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The Balkan Pawns in the Greek Foreign Policy Chessboard

An analytical thesis on how Greece instrumentalizes the Balkan enlargement to secure national interests

Bachelor's thesis in Europastudier

Supervisor: Michael J. Geary

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Abstract

Sitting at the edge of the EU, Greece has a lot to gain from the Balkan enlargement. However, vital interests with their neighbours seek resolution where Greece has much to gain before a potential accession.

Greece has been a central actor in support for a Balkan enlargement. Amidst EU negotiations, Greece seeks to achieve certain foreign policy goals with Albania and North Macedonia. If the two countries are allowed to join the EU, Greece would lose all potential leverage over the two and therefore seeks to exploit the situation while it lasts. This thesis looks at the key issues between the states and how Greece has exploited their role as an EU member to achieve these goals by instrumentalizing the Balkan enlargement for their own national interest.

The findings have been some key cases where Greece has used its position for own benefits such as the Prespa Agreement with North Macedonia, an ongoing maritime dispute with Albania as well as the Cham issue and the Himara case.

Sammendrag

Sittende i utkanten av EU har Hellas masse å tjene fra en Balkan utvidelse, men kritiske interesser med naboene krever en handling hvor Hellas har mye å tjene før en eventuell tiltrødelse.

Hellas har vært en sentral aktør som har støttet en EU utvidelse i Balkan, men mens EU forhandlingene pågår har Hellas søkt å oppnå utenlands politiske mål i Albania and Nord Makedonia. Hvis de to landene blir medlem av EU mister Hellas alt potensielt pressmiddel over de to landene og søker derfor å utnytte situasjonen mens de kan.

Denne avhandlingen ser på nøkkelsakene mellom statene og hvordan Hellas har utnyttet sin rolle som EU medlem til å oppnå sine mål ved å instrumentalisere Balkan utvidelsen for egne nasjonale mål.

Funnene har vært noen nøkkelsaker hvor Hellas har brukt sin situasjon til egen utnyttelse som Prespa avtalen med Nord Makedonia, en pågående maritim uenighet med Albania samt Cham- og Himara saken.

Preface

I would like to thank my advisor Michael J. Geary for excellent help during the Bachelor period inspiring further research and keeping me on the right track.

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List of Abbreviations

EU	European Union
SEE6	South-Eastern Europe Six
N.A	Not Applicable
FYROM	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
WW2	World War two
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ICJ	International Court of Justice
UN	United Nations

1. Introduction

Since the early 2000s a potential Balkan accession into the European Union (EU) has been on the table. The EU hopes that the promise of a potential EU membership can hinder more conflict in the region and transform the “powder keg of Europe” into stable members of Europe and the EU (Naumovski, 2019, p.120). The potential of peace and stability provides vested interest for the whole of Europe, but most especially for Greece. Currently sitting on the outskirts of EU territory, the Balkans divide Greece from the core of the EU, therefore a Balkan accession holds high regards, almost intertwined with Greece’s foreign policy as it would unite Greece to mainland EU (Armakolas & Triantafyllou, 2017, p.611).

The accession negotiations for the Balkan states face issues as the South-Eastern Six (SEE6) struggle to meet the Copenhagen criteria and criteria from member states with special interests in the region.

While a Balkan enlargement is held high on the Greek agenda, Greece does have some key issues and criteria for these potential new EU members that have to be resolved. As a regional power, Greece seeks to establish itself as a vital partner amongst other parties with interests in the region such as the EU, the US, China, Russia and Saudi Arabia (Reljić, 2023, p.46). Some of the key issues for Greece that has been the most prevalent are the rights for Greek minorities in Albania and a naming dispute with North Macedonia interwoven with territorial and cultural claims.

As a member state, Greece holds veto power and can therefore further push their foreign interests to achieve goals in the Balkans otherwise not possible. This has been achieved with the now resolved name dispute with North Macedonia, but more issues persist. Greece has taken a key role in the Balkan accession hosting the Thessaloniki summit in 2003 where the Balkan states and the EU formally declared the beginning of negotiations with the Balkans states pledging themselves to adapt towards the EU (European Commission, 21.06.2003). The summit ended with the European Council stating that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union” (Kmezić, 2015, p.7).

Overall, the Balkan enlargement has taken time since 2003, with slow progress. Recently, European Council president, Charles Michel stated an intention to enlarge by 2030, before Ursula von der Leyen withdrew a concrete timeline a day later, rather opting to include the SEE6 to a larger extent on EU policies (Reljić, 2023, p.46). This has also had negative repercussions on the Balkan will to integrate as some EU member states talk positively about enlargement, but continuously use their veto power to stall the accession process.

The aim of the thesis is to understand Greece’s stance on the Balkan accession process and uncover what factors affect its position towards North Macedonia and Albania and how they approach their issues. The problem that seeks to be answered is: “How does Greece, as an EU member instrumentalize enlargement to influence the Balkan enlargement to secure its national interests?”

This is highly relevant as Greece has a lot to gain on a Balkan accession, but has still been ambiguous in its support towards some of the states seeking membership. A Balkan enlargement would alter the map of the EU greatly tying Greece closer to the mainland EU and be beneficial as Greece is a critical trade partner with many of the SEE6. If

Greece were to allow Albania and North Macedonia to join then Greece would lose all leverage, therefore, it has to exploit the situation while it lasts. As a member of the EU, Greece is in a beneficial position in an imbalanced relationship as they have the power to make or break a candidate's accession progress.

Literary review

Most literature regarding the Balkan enlargement discuss the topic superficially as to why progress is slower in some states and the issues candidates face, but few discuss how member states can use their veto to influence the process. There is a gap in the literature as many discuss the cases between states on an individual level, but few discuss the power the member states hold over candidate states to obtain state interests.

The majority of literature looks at why the EU wants to enlarge, the criteria that has to be met from either supranational perspective or the intranational perspective, but there has been little discussion regarding the stance of why individual member states support or oppose enlargement. Ker-Lindsay et al. (2017, p.513) works to fill in this gap by empirically investigating member states' policies, but in a broader sense than just the Greek perspective. Greece is the perfect example of how a member state can instrumentalize enlargement to secure its national interests and foreign policy goals. By looking at the Greek stance towards Albania and North Macedonia one can clearly observe how they seek to misuse their position as an EU member to prevent an accession until national interests have been achieved.

Gateva (2015) provides a supranational perspective regarding enlargement conditionality and how the states have progressed up until 2015. Armakolas and Triantafyllou (2017) argues how Greece would greatly benefit from the Balkan enlargement, but has an uncertain stance on the matter. The Greek stance is based on its history and that has in turn shaped foreign policy from a strategic standpoint (Armakolas & Triantafyllou, 2017). Armakolas and Triantafyllou (2017) believe Greece has turned accession conditionality into a foreign policy tool mainly in regards to Türkiye, but still refers to the Greek position regarding the SEE6.

As mentioned, most of the authors and articles focus on specific cases, while this thesis seeks to tie the cases together and view it from the Greek perspective of how they use the enlargement to promote their own agenda and obtain their goals. Németh (2022) is one of few sources that discusses a dispute regarding the potential fallout for an EU membership for Albania in regards to the maritime dispute and how that aspect could affect negotiations.

Due to much progress in a short timespan many sources quickly become outdated; therefore, news articles provide an updated insight into ongoing disputes while the articles provide a framework for some issues as many disputes have been a historical part of bilateral relations.

In short, there is a gap in the literature discussing how member states can assert influence on the accession process. Member states can obtain foreign policy goals at the expense of candidate states' EU progression by blocking progress until it is achieved. This thesis seeks to offer a fresh perspective on EU enlargement in regards of how Greece has instrumentalized the Balkan enlargement to achieve their goals.

Methodology

This thesis is structured as an analytical thesis exploring the Greek stance on the Balkan enlargement, investigating the different aspects where Greece has used influence to impact the accession process for Albania and North Macedonia. Due to the parameters of the thesis, the countries deemed most fascinating have been selected at the expense of the rest of the SEE6 or Türkiye.

While Greece and Türkiye have a longstanding bilateral problem where Greece has continually hindered their efforts to join the EU, Türkiye has a plethora of other reasons hindering their process such as democratic backsliding. Therefore, selecting two countries with more isolated causes provides a more fascinating analysis leading this thesis towards North Macedonia and Albania, neighbouring Greece to the North. This topic is relevant as one can investigate how an EU member can influence the accession process for their own gain and to what extent they can hinder or interfere in the process as all member states have veto power.

This thesis is structured as a qualitative analytical case study with a focus on Greece, Albania and North Macedonia. The benefits of looking at few cases allows for a more in-depth and accurate assessment of the relationships. There will be a certain extent of process tracing as the thesis explores the chain of events that affects bilateral relations that could lead to a Greek veto or a certain stance against the candidate states.

Some of the key issues that will be discussed in this thesis is the naming dispute with North Macedonia leading to the Prespa Agreement and Albanian-Greek relations with a maritime dispute, the Cham Issue and the Himara case.

The thesis will first briefly contextualize the progress of the SEE6 with a focus on Albania and North Macedonia before understanding the Greek role in the region and discussing their stance. The analysis will then analyse Greek relations with North Macedonia and their key naming dispute before exploring Greek-Albanian relations through their three key issues before tying it all together in the conclusions.

There is a strong empirical analysis with a wide variety of sources regarding certain cases and disputes between the states. The sources used contain a large selection of secondary sources of reliable academics specialized within their field providing a high degree of validity. These secondary sources are combined with primary sources, such as information directly from the EU and news articles discussing certain cases and aspects that have arisen over the years. Official documents such as the Thessaloniki Summit, Tirana Declaration and Prespa agreement help provide primary sources that strengthen the validity while news articles on the matters help provide updated information to investigate the contention regarding certain disputes and matters.

2. Progress in the Balkans

On the 21st of June 2003, Greece hosted the Thessaloniki Summit that can be seen as the beginning of the Balkan enlargement process, where the leaders of the EU and its member states were present alongside the leaders of Croatia and the SEE6 (with the exception of Kosovo) unequivocally presenting the European perspective for the Western Balkans (European Commission, 21.06.2003). The summit proved motivational for future integration and many states made great progress initially before gradually declining lately as the process has stagnated.

Although the Balkan states are neighbours in the region, they greatly differ from one another with vast differences emerging since, but not exclusively after the fall of Yugoslavia in 1992. Therefore, different approaches are deemed a necessity during their accession process to cope with these variations as each country provides a different set of issues, leading to differentiated conditionality in the accession process (Gateva, 2015, p.164). With the statement from the declaration; "The future of the Balkans is within the European Union", the process of membership seemed optimistic, but time has shown that the process has stagnated over twenty years, with some showing little to no progress creating no realistic timeline for accession (EWB, 21.06.23). While many of the SEE6 have faced backsliding and blockages from member states, the war in Ukraine further pushed the EU to step up their efforts to integrate the Balkans to combat rising Russian influence by uniting Europe (Nuttall, 21.06.23). The EU's recommitment to the Balkans helps combat the lethargy of a lengthy enlargement by finally initiating negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia.

The SEE6 consists of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, who are all at various stages in the accession process. The last country to join from the region was Croatia in 2013 with Montenegro and Serbia having come the furthest as of now. The table below helps contextualize the Balkan enlargement and shows how the different countries have progressed with Not Applicable (N.A) where the states have not progressed far enough to reach. Contextualization of the rest of the SEE6 supports further analysis as it illustrates how the countries in the region greatly differ. The SEE6 all face different issues affecting their progress, but this thesis will focus on Albania and North Macedonia, some of the slowest countries in regards to progress.

Table 1. The SEE6 (European Council, w.d)

Country	Applied for EU membership	Gained Candidate status	Opened negotiations	Chapters opened / Membership
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2016	2022	N.A	N.A
Croatia	2003	2005	2005	Member: 2013
Albania	2009	2014	2022	0/35
North Macedonia	2004	2005	2022	0/35
Montenegro	2008	2010	2012	33/35
Serbia	2009	2012	2014	22/35
Kosovo	2022	N.A	N.A	N.A

The reasoning behind the delay for Albania and North Macedonia is that their accession is bundled together and due to disputes with Greece and Bulgaria little progress has been undertaken, however, the war in Ukraine gave the EU a push to initiate negotiations and make further progression.

3. The Greek Instrumentalization of Enlargement

Historical contextualization and EU relations and role in enlargement

Greece became the first EU member of the region after their democratic transition when they applied for EU membership in 1975 and joined the union in 1981. The EU's

goal at the time was to absorb new democracies to prevent a relapse towards authoritarianism and bring peace and stability across Europe (Reljić, 2023, p.42). Therefore, Greece gained membership in the union with solidarity as the root cause further promoting closer ties between the EU and Central and Eastern Europe (Kmezić, 2015, p.12). Greece arguably joined at the right time as in the period to come, accession criteria and conditionality became stricter where Greece may perhaps not have met the modern EU criteria and been on a level playing field with the rest of the Balkans.

Since Greece became a member of the EU, they have been highly supportive of further enlargements, even putting it high on its list of priorities regarding foreign policy (Gateva, 2015, p.152). As the oldest EU member-state in the region, Greece views themselves as a leader and role model for the Balkan accession who can guide the SEE6 into the EU, but often highlight how the countries first have to meet the accession criteria or resolve certain issues (Athens-Macedonian News Agency, 13.09.23). In a quote from Gerapetritis, he references how a dispute with Albania would have to be resolved before they could receive Greek support to continue their accession process (Athens-Macedonian News Agency, 13.09.23). While foreign minister, Droutsas (2010) stated that while they are highly supportive of a North Macedonian accession, certain 'neighbourly relations' have to be resolved (Gateva, 2015, p.151). These statements highlight how Greece seek to achieve their goals by utilizing the accession criteria.

The Greek position in the region

Historically, Greece has been in an advantageous position compared to its neighbour in the Balkans due to its more recent peaceful history, as can be seen comparing GDP, where in 2000, Greece had a larger GDP than all the SEE6 combined (Armakolas & Triantafyllou, 2017, p.614). Greece is a member of the two organizations most desired by their neighbours, NATO and the EU, which has led to an unbalanced relationship between Greece and its neighbours. With all the tension in the 90's in the region, it wasn't until 1996 and onwards that Greece adopted a more neighbourly approach, leaving its defensive approach in the past in favour of multilateralism and cooperation (Armakolas & Triantafyllou, 2017, p.615). From the early 2000's Greece has re-emerged as a regional actor driven by its geographical proximity, historical ties and economic interests where Greece gradually became one of the most central trade partners with the SEE6 and began promoting European values to the region (Németh, 2022, p.135).

A shift in Greek foreign policy

While Türkiye has always been at the forefront of Greek foreign policy, the fall of Yugoslavia and the rise of Former Yugoslav Republic of Montenegro (FYROM) caused a divergence as FYROM became the new immediate threat (Armakolas & Triantafyllou, 2017, p.615). FYROM used symbolism of great people from the Macedonian empire and portrayed themselves as the ethnic Macedonians, much to the chagrin of Greece who have claimed these figures as part of Greek culture, further deteriorating their relations (Grammatikakis, 22.07.2020). With FYROM a new, more pressing matter appeared as Macedonia is a region mainly located in Greece causing a fear towards a potential expansion or conflict regarding said territory.

Greece and Türkiye have a long history of mistrust, disputes and disagreements, this is especially observable in Greece's stance towards a Turkish accession with continuous blockages of Turkish attempts to join the EU (Gateva, 2015, p.152). Türkiye's close ties

to Albania and North Macedonia causes a fear as Türkiye could be turning Greek neighbours into potential enemies in a conflict. This saw Greece having to step up their influence in the region to counterbalance Türkiye's influence (Németh, 2022, p.135). By exerting more influence in Albania and North Macedonia Greece seeks to show strength towards Türkiye and counteract any influence Türkiye may have in the region as Greece steps up as a vital partner to the Balkan states.

Enlargement as Greek foreign policy tool and their potential gains

With a potential Balkan enlargement on the table, Greece saw their opportunity to exploit their role as an EU member by "hijacking" the EU agenda and instrumentalizing the enlargement to use for their own gain to achieve goals through political bargaining. Greece was one of the most ardent supporters of a Balkan enlargement due to the benefits it would provide Greece, with the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs stating it a success story with a win-win outcome (Armakolas & Triantafyllou, 2017, pp.611-615). Enlargement is according to Droutsas (2010) interwoven with Greece's foreign policy as they have been the vanguard of the Balkan enlargement (Gateva, 2015, p.152).

As an EU member the relationship between Albania, North Macedonia and Greece has an unequal balance of power as Greece holds a beneficial position being able to influence the accession process. The threat or usage of a veto holds a considerable amount of sway and in the case of North Macedonia was detrimental for their EU membership progress. By utilizing a veto Greece can through political bargaining leverage a candidate to unfair concessions in return for being allowed to progress in EU negotiations. If Greece unequivocally allowed Albania and North Macedonia to join the EU, any Greek leverage would be lost and they therefore seek to exploit the situation while they can.

4. North Macedonian Appeasement

Bilateral relations

While North Macedonia (FYROM) applied to join the EU in 2004 and became one of the earliest candidates, they could not begin the accession negotiations until 2022 being one of the states with the greatest delay (European Council, w.d). Greece has been highly opposed to a North Macedonian accession, believing the naming dispute had to be resolved before initiating any accession progress. This has been contradictory towards the Commission's positive view of accession as Greece dampens the progress (Portal, 26.02.24). Greece believes they have taken influential steps to demonstrate goodwill that has not been reciprocated causing diminishing bilateral relations (Armakolas & Triantafyllou, 2017, p.618). Overall, they have co-existed easily with relatively low tensions as Greece has enjoyed the internal market of the EU and exerts some control over its northern neighbour (Vankovska, 2020, p.348).

Bilateral relations saw a significant increase in 2017 with a new government in North Macedonia which provided a more positive outlook on bilateral relations (Bechev & Marusic, 2022, p.15). Most European states viewed this positively as a turning point that could enable the beginning of accession negotiations, but this relied on Greece altering their stance regarding the name dispute amid positive bilateral relations which proved more difficult. The Prespa Agreement calmed bilateral relations between the two states, but "Macedonia" is still a highly contentious topic and the main issue between the two states.

'Macedonia' (the region, people and culture) has been around longer than just the state, only after the fall of Yugoslavia did the topic become politicized as then, FYROM emerged as a sovereign state (Christopoulos, 10.01.2019). The name provides the basis for the dispute as it's a rich region historically with overlapping history with both Bulgaria and Greece (Topalova, 17.06.2020).

The fear from the Greek perspective stems partially from a territorial standpoint as Macedonia refers to a large area of Greece and fear the potential of a United Macedonia as North Macedonia appropriated symbols and figures considered part of Greek culture (Naumovski, 2019, p.121). This dispute regards more than just territory as it dives into culture, heritage and history. As mentioned, the territory of Macedonia covers both Greek and North Macedonian territory causing an intricate case regarding national symbols existing within the region (Topalova, 17.06.2020). As a relatively new country, they are at a disadvantage regarding their history as older states have already claimed what North Macedonians feel belong to them and their history.

Greek membership in the EU provides an asymmetrical leverage between the two parties and the feeling in North Macedonia over the recent years has been "The Greeks are in, you are out" forcing North Macedonia's hand to comply with Greek demands (Bechev, 2023, p.699; Vankovska, 2020, p.352).

The Prespa Agreement - FYROM becomes Republic of North Macedonia

North Macedonia achieved its greatest steps towards an EU membership with the Prespa Agreement in 2018 leading to a name change from FYROM to the Republic of North Macedonia and the end of the Greek veto on North Macedonian membership (Bechev, 2023, p.698).

The Prespa Agreement was viewed as win by the EU by their ability for conflict resolution and role as mediator (Bechev, 2023, p.699). The EU could not take the role as a neutral arbiter as one of its members was a party involved, but the EU had the expertise to help find an acceptable resolution alongside the United Nations (UN).

If Greece had allowed North Macedonia to join without the Prespa Agreement all leverage would be lost. The whole situation arose from Greek stubbornness to strongarm the issue by putting a roadblock on all progress until their demands were met. Greece had an enormous leverage as a member of the EU and North Macedonia was at an extreme disadvantage being dependent on Greek mercy (Bechev, 2023, p.699). The agreement is a testament to the EU's extraordinary pull as countries are willing to take large concessions to be able to progress further towards EU membership. The most positive argument for the Prespa Agreement is that it finally improved the bilateral relations and enabled North Macedonian NATO membership and the beginning of EU accession negotiations in 2022.

While not entirely satisfactory, the Prespa Agreement does nonetheless, show the incredible willingness of North Macedonia to integrate and adapt to be able to join the EU. EU Council President at the time, Donald Tusk stated "... they were ready to sacrifice their own interests for the greater good" (Bechev, 2023, p.699). By putting their collective interests ahead of pride, they could prove to be an inspiration for other SEE6 countries bogged down in the accession process to resolve contentious disputes to calm and better relations. Many Macedonians disagreed with the decision as they felt they were being bullied into compromises by Greece that continually blocked their efforts to

join the European community leading to no other option than the Prespa Agreement bowing to Greek pressure.

A complex myriad of opinions on the naming dispute grew from the Prespa Agreement with strong sentiments from both parties. Overall, the opinions prove to be highly divided with North Macedonia more supportive overall despite setbacks post-Prespa. In both states the opinion that the Prespa Agreement is a valid compromise is below 60% while around 50% believe the agreement undermines national interests in their respective states (Armakolas et al., 2021, pp.9-10). Greek sentiment regarding the Prespa Agreement has not been positive as most Greeks would prefer a state with no reference to the term 'Macedonia' (60%) and the amount that view Prespa as beneficial or harmful are exactly the same at 35.5% (Armakolas et al., 2021, pp.6-8). A majority in Greece were displeased by the compromise as "Macedonia" remained as it gave up ethnicity, language and name to further legitimize North Macedonia, but that disapproval has gradually decreased with time as bilateral relations improved (Armakolas et al., 2021, p.6).

This agreement was not well received in North Macedonia either as some felt it betrayed the national interest and identity of Macedonians (Grammatikakis, 22.07.2020). In North Macedonia a referendum was held before the Prespa Agreement where 91% voted in favour of the change, but with a low voter turnout of only 37% (Grammatikakis, 22.07.2020). As will be explored further in the next chapter, the Prespa Agreement also led to a political shift as governments in both states were ousted.

The struggles of North Macedonia

Even though the Prespa Agreement was signed in 2018, the accession negotiations did not begin until 2022 due to a French veto as they felt there had not been enough credible progress (Topalova, 17.06.2020). Bulgaria also has issues with North Macedonia regarding history tied to ethnic and cultural identity, but that was partially resolved in 2018, but not improved enough to hinder a veto (Topalova, 17.06.2020).

The fact that all member states can utilize a veto with few restrictions has greatly damaged the accession progress as once the Prespa Agreement was finalized hopes were high that the following summit would lead to the initiation of accession negotiations, but a French veto destroyed that hope (Grammatikakis, 22.07.2020). In a poll, 39% of North Macedonians would still support the Prespa Agreement despite the delay in EU negotiations (Armakolas et al., 2021, p.7). It is worth mentioning that the Albanian minority in North Macedonia are the most supportive as they have fewer interests invested in "Macedonia" and rather support stability and improved bilateral relations than culture heritage.

While France vetoed an initiation of EU accession negotiations, the perception in Greece and North Macedonia is that the most involved EU state was Germany. Just below 50% of Greeks believe German involvement benefitted North Macedonia, while in the latter state, Germany's role is perceived as more diffuse as more than a third believe it benefitted Greece, while 20% believe German involvement benefitted North Macedonia (Armakolas et al., 2021, p.13). Germany has in recent years acted as a mediator in the bilateral dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. While France opposes enlargement due to the risk of internal friction, Germany supports enlargement as a means to assert influence in the region (Bechev & Marusic, 2022, p.4). Bulgaria on the other hand does

not share the same sentiments as either Germany or France, but rather seeks to follow in the footsteps of Greece. Prespa displayed the North Macedonian will to integrate and Bulgaria seek their part in North Macedonian history and want recognition that North Macedonian identity and language is based on a Bulgarian foundation (Bechev & Marusic, 2022, p.11). This has led to a new problem for North Macedonia, but with Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU has pushed forward the accession negotiations.

The French veto led to a shift of governments in both states as no parties were satisfied with the outcome and some degree of backsliding in North Macedonia as they felt that after all their progress nothing had changed regarding an EU perspective or prospective of. The North Macedonian government has nonetheless been increasingly progressive towards EU accession despite the lack of a chance at a fast accession, engaging in wider diplomatic relations with its neighbours.

Greek influence and political bargaining

After many years of a Greek veto against North Macedonia, the Prespa Agreement of 2018 changed the tide and North Macedonia could finally begin the accession process and was able to join NATO. This case showcases both the willingness of states to join the EU by making such a large concession to a member state, but also how a member state could continually block a potential candidate's accession until they obtained their goal. Both Greece and Bulgaria had interests that led them to continually veto North Macedonia until their conditions were met through political bargaining. The Greek case was resolved in 2018 under a North Macedonian leadership highly invested in joining the European community at the expense of their identity and culture.

Unfortunately, France felt they had not seen enough credible progress and Bulgaria saw an opportunity to achieve their goals which could jeopardize not only a North Macedonian will to accession, but the rest of the SEE6. It showcases just how much power the member states have and to what degree the candidate has to satisfy all members to avoid a veto. Fortunately, the French veto did not last long, but if the EU progress stalls or drags out in North Macedonia, the Prespa agreement may fail and revert to old relations. Therefore, it should be in all states' interest to ensure that North Macedonia meets all EU criteria and progresses well in the coming years to avoid a rise of nationalistic sentiment and a backsliding in bilateral relations.

Greece did manage to obtain their goal of forcing North Macedonia through political bargaining by continuously blocking their attempts of integrating into the European community. Their foreign policy goal of protecting the rights and culture of 'Macedonia' and hindering a potential rise of expansionistic nationalism worked as North Macedonia was forced to meet Greek demands resulting in the Prespa Agreement. The Greek achievement had a negative ripple effect as after the resolution with the Prespa Agreement, Bulgaria used their veto to hinder progress to achieve their own personal goals.

If North Macedonian EU accession faces more difficult hurdles, they could resort to their old ways and withdraw from the Prespa Agreement. Some argue that the Prespa Agreement could be a paper tiger without any real consequences from not upholding it as most regions in North Macedonia have not reformed to meet the conditions (Topalova, 17.06.2020). Both states felt the agreement did not suit their demands optimally as tensions still lurk, but the agreement has enabled progress for North Macedonia to join

the European community with both NATO membership and EU accession negotiations in 2022. After Prespa, bilateral relations increased with Greece becoming a prime investor and trading partner to North Macedonia while advocating for a North Macedonian membership in the EU.

5. Rising Tensions in Albania

Albania and Greek relations

As Albania was not a part of Yugoslavia and already a member of NATO, most felt Albania had the prerequisites to become a member as they are free from the complications of the Yugoslav wars and its ethnic conflicts (Beshku & Mullisi, 2018). While Albania applied for an EU membership in 2009, it took five years before they obtained candidate status and even longer before they began negotiations. Albania's relationship with Greece is not entirely friendly as multiple disputes and disagreements affect them, leading to Greece threatening to block their accession or hinder the progress.

Both states are to a certain extent interdependent with flexible migration with many Greeks in Albania and Albanians in Greece, although this is also a cause for concern as the relationship is highly unbalanced as Albania depends more on Greece and its tourists, than vice versa.

Bilateral relations were progressing positively in the 2000's with the "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, Good Neighbourliness and Security" from 1996 acting as the most prevalent document solidifying a tolerable relationship between the two states (Németh, 2022, p.127). In more recent times the relationship has been progressing negatively due to a maritime dispute, the "Cham Issue" and the "Himara Case", which now dominate bilateral relations.

A study from the Albanian Institute for International Studies (2013) investigating what Albanians view as the most prevalent issues with Greece concluded that the maritime dispute (46%) was the most vital issue, followed by the Cham Issue (21%) and the treatment of Albanian migrant workers in Greece (19%) (Çela & Lleshaj, 2014, p.30). The Greek public are not concerned about the maritime border dispute as it happens on a higher political level with little publicity on the matter, while Greek minority rights in Albania are more key for the Greek public with the "Himara Case" taking the spotlight (Németh, 2022, p.134).

Historical relations

While both Albania and Greece are members of NATO, both states are formally still at war since World War two (WW2). After Italy attacked Greece through Albania during WW2, Greece passed a 'Law of War' and while the Greek government rescinded the law in 1987, the Greek parliament has yet to ratify the decision (Ruci, 12.05.2023). The failure to annul the 'Law of War' contributes to destabilize bilateral relations between the two states (Mejdini, 22.03.2016). Most Albanians were forced to leave Greece during WW2, but when Greece changed their regional stance in 1996 this led to an increase in migration with Albanians now the largest group of foreign nationals (Armakolas & Triantafyllou, 2017, pp.612-615).

Albanian-Greek relations have been tightly hoven due to their geological proximity and as two of the more stable countries in the region, but they still have their differences and

history. Albania's close ties to Türkiye is a cause of concern in Greece as Türkiye has on occasion intervened in maritime disputes, which in turn has led to Greece seeking a more expansionist maritime policy (Németh, 2022, pp.135-136).

More often than not, the societies of the two states clash as they oppose each other on key matters regarding threat perceptions and their bilateral disputes. While the "Cham Issue" has been important for Albanians, Greece does not feel the same importance on the matter, rather focusing on the maritime dispute and Himara. Most recently the "Himara Case" has been in the forefront of Greek-Albanian relations leading to a tense escalation as it concerns both Greek minority rights and rule of law issues tightly associated to accession conditionality.

The Cham Issue

The movement and migration of people in the Balkans has been high, with numerous regions in other states consisting of a vast number of minorities, such as in Himara in Albania with a large population of Greeks or Albanians in North Macedonia or the Cham minority of Albanians who have previously lived in Greece. However, the situation differs in each case.

In the myriad of national identities in the Balkans some of the Cham minority like to refer to Southern Epirus as Chameria, while some Greeks refer to Southern Albania as Northern Epirus often with the intention of laying some claim on the region and raising nationalist sentiments (Gözübenli, 2018, p.475; Ruci, 12.05.2023). Arguably, a reverse case of the naming dispute with North Macedonia.

Southern Epirus has throughout history housed a large group of ethnic Albanians referred to as Cham Albanians, a Muslim minority (Mejdini, 22.03.2016). This is an issue that has been high on the Albanian agenda as the Chams have twice been expelled from Greece, but Greece refuses to open the topic up for discussion. Albania has stated that territorial claims is not their interest, but rather reclamation of their property rights or repatriation in Southern Epirus (Gözübenli, 2018, p.476).

Greece argue that the Cham Albanians collaborated with Nazis attempting an ethnic cleansing in Greece while the Cham claim Greece were the ones cooperating with the Nazis and killed innocent Chams in their homes (Kefalogiannis, 27.06.2022; Koleka, 24.02.2018). Greece has asked the Commission to intervene to handle the irredentist statements by a candidate state to further push burying the case.

In 2016, when a Greek member of the European Parliament, Maria Spyraiki was in Albania, she was met by protesters pleading their case for a resolution on the "Cham Issue" (Gözübenli, 2018, p.475). Again, Greece asked the Commission for a response as she accused Albania of irredentism again, to which the EU responded that the issue was an existing one and welcomed a discussion on the matter, which was interpreted by Greece as supporting Albania on the matter (Mejdini, 29.09.2016). The Greeks called this statement from the Commission "irresponsible" while still rejecting Albanian claims for reclamation and repatriation (Gözübenli, 2018, p.475). It could seem that the EU has an interest in resolving this case as it is a denial of ownership and has consequences on human rights. With the recent "Himara case" currently a contentious issue, both cases regard human rights, although the "Cham Issue" had larger repercussions and should be a topic for discussion for closure for those involved.

A potential fear from a Greek perspective could be that acknowledging the events would legitimize or validate the events that transpired and enable further Albanian request for repatriation for the alleged genocide. Since Greece is the dominant state in their relations, Albania holds little bargaining power to bring the topic to the agenda, potentially hoping the EU would bring it up for discussion.

Maritime dispute

One of the key issues regarding Greek-Albanian relations is the delimitation of the Strait of Corfu and the maritime borders of North Epirus. In more recent years this dispute has gained more traction as Greece also seeks to show strength towards Türkiye as they face a similar dispute regarding maritime borders.

In 2009, an agreement was reached successfully for both parties and Greece supported an Albanian application to join the EU, while for Greece it was a foreign policy triumph delimitating their maritime borders in the Ionian Sea (Sinoruka, 23.05.2022). Greek attitudes towards North Macedonia of continually blocking their accession process probably impacted the Albanian stance to be more flexible in their negotiations with Greece as if it went unresolved Greece could use their veto powers to block an EU accession.

This agreement did, however, not last as the opposition in Albania greatly opposed the agreement as it gave roughly 225 square kilometres of Albanian waters to Greece (Taylor, 21.12.2022). In short, the lack of Albanian expertise regarding research and knowledge as well as the will to appease Greece probably led to Albania being dealt the short hand. The opposition managed to nullify the agreement due to "procedural and substantial violations of the Constitution and the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea" (Németh, 2022, pp.129-130).

This further pushed the mistrust between the two states to new levels as Albania felt exploited and Greece felt betrayed. The regulation of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) remains high on the Greek agenda to both provide economic benefits and deter Türkiye from expansion into Greek areas by sending a message of being the "prime ruler" of the East Mediterranean (Németh, 2022, p. 136). While Albania wants to take the case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Greece would rather avoid it as they would lose their leverage in an ICJ verdict and prefers the ability to "blackmail" Albania.

The Himara case

A central and more recent case that has caused a backsliding in bilateral relations is the Himara case where a mayor, from the Albanian Greek minority in the Albanian municipality of Himara, along the Ionian Sea, has been arrested (Ruci, 12.05.2023). Fredi Beleri was arrested for allegedly buying votes which he adamantly denies. Beleri does have a history with Albanian authorities as he has been investigated numerous times tied to illegal activities in Albania, but has been cleared all three times (Stamouli, 24.04.24). What makes this case more complex is the location as this could be tied into the maritime dispute as well as an Albanian-Greek mayor in a southern town in Albania could influence or allowed more Greeks to enter Albania's EEZ. The Himara case has largely been disregarded in Albania, but has become a key situation in Greece as they exploit their role as an EU member to put additional diplomatic pressure on Albania.

Greece argues that this showcases the struggle to meet the Copenhagen Criteria regarding the rule of law as it is a wrongful arrest in addition to the fact that property owners are not allowed to invest in their own properties due to corruption in the public

institutions (Taylor, 07.03.2024). Greece has reacted strongly in this case accusing Albania of violating the rule of law and Greek minority rights as Greece believe this to be a politically motivated arrest (Ruci, 12.05.2023). As a result of this dispute Greece threatened to block Albania's EU accession process and didn't support a letter from the Commission to initiate the opening of accession negotiations, they could have vetoed the process, but opted for a lesser option than the nuclear solution.

To further add fuel to the fire regarding the Albanian accession process, a political party in Greece added Fredi Beleri to their list of candidates for the upcoming European Parliament election. The leading political party in Greece, the New Democracy Party has weaponized his arrest to promote their patriotic credentials to reduce the support for far-right parties (Si, 15.04.24). This decision is not exclusively well received as Greece's foreign ministry warned about playing politics with Beleri (Stamouli, 24.04.24). Greece also argue that Beleri should be viewed as a European concern rather than a bilateral dispute as it concerns the rule of law and minority rights that play a key concern in Albania's accession path. By adding Beleri to their candidate list the party is attempting to rally votes by giving the perception of standing up for Greek minorities abroad, but this comes at the cost of bilateral relations where the potential negative outcome greatly outweighs the positive.

The Himara case has had a negative effect on Greek relations as some member states of the EU feel that Greece exploits their position as a member state to create roadblocks in an attempt to strongarm Albania to achieve their goals. Germany has spoken out against Greek conduct and publicly supported Albania's accession despite Greek opposition (Stamouli, 24.04.24).

Greek gains and roadblocks

Despite the conflicts and regardless of Albanian-Greek relations, when Greece held the EU Presidency, they gave the green light for Albanian candidate status and stated it would be a 'key priority' (Armakolas & Triantafyllou, 2017, p.620). The relationship between the two has been deteriorating in recent times due to the aforementioned issues which have been detrimental for Albania's EU accession progress. Under new political leadership in 2015 the two states attempted to normalize relations starting with attempting to resolve the maritime dispute, however it proves highly difficult to achieve a mutually beneficial resolution, rather resorting to the ICJ (Németh, 2022, pp.131-135). Greece has as of yet not vetoed any significant progress as Albania would be more beneficial as an EU member.

Another potential reason Greece has not used a veto in its issues with Albania may be related to the EU perception of Greece as an "obstructive actor" instead of a "solution" leading to Greece taking a more diplomatic approach (Németh, 2022, p.131). Greece has risked alienating itself within the EU as it has been viewed as part of the Balkan problem with its continual issues with certain member states. Germany has been highly involved in Greek-Balkan disputes often supporting the opposing party instead of Greece showing signs of a potential rift between member states.

While Greece wants to be viewed as a vital actor in the Balkan enlargement with Greek officials often highlighting the Thessaloniki Agenda and how Greece has stepped up their involvement in the region, they have more dominantly been perceived as a problem. When Greece achieves their goals or have gotten their will, they support Albania, but

when for example, the maritime dispute met the wall Greece immediately changed their tone.

The case of Fredi Beleri in Himara has gotten bilateral relations on edge as Foreign Minister Gerapetritis stated that Albania could not join due to lacking basic EU principles such as democracy and rule of law (Athens-Macedonian News Agency, 13.09.23).

However, here Greece interferes in a domestic case in the judicial system of Albania disregarding any evidence against him.

6. Conclusions

The risk of continuous vetoes

When all member states have the right to a veto and the ability to halt progress in candidate states, then the "carrot on a stick" of EU membership may lose its appeal as the candidate states could feel burdened by the red tape presented by member states. This issue of member states "hijacking" the EU agenda for their own benefit has caused the EU to consider a shift towards qualified majority voting instead to reduce the ability to hinder progress (Bechev, 2023, p.699). Overall, the EU has been positive to a Balkan enlargement if its conditionality is met, but the appeal only lasts to a certain extent. If progress is hindered by political bargaining from member states and progress is not rewarded, democratic backsliding could become more prevalent and progress could relapse.

In 2022, the leaders of the EU and its member states met with the SEE6 leaders in Tirana to further reinforce the notion of enlargement and its values (European Council, 06.12.2022). This summit also pushed for acceleration of the accession process where credible reforms to the conditionality were to be rewarded appropriately (European Council, 06.12.2022). Good neighbourly relations were highlighted with the Prespa Agreement and Treaty of Good Neighbourly Relations with Bulgaria in North Macedonia's case (European Council, 06.12.2022). This summit also references the difficulties between states and that there should be more progress to resolve disputes and issues. After the Prespa Agreement, Bulgaria utilized their veto to achieve their goals in North Macedonia, however, due to good progress the EU pressured Bulgaria to allow North Macedonia to initiate negotiations.

An issue with the Balkan enlargement has been the unbalanced relationship between member states and the candidate states where personal benefits have been prioritized instead of the collective growth of the EU. Both Bulgaria and Greece have had interests in North Macedonia that has greatly hindered their EU accession with continuous vetoes while Albania has had disputes with Greece. In 2022 they could finally officially begin accession negotiations 18 years after North Macedonia applied and 13 years after Albania applied for membership. The progress of candidate states depends highly on who is the head of state, as certain governments have been more appealing towards Greece, enabling progression in EU negotiations, but at the expense of local support, as seen with the North Macedonian government post-Prespa. The outcome in North Macedonia with the Prespa Agreement was much to Greece's satisfaction where they achieved their goal of protecting the rights and culture of 'Macedonia'.

The situation in Himara could potentially become a great hinderance in Albania's path to the EU as Greece demands Beleri be released or else, while the EU requests Albania to uphold 'due process'. All eyes are on the Himara case as tensions are rising. An easy option for Albania could be to release Beleri to appease Greece, but that would violate

'the rule of law' of Albania's courts as they would not be independent in their verdict. Greece continuously threatens a veto to block their path, but that would risk further antagonizing other member states as they "hijack" the progress. The arena has been politicized regardless as there is too much at stake.

EU posturing

The EU has shown signs of annoyance regarding Greek hinderance to the enlargement progress as shown with support to both Albania and North Macedonia in some of the disputes. In the Albanian case regarding the Cham minority protesting, Greek complaints to the EU fell on deaf ears showing the tension between the EU and Greece.

Germany has been highly involved in the Balkans in the Prespa Agreement, the "Cham Issue" and maritime dispute with Albania, but rather distances itself from Greece regarding the issues. Their stance highlights how Greece has alienated itself to an extent on the European arena which may be why Greece has taken a more diplomatic approach recently by not utilizing a veto against Albania despite their flaring dispute in Himara.

The Greek role

Greece has had the prime opportunity to be the leading role model and inspiration for the region, but has prioritized personal benefits in their disputes with their neighbours rather delaying the progress. Greece has a lot to benefit from the Balkan enlargement, but has seen an opportunity to achieve their foreign policy goals by instrumentalizing the enlargement through political bargaining. This could be dangerous game as Greece walks on a tight rope between potentially triggering other EU member states, jeopardizing the enlargement or obtaining their goals. In the process of political bargaining with Albania and North Macedonia the perspective of EU membership could suddenly seem too far away for the candidates and the concessions could be viewed as a zero-net sum game which could deter the candidates.

In the case of Albania and their maritime dispute, the case has been taken to the ICJ which would then be out of both state's hands providing a neutral verdict. Regardless, with the Himara case high on the agenda there is much to gain domestically by driving a hard stance towards Albania being perceived in Greece as standing up for Greek minorities abroad. Greece could in the near future use a veto to hinder Albanian progression, but that could potentially derail the entire process and would further alienate Greece within the EU.

Greece is playing chess with the candidate states as pawns on the board used to obtain their foreign policy goals. In North Macedonia they achieved their goal, albeit not entirely to their satisfaction, while in Albania the issue continues to erupt and only time will tell what the outcome will be.

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