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Authoritarian Closeness: Gruevski, Putin and the Macedonian Political Crisis

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LJUPCHO STOJKOVSKI, JUL 15 2015

The ongoing political crisis in Macedonia that started after the disclosure of the wire-tapping scandal by the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), has awoken the European and the wider international community's interest for the country. The small, landlocked Balkan country is going through one of the most difficult political periods since its independence in 1991. Among the many international players that have expressed their opinion about the crisis and its potential resolution, the Russian partaking in this crisis is particularly notable. Considering that Russia has played virtually no role in Macedonia's domestic or foreign affairs – for example throughout the 90's when it gained its independence and was establishing its international position or during the ethnic conflict in 2001 – and that Macedonia has long ago traced its path towards the Euro-Atlantic integration processes, it is worth examining what this Russian involvement is about and whether it signifies a change in Macedonia's foreign policy course.

Before the Crisis

Democracy and the Euro-Atlantic family have been Macedonia's goals ever since its independence. It faced many challenges on that path. Although it did not take part in the wars of former Yugoslavia, it was affected by them, mainly due to the Greek embargo and the sanctions on Serbia. Its acceptance to the UN was blocked by Greece due to name issue and it went through a difficult transitional period in the 90's. Then, in 2001, it was shaken by an ethnic conflict that ended with the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which provided bigger rights as well as equitable representation and participation in state institutions for the ethnic Albanian population (which constitutes about 25% of the total population). Since then, it commenced with its multicultural reconciliation and the Euro-Atlantic integration, aside from being its foreign policy orientation, became an ever-important building block of coexistence between the two biggest ethnic groups. In 2005, Macedonia became an EU-candidate country and in 2009 it received the first EU Commission recommendation for the start of the accession negotiations. This process, along with its eventual NATO membership (since the Bucharest Summit in 2008), is stalled (primarily) as a result of Greece's blockade due to the unresolved name dispute.

In addition to these setbacks, Macedonia has experienced the biggest decline in its history in almost every field since Nikola Gruevski and his right-wing VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) came into power in 2006. Along with its Albanian coalition partner in the government, DUI (Democratic Union for Integration), he has contributed to the country's overall democratic regression. The freedom of the media has deteriorated dramatically, with Freedom House ranking the country in its latest report as 'partly free', last in Europe and only several spots away from the 'not free' group. Rule of law and respect of human rights have been massively violated, as the 2013 State Department Human Rights report has shown. Similar concerns were also highlighted in the latest European Commission progress report. As a consequence of these democratic drawbacks, Freedom House has classified the country as a hybrid regime. In addition, the international image of the country has changed for the worse, with other countries starting to point out that even when Macedonia resolves the name issue with Greece it should sort out other (domestic) issues as well before it can continue its Euro-Atlantic path. All of this only exacerbates the likelihood that the EU will withdraw the recommendation for the opening of the accession negotiations.

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What is the Crisis About...

The current political crisis started with a speech by the Prime Minister Gruevski on 31st of January this year. In it, Gruevski accused the main opposition leader Zoran Zaev of organizing a coup and acknowledged that he was charged for “violence against representatives of the highest state authorities”. He announced the forthcoming audio recordings calling them “illegally obtained” with “some of them being accurate, some partly accurate and some inaccurate”. One week later, the opposition started with the disclosure of the materials.

The “bombs”, as they are called, revealed an abundance of criminal, corrupt, undemocratic and immoral behavior. No separation between the party and the state, partisan use of state resources, intimidation, extortion, blackmailing, abuse of power, phantom voters and other forms of electoral frauds are at the top of the list. Right next to them, is the interference of executive officials in virtually every aspect of the society and especially the judiciary branch with high ranking officials like the former minister of interior affairs, Jankuloska, and the Chief of the Intelligence Agency, Mijalkov, directly selecting judges and prosecutors from their “lists” and from the deals they made with their coalition partner DUI. As a result of this partisan installation, selective justice and lack of fair trials have taken place in favor of government officials. In addition, there has been a direct and brutal usurpation of the National Broadcast Service for governmental promotion and propaganda as well as indirect control over most of the other nation-wide TV channels and newspapers which articulated highly biased and partisan political coverage. Furthermore, the reckless spending on the divisive Skopje 2014 project and other luxuries (like the Prime Minister’s secretly bought car) in a situation in which the economy can’t afford it was shown. A series of corruptive and illegal deals in which Gruevski himself, among others, is directly involved completes the picture although the list of wrongdoings is virtually inexhaustible.

...or Who is Behind the Crisis?

Faced with lack of any plausible defense against the accusations in the wire-tapping materials, which – if processed by an independent judiciary – will put an end to his political career and probably amount to long jail term, Gruevski desperately tried to shift the focus from the content of the materials. He denied the allegations in them, since they were “artificially manufactured”, declined to resign and called for the courts – those same tightly controlled courts – to process them. Instead of dealing with the question of substance, Gruevski laid out another dilemma – who is behind the crisis? In his initial speech, and contrary to the opposition leader Zaev, who claimed that the surveillance of over 20.000 citizens was done by the domestic intelligence services on direct command or with the knowledge of Gruevski, he announced that this was done by foreign intelligence services. Although he later retreated from this accusation to a lesser one – that they were done not by the foreign services themselves but by Zaev and his accomplices for the purposes of the foreign services – the ‘hand of the stranger’ (Moscovici, 1987) has been a crucial argument for swaying the domestic audience to his side.

Acting as a “conspiracy entrepreneur”, (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008) Gruevski initiated a conspiracy theory of society as a way to hold his grip on power. The theory (laid out by Karl Popper in 1966) offers

an explanation of [a] social phenomenon” – like the difficult political crisis or the Kumanovo incident – “[which] consists in the discovery of men or groups who are interested in the occurrence of this phenomenon [...] and who have planned and conspired to bring it about”. (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014)

This conspiracy psychology, according to Moscovici (Moscovici, 1987), has two elements.

The first one is the capability to portray those that are allegedly responsible for the crisis, “to be oneself and at once someone else” (p. 156). The idea here is to describe those people to be “honest workers, good family men, competent scientists, loyal members of their party, and, at the same time be vicious seducers, troublemakers, traitors to their party or agents of a foreign power” (p. 155). Thus, “[o]ne can charge them with intentions and actions that go against all appearance” (p. 155).

It is a typical strategy of autocrats to pursue rhetoric and policies that demonize their opponents and ascribe to them various conspiracy plots. The goal of this demonization is “to change the[ir] ontological status” (p. 166). Right from

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the start of his nine-year rule, Gruevski has introduced the daunting division of 'patriots' and 'traitors'. A number of well-respected intellectuals, journalists and public opinion makers have been blamed of collaborating with various foreign powers in order to 'sell the name', 'support the Albanian cause' or introduce 'Western values'. Employing methods such as show trials, lustration, public labeling and so on, Gruevski has used this pretense nationalism and respect for traditional values as a vote-gathering strategy in the past. This time, he is using it to cover-up his wrongdoings and supposedly save the country from destabilization and coup attempt.

The second element of Moscovici's explanation of the conspiracy psychology is intention. What are "the foreigners" after? What is the purpose of the destabilization? The goal of this destabilization, as it is with almost every other conspiracy, is some visible, tangible and at the same time significant enough material target, easy for the average person to comprehend. This time the choice fell on the "Turkish Stream".

The Turkish Stream, the gas pipeline project that was announced for the first time on the 1st of December last year, is supposed to replace the now abandoned South Stream project. Its goal, similar to the South Stream, is to supply Russian gas to Europe and, at the same time, to bypass Ukraine as a transit country completely. On its way to Europe the pipeline should supposedly include Macedonia as a transit country. The alleged goal of the foreigners, therefore, is to encourage a new 'color revolution' and forcefully install a new government in Macedonia that will not be joining the Stream. There are several factors, however, which point out that this Turkish Stream conspiracy is just that – a conspiracy. First of all, due to numerous economic and political factors, a plethora of skepticism has been expressed about the project, with various experts and officials calling it "not viable", "mysterious", "unrealistic", "highly unpopular in Europe" and difficult to finance. Furthermore, the Turkish Ambassador to Russia recently said that the construction of the project will start only after 2017. Thus, as of now, one can certainly agree with Edward Chow's suggestion that the project is closer to a Russian Dream rather than Stream. Second, having in mind the enormous uncertainty surrounding the Turkish Stream, it is difficult if not impossible to correlate this enterprise to anything else let alone another uncertain occurrence like the police action in Kumanovo. On the 8th and 9th of May, a police action in the ethnically mixed town of Kumanovo was undertaken and eight police officers were killed. The action was carried out against what Prime Minister Gruevski called "one of the most dangerous terrorist groups in the Balkans". It is unclear however, and neither did Gruevski explain, who these terrorists are, what their location is or where they operate from and what are they fighting for, considering that there haven't been any terror related attacks in Macedonia nor the region for a long period. Furthermore, several statements by the Ministry of Interior regarding the shooting have been full of contradictions and dubiousness and an independent investigation about the situation is still missing. All this has caused the speculations and uncertainty about what exactly happened in Kumanovo to grow.

What is certain, however, is that one cannot come to a true conclusion, let alone attribute blame, if the conclusion is based on multiple uncertain or false propositions. Besides, the scenario that foreign services are behind the destabilization of the country because of Turkish Stream fails another simple test. During the Prime Minister's initial speech, he declared that Mr. Zaev first delivered the message of his possession of the materials throughout their meetings that took place from September to November 2014, which is a time well before the Turkish Stream project even existed.

Of course, Gruevski himself never publicly stated which foreign country is behind the crisis (this is even omitted in the official charges against Zaev) or that the objective of the destabilization is the Turkish Stream. On the contrary. Trying not to antagonize the West too much and to ease the looming pressure on him, Gruevski, in a well-known manner for him, responded by saying what the West wanted to hear. In an interview for a website close to his government, he declared that the EU and NATO are the country's future. Regarding the Turkish Stream, he said that it is up to West and Russia to decide on the fate of the Turkish Stream and Macedonia will honour that decision. His domestic rhetoric throughout the crisis, however, was completely different. Gruevski set the stage for this conspiracy to unfold and left the rest to his staunch supporters and pundits. Commensurate with the seriousness of the occasion though, Gruevski needed support from a credible and powerful voice to slow down (or even stop) his falling and mobilize support for the upcoming elections by shifting the blame on others. Enter Russia.

Authoritarian Support

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Russia has entered the Macedonian political crisis right from the onset. It has placed its unequivocal support on Gruevski's side. Its first statement regarding the crisis came only one day after Gruevski announced the supposed coup attempt, which was puzzling considering its general absence from the political scene in Macedonia. In that statement, unlike the USA and EU's statements where they called for investigation of the "alleged wrongdoings" which may be "related to the coup case", Russia called for an investigation of the "failed coup attempt" and for the adoption of an OSCE "document banning anti-constitutional coups". Further down the road, its rhetoric culminated with the Russian foreign minister Lavrov explicitly stating that the events in Kumanovo were orchestrated by the West in order to prevent Macedonia from joining the Turkish Stream and even expressed some highly irresponsible comments like the one that the crisis in Macedonia is an attempt by Bulgaria and Albania to destroy and split Macedonia among themselves.

How can one explain this sudden Russian involvement in Macedonian politics? Gruevski's turn to Russia for help could be explained from the perspective of a legitimacy crisis. When this type of crisis occurs, and

when there is a relatively equal distribution of power between liberal and illiberal elites, [...] there are real possibilities that [a] country could move in either direction. Therefore, elites are fighting over the regime type and potentially their very survival [...] [It is at this moment,] [w]hen elites perceive themselves to be threatened, "external factors are more likely to have more influence". (Vanderhill, 2012)

The selection of the 'external factor' depends on the political ideology of the elites and 'domestic receptivity'. As researches of alliance formation has shown, "ideological similarities between state leaders increase the incentive for allying together" (Vanderhill, 2012). The more similar the leaders are, the bigger is the likelihood that they will support each other. During his rule, Gruevski has expanded the cooperation with leaders like Erdogan, Orban, and Putin and has been extensively compared to them. As for the 'domestic receptivity' factor, there have not been any public opinion polls on the perception of the Macedonian citizens of Putin and Russia. However, the growing anti-western sentiment produced from the top (and consequently the abovementioned conspiracy mentality), the relatively high authoritarian political culture, and the presence of – never before seen during any protest in Macedonia's history – orthodox crosses, T-shirts and tents in the pro-government camp with Putin or Lavrov's names on them, suggest that the receptivity of this 'external factor' could be fairly good among the ruling party supporters.

From Russian standpoint, one possible explanation for the involvement in the Macedonian political crisis is that, similar to liberal democracies, authoritarian regimes also collaborate and support each other. This cooperation is deliberately used by authoritarian regimes "to bolster their particular type of rule" and it can also include hybrid regimes. (Erdmann, et al., 2013) Of course, as Vanderhill correctly points out, the support that authoritarian regimes extend to other such regimes could not be explained merely by the aspiration to influence the regime type (itself), but it "may involve multiple motives and interests" (p. 10), like, for example, some geopolitical objectives. However, at the end, the outcome of this support should increase the authoritarianism in the recipient country.

There is a growing literature examining the ways in which illiberal elites support and learn from each other. We will explore the Gruevski-Putin relationship following Vanderhill's three learning mechanism: demonstration effects, purposive and collaborative action and external pressure (similar, albeit more comprehensive list is offered by Erdmann, et al.).

Demonstration effects. This mechanism describes the process in which the (illiberal) elites adopt certain policies and/or rules from other countries in order to resolve similar situations at home. These policies have turned out to be effective in those countries, so the recipient elite draws the conclusion that it could employ it back at home. Thus, "an active sender" (Erdman et al.) is not necessary here and the diffusion is mainly informal and indirect.

One can provide many examples of the "putinization" of the Macedonian political space. According to Yekaterina Schulman, the term – used in her analysis in the context of Turkey but absolutely applicable here as well – refers to the amalgam of "[ethno]-nationalism, isolationism, support of 'traditional values' and closer relations between the state and the church". In this context, one could mention the calls made by some of Gruevski's closest supporters and experts for the extermination of all "foundations and NGOs financed by Soros" (which they use it as a generic

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term for every foreign type of financing) in similar fashion to the infamous laws adopted by the Russian Duma in 2012 and 2014 in which they designated all NGOs financed by abroad as “foreign agents”. Furthermore, similar to the notorious Russian homophobic practices, LGBT freedoms have seen a drastic fall and the state is neglecting to investigate and punish the violations. Hate crimes by those same government supporters and journalists are on the rise and also left unpunished, all the while the ruling party proposed amendments of the Constitution to prevent the possibility of gay marriage in the future. In addition, harassments and beatings of as well as death threats towards journalists independent and critical of the government have also been on the rise in the last couple of months, and they are equally left uninvestigated.

Purposive and collaborative action. This mechanism comprises some sort of intention or active cooperation in the relationship between the regimes. It could include a direct advice or strategy of the external factor on how to deal with a concrete problem (in order for the recipient regime to obtain or maintain power) or a more general cooperation that could lead to some materialization or support down the road.

While, as of now, we are unaware of any advice from the Russian side as a product of direct collaboration between the regimes, there are some indications that the Macedonian side could have reached for or at least invested in the support of the Russian side. Two obvious examples of this investment are Macedonia’s decision not to join EU and USA in the imposition of sanctions on Russia due the illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine, and the participation of Macedonia’s president Ivanov in the anniversary following the victory over fascism in Moscow this year, when the USA and the EU boycotted the same manifestation for the abovementioned reasons. Also, another less mentioned event could indicate the purposive collaboration and Russian inclusion in the Macedonian political crisis. Namely, in January of this year, almost one month before the crisis started unfolding, the Russian Orthodox Church, which is “involved with ever increasing frequency in Putin’s governmental policies” (Schulman), offered to mediate in the long-standing church dispute between the Macedonian and Serbian Orthodox Church. Together with the Serbians it demanded the release of bishop Vranishkovski as a precondition for the renewal of the talks. Vranishkovski, who the local human rights group Helsinki Committee in one of its reports called “the first political prisoner in Macedonia”, was arrested and convicted back in 2013 for alleged money laundering and it was widely perceived at that time as an attempt by Gruevski to solidify his support amongst the conservative and religious base. Similar calls for his release have been made by Serbia before but to no avail. This time, however, Vranishkovski was expressly released – first on parole and then by an abolition of the previous verdicts. In a joint statement with the Serbians, the Russian Church expressed its satisfaction with the decision and called for Vranishkovski to come to Russia, which he immediately did. The talks between Macedonian and Serbian Churches, however, have not moved an inch since then. While this could all be attributed to coincidence, the timing of the events suggests that it could be a sign of purposive cooperation between Gruevski and his Russian counterpart.

External pressure. In this third mechanism, coercion is involved as an element in the relationship between the actors. The external actor applies pressure at the fellow illiberal elites in order for them to move closer to the (external) pressure applier. The pressure could be in the form of negative or positive incentives and it should affect the costs and benefits of the domestic elite regarding the selection of the regime type.

There are no indications that there has been any negative pressure applied by Russia on Gruevski to ally with it. The same could be said for the positive incentives, although, the manner in which Russia – faced with growing international isolation – uses its natural gas as a tool to enhance its political influence in the world (including the Balkans) suggests that this could be a possibility in the future if Gruevski stays on power.

Uncertain Future

The political stalemate in Macedonia is far from over. The EU-brokered talks (with USA participating as well) that recently took place in Skopje and in Brussels have ended in a gridlock. Gruevski is vigorously and, rather successfully, fighting for his life at the negotiations. If the West’s pledge for democracy, rule of law and human rights are genuine and if it wants this crisis to end justly, it should – to use Daniel Friedman’s implication expressed for similar occasions – meet Gruevski’s bad behaviour with a stern response and not with (more) concessions, the chief one being his hold onto power. He no longer has the legitimacy to rule. As for Russia, like during previous crucial

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instances in Macedonia's post-independence history, it is not part of the negotiations. After the initial upheaval it caused it has since weathered the storm. Its part is done, so far. For Russia, the political situation in Macedonia presented a chance to support a fellow autocrat, to extend its sphere of influence and presence on the Balkans, as well as another opportunity to throw barbs at the West. Putin has provided Gruevski with strong support, domestically and internationally, contributing to his political survival. On the other hand, it is still unclear whether this turn to Putin's Russia by Gruevski is only temporarily to save his skin or will it mean a deeper dip into authoritarianism and steering the Euro-Atlantic course of the country to the East – at least if he somehow miraculously stays on power once the crisis is over. Some of the abovementioned factors indicate that this is a growing possibility, but it remains to be seen.

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