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CASE STUDY

EUPopLink Country report - North Macedonia

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Abstract

This country report examines the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism in North Macedonia, focusing on the political supply side. The analysis draws on electoral programs, expert surveys, public statements, and public opinion research. The report identifies two political parties that combine populist appeals with Eurosceptic positions: the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE and the far-left Levica. VMRO-DPMNE, a long-standing mainstream party, exhibits soft and equivocal Euroscepticism, primarily rooted in nativist concerns over perceived concessions to Macedonian national identity demanded by the EU accession process. Its populism is characterized by people-centrism framed in ethnocentric terms and strategic anti-elitism directed at domestic political rivals. Levica represents a case of hard Euroscepticism, openly opposing EU membership and advocating alignment with alternative geopolitical blocs. The party combines left-wing socio-economic appeals with a pronounced nativist discourse, drawing on populist themes that resonate across ideological extremes. Despite their shared reliance on nativist sentiments, the two parties differ significantly in their ideological grounding and do not coordinate their Eurosceptic stances. Although support for EU accession remains a majority position, it has declined in recent years due to the country's protracted accession process, marked by successive blockades from Greece and Bulgaria, as well as the rise of identity-based politics. Hard Euroscepticism remains broadly dismissed by mainstream political actors and civil society, yet Eurosceptic narratives have gained traction, particularly when linked to perceptions of the EU's role in matters central to Macedonian identity and sovereignty. Although none of the remaining parties exhibit explicit Euroscepticism, all employ populist rhetoric, within which the populism–Euroscepticism nexus in North Macedonia is

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primarily structured around the defense of ethnic Macedonian interests. Further delays in the accession process may intensify Eurosceptic sentiment framed through ethnocentric and populist appeals.

Keywords
populism, Euroscepticism, North Macedonia, VMRO-DPMNE, Levica

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1. Introduction

The Republic of North Macedonia declared its independence in 1991 and became a candidate for European Union (EU) membership in 2005. Accession negotiations began in 2022, and the screening process was completed in 2023, with the European Commission noting that North Macedonia "has consistently stated its political commitment to the strategic goal of EU integration" (European Commission, 2024). This strategic orientation is reflected in public opinion, as a majority of citizens express favorable attitudes toward the EU. The most recent nationally representative surveys report strong net positive perceptions: 79%–17% (International Republican Institute, 2024); 67%–19% (National Democratic Institute, 2021); 51%–13% (Regional Cooperation Council, 2024); and 58%–12% (European Commission, 2025), with the remaining respondents classified as neutral or undecided.

Although support for EU accession remains substantial, it has declined in recent years. A longitudinal public opinion study records a marked drop from 80% in 2014 to 62% in 2024 (Damjanovski, 2025, p. 13). Conversely, opposition to EU integration peaked in 2020, with 22% of respondents expressing negative attitudes, while abstention from a hypothetical referendum on EU membership increased from a negligible 1% in 2014 to a considerable 18% in 2024. The proportion of citizens who consider EU membership highly important also decreased—from 48% in 2014 to 35% in 2024—accompanied by a decline in perceptions of progress toward EU integration (ibid., pp. 14–15). Opposition to EU membership is notably higher among ethnic Macedonians (15%) than among ethnic Albanians (3%), while support is weakest among the youngest and oldest cohorts, with one-third of young respondents indicating they would abstain from an EU referendum (ibid., p. 12).

The decline in support for EU accession in North Macedonia has been driven largely by the country's prolonged accession process. Greece blocked North Macedonia's progress toward EU and NATO membership starting in 2008, insisting on a resolution to the name dispute. The issue was formally resolved through the Prespa Agreement (2018), which led to the adoption of the country's current name, the Republic of North Macedonia, and paved the way for NATO accession in 2020. However, beginning in 2020, Bulgaria initiated withholding its consent for North Macedonia's EU accession, demanding concessions related to the interpretation of history and language and calling for constitutional amendments to include a Bulgarian minority among the state's "founding peoples"—a demand that remains unmet. Between the resolution of the dispute with Greece and the onset of tensions with Bulgaria, the EU—partly in response to calls from some member states—adopted a new enlargement methodology (European Commission, 2020), further delaying progress in North Macedonia's accession process.

During this protracted EU accession period, North Macedonia experienced a rise in ethno-nationalist narratives and identity-based politics. This trend was particularly emphasized during the decade-long rule (2006–2017) of the center-right Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) (Vangeli, 2011), a period also marked by significant democratic backsliding. This was further amplified by the internal divisions within the EU and its lack of consensus on enlargement, which weakened its credibility among North Macedonia's citizens and created space for political actors to portray the Union as unreliable. Taken together, these developments have deepened public disillusionment with EU accession and eroded trust in the Union among the country's citizens (Blanuša et al., 2021).

This report examines the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism in North Macedonia, focusing on the political supply side—that is, political parties and their representatives—in order to capture the current configuration of the party system at the intersection of these two phenomena. The analysis draws on a range of sources, including electoral programs, public statements by party officials, expert surveys on political parties, and public opinion research—some of which are available only in the Macedonian language. The aim is to synthesize existing knowledge on the topic and offer a resource for scholars interested in the nexus between populism and Euroscepticism in the country. The country report was prepared as part of the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis & Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026). Structurally, the report first identifies the main populist actors in North Macedonia, followed by an analysis of how they articulate Euroscepticism, and concludes with an overview of broader political responses to the phenomenon.

2. Populist political actors

Ever since the introduction of multipartyism in the early 1990s, the party system of North Macedonia has been ethnically divided (Šedo, 2010). The major parties mobilize support through clear ethnic branding, reflecting the country's multiethnic composition: roughly two-thirds of the population identify as ethnic Macedonians, about one-quarter as Albanians, and the rest as Turks, Serbs, Roma, Vlachs, Bosniaks, and others. Political competition is largely characterized by power-sharing along ethnic lines, with each group targeted by corresponding ethnic parties (Fraenkel, 2025; Hulsey & Keil, 2021; Piacentini, 2019). While isolated cases of cross-ethnic voting have occurred, they remain marginal

and have not disrupted the prevailing pattern of ethnically segmented electoral behavior. As a result, governments have consistently been formed through coalitions, typically between a major ethnic Macedonian party and an ethnic Albanian partner, often with smaller parties. The present report primarily focuses on political parties that simultaneously exhibit relatively stronger populist and Eurosceptic tendencies, while Table 1 provides an overview of the major political parties during the 2020–2025 period.

The political landscape of North Macedonia is rich in populist rhetoric. All political parties employ populism—understood through the ideational approach (see Mudde, 2017)—to varying degrees, often in combination with other strategies of political mobilization such as programmatic politics, clientelism, and charismatic appeal (Bliznakovski et al., 2023). The two parties that hold more pronounced Eurosceptic positions, VMRO-DPMNE and Levica, do not directly support one another, although similar themes occasionally emerge between them, particularly around nativist issues. This report focuses primarily on these two parties, while acknowledging that populist, although not Eurosceptic, elements can also be found—albeit to a much lesser extent—in the rhetoric of other political actors.

VMRO-DPMNE is a right-wing party endorsing conservative ideology (Lehmann et al., 2024; Norris, 2019). It was established in 1990 as anti-communist, anti-Yugoslav party centered on defending Macedonian identity and culture (Šedo, 2010). In the early 2000s, it adopted a conservative and Christian-democratic profile, while retaining its original ethnocentric appeal and a hardline stance on disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, as well as on interethnic relations. The party governed between 1998–2002, 2006–2017 and is today in power (since 2024), maintaining strong support among more traditionalist and nationalist ethnic Macedonians. Under long-time leader Nikola Gruevski (party president 2002–18 and prime minister 2006–16), the party developed an authoritarian profile (Sotiropoulos, 2023), culminating in the 2015–16 wiretapping scandal that exposed systemic abuse of power and corruption at the top of the party (Priebe, 2015; Auerbach & Kartner, 2022). VMRO-DPMNE is an associate member of the European People's Party and maintains ties with similar ruling parties in Hungary (Fidesz) and Serbia (SNS)—ties exemplified by Gruevski's being controversially granted political asylum in Hungary following the disclosure of the wiretapping scandal. Economically, the party leans to the right, promoting pro-business policies, often accompanied by clientelistic practices toward workers, farmers and companies (Cvetičanin et al., 2023). Culturally, it advances a traditionalist agenda, emphasizing national heritage and family values, while opposing multiculturalism and women's and LGBT+ rights (Miškovska Kajevska, 2018).

VMRO-DPMNE's discourse relies heavily on populism (Cekikj, 2024, Norris, 2019), which plays a central role in the party's identity and political communication. This populist rhetoric is primarily characterized by nativism, traditionalism, and ethnocentrism, and secondarily by a form of valence populism that emphasizes the party's purported superior competence on broadly resonant, non-divisive issues such as economic management, the fight against corruption, and effective governance. The party's populism is rooted in an exclusive concern for Macedonian national and ethnic interests—a defining feature of its people-centrist outlook and a constant in its public image (Cekikj, 2024, 289–292; Stefoska & Stojanov, 2017). This orientation is often, though not always, accompanied by anti-elitist rhetoric directed at the center-left Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), its main political rival, which VMRO-DPMNE frequently portrays as a corrupt "transition oligarchy" betraying the "people" and "selling out" Macedonian identity (Cekikj, 2024, pp. 288–289). The party's us-versus-them discourse—used to stress its closeness to ordinary citizens in contrast to "self-interested elites"—intensified during the wiretapping scandal (Gjuzelov & Ivanovska Hadzievska, 2019, pp. 11–13), when then-leader Nikola Gruevski advanced a narrative portraying ethnic Macedonians as victims of collusion between domestic and international elites allegedly conspiring to undermine the state.[1]

Levica was established during the period of the wiretapping scandal by a group of left-wing activists with a clear far-left political platform. After failing to enter parliament in its first electoral contest in 2016, the party underwent personnel changes and adopted a strong nativist discourse. This event led it to secure nearly 7% of the popular vote (and 6 out of 120 MP positions) in the 2024 parliamentary elections, positioning Levica as a rising political force in the country. The party's program is centered on redistribution and expansion of the welfare state, with left-wing socio-economic appeals (Levica, 2020, 2024). However, the party's rhetoric is simultaneously right-wing in the cultural dimension (Bosilkov, 2021), centered on the defense of Macedonian national interests. Levica strongly opposes the Prespa Agreement with Greece, NATO membership and concessions in internal ethnic relations, while advocating closer ties with Russia, accession to alternative international alliances such as the Eurasian Economic Union, and the reorientation of the country's foreign policy away from the West (Rechica, 2023). Among all parliamentary parties, Levica is notable for the

[1]See, for instance, Gruevski's speech delivered a few days after the 2016 general elections, which ultimately brought him down from power, where he alleged both international and domestic collusion against VMRO-DPMNE: https://prizma.mk/gruevski-ne-priznavame-preglasuvana-nema-veke-pregovori-strantsi/ (available in Macedonian).

Table 1. Overview of current major political parties in North Macedonia.

Party acronym and name	Ideology and demographics	Government experience	Populism	Euroscepticism
VMRO-DPMNE Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity	Right-wing, Conservative, Christian-democratic, people's party of ethnic Macedonians	Extensive as head of government: 1998–2002; 2006–2017; 2024–present.	Pronounced and consistent people-centrism; strategic and occasional anti-elitism and Manichean discourse; populist radical right	Soft
LEVICA The Left	Radical left (economic dimension), nativist (cultural dimension), predominantly ethnic Macedonian party	Very limited: 2 MPs: 2020–24; 6 MPs: 2024–present Local-level presence	Pronounced across all three dimensions (people-centrism, anti-elitism, Manichaeism); left-wing populist with elements of populist radical right	Hard
SDSM Social Democratic Union of Macedonia	Center-left, Social-democratic, ethnic Macedonian party with relatively stronger multiculturalist discourse	Extensive as head of government: 1991–1998; 2002–2006; 2017–2024	Limited to valence populism	None
DUI Democratic Union for Integration	Center-left, Ethnic Albanian party	Extensive as junior coalition partner: 2002–2006; 2008–2024	Limited to valence populism	None
AA Alliance for the Albanians	Center-right, Ethnic Albanian party	Limited: government participation post-2017 in various coalitions; local-level presence	Pronounced people-centrism framed in ethnic terms; occasional anti-elitism against political opponents	None
Besa Movement	Center-right, Ethnic Albanian party	Limited: government participation post-2017 in various coalitions; local-level presence	Limited to valence populism	None
ZNAM For our Macedonia	Center-left Social-democratic people's party, ideologically ambiguous, ethnic Macedonian	Limited: central government member since 2024; local-level presence	Pronounced people-centrism framed in ethnic terms; lacks strong anti-elitist or Manichean elements	None

more extreme tone of its rhetoric, with its leader and MP, Dimitar Apasiev, known for an outspoken, unapologetic and often controversial style (Bosilkov, 2021).

Levica's populism is marked by a strong anti-imperialist and anti-establishment stance directed at the long-term ruling parties, the business elite, the professional NGO sector, and international actors such as NATO and the EU (ibid., pp. 49–52). The party targets mainstream actors across both the ethnic Macedonian and Albanian blocs, portraying them as part of a corrupt political and economic elite. It also opposes Albanian nationalism while accusing Macedonian parties of "selling out" national identity. In parallel, Levica promotes a strong people-centric narrative on both socio-economic and nativist issues as well as a notable Manichean discourse, with party officials portraying a broad array of actors as the "establishment" that "must be removed" for the people to reclaim control over their future. Levica thus draws on populist themes that resonate across ideological extremes, appealing to both far-right and far-left segments of the electorate. It can

therefore be classified as a left-wing populist party, while also incorporating elements typically associated with the populist radical right.

3. Positions on 'Europe' and the populism-Euroscepticism nexus

Apart from Levica, all major parties in North Macedonia maintain a long-standing declarative pro-European stance. Nevertheless, even with its official pro-EU stance, VMRO-DPMNE can be seen as exhibiting a form of *soft and equivocal Euroscepticism*, lacking a consistently articulated stance (Gjoneska et al., 2020), while Levica represents a case of *hard Euroscepticism.* In the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) on EU candidate countries (Bakker et al., 2019), VMRO-DPMNE and Levica received scores of 5.2 and 4.3, respectively, on the overall orientation of party leadership towards EU integration (where 1 indicates "strongly opposed" and 7 "strongly in favor"). All other parties received scores of at least 6.5. Both parties, VMRO-DMNE and Levica were also rated as assigning lower relative salience to EU integration—5.7 for VMRO-DPMNE and 4.0 for Levica—compared to the lowest score of 7.7 among the remaining parties (on a 0–10 scale, where 0 indicates "European integration is of no importance" and 10 "European integration is of great importance").

Thus, Levica stands out as the primary Eurosceptic force in the country (Bakker et al., 2019), openly opposing the fulfillment of economic and political requirements for EU membership. In the 2019 CHES survey, this political party received scores of only 2.3 (economic requirements) and 3.0 (political requirements) on 1–7 scales measuring parties' support for fulfilling the EU accession criteria (where 1 indicates "strongly opposed to fulfilling" and 7 "strongly in favor of fulfilling"). In particular, the party questions EU membership if it is conditioned on national identity concessions, and calls for alignment with alternative political and economic blocs, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (see the pre-election programs of Levica, 2020, 2024). Levica often frames EU integration as an extension of Western imperialist ambitions, portrayed as harmful to socio-economic conditions, local culture, and national sovereignty.[2] The EU is further accused of supporting "foreign" elements—e.g., the Albanians, Greece, and Bulgaria—that allegedly threaten the Macedonian state. The party advocates closer ties with Russia, supports Russia's war in Ukraine, and routinely portrays NGOs and independent media as "mercenaries" of the "West".

VMRO-DPMNE, on the other hand, exhibits a more covert form of Euroscepticism. The party's overall stance has been characterized by experts as "somewhat in favor" of EU membership, with relatively little internal dissent on the question of European integration (Bakker et al., 2019). While VMRO-DPMNE does not oppose the EU in principle, it frequently expresses skepticism about the Union's practices, integrity, and long-term prospects. This position is often rooted in criticism of the EU's role in issues related to Macedonian national identity.[3] Although the party primarily advances soft Euroscepticism, its intensity fluctuates depending on the political context. It reached a peak during former Prime Minister Gruevski's response to the wiretapping scandal, when the EU—and the West more broadly—were depicted as negative external influences (Blanuša et al., 2021; Gjoneska et al., 2020; Gjuzelov & Ivanovska Hadjievska, 2019). Similar rhetoric reappeared during moments when ethnic Macedonians were perceived to be making concessions in interethnic relations or in negotiations with neighboring states (Brunnbauer, 2002).[4] Eurosceptic discourse thus tends to gain prominence among VMRO-DPMNE officials during such polarized episodes and remains a persistent feature of the party's political communication.

In sum, Euroscepticism in political discourse in North Macedonia is largely tied to a nativist populist appeal, emphasizing the concessions that EU integration is perceived to demand from ethnic Macedonians. This discourse is most clearly articulated by the long-standing mainstream party VMRO-DPMNE, as well as by the smaller political party Levica, which also advances Euroscepticism from a left-wing populist perspective. Eurosceptic arguments are typically embedded within broader populist narratives: people-centrism (with "the people" understood as ethnic Macedonians, particularly in relation to interethnic dominance and identity expression); anti-elitism (portraying the EU as an external agent aligned with forces that undermine the Macedonian state and identity); and a Manichean worldview in which ethnic Macedonians must "reclaim" their rightful status by confronting a hostile elite. As discussed in Section 2, these parties differ significantly in their populist profiles—exhibiting all or only some of these elements to varying degrees—and accordingly mobilize Euroscepticism in varying ways.

[2]See interview with party leader Apasiev in Ognjanov/VoA, 2022: https://mk.voanews.com/a/6650965.html (available in Macedonian).
[3]See the statement of party leader Mickovski in DW, 2025: https://shorturl.at/0o3xV; https://www.dw.com/mk/mickoski-nema-po-sekoja-cena-da-staneme-clenka-na-eu/a-73320972 (available in Macedonian).
[4]See, for instance, a statement by party leader Mickovski in Kanal 5, 2023: https://kanal5.com.mk/mickoski-vo-red-se-ubavite-zborovi-od-eu-no-eve-neka-go-trgnat-sporot-so-bugarija/a588893 (available in Macedonian).

4. Responses to Euroscepticism and consequences

Levica's outright rejection of the EU is opposed by all major parties.[5] On the other hand, VMRO-DPMNE—despite being declaratively "pro-European"—is occasionally accused by its competitors of lacking sincerity in its commitment to EU integration.[6] All parties engage in mutual blame over North Macedonia's prolonged and delayed EU accession process, contributing to an adversarial dynamic within the party system on this issue. For instance, SDSM has sought to differentiate itself by highlighting its role in advancing EU integration, particularly in comparison to VMRO-DPMNE's slower or more ambivalent progress.[7] In striking agreements with Greece and managing relations with Bulgaria, SDSM has also attempted to ease nativist sentiments by framing EU accession as a high-stakes trade-off that justifies concessions.

Overall, hard Euroscepticism in North Macedonia is broadly dismissed, yet Eurosceptic attitudes have gained traction, particularly when rooted in nativist sentiments and linked to perceptions of the EU's role in matters central to Macedonian identity, culture, and political sovereignty. Opposition to hard Euroscepticism comes not only from all mainstream political parties but also from segments of civil society and the media. Nevertheless, despite the marginalization of outright Euroscepticism, Eurosceptic narratives remain present in political discourse. Notably, the country's most pronounced Eurosceptic actor—Levica—is currently represented in parliament and has become the largest explicitly Eurosceptic party in North Macedonia's parliamentary history. Meanwhile the major political force and current ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, routinely engages in soft Eurosceptic rhetoric in response to specific developments. The two main Eurosceptic actors do not coordinate or align on this front, and their variants of Euroscepticism differ significantly in both form and ideological grounding.

5. Conclusion

This report has examined the relationship between Euroscepticism and populism in North Macedonia, focusing on the political supply side. It analyzed the positions of two major political parties that display elements of Euroscepticism—VMRO-DPMNE and Levica—and explored how their Eurosceptic narratives intersect with their populist appeals. Given that ethnic-based politics remain a defining feature of North Macedonia's political landscape—both in domestic and external affairs, where the EU often plays a moderating role in contrast to domestic "hardliners"—our analysis suggests that both parties rely heavily on nativist sentiments, positioning themselves as protectors of ethnic Macedonian identity. The smaller of the two, Levica, additionally combines these narratives with left-wing Eurosceptic arguments. None of the remaining parties in the system exhibit explicit Euroscepticism, although all, to varying degrees, employ populist rhetoric—a broader overview of which is provided in the Table 1.

Taken overall, North Macedonia is not a context in which Eurosceptic appeals are highly prevalent, yet such rhetoric has gained traction, particularly in connection with concessions perceived by ethnic Macedonians along the country's EU accession path. The intersection of populism and Euroscepticism thus centers on the discourse of defending ethnic Macedonian interests, resonating most strongly with parties on the right of the political spectrum. Should North Macedonia's accession process face further delays, there is reason to anticipate a potential intensification of Eurosceptic sentiment, likely framed through ethnocentric and populist appeals.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required for this study, as it is based entirely on publicly available secondary sources and does not involve primary data collection or human subjects research.

Data availability

No primary data are associated with this article. This country report draws on publicly available secondary sources, all of which are cited in the text and listed in the references.

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[5]See, the public announcement from SDSM, 2022: https://sdsm.org.mk/soopstenija/47400 (available in Macedonian) and the statement of DUI's leader Ahmeti in TV21, 2022: https://mk.tv21.tv/ahmeti-osven-levitsa-ne-postoi-politichka-partija-koja-e-protiv-nato-i-eu/ (available in Macedonian).
[6]See, for instance, MIA, 2023: https://mia.mk/story/сдсм-вмродпмне-е-против-еу-мицкоски-е-како-груевски (available in Macedonian).
[7]SDSM, 2023: https://sdsm.org.mk/soopstenija/70556 (available in MK language).

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Mitko Arnaudov
Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, Serbia

The analysis raises an extremely important topic which is not exclusively linked to the EU perception by the Macedonian population, but also with the sustainability of the state. In fact, the paper raises the question does the Macedonian state sustainability is endangered in the mixed "portion" of political populism and social EU scepticism? Thus, the authors should give an empirical example about the native populism that VMRO-DPMNE and Levica are "producing" and pushing as a public discourse and to assess how previously mentioned populism endangers the sustainability of the state from the perspective of long-term missed European integration. In fact, authors should raise up the question, does the issue of political populism is just a rethorical mechanism within the political environment in Macedonian state or it could have additional and substantial consequences, not only from the perspective of surveys related to pro-European or against EU attitudes, but on the side of sustainability of the state. We have to point out that the EU integration is firmly a process connected with the sustainability of Macedonian state. In that context, we could not analyze the issues of populism and the raise of Eurosceptism just from narrative perspective, especially in the case study state with serious domestic challenges, risks and threats and weak and politized institutional framework.
For beginning, authors should give, on the empirical examples, assessment, how the type 1 (VMRO-DPMNE) populism and type 2 (LEVICA) populism are explicitly endangering the EU accession of the state from the national interest's perspective. Because EU membership as a key foreign policy goal is closely related to the national interests of the state which sustainability depend on the accomplishing of foreign policy goals. Finally, the paper should isolate the domestic variables, in this case the issue of political populism, on the EU integration path and to predict, if it is possible, does and how mentioned variable substantially influence on the EU path dynamic or it is just a "maneuverable" political instrument in the chapter where EU enlargement policy is not on the top of priorities of Brussels, while the projected domestic EU scepticism serves to political points.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Partly

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Partly

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Based on my MA and PhD thesis, I am firmly dealing with the foreign policy positioning of small and weak states, mostly on the case study of North Macedonia and Western Balkans states. Thus, examining the positions of neoclassical realists, I am supporter of the thesis that domestic variables are extremelly important in the process of foreign policy positioning. On that basis, I am pretty sure that political populism, as a domestic variable, plays an important role on the foreign policy goal reachement of Macedonian states.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 22 July 2026

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Reinout van der Veer
Radboud University Nijmegen, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

This country report examines the state of populism and Euroscepticism, and especially the linkage between the two phenomena, in North Macedonian politics. Its a well-written and well-organized, largely descriptive report that provides valuable insight into the occurrence of populism and Euroscepticism in a country that is rarely featured in the broader literature on these phenomena.

As this report is part of a larger research project in which country reports need to be both in line with a broader theoretical approach and comparable to one another, it's key parameters,

including its goal and how it conceives of key concepts, are presumably fixed. As such, I will take these largely as a given and focus this review on the room for improvement within these confines. I must note that I am also not very knowledgeable on North Macedonian society and politics, and as such cannot fully assess the quality of the report on those grounds.

In general, the work appears 1) appropriately situated in the vast literatures on populism and Euroscepticsm, 2) based on a sound analysis of (primarily) two political parties qualified as populist and Eurosceptic (to varying degree) and 3) to base its conclusions in the analysis presented. It provides a relatively helpful primer on populism and Euroscepticism in contemporary North Macedonian politics for readers without prior knowledge on these issues.

There are, however, a number of points for improvement. I list them below.

The first one is that I believe the authors could help readers understand the North Macedonian context better, especially by providing a bit more specificity on how populism and Euroscepticism are used by the two parties. I offer four examples.

First, the authors discuss the importance of ethnic divisions in the country, and as far as I understand North Macedonia has, to a significant degree, a consociationalist political system. And while the authors frequently discuss the role that nativism (and relatedly, people-centrism) play in the politics of the two parties analysed, we get limited insight into who, precisely, these parties *conceive* to be part of the North Macedonian nation. The text does explain that both VMRO-DPMNE and Levica are predominantly ethnic Macedonian parties, but leaves open whether the nativism of both parties is therefore identical, conceives of the nation in exclusively ethnic-Macedonian terms or whether differences between the parties exist on this front. Given the importance of ethnicity to North Macedonian politics, providing this detail would be a helpful inclusion for the reader.

Second, the report refers to valence populism when VMRO-DPMNE stresses its competence on several valence issues. It would be helpful to know how exactly this is related to populism – is any mention of a valence issue by a political party “valence populism” in the eyes of the authors? The appeal to competence and effectiveness reads more as a techno-populist strategy to me (see e.g. Bickerton & Accetti 2021).

Third, the authors appeal to anti-elitism where the parties politicize ‘interference’ by foreign actors, including the EU (see e.g. conclusion on p. 6). To me, it is not fully clear why the contestation of foreign influence is anti-elitism: is this based on a narrative of out-of-touch, antidemocratic Eurocrats seeking to control North Macedonian society? Or is the foreign-ness of the EU the main problem here, in which case I would perhaps label this anti-imperialist more so than anti-elitist?

Finally, the report would benefit from a bit more clarity on when Euroscepticism targets the *polity* (unwillingness to join the EU political community) and where it targets EU policy (e.g. frustration with the accession process/criteria). While these issues may appear relatively minor, more clarity on the use of terminology throughout would greatly help sharpen both the analysis of populism and Euroscepticism in the report.

In addition, while the report is primarily descriptive, it does offer some (implicit) analysis of the causes of the frustration with the EU. Especially in the introduction, it talks about the issues with

the accession process, and the Greek and Bulgarian opposition in this regard. Yet another potential actor is strikingly missing from the story: Russia. Russia is well-known for backing, funding and promoting populist and Eurosceptic parties across Europe, and on both ends of the political spectrum. In addition, Russia frequently interferes in Western elections, and there is tentative evidence of such influence campaigns in relation to North Macedonia as well. Hence, it seems to me that, if the report is going to speculate about the causes of support for these parties in the North Macedonian context, a more extensive discussion, or at least acknowledgement of the role of Russia here is warranted. This is especially the case because one of the two parties, Levica, is reported by the authors to favour closer ties with Russia, and to support Russia's war against Ukraine.

Another reason why the role of Russia should be given more attention is because the report discusses Euroscepticism in a non-EU country. Hence, political attitudes towards the EU presumably have a different connotation in this context, as compared to in a country like Germany or France. I expect questions of strategic alignment (incl. accession) to bear much more heavily on the positioning of parties than they do in EU member states, where other membership-related issues (e.g. the economy, migration, the EU's alleged democratic deficit) also come into play. To what extent is the debate over Europe in North Macedonia an "EU or Russia" question, as it is in countries like Ukraine or Moldova, and to a lesser extent Romania or Bulgaria? If similar dynamics are present in North Macedonia, this especially warrants more attention to the role Russia plays in funding/supporting/amplifying populism and Euroscepticsm in North Macedonia.

There are also two more minor points. First, it would be beneficial to gain a little bit more clarity on methodology – what were the inclusion criteria for the broad selection of data sources? This is especially relevant for claims that are not based in either obvious (e.g. party programs of the assessed parties) or well-established, prominent academic datasets (e.g. the CHES data), such as the 'public statements' the report refers to.

Finally, at several points, the authors note that the two parties assessed do not "coordinate" their Eurosceptic and populist stances. This implicitly suggests that, to the authors, this is either a relevant or surprising finding, but the reader gets no further information. Is it really surprising that two parties, who are on a number of issues on opposite ends of the political spectrum, do not coordinate their positions? And why is a finding that they do (not) coordinate their positions relevant? I can imagine that it is for the analysis of Euroscepticism in North Macedonia as either an incidental or orchestrated phenomenon, but it would be good to be explicit about this either way.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Partly

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: EU politics, populism, Euroscepticisim

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.