

Original scientific paper

UDK: 327.56::351.86(075.8)(061.1EU)

DOI: 10.5937/jrs19-49142

Received: 7 February 2024 / Accepted: 7 November 2024

## **Ontological Security Dynamics in the EU Accession Process of North Macedonia<sup>1</sup>**

ALEKSANDAR JEKIĆ\*

*Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia*

**Abstract:** Ontological security studies emphasize the importance of routinized relations with others. European Integration is understood as a driver of such routinized relations, making it a source of ontological security and the EU an ontological security provider. Yet, as the case of North Macedonia illustrates, the process of EU accession goes along with bilateral disputes and can trigger concerns about ontological (in)security. To fully understand the dynamics of ontological security-seeking and -provision in the EU, the article investigates its limitations in the context of enlargement. This is done through a qualitative analysis of public statements of Macedonian representatives in the period between the Bulgarian veto in 2020 and the French proposal in 2022. Results indicate that the EU's role as a provider of ontological security in the Macedonian case highly depends on the perceived credibility of EU membership, as the latter is seen as a means to gain external recognition and thereby ensure the maintenance of a coherent sense of the Self. Perceptions of low membership credibility, however, challenge the ability of maintaining a coherent sense of the Self and turn the EU into a depriver of ontological security.

**Keywords:** ontological security, European Union, EU enlargement, North Macedonia, security-seeking

### **(Un)Expected Obstacles on the Pathway to European Union Membership**

Ontological security studies (OSS) attribute a high importance to the continuity of the Self (Krickel-Choi 2021, 9; Mitzen 2006b, 342), which is amongst others assured through routinised and stable relations with others (Ejdus 2020a; Mitzen 2006b). European Integration (EI) can be seen as an example of a process that establishes and maintains such relations in a cooperative way.<sup>2</sup> Acting as a peace project (Bechev 2023, 700), the pro-

---

1 The article was supported by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (Research Programme Group P5-0177).

\* [aleksandar.jekic@fdv.uni-lj.si](mailto:aleksandar.jekic@fdv.uni-lj.si); ORCID: 0009-0006-8676-8759.

2 For an overview of different approaches that study the link between ontological security and European integration see Kinnvall, Manners and Mitzen (2018, 255–56).

cess includes the reconciliation of former conflicting parties as a by-product of political and economic integration (Rumelili 2018, 292). The same counts for EU enlargement, to which the EU attributes the enabling of “the vision of a united and peaceful continent” (Council of the European Union 2003, 3). From the OSS perspective, the EU becomes a provider of ontological security by assuring stable, cooperative relations among European states which, in turn, act as “security-seekers” (Mitzen 2006b, 363).

The case of North Macedonia (MKD), however, challenges this understanding of ontological security-provision by showing that the process of EU accession does not automatically lead to reconciliation and the resulting establishment of stable and cooperative relations with others. Instead, MKD’s pathway to EU membership is shaped by enduring conflicts with neighbouring member states that directly challenge the Macedonian identity. Politically, this resulted in a turbulent period that included a major internal crisis, growing polarization among political parties, and, most prominently, the country’s name change (Bechev 2023). The development equally affected the public, creating “fears among ethnic Macedonians” (Nikolovski 2021, 169) which manifested themselves in mass protests (RTV Slovenija 2022) and continuously decreasing support for EU membership (Damjanovski 2023, 22; Nikolovski et al. 2022, 64.).

Nonetheless, this is not incompatible with expectations deriving from OSS. In the existing literature, arguments against the EU’s role as a provider of ontological security can also be found. Namely, countries can have an interest in the maintenance of conflicting relations, as these equally act as a source of ontological security as cooperative ones (Ejdus 2020a, 3–4; Mitzen 2006b). Besides that, reconciliation processes usually lead to the disruption of established narratives, which potentially causes anxieties that do not only threaten the maintenance of a feeling of ontological security but also the success of EI as such (Rumelili 2018, 292–93).

By analysing the Macedonian case, this article aims to critically investigate the EU’s role as an ontological security provider within the process of EU enlargement. With this aim, the conceptual framework of this paper is outlined in the beginning, introducing ontological security and elaborating on the arguments for and against ontological security-provision by the EU. Thereafter, it is proceeded by contextualizing the Macedonian case, whereby a focus is set on the conflictual relations with neighbouring countries and their impact on MKD’s EU accession process. The analytical part then traces the dynamics that resulted from the inclusion of the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute into MKD’s EU accession process. This is done by conducting a qualitative analysis of public statements coming from the political elite, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector and the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archdiocese of Ohrid (MOC) in the period between the Bulgarian veto in 2020 and the resulting French proposal in 2022.

Results indicate that the EU simultaneously acts as a provider and depriver of ontological security in MKD. It provides candidate states with ontological security by creating a framework of cooperative relations with other states, which in the Macedonian case goes

along with the pursuit of external recognition of a contested identity. Even after facing the Bulgarian veto, the Macedonian government perceived the EU as a provider of ontological security and, congruently, advocated for concessions in the form of identity adjustments. This position was justified with the argument that only full membership in the EU guarantees external recognition and, thereby, assures maintenance of a coherent sense of the Macedonian Self. The attributed role of being an ontological security provider, however, showed to be dependent on the credibility of EU membership. While other actors within the Macedonian state-society also connected EU membership to the protection of the Macedonian Self, they differed in their evaluation of the credibility of reaching the desired external recognition. Following the Bulgarian veto, the process of EU accession, therefore, only became connected to demands for a change of identity without the prospect of maintaining a coherent sense of the Self. This made the EU turn into a depriver of ontological security, against whom countermeasures for protecting the Self were directed.

The article provides a more nuanced approach for understanding recent political dynamics in MKD. Furthermore, it sheds light on the importance of non-acquis related elements within the scope of EU enlargement and their impacts on the policy's success. Theoretically, it deepens the existing literature on the relationship between security-seeking and security-provision in the context of the EU by showing in which ways the EU can act as both a provider and depriver of ontological security. It thereby delivers further evidence for the necessity of including different actors within the state-society complex to better understand cases of ontological (in)security.

### **The EU's Role as a Provider of Ontological Security**

Ontological security was originally conceptualized for the individual level, most prominently through the work of psychiatrist Ronald David Laing (Laing 2010) and sociologist Anthony Giddens (Giddens 2009). It deals with the individual's experience of existence,<sup>3</sup> including the finding of "meaning in life" (Krickel-Choi 2024, 5) and the management of anxiety (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 890–91). For both Laing, who developed the approach to understand and describe the pathological conditions of schizoid and schizophrenic patients, and Giddens, who transformed Laing's work into a sociological theory dealing with the impact of modernity on human beings, ontological security was seen as a cross-cultural phenomenon that most individuals manage to maintain (Giddens 2009; Laing 2010). It can be understood as the "successful ordering of reality" (Krickel-Choi 2024, 4), which, for Giddens, is assured when an individual has sufficient answers to the so-called fundamental questions of human existence regarding the own existence and finitude, relations to others, and continuity of the Self (Giddens 2009, 55). The focus of both approaches is centred around the fewer or limited cases of ontological insecurity,

---

<sup>3</sup> It can, therefore, also be understood as "existential security" (Krickel-Choi 2024, 7) which enables the perception of being "real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person" (Laing 2010, 39).

a condition characterised by permanent, existential anxiety and attempts to (re)affirm a sense of Self (Giddens 2009; Laing 2010).

Ontological security was introduced into the field of International Relations (IR) in the 1990s by Wendt (1994), Huysmans (1998), and McSweeney (1999). The establishment of the theory in IR then followed with the works of Kinnvall (2004), Mitzen (2006b), and Steele (2008), and enabled IR scholars to go beyond dominating understandings of state behaviour by showing that “emotional needs related to identity, recognition, and self-esteem can, and often do, trump conventionally assumed interests like physical security or material gain” (Krickel-Choi 2021, 9). OSS build on the assumption that states, as individuals, seek ontological security, defined as the “need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time” (Mitzen 2006b, 342). A state’s Self that derives from this experience of personhood can be understood “as having a sense of continuity across time and space, as having the capacity for autonomous action, and as having this subjectivity recognised by others and deemed worthy of respect” (Krickel-Choi 2024, 9). This is achieved by creating and maintaining a ‘framework of reality’<sup>4</sup> through discursive and ritualistic practices (Krickel-Choi 2024, 4), including routines and stable relationships (Ejdus 2020a; Mitzen 2006b), autobiographical narratives (Ejdus 2020b; Steele 2008; Subotić 2016), and the state’s identity.<sup>5</sup> Being secure when it comes to existence, in turn, enables purposeful agency, meaning the definition of ends and means of the own action (Mitzen 2006b, 342). The Self is thereby constantly exposed to challenges, which is why maintaining the ‘framework of reality’ requires adjustments of elements of the Self. The feeling of ontological security is, therefore, not the result of a stable identity, but of a stable Self that can deal with change and anxiety, amongst others by reflexively adapting identity when needed (Krickel-Choi 2024; Flockhart 2016).

As in the works of Laing and Giddens, OSS focus on the absence of ontological security. On the state-level, cases of ontological insecurity are expected to derive from so-called ‘critical situations’ that disrupt existing routines and, congruently, the feeling of ontological security. They are defined as “unpredictable events that affect a large number of individuals, catch state agents off-guard, and disrupt their self-identities” (Steele 2008, 12). However, even if all these criteria are met, the actor that underlies the situation also needs to interpret it as an existential threat to himself (Steele 2008, 12). Following critical situations, the discourse of the affected actor is shaped by the (re)appearance of fundamental questions connected to the ‘framework of reality’ (Ejdus 2018; 2020b). It goes along with feelings of “anxiety, self-doubt, shame, guilt, and other incapacitating emotions resulting in a loss of purposeful agency” (Ejdus 2020a, 4). It is accompanied by the demand for countermeasures and can result in irrational behaviour, including the willingness to harm one’s own physical security (Ejdus 2020b, 2; Steele 2008, 2).

---

4 Term coined by Giddens (2009, 36), for its application on the state level see Krickel-Choi (2024).

5 The term identity captures the “story told by a person about where they come from and where they are going in order to make sense of their existence” (Krickel-Choi 2024, 17). Though often conflated with, identity only constitutes one part of the Self (Ibid.).

Coming to EU studies, OSS filled a blind spot of the existing literature, which was criticized for being too focused on the analysis of institutions, legislations and policies (Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen 2018, 255). By delivering a “more well-rounded approach to crises, anxieties, and insecurities in the EU” (Kinnvall, Manners, and Mitzen 2018, 255), OSS have investigated the dynamics of ontological security on the level of European citizens (Manners 2002), religious and national groups (Kinnvall 2012), member states (Mitzen 2006a; 2006b), and the EU (Browning 2018). Contributions on the state-level, amongst others, provided evidence for the interdependence between the ontological security of states and their membership in the EU.

EI is thereby regarded as a driver behind the establishment and maintenance of cooperative relations, and, thus, a source of ontological security as EU member states “seek ontological security through routinising relations with their primary strategic partners” (Mitzen 2006a, 271). Most prominently, this was observable in the case of France and Germany, where EI led to a reconciliation that assured both ontological and physical security on the long-term (Rumelili 2018, 285). EU membership goes even beyond the mere routinisation of relations as it also (re)affirms a certain role-identity that situates the member state’s Self within its social surroundings. The perceived position within the international order is of vital importance for purposeful agency, which is why states are eager to assure continuity within their role-identity (Ejdus 2020b, 25; Krickel-Choi 2024, 16). Consequently, through both routinised relations with others and the role-identity of the Self “member states publicly reaffirm and perform their identity as security-seekers” (Mitzen 2006b, 363). The EU, in turn, acts as an ontological security provider, which goes along with its self-understanding of being a security provider and peace agent.

Through the process of enlargement, the EU even inherits this role beyond its borders (Browning 2018, 107), which is why “the vision of a united and peaceful continent” (Council of the European Union 2003, 3) is attributed to this policy. EU enlargement builds on the assumption that conflictual relations throughout the European continent automatically develop into cooperative ones through breaks with nationalist/irredentist narratives following from the benefits that result from economic and political integration (Rumelili 2018, 292). Deriving from this, it can be expected that candidate countries engage in the process of EU accession in order to routinise relations with their primary strategic allies and to (re)affirm a certain role-identity of their Selves. By pursuing EU membership, candidate states become security-seekers and the EU a potential provider of ontological security.

Seeking ontological security through EU accession, however, does not guarantee the provision of ontological security. This is connected to the necessary establishment of cooperative, routinised relations with other (member) states, which requires the reconciliation of former conflicting parties. For assuring reconciliation, fundamental changes to established definitions of the Self, the Other, and collective memories are needed, which can lead to collective anxieties that do not only threaten the feeling of ontological security, but also the success of the enlargement process (Rumelili 2018, 292–93). This is currently ob-

servable in the Western Balkans (Rumelili 2018, 292–93), where the pathway towards EU membership includes reconciliation processes between conflicting, neighbouring countries.<sup>6</sup> The requirement to break with nationalist aspirations (Rumelili 2018, 288) disrupts established narratives, routines, accepted definitions of right and wrong, and creates a discrepancy between private and collective memory (Rumelili 2018, 292). Ultimately, this challenges the ability of candidate states to narrate themselves “continuous in time and maintain a sense of positive distinction” (Rumelili 2018, 292), a precondition for the feeling of ontological security. This is why the EU does not only act as a potential provider of ontological security, but also as a potential depriver. Resulting from the ambivalent implications of the enlargement policy for candidate states’ ontological security, the latter must be regarded as a “central challenge for the EU to achieve security in a sustainable fashion” (Manners 2013, 413).

Using the case of MKD, this article aims to further explore the relationship between ontological security-seeking and security-provision in the context of the EU. MKD is seen as a security-seeker that aims to establish and maintain cooperative, routinised relations with others to maintain a continuous sense of the Self. EI enables and institutionalises these desired relations and, therefore, becomes a potential provider of ontological security for MKD. The article adds to the existing literature by arguing that the EU only acts as a security provider for candidate states, when the credibility in the membership perspective is assured. Doubts in the ability to maintain a continuous Self through the pursuit of EU membership, on the contrary, lead to collective anxieties that threaten the feeling of ontological security. In these cases, the EU turns into a depriver of ontological security.

The article follows the understanding that ontological security does not only affect state institutions but also subgroups and individuals. Threats to the feeling of ontological security in the form of a critical situation are expected to be perceived differently depending on the actor within the state. Equally, it is argued that the perception of the EU as either a provider or depriver of ontological security is not uniformly shared across the state-society complex.<sup>7</sup> Divergent views about threats to the states’ ontological security translate into a discursive process about the role of the EU, which, as the case of MKD shows, can result in collective anxieties and the demand for countermeasures directed against the EU accession process.

---

6 This does not only count for relations among countries. As Kočan (2023, 206–7) shows, similar dynamics are observable on the level of subnational entities in Bosnia and Hercegovina. In this case, EI is perceived as a threat (to the ontological security) in one entity, the *Republika Srpska*, and results in a rejection of EU initiatives.

7 The term is taken over from Narozhna (2020) and underlines the understanding that state action is always exerted by individuals embedded within the state-society complex, which itself is again highly dependent on the interactions with other individuals and groups. The phenomenon of ontological security must therefore also be regarded as a shared concern of “states as well as societies and individuals” (Rumelili 2015, 57).



## **Contextualizing Conflictual Relations in North Macedonia**

OSS posits that social actors rely on continuity when it comes to their relations with others, regardless of whether these are cooperative or conflictual (Ejduš 2020a, 3–4). Macedonian relations are arguably characterised by the latter, as enduring conflicts shape(d) the relations with all four neighbouring countries – Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia. And while this description does fit certain existing stereotypes about the conflictual nature of the Balkans, it is in fact the outcome of historically recent developments (Malešević 2012).

Concretely, it can be traced back to the 19th century, when first nationalist ideas emerged in the Balkans (Kitromilides 1989, 149). These ideas, however, did not spread uniformly and reached Macedonia,<sup>8</sup> geographically located in a more stable, inner part of the Ottoman Empire, after national movements had already been formed in neighbouring regions (Danforth 1995, 59; Jezernik 2002, 7). The national movements in Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia thereby all included Macedonia into the vision of their nation, which resulted in rivalling aspirations among Macedonia's neighbours. Commonly known as the 'Macedonian question', Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia tried to enforce their claims on Macedonian territory and people, leading to a conflict that peaked during the Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913 and the partition of Macedonia (Danforth 1993, 3).

The inhabitants of the contested territory, however, did not develop a strong alignment towards one of the neighbouring nations. Instead, a certain resistance against external domination evolved, leading to first articulated ideas of a separate Macedonian language among the intellectual elite (Danforth 1995, 61–62), which initiated what has been called the 'revival'<sup>9</sup> of the Macedonian nation. The evolving Macedonian national movement, however, was not recognised by its neighbours, which is why the following decades remained characterised by attempts of assimilation and Macedonian resistance to it. This did not change until World War II, when Macedonians were guaranteed national rights in a new Yugoslav state at the congress of Bihać (Palmer and King 1971, 74). This was formalised with the proclamation of the People's Republic of Macedonia as a federal unit of Yugoslavia in 1944 and assured MKD a considerable degree of autonomy, a clearly defined territory, and state symbols. The nation-building process in the following decades promoted the desired distinction of Macedonians from Bulgarians and Serbs and strengthened the Macedonian identity, amongst others, through the standardisation of the Macedonian language and the unilaterally proclaimed autocephality of the MOC (Palmer and King 1971, 111, 155, 165). Finally, with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, MKD gained full sovereignty and independence in 1991.

---

8 The term Macedonia refers to the geographical area, which besides MKD also includes parts of Bulgaria and Greece.

9 A key event in this period was the Ilinden uprising on 2nd August 1903. Led by the national hero Goce Delčev, the Kruševo republic was established and lasted for ten days until it got recaptured by the Ottomans (Danforth 1995, 51; Palmer and King 1971, 7–8).

Nonetheless, relations with neighbouring Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia remained characterised by misrecognition even after independence. Bulgaria and Greece both accused MKD of the appropriation of their respective cultural and historical heritage, and repeatedly evaluated the Macedonian nation and language as a creation of Yugoslav communists (Danforth 1993, 4; Panov, Cacanovska, and Angelovska-Panova 2021, 245). Until resolved in 2022, Serbian-Macedonian relations were also shaped by an enduring conflict between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the MOC regarding the unilaterally proclaimed autocephaly of the MOC (Aleksov and Lackenby 2023, 422; Perić 2023, 133). Additionally, resulting from the social transformation that accompanied Yugoslav communism as well as the redefinition of the political identities of both Macedonians and Albanians, an internal conflict emerged in MKD (Adamson and Jović 2004; Bellamy 2019). Based on conflicting views about the desirable constitutional arrangement regarding the status of nations and its implications for the state (Bellamy 2019, 124), the dispute escalated into an open conflict between the armed forces of the Albanian minority and the armed forces of MKD in 2001. It ended with the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which enhanced minority rights for Albanians and created the institutional framework on which MKD is still premised today (Karadjoski and Adamczuk 2014, 212).

Surrounded by “four wolves” (Jackson and Subotić 2024, 15–16), MKD continuously faces both internal and external challenges to its identity and statehood (Sazdovski 2015, 54–55). This translates into a social security dilemma between MKD and its neighbours, whereby measures aimed at enhancing the feeling of security of one group leads to a feeling of insecurity for the other group,<sup>10</sup> making “Macedonian ontological security inherently unstable” (Cupać 2020, 20).

## Reconciliation Through EU Enlargement

Since independence, there is a cross-party consensus in MKD about the desirability of Euro-Atlantic integration, whereby membership is, alongside others, understood as a means to secure Macedonian nationhood (Bechev 2023, 705). The process is, however, heavily influenced by disputes between MKD and its neighbours, which became evident ultimately after the proclamation of independence, when Greece blocked the establishment of full diplomatic relations between MKD and the EU due to the new country’s name and flag (Karadjoski and Adamczuk 2014, 211).

After the Interim accord in 1995 temporarily resolved the Greek blockade, MKD became a forerunner in the process of EI, being the first state in the Western Balkans that signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in 2001 (Bechev and Marusic 2020, 2). In the same year, however, further advancements were again hindered due to MKD’s

---

10 An example for this is the Skopje 2014 project, where the construction of neoclassical buildings in Skopje with the aim to manifest links between ancient Macedon and modern MKD led to insecurities and contestations coming from other groups, such as Albanians and Greeks (Jackson and Subotić 2024).



internal conflict, which redirected the EU's focus towards peacekeeping and stabilisation (Bechev 2023, 705).

As the situation quickly stabilized, MKD received candidate status in November 2005. This positive development was, however, accompanied by a “nationalist turn” (Bechev 2023, 705) of the new government in 2006, characterised by various manifestations of alleged links between MKD and ancient Macedon, including the renaming of Skopje's airport and one highway after Alexander the Great (Bechev 2023, 705). Resulting from this, the Greek-Macedonian conflict regained importance and reached a new peak with the Greek vetoes on both North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) integration in 2008 and the beginning of EU accession negotiations in 2009. Since then, MKD's EU accession process is directly linked to the disputes with its neighbours, creating a “negative equilibrium” (Bechev 2023, 706) for MKD's relations with its neighbours and the pathway towards EU membership.

This only changed after a major internal political crisis occurred in 2015, during which the opposition announced a parliamentary boycott, organized mass protests, and instrumentalised the missing progress in the process of EU integration. The crisis was resolved with the signing of the EU-mediated Pržino agreement, after which the Socijaldemokratski sojuz na Makedonija (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia – SDSM) came to power (Bechev 2023, 707–708). The key motivation behind the Pržino Agreement was to overcome the stagnation in MKD's EU accession process (Markovikj and Damjanovski 2018, 90). This was not only promised by the new government (Bechev 2023, 710), but also actively pursued by the EU which took over the role of the United States as a key mediator in MKD. This was possible due to the application of the ‘carrot and stick’ approach, whereby certain concessions from MKD were connected to the prospect of membership (Markovikj and Damjanovski 2018, 90). The EU's approach was thereby understood as an attempt to create an “atmosphere of reconciliation in the Balkan region as a prerequisite for the Western Balkan accession processes” (Nikolovski 2021, 159).

The new government immediately initiated the settlement of the open disputes (Nikolovski 2021, 163; Panov, Cacanovska, and Angelovska-Panova 2021, 224–25). This was done by fostering the linguistic rights of the Albanian minority, signing the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria, and negotiating and implementing the name change to resolve the Greek-Macedonian dispute. Albanian-Macedonian relations were arguably enhanced after the implantation of the new law on languages, which only met sporadic opposition (Nikolovski 2021, 163). The Prespa Agreement, though characterised by a highly disputed referendum, was presented as a success story of the EU, after which Greece even actively supported the beginning of EU accession negotiations with MKD (Bechev 2023, 711–12). However, the reconciliation approach of the new government had also negative impacts. Besides the mentioned controversies around the consultative referendum on the name change, the agreement with Bulgaria caused “serious criticism” (Nikolovski 2021, 164) and “produced fears among

ethnic Macedonians” (Nikolovski 2021, 169). It resulted in polarized debates<sup>11</sup> around the dilemma between the demand for reconciliation for advancing in the process of EU accession and the widely perceived inequality within the framework of dispute settlement (Nikolovski 2021, 164). This did not only lead to a polarization of the Macedonian society, but also on the level of the political elite, where a (discursive) left-right coalition formed an opposite pole to the government’s position (Nikolovski 2021, 160).

Both the Greek-Macedonian and Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute disclosed certain problems with the idea of reconciliation within the process of EU accession. Namely, member states inherit a stronger bargaining position that enables the enforcement of demands through the threat of exclusion. The EU, thereby, did not show the capacity to step in as a neutral arbiter that would facilitate compromise or hinder the inclusion of non-acquis related demands. In both cases, this resulted in a situation where MKD had to change its own historic narrative in order to satisfy neighbouring views on the Macedonian history which, in turn, challenged the Macedonian identity.

### **Case Selection: Bulgarian Veto**

This article will proceed with a focus on the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute. The case is chosen for two reasons that make it the most suitable one for investigating the relationship between security-seeking and security-provision in the context of EU accession. Firstly, the Greek-Macedonian dispute was not only connected to the EU accession process but also to MKD’s NATO accession, which was a further motivation for granting concessions to Greece. Of crucial importance is thereby the role of the United States, which did not only act as a supporter for the resolution of the conflict, but also as an actor that ensured the benefits connected to the Prespa Agreement, concretely membership in NATO. This is of essential importance as the EU did not manage to deliver a credible perspective to EU membership following the name change. Consequently, the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute settlement is not only solely connected to EU accession, but also impacted by negative experiences from the Prespa Agreement when it comes to the credibility of the EU.

Secondly, and again in contrast to the Greek-Macedonian dispute, the efforts in enhancing Bulgarian-Macedonian relations were far less fruitful. This is directly connected to the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation between Bulgaria and MKD signed in 2017, which obliged both states according to Article 8 Nr. 2 to form a “common interdisciplinary expert commission for historical and educational questions” (Vlada na Republika Severna Makedonija 2017) within three months after the agreement. The aim of this expert commission was to objectively interpret historical events that are claimed by both states. Unsatisfied with the progress of this commission, Bulgaria published a declaration in 2019 that announced that Bulgaria will block MKD’s EU accession

---

11 For an overview of the argumentation for and against the agreement see (Panov, Cacanovska, and Angelovska-Panova 2021, 231–32).

process due to a perceived “state-sponsored anti-Bulgarian ideology” that must be seen as a “construct of Yugoslav totalitarianism” (Ministerski savet na Republika Bălgariia 2019). The blockade to the beginning of MKD’s accession negotiation was formalized in November 2020 and withdrawn after MKD accepted a new negotiation framework with the EU in the form of the French proposal in 2022. According to Nr. 5 of the listed negotiation principles of the French proposal, MKD’s advancement in accession negotiations depends on an annual check of the progress of the implementation of the Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation (Sobranie na Republika Severna Makedonija 2022a, 8). While the acceptance finally paved the way for the opening of accession negotiation, it limits any further progress due to its dependence on the work of the expert commission for historical and educational questions.

In line with OSS, it is argued that the Bulgarian veto in 2020 constituted a critical situation. While the veto was not the only case of a challenge to elements of the Macedonian Self in the context of the EU accession process, it is still argued that the impact of previous experiences with the EU following dispute settlements amplifies the significance of this case. Namely, previous concessions that touched upon elements of the Macedonian Self were always connected to certain benefits that would, in turn, ensure the maintenance of continuity of the Macedonian Self. Accepting the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001 was followed by a relatively fast attribution of EU candidate status and the Prespa Agreement by NATO membership, both of which reaffirmed the recognition of Macedonian subjectivity. This, in turn, is crucial for the experience of personhood and made identity adjustments acceptable ‘sacrifices.’ The Prespa Agreement, however, questioned the EU’s reliability when it comes to delivering the benefits connected to Macedonian concessions as the name change did not result in an advancement but in a new stagnation of the EU accession process. When Bulgaria raised its veto, North Macedonia faced another challenge in form of an identity adjustment without the previously assured credibility in benefits that would enable the maintenance of the continuity of the Self.

Furthermore, the Bulgarian veto fits all criteria of the definition of a critical situation, meaning that it: i) affected a sufficient number of individuals, ii) surprised state agents, iii) disrupted existing definition and routines, and iv) has been interpreted as a substantial threat in MKD (Steele 2008, 12). Evaluating these criteria as fulfilled is justified with: i) the mass protests the Bulgarian veto caused in Skopje (RTV Slovenija 2022), and ii) the surprised reactions coming from state agents.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the Bulgarian veto was followed by a Macedonian counterreaction in the form of a resolution of the parliament that defined red lines within the process of EU integration (Sobranie na Republika Severna Makedonija 2021), a document that clearly identifies the Bulgarian veto as a: iii) disruption of the Macedonian identity, and iv) a threat.

---

12 After the Bulgarian veto, Macedonian president Pendarovski expressed his astonishment about the actual implementation of the previously announced intention of Bulgaria (Pendarovski 2020). It even surprised the members of the expert commission for historical and educational questions, as it was only then that “full impact” (Panov et al., 2021, 229) of Bulgarian demands was realised.

## A Note on Methodology

The article relies on a theory-driven qualitative analysis, meaning that considerations regarding data sample and analysis are justified with the theoretical argumentation (Mayring 2022, 51). Deriving from the described research puzzle, this article analyses how the Bulgarian veto as a critical situation influenced the EU's role a provider of ontological security.

With this aim, the data sample consists of public statements from the political elite, the NGO sector and the MOC. The inclusion of political actors is grounded in the OSS framework, which expects that state actors are crucial for both the states' interpretation and reaction following a critical situation (Ejdus 2020b, 2; Steele 2008, 2, 12). In line with the polarised political landscape in MKD (Nikolovski 2021, 160), a division in the analysis is made between two groups, whereby the first consist of the then ruling governmental coalition around SDSM. The second group includes representatives from the then oppositional coalition around *Vnatrešna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija – Demokratska partija za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo* (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity – VMRO-DPMNE), and the Levica (The Left), which was not part of any coalition.<sup>13</sup> Statements from the NGO sector are added due to their importance in the process of EU accession<sup>14</sup> and their financial dependence on the EU (Cekikj and Hristova 2015, 199). Finally, the MOC is included due to their importance in the process of defining and maintaining the Macedonian national identity, a remnant of the key role national churches in the Balkans inherited during the evolvement of national movements in the 19th century (Danforth 1993, 58; Kitromilides 1989, 180). The chosen timeframe begins with the assumed critical situation, the Bulgarian veto in 2020, and ends with the parliamentary debate and voting on the French proposal in 2022, which integrated the content of the Bulgarian veto into the MKD's negotiation framework for EU accession.

### Simultaneously Providing and Depriving Ontological Security

The Bulgarian veto reaffirmed existing divisions and controversies within the Macedonian society that were already observable after the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation in 2017. Through the French proposal, the veto

---

13 As the country is organised after the principles of consociationalism (Orlović 2015), a political system where the individual's ethnicity is institutionalised, minority parties were excluded from the analysis. Challenges to the Macedonian Self are not expected to directly affect the feeling of ontological security of minorities in MKD. Evidence for this assumption was observable throughout the Greek-Macedonian dispute in the context of Euro-Atlantic integrations (Vangelov 2017, 29).

14 Following demands from the EU, the Macedonian law and policy practice towards NGOs significantly changed, with NGOs becoming tasked with monitoring the EU agenda, participating in public hearings and discussions about the EU and assisting the government with expertise (Cekikj and Hristova 2015, 194–95, 204).

ensured the formal inclusion of the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute within MKD's negotiation framework with the EU, which impaired the Macedonian bargaining position. Deriving from this, the veto became a critical situation that resulted in collective anxieties in the form of a widespread perception of being existentially threatened. The analysed data sample shows that the reactions coming from actors of the Macedonian state-society complex bifurcated following the critical situation, with EU membership simultaneously being framed as a protection and a threat to the Macedonian nation. Congruently, the EU became both a provider and depriver of ontological security.

### **Providing Ontological Security Through Membership in the European Union**

In the Macedonian case, the EU's role as a provider of ontological security is tightly connected to the pursuit of external recognition through EU membership. The EU is thereby perceived as a group of equal and mutually recognizing nation-states. Seeing MKD as another European nation, the governmental coalition understood EU membership as a right the Macedonian nation is obliged to. In turn, assuring that MKD becomes a recognized and equal member becomes a moral duty of the EU. Following the Bulgarian veto, the EU's role as an ontological security provider remained unchallenged for actors that still perceived the countries' EU membership perspective and, therefore, the countries' ability to maintain a coherent Self through EU accession as credible.

This was the case for the government and its coalitional partners, which in the beginning did not even evaluate the Bulgarian veto as threat to the Macedonian identity.<sup>15</sup> After immense pressure coming from the public, the opposition and the own party, the government had to adjust its position. Macedonian prime minister Zaev delivered a TV speech addressed to the Macedonian people in December 2020, where he described the Bulgarian veto as threat to MKD, which requires measures for the protection of the Macedonian people and language. In his speech, Zaev attributed a high importance to gaining external recognition of Macedonian nationhood, which would only be possible to assure by becoming an EU member.<sup>16</sup> Congruently, the response to the critical situation heavily built on this understanding of the protective function of EU membership, with Zaev arguing that it is on the "EU to fulfil its fundamental obligation and to recognize and preserve the invaluable treasure of historical and identity diversity of nations on the European conti-

---

15 Instead, the then prime minister Zaev travelled to Sofia for an interview with the Bulgarian news agency BGNES, where he declared the willingness for concessions from the Macedonian side, such as the replacement of memorial inscriptions containing the term fascism when referring to the Bulgarian occupation of MKD during World War II (Zaev 2020b).

16 The same counts for membership in NATO, which Zaev used as an example for the successful external recognition of the Macedonian language and nation (Zaev 2020a). With neighbouring Albania, Bulgaria and Greece all being part of NATO, the social routine of including and recognizing the Macedonian language reaffirms a coherent sense of the (disputed) Macedonian Self and thereby acts as a source of ontological security.

ment”, whereby “the Macedonian identity and language must not be an exception of this principle” (Zaev 2020a). The statement illustrates the perceived incompatibility of the Bulgarian veto with fundamental principles of the EU, which is why the veto was evaluated as an “unresponsible mistake” that constitutes a “defeat of European values” (Zaev 2020a). The veto is, therefore, neither „the European way (...) nor friendship or brotherhood” (Zaev 2020a). Building on this understanding of EI, Zaev declared the openness for any solution in the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute that would ensure a protected Macedonian identity (Zaev 2020a). Similarly, it was reaffirmed that EU membership remains MKD’s primary foreign policy goal. This was combined with the expressed certainty in the EU’s willingness to adhere to its principles, which would enable MKD to enforce its right to become an EU member with a protected identity: “We are here. Macedonians who speak the Macedonian language. We will become EU members as Macedonians who speak the Macedonian language” (Zaev 2020a).

In 2022, the French proposal confirmed the Bulgarian veto by incorporating its demands into MKD’s negotiation framework. This only happened after the proposal was accepted in the Macedonian parliament, which legally was not needed as accepting or denying the proposal was a competence of the government. Passing this responsibility to the parliament was therefore described as “avoiding the responsibility for making a decision” (Nova Makedonija 2022a) and accompanied by mass protests against the French proposal in the days before the start of the plenary discussion (Nova Makedonija 2022b). In the plenary debate, the governmental coalition supported the French proposal with 16 speakers<sup>17</sup> using the opportunity to advocate for its acceptance. Congruent with Zaev’s arguments after the Bulgarian veto, the governmental coalition presented EU membership as the only way for assuring the long-term protection of the Macedonian identity from external contestations. The usage of the Macedonian language within the accession process would thereby already be an important step, and as such “the biggest achievement, the most important success” (Kovačevski 2022, 5). Countering the widespread fears of assimilation expressed during the mass protests in Skopje, the speakers argued that concessions to neighbours would be a necessary hurdle on the way to membership and recognition. The Prespa agreement and the resulting name change of MKD would show that concessions do not lead to assimilation, but to the protection of a distinct Macedonian nation. Voting for the acceptance of the French proposal, therefore, ensures that “we move forward with a protected past, with a certain and stable present in a finally better future” (Kovačevski 2022, 6) and that “the Macedonian history remains ours” (Kocikij 2022, 7).

Concluding, in the case of the government, the EU remained an unquestioned provider of ontological security. This role results from the prospect of external recognition that derives from EU membership. By assuring long-term recognition, EU membership acts as a means of maintaining a congruent sense of the Self. For reaching this goal, identity adjustments were perceived as acceptable hurdles. This was not only seen by the initial

---

17 This includes 15 speakers from SDSM and one speaker from Demokratski sojuz (Democratic Union).



openness of the government for concessions regarding the own autobiographical narrative, but also through the continuous support for the acceptance of the French proposal. It, therefore, shows that adjustments of identity do not necessarily have to threaten the sense of ontological security, as the latter is dependent on a stable sense of the Self, which does not require an entirely stable identity.

The governments' support for the French proposal is an illustrative example for this observation. Even though it challenged elements of the national identity through the demand for a reinterpretation of medieval history, the government advocated for its acceptance. This was justified with the view that it will ensure the external recognition of a distinct Macedonian nation and, therefore, a coherent sense of the Self: “[W]e should continue with the European path, we should continue towards membership in the European Union as Macedonians who speak the Macedonian language, as Macedonians with their Macedonian language and with their unique Macedonian identity” (Mitreski 2022, 12). This observed reliance on the EU and EU membership for the maintenance of a feeling of ontological security is congruent with OSS literature, which postulates that states make sense of their existence through their perceived place in the international order (Ejdus 2020b, 18).

## **Turning Into a Depriver of Ontological Security**

Aside from the governmental coalition, a continuous perception of threat was observable following the Bulgarian Veto. The opposition immediately declared that the Macedonian identity was under threat and proposed countermeasures after the announcement of the veto (Alsat.mk 2020). Similar reactions followed after the French proposal, which altogether 41 oppositional delegates<sup>18</sup> evaluated as a threat during the plenary discussion on its acceptance (Sobranie na Republika Severna Makedonija 2022b; 2022c; 2022d). It was perceived as another “external blow to history and statehood” (Vasilev 2023), a view that highly resonated in the Macedonian public (Vasilev 2023) and led to a rise of right-wing parties and initiatives in MKD (Demiri 2023).

Nonetheless, the government's understanding of the potential protective function of EU membership was also widespread among other actors. The opposition, the NGO sector and the MOC also connected membership to the desired external recognition of Macedonian nationhood within a group of mutually recognizing and equal nation-states. This understanding of EI leads to certain expectations regarding the legitimacy of the process. Namely, a legitimate process would assure the equal treatment of all negotiating parties, prevent the inclusion of demands based on non-acquis related identity disputes, and assure the “dignity of the Macedonian people” (Macedonian Orthodox Church 2020).

---

18 This includes 36 speakers from VMRO-DPMNE, one speaker from Gragjanska opcija za Makedonija (Citizen Option for Macedonia) one speaker from Socijalistička partija na Makedonija (Socialist party of Macedonia). Besides the oppositional coalition, two speakers from Levica and one independent delegate participated in the debate.

Deriving from this understanding of EI principles, the opposition did not only identify the Bulgarian veto and the French proposal as a threat but also as violations of European values. Congruently, the EU accession framework became framed as compromised by Bulgarian demands, which would be a “betrayal (...) at the expense of the Macedonian people and the Macedonian national and state sovereignty” (Vasilevska 2022, 6). Equally, the MOC, the Macedonian Academy for Science and Arts and the Saints Ciril and Methodius University in Skopje (Macedonian Orthodox Church 2020) evaluated the Bulgarian veto as a violation of central principles of EI, such as the right of self-determination (Macedonian Orthodox Church 2020). This is consistent with public statements coming from the NGO sector, which described the potential<sup>19</sup> Bulgarian veto as “not only a betrayal of the Macedonian citizens, but of the founding values of the EU” (European Policy Institute Skopje, EUROTHINK – and ‘Societas Civilis’ 2020). The veto, therefore, not only depicts a major turning point for MKD, but also for the region and the EU enlargement as such. For MKD, it is seen as an unjust prolonging of the inclusion of identity disputes into the accession process. The inconsistency with European values and norms would thereby “punish the most pro-European government in the region for making compromises in the European spirit” (European Policy Institute Skopje, EUROTHINK – and ‘Societas Civilis’ 2020). It would also constitute a turning point for the region, as it might serve as an example for the enforcement of nationalist claims that, if replicated, potentially fosters regional disputes and instabilities. Finally, it would also mark a turning point for the EU and the success of the enlargement policy as under these circumstances a further decrease of support for EU accession can be expected (European Policy Institute Skopje, EUROTHINK – and ‘Societas Civilis’ 2020). Consequently, the inclusion of the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute into the EU accession process would threaten the EU, marking “fateful days for the European unity” (Macedonian Orthodox Church 2020).

The perceived inconsistency of the EU with its own values did not only result in a perceived decrease of legitimacy, but also in a decreasing credibility of the process as such. The missing credibility in MKD’s membership perspective was heavily used in the reactions coming from the opposition, which accused the government of dishonesty regarding the chances for becoming an EU member (360stepeni 2020). Especially after the French proposal, the membership perspective of MKD became perceived as unbelievable, with the inclusion of Bulgarian demands into the negotiation framework being evaluated as a fixation of the stagnating EU accession process (Sobranie na Republika Severna Makedonija 2022b; 2022c; 2022d). An acceptance of Bulgarian demands would namely require a two thirds majority in the parliament, which effectively, due to the missing support in the parliament, makes any progress in the process practically impossible.

With membership becoming unbelievable, the EU lost its role as a provider of ontological security for parts of the Macedonian state-society complex. When dealing with challenges to ontological security, EU membership was not used as a means for assuring a coherent sense of the Self through external recognition as observed in the government’s

---

19 The statement was published shortly before the official announcement of the Bulgarian veto.

case. Instead, the opposition reacted to the Bulgarian veto by demanding the development of a common position that would determine red lines when it comes to the Macedonian identity, history and language (Deutsche Welle 2020). The governments' openness to negotiations in times of threat was interpreted as an attempt to sell the Macedonian identity, which would lead to the necessity for a new "government for the national rescue" that would define "red lines that would be the shield of the Macedonian identity" until new extraordinary parliamentary elections (Alsat.mk 2020). In the end, the opposition succeeded with parts of its demands as the parliament adopted the "resolution for the determination of the Macedonian state position in the context of the European integration blockade" (Sobranie na Republika Severna Makedonija 2021). The resolution binds the government to follow the Macedonian key positions that are defined in the resolution within the ongoing process of EI, including the obligation to exclude anything from the negotiations that would threaten the "dignity of the Macedonian people" (Sobranie na Republika Severna Makedonija 2021, 1). The resolution illustrates how the EU and the process of EU accession became a source of deprivation of ontological security that even required protective countermeasures.

This was again the case after the French proposal, when the MOC demanded a unified reaction of "the government and all social-political factors that are included in this process" in the form of a common strategy that would defend "the Macedonian identity, the Macedonian language, culture and history within the family of European people" (Macedonian Orthodox Church 2022a). While belonging to Europe is emphasized by the Church, the French proposal is seen as an unacceptable threat. In this regard, the Church called for the unification of Macedonian people and all citizens in the form of protests that would "defend their existence" (Macedonian Orthodox Church 2022b). Equally, the opposition called for a rejection of the French proposal, whereby the acceptance was seen as a fundamental threat to the Macedonian nation that would lead to its assimilation and make the government "a successor of Bulgarian fascism" (Jovančev 2022, 14).

Summing up, EU membership is, in general, viewed as a process that provides ontological security through the cooperative routinisation of relations with others, which would include the external recognition of the misrecognized Macedonian Self. However, by becoming dependent on Bulgarian demands regarding the Macedonian autobiographical narrative, the process did not only turn into a perceived threat, but also lost its legitimacy. This went along with increasing doubts in the certainty of becoming an EU member resulting from previous negative experiences with dispute settlements in the context of the EU accession process, particularly the stagnation that followed the Prespa agreement. Due to this, membership was not anymore regarded as a credible means for assuring continuity of the Macedonian Self. With the maintenance of the Self becoming decoupled from EU membership, the expressed willingness of the government for adjustments of elements of the Macedonian Self could not anymore be legitimized. The Bulgarian veto and the resulting French proposal, therefore, did not only negatively impact the EU's role as an ontological security provider, but transformed it into a source of deprivation of ontological security for MKD. This resulted in demands for countermeasures against the

EU, such as the resolution of the Macedonian parliament in 2021 and the demands for a termination of accession negotiations under the current framework.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was to further expand existing OSS literature on the effects of EU enlargement on candidate countries' feeling of ontological security. In this respect, it was aimed at understanding in which ways EU accession can act as a process that: i) provides a source of ontological security by routinising candidate states' relations to others; and ii) deprives the candidate states from their feeling of ontological security by disrupting the definition of the Self and the Other.

With this aim, the article analysed the case of MKD, which was chosen due to the inclusion of the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute into the negotiation framework for EU accession. Concretely, through the Bulgarian veto in 2020 and the resulting French proposal in 2022 demands for a change of the Macedonian identity became a part of the countries accession conditions. As the analysis of representatives of the Macedonian state-society complex showed, this constituted a critical situation that disrupted existing routines connected to the Macedonian Self. Following the perceived existential threat in the form of the Bulgarian veto, the attributed role of the EU when it comes to the maintenance of ontological security started to bifurcate.

On the one hand, the government and its coalitional partners continued to view the EU as a provider of ontological security. This role builds on the understanding that (only) EU membership guarantees the external recognition of the contested Macedonian Self. For assuring this, the government even declared the openness for adjustments of the Macedonian identity. Consequently, the government continued to unconditionally pursue EU membership after the critical situation, whereby the EU, through the membership perspective, served as a provider of ontological security that would assure the continuance of the Macedonian Self.

This reliance on the EU, however, was not uniformly viewed as an adequate means for dealing with the critical situation. For the opposition, the NGO sector and the MOC, the critical situation did not only damage the perceived legitimacy of the accession process but also the credibility of a future membership. This, in turn, challenges the justification for changes of elements of the Macedonian Self. Through the fears connected to the ability to maintain a coherent sense of the Self, the EU became a depriver of ontological security. This resulted in harsh opposition to the Bulgarian veto and the French proposal, combined with the demand for countermeasures that would ensure a protection of the Macedonian Self within the process of EU accession.

Through the analysis of the Macedonian case, the article contributes to OSS in multiple ways. Most notably, it advances the understanding of security-seeking and security-pro-

vision within the process of EU enlargement. It thereby adds to the existing literature that the EU's role as a security provider is highly dependent on the expectation that EU membership reaffirms a continuous sense of the Self. When credible, this perspective even allows for the legitimization of adjustments of the identity. However, when membership and the resulting expectation of a maintenance of continuous Self are perceived as uncredible, the EU turns into a depriver of ontological security. Demands for changes to identity are then perceived as an existential threat that requires protective countermeasures, some of which are directed against the EU. An example for this is the declaration of the Macedonian parliament in 2021 that defined the red lines of MKD in the further EU enlargement process, such as any further negotiations about the Macedonian history and language. By understanding identity as only one part of the Self, the article also addressed the existing research gap regarding differences in the severity of anxiety connected to both (Krickel-Choi 2024, 17). In the case of MKD's EU accession process, anxiety connected to the maintenance of the Self has shown to be a more important for the perception and reaction to critical situations than the mere challenge of the national identity.

Moreover, the article contributes to the debate about state centrality in OSS, showing that for a more nuanced understanding of cases of ontological (in)security the inclusion of a variety of actors from the state-society complex is needed. This was exemplified by the government's initial reaction to the Bulgarian veto, which was marked by absence of any perception of threat. However, this position showed to be unsustainable due to a widespread perception of threat in both Macedonia's political elite and broader society. Consequently, the government had to deal with collective anxieties that it, at least in the beginning, did not share, illustrating the importance of intra-state group dynamics for the feeling of ontological (in)security.

On the level of enlargement as such, this article shows that by underestimating the relevance of ontological security, as illustrated by the content of the French proposal, the enlargement process is trapped in a situation where any advancement became unlikely. Though even after all the criticism on the Bulgarian veto and the French proposal coming from parts of the Macedonian state-society complex a cross-party consensus on the desirability of EU integration still exists (Damjanovski 2023, 24), it negatively impacted overall EU support (Damjanovski 2023, 11–12). The political consequence of this development was observable in May 2024, when MKD held both parliamentary and presidential elections that resulted in a landslide victory for VMRO-DPMNE. The party received almost three times as many votes as the formerly ruling SDSM in the parliamentary elections, which was attributed to the impact of the debates on MKD's EU accession process (RTV Slovenija 2024b). The latter became at latest evident at the inauguration of the new president, who omitted the recently added 'North' when referring to MKD in her speech, after which the Greek ambassador left the ceremony. Following this event, negative reactions came from different actors, including the Greek prime minister Kiriakos Micotakis, Bulgarian president Rumen Radev, Bulgarian prime minister Dimitar Glavčev, president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and president of the European Council Charles Michel. What all the statements had in common was the indication that ignoring

non-acquis related demands will even further deteriorate MKD's membership perspective (RTV Slovenija 2024a), showing that negotiating elements of the Macedonian national identity will remain a key characteristic of EU–MKD relations.

Further research on this case could address the impacts of ontological (in)security in the context of EU accession process on inter-ethnic relations, which went beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, it significantly impacts the political stability of MKD as challenges to the Macedonian identity unequally affect the two main ethnic groups in the country, Albanians and Macedonians. Congruently, the willingness for accepting stagnations to secure the Macedonian identity is not homogenously shared across the country's population and potentially (re)affirms political conflicts among the two ethnic groups. The importance of the relationship between external identity disputes and internal inter-ethnic relations in the context of EU accession could even increase following the recent decoupling of the EU accession processes of Albania and MKD (Euractiv 2024).



## References

- 360stepeni. 2020. "Mickoski povtorno pobara itna liderska i ja obvini vladata deka gi imala najloshite 100-Dena". September 12. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://360stepeni.mk/mitskoski-povtorno-pobara-itna-liderska-i-ja-obvini-vladata-deka-gi-imala-najloshite-100-dena/>.
- Adamson, Kevin, and Dejan Jović. 2004. "The Macedonian–Albanian Political Frontier: The Re-articulation of post-Yugoslav Political Identities". *Nations and Nationalism* 10 (3): 293–311.
- Aleksov, Bojan, and Nicholas Lackenby. 2023. "'Symphonia'? A New Patriarch Attempts to Redefine Church–State Relations in Serbia". *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 71 (3): 412–33.
- Alsats.mk. 2020. "Mickoski: Memorandum Za Indentitenskite Prašanja, Ekspertna Vlada i Parlamentarni Izbori". October 12. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://alsat.mk/mitskoski-memorandum-za-identitenskite-prashana-ekspertska-vlada-i-parlamentarni-izbori/>.
- Bechev, Dimitar. 2023. "The EU and Dispute Settlement: The Case of the Macedonian Name Issue". *East European Politics and Societies: And Cultures* 37 (2): 698–717.
- Bechev, Dimitar, and Damir Marusic. 2020. "North Macedonia on the Threshold of Europe". Atlantic Council. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/North-Macedonia-on-the-threshold-of-Europe.pdf>.
- Bellamy, Richard. 2019. *A Republican Europe of States: Cosmopolitanism, Intergovernmentalism and Democracy in the EU*. Cambridge University Press.
- Browning, Christopher S. 2018. "Geostrategies, Geopolitics and Ontological Security in the Eastern Neighbourhood: The European Union and the "New Cold War"". *Political Geography* 62 (January): 106–115.
- Cekikj, Aneta, and Lidija Hristova. 2015. "The Current State of Civil Society in Macedonia and Its Distinctive Patterns of Development". In *The Development of Civil Society in the Countries on the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia since the 1980s*, edited by Danica Fink-Hafner. Politika 7. Ljubljana: Založba FDV.
- Council of the European Union. 2003. "A Secure Europe in a Better World—European Security Strategy". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15895-2003-INIT/en/pdf>.
- Cupać, Jelena. 2020. "The Anxiety Dilemma: Locating the Western Balkans in the Age of Anxiety". *Journal of Regional Security* 15 (1): 7–38.
- Damjanovski, Ivan. 2023. "Analysis of Public Opinion on North Macedonia's Accession to the European Union (2014-2022)". Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia & Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje. November 6, 2024. [https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/analiza2\\_B5ENG.pdf](https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/analiza2_B5ENG.pdf).
- Danforth, Loring M. 1993. "Claims to Macedonian Identity: The Macedonian Question and the Breakup of Yugoslavia". *Anthropology Today* 9 (4): 3–10.
- Danforth, Loring M. 1995. *The Macedonian Conflict: Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press.

- Demiri, Mariglen. 2023. "Ogled Za Protestite i Klubovite Kako Antipod Na Kulturniot Natprevar Megju Narodite". EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies – Skopje. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://eurothink.mk/2023/01/31/оглед-за-протестите-и-клубовите-како-а/>.
- Deutsche Welle. 2020. "Mickoski Zagrižen Za Makedonskiot Identitet", 25 November 2020. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/mk/мицкоски-загрижен-за-македонскиот-идентитет-во-переговорите-со-бугарија/a-55727028>.
- Ejdus, Filip. 2018. "Critical Situations, Fundamental Questions and Ontological Insecurity in World Politics". *Journal of International Relations and Development* 21 (4): 883–908.
- Ejdus, Filip. 2020a. "Conflict, Peace, and Ontological Security". In *The Palgrave Encyclopaedia of Peace and Conflict Studies*, edited by Oliver Richmond and Gëzim Visoka, 1–9. Springer.
- Ejdus, Filip. 2020b. *Crisis and Ontological Insecurity: Serbia's Anxiety over Kosovo's Secession*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Euractiv. 2024. "Albania's EU Path Decoupled from North Macedonia While Skopje Remains in Limbo", 26 September 2024. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/albanias-eu-path-decoupled-from-north-macedonia-while-skopje-remains-in-limbo/>.
- European Policy Institute Skopje, EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies - Skopje, and Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' - Skopje. 2020. "All of You Will Betray the EU Tonight! Speak Now or Remain Silent". EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies - Skopje. Accessed November 6, 2024. [https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/reaction\\_BG-veto.pdf](https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/reaction_BG-veto.pdf).
- Flockhart, Trine. 2016. "The Problem of Change in Constructivist Theory: Ontological Security Seeking and Agent Motivation". *Review of International Studies* 42 (5): 799–820.
- Giddens, Anthony. 2009. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Reprint. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gustafsson, Karl, and Nina C. Krickel-Choi. 2020. "Returning to the Roots of Ontological Security: Insights from the Existentialist Anxiety Literature". *European Journal of International Relations* 26 (3): 875–895.
- Huysmans, Jef. 1998. "Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier". *European Journal of International Relations* 4 (2): 226–255.
- Jackson, Christopher M., and Jelena Subotić. 2024. "The Ontological Security-Seeking Paradox: Domestic and International Effects of Public Architecture in North Macedonia's 'Skopje 2014' Project". *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 53 (1): 3–30.
- Jezernik, Bozhidar. 2002. "Macedonians: Conspicuous by Their Absence". *EthnoAnthropoZoom/ЕтноАнтропозум* 2: 25–45.
- Jovančev, Zoran. 2022. "Stenografski beleški od Prvoto prodolženie na Osumdeset i prvata sednica na Sobranieto na Republika Severna Makedonija, održana na 15 Juli 2022 godina", by Sobranie na Severna Makedonija. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-sednica.nsp?sessionId=60d8103d-510a-46b1-815d-c5c8f9a1d195>.

- Karadjoski, Mladen, and Artur Adamczuk. 2014. "Macedonia and Her Difficult Neighbours on the Path to the EU". *Yearbook of Polish European Studies* 17.
- Kinnvall, Catarina. 2004. "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security". *Political Psychology* 25 (5): 741–767.
- Kinnvall, Catarina. 2012. "European Trauma: Governance and the Psychological Moment". *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 37 (3): 266–281.
- Kinnvall, Catarina, Ian Manners, and Jennifer Mitzen. 2018. "Introduction to 2018 Special Issue of European Security: 'Ontological (in) Security in the European Union'". *European Security* 27 (3): 249–265.
- Kitromilides, Paschalis M. 1989. "'Imagined Communities' and the Origins of the National Question in the Balkans". *European History Quarterly* 19 (2): 149–192.
- Kočan, Faris. 2023. *Identity, Ontological Security and Europeanisation in Republika Srpska*. Central and Eastern European Perspectives on International Relations. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.
- Kocikj, Nenad. 2022. "Stenografski beleški od Prvoto prodolženje na Osumdeset i prvata sednica na Sobranieto na Republika Severna Makedonija, održana na 15 Juli 2022 godina", by Sobranie na Severna Makedonija. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-sednica.nsp?sessionId=60d8103d-510a-46b1-815d-c5c8f9a1d195>.
- Kovačevski, Dimitar. 2022. "Stenografski beleški od Osumdeset i prvata sednica na Sobranieto na Republika Severna Makedonija, održana na 14 Juli 2022 godina, by Sobranie na Severna Makedonija". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-sednica.nsp?sessionId=60d8103d-510a-46b1-815d-c5c8f9a1d195>.
- Krickel-Choi, Nina C. 2021. *Rethinking Ontological Security Theory: Conceptual Investigations into 'self' and 'Anxiety'*. Stockholm: Department of Economic History and International Relations, Stockholm University.
- Krickel-Choi, Nina C. 2024. "State Personhood and Ontological Security as a Framework of Existence: Moving beyond Identity, Discovering Sovereignty". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 37 (1): 3–21.
- Laing, Ronald D. 2010. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. New ed. Penguin Modern Classics. London: Penguin.
- Macedonian Orthodox Church. 2020. "Makedonski Manifest". December 3. Accessed November 6, 2024. <http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7354>.
- Macedonian Orthodox Church. 2022a. "Soopštenie". July 1. Accessed November 6, 2024. <http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7655>.
- Macedonian Orthodox Church. 2022b. "Soopštenie". July 5. Accessed November 6, 2024. <http://www.mpc.org.mk/vest.asp?id=7658>.
- Malešević, Siniša. 2012. "Did Wars Make Nation-States in the Balkans?: Nationalisms, Wars and States in the 19th and Early 20th Century South East Europe". *Journal of Historical Sociology* 25 (3): 299–330.
- Manners, Ian. 2002. "European [Security] Union: From Existential Threat to Ontological Security". Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI).
- Manners, Ian. 2013. "European [Security] Union: Bordering and Governing a Secure Europe in a Better World?" *Global Society* 27 (3): 398–416.

- Markovikj, Nenad, and Ivan Damjanovski. 2018. "The EU's Democracy Promotion Meets Informal Politics: The Case of Leaders' Meetings in the Republic of Macedonia". *Region* 7 (2): 71–96.
- Mayring, Philipp. 2022. *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse: Grundlagen und Techniken*. 13. Auflage. Weinheim Basel: Beltz.
- McSweeney, Bill, and William McSweeney. 1999. *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ministerski savet na Republika Bălgariia. 2019. "Pozitsiia Otnosno Razshiriavane Na ES i Protsesa Na Stabilizirane i Asocirane: Republika Severna Makedoniia i Albaniia". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.gov.bg/bg/prestsentar/novini/ramkova-pozitsiia>.
- Mitreski, J. 2022. "Stenografski beleški od Vtoroto prodolženie na Osumdeset i prvata sednica na Sobranieto na Republika Severna Makedonija, održana na 16 Juli 2022 godina", by Sobranie na Severna Makedonija. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-sednica.nsp?sessionId=60d8103d-510a-46b1-815d-c5c8f9a1d195>.
- Mitzen, Jennifer. 2006a. "Anchoring Europe's Civilizing Identity: Habits, Capabilities and Ontological Security". *Journal of European Public Policy* 13 (2): 270–85.
- Mitzen, Jennifer. 2006b. "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma". *European Journal of International Relations* 12 (3): 341–70.
- Narozhna, Tanya. 2020. "State–Society Complexes in Ontological Security-Seeking in IR". *Journal of International Relations and Development* 23 (3): 559–83.
- Nikolovski, Dimitar. 2021. "Integration versus Identity – Memory Politics, Populism and the Good Neighborliness Agreement between North Macedonia and Bulgaria". In *Memory Politics and Populism in Southeastern Europe*, edited by Jody Jensen, 159–75. Routledge.
- Nikolovski, Dimitar, Mariglen Demiri, Manuela Caiani, Benedetta Carlotti, Marko Lovc, Faris Kočan, Aljaž Roškar, Adam Balcer, and Maria Winclawska. 2022. "Tackling Illiberal/Eurosceptic Narratives from below: A Cross-National Perspective". EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies - Skopje. Accessed November 6, 2024. <http://eurothink.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Tackling-illiberal-Eurosceptic-Narratives-from-Below---Collection-of-policy-briefs.pdf>.
- Nova Makedonija. 2022a. "Francuskiot predlog kontra rezolucijata?!". July 14. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/politika/francuskiot-predlog-kontra-rezolucijata/>.
- Nova Makedonija. 2022b. "VO ŽIVO - Večera e desetti den protesti protiv francuskiot predlog, utrešniot počinuva na pladne", July 13. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/vecherva-e-desetiot-protest-protiv-francuskiot-predlog-utreshniot-pochnuva-na-pladne/>.
- Orlović, Slaviša. 2015. "Consociational Experiments in the Western Balkans: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia." *New Balkan Politics* 17: 29–50.
- Palmer, Stephen E., and Robert R. King. 1971. *Yugoslav Communism and the Macedonian Question*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books.

- Panov, Mitko B., Ruzhica Cacanovska, and Maja Angelovska-Panova. 2021. "Macedonian Nation Between Self-Identity and Euro-Atlantic Integration: Implications of the Agreements with Bulgaria and Greece". In *Researching Yugoslavia and Its Aftermath*, edited by Branislav Radeljić and Carlos González-Villa, 223–252. Springer International Publishing.
- Pendarovski, Stevo. 2020. "Pendarovski za DV: Istorijata ne se povtoruva, duri ni kako farsa Interview by Deutsche Welle". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.dw.com/mk/пeндapовски-за-дв-истopијaтa-не-се-пoвтopувa-дури-ни-кaкo-фapca/a-55738723>.
- Perić, Miodrag. 2023. "Istorijsko-pravni odnosi između Srpske pravoslavne crkve i Makedonske pravoslavne crkve od 1967. godine do danas". *Politička Revija* 76 (2): 115–134.
- RTV Slovenija. 2022. "V Severni Makedoniji protesti proti predlogu za končanje bolgarskega veta", July 3. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.rtv slo.si/svet/evropa/v-severni-makedoniji-protesti-proti-predlogu-za-koncanje-bolgarskega-veta/633001>.
- RTV Slovenija. 2024a. "Severni Makedoniji po 'provokaciji' Siljanovske Davkove ostro opozorilo Grčije in Bolgarije", May 13. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.rtv slo.si/svet/evropa/severni-makedoniji-po-provokaciji-siljanovske-davkove-ostro-opozorilo-grcije-in-bolgarije/708108>.
- RTV Slovenija. 2024b. "V Severni Makedoniji prepričljiva dvojna volilna zmaga za desni opozicijski VMRO-DPMNE", May 9. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.rtv slo.si/svet/evropa/v-severni-makedoniji-prepricljiva-dvojna-volilna-zmaga-za-desni-opozicijski-vmro-dpmne/707608>.
- Rumelili, Bahar. 2015. "Identity and Desecuritisation: The Pitfalls of Conflating Ontological and Physical Security". *Journal of International Relations and Development* 18 (1): 52–74.
- Rumelili, Bahar. 2018. "Breaking with Europe's Pasts: Memory, Reconciliation, and Ontological (In)Security". *European Security* 27 (3): 280–295.
- Sazdovski, Aleksandar. 2015. "Nation-building under the societal security dilemma: The case of Macedonia." *Journal of Regional Security* 10 (1): 53–78.
- Sobranie na Republika Severna Makedonija. 2021. "Rezolucija za utvrduvanje na makedonskite državni poziciji vo kontekst na blokadite na evropskite integraciji". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-materijal.nspx?param=7f40ccad-0cad-49dd-956c-ebede86ab3dc>.
- Sobranie na Republika Severna Makedonija. 2022a. "Informacijata za soдрžinata na Predlog pregovaračkata ramka za pristapnite pregovori na Republika Severna Makedonija so Evropskata Unija, predložena od strana na Pretsedatelstvoto na Francija so Sovetot na Evropska Unija na 30 Juni 2022 Godina". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-materijal.nspx?param=13c8c72c-b1ff-4494-9e33-56a8d7091a70>.
- Sobranie na Republika Severna Makedonija, ed. 2022b. "Stenografski beleški od Osumdeset i prvata sednica na Sobranieto na Republika Severna Makedonija, održana



- na 14 Juli 2022 godina". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-sednica.nspx?sittingId=60d8103d-510a-46b1-815d-c5c8f9a1d195>.
- Sobranie na Republika Severna Makedonija. 2022c. "Stenografski beleški od Prvoto prodolženje na Osumdeset i prvata sednica na Sobranieto na Republika Severna Makedonija, održana na 15 Juli 2022 godina". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-sednica.nspx?sittingId=60d8103d-510a-46b1-815d-c5c8f9a1d195>.
- Sobranie na Republika Severna Makedonija. 2022d. "Stenografski beleški od Vtoroto prodolženje na Osumdeset i prvata sednica na Sobranieto na Republika Severna Makedonija, održana na 16 Juli 2022 godina". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-sednica.nspx?sittingId=60d8103d-510a-46b1-815d-c5c8f9a1d195>.
- Steele, Brent J. 2008. *Ontological Security in International Relations*. Routledge.
- Subotić, Jelena. 2016. "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change". *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12 (4): 610–627.
- Vangelov, Ognen. 2017. "Stalled European Integration, the Primordialization of Nationalism, and Autocratization in Macedonia between 2008 and 2015". *Intersections* 3 (4): 17–40.
- Vasilev, Kire. 2023. "Is There No Other Solution or Is This Not a Solution? Towards the Dominant Political Narratives in the Macedonian-Bulgarian Dispute". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://eu.org.mk/is-there-no-other-solution-or-is-this-not-a-solution-towards-the-dominant-political-narratives-in-the-macedonian-bulgarian-dispute/>.
- Vasilevska, Ivanka. 2022. "Stenografski beleški od Osumdeset i prvata sednica na Sobranieto na Republika Severna Makedonija, održana na 14 Juli 2022 godina, by Sobranie na Severna Makedonija". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://www.sobranie.mk/detali-na-sednica.nspx?sittingId=60d8103d-510a-46b1-815d-c5c8f9a1d195>.
- Vlada na Republika Severna Makedonija. 2017. "Dogovor Za prijateljstvo, dobrososedstvo i sorabotka megju Republika Makedonija i Republika Bugarija." Accessed November 6, 2024. [https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dogovori/Dogovor\\_Za\\_Prijateljstvo\\_Dobrososedstvo\\_Sorabotka\\_Megju\\_Republika\\_Makedonija\\_I\\_Republika\\_Bugarija.pdf](https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dogovori/Dogovor_Za_Prijateljstvo_Dobrososedstvo_Sorabotka_Megju_Republika_Makedonija_I_Republika_Bugarija.pdf).
- Wendt, Alexander. 1994. "Collective Identity Formation and the International State". *American Political Science Review* 88 (2): 384–96.
- Zaev, Zoran. 2020a. "Premierot Zaev: Vetoto na Bugarija e neodgovorna greška, ostanuvame posveteni za rešenje ubedeni deka e možno bez osporuvanje na makedonskiot Identitet". Vlada na Republika Severna Makedonija. Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://vlada.mk/node/23462>.
- Zaev, Zoran. 2020b. "Zaev: Dogovorot shte bade zakon, shte presledvam omrazat. Interview by BGNES". Accessed November 6, 2024. <https://faktor.bg/bg/articles/zoran-zaev-balgariya-ne-e-fashizam-balgariya-e-nash-prijatel-shte-presledvam-omrazata>.