



# Weekly Briefing

## **Macedonia External Relations briefing:**

### **Macedonia's Foreign Policy in 2017**

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## **Macedonia's Foreign Policy in 2017**

### **Context**

Historically, policymakers in Macedonia – both in the VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM governments – have treated Macedonia as a non-actor on the international stage. On a foreign policy level, this has led to an accommodating behavior in which the attitudes and interests of foreign actors, in particular powers such as the US and Germany have been often taken as something that needs to be closely obeyed. In fact, often the words and actions of foreign powers have had a deciding influence even on the domestic political developments in Macedonia. The political crisis 2015-2017, the so called “regime change” and the recognition of the new Macedonian government led by SDSM were all processes in which the “international community” had a significant, if not decisive voice and influence.

At the same time, despite Macedonia's dependence on foreign actors, on the domestic level policymakers have developed a discourse that treats Macedonia as an island, as an insular polity whereby socio-economic and political developments abroad do not affect Macedonia's development. Global events that led to tectonic shifts such as the global financial crisis, the refugee issues, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump are seen as unimportant for the domestic development of Macedonia and something on which Macedonian political elites have never voiced an opinion – even though the country has felt the ripples of the crisis, it is part of the infamous Balkan refugee route, wants to join a union that is marred by internal problems, and has been loyally following a superpower whose lead is doubted even in the EU.

The new ruling elites of SDSM and DUI have been particularly ruling based on such small-state cognition. So far, there is no presentation as to what their vision for Macedonia in the world is apart from the explicit and measurable targets to be reached on the short and medium term are set to be in line with the

historic cross-party consensus to join the EU and NATO. Joining EU and NATO is seen as a goal in its own, which would be a sort of a confirmation or validation that Macedonia has “succeeded” in its transition away from socialism and more recently, away from the nationalist authoritarianism of Gruevski. The goal of “becoming a member of EU and NATO” is how the political vision is being formed. At the same time there is no discussion of the questions what happens once Macedonia joins EU and NATO (in the sense, what it will make out of its membership), or a discussion on what exactly is the role and future of EU and NATO in the world.

### **Macedonia’s Restatement of the Pro-Western Vision**

The main impression for the last years of the rule of Nikola Gruevski was that Macedonia was becoming gradually alienated from its strategic goals (the double integration in the EU and NATO). With the unveiling of the wiretap scandals in 2015, many of the former allies of the Gruevski government in the West – most notably within the European People's Party (the largest pan-European party, or family of European parties, that commands a majority in the European Parliament), started distancing themselves. At some point, Gruevski was rumored to have adopted a “pro-Russian” orientation; however he himself has negated that in public interviews. In general, Gruevski and his rule, including his foreign policy can be described as an attempt to pursue a partial pro-Western agenda with a particular right-wing twist, which got compromised by failures on the domestic end. The end of the VMRO-DPMNE regime can be also captured by a paraphrase of a Macedonian political joke: “the West would not let us join, the East would not let us leave.” However, with the changes in VMRO-DPMNE, the party has now firmly restored its conservative / demo-Christian pro-Western orientation.

In this sense, the competition between VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM was not one between anti-Western and pro-Western orientation, but rather between two various versions of pro-Westernism. Running on an explicit liberal-democratic

and comprehensive pro-Western platform, the new SDSM government took upon itself the task of reinvigorating Macedonia's foreign policy in a particular liberal direction, and restoring its strategic agenda of becoming part of Western political structures on liberal grounds. By the time it formed the government in summer 2017, SDSM had enjoyed a widespread support by a number of the EU governments as well as liberal circles in the US. The appointment of Nikola Dimitrov, an experienced diplomat with good reputation in the West, to lead the MFA was a sign that the new government was embarking on a soft diplomatic offensive. The appointment of Radmila Shekerinska, a veteran SDSM politician, as a Minister of Defense meant that accession to NATO would gain priority. The inclusion of many civil society figures – whom have worked on advancing the western agenda and liberal values in Macedonia – also meant that the Zaev government is on a mission to restore Macedonia's western path. Indeed, Zaev and Dimitrov, and other officials, in 2017 had an unprecedented amount of foreign policy activity, predominantly focused on Macedonia's EU and NATO bids, and promotion of a liberal-democratic / transitional political discourse.

In this sense, a rapid warming of the relations with Brussels followed, although the EU accession remains a rather conditional process, whereby Macedonia is tasked with a list of reforms it needs to complete to meet the requirements to join the Union (sometimes EU officials have reminded Macedonian officials in a rather cold way that political declarations need to be supplemented with practical work). Comparable is the situation with the accession to NATO, although when it comes to NATO, Macedonia is considered to have already met most of the requirements and now depends on the position of Greece to join. Moreover, Western actors have often used Macedonia as an example which can potentially have spill-over effects in the Balkan region and beyond. A discourse on the so-called “Macedonian moment” has emerged, and Zaev has been lauded as a Macron from the Balkans due to the perception that he has restored Macedonia's liberal pro-Western agenda.

## **Restoring the “Good Neighborhood” Discourse**

Macedonia has historically had complex relations with its neighbors. The Gruevski government had found itself estranged by the EU neighbors, Bulgaria and Greece. The name dispute with the latter had escalated since 2008, effectively blocking Macedonia's foreign agenda and having negative effect on the domestic development. The relations with Albania and Kosovo were also not improving and even becoming worse over time, while the only good relations was the one with Serbia, which many ascribed to the similarity in the governing style between Aleksandar Vucic and Nikola Gruevski.

The new government of Macedonia led by SDSM in 2017 expressed strong political will to improve the relations with at least three of its neighbors: Greece, Bulgaria and Albania.

For one, under SDSM, Macedonia has pushed for a solution to all identity and history related issues with Bulgaria, by signing an agreement on good neighborly relations, and committing to the improvement of connectivity between the two sides (including the construction of a railway link). Even though there has been some controversy, the overwhelming reaction on both sides has been that the agreement is an important step forward. With it, Bulgaria positioned itself as a protector and mentor of Macedonia in its EU integration. This also came as a somewhat surprising development, knowing that historically VMRO-DPMNE had been much closer to Bulgaria than SDSM. A somewhat surprising development has been the push by the Macedonian Orthodox Church (unrecognized internationally due to political issues) to ask for guardianship from the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (orthodox Churches are powerful political players).

While the timing of the rapprochement with Bulgaria happens at the time when Bulgaria is taking over the rotating EU presidency and therefore is seen as positive for Macedonia's pro-European agenda, the deeper intention behind such maneuvering may have been an attempt to gain leverage in the name dispute with Greece. Initially, MFA Dimitrov's open and pro-active style led to the

impression that there may be a chance for the Macedonian-Greek ties to improve. In the last month of 2017, Greco-Macedonian relations also picked up the pace, and there have been many announcements that a settlement of the historic dispute is to follow very soon. Dimitrov and the Greek MFA Nikos Kotzias had numerous meetings, while Zaev has also personally invested himself in the cause – ending the year with a joint New Year’s celebration with the Mayor of Thessaloniki, Yiannis Boutaris. The international community, in the first place the EU has greeted and encouraged these processes. However, nationalist voices are powerful both in Greece and in Macedonia, and therefore the prospects for solution remain an unknown at the time.

The relations with Albania also noticed further improvement, and commitments to better connectivity. The two governments also held joint working sessions. However, relations with Albania always seem conditioned by Macedonia’s inter-ethnic relations, as well as Albania’s inter-ethnic relations. In Macedonia, the rise of ethnic Albanian nationalist rhetoric has made numerous people outside the ethnic Albanian political camps has complicated the perception of the Skopje-Tirana relations.

At the same time, however, under the brief period of SDSM’s rule, the relations between Macedonia and Serbia experienced unprecedented cooling off, with tensions peaking in the month of August 2017 when Serbia withdrew its entire diplomatic staff from Macedonia, after which the two sides managed to calm the tensions and Serbian diplomats returned to Skopje. One of the lines of criticism from the Macedonian side has been that Serbia has a government of the likes of the former Gruevski government in Skopje, and that Belgrade is an instrument in the hands of the destructive influence of Russia. From the Serbian side, Macedonia’s stance on Kosovo, the fear from spillover effects (in terms of mass protests and government change) as well as a suspicion of espionage, have been the reasons for cooling off the relations. Nevertheless, given the interdependence in a number of areas, further confrontation increases the risks for the Macedonian government.

## **Unclear policy towards the rest of the world**

SDSM's foreign policy orientation is clear: Macedonia is not particularly fit to be an actor in the international arena, and is devoting all of its foreign policy resources to join the EU and NATO, and to manage its neighborhood relations. Everything else beyond that – including the relations with China – is of secondary, and even tertiary importance. There has been a general overtone of pragmatism, in terms of attracting investment and securing support for integration in the EU and NATO, however, a general strategy has been lacking.

That being said, there have been a few interesting and counter-intuitive developments under the SDSM government. For one, the government has expressed a very warm attitude towards Turkey – which given their liberal pro-Western orientation, and the fallout between Turkey and the West, is somewhat surprising. One general argument for this has been that Turkey is a regional power and an important economic player in the region; however, rumors have had that in the high ranks of SDSM there are individuals that are personally very close to the Erdogan circles. Second, the SDSM government has from time to time openly confronted Russia and complained about the Russian influence in Macedonia. This has coincided with the development of the discourse on the Russian interference in the West, and the argument about the Russian threat has been used to reinforce the liberal pro-Western discourse in the country. Reports on the Russian involvement in Macedonia have predominantly come from Western sources, with little domestic awareness of it. Finally, even though Macedonia has lacked a global vision and strategy, it has started to echo some of the messages sent by the American establishment on the global stage – for instance, at the UN, Prime Minister Zaev has condemned the DPRK in light of the current tensions regarding the Korean peninsula – without any domestic debate or expertise on the issue (notably, under previous SDSM governments, Macedonia and DPRK had good relations).

When it comes to China, the SDSM-led government has been in general torn between allegiance to the emerging discourse in the West of being wary and critical towards China, and the pragmatic discourse emerging within the context of the 16+1 platform and the BRI. SDSM has started its mandate by stopping the construction of the two highways funded by China's ExIm Bank and implemented by Sinohydro, and in the early months of its mandate has in general demonstrated lack of sensibility towards the relations with China, as well as lack of the domestic coordination. However, by the end of the year, and in particular with the Budapest summit of 16+1, the approach towards China seemed more consolidated, with Prime Minister Zaev taking the lead, and promoting a rather economically-oriented discourse. How will this pan out in 2018, is yet to be seen.