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North Macedonia's EU path: Challenges and opportunities in 2025

This paper outlines the main findings of a fact-finding mission to Skopje that was jointly conducted by experts from four European think tanks – Jacques Delors Institute, DGAP, The Clingendael Institute, and Carnegie Europe – from September 23 to 25, 2024. It was organised with the assistance of the think tank Institute for Democracy (IDSCS) and funded by the Open Society Foundations.

Despite decades of demanding challenges along its EU path, North Macedonia has yet to see tangible progress toward its historic goal. Therefore, the government led by Hristijan Mickoski following the 8 May 2024 parliamentary elections may be reluctant to push for further EU-aligned reforms without a convincing signal of commitment from the EU. For its part, the EU has offered a potential resolution to the deadlock caused by Bulgaria's veto through a constitutional reform that would pave the way to the opening of the country's first negotiating cluster with the EU (see box below). The EU train is in motion – but North Macedonia must be convinced it is more than a mirage.



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Benjamin Couteau,
Research Fellow, Jacques Delors
Institute (Centre Grande Europe)

Iliriana Gjoni
Research Analyst, Carnegie Europe

Milan Nič,
Senior Fellow, German Council on
Foreign Relations (DGAP)

Nikola Xaviereff,
Project Manager Western Balkans,
German Council on Foreign Relations
(DGAP)

Wouter Zweers,
Research Fellow, The Clingendael
Institute

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(Senior Fellow, Carnegie Europe)
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The EU has recently approved a Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans¹ providing substantial funding, though the attached political conditions can be doubted. Indeed, since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU's geopolitical push for enlargement has further shifted the process away from a strictly merit-based approach, favouring political considerations instead. With this shift in mind, the current Macedonian government appears more comfortable to broaden its strategic alliances, including with illiberal figures like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and U.S. President-elect Donald Trump. Should prospects for progress in EU accession negotiations fade, North Macedonia's leadership could pivot towards domestic power consolidation, supported by these alternative partnerships.

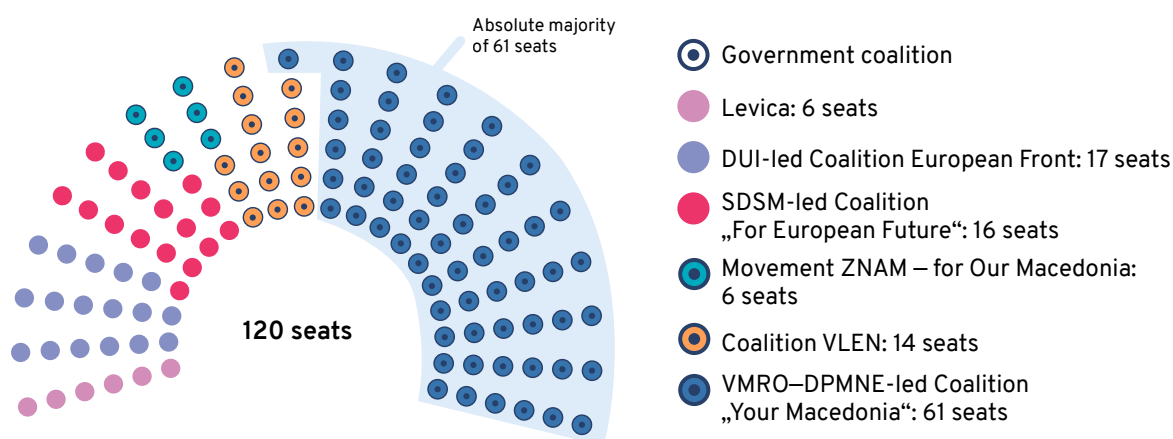
The responsibility now lies largely with North Macedonia's government to break the deadlock it faces on its EU path. Yet, almost 6 months into office, it has not actively supported the necessary constitutional reform recognising a Bulgarian community in the country. This constitutes a critical requirement by the EU to move towards a second intergovernmental conference (IGC), where the country would open its first negotiating cluster. While the EU sees this requirement as an integral part of the accession process, the Macedonian government continues to downplay it as merely a proposal. Without a bold move from both sides, North Macedonia risks falling behind other Western Balkan candidates. That is evidenced by its recent decoupling from Albania, which has just begun negotiations on its first cluster. This stall could in turn jeopardise the EU's broader geopolitical and transformative aims for the region.

I • 8 May, the wind of change

The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)'s failure to deliver the EU progress it had promised after making controversial compromises on national identity issues during its time in government (see *box below*) ultimately led to its resounding defeat last 8 May. As a result, the SDSM-led government fell, dragging down its coalition partners, the Liberal Democratic Party and parties representing the Albanian community's interests (the country's second-largest ethnic group) such as the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). Widespread frustration among Macedonian citizens, who were also dissatisfied with the government's inability to improve economic conditions and public services, resulted in a landslide victory for the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) in the 2024 parliamentary and presidential elections (see *chart*).

¹ European Commission, *Commission approves Reform Agendas of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, paving way for payments under the Reform and Growth Facility*, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 23 October 2024.

CHART. Composition of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia (as of December 2024)²



After eight years in opposition, VMRO-DPMNE returned to power in a broad coalition with the VLEN Coalition, composed of several parties representing the interests of Albanian voters opposed to DUI, and For Our Macedonia (ZNAM), a splinter party from SDSM. This victory, however, was more a reflection of public disillusionment with the SDSM-led government than a full endorsement of VMRO-DPMNE's campaign. The party's campaign primarily focused on highlighting the previous government's shortcomings, particularly its failure to address high levels of corruption and impunity. Party leader Hristijan Mickoski, now Prime Minister, also gained support by presenting himself as a defender of ethnic Macedonians' identity and pride, against sacrifices made on the EU path.

While VMRO-DPMNE officially continues to support EU membership, it has capitalised on the frustration of a protracted, decades-long accession process. Reflecting public sentiment, Hristijan Mickoski has made it clear that EU accession should not come at any price, especially as the unpredictability surrounding the enlargement process casts doubt on future progress. Even if the constitutional reform was passed, additional demands from Bulgaria could still emerge, compounded by the lack of clarity on a potential accession timeline. As the party's electoral success was linked to this stance, it is likely to continue leveraging such rhetoric to maintain support, particularly with next year's local elections on the horizon.

The new government coalition also marks the exit of DUI from power³. This shift follows VMRO-DPMNE's strong anti-DUI rhetoric during the campaign, reflecting the party's broader anti-Albanian sentiment. Meanwhile, the now significantly weakened SDSM, DUI's former governing partner, finds itself unable to provide effective opposition and to hold the government accountable. These political shifts are further complicated by the rise of Leвица, a nationalist, anti-EU, and anti-NATO party. Its parliamentary representation grew from two to six members after the elections, further fragmenting the once broad cross-party consensus on EU integration.

² Website of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, [MPs](#).

³ Since its creation in 2002, DUI has participated in every governmental coalition – whether led by SDSM or VMRO-DPMNE –, except during former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's initial term in office, which lasted less than 2 years (2006-2008).

Although this political context offers a government with such a comfortable parliamentary majority the opportunity to pursue ambitious reforms, little progress has been made in its first few months. Yet, the challenges ahead are considerable, and the government's early decisions risk leading to dangerous hurdles for North Macedonia's future.

II • Domestic challenges on the way ahead

With less than a year until the next local elections, which VMRO-DPMNE is expected to win, the government appears hesitant to make any kind of bold move. Despite stated objectives such as closing negotiating chapters with the EU, achieving 6% growth, and reversing youth emigration, the government's most notable activity so far has been an ongoing reshuffling of the government and public administration. This process, shaped largely by the government change and internal VMRO-DPMNE dynamics, has consumed much of the government's energy. The prolonged reshuffling could potentially continue for another year, reflecting a lack of clear strategy and coordination and raising doubts about its effectiveness.

Under the guise of fighting corruption, a key campaign pledge, this reshuffling has controversially been linked to power-sharing arrangements between ethnic groups at the government and public administration levels – an essential condition for maintaining good inter-ethnic relations in the country. In line with its anti-Albanian rhetoric, VMRO-DPMNE is seeking to capitalise on the recent abolition by the Constitutional Court of the so-called “Balancer”⁴, a calculation system that helped achieve equitable ethnic representation in government and administration but had turned dysfunctional over time⁵. The party had previously pushed for its permanent removal, claiming it had become a tool for misusing public funds. This move seems ultimately aimed at undermining the proper representation of Albanians and other non-Macedonian communities in the administration.

The government is now considering leveraging a much-anticipated Constitutional Court decision on parts of the Law on the Use of Languages, which established Albanian as the second official language after Macedonian, to challenge the official recognition of Albanian. Such a move would put pressure on VMRO-DPMNE's government partner, the VLEN Coalition, possibly triggering a political crisis that could lead to a change in government partners or even early elections. Without the EU accession process as a unifying force, such a move could exacerbate ethnic polarisation and potentially reignite conflict.

On the economic front, no significant actions have been taken so far despite campaign promises. The upcoming Energy and Renewable Energy laws could mark a turning point, unlocking North Macedonia's full potential in these sectors. Mining is already a well-developed industry in the country, with lead, zinc – particularly at the prominent Sasa Mine – and copper extraction leading the way. Although the government's ambition to position North Macedonia as a « regional hub » may be high, the country holds substantial potential in renewable energy, especially in solar power.

The government is also reassessing infrastructure projects. After unofficially backtracking, it

4 МИА - Медиумска информативна агенција, “Constitutional Court abolishes ‘Balancer’ tool”, 9 October 2024.

5 North Macedonia 2023 Report, Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying the document *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement policy*, SWD(2023) 693 final, Brussels, 8 November 2023.

later officially reconfirmed its commitment to the construction of part of Corridor VIII, a key road and rail project linking Italy's Adriatic coast to Bulgaria's Black Sea coast. While this corridor, considered strategic for NATO, would enhance connectivity between Member States, the government initially blamed Bulgaria for not completing its own section. However, many view this vacillation as politically motivated, with funds potentially redirected to Corridor X connecting Skopje to Belgrade and Budapest, North Macedonia's key political allies. This would also incidentally benefit the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Route, part of the Belt and Road Initiative, designed to provide a rapid connection between the state-owned China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO)'s Greek port of Piraeus and the rest of the continent.

III • Strategic uncertainty

The government's close ties with illiberal leaders have raised concerns. While the country remains fully aligned with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, notably regarding sanctions on Russia in response to its war of aggression against Ukraine⁶, the government has moved swiftly to strengthen connections with figures from President-elect Donald Trump's circle and has forged close ties with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, often seen as a model among some Western Balkan leaders due to his ability to offset EU conditionality by leveraging its relationship with Russia and China.

Among EU Member States, the government's main ally appears to be Viktor Orbán, creating an illiberal axis stretching from Budapest to Belgrade and Skopje which extends across economic, energy, digital, political and security issues. Reflecting its shift in foreign policy orientation, North Macedonia has intensified diplomatic relations with Hungary by recently appointing a Special Envoy to the Hungarian EU Council Presidency.

Speculation about personal connections between Hristijan Mickoski and Viktor Orbán has been ongoing, with expectations of a rapprochement after the elections. Nikola Gruevski, Mickoski's predecessor, found refuge in Hungary after fleeing North Macedonia, and VMRO-DPMNE has maintained strong ties with Orbán's regime. Shortly after taking office, the government announced a €500 million loan from Hungary, at an unusually favourable rate. Half of the loan was earmarked for salaries and pensions, while the other half is designated for municipal infrastructure projects.

Although the current government has broadly accepted the negotiation framework with the EU inherited from its predecessor, it remains firm on its campaign position of not fully adhering to the terms outlined in it. This situation is partly the result of the EU's inability to prevent unilateral moves by its Member States, which have eroded trust among Macedonian citizens⁷. There is, as a result, widespread public scepticism that the current veto will be the last, even if the constitutional reform is passed. This explains why the government has requested – unsuccessfully – an amendment to the agreed framework. However, the suggestion to have the constitutional amendment come into force only after North Macedonia's Accession Treaty to the EU is ratified by Bulgaria has been outright rejected by the EU side.

⁶ [North Macedonia 2024 Report](#), Commission Staff Working Document, Accompanying the document *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 2024 Communication on EU Enlargement policy*, SWD(2024) 693 final, Brussels, 30 October 2024.

⁷ Ivan Damjanovski, [Analysis of public opinion on North Macedonia's accession to the European Union \(2014-2023\)](#), *Public Opinion Analysis Paper No.27/2023*, Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia/Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje, 2023.

IV • Recommendations – Seizing the EU train in motion

North Macedonia has made significant sacrifices in its quest for membership in the European Union, and it now stands at a critical crossroads. The EU must acknowledge that the Member States responsible for North Macedonia's repeated obstacles have eroded the bloc's credibility.

Without the assurance that the constitutional reform will concretely advance the country's EU bid, there will be little urgency for the Macedonian government to push forward with these changes. While the government's proposal to delay the implementation of the constitutional amendments represents a dead end, it still underscores the need for decisive action from the EU and its Member States to enable the government to reframe the constitutional change as a success. Such a step would, in turn, lay the first brick in rebuilding trust in the accession process.

EU Member States must be ready to convene a second ICG immediately after the constitutional reform is passed. Momentum could further be bolstered by a commitment to work on preventing further bilateralisation and on reconsidering the use of unanimity throughout the accession process. Such a move could enhance the predictability and credibility of the process, benefiting North Macedonia as well as other candidate countries⁸.

Member States, particularly France and the Netherlands, could also follow Germany's example by supporting legislation that defends the Macedonian language, culture, and identity⁹, thereby providing a guarantee along the accession process. Bulgaria should also be encouraged to execute the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, specifically those arising from the Court's judgment of 2 October 2001, *Case of Stankov and the United Macedonian Organisation Ilinden v. Bulgaria* (Applications nos. 29221/95 and 29225/95).

These actions should be accompanied by a facilitated dialogue between Skopje and Sofia, at diplomatic level and within civil society. Member States could emphasise their common NATO membership to create a level playing field and ensure a dialogue on equal terms, further strengthening advocacy for key NATO projects such as Corridor VIII.

Furthermore, the EU should seize the opportunities presented by the European Green Deal and the new Facility for the Western Balkans to deepen sectoral cooperation with North Macedonia in areas such as connectivity, raw materials, or renewable energy. Such efforts, along with milestones like joining the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), would support North Macedonia's gradual integration into the Single Market. Given the country's advanced alignment with the *acquis communautaire*, these initiatives would ensure swift progress once negotiations concretely begin. This represents a unique opportunity for North Macedonia to catch the EU train in motion.

⁸ See Zweers, Ioannides, Nechev & Dimitrov, "Unblocking decision-making in EU enlargement - Qualified Majority Voting as a way forward?", *Clingendael, DGAP, ELIAMEP, BCCP Solution*, Policy Brief, 2024.

⁹ МИА - Медиумска информативна агенција, "Bundestag adopts resolution supporting Macedonian language, culture, identity", 16 June 2023.

BOX. A history of North Macedonia's challenged EU accession process

A candidate country since 2005 – just a year after Croatia –, North Macedonia is a clear example of the European Union's current struggle to carry out its enlargement policy. Its EU path has been strongly hindered by bilateralisation, with neighbouring countries obstructing progress over historical and national identity issues.

Even before the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council supporting the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries, Greece imposed its own conditions on North Macedonia, forcing a flag change through the 1995 Interim Accord. Though this accord obliged Greece to support North Macedonia's bids in international organisations of which Greece is part of, Greece nevertheless maintained its veto on the country's aspirations for North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and EU membership. While the 2019 Prespa Agreement addressed Greece's decades-long objections by changing the country's official name, opening the door to NATO membership in 2020, EU membership remains elusive. North Macedonia has continued to face new challenges, whereas Croatia joined as early as 2013.

In 2019, France temporarily blocked the start of accession negotiations, followed by Bulgaria, which raised a dispute over North Macedonia's history and national identity. In 2022, North Macedonia's prior SDSM-led government accepted the « French proposal », put forward during France's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, incorporating it to North Macedonia's accession negotiations with the EU. This agreement – approved in Parliament without a single vote against – formally launched the country's talks with the EU, but imposed the specific requirement of a constitutional reform recognising a Bulgarian community in the country as a prerequisite for opening negotiating clusters. The agreement also emphasises maintaining good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, notably through the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria.

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Notre Europe - Institut Jacques Delors
Penser l'Europe • Thinking Europe • Europa Denken
18 rue de Londres 75009 Paris, France • www.delorsinstitute.eu
T +33 (0)1 44 58 97 97 • info@delorsinstitute.eu

