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Internal Mobilization and European Integration. Polish Lessons and Macedonian Experience

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Abstract: The process of European integration gained extensive enlargement track record. The consecutive waves of newcomers expanded the Union and enriched it with their own experience. Each country, due to its specificities, delivers another pattern of reproachment, differ-

ent timelines and most of the times, successful membership in the EU.

The purpose of this text is to explore the existing nexus of the current Macedonian government narrative on the relations with the EU and its implications for the advancement on it. Using Poland as a source of enlargement related experience, this paper stresses the role of internal mobilization as a driver of European integration and argues that in the Macedonian case, structural improvements can be made, in order to improve the role of civil society in the European debate. Hence, this paper aims to encourage a reflection on the nature of the current enlargement related dynamics in Macedonian politics and its implications for Skopje's EU membership perspective.

Keywords: European integration; EU enlargement; North Macedonia; internal mobilization; civil society; Europeanization.

Introduction or the unbearable heaviness of the current Macedonian narrative

With regard for the current state of affairs in the EU – North Macedonian relations, *de facto* stalled since 2018, raise growing concerns about the real goal of the VMRO-DPMNE government, which persistently emphasizes identity related and matters of bilateral nature as justification for the lack of advancement on the road to the EU. Although public discourse in North Macedonia is almost entirely dominated by an anti-Bulgarian narrative navigating popular emotions and fueling tensions¹, it almost

¹ According to a recent Eurothink survey Eurometer 74,2% of the Macedonian respondents consider Bulgaria as the main enemy. ЕВРОМЕТАР, Перцепции и ставови на граѓаните на Република Северна Македонија за општествено-

completely disregards the essence of getting closer to the EU within the process of enlargement. While shifting the accent on restoring bilateral dialog with Sofia and defending identity by refusing to meet the condition of introducing Bulgarians among the ethnic groups enumerated in the Preamble of the Macedonian constitution, for the last four years there is a de facto standoff, or more accurately dead end, which this time is not produced by external forces, but by the internal, Macedonian, approach towards the enlargement. Actually, since 2022 when the French proposal allowed the organization of the first Inter-governmental Conference and the acceptance of the Negotiation framework, introducing the demand to bring Bulgarians among the ethnic groups in North Macedonia, a chain of discouraging events occurred. After two years of stalemate North Macedonia was detached from Albania on the road to the EU and Skopje more and more oscillates in the Serbian orbit. Although the screening process was completed, the negotiations cannot move forward, as the condition to make the constitutional change is not met. The foreign minister Timcho Mucunski underlines that his government deliver on reforms and aligns with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, but "we will not make concessions on identity". The identity narrative restored VMRO-DPMNE to power but it has also turned into a gargantuan obstacle on the way to the EU.

To put it bluntly, the essence of European enlargement is much less concentrated on the nature of the pre-accession political relations between the candidate state and its neighbors, but on the fulfilment of necessary requirements, which transform the

политичката состојба во државата, информирање и евроинтегративните процеси. Истражување во рамки на проектот „Медиумите за ЕУ“: „Медиумите за ЕУ“ – Програма на граѓанското општество за учеството на медиумите во преговарачкиот процес на Северна Македонија за членство во ЕУ, јуни 2026, <https://eurothink.mk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/EBPOMETAP-2026-ФиналенДок-1.pdf> p.37

national economic, political and social reality to the standards defined by the EU and its member states.

It is not by chance, that the term Europeanization, as defined by Claudio Radaelli, "... consists of processes of a) construction, b) diffusion and c) institutionalisation of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things' and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public"². This is not to say that the good neighborly relations are not important. They play a crucial role in shaping the necessary background for a focused interaction between the EU and the candidate state, not disrupted by unexpected and undesired additional obstacles. However, when such obstacles, like bilateral issues appear, the question remains which way ahead.

Paradoxically, the problem of "bilateralization"³ of the process of European integration is not a seldom phenomenon. Already in the 1960's Great Britain had to wait a decade until Charles de Gaulle stepped from office, in order to join the European Communities. Until 2018 Greece blocked Macedonia, which for over two decades had to be called Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and in the meantime bilateral issues emerged between Cyprus and Turkey, Slovenia and Croatia, Albania and Greece, Bulgaria and North Macedonia or Hungary in the context of Ukraine. Notwithstanding the political revival of history in European politics, it seems that no country in the EU is immune to the temptation to use its political advantage towards

² Radaelli, Claudio M., Europeanisation: Solution or problem? European Integration online Papers (EIoP) Vol. 8 (2004) N° 16; <http://eiop.or.at/eiop/texte/2004-016a.htm> p.3

³ The process of capturing of the enlargement process by bilateral issues, which becomes a dominant topic between candidate and member states and overshadows all other efforts to move ahead with the enlargement agenda.

a country willing to join the process of European integration in order to push forward agendas, that could not be resolved otherwise.

This paper takes as a point of reference the political experience of North Macedonia in order to deliver a critical reflection on the basic assumptions related to the integration process. While relying on the Polish enlargement experience as a source of inspiration, the paper pursues a way out beyond the confrontational approach offered by the Macedonian and Bulgarian political elites.

An initial argument needs to be made. The question of pre-accession rapprochement with the EU does not concentrate on the fact whether the relations with neighbors are good or bad, but whether formally and informally the political, economic and social developments at national level lead towards and enhance the perspective of membership. The pace of these developments determines the nature and quality of the EU relations with the candidate countries. In that sense, bilateral issues might seem as secondary, inconvenient aberrations from the general process, which however, have the potential to become serious obstacles in a misfortunate political constellation. Especially, when they concern a candidate state and an EU member equipped with a veto power.

This is why, right after the end of communism, when Poland finally had the chance to conduct independent foreign policy, one of its first priorities was to sign Treaties of amity with all its neighbors in a rapidly changing regional environment⁴. The pro-

cess was completed by 1993 when the Treaty with Czechoslovakia endured its partition as a legally binding document for both the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Whereas, the purpose of these treaties was to regulate bilateral relations and thus mitigate potential conflicts and crises in turbulent times both in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the accomplishment of this task sent a clear signal to the European Union and its member states that Poland will be a reliable partner seeking the enhancement of regional security and cooperation.

The Macedonian experience with bilateral issues, reveals the destructive potential of national mobilization against an external threat (or more appropriately – enemy), which leads to growing nationalism and rally around the flag. So far, the growing confrontational tone that has overwhelmed Macedonian political discourse did not lead to any tangible advancement on the way towards the EU. Instead, it led to growing antagonization in Bulgarian – Macedonian relations, increased disappointment and growing apathy towards the process of European integration.

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to contemplate on the nature and importance of internal mobilization in the context of pursuing of membership in the European Union, which has the potential to serve as an internal accelerator of European integration. The point of reference, is the Polish experience, which ultimately led to the EU membership. Notwithstanding all the differences between North Macedonia and Poland, in terms of regional developments, geopolitical reality, EU enlargement experience, and the timespan of exposure to the EU enlarge-

⁴ Until 1989 Poland had only three neighbors: USSR, Czechoslovakia and Eastern Germany, whereas by 1994 it had already seven neighbors. See: Rafał Czachór, *Treaties of Friendship and Cooperation Between Poland and the Former Soviet Republics: A Comparative Legal Analysis: Traktaty o przyjaźni i współpracy Polski z państwami postradzieckimi. Analiza prawno-porównawcza, Europejski Przegląd Prawa i Stosunków Międzynarodowych*, Nr 4/2025/76 (2025) <https://doi.org/10.52097/eppism.10644>,

Wojciech T. Modzelewski, Piotr Lotarski, *Stosunki Polski z sąsiadami po 1989 roku - płaszczyzna polityczno-wojskowa*, INP UWM, Olsztyn 2020, ss. 235; Ryszard Zięba, *Główne kierunki polityki zagranicznej Polski po zimnej wojnie*, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2010, ss. 251

ment policy, still important aspects can be identified that ultimately contributed to the successful accomplishment of the effort to become a member of the European Union.

This reflection has one more justification. What Poland achieved for fifteen years (since the collapse of communism in 1989 and not the formal submission of membership application in April 1994), remains an enduring challenge for North Macedonia for almost a quarter of a century, since the membership perspective offered by the EU at the Thessaloniki summit in 2003.

The paper touches upon three aspects that seem to be important for the pursuit of alternative Enlargement related dynamics in North Macedonia. These are *raison d'état* defined as the highest national interest, citizens' involvement and cross-party consensus. These three aspects played pivotal role in the Polish experience and contain the potential to reverse the EU related efforts towards a more constructive, and thus more efficient integration process.

EU enlargement as a *raison d'état*

The enlargement process is a complex and multilayered process with numerous stakeholders involved at national and EU levels. However, the main channel of political interaction between the candidate state and the EU is in the hands of the national executive power and the European Commission, which with the time appeared to be best established to coordinate the interests all its members, frame joint positions and manage the relations with candidate countries. This is important, as it elevates the national governments to the role of gate-keepers, which not only manage the enlargement from national perspective, but also have the capacity to select priorities and determine the dynamic of mutual relations, which makes them *gatekeepers* of

the process at home⁵.

However, this context cannot ignore the fact that, as long as the EU expects the candidate countries to be democratic states (in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria), the role of the national executive should not be a self-interested exercise, but a consequence of dominant popular support expressed by voters. In this sense, the membership perspective is not an imaginary interaction between EU and national elites, but a process of direct connection between the popular will for membership, the political elites at national level and the willingness of EU member states to accept another member. Should any of these elements fail, the process is broken. From this perspective the role of national mobilization (understood as societal pressure on the government to deliver tangible progress) for membership is of crucial importance, as it constitutes a driving force for the enlargement related dynamics in the relations between the national government and the European Commission.

The question is, to what extent the Macedonian experience fits this practice? The 2025 Public Opinion Analysis paper on North Macedonia's accession to the EU provides a good picture of this nexus⁶. Whereas for 2/3 of the population the EU membership is important, which is a rather steady trend over the last decade, the percentage of respondents, who consider the membership in the EU non-important has increased from 15 to 29% over the last decade⁷. This tendency is visible also in the Eurothink's

⁵ Risse, T., Cowles, M. G. and Caporaso, J. (2001), *Europeanization and Domestic Change: introduction*, in: Cowles, M. G., Caporaso, J. and Risse, T. (eds.), *Transforming Europe. Europeanization and Domestic Change*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, pp. 1-20.; Radaelli, C. M. (2000), *Whither Europeanization? Concept Stretching and Substantive Change*, *European Integration Online Papers (EIoP)*, Vol. 4, No. 8.

⁶ Ivan Damjanovski, *Analysis of public opinion on North Macedonia's accession to the European Union (2014-2024)*, Public Opinion Analysis paper No.3/2025, Feb. 2025, Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

⁷ Ibid. 14

Еврометар 2026 survey⁸. While acknowledging the slight increase in support of the EU from 53% in 2023 to 58% in 2026, the mistrust in the EU's approach towards North Macedonia which is considered to be unfair and haughty has increased to 60%. Simultaneously only 18% consider the current EU approach fair and consistent⁹. As Katerina Kolozova pointed out already in 2022 much of the Macedonian civil society has joined the right in rejecting a deal with Sofia and Brussels¹⁰.

The brief picture presented by the aforementioned data reveals that whereas, there is a general acknowledgement that there is rather no alternative to European integration, at the same time, there is a strong mistrust in the EU's approach towards North Macedonia. The fact that external factors are considered to be the main obstacle for membership¹¹ and that Bulgaria is considered to be the main threat by 74,2% of the respondents¹², it becomes apparent that a genuine unresolvable nexus has emerged. The "sweet" membership perspective is "bittered" by mistrust towards the EU and the current relations with Bulgaria.

This position strongly corresponds with VMRO-DPMNE's political position of alleged pursuit of membership but on terms, which would require at best, the renegotiation of the negotiation framework (btw. Rejected by the EU) and/or securing additional guarantees that no more vetoes will be applied by EU

⁸ ЕВРОМЕТАР, Перцепции и ставови на граѓаните на Република Северна Македонија за општествено-политичката состојба во државата, информирање и евроинтегративните процеси. Истражување во рамки на проектот „Медиумите за ЕУ“: „Медиумите за ЕУ“ – Програма на граѓанското општество за учеството на медиумите во преговарачкиот процес на Северна Македонија за членство во ЕУ, јуни 2026, <https://eurothink.mk/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/ЕВРОМЕТАР-2026-ФиналенДок-1.pdf> p.37

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Katarina Kolozova, North Macedonia's EU path is under threat from an unlikely actor, Aljazeera, 18.09.2022 <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/9/18/north-macedonias-eu-path-is-in-danger>

¹¹ Eurothink op.cit. p.12

¹² Ibid

members. Expectations that were either rejected by the EU or simply cannot be provided. The membership perspective remains a formal political guideline, but in reality, the national political discourse is replete with arguments and expectations that not only does not advance on the road to membership, but *de facto* discourage further advancement. Hence, it should not be surprising that the majority of the respondents question the EU-Macedonian relations in their current form. The outcome of that is enlargement timelessness. The question remains, whether it is the society that determines government's policy or it is the government's narrative that shapes the society's opinion?

If we consider the fact that, as it was already mentioned, the Enlargement process is largely elite and executive power driven then its dynamics is vastly dependent on the government posture. Simultaneously, we should not forget that VMRO-DPMNE won decisively the parliamentary and presidential elections in 2024 and the local elections in 2025 and that majority of the society supports government policy in that respect and shares the feelings of disappointment about the EU stance towards North Macedonia. However, at the same time, approximately 2/3 of the respondents in the mentioned surveys are pro-EU, which means that they expect this to occur within a certain time span.¹³ There must be a way out of this "Gordian knot" of Macedonian path to the EU.

Following the abovementioned reflections the pursuit of solution will accent on the importance of political mobilization and a comparison of the structural organization of the enlargement efforts in Poland and North Macedonia.

¹³ According to Damjanovski's public opinion paper in 2024 only 5% expected to join the EU within five years, but 40% saw this as a mid-term perspective in a time span of five to ten years and 17% in the next twenty years. However, 26% does not believe that this will ever happen. Damjanovski, op cit. p.17

Political mobilization and the *raison d'état*

In a democratic country, the membership perspective cannot occur without a predominant popular conviction that this is an appropriate and desirable decision within an overwhelming part of society. In democracy this means that the majority's political expectations are transferred into political priorities of the national political elites. Hence, this equals to the existence of predominant conviction among voters and political elites that these efforts constitute a national priority. However, if the membership perspective is only shared by a fraction of the society, the political efforts to join the EU become hostage to partisan interests and hostage to the political priorities of the party/coalition in power. Therefore, the membership perspective is at its highest ebb, when around it an overwhelming consensus is achieved within society and across the political spectrum, which turns it *de facto* into a *raison d'état*. Importantly, this does not mean that differing political visions about the means and ways on how to reach the membership cannot compete at national level, but political actors share the same determination to deliver the ultimate membership goal. Such consensus provides not only for the political predictability and reliability of the candidate state towards the EU and its member states but also serves as a source of internal mobilization to achieve the membership goal.

In Poland, this meant that regardless of the results of the next political elections in the period 1991 – 2004, which brought to power very different²⁴ and often strongly confronted political parties, they shared the EU perspective priority and delivered

on the endurance of the mobilization to achieve the next steps towards membership. Even if they differed in assessment and tactics, the main purpose was not to allow a possible slowdown, which can jeopardize the effort. This aspect, beyond the rhetoric, was the tangible driver of integration and the prove of EU membership being Poland's *raison d'état*.

In comparative terms, the Macedonian consensus also exists in rhetorical terms. Virtually all important parties of the Macedonian political landscape support membership in the EU, but this effort is a subject to constant turbulences depending on the party in power. Hence, in practical terms the cross-party consensus does not exist and European integration is held hostage at national level. Whereas, the blame for this fact will be immediately directed towards the neighbors (firstly, Greece, now Bulgaria) the outcome is long periods of lack of progress on the road to the EU. The dynamics is also visible. The VMRO-DPMNE *de facto* didn't deliver on advancing enlargement neither during Gruevski, nor during Mickoski (so far). The tangible (painful and politically costly) steps were made by the SDSM governments in the period between 2017-2022 with the Prespa Agreement, the Treaty of Amity with Bulgaria and the so-called "French proposal".

The lifting of the Bulgarian veto in July 2022 turned the bilateral dispute with Bulgaria into an internal Macedonian political issue. Instead of national level determination to resolve another aspect on the road to the EU, the provisions of this question, and in particular the inclusion of Bulgarians to the Preamble of the Macedonian constitution, has become the cornerstone of the contemporary Macedonian political discourse. It was instrumentalized by VMRO-DPMNE to return to power on the ticket of defending national identity, which was largely accepted by

²⁴ Between 1991 and 2004 ten governments were in power with Prime Ministers from very different political parties from the post-communists like Józef Oleksy, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz or Leszek Miller to the conservative government of Jan Olszewski or the liberal Jerzy Buzek.

voters in the elections since 2024. Hence, one can argue, that behind the pro-EU political rhetoric in North Macedonia, there is no *de facto* shared determination to achieve the membership goal as other priorities can overshadow it. Therefore, the membership perspective is not really a *raison d'état* for the national political elites but just one of the political priorities, which is subject to prioritization or de-prioritization depending on the political party/coalition in power.

Mickoski's narrative equalizing oppositional SDSM with a Bulgarian political party, has nothing to do with the pursuit of joint, supra-political consensus on the membership in the EU. Instead, it aims to discredit the opposition and argue that the only integration approach for North Macedonia is the head-front confrontation with Bulgaria and the generation of pressure on Bulgarian authorities through the European Union and its other member states. However, this approach completely disregards the Bulgaria's veto capacity and builds on the imaginary belief in the renegotiation of the existing EU negotiations framework. Leaving aside the Bulgarian – North Macedonian relations, this approach has devastating internal consequences. It polarizes Macedonian society, which is divided into vocal and loud defenders of national identity and all the rest, constituting a spectrum of political actors left beyond the circle of true Macedonians. Thus, internally, neither reforms, nor shared efforts on particular EU related efforts are possible, as VMRO-DPMNE leaves no room for consensual political action.

Even if one accepts that the integration process is elite driven and concentrated in the executive branch, other actors can also exert pressure on the political elites and their behavior. Within this part an argument needs to be made on the nature and structure of the societal involvement in the promotion, moni-

toring and navigation of the government's enlargement related activities. Without claiming that the achievement of such goal is possible within the next few pages, two points from the Polish experience and Macedonian reality need to be made.

The National Integration Strategies and the role of civil society in the integration process

Already in September 1989 Poland signed Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the European Economic Communities. Among others, the PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) program was established, initiating a consistent support for the transformation process of the Polish economy. At his first expose foreign minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski, in light of the emerging single market, highlighted the need to sign an agreement with the EEC¹⁵. In December 1991 Poland signed the Europe Agreement, which regulated economic cooperation and framed political dialogue. Importantly, the agreement contained a provision acknowledging the fact that association is only a step towards the achievement of the goal, which was complete membership in the Communities¹⁶. Following its entry into force in 1994, Poland submitted its official application for membership during the Greek presidency of the Council in April 1994. The membership negotiations were launched in March 1998 following the Luxembourg European Council summit in 1997 and completed in 2002. The Polish accession was also subject to a national two days long

¹⁵ Exposé Ministrów Spraw Zagranicznych 1990-2013, Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych
Biuro Archiwum i Zarządzania Informacją, 2013 <https://www.gov.pl/web/dyplomacja/expose-ministrow-spraw-zagranicznych-1990-2013> s. 10

¹⁶ Układ Europejski ustanawiający stowarzyszenie między Rzeczpospolitą Polską a Wspólnotami Europejskimi i ich Państwami Członkowskimi. Bruksela.1991.12.16, Dz.U.1994.11.38
<https://sip.lex.pl/akty-prawne/dzu-dziennik-ustaw/uklad-europejski-ustanawiajacy-stowarzyszenie-miedzy-rzeczpospolita-16795742>

referendum with a 59% voters turnout. 77% of the voters were in favor and 23% against the membership. On May 1, 2004 Poland has become a member of the European Union. Among the numerous dimensions of this journey to the European Union, two dimensions are important for my argument.

Both, Poland and North Macedonia adopted National Integration Strategies in the early phases of their road to the EU. In 1997 the Polish government adopted its National Integration Strategy. This document provided guidelines for state institutions, and for all other participants in the integration process. It aimed to identify the main integration goals and to coordinate their implementation, in wide cooperation with non-governmental organizations, which was supposed to secure the best possible preparation of Poland to the EU. Whereas the document encompasses tasks during the pre-, during, and post-negotiation process, it refines priorities, identifies key adjustments processes and challenges.

The main goal was to achieve favorable for Poland integration with the EU in all dimensions. Importantly, the recipients of this strategy were the President and the Parliaments, the public administration institutions, as well as: political parties and social organizations, companies and employers organizations, labor unions and all citizens¹⁷. This civil or citizens' aspect unfolded both in terms of developing European education, where European integration has become an integral part of educational curricula at all levels, but also by supporting and encouraging NGO's to promote the process. European Integration Council was established, which gathered government representatives, economic and legal experts and NGO representatives to discuss the accession process.

¹⁷ Narodowa Strategia Integracji, Komitet Integracji Europejskiej, Warszawa 1997, p.3 https://oide.sejm.gov.pl/oide/images/files/dokumenty/narodowa_strategia_integracji.pdf

Importantly, the strategy was to be implemented by the Council of Ministers, the Committee of European Integration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other ministries and central agencies, regional and local authorities, through Embassies and other diplomatic representations, as well as NGO's with particular focus on the accession process. This document deserves attention as it identified the concern for the consequences of non-membership in the EU. *"The alternative [to EU membership – SD] is a conscious absence from the main stream of European integration. The whole European historical experience – the old, and the more contemporary – prove, that there is a growing civilizational distance between the societies remaining beyond the main stream of economic cooperation compared to those, participating in it"*¹⁸.

North Macedonia also has its National Strategy for European Integration of the Republic of Macedonia, adopted in 2004. The online available English version of the National Strategy executive summary does not contain a single word about the social dimensions, public engagement and the citizens inclusion in this process¹⁹. However, the Macedonian version of the complete National Strategy contains a whole chapter on the informing of the Macedonian public opinion about the integration process of Macedonia with the European Union²⁰. However, this part contains provisions resembling a top-down information strategy with a clear narrative, explicitly labeled as "optimistic realism", instead of a genuine incorporation of the society in an open

¹⁸ Narodowa Strategia Integracji, Komitet Integracji Europejskiej, Warszawa 1997, p.3 https://oide.sejm.gov.pl/oide/images/files/dokumenty/narodowa_strategia_integracji.pdf

¹⁹ National Strategy for European Integration of the Republic of Macedonia, Executive Summary, Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Skopje September 2004, https://www.sobranie.mk/WBStorage/Files/National_strategy%2006.09.2004.PDF

²⁰ Национална Стратегија за интеграција на Република Македонија во Европската Унија, Влада на Република Македонија, Скопје, септември 2004 година, https://www.sobranie.mk/WBStorage/Files/Nacionalna_strategija%2006.09.04.PDF (pp.214-218)

debate about the EU membership perspective and its consequences. The purpose of the strategy is to secure and strengthen “the current 2/3 support for the full membership in the EU”²¹. The strategy acknowledges the incorporation of organs and institutions which need to play a key role in the process of European integration. This includes the main ministries of the public administration, the EU delegation to Skopje, the NGO and business sectors and the media, exploiting their knowledge and expertise.²² The strategy contains also a clear provision that the responsible Department for European integration²³ will select non-governmental organization, professional organizations and experts, which will participate in the Strategy, based on advices from professional consultants and in accordance with the legal requirements²⁴.

This brief reflection on the content of both documents, highlights the existence of alternative approaches towards the question of public mobilization and the role of civil society. Whereas, in Poland the public opinion in general and the NGO’s in particular were to participate in the whole process, the role of the narrowly defined NGO’s and expert bodies in North Macedonia was rather to serve as disseminators of government created narratives rather than engagement in open dialogue related to the matter. The Polish approach acknowledged the purpose of genuine increased awareness about the integration process, with the hope that this will lead to an overwhelming support for European integration, whereas in North Macedonia, the goal was to reaffirm the high level of support, based on a government shaped narrative. Although, the document contains awareness on the practical implications of the Macedonian membership in

the EU for all citizens, the applied approach is not civic based, but government imposed presentation of official narrative.

The Polish pre-accession fears

Although often the Polish way to the EU is presented as a success story, across the society various fears were circulating. The WWII legacy was reappearing in different and unobvious forms. Germany was the main supporter of Poland’s integration, but many of the fears were actually directly related towards the strong Western neighbor. Poles were afraid that Germans will return, that through their economic advantage they will purchase all the Polish land, that the Polish identity is under threat or that the membership will lead to a loss of sovereignty. These matters were not only individual concerns, but had their political representation and were skillfully steered by populist circles, as well as certain streams within the Catholic church.

Overall however, these concerns were mitigated by reason, rationalism and most importantly enormous hope and expectation that the membership will constitute a turning point in the Polish history. That the lack of borders will provide new opportunities for people and businesses, that EU funds will boost the Polish economy, that ultimately, the country will return to the West, from which it was detached unjustly in the aftermath of WWII.

The Polish fears were handled in various ways. Some, like the concern for the purchase of Polish land by foreigners were resolved by interim measures like the transitional period for the acquisition of agricultural land. Others, like the concerns over sovereignty has become part and parcel of the Polish post accession political discourse. Yes, these concerns did not played a role similar to the level of Macedonian frustration today, but

²¹ Ibid p.214

²² Ibid p.215

²³ Within the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers.

²⁴ Ibid p.218

they had the potential to dominate the discourse and the approach aimed to mitigate their impact with reason and determination.

The Macedonian fears

Concerns about identity are now front and center in Macedonian politics and their role is much stronger than in Poland. The name dispute and the clash with Bulgaria over the past shaped the political discourse in a way that overshadowed the practical and merit based dimension of the enlargement process. Hardly anyone mentions the anti-Greek posture of Macedonian authorities, but the anti-Bulgarian narrative in the last years seems to be the sole priority of the current government. The tangible and absolutely needed merit based reforms seem to be secondary to the struggle over identity²⁵.

This however produces twisted understanding of the Enlargement related priorities. Firstly and most importantly, it is the internal reforms, which pave the way towards membership. Their introduction is important not only for the sake of EU's expectations, but even more, because they entail separation of powers and increase of transparency, which are not necessarily convenient for the incumbent authorities. Exerting internal pressure on the government to deliver beyond the "proactive" mantra on the relations with Bulgaria, but on the requirements that de facto bring the country closer to the EU, will also generate more leverage as the membership perspective will mobilize EU stakeholders to turn their attention to North Macedonia. At this point, while Macedonian authorities emphasize their devotion

to identity, European partners are aware that there is no realistic scenario that can swiftly move the process ahead. The key to North Macedonia's European integration is in Skopje, not in Sofia or Brussels.

Conclusions

The fundamental question in the context of North Macedonia's road to the EU is not, whether the introduction of the Bulgarians to the Preamble of the Macedonian constitution will destroy the Macedonian identity or whether any new vetoes or conditions can further emerge on the path to the EU, but whether the Macedonian elites really want to join the European Union?

Yes, the Polish experience shows that relations with neighbors are not to be ignored in the context of European integration. In the early 1990ies Poland considered the organization of relations with neighboring countries as its highest priority. Especially, that Poland remains probably the only country, whose all neighbors have changed in the period between 1990 and 1993. The arrangement of bilateral relations through the signing of treaties on amicable and good neighborly relations was not only important for the increase of predictability in relations with adjacent newly emerging countries, but also as a clear signal towards the European partners that Poland is a reliable and stable partner, determined to contribute to peace and security in Central Europe. Whereas, Warsaw was able to achieve its goal, it did not mean that with the agreements all bilateral relations with neighbors were resolved. It took more than two decades to build a sense of trust with Lithuania and up until today, the Polish – Ukrainian relations remain exposed to historical tensions. Germany remains a "boxing bag" for at least half of the Polish political elites. Nevertheless, in the first half of the 1990ies, it was a conscious identification of the "return to Europe", as the

²⁵ 2025 Enlargement Package shows progress towards EU membership for key enlargement partners, Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood 4.11.2025
https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/2025-enlargement-package-shows-progress-towards-eu-membership-key-enlargement-partners-2025-11-04_en

highest national priority, which overshadowed all potential tensions in bilateral relations that could jeopardize this priority.

Regulating neighborly relations is an important, if not explicitly emphasized precondition for membership. Yet, it is not the only dimension that determines whether the integration process should be stalled or advancing. Within this multifaceted and multidimensional process, no less important, or even more important role plays the determination at national level to accomplish the enlargement process. It serves not only as a source of internal mobilization, but also as an important signal for the EU partners, that despite the existing obstacles, the membership remains highest political priority. It also has the capacity to generate additional support, as interlocutors convinced about the genuine determination are more prone to use their leverage and push forward working practical solutions in search for a prompt completion of such a complex process. However, when the candidate state justifies its inability to deliver internal reforms, generates decreasing public support for enlargement and vests all its responsibilities on an external “enemy”, from EU perspective the enlargement process becomes a shield against the acceptance of a country, which is unable to deliver expected results. Then the inability to set up bilateral relations becomes a convenient justification for the lack of progress in the enlargement process.

The Identity based relations with neighbors made North Macedonia hostage not only of its past, but also of its future. After twenty years of name dispute, the relations with Bulgaria has become another trap in which the European perspective got stuck. While completing this paper, “Bulgarization” remains the main threat, simultaneously Albanian students protested in Skopje with demands for the increase of their linguistic rights,

when simultaneously in Kumanovo pro-Vucić manifestations are organized. One cannot get rid of the impression that the identity base of Macedonian politics is its main curse.

While viciously resisting Bulgarian claims and rallying around the defense of Macedonian identity and language, the current Macedonian authorities does not see it inappropriate to conduct common celebrations with Serbian authorities and to organize politically biased parades in support of Vucić’s nationalist politics. This makes it difficult to identify a consistent and predictable approach of Macedonian authorities towards its neighbors. Instead, the fractured and divided Macedonian society is held hostage to identity matters overshadowing the EU perspective. The data on Macedonian friends and foes, speak best how successfully the identity narrative steers Macedonian public opinion.

This approach however, does not remove the obvious asymmetry between a candidate and member state, which has the veto power. The apparent aim of the current government to exert pressure on other EU member states, which will pressure on Bulgaria to promise no more vetoes, no historical disputes or to accept the Macedonian narrative about the past is no less naïve than the Bulgarian believe that a history that once was can return. Nevertheless, most concerning, this approach seems to completely miss the point and it is the fact that bilateral issues cannot be overcome by confrontation but through cooperation. In 2022 the newly elected Bulgarian PM Kiril Petkov tried to deprioritize history in the bilateral relations by accenting on a plethora of political and economic steps and this approach was shared by the then newly elected Macedonian PM Dimitar Kovacevski. Even if at this point this might sound absurd in the context of the current Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, this

should be considered a good idea to start treating the European membership perspective seriously.

Participants of the Prespa Agreement remember that it became possible not when one of the sides wanted to win, but when the costs of the endurance of this stalemate became too high. Hence, this is the long way, paid by a generation to resolve just one bilateral issue. However, there is also a short way. Instead of generating frustration and national mobilization, focus on the homework, deescalate the question and focus on what the EU is about (spheres of cooperation, mutual understanding and building trust about the future). These are difficult times for liberalism, but liberal solutions still seem a better option than the confrontation offered by nationalist narratives, at least in the context of European integration.

The Bulgaria centered enlargement discourse in North Macedonia aims to jeopardize the membership in the EU. Already in 2023 the Institute of Social Science and Humanities called for restoring the European consensus in the civil society in North Macedonia²⁶. The next years of empty promises and no advancement increase public frustration, mistrust and ultimately discourage further mobilization on the road to the EU. What this paper wanted to highlight is that at this stage, membership in the EU is solely an empty rhetoric of the current Macedonian authorities without any genuine costs and benefits analysis of the current position. The membership perspective has become hostage to internal Macedonian politics and this is a dead end. Especially in the context of the Bulgarian refusal to return to a

bilateral discussion of the raised arguments²⁷ and the introduction of the demand for a constitutional change in the Negotiation framework with the European Union.

The obsession with Bulgaria needs to be marginalized. None of the identity or language issues raised by VMRO-DPMNE will be resolved and will remain as a part of the regional political folklore. The government seems to ignore two fundamental principles that 1. Bulgaria has recognized North Macedonia and 2. The Bulgarian position on the Macedonian language is not an obstacle for the further advancement of its international aspirations, including the membership in the EU.

The Polish experience has shown that even if the political elites, the government, and the executive in particular, play a crucial role in the integration process, the society has also a role to play. Its expectations and demands for advancement serve both as an encouragement and as a source of pressure on the government to deliver tangible advancement.

The membership in the EU needs to become a *raison d'état* not only in the political rhetoric, but a genuine driver for popular mobilization. The society needs to hold accountable the government on these aspects of the Enlargement process, which tangibly improve the quality of the state institutions, improve the living standard and increase accountability and transparency in political life. Delivering on these aspects will encourage also the EU to take a second look on North Macedonia's membership perspective.

It is a role of the civil society at home to reconsider its structural limitations to shape the public discourse around the EU. There

²⁶ Restoring EU's Credibility and the European Consensus in the Civil Society in N. Macedonia (Preliminary Research Report), Institute of Social Science and Humanities, Skopje, February 2023, <https://www.isshs.edu.mk/restoring-eus-credibility-and-the-european-consensus-in-the-civil-society-in-n-macedonia-preliminary-research-report/>

²⁷ Радев не вижда смисъл от среща с Мицкоски: Той няма проблем с България, а с ЕС, Mediapool.bg, 18.6.2026, <https://www.mediapool.bg/radev-ne-vizhda-smisla-ot-sreshhta-s-mitskoski-toi-nyama-problem-s-bulgaria-a-s-es-news384580.html>

is an obvious need to go beyond the provisions of the National integration strategy and take a more proactive and creative role in discussing European integration way beyond the identity framework.

Fears on enlargement will always exist and North Macedonia, with its identity narrative is neither the first, nor the last to raise them in the process of European integration. The only solution is to let these fears be confronted by logic and reason. Bulgaria is not Karakachanov, Dzhambazki or even Radev, just as North Macedonia is not going to disappear without Mickoski. The deprioritization of the identity narrative will concentrate the public attention to the tangible dimensions of advancement and will push forward the integration process much more than any next visit of Macedonian authorities in Brussels explaining their “red lines”.

The membership perspective does not start in Athens, Sofia or Belgrade, but with the genuine determination to join the EU, despite all obstacles. It requires the joint effort of the whole society, administration and political elites, to go beyond the obstacles. Such a determination mobilizes not only political elites, but also European partners to respond adequately to the next steps on the way to membership. Internal mobilization and consideration of EU membership as a *raison d'état* remain the main ingredients of a successful quest for joining the EU.