



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

A landlocked nation on the Balkan Peninsula of southeastern Europe, North Macedonia covers an area roughly the size of Haiti or the U.S. state of Vermont. The landscape is predominantly mountainous, with population centers located in valleys and in lowlands. Along North Macedonia's western and southern borders are the scenic Ohrid, Prespa, and Doiran lakes, which are popular recreation sites and among the largest lakes in the Balkans. The capital city of Skopje lies on North Macedonia's major river, the Vardar, which bisects the country on its southeasterly route to Greece. Fertile soils support an important agricultural sector. Certain areas are known for the production of particular goods, such as the Prespa region (apples), Kavadarci (grapes and wine), and Strumica (vegetables).

The climate is temperate throughout most of the country, although temperatures are cooler in the north and at higher elevations. The average temperature in Skopje, in the north, is 73°F (23°C) in summer, with highs reaching over 80°F (27°C). In winter, Skopje's average temperature falls to 34°F (1°C), with lows below freezing. Mountain snowpack supports several ski resorts. North Macedonia has four seasons, with cold, wet winters and hot, dry summers.

History

Kingdom of Macedonia

In ancient times, a large part of what is now North Macedonia was inhabited by numerous tribes that together formed the kingdom of Paeonia. Shortly after Philip II became king of neighboring Macedonia in 359 BC, he attacked and annexed much of Paeonia. The remainder of the region was conquered by Philip's son, the celebrated military strategist Alexander the Great, whose territory eventually ranged from North Africa to Central Asia. After Alexander's death in 323 BC, his empire was divided among his generals, and Macedonia was reduced back to an area that included parts of current-day North Macedonia and Greece.

As a result of its defeat in a series of four wars with Rome from 215 to 148 BC, Macedonia became a Roman province. When the Roman Empire was divided in AD 395, Macedonia came under the rule of the Byzantine Empire. Slavic migrants, pushed south by invading tribes, entered the northern area of Macedonia around 600 and began integrating with the local population, thus laying the ethnic foundation of the modern Macedonian nation. An independent Macedonian state was briefly established between 997 and 1014, but Macedonia remained under Byzantine control until 1389, when the region was conquered by the Ottoman Empire. The Macedonians staged an unsuccessful uprising against the Ottomans in 1903 that is still celebrated by Macedonians as a sign of their refusal to accept Ottoman rule.

Yugoslavia and the Communist Era

Bulgarian, Greek, Montenegrin, and Serbian forces ousted the

Ottomans from the Balkans in 1912 during the First Balkan War, after which Serbia annexed the region; in 1918, the territory was integrated into the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later renamed Yugoslavia. After World War II, President Josip Broz Tito established Yugoslavia as a communist federal republic.

Tito's broad authority held ethnic discord in check, but his death in 1980 unleashed longstanding tensions that ultimately caused the federation to dissolve eleven years later. Macedonia, one of the six nations formed from Yugoslavia, declared its independence that year and formed a parliamentary republic. It began to shift toward a market economy through gradual privatization of industry and decentralization of government. Greece objected to the name "Macedonia" because it was also the name of a northern Greek province. Concerns arose that the new country would eventually make territorial and historic claims on the Greek province, and Greece argued that the country should take on a more specific name, such as "Northern Macedonia." As a result of these objections, the country was admitted to the United Nations under the provisional name of the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" in 1993.

Interethnic Conflict

Macedonia emerged as the most underdeveloped of the former Yugoslav republics and was hampered by regional instability and internal political and economic problems. Even though Macedonia was the only former Yugoslav republic to establish independence peacefully, tension existed between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians (the largest minority).

Antagonism between these groups grew, exacerbated by war in neighboring Kosovo (a province of Serbia at that time). In 2001, the ethnic-Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) began waging battles against the Macedonian military. Fearing the conflict would spread to other parts of the Balkans, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervened and began negotiations with representatives from both sides. The result was the disbandment of the NLA and a peace accord signed in August 2001.

International Relations

While attempting to stabilize its interethnic relations, in part by granting ethnic Albanians more autonomy, Macedonia worked toward a full market economy and greater integration with the rest of Europe. Macedonia officially became a candidate for European Union (EU) membership in 2005, when it began to take on the obligations of membership, including strengthening ties with its neighbors, reducing corruption and trade barriers, and aligning its legal and economic framework with that of the EU. However, accession talks with the EU were delayed due to the ongoing dispute with Greece over the country's name. In 2008, Greece blocked a proposal for Macedonia to join NATO for the same reason. Greece dropped its opposition following a 2018 agreement that allowed the country's official name to be the Republic of North Macedonia. North Macedonia did become part of NATO in March 2020, but the process for EU membership was thwarted again later that year when Bulgaria objected, citing anti-Bulgarian sentiment from the Macedonian government.

Struggle for Democracy

As North Macedonia continues to try integrating with Europe, it is struggling to strengthen its democracy. A decade of increasingly authoritarian rule by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) was followed by a political crisis, when protests over a government wiretapping scandal forced Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski to resign in January 2016. After new elections, the victorious VMRO-DPMNE failed to form a coalition government. Months of political deadlock ended when the opposition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) party came to power after forming a coalition with two ethnic Albanian parties. Subsequent elections in 2020 were competitive and fair, and while observers say North Macedonia still has work to do, it has initiated political, legislative, and legal reforms intended to make way for its acceptance into the EU.

THE PEOPLE

Population

According to a 2002 census, ethnic Macedonians form 64 percent of the population. Albanians, who are concentrated in the western portion of the country, make up 25 percent of North Macedonia's population. The remainder consists of Turks (4 percent), Roma (3 percent), Serbs (2 percent), and others. Over 600,000 people reside in the capital, Skopje. Bitola is North Macedonia's next largest city.

Language

Both Macedonian and Albanian are official languages in North Macedonia. More than two-thirds of the population speak Macedonian as their first language. It is a Slavic language that uses the Cyrillic alphabet. Albanian is the second most common language, spoken by a quarter of the population, and uses a Latin script. Turkish, Romani, and Serbian are also spoken in North Macedonia.

Language has been one of the greatest sources of contention between the nation's ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. According to the 2001 peace agreement, in municipalities where an ethnic minority comprises 20 percent or more of the population, the minority's native language must be used along with Macedonian as an official language. North Macedonia's constitution grants students the right to learn in their native language in primary and secondary schools, though Macedonian must also be studied. For example, secondary education is usually in Macedonian, but some high schools in areas with large ethnic Albanian populations are taught in Albanian.

Religion

Religion primarily follows ethnic lines. Most ethnic Macedonians and Serbs are Macedonian Orthodox Christians. Albanians and Turks are primarily Muslims, although there are some ethnic Macedonians who converted to Islam under Ottoman rule and remain Muslims today. Approximately 65 percent of the population is Orthodox Christian, and 33 percent is Muslim. The remainder belongs to other faiths or is

not affiliated with a church. Religion typically plays a larger role in the lives of rural people than it does among urban residents.

General Attitudes

Macedonians generally value family, hospitality, and close interpersonal relationships. They tend to be an expressive and warm people who love socializing. Macedonians are not typically straightforward about topics that may be uncomfortable. For instance, rather than saying “no” directly, a person usually avoids the issue or gives a negative response in a roundabout way. Many Macedonians have a relaxed view of time compared to that of U.S. residents. If an informal business meeting is scheduled for 1 p.m., people might start gathering at 1:30, then chat for an hour or so before discussing any business.

Ethnic Macedonians are generally quick to emphasize their nation’s cultural uniqueness and historical achievements because of claims by Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia that Macedonian culture, people, and language belong to the heritage of these neighboring countries. In contrast, people belonging to North Macedonia’s other ethnic groups are more likely to identify with their ethnicity before their nationality. For example, ethnic Albanians generally identify themselves as Albanians in North Macedonia rather than as Albanian-Macedonians, even if they have lived their entire lives in North Macedonia.

Personal Appearance

Most people take great pride in their appearance. Clean and ironed clothes are the norm, especially in the workplace. Women tend to wear conservative clothes, such as a dress or skirt and blazer, while men usually wear suits or dress slacks and sweaters to work. Casual wear for both sexes consists of running suits and other comfortable clothing. Women often dye their hair and wear makeup, and men tend to keep their hair closely cropped. Young urban residents look to Western Europe and the United States for their styles and wear T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers.

Because buying clothes is often too expensive, many rural Macedonians sew or knit their own clothing. Rural and older people dress more conservatively than the urban and young. In Muslim areas, older women cover themselves from head to toe, wearing a scarf-like *shamija* over their hair. Among other groups, older women wear a *marama* (a handkerchief that keeps hair away from the face) while doing household chores. Traditional clothes are occasionally worn at events such as weddings, holidays, and festivals.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Macedonians typically greet one another by saying *Zdravo* (Hello) and shaking hands. Close friends and family members kiss each other three times on alternate cheeks. Other Macedonian-language greetings are *Dobro utro* (Good morning), *Dobar den* (Good afternoon), and *Dobra vecer* (Good night). In Albanian, these greetings are *Tung* (both

“Hello” and “Good-bye”), *Mirmenjezi* (Good morning), *Mir dita* (Good day), and *Naten e mir* (Good night).

Initial Macedonian greetings are followed by questions such as *Kako ste?* (formal “How are you?”) and *Kako si?* (informal “How are you?”), as well as inquiries about family members, such as *Kako e semejstvo?* (How is your family?). When entering a room with several people, Macedonians tend to greet everyone individually with a handshake. While friends refer to one another by first names, formal situations require *Gospodin* (Mr.), *Gospogja* (Mrs.), or *Gospogjica* (Miss).

Gestures

Macedonians are animated people and use many nonverbal gestures when speaking. Waving the index finger means “no,” as does making a clicking sound with the mouth, though both are generally considered rude. It is impolite to nod in conversation—which indicates one wants to interrupt a speaker—or to nod one’s head instead of saying “yes.” Macedonians take offense if they are not looked in the eyes before drinking a toast. Men in particular deeply shrug their shoulders to indicate “I don’t know” or “It’s beyond my control.” Older rural women, upon hearing of someone’s misfortune, attempt to ward off bad luck by pretending to spit three times down their blouses and saying *Loshoto da ne chue* (in Macedonian) or *Skraja da e* (in Turkish), meaning “Do not let evil hear.”

Visiting

Na gosti (visiting) is the most common form of entertainment for adults. Guests often bring the host gifts such as chocolates or flowers. They are expected to take off their shoes upon entering the home. Visiting can be prearranged or done on the spur of the moment, as Macedonians usually have food and drink on hand in case guests drop by. In addition to visiting each other’s homes, men and young people often socialize in café bars.

Macedonians pride themselves on seeing that guests’ needs are met and that they have enough to eat. Guests are served a variety of foods, including salads, *meze* (a mixture of ham, cheese, vegetables, and eggs), and *rakija* (a brandy made of apples, grapes, or plums). These are followed by baked goods and Turkish coffee. Repeated offerings, often in spite of refusals, are the norm. While the adults discuss topics ranging from local gossip to world events, children play amongst themselves. When staying the night, guests sleep in the best bed in the house, even if this means that their hosts must sleep on the floor.

Eating

Macedonians eat three meals a day: *pojadok* (breakfast) around 9 a.m., *rucek* (lunch) around 2 p.m., and *vecera* (dinner) around 7 p.m. Breakfast and dinner are generally lighter, more informal meals, while lunch is considered the main meal of the day. The entire family often eats lunch together while discussing the day’s events, though this practice is becoming less typical in urban areas. The women of the household traditionally served the food, but it is now becoming more customary for everyone to help themselves

from dishes laid out on the table. Still, the women prepare the meal and clean up after everyone is finished.

Dining in restaurants is generally reserved for special occasions and business meetings, though young people eat out more frequently than most Macedonians. Tipping, while not expected, is becoming more common; at restaurants, diners regularly round up when paying their bills as the tip. In restaurants with a live band, diners often tip the musicians. Tipping for a casual event, such as when going out for a drink or a cup of coffee, is unusual.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

Macedonian families typically have one or two children; however, rural Macedonians may have more. Albanian, Turkish, and Roma families also tend to have more children. Rural Macedonians live together in extended families consisting of grandparents, parents, and children. Extended families will often live on the same property. New couples typically build a house on family property. Albanian families often have houses that share a single courtyard, while Macedonian families separate their yards with fences.

In urban areas, many families often live in the same house or apartment building, though they share only common areas such as a living room, dining room, or kitchen. Families that do not live together remain close and visit one another often.

Parents and Children

Everyone in the household participates in child rearing, and all of a family's employed adults are expected to contribute to the household income. Parents help children financially until they finish school and find employment. In turn, adult children take care of elderly parents and provide financial support as soon as they have an income. New couples usually rent or buy their own apartment. However, children still live with their parents until marriage, even after they begin employment.

In villages, children may work in the fields, take care of animals, or help run a small business. Children in both urban and rural areas usually start having chores around the age of six, beginning with simple tasks like cleaning their rooms and increasing as they get older to things like going to the supermarket. A child's main task, however, is to go to school and study.

Gender Roles

Mothers are responsible for educating children and taking care of the household, and fathers are responsible for providing for the entire family. Men are usually considered the head of the household and are responsible for groceries and maintenance of the house. In urban families, parents tend to share responsibilities more than in rural areas. The husband's income covers living costs, and if the wife works as well, her income covers personal expenses. Among Albanian and Turkish families, women traditionally do not work outside the home.

Women are well established in the workforce and well represented as students in institutions of higher education.

Women also hold high positions in government and business. Still, they are almost solely responsible for the upkeep of the home.

Women are entitled to a paid maternity leave that lasts nine months. Fathers can take up to seven days of paternity leave in place of the mother.

Housing

Exteriors

Most Macedonian houses are made of reinforced concrete and cinder blocks and painted white, though in recent years there has been more variety in house colors. The roofs are often made of terracotta tiles, a style that originated in Turkey and was brought to North Macedonia during Ottoman rule. Because electricity is expensive, air-conditioning is rare in the summer and wood-fire heating common in the winter.

Almost all apartments and houses have a balcony, which Macedonians use to dry clothes and entertain guests in warm summer months. Some people grow flowers in pots on their balconies to decorate their homes. Outside, Macedonians often grow flowers, fruits, and vegetables in their yards. There is usually a sitting area in the yard, a balcony, or a porch for entertaining guests. Some buildings have a shared courtyard with flowers, trees, and benches.

Interiors

Houses usually have at least two bedrooms and two bathrooms. Small apartments rarely have bedrooms for the children (who may sleep in the living room) and the rooms are smaller. Usually apartments become crowded as the children grow up. Houses tend to be larger than apartments, though size mostly depends on how much a family can afford. In homes with only one or two bedrooms, family members may sleep in the living room.

Rooms are often painted white, though sometimes children paint their rooms different colors. Big houses and apartments often have rooms for receiving guests. Many people also use the living and dining rooms for entertaining guests. The kitchen is considered the woman's domain.

Ownership

Home ownership is highly valued and common. Macedonians often inherit their homes, land, and property from their parents or grandparents. Students often rent an apartment if they attend school away from home.

Most young couples buy their own apartments using bank loans, though some couples choose to rent until they can better afford to buy a home. It can take a couple around 10 years to pay off a loan for an apartment. Because of high interest rates, it is difficult for some to buy a house, especially if there is no outside help from family members.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Young people, including couples, tend to socialize in groups; cafés and discos are popular spots to meet. Parties, concerts, and road trips are also popular. Teenagers typically begin dating between 16 and 19 years old. Couples usually meet in high school or at university. Couples often spend time with their friends in groups or go on double dates. Among some rural and Muslim families, dating relationships are expected

to end in marriage.

Engagement

Most Macedonians get married in their twenties—early twenties in rural areas and late twenties in urban areas. Traditionally, the family of the man asked the woman's family for her hand in marriage, a tradition still common among Muslim families. More common today, a man proposes to a woman and then they announce it to their family. Both families invite family and friends to an engagement party. This process, from the initial proposal to the engagement party, spans a few days, and the wedding takes place a few months to a year later.

Marriage in Society

Marriage is considered an important institution by society. Finances and planning sometimes delay marriage, but the majority of adults, including couples who live together before marrying, expect to get married and have children.

Though not very common in general, arranged marriages happen more often in rural areas and among Muslim families; the parents and siblings usually arrange the marriage for the couple. Common-law marriages are rare, and people in some rural areas look down on unmarried couples living together. However, unmarried couples still have certain rights, including adoption, though the process is more difficult than it is for married couples. Children are rarely born out of wedlock.

Same-sex marriage is not legally recognized, and in January 2015, North Macedonia amended its constitution to define marriage as a union solely between a man and a woman. Discrimination against LGBTQ people is common.

Traditionally, divorce was unheard of. Although it is still relatively rare, it is considered more acceptable. A divorced man is often regarded better by society than a divorced woman.

Weddings

The day before the wedding, the groom's family brings the wedding gown to the bride's family. The wedding day is divided into three parts. The first part (and official portion) is the signing of the marriage license in the municipal building. Depending on the region and religion, the couple follows different traditions and customs for the second step. Orthodox Macedonians have a religious ceremony (*vencavka vo crkva*) in a church and exchange rings and vows in the presence of family and friends. In Muslim families, a religious leader gives the couple a blessing at home. For the third portion, a wedding party (called *svadva* for Orthodox Macedonians) with music, food, and dancing follows the religious ceremony for both Orthodox and Muslim families.

Receptions are often held in restaurants, where a meal is served that usually starts with cheese and cold cuts as an appetizer, along with carrot, cabbage, or tomato salads. The main course usually includes chicken, pork, or beef, served with baked potatoes, french fries, peas, or corn. For dessert, different kinds of cake are served, as well as traditional desserts like *baklava* (layered pastry with syrup and a nut filling). If the reception is at home, then friends and family usually prepare a barbecue with cakes, cookies, and other homemade dishes. In both cases, wine, beer, and other drinks may be served.

Men usually wear tuxedos, and women wear formal dresses. Sometimes women wear colorful handmade traditional clothing. A popular dance at receptions and other celebrations is the *oro*, which consists of holding hands while dancing and constantly moving in a circle. One tradition is for the bride to throw the bouquet, and the girl who catches it is said to be the next to get married. Guests give money to the couple to help them begin their new life together.

Life Cycle

Birth

The extended family usually helps a pregnant woman physically and emotionally, and she is not supposed to work, drink alcohol or coffee, or smoke. Women are often given two to three months to recover from birth, or longer if needed. Often the woman's mother or mother-in-law will help take care of a newborn for around a month.

Both Orthodox Christian and Muslim Macedonians hold ceremonies for their newborns. Christians go to church for the *krstevka* (baptism), while Muslims invite a *hoxha* (Islamic leader) into their home to say prayers. A few days after the birth, the woman's mother and mother-in-law organize a reception called a *mekici*. Only women are invited, and each guest brings a small present. This reception is named after the food served there: *mekici* is a dish of fried dough served with sugar or jam.

Traditionally, a new mother is not supposed to leave the house for 40 days, though others may visit her and the newborn at home. After the 40-day time period, an Orthodox Christian mother visits three families with her baby; most often, she visits a sister-in-law, her godfather's family, and her mother. She spends the night at the third house, and the child's baptism follows the next day.

At the baptism, the priest blesses the baby with holy water, reads the baptismal prayers, and then cuts off a small part of the baby's hair. The godfather is given the responsibility of naming the child, usually at the parents' suggestion. In Muslim families, the parents name the child themselves, and a religious leader reads prayers for the baby at home. Muslim mothers also do not necessarily follow the 40-day rest period tradition.

Milestones

At the end of the last year of secondary school, students organize a celebration called *matura* or *matorska vecer* (prom night). The students choose the band, the menu, and the venue—sometimes in another town, in which case they must also reserve a hotel. Teachers supervise and attend the celebration. Macedonians are considered adults both socially and legally at 18, when they may take a driving test, vote in elections, and marry. This is also the age when many students graduate from secondary school and may either continue to university or find a job.

Death

Funeral rituals are much more elaborate in Orthodox Christianity than in Islam. When a Macedonian Christian dies, a memorial is placed in the newspaper, and *nekrolozi* (death notices indicating the time and place of the funeral) are posted on trees. The deceased is kept overnight (called the *bdeenje*, or "death night") at his or her home before being

buried the next day. At the funeral, the deceased is brought to the church, where the priest reads a prayer, and then the body is taken to the cemetery to be buried.

In Muslim families, the deceased is usually buried the day of the death. Only men attend the funeral, and the deceased is buried in a shroud without a coffin after a religious leader reads prayers.

For Orthodox Christians, family and friends of the deceased visit the graveside on the Sunday after burial. They leave behind token amounts of food for the deceased. Mourners light a cigarette if the deceased smoked or pour alcohol if the deceased was male. They also bring flowers, always in even numbers. In churches, worshippers light candles to light the way to the afterlife.

A week after the burial, a priest comes to the grave for a small service with family and friends. New death notices are posted after 40 days, six months, and then yearly on the anniversary of the death. During these new rounds of grieving, a priest sings and prays for the deceased at the grave site. Muslim men visit graves during holidays, such as *Bajram* (also known as *Eid al-Fitr*, a holiday celebrated at the end of the holy fasting month of *Ramadan*) or *Qurban Bajram* (also known as *Eid al-Adha*, or Feast of the Sacrifice).

Diet

Typical cuisine consists of roasted or grilled meats such as lamb, chicken, and pork (though Muslims abstain from pork). Popular staples are wheat breads, vegetables, and cheeses such as *sirenje* (feta cheese) and *kashkaval* (a yellow cheese). Favorite dishes include *sarma* (rice- or meat-filled cabbage or grape leaves), stuffed peppers, and *selsko meso* (a dish of meat and mushrooms). Macedonians enjoy cooking with spices such as *vegeta* (a mixture of seasoning salt and dried vegetables), garlic, and red and black pepper. They eat many types of pastries and baked goods. *Burek* (a meat- or cheese-filled pie) is often eaten with a glass of liquid yogurt. Sweet pastries include many varieties of cakes, cookies, and pies. *Ajvar* is a pepper-and-tomato spread that Macedonians make in early October; they eat it with bread.

In the past, only some vegetables were available year-round; now, off-season produce is often available throughout the year but is more expensive than in-season varieties. As a way of preserving produce year-round, Macedonians make *turshija* (pickled vegetables), which can be eaten in any season. People do not drink beverages with their meals; however, when drinking *rakija* (a strong alcoholic drink), Macedonians also eat salad to protect the stomach. Snacks include chips, sweets, and fruits such as apples, grapes, and plums.

Recreation

Sports

The most popular sports in North Macedonia are basketball, soccer, and handball, while wrestling is one of the oldest and dates back to the Turkish Empire. The most popular spectator sport is soccer; regardless of religion, ethnicity, or age, almost everyone watches European soccer leagues, especially those from England, Spain, Germany, Italy, and North Macedonia.

Macedonians follow U.S. professional basketball and support their national teams in European-wide soccer and handball competitions. Macedonians also like to bet on games.

In school, children play soccer, basketball, volleyball, and handball most often. Most cities have a sports center, where local club teams compete. People in rural areas sometimes have limited access to athletic facilities, but most villages are close enough to the cities to have some access to their facilities.

Leisure

Many Macedonians enjoy the outdoors and love going camping, fishing, and hunting. They also typically enjoy visiting at home or in cafés, where music and coffee complement their discussions. Young people often go to discos. Most villages have their own cinemas, cafeterias, discos, and sporting events. In Skopje, people may see films from around the globe in movie theaters or at home. DVDs (often pirated) are popular throughout the country. People generally use their free time after work and on the weekends to relax and enjoy themselves. Popular games are chess, *tabla* (both a strategic board game and a card game), and *hant* (a rummy-like card game).

Vacation

Many families often go on vacations together, especially if they have young children. Sometimes a family goes on vacation with extended family or friends and neighbors. Popular vacation destinations include sites within North Macedonia, within other former Yugoslav republics, and within Albania. Lakes and mountains are especially popular destinations. Many Macedonians like to have fun on vacation by barbecuing, swimming, fishing, playing games, and relaxing from everyday life.

The Arts

The nation's arts reflect its rich history. Church frescos, mosaics, and religious icons date back to the 13th century. Folk dances (*igra oro*) involve special calls and complicated leg and arm movements. The moves often tell a story, such as that of the *Teshkoto Oro*, in which a series of steps depicts the fate of Macedonian fighters struggling against the Ottoman Turks. Females participate in some parts of this dance by portraying those who assisted the rebels in their battle. Dancers wear colorful embroidered costumes reflective of the clothing of past generations. Instruments such as the *gajda* (a type of bagpipe), *tapan* (a drum), and *tambura* (a stringed instrument) are used in the traditional music that sometimes accompanies the dances. Macedonians have a wealth of folk songs (*narodni pesni*) that describe historic battles and life in North Macedonia. The nation also hosts many annual cultural events, including a jazz festival and an international film festival, both in Skopje.

Holidays

Because the Macedonian Orthodox Church follows the Julian calendar rather than the Gregorian calendar, many holidays, especially religious ones, are observed on different days than in much of the rest of the world. Holidays include International New Year (1 January); *Badnik* (also called *Koledo* in eastern North Macedonia, 6 January); Orthodox

Christmas (7 January); *Stara Nova Godina* (literally “Old New Year,” on 14 January); Orthodox Epiphany (19 January); International Women's Day (8 March, when women receive gifts and attend parties thrown by and for women); Easter (March/April); Labor Day (1 May), spent relaxing and barbecuing outdoors; *Ilinden* (2 August), celebrating the uprising against the Ottoman Turks in 1903; Independence Day (8 September), marking the day North Macedonia declared its separation from Yugoslavia; and the People's Uprising Against Fascism (11 October).

Christian Holidays

Macedonians celebrate Orthodox Christmas on 7 January. The day before Christmas is *Badnik*, the last day of the Christmas fast (one of four major fasting periods in the Macedonian Orthodox Church). Families enjoy feasts and serve a pie or loaf of bread with a coin hidden in it. Whoever has the coin is said to have luck for the next year. Children then dress up in costumes and go door to door in small groups or with their parents to collect treats and sing traditional *Badnik* songs. Young people also dress up in costumes and masks and go out to bars or discos to party.

On Christmas Day, Macedonians typically sleep in and spend the day with family. They call their friends and relatives to wish them a merry Christmas by saying *Hristos se rodi I Sreken Bozik* (Jesus is born and Merry Christmas). Families then have a big lunch and visit family and friends in the evening. Macedonians often decorate a tree on New Year's Eve, when they also exchange gifts.

The Easter fast lasts for six weeks and is the longest of the fasting periods in the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Fasting traditions vary by region but generally include abstaining from meat, fish, dairy, olive oil, and wine. Easter in North Macedonia is spent visiting family and friends. North Macedonia is known for its decorated eggs. These eggs were traditionally painted red, but many colors are used now. Some Macedonians also paint pictures or Orthodox icons on the eggs. The eggs are then shared with visitors, exchanging decorated eggs between guests and hosts.

Muslim Holidays

Muslim holidays are celebrated according to the lunar calendar so dates vary every year. *Bajram*, also known as *Eid al-Fitr*, is the largest Muslim holiday and is celebrated at the end of the holy month of *Ramadan*. During *Ramadan*, Muslims do not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset. They also avoid smoking tobacco. Pregnant women, the sick, the elderly, and small children are not expected to participate in the fast. Those who cannot fast because of physical constraints may give money to the mosques instead. On the last day of *Bajram*, men leave early in the morning to attend the main prayer at the mosque. They then visit the graves of their ancestors and return home for a family lunch. The remainder of the day is spent visiting friends and family.

Qurban Bajram, also known as *Eid al-Adha* (Feast of the Sacrifice), is another major Muslim holiday. The word *Qurban* comes from the word for sacrifice, and families that are able give charity to the poor. Often these families will buy a whole lamb, sheep, or cow from the butcher and share it with the poor. Some families also organize public kitchens to serve meals and drinks to the poor during the day.

State and Other Holidays

Ilinden is a state holiday that commemorates two events in Macedonian history that occurred on Saint Ilija Day, 2 August. The first event took place in 1903 and was a 10-day uprising in Krushevo against the Ottoman Empire. The second event was a congress held in 1944 in which the Anti-Fascist Assembly of National Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM in Macedonian) discussed the situation of the Macedonian state, eventually leading North Macedonia to gain its own statehood. To commemorate these events, there is an annual celebration held in Krushevo with military parades and a speech by the president.

Macedonians celebrate Independence Day in the central square of Skopje. The celebration lasts all day, with performances of music and theater. People wear national symbols on their clothes, and the prime minister and president give speeches. Those who cannot go to Skopje spend Independence Day with friends and family, having barbecues and listening to folk music.

In addition to national holidays, Macedonians celebrate their *imenden* (name day), personal holidays that commemorate the saint after whom a person is named. On this day (considered even more important than one's birthday), the person throws a party and receives gifts from friends and family.

SOCIETY

Government

Structure

North Macedonia is a parliamentary republic. A popularly elected president is head of state and serves a five-year term. The head of government is the prime minister, selected by the unicameral parliament, or *Sobranie* (Assembly), whose members serve four-year terms. Members of the *Sobranie* are directly elected, with three of the members elected by diaspora constituencies. Each of North Macedonia's municipalities has its own mayor and local *Sobranie*.

In accordance with the 2001 peace treaty, which ended the ethnic Albanian insurrection by offering them more rights, a system of allocating national representatives by region (and, by extension, ethnicity) was implemented in 2002. Powers were also slowly transferred from the central government to the municipalities for responsibilities such as public services, education, health care, environment, culture, social welfare, and economic development.

Political Landscape

There are two major political parties in North Macedonia: the moderate left-leaning Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), the successor of the Communist Party in Macedonia, and the center-right Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO–DPMNE), a party of pro-European Christian democrats. The Democratic Union for Integration (BDI) is the largest Albanian political party and the third largest political party in North Macedonia. The government faces many challenges, such as widespread corruption and ethnic tension.

Government and the People

Macedonians often expect help from the government, though the government cannot afford to maintain a high level of social support. Most people feel that the government is highly involved in their daily lives, and the government provides meetings and forums at which citizens can voice their opinions directly to officials in each level of government. However, corruption is a problem in North Macedonia's political system, and people generally have little faith in politicians. Despite an anti-discrimination law, many state institutions discriminate against ethnic Roma and Albanians. While voter turnout has increased for parliamentary elections in recent years, participation in presidential elections is generally declining. The voting age is 18.

Economy

North Macedonia's economy is generally stable and for the most part has been slowly growing. The services sector represents about 63 percent of North Macedonia's gross domestic product (GDP), but the industrial sector remains important. Major industries include food processing, beverages, textiles, chemicals, iron, steel, cement, energy, pharmaceuticals, and automotive parts. Agricultural products include grapes, tobacco, vegetables, fruits, milk, and eggs.

Unemployment is high due to a number of factors, including regional disparities in resources and official statistics that do not reflect employment through an extensive grey market (an informal market that includes undocumented workers). Much of North Macedonia's skilled or educated workforce is unemployed or performing unskilled labor.

To reduce household expenses, Macedonians often grow their own fruits and vegetables and produce other homemade goods. Energy costs make up a large portion of national expenditures, as North Macedonia imports the majority of its oil and natural gas. Foreign investment is relatively low—despite free economic zones and low tax rates—due to problems such as corruption and unequal enforcement of the law. Other major economic challenges are organized crime and the illegal trafficking of cigarettes, drugs, weapons, and human beings. The currency is the *denar* (MKD).

Transportation and Communications

Macedonians travel short distances on foot or by bicycle. Donkeys are used in villages. Over long distances, people prefer to use cars, taxis, buses, or trains. Most places have taxis, but only Skopje, Bitola, and Ohrid have public buses. North Macedonia has a well-developed system of roads and railways, which are essential for economic and social development in the landlocked country. The roads themselves are largely in poor condition, though they are improving due to government programs to support road maintenance. Bus and train travel is still relatively difficult due to the limited number of schedules and the frequency of breakdowns.

Most Macedonians have radios, telephones, and televisions in their homes, and nearly everyone carries cellular phones, which outnumber landlines. In urban areas, a public phone is available in the town center or by the post office. A number of television channels and radio stations offer local and international programs. The government owns

three television networks, but the rest are privately owned. Several private and government-owned newspapers are published in Macedonian. Newspapers are also published in Albanian and other languages. While the government does not censor the press, members of the media practice self-censorship because of anti-defamation laws, ties between the government and the media, and concerns about surveillance. State-owned internet cafés in major cities offer free access to youth and the elderly.

Education

Structure and Access

Education is compulsory from ages six to eighteen. Children start primary school at six years old. After primary school (first through ninth grade), students attend four years of *gimnazija* (general education high school in preparation for university) or *sredno učilište* (vocational high school).

Nine out of every ten Macedonian students finish primary school, and more than 80 percent enroll in secondary school. Macedonians regard education as a means to good employment, so parents often make huge sacrifices to ensure that their children are able to attend one of the nation's several universities. Education is available to almost everyone; there are primary and secondary schools in every city and municipality and a number of state and private universities to choose from.

Most schools are public and free, but there are also many private schools in North Macedonia. Private schools are expensive, but not otherwise exclusive, and tend to have better resources. Those who can afford it usually attend private school. Although public schools are free, parents are expected to make small monthly contributions for school supplies, including wood for fuel. Primary schools are usually fairly close to residential areas, and books are free. Secondary school students have to pay fees once a year for supplies like books and uniforms. Private secondary schools include the uniforms and books in the basic tuition fees. At public universities, there are fees for exams and books.

School Life

All primary schools teach from a standard curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education that includes Macedonian, math, science, history, and foreign languages (most often English). Some students, particularly Albanians, also learn Albanian. Teaching style varies by teacher, but the majority of classes are lecture based with discussion and analysis. Students usually spend around two hours a day on homework and studying if they want to do well in school, and some students have tutors. Cheating is common, though it is punished by failure or expulsion when caught. Parents are involved in their children's education, even helping them choose a college or university.

Teachers in primary school are called by the title of "teacher." In secondary school, teachers are called by first and last name with the title of "professor" or by "Mr." or "Mrs." Professors often socialize with students outside the classroom in secondary schools. In addition to *matura*, or prom night, Macedonian students enjoy a week-long trip abroad during the last year of secondary school. Students choose a country, usually in the region, and then teachers

organize and supervise the excursion.

Higher Education

After students graduate from secondary school, they have several choices. They may go to university or a vocational training school, or they may start working immediately. In order to go to university, students must take a final exam. The results of this test, along with overall grades in school and other evaluations, determine whether or not a student gets in. Test scores and grades are usually less important for admittance into a private university.

The main university in North Macedonia is Saints Cyril and Methodius University, in Skopje. Other major universities include the State University of Tetovo, Saint Clement of Ohrid University, and Goce Delčev University (named after a famous revolutionary). The largest private university is the South East European University (SEEU), in Tetovo. Higher education is valued in society and is often viewed as a way to get a better job.

Health

Hospitals are located in most cities, and smaller clinics are available in rural areas. In efforts to raise the quality of health care by introducing competition, some areas of public primary health care have been privatized, and private health services are increasing steadily. Health insurance is only offered by the government. Those without coverage must pay the full costs of health care. High blood pressure, poor diet, and smoking are major health issues. Heart disease and strokes are common causes of death.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of North Macedonia, 2129 Wyoming Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 667-0501; web site www.washington.mfa.gov.mk/en. Macedonian National Tourism Portal, web site www.exploringmacedonia.com.

Country and Development Data

Capital	Skopje
Population	2,130,936 (rank=144)
Area (sq. mi.)	9,928 (rank=145)
Area (sq. km.)	25,713
Human Development Index	79 of 189 countries
Gender Inequality Index	37 of 162 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	\$16,500
Adult Literacy	99% (male); 97% (female)
Infant Mortality	7.32 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	74 (male); 78 (female)
Currency	Denar

ProQuest
 789 East Eisenhower Parkway
 Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106 USA
 Toll Free: 1.800.521.3042
 Fax: 1.800.864.0019
 www.culturegrams.com

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