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**PAVARËSIA E MAQEDONISË SË VERIUT: KONTEKSTI HISTORIK,
SFIDAT DHE IMPLIKIMET RAJONALE**

**НЕЗАВИСНОСТ НА СЕВЕРНА МАКЕДОНИЈА: ИСТОРИСКИ
КОНТЕКСТ, ПРЕДИЗВИЦИ И РЕГИОНАЛНИ ИМПЛИКАЦИИ**

**NORTH MACEDONIAN INDEPENDENCE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT,
CHALLENGES, AND REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

Abstract

The independence of North Macedonia in 1991 marked a significant chapter in the political reconfiguration of the Balkans following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. This scientific paper explores the historical context leading to independence, the constitutional and political processes involved, and the domestic and international challenges faced by the nascent republic. Emphasis is placed on the complex interplay of ethnic, cultural, and geopolitical dynamics that have shaped North Macedonia's development as a sovereign state. The analysis concludes with reflections on the implications of North Macedonia's independence for regional stability and its trajectory towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

***Keywords:** North Macedonia, historical context, independence, challenges, development*

Introduction

The dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in the early 1990s was a pivotal moment in European history, giving rise to new states and shifting geopolitical alignments. Among

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these, North Macedonia emerged as a unique case: a country that declared independence peacefully but faced considerable internal and external challenges in consolidating its sovereignty.

This paper examines North Macedonia's journey to independence, focusing on the historical, political, and socio-economic factors that shaped its path.³ The study also evaluates the implications of its independence for regional stability and its ongoing efforts to integrate into European and international structures.

1. Historical Background

a. Formation of Macedonia within Yugoslavia

North Macedonia's roots as a political entity trace back to its incorporation into the SFRY as the Socialist Republic of Macedonia in 1944. The region's history is marked by a complex tapestry of cultural and ethnic identities, influenced by Ottoman, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Greek rule.⁴ Under Yugoslavia, Macedonia experienced relative political stability and economic development. However, its identity was contested, particularly by neighboring countries that questioned the legitimacy of a distinct Macedonian nationhood. The Republic of Macedonia's formation as a constituent entity within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) in 1944 marked a pivotal moment in the region's history. During World War II, the Anti-Fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM) declared the establishment of the People's Republic of Macedonia on August 2, 1944. This declaration came amid efforts by Yugoslav partisans to resist Axis occupation and redefine the political structure of the region.

The move was significant in recognizing Macedonians as a distinct national group within the multi-ethnic federation. Under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito, the SFRY sought to address historical territorial disputes and national aspirations by granting a degree of autonomy to its constituent republics, including Macedonia. The republic was officially incorporated into the Yugoslav federation in 1946, becoming one of its six socialist republics.⁵

³ Новица, В. (2007) *Македонија и Балканот*, Народна и универзитетска библиотека "Климент Охридски", Скопје.

⁴ Roudometof, V. (2002). *Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: Greece, Bulgaria, and the Macedonian Question*. Praeger.

⁵ Пандил, К. (2007) *Дипломатијата и македонското иселеништво*, Народна и универзитетска библиотека "Климент Охридски", Скопје.

During its time in Yugoslavia, the Socialist Republic of Macedonia underwent extensive nation-building efforts. The Macedonian language was standardized, cultural institutions were established, and educational reforms were introduced to reinforce a Macedonian national identity. While this period brought relative stability and development, it was not without challenges. Macedonia's identity and sovereignty were frequently contested by neighboring countries, particularly Bulgaria and Greece, which raised claims over the cultural and historical legacy of the region.

The Republic of Macedonia remained part of Yugoslavia until the federation's dissolution in the early 1990s. Its peaceful transition to independence in 1991 was unique in the context of the often-violent breakup of Yugoslavia. The foundation laid during its time within Yugoslavia played a crucial role in shaping its national identity and political institutions as a sovereign state.

b. Ethnic and Cultural Diversity

Ethnic diversity has been a defining characteristic of North Macedonia, with Macedonians forming the majority alongside significant Albanian, Turkish, Serbian, and Roma minorities.⁶ This diversity has been both a source of cultural richness and a challenge in terms of governance and national unity. North Macedonia is a microcosm of cultural diversity, shaped by its location at the crossroads of Southeast Europe, where Slavic, Ottoman, and Balkan influences converge. The country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition has profoundly influenced its cultural identity, traditions, and social fabric.⁷

The majority of the population identifies as ethnic Macedonian, with Slavic roots and a predominantly Orthodox Christian heritage. This community has contributed significantly to the country's cultural landscape, including the preservation of the Macedonian language, folklore, and Orthodox Christian traditions, such as religious festivals and richly decorated monasteries.

The second-largest group is the ethnic Albanian minority, primarily Muslim, whose influence is visible in architectural styles, music,

⁶ Бакрески, О. (2005) *Координација на безбедносната заедница на Република Македонија*, Филозофски факултет, Скопје.

⁷ Вајденфелд, В. Веселс, В. (2003) *Европа од А до Ш*, Скопје.

and cuisine. Traditional Albanian folk dances, clothing, and Islamic holidays add vibrant layers to the national cultural mosaic. Other ethnic communities include Turks, Roma, Serbs, Vlachs, and Bosnians, each contributing their unique customs, languages, and practices.

North Macedonia's cultural diversity is reflected in its culinary traditions, music, and festivals. The blending of Slavic, Ottoman, and Mediterranean flavors in local dishes like ajvar and tavče gravče exemplifies this fusion. Musical traditions, from Macedonian folk songs to Albanian polyphonic chants, highlight the harmonious coexistence of diverse influences.⁸

Despite occasional ethnic tensions, efforts such as the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001 have promoted inclusivity and multiculturalism, encouraging the preservation and celebration of all cultural heritages. This diversity remains a source of pride and a defining feature of North Macedonia's identity.

2. Path to Independence

a. Collapse of Yugoslavia

The dissolution of the SFRY was precipitated by economic decline, political fragmentation, and rising nationalism in the 1980s. As Slovenia and Croatia moved towards secession, Macedonia began to reconsider its position within the federation. The collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s was a profound and violent disintegration of a multi-ethnic socialist federation into independent states.⁹ Rooted in a complex interplay of historical, political, and economic factors, the dissolution unfolded amidst rising nationalism, economic decline, and a weakening central government.

After the death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980, Yugoslavia's cohesive leadership structure began to unravel. Tito's unique model of "self-management socialism" had maintained unity among the six republics and two autonomous provinces, but his absence exposed underlying ethnic and political divisions. Economic crises in the 1980s, including high inflation and unemployment, further strained relations between

⁸ Георгиева Л. (2007) *Превенција на Конфликти - Од идеја кон култура за превенција за конфликти во Македонија*, Фондација Фридрих Еберт, Скопје.

⁹ Шкарик, С, Мурцева - Шкарик О. (2007) *Теории за мирот и конфликтите*, Правен Факултет Јустинијан Први, Скопје.

wealthier republics like Slovenia and Croatia and poorer ones such as Serbia and Macedonia. Calls for greater autonomy in the wealthier republics clashed with efforts by Serbian leadership, under Slobodan Milošević, to centralize control, exacerbating tensions.¹⁰

By the late 1980s, nationalist rhetoric dominated political discourse, and ethnic identities increasingly overshadowed a shared Yugoslav identity. Slovenia and Croatia spearheaded movements toward independence, culminating in their declarations of sovereignty in 1991. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia followed suit shortly thereafter. The central government, dominated by Serbia, resisted these moves, leading to armed conflicts, particularly in Croatia and Bosnia.

The wars that accompanied Yugoslavia's collapse were among the bloodiest in Europe since World War II, characterized by ethnic cleansing, siege warfare, and widespread atrocities. International intervention, including NATO involvement and United Nations peacekeeping missions, eventually helped broker peace agreements, but not before significant loss of life and displacement. By the mid-1990s, the former Yugoslavia had fragmented into several independent states, leaving a legacy of unresolved ethnic tensions and regional instability.

b. Referendum and Declaration of Independence

On September 8, 1991, Macedonia held a referendum on independence, with over 95% of voters endorsing the move. This was followed by the adoption of a new constitution in November 1991, establishing the Republic of Macedonia as a sovereign state. The referendum on independence in North Macedonia, held on September 8, 1991, was a decisive moment in the country's transition from a Yugoslav republic to a sovereign state. In the context of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), North Macedonia sought to establish its independence through a peaceful and democratic process, avoiding the violent conflicts that engulfed other parts of the region.¹¹

The referendum posed a straightforward question to voters: "Are you in favor of a sovereign and independent state of Macedonia, with the right to enter into a future union of sovereign states of Yugoslavia?" This phrasing reflected a cautious approach, as it left open the

¹⁰ Маџлеша Р, (2001) *Теорије и системи сигурности*, Магистрат, Сарајево.

¹¹ Липхард А. (1994) *Демократија во плуралните општества*, Скопје.

possibility of cooperation with the remnants of Yugoslavia, aligning with the country's pragmatic foreign policy at the time.¹²

An overwhelming majority of 95% of voters supported independence, with a turnout of approximately 75% of eligible voters. While ethnic Macedonians largely favored independence, the ethnic Albanian population abstained, reflecting their concerns about political representation and rights within the new state.

Following the referendum, North Macedonia formally declared independence on September 17, 1991. The referendum set the stage for the adoption of a new constitution later that year, establishing the Republic of Macedonia as a democratic and sovereign state. Despite its peaceful transition, the country faced immediate challenges, including the lack of international recognition due to Greece's objections to its name and economic isolation. Nonetheless, the referendum marked a key milestone in North Macedonia's quest for self-determination and stability.

c. Peaceful Transition

Unlike other Yugoslav republics, Macedonia's transition to independence was largely peaceful, aided by negotiations with the Yugoslav National Army and international mediation. However, it faced immediate challenges, including lack of recognition by Greece and economic isolation.¹³ North Macedonia's peaceful transition to independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 stands out as a unique example in the otherwise tumultuous breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Unlike other republics that experienced violent conflicts during their secession, North Macedonia achieved independence through a democratic process and negotiated diplomacy.

The transition began with the September 8, 1991, referendum, where an overwhelming majority of citizens voted in favor of independence. The decision to pursue a non-violent path was influenced by the leadership's pragmatic approach, seeking to avoid the bloodshed that had erupted in Slovenia and Croatia. Key to this success was the absence of large-scale Serbian populations or significant military installations of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) within Macedonian territory, reducing the likelihood of armed conflict.¹⁴

¹² Марковски Д, (2002) *Дипломатија, организација и практика*, Скопје.

¹³ Митревска, М. (2005) *Кризен Менаџмент*, Македонска ризница, Куманово.

¹⁴ Maene, C. (2023) *Qualitative Content Analysis: A Practical Introduction*. In: Stevens, P. A. J. (Ed.) *Qualitative Data Analysis: Key Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, Cal.: SAGE Publications Inc.

The Macedonian leadership, under President Kiro Gligorov, emphasized diplomacy and careful negotiation with Belgrade and other international actors. By the end of 1991, North Macedonia had declared independence and adopted a new constitution, establishing itself as a sovereign state. The withdrawal of JNA forces from Macedonian territory in 1992 occurred without major incidents, facilitated by mutual agreements and international mediation.

However, North Macedonia faced significant challenges post-independence, including delayed international recognition due to Greece's objections over its name and economic isolation resulting from regional instability. Despite these hurdles, the peaceful transition allowed the country to focus on nation-building and securing its place in the international community, marking a rare instance of stability in a volatile period.

3. Challenges to Sovereignty

a. The Name Dispute with Greece

One of the most contentious issues facing Macedonia was its name, which Greece viewed as implying territorial claims over its northern region of the same name. This dispute delayed Macedonia's recognition by key international bodies and hindered its EU and NATO aspirations. The name dispute between North Macedonia and Greece was a protracted and contentious issue that spanned nearly three decades, stemming from Greece's objection to the use of the name "Macedonia" by the newly independent state.¹⁵ The crux of the dispute lay in historical and territorial concerns: Greece argued that the name "Macedonia" implied claims over its northern region of the same name, which has significant historical and cultural importance, including associations with Alexander the Great.

Following Macedonia's declaration of independence in 1991, Greece blocked its international recognition under the constitutional name "Republic of Macedonia." This led to a provisional arrangement in 1993, where the country was admitted to the United Nations under the temporary name "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM).¹⁶ Despite this compromise, Greece continued to veto

¹⁵ Нацев З, Начевски Р. (2000) *Мир и безбедност*, Македонска ризница, Куманово.

¹⁶ Арлинда, М. (2009) *Методи на преговарање во надворешната политика*, Народна и Универзитетска библиотека "Климент Охридски", Скопје.

Macedonia's aspirations for membership in NATO and the European Union, tying progress to the resolution of the name issue.¹⁷

The breakthrough came in 2018 with the Prespa Agreement, brokered by the governments of both nations. Under the agreement, the country agreed to change its name to "Republic of North Macedonia" in exchange for Greece lifting its objections to Euro-Atlantic integration. The deal was controversial domestically in both countries but marked a significant diplomatic achievement.

The resolution of the name dispute allowed North Macedonia to join NATO in 2020 and advance its European Union accession talks. While the agreement resolved the immediate political impasse, it remains a topic of debate within North Macedonia, reflecting lingering tensions over national identity and regional history.

The resolution of the dispute came in 2018 with the Prespa Agreement, under which the country adopted the name "North Macedonia." While this agreement paved the way for Euro-Atlantic integration, it remains controversial domestically.

b. Ethnic tensions

Ethnic tensions in North Macedonia have been a persistent challenge, rooted in the country's diverse demographic composition. Ethnic Macedonians, primarily Orthodox Christians, make up about 64% of the population, while ethnic Albanians, mostly Muslim, comprise roughly 25%. Other minorities, including Turks, Roma, Serbs, and Vlachs, add to the nation's cultural diversity but also to its complex social dynamics.¹⁸

Tensions between Macedonians and Albanians have been the most pronounced, stemming from historical grievances, political marginalization, and differences in cultural identity. These tensions culminated in the 2001-armed conflict, when the National Liberation Army (NLA), an ethnic Albanian paramilitary group, clashed with Macedonian security forces. The insurgency aimed to achieve greater political and cultural rights for Albanians.

The conflict was resolved with the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which granted Albanians broader rights, including proportional representation in government, the recognition of Albanian as an official

¹⁷ Берковиќ, С. (2006) *Дипломатија и дипломатска професија*, Загреб.

¹⁸ International Crisis Group. (2001). *Macedonia's Ethnic Albanians: Bridging the Divide*.

language in areas with significant Albanian populations, and increased autonomy in local governance. While the agreement helped de-escalate tensions, implementation has been uneven, leaving some grievances unaddressed.¹⁹

Today, ethnic tensions persist in various forms, from disputes over language laws to education and employment inequalities. Efforts to foster integration and inclusivity are ongoing, but the balance between national unity and ethnic diversity remains delicate. Addressing these issues is crucial for North Macedonia's long-term stability and social cohesion.

4. North Macedonia in the International Arena

a. Recognition and Diplomacy

North Macedonia's path to international recognition and diplomatic integration was fraught with challenges, largely influenced by the name dispute with Greece. After declaring independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, the country sought recognition as the "Republic of Macedonia."²⁰ However, Greece strongly opposed this name, arguing it implied territorial claims over its northern region of Macedonia and appropriated historical and cultural heritage.

As a result, North Macedonia faced delays in joining international organizations. In 1993, it was admitted to the United Nations under the provisional name "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM). This compromise allowed some level of international engagement but limited its ability to fully integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures, as Greece continued to block its accession to NATO and the European Union.²¹

Despite these obstacles, North Macedonia pursued active diplomacy, establishing bilateral relations with many countries and seeking support for its aspirations. The resolution of the name dispute through the 2018 Prespa Agreement was a major diplomatic breakthrough. By agreeing to adopt the name "Republic of North Macedonia," the country paved the way for Greece to lift its vetoes.

¹⁹ Теговски, Ј. *ЕУ интеграциите и превенција на конфликтите*, Министерство за надворешни работи.

²⁰ Beridge, G. R. (1995) *Diplomacy, Theory and Practice*, London - New York - Munich.

²¹ Barston, R. (1996) *Modern Diplomacy*, London.

This resolution marked a turning point in North Macedonia's international standing. In 2020, it became the 30th member of NATO, and progress toward EU accession has resumed, though challenges remain, including disputes with Bulgaria over historical and linguistic issues. North Macedonia's diplomatic efforts reflect its commitment to overcoming regional challenges and pursuing integration into global institutions.

b. Euro-Atlantic Integration

North Macedonia's pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration has been a central goal since its declaration of independence in 1991. The country has sought membership in both the European Union (EU) and NATO as part of its broader strategy to ensure political stability, economic growth, and security. However, this journey has been marked by significant obstacles, most notably the protracted name dispute with Greece.²²

North Macedonia's path to NATO membership was particularly challenging due to Greece's objections over the use of the name "Macedonia." The impasse delayed the country's accession to NATO, as Greece exercised its veto power. However, the 2018 Prespa Agreement between North Macedonia and Greece, which resolved the name dispute by changing the country's name to "North Macedonia," cleared the way for the country's integration into NATO.²³ North Macedonia officially became a NATO member in March 2020, marking a significant milestone in its Euro-Atlantic journey. North Macedonia has consistently pursued membership in the European Union and NATO as part of its foreign policy. The country achieved NATO membership in 2020 and is a candidate for EU accession, though progress has been slow due to disputes with neighboring Bulgaria and internal reforms.²⁴

In parallel, North Macedonia has been working towards EU membership. The country received candidate status in 2005, but negotiations have been hindered by disputes with neighboring Bulgaria, particularly over issues related to language and historical identity. Despite these challenges, North Macedonia has made significant progress in implementing reforms in governance, the rule of law, and economic development, which are key requirements for EU membership. As of 2020, the European Commission has opened accession

²² Нано, Р. (2010) - *НАТО во современите меѓународни односи*, Скопје.

²³ NATO. (2020). *North Macedonia Joins NATO as the 30th Member*. nato.int.

²⁴ European Union. (2023). *EU Accession Progress of North Macedonia*. europa.eu.

negotiations, although the process remains complex and requires continued political and institutional reforms.

Overall, North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration is a testament to its commitment to stability and cooperation with the West, with NATO membership achieved and EU negotiations continuing as key priorities for the country's future.

Conclusion

North Macedonia's independence, declared in 1991, represents a significant achievement in the turbulent history of the Balkans following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The country's peaceful transition to sovereignty, despite the surrounding turmoil in the region, set it apart as a relatively stable new state. However, its journey to full international recognition and integration was fraught with challenges, notably the prolonged name dispute with Greece, ethnic tensions within its borders, and struggles for economic development.

The resolution of the name dispute in 2018, through the Prespa Agreement, was a pivotal moment for North Macedonia, enabling the country to move beyond its diplomatic isolation and achieve key milestones, such as NATO membership in 2020 and the resumption of EU accession negotiations. These achievements underscore North Macedonia's resilience and its commitment to democratic principles, stability, and regional cooperation.

Nonetheless, the country continues to face challenges, particularly related to ethnic relations and political stability. Its future lies in successfully balancing its rich cultural diversity with the need for national unity, while navigating the complexities of European integration. North Macedonia's independence marked a new chapter in its history, and its ongoing pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration holds the potential to further solidify its place in Europe's democratic and security structures.

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