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OFFICIAL APOSTOLIC VISIT OF POPE FRANCIS TO REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract: *The official apostolic visit of Pope Francis, leader of the Catholic Church, and one of the most important religious world leaders, to the Republic of North Macedonia had an exceptional significance in both political and organizational sense. In this context, protocol can be viewed as a practical tool of peace, because this profession greatly influences the perception on how one small country can be perceived as organized, democratic and safe. This is why it is needed to systematically (step by step) and thoroughly look into the activities in connection with this historical visit – planning, organizing, coordinating, and implementing activities related to the official visit of Pope Francis to North Macedonia. The key goal of this paper is to plainly explain the official apostolic visit of Pope Francis to our state through the prism of protocol as a practical peace tool. In addition to protocol, a visit of a high-ranking official such as the Pope needs to also be looked at through the context of diplomacy because it is of exceptional importance to point out that a meticulous organization of one such event can have implications over the bilateral relations between North Macedonia and Vatican. The visit of Pope Francis is explained in chronological order, from his arrival all the way to the departure of the Vatican delegation from the Skopje International Airport. This paper also includes an in-depth analysis of all elements of this visit, because such an approach helps puzzle in all the parts of the mosaic into one perfect, harmonic and full composition. A successfully conducted official visit of this rank represents a positive impulse which can greatly benefit the Republic of North Macedonia and its international reputation. Methodologically, this paper is based on none-participation observation in which the author although not part of the observed group conducts a personal observation of the entire course of the official apostolic visit.*

Key words: protocol, diplomacy, Pope Francis, Vatican, Republic of North Macedonia

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Introduction

Planning all aspects of a visit by a high-ranking official represents a form of a test in organizational and coordinative sense. It is imperative that the official part of the program proceeds without any security slips, and that there are no “protocol gaffes” which can be interpreted as lack of respect and dedication towards the visit itself. Protocol developments have many times shown us that there is a very thin line between unplanned and intentional bending of protocol rules and norms. Sometimes protocol actions speak more loudly than any expressed words or speeches. This is exactly why this official visit was approached with utmost seriousness and 100 percent dedication and professionalism. Prior to the official visit of Pope Francis, there was a three-month period of hard labor of the Coordinative Body formed in March, almost exactly three months prior to the official visit. The Coordinative body was led by our ambassador Viktor Dimovski, at the time State Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and it included representatives of the Catholic Church in our state. The Ministry of Interior Affairs was part of this visit through its departments for public safety, department for security detail of distinguished sites and people, departments for security and counter intelligence, traffic police, as well as almost all other members of the Ministry of Interior Affairs. There was involvement of other state services such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Finance, all public service enterprises operating on behalf of the City of Skopje, the Commission for Religious Groups and Communities and the Macedonian state TV enterprise. One of the more important challenges was the media coverage of the visit. The reason behind this is the fact that the visit required a multidimensional coverage that requires a great number of coverage points, constant “live” feed, establishments of on-line access of information regarding the visit itself, as well as establishment of infield capacities to be put at disposal for the media representatives coming from many different countries to cover this event. From the very start, this visit attracted overwhelming interest of media representatives. This was due to the fact that this was the first apostolic visit to North Macedonia as an independent state. Taking into consideration the very low number of employees in the public relation sectors of the executive institutions, it is clear that this was going to be an exceptionally heavy task. “De facto” this paper is a result of practical infield operations, meaning personal experience of the organization of this big and significant event.

1. Welcoming Pope Francis at Skopje International Airport

Tuesday, May 7th of 2019, 08.15 hrs., Skopje International Airport. This was the exact time and place for the start of the long-expected visit of one of the most important world and religious leaders Pope Francis to the Republic of North Macedonia. Protocol rules were met with full professionalism from the very start. Perfect example of this was placing the Macedonian flag and the flag of the State of Vatican on the airplane windows.

In accordance with the common rules and practices, at the airport, Pope Francis was met by the entire state leadership – for the first time in protocol practice such a high-ranking religious statesmen was greeted by the then president of the country George Ivanov and Zoran Zaev, at the time president of the government. The welcoming committee also consisted of Kiro Stojanov, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Church in Macedonia, Bujar Osmani who was Vice President of the Government, Nikola Dimitrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Darijan Sotirov, Director of the Commission for Religious Community Affairs, and Petre Shilegov, the Mayor of Skopje, the capitol of the state.

Prior to the arrival at the airport, there were several hours of preparations, including laying the red carpet and setting up the honor guard of the Ceremonial Guard Battalion of the North Macedonian Army, through which Pope Francis together with President Ivanov and Premier Zaev were supposed to pass. What was uncharacteristic but not inappropriate for the occasion was that at the airport the Pope was met by several hundred students from the elementary schools from the city of Strumica.

Macedonian folklore could be noticed from the very start – traditional food was presented to the high-ranking guest by people dressed in traditional folklore clothing.

As required by the protocol rules, a representative of the welcoming state first had contact with the protocol representative from the visiting side, which in this case was Mauricio Rueda, the chief of the Vatican protocol. Once he has come out of the plane, Pope Francis was met by children chanting his name. After this, the guest was taken with a vehicle to the airport VIP saloon. During the short trip, the Pope's personal security guards provided a diamond shape security detail around the vehicle. What followed were passport checking formalities while the high-ranking guest was kept company by the high-ranking hosting party.

The essence of protocol is to always be one step ahead of everyone, while simultaneously maintaining focus on both the ongoing and the following stage of the visit. A motorcade that included the vehicle transporting Pope Francis was set in place in a timely manner, thus allowing timely departure from the airport and on to the next activities planned to take place during this visit.

It is worth mentioning that the state was at the highest level of security alert, meaning some 3800 police officers were engaged during this visit, including the police helicopter unit. The entire event was broadcast live by the Macedonian national TV station.

The symbolism of the Pope and all that he represents as a spiritual leader of the Catholicism and a religious leader with exceptional humanity and courage could be seen through the amount of interest his visit caused among the residents of Skopje regardless of their religious affiliation. Large numbers of people followed the Pope's motorcade as it moved from the airport to the North Macedonian presidential residence on Vodno.

2. Welcoming Ceremony at the Presidential Palace

The Vodno located Presidential villa was first on the official agenda as part of the visit. There, the Pope was greeted by the Army honor guard and the army orchestra

playing the Vatican hymn. In accordance with the protocol rule, the commander of the honor guard reported before the Pope, followed by symbolic greeting of the state flag and welcoming handshake between the two delegations.

This element marked the end of the welcoming ceremonial part. What followed was the so-called official working portion of the visit. This portion of the visit included the official meeting between the Pope and the president of the state (George Ivanov), during which, in addition to exchanging welcoming words, there was also exchange of welcoming gifts. The same procedure followed during the meeting between the Pope and the Prime Minister of the country (Zoran Zeav).

A so-called tête-à-tête conversation session was followed by speeches from both Pope Francis and President Ivanov, made at the presidential palace hall "The mosaic".

What Pope Francis Stated in His Speech at the Presidential Villa:

This mix of different ethnicities and religious groups managed to achieve long and peaceful coexistence in which the various entities knew how to develop without denying, suppressing, or discriminating the rest, this way achieving amazing level of tolerance. By doing so, this community has given a prime example of peaceful coexistence. All these characteristics are of great importance for this state on its way towards faster integration within the European family of states.

3. Visit to the National Museum “Mother Teresa Memorial House”

The next "stop" on the agenda for the visit of Pope Francis was the Mother Teresa memorial house. Despite the highest possible security coverage, several Macedonian citizens and people from the region were allowed to make contact with the Pope while he was heading towards the memorial house. The downtown area of Skopje was completely fenced off with metal fencing, with only several entry and exit points. This presented a great challenge for both the police and the protocol services.

In accordance with the pre-established protocol activities, once at the Saint Mother Teresa memorial house, Pope Francis was met by several nuns and a small girl with whom he shook hands. Afterwards, the delegation headed towards the monument of Mother Teresa, where Pope Francis placed some flowers accompanied by several nuns. He touched the monument with his hand and bowed down, acknowledging the significance and importance of Mother Teresa for the Vatican and the Catholic Church. While heading towards the Mother Teresa memorial room, Pope Francis used the elevator while the rest of the delegation had to use the stairs. This was done for security reasons. While at the memorial room, the Pope was accompanied only by the heads of the religious communities in the state, as well as the relatives of Saint Mother

Teresa. After conducting a prayer in the memorial room, Pope Francis had a moment with Father Stefan, head of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Reis Ulema, head of the Islamic religious community, Berta Romano–Nikolic, President of the Jewish community, and the niece of Mother Teresa.

After a short talk, Pope Francis and his delegation headed towards the amphitheater located inside the Holy Mother Teresa memorial house, where, in accordance with the pre-determined activities, there was a group of people for whom the Head of the Catholic Church held a mass and caressed some of them over their heads. The mass was also attended by the Cardinals. It is interesting to point out that, at the very beginning of the visit of the memorial house, one of the nuns welcomed the Pope to the birth place of Mother Teresa.

The humanism of Pope Francis once again became evident after the mass, when he allocated some time to meet vulnerable categories of citizens from the state and the region – mothers with small children, poor people, ill people, addicts. What was even more striking was that he shook hands with all of them and handed them pendants with a cross pennant on it. Touched by this act of Pope Francis, people gathered around him started an unplanned and spontaneous chant “Viva Papa, Viva Papa.”

4. Holy Mass at the Macedonia Square

From both security and organizational aspect, one of the more complex moments during the visit was without a doubt the Holy Mass at the Macedonia Square. This act demanded in-depth planning and impeccable implementation. After the visit to the Mother Teresa memorial house, Pope Francis headed towards the Macedonia Square in the downtown area in his “Popemobile”. On the way there, he was accompanied by the Macedonian security detail as well as his Chief of Security. Along the way, the Pope was greeted by many people who had submitted timely requests to enter the fenced off security area during the visit of the Pope.

Shaking hands with bystanders went on throughout the journey from the Mother Teresa memorial house to the Macedonia Square. Church songs could be heard all the way through. In addition to residents from Macedonia, visitors from Croatia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina were also present.

It was agreed that the Pope come and hold mass once everyone has settled in. This is why the high-ranking guest from the Vatican came last. All the area in front of the stage where the Pope was to hold the mass was occupied by guests seated in accordance with a predetermined list. One of the challenges during this stage of the Pope’s visit was setting up the stage and the sound system. The special stage and sound system were compiled in several levels and they were constructed by a specially hired architect. The entire project was taken care of by the service for general and joint affairs within the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia.

Protocol challenges became even greater taking into consideration that the mass at Macedonia Square was attended by about 15.000 citizens, some of whom were invited

in accordance with the protocol pre-séance list, while numerous others managed to electronically make a check in request for attending this big event.

5. Meeting the Priests (and their families) and Other People of Faith

In accordance with the agenda, after the end of the mass at the central square in the capital, in the residence of the Catholic Church in Skopje, Pope Francis held a meeting with the priests and their families, as well as other people of faith. This was followed by a period of small break from activities and time for lunch. Additionally, there was an organized meeting with people from the business sector. Visit to the residence was finished with a photo session with everyone in attendance. The most interesting parts of visits like this are the ones that are unplanned and not included in the agenda. One such moment during this visit was the photograph that the Pope took with everyone who was in charge of the Pope's personal security and to whom the Pope gave symbolic gifts. This was a great honor and demonstration of respect for all police officials.

6. Ecumenical and Interreligious Meeting with the Youth in the Yard of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral

Upon his arrival at the yard of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral, Pope Francis was met by thousands of young people with whom he shook hands. The meeting was opened with a song by Tose Proeski, who was one of Macedonia's greatest musicians and humanitarians. This was followed by a musical program consisting of several musical performances – songs about the love of God, performed by the music group "Agatha" which is part of the Skopje cathedral.

As part of the visit to the cathedral, the Pope also witnessed an implementation of testimonies by young interreligious married couple, after which he gave a young Muslim woman and a young Catholic woman a gift. As part of the program during the stay at the cathedral, there was a ballet performance by the ballet group led by Sonja Zdravkovska – Dzeparovska. The Pope also had short talks and discussion with some of the people in attendance.

Once the Pope has entered the cathedral, Bishop Doctor Kiro Stojanov gave a speech, followed by religious testimonies from other Catholic priests including one by Davor Topic, priest at the Sarajevo archdiocese who at the time was on parochial service in Skopje. It needs to be pointed out that a religious testimony was also given by Nun Efharistinki, coming from the only Macedonian nunnery community of a Byzantine order.

The visit to the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral was the last stop on the visit of Pope Francis to our country, before heading back to the Vatican.

7. Official Farewell and Departure to Rome from the Skopje International Airport

The procedure regarding the departure of the Pope was not much different from the one during his arrival. All protocol rules and procedures were met and fulfilled, including

appropriate setting of the flags of both the Vatican and our state. A Vatican delegation of Cardinals headed straight to the plane, while the Pope, accompanied by President Ivanov and Premier Zaev, slowly passed through the honor guard formation.

Before finally departing, the Pope first shook hands with Bishop Kiro Stojanov, followed by the Cardinals, Viktor Dimovski State Secretary and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Darijan Sotirovski, Director of commission for religious communities, Boris Josifovski, Chief of cabinet of President Ivanov, Petre Shilegov Mayor of Skopje, Bujar Osmani, the Deputy Prime Minister, and all other actively included in the organizing of the visit, including myself. At the very end, the Pope shook hands with President Ivanov and Prime Minister Zaev.

Conclusion

The apostolic visit of Pope Francis to the Republic of North Macedonia, first of its kind since its independence, represents an exceptional diplomatic gesture and marks a serious progress in the relations with the Holy See. Our state and all involved institution were rightly satisfied by the way this visit was planned, organized, and implemented. Having in mind the number of people present at all stops along the Pope's visit to our country, the three-month hard work by the Coordinative Body and the engagement of almost four thousand police officers, it can be safely said that in organizational sense this event surpassed all other official events in terms of their size and complexity. What is even more important is the benefit which the Macedonian state has received from this visit. On the map of the Catholic state, North Macedonia was recognized as a state that has given huge contribution in the spreading of Christian values through the unselfish mission of Mother Teresa. This country also has historic importance in the spreading of the Christianity in Europe, and the creation of an alphabet for the Slavic people by Saint Cyril and Methodius, an act which later helped spread Christian religion in Eastern and Central Europe. Although facts, all these events were never fully realized throughout the Catholicism. All these facts gave this visit additional gravity and gave our country the attention it deserves.

Why the Visit of Pope Francis is Important for our Country?

Well established worldwide portals dedicated to religious topics classified the visit of Pope Francis to North Macedonia and Bulgaria as a "big thing in small package" (Harris, E. (2019). The Pope in Bulgaria, Macedonia may deliver big things in small packages, **article taken from** <https://cruxnow.com/pope-in-bulgaria-and-macedonia/2019/05/pope-in-bulgaria-macedonia-may-deliver-big-things-in-small-packages/>, **dated** 03.04.2020), especially if taking in consideration that both countries have small populations and even smaller number of members of the Catholic Church, and are considered peripheral states which are not of more significant interest for the Vatican. Still this visit showed that the presence of the Catholic Church in these two predominantly orthodox states can have exceptional importance for the development of the Catholic youth and reinforce

their faith. In sociological-political context, the visit to North Macedonia and Bulgaria bears significance because these are two post-socialist states, and although very much different, they both lack a well-established concept of religious freedom.

This visit also has political context because it opened new pages in the relations between the Vatican and these two Balkan states. There is also the social context having in mind that parts of the topics of discussion with the leadership from both countries were migration and poverty. These topics are very important because both countries are on the path of the migratory routes passing through the Balkans, and both countries are some of the poorest ones on the European continent. For North Macedonia, the political importance of the Pope's visit is even greater because in the eyes of its citizens it was perceived as another sign of recognition from the west (Stojanovski, F. 2019). Pope Francis will visit North Macedonia in May, shortly after the presidential elections, **article taken from** <https://globalvoices.org/2019/04/19/pope-francis-will-visit-north-macedonia-in-may-shortly-after-presidential-elections/>, **dated** 02.04.2020). This visit brings additional gravity because it came at a period when North Macedonia was preparing to finally become full member of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) and start talks for membership into the European Union (EU). The apostolic visit of Pope Francis also has exceptional importance because it reaffirmed and fortified the identity of the Macedonian nation at a time when the perception of large number of citizens was that the uniqueness of the Macedonian culture is constantly challenged by its neighbors. The support the Vatican gave to the Macedonian culture could also be seen through the fact that just one month prior to the Pope's visit to North Macedonia, the official portal Vatican News created a special page in Macedonian language, which made this language one of 34 in which this portal can be accessed. This made it possible for the Macedonian in North Macedonia, as well as those living in the diaspora to have access to news about the Holy See and Pope Francis in their native language (Watkins, D. (2019) Vatican News adds Macedonian language to repertoire, **article taken from** <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2019-04/vatican-news-macedonian-language-website.html>, **dated** 02.04.2020).

The religious importance of the visit of the Pope to North Macedonia is also very big because it acknowledged its capital Skopje as the birthplace of Holy Mother Teresa, a fact that brings pride to all residents of this country. For all Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Roma, Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats living in this state, this visit was reaffirmation of the significance that the small Macedonian Catholic community has on the Catholics worldwide, as well as the sacrifices this community and our country in general is making in the fight against poverty, hunger and illnesses.

The religious importance of this visit is even greater if taking into consideration that Macedonian Christians are very proud of their past and history. Historical facts speak that Saint Apostle Paul came to Macedonia to spread Christianity, making the Macedonian nation among the first in Europe to accept Christianity. This is exactly why Macedonia (officially now North Macedonia) is often described as the gateway for spreading of Christianity in Europe (Vangeli, A (2019) North Macedonia social briefing: Pope Francis

in Skopje, China – CEE Institute Weekly Briefing Vol.18, No.3 (MK), 3). This visit is also seen as an acknowledgement of the fact that as part of Byzantium (East Roman Empire), Macedonia gave significant contribution towards the development of literacy and Christian faith among the Slavic nations in Central and Eastern Europe. This is mostly due to the efforts of the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius who set the cornerstone of the Slavic literacy and introduced the Slavic languages in services in churches in the Balkans and all the way up to Moravia (present day Czech Republic).

Through the visit of Pope Francis, all these facts receive recognition for the importance of the development of the Christian identity in North Macedonia and all over the world. Another aspect of the religious significance of this visit is the acknowledgement of the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Ohrid Archdiocese, the biggest church community in North Macedonia, which still fights for its formal recognition, although it has been independent since 1967.

The message coming from the Pope was and always has been one of peace, equality, coexistence, which is something that Macedonian citizens have nurtured for centuries.

The fact that the visit of Pope Francis to this country echoes to this very day in the collective consciousness of the people here is evidenced by officially marking the anniversary of his visit, something that has not been done for any other statesmen or leader of a religious community visiting our state. Commemorating the occasion, in a letter to the Pope, Bishop Kiro Stojanov who was the Pope's host during the visit to our state, stated that "the visit and the messages sent on this occasion will remain deeply embedded in the memories of the people and will serve as guidelines towards the future."

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