

## CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM DIALOGUE IN NORTH MACEDONIA IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN ASPIRATIONS

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**Abstract.** *The paper intends to present the evolution of pandemy of Covid-19 during the year 2022 and its effects upon Romanian society in overall as presented by the Romanian newspaper “România liberă”. The online archives of the newspaper “România liberă” present the context of the pandemy’s evolution in Romania during the years 2020-2022 with an accent on the year 2022, period which we researched further for the present article. The issue of vaccination, the outburst of different varriants of the virus Covid 19, the public isolation and endemic fear generated by the means of mass media campaign which also helped and raised the citizens’ awarenress regarding the emergence of this virus, were a few coordinates of evolution of public life in the pandemic context. The restrictions imposed to the population including also the international travelling were bypassed by the fact that most people of Romania took the vaccine and, in this case, the resistance in front of new varriants of the virus was much more higher. It was a kind of hybrid war that we won and seemed to reach an end, but the battle was in fact to be stronger than before as individuals in front of emergent challenges. The article intends to present the internal and external context of the evolution of pandemy, with a focus on Romania’s evolution towards the end of the pandemy.*

**Keywords:** *Romanian press, Pandemy, Covid-19, Romania, European states, vaccination, impact, civil society.*

### INTRODUCTION

North Macedonia represents one of the most complex religious and ethnic landscapes in the contemporary Balkans, where two major religious communities coexist: Christians (predominantly Orthodox) and Muslims, mainly Sunni. According to the 2021 official census, approximately 46.1% of the population identifies as Orthodox Christian and 32.2% as Muslim (State Statistical Office of North Macedonia, 2022). This diversity—rooted in centuries of Byzantine and Ottoman influence—has produced both periods of cooperation and episodes of tension, culminating in the 2001 interethnic conflict, which was resolved through the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OSCE, 2011).

Today, in a regional context marked by political and identity-related fragilities, social cohesion between the two communities is essential for strengthening democracy and internal stability. North Macedonia’s aspiration to join the European Union further amplifies the relevance of interreligious dialogue. European policies on minority protection, social cohesion, and interfaith dialogue form an integral part of the political accession criteria, and the European Commission continuously monitors how the state manages religious diversity (European Commission, 2024a). At the same time,

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international reports on religious freedom indicate that interreligious relations remain a sensitive area, with differing perceptions between communities and ongoing risks of politicization (U.S. Department of State, 2023:2).

In this context, the present study explores how interreligious dialogue-rooted in hope and reconciliation—can contribute to social peace and to North Macedonia’s progress on its path toward European integration.

## THE CONTEXT OF THE TOPIC AND THE STAKES OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

North Macedonia represents one of the most diverse and sensitive confessional landscapes in South-Eastern Europe, where religious and ethnic identities significantly overlap. According to the 2021 census, approximately 46.1% of citizens identify as Orthodox Christians and 32.2% as Muslims (State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022). This plural distribution has historically created a complex terrain of interaction, cooperation, but also tension, particularly during periods of political instability or state transformation.

The European integration of North Macedonia goes beyond the technical dimension of fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria and extends to the state’s capacity to ensure internal stability, minority protection, and interreligious dialogue. The European Union places significant emphasis on how candidate states manage religious diversity, as this forms part of the architecture of European values—pluralism, religious freedom, social cohesion, and the rule of law (European Commission, 2014a:9).

Encouraging trends regarding the EU’s enlargement and the accession prospects of the region have not generated a corresponding increase in public support for EU membership within the country.

- In 2023, **60% of North Macedonia’s citizens support EU accession**, the lowest percentage recorded so far.
- The decline in support for accession has **not significantly increased eurosceptic attitudes**, as only **12% of the population is openly eurosceptic**.
- The **undecided or apathetic population has grown** over the past three years to approximately **30%**.
- There is a **significant gap between the two major ethnic communities**—Macedonians and Albanians—in terms of support for EU membership.
- **57% of ethnic Macedonians** support EU accession.
- A considerably **higher percentage of Albanians (78%)** are in favor of accession.
- The number of **undecided respondents is increasing** in both ethnic groups.
  - Respondents with **higher education and higher incomes** tend to be more supportive of EU accession.
  - Only **53% of young people (18–24 years old)** support EU accession.
  - EU membership is considered **very important by 40%** of the population.
  - For **20% of citizens**, EU accession is **not important at all**.
  - Overall, **ethnic Macedonians are more pessimistic and critical** toward the accession process than ethnic Albanians.
  - **66% of the population believes** that the country is **not prepared** for EU membership (Damjanovski, 2023:5).

In this context, **interreligious dialogue provides a constructive framework for rapprochement**. Both Christianity and Islam share narratives of final justice, peace, and

universal moral responsibility. These convergences can function as **symbolic bridges between communities**, helping to reduce tensions and to create a climate favorable to European integration, which requires the capacity to build an inclusive and stable society.

European integration depends not only on legal reforms but also on the **quality of social and interreligious dialogue**. The VIBE 2023 Report shows that North Macedonia faces **strong social and media polarization**, which affects the society's ability to manage religious diversity and sustain dialogue between communities.

This polarization represents a major obstacle to fulfilling the EU criteria related to social cohesion, the rule of law, and minority protection (VIBE, 2023:3).

### **THE RELEVANCE OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE FOR PROMOTING EUROPEAN VALUES: PEACE, COHESION, PLURALISM**

The fundamental values of the European Union are human dignity, freedom, equality, the rule of law, and respect for minorities. These values presuppose a culture of dialogue capable of transcending confessional and ethnic boundaries (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 326/391 (26 October 2012), 7–9). In this sense, dialogue seeks to identify a common language which, without erasing doctrinal and confessional differences, affirms a shared ethical horizon: ultimate good, moral responsibility, and the hope for a society in which conflict is overcome.

In multiconfessional societies such as North Macedonia, where relations between the majority Christian and minority Muslim communities directly influence internal stability, interreligious dialogue can contribute to shaping identity narratives in a cooperative direction. Mircea Brie notes that in Europe's border regions, ethno-confessional identity becomes a sensitive factor, and intercultural and religious dialogue is essential for preventing marginalization and conflict (Brie, 2011:11–12). Within this framework, appealing to shared values can reduce perceptions of otherness and strengthen social cohesion. Moreover, European policies encourage interreligious dialogue as a tool for preventing radicalization and extremism.

Therefore, interreligious discourse—where the hope for a common future transcends confessional boundaries and creates the premises for a genuine culture of peace—serves as a cultural and symbolic instrument that can contribute to promoting European values in candidate states such as North Macedonia.

### **METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY IN RELATION TO EU CRITERIA**

The study employs an interdisciplinary methodology, combining sociological analysis of interreligious discourses with approaches from political science and European studies. The research begins with an interpretation of the specialized literature on Christian–Muslim relations, intercultural dialogue, and religious identities in the Balkan region, integrating relevant contributions such as those of Mircea Brie (Brie, 2011). In parallel, reports of the European Commission and documents related to the political accession criteria—particularly those concerning minority protection and social cohesion—are examined (European Commission, 2024a).

On an empirical level, the study relies on official statistical data (2021 Census) and recent surveys on public perceptions of the European Union and interreligious relations, published by organizations such as the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the International Republican Institute (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2023). These sources

make it possible to correlate the internal dynamics of interreligious dialogue with the degree of alignment to European values. Alongside these statistical datasets and surveys, the VIBE index is also used as an empirical reference because it provides indicators on access to information, describes levels of civic education, evaluates the ability of institutions to respond to social issues, and measures the degree of polarization.

The delimitations of this research correspond to EU criteria: the study does not aim to evaluate the technical aspects of the *acquis communautaire* but focuses exclusively on the **social and cultural dimensions of the accession process**, particularly interfaith dialogue, ethno-religious cohesion, and North Macedonia's capacity to align with the European values of pluralism, social peace, and respect for diversity. Pluralism and democratic stability (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2021).

## CHAPTER I. THE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL CONFIGURATION OF NORTH MACEDONIA

North Macedonia is a deeply diverse state from both a religious and ethnic standpoint—a situation that directly shapes the country's social, identity-related, and political dynamics. According to the 2021 census, the resident population consists of approximately **46.1% Orthodox Christians** and **32.2% Muslims**, representing the largest Muslim community by proportion in Europe outside majority-Muslim states (State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022:12). Religious differences frequently overlap with ethnic structures: approximately **46.1% of the population is Orthodox Christian** (the majority of whom are ethnic Macedonians), while around **32.2% is Muslim**, primarily Albanians, but also Turks, Roma, and Bosniaks (State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, *Census of Population, Households and Dwellings 2021: Book XIII – Religious Affiliation* (Skopje: State Statistical Office, 2022), 12).

This overlap between religious and ethnic identity generates a specific social sensitivity, which Mircea Brie describes as characteristic of “borderland spaces,” where interaction between communities is not only cultural but also influences the political and institutional architecture of the state (Brie, 2011:11–12). For this reason, in North Macedonia religion becomes both a factor of internal cohesion and a potential catalyst for tensions (see more Brie, 2023; Brie; Jusufi and Polgár, 2023: 69-97; Brie; Jusufi and Polgár, 2021: 65-72).

The current social context is also marked by the legacy of the **2001 conflict**, which revealed vulnerabilities in relations between the majority Christian and the Albanian Muslim communities. The **Ohrid Framework Agreement**, which ended the conflict, introduced institutional mechanisms meant to improve minority political representation and reduce structural imbalances. Nevertheless, recent reports show that **interethnic mistrust persists**, and social cohesion continues to depend on dialogue between religious communities (European Commission, 2024a:12–13; Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2021).

In parallel, processes of modernization, mobility, migration, and media expansion are shaping religious identities (Polgar, 2023). Although religion remains essential in defining community belonging, society is experiencing increasing polarization, particularly in online environments, where identity narratives can be politically manipulated. According to the VIBE 2023 index, **“media polarization and the proliferation of disinformation contribute to the consolidation of divergent perceptions between the Christian and Muslim communities in a society where**

**access to information is only ‘moderately vibrant’**” (VIBE, 2023:3–6). These realities show that relations between Christians and Muslims cannot be analyzed separately from the broader social, urban, educational, and economic context.

Therefore, the religious and social configuration of North Macedonia represents a key component of state stability and an important indicator of its capacity to align with European values concerning pluralism, minority protection, and community cohesion (Brie and Blaga, 2015: 255-273).

### **1.1. Demographic Structure: Christians and Muslims (Current Statistics)**

Religious demography must be interpreted within the country’s broader social context. The **Vibrant Information Barometer 2023** indicates that North Macedonia lacks a coherent public sphere, as **“the state does not have a unified society, but social segments that live in parallel realities”** (VIBE, 2023:3). This finding is highly relevant to the relationship between the Christian and Muslim communities, as religious and ethnic differences often overlap with distinct informational ecosystems.

Moreover, the report highlights that **“the polarization of society makes discussion and communication difficult and almost impossible,”** which also affects how the two religious communities perceive interreligious dialogue, trust, and cooperation. Thus, the demographic structure must be viewed not only numerically, but in relation to social polarization, strong religious identities, and a fragmented informational context (VIBE, 2023:4).

Therefore, the presence of the two major religious communities-Christian and Muslim-is a central element of North Macedonia’s social architecture and constitutes the analytical foundation for studying interreligious relations and the potential for cohesion within the context of European integration.

### **1.2. The Ethnic Dimension of Religious Belonging**

In North Macedonia, religious affiliation strongly overlaps with ethnic identity: the majority of Orthodox Christians are ethnic Macedonians, while most Muslims belong to the Albanian community, as well as to Turkish, Roma, or Bosniak groups (U.S. Department of State, 2023). This correspondence between ethnicity and religion means that interreligious relations essentially reflect the dynamics of interethnic relations (Barth; Brie; Dărăbăneanu & Polgár (2019).

Recent studies confirm that these two communities perceive the country’s strategic orientation and European trajectory differently. According to the KAS–IDSCS analysis, **62% of Albanians** (predominantly Muslim) declare themselves oriented toward the West, whereas only **33% of Macedonians** (predominantly Christian) share this view; additionally, **46% of Macedonians** believe that the country “belongs neither to the East nor the West” (Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025:17). Likewise, Albanians are significantly more supportive of the reforms required for EU accession, while Macedonians tend to show more reserved or even skeptical attitudes (Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025:10).

These differences show that **ethno-religious identity** influences social perceptions, political priorities, and attitudes toward European integration. Therefore, **interreligious dialogue cannot be separated from interethnic dialogue**, as the two dimensions are interdependent within the social structure of North Macedonia.

### 1.3. The Evolution of Interreligious Relations (History, Tensions, Reconciliation)

Interreligious relations in North Macedonia have developed within a historical context marked by coexistence but also by periods of tension between the majority Christian–Macedonian and Muslim–Albanian communities. Sociological studies show that interpersonal relations are, in essence, cultural relations, and that religious identities function as expressions of broader ethno-cultural identities (Vejseli, 2024:111).

Although cultural diversity is a defining characteristic of the state, it has historically generated difficulties in communication and integration. In her analysis, Mirlinda Vejseli notes that in North Macedonia, **“social cohesion is often perceived as difficult because of differences in language, culture, and religious practices,”** and tensions arise especially in areas such as language, education, and institutional representation (Vejseli, 2024:112). This finding reflects the reality in which religion and ethnicity form closely interconnected identity structures.

The literature highlights that interreligious dialogue becomes challenging when participants perceive themselves as representatives of **“cultures that stand in an antagonistic relationship,”** particularly...

...where the memory of historical conflicts or perceptions of injustice and discrimination persist (Vejseli, 2024:113). This aspect is evident in North Macedonia, where Christian–Muslim relations are influenced by Macedonian–Albanian political tensions, intensified particularly before and after the Ohrid Framework Agreement.

However, positive trends are also evident, namely that multiculturalism is **not** perceived as an artificial construct imposed from above, but as a natural part of the country’s historical identity (OSCE Mission to Skopje, pp.4–6). S. Stojanov emphasizes that **“cultural diversity is naturally embedded in the very social fabric of North Macedonia,”** suggesting that interreligious relations have genuine potential for reconciliation and cooperation when supported through sustained dialogue (Stojanov, 2024:245).

Therefore, the evolution of interreligious relations reflects a fragile balance between historical coexistence and identity tensions, and the consolidation of social peace depends on strengthening intercultural dialogue and recognizing the contribution of each community to the country’s collective heritage.

## CHAPTER II. INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL COHESION IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

According to the requirements of the European Union, every member state—and any country aspiring to membership—is obliged to uphold European values through combating disinformation, protecting fundamental rights, encouraging civic participation, strengthening social cohesion, and promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue. However, **North Macedonia has not fulfilled this criterion,** according to the **European Commission, North Macedonia 2024 Reports** (European Commission, 2024a: 5–7), which state that institutional responses are slow, corruption undermines trust, the media landscape is fragmented and vulnerable, and society is strongly polarized (Brie, 2009).

“In the context of a polarized society, where public discourse is dominated by mutual accusations and a lack of constructive dialogue, identifying a common narrative oriented toward hope and reconciliation can counteract current polarization and also align with the European values of pluralism and social cohesion” (VIBE, 2023:19–20).

### 2.1. Christian–Muslim Dialogue Between Tension and Cooperation

Christian-Muslim dialogue in North Macedonia unfolds in a context marked by social polarization, low levels of trust in public institutions, and divergent perceptions between the main ethno-religious communities. One of the central factors is **institutional fragility**, which undermines public confidence in the state's ability to mediate conflicts and support social cohesion. Surveys show that **68% of citizens do not trust local authorities**, and **83% do not trust the judicial system**, which limits the role of institutions as mediators of interreligious dialogue (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024:24–27).

To this is added the high level of distrust in Parliament, with **76% of respondents** stating that they do not trust the legislature, while the perception that the media is politically influenced is shared by **64% of adults** (European Commission, 2024b:8–13). These perceptions amplify the divide between religious communities by fueling a climate of suspicion and by weakening credible channels of information.

Another major obstacle is the lack of trust in civil society: **54% of respondents** state that they do not trust civil society organizations (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024:35), which reduces the ability of NGOs to function as neutral platforms for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Trust in the police also fails to provide a stable framework, since **61% of citizens tend not to trust** this institution (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024:12), even though its role in managing community tensions is crucial.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent tensions, there are also favorable premises for cooperation, namely the way multiculturalism is perceived as an organic part of Macedonian identity. According to S. Stojanov, **“cultural diversity is naturally embedded in the social structure of North Macedonia,”** suggesting that interreligious dialogue has real potential when supported by stable institutions and professional mediation (Brie and Brie, 2008: 95-107; Stojanov, 2024: 254).

Thus, Christian–Muslim dialogue is positioned between **tension**, generated by polarization and weak institutions, and **collaboration**, supported by the tradition of coexistence and by the structurally multicultural character of society.

### 2.2. The Potential of Interreligious Dialogue in Strengthening Social Peace in North Macedonia

In a society characterized by deep polarization and low trust in public institutions, **interreligious discourse can function as a tool for reconciliation and cohesion**. Both Christianity and Islam contain theological narratives centered on shared themes such as ultimate peace, justice, moral reward, and communal responsibility, which provide a useful symbolic framework for interreligious dialogue (Rotaru, 2016:45–47).

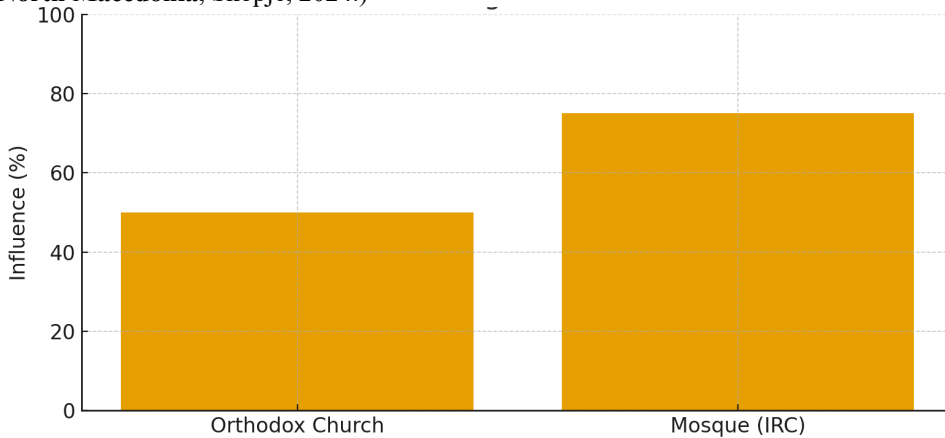
This need becomes particularly evident in the context of institutional fragility and social skepticism. In such a landscape, **religious institutions remain among the few community centers with relatively stable credibility**, giving them the potential to act as social mediators.

Culturally, interreligious tensions are often expressions of deeper ethno-cultural differences. Vejseli notes that dialogue becomes difficult where communities perceive each other as belonging to **“cultures in an antagonistic relationship”** (Vejseli, 2024:113). Yet the author also highlights that cultural diversity is perceived as an **organic element of national identity**, suggesting a real foundation for long-term reconciliation.

However, such interreligious cohesion will be reliable only when supported by a **shared narrative framework**.

Constructive dialogue can provide a “**common moral code**” between the Christian and Muslim communities, creating the conditions for cooperation, trust, and stability in a fragile social context. In the absence of strong political cohesion, this becomes a major symbolic resource for building social peace and aligning North Macedonia with **European values of pluralism and fundamental rights**.

**Fig. 1.** Estimated Influence of the Two Main Religious Institutions on Individuals (*Source: Perceptions of the Citizens about the Position of the Islamic Religious Community, Skopje, 2023, Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis”, Religious Dynamics and Social Trust in North Macedonia, Skopje, 2024.*)



- Orthodox Church: ~50% influence
- Mosque (Islamic Religious Community - IRC): ~75% influence

## CHAPTER III. ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS REGARDING CHRISTIAN–MUSLIM RELATIONS BASED ON SURVEY DATA

### 3.1. Specialized Study on the Muslim Community

The Muslim community in North Macedonia is dominated by the Albanian population, and religious identity is deeply intertwined with ethnic identity, functioning as a cultural and social marker (Vejseli, 2024:112–113). The level of religiosity is high: **66.7% of Muslims state that they trust the Islamic Religious Community (IRC)**, and **over 70% consider religion to have a major influence on their lives** (KAS, 2023:4-6). Religious practices are widely observed, and almost all respondents identify with the Sunni tradition.

However, beyond religiosity, there is a critical perception concerning the relationship between religion and politics. **56.6% of Muslims** believe that the IRC is politically influenced, particularly by the DUI party—reflecting internal tensions between the institution’s spiritual role and its instrumentalization in the public sphere.

Regarding identity, surveys show that **for 42.6% of believers, religion is more important than ethnicity**, indicating the centrality of religious belonging in defining personal identity (KAS, 2023:5). Politically and socially, Muslims—especially Albanians—are significantly more oriented toward the West. According to KAS-IDSCS data, **62% of Albanians believe that North Macedonia belongs to the West**. Moreover, **47%**

**support constitutional changes in line with European norms** (Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025:17).

Overall, the Muslim community presents a profile characterized by strong religiosity, trust in religious institutions, a critical stance toward politicization, and high support for European integration - making it an essential actor in interreligious dialogue.

### 3.2. Specialized Study on the Christian Community

The Christian community in North Macedonia is dominated by ethnic Macedonians, and religious identity is closely linked to national identity. In contrast to the Muslim community, trust in Christian religious institutions remains relatively stable; however, perceptions regarding the direction of the country and the EU integration process are considerably more reserved (VIBE, 2023:3–4).

A first key element is the community's distinct geopolitical orientation compared to that of Albanians. According to the IDSCS & KAS report, only **33% of ethnic Macedonians** (predominantly Christian) believe that North Macedonia “belongs to the West,” while **46%** state that the country belongs neither to the East nor the West, expressing a non-aligned identity position (IDSCS & KAS, 2025:17). This orientation is also reflected in the lower support for the reforms required for EU accession. As indicated by the **IRI Western Balkans Poll 2024**, Macedonians are significantly more pessimistic than Albanians regarding the country's overall direction: only **27%** believe that North Macedonia is moving in a good direction, while approximately **62%** perceive the direction as wrong (IRI, 2024:36). This negative perception also shapes the willingness for interreligious and interethnic dialogue.

Regarding institutional trust, Christians follow the general population trend: very low trust in Parliament (**76% “tend not to trust”**) and a widespread perception that the media is politically influenced (**64%**). These elements narrow the public space for dialogue and encourage the community to withdraw into traditional structures—including religious ones—which remain stable identity anchors (European Commission, 2024b:13).

Socially, Macedonian Christians show a higher level of general distrust compared to Muslims. **Balkan Barometer 2024** indicates that **68%** of North Macedonian citizens do not trust local authorities—a percentage particularly high among Macedonians—explaining their reluctance toward domestic reforms proposed in the EU integration process (RCC, 2024:27).

Overall, the Christian community is characterized by a **more conservative profile**, a **non-aligned geopolitical orientation**, **high institutional distrust**, and **heightened pessimism regarding the country's future**. In the context of interreligious dialogue, these attitudes explain the tense dynamics between communities while also highlighting the need for well-structured dialogue platforms aimed at reducing divergent perceptions.

### 3.3. Analysis of Public Perceptions of Christian–Muslim Relations

Public perceptions regarding relations between Christians and Muslims in North Macedonia are strongly influenced by the ethnic context, the polarization of the public sphere, and the general level of institutional distrust. Demographically, the territorial and ethnic distribution often shapes patterns of intercommunity contact, as shown by studies on societal diversity ethnic distribution: mixed areas tend to foster cooperation, while homogeneous territories generate segregation and social distance (Islam and Polgár, 2023; Trnavcevic et al., 2024:4–6).

On the social level, data from the **IRI Western Balkans Poll 2024** reveal a major difference between community perceptions: only **27% of Macedonians** believe that the country is moving in the right direction, compared to almost **48% of Albanians**. This gap-driven by differing levels of optimism-produces parallel visions of the national future and indirectly affects the willingness for interreligious dialogue (IRI, 2024:36).

Regarding institutional trust, both **Balkan Barometer 2024** and **Eurobarometer 101** indicate a structural crisis: **68%** of citizens do not trust local authorities, **76%** do not trust Parliament, and **64%** believe that the media is politically influenced. This lack of trust limits institutions' role as mediators between communities and weakens the perception of an inclusive society (European Commission, 2024b:8).

**Informational polarization** further deepens these tensions. The VIBE 2023 report describes North Macedonia as a society composed of **“segments living in parallel realities, where polarization makes communication between groups difficult and almost impossible”** (VIBE, 2023:3-4). In such a climate, interreligious perceptions are filtered through separate media ecosystems, encouraging stereotypes.

Structural problems highlighted by **ECRI (2023)** also play an important role, especially cases of hate speech and discrimination. The report notes the persistence of hostile public discourse toward ethnic and religious communities and the existence of forms of segregation in education, particularly in mixed-population localities. These realities increase the perceived social distance between Christians and Muslims (ECRI, 2023:15–18).

Regarding European aspirations, Muslims (especially Albanians) are significantly more pro-Western and more supportive of EU reforms compared to Macedonian Christians. KAS–IDSCS data show that **62% of Albanians** believe that North Macedonia belongs to the West, compared to **33% of Macedonians**; and **47% of Albanians** support constitutional changes required by the EU—more than the majority community (IDSCS & KAS, 2024:11, 17).

This difference in geopolitical orientation affects mutual perceptions, since European integration is understood differently by the two religious communities.

Therefore, public perceptions between Christians and Muslims are shaped by a combination of factors: spatial distribution, levels of social pessimism, geopolitical differences, informational polarization, and institutional discrimination. All these factors directly influence the dynamics of interreligious dialogue—both in terms of tension and in the identification of possible paths toward reconciliation in the context of European integration.

In his inauguration speech, **Prime Minister Mickoski** affirmed that the government would continue its foreign policy in harmony with European partners: **“together with our partners in the EU”** (foreign-policy harmonization) (Eunews). Thus, in principle, he reaffirmed the government's commitment to maintaining the path toward European integration (Eunews<sup>1</sup>)

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of Christian–Muslim relations in North Macedonia, conducted through the integration of sociological and geopolitical data, reveals a complex picture in which religious identity, ethnic belonging, and European orientation overlap and mutually influence one another. Religious and ethnic diversity is not a circumstantial element but a structural component of Macedonian society—an aspect that explains both the potential for cooperation and the vulnerabilities that may generate tensions.

First, the study demonstrates that religion remains an essential identity marker for both Macedonian Christians and Albanian Muslims. For Muslims, religion is directly linked to community identity, unifying ethnicity, language, and tradition. For Christians, religious identity largely coincides with national and cultural identity. This overlap between religion and ethnicity explains both the sensitivity of interreligious dialogue and its strategic potential in a plural society.

Second, the analysis of public perceptions reveals a clear geopolitical divergence between the two communities: Albanians (mostly Muslims) are consistently more pro-European, more supportive of reforms, and more optimistic about the future, whereas Macedonians (mostly Christians) tend to be more skeptical, more pessimistic, and more attached to a non-aligned identity position. This discrepancy directly influences how each community perceives interreligious dialogue and the process of European integration.

A third central element is the high level of distrust in public institutions, a phenomenon widespread across both communities. State institutions, the media, and civil society face a crisis of legitimacy, which limits their ability to mediate conflicts or facilitate intercommunity engagement. In this fragile context, religious institutions—both Christian and Muslim—remain among the few structures capable of inspiring trust at the local level. This grants them a strategic role in strengthening social cohesion.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the polarization of the information sphere and the persistence of hate speech constitute major obstacles. In the absence of shared media spaces and a responsible public discourse, perceptions between communities are often shaped by stereotypes, parallel narratives, and conflicting interpretations of reality. These trends directly affect interreligious dialogue and mutual perceptions.

Despite the identified tensions, the study highlights the existence of significant resources for cooperation, especially within the dimension of dialogue between the two religions. Both Christianity and Islam share powerful symbolic themes—justice, peace, moral responsibility, reconciliation—which can form a common foundation for an interreligious discourse capable of transcending cultural and political barriers.

Ultimately, the general conclusion is that North Macedonia possesses real potential for interreligious cohesion, but this potential depends on several key factors: depoliticizing the public sphere, reducing media polarization, strengthening trust in state institutions, consolidating platforms for interreligious dialogue, utilizing shared theological themes as a cooperative language, and maintaining a clear European orientation perceived as an inclusive project for both communities.

By bringing together these directions, Christian-Muslim dialogue can become not merely a tool for managing tensions but a driving force of European integration, contributing to the consolidation of a Macedonian model of pluralism and coexistence.

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