Band 14 / 2025

Security Perceptions and Their Impact on Regional Cooperation in South East Europe

Predrag Jureković (Ed.)

Study Group Information

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48th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group "Regional Stability in South East Europe

14/2025
Vienna, November 2025

Imprint:

Copyright, Production, Publisher:
Republic of Austria / Federal Ministry of Defence
Rossauer Lände 1
1090 Vienna, Austria

Edited by:
National Defence Academy
Command
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Vienna, Austria

In co-operation with:
PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes
Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Study Group Information

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November 2025
ISBN 978-3-903548-19-0

Printing:
ReproZ W 25-6978
Stiftgasse 2a
1070 Vienna, Austria

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Security Perceptions in North Macedonia: Implications for Regional Cooperation in South East Europe

Aleksandar Pavleski, Rade Rajkovchevski

Introduction

North Macedonia occupies a strategic position in the heart of the Balkans, bridging Southeast and Central Europe. Its security perceptions are deeply shaped by its multiethnic composition promoting tolerance and instability at the same time, historical disputes and its Euro-Atlantic integration's pathway. Understanding how North Macedonia perceives its neighbors and strategic partners is critical for analyzing the impact of these perceptions on its security policies and regional cooperation efforts.

The country's relationships with neighboring states have been a major determinant of its foreign policy. The lack of maturity and assertiveness in Macedonian diplomacy, combined with historical grievances, has contributed to North Macedonia's prolonged wait at the door of the European Union. Although it achieved NATO membership in 2020, this success came only after a painful process of balancing national interests with external demands (where United States of America played the key role), most notably through the Prespa Agreement (signed on 17 June 2018) with Greece, which involved a constitutional name change. Further challenges emerged with Bulgaria, where disputes over language, identity, and history delayed EU accession negotiations despite the signing of a so-called Friendship Treaty (on 1 August 2017). These developments have left a significant mark on North Macedonia's internal political landscape and public perceptions of regional cooperation, particularly regarding the costs and benefits of compromise in securing international integration.

This paper explores these dynamics, highlighting the opportunities and risks that arise from the evolving security environment, the shifting balance between cooperative and competitive regional relations, and the internal challenges North Macedonia faces in maintaining national cohesion, diplomatic credibility, and strategic alignment with Euro-Atlantic structures

and developments hindering cooperative security frameworks in South-East Europe.

Perception of Neighbours in the Area of Security Policy

The perception of neighboring countries significantly influences North Macedonia's security posture. Relations with Albania and Kosovo are generally positive on an official level, driven by strong ethnic Albanian ties within North Macedonia itself. Cooperation with Albania is viewed as essential for internal stability and regional projects, particularly in the context of NATO and EU integration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, 2020). Political leaders from the Albanian community in North Macedonia maintain close connections with Albanian and Kosovo's officials, with mutual visits and public endorsements being common. This relationship, while enhancing regional connectivity, also at times sends mixed political messages that are perceived domestically as undermining interethnic cohabitation.

Several instances illustrate this dynamic. For example, statements by former **Albania**'s Prime Minister Sali Berisha and former President Ilir Meta emphasizing the concept of "natural Albania" were interpreted as provocative within Macedonian society (Meta, 2018; Berisha, 2015). In 2020, Kosovo's former President Hashim Thaçi openly supported greater rights for Albanians in North Macedonia, which was criticized for interfering in internal affairs. Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama's frequent visits to Tetovo and other majority-Albanian community's areas, such as his 2021 visit ahead of North Macedonia's local elections, were seen as overt political endorsements of ethnic Albanian parties, raising concerns about external influence on internal political dynamics (Balkan Insight, 2021). Similarly, Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti has on several occasions expressed public support for ethnic Albanian political initiatives in North Macedonia, including statements in 2021 encouraging Albanians to assert their "full rights", which were perceived as undermining the delicate balance of interethnic relations (Telegrafi, 2021). From other aspect, his visit to the municipalities of Tetovo and Chair in August 2023, is also perceived from the perspective of his message to the international public that his influence does not end at the borders of Kosovo, in order for this to be seriously taken into account by the 'big ones' in their treatment of Pristina in the context of relations

and dialogue with Belgrade (DW, 2023). The possible accuracy of the indicated perception would represent additional confirmation about the complexity of certain political and security dynamics, as well as about their serious spillover effect at the regional level. Additionally, some Albanian ambassadors in Skopje, such as Ambassador Fatos Reka (2019), have issued statements emphasizing ethnic solidarity over civic unity, further complicating interethnic trust.

The government of North Macedonia, aware of the sensitivity of these issues, has generally reacted with diplomatic caution. Official responses have often downplayed the political significance of these statements and visits, emphasizing bilateral friendship and regional cooperation instead of confrontation. This cautious approach aims to prevent escalation of tensions internally while maintaining the country's commitment to a multiethnic democratic model and preserving its Euro-Atlantic integration path.

Kosovo is perceived with a mix of solidarity and caution. While ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia strongly support Kosovo's statehood and normalization, significant concerns persist regarding border security and the potential spillover of political tensions. A critical issue affecting perceptions was Kosovo's refusal to extradite individuals involved in the 2012 Easter massacre near Skopje, despite convictions by North Macedonian courts (International Crisis Group, 2021), but also regarding the 2015 cases investigating the involvement of people from Kosovo in the attack on the police border station in Goshince and the murder of police officers in the operation to arrest the group in Kumanovo. This refusal deepened mistrust among ethnic Macedonians, reinforcing fears that Kosovo might remain a source of destabilization. Moreover, the memory of the 2001-armed conflict between Macedonian forces and Albanian insurgents, many of whom reportedly had connections with Kosovo, continues to influence public perception of Kosovo as a potential security threat.

Relations with **Serbia** are more complex. Although diplomatic relations are stable and trade ties are strong, historical sensitivities regarding Kosovo's status and competing national narratives occasionally cause friction (Bieber, 2020). However, a positive impulse to bilateral relations with Serbia has been provided by the resolution of the decades-long church dispute between the Macedonian and Serbian Orthodox Churches in June 2022. In

addition, as a basis for deepening cooperation and for strengthening and improving relations, stand out: mutual friendly feelings of citizens of both countries, approaching membership of European Union, and the future development of democratic processes in both countries.

Cooperation frameworks such as the "Open Balkan" Initiative, established in 2021, offer avenues for improving trust, regional economic integration, and labor mobility. However, the implementation of "Open Balkan" remains under construction, and there is an ongoing lack of clarity regarding its full implications. While political leaders emphasize the benefits of open borders, mutual recognition of documents, and a shared labor market, the operationalization of these commitments reveals significant challenges. Still, during the election campaign for the 2024 parliamentary elections in North Macedonia, the issue of reconsidering the role, as well as, about the country's further membership in this Initiative, was raised by the former ruling Albanian party – DUI. According to the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, the "Open Balkans" initiative is not complete, since it does not include all six countries in the Western Balkans, and furthermore, its initial goal of reconciliation and trust-building, according to him, has been seriously undermined by the events in the village of Banjska in Kosovo on 24 September, 2023 (DW, 2024).

One major concern relates to the costs of harmonizing IT infrastructure across participant states, necessary for enabling free movement and data sharing in real-time. North Macedonia's administrative capacities and cybersecurity standards may require substantial upgrades, raising concerns about financial sustainability and data protection (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022). Similarly, the opening of the labor market without fully harmonized regulations could lead to labor imbalances, brain drain from smaller economies like North Macedonia, and social tensions, particularly if local workers perceive competition from cheaper or more mobile labor forces (World Bank, 2023).

Moreover, while "Open Balkan" is presented as an inclusive regional project, some sectors of Macedonian society perceive it skeptically, fearing that deeper economic integration without clear political safeguards could favor the larger economies (especially Serbia) and potentially reinforce regional asymmetries rather than overcome them. These apprehensions further in-

fluence public perceptions of neighbors and impact political debates regarding the country's strategic orientation. However, it can be expected that future Macedonian-Serbian relations will increasingly be viewed through the prism of general regional cooperation, parallel to the bilateral relations of the two countries, which as such will mean more to these countries themselves, than they will be significant for the EU and for other regional countries and partners.

An official bilateral cooperation with **Bulgaria** is based on a broad framework of concluded agreements in various spheres. Namely, starting from 20 August 1992, when the first agreement between the governments of the two countries for the opening of consulates generally was signed, until 23 November 2017, when the agreement on mutual cooperation in case of disasters was signed, the indicated framework consisting of a total of 34 agreements were subject to ratification. However, despite the broad framework for initiating bilateral cooperation and improving bilateral relations, the perception is that the effects of it are not at a satisfactory level. Such a perception has been particularly present in the last 5 years. On the Macedonian side, there is a perception that Bulgaria is using its EU membership to exert unjustified pressure on North Macedonia in relation to identity issues (history, language, culture, etc.) and hence to block its European integration process, while the Bulgarian position is that North Macedonia is not respecting the Friendship Treaty signed in 2017, as well that the continuation of its European integration is determined by the constitutional amendments and the inclusion of Bulgarians in the Macedonian Constitution.

In October 2019, Bulgaria warned that it would block North Macedonia's path to the EU unless certain historical and educational issues were resolved, while in 2020 it vetoed North Macedonia's EU membership. To resolve the issue, the "French Proposal" emerged, which was hotly debated by both sides. However, in the end, the North Macedonian parliament approved the French proposal and as a result, North Macedonia conditionally (given that there is a protocol on bilateral issues, which serves as a detailed roadmap for future talks) began accession negotiations with the EU. But of course, the process is not over and there is still much to be done and many new challenges that could have a serious impact on the socio-economic well-being of both countries (Trenovski, 2022).

Despite the current burdened bilateral relations, cooperation between the two countries is taking place at a satisfactory level within the framework of regional and international initiatives and alliances, especially within NATO. The perception of Bulgaria's obstruction of North Macedonia's EU integration aligns with a broader pattern of using the enlargement process as leverage to address unresolved historical and identity-related grievances. Bulgaria's insistence on constitutional amendments in North Macedonia, particularly the inclusion of Bulgarians as a constituent people, appears to extend beyond standard EU conditionality and reflects a more profound historical and political agenda.

This approach is rooted in long-standing national narratives tied to Bulgaria's diminished role before, during, and after World War II, as well as its contested historical interpretation of the Macedonian identity. A significant turning point in this context was the Bled Agreement of 1947, under which Yugoslavia and Bulgaria – then both under communist regimes – attempted to institutionalize cooperation and mutual recognition, including tacit acknowledgment of Macedonian identity in the Pirin region. However, following the Tito-Stalin split and shifting geopolitical alliances, Bulgaria reversed course, denying the existence of a Macedonian minority within its borders.

To this day, Bulgaria does not officially recognize the Macedonian minority, despite numerous judgments by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR, 2024). At least 14 ECtHR rulings have found Bulgaria in violation of the rights of individuals and organizations advocating for the recognition of a Macedonian identity. These rulings pertain to freedom of association, expression, and minority rights, yet Bulgaria has failed to implement them, raising serious concerns about its own compliance with European legal standards.

In contrast, North Macedonia has demonstrated commitment to good neighborly relations through the Friendship Treaty signed in 2017, its willingness to engage in joint historical commissions, and its strategic compromises under the Prespa Agreement with Greece, including the constitutional name change – one of the most significant concessions made by any EU candidate country in recent memory.

The imbalance in expectations and obligations – where North Macedonia is expected to make repeated concessions while Bulgaria disregards international legal rulings and fails to reciprocate in good faith – undermines the credibility of the EU as an honest broker. It also threatens to turn the enlargement process into a platform for bilateral score-settling, rather than a structured path based on the Copenhagen criteria and shared European values.

Unless the EU establishes firm mechanisms to prevent unilateral and identity-driven blockages, it risks eroding trust not only in North Macedonia but across the Western Balkans. Guaranteeing the rule of law, minority rights, and mutual respect must be enforced equally among all member and candidate states, to preserve the legitimacy and effectiveness of the enlargement process.

A characteristic of bilateral relations with **Greece** is that starting from 1999 (when the first bilateral agreement for the construction and management of an oil pipeline was signed), until 2 April 2019, when the last Agreement for the opening of a new border crossing between the two countries was signed, the framework for official bilateral cooperation, which is subject to ratification, consists of a total of 5 agreements. Such a situation is in some ways expected, considering the decades-long dispute that the two countries had over the name Macedonia, which was politically resolved with the signing of the Prespa Agreement in 2018. It is precisely the aforementioned dispute that represents a major obstacle and challenge to the development of both bilateral cooperation, as well as the development of negative perceptions between both countries. Has the situation significantly changed after the signing of the Prespa Agreement? Even though North Macedonia became a member of NATO, the perceptions in Macedonian society are that the Macedonian side in the period after the signing of the Agreement took its implementation too seriously, in contrast to the more reserved approach of Greece in this regard. The general perception is that the Agreement calmed tensions between the two countries, mainly on the political level, while its effects are limited in reducing cultural tensions between the people of both countries. As result, there is recent progress in opening the border crossing in Prespa region and starting the construction works on new gas interconnector.

Bosnia and Herzegovina and **Montenegro** are perceived positively, as partners in regional initiatives and Euro-Atlantic integration efforts. Shared challenges in state-building, ethnic reconciliation, and economic reform foster a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022).

Impact of Perceptions on Strategic Documents and National Security Policy

North Macedonia's key strategic documents reflect an emphasis on cooperative security while recognizing latent risks from regional instability. The National Security Strategy (2019) identifies the Western Balkans' stability as a vital interest and explicitly names regional cooperation as a strategic priority (Government of North Macedonia, 2019).

However, these documents also highlight potential threats stemming from unresolved bilateral issues and ethno-nationalistic tensions in neighboring countries. The Defense Strategy (2020), drafted after NATO accession, underlines the need for interoperability and joint operations with allies, suggesting a move toward collective security frameworks rather than bilateral threat assessments (Ministry of Defense of North Macedonia, 2020).

The perception of Serbia and Kosovo features more subtly in North Macedonia's strategic documents. Rather than openly addressing these bilateral tensions and challenges, strategic language focuses on "fragile democratic processes" and "governance challenges" in the region (Government of North Macedonia, 2019). This indirect approach reflects a pragmatic effort to navigate the sensitivities involved in relationships with both countries. By emphasizing regional instability without naming specific threats, North Macedonia seeks to avoid exacerbating tensions and remains diplomatically neutral, positioning itself as a facilitator of regional cooperation.

However, this language in the strategic documents also reveals the underlying tensions and concerns that inform the country's security posture. The avoidance of direct references to Serbia and Kosovo may indicate the delicate balancing act the government faces: addressing the risks of instability without overtly alienating either neighbor. While North Macedonia's NATO accession is framed as a pivotal achievement for regional security,

there is an implicit acknowledgment that the unresolved issues between Serbia and Kosovo continue to present a security risk – albeit in a more abstract and indirect form. This indirect framing allows the country to present a strong commitment to peace and cooperation, while quietly recognizing the long-term destabilizing effects of these unresolved issues on broader regional security.

In practice, this subtle approach is reflected in the country's defense and foreign policy actions. For example, North Macedonia's participation in NATO-led missions often positions it as a peacekeeping contributor and conflict-prevention actor, rather than directly confronting or taking sides in the Serbia-Kosovo dispute. Additionally, North Macedonia has actively promoted dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo within the framework of the EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina talks, positioning itself as a neutral party focused on the overall stability of the region rather than engaging in the bilateral disputes of its neighbors.

This calculated diplomatic ambiguity in North Macedonia's strategic documents – balancing cooperative security principles with the realities of regional tensions – highlights the nation's desire to maintain its role as a bridge between East and West, while ensuring its security policy is flexible enough to respond to shifting regional dynamics. The challenge remains, however, in managing perceptions domestically, especially given the ethnic composition of the country and the lingering effects of the 2001 conflict, where domestic ethnic Albanians fought alongside ethnic Albanians from Kosovo.

This nuanced security policy further underscores the complex interplay between domestic political realities, regional security concerns, and the broader international context in which North Macedonia is embedded. It remains to be seen whether this strategy will be able to withstand the pressures of a more assertive regional security environment or whether the latent risks posed by ethno-nationalism and unresolved conflicts will eventually require a more direct confrontation in North Macedonia's security discourse.

Impact on Regional and International Security Initiatives and Peace Support Missions

North Macedonia actively participates in a broad range of regional and international security initiatives, reinforcing its commitment to cooperative security and regional stability. Engagement through platforms such as the U.S.-Adriatic Charter Initiative (A3 established in 2003, lately A5 [in 2008], in which besides North Macedonia, Albania and Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro were involved) and South-East Europe Defense Ministerial (SEDM) helped in fostering interoperability, mutual trust, and strategic dialogue among neighboring countries (Adriatic Charter, 2021).

Participation in NATO-led missions has been central to North Macedonia's security policy. Contributions to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) operation serve multiple purposes: strengthening military professionalism, affirming North Macedonia's status as a responsible NATO ally, and building trust among regional actors (NATO, 2023). However, the involvement in KFOR also carries symbolic weight, particularly in managing domestic perceptions related to Kosovo. While ethnic Albanians within North Macedonia view this engagement positively, ethnic Macedonians sometimes perceive it with caution, given historical memories of the 2001 conflict and lingering concerns over potential cross-border security threats.

North Macedonia's sustained support for EUFOR's Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects a consistent policy of preventive diplomacy and peace support operations (Ministry of Defense of North Macedonia, 2025). The country's participation underscores a broader strategic vision: maintaining stability in fragile neighboring states reduces potential spillover risks and strengthens its Euro-Atlantic credentials.

At the same time, evolving regional cooperation frameworks have played a crucial role in strengthening disaster risk management efforts across South-Eastern Europe. The Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Initiative for South-Eastern Europe (DPPI SEE), established nearly two decades ago, continues to serve as a cornerstone for fostering collaboration among national civil protection authorities (DPPI SEE, 2024). Additionally, the "Open Balkan" Initiative, although broader in scope, includes disaster protection and emergency management as one of its key pillars of cooperation

(Open Balkan Declaration, 2021). Equally significant is the contribution of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), whose Strategy 2030 explicitly prioritizes disaster risk reduction as a critical area of regional engagement (RCC, 2023). Together, these initiatives form the backbone of coordinated efforts to enhance resilience, promote mutual assistance, and address emerging disaster risks and threats across the region. Their combined impact reflects a growing recognition that transboundary challenges require joint, strategic, and sustained action to safeguard communities and support sustainable development.

While North Macedonia officially supports Open Balkan as a means of fostering economic growth and regional integration, societal skepticism remains. Although Open Balkan and the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) provide frameworks for economic cooperation, historical sensitivities and competing national narratives persist below the surface. North Macedonia carefully calibrates its diplomatic messaging, seeking to maintain cooperative relations with Serbia without alienating domestic constituencies sensitive to issues surrounding Kosovo and broader regional dynamics.

Security perceptions, therefore, shape not only North Macedonia's participation in regional security and economic initiatives but also the country's broader strategic calculations. By engaging constructively while remaining vigilant regarding potential risks, North Macedonia attempts to position itself as both a contributor to regional security and a guardian of its national interests.

In this context, North Macedonia's dual-track strategy – strengthening ties with Western-led institutions like NATO and the EU while cautiously engaging in regional initiatives like Open Balkan – illustrates its pragmatic approach. It reflects an understanding that while cooperative security offers important opportunities, it also demands careful management of unresolved regional tensions and internal vulnerabilities.

Opportunities and Risks for North Macedonia in the Evolving Security Environment

The evolving security environment in South-East Europe presents both significant opportunities and critical risks for North Macedonia. The coun-

try's strategic positioning – both geographically and politically – offers avenues for strengthening its regional and international standing, while simultaneously exposing it to vulnerabilities rooted in historical, ethnic, and political complexities.

Opportunities

North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration has significantly enhanced its security guarantees. NATO membership (achieved in 2020) has reduced fear-based perceptions regarding threats to national sovereignty stemming from interethnic tensions and neighboring ambitions, while simultaneously promoting a cooperative approach to regional security (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, 2020).

Additionally, North Macedonia's participation in regional crisis management initiatives, including joint disaster response exercises and pandemic coordination efforts, reflects a maturing security culture in South-East Europe (Regional Cooperation Council, 2022). These engagements have improved mutual trust among neighbors and demonstrated the potential for practical cooperation beyond political rhetoric.

Economic initiatives, particularly the Open Balkan Initiative, provide platforms for de-securitizing interstate relations through growing economic interdependence. Furthermore, active involvement in regional security platforms – such as the Adriatic Charter (A5) and the South-East Europe Defense Ministerial (SEDM) – enables North Macedonia to engage in strategic dialogue with its neighbors and foster interoperability, particularly in military and security sectors. Such participation amplifies the country's voice in shaping the regional security agenda and building its diplomatic resilience.

Risks

However, these opportunities are closely shadowed by significant risks that require careful management.

Bilateral disputes continue to present major challenges. Historical grievances and identity-related disputes, particularly with Bulgaria, risk reigniting

nationalist narratives both domestically and regionally. The experience of name change's negotiations and the sensitive bilateral agreements with Bulgaria have already demonstrated how historical issues can deeply affect North Macedonia's external relations and internal stability.

The fragility of neighboring states, especially the potential of instability coming from Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, adds another layer of uncertainty. Political instability in these countries could destabilize the broader perception of regional security and have direct consequences for North Macedonia, particularly in its ethnically mixed areas (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Moreover, external influence operations, notably Russia's disinformation campaigns, aim to undermine trust in Western institutions and fuel division within the region (European External Action Service, 2022). North Macedonia remains particularly vulnerable to these narratives given its internal political polarization and unresolved societal cleavages.

Even within economic cooperation projects like the Open Balkan Initiative, risks persist regarding its implementation and commitments of the countries involved. While the initiative holds economic promise, it also entails technical and institutional challenges that remain insufficiently addressed.

The latest regional initiatives for cooperation in the military-security sphere may pose a serious challenge to the proclaimed neutral approach of North Macedonia towards managing and resolving open bilateral issues in the Western Balkans. Namely, in March 2025, Croatia, Albania and Kosovo signed a declaration on deepening cooperation in the field of security and defense. Without giving specific details, the defense ministers of the three countries said that they would increase the interoperability of their armies through education, training and joint exercises, as well as that they would engage in the fight against hybrid threats but also coordinate policies for Euro-Atlantic integration. Serbia considered it as a step that "undermines regional stability" and as a threat to its "territorial integrity", while Kosovo's position is that such initiative should not be seen as a threat to anyone but rather should be accepted as a message that the three states will be united in the face of any challenge or threat. However, the response from

Serbia came in a short period of time, through the Treaty of Military Cooperation with Hungary, signed in April 2025. Despite its geopolitical significance, the most sensitive scenario of the aforementioned process would be if such agreements initiate a further regional arms race, which, combined with the previously mentioned security risks, both at the national (internal instability) and regional level (open bilateral disputes), would represent a new serious test of security and stability for both, the countries themselves and the entire Western Balkan region.

Finally, internal ethnic dynamics pose an enduring risk. Political messages from Albania and Kosovo sometimes unintentionally fuel ethnic tensions within North Macedonia. If left unmanaged, these tensions could weaken the country's internal cohesion and complicate its regional engagement efforts.

Balancing Act

Navigating this complex environment demands a careful balancing act. North Macedonia must continue to deepen its Euro-Atlantic ties while actively engaging in regional platforms, carefully managing bilateral disputes through diplomacy, and strengthening societal resilience against disinformation and ethnic polarization. Investments in cybersecurity, strategic communication, and inclusive governance will be crucial in mitigating risks and fully exploiting the opportunities presented by the evolving regional security landscape.

Conclusion and Recommendations

North Macedonia's security perceptions are increasingly framed by its Euro-Atlantic orientation and strategic commitment to a stable, cooperative Western Balkans. NATO membership and the pursuit of EU accession have elevated cooperative security frameworks over traditional, threat-centric views. Nonetheless, historical legacies, unresolved bilateral disputes, and evolving regional dynamics – particularly concerning regional hotspots continue to shape the country's strategic environment.

To fully exploit the opportunities and mitigate the risks identified, North Macedonia should pursue the following priorities:

- **Strengthen Multilateral and Regional Platforms:** Sustain and deepen participation in multilateral frameworks such as NATO, the Adriatic Charter (A5), SEDM, and EUFOR missions. Proactively asses' national interests through shaping the future development of initiatives like Open Balkan. It can ensure they contribute to genuine regional integration without exacerbating asymmetries or governance gaps.
- **Enhance Strategic Communication and Societal Resilience:** Invest in comprehensive strategic communication strategies to counter disinformation campaigns, particularly those targeting ethnic relations and Western alliances. Strengthening media literacy, building institutional transparency, and promoting inclusive national narratives will be crucial in maintaining societal cohesion.
- **Promote Confidence-Building with Neighbors:** Expand bilateral and regional confidence-building measures with neighboring countries and other partners where historical grievances persist. Initiatives could include joint cultural projects, youth exchanges, and security sector cooperation, aimed at closing perception gaps between political elites and wider societies.
- **Anticipate and Address Emerging Risks:** Develop early warning mechanisms to monitor political instability in neighboring fragile states and prepare contingency strategies to mitigate spillover effects. Attention should also be given to cybersecurity risks associated with deeper regional connectivity and open data flows.
- **Leverage Economic Cooperation for Stability:** Align regional economic projects with strategic political goals, ensuring that economic interdependence complements and strengthens political trust rather than creating new dependencies or inequalities.

The evolving security architecture in Southeast Europe presents both significant opportunities and considerable challenges. North Macedonia's constructive, proactive, and resilient engagement will remain vital not only for its national interests but also for fostering a more cooperative, stable, and secure regional environment.

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