

MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES IN NORTH MACEDONIA: A FOCUSED STUDY

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Abstract

North Macedonia's journey toward democratization and EU accession has faced significant political challenges, including constitutional changes. This study explores the media's role in shaping public discourse by examining the media framing of constitutional changes in North Macedonia. The analysis focuses on a brief period of ongoing debates, utilizing mixed methods of content analysis. The study focused on the coverage of North Macedonia's online media outlets from four major TV stations, analyzing a sample of 54 news pieces over 17 days. By categorizing the news pieces into neutral, negative, and positive contexts, this article aims to illustrate how these media outlets informed the public about constitutional changes on a significant political momentum that could define North Macedonia's EU path. The findings showed that the media's focus on the Macedonian opposition's rhetoric overshadowed other viewpoints, making them seem less important. This influenced the debate around constitutional changes and shaped how people thought about the issue. Moreover, the study finds that the public discourse was highly polarized and divided into pro and con constitutional changes incited by politics and media. The study highlights the importance of promoting constructive discussion and encouraging diverse viewpoints, ensuring all opinions receive equal media coverage as a paradigm of a healthy society that advocates for democratic values.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Constitutional Changes, EU Accession, Media frame, Democracy.

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UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

North Macedonia has faced various political challenges in recent years as it strives for democratization and EU accession. These challenges include sensitive national issues such as name change and constitutional reforms, which require extensive efforts from all segments of society, particularly political parties, and media.

North Macedonia faced obstacles in its journey towards EU accession, including a naming dispute with Greece and a following veto on accession talks. Bulgaria later blocked the start of accession negotiations due to concerns over historical and linguistic disputes. The constitutional changes in North Macedonia occurred within a specific historical context marked by political challenges and aspirations for democratization and EU accession. The country's journey towards constitutional reform was influenced by the long-standing dispute with neighboring Greece over using the name „Macedonia“. This dispute, which lasted from 1991 to 2019, resulted in a Greek veto against EU and NATO accession talks (Bechev & Marusic, 2020). The issue was finally resolved in 2019, leading to the joining of NATO and formal approval of EU accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania by the EU in March 2020. However, another obstacle emerged when Bulgaria blocked the official start of North Macedonia's EU accession negotiations in November 2020 (Reuters, 2020). Bulgaria raised concerns regarding implementing the 2017 Friendship Treaty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017), state-supported hate speech, and minority claims towards Bulgaria. Overcoming these challenges required the involvement of various stakeholders, including the governments of North Macedonia and Bulgaria, as well as international mediators and EU officials. The constitutional changes were seen as a crucial step towards addressing these concerns and moving forward toward EU accession (EC, 2023).

However, in June 2022, Bulgaria lifted its veto, allowing negotiations to begin (Marusic, 2022). To progress further, North Macedonia must amend its constitution to include the local Bulgarian population and address opposition from Bulgaria. In the current situation, North Macedonia is facing the challenge of implementing constitutional changes that involve the inclusion of ethnic Bulgarians, along with other minority groups, in its constitution.

In April 2023 the government formed a working group with 10 representatives from the president's cabinet, the Secretariat for European Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and external legal and constitutional experts. This group proposed a set of changes that were submitted on May 2023 to the Government and presented to the Parliament. The suggested amendments included six additional ethnic communities—Bulgarian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Slovenian, Jewish, and Egyptian—in the Constitution's Preamble and two articles (Taylor, 2023).

As of the time this research was conducted in May - June, the situation in North Macedonia regarding the constitutional changes was characterized by opposition from multiple fronts. Macedonian opposition has disagreed with the proposed amendments, raising concerns about the potential impact on the country's identity and national unity. They argue that altering the constitution could undermine the Macedonian heritage and weaken the Macedonian character of the state (Marusic, 2023). On the other hand, the Albanian opposition sought to ensure adequate representation of the ethnic Albanian population. They demand that the '20 percent' be replaced with an Albanian language specifically representing ethnic Albanians in the constitution (Euronews, 2023).

This complex issue has generated political tensions and sparked debates about the balance between preserving national identity and fostering inclusivity within the country (A1on, 2023). The media discourse surrounding the constitutional changes in North Macedonia has been heavily concentrated within the Macedonian opposition, often overshadowing a healthy public debate that would thoroughly examine and clarify all aspects of the reforms (Trajanoski et. al, 2023). Additionally, the differing positions of the opposition and position highlight the complexities involved in achieving consensus on constitutional changes and the need for a delicate and inclusive approach to address the concerns of all actors.

The subject of this analysis is the media coverage of constitutional changes in North Macedonia. It examines how different media outlets report on this issue, the framing of perspectives for and against the changes, and the influence of this coverage on public discourse. The analysis also considers the implications of agenda-setting theory in shaping public opinion and political rhetoric surrounding the constitutional changes.

The unit of analysis in this study are news pieces from online media outlets of four major national TV stations in North Macedonia: TV Sitel, Kanal 5, Alsat M, and TV 21. Each news piece is examined for its content, framing, and perspective on the constitutional changes, as well as the space allocated to different viewpoints. The monitoring length was for 17 days to understand the frequency and narrative imposed on the public regarding the constitutional changes.

This examination aims to shed light on the relationship between media, public opinion, and democratic processes, contributing to a deeper understanding of the sensitive challenges North Macedonia faces.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the realm of democratic societies, the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, influencing political discourse, and setting the agenda for public discussion. Through the selective presentation and framing of news, the media can shape what the public thinks about and focuses on (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Repeated media exposure to certain issues can elevate their importance in the public's mind and guide collective attention toward those issues. This, in turn, can affect public perceptions, policy discussions, and even voting behavior (Bishop, 1999). Agenda-setting theory posits that the media can determine the salience and prominence of particular issues or topics within the public sphere as McCombs (2004) notices. Understanding how media coverage impacts public perception is crucial, particularly in the context of significant political events or sensitive issues (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). The exploration of how the prioritization of certain issues shapes the broader political agenda and influences decision-making can be traced and analyzed (Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014). According to Rosler (2017), McCombs and Shaw determine the degree to which the media sways public opinion, by comparing the salience of issues in news content with the public's perceptions. Public opinion feeds off the media, which informs the public through an ongoing process of interaction, whereas this somehow informed public opinion, in turn, influences political decisions and policies, thereby impacting the country's progress (Fuga, 2017). Applying this theory to the case of constitutional changes in North Macedonia, we can investigate how the media shaped the agenda surrounding this issue by analyzing the news coverage from various media outlets. This involves examining the emphasis placed on perspectives both supporting and opposing the constitutional changes, the amount of space allocated to each viewpoint, and how certain viewpoints were marginalized or silenced.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study involved a content analysis of media coverage from four major North Macedonian online media outlets of national TV stations: TV Sitel, Kanal 5, Alsat M, and TV 21-MK. These online websites of TV stations were chosen for monitoring based on the report from the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services of North Macedonia, which highlighted viewer preferences from April to June 2023. According to the report, Sitel TV and Kanal 5 were the top-ranked Macedonian-language national TV channels, while Alsat M and TV 21 were the most viewed by Albanian citizens, with Alsat M being the leading national TV channel and TV 21 the top-ranked nationwide TV channel via satellite or cable (AVMU, 2023, p.58).

Over 17 days, from May 27, 2023, until June 12, 2023, the frequency and framing of news related to the constitutional changes were monitored. This included analyzing the number of news pieces focused on the issue and the prominence given to various perspectives. The study also incorporated qualitative analysis by examining how the media coverage aligned with agenda-setting principles, focusing on how the narrative of nationalist rhetoric influenced public discourse and potentially suppressed alternative viewpoints.

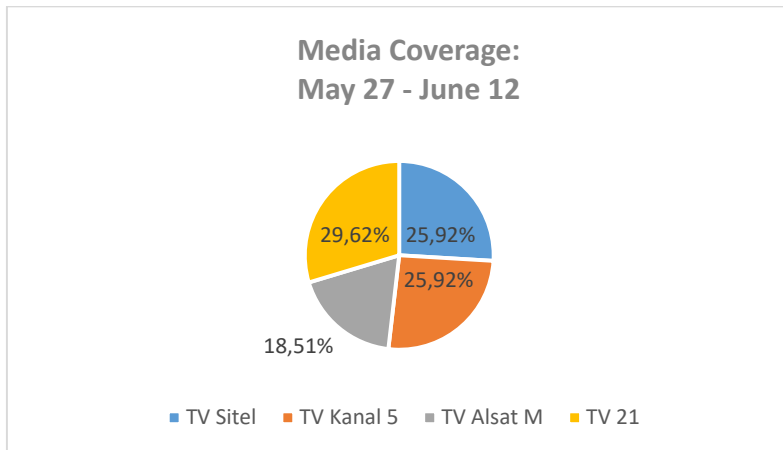
Simultaneously, through desk research existing opinion polls of North Macedonian citizens conducted after the monitoring period were analyzed to assess their perspectives on constitutional changes.

Through data collection, in total, 54 news pieces were analyzed by searching with the keywords 'constitutional changes' and '20 percent' in Macedonian and Albanian languages within the predetermined timeframe. For this analysis, three categories (negative, neutral, and positive) were used, to review how the media swayed the public discourse regarding the constitutional changes. It is important to note that assigning these categories to the news pieces—positive, negative, or neutral—does not imply that the media covered the story in a biased manner. Rather, it reflects the amount of attention to which media outlets provided space for various actors to express their perspectives on the issue of constitutional changes, whether it was negative, neutral, or positive about the constitutional changes. News pieces were assigned a negative context if they predominantly reflected a negative point of view on the constitutional changes, especially when such perspectives were mainly expressed by the Macedonian opposition. The neutral category was assigned to news pieces that merely informed about the process and procedures of the constitutional changes in the parliament and government at the national level. News pieces were assigned a positive context if they predominantly reflected a favorable view of the constitutional changes and the path to EU integration. This category included activities and statements from the government advocating for the changes, as well as statements from international figures such as the U.S. Ambassador to North Macedonia, Angela P. Aggeler and former U.S. Ambassador to North Macedonia Jess L. Baily.

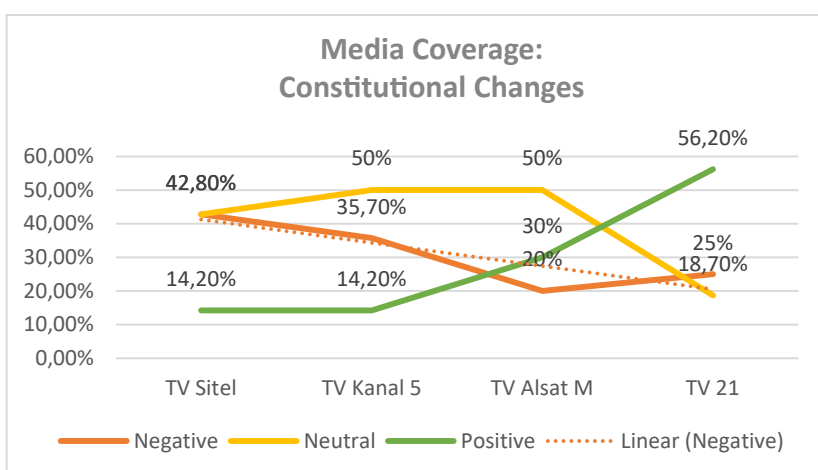
FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The following section presents the findings from the analysis of media coverage regarding the proposed constitutional changes in North Macedonia. This analysis encompasses a total of 54 news pieces gathered from the online media platforms of four major TV stations, covering the period from May 27 to June 12, 2023. By categorizing the coverage into neutral, negative, and positive contexts, this article aims to illustrate how these media outlets shaped public discourse

around the constitutional amendments. In this context, it can be confirmed that the TV 21 on-line platform generated more news on the issue of constitutional changes during this period. The table below presents the number of news pieces in percent produced by each media outlet. The two media outlets from the Macedonian-language TV stations were aligned in this regard, producing the same number of articles (see Table 1).



From the quantitative analysis of the news pieces during this period, it is evident that media outlets from Albanian TV stations (TV Alsat M and TV 21) produced more positive news regarding the constitutional changes. Examples include: ,Former US Ambassador in Skopje: Constitutional changes are a solution for the EU‘ (TV 21, June 9, 2023), and ,Ageler: The constitutional changes should pass by the end of the year‘ (TV Alsat M, May 28, 2023). Both of these interviews appeared on each of the Albanian media outlets monitored in this research. However, these pieces were absent from the Macedonian-language media (TV Sitel and TV Kanal 5), where coverage predominantly featured statements and news from the opposition leader Kristijan Mickoski and his party VMRO-DPMNE, as well as on arguments between the Macedonian party in government (SDSM) and the Macedonian opposition. For instance, ,Mickoski: Without the two conditions delivered by VMRO-DPMNE, there will be no constitutional changes‘ (TV Kanal 5, June 8, 2023) and ,VMRO-DPMNE: We will not accept constitutional changes according to Bulgarian dictation‘ (June 12, 2023).

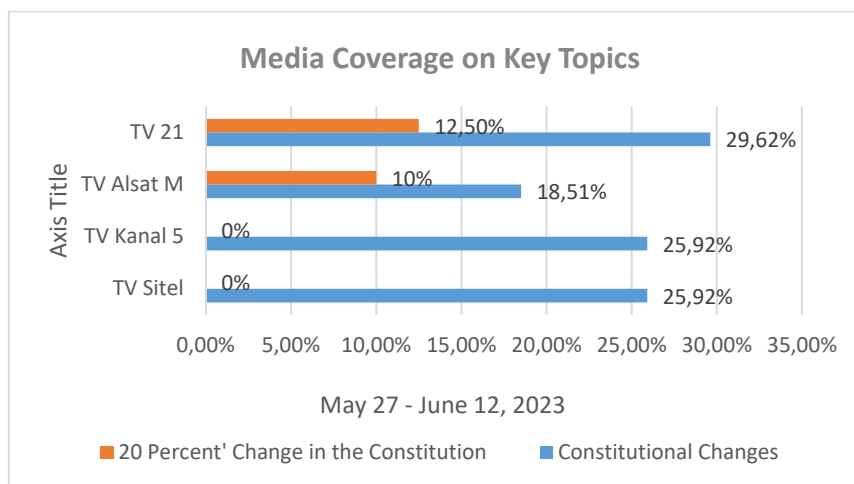


In the instance of producing news about constitutional changes, in higher percent (42.8 - TV Sitel and 35.7 – Kanal 5) these outlets produce negative viewpoints for constitutional changes in North Macedonia.

We can conclude that, during the given period, the online media of TV 21 station produced a high proportion of positive content about the constitutional changes (56.2 percent) and a low proportion of negative content (18.7 percent) (see Table 2).

However, this study does not cover the entire duration of the discussion on constitutional changes in North Macedonia. Therefore, more comprehensive research is needed to accurately determine the extent to which these media outlets provided space for various viewpoints and swayed public opinion on constitutional changes.

For this research, four media outlets were analyzed by searching their websites for two key topics: ‘Constitutional Changes’ and ‘20 percent,’ in both Macedonian and Albanian languages. The results revealed that the Macedonian media provided no coverage of the ‘20 percent’ requirement by the Albanian opposition. In contrast, the Albanian media addressed this issue, accounting for 10% of the total number of articles on constitutional changes during this period for TV Alsat and 12.5% for TV21 (see Table 3). In this case, we can confidently assert that the Macedonian media’s effort to marginalize or silence the topic from different points of view can be attributed to agenda-setting theory. This theory emphasizes how the media’s coverage prioritizes certain issues while diminishing the prominence of others, leading to a lack of attention to diverse perspectives by influencing and swaying public discourse on a specific topic.



However, four media outlets were subjected to content analysis, revealing a striking pattern: daily, two pieces from these outlets were found to specifically focus on the Macedonian opposition party VMRO-DPMNE and its arguments against the constitutional changes (See Apendix 1).

‘The government doesn’t seem to have any plan or talk about it. On the other hand, we have a prime minister who has been blackmailed. We have a prime minister who is being held hostage by a DUI, and they are the real bosses in the government, crime bosses and masters of other people’s destinies’, Mickoski added (TV Sitel, 09.06.2023).

This rhetoric of mutual blame has characterized the entire period of public discourse on constitutional changes, diverting the audience’s focus from the main aspects and essential information regarding the changes. Simultaneously, it has incited divisions by encouraging the public to take sides, either in support of or against them. This polarization of public discourse has obstructed the inclusion of diverse viewpoints and well-informed decision-making.

The Macedonian opposition's strong opposition to the changes has garnered significant media attention, leading to a polarized narrative that predominantly focuses on their criticisms and concerns, inciting public hatred against Bulgaria: 'VMRO-DPMNE: We will not accept constitutional amendments according to Bulgarian dictation', (Kanal 5, 2023). The media's emphasis on the opposition's situation can contribute to a biased representation of the reforms, potentially limiting the public's understanding of the broader implications and potential benefits of the changes.

The agenda-setting theory introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972) shifted the focus of media effects research from telling people what to think to influence what they think about. This perspective highlights the power of the media in shaping public discourse and setting the agenda for societal discussions. The media coverage for the Macedonian opposition aligns with agenda-setting theory as it strategically emphasizes nationalist rhetoric and amplifies their narrative for a sensitive issue that the country faces, such as Constitutional Changes for opening the path to EU accession. For example: 'Mickoski: Government without DUI, and the constitutional amendments should be effective when Macedonia becomes a member of the EU' (TV 21-Mk, 2023). With this statement, VMRO-DPMNE alludes that as the biggest Albanian political party in government, DUI, has no right to decide for the Macedonian national interest and North Macedonia's path. Their actions contribute to the incitement of divisions, fueling inter-ethnic hatred and exacerbating impatience among the population. By emphasizing the perceived threats to national identity and sovereignty posed by the constitutional changes, the opposition aimed to rally support and mobilize the population against the reforms. Exploiting nationalist sentiments can further polarize public opinion and fuel societal divisions. The media's strategic use of nationalist discourse serves to solidify their political standing and garner public sympathy, potentially overshadowing a more nuanced and constructive discussion.

From the quantitative analysis we saw that Macedonian language media provided more space for this narrative (see Table 1), whereas, through repeated coverage and selective reporting, the opposition media sets the agenda by focusing on nationalist rhetoric, stirring emotions, and framing the changes as threatening national identity. By doing so, they effectively set the agenda for public discussion, steering the attention and priorities of the audience toward their preferred narrative. This agenda-setting process influences the issues that receive the most attention, overshadowing alternative perspectives. The opinion poll conducted on December 2023, showed that only 24% of those surveyed participants agree to meet the commitment if it means continuing the integration process by changing the Constitution to include the Bulgarian minority group (Velinovska, 2023). In this analysis, only 14% of Macedonians and 49% of Albanian citizens believe that constitutional changes are necessary for North Macedonia's accession to the European Union. From a political party affiliation perspective, a significant percentage of respondents who identify with SDSM (61%) and DUI (62%) support the implementation of constitutional changes, compared to only 7% of respondents affiliated with VMRO-DPMNE. This substantial difference in perception aligns with the beliefs associated with their political party affiliations. These results indicate a highly polarized society with differing viewpoints, where public discourse is influenced by political parties and their respective media outlets. The study on public opinion conducted in December 2023 closely correlates with this focused study conducted in May-June 2023 on constitutional changes, illustrating the media's impact on public discourse by prioritizing topics and influencing how the public thinks about an issue.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is important to critically analyze the motives behind media narratives and promote a balanced and informed discourse that encourages a comprehensive understanding of the issues. Moreover, fostering an environment that encourages open and inclusive dialogue is essential, enabling different viewpoints on the issue and their implications for the country.

In conclusion, agenda-setting has played a significant role in shaping the media coverage of the constitutional changes in North Macedonia. The media, as a powerful force in shaping public opinion, has the ability to influence the salience and prominence of certain issues. In this case, the Macedonian opposition has strategically capitalized on nationalist sentiments to rally support and gain political leverage. Media outlets by amplifying their narrative and framing the constitutional changes as a threat to national identity, have set the agenda for public discourse, overshadowing alternative perspectives and limiting constructive discussion. This manipulation of media coverage aligns with the principles of agenda-setting theory. It is crucial to critically analyze media narratives, promote balanced and informed discourse, and encourage a comprehensive understanding of the constitutional changes to ensure an inclusive democratic society in North Macedonia. By doing so, a more diverse and informed public dialogue can be fostered, ultimately contributing to the democratic processes and societal progress in North Macedonia.

During constitutional changes, media coverage becomes even more significant as it can shape the narrative, mobilize support, and create an encouraging environment for a healthy public debate with a well-informed public. However, it is crucial to critically evaluate the media's role in sensitive national issues, ensuring that a diverse range of voices and perspectives are represented. By promoting balanced and informed media coverage, societies can foster a more inclusive and constructive dialogue, facilitating a deeper understanding and engagement with the complexities of constitutional changes. The media's responsibility to provide accurate, fair, and comprehensive coverage is vital to upholding democratic principles and facilitating the progress of societies towards democratization.

"The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum - even encourage the more critical and dissident views". Naom Chomsky

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite providing valuable insights, this study has several limitations that need to be addressed in future research. Firstly, the analysis covers a limited timeframe and does not capture the entire duration of the discussion on constitutional changes. As such, it may not fully represent the evolving media landscape and public opinion over a longer period. Therefore, longitudinal research needs to be considered to reflect the overall landscape of media and public discourse on the constitutional changes in North Macedonia. Additionally, this study focuses on a select number of media outlets, which may not encompass the full diversity of media perspectives in the country. Future research should extend the analysis to a broader range of media sources and a longer timeframe to gain a more comprehensive understanding of media influence. Incorporating additional methods of discursive analysis could pro-

vide deeper insights into the narrative and rhetoric surrounding the constitutional changes. Finally, conducting an opinion poll on constitutional changes and nationalist sentiments among the citizens of North Macedonia could offer a more holistic view of the media influence, political discourse, and its effects on decision-making and voting behavior.

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Appendix 1

List of Media Coverage for Constitutional Changes:

- Micevski for Channel 5: The Parliamentary Group of VMRO-DPMNE Will Not Vote for Constitutional Amendments,“ 2023. Retrieved from <https://kanal5.com.mk/micevski-za-kanal-5-pratenichkata-grupa-na-vmro-dpmne-nema-da-glasa-za-ustavni-izmeni/a586308>
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