



Research Article

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Albanian Odonyms in North Macedonia as Means for Preserving Linguistic and Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

This paper analyses some problems related to street names in North Macedonia, the necessity of their translation or adaptation into Albanian, as well as some issues related to the standardization of these names. Street names (odonyms) constitute a prominent feature of a city's linguistic landscape and they are associated with a particular nation in geo-linguistics. As a result, certain political regimes using their authority, influence/change/or do not accept changes in the existing street names and designations. Language itself is a marker of the identity of a group of people and as such carries a symbolic value, especially in cases where two languages are identified with two national communities, which due to several reasons may be in a "conflict". In such situations, state authorities tend to influence in favour of that group that constitutes the dominant part of the nation, giving priority to the language of this group. In general terms, this is also the context in which the Albanian language is found in North Macedonia, where, despite being recognized as the second official language, there are observed problems, especially in its implementation in various spheres of life. We have observed problems in the names of the streets, and we strongly emphasize the idea (which originally originates from the law on the languages) that they should be translated or adapted into Albanian according to the rules dictated by the Albanian language itself. On the other hand, the standardization of street names is as necessary for national and international communication as the standardization of street names. A series of normative rules and criteria are applied for the standardization of the countries' names, which basically aim to guarantee the uniformity of these names. This means that they should only have one standardized spelling form. Even for the standardization of street names, it is applied the same criteria, but there are also respected some specific rules that apply only to these types of names, since often, street names come as a result of spontaneous actions of a certain speaking community. However, although the establishment of these designations seems like a natural process, it is usually, if not always, a process directed by the administrative or political authorities of a country, which makes their standardization difficult.

Keywords: micro-toponymy, street names, standardization, RNM

1. Introduction

1.1 Historical overview

The Republic of North Macedonia is a multi-ethnic and multilingual country. The latest data from the census which were carried out in 2021, show that in this Balkan country named North Macedonia, there live Macedonian Slavs, Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Roma, Bosnians, Serbs, etc. Based on these data, the population's education sphere is multi-ethnic, but in regards to the official use of languages. The Macedonian language is the official language in the Republic of North Macedonia and this is sanctioned by the Law on the Use of the Macedonian Language. Recently, the Albanian language is given the status of official use. Its official use is sanctioned by the Law on the Use of Languages. When we talk about official aspects of the use of languages, historically there have been several legal regulations, while the most recent ones originate from the Ohrid Framework Agreement¹ which ended the conflict in 2001. The Ohrid Framework Agreement settled matters of general principles, ended hostilities, decentralized power, provided non-discrimination and fair representation, and changed parliamentary procedures, education, identity, and use of languages (Sela et al., 2021).

Amendment V of the agreement defined the use of languages, thus replacing Article 7 of the 1991 Constitution: "In the entire territory of the Republic of North Macedonia and in its international relations, the official language is the Macedonian language and its Cyrillic script. Another language which is spoken by at least 20% of citizens is also the official language and its writing is defined by this article" (Ymri, 2021).

In local self-administration units, the language and alphabet used by at least 20% of citizens is the official language, alongside the Macedonian language and its Cyrillic alphabet. For the use of languages and alphabets, which are spoken by at least 20% of the citizens in the local self-administration units, the bodies of the local self-administration units decide which language to use" (Official Gazette of RNM, 2019)

This use of the language began to be implemented after 2001. So in order to be implemented, at least 20% of the population must be from a non-majority language, both in the entire territory of the country and in the local self-government, of course in addition to the Macedonian language. This includes different inscriptions, toponymy, primary and secondary education, as well as higher education (Daniela-Carmen Stoica, 2018). This method of choosing and solving language issues is quite special. The numerical requirement of 20% set for official use put the Albanian language aside in the legal framework; meanwhile, Albanians are only mentioned as a non-majority community with 20% of the population.

This historical framework is important to understand the linguistic situation in the Republic of North Macedonia, as a multi-ethnic state, since all actions (which have to do with language) reflect in some way the linguistic policies of this state.

2. Literature Review

Studies on street names (odonisms) play an important role in onomastic research. For years, researchers have been exploring a multitude of issues related to street designation and naming processes, emphasizing the importance of these names both in terms of the administrative management of spaces and in political-ideological ones. According to these studies, street names are

¹ Note: The **Ohrid Framework Agreement** was the peace deal signed by the government of the Republic of North Macedonia and representatives of the Albanian minority on 13 August 2001. The agreement was signed by the country's four political parties after international mediators demanded their commitment to its ratification and implementation within a four-year period. What we can conclude is that the Albanian language moved one step further towards its official use at the national level, facilitating its use at the local level as well.

an important aspect of naming that society uses to define, individualize and identify places (Rose-Redwood et al. 2011, Rusu, Mihai S, 2019).

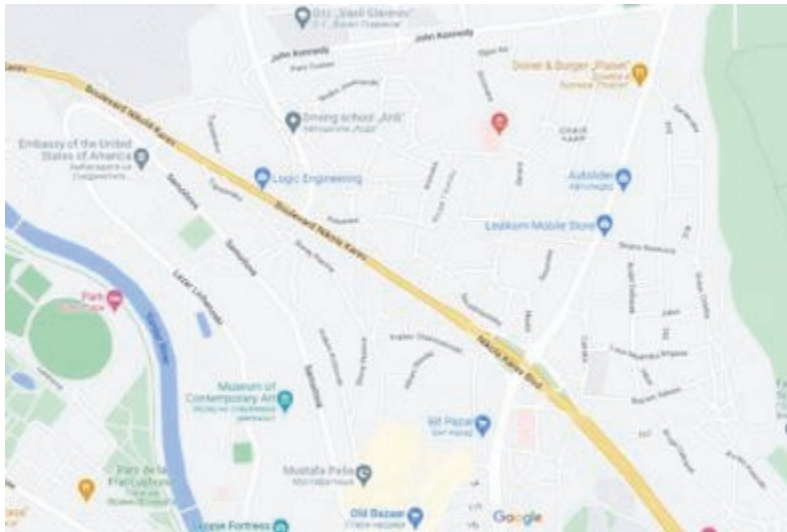


Figure 1: Examples of street names in North Macedonia

Odonymy is one of the sub-categories of toponymy, which also studies the origin of street names, the process of selecting these names, their standardization and unification. However, according to researchers Dwyer & Alderman (2008), street names are also used in symbolic and connotative ways to give political nuances to this process. “When employed as toponymic means of idealizing space with the symbols of power, icons of identity, and historical remembrances that legitimize the political regime, street names render space into politically loaded memorial landscapes” (p. 165-178). Also according to the scholars, David (2011); Hoelscher and Alderman (2014); and Foote & Azaryahu (2007) the system of street naming provides powerful means of communicating the dominant ideological ethos. This means that street names also become ideological practices, which are used politically to build public memory. The political influence on street names is now recognized by researchers. Thus, scholars Rose-Redwood, and Alderman (2011), state that, “There is clearly a need for a more nuanced critical theory of political toponymy that moves beyond the long-held belief that place naming is a strictly “cultural” phenomenon which is somehow disconnected from the political, economic, and social struggles over the production of “place”. According to them, “what is needed is instead a critical exploration of the social struggles over place naming within the context of the current politico-economic restructuring of toponymic practices”.

Toponyms, in general, including odonyms, have several functions. On the scientific level, they are considered sources for the investigation and reconstruction of ancient naming processes, and they are equally essential for disciplines such as the history of landscapes, the history of physical and political geography, etc. Variations in place names can also provide valuable information on semantic and phonological changes in language. Furthermore, since language is intrinsically related to culture, place names created and used by different populations can also provide insight into the traditions of the place, as well as perceptions of the environment by people and communities. The functions of place names can also be sub-categorized into individual and other more general aspects.



Figure 2: Examples of street names in North Macedonia

From the individual approach, street names adopt practical functions as a form of organization of the spatial environment, helping speakers in their orientation, as well as in finding directions and destinations. On a broader level, toponyms can shape individual and collective memory and traditions, enabling different connotations (both negative and positive) through events associated with certain areas.

With these functions, place names, including the changes that may occur to these names, can play a vital role for a nation, inducing strong feelings in people, especially for countries with multi-ethnic populations. This is particularly important in the context of North Macedonia, which is made up of several ethnic groups, with the Albanian group making up a significant portion of the country's population.

Studies on the toponymy of North Macedonia, are mainly focused on the etymological aspects of street names as distinct units, not taking into account the importance of their naming practices in different languages. From this point of view, we think that the odonymy of North Macedonia is still an unexplored field. A research on NM street naming strategies can provide deeper insights not only in the field of historical toponymy, but also shed light on the history of toponymy in the local context and for different ethnic groups. In this respect we have focused only on some problems related to the names of streets in Albanian, mainly considering the names in the cities of Skopje, Tetova and Gostivar, where there is a significant number of the Albanian population.

2.1 Research Questions

The research questions which the research is mainly focused on are:

1. Why is it important for a country like the Republic of North Macedonia, which aims to be integrated in the EU, to pay attention to the language, culture, and identity of the ethnic groups within its territory? Should support for indigenous minority languages also be expressed by displaying "messages" in their language, such as road signs, public signs, institutions, street names, etc., i.e. in the whole space that is called the linguistic landscape?
2. Should the names of the streets in the Republic of North Macedonia be written (adapted or translated or even changed) in Albanian, mainly in those municipalities and communes where Albanians make up more than 20%? What are the right ways, measures and tools for the development of this process?
3. Why is the process of standardization of geographical names important?

3. Methodology

In the last two decades, linguistic research regarding street names has been conducted not only by European linguists but also by geographers and historians. Since the mid-1980s, the academic literature exploring the various facets of street naming processes experienced a genuine scholarly upsurge across the social sciences and the humanities. Street name studies underwent a scholarly boom in terms of knowledge production in the last decades (Mihai, 2021).

When we try to analyse street names, we must take into account all aspects of a nation's linguistic identity: structural (typological), genetic (genealogical), and when it comes to language, the sociolinguistic aspect as well. The numerous sociolinguistic theories of the 20th century were mainly based on the observation of the attitude of speakers toward their mother tongue. Language is observed as a phenomenon with its social role, cultural tradition, and inevitable symbolic reference to national values.

Our paper aims to analyse the issue of Albanian language regarding the street names in the Republic of North Macedonia according to an approach that takes into account social and sociolinguistic perspectives, alongside conventional historical and etymological methods. The names of the streets in the cities of Skopje, Tetova and Gostivar, (there is a significant number of the Albanian population in these three cities) were taken into consideration. For this reason, we took a sample of 20 street names from each city, which were collected and analysed according to specific naming strategies, dividing them into the following categories.

1. Commemorative designations - *Streets are named after individuals (who have contributed significantly to the country's development* (e.g.: Rr. "Kuzman Josifovski-Pitu"; Rr. "Gjoçe Stojčeski"; Rr. "Gjorče Petrov" etc.)
2. Descriptive naming: *when streets are named according to landscape features or anthropic facilities which existed or still exist in specific areas* (e.g.: Rr. "Njegosheva"; Rr. "Karaorman" etc.)
3. Borrowed names: *when streets are named by borrowing place names from foreign languages and their respective countries* (e.g.: Rr. "Ruga e Dizhonit", Rr. "Jajce", Rr. "Xhon Kenedi", Rr. "Viktor Hygo" etc.)
4. Thematic odonymy: *when streets are named after a specific theme* (e.g.: Rr. "Partizanski Odredi"; Rr. "Kosturski heroji" etc.)

4. The Practice of Naming Streets in the Republic of North Macedonia

Before starting with the analysis of the above issues, an overview of what is the practice of street naming in the RMV will be provided below.

In 2004, the Law on Determining the Names of Streets, Squares, Bridges and other Infrastructural Facilities was adopted in the RMV. Article 3 of this law defines the use of names or numbers for streets (Official Gazette of North Macedonia no. 66/2004).² Further, Article 4 defines municipal councils as responsible for names and numbers, while Article 5 defines geographic, ethnographic, historical names, scientific and cultural personalities, names and dates of important events, as acceptable for use. It should be noted that during the voting of names, a double majority is used, that is, the majority of communities with the least number in the municipality participate in the voting. The law does not determine whether these names must necessarily have an ethnic background according to the country's population, but it does determine that in municipalities where

² Note: Paragraph 1 and 2 of Article 3 of the Law on Determining the Names of Streets, Squares, Bridges and other Infrastructural Objects states that a name or a number is defined for every street, square, bridge and other infrastructural object. For more see: <https://www.pravdiko.mk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Zakon-za-opredeluvanje-na-imin-a-na-ulitsi-ploshadi-mostovi-i-na-drugo-infrastrukturni-objekti-16-09-2004.pdf>

at least 20% of citizens use a language other than Macedonian, signs are placed in Macedonian as well as in the language used by at least 20% of the citizens of that municipality.



Below there are provided some examples of street names we photographed on streets of Tetova and Gostivar which are not in the Albanian language, but they are very out-dated, or missing in many streets. The personalities in the tables belong to the Macedonian ethnicity.



Figure 4: Examples of street names in North Macedonia (Tetova and Gostivar)

5. The Importance of Minority Languages for the European Union

The European Union considers the preservation of the languages as a vital asset and also as an integral part of European identity and a means of expressing nations' culture, economic development, and growth. Multilingualism is at the heart of the European project and is envisaged as an important element in Europe's competitiveness. The principle that the EU is in favour of linguistic diversity is included in the EU Charter for fundamental rights article 22 (2012) which it is stated that the Union shall respect cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity" and prohibits discrimination on grounds of language (article 21) and in the treaty of European Union (1992). Language policy is the responsibility of EU member states, which should promote language diversity and encourage the implementation of a multilingual policy, with an emphasis on learning at least two languages in addition to the mother tongue (European Commission, 2017). Promoting multilingualism and language education can also be considered a democratic tool that contributes to the active participation of citizens in an intergovernmental forum such as the EU.



Figure 5: Examples of bilingual street names in North Macedonia (Skopje)

The range of languages spoken in the EU, considered one of the most institutionally multilingual policies in the world, is not confined to the 24 national or official languages used in each of the 28 EU member states and recognised as official languages of the EU. In fact, there are over sixty indigenous, regional, or minority languages being spoken, which enjoy equal status. However, it is to be noted that among these languages there are some of them that "enjoy a higher standard" (English, French, and German), because of the fact that they are the procedural languages of the European Commission, and because they "are the languages of the strongest economies in the (Dendrinos, 2018)". However, in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and in the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities it is clearly stipulated the protection and promotion of languages used by traditional minorities, which constitutes the Council of Europe's commitment to the protection of national minorities, their heritage, culture, and language, which contribute at the same time for building of a Europe based on democracy and cultural diversity. Both these two important documents, together with international agreements in the field of human rights which, although not binding on the signatory states, advise the drafting of specific laws, where the focus should be to improve the legal framework and policies for protection of minorities. And these policies should start with the protection of the language, as one of the most valuable resources through which the culture and traditions of a country are transmitted. If language is not preserved, a language dies out and future generations will lose connections with their roots. Therefore, policies to promote bi- and multilingualism are essential, especially for small languages, which are under the pressure of native languages (usually the first official language, which has a larger number of speakers) and are vulnerable to necessary language conservation policies.

Seen from this point of view, in today's Europe, it is normal to express support for minority languages or for communities that speak minority languages to express bilingual or multilingual

"messages", which include the languages of the majority as well as those of the minorities, national or ethnic groups. This form of linguistic support of minorities is in many cases also legally binding as it is included in various legal statutes, which were mentioned above (Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Article 11) and Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (article 10, paragraph, 2.g), both treaties of the Council of Europe.

However, the presence or absence of these messages provokes different reactions between ethnic groups within a certain territory, including deleting, disguising, colouring with paint these linguistic "messages" (which can also be street names) as the language in which are written is considered undesirable. This is a phenomenon that happens all over Europe and it's actually not surprising why it happens because these kinds of "linguistic messages" in public spaces are important to our daily lives: they help us structure physical space, mark it, give it meaning and thus create special places and landscapes in which we live and act, which have a practical and emotional value for us and which are undoubtedly the source of our identity.

5. Street Names in Albanian in North Macedonia (Translation, Adaptation, Change)

5.1 Legal framework

In UN resolution 1/4d (of which RNM has been a member since April 8, 1993), on multilingual areas, it is recommended that in countries where more than one language is spoken, national authorities should, as appropriate:

- a) Define geographical names in each official language and other languages as appropriate;
- b) Demonstrate clear indications of equality or superiority to recognized official street naming and designations;
- c) Publish these officially recognized designations on maps and other official institutions.

Likewise, in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992), article 7, point d, it is emphasized that states should enable and encourage the use of regional or minority languages, in speech and writing, in public and private life.

In this regard, States should undertake to eliminate any unjustified distinction, exception, restriction, or preference in relation to the use of a regional or minority language which aims to discourage or endanger its preservation or development.

In the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992), it is also emphasized that: "The adoption of special measures in favour of regional or minority languages aimed at promoting equality between the users of these languages and the rest of the population or that receive given their specific conditions, it is not considered an act of discrimination against users of the most widely used languages.

North Macedonia has not yet ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The Council of Europe continuously asks EU member states and non-member states to prepare for the ratification of the Charter (1992), also using legal assistance provided by experts working in the Council of Europe. These experts have compiled a manual (two volumes) that proposes a legal path of ratification for each country (including North Macedonia), adapted to the linguistic, political, legal, and practical situation in the given country (European Centre for Minority Issues, 2011). The legal support for the ratification of this convention is based mainly on the Ohrid Agreement (2001), the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia (amended on November 17, 1991), Article 8 of the Law on Primary Education (September 13, 1995), in the law on the use of languages spoken by at least 20% of the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia and in local self-government units (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia no. 101, August 13, 2008), as well as the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, in which RNM has joined since 2001 (a fact that legally obliges it to take measures, protect and promote minority groups within its territory.)



Figure 6: Examples of bilingual street names in North Macedonia (Skopje)

Taking into account what is written above, it is normal that in accordance with the law, but also with the conventions, treaties, etc., that the Republic of Macedonia has ratified or is a part of, North Macedonia should allow and even promote the expression of identity, language, the culture of national minorities living within its territory. Therefore, the request of the Albanians for the establishment of Albanian street names (here we mean the translation, adaptation, but also the change of these names in those areas where the context requires such a thing, in order to reflect the ethnic and cultural reality) is fair and right. Concrete examples are the roads "Kosturski heroji", "Partizanski odredi", "Macedonsko-Kosovska udarna brigada", "Ohridska", Buk. "Marshall Tito", "Braça Milladinovci", "Bratstvo edinstvo", "JNA", "Vardarska", etc., which are encountered in Skopje, Tetovo, Gostivar, also where Albanians make up at least 20% of the population. The dilemma that arises here is whether to translate, adapt or change completely. We think that it should be done according to the percentage of the population, as determined by the Law on the Use of Languages.

So, from the examples mentioned above, we should have "Heronjtë e Kosturit", "Aradhat Partizane", "Brigada Sulmuese Maqedono-Kosovare", "Rruga e Ohrit", Bul. "Iliria", "Vëllezërit Frashëri", "Bashkimi", "Rruga e Vardarit" etc. Depending on the composition of the population of the settlement, the street names should be put accordingly.



Figure 7: Examples of street names in North Macedonia (Tetova)

Finally, in February 2021, the Skopje City Council approved a proposed list of street names, which includes the names of Albanian figures such as Asdreni, Dritëro Agolli, Fatos Arapi, or even Albania. However, the change in the street names faced obstacles. An attempt to revoke the earlier approval of the street names was thwarted when the Skopje City Council withdrew from the agenda an item calling for the repeal of the earlier decision. The Central Registry reasoned that the decision on the street names was not made in accordance with the Law on the Determination of the Names of Streets, Squares, Bridges, and other Infrastructure Objects, therefore it had not proceeded with the change of street names. Even the Municipality of Skopje stated that the earlier decision was considered in violation of the relevant law, as it was taken in a period of time that contradicts Article 8 of the law, which states: "Names cannot be changed 6 months prior to the regular presidential, parliamentary and local elections, and one year before the population census process" (Zendeli, 2021). This has caused confusion, both for the citizens, who need new documents and for the administration, which encountered difficulties with the new street addresses of the citizens (Shkopi, 2022). A similar initiative to change the names of streets and institutions has emerged in the municipality of Tetova. There were similar initiatives before 2022, but they failed or the process halted. The newest initiatives aim to change the names of streets and institutions, based on the ethnic and cultural reality of the Municipality of Tetova (Xhelili, 2022).



Figure 8: Examples of bilingual street names in North Macedonia (Tetova)

6. The Process of Standardization of Geographical Names

The standardization of street names is necessary for various reasons. For the standardization of the names of the countries, a series of normative rules and criteria are applied, which basically aim to guarantee the uniformity of these names. This means that they should only have one standardized spelling form. Even the standardization of street names responds to the same criteria, but also respects some specific rules that apply only to these types of names, since often street names come as a result of spontaneous actions of a certain speaking community. However, although the establishment of these designations seems like a natural process, it is usually, if not always, a process directed by the administrative or political authorities of a country, which makes their standardization difficult.

As a rule, street designations or street names are approved by the Municipality or the Municipal Council, which are then approved by the Ministry of the Interior. Official street names are communicated to the Geographical Names Standardization Committee, to be checked and corrected, in order to achieve uniformity across the country.

Albanian geographical names in RNM are not just labels on the map. They serve as connecting points between man and the earth and are needed to identify, describe and analyse geographic

entities. The misuse of these names can cause problems, because they describe the history and culture of the Albanian community over the years and also constitute important evidence not only for citizens but also for researchers, historians, archaeologists, and others, for analysis, understanding, and maintaining community identity. The benefits of standardization and the use of geographical names can be categorized into four main groups, these are:

1. Technical,
2. Social,
3. Economic, and
4. Cultural.

It is important to follow strict rules for the standardization of street names, based also on international standards. This enables a homogeneous representation of geographical names in digital databases, geographic information systems, maps, books, and internet applications, which would make it easier today for all foreigners, tourists, foreign researchers, academic institutions, organizations, and others, to read all Albanian street names correctly.

7. Recommendations and Conclusions

In July 2022, North Macedonia started screening with the European Union in Brussels. This process must be completed by the end of 2023 before membership negotiations can begin. During this period RNM should undertake constitutional changes which will prove the country's commitments to achieve full membership in the EU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RNM, 2021). Therefore, for a country like RNM, aiming for EU integration, it recommends that it:

- gives importance to the language, culture and identity of the ethnic groups within its territory. In this way, the state proves that cultural and ethnic diversity is not an obstacle, and that it is considered an important asset of the country, bringing it closer to the values of the EU, which RNM intends to join.
- provides support and defends the indigenous minority languages also by displaying "messages" in their language, such as road signs, public signs, institutions, street names, etc., i.e. in what is called the linguistic landscape. Thus, RNM will follow the path of the EU which speaks in all the languages of the member states, following its language policies.
- street names in RMV, mainly in those municipalities and communes where Albanians are more than 20% should be written, adapted or translated into Albanian or even changed. Such a step does not endanger the Republic of Macedonia or the Macedonian language, on the contrary, it will prove that this country is democratic and respects its citizens, regardless of culture or ethnicity. A similar step should be taken for other ethnic communities, regardless of the fact that they are below 20%.
- must ratify and harmonize all its laws with those of the EU that deal with language policy issues. This step must be taken before the start of the last phase of EU membership talks.

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