



Balkans EU Accession 2019 Pilot Observatory

November 25, 2019

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ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Global Voices works to identify, translate, contextualize and explain emerging trends and issues around the world, with a focus on civics, rights, power, and technology.

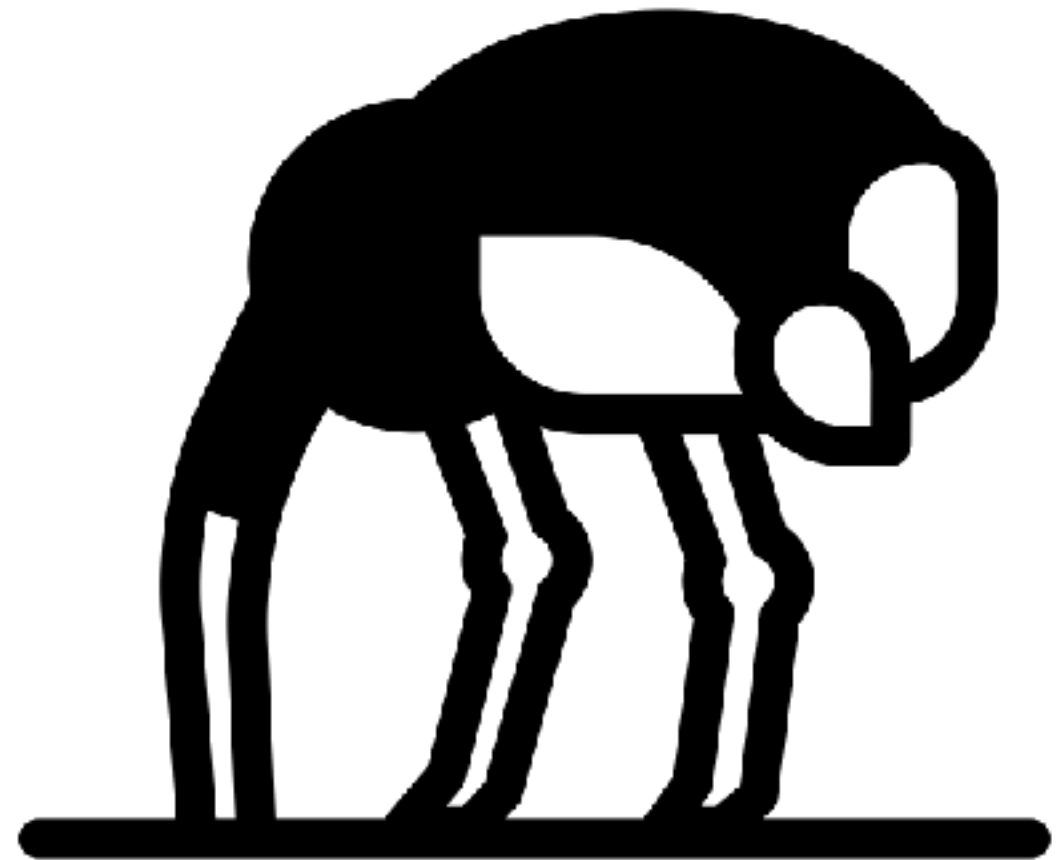
We take the long view, starting with local knowledge and digging deep into a wide range of online sources to make sense of the stories and ideas that shape our societies. We arrive early, and continue to cover stories long after attention has shifted elsewhere.

Our stories emerge from the local knowledge of our global team of volunteer writers and paid editors. By combining cultural awareness with a focus on translation across language and culture, we have uncovered Russian online disinformation campaigns, Arab political uprisings and patterns of digital authoritarianism long before they broke into mainstream awareness.



THE PROBLEM

1. Social media platforms lack the local and contextual knowledge, subtext and language capacity required to understand, assess and respond to emerging events around the world.
2. Media environments are vulnerable to the spread of harmful information: a phenomenon that increasingly disrupts democratic processes.
3. News media often neglect marginalized voices, and are ill-equipped to build understanding across language, culture and geographic borders. Key events or trends are often ignored, leaving institutions and communities unprepared to deal with what should have been foreseeable shocks.



CIVIC MEDIA OBSERVATORY

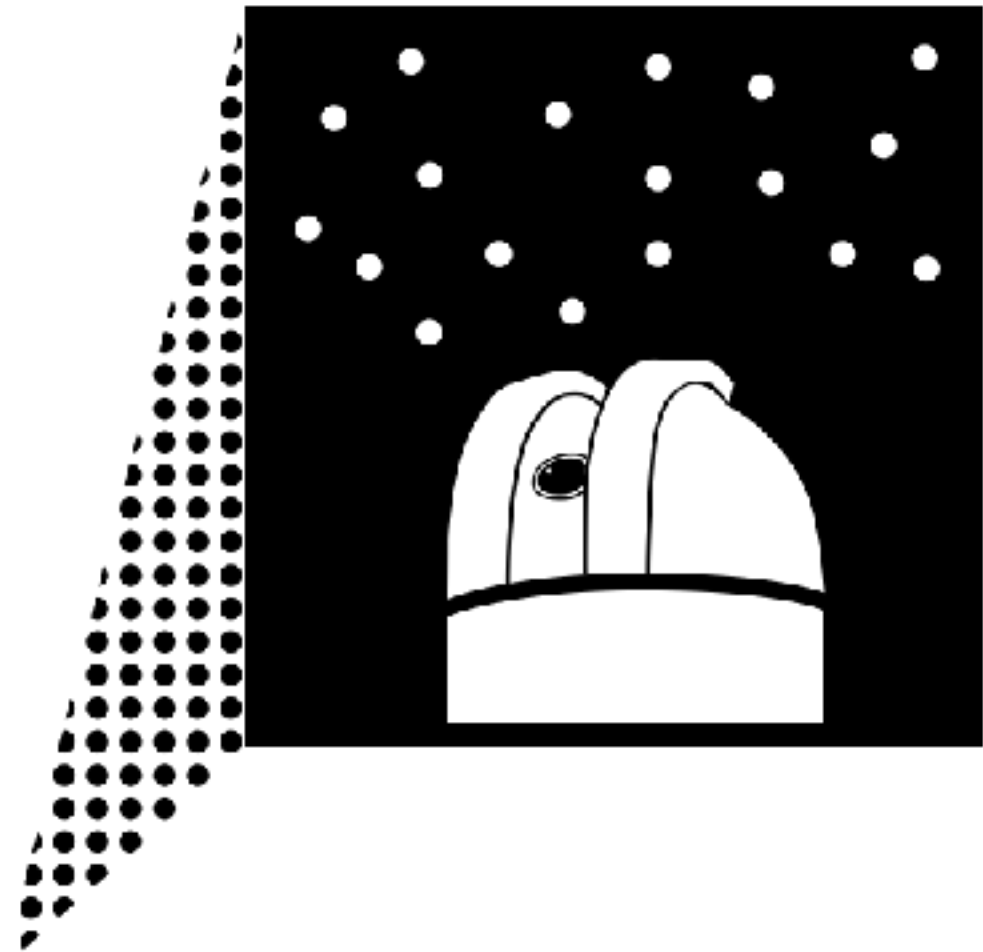
The Civic Media Observatory is a research method deployable in relation to key events and trends to find, assess, describe and analyze information, grounded in the following:

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE — clarifies subtext and context

EDITORIAL RIGOR — helps partners decode the underlying narrative framing of media, and thereby assess their meaning, value or threat

CIVIC IMPACT SCORE — evaluates material based on potential benefit or harm to civic discourse, in accordance with international human rights norms

SUGGESTED ACTIONS — a range of tactics to inform journalistic coverage, support content moderation and platform governance strategies, and help frame research, to promote the protection of human rights within the media environment



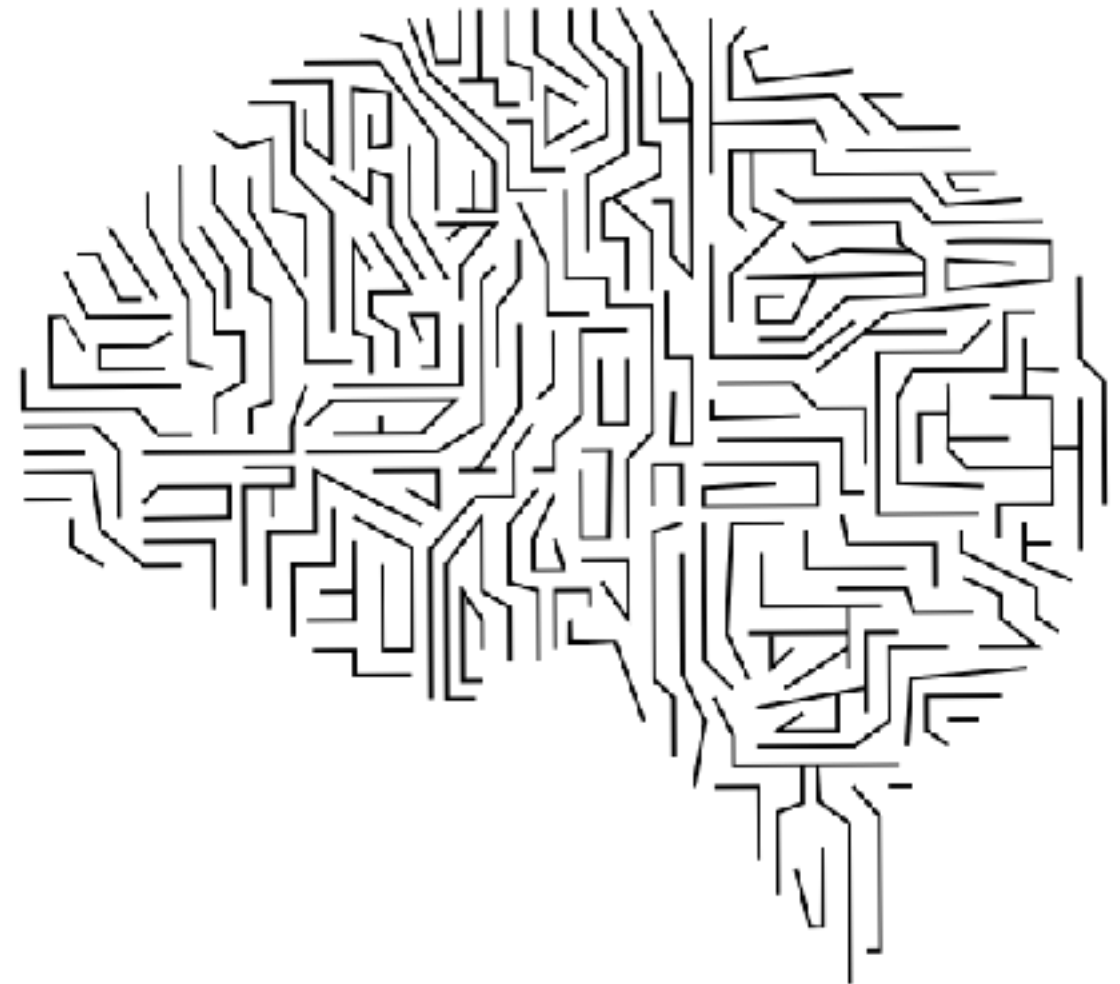
METHOD

The core of the Civic Media Observatory is the **INVESTIGATION**—the focus of the research in a given instance. Investigations focus on **THEMES**—events, trends or phenomena.

The researchers working on an Investigation classify, analyze and assign a measure of civic impact to **MEDIA ITEMS**—social and other online media, mainstream media and offline content—and suggest further **ACTIONS** to be taken.

Researchers also identify **MEDIA FRAMES**—the dominant narratives used to debate themes.

In addition to time-limited Investigations, the Civic Media Observatory will also **MONITOR** media ecologies that are likely to be the subject of Investigations.



OUTPUTS

Through a rigorous assessment/analysis of the provenance, messaging and contextual impact of media, we will generate an extensive base of knowledge for use by partners, editorial teams and researchers, comprising:

.CSV DATABASE FILES — via an API, with documentation such as screen grabs and other evidence

STORIES — reporting on important trends and their meaning

PERIODIC NEWSLETTERS — reporting on monitored media environments

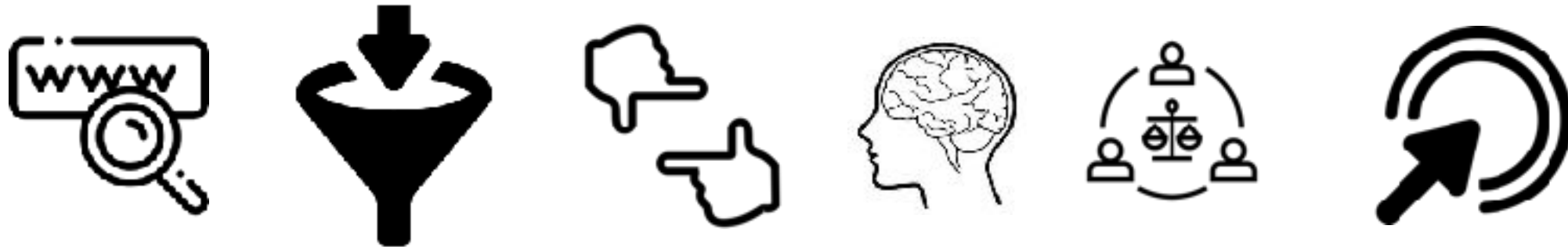
SPECIAL REPORTS — for Investigations

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT ANALYSES — for each Investigation

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS — of individual media items of particular interest to researcher and partners



WORKFLOW



Discover → Capture → Describe → Analyze → Score → Action

Media item collected.

Full text and screenshots entered into platform; item assigned to researcher with local knowledge.

Researcher annotates item with metadata, describes and analyzes meaning, and assigns it a theme, a media frame, and a civic impact score.

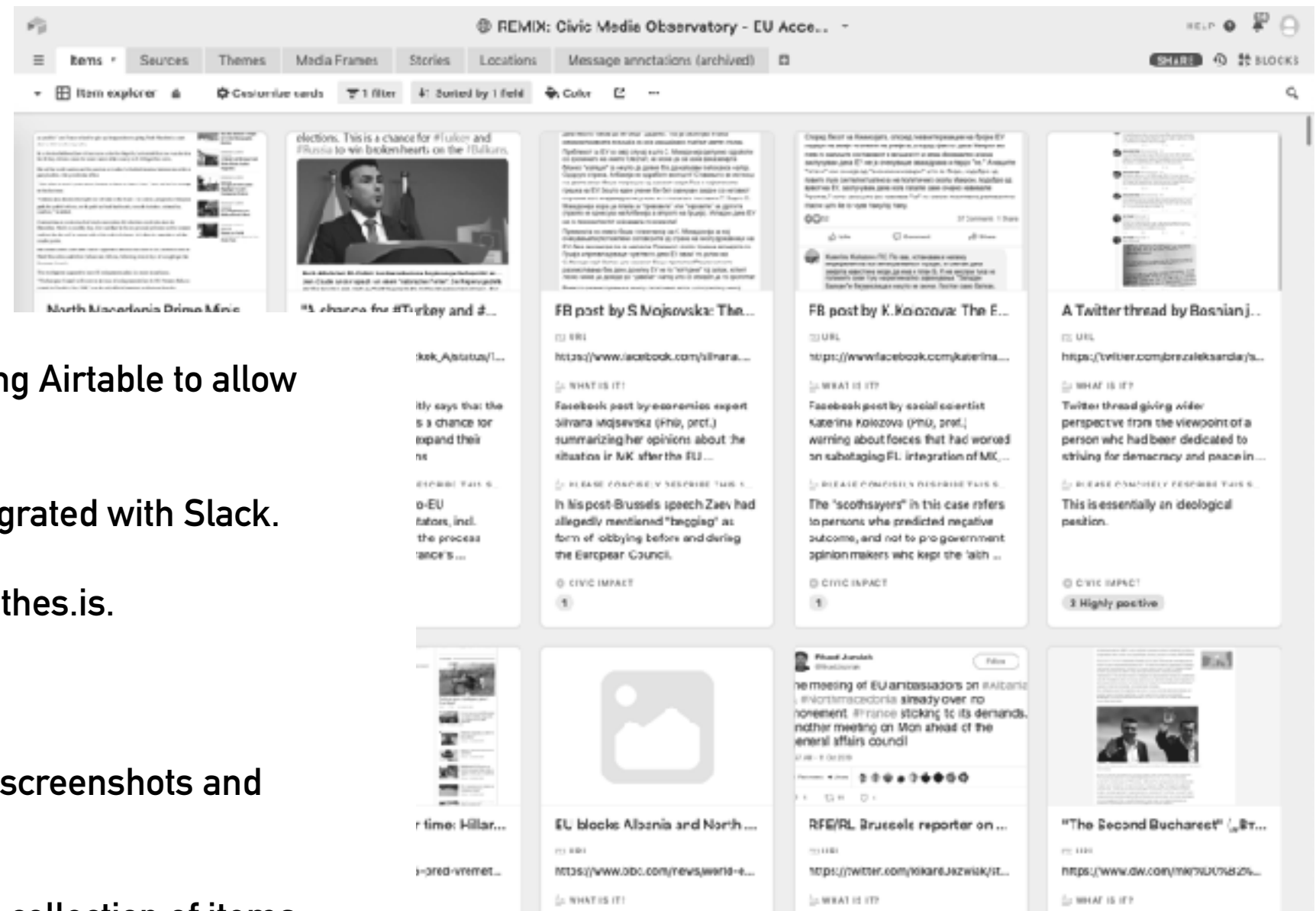
Analysis may trigger actions such as writing a story, reporting item to moderators, or more research.

SCORING



- 3** hateful, inciting, illegal, disinforming or otherwise harmful material, with a large audience, coordinated activity and likely to result in harm
- 2** hateful, inciting, illegal, disinforming or otherwise harmful material without mass audience or coordinated activity; or false or misinforming material with a mass audience
- 1** false, misinforming, inaccurate or biased material
- 0** material containing no substantive information/knowledge
- +1** generally accurate material with little influence or importance
- +2** accurate, original material that has value and importance
- +3** accurate, highly original material that expands understanding and deserves a wide audience

PROTOTYPING



Platform model created using Airtable to allow for rapid iteration.

Collaborative workflow, integrated with Slack.

Items annotated using Hypothes.is.

Future versions to include:

- Automated capture of screenshots and full text
- Bookmarklet for rapid collection of items
- Tighter integration with Hypothes.is
- Additional tooling for analysis

A faint background map showing the border between North Macedonia and Albania. The city of Skopje is labeled in both Cyrillic (Скопје) and Latin (Skopje). Other labels include Podgorica, Durrës, and Albania. Road markers for E851 and E-75 are visible.

North Macedonia and Albania would like to join the European Union. Will they succeed?

**How are these subjects framed by different sides?
Who will seek to support an accurate presentation about the issues, and who will seek to disrupt or dissuade?**

**What are the major subjects of debate?
Who are the supporters? Who are the detractors?**

INVESTIGATION: N. Macedonia/Albania EU accession

CONTEXT

Region has a turbulent recent past.

One condition of EU application for North Macedonia was the Prespa Agreement, which settled a long-standing dispute with Greece and resulted in a name change for the country.

"Arguably, the Prespa settlement is the west's biggest diplomatic achievement in the Balkans since the US-brokered Dayton agreements that ended the Bosnian war in 1995."
Tony Barber, The Financial Times

The issue is playing out in at least seven different languages in various media environments.

Balkan countries' accession to the EU (and NATO) is a significant factor in the contest between democratic and authoritarian rule. Failure to accept the Balkans into the EU will leave them open to Russian, Turkish and Chinese influence, and could renew nationalist influence at home.

Accepting new entrants without ensuring EU reforms that can enforce rules about democratic institutions could weaken the EU as a whole.

DETRACTORS: Greece, Russia, Turkey; right-wing U.S., some Macedonian and Greek nationalists
PRO-EU REFORM: France, Netherlands, Denmark
SUPPORTERS: Balkan countries, most EU countries, including the Visegrad 4.

OVERVIEW

Pilot Investigation team:
2 editorial staff; 6 researchers (Albania,
Czech Republic, Greece, North Macedonia,
UK, USA) working over one month

Analyzed media items in
Albanian, Greek,
Russian, Macedonian,
English, Bulgarian,
Serbian

Summary of issue in each
language/interest group

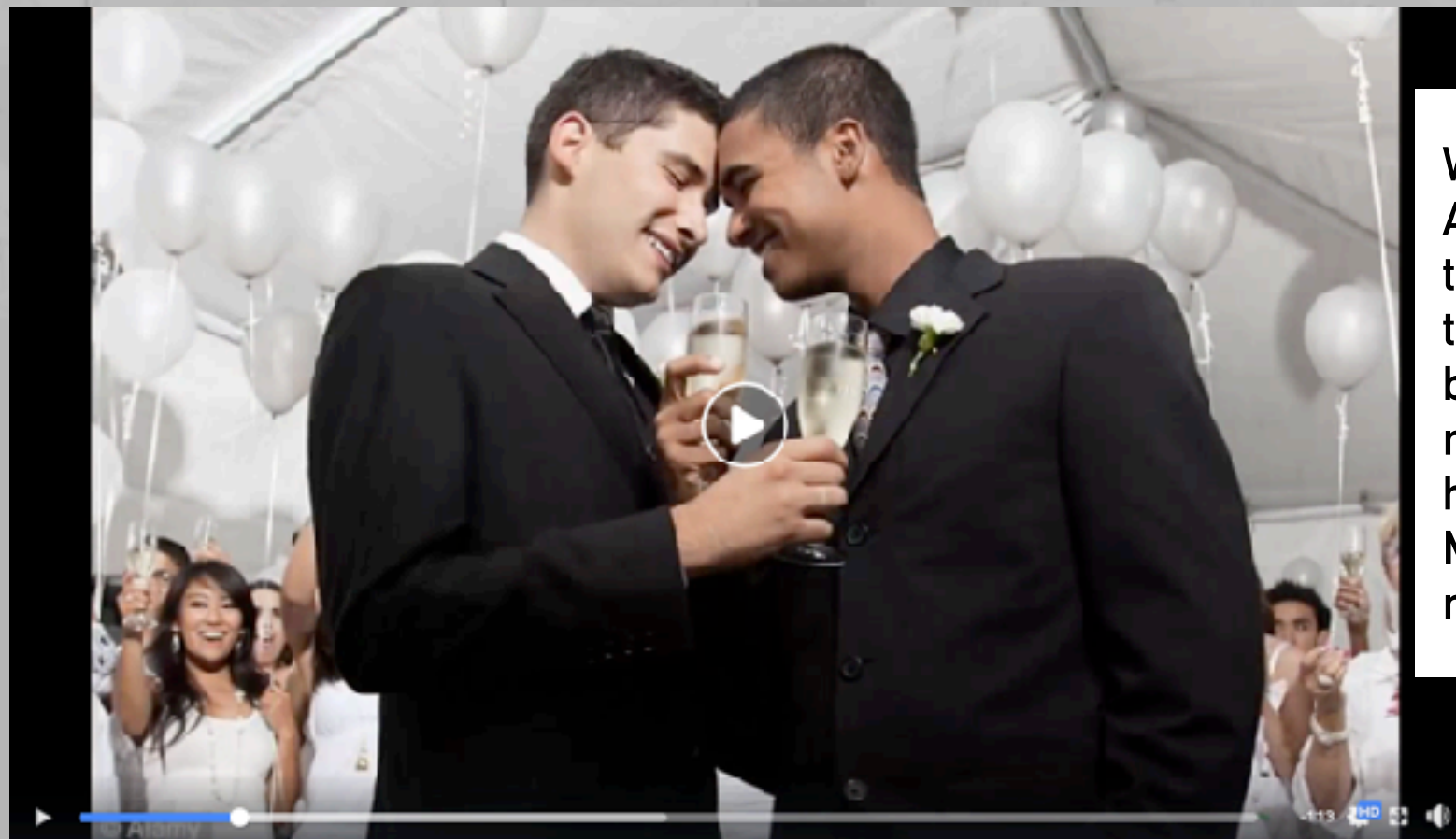
Observatory process workshop in
Skopje, North Macedonia

22 themes
24 media frames
4 media environment charts

230+ media items
84 media sources
66 negative items—16 highly negative
93 mainstream media items
94 social media items
47 open internet media items
4 offline media items

MEDIA ITEM

Facebook video presented prior to the 2018 referendum on the Macedonia name change promoting the patently false idea that the EU forces homosexuality on heterosexuals.



WHAT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE ADDS
Aimed at conservative audiences, the video features a pro-EU priest talking about (Christian) brotherhood, which the video misrepresents as referring to homosexuality ("hot brother" is a Macedonian slang term for gay men).

**ASSIGNED CIVIC
IMPACT**

-3

ACTION

Further research;
share with partners

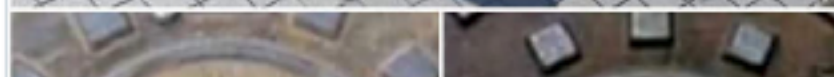
THEME: Macedonian nationalism
FRAME: Prespa Agreement was a mistake/Pro-Macedonian nationalist/Anti-EU



Jason Miko //
@JasonMiko

"The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history.... Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was." - Milan Kundera

#Macedonia



← Tweet



6:08 PM - Aug 15, 2019 · Twitter Web

POPULARITY
49 retweets, 97
likes at time of
capture

ACTION
Further research, strategic
silence.

ASSIGNED CIVIC IMPACT
-1

MEDIA ITEM

Tweet by self-described Hungarian-American juxtaposing three photos of a public works employee erasing the Vergina sun symbol from a manhole cover allegedly in a city in North Macedonia with a quote from renowned Czech author Milan Kundera. Tweet seems to attract attention of nationalists from both Greece and North Macedonia.

SUBTEXT

The notion of history (often covert) etched on manhole covers being abraded by passersby is popular in nationalist narratives.

WHAT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE ADDS

The Twitter user is a lobbyist and propagandist working for the VMRO-DPMNE party. He has received funding from both the party and government (ie Macedonian taxpayers). The location of the manhole is unclear—the Vergina sun symbol is a Greek symbol that, under the Prespa agreement, can no longer be legally used in by the N. Macedonia government.

THEME: Passage of Prespa Agreement
FRAME: Macedonian nationalist



Sara A. Carter
@SaraCarterDC

.@BarackObama State Dept used taxpayer dollars to fund @georgesoros group's political activities in #Albania, watchdog group says || via @brookefoxnews



Obama State Dept used taxpayer dollars to fund George Soros group's political activities in Albania. The Obama administration sent U.S. taxpayer funds to a group backed by billionaire George Soros to fund left-wing activities in Albania, a conservative watchdog group says. [foxnews.com](https://www.foxnews.com/politics/obamas-state-dept-used-taxpayer-dollars-fund-george-soros-group-political-activities-albania)

11:15 AM - Oct 15, 2019 - TweetDeck

8.4K Retweets 10.5K Likes

POPULARITY

Twitter: 8.4k retweets,
10.5 likes, 750 comments

ASSIGNED CIVIC IMPACT

-2

ACTION

Further research into
source, strategic
silence.

MEDIA ITEM

An apparent attempt by a US conservative influencer to resurface Albania-linked Soros conspiracy theory "replay attack" on the day of accession talks (Oct. 15). Original story was published in April 2018.

SUBTEXT

Underlying the false claims made in the story is the idea that Soros captured USG interests under Obama. This is an intentional misreading of a banal collaboration between organizations working in the same field.

WHAT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE ADDS

By mentioning Obama, Soros and Albania in a retro-dated "scoop," the author is attempting to create negative perceptions on political developments in Albania, on the week of the accession talks at the European Council, without specifically mentioning them. The source's Albania-related agitation stopped after Oct. 15th.

THEME: External development and
democracy promotion

FRAME: George Soros conspiracy theory



MEDIA ITEM

Facebook post by law professor Tanja Karakamisheva, Macedonian representative to the Venice Commission, (2016-2020, appointed by former populist government), sharing a fake quote by Nostradamus "predicting" the treason and demise of Prime Minister Zaev for agreeing to the Prespa Agreement. The quote is from a Serbian site that has translated it from a Macedonian nationalist website.

SUBTEXT

The post incites hate against Zoran Zaev and supporters of the Prespa Agreement, and reinforces VMRO-DPMNE propaganda that they will return to power soon. Hundreds of pro-VMRO profiles have commented or shared the post, suggesting coordinated action. Many comments include "Amen!" which is usually posted by Orthodox Christian believers on images of religious icons of saints posted on Facebook.

WHAT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE ADDS

Quote can be traced to a network of websites run by VMRO-DPMNE troll army. The message is that Zoran Zaev will be ousted from the position of prime minister of North Macedonia and all the reforms he implemented related to Prespa must be reversed.

POPULARITY
1.2 K likes, 119
comments and
479 shares.

**ASSIGNED CIVIC
IMPACT**
-3

ACTION
Further research,
write a story.

THEME: Renaming of North Macedonia
FRAME: Pro-Macedonian nationalist

MEDIA ITEM

Tweet in which the leader of the Greek far-right Golden Dawn party uses the anniversary of the death of one of the military heroes of the Greek struggle for Macedonia to drum up opposition to the Prespa Agreement.



"115 years ago EXACTLY, Pavlos Melas shed His Blood for the one and only GREEK MACEDONIA! May History curse those who betrayed His Sacrifice by "respecting" the Prespa Agreement ... NATIONALISTS DON'T FORGET #ND_crooks"

WHAT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE ADDS
Golden Dawn have been consistently attempting to co-opt all nationalist anniversaries, personalities and symbols in Greece for years.

ASSIGNED CIVIC
IMPACT
-3

ACTION
Strategic silence, keep an eye on Golden Dawn incitements post-breakdown of the accession talks

THEME: Greek Nationalism
FRAME: Greek Nationalist

MEDIA ITEM

Tweet from official account of Leave.EU, presenting Albania's potential accession to the EU as giving carte blanche to Albanian organised crime activity in EU nations.



ASSIGNED CIVIC
IMPACT

-3

WHAT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE ADDS

Albanians already have freedom of movement within European territory following visa liberalisation.

The photo is taken from a performance scenario by the Albanian rap artist Stresi, and is used here to give a false perception of a violent nation.

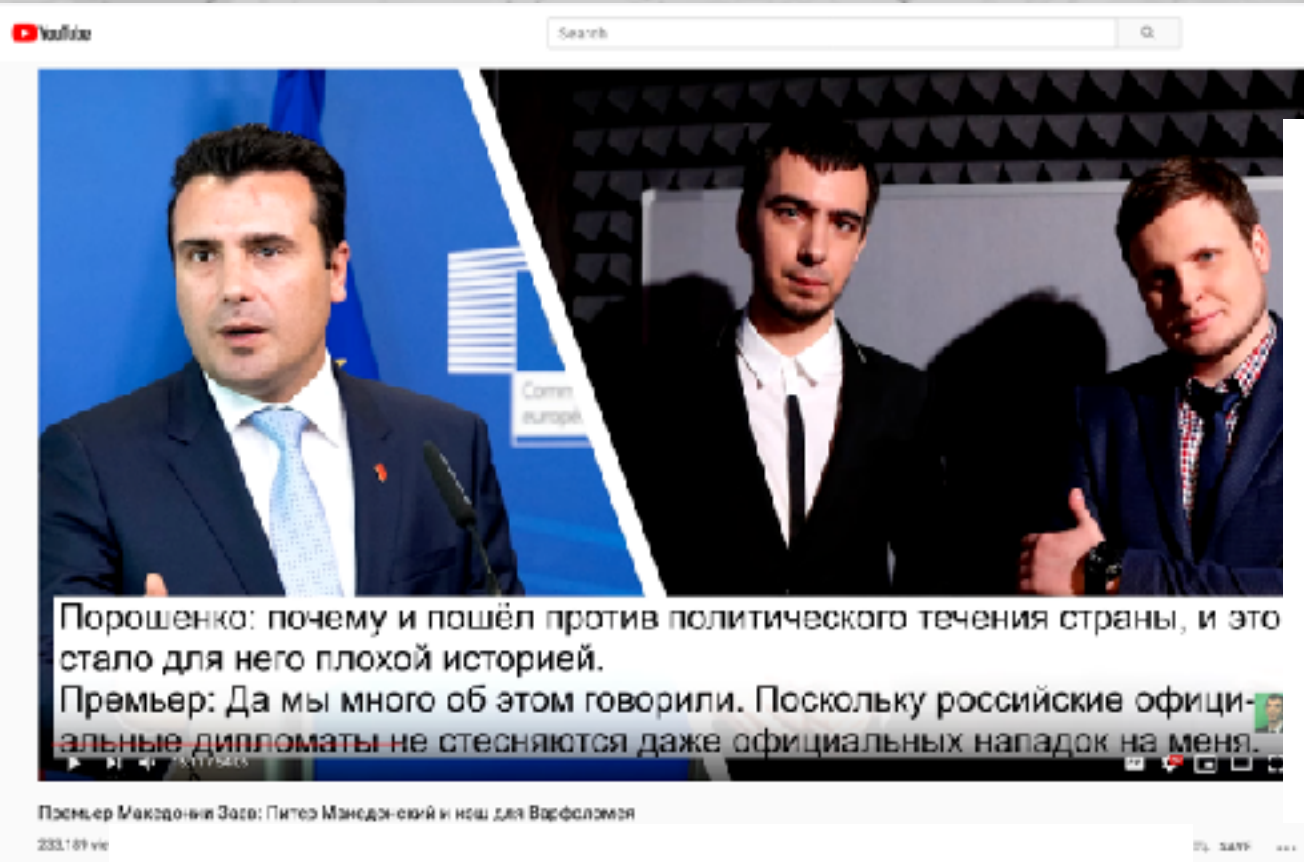
POPULARITY

Item has 533 retweets and over 1,000 likes. Leave.eu has over 279,000 followers on Twitter and over 978,000 on Facebook. This popular profile, existing across many platforms, consistently attempts to influence both U.K. and E.U. politics with divisive and sometimes hateful rhetoric.

ACTION

Close monitoring

THEME: EU Accession Talks
FRAME: Anti-EU



MEDIA ITEM

YouTube video by Russian pranksters Vovan and Lexus featuring three prank phone calls in which they pose as Ukrainian Prime Minister Petro Poroshenko and NATO general secretary Jens Stoltenberg, and call Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev. Zaev speaks candidly, sharing information about Macedonia's NATO ties, his views on Russian influence on specific North Macedonian politicians, even his personal phone number and that of a former American diplomat.

WHAT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE ADDS

Vovan and Lexus are celebrities in Russia. They target only public figures deemed antagonistic to the Kremlin's interests. This video plays to dominant Russian media narratives about NATO expansion in the region, which is attributed solely to foreign pressure and reflects no popular consent from the populations, but only from pro-Western, servile sections of their ruling elites.

SUBTEXT

Vovan and Lexus are implying that Zaev is eager to please, sycophantic, and believes anything if branded with the appropriately pro-NATO/EU language.

POPULARITY

233,102 views at time of capture; reproduced on other channels and widely reported on in Russia.

ASSIGNED CIVIC IMPACT

-3

ACTION

Further research, write a story.

THEME: Post-Prespa diplomacy/
Propaganda

FRAME: Russian opportunism in the Western Balkans/Anti-NATO

- Albania doesn't respect ethnic minority rights
- Anti-EU
- Anti-EU enlargement (within the EU)
- Anti-nationalist / anti-fascist
- Anti-NATO
- Anti-Russia
- Bulgarian nationalist
- Democracy promotion (pro)
- Eurocrat (pro)
- George Soros conspiracy theory
- Greek nationalist
- Media and journalism increases integrity
- North Macedonia is a weak and incompetent state

- Prespa Agreement was a mistake
- Pro-business, anti-populist
- Pro-EU enlargement
- Pro-Macedonian nationalist
- Pro-Russia
- Pro-Serbia
- Pro-Turkey
- Russian opportunism in the Western Balkans
- The Albanian government doesn't respect EU values
- The Western Balkans are European
- The West doesn't respect the Balkans



**WE
IDENTIFIED
THESE
MEDIA FRAMES**

- Anti-EU enlargement (within the EU)

- The West doesn't respect the Balkans

THESE
TWO
PROVED
CATALYTIC

HOW THE EVENT PLAYED OUT

France rejects accession

The Zaev government in North Macedonia announces early elections to seek a new mandate

The Macedonian nationalists are emboldened

In response to announcement of elections, dehumanizing rhetoric intensifies in North Macedonia

Events are used to bolster Russian narratives presenting the West as duplicitous

Pan-Balkan support for EU accession intensifies





жениор на Боре Потързано: Барселона - Реал Мадрид на 18 декември Отвара: 39 мля в камион, пристигнал от България във Великобритания

БЪЛГАРИЯ, ОБЩЕСТВО

DW.COM

НАЧАЛО Без Филтър България Местни Избори 2019 Свят Лайфстайл Спорт

Македония пред френското посолство

на 20/10/2019 19:00

Десетки интелектуалци, общественици и граждани се събраха тази вечер пред посолството на Френската република в София за да изразят своето несъгласие с решението на президента Еманоел Макрон да блокира започването на преговори за присъединяване на Скопие и Тирана към ЕС, предаде репортер на БГНЕС.



Участниците скандират: "България и Македония под едно небе! Не на лицемерието, да на Македония!". "Ние сме свидетели на възраждането на Френско-съюзния съюз, който "през последните години беше "замразен" и който цели да блокира европейското бъдеще на Македония". Това заяви пред БГНЕС известният български специалист и публицист Иван Николов. Друг участник в бидежето призова "за безкомпромисна и последователна подкрепа за европейския съюз".

MEDIA ITEM

Report by private independent news agency about a protest by pro-EU Bulgarians supporting EU entry of North Macedonia in front of French Embassy in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia.

SUBTEXT

An example of reactions countering 'standard' Balkan nationalism and opportunism.

WHAT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE ADDS

Positive narrative countering hate speech by N. Macedonian nationalists against Bulgarians, promoting cohesion in Western Balkans and the EU. Conveys main pro-EU arguments in succinct form, and was widely shared in North Macedonia as an example of useful information.

ASSIGNED CIVIC
IMPACT

2

ACTION

Further research,
write a story.

THEME: Balkan internationalism/anti-imperialism
FRAME: The West doesn't respect the Balkans

MEDIA ITEM

Macedonian-language Twitter thread criticizing VMRO-DPMNE [right-wing N. Macedonian nationalist party] celebrations of the Oct 19 announcement of early elections following the collapse of the EU accession process.



"Is it [the VMRO rabble] are celebrating for getting early elections or I am just imagining it? Honking, cars, flags. Very nice, a good reminder for us about the peasant profile of those aiming to get into power."

"The elections are in 6 months, but these unwashed lice are honking and it seems they celebrate something in Kumanovo. So ladies and gentlemen, these bastards will most probably be our new overlords. Characters who should have been doing hard time in prison, unfortunately can find a seat in state armchairs."

"Do the lobotomized celebrate with cars and flags? What in the God's name are they celebrating?!"

No date for EU - they are celebrating. They got a date for early elections, they celebrate again. These V... [meaning VMRO supporters, without derogatory nickname] are such a jolly people. #WeAreLunatics

WHAT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE ADDS

Use of descriptive tropes in common use in Macedonian political discourse. At a time when majority of the population dreads early elections, VMRO-DPMNE's celebration of early elections signals the party's eagerness to project confidence that it could win.

ASSIGNED CIVIC IMPACT
-2

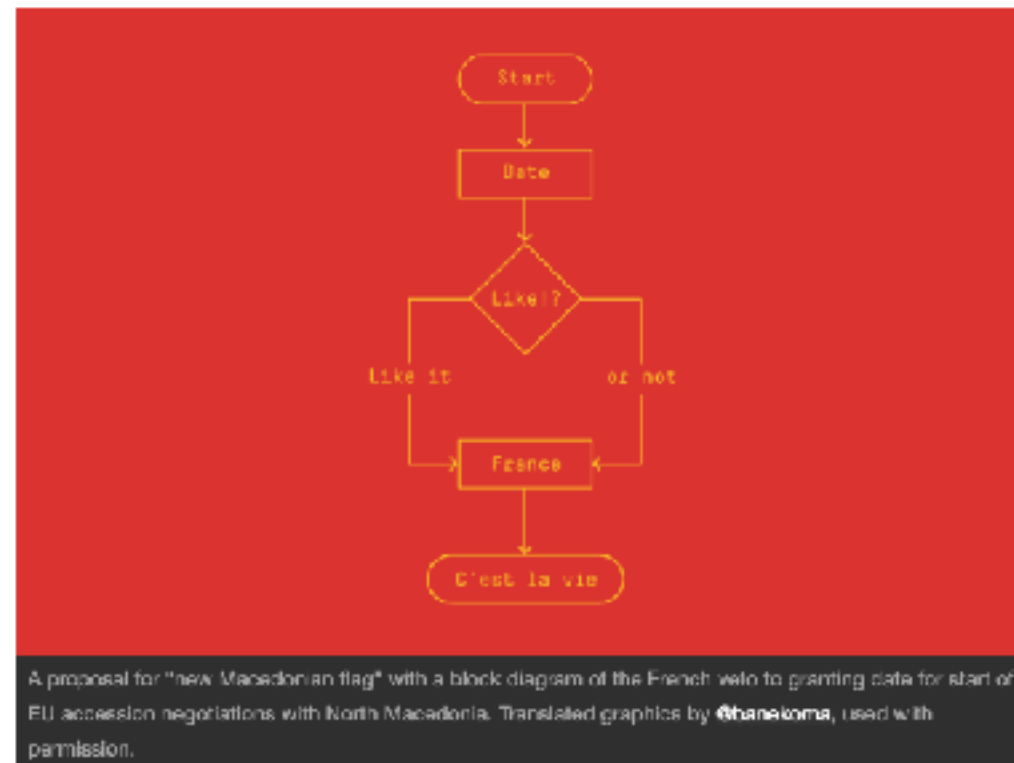
ACTION
Further research
and monitoring
of sources

THEME: Elections
FRAME: Anti-nationalist/anti-fascist

Twitter users from North Macedonia fight disappointment with EU non-decision with humor

As is usually the case with politically tense circumstances, internet users vented their frustration with memes.

Posted 21 October 2019 21:00 GMT



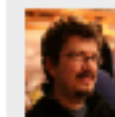
The week ending October 19, 2019, was a rough one for North Macedonia and Albania, as the date for the long-anticipated start of negotiations for the two Western Balkan countries' European Union (EU) membership **didn't materialize**, due in large part to a lack of support by France.

Despite clear recommendations by the European Commission to grant the date, neither the foreign ministers who convened in Luxembourg for the **General Affairs Council** on October 15, nor the top member country leaders who met at the **European Council** on October 17 and 18 **could reach consensus**. The result? Postponement of a decision **that had already been delayed**.

"A great injustice was inflicted on us... I am disappointed and angry and I know our people feel the same."

Zoran Zaev, North Macedonian prime minister

Zaev's disappointment was shared by EU top leaders, including Commissioner for Enlargement Johannes Hahn, who also voiced concern over the EU's **shattered credibility**. But reactions by social media users from North Macedonia, many of whom had hoped their country would be able to join the European Union as soon as possible, ranged from unpleasant surprise and outrage to... well... humor.



Written by
Filip Stojanovski

Read this post in [Shqip](#)

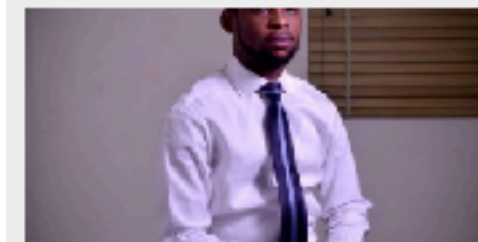
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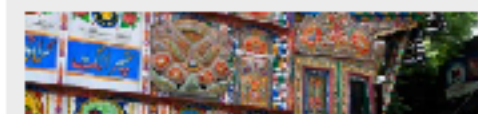
[Sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Nigerian journalist under threat of arrest for exposé of police and prison corruption



[East Asia](#)

First Thai female Theravada monk named one of BBC's 100 most influential women



Albanians angry at EU's failure to open accession talks—but for PM sun 'still shining'

Reactions from Albania after French President Macron helped block accession talks

Posted 24 October 2019 00:01 GMT



"As you see, the sun is still shining, the bright day goes on."
Edi Rama, Albanian prime minister

The European Union (EU) has [failed to open accession talks](#) with Albania and North Macedonia in a blow to pro-EU politicians in the small Western Balkan nations.

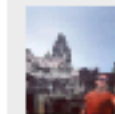
In meetings that took place over the week ending on October 19, French President Emmanuel Macron led a small number of member states in blocking the launch of membership talks with the two hopeful countries. Macron was joined by [Denmark](#) and [the Netherlands](#) in refusing Albania but France alone rejected North Macedonia. New membership talks require approval by all EU member states.

The lack of agreement was received negatively not only by politicians and the public in Albania and North Macedonia, but also by bureaucrats in Brussels.

The head of the European Commission, the executive branch of the EU, Jean-Claude Juncker said the EU was making a "major historic mistake", while EU Council President Donald Tusk stressed that Albania and North Macedonia weren't at fault.

"I would like to send a message to our Macedonian and Albanian friends: don't give up! You did your share and we didn't. But I have absolutely no doubt that you will become full members of the European Union. <https://t.co/8G5z2NjHPr> pic.twitter.com/xgTjKSoHML

— Donald Tusk (@eucopresident) October 18, 2019



Written by
Ardi Pulaj

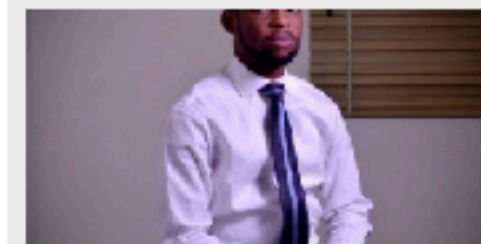
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Nigerian journalist under threat of arrest for exposé of police and prison corruption



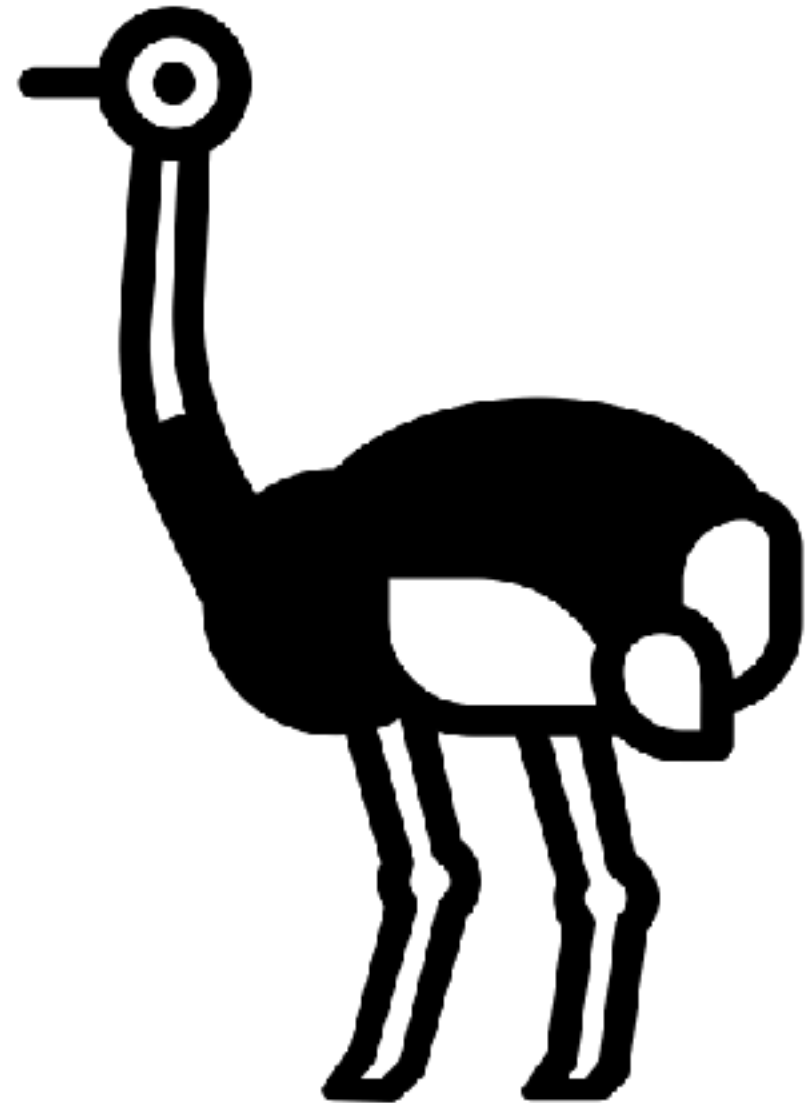
[East Asia](#)

First Thai female Theravada monk named one of BBC's 100 most influential women



WHAT DID WE LEARN?

1. Journalistic skills critical for defining media frames and themes, and scoring civic impact.
2. Frames, once defined, help us to rapidly analyze ongoing events. They will form the basis of further research into what is shaping up to be a contentious electoral campaign in North Macedonia.
3. Frames are highly contextual, and we can see a rapid shift in opinion based on reaction to events.
4. Networks may be silent/passive, but can be quickly activated when events occur.
5. Memes and ideas, and especially disinformation frames, cross language boundaries easily, especially among allied nationalist groups.



Civic Media Observatory – North Macedonia dominant themes

Elections

The theme of elections became dominant after Prime Minister Zoran Zaev announced that they will need to take place after the European Council's failure to grant a date for start of negotiations. The opposition VMRO-DPMNE has demanded early elections for a long time and party political PR activities and the coverage by crony media were focused on presenting this as a victory for them, or as a "fall of the government" and initiated celebrations. On the other hand, the ruling parties seem to have made a rational decision to hold the elections early, in April 2020 to capitalize on the perceived level of support expected due to receiving full membership in NATO in January or February, as well as the expected benefits of some economic reforms. There were no constitutional requirements on Zaev's government to schedule these elections, nor did the government lose its support of majority MPs in the parliament.

EU accession talks

The start of the EU accession talks was the top topic of this period, as the EU was expected to fulfil its promise from the June European Council and grant a date for start of negotiations in October. In the preceding weeks, the general expectation was that this will take place. There were some doomsday scenarios on regard to obstacles from Bulgaria, after news about a decision taken by the government to impose new conditions directly affecting the expression of Macedonian identity spread. However, in both Luxemburg at the Council of the EU (ministers) and European Council (heads of governments) Bulgaria had advocated accession. The French move to block the EU enlargement by not providing consensus vote was viewed with dismay and surprise, leading to guesswork, analysis and conspiracy theories about ulterior motives. The Macedonian media provided a constant stream of news items about "every" statement of EU officials and prognoses about the outcome of the negotiations in Luxemburg and Brussels.

Macedonian nationalism and Macedonian identity

Media content often combined these two themes, as the nationalist perspective mainly builds its narrative by stressing the nationalists have a sort of monopoly on patriotism expressed through protection of Macedonian identity. This identity is ethnic in nature, viewing Macedonia primarily as nation state/homeland of ethnic Macedonians and assigning a kind of 'guest status' to other ethnicities, and not a civic identity of citizens of multiethnic North Macedonia. The concerns about "loosing" some aspects of identity during the process of EU and NATO accession, in particular due to pressure of mainstream nationalisms of neighboring countries were also used to sway essentially non-nationalist segment of ethnic Macedonian population into accepting nationalist arguments. In essence this concerned media manipulations using fear.

Renaming of North Macedonia

Renaming of North Macedonia was presented in the Macedonian media as an ultimate sacrifice and heavy price that was paid to be able to get into EU and NATO. Not appreciating this sacrifice by not granting even a date for start of the negotiations (which does not necessarily need to be very near), and not appreciating the gravity of situation in the country before June 2017 and the democratic changes afterwards, especially in comparison to Serbia which has already in the process of negotiations, was considered an ultimate injustice by both pro-EU and anti-EU commentators. Nationalists had a field day with the "I told you so" messages.

Civic Media Observatory – North Macedonia dominant frames

Anti-EU

Anti-EU sentiments were less present in official statements and in the mainstream media, but very much on Macedonian nationalist social media profiles and pages, as well as fringe media under control of nationalist parties. More or less openly, the idea of getting closer to Russia or other non-Western powers was advocated by these sources. In addition, the possibility that EU would not ever accept the Western Balkans (for its internal reasons or prejudices) and the need for “Plan B” was voiced by liberal voices disappointed in the result of the European Council. However, this didn’t escalate into full blown Eurosceptic campaign in the mainstream discourse.

Eurocrat (pro)

The role of Eurocrats – the high ranking EU officials, as well as representatives of EU countries who had advocated granting the date of negotiations to North Macedonia during the week of the European Council was presented in a highly positive light in the Macedonian media sphere. Their statements of hope that somehow the situation will reverse before the week was over, and expressions of outrage with the French obstructionism were repeated by both pro-government and pro-opposition media. The statements that North Macedonia has paid a heavy price (with the name change) and did its homework (with democratic reforms) were the mainstay of pro-government media and commentators, with an aim of exonerating the prime minister and the foreign minister from blame for the failure (assigned to them by the opposition).

Prespa Agreement was a mistake

This has been a mantra by nationalist media or opinion makers, as well as the position of VMRO-DPMNE, the nationalist populist political party. While its mouthpieces promote the idea of revoking the agreement after the country receives full membership into NATO, the party has not issued an official position about whether it would annul the agreement if it gets into power. This revocation has been viewed as impossible by most commentators who are not associated with the party, but has influence on the party base. This party’s voting base has been primed as recipient of similar propaganda. For instance, in the past the party’s opinion makers and other nationalist forces have been advocating similar ideas about annulling historical treaties considered harmful for Macedonia, like the Bucharest Treaty of 1913 that divided the region of Macedonia among its neighboring countries.

Pro-EU enlargement

Most of the coverage by mainstream media in North Macedonia promoted the pro-EU enlargement “side” with very few voices opposing the overall concept. The anti-enlargement narratives were present on social media, and in some statements by few right wing political figures considered marginal in the general scheme of things.

The Western Balkans are European

The reactions decrying the France’s obstructionism as motivated by stereotypes (fueled by Macron’s speech from Toulouse where he used some shaky arguments about Albanians) and a form of “Orientalism” (the analogue “Balkanism” was also used) also included statements reaffirming the notions that Western Balkans is part of Europe, and that the differences in levels of institutional development (and rule of law) should not be extended to stereotypes about the people. Another aspect of this frame included promotion of statements by pro-enlargement EU leaders who all reiterated that Western Balkans is European and should join the EU – in particular statements by top EUrocrats and leaders of EU countries from the Balkans (for instance, Bulgaria).

Civic Media Observatory – Russia dominant themes

NATO Accession

Dominant issue in Russian popular press's interest towards the Balkans; accession is seen as a method of encircling “brother Slavs” in Serbia and jeopardising Russian infrastructure projects, including the South Stream gas pipeline.

Risks: appealing to quasi-conspiratorial narratives spun by the Russian tabloid press about Serbia's “encirclement” and Russian “defence against NATO encroachment on its sphere of influence.”

Russian influence in the Balkans

And the need to preserve it. Russophone audiences know comparatively little about domestic politics in the Western Balkans apart from positive connotations with Serbia and parallels with the collapse of the USSR and former Yugoslavia.

Risks: Perceived parallels in post-socialist experiences can be a useful news hook to an unfamiliar topic but can override significant differences between societies, hence nuance.

Macedonian identity

Russian audiences were drawn to cultural commonalities, Orthodoxy, and “Slavic brotherhood” to a limited degree. The role of the West, Greece, and (pro-Western) Albanian minorities were also mentioned in this context.

Risks: Fermenting generalised mistrust towards ethnic minorities for their assumed geopolitical sympathies, and presenting the Prespa Accords as a “capitulation” of Macedonian identity.

Civic Media Observatory – Russia dominant frames

Anti-NATO

By far the most common frame, presenting NATO accession as a hostile anti-Russian and anti-Serbian move, widely seen in state owned and pro-government media outlets. Possibly the only news hook which can be made to resonate with readers of popular publications, so it dominates. Specialist observers and publications remain critical but are more measured, accepting the move as a fait accompli and stressing a need to build new ties as far as possible.

Risks: Routine marginalisation and dismissal of the agency of local Balkan populations in NATO accession, which is largely presented as a move forced on Macedonians or at least by a corrupted and out of touch pro-Western political elite.

Anti-EU

Pro-government media and commentators largely object to NATO, rather than EU, membership (this is the official line of the Russian government). However, in this frame, EU membership is less objectionable but is nonetheless a dangerous step on a path towards Euro-Atlantic military integration. Less specialist commentary does not distinguish between them in tone.

Risks: Russian tabloid and “patriotic” media largely criticises the EU by reference to culture wars (“Gayropa”, “liberal degeneracy,” etc), anti-EU framing which relies on these could amplify reactionary traditionalists and homophobes in the Russian media and in the Balkans.

Russian opportunism in the Western Balkans

The French refusal to open accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania was presented in the Russian media as a sign of European duplicity and lack of respect for Balkan governments and peoples. This is a crucial time for pro-Russian actors to amplify alternatives, real or imagined, to the humiliating holding pattern of Balkan entry (or as they see it, re-entry) into the European community.

Risks: Undermining popular belief in the necessity for anti-corruption and judicial reform demanded by Brussels. Some Russian outlets also praised the EU for the move, interpreting it as a great power putting aside its pretensions to liberal democratisation and prioritising its own interests — opening the door to a more transactional relationship with authoritarian regimes.

Civic Media Observatory – Greece dominant themes

Irregular migration

Dominant issue in Greek domestic politics, affecting EU perceptions, inflaming racist tensions and nationalist rhetoric (Greece is seen as a holding pen for Europe's undesirables).

Risks: exacerbating Greek xenophobia/isolationism, anti-EU sentiment

Propaganda / "fake news"

Daily news outrage cycle fed by social media-primed disinformation and spin from all sides, Greece already tops news avoidance and low trust in media statistics (Reuters 2019). Mainstream media –esp. private TV channels- largely considered complicit in austerity policies, after decades of clientelist collusion with the bipartisan political establishment. Undercurrent of conspiracy theories popular with segments of the public, also for decades (primarily partisan anti-imperialist narratives with an anti-Semitic slant)

Risks: peak media apathy/nihilism, vilification of journalism

Renaming of North Macedonia

The wider Greek public, and mainstream media, are adapting to using the nomenclature agreed upon by the Prespa Agreement, albeit often grudgingly, whereas nationalists continue to use the terms Skopje and Skopjans to refer to their neighboring country and nation

Risks: protracted uncertainty or backtracking over the implementation of the Prespa Agreement could revert public perception of, and interaction with, North Macedonia to the naming issue fixation

Civic Media Observatory – Greece dominant frames

Greek nationalist

Although Greek society has steadfast anti-fascist reflexes and a vibrant leftist/anarchist sphere, nationalism is historically prevalent in conservative/reactionary parties across the spectrum and directly informs politics and everyday discourse. Manipulated outrage over the Prespa Agreement saw the most inflamed nationalist protests in recent decades, backed by the Orthodox Church, the mainstreaming of far-right rhetoric, and the return of Conservatives to power. Nationalist agitators are currently engaged in a campaign to vilify conservative PM Mitsotakis for walking back his opportunistic opposition to the Prespa Agreement after winning the elections, in favor of realpolitik

Risks: public currently apathetic, but nationalist sentiment could be inflamed by developments on a number of issues (Turkish imperialist adventurism in the region, ethnic minority tensions in Albania, Prespa Agreement implementation difficulties)

Prespa Agreement was a mistake

This framing is very popular even across some moderate segments, blaming former PM Tsipras for jumping the gun and going it alone, seizing primarily on perceptions of caving in to NATO pressures to cinch the deal. Polling pegged anti-Prespa Agreement sentiment at 65-58% in Greece

Risks: nationalists could incite tensions with/over North Macedonia again (now dormant), if the accession roadblock results in any backtracking on its implementation (e.g. the erga omnes issue)

Anti-NATO

NATO is widely seen as the primary meddler in Balkan and Middle Eastern geopolitics in Greece. Partisan anti-imperialist narratives are popular across the political spectrum, occasionally venting into anti-American, and in recent years, anti-German, sentiments

Risks: unchecked spread of Russian influence in public perceptions, and possibly regional diplomacy

* Reuters Institute - Digital News Report 2019



A project of Global Voices, the **Civic Media Observatory** is a method to investigate and decode how people understand information and create knowledge in complex and seemingly chaotic media ecosystems.

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To see our methods and learn more about this project, see: <https://globalvoices.org/special/observatory/>

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