



Weekly Briefing

North Macedonia external relations briefing:
Counting the Costs:
Macedonia's 4-year NATO Membership in Review
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Counting the Costs: Macedonia's 4-year NATO Membership in Review

Summary

March 27, 2024, marked the fourth anniversary of (North) Macedonia's NATO membership. The occasion was approached differently by various political and social actors, reflecting their stances regarding the Alliance and, more broadly, contemporary geopolitical issues. While the political establishment centered on festivities commemorating the event, the social landscape was marked by a growing distrust of the Alliance, as evidenced by a persistent increase in the percentage of individuals inclined to exit the Alliance since 2020. According to the Ministry of Defense, as of 2024, 2.05% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) or 327 million euros will be allocated to the country's defense budget. This will make Macedonia one of the 18 member countries that from 2024 meet NATO's criterion to allocate 2% of GDP for defense. This will occur against the backdrop of a devastated social context, where the state is unable to provide basic conditions such as healthcare, education, or human security to its citizens. Yet it is willing to spend significant portions of its budget on the membership fee of a military alliance that its citizens never agreed to joining.

March 27, 2024, marked the fourth anniversary of (North) Macedonia's NATO membership.¹ The occasion was approached differently by various political and social actors, reflecting their stances regarding the Alliance and, more broadly, contemporary geopolitical issues.

¹ The country became the thirtieth member of the Alliance on March 27, 2020, 27 years after the Assembly adopted a Resolution in 1993 defining the country's foreign policy priorities – NATO and European Union membership. In April 1999, at the NATO Summit in Washington, the Republic of Macedonia gained candidate country status for membership in the Alliance, initiating preparations and implementation of the Membership Action Plan. The invitation for membership was expected at the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008. Croatia and Albania received it then, but in the final declaration of that summit, the Alliance decided that the country should receive an invitation for membership after resolving the name dispute with Greece. On December 25, 2017, the Assembly adopted a declaration to accelerate reform and integration processes for NATO membership.

The central ceremony commemorating four years of NATO membership took place on the square in front of the Ministry of Defense. Prior to the central ceremony, the so-called “traditional NATO breakfast” with the diplomatic corps was held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, marking the beginning of NATO Days in the country, which will last until April 4th.²³

The Assembly adopted the Declaration to mark the anniversary and 75 years since the formation of the Alliance within the framework of the 149th session. The president and petitioner, Jovan Mitreski, emphasized that by adopting the Declaration, the MPs confirm their determination to make a serious and significant contribution to ensuring regional and world peace and stability. Four years after joining the Alliance, he concluded that the decisions made along the way to membership were difficult, but worth it.⁴

By supporting the declaration, he said that the message will be sent to NATO partners, as he emphasized, that they have a dedicated and reliable partner and ally in us. “In addition, by adopting this declaration at the very end of the mandate, we will leave a message to future MPs and for future generations in general, that there is no deviation from the direction we have taken and that as MPs we recognize strategic values. We do not deviate from them and work together on their full realization”, Mitreski pointed out.

Earlier, the member of parliament of the Left [Levica], Dimitar Apasiev, requested the removal of the declaration from the agenda, presenting arguments that the Alliance is an aggressor and a violator of international law. According to him, membership in NATO does not bring economic prosperity and because, as he said, the budget is used for militarization, instead

² Северна Македонија одбележува четири години членство во НАТО [North Macedonia marks four years of NATO membership], published on 27.03.2024, available at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/32879238.html>, accessed on 01.04.2024

³ Photo gallery: Со традиционалниот НАТО појадок одбележан почетокот на НАТО Деновите во Северна Македонија
<https://www.mfa.gov.mk/en/photo-gallery/3334/so-tradicionalniot-nato-pojadok-odbelezhan-pochetokot-na-nato-denovite-vo-severna-makedonija>

⁴ The Assembly adopted a Declaration to mark four years of NATO membership, published on 30.03.2024, available at <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/en/sobraniето-usvoi-deklaracija-za-odbelezhuvanje-chetiri-godini-od-chlenstvoto-vo-nato/>, accessed on 01.04.2024

of social packages for citizens. "NATO does not bring democracy. NATO is a violator of international law and the mandate of the United Nations. Without permission from the Security Council, NATO attacked Yugoslavia in 1999, attacked Libya, attacked Iraq, and numerous other countries," Apasiev stated. Moreover he added that it is not accurate that the Macedonian people want NATO membership: "Article 120 of the Constitution was not adhered to, which states: 'The decision to join or withdraw from a union or alliance with other states is adopted if a majority of the total number of voters cast their vote in favor of it in a referendum.' The referendum in 2018 was unsuccessful and had no turnout threshold, thus the constitutional requirement for NATO accession was not fulfilled, meaning that our entry into NATO was unconstitutional and against the will of the people."⁵

The Government Commemorates Four-Year Anniversary of NATO Membership

The Government held a ceremonial session presided over by the acting Prime Minister, Talat Džaferi. "Through our membership in the Alliance, we align ourselves with the most advanced democracies globally and play a crucial role in upholding peace for over a billion people", Džaferi stated. Additionally, he noted "the remarkable transformation of our army to match the standards of our allies".⁶ At the ceremonial session, Minister of Foreign Affairs Bujar Osmani also extended congratulations, emphasizing that "these four years signify security, as membership has contributed to preserving stability in the country". He noted that this came at a crucial moment, as he stated, "before the onset of Russia's aggression against Ukraine."⁷ "We can imagine what the situation in the region would be like if we were not a NATO member, given the conditions of imperial Russian ambitions. Ukraine is just one stop on Russia's ambitions, and one of those stops would be the Western Balkans," said Osmani, highlighting the country's contribution towards assisting Ukraine. He also pointed out the army's participation in other missions. He also noted that Macedonia has met the NATO obligation of

⁵ Апасиев: НАТО не носи демократија, НАТО е кршач на меѓународното право и Повелбата на Обединетите нации [Apasiev: NATO does not bring democracy, NATO is a violator of international law and the Charter of the United Nations], published on 28.03.2024, available at <https://antropol.mk/2024/03/28/apasiev-nato-sobranie/>, accessed on 01.04.2024

⁶ Четири години членство во НАТО: Македонија фактор на стабилност на Западниот Балкан, [Four years of NATO membership: Macedonia, a factor of stability in the Western Balkans], published on 26.03.2024, available at

<https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/chetiri-godini-chlenstvo-vo-nato-makedonija-faktor-na-stabilnost-na-zapadniot-balkan/> accessed on 27.03.2024

⁷ Ibid

reaching 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defense spending."⁸ Finally, Osmani emphasized, "I want to express satisfaction with the accession of Sweden and Finland; we are no longer the newest members. With their defense capacities, the role of NATO and all allies will certainly be strengthened."⁹ Moreover, he added, "European integration is also a security issue, so the EU must continue its policy of open doors because membership in the Union is already seen primarily as a security issue that will consolidate the region, and in that direction."¹⁰

During the government session commemorating four years of NATO membership, the first Deputy Prime Minister Bojan Marichikj and the Minister of Defense Slavjanka Petrovska also addressed the attendees. Deputy Prime Minister Marichikj emphasized: "Today is a special day for all our citizens who desire a peaceful, stable, and prosperous state. Today, we are all reassured knowing that we are part of the most advanced, most powerful defense and political-military Alliance in the world. Because we stand among democrats, visionaries, but also because we are all here for one and one for all, shoulder to shoulder with the most developed in the world."¹¹ Minister of Defense, Petrovska said that on this day, four years ago, (North) Macedonia showed where it belongs. "By entering NATO, we clearly chose the path of stability and partnership against destructive behaviors. In 2022, at the Alliance's Leadership Summit in Madrid, we adopted the new NATO Strategic Concept, which outlines our goals, points out our tasks, and shows that NATO is not a threat to anyone. On the contrary, NATO exists to protect itself and prevent unilateral and ill-considered decisions by various regimes from being those that could endanger our territory and our citizens," Petrovska emphasized. The Minister highlighted that (North) Macedonia, through its participation in multinational forces in Latvia,

⁸ In 2014, NATO Heads of State and Government agreed to commit 2% of their national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to defense spending, to help ensure the Alliance's continued military readiness.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Одбележана 4-годишнината од членството на Северна Македонија во НАТО, Маричиќ и Петровска со порака дека нашата држава е ценет сојузник кој дава значаен придонес кон колективната безбедност, [Marking the 4th anniversary of North Macedonia's NATO membership, Marichikj and Petrovska conveyed a message that our country is a valued ally contributing significantly to collective security] published on 27.03.2024, available at <https://mod.gov.mk/%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0-4-%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%88%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D0%B4-%D1%87%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%82/>, accessed on 31.03.2024

Bulgaria, and Romania, contributes to the security of the Alliance's eastern flank, as well as in the region, through participation in the KFOR mission in Kosovo and ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹²

The cost of NATO membership

(North) Macedonia is one of the 18 member countries that from 2024 will meet NATO's criterion to allocate 2% of GDP for defense. According to the Ministry of Defense, as of 2024, 2.05% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) or 327 million euros will be allocated to the country's defense budget. For comparison, Macedonia's defense budget for 2023 amounted to 274.6 million euros (1.85% of GDP), which was 24.45% higher than the defense budget for 2022, which was 1.57% of GDP. This year, just like the previous one, almost one-third of the defense budget is allocated for the modernization and equipping of the Army, which euphemistically refers to purchasing equipment from the USA or paying the NATO membership fee. In 2014 the allocations for new equipment were between 6 and 7%. In 2023 they amounted to 34.2%. "North Macedonia is fully committed to its membership obligations, through a clear commitment to stable defense financing, continuous development of defense capacities and capabilities in accordance with Alliance standards, contributing to NATO's mission in Kosovo and Iraq, as well as NATO's multinational forces in Latvia, Bulgaria, and Romania," stated State Secretary Vladimir Anchev, who led a delegation from the Ministry of Defense in multilateral discussions with Macedonia at NATO headquarters in Brussels on March 14th.¹³

The meeting came less than a week after it was announced that the country will be purchasing military vehicles from the United States for an estimated cost of \$111 million. The Government has requested to buy an additional eighteen (18) M1278A1/A2 Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV) Heavy Gun Carriers (HGC); and seven (7) M1280A1/A2 Joint Light Tactical Vehicle (JLTV) General Purpose (GP), in addition to a total of seventy-one (71) JLTVs, consisting of forty-eight (48) M1278A1/A2 JLTVs HGC; seventeen (17) M1280A1/A2 JLTVs

¹² Ibid

¹³ Висока е поддршката за НАТО во Северна Македонија, [Support for NATO is high in North Macedonia.] published on 15.03.2024, available at

<https://www.dw.com/mk/visoka-e-poddrskata-za-nato-vo-severna-makedonija/a-68536247>, accessed on 31.03.2024

GP; and six (6) M1281A1/A2 JLTVs Close Combat Weapons Carrier (CCWC).¹⁴ The statement by the Defense and Security Cooperation Agency said that the proposed sale will enhance Macedonia's "capacity to meet current and future threats by providing a tactical vehicle capability to deter adversaries and participate in NATO operations."¹⁵ Moreover, it added that "this proposed sale will support the foreign policy and national security of the United States by improving the security of a NATO Ally that is an important force for political and economic stability in Europe."¹⁶

The purchasing of military equipment and participation in military missions are not the only costs the country has to incur as a result of its NATO membership. The idea for the Balkan states, including Macedonia, to assist in the rehabilitation of soldiers from military zones in Ukraine, as announced by the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, was discussed at a meeting with the Presidents of (North) Macedonia and Montenegro, Stevo Pendarovski and Jakov Milatović, at the Ukraine - Southeast Europe Summit held in Tirana on February 28th. "The idea is generally acceptable to us, with the need for specific development of the details to be under the jurisdiction of the governments of the countries that will agree to participate in this program," stated President Pendarovski's Cabinet. For the implementation of the idea for the rehabilitation of soldiers from Ukraine in appropriate health and rehabilitation centers, the Government also needs to express its position.

"Based on coordination with the President's Cabinet, which participated in this discussion, the idea is generally acceptable, with the need for specific development of the details to be under the jurisdiction of the governments of the countries that will agree to participate in this program," stated the Government.¹⁷ This is not the first such initiative. In August 2021, the

¹⁴ NORTH MACEDONIA – JOINT LIGHT TACTICAL VEHICLES, published on 08.03.2024, available at <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/north-macedonia-joint-light-tactical-vehicles>, accessed on 31.03.2024

¹⁵ U.S. State Department Approves Sale Of Light Tactical Vehicles To North Macedonia, published on 09.03.2024, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-state-department-sale-north-macedonia/32854897.html>, accessed on 31.03.2024

¹⁶ NORTH MACEDONIA – JOINT LIGHT TACTICAL VEHICLES, published on 08.03.2024, available at <https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/north-macedonia-joint-light-tactical-vehicles>, accessed on 31.03.2024

¹⁷ Идејата на Зеленски за рехабилитација на украински деца и војници се разгледува во Скопје [Zelensky's idea for the rehabilitation of Ukrainian children and soldiers is being discussed in Skopje] published on

country joined the initiative to rescue the Afghan population whose lives were endangered by the Taliban. 793 citizens from Afghanistan, who were relocated to Macedonia, have since moved to Canada.¹⁸

Media Bias: Misrepresentation of NATO's Perception Among the Population

One of the primary arguments advocated by political elites in Macedonia in favor of NATO membership is the purported support it enjoys among the population. Media reports frequently distort statistics to highlight NATO's perceived acceptability among Macedonian citizens. For example, a text published by Deutsche Welle on March 15, 2024, claims that "Support for NATO membership in Macedonia is high."¹⁹ However, this narrative overlooks the fact that according to NATO's own assessments, support among the Macedonian populace has been steadily diminishing over the years. The NATO annual report for 2022 revealed that 22% of Macedonian citizens would opt to leave the Alliance. This figure increased to 24% in the subsequent Annual Report for 2023. Consequently, over a span of three years, the proportion of individuals expressing intent to exit the Alliance surged by 10%. This indicates that following accession, backing for the Alliance has consistently dwindled. This occurs within a media landscape that exhibits clear favoritism towards NATO.²⁰

Macedonia's commemoration of the fourth anniversary of its NATO membership on March 27, 2024, served as reflections on the nation's journey within the Alliance. Within the political sphere, divergent viewpoints emerged regarding NATO membership. While some leaders staunchly advocated for continued alignment with the Alliance, others voiced

06.03.2024, available at <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/idejata-na-zelenski-za-rehabilitacija-na-ukrainski-deca-i-vojnici-se-razgl eduva-vo-skopje/32847062.html> accessed on 31.03.2024

¹⁸ Ниту еден од 793 Авганистанци кои беа сместени во Македонија не останал, сите си заминале во други земји, [None of the 793 Afghans who were resettled in Macedonia have remained; they have all moved to other countries.] published on 30.10.2023, available at

<https://fokus.mk/nitu-eden-od-793-avganistantsi-koi-bea-smesteni-vo-makedonija-ne-ostanal-site-si-zaminale-vo-drugi-zemji/> accessed on 31.03.2024

¹⁹ Висока е поддршката за НАТО во Северна Македонија [The support for NATO is high in North Macedonia], published on 15.03.2024, available at

<https://www.dw.com/mk/visoka-e-poddrskata-za-nato-vo-severna-makedonija/a-68536247>

²⁰ The Secretary General's Annual Report 2023, published on 14.03.2024, available at

https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/sgar23-en.pdf, accessed on 01.04.2024

skepticism and raised critical questions about NATO's actions and their impact on national sovereignty. Despite economic challenges, Macedonia pledged to allocate 2% of its GDP to defense spending in 2024. As part of this, at the start of March new plans to acquire military vehicles from the United States were announced. During the same period, it was hinted at the possibility that the country will serve as a center for rehabilitating Ukrainian soldiers. In conclusion, the fourth anniversary of (North) Macedonia's NATO membership in March 2024 was marked by contrasting narratives and perspectives. While political elites celebrated the occasion with ceremonies and declarations underscoring the nation's commitment to the Alliance, the social landscape revealed a growing skepticism and discontent among the population. This skepticism is reflected in the increasing percentage of individuals inclined to leave the Alliance, indicating a significant divergence between the political establishment and public sentiment. Moreover, the allocation of a substantial portion of the country's budget to meet NATO's defense spending criteria raises concerns amidst a backdrop of pressing social needs left unmet by the state. At the same time however, in view of the growing political polarization in the world, the choice of the political elites to align the state with the NATO alliance, continues to contradict the country's tradition of non-alignment as pioneered and advanced when it was part of the Yugoslav Federation.