

NORTH MACEDONIA'S NATO MEMBERSHIP: HUMAN SECURITY BENEFITS OR *STATUS QUO*¹

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Abstract: The essential goal of this paper is to provide an explanation about the human security benefits of small states membership in NATO in contemporary international relations, on the example of North Macedonia. It is the latest country to become a member of the North Atlantic Alliance, and it happened at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In that period, when NATO has proclaimed itself as an organization which will help its allies in the fight against the pandemic by ensuring medical equipment, financial support, medication and other necessities, North Macedonia's citizens were faced with enormous difficulties as a consequence of the weak national medical system, and the unpreparedness of national authorities to create a national strategy for facing the ongoing challenges, while at the same time relying their country and citizens on international organizations and institutions support (Deibel, 2007, p. 77). The example of North Macedonia's full integration in NATO during the period when a global pandemic was endangering the world health system and was creating huge obstacles for ensuring human security sustainability at different levels, is the core example which leads us to the topic of our research. The aim of which is to examine how certain international security organizations, in this case NATO, are not able to provide adequate support to its allies, which in certain moments are exclusively dependent of foreign support. This paper's contribution, from a theoretical point of view, would be seen in the confirmation of a realistic approach which says that national interests always prevail in international relations and that small states could not always rely on the allies' solidarity when in certain moment they are facing the same or similar challenges as big countries, especially when those are focused on resolving internal all-pervading problems.

Key words: *North Macedonia, Covid-19, Human security challenges, realism, national interests*

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary security challenges have brought national states to a position which faces the necessity of adapting their strategic documents on national security so that they, and their authorities, can be able to efficiently and effectively face current threats. It is about threats that do not endanger the national borders and territorial integrity of national states (Arnaudov, 2021, p. 46) as a type of classic threats, but “erode” political sovereignty and economic sustainability, and, therefore, bring into question the general security of a society due to internal systemic challenges. This type of threat may have become more and more visible for all the aspects of society with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has shown all the shortcomings states faced in the modern global order. In this context, the systemic problems of a society showed how much a country, and therefore its citizens, are threatened not by external security threats, but by internal threats produced by the system itself. When introduced in 1994, the human security approach refocused the security debate from territorial security to people’s security. This idea, which the UN General Assembly endorsed in 2012, invited security scholars and policymakers to look beyond protecting the nation-state to protecting what we care most about in our lives: our basic needs, our physical integrity, our human dignity. It emphasized the importance of everyone’s right to freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom from indignity. It highlighted the close connection between security, development and the protection and empowerment of individuals and communities (United Nations Development Program, 2022, p. 13).

From that point of view, the case of North Macedonia as a member state of NATO, which has extremely weak system efficiency (European Commission Report, 2022, p. 16) is important in this paper, in the context of human security, in order to show that although it is a member state of one of the biggest security organizations in the world, it still has no adequate mechanisms to secure the safety of its citizens. The Covid-19 pandemic is a pervasive threat to the national systems at all levels, especially in health and economy. It has brought into question the security of Macedonian citizens, bearing in mind the fact that North Macedonia was one of the states in Europe, with the most negative and the weakest performances in the fight against this disease.

According to the UNDP Special Report “New threats to human security in the Anthropocene Demanding greater solidarity” as the Covid-19 pandemic got underway, the world had been reaching unprecedented heights on the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Program, 2022, p. 13). “People were, on average, living healthier, wealthier and better lives for longer than ever, but under the surface a growing sense of insecurity had been taking root” (United Nations Development Program, 2022, p. 13). In the years leading up to the pandemic, for the first time, indicators of human development have declined — drastically, unlike anything experienced in recent global crisis (United Nations Development Program, 2022, p. 13). We are mentioning all this, in the context of North Macedonia, because of two reasons: the first one — the importance of NATO membership (Одлука за стапувања на Република Македонија во членство во Северно-Атлантската договорна организација НАТО, 1993, p. 78) which to North Macedonia’s citizens was not politically presented as an opportunity for facing the actual and upcoming challenges, but more of a goal that will secure Macedonian territorial integrity, as well as independency (Kurir, 2022); the second one — conditions of life in Macedonian society are far below the standard of the developed societies, where most of them are also NATO member states. On the one hand, this is the main ground on which we can prove that North Macedonia’s NATO membership did not bring any type of advancement of human security within the Macedonian society. On the other, although North Macedonia has received different types of financial support from NATO member states in the fight against Covid-19, the unpreparedness of its national system, especially health care mechanism, had contributed North Macedonia authorities to face with huge fault in the context of failure to cope with the global disease during the pandemic.

Covid-19 pandemic, in the case of North Macedonia, has shown that membership of any international security or defence organization could not contribute in resolving internal human security threats if the national system is not ready or based on the strategy which could predict, prevent and provide efficient mechanism for such kind of threats. Analysing global trends, for the first time, as well, indicators of human development have declined — drastically, unlike anything experienced in other recent global crises (United Nations Development Program, 2022, p. 13). The Covid-19 pandemic has upended the global economy, interrupted

education dreams, delayed the administration of vaccines and medical treatment and disrupted lives and livelihoods (United Nations Development Program, 2022, p. 13). In such circumstances, although international solidarity was visible on some level, especially when it came to providing medical equipment and medical donations, mostly from the developed to the developing countries, the states with insufficiently developed national systems, high level of corruption and systemic instability, were unable to cope with the threats that were brought about by the pandemic. The North Macedonian health care system was endangered at all levels (BBC News na srpskom, 2022). Public hospitals were not prepared for such a widespread disease, while public authorities did not create a health care strategy for emergency reaction. The health care situation, from the point of the Covid-19 pandemic, was mostly dependent on foreign help and donations, without any internal mechanism which could provide better instruments for fight and, in that context, provide better conditions for the patients. Such a state of affairs on the ground had an additional impact on the deterioration of the level of human security in North Macedonia, which was accompanied not only by health challenges, but also by deepening economic consequences.

NORTH MACEDONIA FACING NATO MEMBERSHIP AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

On March 30th, 2020, when North Macedonia officially became a NATO member state, the number of Covid-19 cases was ever raising (Dimovski, 2021, p. 17). On that day, North Macedonia was dealing with the Covid-19 outbreak, with a total number up to 285 confirmed cases, while the capital city of Skopje was most affected with 164 cases. Because of the existing health care issues North Macedonia was already requesting (Defrančeski, 2020), i.e., gloves, protective suits and goggles, and surgical masks from NATO allies (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). North Macedonia requested assistance through NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Co-ordination Centre (EADRCC) for surgical masks, protective suits and other equipment (Beta, 2020).³ In that context, NATO Secretary General, Jens

³ The NATO center passed the requests on to NATO Allies and partners, who provide assistance on a bilateral basis. The EADRCC is NATO's principal disaster response mechanism. It operates on a 24/7 basis, coordinating requests from NATO Allies

Stoltenberg, stressed that NATO is determined in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2020) and added that, while all Allies are affected by the crisis, some are able to reallocate resources in order to help others in need, including North Macedonia (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). In fact, North Macedonia was the first member state of NATO which requested support in the fight against Covid-19 (Glas Amerike, 2020). From the point of bilateral aid, Hungary was the first NATO ally to provide aid to North Macedonia, in the form of 100.000 protective masks and 5.000 protective suits, while at the same time Slovenia provided 100.000 surgical masks and 100.000 protective masks to North Macedonia (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). Furthermore, the Netherlands provided Covid-19 test kits, through an international donation to the International Atomic Energy Agency, while the US Administration committed \$1.1 million to mitigating the spread of Covid-19 outbreak⁴ in North Macedonia (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). Norway donated medical supplies to North Macedonia totalling €180.000. Moreover, North Macedonia used a field hospital donated by Norway, allowing the country to double the capacity at the Infectious Disease Clinic in Skopje, its largest hospital, in the fight against Covid-19 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). In fact, different types of medical equipment and support North Macedonia received by donation, at the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic, support, to some extent, our thesis that the public health system is unsustainable without foreign support, in this case, more precisely, without the support provided by NATO allies. As April 2020 began, North Macedonia authorities, once again, requested assistance via NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre. Thus, military transport aircraft, CASA C295, of the Czech Army, transported 1.000.000 masks to North Macedonia (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). In fact, the health system of North Macedonia lacked the basic necessities to fight the pandemic. With that in mind, it can be very simple to consider that human security in that country was threatened at the basic level, without taking into account other economic, political and security challenges outside the public health care context. Challenges in the health care

and partners, as well as offers of assistance to cope with the consequences of major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁴ Through this assistance, it will support several initiatives, including large-scale testing of COVID-19 and infection prevention and control.

system of North Macedonia, during the Covid-19 pandemic, are a sufficient indicator of the state of human security in that state and how such eroded health system has influence on the basic human security standards in Macedonian society.

North Macedonia also got assistance from Poland which dispatched nearly 70 tonnes of medical supplies to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia, helping them respond to the Covid-19 pandemic (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). Furthermore, Estonia delivered medical supplies to North Macedonia, as a part of wider Estonian medical support which included 4.000 pump dispenser bottles of hand disinfection liquid and 1.000 litres of surface disinfectant, and several hundred mattresses, bedding sets and blankets (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). One of the most important NATO donations to North Macedonia was the delivery of 60 ventilators⁵ (Dojčevele, 2020), as a part of the Alliance's support to Allies to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). This donation, same as the previous ones, was coordinated by NATO's EADRCC in response to a request from North Macedonia. Such data shows the challenges faced by the health system in North Macedonia during the Covid-19 pandemic. The question is, how would have the authorities in that country coped with the pandemic if they had not received any kind of medical assistance from the NATO allies and does that mean that the NATO assistance was crucial in that period for North Macedonia? However, it is difficult to establish whether NATO played a key role, bearing in mind the fact that in the fight against the pandemic, North Macedonia received support and was helped from non-NATO countries, which used their national capacities to help the North Macedonian authorities in the fight against Covid-19.

On January 11th 2021's EADRCC received one more request for international assistance from North Macedonia to help in the fight against the Covid-19 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). Few weeks later, North Macedonian Ministry of Health received a donation of additional

⁵ The ventilators are part of a donation from the United States to the NATO stockpile in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They were stored by the NATO Support and Procurement Agency in a warehouse facility at the NSPA Southern Operational Centre in Taranto, Italy and were transported to Skopje by an Italian transport aircraft C27J.

60 sets of ventilator equipment. This donation happened due to the financial contributions by the Czech Republic, Lithuania, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and the United States (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). At the same time Slovakia delivered four pulmonary ventilators to North Macedonia, including masks, hygiene packs, blankets, tents and generators. The NATO Pandemic Response Trust Fund maintains an established stockpile of medical equipment and supplies to be able to provide immediate relief to Allies or partners in need (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020). Furthermore, at the beginning of March 2021, North Macedonia received 6.000 litres of surface disinfectant detergent from NATO's Pandemic Response Stockpile which were distributed to 17 hospitals around the country, General Hospitals of Gevgelija, Strumica, Gostivar, Ohrid, Bitola and the Institute for children's diseases in Skopje (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020).

However, North Macedonia did not receive NATO assistance during Covid-19 pandemic solely in the health care area. This country, as NATO's newest ally, signed a key document that contributes to improving cyber defence cooperation and assistance between NATO and the country's cyber defenders. It is the Memorandum of Understanding on cyber defence cooperation which facilitates information-sharing on cyber threats and best practices, and helps prevent cyber incidents and will enable North Macedonia to increase its resilience to cyber threats (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2020).

From today's perspective, we have to point out that North Macedonia applied more or less the same measures as its neighbouring countries. Essentially, all of them applied identical measures in the fight against Covid-19, but North Macedonia feared the worst, as it had the largest number of new Covid-19 cases and deaths in relation to the number of citizens. The difference between North Macedonia and other neighbouring states was only in the measures for entering and leaving the country, where state quarantine was obligatory for Macedonian citizens, and foreigners (Mirilovic, 2022). Full professor of microbiology and parasitology at the Faculty of Medicine in Skopje, Nikola Panovski, explained that the Macedonian health care system was relatively ready until the moment when the number of hospitalized patients was between 500-700 at the state level. According to him, when the Clinical Centre and the City hospital in Skopje were not able to receive the more serious

patients, Covid-19 departments were opened in smaller towns in which hospitals had never before treated patients who required oxygen and complex laboratory tests. “Family doctors who normally work privately and have contracts with the Public Health Insurance Fund were not prepared to treat these difficult cases, so the patients were left to fend for themselves (Mirilovic, 2022). Along with Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia was in the top ten European countries in terms of mortality rate from Covid-19 (Mirilovic, 2022). According to data from September 1st 2022, North Macedonia, registered 340.510 cases, from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic — 329.434 recovered patients and 9.490 deaths (Worldometers, 2022). North Macedonia signed its first agreement on the procurement of the first contingent of vaccines (200.000 doses) on February 8th 2021, with the Chinese company Sinopharm, but the first contingent of vaccines (4.680 doses), were the Pfizer ones donated by Serbia (Mirilovic, 2022). At the beginning of March 2021, the Prime Minister of North Macedonia at that time, Zoran Zaev, announced that his government had ordered 2.5 million doses of vaccines, both through the Covax program⁶ and through bilateral cooperation with Russia and China and their companies. Until then, only vaccines donated by Serbia were in use and were given to the workers in public healthcare system (Mirilovic, 2022). The biggest tragedy during the Covid-19 pandemic in North Macedonia happened on September 9th. There was a big fire in the Tetovo public hospital, which engulfed one of the prefab Covid-19 hospitals where 14 patients died. Although the competent authorities denied their responsibility, speculations quickly emerged that these temporary hospitals were built without safety procedures in mind. The Tetovo tragedy became another segment of the entire Macedonian disaster in the fight against the Corona virus (Mirilovic, 2022). The fact that the health

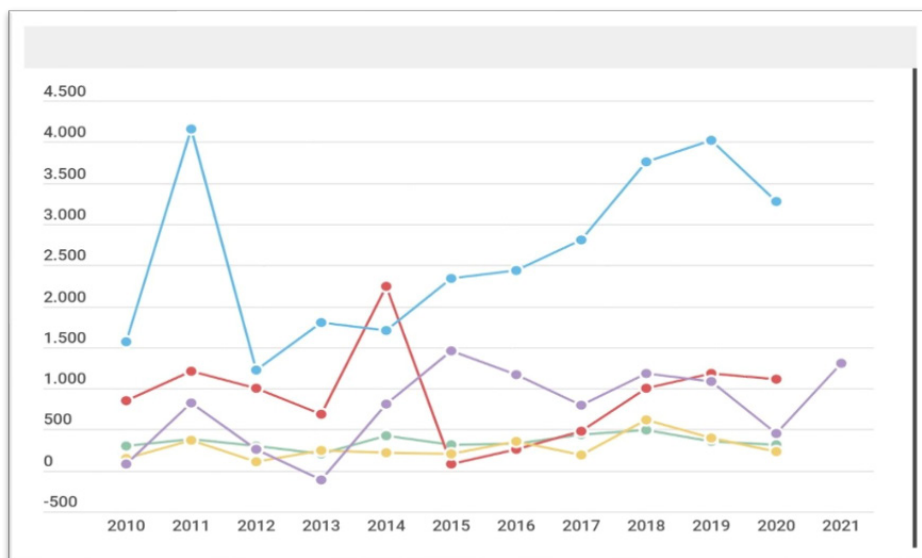
⁶ COVAX is the vaccines pillar of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. The ACT Accelerator is a ground-breaking global collaboration to accelerate the development, production, and equitable access to COVID-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines. COVAX is co-led by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), Gavi and the World Health Organization (WHO), alongside key delivery partner UNICEF. In the Americas, the PAHO Revolving Fund is the recognized procurement agent for COVAX. It aims to accelerate the development and manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines and to guarantee fair and equitable access for every country in the world.

system was unprepared to deal with this pandemic, that the public institutions were unable to react quickly, that there was a late reaction in the process of procuring medical equipment and vaccines and that the organization of work was unprofessional and led to the tragedy in the Tetovo hospital, all prove that North Macedonia could not have gotten the required medical help and support, had it not been a part of the NATO membership, albeit it had not been able to provide its citizens with human security, which turned out to be a phenomenon which is not causally related to the membership with the Alliance.

NORTH MACEDONIA'S ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AFTER THE NATO ACCESSION

The economic standard of the citizens, issues of well-being, and consumer baskets in modern international relations represents one of the key factors in determining the state of human security in a society. In that context, if we assess the level of human security within the Macedonian society from the economic perspective, the results could not be positive, bearing in mind the fact that the economic performance of North Macedonia was still one of the worst in Europe (Nechev & Nikolovski, 2019). When we are talking about the benefits of North Macedonia's membership in NATO, we have to point out that Macedonian political elite have presented NATO membership as an opportunity and chance for attracting foreign direct investment (Makfax, 2019). Politicians in North Macedonia, no matter whether we are talking about those from the left or right on the political scale, justified that thesis by saying that the Republic of North Macedonia would represent a safe, predictable and stable environment, which is one of the key prerequisites for large investors when making decisions about new investments. Based on such claims, Macedonian society, regardless of their ethnicity, have expected an investment boom after the country joined the Alliance, but the reality did not go in such direction. Furthermore, as Gocevski and Gjurovski stated, the theories of security and peace unequivocally indicate that one of the key factors for the promotion and preservation of world peace is precisely raising the level of economic development of countries (Gocevski & Gjurovski, 2017). North Macedonia's accession to NATO happened while being accompanied by the global economy

problems, firstly, due to the pandemic, as well as the processes of global economic restructuring due to new circumstances. Such process has led us to the new reality where the investment flows have recorded a reduced intensity, which was also influenced by the challenges facing developed countries due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The real value of foreign direct investments (FDI) in North Macedonia has significantly dropped in 2020, when compared to 2019. According to the annual report of the National bank of North Macedonia, the country attracted FDI in the value of €171 million in the year before the Covid-19 pandemic, while the amount of FDI in 2020, following Covid-19 pandemic, were almost halved and amounted to €97 million (Tomic, Antonijevic, Pejovic, 2021). According to the available data, North Macedonia has the highest decrease rate in FDI inflows in 2020, where the decrease, compared to 2019, was around 43 per cent for the first three quarters in 2020 (National Bank of Serbia, 2021). The purchasing power of one inhabitant of North Macedonia is only 44 per cent compared to the European average, and in front of it are Serbia with 52 per cent compared to the European average and Montenegro with 61 per cent (Demostat/Danas 2022). According to mentioned data we can state that from the economic perspective North Macedonia, is at the bottom, not only of the European continent, but also of the Western Balkans, and only Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina are behind it (Demostat/Danas, 2022). In fact, human security within Macedonian society is endangered and challenged, not because of the question whether this state is a member or it is not member of NATO Alliance. Many parameters show human security within North Macedonia an open issue because of many other, important, essential issues which are neither directly, nor indirectly connected with NATO membership. Weak public institution framework, high-level corruption, political instability, as well as unsustainable health system — dysfunctional during the Covid-19 pandemic, are all the leading issues North Macedonia is faced with, and which are crucially influencing on the condition of human security in this country.

Graph 1: FDI inflow by country in the region in million EUR

● Bosnia and Herzegovina ● Croatia ● North Macedonia ● Serbia ● Slovenia
 Source: (Vajdić et al., 2022)

According to the data in the table, North Macedonia recorded the lowest growth of foreign direct investments in the previous period, even though it is a country that has become a NATO member state in the meantime, which leads us to open a new research question: Does NATO membership automatically lead to an investment boom for the countries that become a part of the Alliance, or do the investment trends, which are primarily determined by numerous other parameters, depend on internal, that is, national institutional efficiency? Similar challenges, from the economic and financial point of view, North Macedonia is facing in the area of income, which positions it at the bottom in the region. The average monthly net salary in North Macedonia was 31,525 denars (514 euros) in April, according to data from the State Statistics Office (DZS), while at the same time the average salary in Serbia was 74,664 dinars (635 euros), according to data from the Serbian State Statistics Office (Tanjug, 2022). According to the data of the State Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the average monthly net salary paid in the first quarter of 2022 was 1,065 KM (545 euros), which indicates that only Albania has lower average monthly net salary in comparison to North Macedonia.

According to the National Statistics Institute of Albania, the net average salary in Albania during the first quarter of 2022 was 59,242 ALL (493.51 euros) (Akta, 2022). These indicators, such as the condition of health system during Covid-19 pandemic, the unwillingness of national institutions to provide a quick reaction in the extraordinary situations, such as the pandemic, the average monthly salary, the level of foreign direct investments, as well as the purchasing power of the population — all these to indicate that nothing has changed, essentially, in North Macedonia since this country became a full member of NATO. This data also indicates that in North Macedonia nothing has changed in the context of human security. However, this conclusion, as in the case of the fight against the global pandemic, should not mean that membership in NATO is a wrong foreign policy choice of the country. It should rather point towards the fact that the functionality of the internal system, at all levels, determines the solution to challenges and emerging security problems — for the most part, and that membership in NATO does not mean instantaneous solving all the existing problems that North Macedonia was facing and is still facing. We might wonder why this is important. For the most part, it is because many of these problems, especially those connected with human security, indirectly contribute to the fragile security mosaic of this country as well, which is not in a direct correlation with NATO membership.

CONCLUSION

North Macedonia became a full member of NATO at the moment when security challenges have changed their context when it comes to protecting the political sovereignty and territorial integrity of the modern state. “Traditional” security challenges occupy a relatively lower place in the security strategies of states, while modern security challenges, and human security, become key in newer security strategies. In this context, the issues of territorial integrity and political independence are no longer on the top of security agenda of NATO member states, nor in the case of North Macedonia, as the newest member state of the Alliance. In contemporary international relations, NATO member states are facing challenges that directly affect human security. These are challenges that threaten economic and technological systems and structures, challenges such as the pandemics which threatens the public health system, and challenges in

cyberspace that appear invisible, but can make a state system completely non-functional in the case of a potential attack. From that point of view, this paper serves as a case study on the example of North Macedonia to show that membership in NATO, in the context of contemporary security challenges and human security, does not automatically mean the creation of a secure environment.

The connection between economic and political flows, and health crises in contemporary international and domestic processes, play a crucial role in the domain of human security. In this paper we have proved that, in the field of human security, on the example of the Covid-19 pandemic in North Macedonia, this country has not progressed in any way. As a member state of the Alliance, it has received a large amount of material aid and donations in the fight against Covid-19, but it did not manage to improve the current state of human security within the country. Due to the problems within the health system, economic capacity and the low level of public functionality made it impossible for North Macedonia to successfully fight the pandemic. Health aid and donations from NATO member states have facilitated the Macedonian authorities' fight against this global disease, but they have not changed the internal mosaic of human security.

If a state infrastructure creates human security mosaic in a country, including the political, economic and health system within that infrastructure, then, in the case of North Macedonia, it can be concluded that this country does not meet the basic prerequisites for ensuring sustainable human security. From a theoretical point of view, this case study has shown that the integration of small and micro states into collective security systems, as it is North Macedonia, does not automatically mean resolving all security issues and challenges faced by these groups of countries. From a long-term perspective, small and micro states, as well as developing states, enjoy numerous benefits and advantages from full membership in collective security systems, but membership as an official act, as we have proven on the case of North Macedonia, does not automatically contribute to the solution of institutional challenges or health problems, nor economic difficulties which are mostly "responsible" for human security environment within the society from the perspective of their effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. North Macedonia is an authentic case study in this field, not only from the perspective that this country, according the

criteria of “new” security threats, has failed to fulfil secure environment for its citizens even though it is a member-state of NATO, but also to show how much certain small and micro states, including their political elite, are not aware about the newly composed security threats which are directly endangering their citizens, avoiding the question of political sovereignty and territorial integrity.

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