

## THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA - A 'NEW' COUNTRY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

**Mira Šorović**

University of Montenegro, Montenegro

E-mail: mirasorovic1992@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The article tries to explain and define political processes and changes through history of the 'new' Western Balkans country - the Republic of North Macedonia. It is word about analysis of the political dispute between Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Greece, from its beginnings until the present day. This paper will try to give the real picture of political area in the Balkans and explore deeper roots of the 'Macedonian Question' controversy. Also, it will give the explanations of the resolution of 27-year dispute, (between the two neighbor countries), by signing the Prespa Agreement. Hence, leaving by side national identity and history, the North Macedonia will be able to join the European Union and NATO. Thus, in short period of time, a 'new' country in the Western Balkans has putted in the center of the regional politics, with clear purpose: promoting ethnic and cultural heritage in the edge of the European continent.*

**Key-words:** *North Macedonia, Greece, the 'Macedonian Question', the name issue, the Prespa Agreement, identity, the Western Balkans, the European and Euro-Atlantic integration.*

### 1. Introduction

In recent time, North Macedonia has hold attention on the regional political scene of the Balkans, as a 'geopolitical fault line' (Armakolas et al. 2019, 1).

Nearly three decades, the 'Macedonian Question' has been subject of many round-table discussions, descriptive articles and many analyses from diverse perspectives. Because of the importance of this unique political conflict in the international relations, its implications have various natures (from historical, linguistic, political and legal, to ethnological and psychological) (Dzuvalakovska et al. 2013). Despite a lot of descriptive articles on the North Macedonia name issue with Greece, in the literature there is no theoretically

informed analysis of this complex Question, from the roots till the resolution of this name dispute - conflict.

The goal of this research paper is to further explore: the political relations between North Macedonia and Greece, historical roots of this name dispute; pragmatic dimensions and (political, historical and cultural) factors contributing to the resolution of this neighbor conflict, with a special focus on North Macedonia (West-East) relations, which represent a good basis for the further North Macedonian European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Also, this article tries to explain how the international community has reacted and responded to the resolution of the 'Macedonian Question'. Finally, the article includes conclusions which are in relation with the possible scenarios at the political Balkans scenes, including the ratification and implementation of the *Prespa Agreement* in North Macedonia. In that light, it will be a few words about the next North Macedonia's steps to the EU and NATO accession.

Hence, it is important to mention that 'the dispute about name of the Republic of Macedonia constitutes just one dimension of a broader latent conflict, one that touches so much upon the fundamentals of the two societies involved' (Sofos 2013, 226). In that way, North Macedonia left by side its social identity, history of Macedonians and its own statehood, although Greece claimed the virtual ownership of the term 'Macedonia' and its connection with the name of Alexander the Great and his Empire.

On February 12, 2019, SFR Macedonia officially changed name in the Republic of North Macedonia or North Macedonia for short. It changed its name to avoid the confusion with Greek northern-country region, also called Macedonia. Thus, neighbors' countries ended a 27-year name row. In accordance with it, North Macedonia, in short period of time is making significant progress on its path to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration process in the region. In accordance with it, North Macedonia signs *NATO Accession Protocol* on February 6, 2019.

The resolution of this intense neighbor' conflict - the 'Macedonian Question', in future will bring better conditions for the Western Balkans countries, which means promoting ethnic, religious and cultural heritage in the edge of the European continent.

Research hypothesis is: 'The Resolution of the 'Macedonian Question' is finished with the signing of the *Prespa Agreement* by the two countries, Greece and North Macedonia, which represents good basis for investing in the stability, security, prosperity and neighbor relations of the Western Balkans' (despite the fact that majority of citizens in both countries opposed the *Agreement*). Hence, my theoretical framework is based on realist theory with many historical facts, which seems the most appropriate to analyze The

Republic of North Macedonia - a 'new' country in the Western Balkans. Taking all these aspects into account, after 27 years, it is ended political (name) dispute between two neighbors' countries. In that way, North Macedonia will be in position to join the European Union (EU) and NATO. Also, after February 12, 2019, Macedonia was officially changed the name to the Republic of the North Macedonia (North Macedonia).

## 2. Historical background of the conflict

North Macedonia is the Western Balkans country. It represents a complex border country between West and East, Europe and Asia. Hence, it is important to underline that during the history, today's territory of North Macedonia was interesting area for conquerors.

Hence, Dr. Bozhidar Dimitrov in his book *'Macedonia-Holy Bulgarian Land'* presents two opponent historical points of view: the Macedonian and the Bulgarian<sup>1</sup>. Thus, in this article, with special attention, I try to digest only Macedonian view over Macedonian country history. In accordance with it, Macedonian country dated from the ancient times, when Macedonians lived in their (Bulgarian) lands. They are ancestors of the Alexander the Great - the Ancient Macedonians<sup>2</sup>. Since that time, they have been oppressed by: the Byzantine Empire, Bulgaria and Ottoman Empire.

Furthermore, in 9<sup>th</sup> century, during the rule of Bulgaria, two Macedonian brothers, Cyril and Methodius invented the Glagolitic Alphabet, later modified by Cyrillic Alphabet by St. Clement of Ohrid. In the end of 10<sup>th</sup> century, Macedonian seceded from the Bulgarian Empire and established their first and the only country in medieval times led by Macedonians Tsar Samuil. After

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Bulgarian history, Macedonians, Macedonian culture and Macedonian language didn't exist. Hence, different points of view are defined as a historical conflict between Bulgaria and FYROM. Furthermore, later version of this conflict is formalized as official world history and recognized by Bulgaria, Greece and serious historical dealing with the Balkans history (Damyanov, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> The Macedonians have led a very peripheral existence and they had small partake in intellectual, cultural and social progress of Southern Greece. However, the golden period of the Kingdom of Macedonia was under Philip II. During his reign, the Kingdom was politically and military strong, with its enlargement through a series of successful military campaigns, Philip II included a large part of Southern Balkan Peninsula. After dead of Philip II, his son Alexander the Great has established enormous Empire in Europe, Asia and Africa. In that way, he was spreading military and ideological crusade against the Persians (Floudas, n.d.).

the Tsar's reign, Macedonia was ruled by Byzantine Empire<sup>3</sup> (Damyanov, n.d.).

And the last ruler over Macedonia was Ottoman Empire. Therefore, many Balkans countries were under Ottoman Empire, from 14<sup>th</sup> up until early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in some parts of this region (Šorović 2018). In accordance with crucial sphere of influence and regional political order, Ottomans controlled the Balkans territory, including Macedonia<sup>4</sup>, till the end of the Balkan Wars<sup>5</sup>, after which Macedonia was divided among: Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece. But, before the Balkan Wars, from 1903 to 1908, the Macedonian freedom fighters, Damyan Gruev and Georgi Delchev established the organization – VMRO, which main aim was struggle and political independence of Macedonia from Ottomans (Damyanov, n.d.).

### **2.1. Yugoslavia and its dissolution**

Yugoslavia was a political creation of great powers. It was established at the end of World War I. In that period of time, Slovenian, Bosnian and Croat territories (as a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) united with the Serbian Kingdom. But, this creation did not exist for long. During World War II (WWII), the country broke up under the (Nazi) occupation. Thus, Nazi - allies created independent Croat state, which was reunified at the end of War, when communists liberated the country.

After WWII, one of main political priority of the U.S. Government was Yugoslavian unity. Hence, it is important to point out that Yugoslavia made changes in political sphere of influence. Although, it was communist country: in 1948 Yugoslavia broke away from Soviet sphere of influence, in 1961 it become a founding member of Non-Aligned Movement and during the Cold War it adopted less repressive and more decentralized form of government –

---

<sup>3</sup> During the Byzantine and later Ottoman Empire, the term 'Macedonia' is used in geographic sense, because it was covered the boundaries of the former Roman administrative regions of Macedonia. This region was larger than 'historic Macedonia', the core domain of the Macedonian Kingdom in 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. It was inhabited by different Balkan ethnic groups (Floudas, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> During World War I, the Serbian segment of Macedonia was incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (after 1929 it was called Yugoslavia). After World War II, the Serbian segment of Macedonia was incorporated into the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (later, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) (Danforth 2019).

<sup>5</sup> The Balkan Wars consisted of two conflicts, from 1912 to 1913. Also, they are known as wars for independence of the Balkans against Ottoman Empire occupation.

compared with other communist countries of East Europe (The Breakup of Yugoslavia 1990-1992, n.d.).

It is important to mention that in 1944, Tito, the Yugoslavian leader, created a new federal state (consisting of six republics). He renamed the southernmost province, previously known as Vardarska Banovina (i.e. District of Vardar River). The new country name was People's Republic of Macedonia<sup>6</sup> (Floudas, n.d.).

Focusing on the Eastern Europe, there were wide specters of reasons for the Yugoslavia's breakup, ranged from religious and cultural divisions between ethnic groups. However, a series of major political events served as the catalyst for exacerbating inherent tensions in the Yugoslav republic. Following the death of Tito in 1980, provisions of the 1974 constitution provided for the effective devolution of all real power away from the federal government to the republics and autonomous provinces in Serbia by establishing a collective presidency of the eight provincial representatives and a federal government with little control over economic, cultural, and political policy. External factors also had a significant impact. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, the unification of Germany one year later, and the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union all served to erode Yugoslavia's political stability. As Eastern European states moved away from communist government and toward free elections and market economies, the West's attention focused away from Yugoslavia and undermined the extensive economic and financial support necessary to preserve a Yugoslav economy already close to collapse. The absence of a Soviet threat to the integrity and unity of Yugoslavia and its constituent parts meant that a powerful incentive for unity and cooperation was removed' (The Breakup of Yugoslavia 1990-1992, n.d., 1).

For great powers, especially during and after dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Balkans region has become the 'playground' for their strategic accomplishment of diverse interests of several actors (Šorović 2018). Day by day, ethnic tensions and political misunderstandings, led to idea of Yugoslavia's dissolution and politics independence of every Yugoslavian republic.

Furthermore, 'on December 23, 1990 a referendum in Slovenia supporting independence triggered off the chain of events that led to the dissolution of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. In similar referendum on

---

<sup>6</sup> This Republic was constitutive part of federal Yugoslavia. The 'titular nation' name was *Makedontsi* (Macedonians), while, their Macedonian language become one of Yugoslavia's official languages (Floudas, n.d.).

September 8, 1991, a large majority in the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia voted in favor of independence and the Republic duly declared its sovereignty on September 17, 1991. At the same time, it started seeking international recognition as the 'Republic Macedonia' (Floudas, n.d., 3).

## 2.2. Path to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration

*The declaration of independence of Republic of Macedonia's* in 1991 was crucial for establishment of the new country and its recognition on the international level. More precisely, Greece delayed Macedonian recognition by international community and its accession to the United Nations (UN). Main reason was **the inclusion of the term 'Macedonia'** in the declaration of independence in 1991. Also, there were two vital problems which facing the newly country at political scene. It was ensuring for Albanian minority rights (for fully citizenship) and gaining international recognition under its constitutional name, what was underlined with Macedonian membership in international organizations.

Hence, neighbor countries find compromise formula - 'the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' (FYROM). It was used as provisional reference, rather than an official country name. According to it, in April 1993, Macedonia became part of the UN. Following existing practice of this prestigious supranational organization, the international organizations (such as, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) adopted the UN terminology, and with that action, a large number of countries in the international community recognized the country as the **FYROM**. However, Greece was not satisfied with that political decision. It initially refuses to recognize FYROM at all. Hence, it imposed the trade embargo on it, until 1995. The embargo affected on Macedonian economy and damaged it.

In the context of *A 1995 Interim Accord*, neither country was mentioned by name, what led to the stabilization of relations in the Western Balkans. More precisely, with this treaty were defined fundamental frameworks for establishing diplomatic relations between neighbor countries, FYROM and Greece. In that context, FYROM changed its flag (dropping the **Vergina Sun**<sup>7</sup>),

---

<sup>7</sup> The predominant theory of the Vergina Sun represents a simplified symbol, not only for the astral, also in the religious system of the Ancient Greeks and the Macedonians. This symbol usually had 8, 12 or 16 'rays', while in the center was a 'rodakas'). For better understanding, it is important to mention that 'rodakas' means 'flower' and it represented a decorative motif. It had particular importance in the Ancient Greece. On the symbol of the Vergina Sun, a 'rodakas' is putted in the center and it symbolized the Earth on which all the spiritual and material goods are fertilized. On the other side, the number 16 was symbol of completeness and totality. More precisely, the

made amendment to its Constitution and they specifically denied any claims on the Greek territory. On the other side, Greece agreed not to block Macedonian accession to the international organizations and it provided that Macedonia would accede in international community under the name of 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia'. From that moment, Greece became close economic partner and one of the main foreign investor Macedonia (Macedonia's dispute with Greece 2019).

Also, relations between the two countries are improved between 1995 and 2008. Because of their intensified collaboration, it was marked an increased trade and influx of Greek direct investments to the Republic of Macedonia (Dzuvalekovska et al. 2013).

***'The Stabilization and Association Agreement'*** represents a framework document for the further path of the Balkan countries' on the EU integration progress. During the negotiations, it is necessary to abide all deadlines and conditions which the country needs to fulfill in order to become the full EU Member State. Also, this document defines guidelines - general principles for: political dialogue, international cooperation, free movement of people, goods and capital, harmonization of domestic legislation with EU directives, improvement of market competition, cooperation policy, etc. Hence, every country that strives to become the EU Member State needs to comply with the rules and regulations of the EU. In addition, it is important to point out that after the summit in Thessaloniki, the EU sends a clear message that „there are no shortcuts to the EU” (Đurović 2012, 335) and that the accession process is quite complex and „it requires a lot of engagement of all key segments of society in one country” (Đurović 2012, 335). This Agreement confirms the status of a potential candidate for membership in the European Community, but without a precisely defined the date of entry into the EU. In short, the Agreement represents a „waiting room” for country's entry into the EU. Hence, full membership in the EU is based on the individual capacity of the country to accept European criteria and standards, which derive from its affiliated membership' (Đurović 2012, quoted in Šorović 2018, 85-86).

It is important to underline that on April 9, 2001, the Republic of Macedonia was the first country from the Western Balkans who signed a

---

complete Vergina Sun set symbol consists of the four elements (that constituted the world in the Ancient time): the Earth, the Ocean, the Air and the Fire, while the four quadrants (created by vertical axes) are placed the 12 gods.

Those symbols, the archeologists have discovered on Hellenistic coins, vases, etc. However, after 1977, the symbol of the Vergina Sun was connected with the Dynasty of Philip II and his son, Alexander the Great (LATO, n.d.).

**Stabilisation and Association Agreement** with the European Union, in light of the worryingly rise of the ethnic tensions between the Albanian minority and Slavic majority in the country. This document granted the Republic of Macedonia the candidate status for the EU membership in 2005, but it still is waiting for starting the accession process (Cvijic 2009).

'**The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)** for aim has stabilization and regional cooperation between countries of the Western Balkans. The first phase of the SAP begins with the establishment of a dialogue, in the form of the regular meetings between representatives of the European Commission and the potential candidate for the EU Member State, and finishes with the publication of the Feasibility Study (by the side of the European Commission, which represents the readiness and the ability of the country to fulfill the necessary conditions arising from the Agreement on Stabilization and Association). Therefore, this Agreement represents an international agreement between the EU and country, which is the legal framework for mutual cooperation, as well as approximation to EU values and standards. By concluding this Agreement, the country confirms the status of a potential candidate for EU membership, without defining whether the country may join the EU: start the institutionalization relations of the country with the EU' (Mihanović 2005, quoted in Šorović 2018, 86).

The **Ohrid Framework Agreement** represents a key instrument for maintaining inter-ethnic harmony in FRYOM. More precisely, the Albanian minority conflict is resolved by constitutional changes led by many international organizations: the EU, NATO, OSCE and the United States (Damyanov, n.d.). It was signed on August 13, 2001, 'and ended Macedonia's armed conflict between Albanian rebels and Macedonian security forces' (European Stability Initiative, n.d., 1). This *Agreement* was main pillar for country progress on path to becoming a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious and stabile society, towards its goal in the EU and NATO integration process. Hence, with the *Ohrid Framework Agreement*, FYROM is stabilized its political institutions, passed legislation reforms and create the room for more equitable ethnic representation in public institutions (Ibid.). However, 'the *Ohrid Framework* which came out as a solution and compromise between Macedonians and Albanians could be very useful and serve as a guiding tool which gives hope that any current ethnic conflict between Bulgaria and FYROM could be resolved and any future conflict could be prevented preserving and sustaining the ethnical peace and good neighborly relations' (Damyanov, n.d., 32-33).

In 2003, The European Council adopted **The Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: Moving towards European integration** at the

**Thessaloniki Summit**, where it was announced that 'the future of the Balkans lies in the EU' (The Thessaloniki agenda for the Western Balkans 2003, quoted in Šorović 2018, 85). 'At this summit, the countries of the Western Balkans have been given the promise that with their certain progresses and reforms process, those countries will become the EU Member States' (Šorović 2018, 85).

At the **NATO summit in Bucharest**, in April 2008, Macedonian government and UN mediator, Matthew Nimetz presented proposals – including the name 'Republic of Macedonia (Skopje)'. But, Greece rejected all proposals and vetoed the Macedonian accession to Euro-Atlantic integration. Hence, the Greek veto was clear example of breach of the 1995 *Interim Accord* (Office of the Historians, Bureau of Public Affairs). This Greek political decision presented the deterioration in mutual neighbor trust. More precisely, with that stand, Greece was drawing of red lines in negotiations, which for its purpose had denied of the Macedonia's national, cultural and linguistic identity. After this summit, Macedonia filed an application for a ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legality of action of Greece, at the Bucharest summit. Hence, in December 2011, the ICJ confirmed that Greece had breached the *Interim Accord* by blocking Macedonia's membership of NATO. It is important to mention that the terms of the *Interim Accord* obliged Greece not to obstruct the integration process of Republic of Macedonia within the international organizations, because the provisional reference are established in the aforementioned UN Resolution (Dzuvalekovska et al. 2013).

The **Berlin Process** is a summit dedicated to the Western Balkans, 'whose main goal was to reach a common agreement on strengthening regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and establishing a four year framework (2014-2018) for resolving all the remaining outstanding issues in the region' (Berlinski proces 2016, quoted in Šorović 2018, 85).

The **Prespa Agreement** is the most important document for establishing the 'new' country in the Western Balkans. It was signed beside the Prespa Lake, **on June 17, 2018**, between the two neighbor's countries, North Macedonia and Greece. Hence, this Agreement is ratified by the Macedonia's and Greece's parliament, on January 25, 2019 and went into force on February 12, 2019. Following that fact, on this date, the name of the country was changed from the Republic of Macedonia to **the Republic of North Macedonia (North Macedonia)**. Citizens of North Macedonia are called '**Macedonians/citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia**' who speak '**Macedonian**' language (family of South Slavic languages). Furthermore, this

*Agreement* replaced A 1995 *Interim Accord*, following on that way the *NATO Accession Protocol* on February 6, 2019 (Danforth 2019).

By this *Agreement* are précised and defined the terms 'Macedonia' and 'Macedonian' in historical and cultural heritage context. Thus, North Macedonia left by side the disassociation with the Ancient Hellenic civilization, developed in historical Macedonia. Also, North Macedonia revised its Constitution, in aim to ensure full domestically application of the *Agreement* and in the same time to revise/eliminate all passages that could be taken to imply aspirations towards Greece and Greek nation (Tzifakis 2019).

However, political system in Greece has putted by side the social cohesion and quality of democracy. The resolution of the name issue represents a main positive development in the Western Balkans, bringing consolidation and stability in the region and advancement in the European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Because of that, the resolution of the *Agreement* had a serious paradox. There were huge discrepancy between the political views of Greek society (against any compromise on the matter) and its elected representatives in the Parliament and most political parties on the other side. In that order, political parties have used the resolution of the conflict as an opportunity to adjust their tactics and score points at the parliamentary elections. On that way, combination of the name dispute with the electoral consideration has established polarization of politics in Greece (dichotomies: 'patriots-traitors' and 'pragmatists-ultranationalists'). Taking all these aspects into account, the 'Macedonian Question' has been latent conflict for almost three decades. But, despite of that, there has never been any serious country debate in order to inform the people about real state, just strong emotional arguments connected with the self-determined account established in historical origins of the Ancient Macedonia. Also, long and existed economic crisis in country influenced that Greeks feel like they have already paid too heavy price (materially and symbolically). In this regard, the NATO partners have unequivocally supported the resolution, by which is affirmed and served the international over Greek interests (Ibid.).

### **3. The 'Macedonian Question'**

It is the fact that the conflict about a name is very sensitive and, in the same time, a quite difficult question. But, the right of self-determination of a nation is undisputed for every country in the world and it is corroborated by a whole series of legal acts, from the UN to the Council of Europe. However, it is really difficult to negotiate if myths, the Balkans nationalist legends and the controversial history are involved in it. Besides of all that, so much blood and

young life were spilled in this part of the Balkans, from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through the Balkan and World Wars, until the Civil War from 1946 to 1949, which was run mainly in Greek Macedonia. Hence, it is almost impossible to conduct political talks, if it is word about the negotiation process on identity issues (which are the most delicate for each country, especially for the Western Balkans region) (Lukač 2016).

However, the 'Macedonian Question' becomes the longest lasting dispute at the political scene in the recent history. 'The issue was easily being dismissed as the product of the intransigence of two typically nationalistic Balkan countries' (Kolozova 2019, 1). In addition, one of the best given explications of the name dispute is on the best way defined and explained by the statement on the website of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs (now is taken down): 'the use of the name expresses claims on Greek cultural heritage, history, and, hence, identity and this in itself constitutes "irredentism". That is, the dispute was about history and identity, and not the territory'(Kolozova 2019, 1).

Historically, **“the geographical term 'Macedonia' is a Greek word and was used in antiquity to designate the area inhabited by the Macedonians, 'the tall ones', apparently on account of the distinguishing physical height of this tribe”** (Floudas, n.d., 1). Also, this term represents the culture of Ancient Macedonians which is connected with the Hellenistic nation, as a part of the Greek-historical heritage. The term 'Macedonia' geographically refers the wider region of several Balkan countries - the largest part is in Greece, where 2.5 million Greeks for centuries live as Macedonians. Therefore, the Greek government has identified three issues for the alleged Macedonian aspiration for expansion: the country name of Macedonia, the national flag contains the Vergina Sun and the Constitution of November 17, 1991, which in Article 49 required the protection of minorities and the cultural promotion of Macedonians abroad (Lukač 2016).

The Former Prime Minister of Greece Konstantinos Mitsotakis and many nationally oriented Greeks considered that term 'Macedonia' had always been Greek and it is related to the territory of Greece. Besides that, the Vergina Sun with the sixteen rays, which origin dated from the historical emblem of the Ancient Macedonian Royal family Philip II, father of Alexander the Great. On the other side, the critics of the Greek position claimed that it is unlikely that the FRYOM with only two million inhabitants and 10,000 modestly armed soldiers would attack a well-equipped Greek army of 122.000 soldiers. Also, they pointed out that the Greek Constitution, in Article 108 prescribes the Athens care about the Greek diaspora. In accordance with it, Macedonia, in

the same way, just like Greece, wants to take care of its people who do not live within the borders of Macedonia (Lukač 2016).

The dispute over Macedonia's constitutional name dates from 1991, after the collapse of Yugoslavia and the peacefully declare independence of the Republic of Macedonia, on September 17, 1991. Despite that fact, the breakthrough in the Greek-Macedonian relationship was achieved on September 13, 1995, thanks to the *Provisional Agreement*. This bilateral problem was solved thanks to the fact that Macedonia changed its state flag in a way that the Sun with sixteen rays was replaced by the Sun with eight rays. As a counteroffensive, Greece abolished a one-sided economic blockade. The two neighbor countries have agreed on mutual recognition of their sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence (Ibid.).

In December 2016, at the parliamentary elections, pro-Western government led by Zoran Zaev came to power. His government wanted to Macedonia made progress at the path of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, leaving history by side and finding solution for better future of Macedonian society. In accordance with it, North Macedonia signed with Greece the *Prespa Agreement*, on June 17 2018. The main aim of this political agreement was resolving, nearly thirty years standing name dispute between the two Balkans nations.

The *Prespa Agreement* represents the enduring attraction of European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the Western Balkans countries. More precisely, Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev, Foreign minister Nikola Dimitrov and Macedonian government have embarked on a compromise solution, in order to secure the entry of their country into NATO and eventually the EU, under the compromise name 'North Macedonia'. On the Greek side were Prime Minister of Greece Alexis Tsipras and Foreign minister Nikos Kotzias (Armakolas et al. 2019).

The two neighbor countries had obligation to recognize each other's concerns, in the order to address them. The Greek side was underline that the term 'Macedonia' laid a claim on the Hellenistic nation, as a part of the Greek-historical heritage and its identity. The Macedonian side had justified fear, that, with the change of the name of the country, it would delete and throw away its national history, identity and language (Kolozova 2019). Hence, in Article 7 of the *Prespa Agreement*, North Macedonia and Greece addressed these issues recognizing that the term 'Macedonian' could have two different meaning at the same time: 'for the Macedonian side, it means nationality, ethnic belonging and a South Slavic language, whereas, for the Greek side, it refers to the cultural heritage of Ancient Greece and the legacy of the Kingdom of Phillip and Alexander of Macedon'(Kolozova 2019, 1).

More precisely, in the *Prespa Agreement*, in Article 8 is defined that 'within six months following the entry into force of this 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 2018, 10) North Macedonia 'shall review the status of monuments, public buildings and infrastructure on its territory, and in so far as they refer in any way to ancient Hellenic history and civilization constituting an integral component of the historic or cultural patrimony' of the Greece 'shall take appropriate corrective action to effectively address the issue and ensure respect of the said patrimony' (Ibid). Also, the similar story is with the symbol formerly displayed on Macedonian former national flag, which needs to be changed. In accordance with the recommendations of the UN Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, the two countries shall abide to use the official geographical names and toponyms in the territory of the other country. Additionally, after one month of the signing of this Agreement, the two countries 'shall establish a joint Inter-Disciplinary Committee of Experts on historic, archaeological and educational matters, to consider the objective, scientific interpretation of historical events based on authentic, evidence-based and scientifically sound historical sources and archaeological findings' (Ibid. 2018, 10). In that way, they will revise textbooks, atlases, teaching guides, official documents, maps etc., in accordance with the aims and main principles of UNESCO and the Council of Europe. Thus, the Committee shall set specific timetables for the ensuring countries that will not being used any material that contains any revisionist references. Also, at least two times per year, the Committee shall submit an Annual Report on its activities and recommendations, approved by the High-Level Cooperation Council. On the other hand, between Athens and Skopje is intensified cooperation in different area: in the context of the international and regional organizations, political and societal cooperation, economic cooperation, cooperation on the fields of education, science, culture, research, technology, health and sports, police and civil protection cooperation, defense cooperation, etc. (Ibid. 2018, 10-16).

Besides the fact that the *Prespa Agreement* undermines the Macedonian identity, in Greece, between 60 and 70% of population is against this Agreement. Furthermore, even though this dispute, 'North Macedonia has had a virtual monopoly on it for at least the past 27 years. There is a sense in Greek society that the agreement was imposed by foreign players, specifically "the West", and that the name was "given away", with Greece getting essentially nothing in return' (Filis 2019, 1). Because of that political dissatisfaction, the

Greeks created an expression 'painful national compromise' (Filis 2019, 1), in order to represent the general disappointment. However, in long term, the *Prespa Agreement* could be 'a catalyst for convergence between the two sides, with Greece influencing in a positive way its northern neighbor's engagement with the West, which may gradually restrain nationalist dynamics in North Macedonia' (Ibid.).

Also, with this *Agreement*, the principle of the Macedonia's self-determination is reaffirmed. In the same time, it was negotiated the inclusion of the Slavic and Hellenic signifiers. In order to achieve the *Agreement* between two conflict sides, it was used sensitive rhetoric and redouble effort, in a way which was delicate to their political cultures, history, national identity and concerns. And, in the end, the Prime Ministers have been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, because this *Agreement* provides stability and prosperity in North Macedonia and Greece, what is good basis for the security of the Western Balkans and the whole Europe. Hence, this resolution of name dispute (between neighbor countries), will be defined in their history as a great vision and huge sense of responsibility of the two Prime Ministers (Koložova 2019).

It is important to mention that the 'Macedonian Question' again entered at the political scene in the second half of 2017. The opposition parties leading by New Democracy party tried to link Novartis scandal<sup>8</sup> with the negotiations on the opened name dispute, stating in that way that ruling party SYRIZA retailed national interest in order to remain in power. In this light, nationalist adopted uncompromising attitudes on this emotional issue, as a result of the Prime Minister Tsipras and SYRIZA government (Armakolas et al. 2019).

Early phase of negotiations was very pessimistic. There were many reasons for it. Public debate in Greece was very limited, ('for or against' the name solution) because of that, most of Greek population considered this solution as an unacceptable. Also, in recent years, the importance and influence of 'mainstream' media radically reduced. Last, but not least important is the regional dimension of opposition to the name dispute. Opinion polls presented that a majority across entire country opposes compromise solution (Ibid.). 'However, attitudes are much more hardened in Northern Greece (Thessaloniki, Greek Macedonia regions, Thrace, and parts of central Greece). Conservatism and nationalism are more salient in Northern Greece as a result of developments in the last century, and especially

---

<sup>8</sup> For more information about Novartis scandal, see for example here: <http://www.politico.eu/article/greece-politics-novartis-scandal-pharmaceutical-whistleblower/>

the traumatic experience of the Greek civil war (1940s) during which many Slavic speaking inhabitants sided with the rebel Communist Army, a move widely seen in Greece as an effort for a violent carve-up of Greek Macedonia' (Ibid. 2019, 5).

At the end of 2018, after rallies (in Thessaloniki and Athens), things are looked more optimistic.

#### **4. International community**

In recent years, North Macedonia has commanded attention to political scene of the Western Balkans. Thus, with special attention, I try to analyze how international community (the EU, Russia and the Western Balkans) has impact on the new Balkans country and mention main neighbor conflicts connected to its previous political establishment.

##### **4.1. The European Union**

It is the fact that the European Union (EU) has been faced by a succession of crises in last few years: the aftershocks of the global financial meltdown in 2008, which affected on the Eurozone's foundations; Russia as a geopolitical challenge; war in Syria – the Migration Crisis and asylum seekers in 2015 – 2016 and Brexit as the special Union question.

Hence, the European community is not yet completely secure to deal with the daunting problem – task of international consolidation. Besides all previous the EU tasks, Skopje-Athens negotiation over name dispute reached in June 2018. In accordance with it, the EU and NATO made crucial decision on the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of North Macedonia: the EU's General Affairs Council, on June 26, put North Macedonia on the path toward opening accession negotiations in 2019, while, on July 11, NATO invited North Macedonia to start with accession negotiations. More precisely, both political decisions were based on rewarding North Macedonia for signing the *Prespa Agreement*, on June 16. Also, country has changed political regime who took place in 2017 and it puts North Macedonia into democratic transformation, after a decade of country capture of VMRO-DPMNE (ruling) party.

Germany as important player on political scene has supported North Macedonia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration process in Western Balkans. Thus, Germany puts efforts on the EU and the West to manage the 2015-2017 political crises in this country (Armakolas et al. 2019).

After a while, the skepticism about the EU enlargement is left by side, thus, Germany was approved the opening of the EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia, 'but that the opening of the first negotiation chapters

should be conditional of the implementation of certain reforms (in the areas of justice and public administration reforms, the fight against corruption and organized crime) (Ibid. 2019, 10).

However, France has had valid reasons for its skepticism (Albanian issue). In mid-June 2018, at traditional biannual intergovernmental talks between Germany and France at Marseberg, French President Emmanuel Macron 'insisted there should be no further steps toward EU enlargement before the May 2019 elections for the European Parliament' (Ibid. 2019, 11).

From the establishment of the EU, the EU enlargement was trademark policy. Following the previous Union practice, 'the EU needs to remain an interesting Community that would attract Eastern countries, from the edge of the continent, without *enlargement fatigue*' (Šorović 2018, 2). With that concept, there would be space for every country to spread and share common Union's values and freedoms, building ties between the EU and the Western Balkans countries.

#### **4.2. Russia**

During the centuries, Russia has had interests to control the Balkans region, as important counterbalance area to the West. Through diplomatic channels and with mediation role, Russia tries to remain an important player who is fighting for post-Soviet space.

Obstructionism of Russia has a function in confrontation with the United States and the EU. The culmination of this 'clashes of civilization' is triggered by Crimea's annexation. Thus, relations between the Western countries and Russia in South Eastern Europe weren't completely based on zero-sum conception. There are evident overlapping interests in this area (through energy infrastructure). In recent time, South Macedonia is 'playground' for great powers.

Following the previous, between 2015 and 2017, some political analysts have described the Macedonian political crisis 'as a continuation of the standoff between Vladimir Putin's Russia and the West'(Arnakolas et al. 2019, 1). The previous Prime Minister of North Macedonia Nikola Gruevski 'remained rhetorically committed to the European Union and NATO, he put considerable effort into building up ties with the Russians. For instance, Skopje and Moscow developed plans to supply the country with gas. Russian companies have invested in other parts of energy sector' (Ibid. 2019, 13). When is word about the *Prespa Agreement*, Russian attitude about it has been ambivalent, although, the Foreign Ministry of Russia Sergey Lavrov welcomed the compromise. On the other hand, Russia continues to express its opposition to North Macedonia's entrance to NATO. Because of that, Russia's

*soft power* is used in disinformation campaigns and proactive measures to boost nationalism in both country, North Macedonia and Greece, and, in the same time, it is in accordance with its policy of pushing back against the West.

In this scenario, North Macedonia as member of NATO is finished political 'business' dating back to 1990s. For the West, this information is great political victory, in way to contain Russia away from the post-Yugoslav space. Also, it is important to underline that NATO would be 'bridge' between the ethnic divide in North Macedonia, as well as supra-national organization with aim to boost and secure internal and external security (Ibid. 2019).

### **4.3. The Western Balkans**

The implementation of the *Prespa Agreement* was successful. In accordance with it, the countries of the Balkans region will increase pressure to resolve all bilateral issues (primary relations between Serbia and Kosovo).

During the previous year, Bulgaria questioned the distinctiveness of the Macedonian language and nation. Thus, this 'neighbor problem' has roots down deep in the history of those two nations and the ethnical origin of today's North Macedonians. Hence, 'Bulgarians claim Macedonians are Bulgarians and have Bulgarian history while Macedonians deny it and claim they are Macedonians with their own history' (Damyanov, n.d., 6).

Between Bulgaria and North Macedonia was signed and ratification the *Treaty on friendship, good neighborly relations and cooperation*. During the Bulgarian presidency of the EU the *Treaty* came into force. Thanks to this *Treaty*, both countries recognized territorial integrity, led by side the different views on history and focused on cooperation in economy, culture and infrastructure. Hence, Agreement is a basis for Bulgarian political action and neighbor country support to join NATO and the EU. Hence, in short period of time, Bulgaria changed its external policy (from suspicious neighbor to a strong supporter and promoter of North Macedonia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. On the other side, Serbia took five years to recognize North Macedonia as an independent country. However, the Serbian Orthodox Church didn't accept the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

Relations between North Macedonia and Serbia become tense since change of government in Skopje. More precisely, previous Prime Minister of North Macedonia Nikola Gruevski enjoyed strong support from the Prime Minister of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić and his ruling party. However, with come into power new government in Skopje, relations between those two countries are changed. New government of North Macedonia is defined as a creation of a 'Great Albania' who plays into the Albanians hands, in favor of the dissolution of North Macedonia (Armakolas et al. 2019).

## 5. Conclusion

The identity dispute is not supposed to be happening on the European continent, especially in 21<sup>st</sup> century. Because of that, the 'Macedonian Question' should be used as a 'potent reminder of the considerable influence that nationalistic divides have always exerted in the Balkan region' (Floudas, n.d., 1).

The dispute resolution is a historic achievement and represents 'new chapter' in the relations of two neighbor countries. Although, this emotional issue was a previously latent conflict that has touched so deep in the fundamental pillars of the two nations. The claim of Greece to a 'virtual' ownership of the name 'Macedonia' was very irritating, but history and numbers prove their point of view. Greek Macedonia is the largest country region, with a large population and the electoral weight big enough to make the 'Macedonian Question' important matter in Greek politics (Liaras 2018).

On the presidential elections, on May 5, 2019, North Macedonia elected the pro-Western candidate, Stevo Pendarovski, supported by the ruling Social Democrats. The result of the elections is defined as a victory of the pro-European and Euro-Atlantic integration process (with the 51,66% in a run-off vote), and in the President's words it was characterized as 'our ticket to Europe' (Smith 2019, 1). Now, the new government, leading by President Pendarovski, has enormous responsibility in order to fully implement the *Agreement*. It is a sensitive area and because of that he could make turnover in the North Macedonia's domestic and international politics, putting in danger, on that way, the previous *Agreement* ratification. The politics is the art of possible. Hence, the time will give us all the answers.

Although, North Macedonia had needed to face with the loss of identity, the resolution of the 'Macedonia Question' is an excellent example for the Western Balkan region and it represents an excellent model for resolving other difficult disputes that still exist in the political (international) community. The resolution of the name dispute between the two Balkans countries sends clear message in the world – 'nationalism is defeated'. In that order, it is evident that 27-year conflict is resolved through political dialogue and border collaboration, using history as a lecture, not as a mistake from the past. In that way, 'the powder keg of Europe' is presented as a friendly political area which by joint action neighbor countries invest in future, promoting the regional stability, security, prosperity and neighbor relations of the Western Balkans'.

The 'Macedonian Question' finished with the provocative fear on Greek side, overcoming the obstacles, imposed by wrong information and many misunderstandings, which for the main purpose have wrong perception of

name 'Macedonia', established in historical and geographical claims, rooted in possible territorial demands over Greece. Hence, the *Prespa Agreement* will normalize the relations between two countries with *win-win* outcome. On that way, North Macedonia and Greece will improve regional stability, echoing the view of the Western countries that see NATO and the EU membership as the best way of preserving peace and stability in the Balkan region. In accordance with the previous, the summer of 2019 will be marked in international community as North Macedonia's the European and Euro-Atlantic integration process. More precisely, NATO will welcome its 30<sup>th</sup> member state, while the EU will expect to start with North Macedonian membership negotiations. Also, it is time that North Macedonia proves as an important partner of the EU who helps in reducing the extent of the Migration Crisis - asylum seekers from the Middle East (because of popularity of the Balkans migrant route).

## References

Armakolas Ioannis, Bandovic Igor, Bechev Dimitar and Weber Bodo. 2019. *North Macedonia: What's next?* Publication. Brussels: Open Society, European Policy Institute. <http://opensocietyfoundations.org>. Accessed April 15, 2019.

Berlinski proces. 2016.

<http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/spoljna-politika/eu/regionalna-saradnja/2016-11-04-09-04-26?lang=lat>. Accessed April 12, 2018.

Casule, Mircela Dzuvalekovska, Lozanoska, Jana, Kaczorowski, Maciej, Tasev, Donče, Rušev, Trajče and Antonov, Dragan. 2013. *The name Dispute Revisited*. Skopje: Macedonian Information Centre.

Cvijic, Srdjan. 2009. *Macedonia: what's in a name - and behind it?* Commentary under the auspices of the EPC's Balkan Forum. *European Policy Centre*. <http://www.epc.eu>. Accessed May 2, 2019.

Damyantov, Hristo. N.d. "The conflict for the name 'Macedonia' between Greece and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in regards to the application of FYROM to become a Member State of the European Union." Anr. 292595.

Danforth, Loring. 2019. "North Macedonia." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <http://www.britannica.com>. Accessed May 8, 2019.

Đurović, Gordana. 2012. "Evropska unija i Crna Gora-politika proširenja." Podgorica: Univerzitet Crne Gore-Ekonomski fakultet, 319-320.

European Stability Initiative. 2012. "Macedonia's dispute with Greece." Berlin-Brussels-Istanbul.  
<http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=562>. Accessed April 22, 2019.

European Stability Initiative, N.d. The Ohrid Agreement and its implementation. Berlin-Brussels-Istanbul.  
<http://www.esiweb.org>. Accessed May 8, 2019.

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. 2018.  
<http://www.ekathimerini.com>. Accessed May 8, 2019.

Filis, Constantinos. 2019. *After Prespa: Could the North Macedonia name agreement fall apart?* European Council on Foreign Relations. Commentary.  
[https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_after\\_prespa\\_could\\_the\\_north\\_macedonia\\_name\\_agreement\\_fall\\_apart](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_after_prespa_could_the_north_macedonia_name_agreement_fall_apart). Accessed April 28, 2019.

Kolozova, Katerina. 2019. "How the Balkans solved a Balkan problem." *Aljazeera*.  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/balkans-solved-balkan-problem-190220144133934.html>. Accessed April 3, 2019.

LATO. N.d. The symbol of Vergina: the unknown symbolisms behind the rays of a much-discussed 'Sun'.  
<https://griekse-les.nl/the-symbol-of-vergina-the-unknown-symbolisms-behind-the-rays-of-a-much-discussed-sun/>. Accessed May 7, 2019.

Liaras, Evangelos. 2018. The Last Chapter Of The Macedonian Question?  
<https://www.socialeurope.eu/the-last-chapter-of-the-macedonian-question>. Accessed May 4, 2019.

Lukač, Afrodita. 2016. Izazovi procesa pristupanja zemalja kandidata za članstvo u EU na primjerima Turske i Makedonije. Magistarski rad. Podgorica: Univerzitet Crne Gore-Fakultet političkih nauka.

Mihanović, Dino. 2005. "Granice (EU)rope." *Politička misao*, Vol. XLII, br. 3, 141-155.

Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs United States. N.d. The Breakup of Yugoslavia 1990-1992.  
<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1989-1992/breakup-yugoslavia>. Accessed March 3, 2019.

Smith, Helena. 2019. "Our ticket to Europe': North Macedonia elects pro-western president." *The Guardian*.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/06/north-macedonia-elects-pro-western-president>. Accessed May 5, 2019.

Sofos, Spiros. 2013. "Beyond the Intractability of the Greek-Macedonian Dispute." In *The Name Dispute Revisited*, edited by M. Casule, 223-239. Skopje: Macedonian Information Center.

Šorović, Mira. 2018. "Importance and Role of Turkey in the Western Balkans." *Research in Social Change* 10(2): 83-104.

Tzifakis, Nikolaos. 2019. "What the ratification of the Prespa Agreement means for Greek politics?" *The London School of Economics and Political Science*.  
<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/01/30/what-the-ratification-of-the-prespa-agreement-means-for-greek-politics/>. Accessed August 8, 2019.