Preliminary Research Report
Restoring EU's Credibility and the European Consensus in the Civil Society in N. Macedonia

Authored by the Research Team of ISSHS

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Skopje, February 2023

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The breaking point of diminished trust in the European Idea

Among the civil society in North Macedonia, in particular the think tank and expert organizations, there has been a long-standing consensus, one that lasted for decades, stating that there is no alternative to the country's EU integration. I may be using the term civil society in the discussion as per its wider definition and as per the one used by the European Commission (DG NEAR, more specifically), which also includes scientific research institutes and academia, trade unions, professional associations and other forms of organization.[1] However, in the field research itself, we targeted mainly NGO's that are legally defined either as citizens' associations or foundations, even though in terms of their programmatic content, i.e., their products, and mission they could be classified as think tanks or expert NGO's, in present use, the latter term refers to organizations that are equally engaged in analysis, advocacy and negotiations with authorities as well as with their constituencies. There has been a long-standing consensus on the EU integration having no alternative that we can empirically demonstrate through a longitudinal discourse analysis, but that would entail an entirely different research. For the sake of this analysis, let us consider this premise corroborated by the data from the survey and the focus groups that indicates a relatively abrupt collapse (considering the responses, this is not an exaggeration) of said consensus, which seems to be linked primarily with specific recent events in N. Macedonia's international politics. Inter-party and

[1] DG NEAR *Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region 2021-2027*, Produced by DG NEAR with the support of EU TACSO 3 (Skopje: June 2022), p. 6. Citation: Civil society is highly heterogeneous and encompasses a wide range of actors and aims. The EU considers civil society organisations to embrace a wide range of actors with multiple roles and mandates which includes all non-State, not-for-profit, independent and non-violent structures, through which people organise to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, religious, environmental, social or economic or related to health [...] They include, but are not limited to: Non-governmental organisations, organisations representing indigenous peoples, women's and youth organisations, diaspora organisations, migrants' organisations, local traders' associations and citizens' groups, cooperatives, employers' associations and trade unions (social partners), organisations representing economic and social interests, organisations fighting corruption and fraud and promoting good governance, civil rights organisations and organisations combating discrimination, local organisations (including networks) involved in decentralised regional cooperation and integration, consumer organisations, environmental, teaching, cultural, research and scientific organisations, universities, churches and religious associations and communities, philosophical and non-confessional organisations, the not-for-profit media and any non-governmental associations and independent foundations, including independent political foundations. The EU values CSOs' diversity and specificities and engages with transparent, accountable and capable CSOs, which share a commitment to social progress and the fundamental values of peace, freedom, equal rights and human dignity.

party-related social polarization has been a long-standing problem in the country since 2016, a process we have monitored and studied for almost a decade, documented in numerous publications and debate recordings.[2]

- In spite of the endorsement of the Prespa agreement, a certain point of breaking of the consensus and a polarizing sentiment toward the EU has been planted. This is not the breaking point itself, but the penultimate step leading to it.
- The Treaty with Bulgaria conditionality embedded in the Negotiating framework between the EU and N. Macedonia is probably the breaking point.
- Incremental dissatisfaction with the endlessly prolonged accession process linked with sensitive, identity-related issues.

The formulation of the points is derived from the perception of the CSO assessed through this research (survey and focus groups). The wording of the EU is clear in the already cited documents: "good neighborly relations" is a criterion related to the country's stability (as a prerequisite of association and accession) as well as to some of the fundamental rights and liberties (including respect for minorities). Thus, even though painful, due to the fact that both treaties and their implementation concern a sense of identity, it is a process that must be successfully completed in order to ensure regional and thus European stability. The fact that the two sides of this line of polarization speak different languages on the same issues is perhaps an indication as to what is missing – a common

[2] Katerina Kolozova et al., "Polarization as Means of Populist Governance and How to Overcome It: Analysis based on the Macedonian case of socio-political efforts to overcome 'state-capture' as chief means of governance" (Skopje: Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2020); The web campaign "De-polarize" is part of the project "Toward depolarization of public discourse in North Macedonia: Dialogue between the opposing political poles is the pre-requisite of surpassing the populist model of governance," supported by the National Endowment for Democracy. The digital platform contains a number of studies on the topic. The policy brochure "The basic steps of polarization and populism" (available only in Macedonian and Albanian), is available at: https://www.is-shs.edu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ Основните-чекори-на-поларизација-и-популизам-1.pdf; Policy brief "The State of Democracy in North Macedonia in the times of the Covid-19 Pandemic" available at: https://www.isshs.edu.mk/the-state-of-democracy-in-north-macedonia-in-the-times-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/; Ана Блажева, Мариглен Демири и Катерина Колозова, Модел за деполаризација – Политичкиот дијалог и граѓанското учество во надминување на општествената поларизација (ИОХН: Скопје, 2020) [Ana Blazeva, Mariglen Demiri and Katerina Kolozova, Depolarization Model - Political Dialogue and Civic Participation in Overcoming Social Polarization (ISSHS: SKopje, 2020)], to name a few.

ground enabling both parties to understand one another and overcome the situation of polarization they find themselves in. A public dialogue between both sides, structured as per the methodology of truth and reconciliation (yet not miming fully the Mandela/Derrida model, but rather adjusted to what is possible in international relations and diplomacy), could significantly contribute to reconciliation. In parallel, the misinformation around the so-called "French proposal" must be combated as it contributes to the overall misunderstanding, polarization and the problem of "speaking different languages" that we are addressing here.[3]

[3] Zarko Trajanoski and Petrit Sarachini (eds.), "The French Proposal: Hate Speech, Desinformation, Media Manupulations," (Skopje: IMA Institute, 2022) [Жарко Трајаноски и Петрит Сарачини (уредници), Францускиот предлог- Говор на омраза, дезинформации, медиумски манипулации (Скопје: ИМА Институт, 2022)]

Some background of the more recent political history of the country

The experience of the so-called anti-authoritarian movement that soared in 2014, and culminated in the summer of 2015, amounted to the so-called Przino June/July Agreement (followed by an aftermath dubbed "the colorful revolution"). The efforts to democratize a "captured state" or a hybrid regime, such as N. Macedonia in the era of Nikola Gruevski led government officially ending in the beginning of 2017, were shared by, as well as entailed collaboration between, the civil society and the European Union, DG NEAR (Directorate General of Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations) more specifically. In other words, both sides seemed to understand the democratization agenda as summed up in The Urgent Reform Priorities set up by the EU in 2015, reflected in the policy priorities set by the so-called Blueprint group, which was composed of the most prominent civil society organizations in the country, primarily think tanks, which were also part of the protest movement of the previous two years. In other words, the Blueprint group acted as if democratization priorities coincided with the EU integration agenda. Most of the CSOs supported the Agreement with Greece by endorsing the Government's referendum campaign under the motto "Together for European Macedonia."[4] In spite of the consensual support, the Agreement with Greece has been a bitter pill to swallow for the civil society (CS) in what was then Macedonia, as our in-house field research carried out in 2018 and 2019 shows, reflected in the country's Context Watch for the two years that ISSHS produced it, and that was commissioned and owned by the Swiss Embassy in Skopje. Furthermore, this very research whose results are presented and discussed below seems to confirm this fact. The Treaty with Bulgaria seems to be the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back, but the CS which endorsed the Prespa Agreement (the changing of the name of the country, bilaterally agreed upon between the then Republic of Macedonia and Greece) seems to have been traumatized nonetheless – or, put differently, to have perceived it as too much of a sacrifice – by having to support the Agreement in the name of the country's EU future. The responses to our survey as well as the focus group input, discussed here (see below), seem to corroborate this conjecture. Certainly, our desktop research offers similar

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[4] Admir Fazlagikj, "Macedonia Facing a Historic Referendum on September 30th," [Македонија во пресрет на историскиот референдум на 30 септември], Anatolia Agency (25 September 2018), available at https://tinyurl.com/2p8bsece, acceseed on 10 January 2023,

proof, as well as proof that the "Prespa Agreement" remained a polarizing issue for the overall society years after its adoption.[5]

Last summer, however, think tanks and other forms of CSO's, both NGO's and academia, that would traditionally support the processes of EU integration, adopted the stance that the country should reject the EU's invitation from June 2022 to open negotiations of accession.[6] The phrasing most of the CS experts used referred to the "French Proposal" of overcoming the Bulgarian veto, even though such a proposal is a myth. The real referent behind this misleading designation is the "EU's General Position" on opening negotiations with North Macedonia and the accompanying negotiating framework.[7] This indirect solution of the problem of the veto comes down to merely surpassing it by granting the Treaty of Bulgaria the same status as the Agreement with Greece: both treaties are to be respected as part of the good neighborly relations criterion, and disputes of cultural identity (history, languages, etc.) are to be resolved through bilateral commissions, just like in the case with Greece. The analogous treatment of the two treaties is evident, but, this conditionality, the latest addition to the specific requests posed to North Macedonia having to deal with complex and sensitive issues of identity, seem to have become the breaking point. Around June/July 2022, one could witness once notable proponents of the EU integration process advocating, in the public debate, "alternatives to the EU," more often than not without pointing to what those alternatives could be. This sudden turn is due to the perception that the country has given up on its national identity,[8] or on the ethnic identity of the majority, due to the condi-

[5] National Survey on the Public Opinion about North Macedonia and Greece: The Prospects of the Prespa Agreement [Истражување на јавното мислење во Северна Македонија и Грција: Изгледите на Договорот од Преспа] (Skopje: IDSCS 2021), available at https://tinyurl.com/46j5v4hp, accessed on 10 January 2023.
[6] Невладините организации бараат целосна транспарентност за преговорите со Бугарија [CSO Demand Full Transparency in the Negotiations with Bulgaria] (4 July, 2022), available at https://telma.com.mk/2022/07/04/nevladinite-organizacii-baraat-celosna-transparentnost-za-pregovorite-so-bugarija/.
[7] Katerina Kolozova and Elise Bernanrd, "Pourquoi la France est désignée comme responsable dans les désaccords entre la Bulgarie et Macédoine du Nord," *Le Journal du Dimanche* (23 June 2022), https://www.lejdd.fr/International/pourquoi-la-france-est-designee-comme-responsable-dans-les-desaccords-entre-la-bulgarie-et-macedoine-du-nord-4120793, accessed on 10 January 2023.
[8] Невладиниот сектор поделен околу францускиот предлог јули 11, 2022 [CS Sector Divided Regarding the French Proposal] https://novatv.mk/nevladiniot-sektor-podelen-okolu-frant-

tionality of good neighborly relations with Bulgaria. The phrase "no to joining the EU at any cost" became a phrase used by parts of the progressive, once unshakably pro-EU, society and not only by the nationalist parties that led the protests in June and July 2022.[9] In spite of the uproar, in July 2022, N. Macedonia did hold its first IGC (intergovernmental conference) with the EU and thus the negotiating process formally commenced. Its continuation, however, depends on the condition of the country's recognition of the Bulgarian minority as an important first step in N. Macedonia's efforts to abide to the criterion of good neighborly relations, linked with the Copenhagen criteria. This study seeks to understand and measure the degree of the purported change of heart among the CS with regard to the EU prospects of the country, as well as to measure and understand other points of polarization in the country and their relation to the question of EU integration.

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[9] Над 800 интелектуалци го потпишаа „Манифестот на македонските учители"- НЕ за понижувачкиот француски предлог [Over 800 Intellectuals Signed the "Manifesto of the Macedonian Teachers - NO to the Humiliating French Proposal], available at https://tinyurl.com/43rc-3cc5
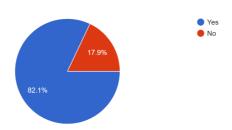
Survey Results and What They Mean

SAMPLING OF THE TARGETED SURVEY

Representatives of the most influential parts of the civil society, identified through the degree of their presence in the media and their influence in the public measured through media citations, and not merely presence, answered to our Survey (conducted November-December 2022) based on a targeted sample: 30 respondents from sampled organizations, based on the cirterion just explained and identified through the method explained in the research design of this study. A total of 39 respondents took the survey, whereas the sample targetted representative organizations such as the: Metmorphosis Foundation, IDSCS, EPI, Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCIC), Center for Economic Analysis (CEA), Youth Alliance Krusevo, and many more. Most of the members of the aforementioned Blueprint group partici-pated in the survey. The fact that they were targetted does not mean that all or even most of them are represented as the survey was entirely anonymous. Here are respondents' responses: polarization across a number of political and socio-economic and cultural areas is admitted, means of de-polarization are suggested but the sector's polarized relationship with regard to the EU is dis-played as well. Strained relations between the CSOs and the EU institutions as well as the very idea and values of the EU Project seem to emerge as a very clear analytical finding of this survey. Even though the respondents state hope – rather than feasible proposals – that the credibility of the EU integration pro-cess could be restored, the conclusions are rather discouraging. They seem to be premised on the hope that the EU can relinquish the identity related con-ditions embedded in the good neighbourly relations criterion (paragraph 5 of the Negotiating Framework, and onward), which has been elevated to the level of the Principles governing negotiations (Principle 4 in the Framework).[10] On a brighter note, the respondents identified socio-economic issues that could unite the politically polarized sides in the country as the shared concern, and related basic values could be recognized as a common interest and grounds for collaborations across aisles. Thus, some concerns could in fact help overcome the issue of polarization along party lines by becoming the common ground for collaboration in policy making.

[10] The Negotiating Framework that has been complemented by a revised draft of the General https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/draft_general_eu_position.pdf or Common EU position https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/draft_eu_common_position_for_the_1st_igc.pdf

1) The response of the point of departure quesition of the survey is pretty straightforward

Is EU's credibility in N. Macedonia diminished?

Keeping in mind that this is a response coming from established CSO's it raises grave concern. The EU, its enlargement process and the country's commitment to it are considered by the leading CSO's as institutions and values of diminished credibility. The high percentage of those who share this view is a worrying signal that the credibility at issue is dramatically damaged.

2) If "yes," can it be restored, and how can it be restored?

A third of the responses seem to come down to the expectation that the EU should reform itself before expecting North Macedonia to reform itself, it needs to democratize itself before assessing N. Macedonia's progress in democratization as per the EU standards. The reverse image, in which N. Macedonia's once pro-EU avantgarde is demanding from the EU to democratize itself, speaks of a rather distorted, upside-down discourse among the CS actors and also a symptom of a similar upside-down relationships between the EU and the CS sector. One ought to ask the question: do the experts from the CSOs seriously believe in the EU's democratic deficiency when compared to N. Macedonia, or is this position a symptom of a polarization resulting from a deeply nested frustration with the accession process? Let us illustrate this conclusion with some examples from the list of responses to the open question in the survey: "For a start, by abiding to its own values and principles, instead

of raw interests, especially not by succumbing to particular interests of individual member states," or, "Yes, it can be restored by respecting the values that they are promoting," "By abiding to their own principles," or, "It can be partially restored by starting immediate accession negotiations. With sincere commitment." Some say: "It cannot be restored."

Other responses seem to be premised on the belief that the EU "can fix the country" by an almost direct intervention. Consider the following statements: "To lower corruption and improve the political system, have less administration employees," or, "Apparently, the EU should take a much firmer stance on a number of issues - democratic reforms, the fight against corruption, regarding the outstanding issues presented by Bulgaria, etc." Then similarly: "It can be restored by reforms of the justice and educational system."
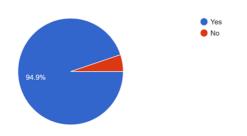
A handful of responses state that the EU can restore its credibility by a better presentation of its values and making the accession process of the country more easily understandable to the public, as well as by offering a more convincing presentation, one understandable to the ordinary citizens, of the advantages of EU membership.

Only 8 respondents argue that there is not much damage to be fixed and that they doubt that EU's credibility is truly diminished among the general public, and that this skepticism might be growing only among the elites that can afford such cynicism (our paraphrase in summing up the 8 responses). The latter might be a correct conjecture as it seems to be corroborated by the latest IRI national survey.[11]
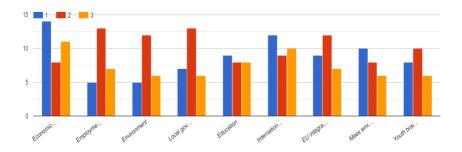
3) As to the question if there is political and social polarization in the country, not merely on the issue of EU accession but overall, the response is virtually unanimous – 94.9% respond affirmatively.

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[11] National Poll Of North Macedonia | September – October 2022 (December 2022), available at https://www.iri.org/resources/national-poll-of-north-macedonia-september-october-2022/, accessed on 10 January 2023.

Would you agree there is political and social polarization in the country?

What are the main causes of such polarization? (Choose 3 in order of priority, from 1 to 3, 1 being the highest)

As we can see below, the issue of polarization across all socio-political lines in the country is not reducible to the issue of EU accession and the specific, identity related, conditionalities put forward for N. Macedonia. As discussed above, such polarization does exist, and the respondents have pointed, in the open questions, to its sources. However, there are competing issues of polarization and three of them can be singled out as the deepest sources of such a state of affairs: economy, international relations (EU integration and the Bulgaria and Greece related conditionality) and mass emigration in conjunction with brain-drain, as they are inherently related, and the focus group proves that they are indeed perceived as such by the respondents.

Economic crisis:

14 respondents say reason number 1 for polarization

8 respondents say its reason number 2

11 respondents say it's reason number 3

International Relations (regional relations with Bulgaria and Greece):

12 – Reason 1

9 – Reason 2

10 – Reason 3

Mass Emigration:

10 – Reason 1

8 – Reason 2

6 – Reason 3

Brain-drain:

8 – Reason 1

10 – Reason 2

6 – Reason 3

It is interesting to note that the fourth top reason, esp. if combined with the scores for brain-drain that are equally relevant for it as for the issue of emigration, is education. The total of three levels of prioritization is more or less the same as the other issues below the top three, but the score of priority number 1 is highest (9), whereas the score for second and third priority are close to number 1. A qualitative glance enables us to see that education is a major priority outscoring unemployment, cumulatively equal but qualitatively raised to a higher priority.
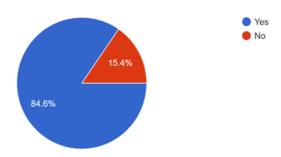
Employment:

5 state it as reason number 1

13 state it as reason number 2

7 state it as reason number 3

Environment

5 –reason 1

12 – Reason 2

6 – Reason 3

Local Government

7 – Reason number 1

13 – Reason number 2

6 – Reason number 3

Education

9 – Reason 1

8 – Reason 2

8 – Reason 3

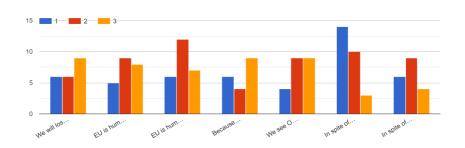***EU Integration***

9 – Reason 1

12 – Reason 2

7 – Reason 3

Is the issue of country's EU integration polarizing?

A vast majority of the respondents state that the country's EU integration is a polarizing issue, a total of 84.6%. In contradistinction to the stated criticisms toward the EU for the strained relation and the admitted polarization discussed above, the vast majority of the respondents see the resistance to the EU accession rooted: a) in the country's economic elites seeking to preserve their status by way of avoiding EU levels of rule of law, b) covert pro-Russian sentiment among the elites.

See the breakdown of the answers below, reflecting the data provided in the image:

If "yes," why is it so? (Choose 3 in order of priority, from 1 to 3, 1 being the highest)

We will lose our national identity

6 – Reason 1

6 – Reason 2

9 – Reason 3

EU is humiliating us with conditions concerning the Treaty with Bulgaria

5 – Reason 1

9 – Reason 2

8 – Reason 3

EU is humiliating us with conditions concerning the Treaty with Bulgaria and the Agreement with Greece

6 – Reason 1

12 – Reason 2

7 – Reason 3

Because we have to recognize the Bulgarian Minority in Constitution's Preamble

6 – Reason 1

4 – Reason 2

9 – Reason 3

We see Open Balkans as viable yet overlooked alternative to the EU

4 – Reason 1

9 - Reason 2

9 – Reason 3

In spite of the proclaimed pro-Europeanism parts of the elites would rather stay outside the Union for their own corruptive benefit

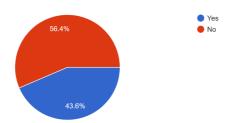14 – Reason 1

10 – Reason 2

3 – Reason 3

In spite of the proclaimed pro-Europeanism parts of the elites would rather stay outside the Union for their covert pro-Russian sentiment

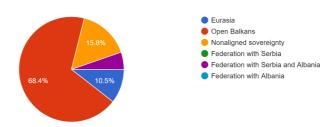6 – Reason 1

9 – Reason 2

4 – Reason 3

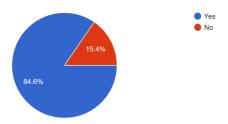Is there an alternative to the EU integration?

Only 56.4% of the respondents state there is no alternative to the EU, whereas almost 44% argue there is one. See below their alternatives of choice: 68.4% see the Open Balkans Initiative as an alternative to the EU membership of the country. It is very peculiar that Open Balkans is seen as a viable geopolitical option. Equally interestingly, 15.8% believe that non-alignment is an option in the contemporary global geo-politics. Almost a third of the 39 leading and presumably pro-EU NGO's believe that Eurasia is an alternative to the EU.
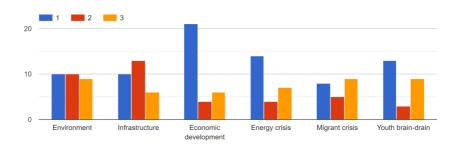
If "Yes", what is it?

- ● Eurasia
- ● Open Balkans
- ● Nonaligned sovereignty
- ● Federation with Serbia
- ● Federation with Serbia and Albania
- ● Federation with Albania

Can working together on common challenges across different party and national lines help overcome the issue of polarization?

- ● Yes
- ● No

As far as the overall societal polarization mainly caused by inter-party relations, the majority of the civil society believes that it can be overcome by enabling a climate of collaboration across party aisles on issues such as economic development, environment, energy crisis and other issues (see below):

If "yes," what are those challenges? (Choose 3 in order of priority, from 1 to 3, 1 being the highest)

Environnent

10 – R1

10 – R2

9 – R3

Infrastructure

10 – R1

13– R2

6– R3

Economic development

21 – R1

4 – R2

6 – R3

Energy Crisis

14 – R1

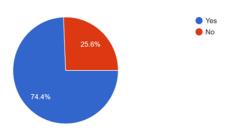4 – R2

7 – R3

Migrant Crisis

8 – R1

5 – R2

9 – R3

Brain Drain

13 – R1

3 – R2

9 -R3

Are there ways for the EU to take proactive role in restoring its credibility in the country and what are they?

Here, again, in line with the above responses we read in the responses to the open question as to how the EU might improve its credibility: taking the Macedonian side in the Bulgaria-Macedonia dispute, to "respect its own principles" (leading to taking the Macedonian side in the dispute with Bulgaria, or just simply eliminate the good neighborly relations conditionality in the negotiations) and thus provide a "level playing field for all" (thus implying that other countries haven't faced similar issues and conditionalities

in their accession process). Consider the following quotes: "I can only guess that the citizens would expect for the EU to take a firmer stance to support the Macedonian side of the story in the ongoing dispute with Bulgaria." Or: "Mentioned above… by abiding to its proclaimed values (Article 2 of the EU Treaty) and principles, rather than allowing individual member states to use their veto power to blackmail other countries (especially candidates for EU membership), i.e. to provide a "level playing field" for all. This is the same now for the Netherlands - Bulgaria dispute on Schengen regime… it is so fascinating how now Bulgaria feels offended and discriminated (which is probably true) not realizing they did exactly the same to Macedonia with their veto on EU accession." There is only one response mentioning that the EU must combat more actively the misinformation around the so-called "French proposal."

Focus group

With the analysis shifting to the focus group, it is worth noting that to a great extent it correlates with the findings of the Survey. The scope of this focus group was to identify the credibility of the EU integration process in N. Macedonia in terms of the perception of the CSO representatives, participants in the focus group. The respondents pointed out that the credibility of the EU is indeed diminished as the result of the obstacles that accompanied the start of the EU accession negotiations. It was stated unequivocally that the dispute with Greece, and the post-Prespa agreement general sentiment, followed by the Bulgarian veto in 2020 that blocked the progress of N. Macedonia due to a disagreement between the countries over historical questions, are among the main reasons for the diminished credibility of the Union. Besides a promising green light for North Macedonia (18 June 2022) to start negotiations that could ultimately lead to EU membership, any further difficulties that may arise will only increase Euroscepticism in North Macedonia and further undermine EU's credibility, state the respondents. Furthermore, participants in the focus group mentioned that a complex set of economic, social and political circumstances in the European Union itself and in its immediate neighbourhood, including the refugee crisis, economic recession, Brexit, Russia's war against Ukraine, beg the question as to whether the EU should move towards further enlargement. The states that aspire to join the EU, just as it has been the case with North Macedonia, might undergo a rather unpredictable process and narrative delivered by the EU itself. According to the respondents, the EU should be fully committed to the integration of North Macedonia in order to restore its credibility, thus be more proactive, more invested in the process. In general, North Macedonia and the Western Balkans region are on the Union's agenda but have never been a top item, comment the respondents. This situation should change.

The second point of discussion concerned the other aspects of social and political polarization in North Macedonia. In general, following the dynamics of the recent years, there is a growing polarization and rising Euroscepticism in the country because of the EU accession stalemate. Therefore, we infer, according to the participants, the major other issues are once again linked to the difficult path of N. Macedonia's accession to the Union. Notwithstanding

the fact that the primary focus is on EU integration, participants have revealed other factors that are responsible for the overall polarization, such as economic growth, unemployment, and mass emigration.

The last set of questions aimed to discuss alternatives to European integration. Since the EU enlargement process has come to a standstill, one possibility debated in this focus group was the idea of Open Balkans, initially named 'mini-Schengen' launched in October 2019. According to some of the respondents, Open Balkans is not an alternative to membership in the EU but a temporary way for the countries to reconstruct cooperation and prepare for membership in the EU. This is a point of divergence from the Survey in which the answer of it being a proper alternative was rather straightforward. Another point discussed as an alternative to membership in the EU was the Eurasian Union - some commented that this idea was mainly supported by some insignificant political factors in the country and various fringe political parties and figures in N. Macedonia, while not touching upon the fact that some of the CS' prominent figures see it as an alternative too, as our Survey indicates (see above, slightly over 10% of the respondents hold this view).

Conclusion

We can only reinstate the insights presented above, both regarding the central findings and the more specific issue related ones, by way of summing them up in the following inferences:

- The perception of the greatest part of the prominent CSO is that there is an overall polarization in the country and that it is a challenge that needs to be faced and overcome.

- The majority of the CSO see the crux of this polarization in the country's endlessly stalled EU integration process and in the fact that the EU negotiations perpetuate the possibility for further stalemate by integrating the treaties with Bulgaria and Greece as part of the good neighborly relations conditionality.

- The CSO sees the EU as the culprit for its diminished credibility and for the overall polarization.

- It seems that most of the CSO see the EU as an entity that can and should solve country's problems directly, including the identity related disputes with the neighbors.

- There is not a clear support among the CSO's for the recognition of the Bulgarian minority in the country's constitution.

- Prominent CSOs, and in a vast majority, see the Open Balkans Initiative as an alternative to the EU membership (and do believe that there should be one).

As already noted, the EU speaks a rather different language and does have conditionalities that unfortunately affect the identity related sensitivities of the Macedonian nation and ethnos:
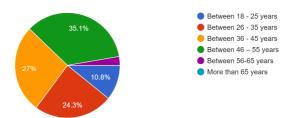
- Good neighborly relations, in particular with the EU neighbor-states are a legitimate condition, and a sensible one – stability is required from all prospective member states; thus, there is no issue of special (negative and unfair) treatment of N. Macedonia.

- The treaties with Bulgaria and Greece and their implementation are part of the obligation to build good neighborly relations and achieve them toward the end of the negotiation process; apparently, the EU has set a political framework for this, not a "historical one," even if this framework implies that N. Macedonia ought to resolve its cultural and identity related ("history related," as we called them in the region) disputes with the neighbors; cultural and national identity related disputes are explosive when it comes to the stability and security of a region, including that of N. Macedonia and its neighbors, as well of the continent of Europe.

- Recognition of the Bulgarian minority should not be an issue for a country that recognizes all the ethnic communities as constituents of the nation. It is a condition for further negotiations as it vouches for the candidate's good will toward the neighbors. Should the Macedonian society fail to support this idea, N. Macedonia will effectively self-veto itself.
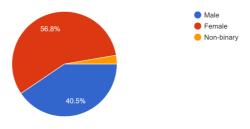
We can only repeat the aforementioned realization: a common ground must be found on which these entirely mutually exclusive discourses can become subject to critical conversation of good will, and a reinvention of a newly shared common language on the issue of enlargement as well as on the other aspects of the problem of polarization can be forged.
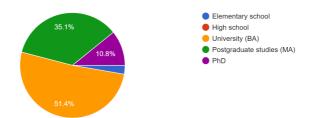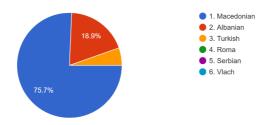
ADDENDUM

on Demographics

Age

- Between 18 - 25 years
- Between 26 - 35 years
- Between 36 - 45 years
- Between 46 – 55 years
- Between 56-65 years
- More than 65 years

35.1%
10.8%
24.3%
27%

Gender

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary

56.8%
40.5%

Education

- Elementary school
- High school
- University (BA)
- Postgraduate studies (MA)
- PhD

35.1%
10.8%
51.4%

Ethnicity

- 1. Macedonian
- 2. Albanian
- 3. Turkish
- 4. Roma
- 5. Serbian
- 6. Vlach

75.7%
18.9%

Working status

- Employee in the public sector
- Employee in the private sector
- Business owner
- Freelance
- Retired
- Student
- CSO
- Non-governmental

1/2

8.8%
41.2%
17.6%

If "Yes", What type of organization are you a member of?

- Think-tank
- An expert organization (organization s…
- Membership based organization (Ass…
- NGO
- admirers of a (particular) village
- Citizens association
- Foundation
- I say no in D7

1/2

17.9%
33.3%
12.8%

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