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European integration of North Macedonia: a candidate-witness of the transformation of the European Union

SUMMARY

North Macedonia is no longer in the focus of the enlargement of the European Union. After the conflict in 2001, it was a leading country on the European road, ahead of Croatia, which is already a member, in many segments. At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, it took on the role of “last wagon” in the wider context of European integration in the Western Balkans, no

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doubt behind Croatia, which was already readily awaiting the accession date, but at the same time behind Montenegro and Serbia. Everything was reduced to the Greek-Macedonian dispute, which actually answered the question that Greece is far from the role of “exclusive brakeman” of the European integration of its northern neighbor. In fact, transformation was a two-way street in the case of the relationship between the European Union and North Macedonia. While Skopje was facing an internal struggle between a civil (bi-national) and a national (uni-national) state, an all-pervading political clash whose epilogue was a completely captured institution, the European Union was faced with internal economic, financial, and then political and institutional challenges that in some way influenced that Brussels is not ready to face the conflict on the territory of Ukraine. This is precisely why we will seek answers to the questions: what are the causes of the “vacuum” in the relations between Skopje and Brussels, what wrong steps can we attribute to Skopje and which to Brussels, has European integration in the Western Balkans become only a theoretical concept, with no practical possibility of realization and how what will the next transformation of the European Union, on the one hand, and North Macedonia, on the other, look like – after all the current challenges?

INTRODUCTION

North Macedonia is a candidate country for membership in the European Union, which, within the framework of the so-called Western Balkan six, “enjoys” the greatest experience in the process of accession, since it acquired candidate status in 2005, but has not yet started accession negotiations. In fact, as stated in an article of Foreign Policy magazine, North Macedonia, together with Croatia, was the favorite for joining the European Union in the early 2000s, but its membership “stuck” (Bieber 2018) due to the regional challenges it faced in that moment she was faced with. The reasons for “postponing” the start of the accession negotiations of the European Union with North Macedonia are multiple, initially determined by bilateral disputes that this country was faced with, and challenges within the framework of the European Union, then by internal political problems that this country was faced with, in order to eventually entered the chapter of “saturation” with the EU enlargement policy, as well as the current political and security challenges that marginalized the European Union enlargement policy itself on the official agenda of Brussels. Precisely because of this, this work poses multiple questions that should provide us with answers about the current role of the European Union in the area of the so-called Western Balkans, then to answer how realistic the enlargement policy is in general in current international relations, even in the medium term, but

also to give us provide an understanding of the extent to which the foreign policy activities of small states, such as North Macedonia, are determined by a given “momentum” in international relations, which will either be recognized and thus used in the context of the realization of foreign policy goals, or will be missed, and as a consequence will cause multiple consequences both in the context of internalization and in the context of foreign policy of the given subject. In fact, we will make, through a time analogy, an analysis of the process of relations between the European Union and North Macedonia from the acquisition of candidate status until the decision of the European Council to officially approve the start of accession negotiations with the European Union to Skopje, which as a process was once again conditioned by bilateral disputes, i.e. bilateral a dispute which, it seems, is continuously permeated in the process of European integration of North Macedonia. However, it is wrong to state that bilateral disputes were the key “brakes” of this country on the European path, but the analysis of them in this paper will provide an additional explanation of how much bilateral disputes, often not of an essential, but exclusively political character, affect precisely the passage that “momentum” in international relations which, on the one hand, significantly affects the geopolitical circumstances in the given region, while, on the other hand, it contributes to the realization of the foreign policy goals of small states, which makes them more sustainable in the long term.

Therefore, in this paper, we will focus on the various determinants that “conditioned” the relationship between North Macedonia and the European Union, and thus directly, but also indirectly, influenced the process of European integration of Skopje, which so far has proven to be an unsuccessful example, because on the European side of the Union showed how much its “absorption power” in the geostrategic sense is largely limited, while, on the other hand, how over time the essential role of the official Brussels in the Western Balkans region, based precisely on the strength of the enlargement policy, has weakened as a result of the temporal “freezing” the European Union’s enlargement policy, which became a “bulky” conditionality mechanism that directly affected the popularity of the Union in the region mentioned, while it indirectly contributed to the intensification of the role in the Western Balkans by other and new major and regional powers that are already largely projecting their political and foreign policy interests, but also economic and the countries of the so-called Western Balkan six.

FOREIGN POLICY GOALS OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Officially, Skopje quickly adopted the Declaration of Independence after gaining independence, that is, ten days after the referendum declaration of independence, held on September 8, 1991. Article three of the Declaration on the Independence of the then Republic of Macedonia, which was adopted on

September 17, 1991, states that “the Republic of Macedonia is committed to the all-round development of good-neighborly relations and cooperation with all its neighbors, as well as development and cooperation with all European and other countries, international organizations and groups. In this sense, the Republic of Macedonia is vitally interested in the initiation of integration processes in Europe as well as in increased participation in bilateral and multilateral forms of cooperation in the region, which, under the influence of modern trends, will be increasingly affirmed in the interest of all countries and peoples living in this area”.³ With this, in a formal and legal way, in one of the highest legal acts of subjects of international law, North Macedonia indicated that it is committed to European integration and membership in the European Union. Viewed from that angle, 32 years have passed since the moment when political actors in Skopje defined European integration as one of the vital foreign policy goals of the country that has not yet been realized. Actually, in the formal-legal sense of the analysis of the relationship between North Macedonia and the European Union, a lot has been done, but the realization of the main goal – the status of the state – a full member of the European Union, has not been achieved. In this context, on February 10, 1998, the Macedonian Parliament already adopted the Declaration on the Development of the Republic of Macedonia’s Relations with the European Union, which states that “membership in the EU is a strategic goal of the Republic of Macedonia, it emphasizes the readiness to raise the level of the Republic of Macedonia’s relations with the EU through signing the European Agreement for Associate Membership, and on the basis of the comprehensive implementation of the criteria adopted by the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993”.⁴

Before that, diplomatic relations between Skopje and Brussels were established on December 22, 1995, when the EU opened negotiations with Skopje in the direction of reaching an agreement on cooperation in the areas of trade, financial operations and transport, then on March 10, 1996, the Republic of Macedonia became a full partner of the PHARE program, while on June 20, 1996, the Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Macedonia, including the Transport Agreement, was signed in Brussels.⁵

3 „Декларација”, Службен весник на Република Македонија, Број 42, Год. XLVII, Скопје 1991, Accessed June 5, 2021. Available at: <https://www.slvesnik.com.mk/Issues/C9B84AE4F4E14F568645C6F88960B9C5.pdf> op. cit.

4 „Декларација за развој на односите на Република Македонија со Европска унија”, Службен весник на Република Македонија, бр. 7, Скопје 1998. Accessed June 7th 2021. https://www.sobranie.mk/WBStorage/Files/Rezolucija%2004_02_2008%202.pdf op. cit.

5 „Хронологија на односите со ЕУ”. Секретаријат за европска прашања, Влада на Република Северна Македонија. Accessed June 7th 2021. <https://www.sep.gov.mk/post/?id=8#.YEyHf51KhPZ>.

All this, at the given moment, “instilled” hope that North Macedonia, in relation to the states that emerged from the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ), would become the first state in the so-called Yugoslav territory to become a member of the European Union. European integration as a foreign policy goal represented an indicator at the internal level of a double consensus on this issue, and on the inter-party level in the context of the right and the left, but also on the national-ethnic level, in the context of the consensus on this issue between the majority Macedonian people and the dominant Albanian ethnic minorities in that country. Analyzed from the perspective of the internal political mosaic of North Macedonia, both during the nineties and today, the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration, i.e. membership in the European Union and NATO, as two supporting and vital foreign policy goals, have become the lowest common denominator in the creation of social, political and interethnic consensus. But political and inter-ethnic disagreements in the process of realizing the stated foreign policy goals have permeated the political and social arena of North Macedonia in the past more than thirty years, which in the context of the analysis of internal (un)opportunities has greatly contributed to missing certain “momentums” in international relations, more specifically at the European political level, when it comes to achieving defined foreign policy goals.

WHAT DID BRUSSELS DO IN THE PROCESS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF NORTH MACEDONIA

The European Union is no longer as attractive as it was 15 years ago, when North Macedonia was a leader on the path of European integration. Despite the global economic and financial crisis, the “rescue” of Greece, Brexit, and the refugee crisis, the citizens of the Western Balkans interpreted the entry into the European Union as a guarantee for prosperity and stability. (Bieber 2018) Today, the picture on the field has changed. In fact, it is a double failure to recognize the so-called “momentum”. Both by the European Union and the member states of the Union, including the key international partners of Skopje, such as the United States, but also by the political leaders in Skopje, who put the political battle and party interests in the position of “the main game in town”, thus ignoring the interests of the state, and thus the interests of the citizens. As Rosa Balfour from the German Marshall Fund for the United States claims, “the enlargement process has always been full of obstacles”, but at the same time “multiple crises – financial, refugee and security, which have affected the European Union and the region, have weakened the influence of the EU on the candidate countries”. (BBC News na srpskom 2018a)

Before analyzing the “big momentums” missed by the European Union, in the process of Western Balkan integration” and thus “cementing” its role as

a key international player in this part of the European continent, it is important to state that, in a formal sense, the policy of Brussels is to bilateral disputes should not block the initiated integration processes. However, as stated in a BBC article, although by unwritten rule member states should not block candidates due to bilateral disputes, this often happens in practice, so Slovenia postponed the admission of Croatia for a couple of years due to the dispute over the Gulf of Piran, while At certain stages, Croatia blocked Serbia (in the negotiation process) due to a series of unresolved disputes with Belgrade. (BBC News na srpskom 2018b)

A similar approach, like Slovenia, but much longer, in the case of North Macedonia, was used by Greece, using the name dispute to implement a de facto blockade of the process of Skopje's integration into the European Union. Back in June 2008, at a meeting in Luxembourg, the ministers of foreign affairs of the European Union failed to agree on whether they should send a message of "encouragement" to the then Republic of Macedonia that they would open accession negotiations with the Union that year precisely because of the blockade of Greece. (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2008) A similar thing happened a year and a half later, in December 2009, when at the Council of Ministers of the European Union, the then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Greece stated that the start of negotiations on Macedonian membership was unthinkable, stressing that membership negotiations would only begin if the dispute was resolved about the name. (Index.hr 2009) In fact, in this context, it is important to point out that the European Commission recommended for the first time in 2009 the opening of accession negotiations on the condition that the then Republic of Macedonia resolves the name dispute with neighboring Greece. Nine years passed from that moment to reaching a solution between Skopje and Athens, however, despite reaching a solution with Greece, today's North Macedonia still has not started the negotiation process in the essential sense. The so-called French blockade followed, when official Paris vetoed the beginning of the process of accession negotiations with a request to change the methodology in the accession negotiations, and then neighboring Bulgaria blocked the negotiations with North Macedonia, conditioning the opening of the process on the resolution of the dispute concerning language and history. (Tuhina 2022a) This time, the solution was reached thanks to the so-called French proposal, which "convinced" Bulgaria, as a member state of the European Union, to accept the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia. Through the "French proposal", the official Sofia demanded that the Macedonian authorities accept the thesis that the Macedonian language has its roots in the Bulgarian language, that the Bulgarian people be included in the Macedonian Constitution, together with other minority nations, and that concrete measures be taken in, as the Bulgarian side states, "hate speech against Bulgaria".

And so it happened, because the formal start of the negotiation process was initiated by the first intergovernmental conference of the European Union

and North Macedonia, held on July 19, 2022, (Tuhina 2022b) but a year and a half later, not a single chapter in that process, i.e. cluster, was opened, precisely because of the current impossibility of reaching an agreement between political subjects in North Macedonia on constitutional changes, and the classification of the Bulgarian minority, together with other minority peoples, in the Constitution of North Macedonia. It is likely that at some point a double two-thirds majority will be reached in the Macedonian Assembly, in order to make the necessary constitutional changes, and remove this precondition on Skopje's path to the European Union, but the bottom line is that this proposal also came at a time when North Macedonia for a long time in the waiting room of the European Union, and this creates frustration among a large part of the public, and Bulgaria's rhetoric is not good. As political analyst Petar Arskovski explains, all this is happening "at the moment when people are most vulnerable". (BBC News na srpskom 2022c) In the context of North Macedonia's European integration, the BBC's analysis of "all historic agreements" states that it is a sentence that the inhabitants of North Macedonia could often hear in the last two decades, because "The Ohrid Agreement was historic is ended the conflict between the National Liberation Army and the Macedonian security forces, which improved the rights of Albanians in this country, while the name issue and the decades-long dispute with neighboring Greece were resolved by Prespa. (BBC News na srpskom 2022d) On the other hand, Arsovski reminds that "a part of the population, as well as the opposition political scenes, no longer believe in historical moments, and consider the French solution black-mail". (BBC News na srpskom 2022e)

On the same line is the position of the editor of the Macedonian respected political weekly Fokus, Gordana Duvnjka, who emphasizes that "the Macedonian people feel disappointed because the entire time the narrative of the current government has been that we have no other alternative than the European Union, which creates such pressure and dissatisfaction because we are in a way it assigns the role of Turkey, which has been at the door of the EU for decades and is never close enough". (Maglajlija 2021)

In fact, one would get the impression that the European Union "got lost" in the bilateral disputes that North Macedonia was facing, and that the geostrategic vision of Brussels in the context of the integration of the Western Balkans became a kind of "collateral damage" to the narrow political interests of the member states of the Union. This is very clearly recognized and seen precisely in the European integration process of Skopje, because it is a question of two bilateral disputes, which do not cause any security implications or lead to a real threat to the member states of the Union, and yet they are "abused" in one process that goes beyond the very realization of North Macedonia's foreign policy goal, i.e. joining the European Union, is directly related to the geostrategic position of the Union in this part of Europe, in the Western Balkans, which in the context of the current chapter of international relations, imbued with the

phenomenon of multipolarity, is significantly threatened. In fact, the region of the Western Balkans has largely become important for the subjects of international law, which from Brussels' point of view are seen as a kind of competition, but also a threat to the European idea, both in political, security and economic terms.

Seen from that angle, the European Union missed several decades of "momentum" to make its geostrategic position in the Western Balkans almost irreplaceable, bearing in mind its comparative advantage in the geographical, economic and political context. The policy of enlargement, as the most attractive policy of the European Union for the countries in South-Eastern Europe, former members of the USSR, but also the SFRY, was misused at the expense of the political interests of the member states, and all this was simultaneously accompanied by challenges such as the economic and financial crisis, the refugee crisis, the institutional crisis, Brexit and the ongoing conflict on the territory of Ukraine contributed to the official Brussels becoming only one of the "external actors" in the political entities in the Western Balkans. The geostrategic essence of the European Union's enlargement policy in the Western Balkans has been replaced by political interests, accompanied by newly emerging circumstances at the world and global level, while at the same time Brussels is trying again and again to reposition the European Union in this part of Europe, but again "burdened" by the conditions and interests of the member states in the matter actualization of the enlargement policy. From today's perspective, the relations between the European Union and actors in the Western Balkans look more and more like a kind of partnership from which everyone gets what suits them best, instead of results based on the principles and postulates of European integration. The European Union is still firmly committed to stability and peace in the region, as well as to ensuring a sustainable environment for economic, investment and trade flows, which in practice is an "outdated" method that no longer contributes to strengthening the role of the Union in regional frameworks. (The State of the European Union – A Need for Unity and Solidarity 2023)

WHAT DID SKOPJE DO IN THE PROCESS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF NORTH MACEDONIA

When it comes to the performance of the official Skopje in the process of European integration, it is important to emphasize, already at the very beginning, that it is to a large extent a "hypocritical" political attitude, primarily in the period after obtaining candidate status. Because North Macedonia, in its own way, has begun to put "in the foreground" the dispute with the Republic of Greece over the constitutional name of the state as a critical point, i.e. a supporting determinant in the process of European integration. The fact is

that the Greek authorities blocked the European integration process of North Macedonia, especially in the period after receiving the first positive recommendation of the European Commission on the start of the negotiation process, but the Greek side did it in a very “skillful” way in diplomatic communication, placing on the European “terrain” internal challenges faced by its northern neighbor, including the contribution to the development of regional cooperation. In North Macedonia, everything was formally focused on European and Atlantic integrations, while in essence work was done exclusively on satisfying party and political interests. At the same time, all-pervasive and multiple corruption “ate” the institutional postulates of that country, while the political elite was mostly directed towards the political struggle, which de jure was presented as the highest level of democratization of the Macedonian state, while on the “field” it was a Machiavellian struggle for bare authorities and powers. In such an environment, foreign policy goals, including integration into the European Union and NATO, became instrumentalized mechanisms that served exclusively for the purpose of internal political struggle, and the essential contribution to their achievement was largely left aside. The instrumentalization of foreign policy goals has reached the level that, unlike the moment of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, when they were defined as vital state interests, those same goals have become the main factors undermining Macedonian statehood, identity and uniqueness. In that period, there were political accusations that the then Republic of Macedonia would be faced with cantonization, federalization, bionationality, as a model of constitutional arrangement, and the redefinition of the state, which did not come true, but the politically abused narrative was that it was an externally “imposed” project. to elect a ruling structure in that country that will de facto trade in the national attributes of this country for the sake of membership in NATO and European integration. (Канал 5 Телевизија 2017) The fact that the political crisis threatened the sustainability of the process of realizing vital foreign policy interests is also evidenced by the statement of the then President of the European Council, who warned the Republic of Macedonia not to allow the current political crisis to jeopardize its ties with NATO and the EU: “Europe needs a stable FYROM (former Yugoslav Republic Macedonia), which is governed by the rule of law. The country’s Euro-Atlantic future is at risk”. (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2016)

In fact, we are talking about the period from 2014 to 2017, when the European Union de facto, in an absolute sense, “let go” of the Western Balkans, and European integration, at that moment, was followed by the statement of the then President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, who pointed out that EU enlargement will not take place during the mandate of his commission (Danas Online 2014), as well as by launching the Berlin Process initiative, interpreted as a “consolation prize” (Matić 2017a) after the official stance on the “freezing” of enlargement, it was placed at the “bottom” of the political agenda not only within the framework of the European Union and

its member states, but also on the political agenda of political leaders in the Western Balkans. The entire focus of Brussels in relation to the region actually came down to a kind of political stability, the only question left open is how to achieve that political stability if, in the example of North Macedonia, the country's foreign policy goals are threatened in the long term, which by some logic indicates that the national ones are also threatened interests of the country. If we look at it from a theoretical point of view, let's remember that foreign policy interests are defined on the basis of previously determined and permanent national interests. However, if we take a step back, the claim that political stability, probably in the security context, is key, is also evidenced by the writing of the respected German newspaper *Deutsche Welle*, which states that in the Western Balkans "political stability is decisive, but that there are currently a whole series of bilateral conflicts that are hindering true cooperation on the way to the EU", reminding that former German Chancellor Angela Merkel knows this too: "Political stability in this region is political stability for us". (Matić 2017b) To that, *Deutsche Welle* adds that "no one is talking about the concrete perspectives of accession anymore, and that nobody in Brussels has officially declared them dead, but that one thing is that there will be no new EU members in the foreseeable future, and that Brussels currently has more important concerns than Balkans, and that the economic union is a consolation prize and a kind of waiting room for admission to the club". (Matić 2017c) The statement of the then Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy Johannes Hahn, who pointed out that "the EU is already conducting concrete negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro, but they are still far from that with the others" is cited as a kind of proof of such an approach of the EU towards the countries in the region. (Matić 2017d)

In fact, the political crisis in North Macedonia was accompanied by the complete "disinterest" of the European Union in the enlargement policy, which testifies to the double freezing of European integrations, and which also caused double strategic consequences: initially, space was created for the role of the European Union in the region to be significantly revised, while at the same time political leaders in the region took advantage of the "disinterest" of Brussels to distance themselves as much as possible from the concept of the European Union, and to openly advocate for new foreign policy partnerships in order to preserve political popularity, and presenting themselves as "fathers of nations" whose the goal of preserving the state, regardless of the new circumstances. The then authorities in Skopje placed the political battle in North Macedonia on the level of national identity, thus placing the national attributes of the Macedonian state and nation as the main determinants in the process of preserving statehood, the people, and thus the uniqueness. The opposition's policy was presented as a platform of "national treason" whose main goal is to win power with the help of a foreign factor, and in return to "satisfy" the demands of external factors – primarily in the context of the disputes that

Skopje had with Athens, over the constitutional name of the country, and with Sofia, about historical, identity and language issues. In the political arena in that country, no means were chosen, thus distorting the reality of the country's vital foreign policy goals, because the discourse was established that the "sale" of national attributes is the only possibility for the realization of foreign policy goals.

However, it would be wrong to blame only the then ruling elite in North Macedonia for the imposition of such a discourse in Macedonian society and public discourse, bearing in mind the "momentums" missed by the European Union in the integration process of this country, thus bringing Macedonian politicians to a "two-way track": should they accept numerous concessions and thus justify their foreign policy actions (sacrificing their political careers) or should they stand "on the defensive" of national attributes, which is again a difficult position, bearing in mind the dominant Albanian ethnic minority in that country and its position on Euro-Atlantic integration, and started a wave of internal challenges both on the political and foreign policy, but also on the ethnic level – which was the case in North Macedonia from 2014 to 2017.

In fact, the relationship between North Macedonia and the European Union in the context of Skopje's European integration testifies to how much foreign policy action of small states is conditioned by external circumstances, in this case regional and European. On the other hand, the all-pervasive political crisis that engulfed North Macedonia from 2014 to 2017 testifies to how small states are, to a large extent, in a dependent position in relation to their foreign policy partners, even in the chapter of the so-called multipolarity of international relations, and how much "The (non)involvement" of foreign policy partners indirectly also determines the internal flows in these categories of states. In order not to lead the reader to the wrong conclusion, the "source" of the political crisis in North Macedonia at that moment was largely internal challenges, weak institutions, pervasive corruption, pronounced political clientelism, as well as the weakened democratic capacities of the institutional infrastructure, but it is largely measures all this indirectly, but also directly contributed by the European Union itself, with its policy of basing the process of integration on exclusively political criteria, we remind you at that moment, and then not with the essential role of the process of overcoming the political crisis, which could lead us to the conclusion that one of the determinants of the crisis used the crisis as a "barrier" in the integration process.

MISSED "MOMENTUMS"

Seen from the point of view of the independence of North Macedonia, the first missed "momentum" by the member states of the European Union was the disregard of the opinion of the Badinter Commission, which was formed on the occasion of the Conference on the former Yugoslavia in The Hague in 1991,

and whose arbitration at that time had the force of an international judgment. In its opinion from January 11, 1992, the Badinter Commission stated that the Republic of Macedonia meets the conditions stipulated by the guidelines related to the recognition of new states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, as well as by the Declaration on Yugoslavia adopted by the Ministerial Council of the then European Community 16 December 1991. (Peščanik.net 2008) In fact, with the adoption of the so-called Lisbon Declaration on June 27, 1992, the opportunity was missed for the then European Community to position itself as a key foreign policy mentor of the then Republic of Macedonia, because the willingness to recognize the independence of this country by the member states of today's EU was expressed, but on the condition that in the name of the country will not include the term Macedonia.⁶

At that moment, the first strategic mistake was made when it comes to the role of the European Union in the Western Balkans, because it was about refusing to recognize one of the republics that were part of the SFRY, which at that moment was not involved in civil conflicts, because one member state of the Union set a political condition, without any international legal foundation, bearing in mind the fact that the Republic of Macedonia also made constitutional changes guaranteeing that its constitutional name does not prejudice any territorial claims in relation to other geographical territories that make up the whole the territory of Macedonia in a geographical context. Then came a period in which the Macedonian leadership led a so-called "conditional" foreign policy, which proved to be very dangerous internally due to the essential marginalization of vital foreign policy goals. The institutional infrastructure of the then Republic of Macedonia was the subject of massive political abuses which, along with the economic sanctions imposed by official Athens in that period, made the state unsustainable, while the social environment increasingly became an instrument for satisfying political interests. Neglect of internal challenges, unstable and corrupt institutions and political leadership that completely marginalized foreign policy goals led to an armed conflict in the north-western parts of the Republic of Macedonia between Macedonian security forces and members of an extremist organizations which have claimed and whose formal goal was the fight for human and minority rights of Albanians. The months-long conflict managed to position this country at the top of the agenda of the European Union and NATO, but in the security context, as a factor in the destabilization of European conditions, instead of as a country that aspires to be part of the Union. Thus, with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia in 1991), which stopped the conflict, another "momentum" was missed to enable North

6 Ljubica Jančeva, „Konstituisanje nezavisne i suverene Republike Makedonije (1990–1992)”, Yu historija, Available at: https://yuhistorija.com/serbian/jug_druga_txt01c5.html Accessed June 3rd 2021.

Macedonia's European integration in the years when the policy of enlargement was the focus of the official Brussels, and when the member states The Union had mechanisms and capacities to integrate this country, thus implementing its strategic security policy of permanent peace and stability on the European continent. In the context of European integration, in the case of this country, official Brussels once again missed the "momentum" to recognize the lowest common denominator of the two dominant ethnic communities, which was precisely European integration, and thus enable its sustainable and safe development, which greatly contributes to European stability on this part of the continent. Instead, the case of the Republic of Macedonia was once again viewed through the prism of bilateral disputes, although in 2005 a decision was made to grant candidate status, but without specific dates on the process of integration and eventual accession.

The third missed "momentum" followed in 2008 and 2009, when both the European Union and NATO neglected the importance of their strategic positioning in this part of the European continent. Although we are talking about a region and a country that, in that strategic context, are *de facto* "encircled" by the member states of NATO and the European Union, this should not have been a guarantee of the development of opportunities in the "desired" direction, which later turned out to be true, considering in view of the capacity of the political crises that followed, and the "influence" of new external entities in the Western Balkans, which greatly changed the essence of the Union's role in this part of Europe, and official Brussels *de facto* put itself in the position of being one of the competitors for implementation of its interests in the Western Balkans, due to the missed opportunity to "permanently" position itself as a strategic foreign policy partner. In the context of North Macedonia, NATO "excluded" this country from the so-called Adriatic Troika, and at the Summit in Bucharest in 2008, it invited only Albania and Croatia, demanding from the official Skopje to first resolve the dispute with Athens, and then that the process of Atlantic integration "thaw". While in the case of the European Union, despite the European Commission's recommendation to start accession negotiations with this country, it was also decided to first reach a solution to the bilateral dispute with Greece, and then to start the process of European integration in the context of accession negotiations.

It is about "momentum" that caused far-reaching consequences because: the authorities in Skopje formalized the process of European integration in the absolute sense; room for maneuver has been opened for the access of new/other foreign policy partners; public opinion "relativized" its views on European integration, and the thesis prevailed in Macedonian society that the "price of concessions" for admission to NATO and the EU was too high, while at the same time other actors in the Western Balkans used precisely the example of North Macedonia's European integration to "legitimized" new strategic partnerships with third foreign policy partners. In the case of North Macedonia, it caused a

deep and multi-year political crisis, social intolerance based on political competition, and growing divergences in the attitudes of the dominant ethnic communities regarding vital foreign policy goals. In fact, we are talking about a frozen period of ten years which has largely “relativized” the role of the European Union in the region, followed at the same time by new security challenges on the European continent, such as the Ukrainian crisis, the migrant crisis, the financial and economic crisis, and even political tensions. in the Western Balkans. The extent to which the EU’s role in the Western Balkans was “relativized” and how marginalized its effective influence in North Macedonia was is evidenced by the multi-year political crisis in North Macedonia, which was resolved in stages, under the mentorship of the official Brussels, but whose the duration *de facto* showed how much the “ultimatums” of representatives of official Brussels, i.e. the Union, are not of great importance for local politicians. Which in practice testifies that the process of European integration has become just one of the foreign policy activities in North Macedonia, but not at a level that would be characteristic for the realization of a vital foreign policy goal.

The fourth “momentum” with which, it is assumed, 20 years of “unsuccessful” European integration of North Macedonia will be marked is when officially Skopje in a very short period of time in 2017–2018. reached agreements on overcoming bilateral disputes with official Athens and official Sofia. Although the dispute with Sofia regarding the interpretation of historical facts, and the origin of the Macedonian language and identity, is still current, bilateral issues, which in the case of this country were the biggest barrier on the way to European integration, have largely been overcome. The European Union did not “readily” meet this “momentum”, and once again placed itself in the position of an “unreliable” foreign policy partner of North Macedonia in the context of European integration. The fact is that this country’s main trading partners are the member states of the European Union, that is, Germany and Greece (InStore.rs 2023), but in practice this does not change the newly created perception in relation to the European Union, because the vital foreign policy goal of this country is not the construction of foreign trade relations with the member states of the European Union at the highest level, but complete integration into European structures in the status of a full member state.

CONCLUSION

“If we analyze the milestones in the process of North Macedonia’s accession to the European Union, it is clear that the country has been “on political hold” since 2009, when the first recommendation of the European Commission for the start of negotiations was given. It was expected that the summit of the European Council in October 2019 would be a turning point in the process of European integration. North Macedonia has fulfilled what the European Union set as a key criterion for the start of negotiations, which is the solution of the

political dispute with Greece. Based on the strong promises of the EU leaders, it was expected that the EU would fulfill those promises and the decision to start negotiations was made". (Mojsovska 2021, 1)

In order to provide a more comprehensive overview of the political dimension of the European integration process of North Macedonia, it is worth mentioning the milestones in that process:

- In April 2001, the Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed, which states the principles and goals of political dialogue, regional co-operation and cooperation between the parties in many policy areas, and which entered into force on March 20, 2004;
- In March 2004, North Macedonia applied for EU membership;
- In October 2009, the European Commission concluded the Country's Progress Report with a recommendation to start membership negotiations, however, the European Council in December of the same year did not adopt a conclusion on starting partial negotiations;
- In June 2018, after the signing of the so-called Prespa Agreement between Skopje and Athens, the Council of the European Union adopted conclusions which provided for the EU to start accession negotiations in June 2019, but it was not a final decision;
- In June 2019, the EU Council still did not make a decision on the start of membership negotiations with North Macedonia, and it was decided to decide on the matter again in October of the same year;
- In October 2019, the European Council again postponed the decision on the start of accession negotiations, due to France's request to change the methodology of the accession process;
- In February 2020, the European Commission proposed a document on the new accession methodology "Improving the accession process – a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans;
- On March 25, 2020, the Council of the European Union adopted a document on the new methodology and made a decision on the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia, but did not set a date for the first intergovernmental conference;

In December 2020, the European Council failed to set a date for the first intergovernmental conference, after Bulgaria, as a permanent member of the Union, set new conditions for the start of accession negotiations; (Mojsovska 2021, 4)

- On July 19, 2022, the European Union held the first intergovernmental conference with North Macedonia, which formally opened accession negotiations. (Tuhina 2022c)

However, this time too it is difficult to establish that the essential process of accession to the European Union for Skopje has begun, as noted by certain German media. Thus, the respected German newspaper Deutsche Welle writes that "unlike the others, North Macedonia has embarked on what the formal

Brussels dictionary describes as – the beginning of the process of opening negotiations, (the so-called screening process), and in order to open negotiations, the country must first change its constitution and include the Bulgarian minority as a constituent part, but there is no two-thirds majority in the Macedonian parliament for that step. Apart from the nationalist opposition, many pro-Western intellectuals and politicians believe that this will only fuel Sofia's further expectations and demands". (Georgievski 2022)

That is why North Macedonia is a candidate country for membership in the European Union and a witness to the transformation of an economically successful global player that in current international relations does not recognize its strategic goals in the given context of power relations and the increasingly evident multipolarity of the order. Leaving aside the internal issues and challenges, which the European Union was faced with from the moment of granting candidate status to North Macedonia, until today, the fact is that the official Brussels and the member states have lost a pragmatic understanding of the importance of the integration of the Western Balkans into the European economic and political the whole precisely because of the security, political stability and economic viability of the Union. The Western Balkans, and in that context also North Macedonia, do not have significant capacities to threaten the security, stability and sustainability of the European Union as a whole. But bearing in mind the fact that it is a region within the geographical entirety of the Union, and at the same time not ignoring the "penetration" that "other" foreign policy actors have had in this small and dynamic region in the past two decades, the fact is that the European concept, as such, de facto endangered in the regional framework, but also in the broader European framework because the "vacuum space" created by the Union itself by its inaction is filled with new political actors and their interests, which are usually not acceptable for the Union as a whole, but also for its member states.

In the context of the Western Balkans and North Macedonia, the European Union no longer enjoys the trust of the local population, as was the case 15 years ago. In addition, the European Union is no longer the only alternative in the direction of development and sustainability of this region. By opening a "chapter" in which at the same time access to this region was opened to "other" foreign policy players and potential partners of the Western Balkan six, both in the economic, political and security context, Brussels "imposed" a new role on itself – one of the competitors in the region, which, together with potential and new alternative partners, is trying to realize its strategic interests in this part of Europe. The bottom line is that the transformation of the European Union in the Western Balkans region, which can be seen in the example of North Macedonia, is developing in a regressive direction – from a key foreign policy partner to one of the interested foreign policy actors that pretends to reflect its political and economic power.

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