

INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A CANDIDATE COUNTRY FOR MEMBERSHIP (SELECTED MACEDONIAN EXPERIENCES AND EFFECTS)



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Abstract

The paper ‘Institutional Reforms in the European Union from the Perspective of a Candidate Country: Selected Macedonian Experiences and Effects’ focuses on the foreign and defense policy of North Macedonia, analyzing its path to independence and integration into international institutions. Emphasis is placed on the role of the European Union and NATO in shaping Macedonian policy, as well as on public perceptions of achievements and challenges in these areas. The research utilizes data from public opinion surveys, revealing citizens’ perspectives on the progress and setbacks in foreign and defense policies, as well as their expectations for the future. The findings highlight the impact of prolonged delays in EU accession on rising Euroscepticism and propose measures to strengthen EU decision-making processes, prevent abuses by member states, and foster more efficient integration processes.

Keywords: North Macedonia, European integrations, Foreign affairs, Independence

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1. Introduction

The beginning of each new decade is marked by the anniversaries associated with the independence of today's North Macedonia.¹

If 1990 is the year when the processes of democratic transition and political pluralism began and intensified,² and 1991 is the year when the country's independence process began,³ then 1992 is the year when the process of creating and consolidating the key attributes of the already established sovereign and independent state – the Republic of Macedonia – started.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned, 30 years later, in 2022, we celebrated two important anniversaries related to one of the most important elements of Macedonian statehood:

- a) First: 30 years since the establishment of the country's foreign policy;
- b) Second: 30 years since the establishment of the country's defence policy.

With the adoption of the Declaration on International Recognition of the Republic of Macedonia⁴ at the beginning of 1992, the process of establishing our country's bilateral relations began – first with Bulgaria,⁵ then with Slovenia⁶ and with Croatia.⁷ However, it was with recognition by the Federal Republic of Germany⁸ that this process gained increased momentum.⁹

In 1992, when this international recognition process began, the foundations of defence were laid. Thus, after the adoption of the Constitution of our country¹⁰ according to which 'the defence of the Republic is regulated by a law adopted by a two-thirds majority vote of the total number of Representatives', the Parliament adopted the Law on Defence.¹¹

Taking into account the aforementioned, this paper has two purposes: (a) First: to shed additional light on the key issues related to the conduct of foreign policy and the defence of our country and (b) Second: to investigate how citizens have viewed the move towards independence in foreign relations and defence over the last 30 years, as well as their expectations for these fields in the decades to come.

Based on the data obtained, specific conclusions are then presented.

1 This paper contains selected findings that are part of the publication Spasenovski, 2022.

2 Spasenovski et al., 2021.

3 Ibid.

4 Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia, 1991.

5 Diplomatic relations with Bulgaria were established on January 15, 1992.

6 Diplomatic relations with Slovenia were established on March 17, 1992.

7 Diplomatic relations with Croatia were established on March 30, 1992.

8 Diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic of Germany were established on December 16, 1993.

9 More on the history of Macedonian-German relations in: Naumovski et al., 2018.

10 Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 1991, pp. 805–815.

11 Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 1992.

2. Analysis

The process of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia (SRM) gaining independence by separating from the then Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) began in 1990.

Following the developments in the other republics of federal Yugoslavia, the political authorities of the time took appropriate steps responding to the steadily deteriorating situation. Thus, in the summer and autumn of 1990, the republic's institutions made a series of key decisions opening the way for Macedonian independence, by constructing a new constitutional-legal system based on principles diametrically opposed to the socialist-federal ones previously in place.

On September 20, 1990, the Assembly of SRM adopted 25 amendments to the Constitution thus implementing the first changes in the constitutional-legal system.¹² The monopoly of the ruling SKJ party was abolished (amendment LXXVII), the delegate system was replaced by a parliamentary system (amendment LXXIV), a government was set up instead of the executive council (amendment LXXVI), and the position of president of the Republic was established instead of the presidency of SRM (amendment LXXV).

Based on the aforementioned changes, on September 24, 1990, the president of the legislature announced the first democratic multi-party elections, held on November 11 of the same year, and the Assembly was constituted on January 8, 1991.

Furthermore, on January 27, 1991, the deputies elected the first democratic president of the Republic, Kiro Gligorov, and on March 20, 1991, the first democratic technocratic government headed by Nikola Klyusev was elected.

In this way, the foundations of the new democratic system of state government organization were laid.

In the meantime, on January 25, 1991, the representatives of the citizens in the Parliament passed the 'Declaration for Sovereignty of Macedonia',¹³ which, in Article 1, expresses sovereignty in accordance with the constitutional determinations for independence and territorial integrity of the Macedonian state, as well as the right of the Macedonian people to self-determination, including the right to secede.

Furthermore, on June 7, 1991, constitutional amendment LXXXII was adopted, which omitted the term "socialist" from the name of "SRM".¹⁴ In this respect, on May 7, 1991, the President of the State submitted to the deputies a proposal for the adoption of a new democratic constitution which was voted on November 17, 1991, preceded by the independence referendum of September 8, 1991 and the 'Declaration on the occasion of the plebiscite expressed will of the citizens for a sovereign and independent state of Macedonia', adopted at the session of the Assembly on September

12 Official Gazette of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, 1990, pp. 506–511.

13 Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, 1991.

14 Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 1991, p. 357.

17, 1991.¹⁵ Thus the new constitutional-legal system of today's North Macedonia as a democratic and independent state was created.

Finally, on December 19, 1991, with the adoption of the 'Declaration on International Recognition of the Republic of Macedonia', the process of international recognition of the recently created state began.

The declaration of international recognition consists of five points and was signed by the then president of the Assembly, Stojan Andov. In this declaration, MPs demand that 'the Republic of Macedonia, which is a sovereign and independent state, be recognised internationally', while stating that the state accepts the criteria in this sense of the Council of Ministers of the European Community from 17.12.1991, as well as the draft document of the Conference for Yugoslavia at the Hague, and at the same time that the country supported the efforts of the United Nations (UN) for a peaceful resolution of the Yugoslav crisis.

After the adoption of this document, the then Republic of Macedonia began to establish diplomatic relations and to establish relations of closer cooperation with states and with other entities of international relations. The first country that recognised the independence of our country was the Republic of Bulgaria on January 15, 1992, followed by the recognition of Slovenia on March 17, 1992 and Croatia on March 30, 1992. Today, the Republic of North Macedonia, as a member of NATO and a country negotiating for membership in the EU, has established diplomatic relations and is building dynamic foreign policy with more than 190 countries in the world.¹⁶

When the process of international recognition of the state began in 1992, the foundations of the defense were laid at the same time. Thus, after the adoption of the Constitution according to which 'the defense of the Republic is governed by a law adopted with a two-thirds majority of votes from the total number of deputies', the Parliament passed the Law on Defense.¹⁷

The Defense Law of 1992 consists of 135 articles divided into 11 chapters, according to which the defense of the Republic aims to ensure the independence and territorial integrity of the country, and it is carried out by citizens, state administration bodies and the Army of the Republic of Macedonia (ARM)¹⁸. Apart from the aforementioned, this law is characterised by Article 3 and Article 7, providing for military service of all adult male citizens for a period of 9 months.¹⁹

The foreign and defense policy of North Macedonia for the past 30 years has been characterised by stability and predictability.

15 Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia, 1991.

16 More about bilateral relations on the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia. Available at: www.mfa.gov.mk (Accessed: 12 December 2023).

17 Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia, 1992.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

3. Public opinion research

For the purposes of this paper, a comprehensive public opinion survey was conducted at the end of August 2022. The sample size was chosen in accordance with the requirements of the research. In this case, 1111 respondents are included, keeping the general ratio in terms of basic demographic characteristics (gender, age over 18 years, ethnicity, profession and education), while respecting geographical balance.

The research aims to reveal citizens' views of the process of independence, the successes and failures of North Macedonia in the external and defense fields in the past three decades, and the expectations for these areas in the years to come.

3.1. General assessments of foreign policy and defense

The questions in the first part can be divided into two groups; in the first group, the respondents scored the conduct of foreign policy on a scale of 1 to 5, then did the same for the Army's performance over the past 30 years (see table 1 and table 2).

The analysis of the results shows that the respondents' average rating regarding the way the foreign policy of the country has been conducted over the past three decades is 2.52, while for the behavior of the Army, it is 3.37.

It is characteristic that there is no particular difference in the scores between the respondents, across ethnic origin, geographic origin or education.

The significantly higher evaluation of the respondents for the performance of the Army compared to the conduct of foreign policy can be attributed to the accession of North Macedonia to NATO, which represents the most significant goal which is strongly supported by the majority of political parties in the country. Of course, the traditional support of the citizens for the security system of the state has an influence on the results of both questions, which has been confirmed in almost all public opinion surveys up until the present time²⁰.

20 More information on this topic in the text: Slightly visible, but with the greatest trust (2022), Nova Makedonija.

Table 1.²¹

Foreign policy in the past 30 years

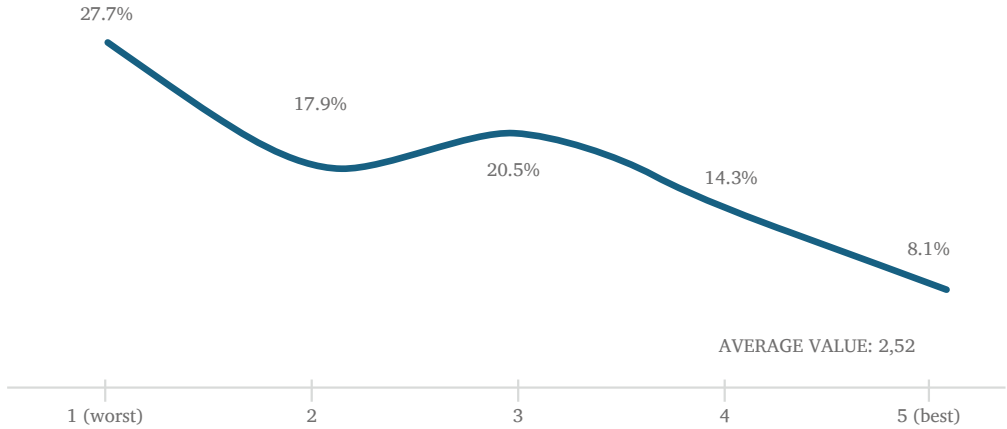
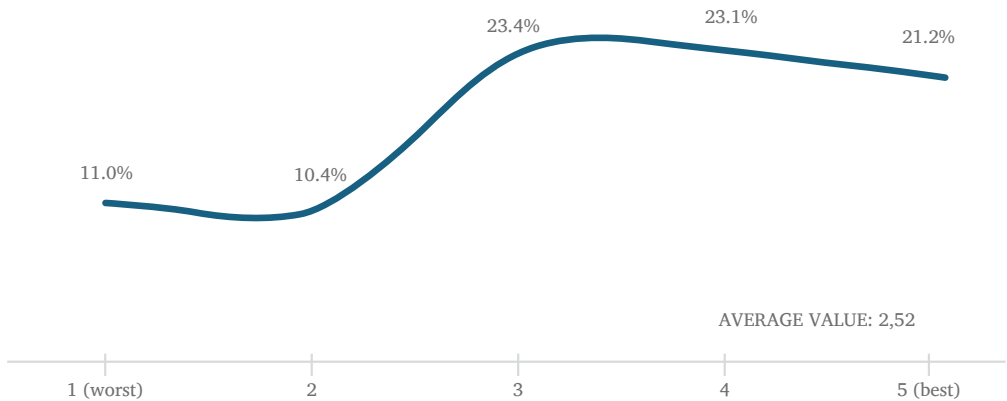


Table 2.

The role of the Army in the past 30 years



²¹ The ratings presented in this and in all other tables of this type in this text represent personal views of a specific group of respondents, compiled on the basis of established criteria for methodologically correct implementation of a public opinion survey.

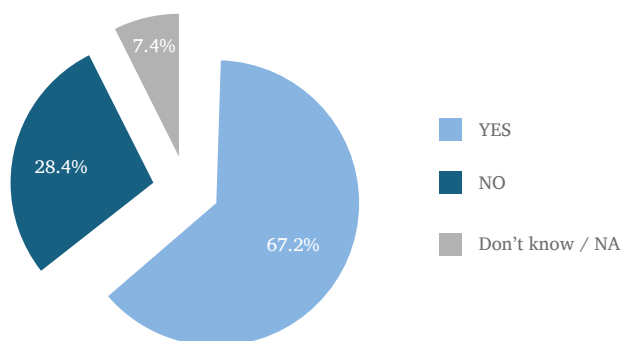
3.2. NATO and the European Union

The next segment of the research analyses respondents' views of the two most important foreign policy and defense goals.

Some 64.2% of the respondents support the membership of North Macedonia in NATO against 28.4% who are opposed (see table 3), which represents a ratio of 2:1 in favour of the advocates of the country's integration into the NATO alliance. In this respect, there are noticeable differences in the statements, mainly based on the ethnicity of the respondents. Thus, 90.1% of the members of the Albanian ethnic community support the membership of North Macedonia in NATO in contrast to the rest of the ethnic communities, where the support for this strategic goal of the state ranges between 55% and 65%, representing a difference of about 30%.²²

Table 3.

Do you support the membership of North Macedonia in NATO?

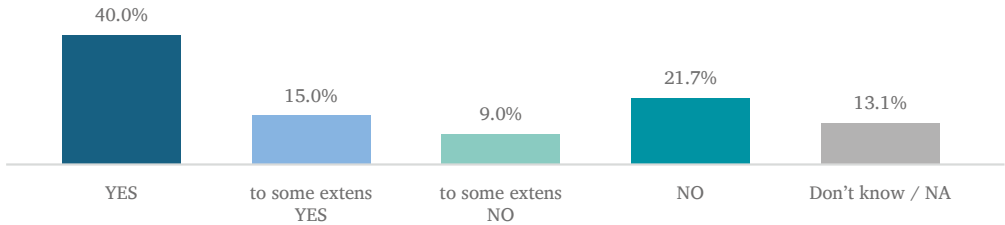


In addition to the previous question, cumulatively, 56.2% of respondents agree with the statement that North Macedonia is safer and more stable with NATO membership, compared to 30.7% who do not think so, representing a difference of 25.5%. As for the previous question, differences in the ratio of answers can be observed based on the ethnicity of the respondents.

²² Regarding the ethnic stratification of the respondents, the membership of North Macedonia in NATO is supported by 56.3% of the Macedonian respondents, 90.1% of the Albanian respondents and 63.6% of the respondents who belong to other ethnic communities in the country.

Table 4.

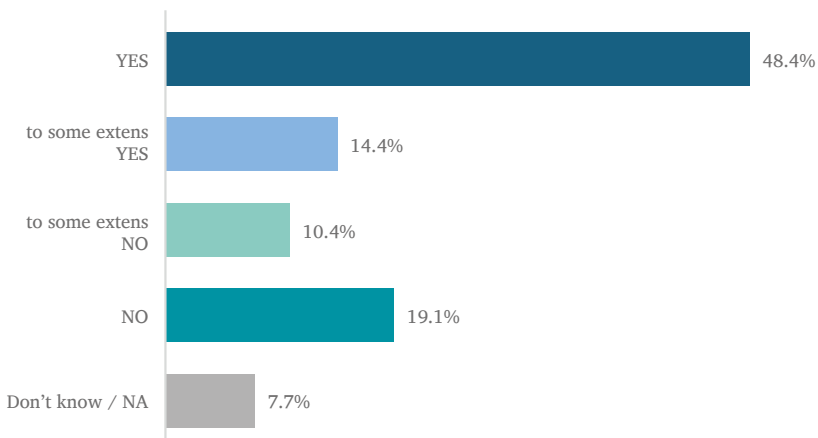
Do you agree or disagree with the claim that by joining NATO,
North Macedonia is a safer and more stable country



European integration and membership in NATO are foreign policy goals which enjoy consistently high levels of support from the Macedonian citizens. However, unlike the first decade of independence, the second and third decades are characterised by a steady decrease in citizens' support for North Macedonia's EU membership. Thus, 48.4% of respondents fully support the country integrating into the Union, while 14.4% support this only to some extent (see table 5). In total, 62.8% of all respondents are in favor of North Macedonia being part of the EU one day. Although this percentage is still very high, compared to the first two decades of independence, significant shifts in a negative direction can be observed.

Table 5.

Do you support the European integration process or not?



3.3. Relations with other countries

The next segment of the research analyses the bilateral relations of North Macedonia with other reference countries.

Respondents have the most positive impression of the quality of North Macedonia's mutual relations with Turkey, with 71.6% positive ratings; with Serbia, with 68.6% positive ratings and with Germany, with 64.3% positive ratings (see table 6). The research also notes that a significant 37.7% of respondents positively evaluate the quality of Macedonian-Greek bilateral relations. Also, 58.5% of the respondents have a positive opinion about the bilateral relations of North Macedonia with the USA and 57% have the same attitude about the bilateral relations between our country and Albania.

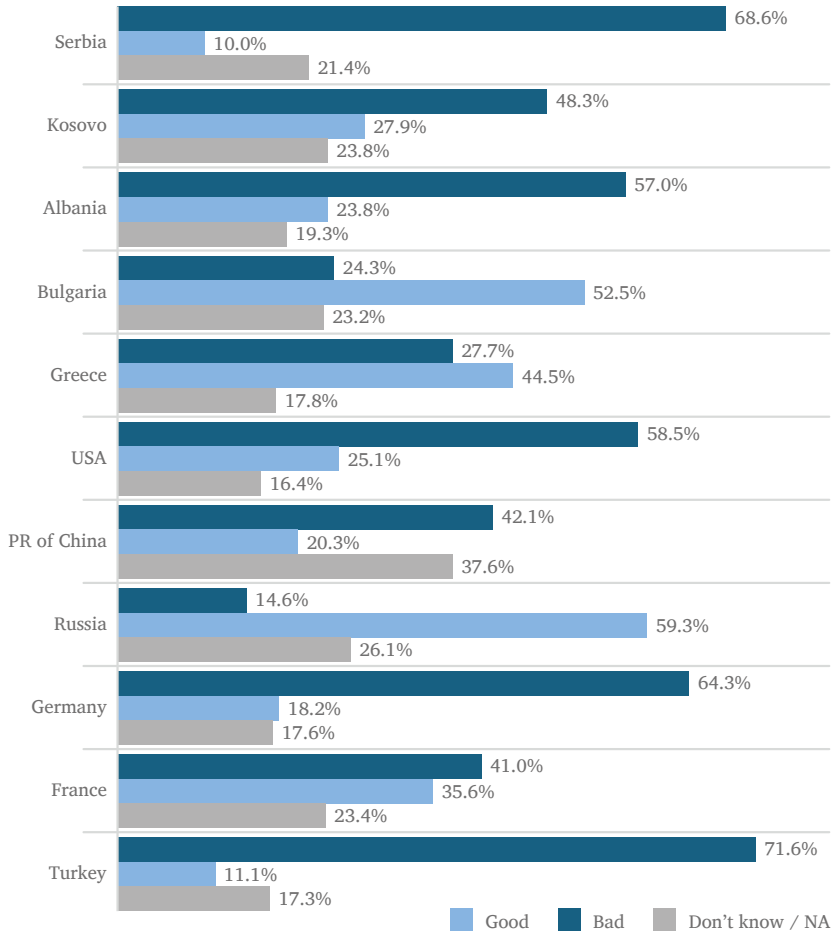
At the bottom of the scale are Russia and Bulgaria, for which 59.3% and 52.5% of respondents believe that they have poor bilateral relations with North Macedonia. The public opinion survey of 2021, which covered the three decades since the establishment of North Macedonia's independence, the citizens' opinion of the nature of our country's bilateral relations with Bulgaria and Russia was examined²³. At that time, 17.3% of respondents rated North Macedonia's bilateral relations with Russia as bad; the same figure for Bulgarian was 59.8%. This means that unlike in 2021, in 2022 the negative opinion of the citizens towards Bulgaria remains almost unchanged, and towards Russia it has visibly worsened. This situation in relation to respondents' opinions about Russia can be correlated with Russian aggression against Ukraine, a correlation which is also evident from the question in the penultimate segment of this analysis.

Analysis of the respondents' answers leads to the conclusion that the view of the quality of bilateral relations between our country and the aforementioned countries are relatively stable without major fluctuations, except in the case of Greece as a positive example and Bulgaria and Russia as negative ones.

23 See: Spasenovski et al., 2021.

Table 6.

How do you evaluate the country's bilateral relations with the following countries?



3.4. Current challenges

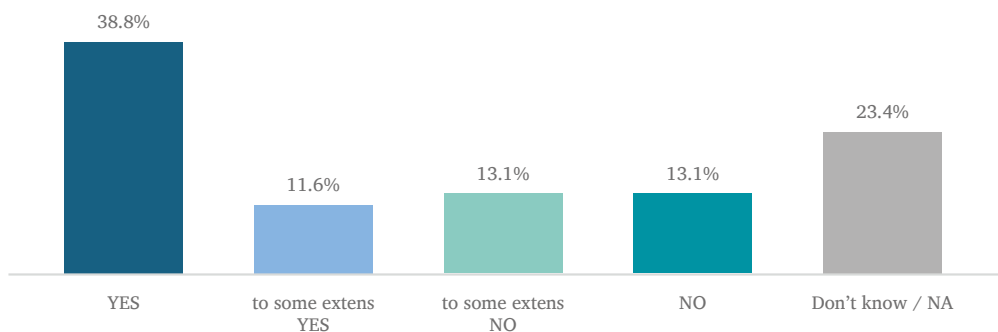
The next segment of the research covers two current issues in the field of foreign relations and defense.

The first question presents the respondents' impressions regarding the current situation in Ukraine (see table 7). Thus, 50.4% of the respondents consider that the Russian military aggression against Ukraine is unjustified and unacceptable, while 26.2% consider that it is justified and acceptable, which represents a ratio of 2:1. Analysis of the results leads to the conclusion that the respondents have

approximately the same attitude regarding this topic as the citizens of other EU and NATO member states.

Table 7.

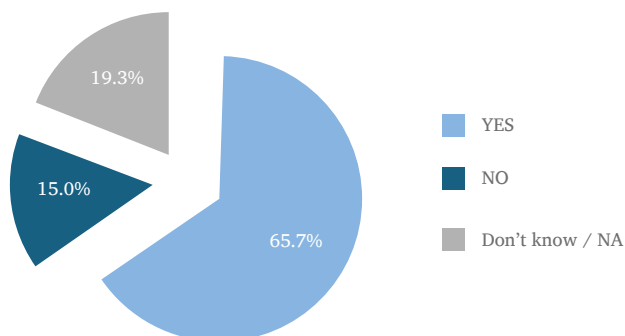
Russia military aggression against Ukraine is unjustified and unacceptable



The second question of this segment analyses respondents' position regarding the regional form of closer integration of North Macedonia, Albania and Serbia called "Open Balkan" (see table 17). Some 65.7% of respondents support the "Open Balkans" project, while 15% do not support it. The reasons for the high level of support for this form of regional integration can be attributed to the high level of approval for bilateral relations of North Macedonia with each of the two countries individually. Of course, considering the opportunities for cooperation which have been opened up by the implementation of this trilateral project, surely this is also a significant reason for such a positive impression on the part of the respondents.

Table 8.

Do you support the cooperation project between North Macedonia, Albania and Serbia called "Open Balkan"?



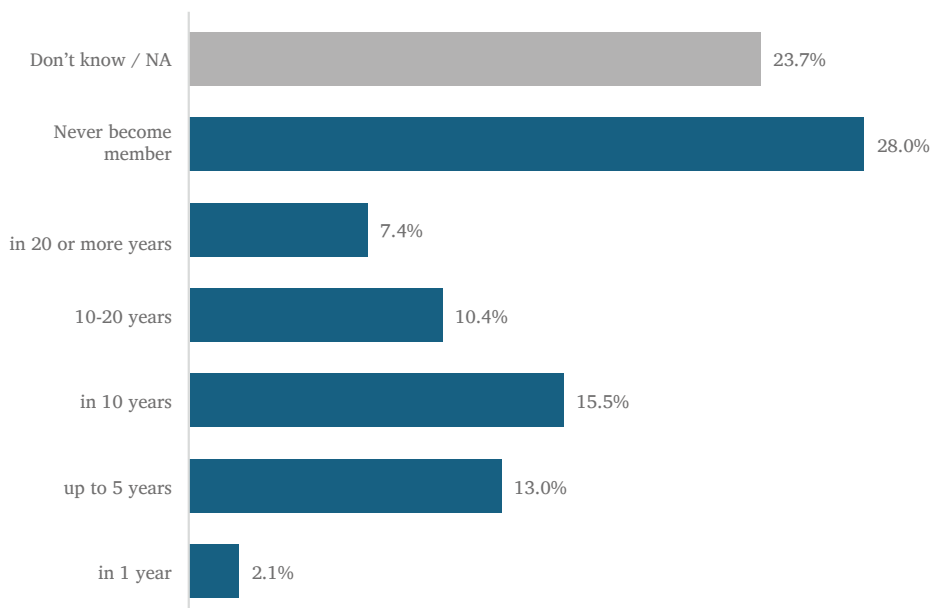
3.5. Expectations for the future

After the accession of North Macedonia to NATO, the remaining major foreign policy challenge for the country is EU integration, to which the last question is devoted (see table 9). Thus, when asked, 'When you think North Macedonia will join the Union?' 28% of respondents stated that it will not happen, which is the largest group, while 23.7% expressed their pessimism through the answer that they do not know when it will happen, i.e. they have no answer. Contrasting with these two groups are the more optimistic respondents: 7.4% stated that the country will become a member of the EU in 20 or more years; 10.4% stated in 10-20 years; 15.5% stated in 10 years; and 13% of respondents believe that North Macedonia will join the EU in 5 years.

From the responses, it appears that there is a pronounced pessimism about the membership of North Macedonia in the EU, as well as about how quickly this strategic goal will be achieved. The pessimism of the citizens regarding the integration of North Macedonia in the EU does not arise from the character of the Union or from the dissatisfaction with the way it functions, but is the result of the ongoing obstacles and delays that the country has experienced over the years, mainly as a result of bilateral problems. Thus, overcoming the bilateral obstacles and opening a clear perspective for the dynamic integration of North Macedonia without additional delays, would most certainly influence citizens' views in a positive sense in relation to the Union itself, as well as in relation to when such membership can be achieved.

Table 9.

When do you think North Macedonia will become a member of the European Union?



4. Conclusion

The history of the integration of the Republic of Macedonia into the European Union is the most vivid and unfortunate example of the open abuse by certain member states of decision-making procedures in the Union. The best argument for this position can be found by answering the question: how long did the last three countries which joined the European Union, i.e., Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia, negotiate for membership in the European Union? In the case of Romania and Bulgaria, negotiations with the European Union lasted five years, and in the case of Croatia, negotiations lasted six years. In contrast to the aforementioned states, the Republic of Macedonia has been a candidate state for membership in the European Union since 2005, the decision to start membership negotiations was made only in 2022. This means that the Republic of Macedonia waited 17 long years from the recognition that it was a candidate state to the formal launch of negotiations for membership in the Union. If this fact is combined with the situation that formal diplomatic relations between the Republic of Macedonia and the European Union began five years after the declaration of independence of our country, i.e., in 1995, then

the picture becomes complete. For 23 out of 33 years of independence, the Republic of Macedonia has not progressed in its integration into the European Union due to various blocking moves and unprincipled actions. Among other things, these long-running and quite open practices have led to excessive growth of Euroscepticism in the country. This fact against the background of today's changed geopolitics after the beginning of Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, also represents a problem for the European Union itself.

The decision-making mechanism is one of the greatest problems facing the European Union today. The example of the Republic of Macedonia shows this mechanism being continuously abused, leading to long-term stagnation of integration processes in the EU. Given the changed geopolitics, such abuses reflect negatively on the European Union itself, which on its geographical borders – such as the Western Balkans – has societies and citizens where Euroscepticism is gaining alarming proportions. At the same time, the influence on citizens and societies from countries and cultures whose values are not the same as those of the Union is reaching very concerning levels. Hence, the final question is: 'how to prevent the abuse of the EU by some member states, which prevents other states from progressing in their integration into the Union?' There are many ways, but among these I have singled out the following five:

- 1) Strengthening EU Institutions: enhancing the effectiveness and independence of EU institutions, such as the European Commission, could help ensure a fair and impartial evaluation of aspiring member states. This includes maintaining a robust monitoring mechanism to assess progress, identify challenges, and provide reform recommendations.
- 2) Transparency and accountability: promoting transparency and accountability within the EU decision-making processes could help prevent abuses. Encouraging open debates, ensuring public access to information, and providing platforms for dialogue could expose any attempts to hinder integration, and it could increase accountability among member states.
- 3) Consensus-building and mediation: facilitating dialogue and mediation among member states could help resolve disputes and address concerns. The EU should play a proactive role in promoting dialogue, fostering understanding, and finding compromises between member states to overcome obstacles to integration.
- 4) Strengthening solidarity and cohesion: building stronger solidarity and cohesion among EU member states could help prevent the abuse of power by individual states. Promoting mutual support, sharing best practices, and encouraging cooperation can foster a sense of collective responsibility and minimise actions which hinder integration.
- 5) Timely enlargement: ensuring that the enlargement process is efficient, predictable, and based on clear criteria and timelines could minimise opportunities for abuses. Clearly defined milestones, transparent negotiations, and adherence to agreed-upon procedures could help prevent undue delays or manipulations in the accession process.

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