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*Working paper*

“How to Resolve the Current Macedonian Gordian Knot- and Continue the EU Accession Talks”

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**Abstract**

The process of the entry of the Republic of North Macedonia into the European Union is one of the most complex issues in the history of the country. This is a problem that all government constellations are dealing with during their rule. Unfortunately, no government has so far, despite its efforts and policies, been able to overcome the problems, challenges and ultimatums set by both the EU and neighboring countries of the Republic of North Macedonia. The main goal of this paper is highlighting solutions in favor of the Republic of North Macedonia to fulfill the basic standards for entry into the European family and to successfully continue the process of accession to the EU. The primary priority is the development of the state's standard of living, that is, an increase in income through which the country would be a step closer to European criteria, thanks to a better quality of life for everyone. The saddest reflection of the absence of the above-mentioned aspect is the massive outflow of young minds from our country in search of a better livelihood. Unfortunately, over the years, the Republic of North Macedonia was and still is forced by its neighbors to undertake various adjustments as conditions for entry into the EU, but despite their fulfillment, membership in the European Union is still a dream for us.

**Keywords:** Republic of North Macedonia, European Union, membership, process, neighbors

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## **1. Introduction**

The Macedonian<sup>1</sup> EU accession case has been one of the most painful (for the nation itself) and most immaterial (for the EU). At least, this is the common perception amongst the Macedonian population.

The Macedonian public seems to be tired of making concessions and not getting the promised outcomes. Dr. Bujar Osmani, the Macedonian foreign minister, warns that “the North Macedonian society has become wary of “making concessions while there are no deliverables” (Georgian, 2023). North Macedonia is probably the country that has suffered most in the process of the EU accession.

According to Vangelov (2017), when the progress is stalling, then the retrograde process starts to appear. As a result of the stalling of the process due to the Greek veto, Macedonia has started the process of deterioration of democracy and growth of autocracy. This is why it is of crucial importance to continue the Macedonian path towards the EU and EU path to embrace Macedonia.

## **2. The history of the Macedonian EU accession process**

### **2.1 The independence and statehood: 1991-1993**

After the proclamation of independence, Macedonia has stated the EU accession as its strategic priority (Republika Makedonija, n.d.).

In the next year, the famous Badinter Commission came out with a positive opinion about Macedonia and Slovenia in terms of their international recognition (Robert, n.d.). However, the EEC has recognized Croatia, but failed to do the same for the Republic of Macedonia. Why? Because the EEC governments considered that the Arbitration Commission has a “fact-finding mission and its opinions were treated merely as a matter of information.

This went on and on, and the Greek government had its glorious days with the Lisbon declaration in 1992. “The past semester of intense Greek diplomatic activity was fruitful, and the Community finally formulated a position whereby it was to recognise FYROM in accordance with the December 1991 declaration and as Floudas (2002) states, only "under a name which does not include the term Macedonia.

The Greek influence was so strong that the UN Security Council eventually adopted the resolution 817/1993 and accepted the country in the U.N. membership, but, with a provisional name FYROM, and as Floudas (2002) points out, without waving the flag. This was the first and only time in the history that something like this happened.

### **2.2 Macedonia and the EU**

Macedonia signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2001, as the first country to sign this new mechanism, even before Croatia.

Macedonia officially became an EU candidate state in 2005 and received the suggestion from

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the European Commission to start negotiations in 2008.

Bulgaria was admitted in the EU in 2007 and, most likely, it would have never blocked the Macedonian accession negotiations if they had started in 2008. But they hadn't started it. And they still haven't started it.

### **2.3 The Greek issue: 1991-2018**

The EU accession had been blocked for so many years due to the Greek opposition.

The Macedonian-Greek relations have been put in a state of normal relations with the Interim Accord from 1995.

We should not forget that in Article 11, according to Interim (1995), this contract had the following clause: "Upon entry into force of this interim accord, the Party of the First Part agrees not to object to the application by or the membership of the Party of the Second Part in international, multilateral and regional organizations and institutions of which the Party of the First Part is a member.

This Article 11 was supposed to prevent Greece for putting veto on a Macedonian accession to NATO and the EU.

However, it was 2008 when Greece blocked Macedonia to join NATO and the EU (Karajkov, 2008). This is why Macedonia put Greece on trial and eventually won the court case in Hague<sup>2</sup> (Macedonia, 2008).

The issue was finally resolved with painful changes in the constitution based on the Prespa agreement from 2018 (Agreement, 2018).

### **2.4 The Bulgarian Issue 1992-2023**

Bulgaria was the first country to recognize the independence of its neighbor in 1992.

During the Greek embargo to Macedonia, Bulgaria was a window for supply of all goods to Macedonia.

In 1997, the Macedonian PM, Ljubco Georgievski, signed the Declaration for Friendship with the Bulgarian government (Trpkovski, 2020).

In 2017, Macedonia and Bulgaria signed the Contract for Friendship, Good Neighbor Relations, and Cooperation.

This seems to be the most questionable move of the Macedonian Government and the Macedonian parliament. The Macedonian then Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, didn't seem to understand the semantic difference between "joint" and "shared ". The two countries had signed that they shared a joint history, but ... the entire Balkans shares joint history." The Macedonian Foreign Minister then, Nikola Dimitrov, was the Head of the legal team which won the court case against Greece. He must have known that main difference between the Interim Accord with Greece and this Contract with Bulgaria - This time, there wasn't a clause in the contract such as in 1995: "... agrees not to object to the application by or the

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membership of the Party of the Second Part in international, multilateral and regional organizations and institutions of which the Party of the First Part is a member.”

The deterioration of the relations started very soon. “On 6th November 2019, the Bulgarian MFA informed the EU that “Sofia will block the so-called negotiating framework for North Macedonia, which is due to be the basis for the formal launch of the EU accession talks” (Trajanovski, 2020).

This author had the privilege to be one of the participants of the conference in December 2021 (Dialogue, 2021). There he said: “The behavior of Bulgaria towards Macedonia will have a negative impact on the whole generation.”

## **2.5 Epilogue**

To illustrate the best of the Macedonian EU accession, we shall use the statements of two Croatian politicians:

- President Milanovic said, “Macedonia is kicked like a ball, this is not OK” (Milanovic, 2021).
- Prime Minister Plenkovic says, “What we are doing to Macedonia is not fair and harms the image of the EU” (Plenkovic, 2023).

We should mention that these are two political leaders in Croatia that rarely have common position on various issues. Macedonian case is so vehement and so vigorous that can unite the un – unifying.

## **3. Current situation: 2022/2023**

### **3.1 Lack of participative management**

The situation with the changes in the constitution is River Deep – Mountain High:

SDSM pushes for constitutional changes in order to start the EU accession talks, but they forget that the decision to accept changes in the Constitution and accept the French proposal has been done without consulting VMRO – DPMNE.

The author’s humble knowledge tells us that a decision “made together” is a “decision sold” and everyone will work to reinforce it. Instead of talking to VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM and DUI were talking to various phantom NGO-s to “build” support for acceptance of the French proposal. This is past now, and there’s not much we can do about it. Maybe both sides can engage in more participation and discussion today. Responsibility lies primarily at the Government.

### **3.2 Swap of the thesis – it is not a problem to have Bulgarians in the Constitution, but it’s a problem to sustain further harassment from Bulgaria**

Recently, the author had a short speech at the meeting of the Pan European movement in Ohrid. Related with the constitutional changes, the point was: “We are not chauvinists, so why don’t we recognize the Bulgarian minority as a separate one? But everyone is worried

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about the Bulgarian harassment (Pendarovski, 2023).

Unfortunately, Bulgarian harassment was intensive. In “Samo Intervju” (2021), President Pendarovski has said: “Bulgaria should not be a reason for a new disappointment for our people”. On the other hand, for Nova Makedonija (2023), he said “if this happens, our disappointment will be huge”. But, Bulgaria, even felt free to propose “to participate in the writing of the amendments” (Jordanovska, 2023).

Edward Joseph, an American analyst, mentioned the same: Bulgaria is harassing the NATO ally: “Bulgarians are encroaching on the country’s history and identity, which is unheard of” (Edward, n.d.).

### **3.3 Constitutional changes and the elections**

VMRO says: “There will not be constitutional changes in this parliamentary composition.” SDSM and DUI continuously repeat: Now there is no time for early elections. Why not? It’s obvious that there are serious problems with corruption, clientelism and inefficient governance. Road building is stalling, public debt is soaring, universities are lagging behind even provincial universities from Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia, some major famous architectural objects, such as the Universal Hall (Univerzalna, n.d.), and the Post office (Izgorenata, 2021), are simply falling apart.

#### **Conclusion- How to overcome the whole issue and change the Constitution?**

When speaking of overcoming the whole issue and changing the Constitution, the author suggests several solutions.

SDSM and VMRO DPMNE to sign a Declaration that they don’t accept any further unilateral conditions from Bulgaria. It would be important for SDSM and VMRO to link the Friendship Agreement with its article 2. However, SDSM and VMRO would cite Bulgaria's promise not to block the Macedonian path to the EU, and both political parties would commit to terminating the Friendship Treaty if there are any more demands. Both political parties will vote for a constitutional change. They will agree that, at the moment the Constitution is amended, the Parliament adjourns, and early elections are instantly called. It would be good if VMRO and SDSM ask the United States and maybe some of the five founding members of the EU (alongside Germany) to adopt resolutions in support of the Macedonian identity. But the key is support from the U.S- the only country whose influence among Macedonian population is unquestionable.

If someone (maybe) asks why is this possible, the answer would be so simple. According to the author’s humble opinion, no one is against Bulgarians in the Constitution, but against the Bulgarian unilateral conditions. Everyone can earn political points: SDSM for starting negotiations, and VMRO for defending the Macedonian identity! They hadn’t voted for the constitution, until assurances from the powers were received. VMRO gets early elections. But, also, VMRO can support the thesis that they are pro-European and pro-Macedonian and that they have decided to change the Constitution, but only once they have got assurances from the U.S. SDSM will have a shorter mandate, but starting the EU accession might be their

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most important success before elections. They can claim that VMRO was only interested in elections, and that SDSM is the only pro-European force. The most important is the fact that there will be a dialogue between SDSM and VMRO, which is very important. All these ideas may seem utopistic, but it's worth trying.

### Disclaimers and Notes

<sup>1</sup> DISCLAIMER: The term "Macedonian" here and afterwards refers to North Macedonia (as a noun) and North Macedonian (as an adjective). The author fully recognizes that, as of 2017, the constitutional name of the country is the Republic of North Macedonia, However, he doesn't feel the need to permanently use the official name. Frenchmen do not use the term "French Republic", neither Russia permanently uses "Russian Federation" or Chinese "People's Republic of China". However, in no way does the usage of the name Macedonia and the adjective Macedonian imply any territorial pretensions on our neighbor, Republic of Greece, and its region Macedonia.

<sup>2</sup> An interesting note: The news agency cited here says: "A UN mediator has proposed "Northern Macedonia" as a compromise solution, but talks are tangled over related issues such as how outsiders should refer to the language and the nationality of the people who live there." Should we mention that 10 years later we became North Macedonia? And now, in a much worse negotiating position with Bulgaria.

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