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DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY
UNIVERSITY OF SARAJEVO — FACULTY OF SCIENCE

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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL

Ranko Mirić 7

ARTICLES

Igor Žiberna
Surface urban heat island in Kranj 9

Boris Avdić
Educational benefits of integrating GIS into geography teaching 35

Tim Gregorčič, Lena Kropivšek, Irma Potočnik Slavič
Operational insights related to mapping and analysing rural place (dis)amenities 59

Dževad Mešanović, Edin Hadžimustafić
Gender disparity in literacy among the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina 87

Blaž Repe
Soil geography in Slovenia from primary school to university 109

Simon Kerma
Farm tourism in Slovenia – perspectives and development challenges 131

Goran Kitevski
The French proposal and North Macedonia’s European perspective: a political geography 151

INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS 175

EDITORIAL

In 2025, the University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Science, Department of Geography and Geographical Society of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, continues to issue a scientific journal called "Geografski pregled". It was created in 1954 because of a growing need for scientific geographic research on the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The creation of this journal is a major contribution to the development of geographic science in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Journal is primarily intended for the presentation of scientific and professional achievements in all fields of geography.

This is the 52nd issue of the journal. The Journal will be exchanged in Bosnia and Herzegovina and abroad, primarily in Europe, but also overseas. The Faculty of Science and Department of Geography, which financially supports the issuance of "Geografski pregled", prescribed special Instructions for authors to publish their works. It is an integral part of this Journal. Guidelines are based on international standards and norms.

I thank the authors for coming with their works, reviewers for their maximum engagement, as well as members of the editorial board, and we invite everyone to further the cooperation with the aim of increasing the total contribution of geography to the overall science and development of our country.

Sarajevo, December 2025

Ranko Mirić - Editor in chief

ARTICLES

THE FRENCH PROPOSAL AND NORTH MACEDONIA'S EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: A POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY*AUTHOR***Goran Kitevski**

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*ABSTRACT****The French proposal and North Macedonia's european perspective: a political geography***

This paper examines the so-called French Proposal, a diplomatic framework specifically designed to overcome Bulgaria's veto and facilitate the continuation of North Macedonia's accession process to the European Union. The proposal's most contested element is the requirement to amend North Macedonia's Constitution to explicitly include Bulgarians as a constituent people—an obligation that serves as a gateway for opening a broader negotiation process. This requirement is embedded within a broader framework that incorporates the 2017 Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness, and Cooperation, thereby elevating a long standing bilateral dispute to the level of a formal EU accession criterion. By integrating identity-related and historical disputes into the negotiation process, the proposal effectively Europeanizes a bilateral issue. This study argues that the constitutional amendment represents only one aspect of a deeper and enduring challenge: the identity-based dispute with Bulgaria, now institutionalized within the EU framework, will remain a decisive factor influencing both the pace and prospects of North Macedonia's European integration.

KEYWORDS

French proposal, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, European Union, Good-neighborliness

1. Introduction

The French proposal was not the first document to stir political imbalance in North Macedonia. Three key agreements have significantly shaped North Macedonia's political sphere: the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which ended the inter-ethnic conflict of 2001; the Prespa Agreement (2018), which settled the dispute with Greece over the naming issue and all implications associated with the name "Macedonia"; and finally, the Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighborliness, and Cooperation (2017) signed with Bulgaria; treaty intended to resolve all outstanding issues between North Macedonia and Bulgaria before the dispute became as intractable as the one with Greece.

Former President of the Macedonian Parliament, Tito Petkovski (2014) writes that EU and NATO leaders have consistently highlighted the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) as an essential step toward integration. After North Macedonia gained candidate status in 2005, the axiom "the road to Brussels passes through Ohrid" emerged (Pendarovski, 2012). Following the OFA, the next major precondition was the name issue with Greece, which complicated EU and NATO procedures due to member-state veto power (Frčkoski, 2016). Matthew Nimetz (2020) writes that back then, he warned that if unresolved, this [naming] issue could prevent North Macedonia from aligning with Croatia's EU accession timeline; a prediction later confirmed as negotiations stalled in 2019 under President Macron's call for restructuring (Cvetanoska, 2019) and again in 2020 due to Bulgaria's blockade. North Macedonia joined NATO as its 30th member in 2020, leaving only the European process unrealized.

Amid the new global political challenges in 2022, during France's presidency of the European Union, an injury-time draft proposal emerged aimed to resolve the blockade imposed by Bulgaria. The so-called French proposal rendered North Macedonia's European process analogous to Schrödinger's cat experiment: the negotiations are in a state of simultaneous commencement and suspension, contingent upon the principal condition of the proposal: the constitutional amendment to include ethnic Bulgarians in North Macedonia's preamble. Following the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001) and the Prespa Agreement (2018), both of which were critical preconditions for the country's European

aspirations, through the French Proposal, the 2017 Agreement was, in a sense, institutionalized, thereby establishing an integration relation between Skopje, Brussels, and Sofia.

This study uses a qualitative, document-based analytical approach. Primary sources, including the French Proposal (2022), the 2017 Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation, and EU Council Conclusions, were examined. The French Proposal is situated within the broader historical trajectory of North Macedonia's integration efforts, including the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001) and the Prespa Agreement (2018), with purpose to identify patterns of external conditionality and internal political responses. Public statements by political leaders, EU officials, and civil society figures were reviewed to assess competing narratives surrounding identity and integration. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that the main contentious point: the inclusion of Bulgarians in the constitution is not the sole condition. On the contrary, reservations regarding identity issues, which Bulgaria has consistently raised with North Macedonia, will need to be addressed during the negotiation process, given that through the French proposal, the Treaty also forms part of the negotiating framework (Kitevski, 2024).

2. The European Union and the Macedonian integration: Brief overview

The European Union (EU) is a unique economic and political union (European Commission 2024). Originally limited to Western Europe, the EU underwent a significant expansion into Central and Eastern Europe in the early 21st century (Gabel, 2025). Today, it consists of 27 member states with a total population of 448.4 million and 24 official languages, spanning on 4 million km² (European Union n.d.). Since its inception in 1951, enlargement policy has been an integral part of the EU integration process, gaining particular momentum in the 1960s and 1970s (Bauerová, 2022). To date, five waves of enlargement have occurred (Varbanova, 2007). Between 2004 and 2007, the EU expanded to include ten formerly communist countries and two Mediterranean island states (Anghel and Jones 2021). The accession of Croatia in July 2013 marked the seventh enlargement round (Schwarz, 2016). It has now been twelve years since the last country joined the EU, and in contrast, one major member, the United Kingdom, left the Union in 2020 following the 2016 Brexit referendum. EU enlargement has always been a political process (Basheska, 2022), becoming increasingly complex over time. The procedure evolved from an almost rule-free policy in the 1960s to one governed by a highly detailed set of criteria that aspiring members

must meet (Kovačević, 2022). For candidate countries, accession negotiations have often proven more difficult than initially anticipated (Anghel and Jones 2021).

In 2000, the Western Balkans were included in EU enlargement process (Vukasović, 2018), and at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, the European Union expressed its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries (Panagiotou, 2020), a commitment it reaffirmed at the Sofia Summit in 2018 (Bauerová, 2022). Although the EU accession process and its attitude toward the Western Balkans can, without doubt, be described as slow and never-ending (Herceg Kolman and Bandov, 2022), significant efforts have been made to reform the process. In 2020, the European Commission adopted a new enlargement methodology, calling for a more credible process with a stronger focus on fundamental reforms in the rule of law, public administration, economy, and the strengthening of democratic institutions (Korpalo & Rabinovych, 2025).

The aim was to make the enlargement process more credible, predictable, dynamic, and subject to stronger political steering. This represents the fourth occasion on which the EU has formally introduced new rules for accession negotiations (Tilev, 2020). However, what was intended to be predictable was quickly challenged by geopolitical conditions. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU intensified its diplomatic engagement with the Western Balkans due to the region's geopolitical and security significance (Christidis, 2024). Moreover, the push for enlargement has shifted the process away from a strictly merit-based approach, favoring political considerations instead (Couteau et al., 2024). Within this context of new political polarization, candidate status was granted to Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while North Macedonia and Albania advanced further in the accession process.

The European path of North Macedonia, both in terms of internal political orientation and public support, has never been in question throughout the country's independence. European integration and NATO membership have consistently been central themes in the political campaigns of the largest parties, across both the Macedonian and Albanian blocs. North Macedonia has been a candidate for EU membership since 2005, receiving its first recommendation to open negotiations in 2009, but remained under constant blockade from Greece due to the lasting naming dispute. Only with the Prespa Agreement was a solution finally reached regarding the name and everything the name symbolized

(Kitevski, 2023). The name dispute was an extremely sensitive issue for Macedonians, the majority of whom rejected the idea of changing the country's name simply because of Greece's disapproval (Bozhinovski, 2019). This was evident in the referendum's failure, although the consultative referendum itself was also tied to European and NATO aspirations. Prior to the vote, prominent world leaders either visited the country or sent direct appeals urging citizens to vote "yes" for the country's European and Euro-Atlantic future. In their rhetoric, NATO membership was presented as a done deal. EU membership, however, was never explicitly guaranteed by international actors (Kitevski and Mijalov, 2023).

Following the name change, the Republic of North Macedonia indeed became the 30th member of NATO, from a process directly linked to resolving the Greek dispute, as had already been clear since the 2008 Bucharest Summit. EU integration, however, has been a different story. The supposedly "clean" post-Prespa path was first delayed by the EU's need to adopt a new enlargement methodology in 2019. A few months later, in March 2020, the Council of the European Union finally adopted conclusions to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia, though without setting a date for the first intergovernmental conference (Malinka, 2020). Later that year, Bulgaria imposed a veto, citing non-compliance with previously agreed commitments. This move was not entirely unexpected: in 2019, Bulgaria had adopted a framework position outlining conditions for North Macedonia, based on the 2017 Treaty of Friendship (Christidis, 2019). Although for years Greece was perceived as the sole opponent of Macedonia's EU path, in 2012 Bulgaria also joined the blockade (Karadzoski and Adamczyk, 2014), demanding the signing of a friendship treaty, which, took place in August 2017. Yet, the dispute with Bulgaria is far from trivial: it is layered, complex, and arguably even more sensitive than the naming issue with Greece.

3. North Macedonia and Bulgaria: a persistent issue

The core of the problem lies in Bulgaria's view of North Macedonia as an artificial nation, whose ethnic identity and language were constructed during the Yugoslav socialist period, with Macedonians considered to have Bulgarian origins (Marinov, 2013a; Marinov, 2013b) In short, Bulgaria disputes aspects of Macedonian history that Greece had no objections to, leaving these issues "unresolved" even after the 2018 Prespa Agreement. This stance toward the Macedonian national question has experienced some historical fluctuations,

largely influenced by developments in relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union (Sfetas, 2012). However, a definitive position, regardless of geopolitical circumstances was established during the era of Todor Zhivkov, when the main points of the Bulgarian perspective were carved out: 1. There is no Macedonian nation as a historical entity; 2. The falsification of Bulgaria's history by historians in Skopje and the creation of the Macedonian nation on an anti-Bulgarian basis are unacceptable; 3. There is no Macedonian minority in Bulgaria; 4. Macedonian national consciousness is being cultivated in the People's Republic of Macedonia, but it is a product of political conditions that facilitated the transformation of Bulgarians into Macedonians (Sfetas, 2012).

The Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2017), signed in Skopje on 1 August 2017 and in force since February 2018, can be seen as a continuation of the 1999 Agreement. That earlier treaty, among other things, in some way, resolved the language dispute with a formula stipulating that "bilateral agreements between the two countries would be signed in the official languages of both parties, according to their Constitutions respectively," thus avoiding the explicit use of the languages' names (Vangelov, 2015). The 2017 Treaty, in turn, sought to reconcile all outstanding differences concerning unresolved identity and historical issues between the two countries. This is evident in several articles, including the creation of a Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on historical and educational matters, tasked with producing scientifically grounded interpretations of historical events and submitting annual reports.

The Treaty provides for joint commemorations of shared historical figures and events, aimed at reinforcing good-neighborly relations (Art. 8). Furthermore, the Treaty affirms that North Macedonia's Constitution cannot serve as a basis for interference in Bulgaria's internal affairs, while both states commit to preventing hostile propaganda and discouraging activities that incite hatred or violence (Art. 11). Additionally, a Joint Intergovernmental Commission, co-chaired by the ministers of Foreign Affairs is established to oversee the Treaty's implementation, enhance bilateral cooperation, and resolve emerging issues through annual and, when necessary, ad hoc meetings (Art. 12). In the preamble of the Treaty, which refers to a common history, there exists a divergence in understanding and interpretation: for Bulgaria, it implies sameness, whereas for North Macedonia, it implies shared history (Brunnbauer, 2020). This subtle, perhaps unintended difference reflects the very essence of the problem the Treaty is intended to guide the two states toward resolving.

4. The French proposal: A (no) way forward

France delivered a draft proposal to the authorities of North Macedonia and Bulgaria aimed at removing Bulgaria's veto (Vasileska, 2024). While the proposal divides the process into a formal political opening with screening and a subsequent negotiation stage, it introduces a new condition for negotiations to truly commence: North Macedonia must amend its constitution to recognize ethnic Bulgarians (Vangelov, 2023).

The document that the Government of North Macedonia published is said to be the modified version of the original proposal, which had been deemed unacceptable by the Macedonian authorities. The new, revised version was described by President Stevo Pendarovski as a "transitional compromise that was acceptable" (Pendarovski, 2022), and, according to Prime Minister Dimitar Kovačevski, as a means by which "the country will be brought into the EU by 2030" (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2023). The announcement of the proposal's acceptance triggered mass opposition-led protests, with critics framing it as an attempt to assimilate and Bulgarize the state. Despite these protests and widespread public dissent, the Macedonian Parliament adopted the proposal on 16 July 2022 (Gjorgjioska, 2022; Christidis, 2024). In July 2022, the Intergovernmental Conference on accession negotiations was held with North Macedonia, and the European Commission initiated the screening process (European Commission, 2025). This formally marked the beginning of negotiations, with the key condition for their substantive progress being the constitutional amendments to include Bulgarians (Vangelov, 2023).

The so-called proposal from the French Presidency, namely the Draft Council Conclusions (European Union, 2022b), was released alongside two additional documents for informational purposes, even though procedurally they follow as steps in the opening of accession negotiations: the EU common position (European Union, 2022c), reflecting the text from the political meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference on North Macedonia's accession, which follows immediately after the adoption of the proposal; and the Ministerial Meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference Completing the Opening of the Negotiations on the Accession of North Macedonia to the European Union, which applies after North Macedonia implements the required constitutional amendments (European Union, 2022a).

The Draft Council Conclusions contain seven points. They reaffirm the 2021 Council Conclusions and commend North Macedonia's reform efforts, while

stressing the need for tangible results and faithful implementation of bilateral agreements, notably the Prespa Agreement (2018) and the Treaty with Bulgaria (2017). Special emphasis is placed on the latter, with the protocol from the second intergovernmental commission welcomed as an important contribution to good-neighbourly relations, a key element of both the enlargement process and the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). The core of the French proposal, outlined in point four, highlights the strengthening of minority rights in North Macedonia, contributing to compliance with the Copenhagen criteria. The Council also welcomes North Macedonia's commitment to constitutional amendments, including the explicit recognition of Bulgarians. According to the proposal, the Council approves the Negotiating Framework, with an initial intergovernmental conference to follow.

A second conference will be held once constitutional amendments are adopted, meaning that the negotiation process formally begins but its completion depends on the inclusion of Bulgarians in the constitutional preamble. The second document contains 18 points, several of particular importance. Point three stresses that opening negotiations demonstrates unequivocal support for the Western Balkans' European perspective, while point four underlines that the EU fulfills its commitments once conditions are met—implicitly placing responsibility for delays on candidate countries. Point 14 reiterates that regional cooperation and good-neighbourly relations remain essential, again highlighting the Prespa Agreement and the Treaty with Bulgaria. The third document enters into force once constitutional amendments are adopted.

Its EU Opening Statement, comprising eight points, reaffirms regional cooperation and good-neighbourly relations as core elements of enlargement, explicitly calling for tangible implementation of the Prespa Agreement and the 2017 Treaty with Bulgaria. Within the Negotiating Framework, the "Principles Governing the Negotiations" are central: point five specifies that progress depends on meeting the Copenhagen criteria, fulfilling the Stabilization and Association Agreement, and maintaining good-neighbourly relations, including full implementation of both agreements and annual reviews under Article 12. Equally significant, point 13 allows the Commission, in cases of serious and persistent breaches of EU values, to recommend suspension of negotiations, thus underscoring that North Macedonia must fully honor its commitments, particularly those stemming from the Prespa Agreement and the Treaty with Bulgaria.

One day after the Assembly of North Macedonia adopted the French Proposal, the foreign ministers of North Macedonia and Bulgaria signed in Sofia the second bilateral Protocol for the implementation of the 2017 Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation, pursuant to Article 12 (Ministry of Foreign affairs of North Macedonia, 2022). The Protocol, serving as the minutes of the intergovernmental meeting, contains four points, two of which are substantive. Point two approves the annual reports from thirteen meetings of the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues (10 June 2019 – 10 June 2022). While the Commission's work fell short of expectations, both states committed to supporting more effective outcomes, implementing results achieved, and publishing future findings. Point three outlines guidelines for implementing the Treaty in the upcoming period and signals Bulgaria's readiness to hold the first political intergovernmental EU–North Macedonia conference, contingent on North Macedonia adopting constitutional amendments to include Bulgarians. This point is divided into measures to be taken before and after the conference for completing the opening phase of accession negotiations.

Prior to the conference, North Macedonia agrees that the next intergovernmental conference will occur only after constitutional amendments enter into force, while Bulgaria pledged to lift its reservations on the draft Frontex Agreement following adoption of the French Proposal. North Macedonia also committed, under Article 11(5) of the Treaty, to ensure that its Constitution does not interfere in Bulgaria's internal affairs or in the rights of non-Macedonian citizens. The pre-conference measures cover three thematic areas: (1) hate speech: both states commit to prevent, combat, and sanction all forms of hate speech, establish rapid-response procedures, and counter malicious propaganda; (2) rehabilitation of victims of communist-era repression: North Macedonia shall condemn the Yugoslav repressive apparatus and establish a legal framework for archival access; and (3) history: both states shall publish existing results and commemorate historical events and figures agreed upon by the Commission.

Post-conference measures include revising the 7th-grade geography textbook to remove unfounded ethnic or territorial claims and applying similar revisions across educational programs, with mutual notification. The three thematic areas are reinforced: (1) hate speech: information exchange and compliance with the Treaty across all publications; (2) rehabilitation of communist-era victims: North Macedonia to establish the legal framework within one year, drawing on Bulgaria's experience; (3) history: commemorations, public rhetoric, and educational content must reflect the Commission's outcomes. Both governments

pledge continued support for the Commission to complete its work on all periods of the “common history” in line with Article 8(2) of the Treaty.

The final section of the Protocol is very important. The Republic of North Macedonia will take measures to ensure effective access to equal rights, protection against discrimination, and the safeguarding of the culture and identity of the Bulgarian community. These measures include achieving sustainable results in preventing and responding to instances of hate speech against Bulgarians in public spaces, ensuring the investigation and prosecution of hate crimes and discriminatory acts, strengthening awareness and institutional mechanisms for human rights, and fostering the Bulgarian community’s trust in these institutions. Additionally, North Macedonia commits to guaranteeing the free exercise of the rights of Bulgarians to express, protect, and develop their identity and specific community characteristics, including the unrestricted use of their community symbols (Ministry of Foreign affairs of North Macedonia, 2022).

5. Results and discussion

The European Union’s enlargement policy is politically driven. In the wake of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2022 and the emergence of a new geopolitical reality, the EU swiftly granted candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, while also seeking to resolve the long-standing stalemate between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. In a repetition of history, this time verging on farce, a last-minute solution emerged under the French Presidency of the Council of the EU. Ironically, France had been the very state that, in 2019, advocated for a new enlargement policy to prevent the mistakes of prior accession rounds. North Macedonia became the first “integration victim” of this revised approach, before being formally vetoed by Bulgaria in 2020. The so-called French Proposal, intended to break the stalemate, in fact introduced potential pitfalls for further vetoes, particularly from Bulgaria (Vangelov, 2022). The proposal required constitutional amendments in North Macedonia, notably the inclusion of Bulgarians in the Preamble, as a transitional step before accession negotiations could formally commence. Simultaneously, the negotiating framework incorporated provisions of the 2017 Treaty of Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation between North Macedonia and Bulgaria initially intended to serve as a stepping stone, ultimately became an additional stumbling block.

The French Proposal provoked intense debate across Macedonian society. The then-ruling government defended it as a minor concession “merely adding Bulgarians to the Constitution”, arguing that this was insignificant compared to Bulgaria’s more maximalist demands. The dominant narrative emphasized that the key priority was to commence accession negotiations and that, through this process, the “Macedonian language” had already been safeguarded, a position further reinforced by the signing of the Frontex agreement. The government maintained that North Macedonia should not remain blocked by the prospect of another veto (Telma TV, 2022). European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen also underscored the meaning of the “Macedonian language” in her address to the Macedonian Parliament prior to the proposal’s adoption (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2022).

For the opposition at the time, and now the governing party, the French Proposal represented a Bulgarian diktat, a potential path to Bulgarization, and an unacceptably high cost for EU membership. Although its rhetoric has softened since coming to power, the government has continued to assert that the proposal does not provide a clear pathway to the EU. The constitutional amendments, including the formal recognition of Bulgarians, were perceived as only the initial step (Government of North Macedonia, 2022b). Consequently, the new government frequently calls for guarantees from Sofia against future conditions, despite it is clear that provisions of the 2017 Treaty, particularly those addressing historical issues, are already integrated into the negotiating framework. Nonetheless, there are indications that constitutional changes may eventually be implemented. A narrative has emerged suggesting that the amendments could be introduced with delayed effect, a position supported by several political actors, including President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, who has advocated that the changes take effect only once North Macedonia achieves full EU membership (Mircheski, 2024).

North Macedonia’s Constitution, belongs to “the new generation of European constitutions” and was drafted in the spirit and tradition of European constitutionalism (Dokmanović, 2011). While constitutional amendments are inherently complex and contentious (Majhoshev & Denkova, 2013), in its short history of independence North Macedonia has already amended its Constitution eight times, introducing 36 amendments. Three of these interventions resulted directly from external political pressure. The earliest, in January 1992, just 50 days after the Constitution was adopted, saw amendments I and II introduced, declaring that the Republic had no territorial claims against its neighbors, that borders could only be changed by consent and international norms, and that

Macedonia would not interfere in the sovereign rights or internal affairs of other states. The most extensive amendments occurred in 2001, following armed conflict and internationally supervised negotiations between Macedonian and Albanian parties (Gaber Damjanovska, 2011). These aimed to strengthen internal integration of all ethnic communities without assimilation and to provide a basis for long-term interethnic stability (Czymmeck, 2011). The most recent significant amendments followed the Prespa Agreement, changing the country's name to the Republic of North Macedonia and introducing Amendments XXXIII–XXXVI, with Amendment XXXIV modifying the Preamble to incorporate the 2001 Framework Agreement (Kitevski, 2020).

Perspectives on the inclusion of Bulgarians in the Constitution vary considerably. Optimists contend that the amendment would represent Bulgaria's implicit recognition of the distinct Macedonian nation, otherwise, they ask, why demand the explicit inclusion of Bulgarians? Pessimists, conversely, fear far-reaching consequences, suggesting that Bulgarians could acquire rights analogous to those of the Albanian community under the Ohrid Framework Agreement, although they are represented in an insignificant percentage of the total population in North Macedonia. According to the Protocol from the second intergovernmental session, North Macedonia is obliged to protect and nurture the identity of Bulgarians in the country, to develop their identity and the specific characteristics of the community, as well as their unhindered right to use community symbols. Bearing this in mind, it can be assumed that once the Bulgarians are inscribed in the constitution, it will be difficult to measure the extent to which the state fulfills their right to identity without being assessed as insufficient or discriminatory. As an illustration of the potential, in 2022, in Bitola and Ohrid, new Bulgarian cultural clubs were opened, named after figures from Bulgarian history who, at the very least, are considered controversial in Macedonian historiography. That move provoked condemnatory reactions in the public, and the openings were also assessed and condemned as a provocation by both the government and the opposition. Both clubs were banned in 2023, following a decision by a government commission that naming the clubs after controversial figures constituted an offense and a provocation to the Macedonian public (Telma TV, 2023).

According to the 2021 census, 3,504 citizens self-identified as Bulgarians (State Statistical Office, 2022). Nevertheless, this figure may be (mis)used in political discourse, particularly given the sensitivity surrounding the granting of Bulgarian citizenship to Macedonian citizens. In fact, the central Bulgarian objective may relate less to the officially registered minority and more to the

approximately 120,000 citizens of North Macedonia holding Bulgarian passports obtained through claimed ancestry (Kyuchukov, 2021). For years, largely due to Bulgaria's EU membership (since 2007), a large number of Macedonian citizens have applied for and obtained Bulgarian citizenship. The essence of the problem lies in the very manner in which citizenship is acquired. In order to obtain Bulgarian citizenship, applicants must meet several conditions (six in total), though more flexible criteria exist for those of Bulgarian origin (Risteski, 2014). Macedonian citizens applying for a passport submit a document (birth certificate or passport) proving that at least one parent is of Bulgarian origin (Neofotistos, 2016). This means that a Macedonian who acquires a Bulgarian passport can continue to identify as a Macedonian, according to their personal sense of identity, but given that they obtained Bulgarian citizenship on the basis of ancestry, it implies that their origin is Bulgarian, while Macedonian is their contemporary identity: a reflection of the Bulgarian stance over the Macedonian question. Contrary to Bulgaria's maximalist policy of not recognizing the existence of a Macedonian nation and language, at its core lies "political reality," that is, acknowledged modern political realities, and "does not dispute the citizens of North Macedonia's right to self-determination and identity" (Kyuchukov, 2021), while explicitly referring to the historical process that led to the current situation. In the direction of modernity and reality was also the rhetoric concerning the "pure Macedonian language and identity," continuously emphasized as "something preserved" both from the Macedonian side and by Europe, through the diplomatic process surrounding the French proposal and the opening of negotiations.

In the same line of modernity and reality was the statement of European Commissioner Marta Kos during her visit to Skopje in July 2025 (Džundeva, 2025). In order to explain that Macedonians should not fear for their identity, she vividly explained that what matters is how they feel, and that their identity consists of elements of spiritual, material, and culinary culture. The Prime Minister, Mickoski, in a form of reply, added that identity is not only culture, but also history and historical figures, such as Goce Delchev, Shapkarev, and the Ilinden Uprising. This identity-based polemic between Kos and Mickoski essentially reflects the positions regarding historical truths that will be part of the negotiations once the Bulgarians are incorporated into the constitution. The entire essence lies in the fact that, in the end, Bulgaria would recognize reality, in line with the definition of identity articulated by Commissioner Kos, once North Macedonia and Bulgaria agree on the remaining part: history and figures such as Delchev and Ilinden.

By the very fact that the principle of good-neighbourliness is part of both international law and the fundamental values of the European Union (Gadkowski, 2021; Kalicka-Mikołajczyk, 2019) the 2017 Treaty, explicitly named and dedicated to these values, automatically becomes part of North Macedonia's negotiating process with the European Union. The progress of Western Balkan states toward EU accession has consistently depended on their bilateral relations with member states, particularly neighbors (Basheska, 2022), and although the Stabilization and Association Process emphasized good-neighborliness from the outset, the 2018 EU Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans was the first to explicitly condition accession on the improvement of such relations (Petrović and Wilson, 2021). At the Sofia Summit (2018), the EU reaffirmed the Thessaloniki perspective and underscored commitments to strengthening good-neighbourly relations, regional stability, and reconciliation. The Zagreb Declaration (2020) was even more explicit, highlighting the need for faithful implementation of both the Prespa Agreement and the Treaty with Bulgaria. The Brdo Declaration (2021) reaffirmed the same principle.

Documents stemming from the French proposal likewise underscore the EU's expectation that North Macedonia will demonstrate tangible results in implementing both the Prespa Agreement and the 2017 Treaty with Bulgaria. Given that Bulgaria blocked North Macedonia's accession on the grounds of insufficient compliance with the 2017 Treaty, it is reasonable to expect that divergent Bulgarian interpretations of its implementation will signal to Brussels that North Macedonia is not adequately fulfilling one of the EU's core conditions, that is good-neighbourly relations. This is particularly important in the context of the Commission's revised enlargement methodology, which grants individual member states increased influence in the accession process (Petrović and Wilson, 2021). Since EU enlargement policy is inherently politically driven, the interpretation of the Treaty's provisions and the degree of flexibility tolerated will largely depend on evolving geopolitical dynamics.

6. Macedonian sunk cost fallacy

The sunk cost effect refers to the tendency to persist with an endeavor once an investment of money, effort, or time has been made (Arkes and Blumer, 1985). In political science, this phenomenon is often discussed as the "sunk costs fallacy," a concept borrowed from organizational psychology and behavioral economics, describing situations in which decision-makers escalate commitment

to failing projects in an attempt to “recoup” prior investments (Miller, 2019). Even when negative outcomes become evident, individuals and institutions frequently continue along the same path, illustrating the powerful influence sunk costs can exert on judgment and decision-making (Schulreich et al., 2022).

Under the narrative of its eventual accession to the EU and NATO, North Macedonia underwent the painful process of changing its name. As a result of the Prespa compromise, North Macedonia became the 30th member of NATO, and a smooth integrative path toward the European Union was anticipated. The underlying assumption was that the substantial sacrifices made under the Prespa deal would ultimately yield the desired outcome, primarily the full EU membership. However, as it became increasingly evident that EU accession would not be readily attainable despite the Prespa compromise, a perception emerged that an excessively high price had been paid for comparatively meager returns. While NATO membership represented a tangible achievement, public perception framed it as insufficient compensation for such a painful process and outcome. This scenario also sent a broader signal to the region, particularly to states facing similar outstanding issues, raising questions about the consequences should they follow North Macedonia’s example (Kitevski, 2023).

Nonetheless, the EU does not consider itself indebted to North Macedonia. Following the French proposal, the responsibility shifted to North Macedonia to deliver the constitutional amendments necessary to formally start accession negotiations. The document produced by the first Intergovernmental Conference on the initiation of accession talks emphasized that the EU fulfills its commitments when candidate states meet the required criteria, echoing the 1999 statement of the former Commissioner for Enlargement, Günter Verheugen: “Negotiations should proceed on the basis of merit, not on the basis of compassion” (Müftüler-Bac, 2002; Alexandrescu, 2020).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, along with new geopolitical polarization, and the rapid NATO accession of Sweden and Finland, partially alleviated the post-Prespa frustration that nothing had been gained from the asymmetrical deal with Greece. Nonetheless, the French proposal does not signal a new “Prespa moment.” If the Prespa Agreement required North Macedonia to make significant historical concessions to Greece in exchange for progress toward the EU, it remains uncertain whether North Macedonia could endure another identity-related compromise without a guaranteed outcome. Some key Bulgarian demands regarding history challenge fundamental aspects of North Macedonia’s national narrative, making compromise difficult and requiring

considerable goodwill and creativity from both sides (Christidis). As expected, the government led by Hristijan Mickoski remains reluctant to pursue further EU-aligned reforms without a credible signal of commitment from the EU (Couteau, 2024). But, despite the perception that the path to the EU is sometimes a “two steps forward, one step back” process, the ultimate target and goals remain unchanged (Panagiotou, 2020).

The EU offers North Macedonia neither concrete incentives nor deterrents, aside from the enlargement package decision to separate Albania from North Macedonia in the process. Given the public and civic narrative that Albania is “rapidly advancing toward the EU,” a strong sense of being left behind is being created, as well as political pressure, particularly through the Albanian political bloc; similar to the case of the issue with Greece, the Albanian community in North Macedonia raises the stakes in the political arena, expressing frustration that integration is stalled by issues that do not directly concern them (Pendarovski, 2012).

7. Conclusion

In 2025, it marks 20 years since North Macedonia was granted candidate status for the European Union; 5 years since the country became a full member of NATO; and 3 years since the French proposal was set and accepted to unblock North Macedonia’s EU integration path.

Intended as a solution, it has proven to be a stumbling block, which not only is not a transitional option for resolving the problem with Bulgaria, but on the contrary, it generates the differences in the understanding of history between North Macedonia and Bulgaria in values that need to be addressed during negotiations between North Macedonia and the EU. If the Prespa Agreement of 2018 finally settled the naming issue between Greece and North Macedonia, the Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation reflects, in its naming, the issue between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. Signed in 2017, a few years after Bulgaria expressed its reservations regarding North Macedonia’s European path, among other things requesting an agreement specifically on good-neighborliness, the treaty did not resolve all differences on historical matters. Instead, it proved to be a reason for the blockade in 2020, which lasted until the French proposal, which since then transferred responsibility for the incompletely initiated negotiations to the Macedonian side.

The precondition that the proposal carries: the amendment of the preamble of the Constitution of North Macedonia to include the Bulgarian ethnic minority among the already existing ones, has not yet been realized.

This study shows that constitutional amendment is not the only factor separating North Macedonia from joining the European family. On the contrary, the set of documents published as the “French proposal” continuously affirms the need for tangible results regarding good-neighborliness and cooperation, particularly emphasizing the necessity of implementing the Prespa Agreement and the treaty with Bulgaria. Good-neighborliness is certainly part of the SAP, but it is explicitly highlighted in the 2018 EU Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans as a prerequisite for accession. Good-neighborly relations are also emphasized in declarations from Sofia, Zagreb, and Brdo.

The fact that North Macedonia and Bulgaria have signed a Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation—visible even in the name of the treaty, in line with good-neighborliness as a recognized value in international law and the foundations of the European Union, indicates that respect for the treaty and its provisions will be a prerequisite dictating North Macedonia’s progress through the enlargement procedure. Without setting a concrete estimate for when the constitutional amendments that will trigger the negotiation process will take place, it is easy to conclude that identity issues addressed in the 2017 treaty will remain a topic throughout the process, especially in conditions where, according to the revised enlargement methodology, individual member states have increased influence in the accession process.

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GEOGRAFSKI PREGLED GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

EDITORIAL

Ranko Mirić..... 7

ARTICLES

Igor Žibema
Surface urban heat island in Kranj..... 9

Boris Avdić
*Educational benefits of integrating GIS
into geography teaching*..... 35

Tim Gregorčič, Lena Kropivšek, Irma Potočnik Slavič
Operational insights related to mapping and analysing rural place (dis)amenities..... 59

Dževad Mešanović, Edin Hadžimustafić
Gender disparity in literacy among the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina..... 87

Blaž Repe
Soil geography in Slovenia from primary school to university..... 109

Simon Kerma
Farm tourism in Slovenia – perspectives and development challenges..... 131

Goran Kitevski
*The French proposal and North Macedonia's European perspective:
a political geography*..... 151

INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS..... 175