

The Impact of Changing Balance of Powers on the European Union Enlargement during the Covid-19 Pandemic Process: The Case Of North Macedonia*

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic, which deeply impacted the whole world, resulted in consequences beyond being a health question. The pandemic period, which affected many social, economic, and political areas, had a significant impact on the power balances and political systems in the world. The most impact of the pandemic in the European Union countries put into question the weight and future of the union. Despite that, the process includes some opportunities for the hereafter and expansion of the European Union. The developments in Russia, China plus the USA, and the impact of these developments on the European Union enlargement constituted the main backbone of the study. In this framework, the importance of the acceptance of North Macedonia to the European Union and the developments in Macedonia in this process were discussed.

Keywords

Pandemic, European Union, United States, Russia, China, North Macedonia

Covid-19 Pandemi Sürecinde Değişen Güç Dengelerinin Avrupa Birliği Genişlemesi Üzerindeki Etkisi: Kuzey Makedonya Örneği

Öz

Tüm dünyayı derinden etkileyen Covid-19 pandemisi bir sağlık sorunu olmanın ötesinde sosyal, ekonomik ve siyasi pekçok alanı etkiledi. Pandemi, dünyadaki güç dengeleri ve siyasi sistemler üzerinde önemli sonuçlar yarattı. Pandemi etkisinin en fazla Avrupa Birliği ülkelerinde görülmesi bu birliğin dünyadaki ağırlığı ve geleceğini sorgular hale getirdi. Ancak içinde bulunduğumuz süreç Avrupa Birliği'nin geleceği ve birliğin genişlemesi için birtakım fırsatları da beraberinde barındırmakta. Başta ABD olmak üzere Rusya ve Çin'de olan gelişmeler ve bu gelişmelerin Avrupa Birliği genişlemesi üzerindeki etkisi çalışmanın ana omurgasını oluşturdu. Bu kapsamda Kuzey Makedonya'nın birliğe alınmasının Avrupa Birliği açısından önemi ve bu süreçte Makedonya'da yaşanan gelişmeler uluslararası konjonktür çerçevesinde ele alındı.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

Pandemi, Avrupa Birliği, ABD, Rusya, Çin, Kuzey Makedonya

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INTRODUCTION

Corona Virus appeared in Wuhan, China, in November 2019. It spread all over the world in a short time, causing the COVID-19 pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). According to the World Health Organization, more than 2 million people died, and more than 100 million people got the virus in this process. The pandemic process has caused social, economic, and political consequences on a global scale. With the global effects of the pandemic, the international power balances and the political systems of the countries began to be interrogated. The pandemic process paved the way for the emergence of new actors and forced existing actors to transform. It is a matter of curiosity how the European Union will come out of this process and to what extent it will continue on its way as a global actor. This situation is collateral to the enlargement of the union. Especially after Brexit, The enlargement of the union is very significant to regain its shaken image in the international system and is a center of attraction for solving global problems.

The pandemic process in which the whole world was caught unprepared showed how important regional and global cooperation is. This problem is not a problem that any state or international organization can tackle alone. States are more prone to cooperate in the pandemic process than before as in natural disaster processes. Cooperation between Serbia and Kosovo's health institutions at a peak of the crisis is the most concrete example of this situation. We mustn't forget that these two countries don't recognize each other's independence (Study Group Regional Stability in Southeast Europe, 2020:126). Although the process we are in is a difficult one for the European Union, it contains some opportunities within itself. The enlargement process of the European Union is linked to global balances. Therefore, the situation of the USA, Russia, and China during the pandemic process opened up space for the expansion of the union. In parallel with this situation, Macedonia's full membership in the union is an important opportunity for the union. Thus, the global image of the union that was damaged during the pandemic process can be restored.

INTERNATIONAL MISSION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU)

The European Union is based on the Maastricht Treaty (1991) and the Amsterdam Treaty (1997). It is based on three main pillars: Economic integration, collectivity in the legal system and internal affairs, and common foreign and security policies (Woyke, 1995:66). The political processes of the Union are defined with the term "supranational", unlike all other international organizations. The nation-states that are members of the European Union hand over their sovereign rights to the institutions of the union. This is a process aimed at strengthening Europe against the domination of the United States of America (USA) in the thirty years after the Second World War and the economic crises in Asia-Pacific (Held, 1999:74). In consequence of this subsidiarity voters in EU member states went to the polls in May 2019 to elect new members of the European Parliament for five years. There are approximately 400 million voters in European Union member countries. This process represents the second-largest democratic voting procedure in the world, after the Indian elections. Also, the European Union ranks second nominally after the USA when the sum of all national economies is taken, and after China in terms of purchasing power parity. Over and above, The European Union has a membership in the World Trade Organization, G-20, and G-7 (Surotchak, 2019:134).

Karl W. Deutsch grouped the aims of integration under four main headings: to keep the peace, to move towards broader goals, to build specific missions, and to have a new image and identity (Ari, 2013:347). As Peter Balazs, a member of the European Commission of Hungary said, "The most important thing to advance European Integration is the management of heterogeneity." (Rehn, 2007:58). As a result of this potential and dynamism of the European Union in the global system has brought a new wave of enlargement every decade. This process continued uninterrupted and almost became an unwritten rule for the union since the first wave of enlargement of the 1970s, until the full membership of Croatia in 2013 (Balázs, 2013:3). We can discuss the basic motivation that causes the EU's enlargement process under two main headings: Long-term mutual economic-geopolitical interests (Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2003:43) and historical consensus and liberal democratic values desired to be realized in Europe. In the authentic document of the European Council, the enlargement of the union was defined as "the realization of the vision of a united and peaceful continent" (Council of EU, 2003).

Enlargement always depends on available member states to decide on the admission of new members. A bargaining process occurs to remove objections as not all EU member states cast in the same benefits when deciding on enlargement (Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2003:44). The strategic use of norm-based arguments helps this bargaining process. Frank Schimmelfennig defines this situation as "rhetorical action". Frank Schimmelfennig defines this situation as "rhetorical action" (Schimmelfennig, 2001:48). The European Union demands a series of reforms from candidate countries for full membership. Various mechanisms follow this reform process. Countries that will become members of the European Union have more say in the international arena along with economic gains (Schimmelfennig, 2008:79). The continuity of the EU is compared to the bicycle theory, which states that you need to pedal to continue on the road. it must continue to expand and deepen for not to fall off the bike (Baykal, 2006:9).

The European Union stated that wanted to achieve stability beyond its borders in 2001. The European Commission contributed to this motivation through its "Common Foreign and Security Policy" (Communication from the Commission on Conflict Prevention, 2001:5). In parallel with this process, the EU presented "Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA)" as a framework for Western Balkan countries to provide the conditions suitable for EU membership and to make reforms in 2003 (Bieber, 2012). Internal conditions in the Balkans have become more favorable for the EU, as ultranationalist governments have been replaced by reformist ones (Vachudova, 2003:95). As a result, whether the EU will be taken critically as a foreign policy agent depends on its talent to bring stability and democracy to its immediate vicinity (Vachudova, 2003:104). Innovative alliances and innovative experiments to regulate globalization can be seen as a precondition for an EU governance system, although there is no guarantee of success (Benner, Witte & Reinicke, 2001:265).

Continental Europe has become a target of global powers, particularly after the end of the Cold War. Vladimir Putin's Russia is the most concrete example of this with its soft and hard power. This is also valid for international operations of the Chinese Communist Party and state apparatus controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (Surotchak, 2019:136). Besides, it is expected that the United States will embark on a more global and corporate vision with the Biden administration. The conditions brought

by the pandemic process have affected the global power centers in various ways. It is inevitable that the global power struggles, which accelerate with the pandemic process all over the world, will reflect on the Balkan geography. These changing balances are not limited to the enlargement policy of the European Union, one of the most important actors of the region, and the meaning of this enlargement for the union is much more than before the pandemic.

THE UNITED STATES ELECTIONS AND JOE BIDEN ERA

The United States has got over the pandemic process most heavily. During the pandemic, over 400 thousand people died and over 24 million people were infected with the virüs (Çopur, 2021). The unemployment rate, which was 4.4% before the pandemic, increased to 6.7% due to the economic activities restricted by the pandemic (Yeniçağ Gazetesi, 2021). The synergy of pandemic and high unemployment spilled over to the streets on May 25, 2020, after a police officer killed an African-American citizen George Floyd. The protests that started in Minnesota spread to many parts of the United States in a short time. The protests, which are estimated to be attended by 15 to 26 million demonstrators, went down in history as the most widely attended demonstrations in United States history (Buchanan, Bui & Patel, 2020). Pandemic conditions impacted the American election results. The Democratic presidential candidate, Joe Biden got 51.3% of the vote, and outdistance current president Donald Trump, who got 46.8% in the November 3, 2020 elections (Baykan, 2020).

It is expected that the Biden administration will attach importance to international cooperation and institutional solidarity, contrary to the previous period. Within this scope, it is predicted that he will raise United States relations with Europe to a higher level and his relations with European leaders and institutions, especially Germany and France, within the framework of the NATO alliance, will be in a more advanced position compared to the previous period. The Biden Administration is likely to proceed in harmony with the European Union, particularly on issues such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, and migration. This type of relationship, which depends on strategic integration, is expected to bring along a process that focuses on common goals and values in the form of a win-win policy between the United States and the EU (Munter, 2020:113).

There are normative values that improve cooperation between the United States and the EU. These normative values were shaped in flesh and bones within NATO and a byzantine was formed with 22 of the 28 NATO members being members of the EU. This alliance faces similar multidimensional security threats and operates together in many parts of the world. Therefore, we should not consider EU security independently from NATO and the USA (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2017). The relationship between the two institutions was defined as a "strategic partnership" in official documents (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2014). Thus, NATO enlargement is a factor that enhances the support and promotion of Europe's economic and political union (Pechous, 2008:56). When we look at the historical background, the fact that the member states of the European Union were members of NATO before becoming a member of the union supports this argument. The fact that the member states of the European Union are members of NATO before becoming a member of the union supports this argument.

European integration was most successful when canalized or protected by the United States (Surotchak, 2019:139). For this reason, the struggle of the Biden administration to keep the Western Balkan countries on the agenda is extremely important for the enlargement of the union. The European Commission's decision to promote North Macedonia's accession process is a step that deserves the full support of the United States, especially against the short-term opposition of the member states. A coordinated United States-EU approach to support necessary reforms in candidate countries is a wise choice it is an important motivation to frustrate the efforts of other great powers to deconstruct Transatlantic institutions (Surotchak, 2019:140). Hence, the position of the USA in the Balkans is likened to the Biden administration rebuilding ties with Europe (Munter, 2020:117).

In the past decade, the EU's foreign policy was limited to Ukraine in the east and Libya in the south. This policy consisted of Europe implementing its enactment on its neighbors. However, there are lots of problems for Europe beyond its neighbors. Many issues such as Russia's activities, the Eastern Mediterranean issue, and the refugee crisis in the Middle East increase the need for global cooperation for the EU (Munter, 2020:118). For this reason, the United States-EU cooperation in the Balkan geography will set an example for other fields. The peace, stability, and prosperity of the Western Balkans have direct implications for the stability of the Euro-Atlantic region. The phenomenon of foreign fighters joining terrorist organizations in the fight against Western allies is an example. Also, the location of the region on alternative energy routes contributes to the importance of the region for European countries aiming to reduce their dependence on Russian energy (Study Group Regional Stability in Southeast Europe, 2020:110). In this context, within the scope of the NATO alliance, there is a suitable ground for the Joe Biden administration and the European Union to pursue common policies for the enlargement of the union in the Balkan geography.

RUSSIA FACTOR

Many studies examining Russia's interest in the Balkans emphasize Russia's identity as a superpower. This definition lays stress on that Russia pursues policies aimed at supporting "brotherly" Slavic or Orthodox nations, especially Bulgarians, Serbs, Greeks, and Montenegrins against regional powers such as the United States and NATO (Abrahamyan, 2015). Moscow Administration formed various alliances with the Balkan rebels in their attempts to spread to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean (Smilyanskaya, 2014). This historical mission was embodied in Russian foreign policy doctrine in 2016 (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016). In accordance with Russian analyst Maxim Samorukov, in this process, while posing as Russia's influential world power, it implemented policies that would make the Western Balkans a tangle of problems for the West (Samorukov, 2017). During this period, Moscow followed a policy that would prevent the recognition of Kosovo and supported the lunatic fringe within Serbian leaders and local communities (Samokhvalov, 2019:194). When the Montenegrin government decided to start the integration period into NATO, a Russian-led military intelligence network staged a coup attempt in Montenegro (Samokhvalov, 2019:194).

Russian President Putin found NATO enlargement contrary to Russian interests and said that Russia perceived "NATO's enlargement policy as a devastating military and political strategy remnant of the Cold War." (Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty,

2019). Moscow Administration tried again to destabilize the Greek-Macedonian relations after the Prespa Agreement (2018), which was signed between Greece and North Macedonia and opened the door for North Macedonia to join NATO. Ivan Savvidis, an oligarch affiliated with Russia, provoked and funded protests against the agreement (Clapp, 2018). Savvidis received support from the fanbase of the local football club the Vardar, owned by another Russian businessman, Sergei Samsonenko, to organize protests in Skopje. Unlike Savvidis, Samsonenko, who has a low profile in the Russian business world, suddenly moved to Macedonia in 2006 and became a rising social player. Samsonenko endeavored closely with the pro-Russian part of the leading political party bloc, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO) (Zakharov, 2017). Samsonenko stood by VMRO and adhered to their election campaigns (Samsonenko, 2014).

The Prespa Agreement entered into force despite all the efforts of Russia. When it became clear that the agreement would pave the way for North Macedonia to join NATO, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov blamed the West for interfering with the domestic affairs of Balkan countries (Kathimerini, 2018). This rapprochement between Greece and Macedonia triggered Russia to put forward the economic card in its Balkan policy. Moscow Administration tried to highlight the high economic and social cost of European integration for the Balkan countries and proposed the Eurasian Economic Union as an alternative, under the leadership of Russia. Thus, Moscow Administration appealed to segments of society disenfranchised by the neo-liberal economic policies promoted by Europe. Highlighting all the risks and costs of European integration and proposing an alternative to it is the milestone of Russia's attitude towards EU activities in the Balkans nowadays. Russia suggested struggling together for a decent place in the global value chain instead of accepting a role for the Balkan countries as the periphery of Europe (Samokhvalov, 2019:201).

One of the most effective tools of Russia's economic policies is the energy instrument. Over the past two decades, Moscow has invited Balkan states to assist Russia-driven pipeline projects and become centers of energy flows to Europe. In this context, the South Stream project, which brings Russian and Central Asian gas to European markets, was brought to the agenda. Within the scope of the project, it was planned to establish branches that pass under the Black Sea to Bulgaria, then Greece-Italy, and Serbia-Hungary-Austria. However, the project did not end owing to the emerging European opposition to energy monopolies in European markets. Besides, Russia has made enterprise for the Nord Stream oil pipeline, which extends from under the Baltic Sea to Germany. Studies for this project are still ongoing (Sutyryn, Trofimenko, Vorobieva, Zashev, Abromkov & Pantić, 2019).

Similar parameters also affected the overall trade dynamics between the states of the region and Russia. Despite the Moscow Administration's talks about increasing trade with the states of the region, in reality, trade is in decline comparatively. Even if Serbia is Russia's closest ally in the region, Europe is becoming Serbia's main trading partner. Moreover, as Serbia moves towards European integration, Moscow Administration appears ready to face negative consequences (Maksakova, 2015). Balkan countries observe Russia as a smaller market than the European Union. In the meanwhile, the promise of EU membership and the offer of the Western Balkans to become an important hub for the link between Europe and Asia seem to serve as a

gateway to the global economy (The Committee Of The Regions and The European Investment Bank, 2018).

The pandemic process accelerated this process. Russia has been one of the countries that got over the pandemic process most heavily. According to the data of the World Health Organization, more than 4 million people were infected with the virus and more than 100,000 people passed away from the virus (World Health Organization, 2021). Sputnik V vaccine developed by Russia was not approved in the world except Serbia, Belarus, Argentina, Bolivia, Algeria, Venezuela, Paraguay, and Palestine. The Brazilian Ministry of Health did not give the Russian Sputnik V vaccine emergency use because the phase 3 trials did not achieve the desired results (Şarkul Avsat, 2021). Mass immunization campaign was fallen behind compared to many countries and It could be started at the end of January. Two coronavirus vaccines have been approved in Russia until now. The "EpiVacCorona" vaccine developed by the Virology and Biotechnology Vector Research Center and the "Sputnik V" vaccine developed by the Gamaleya Scientific Epidemiology and Microbiology Research Institute will be applied to Russian citizens arbitrarily (NTV, 2021).

Apart from the health dimension, Russia has been one of the most economically affected states from this process. The main reason for this situation is that the Russian economy is a rentier state mostly based on the sale of resources such as oil and natural gas rather than the production of the local population (Anderson, 1990:61). Russia has the largest reserves in the world with 38 trillion cubic meters of natural gas reserves. In natural gas production, Russia ranked second after the USA (920.9 billion cubic meters) with 679 billion cubic meters of production last year (Temizer, 2020). As of last year, Russia was the third most oil-producing country in the world with 11 million 540 thousand barrels (Kutlu, 2020). Nevertheless, this amount is the lowest level of the last 9 years for Russia. According to the figures of the Russian Ministry of Energy, Russia's crude oil production has decreased on an annual basis for the first time since 2008 and dropped to the lowest level since 2011 (Enerji Günlüğü, 2021). In the World Bank's Commodity Markets Outlook Report, the pandemic had the greatest impact on energy prices and that low oil demand will continue after 2021. The report predicted that the barrel price of crude oil will decrease by 33.2 percent to an average of \$ 41 (Sputnik Türkiye, 2020a). The value of Russia's underground resource corresponds to 60% of its gross domestic product (Sputnik Türkiye, 2019). In the current picture, it is very unlikely that Russia will penetrate the Balkans economically more in the upcoming period.

CHINA FACTOR

China's "One Belt One Road Project", which aims to create an uninterrupted trade route from Beijing to London, was shared with the public in 2013. The project, which envisages an investment of \$ 1 trillion, is expected to impact a population of more than 3 billion. The project, which includes 65 countries, is planned to connect the easternmost of Asia and the European shores of the Atlantic Ocean (Tatar, 2014). Balkan geography has strategic significance for the healthy functioning of this project. Nevertheless, the infrastructure of Balkan countries is not sufficient for the project. Regional governments are in a quest to find the essential financing for infrastructure modernization. For this reason, China wants Chinese companies to play a greater role

in the Balkan countries by providing the necessary infrastructure to facilitate supply to the European market (Pavličević, 2014).

The high-speed railway connecting Belgrade to Budapest has been China's first large-scale project following this logic (Xinhua, 2015). Chinese construction companies completed the construction of a bridge in Belgrade and started building roads and power plants in Serbia, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, and Montenegro in 2014 (China Daily, 2015). The majority shares of Piraeus, the country's largest port near Athens, were sold to China's Cosco Group Limited (Anadolu Ajansı, 2016). The Serbia-North Macedonia highway project is being carried out by the Chinese Power Construction Corporation. These investments are important for the economy of the region due to the high unemployment rates and low growth rates in the region. Besides, China's economic influence in the region began to show itself socially and culturally. In 2017, the construction of one of the largest Chinese Cultural Centers in Europe was started in Serbia (Surotchak, 2019:138). Launching the above projects has accumulated valuable experience for the globalization of Chinese businesses and helped move China's technology, labor force, and capital to Europe and increase its competitiveness in the global market and reach a bigger market share (Zuokui, 2019:91). It is stated that the Balkan countries are of vital importance inside the One Belt, One Road Project National Infrastructure Development Report published in 2017 and 2018. It shows that the importance of the region will continue to increase in the post-pandemic period (One Belt, One Road National Infrastructure Development Index Report, 2018).

There are many reasons why China has preferred to enhance its activities in the Balkans. First of all, The systems and rules of the Balkan countries are supported by the EU market in terms of facilitating trade and investment Although most of the Balkan countries are not EU members. The Balkan geography has a strategic significance as it is on the transit routes to Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Chinese companies were aware of this situation (Zuokui, 2019:93). Second, the cost of production is more competitive in Balkan countries. Third, compared to other markets, the Balkan market plays a significant role as an emerging market with great investment opportunities. Government governance and legislative regulations in the Balkan states are approaching EU standards. Chinese companies operating in the Western Balkans can be familiar with EU market rules and achieve experience to enter the EU market (Zuokui, 2019:94).

In the debate among European think tanks, there is a more popular view that China's investment will undermine the Western Balkans' potential integration into the EU. This perspective doesn't represent reality and doesn't understand China's investment objectives. First of all, China's investment in Balkan infrastructure focuses mainly on the EU's market through investment in the EU's environmental market, hence expecting to ultimately benefit more from these countries' entry into the EU. Therefore, China leans towards Balkan countries' EU membership so that its investments in the Balkans become a "Potential Stock" within the European Union (Zuokui, 2019:96). Second, unlike Russia, China benefits from Europe's continued integration and stability because the EU is China's largest trading partner (Šimalčík, 2018).

Chinese companies embark on a win-win policy so it opens up to third-party collaboration. For example, Albania International Airport employs a German management team, although it is acquired by Chinese companies (Zuokui, 2019:101). China doesn't aim to be involved in the ambitious state-building period of Western

Balkan countries like the EU, and there is no military presence in the Balkans like NATO or the USA. At the same time, it doesn't have a historical and cultural bond with the Balkan countries such as Russia. China aims to establish a political friendship with the Balkan countries by making pragmatic cooperation. China uses the economy card in the Balkan geography and encourages the One Belt One Road Project to integrate into the European market (Zuokui, 2019:102). Therefore, it contributes to the stability of the region in terms of the security of the project and does not have a motivation to be a party to local rivalry and conflicts. China remains silent in all regional conflicts and supports the decisions taken by the EU. China supports the Balkan countries' full membership in the EU because the membership of the countries in the region will make their investments safer (Vuksanovic, 2017).

During the pandemic, over 100 thousand cases occurred in China, and over 5 thousand died due to Covid-19 (World Health Organization, 2021). The emergence of the epidemic in China at first and its spread to the whole world from there affected the global perception of China extremely negatively. Nevertheless, China recovered in a short time and the normalization process started as of April while many countries were struggling with this crisis. China is not only one of the rare countries that survived this process without vaccine but also has exported the Sinovac vaccine to Turkey, Indonesia, Chile, the Philippines, and China in Hong Kong (Amerika'nın Sesi, 2020). China is trying to gain political and economic influence in developing countries with coronavirus vaccines (BBC Türkçe, 2020). Thus, it started to use a soft power instrument with vaccination policies it didn't have before the pandemic process in its foreign policy.

With the pandemic, a serious economic shrinkage occurred all over the world. The United Nations (UN) predicted that the global economy will shrink by 3.2 percent in 2020 due to the Covid-19 outbreak (Euronews Türkçe, 2020). The International Monetary Fund reported that the global economy is expected to shrinkage by %4.4 percent this year (Zengin, 2020). Despite everything, it was announced that the Chinese economy grew by 2.3 percent last year. While this is the lowest growth rate the country has recorded in the last 40 years, the country's growth rate has exceeded the expectations of many analysts. The figures announced show that China is the only big economy growing in 2020 despite the pandemic (BBC Türkçe, 2021). The EU, which sent off Britain with a free trade agreement, reached an agreement on the terms of a future investment agreement with China, which is preparing to take the title of the largest economy from the USA. The agreement, which is expected to enter into force at least a year later, is part of the EU's effort to form a new relationship with China, which it regards as both partners and rivals. This agreement, which is the EU's most comprehensive attempt to modernize economic relations with China, will increase European companies' access to the Chinese market and will tidy up some of the trade imbalance against the EU (Sputnik Türkiye, 2020b). Thus, the membership of Balkan countries in the union will gain more importance for both the EU and China in the upcoming period.

NORTH MACEDONIA ELECTIONS AND ITS EU PROCESS

The Rimland Theory, developed by Nicholas John Spykman, suggested that the ruler of Rimland (the southern coastline surrounding the Eurasian continent) would rule Eurasia, and that who ruled Eurasia would dominate the world. According to the concept of Rimland, Governing the Balkans is necessary to take control of Eurasia (Skrzyp,

2013:32). Moreover, Halford John Mackinder's concept of Heartland emphasizes that the geographical center of the world is Eurasia, which it describes as the Heartland. According to Mackinder's definition, who rules the Heartland that rules Eastern Europe, and who rules Heartland rules the world (Skrzyp, 2013:30). In this theory, the Balkans serve as a gateway to gain control of the Eurasian continent, resulting in its important geopolitical location. At the same time, it should be noted that in the historical perspective in the Balkans, there was a situation that was not conducive to the creation of nation-states (Krzak, 2014:213). According to the French researcher Michel Sivignon - the Balkans is a peculiar regional phenomenon and its specificity lies in the need for cooperation of hostile communities in the confined space (Deslondes, 2009:10).

The Western Balkans is at the crossroads of important transport hubs for Europe and Asia (Sretenović, 2010:54). North Macedonia is centrally located at the intersection of the main communication routes from Western and Central Europe to the port of Thessaloniki in the South (Mitrany, 1973:6). Because of this location, neighboring countries made great efforts to include North Macedonia within their borders for at least a few decades of the 20th century. This situation also affected the country's EU process. In December 2005, the Council of Europe gave the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia candidate member status. Visa liberalization with EU members entered into force in December 2009 (Petrelli & Aspridis, 2012:13). After Zoran Zaev, Chairman of the Social Democratic Party (SDSM) became prime minister in May 2017, Macedonia's EU integration process gained momentum and followed a roadmap based on four pillars: Inclusive governance, one society for all, equal growth, and good neighborliness relations (Zaev, 2018:170).

The first pillar includes building independent institutions, rule of law, and inclusive governance. Second, it takes the form of the slogan "A society for all", a civic-based concept designed to unite ethnic divisions. Fair economic growth and policies against income inequality constituted the third pillar. Policies were adopted to eradicate poverty and raise living standards by the government. In the first six months after the new government took office, the minimum wage was increased, and more support and incentives for small and medium-sized companies came. The fourth and last pillar is regional cooperation. In this context, important steps have been taken for NATO and EU membership (Zaev, 2018:172-174). With the Prespa Agreement signed with Greece, the border problems between the two countries were resolved and the road to NATO membership for North Macedonia has been opened via Greece lifting its veto (Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe, 2020:116). As a result of the negotiations, North Macedonia became the 30th member of NATO on 27 March 2020. The US administration said that North Macedonia's membership in NATO would support the enhancement of security and stability in the region (Çetin, Abdula & Baykan, 2020).

During the pandemic process, the current government, the Union of Social Democrats of Macedonia (SDSM), restored trust in the parliamentary elections held on 15 July 2020 while counterparts in many countries lost blood. According to the official results, the SDSM-led "We Can Do Alliance" had 46 members of parliament with 327,408 votes (35.89%). Another Macedonian party led by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Macedonian National Democratic Union (VMRO-DPMNE), "Stand Up Macedonia Alliance" won 44 seats in Parliament with 315,344 votes (34.57%). The largest Albanian party in the country, the Democratic Union for

Integration (BDI), with 104 thousand 587 votes (11.48%), 15 deputies, the alliance between the "Alliance for Albanians" and "Alternativa" parties, which allied with the slogan "Now is Time", 81 thousand 620 votes (8.95%), 12 deputies, the Left (Levica) Party received 37 thousand 426 votes (4.1%), 2 deputies, and the Albanian Democratic Party (PDSH) with 13 thousand 930 votes (1.53%), 1 deputy was represented in the parliament. In addition to other parties, the Turkish Movement Party (THP) and the Turkish Democratic Party (TDP) also took part in the SDSM-led "We Can Do Alliance" and they won one deputy each in these elections. In the newly formed cabinet, SDSM was represented by 11, BDI by 6, BESA Movement, and Liberal Democratic Party with one ministry. The new cabinet, led by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, received a vote of confidence from the parliament.

North Macedonia's EU accession process continues with led by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev. The EU Commission approved the 9 billion euro economy and investment package for 6 Western Balkan countries, including North Macedonia at its summit on 6th October 2020. It is aimed to support long-term economic development, green and digital transformation in the Western Balkans. Thus, it contributed to the EU membership process of the Western Balkan countries. Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Relations and Security Policy, stated that these 6 countries are "part of the EU" and that the package will offer a more modern, green, and prosperous environment to these countries on the way to EU membership. Oliver Varhelyi, a member of the EU Commission responsible for enlargement, visited these countries after the package was announced. He emphasized the importance of the package for regional cooperation. Varhelyi stated that the EU is ready to allocate an additional 20 million Euros for the Western Balkan countries. He noted that the aim here is to strengthen the economies of the countries in the region and to catch up with the level of other countries in Europe (Gül, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Two coalitions led by the Union of Social Democrats of Macedonia (SDSM) and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Macedonian National Democratic Union (VMRO-DPMNE) stand out in the political picture in North Macedonia. However, the come to the power of these two alliances depends on their coalition with the Albanian Parties. In other words, the blue-chip in Northern Macedonian politics is in the hands of Albanian parties. Albanian parties have very close ties with the USA and the EU and these parties don't hide this relationship (Yusuf Emin Youtube Kanalı, 2020). Zoran Zaev, pro-EU prime minister of North Macedonia, regained confidence in the elections held during the pandemic and he established the coalition government with the Albanian parties is an important opportunity for the full membership of North Macedonia. North Macedonia's EU process will set an example on several counts for other Balkan countries in the coming days. The political atmosphere in North Macedonia is more favorable than ever for this.

North Macedonia's EU membership will make the eastern borders of the EU more secure. The gathering of the people of North Macedonia, which includes many ethnic and religious elements, to build their common future within the framework of the European Union membership, can be a role model for other Balkan countries and even other countries where ethnic and religious tensions are experienced in various parts of the world. North Macedonia is the digestibility of the EU in terms of population and

area. The feeling of the EU umbrella in the Balkan geography, which has been the center of political crises for centuries, will naturally mean the solid implementation of the EU's values as much as the countries in the region. The image of the union, which was shaken globally with the departure of England, will tend to recover, even partially, with the full membership of North Macedonia. The European Union's test for North Macedonia's full membership will be a positive reference for being a part of the solution in crisis regions such as the Middle East and the Caucasus.

The uncertainty created by the Covid-19 pandemic deeply affected the global power balances. During this period, the importance of institutional structures and cooperation models was better understood. The EU is in a more advantageous position compared to other global powers in this process due to its organizational and geopolitical position. In this period, European Union can act as a leverage task in the global balance of power with its current position. The competition between the USA and China is an important opportunity for the European Union to increase its global influence. The US elections and the One Belt, One Road project support this situation. Based on these developments, the EU can be more effective in its immediate surroundings by reducing Russia's influence on itself. Therefore, North Macedonia's membership in the union may not only strengthen the EU's hand in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea but also be a move that has global repercussions.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction and Research Questions & Purpose

The Covid 19 pandemic process has affected the global power balances very deeply. In this context, the European Union is a global power on which eyes are turned, just like Russia, China, and the USA. However, the institutional structure and special position of the European Union puts it one step ahead of other global actors. The main purpose of the study is that this advantageous situation of the European Union includes some opportunities for the expansion of the union during the pandemic. The study was written to seek an answer to the problem of how the Covid-19 Pandemic process affected the European Union enlargement process. The study carried out addressing Macedonia's EU process is aimed to set an example for other Balkan countries.

Literature Review

Various databases such as Jstor, Taylor and Francis, E-book Central, Proquest were used in the study. Also, interviews and internet resources about the subject were scanned especially Macedonia's domestic policy. In addition, my observations during my short visit to Macedonia and Prof. Dr. Kire Sharlamanov from International Balkan University were effective in the emergence of the study. In the literature review, no study was found on the effect of the pandemic process on the European Union's enlargement and it was aimed to contribute to the literature by examining Macedonia's union process with this study.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used in the study because there is a comprehensive perspective provided to the researcher, an opportunity to analyze the phenomenon in-depth, and flexibility that allows revision in the process of research design. For this reason, the study to be conducted is based on two main research sources, desk-based research and field studies. The information obtained within this framework will be tested on North Macedonia's politics in the form of case studies.

Results and Conclusions

The pandemic process has created an international picture that requires more and more global cooperation. The European Union has an advantage that global powers such as Russia, China, and the USA do not have due to its supranational institutional structure. The positions of these global actors in the pandemic process open up a space for the European Union's expansion in the Balkans. Developments in North Macedonia's domestic politics support this process. For these reasons, there is a win-win situation

between the European Union and North Macedonia. Considering the international atmosphere, the process between the European Union and North Macedonia will have a positive reflection on other Balkan countries.