

THE ALBANIAN FACTOR AND REPUBLIC OF (NORTH) MACEDONIA (1991–2021)*

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Abstract: For more than two centuries the Albanian factor in Macedonia has been a dynamically changing reality. The last decade of the 20th century is associated with the international consolidation of the Republic of Macedonia, whereas during the first decade of the 21st century the country faced “significant” international problems and confrontations between the Macedonians and the Albanians, as well as the dilemma of its further steps towards membership in the European and North Atlantic structures.

Keywords: Republic of (North) Macedonia; Ohrid Agreement; Przino Agreement; NATO; EU.

Introduction

In the SFRY at the end of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, there was a transition from the one-party authority of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) towards the establishment of a pluralist multi-party system. After the possibility to establish new political parties was legalized, about 20 parties and coalitions were founded in the Federal Republic of Macedonia. Which brought great diversity to the political life of the Republic and provided the foundation of party pluralism. The parties divided based on their attitude toward the future development of Yugoslavia, so there were “pro-Yugoslav” and there were “national” parties. At the same time that Macedonian national parties were established in Macedonia, political parties and coalitions based on national and ethno-religious foundations were created. The Party of Democratic Prosperity (SDP) and National Democratic Party (NDS), which have their base of support among the Albanians in Macedonia, were particularly prominent among the

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parties.¹ One of their major program requirements was to “redefine” Macedonia as the state not only of Macedonians, but also of Albanians and Turks, so that the Albanian community would be created along with the gain of political and territorial autonomy. Not a small role in the policy and conduct of these parties was played by the establishment of a close relationship and mutual activities with the representatives of the so-called Kosovo Alternative – the leaders of the Democratic Alliance of Kosovo with political parties and government institutions of Albania.

“The Albanian Syndrome” in the Republic of Macedonia

“The Albanian Syndrome” or the problem of “Kosovization” of West Macedonia realistically endangers the integrity of the Macedonian state. This problem is gradually becoming an international problem and there is a unanimous assessment that it is a considerably serious source of ethnic, political, socio-economic and military tensions for not only the Republic of Macedonia, but also for the whole region.²

There are entire territories, such as the towns of Tetovo, Struga and Gostivar where the Albanian population is in the majority – they make up 80 % of population and as for the percentage they exceed the situation in Kosovo. Essentially, this expansion is the re-run of the trend that occurred in Kosovo in order to create “ethnically clean” Albanian towns and entire territories, which would be a foundation for a future “Albanian republic in Yugoslavia.” It turned out that these were not only intentions or theoretical constructions but a long-term implemented policy.

After the referendum of September 8, 1991, when out of 1,494,624 voters 95.32 % voted for the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Macedonia³, the further development of public and political life of the independent state was marked by increasingly deeper secessionist activities of the Albanian population and their political organizations.

After the intentional political activities in the campaign preceding and during the elections, the leaders of the Albanian parties SDP and NDS turned to the tactics of abstention - boycott and non-participation in the efforts to create a pluralist civil society and strengthen the just born Macedonian statehood. The first step towards the full abstention from public and political life was directly linked to the establishing of the first democratic Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia on November 18, 1991. According to the Constitution, Republic of

¹ Славко Милосавлевски и Мирче Томовски. Албанците во Република Македонија 1945-1995. Легислатива, политичка документација, статистика (Скопје: Студентски збор, 1997).

² Антон Първанов, “Албанският синдром” в Република Македонија“, в: Национални проблеми на Балканите: история и съвременност (София: Аргес 1992), 158–178.

³ Антон Първанов, „Обявяване на независимостта на Република Македонија през 1991 г.“, Военноисторически сборник, № 2-3 (1992), 222–244.

Macedonia was declared an independent, sovereign and civil state. The rights of nationalities in Macedonia were regulated by Articles 7 and 48. They provide for the use of one's native tongue as official in municipalities where a group comprises a majority or a considerable part of the population. They determine the rights of declaration, development and determination of national identity and characteristics, native tongue and literacy. They can use their flag and other symbols, which however must not be identical to those in their mother countries. Considerable concessions were made in this way, but the Albanian parties remained dissatisfied.

The Albanian population refused to participate in a census in the Republic of Macedonia at the beginning of 1992. The Albanian members of parliament repeatedly boycotted its sessions many times, including at times when important laws were being passed. There were even attempts to create parallel state institutions. In 1993, the intention was announced to create an autonomous Albanian area in Macedonia, so-called Republic of Ilirida. In 1994, attempts were made to create Albanian paramilitary organizations by establishing so called National Defense Axis of Albanian Armed Forces under the leadership of H. Haskaj – who was the Depute Minister of Defense of the Republic of Macedonia at the time and H. Arushi, a former Yugoslav Army officer from Kosovo.

The situation in Macedonia had elements of escalating tension on the eve of the Kosovo conflict of 1998/1999, whereas even back in 1996/1997 the territory of the Republic was turned into a starting logistics base and support and the main channel for transfer of weapons, people and ammunition used by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). On the eve of 2001, the territory of Macedonia was used by the units of the Army for Liberation of Medvedja, Presevo and Bujanovac, which established their bases, supports and military warehouses there.

The same processes unwinding in Kosovo one way or the other happened in Macedonia as well, with varying rate and intensity of course. After the first wave of Albanian refugees from Kosovo into Macedonia during 1990s, there was a second wave, which followed mass refugee movement during the military activities in Kosovo in 1998/1999. In this way over 300.000 Albanians from Kosovo were directed by the Serbian Army toward Macedonia. This caused considerable changes in the ethnic balance of the population, since the majority of them continued to live with their relatives in Macedonia.

At the same time, on the eve of a new millennium in 2000, Albanian scientists from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia worked out the last variant of the Albanian national doctrine for the 21st century – “The Platform for the Solution of the Albanian National Interest.” It declares the attitude toward Greater Albania the most topical and offers the new programmatic goals: The rise and determination of national identity, self-consciousness and pride of the Albanians; The change of the status of the Albanian ethnic communities in

neighboring countries, where they would no longer be treated as minorities but should enjoy a certain degree of independence; Free communication within the Albanian cultural and ethnic areas; “Collective” integration of all Albanians in the Balkans into Euro-Atlantic structures, organizations and values – regardless of state borders within which they live.⁴

The situation in the Republic of Macedonia changes swiftly and almost suddenly from the state of relatively stable inter-ethnic relations and domestic political situation, it turns into armed conflicts between the Macedonian armed forces and paramilitary terrorist groups of Macedonian Albanians with the support of units and staff of the Kosovo Liberation Army from Kosovo and South Serbia.

The escalation of tensions in Macedonia began after the signing of the Agreement of demilitarization of the border between Serbia and Macedonia and acknowledgment of it as an interstate border. This agreement was signed by President Vojislav Kostunica and President Boris Trajkovski in Februar 2001. The agreement was proclaimed illegitimate by the Kosovo Liberation Army and the Army for Liberation of Medvedja, Presevo and Bujanovac in Kosovo, and by the Albanian parties in Macedonia because according to them it isolates the Albanians in Kosovo as a negotiating party and the border which goes between Kosovo and Macedonia and closes natural links between relatives.

Immediately after that there followed an armed action to take Tanusevci, when a new factor of Macedonian Albanians entered the scene – a terrorist organization called National Liberation Army (NLO).

During the following months the activity and behavior of the Albanian political forces in Macedonia were redirected from the politics of ethnic coexistence, integration and cooperation towards the tactics from the beginning of 1990s – abstention, boycott, and active irredentist activities “flavored” with the armed terrorist actions of NLO.

There is a striking resemblance between the tactics and activities of the Albanian radical footholds and forces in Kosovo in 1998/1999 and the occurrences in Macedonia in 2001. By declaring the NLO as a bearer of extremist attitudes and first military actions in Tanusevci and Tetovo, there followed mass meetings and demonstrations of the Albanian population – in Skopje and Tetovo in support of the demands to change the Macedonian Constitution and make the NLO legitimate.

The typical characteristic of the situation during the active military actions in Macedonia was increasingly closer cooperation and mutual operations of the leaderships of political parties DPA and NDS with the leaders of the NLO. The

⁴ Марияна Стамова, „Албанският проблем на Балканите: исторически корени и съвременни измерения“, в: Етномалцинствени проблеми в Югоизточна Европа през 90-те години на XX век и евроатлантическата интеграция на България (София: Албатрос, 2001), 105–112.

evidence for this was the signing of so-called Prizren Declaration on May 23, 2001, by and between the leaders of DPA, NDS and the NLO. The document provides for the common political platform and action plan: The change of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, which would be transformed from unitary into dual state; Proportionate participation of the Albanians in all government institutions; The Albanian language will become the second official language; The creation of separate educational system for the Albanians, which would include opening of an Albanian University; Establishing of “free communication with the Albanian cultural and ethnic areas” in Albania, Kosovo, South Serbia; Rehabilitation of the NLO and their free “reintegration” into society; Remuneration of all losses and destruction suffered by the Albanian side due to punitive actions by the Macedonian government and army.

The analysis of the events shows that a double standard was applied in the behavior of the Albanian political factor – on the one hand, they spoke in favor of preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Macedonia, and on the other hand – more and more they took an attitude of support for terrorist actions, to make the NLO legitimate, to include it in the negotiating process and to cement their escalating demands on the Macedonian government. Ultimately, they were in favor of internationalization of the problem.

In the end it should be noted that in 2001 the political and ethno-national situation in Macedonia entered a qualitatively new stage. After an almost 10-year-long period, when there was a gradual creation of the framework of “the Macedonian model of ethnic coexistence” within which the Macedonians as a majority nation in the republic and the Albanians, organized ethno-politically into two powerful political parties, made attempts to find a common language of communication and to implement the European standards in the minority-related policy, there was a sudden turn.⁵

The Situation after “The Ohrid Agreement” in the Republic of Macedonia

After the Ohrid Agreement of August 2001, voting in favor of 15 Constitutional amendments, and passing the law of local self-government, education and use of language, quota representation based on principle of ethnicity was introduced in the various state structures and institutions, including in the army and in the security forces. The preservation of still intolerance in the attitudes and behavior of the two involved in the conflict sides, the double standards and the passivity of the so-called international community, the

⁵ Антон Първанов, А. „Конфликтната ситуация в Република Македония през 2001: преход от “Македонски модел на етническо съжителство” към етно-политическа криза“, в: България-Македония (Проблеми на евроинтеграцията) (София: Кота, 2002), 233–244.

unpredictability of “irresponsible” factors among the Macedonians and the Albanians, leads to this – the situation in Republic of Macedonia remains open.

On the verge of the new 21st century, Republic of Macedonia clashed with numerous domestic political problems and escalation of the inter-ethnic conflicts. The danger of the escalation and spreading of the ethnic conflict and its transformation into civil war was successfully averted with the help of the international community.⁶ From a foreign policy perspective, during the first decade of the 21st century the country had candidate status for EU membership and the doors of NATO were open for it. However, the main problem before its successful integration consisted in finding a solution to the issue of the country’s name in its dispute with Greece.

In spite of the serious efforts of the Republic of Macedonia, the EU did not set a date for the start of the accession negotiations in the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. On its part, NATO was ready for rapid accession of the Balkan state, but only after the dispute on its name had been resolved. That position was clearly outlined at the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008, when Albania and Croatia received invitations to join the Alliance, but Macedonia did not. The country thus remained with totally blocked dialogue with NATO and the EU on account of the demands of Greece concerning its name and the implementation of the good-neighbourhood policy. That in turn created a security threat and resulted in escalation of the inter-ethnic tension.⁷ The country’s growing destabilisation was strongly influenced by the deepening crisis in the domestic policy sphere in the autumn of 2012, provoked by the so-called “budget crisis.” It was connected with difficulties for adopting the new budget after it was blocked in the Assembly by the opposition. The political crisis continued in 2013, with the active help of the opposition, notably the left-wing Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDUM) that blocked on numerous occasions the Assembly’s work on various issues. These processes intensified in 2014 after a series of elections in the country: five presidential and eight parliamentary, three of which pre-term. President Gjorge Ivanov was elected for his second term in office, and the parliamentary elections were again won by the right-wing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (IMRO-DPMNU, also known as VMRO-DPMNE). According to SDUM, the elections were rigged and it refused to participate in the Assembly’s work, insisting on the election of a caretaker government. In this connection, the opposition in the country declared a “hot political autumn” for yet another year, characterised by the addressing of important issues and problems facing the country, e.g., the absence of political

⁶ Марияна Стамова, „Република Македонија: реални или надценени амбиции“, в: Балканите през второто десетилетие на 21 век (София: Парадигма, 2015), 221–254.

⁷ The inevitable happened in the spring of 2012 with the flaring of the ethnic unrest after the murder of five Macedonian citizens on Easter Day at Smilkovci Lake.

dialogue, the dispute on the name, the NATO Summit in Cardiff after yet another failure of the country to join NATO at the Chicago Summit in 2012, the eagerly awaited annual report of the European Commission, economic issues like debt, fragile international relations, etc.⁸

The Political Crisis in the Republic of Macedonia

The situation in the country was particularly dynamic in 2015, because then and in the subsequent 2016 the tendencies for change of power in the Republic of Macedonia became more and more visible. The process aimed at the change of governance was activated as a result of the internal political events in the state, as well as with the help of external structures, notably various nongovernmental organisations financed by centres abroad.⁹ It was characterised by three principal and significant changes: of power in the country, of its name that became Republic of North Macedonia (RNM),¹⁰ as well as of its Constitution. All that happened under great pressure for “successful” referendum, as well as with pressure exercised upon the MPs in the Assembly to vote in favour of those changes.¹¹ The ethnic Albanian citizens were more comfortable with that process and accepted much more easily the changes, unlike the Macedonian community that rejected above all the new name of their state, although it was an important condition for NATO and EU accession. Similarly, the IMRO-DPMNU that ruled the country until 2016, led by Nikola Gruevski, was resolutely against the change of the name of the state under external pressure. Naturally, that was not received well by the EU and NATO. Those who were in favour of the changed name and of the Prespa Agreement with Greece¹² were above all the representatives of the Albanian community. At the same time, a division was noticed on this issue among the Macedonians. The Albanians used that for extending their rights, which resulted in the possibility of adopting

⁸ Пелагија Стојанчова: Дебела сенка во најавуваната жешка политичка есен, *Радио Слободна Европа*, 6.09.2014. <http://www.makdenes.org/content/article/26569605.html>. (access: 26.06.2023).

⁹ Марияна Стамова, „Република (Северна) Македонија: трънливият път към евроатлантическата интеграция“, в: *Новите предизвикателства пред Балканите*, Костов, А. (Съст.), (София: Парадигма, 2019), 197–222.

¹⁰ The amendments to the Constitution came into force on 12 February 2019, thus complying with all conditions concerning the use of the name *Republic of North Macedonia*, or *North Macedonia* for short. Its acronym RNM will be used in this text.

¹¹ On 27 April 2016, storming of the Assembly was organised at a moment when Talat Xhaferi from the Democratic Union for Integration was elected its President in a manner that was considered to be rather dubious.

¹² On the agreement with Greece see: <https://vmacedonia.com/politics/macedonia-greece-agreement.html>. (26.06.2023).

Albanian as official language over the entire territory of the state, not only in the areas where they are the majority.

The change in power took place in May 2017 with a SDUM government – the Macedonian party that failed to win a majority and ruled in coalition with representatives from the Albanian political spectrum. However, that did not lead to changes in the country's economic and social life. The new government was shaken by permanent and numerous scandals. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev was sentenced and subsequently pardoned by two presidents: Branko Crvenkovski and Gjorge Ivanov. Zaev, who ruled the country with a very slim majority in Parliament, actually did not make any substantial changes, especially in the judiciary system, which is defined as being corrupt. Indeed, his involvement in corruption schemes was never proven, but suspicions remained. On the other hand, the promised NATO accession actually came true, but that was a small success because there was a clear position on the issues presented above already in 2008.

“The Pržino Agreement”

SDUM was the party whose president Zoran Zaev openly defended the change in the name in response to the demands of Greece. His position that “we need to bend our back in that respect” was acceptable to most EU Member States which supported his coming to power. In this context, at the height of the political crisis in the country, the West initiated the signing of the Pržino Agreement on 2 June 2015. IMRO-DPMNU had doubts that this led to various manipulations with the voter registers, while the postponement and the rescheduling of the dates of the elections created an atmosphere for victory of SDUM and of the leading Albanian party Democratic Union for Integration (DUI).

It should be pointed out that the two rounds of the regular presidential elections in the country were held during Zoran Zaev's first government, on 21 April and 5 May 2019.¹³ Almost all similar elections, irrespective of the programme proposed, were won by the party that had majority of seats in the Assembly. In that case, too, the candidate Stevo Pendarovski proposed by SDUM and the ruling coalition defeated the IMRO-DPMNU candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova. That was also in confirmation of the unwritten rule that the candidate who had attracted the majority vote of the Albanian ethnos was in an advantageous position.

The rising tension in the political atmosphere in the RNM at the end of 2019 led to new early elections. Following the provisions of the Pržino Agreement, a caretaker government headed by the former interior minister on the SDUM ballot paper Oliver Spasovski was elected on 3 January 2020. It had

¹³ Цафери распиша претседателски избори за 21 април, *Макфакс*, 8.02.2019. – [Цафери распиша претседателски избори за 21 април \(makfax.com.mk\)](https://makfax.com.mk). (26.06.2023).

to discharge its functions until the early parliamentary elections, which were originally scheduled on 12 April. On 17 March, the leaders of the political parties in the country met with President Stevo Pendarovski and a decision was reached to postpone the elections on account of the spread of the COVID-19 infection in the RNM.

The early parliamentary elections were held on 15 July 2020 and they brought an interesting development on the political scene of the Republic of North Macedonia. Their outcome was surprising for almost all political parties. The two biggest parties that were in the preceding government, i.e., the Macedonian SDUM and the Albanian DUI, accused each other of corruption and inability to govern the state even during the pre-election campaign. In this connection, the two parties did not expect that they would be together in the government again. SDUM hoped to win more than 61 seats in the 120-member parliament, thus securing parliamentary majority. Therefore, the social democratic alliance also formed a pre-election coalition with one of the smaller Albanian parties: the BESA Movement headed by Bilal Kasami. The victory of the earlier ruling party SDUM was thus secured with the support of the Albanian votes from the coalition partner BESA.

That could also be assessed as a mistake of the ruling Macedonian party because that coalition failed to get sufficient votes from the Albanians as most of them went to the other Albanian political parties: to DUI and to the coalition of the Alliance of Albanians of Ziadin Sela with the BESA wing that broke away from it: the Alternative of Afrim Gashi. That fact shows that the Albanian parties are united on a national principle and are not very interested in coalitions with Macedonian parties. It so happened that the Albanian parties received the highest number of votes in all elections so far and they legitimately acquired a higher self-confidence. It is essential to add to this the fact that SDUM headed by Zoran Zaev continued to be the object of doubts about corruption, because it encouraged the intervention of the government structures in the activities of the Special Prosecution, as well as other illegal practices.¹⁴ It can be stated that SDUM had a rather self-confident behaviour towards the population both in earlier and in this election. That was punished by a part of the voters and the party received less votes than expected. The wrong communication with the electorate continued after the elections as well.

In such a political atmosphere the leading Albanian DUI raised the issue that the time had come for an Albanian prime minister, and transformed that into

¹⁴ Фридом хаус: Корупцијата, селективната правда, сериозен проблем во Македонија, *Експрес*, 13.06.2020. <https://expres.mk/fridom-haus-korupcijata-selektivnata-pravda-seriozen-problem-vo-makedonija/> (26.06.2023).

a fundamental slogan for political actions¹⁵ that brought 15 seats for DUI and turned it into a factor that cannot be ignored. It is difficult to assume whether the party believed in the slogan for Albanian prime minister, but it attracted votes in its support and it won five seats more than in the previous elections. DUI consolidated its position also due to the fact that the two biggest Macedonian parties made many mistakes in their governance and thus mindsets were generated that the time had come for the Albanian bloc to come out more and more openly on the internal political scene. The number of seats won by DUI gave the party the necessary boldness to present impossible conditions for the formation of the future government. However, they proved to be acceptable to the SDUM leader Zoran Zaev whose aim was to form any government whatsoever with his mandate.

The elections in that state in recent years were characterised by the leading position of the two principal parties in the Macedonian political spectrum: SDUM and IMRO-DPMNU, and one party in the Albanian spectrum: DUI, to which it is necessary to add smaller political parties.¹⁶ The emergence and consolidation of other political entities that entered the Assembly was visible, albeit modestly, notably: the Macedonian Left of Dimitar Apasiev and the Albanian BESA, Alliance of Albanians and Alternative.

It should be noted that it would not be possible to talk about stabilisation of the Republic of North Macedonia after the elections, which is the result of the aggregate of internal and external influences. The internal influences are due above all to the weak political elites and the economic problems, and the external ones – above all to Greece, and also to Bulgaria. Sofia repeatedly warned of blocking of the country's EU integration process due to that country's failure to fulfil the bilateral agreement and to the difficulties in the functioning of the joint multidisciplinary expert commission on historical and educational matters.¹⁷ Hence the framework of the negotiations with the EU is influenced by the position of Bulgaria and Greece that monitored strictly the implementation of the two agreements.

Special attention needs to be devoted during the forming of the coalition government in North Macedonia in 2020 to the behaviour of DUI headed by Ali Ahmeti. Not much time has elapsed since 2016 when that same party disregarded

¹⁵ Ахмети: Нашата следна цел е да го избереме првиот премиер албанец на Македонија, 5.06.2020. <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/ahmeti-nashata-sledna-cel-e-da-go-izbereme-prviot-premier-albanec-na-makedonija/>. (26.06.2023).

¹⁶ Марияна Стамова, „Република Македонија: консолидација и евроинтеграција“, в: *Балканите през првото десетилетие на 21. Век* (София: Парадигма, 2012), 244–267; М. Стамова, *Република Македонија: реални или надценени амбиции*, 221–254.

¹⁷ On these issues see more details in: Вонредна вест: Бугарија почна со блокадата на македонските преговори со ЕУ, *Експрес*, 15.09.2020. See also Меморандум в ЕС: 28 г. Бугарија подкрепя Македонија, Скопие не спазва договора, мълчи за избиването на десетки хиляди, *БГНЕС*, 17.09.2020.

the principle that it had firmly supported, namely that a coalition for forming a government is to be made only with the victorious party from the Macedonian political bloc. DUI refused then to form a government with IMRO-DPMNU that had won two seats more than its opponent SDUM. However, in 2020 it “adhered” to its principle to form a coalition government with the victorious SDUM: again with two MPs more. The new government became a fact although during the election fight and canvassing SDUM hurled political accusations and insults both against Ali Ahmeti and against his DUI party as corrupt and mafia-like.

The accession of North Macedonia to NATO

The realities thus outlined raise the issue whether all these decisions had not been prompted by the external factor as well, which was particularly active in recent years: the US Embassy in Skopje and Washington’s policy in whose priorities the Albanians remain a strategic partner in the Balkans. In this connection, special attention should also be devoted to the circumstance that less than one day after President Stevo Pendarovski handed on 13 August 2020 the mandate to the SDUM leader Zoran Zaev to form the new government, the US Ambassador to Skopje Kate Marie Byrnes congratulated him. This clearly shows that the USA hoped to have precisely Zoran Zaev as their ally to continue working for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the latest – 30th – NATO member: North Macedonia.¹⁸

In this context it is necessary to note that the Republic of North Macedonia does not play an important role in the Balkans. Much stronger and more stable states view it as a factor for destabilisation, especially on account of the actions of the Albanians and the permanent fears that inter-ethnic tension could flare again. In this connection, it can be said that a factor contributing to that tension is that during the first term in office of Zoran Zaev’s government in coalition with DUI proclaimed Albanian as official language in the country. That was adopted by the Assembly on 14 March 2018 and was promulgated in the *Official Gazette* in the beginning of 2019.¹⁹ However, that naturally evoked discontent among the Macedonian population, as well as among the other ethnic groups in the state. The illogical circumstance consisted in the fact that the Albanian minority, estimated possibly at less than 25 % of the population, enjoyed equal rights as the majority. However, it was precisely the Albanians who

¹⁸ Американската амбасадорка му го честита мандатот на Заев, *Макфакс*, 13.08.2020.

¹⁹ Службен весник го објави Законите за употребата на јазиците и за ратификација на Договорот од Преспа, 15.01.2019. <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/sluzhben-vesnik-gi-objavi-zakonite-za-upotreba-na-jazicite-i-za-ratifikacija-na-dogovorot-od-prespa/>. (26.06.2023).

refused in recent years the organising of population census, or presented many conditions in that connection.

The relations with neighbouring countries to the path of EU

Finally, it may be concluded that after the accession of North Macedonia to NATO on 27 March 2020, its EU accession became the leading national priority of all political factors in the country. A strong impetus and hope in this respect came from the political consent of the ministers on European affairs to start accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia on 24 March 2020. Two days later, the conclusions on the enlargement and on the process of stabilisation and association were officially adopted, and on 26 March they were approved by the members of the European Council.²⁰

The issue of improving relations with neighbouring countries was raised as an important condition and requirement for starting the negotiations. In this connection, Zoran Zaev's government accelerated the signing of the agreements on good-neighbourly relations with Bulgaria and Greece. According to sociological surveys, the agreement with Greece, which necessitated changing the country's constitutional name, was not well received by the majority of the population. The Greek-Macedonian joint committee formed had the task to coordinate concrete issues and to contribute to the elimination of the lack of understanding between the two states.²¹

Relations between Skopje and Sofia are rather delicate. The treaty on friendship, good-neighbourly relations and cooperation, as well as the formation of a joint multidisciplinary committee on historical and educational matters,²² did

²⁰ See more on the recent decisions of the Council of the EU on the Republic of North Macedonia in: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/bg/policies/enlargement/republic-north-macedonia/>. (26.06.2023).

²¹ See more on the official Greek policy vis-à-vis the neighbouring Republic of North Macedonia in: Юра Константинова, „Съвременната одисея“ на Гърция: предизвикателства и нови възможности“, в: *Новите предизвикателства пред Балканите*, Костов, А. (Съст.) (София: Парадигма, 2019), 128–131; Demetrius Andreas Floudas, Pardon? A Conflict for a Name? FYROM's Dispute With Greece Revisited, co-edited by George A. Kourvetaris, Victor Roudometof, Klesomenis Koutsaikis, Andrew G. Kourvetaris; *The New Balkans: Disintegration and Reconstruction*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, pp. 85–117; Aristotle Tziampiris, *Greece, European Political Cooperation and the Macedonian Question*. London: Routledge, 2000, 320 p.; Matthew Nimetz, "The Macedonian "Name" Dispute: The Macedonian Question—Resolved?", *Nationalities Papers, Volume 48, Special Issue 2: Special Issue on National Cultural Autonomy in Diverse Political Communities: Practices, Challenges, and Perspectives*, March 2020, pp. 205–214.

²² The treaty on friendship, good-neighbourly relations and cooperation between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia was signed on 1 August 2017 and came

not bring the expected results until the end of the second decade. Quite on the contrary, the situation became more complicated on many of the issues discussed. The two sides have different approaches to the interpretation of the commission's mandate. According to the Macedonian side, its creation is viewed as formal condition for the accession to NATO and for start of the negotiations with the EU. The expectations in Sofia are for substantial contribution to change in the historiography and textbooks with definite anti-Bulgarian orientation. However, Skopje has no intention of changing anything in the interpretation of the history and the language. That was confirmed by the unilateral discontinuation of the commission's work by the Macedonian side at the end of 2019, as a result of the early elections.²³ In practice, the commission stopped its work after its last meeting on 28 and 29 November 2019 in Sofia. The discontinuation of its work can also be explained as the result of certain essential requirements submitted by the Bulgarian side for which it is difficult to find a mutually acceptable solution. In this connection, the elections were not the reason, but merely a pretext. The actual commission was not formed as a political body, but it was actually transformed into such a body by addressing historical topics and issues to which it is unable to propose a coordinated response. This could lead to conclusions that the issue with the treaty and with the commission is politicised, i.e., it is transformed from an academic to a political dispute. It can be said that the composition of the commissions was not well considered, because they comprise persons close to politics who – in spite of being experts in concrete spheres of history and language – cannot be expected to have substantial success in their work.

This led to serious complications in the bilateral dialogue and the treaty on friendship, good-neighbourly relations and cooperation definitely did not contribute to progress in the economic sphere. Deterioration of the bilateral relations was even observed as a result of the challenges related to the historical and linguistic issues. The work of the joint Bulgarian-Macedonian commission focuses on persons and dates that are highly important for both states, but no agreement on them is reached. These are actually academic issues that had been examined earlier as well, because they occupy a definite place in the respective historiographies. More specifically, the Bulgarian part of the commission insists on the recognising of academic positions in the historical and linguistic spheres, which deny the Macedonian language and the autonomous Macedonian history prior to 1945. The Macedonian side of the commission object to that and the

officially into force on 14 February 2018.
<https://www.mfa.bg/uploads/files/1501093350Dogovor-RM-RB.pdf>. (26.06.2023).

²³ Българо-македонската комисија зацikli, чака изборите в Македонија, 29.11.2019.
<https://news.bg/politics/balgaro-makedonskata-komisiya-zatsikli-chaka-izborite-v-makedoniya.html>. (26.06.2023).

scholars on both sides defend their theses and arguments ever more categorically, as being the only truthful ones, as a result of which the work on many issues does not progress.

Conclusion

Processes of political changes escalated in the Republic of (North) Macedonia in recent years, and especially after 2015. With the help of the external factor and as a result of the internal political events during those years, the situation in the RNM is characterised by three key changes: of the power, name and Constitution of the state. The ten years during which the IMRO-DPMNU and Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski were in power (2006–2016) generated tension among some of the leading political parties, notably the SDUM. They accused him of corruption and of stopping the processes of NATO and EU accession. A real opportunity for change of the rule in the RNM was created with the Pržino Agreement (2015) and with the active assistance of the EU representatives. Prime Minister Gruevski's firm stand against the change of the country's name under pressure and on its evaluation with a view to NATO and EU accession was not well received in the Western world. On its part, precisely SDUM was the party whose president Zoran Zaev openly and clearly supported the name change. That was a painful issue for a large part of the population of the RNM, but real conditions for a change of the name existed on account of the country's ethnic composition. The Albanian community took a firm stand in support of the new name. They skilfully used the signing of the Prespa Agreement between the RNM and Greece in 2018 to expand their rights and to make the Albanian language official over the entire territory of the country. Improved relations with the neighbours were an important prerequisite for NATO accession and for the start of the EU negotiations. In this connection, the agreement with Greece was preceded by an agreement between the RNM and Bulgaria. A serious challenge before the stabilisation and the process of EU integration of the RNM is perceived not only in the internal influence expressed with weak political elites, enormous economic problems, constant tension in the inter-ethnic relations, failure to cope with the corruption and the existing political revenge seeking, but also in the external influence, complying with the implementation of the agreements with the neighbours.