

National debate on state positions in international relations: Citizen perspectives on North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration



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Policy brief

National debate on
state positions
in international relations:
Citizen perspectives on
North Macedonia's
Euro-Atlantic integration

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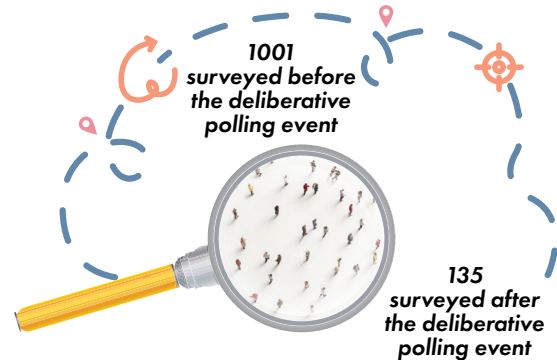
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1. Introduction

A country's foreign policy is central to its efforts to secure its place within the international community. Since gaining independence, North Macedonia has focused on integrating into Euro-Atlantic structures such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Achieving NATO membership in March 2020 was a significant milestone,¹ bolstering the country's security and strategic alignment, while EU membership remains an ongoing objective.²

In the current international landscape, understanding public perceptions of these foreign policy alignments is more important than ever. As North Macedonia continues to navigate its path towards EU accession and fulfill its commitments as a NATO member, it is important to ensure that these efforts reflect and address the concerns and views of its citizens. Insight into public opinion helps in developing policies that effectively support the country's international objectives while maintaining broad domestic support. Policies that are both reflective of and responsive to citizens' views are crucial for fostering legitimacy.



DELIBERATIVE EVENT

6-7 July 2024

135 participants

POST-DEBATE SURVEY

N = 135 participants
82.2% Macedonian
14.6% Albanian
3.2% other ethnic communities



To effectively gauge and comprehend the public's perspectives, the European Policy Institute (EPI) carried out a deliberative poll, a distinctive form of political consultation pioneered by the Deliberative Democracy Lab (formerly known as Center for Deliberative Democracy) at Stanford University. This method combines traditional public opinion polling with informed public discussion, aiming to reveal how public opinion might change when citizens have the chance to thoroughly engage with a topic. Participants are surveyed on specific issues both before and after they engage in detailed discussions among themselves and with experts and political figures, allowing for an analysis of how opinions might shift as participants become more informed and involved.³

¹ 'NATO Membership (НАТО Членство)', Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade (Министерство За Надворешни Работи и Надворешна Трговија), n.d., <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/mk/page/7/nato-chlenstvo>.

² 'EU Membership (ЕУ Членство)', Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade (Министерство За Надворешни Работи и Надворешна Трговија), n.d., <https://www.mfa.gov.mk/mk/page/6/eu-chlenstvo>.

³ 'What Is Deliberative Polling®?', Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab, n.d., <https://deliberation.stanford.edu/what-deliberative-pollingr>.

The deliberative process began with an initial survey, conducted between May 27 and June 14, 2024, encompassing a nationally representative sample of 1001 adult respondents from across North Macedonia. This initial survey included both knowledge and opinion/attitude questions, capturing a wide range of views from respondents comprising 67% Macedonians, 24.6% Albanians, and 8.4% from other ethnic groups.

Prior to the event, participants were provided with balanced briefing materials reviewed by relevant experts to ensure the information was unbiased and objective. These materials served as the foundation for the discussions during the event. On July 6 and 7, 2024, a two-day debate event was held, during which 135 respondents participated in in-depth discussions about North Macedonia's foreign policy, particularly its alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and its membership in NATO. During the event, the participants engaged with experts and political figures to develop a more nuanced understanding of the issues at hand. Following the event, the participants were given the initial survey again, to measure changes in their perceptions on the topics discussed, with respondents comprising 82.2% Macedonians, 14.6% Albanians, and 3.2% from other ethnic groups.

This policy brief summarizes the findings from the deliberative poll, providing a comprehensive view of how public opinion evolves when citizens engage in informed discussions on complex foreign policy topics. Based on these insights, the brief offers actionable recommendations aimed at both aligning North Macedonia's international strategies with public views and fostering a deeper understanding among citizens.

2. Key insights from the national deliberative poll

Over the years, North Macedonia's foreign policy has been largely defined by its pursuit of EU and NATO membership. This dual focus reflects a broader strategic orientation towards the West, aimed at solidifying the country's democratic institutions, enhancing economic growth, and securing a stable future within a complex regional context. However, the path to deeper integration requires not just broad public support, but also a thorough understanding of the obligations and challenges that come with it. This includes familiarising citizens with more complex policies like the EU's CFSP, and why aligning North Macedonia's foreign policy with that of the EU is necessary for the integration process.

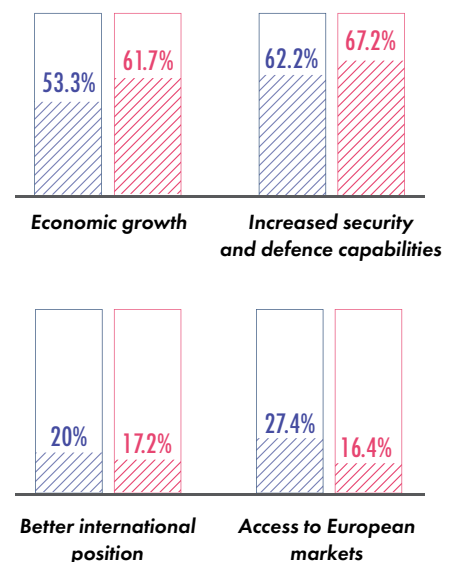
Using the deliberative polling method, the goal was to observe whether exposure to comprehensive and unbiased information would lead to shifts in public opinion. However, the analysis shows that in several areas, participants' opinions remained largely consistent.

Pre-debate, 68% of participants expressed a strong interest in foreign policy and national security, a level of engagement that remained stable (mean scores of 7.92 before and 8.00 after the debate). This suggests that the participants' interest in these issues was firm and not significantly altered by the debate.

Regarding the European Union, most participants initially held a positive opinion (68.8%). While there was a slight decrease in positive sentiment and support for North Macedonia's EU integration post-debate, these changes were not statistically significant (mean values of 7.73 pre-debate and 7.19 post-debate). Additionally, participants' familiarity with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy saw no improvement, indicating difficulty in enhancing public understanding of complex policy issues, even through informed discussion.

Support for NATO membership remained steady at 71.8% pre-debate, with no significant variation observed after the debate. Economic growth continued to be highlighted as the primary benefit of EU and NATO membership, a view reinforced by the debate.

In your opinion, what do you think are the main benefits of North Macedonia's membership in the EU and NATO?



While the debate provided valuable insights and encouraged discussion, it did not significantly change participants' fundamental views on foreign policy, EU integration, and NATO membership.

This outcome reflects the fact that topics such as EU integration and NATO membership are frequently covered in public discourse, leading citizens to have well-established opinions. In contrast, more complex issues, like the EU's CFSP, are less prominent and less thoroughly explained to the public. A single deliberative event may not be sufficient to significantly improve familiarity with such nuanced topics, especially when they are contentious and prone to politicisation. This challenge is not unique to our context; it is also observed within the EU itself, where progress in deeper foreign policy integration has been limited due to what experts describe as a "politicisation trap".⁴ The same study also suggests that public opinion on CFSP within the EU is more influenced by substantive arguments than by ideological affiliations.⁵ This indicates that the nature of the debate – specifically, the ability to convey substantive elements – is crucial in shaping public attitudes and avoiding the politicisation of such complex policies. Therefore, to achieve a deeper and more lasting impact, more frequent and comprehensive educational initiatives that ensure that public discussions are substantive and informative should be undertaken.

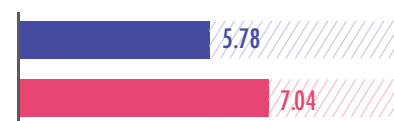
2.1 Understanding foreign policy

Foreign policy is often seen as "high politics", a domain traditionally reserved for political elites and experts due to its complex nature and far-reaching implications.⁶

The intricacies of diplomatic negotiations, international treaties, and strategic alliances are usually beyond the everyday experiences and concerns of ordinary citizens, making it difficult for them to fully grasp or feel connected to these issues. This disconnect can result in a lack of public engagement or interest in foreign policy, reinforcing the perception that it is not directly relevant to their daily lives.

Initially, just over half of the respondents (51.1%) believed that North Macedonia's foreign policy affected their daily lives, while nearly the same percentage (47.6%) felt it did not. However, after the debate, there was a notable shift in perception. The mean values increased from 5.78 before the debate to 7.04 after, indicating that the debate significantly raised awareness about the impact of foreign policy on daily life. This suggests that while citizens might not always recognize the immediate effects of foreign policy, informed discussions can enhance their understanding of its relevance to their everyday experiences.

On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means no influence at all, 10 means a lot of influence, how much does the foreign policy of North Macedonia affect your daily life?



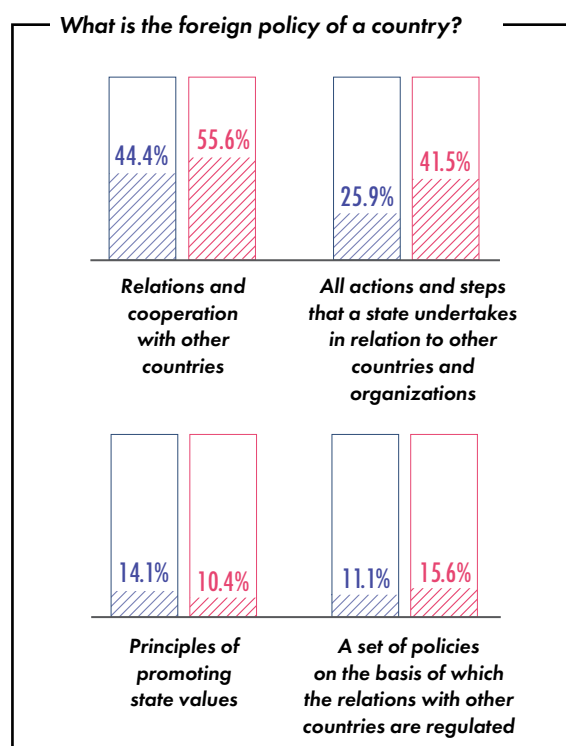
4 Davide Angelucci et al., 'Public Opinion and the European Foreign and Security Policy: Is There a Risk of Politicisation?', JOINT Research Papers, no. 25 (April 2024), https://www.jointproject.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/joint_rp_25.pdf.

5 Angelucci et al.

6 Christian Opitz, Hanna Pfeifer, and Anna Geis, 'Engaging with Public Opinion at the Micro-Level: Citizen Dialogue and Participation in German Foreign Policy', Foreign Policy Analysis 18, no. 1 (2022), <https://academic.oup.com/fpa/article/18/1/orab033/6414434>.

Before the event, a large majority of respondents (74%) believed that regional stability and cooperation with neighbouring countries is extremely important for the future of North Macedonia, with an additional 12% considering it important. Only a small percentage (13.5%) viewed these aspects as less important. After the event, participants' views on this topic remained consistent, with no statistically significant changes observed. The mean values were 8.87 before the debate and 8.59 after, indicating that participants already had strong and stable views on the importance of regional cooperation.

Additionally, respondents were asked to assess the importance of various strategic goals for North Macedonia. Before the debate, there was strong support for cooperation in international organizations (84.8%), commitment to a stable and prosperous region (83.3%), and promoting the country's interests on the international stage (81%). Membership in the European Union and NATO was also deemed important by 75.9% and 74.3% of respondents, respectively. After the debate, participants' opinions on these objectives remained largely unchanged, with only a slight, non-significant decrease in support for EU membership.



These findings reveal that citizens of North Macedonia have a strong foundational understanding of their country's foreign policy, particularly in areas like regional stability, international cooperation, and strategic alignment with the EU and NATO. Their views on these subjects are deeply rooted, as evidenced by the minimal changes in opinion before and after the debate. However, the notable increase in awareness about how foreign policy impacts daily life indicates that while citizens may be well-versed in broad strategic goals, there is still potential to deepen their understanding of the direct implications of foreign policy decisions. Engaging citizens in discussions that connect foreign policy to tangible outcomes could further strengthen their grasp of these complex issues, making them more informed participants in the democratic processes.

2.2 Views on EU integration and CFSP alignment

Being a candidate for membership since 2005, North Macedonia has been on a determined path toward European Union membership, with efforts focused on meeting the criteria set out in the accession process. One of the requirements of the EU accession process is aligning with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).⁷ This alignment is crucial for North Macedonia as it demonstrates its commitment to EU values and its readiness to contribute to regional and global stability.

Before the debate, a majority of respondents, 65% (43.9% fully aware, 21.1% somewhat aware), indicated that they were familiar with the steps North Macedonia must take to achieve full EU membership. However, 34.4% of respondents (20.6% not aware, 13.8% not aware at all) were not familiar with these steps. After the debate, there was no statistically significant change in the level of awareness, indicating a stable but limited understanding among the public.

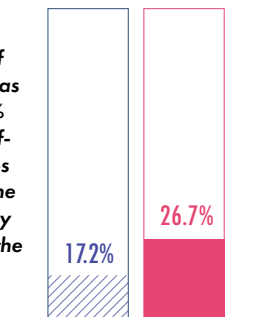
The majority of participants (66.2%) believed that cooperation within EU policies contributes to regional and global security, reducing the risk of conflicts. However, a portion of them (29.1%) held reservations about this notion, indicating a split in public opinion. Furthermore, a notable segment of the population (65.7%) felt that aligning with the EU's foreign policy often requires prioritising EU interests over national ones, reflecting concerns about potential compromises to national sovereignty. There were also concerns that alignment with EU foreign policy might lead to tensions with

countries that do not share the EU's interests (61.9%). Despite these concerns, a substantial number of citizens recognized the benefits of participating in EU joint missions, seeing it as a way to enhance North Macedonia's ability to respond to global threats and improve its international status and influence (64.4%). The debate did not lead to significant shifts in attitudes towards the EU's CFSP, indicating that participants' views were either firmly established or that the debate lacked the influence to change them.

When asked about specific milestones in North Macedonia's EU integration process, such as when the country was granted candidate status and when the screening process for EU accession began, a significant number of participants correctly identified these events. The debate had a positive effect on reinforcing knowledge of these milestones, with a slight increase in correct responses afterward.

In which year did the screening process for accession to the European Union begin?

A significant increase was observed in the percentage of participants identifying 2022 as the correct answer from 17.2% before the debate to 26.7% after the debate, which indicates there was more clarity after the debate and the need for timely information of citizens about the key processes of the country.



The discussion also touched on the EU's response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, where a large majority of respondents correctly identified economic sanctions as the EU's primary response. Regarding the impact of sanctions on North Macedonia, more than half of the citizens initially believed that sanctions against Russia had led to increased electricity prices and other economic consequences

⁷ 'Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) / Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in the Western Balkans', European Union External Action, 16 March 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/common-foreign-and-security-policy-cfsp-common-security-and-defence-policy-csdp-western-balkans_en.

within the country. However, post-debate, there was a significant decrease in this belief, with some participants becoming uncertain or changing their views. This shift indicates that the debate provided new information or perspectives that prompted participants to reassess their understanding of the sanctions' effects. Before the debate, the majority of respondents (68%) were critical of how North Macedonia was handling the economic effects of sanctions. However, the debate had an impact on perceptions, leading to a more neutral assessment of the government's handling of the situation afterward (mean values of 4.32 before the debate and 5.20 after the debate).

The debate underscores the need for continuous engagement and educational efforts to ensure that the public is well-informed and actively involved in the critical discussions surrounding the country's future within the EU.

In conclusion, public awareness and opinions on key issues related to EU integration and CFSP alignment remain mixed. The uncertainty among the public about the steps necessary for EU accession might stem from the overshadowing effect of bilateral issues over the years. Similarly, the uncertainty about sanctions against Russia and their domestic effects may result from exposure to conflicting information and exaggerated claims in public discourse. The national debate offered a valuable platform for discussion but did not drastically alter established views. This outcome underscores the need for continuous engagement and educational efforts to ensure that the public is well-informed and actively involved in the critical discussions surrounding the country's future within the EU.

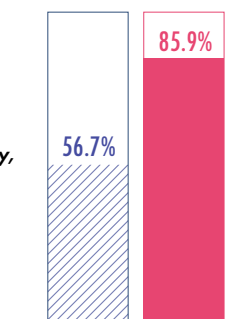
2.3 Views on NATO membership and national security

Officially joining the alliance in March 2020, North Macedonia's accession marked a key milestone in its commitment to collective security and regional stability. By becoming a NATO member, North Macedonia has aligned itself with Western defense structures, aiming to strengthen its security and cooperate more closely with its allies.

Initially, there was considerable confusion about the year North Macedonia officially joined NATO, with a significant portion of respondents unable to identify it. However, following the debate, awareness improved significantly, with 85.9% correctly identifying 2020 as the year of accession. The debate also contributed to improved knowledge about NATO's current membership, with 85.9% of respondents correctly identifying the number of member countries after the debate, compared to 79.6% before. This suggests that the debate was effective in enhancing public knowledge about the alliance.

In what year did North Macedonia officially become a full member of NATO?

After the debate, the percentage of participants identifying 2020 as the correct answer to this question increased significantly, reaching 85.9% compared to 56.7% before the debate, indicating there was more clarity after the debate.



When respondents were asked about NATO's main purpose, a majority initially recognised collective defense against armed attacks as the primary goal. After the debate, this recognition slightly increased to 73.3%, showing a clearer understanding of NATO's core mission. Additionally, there was a slight increase in those who acknowledged economic cooperation as a goal of NATO (from 6.4% to 7.4%), while the perception that NATO primarily enhances Western influence decreased (from 17.2% to 9.6%).

Regarding the impact of NATO membership on North Macedonia, the majority of respondents agreed that it strengthens national security and military training standards. However, there were also concerns about NATO's impact on the country's neutrality and financial burden. These views remained consistent before and after the debate. The debate also shed light on NATO's evolving role in addressing contemporary security challenges. Notably, there was a significant increase in the number of respondents who recognised NATO's role in countering cyber threats and addressing climate change, with mean values rising from 6.88 before the debate to 8.5 after the debate. This suggests that, while traditional views on NATO's role remain strong, there is growing public awareness of its expanded role in addressing non-traditional security threats.

While the debate was effective in clarifying certain aspects, such as NATO's purpose, the year of North Macedonia's accession and the number of member countries, it also highlighted persistent uncertainties and varied opinions. The increase in correct responses about NATO's key facts underscores the value of informed discussions. However, ongoing efforts are needed to address remaining concerns and provide a more comprehensive understanding of NATO's role and benefits.

Efforts are needed to address remaining concerns and provide a more comprehensive understanding of NATO's role and benefits.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

The overall stability in participants' opinions before and after the debate suggests that many citizens have well-established views on these subjects. Issues like EU integration and NATO membership are deeply embedded in public discourse, and citizens have developed firm opinions over time. One of the most notable outcomes of the deliberative poll was the increase in awareness regarding the impact of foreign policy on daily life. Before the debate, a sizable portion of the population did not fully grasp the relevance of foreign policy decisions to their everyday experiences. However, after the deliberative event, participants displayed a heightened awareness of how foreign policy, including EU integration and NATO membership, directly affects their lives. This shift underscores the potential of informed discussions to bridge the gap between abstract policy issues and the tangible realities that citizens face. However, while there is an increased awareness of the impact of foreign policy decisions on citizens' daily lives, there remains a clear gap in understanding processes related to EU integration and what NATO membership entails. This underscores the significant value of engaging citizens in discussions that deepen their understanding and knowledge.

The deliberative poll revealed a general hesitancy among participants to fully embrace complex EU policies like the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The limited change in familiarity and opinion about CFSP alignment reflects a broader challenge in conveying the nuances of such policies to the public. Despite the provision of balanced briefing materials and expert discussions, the complexity of these issues and the prevalence of misleading information and politicisation likely contributed to the limited shifts in public perception. The results also highlighted persistent concerns among citizens regarding the potential trade-offs associated with EU integration and NATO membership. Many participants voiced apprehensions about the potential loss of national sovereignty as a country becomes a member of the EU and NATO, and the financial burdens of NATO membership. These concerns, while not dominant, indicate a need for more transparent and inclusive public engagement efforts to address such reservations and build broader consensus around the country's foreign policy objectives.

Overall, the deliberative poll provides a clear indication that while North Macedonia's citizens are generally supportive of the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation, there remains a need for continued educational initiatives and dialogue. By fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry, and by actively countering misinformation, policymakers can ensure that North Macedonia's foreign policy remains both reflective of and responsive to the views of its people, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of the country's international strategies.

Recommendations:

- Develop communication strategies that translate foreign policy decisions into their practical impacts on citizens' daily lives. Highlight how international efforts, such as EU integration and NATO membership, affect economic opportunities, security, and social services.
- Ensure that government communications on foreign policy are clear, transparent, and accessible.
- Strengthen partnerships with civil society organisations that focus on foreign policy, EU integration, and security issues. These organisations can help disseminate information and engage with communities across the country.
- Organise public consultations and educational campaigns focusing on specific foreign policy issues that directly impact citizens. These initiatives should be designed to be accessible and relevant to the general public.
- Implement strategies to combat misinformation regarding EU integration and NATO membership. This could include fact-checking services and public awareness to promote accurate information.
- Conduct regular public opinion surveys to monitor changes in citizens' attitudes toward foreign policy. These surveys should be used to inform policy decisions and communication strategies.

