Symbolic Threats and National Identity Construction: The Name, Language, and Territorial Disputes in North Macedonia's EU Accession Process

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Abstract. Theoretical approach of the external constraints that the North Macedonia meets in its path to the EU accession from the perspective of national identity construction for recognition, as the name dispute with Greece and Bulgaria about the country's name, language and historical-territorial claims is of great interest. Qualitative case analysis and "symbolic threat" theory from social psychology as a core analytical framework, in this study, will be systematically analyzed and explored the "symbolic threat" mechanism and identity politics in these two cases. The research results show that the national names, language and territory are not only the basic content of national identity, but also the space for contesting power and history in international politics, and have a significant impact on the process of North Macedonia's European integration. This study explores how symbolic threat affects the EU accession process in national identity conflicts and reveals the impact of national identity on international political decision-making and national destiny.

Keywords: Symbolic Threat, National Identity, European Union, European Integration

1. Introduction

The construction of national identity is not a static process, it is a dynamic process that is ongoing in the process of dialogue and interaction with "others". It is based on the narration of history, the contest over the symbols and the process of boundaries delimitation to answer the question of "Who we are" [1].

Relationship between Greece, Bulgaria and North Macedonia is a good example of the process in which national identity is constructed. Since North Macedonia joined the ranks of candidate countries for EU membership in 2005, its accession has been full of dead ends. Greece and Bulgaria have huge values differences with North Macedonia over the country's name, language and territory. When there are values and worldview differences between in-groups and out-groups, people subjectively feel some kind of threat and this may in turn increase their bias toward out-groups. Such a threat is called a "symbolic threat". Consequently, Greece and Bulgaria felt a "symbolic threat" from North Macedonia so that Greece and Bulgaria hindered North Macedonia accession to the European Union. Greece objected to use of Macedonia's name and refused to consent to its accession to the European Union. Finally, in 2018, the two sides reached the Prespa Agreement,

according to which Macedonia was renamed the "Republic of North Macedonia" and Greece agreed to Macedonia accession to the European Union. Recently Bulgaria has also put up similar symbolic objections over language and identity. In March 2020 Bulgaria asked the EU to avoid using the term "Macedonian language" in documents and papers and use instead "the official language of the Republic of North Macedonia". Then in June 2025 the Bulgarian government also asked for North Macedonia's EU accession report to be revised, demanding that "Macedonian language and identity" be changed to "modern Macedonian language and identity". The demand of Bulgaria is also causing discontent among the North Macedonian government which feels that Bulgaria is attempting to assimilate the people of North Macedonia and undermine their national identity.

The purpose of this paper is to address the following central question: In what ways have symbolic threats shaped the dilemmas in constructing national identity in North Macedonia? How do these symbolic threats affect the accession of North Macedonia to the European Union in a tangible way? From the perspective of national identity construction, this paper analyzes the core contentions between Greece, Bulgaria and North Macedonia during North Macedonia accession process to the European Union. It explores how the contentions between the parties are affected by the country's name, language and history and reveals the logic of identity politics reflected in the contentions between the parties. This paper also provides new empirical basis and analytical approaches for the theoretical discussion on how symbolic threats shape national identity construction.

2. Literature review

Psychological research shows that "identity" is one of the basic characteristics of humans, representing something profound, fundamental, enduring, or essential. The concept of national identity first appeared in the field of political science in the 1970s. However, because there was considerable controversy over its conceptual definition, it did not receive much attention from scholars at the time. As early as the 1970s, Tajfel proposed the theory of social identity. He posited that the psychological process of social identity comprises three components: social categorization, social comparison, and positive differentiation [2]. People enhance the perceived similarity between themselves and members of their group through self-categorization, while social comparison and positive differentiation both serve to maintain and boost individual self-esteem. Tajfel's theoretical model provides a micro-level springboard for understanding the emotional attachments that people make with the nation-state as a kind of "in-group" membership. Western "identity politics" in this sense, is, in reality, nothing more than a tactical tool used by the ruling class to plant the seeds of divisiveness, create divisions, and incite self-inflicted slaughter among the ruled. When the ruling class blows up pre-existing social differences (especially those based on identity) through controlled mass media and allied social organizations, the ruling class intentionally magnifies these differences. This calculated manipulation makes the ruled divide and rule along lines of identity, turn against each other, and thus never unite in opposition to the current power structure [3]. This form of identity politics, in other words, is nothing more than playing on the cognitive differences in identity which one finds during social categorification.

Benedict Anderson proposed in Imagined Communities that a "nation" is an imagined community, yet it is not a fictional one. Rather, it is a psychological construct connected with historical and cultural changes, rooted in the deep consciousness of the people through historical accumulation. The reason "nation" can evoke such intense attachment in people's hearts is that this imagined community is inseparable from things that individuals have no choice over—such as birthplace, skin color, and language. Among them, language, as the most important medium, gives

this imagination an ancient and natural power. Thus, people perceive a selfless and noble sense of sacrifice within the image of "nation" [4]. These classic theories profoundly reveal the ways in which "identity" is constructed, but sometimes they place too much emphasis on the cultural and psychological aspects, while providing insufficient analysis of the constraining effects of rigid factors such as state power, institutional arrangements, and international politics on identity formation.

Social identity forms the foundation of national identity, and the strengthening of national identity contributes to the consolidation of social identity. Regarding national identity, the Spanish scholar Montserrat Guibernau, in her book The Identity of Nations, adopts a combined theoretical and comparative research approach to provide a detailed analysis of the concept of national identity and five dimensions of its construction: psychological, cultural, territorial, historical, and political. The five dimensions she summarized also provide a research paradigm for the formation of national identity. However, her research primarily focuses on Western Europe. For nations like those in the Balkans that have experienced border reconfigurations and intense ethnic conflicts, the explanatory power and dynamic applicability of this model remain to be tested. This limitation is confirmed in case studies of identity politics in Catalonia, Spain. A large number of academic studies have analyzed how Catalonia fostered the birth of cultural nationalism through the Catalan Renaissance movement, and subsequently, through language policies, history education, and the preservation of unique cultural institutions, successfully constructed and maintained a strong regional national identity within a multi-ethnic country. However, these studies have focused on analyzing the relationship between national identity and subnational unit identity, failing to fully explain the security dilemma triggered when a nation's overall identity is denied by other sovereign states at the international level [5].

Domestic Chinese scholars began focusing on the issue of national identity in the early 21st century. Taiwanese scholar Jiang Yihua defines national identity as "the psychological process by which an individual confirms their affiliation with a nation and perceives the nature of that nation." Su Xiaolong, however, argues this definition is too broad, asserting that national identity encompasses at least the progressive meanings of a sense of difference and similarity, belonging, loyalty, idealism, and stance. Yin Dongshui proposes that from a constructivist perspective, national identity research examines how modern states leverage their resources to foster citizens' dependence, identification, and belonging toward the nation [6]. However, domestic research also exhibits certain gaps: most studies focus on internal national identity issues within a single state, while fewer analyze how national identity functions as a bargaining chip in political negotiations between member states and candidate countries within integration processes like the European Union.

The "integration threat theory" in psychology and sociology holds that any type of "subjective threat" perceived by members of a group may impact intergroup prejudice. The construction of national identity explains how collective meaning is created, but the theory of symbolic threat explains why such meanings may be sources of political contention in international relations. People's tendency to self-categorize through common attributes leading to a sense of belonging to an imagined "community" are influenced by factors such as language and history. As nations self-categorize through common attributes over time, they come to see themselves as a linguistic community, name their country, and over time, create a sense of belonging to a territorial unit. As nations interact in these linguistic, naming and territorial dimensions, differences in values can lead to perceptions of "subjective threat". These perceptions may in turn increase intergroup prejudice and play a large role in how national identity is constructed and maintained. At the state level, this

type of subjective threat is not always relegated to socio-psychological realities—it can be consciously expressed in explicit foreign policy positions and concrete measures. When one state perceives another state making claims over certain historical symbols, language and territory as undermining the coherent national narrative of the first state, it can play on the public's sense of being threatened and then logically frame the removal or mitigation of this perceived threat as a core diplomatic objective and policy priority. This subjective threat at the state level provides a fascinating application of symbolic threat theory and identity construction through understanding the durability of symbolic battles such as those witnessed throughout the European Union enlargement process.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design and methods

Following a qualitative research design, the study uses a single-case analysis to systemically investigate the identity politics behind international disputes. Taking the EU accession bid of North Macedonia is the subject of the investigation. Documentary analysis and historical archival research are drawn from North Macedonia`s accession bid into the EU. The investigation focuses on the "name dispute" between North Macedonia and Greece, as well as the "language and identity dispute" between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. The analysis reveals what information naming, language and historical claims convey to national identity, and how identity-driven controversies impact a state's foreign policy and position in the international system.

3.2. Data sources and materials

In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the data collection of the research, the data used in this study were collected from various publicly available sources. Official statements of the government of the People's Republic of North Macedonia, Hellenic Republic of Greece, Kingdom of Greece and Kingdom of Bulgaria were referred to. Prominent official international agreements, such as the Prespa Agreement, were also referred to. In addition, domestic and foreign scholarly monographs and journal articles on the topic of national identity, nationalism, social psychology and studies on the Balkan region, as well as reports and in-depth analysis of relevant events from authoritative foreign news agencies were referred to. Through the reading of the above texts, an analytical framework based on the connection between "symbolic threat" theory and national identity disputes was constructed, providing the theoretical basis and interpretive tools for this study. These texts provide the most authoritative policy and official positions on controversies.

3.3. Analytical approach

This study focuses on case analysis, examining the series of obstructionist actions taken by Greece and Bulgaria during North Macedonia's EU accession process on the grounds of its country name and language. It seeks to uncover the underlying logic behind these behaviors. The study dialogues with and cross-verifies patterns extracted from the case analysis with theories from the literature review, such as social identity theory, imagined communities, and symbolic threat, concluding that the obstacles to North Macedonia's EU accession are not merely diplomatic disputes, but a 'political-cultural' contest among different countries around symbols of identity. These stem from each nation's preservation of its own national identity and rejection of the "other's" identity. While

qualitative case studies limit generalizability, they enable deeper contextual understanding of identity-driven political dynamics.

4. Results: case analysis

The disputes that have arisen between North Macedonia and other countries during its EU accession process can also be analyzed from the perspective of national identity construction to understand the root causes and core contradictions of the conflicts. Gordon Allport, in his discussion on the relationship between personal values and identity, proposed that since values constitute a vital component of identity, people often reject groups whose values differ from their own. In fact, this is a kind of "symbolic threat". In the case examined here, divergent values regarding national names, languages, scripts, and territorial boundaries—as perceived from different national perspectives—impacted the construction of national identity. This, in turn, generated "symbolic threats" that ignited conflicts.

4.1. Country name

The core of the conflict between Greece and North Macedonia lies in the recognition of North Macedonia's country name. Initially, Greece argued that "Macedonia" was the name of a state during ancient Greek times. Given North Macedonia's high degree of Slavicization, Greece contended that it had no right to use the name of Greece's historical heritage as its national designation. Greece could not accept the transformation of Vardar Macedonia into an independent Macedonian republic. Therefore, they opposed the use of the country name 'Macedonia' and did not agree it to join the alliance. Shortly after Macedonia declared independence, Greek citizens held protests, claiming that Macedonia once belonged to Greece, now belongs to Greece, and will always belong to Greece. In 2018, the two nations reached the Prespa Agreement, ultimately renaming Macedonia as the "Republic of North Macedonia", establishing a consensus between the parties [7].

A country's name is its most concentrated symbolic representation. It is not invented out of nothing but contains rich geographical, historical and cultural information. Furthermore, a country's name also acts in uniting people and inspiring patriotic enthusiasm and is an important part in constructing national identity. In the dispute between Greece and North Macedonia, the vigorous argument between the two countries over the issue of their national names reflects that there is a huge difference in the two countries' basic values on history. As a result, Greece felt a subjective "symbolic threat". Therefore, Greece, arguing that the name is a reason, does not accept that the country's name contains the word "Macedonia" and has blocked North Macedonia from joining many international organizations. This shows that naming disputes can become symbolic threats by questioning the historical legitimacy of national identity.

4.2. Language and script

The core of the conflict between Bulgaria and North Macedonia lies in the definition of the Macedonian language. From a textual perspective, the Cyrillic alphabet was created by the brothers Cyril in Great Moravia and later perfected by their disciples in Ohrid. At that time, Ohrid fell within the territory of Bulgaria, whereas it is now located within the borders of North Macedonia. The world's largest statue of the Cyrillic brothers stands within present-day North Macedonia. The mismatch between these historical territories and modern borders is a typical consequence of the continual redrawing of boundaries in the Balkans following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire,

through the Treaty of Berlin, the two Balkan Wars, and the World Wars. Consequently, the two countries have long been at odds over the question of which nation can claim to be the true birthplace of the Cyrillic alphabet.

From a linguistic point of view, it was after World War II only that the Macedonian language has been recognized and at that time the construction of the Macedonian language had faced many challenges and was not complete. Therefore, North Macedonia has been entangled with Bulgaria over language issues for a long time. After resolving the naming dispute with Greece, the accession of North Macedonia to the EU was blocked again by Bulgaria over the issue of language and identity. For several decades, Bulgaria has maintained an unwavering position in denying the Macedonian linguistic identity, describing it as only a regional variety of Bulgarian. The language issue had continued to smolder as an entrenched source of conflict in the 1990s. Though the 1994 presidential visit made some significant advances in various areas of bilateral cooperation, Bulgaria remained unwilling to recognize the Macedonian language as having equal status with Bulgarian and left this fundamental disagreement unresolved. The situation changed dynamics after Bulgaria joined the Union. Having seen the clear benefits of Union membership, North Macedonia submitted its own candidature in a formal manner. After reaching a protracted naming deal with Greece with the signing of the 2018 Prespa Agreement, North Macedonia had no choice but to enter into negotiations with Bulgaria. But negotiations soon stalled. In November 2020 Bulgaria unilaterally suspended accession talks and used this card to force North Macedonia's acceptance of Macedonian as a Bulgarian dialect. North Macedonia was not prepared to yield to this Bulgarian pressure; it considered its language as a fundamental aspect of its sovereignty. In June 2025, Bulgaria renewed its old demands, now specifically insisting that EU documents use "Macedonian language and identity" terms replaced with "the language and identity of modern Macedonia". North Macedonia's renewed rejection of these terms, threw the two countries into another crisis [8].

Language is not only a tool for communication, it also has the following functions. First of all, language is a symbol of identity and distinction. Just as when we hear Chinese, we think of the Chinese, it is a label of identity, and it is also a boundary of "one's own country" to "foreign country". Second, language is a bond of human feelings. When we hear someone speaking the same language as us, we feel close to him, and this feeling is also the most direct expression of recognition. In addition, language is also an important medium of education. Through the education of a unified language, the old generations transfer to the young ones the history, culture and values it contains little by little. This way, different values between two nations emerge, and finally North Macedonia felt Bulgaria's behavior a "symbolic threat". They thought Bulgaria's behaviors were trying to absorb North Macedonians and weaken their national identity. In the above cases, except for culture, language and writing of Bulgaria and North Macedonia also have the territory to be fought for between the two countries. For instance, in the argument between the two countries over Ohrid as the birthplace of the Cyrillic alphabet, the relationship between the two countries also has an impact from the political aspect. From this point of view, the disputes about language and writing may also be the symbolic threat, which may further affect the building of national identity.

4.3. Territory

The most fundamental role of territory is that it defines the boundaries of power of a state. In addition, because it is the stage where all kinds of historical events occurred, it builds people's emotional attachment for it through historical and cultural aspects. It is also true for Bulgaria and North Macedonia. In 1878, Bulgaria got its independence through the Treaty of San Stefano and rid itself of the rule of Ottoman Empire. However, the territorial size of Bulgaria was drastically

reduced through the Berlin Treaty signed by the two countries in the same year, and it stopped the full implementation of national revival aspiration. Of course, the situation Bulgaria faced at that time was a dilemma that its territory was broken into small pieces and national identity became blurred. While the Macedonian region was the most important area in the "Greater Bulgaria" that was drawn by the Treaty of San Stefano. In the following two Balkan Wars, World War I and World War II, the territorial claims of Bulgaria were always focused on Macedonia. Bulgaria never gave up its sovereignty requirement over Macedonia and always regarded it as "part of Bulgaria" [9]. The very independence of North Macedonia brought a "symbolic threat" to Bulgaria's "Greater Bulgaria", and it affected Sofia's diplomatic policy toward Skopje for a long time.

5. Discussion

The accession process of the North Macedonia has shown us very clearly that the name dispute with Greece and the language and identity dispute with Bulgaria are about recognizing the historical facts and symbols related to the national identity of the North Macedonia. National names, languages and historical narratives are not empty symbols, but they are "carriers" carrying national feelings, political legitimacy and sovereignty requirements of the nation [10]. The attribution of national names, languages and historical narratives directly determines the answer to the question of "Who we are?" For Greece, "Macedonia" is the only symbol of its glorious ancient civilization and Alexander the Great. For Bulgaria, recognizing the distinctiveness of the North Macedonia language and national identity would damage its historical vision of "Greater Bulgaria", so they insisted that the Macedonian language was just a dialect of Bulgaria and the Macedonian people were a branch of the Bulgarian people.

From the case of the North Macedonia, we can see that when the recognition of identity in certain society becomes institutionalized in supranational institutions such as the EU, the symbolic threat will be produced. For Greece and Bulgaria, the rejection of the state name and language of the North Macedonia is their "symbolic threat", that is, the symbol of the North Macedonia's national identity. This threat does not directly affect the physical security of Greece and Bulgaria, but instead, it affects the legitimacy of group self-esteem, historical narratives and worldviews. At the international political level of the North Macedonia, "symbolic threats" can be consciously instrumentalized. Greece and Bulgaria are not completely victims of this threat, to some extent, they are also using and exporting this threat. The above findings greatly enrich the existing theories: different from the social identity theory of Taffel, which focuses on the construction of identity in the same group, this study focuses on how the perception of threat between groups is activated in the national institutional environment. At the same time, it extends the discussion to explore the role of rigid factors such as state power, institutional arrangement and international politics in the formation of identity [11].

This study analyzes the disputes over national names between Greece and North Macedonia, as well as the language identity conflict between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, to identify a core chain of mechanisms: "symbolic threat → identity anxiety → political instrumentalization → policy obstruction." The identity anxieties caused by threats are reserved and instrumentalised, and then turn into concrete obstacles to the accession of North Macedonia into the EU through the decision-making mechanisms of EU. The North Macedonian case shows that even in the process of European integration, the identity of nation-state still has a strong impact on the destiny of a country. Based on the above analysis, EU should consider setting up corresponding mechanisms for cultural dialogue and historical reconciliation during accession negotiations, and guide the identity conflicts into institutionalized resolution channels. If North Macedonia wants to make breakthroughs in the

process of joining the EU in the future, in addition to making policy adjustments, they also need to find a balance between identity construction and historical reconciliation.

6. Conclusion

This paper takes the disputes between Greece, Bulgaria and North Macedonia during the accession process to the EU as objects of study, and finds that these two conflicts actually stem from the collision of national identity over legacy history and cultural symbols. The introduced theory of "symbolic threat" can well explain why these historical symbols will be regarded as threats to group self-esteem and identity. It also explains how these symbolic threats can be instrumentalized as tool of tangible political power in the EU's institutional framework. The theoretical innovation of this paper is to systematically apply the theory of "symbolic threat" introduced in social psychology to the research of international relations, and explain how the psychological mechanisms of national identity conflicts turn into tangible political obstacles in the institutional framework of the EU.

The case studied raises strategic questions for EU and its member states. For candidate countries like North Macedonia and other countries in a geopolitical limbo, identity has a strong impact on destiny, so when adopting an integration strategy, they should not unilaterally make policy concesions, but try to find a balance in identity construction, and develop more flexible strategies in cultural diplomacy and historical narration to avoid being challenged by other countries.

This study is mainly oriented towards external challenges from Greece and Bulgaria, while paying scarce attention to the way in which North Macedonia deals with these challenges and the divides and consensuses within the domestic discourse on these disputes. Hence further researches could be conducted using systematic media discourse analysis to explore how the domestic public opinion and political elites in North Macedonia respond to external identity threats. Furthermore, one could use this analytical framework in a comparative study design for situations with similar identity challenges, e.g. apply analytical framework to Serbia and Kosovo, in order to test how the "symbolic threat" mechanism works in practice in different geopolitical contexts.

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