



Identity Insecurity: North Macedonia's Challenging Relationship With Itself and Others

Ivana Jordanovska

Abstract

This analysis offers an overview of the interplay among foreign policy, national identity, and security perspectives. It attempts to show how a country's identity is an important factor in state confidence and how it impacts foreign and security policy decisions. For a young country like North Macedonia, the construction of this identity has seen a number of setbacks, some of which originated domestically,

while others were orchestrated abroad. For a small and open country like North Macedonia, these foreign challenges are particularly impactful. The insecurity in its own state makes the citizens of North Macedonia adopt non-democratic stances, support autocratic leaders, and approve of military invasions. An awareness of these mechanisms is important for foreign policy makers to be aware of how they impact North Macedonia's state confidence, identity and foreign policy.

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Challenging Relationship With Itself
and Others – Ivana Jordanovska



Just seven short years ago, North Macedonia was on a stellar trajectory. It had successfully overcome a two-year political crisis and peacefully replaced a semi-authoritarian government with a pro-European, pro-democratic coalition voted for by citizens from all ethnic backgrounds. Soon after, it signed a friendship treaty with its eastern neighbor, Bulgaria, and even more importantly, an international agreement with Greece. After more than 25 years, the disagreement with Greece over its name was resolved with a comprehensive agreement ratified by the parliaments of both countries. NATO and EU accessions seemed reachable and a matter of technical progress. A sweeping local elections victory for the government coalition parties promised ease of reform.

Today, however, on the eve of parliamentary elections, the trajectory for the next five years seems far less spectacular. While NATO accession did happen, it was overshadowed by the French and then Bulgarian vetoes blocking the start of EU accession negotiations and the COVID-19 crisis. Inflation and economic hardship were felt extensively and challenged the government's ability to answer the needs of individuals and groups. The country's rampant corruption is often the topic of U.S. State Department press releases.

Under these conditions, how is North Macedonia's security position faring? My assessment is bleak: The confluence of domestic narratives and international challenges has created a figurative earthquake rattling the very identity of Macedonian citizens. Being told their place in Europe and the world does not quite match what a series of political elites have presented has shaken the nation to the core, resulting in a series of questionable decisions and harmful narratives. The identity insecurity has been exploited by domestic and foreign actors, often with dubious and self-serving goals. An understanding of the European and domestic security landscape is constructed through the warped perspective of identity insecurity. While these identity troubles mostly affect ethnic Macedonians, they also create apathy and disillusionment that is high among ethnic Albanians. But I am getting ahead of myself: Let's go back.

A State Captured: How Greek Nationalism Played Into the Hands of a Local Autocrat

When the first of hundreds of [conversations recorded illegally](#) were leaked in [2015](#), the country had been led by the governments of VMRO-DPMNE's Nikola Gruevski for almost 10 years. Over that near-decade, what had started as a progressive center-right government ended up as a semi-authoritarian regime. In 2008, after two years in power, Gruevski's government [faced a Greek veto](#) at the NATO summit in Bucharest. This was an important blow to the conscience of a nation whose first official parliamentary document stating the intent to join NATO was issued in [1993](#). Since then, multiple governments from across the political spectrum promised NATO accession in the "near future." Stability was more important in the 1990s, and 2001 brought an [interethnic conflict](#) to the country itself. So, finally, in 2008, after years of progressive democratization, it seemed like the country might join the alliance after all. However, when the Greek veto was announced, it was more than just a blow to the country's NATO aspirations.

Greek objections to the name were part of a much longer and complicated Balkan history of nationalist romanticism and the ghosts of ethnic cleansing. In a nutshell, the modern Greek state spent the majority of the 20th century denying the existence of ethnic minorities in its territory, and in particular in the parts of northern and eastern Greece that were won in the [Balkan wars of 1912-13](#). A large Macedonian minority was expelled, and the Greek official policy was to deny that these people ever felt Macedonian or had the right to [return to Greece](#). In Yugoslavia, the problem was chronic, but not acute. As soon as independence was declared, the new state was seen as a potential patron of those who had a claim to or maybe even still lived in Greece. The newborn Republic of Macedonia was accused of irredentism – even though its own military capabilities were reduced to World War II levels thanks to the [policies of Slobodan Milošević](#).

The plight of the Macedonian refugees from Greece was well known even to the non-refugees: Each city and town in today's North Macedonia has a neighborhood named "Aegean" after the refugees who settled there. Greek treatment of Albanians didn't



help matters. So, when Greece vetoed the country's NATO accession, it was double-edged: On one hand, it challenged the notion of belonging to NATO as a security organization that was being built since 1993, and on the other hand it brought up decades-old policies of ethnic prosecution and renewed anger against them.

From this perspective, we know that Gruevski's government (as many other governments) didn't have the capacity to channel the public sentiment into productive means. Instead, he did what every other nationalist has done since the dawn of time: He strengthened his hold on power, began a democratic decline, and started manufacturing history. He tapped into antiquity and attempted to build a public consciousness of a national identity spanning continuously from Alexander the Great to today. While his aim might have seemed noble at first glance, it was also accompanied by a massive corruption scheme that built statues and covered brutalist buildings with neoclassical facades made out of [Styrofoam](#). In order to control both opponents and possible dissidents within his own government, he established a massive wiretapping operation.

Bottom-up Democratization, a Foreign Policy Focus, and a Global Pandemic

Once the wiretapped conversations were made public by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) in 2015, widespread protests began that lasted for close to two years. As the biggest opposition party, SDSM coordinated the work with [activists across the country](#). By covering a number of scandals and issues that happened over the years, a cross-issue coalition was built on promises for democratization, rule of law and overall quality of life improvements. These ideas were closely intertwined with the promise of EU accession: Once the country gets back on track to being a democratic nation, our effort will be recognized, and we will rejoin the European family of states, where we rightfully belong.

After a prolonged protest period, a series of internationally mediated agreements and a violent attack on the Parliament, a new SDSM-led government was formed in [June 2017](#). A number of activists joined in politically appointed posts, strengthening

the reform power of the new [government](#). In the spirit of full disclosure, I also served as an adviser to the prime minister for cooperation with international organizations. In my humble opinion, the potential for reform stemming from the sheer concentration of knowledge and drive in these former civil society activists was enormous. However, the results paint a different picture.

In the first year of the mandate, the focus of the government was on foreign policy. A friendship treaty was signed with Bulgaria while Boyko Borisov was its prime minister. He was also the first Bulgarian prime minister to attend the annual commemoration of the deportation of Jewish residents from North Macedonia, which had been carried out by Bulgarian occupying force during WWII. The appearance fell short of an apology, but it still meant [progress](#). A long process of improving relations with Greece resulted in the signing of the [Prespa Agreement](#), which finally put an end to the decades-long name issue between the two countries. [It changed](#) the name of the country to "The Republic of North Macedonia," thus distinguishing from and confirming the Macedonia region of Greece, recognizing the Macedonian identity of citizens in both countries, regardless of their heritage, and adding an additional layer of recognition to the Macedonian language as such.

The Prespa Agreement was a compromise, which many in North Macedonia felt was more generous toward the Greeks. Was the name dispute negotiated in a state of power imbalance? Absolutely. The Greek state was already a veto-carrying member of NATO and the EU, and joining those alliances had been the two main goals of North Macedonia's foreign policy for decades. Not to mention that Greece was [economically and militarily superior](#): In 2017, the Greek GDP was just shy of \$200 billion, while North Macedonia's was at \$11.31 billion. In the same year, Greece spent 2.6% of this GDP on defense; North Macedonia spent 0.9%. Was North Macedonia going to get a better deal than the one that protects its identity and language, while adding an adjective to its name? I remain highly skeptical.

However, the problem with compromises born out of a power imbalance is that they will always carry a sting of unfairness. This, together with the historical



disagreements over the “Aegean Macedonians,” creates a mostly unfavorable view of the Prespa Agreement, especially among more [conservative Macedonians](#). The main opposition party of the Macedonian voting body, VMRO-DPMNE, has tried to capitalize on this dissatisfaction by promoting a narrative of national defeat at the hands of the Greeks, alongside their domestic “traitors.”

The long-awaited NATO accession was thereafter fast-tracked, and on March 27, 2020, North Macedonia became NATO’s 30th ally. However, the news was almost fully eclipsed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government’s efforts were more positive than negative, and North Macedonia spent about 10% of its GDP on stimulus payments to people and businesses in [2020 alone](#). Still, the panic, confusion and helplessness of a global pandemic triggered the public’s anger at the government, somewhat undeservedly. However, it was the [vaccine nationalism](#) of rich countries that truly raised the public’s pulse, which saw it as a failure of North Macedonia’s government [to effectively represent them abroad](#). The Balkans’ leading autocrat, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who allowed North Macedonia’s citizens to get vaccinated in Serbia and later sent donated [vaccines](#), only increased with the envy and glorification of Serbia’s, which has always been regarded as bigger, better, and more advanced.

A Faraway Union: How the EU Threw the Country Into Turmoil, Again

The story of North Macedonia’s identity crisis wouldn’t be complete without the ever-looming presence of the European Union. Once the Prespa Agreement was signed, it seemed that the last obstacle for starting North Macedonia’s accession negotiations was removed. Until the French said: “*Mais, non!*” President Emmanuel Macron [vetoed North Macedonia’s](#) accession negotiations in October 2019 as [collateral damage](#) in his power struggle with then-German chancellor Angela Merkel. This was a strong and decisive blow, both to the government that signed the Prespa Agreement and the beliefs and identity held by most citizens. The author strongly believes that the French veto was a tipping point for the downward slope that North Macedonia is still on to this day.

How did the French decision exercise so much power? First, it emboldened Bulgaria to demand further concessions from North Macedonia along purely nationalist lines. To say that Bulgaria’s demands were unreasonable is an understatement: It even went as far as a demand to label the internationally recognized Macedonian language as Bulgarian. It struck a chord right at the heart of the Macedonian identity: Once again, they were told by a neighbor who they were, what they spoke, and how they should identify, while being backed by a powerful entity such as the EU. Second, it allowed various euroskeptics to claim they were always right in doubting the EU’s willingness to admit the country. If taking down an autocrat and changing one’s name is not enough to even start negotiations (which is a long process that does not always end in accession), what is enough?

In 2022, France played a mediator: It offered an agreement that would make some of Bulgaria’s demands milder, while conditioning North Macedonia to amend its constitution yet again to include the Bulgarian minority, among other demands. North Macedonia’s government accepted, but it hasn’t been able to deliver on its promise. The opposition to the constitutional change, particularly with regards to the Bulgarian minority, remains [very high](#).

Identity (In)Secured: Why State Confidence Matters

How does a string of unfortunate foreign policy events and turbulent domestic politics play into a security challenge? Well, dangerously. Citizens of any country have a certain opinion of themselves, their country, and their and their country’s position in the wider world of international relations. Americans see themselves as serving the greater good from WWII onward; the Chinese are in pursuit of their lost superiority; and the British are the world’s “gentlemen.” Deserved or not, these conscious and unconscious opinions held by individuals form the public opinion. On the other side of the public opinion are the political elites who act as the translators for the public. They observe and participate in the international system and construct a foreign policy that is then communicated to the [citizens](#). The foreign policy is a response and a construction of what the citizens believe their country can and should do in the international sphere. It is reflexive: It flows in both



VMRO-DPMNE, the largest opposition party in North Macedonia, protests and demands early general elections in Skopje in June 2022. (Edita Zekjirovikj / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

directions, and identifying with what one's country stands for and is able to accomplish is important in feeling secure. It offers coherence.

So, when there is a strong disconnect between what is expected and what happens, and when this is a pattern of behavior, it results in a deep crisis. For a country like North Macedonia, the problem is compounded by its relative youth and highly corrupt system. Despite what nationalists like to believe, the country has been in charge of its own security or foreign policy only since 1991. And with state building comes identity and confidence building, the latter being particularly deficient in North Macedonia. On the other hand, ever since its independence and to this day, impunity for corruption is widespread and plenty of politicians have promised a better life, while only securing a better life for themselves.

For all of its positive steps, the government led by SDSM has had numerous failings: First and foremost, it has an absolute inability to manage expectations. While the political crisis caused by Gruevski's government was ongoing, it was important to

maintain morale. However, at some point the citizens started to believe that as soon as Gruevski was gone, everything would miraculously change for the better: The corruption would disappear, the country would immediately become an EU member, salaries would increase dramatically, and everyone would start picking up after their dog's public defecations. When SDSM failed to manage expectations, and then very obviously, failed to deliver on these impossible expectations, it was met with enormous disappointment.

This began a vicious circle: Many of the original activists and believers in the cause left the government in the first two years, slowly emptying the professional capacity of the institutions. Those who were left were overworked and bitter. Many felt that anything they did in their official capacity was never positively accepted by the public. Being negative – privately, but also publicly – turned into the country's favorite sport. Everything bad came from North Macedonia, everything good was outside of it. This opened a dangerous pathway for foreign malicious influence.

Maleficent 'Friends': How North Macedonia's Insecurity Helps Serbia's Autocrat

A country like Russia has never paid as much attention to North Macedonia as it does to Serbia. However, it has also never needed to pay as much attention, simply because of a simple causal pathway: Serbia is an extremely fertile space for Russian propaganda, and ethnic Macedonians consume everything that comes out of Serbia, often uncritically. It ranges from proclaiming Western holidays, such as St. Valentine's Day, as a product of LGBTQ+ propaganda, to infiltrating the [Macedonian Orthodox Church](#) – Archdiocese of Ohrid. This propaganda never comes in Russian, and it is rarely translated into Macedonian; instead, it is spread and consumed mostly in Serbian.

The relationship between North Macedonia and Serbia is complicated, to say the least. Historically, Serbia had held the power center of both the federal Yugoslavia (1945-1991) and colonial Yugoslavia (1918-1941). While citizens of the federal state of Macedonia participated equally in the decision-making of the second Yugoslavia, they had far less influence in the first one. Since the occupation of today's North Macedonia by the Serbs in 1912 to the



German defeat of the Yugoslav Kingdom in 1941, the Orthodox Christian population was forced to identify as southern Serbian. The official language was Serbian, all the personal names were Serbianized, and profitable agricultural products, such as tobacco, were monopolized by the state. My own grandmother's family was renamed to Stošić in this period. (For those unfamiliar with family name nomenclature in North Macedonia, a name ending with -ić is identified most often as Serbian. While there are plenty of names ending in -ov in North Macedonia proper, there is a much larger identification with the construct with Bulgarian names. On the other hand, having a name that ends in -ski is almost always recognized as Macedonian. Of course, these are very broad definitions to a very complex population, so plenty of exceptions exist.)

Vučić had a hot-and-cold relationship with the SDSM-led movement even before it formed North Macedonia's government in 2017. During the political crisis in 2015-16, Vučić kept warning the Serbian citizens of the "[danger of a Macedonian scenario](#)." At the most volatile moment of the crisis, when a mob of insurrectionists stormed the Parliament, a member of the Serbian intelligence service was caught on camera [entering the Parliament](#) as well. Once the SDSM-led government was formed, in June 2017, one of the first major crises it faced was the complete [withdrawal](#) of all diplomatic personnel from the embassy in Serbia just two months later.

Fast forward seven years, and the relationship seems better, on paper. Ever since the French, and then Bulgarian EU veto, North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania have participated in creating [Open Balkan](#) – an initiative to open borders and facilitate trade across the region. It sounds reasonable, and yet – it is a profoundly bad idea within the context. It envisages essentially a free flow of people, goods and services across the borders, a sort of mini-Schengen Area. First, it reads as an overly sugarcoated distraction for North Macedonia and Albania, whose EU accession is stalled because of vetoes by the union's members. Second, it gives Vučić something to sell to his electorate after failing to make barely any progress in Serbia's EU accession. Third, it allows an even freer flow of organized crime from Serbia to North Macedonia. And

fourth, Russia likes the idea of distracting these three countries from pursuing EU membership full steam.

In an attempt to appease an insecure citizenry, the government of North Macedonia wholeheartedly embraced the Open Balkan project. Since the country's, and especially the ethnic Macedonians', identity is trembling, the worse Serbia treated North Macedonia, the more its people believed that it is well-deserved. If our own politicians can't deliver on the EU promise, why wouldn't we be closer to Vučić and his version of Serbia? After all, he's been effectively playing off the EU's attempt to normalize Serbia-Kosovo relations, thus strengthening Serbia's [identity security](#). To a desperate nation, it is an example of a politician helping one's own nation to feel more secure in its identity.

An Ally Unconvinced and the Road Ahead

The identity insecurity experienced creates a vulnerable position to judge foreign policy issues. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a fierce division within North Macedonia along several lines. On one hand, the political elites strongly supported Ukraine, while a large portion of the voting body found that Russian leader Vladimir Putin's hand was forced (and justified) by NATO's actions. Similarly, a division along ethnic lines is evident: A much larger portion of ethnic Macedonians support Russia, while ethnic Albanians are against Russia. At first glance, one might associate the ethnic Macedonian support with some sort of pan-Slavicism; I'd argue this is unfounded. Most pro-Russian Macedonians see a hero in a figure like Putin because he stands up to the hypocritical "[West](#)."

The position of ethnic Albanians in this situation is important to note. On one hand, there is a high level of disillusionment with the largest Albanian party still in government, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). DUI was the junior partner of VMRO-DPMNE during the most corrupt period in the country, but most of its members were never prosecuted. At the same time, there is a strong urge to join the EU, and ethnic Macedonians' concerns about Bulgarian identity claims can be seen as an obstacle to EU accession. As a minority in the country, many Albanians feel unfairly held back. However, while Macedonians blame everyone else, Albanians often blame Macedonians.



While this analysis focuses on the interplay of foreign policy and identity, it would be wrong not to acknowledge the other factors that impact North Macedonia's identity and security position. Corruption remains rampant, and the judicial system is [particularly bad](#). The inability to get justice, unless they have connections, makes citizens furious with the system altogether. Brain drain and migration have remained high, further siphoning human capital from the country. The [public administration](#) remains proportionally too big for the size of the country and inefficient. All of these factors contribute to the state of the country and its citizens' lack of trust. However, for a small and open country like North Macedonia, the influence of outside forces is felt disproportionately.

Looking to the future, one can only hope that North Macedonia's state confidence in itself will be built internally, through a positive and value-based interaction with the country's partners. It is high time for the European Union to start acting on its values

and not adopt the parochial interests of some member states as its own. An ever-stronger engagement with NATO and information sharing about the role of the alliance in vulnerable regions such as Ukraine is important, especially for the ordinary citizen. The U.S. should remain committed to its role of a global partner for democratization, instead of the isolationism that some propose.

The process of building confidence and trust will be long and closely intertwined with the process of democratization. The more North Macedonia changes its expectations and values and learns to believe in standing on one's own two feet, the less it will support authoritarian leaders. Given our history, this may be our biggest challenge to face. However, with the ever-greater technological development, globalization, and feminist struggle, societal change in North Macedonia is possible and already underway. To put it simply: Our short term may be a downward slope, but our long term is a cautiously optimistic upward trend.



Ivana Jordanovska is a doctoral candidate in political science and international relations at the University of Southern California. Her research focuses on the intersection of international security and political psychology, with a particular interest in NATO and emerging challenges. Before pursuing a doctorate, she worked as an adviser for cooperation with international organizations for the prime minister of the Republic of North Macedonia. Her professional experience includes work for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. As a Balkan native, she has extensive experience in political, as well as nongovernmental work across the region.

She earned her master's in international relations from New York University as a Fulbright Fellow, her bachelor's in political science with focus on transatlantic relations from the Institute for Political Science in Paris (Institut d'Etudes Politique de Paris – Sciences Po) and is an alumna of United World College in Mostar.