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Determinants of Bilateral Cooperation of Small States in Contemporary International Relations: From the Neorealist Perspective of Politics and Security – A Case Study: Serbia and North Macedonia

Abstract

Bilateral relations of small states represent a very limited field in academic debates and research within the science of international relations. In fact, there is a lack of research and relevant debates on what the determinants and factors of bilateral relations are between small states and how much those factors contribute to promoting it on one hand, while, on the other, how much same factors condition that cooperation, and, finally, how much small states independently determine and define their bilateral relations in their foreign policy activities. In this paper, using the example of bilateral relations between Serbia and North Macedonia in the period of the last ten years, the authors will try to answer the following main research question: What is the basis of the bilateral cooperation between Serbia and North Macedonia and what is its perspective? On those grounds, they will also answer the following questions: To what extent is this cooperation conditioned by internal political circumstances in either country; to what extent is this cooperation determined by regional circumstances; how much is it influenced by the so-called “major actors” in international relations; and, finally, to what extent is it actually a consequence of the sovereign decisions of the authorities in Belgrade

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and Skopje? With this methodological order of research questions, from the general to the individual in the theoretical sense through the prism of realists and structural realists, the authors will establish the perspective of bilateral relations between small states within the framework of the actual circumstances of international relations.

Keywords: Bilateral Cooperation, Foreign Policy Action, Neo-structural Realism, Serbia, North Macedonia

Introduction

The relations between Serbia and North Macedonia in the last almost 33 years, since the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), have largely been determined by regional, political, and security-based circumstances, but also by recently-closed bilateral issues regarding the status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archbishopric. Genuine political scientists would not, according to the textbook model, classify the issue of the canonical status of the Macedonian church as a bilateral, interstate issue, but bearing in mind interstate relations in the Balkans and between countries in the post-Yugoslav area as well as the political position enjoyed by church communities in these subjects of international law, it is impossible to ignore the importance of the relations between religious communities when analysing bilateral relations in this area. In the context of the relationship between Serbia and North Macedonia, also bearing in mind the theory that it was the only bilateral challenge between those two neighbours in the post-Yugoslav period, understanding the relationship between the churches greatly contributes to providing not only a more precise understanding about the current level of their bilateral relations, but also about the potential of future relations in the context of development and regional integration. However, the focus of this research is in the understanding of those relations from the perspective of current political, security, and economic circumstances, especially in the political and security context of the last ten years and how they determine relations between Belgrade and Skopje in the context of: cooperation at the political level; coordination on the plan of dealing with modern security challenges and risks; and integration and synchronisation at the economic level with the aim of development and long-term sustainability. The past five years at the time of this writing, i.e., since the joint promotion of the Open Balkans initiative, represent a sustainable case study for an analysis of relations between Serbia and North Macedonia because, in that given period, there are various multi-

permeating determinants that largely determined the intensity of the relations between those two neighbours, but also conditioned something of a mapping of future frameworks for the development of those relations in various domains of established and potential cooperation (Jelisavac Trošić, Arnaudov, 2023, p. 80).

This approach gives the authors the opportunity to contribute to the realist theory itself, which is largely skeptical when it comes to the foreign policy actions of small states, their real impact on regional conditions, and also on interstate relations. Because, in contrast to the established attitude of realists that small and micro states are exclusively dependent on the positions of major powers in their foreign policy, as in the example of cooperation between Serbia and North Macedonia in the past years not only in the domains of economic integration but also political and security cooperation in the current European circumstances, the authors will prove that the independent foreign policy action of small states in modern international relations is possible and realistic, primarily in a tactical and medium-term context instead of its strategic and long-term counterpart.

Bilateral Cooperation in the Light of Neorealism

Bilateral cooperation in contemporary international relations is not always determined solely by the actions of two specific subjects of international law, but represents a kind of complex of wider regional and global circumstances that permeate and largely determine the possibilities and potential of certain bilateral cooperation. In the context of small states, the above is even more emphasised because, if looked at from a realist's point of view, small states are not capable of conducting foreign policy exclusively on their own, and rely to the greatest extent on the position, attitudes, and guidelines of the great powers. If bilateral cooperation in the field of foreign policy is interpreted exclusively in that way when it comes to small states, it will turn out that big actors in international relations, among other things, also determine these relations. More specifically, from the point of view of realists, this would lead observers in the direction that the bilateral cooperation of small states is determined by the security interests of big powers, because the starting point for realists is that the lack of state security is the main problem in international relations (Walt, 2017, p. 1). Thus, realists describe the international system as a field in which self-help is the primary motivation of states, because, as they explain, they must ensure their own security due to the fact that they cannot count on any other agency or actor to do it for them (Walt, 2017, p. 1). If bilateral

relations are analysed in this light, a very simple conclusion will be reached which is largely difficult to defend in contemporary international relations. In other words, the authors will determine that bilateral cooperation, as well as the existing international system, is something of a so-called “forced” reality based exclusively on ensuring state security and actually protecting that national interest. But such a conclusion would not be sustainable, because it is difficult to imagine the concept of cooperation if national security, so selfishly interpreted, is seen as an aureole in relation to the wider context of bilateral and international relations. In fact, this would lead us to complete isolation, in which each actor in international relations would selfishly set their own security interests, thus excluding any cooperation at bilateral and, in general, multilateral levels. Such logic would undoubtedly lead to the pervasive isolation of actors in which international relations as a concept does not exist, and, at the same time, interstate cooperation would be an unknown concept. However, unlike classical realists with their classical understanding of foreign policy action, in the context of the analysis in this paper, a significantly more favourable position is offered by one of the most famous representatives of structural realism, the American political scientist James Rosenau (James N. Rosenau), who, unlike his classical realist predecessors, leaves more room in the understanding of foreign policy action, especially when it comes to small states. Thus, Rosenau, also known as the godfather of comparative foreign policy, presented three possibilities for understanding foreign policy action based on three assumptions: size, the rate of development, and the political system of a particular state (*Small States in World Politics*, 2003, p. 9). On these foundations, Rosenau broke down his possibilities of understanding foreign policy into five categories: the international system; roles (meaning bureaucratic actors); government (the relationship between government representatives); society (public attitudes and national culture); and eccentricity (individual behaviour) (*Small States in World Politics*, 2003, p. 9).

In addition to the mentioned possibilities, assumptions, and categories that Rosenau proposed in order to understand the foreign policy action of state actors in the context of small states and their foreign policy activities, he also presented three questions which are also directly related to the understanding of the foreign policy activism of small entities of international rights. Thus, the authors of this paper posed the essential question: To what extent are small states manipulated by the world system and the actions of others? Then he asked the question: Do the leaders of small countries have the “luxury” to implement the policy as they envisioned it, because they are not seen as important or dangerous

to other countries? Finally, a third question: Which patterns appear at the internal level in small states with very different political, economic, and historical backgrounds? In fact, through the aforementioned three questions and the previously-mentioned factors and starting points, Rosenau does not only offer an understanding of the foreign policy action of small states, but leaves a space that would make impossible a uniform understanding of the role of small states in international relations. In fact, this structural realist provides different approaches and angles for viewing and understanding the foreign policy action of small states on one level, while on the other, through the above questions, it allows researchers to distinguish between different small actors and provides an explanation as to why small states do not always act in the same way in international relations.

Rosenau's explanation, given through two levels, will be used in this paper in the domain of the bilateral action of small states, more specifically through the mapping of factors that, at an internal level, has contributed to the intensification and deepening of certain instances of bilateral cooperation, as well as the mapping of external factors as regards their direct and indirect influence in promoting or relativising concrete bilateral cooperation between two small actors in international relations. In fact, the authors will use the structural realist explanation of international relations at the micro bilateral level using the same factors, i.e., determinants offered by the most prominent scientists of the aforementioned theoretical direction. In this sense, through a specific case study, the authors will go one step further because, in the concluding remarks, they will establish how much so-called "external factors" influence the sectoral management of foreign policy by small states, more specifically on the management of bilateral policy.

Bilateral cooperation as such cannot be viewed in isolation from foreign policy goals and current international relations regardless of how firmly established it is throughout history or, on the other hand, forced into being by newly-created circumstances. As such, in the context of small states, bilateral cooperation represents a significant determining factor of national security, especially when it comes to this format of cooperation between states from the immediate environment because, due to the fact that these states, thanks to their limited capacities and resources, are in a significant security situation, it measures the vulnerable when we talk about not only so-called "traditional" security threats, but also about current threats, challenges, and risks that do not recognise physical interstate borders. In essence, bilateral cooperation in modern international relations should be seen as one sector in the mosaic of comprehensive multilateral

cooperation in which they have a causal effect on each other, especially when it comes to the great powers. That is, perhaps it is most relevant to place that relationship thusly – the bilateral cooperation of large parties yields huge influence on multilateral cooperation in current international relations, and, at the same time, multilateral cooperation to a significant extent. However, this is not always the case, and as a rule, that influence determines the bilateral cooperation of small actors in international relations.

Political Cooperation Between Belgrade and Skopje

In contemporary international relations, it is almost impossible to observe political cooperation between two states in isolation from other domains of interstate relations. In fact, political cooperation has become an umbrella term, often universal, within the framework of which relations between states are explained, described, researched, and analysed. This is perhaps a facilitating circumstance for certain researchers, bearing in mind the possibility that they can deal with numerous topics and issues of bilateral cooperation between two states, all framed in political cooperation, while, on the other hand, such broadly understood political cooperation, as a term, leaves too much insufficiently specified space in which it is difficult to find its essence, especially when it comes to analysis or research in the answers to the questions: On what foundations was this cooperation established? What contributes to its development? What are the causes of stagnation? How much does it depend on foreign/external political actors? Are there common denominators which naturally leads to cooperation? How much does it lead in the direction of deeper integration?

When it comes to the political cooperation between Serbia and North Macedonia, it is important to point out at the very beginning that it is a question of political relations based on a threefold determining track: the historical context of relations between Serbs and Macedonians and the closeness of political elites; regional circumstances; and the foreign policy goals of both sides.

When it comes more specifically to the relationship between Serbs and Macedonians, it is worth mentioning that the citizens of North Macedonia consider Serbia to be their current closest ally among countries according to a survey by the PRESPA Institute made in cooperation with the US Embassy in Skopje. According to this research, among the surveyed citizens of North Macedonia, as many as 38.6% of the respondents consider Serbia to be their greatest ally, followed by the USA at 16.8%, and the European Union at 7.8% (Kosovo Online, 2022). With this research, the

poll's Macedonian participants actually showed that they perceive Serbia as a closer friend even than the strategic partners of their own country (Northern Macedonia) (U.S. Department of State Archive, 2008), i.e., the United States, with which Skopje has a strategic partnership agreement, and also the European Union, representing one of Skopje's key foreign policy goals. Some analysts believe that the consequence of such an attitude of the citizens of North Macedonia is Macedonian statehood, identity, and specialness remaining unchallenged by Belgrade.

From Serbia's perspective, according to the findings of a survey conducted by the Belgrade Institute for European Affairs, North Macedonia is perceived as the third state, behind Hungary and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the friendliest neighbour country to Serbia. According to the data of this research, compared to previous waves, the largest percentage of respondents in May 2023 named Hungary as their friendliest neighbour, with Bosnia and Herzegovina bringing up the rear, while North Macedonia is slowly gaining more and more popularity among respondents in Serbia in the observed period from March 2018 until May 2023 (N1, 2023). In this context, Aleksandar Gudžić points out that Serbia had no ambitions to threaten Macedonian statehood (Kosovo Online, 2022). Beside the mentioned surveys conducted in North Macedonia and Serbia between the populations of both states, it is also important, in the context of good inter-state relations, to point out the legal frameworks between Serbia and North Macedonia which "(...) have committed themselves to actively act on the preservation of the national, religious, linguistic, and cultural identity of national minorities (Serbian, i.e., Macedonian), as well as to take appropriate measures in order to achieve this equality of minorities in all areas of social life. At the same time, it was pointed out that states will not undertake measures aimed at changing ethnic structures nor assimilate any members of national minorities" (Raduški, 2021, p. 65). But, from the other side, university professor Dimitar Mirchev says that in relation to other neighbours, between Belgrade and Skopje there is an imbalance in the cultural presence of Serbian culture in the authors' country (North Macedonia), but that it would be an exaggeration to talk about the so-called "Serbisation" of Macedonian society (Tumanovska, 2021). This is fundamentally important in understanding the relations between political entities within the Western Balkan framework, bearing in mind the instrumentalisation of nationality, ethnicity, and religion in the civil wars on the post-Yugoslav territories.

In the context of understanding the challenges faced by North Macedonia when it comes to the constitutional name of that country in the period from 1991 to 2018, as well as the problematisation of the

Macedonian language and Macedonian identity by Bulgaria and Greece, it is important as a determinant in the interstate relations of Skopje and Belgrade to take into account the fact that Serbia not only accepted the previous constitutional name of the country as the “Republic of Macedonia”, but also accepted the existence of the Macedonian language and the Macedonian nation as separate from other nations and languages on the Balkan Peninsula. In the past thirty plus years, the acceptance of the constitutional name of the then Republic of Macedonia as well as the existence of the Macedonian nation and language by Belgrade carried major importance in understanding why the citizens of North Macedonia, primarily of Macedonian nationality, see Serbia as a sincere ally. However, this seemingly emotional angle of the political relations between Belgrade and Skopje has often been subject to reexamination, primarily as a result of regional circumstances that at certain moments, but also to a large extent, brought the relations between these two countries to the edge of the metaphoric precipice. This was especially emphasised when the unilateral independence of Kosovo was the focus of regional events, especially when it was followed by its recognition by Skopje (Radio Television of Serbia, 2008), and also when it comes to the now-overcome dispute about the canonical status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archdiocese. Although we are talking about secular states, when we talk about Serbia and about North Macedonia, the history of interstate and interethnic relations on the Balkan Peninsula testifies that the church has had a large and frequent influence not only on internal political conditions, but also in the process of determining the foreign policy of the states in this area.

On the other hand, if the relationship between the political leaders of Belgrade and Skopje were to be analysed, one would also find that they are one of the determining factors in the relations between the two countries. Indeed, if we look at it from the point of view of the launching of the Open Balkans initiative, which is to the greatest extent an authentically regional project based on the interests of the states/region, it is also about the mutual trust of the leaders of Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania, who stood firm in representing this initiative. Why are we talking about the mutual trust of those political leaders? Because lived experience after the collapse of the SFRY showed that political trust in the post-Yugoslav area, while being one of the main determining factors of regional cooperation, can also undermine it. Therefore, in the context of relations between Serbia and North Macedonia, it is irresponsible to ignore the friendly relations of the political elites as one of the factors in the comprehensive understanding of the political relations of those

two neighbours. But, in the context of interstate relations, even at the level of wider international relations, the past fifty years have established the importance of relations between political leaders in a comprehensive understanding of international and bilateral relations, because there are numerous examples throughout the history of international relations where good relations between political leaders have greatly determined interstate relations, even when it comes to subjects of international law with a long, war-based past and experience.

However, regional circumstances were not always on the side of good-quality political relations between Serbia and North Macedonia, especially in the context of the unilaterally self-proclaimed and illegal independence of Kosovo, as well as the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. The fact, as the authors have previously stated, is that Skopje officially recognising Kosovo's independence at a given moment contributed to a cooling of relations between the two countries, which have since been repaired, but which created long-term consequences that go beyond the current relations of those two neighbours at all levels, because diametrically-opposed positions regarding the status of Kosovo and Metohija affect the comprehensive relations between Belgrade and Skopje from situation to situation. In fact, and somewhat ironically, the progressive and positive tendencies in the relations between Serbia and North Macedonia always hinge upon potential new disagreements on the issues of the future status of the city of Pristina and its role in the regional framework not only in the context of the European integration of Serbia and North Macedonia and the Western Balkans as a whole, but also in the context of Pristina's positioning in international relations. In the context of the overall mosaic of bilateral relations between Serbia and North Macedonia, in addition to good economic relations primarily based on developed trade relations, there are regional challenges that most often create certain instabilities in both actors. Disagreements between Belgrade and Pristina largely determine the regional security mosaic and, as a consequence, the bilateral relations of actors in the Balkans. In the regional context, Belgrade is alone in its position on Kosovo, which may not directly but indirectly affect the relations with other regional actors. In fact, it is much more difficult for Belgrade to establish stable, sustainable, and predictable regional relations with actors which *de jure* undermines the territorial integrity of Serbia. Although Belgrade does not establish relations with Skopje on those grounds, the disagreements regarding Kosovo's status affect the international positioning of those two actors (Jelisavac Trošić, Arnaudov, 2023).

However, in contrast to the not particularly favourable influence of regional circumstances on the relations between Serbia and North

Macedonia, the strategic foreign policy goal of these two neighbours, i.e., membership in the European Union, essentially represents one of the main common denominators that largely determines the current and upcoming bilateral relations between the two. Understanding European integration as a main common denominator from the foreign policy angle is also perceived by the Macedonian authorities which are claiming that both states, in the context of foreign policy, do not have another alternative (Plusinfo, 2023). In fact, this can be established on the example of the Open Balkans initiative, which is based on the principles of the European Union, whose full membership represents a strategic (Europe, 2020) foreign policy goal for both sides. In addition, the joint appearance of the leaders of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania at the Summit of the European Union and the Western Balkans held in June 2022 testifies to how important European integration is in bilateral cooperation between Belgrade and Skopje. On the eve of the summit, the president of Serbia published a statement, saying that, "...after detailed and comprehensive consultations with associates and members of the governments, the leaders of the three countries made a decision to go to the summit together, and the principles that will represent the main backbone were also agreed upon discussions with numerous officials of the European Union". It was something of a turning point in the classical understanding of contemporary Balkan relations because when it comes to European integration, it was the first time that political leaders had reached an agreement not only on the presence, but also the performance of the EU integration of the Western Balkans at the meeting of the European Union at the highest level. This is precisely why the European Union is not only one of the major foreign policy actors with a pronounced political and economic presence in the Western Balkans, but it is also a determining factor in bilateral cooperation, especially today, in the context of the slow process of European integration of both individual states and the region as a whole.

Contemporary Security Challenges in the Relations Between Belgrade and Skopje

Realists claim that the focus of research on international politics and its constitutive elements should be on discovering the important forces that drive interstate relations (Arnaudov, Ćurčić, 2023, p. 137). In this context, the struggle for power and national interest is the focus of every sovereign state and is the main force that moves the world. In fact, this statement is nothing new, nor is it an epoch-making discovery, because the struggle for

power is framed in the national interests of every sovereign state, from the strongest entities that aspire to global power, to those that are classified as micro and small states whose struggle for power is reflected in regional, micro frameworks and in the immediate environment. However, the struggle for power in contemporary international relations is woven into the concept of international cooperation which, from the point of view of classical realists, would lead in the direction of illogicality, because how is it possible to fight for power with other sovereign actors, and at the same time build the foundations of mutual cooperation? Contemporary researchers of international relations would say that international and bilateral cooperation, as well as international institutional infrastructure, are actually mechanisms and instruments in the hands of sovereign actors that enable the acquisition of power in current international relations, because today's power of a sovereign nation is not based only on military power, resource/economic capacities, diplomatic strength, its presence on the international economic market, the reach of its cultural diplomacy, but also on human resources that influence very small nations and states to have very strong and pronounced capacities in existing international relations. With all that in mind, today we can classify bilateral and strategic partnerships as one of the determinants that contribute to the increase of the power of a sovereign country. Practice in international relations has shown that states that have a large number of partners and so-called "friends", interstate partnerships, alliances, and strategic cooperation, are seen – at certain moments – as actual powers in the international order. This is especially true when it comes to making decisions within the framework of the international institutional infrastructure, where alliances and partnerships have had the greatest influence on what kind of decisions will be adopted.

In the context of security and modern security challenges, risks, and threats, bilateral and multilateral partnerships along with cooperation also play a dominant role in facing, managing, and overcoming existing security phenomena. Bearing in mind the character of the existing security challenges, risks, and threats, it is almost impossible to assume the strength that a sovereign actor should possess today in order to face them in isolation. All-pervading consequences, the lack of recognition of physical borders, and immunity to financial power are only a part of the so-called "invincible" characteristics of modern security risks, challenges, and threats, for which bilateral cooperation has become a minimum basic prerequisite.

When we talk about the relations between Serbia and North Macedonia in the context of contemporary security challenges, the necessity of

cooperation is demonstrated by the most current security challenges and risks faced by those two actors, i.e., the migrant crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and also the pronounced emigration of the states' qualified and working-capable populations. The so-called "Balkan migrant route" is a textbook example of the importance of interstate cooperation in dealing with contemporary threats. And the recent meeting of the ministers of interior affairs of Serbia and North Macedonia attests to how important cooperation in this field is, at which point it should be highlighted that both countries stand on the same path of preventing irregular migration and that the key to solving this problem is firm cooperation and collaboration which is in the interest of the citizens of both countries (Radio-televizija Vojvodine, 2023). The importance of cooperation in the field of migration is evidenced by the first Declaration adopted within the framework of the Open Balkans initiative, which states a willingness to strengthen regional cooperation in the fight against illegal migration (Privredna komora Srbije, 2019, p. 1), which is actually a security risk and a threat that requires bilateral cooperation as the first step towards dealing with it. A similar scenario as regards modern security risks and threats was observed in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. The limitation of medicines and mechanisms for dealing with the global pandemic, as well as the lack of vaccines, also set bilateral and international cooperation as a precondition for dealing with that particular threat. With regard to the example of North Macedonia, this can be established in the simplest way and in the context of the support that the country received not only from NATO and its allies within the framework of this organisation (Arnaudov, 2022, p. 107), but also from Serbia (Arnaudov, 2022, p. 110), at the moment when North Macedonia received the first contingent of vaccines thanks to the friendly bilateral relations between Belgrade and Skopje.

In addition to cooperation in the areas of illegal migration and also in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, Serbia and North Macedonia, together with Albania and within the framework of the Open Balkans initiative, have jointly established mechanisms for dealing with the negative trends of emigration of their qualified and working-age populations. The market, based on the postulates of the four freedoms of the European Union, represents the ultimate goal, i.e., the highest goal of the Open Balkans initiative, but one of the essential and immediate effects of this initiative is precisely the common labour market, which will have a significant impact on the current negative emigrant trends in the medium and long term. Agreements on the conditions for free access to the labour market in the Western Balkans and the interconnection of schemes for the electronic identification of citizens of the Western

Balkans, as well as the Memorandum of Understanding on work permits, signed within the framework of the Open Balkans initiative (Privredna komora Srbije, 2024), represent a formal, legal cornerstone in the joint struggle of Serbia and North Macedonia *and* Albania against the modern migration of the inhabitants of those three countries, which could have major, negative consequences in the long term.

Conclusions

Through the prism of the independent foreign policy action of small states in modern international relations, the authors have reached the conclusion that cooperation between Serbia and North Macedonia is possible and realistic, primarily viewed in the medium term. It is clear that bilateral cooperation in modern international relations is not always determined exclusively by the actions of two specific subjects of international law, but rather represents a kind of complex of wider regional and global circumstances, which permeate and largely determine the possibilities and potentials of certain bilateral cooperation. In the context of small states, in which the authors have observed Serbia and North Macedonia, this is even more emphasised. On the postulates of structural realism, small states do not act nor always participate in international relations in the same way. This is also the case with Serbia and North Macedonia, which did not have the same path after the breakup of the common state, nor were the perspectives of their mutual cooperation a priority for either of them, but in the mix of internal, regional, and world circumstances, both states have found themselves and achieved significant steps towards stabilisation and cooperation.

Bilateral cooperation as such cannot be viewed in isolation from foreign policy goals and current international relations, no matter how firmly established it has been throughout history. As regards the example of Serbia and North Macedonia, in the context of small states, it is clear that bilateral cooperation represents a significant determining factor of political stability and national security as well as economic perspectives. This especially applies to the format of cooperation between countries in the immediate vicinity. The bilateral cooperation of these two countries in recent years has been coloured by political relations based on a threefold determining track: the historical context of the relations between Serbs and Macedonians and the closeness of the political elites; regional circumstances; and the foreign policy and economic goals of both states. After the collapse of the SFRY, the time since has shown that political trust in this area is one of the main determining factors of regional

cooperation, but also something which can undermine it. In this way, the relationship between the political leaders of Belgrade and Skopje is one of the determining factors in relations between the two countries. The fact of the necessity of cooperation has been demonstrated by positive economic trends as well as the joint overcoming of recent crises including the migrant crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and also the pronounced emigration of their qualified and able-bodied populations. These problems can be solved more easily, as experience has already shown, via the strongest possible institutional cooperation and joint efforts, which is in the interest of the citizens of both countries.

We must not lose sight of membership in the European Union, as a strategic foreign policy goal of these two neighbours, which is essentially one of the main common denominators which largely determines both their current and future bilateral relations. The European Union is not only one of the major foreign policy actors with a pronounced political and economic presence in the region, but also a determining factor in bilateral cooperation, especially today in the context of the slow process of European integration both for individual countries and for the region as a whole. Economic integration and convergence with the postulates of the EU is already being observed in several dimensions. The EU, as an entity that Serbia and North Macedonia are planning to join, is an open economy that cannot do without world trade. In this context, strengthening the competitiveness and integration of companies from Serbia and North Macedonia is a complex and important task. Indeed, it is a complex and long-term process that should contribute to the greater ability of companies to successfully compete on the international market. In addition to increasing turnover between the two countries, the long-term goal is to increase exports to the European Union member countries, with which there is already a long-term trade cooperation in certain areas.

The cooperation between Serbia and North Macedonia, as this analysis shows, is conditioned by internal political circumstances determined by regional circumstances and under the influence of the so-called great powers in international relations, and is partly determined by the need for economic cooperation as well as by the sovereign decisions of the leaders of these two countries. This bilateral cooperation, in the previous period, was founded on a series of challenges and the interference of external factors as well as internal turmoil but, to the greatest extent we can evaluate it positively, it has the perspective of both countries' empowerment and the development of concrete projects arising from such relations.

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