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Misinformation Through Selective Information Geared Toward Anti-EU Narrative Building

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ken: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century (Toronto CA: McGill-Queen's University Press), pp. 39-46. She is also the author of numerous interdisciplinary policy studies dedicated to the issues of "illiberal democracy," partocratic mechanisms of state-capture in "hybrid regimes," policy critique of repressive technocracy in the legislation of the authoritarian neoliberal post-socialist states in Europe. Reforms in the educational and scientific sector and their consistent alignment with the principles and documents of the Bologna process, and especially the implementation of the EU strategic goal of the "twin transition" (digital and green) in the process, is one of the main topics of Kolozova's current policy analyses. In the period 2021-2022, as a volunteer, she volunteered in the team of experts who advised the Ministry of Education on the subject of reforms in the science sector. Since August 2023, she has been engaged by the Secretariat for European Affairs as an expert on Chapter 26, Cluster 3 of the EU related reforms and consistent application of the Bologna process.

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Abstract: This paper examines how misinformation and selective information framing drove anti-EU sentiment in North Macedonia following the 2022 proposal of the EU negotiating framework (the "French Proposal"). Focusing on the 2020–2024 period, the study uses qualitative discourse analysis (70 analyzed templates) and quantitative digital data harvesting across platforms like Twitter/X, YouTube, and digital media outlets. The primary finding highlights an unusual convergence between traditional pro-Russian nationalist actors (e.g.,

Levica, VMRO-DPMNE) and “unusual suspects”—historically pro-Western, EU- and USAID-funded NGOs, think tanks (such as EPI and IDSCS), and prominent public figures. Both groups leveraged tropes portraying the EU accession framework as a threat to Macedonian national identity (“Bulgarianization”) and framed the EU as duplicitous and unyielding. This narrative promoted euro-nihilism, advocating for frozen negotiations, “full sovereignty,” or regional alternatives like “Open Balkans”. Quantitative tracking revealed heavily shared anti-framework content, peak usage of anti-EU/nationalist hashtags, and significant overlap with Serbian media narratives that facilitate indirect Russian influence. The study concludes that inadvertent anti-EU rhetoric from reputable, civil-society actors mainstreamed euro-skepticism, normalizing a state of stalled EU integration and geopolitical limbo in North Macedonia.

Keywords: Misinformation, Anti-EU Narratives, Euroscepticism, EU Accession, Russian Influence, North Macedonia.

Introduction: Public Discourse Actively Sustaining EU’s Decision to Freeze the Negotiations with North Macedonia

In the context of the project initiative “Combatting anti-EU discourses and misinformation in North Macedonia and Serbia” supported by IVF, I have developed the present analysis both building on my previous research on the topic of misinformation and malinformation concerning the European Union and the prospects of EU accession of North Macedonia in particular, while applying a comparative analysis of the case of Serbia.¹ I

have focused on data analysis collected from a selection of social media profiles and discourse analysis of articles, interviews, studies found in both in the press (digital and printed) and in the visual media. I have focused on data that constitutes the period of the buildup of anti-EU sentiments in the mainstream public discourse following the formal (and purely ceremonial) opening of the EU negotiations on July 19th, 2022. Negotiations have been frozen once the screening phase was completed, and no constitutional changes have been brought to recognize the Bulgarian minority which is the formal condition to start substantive, per chapter negotiations of accession. Most of the harvested information points of our digital analysis refer to the period 2022-2024. After the win of VMRO-DPMNE in May 2024, that ran on anti-EU rhetoric, the country has remained in the status quo of frozen negotiations without either a willing government or a committed opposition to the resumption of the EU integration process. The data points collected for the digital analysis are so few they do not constitute 15% of what we could harvest previously. It is only the proof that at the end of 2025 and the first half 2026 the country has normalized the limbo and has accepted its status of a disgruntled forever EU candidate (but never a member of the Union).² The transition can be noted in the gradual acceptance to recognize the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution of North Macedonia, even by high ranking officials of the Government,³ even though the tropes implying settling

ing-Influence-and-Disinformation-Campaigns-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf, accessed on 9 April, 2026.

² Katerina Neshkova, Bulgaria Won’t Have Veto Power in the Case of Gradual Membership Accession in the EU [Бугарија ќе нема право на вето кај постепеното зачленување во ЕУ], Sitel (February 21, 2026), available at <https://sitel.com.mk/bugarija-kje-nema-pravo-na-veto-kaj-postepenoto-zachlenuvanje-vo-eu>, accessed on April 5th, 2026

³ Or this statement of the Macedonian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zoran Dimitrovski “The Problem is not ‘The Bulgarians in the Constitution,’ but Rather the Historical and Identity Related Issues I, „Не се проблем бугарите во Уставот, туку историските и идентитетските прашања”, Plus Info (April 17th, 2026), available at <https://plusinfo.mk/ne-se-problem-bugarite-vo-ustavot-tuku-istoriskite-i-identitetskite-prasha-a-i-da-nema-novi-bara-a-od-sofi-a-problem-se-ve-e-postavenite-ba>

¹ Monitoring Influence and Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans (MEDI-WEB), available at <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Monitor->

historical disputes is a condition in the Framework (which is not, as we can see in the Framework, article 4). To cover this period, I have used the same tools for qualitative data collection and analysis (template is attached as an annex) as in the previous study mentioned beginning of this paper, accompanied by the same or compatible software for data capturing.

The ties with Serbia have become tighter and the distancing from Albania obvious. As our study shows (in the data presented below), North Macedonia has somehow been incorporated into "Srpski svet",⁴ and through that subjected to indirect Russian influence, as proven by the latest country progress report submitted to the European Parliament by the special rapporteur.⁵

The context

1.1. Rising Anti-Europeanism

Based on my previous research, I postulate an unusual phenomenon in North Macedonia which, in comparison to Albania and other Western Balkans countries, is unique. Namely, the mainstream of civil society scene as well as academia have been vehemently opposed to North Macedonia accepting the invitation to open negotiations extended under the French Presidency with the Union in June 2022. The comparison with Albania is relevant as the two countries' accession is – for the time being – carried out as a single process, the two countries are treated as a "package."⁶

ra-a/, accessed on April 20th, 2026

⁴ Daniela Trpcevska-Zafirovska "Accusations of a "Serbian World" stir the political scene" Deutsche Welle in Macedonian (July 22, 2025) [Даниела Трпчевска-Зафировска, Обвинувања за „српски свет" ја брануваат политичката сцена], accessed on April 9, 2026. Or the primary source: Report on the 2023 and 2024 Commission reports on North Macedonia (2025/2021(INI)), Committee on Foreign Affairs. Rapporteur: Thomas Waitz, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0118_EN.pdf, accessed on 9 April, 2026.

⁵ European Parliament, Report on the 2024 Commission Report on North Macedonia, A10-0118/2025 (Brussels: European Parliament, June 27, 2025), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0118_EN.pdf.

⁶ 2019 Enlargement Package: "North Macedonia and Albania have delivered on

North Macedonia has been an EU candidate country since 2005 and precedes Croatia by one month in receiving the invitation to submit its candidacy. For decades, the country then called provisionally The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, has been stuck in the position of a mere candidate without entering the process of accession negotiations. Finally, after signing an agreement with Greece in 2018, which led to the change of the country's constitutional name to Republic of North Macedonia, two years later, the country became a NATO member and received an invitation to open negotiations with the EU in June 2020. For almost two years, Bulgaria has been blocking the first Inter-Governmental conference and the initiation of the negotiations insisting that North Macedonia did not adhere to its bilateral treaty on good neighborly relations. At last, in June 2022, the EU bypassed the Bulgarian veto by proposing a negotiating framework which allowed for Bulgaria to unilaterally distance itself from reference to language - while the rest of the EU recognizes it as per the Agreement with Greece which is *erga omnes* – requiring North Macedonia to abide to the principle of good neighborly relations. Both treaties, that with Greece and that with Bulgaria, are referenced Article 4 of the Framework dedicated to the criterion of good neighborly relations. The criterion also includes the recognition of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia which has a population of over 100,000 Bulgarian nationals (Macedonians⁷ with dual citizenship, both

reforms", available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/63405_en, accessed on 17 February 2024.; "Opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania is a long-overdue step forward for the EU's enlargement policy," Statement by Christa Schweng, EESC president and Dimitris Dimitriadis, president of the Section for External Relations (released 17 July 2022), available at <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/presentations/opening-accession-negotiations-north-macedonia-and-albania-long-overdue-step-forward-eus-enlargement-policy>, accessed on 18 February 2024.

⁷ As per the Guidelines of the Agreement with Greece the term Macedonian is retained to refer to the national majority, the Slavic Macedonian ethnicity and the language. Thus, the use of the adjective "North Macedonian" is against the agreement, which is *erga omnes* (applicable to all), and when referring to the institutions of the state in the form of an adjective one uses "of the Republic of North Macedonia."

Macedonian and Bulgarian). Currently the negotiations are frozen because there has been no qualified majority to vote the Bulgarians into the Constitution. Because of this, in the anti-EU rhetoric produced in the country one finds references to the EU negotiating framework as the Bulgarian framework or as “the French proposal” because this solution to the dispute via the Framework was adopted by the EU Council during the French presidency with the Union.

In the case of North Macedonia, the opposition to the negotiations was virtually in unison and not by some fringe parties and political actors, but by the mainstream represented by the biggest opposition party VMRO-DPMNE (centre-right, close ties with Fidesz and a member of EPP), institutions such as the Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences, the oldest and most reputable newspaper Nova Makedonija, but also by the presumably pro-EU NGOs and think tanks in the country. I am using the term “presumably” to express caution when treating these organizations as both pro-EU and/or anti-EU: they are a complex phenomenon considering they have demonstrated a EU commitment in the past but have become increasingly euro-skeptical (in the sense of whether it makes sense to even integrate in the Union) in the past 7-8 years. I discuss this phenomenon below and cite sources to corroborate the claim, however, as an introduction to the phenomenon consider the study *“The French Proposal”: Hate Speech, Misinformation and Media Manipulation (Media Analysis)*.⁸

Even though the civil society mainstream embraced the agreement with Greece that led to the country’s name change (also called “The Prespa/Prespes Agreement”), I would argue that it was a reluctant acceptance: we haven’t seen the level of ani-

mated support and personal involvement through media appearances and activism, as we have seen in the case of opposing the acceptance of the negotiating framework adopted by the EU during the French presidency with the Consillium (EU Council) dubbed “The French Proposal.” The first wave of misinformation by unlikely actors began precisely at the time of the EU Council’s unanimous vote on the negotiating framework. As the framework seeks to settle the bilateral disputes with the EU neighbors, it requires that North Macedonia and Bulgaria implement the Treaty on good neighborly relations, as it requires to implement a similar treaty with Greece.

It is peculiar that precisely this treaty is seen as “introducing history and language” by many of the mainstream think tanks offering EU accession expertise, considering the same article of the framework (Art. 4) requires the same with regard to the Agreement with Greece.⁹ In short, national support for EU accession has dropped by approximately 30% since the name change of the country, and has precipitated downward ever since the Bulgarian veto. However, the EU negotiating framework and the perception of it as an “insidious plan to efface the Macedonian identity and replace it with a Bulgarian one (by way of ceding our national history, which is supposedly required by the Framework,”¹⁰ a view perpetuated by the mainstream centre-right and left including by the NGOs primarily funded by the EU and US funds in the country.¹¹ For our digital analysis and

⁹ The “French Proposal” aka EU’s Common position and negotiating framework, available at https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/draft_general_eu_position.pdf, accessed 24 April 2024; a prior leaked draft that has been presented in the country as something that the Government opposed and “renegotiated” is available here https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/draft_eu_common_position_for_the_1st_igc.pdf.

¹⁰ A paraphrase of the director of the Institute of Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje (ID-SCS) of numerous statements in the media which preceded, followed and last to this day (even though less so since August 2023, since the pause on the negotiating process took place due to Parliament’s failure to vote in favor of recognizing the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution’s Preamble): Telma TV debate April 2023) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niAlgX_s-CU.

¹¹ Krzalovski - the French Proposal Has Created Damage for the Entire Society

⁸ Zarko Trajanoski, “The French Proposal”: Hate Speech, Misinformation and Media Manipulation (media analysis) [Жарко Трајаноски „Францускиот предлог”: Говор на омраза, дезинформации, медиумски манипулации (медиумски анализи) (Skopje: IMA, 2023), 25-41.

data capturing it has been important to clarify that the term “French proposal” refers directly to the EU negotiating framework (therefore, we are excluding the diplomatic proposals to solve the dispute and initiate negotiations that have been made by different EU presidencies, such as the Czech, Portuguese and, of course, the French).

The most reputable think tanks specialized in EU accession displayed a vehement reaction to the Framework (persistent misinforming the public that it was a “proposal” that could be negotiated instead of the simple fact that it is a document of EU’s conditions to engage in negotiations in the first place). Respected EU experts, among which the present and former directors of the European Policy Institute (featuring members of the BIEPAG network) have called the process of “EU accession” a process of “bulgarization” (instead of Europeanization).¹²

The recognition of the Bulgarian minority in the country’s constitution along with the dozens of other minorities is the only conditionality of the EU to proceed with the negotiations which have been frozen since the first year consisting of a screening process. This conditionality and the implementation of the Treaty on good neighborly relations have been painted as devastating to the Macedonian national identity both by the leading opposition (right wing party) and oddly enough by the liberal center.¹³ It is still seen so by many organizations funded by

the EU Delegation in Skopje, for example the European Policy Institute, whose head pleads in front of the cameras of national televisions not to recognize the Bulgarian minority as the process of accession is a trap in a double sense: it both threatens to annihilate the Macedonian (ethnic, and national) identity, as well as the new (“French) reform methodology, “being senseless” (to paraphrase one of EPI’s analysis),¹⁴ promises endless stalling of the accession process.

Thus, we are facing a peculiar context, as per the poll published by IRI in April 2024: Only 31% of the Macedonian citizens (around 20% of them ethnic Albanians) support the pro-Western and pro-EU policies of the government, whereas the rest divided in smaller percentages prefer “equal integration” or “equally close relations” with both the EU and Russia. The pro-Russian stance permeates and intertwines with the pro-European one. Thus, our task at hand is complex, and the actors and their platforms are not to be seen through “black and white lenses.”

actor: Much of the Macedonian civil society has joined the right in rejecting a deal with Sofia and Brussels. This is dangerous,” *Al Jazeera English* (18 September 2022), available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/9/18/north-macedonias-eu-path-is-in-danger>, accessed on 18 February 2024 ; Elise Bernard and Katerina Kolozova, *Pourquoi la France est désignée comme responsable dans les désaccords entre la Bulgarie et Macédoine du Nord*. Le Journal du Dimanche (30 July 2022), available at <https://www.lejdd.fr/International/pourquoi-la-france-est-designee-comme-responsable-dans-les-desaccords-entre-la-bulgarie-et-macedoine-du-nord-4120793>, accessed on February 19, 2024.

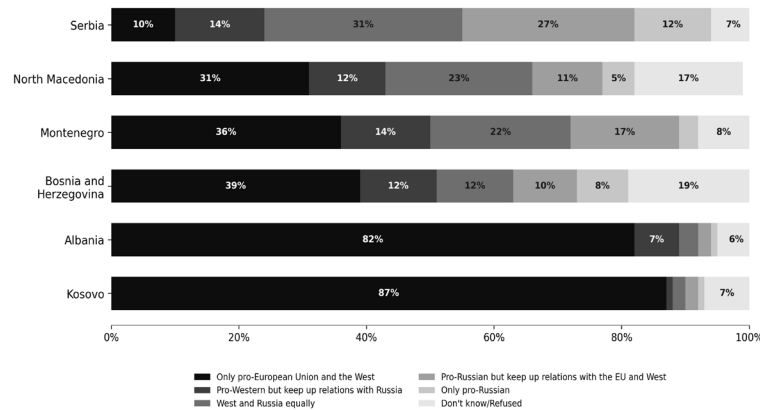
¹⁴ Analysis of EPI «What is the Cost for the Western Balkans: Existing and New Instruments of EU Enlargement [Која е цената за Западен Балкан: постојни и нови инструменти за проширување на ЕУ] (Skopje, released on 06 April 2022 by European Policy Institute), available at <https://epi.org.mk/post/20834>, accessed on 20 February 2023.

[Кржаловски - Францускиот предлог нанесе штета на целото општество], Radio Free Europe Macedonia (18 July, 2022), available at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/31948593.html>, accessed on 4 May 2024.

¹² Zarko Trajanovski, “Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories and Media Manipulation in Light of the Proposed Constitutional Reforms” [Дезинформации, теории на заговор и медиумски манипулации за предложените уставни измени], (Skopje: IMA, 2023) 7-34. (In Macedonian); Katerina Blazevska “Are We Asking from Brussels to Protect us from Ourselves” [„Дали бараме од Брисел да нè заштити од самите себе?“] *Deutsche Welle in Macedonian* (Skopje, 20.02.2022), available at <https://tinyurl.com/2n-vsdprv>, accessed on 4 May 2024. (The article contains statements from the EPI expert describing the EU accession process as one of “bulgarization.”)

¹³ Katerina Kolozova, “North Macedonia’s EU path is under threat from an unlikely

What should our country's foreign policy course be?



1.2. The Specificity of the Context: Identifying the Usual and the “Unusual Suspects” (emphasis on the latter)

What is so unique in the presented situation? The tight intertwining between the pro-Russian and/or anti-EU sentiments with those that still want to accede to the EU and subscribe to some of its values is specific to the situation in North Macedonia. That makes it perhaps fundamentally different from the situation in Serbia. However, matters are further complicated by the fact that Serbia is seen by the majority in the country as its closest ally – and has highest media presence in the country¹⁵

¹⁵ Dragan Mishev «Even Through Macedonia Forbids Russian Networks, Disinformation Penetrates through Serbian Media» [Драган Мишев Мишев: Иако Македонија забрани руски мрежи, дезинформациите доаѓаат преку српските медиуми], in *Brief* (Skopje 15 May 2024), available at <https://www.brief.mk/mishev-iako-makedonija-zabrani-ruski-mrezhi-dezinformaciite-dogaat-preku-srpskite-mediumi>; Goran Lefkov, «Social Networks and Media, The Lever for Spreading Authoritarian Propaganda» in SCOOP (Skopje, 2 May 2023) [Социјалните мрежи и медиуми – лост за ширење на авторитарни пропаганди], available at <https://tinyurl.com/2vzxssn>; Rumena Filipova and Vladimir Shopov (eds.) *Authoritarians on a Media Offensive in the Midst of War: The Informational Influence of Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf States in Southeast Europe: A Study Produced by Institute for Global Analytics - Sofia*, Published in 2022 Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Media Programme South East Europe, available at https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Report_Authoritarians-on-a-Media-Offensive.pdf; Goran Georgiev, Vanya Petrova and Kristina Tsabala, *Breaking the Code: Tackling the Interlocking*

– whereas Serbia itself sees Russia as its closest ally and its media influence in the country is considerable (the source is again, the aforementioned Poll on WB done by IRI February and March 2024). It is for this reason that we ought to look at actors and media outlets that are not habitually perceived as pro-Russian or anti-EU, or both – yet, some of them are porous and have become platforms for euroscepticism and sometimes implicit (or even explicit) Eurasianism including Radio Free Europe in Macedonian, Deutsche Welle in Macedonian, BIRN (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network) to name a few. Many of these outlets are part of the samples used for the quantitative and qualitative data analyses. They are added to the list of those who either flirt with Russian propaganda such as the parties Levica, Rodina, United Macedonia and outlets like Russia Beyond in Macedonian and Russia Beyond in Serbian (the Macedonian ethnic minority reads in Serbian as much as in Macedonian). As explained in the introduction, one does not need to be a pro-Russian actor to find oneself completely overlapping in views with those who are – the various, already intimated, factors that inspire the rise of euro-scepticism and its mainstreaming have contributed to such conversion.

In July 2023, the Russian think tank RIAC specialized in foreign affairs and one of the most reputable in the Russian Federation published the following: “Macedonia applied for membership in the European Union in March 2004. The European Union literally put pressure on the citizens of Macedonia to change the national flag and change the name of the country because of the position of Greece. And now Bulgaria has several conditions for Macedonia - recognition that the Bulgarians did not collaborate with Nazi Germany and did not deport Jews during World War II. And they also want Macedonia to recognize that the Macedo-

Nexus of Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe (Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023).

nian language is a dialect of the Bulgarian language. And all this happens only because Bulgaria, as a member of the European Union, enjoys the right of veto, just like Greece in the matter of renaming the state from “Macedonia” to “North Macedonia”. Despite the fact that Macedonia accepted these conditions, it is still not a member of the European Union.” Our analysis will demonstrate that the (once) perceived pro-EU NGOs, think tanks, and the mainstream center right party VMRO-DPMNE (member of EPP) as well as important parts of the old nomenclature of the social democratic party SDSM, which ruled until May 2024, produced the same rhetoric, same type of argumentation and the overall undergirding point that North Macedonia is the perpetual victim of the “duplicitous Europe” (cited below) and its EU neighbors.

In spite of the nuanced tone of a “disappointed pro-European,” many of the unlikely actors (identified in a study referenced below, “Restoring EU Credibility” focusing on the polarization between) produce a discourse that coincides perfectly with the political narratives exuding nationalism and rightwing euro-skepticism expressed by the biggest opposition party, VMRO DPMNE, member of EPP. Furthermore, VMRO DPMNE’s discourse coincides with the declaredly pro-Russian political party the nationalist (presumably) leftwing party, Levica (the Left). Both parties organized mass protests in June and July 2022 related to the EU Council’s invitation to open negotiations accompanied, as per usual, by an adopted common position (the decision of the Council to open negotiations) and the negotiating framework. Their positions were backed by the (once) pro-EU experts who called upon the rejection of the “French Proposal,” i.e., of the EU negotiating framework and thus in the EU accession negotiations themselves. (The reader does not need clarifications that the negotiating network is not “pre-negotiated” by the candidate country.) That is why this study is focusing not only on keywords, isolated statements and self-proclaimed

pro-Russian actors, but also on those who are supposedly the opposite yet manage to perpetuate the pro-Russian and/or anti-EU arguments and on the complexities of narratives, types of arguments (tropes) in discursive strategies, and thus engages in qualitative as well as quantitative research. To illustrate our point and methodology, we will offer the reader a simple example of comparative discursive analysis: an interview given by Emilija Geleva in 2023 and one given in 2022 by Nikola Dimitrov as well as an op-ed by Katerina Blazevska published by Prizma in 2023, a pro-Russian and a pro-Western actor respectively, point to the “European hypocrisy in breaching its own principles,” call the process of EU accession a process undemocratic and essentially non-European. It is interesting to note that even Geleva, a key figure in the pro-Putin party and public discourse, calls herself a disillusioned European, similar to the tone of Nikola Dimitrov. They both falsely claim that conditions of a bilateral nature (or concerning historical heritage) have never been posed on other candidates.¹⁶ We should note that at a panel hosted by IDSCS and EPI, at which Dimitrov appeared sharing similar positions to the hosts, the process of EU accession under the given framework would become a process of “bulgarization.”¹⁷

Any historian of the EU accession process can prove the opposite, and for the sake of brevity we will point out the Clingendael Study from 2010 “Bilateral barriers or good neighborliness? The role of bilateral disputes in the EU enlargement process” by Arjan Uilenreef, among other, numerous publications. In other words, the constant repetition of the lie, even if it is felt as

¹⁶ I am adding to appendices that illustrate the method and the offer verifiable insight into the proposed inference and, hence, comparison. *Appendices will be included in the final version not the online first version.*

¹⁷ „Владата да каже како дојдовме до позиција билатералните прашања со Бугарија да бидат дел од преговарачката рамка, вели Димитров“ [I Call Upon the Government to Tell us How the Bilateral Questions with Bulgaria Became Part of the Negotiating Framework] (20 June 2022), available at <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/vladata-da-kazhe-kako-dojdovme-do-pozitsija-bilateralnite-prashana-so-bugarija-da-bidat-del-od-pregovarachkata-ramka-veli-dimitrov/>, accessed on 25.03.2026

a truth, becomes misinformation which serves to increase not only euro-skepticism but outright anti-Europeanism. Those who wish to have “equally good relations” with both the West and Russia, would say “Let us bring Europe home, let us fix the country as if it were the EU but without the EU (because of the “pernicious” negotiating framework). Once again, I must note that the same trope (leading to a similar or the same narrative) can be found in the openly pro-Russian discourse propagated by influential pundits such as Milenko Nedelkovski who has endorsed in the presidential and parliamentary elections campaign of 2024 the mainstream “center right” party (member of EPP, close to Viktor Orbán), VMRO-DPMNE. In short, regardless of the declared positioning in relation to the prospects of EU accession, i.e., some being pro-EU in principle (or until recently, while still receiving EU and USAID funds) yet now “disappointed Europeans” and the others openly pro-Eurasian, the discursive outcome dominating almost the entire public sphere is the same. After explaining the method, we will go into more detail about the empirical data we collected as part of this research corroborating this assertion.

2.1 Defining the Focus of the Study on North Macedonia

In identifying the specific characteristics of the malign misinformation when it comes to North Macedonia, I have relied on prior research and participation in studies dealing with misinformation and media manipulation regarding the EU negotiating process, the spread of euroscepticism across the political spectrum, including the supposedly non-partisan part of the public – the civil society. Most of those studies are referred to in the pages that follow. Our first focus was to identify types of discourses, rhetorical and discursive strategies that produce euroscepticism amounting to appeals to freeze the EU negotiating process, pull out of the integration process, denigrating EU and its institutions to a degree which renders “there is no point in continuing with the accession process” as the inevitable conclusion even when the actors still want to paint themselves as pro-European. Then we could compile lists of tropes (phras-

es, turns of phrase and types of arguments), keywords, and finally identify the actors/profiles subject to this analysis. In the qualitative analysis we identify the tropes, the main arguments and takeaways of a published article or a statement (a variety of forms and genre are included, such as an interview, op-ed, or a breakdown of a poll or a study or a tweet and other social media posts). Based on these tropes and model of analysis we could extract the lists of the main authors/actors/channels whose status of representativeness is corroborated by the quantitative empirical research carried out as part of this analysis as well as my prior research which is cited below (*Restoring EU Credibility*, Chapter in the edited book on media manipulation and misinformation around the EU negotiating framework [“The French Proposal”] published by IMA cited below, and others). Below, we offer more information on the methodology.

2.2. The main themes

One could say that the narrative of “euro-skepticism,” even among many mainstream actors, is closer to euro-nihilism than merely skepticism. For example, in the context of national elections of 2024, in the comment areas of different profiles we monitored for the purposes of this study, the dominant tropes among VMRO-DPMNE voters are “if we start negotiating, we will disappear as a nation” coupled by “EU is falling apart, there is no purpose to sacrifice our identity by negotiating.” These tropes, i.e., arguments, turns of phrase, narrative “building blocks” have been assembled and illustrated in appendices to this study have been analyzed in 78 articles/interviews/lengthy social media posts.¹⁸ We find similar comments among the supposedly pro-Western NGOs who are opposed to the negotiating process and argue for the rejection of the Framework (which is de facto arguing against accession, as we explain above), such as in the *Res Publica* op-ed published by the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS, or ИКК in Cyrillic) in April 2024 titled “Now

¹⁸ The appendices are available in a separate research archive, housed by a German institution, not this publisher.

What, Are we With the EU or Russia?" (ICS is usually funded by the British Embassy and subcontracted occasionally by the US-AID, certainly not for projects that perpetuate euro-skepticism but can sometimes implicitly contain it – the reputation of being pro-Western is too longstanding for the donors to recognize the shift, especially when the program managers are locals.) So, the trope of dystopian outcomes, either for the nation or for the EU or both, is building a trope that could be anti-EU without the actor proclaiming an openly anti-EU stance, but a mere resignation. In the spirit of that resignation, we are forced, even if our hearts have been with the EU for so long, to look for allies in Eurasia. This type of tropes and turn of tropes is very common among the "disappointed Europeans" we analyze in this study. Said nihilism and opposition to the EU as an ally and a union the country should belong to as an emotional response to a combination of media manipulation type of tropes or "analyses" that come down to slogans and buzzwords.

Two major misinformation bundles of discursive manipulation that emerged in this social turmoil have been recurring tropes around the same types of arguments (leading to anti-EU or euro-sceptic or pro-Eurasian public disposition):

a) "Negotiations with the EU haven't commenced" because their continuation per chapters in conditioned by the recognition of the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution, "negotiations are not real" (in spite of von der Leyen claiming the opposite in the Parliament of North Macedonia and in spite of EU stating negotiations have commenced easily verifiable on the EU's websites), "Bulgaria is vetoing negotiations" (in spite the veto being lifted precisely through the adoption of the negotiating framework), "The French Proposal" is a document that lifts the Bulgarian veto but is not a real "EU negotiating framework" (vastly, according to the online reactions of social media users, I have observed for this and prior studies, the general public

does not understand that these two are the same thing,¹⁹ "EU/French empty talk and lies" (in the sense "they [the Europeans"] always promise and never deliver even though Macedonia has been a EU candidate since March 2005" etc.); these have been the major discursive tropes and they form clusters of argumentation we have analyzed as part of this study, and similar. The manipulative misnaming of the EU negotiating framework a "French Proposal" (to lift the Bulgarian veto to N. Macedonia's EU accession), have led to the predominant discourse according to which "the EU has not delivered and despite the change of the name of the country as the result of the Agreement with Greece, even though N. Macedonia became a NATO country, it has not commenced its EU negotiations". The Bulgarian veto has been an aggravating continuation of the same agony, in this narrative, which only proves the "EU's hypocrisy when it insists it wants to integrate the entire group of the WB negotiating countries by 2030."²⁰ Thus no matter how many recommendations adopted by the European Parliament, no matter how many statements by Charles Michel that the EU wants to secure its borders by integrating this region that is at the heart of the European Union, all is declared a lie – and the tropes of "Europe as the old deceptive and corrupt Lady" and the hypothetical or paranoid reasoning that "whatever the reassurances from the EU it is all lies" trump the actual statements of the EU officials

¹⁹ Consider this as a case study out of the 5 qualitatively (ethnographically) monitored profiles from July 2022: Hristijan Mickovski (President of VMRO-DPMNE), a Facebook post: <https://fb.watch/slkdWKRck6/> stating "National protest 'Ultimatum - NO, thank you'" (Media Statement) 2800 reactions (likes) / 780 comments/ 195 shares, under which the most used phrases in the comment area are: "Macedonia Forever," "Stop the French Proposal," "Death to the Traitors," "Stop the Negotiations, Stop the Genocide to the Macedonian People," and this is just a figment of flood of posts and comments of this sort in the stated period.

²⁰ The Recommendation has been adopted by 502 votes in favor, 75 against and 61 abstentions, sources available here: A strengthened enlargement policy is the EU's strongest geopolitical tool (Press Release: 23 November 2022, Strasbourg), and the recommendations are as follows: No alternatives should replace enlargement; Reform the decision-making process on accession and advance with accession negotiations by qualified majority instead of unanimity; Accession negotiations should be concluded by 2030.

and the recommendation of the EU Parliament that requires that N. Macedonia, Albania, Serbia and Montenegro complete their integration into the EU. So, conspiracy packaged as skepticism rules over verifiable facts: it is essentially media manipulation which creates the effects of misinformation or produces outright misinformation. Just as an illustration, we have analysed an interview of the Dutch ambassador in the country, given for Radio Free Europe Macedonia, in which he is forced to factcheck and correct a journalist who repetitively asks “what will take to start the negotiations and lift the Bulgarian veto”, whereas his responses that “the negotiations have commenced and the veto has been lifted are continually ignored and the subsequent questions build up as if the interviewer’s premise was never refuted.

The other bundle of misinformation is often combined with elements of the first one. It is still a form of information manipulation rather than outward lie, some of it could be understood as misinterpretation of facts but when coming from expert sources and media of reputation the falsity of the information can be interpreted but as an intentional misinformation. However, it also contains outward lies or conspiracy theories:

b) the government of North Macedonia “could have negotiated” a better negotiating framework (regardless how senseless is the proposition that N. Macedonia would have a say in EU Council’s own document of invitation, this lie continues to be perpetuated to this day), “EU is falling apart, there is no point in making any further sacrifices to join it” (the implication is that the Agreement with Greece was enough of a sacrifice, and the Treaty with Bulgaria is seen as the straw that broke the proverbial back of the camel), “it is possible to be equally friendly with both Russia and the EU,” “North Macedonia can maintain absolute sovereignty without aligning itself with either the East or the West,” “it is possible to annul the agreement with Greece, the treaty with Bulgaria and step out of NATO” (this is a frequent

trope perpetuated by VMRO-DPMNE and Levica in the past two years; which in the case of VMRO during the election campaign of April-May 2024 underwent some tweaking to border with manipulative interpretation rather than the strong claims that Levica still maintains), “Europe is an undemocratic, duplicitous entity” when it comes to North Macedonia is almost a slogan (propaganda) but it is also combined with a frequent trope “We will join Europe when it is democratized” and “Europe is fascist, therefore we do not wish to join it”, and “we should look for alternatives, which are possible.”

These nodes of disinformation, as already stated, are regurgitated, and firmly maintained by the mainstream opposition parties, esp. VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, but also by the CSOs, academia and media. The latter remark is not arbitrary, but corroborated by a study I completed in 2023 on the topic of polarization between the CS scene in the country and the EU institutions: over 80% of the respondents maintain North Macedonia should look for alternatives to EU accession (most of them advocate for “Open Balkans” as the alternative, but there is 10% of them favoring Eurasia too).²¹ The dream of “Open Balkans” may be dead, but one seems to look for its substitutes to this day. In short, there are no Eurosceptic niches or poles of the public discourse in the country, as Euroscepticism has metastasized into the entire public sphere with the exception of the Government (led by SDSM and its ethnic Albanian coalition junior partner). It is important to note that this is the sentiment among the Macedonian ethnic majority and its political and public discourse actors, whereas the Albanian minority maintains an almost opposed stance.²²

To conclude this section, the discursive landscape we are paint-

²¹ Katerina Kolozova and Tihomir Topuzovski, “Restoring EU’s Credibility and the European Consensus in the Civil Society in North Macedonia” (Skopje: ISSHS, 2023), available at <http://tinyurl.com/bdh8hhnd>, accessed on 20 February 2024.

²² Ivaylo Tsonev, The Conservative resurgence in North Macedonia: Electoral Triumph amid a need for progressive agenda, in Friedrich Naumann Foundation (20.05.2024), available at <https://www.freiheit.org/node/44549>.

ing here is analysed in depth through discourse and representation qualitative analysis, as per a template explained below. Its findings are further corroborated by quantitative research through the digital tools provided by the digital experts I collaborated with on a broader study this analysis is based on.

Methodology

We have compiled information from online media outlets, as well as conventional media have their online versions, in addition to the analysis of social media posts.

Considering the complexity of the context, and thus the intertwining of the obvious and open actors with those who are perceived as established pro-Europeans and pro-Western or rather the overlaps of their discourses and geopolitical preferences, we had to employ a qualitative alongside a quantitative approach. For the purposes of the qualitative analysis, we used media monitoring templates designed for discourse and representation analysis in conventional media which were adjusted for the media subject to this study (internet, and mainly textual instead of primarily visual analysis). The template we used is an appendix to this report. Also, it is important to note that using Inspectre digital tools, we could also enrich the analysis with visual output.

Considering the above presented postulation of the problem as one displaying need for searching malign misinformation across the political-ideological and national board, as well as the fact that it is impossible to reduce the actors to malign Eurasian voices vs the pro-European ones, we composed a media monitoring guide and the aforementioned template according to categories of public discourse actors. I used the type of templates habitually employed in conventional media monitoring designed for discourse and representation observation where qualitative tropes (coded keywords and turns of phrase) are

analyzed by identifying the rhetorical markers and advocated outcomes (thus, criteria) under which we include numerous variations of discursive patterns. Again, before presenting the qualitative research template, let us note that the second part of the study, where we present the quantitative findings corresponds fully with and corroborates the qualitative findings (analyzed in 78 templates).

A presentation of the structure of the template which identifies:

- Types of actors

1. Overlaps with the Russian discourse
2. Resonates similarly with the pro-Eurasian discourse.
3. Sovereigntist discourse (overlapping with Eurosceptic arguments, arguing we should stay "sovereign" meaning outside of the EU)
4. Reputation of being pro-EU, displaying a turn toward euro-skepticism (since the 2020 invitation to open negotiations)

- Types of (mis)information and tropes (leading to a narrative through information manipulation):

1. Negotiations haven't started yet.
2. We should be looking for alternatives to EU accession (implied, primarily – but not only - through arguments leading to the conclusion that either negotiations lead to dead-end or to losing Macedonian national identity)
3. EU Negotiating framework should not be accepted/should be rejected ("renegotiated" even though a candidate country does not ever participate in setting up the Framework).

4. Negotiations should pause/be frozen (unless the Negotiating Framework is changed)
5. The methodology for accession after 2020 is intentionally devised to delay accession (or to lead to a never-ending process)

Representativeness of actors and types of discourses covered by the qualitative research sample:

The actors were identified through desk research based on previous studies of the lead researcher, one of which a 60-page study, published in May 2023,²³ which conveys the views of the most influential CSO's and media widely perceived as pro-Western, at least until the presentation of EU's negotiating framework for the country in the summer of 2022. For the purposes of the previous study the actors were sampled according to their annual budgets in the past 5 years, types of funding such as major EU and USAID projects and media visibility established. On the basis of that study, which consisted of both qualitative and quantitative research, and which demonstrated a level of polarization toward the EU ranging between 80%-90% as well as that the mainstream CSOs and media would favor an alternative to the EU (approximately 80% of them), we established our sample of actors (but not only, as we have followed these actors and their statements as part of other research projects). In the qualitative part of the study before you, we put an emphasis on the actors that are not openly pro-Russian and/or have the reputation of being pro-Western but have become staunch critics of the EU accession process of the country. We also include the openly pro-Russian actors for the sake of comparative analysis (looking at the takeaways from the discourses generated by openly pro-Russian and presumably pro-Western actors and their overlaps).

²³ Katerina Kolozova and Tihomir Topuzovski, "Restoring EU's Credibility and the European Consensus in the Civil Society in North Macedonia" (Skopje: ISSHS, 2023), available at <http://tinyurl.com/bdh8hhnd>, accessed on 20 February 2024.

The timeline milestones: it is very important to note that the "unusual" actors appear to produce anti-EU discourse in the periods of June 2022 to September 2022 and then Spring of 2023 till September 1st, 2023. In those periods, their arguments overlap fully with the discourse of the VMRO-DPMNE (a party that is openly against continuing the accession process and the treaties with Greece and Bulgaria) and Levica led protests. As these are EU and USAID funded organizations and run other donor driven projects at occasions they change the topic, even though their opposition to the new EU accession methodology and to the recognition of the Bulgarian minority remains persistent. Still, when analyzing these actors, we are primarily focusing on the periods just stated. As for the openly pro-Russian or openly anti-EU actors, we look at them also in more recent periods, especially around the election period of April-May 2024 which is the main timeframe for the quantitative aspect of this research project. Our quantitative research covers the period of 2020-2024 which captures the aftermath of the change of the constitutional name of the country due to the Prespa Agreement signed with Greece as well as the admission to NATO and the Bulgarian veto. This broadened scope adds context to our qualitative analysis here.

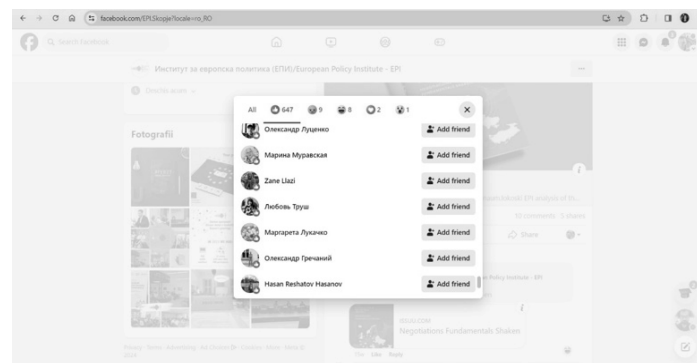
We produced approximately 100 and used 70 templates of discursive qualitative analysis and we have established that since July 2022 when the EU lifted the Bulgarian veto and extended its invitation to the first IGC (intergovernmental conference) opening the negotiating process, the overlaps of the pro-Russian discourse on the EU accession process of the country and the Russian criticisms of the EU itself (and its treatment of North Macedonia) coincide fully in the substance of the arguments even if the wording or the tone of the narrative may be a bit different. The substance is: in the negotiating framework ("the French proposal) there are "invisible traps" (they are unnamed, but it is suspected they will emerge - unavoidably) that will lead

to the effacement of the Macedonian identity. Therefore, the country should “freeze the negotiations” indefinitely, possibly for decades according to VMRO-DPMNE representatives during the most recent elections as demonstrated in our quantitative digital analysis whose findings are presented below. Bearing in mind the specificity of the context, it will come as no surprise that the perceived “pro-Western” experts and media argue similarly. Furthermore, the arguments against accession made by the openly pro-Russian actors are exactly the same as already illustrated (the Geleva-Dimitrov comparison made above). The only difference is that the openly pro-Russian actors also argue the country should leave NATO, apply for BRICS membership or be fully sovereign and unaligned with any geopolitical power. Interestingly, the “full sovereignty and geopolitical non-alignment” (comparing it to Yugoslavia’s membership in the league of the Non-Aligned [countries]) is also the argument of the “pro-Western” think tanks like EPI (European Policy Institute) and IDSCS (Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje) too or that the Open Society Initiative “Open Balkans” should replace the EU accession.²⁴

The first part of this report is context, and it is mainly based on qualitative analysis. We will speculate (as we cannot prove anything about the actors’ *motivations*) that not necessarily all these actors that contribute to the malign misinformation tendencies are directly or intentionally aligned with the Eurasian goals and agendas. The overlap may be spontaneous due to disillusionment with the EU process where N. Macedonia is seen as the victim of Bulgaria and the more powerful actors (primarily Greece, the change of the name of the country is something the opposition still promises to reverse as soon as they come to power). But between this position, accompanied with tendencies to spread misinformation giving rise (to bitter, rather

pronounced) euro-skepticism and anti-Western attitudes, and embracing Eurasia openly there is a fine line – so thin that it can be easily crossed. For example, the leading figures of the European Policy Institute or the Institute of Communication Studies (sponsored, ironically, by the British Embassy in Skopje to monitor malign information) have given statements or openly supported the protests against the opening of negotiations with the EU led by VMRO-DPMNE and Levica in the summer of 2022 (conveniently renaming them as national, people’s, etc. in spite of the openly demonstrated organization of the protests by said parties’ leaders). In doing so, we have noticed that they have completely reflected the wording of the Russian Embassy’s social media (we have included an analysis of such a tweet), or those of the openly pro-Russian political party Levica. Proof to this is the fact that EPI’s grim review of the EU’s progress report on North Macedonia in 2023, was publicized on Facebook as a sponsored post which showed reactions of 700 likes (80% of them had Russian sounding or South American sounding names, fake or true, we cannot determine, and only 10 out of them were from N. Macedonia or Western Balkans; it makes absolutely no sense that such a report would be interesting to hundreds of inhabitants of different continents and outside of Europe but hardly to more than a dozen in the region at issue. So, we wonder if this could be a bot farm?

(See the image below)



²⁴ *Restoring EU Credibility*, p. 22.; compare with the following EPI analysis: Malinka Ristevska Jordanova “Even if We Include the Bulgarians in Our Constitution, Bulgaria will keep on Blocking Us” (31.05.2023), available at <https://pressingtv.mk/makedonija/ristevska-jordanova-i-da-gi-vmetneme-bugarite-vo-ustavot-bugarija-ke-prodolzhi-dane-blokira/>

Quantitative Research: Data Captured Through Digital Analysis Tools

- **Opposition to the French proposal and inextricability of the “usual” and “unusual actors” of malign and/or anti-EU influence and media manipulation**

One of the first searches, narrowing down on the opposition to the EU negotiating framework (referred to as “The French Proposal” throughout 2022 till the elections of 2024) demonstrates that “The Left” party (Levica or Левица, which is openly pro-Russian and nationalist) was the most active. Going back to 2020, the search shows that Levica was equally actively opposing the name change (the agreement on good neighborly relations signed with Greece in 2018). In other words, the Negotiating framework (misnamed “the French proposal”), and the negotiating condition to recognize the Bulgarian minority, triggers rekindled opposition to the Agreement with Greece which served as the basis for both opening negotiations with the country, as well as for its admission to NATO. Levica is openly opposed to NATO and EU membership. However, in their opposition to the “French Proposal” they overlap in rhetoric with the nominally centre-right party VMRO-DPMNE which is presumably pro-Western and whose leadership is in a publicly admitted mentorship of Viktor Orbán’s *Fidesz*. So, we will be once again looking at overlaps between openly pro-Russian and at least declaratively pro-Western actors who produce and reiterate the same arguments against EU accession and the treaties with Bulgaria and Greece. Here we are also including the CSOs and prominent individuals as well as media who manage to produce the same arguments and even declare for the support against the EU negotiating framework organized in the summer of 2022 by VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, which actors like Balkan Insight, BIRN Prizma and IDSCS (Institute for democracy Societas Civilis – Skopje) and EPI (European Policy Institute) call “popular pro-

tests” and avoid mentioning the fact they are organized by said political parties.

- **Data Harvesting and Data-Wrangling to Reach Qualitatively Relevant Quantitative Data**

We have employed the tools of Brandwatch, Crowdtangle and Inspectre to capture as vast a range of social media data as possible, intersecting data of profiles/actors/outlets (let us call them “content creators” as a generic term, to refer in the widest possible sense to those who produce the content that we seek to analyze discursively) with keywords and tropes. Based on our desk analysis, prior research cited in the first half of the study, and on the qualitative research we could establish lists of dozens of actors combining the obvious actors perpetuating the malign influence types of narratives, based on misinformation and media manipulation, with those who would not be too obvious or would be embedded in media and NGOs which wouldn’t be habitually the home of such voices. The results received on the list of actors have been cross-referenced with keywords and tropes (types of arguments building a specific narrative, “No to EU... as it is now” [continued by explanation why EU would never improve its policies, at least to us], for example, very commonly used by those who do not want to be perceived as anti-EU, like Nikola Dimitrov or the EPI expert Malinka Ristevska Jordanova) to receive relevant results. Multiple searches have been run which further solidify the argument that we are making here: the lines are blurred between mainstream actors once perceived as pro-EU and the openly pro-Eurasian voices in the country. The breaking point is the EU accession negotiating framework for the country dubbed “the French Proposal” (above, we discuss the manipulative nature of this strategy of misnaming). The agreements with Greece and Bulgaria, perceived as robbing the Macedonians of their national identity, paved the way leading to said breaking point, thus

our searches cover them as well.

Top searched sites are Twitter, YouTube, Infomax whereas Facebook, which is most used in the country and where most of the actors posted their selfies from the anti-EU protests,²⁵ including the incumbent prime minister Hristijan Mickovski, is strangely less searched. This indicates a non-organic, deliberate focus on the use of Twitter/X. Let us note that most of “bot farms” available in the country are on Twitter/X,²⁶ and that the Russian Embassy and its handle was most active there.²⁷ The discrepancy is striking: 912 (Twitter) vs. 39 searches (Facebook). We have noted that some of the top shared tweets have been deleted, so it would be no surprise if many Facebook posts were deleted because they were locally most exposed.

Infomax.mk is third most searched after YouTube but let us note their presence on YouTube as well: this is a channel that was overwhelmingly in support of VMRO-DPMNE and the annulment of the treaties with Bulgaria and Greece in 2020-2023. It is interesting to note that around the general elections of 2024 (held on May 8th), turned against VMRO-DPMNE claiming that both the ruling Social Democratic party (SDSM) and VMRO-DPMNE were “controlled by the oligarchs”, and that their analysis has demonstrated that the negotiating framework with EU cannot be changed, and the claim purported VMRO-DPMNE turns out to be fake news. This channel of openly right-wing nationalism shows that EU criticism and all or any opposition to the so-called French proposal does not need to be pro-Russian, as they

were emphatically pro-EU accession in the election period. This was in fact the issue that turned them against VMRO-DPMNE precisely around the elections. Their podcasts are living proof of combating media manipulation: they are figuring out in real time if and what can be changed in the EU negotiating framework, the true referent behind the “French Proposal” and their struggle to understand these concepts and legal phenomena is an illustration of the difference between misinformation, deliberate misinformation and media manipulation (discursive strategies of interpretation of facts with convenient tweaking of some of the facts and renaming/rebranding phenomena).²⁸

The top hashtag in this search “severdzan” (северџан) a derogatory moniker for those who identify with “North Macedonia” (the new name as per the agreement with Greece), meaning “Northerner” (who comes from “Nordisatan”, Severdzanistan), a deliberate orientalizing wordplay behind the name. In the searched period (2020 to 2024) it appears on the very top of hashtags, i.e., 5616 next to #Macedonians 2445, which is a hashtag that defies both the Agreement with Greece as well as that with Bulgaria. Both treaties are the precondition for the country’s full EU membership, and both are primary topics and target throughout a period of 4 years. The highest peak coincided with the protests against the “French proposal” but the fact that the term has been peaking almost rhythmically throughout the 4-year period shows that the opposition never really accepted the Agreement with Greece, and that the “real name” of the country is more important than its NATO and EU membership.

Hashtags containing “bulgarization” and “anti-Macedonianism” feature high in our outputs targeting the period of the strongest opposition to the EU Negotiation Framework (“The

²⁵ “Ristevska Jordanovska came out in front of the Government to say loudly that “NO should remain NO” [Ристевска Јордановска излезе и пред Владата гласно да каже дека „НЕ треба да остане НЕ“], *Република online* (03 July 2022) url: <https://republika.mk/vesti/makedonija/ristevska-jordanovska-izleze-i-pred-vladata-glasno-da-kaze-de-ka-ne-treba-da-ostane-ne/>

²⁶ Emil Zlatkov, “When Macedonian trolls march: Hooray for ours, gallows for yours” [Кога македонските тролови маршираат: Ура за нашиот, бесилка за вашиот], *Радио Слободна Европа* (31 May 2023), url: <https://tinyurl.com/dgce6yza>

²⁷ “The Russian Embassy in Skopje - Balkan recorder on social networks” [Руската амбасада во Скопје - Балкански рекордер на социјалните мрежи], *Радио Слободна Европа* (14 August 2023), url: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/ruskata-ambasada-vo-skopje---balkanski-rekorder-na-socijalnite-mrezhi/32543989.html>

²⁸ “Hard Talks with Petar Arsovski, Mechka i Mičo, episode 128, season four 04.04.2024” [“Тешки Муабети со Петар Арсовски, Мечка и Мичо, епизода 128, сезона четири 04.04.2024”], *Infomax Podcast* (04 April 2024) url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZgvAdstkVk&ab_channel=%D0%98%D0%B-D%D1%84%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%81

French Proposal”), following only the hashtag “no” (which is the highest number of cases linked to the keywords and topics we searched, and only appears as simple negation in the grammatical sense only in the lower margin of occurrences). This is the rate of occurrences alongside other relevant hashtags #не 247 Антимакедонизам (“Anti-Macedonianism”) 186, Македонија (“Macedonia”) 169 (also in the majority of cases used in the context of the protest rhetoric), СДСМ (SDSM, the Social-Democratic party then in government pointed out as a national traitor) 131, Бугаризација (“Bulgarianization”) 120, ЕУ 98, #етноцид (“Ethnocide”) 62 (meaning: the EU, through the French proposal, commits an ethnocide of the Macedonians).

In one of the most popular tweets in the targeted period (the peak of the protests against the “French Proposal”) posted on July 14th, 2022, the leader of the (then) biggest mainstream opposition party, an EPP member, Hristijan Mickoski unabashedly opposes Ursula von der Leyen’s encouragements to support the EU negotiating framework while perpetuating the discriminatory language toward Bulgaria as a fascist country (reference to WWII), saying (210 likes, 89 retweets). Second in its popularity is a tweet from the following day published by a VMRO-DPMNE MP stating “The treacherous agreement for the assimilation of the Macedonians should be burned. NO! to Bulgarianization!” [Shows him burning a document seemingly in parliament] (301 likes, 70 retweets). Please note, that this party won by a large margin in the May 2024 general elections, whereas the Social Democrats have been decimated. We can only infer how (and if at all) the EU negotiations process of North Macedonia will look like in the coming years.

- The Heroes of the Prespa Agreement Oppose “The French Proposal.”

It is important to note here that some of the actors that supported the agreement with Greece, even if not too publicly and

some of them in a very exposed way (such as Nikola Dimitrov who in his capacity of a minister of foreign affairs signed the agreement in 2018),²⁹ and would be target of these pejorative hashtags, in 2022 join ranks with the same actors who have been calling them “Severdzan” in opposing the EU negotiating framework and recognition of the Bulgarian minority. As shown further in this analysis (based on the 4th search of data points conducted in May and June 2024), these once politically opposing forces join ranks in spreading not only euro-skepticism but euro-nihilism (our qualitative study shows this qualification is no exaggeration) and calling for the rejection of the EU negotiating framework and abstaining from taking part in the first IGC with the EU scheduled for July 2022 – this is a call for de facto refusal to negotiate for EU accession. The clear nature of this message is obfuscated using the term “French Proposal” which is supposed to be taken as some document that France produced during its presidency with the EU to overcome the Bulgarian veto at the time (to N. Macedonia opening negotiations) but not the actual framework of negotiations. That is why it is important to note that the same actors keep repeating that “the negotiations haven’t really started” (even RFE and DW in Macedonian), but also to demonstrate that “Europe keeps lying” and “it does not want us in” (in spite of the visits of Von Der Leyen, Scholz and a number of important dignitaries addressing the Parliament in Macedonian to reassure of the opposite). The danger of the French proposal is “bulgarization” of the Macedonian identity claim even the (once) progressive actors (mainly OSI Foundation’s longstanding grantees, advocates of Open Balkans)³⁰ in addition to the rightwing mainstream, namely VMRO-DPMNE which won the elections in May 2024 with a landslide under the tutorship of experts close to Viktor

²⁹ “The Agreement to Resolve the Dispute with Greece Signed,” [“Потпишан договорот за решавање на спорот со Грција”], *Sdk.mk* (17 June 2018), url: <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/potpishan-dogovorot-za-reshavane-na-sporot-grtsija/>

³⁰ This is not to say anything against the OSI: the author of this analysis has been a longstanding grantee of OSI; I am however among those who oppose the idea of “Open Balkans” which seems to be in the focus of the Foundation.

Orbán and Fidesz.³¹

One might think that these NGO voices, once pro-Western or perceived so and former OSI grantees (EPI is a grantee to this day) cannot be that influential among the vast population. However, the searches conducted by my UK colleagues involved in a more massive study this analysis was initially part of, show that Balkan Insight and BIRN-Prizma are far more shared in the period of 2020-24 (with a narrower focus on the summer of 2022) than Twitter or Facebook or YouTube:

Top Shared Sites	Volume
http://balkaninsight.com/	30630
Prizma.mk	7725
Twitter.com	2764
Youtube.com	2349
Facebook.com	1197
t.me	1019
Idscs.org.mk	667
Birn.eu.com	503
Off.net.mk	473

The table above focuses on the authors that are critical of “the French Proposal” but presumably or until recently perceived as pro-Western and the right and leftwing nationalist parties equally. The ratio between the two types of authors is approximately 50% to 50%. Interestingly, the proponents of Open Balkans not perceived or not self-declared as anti-EU (at least until the French Proposal) are far more present in the media and far more shared than the rightwing YouTube and Twitter authors

³¹ Ljupcho Popovski, “What can Orbán offer for the election program of VMRO-DPMNE” [Што може да понуди Орбан за изборната програма на ВМРО-ДПМНЕ], *Deutsche Welle* (20 October 2023), url: <https://www.dw.com/mk/mickoski-se-otkaza-od-predvremenite-izbori-kako-sto-ke-kaze-kovacevski-za-datum-i-den-taka-ke-bide/a-67161999>

and the pro-VMRO-DPMNE online outlet OFF net.

- **Note on Serbian influence or intertwining of Serbian and Macedonian malign narratives**

It is worth noting that when the authors of the profiles and ratio I just explained are combined with Serbian sites and keywords, there are abundant results: there has been a remarkable coverage of topics and authors coming from North Macedonia and vice versa, according to our Brandwatch and Crowdtangle searches. This is in line with the theses of multiple experts that Russian influence in North Macedonia enters through Serbia,³² a fact that is reinforced by the immense popularity of Serbia and its leadership in North Macedonia,^{33 34} the general public’s perception that Serbia is the “most important ally” to North Macedonia as per the IRI 2024 Poll on Western Balkans (already cited in references above), more than any major geopolitical player, whereas Serbia declared Russia to be its most important ally in the very same poll (p. 9).

- **More on the “French Proposal” or the Peak of the Fierce Opposition to Accepting the EU negotiating framework and the invitation to the first Intergovernmental Conference held with the EU in July 2022**

The monitoring of the peaks and volume of social media debate

³² Emotional ties and propaganda: The Russian “Soft power” in the Balkans, Metamorphosis Foundation (Skopje, 28 February 2024), available at <https://meta.mk/en/emotional-ties-and-propaganda-the-russian-soft-power-in-the-balkans/>. Leaked Documents Show Russian, Serbian Attempts to Meddle in Macedonia, OCCRP Report from 2017; cited in Zoran Bojarovski who offers more sources in his recent article “Dangerous Obfuscation of Russian Influence in Macedonia” [Опасно замаглување на руското влијание во Македонија], a review of a study conducted by IKS (Institut za Komunikaciski Studii) from Skopje, published by Racin (15.04.2024), available at <https://racin.mk/analizi/opasno-zamagluvane-na-ruskoto-vlijanie-vo-makedonija/>. ³³ Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2024 Country Report — North Macedonia. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024.

³⁴ Increasingly good political, economic relations between Serbia, North Macedonia (Serbian Government: Belgrade, 31 March 2023), available at <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/204270/increasingly-good-political-economic-relations->, accessed 15 May 2024

around “the French Proposal,” when rerun with a combination of selected authors and keywords, proves that indeed this topic was massively discussed. Moreover, once again our digital tools provided results that prove that the reactions to the EU Negotiating Framework were vastly negative regardless of whether the authors/channels belong to the nationalist right (and left) or the so-called progressive “once declaredly” pro-EU mainstream. (In the first part of this study I am citing an empirical research analysis published in 2023, which proves the admitted dramatic polarization of the Macedonian CSOs and online media functioning as nonprofits like BIRN vis-à-vis the EU and the very idea of accession; hence the use of the “once declaredly”.) Our repeated search reaffirms that the most shared posts, available in Macedonian, are those of the President of VMRO-DPMNE and its vice-president, Aleksandar Nikolovski as well of the leader of the pro-Russian Left Party (Levica) Dimitar Apasiev. In the entire period of 2020 to 2024 we have captured 124,000 mentions of the monitored profiles, and it is interesting to note that Aleksandar Nikolovski is the top author in this entire period in which VMRO-DPMNE painted the government as national traitors (and the public figures supporting them, essentially a handful) for the change of the constitutional name – interrupted by what they see as mismanagement of the Covid crisis – followed by another outrage around a presumed “national treason,” namely the treaty with Bulgaria and the “French Proposal” which in the monitored discourse are fully equated.

As we find out in our search targeting the English content (presumably intended for the international public), in the English searches performed with the digital tools I mention above, the former minister of foreign affairs and the signatory of the much-celebrated Prespa Agreement (with Greece), Nikola Dimitrov, appears as the top author and staunch advocate against “The French Proposal.” Just as in the period around the French Proposal, throughout 2020-2024 the most top shared website is

Balkan Insight and the NED and EU and USAID supported think tank IDSCS appears among the top ten ranking higher than Express or Off-Net which are among the most popular neoconservative, nationalist and populist websites. Just like Dimitrov, IDSCS has built a pro-EU and pro-Western profile while systematically advocating against the EU negotiating framework, against the recognition of the Bulgarian minority which is the constitutional change required to continue the negotiating process and has been slamming the new accession methodology as non-sensical for years now (alongside EPI, European Policy Institute which are the same type of dubious actor). This is a proof a truly interesting more general finding of this study: the malign influence can be parasitic on Western funds, at least in the case of Serbia and North Macedonia and their respective Orthodox Slavic spontaneous attachment to Russia. Here is the data I refer to a couple of sentences above:

Top Shared Sites	Volume
http://balkaninsight.com/	30630
Prizma.mk	7725
Twitter.com	2764
Youtube.com	2349
Facebook.com	1197
t.me	1019
Idscs.org.mk	667
Birn.eu.com	503
Off.net.mk	473
www.expres.mk	473

Again, the boundaries between pro-EU and anti-EU actors are blurred: the mainstream be it left or rightwing states its pro-EU orientation declaratively and when called out while, at the same time, spreading EU skepticism, even nihilism and full resignation; the habitual phrases analyzed primarily in the qualitative

part but also the quantitative part of this study are: “no matter what they say, they will never let us into the Union” – “all is a lie”, “Europe is duplicitous, has been lying to us for decades,” and, in summary and paraphrase, “the negotiating framework is abundant in boobytraps leading to identity “effacement of Macedonia” mantra – the famous “Europeanization as Bulgazization” trope - and/or making it impossible to accede “due to its deliberately complex new [“French”] methodology”, are predominant content in spite of the declared EU commitment. Just for the sake of comparison, Aleksandar Vučić is also committed to the EU with certain reservations, criticism and anti-EU rhetoric, and so are these actors. I argue they are far more dangerous than the declared pro-Russian actors. An obvious overlap has been happening since 2022, and not so obviously since 2020 (the year of the decision of the EU Council to open negotiations).

This search focuses on capturing tweets by selected authors that contain links to other social media platforms. What these results show is that post-“French proposal,” the anti-EU narrative was masked under the “fight against corruption” narrative and concentrated on a project for building road corridors, specifically Corridor 8, by the American firm Bechtel & ENKA. These corridors will create a trade link and routes connecting directly Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Albania. What is more important, it creates a direct and fastest connection between the ports of the Black and the Adriatic Sea (Durrës-Varna). These findings complement those around the “French Proposal” (EU negotiating framework) in line with the timeframe proposed in our methodology: in order to undermine the process, it has been necessary to demonstrate that the US construction giant struck a corrupt deal with the social-democratic government followed by warnings about the “dangers” of recognizing a Bulgarian minority. Furthermore, as several of our searches – data point harvesting – show constant insistence that “the negotiations haven’t really begun” – the point being Europe constantly lies as

the social-democratic government, which opened the negotiations, does too. This rhetoric of adding yet another European lie to the pile of lies about the country’s EU membership has been the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back when it comes to the support of the country to the EU integration and the dramatically increased euro-skepticism that we demonstrate in the beginning of the study.

These corridors were also mentioned in the Treaty on good neighborly relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia signed in 2017 (thus preceding the Prespa agreement). Even though the procurement process was closely monitored by the European Union and USA, the main opposition party VMRO-DPMNE (a right-wing party) continued to spread innuendoes about corruption, painting a picture that the entire deal was corrupt. The peak of the attack was led by the vice-president of the party, Aleksandar Nikolovski, most notably on May 25th, 2023. The most interesting part is that this narrative was widely shared by many arguably pro-EU think tanks (EPI, IDSCS, etc.), and the rhetoric was mimicking the same narratives as the main opposition party (VMRO-DPMNE) and a media outlet with openly pro-Russian rhetoric closely linked to the party LEVICA, Antropol.

From this search, we can also see a re-emergence of the anti-Bulgarian narrative, which peaked on December 2nd and was provoked by the vice president of VMRO-DPMNE, Aleksandar Nikolovski, on the subject of the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria (regarding the use of the Macedonian language and their rights). Again, we see that this narrative was entangled with pro-EU think tanks (EPI, IDSCS, etc.) and a media outlet with openly pro-Russian rhetoric closely linked to the party LEVICA, Antropol.

We repeated the same search narrowing it down through the intersection of keywords with a greater number of outputs and

focused on monitoring activity on Twitter (now X) while focusing on the period from June 2020 to March 2024. We cross-referenced specific actors (media outlets, individuals, stakeholders, organizations, NGOs, and think tanks) with selected keywords and their activity in the English language. As the previous searches have shown, the most shared story in this period was against the so-called “French proposal,” published by the news outlet Republika.mk, which is openly pro-VMRO-DPMNE (a right-wing party).

The trend is also evident in the list of top shared sites, where english.republika.mk ranks first, followed by Balkaninsight.com. Republika.mk in English is an outlet with open ties and affinities to the rightwing nationalist party and has a history of propagating opposing the Agreement with Greece, the Treaty with Bulgaria and, of course, the EU negotiating framework. Their popularity is not surprising. However, the popularity of Balkan Insight is indeed odd: it is an outlet consulted by the expert elites, and far from being known among the general population. We can conjecture that its popularity comes from the numerous reshares by sites such as Republika.mk. However, it seems that a special effort has been made to render obscure think tanks and their websites widely shared, because websites of NGOs such as EPI and IDSCS oddly feature among the ten most popular websites.

The fact that nationalist parties, including VMRO-DPMNE with openly close relationship with Viktor Orbán, would be researching content of “liberals” and Soros funded “traitors” seems very unusual. We have no definitive explanation of this phenomenon, but we can speculate: the affinity of the “liberals” to the idea of Open Balkans, their admitted “disappointment with the EU” plays well into the hand of the anti-EU actors (even when they claim to be pro-Western EPP members, however with many caveats, such as the rightwing VMRO-DPMNE party which won

the May 2024 parliamentary elections by a landslide). As previously mentioned, a vast part of the civil society expert and media scene which had built a pro-EU and pro-Western profile, since 2022 has been systematically advocating against the EU negotiating framework, opposing the recognition of the Bulgarian minority (a constitutional change required to continue the negotiating process), and, for years, criticizing the new accession methodology as nonsensical.³⁵ Furthermore, as noted above, they have been negative about the new accession methodology and spreading conspiracy theories that it has been rendered too complex in order to make the accession for North Macedonia and Albania impossible³⁶

The Macedonian think tank organization EPI (European Policy Institute) ranks fourth among the most shared sites, which is notable because EPI has a higher share count than six media outlets. This is further confirmed by the ranking of the top authors, which includes the acting executive director of EPI (Simonida Kacarska) and the former executive director Malinka Ristevska Jordanova. Both authors are openly against the so-called “French proposal” but have built a pro-EU and pro-Western profile. The second place on this list is occupied by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikola Dimitrov, who is perhaps the most vocal opponent of the EU negotiating framework. The list also includes Marko Troshanovski, the executive director of IDSCS, another vocal opponent of the proposal.

Top Authors and Their Tweets, captured in our searches are @RepublikaEng, @Dimitrov_Nikola, @BalkanInsight, @MalinkaJor-

³⁵ Malinka Ristevska Jordanova, “Ristevska Jordanova, expert on EU: Even if we include the Bulgarians into the Constitution, Bulgaria will continue to block us”, *Republika English* (31 May 2023), url: <https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/ristevska-jordanova-expert-on-eu-even-if-we-include-the-bulgarians-into-the-constitution-bulgaria-will-continue-to-block-us/>

³⁶ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, “North Macedonia Doubts French Push to Solve Dispute with Bulgaria” *BalkanInsight* (17 June 2022), url: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/20/north-macedonia-doubts-french-push-to-solve-dispute-with-bulgaria/>

danov, @epi_skopje, @MarkoTroshan, @PrizmaBlRN to name the most prominent among the top ten.

Regarding keyword frequency, the hashtag #macedonia appears prominently and is linked with nationalist profiles or with the actors discussed above and is part of the slogans opposing "The French Proposal," along with #bulgaria, #bulgarian, and #frenchproposal.

It is an interesting and notable fact that the most shared and cited tweets (in English) during the protests against the "French proposal" were from Nikola Dimitrov (274 likes and 101 retweets for two most popular tweets; in North Macedonia, for a political debate in English and on Twitter, this is quite a remarkable number of reactions), who openly and vehemently opposed it as well as the mention of "Bulgarians in the [Preamble of the] Constitution" (an obligation of North Macedonia as part of the EU negotiation framework). Similar narratives are found in tweets from Malinka Ristevska Jordanova and Katerina Klimoska (a former employee in the Cabinet of the Minister for Education and Science, and a VMRO-DPMNE close intellectual and probably a member of the party too) and Balkan Insight who Dimitrov, as shown above, remains one of the most vocal advocates in Macedonian as well, alongside Malinka Risteska Jordanova, *Balkan Insight* and all the others mentioned above among the "not-so-usual-suspects" when it comes to propagating anti-EU not just Eurosceptic discourse. This is a discourse that plays into the hands of the habitual "malign influences," i.e., the Eurasian, even if the habitual actors and sources of finance may not be directly influenced or sponsored. As noted, much of the influence comes through Serbia, it is spontaneous, and the dream of the Ersatz Yugoslavia (Open Balkans) serves well the purposes of both Russia and Serbia and anti-EU influence in the region.

- **Closing remarks concerning the quantitative research of this study**

Thus, in the case of North Macedonia, one should focus more on the inadvertent propagators of malign influences, the strong anti-EU public voices advocating for alternatives to EU integration or for (almost naively) pure sovereigntism who are generally perceived as pro-EU (at least until the infamous "French Proposal"). They are embedded in EU and US backed NGOs and outlets or are "once heroes" of the EU integration processes in the country, such as Nikola Dimitrov, for example (but not only). The new government to be led by VMRO-DPMNE has expressly admitted not to recognize the Bulgarian minority, to ignore the Agreement with Greece by calling the country "Macedonia" (instead of North Macedonia), and to pause the accession process indefinitely until "they change the negotiating framework." As already cited, both the US Ambassador in the country, as well as the DG NEAR Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi had to debunk the promise of "changing the negotiating framework as fake news." Thus, the government in making is already stirring instability in this fragile region, and one should pay as much attention to those actors that are not openly backing VMRO-DPMNE or pro-Russian narrative, as to the ones that openly do so. In fact, more to the former than to the latter, as it is the former that creates the perception that the opposition to the EU is a national consensus backed by the reputable experts on EU accession.

