




COMMENTARY


North Macedonia's Unusual Waltz with Turkey – Will it frustrate the EU and NATO?

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The saga, surrounding the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), finally came to an end this February (2019) with a brand new North Macedonia label stamped over the old contested FYROM insignia. The decade-long sensitive issue has kept audiences on the edge of their seats, wondering what would happen next. For the most part, the storyline has been going in circles, since every positive development has been followed by an anti-climactic regression back to the starting point.

However, the Prespa Agreement constituted a real breakthrough in the otherwise vicious cycle. World news headlines indicated this much, hailing the agreement (and its subsequent ratification) to have “[done a] mission impossible”,¹ “draw[ing] the line”² and “end[ing] the bitter dispute.”³ Though appraised to “pave the way for NATO [and EU] membership,”⁴ commentators have been cautious to not overblow its significance (i.e. stopping short of equating it to inevitable membership), wisely preferring to keep the prospects tentative and strictly “on paper.”⁵

By all accounts the Prespa Accord can be denoted as a ‘great leap forward’ in the Skopje-Athens relationship, as well as the Skopje-Brussels line. The actual document emphasises “[the desire] to strengthen an atmosphere of trust and good-neighbourly relation in [the Balkan] region and to put to rest permanently any hostile attitudes that may persist.”⁶

Truthfully, the Social Democratic Union and Tsipras have gotten North Macedonia’s foot in the EU/NATO door – a remarkable feat in its own right. Nevertheless, there is a long road ahead of Skopje and the legacy of the Prespa Agreement will be up in the air. In the words of Ilcho Cvetanovski, the arrangement begs the question of whether “[the Prespa compromise will] be regarded as the start of a strategic partnership or just another short-sighted deal predominantly addressing the geopolitical needs of Western allies?”⁷ Regional interactions will certainly influence the final outcome and the North Macedonian government shouldn’t only fixate on Greece, but should additionally be wary of the other major player in the neighbourhood, Turkey.

A problematic relationship with Mr. Erdogan?

On its upwards trajectory, North Macedonia will have to tackle a multitude of challenges (*inter alia* judicial reforms, ethnic conflicts, media freedom, etc.). Focusing on the rule of law, this opinion will explore a relatively unnoticed diplomatic episode that took place approximately a fortnight ago - a meeting between Turkish Defence Minister, Hulusi Akar, and North Macedonia counterpart, Radmila Shekerinsa. The rendezvous slipped under the radar of European decision-makers largely because a

¹ Maltezou, R and Kambas, M. “Greece does ‘mission impossible’, ratifies North Macedonia accord.” Reuters. 25 Jan 2019, available at <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-greece-macedonia-parliament-vote/greece-does-mission-impossible-ratifies-north-macedonia-accord-idUSKCN1PJ1IM>>

² Halasz, S, Labropoulou, and McKenzie, S. “Macedonia officially changes name to North Macedonia, drawing line under bitter dispute.” CNN. 13 Feb 2019, available at <<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/02/13/europe/north-macedonia-name-change-intl/index.html>>

³ Smith, H. “Macedonia changes name, ending bitter dispute with Greece.” The Guardian. 17 June 2018, available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/17/macedonia-greece-dispute-name-accord-prespa>>

⁴ See Halasz

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences Described in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the Establishment of Strategic Partnership between the parties.* Ekaterina.com. 12 June 2018, available at <<http://www.ekathimerini.com/resources/article-files/aggliko-1.pdf>>

⁷ Cvetanovski, I. “(North) Macedonia and the Prespa agreement, success or defeat?” Observatorio balcani e caucaso transeuropa. 6 Feb 2019, available at <<https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/North-Macedonia/North-Macedonia-and-the-Prespa-agreement-success-or-defeat-192496>>

prima facie it was nothing out of the ordinary. The meeting didn't deviate from the customary diplomatic standards, consisting of the usual pledges to “embrace peace, stability and trust.”⁸

Yet, upon a closer inspection the correspondence wasn't all that routine. The substance of the conversation revolved around the fight against terror, but not any unspecified terror. The name of the Fetullah Terrorist Organisation (FETO) dominated the discussions with Mr. Akar, who depicted the group to be public enemy number one. The Turkish Defence Minister outlined the fight against FETO - a term created by Mr. Erdogan to denote Gulen Community members allegedly conspiring against the Ankara government - along the line of *raison d'état*, stating that “it should be clear that [Ankara government] will put all kinds of effort for the security of its country, sovereignty and independence of [its] nation.”⁹

Mr. Erdogan's has signed up to “a very bitter agenda [against] followers of [the] Gulen Movement, not only in Turkey but also in countries where Turkey can exercise influence through various means.”¹⁰ The Turkish delegation clearly demonstrated that the dismantlement of the faction was to take a priority in the bilateral cooperation between the two countries. Even if not explicitly declared, Mr. Akar oblique language evidently incentivised Macedonian assistance. Speaking on behalf of Mr. Erdogan, Mr. Akar put faith and “trust [in] the Macedonian authorities, “which the Turkish administration “believ[ed] with all [its] heart [would take] the necessary steps [against the Gulen community in Macedonia].”¹¹

Fresh out of the fire, Skopje has found itself back into the frying pan. Despite the lack of an official demand, Ankara is leveraging a request at the Balkan republic, appealing for action (with the apparent parallel to Kosovo discussed below). One should look no further than the opening statements of the Turkish minister, where he purposefully underlined “Turkey's support for all efforts necessary for North Macedonia's integration into NATO and the EU processes.” Ignoring the NATO implications for a moment, the claim to help for EU membership sounds farfetched in light of Ankara's very own dysfunctional relation with Brussels. EU Commission representatives such as Ms. Sarah Lambert has signalled that “the accession negotiations are currently and actively frozen” due to Mr. Erdogan's administration “backsliding in all the core fundamental areas, [i.e.] rule of law, independence of the judiciary and human rights.”¹² Hence, it's hard to envision a meaningful Turkish contribution to North Macedonian EU accession.

Moving back to NATO, the situation is radically different. As a Member State, Turkey possesses a veto-right over new admissions. NATO's rulebook dictates that “the [Membership] Protocol has [to be] ratified in the capitals of each of the 29 Allies, according to national procedures, [in order for a] country [to] become a member of NATO.”¹³ Therefore, Mr. Erdogan has an ace up his sleeve. He can dangle the prospect of Euro-Atlantic membership in front of Skopje to encourage it to collaborate with his internal security programme. Mr. Akar's statement doesn't constitute an implicit threat towards North Macedonia; however, the minister's remarks do carry a tacit message of *quid pro quo*,

⁸ Ozer, S. “N. Macedonia should embrace peace: Turkey.” AA. 3 Apr 2019, available at <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/nmacedonia-should-embrace-peace-turkey/1441580>>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hoes, J. “Erdogan's Parallel State In Kosovo Functions Despite Prime Minister Haradinaj.” Vocal Europe. 30 Mar 2018, available at <<https://www.vocaleurope.eu/erdogans-parallel-state-in-kosovo-functions-despite-prime-minister/>>

¹¹ “Ankara expects North Macedonia to take necessary steps on FETÖ schools.” Daily Sabah. 4 Apr 2019, available at <<https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2019/04/04/ankara-expects-north-macedonia-to-take-necessary-steps-on-feto-schools>>

¹² Petraru, R and Vanev, P. “Panel — Can The European Union Remain Connected To Turkey?” Vocal Europe. 12 Mar 2019, available at <<https://www.vocaleurope.eu/panel-can-the-european-union-remain-connected-to-turkey/>>

¹³ *Relations with the Republic of North Macedonia*. NATO. 15 Feb 2019, available at <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48830.htm>

whereby Ms. Shekerinsa's acquiescence with the Turkish security demands would secure Mr. Erdogan's support for an eventual North Macedonia NATO inauguration.

The Skopje administration can go on a limb and instigate a clampdown against Mr. Erdogan's adversaries in the hope of whizzing through the NATO accession. However, such a scenario would not be devoid of a perilous downside, estranging North Macedonia from NATO and the EU alike. For starters, lately Turkey's place within the North Atlantic Framework has been shaky. Rather than harmoniously humming to the same Anti-Russian tune, Ankara has defied the High Command to "buy a long-range air defence system, [S-400 missiles], from Russia rather than from a NATO ally."¹⁴ The establishment has "diminishe[d] its democratic principles and institutions," which has "damage[d] the alliance."¹⁵ In broader terms, Mr. Marcus Kaim (Senior Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs) summarises:

The Erdoğan government has seriously undermined the political cohesion of the alliance: first, by multilateralizing bilateral conflicts thereby deeply antagonizing these countries as well as putting solidarity at risk; second, by prioritizing national interests over multilateral policy coordination, which has prohibited developing unified Western positions; and finally, by diversifying its policies, turning away from the West and pivoting more toward Moscow and Tehran... It's sad to say, but it seems that if Erdoğan were to one day announce Turkey's withdrawal from NATO, not many governments would shed tears.¹⁶

Albeit carrying out its strictly military duties, Turkey has sown distrust in the Euro-Atlantic organisation. It has increasingly looked out for its sovereign interest, at the expense of Alliance's unity. Its authoritarian relapse has jeopardised the political realm of NATO, discrediting the latter's commitment to its democratic core. North Macedonia should be anxious about pursuing Mr. Erdogan's overtures because Skopje would be voluntarily risking reprimands by the Western states. Throwing its weight behind Ankara, might hinder the re-branded republic's fragile international standing.

The Precedent of Kosovo

Outside of the possible negative ramification in sphere of NATO, the Balkan county will irrefutably face immediate chastisement, in the event that it apprehends and decides to deport alleged Gulen conspirators. The proximity of the Balkans has made them an ideal hunting ground with Kosovo providing the case in point. On the 3rd April, 2018 six Turkish nationals were deported back to their homeland without a due process, as if on a whim.¹⁷ An arbitrary judicial proceeding hastily sealed their fate on the basis of their (alleged) ties to the Gulen Movement.

The EU was quick to denounce the rulings as "going against the [EU] principles,"¹⁸ mainly the fundamental rule of law. Maja Kocijancic, the EU spokesperson, reinstated "the right of every

¹⁴ Dempsey, J. "Judy Asks: Is Turkey Damaging NATO?" Carnegie Europe. 24 Jan 2018, available at <<https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/75345>>

¹⁵ Conley, H. In Dempsey, J. "Judy Asks: Is Turkey Damaging NATO?" Carnegie Europe. 24 Jan 2018, available at <<https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/75345>>

¹⁶ Kaim, M. In Dempsey, J. "Judy Asks: Is Turkey Damaging NATO?" Carnegie Europe. 24 Jan 2018, available at <<https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/75345>>

¹⁷ "EU Criticizes Kosovo, Turkey Over Deportation Of Six Erdogan Political Foes." Radio Free Europe. 4 Apr 2018, available at <<https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-criticizes-kosovo-turky-over-deportation-six-erdogan-political-foes/29144413.html>>

¹⁸ Ibid.

individual to fair trial,” recounting that “[any] European Union candidate country” should “subscribe to this principle.”¹⁹ Although aimed at Turkey, Ms. Kocijancic’s proclamation plainly declared that the EU would not tolerate gross violations of human rights law and summarily prosecutions. To avoid a dramatic diplomatic fallout with the EU, the Kosovar PM, Ramush Haradinaj, had to distance himself (and his administration) from the scandal and to sack the perpetrators, Kosovo's Interior Minister and Intelligence chief. The created chaos exposed serious internal institutional division, which were masterfully exploited by Mr. Erdogan.

In the case that the situation repeats itself in North Macedonia, the Skopje government would find itself in a high risk, low reward territory. Yes, the Zaev administration might manage to speed up NATO membership, but at what cost? In the context of the Council’s promise to “open accession negotiations with [North Macedonia] in June 2019,”²⁰ Skopje would surely want to refrain from confrontations with Brussels. Flirting with Mr. Erdogan’s insatiable security craving can aggravate the European decision-makers, forcing them to re-consider their approach towards the Balkan republic. At minimum, Zaev’s government risks a minor delay in the kick-off negotiations, but the implications might as well go up to a substantial suspension of North Macedonia’s candidature, if a scandal runs rampant. Furthermore, clandestine collaboration with Ankara can stir up public unrest, threatening domestic stability and bringing the national anti-Prespa bloc back to the fore – effectively reversing all gains.

Turning back to the beginning of this article, North Macedonia has to carefully position itself on the international arena. Skopje has to prove that it has moved on from its past and it has broken the (dead)lock that previously held it back. It shouldn’t dither about what to do next. If it is to claim its spot in the EU, North Macedonia can’t afford to succumb to the pressure by any third parties of disregarding the democratic framework. Any collaboration must adhere to the rule of law, prohibiting excesses and arbitrary rulings. Even if Turkey is to display some formal opposition to North Macedonian NATO membership, it would be doubtful that Mr. Erdogan would be able to sustain a veto for a meaningful amount of time. The Erdogan administration should worry more about its own place within the Alliance because its conduct can alienate it from the rest of the partners.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ *The Republic of North Macedonia*. Council of the European Union. 19 Mar 2019, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/republic-north-macedonia/>

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