

# **NORTH MACEDONIA AFTER THE RESOLUTION OF THE NAME ISSUE**

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## **Abstract**

When North Macedonia separated from Yugoslavia and declared its independence in 1991, it chose the Republic of Macedonia as its country name. However, this name was not accepted by Greece because it was the same as a region in northern Greece. Macedonia, on the other hand, argued that its name was a constitutional right, by international law and reflected its national identity. Macedonia was temporarily recognized by the United Nations as the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, but this name was not accepted by Macedonia either. The name issue between the two countries could not be resolved despite various mediation attempts for 27 years. However, in 2018, a new political will emerged between the two countries, and the Prespa Agreement was signed. According to this agreement, the new name of Macedonia was determined as the “Republic of North Macedonia”. The agreement aimed to normalize Greek-Macedonian relations, accelerate North Macedonia’s NATO and EU membership process, and increase stability in the region. In this study, the historical development of the name issue between Greece and Macedonia will be touched upon and the process that resulted in the solution of the problem with the Prespa Agreement will be examined. In addition, by including the views of the supporters and opponents of the agreement between the public opinion of the two countries, which emerged after the agreement came into force in 2019 having been approved by the parliaments

of the two countries, the legitimacy, and permanence of the solution will be explained with the arguments defended by constructivism, one of the theories of international relations.

**Keywords:** *Name Issue, Prespa Agreement, North Macedonia, Greece, Constructivism.*

## **Introduction**

The Republic of North Macedonia is a Balkan country that declared its independence with the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991. However, since the name of this country is the same as its neighbor Macedonia, a historical and geographical region in the north of Greece, it led to a name problem between the two countries that lasted for about 27 years. Arguing that the name Macedonia is a historical, cultural, and national heritage, Greece viewed North Macedonia's use of this name as an irredentist and provocative attitude and prevented this country's membership in international organizations. This situation has negatively affected both the domestic and foreign politics of North Macedonia.

This research will analyze the name issue of North Macedonia from historical, political, and social perspectives and examine how the Prespa Agreement signed between the two countries in 2018 solved this problem and what consequences it had. For this purpose, the research was conducted with a qualitative method, and data from the literature was used.<sup>1</sup>

The research consists of three main headings:

In the first title, the origins, development, and international dimension of the name issue that North Macedonia has experienced with Greece throughout the historical process are discussed. In the second title, the change of government in North Macedonia in 2017 and how this change affected the process leading to the solution of the name issue was examined. In the third title, the content, legal status, and reaction of the public opinion of Greece and North Macedonia to the agreement signed in Lake Prespa in 2018 for the solution of the name issue were evaluated.

The research, will attempt to explain whether the name problem solved by the Prespa Agreement will be permanent and continuous, the support and reaction of the public opinion of the party countries, with constructivism, one of the theories of international relations.

This research is important as it is a comprehensive and up-to-date study that addresses the name issue of North Macedonia from both a historical and current

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<sup>1</sup> In this research, the name North Macedonia was used in general and current information regarding country naming. In addition, in the events before the resolution of the name issue, the name Republic of Macedonia was used for those reflecting the Macedonian side's point of view, and FYROM was used for those reflecting the Greek side's point of view.

perspective. In addition, this research reveals the effects of the Prespa Agreement on the international integration, political stability, and ethnic diversity of North Macedonia, giving an idea about the role and future of this country in the Balkans. This research endeavors to fill the gap in the literature on this subject and provide useful information to interested parties.

### **North Macedonia's Name Dispute in the Historical Process**

The name dispute of North Macedonia goes back to ancient times. The Macedonian region, whose borders are not fully known as historical, consists of three parts. These are Vardar, Aegean, and Pirin. The Vardar region borders the North Macedonia, the Aegean region borders Greece, and the Pirin region borders Bulgaria. The Macedonian State, founded in ancient times in the north of Greece, dominated Greece in the 4th century BC and spread the Hellenic culture to a wide area with the campaigns of the Macedonian King Alexander the Great. For this reason, the State of Macedonia was seen as an important part of Greek national history (Agnew, 2007, p. 399).

The region, which came under the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the 14th century, was named Macedonia as a whole. The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), a Slavic-Orthodox group that came into existence in the region with the nationalist movement that emerged after the French Revolution in 1789, started an independence movement against the Ottoman Empire. After the Balkan Wars, the Slavic-Orthodox living in the region that was no longer under the control of the Ottoman Empire began to express themselves as Macedonians (Nimetz, 2020, p. 206). During the Cold War, the province in the Vardar region, which was under the control of Yugoslavia led by Josip Broz Tito, was named the People's Republic of Macedonia. During the Cold War, Greece stayed away from a negative discourse on the name. Also during the Cold War, the US pressured Greece to follow a moderate policy, while also making an intense effort to include Tito, who moved away from the Eastern Bloc and followed a stronger policy, into the Western Bloc, (Cornell and Hartman, 2007, p. 51).

With the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991, the Republic of Macedonia attempted to reclaim its legacy as the heir of Ancient Macedonia and Alexander the Great and, accordingly, its national identity. The country solidified this by preparing a declaration of independence (Kofos, 2010, p. 429). Greece was the one that reacted the most to the newly established state, objecting on the issues of the name, symbol, flag, and Constitution. According to Greece, Alexander the Great and the Ancient Macedonians are the ancestors of the Greeks. The fact that the language of the ancient Macedonians was Greek is one of the most important proofs of this. For this reason, it does not accept Macedonian, the Slavic language spoken by the newly established state, as the language of the Macedonians. Therefore, Greece objected to the name of the newly established state of Macedonia. However, Greece also objected to the flag of the Republic of Macedonia. Greece said that the first flag of Macedonia was the sixteen-rayed Sun of Vergina and that this symbol was its national symbol. This symbol was found in 1997 by the Greek archaeologist Manolis Androkinos in the

Vergina region near Thessaloniki. The symbol with a sixteen-rayed sun motif was seen in the chest where the bones of Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, were found. Greece claimed that by having this symbol on the flag of the Republic of Macedonia, the newly established state was stealing the historical symbol of Greece (Danforth, 2010, p. 745). Greece also objected to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia. Greece, which was disturbed by the statement in Article 49 of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia that it would help the Macedonian people and Macedonian expatriates in neighboring countries and establish close ties with them, was worried that the Republic of Macedonia would interfere in Greek internal affairs. Greece wanted to feel safe, and thus refused to recognize its neighbor by the name of Macedonia (WIPO, 1991). Because it worried that a state established with this name in the region would evoke the Ancient Macedonian State and that the Republic of Macedonia could claim land from Greece in the future (Gligorov, 2008, p. 16). Because of this concern, Greece has rejected minorities in its country, since Greece thought that the Macedonian minority living in Greece was a security problem. Greece indicated its views of not recognizing the State by describing Macedonia as Skopje and Macedonians as Skopje (Dukanovic, 2019, p. 95).

Greece wanted the state on their northern border to change its name from Macedonia, declare that it would not follow an expansionist policy against Greece, and say that there was no Macedonian minority in Greece (Ivanovski, 2013, p. 53). The Republic of Macedonia, on the other hand, rejected Greece's demands, saying that they were descendants of Alexander the Great and the Ancient Macedonians and that they were not Slavs (Daskalovski, 2019, p. 66). International actors stepped in against the name dispute on between the two sides. In 1992, the European Community held talks between the two sides in Lisbon and presented the Pinheiro Package, which was created under the chairmanship of Portuguese Foreign Minister Deus Pinheiro, to solve the problem. The Pinheiro Package proposed that the borders of the two states should be recognized and should be inviolability, that the Republic of Macedonia should declare that it would not pursue an expansionist policy against Greece and that the name of the state should be New Macedonia. However, Greece rejected the Pinheiro Package because the phrase Macedonia was mentioned in the presented name proposal (Kofos, 2005, pp. 129-133). Greece, which started to impose an economic embargo on the Republic of Macedonia due to the name problem, tried to prevent Macedonia from being recognized in the international system. Greece also refused to use the name Macedonia in order not to provoke the Macedonian minority living in its country. Although the US made mediation attempts to solve the name problem between the two countries, the negotiations started in 1993 did not yield any results. In 1994, the European Commission complained to the European Court of Justice that the economic embargo imposed by Greece on the Republic of Macedonia was contrary to the internal market. But no clear result was obtained (Koneska, 2019, p. 54). However, Greece, which faced great pressure from the international community, accepted the interim formula on this issue and

accepted the country's membership in the United Nations (UN) under the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) with the Interim Accord signed in 1995. After the interim accord, it amended FYROM's Constitution and stated that FYROM would not claim any rights in the territories of its neighbors and would not interfere with their sovereign rights and internal affairs in any way. At the same time, FYROM made changes to its flag. The new flag of the state became a ray of sunlight on the red form (Nikolovski, 2021, p. 113).

After the signing of the temporary agreement, relations between the two countries began to develop. Economically, the trade volume between the two countries was approximately \$ 19 million before the Interim Accord, while it was approximately \$ 286 million after the Interim Accord. Between 1995 and 2000, Greece was the largest investor in FYROM. In addition, the development assistance provided to FYROM between 2002 and 2006 within the scope of the Five-Year Development and Cooperation Agreement signed between the two sides in 2002 and the Greek Plan for the Economic Reconstruction of the Balkans (HIPERB) amounted to approximately 75 million Euros. These aids made a significant contribution to the economic development of FYROM (Floudas, 1996, p. 293).

After the Interim Accord, military cooperation between the two countries also developed. In October 1995, Greece lifted its veto preventing FYROM from joining the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and FYROM joined NATO's Partnership for Peace Program. In 1997, the two countries participated in the first NATO military exercise on the territory of FYROM. In 1999, a Military Cooperation Agreement was signed between the two countries. Within the framework of this agreement, military personnel from FYROM received training in Greece (Shea, 2008, p. 29).

Despite all this, because Macedonia, did not change the name and national identity of the country, Greece limited its relations with Macedonia and prevented Macedonia's membership in organizations such as NATO and the EU by using its veto trump card. Although political actors in Macedonia support the country's membership in NATO and the EU, they were able to take important steps due to the name issue. Macedonia, which applied for EU membership in 2004, obtained candidate status in 2005, but could not start negotiations due to Greece's veto. A similar situation was experienced during the NATO membership process (Marolov, 2013, p. 30).

The fact that nationalist parties in both Macedonia and Greece were in power led to the undermining of the membership processes. Both countries have refrained from making concessions on the name of the state. Between 2006 and 2017, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-National Democratic Union of Macedonia (VMRO-DPMNE), which was in power in Macedonia, intensely practiced Macedonian nationalism and even made statements against Albanians in the country. Although the ruling party, which supports integration with the West, negotiated with Greece on the solution of the name problem, no result was obtained. At the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008, Greece, which rejected the proposals on the name, vetoed FYROM's

NATO membership. Thereupon, FYROM filed a complaint with the International Court of Justice against Greece because it acted in violation of the Interim Accord. In 2011, the International Court of Justice upheld Greece's violation of the Interim Accord (Azizi, 2012, p. 5). In addition, the ruling party, which continued its policies on Macedonian identity, worried Greece with the Skopje 2014 project, which aimed to give a more classical image to the capital, where many museums and public buildings being built and monuments of historical figures in the region being erected. The most striking statue was the statue of Alexander the Great (Graan, 2013, p. 165).

This problem with Greece caused tension with Macedonia's main opposition party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), and the harsh policies of the ruling party. In 2015, the wiretapping between the government and the opposition and the Kumanovo clashes (BBC, 2015) increased the tension between the two sides, which led to the suspension of negotiations with Greece. In the general elections held in December 2016, the SDSM seized power and Zoran Zaev formed a new government. With the establishment of the new government, a new process has started regarding the name problem (Kelkitli, 2020, p. 148).

### **Change of the Government and The Process Leading to the Prespa Agreement**

Nikola Gruevski failed to form a government even though his party VMRO-DPMNE won the majority in the December 2016 general elections. For this reason, the task of forming a government was given to Zoran Zaev, the leader of the opposition. The government, which could not be established until April 2017, when VMRO-DPMNE supporters raided the parliament. After this incident, Zoran Zaev managed to form a new government, and made solving the ongoing problem regarding the name of the country the most important agenda issue (Chrysosgelos and Stavrevska, 2019, pp. 431-436).

The new government renamed Skopje International Airport and the highway from Alexander the Great Highway to the more neutral name "Friendship Road". These name changes betrayed the aim of the new government and showed Athens that North Macedonia now had a completely different attitude to the name issue (Tagaris, 2018).

The interim agreement signed between Macedonia and Greece in 1995 remained in force for more than twenty years, until a new meeting was held in 2017-2018 under the auspices of the UN. SYRIZA, an emerging political force in Greece, maintained independence from established parties like PASOK and New Democracy Party. However, the economic downturn diminished Alexis Tsipras' ability to pursue regional peace initiatives, leading to a decline in public backing. This situation contradicted the possibility that they could reach an agreement with Macedonia on the name issue. What ensured success was that SYRIZA was against nationalism and wanted an agreement for permanent peace in the Balkans (Lozides, 2020, p. 497).

Matthew Nimetz was the UN Special Envoy at the time the interim agreement was signed and remained in that position for many years. In 2017, the

suggestion to name the nation the Republic of North Macedonia was put forward, and an accord was finalized between Zoran Zaev and Alexis Tsipras on June 12, 2018. For Greece, there were still many unresolved foreign policy issues surrounding the Balkans and Türkiye. These could increase, and in this context, solving the ongoing problem with Macedonia became important for Tsipras. Based on these factors, Tsipras was able to legitimize the Prespa Agreement despite all its weak points. In addition, in this process, the SYRIZA government used its NATO membership to support Greece's positions in solving the problem (Önsoy and Pelit, 2022, p. 335).

With the Prespa Agreement, Zoran Zaev and the new Macedonian government abandoned the policy of shaping the Macedonian identity by referring to ancient history and made a radical change to solve the name problem. For Zaev, there were several reasons for the success of the agreement. With the agreement, both sides acknowledged that Greece had the cultural heritage of ancient Macedonia. On the other hand, North Macedonians retained the privilege to identify as "Macedonians" and to call their language "Macedonian." Zaev was also instrumental in setting the stage for the country's EU and NATO membership negotiations. Additionally, the Prespa Agreement garnered support from the Albanian minority in North Macedonia and contributed to the harmonization of inter-ethnic relations within the nation (Zahariadis, 1994, p. 652).

The Prespa Agreement nullified the 1995 Interim Agreement and altered the nation's official name from the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia. The accord was comprehensive, outlining the application of the new name for various instances and clarifying the demarcation and description of geographical areas. It included assurances that Greece would not obstruct North Macedonia's involvement in international bodies and organizations. The official name of the region would be the Republic of North Macedonia, which is also its constitutional name. The abbreviation of the name would be North Macedonia. All old nomenclatures in the country would not be used. Citizenship matters, the spelling on all travel documents would be Macedonians / Citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia. The official language in the country was to be called "Macedonian" according to the acceptance in 1977 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995).

The two sides also recognized that the word "Macedonia" was defined in different historical and cultural contexts. For Greece, the designation not only signifies the geographical area of Northern Greece but also embodies the attributes, historical narrative, culture, and legacy of its inhabitants from antiquity to modern times. Conversely, for North Macedonia, the term signifies its own territory, language, populace, and distinct characteristics, history, culture, and heritage, which are entirely distinct from those of Greek Macedonia and bear no relation to the ancient Hellenic civilization, history, culture, or legacy. Given that Macedonian is a South Slavic language, it is acknowledged by both sides that this language and its associated features are unrelated to the ancient Hellenic civilization and heritage of Greece's northern

region. It is imperative to maintain a clear distinction between the two contexts and avoid any conflation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995).

Greece has promised that it will not oppose and in fact will approve North Macedonia's desire to join international multilateral or regional institutions and organizations in which Greece is also involved. In this regard, the way has been paved for North Macedonia to join NATO and the EU under its new name and by the terms of the Prespa Agreement. The parties also guaranteed that the existing borders between their countries are unchangeable and are determined as permanent international borders. Each party agrees not to assert or endorse territorial claims over the other's land. There will be no attempts to alter their shared borders, nor will they sanction third-party territorial claims. Both will uphold the sovereignty and political autonomy of the other. No article in the relevant laws of the parties can and should be interpreted as the basis for a claim regarding a territory lying outside the existing national borders (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995).

### **Reactions to the New Status Quo**

Due to long-standing nationalist attitudes regarding the name issue in Greece, the process of public acceptance of the Prespa Agreement was very painful. There were major protests against the agreement in Greece. Among these, was a rally in Thessaloniki attended by more than 300,000 Greek Macedonians (Veremis, 2014, p. 217). While the opposition in Greece specifically opposed the part of the Prespa Agreement regarding identity and language, Prespa supporters emphasized that the problem was resolved for Greece with this new name accepted by the Macedonian side. Critics of the Prespa Agreement contended that acknowledging the Macedonian identity and language was intolerable, equating it to a betrayal of Greek cultural legacy. Conversely, proponents maintained that Greece had acknowledged the Macedonian language at the UN in 1977, emphasizing that the Prespa Agreement distinctly identifies it as a Slavic language unrelated to the Greek heritage (Delauney, 2018).

While the agreement was perceived as a domestic setback for both administrations, it garnered acclaim as a diplomatic triumph. External feedback was overwhelmingly favorable. "They had imagination, they took risks, they were willing to sacrifice their interests for something bigger. Zoran, Alexis - well done!" tweeted EU Permanent Council President Donald Tusk (Tusk, 2019). NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg also expressed anticipation on Twitter for the prospective Republic of North Macedonia's NATO membership (Stoltenberg, 2019).

The United States appreciated Greece's role in maintaining stability in the Balkans region and welcomed the Prespa Agreement. According to them, Greece was the dominant "stability element" in the region (Pompeo, 2020). The name issue created a bad relationship between these countries and disrupted regional stability. Since Greece has been unwilling and incapable of finding a solution for a long time, it lost its diplomatic prestige in the international arena

because many Western countries, which Greece saw as allies, wanted NATO and the EU to expand and include the countries of former Yugoslavia. During the negotiation of the name issue, Russia was accused of meddling. Greece responded by deporting Russian diplomats for allegedly engaging in activities that sought to disrupt the agreement. These diplomats were charged with attempting to sway the name resolution process by corrupting members of the Greek military and the Orthodox Church. Furthermore, Greece strongly objected to Moscow's critique that it had dismissed its citizens' desires by not holding a referendum on the Prespa Agreement. Russia perceived the agreement as a Western strategy to bring North Macedonia into NATO, which has strained the historically cordial relations between the two Orthodox nations (BBC, 2018). While the solution to the name issue for the Western world creates a new potential candidate for the expansion of NATO and the EU, Russia's interest is in keeping North Macedonia away from the Western world. The extreme interest shown by the great powers in such a limited and regional issue shows that this is not only about Greece and North Macedonia but also a reflection of the divide between the East and the West.

### **After the Agreement**

When the two countries announced the signing of the agreement at the UN, North Macedonia also signed an agreement for the country to join NATO in February 2019. On March 17, 2020, Spain, the most recent of the 29 countries to become a member of NATO, approved North Macedonia's participation in the long-awaited defense union, making the country the 30th member of NATO (Macedonian Ministry of Defense, 2020).

In July 2019, Greece experienced a shift to conservative governance. Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the head of the New Democracy party, garnered 39.85% of the vote, succeeding the incumbent left-wing SYRIZA party and its Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, who received 31.53% of the vote. This shift indicated that SYRIZA, which had risen to prominence as the principal left-wing force in Greece post-PASOK since 2015, had relinquished its control. The New Democracy party secured a parliamentary majority with 158 out of 300 seats in the election (Reuters, 2019).

Mitsotakis and the New Democracy Party have adhered to the Prespa agreement. In their September 2019 meeting, Mitsotakis expressed that although he and his administration did not endorse the agreement and attempted to block its ratification, it had become a component of international law following its approval by the Greek parliament. It is the law and they respect it. Despite this negative stance, the new government stated it will continue to support North Macedonia's EU membership (Ekathimerini, 2019).

Mitsotakis initially voiced opposition to the accord's acknowledgment of Macedonian language and identity. He also pressed Zaev to expedite the fulfillment of the treaty's terms, particularly concerning trademark protection, emphasizing that North Macedonia's prompt action was crucial for advancing its EU integration efforts. If North Macedonia became a full member of NATO, a project in which Greek jets would protect North Macedonia's airspace was

also mentioned. This was not directly mentioned in the Prespa Agreement but emerged as a result of the positive development of bilateral relations (Ekathimerini, 2019).

The Republic of North Macedonia submitted its EU membership application in 2004 and has maintained its candidate status since 2005. On October 15, 2019, the EU deliberated on enlargement, considering the initiation of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. The commencement of negotiations requires unanimous approval from all EU member states. A majority of the member states advocated for starting the negotiation process with both countries, acknowledging their reform efforts. They cautioned that failing to meet the EU membership aspirations of these countries could lead to a power vacuum in the region, potentially exploited by China and Russia to enhance their influence. The member states were unable to reach an agreement because France, the Netherlands and Denmark said no. French President Macron stated that the EU and the existing member states should first reform themselves and solve their problems before enlarging the EU (Baczynska, 2019). Zaev called this decision a historical mistake. He explained that his country has done a lot to adapt to the EU and move closer to it. Zaev indicated that this regression might reignite longstanding Balkan disputes and give nationalist factions the opportunity to leverage these unmet EU aspirations to incite new religious and ethnic strife (BBC, 2019).

Following the EU's decision against initiating accession talks with North Macedonia, the nation's political head, Zoran Zaev, declared the scheduling of new elections for April 2020. This was an advancement from the initially planned date of November 2020. In the upcoming election, the electorate would determine the nation's direction. Oliver Spasovski, the ex-Interior Minister, would serve as the caretaker Prime Minister until the April elections. The election timing was strategically selected to coincide with the anticipated date of the country's full induction into NATO (Associated Press, 2020).

The European Commission, on March 2, 2020, formally extended an invitation to North Macedonia to commence EU accession discussions. The Commission recognized North Macedonia's significant progress in bolstering democratic structures and delivering tangible, enduring outcomes. The country received commendation for its efforts to fortify judicial autonomy and enhance its battle against corruption and organized crime (European Commission, 2020a). By March 2020's close, it was confirmed that all 27 EU countries, the Netherlands and France among them, were in favor of initiating accession talks with North Macedonia (European Commission, 2020b).

In the elections of July 15, 2020, SDSM won a narrow victory, but could not secure the majority to form the government on its own. VMRO-DPMNE, which is nationalist and critical of the Prespa Agreement, emerged as the second party with a narrow margin in the election. The SDSM agreed to form a joint government with the Albanian nationalist party BDI. Despite the consensus that Zoran Zaev would serve as prime minister for the majority of his term, this arrangement caused concern among Albanian constituents who had supported the BDI with the expectation of an ethnic Albanian prime minister. The

agreement faced backlash from other parties representing the Albanian minority, accusing the BDI of voter betrayal. Nonetheless, Zoran Zaev resumed his role as North Macedonia's Prime Minister on August 30, 2020, ensuring the maintenance of political stability (Marusic, 2020).

### **Evaluation of the Prespa Agreement from a Constructivist Perspective**

The Prespa Agreement includes numerous provisions addressing language and identity matters. Notably, its seventh chapter codifies the entitlement of North Macedonia's inhabitants to self-identify as "Macedonians" and to their language as "Macedonian." This particular concern holds significant weight for Macedonians and has historically been a pivotal factor in the inability to settle the naming dispute, primarily due to a lack of agreement on this subject (Heraclides, 2021, p. 38).

The whole context of the name issue is linked to the identity issue and can be explained by constructivism. The very essence of the conflict is rooted in ideological and identity-related queries. The dispute emerged from the mutual conviction of both parties that they were the rightful inheritors of the Macedonian cultural legacy, which entitled them to the name "Macedonia." The protracted nature of the naming issue and the lengthy duration it took to reach a resolution can be attributed to the lack of a shared perspective on the entitlement to the Macedonian designation (Kardaş, 2006, 2006. p.85).

The contention surrounding North Macedonia's flag is intertwined with constructivist notions of identity and ideology. The Greek stance holds that the Vergina Sun emblem represents historical Macedonia and is not a symbol for the Slavic peoples of the former Yugoslavia. A nation's flag is emblematic, representing the unity and identity of an ethnic community. From a constructivist approach, one can come to the conclusion that the Greeks did not believe that the flag in question represented the population and identity of North Macedonia, but that they believed that this flag represented historical Macedonia (Vangelov, 2019, p. 14).

The debate over the designation of the language in North Macedonia as 'Macedonian' is also a matter of constructivist ideology. From the Greek perspective, it is crucial that this term is not adopted by North Macedonia, as the Greek argument posits that 'Macedonian' refers to the language of historical Macedonia, unrelated to the Slavic dialect of North Macedonia. Although the ancient Macedonian tongue is extinct, it remains a vital element of Hellenic heritage. The Prespa Agreement's acknowledgment of the Slavic language as 'Macedonian' signals new shifts in identity dynamics, intensifying the concerns for Greece (Bechev, 2012, p. 705).

The fact that more importance is attached to issues related to names, symbols, and language, rather than issues such as geographical area and border disputes, can be explained by constructivism. It has been difficult for the outside world to understand what the name issue between North Macedonia and Greece means. Because this dispute is not about hard politics such as a land-sharing conflict or a border issue. Disagreements over hard policy issues are easier to recognize and understand, but a conflict about identity like this is harder to

understand. From the outside, it is difficult to predict how a sunny flag or a statue with a historical figure will resonate for both parties (Fidanovski, 2018, p. 29).

Although an immediate agreement on the name issue would open up new opportunities that would bring economic and military benefits to both sides, it took many years for the countries to reach an agreement. From a constructivist perspective, it can be argued that the reason why the agreement was not reached earlier was the sensitivity of the identity and opinion issue. There are signs of constructivist elements here, as ideas and identities have prevented countries from working together for many years, even though both parties are rational and strategically favorable to the parties (Fraser, 2002, p. 354).

Although the Prespa Agreement regulated issues of identity and ideas, it also contains elements that weaken the chances of full success, as it may lead to new identity problems for the people in the north of Greece who call themselves Macedonians. In this context, when the Prespa agreement is evaluated from a constructivist perspective, it was signed without taking into account the value of identity and ideas. The material and strategic gains that the agreement will provide for the two countries have caused identity-related elements to be ignored, and in this respect, they weaken the thesis that the agreement can be permanent (Maleska, 2012, p. 127).

The Prespa Agreement also addressed the entitlement to the ancient Macedonian heritage. North Macedonia pledged not to assert ownership over the legacy of Alexander the Great and ancient Macedonian history, choosing instead to align with its Slavic historical roots. This was a very important issue for the Greeks, because for them the historical legacy of ancient Macedonia formed a large part of Greek national identity. From a constructivist perspective, one can say that there are elements that could lead to conflict in the future, as the people of North Macedonia want to claim ancient Macedonia and its heritage for themselves, just like the Greeks. The frequent use of the symbols of Alexander the Great and Vergina Sun constitutes concrete evidence of this situation. In other words, the Prespa Agreement is an attempt to eliminate some of the elements that the people of North Macedonia accept as their own identity. In this sense, there are hesitations from the people of North Macedonia about whether the agreement will be permanent or not (Hagemann, 2019, p. 13).

In 2019, North Macedonia's bid to join the EU faced a hurdle as certain EU countries objected to the commencement of membership negotiation talks. Using a constructivist approach, it is possible to find evidence that some EU member states have contradictory ideas about the accession of some Balkan countries that are the continuation of the former Yugoslavia because they do not have a Western European identity. According to constructivism, cooperation comes from sharing and commonality of ideas and values. In this respect, there is no motivation for North Macedonia to join the EU, as it neither shares the Western European identity nor shares the same ideas with those who belong to the European identity (Ceka, 2018, p. 149).

From a constructivist perspective, it can be said that the Prespa agreement will not be successful. There are strong views against the agreement in both countries, based on issues of identity and opinion. The prerequisite for the opposite to occur and for the agreement to be sustainable and successful is that the identities of the societies change and converge over time. Yet, such an outcome appears unlikely in the near future. For collaboration to become enduring or permanent, the development of a shared European identity and North Macedonia's full accession to the European Union are critical prerequisites (Ker-Lindsay, 2019, p. 198).

The SDSM and the government of Zoran Zaev came to power in North Macedonia in 2017. One could contend that the eagerness to swiftly secure a constructive resolution to the naming dispute is driven by the desire to establish a lasting agreement. The agreement is important for the ability to influence the integration and participation process in NATO and the EU and thus gain a domestic political advantage. There were also many nationalist forces in North Macedonia, especially VMRO-DPMNE, and Zaev and the Social Democrats wanted to weaken the influence of these elements. Since the rule of the Social Democrats and their integration into Western institutions required an intellectual transformation, it was important that Zaev's government have as much time as possible to realize this vision (Asani, 2018, pp. 62-65).

In Greece, unlike Zoran Zaev and the Social Democrats in North Macedonia, Alexis Tsipras and SYRIZA had ruled the country since 2015, when the agreement was signed, and were on the verge of losing power. SYRIZA, recently assumed the mantle as Greece's leading left-wing party, viewed the settlement of the naming dispute as a chance to cement its status in the political mainstream and to have a lasting impact on Greek foreign policy. In contrast to Zaev and the Social Democrats, Tsipras and SYRIZA stood to benefit minimally from the Prespa Agreement in the immediate future. However, they regarded the accord as a gateway to future influence, securing a role for their party's principles in the long-term direction of Greek foreign affairs (Mavromatidis, 2010, p. 54).

## **Conclusion**

This research aimed to analyze the name issue of North Macedonia from historical, political, and social perspectives and to examine how the Prespa Agreement signed between the two countries in 2018 solved this problem and what consequences it had in the context of constructivism, one of the international relations theories.

The research revealed that the process leading to the solution of the name issue of North Macedonia was complex and multidimensional and needed to be addressed from both a historical and contemporary perspective. In this process, it has been observed that North Macedonia's nationalism construction, identity debates, international relations, and political actors played an important role. In addition, it is understood that the Prespa Agreement, beyond resolving the name issue of North Macedonia, is a historical step that will shape the role and future of this country in the Balkans. However, according to the constructivist theory, the permanent and sustainable new status quo can only be possible by bringing the public opinions of the two countries closer to each other.

This research is important as it is a comprehensive and up-to-date study that addresses the name issue of North Macedonia from both a historical and contemporary perspective. In addition, this research reveals the effects of the Prespa Agreement on the international integration of North Macedonia. This research aims to fill the gap in the literature on this subject and provide useful information to interested parties.

This research included limitations in that it was conducted with a qualitative method and secondary data was used. Therefore, the findings of the study are limited by the reliability, timeliness, and adequacy of these data. The research discussed the name issue of North Macedonia and the Prespa Agreement in the context of bilateral relations between North Macedonia and Greece. Therefore, the findings of the research are not related to the impact and contribution of other countries and international organizations in the region, other than these two countries, to this process.

It is thought that this research may contribute to future studies. In this context, the following suggestions can be made:

The research can be replicated with a quantitative method and utilize primary data. In this way, the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the research can be increased. The research can address the name issue of North Macedonia and the Prespa Agreement from a regional and global perspective. In this way, the scope, depth, and meaning of the research can be expanded.

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