

## North Macedonia within the western Balkan sub-regional security complex: A theoretical approach

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**ABSTRACT:** This article, which builds on Buzan's and the Copenhagen school's security theorizing, explores the main security issues of a small and landlocked country of the Western Balkans, the Republic of North Macedonia. The internal demographic structure and the external bilateral contests, make this state an interesting case to analyze within the Balkan's sub-regional security complex. The central argument raised here is that North Macedonia reflects an interplay of regional and internal security dynamics, expressed mainly through an overlap of societal and political security issues. Although in North Macedonia's case, the societal security issues appear to be crucial, as national identity issues represent the main element around which circulate the greatest fears and insecurities of this country, the approach and way these issues seem to be handled reflect an intersection of the societal and political sector. Relying on main regional security complex theories, this article will construct and analyze the most significant security interactions taking place in North Macedonia and the sectors with most sources for securitization.

**KEYWORDS:** Securitization, societal sector, political sector, North Macedonia, sub-regional security complex, national identity, bilateral contests.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with a small state's security issues and their implications within the so called sub-regional security complex of the Western Balkans. Since the security dynamics are by nature relational, analyzing the security issues of North Macedonia, would require an analysis within its regional context. The regional level explains the way security is sufficiently linked with other units. Buzan et al. define the Regional Security Complex (RSC) as 'a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another'. The relations within regions are characterized by patterns of amity and enmity, caused usually by historical or cultural factors, and the closer these states are located physically, the greater their security interaction may be. Thus, the standard form of RSC is characterized by rivalry, power balancing, or alliance building among the main powers of the region, however, the latter may also be penetrated and influenced by external powers [1].

### 2 THE BALKANS: A SUB-REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX OR AN RSC IN ITS OWN RIGHT?

The Balkans, in which North Macedonia is located, represents a region which moved from being almost a complex in its own right, through the process of *Balkanization*, in early 90s, to a subcomplex of the wider Europe-EU regional complex by late 90s. The fact that security issues in the Balkans of the 90s, such as ethnic cleansing, wars, dehumanization, were substantially different from the issues within the region of Europe, motivated scholarly attempts to delimit this region as a world region, separate from that of Europe. These attempts were furthermore strengthened by the fact that interaction and security interdependence were much greater within the Balkan units than between the latter and external actors.

The counter-argument to this position, however, is that the Balkans region was never completely independent from the European influence. The interaction of the Balkans with the wider European security dynamics oscillated from being almost

independent to merging into one European regional complex. For instance, during the Balkan wars against the Ottoman rule, local actors counted on the European support and borders were drawn according to European ruling principles [2]. During World War I the Balkans completely merged into the European complex, sharing the same security issues as the western European states. Also, the emerging of the Serb-Croatian-Slovenian Kingdom (1918), seemed to be a decision of the great powers as much as it was a reflection of the Pan-Slavic and nationalistic constellations. The new Yugoslavia emerged almost within the same borders as the SCS Kingdom, while it served as a buffer zone between the East and West during the Cold War years. The collapse of Yugoslavia, although seemingly an internally driven process, motivated by nationalism and irredentism, also reflects influences by external factors. During the 90s conflicts, following the break-up of Yugoslavia, the involvement of the external powers was not only evident but also highly expected by the internal actors. According to Buzan the influence of the external factors on the internal Balkans conflicts impacted the outcome of these conflicts, causing the latter to linger, as powerful external friends offered their support on either side of the conflicting parties [3] (ex. Croats counting on Germany, Serbia on Russia, Bosnians and Kosovar Albanians on USA, etc.).

In the post Yugoslavian period, the independent Balkan states are characterized by a number of security issues which may be located at the intersection of the societal and political sector. According to Buzan and Waever, of all sectors, indeed, the societal sector appears to be crucial within the Balkans, as national identity issues represent the main element around which revolve the greatest fear and insecurity of Balkan countries. Although religion may also play a role as a divisive line between Balkan nations, Buzan argues that religion serves mostly as an identity marker of ethnic or national groups, and not as a security issue in its own right. Since national identity appears to be the main organizing principle of the Balkan states, the security threats which affect this principle appear crucial in the process of securitization. However, based on the nature of the security issues, as well as on the way these issues are approached, the political sector also emerges as important. The Balkan conflicts have been characterized by ethno-territorial clashes whose status lingers to this day [4]. Some examples of these security issues are illustrated by following examples: the sustainability and longevity of Bosnia as a divided country into three autonomous units; the recognition of Kosovo by Serbia as an independent state and the issue of Kosovo's uncontrolled norther border; the relationship between the Macedonian majority ethnic group and the Albanian large minority in North Macedonia; the minority issues between Albania and Greece; the issue of external contestation of North Macedonia's national/state identity, etc.

As the above analysis shows, the influence of external powers on the shaping of the Balkans, renders the latter as a sub-complex within the Europe regional security complex. As Buzan and Waever argue, the reason for the involvement of the external powers in the Balkans may be the European consideration of the Balkans as 'part of us' [5]. However, as Hansen argues, the dilemma among Europeans as to whether the Balkan region should be sealed off as a separate region or be included as a subcomplex of the European region, continues to exist to this day [6]. Furthermore, Buzan and Waever claim that the involvement in the Balkans of the external powers, at the regional or even the global level, has at times been irrespective of their will. It has either been imposed by the expectations of the local actors, by the media and civil society pressures, or by potential spill-over effects of the Balkan security issues in Europe, albeit in other forms of (in) security, such as migration [7].

## 2.1 NORTH MACEDONIA WITHIN THE WESTERN BALKAN SUB-REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX

North Macedonia would be an example which embodies all of the above security issues. A small, landlocked country, North Macedonia gained international attention due to the existing conflicts in the surrounding Balkan countries. Considering the conflicts which broke out in the early 90s, in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and later in Kosovo, as an outcome of Yugoslavia's dissolution and the declaration of independence by its constituent countries, the international factor grew fearful of a potential spillover effect of these conflicts into the small territory of North Macedonia. This fear materialized further when taking into consideration the demographic structure of this country. According to the last census conducted in 2002, in North Macedonia cohabit a variety of ethnic groups, with a majority of ethnic Macedonians (64 percent), followed by Albanians (25 percent), Turks (3 percent), Roma (2 percent), Serbs (1 percent), Bosnians (0.8 percent), Vlach (0.4 percent), and others (1 percent) [8]. Despite the high possibility of being absorbed into the armed conflicts that surrounded it, North Macedonia luckily escaped the crisis of Yugoslavia's fall in a peaceful manner. This luck, however, didn't follow North Macedonia throughout its journey towards consolidation as an independent, stable, and prosperous state. Its path towards consolidation is mostly bumpy and thorny, characterized by many security issues which have many times brought the country almost to the verge of collapse.

When analyzing the conflict issues existing within North Macedonia, Buzan and Waever divide them into two categories. In the first category they place the internal conflicting relationship between the strong Albanian minority, and the Slavic (or ethnic Macedonian) majority. This tensioned relationship culminated into an opened armed conflict in 2001. In the second category they place the external relations North Macedonia has, mainly with its neighbors: Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Albania, and Kosovo. These relations are considered as source of insecurity within the Balkan subcomplex, due to the competing interpretations of North Macedonia's statehood and nationality. Buzan defines North Macedonia as a uniquely complicated case, where all of its

neighbors have a role in defining it. Greece contests its constitutional name “Macedonia”, claiming that it belongs to the Greek province and is part of its historic and cultural heritage. Bulgarians contest the unique Macedonian nationality, considering the state as ‘west Macedonia’, Serbs contest the idea of it being an independent state, as they consider the latter a product of Yugoslavia’s project. Albania, on the other hand, has a salient interest in this country due to the big minority of Albanian population who lives in it [9]. In the following section I will elaborate on these two categories separately, in order to be able to later draw a relationship between the internal and external main security issues that North Macedonia faces. Besides the internal and sub-regional complex, I will add another category of security issues which North Macedonia is affected by. The internationalization of *Macedonia’s Question*, reflects the impact of external powers over its bilateral and internal conflict, thus interfering with its main security issues.

### 2.1.1 MACEDONIAN-ALBANIAN SECURITY COMPLEX

This complex defines and explains the internal conflicts that North Macedonia faces since its independence in 1991. I argue that the main reason behind these conflicts revolves around *the idea of the state*, since its birth. The definition of North Macedonia, in its first constitutional preamble, of 1992, as a “national state of the Macedonian people, in which full equality as citizens and permanent co-existence with the Macedonian people is provided for Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Roma, and other nationalities living in the Republic of Macedonia” [10], would become the internal source of dispute among the ethnic majority of Macedonians and the big ethnic minority of Albanians. Although more than two ethnicities live within the territory of North Macedonia, their significantly smaller percentage (Serbs constitute only 3 percent of the total population), left room for the inter-ethnic conflict dispute to be concentrated only on the two largest groups: Macedonians (64 percent) and Albanians (25 percent). The essence of their differences lies on the idea of the state. Ethnic Macedonians insist that the state is built on the basis of its ethno-nation, or a nation-state of the Macedonian people, where other ethnic groups would be treated as equal citizens before the law. This idea is fiercely contested by the Albanian ethnic group, who favor a binational or a civic state, where the Albanians would be considered as a constituent nation, alongside the Macedonian nation [11].

Even the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which closed the armed conflict of 2001, did not resolve fundamentally the issue of power-sharing and therefore, the inter-ethnic conflict. With an amended preamble and several other amendments, it attempted to transform a self-defined nation-state to what Bieber describes as “a state straddling between nation-state, civic state, and binational state with a formal power-sharing structure”. Yet, its ambiguous nature, left room for different and often contradictory interpretations. In turn, this ambiguity created discontent in both ethnicities. Despite its attempts to resolve inter-ethnic conflict, the OFA became rather a controversial document. The Macedonian ethnic group has remained, in its majority, skeptical towards the agreement, fearing that it would eventually lead to loss of their control over the state and even worse to secession [12]. Although initially supported highly by the Albanian community, OFA’s failure to establish formal power-sharing system in North Macedonia and lack of political commitment for its thorough implementation, has caused much frustration among the Albanian community as well [13].

In efforts to systematize the internal security issues that North Macedonia faces since its birth, I would argue that they represent an intersection of the societal and political sector. At first sight, it seems that the conflict holds in its essence a political dispute, and therefore it should be cataloged into the political sector. From the Albanian viewpoint, the conflict reflects the resisted demands of the Albanian ethnic group for their political and legal status advancement. From the Macedonian viewpoint, ceding advanced rights to Albanians might empower them to a point that they become a threat for the territorial integrity of the state. Advanced and decentralized powers for Albanians evoke fear in Macedonians for potential secession of the western part of the state, where ethnic Albanians are mostly concentrated [14]. In Buzan et al. terms, any threat that may target the sovereignty of a state, yet uses non-military means, may be therefore considered as a threat within the political sector. Considering the Albanians’ demand for power-sharing in North Macedonia’s case, one might argue that even if territorial sovereignty is not under direct threat, the idea of the nation-state surely is, and this, to some extent, might also mean loss of sovereignty, as long as the latter depends upon the existing organizational stability of that state [15].

If the arguments above illustrate how internal conflicts in North Macedonia are in essence political insecurities, then how can it be that the latter intertwine with societal insecurities? As Engstrom (2002) puts it, Albanians in reality do not contest the ethnic identity of Macedonians, including its integral components, such as the name of the state and nation, language, history, religion, etc. However, their political demands, if accepted, would consequently affect Macedonian identity and cultural features, by changing or modifying the political character of the state of North Macedonia. Ethnic Macedonians’ ‘proprietary right’ over the state, is closely related to identity insecurities they endure from external actors. Consequently, denying this right to them would not only mean loss of internal legitimacy as the ethnic group which dominates state structures and institutions, but also loss of identity. As Macedonian identity is threatened saliently externally, this people links closely its territory and internal legitimacy with the possibility of protecting and asserting its unique identity against external threats [16].

Hence, to Macedonians, the preservation of the nation-state of the Macedonian people philosophy would be a way of securitizing their identity not so much towards Albanians, as the second largest ethnic group, as much as towards the external states, which contest it.

The contestation of the authenticity of Macedonian identity by the neighbors, is in a reverse way, also linked to the internal insecurities. Such contestation, consequently stirs nationalism within Macedonians, as a tool to justify their being as a state-nation. In order for Macedonians to be able to defend 'their distinctive and authentic' national identity towards external threats, they need to consolidate their nation internally, by submerging it into the idea of the state and consequently into the state institutions. However, the process of Macedonian national identity consolidation seems to be in direct contradiction to the Albanian endeavors to preserve and assert their distinctive identity. This may be further aggravated when the state tries to impose an overreaching identity over pre-existing ethnic groups, such as the case of the Macedonian nation-state. According to Buzan and Waever, being mutually exclusive identities, their rivalry would pose a real threat to the societal security, since it is very difficult to be both Macedonian and Albanian, as it is problematic to be both Greek and Turk, or Muslim and Christian [17].

### 2.1.2 NORTH MACEDONIA-NEIGHBORS SECURITY COMPLEX

North Macedonia's conflicts with its neighbors involve security issues which seem primarily societal in nature. However, through the attempts of merging social and political identity, by building a nation state, where the state and society interests would converge, the societal security issues ultimately become political issues as well. Buzan et al. argue that society can react to societal threats in two ways. The first way is by moving the issue into the state agenda, hence by merging it with the political sector, and the second way is by avoiding the involvement of the state and resolving the issue (s) at the community (or non-state) level. Most societal issues, however, are dealt with at the state level, hence, the differentiation between the two sectors becomes difficult [18]. North Macedonia, I would argue, illustrates such cases.

The intertwining of the political and societal sectors in North Macedonia vis-à-vis its neighbors, is reflected through the close connection of the state sovereignty with its national (ethno-national) identity. Embodying ethnic elements into the state features, any attack on ethnic identity becomes ultimately a threat towards the state identity as well. Besides Albania and Kosovo, North Macedonia's relationship with the rest of its neighbors (Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia), is defined by societal insecurities which arise as a result of its neighbors' contestation of the authenticity of vital elements of its ethno-national identity. Since ethnic-Macedonian elements are embedded in the state's main identity features (ex. official language, history, myths, other symbols, etc.), these insecurities take the form of political issues as well, as the state represents the main referential object within the political sector.

#### 2.1.2.1 GREECE

Since its independence, Greece had decided to use all methods within its power as a member of the EU, to prevent the recognition of the new state called 'Macedonia' [19]. The essence of the conflict with Greece is characterized by the latter's contestation of the Macedonian state and ethnic flag, depicting the Star of Vergina, by negating the application of the term *Macedonian* to the majority ethnic group, and by opposing the constitutional name *Republic of Macedonia*. Certainly, this contest is perceived differently by both sides of the conflict. According to Sofos, the Macedonian side views the conflict with Greece as an irrational demand. The denial of the people's right to call themselves in a way by which they identify, to the Macedonian people represents a violation of the right to self-determination. The Greek side, on the other hand, views the naming of the new state *Macedonia* as a provocation by the northern neighbor, as a tendency of appropriating key elements of the Greek ancient history, and furthermore as a tendency to disguise potential territorial claims towards Greece. Sofos describes this contest as an issue deeply enrooted in Greeks' psychology, who for 200 years learn Ancient Macedonian and Hellenic past as part of the Greek history. Thus, any use of the elements of this history, be it the name *Macedonia* itself, to the Greeks represents an unjustified appropriation [20].

This bilateral contest amplified during the early 90s, resulting in Greece's blockade of North Macedonia's membership in the UN under its constitutional name, in Greek economic embargoes on North Macedonia, and as a result in constitutional amendments made by the Macedonian parliament in 1995. The new amendments specified that North Macedonia wouldn't project any territorial claim towards its neighbors, and it wouldn't interfere in the sovereign rights of other states [21]. In 1995 North Macedonia also changed its official flag, which depicted the *Star of Vergina*, a sun with sixteen rays, from the era of ancient Macedonian kingdom [22]. Although the relations between the two countries seemed to slightly improve after the Interim Accord signed in 1995 [23], the main conflicting issues did not disappear. The unresolved 'name issue', lay at the center of the cold diplomatic relations between the two states. Greece's contestation to North Macedonia's use of its constitutional

name, the Republic of Macedonia, led the former to present a veto on North Macedonia's membership to NATO and EU. The first changes in the relationship between the two countries emerged in 2017, when the new Macedonian government, in an attempt to deblock the Euro-Atlantic integrations, resolved the name issue with Greece, accepting to change its constitutional name into the Republic of North Macedonia. It can be argued that, whereas these changes may contribute to the elimination of political threats from Greece, they may certainly give rise to societal threats, which would result from the internal fears within the Macedonian ethnic group for beginning to lose their national identity as a result of the external pressures.

#### **2.1.2.2 BULGARIA**

The conflict with Bulgaria targets another element of identity: the nation. Bulgaria doesn't recognize the distinctiveness of the Macedonian nation, including its language, history, etc. Considering North Macedonia as part of its own national identity, in Bulgaria's perspective all its attempts towards North Macedonia are made in an effort to protect the Bulgarian national identity. From North Macedonia's perspective, these attempts are considered as direct threat to its own national identity. Paradoxically, Bulgaria was the first country to formally recognize North Macedonia as an independent state in 1992. Emerging in difficult political circumstances, North Macedonia's recognition by Bulgaria had a special significance and became a basis for building good neighborly relations [24]. While Bulgaria recognized the new state, it refused to recognize the Macedonians as a constituting nation, which is different from Bulgarians. They also disputed the authenticity of the Macedonian language, considering it a dialect of the Bulgarian language [25]. The 'language problem' between the two countries burdened their relationship. Every cooperation was made more difficult due to the non-recognition of the Macedonian language. The blockade between the two countries was resolved in 1999, when a joint declaration was signed. Based on this declaration, the language issue was resolved and both sides agreed on using the following formula: "Bulgarian language according to the Bulgarian constitution, and Macedonian language according to the Macedonian constitution" [26]. In this manner, the language issue between North Macedonia and Bulgaria was treated in legal terms and not as an ethno-national issue. Nevertheless, the position of Bulgaria changed in 2006. In this period the Bulgarian President and the Foreign Minister stated that the Bulgarian support would not be unconditional "and in the future, Bulgarian support will depend on the willingness and the success of the Republic of Macedonia in adopting and maintaining a policy of good-neighborly relations" [27]. The relations between the two countries moved from a frozen point in 2017, when the two signed a bilateral agreement, which was a build-up of the 1999 agreement. This agreement was furthermore perceived as a key step for removing the blockade on the Euro-Atlantic integrations, and as basis for turning Bulgaria into one of the strongest supporters of North Macedonia in its integration path [28]. However, the recent developments hint at a new conflict in the horizon. Through a declaration made by Bulgaria, as part of the conclusion resume for EU enlargement and decision for start of EU negotiations with North Macedonia, another blockade was signaled by a neighboring state. The latter has presented North Macedonia with several new conditions regarding the Macedonian official language, Macedonian minority in Bulgaria, and the Macedonian historical figures [29]. Although the epilogue of this new development is unknown, the persistence of the long-running issues reflects the still existing social and political security threats between the two states.

#### **2.1.2.3 SERBIA**

The relationship with Serbia also reflects identity conflicts which at times intersect with the political ones. Initially the conflict revolved around Serbia's consideration of North Macedonia as a nation created by Yugoslavia's Tito. The first crack in their relations occurred when the Serb minority from North Macedonia boycotted the independence referendum, followed by Serbia's rejection of the official percentage of the Serb minority in North Macedonia, claiming it was much higher. Serbia's stance on North Macedonia's independence was divided. One group accepted the new reality of an independent North Macedonia, while the other continued to consider North Macedonia as Southern Serbia.

The political issues between the two countries began to normalize after 1996. However, another disruption of political relations between the two states occurred when North Macedonia officially recognized Kosovo's independence. As a result of this action, Serbia expelled North Macedonia's ambassador from Belgrade. But the relations between the two countries quickly ameliorated [30].

The existence of another contest between the two states revolves around the religious axis. It concentrates on Serbia's denial of the Autocephalous Macedonian Orthodox Church. Since religion represents an identity marker of Macedonian ethno-nationality, more than a security issue on its own, the targeting of the religious autocephality by Serbia represents a societal threat for North Macedonia's national identity [31]. However, this issue has also been politicized several times, as it the case

when SOC prohibited North Macedonia's delegation to celebrate the national holiday, *Illinden*, at the Prohor Pciniski monastery<sup>1</sup>.

#### 2.1.2.4 ALBANIA

The relations Albania cannot be defined precisely in terms of societal security, in the sense that there isn't a direct identity contestation by this neighbor. The issues with Albania rather fall under the political sector, as the former does not agree with the 'nation-state of Macedonian people philosophy,' claiming that Albanians constitute a large minority, hence their rights and political status should reflect their numbers accordingly. As Isakovic puts it, the Albanian state shown willingness to recognize the state of North Macedonia, by maintaining, at the same time, that it doesn't belong only to the ethnic Macedonians [32]. The public declarations by officials of Albania in support of the Albanian minority in North Macedonia, and their support for the Ohrid Framework Agreement, has many times resulted into a cause for disputes between the two countries.

Albania's interest in the issues of the Albanian minority in North Macedonia, has caused indignation and protest in the ethnic Macedonian group, who consider such position by its western neighbor as classic interference in their internal affairs. By many Macedonians, Albania's attitude towards North Macedonia is considered as direct intrusion into its internal affairs, hence a threat to the state's sovereignty [33]. However, since the nation-state is a tool Macedonians use to legitimize their national identity, any external interference into the affairs of this state may be also considered as a threat to its national identity.

#### 2.1.2.5 Kosovo

The relationship with Kosovo, albeit a new state, reflects several security issues, across different sectors. Migration of Albanian Kosovars into North Macedonia, mostly during the 1998-1999 Kosovo War as war refugees, is considered as a 'source of competing identity' by Buzan [34]. Kosovo immigrants into North Macedonia hence can be considered as a direct identity threat by causing the *Albanization* of North Macedonia. Another security issue related to Kosovo is the spillover effect, some believe, the Kosovo war had in North Macedonia's 2001 armed conflict. Connecting this conflict to the Kosovo question and to the direct support by Kosovo's Liberation Army, the former becomes a political threat against the existing order which is not only induced by internal discontent but also influenced and supported externally. The conflicts around North Macedonia's external bilateral relations also represent an intertwining of the political and societal sector. In the case of Kosovo, one could argue that the conflict also represents a military threat, if the spillover effect of the former's war into North Macedonia's 2001 conflict is taken as a reliable argument. But as Chivvis puts it, had there been no internal conditions for such rebellion, a revolution triggered externally would've been impossible [35].

#### 2.1.3 NORTH MACEDONIA-THE EU SECURITY COMPLEX

According to the above analysis of North Macedonia, it seems that the conflicts between the units within the Balkan area have indeed internal roots, especially in terms of societal and political insecurities. However, Buzan argues that these roots are sometimes reflected upon inter-state conflicts as well, taking as an example the internationalization of North Macedonia's question and the level of international involvement in it. The fact that external actors exert their influence on the formation of events in the Balkans, causes the latter to be considered as part of EU-Europe RSC. Such involvement by external actors, besides deriving from their perception of the Balkans as 'part of us', or as 'Europeans', is also demanded and expected by the Balkan local actors. The opening of an EU perspective for the Balkan countries, including North Macedonia, would become a signal of Europe's perception of the Balkans as part of the European RSC. The question then is where does North Macedonia stand in relation to EU-Europe as a world region, and how do its security issues interact with the latter? In order to answer these questions an overview of the main security patterns within EU-Europe region will be provided below.

Analyzing the security patterns within the Europe of post-cold war period, Buzan argues that two dominant issues became almost the main organizing principles of this region. The first issue was the determination of avoiding the return to old Europe and balance of powers, which had caused devastating wars, and thus integration was the utmost solution. The second issue

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<sup>1</sup> This was a monastery where the ASNOM (Anti-fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia) session was held, founding the state of Macedonia in 1944. After the demarcation of the border, this monastery became part of modern Serbia (Marolov, 2015, 125)

stood in contradiction to the first, as it maintained that integration would threaten national identity. In relation to the first issue, it is precisely the Balkans, the “Europe’s ghost reminding it of the risks of war”. Furthermore, the ethnic conflicts, typical for the Balkans, would become a security issue for Europe due to their possibility of dragging the big powers into opposing sides of the conflict and reinstalling power politics among main EU states. These conflicts are therefore related to the calculations of the EU integration/fragmentation effects. In other words, EU integration, becomes a security dimension which would prevent the return of Europe to the infamous past, by disabling wars and power balancing. Consequently, whereas the German-French relationship represent the conflicting past of Europe, acting against conflicts, such as in Bosnia or Kosovo, represents the way of defending a peaceful future. EU integration, according to Buzan, represents a security strategy more so for the states with concrete and realistic EU membership perspective, such as Hungary at the beginning of the 2000s (and what would be most of the Balkan states today). This is so, since the integration mechanism within such states may help downplay other security issues, such as minority issues, until the state reaches a stronger position (as an EU member) before reopening them. Furthermore, EU integration may offer an overreaching identity, hence causing old security issues to cease being security issues [36]. Would this be true in the case of North Macedonia then? Would EU integration help relativize societal and political insecurities by overlaying its identity over the small nation-state? If yes, then would it affect the internal insecurities in the same way as the external ones?

Contrary to the passive role the EU had played in the previous Balkan crises, in the armed conflict which broke in 2001 between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians, the EU decided, head on, to take the lead in mediating and bringing the fighting parties to an agreement. During this time, EU had already shown its determination to become involved as an external actor in North Macedonia, as it had signed the Stabilization and Association Pact with the latter, a few years before. By opening the path to North Macedonia’s EU membership, Europe signaled the attitude towards North Macedonia as ‘part of us. Six months into the conflict, the EU managed to resolve the 2001 ethnic crisis successfully, by bringing the two sides on the same table, and having them signed the so called Ohrid Framework Agreement, drafted on the basis of EU’s legal expert, Robert Badinter. The EU would continue to remain present in this country in the aftermath of the crisis, and in 2005 it would advance North Macedonia’s position towards the EU by granting it the candidate member status in 2005 [37]. North Macedonia-EU relationship may be considered as complex which generates both security and insecurity issues for the former. If seen from the domestic perspective, becoming an EU member may represent a mechanism for this country to overcome its internal insecurities. This process is best explained by Waever and Kelstrup, through their suggestion for a European overreaching identity. Using integration as an analytical tool, they argue that by developing an overreaching split identity, along cultural and administrative lines, the EU would be addressing the internal insecurities that are of societal character in member states, and even in candidate states such as North Macedonia. The EU would address the fear of national identity loss by giving the nation a cultural identity and all that it entails, such as social welfare and education, and at the same time, it would ensure the representation of the member states’ interests by giving the European Community state-like institutions. In this way the “nation becomes a cultural community, without political or economic claims to sovereignty” [38]. This approach would eliminate the core of the inter-ethnic conflict which results from competition over state institutions’ control and domination. In this perspective, then we may make the claim that EU integration represents a mechanism for resolving societal and political insecurities in the sense of vertical competition.

### **3 CONCLUSION**

The internal and external relations of North Macedonia have been viewed and analyzed using security lenses. Analyzing the case of North Macedonia initially within a sub-regional security complex, i.e. the Balkans, and then within the Europe – EU regional security complex, allowed a more holistic analysis of the interdependency of the security issues which characterize this small state. As the discussion of the Balkan sub-regional complex shows, the security interactions between and within units (states) are quite intense and at times almost independent of the regional complex of Europe. However, as demonstrated above, the interaction of European regional powers and even of global powers (ex. USA, Russia) with the Balkan’s security dynamics, has been always present over this (sub) region, albeit with different intensities.

Analyzing North Macedonia within such security constellations, we may derive several conclusions. Level-wise, North Macedonia’s security issues may be categorized as internal and external, but both levels have crossed implications. The internal security dynamics deals with the relationship between the majority of ethnic Macedonians and the large minority of ethnic Albanians. From the analysis of this relationship above, we may conclude that the conflict between Macedonians and Albanians represents an intersection of the political and societal sectors, and is characterized by a vertical competition, between the nation-state and a minority group. Granting Albanians the status of a constituent nation doesn’t represent only a minority rights issue, but also an issue which affects the perseverance and legitimacy of the Macedonian national identity. In this conflict, therefore, it is not only political referential objects, such as the state’s unitary system or its sovereignty in terms of ethnic Macedonians self-determination, that are being at stake. The Macedonian contested identity from other states is perceived as

another existential threat, that leads to the securitization of its ethno-national identity, as a referential object within the societal sector.

The external sub-regional security dynamics, involves security issues with almost all of North Macedonia's five neighbors, though of different intensity and nature. Although these security threats have also come to travel across other sectors, such the economic one, as a result of the Greek economic embargo imposed on North Macedonia in 1994 [39], their essence lies in the identity issues. Thus, North Macedonia's external (in) security complex may be categorized well within the societal sector. However, the response towards the external societal threats involves the state, hence transferring these issues into the political sector. Ethnic Macedonians' domination of the state, in turn, facilitates the process of involving the state in responding to external threats. The typical state response to these threats is illustrated by bilateral agreements, or even by internationally supervised processes of inter-state conflict resolution. Although Buzan et al. admit that identity may consist of objective elements such as language or location, it is still a constructive concept. It is a political and personal choice of a group to identify with certain community, therefore a threat to such identity is consequently a threat to what is perceived as 'we'. In case of identity conflict then, the authors Buzan et al. predict two ways of reaction. The first is the redefinition of the identity of a unit (state), thus differentiating it from the 'others', as the most adequate security strategy. However, if the identity is so stable, or even a pillar of a nation's survival, then the best security strategy is to assert this stability in relation to others, which is indeed the second way of reaction [40]. In the context of this dilemma, North Macedonia's response towards bilateral threats has oscillated from one end to the other. However, the most recent developments have shown (ex. Name change agreement with Greece in 2018, Agreement of Friendship with Bulgaria 2017), that the state's strategy towards external insecurities tends to lean mostly towards 'differentiation' of identity features, in return for building good neighborly relations and for opening up the Euro-Atlantic integration path.

Finally, the analysis of security interaction between EU, as an external regional power, and North Macedonia, portrays a complex interaction which generates both security and insecurity issues for the latter. The overlaying EU identity, argued above, may play a significant role in resolving North Macedonia's external and internal societal and political insecurities. Membership into the EU may reflect an internal security role, by uniting the two antagonized ethnic groups (ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians) over the Euro-Atlantic agenda. It would also relativize national identity, which in turn, is the core dispute between North Macedonia and its neighbors; (the same case has occurred during Yugoslavia's integration, when the Macedonian Question remained dormant, until Yugoslavia dissolved). However, this scenario may be impossible for two reasons. The first one is related to the uncertainty of the EU identity development, since up-to-date data show that national identity in much older states is still stronger than the EU one (ex. France). But even if the EU would consolidate its identity and overlay it over the existing national identities of member-states, North Macedonia's case still would not fit into the latter category. This is so, due to the fact that North Macedonia, before it is able to embrace an EU identity and thus resolve national-identity issues with its neighbors, is stalled from the process of becoming a full member, precisely because of these external factors. Two out of the five neighbors are already EU members, and out of the two, Greece has played the most decisive role in impeding North Macedonia's path to full integration, before North Macedonia agrees to make national identity changes, such as changing its name, citizenship, etc. Hence, the EU itself, through Greece's and potentially Bulgaria's veto, becomes a threat to North Macedonia's societal and political security. Remaining stalled from EU integration would not only flare up internal inter-ethnic tensions, due to lost EU perspective, but would also make the isolated country more vulnerable towards the neighbors it is in conflict with, because of their superior international position.

On the other hand, succumbing to external demands to unblock the EU path may serve as a tool of resolving the above mentioned societal and political threats. However, it may also represent a threat for a forever lost or modified national identity of the majority ethnic group, and along with it, of the state it predominantly controls. The state's response towards these societal and political threats, would depend upon the perception of where its most vital security aspect lies: as long as it lies in preserving its national identity, it would resist any external pressures for identity changes, but as long as it lies in the Europeaness and the overlaying identity it generates, then it would succumb to external pressures, as the only way for unblocking that path.

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