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JOURNAL FOR POLITICS, GENDER AND CULTURE

SPECIAL ISSUE

INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES SKOPJE

Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture

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This issue of *Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture* is supported by:

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PUBLISHER
Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, Skopje
Street "20 Oktomvri" nr. 8, second floor
1000 Skopje, Macedonia

Identities: Journal for Politics, Gender and Culture
ISSN 1409-9268 (print)
ISSN 1857-8616 (online)
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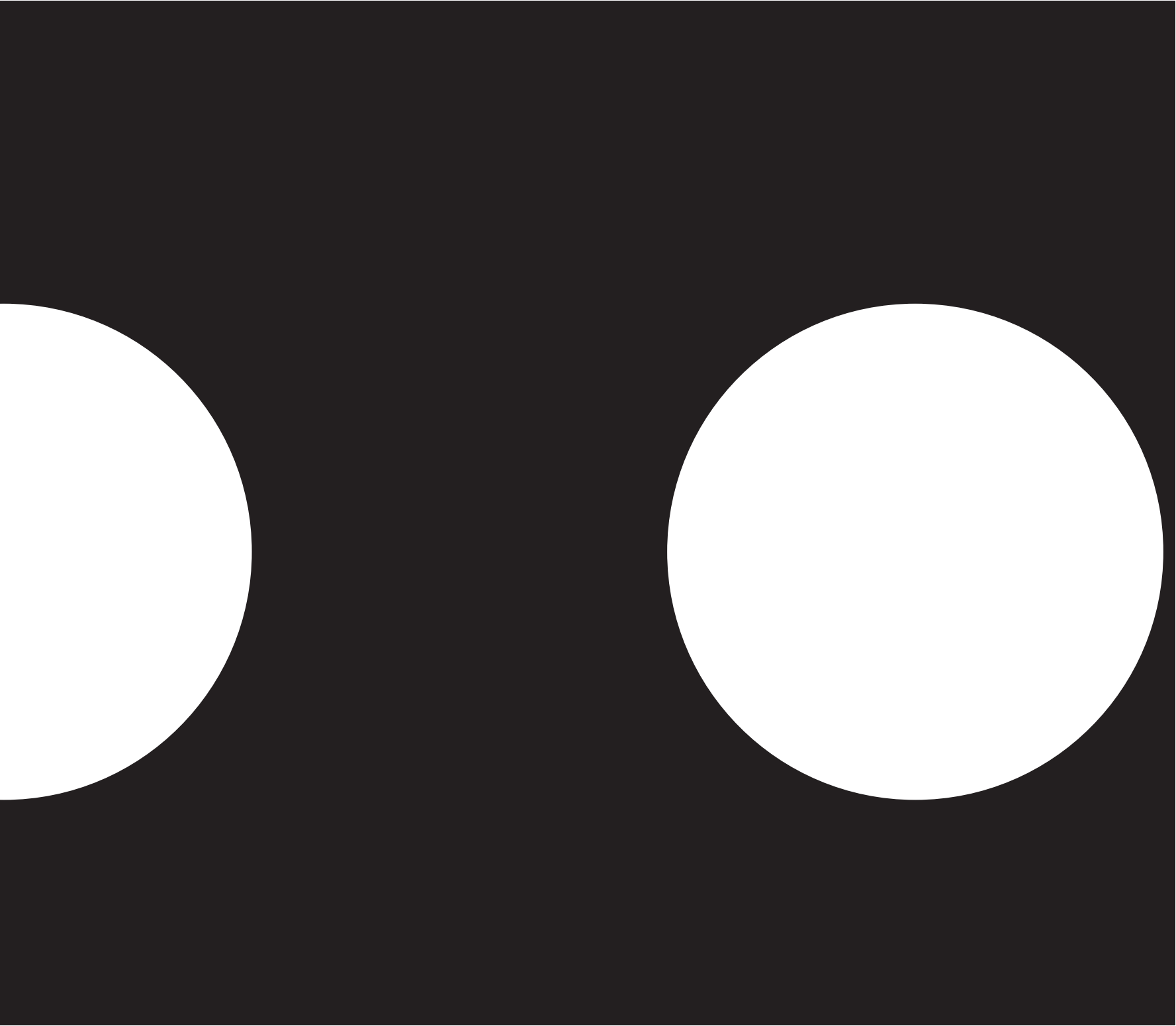
OVERCOMING POLARIZATION AND RISING EUROSCEPTICISM AND EROSION OF TRUST IN THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE OF SERBIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA

Proceedings



Jelisaveta Blagojević and Irena Cvetković

Cycling to Brussels: Democratic Subjectivity Between Situationship and Political Form

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Abstract: This paper argues that the contemporary impasse of European Union enlargement is not a temporary delay but a structural condition of political suspension. Rather than operating as a linear process of convergence, enlargement unfolds through deferral, ambiguity, and managed proximity. Drawing on political theory and recent student movements in Serbia, the paper develops the distinction between relationship and situationship to conceptualize forms of political belonging that are neither fully institutionalized nor entirely external to institutions. It argues that democratic subjectivity increasingly emerges outside institutional frameworks and that the future of enlargement depends on the capacity to recognize these emergent forms as political rather than residual.

Keywords: EU enlargement; Serbia; democratic subjectivity; political situationship; student movements; political belonging; indeterminacy.

1. Suspended Democracies: Enlargement Without Arrival

European Union enlargement has long been conceptualized as a temporal project. It presupposes movement, direction, and eventual completion. Candidate countries are positioned along a trajectory defined by reform, convergence, and accession. This trajectory is not merely institutional; it is normative. It organizes expectations about what political transformation should look like and how it should unfold. Yet this temporal logic has increasingly come undone. Enlargement no longer operates as a

process moving toward completion, but as a condition in which movement persists without arrival[1]. Negotiations continue, reforms are announced, benchmarks are evaluated, but the endpoint remains indefinitely deferred. What emerges is not stagnation but a peculiar form of continuity — a process that continues precisely by not concluding. This shift cannot be explained simply by political reluctance or institutional fatigue. It reflects a deeper transformation in the structure of political time. Enlargement no longer organizes time as progression but as suspension. The future remains open, but not in the sense of possibility. It remains open as delay.

In Serbia, this temporal shift produces a specific configuration of political life. Democratic institutions remain in place, but their function changes. Elections are held, but they no longer serve as sites of genuine contestation. Legal frameworks are maintained, but their capacity to regulate power is weakened. Public discourse expands, yet it increasingly operates within a space that is disconnected from decision-making. This configuration is often described through the language of democratic erosion or backsliding. However, such terms presuppose a deviation from a stable democratic norm. They imply that democracy has weakened and could, in principle, be restored. What they fail to capture is that democracy is not simply weakening — it is being reorganized. The persistence of institutional form alongside the erosion of political agency suggests that the problem is not the absence of democracy but its transformation. Institutions continue to function, but they no longer produce the kind of political subjectivity they once did. They stabilize power rather than opening it to contestation.

At the same time, the European Union undergoes a parallel transformation. Enlargement is no longer a political decision in the classical sense. It is not the result of a sovereign act that includes or excludes. Instead, it is governed through procedures — through reports, criteria, conditionalities, and compliance mechanisms. Decision is displaced into process. This proceduralization of enlargement does not eliminate power; it redistributes it. Responsibility becomes diffuse, and decision-making becomes opaque. Enlargement continues, but no one appears to decide it. It becomes a system that reproduces itself without requiring closure.[2] This reading resonates with recent critical approaches that interpret enlargement not as a linear process of expansion, but as a geopolitical regime structured by deferred inclusion and planetary-scale asymmetries.What connects these two transformations — in Serbia and in the EU — is a shared condition of suspension. Both operate within a temporal structure in which the future is continuously deferred. Serbia remains a candidate without becoming a member; the EU remains committed without deciding. This mutual suspension is not symmetrical. It produces clear asymmetries of power. The European Union controls the conditions, pace, and criteria of integration, while Serbia remains subject to them. Yet the relation is sustained not through resolution, but through its postponement. This asymmetry becomes most visible precisely at the level of temporality. Power operates not only through the capacity to include or exclude, but

[1] See for the legitimization of the concept of the political time, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

[2] Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities – Skopje, *Envisaging EU Enlargement…* (2024)

through the capacity to regulate time — to defer, accelerate, or suspend movement. Enlargement thus functions less as a spatial project of expansion than as a temporal regime in which access is continuously negotiated but never finalized. In this sense, waiting must be understood not simply as a condition imposed from outside, but as a structured mode of governance. Waiting organizes political participation by maintaining actors within a process that demands continuous engagement while withholding resolution. Candidate countries are required to reform, adapt, and align, yet always within a horizon that recedes as it is approached. This produces a peculiar form of political activation without transformation. Movement is constant, but its direction is unstable. Reform becomes iterative rather than cumulative, and compliance replaces decision as the dominant logic of political action. What is sustained is not progress, but the appearance of progress. For Serbia, this condition enables the consolidation of what might be described as a managed democracy. Democratic procedures remain in place, but their capacity to produce political change is constrained. External pressure for reform does not necessarily destabilize existing power structures; it can become part of their reproduction. Reform is translated into performance, and alignment into rhetoric.

At the same time, the European Union's reliance on procedural governance produces its own form of depoliticization. Enlargement becomes a technical question of readiness rather than a political question of inclusion. The criteria of accession are framed as objective and measurable, while the decision to admit new members remains indefinitely postponed. This separation between evaluation and decision allows the process to continue without requiring political commitment to its outcome. It stabilizes enlargement as a system, while suspending its resolution. In doing so, it transforms enlargement from a project of expansion into a mechanism for managing uncertainty. What emerges, therefore, is a regime in which political time is neither linear nor static, but regulated. It produces a condition in which actors are continuously oriented toward a future that does not arrive, yet remains operative as a horizon of expectation. This raises a fundamental question: what kind of political subjectivity is produced under conditions in which belonging is continuously deferred?

2. "Situationships": Indeterminacy as a Political Condition

If enlargement no longer functions as a trajectory toward inclusion, but as a condition of suspended proximity, then the conceptual vocabulary through which we understand political belonging must also shift. The binary distinction between inclusion and exclusion, inside and outside, no longer adequately captures the nature of the relation between the European Union and its candidate states. What is needed is a concept capable of describing relations that are sustained without being resolved. It is in this context that the distinction between relationship and situationship becomes analytically productive. A relationship, in political as well as interpersonal terms, implies recognition, continuity, and institutionalization. It stabilizes expectations and produces a temporal horizon oriented toward a shared

future. It defines positions, roles, and obligations. In short, it produces a form of closure, even if that closure remains open to change. A situationship, by contrast, is defined precisely by the absence of such closure. It is sustained through ambiguity, temporal openness, and deferred definition. It involves proximity without commitment, connection without institutionalization, and continuity without resolution. It persists not despite its indeterminacy, but because of it. While the term originates in the language of contemporary intimacy, its analytical reach extends far beyond it. Situationships provide a way of understanding forms of relation that are neither fully institutionalized nor entirely external to institutions. They name a mode of being-in-relation that is structured by uncertainty. This uncertainty is not simply a lack. It is constitutive. Drawing on Derrida, we can understand undecidability as the very condition of decision. A decision is only political insofar as it cannot be fully grounded in prior certainty.[3] If it were, it would be merely the execution of a rule. Political action emerges precisely where such grounding is impossible. Indeterminacy, in this sense, is not the failure of politics, but its condition. It is what makes political action necessary and possible. The attempt to eliminate indeterminacy — to reduce politics to administration, to procedure, to governance — is therefore not the completion of politics, but its displacement. Indeterminacy, however, must be understood more rigorously if it is to function as a political concept rather than a descriptive gesture. It is not simply that political situations are complex or uncertain. Rather, indeterminacy names a structural condition in which no decision can be fully grounded in prior knowledge or rule. This is precisely what Derrida insists upon when he argues that a decision, to be worthy of the name, must pass through the ordeal of the undecidable. A decision that is merely the application of a norm is not a decision, but a calculation. What follows from this is crucial: indeterminacy is not the failure of political order, but the condition of its possibility. Any attempt to eliminate indeterminacy — to render political life fully predictable, calculable, and governed by procedure — results not in the perfection of politics, but in its displacement into administration. What we are witnessing in the technocratic management of EU enlargement is precisely such a displacement. Decision does not disappear; it is absorbed into procedural frameworks that obscure its contingency. In this sense, the suspension that characterizes enlargement is not simply a delay in decision-making, but a transformation of the very nature of decision. Decisions are no longer experienced as moments of rupture or responsibility; they are diffused across time, fragmented into stages, and distributed across institutional actors. Responsibility becomes untraceable, and with it, the possibility of political accountability. Nancy's intervention further complicates this picture by displacing the idea that political belonging can be grounded in a shared identity or substance. Being-with is not a property that subjects possess, nor is it a unity that precedes difference. It is, rather, the exposure of singular beings to one another — an exposure that cannot be stabilized into a totality. Community, in this sense, is not something that can be achieved; it is something that happens.[4]

[3] For the rethinking of the concept of decision as political, see Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997).

[4] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (2000)

This has significant implications for how we understand political organization. If being-with is fundamentally exposed and incomplete, then any attempt to close it into a stable form — whether through national identity, institutional membership, or legal status — necessarily excludes the very condition that makes relation possible. Institutions, in this sense, are always partial. They organize relation, but cannot exhaust it. Glissant radicalizes this insight by introducing the notion of opacity as a political principle. Opacity is not the absence of knowledge, but the refusal of reduction. It is the insistence that relation does not require transparency[5] — that subjects can be connected without being fully understood, translated, or absorbed into a common framework.

This is particularly relevant in the context of EU enlargement, where the dominant paradigm presupposes that integration requires transparency: alignment of laws, harmonization of institutions, standardization of practices. What is lost in this paradigm is precisely the possibility of relation that does not reduce difference. Enlargement becomes a process of translation into sameness, rather than a negotiation of multiplicity.

If we take Glissant seriously, then the problem with enlargement is not only that it is delayed, but that it is conceptually constrained. It operates within a framework that equates political belonging with equivalence, rather than relation. Serbia is not asked to enter into relation with Europe, but to become recognizable within its existing categories. This is where the concept of situationship acquires its full analytical force. Situationships do not eliminate difference; they sustain it. They do not resolve relation into identity; they maintain it as a process. They are unstable, but this instability is precisely what allows for new forms of connection to emerge. Yet this also points to their limit. Situationships cannot provide the conditions for durability on their own. They require forms of articulation with institutional structures if they are to produce lasting effects. The challenge, therefore, is not to move from situationship to relationship as a linear progression, but to think how the openness of situationship can be preserved within institutional forms. This would require reimagining institutions not as mechanisms of closure, but as sites of ongoing negotiation. It would require accepting that political belonging cannot be fully stabilized, and that any attempt to do so will necessarily produce exclusions that undermine the very relation it seeks to secure.

When viewed through this conceptual lens, the EU–Serbia relation appears not as an incomplete relationship, but as a sustained situationship. It is characterized by proximity without inclusion, engagement without membership, and recognition without commitment. Serbia is integrated into processes, subject to continuous evaluation, and positioned within a horizon of eventual accession. Yet this horizon remains indefinitely deferred.

This produces a specific form of asymmetry. The European Union occupies a position from which it can regulate the temporality of integration — determining when progress is sufficient, when conditions are met, when movement can occur. Serbia, by contrast, remains positioned within a horizon that is always postponed. Its political time is struc-

[5] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (1997)

tured by waiting. This waiting is not neutral. It is a political technology. It organizes time, distributes responsibility, and produces attachment. It sustains the relation precisely by preventing its resolution. The promise of Europe remains effective not because it is fulfilled, but because it is deferred.[6] At the same time, this condition produces a particular form of political subjectivity. Subjects are constituted not through stable inclusion, but through their position within a relation that remains open. They are neither fully inside nor fully outside. They inhabit a space of in-betweenness. This in-betweenness is not merely spatial; it is temporal. It is a condition of being oriented toward a future that does not arrive. It produces a form of suspended belonging — a belonging that is felt, enacted, and desired, but not fully recognized. Yet this condition is not without tension. The very indeterminacy that sustains the relation also destabilizes it. The absence of closure generates uncertainty, frustration, and disorientation. It produces a sense of being held in place. This is where the limits of situationship as a political form become visible. While it enables the emergence of new forms of relation, it does not provide a stable framework for their continuation. It opens space, but does not organize it. It allows for movement, but does not guarantee direction. The political challenge, therefore, is not to replace institutional forms with situationships, but to rethink the relation between them. This requires a reconfiguration of institutions themselves — not as mechanisms of closure, but as frameworks capable of sustaining openness. Such a reconfiguration would require a shift in how we understand political order. Rather than grounding it in stability, identity, and resolution, it would have to be understood as a process of continuous negotiation. Institutions would need to be capable of accommodating indeterminacy without collapsing into instability. This is not a technical adjustment; it is a conceptual transformation. It requires abandoning the idea that politics aims at closure. Instead, it suggests that politics unfolds through the management of what cannot be resolved.

[6] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011)

3. Cycling to Brussels: Student Movements and the Return of the Political

If the EU–Serbia relation can be understood as a prolonged situationship sustained through deferral and temporal asymmetry, then the question becomes where, and how, political subjectivity can still emerge within such a condition. If institutions no longer function as sites of political articulation, and if belonging is continuously postponed, what forms of political life remain possible?

Recent student movements in Serbia provide a crucial point of departure for answering this question. These movements do not simply respond to institutional failure; they operate in a way that redefines the very conditions under which politics takes place. Their significance lies not only in what they demand, but in how they act. Through practices such as walking, cycling, occupying public spaces, and reclaiming universities, these movements produce a form of political presence that cannot be fully captured within institutional frameworks. Their actions are not reducible to representation. They do not speak only through demands articulated to power; they act through the creation of a shared space in which political subjectivity be-

comes visible. What is at stake here is a shift from representation to presence. In representative politics, political subjects act through mediation — through institutions, parties, and procedures that translate collective will into decision. In these movements, however, political action is enacted directly, through the act of appearing together. This appearance is not merely symbolic. It is constitutive. It brings into being a political space that did not exist before. Streets, squares, and campuses become sites of articulation, not because they are designated as such, but because they are occupied and transformed through collective action. In this sense, these movements do not simply intervene in politics; they produce it. They enact democracy not as a system of governance, but as a mode of collective existence. Democracy appears here not as something to be implemented, but as something to be practiced. At the same time, these movements resist closure. Their demands — justice, dignity, ecological responsibility — are articulated in ways that do not reduce to a single ideological framework. They open space rather than closing it. They produce a field of contestation in which meanings remain negotiable. This openness is not a weakness. It is a condition of their political force. It allows for the emergence of forms of solidarity that are not based on fixed identity, but on shared exposure and participation. It enables coordination without rigid hierarchy, and belonging without formalization.

In this sense, these movements can be understood as political situationships. They are sustained through intensity, affect, and presence. They generate relations that are real and consequential, yet not fully institutionalized. They operate through proximity without closure. What becomes particularly significant in this context is the way these movements reconfigure the relationship between political subjectivity and space. Space is no longer a neutral backdrop against which political action unfolds; it becomes something that is actively produced through movement. Streets, campuses, and public squares are not simply occupied—they are transformed into sites of articulation through the very act of being traversed collectively. This transformation is inseparable from the role of the body. In institutional politics, the body is often abstracted or rendered secondary, replaced by representation, delegation, and procedural mediation. Here, however, the body reappears as a central medium of political expression. To walk, to cycle, to remain present over time—these are not merely symbolic acts, but material practices that produce political meaning. These practices introduce duration into political action. They require time, effort, and persistence. They unfold not in isolated moments, but across extended sequences of movement. This temporal dimension is crucial, as it contrasts sharply with the temporality of suspension that characterizes enlargement. Where enlargement defers, these movements endure. Where institutional processes postpone, bodies persist.

Cycling, in particular, intensifies this dynamic by introducing rhythm as a condition of collective action. Cyclists do not simply move together; they must continuously adjust to one another. Distance and proximity are constantly negotiated. Speed is not fixed, but collectively modulated. Coordination emerges not from central command, but from distributed attention. This produces a form of orga-

nization that is neither hierarchical nor chaotic. It is structured through relation. Each participant remains singular, yet movement depends on their capacity to respond to others. What is enacted here is not unity, but synchronization—a form of being-with that remains open, contingent, and unfinished. At the same time, this mode of movement foregrounds exposure. Unlike enclosed or mediated forms of political participation, cycling takes place in direct contact with the environment. It involves risk, vulnerability, and the possibility of interruption. This exposure is not merely a constraint; it is constitutive of the political intensity of the movement. It produces an awareness of shared presence that cannot be fully translated into representation. In this sense, cycling can be understood as a materialization of relation in Glissant's sense: a mode of connection that does not require reduction, that allows for multiplicity, and that unfolds through movement rather than stabilization. Participants do not become identical; they remain different while moving together.

This has important implications for how we understand the relation between movements and institutions. Rather than viewing movements as preliminary or transitional — something that must eventually be translated into institutional form—cycling suggests a different temporal logic. Movement does not necessarily aim at closure. It can sustain itself as a form of political existence. This does not eliminate the need for institutions, but it destabilizes their exclusivity. It suggests that political life cannot be fully contained within institutional frameworks. There are forms of organization, coordination, and belonging that emerge outside of them, while remaining deeply political. At the same time, the question of durability remains unresolved. The very openness that enables these movements to emerge also makes them difficult to sustain over time. Without mechanisms of stabilization, they risk dissipation. Yet any attempt to stabilize them risks undermining the conditions that made them possible. This tension should not be resolved prematurely. It is precisely within this tension that the political significance of these movements resides. They do not offer a model to be replicated, but a problem to be thought: how to sustain forms of collective action that remain open, relational, and non-totalizing.

It is here that the metaphor of cycling to Brussels acquires its full force. It no longer refers simply to movement toward a destination, but to a form of movement that redefines the meaning of destination itself. Brussels, in this sense, is not only a place, but a horizon — a point that organizes movement without fully determining it. To cycle toward Brussels is therefore not simply to move closer to institutional inclusion. It is to inhabit a form of political action that refuses to be governed exclusively by the logic of arrival: to remain in motion without subordinating movement to completion.

Cycling is movement without guarantee. It does not follow a predetermined path toward a fixed endpoint. It requires constant adjustment, coordination, and effort. It is collective, but not centralized. It is directional, but not teleological.

Unlike walking, which implies proximity and continuity, or driving, which implies control and enclosure, cycling occupies a space in between. It is exposed, vulnerable, and

dependent on others. It requires balance — not as a stable condition, but as an ongoing activity. This mode of movement offers a way of thinking about political action under conditions of suspension. It neither accepts stagnation nor presupposes arrival. It moves without guaranteeing where it will end. Within the context of EU enlargement, cycling disrupts the temporality of waiting. Instead of orienting political action toward a deferred future of membership, it enacts movement in the present. It refuses postponement as the dominant temporal structure. In doing so, it redefines what it means to be pro-European. Being pro-European is no longer reducible to aspiring to institutional inclusion. It becomes a matter of enacting democratic practice — of embodying the values that are said to define Europe, regardless of whether recognition is granted. This redefinition introduces a fundamental shift. The central question of enlargement is no longer whether Serbia is ready for Europe, but whether Europe is capable of recognizing democracy when it appears outside its institutional frameworks. This question is not merely rhetorical. It exposes a structural limitation in the current enlargement paradigm. If democracy can only be recognized when it conforms to institutional criteria, then forms of political life that exceed those criteria remain invisible or illegible. In this sense, enlargement risks reproducing the very exclusions it claims to overcome. It extends the promise of inclusion while maintaining the conditions that prevent it. It sustains relation while deferring recognition.

The student movements challenge this logic not by rejecting Europe, but by rearticulating it. They insist that democracy is not the property of institutions, but a practice that can emerge wherever collective action takes place. They shift the site of Europe from institutional structures to political action. This shift has significant implications. It suggests that the future of enlargement cannot be determined solely through policy, negotiation, or institutional reform. It depends on the capacity to recognize forms of political life that do not fit established categories. Such recognition would require a transformation in how political belonging is understood. It would mean acknowledging that democracy does not exist only where it is formally recognized, but also where it is enacted. This, in turn, requires rethinking the relation between institutions and political subjectivity. Institutions would need to become capable of responding to forms of political life that emerge outside their frameworks. They would need to engage with openness rather than suppress it.

Cycling, in this sense, names not only a form of movement, but a mode of political imagination. It suggests that political action does not need to wait for recognition in order to be real. It can proceed without guarantee, without closure, without predetermined outcome.

Conclusion

The contemporary condition of European Union enlargement reveals a fundamental transformation in the logic of political belonging. Enlargement no longer operates as a linear process of convergence, but as a regime of suspension that organizes expectation without fulfillment. This transformation cannot be adequately understood within the framework of institutional analysis alone. It requires a conceptual shift toward forms of relation that are struc-

tured by indeterminacy. The distinction between relationship and situationship provides one way of articulating this shift.

Situationships name a mode of political relation that is sustained through ambiguity, openness, and deferred definition. They capture forms of belonging that are neither fully institutionalized nor entirely external. They make visible a dimension of political life that remains obscured within binary frameworks of inclusion and exclusion. At the same time, situationships are not sufficient as political forms. Their openness enables emergence, but does not guarantee continuity. The challenge is therefore to think their articulation with institutional structures — to develop forms that can sustain indeterminacy without collapsing into instability. Recent student movements in Serbia provide an example of how such articulation might begin. Through practices of collective presence, they enact forms of democracy that are not reducible to institutional frameworks. They demonstrate that political subjectivity can emerge in spaces that are not formally recognized as political. The metaphor of cycling to Brussels captures this condition. It names a form of movement that is collective, contingent, and open-ended. It resists both stagnation and teleology. It suggests that political action can proceed without guarantee.

In this sense, the future of enlargement is not simply a question of policy or institutional reform. It is a question of political imagination. It depends on the capacity to recognize that democracy is not only a system to be implemented, but a practice to be enacted. To take this seriously would require a transformation in how political belonging is understood. It would mean acknowledging that political life unfolds not only within institutions, but also in the spaces between them.

It is in these spaces — uncertain, open, and contingent — that new forms of relation become possible.

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Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities – Skopje. Envisaging EU Enlargement in an Era of a Newly Rediscovered Notion of European Geopolitics on a Digital Planetary Scale. Skopje: Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities – Skopje, 2024

Spasimir Domaradzki

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, different 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 tensions[1], 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 Intergovernmental 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 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

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

[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 environment[4]. The process 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 led 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 prawnoporównawcza, 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'etat 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'etat

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 home[5].

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 nexus[6]. 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 decade[7]. 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, Ithaka 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 survey[8]. 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 consistent[9]. 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 Brussels[10].

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 membership[11] and that Bulgaria is considered to be the main threat by 74,2% of the respondents[12], 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 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.

[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

[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'etat

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'etat.* 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 different[14] 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'etat*.

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

[14] 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'etat* 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, monitoring 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 EEC[15]. 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 Communities[16]. 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 Luxemburg 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 Rzecząpospolitą 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-rzeczapospolita-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 citizens[17]. 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.

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 process[19]. 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 Union[20]. 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

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

[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 integration[23] 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 requirements[24].

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 identity[25].

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 meant 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 Macedonia[26]. 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 arguments[27] 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'etat* 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-smisal-ot-sreshta-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'etat* remain the main ingredients of a successful quest for joining the EU.

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Illiberal loyalists: Viktor Orbán's regional clientelistic networks in the Western Balkans

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Abstract: *After the decisive Hungarian parliamentary election on 12 April 2026, which ousted long-time Prime Minister Viktor Orbán from power, it might be apt to take stock of his policies toward the countries of the Western Balkans. Officially, the Hungarian government, under the leadership of Orbán, always supported the EU accession of the Western Balkan countries, but at the same time adopted anti-EU narratives. Moreover, on a bilateral level Orbán provided financial and political support to establish loyal networks and influence politics in the region. Orbán's objective was to create a regional leadership role for himself, which seems to be the driving factor of establishing close relationships with the political leaders in the region. The research question is whether Orbán succeeded in establishing a leadership role in the Western Balkans, supported by a regional clientelist network? The article provides an overview of the background of the Hungarian foreign policy role and Orbán's interpretation of Hungary's place in Europe. The paper provides insights into Hungary's motivations for cooperation with the Western Balkan states and how the anti-EU narratives and the disdain for "Brussel" in FIDESZ rhetoric were framed. Moreover, the paper examines the concepts of clientelism, corruption, and state capture, which were partly deliberately expanded into Hungary's neighbouring states in order to increase Hungarian influence in the region. The paper assesses the bilateral relations between Hungary and the Western Balkan states from 2010 until 2026, with a special focus on relations with Serbia and North Macedonia. The analysis of the bilateral relations is based on investigative reports and newspaper articles. The relationship with Orbán can be categorised into a low-intensity of just personal sympathy, a more strategic relationship of ideological alignment and the final stage, which combines loyalism, ideological outlook and links it to the establishment of clientelist networks.*

Keywords: *Western Balkan, Hungary, clientelism, state capture, anti-EU rhetoric*

Introduction

"Orbán is looking for vassals in the Balkans, politicians who accept him as a regional leader and with whom he can have cordial ties", Istvan Szent-Ivanyi, expert on the Western Balkans, former Hungarian ambassador to Slovenia and former member of the European Parliament.[1]

One of Hungary's foreign policy priorities is its active support of EU enlargement for the countries of the Western Balkans, Moldova and Georgia. For Orbán, the accession of Ukraine was unacceptable.

When Hungary, together with many other former socialist countries, became an EU member in 2004, it seemed that the country had achieved its objective by "returning to Europe". Hungary's experience of EU accession was considered to be a role model for other states. However, the post-socialist countries experienced different political realities, compared to the founding members of the EU. After the enthusiasm of EU membership faded, resentment was building up in the societies of Central Europe. The political elites in the countries of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, the Visegrád Group (V4), started questioning the EU's underlying norms and values. Within the V4 countries, a sentiment emerged that the "older" EU member states and the EU's founding members do not fully appreciate Central European perspectives. During the so-called migrant crisis in 2015, differences in attitudes became apparent. The V4 countries opposed the EU's proposal of accepting refugees on the basis of an agreed quota and publicly took a diverging stance from the EU mainstream opinion. The EU's internal cohesion was challenged. From 2015 onwards the then Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán became more outspoken and moulded its role as a foreign policy leader. He publicly opposed German Chancellor Angela Merkel on the EU's proposed refugee plan. At the time two political role models were on offer, "the Merkel way" or "the Orbán way". Orbán depicted himself as a defender of Christian Europe in general[2] and acted as a speaker for the Central European EU countries, which had their grievances and felt misunderstood by the "West".

Meanwhile, the disillusionment with the EU's accession process in the Western Balkans grew and negatively affected politics in the region. The EU enlargement process became a slow, unpredictable, and tedious process which produced no progress. Despite rhetorical promises by the EU, its member states occasionally blocked the enlargement and left the Western Balkan countries in a political limbo. Hungary's commitment to the accession of the Western Balkan states remained a priority and still is. Hungary, or rather its former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, attempted to take up a regional leadership role by actively engaging with the countries of the Western Balkan region. While in the Western Balkan region the frustration with the EU took hold, Orbán maintained its support of the accession countries and gained their trust. These relations were substantiated by the narrative that Hungary better understood the Western Balkan states than the "old" EU, due to the shared historical experiences of foreign domination and of post-socialist transition. As a result, the ambiguous situation emerged in which Orbán openly criticised the EU on a number of political issues, including its fundamental values, while continuing to support the policy of EU enlargement.

[1] Edit Inotai and Srecko Latal "Viktor Orbán's visit to Bosnian Serb strongman puzzles observers", *BalkanInsight* (November 9, 2021). https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/09/viktor-orbans-visit-to-bosnian-serb-strongman-puzzles-observers/ (accessed on April 16, 2026).

[2] Ian Traynor, "Migration crisis: Hungary PM says Europe in grip of madness", *The Guardian* (September 3, 2015). https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/03/migration-crisis-hungary-pm-victor-orban-europe-response-madness (accessed on April 16, 2026).

Moreover, Orbán pushed for a more political enlargement process, with less focus on conditionality. In 2019, the Hungarian diplomat Olivér Várhelyi was appointed EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, who showed a tendency to especially assist Serbia in moving forward on its EU accession path. Soon enough it became apparent that the EU made a mistake by trusting a close ally of Orbán with the task of fostering EU enlargement. By demanding a stronger political influence, Hungary weakened the "merit-based principle", which is the EU's strategic approach to EU membership.

The paper discusses the tendencies of the transfer of policies, procedural approaches, and ideas of Viktor Orbán's illiberal model to the countries in the region and his motivation of supporting and working with other more autocratic political leaders in the Western Balkan region. This close political cooperation was accompanied by economic investments and financial aid from Hungary to the candidate countries, creating dependency, fostering corruption and establishing clientelist networks in the region. The paper puts a focus on Hungary's special relations with Serbia, which moreover impact on Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, as well as, North Macedonia. Both cases combine ideological motives, as well as the ambition of establishing profitable clientelist network. After providing an overview of the background and the political context of Orbán's Western Balkan politics, the concepts of clientelism, corruption and state capture, political ideas are introduced and in the final part the bilateral relations with the Western Balkan countries are presented. The objective is to demonstrate Orbán's attempts to expand his policies and models to Hungary's neighbours and how he gained importance and influence in the region. These dynamics are discussed under the term of regional clientelism, a network based on personal loyalism, cross-border corruption and state capture supported and funded by Orbán's Hungary. The overall question of the paper is whether Orbán succeeded in establishing a leadership role in the Western Balkans, supported by a regional clientelist network?

Background: Hungary's Role and Influence in Neighbouring Regions

From the moment Hungary regained its full sovereignty in 1991 and was able to conduct an independent foreign policy, it followed three main principles: Euro-Atlantic integration, good neighbourly relations, and support for the Hungarian minorities living abroad.[3] Hungary became a NATO member in 1999 and immediately faced the difficult situation of joining the NATO mission against Serbia with the objective to curtail its aggression against Kosovo's population at the time. Hungary was concerned about possible retaliatory acts against its Hungarian minority in Serbia, but still participated in the mission. Hungary also initiated the Szeged Process in 1999 within the framework of the Stability Pact to support democratic forces in Serbia.[4] With the accession to NATO and the EU, the goals shifted and Hungary became an active partner and a strong advocate for the Western Balkan states in the EU's enlargement process. The V4 group made EU enlargement a main priority, but it was Hungary — due to its location and its Hungarian minorities in the region – that became the main promoter of EU accession of the Western Balkan countries. Before Orbán's anti-EU policies prevailed, Hungary supported the Western Balkan region

[3] Beáta Huszka, "Hungary's Western Balkan policy in the Visegrad context", *EU Frontiers,* Policy Paper, Centre for EU Enlargement Studies - CEU CENS (Budapest, November 2010) p. 7.
[4] Beáta Huszka, "Hungary's Western Balkan policy in the Visegrad context", *EU Frontiers,* Policy Paper, Centre for EU Enlargement Studies - CEU CENS (Budapest, November 2010) p. 11.

through the established regional or European institutions,[5] but with increased criticism of the EU, Hungary started to intensify bilateral relations with the Western Balkan countries. Huszka argues that supporting EU enlargement of the Western Balkan countries "serves Hungary's rational self-interests."[6] According to Huszka, the well-established relations of the Hungarian Government under Viktor Orbán with the countries of the Western Balkans can be explained due to geographical proximity, the existence of Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries, as well as the strong economic connections. Moreover, due to Orbán's ambitions, the regime tried to establish and maintain relationships with new partners, who would spread the values of illiberal populism and nationalism, argues Huszka.[7]

From the perspective of the Western Balkan countries, the cooperation with Hungary is beneficial, because Hungary provides practical and political support in implementing the required reforms for EU accession. The Western Balkan countries understand that any EU member country can block or delay the enlargement process, so an overall gratitude exists for having in Hungary a supportive partner. In the case of Kosovo, however, Hungary became an obstacle to membership in regional organisations, because Orbán felt that Hungary had to remain loyal to Serbia's wishes. The relationship between Hungary, as an EU member, with the Western Balkan states, as EU candidate countries, is asymmetrical. Orbán could use this asymmetry to his advantage to bolster his own personal profile in providing various forms of assistance and by working closely with the political elite in the region. On the other hand, Orbán was assisted by strong politicians in the region, who officially reinforced Orbán's profile as regional leader. The Western Balkan "stabiliocrats"[8] who claim to provide political stability in the region, while in fact continuously creating instabilities themselves, at the same time charmed Orbán to receive financial, political and administrative support to bolster their anti-democratic policies in the region. Orbán's personal ambition created an opportunity for the regimes in the Western Balkans to take advantage of him for their own benefit.

Expanding Clientelism and State capture

Orbán's regime was dominated by one-party,[9] which had built a clientelist network, based on corruption and state capture. Similar features can also be found in the Western Balkan countries, such as Albania under Prime Minister Edi Rama (since 2013), the then Republic of Macedonia under the premiership of Nikola Gruevski (2006–2016) and the current regime of Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić (since 2014), as well as the former president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik (2010-2018, 2022-2025).

Political clientelism is seen as a "particularistic exchange of material benefits (distributed by patrons) for political services (performed by clients)".[10] Bliznakovski defines political clientelism

[5] Zlatko Šabić and Annette Freyberg-Inan, "Central Europe and the Balkans. So Close and Yet So Far", in *Regional and International Relations of Central Europe,* eds. Zlatko Šabić and Petr Drulák, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), pp. 261-285, here p. 272.

[6] Beáta Huszka, "Eurosceptic yet pro-enlargement: the paradoxes of Hungary's EU policy", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,* Vol 17, No. 4 (2017), pp. 591-609, here p. 593.

[7] Beáta Huszka, "Eurosceptic yet pro-enlargement: the paradoxes of Hungary's EU policy", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol 17, No. 4 (2017), pp. 591-609, here 593.

[8] Florian Bieber, "The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies", *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development,* No. 10, (2018), pp. 176-185.

[9] Although the Fidesz government was officially in coalition with the KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party, Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt), which was not promoting an independent policy from Fidesz.

[10] Jovan Bliznakovski, "Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans: Collections of Papers", in: *Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans,* eds. Jovan Bliznakovski, (Skopje: Institute for Sociological, Political and Judicial Research, 2021), pp. 3-12, here p. 3.

as "a dyadic relationship based on asymmetry of power and contingency [...] where the role of patrons is assumed by political parties, their members, and most broadly, the political elite, while the role of clients by a variety of social actors, including (but not limited to) citizens/voters, civil servants, judges, private companies and religious leaders."[11] Clientelism is an informal hierarchy, based on the asymmetrical relationship between politicians, acting as patrons and dependent citizens. The main aim of the politicians is to remain in office, which also benefits the politicians` clients. Politicians taken on the role of middlepersons between the state institutions and the citizens, who ensure that the "loyal" citizens receive benefits. The patrons can provide a range of different services from election handouts, access to welfare, employment opportunities to procurement contracts and business permits. The clients, on the other hand, are expected to reciprocate by voting for the candidate, or for being actively engaged in election campaigns, in the organisation of party events, or for providing financial support to the party or party members or any other forms of assistance.[12] Politicians' "services" contribute to disparities, intransparency, unfairness and inefficiency within societies. Djolai and Stratulat note that clientelism creates "negative and destructive dynamics within social relations that disempower many citizens",[13] contributes to a breakdown of social networks, as well as a decline of social trust within society. Clientelism is based on unequal power relations between the politician and the citizen, depends on reciprocity and contributes to unfair and non-transparent distribution of services and goods. Clientelism is accompanied by the politicisation of the public administration and favouritism, which impacts negatively on the effectiveness and efficiency of state institutions. Citizens are trapped in these asymmetrical informal relationships because it becomes nearly impossible to access the state's services or social benefits through a regular, transparent pathway.[14] The existence of clientelist systems damages democratic structures, because the power is held by informal networks, instead of the state, that should be the main, independent and neutral provider of social and public services. Political clientelism has remained very resilient in the countries of the Western Balkans and undermines democratic processes.[15]

Connected to the phenomenon of clientelism are the concept of state capture and corruption. State capture is an intentional activity of extracting financial resources from the state for the use of the political and economic elites. The political elite controlling the political institutions, together with business elites, use state structures, facilities and resources for their own personal benefit.[16] State capture is the "collusion of political and economic elites with the goal of extraction from the state".[17]

[11] Jovan Bliznakovski, "Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans: Collections of Papers", in: *Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans,* eds. Jovan Bliznakovski, (Skopje: Institute for Sociological, Political and Judicial Research, 2021), pp. 3-12, here p. 4.
[12] Jovan Bliznakovski, "Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans: Collections of Papers", in: *Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans,* eds. Jovan Bliznakovski, (Skopje: Institute for Sociological, Political and Judicial Research, 2021), pp. 3-12, here p. 4-5.
[13] Marika Djolai and Corina Stratulat, "Clientelism (Chapter 5)", in: *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion,* eds. Marko Kmezic, Florian Bieber, Policy Study, BiEPAG (Graz 2017), p. 73 -74. https://www.biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TheCrisisofdemocracy.pdf (accessed on April 18, 2026).
[14] Marika Djolai and Corina Stratulat, "Clientelism (Chapter 5)", in: *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion,* eds. Marko Kmezic, Florian Bieber, Policy Study, BiEPAG (Graz 2017), p. 78-79. https://www.biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TheCrisisofdemocracy.pdf (accessed on April 18, 2026).
[15] Jovan Bliznakovski, "Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans: Collections of Papers", in: *Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans,* eds. Jovan Bliznakovski, (Skopje: Institute for Sociological, Political and Judicial Research, 2021) pp. 3-12, here p. 3.
[16] Predrag Cvetičanin and Jovan Bliznakovski, Nemanja Kristić, "Captured states and/or captured societies in the Western Balkans", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,* Vol 24, No. 1 (2024) pp. 41-62, here p. 41.
[17] Predrag Cvetičanin and Jovan Bliznakovski, Nemanja Kristić, "Captured states and/or captured societies in the Western Balkans", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,*

Due to the prevailance of state capture in Hungary and in the Western Balkan countries, it became easier to establish business deals, whereby Orbán was able to direct investments to certain areas, especially to the Vojvodina and the Republika Srpska. Overall, Hungary as a neighbouring country has a natural interest in maintaining good political relations and exploring possibilities of investment in the countries of the Western Balkans. Orbán's good relations with the local political elites seemed to have been boosting Orbán's political profile in the region and opened up some non-transparent business deals and financial transactions. Similarly, the state capture systems in the Western Balkans solidified the political leaders' positions, hence any outside support in providing funds was welcome, whereby the cooperation between Orbán and the politicians in the region was beneficial for everyone involved.

A result of clientelism is the phenomenon of "society capture" or "captured society", which describes a situation where people cannot freely participate in the political process, but are rather bound to wishes or demands of their "patrons". Not only citizens are captured, but also political parties, trade unions, civil society organisations, as well as private businesses and media companies.[18] People's dependency on the assistance of politicians in obtaining employment, permits for businesses or access to social services "captures" the citizens' choices and behaviour.

These clientelist dynamics depend on the individual contexts of the Western Balkan countries and their political leadership. Orbán with the help of his regional partners was able to use the clientelist networks in the Western Balkan countries to expand his own influence. Apart from Vučić's support for Orbán's activities, the Hungarian Prime Minister was in close contact with a Hungarian minority party, which he "captured" to ensure that it implemented Orbán's policies in the Vojvodina. The Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ) is the largest Hungarian minority party in Serbia and is ideologically aligned with Orbán's Fidesz party. VMSZ won six seats in the Serbian parliament and nine seats in the local Assembly of Vojvodina. In this capacity, the party bolsters Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Moreover, the Hungarian government gained access to the Pannon RTV station based in Vojvodina, founded in 2006 in Subotica, which adopted the Hungarian National Council's media strategy (Magyar Nemzeti Tanács média stratégiájának) in 2012.[19]

Orbán's ambition to be accepted as a regional leader was easiest to achieve in the Western Balkans, given the asymmetrical relationship between EU member state Hungary and the Western Balkan candidate countries. The Western Balkan countries dependent on the support of the EU and its member states to achieve EU membership. On the other hand, the cooperation with the Western Balkan states was smoother for Orbán because of the similarities in personalities in the respective governments and Orbán's ability and willingness to provide investments.

Narrative of Orbán's Government

Orbán's ideological orientation might be traced back to experienced disappointments regarding Hungary's EU membership and the perception of not being fully accepted as an equal partner. In 2004, Hungary joined the EU, and since 1999 it has been a NATO member. Hungary successfully managed the difficult po-

Vol 24, No. 1 (2024) pp. 41-62, here p. 43.

[18] Predrag Cvetičanin and Jovan Bliznakovski, Nemanja Kristić, "Captured states and/or captured societies in the Western Balkans", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol 24, No. 1 (2024) pp. 41-62, here p. 41-42.

[19] Pannon RTV, Pannon TV, https://pannonrtv.com/pannon-tv (accessed on April 29, 2026).

litical and economic transitions and the EU integration process. However, the transformation from socialist to democratic, liberal market economy has deeply impacted Hungarian society. The "shock therapy" of sudden economic and political reforms resulted in a sense of insecurity among the wider population. Not only were the populations of the post-socialist countries exposed to existential transformations, but these experiences were not valued by the EU.

The migration situation in 2015 was another turning point in the relations between the "old" and the "new" EU member states. The diverging stands on the issue of migration contributed to the idea that the Central European states were not being taken seriously and were supposed to be policy takers only, rather than active policy makers. Since then, the Hungarian government under Viktor Orbán began to oppose some EU policies and rejected EU values. In 2014, Orbán in his famous speech in Băile Tuşnad (Tusnádfürdő), declared that he would adopt the illiberal form of government for Hungary.[20] Since then Orbán continued to speak out against liberalism and in favour of a Christian Europe, defending its values.[21] His politics became more nationalist, following his interpretation that Central Europe - due to its history of communism and its denial of national sovereignty - is more positively related to national values.[22] Bershidsky writes: "Post-communist nations have taken two decades to decide what they are, and the decision is almost unanimous: They are countries based on strong national traditions and interests".[23] Orbán attempted to offer an alternative policy model to the EU members and to the EU candidate countries. For more than a decade "the EU has been challenged by geopolitical competition from the outside and by nationalism and illiberalism from within".[24]

Orbán demanded that EU member states' sovereignty be strengthened and the influence of "Brussels" limited. Orbán depicted this as a conflict over sovereignty within the EU, which Fidesz occasionally compares to the former Soviet Union's control over Hungary.[25] According to Orbán, the EU's liberal ideas were "inevitably prone to a despotism which they tend to call 'the rule of law' but which is simply 'the rule of blackmail'; they are vulnerable to infiltration by Soros-style networks, and if they are forced to choose between the citizens of individual national communities and the big guns of global capital, in the end they will always opt for the latter."[26] The concept of liberal democracy was questioned by Orbán: "The doctrine that 'democracy can only be liberal' - that golden calf, that monumental fetish - has been toppled. [...] It seems that conservative and

[20] Edit Inotai, "Hungary's Orban tries to give 'illiberalism' a makeover", *BalkanInsight* (July 30, 2019). https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/30/hungarys-orban-tries-to-give-illiberalism-a-makeover/ (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[21] Viktor Orbán, "Viktor Orbán's speech at the 14th Kötcse civil picnic" (September 5, 2015) published September 17, 2015, *Website of the Hungarian Government*. https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-14th-kotcse-civil-picnic (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[22] Ivan Krastev and Stephan Holmes, "Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 29, Issue 3 (July 2018) pp. 117-128, here p. 120.
[23] Leonid Bershidsky, "A Nationalist Eastern Europe Reshapes the EU", *Bloomberg Opinion* (September 7, 2016). https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2016-09-07/a-nationalist-eastern-europe-could-reshape-the-eu (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[24] Faris Kočan and Marko Lovec, "What can the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union do for the Western Balkans?", *ÖGfE Policy Brief* 12 '2021 (October 4, 2021), p. 1. https://www.oegfe.at/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PB-122021.pdf (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[25] Krisztina Than, "Hungary's Orban accuses Europe of 'Soviet-style' meddling", *Reuters* (January 5, 2013) https://www.reuters.com/article/world/hungarys-orban-accuses-europe-of-soviet-style-meddling-idUSBRE9640BS/ (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[26] Viktor Orbán, "Together we will succeed again" (September 21, 2020), Originally published in Hungarian in *Magyar Nemzet*, https://miniszterelnok.hu/together-we-will-succeed-again/ (accessed on April 30, 2026).

Christian democratic parties and political movements can finally escape from the deadly embrace of the liberals'".[27] Orbán argued that "radical change was needed in the organising mode of society and the community. We expressed this by saying 'yes' to democracy and 'no' to liberalism."[28]

Pragmatism made Orbán change from an originally liberal politician to a Christian-conservative one, and pragmatism was a trait of his political style which he applied to bilateral relations. Orbán was a regional promoter of an illiberal, national, and traditional governance model and pushed for changes in the EU's enlargement policy.

Hungary's position on the Western Balkan enlargement

For some years now a power struggle over the hearts and minds of the EU candidate countries wishing to join the EU, emerged. The "old" EU, which is perceived to have been in a state of a prolonged crisis for more than fifteen years and was not able to deliver on EU membership for the Western Balkan countries, was opposed by Orbán's more technical and pragmatic approach to EU enlargement. Orbán promoted the idea that EU enlargement is a political process, which should not focus on compliance with the preconditions for accession, such as the rule of law and the EU's fundamentals. Hungary presented itself as an alternative role model for the Western Balkan states.[29]

Hungary enjoyed a high level of trust in the region. The more objective reasons for maintaining close relations with the region are of an economic and security nature, as well as energy security. Additionally, Hungary always referred to shared cultural links and experiences of occupation or domination by empires, such as the Ottoman empire, the Austro-Hungarian empire and later the communist experience. Countries in the Southern European region can relate to these shared historical legacies. Hungary's support for the Western Balkan countries is very much appreciated in the region, whereby it is perceived as an "honest broker". Orbán took the side of the Western Balkan countries by claiming that the EU had shown a lack of interest in the region, even though the Western Balkan countries had implemented sufficient reforms, while the EU had failed to deliver on its promises. He criticised the EU, asserting that further accession delays would invite external influence in the region. Orbán argued that a focus on the issue of rule of law or quality of democracy is not providing a useful approach, rather a political decision on accession should be taken by the EU. Orbán promoted the political approach to EU accession and consequently weakened the EU's "merit-based process", which foresees fundamental reforms prior to accession. In 2019 Hungarian diplomat Olivér Várhelyi served as EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, a position in which he indirectly supported Orbán's approach to the EU accession process.

Yet, some EU member states are cautious to proceed with the Western Balkan enlargement, due to previous negative experiences - especially the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, as well as, Hungary's, Poland's and meanwhile Slovakia's democratic backsliding incidents. Because of these experiences, the EU insists on compliance with its fundamental values, especially the rule of law. A pure political approach is not in the interest of the majority of EU countries. The more enlargement-sceptic countries within the EU fear that the Western

[27] Viktor Orbán, "Together we will succeed again" (September 21, 2020), Originally published in Hungarian in *Magyar Nemzet,* https://miniszterelnok.hu/together-we-will-succeed-again/ (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[28] Viktor Orbán, "'Yes' to democracy, 'no' to liberalism", (July 28, 2019). https://miniszterelnok.hu/yes-to-democracy-no-to-liberalism/ (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[29] Fanni Elek and Christina Griessler, "Hungary, an anti-role model for successful EU integration?", *ÖGfSE Policy Brief,* Vienna: Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik (October 22, 2021). https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/hungary-an-anti-role-model-for-successful-eu-integration/ (accessed on May 1, 2026).

Balkans may not fully incorporate EU values and may question them once they achieve EU membership. The cohesion of the EU could be weakened furthermore and political leaders such as Orbán, who are making the case for an illiberal model of democracy would benefit from the EU accession of similarly minded leaders. The group of defective democracies within the EU would grow and ultimately fundamentally change the basis on which the EU is built.

Another important aspect is that a shift of power within the EU would occur, once Serbia and other Western Balkan states have joined the EU. The push for a revision of the EU values might follow. Orbán had an interest in side-lining the issue of rule of law, which his government was not complying with. Hungary throughout the last years, tried to strengthen its economic and political ties and to present itself as an investor and political friend. Over the years, Hungary had established excellent relations with Serbia, on a political as well as on the personal level between Orbán and Vučić. Hungary had improved its relations with Albania, North Macedonia and the Republika Srpska. Relations with Montenegro were overall good and focused on economic cooperation; with Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina relations are more complex due to Hungary's preference of Serbia.

Hungarian bilateral Relations to the Western Balkans[30]

Although Hungary has always been supportive of EU enlargement of the Western Balkans, Orbán has made relations with the countries a personal issue. He maintained good relationships with some of the Western Balkan leaders and he travelled there regularly. For years, Hungary provided administrative assistance in preparation for EU accession by posting Hungarian experts to the countries. Moreover, Hungary delegated military personnel for the peacekeeping missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina (EUFOR Althea) and Kosovo (KFOR). Hungarian diplomats and experts were involved in UNMIK, EULEX and other international activities in the region.[31] Despite Orbán's policies, Hungary has acquired an expertise in the region, provided valuable support to the countries and was seen as an "honest broker" for the countries' interests. With the new Tisza government, it can be expected that Hungary's foreign policy will move away from the clientelist policies and the personal loyalties established by Orbán and (re-)connects with all the countries on an equal basis.

The analysis of the bilateral relations between Hungary and the Western Balkans focusses on Serbia and its closer neighbourhood, where it has a strong political influence, such as Republika Srpska and Kosovo. On the other hand the case study of North Macedonia and its mainly political connections are analysed. At the end a brief look at Albania and Montenegro brings this chapter to a conclusion.

Serbia: Hungary's main regional partner in the Western Balkans

Relations between Hungary and Serbia were central to Orbán's Western Balkan policy during his time in government. They were key to understanding Orbán's policies towards Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo and are therefore discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

[30] The part on the bilateral relations between Hungary and the countries of the Western Balkans is partly based on a previously published Blog by Christina Griessler, "Viktor Orbán und die Staaten des Westbalkans: Strategische Vernetzung oder transregionaler Klientelismus?" [Viktor Orbán and the Western Balkan states: Strategic networking or transregional clientelism?], *AUBlog,* (Andrássy University Budapest, 2026) https://aub.eu/universitaet/nachrichten/viktor-orban-und-die-staaten-des-westbalkans-strategische-vernetzung-oder-transregionaler-klientelismus/ (accessed on May 1, 2026).

[31] Mehdi Sejdiu, "Hungary and Kosovo a Cautiously Active Relationship", in: *Hungary in/and the Western Balkans, eds.* Hungarian Institute for International Affairs, *Foreign Policy Review* Vol. 17, No. 1, (Budapest 2024), pp. 76-100, here p. 89.

Serbia and Hungary have undergone a successful reconciliation process, which had already begun prior to 2010. Historically, the relations were tainted by the events of the two World Wars and the atrocities committed on both sides. Vojvodina, once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire home to a substantial number of Hungarians, became part of Serbia after World War I. During World War II the region was occupied by Hungarians, but returned to Yugoslavia after the war. Atrocities on both sides took place during those years. The massacre of Hungarians against Serbs in January 1942 in Novi Sad and the retaliation against Hungarians committed in autumn of 1944, when the partisans took over the area, remained in living memory. The shifting of borders and rearrangements of territories have impacted the neighbourly relations and demonstrates the interconnectedness of both countries. During communism relations improved a bit, but outstanding historical issues were not addressed.

Shortly after Hungary joined NATO in 1999, it was part of the NATO campaign against Serbia to halt the atrocities in Kosovo. The Hungarian government at the time was concerned that their NATO engagement could lead to reprisals against the Hungarian minority in Serbia. Occasional attacks against the Hungarian minority in Serbia were recorded previously; therefore, the objective of the Hungarian government was to improve their relationship with the Serbian government after 2000. In September 2004 Hungarian President Ferenc Mádl visited Serbia and Montenegro and met with President Svetozar Marović to address the issues of bilateral relations and the Hungarian minority. President Mádl also visited Subotica in Vojvodina at the time.[32] The attempts to promote a reconciliation process were intensified around 2010, when politicians from both sides publicly addressed the committed crimes during the two World Wars. A joint commission of historians was established in 2010 to examine the historical events. Reciprocal visits and participation of politicians in commemorative events took place. In 2012, the then-presidents of Hungary and Serbia, János Áder and Tomislav Nikolić, commemorated the innocent Hungarian and Serbian victims of the World Wars. In 2013, in a speech before the Serbian Parliament, János Áder apologised for the crimes committed by Hungarians during the Second World War. Further reconciliation efforts followed in the subsequent years, attempting to shift the public discourse toward a more positive perspective regarding the opposing sides' negative attitudes.[33]

For Orbán, Serbia was the most important partner in the region due to its direct proximity and his personal ties to President Aleksandar Vučić. Although Vučić, at the beginning of his term as Prime Minister (2014-2017), appeared to be a pro-EU politician, this image has since been replaced by that of an autocrat. Since 2014, both governments have organised regular joint meetings on the bilateral level. The frequency of visits between Orbán and Vučić increased, after the Hungarian elections in 2018.[34] In September 2021, a Strategic Partnership Agreement between the then Prime Ministers Viktor Orbán and Ana Brnabić was signed, which was accompanied by a number

[32] Nicholas Wood, "Attacks Against the Hungarian Minority in Serbia Are Increasing", *New York Times,* (September 16, 2004). https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/16/international/europe/attacks-against-the-hungarian-minority-in-serbia-are-in.html (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[33] Gyurkovics Virág, "Intertwined Political Relations Between Hungary and Serbia", *Átlátszó Vajdaság*, (November 19, 2024) https://atlatszo.rs/en/2024/11/19/intertwined-political-relations-between-hungary-and-serbia/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[34] Fanni Elek, "Die special relationship zwischen Viktor Orbán und Aleksandar uund deren Einfluss auf den serbischen EU-Beitrittsprozess" [The special relationship between Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić and their influence on the Serbian EU accession process], *Andrássy Working Papers zur Demokratieforschung,* No. 12, (Budapest, 2023). https://aub.eu/forschung/andrassypublikationen/die-special-relationship-zwischen-viktor-orban-und-aleksandar-vucic-und-deren-einfluss-auf-den-serbischen-eu-beitrittsprozess/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

of bilateral activities, such as cooperation regarding opening smaller border crossings, infrastructure, cooperation between young farmers, and economic cooperation.[35] The strategic partnership was strengthened by the close personal ties between Orbán and Vučić, as the two leaders meet regularly bilaterally and on European level, including regular EU-WB summits and since 2022, the biannual meetings of the European Political Community (EPC). In June 2023, the then Presidents of Serbia and Hungary signed a joint political statement on establishing the Strategic Council for Cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and Hungary. During that meeting the construction of a new oil pipeline, connecting Serbia and Hungary, was agreed, as well as establishment of a joint gas trading company, aiming for closer cooperation in the area of natural resources and energy. Additionally, cooperation in the area of asylum, migration, border traffic control, customs administration, agriculture, infrastructure and strategic cooperation in the area of defence were established.[36]

The relationship between Vučić and Orbán was a rather solid one. Overall Orbán was quite supportive of the Vučić government, even when it jeopardised relations with other countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina or Kosovo. Also, the incident when Serbian hooligans took part in orchestrated violent protests in the North of Kosovo in June 2023, which led to severe injuries of Hungarian KFOR-Soldiers, Budapest remained silent.[37] The day before the violent protests, Hungarian Foreign Minister Szijjártó was a speaker at Vučić's organised demonstration in Belgrade, which was meant to counter the large public anti-Vučić protests at the time. Hungary was clearly taking sides with its friend Vučić instead of the people.

Both governments were ideologically aligned and tried building more autocratic political systems in their respective countries, thereby undermining democratic standards, weakening political institutions, attacking civil society organisations and trying to take over the media. Internationally, they maintained their good contacts with Russia and China and facilitated their investments in the region, with the intention to provide an overly positive image of these autocratic regimes. Because of Orbán's and Vučić's shared policies and close relations to autocratic external actors, such as Russia and China, EU scepticism in the countries increased.[38] The involvement of a Hungarian company in the Chinese railway project between Belgrade and Budapest became public knowledge after the deadly accident in Novi Sad in November 2024. According to sources, the task of an Hungarian company, involved in the project, were consulting, design, and supervision,[39] and it remains unclear whether the company is in

[35] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Serbia, "Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between Serbia and Hungary" (September 8, 2021), https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/news/strategic-partnership-agreement-signed-between-serbia-and-hungary (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[36] The Government of the Republic of Serbia "Serbia, Hungary sign several agreements aimed at strengthening cooperation", (Palić, June 20, 2023). https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/208530/serbia-hungary-sign-several-agreements-aimed-at-strengthening-cooperation.php (accessed on May 4, 2026); Magyar Nemzet, "Serbia-Hungary relations reach a new level", (June 20, 2023), https://magyarnemzet.hu/english/2023/06/serbia-hungary-relations-reach-new-level (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[37] Gergely Nyilas, "Why it's a failure of Hungarian foreign policy if Hungarian peacekeepers in Kosovo were attacked with Belgrade's prior knowledge", *Telex.hu,* (June 5, 2023). https://telex.hu/english/2023/06/05/why-its-a-failure-of-hungarian-foreign-policy-if-hungarian-peacekeepers-in-kosovo-were-attacked-with-belgrades-prior-knowledge (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[38] Agon Maliqi, "What Orbán's defeat in Hungary means for the Western Balkans", *Dispatches,* Atlantic Council, (April 22, 2026). https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/what-orbans-defeat-in-hungary-means-for-the-western-balkans/ (accessed on May 11, 2026).

[39] Gyurkovics Virág, "Hungarian Company Supervising Railway Reconstruction in Serbia Pocketed Millions", *Atlátszó vajdaság* (November 13, 2024). https://atlatszo.rs/en/2024/11/13/hungarian-company-supervising-railway-reconstruction-in-serbia-pocketed-millions/ (accessed on May 12, 2026).

part responsible for the failure of the construction. Corruption has been identified as a cause for the accident, which led tragically to 16 people being killed.

The dominant Hungarian minority party, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (*Vajdasági Magyar Szövetség,* VMSZ) was closely connected to the Orbán government. Moreover, it supported the policies of President Vučić and has been part of the Serbian governing coalition since 2014.[40] Hungary rewarded the political cooperation of VMSZ with investments, which primarily benefited VMSZ members.[41] Hungary's investment activities in Vojvodina were not always transparent, particularly when financing was channelled through football clubs[42] or other foundations, such as *Pásztor István Alapítvány* or the *Prosperitati Alapítvány*. Even shortly before the election, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó travelled to Vojvodina to hand over more financial support for companies in the region. Overall, 183 billion HUF (approx. €517 million) were invested in sectors of agriculture, industry and tourism.[43] The VMSZ has campaigned for Orbán's Fidesz during the Hungarian elections, to ensure that ethnic Hungarians with Hungarian citizenship voted for Fidesz. The cooperation between VMSZ and Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) was approved and even fostered by Budapest. This created the impression that the VMSZ became a tool for the Orbán government to maintain Vučić's power, but as a consequence the party became "captured" by Orbán and was less able to pursue their own policies. There is no surprise that also Vučić and Orbán have publicly supported each other's election campaigns for years. However, just some days before the Hungarian elections in April 2026, the incident of the discovery of a bomb next to a gas pipeline providing oil for Hungary close to Kanjiza in Serbia, was interpreted differently by Orbán and Vučić. This "incident" should have supported Orbán's narrative, that Hungary is under attack by Ukraine, but Vučić did not confirm this interpretation and consequently damaged Orbán's election campaign. Still, Vučić considers Orbán as a friend.[44] Over the years, these political contacts have facilitated the expansion and deepening of economic ties. However, the lack of transparency surrounding investments in Vojvodina makes it difficult to assess the extent to which Orbán's government was able to establish a localised "state capture-system", which used the local state institutions for personal benefits. For sure, the tight connections to the VMSZ, the dominance in some Hungarian media outlets, such as Pannon RTV, and the politically important role of the VMSZ in the Serbian government, in the Assembly of Vojvodina and in the Hungarian National Council (*Magyar Nemzeti Tanács*) enabled Orbán to establish a clientelist network of dependence in Vojvodina. Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić established some good personal relations and fostered further cooperation in other areas, especially Hungary's support of Serbia's EU accession.

The close political cooperation and the non-transparent economic transactions between the countries contributed to a neg-

[40] Ungarn heute, "Ungarn in Serbien erreichen ihre Wahlziele" [Hungarians in Serbia achieve their election goals] (December 18, 2023). https://ungarnheute.hu/news/ungarn-in-serbien-erreichen-ihre-wahlziele-47391/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[41] Gyurkovics Virág, "Twelve Tycoons", *Átlátszó Vajdaság* (February 13, 2023). https://atlatszo.rs/en/2023/02/13/twelve-tycoons/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[42] Gyurkovics Virág, "Invisible money: Hungarian government's €14 million grant for a soccer academy and stadiums in Vojvodina spent in a non-transparent way", *Átlátszó* (October 20, 2018). https://english.atlatszo.hu/2018/10/20/invisible-money-hungarian-governments-e14-million-grant-for-a-soccer-academy-and-stadiums-in-vojvodina-spent-in-a-non-transparent-way/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[43] Hungary Today, "New Investments Help Strengthen the Hungarian Community in North Serbia", *Hungary Today,* (March 25, 2026). https://hungarytoday.hu/new-investments-help-strengthen-the-hungarian-community-in-northern-serbia/ accessed on May 9, 2026).

[44] European Western Balkans, "First frictions between Magyar and Vučić in post-election public statements", *European Western Balkans,* (April 14, 2026). https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2026/04/14/first-frictions-between-magyar-and-vucic-in-post-election-public-statements/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

ative development of democracy in both countries. The VMSZ became part of the "state capture" system, which channelled Hungarian interests and funds into projects in Vojvodina, thereby fostering cross-border corruption and demanding unquestioning loyalty.

The relationship between Budapest and Belgrade under a Tisza government will change, but both governments are aware of the importance of the bilateral relations and the necessity to cooperate in the future. For the Hungarian government the support of the Hungarian minority remains a priority of its foreign policy, but advantages the VMSZ had enjoyed so far will be retracted, as a new Hungarian party has emerged, the Vojvodina Hungarian Restart (VMÚ; *Vajdasági Magyar Újrakezdés*), which is ideologically aligned with the Tisza party. Magyar has already proclaimed that he will investigate the last years of Hungarian funding for Vojvodina to reveal irregularities. Overall, it would be a positive development once the dominance of the VMSZ ends and other parties are able to participate in a pluralistic political scene within the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina.

Republika Srpska and the relations to Bosnia-Herzegovina

The relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina are rather complicated. Hungary on the one hand officially supported BiH's EU accession, but on the other Orbán was seemingly on good terms with the former separatist President of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik. Hungary provided troops and military support for the EUFOR Althea mission for years and was even leading the mission from 2024 until 2025.[45] However, Orbán's visits to the capital Sarajevo were not as frequent as to Banja Luka, the administrative capital of Republika Srpska. Moreover, Orbán's name was also linked to a non-paper (or even several non-papers) emerging in March and April 2021, which suggested a division of Bosnia-Herzegovina along ethnic lines.[46] Rumours stated that the Orbán government together with former Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša had a hand in the drafting and/or leaking of the "non-paper", but this was never officially confirmed. Relations between Hungary and the Republika Srpska in political and economic areas were intensified from 2019 onwards,[47] which is proof of the good personal relationship between Orbán and Dodik. Dodik even referred to Orbán as a friend of the Serbian people and Orbán officially supported Dodik's election in a video message in 2022.[48] However, Serbian President Vučić also had a vested interest and played a crucial role in connecting both politicians. Dodik visited Hungary in 2019 and in September 2021 he attended the Budapest Demographic Summit as a speaker. In November 2021, Orbán met with Dodik in Banja Luka without coordinating with EU politicians, which fuelled suspicions that Orbán would support the Serbian demand for the secession of Republika Srpska. Dodik repeatedly threatened to declare Republika Srpska's independence, defied the orders of the High Representative, and thus violated the 1995 Dayton Agreement. Orbán's decision to travel to Banja Luka to meet Dodik in June 2023 immediately after only a brief official

[45] Eszter Bányász, "EUFOR: Successful Hungarian Command Year Comes to a Close", *Hungarian Defence Forces Online*, January 23, 2015. https://defence.hu/news/eufor-successful-hungarian-command-year-comes-to-a-close.html (accessed on May 11, 2026).

[46] Edit Inotai and Srecko Latal, "Viktor Orbán's visit to Bosnian Serb strongman puzzles observers", *BalkanInsight,* (November 9, 2021). https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/09/viktor-orbans-visit-to-bosnian-serb-strongman-puzzles-observers/ (accessed on May 1, 2026); Julianna Ármás; Ferenc Németh and Anna Orosz, "Non-papers on border changes in the Western Balkans: promise of an easy solution or a hazardous game?", *KKI Policy Brief, KE-2021/43,* (Budapest: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021), p. 6.

[47] Gyurkovics Virág, "Hungary's Neighbour of Honour: Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Átlátszó Vajdaság* (February 6, 2025). https://atlatszo.rs/en/2025/02/06/hungarys-neighbour-of-honour-bosnia-and-herzegovina/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[48] Azem Kurtic, "Hungary's Orban Champions Bosnian Serb Chief Ahead of Elections", *BalkanInsight,* (September 29, 2022), https://balkaninsight.com/2022/09/29/hungarys-orban-champions-bosnian-serb-chief-ahead-of-elections/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).

visit to Sarajevo was regarded as a diplomatic affront.[49] On August 20, 2023 Dodik attended the World Athletics Congress in

Budapest, where several people of Orbán's illiberal network met.[50] In April 2024, Orbán was awarded with the Order of Merit of Republika Srpska by Dodik.[51]

While the US imposed sanctions on Dodik in 2022, Orbán supported the regime with a €100 million loan in the framework of Hungary's Responsible Neighbourhood Policy and blocked any sanctions at the EU level.[52] The loan was provided by Hungary's State EXIM Bank and came with a fixed interest rate at 5 percent for a duration of 10 years.[53] Additional funds, that were €35 million in 2022 and an additional €17 million in 2023, were provided to enable small and middle-sized enterprises[54] and farming enterprises to purchase Hungarian agricultural machinery.[55] These programmes, as well as the €100 million loan that ultimately grew to €110 million, were available only to the Republika Srpska. In 2024, financing of €140 million for energy infrastructure projects in Republika Srpska was agreed upon. Some of these projects were ones from which Germany had withdrawn due to the sanctions.[56]

Despite Orbán's support for the country, relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina remain somewhat strained. Although Hungary played a constructive role in the administrative and technical preparations for EU accession, the Hungarian policy had been inconsistent with its generous economic and political support for Dodik. An agreed cooperation agreement with the Hungarian Diplomatic Academy, which was intended to train 50 experts by the Hungarian diplomatic service, was abruptly suspended by Bosnia in May 2025 because Hungary voted against the EU resolution recognising the Srebrenica massacre as genocide. The matter was later resolved.[57]

At the beginning of 2025, it became known that Orbán had sent the Hungarian Anti-Terrorist Unit (TEK) to Republika Srpska to protect Dodik. The TEK force, up to 70 strong, entered Bos-

[49] Hungary Today, "Being Good Neighbors Is a Policy Shared by Budapest and Sarajevo", *Hungary Today* (June 23, 2023), https://hungarytoday.hu/being-good-neighbors-is-a-policy-shared-by-budapest-and-sarajevo/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[50] Euro News, "Hungary using World Athletics Championships to boost ties but EU and NATO leaders not invited", *Euro News* (August 19, 2023). https://www.euronews.com/2023/08/19/hungary-using-world-athletics-championships-to-boost-ties-but-eu-and-nato-leaders-not-invi (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[51] About Hungary, "PM Orbán: Bosnia's Serb community can rely on Hungary's continued support", *News in brief,* (April 8, 2024). https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/pm-orban-bosnia-s-serb-community-can-rely-on-hungary-s-continued-support (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[52] Jasmin Mujanovic, "Hungary's Orban: Investing in the Destruction", *BalkanInsight* (January 5, 2022) https://balkaninsight.com/2022/01/05/hungarys-orban-investing-in-the-destruction-of-bosnia/bi/ (accessed on May 2, 2026); Inotai, Edit, "Orbán: Hungary gives €100 Million Support To Bosnian Serbs", Reporting Democracy, BIRN, *BalkanInsight* (December 21, 2021). https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/21/orban-hungary-gives-e100-million-support-to-bosnian-serbs/rd/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[53] RFE/RL's Balkan Service, "Republika Srpska Signs Loan Agreement With Hungary's State EXIM Bank", *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty,* (December 19, 2022). https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnia-srpska-hungary-loand-orban-dodik/32183392.html (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[54] Edit Inotai, "Orban: Hungary gives €100 Million support to Bosnian Serbs", *BalkanInsight* (December 21, 2021). https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/21/orban-hungary-gives-e100-million-support-to-bosnian-serbs/ ((accessed on May 2, 2026); Azem Kurtic,"Bosnia's Serb entity welcomes Hungary's 35 Million euros in Aid", *BalkanInsight* (July 1, 2022). https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/01/bosnias-serb-entity-welcomes-hungarys-35-million-euros-in-aid/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[55] Edit Inotai, "Hungary announces millions more in grants for Bosnia's Republika Srpska", *BalkanInsight* (May 26, 2023) https://balkaninsight.com/2023/05/26/hungary-announces-millions-more-in-grants-for-bosnias-republika-srpska/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[56] Daria Sito-Sucic, "Hungary to help with $156 mln energy projects in Bosnia´s Serb region", *Reuters* (April 5, 2024). https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/hungary-help-with-156-mln-energy-projects-bosnias-serb-region-2024-04-05/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[57] Edit, Inotai, "Hungary throws diplomatic weight behind Bosnian Serbs during Dodik visit", Reporting Democracy, *BalkanInsight* (May 15, 2024). https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/15/hungary-throws-diplomatic-weight-behind-bosnian-serbs-during-dodik-visit/ (accessed on May 2, 2026); Gyurkovics Virág, "Hungary's Neighbour of Honour: Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Átlátszó Vajdaság,* (February 6, 2025). https://atlatszo.rs/en/2025/02/06/hungarys-neighbour-of-honour-bosnia-and-herzegovina/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).

nia-Herzegovina in civilian clothes and apparently had orders to remove Dodik from the country in case of an arrest. Dodik had been convicted by a Bosnian court of disobeying the orders of the High Representative. Once the operation became publicly known, the Hungarian side declared it a police exercise.[58] As a consequence of Dodik's conviction, he became barred from holding political office for a total of six years, which is the reason why elections had to be held and Dodik's party colleague, Siniša Karan, was elected President of Republika Srpska in February 2026. In January 2026, shortly before the presidential election in Republika Srpska, in which Dodik was no longer eligible to run, he travelled to Budapest with his deputy, Ana Trišić Babić, to hold talks with Orbán.[59] This indicates that Dodik still holds informal power in Republika Srpska and wanted to guarantee that Orbán would continue the cooperation.

Hungary's relationship with Republika Srpska was based on economic advantages and similar personal interests. The funding provided to Republika Srpska was only available for the Serbian entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina and was not earmarked for reforms required for EU accession. The Hungarian Government provided money to Dodik to avoid state bankruptcy and assisted smaller companies to buy Hungarian machinery from their own funds. Connected with these financial arrangements comes a dependence and certain expectations, which can be described as clientelist. Reasons explaining Orbán's behaviour in the relationship with Dodik are that he wanted to be accepted as a regional leader and was willing to pay for it, and that he with the help of the clientelist network benefited from the financial transactions and the business arrangements. On the other hand, Dodik had a friend in the EU, which averted EU sanctions, politically supported him and provided funding, when needed. Although Orbán was actually in a stronger position, because Hungary is an EU and NATO member, Dodik was able to gain more out of this relationship. For both sides, clientelism and corruption must have played an additional role to be willing to maintain the contacts.

With the new Hungarian Prime Minister Péter Magyar the special relations with Republika Srpska are likely to end and contacts to Sarajevo strengthened. What can be expected is that Hungary reconfigures its foreign policy approach towards Bosnia-Herzegovina, continuing its constructive assistance of the country's EU accession, but ends the toxic political situation in the Republika Srpska. Magyar might consider launching an investigation into the funds provided by Hungary to the Republika Srpska.

Kosovo: In the shadow of Serbia

Kosovo is discussed in the context of Serbia's influence on the country, as Serbia is in the position to block any political development in the area of regional cooperation and the EU integration process. Kosovo is in a vulnerable position opposite to Serbia. Hungary's close relations with Serbia meant that it was politically siding with Serbia at the European and international level and has not been a trustworthy partner for Kosovo.

Hungary's recognition of Kosovo in 2008, occurred before Orbán took office in 2010, and happened shortly after Kosovo's declaration of independence. Hungary opened a Liaison Office

[58] Szabolcs Panyi, "Orbán's covert Bosnia Operation: Special Forces stood ready to extract Dodik", *VSquare* (March 6, 2025) https://vsquare.org/viktor-orban-tek-special-police-forces-bosnia-banja-luka-milorad-dodik-extraction-us-tensions/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).

[59] Prime Minister Viktor Orbán / MIT, "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán had talks with President of Republika Srpska", Homepage of *Viktor Orbán* (January 31, 2026). https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/prime-minister-viktor-orban-had-talks-with-president-of-republika-srpska-2026-01-31/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).

in Pristina already in 2005.[60] From 2008 until 2012 Hungarian diplomats were part of the International Steering Group (ISG), which was established to observe Kosovo's implementation of independence, and the International Civilian Office.[61] In 1999 Hungary participated to a limited extent in the NATO mission against Serbia. While it made available its airspace and military bases, it did not participate in combat operations for the fear of reprisals against the Hungarian minority in Serbia. Since 1999, Hungary has been sending military personnel to KFOR in Kosovo. Hungary also assisted in the European Union Rule of Law Mission, the EULEX programme.[62] Even prior to the start of Orbán's second government in 2010, Hungary was administratively active and engaged in Kosovo. Although Orbán's government officially declared to support all the countries of the Western Balkan on their path to EU membership, a preferential policy towards Serbia became obvious by its activities. During Orbán's premiership maintaining good relations with Serbia was a priority, but at the same time it had to fulfil its obligations within NATO and the EU. Hungarian KFOR soldiers have been stationed in northern Kosovo to help maintain peace between Serb communities and the Kosovo authorities. Unfortunately, an incident happened in May 2023, whereby Hungarian KFOR soldiers were attacked and severely injured by Serbian protesters. The Hungarian government remained silent, not to damage the relationship with the Serbian President Vučić. Only the then Hungarian president Novák visited the soldiers in hospital, once they had been transported back to Hungary.[63] In the same year three Kosovar policemen were abducted from Serbian police by asserting that they had crossed over onto Serbian territory, which was disputed by Kosovo. Orbán officially asked Vučić to release the three policemen, and Vučić complied with. This was presented as a success of Orbán, despite the EU's parallel efforts to convince Vučić to hand over the policemen to Kosovo. In January 2023 Hungary voted against Kosovo's admission to the Council of Europe with the argument that a solution between Serbia and Kosovo in relation to the Serb minority in Kosovo needs to be found, before the membership.[64]

Although talks between Vučić and Kosovar Prime Minister Kurti took place in Ohrid in March 2023, Vučić refused to sign the reached agreement. In March 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) voted in favour of Kosovo's admission, but Kurti opposed to agree on the statutes of the Association of Serbian-Majority Municipalities (ASMM).

Although Hungary officially maintains good diplomatic relations with Kosovo, Orbán would have sacrificed these to ensure he did not offend Serbia. Although economic relations between Kosovo and Hungary have improved in recent years, Serbia remains a key partner.[65] Diplomatic visits between the two coun-

[60] Alejandro Esteso Pérez , "A triangle of (mis)trust: Hungary's Enlargement Stakes in Serbia and Kosovo", *BiEPAG Policy Brief,* (2024), p. 15, https://www.biepag.eu/publication/policy-brief-a-triangle-of-mistrust-hungarys-enlargement-stakes-in-serbia-and-kosovopdf (accessed on May 6, 2026).

[61] Mehdi Sejdiu, "Hungary and Kosovo, a Cautiously Active Relationship", in: *Hungary in/and the Western Balkans, eds.* Hungarian Institute for International Affairs, *Foreign Policy Review* Vol. 17, No. 1, (Budapest 2024) pp. 76-100, here p. 77, p. 89.

[62] Mehdi Sejdiu, "Hungary and Kosovo, a Cautiously Active Relationship", in: *Hungary in/and the Western Balkans, eds.* Hungarian Institute for International Affairs, *Foreign Policy Review* Vol. 17, No. 1, (Budapest 2024), pp. 76-11, here p. 77.

[63] Gergely Nyilas, "Why it's a failure of Hungarian foreign policy if Hungarian peacekeepers in Kosovo were attacked with Belgrade's prior knowledge", *Telex.hu,* (June 5, 2023) https://telex.hu/english/2023/06/05/why-its-a-failure-of-hungarian-foreign-policy-if-hungarian-peacekeepers-in-kosovo-were-attacked-with-belgrades-prior-knowledge (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[64] Hanga Zsófia Aradi, "Szijjártó: Hungary will vote against Kosovo's admission into European organizations", *Telex.hu,* (January 10, 2023). https://telex.hu/english/2023/01/10/szijjarto-hungary-will-vote-against-kosovos-admission-into-europe-an-organizations (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[65] Alejandro Esteso Pérez, "Orban will sacrifice Kosovo to keep Serbian Ally Sweet", Reporting Democracy, *BalkanInsight* (May 16, 2024), https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/16/orban-will-sacrifice-kosovo-to-keep-serbian-ally-sweet/rd/ (accessed on May 5, 2026).

tries were not actively pursued, although at the time Presidents Vjosa Osmani and Katalin Novák met for an official meeting in 2022. The former President Osmani attended the European Political Community (EPC) summit in Budapest in November 2024, where she met with then Prime Minister Orbán. In June 2025, Osmani visited Hungarian President Tamás Sulyok in Hungary, who returned the visit to Prishtina the same year in December.[66]

Economic relations have intensified and increased, especially since 2015, where the main sectors of Hungarian investment are telecommunication (4iG), banking (OTP), transport (WizzAir) and energy (MOL). Hungary signed an Agreement of Economic Cooperation with Kosovo in 2015 and established the Hungarian–Kosovar Joint Economic Commission in 2016. A Hungarian loan agreement in 2020 of €62 million with Kosovo for infrastructure projects, failed to materialise, due to problems of implementation and slipped deadlines.[67]

Contacts between the two countries tend to take place on representative or technical level, particularly in relation to the Hungarian KFOR troops stationed in Kosovo. For Orbán, the balancing act between Kosovo and Serbia proved to be difficult, as Hungary's priority was to maintain its excellent relations with Serbia, while fulfilling their international obligation within NATO and its commitment of supporting Kosovo's enlargement efforts. Kosovo was also of economic interest to the Orbán government.

A change of government in Budapest might have a positive impact on relations with Kosovo, if Hungary reconsiders its position and starts treating both countries – Kosovo and Serbia – on an equal basis. Kosovo could certainly use a true honest broker.

North Macedonia: The ideological partner

The connections to North Macedonia were built on party contacts, with Orbán's objective of supporting the conservative VMRO–DPMNE, in government but also during their time in opposition. Overall, Hungary consistently supported the EU accession of North Macedonia and provided administrative assistance for facilitating the implementation of reforms. Orbán's Fidesz strengthened the bilateral relations with the ideologically aligned conservative VMRO–DPMNE, which was in government from 2006 until 2017. When in 2018 Orbán's government granted political asylum to former Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski of the VMRO–DPMNE, relations with North Macedonia were for some time dampened. Orbán was facilitating Gruevski's escape from the then Republic of Macedonia with the help of the Hungarian embassy in Tirana and quickly secured a residence permit for his political ally in Hungary. Gruevski, who ruled autocratically, ultimately had to resign as Prime Minister under pressure from a broad section of society and the EU in January 2016, and was later charged and convicted in connection on corruption cases. While he was in office, close links were established between Budapest and Skopje and personal relationships were fostered between Orbán and Gruevski. Hungary has supported North Macedonia during the migration crisis in 2015 and acted as a strong advocate for EU membership for the country. Moreover, Hungary and North Macedonia cooperate on economic matters within the framework of the Hungarian-Macedonian Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation (JEC), which was set up in 2015. At its fourth meeting of the JEC

[66] President of the Republic of Kosovo, "Dr. Vjosa Osmani Sadriu, International Visits". https://president-ksgov.net/en/?s=Hungary&lang=en (accessed on May 5, 2026).
[67] Mehdi Sejdiu, "Hungary and Kosovo, a Cautiously Active Relationship", in: *Hungary in/and the Western Balkans, eds.* Hungarian Institute for International Affairs, *Foreign Policy Review* Vol. 17, No. 1, (Budapest 2024) pp. 76-11, here pp. 85-88.

in 2022 an Economic Cooperation Agreement was signed and put a focus on energy, infrastructure and innovation at the fifth meeting.[68] Hungarian Foreign Minister Szijjártó stated in 2017 that the Hungarian-North Macedonian cooperation is of importance for Hungary, due to the migration issue, EU and NATO enlargements and because of economic reasons.[69] That quote demonstrates that Hungary had an interest in maintaining the relationship with North Macedonia's social democratic government, even after Gruevski's departure. Still, Orbán continued financial support for the then oppositional VMRO–DPMNE party. Rumours believe that Orbán funded the VMRO–DPMNE, because he saw the party as a strong political ally and partner in the region.[70] Close contacts to the VMRO-DPMNE during their time in opposition were maintained by both sides. Personal meetings continued between Orbán and the chairman of the VMRO–DPMNE party, Hristijan Mickoski, as well as his deputy, Aleksandar Nikoloski in September 2021.[71] Mickoski attended Orbán's victory celebration in Budapest after the parliamentary elections in April 2022.[72] These frequent visits demonstrated Orbán's close ties to the VMRO–DPMNE leadership.

With their return to government, after VMRO–DPMNE's election win in May 2024, the issue of Gruevski's asylum status no longer seemed to be a sensitive issue between the two countries. However, with the ousting of Viktor Orbán and the election of Magyar as Hungarian Prime Minister, it seems that Gruevski's asylum will be ending.

In 2024 Orbán visited North Macedonia and offered the new Prime Minister, Mickoski, his assistance in resolving the bilateral conflict with Bulgaria. Furthermore, an intergovernmental loan of €500 million was provided as financial support.[73] With a new VMRO–DPMNE government, Hungary hoped to further expand economic relations. While Hungary is an important trading partner, it is not among the country's major investors. Plans were in place to increase Hungarian investment, as several opportunities have been identified in the field of telecommunications, agriculture, and the energy sector.[74] Hungarian investments in media in North Macedonia were interpreted as attempts by Orbán to control some media outlets and to disseminate illiberal political narratives.[75] Moreover, it appears that the Hungarian

[68] Bisera Altiparmakova-Marusic, "Macedonia and Hungary strengthen strategic energy cooperation", *Media Information Agency* (November 15, 2025) https://mia.mk/en/story/macedonia-and-hungary-strenghten-strategic-energy-cooperation (accessed on May 5, 2026); Magyarország Kormánya, "Co-Chair's meeting of the Hungarian-Macedonian Joint commission on Economic Cooperation", (October 15, 2023), https://kormany.hu/hirek/co-chairs-meeting-of-the-hungarian-macedonian-joint-commission-on-economic-cooperation (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[69] Website of the Hungarian Government, "Hungarian-Macedonian cooperation is also crucial from viewpoints of security and the economy", (December 19, 2017) https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/hungarian-macedonian-cooperation-is-also-crucial-from-viewpoints-of-security-and-the-economy (accessed on May 5, 2026).

[70] Tzimas Stavros, "As Zaev exits, Orban's specter lurks", *eKathimerini.com,* January 19, 2022, https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/1175668/as-zaev-exits-orbans-specter-lurks/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[71] Cabinet Office Of the Prime Minister / MTI, "Hungary supports North Macedonia's EU membership" (September 21, 2021). https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/hungary-supports-north-macedonias-eu-membership/ (accessed on May 5, 2026).

[72] Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "North Macedonia Opposition Leader Attends Orban's Victory Party" *BalkanInsight,* (April 4, 2022). https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/04/north-macedonia-opposition-leader-attends-orbans-victory-party/bi/ (accessed on May 5, 2026).

[73] Centre for Western Balkan Studies, "Hungarian-Macedonian friendship and its consequences", Budva (September 30, 2024) https://cfwbs.org/hungarian-macedonian-friendship-and-its-consequences/ (accessed on May 5, 2026).

[74] Viola Cintia, Anna Orosz and Julianna Ármás, "North Macedonia as a growing strategic partner for Hungary" Position paper, *Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, HIIA,* (Budapest, September 27, 2024), p. 2, https://hiia.hu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/0927_North-Macedonia.pdf (accessed on May 5, 2026).

[75] Dimitar Keranov, "Hungary's Power Play in North Macedonia", *German Marshall Fund* (March 20, 2025), https://www.gmfus.org/news/hungarys-power-play-north-macedonia (accessed on May 5, 2026).

loan to the Macedonian government is intended to help boosting trade with Hungary and attract further investments. North Macedonia's Prime Minister Mickoski visited Budapest at the end of March 2026 and gave a lecture on the strategic Hungarian-Macedonian partnership at the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC).[76]

Orbán's removal from office is a significant loss of a loyal partner for VMRO–DPMNE. The loyalty between Orbán's Fidesz and the VMRO–DPMNE was based on a similar ideological outlook of both parties, Orbán's ambitions to be accepted as a respected partner in North Macedonia (and the region), VMRO–DPMNE's financial support by Hungary and Hungary's political support for North Macedonia in relation to EU accession. The relationship can be best described as a form of loyalism. The money provided for VMRO–DPMNE was an attempt by Orbán to buy another partner in the region and to influence politics and economy in North Macedonia.

After Orbán's departure from office, it is very likely that the economic cooperation will continue, but no non-transparent loans are going to be provided by Hungary for specific parties. The support for North Macedonia's EU accession will remain a policy priority under the new Hungarian government, but without promoting Orbán's illiberalism and anti-EU narratives.

Hungary's relations with Albania and Montenegro

Orbán fostered the personal relations with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, who both got along well. Montenegro was economically of interest, as well, because of its status as soon to be new EU member state.

Viktor Orbán was a great supporter of his Albanian counterpart Edi Rama, despite their different party backgrounds. Over the past few years, the two have cultivated good personal relationships, and Hungary has provided not only technical support for Albania's EU preparations but also funding.[77] Intensification of relations started from 2021 onwards, when Edi Rama started his third period as Prime Minister. The year 2021 became a particularly active one for Albanian–Hungarian relations, when a number of respective official visits between the countries took place. The Hungarian-Albanian Intergovernmental Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation (JCEC) facilitated the negotiations on strengthening the cooperation between the two countries.[78] In June 2023, another bilateral agreement was signed to strengthen cooperation in water management and Albania's accession process.[79] Both sides consider the relationship positive and actively maintained it.

For Hungary, the investment opportunities in Albania are of major interest, hence close economic cooperation was a priority for the Orbán government. Hungary currently is an important investor in the banking sector (OTP), telecommunications (4iG PLC), and tourism (Wizz Air).[80]

[76] Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), "Shared Values, Stronger Ties: Hungarian-Macedonian Strategic Partnership - Event with H.E. Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski" (Budapest March 30, 2026). https://mcc.hu/en/event-registration/2026-03-30-shared-values-stronger-ties-hungarian-macedonian-strategic-partnership-event-with-h-e-prime-minister-hristijan-mickoski-1 (accessed on May 10, 2026).

[77] Loran Koçollari, Renata Ryoko Drávucz, "Albania-Hungary: where do the stand now?", *Tirana Observatory,* (July 16, 2022). https://tiranaobservatory.com/2022/07/26/albania-hungary-where-do-they-stand-now/ (accessed on May 1, 2026).

[78] Magyarország Kormánya, "The third session of the Hungarian–Albanian Intergovernmental Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation took place in Budapest", *Magyarország Kormánya* (November 16, 2021). https://kormany.hu/hirek/the-third-session-of-the-hungarianalbanian-intergovernmental-joint-commission-on-economic-cooperation-took-place-in-budapest (accessed on May 9, 2026).

[79] About Hungary, "Hungary and Albania sign agreements on water management and European integration process", *About Hungary* (June 19, 2023). https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/hungary-and-albania-sign-agreements-on-water-management-and-european-integration-process (accessed on May 2, 2026).

[80] Loren Koçollari; Renata Ryoko Drávucz, "Albania-Hungary: where do the stand now?" *Tirana Observatory* (July 26, 2022). https://tiranaobservatory.com/2022/07/26/albania-hungary-where-do-they-stand-now/ (accessed on May 1, 2026).

Even though close relationships between Orbán and Rama existed, the policy of Edi Rama remained pro-EU. Rama sought Hungarian investment in Albania and maintained good relations with Orbán, but he was not influenced by Orbán's EU-critical policies. Rama kept Orbán out of internal affairs, but was content to work with him. Still, Orbán provided the funds, assistance and investments for Albania. This suggests that Rama benefited more from Orbán than the other way around.

What can be expected is that even with the new Tisza government in Budapest, the existing strong economic cooperation is likely to continue, as Prime Minister Magyar has an interest in the expansion of economic relations in the countries of the Balkans.[81]

Hungary has maintained very good relations with Montenegro since its independence in 2006. However, meetings with Montenegrin politicians were not that frequent. In recent years, Orbán met Duško Marković in February 2017 and in July 2018.[82] In October 2024, Prime Minister Milojko Spajić visited Budapest for talks with Orbán,[83] and in July 2025, the two governments signed an intergovernmental agreement to support the modernisation of Montenegrin infrastructure, including the railway, and to provide administrative assistance with reforms.[84] Economic cooperation is also being intensified, as Hungarian companies have made significant investments in Montenegro in the IT, telecommunications, and financial sectors.[85]

There are no political issues of contention between Hungary and Montenegro, and economic cooperation is proving beneficial for both sides. Under the new Hungarian Prime Minister relations with Montenegro would essentially remain unchanged. Prime Minister Magyar considers the strengthening and expansion of economic relations with the Western Balkan states to be a foreign policy priority. Hungary continues to welcome the possibility of Montenegro joining the EU in the near future.

Conclusion

Hungarian foreign policy under Viktor Orbán proclaimed to adopt interest–based policies to strengthen state sovereignty, it had been critical of the EU, but supported EU enlargement for the Western Balkans and publicly promoted contacts with autocratic countries. The aim was to reject the liberal values of the EU and to replace it with Orbán's concept of an "iliberal state". Orbán framed his leadership role around the idea that he can offer an alternative to the EU, or rather he was ready to take over the EU and change it internally. To achieve this, he needed more like-minded political actors within the EU. Of

[81] Tisztelet és Szabadság Párt [Respect and Freedom Party], "A Működő és Emberséges Magyarország Alapjai" [The foundations of a functional and humane Hungary], (Eger, 2026) https://mukodoorszagot.hu/#program-pontok (accessed on March 31, 2026).
[82] Government of Montenegro, "PMs Marković, Orban: Montenegrin-Hungarian relations are at highest level characterised by alliance in NATO, EU integration cooperation", (July 24, 2018). https://www.gov.me/en/article/189375--pms-markovic-orban-montenegro-hungary-relations-are-at-highest-level-characterised-by-alliance-in-nato-cooperation-in-eu-integra, (accessed on May 4, 2026); Government of Montenegro, "Budapest: Excellent relations, Montenegro's place is within EU, NATO, PMs Marković and Orban say", (February 24, 2017) https://www.gov.me/en/article/169-753--budapest-markovic-and-orb-n-relations-are-excellent-montenegro-place-in-the-eu-and-nato (accessed on May 4, 2026).
[83] About Hungary, "Press statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán following his meeting with Milojko Spajić, the Prime Minister of Montenegro", *About Hungary* (October 24, 2024). https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-his-meeting-with-milojko-spaji-the-prime-minister-of-montenegro (accessed on May 4, 2026).
[84] Government of Montenegro, "Spajić and Orbán sign agreements: Hungary to support Montenegro's infrastructure development, railway modernization and administrative reform", (July 1, 2025) https://www.gov.me/en/article/spajic-and-orban-sign-agreements-hungary-to-support-montenegros-infrastructure-development-railway-modernization-and-administrative-reform (accessed on May 4, 2026).
[85] Government of Montenegro, "Gjeloshaj, Szijjarto announce signing of intergovernmental G2G agreement on infrastructure, data centre construction", (June 18, 2025). https://www.gov.me/en/article/gjeloshaj-szijjarto-announce-signing-of-intergovernmental-g2g-agreement-on-infrastructure-data-centre-construction (accessed on May 4, 2026).

course, he was meant to be in the leading position. Although Orbán was politically in a stronger position, the bilateral relationships with some of his Western Balkan partners seemed to be more favourable for them rather than for Orbán. In a certain way Orbán was accepted and welcomed as an important political actor in the region, but on the other hand, he used money to maintain these relationships. Because, the relationships were based on a certain level of personal loyalty and an existing political asymmetry between an EU member state and EU candidate countries, this set-up actually should have benefited Orbán. But still, all these contacts and networks had been substantiated by funding. Although Orbán believed that he took on a leadership role, he paid for his acceptance by financial and political deeds.

The relationship with Albania was well established with Rama, but there was limited political influence by Orbán, because Rama kept a strict pro-EU approach, despite occasional criticism. The Albanian and Hungarian relations developed well in the area of business investments.

The relationship with the Republika Srpska can be described as a clientelist and "state capture" scenario. The Serbian entity of the Bosnian state was dependent on funding coming from Hungary. Despite the clientelist set-up and the lack of transparency in the loan structures of the funding, it remains unclear whether Orbán actually gained anything from it. Dodik had a strong political protector in Orbán, who was even willing to help Dodik avert arrest and to give him political asylum. The similar political outlook and worldview kept the relationship on a good basis. The official relationship to Sarajevo suffered due to Orbán's close connection to Dodik.

The same can be said about North Macedonia's VMRO–DPMNE party, which is ideologically close to Orbán's Fidesz and worked closely with Orbán while in government and was continued even when VMRO–DPMNE had to go into opposition from 2017. Again, funding was provided by Orbán, which went directly to the party. This might have helped to open up the business environment for Hungarian companies and maybe Orbán gained some political influence, but overall, the idea was to get VMRO–DPMNE in power and to keep them there.

The Serbian case is special due to the interwoven nature of the relationships, which can be interpreted as a regional clientelist network, where the VMSZ took a central place. The bilateral cooperation between Hungary and Serbia was built upon the personal loyalties between Orbán and Vučić, their ideological alignment, their joint interests in economic cooperation and political alliances with China, Russia and maybe some other autocratic regimes. The Hungarian minority party, VMSZ, was well placed to become an interlocutor of the various interests. Orbán could transfer funding to the Vojvodina, which ended up with the VMSZ. The VMSZ dominated the local structure of the region and made sure the local media was promoting the Fidesz party among the Hungarians in Serbia. Orbán controlled the VMSZ and the VMSZ controlled the local institutions. Moreover, VMSZ backed the Vučić government in Belgrade and the local government in Vojvodina. A perfect network of loyal actors, fostering cross-border corruption and expanding parts of the Hungarian "state capture" system to the Vojvodina, which was unofficially accepted by Vučić, as he can rely on the VMSZ's political support. Moreover, on the international level Orbán was fighting Vučić's cause in relation to EU enlargement and issues with Kosovo.

Kosovo had to accept that Orbán would take Serbia's side in regard to the normalisation process between Belgrade and Pristi-

na. Although officially, Hungary would establish contacts to all countries on a similar basis and had supported EU enlargement for all the Western Balkan countries, with time Serbia gained a special place for Hungary in the Western Balkans. Kosovo still received administrative assistance from Hungary and would establish economic relationships, but politically there was not much support coming from Orbán. Overall, Kosovo was not an economically important partner, hence the influence of Orbán remained limited.

The same can be said about Montenegro, which established sound political and economic relations, but after Milo Đukanović was gone, there was no equivalent decisive political leader Orbán could or would work with. Therefore, some official meetings took place, Hungary provided administrative support for Montenegro's EU accession, and it built up good economic investment opportunities. Otherwise, these relations can be defined as regular bilateral relations.

Not all the countries of the Western Balkans were closely involved in the Orbán's sphere, but he was a personality, who strived for being accepted as a regional leader and he provided funds to require this status. The regional corruption and clientelist structures were present in the relations with the Republika Srpska and Serbia. The question is whether these networks were underpinned by Russian interests. Other countries were just ideological aligned with Orbán's Fidesz party, such as the VMRO–DPMNE in North Macedonia, and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Dodik's The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD).And personal sympathy played a role with Albania's Edi Rama, as well as Dodik and Vučić. Overall, the relationship with Orbán can be categorised as a low intensity of just personal sympathy, the more strategic relationship of ideological alignment and the final stage, which brings everything together and feeds into clientelist networks.

Orbán's drive for acceptance and clientelist approach to establishing and maintaining political relations in the region contributed to weakening of democratic processes in the countries. Orbán's role, policies, narratives and influence reduced the chances of the Western Balkan countries to move forward on the EU path. Instead of supporting the EU enlargement in the region, Orbán delayed that process.

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Katarina Kolozova

Misinformation Through Selective Information Geared Toward Anti-EU Narrative Building

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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

[1] Monitoring Influence and Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans (MEDIWEB), available at https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Monitoring-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), avialable 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 l„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-

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 Sebia 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]

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 100unisooo Bulgarian nationals (Macedonians[7] with dual citizenship, both

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 бранувааt 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 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 animated 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

[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.

[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 (IDSCS) 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

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 (persistently 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.

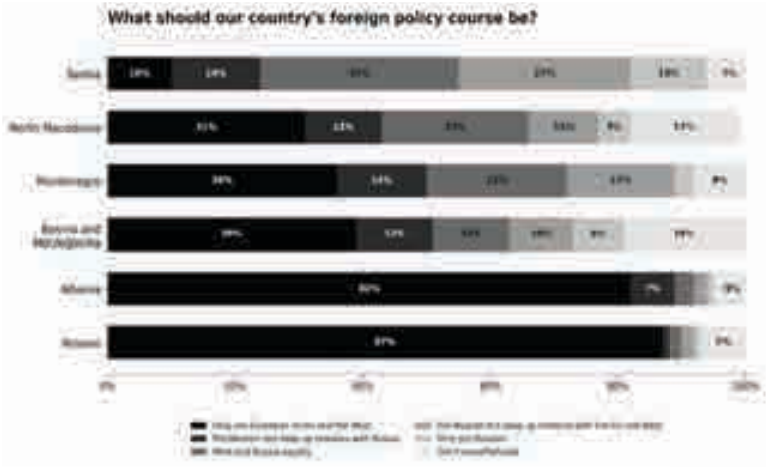
Thus, we are facing a peculiar context, as per the poll published by IRI in April 2024: Only 31% of the Macedonian citizens (around 20% of them ethnic Albanians) support the pro-Western and pro-EU policies of the government, whereas the rest divided in smaller percentages prefer "equal integration" or "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."

[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 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.



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 country[15] – 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-

[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.brif.mk/mishev-iako-makedonija-zabrani-ruski-mrezhi-dezinformaciite-doagjaat-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/2v2zxssn ; 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 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 Tella 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 (phrases, 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 ИКС 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' 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' *motivation*s) 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-da-ne-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 Sociatas Civilis – Skopje) and EPI (European Policy Institute) call "popular protests" 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-deka-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/d9ce6yza

[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 Mićo, episode 128, season four 04.04.2024" ["Тешки Муабети со Петар Арсовски, Мечка и Миќо, 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%BD%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, EU 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 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

[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

[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 CSOss 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 Bulgarization" 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 Vitkor 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 impossible[36]

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.

Juraj Marušiak

Foreign policy – a new field of populist politics. Case study of the "Eastern policy" of Slovakia after the 2023 national elections

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to analyze the impact of a populist style of governance on the foreign policy of the Slovak Republic following the 2023 parliamentary elections. In addition to changes at the discursive level, the article examines changes in political decision-making processes, changes at the institutional level, and changes in the substance of foreign policy. The article focuses on the policies of the Smer – Social Democracy (Smer-SD) party, which holds the decisive say in foreign policy. It focuses primarily on one aspect of this policy—the policy toward Russia and Ukraine—which is characterized by the greatest discontinuity compared to the period before 2023, and in which the influence of populism and de-Europeanization is most pronounced. In the concluding section, the author examines the opportunities and limitations of populist foreign policy within the context of existing domestic and external factors shaping Slovakia's political development.

Keywords: Slovakia; Smer-SD; populist foreign policy; Russia's aggression against Ukraine; de-Europeanization

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Introduction

Following the early parliamentary elections in 2023, a new gov-

erning coalition was formed in Slovakia, consisting of the parties Smer – Social Democracy (Smer-SD), Hlas – Social Democracy (Hlas-SD), and the Slovak National Party (SNS). As in 2020, this represented a substantial change in the ruling coalition, as no party from the previous coalition is represented in the current one. While the 2020 parliamentary elections focused primarily on the fight against corruption, three years later, the elections were dominated by issues of stability and calls to overcome political chaos. However, following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, foreign policy issues also came to the forefront, with the Smer-SD and SNS parties in particular raising the issue of Slovakia's sovereignty in foreign policy. In doing so, they criticized the policies of the previous governments led by Eduard Heger (2021–2023) and Ľudovít Ódor (2023), as well as those of the then-President of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Čaputová (2019–2024), for providing support to Ukraine, including military aid.

Concerns about an escalation of the armed conflict are also reflected in the motto of the policy statement of Robert Fico's fourth government: "A Better, Calmer, and Safer Life." The government document also speaks of the need to "restore sovereignty to Slovak foreign policy and protect Slovak interests," thereby indirectly suggesting that previous governments had failed to pursue a sovereign foreign policy. The protection of Slovak interests was also to become a key principle in Slovakia's activities within the European Union (EU). It defined as a priority the fight against efforts to abolish the right of veto on issues requiring the unanimous consent of all member states and against the "unjustified transfer of powers from member states to EU institutions".

The government committed to "continue supporting humanitarian aid to Ukraine," but not to "continue providing military aid to Ukraine at the government level." Alongside slogans such as "Slovakia First" and "sovereign foreign policy," the call for a "foreign policy toward all four corners of the world" in the context of membership in the European Union and NATO has also become part of the government's agenda. The Slovak government's policy statement also warns against attempts to "erect a new Iron Curtain between the West and the East." [1]. The stress on the claim of sovereignty is part of the populist rhetoric pursued by Smer-SD and its allies both before and after the elections.

"Eastern Policy"—currently understood as the Slovak Republic's stance toward Ukraine and the Russian Federation in the context of the ongoing military conflict—has thus become one of the most significant elements of discontinuity in Slovakia's foreign policy after 2023. The aim of this chapter is to analyze Slovakia's current "Eastern Policy" and the extent to which it differs from EU policy. At the same time, the chapter will analyze the evolution of Smer's foreign policy after 2020 and the limits of these changes.

Since its founding in 1999, Smer has been characterized as a populist party. In its early years, it was described as a "centrist populist" party.[2] Although later, after 2003, the party began to identify with European social democratic parties and in 2004 even became a member of the Party of European Socialists (PES) and the Socialist International, it retained numerous populist elements in its agenda, while its relations with the PES remained complicated. From 2006 to 2008, the party's member-

[1] *Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023 – 2027: Lepšie, pokojnejšie a bezpečnejšie žiť.* Bratislava: Office of Government of the Slovak Republic, 2023, https://www.vlada.gov.sk/site/assets/files/1694/programove_vyhlasenie_vlady_sr.pdf.
[2] Peter Učeň, "Parties, Populism, and Anti-Establishment Politics in East Central Europe". *SAIS Review,* vol. XXVII, no. 1 (Winter – Spring 2007), pp. 49-62.

ship was suspended after it formed a coalition with the far-right SNS. A more pronounced shift toward populism in Smer-SD's agenda occurred in connection with the 2015 refugee crisis and the rise in electoral support for far-right parties, which led to the far-right People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽS NS) entering parliament following the 2016 national elections and to Robert Fico's forced resignation as prime minister in 2018 as a result of the anti-corruption protests "For a Decent Slovakia" following the assassination of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. Given these developments in the party's agenda, there is consensus within the academic community on characterizing Smer-SD as a populist force[3]. According to the 'Authoritarian Populism Index', this party is using nationalist rhetoric … it has described Slovakia as a nation for Slovaks, not for its minorities." The party is characterized as rooted in Slovak social democracy, combined with its nationalism, and is classified as both a left-wing populist and a national conservative party: "It is left-leaning on economic issues, conservative on social issues, and has become Eurosceptic in recent years, with Fico being a close ally of Hungary in Brussels."[4]

The issue of foreign policy orientation—and, above all, relations with Russia—was a contentious topic in Slovak politics as early as the first years of Slovakia's existence as an independent state. It was viewed as such during the third government of Vladimír Mečiar (1994–1998), when Mečiar's government was building a special relationship with the Russian Federation in response to the crisis in relations with the EU and NATO[5]. A foreign policy consensus was not established until after this period, when all major parliamentary political parties expressed support for Slovakia's integration into the European Union. Even then, this process was not straightforward, particularly during the so-called Kosovo Crisis in 1999, when a large segment of society objected to the Slovak government's decision to allow NATO air forces—which were attacking the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—to fly over the country's territory. Although differing approaches to relations with the Russian Federation also emerged in subsequent years (e.g., during the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 or during the suspension of natural gas supplies to Central Europe via Ukraine in early 2009), one can speak of a persistent foreign policy consensus among Slovakia's political elites until 2014. Russia's occupation and annexation of Crimea following the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity in 2014 and the outbreak of armed conflicts in eastern Ukraine thus also mark the beginning of the erosion of the foreign policy consensus that had prevailed until then.

In analyzing Slovakia's foreign policy after 2023, I will focus primarily on the activities of Smer-SD, as this party holds a dominant position not only within the governing coalition but also in foreign policy. This applies not only to the definition of its goals and specific measures but also to its performance, since during the party's terms in government, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic (until 2012, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic) was led by the party's appointees—Ján Kubiš (2006–2009), Miroslav Lajčák (2009–2010, 2012–2020), and Juraj Blanár (from 2023

[3] See Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart, "Euroscepticism and Anti-Establishment Parties in Europe," *Journal of European Integration,* vol. 46, no. 8, pp. 1171–1191. doi:10.1080/07036337.2024.2329634. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2024.2329634; Augustus Giller "SMER, Anti-Western Populism, and Political Violence in Post-Communist Slovakia," *Bates College Journal of Political Studies*: Vol. 1: No. 1 (2025), pp. 32-56.

[4] Andreas Johansson Heinö, *Authoritarian Populism Index*. Stockholm: Timbro 2024, p. 270. https://www.epicenternetwork.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Populism-Index-2024-Compressed.pdf

[5] Alexander Duleba, *The Blind Pragmatism of Slovak Eastern Policy: the actual agenda of Slovak-Russian Bilateral Relations*, Bratislava: RC SFPA (1996); Pavol Lukáč, Vladimír Bilčík, Grigorij Mesežnikov, and Oľga Gyárfášová, *Kosovo 1999 a slovenská spoločnosť.* Bratislava: ŕRC SFPA (2001).

to the present). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was responsible for the day-to-day conduct of foreign policy, while certain key issues were communicated by the prime minister himself. The Smer-SD party in Slovakia was the dominant component of the governing coalition 2006–2010, 2016–2020, and from 2023 to the present; from 2012–2016, it held a majority in the National Council of the Slovak Republic and governed independently.

How to understand the populist foreign policy?

The concept of so-called "populist foreign policy"—that is, the impact of a populist style of governance on the nature of a given state's foreign policy—remains a largely under-researched topic, in contrast to the effects of populism in domestic politics. It is precisely the "success of populist leaderships in winning governmental power ... and setting and shaping the political agenda" that has caused populism to "become a defining feature of the domestic *and* international political landscape"[6], despite numerous differences at the national and regional levels[7]. As Wajner and Giurlando further point out, "even in countries where populists took power, few scholars considered the role of populism in their interactions with other international actors and their international stances to be particularly puzzling"[8].

Populism is ideologically articulated as a thin-centered ideology, "one that considers society to be ultimately divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite.'" It interprets its politics as an expression of the "volonté générale"[9]. In relation to foreign policy, it is relevant to emphasize populism's questioning of "all kinds of technocratic authorities that fail to reflect the vox populi," including regional and international organizations, international non-governmental organizations, multinational companies, and the international judicial system[10]. In the case of EU member states, this most often refers to so-called "Brussels," although it may not directly involve questioning a country's EU membership, but rather distancing oneself from its institutions, "bureaucracy," or representatives of the most powerful EU member states.

The focus on the leader as an ideological chameleon—adapting his ideology and platform to prevailing social sentiments or to potential partners[11] —means that decision-making is becoming more unpredictable and is based on personal loyalty when filling key positions, rather than on experience, competence, and pedigree[12]. Another core feature of populism is anti-pluralism, manifested in a tendency toward homogenization and an exclusionary conception of the people. This gives rise to a negative attitude toward minorities[13] , which can also manifest itself in various ways in the realm of foreign policy. It follows that populist governance can also alter the substance of foreign policy in terms of agenda setting, defining problems, and evaluating policy alternatives, among other things. In contrast to supranational and technocratic governance, populists speak of the need to restore sovereignty not only in domestic politics but also at the international level. At the same time, however, sovereignist

[6] Daniel F. Wajner and Philip Giurlando, "Introduction to Populist Foreign Policy (PFP)", in *Populist Foreign Policy: Regional Perspectives of Populism in the International Scene*, ed. by Philip Giurlando and Daniel F. Wajner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), p. 2.
[7] Wajner and Giurlando, "Introduction".
[8] Wajner and Giurlando, "Introduction", 5.
[9] Cas Mudde, "The populist zeitgeist", *Government and Opposition,* vol. 39, no. 4 (2004), pp. 541–563. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x; Sandra Destradi, David Cadier, and Johannes Plagemann, "Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (Introduction)", *Comparative European Politics,* vol. 19, no. 6 (2021), pp. 663–682. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00255-4
[10] Wajner and Giurlando, "Introduction", 10.
[11] Paul Taggart, "Populism", Buckingham – Philadelphia: Open University Press (2000), p. 2—8.
[12] Wajner and Giurlando, "Introduction", 12.
[13] Destradi, Cadier, and Plagemann, "Populism and foreign policy", p. 667.

discourses become part of transnational narratives, leading to the formation of new alliances on the international stage[14]. Populism also manifests itself on the discursive level, where the position of "genuine leaders" is established through scandals, dramas, and "affective relationships of martyrdom and heroism with regional and global publics"[15]. In Central Europe, populist discourse in foreign policy is characterized—particularly in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine—by "crisis talk" and "war rhetoric"[16]. Thus, since the refugee crisis of 2015—and also in the context of the war in Ukraine—foreign policy in Central Europe has begun to represent a "useful arena for populists that allows the performance of crises and the construction of threatening external others"[17].

With regard to "populist foreign policy" in Central and Eastern Europe, publications to date have focused more on the phenomenon of Viktor Orbán, or on Poland during the Law and Justice government (2015–2023)[18], and less to Slovakia, even though Slovakia has had a longer history of populist governance, even in the period before 1993 when it was a part of Czecho-Slovakia. This populist experience includes governments dominated by the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS, 1992–1994, 1994–1998), Smer-SD (2006–2010, 2012–2020, and after 2023), but the governments of Igor Matovič (2020–2021) and Eduard Heger (2021–2023) can also be considered populist. This means that populists of various political orientations were in power in Slovakia for a total of 24 years after 1989, which certainly cannot be characterized as a "populist episode", as described by Kopper et al.[19] It is true, however, that, apart from the 1990s, the populist model of governance did not significantly translate into foreign policy in practice. On the other hand, such a long period of populist governance in the case of Slovakia demonstrates the considerable effectiveness and vitality of this model. This raises the question of to what extent Taggart's assertion about the "episodic," and thus short-lived, character of populism—due to its chameleon-like nature—holds true.[20]

Another important aspect I will focus on is the issue of de-Europeanization in the policies of the Smer-SD party, both in terms of ideology and identification with partner parties in the EU, and in terms of foreign policy—at the levels of individual decisions and substantively connected multiple decisions (policies).[21] Spasimir Domaradzki distinguishes between two levels of de-Europeanization—a departure from European values and institutional and procedural de-Europeanization.[22] By "de-Europeanization," I therefore mean a progressive "disengagement between the EU and the national level," which implies that it should be traced over time and perceived as a process rather than an outcome. It concerns the weakening of the EU's political or normative influence, whereby de-Europeanization presupposes prior Europeanization[23].

[14] Wajner and Giurlando, "Introduction", 16-18.
[15] Wajner and Giurlando, "Introduction", 14.
[16] Akos Kopper, Andras Szalai, and Magdalena Góra, "Populist Foreign Policy in Central and Eastern Europe: Poland, Hungary and the Shock of the Ukraine Crisis", in *Populist Foreign Policy: Regional Perspectives of Populism in the International Scene*, ed. by Philip Giurlando and Daniel F. Wajner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), p. 92.
[17] Kopper, Szalai, and Góra, "Populist Foreign Policy", 91.
[18] Angelos Chryssogelos, *Is there a populist foreign policy?,* Chatham House. Europe Programme (March 2021). https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/03/there-populist-foreign-policy, accessed on? [date]
[19] Kopper, Szalai, and Góra, "Populist Foreign Policy", 93.
[20] Taggart, "Populism", p. 106.
[21] Gunther Hellmann, "Lamed Power: Germany and European Integration", in Gunther Hellmann (ed.),
Germany's EU Policy on Asylum and Defence. De-Europeanization by Default? Basingstoke:
Palgrave Macmillan (2006), pp. 163, 165.
[22] Spasimir Domaradzki "Opportunistic legitimisation and de-Europeanisation as a reverse effect of Europeanisation", *Global Discourse,* vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 221-44 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1332/204378919X15470487645475; Spasimir Domaradzki, "Wymiary deeuropeizacji – Dimensions of De-Europeanization", *Athenaeum,* vol. 61, no. 1, pp. 155–173.
[23] Tomini, Luca, and Gürkan. Seda, "Contesting the EU, Contesting Democracy and

The presence of de-Europeanization—whether at the discursive, procedural, or institutional level—is becoming an integral part of the political practice of populist parties. It stems from their emphasis on "sovereignty." At the same time, however, when these parties come to power, their populist practices encounter limitations stemming from governmental responsibility as well as—in the case of the EU—from the complex nature of European integration and the decision-making mechanisms applied within European institutions[24] .

The "Eastern policy" of Smer-SD before the February 2022

Prime Minister Fico's stance toward Ukraine was shaped by several events that occurred prior to the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of armed conflict in the Donbas in 2014. Mutual relations had been characterized by a low level of trust since 2008, when gas supplies to Central Europe were halted as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian trade dispute. At that time, Fico blamed Ukraine for the crisis; later, after 2014, he repeatedly expressed criticism of the manner in which President Viktor Yanukovych was ousted. He described the events in Ukraine at that time as a dispute between Russia and the U.S.[25] Nevertheless, Slovakia condemned the annexation of Crimea, because changing borders in Europe threatens Slovakia's national interests and national security. The principle of territorial integrity and the inviolability of existing borders in Europe is a point of consensus among the overwhelming majority of political parties in the Slovak Republic. Even those political forces that in 2014 were focused on building good relations with Russia and were sometimes critical of the West were forced to adopt a critical stance toward Russia, such as the Direction – Social Democracy party. The only political force that openly supported and continues to support Russia's policy toward Ukraine is the neo-Nazi People's Party – Our Slovakia, led by Marian Kotleba. At the same time, however, Fico criticized the policy of sanctions against the Russian Federation, which, in his view, threatened the economic interests of both Slovakia and the entire EU, even though he did not block their adoption.

Although the Smer-SD party framed Ukraine in a critical light, it avoided framing Russia in a similar way. After 2014, Fico declared a negative stance toward Ukraine's NATO membership, while at the same time striving to build good relations with Russia. Unlike Presidents Andrej Kiska (2014–2019) and Zuzana Čaputová (2019–2024) and most center-right parties, who expressed unequivocal support for Ukraine, Fico limited his support to the issue of EU membership as well as the provision of humanitarian and transitional aid. At the same time, he declared his opposition to labeling Russia as an enemy of Slovakia. On this issue, Smer-SD thus aligned itself with the policies of pro-Russian national-conservative parties such as the SNS, the People's Party Our Slovakia (renamed the Republika Party after 2020), and the nationally or Slavic-oriented spectrum of non-governmental organizations. Smer-SD's pro-Russian rhetoric escalated following the anti-corruption protests in early 2018, when the scope for cooperation between the party and pro-European parties was minimized. This is also evidenced by Smer-SD's reaction to these protests, which its representatives

Rule of Law in Europe. Conceptual Suggestions for Future Research,"in *Illiberal Trends and Anti-EU Politics in East Central Europe,* ed. by Astrid Lorenz and Lisa H. Anders, 285–300. London: Palgrave Macmillan (2021). https:// doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54674-8_12; Lia Tsuladze, Nino Abzianidze, Mariam Amashukeli, and Lela Javakhishvili, "De-Europeanization as discursive disengagement: has Georgia 'got lost' on its way to European integration?", *Journal of European Integration,* Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 297-319, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2278072

[24] Paul Taggart, "Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe", *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2004)., pp. 269–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/1356931042000263528

[25] Andrej Sarvaš, Miroslav Kern, and Dušan Mikušovič, "Konflikt na Ukrajine je bojom Ruska s Amerikou", *Sme,* September 4 (2014), https://www.sme.sk/domov/c/fico-konflikt-na-ukrajine-je-bojom-ruska-s-amerikou

likened to Ukraine's "Maidan"—naturally with negative connotations as an act of attack on legitimate government authority. Smer-SD's political isolation increased its dependence on anti-Western forces, which contributed to the strengthening of pro-Russian rhetoric within the party and criticism of the policy of sanctions against the Russian Federation—though Slovakia did not exercise its veto power.

The shifting coalition potential of Smer-SD, the rise in popularity of the far right (the entry of ĽS NS into parliament between 2016 and 2020), and the escalation of the conflict between the West and Russia in connection with developments in Ukraine led to a further transformation of Smer-SD. After attempting to position itself as a centrist-populist or anti-establishment reform party[26], it began to align its agenda with that of right-wing populist parties and increasingly incorporated hard Euroscepticism and hostility toward the EU into its platform, while defining migration as the primary source of threat. Prior to 2020, Slovakia opposed the introduction of so-called refugee quotas (in 2015); later, it limited its participation in the drafting of the so-called WHO Pandemic Treaty and has also advocated for preserving the veto rights of EU member states to the greatest extent possible. These shifts in the party's agenda confirm the "chameleon-like" nature of the Smer-SD party's policy, which adapts to the current political climate as well as to potential political allies on the domestic and international stages[27] .

The shift in Smer-SD's foreign policy was influenced by several factors. The first of these is the traditionally high level of sympathy among a large segment of the Slovak public toward the Russian Federation, stemming from a historically rooted perception of Russia as an ally of the Slovaks dating back to the 19th century, when Slovakia was part of the Habsburg Monarchy[28]. A large portion of the population shares the view that Slovakia is not an integral part of the West and would prefer the country's position to be "between East and West". According to a public opinion survey commissioned by the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 46.4 percent of respondents in Slovakia in June 2024 favored a Western geopolitical orientation, but a significant portion of respondents (39.5 percent) would prefer a balanced position between Russia and the West. However, in May 2023, before the elections, 44.9 percent favored a balanced position between the West and Russia, while only 37.7 percent supported Slovakia's unequivocal alignment with the West[29]. The Smer-SD's position reflects the volatility of Slovak voters' foreign policy orientation, with their views often influenced by other factors, such as domestic political considerations.

In this case, it can be assumed that Slovak "Russophilia" may also be rooted in frustration over the social costs of post-communist transformation. The role of foreign policy as a factor in political mobilization increased following the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022. During the period in question, i.e., from 2020

[26] Učeň, "Parties, Populism"; Seán Hanley and Allan Sikk, "Economy, corruption or floating voters? Explaining the breakthroughs of anti-establishment reform parties in eastern Europe," *Party Politics,* vol. 22, No. 4 (2016), pp. 522-533.

[27] Dominika Mikucka-Wójtowicz, "The Chameleon Nature of Populist Parties. How Recurring Populism is Luring 'the People' of Serbia and Croatia", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 71, no. 3 (2019), pp. 458-459, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1590534.

[28] Mateusz Gniazdowski "Panslavizmus svetozára Hurbana Vajanského a jeho vzťah k Poliakom a poľskej otázke", *Studia Politica Slovaca*, Vol. 18. No.1 (2025), pp. 6-26. https://doi.org/10.31577/SPS.2025-1.1; Juraj Marušiak, "Slovakia: Emergence of an Old-New Pseudo-Pan-Slavism in the Context of the Conflict Between Russia and Ukraine After 2014", in Mikhail Suslov, Marek Čejka, and Vladimir Đorđević (eds), *Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia in Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 329-355. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17875-7_16; Duleba, "The Blind Pragmatism".

[29] *Facebook,* Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences, July 8, 2024. https://www.facebook.com/sociologickyustav/photos/pod%C4%BEa-druhej-tla%C4%8Dovej-spr%C3%A1vy-z-novej-vlny-v%C3%BDskumu-ako-sa-m%C3%A1te-slovensko-ktor%C3%BD-re/969203168337272/

to 2023, the Slovak government was formed by an internally unstable coalition of center-right parties (Ordinary People and the Independent Personalities, We Are Family, Freedom and Solidarity, and For the People). Although this coalition held a constitutional majority (three-fifths of the seats) following the 2020 parliamentary elections, it soon lost its absolute majority. Public dissatisfaction stemmed not only from the coalition's communication with the public but also from its pandemic response.[30] Smer-SD took a radically oppositional stance toward this coalition.

The foreign policy agenda became an important part of the opposition's platform, as the coalition took unequivocally Euro-Atlantic stances. An example of the instrumentalization of foreign policy was the protests against the bilateral defense treaty between Slovakia and the U.S. on the eve of the Russian invasion.[31] Smer-SD, along with other opposition parties, notably ĽSNS and Republika, denied the possibility of Russian aggression against Ukraine until the very last moment; on the contrary, they accused the West, NATO, and the Slovak government of having aggressive intentions. As late as the end of January 2022, according to a Focus poll, as many as 44 percent of respondents blamed the U.S. for escalating tensions on the Ukrainian-Russian border, while nearly 33 percent blamed Russia. After the outbreak of the war, public opinion shifted dramatically for a short time. According to a February 25, 2022, AKO poll, as many as 62 percent of the population held Russia responsible for the war, while 25 percent held the U.S. responsible. Other culprits included NATO (8.9 percent), Ukraine (7.8 percent), and the EU (5 percent)[32]. Although the majority of MPs from the opposition parties Smer-SD (including its leader Robert Fico) and Hlas-SD voted in favor of the resolution condemning Russia's aggression, the representatives of ĽS NS and Republika, as well as some prominent Smer-SD MPs, did not participate in the vote (Ľuboš Blaha, Ladislav Kamenický, Dušan Jariabek, Ján Podmanický), unlike party chairman Robert Fico.

Slovak governments from 2020 to 2023 also actively participated in providing military aid to Ukraine. However, this policy was the subject of political polarization. While pro-Ukrainian policies enjoyed strong support immediately after the start of the full-scale invasion, according to the Globsec poll, by March 2023 as many as 34 percent of respondents claimed that the war was the result of Western provocations against Russia, while another 17 percent accused Ukraine of oppressing its Russian-speaking population[33]. In May 2023, as many as 33% of Slovak respondents expressed support for withdrawing from NATO[34]. Smer-SD's pro-Russian rhetoric thus had the backing of a significant portion of the public. All parties in the future governing coalition—Smer-SD, SNS, and Hlas-SD (which, however, took a more pro-European stance during the pre-election

[30] Radoslav Štefančík, *Radikálny populizmus v ére pandémie COVID-19 a vojny na Ukrajine*, Bratislava: Ekonóm (2022), pp. 29-30; 174-179; Michał Lubicz Miszewski and Juraj Marušiak, "Skutki społeczne pandemii COVID-19 w Republice Słowackiej", *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, vol. 20 (2022), no. 3, pp. 61-96, https://doi.org/10.36874/RIESW.2022.3.3.

[31] *Agreement on Defense Cooperation Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Slovak Republic,* Washington D.C., February 3 (2022). Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic – official website, https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/4773714/220207-dohoda-obranna-spolupraca-USA-EN.pdf/523a3aeb-4032-4886-8a1c-526od27ed61e

[32] Peter Blaško, "Exclusive Survey for HN: Slovaks Have Changed Their Minds. Most People Think Russia Is to Blame for the War," *Hospodárske noviny,* February 26 (2022). https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/22558282-prieskum-vojna-na-ukrajine-kto-je-zodpovedny

[33] Alexander Duleba, "The end of Fico's 'two-track' Eastern Policy in 2024, in Peter Brezáni (ed.), *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2024,* Bratislava: RC SFPA (2025), p. 130.

[34] Krzysztof Żarna, "The Russo-Ukrainian War in the Campaign Preceding the Parliamentary Elections in the Slovak Republic (September 30, 2023), *Przegląd Politologiczny*, Vol. 31, No.1 (2026), pp. 10–21, https://doi.org/10.14746/pp.2026.31.1.2.

campaign)—called for a "four-directions" foreign policy in their election platforms. In its sharp anti-Western rhetoric, Smer-SD spoke primarily of the need for a "sovereign foreign policy." At the same time, in the spirit of identitarian ethno-populism, its leader, Robert Fico, described the war in Ukraine as one in which "Slavs were being slaughtered because of certain geopolitical interests"[35]. After exploiting Slovak-Hungarian ethnic tensions prior to 2012 and stoking fears of the arrival of refugees from non-European countries between 2016 and 2020, he began speaking after 2022 about a potential conflict between the West and the "Slavs."

Although Smer-SD criticized EU and NATO policies, particularly regarding Russia, it simultaneously rejected withdrawal from the EU and NATO. However, it described the policies of the governments at the time as "subservient" and harmful to Slovakia's interests, while labeling the coalition parties—as well as its strongest rival, the then-extra-parliamentary Progressive Slovakia (PS)—as "tools of foreign interests." This party also identified NGOs as another enemy promoting foreign interests.[36] Although the most radical anti-EU rhetoric was promoted by the far-right party Republika (formed in 2020 after splitting from the neo-Nazi ĽSNS), Smer-SD exhibited the most dynamic de-Europeanization tendencies in 2023[37] . In addition to sovereignty, Smer-SD's pre-election foreign policy agenda also employed other elements of populist mobilization strategies—spreading a sense of fear and crisis, anti-elitism, a Manichaean division of society into two opposing camps, and the chameleon-like nature of its rhetoric. Although the party chairman verbally condemned Russian aggression, rhetoric rejecting military aid to Ukraine gradually came to the forefront of Smer-SD's discourse.

National Elections 2023 – a new milestone of Slovakia's "Eastern policy"

Despite significant differences in rhetoric between Smer-SD and SNS on one side and Hlas-SD—which, since its inception, had espoused the policies of European social democratic parties—these parties formed a new governing coalition in the fall of 2023. Smer-SD filled key foreign policy posts within the coalition. Smer-SD nominees filled all key foreign policy posts within the coalition: Robert Fico as Prime Minister, Juraj Blanár as Foreign Minister, and Robert Kaliňák as Defense Minister. The very first steps signaled a break with the country's previous foreign policy, as the new government fulfilled Smer-SD's campaign promise and halted the provision of free military aid to Ukraine[38]. The party's longstanding discursive 'de-Europeanization' thus began to translate into concrete policy actions.

R. Fico defined his party's election victory as "the end of the rule of non-governmental organizations in Slovakia"[39]. NGOs are framed in Smer-SD rhetoric as actors promoting foreign interests. Strengthening relations with Russia has also become part

[35] Aliaksiej Kazharski, "On the nexūs Between Populism and Geopolitical rhetorics: Evidence from the Visegrád Four", *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 20-38. https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v11i3.1373.

[36] Veronika Bundzíková and Denis Janšta, "Slovakia's 2023 Elections: Framing of Foreign Policy Preferences by Populists", *Politologický časopis – Czech Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2024), pp. 197–198.

[37] Jaroslav Mihálik, Jakub Bardovič, and Peter Orosz, "From European dreams to nationalist drift: the state of de-Europeanization in the 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia", *Society Register*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2025), pp. 24-25. https://doi.org/10.14746/sr.2025.9.3.01

[38] Henrieta Mihalková, "Vláda nepošle už na Ukrajinu ani náboj. Fico: zásielky zbraní a munície zo štátnych skladov sa skončili", *Pravda,* November 8 (2023). https://www.pravda.sk/spravy/domace/clanok/687769-vojenska-pomoc-ukrajine-koniec-robert-kalinak-robert-fico-nova-vlada-zastavila

[39] Viktória Némethová, "Fico opäť nešetril mimovládky. Plánuje ich označiť za zahraničných agentov", *Noviny.sk,* October 18 (2023). https://www.noviny.sk/politika/847294-fico-opat-nesetril-mimovladky-planuje-ich-oznacit-za-zahranicnych-agentov

of this "sovereign foreign policy," despite the ongoing sanctions imposed on that country by the EU as a result of its invasion of Ukraine. The government justifies this, on the one hand, by Slovakia's continuing dependence on supplies of Russian energy resources (oil, natural gas, and nuclear fuel), but also by its ambition to become a country that will play a key role in restoring normal relations with Russia after the war ends[40]. R. Fico thus positions himself as a defender of Slovakia's interests while simultaneously seeking to strengthen his standing within the EU. Fico's meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin (working visit in December 2024, bilateral meetings during the Victory Day celebrations in 2025 and 2026) were also accompanied by his criticism of the EU. Another development was the escalation of anti-Ukrainian rhetoric by Slovak government officials[41]. Government officials framed Ukraine itself, rather than Russian aggression, as the primary security threat to Slovakia. For example, in connection with the civil protests at the beginning of 2025, Fico accused Ukrainian intelligence services of plotting a coup in Slovakia[42]. He took a similarly anti-Ukrainian stance in connection with the interruption of natural gas supplies resulting from the need to repair the "Bratstvo" (Brotherhood) gas pipeline, which had been damaged by Russian bombing.[43] Part of the pro-governmental media, but also sometimes the politicians, also accuse Ukraine and the West of escalating the military conflict into one that could take on a global character.[44]

At the turn of 2025 and 2026, Slovakia opposed the European Union's decision to grant a "war" loan of 90 billion euros to Ukraine. Like the Czech Republic and Hungary, it declared that it would not participate in guaranteeing the loan. At the same time, however, it did not block the loan from being granted[45].

Alongside the discursive steps justifying the shift toward de-Europeanization in foreign policy, institutional measures also followed. In the past, during governments dominated by Smer-SD, the position of foreign minister was held by technocrats. Ministers Ján Kubiš (2006–2009) and Miroslav Lajčák (2009–2010 and 2012–2020) were career diplomats; similarly, governments after 2020 also filled the post of Minister of Foreign and European Affairs with career diplomats (Ivan Korčok, Rastislav Káčer, and Miroslav Wlachovský), who also had no direct ties to political parties. The role of political parties in foreign policy was thus relatively weak. After 2023, Smer-SD decided to nominate a politician, the party's vice-chairman Juraj Blanár, for this post. His appointment was justified by R. Fico precisely by the need to weaken the power of the elites: "We need a pike that, perhaps in an unconventional way, will stir up the old carps in the pond of Slovak diplomacy—a pond that pretends to be untouchable and intended only for elites like Káčer, Korčok, Demeš, and company."[46] On the one hand, this anti-elitist and, at first glance, democratizing move was accompanied by the removal of NGOs (also viewed as part of the transnational elite) from the decision-making process. Long-standing cooperation,

[40] Duleba, "The end of Fico's", pp. 125–126.
[41] Bundzíková and Janšta, "Slovakia's 2023 Elections", p. 200.
[42] TASR, "Ukrajina kritizuje Ficove vyhlásenia o prevrate na Slovensku", *Aktuality.sk,* January 24,2025, https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/5u38Qke/ukrajina-kritizuje-ficove-vyhlasenia-o-prevrate-na-slovensku/
[43] Jozef Ryník, "Ako je to s ruským plynom? Slovensko sa slabo pripravilo, Fico zavádza a zveličuje", *Sme,* December 31 (2024), https://www.sme.sk/index/c/plyn-rusko-ukrajina-dodavky-cena-2
[44] Ángel Torres-Adán, "Has World War III started? Geopolitical preferences, conspiratorial thinking and individual threat perceptions of a global conflict in Slovakia", *European Security,* Vol. 35, No. 1 (2026), pp. 124–147, doi:10.1080/09662839.2025.2506084.
[45] TASR, "Ukrajina dostane peniaze aj bez súhlasu Slovenska a Maďarska", *Aktuality,* March 11 (2026). https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/rpF4TIv/madarsko-a-slovensko-ukrajine-skrt-cez-rozpocet-neurobia-europska-unia-ma-udajne-plan-b-v-pripade-blokovania-pozicky/
[46] "Novým šéfom slovenskej diplomacie bude Juraj Blanár", *Pravda,* October 19 (2023). https://www.pravda.sk/spravy/domace/clanok/685533-novym-sefom-slovenskej-diplomacie-bude-juraj-blanar

including the provision of grants to NGOs, was terminated, and the existing consultation mechanisms were not replaced with new ones. Unlike in Poland—where Law and Justice (2015–2023) could draw upon established conservative counter-elites to replace legacy diplomatic cadres[47]—Smer-SD lacked an existing pool of aligned foreign policy experts. Foreign policy decision-making processes thus became more "sovereign" (i.e., controlled by the governing parties), but not more transparent, since it is unknown where and by whom its substantive priorities are formulated.

However, Smer-SD is attempting, at least through one-off events, to simulate the emergence of counter-elites (e.g., by organizing the conference "Sovereign Policy of the Sovereign States of Central Europe" in April 2026 under the auspices of Tibor Gašpar, Vice Chair of the National Council of the Slovak Republic), framed by some pro-governmental media as "Anti-Globsec" (i.e., in opposition to the international security conference Globsec Forum, organized by the Slovak NGO Globsec, first in Bratislava and later in Prague). The conference was attended by representatives of far-right parties from Central Europe[48] . However, Smer-SD is also taking practical steps to build a counter-elite in diplomacy loyal to the party's policies. After 2023, personnel changes took place at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, justified by economic reasons and austerity policies. However, according to some former employees, the main reasons were political.[49] Subsequently, another 146 people were reportedly hired—graduates of Russian schools such as MGIMO or St. Petersburg State University, from which Russian intelligence services traditionally recruit informants.[50]

As Wajner et al. note, contesting international institutions is also an element of populist foreign policy[51]. At the discursive level, these expressions were accompanied by institutional steps toward the de-Europeanization of the Smer-SD and Hlas-SD parties vis-à-vis the social democratic parties of the EU. As early as December 2017, R. Fico declared at the Smer-SD party convention that Smer-SD stood for "Slovak, not Brussels' social democracy." This referred to the party's stance on migration policy, as well as the need for a stronger national focus, the defense of the traditional Slovak way of life, a more critical stance toward EU migration policy and sanctions against Russia, and anti-liberal and anti-LGBT rhetoric.[52] Smer-SD is using a marketing name, "Slovak Social Democracy"; however, the party had not changed the name under which it is officially registered as of July 2026.

Conversely, "Brussels" symbolizes, in Smer-SD's rhetoric, first liberalism and, after 2020, "progressivism." The latter is also associated with the name of Progressive Slovakia (PS), the main opposition party since 2023, thereby becoming a non-Slovak political force in Smer-SD's rhetoric. Due to its formation of a

[47] Jakub Drożdż, "Foreign Policy Counter-Elite and Durability of Populist Foreign Policy", *Foreign Policy Analysis,* vol. 22, no. 3 (2026), p. 123. https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/oragoo9; Kopper, Szalai, and Góra, "Populist Foreign Policy", 92.

[48] Martin Hodás, "Gašpar starší hostil poľského antisemitu, Gašpar mladší zamlčal akciu proti Rusom", *Sme.sk,* April 12 (2026). https://www.sme.sk/domov/c/gaspar-starsi-hostil-polskeho-nacka-gaspar-mladsi-zamlcal-akciu-proti-rusom-dezinfomajak-73

[49] SITA, "Bývalí zamestnanci ministerstva zahraničia podali na rezort hromadnú žalobu", *Sme,* April 3 (2025). https://www.sme.sk/domov/c/byvali-zamestnanci-ministerstva-zahranicia-podali-na-rezort-hromadnu-zalobu

[50] Victor Breiner and Martin Hodás, "Blanárovi radí antisemite. Ministrom nechcel byť, ľudia sa ho boja, hovorí bývalý diplomat", *Sme,* November 3 (2025). https://www.sme.sk/domov/c/blanarovi-radi-antisemita-ministrom-nechcel-byt-ludia-sa-ho-boja-hovori-byvaly-diplomat

51 Daniel F. Wajner, Sandra Destradi, and Michael Zürn. "The effects of global populism: assessing the populist impact on international affairs," *International Affairs*, vol. 100, no. 5 (2024), pp. 1819-1833. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiae217.

[52] Marek Rybář, „The 2023 Slovak Parliamentary Elections: Fico's Return to Power is Likely but the New Government May Not Last Long", in *Party Systems & Government Observatory*, October 1 (2023). https://whogoverns.eu/the-2023-slovak-parliamentary-elections-ficos-return-to-power-is-likely-but-the-new-government-may-not-last-long/

coalition with the far-right SNS, Smer-SD's membership in the Party of European Socialists (PES) was suspended from 2006 to 2008. The PES once again suspended Smer-SD's membership for the same reason in the fall of 2023, and in 2025, Smer-SD was officially expelled from the PES.[53] While Smer-SD made active efforts to reinstate its membership after 2006 and both sides tried to find the political rapprochement, Smer-SD did not do so after 2023. The political and ideological de-Europeanization resulted into the complete institutional de-Europeanization. The example of Smer-SD illustrates de-Europeanization as both a top-down and bottom-up process, which resulted in mutual disengagement.

In lieu of conclusions—opportunities and limits of populist foreign policy

Fico's euro-critical policy and pursuit of pragmatic engagement with the Russian Federation reflect structural domestic demand rather than purely idiosyncratic posturing. This is confirmed not only by the election results of this party—which, with the sole exception of the years 2020–2023, has been the strongest parliamentary force since 2006—but also by the voter base in terms of socioeconomic preferences and cultural inclinations. According to a 2025 survey conducted by NMS Market Research and Chapel Hill, the traditionalist left segment (economically left-leaning, culturally conservative voters) comprises 44 percent of voters, making it the largest segment of society.[54] Smer-SD frames its divergence from EU consensus around the Russia-Ukraine war in terms of national economic interest—a posture characterized in international relations literature as 'hedging'[55]—a strategy employed by small states with limited ability to influence the policies of powerful global actors. This position forces them to diversify their foreign relations in order to avoid one-sided dependence.

On the other hand, the country's economic interests will limit the extent of Slovakia's post-2023 foreign policy reorientation. Firstly, although Slovakia has halted the provision of military aid to Ukraine, it continues to supply military equipment to Ukraine on a commercial basis as it would damage local commercial defense manufacturing interests[56]. Slovakia has not blocked either the European Union's provision of military loans to Ukraine or sanctions against the Russian Federation. Secondly, Slovakia remains interested in participating in the EU-funded post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, which it views as an opportunity for Slovak businesses and the development of Slovakia's eastern regions bordering Ukraine. For this reason, it maintains government-to-government contacts with Ukraine. Thirdly, the scope for "de-Europeanizing" Slovakia's foreign policy on issues related to the Russia-Ukraine war has significantly diminished due to the changing regional dynamics following Viktor Orbán's electoral defeat in April 2026.

In addition to criticism from the pro-Ukrainian opposition, Fico also faces discontent from the more radical wing of pro-Russian forces, including the coalition party SNS and the extra-parliamentary Republic party, which may become a future coalition partner of Smer. SNS Chairman Andrej Danko has criticized Fi-

[53] Vincenzo Genovese, "European Socialists expel Slovakian PM's party for values breach", *Euronews,* October 17 (2025). https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/10/17/european-parliaments-centre-left-group-expels-slovakia-pms-party-for-values-breach

[54] Michal Mislovič and Denisa Lakatošová, "Politické postoje Slovákov: Sme ľavičiari s tradičnými hodnotami", *NMS Market Research – official website*, September 9 (2025). https://nms.global/sk/politicke-postoje-slovakov-sme-laviciari-s-tradicnymi-hodnotami/

[55] Joan DeBardeleben, "Hungary, Slovakia, and the Ukraine War: explaining the outliers", *International Politics,* (2026). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-026-00754-9.

[56] Jozef Tvardzík, "Ani náboj na Ukrajinu? Žiadna iná krajina nerastie vo vývoze zbraní tak ako Slovensko", *Sme,* January 12, 2026. https://www.sme.sk/index/c/ani-naboj-na-ukrajinu-ziadna-ina-krajina-tak-nenarastla-vo-vyvoze-zbrani-ako-slovensko

co's statements in support of Ukraine's integration into the EU, while other pro-Russian politicians accuse him of double-dealing.[57] Meanwhile, former advisor to Fico, Eduard Chmelár, has publicly questioned the purpose of Fico's repeated trips to Moscow and his ability to play a more significant role in brokering peace between Russia and Ukraine.[58]

Despite the aforementioned limitations, however, it must be noted that the de-Europeanization and populist tendencies in Smer-SD's foreign policy after 2020—or, more specifically, after its return to power in 2023—have moved beyond the discursive level and are shifting to the procedural and institutional levels. In Slovakia, populist foreign policy thus goes beyond mere rhetoric.[59] Following its electoral defeat in 2020, Smer-SD's populist and illiberal rhetoric has become more radical. It is precisely foreign policy—particularly regarding the EU and the party's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war—that has become the new agenda, allowing the party to present itself as an anti-elitist force despite having been in power for 15 years, during which time it has played a dominant role in every government. Although the relevant foreign policy elites have not yet been formed for the period 2023–2026, as was the case, for example, in Poland under the Law and Justice government, Smer-SD is shaping new patterns of Slovakia's conduct on the international stage, which may influence Slovakia's foreign policy in the medium and long term as well.

This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under Contract No. APVV-24-0359 conducted at the Institute of Political Science, Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava (Slovak Republic).

[57] Anton Filippov, "Why Fico changed his rhetoric towards Kyiv and how he could lose his pro-Russian electorate", *European Pravda*, May 8 (2026). https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/news/2026/05/8/7237131/
[58] Diana Štrusová and Magdaléna Svetláková, "Fico ako mierotvorca? Chmelár v ta3: Nemá moc, Putin a Zelenskyj ho nepotrebujú. Únia má „veľkohubé" reči", *TA3 TV*, May 11, 2026. https://www.ta3.com/clanok/1048999/fico-ako-mierotvorca-chmelar-v-ta3-nema-moc-putin-a-zelenskyj-ho-nepotrebuju-unia-ma-velkohube-reci
[59] Bundzíková and Janšta, "Slovakia's 2023 Elections".

Michal Vit

Shaping the narrative of (dis)information, a view from the Czech Republic

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Abstract: This paper examines how narratives concerning Ukraine are constructed and adapted within the Czech public sphere through the interaction of media visibility, social capital, business interests, and access to political institutions. Rather than approaching disinformation exclusively as the dissemination of false content, the study focuses on the social and institutional environment in which narratives acquire legitimacy and political influence. It analyses the public discourse and professional networks of two prominent Czech entrepreneurs and philanthropists, Libor Winkler and Jan Barta, between 2014 and 2026. The research combines social network analysis with a qualitative examination of approximately 3,000 media outputs retrieved from the Newton Media Archive, comparing narrative developments before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The paper highlights the importance of examining the relationship between values-based communication, elite networks, and material interests when assessing how influential public narratives about Ukraine are produced and sustained.

Keywords: (dis)information, narratives, social capital, elite networks, Ukraine, Czech Republic.

The topic of disinformation has been widely researched in the past decade in the whole area of the CEE and SEE regions. The mainstream of attention has focused on media, dissemination of disinformation, or tracking financial flows of specific campaigns related to election campaigns. Significantly less attention is paid to the issue how to capture the space in which certain narratives of (dis)information are shaped. Namely, how a narrative is created within a specific milieu of media, public figures, NGOs as well as how this milieu operates when it comes to institutional and personal capacity.

This paper analyses how the war in Ukraine has become a significant element in shaping the narrative of (dis)information when it comes to content as well as structure. The main scope of analysis is the systematic elements of shaping the narrative: background – movers – of the media space and public figures who have significantly participated in the narrative regarding

the Russian aggression towards Ukraine. That said, the paper examines two public figures, Libor Winkler and Jan Barta. They are among the most visible figures shaping the structure as well as managing the narrative through, business activities, public profile. To do so, the paper pays attention to the context of the war in Ukraine, and evolution of their media presence in that context. Through this, the paper focuses on narrative shaping that conforms to generally accepted views and serving their business interests. The paper argues that these figures do not represent their consistent and genuinely pro Ukraine views, but rather conforming to generally accepted attitudes with a significant impact on their positioning through their public and economic influence. In this context, (dis)information is a tool protecting their political and economic interests exerted as influence over state institutions and access to decision makers. Therefore, the use of the (dis)information is more a matter of private interests rather than the institutional (state) one.

The analytical design of the paper follows the logic of social network analysis investigating structure, interconnections, social background gained at the beginning of their professional careers. For purposes of this article, social networks and structure provided by it is considered as a key determinant for the pursuit of social, political, and business interests. In that context, the key determinant is the nature of relations: social capital providing justification for political, social, and economic influence. The influence is understood as an ability to shape the political process, public opinion using media influence, to be able to pursue private interests through state institutions in financial terms. For the purpose of this paper, disinformation is defined as a coordinated and strategically designed set of information operations conducted directly by actors, indirectly through siding actors, or via proxy networks, with the objective of manipulating public perception, influencing political decision-making, and advancing specific political interests through the dissemination of false, misleading, selectively framed, or emotionally manipulative content within public space and providing them with legitimacy through state institutions.

In this context, the identification of the narrative or certain information campaign is not executed by a couple of individuals or by a specific institution. It is a process that includes public figures known for its passion without questioning its background, including support of independent media as well as certain political parties and to be vocal about it as a means to cultivate democratic culture emerging from the narrative – rhetorical support for Ukraine against Russian aggression. In this context, questioning the intentions of these individuals and institutions is labelled a "response of Russian troll farms aiming to discourage them from supporting Ukraine". As a consequence, access to institutions and exerting influence using state subsidies for companies and institutions controlled by these individuals translates into the logic of defence against Russian information campaigns regardless of whether they are a real threat or a "wag the dog" to fill up the information space with content instead of attention to substance, such as the legacy of communist State Security (StB) as the key business associates of Libor Winkler who emerged from this milieu.

Relevance of social networks as a source of social influence

Similar mapping of social networks translated into shaping of narrative has been done in Central Europe for example by Alen Toplisek (2024)[1] focusing on a battery manufacturer based

[1] Alen Toplišek, "Beyond Dependent Development? The Unlikely Emergence of an Upgrading Alliance in the Case of InoBat in Slovakia," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 59, no.4 (June 28, 2024): 767-793, available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-024-09440-4, accessed on 09/08/2026.

in Slovakia, Inobat. He analysed how the social capital of the founder, Marián Boček, contributed to the narrative of a Slovak-based electric battery producer manufacturing and even part of an innovation cluster of EU electric cars industry. Boček built Inobat largely through the strategic use of social capital and elite networks connecting Slovak business, government, and European institutions. Drawing on his background in international finance and investment banking, Boček leveraged relationships with key Slovak and EU decision makers, particularly the EU Commissioner for Energy, Maroš Šefčovič, and one of the key personalities behind the leading think tank in Central Europe, Globsec, Vazil Hudák, to position Inobat as a strategically important European battery producer aligned with EU industrial and energy policy objectives. It needs to be noted that both Šefčovič and Hudák studied together in Moscow at the prestigious MGIMO. Through networking opportunities such as the Globsec/Tatra Summit and direct access to lobby state actors in Slovakia, Boček secured early government backing and political legitimacy for the project, which subsequently helped attract major international investors. Yet the project faces significant delays which call its credibility into question, particularly in the case that there are neither functioning production facilities nor an R&D centre regardless of significant EU and Slovak state support in size roughly 50 million EUR.[2] That said, the Inobat case shows the strength of narrative in the public space, in this case portraying Slovakia as part of European innovative industry with an imaginary production facility, yet with claimed credibility provided by the social capital of Marián Boček. This case shows how social environment and social capital shape (state/public) interests and creates conditions for policy action, in this case creating a narrative of strategic investment in electric battery production which does not exist.

The story of philanthropists across four decades

For an understanding of both Winkler's and Barta's public role, their early professional careers offer an interesting perspective. They both share the fact that their early stages of business activity contains many blind spots primarily related to the environment of the communist intelligence agency, State Security, (StB). More specifically the so-called Science and Technology Intelligence unit that focused on spying primarily on Western countries and their allies when it came to Western advanced technologies, such as computing technologies.[3] At the same time, the StB agents were tasked to create a network of cover companies to hide financial and know-how flows. They were often tasked by the USSR secret service, KGB, to focus on certain technologies and specific environments/companies, such as New York Stock Exchange, NYSE.[4] During the early years of the post-1989 transformation period these individuals smoothly transitioned into driving the economic transformation utilizing their networks and skills gained while being stationed in the West and managed to maintain the network which they maintained for years. It needs to be stressed that both Winkler and Barta gained their social capital through this network being pushed as front-runners of the new social and economic establishment in Czechia.[5]

[2] InoBat, "InoBat has secured another significant investor, Slovak Investment Holding," (January 31, 2024), available at: https://www.inobat.eu/newsroom/inobat-has-secured-another-significant-investor-slovak-investment-holding/, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[3] Ministerstvo vnitra, document k čs. rozvědce (April 16, 1968), available at: https://www.ustrcr.cz/data/pdf/projekty/srpen1968/rozvedka/info680416.pdf, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[4] Johann von Elbogen (@von_Elbogen), "Plotnik je zde:" *X* (August 10, 2025), available at: https://x.com/von_Elbogen/status/1954546737495802292/photo/1, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[5] Daniel Novák, "Skupina RSJ se mění. Winkelr popisuje investice, spory i útoky na síti X," *Seznam Zprávy* (April 10, 2026) available at:https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/

Libor Winkler worked as a researcher at the Crop Research Institute of the Academy of Science, where he focused on modelling water movement in the landscape using Western technologies connected to controversial agricultural company JZD Slušovice. In 1991, he moved into the private sector and became director of the computing centre at Agrostav Hustopeče within the early stages of its privatisation.

At the time Libor Winkler was active around Agrostav Hustopeče, he obtained a broker's license (1993) and worked at the brokerage firm Katnek Securities.[6] By the late 1990s, he became one of the founders of RSJ, specializing in algorithmic trading on global markets. Alongside this professional career, he supports the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art,[7] the Anti-Corruption Endowment Fund, and independent journalism projects such as Deník N.[8] Winkler, one of the founders, shareholders, and executives of the company RSJ, is generally known primarily for his philanthropic activities, having supported numerous NGOs, modern art initiatives[9], and the election campaign of the pro-Western Czech president Petr Pavel together with other businessmen. However, this media image carefully and deliberately cultivated over more than twenty years reveals significant contradictions upon closer examination. Setting aside his former business associate, Karel Janeček, known for sharing pro-Russian narratives and having successive Russian wives, as well as members of the Altman family, who appear in several major Russian money laundering scandals (including the "Malaysian Sultan,"[10] and Callisto cryptocurrency project[11]) and other white-collar organized crime networks connected to the investment funds managed by this network.

A demonstrably crucial role in Winkler's professional career and wealth portfolio was played by Katnek Securities, where around ten former informants and collaborators of the StB operated alongside Winkler. The company, together with its sister company Katnek s.r.o., was founded by former Communist youth official and Prague district official Jiří Nekovář and Russian citizen Oleg Katarskiy.[12] Another important figure was Václav Okleštěk, former deputy head of the analytical and information department of the Scientific-Technical Intelligence branch of the StB, who was among others stationed in the 1980s in the United States. Okleštěk and Winkler became the first citizens in the democratic Czech Republic who obtained licenses for stock exchange trading.

Press reports show that Katnek Securities significantly participated in promoting the Harvard Funds of Viktor Kožený,[13] the

clanek/ekonomika-byznys-rozhovory-skupina-rsj-se-meni-winkler-popisuje-investice-spory-i-utoky-na-siti-x-303529, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[6] Petr Weikert, "Dlouhé peníze pro dlouhé příběhy," *E15 magazín* (September 2024), available at: https://www.rsj.com/documents/e15-magazin-2024-09-04-dlouhe-penize-pro-dlouhe-pribe.pdf, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[7] Simona Janíková, "'Nebaví mě shromažďovat majetek,' říká Libor Winkler, který na dobročinnost věnoval stovky milionů korun," *Hospodářské noviny* (July 29, 2022), available at: https://vikend.hn.cz/c1-67096950-bdquo-nebavi-me-shromazdovat-majetek-ldquo-rika-libor-winkler-ktery-na-dobrocinnost-venoval-stovky-milionu-korun, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[8] Jakuk Jetmar, "Investoři Deníku N předali své podíly nové nadaci," *Médiář* (January 19, 2021), available at: https://www.mediar.cz/investori-deniku-n-predali-sve-podily-nove-nadaci, accessed on 09/08/2026; Deník N, "Vlastníci," available at: https://denikn.cz/vlastnici, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[9] Marek Pokorný, "Fond Pro arte miliardáře Winklera se chtěl pochlubit obrazem od Zrzavého. Zabavila ho policie," *Hospodářské noviny* (August 1, 2017), available at: https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-65831450-winkler-pro-arte-zrzavy-obraz-hofman-policie, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[10] ČTK, "Zámek Protivín koupila Rodina malajského sultána: Do českého skvostu nasype půl miliardy," *Blesk* (September 7, 2021), available at: https://www.blesk.cz/clanek/zpravy-udalosti/689465/zamek-protivin-koupila-rodina-malajskeho-sultana-do-ceskeho-skvostu-nasype-pul-miliardy.html, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[11] Adéla Gajdicová, "Callisto: Bitva miliardáře a kryptotěžaře o ztroskotaný project za stamiliony," *Investigace.cz* (January 27, 2025), available at: https://www.investigace.cz/callisto-krypto/, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[12] Johann von Elbogen (@von_Elbogen), "Oleg Katarskij a I. správa SNB," *X* (November 20, 2025), available at: https://x.com/von_Elbogen/status/1991441942522286552/photo/1, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[13] Jan Velinger, "Czech Shareholders Ripped Off by Kožený Could Gain from Sale of

first major privatization fraud in the 1990s in the Czech Republic.[14] At the same time, it reportedly held approximately 40% of the shares of Chemapol, a subsidiary of Chemapol Group, the most significant petroleum processing company in the Czech Republic. This stake may effectively have represented a controlling package during a key ownership transfer in the mid-1990s. Chemapol itself formed the core of a widely documented business network tied to the monopoly on importing Russian oil before 1989 and, according to government decisions, also during the 1990s. The company was led by former StB informant Václav Junek, who was accused of causing damages estimated at 17 billion CZK.[15] Winkler, through RSJ, has also become involved in lithium mining projects in the Krušné Hory, which focus on extracting lithium from tailings created by historical tin and metal mining. Cínovecká deponie has already received permits for lithium extraction from the Cínovec tailings site; however, the business strategy depends on whether the Czech state provides tangible financial support for the extraction process.[16]

A generation younger, Jan Barta, and his broader business and family background illustrates the continuity of post-socialist elite networks that emerged from the transformation period of the 1990s and were closely connected to former state, intelligence, and foreign trade structures. At the same time, Jan Barta's father, Rudolf Barta, reportedly operated under the codename "Operátor" within structures of the StB. Meanwhile, his grandfather, Čestmír Barta, who was registered as StB agent, participated in high-tech collaboration on the Soviet space program Mir.[17] Čestmír also introduced him to trading with highly valuable minerals, moldavites (vltavíny). These family and institutional continuities intersect with broader post-1989 business structures connected to Omnipol, Chemapol,[18] and later financial-investment groups also with media influence using network independent media.[19] His wider family members, such as Marek Vydra, have a significant track record of contacts with StB business activities with individuals of questionable reputation during the privatization process in the Czech Republic.

Within this environment, Jan Barta's circle became linked to individuals such as Martin Šenar, whose family members are in the archive materials of the StB. Among others, Šenar was a key personality of shady business operations of the biggest photovoltaics project, Ralsko, in early 2010s.[20] He is connected

Aspen Chalet," *Radio Prague International* (May 15, 2012), available at: https://english.radio.cz/czech-shareholders-ripped-kozeny-could-gain-sale-aspen-chalet-8554325, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[14] Jan Palascak (@jan_palascak), "Mate to spravne...," *X* (June 19, 2025), available at: https://x.com/jan_palascak/status/1935797690404659260/photo/1, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[15] Vladimír Mlynář, "Ředitel Chemapolu byl agentem rozvědky." *Respekt* (August 15, 1994), available at: https://www.respekt.cz/tydenik/1994/33/reditel-chemapolu-byl-agentem-rozvedky?srsltid=AfmBOooiAYowL8ktu2tyXCZ1tDWqJoAcvWCKH_tPr5YOHwLKxu7w4ewY, accessed on 09/08/2026; Ivan Hartman, "Jak jsem objevil Klause. Ivan Havel v knižním rozhovoru vzpomíná na bratra prezidenta, ptydepe I StB," *Hospodářské noviny* (May 18, 2017), available at: https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-65732610-ivan-m-havel-jan-lukes-prave-proto-ze-jsem-kniha-recenze, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[16] David Tramba, "Tajemné lithium: RSJ má povolení už 9 let, ale s těžbou na Cínovci stále váhá," *Ekonomický deník* (August 15, 2025), available at: https://ekonomickydenik.cz/lithium-rsj-ma-povoleni-uz-9-let-ale-s-tezbou-vaha/, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[17] Karel Pacner and Antonín Vítek, "Češi se v kosmu neztratili. Exkluzivní serial o dobývání vesmíru," *iDNES.cz* (November 28, 2007), available at: https://www.idnes.cz/technet/vesmir/cesi-se-v-kosmu-neztratili-exkluzivni-serial-o-dobyvani-vesmiru.A071127_160218_tec_vesmir_vse, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[18] Jiří Šťastný, "Josef Šťáva nabízel komunistům obchod se zbraněmi, ukazují dokumenty." *iDNES.cz* (June 13, 2011), available at: https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/josef-stava-nabizel-komunistum-obchod-se-zbranemi-ukazuji-dokumenty.A110608_154758_domaci_js, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[19] Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, "Kolegium," available at: https://www.nfnz.cz/kolegium/, accessed on 09/08/2026; Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, *Výroční zpráva Nadačního fondu nezávislé žurnalistiky za rok 2023*, available at: https://data.eu.cntmbr.com/nfnz/nfnz-prod/4ea805f8-dfa7-4ce7-b80e-3dfodfdee133/NFNZ_final_vyrocni_zprava_2023.pdf, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[20] Jaroslav Plesl, "Od Elle a Marianne k byznysu za miliardy s Martinem Romanem," *Hospodářské noviny* (September 13, 2010), available at: https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-46394180-od-elle-a-marianne-k-byznysu-za-miliardy-s-martinem-romanem, accessed on

to Barta through family relations and business ties to figures around Portland Trust and networks associated with the financing of Czech political and media projects in the 1990s. Portland Trust is a key real estate entity of StB confidents.[21] Šenar participated in the process of selling Barta's online business to German-based Bauer Media Group.[22] The same networks later extended toward digital media and investment ventures of the early 2000s, including Extra Online, Credo Ventures, Cognitive Security.[23] One of Barta's first operations emerged through a network of intelligence-linked, foreign trade, and financial actors who transitioned into venture capital, technology, media, and energy sectors after 1989.

Philanthropists shaping the narrative

In the following section, media outputs of Libor Winkler and Jan Barta between 2014 and 2026 have been analysed to vividly see the development of narratives regarding Ukraine and their attitudes towards the role of Ukraine in the Czech media space. The analysis was conducted using the Newton media archive which provides access based on keywords. In this case, the analysis covers narratives in two periods, between 2014 and 2022 and between 2022 and 2026. It includes roughly 3,000 media outputs including social media appearances. The time frame allows an in-depth overview to be gained of narrative development with the decisive moment of February 2022 and full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. The analysis of narratives tracks the dynamics over time with a focus on changes in framing of Ukraine as a subject of public discussions. Given the high volume of data, the analysis traces narrative development over time with the aim of covering all media outputs of both Winkler and Barta. However, a limitation of this research is that it does not undertake an in-depth content analysis of all public mentions of Ukraine as a subject of interest. At the same time, the outputs provide valuable insight into the development of narratives over time, offering a unique perspective on how the information space is shaped by two leading figures who are portrayed as philanthropists and supporters of Ukraine in the Czech context.

Before 2022, the Libor Winkler's discourse on Ukraine was fundamentally different from the later wartime and postwar narratives. Ukraine was not yet framed as a civilizational, democratic, or geopolitical issue. Instead, the dominant narrative positioned the country primarily as a space of economic underdevelopment and unrealized potential. Winkler repeatedly approached Ukraine through the lens of infrastructure, industry, and investment opportunity, portraying it as a large but overlooked market on the periphery of European economic attention. The core narrative was not about defending Ukraine, but about recognizing opportunities others ignored. Ukraine appeared as a country that had been economically underestimated by Western and Czech investors despite its strategic size and industrial capacity.

Within this framework, the discourse evolved toward a more specific narrative of infrastructural modernization. Ukraine was increasingly described as a country requiring practical transformation such as in energy infrastructure, and industrial mod-

09/08/2026.

[21] Into this wider circle belongs also StB agent Petr Bednařík who was stationed in the United States and among others contributed to the story of The Wolf of Wall Street intermediating selling of worthless shares of companies in Central Europe in early 1990s, more Tomáš Plhoň, "Česká investice vlka z Wall Street. Měl vazby i na český byznys," *Lidovky.cz* (July 9, 2017), available at: https://www.lidovky.cz/byznys/ceska-investice-vlka-z-wall-street.A170708_145114_firmy-trhy_pkv, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[22] Ondřej Aust, "Burda kupuje Extra Online Media, výrazně posílí na internetu," *Médiář* (June 1, 2023), available at: https://www.mediar.cz/burda-kupuje-extra-online-media-vyrazne-posili-na-internetu, accessed on 09/08/2026.

[23] Marek Janouš, "Credo Ventures se podařil první velký exit: Cognitive Security." *Lupa.cz* (January 31, 2013), available at: https://www.lupa.cz/clanky/credo-ventures-exit-cognitive-security/, accessed on 09/08/2026.

ernization. The focus was highly technocratic and operational: modernization was understood as a process of improving inefficient post-Soviet systems and integrating them into broader European economic logic. In this phase, Ukraine was framed less as a political subject and more as a technical and economic environment suitable for long-term infrastructure investment. The narrative emphasized utility, modernization, and economic rationality rather than ideology or values.

Another important element before 2022 was the idea of Eastern Europe as a delayed transformation space. Ukraine was implicitly compared to the post-1989 experience of Central Europe, but in the sense that its transformation had remained unfinished or incomplete. Winkler's discourse hints that Ukraine represented a 'late modernization frontier'—a place where economic and institutional changes still offered opportunities that had already disappeared in more developed Central European markets. This framing positioned Ukraine as part of a broader regional story about post-socialist transition, economic convergence, and the expansion of European-style capitalism eastward.

At the same time, there was also a developing narrative of strategic early positioning. Ukraine was increasingly discussed as a market in which long-term actors could gain advantage before broader international engagement arrived. This was not yet framed geopolitically, but economically: being active in Ukraine meant entering a difficult but potentially transformative environment ahead of competitors. The emphasis was therefore on foresight, patience, and strategic investment timing rather than moral responsibility or democratic solidarity.

The development of narratives in the Libor Winkler's discourse on Ukraine is less a chronological sequence of isolated topics, and more a gradual transformation of the *meaning* of Ukraine itself within his worldview. At the beginning of the war, Ukraine was framed primarily through the narrative of immediate defense against aggression. The central logic was reactive: Russia represented destruction and instability, while support for Ukraine was understood as an urgent moral necessity. In this phase, the dominant narratives revolved around military resistance, the need for decisive Western engagement, and preventing European passivity in the face of authoritarian violence. Ukraine appeared mainly as a victim requiring solidarity and rapid assistance.

This initial security-oriented framing evolved into a broader narrative of strategic reconstruction. Ukraine stopped being portrayed merely as a battlefield and became increasingly conceptualized as a future-oriented rebuilding project. Reconstruction was not framed only as humanitarian recovery, but as a transformational historical process comparable to post-communist modernization in Central Europe after 1989. In this stage, Winkler's rhetoric merged moral obligation with economic and institutional opportunity. The key narrative shift was from "Ukraine must survive" toward "Ukraine must be rebuilt as part of Europe." Reconstruction thus became both a geopolitical mission and an investment framework.

A further narrative development occurred when the discourse moved from physical reconstruction toward the protection of civilizational continuity. Ukraine increasingly appeared not simply as territory or infrastructure, but as a cultural and historical entity whose survival depended on preserving books, archives, libraries, intellectual heritage, and collective memory. In this phase, the war was no longer framed only as a military conflict, but as an attempt to erase cultural identity. Winkler's support for preservation projects introduced a new narrative layer: the

idea that defending Ukraine also means defending European culture itself. The meaning of reconstruction therefore expanded from rebuilding cities and energy systems to preserving historical continuity and national identity.

Simultaneously, the discourse evolved toward a narrative of value-based capitalism. Investment in Ukraine ceased to be presented as purely economic activity and instead became connected with ethics, democracy, and geopolitical responsibility. Winkler repeatedly emphasized that engagement in Ukraine has a "value dimension," meaning that capital allocation itself can become an expression of political and civilizational alignment. This transformed business involvement into a form of democratic participation. Economic engagement was framed not only as profitable or strategic, but as morally meaningful.

In the final stage of development, all previous elements—security, reconstruction, culture, and investment—merged into a narrative of European civilizational defense. Ukraine became symbolic of a wider struggle over the future political identity of Europe. Russia was increasingly framed not merely as a geopolitical adversary, but as a force threatening democratic values, openness, and European continuity. The discourse therefore evolved from humanitarian solidarity into an ideological framework in which support for Ukraine represented a test of Europe's own moral coherence and historical responsibility. By the end of this development, Ukraine was no longer discussed as an external crisis, but as an integral component of Europe's democratic and civilizational future.

Overview of narrative development (2014 – 2026)

Narrative Theme / Category	Frequency	Meaning
Support for Ukraine through military aid	30–40 mentions	Direct practical assistance
Drones and tactical technologies	20–30 mentions	Technological warfare and effectiveness
Energy independence from Russia	15–20 mentions	Solar power and decentralization
Anti-Putin / "another Hitler" framing	15–18 mentions	Moral-historical justification
Ukrainian startups and innovation	10–15 mentions	Wartime innovation ecosystem
Strategic philanthropy	10–12 mentions	Maximum measurable impact
Reconstruction through technology	8–10 mentions	Ukraine rebuilding through innovation
Czech leadership	8–10 mentions	Czech investors and networks helping Ukraine
Refugee and humanitarian support	8–10 mentions	Housing and logistical assistance

Europe must resist authoritarianism	5–8 mentions	Democracy-security framing

Source: Newton Media

Before 2022, the Jan Barta's discourse on Ukraine was relatively limited and lacked the strong geopolitical, military, and anti-authoritarian framing that later became central after the Russian invasion. Ukraine appeared only occasionally within broader discussions about Eastern European entrepreneurship, regional modernization, and technological development. The dominant narrative in this period framed Ukraine primarily as part of a wider post-socialist transformation space—a region characterized by economic catching-up, underdeveloped markets, and emerging entrepreneurial ecosystems. The emphasis was not on security or democracy, but on innovation potential and long-term market development.

The first major narrative before 2022 was the idea of Eastern Europe as an innovation frontier. Ukraine is discussed not as a geopolitical problem, but as part of a broader ecosystem of technologically ambitious but still structurally underdeveloped post-Soviet and post-socialist markets. In this framework, Ukraine represented opportunity through incompleteness: markets were less saturated, technological sectors were still emerging, and regional entrepreneurial cooperation offered possibilities unavailable in Western Europe. The discourse reflects the typical venture-capital logic of identifying future growth areas before they become mainstream.

A second narrative relates to regional entrepreneurial integration into the European market. Ukraine appears mostly in relation to cross-border startup environments, networking, and technological cooperation inside Central and Eastern Europe. Rather than treating Ukraine as a distinct political subject, his rhetoric positioned it within a wider regional space shaped by digitization, innovation, and economic modernization. The underlying logic was pragmatic and transnational: Ukraine is valuable because it formed part of an emerging technological region rather than serving any broader ideological or strategic purpose.

Another important pre-2022 narrative is that of technocratic modernization. Ukraine was implicitly framed as a country still undergoing delayed transformation processes like those experienced by Central Europe in the 1990s and early 2000s. The emphasis was strongly interest-driven and investment-oriented: modernization meant technological adoption, startup growth, digitalization, and integration into broader European economic structures. There is little emotional or normative language attached to this discourse. Ukraine was primarily treated as an environment for entrepreneurship and future-oriented technological development.

Between 2022 and 2026, the Jan Barta's discourse on Ukraine underwent a major transformation from immediate wartime solidarity into a broader narrative centered on strategic resilience, technological warfare, and democratic resistance. Unlike Libor Winkler, whose narratives have evolved towards culture and civilizational identity, Barta's discourse developed towards innovation and security. The first stage of this transformation emerged immediately after the Russian invasion in 2022, when Ukraine was framed primarily through the narrative of emergency mobilization and practical solidarity. The dominant themes involved refugee accommodation, rapid humanitarian assistance, fundraising, and immediate support for Ukraine's survival. At the same time, the war became connected in his

rhetoric with the issue of European energy vulnerability. Investments in solar energy and energy independence were presented not merely as economic decisions, but as strategic tools weakening Russian influence. In this phase, Ukraine functioned as a catalyst exposing the fragility of Europe's dependence on Russian resources.

The humanitarian and energy-security framing moved into a broader narrative of strategic resistance against authoritarianism. Ukraine appears not only as a country under attack, but also became a symbol of a wider geopolitical confrontation between democratic societies and authoritarian power. Barta's rhetoric became more openly confrontational toward Russia, and the discourse began integrating historical analogies, especially comparisons of Vladimir Putin to Hitler. This marked an important narrative escalation: support for Ukraine was no longer described merely as solidarity, but as a moral necessity aimed at preventing the expansion of authoritarian aggression across Europe. The central meaning of Ukraine shifted from humanitarian crisis to a strategic frontline of democratic defense.

A further shift observed in the discourse moved the discourse from general resistance toward the narrative of technological warfare and measurable effectiveness. Beginning especially in 2024, drones, tactical technologies, and military innovation became the dominant framing. Ukraine is increasingly framed as a laboratory of adaptive warfare in which technology, decentralization, and rapid innovation can compensate for conventional asymmetry. Barta repeatedly emphasizes that support should have "maximum effect," revealing a strongly technocratic logic in which philanthropy, military aid, and investment are evaluated through operational efficiency and strategic impact. This transformed Ukraine in his rhetoric into a proving ground for new forms of warfare, resilience, and scalable technological solutions. The meaning of support shifted from symbolic solidarity toward quantifiable strategic contribution.

At the same time, another narrative layer developed around innovation and reconstruction ecosystems. Ukraine increasingly appeared not only as a battlefield, but also as a future-oriented technological space capable of generating startups, venture capital opportunities, and reconstruction-driven innovation. Prague is portrayed as a potential hub connecting Ukrainian startups, investors, and reconstruction initiatives. In this phase, Ukraine was reframed from a passive recipient of aid into an active producer of technological creativity and wartime adaptability. War itself is increasingly interpreted as accelerating innovation rather than eliminating it. Reconstruction, therefore, was connected not only with rebuilding infrastructure, but also with building new technological and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

These narratives moved into a broader framework of strategic resilience and civilizational competition. Ukraine was no longer discussed only in terms of immediate military support or reconstruction, but as part of a long-term geopolitical struggle shaping the future technological and political order of Europe. The discourse was increasingly connected to democracy, innovation, military technology, decentralized energy, and investment in a single strategic logic. Unlike humanitarian narratives centered on compassion, Barta's rhetoric emphasizes resilience, scalability, adaptation, and effectiveness. By 2026, Ukraine had become a symbol in his discourse of technologically enabled democratic resistance, a place where the future balance between authoritarianism and open societies was being tested not only militarily, but also economically, technologically, and institutionally.

Overview of narrative development (2014 – 2026)

Narrative Theme / Category	Frequency	Meaning
Military assistance	30–40 mentions	Support for Ukraine's military capabilities
Military innovation	20–30 mentions	Technology provides Ukraine with an asymmetric advantage over Russia
Humanitarian aid and refugee support	20–25 mentions	Immediate solidarity
Energy independence from Russia	15–20 mentions	Reducing dependence on Russian energy
Anti-Putin / "Stopping another Hitler"	15–18 mentions	Preventing the expansion of authoritarian aggression
Ukraine as a frontline defending democracy	15–18 mentions	Ukraine protects Europe from authoritarianism
Strategic philanthropy	10–12 mentions	Donations should maximize measurable military and societal impact
Ukrainian startups and innovation ecosystem	10–15 mentions	Wartime as source of technological innovation
Reconstruction through technology and investment	8–10 mentions	Modernize Ukraine rather than simply rebuild it
Czech leadership in supporting Ukraine	8–10 mentions	Active role in the post-war process
European strategic responsibility	8–10 mentions	Supporting Ukraine is essential for Europe's future security
Technological resilience and adaptation	6–8 mentions	Innovation determines military and economic resilience

Source: Newton Media Archive

Narratives Shaping Public Opinion

The analysis shows how two significant figures are shaping the public narrative with content that corresponds to the very general trends when it comes to both the foreign policy of the Czech Republic as well as public opinion towards Ukraine and its support. In both cases, it is clearly visible how primarily Libor Winkler is adjusting his narratives to his target group – a part of society that is strongly receptive to showing general social support for Ukraine.[24] Looking at the period before 2022, the evaluation shows flexibility to react, or rather adjust, to the external political environment. In this case, support for Ukraine is primarily a subject of political action rather than an implementation of strategy or a call for political and institutional action. At the same time, both Winkler and Barta are strengthening their

[24] Jiří Zatloukal and Daryna Dziuba, "Чеський мільярдер вже відновлює Україну та інвестує мільйони крон," *Seznam Zprávy* (November 29, 2022), available at: https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/ukrajinski-novyny-cheskii-miliarder-vzhe-vidnovliuie-ukrayinu-ta-investuie-milioni-kron-220231, accessed on 09/08/2026.

domestic image as supporters of Ukraine. Primarily in the case of Libor Winkler, it means that their target audience is in the Czech Republic and has a specific aim – to use the momentum of the war against Ukraine to be filled up with their narratives rather than creating a systematic change or coordinated political action. It also demonstrates the fact that their media footprint in Ukraine is almost invisible alongside the fact that their media presence supporting Ukraine in the Czech Republic does not match the size of economic presence in Ukraine especially in comparison with other Czech businesses present in Ukraine that have significantly smaller media coverage even being present in the same line of business. There is an interesting paradox: Winkler, whose business interests in Ukraine are in Ukraine is significantly larger than Barta's, has very weak media coverage in Ukraine. It shows that the increased emphasis on the emotional narrative shaping in the domestic space does not correspond with the size of business interests in Ukraine that should be presumably growing and thus attract media attention.

To answer the question about shaping narratives of Czech society alongside political action or structural change raises the question why such narratives are present. Firstly, both Winkler and Barta demonstrate significant flexibility in their narratives in order to be perceived as such in the Czech media space. They are mimicking a strategy in terms of support for Ukraine leading to political and structural outcomes. Their focus is thus to use the general expectation to serve their private interests. Yet, with access to the political and media space, it poses a question what their intentions are, as well as the duration limits of these narratives. Secondly, there is a clear misfit between the emphasis on these narratives and having direct economic interests or publicly recognized presence in Ukraine. That said, the information space is shaped by particular and short-lived narratives. Consequences of such development can easily result in the emergence of counter-narratives based on similar, yet opposite intentions based on similar flexibility, just focusing on other (for example national conservative) demands that exist in society as a counter-response to the emotionally driven Western liberal existential narratives. Lastly, the professional environment primarily surrounding Libor Winkler poses a question if the background and social capital as analyzed above can generate values-based narratives without 'other' intentions.

Идентитети: Списание за политика, род и култура
(ISSN 1857-8616)

Издавач: Институт за општествени
и хуманистички науки, Скопје

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ISSN 1409-9268