



Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia external relations briefing:
Russia's FM Lavrov steals the show at the 30th OSCE Ministerial
Council in Skopje**
Gjorgjioska Marija Adela


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

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Summary

Macedonia held the 2023 Chairmanship of the OSCE, with a focus on prioritizing the needs of the people. It was the first time that the country has held the presidency of the OSCE. Unfortunately, the Macedonian Presidency has not served as a platform to promote peace; rather, it has functioned as an extension of NATO's agenda. This was apparent not only in the rhetorics, but also in the official visits undertaken by the Chairman-in-Office. As a result of its uncritical adoption of the NATO-position, the Macedonian Presidency missed a vital chance to fulfill some of the OSCE's primary roles: promoting dialogue among member states, fostering security, stability, and advocating for human rights in the context of the war in Ukraine. This was further confirmed during the annual ministerial meeting, although the event failed to turn into another NATO gathering, disrupted by the presence of Russia's FM Sergei Lavrov.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is a regional security-oriented intergovernmental organization with 57 participating states from Europe, Asia and North America. The OSCE's main objectives include fostering security and stability, promoting human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, and addressing various challenges, including arms control, terrorism, and economic cooperation. The OSCE operates on a principle of a rotating chairmanship, where each participating state takes on the role for a one-year term. The chairmanship's responsibility includes guiding the organization, setting the agenda for meetings, facilitating dialogue among member states, and representing the OSCE externally. The organization also holds an annual ministerial meeting, hosted by the country holding the OSCE chairmanship. These meetings bring together foreign ministers and high-ranking officials to discuss and make decisions on policy matters, assess the organization's activities, and set priorities for the upcoming year.

Macedonia held the 2023 Chairmanship of the OSCE, with a focus on prioritizing the needs of the people. It is the first time that the country has held the presidency of the OSCE. Upon taking over the OSCE Chair on January 1st, Macedonian Foreign Minister and Chairman-

in-Office of the OSCE, Bujar Osmani stated: “Our plan is to reach out and lend a hand to conflict-affected populations, but also to others in need.” He also said: “We see the OSCE as a perpetual provider in mitigating crises and supporting peace and thus we must take appropriate action to enable the OSCE to provide space for its versatile toolbox.” The presidency also pledged to work closely with the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine. “We see the OSCE as a perpetual provider in mitigating crises and supporting peace and thus we must take appropriate action to enable the OSCE to provide space for its versatile toolbox,” Osmani has said. He also added that Ukraine will remain a central priority and a key security issue. “The unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine has undermined the European security architecture and threatens the peace and stability of the continent and beyond”, Osmani stated.¹ Several months later, in an op-ed, Osmani reiterated the focus on the war in Ukraine: “When I assumed the role of OSCE Chairman-in-Office in January this year, I felt a strong sense of responsibility to uphold the Organization's values and principles, seriously undermined by the Russian Federation’s war of aggression against Ukraine”, he said.²

Unfortunately, the Macedonian Presidency has not served as a platform to promote peace in Ukraine; rather, it has functioned as an extension of NATO's agenda. This was apparent not only in the rhetorics, but also in the official visits undertaken by the Chairman-in-Office. Minister Osmani's first official visit as OSCE Chairman-in-Office took place in Kyiv, Ukraine. Throughout his visit, he engaged in discussions with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Speaker of Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Ruslan Stefanchuk, and Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba. Osmani reaffirmed his unwavering support for Ukraine and emphasized a resolute stance, stating, "I am present here today to underscore our unwavering backing for Ukraine and to convey a clear message: the Russian aggression against Ukraine lacks justification and is without provocation. As part of our role in the OSCE Chairmanship, we remain committed to extending OSCE's aid and support during these testing times," Osmani conveyed.³ On the 31st of January Bujar Osmani addressed the North Atlantic Council of

¹ North Macedonia takes over OSCE Chair, published on 01.01.2023, available at <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/535161> accessed on 05.02.2023

²It's About People and their Future: Op-ed by OSCE Chairman-in-Office Bujar Osmani, available at <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/543411>, accessed on 01.12.2023

³ “OSCE Chairman-in-Office Osmani completes visit to Kyiv, emphasizes continued destructive impact of Russia’s war on Ukraine’s people”, published on 16.01.2023, available at

NATO in Brussels, where he presented the Program of Macedonia as the Chairman of the OSCE in 2023. "The Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine has shaken the pillars of our security," Osmani emphasized, adding that Ukraine will remain a top priority and key security issue. "Our priority in all three aspects will be to provide essential support to Ukraine and its people," he said.⁴

As a result of its uncritical adoption of the NATO-position, the Macedonian Presidency missed a vital chance to fulfill some of the OSCE's primary roles: promoting dialogue among member states, fostering security, stability, and advocating for human rights in the context of the war in Ukraine. This was further confirmed during the annual ministerial meeting, although the event failed to turn into another NATO gathering, disrupted by the presence of Russia's FM Sergei Lavrov.

The 30th OSCE Ministerial Council in Skopje

The OSCE Ministerial Council began with an opening session that included an introductory address by the Prime Minister of the Republic of N. Macedonia, Dimitar Kovachevski. The Chairperson-in-Office of the OSCE and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, opened the 30th OSCE Ministerial Council. He called for unity in support of the OSCE commitments. Osmani, in his address, touched upon three key points that marked Macedonia's chairmanship with the OSCE: "the OSCE's support for Ukraine facing military aggression from the Russian Federation, strengthening the OSCE and its future, and the concern for people as the focus of the OSCE's work."⁵ "Due to all these reasons, the OSCE is necessary to foster multilateralism and facilitate cooperation, for people to live freely. We must respond to this call together because it does not come from me as the current Chair, but from the people of the OSCE region - the people and citizens of our countries," Osmani emphasized. He also used the

<https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/536055>, accessed on 16.02.2023

⁴ Osmani before NATO in the capacity of Chairman of the OSCE, published on 31.01.2023, available

<https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/page/13/post/3269/osmani-pred-nato-vo-svoistvo-na-pretседavach-so-obse>

accessed on 09.03.2023

⁵ The Ministerial Council has begun. Osmani: Our actions today are a legacy for our future and the future of the OSCE, published on 30.11.2023, available at <https://mfa.gov.mk/en/page/13/post/3596/zapochna-ministerskiot-sovet-osmani-nashite-dela-deneska-se-nasledstvo-za-nashata-idnina-i-idninata-na-obse>, accessed on 01.12.2023

opportunity to voice his stance on Russia, saying that “the Russian military aggression has a negative effect on the OSCE and its main task - to represent a platform for dialogue that offers solutions to security challenges.”⁶

The 30th OSCE Ministerial Council took place in the Boris Trajkovski Sports Center, re-equipped as an exhibition pavilion. The heads of the over 50 delegations were each welcomed by the Foreign Minister Osmani. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a brief stop in Skopje on November 29th, but left for Israel hours later. He did not encounter Lavrov, who arrived soon after his departure. However, he did stay long enough to appear in the family photo taken of the meeting’s delegates prior to Lavrov’s arrival.

The participation of Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the meeting was unclear until the last minute. Four days before the start of the event Bulgaria's Foreign Ministry gave permission to the Russian Foreign Minister’s plane to cross its airspace en route to Skopje. The response was an immediate outcry from Ukraine, Poland and the three Baltic states (Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania) who announced that they would boycott the meeting in protest at Lavrov’s planned presence. Poland’s newly appointed foreign minister, Szymon Szynkowski vel Sęk, explained his decision by saying that “Russia was an aggressor state responsible for war crimes, and he was critical of its head of diplomacy being able to participate in a meeting aimed at building peace and security”. Lavrov’s participation, he said, with the same rights as other partners was “unacceptable” to Poland and that no other representatives of Poland’s Foreign Ministry would take part.⁷ The response by Ukraine was along similar lines. “The Ukrainian delegation will not participate in the OSCE ministerial meeting at the level of the minister of foreign affairs,” Oleh Nikolenko, spokesman for the Ukrainian foreign ministry, wrote in a statement on Facebook. In solidarity with Kyiv, the foreign ministers of the three Baltic countries later issued a statement saying they too would not take part in the meeting if Lavrov attended. His participation “risks legitimizing aggressor Russia as a rightful member of

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Poland, Baltic States, Ukraine to boycott OSCE meeting over participation of Russian FM, published on 29.11.2023, available at

<https://tvpworld.com/74432171/poland-baltic-states-ukraine-to-boycott-osce-meeting-over-participation-of-russian-fm#:~:text=Poland's%20foreign%20minister%20has%20said,Sergei%20Lavrov%2C%20his%20Russian%20counterpart>, accessed on 01.12.2023

our community of free nations, trivializing the atrocious crimes Russia has been committing,” they said.⁸

FM Lavrov “steals” the show

Although Lavrov’s plane was expected to arrive through Bulgaria, it flew over Turkey and Greece, before landing in Skopje late on November 29th. Bulgaria had refused to open its airspace to Lavrov’s plane. “The permission is granted to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the accompanying delegation for the participation in the Skopje meeting <...>. This permission does not apply to Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department Director Maria Zakharova who is on the EU sanction list,” was the justification given by the Bulgarian foreign ministry.⁹ In spite of all the obstructions, Lavrov was able to attend the meeting, and to make some very vocal and strong points, regarding the OSCE, as well as the broader geopolitical environment.

On November 30th, Foreign Minister Lavrov presented his address in front of the 30th meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council. Some delegates walked out as the Russian foreign minister began his speech. Most of the delegates and attendees, however, remained in the room.¹⁰ Lavrov started his speech by noting that upon approaching its 50th anniversary, “the OSCE is in a lamentable condition, and its prospects remain uncertain”. He further regretted that the OSCE had missed out on the opportunity to serve as a platform for broad-based pan-European cooperation in the post-Cold War period. “Unfortunately, Western political elites appropriated the role of rulers of humanity’s destiny and made a shortsighted choice in favour of NATO rather than the OSCE,” he exclaimed. Furthermore he recalled that NATO and EU member states destroyed the military-political dimension of the OSCE. “In 1999, NATO

⁸ Twitter Post by the Lithuanian MFA, published on 29.11.2023, available at https://twitter.com/LithuaniaMFA/status/1729490269471437253?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1729490269471437253%7Ctwgr%5Ef5ec9d0e1846524cb0902e598ce21934d135e059%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Ftvpworld.com%2F74411731%2Fukraine-baltic-states-to-boycott-osce-meeting-over-russias-lavrovs-participation, accessed on 01.12.2023

⁹ Lavrov arrives in Skopje, flew over Greece, not Bulgaria, published on 30.11.2023, available at <https://tass.com/politics/1713949>, accessed on 01.12.2023

¹⁰ Delegates walk out of OSCE as Sergei Lavrov begins speaking – video, published on 30.11.2023, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2023/nov/30/delegates-walk-out-of-osce-as-sergei-lavrov-begins-speaking-video> accessed on 01.12.2023

committed an act of an unabashed and violent aggression against Yugoslavia, a member of the OSCE and the UN. In 2008, in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and the principle of the inviolability of borders in Europe enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act, Kosovo was separated from Serbia without a referendum.” In his speech, he also spoke in length about the West’s efforts and actions to pit Georgia and Ukraine against Russia. Looking into the future he warned against similar developments in Moldova: “In effect, Moldova is destined to fall the next victim in the West-unleashed hybrid war against Russia. This should give food for thought to every country where Western emissaries, funds and so-called NGOs are now active.”¹¹ Finally, he posed a very direct question: “Why do we need flawed human rights institutions that are used as a tool by those who are set on privatising the secretariats of international organisations to suit their own needs? What interests of pan-European security and cooperation does such an OSCE serve?” Lavrov concluded on a pessimistic note: “There are no particular reasons to be optimistic now. Essentially, the OSCE is being reformatted to become an appendage of NATO and the EU. This organization (let’s face it) is on the brink of the abyss. Hence, a simple question: Does it make any sense to invest in any effort to revive it?”¹²

On the first day of the meeting Lavrov also held meetings with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan and with Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Peter Szijjarto. During the meeting with Mirzoyan, the Russian side reaffirmed its readiness to vigorously promote Armenian-Azerbaijani normalisation on the basis of the set of trilateral agreements signed by the leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020-2022, including efforts to conclude a peace treaty between Yerevan and Baku.¹³ As reported by the Russian Foreign Ministry, at the meeting with the Hungarian FM, the two foreign ministers compared positions on a wide range of practical issues of bilateral cooperation with a focus on the implementation of the agreements confirmed in Beijing on October 17, 2023 during the meeting between President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orban. Moreover,

¹¹ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks during the 30th meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council, Skopje, published on November 30, 2023, available at

https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/regprla/1918477/#sel=11:1:X,11:1:X accessed on 01.12.2023

¹² Ibid

¹³ Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s conversation with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan, published on 30.11.2023, available at

https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/regprla/1918431/ accessed on 01.12.2023

they exchanged views on key issues related to OSCE activities and topical international problems, including the situation in Ukraine.¹⁴

On the same day the Russian delegation also held a meeting with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Malta and N. Macedonia. "The meeting was convened with the aim of ensuring the continued functioning of the OSCE institutions, in the context of the specific circumstances in which the Organization finds itself," announced the Macedonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs following the meeting.¹⁵ The statement was issued only after the information about the meeting was made public by the Russian embassy in Skopje. It functioned as a justification from the Macedonian Foreign Minister regarding the reasons for holding discussions with Russia's foreign minister.

The subsequent day, Lavrov conducted a press briefing, drawing a substantial attendance of reporters.¹⁶ The foreign minister maintained the tone that prevailed in his address to the meeting the day prior: "I regret that we have approached the 30th OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in an atmosphere that is not conducive to anniversary celebrations. We are seeing the complete degradation of everything that has been created within the OSCE (previously within this Conference) in all three security dimensions (military-political, economic-environmental and cultural-humanitarian)," Lavrov remarked.

Answering to media questions, Lavrov also explained his position on Bulgarian-Macedonian relations: "I can say that the Macedonian people have a full right to take part in all of the activities on our continent on an equal basis," Lavrov emphasized. He further added: "Speaking in general, not just about Macedonian-Bulgarian relations but about the persisting

¹⁴ Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's meeting with Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Peter Szijjarto, published on 30.11.2023, available at

https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/regprla/1918423/ accessed on 01.12.2023

¹⁵ "The meeting between Lavrov and the current as well as the future OSCE chairpersons was announced by the Russian embassy.", published on 30.11.2023, available at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/32708796.html> accessed on 01.12.2023

¹⁶ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions following the 30th OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting, Skopje, December 1, 2023, published on 01.12.2023, available at

https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1918688/ accessed on 01.12.2023

problems in the Balkans in general, they are rooted in the West's actions on the destruction of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Montenegrins, Slovenes, Slovaks, Serbs and Macedonians lived in that country. They did not have the difficulties that we are talking about now.”¹⁷ He also commented on the name issue, which led to Macedonia becoming renamed into North Macedonia under the dictate of NATO and Greece: “I remember that for years Macedonia was called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). This was humiliating. Then, North Macedonia was invented.” Furthermore, he noted: “Several years ago, the Speaker of the Macedonian Parliament, Talat Xhaferi, proudly posed for a photo in his office and there was an Albanian flag on his table. A problem exists, and everyone knows it.” He added: “The West was interested in breaking Yugoslavia apart. It did not need such a unifying force in the Balkans. They have always wanted to set one nation against another there, and they are still doing this with success. However, I am convinced that the people of the Balkan countries have developed a genetic code during their long and difficult but glorious history and eventually will not allow anyone to offend them. They will not let our Western colleagues set them against themselves, to incite one nation against another.”¹⁸ Finally, he concluded that the citizens he had encountered in the streets and in the hotel felt warmth for the Russians. He reassured those present that the feeling is mutual. Indeed, contrary to the official Macedonian foreign policy, the majority of the Macedonian people hold very critical views of NATO's engagement in Ukraine (and previously in Macedonia in 2001 and in Serbia in 1999) and a generally understanding and welcoming view over the role of Russia, in the construction of a new multipolar world order.

Conclusions adopted at the Meeting

The participating States' adopted, by consensus, decisions on the selection of Malta as OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for 2024, the extension of OSCE Secretary General Schmid, Representative on Freedom of the Media Ribeiro and High Commissioner on National Minorities Abdrakhmanov, and the appointment of Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights Mecacci, until 3 September 2024. “Our ability to come together now and forge consensus among all 57 participating States reveals, once more, the importance and efficacy of building agreement through negotiation and compromise on behalf of our

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

common goals and objectives. Despite our differences and disagreements, we have shown the strategic vision required to continue our constructive efforts toward implementing and applying the OSCE's competitive advantages through the work of its executive structures to the benefit of all our people," said Osmani. Malta will begin its term as OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on 1 January 2024. In his remarks on the decision, the Maltese Minister of Foreign Affairs and upcoming Chairperson-in-Office, Ian Borg, emphasized the country's willingness to assume the mantle of leadership. "The unanimous vote by all 57 countries is a testament to our joint commitment to continue strengthening our organization and, despite all the challenges we are currently facing, ensure that this organization remains robust. The OSCE was created upon shared principles and values. It is an inclusive platform for effective dialogue and we will make sure to keep strengthening it," said Minister Borg.¹⁹

Despite its stated goals and aspirations to prioritize humanitarian needs, the Macedonian presidency of the OSCE veered towards echoing NATO's agenda regarding the Ukraine crisis. This stance eclipsed the OSCE's core duties: facilitating dialogue, fortifying security, and championing human rights in the conflict. The 30th OSCE Ministerial Council in Skopje was unsettled by Russia's FM Lavrov's presence, sparking widespread debate and controversy. The ministerial council witnessed Lavrov's address, highlighting the OSCE's faltering state and NATO's dominance over the organization. Lavrov's remarks underscored Western interventions in South-Eastern and Eastern European conflicts and projected future pitfalls for Moldova. This diplomatic turbulence at the meeting exemplified discord within the OSCE. Amidst contentious dialogues and divergent perspectives, the OSCE selected Malta as the Chair for 2024. Macedonia's OSCE presidency illuminated the precarious state of the OSCE and raised pertinent questions about its relevance and future, especially in light of its role in advancing NATO's agendas in recent years.

¹⁹ OSCE Chairman-in-Office Osmani announces Malta as 2024 Chairpersonship, extension of senior officials following 30th Ministerial Council, published on 01.12.2023, available at <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/559671> accessed on 02.12.2023