

AVİM
AVRASYA İNCELEMELERİ MERKEZİ
CENTER FOR EURASIAN STUDIES

FLAWED MEMBERSHIP PROCESS: THE CASE OF NORTH MACEDONIA - 05.11.2021

Havanur ÖLMEZ

-

Uep Rapor No: 6
05.11.2021

Havanur ÖLMEZ

Traineeship Program Participant

INTRODUCTION

The geography of Macedonia has hosted great empires throughout history. For this reason, it has always been subject to migrations. Migrations caused North Macedonia to be very diverse in terms of ethnic identity. This diversity of ethnic identity has been a problem for North Macedonia in every period of history and continues to be today.

After the fall of Yugoslavia, North Macedonia declared its independence on September 17, 1991, and continues to exist today. The Balkans geography of North Macedonia is of great strategic importance because it is almost a mini-Balkan with its ethnic elements. In addition, its central location increases the strategic importance of North Macedonia. All these reasons make North Macedonia essential for the European Union. North Macedonia is important in finding a solution to the instability caused by the ethnic identity debates in the Balkans and the EU's effectiveness in the Balkan geography. The importance of the EU for North Macedonia is that it needs the transformative power of the EU to overcome the social and economic crises it has experienced especially, after its independence.

In 2004, North Macedonia started EU membership negotiations. However, full membership has not yet been realized. Among the main reasons for this situation were the ethnic identity debates of North Macedonia. She has been in these disputes with Bulgaria and

Greece, both neighbors and EU member countries on that matter, and this dispute. The name dispute with Greece, the ethnic identity, and the language dispute with Bulgaria slowed down the EU membership process of North Macedonia.. In this study, the history of North Macedonia will be summarized, and the roots of the problem with Greece and Bulgaria will be examined. By using the theories of nationalism, it will be determined what the motivation is in the problems of North Macedonia with these two countries. Then, the EU membership process will be examined, and the effects of this process in domestic politics will be examined.

1. THEORY

Each state determines the foreign policy to be followed by taking into account the conditions of the international system. While forming foreign policies, of course, it cannot be considered separately from domestic politics. Domestic and foreign policy mutually affect each other. Every society has its own identity and sensitivities. Since domestic and foreign policies are intertwined, the accuracy of societies affects foreign policy. Sensitivities of societies may emerge as the interests of states in foreign policy. In this study, the membership process of North Macedonia to the EU will be examined, taking into account the constructivist theory.

North Macedonia is a state with many sensitivities because it contains many ethnic elements. Mainly, these sensitivities appear in the issue of membership to the EU, which has an essential place in its foreign policy. To better understand these sensitivities of North Macedonia, it is necessary to examine the nation-building process. While studying study, primordialism, one of the nationalist theories, will be used to distinguish the identity and sensitivities of the North Macedonian society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the postgraduate study by Rejhan Gjul, the integration process of North Macedonia to the EU has been examined. Social constructivism theory has been used in this study. As the history of North Macedonia is mentioned, the past of the current problems is looked at. The name problem with Greece has been emphasized. How to solve this problem is explained in detail. The focus is on North Macedonia's relations with the EU. The reforms that should be carried out in the EU membership process are mentioned. At the end of the study, ethnic problems and unemployment problems of North Macedonia has mentioned.

Greek and Macedonian nationalism has mentioned in the article written by Sündüs Adaş and Emrah Konuralp. The theories of nationalism have been used in this study. The historical context of the problem between North Macedonia and Greece has been mentioned.

In Gönül Tezcan's article, developments have been examined in North Macedonia's domestic and foreign policy from Gruevski to Zaev. In this article, firstly, the deadlocks in

domestic and foreign policy were determined then, how these problems have been solved has been examined. Finally, attention has been drawn to the policy differences between Gruevski and Zaev. In addition, it is placed in a historical context to make sense of the policies of the two politicians.

In Selim Vatandaş's article, the EU process of North Macedonia has been examined. While examining this process, North Macedonia-EU relations have been mentioned. In addition, the problems faced by North Macedonia in this process have been examined.

In Murat Derin's article, the debates on the name of North Macedonia have been examined. The process leading to the Prespa Agreement, which is the solution to this problem, is discussed. It has been mentioned how this problem between Greece and North Macedonia is a problem in terms of security in the region.

When we look at the literature, in general, the problems faced by North Macedonia in the EU membership process have been mentioned. While addressing these problems, the historical process has been examined. There are sources in the literature with the countries where it has a problem. However, the missing point in the literature is how the EU membership process is reflected in the internal dynamics of North Macedonia. When referring to the foreign policy of North Macedonia, the forgotten point was its domestic policy. Examination of internal and external dynamics together is substantial in terms of making a correct analysis. However, the number of sources addressing this point in the EU process of North Macedonia is very much low. The reason for this situation is that most of the sources written in the literature are written with a particular point of view. This perspective ignored how the people of North Macedonia have been shocked by the EU harmonization process.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The geography of Macedonia has been under the sovereignty of many states throughout history. For this reason, it contains many ethnic elements together. Today, it is necessary to look at the historical process to understand the relations of North Macedonia with Greece and Bulgaria, which have problems in the EU membership process.

When taking into consideration theories of nationalism, it is seen that the problem between Greece and North Macedonia is actually about who first existed in the region. In the theories of nationalism, this situation is explained by the primitive theory. According to primitive theory, nations have natural boundaries. Today's nations have been together for centuries. Only the form of nations has changed. The essence they have in themselves remains the same.[1] Here is the root of the name problem between North Macedonia and Greece. Is the core of the nation in the region based on Greece or North Macedonia? Who first settled in the area in question? This question, which concerns centuries ago, confronted North Macedonia during the EU membership process.

Greece had to base its historical and cultural origins on a point to ensure the unity of the Greek nation in the nation-building process. For this, she chose the Hellenic history and

culture as old and her own as possible. Therefore, they included the Macedonians in their history as part of the tremendous Hellenic culture. While doing so, they recreated Alexander the Great, who played a vital role in the spread of Hellenic culture, not as a Macedonian, but as a ruler who was the protector of Greek civilization and united the Greeks.[2] By basing its history on pre-Orthodox Greece, it could lay claim to Macedonian lands. Since Greece has landed in Aegean Macedonia, they saw the adoption of the Macedonian name as the name of the country of the Macedonian population as a threat to them.

The origin of the problem between Bulgaria and North Macedonia dates back to the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878. Russia wanted to establish a great Bulgaria with the Treaty of San Stefano in the Balkans. However, this treaty was later nullified by the signing of the Berlin Treaty. Then, on October 8, 1912, the First Balkan War broke out. This war seems to be a war of the Balkan nations united against the Ottomans. However, at the end of the war, the other Balkan states thought Bulgaria had taken too much land, and Second Balkan War took place. The main reason for the outbreak of the Balkan War II was the dispute over Macedonian territory. Ultimately, as a result of the Balkan War, the Treaty of Bucharest was signed, and Macedonian lands were divided into three. Greece got Aegean Macedonia, Serbia got Vardar Macedonia.

Bulgaria, on the other hand, took Pirin Macedonia, the smallest Macedonian territory. For this reason, the dream of "Great Bulgaria" promised to Bulgaria with the San Stefano Treaty has not been realized. [3]. This situation has led to the emergence of expansionist tendencies of Bulgaria against Macedonia. These expansionist tendencies reached the point where the Macedonian identity was denied by the Bulgarians. Bulgarians deny this, although they speak the Slavic language spoken by the Macedonians. This problem between Bulgaria and North Macedonia can also be associated with the primitive theory. Its basis is due to Bulgaria's claim to have been in the Macedonian region before. Even though they share a similar Slavic origin, neither Bulgaria nor North Macedonia claims this. It accepts the borders of Bulgaria within the dream of "Great Bulgaria" as its "natural" borders. For this reason, expansionist tendencies have formed. The Slavic identity that was "given" to the Bulgarians has not been given to the Macedonians.

Macedonia was part of Serbia when World War I ended. For this reason, Macedonia was in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. After World War II, it became one of the six founding republics within the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia. Thanks to Tito, the leader of Yugoslavia, unity was achieved among the six constituent republics. Tito used Macedonia as a buffer against the expansionist ambitions of Serbians and Bulgarians. For this reason, Tito gave importance to the acceleration of Macedonia's nation-building process.[4] Macedonia had a more territorial understanding of the nation before Yugoslavia broke up. In other words, she prioritized the Yugoslav identity above the Macedonian identity. During the disintegration of Yugoslavia, other republics were in favor of disintegration. However, North Macedonia favored unity. Undoubtedly, one of the biggest reasons for this is that Macedonia is aware of the problems it will experience after disintegration.[5] Thusly, the nation-building process of Macedonia, which declared its independence in 1991, has been a problem for other states in the region. This situation is one of the

biggest problems of Macedonia today.

4. EU ACCESSION PROCESS

The former Yugoslav republics, which became independent after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, needed the transformative power of the EU. The EU, on the other hand, wanted to incorporate the Balkan states into itself to ensure stability and security in the region. As a newly independent country, North Macedonia needed the transformative power of the EU to solve its problems such as human rights, minorities, and economy.

North Macedonia is the only state that is left without violence from the six states that separated from Yugoslavia during the independence process. It has also become an independent state without conflict, although a quarter of its population has been made up of the Albanian minority. EU representatives considered this as a success. The Badinter Commission, which was established to determine which of the states that left Yugoslavia could join the EU, determined North Macedonia as an internationally recognizable country in 1991.[6] In 2004, it applied to the EU as one of the five candidate countries. In 2005, the European Council gave its positive opinion for North Macedonia's membership application and guaranteed its candidacy status. In 2006, it was accepted into the European Partnership, which was established to improve cooperation between Balkan countries. In 2009, the EU Commission recommended to the Council to start accession negotiations with North Macedonia.[7] However, North Macedonia still has not started these negotiations because it has problems to solve.

a. Greece Hurdle, Name Dispute

The historical origin of the problem between Greece and North Macedonia has been mentioned above. Despite the positive opinions of the Badinter Commission in 1991, the EU did not recognize North Macedonia. The reason for this is Greece's opposition to the name and flag of North Macedonia In addition, Greece claimed that North Macedonia, which has a population of 2 million, is a threat to its security. Besides these discussions, Greece also imposed an economic embargo on North Macedonia.[8]. After all these, an agreement called Interim Accord was signed in 1995. According to this agreement, both countries would not interfere in each other's internal affairs. They would respect human rights and democracy. In addition, Greece would lift the economic embargo. North Macedonia would agree to change its flag.. In return, Greece would accept the entry of North Macedonia into international organizations under the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Despite all this, no solution could be found to the name issue, and negotiations continued at the UN. [9] It is seen that the EU has a passive attitude towards the solution of the name dispute. In 2009, the EU Commission recommended starting negotiations. However, negotiations can not be started due to the veto of Greece. The EU has called four times to resolve the name issue. However, all four calls did not bring any results.

After 27 years of conflict, both sides could not find a way out. Moreover, this situation has damaged the foreign policy of both countries. North Macedonia did not start membership negotiations with the EU, and Greece became a country that did not agree to an agreement due to its constant veto. Alexis Tsipras, who came to power in Greece in 2015, signaled that they wanted to go for a solution, saying that "nationalism in the region has become a vicious circle." In Macedonia, Zoran Zaev became prime minister after the Macedonian Social Democrats Union came to power. Zaev mentioned in the election campaign that he would solve the name problem with Greece. The desire of both sides to get rid of this vicious circle came to an end with the signing of the Prespa Agreement on 17 June 2018. In the Prespa Treaty, the name issue was resolved by agreeing on the name "Republic of North Macedonia." Passports would have a choice of Macedonian or North Macedonian citizens. In addition, both countries would act within the framework of good neighborly relations.[10] The EU has welcomed the resolution of the quarter-century conflict. Greece lifted its veto, and an obstacle to North Macedonia's EU path has lifted.

b. Second Hoop, Language Dispute

Bulgaria was the first country to recognize North Macedonia with its constitutional name after declaring its independence. However, later on, there was a disagreement about the language. Bulgaria claimed that Macedonian spoken in North Macedonia is an ancient dialect of Bulgarian. She argued that if she recognized the language of North Macedonia, she would have denied her history and nation. For this reason, she did not recognize the Macedonian nation. This is another obstacle that North Macedonia faces in its negotiations with the EU. Bulgaria has said that it will veto North Macedonia's negotiations with the EU until its problems with North Macedonia are resolved.

In 2012, the EU declared its readiness to re-start negotiations with North Macedonia. However, Bulgaria prevented this by saying that North Macedonia followed anti-Bulgarian policies. An agreement on good neighborly relations was signed between North Macedonia and Bulgaria in 2013. North Macedonia accepted this agreement in order not to attract the reaction of international politics. The content of this agreement was generally aimed at increasing the cooperation between the two countries. Bulgaria softened its veto rhetoric in 2013 with the influence of the EU. However, relations became bad again afterward.[11] [12]

In 2017, the Good Neighborhood and Friendly Relations Agreement were signed between the Prime Minister of North Macedonia Zoran Zaev and the Prime Minister of Bulgaria Boyko Borisov. The content of the treaty included subjects such as history and education. In addition, a Joint Expert Commission on these issues was established within the scope of the treaty. In October 2019, Bulgaria approved the declaration necessary for the start of negotiations with North Macedonia. In the letter Bulgaria sent to the EU in September 2019, she stated that North Macedonia asked the EU for support against the anti-Bulgarian state ideology. Bulgaria also stated that his problems with North Macedonia should not be brought to the EU without being resolved. Prime Minister Zaev said that

Bulgaria violated the Good Neighborhood Treaty. Bulgaria officially issued its veto on 17 November 2019.[13]

5.TRAUMA IN DOMESTIC POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Its accession to the EU is significant for a country like North Macedonia, which was recently independent. However, the concessions made by North Macedonia to enter the EU turn into concessions made by North Macedonia on its own identity. This situation causes traumas in North Macedonian society. North Macedonia already has a fragile social structure due to its multiple ethnic identities. The problems Macedonia faced in the process of harmonization with the EU made this situation even more sensitive.

In the name problem of North Macedonia with Greece, it is seen more clearly how traumatic this situation is. What Greece does not accept is the constitutional name of a nation-state. In the name problem of North Macedonia with Greece, it is seen more clearly how traumatic this situation is. What Greece does not accept is the constitutional name of a nation-state. Naturally, it has become difficult for a country whose constitutional name is not even recognized to keep ethnic elements under control. With the Ohrid Framework Agreement signed in 2001, the conflict with the Albanian minority was resolved. However, mutual distrust has not ended. When Gruevski, the prime minister of the nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE, came to power, the oppressive attitude towards minorities in domestic politics increased even more. Because, on the one hand, the language problem with Bulgaria, on the other hand, the vicious circle relations with Greece caused Gruevski to increase her repressive policies at home. This situation caused North Macedonia to go backward on the EU path. The Skopje 2014 project that emerged in 2014 is an excellent example of the policies of Gruevski and his party. This project includes erecting statues of Macedonian historical figures and the construction of many museums and art centers. However, this project caused a reaction in domestic politics. This project for identity building has disturbed other ethnic groups, predominantly the Albanian minority. In addition, the people struggling with unemployment and poverty reacted to the fact that 560 million euros went to such a divisive project. [14]

Another trauma caused by the name issue for North Macedonia is about the flag and the constitution. Greece's objection to the flag was to the Vergina Sun on the flag of North Macedonia. According to Greek claims, this symbol was a Greek symbol. North Macedonia could not stand the pressure and had to change its flag The demand to change its flag as a sovereign state is a traumatic situation enough for North Macedonia. As for the constitution, she added the phrase "The Republic of Macedonia has no territorial claims against neighboring states" by amending Article 3 of its constitution.[15]. The constitution is the founding element of a state. The constitution of North Macedonia was interfered with from the outside and intervened in its internal affairs. In fact, the interference of external circles in the constitution of North Macedonia meant interference in internal affairs. However, North Macedonia had to accept this because it was afraid of the international pressure environment.

The state of obligation in North Macedonia has also led to the increasing pressure of society. Not being accepted in foreign policy has affected North Macedonia economically and socially. The activities of criminal organizations have increased. Uncertainties in foreign policy also triggered economic problems. The unemployment rate has steadily increased. In this process, trust in democracy has decreased. The participation rate in the elections remains below 50%. The turnout in the 2019 general elections was 41.79%.[16] While the EU is seen as the road to democracy for North Macedonia, it is ironic that the trust in democracy has decreased in North Macedonia's domestic politics.

CONCLUSION

North Macedonia, like most states in the Balkans, has just gained its independence. Therefore, being an EU member state is substantial for North Macedonia. For this reason, it tries to transform its institutions, politics, and economy in line with EU criteria.

When the whole EU process of North Macedonia is examined, it is seen that the problems it faces are due to ethnic identity. As a newly independent country, the inability to impose its own identity abroad has made it difficult for North Macedonia to enter the EU. In particular, the fact that the countries with which it has problems are Greece and Bulgaria, which are EU members, caused the direct veto of North Macedonia. This troubled process of North Macedonia on its way to the EU has caused shocking effects in its domestic policy. Since it/she could not become a nation in the eyes of the other countries, it/she had problems with its minority groups. The insecurity experienced in domestic politics and the decrease in belief in democracy led to the strengthening of illegal organization activities. All these have brought about economic depressions, and the unemployment rate has increased.

All of these problems are seen in all Balkan countries. They deem the EU as a key to overcome these structural crises they are experiencing If we look at North Macedonia in particular, the realization of a transformation within the framework of the EU is essential in terms of solving the structural crises in the country. The aim of North Macedonia from the very beginning of the EU membership process is to benefit from the economic opportunities of the EU. To receive the economic support of the EU, it tries to transform its institutions in line with the EU criteria. This process is and continues to be painful for North Macedonia. However, the need for the EU's economic power does not deter North Macedonia from this goal.

**Photo: https://ifex.org/*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Derin, Murat. «KUZEY MAKEDONYADA İSİM TARTIŞMALARI VE PRESPA ANLAŞMASI.» *Meriç Uluslararası Sosyal ve Stratejik Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 2019: 239-260.

Fazlagikj, Admir. *Anadolu Ajansı.* 27 Ocak 2021. https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/kuzey-makedonyaya-ab-yolunda-yeni-engel-bulgaristan/2124402 (erişildi: Ekim 31, 2021).

GJUL, Rejhan. "Avrupa Birliği Entegrasyon Sürecinde Kuzey Makedonya Cumhuriyeti." *Yüksek Lisans Tezi.* Bursa: Uludağ Üniversitesi, 2019.

Gül Tuba DağcI, Asiye Şimşek. "Makedonya ile Yunanistan Arasındaki İsim Sorununda Rol Oynayan Temel Parametrelerin Analizi." *Yalova Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 2016: 175-200.

ÖZGEN, Cenk. "Balkanlarda Güvenliğe Yönelik Bir Tehdit:Yunanistan-Makedonya Anlaşmazlığı." *U.Ü. Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi*, 2013: 327-343.

Özkırımlı, Umut. "Milliyetçilik Kuramları." *Ankara: Doğu Batı*, 2019.

Pirinççi, Ferhat. "Yunan Ulus Kimliğinin Oluşum Sürecinde İçsel Ve Dışsal Parametrelerin Analizi." *Dil ve Tarih Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi*, 2006: 53-78.

Tevfik Durul, Sinan Doğan. *Anadolu Ajansı.* 25 Nisan 2019. https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/dunyada-secimlere-katilim-dusuk-seyrediyor/1462264 (erişildi: Ekim 31, 2021).

Tezcan, Gönül. "Gruevskiden Zaeve Makedonyanın İç ve Dış Politikasındaki Gelişmeler." *Gümüşhane Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Elektronik Dergisi*, 2019: 379-394.

Vatandaş, Selim. "Makedonyanın AB Üyelik Süreci." *Bilge Adamlar Stratejik Araştırma*, 2013.

[1] Umut Özkırımlı. Milliyetçilik Kuramları. Ankara: *Doğu Batı Yayınları*, 2019: p.77.

[2] Ferhat Pirinççi. Yunan Ulus Kimliğinin Oluşum Sürecinde İçsel ve Dışsal Parametrelerin Analizi. *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Dergisi,*, 2006: p.64

[3] Gönül Tezcan. "Gruevskiden Zaeve Makedonyanın İç ve Dış Politikasındaki Gelişmeler." *Gümüşhane Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Elektronik Dergisi*, 2019: p.380-381

[4] Ibid.

[5] Emrah Konuralp and Sündüş Adaş. Makedonyada İsim Sorunu: Yunan ve Makedon Milliyetçiliklerinin Kıskacında Kimlik İnşası . *Iğdır Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi,* 2020: p 322-323

[6] Rejhan Gjul. "Avrupa Birliği Entegrasyon Sürecinde Kuzey Makedonya Cumhuriyeti." *Yüksek Lisans Tezi.* Bursa: Uludağ Üniversitesi, 2019: s.47-48.

[7] Selim Vatandaş. "Makedonyanın AB Üyelik Süreci." *Bilge Adamlar Stratejik Araştırma*, 2013, p.2-3

[8] Gjul.op.cit., p.48.

[9] Murat Derin. Kuzey Makedonyada İsim Tartışmaları ve Prespa Antlaşması. *Meriç Uluslararası Sosyal ve Stratejik Araştırmalar Dergisi, Cilt:3,* 2019: s.249.

[10] Derin, op.cit., p.252-255

[11] Gjul, op. cit p. 63-64

[12] Vatandaş, op.cit., p.4

[13] Kuzey Makedonya'ya AB yolunda yeni engel: Bulgaristan, last update, 27 Ocak, 2021 https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/kuzey-makedonyaya-ab-yolunda-yeni-engel-bulgaristan/2124402

[14] Tezcan, op.cit., p.386

[15] Konuralp and Adaş op.cit. p.324-325

[16] Dünyada seçimlere katılım düşük seyrediyor, last update, 25.04.2019. https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/dunyada-secimlere-katilim-dusuk-seyrediyor/1462264

About the author:

To cite this article: Havanur ÖLMEZ. 2026. "FLAWED MEMBERSHIP PROCESS: THE CASE OF NORTH MACEDONIA - 05.11.2021." Center For Eurasian Studies (AVİM), Uep Rapor No.2021 / 6. November 05. Accessed November 22, 2026. https://avim.org.tr/public/UEPRapor/FLAWED-MEMBERSHIP-PROCESS-THE-CASE-OF-NORTH-MACEDONIA-05-11-2021

Süleyman Nazif Sok. No: 12/B Daire 3-4 06550 Çankaya-ANKARA / TÜRKİYE
Tel: +90 (312) 438 50 23-24 • **Fax**: +90 (312) 438 50 26
@avimorgtr
https://www.facebook.com/avrasyaincelemelerimerkezi
E-Posta: info@avim.org.tr
http://avim.org.tr

© 2009-2025 Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM) All Rights Reserved