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INSIGHT

Opinion | My parents' homeland might have a bright future — if its neighbours allow it

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Towering over Macedonia Square in Skopje, North Macedonia is a statue widely understood to portray Alexander the Great — but, owing to a dispute with neighbouring Greece, is officially known as “Warrior on Horseback.”

Bruce Campion-Smith for the Toronto Star

By Jordan Bitove Publisher of Toronto Star

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OHRID, NORTH MACEDONIA — This picture-perfect town is a jewel. Set on the sparkling waters of Lake Ohrid, surrounded by mountains, thousands of visitors flock here for the fresh air and dramatic scenery. As one tour guide notes, tourism is the factory that powers the local economy.

But a short drive from the bustling waterfront, another factory is helping to reshape the nation's economy.

The Kostal plant produces components for electric vehicles as well as advanced mechatronics modules, like shift-by-wire systems, for customers that include the VW Group (Porsche, Audi, VW, Skoda), Mercedes, BMW, Jaguar and Land Rover.

The facility, which just celebrated its 10th anniversary, has 1,300 employees and ranks as one of the country's top five exporters.

It's far different than what I saw during my first visit here in 1991. At the time, Macedonia had just declared its independence from Yugoslavia. The shift from socialism, together with the Serbian-Croatian conflict, was a difficult period marked by economic uncertainty and high unemployment — in 2006, the jobless rate was 36 per cent.

On a visit this spring, I found a nation more confident, its economic outlook more optimistic and its place in the world more assured.

That is the path my parents desired for this country. My mother Dotsa was born in a village located in Aegean Macedonia, now part of Greece. My father John's parents were from a nearby village.

They were proud of their Macedonian heritage and had a deep love for the country. My father was a vigorous supporter of Macedonian independence, which became a reality in 1991 following the collapse of Yugoslavia. He led an international campaign to have the Republic of Macedonia recognized as an independent state. In recognition of his work and philanthropy, he was honoured with the Order of Canada as well as the highest honour in Macedonia.

Today, my brothers, sister and I are proud of our Macedonian roots. We have worked to continue our father's legacy to support its economic growth and its place on the world stage.



Built around 200 BC and still in use, this amphitheatre is one of the attractions in scenic Ohrid, a popular tourist stop in North Macedonia.

Bruce Campion-Smith for the *Toronto Star*

In May, I spoke at the Macedonia 2025 conference held in the capital Skopje. It brings together leaders with the shared goal of furthering the country's progress and economic reform, including building the capacity of young business leaders. The organization was co-founded by my brother John, who also spoke at this year's session. Its ambitious goal is to see North Macedonia become the most prosperous country in the region. It's calling for zero tolerance for corruption; sustained GDP growth above five per cent, driven by investment in education and business, regulatory reform and export support; high-quality public administration; and irreversible progress toward EU membership.

A week of travel and conversations with business leaders and politicians revealed challenges and opportunities on the path to that vision.

Critically, North Macedonia continues to be targeted by neighbouring states, keen to frustrate its ambitions to take its rightful place on the global stage.

The country has already changed its name, its flag and its Constitution under pressure from neighbouring states, all the result of decades-long regional tensions.

For example, Greece held up its membership in NATO, complaining that the name Macedonia suggested territorial claims on the northern region of its own country. Greece relented only after the name was changed to North Macedonia in 2019, a decision that remains unpopular among Macedonians.

Now Bulgaria is holding up North Macedonia's years-long effort to join the European Union. It's demanding changes to the North Macedonian Constitution to officially recognize the Bulgarian minority in the country as a condition to withdraw its opposition.

The current government would probably agree to this, as it recognizes all minorities, as long as this was the last compromise that had to be made to finally take their rightful place in the European Union.



Jordan Bitove speaks at the Macedonia 2025 conference with financial executive and session moderator Elizabeth Naumovski on May 12, 2026 in Skopje, North Macedonia.

Bruce Campion-Smith for the Toronto Star

The stalemate is unacceptable.

Tellingly, Croatia applied to be an EU member in 2003 and became a full member in 2013. North Macedonia applied a year after Croatia and more than two decades later, it is still waiting at the door.

At a time when tariffs are reshaping global trade, when the EU itself has been in the crosshairs of the Trump administration, the addition of North Macedonia as a stable member country would strengthen the 27-member bloc. That's especially so considering North Macedonia's strategic position at the centre of vital trade and energy corridors in the middle of the EU's southern flank.

Macedonians are well aware of the advantages of EU membership. Many favour taking their place in the EU. But not at any cost.

The frustrations reminded me again that Macedonians need allies in capitals like Ottawa to help push back against this pattern of bullying.

I had the opportunity to meet with Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, the president of North Macedonia.

She rightly makes the case that North Macedonia is part of Europe. It has earned its place in the European Union and the EU should stop allowing regional grievances to hold it back.

"For me, the EU is not just political or bureaucratic machinery. It is a community based on values and principles. That is what attracted us, because always we have been a part geographically, historically and culturally of Europe always. Why not to complete this European story by political membership," she says.

She also highlights the important role of small countries and the imperative for strong institutions at this time of conflict and uncertainty. "We need small countries and multilateralism, not multi-polarization. That's the reality. That's why we badly need stable institutions and decision-making process in the UN, in Brussels."



Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, pictured at Skopje's Villa Vodno, which serves as the official residence and workplace for North Macedonia's president, a role she has held since 2024.

Bruce Campion-Smith for the Toronto Star

A distinguished legal scholar and law professor of constitutional law, in 2024 she became the first woman elected to serve as North Macedonia's head of state.

I thought immediately how much she has in common with Louise Arbour, Canada's newly appointed Governor General, who also has an impressive legal résumé as former Supreme Court judge and UN high commissioner for human rights. Arbour's time as chief prosecutor for the international criminal tribunals for the former Yugoslavia has given her a deep understanding of the Balkans, maybe more than any other Canadian leader.

I'm hoping their shared expertise in law and commitment to justice and fairness will set the stage for a state visit to help further relations between Canada and North Macedonia.

Canada, after all, has a stake in this issue. Prime Minister Mark Carney is aligning the country closer to the European Union and North Macedonia is also a member of NATO.

It's in the interests of all of Europe and NATO to have a strong stable, democratic, ally on its southern flank. This is critical a time when China is exerting economic influence across the continent and Russia continues its war against Ukraine and threatens Baltic states.

In 2025, five years after it joined NATO, North Macedonia was praised as a "strong and reliable ally of NATO," recognized for meeting military spending targets and its donations of tanks, aircraft and weapons to Ukraine.

During my visit, I met as well with business leaders like Viktor Mizo, managing director of Kostal Macedonia, whose enthusiasm for his home country is infectious. Mizo, who holds an MBA from Harvard University, previously worked as an economic development ambassador for North Macedonia. He brought an entrepreneurial energy to that role, travelling the globe to pitch governments and businesses about investment opportunities here.

It was a successful approach the current and future governments would be wise to replicate.

In addition to the visit at the Kostal plant, we also toured a Magna plant here, one of two in the country. Companies like these have meant the transfer of knowledge in technology, along with management and leadership skills, that have been critical in making the country's economy more competitive and resilient.

That's reflected in economic statistics. In 2024, GDP growth was three per cent per year and unemployment was 12 per cent, trending down in recent years from just over 20 per cent just six years ago, according to World Bank data. The value of exports grew by 2.6 per cent in 2025.



A street scene in the old bazaar in Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia.

Bruce Campion-Smith for the *Toronto Star*

But the country can't stand still. While progress has been made, its living standard still significantly lags other European countries, the brain drain is a threat and corruption, while declining, is persistent.

So what more is needed?

The workforce and factories that today make auto parts components provide a foundation. Those skills and facilities, for example, could be expanded into aerospace and defence manufacturing to name a few options.

Mizo has a vision for the country that builds on manufacturing and expands into value-added business services, like logistics, finance controlling, accounting to provide to multinationals.

“This is important for us to find a niche and not to overextend ourselves. Let us find three to four sectors with a strategy and an implementation plan on how to do it, and allow professionals with proper industry experience to do this job,” he said.

A vibrant economy is vital, in part to provide a future for young people and stem the brain drain of talent to other countries. The population of around 1.8 million has been declining for the last 20 years, a testament to the reality that young people see

opportunities elsewhere.



A lakeside view of homes on the hills of Ohrid, North Macedonia, with the old town fortress at the top. This town, set on Lake Ohrid and surrounded by mountains, is popular with tourists.

Bruce Campion-Smith for the **Toronto Star**

“The impetus is to create an economy where people will want to work and not move away,” Mizo said.

North Macedonia is a country rich in history and culture, blessed with stunning natural spaces, and an engaged diaspora eager to lend their expertise.

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But it will take political leadership in places like Brussels, home to the European Union, and allies like Canada, to bridge age-old grievances to help ensure North Macedonia’s bright future and rightful place at the EU table.

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