



Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia external relations briefing:
Continuing the “Double Integration”
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Continuing the “Double Integration”

Introduction

Even though originally running on an electoral agenda centered on economic renewal and anti-corruption, foreign policy quickly became one of the priorities of the SDSM-DUI Government immediately after it came in power in 2017. In 2018, solving the name dispute with Greece, framed as part of the pursuit of Macedonia's bid to join NATO and the EU, along with securing international support for the process, were the top priorities of the Government, taking over the foreign affairs agenda and at times overshadowing even the domestic affairs agenda itself. At the same time the Government led by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev profiled itself as having a staunch Western geopolitical orientation, and proved to be ready to go at great lengths in order to be finally “admitted in the Western club,” as often people in Macedonia colloquially dub the two accessions to NATO and EU. After a year of tough negotiations with Greece, lobbying for international support, a tense referendum in September, and domestic political bargaining in order to amend the Constitution, in 2019 Macedonia is set to officially change its name to North Macedonia, and in return, accelerate its accession to NATO and EU. At the same time, after having exclusively focused on its NATO and EU accession processes and the name dispute as part of it, in 2019, the Government will perhaps tend to other foreign policy issues to a limited extent, but its attitude will likely be shaped by the new reality (the one of a prospective NATO member in the first place). This paper provides an overview of the two segments of Macedonia's external affairs: a) the following steps in the pursuit of the core strategic priorities (the double “Euro-Atlantic integration”) and the shaping of Macedonia as part of the geopolitical West; and b) secondary objectives – which at this point means all other aspects of foreign affairs including regional diplomacy, and bilateral relations with non-Western actors.

Core Priorities

Joining NATO and EU remain the core priorities for Macedonia's Government in 2019; to ensure that Skopje's “Euro-Atlantic agenda” moves forward, the priority of the Government will be to conclude the solution of the name issue with Greece, which depends on the full implementation of the Prespa Agreement. Most of the legwork regarding the change of the name of the country was done in 2018, so 2019 will be a year of practical matters.

In January and February 2019, the Prespa Agreement, despite the lack of domestic consensus, is to be finalized, and in the period to follow, as the government has argued, follows the period of reaping the fruits. After the majority vote in support of the agreement in the Greek Parliament, Macedonia (soon to be called “North Macedonia”) has a more or less clear path to joining NATO. After having cleared all administrative barriers (which includes ratification of the accession protocol by all NATO members), Macedonia will be set to join the military alliance during the London Summit of the NATO to be held in London in December 2019. There are no other substantive issues in the way, as Macedonia had fulfilled most of its obligations towards NATO more than a decade ago, and after the Prespa Agreement, there are no other hurdles for it to become a full member of the alliance. At the same time, even though there are a number of domestic actors opposed to the change of the name of the country, there is a consensus on NATO membership among all the parliamentary parties (the only ones who object are extra-parliamentary opposition parties).

Thus, aside from the regular diplomatic contact between the two sides, joint events and military drills, there is will be no other substantial developments on that end. There are also no domestic barriers, as all the parliamentary parties have a consensus on the NATO membership. One particular challenge that may emerge on the path to NATO, however, is the potential escalation of intra-NATO frictions, as the US President Donald Trump continues to seek greater commitment and greater defense spending from the European NATO members. In the American debates on NATO, Macedonia's future membership is frequently framed as a liability – this is something that the Macedonian leaders will have to cope with in 2019.

While joining NATO seems to be a rather straightforward deal, making a stride in the EU accession process will be much greater challenge in 2019. The major objective for Macedonia is to start the accession negotiations in summer 2019. For this goal to be attained, in terms of its diplomatic endeavors, it will be crucial to get the support of some of the EU member states that are opposed to enlargement at this juncture – in the first place France. This will be particularly challenging in light of the ongoing political developments in Europe, in the first place the looming reality of a no-deal Brexit. At the same time, the Macedonian Government will have to undertake a number of reforms at home related to the rule of law, freedom of the media, and other aspects of its political and economic system, in order to meet the expectations of the European Commission, as a precondition to open the talks.

As part of its “admission” to the Western club(s) it is very likely that in 2019, Macedonia will increasingly position itself as closely aligned to the position of the US and Western European countries on a number of global issues, and at times will adhere to their goals even

more stringently than they themselves. In particular, in terms of diplomatic activity, it is to be expected that Macedonia will intensify its diplomatic relations with the US (the relations were already intensified in 2018), and will try to profile itself as an even closer American ally in light of its prospective NATO membership. At this juncture, this may lead to somewhat of a transformation of the global outlook of the country. While Macedonia did not shy away from taking sides in global politics in the early 2000s (i.e. it was among the first countries to send troops to Iraq), for most of the time in the past two decades it remained relatively passive and inward-looking. However, Macedonia's foreign policy posture is slowly changing, as Macedonian leaders have made comments on issues such as North Korea, the alleged Russian influence, and in 2019, they recognized Juan Guaido as legitimate acting President of Venezuela. It is expected that this trend will intensify in the months to follow.

Secondary Objectives

In 2018, there was not much on the horizon of Macedonia's diplomats beyond Athens, Brussels, Berlin and Washington. Even when other issues appeared on the agenda, they were framed in light of the two accessions and the name issue. In 2019, this trend will likely continue, although it is to be expected that other foreign affairs issues will be on the agenda of the Macedonian Government.

For one, Macedonia will continue with the rhetoric of friendly relations with all of its neighbors. In the process, it will have to overcome certain issues with each of its neighbors. For example, in 2018 there were occasional spats about questions pertaining to historical interpretation and symbols in the relations with Bulgaria, even though both sides upheld the Agreement on good neighborly relations. It is to be expected that relations with Bulgaria will continue to develop in a generally positive direction (following the 2017 Agreement), with other notable frictions between Skopje and Sofia on the way. At the same time, Macedonia enters 2019 with a particularly deteriorated relationship with Serbia, which can be traced back to ideological differences between Zaev and Vucic. While there have been attempts to improve the relations, divergences on fundamental issues persist; the Macedonian-Serbian relationship in 2019 thus has an open-ended trajectory and is impossible to predict. The Government in Skopje will also have to carefully observe the Serbia-Kosovo relations and the implications for Macedonia. As the political situation in Prishtina is particularly complicated (with the visible divide between the President and the Prime Minister), Macedonia will be particularly careful about any potential deepening of the crisis and spillover effects. The relations with Albania, on

the other hand, while developing in an overall positive direction, are occasionally affected by the dynamics Macedonia's inter-ethnic relations. In 2019, it is to be expected that political leaders of Macedonian Albanians will continue to promote the discourse of ethno-national solidarity and closeness with Tirana, which in turn will cause backlash among some of the ethnic Macedonians in the country.

One particular issue for Macedonia's government in 2019 will be to handle the consequences of the escape of the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski to Hungary. For one, Macedonia will have to carefully navigate its relationship with Budapest, as Gruevski has been granted asylum from persecution based on political opinion, which can have consequences for Macedonia on the global stage. However, Hungary is a NATO and EU member, and thus Macedonia will try to avoid harming its relationship with Budapest. Moreover, in handling the case of Gruevski's escape, Macedonia's relations with three other countries that were on Gruevski's route to Budapest will be affected – Albania, Montenegro and Serbia. So far, there has been no successful cooperation regarding the case; whether this will change in 2019 remains to be seen.

In 2019 Macedonia will continue to pay little attention to its relations with non-Western countries, in particular Turkey, Russia and China, a process that started in 2018. One reason for this is the lack of resources to attend to all external relations equally and the strong prioritization of the NATO and EU accession processes and related issues on the expense of everything else; however, it is likely that as the global political landscape becomes ever more complicated, the relationships with non-Western actors will be considered politically sensitive. The political sensitivity can make Macedonia more passive with regards to these relationships, or stimulate a policy of vigilance. For now, Macedonia has explicitly confronted with Russia, and this will continue in 2019 – and may even escalate, in the case for instance of Russia potentially objecting to the Prespa Agreement in the United Nations. Turkey still plays an important role as a strategic partner, so in 2019 Macedonia will likely try to find a way to reconcile its devout pro-US attitude with its favorable attitude to Ankara, without damaging the relations with the latter. Finally, the SDSM-DUI government will likely continue to maintain but not significantly deepen the cooperation with China in 2019, and follow the new trends among other Central-East and Southeast European (CESEE) countries in light of the changing China-EU and China-US relations.

Finally, Macedonia will have presidential elections in 2019. The current president, Gjorge Ivanov, has been very much opposed to the direction of the SDSM-DUI government with regards to the change of the name of the country. However, the Presidency has had limited

effect on the foreign policy process. Thus, even if Macedonia elects a president who will continue to oppose the Government on core issues, this will not matter much in terms of the direction of the country. At the same time, a victory for a candidate aligned with the positions of SDSM-DUI would give further impetus to the ongoing processes.