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Nationalist obstacles and geopolitical blind spots: the specific case of North Macedonia

With the return of high-intensity warfare, the Member States and the European institutions are adopting a different approach to the enlargement of the European Union. The subject seems to have become less technocratic and more geopolitical, with the acceptance of applications from the three former Soviet republics of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

For "old" applicants such as North Macedonia, a former Yugoslav Republic, this is good news in principle, as this geopolitical aspect never seems to have been taken into consideration since Skopje submitted its application to the European institutions, in [March 2004](#), a few months after the greatest-ever enlargement of the Union from 15 to 25 members.

For two decades, North Macedonia has faced opposition from certain Member States on its path towards the European Union: [firstly Greece](#) concerning aspects related to the name of the State, then [Bulgaria](#). The relief provided by the resolution of the situation during the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2022 will unfortunately have been short-lived[1]. The [lifting of the Bulgarian veto](#) to the opening of negotiations in the summer of 2022 caused an [unexpected turn around in Macedonian public opinion](#). In the words of its critics, the European Union has become "*unfair, arrogant and a promoter of blackmail*" with regard to North Macedonia.

Since negotiations were opened — after twenty years of opposition that had nothing to do with the democratic or economic nature of enlargement — the situation has remained unchanged. This time the blockage is not being caused by a Member State, but is exclusively internal. The "Common Position" on the opening of negotiations, including the accompanying "Framework for

Negotiations", is said to no longer be acceptable to the Macedonian side. [Demonstrations in the street](#) called to [reject these negotiation conditions](#) because they were said to be based on historic revisionism that would wipe out the country's national identity. Slogans like "No to this Europe", "No to a non-democratic Europe" were spread by the [nationalist parties like VMRO-DPMNE and Levica](#) but also by actors from civil society and academia who were said to be supportive of European Union membership.

This is a serious moment for European integration in this country, which is already an "old" candidate, not for reasons relating to the so-called "[eurofatigue](#)" but because of an [inexorable rise of nationalism and euroscepticism](#) within the population. We therefore believe that the European institutions - and the Commission in particular - must now take their decisions regarding North Macedonia in full knowledge of the facts, because the outcome of this stalemate cannot simply be determined by the results of the presidential and parliamentary elections on [24 April](#)[2] and 8 May.

NORTH MACEDONIA'S BID TO JOIN THE EUROPEAN UNION IS CENTRAL TO ITS POLITICAL LIFE

The question of EU membership is still central to political debates. In [2008](#), the Social Democrats blamed the Christian Democrats for the fact that

[1] From June 2022, when the EU's common position and negotiating framework were disclosed to the Macedonian public, to 16 July 2022, when the government accepted the so-called "French proposal".

[2] After the [first round of voting](#), Gordana Siljanovska Davkova VMRO-DPMNE came first with 40.09% of the vote, ahead of Stevo Pendarovski with 19.93% and Bujar Osmani with 13.34%. Turnout stood at 49.75%. See also [OSCE report](#).

Skopje had still not been invited to join NATO and that there was still no date set for negotiations with the European Union. To which Nikola Gruevski[3] replied that NATO integration and EU membership were indeed priorities for his government and his party, while defending Macedonian interests. Four years after obtaining candidate status for the European Union, the question of the opening date for negotiations was already a key issue for Macedonian voters and a burning question between the candidates.

The aim here is not to say that one has done a better job than the other in securing North Macedonia's accession to the European Union. It is to be noted that the first stumbling block on the European and Atlanticist path was only lifted 15 years later, firstly thanks to the [hard work undertaken by the Union, the UN and finally the hand held out by Greece](#). The referendum held on 30 September 2018 on the question of joining the European Union and NATO by accepting the agreement signed with Greece[4] witnessed the involvement of Western diplomacy, with visits from Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of NATO, Sebastian Kurz, then Austrian Chancellor and [Angela Merkel](#), then German Chancellor.

Five years ago, therefore, the promoters of a pro-European regime in Skopje were reassured with [the election of Stevo Pendarovski](#), a former national coordinator [for NATO membership](#), as the country's leader. But it has to be admitted that the results of the polls in favour of a European trajectory were not enough.

In other words, the new European impetus in North Macedonia was only possible thanks to the support of the Union, the encouragement of its Member States and an enthusiastic population in all its components, including its minorities. [Indisputably great care is being paid](#) to the representation of Macedonian Albanians in the Macedonian political system. The current Prime Minister, [Talat Xhaferi](#), advocates reconciliation between peoples: if relations are pacified with the Albanians and their rights constitutionally recognised, he plans [the same thing for the Bulgarian minority](#). Macedonia is a pluri-national country and can be proud of that fact, and it seems obvious to us that the Bulgarian minority in Macedonia is also entitled to this recognition.

This seemed to have been achieved during the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union: the Bulgarian Prime Minister at the time, Kiril Petkov, agreed to lift his country's veto in June 2022. With this, Bulgaria had put pressure on the representatives of North Macedonia to recognise the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution, alongside the Albanian and Roma minorities. This is the crux of the 2024 campaign: would such recognition be tantamount to denying the existence of a Macedonian state?

THE RISE OF NATIONALISM IN NORTH MACEDONIA: A BARRIER TO EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Unfortunately, since the summer of 2022, while everything is being prepared in Brussels, the Macedonian media have been claiming that the European Union is "undemocratic" because it was said to be responding ["Bulgarian nationalist intimidation"](#). This is potentially just a problem of manipulation whose only effect is to prevent the opening of negotiations.

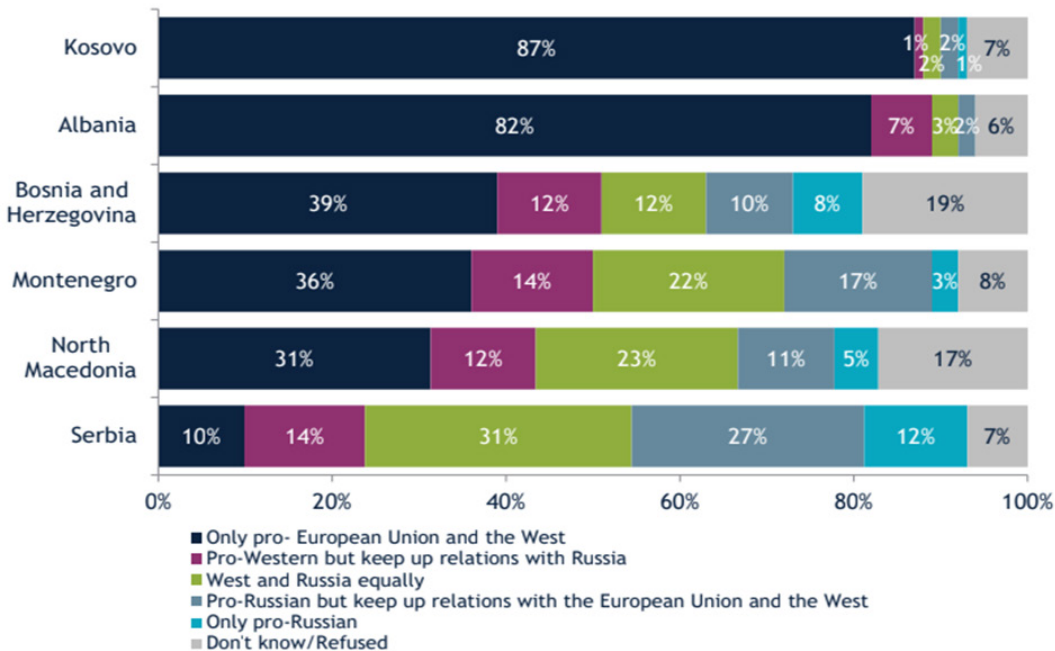
Admittedly, the subject is a thorny one. Although North Macedonia is an "old candidate" in terms of its membership of the European Union, the State is young, since it has only been independent of the Yugoslav federation since September 1991. While the need to justify and legitimise its specific statehood by distinguishing itself from neighbouring Bulgaria is understandable, [violently rejecting recognition](#) of a separate "Bulgarian" minority within the Macedonian state is however unjustifiable. It might even be deemed a strange position, if we consider that such recognition [would unquestionably reflect the distinction](#) of the Macedonian majority founding the Macedonian state with other Bulgarian, Albanian and Roma populations in particular. The situation in the country is so polarised by this paradox that North Macedonia's European destiny is — once again — blocked, whereas over the last five years it has been able to boast a pro-European executive with a favourable Assembly.

Particularly worrying is the result of the International Republican Institute's poll, illustrating the [surveys](#) it has undertaken in the Western Balkan states between February and April 2024.

[3] Former Prime Minister from 2006 to 2016 is [in exile in Hungary at present](#).

[4] [Prespa Agreement](#) which provides for the renaming of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) as the Republic of North Macedonia.

What should our country's foreign policy course be?



According to this poll, only 31% of Macedonians are in favour of integration into the European Union, and it can be assumed that the majority of them are citizens who do not feel concerned by the question of the Macedonian nation (23% of the citizens of North Macedonia belong to the Albanian minority). These figures, diluted between "pro-Europe" and "pro-Russia", seem to indicate that citizens do not understand what the West, Russia or the European Union can offer them. The only sticking point could therefore be the rejection of the Bulgarian minority.

This would explain why the Assembly of North Macedonia has still not voted to recognise the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution, or even the other [reforms expected by the European Commission](#)[5]. The progress needed for accession is being held up by heated debates that seem to belong to another era. Negotiations have therefore been frozen, and the accession process has once again been (re)placed on indefinite hold. Pessimists are coming to the conclusion that the Macedonians are making a special effort to remain candidates... but certainly not to join the Union.

PUTTING AN END TO NORTH MACEDONIA'S "ETERNAL CANDIDATE" STATUS

The very fact that the Commission has dubbed itself the "Geopolitical Commission" bears witness to a commitment to a new vision of the foundations of the European Union and of those who aspire to join it[6]. The discourse promoting objectives and values - summed up in slogans such as "For a geopolitical Europe", or "United in diversity" - deserves particularly close attention in North Macedonia, for all the reasons explained above. The European Union is developing a geopolitical vision of its future based on the cohesion of the continent in its sectoral policies[7] but it must go further and more decisively with its "old candidates" so that they do not remain eternally in this situation.

The European Parliament has already spoken out in favour of this. In November 2022, two [recommendations](#) that were adopted deserve clear action from the Commission in response to the Macedonian blockage:

- No alternative should replace enlargement.
- Accession negotiations should be concluded by 2030.

[5] Speech by Ursula von der Leyen in Skopje, 30 October 2023: "(...) to ensure efficient public administration, sound public finances and a better business environment. It is also essential to continue the reforms in favour of the independence of the judiciary and to fight corruption. All these reforms must be carried out to ensure a level playing field between the European single market and the common market of the Western Balkans".

[6] This self-definition came as such a surprise that it was greeted with scepticism, if not condescension. In other words, the Commission would be unable - or should not venture - to act as a geopolitical player, if Nicole Koenig is to be believed, "The 'Geopolitical' European Commission and its Pitfalls", IWM - Vienna Blog, We are personally opposed to this idea.

[7] This is illustrated, for example, by the 2030 strategy of the [new European Research Era](#) which highlights the inextricable link between innovation, economic growth and global geopolitical relevance.

The guardian of the Treaties lacks this resolve. We recommend that the next European Commission, which we hope will be even more political, adopt a more pragmatic approach with its candidates.

North Macedonia is applying to join the European Union because it aspires to become a member. And not to receive the European subsidies allocated to candidates and to collect these subsidies without amending its legislation. The European Commission must carry out an in-depth examination to determine whether the funds paid to civil society organisations are contributing to the construction of a North Macedonia that shares the same values as the European Union, respects [Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) and promotes the ratification of the European Charter of Regional and Minority Languages, [as demanded by the follow-up report](#) regarding progress towards membership.

A candidate country is expected to work towards accession, not to indulge in a waiting game that guarantees pre-accession funds with no obligation to achieve results[8]. The 2021 regulation establishing the pre-accession instrument, the [IPA III](#) is however clear on this: the purpose of this instrument is to "*help the beneficiaries (...) to align themselves with the rules, standards, policies and practices of the Union with a view to their future accession to it, by promoting*

[8] The funds are voted on and paid to the candidate countries, but there is no obligation to have adopted legislation that complies with the *acquis communautaire* in order to receive these support funds again the following year. There are no conditions attached to the payment of pre-accession funds.

political, institutional, legal, administrative, social and economic reforms".

The next Commission must therefore fight against the idea that the process of accession to the European Union can be substituted, in order to speed up and complete the said process, and oppose the civil society players promoting anti-minority, anti-Bulgarian nationalism and alternative solutions to membership of the Union.

Of course, on the road to European integration, the stubborn wall of competing national romanticisms will be a regular obstacle in the Balkans. However, this wall is not insurmountable: the European Commission can be firmer and more consistent with North Macedonian decision-makers. The Member States can encourage and share their experience of multinational states. Other international organisations should not hesitate to make the case that North Macedonia matters, in these troubled times of war, and that its status as a candidate state is not only deserved, but also beneficial.

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