



*Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.*

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

A landlocked nation on the Balkan Peninsula of southeastern Europe, Macedonia covers 9,928 square miles (25,713 square kilometers), an area roughly the size of Vermont. The landscape is predominantly mountainous, with population centers located in valleys and lowlands. Along 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 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. Mountain snowpack supports several ski resorts. Macedonia has four seasons, with cold, wet winters and hot, dry summers. The average temperature in summer is 69°F (21°C). In winter, it plummets to 30°F (-1°C).

### History

The modern nation of Macedonia has roots in the Kingdom of Macedonia established around 800 BC by Caranus, centralized around 400 BC by Archelaus, and expanded by his successors Philip II and Alexander the Great. A celebrated military strategist, Alexander conquered territory from North

Africa to Central Asia. His possessions were divided among his generals after his death in 323 BC.

Three wars from 215 to 148 BC established Macedonia as a province of Rome. When the Roman Empire was divided in AD 395, Macedonia came under the rule of the Byzantine Empire. Slavic migrants, pushed by invading northern tribes, entered Macedonia around AD 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 a famous, though unsuccessful, uprising against the Ottomans in 1903, and Macedonians still celebrate the revolt as a sign of their refusal to accept Ottoman rule.

Bulgarian, Greek, Montenegrin, and Serbian forces ousted the Ottomans from the Balkans in 1912, allowing Serbia to annex the territory belonging to modern Macedonia. In 1918, Macedonia was integrated into the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later renamed Yugoslavia. President Josip Broz Tito established Yugoslavia as a communist federal republic following World War II.

Tito's broad authority held ethnic discord in check, but his death in 1980 unleashed longstanding tensions that ultimately caused the dissolution of the federation in 1991. Macedonia, one of the six nations formed from Yugoslavia, declared its independence that year and formed a parliamentary republic that was based on a market economy. As a result of Greece's objections to the use of the name "Macedonia" (also the name of a northern Greek province), the country was admitted to the United Nations as the "Former Yugoslav Republic of

Macedonia" in 1993.

Macedonia emerged as the most underdeveloped of the former Yugoslav republics and has since been hampered by regional instability and internal political and economic problems. In 2001, antagonism between the nation's ethnic Macedonians and Albanians was heightened by war in neighboring Kosovo (a province of Serbia). 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.

While attempting to stabilize its interethnic relations, in part by granting ethnic Albanians more autonomy, Macedonia continues to move toward a full market economy and greater integration with the rest of Europe. In 2005, Macedonia officially became a candidate for European Union (EU) membership. Macedonia is gradually taking 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 European Union. Because of continuing disputes over the country's name, Greece blocked an invitation for Macedonia to join NATO in 2008. Macedonia subsequently appealed to the International Court of Justice in the Hague for a final decision on the conflict.

## THE PEOPLE

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### Population

Macedonia's population of roughly 2.07 million is growing at an annual rate of 0.26 percent. An estimated 67 percent of the population lives in urban areas. Over 600,000 people reside in Skopje, and another 95,000 live in Macedonia's second largest city, Bitola. According to the nation's 2002 census, ethnic Macedonians form 64.2 percent of the population. Albanians, who are concentrated in the western portion of the country, comprise 25.2 percent. The remainder consists of Turks (3.9), Roma (Gypsies, 2.7), Serbs (1.8), and others (2.2).

### Language

Macedonian, the nation's official language, is the first language of more than two-thirds of the population. It is a Slavic language that uses the Cyrillic alphabet. Albanian, the other major language, uses a Latin script. Turkish, Romany, and Serbian are also spoken in 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 mother tongue must be used along with Macedonian as an official language. Macedonia's constitution grants students the right to learn in their mother tongue until the eighth grade. Secondary education is primarily 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 Eastern 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, 33 percent is Muslim, and the remainder consists of Catholics, Jews, and Protestants. 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 are an expressive and warm people who love socializing. Macedonians are not typically straightforward about topics that may be uncomfortable. For example, rather than saying "no" directly, a person usually avoids the issue or gives a negative response in a roundabout way. 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. Due to claims that Macedonia's culture, people, and language belong to the heritage of neighboring countries (Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia), ethnic Macedonians are quick to emphasize their nation's cultural uniqueness and historical achievements. In contrast, people belonging to 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 Macedonia rather than as Albanian-Macedonians, even if they have lived their entire lives in Macedonia.

### Personal Appearance

The people of Macedonia take great pride in their appearance. Clean and ironed clothes are the norm, especially in the workplace. Women wear conservative clothes, such as a dress or skirt and blazer, while men wear suits or dress slacks and sweaters. Causal wear for both sexes consists of running suits and other comfortable clothing. Women often dye their hair and wear make-up, 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.

## 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), *Mirdita* (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 semejstvoto?* (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 blouse 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.

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. In addition to visiting each others' homes, men and young people often socialize in café bars.

### 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; diners regularly round up when paying their bills.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

Rural Macedonians live together in extended families consisting of grandparents, 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. In urban areas, where extended family households are less typical, couples usually buy or rent their own apartments. However, children still live with their parents until marriage, even after they begin employment. Families that do not live together remain close and visit one another often. Women are well established in the workforce and well represented as students in institutions of higher education. Still, they are almost solely responsible for the upkeep of the home.

### Housing

Most Macedonian houses are made of enforced concrete and cinder blocks and painted white. The roofs are often made of terracotta tiles, a style that originated in Turkey and was brought to 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—in the absence of dryers (a rarity)—Macedonians use to dry clothes and entertain guests in hot summer months. In homes with only one or two bedrooms, family members may sleep in the living room. Outside, Macedonians often grow flowers, fruits, and vegetables. There is usually a sitting area in the yard for entertaining guests.

### Dating and Marriage

Young people, including couples, tend to socialize in groups; cafés and discos are popular spots. Couples may live together without marrying, but nearly all cohabiting couples plan on marrying within a few years and having children. Children are rarely born out of wedlock. Divorce was traditionally unheard of. While it is considered more acceptable today, it is still relatively rare. The wedding day is divided into three parts. The official portion is the signing of the marriage license in

the municipality building. The religious ceremony (*vencavka vo crkva*) takes place in a church in the presence of family and friends. It is here the bride and groom exchange rings and vows. Afterward comes the reception (*svadba*) with music, food, and dancing. A popular dance at receptions and other celebrations is the *oro*, which consists of holding hands while dancing particular steps and constantly moving in a circle. Guests give money to the couple to help them begin their new life together.

### **Life Cycle**

Both Orthodox and Muslim Macedonians hold ceremonies for their newborns. Christians go to church for the *krstevka* (baptism), while Muslims invite a *Hoxha* (Islamic priest) into their home to say prayers. 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 stuck on trees. On the Sunday after burial, family and friends of the deceased visit the graveside. They leave behind token amounts of the food they have been eating 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 with a view to bringing light to the deceased in the afterlife. New death notices are posted after 40 days and 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.

### **Diet**

Typical cuisine consists of roasted 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. Because only some vegetables are available year-round, Macedonians make *turshija* (pickled vegetables), which can be eaten in any season. People do not drink beverages with their meals, but salad is eaten with *rakija* to protect the stomach from this strong alcohol. Snacks include chips, sweets, and fruits such as apples, grapes, and plums.

### **Recreation**

The most popular sports in Macedonia are basketball, soccer, and handball. Most cities have a sports center, where local club teams compete. Macedonians follow U.S. professional basketball and support their national teams in European-wide soccer and handball competitions. People enjoy the outdoors

and going on vacations. Favorite destinations include sites within Macedonia, other former Yugoslav republics, and Albania. Macedonians also enjoy visiting at home or in cafés, where music and coffee complement their discussions. Young people often go to discos. In Skopje, people may see films from around the globe in movie theaters or at home. DVDs (often pirated) are popular throughout the country. Popular games are chess, *tabla* (both a strategic board game and a card game), and *hant* (a rummy-like card game).

### **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 Macedonia. The nation also hosts many annual cultural events, including a jazz festival and an international film festival, both in Skopje.

### **Holidays**

Holidays include International New Year (1 Jan.); Orthodox Christmas (7 Jan.); *Stara Nova Godina* (literally "Old New Year," on 14 January, marked according to the Julian calendar still used by the Macedonian Orthodox Church); International Women's Day (8 Mar.), when women receive gifts and attend parties thrown by and for women; Easter; Labor Day (1 May), spent relaxing and barbecuing outdoors; *Ilinden* (2 Aug.), celebrating the uprising against the Ottoman Turks in 1903; Independence Day (8 Sep.) marking the day Macedonia declared its separation from Yugoslavia; and the People's Uprising Against Fascism (11 Oct.).

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**

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### **Government**

Macedonia is a parliamentary democracy. An elected president (currently Gjorgje Ivanov) is head of state and commander of the armed forces. The head of government is the prime minister (currently Nikola Gruevski), selected by the 120-representative unicameral parliament, or *Sobranie* (Assembly). The president serves a five-year term. Parliamentary elections are held every four years. Each of

Macedonia's municipalities has its own mayor and *sobranie*. In accordance with the 2001 peace treaty, a system of allocating national representatives by region (and, by extension, ethnicity) was implemented in 2002. Powers were also transferred from the central government to the municipalities in areas such as public services, education, health care, environment, culture, social welfare, and economic development, though the implementation of these power transfers has been slow. The voting age is 18.

## Economy

Although the transition from a socialist to capitalist system is still ongoing, Macedonia is now almost entirely privatized. The services sector represents more than half of Macedonia's gross domestic product, but the industrial sector remains important. Major industries include chemicals, fertilizers, food processing, machinery, mining, and textiles. Agricultural products include corn, rice, wheat, millet, tobacco, vegetables, and grapes. Unemployment is high. Much of Macedonia's skilled or educated workforce is unemployed or performing unskilled labor. To reduce household expenses, Macedonians often grow their own fruit and vegetables and produce other homemade goods. Foreign investment has been inhibited by instability in the region. Other major economic challenges are organized crime, the black market, and the illegal trafficking of cigarettes, drugs, weapons, and human beings. The currency is the Macedonian *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. Macedonia has a well developed system of roads and railways, but 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 all carry mobile phones. 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. While the government still owns three television stations, the rest are privately owned. Several private and government-owned newspapers are published in Macedonian. Newspapers are also published in Albanian, Turkish, Romany, and Serbian. The internet can be accessed at internet cafés in urban areas.

## Education

Schools are publicly funded, although parents are expected to make small monthly contributions for school supplies, including wood for fuel. Education is compulsory from age seven to fifteen. After primary school (first through eighth grade), students attend four years of *gimnazija* (general education high school in preparation for university) or *sredno učilište* (vocational high school). More than 90 percent of Macedonia's students finish primary school and around 80 percent go on to complete 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.

## Health

Hospitals are located in most cities, and smaller clinics are available in rural areas. Most healthcare institutions are still owned by the government, although there is an increasing number of private practices in dentistry and general medicine. Health insurance is only offered by the government. Those without coverage must pay the full costs of health care. Concern is growing over the spread of HIV/AIDS. Smoking and alcoholism are major health issues, and the rates of heart attacks and strokes are high among the middle-aged.

## AT A GLANCE

### Contact Information

Embassy of Macedonia, 2129 Wyoming Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 667-0501; web site [www.macedonianembassy.org](http://www.macedonianembassy.org).

### POPULATION & AREA

|               |                      |
|---------------|----------------------|
| Population    | 2,072,086 (rank=143) |
| Area, sq. mi. | 9,928 (rank=147)     |
| Area, sq. km. | 25,713               |

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

|                        |                          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Human Dev. Index* rank | 71 of 182 countries      |
| Gender inequality rank | NA                       |
| Real GDP per capita    | \$9,100                  |
| Adult literacy rate    | 98% (male); 94% (female) |
| Infant mortality rate  | 9 per 1,000 births       |
| Life expectancy        | 72 (male); 78 (female)   |

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).