

THE PRESPA AGREEMENT: MACEDONIAN DIPLOMATIC GAMBIT OR GEOPOLITICAL GAME CHANGER

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Abstract: The analysis, conducted over five years following the signing of the Prespa Agreement, aims to comprehensively evaluate its impact on the resolution of the longstanding name dispute between Macedonia and Greece and to forecast its implications amidst evolving geopolitical trends. By using a critical geopolitical lens and discourse analysis, the study will examine whether Macedonia made a wise diplomatic move by signing the agreement or whether it was a strategic tool to help the government achieve its aims of joining NATO and the EU. Concurrently, it will scrutinize the agreement's transformative role in reshaping the Western Balkans' geopolitical landscape and its consequential influence on wider regional dynamics. This perspective will illuminate potential cascading effects, encompassing the sway of other regional influences and power shifts. It is discernible that, despite being a significant milestone towards Euro-Atlantic integration, the Prespa Agreement's success remains partial. Despite Macedonia's accession to NATO in 2020, the agreement did not facilitate, let alone ensure, a seamless path towards EU membership. Moreover, as an example of an asymmetric agreement, Bulgaria has exploited the Prespa Agreement, using the situation to impose conditions and introduce new "unresolved" issues that challenge the Macedonian people's identity, language, and historical narrative. With this development, the Prespa Agreement has temporarily or finally lost its potential for Macedonia to move towards the EU. Macedonia's prolonged integration process may encounter fresh and formidable challenges in a turbulent and uncertain multipolar geopolitical world.

Keywords: Prespa Agreement, critical geopolitics, Macedonia, NATO, EU.

Introduction

The signing and validation of the Prespa Agreement on June 17, 2018, and February 12, 2019, respectively, marked a watershed moment in the historical relationship between the Republic of Macedonia (now the Republic of North Macedonia) and Greece. This internationally recognised agreement effectively ended decades of discord surrounding the use of the name “Macedonia,” which had strained diplomatic ties between the two countries. By entering into force, the Prespa Agreement rendered the Interim Accord of 1995 obsolete. This Interim Accord served as a temporary measure to manage relations between the two countries amidst the unresolved naming dispute. However, the Prespa Agreement’s implementation signified a definitive resolution to the longstanding issue, clearing the path for a new era of cooperation and mutual understanding between North Macedonia and Greece.

The formal title of the agreement, “Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties”, underscores its comprehensive scope and ambition (Janev, 2021). This designation highlights the agreement’s aim to address the issues outlined in United Nations Security Council resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), which had significant implications for the relationship between the Republic of Macedonia and Greece. By referencing UNSC Resolution 817 (1993), the agreement acknowledges and builds upon the legal framework established by the United Nations, emphasising its commitment to international law and diplomatic norms. This recognition underscores the agreement’s legitimacy and adherence to established principles of conflict resolution within the global community. In addition, the Interim Accord of 1995’s termination marks a significant advancement in settling the parties’ long-standing disagreements and a step towards a more stable and cooperative relationship. Furthermore, the formation of a strategic partnership highlights the agreement’s more general goals of promoting confidence, collaboration, and interests between Greece and North Macedonia.

The paper aims to hint at the multifaceted nature of the Prespa Agreement between North Macedonia and Greece. It suggests that the agreement could be seen through two different lenses. Using chess terminology, it will be analysed whether the Macedonian diplomatic gambit of sacrificing the constitutional name of the Republic of Macedonia represents a strategic and diplomatic manoeuvre that should provide the country with

a secure and prosperous future. From the perspective of the Macedonian diplomatic gambit, the resolution of the long-standing name dispute with Greece should have enabled smooth membership in NATO and the EU. This point of view ought to highlight and defend Macedonian diplomacy's commitment and involvement in achieving the deal. Even though the Republic of Macedonia declared its independence on September 8, 1991, and the Prespa Agreement was signed on June 17, 2018, about 27 years had elapsed. However, thanks to diplomatic ploys, about 140 UN members were able to recognise the country's constitutional name in bilateral relations.

Furthermore, the paper will try to analyse the period after the signing of the Prespa Agreement over five years. In doing so, the agreement will be viewed as a geopolitical game changer. That means that the Prespa Agreement has significant implications that go beyond the immediate resolution of the name dispute. That is, the agreement definitely changed the geopolitical landscape of the Balkans and potentially affected the wider regional geopolitical dynamics. This perspective may emphasise that the solution to this dispute may have ripple effects and affect other regional conflicts and power dynamics, but it also continues to represent an obstacle for Macedonia in its efforts to achieve its national strategic goals. In essence, the analysis in the paper covers the duality of the impact of the Prespa Agreement: one that acknowledges and verifies the (un)success of North Macedonia's diplomatic strategy in achieving the agreement, and another that emphasises the wider geopolitical implications that influenced the signing of the agreement. The paper presents the agreement as a key event that can be interpreted in different ways based on its immediate diplomatic implications and its potential to reshape the geopolitical dynamics of the Balkans.

Adding qualitative methods to the critical geopolitics approach, which is based on structural geopolitical analytical tools, will be the main way to figure out how the Prespa Agreement affected things as a diplomatic move by Macedonia or a major geopolitical game changer. By employing qualitative methods such as content analysis and discourse analysis, we will be able to delve into the intricate nuances of diplomatic manoeuvring and its broader geopolitical implications. Through the examination of speeches, official papers, and media coverage, we are able to discern the narratives, symbols, and rhetorical devices that are employed to portray the agreement as a diplomatic triumph or setback on a national and international level. This requires a comprehensive examination of the historical backdrop surrounding the name issue, the unsuccessful endeavors to reconcile it, and the geopolitical environment before the Prespa Agreement's execution.

More precisely, according to O' Tuathail (1999), for heuristic reasons, critical geopolitics is divided into formal, practical, popular, and structural. Structural geopolitics, or the method of analysis within critical geopolitics, involves the study of structural processes and tendencies that condition how states practice foreign policy. Hence, through the analytical framework of structural geopolitics as part of critical geopolitics, we will try to analyse the Prespa Agreement. Without intending to elaborate on it in detail, the main aim is to understand the geographical context. The analysis is based on the position of Macedonia in the Western Balkans and its geopolitical and geostrategic relations with other regional powers, as well as the impact of the geopolitical significance of the agreement. Furthermore, regional security will be reviewed with the resolution of the name dispute and the contribution of the Prespa Agreement to the stability of the Western Balkans. The structural geopolitical analysis takes into account the influence of the Prespa Agreement in balancing relations with neighbouring states. The integrations and integration processes that the agreement accelerated have had great geopolitical importance. Structural factors such as the geopolitical interests of other NATO and EU member states can have an impact on the process of negotiation and implementation of the Prespa Agreement. And as the last part, within the framework of the structural geopolitical analytical approach, the impact of the agreement on bilateral relations between Greece and Macedonia, as well as their relations with other countries in the region and beyond, should be considered.

Historical Context: The Origins of the Name Dispute and its Impact on Relations between Macedonia and Greece

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which ceased to exist in 1992, gained international recognition for its republics. The cause of its disintegration and the root causes of violence remain debated. The 1990s wars sparked heated scholarly debates, often linked to rival policies. Despite the disintegration, new histories and studies continue to emerge, highlighting the ongoing interest in the subject and the relevance of the debates it sparked (Dragovic-Soso, 2008).

As a prelude to what was written above, the collapse of the bipolar world order that was marked by the fall of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, symbolically marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall, started the geopolitical transition period. Many authors, such as Krauthammer (1990), Freedman (1991), Carpenter (1991), Nye (1992), Tuathail (1994), and Luke (1994), argued

and defined that transition period as a transition from a bipolar to a unipolar world order with a single world power, the United States. However, this unipolar moment, according to Kenneth N. Waltz and Christopher Layne, paves the way for a faster transition to a multipolar order because it will stimulate the growth of new powerful states and regions (Layne, 2006). But what is interesting about this analysis is that the unipolar moment inevitably caused the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), which was trying to create balance between the West and the East and stimulate a movement of non-aligned countries. The breakup was inevitable and, unfortunately, had a bloody ending.

The Republic of Macedonia was one of the ex-Yugoslavia federal republics that gained independence on September 8, 1991, without bloody conflict on its territory. With an overwhelming majority, more than 95 percent of the citizens who went to the referendum on September 8, 1991, answered positively to the referendum question: *“Are you in favour of an independent Macedonia with the right to enter a future union of sovereign states of Yugoslavia?”* The referendum was preceded by a Declaration of Independence that the first multi-party Macedonian Parliament adopted on January 25, 1991. Formally, the will of the people for an independent state was confirmed by the Declaration of Acceptance of the Referendum Results on September 18, 1991, in the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia. The next important step in strengthening the state was the adoption of the new Constitution on November 17, 1991. The international legal subjectivity of the state was definitively confirmed on April 8, 1993, when, by acclamation in the General Assembly of the United Nations, Macedonia was accepted as the 181st full member of the World Organisation (Veljanoski, 2017).

The Macedonian Constitution of November 17, 1991, is the embodiment of the historical cultural, spiritual, and state heritage of the Macedonian people and their centuries-old struggle for national and social freedom and the creation of their state. The foundations of the state derive from the state-legal traditions of the Republic of Krushevo, the historical decisions of ASNOM, and the constitutional-legal continuity of the Macedonian state as a sovereign republic in Federated Yugoslavia, as well as from the free will of the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia in the referendum of September 8, 1991. The concept of the state is determined as a national state of the Macedonian people in which full civil equality and permanent coexistence of the Macedonian people with the Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Roma, and other nationalities living in the Republic of Macedonia are ensured (Службен весник на РМ, 2011). On the other side, Greece reluctantly

accepted the independence of the Republic of Macedonia. Greece asserted that the term “Macedonia” alluded to the historical Kingdom of Macedon and that adopting it as part of the name of a neighbouring country would hijack a crucial aspect of culture and legacy unique to “Greek”. Additionally, it argued that the name Macedonia suggested territorial claims to a province of the same name in the northern part of Greece (Macedonia’s Dispute With Greece | ESI, n.d.). This region, referred to as Aegean Macedonia in Macedonian historiography, belonged to Greece due to the partition of ethno-geographic Macedonia that existed under the Ottoman Empire.

Due to the consequences of the Balkan Wars, ethno-geographical Macedonia was partitioned following the Ottomans’ withdrawal. With these starting positions, the Macedonian state began to seek wider international recognition. The European Community’s Council of Ministers determined on December 16, 1991, the terms under which the EC would acknowledge the former Yugoslav republics that had proclaimed their independence. The European Community (EC) required these republics to guarantee that they had no territorial claims against any neighbouring EC state and to commit to protecting the human rights of the ethnic minorities living in the frame of their state territory. Additionally, they would not engage in hostile acts against any such state, including the use of a name that implied territorial claims. This requirement, which was added at Greece’s request, obviously only pertained to Macedonia because it was the only former Yugoslav country that bordered an EU member state (EC: Declaration on Yugoslavia and on the Guidelines on the Recognition of the New States, 1992). An EC Arbitration Commission concluded that only Slovenia and Macedonia met the requirements for recognition after the Macedonian government offered additional constitutional guarantees that it would uphold the integrity of all international borders and refrain from meddling in the domestic affairs of other states. Furthermore, it made it clear that using the name “Macedonia” did not mean making territorial claims against a neighbouring state (Turk, D., 1993: 80). Nevertheless, the EC declared on January 15, 1992, that it would recognise Slovenia and Croatia but not Macedonia. The Republic of Macedonia was granted recognition by the European Community in May 1992, but only after taking a name that satisfied all sides. It declared a month later that it was prepared to acknowledge the Republic “under a name that does not include the term Macedonia”. It was evident that the EC supported Greek claims to prevent the new state on their northern border from being recognised (Danforth, 1993).

However, various names were suggested to resolve the issue, including the names of ancient regions to the north of Macedonia, Dardania and Paeonia, South Slavia, the Vardar Republic, the Central Balkan Republic, and the Republic of Skopje, all of which were approved by Greece. Northern Macedonia, New Macedonia, and the Slavic Republic of Macedonia were other compromise proposals that Greece rejected. Greece even proposed at one time that the Republic take on two names: an unofficial name for internal consumption that could contain the word “Macedonia” and an official one for external use that could not. Despite this, the Republic of Macedonia itself rejected each of these options, insisting that it would only accept recognition as the Republic of Macedonia in accordance with its constitution.

When the Republic of Macedonia petitioned to join the UN in December 1992, the conflict moved from the capitals of the member nations of the European Community to New York City. When a plan was put forth that called for the Republic of Macedonia to be admitted to the UN under the temporary or provisional name “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,” with a permanent name to be determined later through a mediation process, the governments of both Greece and Macedonia were willing to make concessions. Ultimately, on April 7, 1993, the Security Council decided to accept “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” into the United Nations by a unanimous vote (Danforth, 1993).

Failed Attempts at Resolution before the Prespa Agreement

In a situation of strong geopolitical disturbance of the Western Balkans, after the dissolution of SFRY and attempts by the US and Western allies to strengthen NATO position and start with the EU enlargement process, strong national mobilization in Greece against the name of the new neighbouring country on the northern border occurred. Both governments have had a very difficult position in the further process of negotiation on the so-called name dispute. The position was diametrically opposite. Maybe, in that situation, President Gligorov from the Macedonian side and Prime Minister Mitsotakis from the Greek side were brighter points in guiding regional geopolitics in the Western Balkans. This argument stems from the previous rich political experience of both politicians. Apparently, those did not stop nationalism on both sides. It was more expressed from the Greek side and culminated with major protests in Thessaloniki in 1992. On February 12, 1992, a massive protest gathered one million people in Thessaloniki, declaring that “Macedonia is Greek” (Ioannou, 2018).

In 1994, Greece broke diplomatic ties with Macedonia and placed a trade embargo on the country. Greece's actions delayed international recognition of the newly established Macedonian state despite criticism from the UN and the majority of EC/EU member states. Greece and Macedonia eventually reached an interim accord in 1995, expressing respect for each other's territorial integrity as a result of diplomatic intervention by the United States. Macedonia pledged to alter its flag and remove any language from the constitution that would be construed as a breach of Greek territorial integrity in exchange for Greece's recognition of the Macedonian state. But because the dispute over the name "Macedonia" could not be settled, Macedonia adopted the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to gain international recognition (FYROM). As the mediator in the 1994 name dispute settlement, Matthew Nimitz's recommendations and directives focused on resolving the country's name in a way that would be acceptable for diplomatic reasons and would not infringe upon the identity of Macedonians. As a diplomat who began working for the Clinton administration in 1990, he spent 24 years concentrating on "one word": Macedonia (*The Man Who Has Focused on One Word for 23 Years*, 2017).

Among the permanent efforts to resolve the name dispute, we apostrophized the situation in 2008 at the NATO Summit in Bucharest. A summit was held in April 2008 to consider the aspirations of three Balkan countries, Croatia, Albania, and Macedonia, to become NATO members. It was clear that there was strong support from the US administration and President George W. Bush. In the statements he gave in front of the Summit, Bush clearly stated that all US-Adriatic Charter participants have to be new NATO members. On May 2, 2003, the ministers of foreign affairs signed the US-Adriatic Charter in Tirana (Grdešić, 2004). As part of the first developments at the Summit, Bush stated, "NATO will decide whether to invite three Balkan nations – Croatia, Albania, and Macedonia – to join the Atlantic Alliance". The United States strongly supports inviting these nations to join NATO. These countries have walked the difficult path of reform and built thriving, free societies. "They are already making important contributions to NATO missions, and their citizens deserve the security NATO membership brings" (NATO Summit 2008, 2008).

As a result of the unresolved dispute, in 2008, Greece blocked Macedonia's NATO membership. It has also blocked the start of Macedonia's EU accession talks, despite several positive annual reports from the European Commission on the country's progress. Greek Prime Minister Karamanlis said on March 3, 2008, that progress has been slow on this issue.

“No solution, no invitation”, he said. The Macedonian position was that they should have the right to name their own country, that they had amended the Macedonian Constitution to renounce all territorial claims on Greece or any neighbouring country, and that they had changed the country’s flag (NATO Enlargement: Albania, Croatia, and Possible Future Candidates, 2009). The Macedonian side used this turn of events to accuse Greece of breaking the Interim Accord from 1995, specifically Article 11, and to file complaints against the neighbour with the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Apart from the failed efforts to resolve the name dispute, from a geopolitical point of view, that period is quite dynamic, due to the progress of the independence of Kosovo¹ and the paving of the way to expand NATO to the east, that is, with Ukraine and Georgia. As Fridman (2008) argues, on August 8, 2008, the Russian invasion of Georgia did not change the balance of power in Eurasia but simply announced that the balance of power had already shifted. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with a possible confrontation with Iran and a destabilising circumstance in Pakistan, have consumed the United States. It is unable to intervene on the Russian perimeter and does not have any strategic ground forces in reserve. These key developments have given the Russians a chance to reclaim their dominance in the former Soviet arena. The invasion did not tip the scales of power because Moscow was not concerned about how the United States or Europe might respond. It was up to the Russians to decide when to announce the shift in the balance of power.

The third phase of expansion began with the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, marking the geopolitical developments at the end of the Cold War. Poland and Hungary in 1999 and seven other nations (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania) in 2004 were the first two phases. Furthermore, it appears that in 2008, the NATO Alliance recognised the geopolitical interests of the United States with the entrance of Croatia and Albania. Specifically, in relation to the veto for Macedonia, the US administration demonstrated its continued alignment with the geopolitical redefinition of the former Yugoslav regions by proposing and inking a strategic alliance with the Republic of Macedonia. Hence, the Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Macedonia was signed on May 8 in Washington, D.C. Based on shared values, aspirations, and interests, the United States of America and the Republic of Macedonia are committed to strengthening and broadening their close alliance. The two nations want to

strengthen their strategic partnership by working together more closely on security, people-to-people contacts, and trade (*Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Between the United States of America and the Republic of Macedonia*, n.d.).

After such events, with a pronounced geopolitical connotation, the name dispute becomes a secondary issue. Following the mediator Matthew Nimitz's fruitless attempts to resolve the issue over the name, the Macedonian government (headed by VMRO-DPMNE) initiated the "Skopje 2014" project to renovate the country's capital and began the so-called "antiquization" process widely presented in 2010. The goals were to increase public awareness and potentially capitalise on the fact that more than 60% of UN members – including the US, China, and Russia – recognised the state's constitutional name before the NATO Summit in Bucharest. In light of the circumstances surrounding the Prespa Agreement's signing in 2018, Boyko Borisov, the prime minister of Bulgaria, made a comment that warrants consideration. Specifically, in 2012, he appeared to reveal the geopolitical dynamics in the region even after Macedonia and Greece's disagreement was resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Given that Macedonia is a northern region, any solution that included a geographic designation would be unacceptable to Bulgaria. The prime minister of Bulgaria argued that calling something "Northern Macedonia" is inappropriate since it encompasses Bulgarian territory as well, which will lead to opportunities and motivations for territorial claims (Bulgaria Says No to Macedonia Becoming "Northern Macedonia"; Novinite.com; Sofia News Agency, n.d.). This is a good indicator of today's negative development of bilateral relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria. It is especially noteworthy to highlight the current culmination of a radical swing in relations, given that Bulgaria, on January 15, 1992, was the first nation to officially recognise the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, as defined in its inaugural constitution (Bulgaria Was the First to Recognise Independent Macedonia 30 Years Ago, 2022).

Structural Geopolitical Analysis of the Prespa Agreement: Towards (un)predictive Geopolitical Development

Before starting the analysis of the Prespa Agreement from the angle of structural geopolitics, it is useful to determine the changing nature of the political approach as well as the global and regional geopolitical dynamics. These processes have been applied and are present both before and after the signing of the agreement. In that direction, the evolution of the political

approaches of both countries to resolve the dispute is obvious. Namely, the earlier stages of the issue surrounding the disagreement over the name Macedonia unmistakably point to and describe an extraordinarily challenging negotiation process between the two nations through UN mediation. Greece has backed down from its earlier tough stance that any mention of the word Macedonia in the name of its northern neighbour would be prohibited. Firstly, the so-called twofold formula can be applied, wherein the Republic of Macedonia in the Cyrillic alphabet can be used for internal purposes; nevertheless, an acceptable solution had to be found for external use. Before the Prespa Agreement was signed, the negotiations' dynamics produced a mutually agreeable solution wherein the name Macedonia could be used. Still, the solution would be *erga omnes* or for general use.

Globally speaking, the geopolitical environment is rapidly shifting. The stances taken at the beginning of the previous century have shaped Macedonian diplomacy, which works to achieve the strategic goals of joining the EU and NATO. However, it is not a matter of having to stray from predetermined strategic objectives; it rather has to do with a lack of preparation for the shift in the global geopolitical power environment. It is critical to keep an eye on geopolitical dynamics, particularly for entities with tiny geographical areas. This makes it possible to forecast changes in the geopolitical stratum as well as one's own state's situation. In particular, a multitude of scientific analyses suggest that the geopolitical processes at play on a worldwide scale are evolving. It is evident from a close examination of Nye, Brzezinski, and Kaplan's ideas that the geopolitical shift of power from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asian and Asia-Pacific areas is a multi-decade process. The works of Brzezinski (2012), Nye (2011), Kissinger (2011), Kaplan (2010), Mearsheimer (2014), and others clearly demonstrate these conclusions. The multipolar world is determined by the process of geopolitical power transfer (Mileski et al., 2023). The global event that determined the geopolitical trends before the signing of the Prespa Agreement was the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House as the 45th US President (Smith, 2023). During that period, the American administration made strong efforts to resolve the Kosovo issue and the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue. The views on the issue of the dispute with the name are continuously in the direction of support and motivation for finding an acceptable solution (Juzová, 2021).

However, one must ask what precisely transpired on the international scene prior to the Prespa Agreement being inked. The realisation that the

geopolitical landscape in the region had changed while the EU was looking inward and concentrating on its serious domestic issues — such as the crises in Greece and the eurozone, Brexit, the refugee crisis, and the rise of Euroscepticism and populist extremism in Europe — has been a major catalyst (Panagiotou, 2021).

With a focus on the symbolism of the UK's exit from the EU, Teokarević (2021) analyses how Brexit has affected relations between the UK and Western Balkan countries. He uses the concepts of linkage, leverage, and soft power to analyse trade, security, and cultural relations between the UK and the region. According to the research, relations will deteriorate after Brexit, and the UK will mainly have little interest in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, the majority opinion within the EU regarding further enlargement and low preparation for EU membership means that Brexit has not significantly changed the low chances of EU accession for the Western Balkan countries. Also, prior to the Prespa Agreement's signature, the Western Balkans were the focal point of the 2015–2016 regional migration and refugee crisis. During that time, the EU made an effort to defend its external borders against both legal and illegal migration, as well as to maintain control over the so-called Balkan route. It was natural that the Macedonian and Greek authorities would cooperate in that situation. Although certain misunderstandings were evident along the Macedonian-Greek border, the cooperation has been deemed adequate (Mileski, 2018). The growth of Euroscepticism and populist extremism in Europe is a framework that determines the EU's approach and attitude towards enlargement. Numerous authors, including Styczyńska and Meijer (2023), Larsen, Cutts, and Goodwin (2020), Treib (2021), Ehin and Talving (2021), and others, analyse their growing influence and profile the geopolitical trend in the context of debates and real needs and wishes for expansion with the countries of the Western Balkans.

Regional connection is also a noticeable trend in the region, before and after the signing of the Prespa Agreement, and it refers to the Berlin Process and the Open Balkans. The goal of the Berlin Process, which started in 2014 in response to the enlargement-related Juncker Declaration and in light of significant geopolitical problems the EU faced, was to keep the Western Balkans region of Europe moving forward with European integration. Although it was first restricted in scope and time (2014–2018), it has since expanded and taken on other facets, with no clear end in sight. Thus far, it has only engaged a small number of candidate member states (the six Western Balkan states hoping to join the EU: the so-called WB6 group

consisting of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Serbia) (Marciacq, F., 2017). It can be noted that Greece was not interested in participating in this process. The next project after the Prespa Agreement that shapes the geopolitics and regional cooperation of the Western Balkans is called the Open Balkans. The goal was to close the large gap between expectations and realities about the Western Balkans' European destiny. Three Western Balkan nations—Serbia, N. Macedonia, and Albania—started an initiative for indigenous regional cooperation in many domains in 2019. Kulo and Novikau (2023) evaluated the partnership as having nothing groundbreaking or essentially novel in terms of concepts, goals, and actors, with an emphasis on the economic side of things. Even if it is completely implemented, its effects are expected to be minimal because it is limited to only three Western Balkan countries.

The Prespa Agreement in Geographical Context and Internal Political Dynamics

In the presence of UN mediator Matthew Nimetz, the foreign ministers of Greece (Nikos Kozijas) and the Republic of Macedonia (Nikola Dimitrov) signed the Prespa Agreement on June 17, 2018, in the village of Nivitsi on the shores of Lake Prespa. In general, the agreement's goals were to forge a strategic partnership between the parties and open the door for the Republic of Macedonia to join NATO and the EU. The agreement called for Macedonia to rename itself North Macedonia and change the state's official name to "Republic of North Macedonia". On the other hand, Greece agreed to recognise the Macedonian ethnonym used in the citizenship name and designate Macedonian as the official language. Furthermore, Greece promised not to obstruct its neighbour's admission to international organisations (Конечен договор за решавање на македонско-грчкиот спор за името и за стратешко партнерство, 2021).

Final negotiations began in February 2018, with the first draft of the agreement prepared by Greek Foreign Minister Kozias. Interestingly, according to Nimitz's claims, these negotiations were bilateral, with no outside pressure input except for his discreet assistance. In his paper "The Macedonian "name" dispute: the Macedonian Question—resolved?" Nimitz (2020), among other things, explained what the starting point was in addressing Macedonia to resolve the dispute. Namely, his addressing the name dispute as a "geographical" problem and issue, and not an identity issue, was denied by later events after the suppression of the Prespa Agreement, explaining that all the resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council were not aimed at

changing the identity of the Macedonian people. The focus that was given only to the geography and the geographical region of Macedonia, according to Nimitz, required the addition of a certain modifier to the name of the Republic of Macedonia for a more accurate reflection of the geographical reality. This perspective, framed within the structural geopolitical analysis of critical geopolitics, underscored the pivotal geopolitical position of Macedonia. Its proximity and interconnectedness with neighbouring regional powers elevated the geopolitical significance of the Prespa Agreement. Historiographically speaking, the geopolitical significance of Macedonia as the crossroads of the Balkans during various periods significantly influenced the development of geopolitical dynamics. Macedonia, despite its exceptional geographical location, places little and a relatively moderate amount of value on its geopolitical standing (Mileski, 2017). From a contemporary analytical standpoint, it is indisputable that the effort to resolve the name dispute before the conflict in Ukraine held significant geopolitical implications for NATO. Vankovska (2020) concurs with this line of reasoning, emphasising that Macedonia's geographical predisposition and geopolitical position produce the same outcomes, i.e., its location on the front lines of the new "Cold War," where proxy warfare is conceivable.

However, on a domestic political level, following the Prespa Agreement's assignment, the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia called a referendum on July 30, 2018, intending to approve the Prespa Agreement. The fact that only 37% of voters participated in the referendum shows that former Prime Minister Zaev was unable to inspire the populace and persuade them of the advantages the shift would provide. The state institutions were forced to decide in response to the referendum's unsuccessful validation, which required them to declare the referendum to be consultative. More precisely, on the referendum question, "Are you in favour of the EU and NATO membership by accepting the Agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Greece?", 91.46 percent, or 609,813 citizens, voted "for" and 5.65 percent, or 37,700 citizens, voted "against". Invalid ballots were 19,221 or 2.89 percent. In an official statement, the President of the State Election Commission clarified, "The decision has not been adopted because more than half of the total number of citizens registered on the Voters' List did not vote" (Veljanoski, 2018). Despite the violation of the state Constitution, that is, Article 73, which indicates that referendums on certain issues announced by Parliament are mandatory, the process of implementing the Prespa Agreement continued (Nakeva, 2022).

Following the implementation of the Prespa Agreement, the Republic of North Macedonia will have a new constitutional name according to four modifications adopted by the parliament. Along with these modifications, the legislature also passed a constitutional bill amending Amendments 33, 34, 35, and 36 to take effect when the NATO membership treaty is ratified and the ultimate solution between Greece and Macedonia over the name issue is reached. Citizens protested in front of the Macedonian Parliament in order to deter the Assembly from voting on the subject of changing the country's constitution and name. Nonetheless, 81 percent of the parliamentarians supported the constitutional modifications, and on February 12, 2019, the Greek Parliament ratified the accord, bringing an end to the conflict between Macedonia and Greece and renaming the state the "Republic of North Macedonia". In return, Macedonia was permitted to begin admissions talks with the EU. Furthermore, it completed the final formal phase of the Prespa Agreement with Greece on March 27, 2020, making it the official 30th member of the North Atlantic Alliance. From a contemporary standpoint, the Prespa Agreement originally achieved a single strategic objective: NATO membership. However, it is valid to question if the name change was required to achieve that objective if the procedure continued until the outbreak of the Ukraine conflict. Moreover, EU expansion policies are starting to imitate the growth process of NATO.

The Prespa Agreement and Regional Stability

Practical geopolitical analysis shows the strong support of Western politicians regarding the referendum in Macedonia. For instance, President Macron, via video messages, expressed his support: "You should vote and decide whether you are in favour of amending the Constitution so that the agreement could come into force. I strongly support it and firmly believe this agreement is good for you, for the region, and for Europe", stated Macron (European Western Balkan, 2018). In that direction was also German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She visited Macedonia and voiced strong support for Macedonia's efforts to ensure a successful referendum on the historic "name" agreement with Greece (Marusic, 2018). The former US president Donald Trump said on the referendum: "The historic Prespa Agreement resolves the long-standing name issue with Greece and paves the way for Macedonia's membership in both NATO and the European Union" (Kathimerini, 2018).

This strong support is interpreted via the lens of structural geopolitical analysis as a narrative meant to provide greater stability in the Balkans,

depicted historically as an area troubled by geopolitical competition and ethnic tensions. The powers and relationships among the surrounding states were not balanced by the Prespa Agreement. As Vankovska (2020) argued about the Prespa Agreement in a geopolitical frame, it is an imposed solution of great Western powers with one very unique term, represented in domestic political and scholar circles, called geopolitics in denial. In contrast, proponents of the treaty highlight its importance because of the security threats if a small country does not resolve the dispute. As previously mentioned, the question arises whether, after the tectonic geopolitical changes caused by the two crucial geopolitical game changers – the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine – the nature of the threats is still the same. Or, did the five-year experience after the agreement was signed, which opened new fronts of confrontation with neighbouring countries (Bulgaria, which is a NATO ally), stall the promised progress towards the EU? Macedonia increased its national security but hypothetically became a legitimate target of a possible confrontation with Russia as a member of NATO. These conditions in a multipolar geopolitical order require greater caution in attempts to maintain peace in these areas, but at the same time, they create great scepticism in the intentions of the allies from the west towards Macedonian EU progress.

In that direction, it is interesting to see that the support for the membership of North Macedonia in NATO has increased from 2021 to 2023. In a survey conducted by Spasenovski (2023), supported by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, support in 2021 was 59.8%, 64.2% in 2022, and 65.7% in 2023. But it is indicative that with NATO membership, a small trend of scepticism is observed in North Macedonia about whether the country is safer and more stable. The perception that it is a safer country was 40.6% in 2022, and in 2023 it dropped to 32.1%. It is noticeable that the population is beginning to doubt the increase in security, answering “somewhat yes” to the same question, which in 2022 was 15.6% and in 2023 was 24.0%.

The Prespa Agreement and Integration Processes

By settling the name controversy, the Prespa Agreement’s primary goal was to allow the Republic of Macedonia to resume its Euro-Atlantic integration process. Even though people have been interested in that topic for a long time, especially when it comes to joining the EU, the stories about expansion have always been about finding specific reasons, inconsistencies, non-principled solutions, and necessary changes within the EU. In that regard, Wesley Scott (2005) notes that the EU’s enlargement is a distinct

process of regional involvement aimed at resolving the conflicts involved in the development of a cogent geopolitical strategy for the EU. The lack of a single, broadly accepted geopolitical agenda that addresses the challenge appears to aim at expanding the spheres of influence for “stability”, “prosperity”, “sustainability”, and “security”. This controversial narrative related to EU enlargement has followed Macedonia from the moment of obtaining candidate status in 2005 to the conditional invitation to start membership negotiations in 2022 (Следната Цел: Членство Во ЕУ, 2022).

Jańczak (2015), Keil (2023), Petrovic and Tzifakis (2021) note that the EU’s enlargement policy in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership (*Eastern Partnership, n.d.*) are proceeding in two distinct directions based on their analysis of a significant number of scholarly articles. Enabling the Western Balkans to adapt to European norms, values, and legal frameworks through the EU *acquis communautaire* is of utmost importance. However, the Eastern Partnership strategy is a well-established geopolitical concept.

In the previously described context, in conditions of weak or incoherent will for EU expansion in the Western Balkans and the absence of unity, the Prespa Agreement failed to become a successful diplomatic story. This conclusion stems from two key moments in the last five years. The first moment is French President Macron’s veto in October 2019 for the start of EU membership negotiations for Albania and Macedonia. The excuse was the urgent need to change the methodology for EU enlargement with new candidate countries (Cvetanoska, 2019). Brussels’ inconsistency is best reflected in Juncker’s statement. Jean-Claude Juncker, former president of the European Commission, referred to the refusal of EU leaders to initiate membership negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania as “a grave historic mistake” (Gray, 2019).

The second key moment, which definitely reduces the effect of instant success and diplomatic victory of the Prespa Agreement and has the potential to increase Euroscepticism, is the decision of the European Council in December 2023. With that decision, negotiations for EU membership with Ukraine and Moldova began, while Georgia received the status of a candidate country. At a press conference on November 8, 2023, EC President Ursula von der Leyen recommended opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova (Kováčik, 2023).

It is worth noting that Ukraine and Moldova acquired the status of candidate countries for EU membership in 2022. It is just another inconsistency in EU enlargement policies. This is especially true if one knows the military and political situation in Ukraine (war) and Moldova

(separatism). In addition, the invitation to start EU membership negotiations addressed to Bosnia and Herzegovina (candidate status from 2022) in March 2024 further diminishes the importance of the Prespa Agreement in the context of European integration (The Guardian, 2024). However, it is notable that the war in Ukraine has altered the EU's enlargement policy, which, as we said previously, resembles NATO expansion.

The Prespa Agreement and Bilateral Relations

Bilateral relations between Macedonia and Greece have been on the rise for the last five years. This especially applies to diplomatic and economic cooperation. However, the echo in the political and scientific spheres is negative in both countries. The Prespa Agreement may have improved relations with Greece, but as a result, relations with another EU member state, Bulgaria, have become problematic. Bulgaria managed through the so-called "French proposal" to obtain the conditional invitation for the start of membership negotiations with the EU, imposing a condition: the inclusion of the Bulgarian minority, which according to the last census of 2021 was 3,504 people, in the country's constitution. At the same time, Bulgaria is problematizing Macedonian history, language, and identity (Kitevski, 2023). Or even more, as Vankovska (2019) stated, the Prespa Agreement symbolically reconceives the old Macedonian question into a new form with an old essence. On the other hand, the supporters of the constitutional changes to include the Bulgarian minority, who are mostly from the ruling political elites, point out that this demystifies the Bulgarian position of "one people in two states" and that the Bulgarians are already in the constitution in the section of the preamble that has a clause about "other peoples, i.e., communities". Furthermore, there is the declaration for the protection of the Macedonian language in the German Parliament or the signing of the agreement on Frontex in the Macedonian language. Today, we have a situation in which North Macedonia, from the formal legal aspect, started the negotiations for EU membership on July 19, 2022, but in circumstances that are unknown in the history of the EU enlargement process (Tiliev, 2022).

If we concentrate only on the reflection on the Prespa Agreement, then obviously it was negative on both sides. From a political aspect, the Greek and Macedonian governments faced strong opposition and dissatisfaction with the historic deal. The Macedonian Assembly approved the deal on June 20, 2018, but without opposition parliamentarians. Former Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov boycotted the session, and protests erupted in

Skopje. The Greek government faced opposition from New Democracy, accusing Tsipras and Kammenos of allowing Macedonian citizens to claim Macedonian language (Νούσης, 2022). The provisions of the Prespa Agreement, which were supposed to become valid after 5 years, brought to the surface the problems and the negative attitude of the population towards the agreement. Pursuant to Article 1, paragraph 10 of the first part of the agreement, within five years after its entry into force, Macedonia must change the official documents (passports, identity cards, and driver's licences) that are used outside the country. This situation made it impossible for a large part of the population, due to the weak institutional capacity to implement the provisions of the agreement, to leave their own country. According to some estimates, more than 400,000 citizens remained stuck in the labyrinth of processes for changing personal documents and driver's licences with the new constitutional name. Thus, they were denied the guaranteed right to freedom of movement. On the other hand, Greece does not comply with the provisions regarding the change of road signs to the Republic of North Macedonia. Also, three memoranda of cooperation arising from the Prespa Agreement await ratification in the Greek Parliament. They refer to obligations to accelerate the process of Macedonia's integration into the EU, to establish a coordinating committee for economic cooperation, and to a technical agreement for monitoring flights. In a word, the deadlines of the Prespa Agreement, to which both countries committed, have been breached (Спаковска, 2024).

Conclusion

Considering the Prespa Agreement as a resolution of a lasting dispute regarding the name "Macedonia" through an analogy of a chess game would preclude it from being deemed a compromise (draw) that would have satisfied both parties. Both sides express "loud" criticism of the Prespa Agreement in this specific case. Overall, it is an unfair agreement that does not count as a successful diplomatic gambit (material sacrifice) because of the concessions that were made during the negotiations, especially the controversial change to the constitutional name of the Republic of Macedonia. In essence, the "chess opening" that occurred at the onset of the name dispute and in the years preceding the signing of the Prespa Agreement resulted in about 140 recognitions of the constitutional name Republic of Macedonia and one positive judgement by the Hague-based international court against Greece for its side in the violation of the 1995 Interim Accord. As evidenced

by the sequence of events, Macedonia's efforts to preserve the name that has been accepted and embedded in the national identity for generations were not aided by this "chess" opening. The necessity for a compromise became abundantly apparent due to global geopolitical shifts and pressure from international factors. Macedonia accomplishes one strategic objective by becoming the 30th member of NATO; however, the commencement of negotiations and membership in the European Union appear to be highly problematic and relativized. Simultaneously, the four-year NATO membership contributes to an increase in security, but no discernible and practical economic impact has yet materialised.

When analysed through the lens of structural geopolitics, the Prespa Agreement can be identified as a geopolitical game changer at the regional level. Notwithstanding the amelioration of political relations with Greece, acrimonious relations emerged with Bulgaria. Despite being the first nation to acknowledge the Republic of Macedonia's independence, Bulgaria has thus far succeeded in integrating its interests into the framework of negotiations for Macedonia's EU membership. The Prespa Agreement, which was intended to serve as the "key" to initiating EU membership negotiations, fails to accomplish this objective without introducing other significant matters that are vital to the state's national interest. Since it entered into force five years ago, the Prespa Agreement has undergone multiple relativizations. In the first place, the blockade of Macron and the EU in 2019 was under the pretext that essential modifications to the EU accession process were required. Concurrently, a framework for negotiations is founded on a so-called "French proposal" that is distinct and has not been implemented in any other member-seeking nation. Furthermore, Hungary abstained from consensus decision-making (27-1) in November 2023, when an invitation to commence negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova was issued. The invitation extended to Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2024 unequivocally implies that the European Union deviates from its established enlargement policy criteria in favour of responding to world geopolitical dynamics and trends. The most recent actions have resulted in the relativization of the initial stages of EU membership negotiations, as well as the postponement and unpredictability of the candidates' complete membership at this juncture of geopolitical dynamics. Furthermore, the EU's conditioning relationship has the potential to heighten Euroskepticism among Macedonian citizens, thereby facilitating a restructuring of the prevailing European discourse in the country and amplification of foreign geopolitical influence.

Eventually, the question is not whether an alternative to European integration exists but how a nation safeguards its national interests along that trajectory. Due to these factors, small states must implement a prudent and calculated foreign policy that incorporates strategic hedging into their interactions with major and regional powers, among other components. Small states, which are vulnerable to asymmetric approaches, pressures, and concessions during negotiations with large states or alliances, must implement the concept of strategic hedging. It is necessary for determining the optimal formula for situating small sovereign states in the multipolar world of global competition, but it can also be beneficial in the regional geopolitical context and dynamics. For this reason, hedging must not be perceived as opportunistic but rather as a pragmatic decision and mode of operation. One may legitimately inquire about the potential consequences of the name dispute remaining unresolved before the commencement of hostilities in Ukraine on February 22, 2022. Under such circumstances, without an agreement with Greece, would Macedonia become a member of NATO? After Macedonia, Finland and Sweden expressly did, especially Sweden, which abandoned the concept of a neutral state. It represents another argument, despite the strategic partnership with the US, for failing or not having a strategic hedging concept.

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