

## EVALUATING MACEDONIAN FOREIGN POLICY: LEGAL PERSPECTIVES, REGIONAL REALITIES, AND PUBLIC OPINION PERCEPTIONS

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### **Abstract**

This paper is focused on a general overview of Macedonian foreign policy since the proclamation of the independence of the Republic of Macedonia in 1991 until present day. During this period many agreements were conducted and the state walked the path from severe regional instability, toward EU and NATO integrations. The strategic national interest of the general foreign policy is related in continuity with a top priority of the country's Euro-Atlantic integrations, but also continuity of the tight relations, upgraded to strategic partnership with the United States.

During the process of seeking the right path for those mentioned priorities, Macedonia was faced with the challenges of compromising on many national questions, related to the identity of the state and its people. In parallel structural inner reforms are conducted, not only in the sphere of rule of law, economy, or democratization, but also and significant redefinition of the state regarding the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. The recent membership in the NATO alliance was precluded by a painful agreement on the so-called Name Issue and with the Prespa agreement compromise was concluded with Greece, which resulted in constitutional changes and a new state name. Those reforms regarding the strategic interest of the Macedonian foreign policy were not always supported by wider public opinion in the country. Therefore in this paper, we are presenting the results of the public opinion research conducted by a team of researchers from the Faculty of Law at Goce Delchev University in Shtip.

**Keywords:** *Macedonia, Balkan, diplomacy, EU, NATO.*

### **1. The Constitutional Postulates for the Foreign Policy of Macedonia**

Foreign policy is one of the most important state policies and strategies. It defines and represents the state on the international scene, shapes international relations, and builds a policy of peace, stability, cooperation, or vice versa a policy of deteriorating relations. No state can function without communication with the outside world, like an isolated island. From here is the need for networking and establishing correct

relations with other countries and organizations. That is why foreign policy is an important indicator for the development of every country.

In the Law of Foreign Affairs<sup>1</sup>, "Foreign policy" refers to the political goals and activities for the relations of Macedonia with the other states and with international bodies, organizations, and communities, which realize the interests of Macedonia in international relations and protect the interests of its citizens and registered legal entities, especially: the preservation, confirmation, and advancement of the basic interests of Macedonia; - the preservation of the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Macedonia and its constitutional order; the respect and promotion of the fundamental values of the Constitution of Macedonia; - the sharing of values, interests and the will to associate based on an equal agreement and in accordance with the Constitution; - the strengthening of democracy and the rule of law in the whole world, based on human rights and freedoms and through their application and respect in international law;

Because of the great importance of foreign policy, the question always follows, who are the main "stakeholders" for this policy? In Macedonia, these are the President of the Republic, the Government, the Parliament, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the following pages, we will give a very brief overview of the powers of all these authorities.

The President of the Republic is the first among the four bodies to conduct foreign affairs policy (together with the Parliament, the Government, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). These bodies determine the general directions, make and adopt decisions on activities and attitudes, and realize with mutually coordinated cooperation all state activities related to foreign affairs. The foreign affairs authorities create, determine, and implement the foreign policy of Macedonia. The President, the Prime Minister, and the Minister represent the state in international relations in accordance with international law and customs.

### **1.1 The President of the State**

The president of the state represents the state in international relations, and it is quite justified that he is the first association for foreign policy. The powers of the President, among others, are the following: The President participates in the creation of foreign policy in cooperation with the Government, by determining the general directions of foreign policy, including issues of international relations with implications for the security and defense of the country; The President monitors the implementation of the foreign policy and can inform the Parliament about the results and possible disagreements with other bodies for the performance of foreign affairs; The President makes proposals and participates in taking positions on certain foreign policy issues within his jurisdiction, including the security and defense aspects arising from international relations; The President appoints and revokes, by decree, ambassadors and deputies of the Republic of North Macedonia abroad in a procedure determined by the Law on Foreign Affairs; The President gives consent for issuing an agreement to the head of a foreign diplomatic mission; and the President also receives the credentials and letters of revocation of foreign diplomatic representatives in a procedure established by the Law on Foreign Affairs.

### **1.2 The Assembly of Macedonia**

The Assembly of Macedonia, in terms of foreign policy, has the following powers<sup>2</sup>: It ratifies international agreements; decides on war and peace; makes decisions on changing the borders of the Republic; makes decisions on entering and leaving an alliance or community with other states; determines the foreign policy of Macedonia, including issues of international relations with implications for the security

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<sup>1</sup> The Law of Foreign Affairs; Available at: <https://d1qv8oyeh4usdm.cloudfront.net/images/fa58129333dd4d5183f8f8685d7451d1.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Assembly of Macedonia; <https://www.sobranie.mk/nadleznosti-na-sobraniето.nspk>

and defense of the country; - at its own request or at the request of the Government, reviews reports on the implementation of the foreign policy and the international position of the Republic of Macedonia, including international security and defense issues; takes positions on a certain issue, at the proposal of the Government, including those foreign policy issues related to security and defense; - in the case of different positions on issues in the field of foreign affairs, at the proposal of the Ministry, on behalf of the Government or at the proposal of the president, the Assembly discusses those issues, after which it adopts appropriate conclusions; the working body of the Parliament responsible for foreign policy at least twice a year reviews the minister's report on the implementation of foreign policy; and - achieves international cooperation within the framework of its competences.

### **1.3 The Government of Macedonia**

The government in our country has a wide range of powers in terms of foreign policy. Thus the government decides on: Recognition of states and governments; Establishing diplomatic and consular relations with other countries; Makes decisions on opening diplomatic-consular missions abroad; Proposes appointing ambassadors and representatives of Macedonia abroad; Appoints heads of consular missions; participates in the creation of foreign policy by determining the general guidelines for foreign policy in cooperation with the president, including issues of international relations with implications for the security and defense of the country; reports to the Parliament on issues in the field of foreign policy and international relations; - at the request of the Parliament, submits a report on the implementation of the foreign policy and on the international position of Macedonia, including security and defense issues on the international level; monitors the implementation of the foreign policy, and can inform the Parliament about the results and possible disagreements with other bodies for the performance of foreign affairs; - submits opinions and proposals on international issues to the president; - establishes, develops and promotes the political, economic or financial relations with one or more countries or international organizations; - decides on the visa regime of the Republic of Macedonia with other countries and entities in international relations; decides on the termination or reduction, partially or completely, of political, economic or financial relations with one or more countries, or international governmental or non-governmental organizations and informs the Parliament about it; - proposes the appointment and recall of ambassadors and deputies of the Republic of Macedonia and appoints and dismisses heads of consular missions and honorary consulates of the Republic of Macedonia abroad; - issues warrants or exequaturs for heads of foreign diplomatic-consular missions and foreign honorary consulates; decides on the opening and closing of diplomatic-consular and other representative offices of the Republic of Macedonia and on the opening and closing of foreign diplomatic-consular representative offices or representative offices of international organizations in Macedonia, in a procedure determined by this law; - decides on the participation of Macedonia in The common foreign and security policy and the European security and defense policy of the European Union; - provides funds within the Budget of Macedonia for emergency and unforeseen situations that arise within the framework of the implementation of the foreign policy; provides funds in the Budget to reimburse the costs of membership fees and other expenses resulting from the membership and participation of the Republic of Macedonia in international governmental organizations; - regularly monitors and evaluates international relations that have implications for security and defense and informs the President and The Assembly ensures that humanitarian operations in which the Republic of Macedonia participates are coordinated with those of international organizations.

The role of the Government in terms of foreign policy has been improved with the adoption of the Law on Conclusion and Ratification of International Agreements (1998). And the Law itself provides for cohabitation, that is, cooperation between the President of the State and the Government in terms of foreign policy issues and decisions. As an illustration, we will cite Article 3 of the Law on Conclusion and Ratification of International Agreements, which notes: "*International agreements on behalf of the Republic*

*of Macedonia are concluded by the President of the Republic." The Government of the Republic of Macedonia can also conclude international agreements on behalf of the Republic of Macedonia, which regulate issues in the fields of economy, finance, science, culture, education and sports, traffic and communications, urban planning, construction and environmental protection, agriculture, forestry, water management, health, energy, justice, labor and social policy, human rights, diplomatic-consular relations, as well as in the field of defense and security of the state, except for issues related to the border of the Republic of Macedonia, joining alliances or communities with other states or for withdrawal from such alliances and communities and other international agreements which, according to international law, are concluded by heads of states<sup>3</sup>".*

#### **1.4. Ministry of Foreign Affairs**

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs carries out the work related to: foreign affairs and foreign policy of the Republic of Macedonia; establishing, developing and coordinating relations, representing and affirming the Republic of Macedonia internationally; protection of the interests, rights and property of the Republic and its citizens and domestic legal entities abroad; coordinating and reporting on the policy of the authority for which it was established; concern for the position and rights of the members of the Macedonian people in the neighboring countries; the organization and management of the diplomatic, consular and other representations of the Republic of Macedonia, as well as organizing the system of connections with them; the conclusion, ratification and preservation of international agreements; the determination and marking of the state border; communication and cooperation with foreign diplomatic and consular representations of foreign countries and missions of international organizations in the Republic of Macedonia; the accreditation of ambassadors, the reception of credentials, the issuing of privileges and immunities to foreign diplomatic missions and representations of international governmental organizations and other matters related to the appointment and recall of ambassadors of the Republic of Macedonia abroad; the collection, study and care of foreign and domestic documentation under his authority and performs other tasks established by law. Also, it coordinates the participation of the Republic of Macedonia in the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the European Security and Defense Policy of the European Union; ensures coordination of the foreign policy aspects of the participation of Macedonia in the missions and operations to maintain international peace and security; - monitors the development of international economic relations and proposes appropriate decisions to the competent authorities; monitors and contributes to the development of international relations and international law; - determines and marks the state border, maintains and restores border markers and participates in the resolution of border incidents; - proposes and implements the visa policy and visa regime of the Republic of Macedonia; - manages the Visa Center and the visa information system, which ensures the connection of all segments in the process of implementing the visa regime of the Republic of Macedonia; - communicates with and coordinates cooperation with foreign diplomatic and consular missions and the missions of international organizations in the Republic of Macedonia.

#### **1.5 Diplomatic-consular missions**

We also must mention the diplomatic-consular missions, as stakeholders in the foreign policy. Diplomatic representations of the Republic of Macedonia are embassies, permanent missions to international organizations, liaison offices, and special missions. The consular missions of the Republic of Macedonia are consulate general, consulate, consular office, and honorary consulate. With a special decision, the Government also established cultural and information centers, economic and other representative offices abroad. The cultural and information centers, the economic and other representations of Macedonia abroad, work as part of the diplomatic-consular representations of Macedonia.

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<sup>3</sup> See Art. 3 of the Law on Conclusion and Ratification of International Agreements; <https://shorturl.at/ijGX2>

From the previously elaborated, we can conclude that foreign policy is complex and multidisciplinary. As such, it requires a serious and multifaceted approach involving multiple institutions and stakeholders. The degree of cooperation and balancing between them should be at a high level so that it can leave good results not only externally but also internally for the state.

## 2. Macedonian Foreign Policy in International Relations Context

The Republic of Macedonia became an independent state in the early 1990s following the breakup of the former federal state of Yugoslavia, of which it was an equal constituent. With the establishment of independence, there arose a need to formulate its own foreign policy to achieve its international objectives (Maleski, 2012).

From the very beginning, the state faced significant challenges. Domestically, there was dissent from the largest minority group the Albanians who, like the Serbian minority, refused to participate in the referendum for the creation of an independent state (Marolov & Mitev, 2019). Specifically, the situation with the Albanian minority in Macedonia has never been ideal (Tashevska Remenski, 2007). Since the formation of the state, Albanians in Macedonia have organized into political parties with an ethnic prefix. Their actions were primarily aimed at altering the constitutional order and their status within the state. In analyzing this situation, it is crucial to consider the regional context of instability and the problems faced by Albanians in Kosovo under Milošević's regime.

The situation escalated in 2001 when, following the conflict in Kosovo, the crisis spilled over into Macedonian territory with the creation of the paramilitary National Liberation Army (Kuzev et al., 2006). Initially, these paramilitary formations fought for the secession of parts of the republic, later changing their narrative to a struggle for greater rights for Albanians. This occurred at a time when Albanians in Macedonia were already organized into political parties and were part of the government, holding positions such as ministers, mayors, and directors.

The resolution to this crisis was found in the Ohrid Framework Agreement,<sup>4</sup> (Pavleski, & Rajkovchevski, 2023), which, although signed by the four largest political parties in Macedonia,<sup>5</sup> can be considered an international agreement as representatives of the EU and the US were also signatories. This agreement significantly transformed Macedonia, practically favoring the rights of the Albanian ethnic minority over those of other minorities.

Despite the fact that the agreement favored ethnic Albanian demands, the Albanian minority consistently seeks to enhance their status in each subsequent election, often exceeding the provisions of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. A notable example of this is the Tirana Platform, which sparked additional tensions and disagreements within Macedonian society (Marolov & Stojanovski, 2017).

Externally, the newly established state found itself surrounded by the broader environment of military conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, which threatened to spill over into its territory. Additionally, the process of gaining international recognition proved to be exceptionally difficult, primarily due to the opposition from its southern neighbor, Greece, which refused to recognize the new state under its constitutional name (Dokmanović, 2021). Furthermore, the state faced severe economic pressures due to the military conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and the imposed sanctions on its northern neighbor, Serbia. Greece also imposed an oil embargo on Macedonia, causing significant economic damage.

Under such circumstances, the state's top priority was to secure international recognition of its independence and gain membership in the United Nations. However, this was also hindered by Greek diplomacy. Macedonia and Greece managed to sign the Interim Accord in 1995, which relatively normalized their relations. Earlier, in 1993, Macedonia's admission to the UN occurred under the reference "the former

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<sup>4</sup> on August 13, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> The two largest Macedonian and the two largest Albanian political parties, so to speak

Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", as a form of imposed solution and a condition for membership. According to the previous agreement, Macedonia was forced to change its national flag and attempt to find a resolution to the name dispute, a requirement also confirmed by a UN Security Council resolution.<sup>6</sup> Undoubtedly, conditions for admission to the UN were imposed that were outside the Charter and conditions that had never before been demanded of a state seeking membership.

After securing international recognition of Macedonian independence, the Republic of Macedonia clearly proclaimed its Euro-Atlantic orientation, expressing a desire for membership in existing regional international organizations, primarily the EU and NATO. This became a top priority in its foreign policy, laying the groundwork for additional conditions and compromises. Naturally, these intentions were known to the neighboring states, which were members of these organizations and possessed veto rights. Indeed, the veto power would be (miss) used in the coming years to coerce concessions from Macedonia in the interests of its neighbors.

Despite the existence of the Interim Accord with Greece, one of the few positive provisions for Macedonia was not respected. Specifically, under the Interim Accord, Greece committed not to obstruct Macedonia's path to international organizations. However, Greece vetoed Macedonia's accession to NATO in 2008, thereby breaching the Interim Accord—a fact acknowledged by the International Court of Justice in its judgment of 2011 (*The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia v. Greece* 2011). Meanwhile, over 140 countries decided to recognize Macedonia under its constitutional name. Nevertheless, despite everything, the new Macedonian government in 2018 decided to sign the famous Prespa Agreement, which paved the way for NATO membership (Demircioğlu, Akcay, & Deniz, 2024).

With this agreement, the Republic of Macedonia amended its own constitution and renamed itself the Republic of North Macedonia. However, some legal scholars and experts debated its compliance with international law, especially regarding sovereignty and treaty obligations. (Nikodinovska Krstevska, 2018). A referendum was organized in Macedonia, which failed due to insufficient voter turnout. Despite this, the Assembly decided to accept the agreement. There were allegations of significant controversy regarding the voting of parliamentarians who were released from detention, among other issues, to vote "yes". During the referendum campaign, promises were made ranging from NATO and EU membership to free healthcare.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Resolution 817 (1993)

<sup>7</sup> According to clause (4), Macedonia undertakes to promptly submit the agreement to its Assembly for ratification, after which it must inform Greece of its ratification. Under this provision, Macedonia has the right to hold a referendum on the issue of the name change or acceptance of the agreement. While this may appear to some as a significant victory for Macedonia, in reality, it falls short. The notion that there is no reciprocal right for Greece, namely the right to a referendum on the name of another state, is at least ironic, as Macedonia's right to hold a referendum on its own name is nothing more than a natural right.

Interestingly, it is noted that the Macedonian leadership still opted to hold a referendum which was controversial in many aspects, starting from the formulated question to the attempt to portray it as successful despite not meeting the established census requirement, among other issues. The referendum question was posed in a manipulative manner, where citizens were led to believe that a "YES" vote for the Prespa Agreement would automatically enable Macedonia's membership in the EU and NATO. However, the referendum ended unsuccessfully due to the failure to meet the required turnout threshold, thereby depriving it of legitimacy in the eyes of the citizens. This fact was acknowledged by the State Election Commission. Nonetheless, this did not prevent the government from asserting that the referendum, in a way, was still successful because a majority of those who voted supported it.

The government's campaign for the referendum itself was filled with numerous ambiguities and promises of various kinds. Numerous billboards were placed stating that this was the final hurdle for EU and NATO accession, and that accepting the Prespa Agreement solidified the Macedonian identity. It was claimed that the Macedonian language would become one of the official languages of the EU, alongside promises of free healthcare, education, and more. However, it quickly became evident that the Prespa Agreement was not the final obstacle on the path to the EU, due to the subsequent Bulgarian veto. Additionally, it was shown that the Macedonian identity was not solidified due to challenges from Bulgaria, an EU member state like Greece. The assertion that the Prespa Agreement would lead Macedonia to become an EU member and its language to become official was far from true, as Macedonia was still in

There were also visits from prominent foreign leaders from countries lobbying for a successful referendum and name change, arguing that this was the last unprincipled barrier on Macedonia's path to Euro-Atlantic integration.

The 'Greek scenario' was also utilized by Bulgaria, which, like Greece, was already a member of these organizations. However, it should be noted that Bulgaria did not obstruct Macedonia's path to integration at the same time that Greece did. Macedonia signed a Declaration with Bulgaria as early as 1999, which helped Bulgaria assert that there were no unresolved issues with its neighbors before its EU accession. Years later, the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness, and Cooperation was signed in 2017, which sparked some controversies.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Bulgaria later decided to block Macedonia's European integration, demanding constitutional changes not mentioned in the treaty, a situation that continues to this day.<sup>9</sup>

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the phase of uninitiated accession negotiations. Accession negotiations typically last for several years, hence the claim that this 'magical' agreement would somehow fulfill all of this was unserious.

However, here we encounter a legal dilemma that seems not to have been raised as an issue during the referendum campaign. It pertains to the fact that the referendum was called even after the agreement had been ratified by the Macedonian Parliament. What is crucial is Article 118 of the Constitution of Macedonia, which states that an international agreement ratified by the Parliament becomes part of the internal-national legal order and cannot be changed by any laws. Therefore, calling a referendum on a question related to an international agreement that had already been ratified was, at the very least, misleading the masses, giving the impression that they were still deciding on something in a legal situation where the Macedonian Constitution does not provide for a procedure for deratification. Hence, if there had indeed been a sincere desire on the part of the Macedonian authorities for "consultation" with the people, the referendum should have been held before the ratification of the agreement in the Macedonian Parliament. Therefore, the logic is clear: if you have already ratified the international agreement, it becomes part of the internal order, making the referendum unnecessary and pointless.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the foundation for regulating the relations between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria is encapsulated in two legal instruments: the Declaration of 1999 and the Treaty of 2017. Regarding these two documents, it can be concluded that although formal equality of the parties is maintained, there is nonetheless a certain asymmetry concerning the Republic of Macedonia. Specifically, the Republic of Macedonia has made statements and guarantees that are already stipulated as part of its highest legal act, the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia. Furthermore, there is a provision concerning the interpretation of the Macedonian Constitution, namely the "renunciation" by the Republic of Macedonia with respect to the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria, while no reciprocal obligation is foreseen for Bulgaria.

The Treaty goes a step further than the Declaration by providing for the establishment of a multidisciplinary commission tasked with interpreting historical events. This commission is accountable to the governments of both countries for its work. Although this provision seems to reflect the formal legal equality of both parties, this is not the case, considering that at the time of signing the Treaty, Bulgaria was a member of both NATO and the EU, while the Republic of Macedonia had only clearly stated ambitions for membership in these organizations. Therefore, the "assessment" of the commission's work by both governments is practically an instrument solely in the hands of the government of the Republic of Bulgaria. Specifically, in a situation where the commission is unable to reach a joint interpretation (i.e., when Macedonian representatives disagree with a particular Bulgarian interpretation of history), Bulgaria could invoke non-compliance with the Treaty and use its veto power. Essentially, these provisions assume agreement from the Macedonian representatives in the commission on every interpretation and any issue; otherwise, their actions could be interpreted as the commission's dysfunction, leading to a negative assessment, thereby allowing Bulgaria to claim a breach of the Treaty.

Finally, in both the Declaration and the Treaty, the key compromise regarding the Macedonian language is concealed within the transitional provisions, treated as a mere technical matter. In this way, Bulgaria simply acknowledges the existence of a constitution of a state it has already recognized, while maintaining its position that a distinct Macedonian language does not exist. Through this compromise, Bulgaria merely acknowledges the obvious fact that the Republic of Macedonia has its own constitution, which states the existence of the Macedonian language.

<sup>9</sup> Namely, this concerns the so-called French proposal, which, in addition to the previous agreements, further conditioned Macedonia by requiring the inclusion of the Bulgarian minority in its constitution as a prerequisite for lifting Bulgaria's veto on Macedonia's EU integration.

It is worth mentioning that The Republic of Macedonia holds the status of a candidate country for EU membership, having signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement on April 9, 2001. It is noteworthy that Macedonia was the first country from the Western Balkans with which the EU signed such an agreement. Additionally, it should be mentioned that the strategic partner of the Republic of Macedonia is the United States, with which it signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2008 following the Greek veto at the NATO summit in Bucharest.

### **3. Macedonian Foreign Policy through Public Opinion View**

#### **3.1 Research Methodology**

The research was conducted in April-May 2024 on a survey with 225 respondents. The survey was conducted in the eastern parts of Macedonia, and therefore, the ethnic and religious origin of the sample reflects the region, not the state overall, and almost all of the people included are with Orthodox Christian religion and Macedonian nationality. In the sample 54,2 % are male and 45,8 % are female. 0,9 % are on the age between 16 and 18 years old, 38,2 % between 19 and 30, 33,8 % between 31 and 45, 16 % between 46 and 60, and 10,7 % of the surveyed are on age more than 61 years old. We have to mention that the results of the research will be compared with the research on a similar methodology conducted in 2017<sup>10</sup>. Part of the results of the last mentioned research were published in the paper "*Republic of Macedonia, the 30th member of NATO?*" (Stojanovski, Marolov, 2017).

The thesis is that, if EU membership is conditional on/with bilateral disputes, then the public support for membership will decline.

#### **3.2 Research Results and Discussions**

From the research results in 2024, as well as similar results from the last three decades, we can notice that the support for Macedonian eventual integration in European Union is in fall. Therefore 56,9 % of the respondents support future membership in the EU (Graphic 1). A surprising attribute of this data was that the lowest support comes from the young categories of respondents between the ages of 19 and 30 years old at 41,9 %. Comparing with the research in 2017 it is clear that the support for EU membership is in downfall (Table 1). This rather dramatic fall of support is due to the long process for the start of the negotiations since the official candidacy status in 2005, the lack of will in the EU for future enlargement, and the painful concessions regarding the Prespa Agreement and the new conditions and the blockade from Bulgaria.

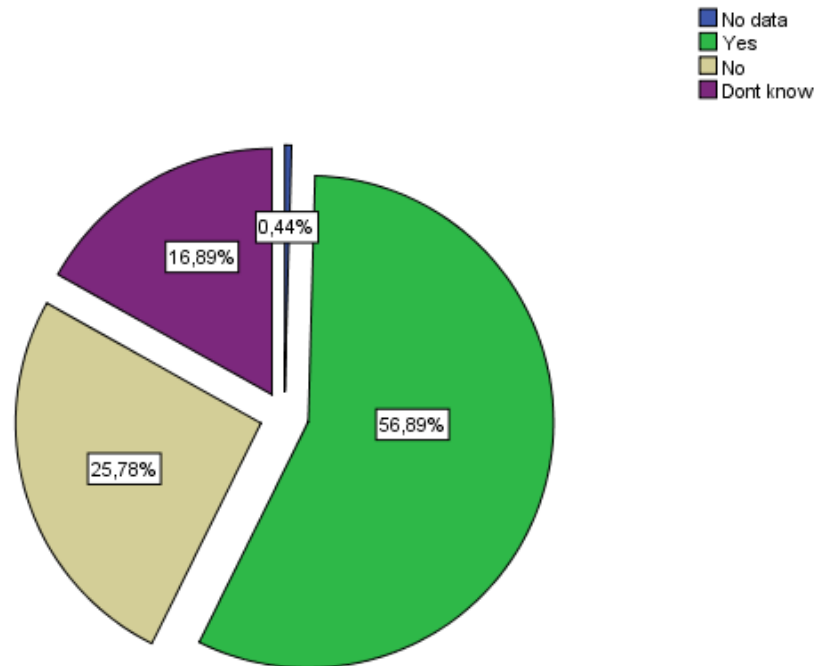
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<sup>10</sup> This research was conducted in the eastern parts of Macedonia in 2017 on a sample of 364. 44,8 % were male and 52,2 % female. 42,3 % were on age between 18 and 29, 27,5 % between 30 and 45, 21,4 % on age between 46 and 60, and 8,8 % on age more than 61 years old.



**Graphic 1**

**Do you support Macedonian membership in European Union**



**Table 1**

**Percentage of support of Macedonian membership in EU-in total and by age**

	<b>Total support</b>	<b>18-30</b>	<b>31-45</b>	<b>46-60</b>	<b>61 +</b>
<b>2017</b>	70, 9 %	63 %	73 %	79, 5 %	81, 3 %
<b>2024</b>	56, 9 %	41, 9 %	67, 1 %	63, 9 %	62, 5 %

We have a very similar situation when the support of the NATO Alliance is in question. Even though the gap in support in 2017 and 2024 is not so large, and the situation has changed from aspiration in 2017 to full NATO member in 2024, the support is decreasing (Table 2). The reasons are connected to the attitudes toward the EU, since in the public discourse and political narrative in the last three decades the term Euro-Atlantic integrations is present. Also, we want to point out that in the past always there was a significant difference and higher support for the EU than NATO, but from the results, we can notice that the figures are

almost overlapping. Furthermore, regarding the research in 2024, maybe for the first time, in this case to the youngest categories, we can see stronger support for NATO than the EU.

**Table 2**

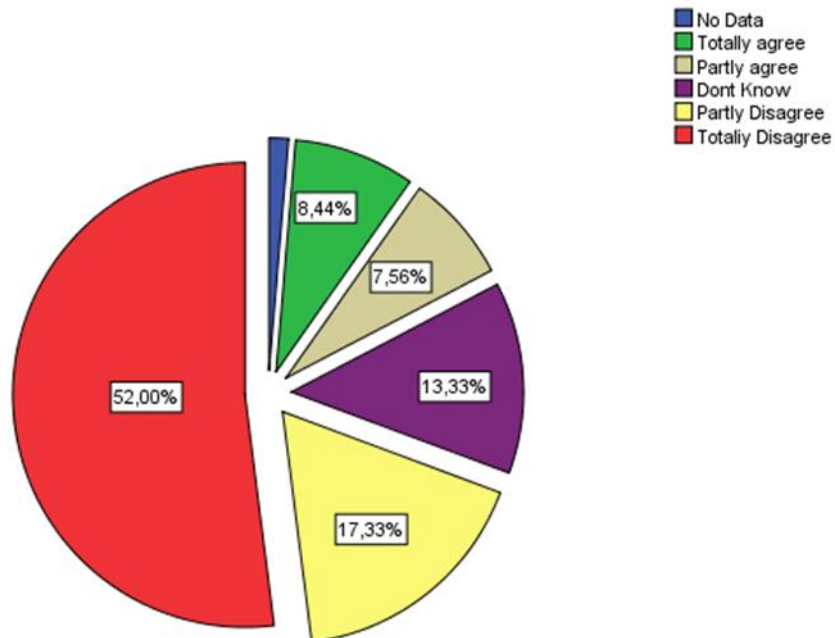
**Percentage of support of NATO (in 2017 future membership, in 2024 current membership), in total and by age**

	Total support	18-30	31-45	46-60	61 +
<b>2017</b>	62, 9 %	58, 4 %	64 %	51 %	75 %
<b>2024</b>	55, 1 %	44, 2 %	61, 8 %	61, 1 %	58, 3 %

The fall of support for EU membership is significantly increased when we put the question of completing the requirements from so-called "French Proposition" and satisfaction of the preconditions from Bulgaria for additional constitutional changes. In this case, only 16 % would accept EU membership under those conditions, of 69, 3 % are against (Graphic 2). This result is very similar to the situation in 2017 when only 9, 07 % would accept EU and NATO membership, and 84, 14 % are against it if the country has a condition to change its constitutional name (Table 3).

**Graphic 2**

**Would you support constitutional change and entry of Bulgarians in the Constitution as a condition for EU membership?**



**Table 3**

**Support of EU and NATO membership when the condition of constitutional changes is imposed**

**In 2017 the question was "Do you support a change of the constitutional name of the Republic of Macedonia as a condition for entry in NATO and EU?"**

**In 2024 the question was "Would you support constitutional change and entry of Bulgarians in the Constitution as a condition for EU membership?"**

	<b>Total support</b>	<b>18-30</b>	<b>31-45</b>	<b>46-60</b>	<b>61 +</b>
<b>2017</b>	9, 07 %	11 %	9 %	6, 4 %	6, 2 %
<b>2024</b>	16 %	17, 5 %	11, 8 %	11, 2 %	29, 1 %

The continued blockades, the rise of EU skepticism, the lack of clear perspectives for the future, and some traditional factors, such as religion and the idealized picture of the ex-Yugoslav federation influenced on the public opinion view on the region and the world. Even, the question "Which of the countries do you feel closest / friendliest", seems not to be relevant, in a geopolitical sense is a significant factor. Additionally, we can clearly follow patterns of present and future hybrid threat and even potential for regional destabilization, if the public opinion views are canalized and utilized in regional, or global political stand of view. This is even more significant in the case of the Russian aggression on Ukraine and its reflections and repercussions. Therefore, every bilateral regional problem, and every blockade on the EU integration road can be used by Russia potentially to destabilize the wither region, and the countries with no clear prospects for full integration in all western organizations and institutions.

In the research in 2024, on the question "Which of the region countries is the closest/friendliest towards Macedonia?", the highest percentage goes to Serbia (73, 8 %), and significantly lower 7, 6 % for Croatia, and 5, 3 % for Turkiye. This can be explained by traditional connections with Serbia and the present Yugo-nostalgia, but also and the neutral status of Serbia. From those results, it's clear that the support for Serbia increases with the respondents 'age (Table 4).

**Table 4**

**Perceptions of Serbia as the closest/friendliest country, among the countries in the region**

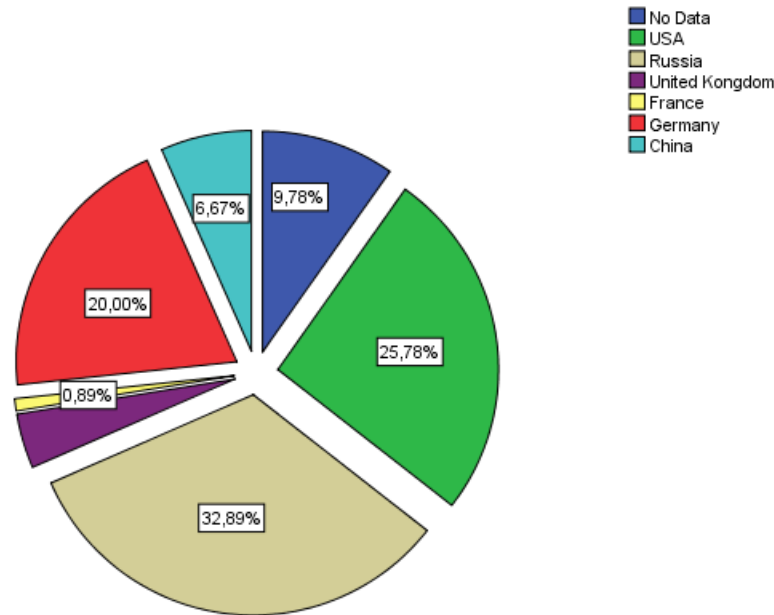
	<b>Total</b>	<b>18-30</b>	<b>31-45</b>	<b>46-60</b>	<b>61 +</b>
<b>2017</b>	53 %	51, 3 %	48 %	55, 1 %	71, 9 %
<b>2024</b>	73, 8 %	66, 3 %	73, 7 %	86, 1 %	79, 2 %

As in 2017, in the research in 2024, there is a bit of difference is the position of Macedonian citizens toward the perception of world powers. On the question of Which of the world powers is the closest/friendliest towards Macedonia?, and there is almost equal division in the attitudes regarding Russia (32, 9 %), Germany (20 %), and the United States (25, 8 %) (Graphic 3). The perceptions of Russia are related to the traditional linguistic and religious (Orthodox Christianity) connections, but also a result of the frustrations of Macedonian citizens on the lack of perspectives for EU integrations, which in the past were

mainly based on the blockade by Greece, and today by the blockade by Bulgaria. In this sense, this perception is also stimulated by the lack of interest in Brussels's bureaucracy for expansion of the European Union, regarding other European priorities and problems, but also and more aggressive Russian propaganda and expansionist foreign policy. The perceptions toward Germany are the most puzzling. Since Germany does not have bigger visibility even in soft policy, the only argument can be referred to strong economic relations with Macedonia. The fact is that the biggest trading relations of the Republic of Macedonia are with Germany, and also in this country is the biggest Macedonian emigration in Europe. The perceptions toward the United States are not simply reflections on the US position in the world politics, but should be seen as sharing of the same value system, in first place democratic values. Also, the strong bilateral ties between the two states (The agreement for strategic partnership), are improved with cooperation in education, economy, culture, and security. All of those factors, and others, as the preferred foreign language in Macedonia is English, are key for the high level of empathy of Macedonian citizens toward the US. Comparing the research in 2017 and 2024, almost there is no difference in the preference of the world powers as closest/friendliest (Table 5).

### Graphic 3

Which of the world powers is the closest/friendliest towards Macedonia?



**Table 5**

**Perceptions for the closes/friendliest country in the world in 2017 and 2024**

	<b>USA</b>	<b>Russia</b>	<b>UK</b>	<b>France</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>China</b>
<b>2017</b>	23, 4 %	33 %	3 %	2, 2 %	24, 5 %	4, 9 %
<b>2024</b>	25, 8 %	32, 9 %	4 %	0, 9 %	20, %	6, 7 %

On the question “Which of the world powers is most influential towards Macedonia’s foreign policy?”, there is clear domination of the United States (85, 3 %), before Germany (6, 7 %) and Russia (3, 6 %) This refers to the real situation, where the Republic of Macedonia’s foreign politics is traditionally connected with the United States, in the first place, which culminated with the agreement of strategic partnership. The figures are similar to the result in 2017, where there is domination in the United States (72, 5 %), before Russia (9, 1 %) and Germany (8, 5 %).

In the end, we have imposed a question on respondents to give a grade for the success of Macedonian foreign policy. This grade refers to all state institutions which have jurisdiction in this sphere, such as The Government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The President of State, and The Parliament. The lowest offered grade was 1 and the highest was 5. The average grade in 2024 is 1, 93, and in 2017 was 2, 43. If we compare the constellations of international politics of Macedonia in 2017 and 2024, together with inner political situations, both were transition periods. The first period reflects the foreign policy of the government led by VMRO DPMNE, which was deposed from authority, and the second reflects the foreign policy of the government led by SDSM, which recently lost the elections. In the first period, there were complex international relations of the country, mainly faced by the blockade by Greece for NATO and EU accession. The second period reflects on painful constitutional changes as a result of the Prespa Agreement with Greece, membership in NATO, but also and new blockade from Bulgaria for the start of EU accession negotiations.

**Conclusion**

The constitutional framework guiding Macedonian foreign policy is structured through key state institutions, including the President, the Government—particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—the National Assembly, and the network of Diplomatic and Consular Missions. Since Macedonia’s declaration of independence on September 8, 1991, the country has faced significant challenges in establishing its international standing. These challenges were initially rooted in the struggle for international recognition, further complicated by the "Name Issue" with Greece, which led to persistent blockades. These developments occurred within a broader context of regional destabilization, notably the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Balkan conflicts. The internal conflict of 2001 marked a period of significant destabilization for Macedonia, after which the country gradually moved towards relative stabilization. However, despite attaining EU candidate status in 2005, the commencement of accession negotiations has been hindered by ongoing bilateral disputes, most recently with Bulgaria, even as Macedonia successfully achieved NATO membership following the Prespa Agreement.

Relating to some of the important questions regarding Macedonia’s foreign policy priorities, there is fluctuation in the public opinion attitudes. The research conducted in April-May 2024, involving respondents from the eastern parts of Macedonia, reveals a significant shift in public attitudes toward Macedonia’s foreign policy priorities. Traditionally, support for EU membership has been declining, and the

recent survey confirms this trend. Probably for the first time in any conducted public opinion research, the support for NATO within this category is higher than the one for the EU. Among younger Macedonians, aged 19-30, the level of support has now fallen below 50%, indicating increasing disillusionment with the EU integration process. This decline can be attributed to frustration over the prolonged EU negotiation process, dissatisfaction with the Prespa Agreement, and new conditions imposed by Bulgaria.

Furthermore, the analysis of neighborhood relations reveals that Serbia is regarded as Macedonia's closest regional partner, reflecting strong historical and cultural ties. At the same time, public opinion remains divided on global powers, with the USA, Russia, and Germany. This ambivalence toward world powers suggests a complex foreign policy landscape for Macedonia, where regional relations and external influences continue to shape public perception. These findings underscore the importance of understanding and addressing public sentiment as Macedonia navigates its foreign policy challenges in the years ahead.

As seen previously, when bilateral issues, such as the disputes with Bulgaria, are set as conditions for EU membership, public support significantly declines. Nearly 70% of respondents oppose continuing the EU integration process under such conditions. Based on the analysis, it is evident that the main goals of Macedonian foreign policy remain focused on Euro-Atlantic integration. With NATO integration successfully achieved, the country has fulfilled one of its key objectives. However, public opinion, though still generally supportive of EU integration, is steadily declining. This shift is largely due to the prolonged negotiation process and the imposition of additional, and often unexpected, conditions stemming from bilateral issues, such as those with Bulgaria. These factors contribute to growing frustration and skepticism about the EU integration process among the Macedonian public.

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