

HYBRID WARFARE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ELECTIONS IN GEOPOLITICS: NORTH MACEDONIA AS A PART OF THE WEST OR RETURNING TO THE SPHERE OF RUSSIA AND SERBIA

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Abstract

Electoral processes are gaining increasing importance on the geopolitical stage, becoming a major force in shaping politics and international relations. Observing elections in countries such as the USA, Germany, and Italy, confirms that ideological changes within political parties are significantly impacting geopolitical dynamics (i.e., electoral politics as a form of geopolitics). These changes are evident in the use of electoral processes by autocratic regimes such as Russia and Serbia to influence fragile democracies, including North Macedonia and Montenegro. The hybrid warfare strategies of these regimes aim to influence the outcome of elections and manipulate political structures in their favor. In the Western Balkans, these interventions pose challenges for the integrity of these countries. In this paper, we described, explained, analyzed, and assessed the influence of Russia and Serbia in North Macedonia and the potential consequences, including the presidential and parliamentary elections in this year. This analysis underscores the importance of understanding the dynamics of electoral politics, including socio-economic development, ethnic tensions, and long-term solutions for the stability and continued development of the country in a changed international scene.

Keywords: North Macedonia, hybrid war, elections, geopolitics, Russia, Serbia, cybersecurity.

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Introduction

In the labyrinth Balkan landscape, North Macedonia emerges as a country of significant geopolitical importance. Tucked amidst mountains and steeped in history, its strategic value far surpasses its modest size. Serving as a crucial land bridge, North Macedonia connects the trade and infrastructure networks between South-Eastern and Central Europe. This geographical advantage positions it as a key player in facilitating trade and fostering development across the region.

Officially known as the Republic of North Macedonia, this landlocked nation, with a population predominantly composed of Macedonians and a significant Albanian community, was established as a republic within the former Yugoslavia on August 2, 1991. It later gained independence through a referendum held on September 8, 1991, solidifying its status as an independent republic.

Serbia during the 90s, when Yugoslavia was collapsing and the Serbian state apparatus appropriated from the remnants of former Yugoslavia, was engaged with all its mechanisms to occupy Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and North Macedonia (at that time known as Macedonia or FYROM). Nevertheless, North Macedonia managed to avoid engaging in armed conflict, not because no one there wanted it, but because the interests were different.

Immediately after the referendum and the declaration of independence of North Macedonia, Russia became the first permanent country in the Security Council (SC) of the United Nations (UN) to recognize its independence in early 1992, ahead of the United States of America (USA) and every major country in Western Europe. On the other hand, this country would not be attacked by Serbia due to the fact that:

Serbia was engaged in many wars, It did not want to expand the war zone where there were even more Albanians and There were other plans for North Macedonia and Greece.

Milosevic, during his travel in the Greek Riviera, proposed to Greece to create a confederation between Serbia - Macedonia - Greece, an idea that was liked by Macedonian politicians, including Gligorov.

Later in 1994, Greece, with Western insistence, would reject this idea, then Gligorov would do the same, but the Gligorov's refusal almost cost him with his life, even though it cost him with mutilations in his eyes and face. The circumstances of a planned assassination against him will be explained in a separate paper.

North Macedonia's westward journey has been involved in a crossroads that has marked major clashes between pro-Western and pro-Russian and pro-Serbian forces. In 2017, in the process of voting for the new

government in the Assembly of North Macedonia, which culminated in the ouster from power of VMRO-DPMNE, which had a more pro-Russian and pro-Serbian approach, and its substitution by SDSM, there were riots aimed at orchestrating an electoral overthrow. This transition brought to view clear goals for damaging the democratic process, with violent incidents that occurred inside and outside the Assembly, leaving behind injured Albanian and Macedonian politicians, as well as citizens. This period was characterized by a marked Russo-Serbian influence in domestic politics, witnessing high levels of infiltration. But while the 2016 elections brought a change of clear approaches in the foreign policy of North Macedonia, and during this period this country managed to solve the name problem with Greece, join NATO and take other steps towards the European Union (EU) and get closer to solving the problems also with Bulgaria, as it seems the new elections held at the end of April and beginning of May will be no less challenging than those of 2016.

In the paper, we will refer to North Macedonia with its new official name even when we speak about the period prior to Prespa agreement, this is because we would like to avoid possible misunderstandings for the reader.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the Russian and Serbian influence in North Macedonia, mainly in the last two decades, including the current situation. To identify the impact of the 2016 election process and its ongoing developments on the geopolitical landscape of this country.

The research question of the paper is: What are the clashes and collaborations of North Macedonia with Russia and Serbia in terms of geopolitical influence and the role of electoral elections in these conflicts?

The dependent variable is: The geopolitical influence of Russia and Serbia in North Macedonia.

Hypothesis: The influence of Russia and Serbia in North Macedonia is with considerable impact factor in the country's politics and development, through efforts to hinder North Macedonia's cooperation and integration with Western countries, including political subjects, various organizations and electoral elections.

The research method of this study is founded on a wide range of information sources and analytical techniques. The main focus of this method is on:

- The collection and analysis of the actions of Serbia and Russia against North Macedonia.
- Geopolitical analysis
- Analysis of the elections and comparison of the change in the geopolitical course.
- Analysis of hybrid warfare.

The purpose of this research method is to adopt a transdisciplinary approach to delve into the complex dynamics of conflict and rivalry in North Macedonia, integrating information from different sources and using appropriate analytical techniques to achieve a complete and comprehensive understanding of the situation.

The Octopus Institute also wrote an e-mail to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia dated 29.02.2024, but we have not received answers to our questions related to the topic examined in this paper.

Theoretical Framework: Understanding the Influence of Russia and Serbia in North Macedonia

This paper from the theoretical framework can be examined in the context of the political, economic and social influence of Russia and Serbia on North Macedonia. Therefore, to understand this complex dynamic, we rely on three prominent theoretical perspectives in international relations: Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Social Constructivism.

Grounded in the notion that states are rational actors driven by self-interest and power (Kunz & Morgenthau, 1948), Realism posits that international politics is a competitive struggle for advantage. In this context, Russia and Serbia, with their respective ambitions and historical ties to North Macedonia, could utilize economic tools or political pressure to advance their national interests. Russia, for instance, might leverage its energy exports to influence North Macedonia's foreign policy choices, aligning them with Moscow's strategic goals (e.g., Mearsheimer, 2001).

Similarly, Serbia, with its shared Slavic heritage and cultural influence, could exert pressure on North Macedonia's government through political maneuvering or appeals to ethnic nationalism (e.g., Waltz, 1979).

In contrast to the power-centric view of Realism, Liberal Institutionalism emphasizes the role of international institutions and norms in shaping state behavior (Keohane, 1984). This perspective suggests that North Macedonia's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration, particularly membership in the European Union (EU) and NATO, acts as a countervailing force against Russian and Serbian influence. By adhering to the democratic norms and institutional frameworks of these organizations, North Macedonia seeks to strengthen its sovereignty and economic development, potentially distancing itself from the influence of regional powers with less democratic agendas (Moravcsik, 1997).

Moving beyond material power dynamics, Social Constructivism highlights how shared understandings and social processes shape international relations (Wendt, 1995). This theory sheds light on the influence of pro-Russian and pro-Serbian media narratives in North Macedonia. These narratives, disseminated through various media outlets, can influence public opinion and political discourse, potentially fostering a sense of cultural and historical affinity with Russia or Serbia. By shaping perceptions of national identity and regional security threats, these narratives can indirectly influence North Macedonia's foreign policy decisions, even if not directly dictated by Russia or Serbia.

Each of these theoretical perspectives offers valuable insights into the influence of Russia and Serbia on North Macedonia. Realism highlights the importance of national interests and power dynamics. Liberal Institutionalism emphasizes the constraining and enabling effects of international institutions and norms. Social Constructivism sheds light on the role of shared understandings and media narratives in shaping foreign policy. By employing these frameworks in a complementary manner, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex factors shaping North Macedonia's international relations.

Toward “Serbianisation”

Russian spies and diplomats have been involved in a nearly decade-long [presently, especially after 2008] effort to spread propaganda and provoke discord in Macedonia as part of a region-wide endeavor to stop Balkan countries from joining NATO. This conclusion comes from a tranche of intelligence documents obtained by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and partners NOVA TV and the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) (Dojčinović, 2017).

Gas has played a pivotal role in Russia's exertion of influence over North Macedonia, as it seeks to establish a “state that is solely reliant on Russia's policy”.

According to leaked documents, Russian agents worked to recruit members of the Macedonian army and interior ministry officials to create a “critical mass of military trained persons” who would be used in certain situations to support Russia's interests”.

Russia has committed to finance the media in North Macedonia, including those against the Albanians, then it has opened intelligence bases in the name of honorary consulates in Bitola and Ohrid, through the Serbian church it has committed to push Pan-Slavic ideas, it has financed a cultural center in Skopje and the construction of crosses and churches, including restoration according to the Russian style. It has

created about 30 associations of friendship between Russia and North Macedonia and apparently these have had an effect where in 2014 North Macedonia did not join with the West in sanctions against Russia for the war in Ukraine, at the time when Russia annexed Crimea.

VMRO-DPMNE and Nikola Gruevski were Russia's “gateway” to North Macedonia, but Gruevski was forced to resign in 2015 after the publication of wiretapping by Zoran Zaev, leader of SDMS, a party with a pro-Western approach.

From 2006 to 2016, under the leadership of Nikola Gruevski, from the VMRO-DPMNE party, there would be a policy that was significantly pro-Russian and pro-Serbian, but we cannot say that it is pro-Western advancement including the recognition of Kosovo was deficient.

Jasmin Mujanovic in his book titled “Hunger and Fury: The Crisis of Democracy in The Balkans”, wrote that Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE “attempted to move Macedonia into the realm of one-party rule (Mujanović, 2018)”, and that Russia's investments in the Western Balkans have latently encouraged anti-democratic feelings, especially among the elites, where the main ones are the government of Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely in Republika Srpska, followed by the government of Vučić in Belgrade and Nikola Gruevski and the VMRO-DPMNE in Macedonia (Mujanović, 2018).

Ljubčo Georgievski, former prime minister of North Macedonia and founder of VMRO-DPMNE who would later leave this party to create VMRO-NP, also criticized as pro-Bulgarian and who would later receive Bulgarian citizenship, in an interview in 2015, he said that: “...the party that convinces the Macedonian citizen that it protects his identity from the Greeks and Bulgarians, on the other hand, makes the serbianisation of the Republic of Macedonia. I think that at this moment we have an open serbianization of the Macedonian people and I think it is a bit of a shame if 80 percent of us vote for the merger with Serbia tomorrow in the referendum” (Mitevaska, 2015).

Following the release of “Zaev bombs” by Zoran Zaev, the fall of Gruevski and new elections, the leader of the social democratic opposition Zaev won by creating a government with two Albanian parties.

The wing of VMRO-DPMNE, the pro-Russians and pro-Serbs expressed their dissatisfaction on May 27 by attacking the parliament, where Zoran Zaev, Ziadin Sela, Talat Xhaferi were beaten, and about 102 people got injured in the riots inside and outside the Parliament (Gazeta Shqip, 2017). At least one Serbian agent was identified there (Dojčinović, 2017).

These elections were criticized by Russia for interference by the USA and the EU with the aim of dividing the Balkans and creating “Greater Albania”, claiming that they were actually won by VMRO-DPMNE (BIRN, 2018).

From “pro-Russian and pro-Serb” to “pro-West”

In an April 7 document between senior Macedonian Foreign Ministry official Nenad Kolev and Russian Ambassador Oleg Shcherbak, the ambassador confessed that Russia’s intention was to “create a strip of militarily neutral countries” in the Balkans that includes Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Serbia. Intelligence documents also show the influence of the BIA. Vucic has not made any public statements, but the media supported by Vucic have strongly supported Gruevski and Russia. The documents show that Macedonian counterintelligence agents have been monitoring a BIA operative and embassy official in Skopje, Goran Živaljević, who, according to an estimate, since 2015 worked to oppose the country’s integration with Europe. (Dojčinović,2017)

The documents show Živaljević giving instructions to Ivan Stoilković, a pro-Russian Macedonian MP, who is the leader of a VMRO coalition partner, the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia. Živaljević frequently met Stoilković “when making important decisions in the assembly or before meetings of the government,” according to one document. Stoilković was among a number of Balkan politicians who traveled to Moscow to sign a declaration calling for the region to be “militarily neutral,” a position that would preclude an agreement with NATO. Stoilković also met politicians and activists from nearby Montenegro who are opposed to that country joining NATO, included Marko Milačić. (Dojčinović, 2017)

Živaljević and Stoilković were also intercepted with over 50 audio interceptions while they were coordinating, from Serbia, anti-Zaev propaganda..

Following the corruption scandals that surfaced in North Macedonia, the plans of Russia and Serbia experienced a severe impact. The Kremlin issued numerous press statements in support of Gruevski, trying unsuccessfully to portray the growing anti-Gruevski sentiment in North Macedonia as “heavy interference from the West” (Noack, 2021).

Zaev’s victory deters the Russian and Serbian influence in Macedonia to some extent, at least by creating a limitation. However, Russia has been effectively engaged in blocking North Macedonia’s membership

in NATO and the acceptance of the Prespa agreement (from “Macedonia” to “North Macedonia”) between Greece and North Macedonia over the name issue. Russia, according to the data, has been repeatedly framed in the propaganda to vote against the Prespa agreement in the 2018 referendum.

At the forefront of the resistance against the referendum stood Janko Bacev, leader of Edinstvena Makedonija, a Russophile party that supports the ruling party in the Kremlin “United Russia”, which defended the reorientation of North Macedonia towards the Eurasian Economic Union, in which Serbia also participated.

This party has organized panels and seminars with some of the ideologues from Moscow such as Alexander Dugin. In May 2018, 50 party members attended a training by political strategist Leonid Savin (Trpkovski, 2018).

Russia is not simply an opponent of the membership of various countries in the European Union; in fact, it is against their membership in NATO for major strategic and political reasons. In an effort to maintain its influence in the Eastern and Central European region, Russia has made continuous efforts to influence the policies and elections of these countries, trying to prevent their integration into Western structures, such as NATO. This has been a weak point for Russia, as it faced serious challenges to maintain its dominance in the area.

To oppose NATO membership, Russia has used every possible method, including propaganda, political destabilization, and in some cases the use of secret force. However, its interventions have encountered resistance and counter-responses from other states interested in helping the Euro- Atlantic integration of the region. Thus, while Russia has been determined to overturn the NATO membership process, its efforts have been accompanied by challenges and different responses from Western countries.

Russia’s commitment to hinder North Macedonia towards NATO and the EU

Russia was effectively committed to damaging North Macedonia’s relations with Greece in order to stop the process of improving relations between these two countries and to stop reaching an agreement about the name issue. Russian diplomats were even caught bribing Orthodox clergy (Deutsche Welle, 2018) besides other officials and inflicting problems in the security of Greece (Benakis, 2018). This problem has led to the deportation of Russian diplomats from Greece (Nedos, 2018).

In 2018, the then-Russian ambassador to North Macedonia, Oleg Shcherbakov, said that joining the

Alliance would have a direct impact on Skopje, as it could turn it into a target for Russian attacks, should Moscow feel threatened (Drapak, 2023).

The agreement process between these two countries did not stop Putin and Lavrov from presenting their frustration publicly.

In 2019, prior to his visit to Belgrade, Putin expressed his dissatisfaction with the agreement between Greece and North Macedonia on the name issue. He lodged accusations against the Western powers for amplifying their dominance in the Western Balkans.

“The policy of the United States and some other western nations in the Balkans, who seek to assert their dominance in the region, has been a serious destabilising factor. [...]“This will eventually increase mistrust and tension in Europe, rather than improve stability”. He also added that the decision of Montenegro to join the western alliance [NATO] in April 2017 had resulted in the country “now going through a period of political instability”. At the same time, the foreign minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov for the North Macedonia issue had said that “Moscow had credible grounds to question the legitimacy of the process by which Macedonia had changed its name” (Smith, 2019).

Gjorge Ivanov, president of Macedonia at that time, also refused to sign the agreement between Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras on the name issue. (Deutsche Welle, 2018a)

Based on the reporting of Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), one of the richest Russian businessmen, Ivan Savvidis, has given at least 300,000 euros to Macedonians opponents, who were against NATO membership and against the name change. Savvidis was once a member of the Russian parliament and has also lived in Greece. (Cvetkovska, 2018)

Daniel Suter, in a 2020 article for “NATO Review”, argued that: North Macedonia was an example of concerted propaganda, diplomatic and intelligence activities for almost ten years prior to its NATO accession in 2020 [from Russia]. Information activities now focus on presenting the country as a victim of its neighbouring states, Bulgaria and Greece, and accusing the current pro- Western government in Skopje of giving in to Sofia’s demands on the issue of identity (Sunter, 2020).

So, just like in the case between Greece and Macedonia, the same commitment of Russia has continued in the destruction and boosting into conflict between Macedonia and Bulgaria (Европа, 2022).

Moscow has shown proficiency in blurring the border lines between official and unofficial state actions,

often channeling its support through proxies (McBride, 2023) such as Serbia and Republika Srpska. Russia's policy in the region is also about recruiting all sorts of external support for the Kremlin's international agenda (Secrieru, 2021) Serbia, being Russia's Proxy, has constantly offered various levers against North Macedonia. To prove that Serbia is not friendly to North Macedonia, Milos Vucevic, at the time when this paper is published, candidate for prime minister nominated by Vucic, the current Minister of Defense of Serbia, also the chairman of the Progressive Party of Serbia after Vucic resigned, in an open threat, for the Pink media said that Montenegro and North Macedonia angered Serbia so much when they recognized the state of Kosovo, so much so that this action will hit them in the head, as if Ukraine is being hit. (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023).

Montenegro began to change its political course from the west towards Russia and Serbia from 2020, North Macedonia has had an opposite journey where, until 2016, was led by a party which had more pro-Russian and pro-Serbian inclination enough to restrain towards NATO.

However, this journey towards the west, not only that the Greece got in the way of North Macedonia, but in 2020 also Bulgaria, which used the right of veto to block North Macedonia from joining the European Union. According to Sofia, the Macedonian language is simply Bulgarian by another name, while North Macedonia does not recognise its common cultural and historical ties with Bulgaria. Sofia, at the same time, demanded that a Bulgarian minority [approximately 3500] is officially included in the Constitution of North Macedonia. The proposal came from France in June 2023 – during Paris' EU presidency – offered a series of measures to overcome the current stalemate, [including the constitutional amendments related to the recognition of the Bulgarian community as a national minority] measures that were adopted by the Macedonian government, while the opposition rejected firmly (Samardjiev, 2024).

Despite the agreement, French President Emanuel Macron persisted in his stance, the Bulgarian position seemed to be doubtful. Two years after the agreement, the Bulgarian president Rumen Radev with a pro-Russian conviction stated that: “Bulgaria will not allow the legitimization of Macedonianism” (Президент На Република Български, 2022).

In August 2023, Gabriel Escobar, US Department of State's Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs and Special Representative to the Western Balkans, stated that “he had personally talked to Bulgaria's foreign minister Mariya Gabriel and she assured him that if North Macedonia did what was outlined in the current agreement, there would be no other conditions set by Bulgaria” (Reed, 2023).

But the French proposal, which became the EU proposal, was not well received by the Macedonian population. According to a survey by IPIS, 70%-80% of citizens are against this proposal and do not want EU membership according to this proposal. (*Анкета На ИПИС: Над 70% Од Граѓаните Се Против Францускиот Предлог*, 2022)

So, this proposal succeeded in oscillating the road to the EU, as the opinion as a whole is not Eurosceptic, where by 2023, 57% of ethnic Macedonians and 78% of Albanians are in favor of EU membership. (Nikolovski & Kirchner, 2021)

This has directly influenced the rise of the spirit of parties with pro-Russian and Serbian segments such as VMRO-DPMNE or such as declaratively pro-Russian and Serbian that is Levica. It turns out that the Macedonians love the EU, but not under the terms of the agreement with Bulgaria.

Professor Eduard Joseph, comparing Russia’s approach to Ukraine and Bulgaria’s to North Macedonia, says that:

“The connection is the fragility of extreme Bulgarian and Russian nationalism. In each case, national identity is rooted in putative ancient origins, vested in a “lost possession”—Macedonia and Ukraine, respectively. In each case, the nationalist mission is to reassert dominion, over history and language in particular, in a territory that was unjustly removed from its rightful overlord in Sofia and Moscow. In each case, the mere existence of an independent, “artificial” Macedonian or Ukrainian identity is perceived—viscerally and intellectually—as wholesale negation of the authentic Bulgarian or Russian identity. In short, achieving formalized identity submissiveness—vice compromise or respect for differences—is the means for undermining Macedonian and Ukrainian statehood” (Joseph, 2023).

The war in Ukraine and the new geopolitical circumstances

The start of the war in Ukraine brought North Macedonia back into the attention. Since the beginning of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine, North Macedonia has deported and declared *non grata* Russian diplomats thrice. On March 28, 2022, North Macedonia deported five Russian diplomats (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2022). On April 15, 2022, it also deported six Russian diplomats and in the third deportation on September 12, 2023, it deported three Russian diplomats (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2023b).

After a gap of 17 years, North Macedonia is set to hold regular parliamentary elections this year. Notably, these elections will take place simultaneously with the presidential elections, making it a significant event in the country's political history. The first round of presidential elections will be held on April 28, while the second round (if no candidate secures more than 50% of the votes) will be held on May 8, the same day as the parliamentary elections.

As it seems, the Russian-Serbian influence is not absent here, as in the case of Montenegro, the slogans of the mobilization in Montenegro to stop the return to power of the Montenegrin nationalists referring to the Democratic Socialist Party created by Djukanovic, the same equivalence is also used in North Macedonia, but only with other expressions such as “Elections in North Macedonia - Defines the way for the creation of ‘Greater Albania’” (Kosovo Online, 2024).

The two ideologies, or the Two projects, Russky Mir (Russian World) and Srpski Svet (Serbian World) are constantly committed to holding back the Western Balkans towards advancement in the EU and NATO.

Their intention has been and remains to disrupt Western unipolarity at the global level and the Western Balkans. “By backing Serbia, Russia is testing its own desire for a multipolar order, one based on a concert of great powers. The primary objective for Moscow is to disrupt the unipolar world order that was established in the Balkans during the 1990s, and to reaffirm its status as a global great power—a status it feels has been wrongfully denied by the West” (Vuksanovic, 2018).

According to Russian experts, a “concert of powers” – where Russia is one of multiple managers of the Western Balkans – is the only way to break free from the current regional rivalry and move towards a better handled multi-stakeholder order (Secrieru, 2018).

Putin’s autocracy, like the communist ones, cannot be said to be held only by one person and one ideology or party, but relies on a very wide group of actors: the intelligence service, political operatives, oligarchs, various organizations and entities. ultranationalists, state companies, paramilitary hackers including private and illegal mercenary companies, state media and variously funded media, criminals and internet trolls. So, it is a hybrid amalgam of actors who overlap the agenda of the Russian state with the Serbian one. Serbia being Russia’s *Proxy* perfectly manages to take advantage of the flow of mutual interest with Russia to realize the geopolitics of the Russky Mir (Russian World) and Srpski Svet (Serbian World) plans.

Therefore, the historical, religious, ideological, civilizational and geopolitical complementarity between

Russia and Serbia is holistic and real.

Russian-Serbian influence as a process of failure of subjects in political, economic and social development

Dissatisfaction with the current government, which citizens consider to have no influence in the country's foreign affairs, and a generally declining trust in the EU, affect political and social processes, opening the doors to external actors such as Russia, China, Turkey and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf - to exert influence. The disillusionment experienced by numerous North Macedonian citizens towards the European Union creates opportunities for Russia and other foreign entities to exert influence within Macedonian society. (Rechica, 2023)

So, said in the words of the people: “In Gruevski's time, there was stealing, but also building”. One of his major projects was Skopje 2014, an €800mn revamp of the capital — a subject of huge controversy (Dimitrievska, 2024).

A general feeling of stagnation and helplessness seems to have gripped the people of North Macedonia. Most speak of domestic politics with profound contempt. And hardly anyone has anything good to say about the EU any more or expects anything positive to come out of Brussels. Those who can, look for work abroad. The exodus from North Macedonia is staggering: In recent years, the population has shrunk by 10% to about 1.8 million (Brey, 2023).

North Macedonia, as well as its neighboring countries, have fallen into the trap of maintaining big policies and the internal erosion of “usurpocrats”.

The West's prioritization of stability (Stabiliocracy) over true democratic consolidation has backfired spectacularly. This approach has allowed pro-Western leaders to cultivate “patronage networks” and neglect vital socio-economic reforms, ultimately leading to public disenchantment.

Russia with its historical, religious and cultural ties with several countries of the Western Balkans and especially with Serbia, have capitalized on public dissatisfaction for geopolitical interests. Their influence is manifested not only through possible secret operations, but also through the promotion of stories that resonate with internal complaints.

The 2020 Montenegrin election, which toppled a pro-Western government, serves as a “sharp warning”. While the possible Russian and Serbian intervention deserves vigilance, because the research underlines

the role of citizen frustration with “usurpocracy”, corruption and economic stagnation, and this has fueled sentiment against pro-Western parties, giving space to anti-Western parties.

The failure of internal economic development, the battle with Greece and now again with Bulgaria seem to have caused fatigue among the people in North Macedonia.

Elections as a “solution” towards the West or a return to geopolitics

Before the 2016 elections, Ljubčo Georgievski with his VMRO- NP party had launched an electoral campaign “Stop the Serbian assimilation of the Macedonian

nation” (Filipovic & Pejic, 2015). These billboards were quickly removed from the streets of North Macedonia and the pro-government media accused Georgievski of being pro- Bulgarian. At that time, the great division of political regimes took place where the regime of Nikola Gruevski VMRO- DMPNE fell and the SDSM won. So, the power in



Foto 1: "Stop the Serbian Assimilation to the Macedonian Nation"

North Macedonia, with an almost pro-Serbian and pro-Russian compass, turned to a pro-Western perspective, with the Albanians as a key factor.

In the new presidential and parliamentary elections expected to be held at the end of April and beginning of May, the dilemma is almost the same but in the form of an inverted pyramid.

The officially defined coalitions are: “Coalition for the European Future” led by SDSM, “Your Macedonia” of VMRO-DPMNE, the coalition “With courage for Macedonia” led by the “Grom” party, “European Front” which led by DUI and the “Vlen” coalition of the Albanian opposition. Only “Levica” and “Znam” party participate alone in the elections (Klan Macedonia, 2024).

The European Front led by Ali Ahmet and Ziadin Sela, two fierce political opponents who joined now, have their campaign “against Russia, pro Europe (Lajme Sot, 2024)”. However, among the Albanians, there is no pro-Russian or pro-Serbian approach to any party, which means that the Albanians do not pose any danger to the state of North Macedonia.

However, the clash between the two Albanian coalitions is fierce, in the “life or death” political model,

but it is not any difference also in the Macedonian camp. In the Macedonian camp, even the confrontation is in the strategic orientation for North Macedonia. The pro-European SDSM, which has expressed readiness to vote for the constitutional changes, faces the great growth of the VMRO- DPMNE, which is against the constitutional changes. On the other hand, Levica, a declaratively pro-Russian party, according to journalist Fitim Kryeziu, aims to get at least 6 seats in the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The attack on North Macedonia through hybrid warfare

North Macedonia became the center of the spread of the hybrid war not only for the region, but up to the impact on the elections in the USA.

The role of North Macedonia in the 2016 USA election included spreading fake news to American voters through websites based in North Macedonia. These websites were presented as American conservative media, generating online advertising revenue by distributing sensational and misleading content originating from right-wing conspiracy theory websites in the United States (Synovitz & Mitevska, 2020).

The fake news industry in North Macedonia, especially in Veles, became renown for spreading false stories, including claims such as a non-existent criminal indictment against Hillary Clinton and a fabricated endorsement of Trump’s candidacy by Pope Francis (Silverman & Alexander, 2016).

The influence of the North Macedonian fake news industry on the 2016 USA election was significant, as it influenced public discourse and potentially influenced the outcome of the election. The spread of misinformation through social media platforms reached millions of Americans, creating a ripple effect that distorted facts and spread false narratives.

Despite efforts of Facebook and Twitter (X) to remove fake accounts linked to operators in Veles, Macedonian websites adapted their strategies to continue with targeting conservative Americans with misleading content (Synovitz & Mitevska, 2020).

International media organizations initially reported that the fake-news industry in Veles was run by tech-savvy teenagers. But an investigation conducted in 2018 by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and its partners revealed “secret players” behind the English-language-political-news industry in Veles.

The investigative report established that the websites were “not started spontaneously by apolitical teens”

with only a rudimentary grasp of English, and it was launched by a well-known Macedonian media attorney, Trajche Arsov - who worked closely with two high-profile American partners for at least six months during a period that overlapped with Election Day, was written by the OCCRP.

The OCCRP investigation also revealed that a least one employee of Russia's infamous “troll factory”, the Internet Research Agency (IRA) in St. Petersburg, visited North Macedonia just three months before Arsov registered the web domain in 2015 for his country's first U.S.-focused political website, Usapoliticstoday.com.

IRA operative Anna Bogacheva was also among a group of Russians accused by US Special Counsel Robert Mueller during his investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election that had visited North Macedonia (Cvetkovska et al., 2018).

Similar problem reappeared in 2020 centered again in Veles. According to research conducted by Internet researchers from Stanford University it indicates that “partisan clickbait” websites in Veles, North Macedonia are once again posing as conservative US news media in order to collect revenue from online advertising.

The latest websites follow the tradition of copying content from better-known sites to generate ad revenue, but have shifted tactics to improve their chances of hiding and attracting an audience.

This “content farms” in Veles still “follow the tradition of copying content” of the most popular right-wing conspiracy theory websites in the United States, researchers say. But the macedonian website internet “have refined their tactics since 2016 to conceal their trails and exploit right-wing social media platforms that are less likely to take down such content”, they concluded (Cable et al., 2020).

So, support for the right wing in the US was very strong with over 100 websites identified in 2016.

The right-wing, which should in fact represent conservatism by Russian and Serbian forces, is seen as an opportunity to realize their geopolitical interests.

If we see who cares about a president in the USA who changes the lines established so far, then we can understand it from the leader of the “Serbo-Americans for Trump” campaign. The person is Olga Ravasi, who, while justifying the organization of “SAVA PAC” for the gathering of Serbs to vote pro- Donald Trump, said: “...because they disappointed the previous presidents Bill Clinton, George Bush Junior and Barack Obama. President Trump, then Grenell, Douglas McGregor, even Vice President Pence, these are

the people who removed the red lines when it comes to Kosovo and Metohija. Prior to this moment, the topic was considered as concluded... Now the horizons are open and much more depends on us and our abilities. We have to influence things, have a strategy, lobby. We must be proactive and not sit back and wait for someone to ‘return’ something to us." (Kovačević, 2020)

So, the young people engaged in this project based in Veles, are not a coincidence that they were initially brought to light that fast, the idea of supporting Trump and to whom this whole organization were useful, in this project may not have been involved at all no one from Trump’s group, but from those who have had certain interests in Trump becoming president, from countries like Russia and Serbia.

Misinformation about the coronavirus, during the COVID 19 pandemic, also derived from North Macedonia and Facebook was engaged in closing those pages. (Collins& Zadrozny, 2020)

North Macedonia faced the intensification of cyber-attacks since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, but there were such attacks even before the start of the war in Ukraine. (Marusic, 2022)

On February 21, 2023, more than 30 locations in Skopje and one in the city of Prilep were evacuated after authorities received false bomb threats. The threats targeted a wide range of locations, including the presidential palace for the first time, but also schools, public institutions, television stations, courts, shopping malls, residential buildings, museums and hotels. North Macedonian authorities have stated that the senders of false bomb threats are difficult to detect and that the attacks represent a form of hybrid warfare (Dimitrevska, 2023).

After these attacks, NATO was effectively engaged in helping North Macedonia to face the consequences of hybrid attacks and to prevent them in the future (NATO, 2023).

Nevertheless, despite the joint endeavors with NATO to counter hybrid warfare, it appears that the anticipated outcomes have not materialized. Disappointingly, in 2024, Veles has once again assumed the role of a focal point for cybercrime. This cybernetic crime happened by using the sale of “digital cards” where people were asked to invest in them on the grounds that they held

\$200,000 and were made by using the name of Donald Trump. From the 69 people identified in this network, 2/3 of them have their digital footprints located in Veles. They are making sales by using the Telegram platform, (Katic et al., 2024) a social network where today most news are posted and group coordination is done for certain interests from Russia and Serbia.

The hybrid war seems to have greatly damaged North Macedonia in political, institutional and state terms, which has made officials from this country to accuse the EU for this events

According to Bujar Osmani, foreign minister of North Macedonia on duty, this hybrid war has been made feasible due to the postponement of North Macedonia's EU membership. He stated that: “Frustration over the delay in North Macedonia’s EU accession is creating an opening for Russia to sow discord in the country through an ‘arsenal’ of hybrid warfare” (Jones, 2024).

Meanwhile, the Minister of Defense of North Macedonia Slavjanka Petrovska said that “they are specific because they aim to paralyse state institutions and prevent the smooth, normal functioning of state institutions and the private sector. The consequences of such attacks are felt by a large number of citizens. An assumption regarding the increasingly frequent hybrid attacks and their goal of disrupting social life is the creation of discontent that will be reflected at the ballot box. That is, they would cause a crisis and a decrease in support among pro-western actors and governments (Gjorgovski & Petrovska, 2023).

The hybrid warfare in North Macedonia has been and remains at many levels a challenge as it can destabilize the country without directing to an open conflict, the consequences of this war are worrying as they include:

- Weakening of pro-Western determination

Disinformation campaigns, a key element of hybrid warfare, could erode public confidence in North Macedonia’s democratic institutions and its commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration. These campaigns often spread false narratives and exploit existing social divisions, weakening public support for pro-Western reforms.

- Ethnic tensions and fragility

Russia and Serbia can exploit these existing ethnic divisions to create discord and incite unrest. This could lead to a destabilization of the region, potentially jeopardizing the fragile peace achieved after the 2001 uprising.

- Limited economic and political maneuvering

Russia and Serbia can use economic connections and political influence to pressure North Macedonia to align with their foreign policy goals. This could limit North Macedonia’s autonomy on the international stage and hinder its ability to pursue independent policies.

While the potential consequences are worrisome, the impact of the Russian-Serbian hybrid warfare on North Macedonia is a complex issue that requires ongoing analysis. While the full extent of the threat remains unclear, the potential for weakening pro-Western institutions, fueling ethnic tensions, limiting the autonomy of North Macedonia and strategic reorientation requires a vigilant response.

Conclusions

Electoral processes have begun to evolve from internal social-political and economic issues to a major force in the formation of politics and geopolitics.

The elections in the USA from 2016 until today, then in Germany, Italy and other European countries show that the ideological changes of the parties are not only appearing as internal changes in economic and social development but also external geopolitical. However, these changes are affecting the most third countries. Autocratic regimes such as Russia and Serbia recognized the potential of electoral processes through hybrid warfare as a weapon to exert influence on fragile democracies, including North Macedonia and Montenegro. This manipulation of democratic processes is a manifestation of hybrid warfare, where political, economic and informational strategies are used to achieve strategic objectives.

Recently, we are witnesses for the statement of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on the elections in North Macedonia, in which he clearly demanded to vote for SDSM. This statement of Mr. Scholz is not just a personal preference of his, but a calculated move within a comprehensive strategy to protect the main interests of NATO and the EU in the strategic region of the Western Balkans.

Change in North Macedonia's political landscape that are not in alignment with Western interests could potentially create a dangerous anti-Western and quasi-Western axis, including Serbia, Republika Srpska, Montenegro and North Macedonia. This development could have far-reaching implications for the stability and security of the entire region, and thus, for the interests of the West.

In this context, electoral processes have become a critical component of geopolitical influence, forming alliances and influencing international relations. As such, understanding the dynamics of electoral politics in third countries is essential to research into the complexities of the contemporary global order. So, we are in the “electoral elections as geopolitics” trend.

For example, in the USA the electoral challenge between the candidates Joe Biden and Donald Trump is not just a political duel within their borders, but it is also a spectacle that can deeply affect the global

geopolitical structures.

In this regard, the potential impact of a shift in the United States government on its geopolitical stance and relationships with global partners is being closely monitored.

During this election period, it is hard not to notice the influence of outside interests on the campaign and the election results of the USA. In a changed and important geopolitical environment, international actors use their diplomatic, economic and propaganda tools to influence the course of events in the most powerful country in the world.

The decision made at the polls will not solely represent the political preferences of the American public, but also symbolize the acknowledgment of the responsibilities and difficulties that come with being a newly elected leader in a world undergoing change.

In the context of the geopolitical challenges of the Western Balkans, the actions of Russia and Serbia through the use of hybrid warfare strategies in North Macedonia represent a clear attempt to influence the outcome of the elections and to manipulate the political structures in favor of their interests. In this scenario, the goal is to create an unstable political situation, which will result in an uncertain government, and will keep North Macedonia in a similar state as that of Montenegro.

In detail, this strategy intend to ensure a victory for right-wing nationalist parties such as VMRO-DPMNE, linking them with a left-wing movement such as Levica, to create a governing coalition that includes some Albanian coalition in the name of multi-ethnicity and pro-Western guarantee, however, under the conditions of such a government, state and institutional stability cannot be guaranteed.

In this situation, the Western powers will be forced to accept such a governance structure in the name of stability, as they did before in the case of Montenegro. Stability can be restored in a challenge but not from the Albanian factor, as it is important to emphasize that the risk of worsening ethnic tensions in North Macedonia does not originate from the Albanian factor. Instead, ethnic tensions mainly stem from internal Macedonian factors.

Albanians, whether politically or ethnically, have demonstrated a stable state consciousness towards North Macedonia, maintaining a pro-Western orientation and expressing their will to be part of the country's state and political structures. The consistent presence they hold in their position has been instrumental in stabilizing the political environment of North Macedonia, regardless of the changes in

the ideological and strategic characters of the political parties on the Macedonian side.

Therefore, in order to understand and address the ethnic tensions in North Macedonia, we must return to the challenges and dynamics within the Macedonian community, examining them in the context of the country's history and domestic politics, and identifying their main sources to find sustainable and long-term solutions for the stability and continued development of North Macedonia.

In order to maintain the integrity of North Macedonia and to avoid widespread Russian-Serbian influence, one of the main challenges that should be seriously considered is economic and social development. To achieve this objective, it is crucial for the political, intellectual, and civic sectors in North Macedonia to act as genuine patriots, working towards the preservation of its independence and progress in sustainable development.

This process requires the political and social actors to collaborate in harmony to avoid the involvement of foreign policies that could lead to state capture, thus creating a favorable climate for sustainable development and for the progress of the country. On the contrary, political disputes and tensions can cause social revolt and destabilization, endangering the existence of North Macedonia as a state entity in the current political structure.

In this particular context, it is of utmost significance for North Macedonia to thoroughly assess the internal and external obstacles it encounters. It is crucial for North Macedonia to draw insights from Montenegro's approach in tackling similar challenges as a guiding example. The strong connection with NATO and the integration efforts in the European Union are also essential to guarantee the security and development of the country in a changed geopolitical context. Therefore, it is important that North Macedonia continues to understand and take appropriate steps to maintain its integrity and fulfill its strategic objectives on the international arena.

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