

# THE IDENTITY CHALLENGES OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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**Abstract.** *Despite peacefully achieving independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, North Macedonia has had to face several identity challenges both domestically and in its relations with neighboring states. The present research is intended to be an analysis of the implications and challenges of the identity disputes in North Macedonia within the context of the European integration process (We are taking into account both internal disputes, such as those between the Macedonian and Albanian communities, and external ones, focusing on North Macedonia's relationship with Greece and Bulgaria). Based on this, the purpose of the paper is to establish and analyze the relationship between the management of identity disputes in North Macedonia and the process of rapprochement, of Euro-Atlantic integration. As specific objectives, we propose: 1. Identification and analysis of North Macedonia's internal and external identity disputes, 2. Establishing a correlation and analysis of the mutual influence between the Euro-Atlantic integration process and the management of identity disputes, and 3. Analysis of public perceptions and support among the population of North Macedonia for resolving identity disputes and reaching compromises in order to achieve geopolitical goals (integration into NATO and the EU). Methodologically, we propose a three-level analysis: a. Analysis of how identity issues, specifically internal and external identity disputes, influenced the level of integration and the rapprochement process with the European Union, b. Analysis of rapprochement with the EU and integration into NATO to determine the degree of flexibility of the Macedonian position on identity issues and c. Analysis of public perceptions regarding identity disputes in the Euro-Atlantic integration context (our focus is to conduct this comparative analysis at the level of the Macedonian and Albanian communities, with the latter being the largest minority community in this state).*

**Keywords:** *EU, Integration Process, identity, ethnicity, religion, minority, language,*

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

North Macedonia peacefully gained independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991. Since then, it has faced numerous internal and external identity challenges that have affected its geopolitical orientation and relationship with neighboring states. The Republic of North Macedonia has long expressed its intention to join the EU. However, progress in the negotiations has been limited and is often blocked by various identity disputes. "The country has implemented substantial constitutional and legal reforms, resolved its name

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dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement, and aligned its foreign and security policy with that of the EU” (Abazi Imeri, 2025: 102). Internal challenges have also proven to be significant, with the greatest pressure being the political polarization caused by identity fragmentation.

The *purpose* of this paper is to establish and analyze the relationship between the management of identity disputes in North Macedonia and the Euro-Atlantic integration process. We mainly take into account the internal disputes between the Macedonian and the Albanian communities, as well as the external disputes, focusing on North Macedonia’s relationship with Greece and Bulgaria. Due to the latter two disputes (with Greece and Bulgaria), the small Balkan state was kept away from NATO and the EU for a long time. As specific *objectives*, we propose: 1. Identification and analysis of North Macedonia’s internal and external identity disputes, 2. Establishing a correlation and conducting an analysis on the mutual influence between the Euro-Atlantic integration process and the management of identity disputes, and 3. Analysis of public perceptions and support among the population of North Macedonia for resolving identity disputes and reaching compromises to achieve geopolitical goals (integration into NATO and the EU).

Methodologically, we propose to develop a *three level analysis*:

a. Analysis of how identity issues, specifically internal and external identity disputes, influenced the level of the integration and the rapprochement process with the European Union,

b. Analysis of rapprochement with the EU and integration into NATO, to determine the degree of flexibility of the Macedonian position on identity issues,

c. Analysis of public perceptions regarding identity disputes in the Euro-Atlantic integration context (our focus is to conduct this comparative analysis at the level of the Macedonian and Albanian communities, with the latter being the largest minority community in the country).

Our research, focused on achieving these objectives and developing the three levels of analysis, is based on the following hypotheses:

➤ Rapprochement with the EU and integration into NATO have led to a more flexible Macedonian position on identity issues.

➤ Internal and external identity disputes have influenced the integration level and the process of rapprochement with the European Union.

➤ Minorities in North Macedonia are more willing than Macedonians to compromise on external identity disputes in order to ensure rapprochement with the EU and NATO.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the nineteenth century, the European space has undergone an extensive process of identity transformation. The European societies are modernizing, and modernization has led to profound changes at both the domestic and international levels. This identity revolution was not confined to the second half of the nineteenth century, when the emergence of new ideas led to the erosion of the old monarchical order of powerful governments. Peoples are developing an increasingly strong national consciousness, culminating in the principle of self-determination, as seen in the treaties that regulated the post-First World War order. One of the most visible transformations is the national and identity emancipation. Today, this process continues to develop new levels of identity. At the same time, more and more "border" cleavages are emerging within European societies. These boundaries are most often symbolic and ideological (Brie, 2023: 283-284).

Despite the progress made at European level in terms of consolidating the European identity, we are witnessing a resurgence of the national in the contemporary period. The process of European construction was accompanied by a certain blurring of the national identity, particularly in terms of the expression of nationalist-extremist movements. European identity appears as a higher-ranking identity, reducing the forms of expression of national and regional identities. This is, at least, in theory. On the other hand, in the current context, we are entitled to believe that European identity has emerged alongside national and regional identities, without being closely related to them. In other words, the reduction or amplification of manifestations at one level does not lead to a counterweight at another level (Brie, 2018: 237). Diachronically, stimulated by the phenomenon of globalization and the success of the EU, especially the European enlargement to the east and the disappearance of the "Iron Curtain", the European identity has experienced exaltation at both the level of public discourse and in daily life. In our opinion, the phenomenon has another facet: the identity revenge of the current period. As a result of systemic crises at EU level (economic, financial, social, institutional or legitimacy), new geopolitical realities in the neighboring area (e.g. the situation in Ukraine, the Middle East and North Africa), but also as an effect of mass migration, there has been a return to local, regional or national identities (see Brie and Blaga, 2015: 255-273 for more details). Without intending on this occasion to analyze the political realities or the discourse of political leaders in Europe and beyond, we are witnessing in this period, more than at any other time in the last hundred years, a radicalization of the discourse with an emphasis on the national. Political movements are gaining more and more national, ethno-cultural and identity-based nuances. It is not only populism that is gaining ground, but also the xenophobic, tribal debate of fear and danger portrayed in the image of the other (Brie, 2018: 238; Brie, 2023: 283-284).

The topic of identity and identity borders has been a key personal interest in our research on the Balkan and Eastern European space over the last decade. This paper develops in a new methodological construction ideas and synthetic research contained in others previous papers on identity as a border in the space of Central and Eastern Europe (Brie, 2016: 359-381; Brie, 2023: 281-294; Brie; Jusufi and Polgár, 2023: 69-97; Brie, Jusufi and Polgár, 2021: 65-72).

The fall of communism and the disintegration of Yugoslavia initially amplified the process of identity emancipation and the emergence of new cleavages in the Balkan space. Following the armed conflicts that ensued after the initial proclamation of independence in several of these countries, a period of consolidation began, accompanied by European integration, as well as cooperation and reconciliation efforts. The gradual resolution of these conflicts has relieved the public sphere from excessive ethnic nationalistic discussions, which has been conducive to the emergence of civic identities and, with the further rapprochement to European Union, offering the prospect of European non-ethnic identities. The European Union opted for a regional approach in this part of the continent, in order to achieve greater stability among the conflicted communities and states. In 1996, the European Union began to differentiate between the two terms 'South-East (SE) Europe' and 'Western Balkans'. 'South-East Europe' refers to all the countries from the Gulf of Trieste to the Black Sea, while the 'Western Balkans' consists of all the former Yugoslavian states except Slovenia, plus Albania (Trenchov, 2012: 1-12). Basically, we can say that the relations between the EU and Western Balkan countries are developing, and the European Union's approach to the region has brought progress and cooperation between the conflicted countries. The main tool in this process, where we can see also great

achievements, is the organization of bilateral and multilateral meetings by or with the support of the European Union, where political leaders from the region gather and make common decisions that are valuable for the whole region (Alujevic, 2012: 6-9; Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2021).

At a *conceptual* level, identity constructions appear to be on the same level of analysis, but they can have different connotations. Regardless of the level of reporting (European, national or regional/local), identity is found as a form of expression in the public space despite universal trends, globalization and the uniformity of values, characteristics or community expressions. Elements of ethno-religious identity are found in the global public space, including in forms multiplied through the channels of global propagation. Therefore, it is not only the global increase itself that is important, but also the particular and the specific.

The latter often take forms of extremism, nationalism and ethno-religious violence are multiplied by gaining followers thousands of miles away. The national and ethnic state, associated with the national territory, has not only survived the pressures of the "global society", but has also demonstrated an even greater capacity for affiliation. *Identity globalization* has proven to be stronger in urban and industrialized societies. However, where there are consistent rural areas, a rich heritage and cultural tradition, resistance to globalization has developed. Consequently, local and national-cultural identities are more strongly preserved in the rural-agricultural environment, as well as in the proximity of cultural sites (Brie, 2021: 5-29). Such a reality does not rule out the possibility of a European supranational identity developing and consolidating in parallel. Conceptually, this seemingly antagonistic relationship appears: European identity versus national/local identity. We hereby propose three levels of analysis regarding the concept of identity: the European level, the national level and the regional level. Specialist literature captures the dispute over the establishment of the identity of a person or community. This process comprises two dimensions: self-identification and hetero-identification. In either cases, whether one identifies themselves or is identified by someone else, the debate on identity involves both objective and subjective elements. Theoretical analyses, on the other hand, seize a dispute around the subjective and objective dimension of identity. Unlike the concept of *national origin*, which refers to something given, inherited by birth, *national identity* is, above all, the expression of the consciousness of belonging to a cultural community that is defined as a political community (Brie, 2021: 5-29). Ernest Renan refers to this reality when he characterizes the nation, suggestively, as a "daily plebiscite" (Flóra, 2011: 114). The national identity in this case is related to the concept of nation. The latter one understood as a population that divides a territory (to which it relates through the historical dimension), myths and common historical memories, a mass culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for each member (the latter referring to the state political organization). This analysis presupposes the existence of two things: 1. a segment of the population living in a certain territory, and 2. a certain type of relationship that expresses the consciousness of identity and belonging, or a "community spirit" (Brie and Blaga, 2015: 255-273).

Such a perspective on the nation is in line with the philosophy of the Westphalian state that focuses on the idea of state-nation-territory.

Conceptually, the entire identity building has at least two elements of specificity ever since its construction (Brie, 2016): 1. National identity born of ethnic belonging, and 2. National identity born of civic/citizen affiliation. In the first case, national identity serves a particular ethnic group that is often in competition with other ethnic groups (most often

present in the same reference space). The perspective gives rise to nationalist-tribal expressions that may involve the exclusion of representatives of other ethnic groups. In the second situation, the civic dimension serves the state, leading most often to patriotism (this perspective is rather positive compared to the first situation when we are dealing with a perspective with negative connotations!).

In most Western countries, the national identity has been built mainly around citizenship, and consequently, the territory of citizenship has become the fundamental term of reference for the "national territory" - the civic dimension of national identity. Eastern Europe has had a different pattern of development, in which ethnicity, the ethnic belonging or affiliation has fulfilled a fundamental role in building the national identity – the ethnic dimension of national identity (Flóra, 2011: 116). Thus, the Western model of the nation emphasizes the centrality of the national territory or homeland, while the Eastern model focuses on ethnic origin and cultural ties.

A fundamental feature of state-type nation-state constructions in the Western Balkans is their permanent lack of legitimacy or, rather, their incomplete legitimacy. By identifying the state with a single national identity, other national communities inevitably found themselves excluded from this process of legitimation, which constituted a fundamental source of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. This reality has led to the sacralization of the state territory considered national territory (Flóra, 2011: 118-128) (the righteous property of a single nation/nationality!), while the cultural-historical philosophy seeks to delegitimize the contribution of other national communities as much as possible. At the European level, the legitimate question is to what extent we are talking about a common European identity or, in antithesis, about the presence of identity borders in the European space. A certain identity cleavage can be observed between Western and Eastern Europe. This reality is given by the historical, cultural, religious and political heritage (Brie, 2021: 5-29).

**Figure 1.** Ethnic distribution in the Western Balkans



Source: United States. Central Intelligence Agency. Cartography Center, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2008620837/>, accessed on May 20, 2025

From the conceptual point of view, we can identify different characteristics of identity in the Balkan countries. Many cleavages or borders are associated with identity:

- citizen identity/civic identity
- ethnic identity
- religion identity
- linguistic identity
- alphabet identity
- cultural identity
- geopolitical identity

The young states born from the disintegration of Yugoslavia had to consolidate and strengthen their national identity by referring to its various associated forms. The ***national identity based on citizenship***, respectively on civic identity, was difficult to achieve in regions of great ethnic and religious diversity. The new reality of strong identity cleavages, which culminated in violent inter-ethnic conflicts, has left a profound mark on Balkan societies. Competition and mutual distrust characterized the first two decades after the fall of communism. Proofs of this are the complicated realities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia's disputes with Kosovo (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2021: 185-209; Polgar and Brie, 2024: 497-528). Strong identities used for political purposes were justified ethnically, religiously, linguistically or culturally. This hindered the weak initiatives of the states that resulted in the former Yugoslavia to create a national identity based on citizenship. In the absence of a solidarity based on citizenship, identity borders were highlighted to more obviously separate communities built on other identity criteria. This resulted in the emergence of identity borders.

***The ethno-national identity border.*** A strong identity supports and justifies a strong statehood. Political regimes have often used logic, and vice versa, in order to justify newly appearing national-state constructions on the European map. Thus, the existence and survival of a political-state construction came to depend, among other things, on the need for an identity construction that would distinguish it from the neighboring states and peoples, drawing not only state borders but also identity borders. Like the state of Montenegro, North Macedonia developed after independence a specific policy aimed at highlighting the unitary relationship within the triangle state, nation, citizenship (Džankić, 2015). The three dimensions must be mutually supportive and mutually reinforcing. If the national dimension is weaker, statehood and citizenship must sustain and justify national existence and consolidation.

In North Macedonia there is a very interesting relationship between Macedonians and Albanians in terms of ethnic borders.

***Language as a border: individuality and foundation of nation.*** Language was used as a political tool in the nation-building process. Linguistic solidarity is key to establishing a distinct identity in relation to others, causing the individual to position themselves "inside the linguistic borders", alongside the linguistic community and in opposition to others. The linguistic individuality of a people has always played an important role in consolidating statehood. A distinct language leads to an additional force to preserve statehood. The close relationship between a state construction, an ethno-national identity, on the one hand, and the linguistic individuality of a population, on the other hand, is not specific only to the contemporary period, not even to the modern one. It is deeply rooted in history, and has nothing to do with a specific geographical area. The language of one community has always served as a means of distinguishing itself from another community. It has always been a form of creating a consciousness of community

belonging, of solidarity of individuals with the group. It is no wonder, therefore, that it has been used by certain states or political regimes to create and support identity disputes inside or outside a state, inside or outside communities (Brie, 2023). For example, in Montenegro, the public policies and public discourse have led to the assertion of linguistic individuality in relation to the Serbian language. If the Serbian language was initially accepted as the official language, the 2007 constitution required the "Montenegrin language" as the official language, causing dismay on the Serbian side (Morrison, 2018: 138).

A similar case is that of the Republic of Moldova, where the promotion of *Moldovanism* as an identity has caused controversy. The Moldovan language, distinct from Romanian, serves the same interests and political or geopolitical objectives.

***The Cyrillic alphabet as an identity border.*** The alphabet can also be used as an element of distinct identity, taking the form of a cleavage, such as identity boundaries. While the use of the Latin alphabet by the Albanians in the former Yugoslavia was accompanied by the existence of a clearly distinct language, this was not the case for other peoples who were part of the former federal state. For a long time, the linguistic individuality of Croats in relation to Serbs was linked to the use of the Latin alphabet by the former and the use of the Cyrillic one by the Serbians. This dispute can be identified in the case of Montenegro (Morrison, 2018: 130-152) or the existence of a separate Bosnian language (Džankić, 2015: 48). The alphabet has always played a very important role in the justice of the decision to draw a linguistic boundary of an identity nature.

The issue of the Cyrillic alphabet in the identity dispute of Bosnian Serbs has returned to the agenda. In this case, alongside religion, the Cyrillic alphabet plays a significant role in defining identity. On 15 September 2021, on the occasion of Serbian 'Unity Day', MPs from the two parliaments of Serbia and Republika Srpska passed two laws to encourage the use of the Cyrillic alphabet in a new attempt to strengthen a common national identity (Serbia, 2021). All public institutions and societies, schools and universities, national associations and companies are required to use the Cyrillic alphabet (Cyrillic Alphabet mandatory, 2021). Furthermore, private companies have been offered tax reductions provided they use this alphabet. The Cyrillic alphabet is one of a number of increasingly complex factors that are bringing nationalism back to the complicated Balkan republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the introduction of the Cyrillic alphabet as a distinctive element in relation to the Romanian language was a weapon used by the Soviet regime but also the Russian one (both the Tsarist and current one). In Transnistria, Cyrillic spelling is still used to write "Moldovan". The choice of the alphabet has often proved to be a political act aimed at often solving geopolitical problems (to be seen the case of the Soviet Republics presented by Alexe and Ciapai, 2021).

***Religion as a border.*** In the Balkans, religion has always played a role in shaping community identity, in relation to which the boundaries of identity-national communities, and even of states, have been drawn. In the former Yugoslav state, despite numerous efforts made after the Paris Treaties to achieve national cohesion, religion has always been an impediment to this success. Slovenes and Croats are mostly Catholic Christians, Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians are mostly Orthodox Christians, Albanians and Bosnians are Muslims. This mosaic is clearly visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where religion has played a significant role in shaping identity borders. The Serbs are Orthodox, the Croats are Catholic, and the Bosniaks are Muslim. Despite efforts to standardize language and religion (but not only it!), the ethno-national communities have remained

distinct. Moreover, there is no longer any unity within Orthodoxy itself, as evidenced by the case of the Church in Montenegro. Here, a significant proportion of the population criticizes the hierarchical superiority of the Serbian Church and challenges it (Brie, 2021).

### **3. NORTH MACEDONIA'S IDENTITY CRISES AND INTEGRATION PROCESSES**

North Macedonia is a young Balkan state with a population of 2.1 million that is ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). Internal identity disputes, primarily between Macedonians and Albanians, have been exacerbated by disputes with neighboring states. North Macedonia shares borders with Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece.

In both its internal affairs and its relations with neighboring states, North Macedonia has had to make efforts to resolve identity disputes in order to avert crises and achieve certain geopolitical objectives. However, despite these efforts and sacrifices, the process of rapprochement with the EU has often been hindered by bilateral and geopolitical constraints, as well as persistent internal challenges, the most significant of which is political polarization (Couteau et al., 2024; European Commission, 2024).

#### **3.1. Internal identity balance and the national integration process**

The country has a complex and ethnodiverse population, with ethnic Macedonians holding the numerical majority, followed by ethnic Albanians. Albanians are the largest ethnic minority in North Macedonia. According to the census held in 2002, Albanians comprised 25 percent of the population of North Macedonia. Unofficial estimates are higher due to large emigrant community (Visoka and Gjevori, 2013: 479-498). Albanians live mainly in the north-western parts of the country.

Similarly, religion is reflected in the main religion of each group, which is Orthodox Christian in the case of Macedonians and Muslim in the case of Albanians (Piacentini, 2020). The large majority of Albanians in North Macedonia are Muslims, but there are also some who practice the Bektashi dervish order, Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity. North Macedonia has been identified as one of the examples of the states that have more or less implemented a political system of consociationalism (McCrudden, 2006: 2). However, it is important to acknowledge that language serves as the most distinguishing feature between the two groups because the two are not mutually intelligible. It is also worth noting that the primary and secondary education is segregated, making language “not only the main ethnic marker between the two largest communities, but also a prime obstacle in bridging them” (Sorrells, 2025: 127; Piacentini, 2020, 100-101).

Since North Macedonia gained its independence in 1991, the country's politics have been heavily influenced by both tensions and political dialogue between its two largest communities, the Albanians and the Macedonians. Among other notable crises one must include the Gostivar flag crisis in 1997 and the Kosovo war in 1999. The inter-ethnic tensions culminated with the ethnic conflict that occurred in 2001, which was the peak of the inter-ethnic struggle in the post-independence North Macedonia. The conflict left deep scars in the country's collective consciousness (Kristen; Simkus and Listhau: 75-95). The Conflict came to an end with the signing in August 2001 of the peace agreement, the Ohrid Framework Agreement, named after the city where it was concluded.

The Ohrid Agreement was a significant development in this regard, as it established a framework for enhanced protection and representation rights for the Albanian community (Székely and Horváth, 2014: 426-448). As a result of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, important guarantees were provided for ethnic Albanians, particularly as regards local governance, education, language use and participation in public life, including public-sector employment. The Agreement ceased the hostilities and led to the constitutional and administrative changes in order to meet the grievances of the ethnic Albanian and other minority groups. The Agreement opened a new era in North Macedonia's transition as it brought a major change in the national policy (Koneska, 2017: 36-50).

At the Western Balkans level, the Albanian community is present in an extensive area in the southern part of the ex-Yugoslav space.

**Figure 2.** Distribution of Albanians in neighboring countries



Source: [https://www.mapmania.org/map/70331/distribution\\_of\\_albanians\\_in\\_neighboring\\_countries](https://www.mapmania.org/map/70331/distribution_of_albanians_in_neighboring_countries), accessed in 12.06.2025.

It is important to note that the Albanian community in the Balkans has experienced certain nuances in terms of identity. It seems that from an ethno-linguistic and religious perspective, this community has managed to maintain a status that would ensure the preservation of its cultural-community specificity. Identity has “migrated” to other associated forms of identity connected with citizenship, the civil one, and in some cases even global – European nature. This phenomenon is most clearly observed in Kosovo, where it appears to be a growing attachment among citizens to the citizen identity given by the identity-state value. If, in this case, the Kosovo national identity is associated with the Albanian one, in North Macedonia, the ethno-Albanian community is subject to a form of national otherness by associating it with the Macedonian citizenship identity of the state. In the latter case, the partnership compromise for the well-being and preservation of statehood can lead to a mixed syncretic identity. The ethno-identity dimension (even

linguistic or religious) takes a second role in the process of constructing national identity. The national identity is gradually acquiring a more pronounced civic dimension, which is the result of political compromise (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2021).

The balance in inter-ethnic relations in North Macedonia is in the process of strengthening. The Albanian community, supported in its external efforts, has become aware not only of the influence it has on the domestic policy of the state, but also of its limits.

„North Macedonia’s institutional design, shaped by the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, has codified ethnic power-sharing mechanisms. While these mechanisms are widely regarded as being crucial for peace and stability, it is also acknowledged that they have embedded ethnic identity as a primary axis of political mobilization” (Abazi Imeri, 2025: 104). The 2024 Bertelsmann Transformation Index notes that ethnic segmentation in the party system “makes it difficult to foster issue-based competition,” reinforcing voter alignment along identity rather than policy lines (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Abazi Imeri, 2025: 104).

### **3.2. The identity crisis of the state's name and the integrative compromise at the security level**

Following a long period of tensions over the name and historical legacy, the Prespa Agreement was signed on 18 June 2018 in the village of Psarades (Nivici in Macedonian) near Lake Prespa. Macedonia changed its name to the Republic of North Macedonia (which Greece officially recognized), and the people and language were to be recognized as “Macedonian”. It is important to note however that Macedonia renounced all claims to Greek Macedonia and its history. In exchange, Greece allowed Macedonia to join NATO and the EU (Prespa Agreement, 2018).

The agreement was not met with universal approval, with both Greeks and Macedonians expressing their discontent and bursting in protests.

The claims regarding the identity heritage related to the name "Macedonia" have strained bilateral relations between the two neighbors for decades. In the absence of a solution, Greece has blocked North Macedonia in its aspirations towards NATO and European integration. Despite the fact that in certain areas and social groups the agreement is still a sensitive subject, the Prespa agreement is still seen as a step forward for North Macedonia towards the EU. Based on the achieved results we can consider the Prespa agreement as a real game-changer for the entire region which demonstrates the transforming force and modernizing dynamics of the enlargement policy, a process that contributes to the stability and prosperity of Europe and its neighborhood. With seven years having passed since the agreement was signed, we can consider it an important achievement, a success recorded by the Republic of North Macedonia in its European and Euro-Atlantic course. This success can be attributed to the perseverance and firm political will of the Macedonian political leadership, with support from the civil society, which has expressed a clear and firm choice in favor of the community of democratic values established in the EU and NATO (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2023: 81).

The Prespa Agreement was warmly received in Western states that were expecting a settlement that would lead to the integration of this small Balkan state into NATO and the EU, and with it to the consolidation of security and a Euro-Atlantic future for the Western Balkans.

NATO integration was accelerated immediately after the signing of the Prespa Agreement. “On 1 August 2018, the NATO Secretary General sent a letter to the Minister

of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia together with the Plan for implementation of the NATO accession process” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025) and on 27 March 2020, North Macedonia became a member of NATO.

European integration was also gaining new impetus in the context of NATO integration. Despite the compromises made, EU accession faced new obstacles: Bulgaria blocked progress due to disagreements over language and national identity.

### 3.3. The compromise with Bulgaria

The issue is one with deep historical roots, and its complexity leads to difficulties in reaching a real legal compromise and its implementation.

As a young state, national construction was necessary through all means of identity. In Bulgaria, where there were many supporters of a possible "reunification" based on a historical narrative, there was a sense of hostility towards the nation-building process of the Macedonians. Each country has in the past accused the other of not respecting the rights of its national minority living across the border.

Macedonians are seen as a "product of the political history of the late 19th century" (Sivignon 2009: 121). Moreover, the Serbian Macedonian identity (as distinct from Greek Macedonian and Bulgarian Macedonian) became even more pronounced during the Yugoslav period (Sivignon 2009: 122-123). The Macedonian Republic thus found its place in terms of identity and politics within the Yugoslav Federation. Identity issues are central to the dispute. Bulgaria refuses to recognize the existence of a separate ethnic Macedonian identity and a separate Macedonian language. It demands that the EU avoid using the term "Macedonian language", and instead use the term "Official language of Republic of North Macedonia" (Phillips 2022). It insists that the Macedonian language is a Bulgarian dialect and ethnic Macedonians are a subgroup of the Bulgarian nation (Phillips 2022). Macedonia and Bulgaria share linguistic and cultural similarities but also hold differing views on their history and language. These differences can be traced back to the 19th century, when Bulgarian nationalists claimed Ottoman-ruled Macedonia as part of Bulgarian territory (Marusic 2017; Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2023: 84).

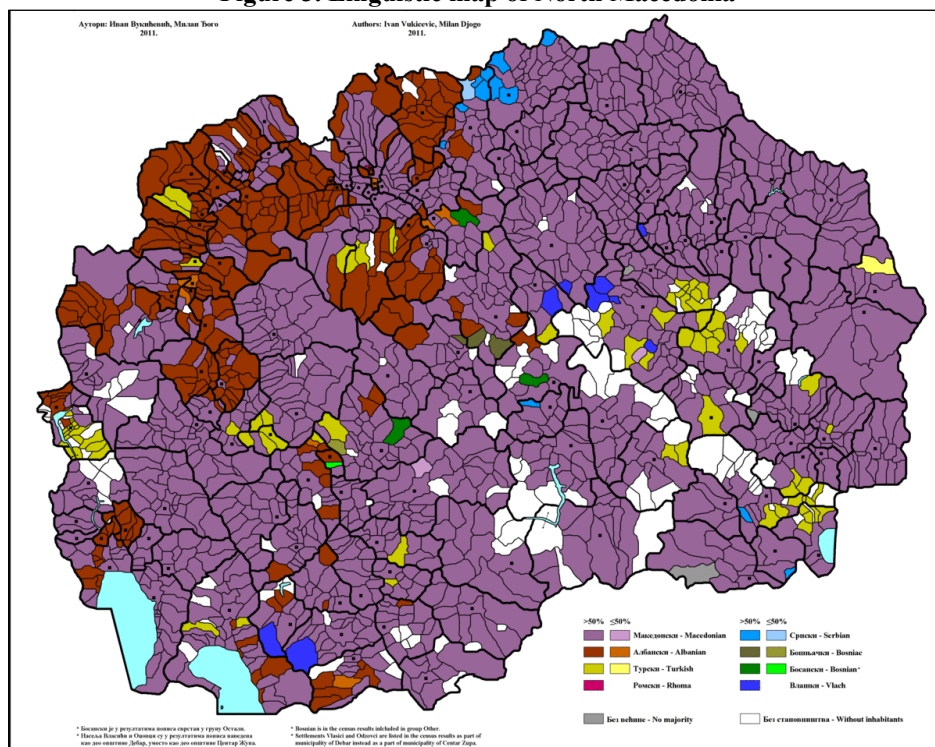
North Macedonia has an identity dispute with Bulgaria which focuses on three main demands of the Bulgarians: 1. the identity of the Macedonian language as the Bulgarian side demands that their neighbors should formally recognize the Bulgarian roots of their language, respectively the official formulation of a "common history", including identity; 2. the recognition and inclusion of the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution of North Macedonia (this claim would mean that the remaining majority is not Bulgarian as the more extreme Bulgarian claims sound, which would put an end to a nationalist dream of the Bulgarian side); and, a much vaguer formulation, 3. that North Macedonia renounces to what is called a "hate speech" against Bulgaria and „revision of the national historical narratives”.

The history of disputes is long. In the context of negotiations related to the Euro-Atlantic integration process, the Macedonian government made a conscious effort to adopt a more open stance towards negotiation. However, many discussions were sterile, and there were times when promises were not fulfilled. This was also influenced by the clear opposition of public opinion to these compromises.

In 2017 Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov signed Bulgarian-Macedonian *Treaty on friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation* in Skopje (European Western Balkans, 2017). At the regional and European level, the bilateral treaty may have major implications for Sofia's attempt to join

the EU's regional initiatives, which promise (also) economic opportunities, first of all through the Berlin-process (Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa 2017). Both countries will also now say they have no territorial claims against each other. Both countries also pledge to protect the rights of the other country's nationals living on their soil – not to interfere in the other's domestic affairs (Treaty, 2017). The 2017 Friendship Treaty between North Macedonia and Bulgaria called for the establishment of a joint commission on historical and educational issues. But implementation of the Friendship Treaty languished (Phillips 2022). In October 2019, Bulgaria warned that it would block North Macedonia's EU accession unless its “anti-Bulgarian ideology” was addressed. Bulgaria strongly objected to state-supported or tolerated hate speech and minority claims towards Bulgaria. North Macedonia politicians across the political spectrum rejected the claim that Macedonians and Bulgarians were a single people, divided by Yugoslav policy during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Phillips 2022). In March 2020, the EU Council decided to open the long-awaited accession negotiations. And just as the first intergovernmental conference was about to take place, in November 2020, Bulgaria blocked the adoption of the negotiation framework over issues of identity and history. The year 2021 did not bring any progress in the negotiation process. Despite a relative progress with the signing in 2017 of the *Treaty on friendship, good neighbourliness and cooperation* at civil society level, there has been no improvement in the perception of the required compromise in the relationship with Bulgaria (Brie, Jusufi and Polgár, 2023; Brie, 2023).

**Figure 3. Linguistic map of North Macedonia**



Source: apud <https://www.deblauwetijger.com/macedonic-sociaaldemocraten-en-albanezen-gaan-regeren/>, accessed in 12.07.2025 (Ivan Vukicevic, Milan Djogo, 2011)

In the end, after further rounds of negotiations and under the pressure of the EU, which wanted to give a clear signal of integration to the Western Balkans, Bulgaria's veto was lifted after mediation by the French Presidency of the EU Council. The solution was a bitter compromise for North Macedonia, as the opinions expressed by civil society would show. The grievances were clear, but the compromise was necessary. Thus, with the vote of the parliament in Skopje on 16 July 2022 and the signing of the agreement between the two sides in Sofia a day later, the agreement enabled the formal opening of negotiations on the accession of North Macedonia to the EU, officially announced in a communiqué of the Council of the EU on 19 July 2022 (Council of the EU, 2022).

It was an agreement and a promise (later unfulfilled). The center-left government accepted a Bulgarian demand to insert a reference to the Bulgarian ethnic minority in North Macedonia's constitution. However, that administration lacked the parliamentary majority to implement the change. In 2024, a conservative government led by Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski came to power, who "has said it will only amend the constitution if Bulgaria first approves North Macedonia's EU membership" (Testorides, 2025).

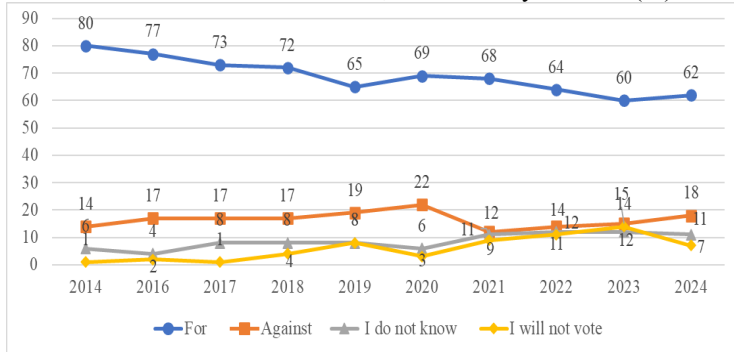
After three years, in 2025, the EU still demands that North Macedonia amends its constitution due to the impasse with Bulgaria. On May 15th, 2025, "European Council President Antonio Costa has called on North Macedonia to change its constitution to include the Bulgarian minority as a way for the country to continue its path toward full European Union membership" (Testorides, 2025).

#### **4. ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS REGARDING IDENTITY COMPROMISES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS**

We aim to develop a synthesis of opinion polls conducted over the last years to capture some trends recorded in relation to sensitive identity issues that have influenced the Euro-Atlantic integration process.

General trends: "The declining public support for EU membership in North Macedonia over the past decade can be largely attributed to the low credibility in the country's EU accession prospects, which was initially triggered by the prolonged Greek blockade of the process, based on the longstanding name dispute between the two states. While the resolution of this issue in 2019, following the ratification of the Prespa Agreement, was expected to reinvigorate the accession momentum, this enthusiasm proved to be short-lived. By the end of 2020, the start of accession negotiations was once again obstructed by a new blockade tied to a new bilateral dispute with Bulgaria that involves issues of national identity, history, and language" (Damjanovski, 2025:11). As mentioned, the deadlock was temporarily lifted with the Macedonian government's approval of the EU-backed "French proposal", which (among other conditions) required the recognition of a Bulgarian minority in the Macedonian Constitution (2022). The accession negotiations were blocked again: the constitutional amendments could not be implemented due to the lack of consensus between the parties in Parliament. The new conservative government of Hristijan Mickoski (voted by parliament in June 2024) refused to implement the agreement with the Bulgarian side regarding the constitutional amendment.

**Figure 4.** If next week there is a referendum for membership of the Republic of North Macedonia in the EU, how would you vote? (%)



Source: author’s own preparations based on data collected from Damjanovski, 2025: 13 (public opinion surveys research conducted in the period 2014-2024)

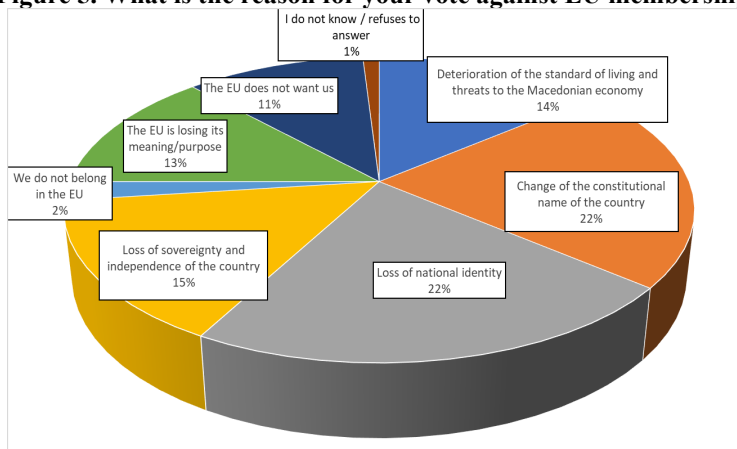
We propose to continue by focusing on the current implications of the European integration process and the public perceptions that are expressed in relation to identity issues. Given our limited space but also the topicality of the debate, our study is directed towards analyzing public perceptions in relation to the dispute with Bulgaria (an issue that remains unresolved).

Analysis of data from several opinion polls shows a high level of support among the citizens of North Macedonia for EU accession.

The graph above shows this support, although in recent years a decrease in this percentage can be observed. The reasons are multiple. Some are related to the lack of a perspective, a certain fatigue, the growth of resentment and nationalism amid numerous disputes with neighbors.

In the context of an endless series of identity disputes and the lack of a predictable geopolitical future, resentments and traumas caused by identity crises always appear. Even though it is older, the issue of changing the name also reappears in the context of disputes with the Bulgarians. Too many compromises have been made and the society is experiencing radicalization and the path to extremism.

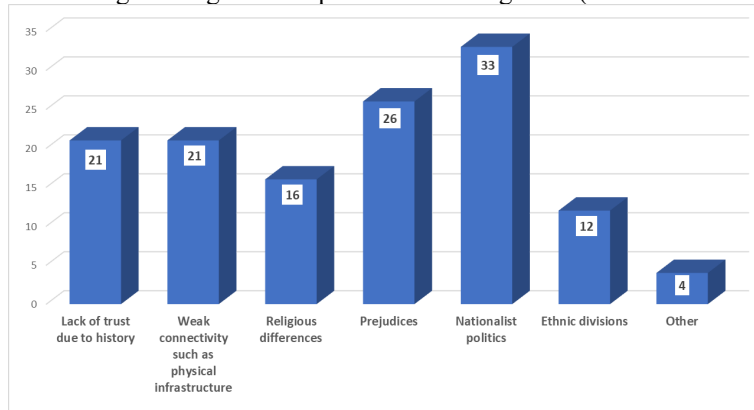
**Figure 5.** What is the reason for your vote against EU membership?



Source: author’s own preparations based on data collected from Damjanovski, 2025: 23 (public opinion survey research conducted in the period October-December 2024)

Even though the share of the Eurosceptic population remains very low (11%), the associations of the anti-EU vote with changing the country's name, with the loss of sovereignty and national identity are very strong (59% of those who stated that they would vote against a possible referendum on EU accession motivated their decision by association with identity disputes).

**Figure 6.** Challenges in regional cooperation with neighbors (North Macedonia, 2024)

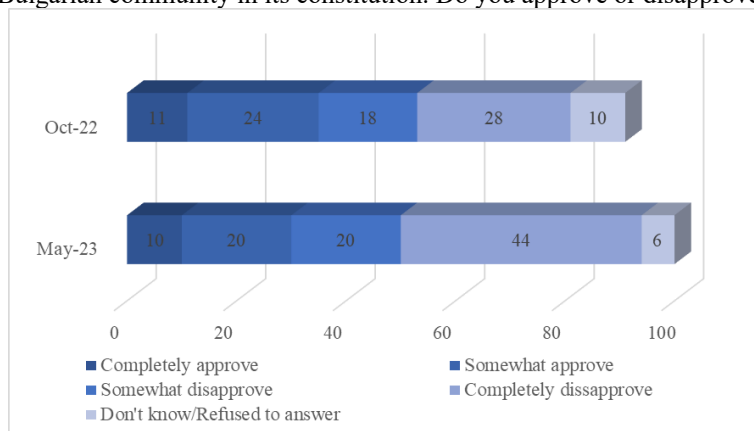


Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Balkan Barometer, 2024: 52.

Q: In your opinion, what hampers regional cooperation between Western Balkan economies?  
(All respondents, N=6000, multiple answers, share of total, %)

These internal and external identity disputes lead to a weak openness to cooperation of this Balkan state. Even the limited regional cooperation is also explained by the association mainly with identity challenges and suspicions in relation to its neighbors. Lack of trust due to history, religious differences, prejudices, nationalist politics and ethnic divisions are the main challenges for a better regional cooperation.

**Figure 7.** For the EU accession negotiations to continue, North Macedonia has agreed to include the Bulgarian community in its constitution. Do you approve or disapprove of this? (%)

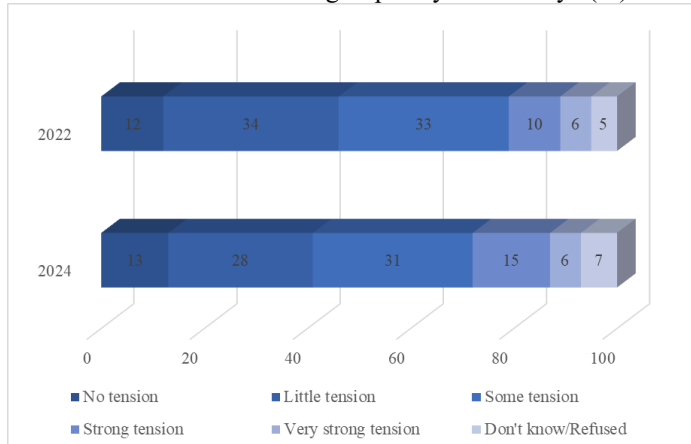


Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Brima: 2023: 77.

The rejection of a compromise by changing the constitution is increasingly evident after 2022. The share of those who disapprove of this approach increases in 2023 and 2024. Moreover, although they are aware of the importance of this approach for the

EU accession process, Macedonians do not approve of it. This phenomenon identifies a compromised European integration process for this category of population (hate speech towards Bulgarians is more important).

**Figure 8.** How would you rate the level of intensity of tension between different ethnic groups in your country? (%)

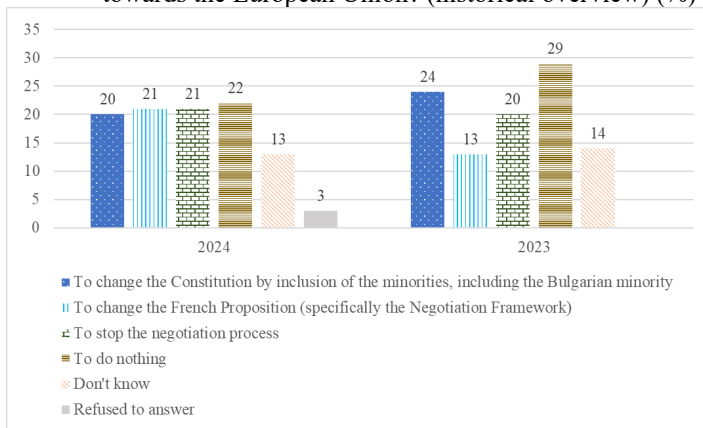


Source: author’s own preparations based on data collected from IPSOS, 2024: 94

The level of intensity of tensions between different ethnic groups is perceived by public opinion as increasing as well. One can therefore identify a blockage that appears in addressing identity issues and in achieving the compromises necessary to implement the agreements required in relations with neighboring states.

The radicalization of public opinion is also reflected in the policy of the government. During this period a new conservative government led by Hristijan Mickoski is established in Skopje (the lack of compromise in terms of identity becomes official policy), which refuses to implement the agreement reached to change the constitution, indicating a process of rapprochement with the EU that is facing challenges.

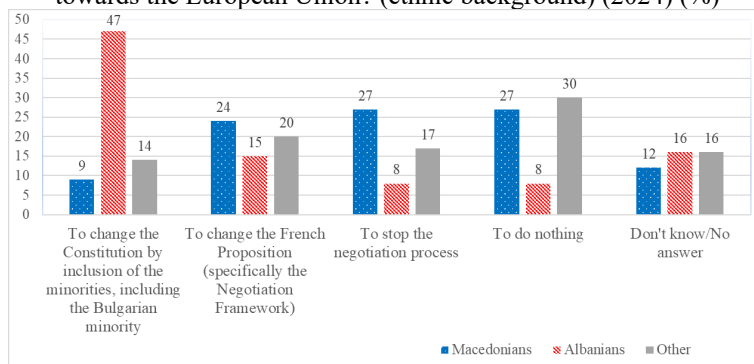
**Figure 9.** What changes do you think need to be made on the path towards the European Union? (historical overview) (%)



Source: author’s own preparations based on data collected from Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025:

A radicalization and a decreasing inclination towards compromise can be observed in the context of 2022-2024. Changing the constitution in accordance with the Macedonian-Bulgarian agreement of 2022 regarding the Bulgarian minority is far from being resolved.

**Figure 10.** What changes do you think need to be made on the path towards the European Union? (ethnic background) (2024) (%)

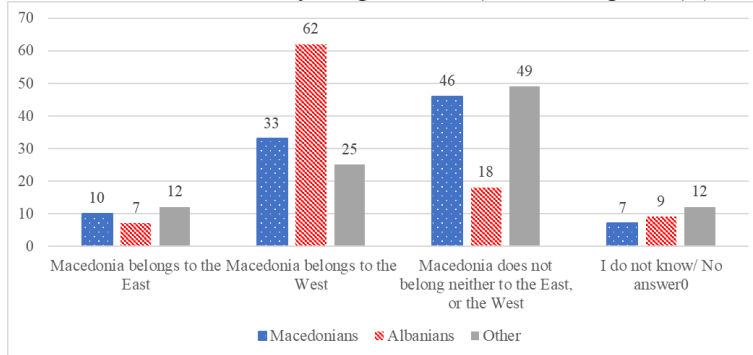


*Source:* author's own preparations based on data collected from Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025: 10

It is interesting to note the greater openness to compromise of the Albanian minority in North Macedonia, which appears to be more focused on achieving the goal of European integration and to a lesser extent interested in the identity dilemmas of Macedonians in relation to Bulgarians (this could be seen both in relation to the historical narrative and in relation to the identity of the Macedonian language or the recognition of the Bulgarian minority).

The case of the Albanians in North Macedonia is a relevant example of how a minority group can become a powerful force in influencing the European integration of a country. The Albanians forced the country to take a more proactive approach and to take ownership and leadership for the EU-related reforms (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2021: 86-87).

During the period from October to December 2024, it was found that „82% of the ethnic Albanian respondents expressed their support for North Macedonia's EU membership aspirations” but only 56% of the ethnic Macedonian respondents support them (Damjanovski, 2025: 50. In 2021, 63% of ethnic Macedonian respondents expressed support for the country's European integration, while a significant proportion of ethnic Albanians (82%) voiced their support for North Macedonia's membership in the EU (Damjanovski 2022: 4).

**Figure 11.** Which statement do you agree with? (ethnic background) (2024) (%)

*Source:* author's own preparations based on data collected from Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025: 17

The attitude towards geopolitical affiliation differs depending on ethnicity. The Albanian community played a decisive role in the pro-Western orientation of Northern Macedonia. In 2024, the highest percentage of support for the Western orientation is observed among ethnic Albanian respondents (62%), while Macedonians support the Western orientation only by 33% (Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025: 17).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing the identity crises that have been linked to integration discussions at the regional and Euro-Atlantic levels, we conclude by emphasizing the idea that only compromise can be the key in identity disputes between the parties involved. North Macedonia has made many compromises, but it is fair to say that it is still not enough to resolve all the controversial aspects of these disputes.

A fatigue can be noted in this process, given that the beneficial effects of these compromises are for Macedonian citizens (and their political leaders) only promises of a possible European integration that would produce (possible) positive effects on the state and society.

Directly following the achievement of the assumed objectives, and developing the three levels of analysis that our methodology contains, we draw several conclusions:

- An internal identity dispute between Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, an external dispute with Greece over the name of the state and a much more complex one with Bulgaria were identified and analyzed. The first two had a relatively positive outcome at the integration level (national, regional and Euro-Atlantic – North Macedonia joined NATO for example or internally developed a partnership that increasingly integrated the two largest national communities). The last, the one with Bulgaria, is still far from being resolved and is related to the complexity of the historical narrative, the recognition of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia (with the inclusion of this fact in the Constitution – as provided for in the 2022 agreement) or the issue of the Macedonian language.

- Our analysis led to the conclusion that the Macedonian position was becoming more flexible under the pressure of negotiations related to the Euro-Atlantic integration process. The Macedonian position was not a comfortable one. The pressures of the Greek and Bulgarian neighbors created widespread frustration beyond the flexibility of political positions. In the context of radicalization trends and growing

nationalist frustrations, Macedonian society and the new conservative government that came to power in mid-2024 have become increasingly inflexible in implementing the agreement with the Bulgarian side.

- The analysis of public perceptions and support of the population of North Macedonia for resolving identity disputes and reaching compromises in order to achieve geopolitical objectives has highlighted support for integration into NATO and the EU (with decreasing trends in this support). Another conclusion is the increase in the share of those who reject identity compromises and the existence of different perceptions among ethnic Albanians compared to Macedonians. Albanians support the Euro-Atlantic integration process and the achievement of identity compromises with the Greek and Bulgarian states more than Macedonians.

The first hypothesis, namely a rapprochement with the EU and integration into NATO, which has led to a more flexible Macedonian position on identity issues, is partially confirmed (at least until the government led by Hristijan Mickoski came to power in 2024 – a less flexible position has been announced by the new government).

The second hypothesis, that internal and external identity disputes have influenced the integration level and the process of rapprochement with the European Union, is confirmed: the integration process was directly influenced and is still blocked by the lack of compromise related to changing the Constitution by including Bulgarians among the recognized national minorities.

The third hypothesis, that minorities in North Macedonia support to a greater extent than Macedonians compromises in external identity disputes, in order to ensure rapprochement with the EU and NATO, was also confirmed. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the fact that national minorities, especially Albanians, pursued the Euro-Atlantic integration objective in a much more pragmatic way and gave more limited attention to the Macedonians' identity compromises.

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