



**Hermes Institute of
International Affairs,
Security & Geoeconomy**

BRIEFING NOTE No “2/2024”

**A Friend in Need? North Macedonian - Turkish Relations Under the
New VMRO-led Government and Implications for Greece**

By

Ioannis Chouliaras

Research Associate of “HERMES” Institute of International Affairs, Security &
Geoeconomy

Athens, August 2024

“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE

“HERMES” Institute of International Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy (“HERMES” I.I.A.S.GE) is an independent, non – governmental, non – profit organization, consisting of scholars dedicated in the research and analysis of international affairs in regional and global level. The Institute aims at providing objective, scientific, and reliable research analysis through a variety of studies contributing effectively and constructively in the public dialogue and the evolution of scientific knowledge.

Copyright © 2024

“HERMES” Institute for Foreign Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy

All rights reserved

“HERMES” Institute of International Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy offers a forum for researchers to express their views freely, thoroughly and well-documented. The views expressed in this briefing note are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the “HERMES” Institute. Briefing Notes aim to contribute constructively in public debate in a wide range of international politics, defense, security and geoeconomy topics.

North Macedonia's relations with Greece will almost certainly deteriorate and its European integration prospects will face significant hurdles under the new nationalist government. Skopje's new ruling elite will likely seek to bolster ties with Turkey, a traditional partner of the country. By strengthening cooperation with Ankara, the North Macedonian government will seek to counterbalance Greek pressure, utilizing Turkish influence over Bulgaria and the Albanian population of the Balkans to soften Sofia's demands and preserve domestic interethnic peace, and secure a powerful advocate within the Western Alliance, while at the same time benefiting from Turkish economic and military might and links with major non-Western powers. A stronger Skopje - Ankara axis could present significant challenges for Greek policy in the Balkans.

On May 8th, 2024 the right-wing nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) resoundingly won both parliamentary and presidential elections held in the Balkan country, ending the 7-year rule of the center-left Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). VMRO leader Hristijan Mickoski was elected Prime Minister, while the party's candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova became North Macedonia's new President. Mickoski formed a coalition with the VREDI block of ethnic Albanian parties and the left-wing nationalist ZNAM, which secured parliamentary approval on June 23rd, 2024.

Early on and despite its promise to continue seeking European Union (EU) membership, the new nationalist government was quick to ratchet up tensions with North Macedonia's neighbors Greece and Bulgaria. Mickoski and Siljanovska angered the Greek government by calling their country "Macedonia" and publicly stating that they would refuse to use the official name "North Macedonia" as stipulated by the 2018 "Prespa" Agreement between the two countries, which paved the way for the country's accession to NATO by resolving the long-standing name dispute and lifting Greece's veto. Mickoski even called the name change, agreed to by his center-left predecessors, "shameful" and declared that he would not utter it domestically, although he would still use "North Macedonia" when abroad. VMRO had been opposed to the "Prespa" Agreement from the beginning and its voter base has long been hostile towards Greeks and the Greek state. Greece reacted strongly, with the government of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis accusing Mickoski of breaking the deal and warning that it could once again veto the country's accession to the EU. Brussels issued its own warnings that the North

Macedonian government was obliged to respect Skopje's international agreements. Furthermore, VMRO has opposed constitutional changes demanded by Bulgaria as a precondition of lifting its own veto on North Macedonia's EU accession process. It had also engaged in a fierce rivalry with the country's largest Albanian party DUI (Albanian Democratic Union for Integration) which was the SDSM's main partner during the previous government, accusing it of taking advantage of its position to promote the Albanian minority's and its own cronies' interests within the state apparatus and the economy.

Meanwhile, the new government had a much better start in relations with another major regional player. On June 5th, 2024 Siljanovska received the Turkish Ambassador to North Macedonia, praising her country's strong ties with Turkey and expressing her desire for further cooperation in all fields. On July 18th, 2024 North Macedonia's military chief Lieutenant General Vasko Gjurchinovski visited Ankara and met with his Turkish counterpart as well as Defense Minister Yasar Guler. Interestingly, on the same day Guler also received the "ambassador" of the unrecognized "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus", shortly before the 50th anniversary of the Turkish invasion of the divided island.

It would probably not be unreasonable to suspect that the VMRO government was seeking to send a not-so-subtle message to Athens. Despite an improvement in bilateral relations since the February 2023 earthquake, Greece and Turkey remain embroiled in a litany of bilateral disputes in the Aegean Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Cyprus, with no resolution in sight. Flirting with Greece's major regional rival would be an effective way to ruffle feathers in Athens and remind Mitsotakis that should Greece choose to up the ante, Skopje also has powerful allies to turn to.

Indeed, Turkey has historically been a strong supporter of North Macedonia since the country's independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. It recognized the country under its then-constitutional name "Republic of Macedonia" in 1992. North Macedonia's first president Kiro Gligorov's first visit abroad was to Turkey, and Turkish President Turgut Ozal was the first foreign leader to visit North Macedonia in 1993, underlining the importance that the newly independent former Yugoslav state assigned to its relations with Ankara. Facing severe regional isolation due to its bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria over its name and historical claims, fearing Serbian expansionism, and having to

contend with a restive Albanian minority within its borders (roughly 25% of the population), North Macedonia pursued a robust partnership with Turkey as a counterbalance to safeguard its independence and integrity and benefit from Turkish military and economic potential. On its part, Ankara was more than happy to secure a geopolitical foothold on Greece's northern flank, intensifying Athens' fears of strategic encirclement and bolstering its influence in the Western Balkans. It is worth noting that after Greek pressure forced the country to change its official name to "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM) until the "Prespa" Agreement, Turkey continued using the old name ("Republic of Macedonia") in international settings. Thus it should not come as a surprise that a majority of North Macedonia's citizens have a highly favorable view of Turkey.

In contrast to its frosty, antagonistic relationship with Greece, North Macedonia's ties with Turkey only deepened in the ensuing decades. Turkish - North Macedonian trade exceeded \$1 billion in 2022. Turkish companies have undertaken major investments in the country, such as a \$1,3 billion deal with a US - Turkish joint venture to construct motorways connecting with ports in Albania, Bulgaria, and Greece. In addition, institutions like the Turkish International and Cooperation Agency (TIKA) and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) have engaged in significant development and cultural initiatives, such as repairing schools, building critical infrastructure, and renovating Ottoman-era monuments, which also serve the interests of the country's Turkish minority (roughly 4% of the population). But most concerning for Athens has been Ankara's military ties with North Macedonia. Since the mid-1990s, Turkey has provided extensive support to Skopje's armed forces by selling or donating equipment, training North Macedonia's officers, and backing military modernization efforts to NATO standards. Reports and officials have mentioned thorough intelligence cooperation as well. Greek officials have long been disturbed by the Turkish - North Macedonian strong cooperation, viewing Turkish penetration of Skopje's security apparatus as part of a plan to encircle Greece from the north and overstretch Greek military forces. Fears of Ankara even opening up a second front by orchestrating asymmetric North Macedonian attacks on Greek territory during a potential conflict over the Aegean and/or Cyprus have been expressed in the Greek press, although such claims should always be taken with a grain of salt.

The approach with Turkey has been viewed as critical for North Macedonia's

security and has been cultivated by all successive governments since independence. Even the previous SDSM-led government followed the same policy, despite its pro-EU orientation and rapprochement with Athens. The two countries signed a five-year defense cooperation agreement in 2021 envisaging Turkish financing of North Macedonia's military modernization efforts, and Skopje purchased 18 Turkish-made BORAN howitzers in January 2023. Former SDSM-backed President Stevo Pendarovski advocated for further military cooperation with Turkey and hinted at a potential future purchase of Turkish drones.

Considering the above, the new VMRO-DPMNE-led government will likely deepen political, economic, and security ties with Turkey. Skopje's hostility toward its Greek and Bulgarian neighbors and its internal ethnic disputes have long driven its existential fears about threats to its independence and territorial integrity. Tensions with Athens and Sofia will almost certainly rekindle and further increase under VMRO-DPMNE. The North Macedonian ruling coalition seems determined to undermine the "Prespa" Agreement by de facto abandoning usage of the country's official name, even if the deal formally remains in force. Stirring up traditional enmity toward Greece will also be an effective way of mobilizing its nationalist voter base and distracting public attention from North Macedonia's significant economic challenges. The conservative Greek government under Mitsotakis and his New Democracy party, most of whose supporters were also fiercely opposed to the agreement in the first place, will almost certainly be forced to respond, particularly since popular support for the party and the Prime Minister has eroded in recent months. Absent a dramatic policy shift in Athens or Skopje, Greece will once again block North Macedonia's EU accession. Bulgaria will almost certainly continue with its own veto too, since its demands about amending the North Macedonian Constitution to recognize a Bulgarian minority are strongly rejected by VMRO-DPMNE. Under these conditions, an enhanced partnership with Turkey could benefit the new North Macedonian government in several ways:

- It would secure the backing of a major regional power with significant clout both within the Western Alliance and among non-western states, limiting Greece's ability to diplomatically isolate Mickoski's government, as well as providing leverage vis-a-vis Athens by stocking Greek fears of encirclement and signaling that Greek attempts to

pressure Skopje will only result in further cozying up to Ankara.

- Turkey wields substantial influence over Bulgaria, Albania, and Kosovo, which could potentially enable Ankara to mediate between Sofia and Skopje and help keep North Macedonia's Albanian minority calm, preserving the country's interethnic peace despite VMRO-DPMNEs' nationalist rhetoric and policies.

- Since VMRO-DPMNE's positions on relations with Greece and Bulgaria have already caused serious concerns in Brussels and Washington about potential destabilization in the Balkans, cooperation with Ankara could help reassure policymakers that Skopje remains firmly entrenched within the Western bloc. At the same time, Turkey has close ties to Serbia and Hungary, which also back the VMRO-DPMNE, complementing the North Macedonian government's policy of forming a supportive regional bloc to counterbalance Greek and Bulgarian pressure.

- In case relations with Western powers deteriorate further and with EU accession most likely blocked for the foreseeable future, Turkey's economic resources, military might, and links to major non-Western states such as Russia, China, and the Gulf states could provide an alternative to Western integration and a lifeline for VMRO-DPMNE's hold on power.

A stronger North-Macedonian - Turkish partnership under a hostile VMRO-DPMNE could pose several challenges for the Greek foreign policy. With Greek - Albanian relations strained over Tirana's policies toward its Greek minority, traditional ties with Serbia weakened due to Athens' shifting stance toward Kosovo, and increasing Turkish political and economic influence in Bulgaria, particularly in the critical energy sector, Greece could be left further isolated in its immediate region. The Greek - Turkish detente established since the 2023 earthquake seems to be withering, and an enhanced Turkish foothold on its northern borders could divert Greece's attention from Ankara's assertion in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean and stretch its limited resources. Furthermore, as Athens' stance on North Macedonia's EU prospects will inevitably harden due to the VMRO-DPMNE's anti-Greek provocations and undermining of the "Prespa" Agreement, Turkey will likely exploit the opportunity to present Greece as an unhelpful actor bullying its smaller neighbor and obstructing Western policies in the Balkans, draining Athens' diplomatic capital. In that context, Turkey could take advantage of its increased strategic

significance amid the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East to advocate for the VMRO-DPMNE in Western capitals and convince governments to ignore Greek demands. All in all, the result could be a much diminished Greek position in the Balkans and substantial loss of Athens' influence in this strategically important region, which would further undermine Greece's standing and significance for its major Western allies.



Ioannis Chouliaras, is a Research Associate of the “HERMES” Institute of International Affairs, Security & Geoeconomy. He holds a bachelor degree in International and European Studies from the University of Piraeus, and a Master of Arts (MA) in Intelligence and Security Studies from the Brunel University, London. His interests

include global politics, and security and defense issues, with a particular focus on Europe, Russia/former Soviet countries, and the Middle East. Ioannis has joined several research organizations as an analyst/researcher such as the Institute of International Relations (IDIS)/Russia, Eurasia and Southeastern Europe Project, Center for International Strategic Analyses (KEDISA), Greek Student Association for International Affairs (SAFIA)/Politics and International Relations Research Group. He was also a columnist in the Offlinepost and PowerPolitics.eu websites. His working experience includes his employment in “MS Risk Limited” (monitoring events in the Middle East and North Africa region), “Counterterrorism Group – Paladin 7” (monitoring news agencies for any events of interest and utilizing OSINT tools to conduct online research on terrorist attacks and groups), the Greek Embassy in Bulgaria and in the UK.