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THE BALKANS IN THE NEW MILLENIA - REWRITING HISTORY AS A PREREQUISITE FOR HAVING A GOOD NEIGHBOUR

Key words: Southeastern Europe, SFR Yugoslavia, Republic of Macedonia, diplomatic relations with the neighboring countries.

Abstract

Macedonia gained its independence at the beginning of the last decade of 20th century. Not only in the Balkans, but also in Europe, the 90's began with a great sense of optimism. After gaining its independence, the next important goal for the new state was gaining international recognition, for which Republic of Macedonia demonstrated readiness to accept the conditions given by the international community. However, the European Community was either not ready or lacked the will to recognize the new state a priori. In the meantime, Macedonia was steadily building good relations with its neighbors. Based on these facts, the goal of this paper is to analyze the bilateral relations between Republic of Macedonia and the neighboring countries in the new millennia.

At the end of the 1980's, the newly born democratic part of national elites in former Yugoslavian federation and the power of the nomenclature were interested in about the changing of the common state and maintaining their own power. The collapse of the socio-communist doctrine in 1989 resulted with the new challenges for the countries of Southeastern Europe. The lack of democratic discourse inevitably strengthened nationalist forces growing a new popular alternative against the state-socialism from the 1980. These events greatly reflected upon SFR Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia in that time held a strategic geographical position as a buffer zone between the two military-political blocks. "The old nationalist receipts by first the Serb nomenclature then by the new Croat; nationalized elite could make new identification. They made mythical conceptions against the other nations. Forced the people to accept these myths, and after that they were becoming one-dimension people who could define themselves only by their nationality without all other identical dimensions".¹

The basic idea of the Yugo Slavism was that the Southern Slav people could well coexists in a common state. Without any common historical narrative, the intellectual favour of the Yugoslav idea wanted to develop a new one instead of the different national perceptions. In other words, reality suggested that in fact the nations in the Western Balkan from the 1980's could not find common interests to maintain the common federation.²

Very important factor of maintaining these events was the fall of the Iron curtain. It also brought the powerful influence of liberal-democratic ideals, which was a serious test for the unity of the republics and provinces of Yugoslavia.³ This country had a policy of equidistance both ideologically and politically, but this policy could not be maintained after the dissolution of

¹ Drakulic, Slavenka, *Balkan Express, Fragments from other side of the war*, WW Norton Company, New York, London, 1993. p. 53.

² Vukadinović, Radovan, *The Break-up of Yugoslavia: Threats and Challenges*, Netherland Institute of International Relations "Clingendael", Hague, 1992.

³ Vojvodic, Natasja, *Inhibition, Instrumentalization and Inevitability: Ethnic nationalism and the breakdown of Yugoslavia*, University College London, School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies, 2012. p. 6.

the bipolar structures at the end of the Cold War.⁴ The social national development movement was inspired by external examples from the West. The new barriers created by the national development were also very artificial. National cultures by national historical myths could only define themselves against each other, mostly in the same geographical area. The national development was based even stronger on the culture i.e. inspired by the Romanticism as cultural nationalism in these regions than in the Western countries. It was impossible to make ethnically “clear” countries without violent conflicts among the ethnic groups by large national inspirations.⁵ Based on emphasizing the cultural-religious differences and taking a kind of democratic legitimacy of the republican elites a new pan-Yugoslav consensus was impossible, just because a more plural and less communist state could undermine the status of the communist nomenclature and the unified high-preferred army.

It is evident that Republic of Macedonia as one of the federal republics participated with its own representatives in all the institutions of SFRY; however, its political leadership did not take a single step to contribute to a violent dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. On the contrary, the Republic of Macedonia was a loyal member of the Federation up to the referendums for independence in Croatia and Slovenia and the military actions that started in these republics. Both of these factors significantly influenced the start of the process for independence in the Republic of Macedonia. The state leadership of the Republic of Macedonia during the dissolution of Yugoslavia contributed to its separation from the Federation in a peaceful and democratic way without military conflict. A significant move by the Macedonia political leadership was the agreement for the peaceful withdrawal of the Yugoslav National Army from the territory of the Republic of Macedonia without any specific requests being made by the Macedonian side.

In a state-legal sense, besides the passing of the first document in which the sovereignty and the possibility to form an independent Macedonian country was emphasized, i.e. the Declaration of sovereignty of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, in June 1991 the Macedonian Assembly removed the term “socialist” from the name of the state and established the constitutional name as the Republic of Macedonia. The Macedonian government advocated for

⁴ Dodovska, Ivanka, *Macedonia in the 21st Century: Social, Political and Diplomatic Issues (1991 – 2015)*, Political Thought “Political Elites, Citizenship and Social Changes”, No. 52, 2016, Skopje. p. 52.

⁵ Norman, Wayne, *Negotiating Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006. p. 125.

peaceful solutions to all issues pertaining to the dissolution of the Federation, the Assembly of Republic of Macedonia passed a Decision for a referendum to be held in Republic of Macedonia on 6th of August 1991.⁶

With this decision, the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia were given the right to answer directly the following question: “Are you for a sovereign and independent state, with the right to enter a future union of sovereign countries of Yugoslavia?”⁷ This form of the referendum question resulted from the political and military crisis in Yugoslavia and after lengthy negotiations in the Macedonian Assembly, the members of the parliament voted to hold the referendum on 8th of September 1991. The majority of Macedonian citizens voted for an independent and sovereign Macedonian state. The appointed election commission for implementation of the referendum did not find any irregularities regarding the method in which the referendum was conducted. On the contrary, the commission confirmed the majority of the citizens with the right to vote supported a sovereign and independent Macedonian state. As a result, 8th of September was established as the independence day of the Republic of Macedonia.⁸

This way, the transformation of the socialist system opened the way to construct an independent Macedonian state and to build a parliamentary democracy, starting with the event of the first democratic parliamentary elections. This way, the foundations of the Macedonian state were established with the passing of the new Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia on 17th of November 1991. Under the new Constitution, essential changes were made regarding the former system of Yugoslavia and the Republic of Macedonia for the first time was defined as independent and sovereign state, aimed towards a democratic development and parliamentary system, with its own national symbols such as flag, coat of arms and anthem.⁹

This constitutional form provoked permanent conflicts with the Albanian minorities. “When Macedonia opted for independence in 1991, Albanian feelings were mixed. On the one hand, disintegration of the once powerful Belgrade ruled Yugoslav federation was welcome to

⁶ Додовска, Иванка, *Меѓународното признавање на Р. Македонија, 1991 – 2001 година (изградба и развој на меѓународните односи)*, Зборник на трудови од научната конференција одржана на 13 и 14 декември 2016 во Скопје, „70 години Институт за историја“, Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј“ – Скопје, Филозофски факултет, 2016. p. 452.

⁷ Службен весник на СРМ. 1991. Бр. 27.

⁸ Службен весник на РМ. 1991. Бр. 52.

⁹ *Документи за Република Македонија 1990 – 2005*, едиција документи за Македонија, книга III, Скопје, 2008. p. 188.

most Albanians, who had never identified with the Slavic state and hoped for secession. On the other hand, the new border between the FRY and Macedonia divided Albanians further and separated families in a painful way. Both Albanians and Macedonians acted with little regard for each other's interests".¹⁰

After the building of the main elements of independence for the Republic of Macedonia, the wish of the Macedonian political leadership for its place on the international stage became more obvious and all possible efforts were made for the Republic of Macedonia to be recognized as an independent and sovereign state. The Republic of Macedonia demonstrated readiness and preparedness to accept the conditions given by the European community in order to receive international recognition. However, it is also obvious the European community was either not ready or lacked the will, to recognize the Macedonian independence a priori.

Aside from meeting the conditions of the Declarations of the European community for international recognition of the countries from Eastern Europe and the Yugoslav republics which decided to form themselves over a democratic foundation and accept the prescribed international obligations and the receiving of a positive opinion by the Badinter's Arbitrary commission for the recognition of the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, the European community decided, in a session of the European Council in Lisbon June 1992, with a declaration, not to recognize the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, i.e. to recognize it only without a name which does not include the term Macedonia.

It is obvious that this decision was made under pressure by Greece, which had an issue with the constitutional name of Republic of Macedonia. Greece reacted strongly against the independence of a country named the Republic of Macedonia, insisting that such a name was equivalent to territorial claims against Greece itself, and questioned the existence of a Macedonian nation. Athens convinced its EC partners and the United States not to recognize Skopje under the name Republic of Macedonia. Almost the entire international community followed this advice, although the Arbitration Commission of the Carrington Conference took the view that Macedonia qualified for recognition, and that "the use of the name 'Macedonia' cannot... imply any territorial claim." The Commission took this decision after Skopje had, on 6

¹⁰ Ahrens, Geert-Hinrich, *Diplomacy on the Edge, Containment of Ethnic Conflict and the Minorities Working Group of the Conferences on Yugoslavia*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press. Washington, D.C., 2007. p. 391.

January 1992, changed its constitution by clarifying that it had no territorial claims and would not interfere in sovereign rights and internal affairs of other states. In a statement to the Arbitration Commission, Skopje also renounced “hostile propaganda”.¹¹

It was already clear that principles no longer played any part here but from the point of view of the European Community, it was important to protect the Maastricht Treaty and the common foreign and security policy in the face of the Greek veto.¹²

As it was mentioned before, the Greek reactions and pressures influenced the European community to recommend Macedonia to make constitutional changes, which should help with international recognition. However, all the changes on the Macedonian side achieved weak results in the relations with the European community, although the process of establishing bilateral diplomatic relations was positive with a significant number of countries recognizing the Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name.

It is interesting that in spite of the conduction of peaceful politics by the Republic of Macedonia and it being a special case due to its peaceful dissolution from the SFRY, while simultaneously accepting all the democratic principles in the building of its independency, the European community allowed one of its members to obstruct its economic development with imposing embargo and international recognition.

The hard conditions which the Republic of Macedonia faced on its path to the international community did not stop it from continuing with efforts for international affirmation and for securing membership in the international organizations. In spite of the disappointment caused by the attitude of the international community with the denial of the Republic of Macedonia and the numerous obstructions set in front of the young Macedonian state, it had to develop a strategy for conducting its external policy. These external negative influences over the development of the Republic of Macedonia were complemented with the politics led by its neighbors regarding its independence, identity and language of the Macedonian people, the Macedonian minority and its church. In fact, even though the Republic of Macedonia faced certain issues with its neighbors during its independence, it succeeded to establish in the first

¹¹ Ahrens, Geert-Hinrich, *Diplomacy on the Edge...* p. 382, 383.

¹² Schlotter, Peter, *The Yugoslav Lesson*, Vol. 2, No. 1, NIP Nova Makedonija, Skopje, 1994. p. 15.

decade of its independency diplomatic relations with all of its neighbors and to surpass all threats to its territory and sovereignty. That condition of the state was endangered with the occurrence of the war conflict in 2001, which was ended with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in august, same year in the capitol town of the Republic of Macedonia, Skopje.¹³

It is perfectly clear that one of the most significant features of the international relations of the Republic of Macedonia has been the building of peaceful relations with its neighbors. The neighboring countries had problems ranging from the recognition of the constitutional name of the country, the recognition of the Macedonian minority or the denial of the Macedonian language and national identity. Nevertheless, the Republic of Macedonia successfully established diplomatic relations with all of its neighboring countries: Republic of Bulgaria, Republic of Albania, SR Yugoslavia (later Republic of Serbia), as well as with Greece, although this occurred under obviously difficult conditions.

After the positive opinions of Badinter's arbitrary commission for the Republic of Macedonia were published and as Macedonia met the criteria foreseen in the Declarations of the European community for international recognition, on 15th of January 1992, the Republic of Bulgaria passed a decision to recognize the Republic of Macedonia under the Note for recognition of the independence of the Republic of Macedonia from Bulgaria. However, in spite of the positive developments in diplomatic relations between the two countries, the latent conflict between the two states remained regarding the Bulgarian denial of the Macedonian identity and language, along with the denial of the Macedonian national minority in Bulgaria. These denials have led to present destabilizations in Macedonian-Bulgarian relations even so the two sides had sign bilateral Agreement for friendship and understanding in 2017.

A special place in these historical diplomatic processes holds the politics lead by Greece towards the Republic of Macedonia. The history of diplomatic relations between the two countries resembles the former experiences of the Republic of Macedonia regarding Greek obstructions of its international recognition and membership in the international organizations. The powerful opposition and denial of the constitutional name of the country by Greece led to tightening relations between the two countries. It is certain that the problem with the

¹³ Reka, Blerim (editor) *Ten Years from the Ohrid Framework Agreement Is Macedonia Functioning as a multiethnic state?* Tetovo, 2011.

Greek-Macedonian dispute about the constitutional name of Macedonian country became extremely visible in the last decade of the XX Century. All the archive materials and documents, only point out to the deep Greek dissatisfaction to Macedonian independence. For example, Adamantios Skordos, building upon the statement of Evangelos Kofos who said that only on September 17, 1991 the Greek became aware of the existence of an independent state with a name Macedonia, wrote: “We need to precisely acknowledge that only after the proclamation of independence, majority of the Greeks became aware of an existence of a Macedonian state.”¹⁴

Greece consistently blamed Macedonia for appropriation of the Greek ancient history. Nevertheless, history points out to something else. Namely, after the creation of the Greek national state in 1830, ancient Macedonia was not considered as a part of Greek history. The need for territorial expansion towards Ottoman Macedonia imposed the urge to incorporate ancient Macedonian history in to Greek history. It is of a great interest to the subject of this research, the process of “Macedonisation” of northern Greece that took part after the civil war in the neighboring country. Underlining the connection of the natives in those parts with the Macedonian antique heritage and history after the end of the civil conflict in Greece, was imposed as a need to fortify the Greek identity in the northern parts of the state, but considering the former ethnic situation of that region, and the improbability to impose those action by the state upon the refugees from Asia Minor that were settled there after 1923. Finally, the Greek state saw an opening for solving that problem, and it was used to its full potential, mainly in the relations with neighboring Yugoslavia where a Macedonian state already existed in the Federation.

Since 1992, the official Greek institutions have continuously pushed negative propaganda against the Republic of Macedonia and have caused various obstacles within the international community and organizations. An example of such action was the economic blockade from 1992-1994, aimed to constitutional changes, including the constitutional name, constitutional flag, etc. At last, the economic blockade was completely lifted with the signing of the Interim Accord between the Republic of Macedonia and Greece on 13th of September 1995 in New York. Despite all the legal arguments, this dispute ended with the intervention of the International community with the signing of the Prespa agreement in 2018, according to which

¹⁴ Адамантиос Скодрос, *Грчко-македонското прашање. Граѓанската војна и политичката историја на Југоисточна Европа 1945 – 1992*, Арс студио, Скопје, 2016, с. 351.

Republic of Macedonia in 2019 made constitutional change of its name and became Republic of North Macedonia. This change resulted with Macedonian membership in NATO, but it did not help in the most important matter i.e. - start the negotiation process with the EU. According to Biljana Vankovska, “North Macedonia was officially admitted to NATO on 27 March 2020 as its 30th member state. It was supposed to look like a dream come true for generations of Macedonian citizens and the political elites across the ethnic divides. However, the act was hardly met with any euphoria”.¹⁵

This facts clearly opened widely the old Pandora box from the XIX Century about the old paradigms of the Great Balkan states aspiration in which the most important question was: To whom mostly belong Macedonia and its people? – Regarding this matter, it is obvious that the agreements impose the revision of the Macedonian national narrative by replicating the national history of Bulgaria and Greece, which essentially challenges and delegitimizes the identity of the Macedonian nation. This is expected to be reflected in the revised school textbooks from which the new generations will learn about the new history of the citizens of ‘North Macedonia.’

These events resulted into establishing of two mixed commissions for historical questions between the Macedonian state and its neighbors, Bulgaria and Greece. The commissions were filled with selected scientists from the three states which discussed and revised Macedonian history!

This provoked stormy reactions in the ranks of academia in Macedonia, but also in Bulgaria and Greece, because of the fact that the scientific conclusions were to end in the hands of politicians who are not only incompetent to deal with questions regarding national history and with that stepping out of the frame of the Constitution which guarantees the right of self-determination and sovereignty, the highest postulates of an independent state. Questions usually debated by scientists at international scientific congresses, as this one today, with those actions became subjects of banal mercantilism and vulgar attack upon the Macedonian national historiography and its efforts and results built during the past decades.

¹⁵ Vankovska, Biljana, *The NATO Membership: on the Frontline?*, MAR-SAZ, Skopje, 2020. p. 11.

Also, the Government of the Republic of Albania recognized the independence of the Republic of Macedonia on 26th of April 1993. This act was followed by several official meetings between representatives from both countries, aiming to establish bilateral diplomatic relations. At first, a protocol was signed between the two countries to open consular offices in Skopje and Tirana. On 27th of December 1993, the Government of the Republic of Macedonia passed the Decision for establishing of diplomatic relations between Republic of Macedonia and Republic of Albania at an embassy level. For the Albanian leadership, the independence of the Republic of Macedonia did not present a problem, however, the rights and the treatment of the Albanian minority living in the Republic of Macedonia was under constant observation by Albanian state leadership.

“The “Albanian question” in the Republic of Macedonia is one of the most significant elements of her internal policy and to a great extend in it a function of her foreign policy. All the more so, in view that it is also an issue present in the policy perspectives of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), as a neighboring Balkan state. In the Republic of Macedonia, this is an issue of significance not only because of the number of Albanians that live in the Republic of Macedonia, but also because of the permanent aspirations of the state to care for the national self-identification of the Albanians, for which there is already and established standard. The attitude towards the nationalities and towards the national issue in general is one of the means for democratic self-affirmation of the Macedonian state, especially in view of the fact that she is a multi-national community”.¹⁶ In this sense, in the direction of impending Macedonian state democratic development, on 2 August, 1994, was made step forward in this matter with the proclamation of the specific rights of the Albanians, and of other nationalities in the country, on the level of European conventions and standards, above all as a civilizational attitude. It is also clear that the Republic of Macedonia, from the first day of her state and legal independency in the beginning of the last decade of the last century, in terms of the existence interest of the Macedonian people and the other citizens in the Macedonian state, found and still finds herself under great pressure from all neighbors. “In the context of the general Balkans nationalistic euphoria, the Albanian nationalism was also raised to the highest possible level, in

¹⁶ Milosavlevski, Slavko, Tomovski, Mirche, *Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia 1945 – 1995, Legislative Political Documentation, Statistics*, NIP “Studentski Zbor”, Skopje, 1997. p. 7.

the hope that it can put into question the very historical existence of the young independent state”.¹⁷

The support given to the Albanian minority in Macedonia and the Albanian political parties in the Republic of Macedonia was often excessive and resulted in the occasional chilling of the relations between the Republic of Macedonia and Republic of Albania. For example, I should mention the controversial Tirana platform which was proclaimed under supervision of Edi Rama at the meeting held in Tirana with the leaders of the Albanian political parties from Macedonia, in the beginning of January 2017, which resulted with massive protest for protection of the state unity of Macedonia, known as “For Macedonian Unity”!

The Republic of Macedonia also established diplomatic relations with its northern neighbor SR Yugoslavia. An important element for the establishment of diplomatic relations was the signing of the Agreement for regulation of the relations and for promotion of the cooperation between Republic of Macedonia and SR Yugoslavia on 8th of April 1996 in Belgrade. On 31st of May 1996, President Gligorov passed the Decree for setting an associate authorized ambassador of the Republic of Macedonia in SR Yugoslavia, after which the relations between the two states started to improve. Namely, after the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, SR Yugoslavia did not want to recognize the border with Macedonia, as it considered it to be only an administrative border. This dispute finally had its resolution with the demarcation of borders in 2001, which was a significant step forward for normalization of the relations between the two countries, regarding the biggest problem between the two states to date has remained the dispute regarding the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, for which still there is no positive conclusion in sight. The denial of the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding the autocephality of the Macedonian Orthodox Church is a subject of constant reaction and criticism by the Macedonian political leadership and the Macedonian public.

For the Balkan nations, territorial and national rights were always of much greater importance than human or civic rights. This historical fact became a milestone for development of national ideologies among the Yugoslavs, who put on a pedestal of “national policy” the aim to transform ethnographical borders into the national-state borders. A period of the bloody destruction of the SFR of Yugoslavia followed by the inter-ethnic conflicts in Kosovo-Metohija

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 8.

and the Republic of Macedonia (1991–2001) is typical example of such national policy based on the idea of creation of a united national state, if possible without the ethnic minorities.¹⁸ Even more, Southeast Europe as a transit region, which for centuries has been used as a crossroad from East to West and from North to South. In the various historical stages, different ethnic and religious groups passed through this area. Along the way, some of them left their mark and left, others remained and permanently settled in this region, participating in the creation of the specific Balkan amalgam, out of which the Balkan national states were created during the XIX and the early XX century.

During the past few decades, this region, influenced by the destruction of the bipolar world, with a varying intensity, remained a geographical determinant - a crossroad for the different ethnic groups, which moved through it due to the pressure of the wars in the former Yugoslavia.

For these reasons, it is evident that Macedonian state, in the past three decades of its independency made many efforts to surpass possible regional crisis. This has been a period of transition from a politically inefficient system towards a new pluralistic system based on the civilizational values of an open society. “From 1990 on, socio-economic changes have become our reality. These changes are occurring in all segments of the social structure. They progress more or less spontaneously in almost all of the countries in transition, followed by a weak intensity, low level of organization, delayed time effects and the occurrence of social and political opposition and blockades”.¹⁹

It is evident that Macedonia and its various ethnic population groups today too have an “enormous potential to create a fireball through southeastern Europe, one which might take in part of Central and Eastern Europe” is still a common opinion in the international security community. Here a particularly popular view is a Balkan “domino theory” which says that ethnic warfare in Kosovo would necessarily involve Macedonia, then Albania, then Greece, then Bulgaria and finally maybe, Turkey.

¹⁸ Sotirović , B. V., *NATIONALISM AND TERRITORIAL CLAIMS OF THE YUGOSLAVS CHALLENGE TO RE-MAP THE BALKANS IN THE 21ST CENTURY*, Journal of Security Studies and Global Politics, Vol. 2, 2017. p. 80.

¹⁹ Kljusev, Nikola, *The Problems of Transition of the Socio-Economic System*, Balkan Forum, Vol. 2, No. 1, NIP Nova Makedonija, Skopje, 1994. p. 180.

The question is: Has the traditional paradigm of Balkan politics eroded in such a way that conventional wisdom is no longer of practical use? – In 2001, Macedonia went through its gravest crisis since independence. The first symptoms of trouble had appeared a year before, when unusually violent, ethnically motivated incidents took place inside the country. This serious military crises as I mention before ended on August 13, 2001, with the signing of Framework Agreement by the leaders of Macedonian's four major political parties – VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, DPA and PDP, under the auspices of President Trajkovski. These crises in many aspects confirm the “domino theory” and even today, twenty years later, in many aspects is concerning the ethnic diversities, and stays still open.

Beside all, it is also obvious that the numerous obstacles to its independency and the road to the international recognition, as well as the international negative influences and internal disagreements, the Macedonian country continued towards the challenges brought by these new historical processes in the new millennium. Regarding the main subject in this research it is obvious that this process continues to the uncertain future.

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