

Reforming EU Enlargement Decision-Making: Lessons from the Bulgarian and Greek Vetoes on North Macedonia

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Abstract: This article examines North Macedonia as a prime example of a candidate state whose efforts to join the European Union (EU) have been repeatedly hindered by vetoes from several Member States, including Greece, France, and Bulgaria. The author argues that North Macedonia's case highlights both the necessity and the challenges associated with reforming the EU's enlargement decision-making mechanism. From a comparative and historical perspective, this paper examines the Greek and Bulgarian vetoes in North Macedonia's accession process within the context of prevailing narratives in the two countries' policymaking. The author uses document and discourse analysis. The article concludes with insights into the "logic" of national vetoes, the stakes involved in their use, and the prospects for reforming the EU's enlargement decision-making process.

Keywords: EU accession, candidate country, bilateralism, qualified majority voting, reform.

Introduction

In recent years, the debate over reforming the decision-making mechanism within the European Union (EU) in the area of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) by adopting Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in place of the unanimity rule has gained significant traction. Frequent recourse to the veto has undermined both the EU's ability to act and its global image.² That debate has only intensified

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² It has been estimated that "between 2016 and 2022 Member States used or threatened to use their veto or delayed decision related to the CFSP matters at least 30 times" (Navarra *et al.* 2023, 6).

following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, also impacting enlargement policy, where many argue that Member States have been misusing their veto power for purposes unrelated to EU values and interests. High-ranking EU officials, such as Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, have been among those advocating for the introduction of QMV in the CFSP, including in enlargement policy (Herszenhorn 2022; Borrell, 2022).³ Some policy experts have even argued that "if a qualified majority is not introduced in the EU enlargement decision-making, the whole process will die" (Cvijic and Nechev 2022).

National vetoes over enlargement have a long history within the EU. In January 1963, French President General de Gaulle declared his opposition to the United Kingdom's application for accession. Later on, in the 1980s and 1990s, Greece opposed the advancement of the European Community's/EU's relations with Turkey. In December 2008 and again in 2009, Slovenia blocked the opening of new chapters in the accession negotiations between the EU and Croatia due to unresolved territorial disputes between the two countries (*BIRN* 2009). In the Western Balkans, North Macedonia stands as a prime example of a candidate state whose efforts to join the EU have been plagued by successive vetoes. It was recognised as a candidate country in December 2005, and from October 2009 onwards, the European Commission recommended the opening of accession negotiations. However, North Macedonia faced a series of vetoes: from 2009 until 2018 from Greece and from 2020 until mid-2022 from Bulgaria. Additionally, in 2019, France objected to Skopje's European integration efforts, leading the Council to postpone the final decision regarding the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia (and Albania) until October. On October 18, French President Emmanuel Macron vetoed the opening of accession negotiations, arguing that the enlargement process needed "substantial restructuring before enlargement" (Cvetanoska 2019; Domaradzki 2023, 23).

³ "We have seen similar dynamics on the opening of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, with one country blocking what everyone else can agree to—again with negative consequences for the EU's credibility and influence. After two and a half years of experiences having dealt with such situations, I think that we have to review our decision-making process. Over the years, we have seen many instances where member states were divided on foreign policy issues. And in principle, it is normal that we have different views to start with, given our differences in history, geography, and strategic political culture. But what matters in political life is not how a discussion starts but how it ends. The strength of the EU system has always been to somehow turn divisions into agreements. And here it matters a great deal whether a decision is taken by unanimity or by qualified majority vote" (Borrell 2022).

The following article will provide a brief comparative analysis of the Greek and Bulgarian vetoes *vis-à-vis* North Macedonia. It will examine Greek and Bulgarian vetoes over North Macedonia's accession process in the context of the dominant narratives regarding policymaking in Greece and Bulgaria. Through a comparative and historical perspective, the paper will analyse the phenomenon of the national veto (ab)use and its ramifications in the European Union's enlargement policy. The author uses document and discourse analysis to illustrate the issues surrounding the bilateralisation of North Macedonia's EU path and its implications for broader enlargement policy. From a realist perspective, the bilateralisation of EU integration efforts by Greece and Bulgaria towards their Macedonian neighbour represents an instance of the member states' (ab)use of decision-making powers to pursue their own national interests (such as those tied to security), even if those interests are not compatible with those of the EU as a broader community. As rational actors, these member states try to maximise their positions in the international system (Waltz 1979, 111). These two countries leverage their advantageous status within the context of European integration to shape the decision-making process. In the context of enlargement policy, this translates into the bilateralisation of North Macedonia's EU accession, whereby its southern and eastern neighbours impose conditions unrelated to European integration in order to make progress on the EU path.

The author will also examine the prospects of reducing or abandoning unanimous voting in the domain of EU enlargement, arguing that qualified majority voting would make decision-making more efficient and increase the likelihood of long-term candidates, such as North Macedonia, joining the EU. The author concludes that the bilateralisation of the EU accession process, as seen in the case of North Macedonia, represents an unfavourable instance of the instrumentalisation of EU decision-making by two of its member states and neighbouring Balkan countries.

The birth of the Greek veto approach towards its Macedonian neighbour

Since the 1980s, Greece has used its veto power, afforded by its membership in multilateral organisations, as a tool to defend its foreign policy interests. It was back then that Athens raised objections over efforts to normalise the European Community's relations with Turkey,⁴ following the gradual return to parliamentary

⁴ The name *Türkiye* has been in use in international official use only since 2022, which is why this article refers to the country by its former name (when examining events preceding that year).

democracy of the latter after 1983. Athens specifically objected to the re-establishment of financial ties and the provision of assistance to Ankara on the grounds of ongoing human rights violations and Turkey's invasion of Cyprus. The exercise of a veto over the EU's relations with Turkey continued into the 1990s, regarded in Athens as generally "beneficial", as it was credited with managing to lift objections to Cyprus starting accession negotiations with the EU in return for Athens not blocking the signing of the EU-Turkey customs union agreement in 1995. Also in December 1999, Athens lifted its objections to recognising Turkey as a candidate member of the EU after it had previously secured the consent of the other member states into a resolution, tying any differences the two states had about the legal status of the Aegean Sea with recourse to the International Court of Justice in The Hague (Helsinki European Council, Presidency Conclusions 10 and 11, December 1999).

The Greek veto over the Euro-Atlantic ambitions of North Macedonia was developed upon the largely successful experience of veto exercise *vis-à-vis* Turkey. It directly relates to Greece's policy towards the Republic of Macedonia following its declaration of independence in September 1991.⁵ Broadly speaking, the European Union (EU) was not content with the Greek embargo towards the newly independent state (Shea 2016, 288). Nonetheless, the emergence of an independent state under the name Republic of Macedonia was perceived at the time as a threat, as Greece's political establishment and its public opinion appeared certain, at large, that the Republic of Macedonia had an "irredentist ideology" bent on "usurping parts of the Greek historical heritage" and on challenging the territorial integrity of the administrative region of Macedonia (*Μακεδονία*) in northern Greece. A significant majority of Greeks were more than certain that the new state had irredentist pretensions towards its northern territory (Greek Macedonia); that the state's irredentism was expressed via the name "Macedonia", articles in the Constitution—Art. 3, Art. 49, and its preamble, where there was a reference to the founding document of the Anti-fascist Assembly of the National

⁵ To better understand this policy, a few introductory remarks on Greece's relationship with the Macedonian Question are necessary. This issue emerged in the late 19th century as part of the Eastern Question, concerning the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the fate of its European provinces, especially Macedonia, with its multi-ethnic population. For Greece, the Macedonian Question became a territorial struggle, including violent conflict, to expand into Ottoman Macedonia. From the late 19th century to 1913, Greece's policy focused overwhelmingly on security, known as the "Macedonian Struggle" in Greek historiography (*ο Μακεδονικός Αγώνας*). This focus persisted until the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, with Greece refusing to recognise any non-Greek ethnic minority in Greek Macedonia. By the late 1980s, concerns over the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's impact on Greek identity grew increasingly prominent (Χριστιδίδης 2006, 67-70).

Liberation of Macedonia of August 1944, as well as symbols; and, finally, that the name Macedonia belonged to Greek historical and cultural heritage and that the “Slavs of Macedonia had no right in using it”. On February 14, 1992, a huge protest meeting took place in Thessaloniki, the second largest Greek city and capital of Greek Macedonia, with the main slogan being “*Η Μακεδονία είναι ελληνική - Macedonia is Greek*” (Christidis 2020, 565).

Greece’s longstanding tradition of emphasising security issues in its foreign policy, combined with a surge of nationalist sentiments in the early 1990s—and the dominance of oversimplified views on the complex historical issue of Macedonia—provided the context in which Athens shaped its policy toward the Republic of Macedonia. In the dominant narrative that influenced the decision-making process at the time, few arguments were addressing the need for a mature democracy—like Greece, a member of major Western institutions—to support a neighbouring, newly independent state taking its first democratic steps in a highly volatile environment, marked by the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia.

By the end of 1991, Athens was actively obstructing the recognition of the newly independent state, objecting to any international acceptance of its constitutional name. Athens would be negotiating with its European partners the recognition of the independence of Slovenia and Croatia in exchange for a number of conditions set on the recognition of the Republic of Macedonia. Thus, according to the resolution adopted during the meeting of the EC Foreign Ministers on December 16 and 17, 1991, in Brussels, it was stated that: “The Community and its member states also ask from the Yugoslav republic to undertake the obligation, before it is recognised, to provide constitutional and political guarantees that will ensure that it does not have any territorial claims towards a neighbouring state, member of the Community, and does not engage in hostile, propaganda activities towards a neighbouring state, member of the Community, including the use of name that implies territorial claims” (further in: Χριστιδης 2006, 72). On April 13, 1992, Greece’s leaders of all four parliamentary parties met under the aegis of the President of the Republic, Konstantinos Karamanlis, to discuss the country’s position over the Republic of Macedonia. At that meeting, the Council of Political Leaders adopted the following position: “Concerning the Skopje issue, the political leadership of the country, with the exception of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), agreed that Greece will recognise the independent state of Skopje, only if the three terms set by the EC on December 16, 1991, are met, with the obvious clarification that the word Macedonia will not be included in the name of that state” (Χριστιδης 2006, 72-73). The resolution was a clear manifestation of Athens’ determination to obstruct the international recognition of the Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name, involving all possible diplomatic means.

Greece's position as a member state of the multilateral organisations that the new state sought and needed to join placed Athens in a privileged diplomatic position. Already in August 1992, the Republic of Macedonia had tabled a request for joining the United Nations, and in December 1992, it asked for the "activation of the process" of joining the UN (Χρηστίδης 2023, 71; Petreski and Ilik 2017). However, due to Greece's objections, that became possible only under a temporary name agreed upon in February 1993, following a compromise name proposed by Britain, France, and Spain: the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). The proposed name became accepted by the Republic of Macedonia, despite strong objections by the opposition and the initial reservations of President Kiro Gligorov that privately had characterised the proposed name as "the least accepted" and "dangerous" (Χρηστίδης 2023, 72).

On September 13, 1995, as several open issues were settled in the Western Balkans, with the most prominent one being the termination of the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the signing of the Dayton Agreement, Athens and Skopje with American diplomatic mediation signed the so-called New York Interim Accord. The agreement was an important step in the direction of normalising relations between Greece and FYROM, leaving the so-called name dispute as the most important open issue. Based on the New York Accord, Greece agreed to recognise and establish diplomatic relations with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, to lift the trade embargo against it, and to allow it to join international organisations (under its provisional name). The Republic of Macedonia made a binding interpretation concerning all the "controversial clauses" of its Constitution (the Preamble, Article 3, and Article 49) and agreed to remove the star of Vergina from its flag. Both sides recognised the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the other. They agreed to take measures to forbid hostile or propaganda activities, while there are several clauses concerning bilateral cooperation. The controversial issue of the name was not dealt with in the agreement.

Nevertheless, the accord created opportunities for the development of important bilateral economic ties between Greece and FYROM (involving primarily the private sector).⁶ By the end of the 1990s, there was a new consensus among

⁶ By 2001, Greece had become one of the most important trade partners of FYROM, absorbing 8.77% of FYROM's imports and covering 10.92% of its exports, while Greek investments during the same period (1995–2001) would be worth more than 180 million dollars, putting Greece at the top of foreign investors in the country. Tourism flows would also become noticeable, with thousands of Macedonians visiting the tourist resorts of Northern Greece in the summer or for shopping tourism in Thessaloniki, while a growing number of Macedonian youth would be enrolled in the private colleges of Thessaloniki (Christidis 2020, 573).

Greece's main political forces regarding an "acceptable solution" to the name dispute. There was a clear admission that the maximalist line adopted during April 1992, i.e., that Greece would never recognise a state north of its borders under the name of "Macedonia", had to be abandoned, favouring now a compromise name that would include the term Macedonia. By the beginning of 2001, there were frequent media reports that Athens and Skopje were close to an agreement, with Washington exercising significant pressure upon both sides for such an agreement. It was reported that Athens was offering a package of substantial economic and diplomatic incentives to the government of Ljubčo Georgievski to accept a composite new name, with "Gornomakedonija" mentioned as a name that Athens was in favour of (Christidis 2020, 574). The new line undoubtedly represented a significant leap of pragmatism. It was based on the understanding that the survival of FYROM was imperative in preserving the fragile geopolitical balance in the region, especially after the 1999 NATO intervention in the region of Kosovo and the rise of the so-called "Albanian question". The Kosovo crisis in 1999 and the subsequent Albanian insurgency in the so-called "Preševo valley" in southeast Serbia the following year(s) had left no doubts to the Greek Foreign Ministry; some even talked about a new "Greek foreign policy dogma": that only FYROM's stabilisation and survival as a state could deter the emergence of a "Great Albania" or a "Great Bulgaria" (cited at Christidis 2020, 574). Athens would approach negotiations on the name dispute, conducted either under the aegis of the UN or bilaterally, under this new diplomatic line and always ready to use its veto power in international organisations.

Thus, in April 1997, Athens blocked the provision of EU assistance to FYROM because "of the lack of progress in the negotiations in the UN" on the so-called name dispute (Σάββα 2005). Furthermore, although bilateral economic ties between the two countries, involving primarily the private sector, would flourish, the overall picture of bilateral relations was far from being "normal", as any agreements signed by the two sides would not be submitted to the Greek parliament for ratification due to the name dispute. The two countries signed bilateral agreements in a variety of fields, including sensitive areas like police cooperation and defence. For example, in December 2000, the Greek Defence Minister Akis Tsohatzopoulos signed with his counterpart Ljuben Paunovski a memorandum of understanding and a cooperation agreement. It is estimated that by the beginning of 2005, Greece and FYROM had signed 35 bilateral agreements, but none was ratified by the Greek Parliament (Λυγερού 2005, also cited at Christidis 2020, 576).

Further instrumentalisation of veto after the Thessaloniki Summit

In 2003, the Thessaloniki European Council summit confirmed the EU membership perspective for all Western Balkan (WB) counties. In 2005, FYROM became an EU candidate, while from the spring of 2005 until March 2008, a series of new UN-mediated negotiations took place between Athens and Skopje, seeking to find a solution to the name dispute. The next round of UN-led negotiations occurred not only due to the prospect of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans but also because Washington was advocating for a new round of NATO enlargement that would include Albania, Croatia, and FYROM. Although Athens would participate in the negotiations with a “newfound willingness” to accept a composite name that would include the term “Macedonia”, all efforts failed to produce an agreement as the Macedonian government was insisting that it was ready to accept a composite name only in the bilateral communication with Greece (Christidis 2020, 576-584). On April 1, 2008, the Greek Prime Minister, in a letter he sent to the other NATO leaders, underlined that “the absence of a commonly accepted solution was forcing Greece not to consent to FYROM’s access to NATO” (Καρανασσοπούλου 2008, cited at Christidis 2020, 584). Indeed, during the dinner of the NATO leaders on April 2 at Bucharest, it became clear that the Greek Prime Minister could not consent to the next wave of NATO enlargement, including FYROM. The leaders of Italy, Spain, and, in particular, French President Nikola Sarkozy expressed understanding for the Greek arguments (Christidis 2020, 585).

The NATO summit at Bucharest left no doubt about Athens’s continued determination to use its veto power and to block any effort by the Republic of Macedonia to advance its Euro-Atlantic integration before any mutually accepted agreement on the “name dispute”; no arguments concerning the need to advance the stability of the region through its anchoring to Euro-Atlantic institutions could overcome the belief of a member state of the Alliance about the need to protect its national interests. In a manifestation of diplomatic skills, Athens had not simply defied Washington’s plans concerning FYROM’s inclusion in the NATO enlargement; it had actually persuaded Washington that FYROM could not join the Alliance without a prior solution to the name dispute. During the visit of the US Ambassador to NATO, Victoria Nuland, to Skopje on November 8, it was underlined to Nikola Gruevski’s government that if it wanted to join the Alliance, it had to meet three criteria: improve the domestic political situation, normalise relations with the Albanian minority, and settle the name dispute with Greece (*TA NEA* 2007, cited at Christidis 2020, 582).

The purpose of the use of veto power was not challenged even following the decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague in December 2011.

On November 17, 2008, FYROM filed an application at the ICJ, instituting proceedings against Greece, arguing that during the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Greece violated its obligations arising from Article 11 Interim Accord of New York, whereby it had agreed not to block the Republic of Macedonia from joining international organisations under the provisional name FYROM (ICJ 2008). On December 5, 2011, the ICJ indeed found that Greece had violated the Interim Agreement of New York.⁷ The Court's decision was a moral blow for Greece. However, it had little political or diplomatic gravity, as it did not alter Athens's position of refusing to consent to FYROM's accession to Euro-Atlantic institutions without a prior, agreed solution to the name dispute.

Nonetheless, the outbreak of the debt crisis in Greece in 2010 did not also affect Athens's determination to keep using its veto power. The debt crisis not only absorbed the attention and energy of Greece's political class in managing the internal consequences of the crisis but signified a steep diminution in the country's power and international image (Λυγερός 2010), effectively making it harder for Athens to maintain a veto position over the EU's enlargement process. The steep deterioration of Athens-Skopje relations after the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit maintained in Greece solid domestic support in favour of the use of the veto power. A new policy of "antiquisation", implemented by the Macedonian government of Nikola Gruevski, involving renaming highways, football stadiums, and airports after historical figures from classical antiquity, as well as erecting statues of ancient Macedonian figures (Georgievski 2009), was seen in Greece as representing a direct challenge to Greece's heritage and an openly unfriendly policy (Τζιμας 2009; Αντωνίου 2009). Likewise, the illiberal tendencies of the Gruevski government (2006–2017) began to increasingly diverge from EU standards (Gjuzelov and Ivanovska Hadjievaska 2021). Thus, in December 2012, Athens once more objected to the opening of accession negotiations with the EU (Αθανασόπουλος 2012). What also helped Athens was the fact that, following the 2007 enlargement, there was growing fatigue and scepticism inside the Union about the prospect of absorbing new members, especially from the economically underdeveloped Western Balkans. In July 2013, Croatia joined the EU. However, one year later, the

⁷ The ICJ decided by 15 votes to 1 that Greece "by objecting to the admission of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to NATO, has breached its obligation under Article 11, paragraph 1, of the Interim Accord of 13 September 1995". At the same time, the Court "rejected all other submissions made by the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", i.e., it did not "consider it necessary to order the Respondent (Greece), as the Applicant requests, to refrain from any future conduct that violates its obligation under Article 11, paragraph 1, of the Interim Accord" (ICJ 2011, 52-53).

new President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, announced that the EU would not expand over the next five years (Erebara 2014).

It should be noted that, in June 2015, a series of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) were signed in Skopje between the Greek Foreign Minister, Nikolaos Kotzias, and his Macedonian counterpart, Nikola Popovski, aimed at “strengthening mutual confidence and advancing overall bilateral relations”. The CBMs included eleven areas of interest: political consultations between the two Ministries of Foreign Affairs; bilateral dialogue for EU affairs and strengthening cooperation in the framework of the cross-border IPA2 programmes; cooperation between the National Centre for Public Administration in Athens and the Administration Centre in Skopje; cooperation between universities, research centres and institutes; the provision of university scholarships; cultural exchange and cooperation; enhancing economic and trade relations; improving energy connectivity; improving railway connectivity; consultations between representatives of the Ministries of the Interior, border police and customs administration; and cooperation on health issues. The migrant crisis that followed soon after, engulfing much of Central Europe during 2015–2016, facilitated a partial *rapprochement* between Athens and Skopje, opening a new chapter of bilateral cooperation and contacts as the two sides worked on implementing the signed CBMs (Chupeska-Stanishkovska and Christidis 2018, 40, 42).

The political changes in Skopje following the December 2016 elections made possible a “historic compromise” between the two countries. The new Macedonian government of Zoran Zaev, formed in May 2017, made accession to NATO and the EU the highest priority of his government, something that presupposed a previous settlement of open issues with neighbouring countries. Thus, “unlocking the Euro-Atlantic integration” became the key that made possible the Prespa compromise: agreeing to a new, constitutional name with an *erga omnes* application, as demanded by Athens, in exchange for recognition of the Macedonian language and identity by Greece, albeit under certain qualifications. The compromise achieved in Prespa proved a workable enough solution for Greece to remove its objections to North Macedonia’s Euro-Atlantic integration, and in March 2019, the latter joined NATO (Bechev 2023).

The evolution of Bulgaria's policy *vis-à-vis* North Macedonia and the birth of the veto approach

Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, but its veto policy *vis-à-vis* North Macedonia dates much later than 2007, beginning in 2020. Recourse to the veto power relates to the evolution of bilateral relations with North Macedonia following the declaration of independence of the latter in 1991, and the context whereby Sofia shaped its policy *vis-à-vis* the Republic of Macedonia is cardinally different from that in Greece's case. The dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the declaration of independence of the Republic of Macedonia in September 1991 had generated widespread expectations in Bulgaria at the time "that independence would finally free the ethnic Macedonians from Serbian tutelage, allowing them to rediscover their Bulgarian roots" (Χρηστίδης 2007, 178). Bulgaria was thus the first state to recognise the Republic of Macedonia by its constitutional name on January 15, 1991, with Bulgaria's state and political leadership—President Zheliu Zhelev and Prime Minister Filip Dimitrov—treating the issue with a sense of "historic responsibility" (Χρηστίδης 2007, 178-179). At the same time, the act of recognising the Republic of Macedonia was accompanied by a refusal to recognise a Macedonian ethnic identity and the Macedonian language as different from Bulgarian (Χρηστίδης 2007, 178-179; Bechev 2013, 194), pointing out to a complex "historical baggage" concerning Bulgarian perceptions and policies relating to the so-called Macedonia Question.⁸

The identity issues, and especially Bulgaria's refusal to recognise a Macedonian identity in all its ethnic and linguistic parameters, significantly complicated bilateral relations during much of the 1990s. It illustrates the prevailing atmosphere at the

⁸ As in the case of Greece, Bulgaria's preoccupation with the so-called Macedonian Question predates the declaration of independence of the Republic of Macedonia in 1991. It goes back to the establishment of the modern Bulgarian state by the San Stefano Treaty in 1878, which defined the borders of "Greater Bulgaria" to include most of the territory of Ottoman Macedonia (Petrović and Veselica 2024, 87). The abrogation of the Treaty of San Stefano, due to Great Power rivalry, and the creation of a smaller Bulgarian Principality gave rise to the "Macedonian Question" in Bulgarian foreign policy. Bulgaria sought to reclaim "lost territories" and correct the perceived "injustice" of the treaty's annulment. Capturing Macedonia was central to Bulgarian foreign policy from 1878 until the end of World War II, deeply rooted in popular imagination. As President Petar Stoyanov said in 1997, "Macedonia has been the most romantic piece in Bulgarian history". After World War II, Bulgaria briefly aligned with Communist Yugoslavia's Macedonian policy, recognising a distinct Macedonian people. However, after the 1948 Moscow-Belgrade rift, under Todor Zhivkov, Sofia shifted, asserting that Macedonian ethnogenesis occurred post-1944 on an anti-Bulgarian basis and that the Macedonian language was a Bulgarian dialect.

time that the two sides would agree but never sign various agreements on bilateral cooperation due to the so-called language dispute. Thus, during Gligorov's state visit to Sofia on April 25-26, 1994, no agreement was signed out of 15 prepared, as the two sides disagreed on the exact wording of the text. The Bulgarian side asked for the agreements to be signed "in the official languages of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia". The Macedonian side insisted on the stipulation that the agreements were signed "in the Bulgarian and the Macedonian language" (Χρηστίδης 2007, 181). A technical solution to the language dispute was found only at the beginning of 1999. In February 1999, the Bulgarian government of Ivan Kostov and the Macedonian government of Ljupco Georgievski signed a Declaration, providing a formula for the language dispute. Thus, the document was signed "in two original copies, each in the official language of the two countries—the Bulgarian language according to the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Macedonian language according to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia" (Χρηστίδης 2007, 182).

Bilateral relations after that have developed, but up to a point, as "minority-identity issues" again undermined any existing dynamic for a Bulgarian-Macedonian *rapprochement*.⁹ Particularly on the Bulgarian side, among the small circle of historians, journalists, and policy experts dealing with Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, the feelings that Bulgaria had, post-1991, provided "one-way support to the Republic of Macedonia without getting much in return, especially on issues such as Bulgaria's historical legacy in Macedonia and the free self-identification of ethnic Bulgarians in the Republic of Macedonia" increasingly gained strength (Χρηστίδης 2007, 186). In July 2006, and in advance of Bulgaria joining the EU, the Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ivailo Kalfin declared that Sofia would support the Republic of Macedonia in its European aspirations, provided the latter ceased "its hostility towards the Bulgarian nation and its history... and showed respect for the common history and cultural past and good neighbourliness towards Bulgaria" (Χρηστίδης 2007, 186).

Kalfin's statement gave an early indication that Sofia would be willing to use the prerogative of the veto, provided by its membership in the EU, in order to advance its national interests (Nancheva and Koneska 2015). In December 2012, Sofia clarified that it would consent to the opening of EU accession negotiations with the Republic of Macedonia only if the latter satisfied three preconditions: the

⁹ Thus, Skopje resented the fact that the political representation of the Macedonian ethnic minority in Bulgaria would be faced with legal obstacles, while the Bulgarian side claimed "state persecution and hostility" against those who expressed a Bulgarian ethnic identity in the Republic of Macedonia (Χρηστίδης 2007, 185).

signing of a friendship and cooperation agreement between Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia, the formation of joint government sessions, and the signing of an agreement for the joint celebrations of notable personalities and events in the “common history” of the two countries (Christidis 2017). Relations between Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia would effectively stagnate during the 2008-2016 period, as the “antiquisation policy” that occupied much of the agenda of the Macedonian government of Nikola Gruevski succeeded in antagonising and alienating also the Bulgarian public opinion (Christidis 2017, 1). It was only after the formation of the new Macedonian government of Zoran Zaev in May 2017 that bilateral relations improved, as the new government in Skopje understood well that it had to improve relationship first with neighbours like Bulgaria and Greece if it wished to advance Euro-Atlantic integration of the country. Thus, on August 1, 2017, Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia signed a Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighbourliness, and Cooperation. The treaty committed Bulgaria to assist the Republic of Macedonia in its Euro-Atlantic integration, providing at the same time for the establishment of a committee of experts to examine “historical and educational issues” and for the celebration of “common historical events and personalities” (Christidis 2017, 1-2).

Despite the signing of the 2017 Treaty, relations between Sofia and Skopje quickly turned sour. By the end of 2018, right-wing political forces, like ATAKA and VMRO, that participated in the Bulgarian governing coalition, and a growing number of policy experts, like members of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and university professors, accused North Macedonia of “insincerity” on issues concerning the treatment of “common history” and “prevarication” in the work of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues, established by the 2017 agreement (Christidis 2019). In December 2018, Krasimir Karakachanov, the leader of the VMRO that saw itself as the guardian of “Bulgarian heritage in Macedonia”, and Minister of Defence in the Bulgarian government, accused North Macedonia of continuing to “play tricks... falsify history and... forcing a Macedonian identity and language not only within Macedonia but also on Bulgarian territory” (Christidis 2019). In advance of the important EU Summit on October 16, 2019, that would have decided on the opening of the EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia, an extraordinary session took place in Sofia with the participation of Bulgaria’s President Rumen Radev and Prime Minister Boyko Borisov.¹⁰ At the meeting, Borisov stated that “the membership of North

¹⁰ The meeting took place on September 30, 2019. Besides Radev and Borisov, the Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva, Karakachanov, and the head of the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs and of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues also participated.

Macedonia to the EU is important, however, it cannot take place at our expense with a rewritten history...”, while Radev underlined that it is important “to draw red lines that will guarantee that North Macedonia’s access to the EU will not take place at the expense of Bulgarian history, language, and identity” (Christidis 2019).

On October 9, 2019, the Bulgarian government adopted the so-called “Framework Position in Relation to EU Expansion and the Process of Stabilisation and Association: the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania”. Although in the document it is stated that Bulgaria “welcomes and supports the recommendation of the European Commission to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia as well as with Albania”, Sofia renders its support dependent upon the whole accession process and contingent upon Skopje addressing what it sees as the “anti-Bulgarian ideological foundations of Macedonianism” constructed after 1944 and the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia in post-Second World War Yugoslavia. The document proceeds to underline that Bulgaria’s support for North Macedonia’s EU accession is tied to the implementation of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness, and Cooperation, signed between the two countries in August 2017, and specifically on achieving “real progress in the implementation of the letter and spirit of the Treaty”. Sofia expected “real progress” from Skopje in addressing several issues related to the official narrative of the Macedonian national identity, dealing with historical matters, and placing particular emphasis on the work of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues (Christidis 2019). The adoption of the Framework Position (also voted in the Parliament the following day, October 10) brought about successive vetoes by Sofia on the beginning of the EU accession process for North Macedonia in November 2020 and October 2021 (Stefanova 2024, 85).

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU intensified its diplomatic engagement with the Western Balkans due to the region’s geopolitical and security significance. In the case of North Macedonia’s EU accession process, there were renewed diplomatic efforts to reach an agreement that would facilitate the lifting of the Bulgarian veto. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited Sofia and Skopje at the beginning of June 2022, calling Bulgaria to lift its veto on North Macedonia (DW 2022a). The diplomatic efforts culminated in the acceptance of the so-called French proposal: Sofia would drop its veto, and the accession process would begin as soon as North Macedonia amended its Constitution to include citizens living within the state’s borders who are part of other national groups, such as Bulgarians. On June 24, 2022, the Bulgarian Parliament voted in favour of the government’s decision to lift its veto on North Macedonia’s EU membership. “The decision is adopted with 170 votes in favour, 37 were against and 21 abstained”, parliament deputy speaker Atanas Atanasov said after the vote. “Ultimately, it is

in our interest for the Western Balkans, for North Macedonia and Albania, to receive a perspective to join the EU”, Hristo Ivanov, the co-chairman of the right-wing Democratic Bulgaria party who proposed the motion, said during the debate (DW 2022b).

On July 16, 2022, the Macedonian Parliament also voted in favour of the proposal, despite vehement protests by the opposition. Sixty-eight lawmakers in the 120-seat Macedonian Parliament voted in favour of the proposal. The main opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, said it will never agree to the constitutional changes. Aleksandar Nikoloski of VMRO-DPMNE said: “This is a crime against the whole nation. Such a grave mistake has never happened since the independence” (DW 2022c). The strong controversy caused by the acceptance of the proposal related, to a great extent, to a bilateral Bulgarian-Macedonian protocol agreed in advance of the acceptance of the French proposal. Critics of the protocol have argued that it contains several conditions related to the Joint Historical Commission, including setting timelines for the Commission’s work and encouraging a complete resolution of its work before North Macedonia can join the EU. Essentially, if the Commission fails to produce the desired results as outlined by Bulgaria, it can again claim grounds for North Macedonia’s failure to fulfil its obligations and indefinitely delay North Macedonia’s accession to the EU until it finally complies with Bulgaria’s demands for the revision of its history textbooks and other curricula (Vangelov 2023, 163).

Concluding remarks

While the birth and evolution of the Greek and Bulgarian vetoes regarding North Macedonia differ, their underlying logic is quite similar: the defence of what each nation-state considers its legitimate national interests, particularly concerning the issues of identity and historical legacy. These issues have never been peripheral in the context of the birth and evolution of the Greek and Bulgarian states over the past two centuries. They occupy a central position in both nations’ ideologies and narratives, capable of mobilising large segments of public opinion¹¹ and thus playing a crucial role in political life.

In other words, being perceived as defending one’s identity and heritage can be politically not just a winning ticket but also imperative. In this respect, there is

¹¹ For example, in the two huge demonstrations that took place in April 1992 and 1994 in Thessaloniki under the slogan “*Η Μακεδονία είναι Ελληνική*» (“*Macedonia is Greek*”).

little room for ideas that accommodate different views or consider the larger stakes involved in the exercise of the veto. In the case of North Macedonia, the stakes involved both the EU's credibility and North Macedonia itself. Blocking the accession process has undermined pro-reform forces, strengthening authoritarian politicians in the country. This was evident in the case of Nikola Gruevski after 2008, as he adopted a populist-nationalist agenda and displayed anti-democratic behaviour that undermined the rule of law (Rigels 2024).¹² It was also seen in the demise of Zoran Zaev, who was credited with agreeing to change the constitutional name of his country in exchange for unblocking North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration (Stamatoukou 2024). More recently, Bulgaria's policies regarding North Macedonia's EU accession have raised concerns about inflaming inter-ethnic relations within the country (Vangelov 2023). Furthermore, the vetoes have undermined the EU's credibility both domestically in North Macedonia and more broadly in the Western Balkans, as promises made following the Prespa Agreement have not been fulfilled (Burazer 2021).

Thus, the extensive criticism directed at the use of the national veto has fallen on deaf ears in both Greece and Bulgaria. It has been argued that the EU's right to veto has often been unduly used and exploited by member states for issues unrelated to EU values (Rigels 2024). Additionally, it has been stated that "Bulgaria's veto had nothing to do with the rule of law or democratisation" (Rigels 2024), nor with the economic and democratic principles governing the EU enlargement process (Cvijic and Nechev 2022). None of these arguments have impacted the belief that the veto is an irreplaceable instrument for defending national interests. This belief is held not only by Greece and Bulgaria within the EU. In the debate that has been growing over the last few years, there is still no clear majority in favour of adopting QMV in the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Only nine member states have openly expressed support for this change. In May 2023, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Spain launched a "Group of Friends" to promote the debate on using QMV in the CFSP to enable the EU to respond to the growing international challenges facing Europe (Navarra *et al.* 2023, 8).

However, on May 15, 2023, Greece and Bulgaria, along with six other member states—Poland, Hungary, Czechia, Cyprus, Malta, and Croatia—gathered to express their support for maintaining unanimity (Navarra *et al.* 2023, 9). More recently, at

¹² "Imposing the Greek veto marked the end of any kind of reforms regarding further democratisation or the rule of law in Macedonia... The Greek veto effectively blocked any kind of enlargement regarding Macedonia in the EU, making it easy for Gruevski to transform into a headline nationalist" (Rigels 2024).

the beginning of September 2024, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk stated that “Ukraine will not get Poland’s consent to join the European Union unless it meets Warsaw’s expectations on how it should deal with the past, setting the record straight on World War II events involving the two countries” (Kosc 2024). Clearly, it is not only Greece and Bulgaria that feel entitled to use the veto for issues unrelated to the Copenhagen criteria. The prospects for abandoning the unanimity rule do not appear particularly high at the moment. Smaller states within the EU fear that under QMV, their interests will simply be ignored in the CFSP by the larger states, which makes them reluctant to consent to abandon the unanimity rule (Navarra *et al.* 2023, 9). The EU is hostage to the fact that its integration process has not progressed quickly or deeply enough; it has yet to become a truly supranational organisation. It will require a great deal of creative thinking¹³ and hard bargaining to persuade the sceptical EU member states to agree to abandon the unanimity rule in the CFSP, including in enlargement policy.

The findings of the paper were presented at the annual international roundtable organised by the Institute of International Politics and Economics and the Hanns Seidel Foundation in Belgrade. The roundtable, titled “EU Enlargement Policy Between Idealism and Realism”, was held on September 30, 2024.

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**REFORMA ODLUČIVANJA EVROPSKE UNIJE O PROŠIRENJU:
LEKCIJE IZ BUGARSKIH I GRČKIH VETA ZA SEVERNU MAKEDONIJU**

Apstrakt: Ovaj članak proučava Severnu Makedoniju kao primer kandidatske države čiji su napori da se pridruži Evropskoj uniji (EU) u više navrata ometani vetom nekoliko članica, uključujući Grčku, Francusku i Bugarsku. Autor tvrdi da primer Severne Makedonije ukazuje na neophodnost, ali i na izazove, povezane s reformom mehanizma donošenja odluka o proširenju EU. Iz komparativne i istorijske perspektive, ovaj rad istražuje veto pristup Grčke i Bugarske u procesu pristupanja Severne Makedonije u kontekstu preovlađujućih narativa u politici dve države-članice Evropske unije. U istraživanju se koristi analiza dokumenata i analiza diskursa. Članak pruža osvrt na logiku i svrhu nacionalnih veta, njihovu upotrebu, kao i izglede za reformu procesa donošenja odluka o proširenju Evropske unije.

Ključne reči: pristupanje EU, država-kandidat, bilateralizam, kvalifikovana većina, reforma.