

THE RISE AND FALL: MACEDONIAN - RUSSIAN RELATIONS IN THE POST SOVIET PERIOD

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-Abstract-

The end of the 20th century has brought important transformations to the European continent. Europe has experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The change of the political map and the birth of new states, whether in the former Yugoslav or Soviet space, has enabled their *internationalization* and establishment of bilateral communication and relation with many countries. In this context, global powers saw new possibilities for influence and presence in different areas. This article analyses the interstate bilateral relations between the Republic of Macedonia and the Russian Federation during the post-Soviet period with focus on several “hot” topics: Russian position during 2001 conflict, Macedonian - Greek name dispute and Russian attitude regarding the integration of the country in NATO. The main argument of the paper is that the improvement or deterioration of Russian-Macedonian relations, their rise and fall over time has been influenced by the general *climate* of the Russian-Western relations.

Key words: *Russian Federation, Macedonia, NATO, name dispute, 2001 conflict, NATO enlargement.*

I. BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA 1990-2000

Beside the similar social and ideological arrangement during the second half of the XX century, in the early 1990s both the Russian Federation and the Republic of Macedonia underwent a transformation from a monist system to a multiparty democracy and transition. Unlike the other Yugoslav republics, the fate of the Republic of Macedonia was somewhat different because its secession from the Federation took place without bloodshed, *without a single bullet being fired*.

The foreign policy of the Russian Federation towards the Republic of Macedonia during that period is determined by the general policy regarding the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The establishment of the

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Republic of Macedonia as a new state and a new subject in international relations has created an opportunity for cooperation with various countries in the world, including the Russian Federation. As a result of that, Macedonian independence has opened a new chapter in the bilateral relations.

In respect to the referendum on the independence of Macedonia (September 8, 1991), the Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Vitaly Churkin emphasized that the Russian Federation sees the holding of the referendum in the context of the sovereign right of nation, the Macedonian nation, for self-determination...¹

Having in mind the circumstances in which Russia found itself after the fall of the Berlin wall, the support for political independence of states such as Macedonia was understandable and logical. Russia of President Yeltsin itself was undergoing a similar experience and had already supported the self-determination of the Baltic states, but also the independence of the Yugoslav states: Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The first item on the bilateral diplomatic agenda following the referendum for independence was the issue of recognition. In the period from September 1991 - May 1992, the state authorities of the Republic of Macedonia continuously made efforts within the framework of various official visits and exchange with representatives of the highest authorities of the Russian Federation to obtain the recognition of the independence of the Macedonian state. However, one should also have in mind that this issue was also influenced by the Greek position regarding the official name of the Republic.

After the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev to Skopje in May 1992, he informed the Greek Prime Minister Kostas Mitsotakis that Russia would recognize Macedonia. His letter stated that, "on the basis of traditional friendly relations with Greece, fulfilling your wishes, we have postponed the announcement of this decision (*the recognition of Macedonia, o.n.*). We wanted to get guarantees that Skopje has no territorial claims... Further delaying the recognition loses its meaning".²

Although the official recognition came several months latter due to the situation created as a result of the introduction of sanctions against Yugoslavia, President Yeltsin's statement on August 3, 1992 during his visit to Sofia that "Macedonia itself has decided how it will be called", was a confirmation of the forthcoming official recognition. Additionally, President Yeltsin's statement about the recognition of the Republic of Macedonia during the meeting with his Bulgarian colleague Zhelju Zheljev, Being one of the few countries that recognized Macedonia at the time, it was clear that the Russian move for recognition was requested and supported by official Bulgarian authorities. Two days later, on August 5, Vitaliy Churkin, during his visit to Skopje, officially handed over the decree for the recognition of the Republic of Macedonia by the Russian government.³

This decision of the Russian diplomacy was later criticized by Western European countries and perceived as opposite to the conclusions of the European Council in particular the conclusion of the European Community Lisbon Summit in June 1992. The European Community "expressed their readiness to recognize that republic (*Macedonia, o.n.*)... with a name that does not include the term *Macedonia*".⁴ Responding to Western critics, Russian foreign policy considered that since Russia was not consulted on the decisions of the Lisbon summit, "it does not give priority to anyone"⁵

¹Докмановиќ, Мишо. *Сами на своето, Кратка усторија на македонската независност (1990-1993)*, Fridrih Ebert Stiftung, Skopje, 2021, p. 310.

²Nikifirov, V.K. "Rossiya (SSSR) i Makedoniya: istoriya, politika, kultura 1944-1991". Retrieved from: http://macedonia.kroraina.com/rm/rm_1.htm?fbclid=IwAR3YTLz1ViX74DNVHqb5_JegoudzvL-21CMKFwiZRI8Dz-q0R6l7nz2b5dQ

³Ibid.

⁴ European Union: European Council in Lisbon, *Conclusions of the Presidency*, Lisbon 26/27 June 1992, SN 3321/2/92, Retrieved from: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/20510/1992_june_-_lisbon_eng_.pdf.

⁵Headley, James. *Russia and the Balkans: Foreign Policy from Yeltsin to Putin*. London, HURST & COMPANY, 2008. p.95.

Macedonia's recognition was an illustrative example that in the absence of EU consultation with Russian diplomacy, Russia was taking an unilateral step.⁶ In fact, the intention and tendency of post-Soviet Russia to be treated as an equal partner with Western countries in the settlement of European and even Balkan disputes, and not to be excluded from Western society was clearly manifested in this case.

However, the delay in establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries until 1994 was an indication that the Russian government was balancing with its relations with Greece, and the possible influence that Greece could have in the context of the European Community.

Regarding the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and Macedonia, the head of Russian diplomacy stated that "certain aspects of the Greek-Macedonian problem should not delay Macedonia's membership in international organizations OSCE, UN, etc. (1992 o.n.)".⁷

The recognition by Russia was also of great importance because Macedonia was being recognized from a major world power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The Russian Federation was the first UN Security Council member to recognize Macedonia under its constitutional name, paving the way for the country's membership in this organization.

Following Macedonian admission to the UN under the provisional reference, the Russian Federation included the building of bilateral, economic and political relations with the Republic of Macedonia within the framework of the Foreign Policy Concept of 1993. This clearly demonstrated Russian interest to boost relations with Macedonia on all levels.

With the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Macedonia, the two countries signed (and ratified) a significant number of agreements in various fields. In the spirit of bilateral relations, in January 1998, the Declaration of Friendship and Cooperation between Russia and Macedonia was signed, emphasizing, among other things, "the cultural heritage of the two countries and their contribution to European civilization."⁸

It seems that Russia perceived the building of friendly relations with the countries of the region, including Macedonia, in the context of opening a new chapter in its foreign policy. As far as the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and Macedonia, although they were established in 1994, the first Russian ambassador to Macedonia handed over the credentials to the President Kiro Gligorov at the end of December 1996.⁹

Despite the fact that a number of agreements were signed between the two countries, however, the further development of relations was challenged by a few emerging issues (for instance, the position of the Russian Federation in relation to the UNPREDEP¹⁰ peacekeeping force in Macedonia, and the strengthening of NATO's influence as a result of the crisis in Kosovo).

According to some sources, Russian diplomacy, through its ambassador in Macedonia, proposed to President Gligorov the replacement of American troops in the UNPREDEP mission with Russian military personnel, "...if necessary, with a larger military unit, with a division...".¹¹ Russia appears to

⁶Samokhvalov, Vsevolod. *Russian-European Relations in the Balkans and Black Sea Region: Great Power Identity and the Idea of Europe*, Palgrave McMillan, 2017, p.149.

⁷Докмановиќ, Мишо. p. 315.

⁸Deklaratsiya o Druzhestvennykh Otnosheniyakh i Sotrudnichestve mezhdru Rossiyskoy Federatsiyey i Respublikoy Makedoniyey. Retrieved from: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/8310531> 10.06.2022.

⁹Ambassadors of Russian federation to Republic of North Macedonia. Retrieved from: https://macedonia.mid.ru/ru/web/macedonia_mc/istorija

¹⁰On March 31, 1995, the Security Council decided to replace UNPROFOR with three separate but interrelated peacekeeping operations. Within the framework of the Republic of Macedonia, the Council decided, by adopting resolution 983, that UNPROFOR will be known as the United Nations Preventive Deployment Force - UNPREDEP.

¹¹Koloskov, A. Evgenij. *Strana bez nazvaniya: Vneshnopoliticheskiy aspekt stanovleniya makedonskogo gosudarstva (1991–2001 gg.)*, Russian Academy of Science: Institute of Slavic Studies, Moscow, 2013/. p.173.

have been sceptical of the large presence of US troops in the peacekeeping capacity for safeguarding Macedonian borders.

II. THE CONFLICT OF 2001 AND THE POSITION ON RUSSIAN DIPLOMACY

In Russian academic circles, as the famous political scientist Elena Panomareva, the Republic of Macedonia represented a successful example of modernization reforms in a multi-ethnic society, which within certain limits led to a policy of reconciliation and integration of minority groups in the government.¹²

The 2001 conflict experienced by the Republic of Macedonia drew the attention and interest of various Western circles, not excluding the Russian Federation.

For the Russian establishment that came to power in 2000 headed by Vladimir Putin, the political situation in the Balkans logically raised interest, mainly because of its dissatisfaction of treatment of previous governments and Russian diplomacy during 1990s conflicts in the Balkan context.

In that direction, the conflicts in the Balkans (for example, Southern Serbia and Macedonia) after the events of 1999, in fact after the NATO intervention in Kosovo, were perceived by Russian diplomacy within the framework of a new form of "diplomatic awakening". This approach aimed to oppose further military presence and the expansion of NATO in the Balkans.¹³

For Russia, the main generator of the security crisis in the Republic of Macedonia in 2001 was precisely the military intervention in Kosovo. One the first statements of the head of Russian diplomacy, Igor Ivanov, regarding the fighting in the Republic of Macedonia, was that, "these events were the result of NATO's direct aggression against Yugoslavia, and the wrong steps taken by Western countries in Kosovo."¹⁴

From the Russian point of view, the conflict in Macedonia came directly as a result of the withdrawal of the Yugoslav army from Kosovo and that "despite the international presence, the power vacuum was filled by extremists".¹⁵

In this regard, the Russian political leadership was convinced that the lack of disarmament in Kosovo led to the crisis in Macedonia, and President Putin emphasized that, "nothing has been done to disarm the terrorists".¹⁶

On March 19, 2001, Vladimir Putin on Russian television described the situation in Macedonia as "out of control" while "the international community must take decisive action, including the use of force, to stop the Albanian uprising."¹⁷ In that context, for Russian military circles, such an idea could be implemented through the arrival of Russian troops that were positioned in Kosovo.¹⁸ Practically, the

¹²Ponomareva, G. Elena. *Politicheskoye razvitiye post'yugoslavskogo prostranstva (vnutrenniye i vneshniye faktory)*, MGIMU University, Moscow, 2007, p.85.

¹³Bazerkoska, Brsacoska, Julija. Spasov, Aleksandar. "Challenging the West by (Ab) Using the Vacuum: The case of the Russian Influence in Republic of North Macedonia". *Law Review Iustinianus Primus*. Vol.10, 1/2019, p. 10.

¹⁴"Russia calls for Balkans intervention". In *The Guardian* (23 March 2001), Special report: Macedonia. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/mar/23/balkans4>

¹⁵RFE/RL - Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty – "Putin says pull-out in Macedonia led to Violence" - *Newsline* March 6, 2001. Retrieved from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1142355.html>

¹⁶Pihl, Hemmer, Luise. "Putin: Macedonia and Chechnya, the same problem." *euobserver*, (24 March 2001). Retrieved from: <https://euobserver.com/news/1842>

¹⁷ RFE/RL - Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - "Putin urges decisive action in Macedonia"-*Newsline* March 20, 2001. Retrieved from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1142365.html>

¹⁸Ibid. "Door wide open for Putin in Macedonia?"

Russian Federation, through a possible peaceful military mission in Macedonia, aimed to ensure a military presence, which it has already insisted on within the framework of UNPREDEP.

The Russian Federation has perceived the 2001 conflict through the prism of the war against terrorism and the defence of the territorial integrity of a sovereign state. For the Russian diplomacy, "extremists and terrorists should not have any doubts that the legitimate actions of the state authorities to protect the state borders, the territorial integrity of the country and the protection of citizens, would have the full understanding and support of the international community."¹⁹

In fact, in several meetings with Western leaders, Vladimir Putin compared the conflict in Macedonia to the events in Chechnya. During the European summit held in Stockholm in March 2001, he has emphasized: "what was happening in Macedonia was very similar to what has happened in Chechnya"²⁰

At this summit, President Putin made a proposal to resolve the conflicts in the Balkans and he even presented this proposal to President Boris Trajkovski. The Russian plan envisaged that the Balkan countries would reach agreements on important principles of international relations, while the World Bank would act as a guarantor of such an agreement.²¹

Hence, it could be concluded that Russian diplomacy was interested in establishing a mechanism in which peace in the Balkans would prevail within the UN, and through which Russia would be a participant in its monitoring. This proposal was in a way intended to fulfil the Russian vision of security and peace in Europe, but without the exclusive presence of NATO.

In the context of the bilateral relations between Macedonia and the Russian Federation during the period of the conflict, the Macedonian leadership considered Russia a partner that could assist Macedonian state in facing its challenges.

This could also be seen during President Trajkovski's visit to Moscow in 2001. He has received a clear support of President Putin, who stressed out that "Russia is helping a UN member state, not rebels..."²²

According to some sources, the Russian leadership promised military aid to the Republic of Macedonia, but the fulfilment of such a promise cannot be confirmed (!) Namely, during that period the military cooperation between the two countries could hardly be concretized due to the fact that Russia could not have offered free military aid to Macedonia, as NATO member countries could.²³ On the other hand, former Ambassador Marjan Gjorchev, who headed the Macedonian delegation that visited Ukraine in 2001, perceived the lack of economic cooperation as a reason why there could not be a successful military cooperation with Russia. According to him, "this was the logical answer why Russia was not interested in Macedonia during the military conflict of 2001".²⁴

Despite the Russian rhetoric of support, which was present during the conflict phase, it seems that Russia, utilized the situation in Macedonia in multilateral forums to manifest its intentions to be treated as a great global power.

During this period, Russia was in the phase of internal reorganization and repositioning in the international arena and consequently the possibilities to influence the course of the crisis in Macedonia were minimal. Obviously, this might be the reason why five members of the Contact Group, the "Group

¹⁹Headley, James. p.447.

²⁰ Pihl, Hemmer, Luise. "Putin: Macedonia and Chechnya, the same problem".

²¹President of Russia. "President Vladimir Putin held meetings with French President Jacques Chirac and President Boris Trajkovski of Macedonia". Retrieved from:

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/40726?fbclid=IwAR3kTQ2FK6JqISNVtMMY6H9LNg59GXTPfAw227Imyo5qvWYKX09Jh9EcuxA>

²²Koloskov, A.Evgenij. *Strana bez nazvaniya...* p. 221.

²³Ibid. p. 176.

²⁴Фокус. „Зошто Македонија купуваше воена опрема од Украина, а не од Русија?“ Retrieved from: <https://fokus.mk/zoshto-makedonija-kupuvashche-voena-oprema-od-ukraina-a-ne-od-rusija/>

of Quint" - USA, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy - (to reach the agreement and stop the conflict) were active for the situation in Macedonia, while Russia kept to the side.²⁵

This was also confirmed by the former Russian ambassador accredited to Macedonia, Aragon Asatur (2002-2006), who said in a statement that, "Russia is not one of the countries that prepared or signed that document (*the Ohrid Framework Agreement* o.n.)".²⁶

In Russian diplomacy, the Ohrid Agreement is already being used to express Russia's dissatisfaction in the context of Russian-European discussions on the rights of ethnic Russians living in the Baltic countries. In 2015, in the speech delivered to the Federal Assembly (Upper House), Sergey Lavrov referred to the Ohrid Agreement, which, according to him, "established peace and harmony", however, he asked the EU: "...after you supported the Ohrid Agreement...can you do the same for the Russians, in Estonia and in Latvia?"²⁷

Regarding the Framework Agreement Vladimir Putin, condemned the international community for double standards, i.e. "...to extend rights for the Albanian minority in Macedonia, and not to recognize such rights for the numerous Russian minority in the Baltic countries." ²⁸

In that direction, the comparisons that Russia drew with the Ohrid Agreement have demonstrated Russia's main goal and determination. Its diplomacy was focused to exert as much influence as possible on its close neighbours, in particular former members of the USSR.

The direct intervention of US and European diplomacy through its representatives during the drafting of the Ohrid Framework Agreement was an indication that the future of Macedonia depended precisely on the presence of Western institutions in the preservation of territorial integrity, internal social cohesion and the Euro-Atlantic path.

III. RUSSIAN-MACEDONIAN COOPERATION AFTER 2001

Given the fact that during the period when bilateral relations were established, the Russian Federation was facing various challenges of security nature as a result of the war in Chechnya, the economic and financial turmoil, more productive relations could not develop under such circumstances.

After the end of the conflict and the stabilization of the situation, the Republic of Macedonia opened a new chapter in the field of foreign policy. This period coincided with the new emerging leadership of the Russian Federation and consequently, as part of its activities in the Western Balkans, Russian-Macedonian cooperation in various fields began to flourish.

After 2001, there was a positive climate in relations between Russia and Macedonia, and this was reflected in mutual visits and signing of a large number of bilateral agreements.

On October 16, 2003, the Macedonian Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski, who led the government-economic delegation on the visit to Russia, had a meeting in Moscow with the President of the Russian Duma Gennady Seleznev and with the Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov.

Crvenkovski stated that relations with Russia are of the highest priority for Macedonia and that economic cooperation should be intensified.

During the official visit of the Macedonian Foreign Minister Ilinka Mitreva to Moscow in 2003, in addition to the development of relations between the two countries, the Russian side expressed its interest in fulfilling the Framework Agreement as soon as possible and preserving the unitary character

²⁵ Pardew, W. James. *Peacemakers: American Leadership and the End of Genocide in the Balkans*. The University Press of Kentucky, 2018, p.277.

²⁶ Bugajski, Janusz. *Cold Peace: Russia's New Imperialism*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004, p.201.

²⁷ Federal'noye Sobraniye Rossiyskoy Federatsii. *Sovet Federatsii* – No. Ст-374, 20.05.2015, Moscow.

²⁸ Путин, Владимир. *Зборови што го менуваа светот*. Ѓурѓа, Скопје, 2017, p. 29.

of the state.²⁹ This was also stated during the visit of the newly appointed Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to the Republic of Macedonia in 2004.³⁰

During this period, an agreement was signed between the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and the Government of the Russian Federation on military-technical cooperation. A military-technical cooperation agreement was planned during the presidencies of Kiro Gligorov and Boris Yeltsin in 1994-1996, but did not materialize due to economic instability in both countries.³¹

ECONOMIC AND TRADE COOPERATION

The intensification of Russian-Macedonian cooperation also showed the willingness of the Russian Federation to strengthen its positions in the Western Balkans, including the Macedonian state. However, although the Republic of Macedonia intensified its bilateral relations with the Russian Federation, this did not put into question its Euro-Atlantic path. It was during that period that the Republic of Macedonia applied for EU membership, the Stabilization and Association Agreement entered into force, and in 2005 the country acquired candidate status for membership in the union.

It seems that the intensification of relations between Macedonia and Russia during that period was based on a pragmatic basis that aimed above all at mutual economic and trade gains, and at the same time was in line with the progress of the rebuilding of constructive relations between Russia and the West. In fact, the economic, energy and trade aspects were the essence of this cooperation, as was emphasized in the press statements of the high Russian and Macedonian state officials.

The breakthrough of large Russian-owned companies in Macedonia in 2005, such as the LUKOIL company, the BUCHIM mine, as well as the electricity production company TE-TO, etc., were indicators of the will for economic cooperation between the two countries. As a result of the intention to expand economic activities, the Macedonian-Russian Chamber of Commerce was established and promoted within the third intergovernmental session in March 2005, in which today 149 companies participate.³²

Mutual trade is considered the most important aspect of the economic cooperation between the Russian Federation and Macedonia. According to some data, over 70 Russian companies operate in Macedonia, whose revenues multiply each year, so that from 63 million Euros in 2006, the figures reached 200 million Euros in 2020.³³

Despite the fact that Russian direct foreign investments are present in Macedonia, it could be concluded that their presence is rather modest since in the last 10 years they did not reach even 1% of the total investments in the country.³⁴ Given these parameters, compared to other Western Balkan countries, the economic participation of the Russian Federation in Macedonia is considered limited or minor. This

²⁹The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. *Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov Holds talks with Macedonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ilinka Mitreva*. Moscow, (14 January 2003). Retrieved from: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1705922/

³⁰The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. *Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov makes a working visit to Macedonia*. (December 8, 2004). Retrieved from: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1661148/

³¹Smirov.A.P. "Makedoniya i Rossiya posle "Ramochnykh Soglasheniy": Ukrepleniye Sotrudnichestv". In *Научные Ведомости: Историја, Политологија*, 2019, УДК 327, Vol. 46, No. 1, p. 191.

³²Македонско-руска стопанска комора. „М-Р Дејан Бешлиев за „Руска реч“: можеме многу повеќе во економската соработка со Русија“. Retrieved from: <https://www.maruko.org.mk/>

³³Pari. „Топ 10 компании со руски капитал во Македонија – годишно прават приход од над 200 милиони евра“. Retrieved from: <https://pari.com.mk/top-10-kompanii-so-ruski-kapital-vo-maked/>

³⁴Народна Банка на Република Северна Македонија. *Директни инвестиции – состојби*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nbrm.mk/ns-newsarticle-direktni-investicii---sostojbi.nsp>

economic and trade performance is not a satisfactory indicator for both countries that would allow the construction of sustainable mutual policies.

The Republic of Macedonia returned its focus to Russian politics in 2010, through which Russia seriously considered the possibility of the Macedonian state being involved in Russian energy projects. Undoubtedly, a very important part of Russia's economic policies towards Macedonia was the involvement in the energy gas projects that Russia aimed to achieve with the Balkan countries.

The increase in trade between the two countries was also reflected in the visit of Sergey Lavrov to Ohrid in 2011 on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the opening of the first Russian consulate, and during the meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs Antonio Miloshoski, the Russian minister emphasized that, "In the relations between Russia and Macedonia have no political problems at all. We have plans for deepening cooperation in all areas" and that, "Macedonia has expressed real interest (*for the South Stream project - o.n.*)".³⁵

Apart from the fact that the visit in 2011 came at a time when cooperation at the economic and trade level was emphasized, it should not be forgotten that this also corresponds to the slowing down of the integration processes, but also to the failure to receive an invitation to NATO membership after the summit in Bucharest in 2008. It seems that Russia tried to fill this foreign policy vacuum vis-a-vis the West!

In 2013, Macedonia signed the cooperation agreement with the Russian Federation for the construction of the South Stream gas pipeline, with the Macedonian authorities expecting the project to further strengthen the political-economic relations of the Republic of Macedonia with the Russian Federation.³⁶

Cooperation between Russia and Macedonia in the field of gas transportation was reduced to the gas pipeline Klecovce - Negotino, which was built and financed by the Russian company "Sroytransgaz" as a settlement of the Russian clearing debt to the former Yugoslavia. However, this did not fulfil the energy goals completely, because it did not have the possibility to be included in the eventual gas pipeline Turk Stream (*if it is realized at all*), because it requires a greater capacity for gas circulation.³⁷

The role of the gas sector in Macedonia is marginal, while according to the data, in 2020 the export of "Gazprom" in Macedonia is only 0.14 bcm of the total export to the Eastern and Central European markets.³⁸ On the other hand, the decision of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia in 2022 to become part of the European platform for the purchase of liquid natural gas was focused to avoid the additional dependence on Russian gas even more.

IV. THE RUSSIAN POSITION TOWARDS THE MACEDONIAN-GREEK DISPUTE AND MEMBERSHIP IN NATO

The dispute over the name between Macedonia and Greece, which made the country's independence problematic, turned into a major knot, which prevented Macedonia's membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures.

³⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. *Transcript of Remarks and Replies by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Media Questions at Joint Press Conference Following Talks with Macedonian Foreign Minister Antonio Miloshoski*, Ohrid, April 20, 2011.

Retrieved from: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1702263/

³⁶ Министерство за Финанции. *Македонија и Русија го потпишаа договорот за Јужен тек*. Retrieved from: <https://finance.gov.mk>

³⁷ Samorukov, Maksim. *Illyuziya blizosti: ambitsii i vozmozhnosti Rossii na Zapadnykh Balkanakh*. Carnegie Moscow Center. p.39.

³⁸ Gazprom Export. *Gas supplies to Europe (2020)*. Retrieved from: <https://gazpromexport.ru/en/statistics/>

In the last period (2008-2019), the solution of this issue acquired clear security dimensions because the resolution of the issue was placed in the context of NATO expansion and Macedonia's membership in NATO.

On the other hand, the absence of membership invitation for NATO in 2008 not only slowed down the integration process, but encouraged the official Kremlin at the level of Russian-Macedonian diplomacy to discuss the Security Treaty proposal of President Medvedev (in 2009), which undermined the role of NATO in Europe.

Although the Russian Federation was neutral on this issue (the name dispute), in the 1990s it made modest steps to resolve the Greek-Macedonian dispute. In 1995, during the Russian-Macedonian high-level meeting, Russian diplomat Nikolay Afanasefski stated that the Russian side would try to help resolve the name dispute with Greece, as well as the language dispute with Bulgaria.³⁹

In the context of the economic blockade of Macedonia by Greece, the spokesman of the Russian MFA stated that, "The blockade is not acceptable in international relations", adding that Russia wants to maintain friendly relations with both Macedonia and Greece.⁴⁰

Although these attempts did not materialize, the ambitions of the Russian Federation to provide solutions to interstate problems in the Balkans are evidently connected to the Russian feeling and self-perception that it is a major (European) power with high prestige, capable of providing solutions between conflicting parties.

The Russian reality after the 1990s shows that the Russian Federation was not a credible actor to mediate the disputes of the Balkan countries as it mediated, for instance, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1994.

It could be concluded that until the moment when the name issue was about to enter its final phase of solution, Russian foreign policy saw the Greek-Macedonian dispute in the context of an interstate compromise. In 2008, the spokesman of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Andrey Nesterenko, stated at a press conference that, "we, (*Russia o.n.*) have certainly said more than once that we are in favor of reaching a voluntary compromise between Skopje and Athens through the mediation of the United Nations. We will agree to any mutually acceptable formula drawn up by both parties."⁴¹

Russian diplomacy at this stage did not express antagonism to the final solution because the solution came from such an international mechanism as the UN and that Russia could exert influence. Russia's displeasure with the epilogue came as a result of it being linked to the expansion of the Alliance, and discussions were already taking place to resolve the issue within NATO offices.

After the events in Ukraine in 2014, Russian political circles intensified cooperation with various political actors in the region in order to create an anti-NATO mood. In this context, the leading Russian party "United Russia" within its XVth Congress, held in 2016, signed a declaration of cooperation with several parties from the Western Balkans, including the Democratic Party of the Serbs of Macedonia for "creating a militarily neutral territory on the Balkans".⁴²

The integration of the country in the Euro-Atlantic structures is also supported by the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia. A survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in the period from November 27 to December 23, 2021 showed that 85% of respondents agree that strong relations with the EU best serve the interests of North Macedonia, and 76% share the same opinion

³⁹Koloskov, A.Evgenij. *Strana bez nazvaniya...* p. 168.

⁴⁰Докмановиќ, Мишо. p. 314.

⁴¹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. *Response by Russian MFA Spokesman Andrei Nesterenko to a Media Question Concerning Greco-Macedonian Dispute over the Republic of Macedonia Name* (18 October 2008)

Retrieved from: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1620730/

⁴² Balkan Insight. "Putin's Party Signs 'Military Neutrality' Agreements with Balkan Parties", Retrieved from: <https://medium.com/@balkaninsight/putins-party-signs-military-neutrality-agreements-with-balkan-parties-8f2bbad4c23>

about the United States. But the interesting fact is that 60% of citizens think that strong relations with Russia serve their interests, which is an increase of 6% compared to the survey conducted in February 2020.⁴³ It seems that the pro-Russian mood among the citizens is growing at a time when there was a slowdown in the Euro-Atlantic processes.

For years, the Western Balkans has been a key region of NATO's expansion and is constantly being promised EU membership, which greatly limits the ambitions of the Russian Federation in the region.

The Russian Federation was not fundamentally opposed to the agreement between Athens and Skopje, but was frustrated that the agreement was made without Moscow's consent and paved the way for NATO membership. Russia perceived the West's efforts in the region as a geopolitical move, typical of the powerful states of the XIX century.⁴⁴

Russian diplomacy viewed the referendum on September 30, 2018 with a dose of skepticism, and the day after the referendum, the media department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement saying that, "the participation of 36.8% means that the referendum cannot to be recognized as valid" after "Macedonian voters chose to boycott the solutions imposed from abroad". As for the campaign of Western leaders to hold the referendum, official Moscow considered it an interference in internal affairs.⁴⁵

Previously, the Russian diplomacy made a similar statement during the riots in Kumanovo on May 9, 2015. Few days after the events Sergey Lavrov suggested the Federal Assembly that "Macedonian events are directed from outside... behind all this is still the desire to influence him (*the Prime Minister: o.n.*) regarding his refusal to join the sanctions against Russia and the fact that he supported South Stream ... including ... Turkish Stream".⁴⁶

Surprisingly, Sergey Lavrov mentioned the Albanian factor as a destabilizing element to undermine the government. He went so far as to mention "the federalization of Macedonia... its division between Bulgaria and Albania... and Greater Albania".⁴⁷

Through this statement, Russian diplomacy aimed to create a perception that the Balkans, despite the Western presence, is still a hotbed of the crisis. Also, through this narrative, Russia tried to divert the attention of the West from the post-Soviet to the Balkan region. According to the Kremlin's logic, the more attention the West pays to the Balkans, the less it will engage in the post-Soviet region.⁴⁸

Despite the fact that Moscow officially expressed dissatisfaction with the way the process of resolving the dispute and holding the referendum took place, it still recognizes the country with the new name. North Macedonia's membership in NATO practically brought Russian-Macedonian relations to the lowest level, and although mutual communication continues at the level of embassies, these relations are no more than bureaucratic activity.

⁴³360stepeni.mk. Анкета на ИРИ: Останува силната поддршка за ЕУ и за САД, ама расте и влијанието на Кина и на Русија во земјава. (7 march, 2022). Retrieved from: https://360stepeni.mk/anketa-na-iri-ostanuva-silna-poddrshkata-za-eu-i-za-sad-ama-raste-i-vlijanieto-na-kina-i-na-rusija-vo-zemjava/?fbclid=IwAR3h-LHKyZ5p85NWIMAWc-zxQtN4hJ_4sMmYyj90ackgHU3-CxyHfX2J0LQ

⁴⁴Samokhvalov, Vsevolod. "Russia in the Balkans..." p.194.

⁴⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. *Comment by the Information and Press Department on the results of Macedonia's referendum* (October 1, 2018). Retrieved from: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1576368/

⁴⁶Federal'noyeSobraniyeRossiyskoyFederatsii. *Sovet Federatsii*.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Samorukov, Maxim. "Russia and the Western Balkans: A Last Stand or More of the Same?", Retrieved from: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2019/09/04/russia-and-western-balkans-last-stand-or-more-of-same-pub-79796>

V. CONCLUSION

During post-soviet period, especially after 2001, a large number of bilateral agreements were signed between the two countries, which was an indicator of good mutual relations. However, although the Republic of Macedonia intensified its bilateral relations with Russia, this did not call into question its Euro-Atlantic path. During this period (2005), the Republic of Macedonia applied for membership in the EU, the Stabilization and Association Agreement entered into force, and the country acquired candidate status for membership in the union.

Russian foreign policy saw the Greek-Macedonian dispute in the context of an interstate compromise. But Russia's displeasure with the epilogue came as a result of the settlement of the dispute being linked to the expansion of the NATO Alliance.

The citizens of North Macedonia overwhelmingly support European integration, as the IRI research shows, but on the other hand, there is no lack of support for good relations with Russia. The decline in the dynamics of relations between the Republic of North Macedonia and the Russian Federation is influenced, among other things, by the general relations between Russia Federation and the West (EU and NATO).

After the war in Ukraine began on February 24, 2022 and the Russian troops entered the territory of Ukraine, the differences between Macedonia and Russia deepened even more. After the military aggression, the Republic of North Macedonia joined all EU decisions on restrictive measures and sanctions against Russia. This represented the lowest level of relations between the two countries after the independence. The restoration of good relations between the two countries would come only under a specific circumstance - eventual reproachment between NATO countries and Russia and further de-escalation of the ongoing crisis.

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