

North Macedonia: European integration at a crossroads

Jan Nowinowski

Appointed in June 2024, the right-wing government of Hristijan Mickoski is consolidating its power, as evidenced by his party's victory in the local elections held in the autumn. Despite its declared commitment to EU integration, progress on reforms has been minimal, as indicated by the European Commission's annual report published in November. There are also no clear prospects for resolving bilateral disputes with Bulgaria, which continues to block the opening of accession negotiations. At the same time, Mickoski's cabinet has been deepening relations with the traditional partners of the Macedonian right – Hungary and Serbia – whose leaders openly criticise the EU mainstream. It is also seeking to enhance economic cooperation with China, while simultaneously trying to win the favour of the US administration.

The right consolidates its rule

Following a decisive victory in the parliamentary elections in May 2024 (see '[North Macedonia: the right returns to power](#)'), the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), led by Mickoski himself, plays the dominant role in his government. The cabinet also includes the Albanian party bloc VLEN (Value) and the populist ZNAM movement (For Our Macedonia). Together, they control 75 of the 120 seats in the Assembly of the Republic.

After less than a year and a half in office, the government still enjoys high public support, as confirmed by the local elections held on 19 October and 2 November 2025. VMRO–DPMNE candidates won in Skopje and in 54 of the country's 80 municipalities, while their coalition partners won in another 10. The prime minister himself was the face of the campaign, presenting his party as a guarantor of development and infrastructure investment. The right's position has also been reinforced by the crisis within the largest opposition party – the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), which governed from 2016 to 2024. The SDSM has been unable to rebuild the support it lost due to the slow pace of tackling corruption and the unpopular concessions made to Greece (see '[Macedonia: Parliament votes to change the country's name](#)') and Bulgaria (see '[Krucha ugoda Macedonii Północnej z Bułgarią](#)'). Although the Prespa Agreement enabled North Macedonia to join NATO in 2020, the country is still being blocked by Sofia on its path towards EU membership.

The new (old) foreign partners

On the international stage, Mickoski's government is distancing itself from the policies of its predecessors. Although it declares its intention for the country to join the EU, it continues to refuse to include the Bulgarian minority in the preamble to the Macedonian constitution. Under the agreement proposed by France in 2022 (accepted by both sides), this is a

condition for Sofia to lift its veto on Skopje's launch of accession negotiations. The rhetoric critical of the eastern neighbour's demands and of the arrangements reached by the Social Democrats was the driving force behind VMRO–DPMNE's success in 2024.

In recent weeks, Mickoski has announced steps towards unblocking EU integration, but his earlier criticism of Brussels' regional policy has done little to strengthen Skopje's negotiating position. On the other hand, a series of election victories and the consolidation of the ruling camp could encourage him to introduce constitutional changes without risking a rapid loss of power due to a decline in public support. Despite existing tensions at the European level, the government has achieved some modest successes: North Macedonia has joined the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) and received all funds allocated to date under the EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. Further investment prospects come from an intergovernmental agreement with the United Kingdom, under which London will provide a £5 billion credit line, mainly for the development of Macedonian infrastructure.

Mickoski is focusing on strengthening bilateral relations across the region. For many years, Hungary under Viktor Orbán's government has been a close partner of VMRO–DPMNE. In 2018, Budapest granted political asylum to the party's former leader and prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, who was wanted in his homeland for abuses of power committed between 2006 and 2016 (see '[Hungary: asylum for ex-prime minister of Macedonia](#)'). The right's return to power has brought renewed closeness between Skopje and Budapest, as reflected in intensified high-level meetings and the €1 billion loan granted to North Macedonia by Hungary's state-owned Export–Import Bank. This growing cooperation culminated in the entry of 4iG – a Hungarian telecommunications giant – into the Macedonian market. The intensification of ties with Budapest is indirectly driven by Beijing's interests. According to investigative journalists from the VSquare portal, the loan to the Skopje government in fact originated in China, with the Hungarian bank merely acting as an intermediary. Another example of Macedonian–Hungarian–Chinese cooperation is the planned investment by 4iG (which cooperates with Huawei) to establish the first 5G network in the Western Balkans.

Serbia, under the rule of Aleksandar Vučić, is also one of the key regional partners of Mickoski's cabinet. In the past, the support of the Serbian authorities, and likely also of their intelligence services, for VMRO–DPMNE and Gruevski was a source of tension with the Social Democratic government in Skopje (see '[Serbsko-macedoński kryzys dyplomatyczny](#)'). Belgrade traditionally views North Macedonia as lying within its historical sphere of influence and exerts leverage through cultural and economic ties. The small Serbian minority (1.3% of the population) also participates in governing: the leader of the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia (running on a joint electoral list with VMRO–DPMNE) currently serves as a deputy prime minister. A gas interconnector between the two countries is planned. Moreover, Mickoski supports the railway project promoted by Vučić and Orbán in cooperation with Beijing – the Budapest–Belgrade–Skopje–Athens line. The route is ultimately intended to link the port of Piraeus, controlled by China's COSCO, with the markets of Central Europe.

Skopje is also trying to establish closer relations with the administration of US President Donald Trump. Mickoski was the only leader from the region invited to the inauguration, and in February 2025 he appeared at an event important to the MAGA movement – the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). At the UN, North Macedonia supported

the controversial US resolution on the war in Ukraine (which did not assign responsibility to Russia for starting the full-scale conflict) and abstained from voting on the appeal to end Israel's presence in the occupied Palestinian territories. It appears that ties with the Trump administration may have contributed to Washington adopting a more lenient customs policy toward Skopje. North Macedonia was initially subject to a 33% tariff rate, which was reduced to 15% after several months.

Promises of reform overshadowed by attempts to undermine institutional independence

Despite pre-election pledges of comprehensive reforms intended to advance the country's EU accession, Mickoski's government has made no significant progress in this area. This is reflected, among other things, in the European Commission's annual report on accession preparedness, published in November 2025. North Macedonia achieved 'good progress' in four areas, including improving the free movement of capital (as a result of joining SEPA). However, in the key chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom, and Security), it recorded 'no progress' and 'limited progress', respectively. The report also repeatedly noted the authorities' reluctance to implement the provisions agreed in 2022, which the government in Skopje argued had overshadowed the European Commission's objective assessment of the reform process.

The European Commission's report also stresses the need to intensify the fight against corruption and to support the independence of the judiciary. Both areas were major weaknesses under previous VMRO–DPMNE governments and contributed to their gradual drift towards authoritarianism. Although Mickoski's cabinet has not so far repeated the undemocratic practices of its predecessors, its criticism of the judiciary and the Prosecutor General may signal an intention to increase control over these institutions. At the same time, the government has challenged the authority of independent experts, which it demonstrated by dismissing members of the Bulgarian–Macedonian historical commission, accusing them of failing to protect national interests.

The gravest challenge faced by the right-wing government to date was the nightclub fire in Kočani in March 2025, which claimed 63 lives. Initial investigative findings showed that the venue lacked the necessary permits and had been operating through corruption and administrative negligence. The scandal initially triggered public protests, though these did not evolve into a broader movement of resistance comparable to the mass student demonstrations in Serbia that erupted following the construction disaster in Novi Sad. Unlike their counterparts in Belgrade, the Macedonian judicial authorities took appropriate action. The prosecution brought charges against 34 individuals, including politicians from both VMRO–DPMNE and the opposition.

A Eurosceptic drift?

The steps taken so far by Mickoski's government cast doubt on North Macedonia's commitment to European integration. The cabinet has not made any meaningful effort to implement the required reforms and has shown no willingness to amend the constitution. Given the EU's and Sofia's reluctance to renegotiate this condition, a rapid resolution of the deadlock in accession talks appears unlikely. Mickoski's position in relations with Brussels is further undermined by his close cooperation with Hungary and Serbia, whose leaders openly challenge the EU's values and actions. Contacts with autocratic leaders may also raise fears of similar tendencies emerging in North Macedonia, further fuelled by talk of a

systemic reset and memories of past assaults on the rule of law under previous VMRO–DPMNE governments.

The emerging notion, reflected in the prime minister's statements, of 'membership not at any price' resonates with public sentiment. According to a 2024 survey by the Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' – Skopje, 62% of citizens would support EU accession in a referendum (compared to 80% in 2014), but only 35% consider it a priority for the government's foreign policy. A clear ethnic divide is evident. The Albanian minority, accounting for roughly 25% of the population, supports EU membership overwhelmingly (82%), with 55% viewing it as an important issue. By contrast, 56% of ethnic Macedonians back accession, while 35% do not regard it as significant. This national divide may in the future become a source of internal tensions open to political instrumentalisation.