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## **FOREIGN POLICY RELATIONS BETWEEN SERBIA AND NORTH MACEDONIA 2006–2025.\*\***

### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to analyze the foreign policy relations between Serbia and North Macedonia in the period from 2006 to 2025, specifically from the moment Serbia reestablished its statehood after Montenegro's secession. In this context, the first part of the paper offers a brief overview of the historical background of relations between Belgrade and Skopje during the final phase of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, i.e., during the era of the joint state FRY/SCG from 1991 to 2006. The central part of the paper focuses on the political, security, economic, and cultural relations between the two states in the period following Serbia's renewed statehood. Specifically, through the issues of recognition of the so-called Kosovo,\* the church dispute, then the status of national minorities but also participation in joint programs and initiatives, economic ties and interdependence, as well as humanitarian cooperation, which were the most topical and which aroused the most interest in political and media terms in both countries, we will try to consider the development of bilateral relations between Serbia and North Macedonia. They are highly complex, primarily due to issues of national and spiritual identity, as well as a shared cultural heritage,

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\* All references to Kosovo in this document should be understood to be in the context of United Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

which has served both as a point of connection and a barrier to the national emancipation of Macedonians on one side and the modern understanding of Serbian identity on the other. The entire period of the dissolution of the former common state was marked by very poor bilateral relations, which culminated in Skopje's recognition of the secession of Albanian separatists in Priština in 2008. In recent years, relations between Serbia and North Macedonia have been warming on both the political and economic fronts, despite a change of government in Skopje in 2017 and the country's accession to NATO in 2020. A particularly significant turning point was the recognition of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by the Serbian Orthodox Church in 2022. The paper also explores the prospects for future relations between the two countries.

**Keywords:** Serbia, North Macedonia, Balkans, Church, NATO, identity

## INTRODUCTION

Serbia and North Macedonia are neighboring countries with many similarities. In terms of foreign policy, both countries are strategically committed to membership in the European Union, and at the same time, they are members of numerous regional organizations and initiatives, such as the Open Balkans, the CEFTA agreement, the Berlin Process, etc. On the other hand, while North Macedonia is a member of the NATO pact, Serbia pursues a proclaimed policy of military neutrality, with participation in the NATO program called Partnership for Peace. Although the statehood of North Macedonia was built on territory that once belonged to the internationally recognized Kingdom of Serbia, it was achieved following the successful realization of separatist aspirations and tendencies during the Yugoslav era and the full affirmation of a new Macedonian national identity in the, until then, majority Serbian ethnic area,<sup>1</sup> towards the end of World War II (Ilić 2024, 56). In this regard, it is no surprise that the prevailing opinion today is that these are the closest nations in the region, and interethnic trust in the ex-Yugoslav and Balkan space is highest between Serbs and Macedonians (Raković 2015, 221–222).

<sup>1</sup> Many ethnologists have written about this. See also: Erdeljanović 1925.

After the secession of North Macedonia<sup>2</sup> from the SFR Yugoslavia on September 8, 1991, relations between Belgrade and Skopje were not immediately established. This only occurred after the end of the civil war in the western parts of the former state in 1996. At that time, the FR Yugoslavia recognized its southern neighbor under the name of the Republic of Macedonia,<sup>3</sup> which provoked strong reactions from the Greek side (Todić 2018, 84–85).

After secession of Montenegro in 2006, the Republic of Serbia maintained its embassy in Skopje and continued to apply all previously ratified agreements with North Macedonia. Therefore, there was no need to reestablish diplomatic relations between Belgrade and Skopje, as they had already been considered established since 1996. At the very beginning of Serbia's renewed statehood, Belgrade faced an existential challenge. At that time, negotiations on the status of Serbia's southern province were already underway in Vienna, but they ultimately failed following the rejection of the Ahtisaari Plan and the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence by Albanian separatists. This issue also had significant repercussions on the political scene in Macedonia, considering the large percentage of the Albanian population and the consensus among all relevant Albanian political parties on the matter.<sup>4</sup> In coordination with Montenegro and the United States, the Macedonian government<sup>5</sup> made the decision to recognize the so-called Kosovo on October 9, 2008. The Serbian government responded the next day by withdrawing hospitality to Macedonian ambassador Aleksandar Vasilevski and delivering a protest note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Skopje, requesting that the FYROM reconsider its decision (Čolak i Roknić 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The current constitutional name of this state will be used in this paper. It should be noted that this country was admitted to the UN under the name Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), while official Belgrade has always recognized Skopje under its constitutional name, the Republic of Macedonia.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the naming dispute Skopje officially had with Greece until 2018.

<sup>4</sup> In this regard, it is worth noting that after the constitutional changes of 2001, conditioned by the adoption of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the Albanian community, as one of the non-majority communities, through the so-called Badinter Rule, received the right to veto the revision of the Constitution, (Галева 2019, 235) as well as certain policies, which also determines the foreign policy of this country.

<sup>5</sup> The coalition government of VMRO-DPMNE and the largest Albanian party, DUI, led by Nikola Gruevski.

By recognizing the illegal secession of Kosovo and Metohija, Skopje officially jeopardized the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Serbia within its constitutional and internationally recognized borders. As a result, relations between the two states reached their lowest point since the disintegration of the SFRY (Igrutinović i Paunović 2019, 116). It is worth noting that Skopje did not respond with reciprocal measures, likely assessing that the act of recognizing so-called Kosovo was itself more impactful than any response from official Belgrade. Only a few months later, relations began to thaw. In May 2009, Ljubiša Georgievski was appointed as the new Macedonian ambassador to Serbia (*Glas Srpske* 2009). That same August, for the first time in five years, a Macedonian state delegation visited the Serbian monastery of St. Prohor Pčinjski, led by the Speaker of the Parliament, Trajko Veljanoski, who laid a wreath at the site believed to be the location of the first ASNOM session on Ilinden in 1944 (*Time.mk* 2009).

## **SERBIAN–MACEDONIAN RELATIONS 2012–2022.**

A new phase in relations between the two countries appears to have begun with the change of government in Belgrade in 2012. That year coincided with the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Kumanovo, which marked the beginning of the final liberation of these territories from centuries-long Ottoman occupation. For the first time at the highest state level, two national Serb delegations (from Serbia and Republika Srpska) attended the commemoration of this significant event. On that occasion, the President of Serbia, Tomislav Nikolić, in the presence of the Macedonian Minister of Culture, Elizabeta Kančeska, emphasized that the celebration of this anniversary was “a message of peace, cooperation, and understanding that Serbia and Macedonia send to the region and to the whole world. Zebrnjak is a place that unites us” (Predsednik Republike Srbije 2012). Despite potential geopolitical challenges, the organization of this ceremony, with intertwined Serbian and Macedonian flags, represented an important step in building bilateral relations between Belgrade and Skopje (Živaljević 2019, 158). However, the internal political crisis in North Macedonia also positively influenced the deepening of relations. The first signs of this crisis were seen in 2013 when the opposition walked out of the Sobranie (Macedonian Parliament), and again during the 2014 presidential elections. In 2016, the situation escalated into

massive protests against Nikola Gruevski, known as the “Colorful Revolution”. During these developments, Gruevski’s regime further strengthened ties with Belgrade, with a common practice of holding joint government sessions. In May 2015, the largest terrorist attack in the country since the 2001 insurgency occurred in Kumanovo. Among the eight killed police officers were three ethnic Serbs from Macedonia. This fact, along with the proximity to the Serbian border, prompted reactions from the Serbian public and authorities, who expressed support for Macedonian institutions in their fight against Albanian extremism and terrorist activities. In this context, some authors argue that this act was a “replay of the deep crisis in Albanian-Serbian relations, albeit on a smaller scale,” which “stimulated regional debate about Albanian aspirations, their status, and relations with neighbors” (Teokarević 2015, 43). The Albanian terrorist threat could at that moment have been a factor in bringing the two countries closer together, considering that Skopje had overcome the Albanian uprising in 2001 after the uprising in south-central Serbia the same year (Митевски 2009, 183). The factor of ethnically based terrorism represented a kind of cohesive factor between both societies but, at the same time, it did not have a serious impact on the foreign policy relations of the two states.

In this regard, just a few months later, FYROM voted in favor of the self-proclaimed “Republic of Kosovo” joining UNESCO at the Executive Board and General Assembly (Габер 2017, 305). The aim of the Albanian separatist authorities was to gain control over four of the most important Serbian religious and cultural heritage sites in Kosovo and Metohija. Although this proposal was ultimately unsuccessful, this attitude showed that Gruevski’s tenure could be characterized as a period in which Serbian-Macedonian relations seriously fluctuated, rather than as a period of significant rapprochement between Belgrade and Skopje. This claim is further supported by the persecution of the canonical Archbishop of Ohrid, Jovan (Vraniškovski), which was most intense during this period (Raković 2019, 205–206). It is also noteworthy that Serbian historian Aleksandar Raković, who at the time was welcomed in Skopje as an advocate for improved relations, reported that Nikola Gruevski received advice from non-canonical church circles of the Macedonian Orthodox Church to vote in favor of Kosovo’s UNESCO membership (Raković 2016, 157). This indicates that not only official Skopje, but also the church hierarchy in the country, worked toward erasing Serbian religious and cultural heritage both within their own borders and on Serbian territory.

On the other hand, as the internal political crisis deepened in the following year, the regime in Skopje recognized the need to win over Belgrade in order to preserve its already shaken international standing. However, relations deteriorated again in early 2017 when the opposition SDSM, led by Zoran Zaev, formed a new government with former Albanian coalition partners of VMRO-DPMNE. The crisis reached its peak when disgruntled protesters and Gruevski supporters stormed the Sobranie on April 27. Belgrade initially viewed the formation of the new government in Skopje with distrust. On the other hand, a scandal broke out in Skopje over the alleged involvement of an advisor at the Serbian embassy in that country in the riots in the Parliament (Živaljević 2019, 202–223). Belgrade then withdrew the entire staff of the Serbian Embassy in Skopje for consultations in Belgrade. At that time, bilateral relations seemed to be at their lowest point since October 2008. However, after a few days, Belgrade announced the return of its personnel, and both sides stated that they would resolve disagreements through dialogue. (Igrutinović i Paunović 2019, 122). While relations with Belgrade were very turbulent in the first months of the new Macedonian government, Skopje soon significantly improved relations with Sofia and resolved the long-standing name dispute with Greece by signing the Prespa Agreement in June 2018, officially changing the country's name to North Macedonia.<sup>6</sup> After that, Albanian was declared the second official language of North Macedonia (Закон за употреба на јазиците 2019, чл. 2). Normalization of relations with these three neighbors eventually led, with Belgrade's involvement, to a thaw in Serbian–North Macedonian relations through a new integrative process. Namely, at the end of 2019, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania launched an initiative to create a so-called Mini Schengen, aimed at improving economic integration and creating a common market based on the free movement of people, goods, capital, and services. In July 2021, this regional initiative was renamed the Open Balkan (Rikalović, Molnar, and Josipović 2022, 32–33). It served as a framework for renewed closeness between the two countries, particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Belgrade

<sup>6</sup> Although many citizens boycotted the referendum that confirmed this agreement. A significant portion of the academic community also opposed the Prespa Agreement, with some authors highlighting violations of both international and domestic law (Никодиновска Крстевска 2018, 127–131).

donated a large number of vaccine doses to North Macedonian citizens (Filipović 2021, 22), which was accepted as a gesture of goodwill.

In July 2019, the prime ministers of both countries, Ana Brnabić and Zoran Zaev, opened the integrated border crossing Preševo–Tabanovce, facilitating easier border passage (Đurić 2019). Also, Serbian citizens no longer need a passport to enter North Macedonia –only a biometric ID card is required, and vice versa. However, an additional security challenge to these significant steps towards rapprochement between the two states was Skopje's membership in the NATO alliance, which contributed to the almost complete encirclement of Serbia by NATO forces, which complicated Belgrade's position in preserving its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Especially considering the gravity of Belgrade's historical relations with NATO, as well as the position of most members of this organization on the issue of Kosovo's status. The situation became even more complex with the escalation of the war in Ukraine and the start of the Russian special military operation in February 2022. Unlike Serbia, which did not align its foreign policy with that of the EU and NATO and refused to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation, Skopje fully followed the other NATO members – besides political and economic sanctions, it also provided significant military aid to Kyiv, including tanks. The war in Eastern Europe, in addition to marginalizing the Open Balkans project, divided the Western Balkans on this issue. In addition to pressure from Brussels on Belgrade to impose sanctions on Russia, Moscow, on the other hand, unlike Serbia, put North Macedonia on the list of enemy countries (Gugić 2022, 36). Thus, the two countries find themselves in different positions when it comes to the biggest security crisis in Europe at the moment, which may also affect their mutual relations in the future.

When it comes to the difference in the policies towards Serbia of the two largest North Macedonian parties, it seems that their roles have changed over time. While in the 1990s, Ljubčo Georgievski established VMRO-DPMNE on old pro-Bulgarian and anti-Serbian traditions, Gruevski, in the later stages of his rule, increasingly turned this party towards a more conciliatory policy towards Belgrade, as the only neighbor that did not dispute the borders, identity, name, or other factors on which North Macedonian statehood was built. On the other hand, SDSM, initially perceived as a pro-Yugoslav relic of the former League of Communists of Yugoslavia, over time emerged as a purely pro-Western option. For this party, targeting the alleged Serbian

influence on the extension of the power of her bitterest political rival will be a kind of justification for the support of Western structures in returning this party to power in 2017.

## RESOLUTION OF THE CHURCH DISPUTE

However, the year 2022 was marked by an event that represents a precedent in mutual relations. After fifty-five years of church schism, into which the so-called Macedonian Orthodox Church entered in 1967 by uncanonically separating from the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), reconciliation between the two hierarchies was finally achieved. In early May 2022, the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople accepted the clergy and faithful of the Orthodox Church in North Macedonia into Eucharistic and canonical communion after decades of isolation. Although this move was a direct non-canonical intervention by the Ecumenical Patriarchate (Phanar) into the canonical territory of the SOC, it did not amount to a recognition of autocephaly, a step for which the Ecumenical Patriarchate had no jurisdiction, nor did it resolve the final status of this ecclesiastical territory or definitively determine the name of the new local church. The Ecumenical Patriarchate took the position that it was up to the Serbian Church to regulate, within canonical norms and church tradition, the administrative matters between it and the Church in North Macedonia, referring to the new church body as the Archdiocese of Ohrid, while simultaneously denying it the right to use the name "Macedonian" (Perić 2023, 126). Amidst these developments, it was revealed that the hierarchies of Belgrade and Skopje had begun negotiations regarding the canonical status of the eparchies in North Macedonia. During the May session of the Holy Council of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Bishop Fotije of Zvornik-Tuzla informed the public about the renewal of dialogue between the SOC and the MOC regarding the potential restoration of canonical unity (*Религија. мк* 2022). On the other hand, the non-canonical interference of the Ecumenical Patriarchate was largely ignored and, by some religious analysts, even relativized. Despite being seen as hasty, this intervention was considered welcome in the context of pan-Orthodox acceptance of such a decision (Gagić 2022).

Just a few days later, negotiations were successfully concluded, and on May 19, 2022, reconciliation and the restoration of canonical unity between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the Macedonian

Orthodox Church (MOC) took place. Through a joint liturgy held at the Church of Saint Sava in Belgrade, Serbian Patriarch Porfirije and Macedonian Archbishop Stefan marked the return of the Macedonian Orthodox Church to the status of an autonomous church within the Serbian Orthodox Church, the same autonomous status it had held since 1959 (Perić 2023, 127). Aside from a few critics, this event was met with overwhelmingly positive reactions from both sides, as well as throughout the Orthodox world. The Serbian public interpreted this move as the restoration of canonical unity and the return of the Macedonian dioceses under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church, while the public in North Macedonia seemed to see it as an intermediate step towards achieving full autocephaly through canonical means. However, in the statement issued by the Holy Council of Bishops of the SOC, it was already made clear, through the expression of hope that the final status of the Macedonian Church would be resolved in the fraternal spirit of pan-Orthodox consensus, that the autonomous status of the MOC would not be its final status (Ilić 2022a). The suspicions of a small number of observers were confirmed just five days later, when on May 24, 2022, Serbian Patriarch Porfirije, on behalf of the entire Holy Council of Bishops, granted autocephaly to the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archdiocese of Ohrid, during a joint liturgy held in the Cathedral of Saint Clement of Ohrid in Skopje, in the presence of both Serbian and Macedonian hierarchs (Perić 2023, 128). This historic moment, in which the SOC relinquished part of its canonical territory, was welcomed the same day by the presidents of Serbia and North Macedonia, Aleksandar Vučić and Stevo Pendarovski, who were at the time holding talks on the Open Balkan initiative in Davos (NI 2022). However, the act of recognition alone did not resolve all open issues, and the official document of recognition in the form of a Tomos of Autocephaly was still awaited. Once again, unexpectedly, on June 5, 2022, in Belgrade, the Tomos was handed over by Patriarch Porfirije to Archbishop Stefan. With this act, the new Church was recognized under its full name, and all Serbian holy sites, as well as all SOC property on the territory of North Macedonia, were handed over for use to the new local Church. Thus, at first glance, the canonical status of the new Church was fully resolved (Perić 2023, 130).

However, two serious issues emerged that could complicate both inter-church and inter-state relations between Belgrade and Skopje. The first was the status of the canonical Orthodox Ohrid Archdiocese,

which, as a result of this decision by the Belgrade Patriarchate, became an internal ecclesiastical issue within North Macedonia – one in which the Serbian Church no longer involved itself. The second issue presents an open challenge to future Serbian–North Macedonian relations. The new Church in Skopje calls itself the Macedonian Orthodox Church – Archdiocese of Ohrid – Justiniana Prima. This third designation represents not only a clear aspiration by Skopje to lay claim to the broader ecclesiastical history of the region, but also a direct challenge to the remaining canonical territories of the Serbian Orthodox Church, considering that the historical site known as *Justiniana Prima* is located near Lebane, within the borders of present-day central Serbia. Since the Serbian Orthodox Church recognized the Macedonian Orthodox Church under its full name, it means that it has agreed in principle to the third part of the new Church's name, which directly claims the southern Serbian canonical areas. These facts should be kept in mind, especially considering that autocephaly, including the name of the new Church, for the public in North Macedonia was primarily a matter of national identity (Risteski 2009, 144).

## NEW PERSPECTIVES IN MUTUAL RELATIONS

Amid efforts to resolve open church issues, just one day after the granting of the *Tomos* of autocephaly, the authorities of North Macedonia banned the overflight of a plane carrying the Russian Federation's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, who was scheduled to visit Serbia (Симоновски 2022). In this way, the Macedonian side closed the last open issue it had with Belgrade. Although both states are nominally secular, such a significant concession by the Serbian Church, which led to an additional rapprochement of the two peoples, and therefore the two states, was not accompanied by any concessions from the Macedonian side when it comes to Serbian interests; quite the opposite. It is therefore not surprising that the North Macedonian delegation voted in favor of the resolution on Srebrenica submitted to the UN General Assembly in May 2024 by Germany and Rwanda, which qualifies this war crime as genocide, which was a heavy blow to Serbia's position internationally. This move was even less surprising considering that North Macedonia was among the 34 co-sponsors of the resolution. On the other hand, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić expressed regret over this decision by Serbia's southern neighbors, whom he referred to

as “brothers” (*Сакам да кажам* 2024). However, official Belgrade did not undertake any countermeasures, as had been the case in previous years. At that time, VMRO-DPMNE returned to power in Skopje, led by Hristijan Mickoski, who took the party helm after Nikola Gruevski stepped down and left the country in 2017. A long-time loyal ally of the largest Macedonian party, Ivan Stoilković’s Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia (DPSM) once again became part of the ruling coalition. Stoilković was appointed Minister for Community Relations and Deputy Prime Minister, marking a significant step forward. Relations between the two countries continued to improve, as confirmed by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and North Macedonia’s new President, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, during the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the first ASNOM session at the St. Prohor Pčinjski Monastery (*Politika* 2024).

Serbia reaffirmed its commitment to maintaining the closest foreign policy relations with North Macedonia during a moment of unprecedented tragedy that struck the city of Kočani on March 16, 2025. A fire at a local nightclub has killed 62 people and seriously injured more than 190. Among all countries that admitted the injured, such as Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Croatia, and others, Serbia hospitalized the highest number of patients (Крстески 2025). On the other hand, the North Macedonian side has shown increasing interest in military cooperation with the separatist authorities in Priština. Namely, in late 2024, Turkey signed a framework defense agreement with Albania, North Macedonia, and the so-called Kosovo (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of North Macedonia [MDRNM] 2024). Following announcements about the formation of a military alliance between Zagreb, Tirana, and Priština, Turkey also announced its ratification of the pact in late March 2025 (*Nordic Monitor* 2025). Regarding anti-Serbian actions by third countries on North Macedonian territory, it is important to note that, at the end of 2024, some scenes of a Turkish TV series dedicated to Naser Orić were filmed in North Macedonia (*Sandžačke.rs* 2024). Orić, the wartime commander of Muslim forces from Srebrenica, is charged by Serbian judicial authorities with grave war crimes against the Serbian population in the Podrinje region.<sup>7</sup> All these provocative moves by

<sup>7</sup> An additional curiosity is the fact that the footage of this series, which was filmed on the territory of North Macedonia, was filmed mainly in the area of Serbian villages of Skopska Crna Gora, more specifically in the majority Serbian village of Banjani. It is clear that this choice of location represented a provocation, both

Skopje went unanswered by Belgrade. It is obvious that the thesis put forward by some geopolitical analysts at the beginning of the century, that Skopje, especially after the limited civil war in 2001, completely surrendered to the Atlanticist vector, has turned out to be correct after a quarter of a century. North Macedonia's relationship with Serbia is the best indicator of the thesis that this country has become a tool in the hands of Atlanticism (Proroković 2007, 561).

Finally, it is important to highlight that the Republic of Serbia officially recognizes the Macedonian national minority, which, according to the latest 2022 census, numbered 14,767 individuals. Macedonians in Serbia primarily reside in Belgrade and parts of the Banat region (including Pančevo, Jabuka, Kačarevo, and Plandište). They have their own National Council as well as media outlets in their native language. In 2010, the Union of Macedonian Associations of Serbia was established, bringing together over 50 Macedonian organizations dedicated to preserving tradition, customs, folklore, language, culture, education, information, and similar activities (Raduški 2021, 59). On the other hand, after North Macedonia's independence, Serbs faced years of difficulty in obtaining recognition as a national minority (Галева 2019, 227). However, following the signing of the Ohrid Agreement in 2001, Serbs gained constitutional recognition as a national minority. Since then, they have been granted the right to use their language in three municipalities with a significant Serbian presence (Čučer-Sandevo, Staro Nagoričane, and Kumanovo). St. Sava's Day was officially declared the Day of the Serbian National Minority, and Serbian political representatives have occasionally participated in the executive government. Nevertheless, the religious rights of the Serbian population have been continuously violated, largely due to the decades-long church schism. As a result, the number of Serbs has declined over time to just 23,847, and the percentage of Serbian language speakers has fallen below that of so-called Bosnian language speakers (Ilić 2022b, 24–25).

In addition to the issue of national minorities, the border question remains unresolved, particularly in the context of North Macedonia's recognition of the so-called Kosovo. Specifically, in 2009, Skopje signed an agreement with the separatist authorities in Priština

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for the Serbian community in this country and for official Belgrade. However, the aforementioned actions were completely ignored, and were not followed by any reaction from the Serbian side.

on border demarcation, which in essence defines the border between Serbia and North Macedonia (Dimitrijević 2015, 108–109). Despite all the aforementioned challenges, relations between the two countries have continued to develop in recent years. Fifteen years after opening an honorary consulate in Bitola, Serbia also opened an honorary consulate in Ohrid. On the other hand, economic relations have been significantly improved, with a noticeable increase in trade volume and investments, as well as growing economic interdependence between the two economies. Over the 15-year period (2006–2021), Serbia's exports to North Macedonia grew at an annual rate of 7.75%, from \$319 million in 2006 to \$976 million in 2021 (Jelisavac Trošić and Arnaudov 2023, 152). North Macedonia's exports to Serbia were 800.72 million USD during 2022 (Jelisavac Trošić and Arnaudov 2023, 153). Serbia's exports to North Macedonia were 1.02 billion USD during 2022 (Jelisavac Trošić and Arnaudov 2023, 153). Serbia is Macedonia's largest trading partner among all countries in the Western Balkans region, and Serbia is North Macedonia's fourth trading partner, after Germany, the UK, and Greece (Jelisavac Trošić and Arnaudov 2023, 154–155). The two countries have signed a large number of bilateral agreements in recent years, and they also achieve economic cooperation through other broader frameworks, such as the CEFTA agreement (Jelisavac Trošić and Arnaudov 2023, 155). All these processes will affect the bilateral relations between Belgrade and Skopje in the future.

## CONCLUSION

Foreign policy relations between Serbia and North Macedonia are highly dynamic and complex, shaped by a complicated historical background and burdened with numerous challenges. Given that the process of forming the Macedonian nation and state unfolded alongside the disintegration of the Serbian state and ethnic space, it is clear that in the complex historical circumstances of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, these relations could not have been simple. All identity-related disputes between Belgrade and Skopje were effectively settled with the recognition of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by the Serbian Orthodox Church, along with the complete transfer of Serbian heritage south of the Šar Mountains to the new Church, resulting in the final affirmation of Macedonian identity. There are still open political and economic issues between the two countries. These

concern North Macedonia's non-recognition of Serbia's territorial integrity, its NATO membership, and its military alignment with the separatist regime in Priština through a defense agreement with Ankara and Tirana, which poses a serious security challenge for Serbia. The minority issue is becoming increasingly irrelevant, primarily for demographic reasons. With each census, the number of Serbs in North Macedonia and Macedonians in Serbia continues to decrease, so neither group represents a significant factor in their respective states. The brightest point in bilateral relations remains economic cooperation, including trade exchange, investments, and the integration of economic space. Therefore, it is expected that future cooperation between the two countries will primarily focus on the economic, and to some extent cultural, spheres, while the political and security dimensions will depend on numerous uncertainties.

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## СПОЉНОПОЛИТИЧКИ ОДНОСИ СРБИЈЕ И СЕВЕРНЕ МАКЕДОНИЈЕ 2006–2025.\*\*

### Резиме

Циљ овог члanka је анализа спољнополитичких односа Србије и Северне Македоније у периоду од 2006–2025. године, тачније од тренутка када је обновљена државност Србије, након отцепљења Црне Горе. С тим у вези, у првом делу рада биће учињен краћи осврт на предисторију међусобних односа Београда и Скопља у последњој фази распада Југославије, односно у епохи постојања заједничке државе СРЈ/СЦГ од 1991. до 2006. године. Потом ће централни део рада бити посвећен политичким, безбедносним, економским и културним односима две државе у периоду након обнове српске државности. Конкретно, кроз питања признања тзв. Косова, црквеног спора, потом статуса националних мањина, али и учешћа у заједничким програмима и иницијативама, економске повезаности и међузависности, као и хуманитарне сарадње, која су била најактуелнија, и која су изазвала највише интересовања у политичком и медијском погледу у обе земље, покушаћемо да размотримо развој билатералних односа Србије и Северне Македоније. Они су веома сложени, пре свега, због питања националног и духовног идентитета, али и културног наслеђа које је заједничко и које је представљало препреку националној еманципацији Македонаца са једне, односно савременом схватању српског идентитета, са друге стране. Целокупан период распада претходне заједничке државе обележен је веома лошим међусобним односима, који су кулминирали признањем сепресије албанских сепаратиста у Приштини од стране Скопља 2008. године. Последњих година односи Србије и Северне Македоније

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отопљавају како на политичком, тако и на економском плану, упркос промени власти која се догодила у Скопљу 2017, те уласка ове земље у НАТО 2020. године. Посебно, након признања аутокефалности МПЦ од стране СПЦ 2022. године. У раду ће се разматрати и перспективе међусобних односа две државе.

**Кључне речи:** Србија, Северна Македонија, Балкан, Црква, НАТО, идентитет

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