

TRANSFORMING FAMILY LANDSCAPES IN NORTH MACEDONIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CENSUS DATA FROM 2002 TO 2021

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, the structure, size, and dynamics of families have undergone substantial transformations, marking a significant shift in societal norms and demographic patterns. This evolution is particularly pronounced in the context of shrinking family sizes, which can be attributed to a noticeable decline in marriage rates, an increase in divorce rates, and a reduced birth rate. Furthermore, the demographic landscape is being reshaped by the dual phenomena of migration and an aging population, trends that are mirrored within Macedonian society as well. The latest population census in the Republic of North Macedonia, conducted in 2021 after a hiatus of twenty years since the 2002 census, provides invaluable data for understanding these demographic shifts. This research aims to delve into and compare the data from these two pivotal years to examine the evolution of family structures in Macedonia over this period. By employing quantitative analysis techniques and a descriptive research approach, including content analysis, the study aims to paint a detailed picture of how Macedonian families have changed. The findings reveal significant changes in the demographic composition of households and families, with migration and an aging population being key drivers of this transformation. The study uncovers a trend towards smaller, more diverse family units, highlighting the long-term shifts in family structures and demographics. This comprehensive analysis not only captures the immediate changes but also sheds light on the broader, long-term trends affecting Macedonian families, contributing to our understanding of societal changes and family dynamics.

Keywords: *Family evolution, Household dynamics, Demographic trends, Societal transformation*

Introduction

Change is a constant in the natural world, and the family unit is not immune to this perpetual evolution. Moreover, the family adapts in response to societal shifts. Over time, these changes manifest in the family's structure and roles, as observed previously. The family, as a social construct, has been a companion to humanity from its earliest days to the present. Discussing the family inevitably leads us to one of the most intricate and challenging phenomena to define. It embodies a community characterized by

complete personal engagement, cooperation, and solidarity—founded not just on rational connections but emotional bonds as well (Acevski, 2017). The family is a cornerstone of society, where individuals are born, mature, and forge a myriad of relationships that shape their personalities. The inherent dynamism of the family precludes its categorization as a static social entity. This dynamism is evident in the myriad transformations and societal changes that profoundly influence family dynamics and relationships. Consequently, the family has undergone complete transformations or experienced shifts in certain aspects over time. The conceptualization of love has evolved, leading to a family experience in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that diverges significantly from that of the nineteenth century and earlier (П. Џорџ и Елштејн, 2013).

Historically, the traditional family included multiple generations under one roof, whereas the modern family typically comprises only parents and children, forming what is known as the nuclear family. The family's structure and functions have also evolved in other areas: the separation of sexuality from reproduction, shifts in parenting practices, and changes in the family's core functions. Specifically, the shift from a production-oriented to a consumption-oriented function, where a consumerist lifestyle has become prevalent across families. Additionally, there have been changes in family roles, domestic responsibilities, and the distribution of power within the household (Acevski, 2017).

The structure and dynamics of the family unit serve as a fundamental lens through which the social, economic, and cultural fabric of a society can be understood. In Macedonia, the family remains a cornerstone of social life, with intricate ties to traditions, economic conditions, and evolving societal norms. The 2021 Census provides a timely opportunity to delve into the contemporary Macedonian family, offering a rich dataset to explore various aspects such as demographic composition, socio-economic status, housing conditions, and cultural practices. This paper aims to present a comprehensive analysis of the Macedonian family through the lens of the 2021 Census, supplemented by a comparative study with data from the previous census conducted in 2001.

The demographic variables considered in this study include **age and gender distribution, household size, and family composition**. Understanding these variables is essential for grasping the fundamental characteristics of the Macedonian family. The age distribution provides insights into the generational composition of households, highlighting trends such as aging populations or youthful family structures. Gender distribution helps to understand the roles and responsibilities within families, while household size reveals changes in living arrangements and family dynamics.

Socio-economic factors are crucial for analyzing the financial and educational status of Macedonian families. Variables such as income levels, employment status, and educational attainment provide a snapshot of the economic well-being and social mobility within the family unit. These factors are closely linked to opportunities and challenges faced by families in different regions and communities, offering a nuanced view of socio-economic disparities and their impact on family life.

The structure of the family itself is another critical area of exploration. By examining marital status, the number of children, and household types, we identify shifts in family composition over the past two decades. Trends in marriage and divorce rates, the prevalence of nuclear versus extended families, and the rise of single-parent households are all indicative of broader societal changes. Comparing these trends with data from the 2001 Census will highlight significant transformations and continuities in Macedonian family structures.

This comprehensive analysis, grounded in the 2021 Census data and enriched by a comparative perspective with the 2001 Census, aims to provide a detailed understanding of the Macedonian family. The findings will offer valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and social practitioners interested in the evolving dynamics of family life in Macedonia.

I. Demographic Variables

1.1 Age and Gender Distribution, Household and Family Composition

The results from the 2021 Census, published on March 30, 2022, reveal significant demographic changes in Macedonia. The total population stands at 1,836,713, marking a decrease of 185,834 people compared to the 2002 Census. Of this population, 50.4% are female and 49.6% are male, while according to statistical indicators in 2002, 49.8% were women, and 50.2% were men.

In addition to the resident population, 260,606 non-residents, whose participation in the census was optional, were counted, bringing the total number of individuals recorded to 2,097,319.

Despite 132,269 people refusing to participate in the census, they were still included in the final resident count. Their information was sourced from existing national databases, excluding ethnicity and religion, as these are considered personal identifiers, according to the State Statistical Office

Analyzing the population trend over the past six years reveals a significant decline starting in 2019. According to Macrotrends, the most substantial drop occurred in 2022, with a decrease of 0.46%. If this trend of demographic decline continues, Macrotrends projects that by 2050, the population will decrease to 1,909,309 inhabitants, representing an 8.32% reduction from the current population (North Macedonia Population 1950-2024, n.d.).

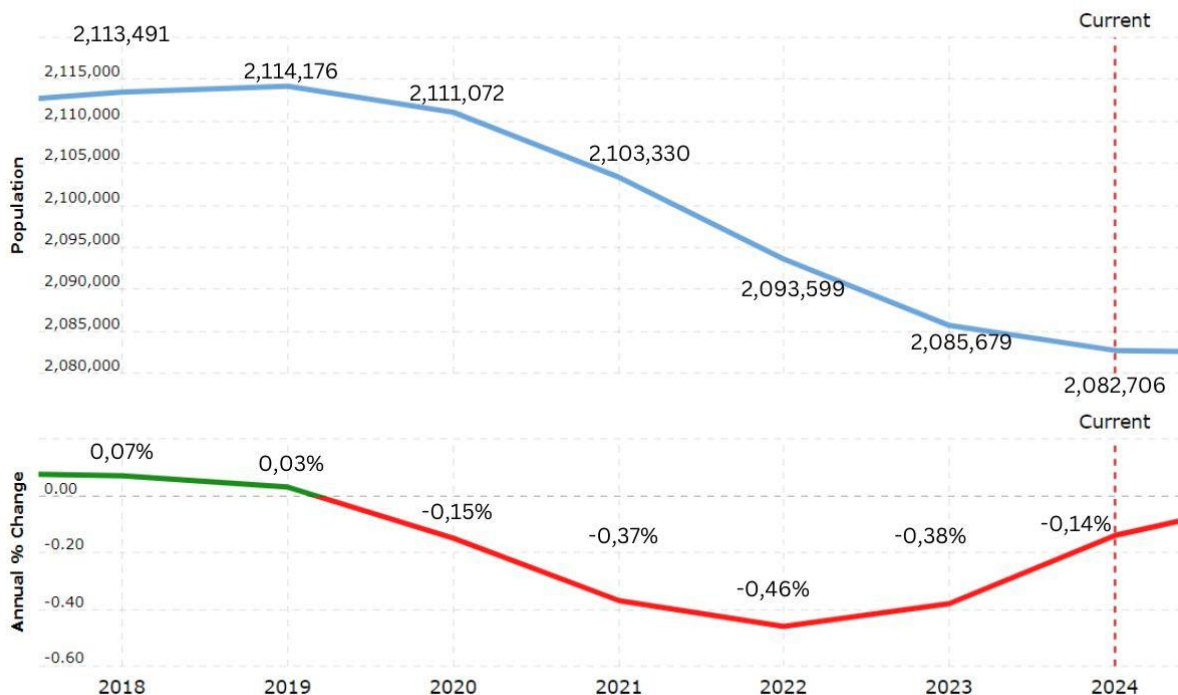


Figure 1: North Macedonia population 2018 -2024

According to the age structure, the largest age group is those aged 40-44 years, comprising 7% of the population. Notably, the census recorded 51 individuals aged over 100 years, highlighting the longevity within the population of North Macedonia (PxWeb, n.d., Population: Demographic Situation, Languages and Religions, n.d.). According to the Population Pyramid data, in 2002, the largest segment of the population in North Macedonia was between the ages of 15-19, comprising 8.3% of the total population. Projections from the same source indicate that the population will continue to age. By 2050, the largest age

group is expected to be those aged 60-64, making up 7.8% of the total population (Population Pyramids of the World From 1950 to 2100, n.d.).

The population density is 72.2 individuals per square kilometer. There are 207 uninhabited settlements. The total number of households is 598,632, with an average of 3.06 members per household (Census 2021, n.d.). Given the significant decrease in population, it is unsurprising that, in 2002, the population density was higher at 78.7 individuals per square kilometer. At that time, there were 564,297 households with an average of 3.58 members per household (Census of Population, 2002).

In 2021, the natural increase rate was -9.19, indicating a population decline, with 68 municipalities experiencing negative growth. This is a stark contrast to 2002, when the natural increase rate was +3.94%, reflecting population growth at that time.

The fertility rate has also declined, from 1.67 in 2002 to 1.47 in 2021. This decrease in fertility rates signifies fewer births per woman, contributing to the overall negative population growth.

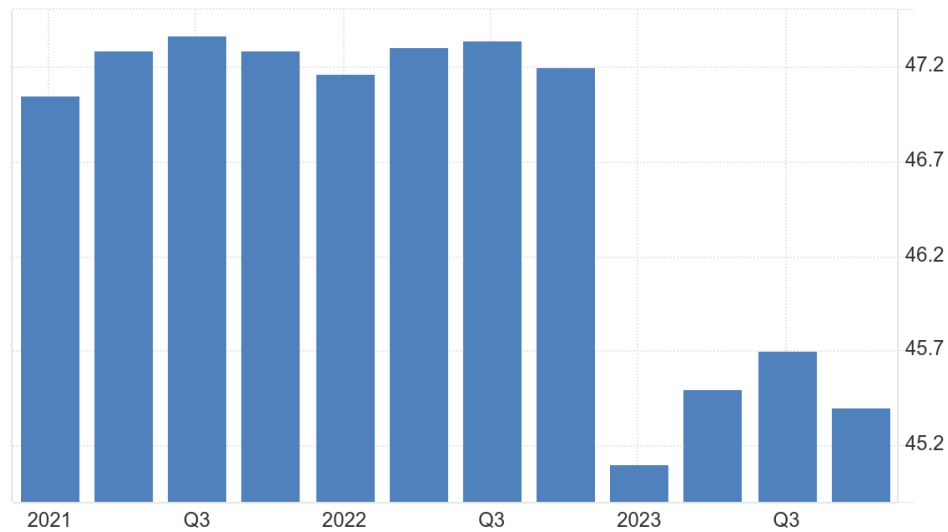
In terms of absolute numbers, there were 18,648 children born in 2021, compared to 24,154 births in 2002. This decline in births over the two decades highlights a significant drop in the birth rate, which is key factor in the country's negative natural increase rate.

These trends underscore the demographic challenges faced by North Macedonia, including an aging population, lower fertility rates, and a decreasing number of births, which together contribute to a shrinking population. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive policies aimed at boosting birth rates, supporting families, and managing the implications of an aging population.

1.2 Socio-economic factors: employment rate and education

Employment rates are defined as a measure of the extent to which available labour resources (people available to work) are being used (Employment - Employment Rate - OECD Data, n.d.). A higher employment rate signifies strong job creation and lower unemployment levels. As a key macroeconomic indicator, it is closely monitored by policymakers and central banks.

MK Employment Rate - percent



Source: tradingeconomics.com | State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia

Figure 2: Employment rate in Republic of North Macedonia

According to official statistics, the employment rate was highest in the third quarter of both 2021 and 2022. In 2023, however, there was a noticeable drop, with the lowest rate recorded at 45.1% in the first quarter and the highest at 45.7% in the third quarter. Over the years, the employment rate has shown an

upward trend, having been close to 36% in the 2002 census (Annual report 2002) . Generally, an employment rate above 70% indicates a healthy labor market, while a rate below 50% may suggest underlying issues.

Statistical indicators show a clear increase in education levels over the last two decades between the two censuses. According to the 2021 census, the total resident population aged 15 and over includes 18,897 illiterate individuals, or 1.2%, with 5,517 men and 13,380 women. In 2002, 3.6% of the population was illiterate, with 14,993 men and 48,568 women. Although the percentage of illiterate individuals has decreased, illiteracy remains more prevalent among women.

The comparison of the two censuses highlights an improvement in educational levels, particularly among those who have completed secondary and higher education. The difference is particularly pronounced among persons who have completed higher education, which in 2021 is 10.8% higher than in 2002.

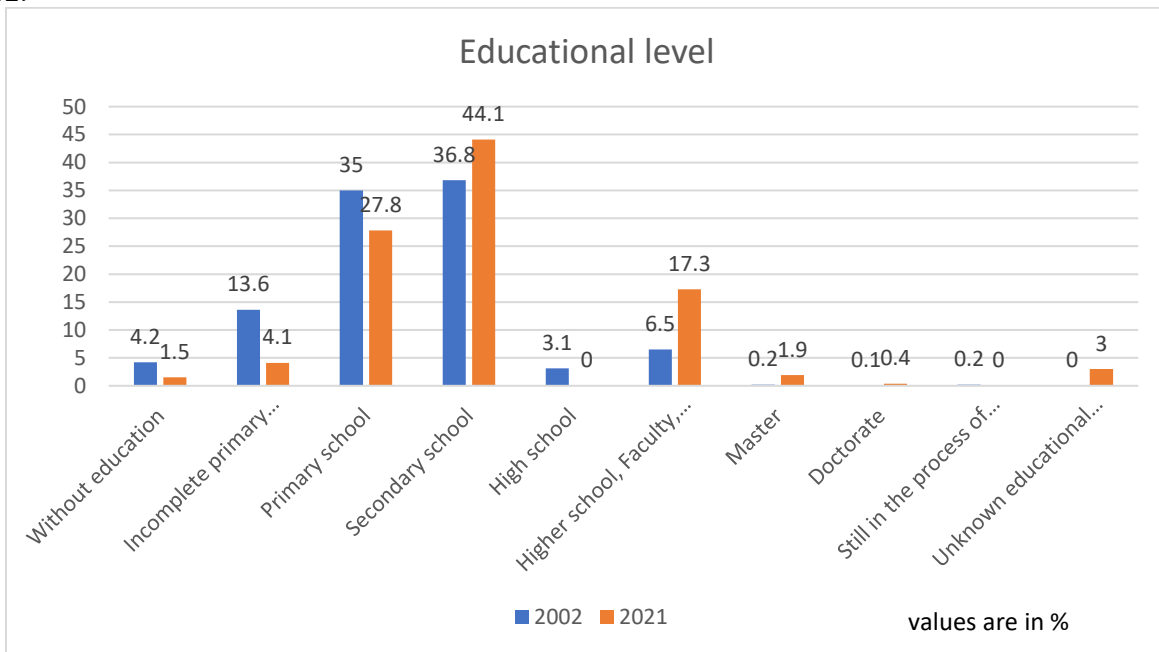


Figure 3: Educational Levels in Macedonia - Comparison of the 2002 and 2021 Censuses

1.3 Family structure

The 2021 Census data reveals notable trends in family structure within Macedonia. Households with two members are the most prevalent, comprising 26.85% of all households. Significant shifts have occurred between the 2002 and 2021 censuses, particularly in the composition of households by the number of members. The most pronounced change is the rise in single-person households, whose share has increased markedly from 9.5% in 2002 to 17.2% in 2021. This shift indicates a growing preference or necessity for individuals to live alone, which could be attributed to various socio-economic factors such as increased urbanization, changing cultural norms, or economic independence.

Conversely, households with four members have experienced a significant decline, decreasing from 28.4% in 2002 to 19% in 2021. This reduction may reflect broader demographic trends such as lower birth rates, delayed marriages, and a preference for smaller family units. The decrease in larger households could also be indicative of economic pressures that make supporting larger families more challenging.

These changes in household structure have important implications for social policy and economic planning. The rise in single-person households, for instance, could lead to increased demand for smaller

housing units and social services tailored to individuals living alone. On the other hand, the decline in larger households may impact community dynamics and the provision of family-oriented services.

Table 1: Number of members in individual households - Comparison of the 2002 and 2021 Censuses

Individual households	Census 2002		Census 2021	
	Number	%	Number	%
Total	564 237	100	598 632	100
1 member	53 861	9.5	103 237	17.2
2 members	110 668	19.6	160 715	26.8
3 members	103 715	18.4	115 732	19.3
4 members	160 502	28.4	17084	19.6
5 members	160 502	28.4	117 084	19.6
6 or more members	64 892	11.5	46 762	7.8

According to the 2021 Census results, the Republic of North Macedonia is home to 538,348 families. The most common family structure is that of married couples with children, which comprises 54.1% of all families. This indicates that more than half of the families in the country are traditional nuclear families.

The second most common family type consists of married couples without children, making up 31.1% of the total. This substantial proportion may reflect trends such as delayed childbearing, childlessness by choice, or economic factors influencing family planning decisions.

Single-parent families also constitute a significant portion of the population, with single mothers and single fathers with children representing 13.3% of all families. This data underscores the diverse family dynamics present in North Macedonia and highlights the need for policies and support systems that address the unique challenges faced by single-parent households. These figures paint a comprehensive picture of the evolving family structures in North Macedonia, revealing a blend of traditional and modern family compositions. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing targeted social policies and programs that cater to the needs of all family types in the country.

Compared to the 2002 Census, the proportion of married couples with children has decreased by 9.9%, and the proportion of married couples without children has decreased by 6.1%. In contrast, single-parent families have seen an increase, with single mothers with children rising by 3.2% and single fathers with children increasing by 1.2% (table 2). Macedonian family is getting smaller and smaller. There is a decline in the prevalence of extended family living arrangements, where multiple generations live together in the same household. Urbanization, increased mobility, and changing social norms have led to smaller family units, with nuclear families becoming more common. If at the beginning of the eighties the family with four members dominated, today households with two members dominate, and the percentage of single-person families has more than doubled (Statistics Institute, 1982; 2022). On the other hand, the reduced number of births and the smaller number of children in the family makes the Macedonian family smaller. It is obvious that the modern average Macedonian family has 1-2 children (Радуловиќ, Авировиќ Бундалевска и Кескинова, 2024).

Table 2: Family types - Comparison of the 2002 and 2021 Censuses

Family type, Census 2002 and 2021, structure		
Type of the family	Census	Census
	Family %	Family %
Total	100	100
Married couple – without children	25.0	31.1
Married couple – with children	64.0	54.1
Unformal couple without children	1.0	0.8
Unformal couple with children	1.0	0.7
Mother with children	7.0	10.1
Father with children	2.0	3.2

The marital and family trends in North Macedonia have undergone notable changes between 2002 and 2021. The number of marriages per year has decreased slightly, from 14,522 in 2002 to 13,337 in 2021. This decline in the number of marriages may reflect shifting social attitudes towards marriage, economic factors, or changing lifestyles.

In contrast, the number of divorces has increased significantly over the same period. Like many other societies, Macedonia has experienced an increase in divorce rates. Changing attitudes towards marriage, the empowerment of women and the development of social norms have contributed to a higher incidence of divorce. Although the divorce rate is significantly lower compared to European countries, it has been increasing in recent decades. Divorce is less seen as a taboo subject and young people do not see marriage as a permanent union. They are not ready to make compromises and see divorce as a solution to an unhappy marriage ((Авировиќ Бундалевска, Радуловиќ и Кескинова, 2023).) This analysis substantiates the observed trend. In 2021, there were 1,964 divorces, compared to 1,310 in 2002. This rise in divorce rates suggests changes in societal norms and possibly greater acceptance of divorce as a resolution to marital conflicts.

In Macedonian society, there is a trend of postponing marriage and parenthood. Younger generations focus on education, career development and personal goals before getting married and starting a family. This delay has implications for family formation and the timing of births. Thus, the age of marriage and childbearing is continuously increasing (Радуловиќ, Авировиќ Бундалевска и Кескинова, 2024). The average age at first marriage has risen for both men and women. In 2021, the average age for women at first marriage was 27 years, up from 24 years in 2002. For men, the average age increased from 27 years in 2002 to 29.7 years in 2021. This trend towards later marriages may be influenced by factors such as extended periods of education, career establishment, and changing personal priorities.

Similarly, the average age at which women have their first child has also increased. In 2021, the average age of women at the birth of their first child was 27.5 years, compared to 23.5 years in 2002. This shift towards later childbirth reflects broader global trends where women are choosing to have children later in life due to career considerations, economic stability, and personal choice.

II. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2021 Census results reveal significant demographic shifts in Macedonia, with a notable population decline since 2002. The gender distribution has slightly changed, and the population is aging, with the largest age group now being 40-44 years. Recent trends show a marked decline in population starting in 2019, projected to continue into 2050. Despite some census refusals, data inclusion from national databases ensures a comprehensive demographic snapshot. These changes highlight the ongoing demographic challenges and the shift towards an aging society in Macedonia.

The socio-economic analysis reveals significant improvements in both employment and education levels over the past two decades. The employment rate, while fluctuating, has generally trended upwards from around 36% in 2002 to highs exceeding 45% in recent years. Educational attainment has also markedly increased, with the illiteracy rate dropping from 3.6% in 2002 to 1.2% in 2021. Despite these gains, illiteracy remains more prevalent among women. Overall, these trends indicate positive socio-economic development, particularly in educational achievements and labor market participation.

Statistical data indicate several changes in family structures within Macedonia over the past two decades. Households with two members are the most common, while single-person households have seen a marked increase, reflecting socio-economic shifts such as urbanization and changing cultural norms. Conversely, the proportion of households with four members has declined, indicating trends toward smaller family units and possibly economic pressures.

The data also shows a notable decrease in married couples with children and an increase in single-parent families, highlighting diverse family dynamics and the need for targeted social policies. The number of marriages has slightly decreased, while the number of divorces has risen, suggesting changing societal norms and acceptance of divorce.

Additionally, the average age at first marriage and the birth of the first child has increased for both men and women, influenced by extended education periods, career priorities, and economic stability. These trends underscore the evolving landscape of family life in Macedonia, necessitating policies that support various family structures and address the unique challenges faced by single-parent households and aging populations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for effective social and economic planning in the country.

In light of these findings, it is crucial to develop and implement strategies that not only address the immediate needs of different family structures but also promote long-term social and economic stability. By focusing on inclusive and targeted interventions, North Macedonia can ensure a supportive environment for all its citizens, fostering resilience and well-being across the population. According to statistical data, priority should be given to:

- *Incentives for Larger Families:* To counter the decline in four-member households and support family growth, introduce financial incentives, improved childcare services, and comprehensive parental leave policies. These measures can encourage larger family units and provide better support for parents.
- *Support for Single-Parent Families:* Develop targeted programs and policies to support single-parent households, including financial assistance, access to affordable childcare, and job training programs. These initiatives can help single parents achieve economic stability and improve their quality of life.
- *Promotion of Family Stability:* With the rise in divorce rates, offer counseling services, family therapy, and community support programs aimed at strengthening marital relationships and providing support during marital conflicts.
- *Adapting to Later Marriages and Childbirth:* Acknowledge the trend towards later marriages and childbirth by offering flexible work arrangements, career counseling, and support for young couples in family planning. This can help individuals balance career aspirations with family life.
- *Comprehensive Elderly Care:* As the population ages, invest in healthcare infrastructure and develop comprehensive elderly care programs. This includes expanding geriatric care services, providing support for home-based care, and ensuring access to quality healthcare for older adults.

- *Enhanced Education and Employment Opportunities*: Continue improving educational attainment and employment opportunities by expanding vocational training, adult education programs, and initiatives to reduce youth unemployment. This will support economic growth and stability.
 - *Urban Planning and Infrastructure Development*: Adjust urban planning and infrastructure development to accommodate different household sizes. This includes creating diverse housing options, enhancing public services, and ensuring that community facilities are accessible to all family types.
 - *Economic Policies to Alleviate Family Financial Pressure*: Implement economic policies that alleviate financial pressures on families, such as tax incentives, subsidies for family-related expenses, and support for work-life balance. This can help make it easier for families to thrive and grow.
 - *Promotion of Community Engagement*: Foster community engagement programs that bring together various family types and generations. These programs can enhance social cohesion, provide mutual support, and strengthen community bonds.
- By implementing these recommendations, North Macedonia can better address the evolving needs of its population, support diverse family structures, and promote a more inclusive and supportive society.

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