ERROR 403: IDENTITY FORBIDDEN

ANALYTICAL REPORT ON THE PREVAILING
CONVERSATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA
REGARDING NORTH MACEDONIA'S
EU ACCESSION AND NATO MEMBERSHIP

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Intro

If one looks at all the posts on social media regarding North Macedonia's EU integration and NATO membership (the country is a member since March 27, 2020), he would get a feeling that narratives supporting the country's European and North-Atlantic strategic goals are dominating. Although this might be true having in mind only the number of posts and the number of interactions, the reality is different.

Despite the widespread trend favoring alignment with the European Union and NATO in the overall discourse, a closer examination of the comments on these posts reveals a distinct dynamic.

The analysis indicates that, with a few positive exceptions, almost all the comments on the most popular Facebook posts regarding the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country in the first two quarters of 2023, were negative in nature even though the content of the posts was favorable to EU and NATO membership. The opposing nature of comments not only featured criticisms of EU and NATO but also included pro-Russian messages. These comments aligned with the messages from actors who communicated opposition to EU and NATO integration. The prevalence of pro-Russian sentiments in the comments suggests the impact that these messaging strategies may have on readers. It indicates that the pro-Russian narrative is resonating with a portion of the audience influencing their perspectives.

The content used in the comments is mostly suggesting that the EU integration of the country, and its NATO membership mean that the Macedonians have lost their identity, and basically, they will seize to exist.

The majority of posts on Facebook are supportive towards North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration

Number of Facebook posts in the first half of 2023 regarding North Macedonia's EU integration and NATO membership divided by sentiment.

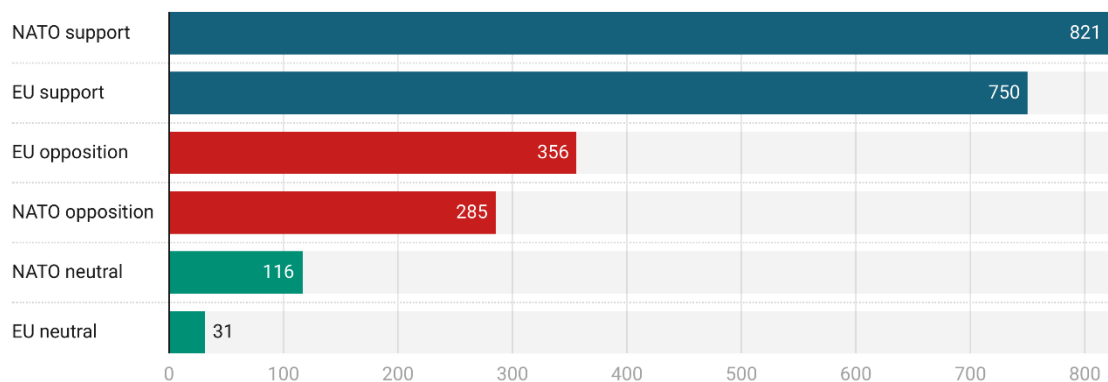|	
NATO support	821
EU support	750
EU opposition	356
NATO opposition	285
NATO neutral	116
EU neutral	31

Chart: Metamorphosis Foundation • Source: Crowdtangle • Created with Datawrapper

(The graph shows that in the first half of 2023 the majority (66%) of 2,359 most popular Facebook posts

related to North Macedonia's EU and NATO membership were supportive towards the Euro-Atlantic integration. About 27% of the posts were opposing the membership and only 6% were neutral. More specifically, if we consider only the posts related to NATO membership, out of 1,222, again more than 67% are supportive, 23% opposing and about 10% neutral.)

The narrative is in the comments

In the course of this investigation, Metamorphosis Foundation analyzed several datasets with posts from the most used social media in the country – Facebook. One part of the data included the general conversation regarding EU and NATO in the first half of 2023. The other part of the analyzed data was the conversation regarding EU and NATO by the political actors, political parties, information sources, questionable sources and influencers in the first half of 2023.

When analyzing all the posts from the two groups we see that those most likely to attract public attention are basically the same – posts from political figures. To some extent, the officials are factually the most influential individuals in society regarding the EU accession and NATO membership, and this is kind of expected having in mind that they are the ones that make the executive decisions and implement them. The analyzed data shows that most of the interactions (75%) on the top 15 Facebook pages with highest engagement on posts regarding EU and NATO in the first half of 2023, were on pages owned by politicians, and another 22% on pages of political parties.

Nevertheless, populist messages that contain pro-Russian/anti-Western sentiment often receive more engagements and have a higher chance of going viral than official state and government sources. Although the latter send mostly positive messages, they get only negative comments and verbal attacks often consisting of hate speech. The actors that coincide with Russian propaganda from one side aim to present anti-European alternatives and accuse the EU of supporting antidemocratic and fascist behavior stemming from member states towards North Macedonia.

When it came to NATO membership there was no difference – the same actors that promoted anti-EU narratives were messaging against NATO. Portraying the NATO membership as a mistake, labelling it as terroristic organization that only wants war so it can profit. The government tries to underline the importance of the membership for the stability and the sovereignty of North Macedonia and counter the Russian narrative but same as the EU messaging, they mostly face verbal attacks and negative comments.

Why is EU important for ordinary citizens

A closer look at the public discourse on social media around North Macedonia's prospects of joining the European union, reveals the differences in the way the government, the opposition and small political parties, as well as certain influencers are messaging on this topic.

When analyzing the posts from the ruling [Social Democratic Union of Macedonia](#) (Macedonian: Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија) known as SDSM almost every statement given either by some important political figure or an official announcement did not miss to highlight that EU membership is a main strategic objective and praise the fact that after 17 years of waiting, the country started EU membership negotiations.

Apart from this single aspect, which is evident in nearly all the posts from state officials, we conclude they have failed to clarify the significance of EU membership for the country. They have not elucidated the benefits it would provide to citizens, and, most importantly, they have not addressed how they plan to tackle broader political issues, such as corruption, a dysfunctional political system, and a divided society.

Certain posts we analyzed, particularly those reporting on the initiation of the EU membership negotiations, targeted the right-wing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity with acronym [VMRO-DPMNE](#) (Macedonian: ВМРО–ДПМНЕ) and the growing left-wing nationalist and Eurosceptic political party [The Left](#) (Macedonian: Левица). These political groups are accused of blocking the initiation of North Macedonia's EU membership negotiations. In the eyes of the state officials, [these entities were responsible](#) for generating panic, organizing protests, and actively opposing the negotiation process.

On the other hand, despite the state official's efforts to promote EU membership, repeatedly the comments received were overwhelmingly negative, claiming that ordinary citizens have no benefit from EU and all the EU funds are misused by members of the government for their personal enrichment.

The narrative that was being repeated most often in the comments is that the price to pay for EU membership for the Macedonians is to lose their identity, including their history and their language.

The type of accounts that most often leave negative comments varies. Although, there is a noticeable trend that often these are either anonymous accounts or new

Facebook users that do not share many details about their personal life. Even though the tool that was used for this analysis, Crowdtangle, does not allow monitoring of individual or private accounts, this notion leads to a conclusion that there is a high probability that part of the negative comments are left in an organized fashion.

As a matter of fact, one former Macedonian government official [publicly revealed](#) on November 28, 2018, that the right-wing populist party VMRO-DPMNE created a 'system' for spreading hate speech through organized mass trolling efforts. Back then, in a [interview](#) with national TV channel Kanal 5, Nikola Todorov, a former high-level official of VMRO-DPMNE, revealed that the party created and is running online "troll farms".

This is a public secret in the whole Western Balkans region – the political parties use troll farms in their everyday operations. This was confirmed recently in Serbia, where a list of more than 14,000 bots [was made public on X](#) (formerly known as Twitter).

Positive narratives with a forceful negative impact

Further analysis of the Facebook posts regarding EU and NATO membership of North Macedonia shows that in their social media communication the state officials are focused on events, meetings, or signing agreements. However, there is a notable absence of information and clarification regarding the key steppingstone in the country's EU integration – the Bulgarian issue.

Namely, there is one official controversial document named the Protocol of the second session of the joint intergovernmental Macedonian-Bulgarian commission. This Protocol concludes that to complete the opening phase of EU membership negotiations, North Macedonia should include the Bulgarian nation in its constitution on an equal footing with other mentioned peoples. This conclusion from the protocol is noted in the [Negotiating Framework](#) between North Macedonia and the European Union which made it an official condition for the process of EU integration.

Right now, the Preamble of the [Constitution of North Macedonia](#), states that "... the country is established as a national state of the Macedonian people, with full equality as citizens and permanent co-existence among the Macedonian people and the Albanian people, Turkish people, Vlach people, Roma people and other nationalities living in the Republic".

Stemming from the mentioned controversial Protocol, the Macedonian government already initiated the [start of the procedure](#) for the change of the Constitution. They propose to add "the Bulgarian people, the Croatian people, the Montenegrin people, the Slovenian people, the Jewish people and the Egyptian people" in the Preamble sentence that was quoted earlier.

This is the only active official dispute that blocks the EU membership negotiations for the Republic of North Macedonia. The hardest part up until now is to get two thirds of the Members of Parliament to vote for the Constitutional change as required by law.

However, on social media posts by state officials, there is an evident lack of explanation regarding the consequences of the proposed constitutional changes. The Facebook accounts by officials, news sources and influencers which were analyzed because they gained most attention during the first half of 2023, fail to explain what does changing the Constitution really mean. This created a significant gap in understanding and created space for other political actors and questionable sources to promote anti-EU narratives, aiming to gain political points or push an agenda.

The right-wing opposition party VMRO-DPMNE tries to portray itself as contributor to European values, regional stability and security. But in their public communication they often highlight the question whether those same values are shared when it comes to Macedonia's accession to the EU. By doing that they accuse the EU members of being hypocritical hence creating a picture that the EU values are not democratic.

Another message dominant in most of the social media posts by VMRO-DPMNE is that the change of the Constitution, as they say "under Bulgarian dictatorship" will not be accepted. They add that EU integration "must not mean giving up the basic identity" for the Macedonians. This narrative clearly overlaps with the Russian narrative that the EU is weak, undemocratic union that supports fascist behavior and is a threat to the sovereignty.

Influencers that supported same nationalistic narratives as right-wing VMRO-DPMNE went a bit further by presenting EU as nazi and colonialist trying to commit an identity genocide. Another narrative is that by adding the Bulgarians into the constitution Macedonia will become a second Bulgarian state and soon Macedonians will cease to exist as a nation. EU as a neo-Nazi organization is a well-known narrative that Russia is disseminating since the most recent invasion of Ukraine, claiming to fight not only Nazism in Ukraine but in the whole of Europe.

The Left as the sole party with Eurosceptic ideology is based on modern ideological similarities, not only aligns with Russian entities but also publicly supports and glorifies Russia, portraying it as an alternative to the EU. For example, one of their two Members of Parliament, Borislav Krmov claims that the ruling social democrats are basically hostages of ethnic Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (Macedonian: Демократска унија за интеграција). Krmov warns that one of the dangers of Bulgarians being listed in the Constitution will be the so called "Albanization of the country".

For years, The Left and VMRO-DPMNE have been disseminating disinformation by using rhetoric that the Macedonians are second-class citizens in their own country. They claim there are substantial ethnic shifts and a power disparity from an ethnic perspective. According to them, the ruling Macedonian party is not in control of the state. They claim that the social democrats (SDSM) are in a state of ethnic political subjugation within their "European coalition" with the ethnic Albanian parties. This altogether, they claim, is perceived as "Albanization of the country".

The political rhetoric of The Left is anti-Albanian using current events to instill anti-Albanian and anti-EU sentiment. Again, this all aligns with the Russian propaganda that aims to cause fear among the ethnic Macedonian population of losing their sovereignty and identity. This leads to further divisions and polarization of the country.

Is there a Moldovan "script" replicated in North Macedonia?

Both the ruling social democrats and the growing pro-Russian Left drew a comparison between the situations in North Macedonia and Moldova when it came to EU accession, yet their interpretations and messages diverged significantly.

On one hand, mentions of Moldova were primarily associated with Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski's visit to Kishinev for the second meeting of the European Political Community. The social democrats shared information about the visit on their page. This included a statement from the Prime Minister Kovacevski, talking about the shared strategic foreign policy priority of Moldova and North Macedonia – EU membership.

The only other political actor mentioning Moldova in the first half of 2023, is the pro-Russian Left party (Levica). They compare the current Macedonian-Bulgarian controversy with the law that the [Moldova Parliament approved](#) which names the national language as Romanian. They imply that same scenario will be seen in Macedonia in 2030 when the Macedonian Parliament will vote that the Macedonian language is Bulgarian and this will be that last obstacle to EU membership. This statement indirectly implies that the price of EU accession is the disappearance of the Macedonian language.

Questionable sources have attempted to highlight unequal treatment within the EU regarding the accession processes of Moldova and North Macedonia. The primary [argument put forth](#) is that Ukraine and Moldova, characterized as the poorest and most corrupt countries lacking significant reforms or minority rights, are deemed deserving of EU membership, while North Macedonia is purportedly excluded despite meeting similar criteria. Accompanied by assertions of double standards, and a denial of the Macedonian people's history and statehood the narrative suggests

that, in the face of these allegations, the EU's stance reflects an unjust treatment of the [Macedonian people and their historical and sovereign identity](#).

Using Ukraine's EU accession as one more proof of lost identity

In relation with the Ukraine accession to the EU the main actors disseminating messages about that are the politicians and news sources. The analysis shows that the information which state officials share on social media on this topic is mostly following the international community. But their messaging on Ukraine's EU integration process does not miss to mention the unjustified Russian aggression against Ukraine. The common interests North Macedonia has with other EU members to explore the most effective ways to suppress the influence of undemocratic third countries in the heart of Europe are also included.

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE almost completely refrains from commenting on this topic. They rarely even mention Ukraine or Russia in their Facebook posts in the first half of 2023. They have no clear position on the war and in the rare occasions they mention it, they manipulate with statements that the war did not have any economic impact on the country.

The pro-Russian Left, clearly openly supports the aggression, referring to it as using the official Kremlin narrative that falsely frames it as being Russian action against fascism in Ukraine. The Left did not miss the opportunity to draw parallels between the case of Ukraine's accession negotiations with the EU and that of North Macedonia. They claim that [Ukraine succeeded in its EU accession negotiations](#) without consensus from all 27 members while the European bureaucrats convinced North Macedonia that without a consensus with "supremacist" Bulgaria, the negotiations cannot start.

In this context, their messages align with the pro-Russian narrative, suggesting that the EU supports fascistic behavior of its members in this specific instance towards North Macedonia. The party further disseminates anti-Ukrainian narratives by adopting Russian state media articles published on the [Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) web site. The party [republishes the articles](#) on their own media outlets in Macedonian language. These negative narratives are then used to launch attacks on the EU and the Western countries.

The public and mainstream media are following the general discussion about the accession of Ukraine to the EU, hoping that this will accelerate European expansion for North Macedonia too. If we look at the comments under these articles, we can sense a known pro- Russian narrative that the EU is misleading Ukraine in the same way that it does with North Macedonia.
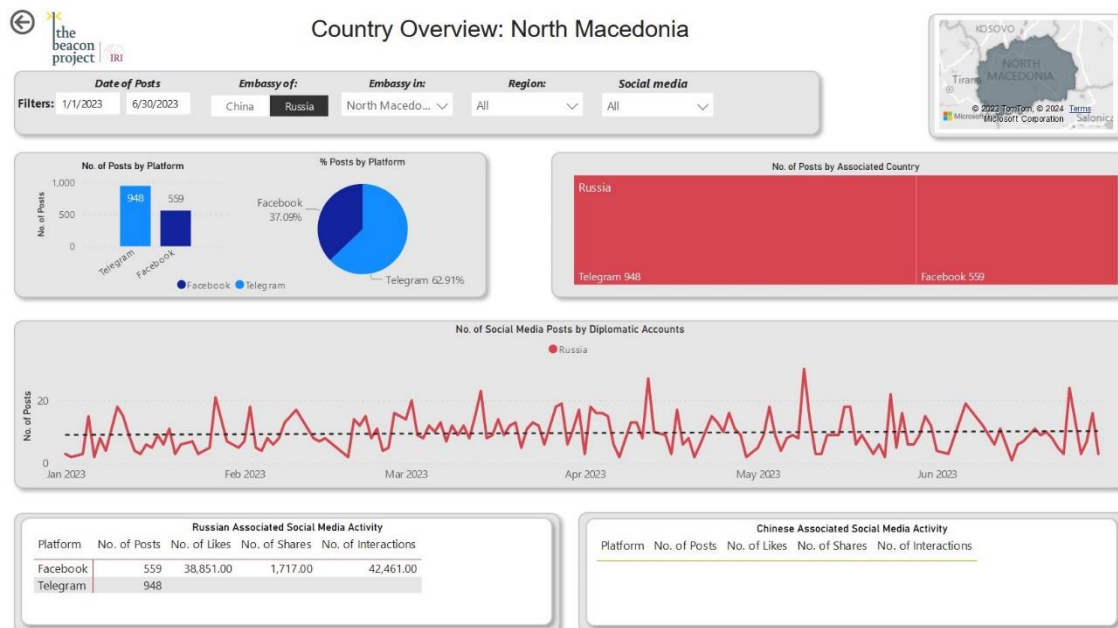
NATO enlargement: Macedonian perspective

The Macedonian government takes great pride in its NATO membership, as underscored in nearly every communication from high-ranking government officials, emphasizing the significance of this affiliation. They highlight that the country now is in the company of the most powerful alliance and as a member of NATO has its secular peace and stability protected. But although the attitude of state officials is averse to the Russian messaging on the topic almost all the comments are either against the government politics or anti-Western. Again, the origin of the negative comments in some cases comes from anonymous or newly created Facebook profiles. Past experiences show that these mass comments are often organized by the political parties themselves. Additionally, it should be stated that the level of polarization in the country on these issues, especially on political (liberal and conservative) and ethnic (Macedonian and Albanian) lines, is quite high. Therefore, it is safe to presume that large chunks of the comments are organic.

Again, the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE does not comment on this topic except on rare occasions when attacking the government. In those cases, they state that to become a member of NATO North Macedonia made a huge, national sacrifice which no other country in the world has done. They refer to the name change, for which the Constitution had to be changed once in 2019. Since then, the Republic of Macedonia is known as the Republic of North Macedonia. On this occasion, two thirds of the Members of Parliament voted for the Constitution change. Undoubtedly the two-third majority of "yes" votes was enveloped in controversy and accusations of blackmailing, bribery and corruption.

When it comes to NATO membership, The Left (Levica) is fully aligned with the Russian views and uses every opportunity to promote anti-NATO sentiment. The leader of the party Dimitar Apasiev refers to NATO as a terrorist organization accusing the government of creating a picture that there is no life outside the EU and NATO. They draw parallels between Serbia-Kosovo and Russia-Ukraine conflict claiming that [Kosovo became the most ethnically homogeneous territory](#) in Europe because of NATO expelling Serbs, Roma, and other non-Albanians. The Left promotes the most common pro-Russian narrative in the region that NATO did to Serbia what Russia is doing to Ukraine accusing the West of being hypocritical and acting solely in its own self-interest.

Another influential source that communicates on this topic are nationalist Facebook pages that promote anti-NATO/anti-Western narratives. They claim, for example, that being a NATO member leads to a large brain drain or "exodus" and a worsened economic situation. These pages very often align with other pro-Russian narrative

such as NATO openly declares their goal is to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia, and Russia is only defending itself.

(The Dashboard charts from IRI's Beacon project shows the number of posts daily that the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia posts on its Facebook page and on its Telegram account. The data clearly shows that there is a peak in the number of posts on May 9, celebrated as Victory Day in Russia, which the Embassy uses to push its propaganda messaging. Source: https://dash-iribeaconproject.org/embassy-tracker/)

The Russian embassy in North Macedonia primarily utilizes its social media profiles to extend congratulations and celebrate public holidays, portraying Russia as a friendly ally to North Macedonia. Many of the posts on Facebook in the first half of 2023 employ language that refers to Macedonians as brothers. But quite frequently, amid all these posts, statements from Russian officials promoting disinformation narratives are disseminated.
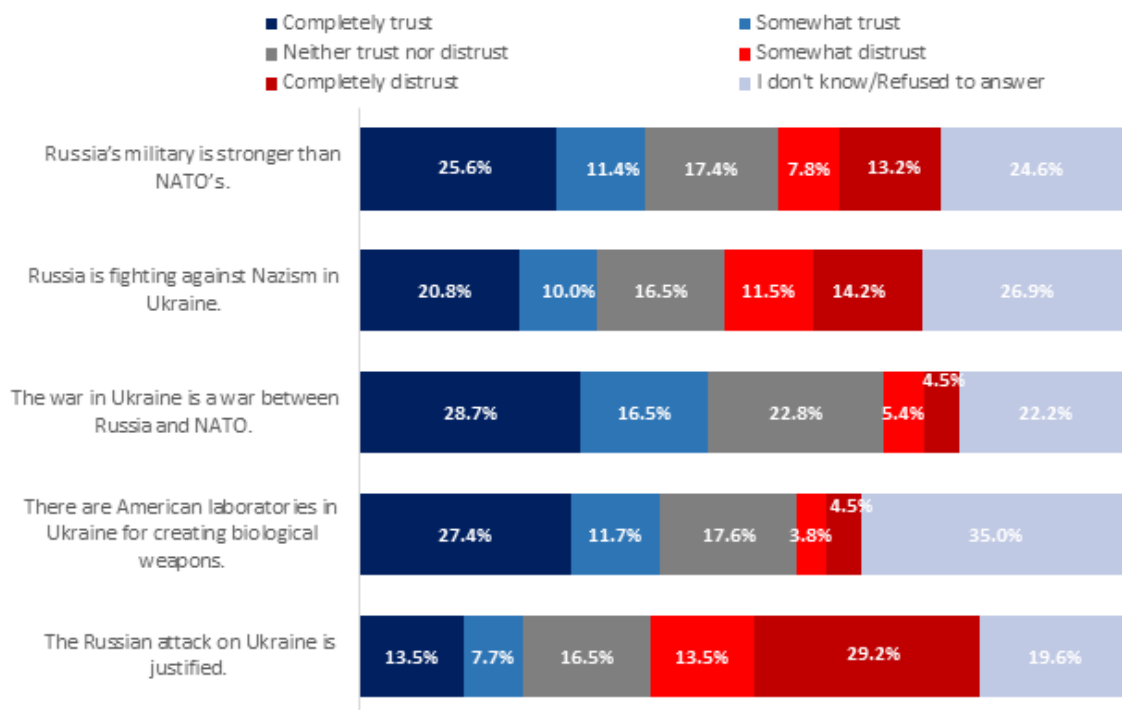
In these posts Putin or other Russian top officials spread narratives such as "NATO holds Ukraine as a hostage and then uses it against Russia" and that the NATO supply of weapons to the "mercenaries of the regime in Kiev is only prolonging the suffering of Ukrainian people".

Another disinformation narrative being spread in North Macedonia regarding Ukraine is the one that claims the war is not being fought between Russia and Ukraine but rather between Russia and USA. Metamorphosis Foundation recently conducted a survey and published a report titled "The Effect of Disinformation and Foreign Influences on the Democratic Processes in North Macedonia in 2023".

The results show that majority of citizens in the country (49%) believe that the war in Ukraine is, in fact, a war between Russia and NATO. This percentage is highest

among citizens with higher education (50%), compared to citizens with secondary education (44%) and citizens with primary education (35%).

To what extent do you believe in each of the following statements?

(Source: The Effect of Disinformation and Foreign Influences on the Democratic Processes in North Macedonia in 2023, Metamorphosis Foundation, January 2024)

Specifically, according to this narrative, NATO enlargement is to blame for the war. This narrative portrays NATO as a hypocritical and terrorist organization that actively pursues war, obstructing any chance for peace to be established in Ukraine. In the posts they aim to diminish the Macedonian support for Ukraine by asserting that NATO will be unable to justify to non-Western countries the benefits from engaging in a confrontation with Russia.

Sergey Bazdnikin, the ambassador of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia is [regularly quoted](#) on Macedonian nationalistic pages, promoting the narrative that it is more advantageous for North Macedonia to align itself with an Orthodox brotherhood country like Russia than to be a part of NATO.

The Russian embassy has also utilized its social media profiles to state that they do not [interfere in the internal affairs of any country](#), including North Macedonia in contrast to what Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski stated publicly. Additionally, the Embassy seeks to portray itself as a victim. This Facebook post received predominantly positive comments expressing support for Russia.

Macedonian support for Ukraine becoming member of NATO

Almost identical as with the issue of Ukraine becoming member of the European Union, the government officials are supportive for Ukraine to join the Alliance. Their messages are composed of claims that the country is not alone in this fight and that North Macedonia stands in solidarity with Ukraine. The government officials also use the war in Ukraine as an example what can happen if the country is not a member of the Alliance.

Despite that, the recent Metamorphosis Foundation's public opinion research shows that the percentage of people that felt more secure after the country entered NATO decreased from 40% in 2022 to 30% in 2023.

The pro-Russian Left and the far-right nationalist also use Ukraine in their narratives but for no other reason than to promote anti-NATO sentiment and shape public opinion. Their conclusion is that NATO is responsible for the war, and it is only using Ukraine as its puppet. This narrative is well known instrument of the Russian propaganda and could be applied on any country as is the case with North Macedonia. The far right nationalist and The Left use the same rhetoric when stating that North Macedonia is a servant to NATO and the USA.

The right-wing VMRO-DPMNE, again, does not comment on the topic of Ukraine's NATO membership except in cases when they publicly ridicule the Minister of Defense, Slavjanka Petrovska. She is criticized for her support to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine as a NATO member country, meaning the government is too weak and incapable to help.

Main actors

The analysis of the social media, specifically Facebook discourse related to NATO membership and EU integration of North Macedonia, surfaced several key individuals who play a significant role steering discussions related to NATO and the EU.

Among the top 5 were: Dimitar Kovacevski, Petar Bogojeski, Nikola Gruevski, Maksim Dimitrievski and Dmitar Apasiev. Their messages gain popularity not only among their followers and party members, serving to strengthen a particular viewpoint, but also among their political opponents who use them as a negative illustration. These actors were observed advocating for divergent paths, occasionally aligning with Russian perspectives and at other times contradicting pro-Russian narratives.

Among the online news outlets that are actively discussing the topic: "vocentar", "TV21", "frontline", "info24" and "Nova Makedonija" emerged as the top 5 messengers in the general conversation, expressing support for both the EU and NATO. These platforms primarily function as channels for sharing statements from governments and NATO officials, often resorting to a simple verbatim news approach without appending any additional commentary. Notably, in the realm of opinion pieces or analytical articles within this discourse, a significant gap was evident as no opinion or analytical articles were present to contribute to the broader discussion in this context.

Certainly, the observation that these news outlets played a dual role in expressing opposition to both the EU and NATO reinforces the previous conclusion that these online platforms predominantly serve as a channel for republishing statements from politicians. An exception to this pattern was the news outlet "Nova Makedonija" where articles and op-eds by several anti-EU, anti-Western and pro-Russian columnists and even ambassadors are published.

Political actors actively expressing support for both the EU and NATO were predominantly government officials: Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski, Minister of Internal Affairs Oliver Spasovski, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European Affairs, Bojan Marichikj and the Facebook page of the party in power SDSM. Government officials, despite serving as the primary advocates in supportive messaging, faced a considerable volume of negative comments, as previously noted.

Unlike the supporting actors, the main actors messaging against the EU and NATO, each have distinct political backgrounds.

The leader of The Left political party, Dimitar Apasiev, and MP Borislav Krmov played prominent roles as messengers against the EU, with a specific focus on anti-NATO narratives. They openly align with the Russian official attitude and criticize the government, labelling NATO as a "terrorist organization" due to their opposition to the country's membership.

Former Prime Minister and leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Nikola Gruevski, was sentenced to prison and fled to Hungary, where he was granted political asylum. Still, he remains popular within his party and among the Macedonian Facebook audience. While he is falsely portraying himself as pro-European and neutral and does not openly share his anti-EU attitude, Nikola Gruevski aligns with the Russian narrative when it comes to relations with Bulgaria. He argues that the country risks losing its identity if it pursues EU membership under the given circumstances.

His successor, the current president of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, continues the party's stance, regarding his position on issues such as EU membership and national identity.

He claims that EU membership "under Bulgarian dictate" will threaten Macedonian national identity, and this aligns with the Russian narrative for lost sovereignty. Mickoski refrains from commenting on NATO membership or the full-scale Russian military invasion of Ukraine. Still, in all his statements, he criticizes the government for alleged misuse of EU funds and prioritizing assistance to Ukraine over addressing internal issues.

The Prime Minister's Facebook page tops the interactions data

Number of interactions (comments, likes, shares) on Facebook posts in the first half of 2023 regarding North Macedonia's EU integration and NATO membership divided by pages.
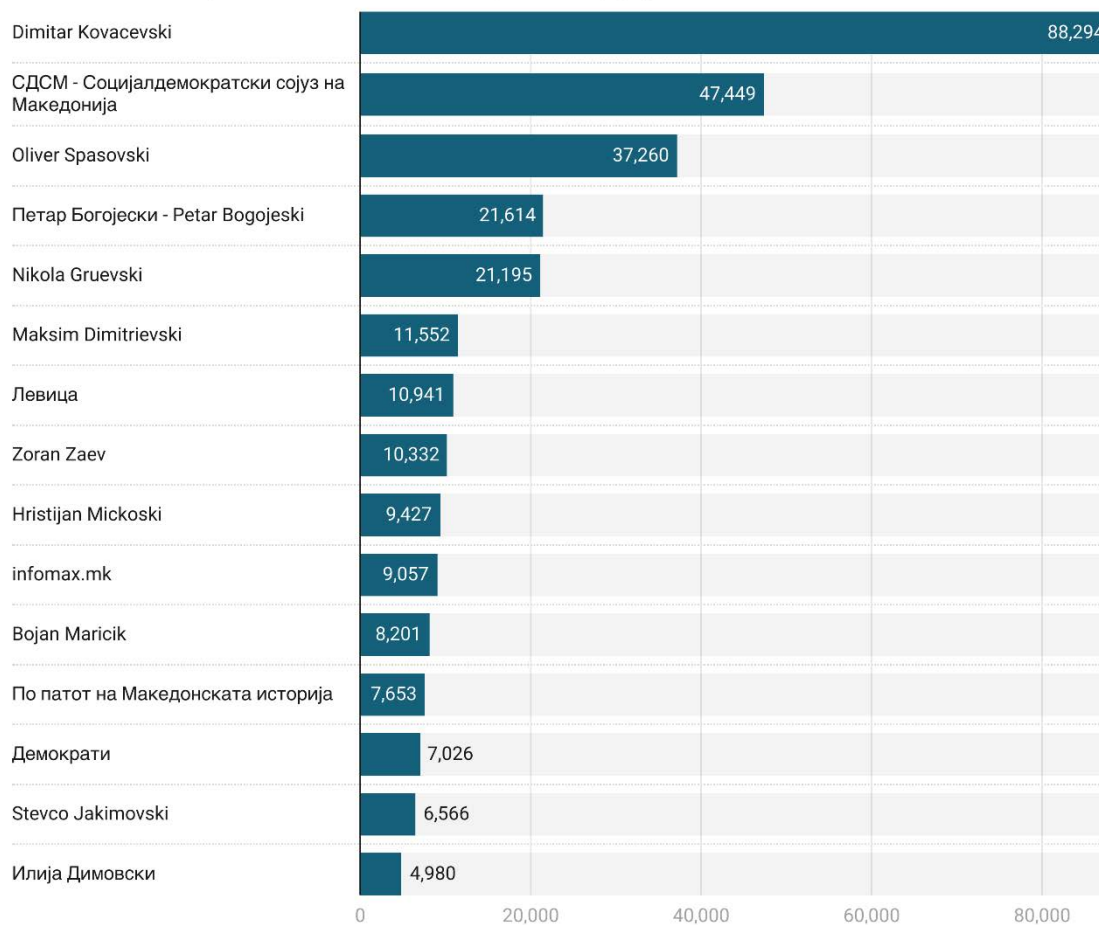
Page	Interactions
Dimitar Kovacevski	88,294
СДСМ - Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија	47,449
Oliver Spasovski	37,260
Петар Богојески - Petar Bogojeski	21,614
Nikola Gruevski	21,195
Maksim Dimitrievski	11,552
Левица	10,941
Zoran Zaev	10,332
Hristijan Mickoski	9,427
infomax.mk	9,057
Bojan Maricik	8,201
По патот на Македонската историја	7,653
Демократи	7,026
Stevco Jakimovski	6,566
Илија Димовски	4,980

Chart: Metamorphosis Foundation • Source: Crowdtangle • Created with Datawrapper

(*The graph shows the Facebook pages with largest number of interactions in the first half of 2023 with posts regarding the NATO and EU membership of North Macedonia. The first three pages are the Prime Ministers page, the ruling Social Democrats page and the Minister of Interior's page.*)

The leader of the so-called national movement Macedonian Concept Petar Bogojeski and his Facebook page with [58K followers](#) came 4th among the Facebook pages with the largest number of interactions, lining up even before Nikola Gruevski. He tries to present himself as pro EU and pro NATO. However, his consistent questioning of the integrity and behavior of both the EU and NATO towards North Macedonia and his nationalist anti-Albanian claims, might leave the average reader with the impression

that something is amiss, without a clear understanding of the specific concerns.

The mayor of Kumanovo Municipality, Maksim Dimitrievski, is another figure who does not openly oppose the EU. In some statements, he asserts that he is not willing to change his language, culture, or national identity to become a member of the European Union and in this regard aligns on the same narrative as VMRO-DPMNE and pro-Russian entities. Nevertheless, he expresses the belief that North Macedonia needs the EU. However, his stance on NATO is not quite clear from the available information. He was initially a member of SDSM, but in 2021, he was re-elected as an independent candidate.

Actors like Maksim Dimitrievski and Petar Bogojeski can be complex in their categorization, as they exhibit characteristics that could align with both the group of political actors and those associated with questionable sources. Their messaging makes it challenging to determine the sentiment at a first glance but if we analyze further both use anti-Albanian rhetoric and fearmongering that to join the EU, the country will lose its identity.

The main actors from questionable sources that fully align with pro-Russian messages were the nationalistic pages: [Along the path of Macedonian history](#), [Sekula Vojvoda Fan Club](#) and [Jovan Kukuzel](#). In their online posts, they openly oppose EU integration and employ a provocative anti-Bulgarian narrative by labelling Bulgarians as fascist. This inflammatory rhetoric not only fuels negative perceptions but also escalates tensions between the involved countries. They present Russia and China as an alternative that North Macedonia should consider. They depict the country's NATO accession as its most significant mistake asserting that it has resulted in the nation becoming hostage to the Alliance. To quote the narrative directly: "NATO is leading the war in Ukraine and forces member countries such as North Macedonia to pay for the ammunition".

The mentioned nationalistic pages, Sekula Vojvoda Fan Club with [23K followers](#) and Along the Path of Macedonian History with [14K followers](#), have significantly fewer followers compared to the [official Facebook page of the ruling party SDSM](#), which has [99K followers.](#) Despite this numerical difference, these nationalistic pages ranked among the top 12 Facebook pages with the largest number of interactions. The impact they wield can be evaluated by considering their organic number of followers, the messages they disseminate and the number of interactions they attract.

The page Along the Path of Macedonian History not only propagates nationalistic narratives but also extends its reach by [sharing and quoting statements](#) from the Russian embassy in North Macedonia.

A questionable source involved in anti-EU messaging is the small newly founded political party Democrats. With 9.7K followers they found themselves among the top 15 actors by interactions with their primary political rhetoric involving blaming and criticizing the ruling party SDSM and their coalition partner DUI, especially when it comes to EU accession. Democrats assert that these parties are pushing for North Macedonia's EU accession at any cost, even if it is detrimental to the Macedonian people and the country.

Recommendations

Institutional communications through official networks should prioritize transparency, clearly addressing the specific issues that the government needs to tackle for the country to gain access to the European Union. Rather than providing vague reports on meetings related to this topic, they need to ensure citizens and stakeholders are well-informed about the challenges, progress, and actions needed for successful EU accession.

Institutional communication services should actively analyze potential disinformation narratives and work to prevent their spread. Proactive measures may include providing accurate information, engaging with the public to address concerns, and collaborating with other entities to debunk false narratives.

The style and language employed in the social media profiles of public institutions should not be overly formal. Instead, the content should adapt to the language that is most acceptable and relatable to the target audience. Using a more approachable and accessible tone helps engage a broader range of individuals and enhances the effectiveness of communication from public institutions on social media platforms. This can be achieved by developing a broader collaboration with a wide range of civil society actors, NGOs, scientists, so-called influencers, community leaders, etc.

Communication from government officials with the public regarding EU integration should prioritize highlighting what EU integration means for ordinary citizens and how individuals will benefit. Using concrete examples by focusing on tangible advantages, such as economic opportunities, improved standards of living, enhanced educational and job prospects, officials can effectively convey the positive impact of EU integration on the daily lives of citizens.

Leveraging the experiences of Visegrad Group countries with EU accession, government officials may find valuable benefits in collaborating with a diverse range of stakeholders within the Visegrad Group. Engaging experts, disinformation researchers, analysts, and NGOs are crucial for gaining insights and effectively countering emerging narratives. By fostering such collaborations, government

officials can draw upon a wealth of knowledge and expertise to navigate the challenges related to misinformation, ensuring a more comprehensive and informed approach to addressing and mitigating the impact of disinformation campaigns.

Government officials, when communicating on social media, should not solely rely on promoted posts but should also prioritize building organic reach. Balancing both promoted and organic strategies ensures a comprehensive and authentic online presence and creates meaningful connections with the public when communicating on topics such as the EU and NATO.

Political parties should refrain from using ethically inflammatory rhetoric in public communication as it threatens the country's stability. Such rhetoric can contribute to social tensions, polarization, and a divisive political climate.

Political parties should avoid building upon existing Russian narratives, particularly those centered around the themes of 'lost identity' and 'lost sovereignty.' This is especially crucial when engaging in sensitive topics related to disputes with Bulgaria and the Albanian ethnic minority in the country.

It is essential for political parties to prioritize responsible and evidence-based communication that promotes understanding, inclusivity, and constructive dialogue rather than relying on disinformation narratives that may have divisive or misleading implications.

The media should refrain from copying statements from politicians on social media and presenting them as the party's official stance. Instead, journalists and media outlets have a responsibility to verify and contextualize information before reporting it.

Social media monitoring methodology

The team at Metamorphosis Foundation with support from the International Republican Institute conducted this report based on a mutually agreed social media monitoring methodology. The main tool that was used for acquiring the data used for this report was Meta's Crowdtangle. The team first agreed on the key words that will be used to search through Facebook. There were two sets of keywords, one for posts involving the EU, and the other for posts involving NATO. The Crowdtangle tool was used to search the entirety of Facebook for posts including those two sets of keywords which were posted in the first half of 2023 divided by quarters.

Out of the results received, the team decided to consider the top 250 posts that were overperforming, the top 250 posts by interactions, another top 250 by comments and 250 more by underperforming. This left us with more than 1000 posts regarding NATO and more than 1000 posts regarding the EU, 2000 in total so far.

Subsequently, the team identified several lists of actors on Facebook, including political parties, political actors, info sources and questionable sources. Then, another search was conducted through Crowdtangle using the same keywords for posts involving NATO and the EU. This resulted in another 2000 posts, 1000 with content regarding NATO, and 1000 more with content regarding the EU.

The team afterwards analyzed the posts one by one and tagged them with four distinct tags for sentiment: NATO_sup for those that were supportive towards NATO, NATO_opp for those that were opposing NATO and NATO_neut for those that were neutral towards the Alliance. Additionally, the posts regarding the EU were tagged too: EU_sup for those that were supportive, EU_opp for the opposing and EU_neut for the neutral posts towards the European Union.

Social media monitoring was only one part of the whole research and analysis which steered the authors in their work. The other part of the report included deep analysis of separate Facebook posts by various sources, analysis of foreign malign narratives as well as analysis of the way that Ukraine's and Moldova's prospects of joining EU and NATO influence the discourse on social media.

The authors paid attention to the way that the political actors are using the topics of North Macedonia's accession to EU and NATO membership, what kind of narratives are used, what are the most prominent actors and what types of messaging they are using.