



# **Is the EU Taking Friends for Granted? Partisanship and Support for External Actors in North Macedonia**

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## Executive Summary

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Aggregate survey results have often led analysts to assume that the “East vs. West” debate in North Macedonia is not a polarizing issue and that Macedonian citizens are overwhelmingly eager to see their country embedded in Euro-Atlantic institutional structures. In this paper, I analyze a number of surveys—including surveys by IRI, NDI, and USAID—and show that while virtually all ethnic Albanians are in favor of EU and NATO membership, ethnic Macedonians are, in fact, largely divided on questions related to the country’s geopolitical future. I show that partisanship is a major driver, or at least predictor, of this divide—those favoring the ruling Social Democratic party (SDSM) are largely pro-Western in their orientation while supporters of the second major party, the right-wing populist VMRO-DPMNE, display partiality towards Russia. I argue that this divide is at least in part attributable to cueing from party elites, despite the claim by all major parties (including VMRO-DPMNE) that they are pro-Western.

In an effort to better illustrate the party elites’ rhetoric and stance in the “East vs. West” debate and begin to illustrate the importance of elite cues, I look at two of the most momentous occasions in the recent history of North Macedonia’s Euro-Atlantic integration: the 2015 wiretapping scandal and the 2018 name-change

referendum. In short, I contend that the party elites’ rhetoric regarding EU, NATO, and Russia during these events begins to lay bare VMRO-DPMNE leaders’ strategy to feign loyalty to the Euro-Atlantic community—thereby allowing them to reap the economic benefits that EU ties facilitate—while simultaneously ingratiating themselves with Russia and snubbing key Euro-Atlantic principles concerning human rights and good governance. I show that VMRO-DPMNE’s strategy of “playing it both ways” has not eluded rank-and-file voters who have, for the most part, successfully deciphered party elites’ cues and have become well-aware of the difference between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE in terms of genuine commitment to improving the country’s EU and NATO integration prospects. As such, in response to this rhetoric, I explain how support among VMRO-DPMNE voters for EU and NATO integration has fallen substantially.

Finally, this paper cautions that further undue complications with respect to North Macedonia’s EU accession negotiations could compromise Macedonian citizens’ trust in the credibility of EU’s commitment to the country. In turn, this would not only undercut the EU’s power to drive democratization but could also erode support for Euro-Atlantic integration which, I show, is already more precarious than is often assumed.



# Introduction

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Immediately after North Macedonia gained independence in 1991, the country's political elites acted decisively to align the country with the Euro-Atlantic community. In 1993, the Macedonian Parliament voted unanimously to undertake the necessary steps for joining NATO and, in 1995, North Macedonia became the second post-Yugoslav country to join NATO's Partnership for Peace, outpaced only by Slovenia. Similarly, in 2001, North Macedonia became the first country in Southeast Europe to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU and gained candidate status four years later in 2005, earlier than any other post-Yugoslav country but Slovenia.

North Macedonia's name dispute with Greece, however, significantly obstructed the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. The dispute centered on North Macedonia's determination to maintain its name as "The Republic of Macedonia" following the 1991 break-up of Yugoslavia, a decision that Greece insisted appropriated its cultural identity and implied territorial claims over a Greek region also called Macedonia. This bilateral dispute, for example, led Greece to, in 2008, wield its veto power to block then-Macedonia's accession to NATO, despite disapproval by all other NATO member states, which insisted that the country had met all requirements for NATO membership.

Ten years after the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, however, and following intense diplomatic negotiations, in June 2018 the governments of Greece and then-Macedonia signed the Prespa Agreement, setting up a framework for changing the latter country's name to "The Republic of North Macedonia." As long as the Prespa Agreement was upheld—which required the Macedonian Parliament to amend the constitution and officially change the country's name—Greece vowed to no longer brandish its veto prerogative and a torrent of EU and US leaders, for their part, promised Macedonians a propitious outlook for their country's integration in the Euro-Atlantic family.

Domestically, the adoption and ratification of the name-change agreement spurred fiery public debates and protests, as well as the failure of a name-change referendum due to the turnout rate (37%) being well below the 50% threshold necessary to validate the results (Marusic 2018). Internationally, the painful compromise by now-North Macedonia was seen as manifesting Macedonians' steadfast commitment to the Euro-Atlantic bloc.

Survey polls are often conjured up to provide further solace to Western observers about Macedonians' loyalty to the West amidst concerns over the increasingly activist foreign policies of "black knight" actors like Russia and China. Namely, citizens of North Macedonia continuously express greater levels of support for the country's Euro-Atlantic integration compared to citizens of other countries in the region. Specifically, a recent poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI; 2019) shows that 65% of Macedonian citizens say they would vote to join NATO compared, for instance, to only 6% of Serbian citizens stating they would do the same. For Montenegrin and Bosnian citizens, these figures are 33% and 49% respectively—still considerably lower than the support for NATO among Macedonians (IRI 2019). Similarly, compared to citizens of Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, citizens of North Macedonia are the least likely to support their country joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (IRI 2019).

Although comforting, these aggregate survey results are somewhat misleading as they falsely imply that the "East vs. West" debate in North Macedonia is not at all a polarizing issue—that Macedonians have completed their geopolitical calculations and are overwhelmingly eager to see their country embedded in the Euro-Atlantic institutional structure. In this paper, I delve deeper into surveys by the IRI, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Tim Institute, and TV Sitel-Detektor and show that while ethnic Albanians are overwhelmingly in favor of EU and NATO membership, ethnic Macedonians are, in fact, strongly divided on questions related to the country's geopolitical future.

All of the aforementioned surveys are nationally representative, with sample sizes between 1,100 (IRI) and 1,228 (USAID). Furthermore, IRI and NDI fielded the same questions in other countries in the Balkan region, allowing me to draw comparisons between North Macedonia and other Western Balkan countries with respect to mass attitudes towards international actors such as the EU and Russia. With the exception of USAID's Media Consumption Survey, which surveyed respondents above the age of 15, all the other surveys sampled respondents aged 18 and above. Most of the surveys I analyze were conducted in 2018 through face-to-face interviews—specifically, the IRI and the NDI surveys were conducted in November 2018 while the USAID and the Tim Institute surveys were



conducted in August and September 2018; Data from the Detektor survey comes from 2019.

Relying on the above-mentioned surveys, I show that the divide among ethnic Macedonians on questions pertaining to North Macedonia's desired geopolitical future is partisan in nature—supporters of the Social Democrats (SDSM) are largely pro-Western in their orientation while supporters of the second major party, the right-wing populist VMRO-DPMNE, have a penchant for stronger ties with Russia. I suggest that this divide is at least in part attributable to cueing from party elites, despite the claim by all major parties (including VMRO-DPMNE) that they are pro-Western. While a more detailed discussion of party cueing can be found later in the paper, in short, party cueing refers to the concept that political parties do not simply reveal or

channel voters' attitudes on issues, they also shape them; put differently, when party elites take a position on a given issue, rank-and-file voters tend to fall in line and embrace the stance of their preferred party (Brader et al., 2020; Brader and Tucker 2012; Campbell et al., 1960; Lenz 2013).

Finally, I caution that further stumbling blocks with respect to the EU's accession negotiations with North Macedonia that are unrelated to the Copenhagen Criteria, such as the name issue with Greece, would likely jeopardize Macedonians' trust in the credibility of the EU's commitment to the country. In turn, this would not only compromise the EU's power to drive democratization (Vachudova 2005) but could also erode support for Euro-Atlantic integration which, I show, is already more precarious than is often assumed.

# What Does the Public Opinion Data Tell Us?

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## Ethnicity

In the aggregate, survey results on topics related to Macedonian citizens' views towards foreign powers suggest united support for the country's integration in the Euro-Atlantic community.

A 2018 poll by NDI (NDI 2018), for instance, shows that Macedonian citizens feel generally positive towards the Euro-Atlantic community: 49% of Macedonians feel favorably towards the EU and only 18% evaluate the EU unfavorably; similarly, 27% of Macedonians said they feel unfavorable towards NATO but nearly twice as many (45%) evaluate NATO favorably. For Russia, respondents seem split: 32% of Macedonian citizens see it favorably and 33% unfavorably. Nevertheless, NDI (2018) maintains that "Macedonia's citizens show a clear preference" and "profess the strongest support" for Euro-Atlantic institutions when compared to Serbian and Montenegrin citizens, who "express greater support for Russia and China than for Western countries and the EU."

Probing beneath the surface of aggregate survey findings, however, indicates profound divides between ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian citizens, divides that call into question conclusions that Macedonian citizens are united in their commitment to the country's Euro-Atlantic progress.

For contextual awareness, about 64% of North Macedonia's citizens identify as ethnic Macedonians while ethnic Albanians constitute approximately a quarter of the country's population (Census 2002). In 2001, the country nearly slid into civil war as rebels demanding greater rights for the ethnic Albanian minority launched an uprising against the Skopje authorities. While ethnic relations have improved in the past two decades, tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians continue to prevail.

Ethnic divides are also conspicuous in citizens' attitudes towards foreign powers and North Macedonia's place in the world. A 2018 poll, for instance, reveals that close to 55% of ethnic Macedonians evaluate NATO either negatively (28.5%) or neutrally (26.3%), compared to only 18.8% of ethnic Albanians expressing the same sentiments (Media Consumption Survey 2019). Similarly, while one out of four (23.2%) ethnic Macedonians would oppose the country joining the EU, virtually no ethnic Albanian (0.4%) would vote against EU integration (Detektor 2019).

Still, although lower compared to the aggregate levels and those among ethnic Albanians, levels of support among ethnic Macedonians for EU and NATO integration remain relatively high. However, so do levels of support for intensified cooperation with non-democratic countries, in particular Russia. For instance, a 2018 nationally representative survey shows that, on average, ethnic Macedonians trust the Russian government more than they trust the EU and the US (Tim Institut 2018). Ethnic Albanians, on the other hand, appear extremely distrustful of the Russian government (Tim Institut 2018). Furthermore, Russia ranks second highest—preceded by the US but followed by the EU—for the international actor ethnic Macedonians perceive the most supportive of North Macedonia's interests.

Thus, closer investigation is needed into the attitudes of ethnic Macedonians about their country's geopolitical future. What are the key factors, in other words, that determine whether a given respondent is pro-Western oriented or whether they harbor sentiments that are more favorable to Russia? In what follows, I begin to puzzle out the support for "black knight" actors in North Macedonia. I do so by focusing my attention on a factor that social scientists have continuously found critical in driving peoples' attitudes: partisanship.



## Parties and Partisanship

Ethnic Macedonians are for the most part split into two partisan camps—supporters of the Social Democratic Party (SDSM) and supporters of the right-wing populist VMRO-DPMNE (Gjuzelov and Ivanovska Hadjievska 2020). Currently in opposition, VMRO-DPMNE was the governing party for over a decade. As the governing party, between 2006 and 2017, VMRO-DPMNE called for EU and NATO membership as a matter of foreign policy, all the while curtailing human rights and pursuing economically corrupt and ethno-populist domestic strategies (See e.g. Gjuzelov and Ivanovska Hadjievska 2020). In 2017, a coalition led by SDSM succeeded in unseating the incumbent populist-authoritarian regime. The new SDSM-led government put EU and NATO membership front and center of their governing strategy and nimbly clinched an agreement with Greece, ending the 27-year name-change dispute with Greece that had blocked the country's Euro-Atlantic integration (Naunov 2018).

Before discussing party elites and their strategies in greater detail, however, I first describe partisan divides on a mass level. I contend that Macedonians' geostrategic preferences should not be taken for granted: preferences over North Macedonia's geostrategic positioning is, in fact, a significant cleavage that divides people across party lines with a large portion of VMRO-DPMNE supporters being hostile to, or at least skeptical about, the Euro-Atlantic community and most SDSM supporters maintaining their pro-Western inclination.

There is a 35 percentage-point gap between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE supporters in their attitudes regarding international relations that further North Macedonia's interests (IRI 2019). While the vast majority of SDSM voters agree that North Macedonia's interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with the EU (93%) and NATO (88%), only a small majority of VMRO-DPMNE voters (58% and 53% respectively) share the same sentiments (IRI 2019).

This leaves over 40% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters disagreeing that EU and NATO integration advance North Macedonia's interests. In comparison, in neighboring Serbia—the one Balkan country analysts continuously warn has a high level of anti-Western sentiments—72% of PM Vučić's right-wing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) supporters agree that strong ties with the EU advance Serbia's interests. In fact, only supporters of Vojislav Šešelj's ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) are more hostile

to EU integration compared to VMRO-DPMNE supporters in North Macedonia (IRI 2019).

Although the percentages of VMRO-DPMNE supporters that disapprove of stronger ties with the EU and NATO are disquieting in and of themselves, these data points become even more revealing when combined with data on attitudes towards Russia. Namely, while VMRO-DPMNE supporters are practically split on whether or not greater ties with NATO advance North Macedonia's interests, they are united in their view on relations with Russia—82% of VMRO-DPMNE assert that cultivating strong relations with Russia furthers North Macedonia's interests (IRI 2019).

In addition to purely geostrategic preferences, ethnic Macedonians are divided across partisan lines over the country's values and culture. The majority of VMRO-DPMNE voters hope that North Macedonia moves closer to Russia in terms of morality and values (61%) as well as culture and intellectual life (54%). That said, although VMRO-DPMNE supporters revere Russia's rigid morality politics, they are generally aware of its economic inferiority and, thus, the majority of VMRO-DPMNE supporters would prefer that North Macedonia approximates Western Europe as opposed to Russia when it comes to economy and socio-economic benefits. SDSM voters, however, remain consistently pro-Western in their orientation; over 75% of them state that they would like for North Macedonia to have more in common with Western Europe over Russia in all societal spheres ranging from views on values and morality to standards of living (IRI 2019).

In fact, when it comes to values and morality, the majority of SDSM voters (52%) opine that the EU is helping North Macedonia adopt a more egalitarian conception of values and rights, although a sizable minority (20%) believe that the EU and developments in EU countries concerning abortion, sexual rights, and religious liberty are, instead, pushing Macedonian citizens to renounce "our traditional values." Among VMRO-DPMNE supporters, these numbers are literally flipped: only 20% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters believe that the EU is helping the country expand rights in a liberating direction while the majority (54%) insist that the EU is unduly pressuring the country to abandon its time-honored values (IRI 2019). In fact, the majority of VMRO-DPMNE voters (54%) deem Russia's President Vladimir Putin as a defender of Christendom and of true European values, ranging from family relations to treatment of Muslims (IRI 2019).



Here too, the attitudes among VMRO-DPMNE supporters largely resemble those found among Serbians and are even more worrying than attitudes found among supporters of the ethnic Serb SNSD political party in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H). Specifically, 54% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters and 51% of Vučić’s SNS supporters believe that the EU is pushing their country to jettison its traditional values, as opposed to helping them embrace a more liberating conception of values and rights. In comparison, 41% of supporters of B&H Serb President Milorad Dodik’s SNSD party in B&H—a pro-Russia party that espouses Serb nationalism—are similarly wary of the EU’s influence in the human rights sphere.

To be sure, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM supporters are not divided in every aspect of geopolitics. For example, the majority of both SDSM (53%) and VMRO-DPMNE (54%) supporters do not have a preference regarding whether foreign investment comes from the EU or from non-Western powers including Russia, as long as it creates new jobs (IRI 2019). Similarly, all Macedonian citizens are aware that Germany and EU countries remain the biggest investors in the country: only 6% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters and 1% of SDSM supporters believe Russia to be the biggest investor in the country (IRI 2019). However, for most questions concerning geopolitics, partisanship has a strong and significant effect. Table 1 below, for instance, reports the results from regression analysis of IRI data on the effect of partisanship on citizens’ attitudes towards the EU and Russia. Namely, as Table 1 illustrates, the effect of partisanship on attitudes towards Euro-Atlantic structures and Russia remains statistically significant at the 0.01 level of significance, even when controlling for other demographic characteristics such as age, education, religion, employment, and place of living. Specifically, compared to VMRO-DPMNE voters, SDSM supporters are both significantly more likely to support stronger relations with the EU and as well as significantly more likely to oppose strong relations with Russia.

Table 1: Support for Strong EU/Russia Relations

	Dependent variable:	
	Russia (1)	EU (2)
Party (SDSM)	-0.471*** (0.096)	0.996*** (0.087)
Education	0.0002 (0.031)	-0.042 (0.028)
Age	0.120** (0.059)	-0.0005 (0.053)
Religion	0.358*** (0.093)	-0.106 (0.084)
Place of Living	0.003 (0.022)	-0.064*** (0.020)
Employment	0.026* (0.015)	0.019 (0.014)
Constant	1.590*** (0.409)	3.506*** (0.370)
Observations	407	406
R <sup>2</sup>	0.117	0.273
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.103	0.262
Residual Std. Error	0.952 (df = 400)	0.860 (df = 399)
F Statistic	8.796*** (df = 6; 400)	24.989*** (df = 6; 399)

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

While the data at hand does not allow for examining longitudinal trends in attitudes towards the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia, prior studies indicate that disillusionment with the West among VMRO-DPMNE voters has been on the rise. One study, for instance, finds that “while in 2014, 77% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters were in favor of EU membership, this percentage dropped to 60% in 2017 and reached its low of 49% in 2018 (Damjanovski and Kirchner 2019).” On the other hand, the authors observe that support among SDSM voters for EU integration, even if it is contingent on a name change, doubled between 2014 and 2018. These attitude shifts, I contend, are at least in part a result of elite cueing.



## Party Cueing

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Political parties do not simply reflect citizens' attitudes on issues, they also shape them. A volume of scholarship has consistently demonstrated that when party elites take a stance, rank-and-file voters align their attitudes with the position of their preferred party (Brader and Tucker 2012; Lenz 2013). Social scientists have offered experimental and empirical evidence of the strong effects of party cueing on public opinion across various party systems, ranging from old and stable democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom to newer democracies such as Hungary and Poland (Brader et al., 2013, 2020; Merolla et al., 2008; Petersen et al., 2012; Slothuus and de Vreese, 2010).

In essence, individuals rarely have the time, interest, or tools to cogitate over the complexities of political issues and, thus, they often treat parties as heuristics, or resource-saving shortcuts, that allow them to efficiently form an opinion on subject matters. Indeed, as Bisgaard and Slothuus (2018) put it "one of the major influences of political parties in contemporary democracies might be their ability to shape how citizens interpret a complex reality." Individuals tend to adjust their interpretations of reality both by following cues from their preferred party and by rebuffing and objecting to cues from the opposing parties (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018).

Of course, not all issues are created equal and it is relatively harder—although still very much possible—to move citizens' opinions on morality-imbued issues. In any event, for the purposes of this paper it suffices to note that scholars have generally found mass attitudes on issues concerning international affairs—including high-salience issues such as a war their country is waging—to be particularly malleable and responsive to party cues (Zaller 1992). In fact, levels of Euroscepticism specifically have also been found to change among the mass public as a result of party cues (Hooghe 2007; Hooghe and Marks 2007).

### Wiretapping Scandal

In 2015, SDSM's leader Zoran Zaev unveiled that the VMRO-DPMNE government massively wiretapped over 20,000 people—including judges, entrepreneurs, journalists and even foreign diplomats and the party's own MPs and Ministers—in a country of less than 2 million people (Berendt 2015). The released wiretapped conversations laid bare VMRO-DPMNE's corrupt, authoritarian rule,

What is interesting in the case of North Macedonia, however, is that all major parties claim to be committed to advancing the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. In February this year, for instance, the Macedonian Parliament ratified the NATO accession protocol without any opposition. And yet, as I have shown earlier in this paper, rank-and-file VMRO-DPMNE supporters have adopted increasingly unfavorable views of the EU and NATO.

To the naked eye, this could seem like VMRO-DPMNE supporters are becoming increasingly anti-Western in their orientation despite party cues attempting to push them in the opposite direction. I argue, however, that such a conclusion would be rather naive and misguided. VMRO-DPMNE elites, like right-wing elites in other countries such as Serbia, have found a way to play it both ways. They pragmatically purport to be pro-Western as a matter of foreign policy, as this carries tremendous economic rewards such as greater market access and international aid. At the same time, however, and especially throughout the past five years, VMRO-DPMNE elites have not only consistently ignored key Euro-Atlantic principles, but they have also openly defied expressed EU demands concerning corruption, ethnic intolerance, and democratic erosion. As a consequence, most voters have become aware that VMRO-DPMNE's commitment to the EU and NATO is disingenuous and almost solely pragmatic. As such, while over 81% of Macedonian citizens agree that SDSM as a party supports the country's NATO membership, less than 35% have the same impression of VMRO-DPMNE (Tim Institut 2018).

The 2015 wiretapping scandal and the 2018 name-change referendum are two important occasions that begin to make clear both the importance of elite cues as well as the difference between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE elites in their commitments to Euro-Atlantic integration.

revealing gross executive interference in the legislative and judiciary branches, including instructing judges to dismiss criminal charges against party officials, directing the Public Prosecutor to selectively prosecute political opponents, orchestrating electoral fraud, and misusing police and public administration for the party agenda (Al Jazeera 2015; Priebe 2015).



While SDSM's leader Zoran Zaev persistently implored the EU and the US to get more involved and help forestall further democratic backsliding in the country, VMRO-DPMNE elites lambasted the EU and the US for goading Zaev into planning a coup d'état. Gruevski, himself, maintained that "foreign powers" are behind the wiretapping and the ensuing protests; SDSM, Gruevski alleged, was simply used as a pawn by "foreign powers" that were spearheading the effort to unseat him (Cvetkovska 2015). Although Gruevski remained vague as to who exactly those foreign powers were, his surrogates rendered the culprits unambiguously clear: the US and the EU. The Macedonian media landscape, heavily controlled by the then-ruling VMRO-DPMNE, was flooded with unsubstantiated theories about how and why the US and the EU are fomenting unrest in then-Macedonia in an effort to unseat then-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. The most widely-read pro-VMRO-DPMNE journalists Milenko Nedelkovski and Mirka Velinovska, for instance, wrote prolifically about certain USAID and State Department officials—whom they claimed were CIA agents—and EU officials trying to export "a Ukrainian scenario" to Skopje in an effort to counter the country's strengthening relations with Russia and replace Nikola Gruevski, a patriotic PM who was unafraid to stand up to Western aggressors and defend national sovereignty, with Zoran Zaev, a puppet PM that would kowtow to the West (See e.g. Velinovska 2016a,b; Todorovska 2017).

In fact, Russia also interjected publicly more often than usual. Similar to the rhetoric of VMRO-DPMNE party

surrogates, the Russian foreign ministry maintained that VMRO-DPMNE and Gruevski were being shamelessly battered by the West for refusing to join Western sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea and for being in favor of joining the Russia-led South Stream and Turkish Stream natural gas pipeline projects (Holodny 2015). The Kremlin issued multiple press releases in support of then-PM Gruevski, framing the growing anti-Gruevski sentiment in the country as "gross interference by the West" (Noack 2017).

Although it is possible that the former administration's veering course did not reflect a genuine foreign policy shift towards Russia but rather opportunistic calculations by Gruevski, who had begun to lose Western support following the wiretapping scandal, it most certainly had an effect on mass attitudes towards international actors. While closely before the wiretapping scandal, in 2014, 77% of VMRO-DPMNE supporters favored EU membership, in the aftermath of the wiretapping scandal and the protests and protracted negotiations it engendered, support for EU among VMRO-DPMNE voters fell to 60% in 2017 and 49% in 2018 (Damjanovski and Kirchner 2019). Although the data at hand does not allow me to study longitudinal trends for attitudes towards Russia among VMRO-DPMNE supporters, it is likely that a similar, and perhaps even more prominent, attitudinal change has occurred although in the opposite direction, with VMRO-DPMNE sympathizers becoming increasingly fond of Russia.

## **Name-Change Referendum**

The name dispute, and specifically the 2018 name-change referendum, further clarifies the effectiveness of party cues and exposes VMRO-DPMNE elites' duplicitous commitment to North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Again, the EU and NATO have long made clear that North Macedonia does not have a future in Euro-Atlantic structures without resolving the name dispute with Greece. As such, both VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM elites claimed they were determined to negotiate a name-change agreement with Greece and promised to hold a referendum once such a deal had been reached. Yet while VMRO-DPMNE made a habit of antagonizing Athens through tactless "antiquization" projects such as Skopje 2014 (Marusic 2014) and failed to reach an agreement for over a decade as a

governing party, the SDSM-led government successfully negotiated a name-change agreement—the Prespa Agreement—with the Greek government in less than a year after rising to power (Naunov 2018).

On one hand, SDSM acknowledged that the name change is a necessary albeit painful compromise, but urged Macedonian citizens to consider the manifold socio-economic and security benefits of EU and NATO accession (See e.g. Dimitrov 2018 a, b, c). On the other hand, VMRO-DPMNE alleged that the Prespa Agreement severely impairs the country's national identity (See e.g. Mickoski 2018; Telma 2018). Aware that they were bound to lose (in large part due to the virtually unanimous support for the Prespa Agreement among ethnic Albanians), VMRO-DPMNE elites



pushed for a boycott of the name-change referendum so as to prevent the referendum from meeting the required threshold to be deemed authoritative (See e.g. RFE/RL 2018).

In the months preceding the scheduled name-change referendum, a torrent of European leaders such as Angela Merkel traveled to Skopje to spell out to both party elites and citizens that upholding the Prespa Agreement was imperative for unblocking the country's Euro-Atlantic integration process and to exhort VMRO-DPMNE elites to forgo their boycott strategy (See e.g. Sitel 2018). In spite of that, VMRO-DPMNE elites continued to argue that the Prespa Agreement was not necessary for advancing then-Macedonia's EU and NATO integration (See e.g. Siljanovska Davkova 2018; Mickoski 2018). Similarly, while VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski's pro forma stance was that they "leave it up to citizens" to decide whether and how to vote, party officials and surrogates, including the country's then-President Gjorge Ivanov, inundated citizens with calls for boycott (See e.g. Dimeska 2018; RFE/RL 2018).

In turn, while most VMRO-DPMNE supporters continued to oppose name-change and boycotted the referendum, support among SDSM voters for EU integration contingent on a name change doubled between 2017 and 2018, from 35% to 67% (Damjanovski and Kirchner 2019). Again, during the same time period, support for EU accession among VMRO-DPMNE voters dropped from 60% to 49% (Damjanovski and Kirchner 2019).

At the same time, VMRO-DPMNE officials remained silent on the alleged Russian fingerprints concerning the Prespa

name-change agreement; namely, both the Macedonian and Greek authorities alleged that Russia was attempting to undermine the name deal. In fact, Athens expelled two Russian diplomats for conducting illicit activities aimed at undercutting the name-change negotiation processes with then-Macedonia (BBC 2018). According to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), one of Russia's richest businessmen, Ivan Savvidis, reportedly disbursed at least \$300,000 to Macedonian politicians, far-right nationalist organizations, and soccer hooligans who were involved in the anti-NATO and anti-name change movement (Cvetkovska 2018). While Zaev and his SDSM-led government publicly rebuked Russian attempts at sabotaging the Prespa Agreement, such as funding hooligans to protest and "commit acts of violence" ahead of the referendum, VMRO-DPMNE officials remained conspicuously silent (Feder 2018).

In any event, the 2018 name-change referendum as well as the 2015 wiretapping scandal reveal VMRO-DPMNE leaders' strategy to feign loyalty to the Euro-Atlantic community—allowing them to reap the economic benefits that EU ties facilitate—while simultaneously ingratiating themselves with Russia and flagrantly defying Euro-Atlantic values and principles concerning human rights and good governance. VMRO-DPMNE's strategy of "playing it both ways," however, has far from eluded rank-and-file voters; most citizens have successfully deciphered the party cues and are well-aware of the chasm between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE in terms of how genuine their commitment is to improving the country's EU and NATO integration prospects (Tim Institut 2018).

# Conclusion and a Note About the Credibility of EU Commitment

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This paper used survey data—including public opinion polls by IRI, NDI, and USAID—and made clear that, unlike ethnic Albanians who overwhelmingly support North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, ethnic Macedonians differ with respect to their visions about the country's geopolitical future. Furthermore, the paper shed light at the nature of this divide—partisanship. Namely, while most supporters of the ruling SDSM party are eager to see their country embedded in Euro-Atlantic institutional structures, most voters of the right-wing populist VMRO-DPMNE have a penchant for stronger relations with Russia. Importantly, the paper proposed a mechanism that has engendered the observed partisan divides; relying on the social science literature on partisanship as well as on two case studies—the 2015 wiretapping scandal and the 2018 name-change referendum—the paper argued that the partisan divide is at least in part attributable to cueing from party elites. Specifically, the paper contended that VMRO-DPMNE elites have espoused a strategy whereby they feign loyalty to the Euro-Atlantic community while simultaneously pandering to Russia and disregarding key Euro-Atlantic principles of democracy and good governance. This strategy, the paper showed, has not escaped rank-and-file VMRO-DPMNE voters who have grown more opposed to North Macedonia's EU integration and more favorable to stronger relations with Russia.

That Macedonian citizens are not unified in their visions of the country's geopolitical future merits emphasis if only because Western diplomacy is full of lessons that it is often not beneficial for the US or the EU to see you as a loyal friend—although they might find it easier to twist your arm, they also find it less worrisome to take a rain check on you and put you on hold (Serwer 2019). Despite negotiating a controversial new name, the new Macedonian government was refused the opportunity to start membership negotiations by France, mainly due to President Macron's dissatisfaction with the enlargement process in general (Cvetanoska 2019; Emmott et al., 2019). At numerous occasions, Bulgaria too has brandished its veto prerogative, conditioning its support for North Macedonia's

Euro-Atlantic aspirations on factors that have no connection to the Copenhagen Criteria and are perceived as highly offensive by Macedonian citizens, including but not limited to demands that North Macedonia acknowledges that the Macedonian language is not a separate language but a dialect of Bulgarian, as well as that the country relinquishes any claim that a Macedonian minority exists in Bulgaria (Marusic 2019; Maksimovic 2020; Topalova 2020).

However, asking North Macedonia for a rain check again and again could irreparably endanger Macedonian citizens' trust in the EU and in the credibility of EU commitment to the country which, this paper shows, is already more precarious than is often assumed. The loss of credibility is a considerable issue because "for the EU to have leverage or 'traction' on domestic politics, a state must be a credible future member of the EU (Vachudova 2005, 65)." In fact, an increasing number of Macedonian citizens have already started to perceive the EU as a club that will never allow North Macedonia in—over 30% of ethnic Macedonians believe this and another 16% doubt this will happen in the next decade, if ever (Detektor 2019).

Further delays and asymmetric power plays by countries such as Bulgaria that condition their vote on criteria outside the Copenhagen criteria run the risk of increasing disenchantment with the West and enfeebling pro-EU and NATO players while empowering authoritarian and ethno-populist forces not only in North Macedonia but across the region. Disillusionment with the West, in turn, is arguably the most propitious entry point for greater influence by major authoritarian governments, especially Russia but also China (Chrzova et al., 2019). The EU ought to prevent this and it needs to deliver its part of the bargain by ensuring a fair and transparent negotiations process with North Macedonia. This is the only way to emulate its 1990s work in the CEE region, when involvement by the EU was key in deterring illiberal impulses and empowering exponents of liberal democracy.



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## About the project

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**“Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Ways Forward in Analyzing External Actors' Influence”** is a follow-up project that aims to build upon a knowledge base established in the preceding project “Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Non-Democratic External Influence Activities,” which mapped, analyzed and publicized Russian, Chinese, Turkish, and Gulf States’ influence activities in the region. The innovative project focuses on in-depth socially rooted research and investigative journalism. Its design reflects the aim to go beyond conventional analytical frameworks, overcoming ideologically constructed stereotypes and methodological nationalism while combining a variety of methodological approaches from security studies to visual anthropology.

Project outputs consist of fifteen analytical studies and fifteen journalistic articles drawing on their findings. Major observations on external actors’ influence gathered throughout the work on the project will be summarized in a final reflection paper.

Project duration: 10/2019 – 03/2021

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## About Prague Security Studies Institute

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**PSSI** is a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in early 2002 to advance the building of a just, secure, democratic, free-market society in the Czech Republic and other post-communist states. PSSI’s mission

is to build an ever-growing group of informed and security-minded policy practitioners dedicated to the development of democratic institutions and values in Central and South-East Europe.

