

# Macedonia

Lying in the center of the Balkan Peninsula, Macedonia is a parliamentary democracy, and an independent state since 1991 (previously being part of Yugoslavia). The country has a multi-party democratic system, and is officially a secular state. The Republic of Macedonia has been a candidate for European Union membership since 2005, and is a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights.

| Constitution and government  | Education and children's rights  | Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals   | Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values  |
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|  |  | <u>Government authorities push a socially conservative, religiously or ideologically inspired agenda, without regard to the rights of those with progressive views</u><br><u>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</u> |  |
| <u>State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions</u> | <u>There is state funding of at least some religious schools</u><br><u>Religious schools have powers to discriminate in admissions or employment</u> | <u>There is significant social marginalisation of the non-religious or stigma associated with expressing atheism, humanism or secularism</u>   | <u>Expression of core humanist principles on democracy, freedom or human rights is somewhat restricted</u> |
|  | <u>State-funded schools offer religious or ideological instruction with no secular or humanist alternative, but it is optional</u>                   |  | <u>Some concerns about political or media freedoms, not specific to the non-religious</u>                  |

Legend

## Constitution and government

The Constitution guarantees basic human rights to all Macedonian citizens and Macedonia is theoretically a secular state.

However, since 2006 and the rise of the "Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity" (VMRO-DPMNE), self-described as "Christian democratic" and "nationalist" party, the government has increasingly been involved in promoting religion and/or religious beliefs and practices.

## **Government promotion of religion**

In recent years the government has made discounted land available to the church for building religious buildings. Under the auspices of its "Skopje 2014" project, with the stated goals of rejuvenating the capital city Skopje, there have been a significant number of statues installed across the city honoring persons with specifically religious historic significance. The 1,000 Macedonian denar bill features an image of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus.

Government-funded commercials are often focused on promoting religious values or religious views on traditional families.

## **Education and children's rights**

The constitution establishes public educational institutions as secular and based on the Law of Education the students are protected from discrimination based on sex, gender, race, national or social origin, political and religious beliefs and property and social status. The Education Law (article 7) forbids religious organizations from proselytizing within schools.

However, the law does permit religious instruction in public elementary schools with no secular, humanist or atheist option. These classes are taught mostly by believers, and may be considered of a clearly confessional nature. Parents choose on behalf of their children if they will follow the optional "Ethics of Religion" classes. In some schools pupils attending religious classes might take part in a variety of religious-based events and activities, sometimes elementary school children are compelled to attend without any parental permission.

[tvorbis.com.mk/?p=21340](http://tvorbis.com.mk/?p=21340)

## **Family, community and society**

### **Religious identities, social and political**

There is a perception among secular Macedonians of widespread discrimination or intolerance towards those with progressive views, including humanist and atheist groups. Those identifying as religious are sometimes considered more trustworthy or in some cases enjoy educational, employment and health privileges. There is a social assumption of religiosity, to the point that one might be taken aback to learn that someone is an atheist.

In the population census of 2002, officially 98.5% of the population was found to be religious, with only 1.5% declared as "Other". (With a high correlation between religious and ethnic identities, the non-religious often declare themselves as Christian or Muslim, as a kind of proxy for stating Macedonian, Albanian, Serbian etc.)

In recent years, especially among young families, conservative religious values appear to be becoming more prominent. Until independence, the country was socialist and religion was somewhat suppressed. As a consequence of the ethnic conflict in 2001, religion has become a more nationalistic, more right-wing and more overt, with increasing religious influence on public policy. Both the ethnic Albanian and Macedonian populations, instead of overcoming differences and inhibitions related to religious identity, are strengthening their distinct religious convictions.

Often, during political protests, especially "counter-protests" (a response from governing parties, to demonstrate that they have a larger number of supporters than those protesting against them), there is a heavy use of religious symbols and religious rhetoric, aligned with patriotism, disparaging

anti-government protesters as less religious and less patriotic.

<[time.mk/c/dfd503bb0e/foto-e-ova-e-narod.html](http://time.mk/c/dfd503bb0e/foto-e-ova-e-narod.html)>

Often, anti-government protesters demanding reforms in favour of equality, justice, and other basic rights, might be labeled as Communists, apostates, or as threatening supposed religious cohesion.

## **Abortion restrictions**

The government has provided funds at taxpayers' expense for anti-abortion adverts. The current anti-abortion law was passed in 2013 as an "urgent" measure subject to controversial restrictions on parliamentary debate. The law now mandates that requests for abortions after 10 weeks pregnancy must be filed with the health ministry, are subject to counseling, require the informing of the woman's partner, and can only be approved where the woman's life is in danger, in cases of rape, or foetal deformity.

## **Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values**

Officially, freedom of expression and advocacy of humanist values should be guaranteed under the constitution. However, there are examples of media pressure on certain groups that do not conform to the government's agenda and broader religious views, such as LGBT groups, the "Sex workers rights group", and others.

Groups that advocate secular, progressive ("non-traditional") values, are largely ignored by the government. But, should they start gaining traction, they might experience biased media coverage, and an increase in government inspections, searching for any legal reason, however small, to fine the organization and disrupt its operations. This has certainly been exhibited in government responses to losses in local elections, with increased inspections on municipalities governed by the opposition.

<[novatv.mk/index.php?navig=8&cat=2&vest=3545](http://novatv.mk/index.php?navig=8&cat=2&vest=3545)>

<[sky.mk/republika/420022-inspekcii-ja-napadnaa-strumica](http://sky.mk/republika/420022-inspekcii-ja-napadnaa-strumica)>

The Criminal Code (as amended 2016) under article 319, criminalizes various forms of attack on "national, ethnic, religious and other symbols" including "mocking" such symbols. However, this appears to be limited to circumstances in which the attack "causes or excites hatred, discord or intolerance". The term "discord" is worryingly vague, nevertheless in the absence of evidence suggesting this law has been used to suppress legitimate criticism of religion, it appears to function as a law against incitement to hatred and not as a criminal blasphemy law. (This would change with any evidence that it was too-broadly applied.)