This summer I interned at the headquarters of the United Macedonian Diaspora (UMD) in Washington, D.C. UMD is the largest international NGO promoting the interests and needs of Macedonians worldwide, and as their International Policy and Diplomacy Fellow, I was mostly responsible for work related to Macedonia's membership in regional and international organizations, such as NATO and the EU.

Some of my duties included conducting research and analysis on NATO, the EU, and the Western Balkans to produce policy papers and reports regarding Macedonia’s integration in the chief institutions of the Euro-Atlantic space. I co-authored 3 policy papers: “Macedonia and EU”, “Macedonia and NATO” and “European Energy Security”. It was an interesting experience to write these policy papers, since despite the fact that I was given some level of autonomy, I still had to operate within certain boundaries. Namely, one of the greatest challenges I faced interning at UMD was my strong disagreement with some of the organization’s central policy stances regarding issues related to Macedonia. Therefore, when writing the policy papers I had to find the subset where my opinions intersect with the well-established, core values of the organization, while simultaneously convincing the President and some of the Board members of the organization to alter some of the policy stances.

That being said, oftentimes I was in a situation when I had to write a persuasive press release that communicates a message I personally do not necessarily agree with. This is perhaps the biggest disconnect I felt between my work experience and my life as a fellow at Middlebury. Namely, while as a CSE Fellow, I am always encouraged not to censor myself the work in diplomacy requires a lot of self-censorship, which I am honestly not particularly good at.
However, I found comfort in acknowledging the incremental, but significant, changes I knew I was making within the organization. For example, UMD has never publicly criticized the current dictatorial regime in Macedonia due to the Board’s hope for the organization to be perceived as objective and unbiased. However, I was able to convince them that we should at least express disagreement with some of the actions by the Macedonian government, or otherwise the organization will lose its credibility and legitimacy to be fighting for the rights of Macedonians worldwide.

In any case, while I do acknowledge and am proud of the small, incremental changes I catalyzed this summer, this internship strengthened my belief that I would not want to work in diplomacy. If it is frustrating for me to write a compelling press release arguing something I do not agree with (but which at the end of the day does not have my name attached to it), I cannot imagine giving a speech or going to a meeting and communicating a message that is not my own.

One extraordinary experience I had as UMD’s International Policy and Diplomacy Fellow was attending meetings in Congress and the Department of State. For example, I visited over 200 Congressional offices and worked extensively on obtaining 35 co-sponsors for H. Res. 56, which affirms U.S. support for Macedonia’s NATO membership. In these meetings with Congressional Foreign Affairs staffers, and sometimes with Congressmen themselves (unlike when writing the press-releases), I was able to openly and honestly communicate my concerns about Macedonia.

Many shared my sentiments, and in fact 16 U.S. Representatives wrote a letter to Secretary John Kerry, making the same argument that I hold. Namely, in the letter they say “In recent years we have seen a steady reverse
of implemented reforms, a decline of democratic institutions, and political turmoil within the Macedonian government. We are concerned that this may be attributed to the abrupt halt to Macedonia’s NATO accession. It is our belief that the genuine prospect of NATO membership for Macedonia will strengthen its democratic institutions and values and increase the stability and security in the region, benefiting all of Macedonia’s neighbors. In contrast, failure to recognize and reward Macedonia’s efforts will continue to discourage further democratic reforms and weaken its commitment to partnering with Euro-Atlantic institutions. This is of particular concern due to the recent increase in Russian influence in the region. U.S. engagement with Macedonia should be bolstered before the country declines any further.”

This was a big personal win for me in the organization, since prior to this letter a few of the other Fellows at the organization criticized my approach to lobbying, and subscribed to the idea that we should focus on commending the Macedonian government. Furthermore, I felt that attending MiddCORE really helped me to confidently network with people and persuasively convey a message, which was immensely beneficial to the lobbying work I did.

During my internship at the UMD, I also worked on creating the weekly newspaper, as well as communicating with and reporting about UMD’s newest project called “Birthright Macedonia.” The mission of this program is to offer all youth who are of Macedonian heritage and live abroad the opportunity to go to Macedonia for three weeks during the summer and while there work with local NGOs or institutions that complement their academic goals, career goals or general interests.

Finally, as an International Policy and Diplomacy Fellow, I was exposed to the work of various prestigious think tanks. In fact, this internship has been exceptional for expanding my social capital since it encouraged me to network and build professional connections. I attended many events throughout Washington, D.C. and this internship offered me an extraordinary opportunity to shake hands with and learn from the work of highly...
renowned people such as the Managing Director of IMF, Christine Lagarde, Senator John McCain, the Chairman of the European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs Elmar Brok, and other remarkable individuals.

Overall, this has been an extraordinary experience, and I am honestly and profoundly grateful to the CSE for making it possible.