



THE EU'S CREDIBILITY AT STAKE IN MACEDONIA

Authors: Zoran Nechev¹ and Hristijan Petrushev²

¹ Zoran Nechev is Senior Researcher and Program coordinator, Center for European Integration, Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" - Skopje and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Macedonia Fellow

² Hristijan Petrushev is Junior Researcher in the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" - Skopje



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS¹

¹ Please take into consideration: In the course of conducting this survey the term state was used in several questions, although one of the optional responses was the European Union. This was made in order to simplify the questionnaire and make it more easily comprehensible. This survey is conducted on a national level.

FINDINGS

- The highest proportion of respondents (44.3%) are not satisfied with European Union (EU) mediation efforts in the political crisis in Macedonia, while 40.6% are partially satisfied, and just 10.9% are fully satisfied.
- In regards to EU mediation, 46.1% of ethnic Macedonians expressed dissatisfaction, compared with 35.2% of ethnic Albanians.
- Two-thirds of respondents (69.9%) believe that the EU accession process will considerably or to a certain extent contribute to strengthening the rule of law in Macedonia.
- The majority of respondents (58.5%) are not at all familiar with the Priebe Report.
- Almost half (48.1%) of respondents believe that Macedonia's most influential foreign ally is the United States of America (USA).
- Around a quarter of respondents (26.2%) believe that the EU would be the best/preferred foreign ally for Macedonia, 25% believe that Russia would be the best ally, while 17.5% regard the USA as the preferred ally.
- The highest proportion of ethnic Macedonians (29%) consider Russia as the most preferred ally, while for the highest proportion of ethnic Albanians (32%), the EU is the most preferred ally.

CONCLUSIONS

- The mixed levels of satisfaction with EU mediation efforts in the political crisis do not have a serious negative effect on general public support for Macedonia's EU accession process.
- Majority of the citizens believe that the EU accession process will contribute positively to strengthening the rule of law in Macedonia; however, there is significant misunderstanding of how this may be accomplished.
- The overwhelming majority of citizens are reluctant/resistant to the existing EU rule of law initiatives.
- The USA is by far the most influential actor in Macedonia according to Macedonian citizens.
- The credibility of the EU is at stake in Macedonia, with the largest proportion of ethnic Macedonians preferring Russia as a foreign ally.
- The void left by the declining support for EU membership² is mostly filled with support for Russia, especially amongst the ethnic Macedonian population..
- A significant gap exists between the two major ethnic groups in their perceptions of the best preferred

² For more on the trends for support of EU membership see: Ivan Damjanovski, "Public opinion and Macedonia's accession to the European Union (2004-2014)", IDSCS and KAS, January 2015, available on: <http://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/javno-misljenje-eu-MAK.pdf>.

ally for Macedonia. The highest proportions of Albanians support the EU and the USA (32.2% and 28.3% respectively), while the highest proportion of Macedonians (29.9%) believe that Russia would be the best ally for Macedonia.

- The common denominator for both ethnic groups is high support for the EU.

INTRODUCTION

The 2016 European Commission report on Macedonia paints a dismal picture of a country in deep political, institutional and societal crisis. The report states that “democracy and rule of law have been constantly challenged, in particular due to state capture affecting the functioning of democratic institutions and key areas of society”.³ This line of argument is supported by the results of the 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index, which revealed that Macedonia is one of the ten countries in the world to have recorded the biggest annual drop on the Index.

Civil society organisations in Macedonia have been raising concerns about this situation for some time. The Blueprint for Urgent Democratic Reforms, a joint effort of a group of civil society organisations and

³ European Commission, “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia progress Report 2016”, Brussels, 9.11.2016, available on: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf.

individuals, was a response to the current political crisis, to the backsliding in democratic standards and the rule of law, and to the loss of credibility of institutions described in the latest Commission report on Macedonia.⁴

In order to provide a more comprehensive overview of the existing political crisis and the role of the European Union in this regard, the Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis', in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Office in Macedonia, conducted a survey to understand people's perceptions, including their views about the effects of the EU accession process on rule of law issues, their views about the findings and recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues Relating to the Communications Interception Revealed in Spring 2015 (Priebe Report), and their views on the extent to which these recommendations are being implemented. In addition, the survey included questions about EU and German mediation, and about preferences for an influential foreign ally for Macedonia.

A telephone survey was conducted during November 2016, sampling 1100 respondents. The sample is representative by gender, age (above 18 years) and ethnicity, and it also has a representative coverage of respondents from all six electoral units in the country. The results are presented in percentages and are subject to an error of $\pm 3\%$.

⁴ "Blueprint for urgent democratic reforms" Skopje, July 2016, available on: <http://idscs.org.mk/en/blueprint/>.

EU MEDIATION EFFORTS

Since Macedonia has gained independence, numerous political crises have occurred, most of which have been resolved with the assistance of foreign mediation. The EU has engaged in these endeavours, as a mediator and sometimes as a guarantor of negotiated deals and resolutions. Its first major engagement was during the armed conflict of 2001. As a result of the concerted efforts of the EU and USA, the Ohrid Framework Agreement was reached; this deal successfully stopped the armed conflict and transformed the political system of Macedonia. The next crisis, which was also resolved with foreign mediation, occurred in 2007, when the largest Albanian party at that time, the Democratic Union for Integration, left Parliament, thus boycotting its work for four months. This crisis was resolved with pressure from both the EU and the USA, the former offering to initiate accession talks with Macedonia.⁵ In 2012, another major political crisis occurred. This time the crisis was generated by the forceful removal of opposition MPs from Parliament.⁶ This political crisis ended with an EU-brokered deal, following the intense personal engagement of the EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fule, as well as the former President of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek, and MEP Richard Howitt.⁷ In sum, over time, the EU's role

⁵ Nenad Markovic and Misha Popovic "Political Dialogue", KAS and IDSCS, pp 26, available on: http://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Politicki_dijalog.pdf

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "EU Brokers End to Macedonia Election Crisis", Balkan Insight, 1 Mart 2013, available on: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonian-leaders-strike-election-deal-end-crisis>.

in mediating and facilitating the resolution of internal political crises in Macedonia has gradually increased.

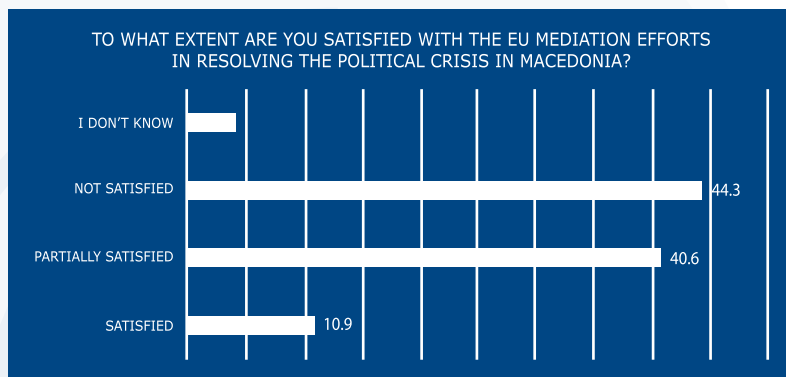
The latest and still on-going political crisis in Macedonia follows this pattern. Starting with the boycott of Parliament by the largest opposition party in 2014, the crisis escalated in 2015 with the announcement of the wiretapping scandal. The EU, in cooperation with the USA, has been deeply involved in the resolution of this crisis too. The so-called Przino Agreement in 2015,⁸ and its extension in 2016,⁹ was reached with the engagement of several MEPs and the personal involvement of the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn. The four biggest political parties in Macedonia supported these agreements. Moreover, the reforms deriving from them paved the way for the December 2016 parliamentary elections in Macedonia.

However, the highest percentage of citizens sampled (44.3%) answered that they are not satisfied by the mediation of the EU in resolving the latest political crisis in Macedonia. The proportion of those who are partially satisfied is slightly lower (40.6%), while only 10.9% are fully satisfied by the EU's mediation. Taken together, these last two groups suggest that the majority of respondents (51.5%) are at least partially

⁸ European Commission, STATEMENT/15/5372, 15 July, 2015, available on: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-15-5372_en.htm.

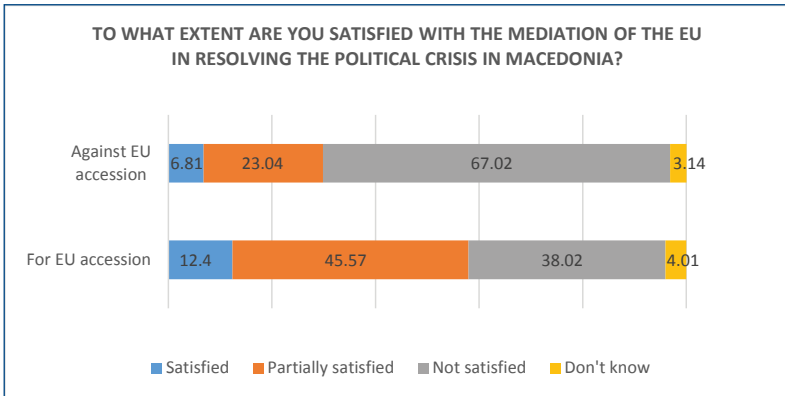
⁹ EEAS, "Agreement between the four political parties", 20 July 2016 http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/delegations/the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia/press_corner/all_news/news/2016/2016-07-20_agreement_en.htm.

satisfied. The data also reveal that Eurosceptic citizens are more prone to be dissatisfied: almost 67% of respondents who do not support Macedonia's EU accession are not satisfied with the EU's mediation efforts, compared with 38.1% of respondents who are supportive of the EU accession process.¹⁰



In terms of ethnic background, more dissatisfaction with EU mediation efforts can be detected among ethnic Macedonians (46.1%) than among ethnic Albanians (35.2%).

¹⁰ It should be taken into account that, according to this survey, 77% of citizens would vote for entry, while 17.5% would vote against.



A striking novelty in resolving this crisis has been the engagement of Germany. In the midst of the crisis, the German Foreign Office appointed a special envoy to work together with other partners on the ground in order to resolve the situation in Macedonia. It is the first time in Macedonia's recent history that Germany has sent its own envoy in addition to the existing EU mediation efforts which were already taking place. This pioneering action of the German government speaks of Germany's willingness to act as Europe's "Chief Facilitating Officer", a ready convener, a responsible broker, forging an ambitious and unified response to the challenges we are facing".¹¹

¹¹ Frank-Walter Steinmeier, "Maintaining Transatlantic Unity in a Complex World", 12.03.2015, available on: http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2015/150312-BM_CSIS.html.

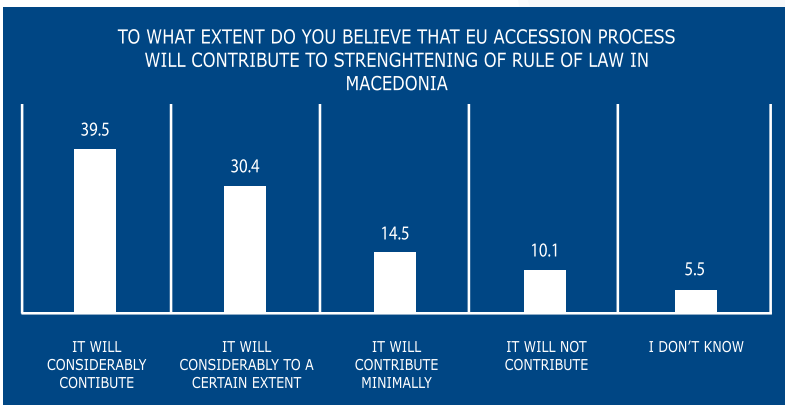
STRENGTHENING THE RULE OF LAW THROUGH EU ACCESSION

Strengthening the rule of law is central to the enlargement process, as outlined in the 2015 EU Enlargement Strategy Paper. This multiannual document, with the latest novelties, covers the remaining period of Juncker's Commission mandate. Therefore, the rule of law policies will remain at the forefront of the process in the years to come. The Commission will be closely monitoring the implementation of policies relating to the judiciary, anti-corruption and fundamental rights, in addition to asylum, (external) migration, border control, visas, police cooperation, the fight against organised crime, terrorism and other issues. In this context, if Macedonia wants to progress in the accession process, a sustainable track record in effective implementation of these policies needs to be established.

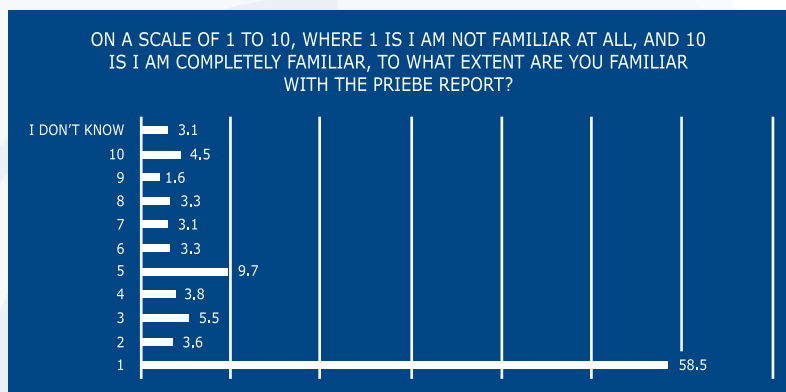
The political crisis has revealed structural rule of law deficiencies that have undermined the effective functioning of democratic institutions. Recent Commission reports have shown a steady decline in the quality of democratic governance in Macedonia, especially regarding the judiciary portfolio. The 2015 wiretapping scandal has prompted serious allegations of state capture by government elites and extensive control over the judicial system as a whole. In order to prevent further deterioration of the democratic situation, the EU called upon a group of senior experts led by Reinhard Priebe to screen the situation and provide analysis, including policy recommendations

about how to address these issues. The expert team analysis disclosed significant gaps between existing legislation and its implementation record, invasion of fundamental rights, shortcomings in the judiciary and external (political) influence in the selection procedure of judges. The backsliding in crucial areas of democratic governance was the actual reason the Commission issued a conditioned recommendation to open accession negotiations with Macedonia. The implementation of Priebe's recommendations would take Macedonia back on the right track towards the EU.

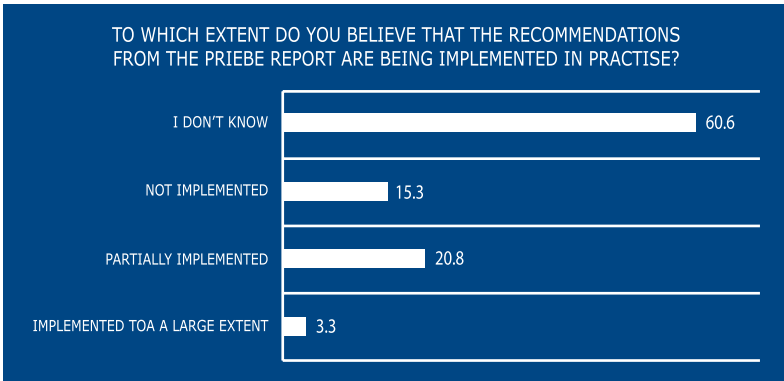
The results of the survey show that two-thirds of respondents think that the EU accession process will considerably or to a certain extent contribute to strengthening the rule of law in Macedonia, while 14.5% believe that it will contribute only minimally. Only 10.1% believe that it will not contribute at all. The responses of citizens of different ethnicities do not vary significantly regarding this question.



However, respondents are not really informed or knowledgeable about the content of the Priebe Report. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not familiar at all, and 10 is completely familiar, more than three-quarters of respondents assessed that they are unfamiliar, 58.5% of whom responded that they were not at all familiar.

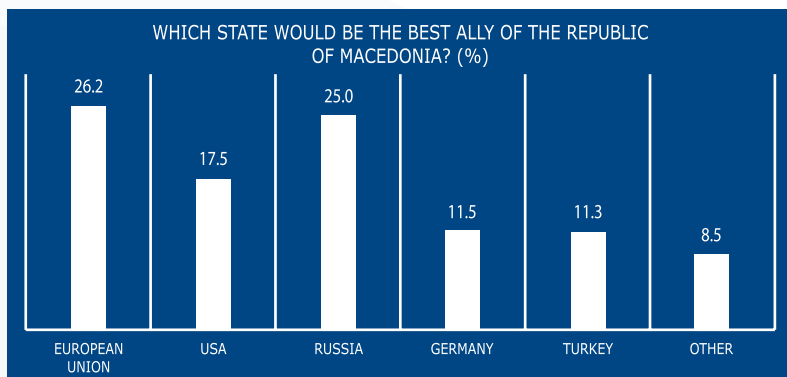


'Citizens' low familiarity with the Priebe Report is confirmed with the next question, which examines the perception of the implementation of the recommendations from the report: 60.6% responded that they don't know if the recommendations from the Report are being implemented, while 15.3% believe that the recommendations are not being implemented at all; 20.8% believe that they are being partially implemented, while a mere 3.3% believe that they are being implemented to a large extent.

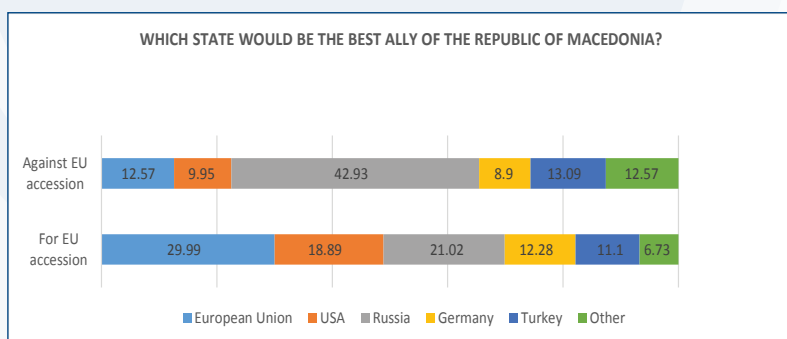


IS THE EU THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN?

Concerning the preferred ally for Macedonia, the largest proportion of respondents (26.2%) believe that the EU would be the best foreign ally, whereas Russia is the second most preferred ally (25%); 17.5% of respondents regard the US as the preferred ally. Although the EU is still the ally of choice for most people, citizens' sentiments towards Russia and eventual Russian involvement could have a negative effect on support for EU membership. This also shows that the credibility of the EU is at stake, and that appropriate and timely measures need to be taken to restore the declining credibility of the accession process for Macedonia.

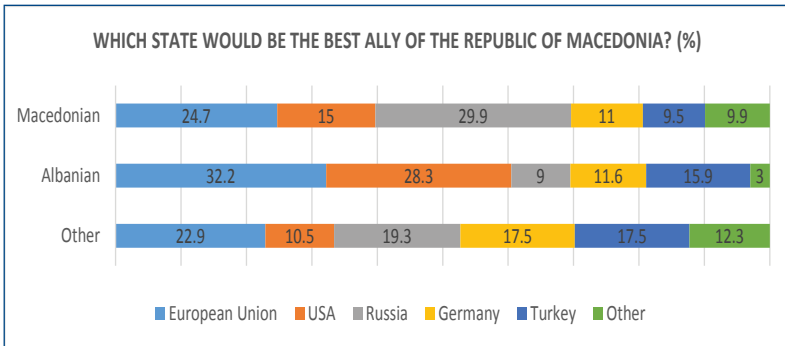


In this context, the largest proportion of Eurosceptic respondents (who represent 17.5% of the overall sample) believe that Russia would be the best ally of Macedonia (42.9%). By contrast, the largest proportion of those who are supportive of Macedonia's EU accession process (77% of the overall sample) believe that the EU would be the best ally (29.9%). This suggests that most Eurosceptic citizens fill the void left by declining support for the EU accession process with pro-Russian positions.



In more detail, the results reveal a gap in the responses between the Macedonian and Albanian respondents. For the highest proportion of Macedonians (29.9%),

Russia is the preferred ally, while the largest proportion of Albanians (32%) prefer the EU. 24.7% of Macedonians believe that the EU would be the best ally, which makes the EU the second most preferred ally for this ethnic group. The two groups' attitude towards the USA also differs significantly: 28% of Albanians prefer the USA, compared with only 15% of the Macedonians.



Regarding the influence that foreign countries have in Macedonia, nearly half the respondents believe that the USA is the country with the biggest influence on Macedonia, whereas 21.8% consider that the EU has the biggest influence. Ethnicity and attitude to Macedonia's EU accession make no difference to these responses.

