

Deferred Gratification: Evaluating the Impact of EU Accession Delay
on North Macedonian Support

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of the European Union's delays in initiating EU accession negotiations for North Macedonia. This delay came despite the continuous European Commission's recommendation to start the negotiation process. The study reveals a gradual decline in Macedonian support for EU integration between 2007 and 2022. Key findings indicate a rise in both nationalism and doubts about the economic benefits of EU membership, contributing to a strengthening opposition to EU membership and a growing reluctance among Macedonians to express definitive opinions on EU membership. The research demonstrates that identity and expectations of economic benefits remain critical predictors of public attitudes towards EU membership, with utilitarian factors influencing people's attitudes on membership more than identity. Despite this, there has been a shift towards a stronger identification with Macedonia rather than the EU, primarily driven by an increase in nationalists who do not expect economic benefits from EU membership. This group's growing skepticism, particularly as the population ages, suggests a deepening resistance to EU integration, highlighting the risk of growing nationalism impeding North Macedonia's journey towards EU membership.

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1 Introduction

The pursuit of European Union (EU) membership has been a primary goal for countries in the Western Balkan region since the early 1990s, seen as a pathway to resolving longstanding conflicts and economic challenges. The EU plays an important role in the region as guarantor of stability and security. Yet, the pace of EU integration in the Western Balkan region has been slow and uneven (Džankić et al. 2019). As a result, it took over a decade for the formal EU accession process for North Macedonia to begin.

Today, the appeal of EU membership as a gateway to security, stability, and prosperity continues for countries in the Western Balkans. Yet the delay in the accession process has led to rising disillusionment among those who had supported EU integration over the years. Growing Euroskepticism has undermined the Union's credibility in the region (Börzel et al. 2017; Bélanger and Schimmelfennig 2021). Skepticism in the potential members stems from numerous unfulfilled promises, changing rules, frequent additional demands, and the dominance of political considerations over policy practices in the EU.

This study is driven by a central research question: How has the delay in initiating formal EU accession negotiations impacted public support for EU integration in North Macedonia? This quantitative case study of North Macedonia examines variations in support before and after the delay and examines whether attitude changes are associated with declining support.

The underlying finding is that the delay in the formal accession negotiations has led to frustration among many individuals initially optimistic and supportive of EU membership. The prolonged state of limbo has gradually eroded EU credibility in the eyes of many Macedonians,

engendering disillusionment, disappointment, and frustration, as noted in other recent work (Parandii 2023).

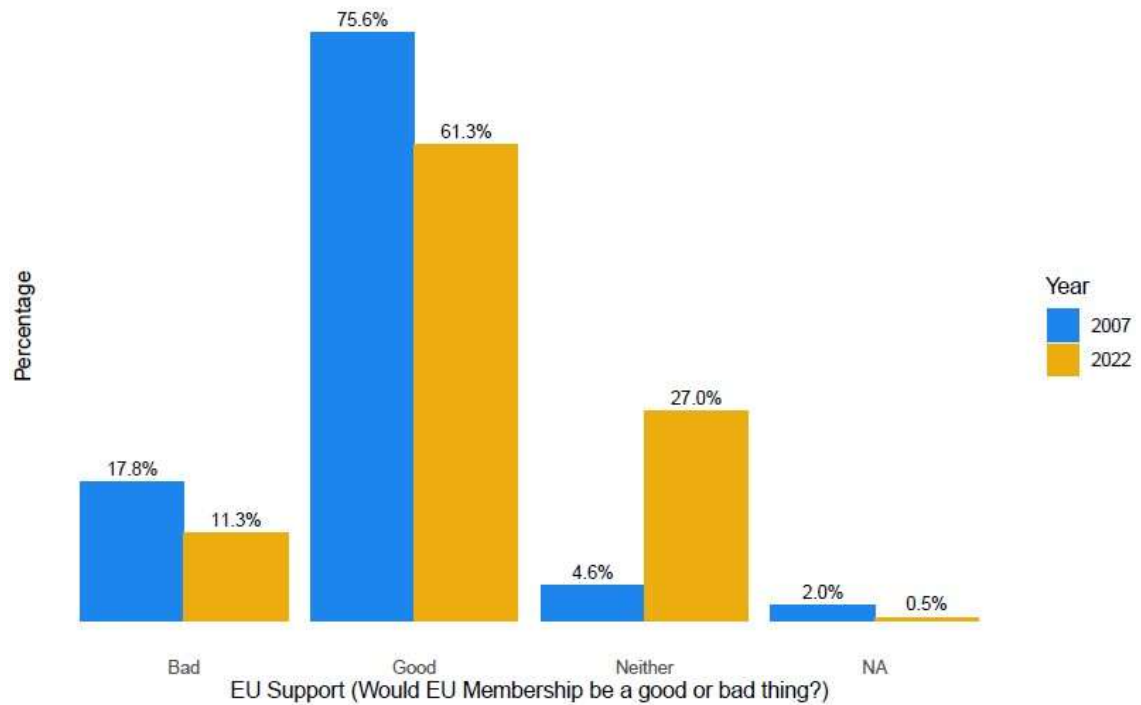


Figure 1: Perception of North Macedonia's Potential EU Membership, 2007 and 2022. (Source: Calculated from Eurobarometer 2007, 2022).

Figure 1 describes two snapshots of public support for the EU in North Macedonia in 2007 and 2022. The data shows a gradual decline in EU support. Though far from being conclusive, this suggests that the delay in initiating accession negotiations explains the overall reduction in public support for EU membership. Yet, what underlies this differential support over time may give us some insight into this relationship between delay and support for the EU membership. This study delves into the reasons for support, identifies which population

segments are losing faith in EU membership, and aims to identify the patterns of attitude changes associated with this trend over time.

The pattern in Figure 1 is confirmed by a Brima-conducted poll for the International Republican Institute's Center for Insights and Survey Research (IRI 2022) that measured public support for EU membership¹. Their findings showed that on average, in 2010², 90% of the North Macedonian population supported North Macedonia's EU membership³, likely reflecting opinions before the first delay. Subsequent years after the beginning of the decade long delay saw a significant drop in support. Initially, opposition was in single digits, but by 2012, opposition had increased to 12%, and from 2014 to 2022, it averaged 19%. Before the delay, support across all the surveys averaged 88.5%, with 9% opposition. Post-delay, particularly after 2014, after the realization that the delay is settled, support decreased to an average of 76%. The surveys indicate that support for EU membership has not returned to its initial high levels measured in 2010, and opposition has remained around 20%, which is a fundamental shift.

¹ The original raw data from the IRI surveys were not available to use. Despite reaching out to obtain it, there has been no response to my inquiry.

² 2010 is the first year they have regarding North Macedonia public opinion on EU integration.

³ The question asked for the poll was: "Do you support North Macedonia becoming a member of the European Union (EU)? – IRI North Macedonia Poll – December 2022.

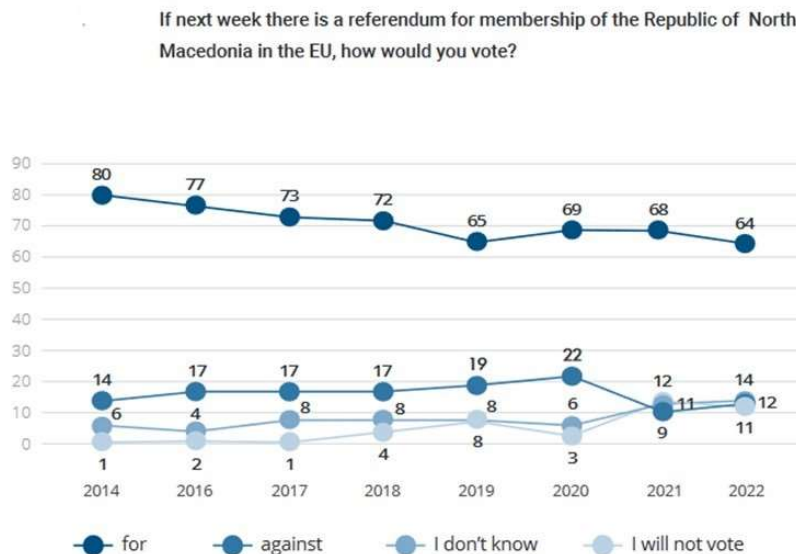


Figure 2: Analysis of public opinion on North Macedonia's accession to the European Union. 2014 - 2022. (Source: Damjanovski 2023. "Analysis of Public Opinion on North Macedonia's Accession to the European Union (2014-2022)")

Damjanovski's (2023) surveys also point to a decline in support. In Figure 2, the results indicate a decline in support for the EU. By following the line that presents the positive responses in supporting the EU (*for* – line), we can see that in the first four years (2014 – 2018), the measured average support was 75.5%, while the average of the last four years (2019 – 2022) was 66.5%. There is a fairly steady decline (except for 2019, which is very low).

The neutral and indifferent categories saw a substantial increase. In Figure 1 those who deemed EU membership neither good nor bad increased more than fivefold, from 4.6% in 2007 to 27% in 2022. This 22.4% increase implies a growing reluctance to express definite opinions on EU membership, possibly indicating growing uncertainty among the surveyed population. Outright opposition to EU membership decreased, as evidenced by the drop from 17.8% in 2007 to 11.3% in 2022, but enthusiasm has also fallen. In fact, positive support for the EU declined from 75.8% in 2007 to 61.3% in 2022. In short, if the delay has any effect, it would

seem to be numbing people's attitudes. This parallels what Damjanovski (2023) finds: the number of individuals who do not even want to vote on a referendum for EU membership is increasing in addition to a decrease in support (see Figure 2). The percentage who "don't know" or "will not vote" jumped from 7% in 2014 to 23% in 2022.

Looking more deeply into these data, as this thesis will show, a major change between 2007 and 2022 is growth in the number of pessimistic nationalists and their more intense opposition to EU membership. Despite overall support in the population at large, the delay poses a risk of escalating nationalist sentiment and pessimism towards the benefits of EU integration, potentially hindering the country's Europeanization. This calls for careful attention and an investigation into the underlying factors driving this shift so as to preserve support for EU integration.

This thesis employs statistical analysis, utilizing data from two Eurobarometer surveys to measure level of public support for the EU: one from the pre-delay period in 2007 before member states blocked North Macedonia's EU accession and another from 2022, following the removal of the most recent veto against formal negotiations.

The paper is structured into six sections, beginning with the context and historical background of North Macedonia's case on its path to join the EU. It proceeds with reviewing the literature on public support and the key determinants of this support for the EU from the viewpoints of residents of both member states and non-member states. A theoretical framework leads to testable hypotheses. These are followed by a presentation of the methodology and approach used in this analysis, and the statistical results.

2 Background and Context

2.1 Overview of North Macedonia's Case in the EU

North Macedonia, one of the Western Balkan countries⁴, seceded from Yugoslavia in 1991 and has since viewed membership in the European Union and NATO as its ultimate foreign policy goals. North Macedonia has officially pursued EU membership since March 2004, when it submitted its application and became an official candidate for EU membership in 2005. The European Union has committed to the integration of the Western Balkans since the 1990s, investing politically and financially to strengthen the region (European Commission 2023). This support helps Western Balkan countries implement the key reforms necessary for EU integration, emphasizing enhancing the rule of law, governance, media freedom, and civil society (Džankić et al. 2019; European Parliament 2023). As part of joining the European Union, accession negotiations require the candidate country to align its national laws with those of the EU, by following the EU accession guidelines rules known as the EU *acquis communautaire*⁵ (the process of Europeanization).

As the first country from the region to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2001 (Garding 2019; Bechev and Marusic 2020), which serves as a framework for relations between the European Union and Western Balkan countries under the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), North Macedonia has demonstrated a high level of motivation

⁴ 'Western Balkan' is a term used by the EU to refer to six countries in South-Eastern Europe that are covered by EU enlargement policy: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia (WB6). Croatia was part of part of the 'Western Balkan' bus since the country joined the European Union in 2013, is no longer a target of the Western Balkans EU enlargement policy.

⁵ The *acquis communautaire* is the body of common rights and obligations that is binding on all the EU member states (European Commission).

to undertake systematic reforms. These efforts aim to meet the conditions for EU membership and establish a clear path towards it. North Macedonia was viewed as a leader in Euro-integration efforts within the Western Balkans. In 2009, the European Commission (EC) recommended that accession negotiations with the country begin. Since then, the Commission has continuously recommended opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia (Commission of the European Communities 2009). Despite positive assessments and recommendations from the European Commission to initiate the accession process (following a lengthy period of reform and alignment with EU regulations and criteria) the country did not see the expected start of negotiation talks for 17 years as the European Council continued delaying the official start of the accession process (Bechev and Marusic 2020; Mojsovska 2021). Only in July 2022 did the first intergovernmental conference on accession negotiations with North Macedonia occur (European Commission 2022).

This postponement was due to multiple obstructions from Greece, Bulgaria, and France, who opposed initiating the EU accession process and issued vetoes. I refer to these events as external factors emanating from EU member states, directly influencing North Macedonia's EU accession process by causing delays.

In December 2009, Greece vetoed the start of the negotiation process for North Macedonia due to a prolonged dispute over the country's official name, halting the country's progress toward accession for nearly a decade. This veto was lifted following the signing of the 'Prespa Agreement'⁶ in 2018, which resolved the name issue. Before this agreement, from 1991 to 2019, North Macedonia was known as the Republic of Macedonia. Despite significant

⁶ The text of the 'Prespa Agreement' is available in UN treaties database (No. 55707). It was signed by both North Macedonia and Greece on June, 17 2018 and was endorsed in 2019.

opposition from Macedonians who perceived it as an assault on their national identity, the change in the country's constitutional name to North Macedonia opened international avenues and elevated hopes for EU membership among the Macedonian populace.

During the European Council Summit in October 2019, France vetoed the commencement of EU accession talks for North Macedonia, arguing that the EU enlargement process requires substantial reforms in its accession methodology (Tregoures 2019). This rejection from the EU pushed North Macedonia into profound uncertainty. In March 2020, the European Council adopted a "New Methodology"⁷ for the EU accession process concerning EU enlargement, effectively putting the ongoing EU integration process for North Macedonia back on track (European Council 2020).

In late 2020, Bulgaria vetoed the adoption of EU's negotiation framework with North Macedonia due to a bilateral dispute concerning national identity, language, and history. Bulgaria requested a revision of the 2017 Good Neighbourly Relations Treaty (also known as the Friendship Treaty)⁸ between North Macedonia and Republic of Bulgaria. This request was outlined in the "Bulgarian Memorandum"⁹ document, citing insufficient progress in the implementation of the Friendship Treaty. In response, the North Macedonian government affirmed that the national identity and the Macedonian language were non-negotiable and dismissed the idea of adding an annex to the Friendship Treaty. The majority of Macedonians

⁷ Details on the new revision of the accession process can be assessed under "Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans" authored by Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations.

⁸ The 'Friendship Treaty' came into effect in February 2018, establishing a joint commission to facilitate discussions on controversial historical and educational issues. (UN Treaty collection: No. 55013).

⁹ The Bulgarian 'Memorandum' from mid-September 2020 was looking into reframing the 'Macedonian' standpoint on the Macedonian ethnic identity and language. Bulgaria claims that Macedonian identity and language both originate from Bulgaria and requests from North Macedonia to acknowledge a Bulgarian minority in the country's Constitution.

saw this move as deeply disappointing and offensive and it further eroded the EU's credibility. In July 2022, despite significant opposition and public rallies, the North Macedonian government approved the so-called French proposal, offering solutions to the dispute between the two countries (Pérez 2022; Taylor 2022). This led Bulgaria to agree to lift its veto on North Macedonia's EU accession talks in 2022. Thereby, this compromise allowed North Macedonia to advance in its EU membership bid. Consequently, the lifting of the Bulgarian veto enabled the European Commission to open formal accession negotiations and start the screening process, which is a first step in these accession negotiations.

2.2 Prior Studies

This section first provides an overview of prior studies on public opinion and the key determinants of support for the European Union (EU) from both EU member and non-EU member perspectives. Next, it reviews the existing empirical research on public opinion in North Macedonia. Finally, I identify the research gaps in the prior literature and empirical studies.

Research has well established that European integration cannot progress without public support, which is crucial for the further European integration of each candidate member (Keohane and Hoffmann 1990).

2.2.1 Prior Studies: Support for EU Integration

The determinants shaping attitudes, whether in support of or opposition to EU integration, have been extensively researched within EU member states. Studies predominantly analyze and test theories to understand the influences on public opinion regarding European integration. Researchers primarily employ two theoretical frameworks—the economic and identity frameworks—to identify the key determinants of support or opposition to the integration process, as evidenced by the work of Anderson and Reichert (1996), Gabel and Palmer (1995), Gabel (1998), and Anderson and Kaltenthaler (1996). Extensive research on perceived or expected economic benefits as predictors of support for EU integration has been extensively assessed. This focus on the economic dimension aligns with one of the descriptions of the European Union as a unique economic union among all its members, with a huge single market that fosters economic cooperation and allows the free movement of goods, services, money, and people (European Commission 2022).

Gabel and Palmer (1995) introduced the utilitarian model of public support for EU integration, which has been subject to analysis ever since. This model, also known as the economic and cost-benefit models, posits that individuals in EU member countries base their support for EU membership on their perceived costs and benefits. Gabel and Palmer (1995), Gabel (1998), and Damjanovski et al. (2020) extended this, contending that the liberalization of the EU's capital market enhances competitiveness, affecting individuals differently based on their occupations and socio-economic statuses. The liberalization of the market poses a threat to individuals with limited skills and education while favoring those with more competitive job skills and higher education levels.

Anderson and Reichert (1996) examine the effect of direct and indirect economic benefits of EU membership on public support for integration among the then twelve EU member states. Through analyzing three Eurobarometer waves in 1982, 1986, and 1990, their findings revealed that economic benefits associated with EU membership affect support for EU integration; people residing in countries that experience greater advantages from EU membership maintain stronger support for their country's EU membership. In addition, individuals who benefit personally are more inclined to support the EU integration than those who do not benefit, and the beneficiaries' support is most likely to stay steady.

The expectation of economic benefit has also been used to explain EU support-in the Europeanisation process in the Western Balkans (Sedelmeier 2011; Zhelyazkova et al. 2019; Schimmelfennig 2012; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2020). Nonetheless, as Toshkov et al. (2014) and Damjanovski et al. (2020) note, studies analyzing the determinants shaping people's attitudes in the Western Balkans are scarce.

The second framework introduces identity as another determinant of public opinion. This identity-based approach posits that attitudes are significantly influenced by national identities and countries' cultural and social norms (Gabel 1998; Hooghe and Marks 2005; Freyburg and Richter 2010). Consequently, some people perceive EU integration as a threat to their national identity, making them less inclined to support EU integration. Taggart (1998) asserts that a major factor contributing to Euroskepticism derives from identity politics, wherein individuals regard the nation-state as a source of identity and fear that the EU might compromise the integrity of their state and impact their identity. While Taggart's study (1998) suggests that the identity-based factor predicting Euroskepticism is predominantly found

among right-wing parties, McLaren (2002) contends that identity-based reasons for Euroskepticism extend beyond right-wing parties to the broader public. Consequently, he identifies national identity as a strong predictor of opposition to EU integration. This is also reflected in Damjanovski's (2014) study, where he highlights that identity-based factors are key in explaining the gradual decline in support for EU membership between 2009 and 2014 and dominant predictor for Euroskepticism in North Macedonia (Damjanovski and Kirchner 2019).

2.2.2 Prior Studies: Western Balkans and North Macedonia

The determinants of support for EU integration in the Western Balkan including North Macedonia have been explored only to a limited extent since the onset of the various EU integration journeys. Recently, a growing number of researchers have shifted their focus from assessing the impact of EU integration on member states (Treib 2008; Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2008; Ladrech 2009) to investigating its effects on candidate member states, especially within the context of Europeanisation theory. This shift has focused on the integration process, which requires substantial political reforms from candidate countries to align with EU accession guidelines, particularly in adopting policy changes and implementing the collection of EU *acquis*. Grabbe (2002), Vachudova (2005), Sedelmeier (2011), Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005, 2020), Balfour and Stratulat (2011), and Schimmelfennig (2012) have all conducted studies that assess the impact of EU accession conditionality through the lens of a cost and benefit model. Analyzing the effect of EU conditionality measures, these studies assess the extent to which conditionality impacts the transformation of candidate countries and their preparedness for EU membership. The findings reveal that EU conditionality is complex and

that the criteria for accession are not fixed; it evolves over time as the EU develops new policies and expands the EU acquis, which makes the accession process a moving target for applicant countries (Grabbe 2002; Džankić et al. 2019). This is because the conditions for EU membership, including the ability to implement EU laws and policies, are broad and lack quantitative assessment criteria, resulting in uncertainty when these criteria have been met. Overall, EU membership depends not only on technical progress in negotiations but also on the political readiness of current member states for enlargement. These studies have not only initiated a dialogue regarding candidate countries but also sparked a wave of research that is essential for evaluating the Europeanization of the post-communist European region.

Börzel (2013), Elbasani (2015), and Zhelyazkova et al. (2019) have extended this research to include candidate countries in the Western Balkan region, initiating an exploration of the Europeanization process and the EU's transformative power in the region. Their findings indicate that Western Balkan countries have received different treatment than earlier candidates for membership in the EU, encountering stricter accession criteria that must be satisfied even before the commencement of the accession process. Zhelyazkova et al. (2019) argue that this situation stems from the lack of public support for enlargement and the phenomenon of "enlargement fatigue" among EU members and that these are further compounded by lower levels of democratic and economic development in the region. Croatia is the sole country from the Western Balkans to have joined the EU in 2013, becoming the most recently admitted member.

Zhelyazkova et al. (2019) have a particular finding concerning the public of the remaining West Balkan candidates: Diminished trust in the EU's commitment to Western

Balkan accession and decreased EU credibility have influenced the expectations and perceptions of the benefits of EU integration. This slow pace is particularly evident in the case of North Macedonia and its delayed integration process. This has motivated this study to delve deeper into changes occurring within public opinion when the EU accession process is slow and uncertain.

Bogosavljević (2023), Manchin (2011), and Damjanovski, Lavrič, and Naterer (2020) have studied public opinion across the Western Balkan, finding that public support for European integration in North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo is generally high. This support is driven by the view that the European Union is the best means for achieving regional stability and prosperity. However, despite this high support for the EU, there is a noticeable level of disappointment among proponents of Europe and a rising trend of Euroskepticism, notably in Serbia.

Regarding North Macedonia, a limited number of researchers have conducted thorough analyses of the country. This is compounded by a scarcity of data focusing specifically on public opinion, its determinants, and the accession process in North Macedonia (Damjanovski, 2014; 2023). Despite this lack of comprehensive literature providing relevant data on public opinion in North Macedonia, some studies have emerged to bridge this gap, offering insights into public sentiment regarding EU integration. Consequently, in recent years the availability of reliable studies and analyses that contribute to a deeper understanding of North Macedonia's journey towards EU integration and the nation's attitude towards EU support has increased. The European Values Study (EVS) included North Macedonia in their 2017 wave, while Eurobarometer surveys have tracked public opinion in North Macedonia on various issues since

2007. In 2014, the Institute for Democracy, "Societas Civilis" in Skopje, and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation created a longitudinal database on public support.¹⁰ This effort involves conducting annual public opinion surveys using a consistent methodology and identical questions (Damjanovski, 2023).

The EU Commission (2021), Markovikj and Damjanovski (2018), and Damjanovski (2023) find that public support in North Macedonia for European Union integration has been consistently high since the outset of the country's EU integration journey. Nonetheless, empirical research shows a gradual decrease in this public support for the EU throughout the lengthy pre-accession process. Damjanovski's study (2014) distinguishes two periods that shed light on the relationship between North Macedonia's EU accession progress and the fluctuating support for EU membership. The research highlights a period from 2004 to 2009 characterized by an exceptionally high level of support for the EU. Conversely, the following period, from 2010 to 2014, witnessed a steady decline in public support for EU integration in North Macedonia. Expanding on these observations, Damjanovic's further examination of public opinion on North Macedonia's EU accession from 2014 to 2022 indicates that recent developments in the accession process, especially concerning the Bulgarian veto and its revocation in 2022, have not significantly affected public sentiment (2023). According to his findings (refer to Figure 2), public support for the EU in 2022 was recorded at 64%, indicating sustained a high interest, albeit with a third of respondents expressing skepticism about North Macedonia's potential EU membership. Figure 2 indicates a decline in optimism among those

¹⁰ The raw data in the longitudinal database surveys from the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" were not available to use at the time of this research.

who support EU integration. The primary motivation for their support is attributed to rationalist-utilitarian factors.

These studies are highly relevant, delving into the impacts and effects of European integration to foster further assessments and contribute to the expanding body of literature in the field. Furthermore, Damjanovski et al. (2020) present one of the initial systematic and comparative analyses of public opinion on Euroskepticism in the Western Balkans (WB), employing both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Acknowledging the scarcity of empirical evidence and limited availability of resources, only a few sources provide quantitative data on North Macedonia's EU integration process. This includes data on changing trends in public opinion patterns over time and factors that influence attitudes towards European Integration. Consequently, measuring the impact of delays in initiating EU accession negotiations presents significant challenges and limitations. Although public support for the EU and North Macedonia's accession process has been acknowledged, it has not undergone comprehensive analysis. A gap exists in systematic analyses of public attitudes examining the perspectives of EU candidate countries, leading to an incomplete analysis of the dynamics behind Macedonian citizens' support for the EU. While prior analyses of public opinion have provided valuable insights and significantly contributed to assessing public opinion in North Macedonia, they fall short in pinpointing which population group is pivotal in driving the observable fluctuations in support for EU integration throughout the protracted accession process. Most of the literature focuses on the impact of EU enlargement policies on current EU member states, the determinants of public opinion within these states, and the capacity of candidate countries, such as North Macedonia, to fulfill EU membership

criteria - including the attention on how EU conditionality influences the political and legal transformations in candidate countries. This observation forms the primary motivation for this study; the limited research on the impact of the EU integration process on public opinion within candidate countries warps our understanding of the complicated dynamics of the overall EU enlargement process. Specifically, there is limited analysis on how delays in initiating formal EU accession negotiations influence public opinion within candidate countries. Alleviating this can help leaders better understand the political consequences of such delays in the future.

Prior studies and Figure 1 presented a general trend of decline in support. This niche phenomenon warrants further analysis. Understanding it may offer strategies for altering public perception of European integration and persuading specific demographic groups of the benefits of EU membership. This issue is critical in North Macedonia and across the entire region. Assessing public opinion is of crucial importance because the EU integration process cannot advance without public support (Keohane and Hoffmann 1990). Without the nation's support for the EU, a national government cannot pursue EU integration; this was exemplified in the 1994 referendum in Norway, where the majority of Norwegians voted against joining the EU (Bjørklund 1997).

This paper aims to investigate these patterns further, enhancing existing research by utilizing Eurobarometer surveys. In closing the gap, regarding the research question introduced in the introduction chapter: "what effect has the delay in initiating formal EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia had on public opinion that might account for the decline in public support for EU integration and growing indifference towards the EU?", this study

focuses on the dynamics of attitudes among various population groups in support of European Integration.

3 Theory and Hypotheses

Given existing evidence for the general trend of gradual decline in support for EU membership and the observation that Macedonians have become more frustrated and uncertain for the EU membership due to the delayed integration process, I theorize that despite overall support, the delay in initiating formal EU accession negotiations has lowered public expectations of economic benefit and fed a rise in nationalistic identity. It is the segment of the population that combines economic pessimism and nationalism that has grown and has become more intensely opposed to EU membership. This is still a minority among Macedonians, but it is a growing segment of the population.

As a contested candidate member, North Macedonia experienced diminished expectations of being admitted to the EU despite decades of effort invested towards this goal. External factors impacting the accession process and a prolonged period of uncertainty have affected the EU's credibility in North Macedonia (Stratula et.al 2020). This extended process may hinder North Macedonia's ability to comply with EU conditionality and impact public attitudes regarding EU membership (Markovikj and Damjanovski 2018; EU Commission 2021; Damjanovski 2023). Previous studies have demonstrated that support for EU integration is generally strong, though some fluctuations exist. While these fluctuations have not pushed the overall strong support below a majority, an increase in disappointment could potentially affect further integration efforts, particularly if a populist and nationalist party were to retake office.

This could increase the risk of the country drifting away from the EU, halting progress towards adopting the *acquis*. The country underwent authoritarian leadership under a populist party between 2006 - 2016, a period known as *Gruevism* (named after ex-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski) (Staletović and Pollozhani 2023). Evidence suggests that during this period, public support for EU membership decreased. Gruevski's party, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), even though it does not publicly oppose EU integration, poses a significant risk to further EU integration development through their opposition to the *Prespa* Agreement, which resolved a decades-long dispute with Greece. In addition, they oppose both the 2017 Friendship Treaty and the 2022 French proposal which seek to normalize relations with Bulgaria. Specifically, they are opposed to the constitutional changes¹¹ required by the French Proposal which were a condition of Bulgaria lifting its veto. This would risk another veto by Bulgaria since the support of the opposition parties is necessary to meet the vote threshold for constitutional changes.

The slow progress of the accession process and rising skepticism towards the EU's commitment to enlargement, economic challenges, political instability, and brain drain, have all contributed to the gradual decline in support for the EU. It is not surprising that people have become more economically pessimistic. Additionally, as we observe rising Euroskepticism in the Member States, the issue of national identity in North Macedonia could strengthen nationalist attitudes, as some citizens worry about losing their national identity as part of the

¹¹ Amending the constitution to include Bulgarians in the country's constitutional preamble, the North Macedonian parliament requires a two-thirds qualified majority.

EU integration process. Therefore, a longer wait is likely correlated with decreased support for the EU and an increase in nationalist sentiment.

Table 1: Categorization of Population Groups by Economic Benefit Expectations and Identity Sentiment

	Economic Benefit Expectations	Economic Benefit Sceptics
European Identity	<p>Optimistic Europeans</p> <p><i>(Group A)</i></p> <p>Identify with the EU and expect economic benefits from it.</p>	<p>Pessimistic Europeans</p> <p><i>(Group B)</i></p> <p>Identify with the EU but do not expect economic benefit from it.</p>
National Identity	<p>Optimistic Nationalists</p> <p><i>(Group C)</i></p> <p>Identify with North Macedonia, and anticipate economic benefit from the EU.</p>	<p>Pessimistic Nationalists</p> <p><i>(Group D)</i></p> <p>Identify with North Macedonia and do not expect economic benefit from the EU</p>

To analyze in greater depth the impact of the delay on public support and examine the change in numbers among different population groups between 2007 and 2022, I identify four population sub-groups. These represent a mix of sentiments cross-pressured between expectations of economic benefits from membership and identification with either the nation or EU. These are presented as economic optimism vs. pessimism and national vs. EU identity in Table 1: "Optimistic Europeans" (A) identify with the EU and expect economic benefits from EU membership. "Pessimistic Europeans" (B) identify with the EU but do not expect to benefit

from membership. "Optimistic nationalists" (C) identify as Macedonians and anticipate economic benefits from the EU. "Pessimistic nationalists" (D) possess strong to moderate national identity and do not expect economic benefit from EU membership. This classification will help identify the group most influenced by the delay in initiating formal EU accession negotiations.

To summarize: building on prior studies of the general trend in public support for EU membership, this thesis examines the dynamics of public opinion. It focuses on the change in influence of two key determinants—utilitarian (economic) and identity factors. Furthermore, this study will investigate whether there has been a change in the degree to which these factors affect the support for membership and attitudes towards the EU among various population groups in North Macedonia as the accession process has been delayed.

Given the theory that the delay in initiating formal EU accession negotiations is associated with a gradual decline in support for EU membership and growing public frustration and nationalism in North Macedonia, this study proposes six hypotheses regarding patterns and shifts in support for EU integration among different population groups. It focuses on how expectations of economic benefits and identity correlate with varying levels of support.

Hypothesis 1: *Support for EU membership is higher among those who expect some economic benefit.*

Hypothesis 2: *Support for EU membership is higher among those who identify with the EU.*

Hypothesis 3: *The economic benefit expectation is a stronger predictor of EU support than identity.*

Hypothesis 4: *The relationship between the expectation of economic benefit and support for EU membership is stronger before the delay than after.*

Hypothesis 5: *Following the delay, the proportion of the population expecting economic benefit declined.*

Hypothesis 6: *Following the delay, the proportion of the population identifying with the nation-state rather than with the EU rises.*

Understanding the factors that shape and transform people's attitudes towards the EU is crucial for conceptualizing the European integration process. A lack of enthusiasm for EU integration could compromise and affect further cooperation and integration efforts. Hence, this study aims not only to map the shifts in public sentiment but also to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay among political delays, economic expectations, and identity dynamics within the context of EU membership aspirations. It will also enhance the comprehensive understanding of the evolving dynamics of public opinion regarding EU integration in North Macedonia.

3.1 Hypotheses Explained

Hypothesis 1: *Support for EU membership is higher among those who expect some economic benefit.*

Hypothesis 2: *Support for EU membership is higher among those who identify with the EU.*

The first and second hypotheses specifically draw upon existing studies (Frieden 2021); I hypothesize that utilitarian and identity factors are the primary influences of support for the EU. The first hypothesis is grounded in political-economic theories, which state that people

form their attitudes about EU integration based on their cost-benefit analyses of material gain (Damjanovski et al. 2020). The second hypothesis is grounded in sociological theories that suggest that identity shapes political choice. Specifically, individuals who exhibit strong nationalistic sentiment but low identification with the EU are more inclined to oppose EU integration and are more likely to perceive EU membership negatively. The EU accession process mandates changes in various societal aspects, challenging traditional norms and practices. Consequently, EU membership can pose a threat to cultural and national identity in the pursuit of meeting EU compliance standards.

Hypothesis 3: *The economic benefit expectation is a stronger predictor of EU support than identity.*

This third hypothesis is also grounded in the economic theories explored by prior studies (Gabel and Palmer 1995; Anderson and Reichert 1996; Gabel 1998; Sedelmeier 2011; Damjanovski et al. 2020; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2020; Damjanovski 2022, 2023) that find utilitarian calculations to be one of the strongest predictors of support for EU membership. This highlights the impact of expectations that states economically benefit from EU integration through the liberalization of trade and investment and the expansion of single market opportunities. Moreover, the greater hopes for gain are often found in less developed states such as North Macedonia, where many expect to gain significantly from integration as it boosts their otherwise slow economic growth.

In contrast to expectations of economic benefits, identity is not as strong a predictor of EU support. National identity serves as a determinant of Euroskepticism. Nevertheless, individuals with stronger national identities who expect economic gain will be more likely to

favor EU membership than individuals who identify with the EU but do not expect to gain materially. Thus, Hypothesis 3 predicts that between the four groups introduced in Table 1, support is greatest among European optimists' group, least among pessimistic nationalists, and that nationalistic optimists are more supportive of EU integration than the European pessimists group.

Hypothesis 4: *The relationship between the expectation of economic benefit and support for EU membership is stronger before the delay than after.*

A prolonged period of delayed integration erodes the hope of ever joining the EU. The pessimism erodes the effect of expected economic benefits on support for EU membership.

Hypothesis 5: *Following the delay, the proportion of the population expecting economic benefit declined.*

Hypothesis 6: *Following the delay, the proportion of the population identifying with the nation-state rather than with the EU rises.*

The final two hypotheses claim that the delay leads to a decrease in the number of individuals who identify moderately to strongly with the EU. Concurrently, with the delay the number of nationalists rises.

Hypothesis 5 draws parallels with Hypothesis 4, suggesting that with the increasing uncertainty regarding North Macedonia's integration into the EU, optimism for economic growth is diminishing. The prolonged wait for membership benefits, particularly in a country where economic vitality is heavily reliant on the EU, erodes trust and patience among its citizens. This builds on the economic theories that one of the biggest advantages of EU membership is the economic opportunities through access to the Single European Market, free

movements of capital and labor, and more investment. Overall, people expect more economic growth and material gain. North Macedonia has navigated a challenging political landscape, fulfilling a significant number of conditions to demonstrate its earnest desire for EU membership and its readiness to start active negotiations for accession. Yet, as of 2022, the nation has not perceived tangible returns on its efforts towards EU integration.

Hypothesis 6 posits that nationalism will increase in 2022, shifting towards identifying more with the nation than with the EU following the delay. The rationale behind Hypothesis 6 is that frustration from continuous extensions of conditionality, delving into profound identity issues, will shift people's identification with the EU towards a more nationalistic stance. For instance, despite widespread opposition, the contentious requirement to change the country's constitutional name was a concession made in hopes of accession. To many Macedonian citizens, changing the country's name seemed like an empty sacrifice. The dispute with Bulgaria also touched upon identity issues and challenged the language and nation's identity. Despite these substantial changes, many felt the EU had not made significant moves in the country's favor. That led some vulnerable populations to retreat to their national identity rather than maintain hope in the EU.

Both rationales model the basis of both hypotheses, Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 6, regarding the expected impact of delays on the populace's identification and their anticipation of economic benefits from EU membership. They suggest that diminished EU credibility by 2022 has shifted the balance from economically optimistic individuals and those who identify with the EU towards a rise in nationalist sentiments compared to the situation in 2007.

By testing these hypotheses, the thesis will present evidence supporting the theory that the delay in initiating formal EU accession negotiations conditions public opinion towards EU integration and is accompanied by a rise in nationalism. Furthermore, it will test whether individuals who perceive benefits from the integration process exhibit significantly higher support for the EU than their counterparts.

4 Data and Methods

4.1 Case Selection

This study investigates and compares the level of public opinion before and after the onset of the delay in the EU accession process, focusing on two distinct periods.

Period 1 measures the pre-delayed period – public opinion before the EU accession process was interrupted from 2007 to 2010. This period covers the time from when North Macedonia became a candidate member in 2005 until 2009 when Greece vetoed the start of the negotiation process for North Macedonia despite the positive recommendation from the European Commission for starting the process. In this paper, this timeframe refers to both the pre-delay period and the initial wait period, with the terms being used interchangeably. The path towards EU membership is time-consuming, and given that North Macedonia emerges from a conflict region with a fragile political and economic system, it requires additional time to meet the criteria for commencing the accession process. Considering this, the initial waiting period was anticipated; thus, this paper does not classify it as a delay.

Period 2 examines public opinion after the delay – following the first Greek veto and the last Bulgarian veto (between 2010 and 2022). It focuses on 2022 when the last veto was lifted and accession negotiation opened.

Comparing 2007 and 2022 introduces a significant challenge. Shift in the relationship of expected benefit and identity to EU support reflects not only the effects of the delay in EU accession negotiations but also the influence of various other events and changes that could have impacted public attitudes and contributed to shifts in support for the EU. Essentially, the comparison between 2007 and 2022 captures not just the consequences of the accession negotiation delay but also the cumulative impact of all intervening factors over this timeframe. Isolating the specific effect of the delay on public support from these myriad changes necessitates further research and analysis beyond the scope of this initial study.

4.2 Data

The initial step involved consolidating the data and modifying the survey data to ensure it was suitable for processing in this study. This data preparation phase involved creating subsets specifically focused on data utilization for North Macedonia, identifying variables, and adjusting their names. Certain variables required reconfiguration due to their original coding being text-based. As the majority of the variables examined were non-ordinal, I recoded both the dependent variable (DV) and independent variables (IVs) into ordinal numeric variables. In addition, I created four new variables to analyze different population groups (Optimistic Europeans, Pessimistic Europeans, Optimistic nationalists, Pessimistic nationalists). I created

these variables by assigning values based on overlap between the main independent variables (EU benefit and EU identity).

I utilize data collected through surveys conducted by the EU (Standard Eurobarometer) in North Macedonia in two distinct years, 2007 and 2022, accessed through the GESIS Data Archive.

The Standard Eurobarometer surveys are conducted biannually. Beginning in 2007, two years after becoming a candidate member, North Macedonia was included in these surveys of the European Commission (EC) as part of the 2nd Eastern Enlargement cluster. The analysis begins with the Eurobarometer 68.1 survey (European Commission 2012), conducted between September and November of 2007. This survey was selected as the starting point for analysis because it is the first Eurobarometer survey to include North Macedonia in its assessment. It serves as the baseline of public opinion patterns in the pre-delay period. For the endpoint of the analysis, I selected the Eurobarometer survey - EB 96.3 from 2022 (European Commission 2022) conducted between January and February. This survey represents the last assessment before the accession negotiation process was reopened. Therefore, this survey serves as the final point of analysis during the delay.

The data from these surveys provide a general snapshot of public opinion in the two years. The survey questions were close-ended. Due to the absence of longitudinal studies tracking the same individuals to observe variations in attitudes between 2007 and 2022, utilizing repeated Eurobarometer surveys that consistently sample the Macedonian population's attitudes presents the most effective approach.

The sampling design used for the Standard Eurobarometer utilizes a multi-stage, random (probability) approach, sampling participants from each administrative region in the country. The process is stratified by the degree of urbanization, with probabilities proportional to population size. Each survey was conducted through a single face-to-face interview per household, with participants chosen at random. The sample size for each survey consists of approximately 1,000 respondents aged 15 and older.

4.3 Measurement of Key Variables

4.3.1 Dependent Variable

This study's dependent variable (DV) is *support for EU Membership in North Macedonia*, termed as "EU Support." To measure this variable, I analyze responses to a question asking respondents to indicate whether they view potential EU membership as a "good thing," a "bad thing," or "neither good nor bad" (refer to Appendix 1 for the exact phrasing of the question).

In the absence of a direct question about support for the EU in Eurobarometer surveys, such as "do you support EU membership," I employ a conventional question to measure support for the EU. This question has been utilized in Eurobarometer surveys since 1973 to measure individuals' attitudes towards EU membership (Hix and Hoyland 2022). This selection is further motivated by prior studies that have used the same question to conceptualize support for the EU (Anderson and Reichert 1995; Gabel 1998).

To construct the dependent variable, I recoded the survey responses as follows: affirmative support for the EU = 1, neutral opinions = 0.5, no support = 0.¹² This operationalization captures the ordinality of the responses while allowing the variable to be used in ordinary linear regression.

4.3.2 Independent Variables

The primary independent variables (IVs) in this study are economic benefit expectations (EU Benefit) and EU Identity, which aim to assess the impact of the delayed EU accession process on public opinion in North Macedonia.

IV - A: Economic benefit expectation

To measure the expectation of economic benefit, I analyze the respondents' agreement or disagreement with the statement regarding whether North Macedonia would benefit from EU membership (refer to Appendix 2 for the exact wording of the question). Those who agree will be the ones who expect to benefit from the EU integration process. Those anticipating benefits from the EU integration process are recoded as "1," and those who indicate no benefit expectations are coded as "0."¹³ This variable in the study is labeled as "EU Benefit."

The survey question concerning 'benefit' assesses whether an individual believes that the country will benefit from EU integration. Despite this question not being egocentric, prior

¹² Responses indicating 'Don't Know' (DK) for the DV were omitted from analysis, as they were non-existent in the 2007 survey and accounted for only 5 respondents in the 2022 survey. Their exclusion did not significantly alter the results.

¹³ The 2007 survey contains no 'Don't Know' (DK) responses for the EU Benefit variable. In the 2022 survey, only 19 respondents selected DK. A sensitivity analysis was conducted by coding DK responses as NA, which revealed negligible and statistically insignificant changes in the coefficient. Consequently, DK responses were retained in subsequent analyses, encoded with a value of 0.5.

studies by Damjanovski et al. (2020) have suggested a strong correlation between belief in the societal benefits of EU integration and personal expectations of gain from EU integration.

IV – B: Identity

To measure the identity variable, I utilize the question regarding personal identities and used responses on two options within one question. The main question used for my independent variable is: "How attached do you feel to the European Union?" This is labeled as "EU Identity." The question is designed not just to gauge one-dimensional attachment but to record the level of attachment across various options: attachment to the EU, the country, and the local community, and in 2022, attachment to Europe was included (see Appendix 3 for the whole question). It allows respondents to indicate their attachment to each option with differing degrees of intensity. I then recoded and reassigned the values of the variable on a scale from 0 to 1 to ensure consistency in magnitude across the variables. These are recoded as follows: not attached at all = 0, not very attached = 0.25, fairly attached = 0.75, very attached = 1.¹⁴ For the main analysis, the EU Identity variable is treated in isolation without consideration of the other identities.

The second identity variable used is attachment to North Macedonia. This is the response to the identity question on how attached respondents feel to their country, which was recoded in the same way as EU identity. This variable is used to formulate the four population sub-groups (refer to Table 1). For this purpose, I isolate extreme individuals who only identify

¹⁴ For the EU Identity variable, for the 2007 survey, no respondents selected 'Don't Know' (DK). In 2022, a minimal number of DK responses were recorded. Sensitivity analysis for attachment across all categories, with DK responses recoded as 0.5 and then as NAs, indicated no significant impact on the results. Therefore, I retained the DK responses, assigning them a value of 0.5. Alternatively, considering the minimal influence on outcomes, omitting the DK responses could also be justified.

with either north Macedonia or the EU but not with both. For this classification, individuals with moderate and extreme identity sentiments were merged, and each group was turned into a new dummy variable. The aim is to isolate the extreme segments of individuals on both ends of the spectrum—extreme nationalists and pro-Europeans with their optimistic or pessimistic economic expectations (for more details on the assigned values to each group consult Appendix 4). The individuals who do not belong in any of the four groups are unbiased towards North Macedonia and the EU and may have identified with both regions or neither. This group serves as the reference group. This approach aims to discern whether these specific groups exhibit unique attitudes toward EU support.

4.3.3 Confounding Variables

In analyzing factors influencing support for EU membership and testing the robustness of the relationship between EU identity and EU benefit with EU support, I included *age*, *community type (rural)*, and *female* as confounding variables. These variables were chosen based on their prevalence in similar studies, suggesting their potential impact on attitudes towards the EU. Including these variables allows for the examination of how demographic and socio-economic factors might affect individual perspectives on EU membership. By controlling for these variables, the analysis aims to isolate the specific effects of perceived economic benefits and identity on support for the EU, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the influence of these key determinants amidst the diversity of the surveyed population. To review the recoding process for the confounding variables used in this analysis, please consult Appendix 5.

4.4 Statistical Technique

The data analysis uses ordinary least square – OLS regression using the *lm* function in R statistical software.

4.5 Regression Model

To quantify the relationships between public support for the EU membership, the expectation for economic benefit, and attachment to the EU, alongside demographic factors, I constructed the following regression model:

$$EU\ Support_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(EU\ Benefit_{it}) + \beta_2(EU\ Identity_{it}) + \beta_3(Age_{it}) \\ + \beta_4(Female_{it}) + \beta_5(Rural_{it}) + \epsilon_{it}$$

In this equation, $EU\ Support_{it}$ is support for EU for individual I at time t . $EU\ Benefit_{it}$ is perceived economic benefits from the EU for individual I at time t . $EU\ Identity_{it}$ is the level of attachment to EU identity for individual I at time t . Age_{it} , $Female_{it}$, and $Rural_{it}$ are the confounding variables. ϵ_{it} Represents the error term, capturing the unobserved factors affecting EU support for individual I at time t . Time t is either 2007 or 2022.

This regression model addresses Hypotheses 1 and 2 and is also relevant for Hypothesis 3. The dependent variable in this model is support for the EU, with EU benefit and EU identity serving as the independent variables.

In the main analyses "don't know" responses are dropped from the analysis. As a robustness check, all regression models were re-estimated with "don't know" responses treated as missing values with the mean of the variable imputed. This resulted in no significant difference in estimates.

5 Results

5.1 Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2

Table 2: EU Support Models, 2007 and 2022

	DV: EU support	
	2007 (1)	2022 (2)
EU Benefit	0.454*** (0.034)	0.510*** (0.022)
EU Identity	0.156*** (0.032)	0.121*** (0.025)
Age	-0.0001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Female	-0.045** (0.022)	-0.009 (0.016)
Rural	0.050** (0.022)	0.006 (0.017)
Constant	0.326*** (0.046)	0.332*** (0.035)
Observations	891	1,016
R ²	0.246	0.433
Adjusted R ²	0.241	0.430
Residual Std. Error	0.321 (df = 885)	0.261 (df = 1010)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

The 1st and 2nd hypotheses assert that utilitarian expectations and identity strongly predict attitudes toward EU membership.

Hypothesis 1: *Support for EU membership is higher among those who expect some economic benefit.*

Hypothesis 2: *Support for EU membership is higher among those who identify with the EU.*

If Hypothesis 1 is true then I anticipate that the coefficient for economic benefit expectation (represented by the EU Benefit variable) will be significant and the largest among all variables in the regression estimates in both years. Table 2 represents two saturated models measuring support for the EU in 2007 and 2022. The EU benefit expectation variable is positively associated with EU support in both years. The effect is statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level in both models, indicating a robust relationship and suggesting that individuals who expect benefits from the EU are more likely to support EU membership.

If Hypothesis 2 holds true, then the EU identity variable should also be positive and significant. Table 2 shows that the EU identity variable is positively associated with support for EU membership and significant at the $p < 0.01$ level. This indicates that those who feel more attached to the EU are more supportive of EU membership, than the individuals who do not identify with the EU.

Two confounding variables were significant in 2007 at the $p < .05$ level, but neither were statistically significant in 2022. Female respondents were less likely to support EU membership in 2007, but this relationship was not significant in 2022. Living in a rural area (community type) positively correlated with EU support and significant at the $p < .05$ level. That changed in 2022 when rural residency maintained a similar coefficient, but the effect was not statistically significant. Age is not statistically significant in either year.

The overall fit of the models improved from 2007 to 2022, indicating that benefit and identity became better predictors and more salient for EU support over time. The R^2 values suggest that the 2022 model explains EU support better than the 2007 model. It indicates how much of the variance in the dependent variable (EU support) is explained by the model, which was 0.246 in 2007 and increased to 0.433 in 2022.

The regression analysis results are consistent with the predictions of Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 that both expectation of economic benefit and identity are strong predictors of public support for EU integration in North Macedonia in both years.

Table 2.1: *t*-Statistics and P-Values for Benefit and Identity

Variable	<i>t</i>-Statistic	P-Value	Significance
EU Benefit	-1.368	0.1717	
EU Identity	0.843	0.3993	

But did the strength of the association change overtime? To determine whether there was a change in the impact of EU benefit and identity, I conducted a *t*-test to compare the coefficients for the two independent variables (IVs), namely EU benefit and EU identity, to ascertain if they were statistically significantly different in 2022 compared to 2007. The results, presented in Table 2.1, indicate no statistically significant difference. This implies that the importance or impact of economic benefit expectations and identity on support for the EU has remained constant. The influence of these factors has not altered, maintaining the same strength in both years.

Table 3: EU Support Models, 2007

	DV: EU Support		
	Models		
	Unsaturated (1)	Semi-Saturated (2)	Saturated (3)
EU Benefit	0.463*** (0.034)	0.462*** (0.034)	0.454*** (0.034)
EU Identity	0.159*** (0.032)	0.160*** (0.032)	0.156*** (0.032)
Age		-0.0002 (0.001)	-0.0001 (0.001)
Rural			0.050** (0.022)
Female			-0.045** (0.022)
Constant	0.313*** (0.032)	0.323*** (0.043)	0.326*** (0.046)
Observations	894	894	891
R ²	0.238	0.238	0.246
Adjusted R ²	0.236	0.235	0.241
Residual Std. Error	0.322 (df = 891)	0.322 (df = 890)	0.321 (df = 885)

Note:

* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Table 4: EU Support Models, 2022

	DV: EU Support		
	Unsaturated (1)	Semi-Saturated (2)	Saturated (3)
EU Benefit	0.517*** (0.022)	0.511*** (0.022)	0.510*** (0.022)
EU Identity	0.123*** (0.025)	0.121*** (0.025)	0.121*** (0.025)
Age		-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Rural			0.006 (0.017)
Female			-0.009 (0.016)
Constant	0.286*** (0.019)	0.330*** (0.033)	0.332*** (0.035)
Observations	1,017	1,017	1,016
R ²	0.431	0.432	0.433
Adjusted R ²	0.430	0.431	0.430
Residual Std. Error	0.261 (df = 1014)	0.260 (df = 1013)	0.261 (df = 1010)
<i>Note:</i>		*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

To test for the robustness of the relationship of EU benefit and EU identity to EU support, I included the influence of the confounding factors in three models and ran these separately for each year. This also permits us to see whether the two primary IVs (EU benefit and EU identity) remain significant with the inclusion of these confounding factors. Table 3 (2007) and Table 4 (2022) showcase this relationship for both years: Model 1 is an unsaturated model with only the two IVs and the DV with no confounders, and Model 2 is a semi-saturated model adding only one confounder (age). The third model is fully saturated with both IVs and all confounders: age, community type (rural), and gender. For both years, the coefficient

estimates for the primary IVs are stable across all three models even when controlling for potential confounders and indicate the robustness and independence of their effects on the EU support. The relationship between the main IVs and the support for the EU is not substantially affected by factors such as age, community type, and gender. It continues to be strong and statistically significant. This strengthens the validity of the results related to the relationship between benefit and identity with support for EU membership.

5.2 Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3: *The economic benefit expectation is a stronger predictor of EU support than identity.*

Table 5: EU Support and Population Groups, 2007 and 2022

	DV: EU support	
	2007 (1)	2022 (2)
Optimistic Europeans (A)	0.358*** (0.038)	0.264*** (0.045)
Pessimistic Europeans (B)	-0.155** (0.060)	-0.112* (0.067)
Optimistic Nationalists (C)	0.255*** (0.043)	0.200*** (0.045)
Pessimistic Nationalists (D)	-0.199*** (0.055)	-0.345*** (0.047)
Constant	0.553*** (0.035)	0.632*** (0.043)
Observations	989	1,017
R ²	0.226	0.420
Adjusted R ²	0.223	0.417
Residual Std. Error	0.343 (df = 984)	0.264 (df = 1012)
<i>Note:</i>	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01	

Hypothesis 3 predicts that the expectation of economic benefit is a stronger predictor for EU support than identity. Upholding Hypothesis 3 would be evident if the results in Table 5 show that $A > C > B > D$. That is, the economically optimistic population groups, regardless of their EU and Macedonian identity (Groups A and C), will demonstrate higher overall support for EU integration than the economically pessimistic population groups (Groups B and D). This pattern would suggest that utilitarian factors have a stronger influence on support for EU membership than identity factors.

In Table 5, respondents who do not belong to either of the population groups (A, B, C, or D) are the reference group. Optimistic Europeans (A) and Optimistic Nationalists (C) – people who expect economic benefits from the EU demonstrate higher overall support for EU integration than those who do not expect such benefits. Pessimistic Europeans (B) and Pessimistic Nationalists (D) are not only less likely to support EU membership than the optimists, they are less likely than the reference group who do not identify exclusively with either North Macedonia or the EU. Optimistic Europeans (A) are the strongest supporters of EU integration and exhibit substantially higher support for EU integration than all other groups in static and dynamic comparison. Pessimistic Nationalists (D) – are the strongest opposition. Both groups, which are economically pessimistic and do not expect to benefit from EU membership, Pessimistic Europeans (B) and Pessimistic Nationalists (D), have a negative association with EU support in both years. However, we cannot draw conclusions about the pessimistic Europeans in group (B) because of the lack of significance; the number of people in this group is too small to be considered with more certainty.

To validate Hypothesis 3, I also used the same linear regression model presented in Table 2, comparing the coefficients for economic benefit expectations with those for EU Identity in both years. It shows that the coefficients' magnitude for economic benefit expectations are substantially larger than those for EU identity in both years. This result supports Hypothesis 3 as the economically optimistic population sub-groups have a positive and significant coefficient compared to the pessimistic sub-groups and the coefficients for economic benefit expectations are consistently higher than those for EU Identity, suggesting

that economic considerations have a stronger influence on support for EU membership than identity considerations.

5.3 Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 4: *The relationship between the expectation of economic benefit and support for EU membership is stronger before the delay than after.*

Table 5.1: *t*-Statistics and P-Values for Population Groups

Variable	T-Statistic	P-Value	Significance
Optimistic Europeans (A)	1.607	0.1084	
Pessimistic Europeans (B)	-0.469	0.6391	
Optimistic Nationalists (C)	0.889	0.3741	
Pessimistic Nationalists (D)	2.018	0.0438	*

In order to confirm Hypothesis 4, the analysis should imply that the magnitude of the coefficients for optimistic Europeans and optimistic nationalists should be statistically significantly greater in 2007 than in 2022. According to Table 5, the coefficient estimates for the population sub-groups linked to the economic benefit expectation appeared larger in 2007 than in 2022. Table 5.1 shows the results of *t*-tests on the coefficients for each population group across the two time periods. For three of the groups, including both optimistic groups, the tests did not reveal a statistically significant difference in the coefficient magnitude between 2007 and 2022. This implies that the utilitarian factor appears to retain the same strength in 2022 as it did in 2007. The results failed to validate Hypothesis 4, which claimed that as a determinant for EU support the economic determinant would lose its strength after the delay in opening EU

accession negotiations. But a statistically significant difference is observed in the coefficient for pessimistic nationalists (D). Pessimistic nationalists were significantly less likely to support EU membership in 2022 than in 2007. The further implications of this result are addressed in the following hypotheses.

5.4 Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 6

Hypothesis 5: *Following the delay, the proportion of the population expecting economic benefit declines.*

Hypothesis 6: *Following the delay, the proportion of the population identifying with the nation-state rather than with the EU rises.*

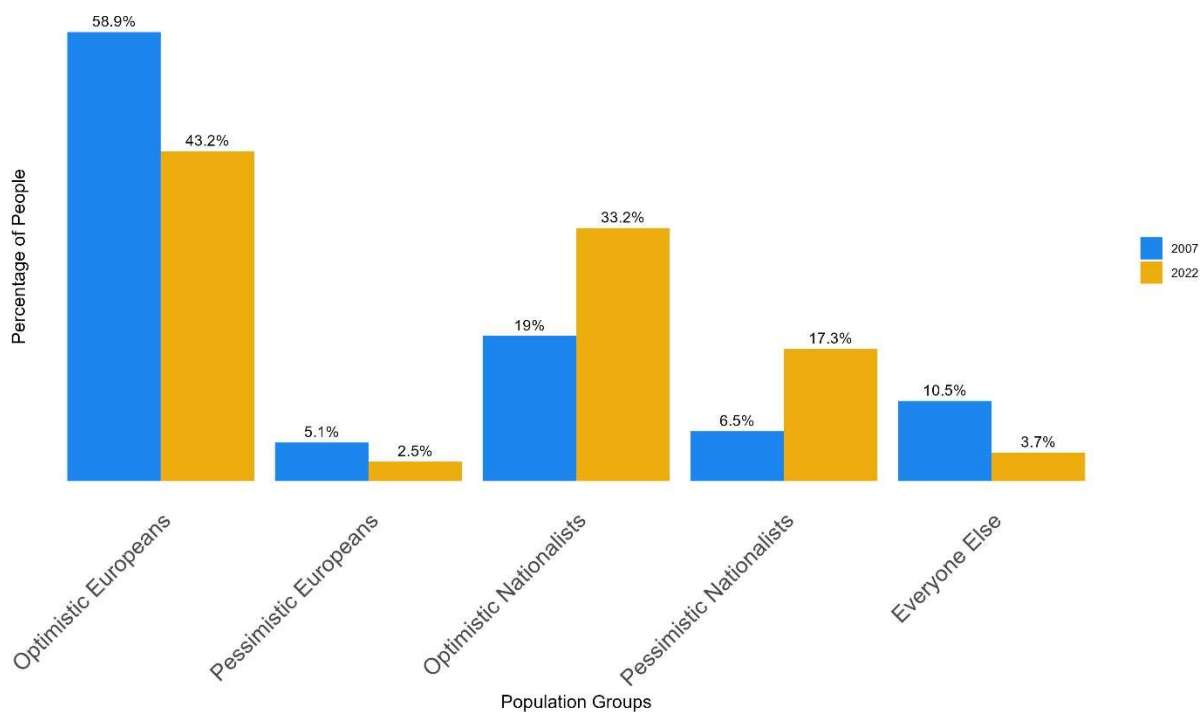


Figure 3: Distribution of Population Groups, 2007 and 2022.
(Source: Calculated from Eurobarometer 2007, 2022).

As shown in Figure 3, the effect of the delay is to decrease the number of people who moderately and strongly identify with EU. That is, the proportion of optimistic Europeans and pessimistic Europeans (A and B) declines. Simultaneously, the proportion of people who have moderate to extreme national identity – that is, optimistic and pessimistic nationalists (C and D) – increases.

In 2007 64% identified with EU but by 2022 this fell to 45.7%. Specifically, 58.9% of respondents were optimistic Europeans; in 2022, that number decreased by 15.7%. Likewise, there was a decrease of 2.6% among people who were pessimistic Europeans. Alternatively, nationalists increased from 25.5% to 50.5%. Specifically, the number of optimistic and pessimistic nationalists (groups C and D) has increased. The percentage of optimistic nationalists has increased by 14.2% and pessimistic nationalists by 10.8%.

These results support Hypothesis 6, that the percentage of nationalists has increased, but not Hypothesis 5, that the percentage of individuals who expect economic benefit has decreased.

The proportion of optimists remained relatively stable – at 77.9% in 2007 and 77.4% in 2022. The proportion of pessimists however, grew from 11.6% to 19.8%.

The pattern suggests that an important consequence of the delay on public opinion is the growth in the number of pessimistic nationalists who are also becoming significantly less supportive of joining the EU.

Figure 3 shows that pessimistic nationalists are more than doubling in number. Table 5.1 shows that being a pessimistic nationalist has a stronger negative effect on support for the EU in 2022 than in 2007.

Table 6: Pessimistic Nationalists, 2007 and 2022

	DV: Pessimistic Nationalists	
	2007 (1)	2022 (2)
Age	0.0001 (0.0005)	0.004*** (0.001)
Rural	-0.039** (0.016)	-0.040* (0.024)
Female	0.015 (0.016)	0.018 (0.023)
Constant	0.072*** (0.025)	0.005 (0.040)
Observations	1,006	1,021
R ²	0.007	0.030
Adjusted R ²	0.004	0.027
Residual Std. Error	0.247 (df = 1002)	0.374 (df = 1017)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

These results raise an additional question: what parts of North Macedonian society are drawn to the pessimistic nationalist camp? Seeing the decline in support for EU membership over time, knowing the growth in the number of pessimistic nationalists, and identifying this particular group of pessimistic nationalists as having a significant negative effect on support for the EU in 2022, the study explored the reasons that explain the change in public support within this particular group. We would like to know who these people are in 2022 to better understand the reason for the overall decrease in EU support.

In order to identify who these people are in 2022, I ran regression on the people classified as pessimistic nationalists' on the confounding variables: age, community type, and

gender. Table 6 displays a regression table with results for two linear regression models, comparing coefficients across 2007 and 2022, with the dependent variable being the "pessimistic nationalist" variable. The coefficients and significance levels in 2007 and 2022 indicate that rural residence remain consistently less likely to be pessimistic nationalists. The negative coefficient of rural (community type), and significant at the 5% level in 2007, suggests that living in a rural area is associated with a decrease in the likelihood of being a pessimistic nationalist. However, this relationship, in 2022, although still negative and similar to 2007, appears less significant. Alternatively older adults have become more likely to be pessimistic nationalists.

The coefficient of age in 2022 is positive and significant at the .01 level, indicating a positive association between age and the likelihood of being a "pessimistic nationalist" in 2022. In 2007, this age coefficient was very small and not statistically significant, indicating that age in 2007 did not strongly affect the likelihood of being a "Pessimistic Nationalist." Age appears to have become a more significant factor in 2022 compared to 2007.

Both models have low R-squared values, which implies that the confounders do not explain a large portion of the variations in the dependent variable.

Table 6.1: *t*-Statistics and P-Values for Age and Community Type

Variable	<i>t</i>-Statistic	P-Value	Significance
age	-4.240	0.0000	***
rural	0.021	0.9833	

To inspect if the difference between age and community type (rural) coefficients is statistically significantly different in 2022, I ran a *t*-test (Table 6.1). The results suggest that only the age variable coefficient is significantly different between the two years; it is significantly greater in 2022, which leads to a rejection of the null hypothesis.

Table 7: Pessimistic Nationalists and Age Groups, 2007 and 2022

	DV: Pessimistic Nationalists	
	2007 (1)	2022 (2)
25-34	0.001 (0.027)	0.017 (0.049)
35-44	0.018 (0.027)	0.089* (0.049)
45-54	0.023 (0.028)	0.087* (0.050)
55-64	-0.005 (0.029)	0.122** (0.048)
65+	0.024 (0.029)	0.180*** (0.048)
Constant	0.055*** (0.021)	0.080** (0.040)
Observations	1,009	1,022
R ²	0.002	0.024
Adjusted R ²	-0.003	0.019
Residual Std. Error	0.248 (df = 1003)	0.375 (df = 1016)
<i>Note:</i>	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01	

For a closer look at the age factor, I ran a linear regression using the age group variable, where the 15 – 24 age group serves as the constant baseline (Table 7). The results indicate a consistent trend in 2022, with a steady progression in the relationship; the older the respondents, the more likely they are pessimistic nationalists. The increase in the coefficients and their significance suggests that as the population ages, the relationship becomes more pronounced, and the likelihood of being a pessimistic nationalist increase. The fact that the 55-64 and 65+ groups were more likely to be pessimistic nationalists in 2022 but not 15 years earlier (when they were 40-49 and 50+, respectively) suggests that this is an aging rather than cohort effect. More research might be necessary to assert these definitively.

6 Conclusion

The results highlight a significant transformation in the public opinion of North Macedonia towards EU integration, spurred by the protracted delay in the accession negotiations. Despite a historical trend of strong support for EU membership, there has been a discernible shift towards pessimistic nationalism and evolving perceptions regarding the economic benefits of EU membership. This study does not suggest a drop in public support for EU integration below a majority but rather identifies a potential risk in the erosion of positive attitudes due to increasing pessimistic nationalist sentiments towards the EU and growing unwillingness within the population to take a stand on EU membership.

A notable limitation of the surveys are their cross-sectional rather than longitudinal nature, which restricts our ability to observe changes in individuals' attitudes over time. The

surveys I used do not permit us to observe changes because this is not a longitudinal study with the same people being surveyed over time. The use of longitudinal data tracking the same individuals across different periods could provide deeper insights into how prolonged delays in EU accession negotiations directly impact public sentiment.

Future extensions of this research could involve a comparative analysis with Croatia, the only Western Balkan country to complete the accession process, to contextualize North Macedonia's experience within a broader framework of EU integration efforts. Croatia joined the EU in 2013 after undergoing a moderately lengthy accession process. While no two accession processes are identical due to differences in social, cultural, political, and historical contexts, Croatia could serve as a good comparison due to its geographical proximity to North Macedonia and its cultural similarities. Both countries faced similar challenges related to Europeanization, including issues with the rule of law and political stability. Croatia too, encountered delays during its EU integration process. Public opinion data from Croatia's pre-accession period without delays can be contrasted with survey data from North Macedonia. This comparison could deepen our understanding of the effects of EU integration and accession processes on public opinion and support for EU integration.

Moreover, a refined focus on socio-economic determinants, including employment status and occupation types, could enrich our understanding of the utilitarian expectations from EU membership. I would expect that people with a college degree or post-graduate education will be more supportive of the EU. The same should be true for people with professional careers compared to blue collar labor. By looking closer into respondents' employment and professional background, future research might uncover more insights into how these factors

influence attitudes toward EU integration. This would refine the logic of the utilitarian theories regarding support for the EU.

Further study could explore how support for EU membership varies among different ethnic groups in North Macedonia. The country has a substantial Albanian minority – 29.52% of the population according to the 2021 North Macedonia Census of Population, Households, and Dwellings (State Statistical Office 2022). This second-largest ethnic group is distinct from ethnic Macedonians in terms of language, religion, and culture, making ethnicity an important confounding variable. The Albanian population's unique nationalistic sentiments could lead to different attitudes towards EU support. Previous research, such as those by Damjanovski (2022, 2023) and Damjanovski and Kirchner (2019), have revealed interethnic gaps and divergences, identifying a higher proportion of Albanians in favor of EU membership. This study does not account for different ethnicities in its data analysis due to the limitations in the available data.

In conclusion, while the delay in EU accession negotiations has undeniably impacted public support for EU integration in North Macedonia, the evolving dynamics of nationalism and economic perception underscore the importance and complexity of public sentiment in candidate countries. Addressing these challenges and understanding the nuanced shifts in public opinion requires different approaches, combining cross-national comparisons and detailed socio-economic analyses. By doing so, we can gain deeper understanding of public opinion and foster a more engaged and supportive public discourse on EU integration.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

The original question for the dependent variable 'Support for EU Membership':

QA12A in EB 68.1 (2007) and QA7b in 96.3 (2022): "Generally speaking, do you think that North Macedonia's membership of the European Union would be a good thing, a bad thing, neither, or Don't know?"

Coded as: 0 = a bad thing; 0.5 = neither good or bad; 1 = a good thing

*(*no 'don't know' responses)*

Appendix 2

The original question used to construct the IV' EU Benefit:

Q13B in the EB 68.1 (2007) and QA7c in the EB 96.3 (2022): "Taking everything into account, would you say that North Macedonia would benefit or not from being a member of the European Union?"

Coded as: 0 = would not benefit; 0.5 = don't know; 1 = would benefit

Appendix 3

The original question for the IV' EU Identity:

QA10 found in EB 68.1 (2007), and QC1a in EB 96.3 (2022) is the following: "People may feel different levels of attachment to their village, town or city, to their country or to the European Union. Please tell me how attached you feel to: 1. Your city/town/village; 2. Our country; 3. Our community; 4. European Union. (* In 2022, the option for our country was replaced with the option for attachment to Europe.) Our country refers to attachment to North Macedonia (NMK).

Coded as: 0 = not at all attached; 0.25 = not very attached; 0.75 = fairly attached; 1 = very attached.

Appendix 4

Coding population groups:

All four groups are coded as dummy variables and are determined with the following formulae:

Optimistic Europeans:

EU benefit = 1, attached to EU = 0.75 and 1, attached to country = 0 and = 0.25

Pessimistic Europeans

EU benefit = 0, attached to EU = 0.75 and = 1, NMK identity = 0 and = 0.25

Optimistic nationalists

EU benefit = 1, attached to EU = 0 and = 0.25, NMK identity = 0.75 and = 1

Pessimistic nationalists

EU benefit = 0, attached to EU = 0 and = 0.25, NMK identity = 0.75 and = 1

Appendix 5

Coding confounding variables:

Age, female, and rural, were recoded into a format suitable for statistical analysis, employing one-hot encoding technique to convert categorical variables into a binary form;

Female: a dummy variable - coded (1) for females, (0) for males;

Age is a continuous variable coded as the exact age according to the self-reported number.

I also used the age variable grouped into six categories (15-24, 25 – 34, 35 – 44, 45 – 54, 55 – 64, and 65 +). I recoded this variable into dummies.

Community type - The community variable is useful for indicating whether the respondent lives in a rural or urban area. That can give us more insights into which demographic group expects more economic benefit or has more national identity. There are three answer options for this question: rural/village, small or mid-size town, and large town. Upon running regression, I found statistical significance and a similar negative coefficient between rural/village and small or mid-size town categories. This led me to collapse rural/village into one rural category and turn into a dummy variable.