



**BROKEN  
CHALK**

Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United  
Nations Human Rights Council 4<sup>th</sup> Cycle – 46<sup>th</sup> Session

## **Right to Education**

### **Country Review: North Macedonia**

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**Submitting Organization: BROKEN CHALK**

**October 2023**

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**Broken Chalk** is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimises worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarisation, and tackling educational inequalities.

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## I. Background

1. The Balkan country of North Macedonia has made remarkable educational progress since gaining independence in 1991. Despite a decade of complicated development in the years following independence, due firstly to the conflicts in former Yugoslavia and Kosovo and then to tensions with Bulgaria and Greece over its own identity, North Macedonia has developed a more proactive policy over the past decade. The country is one of the founders of the Open Balkan Initiative, which aims to bring the countries of the southern Balkans closer together economically and culturally. The improvement in bilateral relations with Greece in 2018, with the Prespa agreements, has raised hopes of reducing regional tensions. This new climate is favourable for creating new initiatives to strengthen cooperation in culture and education. A few Erasmus programs are offered between North Macedonian and other European universities. University exchanges with neighbouring countries, including members of the Open Balkans initiative and the European Union, are the best way to reduce tensions in the Western Balkans by bringing young people together in dialogue.
2. The country's literacy rate, although below the European Union average (98.7%), is ahead of other developed countries such as Greece (97.7%) and Singapore (96.8%). 2002, the literacy rate was 96%, compared with 98.1% in 2015. The female literacy rate rose from 90.93% in 1994 to 96.70% twenty years later in 2014. In addition to these results, public spending on education fell from 3.30% in 2002 to 3.7% in 2016. Moreover, in general, the education budget in North Macedonia has systematically lost since it gained independence in 1991 (4.7% of GDP in 1992). Education is compulsory from the age of 6 up to 15, which is lower than in Western European countries, where schooling lasts, on average, until the age of 16 [i]. School dropout rates vary from one category of the population to another. North Macedonia is ethnically diverse: 26% Albanian, 3.41% Turkish-speaking and 2.53% Roma. The Roma are the primary school dropout victims despite forming only a small ethnic minority.
3. The North Macedonian curriculum is similar to that of OECD countries. Higher education and research and development have received little attention from the North Macedonian public authorities: the budget for higher education has fallen from 1.1% in 2010 to 0.8% in 2021. Higher education is neither free nor fully covered by the state. Students are eligible for grants based not on income but on academic performance. Students are categorised into "state-funded" or "self-funded" groups based on their prior academic performance. State-funded students, representing high-achieving individuals, contribute partially to their education costs and pay administrative fees. Special exemptions exist for disadvantaged groups like disabled individuals, unemployed youths, and security force families, and their number is capped. Self-funded students follow a fixed tuition fee model. Similar fees are applied to students in short-cycle higher education programs. So, even if this system is meritocratic in principle, it excludes students whose families do not have the means to pay for private tuition or don't attach much importance to reading or culture. [ii]

## II. Brief overview of the last UN-UPR cycle

4. At the end of Cycle 3, 169 recommendations were made to North Macedonia, a relatively modest number. North Macedonia indicated its support for the recommendations. It made specific comments on some of them. For example, the North Macedonian government assured us it would "take concrete action" following the Estonian representative's recommendation to combat discrimination more effectively [iii].
5. Combating all forms of discrimination against the linguistic and ethnic minorities of North Macedonia is one of the most recurrent concerns in the recommendations made. The representative of Slovenia underlined the negative impacts of discrimination and segregation in the North Macedonian educational system, incapable of giving the same chances of success to all its citizens. Nigeria, Myanmar and Bhutan stressed the importance of a fairer society for all North Macedonians, regardless of their social background. Croatia and Austria made similar recommendations: North Macedonia needs to focus on children from ethnic and linguistic minorities, who are most affected by poverty and can only extricate themselves from this condition through a fair and equitable school system.
6. Including children from all physical backgrounds is a consistent recommendation. In particular, the Singaporean representative stressed the importance of infrastructures adapted to children with physical and mental disabilities. Recognition of the right of minorities to receive education in their mother tongue was emphasised by the Albanian representative and that of Romania. The representative of the Swiss Confederation also stressed the urgent need to ensure that all children have access not only to high-performance schools but also to an inclusive healthcare system, including children from ethnic minorities with physical and mental disabilities. This recommendation is also shared by the representative of Australia, who stresses the importance of an education system that is as inclusive as possible to have the most skilled population likely in an open job market.
7. Albania, France and Turkey emphasised respect for children's rights and combating violence against women. The Turkish representative pointed out that North Macedonia was a party to the Istanbul Convention and that it should, therefore, in line with its international commitments, demonstrate greater political will in this area. The representatives of Montenegro, the Philippines, and Italy also expressed concern about the lack of resources to combat violence against women. Sweden would like to go further, proposing that the North Macedonian government amend the Criminal Code to make marital rape a crime. The representative from Italy urged North Macedonia to take all necessary measures to combat early marriage; the full integration of children into an inclusive education system is an effective way forward. The question of domestic violence, specifically in rural areas, was raised by the Moldovan representative; more generally, it is the question of territorial inequalities that are brought to the attention of the North Macedonian government.
8. The Tunisian representative also invited North Macedonia to address the issue of school dropouts in rural areas and, in particular, the inequality of treatment between urban and rural schools.
9. Representatives from Slovenia, Serbia, Sweden, Australia, Algeria and Argentina, among others, stressed the urgent need to improve access to education for the Roma minority. Canada's representative insisted on including the Roma in the school system, noting that it is the Roma minority that is most affected by school dropouts. The Roma are the most

marginalised population in the education system and society in North Macedonia, and the delegates stressed the importance of their inclusion.

### III. Inclusion of Roma children

10. A more inclusive society for the Roma minority is the main challenge facing public authorities in North Macedonia today. The Roma minority has historically been discriminated against in the Balkans, and North Macedonia is no exception. Admittedly, North Macedonia stands out as having made progress compared to its neighbouring countries. The town of Šutka, on the outskirts of the capital Skopje, has recognised Romani as an official language. But despite this, the Roma are often regarded by the North Macedonian government as second-class citizens, concentrated in rural areas of the country where access to public services, especially education, is difficult. This access is further complicated by the North Macedonian authorities' lack of willingness to embrace inclusion. The Roma make up less than 2% of the population of North Macedonia. Yet, they are more affected by exclusion and unemployment: 14% of Roma children aged between 3 and 6 attend school, compared with 29% of non-Roma children. 70% of those at risk of poverty are Roma. Life expectancy for the Roma is only 68 years, compared with a national average of 73.5 years. The Roma are the hardest hit by precariousness and lack of housing: 28% live in unfit, insalubrious conditions (without running water or electricity). [iv]

### IV. Invest in education

11. A chronic lack of funding for education and universities leads to public authorities disengaging at an alarming rate from their mission to run schools and build infrastructures accessible to mentally and physically disabled children. The budget allocated to national education has been continuously decreasing since the nation's inception, leading to valid questions regarding the budgetary decisions made since 1991. [v]
12. The school has a role to play in constructing a model of society and a model of community that we can all imagine together. North Macedonia became an independent state in 1991 and is relatively young in light of international law. It had been part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia since 1918 and then of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1945. Its neighbours have questioned North Macedonia's territory and identity. Bulgaria regards North Macedonian culture as an essential constituent of Bulgarian history. Greece prevented North Macedonia from adopting the name *Macedonia* between 1991 and 2018 and gained acceptance of the *Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia* (FYROM) instead. In turn, ultra-nationalist policies implemented via the "Skopje 2014" project caused outrage amongst Greeks, who accused North Macedonia of wrongly claiming the Greek legacy of Alexander the Great. North Macedonia is a country with a complex and divided cultural heritage. Only through the education system can citizens fully and voluntarily identify with North Macedonian identity. Therefore, schools are crucial in building a lasting and distinctive identity in the country. The public authorities in North Macedonia have a vested interest in heavily investing in schools. Following the French approach, the North Macedonian citizen's construction should occur in schools rather than through ultra-nationalist and kitsch policies such as the "Skopje 2014" urban project. [vi]

## V. Infrastructures & development of new technologies

- 13.** A high R&D budget enables us to maintain a high level of scientific knowledge and innovate in numerous fields (including healthcare) that will benefit the population. Scientific research provides a better understanding of science and the potential of new technologies. Investing in education requires substantial public funding to ensure a high level of research and development, considered too marginal today in North Macedonia. Significant progress has been made, such as the existence of joint Macedonian-Austrian scientific research projects for 2022-2023. Still, the latest scientific cooperation project by the North Macedonian Ministry of Education and Science dates back to March 2023. North Macedonia has a research and development budget of just 0.4% for 2015-2020. In May 2023, this figure was 0.22 %, lower than its neighbouring countries such as Serbia (1%) and Montenegro (0.24%). This budget is insufficient to promote scientific research and falls short of European Union standards. The highest share of GDP devoted to research and development in North Macedonia was achieved in 2014, with 0.52% of GDP. This is still below the European average of 2.3%. Public authorities are the main financiers of research and development, whereas companies account for over 50% of R&D funding in European Union countries. In the case of North Macedonia, where public finances do not allow the implementation of very high R&D budgets, instituting public-private partnerships and encouraging private research must be considered priorities. [vii]
- 14.** Artificial intelligence is set to play an increasingly important role in people's daily lives and is already beginning to disrupt the world of work. Teaching students in North Macedonia how to use artificial intelligence, who will be the country's future workers, will not only provide them with a high level of qualification but, above all, enable them to innovate and be more creative. This will require policies to raise awareness and teach new technologies to schoolchildren and older people to prevent them from becoming marginalised. AI technology has the potential to enhance education in Northern Macedonia significantly: the nation must tackle the task of providing top-tier education to isolated and underprivileged regions. By enabling distance learning, AI can circumvent this issue, granting students who otherwise may have difficulties accessing educational resources much more accessibility. AI can automate teacher administrative tasks and provide valuable information on student results. This allows teachers to focus more on interacting with students and enhancing the learning experience. Moreover, implementing AI in education offers language support, especially in a culturally diverse country such as Northern Macedonia, where numerous languages are spoken. AI can furnish translation services and language learning tools, permitting students to learn in their preferred language and bridging language barriers. Ultimately, integrating AI into education could enhance accessibility and educational standards in Northern Macedonia. Understanding how digital tools and artificial intelligence operate involves acknowledging the potential for misinformation. [viii]
- 15.** North Macedonia is not part of the European Space Agency. However, it is a Space Generation Advisory Council (SGAC) member, a non-governmental organisation sponsored by the United Nations to advance space research and exploration. The SGAC is a group of young researchers worldwide, including some from Northern Macedonia. Among other things, the SGAC provides opportunities for individuals to contribute to multidisciplinary research/thinking and discussion groups focused on various topics such as space and cybersecurity, space law and

policy, space exploration, space security, and sustainability. Members have access to grants, competitions, and awards. This connects North Macedonia to the global community and should be encouraged by the public authorities. Strong research policies require financial commitments from the North Macedonian public authorities to support such NGOs.

## VI. Well-being at school

- 16.** Ethnic tensions in North Macedonia are a systemic problem: the school environment must provide children with mental stability. The research conducted in June 2021 by Professor of Public Health Elena Kjosevska and Sanja Proseva from the North Macedonian Institute of Public Health investigates students' mental health in North Macedonia. Results demonstrate that between 20 and 30% of students aged 11-15 state they experience depression at least once per month, with 20% of 15-year-old girls reporting daily bouts of depression. Between 10 and 20% of the school population aged 11 to 15 report weekly episodes of depression. Better communication with their teachers and parents ranks as the top priority for students in this age range, followed by their need for mental health support from educational institutions. Children strongly desire equity and social justice, with many calling for a discrimination-free society. [ix]
- 17.** Investing in schools is not equivalent to endorsing a theoretical "equality of opportunity". North Macedonia must strive beyond simply advancing equal opportunities. The notion of equality of opportunity is imbued with an elusive quality, as it involves putting all faith for change and social progress into chance, resembling some mystical insight. Investing in schools entails principally advocating for equality under the law; every student in Northern Macedonia shall perceive themselves as equal to their peers. Equal access to education is recognised in the Constitution of North Macedonia with 13 mentions. Nonetheless, the practical implementation of equal access remains vague. Since gaining independence, the North Macedonian government has consistently decreased the budget allocated for salaries and school maintenance, giving rise to significant social justice issues. There is a stark inequality in the distribution of resources, with Skopje, the country's most developed region, producing 45.5% of the country's GDP and receiving greater financial attention while neglecting other areas. Achieving equality of means rather than simply equality of opportunity necessitates the provision of higher salaries for educational staff and a substantial increase in national education funding. It is imperative to address territorial inequality and social division to promote equality of means.
- 18.** individuals' self-esteem undergoes constant testing and experimentation throughout their lives. This can result in either reinforcement through aspects like cultural heritage or significant weakening, which may lead to profound devaluation or, in extreme cases, social exclusion. There is a significant requirement for psychological support among students, and the school is responsible for upholding and promoting their self-esteem [x]. Teacher empathy is likely to improve the quality of teacher-student interactions, specifically regarding emotional support, leading to positive outcomes in students' psychosocial development, such as academic interest and peer relationships. Classroom management and pedagogical support, on the other hand, are closely related to student success. [xi]

## VII. Recommendations

19. Broken Chalk recommends that every school nationwide should have a psychologist, a psychiatrist, and group psychological sessions to deal with youth depression right away, without exception. Enhancing communication between children and parents should be the North Macedonian social services' primary focus.
20. Broken Chalk recommends an in-depth education system reform to adapt it to children and the job market. The prerequisites of reading, writing and numeracy must be taught uniformly and are the foundation on which the acquisition of the new skills needed to empower individuals can flourish. In secondary education, courses should be tailored to students' vocational needs. Investing in public education is a long-term gamble with a long-term payoff.
21. Broken Chalk recommends following the example of Belgium in creating municipalities and schools with linguistic facilities. Romani should be recognised as a facilitated language where the Roma population is the majority. Creating communes with administrative and educational facilities would be a significant step towards Roma inclusion in North Macedonian society. By attending classes in their mother tongue, Roma pupils will be in a better position to integrate into the country, with a better understanding of their country's history, Northern Macedonia, and a willingness to integrate into a country that shows them sympathy and respect.
22. Broken Chalk recommends investing massively in education to reduce multi-ethnic tensions. Investing in education advocates for a more cohesive community; investing in education is investing in a united people.
23. Broken Chalk recommends implementing research projects in collaboration between the public and private sectors, which could significantly strengthen North Macedonia's research, development, and university sectors. If established between academic institutions and companies, such partnerships could encourage more students to pursue higher education and extend their schooling. North Macedonia could benefit from the industrial conventions for training through research and establishing cooperation between students and companies. Students can undertake a project that would receive funding from companies. Financing a master's or doctoral project would benefit a company, such as increased visibility, competitiveness and innovation.
24. As there is a disproportionately high level of juvenile depression affecting girls, Broken Chalk recommends courses to combat gender stereotypes and deconstruct misconceptions about genders.
25. Following the precedent set by the preferential language policy for Albanian-speaking students at the University of Tetovo, Broken Chalk recommends that North Macedonian universities be obligated to provide Roma students with courses in Romani. By doing so, these students can be motivated to pursue higher education, thereby securing a better future. As the largest university in the country, the Saint-Clément University of Ohrid shall offer Romani courses.
26. Broken Chalk recommends raising students' awareness of artificial intelligence and digital tools. Learning to use digital tools and artificial intelligence means fighting against fake news and false images, quickly spreading hatred of others in a country where many minorities live.

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