



North Macedonia as a growing strategic partner for Hungary

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Prime Minister Viktor Orbán will make his first visit to North Macedonia on September 26, 2024, following the conservative Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) landslide victory over the left in the parliamentary and presidential elections earlier this spring. The Hungarian government has traditionally maintained good relations with VMRO-DPMNE. With the party now back in power, Hungarian-Macedonian relations could be revitalized. For Hungary, bilateral relations are of paramount importance and are based on four pillars: 1) regional stability and security; 2) addressing the migration crisis; 3) economic cooperation; and 4) shared historical experiences.

As a neighboring country, Hungary is deeply invested in peace and stability in the Western Balkans, being directly affected by developments in the region. Hungary prioritizes the EU membership of the Western Balkans and strongly supports North Macedonia's EU integration. Hungary believes that integrating the region will strengthen the EU and enhance its competitiveness. Both Budapest and Skopje share a similar view of security, which they see primarily realized within the frameworks of NATO and the EU. VMRO-DPMNE holds a firm pro-European stance but seeks to maintain a sovereigntist approach based on national identity elements that also resonate with Hungarian foreign policy—particularly in bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, which have significant social and mobilizing power.

Among regional security concerns, the migration crisis is a particular risk, and its effective management is a priority for both countries. North Macedonia is a key partner for Hungary in this regard. During the NATO Summit in Washington, Prime Minister Orbán discussed combating illegal migration and enhancing cooperation in this area with his Macedonian counterpart, Hristijan Mickoski. The Western Balkans is a major migration transit hub, with one of the main routes to Europe passing through the region. Recognizing this, Hungary is assisting the region in developing its migration management capacities—financially, and in terms of equipment and expertise—particularly in enhancing border management capabilities.

While Hungary is among the top ten trading partners of North Macedonia, Budapest is not yet one of the largest investors in the country. The biggest Hungarian investment dates back to 2001 when Magyar Telekom acquired a majority stake in Makedonski Telekomunikacii (MakTel), making it a subsidiary of the Telekom Group. Recently, 4iG entered the Macedonian market, signing a preliminary cooperation agreement with the North Macedonian government. In addition to telecommunications, there are significant opportunities in agriculture and energy sectors. Companies with experience in other Western Balkan countries, like MOL and OTP, have yet to establish a presence in Macedonia, representing untapped potential for the Hungarian economy. With a favorable political climate—marked by good relations between VMRO-DPMNE and the Hungarian government—economic cooperation could deepen, as exemplified by Hungary's €500 million intergovernmental loan to North Macedonia. Strengthened relations between the two countries will open the door for Hungarian medium and large companies to enter the growing Macedonian economy.

The economic challenges were compounded by the political debates surrounding the country's independence, which continue to affect Skopje's accession to the EU, its relations with neighbouring countries and the development of its external relations. Despite the country's proclamation of independence on 20 November 1991, international recognition was hampered by

a name dispute with Greece, which was accompanied by a trade embargo until 1995. Finally, in September 1995, Athens recognised the country's independence under the name Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), although Greece subsequently vetoed Skopje on [several](#) occasions. Although Skopje was granted EU candidate status in December 2005, the Greek veto(s) have continued to stagnate the EU accession process. The name dispute was finally settled by the 2018 [Prespa Agreement](#) - between the Macedonian Social Democrat and Greek left-wing governments - which allowed the country to join NATO as North Macedonia. However, the opening of EU accession negotiations still did not receive the necessary support in the Council, which was a serious slap in the face for the Social Democrat leadership, which could only push the name change down the throats of the Macedonian people as a necessary sacrifice to be made for EU membership. In the absence of results, they suffered a serious loss of credibility, coupled with a poor economic performance, social situation and spectacular abuses and corruption scandals.

Over time, the EU's hesitation has led to a new frontline. Bulgaria took a constructive approach to an independent Macedonia in the 1990s. However, as a member of the EU, Bulgaria later re-entered the debate over the existence of an independent Macedonian language and identity. In 2017, under a Social Democratic government, the two countries signed an agreement on friendly relations, but the implementation of this agreement was bound to cause conflict. Finally, Bulgaria demanded the inclusion of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia as a constituent nation, even though Bulgarians make up only 0.2% of the population. The EU made the necessary constitutional [change](#) in North Macedonia a condition for the start of EU accession negotiations, but political and social opposition to this proved decisive in the May 2024 elections.

The so-called "Albanian question" was a crucial part of the establishment of independent Macedonian statehood. The exact proportion of Albanians in North Macedonia is difficult to say, but they make up at least 25% of the population; and the situation is complicated by the fact

that the Albanian community lives in the northern areas bordering Kosovo, creating coexisting Macedonian-Albanian societies in these areas. The unresolved political status of the Albanian community also led to armed clashes in 2001, which were concluded by the [Ohrid Framework Agreement](#). Concerning the balance of power between the Albanian parties, the Democratic Union for Integration (in Albanian: *Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim*; in Macedonian: *Демократска унија за интеграција*, DUI), founded by Ali Ahmeti, who was also involved in the armed conflict in the early 2000s, still has the most support. However, corruption cases in the DUI weakened the party and it was forced into opposition in 2024 due to the coalition of opposition Albanian parties (VLEN Coalition) and its conflict of interest with VMRO-DPMNE. The new Albanian coalition will also include a representative of the Kosovar *Lëvizja Vetëvendosje* (LVV), so that the Albanian political forces involved in the current Macedonian government coalition will also enjoy the support of the Prime Minister of Kosovo. The inclusion of Albanian parties in any government coalition is an unwritten rule and a guarantee for peaceful inter-ethnic relations. However, there is no certainty that this will not lead to inter-ethnic tensions, since while the leading ruling party wants to implement administrative reform, the Albanian coalition partner is opposed to it.

By the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2024, the then ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија, SDSM) had essentially eroded its own support base and reached a historic low. The elections brought a landslide victory for VMRO-DPMNE and its presidential candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova. In the 120-seat legislature, the party alliance led by Hristijan Mickoski won 58 seats, while the SDSM managed to win only 18. The parliamentary elections gave political legitimacy and strength to new actors. Within the Macedonian bloc, the party For Our Macedonia (За Наша Македонија, ZNAM) led by Kumanovo mayor Maksim Dimitrievski performed well (6 seats) and has a good chance of positioning itself as a new political force between VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, providing a new alternative for disillusioned voters. ZNAM is more centre-left in its ideology and economic policies, but its

rhetoric, particularly in relation to Bulgaria, is nationalist, which has been effective in attracting a majority of voters disillusioned with the SDSM-led government.

In the light of the election results, the issues that are of paramount importance to voters are improving the economic situation, reducing the spectacular corruption scandals, and on the other hand, a strong representation of national identity concerns in a way that does not become a final obstacle to the EU. Although at first it seemed that the government would reopen the "Greek front", it soon became clear that such a move would have further negative consequences (possibility of another Greek veto; violation of the Prespa Agreement could be sanctioned by the US in a similar way as Milorad Dodik has been sanctioned by the US for the violation of the Dayton Peace Agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Thus, the change of the country's name, although it has raised political and international tensions, has subsided and no such initiative is currently on the agenda. However, they are still trying to shape the unplayed game with Bulgaria along their own political lines; the aim is likely to be to meet the requirement for constitutional change - i.e. to recognise the Bulgarian community as a constituent nation - at the latest possible stage of the EU accession process.

The pillars of the Macedonian-Hungarian relationship on regional security, migration crisis and economic cooperation are well framed by the historical similarities between the two countries. Today's North Macedonia, or Macedonia as a geographical entity, has been part of numerous empires throughout the centuries, with different powers exercising authority over the territory, often simultaneously, thus fragmenting it. While for Hungary the Ottoman conquest meant the dismemberment of the once unified Kingdom of Hungary, for North Macedonia this was the case from ancient times. The problem of the former division still affects the lives of both nations, as does the resulting controversial relationship with their neighbours. The loss of territory and the fact that Hungary's population is stranded outside its borders is precisely what has led to the long-standing and still recurring conflicts with Slovakia, Romania and Serbia. For North

Macedonia, the fragmentation and integration into larger empires that have been a constant feature of its history has made relations with Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia difficult. Questioning the fundamental aspects of Macedonian identity complicates the country's bilateral relations with its neighbours, but Hungary has decades of experience in resolving such conflicts that can be shared and "exported" as political know-how. Hungarian neighbourhood and national policies are therefore also points of contact where Hungary can contribute not only to the prosperity and political success of North Macedonia, but also to the stability of the region as a whole.