NORTH MACEDONIAN DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS: IMPACT OF VMRO-DPMNE’S ALTERATION FROM EUROPEANIZATION TO ETHNO-NATIONALISTIC NARRATIVE

Emin Karišik
Univerzitet u Novom Pazaru, Republika Srbija
emin.karisik@uninp.edu.rs

Abstract
This paper’s primary focus moves around influence of VMRO DPMNE’s (The Internal North Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for North Macedonian National Unity; hereinafter: VMRO-DMNE) alteration of political strategy on the process of Europeanization and does that influence on Europeanization also mean that there is influence on democratization as well, or there is no potential causal relation. The aim is to define what Europeanization means by demystification of the Union’s role in democratization of North Macedonia through the European Union’s (hereinafter: EU) member state building alongside with definition of the term democratization. Thereupon observation of North Macedonian transition in this paper will move around two waves of Europeanization set through timeframes. First wave took place from 1991 to 2006 and second from 2007 until now (still ongoing). Theoretical background deliberated by prominent authors proved causative connection between the processes of democratization and Europeanization in North Macedonia alongside with results from analysis of the two waves of Europeanization that proved that VMRO-DPMNE’s alteration of political strategy from Europeanization narrative to ethno-nationalistic one has contributed to negative democratization trajectory of North Macedonia since 2007.

Keywords: Europeanization, Democratization, VMRO-DPMNE, ethno-nationalist narrative, alteration of political strategy

PROCES DEMOKRATIZACIJE SJEVERNE MAKEDONIJE: UTICAJ PRELASKA VMRO-DPMNE-a SA PROCESA EVROPEIZACIJE NA ETNONACIONALISTIČKI NARATIV

Apstrakt
Primarni fokus ovog rada se kreće oko uticaja VMRO DPMNE-a (Vnatrešna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija-Demokratska partija za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo; u daljem tekstu: VMRO-DMNE) na izmjene političke strategije o procesu evropeizacije i da li taj uticaj na evropeizaciju znači da postoji uticaj i na demokratizaciju, ili ne postoji potencijalna uzročna veza. Cilj je definisati šta znači evropeizacija pod demistifikacijom uloge Unije u demokratizaciji Sjeverne Makedonije kroz izgradnju države članice Europske unije (u daljnjem tekstu: EU) uz definiciju pojma demokratizacija. Nakon toga, posmatranje sjevernomakedonske tranzicije u ovom radu će se kretati oko dva talasa evropeizacije postavljena kroz vremenske okvire. Prvi talas se desio od 1991. do 2006. godine, a drugi od
INTRODUCTION

The spread of democracy was speeded up after Cold War ended. In the case of Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia spread of democracy affected the last remaining non-democratic parts of Europe and as such it became prevailing governmental system in Europe. It is not questionable whether democracy became the prevailing governmental system in Europe or at least the one everyone is striving for, but did the process of Europeanization had significant impact on it. Since its independence North Macedonia set its path of strengthening its stateness through process of Europeanization which predominated after the independence, however this path was challenged when VMRO-DPMNE became ruling party and effects of that change are main focus of this paper.

The relevance of this kind of case study lies in the results that came after comparing the time when Europeanization narrative was predominant and vice versa. However, relevance is not just the result of the research but also the fact that Western Balkan countries are facing with difficulties on their path towards the EU. The difficulties do exist to a certain extent because of the ethnic or nationalistic tendencies, which are not in line with the values EU is promoting. Additionally it is interesting to see dynamics in different Western Balkans countries and to try to identify patterns and to be able to address them properly.

Therefore, the best way to test the dependence of the North Macedonian democratization process on Europeanization is to analyze and compare it to the period when the Europeanization was not in focus, in this case during the rule of VMRO-DPMNE; and to see whether alteration from Europeanization to ethno-nationalistic narrative downgraded democratization trajectory in North Macedonia through comparing various democratic indexes and parameters while using both normative and non-normative analytical tools. Literature used are books of Robert Dahl and Geoffrey Pridham for the theoretical background (Chapter 1), while in chapters that follow various scholar articles, reports by FreedomHouse, BTI, European Commission etc. as well as some prominent websites are used as sources.

First chapter’s focus is to deliberate theoretical backgrounds of Europeanization and democratization and to prove their interrelation. Thereafter retrospective analyses of North Macedonian political scene from its independence appear. That period was in some way the first wave of Europeanization that was carrying a lot of difficult political decisions and reforms that were supposed to establish pillars of democracy in independent North Macedonia. Taking into account short amount of time that has passed from the independence itself, the oscillatory
movements on the North Macedonian political scene were not unexpected at all, nor were they unhealthy for the processes of Europeanization and democratization (quite the opposite). This paper will look into first wave of Europeanization as its Chapter 2 and by doing so it will make an overture to the process of Europeanization of North Macedonia in the 21st century (2nd wave of democratization), which will be tackled in the third chapter.

What will be researched and analyzed in Chapter 3 are events that began to occur more (e.g. elections’ irregularities, policy of antiquization, wiretapping scandal), after the successful consolidation of political power by the, back then ruling political party, VMRO-DPMNE and its new leader Nikola Gruevski. VMRO-DPMNE’s shift from Europeanization to ethno-nationalistic narrative in the second wave of democratization resulted in stagnation of North Macedonia’s path towards the EU, and also caused downgrade of democratization processes in the country. The possibility of having external factor involved in the process of alteration of narratives will also be analyzed.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: EUROPEANIZATION, DEMOCRATIZATION

According to Pridham, the process of state-building, democratization and EU enlargement are in causal connection with each other in almost all Post-Communist States of Europe where one category permeates the other (Pridham, 2002). Europeanization is therefore defined as:

[Europeanization] generates powerful, broad-based and long-term support for the establishment of democratic institutions because it is irreversible, and sets in train a cumulative process of economic and political integration that offers incentives and reassurances to a very wide array of social forces … it sets in motion a very complex and profound set of mutual adjustment processes, both within the incipient democracy and in its interactions with the rest of the Community, nearly all of which tend to favor democratic consolidation … in the long run such ‘democracy by convergence’ may well prove the most decisive international dimension of democratization, but the EU has yet to prove that case fully. (Whitehead, 2005, p.19)

Europeanization as a conceptual framework implies, thus, fulfillment of membership criteria which along with many other aspects include meeting democratic standards. Certain amount of democratization is needed to be reached in order to get closer to the EU. Whereas democratization as process is defined by Robert Dahl in his book “On Democracy” as transition to democracy through 5 categories:

1. Governments and parliaments are elected through secret ballot in free, general, equal, competitive, and regular elections.

2. The elected governments and parliaments possess decision-making powers, which are limited only by the rule of law and separation of powers but not by actors or structures without democratic legitimacy.

3. There is freedom of opinion, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of movement, and freedom of information.
4. Citizens have access to pluralistic mass media, which are independent from the state.
5. Rule of law and separation of powers are well established. (Dahl, 2015)

In inclination with above mentioned the phase of democratization in North Macedonia was perceived as both national state-building and Europeanization process due to the features which it contains that are also features followed in process of accession to the European Union. In addition, according to Diane Ethier, the so called “European conditionality” plays very important role in causative relation between the two. (Ethier, 2003) Namely, the obvious reward for reforms orchestrated by the EU would be membership which on long turn provides, according to political strategy of potential member countries, prosperity, stability and peace; and this will be the case as long as country stays on the path of EU enlargement. This instrumentalization of strong foreign political tool (conditionality) of the EU is enabled by signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (Council of the European Union 2001).

The very existence of Copenhagen criteria (European Commission, 1993), as a legal framework needed to be met in order to become a new member state, is to some extent guideline for democratization. When it comes to leverage needed in case of North Macedonia, its public opinion was always predominately pro-European (which is also proved by the most recent referendum (International Republican Institute, 2018)) therefore being the most important validation and justification of the EU. While Europeanization and democratizations are then clearly linked, according to Tanja Borzel, there is however public animosity whenever EU demands for compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria which are mostly perceived as clash with nationalist beliefs, e.g. regarding the role of minorities and the extradition of war criminals to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. (Borzel, 2011) The legacies of the past resonate less with the EU’s reform agenda and undermine its legitimacy. (Borzel, 2011) Thereupon the clash in case of North Macedonia under the rule of VMRO-DPMNE in 2nd wave of Europeanization was obvious and initial spark was the name of the country, due to the dispute with EU member state Greece.

**FIRST WAVE OF EUROPEANIZATION (1991-2006)**

After the 1990s, the North Macedonia entered the transition process, which involves the transformation of ownership relations, the market economy, the transition from one to multi-party system, pluralism of interests, etc. at the same time, it meant entering an early and painstaking phase of democratization, aiming at democracy as its political system. Since its independence North Macedonian strategic goal was European Union membership. Taking into consideration that the role of the EU was gradually raising from the 1990s and it’s more present and powerful position on the global political scene, the EU has patented the way of growth of influence through its strong neighborhood coherence and as such this patent is applicable and therefore compatible with North Macedonian accession vision. The first formal initiations were:
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in 1996 when the “Poland and Hungary Assistance for the Restructuring of the Economy” (Risteska, 2019) program was signed, followed by a cooperation agreement and opening of the Office of the EU Resident Envoy in Skopje in 1998. (Risteska, 2019) Stabilization and Association Process started with positive assessment of a feasibility study which opened door for North Macedonia to finally sign in 2001 Stabilization and Association Agreement. (Risteska, 2019)

In first wave of Europeanization VMRO-DPMNE was ruling political party just once when they won 1998 parliamentary elections (Republican State Electoral Commission, 1998) For the first time they formed coalition with the main Albanian party and year after they won presidential election as well. Prior to this VMRO-DPMNE followed right-wing politics with national-conservative incentive. However, in their mandate they followed very centrist politics, with less national-conservative incentive and with allowance of European assistance and harmonization with their conditionality. (Andreassen, 2011) Internal turmoil and inter-ethnic conflict in 2001 have enabled this behavior of the party which was dependent on the international mediation and assistance due to the fragile stateness of the country they ruled. (Andreassen, 2011) Hence 1st wave of Europeanization process continued with openly pro-NATO and pro-European president Boris Trajkovski (1956 – 2004)

Researching indexes of democracy from 1999 to 2006 done by FreedomHouse, North Macedonia shows stable democratic trends with a mild fall in 2001 and 2002. Namely, the overall index of democracy was 3.0 (Freedom House, 1999) in 1999 (Freedom House, 2001), then in 2001 there is a blistering decline of 0.5 (Freedom House, 2002) and in 2002 it was a delicate fall in the democratic index showing 4.0 (Freedom House, 2002). It is interesting to note that 2001 was actually year of internal turmoil and ethnic conflicts in North Macedonia that ended the same year with the mediation and assistance of the European Union but its outcomes were projected in following year and that’s why democratic performance was showing the worst score in 2002. The European assistance and presence as mediator in the 2001 conflict resulted in signing Ohrid agreement. This agreement on short-term did provide peace and legal framework for structural reforms in order to boost democratization and process of integration towards the membership and in same time effected positively on the democratization trajectory. The scores that came after 2002 approve this claim, because in periods from 2003-2006 scores were 3.0 each year (Freedom House, 2002).

Europeanization resulted in two-sided transitional position of North Macedonia. That two-sided transitional position contained on one side issues like economy, rule of law, functioning of the state administration and civil freedoms whereas on another national identity, statehood and sovereignty predominate. It seems like constant struggle between the two sides where while analyzing it resembles that North Macedonian stateness is still fragile to cope with some internal problems. Clear example is 2001 inter-ethnic conflict between Albanians and North Macedonian, when UCK even carried out failed coup d’état and without European assistance it was obvious that the conflict wouldn’t be resolved by peace treaty. The gap created by North Macedonian fragile stateness is the gap filled by European assistance.

Nonetheless such events turn the focus of a democratic narrative on the one which is linked to ethno-nationalism and then the process of democratic transition is
neglected by default. And while North Macedonia shows steady progress regarding reforms and adaptation towards EU standards, there are signs that not all is well. The European Commission in 2005 and 2006 writes that North Macedonia “faces major challenges in implementing and, especially, effectively enforcing the legislation” (Commission of European Communities, 2005), that “political changes still have a deep impact” on public administration (Commission of European Communities, 2005) and that “the judicial system shows the same serious shortcomings as in previous years affecting both its independence and its efficiency”. (Commission of European Communities, 2005) Rule of law is not deemed to be fully consolidated, and a sufficient degree of compliance with membership criteria for opening membership negotiations – despite candidate status – is not yet reached (Commission of European Communities, 2005).

The Europeanization process was still very present in political agenda, media, debates etc. in 1st wave of Europeanization because of the leverage that European Union enjoyed in almost all spheres of political life in North Macedonia. According to Vachudova, leverage can be divided in two components: active and passive, where the passive leverage is the attraction of membership and active leverage refers to all the efforts and instruments available to the EU in imposing reforms. (Milada, Vachudova, 2005) Active leverage has little or no impact if the passive leverage is not present. The leverage that existed in the 1st wave was slowly, but gradually being challenged in 2nd wave of democratization on a both active and passive basis.


In the 2006 elections VMRO-DOMNE campaigned for their rebirth after the defeat 4 years prior. This time they were successful with more than 32% of votes. (IzbornaArhiva.mk, 2006) While this election met most of the international standards at the end, in the same time in the first half of the election campaign serious violations occurred overshadowing the democratic processes. (ODIHR, 2006) The coalition formed was between VMRO-DPMNE and Albanian DPA party. The Europeanization process continued with new economic renewal agenda on the basis of which they won elections. According to BTI index North Macedonia reached all time high score in “democracy status” pointing 8.0/10.0 in 2008. However, due to the slow implementation of Ohrid agreement’s deal, main Albanian party DUI refused to participate in national assembly’s sessions and in addition unsuccessful bid in April to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (ODIHR, 2008) resulted government to dissolve itself and to announce new early parliamentary elections.

The new policy preached by VMRO-DPMNE in these elections have different characteristics, characteristics of ethno-nationalistic and right-wing populist incentives. Frozen process of joining the EU and NATO because of the “name dispute” with Greece was just initial spark for the alteration of political strategy. Namely, the alteration from Europeanization to ethno-nationalistic narrative with focus on economic renewal. This situation has constantly been used for personal political purposes which has enabled Nikola Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE to take absolute victory in the 2008 elections with almost 49% of votes. (IzbornaArhiva.mk,
Also these elections went in a barely “democratic” manner with serious regulations and violations of international standards. Clear example was that 88% of people was eligible to vote (ODIHR, 2008, p.2) which is basically impossible according to demography of a country. Once again, the clash explained by Tanja Borzel earlier was now the main turning point for North Macedonian politics which will, in coming phases of the 2nd wave of democratization, shake democratic pillars in their current form and influence processes of democratization and Europeanization.

Nonetheless, 2009 EU Commission’s assessment was satisfactory when it comes to democratic freedoms in the country (Commission of European Communities, 2009). However, according to interviews done by Thorsten Gromes there were instances of intimidation undermined these freedoms. (Gromes, 2009, p.18) Furthermore, the Vice-President of the Social Democratic Union of North Macedonia, Gordan Georgiev in interview for Gromes’ report “Between Impositions and Promises: Democracy in North Macedonia”, complained: “In small towns, people are afraid to talk to me, when they know I am from the opposition”. The political adviser Eben Friedman, also in interview, added that many people believed that they were under state surveillance. (Gromes, 2009, p.18) Therefore it is incomplete just to take indexes and reports in order to measure level of democracy, because there is limitation due to the fact that some of the consequences made in politics might arrive 1 or 2 years later in real life and only then they can affect those indexes. That is approved both by indexes in the aftermath of 2001 escalation as well as 2008 elections’ violations that were noticeable in BTI indexes only after two years. Particularly, index of political participation felt from 8.8 in 2008 to 8.5 in 2010, whereas sub index of free and fair elections had serious downgrade from 9 to 8 (BTI, 2018) therefore effecting the overall index and approving previously mentioned “late effect”.

In period that followed 2008 political tensions were rising gradually on almost all levels. New ethno-nationalistic narrative pursued by VMRO-DPMNE escalated with the new policy of antiquization which is considered as serious provocation by Greece and the EU and has resulted in worsening bilateral relation with the both. (Dzuvalekovska, Ilievska, 2012, p.225) As a response to Greece and the European Union through this policy VRMO-DPMNE have completely changed the look of the capital city with dozens of neo-classical and baroque, ultra-expensive governmental buildings, fountains, monuments etc. This policy also meant changing the name of the main highway and airport and giving them the names inspired from the ancient North Macedonian history. Also, history books were “redesigned” and one completely new approach to North Macedonian history appeared. (Andreassen, 2011) This kind of policies has angered the professional public and the civil sector and it has been thought that there is huge distrust in the ruling majority. However, this was once again denied because on early 2011 parliamentary elections VMRO-DPMNE won again the majority of votes, almost 40%. (IzbornaArhiva.mk, 2011) Ethno-nationalistic policies such as VMRO-DPMNE’s proposal of a bill that extend free health care and other services to members of the security forces who fought in the 2001 conflict, most of whom were ethnic North Macedonian, but not the Albanian paramilitary veterans (Freedom House, 2013) resulted in further polarization of North Macedonian society with new interethnic conflicts between North Macedonians and Albanians in 2012.
According to EU Commission’s report on North Macedonian progress on Europeanization, North Macedonia officially stagnated, and in some chapters, they even made a few steps backwards. (European Commission, 2013) The most critical was the rule of law with special concern about corruption. It was obvious that new politics preached by VMRO-DPMNE’s government represented a process of regression on the paths of Europeanization and democratization and in all possible spheres brought stagnation, except on one and that was economy. Accordingly, economic successes were one of the main legitimacies of VMRO-DPMNE governance. However, the North Macedonian alteration toward more neutral military position and emphasizing relations with Russia resonated among ethnic North Macedonians and has brought even more public support to VMRO-DPMNE. 2014 presidential elections are clear example of that, because the absolute majority voted for Gjorge Ivanov 51% (IzbornaArhiva.mk, 2014).

While busy with consolidating power, ruling party was in 2015 under serious allegations of corruption and money laundering scandals. (Crisis Group Europe. n.d.) Namely huge wiretapping scandal occurred with real proofs of corruption, money laundering, conflict of interests and media control; all of which being orchestrated by chief leaders of VMRO-DPMNE. The scandals followed seriously damaged legitimacy of their governance and resulted in huge critics from the European Union. All of previously mentioned is more than clear while comparing indexes since 2010. Namely in 2010, according to FreedomHouse, overall democratic score was 3.79 while at the end of 2016 it was 4.29. (Damjanovski, 2016) These scores and scandals brought North Macedonian society in one of the most serious political crises since its independence. This crisis was followed by a ‘colorful revolution’ and resignation of many ministers. The consequences of the alteration of political strategy, according to above mentioned, were serious and they were both internally and externally spurred.

The following 2016 early parliamentary elections brought an end to this ethno-nationalistic destructive narrative of North Macedonian politics, because SDSM formed coalition with the main Albanian party DUI (ДЕМОКРАТ, 2016) and their political agenda is the one based on Europeanization and NATO path with “good-neighborliness” characteristics. The years that will come will be politically marked as years of “recovery and reconstruction”, and Prespa Agreement in 2018/9 as well as Albanian being second official language in the North Macedonia.

CONCLUSION

In order to go through a successful state-building process after the fall of Yugoslavia North Macedonia shifted its politics toward the European Union while
trying to democratize itself. The interrelation between Europeanization and democratization is explained by deliberations of prominent authors at the beginning of this essay. The mutual inclusiveness between the two, namely is North Macedonian democratization stable and possible without perusing Europeanization narrative was analyzed by chapters that followed. In both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 timeframes were set in order to compare democratization trajectory when Europeanization narrative predominated (Chapter 2) with the one when ethno-nationalistic narrative was the main political course (Chapter 3).

According to my research question – whether alteration from Europeanization to ethno-nationalistic narrative downgraded democratization trajectory in North Macedonia? – various democratic indexes were analyzed and they showed that in 1st wave of Europeanization democratic trajectory was stable and positive. This wave was predominately characterized by North Macedonian progress on the path of Europeanization which consequently influenced positively on the process of democratization and even helped to solve major internal conflicts by European mediation. However, the escalations that followed resulted in alteration of North Macedonian political narrative from predominant European to ethno-nationalistic one. After the Greek blockade of North Macedonian NATO membership various political moves (among which the most critical one was new policy of antiquization) were done by VMRO-DPMNE that worsened bilateral relations between the countries, deepened inter-ethnic conflicts within the country and brought stagnation in all spheres regarding process of joining the EU.

Therefore, the ethno-nationalistic narrative promoted by VMRO-DPMNE resulted in serious downgrade of North Macedonian democratization trajectory. In addition, the absence of Europeanization in North Macedonia resulted not just in lack of democratization, but in deepening the polarization of North Macedonian society which might have triggered domino effect on the neighboring countries. However, there are plenty of examples throughout history where there is no Europeanization involved but the country is undergoing successful democratization process, in North Macedonia that is proved not to be the case and one of many possible reasons for the fragility of the state.

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North Macedonian democratization process: impact of VMRO-DPMNE’s alteration from Europeanization to ethno-nationalistic narrative


Shodno našem istraživačkom pitanju - da li je promjena od evropeizacije do etnonacionalističkog narativa umanjila putanju demokratizacije u Sjevernoj Makedoniji? - analizirani su različiti demokratski indeksi koji su pokazali da je u prvom talasu evropeizacije demokratska putanja bila stabilna i pozitivna. Ovaj talas je uglavnom karakterisao napredak Severne Makedonije na putu evropeizacije, što je posledično pozitivno uticalo na proces demokratizacije, pa čak i pomoglo da se veliki unutrašnji sukobi reše evropskim posredovanjem. Međutim, eskalacije koje su uslijedile rezultirale su izmjenom sjevernomakedonskog političkog narativa iz dominantnog evropskog u etnonacionalistički. Nakon grčke blokade članstva Sjeverne Makedonije u NATO-u, VMRO-DPMNE je poduzela različite političke poteze (među kojima je najkritičniji bila nova politika antikvizacije) koji su pogoršali bilateralne odnose između zemalja, produbili međuetničke sukobe unutar zemlje i donijeli stagnaciju u svim sferama u vezi sa procesom pridruživanja EU.

Stoga je etnonacionalistički narativ koji je promovirao VMRO-DPMNE rezultirao ozbiljnom degradacijom putanje demokratizacije Sjeverne Makedonije. Osim toga, izostanak evropeizacije u Sjevernoj Makedoniji rezultirao je ne samo nedostatkom demokratizacije, već i produbljivanjem polarizacije sjevernomakedonskog društva što je moglo izazvati domino efekat na susjedne zemlje. Međutim, kroz historiju ima dosta primjera u kojima nije uključena evropeizacija, ali zemlja prolazi kroz uspješan proces demokratizacije. U Sjevernoj Makedoniji se pokazalo da to nije slučaj i jedan je od mnogih mogućih razloga za krhkorost države.