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Macedonia and Her Difficult Neighbours on the Path to the EU¹

Abstract: *Since 1991, when Macedonia became independent, integration with Western structures – the European Union and the NATO – has been its main foreign policy objective. All Macedonian governments have consistently worked towards implementing the political, economic and social reforms required by the Copenhagen criteria. To a certain extent, the EU appreciated Macedonia's efforts: in 2005, it granted Macedonia, known as FYROM, the status of a candidate country. However, the implementation of internal reforms alone has proved insufficient to commence the accession negotiations. The path to the EU is still blocked by unsettled issues with Greece and Bulgaria. The government in Athens demands that Macedonia settle the dispute over its name and accuses it of appropriating Greek historical heritage. Sofia, in turn, accuses Skopje of falsifying history and discriminating against the Bulgarian minority living on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia.*

Keywords: Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the European Union, accession negotiations, foreign policy of Greece, foreign policy of Bulgaria

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¹ The remuneration for Artur Adamczyk was financed by the Association of Copyright Collective Administration for Authors of Scientific and Technical Works (KOPIPOL), having its seat in Kielce, from fees collected under Article 20 and 20¹ of the Polish Act on Copyright and Neighbouring Rights.

Introduction

The process of socio-political transformation in the Republic of Macedonia started in 1991, after the country became independent. While it was a gradual transition from a one-party system to a pluralistic system, from a centrally-planned to a market economy, from a declarative to an functioning democracy, still the actual evolution of the Republic of Macedonia into a modern state started already in 1991. This also marked the beginning of its aspirations for membership in the European Union (back then the European Community), and this idea has grown into a strategic priority for Macedonia. The main political goal of all the political parties since then has been membership in the European Union and NATO. As a result, the Republic of Macedonia was one of the leaders (second only to Slovenia) among the former members of Yugoslavia in implementing pro-Western reforms. Successive Macedonian governments consistently implemented the reforms expected by the EU, which allowed the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) to obtain the status of a candidate country in 2005. However, further integration with the EU has been hindered by the Macedonia's ongoing disputes with its neighbours – Greece and Bulgaria.

The main research problem highlighted by the authors in this article is to search for the answers to the questions: Why, as a leading country among the Western Balkan states in the field of European integration in the 1990s, has FYROM become an outsider? How have the unresolved international issues concerning relations with Greece and Bulgaria contributed to hindering the process of FYROM's accession to the European Union?

This article attempts to objectively analyse the conflicting positions of these countries and identify the most important challenges facing the Republic of Macedonia in its integration with the European Union.

1. How Macedonia obtained the status of an EU candidate country

Macedonia's first contact with the European Communities took place already in the Cold War era, in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) signed trade agreements with the EEC.² When the SFRY broke up and Macedonia declared independence,

² Vlada Republike Srbije, Kancelarija za Pridruzivanje Evropskoj Uniji, *Sporazum o Stabilizaciji Pridruzivanje*, Beograd 2005, www.seio.gov.rs (last visited 09.09.2014), pp. 1–5.

the new Macedonian government tried to renew these contacts. Although the Communities recognised the new country and Skopje sent a permanent representative to Brussels in 1992, full diplomatic relations with the EU were established only three years later,³ due to a conflict with Greece over Macedonia's name and national symbols. In 1995, the two sides signed the Interim Accord, under which the new country could apply for membership in international organisations as the 'former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' (FYROM⁴), thus facilitating the development of international relations.⁵ In December 1995 the European Union decided to establish full diplomatic relations with FYROM and allowed it to open a diplomatic mission in Brussels.⁶ As a result, FYROM started to strengthen its relations with the European Union. In 1996, talks were initiated on trade and transport cooperation, leading to an agreement which entered into force two years later.

Having the Western Balkan countries in mind, the European Commission announced a new project in 1999. The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) was aimed at Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Croatia.⁷ The initiative's primary objective was to stabilise the political and economic situation in the Western Balkans, but the European Commission also wanted to encourage the addressee countries to develop relations between each other, which would allow them to establish a strong regional structure. In this way the Commission intended to check the integration capability of the countries of the Western Balkans striving for EU membership.⁸ The EU Member States were also concerned about the possibility of further conflicts in the region, mainly over Kosovo, and demanded that the Western Balkan countries adopt a peaceful (conciliatory) method for resolving disputes and establish cooperation with each

³ *Македонијаво ЕУ-третодополнето и изменетоиздание*, Секретаријат за европски прашања, Скопје, септември 2006 година/Skopje, September 2006, <http://www.morm.gov.mk> (last visited 03.09.2014), pp. 10–11.

⁴ Mladen Karadzowski, one of the Authors, disagrees with the use of the name 'FYROM' in part of the text.

⁵ *Interim Accord between the Hellenic Republic and the FYROM*, United Nations, New York, 13.09.1995, http://www.mfa.gr/images/docs/fyrom/interim_accord_1995.pdf (last visited 08.09.2014).

⁶ The European Commission opened its representation in Skopje in 1998. Cf. *Македонија во ЕУ-трето дополнето и изменет оиздание*, op.cit., p. 11.

⁷ *Европската Унија и Западен Балкан – Ја градиме иднината заедно*, Секретаријат за европски прашања, Скопје, август 2004, p. 4.

⁸ O. Anastasakis and V. Bijacic-Dzelilović, *Balkan Regional Cooperation and European Integration*, The Hellenic Observatory, London School of Economics and Political Sciences, London 2002, pp. 5–14.

other. It was stressed that this would be the fastest way for the countries of former Yugoslavia to become members of the EU.⁹

The primary instruments of the Stabilisation and Association Process were the bilateral Stabilisation and Association Agreements concluded by the EU with the Western Balkan countries. The government in Skopje immediately commenced negotiations with the European Commission concerning its agreement.¹⁰ At the summit in Santa Maria da Feira in 2000 the European Council announced that all the addressees of the project were potential candidates for EU membership,¹¹ thus achieving its goal of creating a considerable incentive for the countries of the Western Balkans to participate in the Commission's project. FYROM was the first of these countries to sign a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union (already in 2001), thus proving its determination.¹²

The riots caused by the Albanian minority in 2001 exacerbated Macedonia's internal problems, but the government still managed to convince the European Union that it was striving towards democratisation of the country. The Ohrid Framework Agreement¹³ ended the internal crisis and proved that Macedonia was a tolerant country, respecting the rights of national minorities. In 2003–2005 the European Union, with the goal of consolidating the still fragile peace in Macedonia, undertook the EU Police Mission Proxima. The Mission's primary objective was to provide assistance to Macedonia's ministry of internal affairs in maintaining lawful order and reforming the local police force.¹⁴ With the improving internal situation and the implementation of further reforms expected by the European Commission, at the 2004 summit of the European Council in Dublin FYROM's government was able to apply for full membership

⁹ See more: Council Report on the Review of the Stabilisation and Association Process, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/misc/09765.en1.html (last visited 08.01.2015); A. Elbasani, *The Stabilisation and Association Process in the Balkans: Overloaded Agenda and Weak Incentives?*, "EUI Working Papers" SPS, No. 3/2008; O. Anastasakis and D. Bechev, *EU Conditionality in South East Europe: Bringing Commitment to the Process*, April 2003, <http://www.epus.rs/sr/aktivnosti/konferencije/solun/pdf/ostala/conditio.pdf> (last visited 08.01.2015).

¹⁰ *Национална стратегија за интеграција на Република Македонија во Европската Унија*, Влада на Република Македонија, Генерален секретаријат, Сектор за европска интеграција, Скопје, септември 2004 година/Skopje, September 2004, p. 34.

¹¹ Conclusions of The Presidency, European Council, Santa Maria Da Feira 19 and 20 June 2000, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/feil_en.htm (last visited 20.09.2014).

¹² *Македонија во ЕУ-трето дополнето и изменето издание*, op.cit., p. 12.

¹³ Устав на Република Македонија со Амандмани. See more: <http://makemigration.readyhosting.com/upload/Ustav.pdf> (last visited 04.11.2014).

¹⁴ www.europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/r18013.htm (last visited 10.08.2014).

in the European Union.¹⁵ In November 2005, the European Commission issued an opinion stating that FYROM met the requirements for an EU candidate. A month later, the opinion was officially confirmed by the European Council in Brussels.¹⁶

Achievement of the status of candidate country was a reward for the effort put into fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria and for the positive effects of the legal solutions adopted under the Ohrid Agreement. It is worth mentioning that even Greece did not block this decision, even though the negotiations concerning Macedonia's name were still in progress. The government in Skopje was rewarded for its quick and peaceful resolution of the problems of the Albanian minority,¹⁷ which was a quite pressing issue because the riots could have spilled over to other parts of the region and threatened the security and stability of Greece.

The status of candidate country stimulated Macedonia to implement further pro-democratic reforms to bring it closer to full EU membership. It achieved the greatest successes in combating corruption and organised crime, as well as in implementing the principles of freedom of the press.¹⁸ In 2009, the European Union once again showed its appreciation of Macedonia's efforts and decided to abolish the visa requirement for Macedonians already in the first stage of the process of visa liberalisation for the Balkan countries.¹⁹ Bearing in mind the obvious progress made by Macedonia in democratisation and its execution of the priority objectives of the Accession Partnership, in the same year the European Commission recommended commencing accession negotiations with FYROM.²⁰ Consequently the Macedonian government hoped that the EU

¹⁵ Analytical Report for the Opinion on the Application from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for EU Membership, Commission of the European Communities Brussels, 9.11.2005, SEC (2005) 1425, http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/archives/pdf/key_documents/2005/package/sec_1425_final_analytical_report_mk_en.pdf (last visited 10.08.2014).

¹⁶ F. Nelli Feroci, *The Future of Enlargement: Candidate and Potential Candidate Countries of the Western Balkans* in: *A Frontier of Europe: A Transatlantic Problem?*, F.M. Bindi and I. Angelescu (eds.), Washington D.C.–Rome 2011, p. 27.

¹⁷ Наследството на Охридскиот Договор, http://www.bbc.co.uk/macedonian/news/story/2008/08/printable/080812_ohrid_ramkoven.shtml (last visited on 04.11.2014).

¹⁸ T. Żornaczuk, *Macedonia: od bałkańskiego prymusa do chorej demokracji*, "Biuletyn PISM", No. 64/2014, p. 2.

¹⁹ Regulation (EC) No. 1244/2009 of 30 November 2009 amending Regulation (EC) No. 539/2001 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement, <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32009R1244> (last visited 02.09.2014).

²⁰ D. Morolov, *The Euro-Atlantic aspiration of the Republic of Macedonia*, "International Journal of Sciences: Basic and Applied Research (IJSBAR)", Vol. 13(1)/2014, p. 271.

heads of states and governments would set a date for commencing these negotiations. Greece, however, shattered these hopes, as Athens vetoed the decision favourable to Macedonia in the European Council, arguing that they first had to reach an agreement on the country's name and only then could a date for launching accession negotiations be set.²¹

So far no date has been set, even though the European Commission has been maintaining in its annual reports that FYROM is ready to commence accession negotiations.²² The situation is further complicated by the fact that Greece was joined by Bulgaria in its veto, because Sofia is convinced that Skopje is conducting an anti-Bulgarian campaign and is falsifying history.²³ Since decisions on the commencement of negotiations and on possible accession have to be made by the European Council unanimously, until such time as FYROM settles its relations with Greece and Bulgaria its accession process is bound to remain suspended.

2. Greece opposes FYROM's further integration with the European Union

The collapse of the two-block system brought considerable changes to the Balkans. Yugoslavia broke up into several new countries which, due to a surge of nationalist sentiments, began making territorial claims on their neighbours (new and old). Established in 1945 and governed dictatorially, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia actively worked (until the death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980) to prevent the development of nationalisms. As a result, after the end of the civil war Greece had no significant conflicts with this country. Besides, the Greek society and the Serbian people (the Serbs being the politically dominant group in Yugoslavia), shared a lot of mutual sympathy for each other, as both had fought the Turks and both were largely Orthodox.²⁴

²¹ Грција против Препораката на ЕК, <http://vecer.mk/makedonija/grcija-kontra-preporakata-na-ek-za-niv-e-besmisleno-da-pochnat-pregovorite-so-makedonija> (last visited 04.11.2014).

²² Commission Staff Working Document 'The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2013 Progress Report' and accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council 'Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2013–2014', European Commission, COM(2013) 700 final, Brussels, 16.10.2013.

²³ Плевнелиев ја обвини Македонија за водење антибугарска политика, <http://grid.mk/read/news/98933545/1085122/plevneliev-ja-obvini-makedonija-za-vodenje-antibugar-ska-politika> (last visited 04.11.2014).

²⁴ Грција – пријател на Србија, http://documents-mk.blogspot.com/2012/01/blog-post_09.html (last visited 04.11.2014).

The formation of the Republic of Macedonia on 19 December 1991,²⁵ after the break-up of Yugoslavia, was perceived in Greece as a threat to the country's territorial integrity.²⁶ This view was not entirely unjustified, because when the new state emerged, there were initially voices calling for the incorporation into it of the territories inhabited by Macedonians in neighbouring countries.

However, the young Macedonian state itself had a problem with an Albanian minority and had to look after the integrity of its own borders.²⁷ In this context it counted on the assistance of the Western countries and of Greece, so it strived to gain international recognition, which would stabilise its situation on the world map. Therefore, the idea of a 'United Macedonia' was soon abandoned and the parliament declared that the country renounced all territorial claims on its neighbours and that it would solve all disputes by peaceful means.²⁸

Still, Greek politicians remained anxious and the relations between the two countries continued to be strained. The main problematic issue was the name and the national symbols of the new country. Greeks considered the name Macedonia as part of their historical, national heritage, as it was the name of one of the regions of ancient Hellas.²⁹ Consequently, despite the Macedonians' declarations of peace, they considered that its adoption of the name 'The Republic of Macedonia' was a pretext for making territorial claims on Greece. The second reason for the dispute was Macedonia's flag, which depicted the Sun of Vergina – a symbol ascribed to Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great.³⁰ This symbol was also a part of Hellenic history and, in the opinion of Greeks, was not at all related to the heritage of the Slavic people that inhabited the new country. Another problem was one phrase of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, which stated that the state would look after

²⁵ See more at: http://documents-mk.blogspot.com/2012/01/blog-post_09.html (last visited 04.11.2014).

²⁶ J. Engström, *The Power of Perception: The Impact of the Macedonian Question on Inter-ethnic Relations in the Republic of Macedonia*, "The Global Review of Ethnopolitics" Vol. 1(3)/March 2002, pp. 3–17.

²⁷ Идеја за Република Илирида, <http://www.telma.com.mk/vesti/halili-bara-referendum-za-sojuz-makedonija-ilirida> (last visited 04.11.2014).

²⁸ S. Pięta, *Polityka Grecji wobec kwestii macedońskiej w latach 1991–1995* in: *Wybrane problemy współczesnych stosunków międzynarodowych*, M. Waloński (ed.), Wrocław 2008, pp. 159 ff.

²⁹ See more at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/macedonian/news/story/2007/02/070202_makpress_o2feb.shtml (last visited 04.11.2014).

³⁰ Грција се отвори: македонската нација е вештачки и невестинит поим, <http://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/grcija-se-otvori-makedonskata-nacija-e-veshtachki-i-nevistinit-poim> (last visited 05.11.2014).

the rights of all Macedonians, including those living in the neighbouring countries, which concerned mainly Greece and Bulgaria. Athens believed that this provision interfered with Greece's internal affairs and constituted a violation of and infringement on its sovereignty. Moreover, Greece denies the existence of a separate Macedonian nation and believes that the inhabitants of the country are Slavic immigrants.³¹ In the opinion of the Bulgarians, in turn, the people of Macedonia are of Bulgarian origin and their language is nothing more than a variation of Bulgarian.³²

Given these circumstances, European countries clearly indicated that any content in the Constitution which could be associated with nationalism would make it difficult for the new country to be accepted into the international community. As a result, Macedonia changed its flag and removed the controversial provisions from its Constitution.³³ The issue of the name, however, remained unresolved. During the negotiations held in 1992, Greece made several proposals: Republic of Skopje, Vardar Republic, Slavic Macedonia – but none of them were accepted by the Macedonians.³⁴

In February 1992, during Portugal's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Portuguese prime minister, Joel Piñeiro, presented a package of confidence-building measures, the most important of which was the proposal to name the country New Macedonia, but Greece rejected all names that included the word 'Macedonia'. Irritated, EU members refused to be further involved in the search for solutions to this issue and left it to the quarrelling parties.³⁵ Using its international position, Greece prevented the Republic of Macedonia from being admitted into various international organisations, including the UN. Given the armed conflict in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the refusal to recognise Macedonia in the international arena greatly increased the risk

³¹ J. Engström, *The Power of Perception: The Impact of the Macedonian Question on Inter-ethnic Relations in the Republic of Macedonia*, op.cit.

³² Македонско – бугарските односи од признавање до негирање, <http://www.mn.mk/komentari/7011-Makedonsko-bugarskite-odnosi-%C3%83%C2%A2%C3%82%C2%80%C3%82%C2%93-od-priznavanje-do-negiranje> (last visited 05.11.2014).

³³ See more at: <http://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/NewsDetal.asp?vest=7914112775&id=9&setIzdanie=23220> (last visited 05.11.2014).

³⁴ <http://mkd-news.com/to-vima-vargarska-severna-i-gorna-makedonija-se-predlozite-na-nimits/> (last visited 05.11.2014).

³⁵ J. Pineiro's proposal was close to being accepted by Athens. The governing party at that time, New Democracy, with Constantine Mitsotakis prime minister, was willing to consent to the name New Macedonia, but the party's conservative wing headed by Antonis Samaras opposed this and blocked the negotiations. MPs from the socialist opposition party PASOK were also against the proposal. See: F.S. Larrabee, *Greece's Balkan Policy in New Strategic Era*, "Southeast European and Black Sea Studies", No. 3/2005, p. 424.

that the conflict would engulf this country as well. Athens and Skopje, both equally concerned with this possibility, felt compelled to find a solution that would satisfy both parties. It should also be stressed that another influential factor was pressure from the USA and the EU. As a result, the technical name ‘former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia’ was agreed upon, abbreviated as FYROM. On 7 April 1993 Macedonia, under this new name, became a member of the UN³⁶ and could also apply for accession to other international organisations. This technical name, however, was only an interim solution and its adoption did not normalise the relations with Greece.

The 1993 elections in Greece were won by the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK). The new authorities adopted a hard-line, nationalist approach to all its northern neighbours, i.e. Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria. The government of Prime Minister Papandreou was concerned about the threat of Muslim expansion because of the intensification of diplomatic relations between the countries in the north inhabited by Muslims. It was also predicted that Turkey could incite FYROM to make claims to Greek Macedonia.³⁷ Greece decided that the only way to protect itself was to deepen relations with Serbia, which acted as a counterbalance to Macedonian policy in the Balkans.

Greece’s attitude to its northern neighbours was largely shaped by the Orthodox Church.³⁸ The clergy, enjoying significant respect among the general society and among politicians, promoted positive sentiments towards the Serbs and played up the Muslim threat from the north.³⁹ Furthermore, Greek hierarchs did not recognise the autocephalous Macedonian Orthodox Church, as they believed that the area was under the authority of the Serbian Orthodox Church.⁴⁰ Due to the growing unrest in the Balkans and the war(s) in former Yugoslavia, the countries so far untouched by the conflict desperately tried to prove that they respected

³⁶ P. Sioussiouras, *The Process of Recognition of the New Independent States of Former Yugoslavia by The European Community: The Case of the Former Socialist Republic of Macedonia*, “Journal of Political and Military Sociology”, No. 1/2004, p. 12.

³⁷ F.S. Larrabee, op.cit., p. 409.

³⁸ Ανθιμος: *Ποτέ δε θα δοθεί το όνομα της Μακεδονίας στο κράτος των Σκοπίων*, http://orthodoxathemata.blogspot.com/2015/01/blog-post_47.html (last visited 11.01.2015); Ομιλία για την Μακεδονία από τον Παναγιότατο Μητροπολίτη Θεσσαλονίκης κ.κ. Ανθιμο, <http://www.profitisilias.com.gr/index.php/component/k2/item/527-oliliaanthimou.html> (last visited 11.01.2015).

³⁹ *Η επέκταση του Ισλάμ και η ελληνική Εκκλησία*, “Πρωινός Λόγος”, 30.09.2014.

⁴⁰ It should be noted that none of the autocephalous Orthodox Churches in the world recognised the establishment of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. See: http://www.romfea.gr/inex.php?option=com_content&task (last visited 11.08.2014).

the borders and territorial integrity of other countries. Albania, afraid that the conflict would spread to its territory, was the most eager to renounce any nationalist sentiments. Bulgaria presented a similar approach, but for different reasons – Sofia was determined to obtain membership in NATO and the European Union.⁴¹ As a result, Tirana's and Sofia's relations with Athens improved, which also decreased Greece's sense of threat from their northern neighbours. Prime Minister A. Papandreou decided that exerting pressure was the best way to regulate the Macedonian issue. In February 1994, Greece broke off the negotiations concerning Macedonia's name, closed its consulate in Skopje, and introduced an embargo on trade with Macedonia.⁴² The embargo was a severe blow to FYROM's economy, because trade with Greece was an alternative to working with Serbia, which was already under an embargo of the international community.⁴³

The EU Member States sharply criticised Greece's aggressive policy towards Macedonia. The war in the former Yugoslavia was far from over and, instead of stabilising the situation in the region, Greece had caused yet another crisis. And weakening Macedonia could induce Serbia to attempt to annex this country.⁴⁴ Faced with tensions between Athens and Skopje, the USA and the European countries decided to undertake actions to mitigate the conflict. The efforts of the American diplomat Cyrus Vance even brought a certain improvement – talks and trade between Greece and FYROM were re-established. The negotiations resulted in the Interim Accord, concluded in 1995, in which the two countries confirmed the integrity of their borders (Article 2) and their territories (Article 3). Furthermore, they also agreed to refrain from taking any actions or supporting any third party in its actions aimed at undermining the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of the other party (Article 3). Both Greece and FYROM also declared that they would not use the symbols constituting elements of the historical cultural heritage of the other country (Article 7).

⁴¹ P. Papondakis, *The Omonia Five trial: democracy, ethnic minorities and the future of Albania*, "Sudosteuropa", Vol. 4(5)/1996, p. 342.

⁴² The European Commission referred the Greek decision on an embargo on FYROM to the European Court of Justice. The court, however, rejected the claim stating that the issue was a political and not a legal one. But even before that, the Greek prime minister had announced that he would continue his policy towards Macedonia regardless of the Court's verdict.

⁴³ For more see: P. Sioussiouras, *Greece and Landlocked States: The Case of FYROM*, Athens 2000.

⁴⁴ Ch. Tsardanidis and S. Stavridis, *The Europeanisation of Greek Foreign Policy: a Critical Appraisal*, "European Integration", No. 2/2005, p. 229.

For Macedonia, the main result of the agreement was that it was now able to engage in international activity and to apply for membership in NATO and the EU (Article 11):

*'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; however, the Party of the First Part reserves the right to object to any membership referred to above if and to the extent the Party of the Second Part is to be referred to in such organization or institution differently than in paragraph 2 of United Nations Security Council resolution 817 (1993).'*⁴⁵

The conclusion of the agreement did not solve the problem of the new country's name. However, both parties expressed their will to continue negotiations on this issue under the auspices of the UN. This change in Greece's policy resulted in FYROM being accepted – upon Athens' motion – into the Council of Europe and the OSCE.

The improvement in the relations between Greece and the Balkan countries coincided with the deterioration of Athens' relations with Turkey. There was a serious conflict (involving even the mobilisation of the navy) concerning the ownership of some of the Aegean Islands.⁴⁶ Countries of the EU began to perceive Greece as a member which kept embroiling the EU in its conflicts (the problems with the Balkan countries, the Aegean dispute, the Cyprus issue). Greek authorities realised that they would benefit more from a neighbourhood policy that would meet with the approval of the other EU Member States. In order to do that, however, they had to change Greece's image to that of a country that contributes to stabilisation in the eastern Mediterranean Basin and in the Balkans.

The relations between Athens and Skopje started to improve in the second half of the 1990s. The economic cooperation between the two countries developed to the point where Greece was Macedonia's main trade partner and its key foreign investor (currently, it is still one of its biggest trade partners).⁴⁷ Macedonians realised that it would be Greece which would make it easier for them to join the family of European democratic states. FYROM's geopolitical and democratic situation is rather

⁴⁵ For the full text of the Interim Accord see: http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/MK_950913_Interim%20Accord%20between%20the%20Hellenic%20Republic%20and%20the%20FYROM.pdf (last visited 09.10.2014).

⁴⁶ A. Adamczyk, *The Influence of Turkey's International Problems upon the Process of its Integration with the European Union* in: *Poland and Turkey in Europe – Social, Economic and Political Experiences and Challenges*, A. Adamczyk and P. Dubel (eds.), Warsaw 2014.

⁴⁷ <http://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/ekonomija/germanija-grcija-v-britanija-srbija-italija-najdobri-trgovski-partneri-na> (last visited 05.11.2014).

difficult. Almost 23 percent of the population is the Albanian minority, which is still dissatisfied with its status, and given the fact of shared borders with Albania and Kosovo creates a constant threat.⁴⁸ The Albanian riots of 2001 confirmed this lack of security. Concerned that the conflict might spread to neighbouring countries, the EU and NATO quickly reacted on the diplomatic level and NATO undertook military action. The conflict was solved and an agreement was signed in Ohrid.⁴⁹ In order to guarantee its security, in 2004 FYROM applied for membership in NATO and in the European Union. The decision to admit Macedonia into both organisations depended, among other factors, on Greece and whether or not it would exercise its right to veto the enlargement.

In January 2005, FYROM received the status of candidate to the European Union, but the date of opening the accession negotiations has not been set yet.⁵⁰ Macedonia's rapprochement with the EU was, of course, the result of the European countries' efforts to stabilise the situation in Macedonia after the anti-government riots of 2001. The fact that the date of launching the talks was not set was partly a consequence of Macedonia's lack of progress in introducing reforms, but the main reason was Greece's behind-the-scenes machinations in the EU to force Macedonia to change its name. Macedonia's further integration with Western European organisational structures was suspended mainly because of the veto of Athens. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Greece prevented Macedonia from joining that organisation.⁵¹ It also threatened that unless Macedonia settled the matter of its name, Greece would also block its accession to the EU.⁵² Macedonia reacted by referring this announcement to the International Court of Justice, arguing that Greece was violating the agreement of 1995 in opposing FYROM's accession to international organisations.⁵³ In retaliation, in 2009, when

⁴⁸ R. Panagiotou, *FYROM's transition: on the road to Europe*, "Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans", No. 1/2008, pp. 50–51.

⁴⁹ M. Szpala, *Macedonia in: Bałkany Zachodnie a integracja europejska. Perspektywy i implikacje (Western Balkans and European Integration. Prospects and Implications)*, Warszawa 2008, pp. 56–57.

⁵⁰ Преговори за членство во Европската Унија, <http://www.sep.gov.mk/data/file/Publikacii/pregovori-za-clenstvo.pdf> (last visited 05.11.2014).

⁵¹ <http://www.dnevnik.mk/?ItemID=73716E36740C8F4A8B71A2972FC46A49> (last visited 05.11.2014).

⁵² A. Adamczyk, *Kwestia macedońska w bałkańskiej polityce Grecji (The Macedonian Issue in Greece's Balkan Policy)*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej", Vol. 7/2009, pp. 51–67.

⁵³ See more at: <http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/mk/newsbriefs/setimes/newsbriefs/2008/11/18/nb-01> (last visited 05.11.2014).

the European Commission recommended opening accession negotiations with FYROM, Greece blocked the decision on the launching date of these talks.

The policy pursued by the Greek authorities is utterly incomprehensible. Athens should view Macedonia as its natural ally in the Balkans, as both countries are struggling with the same problem, which can be called the syndrome of 'being encircled by the Albanian factor'. The sense of a bond between them should have been further strengthened by the establishment of an independent Kosovo in 2008, which Greece has not recognised.⁵⁴ While the Macedonians have recognised the sovereignty of their new neighbour, they still vividly recall Kosovo providing support to the Albanian rebellion that took place in Macedonia in 2001.

In 2011, the International Court of Justice ruled that Greece's blocking of FYROM's membership in NATO was illegal.⁵⁵ This, however, had no influence whatsoever on Athens' policy towards Skopje. Successive Greek governments maintain the view that Macedonia's integration with the EU can only take place after the issue of the country's name is resolved. Although in its annual reports the European Commission has repeatedly emphasised FYROM's readiness to commence accession negotiations, Greece consistently blocks any attempt to set a date for launching the talks. In December 2012, at a summit of the European Council, the EU's heads of state and government unanimously declared that the commencement of the process of FYROM's accession to the European Union depended on introducing the reforms required by the EU, consolidating good neighbourly relations and, finally, solving the problem of its name in negotiations conducted under the auspices of the UN.⁵⁶

The difficult task of mediating in this matter fell to the UN representative Matthew Nimetz, who proposed several possible names for the country.⁵⁷ At the turn of 2012 and 2013, the following proposals were put forward: The Upper Republic of Macedonia, The Northern Republic of Macedonia, The Democratic Republic of Macedonia and The Vardar

⁵⁴ For more, see: J. Bastian, *Greece in Southeast Europe. Political Opportunities and Economic Challenges*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung 2010, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/07005.pdf> (last visited 09.10.2014).

⁵⁵ International Court of Justice, <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/142/16841.pdf> (last visited 12.09.2014).

⁵⁶ *FYROM Name Issue*, Hellenic Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gr/en/fyrom-name-issue> (last visited 10.08.2014).

⁵⁷ *Nimetz Starts New Push for Macedonia 'Name' Deal*, "Balkan Insight", 08.01.2013, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/nimetz-visits-athens-skopje-for-fresh-name-talks> (last visited 10.08.2014).

Republic of Macedonia,⁵⁸ but none of these were accepted by Greece, and additionally some were opposed by Bulgaria as well. The Greek authorities became hostages to the internal political situation which they themselves had created. As a result, not only do they not want to, but they cannot for political reasons agree on any name that includes the word Macedonia.⁵⁹

The relations between Greece and Macedonia were further worsened by the execution of the 'Skopje 2014' project. The project consisted in re-designing the centre of Skopje in order to emphasise the city's historical ties to ancient Macedon. Monumental statues of Alexander III of Macedon and Philip II of Macedon, as well as of other prominent figures of Greece's history, were erected next to classicist buildings. The new airport was also named after Alexander III of Macedon and a huge statue to the great ruler and commander was placed in its main hall. By doing this, however, Macedonians deeply offended their neighbours' patriotic feelings and provoked further retaliatory measures from Athens. Greeks accused FYROM of wrongful appropriation of their historical heritage in violation of the Interim Agreement of 1995. Furthermore, enlargement policy was not included among the priorities of Greece's Presidency in the Council of the European Union, which the country held in the first half of 2014. Consequently, at the subsequent summit, in June 2014, the issue of setting the starting date for FYROM's accession negotiations was not even brought up. Greece had reached an understanding with the other states of the trio, namely Ireland and Lithuania, that they would not include enlargement on the list of their common priorities, which allowed it to avoid accusations that while generally working on the accession of new members, it was blocking the accession of FYROM. On several occasions, the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle attempted to persuade Athens to soften its position. He proposed to start accession negotiations with FYROM and to make their further progress conditional on solving the name problem, but his mission failed.⁶⁰

It seems that the relations between Greece and Macedonia, and by extension the relations between the EU and Macedonia, have come to an impasse. The government in Athens is waiting for Skopje's initiative,

⁵⁸ *Nowa propozycja nazwy dla Macedonii (A New Name Proposal for Macedonia)*, EuroActiv, 17.04.2013, <http://www.euractiv.pl/rozszerzenie/arttykul/nowa-propozycja-nazwy-dla-macedonii-004616> (last visited 10.08.2014).

⁵⁹ P. Koktsidis, *FYROM's EU Accession Hopes: A delicate Balance*, "ELIAMEP Briefing Notes", No. 6/2013, p. 2.

⁶⁰ *Bulgaria and Greece Block Macedonia's EU Talks*, "Balkan Insight", 12.12.2012, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bulgaria-joins-greece-in-blocking-macedonia-s-eu-bid> (last visited 10.08.2014).

while FYROM's governing party is building its social support around an unyielding attitude in the dispute with Greece. As a result, there are no significant reasons for hope that the problem can be resolved in the nearest future and, consequently, for Macedonia's integration with the EU.

3. The reasons behind Bulgaria's opposition to FYROM's accession to the EU

The relations between Macedonia and Bulgaria have alternated over time – from friendly right after Macedonia declared its independence in 1992, to hostile.⁶¹ It was particularly significant that Bulgaria accepted the name of the Republic of Macedonia, at the cost of a brief crisis in its relations with Greece. Furthermore, Sofia supported Macedonia's efforts towards becoming a member of NATO and the European Union.⁶² Bulgaria was particularly interested in stabilising the political situation of its western neighbour because it was aware that the Republic of Macedonia could become a source of ethnic conflicts in the region due to its sizeable Albanian minority.

While both governments continued to officially declare that they were striving to maintain friendly relations, nevertheless numerous problems arose and hampered the relations between them. For example, Bulgarian linguists have long claimed that there is no separate Macedonian language and that the Macedonians speak a variation of Bulgarian.⁶³ Moreover, Bulgarian rightist politicians and historians even go so far as to maintain that there is no separate Macedonian nation. They claim that the people who inhabit FYROM are ethnically Bulgarian.⁶⁴ A number of Macedonian politicians, in turn, accuse Bulgaria of failing to recognise the existence of the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. Both countries also consider certain historical events as part their own national heritage, which causes further disputes.⁶⁵ In order to improve their relations, in 1999 Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia signed a Joint Declaration committing

⁶¹ <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/enlargement/macedonian-spat-marks-end-greek-presidency-303277> (last visited 08.09.2014).

⁶² <http://www.sitel.com.mk/prvanov-bugarija-ja-poddrzhuva-i-lobira-za-makedonija-vo-eu-i-nato> (last visited 05.11.2014).

⁶³ <http://www.monitor.bg/article?id=434755> (last visited 05.11.2014).

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ In the Middle Ages, the territory currently held by the Republic of Macedonia was part of the Bulgarian Empire and was later conquered by the Ottoman Empire. As an autonomous entity, Macedonia was established only after World War II, as a constituent of Yugoslavia.

themselves to intensify the cooperation between them.⁶⁶ The main objective behind this agreement was to bring the two societies closer together through the promotion of transport and communication between them and through joint participation in regional projects. Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia also declared that they would prevent their institutions and their citizens from engaging in hostile activities against each other: *'Both parties shall undertake effective measures to prevent ill-intentioned propaganda of the respective institutions and agencies and shall not allow activities of private individuals aimed at instigating violence, hatred or other such action which might harm the relations between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia'*.⁶⁷

The document was very general and left much to be desired, but nonetheless it fulfilled its purpose by contributing to improvement of the relations between the Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria. The government in Skopje was well aware that due to Macedonia's bad relations with Greece, Bulgaria was its most important partner in the region. Furthermore, due to Bulgaria's integration with the EU and later accession to it, it could assist Macedonia in its activities in the international arena. Good relations between the two neighbours ended in 2008, at the NATO summit in Bucharest, when Greece vetoed FYROM's membership in the organisation. At the same time, the spokesperson of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that, taking into account the historical and geographical determinants, Bulgaria would not be supporting Skopje unconditionally.⁶⁸ As is often the case, the Bulgarian government took advantage of their partner's difficult situation in order to pursue its own interests. The Macedonian media immediately accused Bulgaria of backing Greece in its dispute with Macedonia. They also suggested that there was a Greek–Bulgarian conspiracy against Skopje.⁶⁹ The Bulgarian prime minister denied these accusations, but this did not prevent the relations between the countries from deteriorating.⁷⁰ It should be stressed that the rejection of FYROM's candidacy for NATO membership in 2008 had

⁶⁶ <http://proverkanafakti.mk/mediumite-i-dogovorot-za-dobrososedstvo-so-bugarija/> (last visited 05.11.2014).

⁶⁷ *Macedonia and Bulgaria: So Close, Yet So Distant*, "Policy Brief", Macedonian Centre for European Training, February 2012, p. 8; http://mcet.org.mk/ckfinder/files/Bulgarija_Macedonia_So-Close_Yet_So-Distant_MCET_-ENG.pdf (last visited 21.09.2014).

⁶⁸ See more at: <http://www.idividi.com.mk/vesti/makedonija/355715/> (last visited 05.11.2014).

⁶⁹ <http://daily.mk/vesti/grchko-bugarski-zagovor-vo-brisel-protiv-makedonija> (last visited 05.11.2014).

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

a great impact on the Macedonian people, whose resentment led to the nationalisation of popular sentiments.

In 2010, the government in Sofia proposed an agreement on good neighbourly relations. It provided for cooperation in the economy, infrastructure, energy, and combating organised crime, as well as the establishment of a special scientific committee which would solve the problems concerning the interpretation of history. In response, Macedonia proposed that Bulgaria sign the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. If it did so, the government in Sofia would be forced to meet one of Macedonia's requests, namely recognise the existence of the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria.⁷¹ The statements issued by politicians from both countries reflected increasingly antagonistic nationalist sentiments. Another very important event in the relations between the two countries was Bulgaria's involvement in the dispute between Greece and Macedonia concerning the latter's name, which happened in 2012 when Sofia opposed the name North Macedonia proposed by the mediator, explaining that it could result in Macedonia making territorial claims on Bulgaria, namely the region of Pirin Macedonia.⁷² Bulgarian politicians declared that they would block any talks between Macedonia and the EU until such a time as all the problems between Macedonia and Bulgaria are resolved. In 2012, the European Commission again expressed a positive opinion on FYROM's readiness to commence accession negotiations with the EU. The government in Sofia, however, claimed that the Commission's assessment was wrong. They maintained that Macedonia was conducting an anti-Bulgarian policy, making it difficult for Bulgarian companies to conduct business and persecuting people of Bulgarian origin.⁷³ Following the example of Greece, at the summit of the European Council in December 2012 Bulgaria blocked the commencement of accession negotiations with FYROM. Sofia decided to take advantage of Macedonia's difficult situation and demanded that FYROM meet three conditions: sign an agreement on good neighbourly relations; create conditions favourable to the development of cooperation and working groups to increase cooperation in key areas; as well as form a council tasked with organising annual intergovernmental meetings.⁷⁴

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁷² Бугарија фаќа позиции за името, more at: <http://dnevnik.mk/?ItemID=CEA39E224BC1DB438B6489CE55F3FCC0> (last visited 05.11.2014).

⁷³ *Bułgaria nadal przeciwna negocjacom UE z Macedonią o akcesji*, EuroActiv, 06.12.2012, <http://www.euractiv.pl/rozszerzenie/wywiad/bugaria-nadal-przeciwna-negocjacom-ue-z-macedoni-o-akcesji-004269> (last visited 21.09.2014).

⁷⁴ *Bulgaria's Brussels Blockade Leaves Macedonia Bitter*, "Balkan Insight", 14.12.2012,

Fearing further international isolation, Macedonia's prime minister agreed to accept Bulgaria's conditions.⁷⁵ However, despite this declaration in 2013 the relations between the countries degraded even further, which was directly caused by repressions against Macedonians of Bulgarian origin in the town of Strumica and the appropriation of Bulgarian historical figures by Macedonia. Bulgarians were, however, most offended by the screening of the Macedonian film entitled 'Third Half', which accused Bulgaria of collaborating with the Nazis during World War II and actively participating in the Holocaust.⁷⁶ It seems that at a certain point the nationalist rhetoric in the statements of politicians from both countries has spun out of control and has become used mainly for the purpose of internal political interests connected with upcoming parliamentary elections in the two countries. So far Bulgaria's position remains unchanged. It still demands that the Republic of Macedonia sign the agreement on good neighbourly relations and refrain from any further falsification of history.⁷⁷

Conclusions

So far, Macedonia's attempts to become a member of the European Union have failed. Despite having introduced numerous political, economic and social reforms, the country has still not been invited to start accession negotiations. The reasons for this are, of course, first of all the opposition of Greece and the problems caused by Bulgaria, but the two countries cannot be assigned the entire blame for keeping Macedonia perpetually at a distance from the EU. Some experts believe that the pro-EU declarations of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO), led by Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and holding power since 2006, have never been wholly honest. They claim that the party's policy was much rather along

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/bulgaria-s-brussels-blockade-leaves-macedonia-bitter> (last visited 21.09.2014).

⁷⁵ *Macedonia Accepts Bulgaria's Terms for Support*, "Balkan Insight", 05.12.2012, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-accepts-bulgarian-terms-for-support> (last visited 21.09.2014).

⁷⁶ *Bulgaria's Relations with Macedonia: Reset or Reverse?*, "The Sofia Globe", <http://sofiaglobe.com/2013/01/10/bulgarias-relations-with-macedonia-reset-or-reverse/> (last visited 12.09.2014).

⁷⁷ *Bulgaria Continues Sting conditions for Macedonia's EU, NATO Accession*, Focus News Agency, 23.07.2014, <http://www.focus-fen.net/news> (last visited 12.09.2014).

the lines of 'integration – yes, but not under EU terms'.⁷⁸ An analysis of the party's activity reveals that it is not striving for reconciliation with its neighbours. Instead, its primary concern is to ensure the support of voters by playing on their patriotism and instilling a sense of threat to their national identity.⁷⁹

Viewed from the other side, other experts think that the problem of Macedonian accession to the EU and NATO is connected with its neighbours, particularly with Greece. They assume that the 'right of veto' in the hands of Greece and Bulgaria is the main obstacle to Macedonia's international path.

The reaction from Greece is irrational, because it is clear that Macedonian citizens have an internal consensus regarding their national identity, which will not be the subject of any negotiations. Actually, the Greek politicians are engaged in deception by claiming that Nikola Gruevski and 'his propaganda and manipulation' are the main obstacles to resolving the name issue, as they said the same about the former President Kiro Gligorov. In actuality they are wrong, because none of the Macedonian politicians will negotiate the Macedonian national identity, which is demanded by the their people. The Greeks don't want to accept that they have an emancipated and aware neighbour.⁸⁰

The Macedonian people, in turn, feel tired and humiliated by the prolonged waiting for the EU's decision on accession negotiations. With no tangible prospect of joining the EU, there is a surge of nationalist sentiments. The Albanian community, which has a fairly liberal attitude to the issue of the country's name, is protesting against the government's policy. Politicians are not standing the test of time and forgetting about implementing new reforms. Macedonia is increasingly often being criticised for lowering its democratic standards, infringing on the freedom of the media, and allowing corruption and nepotism.⁸¹ Its path to the EU is now no longer blocked only by the dispute with Greece and Bulgaria, but also by its violation of European values.

Today, Macedonians are looking for an alternative to integration with the EU. Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski is attempting to develop

⁷⁸ S. Ordanoski, *The Story of Macedonian Populism: 'All We Want Is Everything'!* in: *The Western Balkans and The EU: 'The Hour of Europe'*, J. Rupnik (ed.), Paris 2011, p. 107.

⁷⁹ *Bulgaria's Brussels Blockade Leaves Macedonia Bitter*, op.cit.

⁸⁰ Боцевски за „Република“: Грчката дипломатија е во заблуда, <http://republika.mk/?p=319709> (last visited 17.11.2014).

⁸¹ *Greece Says 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Must Accept European Values'*, EuroActiv, 23.01.2014, <http://www.euractiv.com/macedonia/eu-presidency-tells-macedonia-ac-news-532959> (last visited 10.10.2014).

relations with China and India and hopes for investments from Turkey. The EU, in turn, is not really interested in any further enlargement in the near future. Nevertheless it seems that the future of Macedonia has to involve membership in both the EU and NATO. Greece and Bulgaria should also be interested in this course of events if they want the situation in the Balkans to be stabilised.