

RESHAPING NORTH MACEDONIA: THE NAME CHANGE AND THE PRESPA AGREEMENT

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Abstract: The Balkans have been a significant region in political history. Despite being a small, mountainous country without a coastline, Macedonia's territory has been a significant region throughout history, attracting the attention of major powers due to its strategic location. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991, Macedonia declared its independence. During this period, Greece reacted strongly against the independence. In this context, North Macedonia has been experiencing a name and other crisis. According to Greece, Macedonia doesn't have the territory to use this name, flag, and the national anthem. In addition, they blame to Macedonia with appropriate to Greek cultural values as, Vergina Sun, Alexander the Great. Also, the statue of Alexander the Great built in the center of Skopje, renaming of Skopje airport to "Alexander the Great Airport," and the description of the Thessaloniki Tower on the Macedonian currency have all been perceived as provocative actions by Greece. Greece identifies Macedonia's historical and cultural heritage with its own identity, while the presence of minorities also raises concerns. Additionally, the fact that the preamble of the "Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia" states that the principles of the 1944 ASNOM Declaration are inherited and emphasizes that Macedonians living in the territories of Greece and Bulgaria will be united under the Macedonian Socialist Republic, constitutes one of the main reasons for Greece's concerns. Greece has clearly opposed the use of the name "Macedonia" by rejecting both the existence of the Macedonian minority living within its borders and the recognition of the Macedonian nation. Greece has created international pressure for the resolution of the name issue by blocking Macedonia's NATO and European Union membership process. After the discussions, the Prespa Agreement was signed in 2018 (Gounaris & Kofos, 2019).

Keywords: Macedonia, Greece, Name dispute, Cultural heritage, Identity

Introduction

As North Macedonia undergoes a process of identity construction on the international stage, it has faced numerous challenges. The name crisis that arose following the declaration of independence in 1991 led to serious societal and political polarization within the country. This crisis has profoundly affected not only domestic politics but also international relations. The signing of the Prespa Agreement in 2018, which involved changing the name of Macedonia, marked a critical turning point. With this agreement, a significant step was taken in North Macedonia's international identity construction process. This change has been viewed as part

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of the country's efforts to increase its international recognition and accelerate its integration into the European Union.

However, this change has sparked significant debates not only in international relations but also in domestic politics. Tensions among different ethnic groups and public reactions have added complexity to the process. Therefore, the general problem of the thesis is to comprehensively analyze the effects of the name change on internal political discussions and societal polarization in North Macedonia.

It will be emphasized that the name change is a complex issue that affects not only its legal dimensions but also social and cultural dynamics. The international reactions to this process and North Macedonia's new international position will also be evaluated. Additionally, the reflections of the name change on domestic politics, how it shaped relationships between ethnic groups, and societal perceptions will be discussed. Thus, at the end of the thesis, a comprehensive evaluation of the effects of the name change on the future of North Macedonia will be aimed for. In this context, the process of identity construction in North Macedonia, its place in international relations, and the internal dynamics will be examined concerning the changes brought about by the name change. Therefore, the study aims to shed light on the historical and contemporary issues of North Macedonia.

1. The Macedonia Issue from the Past to the Present

The Macedonia issue is a complex matter that has persisted over a long historical period and has deeply affected the political unity of the Ottoman Empire. This issue occupied Ottoman diplomacy for about 35 years, becoming more pronounced with the rise of nationalist movements in the region, shaped by intertwined geographical, ethnic, and cultural elements (Bucar, 2012). Despite being a small, mountainous country, Macedonia has been one of the most important and strategic areas in the Balkan geography. Due to this strategic position, the Macedonia region has historically attracted the interest of tribes and great powers seeking to establish dominance in the area. The region's strategic location has drawn the attention of both local and international actors, indirectly harming the internal workings of the Ottoman Empire (Miller, 2019). In this context, it has become a factor that threatens the presence of the Ottoman State in the region, going beyond merely being a political issue.

With the rise of Bulgarian nationalism in the 1850s, competition between the Greeks and Bulgarians intensified. Macedonia became the center of this rivalry (Stefanov, 2010). Additionally, Serbs and Greeks opposed to Bulgarian dominance in the region organized into armed bands (Markov, 2016). The Macedonia issue, which began with the Bulgarians' desire to unite Macedonia with Bulgaria, turned into a conflict among the bands and organizations they formed, creating chaos in the region (Markov, 2016). With the spread of nationalism in the Balkans, Bulgarians began demanding that churches conduct services in Bulgarian and the establishment of an independent Bulgarian Church. Although the Greek Patriarchate attempted to prevent this situation, the Ottomans supported the idea and even approved the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate with a decree. The establishment of a separate Bulgarian church from the Greek Patriarchate in the 19th century became a turning point for the Macedonia issue, resulting in confrontations between the Greeks and Bulgarians. As the struggle intensified, national identities overshadowed religious identities, deepening the conflict environment (Bucar, 2011). Although the internal turmoil was suppressed by the

Ottoman Empire, external pressures continued to escalate. This situation paved the way for the Treaty of Ayastefonos. According to the treaty, the independence of Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia needed to be recognized, and compensation was to be paid to Russia. However, the decision made at the congress held in Berlin replaced the Treaty of Ayastefonos with the Berlin Treaty. Nevertheless, as a result of the conflicts, the conditions of the treaty were not adhered to (Stefanov, 2010).

Although stability in the Macedonia region was sought through diplomacy, the issue deepened due to conflicts and band activities. Despite all the measures taken by the Ottoman administration, violence and terrorist incidents in Macedonia did not cease. By the early 20th century, the region faced significant instability and conflict (Markov, 2016). By this time, the Ottoman Empire had a "semi-dependent" appearance, drawing the attention of the Young Turk groups to the region. Young Turks abroad highlighted the existing issue through press and publications. While the conflicts occurring in Macedonia at that time were reported by the publications of the Young Turks, Turkish or Muslim communities living in the region witnessed this environment firsthand. When the ethnic conflicts among groups (Turks, Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs) in Macedonia were combined with the Young Turks' efforts to strengthen central authority, instability in the region increased. While the Young Turks tried to control the nationalist movements in Macedonia, this drew the attention of Balkan countries and actually fueled competition in the region. This tense atmosphere and ethnic conflicts laid the groundwork for the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 (Živanović, 2015).

Indeed, the conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and the Balkan Alliance fundamentally changed the political dynamics in the region. The Macedonia issue, considered the most important reason for the Balkan Wars, eventually transformed from an internal matter of the Ottoman Empire into an international problem. Moreover, until the loss in 1912, it had significant political, social, demographic, and psychological consequences for the Ottomans (Živanović, 2015). The Macedonia issue emerges as an important historical matter not only in terms of the internal dynamics of the Ottoman Empire but also regarding political stability and power balance in the Balkans. Especially from the early 20th century onwards, the Macedonia issue evolved from an internal matter into an international dimension.

1.1. Consequences and Reactions of the Balkan Wars: The Independence Hopes of the Macedonian People

The Macedonian people supported the Balkan Alliance with the hope of gaining independence. During the war, 2,400 Macedonian volunteers joined the Serbian army, demonstrating their support for the alliance in a tangible way (Kostov, 2010). However, at the end of the war, the division of Macedonian territories among the allies left the people's expectations for freedom unfulfilled. The territorial divisions that occurred after the Balkan Wars represented a significant devastation for Macedonia. It has even been stated that the Second Balkan War clearly took on an "occupying, anti-Macedonian character" (Todorova, 2009). Additionally, the Greek army perpetrated atrocities against the Macedonian civilian population, exacerbating the difficulties faced by the Macedonian people. Moreover, Greece's policies regarding Macedonia led to the erosion of ethnic and cultural identities in the region (Vasiliev, 2012). The signing of the Bucharest Treaty after the Second Balkan War interrupted the historical development of the Macedonian people. This treaty also reinforced the occupying

aspect of the Balkan Wars. Greece and Serbia occupied a large part of Macedonia, resulting in an increased influence of Serbia over Macedonia, paving the way for Macedonia to become part of Yugoslavia in the early 20th century (Pavlovic, 2015).

In addition to their dominance in the region, the Greeks claimed to be the former owners of Macedonia, stating that King Philip of Macedonia and Alexander the Great belonged to their history (Ristovski et al., 2008, p. 134). This claim ignited discussions questioning Macedonia's cultural and historical identity. The Greek side attempted to appropriate the region's historical heritage by arguing that Macedonia was part of Ancient Greek culture, leading to historical and cultural conflicts, especially with the Macedonians and other Balkan peoples (Todorova, 2014). Furthermore, these claims regarding Macedonia's historical values resulted in prolonged tension, causing deepening divisions between ethnic identities and national interests in the region (Markov, 2016). This approach by the Greeks further fueled nationalist movements in Macedonia and complicated the political dynamics in the region (Živanović, 2015).

The Balkan Wars resulted in the fragmentation of Macedonia, marking a significant turning point in Macedonian history. Before the wars, Macedonia was under the control of the Ottoman Empire, but it exhibited a notable unity characterized by ethnic diversity. However, as a result of the Balkan Wars, this unity was significantly damaged, and Macedonia was divided among Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria (Katz, 2008). The division of Macedonian territories was not only a change in geographical boundaries but also had profound effects on ethnic and cultural identities. In the post-war period, the political representation of the Macedonian people diminished, and their cultural heritage was threatened. This situation also led the Macedonian people to actively struggle for their "existence." At this point, the Macedonian people sought support both locally and internationally. Their struggles have brought about a process that continues to this day and plays an important role in shaping the ethnic dynamics in the region. The Balkan Wars left lasting effects not only for Macedonia but for the entire Balkans, leading to increased ethnic tensions and the crystallization of national identities in the region. This situation has become one of the fundamental reasons for political instability in the Balkans.

1.2. The Situation of Macedonia After the Balkan Wars: Political Changes and Ethnic Tensions

The Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 led to the loss of the Ottoman Empire's territories in the Balkans. These wars and the subsequent treaties fundamentally changed Macedonia's political map. By the end of the war, Macedonia was divided among Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria, and this division resulted in the reshaping of ethnic and national identities (Ristovski et al., 2008). The changes during this period were not limited to territorial redistribution; they also profoundly affected the social structure of the region. Historically, Macedonia was a region where many ethnic groups and cultures were intertwined, which further highlighted ethnic tensions and identity struggles.

After the Balkan Wars, Serbia occupied the northern and western parts of Macedonia. Over these territories, Serbia implemented various policies to reinforce Serbian identity, creating deep unrest among the Macedonian people. The oppressive policies that Serbia applied to Macedonia, particularly language and education reforms aimed at imposing Serbian

culture, were met with significant backlash from the Macedonians (Živanović, 2015). This process laid the groundwork for the strengthening of Macedonian nationalist movements and the expression of the Macedonian people's expectations for independence.

Macedonian nationalism became more pronounced after the war, and during this period, the defense of national identities and demands for independence also gained strength. Against Serbia's oppressive regime, the Macedonians united to protect their identities and carry out their struggle for independence (Živanović, 2015). During this time, the increase in ethnic conflicts and the escalation of social unrest complicated the political structure in Macedonia. The tensions between different ethnic groups in Macedonia, particularly between Macedonians and Serbs, seriously affected the social fabric of the region.

World War I further complicated the situation in Macedonia. Following the end of the war, the transformation of the Kingdom of Serbia into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1918 reshaped Macedonia's political structure. "The establishment of Yugoslavia accelerated the efforts of the Macedonian people to define their national identities; however, pressures on Macedonian culture and language continued due to Serbia's central authority" (Todorova, 2014). During this period, the cultural and linguistic rights of the Macedonians were severely restricted under Serbian rule, deepening ethnic conflicts.

The establishment of Yugoslavia increased the efforts of Macedonian nationalist movements to define their national identities. During this period, Macedonian nationalism began to seek support internationally, beyond mere resistance (Markov, 2016). Throughout the 1930s, Macedonian nationalist movements engaged in various diplomatic efforts to gain support, particularly from the Western world. In this process, efforts to reconstruct Macedonian identity were a significant step. One of the most important developments during this period was the initiatives taken to preserve the Macedonian language and culture. However, these efforts remained limited due to the pressures of the central government in Yugoslavia.

With Macedonia becoming part of Yugoslavia, tensions among ethnic groups in the region continued. Macedonian nationalists continued their struggle to defend their cultural and linguistic rights against Serbian rule, but the complex power balances and international relations in the region greatly influenced this process. At this point, the most significant factor determining the situation in Macedonia was the power struggles between local and ethnic groups and the interests of great powers in the region (Todorova, 2014).

In conclusion, the period from the Balkan Wars to the establishment of Yugoslavia was a time when political and ethnic dynamics were shaped for Macedonia. While the Macedonian people tried to keep their independence struggle and efforts to preserve their national identities alive, the complex power balances and international relations in the region significantly influenced this process. The political changes and ethnic tensions experienced in Macedonia during this period also impacted future developments in the region.

2. Independent Macedonia and the Challenges

Macedonia, which declared its independence in 1991, has faced various challenges in both domestic and foreign policy. One of the most significant issues in foreign policy has been the "name crisis," which complicated the country's struggle for international recognition. This crisis began with Greece's objection to the use of the name "Macedonia," fearing that it would strengthen historical and cultural claims over the region of the same name located in Greece

and the Ancient Macedonian Kingdom. This situation created a major obstacle in Macedonia's fight for international recognition and delayed its acknowledgment in various international platforms, particularly the United Nations (Hutchings, 2008).

The name crisis led to serious isolation for Macedonia in foreign policy and negatively impacted the country's processes for NATO and European Union membership. Greece made various diplomatic efforts to prevent Macedonia from joining NATO and the EU under the name "Macedonia." This process continued until the late 1990s, occasionally causing tensions and diplomatic crises between the two countries. Although Macedonia attempted to resolve the issue by agreeing to the name "North Macedonia" in 2018, the name crisis remains one of the most significant barriers in the country's international relations.

After independence, competition among nationalist groups in Macedonia increased. Nationalists claiming rights in Aegean and Pirin Macedonia due to the goal of uniting Macedonians clashed with nationalists embracing the ideas of "Greater Greece" and "Greater Bulgaria" (Ristovska, 2010). This situation heightened ethnic tensions in the region and deepened discussions about national identity.

Internal political tensions in Macedonia have further escalated, especially with the increase in the Albanian population. The growth of the Albanian population, parallel to changes in Macedonia's ethnic structure, led to more demands for rights from Albanians and discussions about whether these demands would be met. Macedonian nationalism, advocating the idea that "Macedonia belongs to the Macedonians," resisted Albanian demands, which increased ethnic tensions. Albanians sought to have a greater say in the political arena with demands for cultural rights, linguistic rights, and autonomy (Koliqi, 2004). These tensions peaked with the armed conflicts in 2001.

In 2001, the increasing demands for rights from the Albanian population in Macedonia and their rejection by the Macedonians led to armed conflicts. During this period, clashes initiated by Albanian insurgents against the Macedonian government further fueled ethnic discrimination and posed a risk of turning into a civil war. These conflicts threatened the national unity of the country while also leading to a search for more solutions to Albanian demands. Following the conflicts in 2001, a peace agreement known as the Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed, which aimed to grant more rights to Albanians. The Ohrid Agreement secured the political rights of Albanians while initiating a process of change in Macedonia's ethnic structure. However, this process increased the complexity of the country's ethnic and political structure and, combined with ongoing discussions about national identity and culture, reinforced the internal political instability in Macedonia (Hale, 2009).

After independence, Macedonia also faced an economic crisis. The crisis and social unrest triggered by the conflicts negatively impacted the well-being of society. As a result, the post-independence period for Macedonia has been a painful process due to the challenges it faced in both domestic and foreign policy. These challenges have directly influenced the country's international relations, economic development, and social cohesion.

2.1. Declaration of Independence and the Reactions

It is a fact that Macedonia faced various international reactions following its declaration of independence in 1991. While many countries quickly recognized Macedonia's independence, Greece, in particular, raised serious objections to this process. Greece viewed

the use of the name “Macedonia” as a threat to its national interests due to historical and cultural ties and brought this issue to the international arena. The Greek government’s objections were not limited to the name itself; they also led to a contentious debate regarding Macedonia’s historical identity and cultural heritage alongside its declaration of independence.

Greek Foreign Minister Karolos Papoulias characterized the use of the name Macedonia as an appropriation of Greek culture and history. He argued that Macedonia’s use of the name would severely damage Greece’s historical and cultural ties to the Ancient Macedonian Kingdom, applying diplomatic pressure on countries that were reluctant to recognize Macedonia’s independence. Greece’s reaction complicated Macedonia’s struggle for international recognition and created significant obstacles in its processes for NATO and European Union membership.

Macedonia’s struggle for recognition during this period transformed from a battle over the name of a state into a larger discussion about national identity and ethnic belonging. The Macedonian people argued that using the name “Macedonia,” which Greece defended based on its historical ties and cultural heritage, constituted a violation of their historical identity. Greece’s stance heightened tensions among ethnic groups in the region and deepened the identity struggle between Albanians and Macedonians living in Macedonia.

Due to Greece’s objections, Macedonia faced challenges in its membership processes for the United Nations, NATO, and the European Union. The United Nations recognized Macedonia’s independence on the condition that the country’s official name be changed to the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” (FYROM). This requirement complicated Macedonia’s fight for international recognition. Although Macedonia joined the United Nations in 1993, the name issue rendered the process contentious.

The name crisis that Macedonia experienced also affected its NATO membership processes. Greece employed various diplomatic means to obstruct Macedonia’s accession, particularly exercising its veto power at EU and NATO summits. NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana noted in 1999 that Macedonia’s membership process was “crucial for stability in the region” (Solana, 1999). Despite membership prospects being opened for Macedonia at the 2008 NATO Summit, Greece’s objections stalled the process, demanding a change to Macedonia’s official name.

Macedonia achieved candidate status for EU membership in 2005. However, Greece’s objections complicated the negotiation processes. Throughout this period, the European Union expected progress in Macedonia’s reform efforts, particularly regarding the rule of law, human rights, and the strengthening of democratic institutions. Nevertheless, the name crisis delayed Macedonia’s path to EU membership (Krasniqi, 2008).

3. The Road to the Prespa Agreement

At the end of the 19th century, the Central Rumelia Region, under Ottoman rule, was referred to as “Macedonia,” despite lacking a distinct geographical integrity. During this period, a Slav-Orthodox group known as the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO) initiated an independence movement in this region called Macedonia. The organization’s primary goal was to achieve political independence for these lands (Todorova, 1997). After the Balkan Wars, the region was divided among Balkan states, and Slav-Orthodox

communities identifying themselves as “Macedonian” continued to live there. With the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, Macedonia declared its independence and identified itself as the successor of ancient Macedonia. In this context, it attempted to construct its national identity based on the symbols of the ancient Macedonian civilization. However, Greece contended that symbols such as the Vergina Sun and Alexander the Great belonged to Greek culture (Danforth, 1995; Rossos, 2008). This situation sparked reactions not only from Greece but also from other neighboring countries (Rossos, 2008). The constitution adopted during the declaration of independence included provisions aimed at protecting the cultural rights of Macedonians living in neighboring countries. However, these provisions were perceived by Greece as a threat to its territorial integrity, leading to serious diplomatic crises (Koneska, 2019). Derin describes this crisis as follows: “The statement in the 1944 ASNOM Declaration that the principles of the declaration are inherited and the emphasis on uniting Macedonians living in Greece and Bulgaria under the Macedonian Socialist Republic constitute one of the main reasons for Greece’s concerns. From this perspective, Greek Macedonia appears to be one of the targets of the Republic of Macedonia’s expansionist ambitions” (Derin, 2019). Greece objected to Articles 3 and 49 of Macedonia’s constitution, arguing that these articles contained threats to its territorial integrity and national identity. Article 3 states that Macedonia’s territorial integrity is inviolable, while Article 49 includes a commitment to protect the rights and status of Macedonians living abroad. Greece interpreted these statements as a potential claim to the territory of Greek Macedonia and as supporting an expansionist idea of “Greater Macedonia.” Furthermore, the Vergina Sun symbol on the Macedonian flag and symbols from Thessaloniki used on some banknotes were perceived by Greece as threats to its historical and cultural heritage (Güner, 2020; KLU Kadam, 2020). Greece’s rigid stance negatively affected Macedonia in many ways. Due to Greece’s veto, Macedonia was unable to join international organizations for a long time. “In 1993, Greece did not object to the country’s acceptance into the UN under the name ‘Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’ (FYROM), but two years later, through a temporary agreement, it recognized the country by that name” (Derin, 2019). Negotiations between the two states continued until 1995. However, despite the discussions, Greece did not change its opposing stance. To reduce tensions, Macedonia made several changes, such as amending its constitution to alleviate concerns about territorial claims. In this context, Article 3 was amended to state that “the Republic of Macedonia has no claims to the territories of neighboring countries” (CRM, 11). The amendment to Article 49 states that Macedonia will not interfere in the sovereignty rights and internal affairs of neighboring countries (CRM, 26). Although Macedonia made changes to its flag design, it did not alter its national identity or official name (Derin, 2019). These changes allowed Greece to commit not to veto FYROM in international organizations. Additionally, Greece agreed to open the Port of Thessaloniki, thus ending the embargo. In conclusion, the results of the temporary agreement in 1995 facilitated Macedonia’s international recognition but did not resolve the name issue between the two countries. While the agreement improved Macedonia’s international recognition and trade, the obstacles in relations with Greece and the lack of regional economic cooperation hindered the full growth of its economy. Greece’s opposing stance limited Macedonia’s participation in a broader international economic system and obstructed its economic stability. All these measures provided only a temporary solution, proving unsatisfactory for both sides, and negotiations continued for years (Koneska, 2019). Between 2006 and 2017, the nationalist policies of

the Macedonian National Democratic Union and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (DPMNE-VMRO) significantly influenced the country's politics (Sancar, 2017, p. 85). Although the nationalist party stated that it supported Euro-Atlantic integration and began negotiations with Greece, the party's reluctance to change the name led to inconclusive negotiations (Balkan Research Center, 2016, p. 124). Additionally, architectural projects like "Skopje 2014," which emphasized Macedonian identity, further strained relations with Greece (Sancar, 2017, p. 90). The nationalist policies of the ruling party DPMNE-VMRO faced frequent criticism from the opposition party, the Macedonian Social Democratic Union (SDSM). These nationalist policies created dissatisfaction, particularly among minority groups, increasing ethnic tensions and becoming a source of criticism (Petrov, 2016, p. 48). In the general elections held in Macedonia in 2016, a fierce competition occurred between the Nationalist Party and the Social Democrats. The Macedonian Social Democratic Union came to power with the support of Albanian deputies. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev expressed a different approach from previous administrations, stating that relations with neighboring countries would be improved, particularly that the name crisis with Greece would be resolved and integration with organizations like the European Union and NATO would be achieved (INSAMER, 2018; AVIM, 2018). After taking office, Zaev began discussions with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras. As a result of Zaev's solution-oriented approach, he changed the ancient Macedonian names given to certain places in Skopje during the previous government's term. It can also be said that Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras adopted a constructive attitude to resolve the issue. Tsipras stated that a way out of the "vicious cycle of nationalism" must be found in a region that has suffered from nationalist rhetoric and bilateral disputes for a long time (Derin, 2019). However, the rejection of the agreement by nationalists in the coalition in Greece and the Independent Greeks Party sparked reactions among the Greek public. Tsipras faced difficulties in defending the agreement (DW, 2024; Balkan Insight, 2020). Nevertheless, both leaders exhibited diplomatic and solution-oriented attitudes towards resolving issues. During this process, international actors such as the European Union (EU) and NATO also tried to guide the parties toward reconciliation. In particular, the EU's integration efforts in the Western Balkans supported the acceleration of negotiations.

3.1. Conditions of the Prespa Agreement

The approach of North Macedonia's Prime Minister Zoran Zaev to the naming crisis with Greece significantly differs from the "securitization" policies of the nationalist governments that preceded him. Notably, Zaev's strategy has demonstrated a willingness to address the issue through a "de-securitization" approach (Zaev, 2018). This marks a pivotal moment in North Macedonia's political history. Zaev proposed to treat this issue not as a security threat but as an economic and diplomatic matter. According to Zaev, resolving the naming issue with Greece would not only improve relations between the two countries but also be a critical step for North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration. This strategy has led to significant changes in the country's national security and foreign policy perspective.

The foundation of Zaev's approach is based on the serious damages resulting from Macedonia's economic crisis, particularly due to the embargoes imposed by Greece. Greece's embargoes have not only slowed Macedonia's economic growth but have also narrowed the country's maneuvering space in foreign policy (Smith, 2017). The embargoes, particularly the

restrictions on foreign trade, have created challenges in the labor market and increased unemployment rates in the country. Zaev emphasized that these economic pressures also posed a threat to national security and thus stated that changing the name was a prerequisite for the country's international integration. He also holds a strong belief that the processes of EU membership and NATO integration would gain momentum with the resolution of this issue.

The Prespa Agreement has been recorded as a historic solution to the long-standing naming issue between North Macedonia and Greece. This agreement not only normalized diplomatic relations between the two countries but also constituted a critical step in securing regional stability. The most significant provision is the change of the name "Macedonia" to "North Macedonia" (Balkan Insight, 2020). This change encompasses not only the name of the state but also all official documents and the country's international recognition. This situation has allowed North Macedonia to become more visible in the international arena and helped it achieve a stronger position in international relations. Although this may seem like a loss of identity for some, it has been an important example of compromise for the international community.

The Prespa Agreement also accepted the recognition of the ethnic identity of North Macedonian citizens as "Macedonian," which includes the acknowledgment of the language and culture as Macedonian. However, it has been emphasized that this ethnic identification will only apply to citizens of North Macedonia. Since Greece does not accept an ethnically "Macedonian" people, this definition is limited to North Macedonia and imposes no ethnic definition on Greece (DW, 2024). This situation ensures a clear delineation of borders and cultural sensitivities between the two countries and prevents possible misunderstandings.

The use of the expression "Macedonian/North Macedonian citizen" in passports signifies an important step in identity definition. This situation facilitates a more accurate representation of both the state's name and the ethnic identity of its people on the international stage. In English, the term "Macedonian" is used to refer to both ethnic identity and the official language (Balkan Insight, 2020). This decision is a strategic step towards balancing the national interests of both North Macedonia and Greece.

The agreement commits both countries to respect each other's historical and cultural heritage. In this context, it is understood that some symbols and monuments in North Macedonia need to be altered. Due to Greece's sensitivity towards such symbolism, the Prespa Agreement foresees specific steps to change these symbols or assign new meanings to them (DW, 2024). This process plays a critical role in fostering better understanding between peoples and overcoming negative patterns from the past.

Based on the principles of border security, cooperation, and mutual respect, this agreement aims for closer military and diplomatic cooperation between the two countries. This will not only contribute to the development of relations between the two countries but also to the overall stability in the Western Balkans. The agreement aims to improve the security environment in the region and to pursue a foreign policy compatible with international institutions such as NATO and the European Union (Balkan Insight, 2020).

The acceptance of the Prespa Agreement was made possible by its ratification in the parliaments of both North Macedonia and Greece. This process underwent a challenging period of political negotiations. The opposition from certain political groups in Greece against the agreement and their attempts to prevent its implementation demonstrate the difficult

political context in which the agreement emerged (DW, 2024). However, due to the diplomatic will of both countries and the influence of international pressures, this challenging process came to an end, and the agreement was successfully implemented.

The Prespa Agreement is a critical step towards increasing stability in the region. With the support of the European Union and NATO, North Macedonia's integration into European and Atlantic institutions has accelerated thanks to this agreement. This has promoted not only relations between the two countries but also broader security and economic cooperation in the region. In this sense, the Prespa Agreement has been an important step towards consolidating peace in the Western Balkans (Balkan Insight, 2020).

In conclusion, the Prespa Agreement has provided a solution that resolves the long-standing tension between North Macedonia and Greece while protecting the national interests of both countries and being generally well-received by the international community. Among the tangible successes of this agreement are North Macedonia's accession to NATO and the commencement of negotiations with the European Union. The Prespa Agreement has shaped not only diplomatic relations between the two countries but also the overall geopolitical balance in the Western Balkans.

The Prespa Agreement has elicited different reactions in both Greece and North Macedonia. The referendum process held in North Macedonia was a tumultuous period for the country's politics. The referendum led to a deep division among the public. The participation rate remaining at 37% also brought discussions about the legitimacy of the process (Balkan Insight, 2020). The opposition boycotted the referendum, describing this process as a "loss of national identity" and leading large-scale protests. Nevertheless, the European Union and the United States viewed the referendum and the Prespa Agreement as a critical step for North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration and thus strongly supported the agreement (DW, 2024). External pressures further complicated the process. However, the stabilization process following the referendum was achieved thanks to the international support and determined stance of the Zaev government, and the political balances in the country were gradually reestablished.

While the agreement was regarded as a historic success by the Zaev government, it was seen as a loss of identity and sovereignty by nationalist opposition parties. The opposition argued that changing the country's name would weaken national identity. The agreement also sparked widespread protests among the public, leading to intense criticism of the Zaev government (Balkan Insight, 2020).

On the Greek side, while the agreement was defined as a foreign policy success for the Tsipras government, particularly the New Democracy Party and nationalist groups reacted against the provisions recognizing North Macedonia's "Macedonian" ethnic identity. During the acceptance process of the agreement in Greece, large-scale protests and violent incidents occurred. A portion of the Greek public viewed the agreement as a national concession (DW, 2024). The reactions in both countries can be said to touch upon the deep historical and cultural sensitivities in the region.

3.2. Reconstruction of Macedonian Identity with the Prespa Agreement

On June 17, 2018, the Prespa Agreement was signed by the foreign ministers of the two countries (Derin, 2019). However, for the agreement to come into effect, it needed to pass

through certain stages. Initially, it had to be approved by the Macedonian parliament. The Prespa Agreement was accepted on June 20, 2018, with the approval of 69 deputies (Kılıç, 2020). However, President George Ivanov vetoed the agreement, citing its unconstitutionality. Consequently, after the Macedonian Parliament approved the agreement for the second time in early July 2019, the process for a referendum was initiated.

In the referendum held on September 30, 2018, approximately 90% of votes were in favor; however, the referendum was deemed invalid due to a participation rate below 50%. The low turnout was influenced by the nationalist opposition party VMRO-DPMNE's boycott propaganda and Ivanov's reaction. Nevertheless, the turnout not exceeding 50% did not prevent the parliamentary voting of the agreement. Despite all protests and reactions, the Prespa Agreement was approved in January 2019 with 81 votes from 120 deputies in Parliament (Derin, 2019).

The intensity of protests by nationalist factions both before and after the referendum has drawn attention. Nationalist parties and some civil society organizations labeled the Prespa Agreement as a "compromise on identity" and called the public to the streets. In many cities, especially Skopje, rallies emphasized that the use of the name "North" constituted a historical injustice and would weaken Macedonian identity (Petrovski, 2019, p. 50). Slogans such as "Who gives you the right to negotiate our name and identity? Our name is Macedonia" and "NATO, get out of Macedonia; our identity is not for sale" summarized the nationalist perspective.

From another viewpoint, the name change brought by the Prespa Agreement is seen as a strategic move serving North Macedonia's international interests. According to this perspective, adopting the name "North Macedonia" has removed obstacles in the country's NATO and EU membership processes, allowing it to achieve a stronger position in the regional and international arena (Kılıç, 2020, p. 47). This perspective argues that the name change does not have a direct impact on national identity; rather, it opens doors for global integration while preserving Macedonia's cultural and historical values. The agreement has contributed to normalizing economic and political relations by resolving the long-standing naming crisis with Greece and has encouraged an increase in foreign investments.

According to this supportive viewpoint, identity is defined not only by name but also by broader elements such as cultural heritage, language, and history. Therefore, the name change has strengthened Macedonia's international recognition and played a positive role in the reconstruction of a new identity rather than undermining it. Additionally, the support from the international community for the Prespa Agreement has allowed North Macedonia to expand its global cooperation networks (Petrovski, 2019, p. 52). This view emphasizes that identity has a dynamic and changeable structure, capable of being reshaped in accordance with international and regional contexts. Thus, the name change is considered a strategic step in Macedonia's modern identity construction rather than a concession (Ivanova, 2020, p. 126).

Professor Ratko Duev from Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Macedonia evaluated the impact of the Prespa Agreement on identity construction with the following words: "As stated in the Prespa Agreement, Macedonian identity is preserved. However, the main issue is the territorial question; this is a matter I have emphasized before. The agreement will not change our identity because the Macedonian language and culture will continue to be preserved. Moving beyond an academic perspective, I would like to share a personal anecdote.

I come from a family with roots in the Drama region. For example, my grandfather identified himself as a 'Macedonian Greek.' However, I would tell him, 'You must choose; you cannot be both Macedonian and Greek.' My grandfather would respond, 'I was born in Macedonia, so how can I not be Macedonian?' My grandmother is also from Drama. In this case, birthplace becomes an important criterion. So who am I? Greek or Macedonian? This identity issue is deeply rooted in the folklore, traditions, and national heritage of the people, making it unchangeable."

While the Prespa Agreement attempts to redefine Macedonian identity by adding "North," I liken this situation to the experiences of North and South Korea. Both sides share the same population, only politically divided. However, I do not think it will have a similarly significant effect in our case. Moreover, the main issue is the EU accession process in our countries. Many Macedonians are trying to obtain Bulgarian passports to travel and work freely in Europe. This situation is largely shaped by job and youth opportunities. Therefore, I do not believe these developments will negatively affect national identity. Some countries may prefer to change the names of Macedonia or Macedonian in official documents. However, in everyday language and on the internet, this identity has been clearly defined and established (Interview with Prof. Ratko Duev on October 5, 2024).

Conclusion

The Prespa Agreement presents an important example of how the complex relationships between national identity, nationalism, and foreign policy are shaped, beyond being merely a name change agreement. National identity reflects the social structure, historical background, and cultural heritage of a state, and it is a significant factor influencing how people define themselves (Smith, 2019). Nationalism emerges as an important movement for the strengthening, preservation, and sometimes defense of this identity against external challenges (Anderson, 2018). While nationalism has profound effects on national identity, it also plays a decisive role in foreign policy processes (Hall, 2017). The effects of nationalism on national identity can shape attitudes in foreign policy, and foreign policy can take a specific direction fueled by nationalist discourses (Smith, 2019; Kostakis, 2020).

The agreement not only facilitated the improvement of North Macedonia's relations with Greece but also allowed for the overcoming of a critical threshold in the process of European Union membership. The goal of integration into the European Union has increased the role of external factors in the construction of national identity in the country, leading to a shift from nationalist rhetoric to a more pragmatic and conciliatory approach (Smith, 2019). The European integration process has been seen as an opportunity for North Macedonia to achieve economic development, political stability, and international legitimacy; thus, the name change has emerged as a pragmatic foreign policy move.

On the other hand, the United States (US) can be said to view the agreement as an opportunity to balance Russian influence in the Western Balkans and strengthen NATO's presence in the region. The US has supported North Macedonia's NATO membership, ensuring the process concluded swiftly. Conversely, Russia has adopted a critical approach to the Prespa Agreement, viewing it as part of the West's efforts to increase its influence in the Balkans. This stance aligns with Russia's strategy of continuing to support its traditional allies in the region (Johnson & Williams, 2020).

Turkey, considering its historical ties in the region, has supported the process following North Macedonia's name change and viewed the agreement as an opportunity for further development of relations between the two countries. China has adopted a more neutral stance regarding economic investments in the region and has refrained from developing a direct policy towards this agreement. These differing attitudes demonstrate that the Prespa Agreement is a diplomatic move that resonates not only regionally but also globally (Brown, 2019).

Bulgaria has criticized North Macedonia's claims regarding its historical and cultural identity, particularly promoting the thesis that the Macedonian language is a dialect of Bulgarian, later vetoing EU negotiations (Markova, 2020). Greece, as a primary party to the agreement, has resolved the naming crisis and supported NATO and EU integration processes, but has faced internal political pressures and nationalist criticisms (Rossos, 2018). Albania has supported the agreement in terms of expanding the rights of the Albanian community in North Macedonia and viewed it as an important step for regional cooperation (Brown, 2019). The positions of these countries demonstrate that the Prespa Agreement is an effective diplomatic step not only between the two parties but also across the entire region.

The success of the Prespa Agreement serves as an example that allows us to understand the interaction between national identity and foreign policy. Nationalism has a strong influence on national identity and plays a decisive role in foreign policy processes (Anderson, 2018). In the specific case of North Macedonia, the name change, despite nationalist reactions, has been associated with efforts to comply with international norms and the goal of regional cooperation. This situation illustrates how national identity is influenced not only by internal dynamics but also by pragmatism in foreign policy and international pressures.

The Prespa Agreement reveals how changes in national identity can create a transformation in international relations. The name change in North Macedonia has led to a significant transformation in identity politics, enabling the state to gain greater legitimacy on the international stage. This process highlights how national identity can shape foreign policy preferences (Hall, 2017).

In conclusion, the Prespa Agreement provides a valuable example for understanding the complex relationship between national identity and foreign policy. This process demonstrates how the powerful social dynamics of nationalism can shape society and how they can also be decisive in foreign policy processes. For North Macedonia, the name change should be viewed as a pragmatic foreign policy move and should be interpreted alongside the goals of regional peace and economic development. For Greece, this agreement is part of an effort to rebuild its international reputation and reinforce its regional leadership following an economic crisis.

The success of the Prespa Agreement illustrates the limits of nationalist policies in defending national interests and how pragmatic conciliatory diplomacy and regional cooperation can be made possible. In this context, the agreement offers important lessons for not only North Macedonia and Greece but also for other countries in the Balkans regarding regional peace and cooperation.

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