

## INTERNAL SECURITY CHALLENGES OF NORTH MACEDONIA AS A NATO MEMBER STATE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**Abstract:** The role of international organizations in the process of fighting with the Covid-19 pandemic was brought into the question for several reasons: first, certain international organizations did not have capacities for reacting promptly during the pervasive pandemic; second, certain international organizations focused on economic integration did not have even distribution of resources set for fight against pandemic, while the third group of international organizations, focused on security issues, as it is NATO, have had even more questionable role during the pandemic, bearing in mind that they not reallocated bigger part of military spending for medicaments and medical equipment, especially for developing member states such as North Macedonia, but its contribution was mostly symbolic through humanitarian aid. The focus in this paper would be to find an answer to the question whether international organizations which are dealing with security and defence questions are focused only to so-called hard threats or in theirs strategies they have understanding for contemporary threats which is facing modern societies, such as Covid-19 pandemic. North Macedonia NATO membership will be used as a case study in this paper bearing in mind that it is small country with the weak economy capacities and political system in the process of transition. The major goal of the paper would be to present the role of NATO during the Covid-19 pandemic, how this organization has provided assistance to North Macedonia authorities during the pandemic, as a most serious threat for the sustainability of the public institutions, as well as to provide suggestions for new security strategies of NATO in the upcoming period, which would be focused not only to the so-called conventional threats in terms of military power, but also to the civil threats that in contemporary societies could harm the national system even harder than it could be done using military instruments.

**Key words:** NATO, North Macedonia, Covid-19 pandemic, contemporary security threats, strategies.

### Introduction

North Macedonia has become a member state of NATO on March 2020, the period when the Covid-19 pandemic was in the focus globally. Pandemic has had huge influence not only to the existing international order, but it has hit also many developed countries, which were, from the perspective of that period, very well prepared from economic point of view to face with huger crises. But the reality has shown that even developed countries are facing with Covid-19 pandemic on a difficult way bearing in mind that the ongoing economic

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flows were brought into question, because a huge number of citizens were infected, while the majority of societies were facing with the government's measures of isolation, as one of the different instruments for fighting against this disease. Such circumstances have lead international society into new chapter where international mutual support was visible, but not on the level as it was expected in the developing nations. Respectively, poorer states and developing countries were expecting much more assistance from developed ones in the fight against pandemic, while, at the same time, developed countries were primarily focused on their internal problems such as: how to restructure their health system in order to be able to fight with the disease with huge consequences, how to re-establish its economic systems in such circumstances, how to prevent and protect its monetary and financial systems because of the economic negative trends. In such circumstances, very challenging for the whole world, North Macedonia has achieved one of its crucial foreign policy goals - membership in NATO. In such circumstances, very challenging for the whole world, North Macedonia has achieved one of its crucial foreign policy goals - membership in NATO. In that context we have to mention that North Macedonia was the last state that become member of Alliance, but at the same time the first ally which has requested assistance for fight against pandemic, through NATO mechanisms for fight against Covid-19. In fact, from this point of view we could realize that North Macedonia was a NATO member state with the weakest public healthcare system which was brought under question already during the first month since the pandemic has appeared.

But the weakness of healthcare system of North Macedonia is not the point of this paper. It is just a case study through which we would like to prove the thesis that membership in certain international organization does not mean that it automatically leads to resolving long-term internal problems, as well as the key thesis of realists that even in the contemporary globalized world, national states are primarily selfish, still is applicable in the international policy, bearing in mind the way of behaving of states during the fight against the pandemic. That does not mean that states were not part of the international mechanisms established as one additional measure for fight against Covid-19 pandemic, but that we did not see common and synchronized actions on global level.

North Macedonia political elite have presented NATO membership as a strategic goal for that state from the point of securing political independence, territorial integrity, as well as economic prosperity. NATO membership as a key foreign policy goal was presented during the nineties, when this state was in the process of securing its independence, while at the same time on the territory of former Yugoslavia war clashes were also real threat for this small, military and economically weak state. On December 23 1993, the Macedonian Assembly adopted a unanimous (Arnaudov, 2021, pp. 48. op. cit) "Decision on the accession of the Republic of Macedonia to NATO" (Služben vesnik na Republika Makedonija, 1993, pp. 1867. op. cit). But since the moment when Macedonian Assembly adopted Declaration for NATO membership to the moment when North Macedonia has become full member state of NATO has passed almost 30 years. Many regional threats, especially those which were initial concern for Macedonian authorities, such as wars on the territory of the former Yugoslavia were overcome, while the world and the states were faced with new security threats which are not directly connected with territorial integrity and political independence. In that context, North Macedonia has become member of NATO when so-called traditional threats were not on the NATO agenda, while at the same time Macedonian authorities were not fully aware

that world is facing with modern threats which North Macedonia system is not ready to face with.

### **NATO MEMBERSHIP AND FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 IN NORTH MACEDONIA**

There are three key reasons why public healthcare system of North Macedonia failed to manage the Covid-19 pandemic issues, although this country has received significant international support and assistance in the fight against this disease. First, the problem of corruption, especially on the political level, has led the healthcare system of North Macedonia to the phase of unsustainability. Huge level of corruption, which is also one of the biggest complaints in the European Commission Annual Reports, has led this country to the level of impossibility to create stable and reliable healthcare system that could be able to cope with challenges as it was Covid-19 pandemic. Second, political fight on internal level is also one of the key reasons why North Macedonia is not able to create predictable public system, including the healthcare system that would be able to serve to its citizens. Political battle in North Macedonia is on the so-called Machiavelli level, where political representatives are exclusively dedicated how to save their political positions, instead of working on the well-being to its citizens. Such circumstances throughout the years has influenced to different areas of public life in North Macedonia, as well as in the public healthcare system where new capital investments were not applied since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which has contributed to the weakness of the system. In that context, public healthcare system has faced itself unprepared for fight against Covid-19 pandemic, although there were qualified human resources. In contemporary medical systems, it is not possible to fight with actual diseases, no matter of the qualifications of the personnel, if you do not have adequate medical equipment. Third, weak economic performances of North Macedonia has disabled this state to react promptly and to purchase all needed medical equipment for fighting against Covid-19 pandemic. Different financial resources and instruments were allocated to the private sector, as government assistance in the pandemic period, but healthcare system was put aside and it was mostly relied on the foreign and international assistance in financial means, but also in the context of medical assistance.

Because of the serious healthcare situation which was facing North Macedonia, as a consequence of Covid-19 pandemic, authorities in Skopje has requested medical assistance (gloves, protective suits and goggles, as well as surgical masks) from NATO allies (NATO, 2020). Macedonian government had requested medical support through NATO' Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre which has passed the request to NATO Allies and partners, who provide assistance on a bilateral basis. On that occasion, Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, has pointed out that Alliance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, is determined in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic, adding 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 (NATO, 2020). After the request for medical assistance from Macedonian authorities, Hungary was the first member state of NATO which has provided 100.000 protective masks and 5.000 protective suits to Macedonian public healthcare system (NATO, 2020). Similar donations were sent to North Macedonia from Slovenia which has donated 100.000 surgical masks and 100.000 protective masks (NATO, 2020), while Netherlands, at the same time, through an international donation has provided Covid-19 test kits (NATO, 2020). The US Government has also committed 1.1 million

dollars to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 outbreak<sup>41</sup> in North Macedonia (NATO, 2020). From today's view we could conclude that the healthcare system of North Macedonia in the pandemic period has lacked the elementary necessities to fight the Covid-19 pandemic. It leads us also to the conclusion that citizens in North Macedonia were faced with human security challenges on daily basis, bearing in mind the unpreparedness of healthcare system, weak economic performances, as well as unwillingness of political elite to face with the ongoing challenges. According the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies in North Macedonia during the Covid-19 pandemic there were shortcomings in the public health response, especially at the start of the pandemic. "Repurposing health services and facilities was initially a challenge, and during this period capacity for routine health services diminished with appointments cancelled or delayed. Access to basic and preventative health services has remained variable during the pandemic, and there have been disparities between certain types of clinical conditions and regions", is stated in the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies report for North Macedonia (Euro Health Observatory, 2022).

Later, on the assistance basis, North Macedonia has received donation and medical supplies from Norway with a values of 180.000 euros, but also Macedonian healthcare system has used a field hospital donated by mentioned country, allowing it to double the capacities at the Clinic of Infectious Disease in Skopje, which at that period was the largest hospital in North Macedonia in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic (NATO, 2020).

According the NATO data, in April 2020 authorities in Skopje has again requested assistance from the NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre. In that period Poland has sent medical assistance of nearly 70 tonnes of medical supplies to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia, as well as to North Macedonia (NATO, 2020), while military transport aircraft CASA of the Czech Republic has transported one million masks to North Macedonia, also as a medical assistance for fight against Covid-19 pandemic (NATO, 2020). Estonia in that period has also donated medical assistance to Skopje, as a part of wider medical support, including 4.000 pump dispenser bottles of disinfection liquid for hands and 1.000 litres of disinfectant for surfaces, and several hundreds of mattresses, bedding sets and blankets (NATO, 2020). As a part of the Alliance's support to Allies to fight with Covid-19 pandemic, North Macedonia has received 60 ventilators<sup>42</sup>, which was in coordination with the NATO's Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre in response to a request from Macedonian authorities (NATO, 2020). The international medical aid that North Macedonia received already at the beginning of the pandemic represents an evidence that this country did not have basic medical supplies at that time. That issue should certainly not be analysed from the point of view of whether the country is a member of NATO or not, but from the point of view of the unwillingness of the political elite to provide and ensure a functional health system that will be ready to respond to various modern health challenges, bearing in mind that it is also a question about contemporary security challenges that directly and indirectly threaten the overall security of a country. The security challenges of modern countries cannot and should

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<sup>41</sup> Through this assistance, it will support several initiatives, including large-scale testing of COVID-19 and infection prevention and control.

<sup>42</sup> 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.

not be analysed only in the context of classic and “hard” threats, primarily in the military and defence context, but also in the context of threats that bring the functionality of the entire state system into question, such as health challenges, weak economic performance, and political instability. In that context, inefficiency of the healthcare system of North Macedonia during the Covid-19 pandemic has brought into question the human security of Macedonian population, as well as the functionality of economic and public flows due to the huge numbers of infected citizens.

North Macedonia on January 11th 2021 has again requested international assistance from the EADRCC (NATO, 2020). During that period it has received 60 sets of ventilator equipment, donation enabled with the financial contributions by United States, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Czech Republic (NATO, 2020). Slovakia has also donated of four pulmonary ventilators, including masks, hygiene packs, blankets, tents and generators. Also during the March 2021 Macedonian healthcare system, via NATO’s Pandemic Response Stockpile mechanism, has received 6.000 litres of surface disinfectant detergent which was distributed to the different hospitals within North Macedonia (NATO, 2020).

We have to stress out that North Macedonia did not receive Allies’ support during the Covid-19 pandemic only in medical donations and assistance, but also it has signed a document that helps in improving cyber defence cooperation and assistance between NATO and the country’s cyber defenders. In fact, North Macedonia has signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cyber defence cooperation facilitates information-sharing on cyber threats and best practices, helps prevent cyber incidents and will enable Macedonian authorities to increase its resilience to cyber threats (NATO, 2020).

If we are analysing existing data, North Macedonia, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, states from the same Western Balkan region, was in the top ten European countries in terms of the mortality rate from Covid-19 (Filip Mirilović/Vreme, 2022). According to the *Worldometers* data from September 1st 2022, North Macedonia, from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, has registered 340.510 cases, from which 329.434 recovered patients and 9.490 deaths (Wordlometers.info, 2022).

#### Key facts

	North Macedonia	WHO European region
Cumulative cases per 100,000 population	12,907	15,613
Cumulative deaths per 100,000 population	404	190
Persons vaccinated with at least one dose per 100 population	40.8	65.2

Source: WHO COVID Dashboard; Note: Data as of 2 February 2022

Source: *European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies*, „North Macedonia country snapshot: public health agencies and services in the response to COVID-19“, Available from: <https://eurohealthobservatory.who.int/news-room/articles/item/public-health-in-europe-in-times-of-covid-19-country-snapshot-on-the-role-of-public-health-agencies-and-services-in-north-macedonia> (Accessed: August 19 2022)

Covid-19 pandemic in North Macedonia has also led to delays in or cessation of normal provision of health services, especially for people living with chronic conditions. These treatment-sensitive conditions in North Macedonia, according the report of World Health Organization, increase with age and frequently predominate among poor and marginalized

groups at all ages (WHO, 2021). From the perspective of applied measures in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic, North Macedonia has introduced almost the same measures as the other states in the region. Initially Western Balkan states have applied „copy-paste“ mechanism for measures against the Covid-19, but North Macedonia fared the worst, because, according existing data of different international organizations and institutions, this state has had the largest number of infected citizens and deaths in relation the number of citizens.

The only difference between North Macedonia and other neighbouring states in the region of Western Balkans was only in the measures for entering and leaving the country, where state quarantine was obligatory for Macedonian citizens, as well as for foreigners who are entering in North Macedonia (Filip Mirilović/Vreme, 2022). „Family doctors who are normally working on private basis and have contracts with the Public Health Insurance Fund were not prepared to treat these difficult cases infected by Covid-19, so the patients have been left to fend for themselves“, has said full professor of microbiology and parasitology at the Faculty of Medicine in North Macedonia Nikola Panovski explaining the Covid-19 pandemic situation in his country, adding also that Macedonian healthcare system was relatively ready until the moment when the number of hospitalized patients was between 500 and 700 at the states level (Filip Mirilović/Vreme, 2022). One of the biggest issues in the health care system in North Macedonia during pandemic period, according to him, were Covid-19 departments in smaller towns in which public hospitals had never before treated patients who required oxygen and complex laboratory tests. Those departments were opened when the Clinical Centre in Skopje and the City hospital in Skopje, as the biggest hospitals in North Macedonia, were, due to limited capacities, not able to treat more serious patients. The biggest tragedy during the Covid-19 pandemic in North Macedonia has happened in September 9th. There was a big fire in the public hospital Tetovo, which engulfed one of the prefab Covid-19 hospitals where 14 Covid-19 patients died. Although the competent institutions denied their responsibility, speculations quickly emerged that these temporary hospitals were built without safety procedures. The Tetovo tragedy has become another segment of the entire Macedonian disaster in the fight against the Corona virus (Filip Mirilović/Vreme, 2022).

When it is about prevention, respectively, about the vaccination process, North Macedonia has also lagged behind in relation to other European countries, but also in relation to the countries in the immediate region. Macedonian authorities has signed the first agreement on the procurement of the first contingent of vaccines (200.000 doses) February 8<sup>th</sup> 2021 with the Chinese company Sinofarm, but the first contingent of vaccines (4.680 doses) Pfizer were donated by Serbia (Filip Mirilović/Vreme, 2022). In March 2021 the Government of North Macedonia had announced that has ordered 2.5 million doses of vaccines, both through Covax program<sup>43</sup> and through bilateral cooperation with Russia and China and their companies. Until then, only vaccines that were donated from Serbia were in use and were given to the workers in public healthcare system (Filip Mirilović/Vreme, 2022).

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<sup>43</sup> 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.



An ineffective public health system for the fight against the pandemic, the late response of the authorities for the independent action of the state, reliance on external and international support, as well as poor economic preconditions, have greatly contributed to the fact that North Macedonia has a hard time facing the pandemic and thus ranks itself among the countries that fared the worst in that fight. Such a situation has not only threatened public health in the country and its society, but also led to serious security risks, primarily in terms of human security, bearing in mind the limited capacity of the public system at all levels, due to the large number of infected and death cases.

### **POLITICAL INSTABILITY AS AN ADDITIONAL GENERATOR OF UNAPPROPRIATE INSTITUTIONAL ANSWER TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

According to the number of total deaths per million inhabitants from Covid-19 during the pandemic, North Macedonia ranks fifth in the world, according to Worldometer data. In September 2021 in North Macedonia there were 101 deaths from coronavirus per one million inhabitants. Only Georgia had more deaths with 130 deaths from Covid-19 per one million inhabitants. The other countries that are ahead of Macedonia are not states but territories, such as Guadeloupe, French Polynesia, Aruba and St. Maarten (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2021). Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic to September 2021, with 2850 deaths from coronavirus per million inhabitants, North Macedonia is in fifth place in the world. Only Peru, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Gibraltar, which is also not a state, had a higher death rate (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2021). Full professor of microbiology and parasitology at the Faculty of Medicine in Skopje Nikola Panovski says that the data show that 44 percent of those hospitalized because of Covid-19 in North Macedonia die, while that percentage in the world is an average of 17 percent (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2021). In such conditions the Macedonian political elite failed to create a unique strategy to fight the pandemic, regardless of party affiliation, but during the pandemic, when North Macedonia was the worst on the lists of numerous international organizations that analysed how countries are fighting the virus, politicians continued cross-party accusations. In the summer during the high rate of infected citizens in North Macedonia have been also held parliamentary elections. Covid -19 pandemic has already limited the election campaign to TV propaganda messages, social networks and smaller gatherings, and has also had a thematic effect on mutual accusations and blaming due to the latest increase in the number of infected people.

The elections in North Macedonia, after Serbia and Croatia, were the third in the region to be held during the pandemic, and record low turnout was recorded in both (DW, 2020). In that period, on the eve of elections, data from the European Centre for the Prevention and Control of the Spread of Infection ranked North Macedonia among the five European countries with the highest number of infections per 100,000 inhabitants. Although the number of new infections in July is decreasing, it was still four times higher than the European average (DW, 2020). In addition to the standard political accusations about the failure of the fight against the virus, the political campaign further enhanced this type of accusation. Leading opposition party VMRO-DPMNE demands responsibility and calls for the dismissal of the members of the Commission for Infectious Diseases and the immediate establishment of a new one composed of experts and non-party solutions that will not succumb to political influences and will bring an urgent package of measures to protect the health of citizens (Kanal 5 TV, 2020).

But, negative results in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic did not lead North Macedonia to political changes. Ruling SDSM (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia) party in North Macedonia has won on the elections in the, as BBC analyses (BBC, 2020), politically equalized society, so the prime minister of that time Zoran Zaev got the initial advantage in the talks on the formation of the future government.

The main problem in North Macedonia is the lack of political consensus on any state issue. Regardless of whether it is about the country's foreign policy course, internal political decisions, or decisions that directly concern the citizens of that country. The largest parties on the political spectrum of North Macedonia have always had conflicting opinions and this was visible in the past period, which greatly weakened the position of that country in resolving bilateral issues. The best examples in this context are the signing of agreements with Greece and Bulgaria, when the government held formal talks with representatives of the opposition, presenting potential solutions to disputes, while representatives from the opposition refused any essential involvement in the negotiation process, in order to protect their internal political capital and, at the same time, consolidated it. Such a relationship between the government and the opposition in North Macedonia was repeated during the pandemic crisis. Not at any time was there a political consensus on the measures that were in force to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus, nor was there, at least at the marketing level, the agreement of the political elites in the direction of a so-called unified approach when it comes to respecting the measures. Such a relationship between the government and the opposition led to a protest in the capital. Protests were held in Skopje against measures to combat the Covid-19 virus, where demonstrators burned protective masks and demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, Minister of Health Venko Filipce and the entire government. The participants of the protest, which included restaurant owners and those who believe that citizens who do not want to be vaccinated are discriminated, carried banners with the messages: 'My body - God's property', 'My body is my choice', 'Protect the planet', 'Remove the elite', 'Stop forced vaccinations', 'Give me back my freedom, we will overthrow your regime' (Tanjug, 2021). Many of these protests were quietly supported by the Macedonian opposition, using them as a mechanism in the political fight with the government. In fact, Covid-19 pandemic in North Macedonia was also used as a political instrument in the political elite's hands. Politicians from both sides, ruling and opposition, seems have not been aware about the failure of the state system in the fight against Covid-19 and the human security issues that this pandemic has brought to Macedonian population. From the other side, as it is practice in the previous thirty years since the independence of North Macedonia, there were no any political responsibilities for such a huge failure of this country during the pandemic period.

## **ECONOMIC CHALLENGES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

During Covid-19 pandemic North Macedonia is facing a decline of 40% to 65% as compared to 2019. Measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have slowed economic activity, which in turn has begun to negatively impact the budget. Since the beginning of the pandemic a sharp decline of tax revenues by around 25% per day was observed. This translated into a decline of total tax revenues by 11% in March 2020 as compared to the previous year. This is a result of a 17% drop in VAT revenues, 11% in excise revenues and 11% in profit tax



revenues (OECD, 2020, pp.1). Coronavirus pandemic has lead North Macedonia to a notable slowdown in the economy, which is heavily reliant on trade with and investments from the EU (e.g. almost 50% of exports are directed to Germany). Within the domestic markets small and medium size enterprises, manufacturing and tourism sectors was among the most affected. Unemployment rates have raised again and labour market conditions have deteriorated, given that a notable share of the workforce live abroad (around 20% of the population) (OECD, 2020, pp.5). According to the latest data from the State Bureau of Statistics, almost 452,000 people in North Macedonia live below the poverty line. The state debt reached a record level of over 7.1 billion euros, or more than 60 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2022). Due to poor economic performance, North Macedonia also faced the consequences of the pandemic much harder than other countries on the European continent. Although the government took numerous monetary and financial measures during the pandemic, in order to protect the economy and the standard of citizens, the pervasive impact of the pandemic, especially in the export-input sector of the economy, contributed to the further weakening of the Macedonian economy. In its regular semi-annual economic report for the Western Balkans, the World Bank estimates that North Macedonia's economic growth will slow to 2.7 percent in 2022, and that real GDP will reach its pre-pandemic level by the middle of the year. The World Bank expects North Macedonia's fiscal deficit to remain at a high level in 2022, consistent with continued support to firms and households to mitigate the impact of the energy crisis and the crisis related to the war in Ukraine (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2022). In fact, the Macedonian economy did not even get a chance to recover after the all-pervading consequences of the Covid-19, because after the pandemic, that country, like other countries on the European continent, has faced economic challenges due to the Ukrainian war. The price of electricity in North Macedonia increased by 7.4 percent during the pandemic, while the economy in the second quarter of 2020 recorded a drop of 12.7 percent of GDP (Al Jazeera Business, 2020). Observed by sectors, the largest decrease was recorded in the industrial sector of 25 percent, in trade, transport and hospitality 23 percent, while at the same time the decrease in exports amounted to 25 percent, and imports 31 percent. During that period, investments fell by as much as 30 percent. It is estimated that 12,000 citizens lost their jobs in North Macedonia during the first couple of months of the pandemic in the transport sector alone (Al Jazeera Business, 2020).

In fact, the economy of North Macedonia did not get the opportunity to "feel" the economic benefits of NATO membership due to the period of the pandemic, which affected economic flows not only in developing countries, but also in rich countries, where the largest number of investments towards developing countries come from. In a peculiar way the Covid-19 pandemic situation in North Macedonia also contributed to changing the citizens' perception of the benefits they have expected from joining NATO. Acceleration of the investment boom was impossible precisely because of the consequences of the pandemic, but the opposition parties have used it as a political instrument to accuse the authorities of failing to create a favourable economic climate for the arrival of new investors, even after joining NATO. The ruling political elite did not use the moment to explain to its citizens the current situation and why North Macedonia did not so quickly become a "desired" destination for Western investors, while the opposition, in addition to criticizing the management of the pandemic, did not miss the opportunity to accuse the government of poor economic parameters during pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

North Macedonia has faced Covid-19 pandemic with challenges that were very difficult for exceeding, because of their systematic origin. Weak public healthcare system, political instability and weak economic performances were additional generators of the negative management in the pandemic period. NATO membership in that period has helped to authorities in North Macedonia through different types of medical assistance, but it has not influenced to overcoming systematic issues which, in fact, were origin, for the failure during the pandemic. NATO mechanisms for medical assistance have helped to Macedonian healthcare system, but such assistance did not improve the realistic conditions of the system which was not prepared for such pervasive diseases. Despite the numerous donations from NATO allies, but also from other countries, including Serbia, in the fight against Covid-19, North Macedonia has positioned itself at the bottom of the European countries when it comes to the success during the pandemic period. Huge number of death cases as a consequence of Covid-19 virus has shown the problems which is facing healthcare system of North Macedonia. But such negative trends also has shown the political unreadiness to create sustainable healthcare system, but also to manage in such extraordinary situations. At the same time, economic consequences of Covid-19 pandemic has shown that North Macedonia's authorities did not manage to create sustainable environment which would be enough flexible to overcome such conditions. Despite numerous governmental measures for support, in the field of public financing and monetary policies, a huge number of companies which are operating in North Macedonia have been forced to drop down part of their activities, as well as to drop certain number of the workers. From a theoretical point of view, this paper shows that membership in certain international organizations, as it is NATO, does not mean that the internal conditions of the state would be changed immediately, by automatic manner. It is a realistic point of view. Realistic theory of international relations and their claims that states are acting by selfish manner have been confirmed once again during the pandemic period. Developed countries were firstly focused on themselves, on internal level, how to manage pandemic, how to make their healthcare system more efficient and effective, how to get first vaccines. Although they have shown their solidarity through different packages of medical assistance, their focus at the beginning of the pandemic and at the beginning of vaccination period was on them. From the other side, authorities in North Macedonia have relied managing of the pandemic on international support. North Macedonia was the country with the worst results in the pandemic management, with the poorest medical system from the point of equipment and medical resources, with the weakest readiness in the process vaccine procurement. Such a factual situation in North Macedonia shows that membership in NATO does not mean a developed security infrastructure, nor stability for citizens. Just as joining the European Union will not automatically mean a higher standard of living for Macedonian population. Covid-19 pandemic has showed that Macedonian citizens were existentially threatened even though the country was a member of the Alliance. But that does not mean that NATO membership was a wrong strategic decision. Internal systemic reforms are necessary in order to reach the standards that exist in NATO member states, both in the context of security and in the context of public health, which is also part of modern public security. Just as systemic reforms in the conduct of economic policies are also needed in order to reach the economic standard enjoyed by the citizens of the European Union member states. Because only joining the EU,

as an act, will not brought economic renaissance. It is realism in contemporary internal, as well international politics; everything else is just political rhetoric of populist authorities and politicians.

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