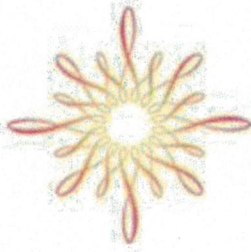


**UNITED MACEDONIAN DIASPORA**  
ОБЕДИНЕТА МАКЕДОНСКА ДИЈАСПОРА

**Submission to the Committee on  
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade**

*Issues Facing Diaspora Communities in Australia  
- The Macedonian Community*

Suite 2d, 4 Belgrave Street  
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AUSTRALIA



UNITED MACEDONIAN DIASPORA  
ОБЕДИНЕТА МАКЕДОНСКА ДИЈАСПОРА

31 July 2020

Committee Secretary  
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
AUSTRALIA

Dear Committee Secretary

**Inquiry into Issues Facing Diaspora Communities in Australia - the Macedonian Diaspora**

The United Macedonian Diaspora Australia (“UMD”) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee (“the Committee”) inquiry into *Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia* (“the inquiry”) having regard to the Terms of Reference. This submission focuses on distinct issues facing the Macedonian diaspora, as well as issues that are shared with other diaspora communities in Australia.

UMD commends the Committee for undertaking this inquiry, and for consulting and engaging with the diaspora communities, to gain an understanding of the important issues encountered within those communities. We strongly support proposals that will be aimed at accurately evaluating and effectively addressing the concerns and challenges of the diaspora communities, including our unique Macedonian community. We also support the release of the Committee’s report later in the year sharing the outcomes of the various submissions.

This submission is informed by findings conducted by UMD and its officers, comprising communications with individuals and organisations within the Macedonian community, following public requests for feedback on the matters covered by the Terms of Reference.

We consider that strategic initiatives, at all levels of government (federal, state and local), that appropriately plan for, and respond to, the needs of the diaspora communities will make for stronger and more resilient communities. This should contribute to enhancing the ability of those communities to participate productively within Australian society. Ultimately, this benefits our nation in promoting inclusivity, social fairness and cohesiveness. To this end, UMD is willing to collaborate proactively with the government, to embrace programs and measures relevant to the Macedonian diaspora. We appreciate that meaningful changes require time, commitment and concerted efforts. Nonetheless, constructive solutions need not always entail complicated programs or overly significant costs.

## Background

UMD represents the interests of the large Macedonian diaspora in Australia by promoting the language, culture and traditions of the community, whilst also organising events and activities that support harmony, mutual respect and tolerance amongst the various community groups. The objectives of equality, elimination of discrimination and societal cohesion lie at the forefront of UMD's work. Our response to the Terms of Reference for this inquiry, in the context of the Macedonian diaspora, are firmly guided by these aims.

The Macedonian diaspora has a long history of over a century in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Settlement of Macedonians to Australia took place before and after the major world wars, after the Greek Civil War and during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Macedonian migration continued after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and also in more recent years. In the 2016 Australian census, 98,441 people declared themselves as having Macedonian ancestry,<sup>3</sup> although it is widely considered that this figure is underestimated.<sup>4</sup>

Over the years, Macedonian Australians have contributed to the development, growth and prosperity of Australia. This has included their involvement in heavy industries such as the Port Kembla and Newcastle steelworks and the Snowy Hydro Scheme, as well as other manufacturing projects and the construction of railways and roads. Macedonian Australians have also been widely involved in the public and private sectors, in community organisations and sporting clubs.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Mendo Trajceviski', *Macedonian Migration to the Illawarra* (Web page)

<<http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/tieswithtradition/essays/macedonian-migration-to-illawarra.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Hill, *The Macedonians in Australia* (Hesperian Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> 'Australian Bureau of Statistics', *Republic of North Macedonia-born Community Information Summary* (Web page)

<<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/mca/files/2016-cis-republic-of-north-macedonia.pdf>>.

<sup>4</sup> Danny Ben-Moshe, Joanne Pyke and Ordan Andreevski, *The Macedonian Diaspora in Australia: Current and Potential Links with the Homeland* (Report, August 2012) 20.

## Term of Reference A

*Support offered to diaspora community associations and similar organisations, including government grants and other funding*

UMD recognises that within the Macedonian community there is a cultural disconnect between government funding and community projects. The Macedonian diaspora, particularly first and second-generation migrants, primarily interact with government support programs through community associations and groups. However, there are cultural sensitivities around asking for and being granted support from the government, especially amongst the older generations. They are usually quiet achievers holding belief systems that err on the side of self-preservation and not 'rocking the boat too much'. They feel they are doing something wrong by taking funds they have not worked for. UMD accepts this is a difficult cultural issue, one that cannot be laid at the feet of government to fix in its entirety.

UMD has identified the following issues that are relevant to support offered to Macedonian community organisations and recommends the initiatives set out below for positive change:

1. There is a genuine need for the various services offered by community associations to the large Macedonian diaspora. These organisations provide direct assistance to diaspora youth, the elderly, newly arrived migrants, the misfortunate and other marginalised groups - essential services that are beneficial for the well-being and sense of belonging of these groups in Australian society.

There is however a disincentive from establishing such not-for-profits due to high set-up costs, especially as the groups have little initial funding. Moreover, existing community associations often struggle to meet ongoing costs, such as insurance for risks covering public liability and volunteers. For instance, the Macedonian diaspora has a literary association that maintains a community library in Sydney attended by the elderly. The association receives no funding, has low membership fees for the elderly and yet incurs high insurance costs each year. Even low to moderate funding would sustain associations of this sort (including theatre and dance groups that are unable to perform during the COVID-19 period), enabling significant benefits to the life of the local diaspora that far outweigh the level of government funding.

It is recommended that government support, in the form of grants or subsidies, or contributions towards establishment costs would encourage greater community uptake and involvement. Likewise, the introduction of a government program to cover or subsidise the insurance costs of community organisations, or the provision of government grants as a co-contribution based on member numbers, would assist with their ongoing viability.

2. There is a concern that community organisations are missing out on funding because they are not always fully acquainted with the availability of government grants. The application process for government grants and other funding is often also a complicated one, or at least is perceived as such. This is especially so when those involved in community associations have limited English language skills and lack technological and other resources needed for the application process.

It is recommended that the grants application process be simplified for community associations. UMD suggests that the government can cost-effectively support measures to clearly communicate both the availability of the grants and the process for applying, in community language that is understandable and relatable. The distribution of this material through existing community associations is one option to encourage uptake. Also, funding to assist the community associations with updated technology and connectivity would be beneficial to this process.

3. To value other cultures, our diaspora community needs to cultivate and promote its own heritage. For this the community needs creative spaces, opportunities and support to thrive. Feedback from members of Macedonian community organisations is that they currently receive very little or no government funding. As well, there is minimal cultural exchange of ideas and interaction between diaspora communities, leading to exclusion rather than the government's intended aim of inclusion. The Macedonian community would greatly benefit from funding for:
  - a. Macedonian cultural and arts organisations - to encourage festivals and exhibitions, for the community to share its culture, heritage, art and literature and to exchange ideas with the broader Australian community. This promotes inclusion and enables artists of Macedonian Australian heritage, especially young artists, to be elevated and to share their works.
  - b. Preserving and teaching the Macedonian language at all levels, especially instruction at university, recognising it is one of the most commonly spoken second languages in Australian homes,<sup>5</sup> even though Greece and Bulgaria adopt official policies of refusing to accept the existence of the language.
  - c. The recording of the Macedonian community's migration history, to assist current and future generations to better understand the community, and its historical contributions here. This can be in written form and/or exhibited in a heritage museum. Thereby, building a stronger and more inclusive future for Macedonian Australians, based on trust, respect and shared experiences.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid page 30.

It is recommended that the government assess the current level of funding to diaspora communities by targeted and fully-informed data collection about those communities. Grants for academic research to evaluate the needs of communities like the Macedonian one would be of benefit. The government can then work towards providing reliable funding relative to need. This will ensure that those communities that are not as prominent, or as visible, and may have cultural resistance to funding are not excluded, where the funding is genuinely warranted.

## **Term of Reference B**

### *Safety concerns among diaspora communities, and means for strengthening the protection and resilience of vulnerable groups*

The strengthening and protection of vulnerable groups in our community should be given priority. There are various vulnerable groups within the Macedonian community, including the elderly, the disabled, those suffering from mental health, addiction, domestic violence and gambling issues, as well as the LGBTQIA+ community. These groups face cultural obstacles and stigma prevalent in the Macedonian community, inhibiting them and their families from reaching out for assistance, with often devastating effects.

The elderly in the Macedonian diaspora are especially vulnerable, many of whom have limited English language skills. The current associations are not fully equipped to deal with the legal, financial and health issues the elderly face. Local governments can address these matters by providing more assistance for advocacy and support services in community languages. There is a need for more extensive translation services for the elderly, particularly in nursing/care homes. Elder abuse, including financial, psychological and physical, is an issue prevalent throughout our society, and is no different in the Macedonian community. There is shame and stigma associated with the elderly reporting abuse, especially against family members/carers with whom they reside. Currently, most communities are struggling with COVID-19 related issues and lack of funding to assist the elderly to use new technology to maintain communication with family and reduce isolation.

Cultural sensitivities place the Macedonian community at a disadvantage due to the 'suffer in silence' mantra that is adopted, and this applies not only to the elderly but other vulnerable groups. Support and effective measures are required to assist these groups to sensitively address the stigma associated with conditions such as mental health and addiction, and to seek available services. Diaspora communities respond in different ways to the problems of vulnerable groups. As such, government funding can build on successful projects that have been undertaken by the Macedonian community in the past, investigating why cultural attitudes have led to mental health services being relatively under-utilised.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ilse Blignault et al, 'Using a multifaceted community intervention to reduce stigma about mental illness in an Australian Macedonian community' (2009) 20(3) *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* 227-233.

Data collection and research is vital to inform community intervention to reduce stigma and target programs to change traditional beliefs and promote mental health services. The community has produced theatrical plays as a means of delivering information to Macedonian speaking audiences, to encourage positive response to the issues of vulnerable groups.<sup>7</sup> Such creative activities and research require community resources, government funding and support from professionals in relevant fields. Greater understanding of vulnerable groups and responsiveness to their needs will be of significant community benefit. UMD is willing to assist the government to facilitate accredited and coordinated programs aimed at addressing these issues in the Macedonian community.

Even though the Macedonian diaspora has an established history in Australia, there are ongoing external factors that disrupt and unsettle the community and make it a vulnerable group. Consequently, the entire community is often required to defend its identity, culture, language and history.<sup>8</sup> The Greek and Bulgarian governments have openly adopted policies espousing the denial of the identity and existence of the Macedonian people, and these policies continue to permeate and create tension within our Australian society.<sup>9</sup>

Most recently, the vulnerability of the diaspora was heightened following the signing of the bilateral *Prespa Agreement*<sup>10</sup> by the Greek and Macedonian governments in 2018 to change the name of the Republic of Macedonia (“the name change”). There have been instances where members of the Macedonian community here have felt that their democratic activities of freedom of expression and association have been threatened. By way of example, the Melbourne University Macedonian Students Society (MUMSS) was publicly denounced by Australian Greek media outlets and the broader Greek community for use of the name ‘Macedonian’ and their display of the traditional Macedonian flag, by reference to the Prespa Agreement.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the Greek community expressed outrage that the Macedonian students had met with the students of the Melbourne University Turkish Society.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the ordinary social and cultural interaction of the students on campus led to targeted hate speech and death threats by members of the Greek community against MUMSS. The Greek Australian media continues to refer to Macedonians as ‘Skopjans’ as a means of undermining Macedonian identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Ilse Blignault et al, ‘Fear and Shame: using theatre to destigmatise mental illness in an Australian Macedonian community’ (2010) 21(2) *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* 120-126.

<sup>8</sup> Danny Ben-Moshe, Joanne Pyke and Ordan Andreevski, *The Macedonian Diaspora in Australia: Current and Potential Links with the Homeland* (Report, August 2012) 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> *Australian Macedonian Human Rights Committee (Inc) v State of Victoria* [2000] HREOCA 52; *State of Victoria v Macedonian Teachers Association of Vic Inc.* (2000) 21(11) Leg Rep SL2a.

<sup>10</sup> *Prespa Agreement* (online, 17 June 2018) <<https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/spogodba-en.pdf>>.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Melbourne University MUMSS students use taxpayer money to fund racial hatred against Greeks’, *Macedonian League* (online, 6 January 2019) <<http://www.macedonianleague.org/news/melbourne-university-mumss-students-use-taxpayer-money-to-fund-racial-hatred-against-greeks>>.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Skopje students using Vergina star and ‘Macedonia’ name, pose alongside Turkish students’, *Greek City Times* (online, 3 June 2019) <<https://greekcitytimes.com/2019/06/03/skopje-students-macedonia/>>.

The vibrancy of the Macedonian diaspora would benefit from government support to protect its integrity and standing within Australia. In this regard, for instance, there is no data on the impact of the name change on Macedonian Australians, and the concern amongst many, that their identity/culture is being erased.<sup>13</sup> Government should also respond to prevent incidents of conflict between groups and to encourage positive interaction in society.

For the government to implement effective policies to assist the Macedonian diaspora and its vulnerable groups, UMD considers that it is crucial that data collection processes about the diaspora in Australia are improved. If the data relied upon by the government contains inaccuracies, it has serious ramifications for the formulation of policies to address the issues for vulnerable groups. It is only with accurate data that suitable policies can be formulated.

Misleading data about the Macedonian community in Australia is peculiar to the Macedonian diaspora. It stems historically from the classification of Macedonians under the descriptions of Yugoslavs or Greeks, reducing the visibility of Macedonians on official records. This has been corrected somewhat in recent times, however inaccuracies in data remain.<sup>14</sup> Assistance will be also be required to ensure appropriate guidance for the community for the upcoming 2021 Australian census. The recent name change of country of origin for many Macedonians may add another layer of complexity for Macedonian Australians completing the census, especially as most do not accept the name change. We are of the view that reliable data and statistics would support the truth of the Macedonian diaspora, and this needs to be further grounded in academia.

### **Terms of Reference C**

*Barriers to the full participation of diaspora communities in Australia's democratic and social institutions, and mechanisms for addressing these barriers*

Cultural and language barriers, including a low-level understanding of the workings of democracy, contribute to a lack of participation in Australia's democratic and social institutions. Macedonian Australians came from countries where their involvement in democracy was minimal. UMD considers that our voice as a community has not been elevated sufficiently to deal with the issues that are important to us. Therefore, mechanisms to support greater diaspora participation and engagement, especially by Macedonian Australian youth, are justified. A strong community confident to lobby about its rights is the hallmark of democratic society.

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<sup>13</sup> If data is not detailed, its relevance to addressing community issues and the impact on vulnerable groups (mental health, depression, suicide rates around the time of the name change) is limited.

<sup>14</sup> Danny Ben-Moshe, Joanne Pyke and Ordan Andreevski, *The Macedonian Diaspora in Australia: Current and Potential Links with the Homeland* (Report, August 2012) 19.



The Macedonian diaspora witnessed the Australian Government's willingness to accept the Prespa Agreement notwithstanding the diaspora's strong opposition to it on the grounds of its unjust, and what is considered by many, invalid terms.<sup>15</sup> This was evidenced by peaceful protests by the Macedonian diaspora in Sydney and Melbourne and around the world.<sup>16</sup>

Further, there are examples of elected Australian politicians openly making inflammatory statements undermining the identity of the Macedonian community.<sup>17</sup> These statements that have the effect of publicly denying the identity of the Macedonian community are intended to shore up electoral support from the larger Greek Australian community, but are particularly unhelpful in our democratic society. They affect the Macedonian community's confidence in government and dampen its willingness to participate in democratic institutions. Many Macedonian Australians migrated here from countries that denied their identity and right to self-determination and continue to do so. The expression of like views in Australia by members of government (where such views have no relevance to governing) have real ramifications, building distrust in our leaders and our form of democracy.

It is recommended that politicians that hold public office, and speak in public, do so in an informed and culturally-sensitive way, and not contribute to the marginalisation and exclusion of diaspora groups. This will assist to develop trust in government and encourage inclusion and participation in Australia's democratic and social institutions.

Most recently, Australia's youngest ever female mayor, Emilia Lisa Sterjova (Whittlesea Shire) was attacked and received death threats on account of identifying herself as being of Macedonian heritage. Australia is known for embracing its diversity, therefore, the halt of a young Australian's political career, based on her identity rather than the successes or failures of her policies during her time in office, highlights the way the community faces barriers in directly participating in Australia's democratic and social institutions.<sup>18</sup>

To reduce barriers to full participation in Australia's democratic and social institutions, it is highly recommended that government support and encourage:

1. mentorship and internship programs for the youth of diaspora communities; and
2. employment cultural diversity targets for members of diaspora communities.

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<sup>15</sup> Igor Janev, 'Legality of the Prespa Agreement between Macedonia and Greece' (2019) 2(2) *Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 50-59.

<sup>16</sup> 'Sydney, Melbourne protests over Macedonia name dispute', *SBS News* (online, 6 March 2018) <<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/sydney-melbourne-protests-over-macedonia-name-dispute>>.

<sup>17</sup> 'Macedonia is as Greek as the Parthenon', *SBS Greek* (online, 28 March 2018) <<https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/audio/macedonia-is-as-greek-as-the-parthenon>> (Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews makes comments at a Greek National Day parade in Melbourne, Victoria).

<sup>18</sup> 'United Macedonian Diaspora (UMD)', *UMD Deplores Death Threats on Australian Mayor of Macedonian Heritage* (Web page) <<http://umdiaspora.org/2019/12/14/um-d-deplores-death-threats-on-australian-mayor-of-macedonian-heritage/>>.

This type of participation in civic and community life will encourage leadership and develop confidence especially among the diaspora youth. Over time, greater diaspora role models in positions of authority encourage stronger participation in democratic and social institutions.

#### **Term of Reference D**

##### *Opportunities to strengthen communication and partnerships between government and diaspora communities in Australia*

There is great scope to strengthen communication and partnerships between government and the diaspora in Australia. The Macedonian community is generally a hardworking one expecting only that it be treated equally to other communities. Ultimately, any meaningful relationship is based on trust, mutual respect and understanding. It is recommended that our leaders and government at all levels be appropriately informed and respond to the vulnerabilities of the Macedonian diaspora in a culturally-sensitive way, especially with regard to fundamental matters such as respect for identity and culture which form the basis of our democratic society. This can be facilitated by Australia developing just, ethical and evidence-based policies towards Macedonia and its people, respecting that the Macedonian people should have the basic freedom of determining their own identity both domestically and internationally, without foreign interference from any other state or political or economic union or military alliance. Australian foreign policy should be cognisant of the legitimate concerns of the Macedonian diaspora which is the bedrock of the Australian-Macedonian relationship. The Australian Parliament and the Government should also acknowledge the positive and significant contribution of the Macedonian diaspora to Australia's economic, social and cultural development. This will be beneficial to strengthen communication and lead to collaborative partnerships between government and the diaspora.

As mentioned under the previous term of reference, it is recommended that mentorship and internship programs be funded by government for diverse diaspora youth to participate in Australia's political system at all levels, as well as within other institutions such as the judiciary. It is important that all voices in our community are heard, and these opportunities will enable the voices of the diaspora communities to be elevated, to create their own narratives and truths, and to feel included in our democratic society.

Another excellent opportunity to strengthen communication between the government and the diaspora is support for the establishment of an Australian Embassy in Skopje. This would be a long-awaited and significant step towards building stronger bilateral relations between the Australian and Macedonian governments and embedding benefits for the great number of Australian citizens of Macedonian heritage that regularly travel, live or do business in Macedonia.<sup>19</sup> The Macedonian diaspora can play a large role in fostering

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<sup>19</sup> Danny Ben-Moshe, Joanne Pyke and Ordan Andreevski, *The Macedonian Diaspora in Australia: Current and Potential Links with the Homeland* (Report, August 2012) 10.

engagement in relations between the two countries. Business chambers to facilitate greater trade and business opportunities between the two countries, and between the diaspora and wider Australian society would also be beneficial.

## **Term of Reference E**

### *And any related matters*

UMD refers to the following matters that the Macedonian diaspora community faces that can be dealt with by aptly developed policies:

1. Culturally sensitive issues that are specific to the Macedonian diaspora should be addressed openly in a practical and compassionate way within Australia's broader democracy. Cultural competency training can be developed for social workers, hospital workers, teachers and others in similar fields to become informed, to show empathy and awareness of the identity of members of the Macedonian community. There are multiple instances that UMD has been informed of that involve Macedonian Australians being questioned, whether directly or tacitly, about their identity, even in public hospitals and schools. This is an ongoing issue that is not abating, particularly with the ongoing discriminatory policies in foreign countries. Targeted training will assist service providers to accept Macedonians as they identify themselves, and to learn not to conflate Macedonians with Greeks.
2. Government and official documents should refer to the "Orthodox Church" and "Orthodox Easter", rather than the "Greek Orthodox Church" and "Greek Easter" when referencing the Christian Orthodox religion. This is because the Macedonian community mainly practices the Orthodox faith, yet the Greek Orthodox Church does not recognise the Macedonian Orthodox Church. As such, it is insensitive to Macedonian Australians that our faith is interchangeably referenced as "Greek Orthodox", creating confusion that it relates to the Greek Orthodox Church presence in Australia. This has led to mix-ups in the community, such as Macedonian diaspora children being placed in Greek Orthodox religious classes in public schools.

Relevantly, the 2016 Australian census question about a person's religion listed a number of specific religions as possible responses, one of which is "Greek Orthodox".<sup>20</sup> It is recommended that this question be updated to "Orthodox" for the reason outlined above, and to ensure that other Orthodox religion adherents such as Macedonians do not inadvertently choose "Greek Orthodox", thus leading to inaccuracy in census data, which is relied upon by government for decision-making.

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<sup>20</sup> 'Australian Bureau of Statistics', *Religious Affiliation Census 2016* (Web page)  
<<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2008.0~2016~Main%20Features~Religious%20affiliation~111>>.

## **Conclusion**

This submission highlights proposals for effective change to improve the resilience of diaspora communities in Australia, with particular reference to the Macedonian diaspora which UMD represents. We would be happy to elaborate upon our recommendations presented in this submission if required.

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Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. Should you have any questions in relation to this submission, please contact Verka Sekulovska.

Yours sincerely

**United Macedonian Diaspora Australia**

Verka Sekulovska  
**Director**