# Identity and Ambition: North Macedonia's status seeking through its foreign policy (2006-2017)

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes North Macedonia's foreign policy behavior in the period of 2006-2017, evaluating its status seeking endeavors as a small state within international politics. Using a qualitative methodology which builds upon a case study, the paper researches the determinants of small states' foreign policy, with an emphasis on ambition and capacity. The paper argues that under VMRO DPMNE'S rule, North Macedonia led an identity driven foreign policy, characterized by projects of antiquization, which in turn would cause a latent shift from the country's traditional Euro-Atlantic orientation. Such overreaching ambition, which aimed to elevate the country's international standing, clashed with the geopolitical realities, resulting in diplomatic isolation, regional tensions, and domestic instability. The findings underscore the limitations to identity driven foreign policy for small states and stress the importance of harmonizing aspirations with capacity in ensuring sustainable international standing.

**Keywords:** Status seeking; identity driven foreign policy; overreaching; punching above the weight; nationalism; North Macedonia

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. General ambitions of small states in international politics

Within a global context, mainly influenced by great powers, the study of small states is often undeservedly neglected. Nonetheless, the post-Cold War developments in the international systems which push towards multipolarity, have opened up more space and opportunity for small states' maneuverings in foreign policy (Browning, 2006). However, accounting for the great diversity among small states, the identification of a single model which demonstrates a consistent small states' foreign policy behavior, represents a considerable challenge, since there are wide variations of how small states approach and execute foreign policy. What causes a certain state to demonstrate a particular foreign policy behavior? Are there any renown patterns which determine a small state's foreign policy behavior? Do these patterns stem from a state's size and power?

A method used for defining small states includes the evaluation of their behavior in foreign policy, searching for distinctive patterns which differentiate them as a unique

category of states. Advocates of this approach argue that small states demonstrate specific behavior within the international arena. These behaviors focus on prioritizing local and regional policies over global ones. There is also a tendency to limit interference and involvement in international affairs, to support actively international law and international organizations, as well as to demonstrate preferences for multilateralism as a way of exerting greater influence as well as defending their security against external threats (see Ingebritsen, 1998; Hey, 2003; Long, 2017; Thorhallsson, 2017; etc.). Such stance corresponds exactly with the conventional IR realist and liberal theories, where a state's behavior in international politics is tightly linked to its material power or military capacity (see Morgenthau, 1972; Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2002).

Challenging the traditional IR theories, the recent studies (see Archer et al., 2014; Baldacchino, 2019; Long, 2022; Theys, 2024) argue that small states' ambitions in international politics are not always linked to their tangible resources such as their economic strength or military power. Instead, the more novel theories suggest that small states are often in quest of influencing the formulation of international norms or gaining international recognition for their unique contribution, even when they are in lack of considerable material power. Such approach introduces innovatory perspectives on a small state's behavior, thus assisting in enhancing our understanding on why and how small states may become involved in 'punching above one's weight' behaviors which may, at times, seem irrational or even high-risk foreign policy actions. Consequently, small states' ambitions are increasingly seen as driven by intangible goals such as status, identity, and prestige, rather than being motivated solely by traditional security concerns or economic gains (see Ingebritsen et al., 2012; Carvalho & Neumann, 2015).

## 1.2. North Macedonia's geopolitical situation as a small state

It requires no extensive scholarly debate for one to be able to assert that North Macedonia fits decisively within the category of a small state, as evidenced by most criteria of the small state theory. Its modest population, limited territorial size, and relatively low economic performance collectively reinforce its classification within this category. As small states literature suggests, this category of states tend to reflect their size and power in their foreign policy behavior, and one would assume North Macedonia has not been an exception to this rule. Indeed, as North Macedonia's foreign policy literature suggest, the country, following its independence in 1991, issued the first foreign policy formulations adopted by the Republic of Macedonia's Parliament. This document stressed the alignment of North Macedonia with key United Nations' resolutions, while emphasizing that the strategic interest for the country was joining the European integration process (Sokalski, 2004).

Nevertheless, North Macedonia's foreign policy trajectory has been far from straightforward. From the onset of its independence, the country was faced with

double security challenges: internal inter-ethnic tensions, and external, bilateral disputes with neighboring countries over identity marks such as its constitutional name, flag, language, history, etc. Such challenges were especially pronounced in its relationship with Greece and Bulgaria, both EU member states. As a result, North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integrations, which represent a cornerstone of its internal and external security strategy, were repeatedly obstructed by these neighbors, who leveraged their EU membership to block North Macedonia's international integration processes (Đukanović, 2019).

The country's response to these blockades has been inconsistent. At times, it pursued diplomatic concessions, reaching agreements such as the Interim Accord of 1995 with Greece. At other times, particularly during in the period 2006-2017, North Macedonia initiated a more provoking approach by fostering an ancient Macedonian identity, manifested by the erection of massive statues and monuments around the capital city, which Greece viewed as an appropriation of its own cultural heritage (Dodovski, 2023). Such shift in its foreign policy, characterized by an amplified nationalism, deviates from the typical small state behavior, which often gives way to pragmatism and compromise over confrontation and provocation, all in function of preserving its stability and ensuring international alliances (Zahariadis, 1994).

Given the preceding elaboration, this paper centers on the thesis that North Macedonia's foreign policy, particularly under VMRO-DPMNE's rule in 2006-2017, represents a clear case of overreaching, where domestic actors seek to 'punch over their weight', by pursuing status-seeking ambitions which ultimately lead to unfavorable outcomes. By promoting an ancient identity and by resisting international pressure to resolve critical open bilateral issues, the government aimed to enhance the country's global standing as a sovereign and independent state. However, such strategy, not only hindered the progress towards the Euro-Atlantic integration, but also led to regional tensions and diplomatic isolation of the country. By analyzing North Macedonia's approach towards external foreign policy challenges, during the period of 2006-2017, the article's goal is to use this case in order to analyze the consequences of an overreaching foreign policy of a small state by pursuing symbolic status seeking actions which exceed its capacities to manage the produced diplomatic consequences. Using the case of North Macedonia, the paper attempts to illustrate how such actions result in diplomatic isolation and in delayed integrations into key international organizations, highlighting the dangers of pursuing a high-risk and identity driven foreign policy in the context of small states' international relations.

The significance of this article lies in its focus on failed status-seeking strategies of small states, using North Macedonia's foreign policy behavior under VMRO-DPMNE's rule (2006-2017) as a case study, which diverges from the majority of literature which puts the accent over successful status-seeking behavior. In the current research, small states

are often portrayed as 'punching above their weight' by using their diplomatic agility, soft power, and strategic alliances to improve their status and to gain recognition on the global arena. Scholars such as Baldacchino (2019), Thorhallsson (2018) and Long (2022) illustrate how small states navigate successfully their international relations through their adaptive and pragmatic strategies, thereby strengthening their sovereignty and ensuring an international prestige despite limited material power.

In contrast, this paper shifts the analytical focus towards failed status seeking endeavors. It explores how North Macedonia, through its foreign policy actions (2006-2017), tried to elevate its status by promoting an ancient Macedonian identity, in order to 'create legitimacy vis-à-vis adverse neighbors' (Dodovski, 2023) yet it provoked instead severe confrontations with its southern neighbor, Greece, resulting in a prolonged blockade of its Euro-Atlantic integration efforts. Such behavior ultimately caused diplomatic isolation, domestic unrest and regional volatility, illustrating the risks associated with overreaching foreign policy, when a small state asserts an inflated status without sufficient capacity.

By analyzing a failed status seeking case, this study contributes to a new dimension in the small state literature. Whereas the majority of existing research emphasizes how small states manage to navigate successfully their limitations, this paper offers an insight into the consequences of over-ambition and the cost of failed strategies. It expands the theoretical understanding of small states' status-seeking by showing that not all such endeavors are met with success and that miscalculations may lead to detrimental results both for the foreign policy objectives and for domestic stability. As such, this paper fills an important literature gap and offers a nuanced perspective on the different paths small states may choose in their efforts to elevate status and gain international recognition.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Small State Status-Seeking Behavior

#### 2.1.1. Defining Status-Seeking in Small States

Similar to individuals or societies, small states also pursue status within the international system. They mostly use their foreign policy strategies to seek and gain status in order to become recognized within the global system. Being limited in resources, small states often choose moral authority and symbolic actions to elevate their status among the greater powers. Unable to rely on relevant resources like a powerful army or strong economy, small states seek to expand their influence through cooperative and normative behavior, tending to become acknowledged as the 'good' states among the hierarchical structure of the international order (Carvalho & Neumann, 2015).

Earlier IR approaches have viewed the size of a state either as a limitation or as a distinctive characteristic which imposes a certain behavior in such a state's foreign policy. Studies like that of Peter Baehr (1975), have even brough into question the analytical benefit of studying small states, while a comparative study conducted by Maurice East (1973) has suggested that small states follow distinct decision-making patterns from the greater powers, favoring joint actions and multilateral platforms to compensate for their limited powers. The study's findings emphasize the unique foreign policy constraints that small states face, indicating a distinct behavioral model which focuses mostly on economic issues and unequivocal attitudes (East, 1973).

The reemergence of scientific interest in studying small states has brought to light their distinct status-seeking behavior, particularly through social creativity and moral authority. The renewed focus admits that while small states cannot compete against great powers on conventional power metrics, they often seek status through 'soft power' initiatives, such as pushing forward normative agendas, such as that of human rights promotion, or environmental protection, and performing diplomatic mediations. As Throhallsson (2018) claims, all Nordic states are effectively recognized as pioneers in promoting norms related to human rights, development aid, women's rights, peacekeeping participation, humanitarian activities, and environmental conservation. The Nordic EU member states also wield greater influence and power than their size suggests, particularly in areas like EU environmental and social policy.

In contrast to neo-realist views, which posit that states' behavior is largely dependent upon power distribution within an anarchical system (1979), scholars of small states argue that status aspirations shape these state's foreign policy, as they seek recognition and respect for the values they represent. Small states, aware of their material limitations, often focus on achieving status below that of the great powers rather than alongside them, aspiring instead to be perceived as credible and morally sound actors within international organizations such as the UN (Neumann & Gstöhl, 2004). Such unique status seeking form emphasized the cooperation values, aligning with Peter Lawler's description of the 'good state', which endeavors to perform a positive role within a global normative structure (Lawler, 2005).

Furthermore, small states' status seeking often serves as a way to access platforms for interaction, enhancing their voice and improving their international visibility. Gaining recognition is pivotal not only for identity creation, but also for increasing opportunities for diplomatic engagement and participation in multilateral agreements. Thereof, small states, like the Scandinavian ones, often aim to punch above their weight, focusing on peaceful and cooperative interactions which in turn enhance their utility and relevance at the global level (Thorhallsson, 2018). As de Carvalho and Neumann (2015) argue, status is even more central to small states than to big ones, since it offers an avenue for influence within a hierarchical international system which revolves around power.

## 2.1.2. *Ambition vs. Capacity*

While many small states have scored impressive achievements by utilizing creatively their ability to ¨punch above their weight¨, not all endeavors for status seeking have resulted successful. Small states' literature reveals many cases of failed overly ambitious foreign policy strategies, pointing to a clear disconnect between ambitions and capacity. This phenomenon, often coined as 'overreaching', occurs when small states overestimate their ability to influence international relations, leading to unintended consequences which might aggravate diplomatic relations or even destabilize internal affairs (Keohane, 1967). An illustrative example of a costly overreaching is Island's unsuccessful bid for a UN Security Council seat for the 2009-2010 term. Although Island's intentions were to gain prestige by getting an impermanent seat at UNSC, the initiative resulted into a diplomatic failure due to the limited capacities and resources (Thorhallsson et al., 2022).

Studies have shown that unlike the great powers, small states have only a small margin of error in their foreign policy decision making (Snyder, 1991) Hence, when these states extend beyond their capacities in status seeking, the consequences may be dire. Neumann & de Carvalho (2015) argue that while status seeking is a key component of a small state's behavior, it is associated with certain risks due to the latter's reliance on soft power and moral authority, instead of material power. When small states pursue high ambitions without adequate resources, they may become more vulnerable to diplomatic isolation or backlash, as illustrated by Albania's example during the 1960s, where its attempts to navigate the alliances of the Cold War (initially with USSR and later with People's Republic of China), led eventually to tensions, isolation, and limited international support (Czekalski, 2013).

As the above arguments illustrate, small states' ambitions to gain prestige or recognition, may paradoxically undermine the very status small states seek to achieve. The consequences of overreaching may not only damage the position of the state itself, but also exhaust its limited resources and destabilize regional relations. This reality underlines a critical tension in small states' foreign policy: the desire for recognition often outpaces their ability to sustain such ambition, placing them in a risky position within the international system. The section after the methodology will explore the disconnect between the ambition of a small state's leadership and their true capacity, examining how such discrepancy may result in costly overreaching, and in some cases in long term setbacks.

## 2.2 Methodology

This paper relies on a qualitative methodology which uses a case study, namely the case of North Macedonia, during the 2006-2017, to examine the foreign policy maneuverability and behavior during this period. A qualitative case study is particularly

adequate for the research objectives of this paper, as it allows a deeper and more layered analysis of the much context-based phenomenon such as a small state's status seeking. By focusing particularly on the foreign policy behavior of this country under VMRO-DPMNE's rule during the above-mentioned period, the study aims to uncover the motives, patterns, and implications of certain foreign policy behaviors within the context of a small state. This approach enables the reader to see how the findings of this paper reflect the broader themes in small states' behavior, such as the tendency for status seeking through symbolic or even provocative actions. Furthermore, case studies are useful when exploring unique cases where standard theories may fall short, since they allow greater flexibility in analyzing the multifaceted political dynamics. To offer a more comprehensive analysis, this study is based on a variety of primary and secondary sources from which important data is extracted. Primary data include official governmental documents, political declarations and speeches by the governmental leadership in the period of 2006-2017. These documents offer a clear reflection of the leadership goals, strategies, and reasoning behind their foreign policy decisions.

## 3. North Macedonia's foreign policy behavior and status seeking

### 3.1. Chronology of foreign policy milestones and setbacks since 1990

Though miraculously spared from the violent conflicts surrounding Yugoslavia's dissolution, the newly emerging state encountered its own set of challenges. A myriad of disputes emerging from its neighboring countries, such as Greece and Bulgaria, coupled with internal inter-ethnic tensions, placed North Macedonia in a precarious position which was ultimately reflected on its foreign policy behavior. Found in a situation of internal and external insecurity, the new state decided to pursue the unidirectional foreign policy orientation, proclaiming the agenda for the country's double integration into NATO and the EU (Pendarovski, 2012).

In the regional context, however, North Macedonia established a specific foreign policy doctrine, based on 'equidistance' from its neighbors. According to the supporters of this cautious foreign policy approach, the country was obliged to maintain an 'equidistance' from its neighbors, in order to preserve inter-ethnic peaceful relations, as an internal factor of stability, and join Euro-Atlantic structures, as an external factor of stability.

Such doctrine would soon prove problematic, as maintaining this balance would hinder the country from building close regional ties much vital for its international positioning progress (Marolov & Rodrigues, 2014). Under EU's pressure on the country to work on its minority issues and find solutions for the bilateral disputes, North Macedonia soon abandoned this approach.

Macedonia's admission to the UN in 1993 occurred while the latter was in difficult circumstances. It faced complex disputes with almost all of its neighbors rooted in historical, ethnic, linguistic and other contestations. The country was admitted to the UN not under its constitutional name (then Republic of Macedonia) but under the reference "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", which the Macedonian leadership promptly rejected. However, having no other option, Macedonia's government accepted such condition of membership in this organization, despite the opposition's protest over the national interest being damaged (Marolov and Mitev, 2016).

In 1994, the NATO alliance, through the launched program, Partnership for Peace (PfP), aimed at transforming the former socialist states' armies into professional military formations, placing civilian control over militaries, thus expanding the democratic order and stability. North Macedonia took part in some of this program's activities, simultaneously preparing the formal application for NATO membership, which it would submit only four years later. However, no one could foresee that due to the external blockade and the internal instability, Macedonia's road to NATO and the EU would be much longer (Pendarovski, 2012).

In 2000, North Macedonia signed the Stabilization and Association agreement with the EU, gaining a special status called "potential candidate". Soon after the 2001 conflict, North Macedonia surprised Brussels when in 2004 submitted its candidacy. In 2005 it gained the candidate status by the European Council. Similarly, North Macedonia was progressing towards NATO membership. In 2002 was founded the fundamental trilateral initiative between Macedonia, Albania, and Croatia. This initiative, which later transformed into the Adriatic Charter, aimed at founding a quadrangle in the Balkan's region, which would bring these countries closer to the security umbrella of NATO. The then Republic of Macedonia continued to show its commitment to NATO by sending military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. But, according to Pendarovksi (2012), NATO, besides being a military alliance, in which realm Macedonia had advanced remarkably, it was also an organization which promoted stability through economic progress, social cohesion, and consolidated democracy. In this aspect, North Macedonia was lagging behind.

Regardless of the progress made on the Euro-Atlantic agenda, the open disputes North Macedonia had with its neighbors, in particular with Greece, brought the integration dynamics to a stall point. In the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, Macedonia's bid for membership was turned down. "'We have agreed that an invitation to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia will be issued as soon as a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue has been reached,' NATO Secretary-General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, told a news conference" (Reuters, 2008). The diplomatic endeavors to get North Macedonia into NATO under its provisional name failed as well, despite such option being foreseen in the Interim Accord of 1995. The dispute with Greece obstructed

the EU integration process as well. Although in 2009 North Macedonia received a positive recommendation by the Commission to begin accession talks, the EU officials promptly declared that the (what was then officially called) Republic of Macedonia's further progress towards the EU depended greatly on the resolution of the disputes with its neighbors, especially with Greece (BBC News, 2014).

North Macedonia's government responded to Greece's blockade by filing an application at the International Court of Justice, instituting proceedings against Greece, in regard to the interpretation and implementation of the Interim Accord, signed between the two countries in 1995. The Republic of Macedonia (as it was known at the time) maintained that Greece, by impeding its membership in NATO, had violated the agreement, according to which, Greece would not object Macedonia's membership into international organizations under its provisional name. The Court ruled in favor of the Republic of Macedonia, concluding that Greece "had failed to comply with its obligation" (Georgievski, 2011, p. 19), deriving from the Interim Accord. Yet, the symbolic nature of the Court's ruling, caused the stalemate to continue. Its decision in favor of Macedonia did not affect at all the foreign policy turn-out, as Greece continued to firmly maintain its attitude towards the naming dispute. It became obvious that this political problem with Greece would become a determining factor in stalling Macedonia's integration agenda (Daskalovski, 2017).

The obstruction of the Euro-Atlantic agenda caused a profound disappointment in North Macedonia. Although from 2009 to 2015 the country continued to make some less significant movements towards the EU[1] and NATO, its pace slowed down dramatically. A shift in the foreign policy approach, following the change of government, in 2017, allowed the resolution of bilateral disputes, more specifically the name issue, to become a policy priority. Such approach culminated with the historic Prespa Agreement in 2018. The latter opened North Macedonia's path to become a full NATO member in 2020, demonstrating opposing results from those of VMRO's led staunch and confronting foreign policy. However, despite such progress, another bilateral dispute, this time with Bulgaria, which revolves around historical and linguistic confrontations, has become the most recent obstacle to the state's EU integration (Daskalovski, 2017). The Bulgarian blockade, which echoes elements from the earlier Greek dispute, persists to the present day, has caused recent decoupling of Albania and North Macedonia in the process of EU integration, a decision of the EU commission associated with certain risks regarding the country's and regional security (Muminovic, 2019).

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[1] After Greece's opposition to the start of the negotiations between the EU and the Republic of Macedonia, the EC devised a special mechanism, the High Level Accession Dialogue, in order to maintain the pace of reforms and implementation of the NPAA. This instrument however was not a substitution for the negotiation process.

## 3.2. The disconnection between domestic ambition and geopolitical realities

Under Gruevski's leadership (leader of VMRO DPMNE and Prime Minister) from 2006 to 2017, North Macedonia's foreign policy took on a distinctive and more assertive character, quite different from the previous cautious and reserved approach. Such shift may be attributed to personal and ideological ambitions of the leadership of that time, which in turn, caused ambition to become more and more disconnected from reality. The Gruevski leadership endeavored to create a vision in which North Macedonia emerges as an important cultural and historical player within the Western Balkans, seeking to elevate the country's international positioning through the construction of a nationalistic ideology and cultural revival. Such vision became particularly evident through national projects such as 'Skopje 2014', a large-scale urban reconstruction which aimed to embody the current Macedonian identity linked to the legacy of Ancient Macedonia. As cited in Giorgievska-Jakovleva's chapter (2023), ¨Nikola Gruevski maintained that 'Skopje 2014 is an excellent project, with a meaningful essence, connected to our negated identity and history...¨ (p.195). As part of identity construction, public buildings were redesigned in classic and baroque architectural styles, while many erected monuments and statues dedicated to ancient figures like Philip the II or Alexander the Great became the central feature of the new urban landscape in Skopje (see Hudson & Dodovski, 2023; Staletović and Pollozhani, 2022; Koteska, 2011).

However, this internal ambition contradicted the country's reality of limited geopolitical power. The governments rhetoric about a cultural and ancient Macedonian prestige was incompatible with the constrains posed by international and regional expectations and the pressing need for integration into the euro-Atlantic structures (Giorgievska-Jakovleva, 2023). The narratives erected mainly through Skopje 2014 project, but also through many other political and societal initiatives, clashed directly with Greece's claims on the ancient Macedonian identity. Namely, as Maleski (2013) puts it, the dispute between these two countries has in essence to do with two irreconcilable nationalisms. Given Greece's rigid position and coupled with its superior international standing, North Macedonia ended up being blocked from NATO and EU integration. The tension between North Macedonia's leadership and the diplomatic realities marked a recurring theme in North Macedonia's foreign policy during this period, expressing the incompatibility between a leadership's ambition and realistically achievable foreign policy goals.

## 3.3. Shift in foreign policy behavior and status seeking (2006-2017)

After Greece's veto to Macedonia at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, the leadership marked an 'undeclared' retreat from the EU and NATO agenda, indirectly arguing that accepting a compromise for the name dispute with Greece, is too high of a 'national' price that isn't worth paying (Pendarovski, 2012). In such context, the then Foreign Minister Milosovski stated: "Macedonia was punished not for what we did but for who we

are... We are Macedonians and always will be Macedonians... The risks of any future destabilization of the region will be the direct responsibility of Greece," (BIRN, 2008), indicating a defiant stance and unwillingness to yield to external pressure, even at the risk of destabilization.

This situation led to the symbolic consideration of some other foreign policy alternatives or alliances beyond the West. Despite its declarative continued commitment to NATO and EU aspirations, Gruevski's government intermittently hinted at alternative partnerships, particularly in response to Greece's obstruction of its integration process. Some such endeavors were the reawakening of the Non-Aligned Movement[2], a greater rapprochement with Turkey, argumentation about the need of a new security concept, through the new Euro-Asian security architecture, and the Euro-Asian Economic Community (Pendarovski, 2012). In sum, the government's policies created a dual approach, wherein the country formally retained its pro-Western stance while informally signaling openness to other alliances (Murat and Pelit, 2022).

As the dispute with Greece over the constitutional name remained the most critical obstacle, North Macedonia's foreign policy trajectory suffered many setbacks and oscillations. After the occurrences at the NATO Sumit in 2008, Gruevski's government interrupted the UN sponsored negotiations and instead intensified its internal focus on the Macedonian identity (Gjuzelov & Hadjievska, 2019). This approach, rooted in the cultural and historic symbolism, diverged from the pragmatic need of securing alliances, causing the priorities of the state's foreign policy to fluctuate between symbolic gestures and pragmatic concessions. Despite ongoing talks with Greece on the state's name, the government resisted the pressures to compromise, choosing instead a foreign policy directed towards nationalism and identity politics, which in turn, complicated further the state's euro-Atlantic aspirations.

The nationalistic rhetorics became the central pillar of North Macedonia's foreign policy during 2006-2016, when status seeking manifested through an ambitious identity and cultural rhetoric which sought to establish North Macedonia as a country with a uniqueness in national characteristics and uniqueness in cultural identity (Giorgievska-Jakovleva, 2023). The antiquization campaign led by Gruevski, symbolizes a form of overreaching, wherein the state pursued international recognition of its ancient heritage without taking fully into account the regional and international implications. Such approach was more evident in the tall statue of Alexander the Great, which aimed to emphasize a direct lineage from ancient Macedonians, positioning today's North Macedonia within this globally admired heritage (Stefoska & Stojanov, 2017). Besides this monument, the process also included the renaming of key institutions, such as the Skopje airport and main highways, with references to Alexander the

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[2] A forum of 120 countries, founded in 1961, whose members are not opposed or formally aligned with any of the major power blocks.

Great or his father, Philip II. Skopje 2014 project aimed to reshape the domestic but also international perceptions on the state, by tying its present-day identity to the classic civilization, and by asserting its historical significance within the Balkans. In Goergievska-Jakovleva's (2023) words, Gruevski's goal through the Skopje 2014 project was to present a unique narrative of Macedonia's nation rooted in the struggle for independence, while portraying antiquity as a symbol for 'a glorious past' admired by generations of patriots. The aim was to foster a triumphant national self-image, as a response to the perceived 'identity crisis'. This narrative's impact was to be reinforced by linking it to a national identity represented by monuments of notable historical figures, suggesting a 'true' version of history and identity that had been contested externally. Ultimately, the visual representation of the 'true' history of Macedonia, through Skopje 2014, sought to validate the legitimacy of the country and its bid to join EU and NATO under its constitutional name.

Nevertheless, such ambition led instead to rejection and criticism both internally and externally. It was perceived as an endeavor to reformulate the Macedonian identity by fabricating an ancient legacy, serving more as a tool to build Gruevski's cult of personality than to unify the nation. Instead of fostering unity, it caused intra and inter-ethnic divisions. Beside dividing ethnic Macedonians over the Slavonic versus ancient national identity, it also aggravated inter-ethnic tensions with the Albanian community, who viewed this project as dismissive of the multi-ethnic reality in the country.

Externally, the government's approach under Gruevski deepened tensions with neighboring countries like Greece and Bulgaria, ultimately complicating and stalling the membership perspective of the country into EU and NATO (Giorgievska-Jakovleva, 2023). Greece loudly and staunchly opposed the interpretations of North Macedonia's ancient identity. The southern neighbor's reactions to this project and to the diplomatic rhetoric of Gruevski were quite harshly, labeling them as a provocation and an attempt to appropriate what it considers exclusively Hellenic heritage (Marusic, BIRN, 2018). The tensions led in turn to the hindering of North Macedonia's progress towards Euro-Atlantic integrations. The failure of this approach to elevate the sought international recognition resulted into reinforced isolation of North Macedonia by key western allies, which was counterproductive to the state's long term foreign policy objectives.

### 3.4. Nationalism and status seeking

By embracing an antiquization strategy, the government sought to establish North Macedonia as a country with distinguishable historical and cultural origin within the Balkans' landscape (see Maleski, 2013; Janev, 2015; Skoulariki, 2020; Hudson & Dodovski, 2023). Such approach fits into the small state's status seeking literature, where identity and symbolism are frequently utilized tools to assert a more unique standing at the

international arena. For small states, which lack in considerable military and economic power, the forging of a unique identity may serve as a method to achieve visibility and respect in the global community (Wievel & Ingebritsen, 2018). Gruevski's strategy, however, extended this ambition through foreign policy behavior fueled by nationalism, by focusing on cultural assertions instead of aligning with regional norms or prioritizing diplomatic consensus.

The identity-based approach produced significant unintended consequences, particularly in relation to Greece and the country's international integration agenda. The cultural and ancient identity conflict with the latter enhanced the pending dispute over the name of the country, which had already posed a major obstacle to North Macedonia's aspirations to join NATO and EU (Vangeli, 2011). As North Macedonia's case indicates, attempts to seek status through nationalist driven foreign policy are fraught with risks for small states, as efforts for identity recognition may clash with the interests of more powerful neighbors, leading thus to diplomatic stand offs. Instead of solidifying North Macedonia's standing at the international arena, the identity campaign resulted into fierce opposition by Greece, blocking ultimately its path toward Euro-Atlantic integrations.

### 3.5. Consequences of status seeking over-reaching

#### 3.5.1. Diplomatic isolation

North Macedonia's nationalist policies in 2006-2017 resulted in considerable diplomatic isolation, as the government's refusal to compromise over the name issue with Greece blocked the state's path towards full membership into the EU and NATO. Greece, utilizing its membership position within the latter organizations, effectively vetoed North Macedonia's bid for membership, using its asymmetric position as a tool to apply political pressure over Skopje.

The isolation worsened largely due to Gruevski's identity driven foreign policy behavior, which came into a direct confrontation with the diplomatic demands about integration into the western alliances (see Koneska, 2019; Hudson & Dodovski, 2023). As evidenced by the Progress Report of the EU Commission of 2007, the international community viewed critically the identity politics led by the then government of North Macedonia, deeming it as a factor for obstructing the country's integration process (Önsoy and Pelit, 2022).

Despite an increasing consensus within North Macedonia on the vitality of Euro-Atlantic integration, the nationalistic approach of the Gruevski-led government amplified the rift between North Macedonia and key international actors. The lack of alignment between governmental initiatives on identity building and the diplomatic landscape, positioned North Macedonia as a state unwilling to make necessary compromises, resulting in long-term obstacles to its strategic objectives.

### 3.5.2. Domestic instability

Gruevski's identity driven foreign policy produced instability over North Macedonia's internal social fabric. The emphasis on the Macedonian identity and the antiquation project aggravated further the relations between the Macedonian and Albanian community. Albanians, whose top priority was international integration and who perceived the name issue as secondary, grew frustrated with the government's provoking approach towards its neighbors and its rigidity towards finding a suitable resolution. Such growing tensions eventually culminated with separate diplomatic offensives, led by high level Albanian politicians, also part of the coalition government, who sought to reach a solution independently from their governmental partner. Although the goal of such behavior might have been driven by the high ambition of the Albanian population to join sooner the Euro-Atlantic structures, the effects of such diplomatic demeanor produced further division and mistrust between the two ethnic communities (see Nuhija, 2013; Vankovska, 2017; Pendarovski, 2012).

The conflicting stances between the ethnic Macedonians and Albanians over the national priorities underscored the deepening of incredulity within the domestic landscape of North Macedonia. To Macedonians, the disputes with it neighbors (initially Greece and later Bulgaria) embodied an existential struggle to safeguard their ethnic and national identity, while to Albanians, who were feeling as 'hostages' of such lingering disputes, the intense preoccupation with the ethnic identity represented a serious barrier much detrimental to the state's integration agenda (Pendarovski, 2012). Hence, the then VMRO's policies escalated inter-ethnic tensions, eroding internal cohesion much needed for sustainable and stable internal governance and foreign policy.

### 3.5.3. The impact on the global reputation of North Macedonia

The long-term effect of Gruevski's led government's choices in foreign policy over North Macedonia's global reputation illustrates the perils of a small state's status seeking overreaching. Instead of establishing itself as a flexible and recognized state, the identity and status seeking campaign resulted into a negative international perception. The cultural assertion displayed through different projects and rhetorics was interpreted by many as a failure to approximate the country with the regional norms, thus lowering the credibility of North Macedonia as a serious candidate for membership into EU and NATO. As Fidanovski (2018) states, the consequences of the name dispute, exacerbated by the domestic politics, have disproportionately affected (North) Macedonia in comparison to Greece, resulting in significantly more consequences for the country, including economic hardships, inter-ethnic division, and eventually international integrations blockades.

In conclusion, North Macedonia's status seeking behavior demonstrated during Gruevski's government (2006-2017), offers a warning example of shortcomings which

small states face when their ambitions outstrip their capacities. Whereas status and identity may be crucial for the international standing of a small state, they must be balanced by a realist diplomacy in order to avoid the costly consequences of overreaching. As the case of North Macedonia demonstrates, identity driven policies, despite their ambition to elevate north Macedonia's status, in the end compromised its global position and exposed its limitations.

## 4. Conclusion

North Macedonia's foreign policy trajectory illustrates the delicate equilibrium that small state should navigate between identity assertion and diplomatic and security tangible achievements within a complex international setting. The governance of VMRO DPMNE in 2006-2017, marked by an identity driven nationalist strategy, strived to position North Macedonia as a culturally distinctive and historically abundant state, but such vision collided with the regional and geopolitical realities. Instead of elevating the country's status or guaranteeing greater recognition, such approach exacerbated tensions with neighboring countries, leading to diplomatic stand-offs and delays in the international integration agenda. By emphasizing symbolism and historical claims over cooperative diplomacy, North Macedonia fell victim to considerable impediments and adjournments, which in turn show the risks of overreaching in small state's foreign policy behavior with limited maneuverability.

The nationalistic policies of the Gruevski-led government reveal the potential pitfalls of small states identity-driven status seeking, especially when they fail to parallelly align with international norms and mobilize tangible support from powerful allies. The antiquization project of North Macedonia, which sought to link the national identity to Ancient Macedonia's heritage, alienated further Greece and exacerbated the dispute around the constitutional name, resulting in an ultimate blockade to EU and NATO integration. This case study illustrates how symbolic actions, when detached from diplomatic considerations, may lead to a firmer external resistance which opposes and impedes an elevation of status sought by a small country. In North Macedonia's case, the ambition to assert an identity which clashes with that of its neighbors, results as costly in terms of its progress towards international integrations, which in turn, are vital for guaranteeing this small state's internal and external security.

Embracing a more conciliatory and pragmatic foreign policy, as the new government did after 2017, reflects a critical lesson about the role of diplomatic adaptability for small states. The signing of the Prespa Agreement of 2018, for instance, enabled the state's full membership into NATO (Daskalovski, 2023), demonstrating that compromise and alignment with regional and international expectations may bring about substantial progress. Such change underscores the effectiveness of a cooperative strategy of

small states, which often benefit more from alliances and regional stability than from isolated and disputed identity assertions (Walt, 1990).

Within a wider context of small states' literature, the experience of North Macedonia illustrates the limitations and shortfalls of an identity-driven unyielding approach in seeking higher status and wider recognition. For small states, diplomatic flexibility and alignment with international norms are usually more effective than nationalistic overreaching, as the former offer a more sustainable path towards integration and recognition. The journey of North Macedonia from isolation to gradual integration indicates that whereas identity may indeed be a valuable asset, it still needs to be balanced by foreign policy pragmatism which takes into account regional dynamics and domestic diversity.

Lastly, North Macedonia's foreign policy underscores a critical insight for small states navigating the global arena: whereas status and identity are an important element which drives their international standing, sustainable recognition and stability are achieved when these ambitions are matched by awareness grounded in geopolitical realities and diplomatic limitations imposed from regional power dynamics. In the context of small states, the case of North Macedonia is a reminder of the value of pragmatism, embracement, and strategic alignment, offering a blueprint for navigating the complexities of status seeking within an interdependent world.

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