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**Perception, Interest, and Engagement:
Albanian Participation in North Macedonia's Bilateral Issues**

DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

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DECLARATION

This is a dissertation composed of papers (dissertation based on papers), prepared in accordance with the requirements stipulated in Section 8(2) of the Rules of Operation of the Doctoral School of International Relations and Political Science of Corvinus University of Budapest, February 17, 2025 (Resolution No. H19/EDT/2025).

The following published paper, marked as Article 1. in the Appendices, constitutes an integral part of the dissertation:

Article 1: Németh, F., 2026. Ride-or-die supporters? Albanian narratives on Euro-Atlantic integration. *Polarities*, 7(SI), pp. 73–96.¹

¹ I declare that the text of the article constitutes my own intellectual product.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 35-year-long political history of North Macedonia,² from the perspective of international relations, encapsulates more than just bilateral issues and interethnic relations. Although these two themes, seemingly unrelated, have dominated and continue to shape academic discourse, scholarship has so far failed to highlight their interconnectedness and has not approached foreign affairs through a minority-focused lens either. As this dissertation highlights, foreign affairs and interethnic dynamics cannot and, from a policy-oriented approach, should not be analyzed separately. The separation of these themes, mainly stemming from the methodological necessity of simplification, has created theoretical and empirical gaps that this dissertation aims to address.

The dissertation is situated at the intersection of security and area studies within the broader discipline of international relations. More precisely, its theoretical framework, main concepts, and notions rely on the epistemological broadening of post-bipolar security studies, while its scope and findings enrich the field of Balkan studies. As a scholar of international relations and an expert on the Western Balkans and EU enlargement policy, an additional motivation came from my own desire to further explore issues of minority inclusion and exclusion in foreign policy decision-making. Having pursued postgraduate studies in Serbia, worked in Kosovo, and conducted fieldwork in North Macedonia, I came to realize the importance of looking beyond the traditional (i.e., state-centric, majoritarian-focused) frameworks through which academics and practitioners approach the region and its Euro-Atlantic integration. My decade-long experience working in the region and beyond, and assessing interethnic dynamics as well as foreign and security policy, gave me an additional impetus to share my research findings with the academic community.

² In accordance with the Prespa Agreement (2018), the Republic of Macedonia changed its constitutional name (*erga omnes*) to the Republic of North Macedonia in 2019. This chapter uses 'North Macedonia' to refer to developments both prior to and following the name change, unless it specifically addresses the region of 'Macedonia' in historical terms. The adjective 'Macedonian(s)' is used to refer to the ethnic group and the official language of North Macedonia.

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a minority-centered analysis of North Macedonia's bilateral issues and Euro-Atlantic integration. Although ethnic Macedonians' standpoints on issues related to identity, nation- and state-building, national security, and Euro-Atlantic integration will not be overlooked, the research nevertheless places the Albanian political corpus at the forefront and makes it its referent object. By doing so, it supplements the existing scholarship that has almost exclusively examined the country's external and internal challenges from a majoritarian Macedonian perspective. Thus, the scope of the research concerns the Albanian political corpus' perception, interest, and engagement and how all these impact its foreign policy orientation and seemingly unwavering support for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Euro-Atlantic integration, understood as North Macedonia's accession to NATO and the European Union, serves as the dissertation's overarching subject. Integration into and membership in Western politico-military alliances, as a normative concept, a political objective, and a societal framework, intersect with identity, national security, and ontological (in)security, as the research proves.

The dissertation is composed of five thematic chapters and three journal articles. The first two chapters, relying on the existing scholarship in security and area studies, lay the theoretical foundations and introduce North Macedonia as the research focus. Moreover, these chapters highlight the core notions of the dissertation, including multination-states (federative state, imperial state), internal and external security, and societal/ontological (in)security, and connect them to the country's bilateral disputes (notably with Greece and Bulgaria) and interethnic relations. The following two chapters center around the academic building blocks of the dissertation, including the research questions and hypotheses, methodology, and novelty. The final thematic chapter, testing the research questions and hypotheses as well as detailing the dissertation's theoretical and practical novelties, should be read after the three journal articles found in the Appendices. The single-authored articles employ the same theoretical framework and methodological approach to examine different aspects of the dissertation: the three case studies center around the Albanian political corpus's stances on Euro-Atlantic integration, their involvement in the so-called name dispute with Greece, as well as their involvement in the identity-related issue with Bulgaria.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter details the changes in scholarship pertaining to post-bipolar security studies and introduces the theoretical framework of the dissertation. It showcases the importance of the internal and external dimensions of security, and societal (in)securities in analyzing (sub)state-level actors, especially in multinational states. In addition, Buzan's typology of nation-state relations—especially federative and imperial states—is highlighted, paving the way for a better understanding of interethnic and power-sharing struggles in North Macedonia.

2.1. The evolution of the post-bipolar security framework

The end of the Cold War provided scholars with “a good deal of soul searching in the academic discipline of International Relations” (SØRENSEN, 1998, p. 83). Post-bipolarity did not only reshape global order but also challenged core assumptions that the prevailing theory of neorealism were based on. While neorealism had long perceived the state as its referent object, the international system as its primary arena and military power as the core measure of security (WALTZ, 1979; WALT, 1987; MEARSHEIMER, 2001), scholars had started expanding its concepts, actors, and levels of analysis. Areas once seen only as peripheral in international relations—including social groups, norms and identity—gained momentum (BUZAN & HANSEN, 2009; WOHLFORTH, 2011). This epistemological broadening also challenged the primacy of the state; while it continues to remain the most prominent referent object, the inclusion of societal and sub-state actors into analysis greatly impacted scholarship.

Post-bipolarity had an impact on security studies, too. The “constructivist turn” (CHECKEL, 1998), famously represented by the Copenhagen School, shifted the focus toward the social constructions of security, including discourse, perception and identity (BUZAN, WÆVER, & DE WILDE, 1998; WÆVER, 1993). Furthermore, the scope of what is or can be considered a security threat has significantly expanded. Wendt's (1992) constructivist approach to security studies, combined with his famous “anarchy is what states make of it” (p. 395) notion, opened the way for analyses to include themes such as

norms and identity. In doing so, the security framework has also evolved to an extent that “by labeling something a security issue that it becomes one” (WÆVER, 2004, p. 9). These insights reframed the core notion of post-Cold War security, also bringing the level of analysis below the state, especially in multiethnic, transitional and/or post-conflict societies.

The clear-cut lines between domestic, national and international politics that neorealist research patterns were based on had also been eroded. Katzenstein (1996) observed that internal and external security had become increasingly interlinked, prompting scholars to explore how domestic identities and social structures shape foreign policy. In this view, the international system is not an arena represented only by states but also by nations, ethnic groups and transnational communities—actors whose perceptions of belonging often differ from those of their governments. Although the state, as Buzan (1983) puts it, continues to be “the most amorphous component” (p. 44) of international relations and security studies even today, they can become sources of insecurity when the political apparatus fails to represent or safeguard certain sub-state groups, nations or identities (BUZAN, 2009, p. 30). This argument later evolved into the foundation of societal (in)securities, all integral part of what neorealists would strictly define as national security³, centering on the threats and “questions of domestic stability and cohesion” (BUZAN, 2009, p. 29).

Societal insecurity, most prominently defined by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998) “exists when communities of whatever kind define a development or potentiality as a threat to their survival as a community” (p. 119). The concept allows scholars to capture how distinct sub-state groups interpret and react to threats perceived as challenges to their identity and/or existence and are key to understanding transitional and/or post-conflict societies, especially in multination-states.

³ National security, in its broadest definition, implies that the referent object of analysis is the nation which consists of “a large group of people sharing the same cultural, possibly the same racial, heritage, and normally living in one area” (BUZAN, 1983, p. 45).

2.2. A fight for national security and control: federative and imperial states

Buzan's typology on nation–state relations provides the theoretical backbone for this research and explains how national security and interethnic struggles are interconnected.⁴ A multination-state, defined as “state(s) which contain two or more substantially complete nations within their boundaries” (STIVACHTIS, 2015, p. 28) can be further broken down to a federative and an imperial one. In a federative state, nations are legally permitted and many times encouraged “to pursue their own identity” (BUZAN, 1983, p. 48) without fears that the other nation would try to dominate the state and/or its core functions. Since nationalisms cannot serve as building blocks of a joint identity—hence the distinctiveness of these nations—, federative states are more exposed to challenges aimed at national security, including separatism, fueled internally or externally, and secessionism. The examples of separatist movements in Canada's Québec province (SLATTERY, 1994; CHANGFOOT & CULLEN, 2011), Czechoslovakia's peaceful (BRANCATI, 2008; STEIN, 2010) and Yugoslavia's turbulent disintegration (RAMET, 2005; RADELJIĆ, 2010) all support this argument.

In an imperial state, one of the nations is in (almost) full control of the state's core functions and is driven by fear of losing its dominance. In a quest to retain power (i.e., over state structures, including national security and foreign policy), the dominant nation can employ various means ranging from legal oppression, violence to attempts of homogenization. Like a federative state, an imperial state is also “vulnerable to threats aimed at their national divisions” (Buzan, 1983, p. 49), rightfully demonstrated by the examples of Austria–Hungary (SZÁSZ, 1996; SZÉKELY & CSERNUS-LUKÁCS, 2020) and the Soviet Union (TUMINEZ, 2003; GOFF, 2020; WIMBUSH, 2021).⁵

⁴ When theorizing about national security and the relationship between the nation and the state, Buzan (1983) outlines four models, one of which is the *multination-state*. In a ‘traditional’ *nation-state*—Japan being the prime example—“the nation provides the state with both a strong identity in the international arena and a solid base of domestic legitimacy” (p. 46). In the *state-nation* model, by contrast, “the state plays an instrumental role in creating the nation, rather than the other way around” (p. 46), as was the case in former British and Spanish colonies in the Americas. Finally, a *part-nation state* is defined as “a nation that is divided up among two or more states,” such as North and South Korea or Cold War-era Germany.

⁵ Of course, not all multination-states can be classified as federative or imperial. Switzerland is one of the exemptions; it is a multination-state by default—by having four nations under a single state—but shows no sign of struggle for power among its ethnic communities nor internal or external challenges (i.e., separatism, secessionism) to national security.

In an imperial state, national security is more complex than the neorealist approach to security; it goes beyond the protection of the state and its citizens. The dominant nation's interest is also to retain, hold and sustain control as well as to counter any external or internal attempts, usually coming from the other nation, that would upset their desired balance (STIVACHTIS, 2015, p. 28). Thus, attempts at federalization (i.e., autonomy) or handing out power in important fields of governance, national security and foreign policy might risk upsetting the status quo. From the perspective of the other (oppressed) nation, the state itself is being perceived as a security threat to their identity, oftentimes culminating in societal dilemmas and insecurity.

The dynamics inside of multination-states, especially security dilemmas, can be supplemented by the theory of securitization. As societal security had deepened the post-bipolar security framework by emphasizing how identity can be the object of security, Wæver (1995) argues that actors can transform issues into security matters through discursive labeling; a political process also known as securitization. Therefore, in multination-states—and more broadly, in multi-ethnic⁶, divided and/or post-conflict societies—, securitization often revolves around domains that define the collective identity of a certain nation/group, including language, education and symbols. As Roe (2005) notes, “if a society loses its identity, it will not survive as a society” (p. 43) and if it is “unable to turn to the regime to guarantee their survival, societies will [...] have to provide for their own security; they will be in a self-help situation” (p. 51). Hence, a security dilemma within the state is born with possible consequences to national security and stability.

⁶ A multi-ethnic state, or what Smith (1986) calls a polyethnic state, is an entity “usually dominated by a single strategic *ethnie* which seeks, to a greater or lesser extent, to incorporate, or influence, the surrounding smaller or weaker *ethnies*” (p. 150). In such societies, minority communities are either “subject to analogous restrictions” or “have been able to take advantage of new opportunities and openings” (p. 220). Smith argues, however, that in polyethnic states such as Belgium, Canada and Yugoslavia—specifically citing Macedonians—one can observe “heightened interethnic tensions generated by cultural pluralism seeking political expression” (p. 220). Gellner (1983) similarly views multi-ethnic states as unstable, arguing that “a state which presides over more than one nation will sooner or later be challenged by nationalism” (p. 43); it is through nationalism that an industrial society, characterized by the nation-state, can survive in the long run.

Buzan's theoretical framework on multination-states, including federative and imperial states, is relevant for analyzing the nexus between national security and interethnic relations in divided societies, and how they manifest in foreign policy. For that, North Macedonia is used as an example to showcase, through three case studies, the intertwined nature of security, foreign policy and interethnic relations.

3. NORTH MACEDONIA AS THE SCOPE OF ANALYSIS

The center of the dissertation is North Macedonia. In this chapter, the country's post-independence political history and interethnic relations are examined from the perspective of the social dimensions of security and consociationalism. Concentrating on the main internal and external factors that have shaped the country's state- and nation-building processes—and, in parallel, have posed or continue to pose challenges to its national security—the chapter also discusses a minority group's potential role in foreign policy decision-making. By doing so, it lays the groundwork for analyzing the Albanian political corpus's role in North Macedonia's bilateral relations with Greece and Bulgaria, as well as in its Euro-Atlantic integration.

3.1. A multination-state with internal and external challenges

The post-bipolar security framework has demonstrated just how central identity and interethnic relations were to security studies in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe (AGGESTAM & HYDE-PRICE, 2000; KUUS, 2007; ZIĘBA, 2023). The collapse of large multi-ethnic states such as the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia, and socialism exposed long-suppressed cleavages around identity (politics), culture, history and ethnicity (BRUBAKER, 2004; BIEBER, 2005). These issues, along with minority inclusion and exclusion, are nowhere more pronounced than in the post-Yugoslav space; the region testifies how easily societal dilemmas and insecurities can emerge in multination-states. As Bojičić-Dželilović (2013) argues, postwar institutions like consociational models in Bosnia and Herzegovina often entrenched ethnic separation instead of overcoming it. Similarly, Sardelić (2015) finds that uneven citizenship regimes across post-Yugoslav states have perpetuated minority exclusion (especially among the Roma community), making access to rights a key component of societal security. These arguments suggest that mechanisms meant to stabilize governance in post-conflict societies often risk deepening or, at least, preserving ethnic boundaries (MCGARRY & O'LEARY, 2009) and faultlines, and thus creating social insecurities between nations.

North Macedonia presents a particularly interesting case for exploring the social dimensions of security. Since gaining independence in 1991 peacefully from Yugoslavia, the country has faced with issues concerning identity and security; internally between Macedonians and the country's largest ethnic minority group, Albanians, and externally from virtually all of its neighbors (Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Albania and Kosovo)⁷ over matters of territory, history and heritage, religion and minority rights (KERLINDSAY, 2009; ISENI, 2013; MARUŠIAK, 2023). These disputes touch upon ontological insecurity (KINNVALL, 2004; MITZEN, 2006) as challenges to national symbols and narratives also threaten collective self-understanding of certain (ethnic) groups.

As social dimensions of security are tightly intertwined, the concept of societal security is also useful in analyzing North Macedonia. Buzan et al. (1998) define societal security as the ability of the society and/or certain sub-state groups to preserve their identity, culture and values, amid perceived changes or threats. It also concerns the “traditional patterns of language, culture, association, and religious and national identity and custom in a given society” (THEILER, 2003, p. 251); these building blocks of identity have been contested by North Macedonia's neighbors towards ethnic Macedonians, and, in the context of interethnic relations, the majority group has triggered insecurities among Albanians, too.

North Macedonia has also been exposed to internal challenges to its state- and nation-building processes, especially concerning national and societal security. The eight-month-long armed conflict between Macedonian security forces and Albanian insurgents⁸, known as the National Liberation Army (in Albanian: *Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare*; in

⁷ The research focuses on Greece and Bulgaria only, especially considering their continued impact North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration process. Importantly, Serbia challenged the Macedonian Orthodox Church's autocephaly, an important element of Macedonian identity and nationhood. Since North Macedonia's independence, Albania echoed concerns over the mistreatment of its kin-minority. The Kosovo war and the influx of refugees (1998–1999), and Kosovo's subsequent independence in 2008 fueled Macedonian insecurities of potential secessionism, too.

⁸ Seeing the Kosovo Albanians' struggle against the oppressive Yugoslav regime led by Slobodan Milošević and the favorable outcome of the Kosovo war, coupled with the deterioration of their legal and cultural rights by the end of the 1990s, Albanians in North Macedonia turned to violent measures to either secure equal rights as Macedonians, create their own autonomy, or, as an extreme political goal, their own state. Hoping for the same level of engagement from Western powers, mainly the United States, and with the assistance of Kosovo Albanians arriving with significant military experience and equipment, the insurgency escalated at the beginning of 2001. The lack of international support, mainly due to the United States' reluctance, forced Albanian insurgents and (Macedonian) state representatives to the negotiating table, with international facilitation provided for them to reach what came to be known as the Ohrid Framework Agreement.

Macedonian: *Ослободителна народна армија*) concluded with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (hereinafter OFA) in 2001 (BRUNNBAUER, 2002; DASKALOVSKI, 2003; KARAJKOV, 2008). The OFA institutionalized mechanisms of power-sharing with strong emphasis on minority representation and rights in multi-level and multi-ethnic governance (BIEBER, 2005; AGYARE, 2021; XHELADINI, 2025). Reflecting on Lijphart's (1977) consociational democracy, it emphasizes that multi-ethnic governance with proportional representation and elite cooperation are keys to state functionality, stability and national security. Cooperation, on the highest levels of governance, is important; Reilly (2001) suggests that a carefully designed, implemented and overseen "institutional engineering" (p. 5) can provide conflicting parties—Macedonians and Albanians, respectively—with "incentives towards cooperation, moderation and accommodation between themselves and their rivals" (p. 6).

Although principles of consociationalism had been institutionalized by the OFA—i.e., expanding Albanians' rights in public administration, education, and local and state governance—, its power-sharing arrangements have not necessarily translated into societal security. Relations between Macedonians and Albanians, both on political and social levels, are still characterized by identity-based insecurities and driven "by fear, suspicion, and demonization of the 'other'" (KOPPA, 2001, p. 39). These insecurities are ontological ones and highlight the importance of perceptions, too: Bieber (2008) argues that while ethnic Macedonians perceive the OFA "a ceiling for the accommodation of Albanians in the state, [...] many Albanians consider the agreement as the floor for building future relations" (p. 208). Debates on how North Macedonia should be built up (i.e., unitary, federalized or as a binational state) and the role of Albanians in the state—either as an ethnic minority group or constituent people—are never-ending (ENGSTRÖM, 2002; VANGELOV, 2017; DJORDJEVIĆ, 2021), and define political and social life in the post-OFA period, too. But where do these fears that are at the center of identity, state- and nation-building, and national security originate from?

For the Macedonian political and social corpora, the rejection of ideas related to any kinds of federalism (including autonomy) derives from their fears associated with and first-hand experience of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, especially with regard to Kosovo (BABUNA, 2000, pp. 67–68). It was through the rise of security dilemmas, fueled by nationalisms and driven by secessionism—both being existential threats to a multination-

state—, that Yugoslavia fell apart along ethno-religious lines. This experience had defined Macedonian perceptions on state- and nation-building and impacted interethnic dynamics in the post-independence period. As states can also become drivers of insecurities (BUZAN, 2009, p. 30), Albanians felt, through the actions of the Macedonian political leadership, that they did not fit into the preconceived notion of a Macedonian nation-state, and their collective identity and security had also been challenged. Similarly, Macedonians “largely saw the republic as belonging to them, rather than a multi-ethnic polity” (KONESKA, 2022, p. 175). Oppressive measures by the state—including political arrests, removing the right to showcase Albanian symbols and the prevention of opening the Albanian-language university in Tetovo (PETTIFER, 2001)—were aimed at suppressing any perceived deviation from the idea of a Macedonian nation-state. These actions were perceived by Albanians as existential threats to their collective identity and survival, culminating in the armed conflict detailed above.

The societal/ontological (in)securities of Albanians are not the only threats perceived by the Macedonian political and social corpora. North Macedonia’s bilateral issues, especially but not exclusively with Greece and Bulgaria, touch upon identity and (national) security, too. The so-called name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia, for instance, was also posed ontological challenges to the building blocks of Macedonian identity (or to what it means to be of Macedonian ethnicity), including ethno-genesis, history and symbols (KER-LINDSAY, 2009). The Prespa Agreement (2018), that legally resolved the almost three-decade-long bilateral issue, has partially desecuritize the issue between political leaderships, yet, created new political and social cleavages in the country (ROSE, 2019; GRAAN, 2021). Conversely, the bilateral dispute with Bulgaria over the Macedonian language, (contemporary) history and minority rights (MARUŠIAK, 2023; VANGELOV, 2023) reinforces the same insecurities, but this time from another neighboring country. These examples also underpin what Buzan and Wæver (2003) suggest that security must be understood as a socially constructed process, highly shaped by perceptions (p. 72). In this context, North Macedonia’s internal and external dimensions of security—the combination of bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, and interethnic relations among Macedonians and Albanians—provides an academically underexplored domain in analyzing the intertwined nature of such issues through the lens of an ethnic minority group.

3.2. Ethnic minority groups and foreign policy

Can ethnic minority groups influence or shape foreign affairs? The United Nations defines an ethnic minority as a group that is “numerically smaller than the rest of the population of a state, is in a non-dominant position and possess ethnic, religious and/or linguistic characteristics” (CAPOTORTI, 1979). From a sociological standpoint, “an ethnic minority is a social group that [...] occupies a subordinate position in the social structure and is subject to differential and unequal treatment by the dominant group” (SCHAEFER, 2021). When discussing ethnic minority groups in foreign affairs, Moore (2002) emphasizes that ethnicity “includes cultural, linguistic, racial, and religious boundaries” (p. 78), all linked to their collective identities.

Ethnic minority groups can also be understood as interest groups, and according to Saideman (2002), their primary interest is the preservation of their identity (p. 94). Under this notion, a comprehensive body of literature examines minority and/or ethnic lobbying in foreign affairs, with scholarship mainly focusing on ethnic lobbying in U.S. foreign affairs and decision-making (MATHIAS JR., 1981; HANEY, 2017) and impacts of diaspora networks on foreign policy (BERKOWITZ, 2014; LARUELLE, 2021; YENER-RODERBURG; 2024). In Southeast Europe, academic research primarily analyses diaspora engagement with their (kin-)state, many times combined with attempts of counterbalancing rivaling ethno-nationalisms. For this research theme, Bosnia and Herzegovina serves as the prime example: the “Herzegovina lobby” (BASSUENER & WEBER, 2012), Bosniak, Croat, and Serb interests in inter-state relations (HALILOVICH, 2018; FINK-HAFNER, 2019) and Bosnian interest groups’ role in reinforcing ethnic cleavages (KAPIDŽIĆ, 2019) testify about the multifaceted nature of the discipline.

3.3. Ethnic minority groups' influence in North Macedonia

The literature on ethnic minority groups' influence on North Macedonia's foreign policy is scarce. Marolov et al. (2024) analyze the evolution of foreign policy objectives, particularly amid external challenges posed by Greece and Bulgaria, while Daskalovski (2025) explores the influence of international actors on the country's interethnic relations. The possible involvement and/or engagement of minority groups, including Albanians, is primarily addressed in Leka's works, which focus on interethnic representation in foreign policy. Leka (2021) investigates whether foreign policy is ethnically dominated and argues that Albanians are (were) deliberately marginalized in this domain. Positive developments, however, are visible, as the role of Albanian political leadership has grown over time, giving them, in theory, more space to be involved in this domain, too.

Saideman (2002) also argues that "small groups may [...] exert a disproportionately large influence" (p. 93) on foreign affairs. Since ethnic minority groups usually possess a narrower policy focus and set of priorities, they "face lower costs to organize themselves" (SHARIF & SWANK, 2019, p. 130) and can channel their resources more effectively. Therefore, the research considers North Macedonia's Albanian minority—more precisely, their political corpus—not only as an ethnic minority but also as an actor (or entity) that has all necessary tools at its disposal to be influential in the domain of foreign affairs, too. Ethnic minority groups also frequently "link their domestic status to the external behavior of the state" (SAIDEMAN, 2002, p. 144), using foreign policy as a means of safeguarding their identity. The concept of transnational nationalism, coined by Brubaker (2004), underscores this argument: minority actors operate simultaneously within domestic and international politics with the aim of enhancing their societal security. Justifying their involvement in foreign affairs, Coakley (2008) observes that "minority elites often frame their participation as a contribution to regional stability" (p. 224). By doing so, they legitimize their presence in the state's foreign affairs as important agents of foreign policy diffusion, translating international norms into domestic policy agendas (WOLFF, 2015, p. 171).

In North Macedonia, the Albanian political corpus's support for joining into western politico-military alliances shows similarities with above-discussed arguments. Meka

(2016) argues that memberships in NATO and EU are perceived and presented not only as mechanisms of collective security, but also as frameworks securing minority protection and sound interethnic relations (p. 32). Thus, a logical link between security, interethnic dynamics (sub-state level) and integration into international organizations (supranational level) can be established; as Iseni (2013) notes, “for Albanian actors [in North Macedonia], Euro-Atlanticism is the political expression of societal security” (p. 54). Since Euro-Atlantic integration stands as their ultimate foreign policy objective, they can be decisive actors in shaping the country’s foreign affairs, especially in the post-OFA period. Their ‘codified’ inclusion in governance and state affairs, through the power-sharing model of consociationalism, provided the Albanian political leadership with access to and influence over decision-making processes that may have included foreign and security policy, too. This connection highlights the relevance and novelty of the research, and also illustrates how societal security impacts both inter- and intra-state levels.

4. RESEARCH PUZZLE

The previous chapters, by relying on the existing academic literature, provided an analysis of North Macedonia's internal and external (in)securities, including its bilateral issues and interethnic relations, and introduced Buzan's typology of nation–state relations. Building on these theoretical and practical foundations, this part of the dissertation focuses on the academic gap that the research seeks to bridge and formulates the research questions and hypotheses.

4.1. Novelty

The dissertation examines perceptions, interests and engagement of North Macedonia's Albanian political corpus regarding Euro-Atlantic integration and bilateral issues with Greece and Bulgaria. The research, by making Albanians its referent object, explores the intersection of security, interethnic relations and foreign affairs in a multination-state, such as North Macedonia, and offers a minority-centered perspective on the country's external disputes and western integration. Thus, the research positions itself at the intersection of two scholarly themes: it explores the interlinks between interethnic relations and foreign affairs in a consociational democracy, while observing nation–state dynamics in the post-bipolar security framework.

Scholarship has found numerous research interests in post-independence North Macedonia, especially concerning bilateral disputes and interethnic relations. Domestic and international (f)actors influencing nation- and state-building, Euro-Atlantic integration and minority–majority dynamics are widely examined (DANFORTH, 1995; BIEBER, 2004; REKA, 2007; VANGELI, 2011; KONESKA, 2016; BLOODWORTH, 2020; VOLCHEVSKA, 2025). The primary focus of these studies, however, is on explaining themes from a majoritarian perspective. To enrich the academic literature, this research places the Albanian political corpus as representative of the country's largest ethnic minority group to the forefront. This novel approach ensures that the construction of North Macedonia's foreign policy (priorities) is viewed through a unique prism, and

enables the exploration of new understandings on the country's bilateral issues and on the Albanian political community's engagement.

The post-independence country, based on Buzan's notion, is considered an imperial state in which two distinctive nations—Macedonians and Albanians, respectively—are in a constant quest to acquire and/or maintain power. Since 1991, Macedonians have dominated the main state structures, including national security and foreign policy, and repressive legal and political actions, as discussed above, have been taken to suppress any alleged forms of Albanian separatism. Although the fear of secessionism and loss of a nation-state is common among nations with relatively young statehood and limited experience in state-building (KOPPA, 2001, p. 47), scholars are divided by the extent to which the Macedonian leadership marginalized Albanians: Iseni (2013) concludes that the concept of a Macedonian nation-state, by default, excluded all minorities and was against the interests of Albanians (pp. 180–181), whereas Ortakovski (2001) argues that Albanian claims of discrimination are exaggerated due to their political parties being included in the respective governments (p. 25). Nonetheless, the OFA, built on the implementation of consociational power-sharing, laid the foundations for a multi-ethnic state in which Albanians “are seen as having a practical veto over the future of the state” (PETTIFER, 2001, p. 138), and transformed North Macedonia into a federative state.

The research timeframe covers the period between 1991 and 2024. In post-independence North Macedonia, interethnic relations and bilateral issues have (seemingly) developed in parallel. The evolution of these themes, namely Macedonian–Albanian dynamics and the bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, has shaped the country over the past three decades, both internally and externally. The year 2024 is chosen for two reasons. First, the presidential and parliamentary elections resulted in the exclusion of Albania's largest ethnic minority party, the Democratic Union for Integration (in Albanian: *Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim*; in Macedonian: *Демократска унија за интеграција*), from government, marking a new era in North Macedonia's post-2001 political landscape (BYTYCI, 2024). Second, the EU integration processes of Albania and North Macedonia have been decoupled (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2024; MARUSIC, 2024), marking the end of their ‘joint’ integration trajectory. These 2024 developments impact both domestic and foreign policy, and interethnic relations, providing somewhat organic boundaries for the research.

4.2. Research questions

The dissertation's research questions and hypotheses, incorporated into three journal articles, explore the interconnected nature of security, foreign policy and interethnic relations in North Macedonia.

R1. What are the foreign policy priorities of the North Macedonia's Albanian political corpus, and how have internal and external developments shaped these priorities?

R2. How does the Albanian political corpus perceive North Macedonia's bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, and its Euro-Atlantic integration?

R3. How has the Albanian political corpus engaged with these foreign policy matters?

Engagement denotes participation in political processes—with reference to foreign affairs—and can be manifested in myriad ways, including lobbying, electoral campaigning, policymaking, and informal means (VERBA, SCHLOZMAN, & BRADY, 1995). This research captures the mechanisms through which Albanian political actors have engaged with, and possibly influenced, bilateral disputes, and advocated for the necessity of Euro-Atlantic integration. Interest reflects on the importance that Albanian political actors assign to specific issues, encompassing their concerns, prioritization and their motivation (VERBA ET AL., 1995; KLÜVER, 2018; FRAUSSEN ET AL., 2021). The research puts an emphasis on contextualizing the drivers of the Albanians' foreign policy interests. Lastly, perception indicates how certain groups interpret, evaluate and assign meaning to (political) events and actors, particularly in identity-laden contexts (LODGE & TABER, 2013). The research investigates the reasons, both internal and external, that lead to the engagement and interest of the Albanian political corpus in foreign policy and Euro-Atlantic integration.

4.3. Hypotheses

The dissertation formulates the following hypotheses to address the driving forces behind Albanian engagement in bilateral issues and nation–state dynamics:

- H1.Foreign affairs—especially Euro-Atlantic integration—is one of the few domains in North Macedonia that binds Macedonians and Albanians together and creates state-level cohesion among distinct nations.
- H2.Although foreign policy is not an arena of rivalry, the justification for the necessity of Euro-Atlantic integration and for managing the bilateral issues that have politically obstructed this process, varies among nations.
- H3.Albanians’ interests and their modes of engagement in foreign affairs are rooted in societal (in)security and in a quest to preserve their collective identity and rights, rather than in traditional state-centric objectives.

Examining North Macedonia’s history of interethnic relations, particularly in the post-independence decade, it is clear that the primary objective of the Albanian political corpus (and society) has been to secure their legal and constitutional rights. Although the OFA subsequently assisted them in achieving this priority, the ethnic minority group’s focus remains on maintaining and, where possible, expanding their rights in all areas of governance (e.g., making Albanian the second official language). Even Euro-Atlantic integration as a foreign policy objective is perceived as a tool for guaranteeing these rights, as insecurities toward the Macedonian political leadership (and potential actions that could lead to the erosion of Albanian rights) continue to prevail.

Analyzing the impact of interethnic relations on North Macedonia’s foreign policy, Leka (2021) argues that this domain remains “a monopoly of a single ethnic group” (p. 53), namely the Macedonians, and is also “an area of interethnic clashes” (p. 55). In contrast to this view, shared foreign policy objectives can be perceived as foundations for a collective, state-level identity that encompasses both Macedonians and Albanians. Although bilateral issues, particularly those related to identity, remain dominated by the Macedonian political corpus (e.g., in setting priorities and red lines), they have not provoked clashes or confrontations from Albanians.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter details the research methodology and the structure of the dissertation. It highlights and justifies the usage of semi-structured elite, and expert interviews and assesses the limitations of the research, mainly arising from its theoretical background, scope, and methodology. Afterwards, the dissertation's structure—keeping in mind its article-based nature—is explained, connecting the three single-authored papers to the research questions and hypotheses, as detailed in the previous chapter.

5.1. Methodology

The dissertation employs an interpretivist, qualitative methodology; I conducted semi-structured elite and expert interviews with twenty-five former/active politicians, advisors, academics and civil society representatives in Skopje and Tetovo, North Macedonia in 2024 and 2025. Stofer (2019) argues that interviews are a good methodological choice if researchers wish to gain a nuanced understanding on a particular issue, in which only a handful of people have been involved or are able to offer insights into it (p. 3). The objective of the interviews was to gain access to narratives and interpretations concerning the role of Albanians in North Macedonia's foreign policy. The use of semi-structured interviews as primary sources is justified by the nature of the dissertation and its theoretical framework since this is the first research of its kind to examine the foreign policy attitudes of Albanians toward Euro-Atlantic integration and bilateral issues through in-depth case studies, as explained above.

The research does not rely on surveys or structured interviews. Qualitative data collection through surveys often lacks participants' own experiences, thoughts and argumentation (ARY ET AL., 2010), and creates an artificial division between the researcher and the participant. While structured interviews are qualitative, they lack sufficient flexibility and openness. Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, better accommodate participants' own frames of reference (BRYMAN, 2016). Thus, open-ended questions were formulated to capture standpoints on perceptions, priority-setting, political engagement and the evolution of interethnic relations vis-à-vis bilateral issues.

Participants were selected based on their past and/or current positions and experience in overseeing foreign affairs, minority issues or interethnic relations, and via snowball sampling and chain referral. The interviewees were predominantly of Macedonian, Albanian or Turkish ethnicity (all citizens of North Macedonia), but to broaden the research's perspective, participants from Greece and Bulgaria were also included. A detailed summary of the participants' professional backgrounds is provided in the Appendices. Interviews were conducted one-on-one, usually in locations chosen by the participants, such as their offices or nearby public spaces. Individual interviews were preferred to avoid perceived group pressure and to minimize conformity pressures that may arise in group settings (CRESWELL & POTH, 2018). Given the sensitive nature of the research topics, such as interethnic relations and political dynamics, enhanced confidentiality measures were implemented to protect participants and also to establish an atmosphere of trust between researcher and participant (ORB ET AL., 2001). The interviews were conducted in English and lasted an average of 1.5 hours.

Prior to the interviews, participants were provided via e-mail with a "Consent to Participate in Research" form (see Appendices), detailing the nature of the research, data protection measures, and procedures for data collection and processing. The data collection focused on perceptions and motivations behind the interest and engagement of Albanian political corpus in bilateral issues and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Interviews began with a discussion of the consent form, including the option to opt out of audiovisual recording. Offering a non-recorded option reduces coercion and increases trust (Orb et al., 2001; British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) note that while recording is advantageous, interviews may also be documented through detailed 'note-taking', especially in ethically sensitive contexts. Recording is a methodological enhancement, not a requirement. Creswell and Poth (2018) also argue that participants may speak more freely when not being recorded, which can lead to more reflective responses. Half of the participants chose not to be recorded; in these cases, only handwritten notes were taken. None of the participants raised any concerns regarding the subject matter, the nature of the research or data management.

Participants' anonymity was ensured in multiple ways. When using information from interviews or direct quotes, the research did not reference names, sex, ethnicity, current or former positions, political affiliation or any other identifiers that could enable the reader to identify certain participants. Removing potential identifiers significantly protects participants while maintaining the integrity of the qualitative data (ORB ET AL., 2001; CRESWELL & POTH, 2018). Additionally, raw data—including audio recordings, handwritten notes and transcripts—are securely stored and accessible only to the researcher. These data can only be made public upon a justified, written request that ensures full anonymity in accordance with the highest ethical standards.

All other ethical considerations and regulations in line with the policies of Corvinus University of Budapest were observed, as detailed in the 'Research Ethics Review Questionnaire for Research Involving Human Subjects' (Kutatásetikai ellenőrző kérdőív humán érintettségű kutatásokhoz), accessible in the Appendices (in Hungarian).

5.2. Methodological limitations and constraints

The dissertation has certain limitations, arising from its scope, definitions and methodology. Notably, it does not deal with kin-state, kinship, or kin-minority politics. Although Albania and Kosovo both play instrumental roles in shaping the foreign policy priorities of North Macedonia's Albanian socio-political corpora, the (in)direct political links and influences from these countries to North Macedonia will not be discussed. This includes any political attempts coming from the above-mentioned countries directed at influencing North Macedonia's Albanian political leadership, or alleged means of cooperation, such as the Tirana Platform (EWB ARCHIVES, 2017).

The Albanian political landscape in North Macedonia has never been homogeneous. Since 1991, and to a certain extent even before then, multiple parties have rallied within the ethnic Albanian social strata. In North Macedonia's three-decade-long political history⁹, one can witness the evolution of Albanian political parties, which have almost

⁹ According to the classification of Jovevka and Gaber-Damjanovska (2004), the country's political parties can be classified into four brackets: 1) national and nationalistic parties, such as the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (*Внатрешна македонска*

exclusively been established along ethnic cleavages (ANDEVA, 2015; IRWIN, 2016; STAMOVA, 2023). The differences between these parties, however, are related to domestic politics, such as the extent of cooperation with the Macedonian political leadership and ideas on a binational state (FRIEDMAN, 2002; PETTIFER, 2001). In foreign affairs, differences are non-existent; hence, the dissertation treats the Albanian political corpus as a single entity, unless contrasting views in this domain are evident.

A simplification stems from the age-old debate of whether political parties can represent the will and/or the totality of the(ir) electorate. In the case of foreign affairs, there is a strong alignment between the priorities of political parties and the Albanian community that is based on, first and foremost, western orientation. There is no evidence that any political or non-political entity from the Albanian social strata has ever contested the foreign policy actions of political parties representing Albanians in North Macedonia. Conversely, this research argues that foreign policy priorities are shared between citizens and political parties, and moreover, that the foreign policy actions taken by Albanian political parties are in sync with the desires of their electorate.

Lastly, the so-called recall bias (ABRAMS, 2016) may have arisen from the semi-structured interviews. Participants were single-handedly chosen, and their roles and especially memories of certain events may have faded or become distorted by recent events.

револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство) and the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (*Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија*); 2) ethnic parties; 3) religious parties; and 4) rural (agrarian) parties, where, in the post-1991 political context, the first two had gained prominence (p. 3.). Ethnic cleavages between Macedonians and Albanians also remain the main dividing line around which political parties are organized.

5.3. Research structure

The dissertation builds on three single-authored journal articles, each of which analyzes the foreign policy posture and actions of the Albanian political corpus. Employing the theoretical framework discussed above, these case studies combine Buzan's notion of multination-states with Lijphart's model of consociationalism to examine Albanian interests, perceptions and engagement in North Macedonia's bilateral disputes and Euro-Atlantic integration. Data from the semi-structured interviews, conducted in North Macedonia are incorporated into all the articles in forms of direct quotes, statements and narratives.

The first article deconstructs the building blocks of Albanian foreign policy interests and examines their seemingly unwavering support for Euro-Atlantic integration. In line with R1, it considers the internal and external factors (e.g., interethnic relations, kinship ties and geopolitical turbulences) that have shaped the foreign policy orientation and agenda of the community's political leadership. Moreover, it sheds light on how the Albanian political corpus perceives Euro-Atlantic integration—a subquestion vital for R2. Building on the empirical findings from the semi-structured interviews, the paper collects and categorizes the main narratives employed by Albanian politicians to convince their electorate of the necessity of Euro-Atlantic integration, particularly in relation to joining western politico-military alliances. In doing so, it also aims to justify H1 by arguing that the realm of foreign policy, particularly with regard to Euro-Atlantic integration, is not hindered or overtaken by rivalries between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. On the contrary, this domain has the potential to foster a collective identity (or at least part of one) that can transcend interethnic cleavages. Moreover, as H2 argues, the paper highlights the different ways in which ethnic groups perceive the necessity of Euro-Atlantic integration, particularly when bilateral issues concerning the elements of the Macedonian identity are at stake.

The second publication focuses on Albanian political participation in resolving the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia. It emphasizes the transition from an imperial to a federative state, illustrating the intertwined nature of interethnic relations and foreign affairs. This trajectory is crucial for understanding how internal

developments—specifically, the shift from oppression to integration into state structures—in post-independence North Macedonia shaped the foreign policy posture of Albanians, as stipulated by R1. The interviews have provided me with a horizontal overview of the interconnected nature of internal and external affairs. Thus, examining the name dispute through the lens of the Albanian perspective provides an in-depth analysis of R2 and R3, particularly regarding the changing dynamics and attitudes towards the Macedonian political corpus and the involvement of the Albanian political leadership in resolving the three-decade-long debate. In line with H3, the paper argues that as the internal position of Albanians improved (e.g., securing legal and structural rights, and obtaining governing positions), so did their interest in state-level domains, including bilateral issues. In other words, Albanians’ interests and modes of engagement in the name dispute have consistently been linked to their societal security.

Building on their heightened political role in a federative state, the third publication examines the ongoing identity-related dispute with Bulgaria. During a period marked by significant Albanian involvement, interest, and activity, the paper combines R2 and R3 to explore the Albanian political corpus’s stance on bilateral issues as well as its modes of political engagement. Beyond exploring the methods and extent of Albanian engagement, the article considers how alleged Albanian attempts to accelerate North Macedonia’s EU accession have been perceived by Macedonians. Taking a more critical view of H2, the article argues that Albanian involvement has generated internal challenges for the ethnic minority group, further deepening existing political and societal cleavages between Macedonians and Albanians. Although no rifts are apparent among Macedonian and Albanian political elites in foreign affairs, as stipulated by H1, state-level cohesion remains limited. Consequently, the Albanian visibility in this bilateral dispute has ultimately been more beneficial to the Macedonian political leadership—and detrimental to Albanians—, particularly given the social repercussions of the so-called European Proposal¹⁰. Since the bilateral issue with Bulgaria remains unresolved and continues to block the country’s EU accession, the semi-structured interviews were instrumental not only in exploring and testing the dissertation’s hypotheses but also in providing with a

¹⁰ In the context of North Macedonia’s EU accession, the European Proposal (also known as the French Proposal) refers to the set of conditions that the government of North Macedonia agreed to in 2022 to unlock the country’s stalled integration process. The most prominent—and still unfulfilled—commitment is a constitutional amendment requiring North Macedonia to include the Bulgarian minority among its constitutionally recognized ethnic minority groups.

detailed account (a play-by-play) of Albanian influence on decision-making and its political and social aftermath.

The three separate yet logically interrelated case studies in the journal articles highlight the interconnectedness between the post-bipolar security framework (particularly regarding ethnic minorities, collective identities and state–nation relations) and foreign affairs. North Macedonia, as the focus of the analysis, provides a research scope that is already well-known to scholars of international relations, security and Balkan studies. However, analyzing the country’s bilateral disputes and Euro-Atlantic integration from the perspective of its largest ethnic minority opens the door to new interpretations and discussions regarding the motives, interests and influences of minorities in foreign affairs. Shifting the focus from (ethnic) Macedonians to Albanians, supplemented by three months of fieldwork in North Macedonia, enables the dissertation to contribute to the relatively scarce literature on minority participation in foreign policy decision-making.

The case studies, together with the twenty-five semi-structured interviews, demonstrate the links between interethnic dynamics within North Macedonia and Albanian involvement in foreign affairs, illustrating the correlation between these two seemingly unrelated research themes. They suggest that foreign policy can potentially be considered one of the few building blocks of state-level identity in what Buzan defines as a multination-state. At the same time, the findings indicate that foreign affairs are not necessarily an arena of interethnic rivalry between Macedonians and Albanians. Finally, the case studies highlight the various means through which the Albanian political corpus engages with, and influences bilateral issues in North Macedonia and the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration.

6. RESEARCH RESULTS

The post-bipolar research framework in security studies introduced new concepts, analytical lenses, and levels of analysis that assumed a prominent role in scholarly debates. This evolution paved the way for examining the interconnectedness between (societal) security, foreign policy, and interethnic relations (KRAUSE & WILLIAMS, 1996; BUZAN & HANSEN, 2009; SCHNEIDER, 2019). This dissertation is thus situated at this underexplored intersection, examining how foreign policy—particularly bilateral issues—is shaped not only by state-level actors but also by ethnic minorities, primarily driven by their societal (in)securities within multination-states.

Buzan's typology of nation–state relations, especially the distinction between imperial and federative multination-states, served as the overarching theoretical backbone of the dissertation. In deconstructing multination-states, the literature argues that imperial states are characterized by persistent rivalry among nations, arising from their limited or absent shared identity, and by competition over control of key state-level domains. By contrast, federative states are understood as more balanced arrangements, in which nations possess greater access to state-level structures and are involved in decision-making processes, including foreign and security policy (BUZAN, 1983, pp. 48–49). This typological distinction served as the analytical lens through which the Euro-Atlantic integration and bilateral disputes vis-à-vis interethnic relations in North Macedonia were examined in three single-authored journal articles. Post-independence North Macedonia, aside from offering scholars a multitude of research themes ranging from bilateral disputes to interethnic dynamics (KONESKA, 2014; NEOFOTISTOS, 2021; HUDSON & DODOVSKI, 2023), served as the case study through which Buzan's theoretical framework is tested. Accordingly, the interests, participation and engagement of North Macedonia's Albanian political corpus, the dissertation's referent object, in the state's bilateral disputes and Euro-Atlantic accession processes were analyzed in these three articles.

The first article, which addressed the Albanian political bloc's support for Euro-Atlantic integration, deconstructs the building blocks of their foreign policy, primarily through discourse analysis. It emphasized internal and external insecurities—related mainly to the minority group's legal and constitutional rights, and identity—in explaining Albanians'

strong advocacy for Euro-Atlantic integration. The second and third articles, in addition to incorporating Buzan's framework into the analysis of interethnic relations, examined the perception as well as the means of engagement and involvement of the Albanian political corpus in North Macedonia's bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, these case studies demonstrated the country's gradual transformation from an imperial to a more federative multination-state, while also highlighting how this alteration has affected opportunities and posed constraints for the Albanian political leadership in becoming more involved in foreign policy decision-making.

6.1. Research findings

This chapter summarizes the dissertation's theoretical and empirical findings. While doing so, it addresses the research questions and tests the hypotheses outlined in the Introduction, and connects these findings to the content of the three journal articles.

6.1.1. Euro-Atlantic integration as a political–societal framework

The prospect of Euro-Atlantic integration plays a central role in this research. Addressing R1¹¹, integration into Western politico-military alliances represents the Albanian political corpus' most consistent foreign policy objective (EPI, 2020, pp. 24–25; LEKA, 2021, pp. 55–56.), as particularly underlined in the first article. When viewed beyond its institutional and welfare dimensions, Euro-Atlantic integration emerges not merely as a priority or attainable goal, but also as a political–societal framework. This is because accession to NATO and the EU is seen as a way of addressing the ethnic group's internal and external (ontological) insecurities. These supranational institutions, moreover, are understood as mechanisms that can ensure the protection and advancement of the Albanians' constitutional and collective rights and, as normative guarantors that contribute to sound interethnic relations.

¹¹ R1. What are the foreign policy priorities of the North Macedonia's Albanian political corpus, and how have internal and external developments shaped these priorities?

Accordingly, Euro-Atlantic integration in the case of Albanians in North Macedonia cannot be understood solely through traditional state-centric lenses or treated merely as a foreign policy objective. Rather, it is deeply rooted in the group's societal insecurities and perceived as the most effective solution to these existential challenges, underscored by my interviews.

Further addressing R1, the internal and external influences shaping the Albanian political corpus' foreign policy posture are deconstructed in the first article, and examined through case studies in the other papers. Internally, volatile interethnic relations—particularly the need to preserve the OFA—and rising nationalisms have reinforced the importance of supranational organizations, especially NATO and the EU, and the guarantees they potentially provide in terms of minority protection and hard security. As examined in greater detail in the third article, the prospect of Euro-Atlantic integration has also been linked to the expansion of the Albanians' collective and constitutional rights, beyond mere gatekeeping.

Externally, the stabilizing role of Euro-Atlantic organizations in the region, their capacity to counter malign influences and the role of Albania as a kin-state provide further justification for Albanian commitment to Western alliances. Albania's own history of Euro-Atlantic integration serves as a powerful reference point, generating both expectations and frustration. In cases where North Macedonia's integration stagnates—primarily due to bilateral disputes politicizing accession processes—perceptions of uncertainty and insecurity intensify. This was evident after North Macedonia failed to receive an official NATO invitation in 2008 (while Albania did and joined the following year), as discussed in the second article, and again after the decoupling of the two states' EU accession paths in 2024, analyzed in the third.

Euro-Atlantic integration thus functions simultaneously as a strategic foreign policy objective for both ethnic groups and for the state, and as a normative framework for Albanians. Its core function is perceived as providing (ontological) security—namely, safeguarding rights and mitigating internal and external threats. This finding directly

confirms H3¹², demonstrating that Albanian foreign policy priorities are rooted primarily in societal security concerns rather than traditional integration-related ambitions. From this perspective, foreign policy becomes an extension of—and a key mechanism for managing—societal insecurities in North Macedonia.

6.1.2. On Albanian approaches and perceptions

Addressing R2¹³, the dissertation examined Albanian perceptions of, and approaches toward, North Macedonia's bilateral disputes and the Euro-Atlantic integration. The most significant political obstacles to the country's Euro-Atlantic integration have been, and continue to be, these foreign policy issues—expressly the name dispute with Greece, and the historical and identity-related dispute with Bulgaria.

Two aspects made these case studies particularly relevant for the research's scope. First, due to the politicization of enlargement (MOJSOVSKA, 2021; MINOVSKA, 2023; BUTNARU-TRONCOTĂ, 2025), as discussed in the third article, bilateral issues have not only become politicized but have also been formally incorporated into North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic accession process, creating significant tensions within national political discourse. Second, these disputes directly concern the Macedonian identity, including ethnogenesis, language, and even contemporary historical narratives (NIMETZ, 2020; ALIU, 2023; TODOROV, 2024).

Drawing on Buzan's conceptualization of multination-states, it can be seen that Albanians and Macedonians share few elements of a common identity. Consequently, the prevalent narrative—mainly articulated by Macedonians and echoed in the interviews as well—claims that Albanians 'do not care' about these bilateral disputes or Macedonian identity sensitivities. Building on this argument, the absence of a shared civic identity may preclude concerns for issues perceived as being outside Albanians' own ethnic domain. This research challenged this assumption.

¹² H3. Albanians' interests and their modes of engagement in foreign affairs are rooted in societal (in)security and in a quest to preserve their collective identity and rights, rather than in traditional state-centric objectives.

¹³ R2. How does the Albanian political corpus perceive North Macedonia's bilateral disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, and its Euro-Atlantic integration?

The research findings demonstrated that Albanians generally approach bilateral disputes—and Macedonian sensitivities attached to them—with pragmatism. The Albanian political leadership acknowledged that resolving these issues was necessary to advance the Euro-Atlantic integration, but not at any cost. Moreover, Albanians recognized identity sensitivities affecting the Macedonian majority and deferred to Macedonian leadership on identity-related issues.

The empirical findings of the second article showed that Albanians supported the resolution of the name dispute, raising concerns only when proposals implied the conceptualization of a Macedonian nation-state that symbolically excluded the Albanian community; for instance, proposals for the country's new constitutional name (LATIFI & NICOLAIDIS, 2017). They also demonstrated an awareness of negotiating red lines and accepted that Macedonian actors defined the negotiating framework and boundaries.

The dispute with Bulgaria complicated this understanding, as pointed out in the third article. The adoption of the European Proposal—particularly the Second Protocol and the constitutional amendment requirement (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2022)—was perceived by Macedonians as an overstepping of the previously agreed red line based on interethnic consensus. Furthermore, their pragmatic stance has been overshadowed by criticisms regarding legitimacy and credibility within the majority population. While Albanian actors justified their support primarily through the imperative of EU integration, personal political ambitions may also have played a role. From the Albanian perspective, the Proposal does not threaten Macedonian identity but rather advances minority protection and inclusion. Through the Macedonian lens, however, it means making further concessions without clear assurances that Bulgaria will not set additional identity-related political or legal requirements for North Macedonia (VANGELOV, 2026).

These differing approaches of interpretation, however, did not result in direct rivalry in foreign affairs, but they did generate political tensions caused by divergent expectations regarding urgency, desirability and acceptable compromise. The European Proposal exemplified this divergence: while Albanian leaders promoted it as a pathway to unblocking EU accession, Macedonian leadership largely rejected it due to its requirements. Albanian involvement in foreign policy thus generates internal tensions rather than outright rivalry in foreign affairs.

These findings confirm H2¹⁴, illustrating that different ethnic communities attach distinct meanings and priorities to the same foreign policy process. While Macedonians prioritize identity preservation, Albanians emphasize the security and stability benefits of a speedy Euro-Atlantic integration in bilateral disputes, too. Although public rhetoric suggested that Albanians were pressuring Macedonians to resolve disputes quickly, there is no evidence that Albanians possessed the capacity to act unilaterally beyond established red lines or state interests.

Despite these differences, a pro-integration consensus persists across ethnic lines, confirming H1¹⁵. This consensus, however, is grounded in different motivations: for Macedonians, identity-related concessions may evoke fears of dilution and symbolic loss of their identity. For Albanians, on the other hand, integration represents a mechanism for long-term societal security and institutionalized minority protection. Nevertheless, Euro-Atlantic integration remains one of the few strategic frameworks capable of fostering interethnic cooperation and establishing state-level cohesion. This divergence supports H2 and answers R2, demonstrating that foreign policy itself is not a domain of interethnic rivalry, but the perceptions of its importance vary between Macedonians and Albanians.

6.1.3. Deconstructing Albanian engagement in foreign affairs

Addressing R3¹⁶, the dissertation highlighted that the Albanian political corpus had progressively expanded its engagement in foreign policy, reflecting North Macedonia's gradual transition from an imperial to a more federative multination-state. Especially after 2001, Albanian actors shifted from informal, indirect influence to formal, institutionalized participation. This engagement included coalition participation, ministerial leadership, diplomatic communication, public advocacy, and international networking.

¹⁴ H2. Although foreign policy is not an arena of rivalry, the justification for the necessity of Euro-Atlantic integration and for managing the bilateral issues that have politically obstructed this process, varies among nations.

¹⁵ H1. Foreign affairs—especially Euro-Atlantic integration—is one of the few domains in North Macedonia that binds Macedonians and Albanians together and creates state-level cohesion among distinct nations.

¹⁶ R3. How has the Albanian political corpus engaged with these foreign policy matters?

However, structural limitations always persisted. Even when Albanians held key portfolios such as foreign affairs and EU integration, their ability to shape outcomes was constrained by the need of Macedonian political approval, particularly on identity-related issues. This was evident in the name dispute and the drafting of the Prespa Agreement. While institutional inclusion increased, identity-related foreign policy domains still demonstrated the ‘dominance’ of the Macedonian elites. However, the Albanian political leadership’s active and visible role in agreeing to the European Proposal blurred the lines between pragmatism (i.e., respecting the Macedonian red lines), and unilateral actions and ambitions. They did so, on the other hand, with the approval of their Macedonian governing partner.

Addressing H3, Albanians also linked foreign policy developments to domestic constitutional objectives, aiming to reinforce societal security through legal mechanisms. The second article showed that only strong international (mainly American) pressure prevented Albanians from linking internal demands—such as constitutional recognition or language status—to the ratification of the Prespa Agreement (MAATSCH, 2021). Conversely, the third article illustrated how proposed constitutional amendments related to the Bulgarian minority may reignite debates over Albanian recognition as a constituent people and the status of the Albanian language (EURONEWS ALBANIA, 2023). Overall, the Albanian leadership has consistently sought to tie their support for resolving bilateral disputes to further advancement of their legal and constitutional status.

6.2. Theoretical and empirical novelty

6.2.1. The interconnectedness of foreign policy and interethnic relations

The dissertation demonstrates that foreign policy in North Macedonia cannot be analyzed independently from interethnic relations, as the two are mutually constitutive. Euro-Atlantic integration serves as a rare convergence point that offers strategic benefits to both communities, despite their differing underlying motivations—further confirming H2. Foreign policy functions both as an external strategic tool and an internal mechanism for

managing societal security and interethnic stability, highlighting the causal interplay between identity politics, societal security, and foreign policy in multinational-states.

Developments in bilateral disputes or the Euro-Atlantic integration directly affect interethnic dynamics. Prolonged accession blockages caused by political or identity-related disputes undermine Albanian foreign policy priorities and generate tensions. Linking constitutional positions to support for bilateral agreements represents a novel empirical contribution, showing that post-OFA advancement of rights remains a central concern for Albanians. This dynamic possibly reopens wider debates over North Macedonia, including fears of federalization and binational conceptions of the state; thus, the research can offer new analytical perspectives and potential research directions for consideration.

The dissertation's novelties can pave the way for expanding its scope in future research and further contribute to Balkan studies. A possible testing ground could be Kosovo. As a potential candidate country to the EU, 92 percent of its population is ethnic Albanian, making Kosovo one of the strongest supporters of integration into Western politico-military alliances. In contrast to North Macedonia, the largest ethnic minority in Kosovo (constitutionally referred to as a 'community'), the Serbs, do not support this political objective. Although their share of the population is only 2 percent, their political power—mainly owing to the 'double (Badinter) majority'¹⁷, similar to that in North Macedonia—makes them relevant actors in shaping internal affairs. The continuation of the study could potentially examine the Serbian community's role in foreign affairs (especially in the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue, facilitated by the EU), and whether the prospects of Euro-Atlantic integration could serve as a tool to address ontological (in)securities and as the same political-societal framework for Kosovo's Serbian community as it does for North Macedonia's Albanian political corpus.

¹⁷ The so-called 'double majority' or 'Badinter formula' requires two concurrent majorities for certain legislation to pass: a general parliamentary majority and a majority among representatives belonging to minority communities that are not part of the majority population. For further details on how this legal provision operates in North Macedonia, see footnote 51.

6.2.2. On Buzan's typology

North Macedonia provides an empirical test of the transition from an imperial to a federative multination-state, while also revealing limitations in Buzan's theoretical framework. Although the post-2001 reforms expanded Albanian access to governance, constraints persist, most notably in foreign policy decision-making related to identity-sensitive bilateral disputes.

While interethnic rivalry has not manifested *directly* in foreign affairs, mistrust remains and is often projected onto political narratives by blaming minority actors. The prime example of this is the aftermath of the European Proposal, highlighting how Albanian politicians were blamed for it in internal political narratives. Taking a broader analytical view, these political tensions also stem from competing visions of state composition and fears of altering the OFA-established interethnic balance.

Foreign policy is not a *direct* arena of interethnic rivalry, but Albanian participation generates or *can* generate internal tensions. Buzan's framework may thus be more applicable to internal governance domains than to external policy arenas, or to the link between external policies (such as bilateral disputes) and internal dynamics. Nevertheless, North Macedonia's shared foreign policy orientation towards Euro-Atlantic integration contributes to the theoretical understanding that, in the absence of a common identity, foreign policy can be the driving force in creating a framework for a mutually shared objective.

6.3. Conclusory remarks

North Macedonia's experience demonstrates that foreign policy in multination-states cannot be fully understood without incorporating societal security and interethnic dynamics. Moreover, from the perspective of nation-state dynamics, Euro-Atlantic integration remains a shared strategic objective, despite differing motivations among ethnic groups. Regarding R1, Euro-Atlantic integration emerges as the central foreign policy priority of the Albanian political corpus, shaped by societal security concerns and external geopolitical constraints. Regarding R2, Albanians approach bilateral disputes

pragmatically, prioritizing integration while recognizing Macedonian identity sensitivities. Regarding R3, Albanian engagement in foreign policy has expanded through formal and informal mechanisms, but it remains constrained by identity-based hierarchies.

Collectively, these findings confirm H1, H2, and H3: Euro-Atlantic integration fosters interethnic cohesion; societal security considerations shape divergent interpretations of foreign policy; and Albanian foreign policy engagement is primarily driven by the preservation and advancement of collective identity and rights.

Euro-Atlantic integration, however, continues to be stalled. Since 2022, North Macedonia has been unable to advance its EU accession negotiations because the prerequisite for holding the second Intergovernmental Conference—the adoption of the constitutional amendments, required under the Second Protocol—has not been fulfilled. Although the country has achieved some progress at the technical level, including the completion of the screening process (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2023), accession to the Single Euro Payments Area, and access to the Reform and Growth Facility (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2025), the accession process has remained politically blocked. Despite renewed, geopolitics-driven enthusiasm for enlargement towards the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova, reiterated most recently at the EU–Western Balkans summit in Tivat (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2026), neither EU member states (particularly Bulgaria) nor North Macedonia appear willing to resolve or overlook the Gordian knot blocking the candidate country’s accession process. Given these developments, or rather the lack thereof, this casts a dark shadow over the support of North Macedonia’s Albanians for EU integration, as the process appears politically unattainable.

6. REFERENCES

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APPENDICES

Article 1.¹⁸

Ride-or-die supporters? Albanian narratives on Euro-Atlantic integration

Abstract: North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration has faced and continues to face significant political challenges. Despite the difficult accession process to NATO and the seemingly never-ending efforts toward the EU, the country's Albanian minority and its political leadership have consistently demonstrated strong support. The paper first examines the foreign policy objectives and then classifies the narratives employed by Albanian political actors to reaffirm their steadfast commitment to Euro-Atlantic structures. Apart from strong justifications linked with (regional) security and interethnic relations, the so-called 'west' is depicted as the only alternative for Albanians. Although the group remains more favorable toward Euro-Atlantic integration compared to ethnic Macedonians, the prolonged EU accession process—coupled with Albania's faster progress in integration—may negatively influence their attitudes, too.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Albanians, Euro-Atlantic integration, foreign policy orientation, foreign policy objectives

1. Introduction

Foreign policy—more specifically, Euro-Atlantic integration—is a domain in which the interests of North Macedonia's political elites are closely aligned. Membership in Western politico-military and economic organizations such as the UN, NATO and the European Union (EU) has been a foreign policy objective of successive governments since the country's independence in 1991 (MAROLOV, 2013, p. 9; BECHEV & MARUŠIĆ, 2020, p. 2). This priority is also shared by both Macedonians and Albanians (LEKA, 2021, p. 56); the latter constituting 24 percent of North Macedonia's population of 1.8 million (STATE STATISTICAL OFFICE, 2022), making the Albanian community the most populous and politically significant minority group. Their political influence and importance,

¹⁸ I declare that the text of the article constitutes my own intellectual product.

particularly after the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement (hereinafter OFA), as well as their role as so-called “king-makers” (GJORGJIOSKA, 2022, p. 3) in government formation, have been widely analyzed. Little attention, however, has been paid to examining their foreign policy priorities, and the (seemingly) unwavering support for Euro-Atlantic integration.

A common shortcoming in existing scholarship is that minority groups are typically analyzed through the lens of their non-dominant status, focusing on interethnic relations and struggles across various aspects of their everyday existence (COWAN, 2000; BRUBAKER, 2019; BLOODWORTH, 2020). Undoubtedly, “stable inter-ethnic relations [among Macedonians and Albanians] is a necessary precondition for stability and democracy” (TALESKI & POLLOZHANI, 2016), but there are other, underexamined themes that may go beyond this paradigm. This paper thus brings North Macedonia’s Albanians into the realm of foreign policy, a field in which their interests and engagement on issues of national importance have rarely been considered or examined. The paper thus maps the internal and external (political and social) influences that have shaped the Albanian political leadership’s foreign policy objectives and the narratives used to voice their support towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

1.1. Research design

Joining western politico-military alliances is one of the few unifying elements capable of symbolizing national cohesion in a divided, post-conflict, consociational democracy. Consociationalism, as defined by Lijphart (1969), is a form of governance that, through carefully designed, implemented, and monitored power-sharing mechanisms, ensures the participation of minority groups at various—including the highest—levels of the state (pp. 216–217). North Macedonia’s case demonstrates that the shared objective of Euro-Atlantic integration remains, even more than twenty-five years after the signing of the OFA, a unique phenomenon. Ethnic Macedonians and Albanians have few cross-cutting issues that hold significance for both groups and that can simultaneously be perceived as national, rather than merely local or ethnic concerns. Since traditional building blocks of identity, such as language, religion, history, or even a common adversary (BABUNA, 2000; PIACENTINI, 2019; ANDEVA et al., 2022), cannot serve as the nexus of self-identification for both ethnic groups, the existence of a consensus on joining Western alliances

represents a positive development¹⁹ and can function as “social covenants” (TALESKI & POLLOZHANI, 2016) in North Macedonia.

After providing an overview of North Macedonia’s challenging path toward Euro-Atlantic structures, the paper highlights the building blocks of Albanian foreign policy agenda and categorizes the most significant arguments put forward in favor of integration into Western alliances. For this purpose, the research employs discourse analysis, drawing on official and public statements made by Albanian politicians. Furthermore, to gain an in-depth understanding of the foreign policy priorities of the Albanian political bloc, Leka’s (2021) concepts of voluntary and imposed retreat (p. 53) are utilized, thereby further strengthening the paper’s theoretical framework.

In addition to comprehensive desk research on the evolution of the Albanians’ foreign policy priorities since North Macedonia’s independence, the paper draws on twenty-five semi-structured interviews²⁰ that I conducted in North Macedonia in 2024 and 2025, to address the following research questions:

- 1) Why does the Albanian political bloc exhibit such a high level of support for Euro-Atlantic integration?
- 2) What narratives have Albanian political actors employed in support of the country’s NATO and EU accession?

The paper argues that although there has long been a consensus among Albanian political parties and society regarding the importance of joining Euro-Atlantic structures, this kind of unwavering, ‘ride-or-die’ support may soon reach its limits; particularly given the persistent obstacles in North Macedonia’s EU accession process, the EU’s regionwide credibility issues, and the fact that their kin-state, Albania, is advancing ahead of them.

¹⁹ Other cross-cutting issues may include environmental protection and climate change, the fight against corruption and state capture, as witnessed in 2016 (GJINOVCI, 2016; STALETOVIĆ, 2023) and 2025 (TELEGRAFI, 2024), and economic challenges such as unemployment and brain drain.

²⁰ I aimed to include interviewees from wide-ranging backgrounds. Regarding professional background, former and current decision-makers, representatives of public institutions (e.g., ministries responsible for foreign affairs and EU integration), as well as members of academia, research institutions, civil society, and journalism were interviewed. In terms of location, interviews were conducted in Skopje and Tetovo, allowing for the inclusion of more diverse perspectives—particularly given that Tetovo serves as the political, cultural, and social center of the Albanian community. All interviews were conducted in accordance with the highest ethical standards, ensuring full anonymity.

2. Rocky road ahead: North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration

North Macedonia has and continues to face a challenging path with its Euro-Atlantic integration. Although many of the country's difficulties, particularly regarding EU accession, stem from structural issues, as noted consecutively in the European Commission's annual reports (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2024), bilateral disputes at the political level have repeatedly blocked its progress, too. The fact that its neighbors (Greece and Bulgaria, respectively) are already members of these organizations North Macedonia seeks to join, creates "asymmetry of power between EU and candidate countries" (WATERS, 2021). In both NATO and EU, accession (i.e., admitting new members) requires unanimous approval. If even one member objects or withholds support, the process halts until the issue, usually of political nature, is resolved. Since declaring independence, North Macedonia has repeatedly encountered blockages caused by the vetoes of either its immediate neighbors or other member states, as discussed below.

2.1. NATO accession

Membership in NATO has long been a cornerstone of North Macedonia's foreign and security policy. Shortly after declaring independence, the Parliament voted to officially launch the country's bid to join the politico-military alliance (ASSEMBLY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA, 1993). Although North Macedonia, like Croatia and Albania, was left out of the so-called Vilnius Group—an informal platform of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European countries seeking NATO membership—and the first three post-Cold War enlargement rounds (1995, 1999 and 2004), it remained committed to achieving NATO's political objectives and technical standards. This included building closer ties with NATO through the Partnership for Peace (NATO, 1995) and the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NATO, 1996). In 2003, Albania, Croatia, and North Macedonia, under the auspices of the United States, created the Adriatic Charter to strengthen technical collaboration (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2003). In this spirit, the country's National Defense Strategy had already been aligned with NATO standards by the new millennium.

Progress was disrupted by the quasi-civil war in 2001. The armed conflict between the National Liberation Army (in Albanian: *Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare*; in Macedonian: *Ослободителна народна армија*, hereinafter UÇK) and Macedonian security forces lasted nearly seven months and ended with the OFA (DASKALOVSKI, 2003). The conflict also prompted three NATO-led peace support operations until 2003: Operation Essential Harvest, responsible for the voluntary disarmament of UÇK members; Operation Amber Fox, tasked with protecting international monitors overseeing OFA implementation; and Operation Allied Harmony, which supported the handover of responsibilities from NATO to local authorities (NATO, 2022).

The Bucharest summit in 2008 had been expected to grant official invitations to all members of the Adriatic Charter. However, while Albania and Croatia had received and eventually joined the alliance the following year (NATO, 2009), North Macedonia—mired in the name dispute—had to wait another decade.

The greatest obstacle to NATO membership did not stem from internal interethnic relations nor the country's level of technical preparedness. At the 2008 NATO summit, Greece vetoed North Macedonia's membership over the unresolved name dispute (NATO, 2008)—a long-standing bilateral issue concerning heritage, history, and national symbols, including the country's constitutional name (HERACLIDES, 2021). Greece's decision effectively blocked North Macedonia's invitation, even though the country had applied under its provisional name, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (hereinafter FYROM). By vetoing the invitation, Greece also violated its obligations under the 1995 Interim Accord, which, in Article 11, stipulated that the country would not obstruct North Macedonia's accession to international organizations as long as the provisional name of FYROM was used. The International Court of Justice later ruled (2011) that Greece had indeed breached this agreement, yet the country maintained its position until the name dispute was formally resolved.

The years 2018–2019 proved to be a watershed in unblocking North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. After a decade of ethno-nationalist politics that stalled UN-led negotiations, the new government prioritized good neighborly relations and the resolution of bilateral disputes. The signing (2018) and ratification (2019) of the Prespa Agreement legally ended nearly thirty years of dispute over the name issue. Greece subsequently pledged not to block North Macedonia's accession to international organizations,

including NATO and the EU (PRESPA AGREEMENT, 2018). As a result, more than a decade in the making, North Macedonia received an official invitation to join the alliance. Following ratification by all member states,²¹ the country became NATO's 30th member (NATO, 2020)—the last Southeast European state to do so to date.

Public support for NATO membership has traditionally been strong, even amid political turbulence. Approval peaked ahead of the Bucharest summit, when 92 percent of citizens supported accession (INTERNATIONAL REPUBLICAN INSTITUTE, 2017, p. 55). However, attitudes shifted following Greece's veto: although 80 percent still favored joining the alliance in 2010, "approximately 65 per cent [...] were opposed to the country changing its name as the price for joining NATO" (MULCHINOCK, 2017, p. 241). Furthermore, data from 2015 showed that 70 percent of respondents would not support membership if it required a name change, while 68 percent would join under the FYROM designation (CAPITAL.GR, 2011). By 2017, public opinion began to shift: polls by the International Republican Institute indicated that 77 percent supported NATO membership, and 57 percent were willing to accept a name change if it meant achieving Euro-Atlantic integration (2018, p. 21). These figures suggest that, while the majority consistently supported NATO membership, the bilateral dispute remained a major social and political divide, as also reflected in the 2018 referendum on the name change²².

2.2. EU accession

North Macedonia's EU accession remains ongoing and also exemplifies the asymmetric nature of the enlargement process. Like in NATO, all EU member states must unanimously approve key milestones (e.g., granting candidate status, opening and closing negotiations, signing the accession treaty); this requirement gives member states veto power over political aspects of enlargement. In practice, vetoes have delayed accession negotiations for several countries in the past; such blockages not only prolong the process but also undermine the EU's credibility and normative power, contributing to enlargement fatigue among candidate countries, too (KELMENDI, 2024). North

²¹ Symbolically, the Greek parliament was the first to ratify North Macedonia's accession protocol (RFE/RL, 2019).

²² The so-called name change referendum, a legally non-binding plebiscite, linked public acceptance of the Prespa Agreement to North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Although 94 percent of voters cast their ballots in favor, turnout was only 35 percent.

Macedonia's experience illustrates all these dynamics: member states' vetoes over issues of political nature and declining public confidence in the EU's role in the region.

North Macedonia once had the potential to be among the first Western Balkan states to join the EU. It was the first to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement²³ with the EU in 2001 (COUNCIL & COMMISSION, 2004), even before the EU had formally/politically declared its openness to Western Balkan enlargement. Following the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, where the EU extended the prospect of membership to the Western Balkans, North Macedonia again led the region by submitting its membership application the following year. The European Council granted candidate status in 2005, based on a positive recommendation from the European Commission, paving the way for the technical and legal stages of accession (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d.). Up to this point, North Macedonia's EU path was on track.

Internal and external political issues soon impeded the accession progress. Despite consistent European Commission recommendations to open accession negotiations since 2009, the European Council could not achieve unanimity; starting from that year, Greece blocked the progress, citing the unresolved name dispute by mirroring its stance during the NATO accession process (KONESKA, 2019, p.57).

After a decade-long impasse, the Prespa Agreement resolved the name dispute, and Greece withdrew its objections. Yet, new obstacles quickly emerged: in 2019, France, Denmark, and the Netherlands opposed opening accession negotiations, citing the need to reform the EU's enlargement methodology and expressing reservations particularly about Albania (BUTNARU-TRONCOTĂ, 2025, pp. 9–10). Since North Macedonia's integration progress had been 'coupled'²⁴ with Albania's, concerns about the latter's readiness delayed both countries. Although North Macedonia was effectively a 'victim' of objections over Albania's integration, France opposed 'decoupling' these candidate countries (TCHERNEVA & VARMA, 2019). Once the revised enlargement methodology, proposed by France, was adopted in 2020, all member states endorsed the formal opening of accession negotiations.

²³ The Stabilization and Association Agreement is a comprehensive legal framework governing EU–candidate relations, and is a key prerequisite for eventual membership.

²⁴ Coupling means that the accession processes of both countries—achieving the main milestones—are linked; if one lags, both are stuck.

Optimism was short-lived, however. In 2020, Bulgaria vetoed the start of accession talks over disputes concerning history, language, and minority rights. The country had long voiced such concerns; as early as 2012, alongside Greece, it reportedly blocked North Macedonia's bid to secure a negotiation start date (VOLCHEVSKA, 2025, p. 186). In 2019, the Bulgarian parliament also adopted a so-called Framework Position (МИНИСТЕРСКИ СЪВЕТ НА РЕПУБЛИКА БЪЛГАРИЯ, 2019) and warned of political consequences if the outlined demands were not met. These positions/demands are all related to the interpretation of historic figures and events, anti-Bulgarian rhetoric, and linguistic and minority recognition (CHRISTIDIS, 2022).

Although Bulgaria lifted its formal veto in 2022 after North Macedonia accepted the so-called European (French) Proposal and politically agreed to constitutional changes recognizing the Bulgarian minority, little tangible progress has followed (VANGELOV, 2023, pp. 161–162). As a result, the country's EU accession remains stalled, while in 2024, Albania was officially 'decoupled' from the country (TAYLOR-BRAÇE & GOTEV, 2024). In practice, this means that the EU integration processes of these candidate countries are no longer linked; Albania could (and did) proceed with its accession, while North Macedonia has remained at a political dead-end.

Although support for EU membership remains high, pessimism prevails. A poll by the International Republican Institute (2023) found that 79 percent of citizens of North Macedonia favored joining the EU. In the past two years, public support has been volatile, signaling citizens' dissatisfaction, especially due to political unwillingness by North Macedonia and Bulgaria to unblock the country's accession process. Despite general support for EU membership, citizens realistically doubt North Macedonia's chances of ever securing membership: Eurobarometer (2025) found that only a quarter of respondents believed North Macedonia would become a member state within the next five years (MIA, 2025), while a combined 32 percent believed the country would either never join or would take more than fifteen years to achieve this foreign policy objective (WEBALKANS, 2025).

3. Foreign policy priorities of North Macedonia's Albanians

The paper now turns to examining the foreign policy priorities of the Albanian political leadership. It argues that, based on earlier research and interviews, most foreign policy objectives—especially Euro-Atlantic integration—are shared with the Macedonian political bloc. The question of Kosovo and the advocacy for its independence, however, had created political divisions. Importantly, although the Albanian political corpus is not homogeneous—there are and have been numerous political parties representing the Albanian electorate since North Macedonia's independence²⁵—their foreign policy objectives and general orientation toward the West remain a shared, uncontested feature. Therefore, out of simplification, the paper treats the political corpus representing the Albanian minority as a single entity.

According to Leka (2021), there are two approaches to explaining the lack of Albanian voices in foreign policy matters: voluntary and imposed retreat (p. 53). According to the *voluntary retreat*, the ethnic group's political leadership had been occupied with securing its constitutional rights; this “ethnocentric and nationalist aim to satisfy the interests of the ethnic collectivities” (PIACENTINI, 2019, p. 473) still remains their highest priority. Once their positions were secured and implemented by OFA after 2001, they were first expected—and later became self-interested—in state-level matters, including foreign policy.

²⁵ In North Macedonia, political parties are typically organized along ethnic lines, especially regarding mainstream parties representing Macedonians, Albanians, and other minorities. Based on the typology of Németh (2022), Albanian political parties, which emerged from the relatively homogeneous ethnic Albanian social strata, can be classified into three generations. The first generation emerged in the late 1980s and/or dominated the first decade of post-independence North Macedonia. It includes the National Democratic Party (in Albanian: *Partia Demokratike Popullore*; in Macedonian: *Национална демократска партија*), the Party for Democratic Prosperity (in Albanian: *Partia Për Prosperitet Demokratik*; in Macedonian: *Партија за демократски просперитет*), and the Democratic Party of Albanians (in Albanian: *Partia Demokratike e Shqiptarëve*; in Macedonian: *Демократска партија на Албанците*). The second generation, in the post-OFA period, is dominated by the Democratic Union for Integration (in Albanian: *Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim*; in Macedonian: *Демократска унија за интеграција*), while the third generation of parties emerged in the 2010s and includes the Alliance for Albanians (in Albanian: *Aleanca për Shqiptarët*; in Macedonian: *Алијанса за Албанците*), the Besa Movement (in Albanian: *Lëvizja Besa*; in Macedonian: *Движење Беса*), Alternativa (in Macedonian: *Алтернатива*), and the Democratic Movement (in Albanian: *Lëvizja Demokratike*; in Macedonian: *Демократско движење*). More on the political system and parties of North Macedonia, see: ABDULA, 2025.

Additionally, there is an understanding that North Macedonia's foreign policy has been shaped and controlled by the (ethnic) Macedonians, thus contributing to the voluntary retreat of Albanians. Undoubtedly, in the first decade after independence, the Macedonian leadership "controlled both the executive and the legislative branches of government" (ROSSOS, 2008, p. 278), including security and foreign policy. Besides, foreign affairs at this period were also a strong domain of the president; Kiro Gligorov, whose "advantages were his patriotism, his career in federal institutions, his political contacts and popularity, including among Albanians" (TODOROVA, 2020, p. 397), maintained strong partnership and coalition with the most prominent Albanian political party by offering them ministerial positions (STEFANOVA, 2008, p. 11). In the post-2001 period, "as a result of the evolution of the political system from semi-presidential to a more classical parliamentary system" (LEKA, 2021, p. 51), the government assumed almost full control over conducting foreign policy. This shift, in theory, allowed Albanian foreign policy interests to be more pronounced, directly through the cabinet.

According to the *imposed retreat*, the lack of (political) opportunities given to Albanians is the reason for their absence from foreign policy making. Although this notion also dates to the 1990s, records show that the Albanian representatives, especially from the Party for Democratic Prosperity, had unconditionally agreed with Gligorov on foreign policy objectives (PETTIFER, 2001, pp. 140–141), presumably because those objectives were in sync with their foreign policy priorities. Moreover, imposed retreat as an explanation further lost prominence by the 2010s; the appointments of Talat Xhaferi as Speaker of the Assembly (and in 2024 as Prime Minister for a hundred-day period) and Bujar Osmani as Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs and later Minister of Foreign Affairs paved the way for a more direct Albanian presence also in the executive branch, including foreign policy.²⁶

The Albanian political corpus has always given its approval to North Macedonia's foreign and security policy objectives, namely accession to NATO and the EU (INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, 2009). Although the group was preoccupied with domestic (internal) issues, it nevertheless showed commitment to the necessity of Euro-Atlantic integration.

²⁶ In the post-2024 period—which falls outside the scope of this analysis—the ministers heading the newly formed Ministry of European Affairs have also come from Alternativa, one of VMRO–DPMNE's junior Albanian coalition partners. Orhan Murtezani initially held the position, followed by Bekim Sali, who currently holds the office alongside the position of First Deputy Prime Minister, which he has occupied since December 2025.

One can argue that, in this sense, these two political blocs jointly constructed the newly independent country's foreign policy: while the Macedonian leadership set the red lines (especially regarding identity-related bilateral disputes), Albanians did not raise any concerns or reservations but remained supportive and pragmatic. In other words: instead of an imposed, a more voluntary retreat may characterize Albanian attitudes toward the country's foreign affairs.

It is rather interethnic mistrust that may have motivated Macedonians to exclude Albanians from foreign policy issues. Many of North Macedonia's bilateral issues—especially those concerning its neighbors—revolve around the Macedonian identity: the name dispute with Greece and the identity-related issue with Bulgaria both touch upon sensitive themes of national identity. A widespread narrative, also brought up in some interviews, claims that the opinion of Albanians in foreign affairs is illegitimate and carry no emotional attachment as it undermines “Macedonian identity, and by extension, the Macedonian nation and the Macedonian state” (BUCK, 1996). There is no evidence, however, to support this claim; the name dispute demonstrated that even under growing impatience, Albanian political elites did not challenge Macedonian reluctance, nor the red lines laid out by the Macedonian leadership. Even though it was in their interest to have the bilateral issue resolved quickly, their pragmatism led them to remain supportive of Macedonian positions and to constitute a unified stance against Greece.

The foreign policy priorities of Macedonians and Albanians are aligned (with the exemption of Kosovo), making it one of the few state-level domains in which there seems to be a harmony among political leaderships. This aspect is of high importance, as it creates a sense of national unity and social cohesion among ethnic groups that otherwise lack common building blocks of identity. The paper now deconstructs, in addition to Euro-Atlantic integration, the pillars that influence Albanian foreign policy priorities, namely Albania, Kosovo, and countering internal and external threats.

3.1. Kin-state and kinship: Albania and Kosovo

Albania holds a special position among Albanian foreign policy priorities. It is regarded not only as their kin-state²⁷ but also as a country that potentially leads by example in foreign affairs. For the Albanian political community in North Macedonia, Albania's integration into Western alliances serves both as an example and, in some cases, a cause for concern. Albania's NATO accession in 2009 demonstrated that once the country had surpassed North Macedonia on their joint integration path, frustration toward the Macedonian leadership and the sense of being left behind grew among Albanians in North Macedonia (MARUSIC, 2009). Albanian politicians were more inclined to raise concerns publicly and promise NATO and EU integration "with or without Macedonians" (A1 TELEVIZIJA, 2009), yet they maintained respect for Macedonian positions vis-à-vis the name dispute even after Albania's NATO accession. The same tendency (frustration primarily) has been evident since Albania and North Macedonia's EU integration paths were decoupled in 2024.

Support for Kosovo and advocacy for its independence are also high on the Albanian foreign policy agenda. The Albanian community—comprising a unified bloc in the northwestern parts of North Macedonia near Kosovo's border—has lived in symbiosis with their Albanian compatriots in Kosovo since the Ottoman period. For Albanians in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, "Pristina and its university were historical, cultural, and intellectual centers of Albanian nationalism" (SERWER, 2018, p. 53), at the expense of Tirana.²⁸ As a result, Kosovo was the hub for future Albanian political actors in North Macedonia, too, and many of their defining politicians, especially from the Democratic Union for Integration (hereinafter DUI), were socialized in Kosovo.

The Kosovo War (1998–1999) and the subsequent declaration of independence (2008) have always resonated with the Albanian political corpus in North Macedonia. As Kosovo Albanians fled the armed conflict to North Macedonia, mainly to the Albanian-inhabited northwestern regions and to Skopje, "the country received 344,500 refugees—15 times more than expected" (DONEV et al., 2002, p. 184). Moreover, many Albanian insurgents

²⁷ According to Waterbury (2020, p. 799), a kin-state "represents the majority nation of a transborder ethnic group whose members reside in neighboring territories" and, apart from nurturing close social, cultural, political etc. ties with them, oftentimes sees itself as their protector.

²⁸ As Albania under Enver Hoxha broke off ties with Yugoslavia by the late 1940s and pursued international isolation by the 1970s, the country could not sustain its leading position among Albanians in Yugoslavia.

from the armed conflict in North Macedonia (2001) had also taken part in the Kosovo Liberation Army (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*), including members of the leadership such as Fazli Veliu and the head of DUI, Ali Ahmeti (NAEGELE, 2002). Later on, Ahmeti himself also became the main advocate for Kosovo's statehood and normalization of relations with Serbia (SLOBODEN PEĆAT, 2022).

The Macedonian leadership initially showed reservations over recognizing Kosovo's independence. The country's "procrastination [...], despite the strong international pressure and the demands of the Albanian political forces in [North] Macedonia, primarily came from fears of possible worsening of economic ties with Serbia" (KARAJKOV, 2008) as well as concerns that an independent Kosovo might negatively impact regional security and the country's territorial integrity. In retrospect, recognition did not impact security, including North Macedonia's (trade) relations with any of its neighbors. Nevertheless, Kosovo's issue and the fear of rising Albanian nationalism—at the expense of North Macedonia's sovereignty or unitary composition—still detectable among Macedonians (DASKALOVSKI, 2025, p. 343).

There has also been rivalry for the support of Albanian political parties in North Macedonia. Edi Rama and Albin Kurti, leaders of Albania and Kosovo respectively, both "struggle for supremacy [...] as these roles are not defined within the Albanian corpus" (KOSOVO ONLINE, 2024), and both aim to be the proverbial leaders of Albanians in Southeast Europe. In practice, this results in support for political parties with which they maintain closer relations: while Rama nurtures close ties with DUI, Kurti focuses more on newer Albanian political formations that aim to oust DUI from power (BEQA, 2023; INDEKSONLINE, 2025). Although North Macedonia's Albanian political bloc is divided over which leader to cooperate with, their unwavering support for Albania and Kosovo remains intact.

3.2. Western orientation as a means of countering threats

Western orientation is an objective shared by Albanians in North Macedonia and elsewhere. In addition to supporting Euro-Atlantic integration, the EU and, more importantly, the United States are perceived as their strategic partners. There are at least two reasons behind the general pro-Western orientation among Albanians and their

political representatives. First, the role of the United States (and NATO) in the Kosovo War and in brokering the OFA. Albanian politicians, in addition to the reasons discussed above, organized protests in North Macedonia in support of American intervention in Kosovo (INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, 1998, p. 17) and also perceive the OFA “as a result of the pressure exerted by the USA, the EU, and NATO” (MAROLOV, 2013, p. 136).

Secondly, they also depict the U.S. as not only a guarantor of (their) local and regional security but also as an ally and protector against internal repression and malign influence.²⁹ Albanians perceive the West (especially the U.S.) as a counterbalance to nationalist tendencies among Slavs (Macedonians and Serbs) and to external influences, mainly from Russia and its local proxies. As Albanians have often been targeted by Russian disinformation campaigns aiming at “deepening the dividing lines between Macedonians and Albanians” (METODIEVA, 2019, p. 18), they perceive U.S. actions countering these tendencies as beneficial to their well-being.

Albanian foreign policy objectives are built on three pillars—shaped by internal dynamics, relations with Albania and Kosovo, and great power rivalry in Southeast Europe. They perceive the West (the EU and the United States) as protectors of Albanian interests regionwide as well as of their own internal security. Therefore, integration into Euro-Atlantic structures can, in their understanding, serve as a useful shield for maintaining interethnic balance in North Macedonia, too. These foreign policy priorities highlight consistency and pragmatism, and they have also stood the test of time: all were, formally or informally, declared soon after North Macedonia’s independence and have served as guiding principles for Albanian political elites ever since.

4. Narratives on Euro-Atlantic integration

This chapter now lists the main narratives employed by Albanian politicians in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration. It examines how Albanian political leaders have framed and communicated support for joining NATO and the EU, both to their electorate and to the

²⁹ The unwavering pro-Albanian stance of the United States, however, is debatable, especially in the case of the 2001 quasi-civil war in North Macedonia. While in Kosovo, the U.S. spearheaded NATO air strikes, it did not show the same level of military engagement or political willingness to support Albanian insurgents in North Macedonia (PERRY, 2011). The U.S. was not interested in yet another unresolved conflict in Southeast Europe; security as a guiding principle outweighed the anticipated American support for North Macedonia’s Albanians.

broader society of North Macedonia. Focusing on the Prespa Agreement, NATO accession, and the referendum on the country's name change, the chapter highlights the rhetoric used by Albanian politicians and explores how the recent decoupling of Albania and North Macedonia in the EU integration process may negatively influence Albanian support for further EU accession.

4.1. Euro-Atlantic integration as a strategic priority and symbol

During the 2000s, Albanian political leaders recognized that the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia was the primary political obstacle to Euro-Atlantic integration. Although the issue dated back to North Macedonia's independence, it was after the Bucharest Summit and Albania's own NATO accession that Albanian politicians became more vocal about the necessity of resolving it.

Afrim Gashi from Besa Movement described NATO accession as “the country's strategic goal” (GEORGIEVSKI, 2019) achievable only through settling the name dispute. Other politicians, such as Menduh Thaçi from the Democratic Party of Albanians and Xhevat Ademi from DUI, went further, arguing that Euro-Atlantic integration “is threatened by the delayed romantic nationalism of some leaders of the Macedonian political elite” (KOLEKA, 2008). Thaçi also argued that although “their identity is very important for them but the road towards European and NATO is much more important for us [Albanians],” (KOLEKA, 2008), feeding into a widespread Macedonian perception that Albanians would ‘give up’ Macedonian identity for NATO membership. Some reports suggest that Albanian leaders even told their Macedonian counterparts that “getting into NATO was so important [for them] they could name the country after a soft drink” (KOLEKA, 2008). Rafiz Aliti from DUI went as far as to state that the lack of a compromise or solution to the name dispute would mean that “Albanians will integrate in EU and NATO with or without the Macedonians” (EURASIA, 2009). Albanian politicians also advocated for an “immediate compromise” (KOHA, 2018), stressing the urgent nature of resolving the issue and signaling openness to any proposal put to the table.

These statements, while provocative, primarily served to reassure Albanian voters of their leaders' commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration, rather than to threaten Macedonian leadership or identity. For Albanians in North Macedonia, integration into Euro-Atlantic structures is highly important. For example, only 18 percent of Albanians perceived the

preservation of the country's name as more important than NATO and EU accession, while almost two-thirds of Albanian respondents favored integration (MARUSIC, 2010). Regarding EU integration, disparities in support between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians are also evident: polls by the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis”—Skopje (2023) show that 78 percent of Albanian respondents support EU accession, almost 20 points higher than Macedonians' support (DAMJANOVSKI, 2023, p. 5). While Macedonians' support remained consistent two years later, the level of support among Albanians increased to 82 percent (DAMJANOVSKI, 2025, p. 5), signaling the importance of EU integration to this minority group. Given the high level of approval among Albanians for Euro-Atlantic integration, Albanian politicians—as confirmed by the interviews—could not refrain from openly pressuring their Macedonian counterparts to unblock bilateral disputes. Failure to do so would have risked alienating their own electorate.

Although the Albanian politicians' rhetoric is often amplified beyond its original intent, they only played a limited role in foreign policy decision-making and had little influence over negotiations with Greece. Although they might have favored a compromise, there is no evidence they sought to overstep their pragmatic role; on the other hand, they always were in favor of “respecting the specificities of the parties [Macedonians and Greeks]” (KOHA.MK, 2017). Thus, their rhetoric should be understood as domestic signaling, rather than threats or some kind of announcement about unilateral and/or uncoordinated actions.

Europe has long been at the center of Albanian political thought. The ‘West’—embodied by the EU and NATO—symbolizes modernity, progress, and security, in contrast to the East or even Turkey, which often represent backwardness or threat. Even Albanian writer Ismail Kadare stressed that Europe is “Albania's natural state. The only one” (TIRANA TIMES, 2012); this statement also applies to the Albanian community in North Macedonia, as Euro-Atlantic integration has been “the guiding principle of their political and social activity” (KOHA.MK, 2018) for decades. For Albanians, Western orientation is embedded in political identity, rooted in ideology and in the pursuit of security and stability. On the other hand, as one interviewee framed it, given internal and external threats perceived by the community, ‘the group cannot support anything else but Euro-Atlantic integration’.

The non-binding referendum in 2018 linking the Prespa Agreement to NATO and EU accession also reflected the overwhelming support of Albanians for Euro-Atlantic integration. Albanian politicians, including Ahmeti, framed the name referendum as a choice to be joining the West: “it will be decided whether we will align ourselves with the countries of Western democracy or once and for all, we will disappoint all our friends and trample on all those platforms, programs and determinations that we have had and align ourselves where we belong, near the Eastern bloc” (INDEKSONLINE, 2018). Also, campaign speeches of Albanian politicians put the emphasis on the magnitude of the decision, stating not only that voting in favor is in the country’s utmost interest but also claiming that “there is no plan ‘B’” (TELEGRAFI, 2018) available. Ahmeti even delivered his very first public speech in Macedonian language to encourage support for the referendum in the broader electorate.

Following NATO accession, Albanian leaders celebrated the event as the fulfillment of a long-held dream. Artan Grubi from DUI (and First Deputy Prime Minister at that time) described it as “a dream coming true for Albanians,” adding that “the sun rises in the West” (REUTERS, 2018). Further, the politician compared the ratification of the Prespa Agreement to the best investment for the future by arguing that the country is “on the right side of history. Heroism is to provide a secure future” (KING, 2018). Apart from symbolic and sentimental narratives, the Albanian leadership stressed more concrete benefits of Euro-Atlantic integration, too.

4.2. Security, stability and interethnic relations

Security remains the cornerstone of Albanian support for Euro-Atlantic integration. Albanian leaders, including Ahmeti, have repeatedly argued that NATO provides the best guarantee of Albanians’ internal security³⁰, claiming that NATO accession represents “the victory [which] is in security and stability” (KOHA, 2018), just as the OFA represents the same goals concerning interethnic relations. He also expanded the resolution of the name dispute to the Western Balkans; from a security perspective, it is important “not only for [North] Macedonia, but also for the region” (TELEGRAFI, 2017). Ahmeti further claimed

³⁰ As noted by many interviewees, security is or should be a sensitive topic for Albanian politicians, especially Ahmeti, given his role in the 2001 civil war in North Macedonia, and the fact that DUI as a political entity grew out of the insurgents. In a sense, they went from being security threats to one of the biggest supporters of security through NATO integration.

that “in this period of uncertainty and geopolitical tensions and geostrategic resurgence, NATO is a key factor for the country's stability” and that “membership in NATO is a guarantee of sovereignty, security and stability” (4NEWS.MK, 2022). More specifically, Grubi claimed that the OFA and Prespa Agreement are examples to follow “especially for the authorities in Pristina and Belgrade, to overcome the dispute and be rounded off with mutual recognition of independence between Serbia and Kosovo, which would contribute to the stability of the entire region” (GRUBI, 2023).

Avoiding renewed interethnic conflicts has also been a central narrative in Albanian support for NATO membership. Membership in the politico-military alliance was presented as both a security guarantee and a safeguard for interethnic peace; Ademi pointed out, for example, that the lack of NATO and EU accession would worsen interethnic relations, too (KOLEKA, 2008). The OFA, in this sense, is also perceived as a sort of ‘trade-off’: the EU promised membership (more precisely, candidate status) to North Macedonia, in exchange for the end of hostilities and agreeing on the agreement (MAROLOV, 2013, p. 136). Thus, Euro-Atlantic integration and interethnic relations have been closely intertwined and are actively linked together by Albanian politicians in the post-2001 period.

Since 2019, the Prespa Agreement has transcended foreign policy concerns. Much like the OFA, it has become part of Albanians’ narrative about interethnic stability and Western protection against destabilizing internal or external influences. Ahmeti warned that any attempt to renegotiate the agreement would violate Albanian vital interests, since the Prespa agreement “remains an essential document for peace and stability in the country and must be respected by all political parties” (INDEKSONLINE, 2025). Moreover, on the 24th anniversary of OFA, Ahmeti stressed that Albanian “contribution to the state resulted in good interethnic and neighborly relations, NATO membership, and the start of negotiations for joining the European Union” (KOSOVAPRESS, 2025), highlighting that both agreements have largely become part of the North Macedonia’s political DNA. This echoes Grubi’s statement that “if it wasn’t for Ohrid, there wouldn’t be Prespa or NATO membership” (MIHAJLOVSKA, 2024), clearly linking not only the two agreements but interethnic relations and foreign policy together.

On a more tangible side of Euro-Atlantic integration, both organizations, but especially the EU are seen as both a security and economic provider. Ahmeti stated that Euro-Atlantic integration is important because “it guarantees peace, stability and security, but also opens up new and concrete economic perspectives” (KOHA, 2018). Membership promises cohesion funds and economic opportunities, and the Albanian diaspora in EU member states plays a key role in this narrative, promoting positive perceptions of the EU and transmitting European values back home.

In summary, Albanian narratives on Euro-Atlantic integration are deeply intertwined with security concerns, interethnic relations, and the desire of joining the ‘west’. Joining western politico-military alliances are viewed as a guarantee for interethnic rights and stability as well as and ideological commitment. The persistence of blockages and the recent decoupling of the EU accession paths of Albania and North Macedonia, however, risk eroding Albanians' support for Western integration.

4.3. Decoupling: 2008 again?

The European Council’s decision to separate the EU integration processes of Albania and North Macedonia sent shockwaves through the Albanian political bloc. According to press statements, it was perceived as the failure of the current government and Albanian parties within the coalition; a failure to advance Albanian foreign policy objectives (namely, EU accession) and claiming that the members of the cabinet “are robbing us [Albanians] of the European future” (CNA, 2024) and “is a grave injustice for every citizen of North Macedonia who has seen Europe not only as a political goal, but as a deep social and cultural aspiration” (REPORTERI.NET, 2024).

The situation bears similarities to NATO’s Bucharest summit. Since 2008–09, the Albanian political sphere has been particularly sensitive and reactive to any developments suggesting that Albania, their kin-state, had achieved milestones in its Euro-Atlantic integration path. When Albania joined NATO, growing frustration emerged among Albanians and their representatives in North Macedonia, leading to a more proactive approach and vocal statements emphasizing the necessity of resolving the name dispute. Separating the EU integration progress of Albania and North Macedonia may foreshadow a similar pattern: Albanian parties campaigning on promises of bringing the country

closer to the EU could lose support as public disappointment and frustration grow. This, in turn, may result in harsher rhetoric from Albanian politicians directed at both the Macedonian leadership and Albanian parties in power.

Decoupling these candidate countries also evokes negative experiences from 2019. At that time, North Macedonia—despite having resolved the name dispute—was blocked by (three) EU member states, mainly because of reservations over Albania's readiness for further integration.

Albanian political parties running on a pro-EU platform may become the greatest losers if EU accession ceases to be a feasible option—whether it is due to North Macedonia's (internal) situation or the stance of certain EU member states.

5. Conclusion

Examining the narratives on Euro-Atlantic integration among Albanians in North Macedonia provides a better understanding of how a minority group with significant political capital argues in favor of achieving its foreign policy priorities. Contrary to prevailing Macedonian narratives, foreign policy constitutes an important part of the narratives and campaigns of Albanian political parties, but for different reasons. While Albanians are driven by the desire not to be left behind by Albania and by promises to their electorate, perceiving Western alliances as guarantees for their socio-economic and political rights in the country, Macedonians proceed with more caution. Due to identity-related bilateral disputes with their neighbors, the conviction that sacrifices must be made for Euro-Atlantic integration at the expense of Macedonian identity prevails. Although Albanians have shown pragmatism in dealing with Macedonian questions of identity, their electorate's frustration may impact their stances on this issue in the future. Nonetheless, foreign policy objectives—specifically integration into Western politico-military organizations—are shared among ethnic groups, making it one of the rare domains in which there is alignment of interests between Macedonian and Albanian political leaderships, even though perceptions of the added value and/or sacrifices differ.

For Albanians, Euro-Atlantic integration is primarily perceived through a security prism regarding their political and socio-economic positions. They understand these supranational structures as bodies or tools that can effectively mitigate potential internal

and external risks challenging their communities' legal rights and general well-being. Internal risks include the fear of rising anti-Albanian rhetoric and ethno-nationalist tendencies among Macedonian politicians, while Serbian and Russian influences are identified as external threats. Additionally, Albania's example with its Euro-Atlantic integration serves both as a model and a source of concern; the fact that Albania has once again surpassed North Macedonia in the EU accession process (as it did with NATO membership) raises societal and political concerns that may negatively impact further Albanian support for EU integration in North Macedonia.

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Article 2.

From disengaged to silent supporter: Albanians and the name dispute

Abstract: North Macedonia serves as a prime example of interethnic relations and bilateral issues, although the synergies between these themes remain highly underexplored. Analyzing the evolution of interests and the forms of engagement of North Macedonia's Albanian political corpus regarding the name dispute (between Greece and North Macedonia) can shed light on changing dynamics within the realm of foreign policy. The paper argues that as Albanians have secured solid constitutional and legal rights, their focus—shaped by both internal and external factors—has been able to shift towards, and eventually contribute actively to, state-level issues.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Albanian minority, bilateral issues, name dispute, interethnic relations

1. Introduction

Known as one of the longest-running bilateral issues of Southeast Europe, the name dispute between Greece and (North) Macedonia³¹ has been in the center of scholarly attention since its inception. Academic research showed a keen interest in topics related to the rise of ethnonationalism (JENNE, 2007; BIEBER, 2020; ISMAILI, 2025), coupled with Macedonia's nation- and state-building processes (PETTIFER, 1999; BABUBA, 2000; KOPPA, 2001; PIACENTINI, 2019), and problems related to the country's integration into international organizations (namely to NATO and EU). The resolution of the name dispute has gained just as much traction as its turbulent, almost three-decade-long history.

The Final Agreement for the settlement of the differences as described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties, commonly referred to as the Prespa agreement (PRESPA AGREEMENT, 2018), has

³¹ In accordance with the Prespa agreement (2018), the Republic of Macedonia changed its constitutional name (*erga omnes*) to the Republic of North Macedonia in 2019. The paper will use 'Macedonia' to refer to developments prior to the name change as well as to describe the region in historical (territorial) terms.

been championed as the beacon of diplomacy and conflict resolution in Southeast Europe, especially in the Western Balkans. (FINANCIAL TIMES, 2019; OSCE, 2019) Given its innovative approach in moving the dispute out of deadlock nearly after almost ten years, its “creative ambiguity” (ARMAKOLAS & PETKOVSKI, 2019, p. 3) in dealing with sensitive subjects including identity, and the protection of Macedonian language and ethnicity (VANKOVSKA, 2019; NEOFOTISTOS, 2020; VLASIDIS ET AL., 2025), the agreement has been considered as an example for the successful resolution of region’s unresolved bi- and multilateral disputes³² and as a guarantee of regional security (KER-LINDSAY, 2019, pp. 201–203; NIMETZ, 2020). The agreement also paved the way to North Macedonia’s accession to NATO as its 30th member (NATO, 2020), contributing to the strengthening of the politico-military alliance’s security architecture in its Southeastern flank.

The path to the Prespa agreement, however, has been marred by tremendous ups and downs. Its volatile nature, primarily due to ethnonationalist political turns in Greece and Macedonia alike, had a major impact on the reception of the agreement (VANGELI, 2018; TAKOVSKI, 2021). Although, it has created new (political) cleavages among ethnic Macedonians (ARMAKOLAS & DAMJANOVSKI, 2021), its added value to the country’s political and economic development and integration, and contribution to regional security cannot be understated, even though the optimism for a faster EU integration proved to be short-lived (GRAMMATIKAKIS, 2020).

There are aspects of the name dispute and its subsequent resolution that yet lack comprehensive academic research. The role of North Macedonia’s Albanian minority, more precisely the perception, engagement and activities of its political corpus³³ have either been overlooked, overshadowed or marginally mentioned by the scholarship. Surely, the name dispute’s contested elements, including Macedonian ethnogenesis, history and national symbols, are linked together with the identity of what it means to be (of) Macedonian (ethnicity) and may not “carry [...] identitarian implications” (ARMAKOLAS, 2021, p. 6) to them. Thus, analyzing this bilateral issue has left little room

³² These disputes either concern Bosnia and Herzegovina or the problems between Serbia and Kosovo, arising from the latter’s legally unresolved statehood status.

³³ The political corpus that generally represents North Macedonia’s Albanian minority is heterogeneous, but in terms of foreign policy (especially Euro-Atlantic integration), their objectives do not show any deviation. Hence, the paper, also out of simplification, treats the Albanian political community as a single actor, except in cases where differing positions are observed.

for the inclusion of the Albanian minority to these academic discussions, for at least three reasons.

Firstly, focusing on the neorealist tradition of international relations, scholars have oftentimes perceived this bilateral issue from the state-level only; rarely, if ever, have they opened the proverbial ‘black box’ by bringing the issue’s level of analysis under the state (KEOHANE, 1986; LOBELL ET AL., 2009). Secondly, the name dispute has been characterized by most scholars, politicians and Macedonians themselves as an issue that solely concerns Macedonians (as an ethnicity). Its exclusionary framing made it merely impossible to look at the country’s bilateral issues from other angles and to connect interethnic dynamics with the realm of foreign policy. Thirdly, although scholars have shown a great interest in interethnic dynamics among ethnic Macedonians and Albanians—from oppression by legal means to their ever-growing role in politics, state administration and everyday life (BRUNNBAUER, 2002; DASKALOVSKI, 2025), and how their volatile relations impact national and regional security (JORDANOVSKA, 2023)—, their level of analysis has always remained under the state. The impact(s) of Albanians, as an entity, outside of their ‘classical’ majority–minority dichotomy is barely existent, let alone in topics related to foreign policy, including bilateral issues.

Examining the name dispute through the lens of the Albanians can, in fact, provide important lessons on power-sharing in foreign policy within an imperial state. An imperial state, a term coined by Buzan, is composed of at least two distinct nations “in which one of the nations within the state dominates the state structures to its own advantage” (BUZAN, 1991, p. 48). The dominant nation, as demonstrated by the examples of the republics under the Soviet Union or the rule of Punjabis in Pakistan, uses nearly every tool at its disposal to retain power, particularly over the core functions of the state, such as national security (BUZAN, 1991, p. 48). This dynamic produces a continuous struggle, fueled by mutual distrust between nations.

In North Macedonia, ethnic Macedonians and Albanians can be viewed as separate nations, lacking a shared ideology or identity that might bind them together, and have therefore been engaged in a persistent contest for power. While ethnic Macedonians (their political leadership) sought to control the state’s main functions and forge a Macedonian nation-state, Albanians initially struggled for equal rights and political representation (ISENI, 2013, pp. 180–181). The Ohrid Framework Agreement (hereinafter OFA), which

ended hostilities between Albanian paramilitary groups and Macedonian special forces in 2001 (FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT, 2001), significantly reshaped the state structure and, in turn, the dynamics between these two nations (MAROLOV, 2013, pp. 151–152). It came close to creating what Buzan calls a federative state, not in the sense of a federal political framework like Germany; rather one that allows and even encourages distinct nations within the same state “to pursue their own identities, and where attempts are made to structure the state in such a way that no one nationality comes to dominate the whole state structure” (BUZAN, 1991, p. 48), like in Canada. However, even twenty-five years after the OFA, interethnic relations in North Macedonia are still driven “by fear, suspicion, and demonization of the ‘other’” (KOPPA, 2001:39), and foreign policy is, according to Leka, “an area of interethnic clashes” (2021, p. 55). Applying Buzan’s notion about imperial and federative states, the paper tests whether North Macedonia’s foreign policy, namely the name dispute, was a domain of interethnic rivalries. It argues that once the Albanian minority was granted, in accordance with the OFA, proper legal-constitutional rights and, as a result, greater representation in state institutions, foreign policy emerged as a policy field where the race for dominance should have become increasingly visible; however, the outcome was the diametric opposite of that.

The goal of the analysis is to change the scope of analysis from Macedonians to Albanians, and to trace how their interest and engagement in the name dispute has evolved in an environment shaped by the transition from an imperial to a quasi-federative state. The paper argues that by focusing on the Albanian political leadership, we enrich the literature of how interethnic developments throughout North Macedonia’s history did or could contribute to the growing presence and influence of Albanian interest(s) in foreign policy. In other words, the novelty is that the research abolishes the lines, drawn out of necessity of simplification, between the realms of interethnic dynamics and foreign policy by analyzing the name dispute from the perspectives of the Albanians in North Macedonia.

The research, after highlighting the most important milestones from the name dispute’s Macedonian-focused point of view, details how interethnic dynamics have gone together with Albanian engagement with foreign policy. Taking also advantage of twenty-five semi-structured interviews that I conducted in 2024 and 2025 in North Macedonia (in Skopje and Tetovo, respectively), the paper establishes four distinctive time periods that

testify to the changing role, interests, and levels of engagement that Albanians played in resolving the name dispute.

2. Name dispute: background, milestones, and outcome

The name dispute and the problems that had arisen from its unresolved nature is just as long as the history of modern-day North Macedonia, if not longer.³⁴ Surely, it has not only accompanied the newly independent state's nation- and state-building processes, but had a significant impact on its integration into international organizations, too. This chapter provides an overview of the background of the dispute, including the standpoints of the parties involved and the evolution of the dispute, up until the signing of the Prespa agreement (2018) that has formally (legally) put an end to the bilateral issue.

Declaring independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (hereinafter Yugoslavia) in 1991, Macedonia soon found itself in an uneasy political situation with Greece. Although the newly independent state was not involved in the armed conflicts that had accompanied Yugoslavia's disintegration, its statehood raised fears of potential secessionism, and its nationhood also drew concerns over its Macedonian irredentism (BONNER, 1995). Moreover, politicians in Greece were convinced that the leadership in Skopje, driven by Macedonian ethnonationalism, either wanted to secede Greece's northern province, Macedonia (Μακεδονία) to its territory or at least tried to politically influence citizens of Greece, culturally identifying as Macedonians (ZAHARIADIS, 1994, pp. 661–663). Even though there is no direct evidence to support these claims, the potential threat(s) to territorial integrity became a defining point in Greece's foreign policy actions towards Macedonia. Despite all neighboring states had, and some still has, some “cultural and territorial ambitions” (ISENI, 2013, p. 175) towards North Macedonia,

³⁴ The problem was there even before Macedonia declared its independence from Yugoslavia, and the seeds of the disputes can be traced back to the post-war period of 1945. Although Greece had raised concerns over the creation of a separate Macedonian republic within Yugoslavia (and later to the Macedonian nation-building process), the fact that it was part of a larger entity served as a reassurance. There was also a ‘gentlemen's agreement’ between the Yugoslav and Greek leadership, based on mutual (dis)trust, that bilateral relations would not be impacted by the Macedonian question. (ROSSOS, 2008, pp. 236–237) The name dispute, including its bilateral, political manifestation, had only become visible after Macedonia's independence in 1991.

none of them have voiced any concerns over issues of territorial claims nor acted as hostile bilaterally or in international fora, as Greece has.³⁵

Why would, in theory, the newly independent Macedonia want to expand its territory at the expense of Greece (or possibly other countries)? Up until the early 20th century, the country known as North Macedonia today was under Ottoman rule for more than five centuries. In fact, the geographical territory known as Macedonia was “one of the first regions of the Balkans to form part of the Ottoman Empire and one of the last to be ‘liberated’ of Ottoman rule” (HERACLIDES, 1995, p. 2) as a result of the Balkan Wars of 1912–13. These wars divided the region among countries united by their desire to oust the Ottoman Empire out of the peninsula and, in the meantime, expand their respective states, too (ROSSOS, 2008, pp. 124–125); in addition to Albania receiving small parts around Lake Ohrid, Bulgaria got what is geographically called ‘Pirin Macedonia’, ‘Aegean Macedonia’ went to Greece, leaving ‘Vardar/Yugoslav Macedonia’ to the newly formed Yugoslav state and their legal successors, including North Macedonia. The Greek understanding is based on the idea of reinstituting a greater Macedonian state that encompasses, in addition to ‘Vardar Macedonia’, other parts of the historical territory that were once ruled by Alexander the Great.³⁶

The King of Macedon brings the second batch of issues to the forefront, concerning Macedonian nationalism and the nation-building process. Greece felt uneasy by the usage of Alexander the Great and his ancient culture as a focal point for the ethnogenesis and identity of Macedonians. More precisely, the role that the Kingdom of Macedon, having its peak in the 4th century BC under Phillip II and his son, Alexander, played in the myths of origin of the (ethnic) Macedonians and in the building of the independent Macedonian (nation)state, troubled Greece. Greece claimed that “no other people, apart from the Greeks, were entitled to use the Macedonian name either as a cultural-ethnic or a geographical appellation” (KOFOS, 1999, p. 235), including the legacy and culture of the Kingdom, and rejected any claims that would presume any continuity between the ancient culture, modern-day Macedonians, and their country. It is important to highlight,

³⁵ Albania as a kin-state were concerned about the treatment of the Albanian minority in the newly formed country (especially after they had decided to boycott the referendum on independence); Bulgaria’s issues at that time concerned national and historical identity, albeit being the first time recognize Macedonia’s independence in 1992; Serbia was too occupied with the armed conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to be able to intervene, despite its national interests to keep the federation intact.

³⁶ It must be noted that Macedonia, in its historical form, never enjoyed independence and, under Ottoman rule, was not even a single administrative unit (vilayet).

however, that Greece had never contested the existence of Macedonians as an ethnicity (of Slavic origins) nor Macedonia's right to having its own sovereign country; the problem was more cultural and ethnonationalist in its essence.

The origins of Alexander the Great were not only supported by the political elites of the newly formed Macedonia, but became state policy under Yugoslavia, too. Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslavia's long-lasting leader, had encouraged Macedonian nationalism by not only promoting its ties to the ancient Kingdom of Macedon, but also making the Macedonian language official in Yugoslavia in 1963 and the Macedonian Orthodox Church independent from the Serbian Orthodox Church four years later (KOFOS, 1986, pp. 159–161). Tito had done so to counterbalance the larger, more populous nations, mainly Serbs and Croats, by strengthening the smaller ones, including Macedonians, Montenegrins, and Slovenes. Strengthening their identity was one part of this balancing act.

The first four years of independent Macedonia were marked by strong political and economic challenges from Greece. Although, Greece, as mentioned before, had acknowledged the existence of a Macedonian state, ethnicity and nation, but rejected any connections, political, cultural or otherwise, to the ancient Macedonian kingdom and culture. Athens therefore did not accept the constitutional name of Macedonia nor, on cultural basis, the Vergina Sun, that was depicted on the new national flag (REUTER, 1999, pp. 41–42). Putting pressure on the Macedonian leadership came from two fronts: Macedonia was hit by a trade embargo by Greece in 1994, lasting for fourteen months (BUCK, 1996), and this politically made it more difficult for the country to start its integration process into international organizations. For instance, Macedonia's UN accession only took place in 1993, despite heavy diplomatic efforts amid Greek backlash, under the name of "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL, 1993).

The first breakthrough was achieved under UN facilitation in 1995. Under the so-called Interim Accord, parties agreed to refrain from imposing any impediment to the movement of people or goods between their countries, and Greece agreed to lift its trade embargo. In exchange, Macedonia agreed to change its constitution in a way so that it would not spark any (Greek) concerns over alleged references to territorial claims of any kind. Furthermore, the Vergina Sun as a symbol would no longer be used in the country's national flag (INTERIM ACCORD, 1995). Although the Interim Accord managed to

normalize economic and political relations, it had only temporarily resolved the issue about Macedonia's constitutional name. Until a legally binding agreement is reached under UN-led negotiations, Macedonia was to use the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (hereinafter FYROM) provisional name in international fora. In exchange, Greece agreed not to block its neighbor's integration into international and regional organizations under its provisional name (INTERIM ACCORD, 1995, art. 11).

Albeit UN-mediated negotiations, led by American diplomat Matthew Nimetz (KLEKOVSKI, 2011, p. 7), bilateral relations hit rock bottom in 2008. The Bucharest summit of NATO was foreseen as a milestone in Macedonia's path to accession into the alliance under its provisional name. Greece, contrary to what the country has vowed in the 1995 Interim Accords,³⁷ vetoed Macedonia's formal invitation to NATO, citing the unresolved bilateral dispute. (BRUNNSTROM, 2008) The Bucharest Summit Declaration states that "we [NATO members] agreed that an invitation to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia will be extended as soon as a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue has been reached" (NATO, 2008, para. 20), echoing Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyanni's sentiments that "we [Greece] can consent to an invitation only if a mutually acceptable solution is found and a Security Council resolution is there" (CASULE, 2008).

The "Bucharest fiasco" (KARAJKOV, 2008) marked the beginning of renewed political tensions between Greece and Macedonia; a period lasting for nearly a decade was characterized by rising ethnonationalist sentiments in both countries, especially in Macedonia. Led by Premier Nikola Gruevski, the country put the emphasis on strengthening the cultural connections to the ancient Macedonian state and culture. The urban project of 'Skopje 2014', also known for being a hotbed of corruption, under the so-called antiquization (*антуквизација*) policy, aimed at redesigning the capital city's image in a way that it would resemble its alleged ancient Macedonian character. This identitarian policy, based on making the ethnocultural link between ancient and present-day Macedonians a reality, also aimed to strengthen Macedonian nationalism, at the expense of good neighborly relations with Greece (GEORGIEVSKI, 2009; DE LAUNEY, 2014; VANGELOV, 2019). Talks, still under Nimetz's supervision, despite the diplomat's efforts were virtually non-existent at this time.

³⁷ The International Court of Justice's 2011 judgement also ruled that Greece had breached Article 11 of the 1995 Interim Accords which obliged Greece not to object to Macedonia's accession to international organizations under its provisional name (INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE, 2011).

The breakthrough came almost ten years later, when political changes in both Greece and Macedonia approximated their leaders to resume negotiations over the name dispute. The new Macedonian government, led by Zoran Zaev, focused on delivering achievements in the country's foreign policy, including NATO and EU membership (RFE, 2017; VANGELI, 2018, p. 4). That meant that the disputes blocking the accession to these institutions, namely the name dispute, became a center issue for the new cabinet. In Greece, the Aléxis Tsípras-led SYRIZA government also showed constructivism towards Skopje.³⁸ Negotiated by foreign ministers Nikos Kotzias and Nikola Dimitrov, leaders put great emphasis on resolving the issue in record time; within a year, a legally binding international agreement, signed near the shores of Lake Prespa between the Macedonian–Greek border, was signed in 2018, putting an end to a nearly three-decade-long bilateral issue.

The Prespa agreement, ratified in 2019, is hailed for its “creative ambiguity” (ARMAKOLAS & PETKOVSKI, 2019, p. 3) and protection of the Macedonian nationhood. The agreement, which foresaw Macedonia changing its constitutional name to North Macedonia (*erga omnes*), also codified the existence of a separate Macedonian language (ROHDEWALD, 2018, p. 591). Nimetz claimed that the biggest success of the agreement lies in its “principle of loss aversion” (2020, p. 206); both parties could champion and sell the agreement in front of their respective legislature and electorate, and came out as ‘winners’, while the protection of Macedonian identity (nationhood and language) was also acknowledged by Greece.

After highlighting the cornerstones leading up to the Prespa agreement, the paper focuses on the Albanian political community's role, engagement, and perspectives to the name dispute. The following chapters combine the development of interethnic relations with how Albanians' interests and levels of engagement have changed in getting involved in the bilateral dispute and its subsequent resolution.

³⁸ Although Greece did not change its position on the name dispute, other factors made it a more constructive party. These included the opening of its foreign and economic policies toward the Balkans and the fact that, instead of FYROM, more countries began using ‘Macedonia’ in international fora. The latter development heightened Greek fears that this usage would eventually become the norm, to their detriment.

3. Albanian interest and engagement in the name dispute

Albanians in North Macedonia experienced a tumultuous history. The evolution of their political and social history, from exclusion to inclusion, and from an imperial to a federative state, demonstrates their changing interests, engagements, and roles in the domain of foreign policy, namely in the name dispute. This chapter details this trajectory; four time periods are envisioned, reflecting on the turning points of interethnic dynamics and the name dispute.

The first period, from the proclamation of independence of Macedonia (1991) until the OFA (2001), foresaw the clashes between ethnonationalist state- and nation-building processes, mainly at the expense of the Albanian ethnic minority. The OFA served as a watershed moment in interethnic relations in terms of legally guaranteed political (and social) representation. This new period, characterized by the expansion of Albanian rights with the implementation of the OFA, ends with the NATO summit of Bucharest (2008). As we reach the post-2008 period, the Albanian political community's rising engagement in foreign policy has become more evident, driven by both internal and external factors. The fourth period details the final months (2017/18), leading up to the Prespa agreement; an era where Albanian engagement towards the issue, combined with significant Macedonian activism, peaked.

3.1. First period (1991–2001): Disengaged, with a solid reason

The evolution of Albanian engagement in the name dispute coincided, for its first decade, with the minority's struggle for constitutional-legal rights. After Macedonia's independence, the country, driven by Macedonian ethnonationalist idea of creating a nation-state, dismissed any Albanian concerns on how the country's political or legal framework should be built up (VANKOVSKA, 2019, p. 91).

Upon independence, two issues were directly of Albanian concern. The referendum question ("Are you for a sovereign and independent state of Macedonia, with a right to enter into and future alliance with the sovereign states of Yugoslavia?") (OFFICIAL GAZETTE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA, 1991) implied a possible (re)unification with Yugoslavia, politically led by Serbia, that would have been discriminatory for Albanians

in Macedonia and Kosovo since it would have “forced [them] to accept the Titoist definitions of a ‘Macedonian’ identity [...]” (PETTIFER, 1999, p. 137). Although fears of (re)unification with Yugoslavia did not materialize, their second issue became more of a reality.

The 1990s marked the period of Albanian politicians actively distanced themselves from state-level issues, including foreign policy. Their sole aim was to advance their constitutional status in a challenging legal and social environment. As they had become preoccupied with interethnic issues, they voiced no concerns or interest in the constitutional name of the newly formed country (that was a cornerstone of the issue for Greece) but silently supported the Macedonian narratives about Macedonian ethnogenesis, history and language (SHASIVARI & ZEJNELI, 2013, pp. 589–590). Albanians, although felt oppressed by the Macedonian state, had never challenged, unlike Macedonia’s neighbors, the Macedonian identity or ethnobelonging (SERWER, 2018, pp. 58–59); their problem arose from how the state itself functions and is hijacked by Macedonian ideology.

For Albanians, the core issue at the dawn of independence was the differing notions on how the newly formed state should be built up. Macedonians, taking control of establishing and reinforcing the ethnonationalist framework of Macedonia, envisioned a nation-state in which their ethnic group would enjoy full ownership (FRAENKEL, 2016). Meanwhile, Albanians were interested in a state composition that leans towards either a binational or partially federalized state, with extensive autonomy to their ethnic community and “in which [...] [they] would be recognized as a constituent nation on par with the Macedonian” (ENGSTRÖM, 2002, p. 6). Macedonia’s first constitution (1991) established a monoethnic country in a de facto multiethnic state where, referring to Buzan’s notion about an imperial state, Macedonians exercised full ownership over state bodies at the expense of Albanians. This fundamental issue of how the state ought to be organized was, and continues to be, the key issue in interethnic relations.

Although Albanian politicians from the Party for Democratic Prosperity (in Albanian: *Partia për Prosperitet Demokratik*; in Macedonian: *Партија за демократски процепумем*; hereinafter PDP), the most prominent ethnic Albanian party after Macedonia’s independence, were part of the respective governments (ORTAKOVSKI, 2001, p. 25), their role was not only marginal, but they actively distanced themselves from

issues outside of the usual interethnic themes. Since they “continued participation [...] in the country's political life is precarious” (INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, 1998, p. 6), they were also not involved in establishing of state’s foreign policy directives (LEKA, 2021, p. 54). Albanians, on the other hand, did share the same idea about the foreign policy trajectory as their Macedonian compatriots: one of the few aspects that had united Macedonian and Albanian (political) interests in the 1990s were their dedication towards joining western politico-military organizations (including UN, Council of Europe, NATO and EU). Given their limited role in decision-making processes, especially in foreign policy, combined with their sole focus on their own internal struggles, Albanians had no chance, motivation or interest in getting involved in the achievement of these declared foreign policy objectives. Nonetheless, although it was the Macedonian leadership that officially constructed foreign policy, it aligned with the Albanian interest of western integration.

As this chapter illustrates, the Albanian political corpus, led by PDP and later by the Democratic Party of Albanians (in Albanian: *Partia Demokratike Shqiptare*; in Macedonian: *Демократска партија на Албанците*), was preoccupied with the domestic issues around legal rights and representation, including the composition of the state. Little evidence or concrete effort proves their interest in Macedonia’s bilateral issues. As they distanced themselves from state-level issues, including the name dispute, the notion that this is a ‘Macedonian issue only’ became common among citizens and Macedonian politicians alike.

This is also the period where Buzan’s concept of an imperial state is the most visible. Macedonians and Albanians, two separate nations within a state, were in a battle for power; while (ethnic) Macedonian leadership wanted to keep their rights not only to managing the most important aspects of the state (i.e., state- and nation-building, institutions), Albanians kept fighting for the safeguarding of their political and social rights amid state-led oppression. As one of the interviewees pointed out: ‘if your state is hostile to you, you do not feel that that is your state’; hence their abundance of state-level issues, including foreign policy affairs.

3.2. Second period (2001–2008): Forced interest, reluctant engagement

The OFA placed interethnic relations in Macedonia on a new, more balanced level, and also triggered changes on Albanian perceptions on state-level issues, and the political responsibilities attached to them—whether they wanted that or not. The “document of peace” (REKA, 2011, p. 19), as Albanian politicians refer to it, foresaw major constitutional changes on the state’s composition by safeguarding its multiethnic character and making Albanians involved in decision-making processes, too. The OFA thus established the model of a consociational democracy in the country, which also meant, without federalization of any form, greater self-management and minority inclusion in everyday politics (BIEBER, 2011, pp. 21–22; ANDONOVSKI, 2018, pp. 30–31).

The OFA, its implementation over the decade, and the introduction of consociationalism, however, did not resolve the fundamental issue of Macedonia—namely, how Macedonians and Albanians perceive their respective roles under the state. The OFA was a compromise between hostile parties (and a success for western diplomacy), that set the legal foundations of the concept of (a more) civic state (GRIESSLER, 2014, p. 6). Mentality, however, had proven otherwise: while the state does belong to citizens, Albanians want to be a constituent part of it, having full equality to Macedonians, while Macedonians, even in the post-2001 era, still perceive Albanians as a minority group (ROSSOS, 2013, pp. 315–316).

As their constitutional and legal rights expanded, Albanians were expected to expand their interests beyond the protection of their ethnic community’s scope. Starting gradually from 2001, they were not only token politicians; rather, Albanians were seen and felt as a more integral part of Macedonia than ever before, especially in the 1990s. They became “an important factor in maintaining post-conflict stability” (RIPILSKI & PENDAROVSKI, 2013, p. 155) and in Macedonian politics. In a sense, the Albanian political leadership, now led by the Democratic Union for Integration (in Albanian: *Bashkimi Demokratik për Integritet*; in Macedonian: *Демократска унија за интеграција*; hereinafter DUI), found itself in an unpleasant situation: they showed no real interest in getting involved in state-level issues outside of their usual (interethnic) domain, but they were, as integral political parts of Macedonia, felt the growing pressure to do or act so.

Albanians in this period were forced to deal with state-level problems that were outside their comfort zone. In theory, as OFA had guaranteed their sound rights and representation, so they also had enough capital to deal with other subjects and act as constituent people of Macedonia—just as how they fundamentally perceived their role (REUTER, 1999, p. 36). This newly found responsibility proved to be somewhat burdensome; while they always acknowledged Macedonian sensitiveness to the focal issues concerning Macedonian language, history and identity, they did not want to get involved, especially not in official capacities (not that Macedonians would have allowed it). Some interviewees, however, have another take on this reluctance: Albanians let Macedonians take full ownership of foreign policy, which demonstrates their constructiveness in moving forward to a possible resolution.

Hence, Albanian politicians, despite their newly given responsibility, distanced themselves from getting involved with the name dispute. The only exemption was Ali Ahmeti, leader of DUI. The former commander of the National Liberation Army (in Albanian: *Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare*; in Macedonian: *Ослободителна народна армуја*), Ahmeti established informal channels of communications between Greece and Macedonia, as well as with western embassies in Skopje, especially with the United States of America (MILEVSKA, 2018). His intentions, however, are debated: did he want to be an informal interlocutor to achieve a resolution to this state-level issue, a lobbyist for Albanian interest(s) or was all these driven by his personal ambitions? Surely, Ahmeti at that time was known for advocating for Kosovo's recognition in Macedonia and elsewhere (VANKOVSKA, 2008, p. 413), and for his aspirations as wanting to be a regional leader of all Albanians in the Balkan peninsula.³⁹

Ahmeti's growing role as a self-proclaimed facilitator became more pronounced once DUI got back to the government coalition after a short hiatus in early 2008. At that time, the cabinet had led by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (*Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство*, hereinafter VMRO–DPMNE), and relations got tense between Skopje and Athens. While

³⁹ There has long been an aspiration among Albanian politicians to act as the unofficial leaders of Albanians in neighboring countries, including Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Greece. Over time, this ambition—particularly between Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and Kosovar Prime Minister Albin Kurti—led to open rifts between national leaders (NÉMETH, 2013). According to some interviews, Ali Ahmeti also nurtured the idea of positioning himself as a self-proclaimed leader among Albanians outside North Macedonia, especially in Kosovo.

Greece was preoccupied with managing the economic crisis, VMRO–DPMNE, since its return to power in 2006, had initiated a more offensive approach towards its neighbor's standpoints about the name dispute. The worsening of bilateral relations, triggered by this nationalist turn in Macedonia (BIEBER, 2020, pp. 56–58), culminated at NATO's Bucharest summit a few months later; the internal and external political developments left room for a more pronounced yet unofficial role of Ahmeti in the coming years.

The OFA, legally speaking, had started changing Buzan's imperial state to a more federative one by providing Albanians with greater representation and access to power in state structures. In this understanding, the imperial state reached its maximum under the 2001 quasi-civil war, when the Albanian struggle turned into full-scale violence. In the post-2001 era, as Albanians were not forced to adhere to the Macedonian idea of nation- and state-building anymore—because of the idea of consociationalism—, they had the opportunity to get involved in state-level issues, including foreign policy, even in a limited capacity and willingness, at first.

An important feature of a federative state is shared responsibility, especially in fields that overarch ethnic boundaries or cleavages (BUZAN, 1991, p. 50). Although there was resistance in taking responsibility for issues that they deemed a sole Macedonian problem in the last decade, the first seeds of limited Albanian engagement were detectable. Apart from Ahmeti, the Albanian political corpus showed little interest and employed just limited energy in dealing with state-level issues. Engagement and interest, triggered by internal and external factors, would, however, take a swift turn after the Bucharest summit.

3.3. Third period (2008–2016): Increased interest and engagement as an outcome of internal and external shockwaves

The NATO summit, in addition to the continued ethnonationalist policies of the Macedonian government, has visibly shifted the interest and engagement of the Albanian political bloc towards the name dispute. For them, this period was the first time a “state-level/Macedonian only” issue (AZIZI, 2012, p. 309), that had no connection to interethnic relations nor their constitutional/legal status, became their priority, too. Although the name dispute was always a state(-level) question, Albanians, for the first time, as a nation

in a federative state, felt the need to actively contribute to its resolution. The problem in the next decade, however, was that their Macedonian compatriots were not interested in engaging with Greece, leaving Albanians and their newly found enthusiasm for foreign policy alone.

This development sent shockwaves through the Albanian political corpus. DUI, a coalition partner to VMRO–DPMNE, realized that its own Albanian voting base’s support is at risk in case Euro-Atlantic integration remains in an impasse. The party, like other Albanian parties, has always built its campaigns around two themes: interethnic relations—i.e., advancement of their political and social rights—and the promise that they would bring the country into western politico-military organizations (TELEGRAFI, 2010). The lack of foreign policy success, for the first time, jeopardized their political popularity. The urge to act more proactively (but still be remindful and respectful of Macedonian sensitiveness) was born, while the notion that the Macedonian leadership keeps them hostages became widespread (TELEGRAFI, 2017).

Another reading on heightened Albanian activism is that the roles between Macedonians and Albanians were consciously divided. While VMRO–DPMNE kept its strong, ethnonationalist positions and virtually ended high-level negotiations with Greece, Albanians, especially Ahmeti, emerged as the constructive actors unofficially representing Macedonia through informal channels . This informal “power-sharing” can be perceived as a deliberate strategy by the government; ‘let the Albanians keep the communication channels with Greece and westerners open but the main decisions, especially those concerning Macedonian identity, would nonetheless remain at the hands of the Macedonians’, as one interviewee pointed out. This notion is also supported by the fact that since Gruevski had no interest in discussing the name dispute, he put Albanians from his cabinet in charge of this foreign policy issue. From 2008 and 2013 onwards, Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs and/or (Deputy) State Secretaries responsible for European Affairs were from the DUI, including Arta Toci and Arlinda Gjakova. This was the first time that Albanian politicians had been given foreign policy-related positions. Hence, their role in these years were not to negotiate on behalf of the government, but rather to keep communication channels open, primarily with Greece.

This division seemed beneficial for Albanian politicians. Since 2008, Ahmeti not only nurtured ties to western embassies but also went on (un)official visits to Greece (КИНГ, 2016), the USA (FIORINA, 2013) and EU institutions (European Union External Action, 2015), where, wrapped around other topics, the name dispute was also discussed. Although his diplomatic endeavors made no progress, they served to benefit DUI's image among its (Albanian) electorate. The Albanian political bloc was perceived in a positive light by westerners, especially since Ahmeti would give interviews to Greek media about the importance of resolving the name dispute (KATHIMERINI, 2017). One might suspect that it was a well-orchestrated 'ping-pong game': when Gruevski's rhetoric testified about his unwillingness to reestablish good neighborly relations, Ahmeti stepped into the picture and tried to convince internationals that there was still political engagement in North Macedonia.

Apart from ethnonationalist narratives and their own electorate's sensitiveness, there has been a major external factor that strongly motivated Albanians to act proactively in foreign affairs: Albania, their kin-state⁴⁰. Albania, Croatia and Macedonia, part of the Adriatic Charter⁴¹ (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, 2011), were all set to receive an invitation to join NATO at the Bucharest summit. Consequently, Albania, together with Croatia joined the alliance in 2009, leaving Macedonia without an invitation due to Greece's objection.

Albania's integration into Euro-Atlantic structures is an important supplement to understand the growing interest of Macedonia's Albanians towards foreign policy. Having realized its NATO integration, or, in the case of Macedonia, the lack thereof, resonated strongly with DUI and its electorate. As Albania officially surpassed Macedonia on Euro-Atlantic integration, Albanians in Macedonia, who "wish [NATO membership] even more than Macedonians themselves" (STAROVA, 2015), perceived that their community would be unable to move forward like their kin-state.

⁴⁰ The term refers to "a state that represents the majority nation of a transborder ethnic group whose members reside in neighboring territories" (WATERBURY, 2020, p. 1), such as Albania, Croatia, Hungary and Serbia. Kin-states nurture cultural, economic, social and political ties to their kinship, and, in some cases, get involved in the internal politics of the other state in the name of minority protection.

⁴¹ Established in 2003 by the United States, the Adriatic Charter aimed to support the politico-military integration of Southeast European countries into NATO.

Realizing that without a compromise with Greece, there would be no further Euro-Atlantic integration, and coupled with Albania's NATO membership, frictions between VMRO-DPMNE and DUI had soon grown. Patience was soon lost publicly, as demonstrated by statements that address both VMRO-DPMNE and DUI's electorate, such as "we [DUI] will have to seek new alternatives" and that the unresolved bilateral issue "creates unneeded interethnic tensions" (MARUSIC, 2009).

There is, however, a paradox that needs to be explained. Amid growing discomfort with VMRO-DPMNE's nationalist policies and rhetoric, and, as a result, a dead-end of negotiations with Greece, DUI remained in coalition with the party. The DUI, as coalition partner, had never challenged VMRO-DPMNE's positions, nor tried to step out of its informal/(un)official role of keeping the conversation about the name dispute alive. Being part of the cabinet was more of a Realpolitik-like compromise than a decision made by principles of any kind. In doing so, they became hostages to a state-level problem.

As the subchapter demonstrates, the name dispute has become important for the Albanians once internal and external factors started threatening their popularity, positions, and Euro-Atlantic integration. It is difficult to judge whether their heightened interest and visibility around the name dispute are a concern over state-level issues (as perpetuated by the concepts of civil and federative state) or the mixture of external and internal influences, directly aimed at their ethnic group (electorate). Subsequent interviews were also divided on this issue; Albania's example and the fear of lagging behind was a significant push for their proactive approach. The fact that DUI also received an additional push from its Macedonian coalition partner was an added value: as VMRO-DPMNE was reluctant to ease its nationalist policies which eventually led to the deadlock with Greece, it was eager to pass the baton to the ever-so-eager Albanians to at least pretend to work on a resolution. The conditions—i.e., no negotiations and compromises—, however, remained intact, which set boundaries/limitations to Albanian engagement.

The political period dominated by VMRO-DPMNE until the elections of 2016 marked a significant increase in terms of visible Albanian engagement and proactivity. The only problem was that their enthusiasm (driven by internal and external considerations, rather than the spirit of consociationalism) was not met by the Macedonians. A regime change was needed the following year so that the new Macedonian cabinet, led by Prime Minister

Zoran Zaev and his party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (*Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија*; hereinafter: SDSM), would share the same level of interest and engagement in resolving the name dispute as DUI; with that, foreign policy was about to become “the most unifying dimension of policy between the two biggest ethnic groups” (OSMANI & LEKA, 2022, p. 51) in a federative state.

3.4. Fourth period (2017–2018): Nation-wide priority, but with the same limitations

The name dispute united distinct nations within the state to deal with a common, state-level problem. As the country’s new government was sworn in 2017 with Albanians represented by DUI and Alliance for Albanians (in Albanian: *Aleanca për Shqiptarët*; in Macedonian: *Алијанса за Албанците*), political developments took a positive turn. The SDSM did not only share the same desire and proactive willingness to put an end to the name dispute, but made it its political priority to promptly address the country’s ongoing, unresolved bilateral issues (MARUSIC, 2017). This paved the way for an active, yet similarly to the previous period, limited involvement of Albanians in that process.

The government change has brought at least two important alterations. Firstly, it has become a priority for the SDSM-led government; their main objective, achieving the country’s almost three-decade-long foreign policy goals, could only be realized if the name dispute was to be resolved. The SDSM took proactive measures to establish good neighborly relations with Bulgaria (UNITED NATIONS, 2017) and, subsequently, relaunched negotiations with Greece, too. This positive change also resonated with the objectives of the Albanian political elites.

Secondly, the level of participation of DUI in the new cabinet has also changed. Their post-election position as “king-makers” (GJORGJIOSKA, 2022, p. 3) enabled DUI to secure important portfolios, virtually overseeing the functioning of state institutions and public administration. Concerning foreign affairs, Albanians were given the opportunity to contribute to them in the executive branch through the appointment of Bujar Osmani as Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs (MARUSIC, 2017), which was a significant step in power-sharing between nations.

Although Macedonians possessed a monopoly on traditional foreign policy themes, this did not mean that Albanian foreign policy objectives were completely sidelined. The respective governments, even in times of tense Greek–Macedonian relations, advocated for western integration/orientation; objectives that the Albanian political corpus has always aligned with (LEKA, 2021, p. 56). Thus, even if no official positions were handed over to DUI before 2017, Albanians had given at least their declarative support for conducting foreign policy without their direct contribution and/or influence. What changed with the appointment of Osmani is that Albanians were, as a quantitative improvement, able to shape Macedonia’s foreign policy.

The months leading up to the Prespa agreement demonstrate that Albanians had a high level of enthusiasm but a low level of discursive support in finding a solution. They were nonetheless vocal about the urgent need to resolve the issue, maintaining open communication channels with Greece (EWB, 2018) and “played an important role behind the scenes, encouraging sensible compromises” (NIMETZ, 2020, p. 209). Interviewees claim that DUI’s activism through informal channels during the previous period, especially keeping communication channels open, served as good grounds for the new Macedonian government to reestablish trust and relaunch negotiations. In terms of direct or official engagement, however, they remained in the back.

Interviewees were divided about the exact role of Albanian leadership. SDSM has surely given DUI (Osmani) visibility in foreign affairs with his ministerial portfolio, but that did not mean that he spearheaded the name dispute negotiations. On the other hand, Osmani would play just as a cardinal role as Zaev, Dimitrov and Kotzias, some interviewees claimed. While the respective ministers of foreign affairs, Dimitrov and Kotzias were the lead negotiators for the agreement, Osmani, in his position as Deputy Prime Minister, played a supportive role by strengthening the narrative about the necessity of resolving the bilateral issue for the sake of Euro-Atlantic integration. In some instances, he acted as a bridge between fellow negotiators. For example, Kotzias would consult with Osmani when he encountered stumbling blocks with Dimitrov, and it was Osmani who would, if needed, liaise between Kotzias, Dimitrov and Zaev. Albanians, according to interviews, perceived that Osmani was the ‘fourth musketeer’ next to the prime and foreign ministers in designing the Prespa agreement. Formally, Albanians, including Osmani, did not participate in negotiations, but they were always briefed about developments, proposals, and the agreement.

This period saw Macedonian and Albanian interests culminating together. Foreign policy, particularly the swift resolution of the name dispute, became a domain where competition among nations was taken over by mutual understanding on its vital importance for the common state's future. Although Albanians, similarly to the third period, kept it under more informal settings, albeit having the ministerial portfolio, they challenged the notion that there is a constant rivalry among distinct nations over core functions of the state, including foreign affairs. Instead, it proves that post-OFA (and especially post-2008) Macedonia has been slowly becoming a more federative state, rather than an imperial one. Speaking strictly about the name dispute, this case also demonstrates that consociationalism works in practice; despite Macedonians still having almost full ownership of this issue (especially concerning negotiations), Albanians were nevertheless treated as junior partners.

4. Connecting the name dispute with interethnic dimensions

The Albanian political bloc's most vital (internal) policy interest undoubtedly revolves around interethnic dynamics. The paper, which connected interethnic relations and foreign policy, now focuses on whether there were any attempts to connect the resolution of the name dispute to further advance the legal rights of Albanians in North Macedonia.

Albanians agreed on the Prespa agreement as a cheque blanco; there were no conditions attached to it, especially none that would have tried to expand their legal rights. The only condition that came up in the phase of negotiations concerned the new constitutional name. According to Ahmeti, "Albanians will not accept names that do not correspond to [their] history and position in the country" (TELEGRAFI, 2018); in practice, proposals such as 'Slavic Macedonia' and 'Vardar Macedonia', that either reflect solely on Macedonian ethnicity or periods of Yugoslav/Serbian repression, were unacceptable for them (LATIFI & NICOLAIDIS, 2018). These proposals would have perpetuated the post-independence (and pre-OFA) idea on Macedonian nation- and state-building processes that also went against multiculturalism. On the other hand, Albanians kept it neutral when it came to other possible solutions without any ethnicity-related prefixes attached to them, including 'New Macedonia', 'Upper Macedonia', or eventually, 'North Macedonia'. These were

also able to signal and promote a more civic and multicultural society, an interest of Albanians since the inception of the country.

When it comes to the “ethnic agenda” during negotiations, some ideas were quickly swept off the table by multiple actors. Ideas concerning the expansion of the law on national languages—efforts to make Albanian the second official language—were publicly circulated by AA and Besa (BALKAN INSIGHT, 2018; INSAJDERI, 2018), a smaller Albanian party outside of the coalition, but were eventually rejected, at least for two reasons. Firstly, the objective of the Prespa agreement has always been to unblock the country’s Euro-Atlantic integration. This goal, shared by Macedonian and Albanian coalition partners alike, served as a ‘greater good’; bringing in interethnic topics during negotiations or implementation would have been disastrous. In addition to this, concerns were raised that adding ethnic demands could complicate the delicate process of securing the necessary two-thirds parliamentary majority for the constitutional changes, and there were also fears that there would be increased push from Albanians to change the fabric of the country to a more binational state formation.

Secondly, Albanian parties faced external pressure, mainly coming from the US, not to get these topics involved or linked. Internationals wanted to ensure that the constitutional amendments leading up to the ratification of Prespa agreement focused strictly on what the agreement itself required—nothing more, nothing less, nothing about Albanians. At the end of the day, the motivation or the objective of the Prespa agreement was not to address the Albanians’ rights in a way OFA did in 2001; the two themes were deliberately separated by internal and external actors—and pressure.

One aspect that has changed and can be classified as a development in interethnic relations is the Preamble of North Macedonia’s constitution. A clear reference to the OFA has become part of the document and now serves as a constitutive element of the state (KACARSKA & LOKOSKI, 2019). In other words, the constitution now explicitly references the OFA, just as it references significant historic documents and events that laid the foundations for modern-day North Macedonia—a symbolic but important step to increase the spirit of a civic nation and consociational democracy.

5. Conclusion

The example of the name dispute demonstrates how, in an imperial-turned-federative state, nations are impacted by foreign policy. More precisely, how one nation, because of internal and external circumstances, are being interested and willing to be engaged actively with a state-level issue. Contrary to what Buzan says about an imperial state, the name dispute—a bilateral issue—did not result in heightened rivalry among Macedonians and Albanians. On the contrary, foreign policy became a glue that connected nations for a common, state-level objective.

Surely, Macedonians were always in decision-making positions and have set the boundaries, too. On the other hand, Albanians have never contested those red lines, even when their foreign policy priority, speedy integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, was hindered because of the unresolved nature of the name dispute. This example demonstrates that Albanians, even when they “felt hostages to the name dispute” (TELEGRAFI, 2017) and their Macedonian compatriots, took a pragmatic approach in dealing with it. There is no evidence that would support, contrary to widespread Macedonian narratives, that Albanians did not respect the boundaries laid out by Macedonians.

Albanian attitude has undergone significant changes in the last thirty years concerning the name dispute, too. From being uninterested in state-level problems and prioritizing ethnicity-related themes (such as their struggle for constitutional/legal rights) in the 1990s, to being forced to deal with issues outside of their usual realm after 2001, as to wanting to actively push for the resolution of the name dispute in the final years. Their engagement, however, has always remained low and silent but critical, even and especially in periods of rising ethnonationalism in Macedonian politics. They have always been supportive and have had a united front with their Macedonian coalition partners.

In the post-OFA period, as the paper argues, it was the name dispute—a common foreign policy challenge—that eventually brought Albanians (as a nation) closer to the state: having realized that their foreign policy priority is on stake that impacts their own (Albanian) electorate, they showed willingness to engage and, within their limits, push for the resolution of the bilateral dispute. At last, Albanian high enthusiasm was met with

the same level of dedication and action from Macedonian political elites, too, culminating in the Prespa agreement.

More importantly, the paper testifies that for the sake of resolving the name dispute, Albanians were willing to leave their interethnic dimensions behind. It demonstrates a change in how the Albanian leadership perceives state-level issues in the post-OFA era: if interethnic relations are sound, the political bloc has space to focus on state-level issues, including foreign policy. This assumption is especially valid when that state-wide issue is linked to either their other goals (western integration), may result in their declining popularity, or has to do with their kin-state, Albania. Foreign policy, Euro-Atlantic integration in particular, is not only a political objective that both nations, Macedonians and Albanians, share; it also serves as a unique bond that binds two distinct nations together in a federative state.

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Article 3.

Political engagement with consequences:

Albanian participation in North Macedonia's bilateral dispute with Bulgaria

Abstract: North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration demonstrates how historical and identity-related issues can penetrate and politicize the accession process, resulting in years of stalemate. At the same time, the bilateral dispute with Bulgaria has also affected relations between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. The political engagement, activism, and visibility of Albanian political actors—arising from their increased inter-institutional positions and influence—in attempts to resolve the dispute have led to sharply contrasting interpretations of the country's EU integration. The so-called European Proposal—particularly the Second Protocol—serves as a case study demonstrating the ethnic minority group's impact on foreign policy in a multination-state.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Albanian minority, Bulgaria, identity, EU accession, interethnic relations

1. Introduction

The Euro-Atlantic integration of North Macedonia⁴² has often been described as “uniquely arduous” (NASKOVA, 2026), “the most tortuous and obstacle-prone” (FOUÉRÉ, 2023, p. 8), and as the country being the “victim of EU double standards” (NOVINITE.COM, 2025). These statements do not refer to the country's technical preparedness, but rather to its bilateral disputes, which “directly challenge the Macedonian identity” (JEKIĆ, 2024, p. 160). While the resolution of the name dispute with Greece—one of the longest-standing bilateral issues in Southeast Europe—allowed North Macedonia's entry into the largest military-political alliance (NATO ALLIED COMMAND TRANSFORMATION, 2020), its EU accession prospects have been hindered by yet another neighboring state. Bulgaria's key demands—the inclusion of the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution's preamble and the

⁴² In accordance with the Prespa Agreement (2018), the Republic of Macedonia changed its constitutional name to the Republic of North Macedonia (hereinafter North Macedonia). Since the bilateral dispute with Greece, and the political and social implications of this legal provision marginally concern the scope of this analysis, the paper will refer to the country by its current constitutional name, unless otherwise specified.

implementation of previous bilateral protocols—have become part of North Macedonia’s Negotiating Framework⁴³ under the so-called European (French) Proposal⁴⁴ in 2022.

The adoption of the European Proposal by the North Macedonian parliament became “the heart of the political debate” and also increased “negative narrative about the EU” (NECHEV, 2024). Although the country was able to hold its first Intergovernmental Conference (and Bulgaria withdrew its formal veto) in 2022, the Negotiating Framework underscores constitutional amendments as prerequisites for continuing the accession negotiations (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2022). As a result, North Macedonia’s EU integration has virtually stalled, and the governing coalition—the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (*Социјалдемократски сојуз на Македонија*, hereinafter SDSM) and its Albanian coalition partner, the Democratic Union for Integration (in Albanian: *Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim*; in Macedonian: *Демократска унија за интеграција*; hereinafter DUI)—was also defeated in the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2024 (REED, 2024).

Zooming in on internal politics and foreign policy decision-making, the adoption of the European Proposal—and more broadly, the historical and identity-related dispute with Bulgaria—functions as a case study for examining interethnic relations between Macedonians and Albanians within Buzan’s theoretical framework of multination-states. A multination-state, as defined by Stivachtis (2015), is “a state which contain[s] two or more substantially complete nations within [its] boundaries” (p. 28), where nations almost or completely lack the building blocks of a shared identity. Buzan (1983) deconstructs his concept into subcategories: imperial states, in which persistent rivalry over the state’s core functions (i.e., national security and foreign policy) prevails and is accompanied by attempts to suppress the identities of certain nations; and federative states, in which the state not only grants access to key domains of governance but also refrains from impeding the expression of a nation’s identity (pp. 48–49). In this paper, North Macedonia—where ethnic Macedonians and Albanians constitute distinct nations based on differing identities

⁴³ The Negotiating Framework, adopted by EU member states unanimously, “establishes the guidelines and principles for the accession negotiations with each candidate” (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2022), and is the most essential legally binding document during the integration process.

⁴⁴ The document was initially referred to as the French Proposal since it was initiated by and drafted under the French EU Presidency. Based on the my interviews with members of the diplomatic corps, the proposal’s negative reception in North Macedonia led French diplomats to emphasize its ‘European’ nature, highlighting that all EU member states and North Macedonia adopted the document as part of the latter’s EU enlargement process.

(BABUNA, 2000, pp. 81–86; ADAMSON & JOVIĆ, 2004, pp. 302–304)—is classified as a multination-state. Furthermore, the evolution of interethnic relations in the post-independence decades (INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP, 1998; KOPPA, 2001; DASKALOVSKI, 2025) has also led me to conclude that the country experienced a shift from an imperial to a federative state, especially in the post-2001 period.

Reflecting on the political history and development of interethnic relations through Buzan's conceptual framework, I distinguish four analytical periods. Each period demonstrates different levels of political interest, participation, and engagement of the Albanian political corpus in the country's foreign policy, including its bilateral disputes. This classification establishes a new scope of analysis in which interethnic dynamics are linked to foreign policy, and will be utilized later in this analysis, too. As detailed below, this classification does not only illustrate the changing behavior of the Albanian political leadership, but also highlights the internal and external factors that either encouraged or constrained its role in foreign affairs.

During the first period, encompassing the entirety of the 1990s, “the definition of the status of Albanians in [North] Macedonia within the state and within the Macedonian society was at the heart of considerable political tensions” (ISENI, 2013, p. 176). As Albanians did not perceive themselves as constituent parts of a newly formed state built around Macedonian nationalism, they showed limited interest in and had limited access to state-level matters, including foreign affairs. Their objectives were predominantly internal: securing legal and constitutional rights (i.e., constitutional recognition, language and education rights, and decentralization), particularly in the face of institutional discrimination. The Ohrid Framework Agreement (hereinafter OFA), which ended a six-month insurgency between Macedonian security forces and Albanian guerrillas of the National Liberation Army (in Albanian: *Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare*; in Macedonian: *Ослободителна народна армија*), paved the way for more proportional minority representation across all fields of governance (FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT, 2001). This power-sharing mechanism—described by Lijphart (1969) as a consociational democracy—granted the Albanian political corpus access to the multi-level decision-making. At the same time, it preserved North Macedonia's unitary state structure, taking into account Macedonian sensitivities over constitutional composition (ROSSOS, 2008, p. 280). As interethnic relations were stabilized after 2001, unwritten expectations emerged in this new, second period: Albanians were expected to demonstrate interest in state-level

issues, including foreign affairs, even when these were outside their ethnic agenda. Nevertheless, until 2008, there was palpable reluctance and limited formal space for their political corpus to engage in such policies.

The 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit marked a turning point in Albanian interest and engagement in foreign policy, including North Macedonia's bilateral disputes. Following the country's failure to secure an invitation into the politico-military alliance (LOZA, 2008), Albanian politicians recognized that unresolved bilateral issues posed the greatest obstacle to the Euro-Atlantic integration and to fulfilling promises made to their (Albanian) electorate. In this third period, increased Albanian interest, engagement, and visibility became evident through political speeches and appearances in domestic and international media—particularly by Ali Ahmeti, leader of DUI—in advocating for a swift resolution (MARUSIC, 2009; TELEGRAFI, 2011; KOROLOGOU, 2013). These efforts, however, remained pragmatic and did not overstep boundaries set by Macedonian political leadership regarding identity. From 2017 onward, in the fourth period, Albanian interest in resolving bilateral disputes aligned with the agenda of the governing Macedonian party. Unlike in the previous period, “foreign policy quickly became one of the[ir commonly shared] priorities” (VANGELI, 2019) as the SDSM-led cabinet focused greatly on unblocking the country's Euro-Atlantic integration, culminating in the resolution of the name dispute in 2018. The Prespa Agreement thus allowed Albanians to achieve their foreign policy objective indirectly, without formal involvement in negotiations. Although the agreement—especially the constitutional name change—created new societal and political cleavages, it ultimately enabled North Macedonia's accession to NATO in 2020.

As the political trajectory of Albanians in North Macedonia illustrates, Albanian engagement with foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation. Once their minority rights were largely secured with the OFA's implementation after 2001, Albanians turned their attention to state-level issues; foreign affairs have gradually become a central concern to them.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ For the Albanian political corpus, Euro-Atlantic integration is perceived as a multifaceted instrument for safeguarding both their internal and external security. Moreover, NATO and EU membership enjoy strong support among the Albanian population; prolonged stagnation risks eroding the credibility and popularity of Albanian parties running on a pro-integration electoral platform if expected results are not delivered.

The evolution of interethnic relations in a multination-state, illustrated through Albanian engagement in North Macedonian foreign policy, provides the foundation for analyzing the political circumstances that led to the adoption of the European Proposal. Marked by optimism regarding Euro-Atlantic integration and high levels of Albanian political access to foreign policy institutions at that time, this period (2020–2024) allows for an examination of Albanian engagement strategies and interethnic dynamics. The paper draws on my twenty-five semi-structured interviews⁴⁶ conducted in Skopje and Tetovo, North Macedonia in 2024 and 2025. Interviewees were selected based on their current or former positions in government, academia, and civil society as well as their knowledge on foreign policy and/or interethnic relations. In addition to citizens of North Macedonia—including Macedonians, Albanians, and Turks—experts from Greece and Bulgaria were interviewed to provide a broader regional perspective on bilateral disputes.

The analysis offers a fresh perspective for understanding foreign policy decision-making by highlighting the interaction between internal (interethnic) and external (bilateral) realms. After discussing North Macedonia's EU integration process and Bulgaria's dual role as supporter and saboteur, the analysis shifts focus to the Albanian political scene and its role in addressing the historical and identity-related dispute with Bulgaria. A special emphasis is paid on the circumstances that led to the adoption of the European Proposal—and its controversial Second Protocol—, and the Albanian role played within. Finally, the positions of the new North Macedonian government, as well as the decoupling of Albania's and North Macedonia's EU accession processes, are examined as an outlook on future avenues through which Albanian actors may shape the country's foreign policy dynamics.

⁴⁶ I aimed to include interviewees from wide-ranging backgrounds. Regarding professional background, former and current decision-makers, representatives of public institutions (e.g., ministries responsible for foreign affairs and EU integration), as well as members of academia, research institutions, civil society, and journalism were interviewed. In terms of location, interviews were conducted in Skopje and Tetovo, allowing for the inclusion of more diverse perspectives—particularly given that Tetovo serves as the political, cultural, and social center of the Albanian community. All interviews were conducted in accordance with the highest ethical standards, ensuring full anonymity.

2. In the grip of national vetoes

2.1. North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration

North Macedonia's EU accession, being the most delayed in the Western Balkans⁴⁷, represents the textbook example to “examining [...] issues that underpin member state support or opposition towards enlargement” (KER-LINDSAY ET AL., 2018, p. 520). Since its independence, the country's accession to Western politico-military alliances has been marked by political obstacles, primarily imposed by neighboring states. These obstacles reflect historical and identity-related grievances, competing nationalisms, as well as structural asymmetries arising from the unanimity requirement at key stages of the accession process.

The Prespa Agreement generated a short-lived period of optimism that member states (especially of Greece) would no longer obstruct the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. In 2019, however, the European Council failed to reach unanimity to formally open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, largely due to France's insistence that internal EU reforms and revision of the enlargement methodology should precede further expansion (EISL, 2019). Although consensus was eventually achieved following the adoption of the revised enlargement methodology (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2020), which addressed France's concerns, North Macedonia again failed to advance. Bulgaria's veto brought back identity-related political disputes to the enlargement policy once again.

As in the case of Greece, asymmetric power relations characterize Bulgaria's relationship with North Macedonia. The EU enlargement process is driven by unanimity; a single member state can halt the progress indefinitely until its concerns—often political rather than technical—are addressed. This institutional structure creates opportunities for member states “to dictate the pace of accession based on their domestic interests” (ZWEERS ET AL., 2024, p. 5), unrelated to the candidate's implementation of the *acquis communautaire*. These asymmetries contribute to what Butnaru-Troncotă (2025)

⁴⁷ Among the Western Balkan countries, North Macedonia has experienced the longest integration trajectory to date. It was the first country, even ahead of Croatia, to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in 2001 and obtained official candidate status in 2005. From 2009 onwards, the European Commission consistently recommended opening accession negotiations. Due to Greece's veto over the name dispute, however, negotiations could only begin more than a decade later.

describes as the “politicization of enlargement” (p. 11): since 2020, Bulgaria, just like Greece until the Prespa agreement, has politicized North Macedonia’s accession by conditioning the progress on the resolution of bilateral issues about history, language, and national minorities; all touching on elements of the Macedonian identity.

2.2. Bulgaria: from supporter to saboteur

Bulgaria’s veto on opening accession negotiations was a “surprise of many unfamiliar with the history of Bulgaria–North Macedonia relations” (CHRISTIDIS, 2022, p. 231). On the surface, Bulgaria, which joined the EU in 2007, had not previously demonstrated an explicit intention to block candidate countries’ accession,⁴⁸ and acted “as a regional expert and a mediator between the Western Balkans and the EU” (RISTESKA & DASKALOVSKI, 2012, p. 227). This support was demonstrated by initiatives such as the EU–Western Balkans Summit held jointly by Sofia and Skopje (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2018) in 2018, as well as Bulgaria’s broader efforts to revitalize the enlargement agenda. Within a relatively short period, however, Bulgaria’s position shifted, transforming the country from a supporter into a key obstacle to North Macedonia’s EU accession.

Bulgaria’s objections toward North Macedonia span multiple domains, including historical interpretations, national identity, minority rights, and domestic political considerations.⁴⁹ Historical disputes, unlike with Greece, extend from medieval kings like Tsar Samuel to modern revolutionary figures such as Goce Delčev⁵⁰, reflecting on competing national narratives. The Second World War, especially the deportation of the Jewish population from modern-day North Macedonia, also remains contentious. Scholars interpret Bulgaria’s staunch positions as reflections of deeper historical,

⁴⁸ Early signs that Bulgaria might hinder North Macedonia’s EU accession appeared in 2012. The country withheld support for scheduling accession negotiations, citing insufficient progress in good neighborly relations, particularly regarding historical interpretation and anti-Bulgarian political rhetoric. It did not, however, use its formal veto power openly, which at the time was employed by Greece to block the integration process due to the name dispute.

⁴⁹ Discussing the contrasting positions on history and the evolution of Bulgarian and Macedonian national narratives in detail is beyond the scope of this analysis. The objective of these paragraphs is to highlight the multilayered nature of the bilateral relations and to show how nationalisms interfere with state- and nation-building processes, as well as how—through the politicization of enlargement—they impact North Macedonia’s EU accession.

⁵⁰ One of the most prominent leaders of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (*Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација*), Delčev is a national hero both in Bulgaria and North Macedonia, and his identity remains the subject to the historical and identity-related dispute between these countries.

geopolitical, and imperialistic aspirations: the Treaty of San Stefano (1878) envisioned a large Bulgarian principality encompassing much of the Balkan peninsula, including Macedonia. Although this arrangement was, a few months later, revised at the Congress of Berlin, it nevertheless “became engrained in Bulgaria’s historical narrative as a grave injustice to Bulgarians” (VANGELOV, 2022, p. 159) and left the country “with a burning grudge and undamped ambitions” (BARKER, 1999, p. 9). The legacy of these territorial visions, wrapped in romanticized nationalism, continues to shape historical consciousness and political discourse among Bulgarian politicians and intellectuals.

Political relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia have always been volatile. Although Bulgaria was the first country to recognize North Macedonia’s independence in 1992, “political elites in Sofia have been struggling to formulate a coherent policy vis-à-vis Skopje” (CHRISTIDIS, 2022, p. 231), arguing that Macedonian identity and ethnogenesis are all rooted in Bulgarian traditions. According to this perspective, a distinct Macedonian identity, as Drezov (1999) puts it, is the outcome of “Serbian, Comintern and Titoist propaganda” (p. 51) that emerged—or was created—during Yugoslavia as part of a broader nation-building project aimed at weakening Bulgarian and strengthening Serbian influence. Consequently, Bulgarian elites characterize the Macedonian as a dialect of the Bulgarian language, being the product of Yugoslav national engineering (VOLCHEVSKA, 2025, p. 227). As Heraclides (2021) argues, these claims denying the existence of the Macedonian nation are “existential and intractable” (p. 139), and go far beyond Greece’s claims in the name dispute.

The first bilateral declaration between the two countries, signed in 1999, represented an important diplomatic milestone. By being written in both Bulgarian and Macedonian languages (UNITED NATIONS, 1999), the joint declaration constituted a *de facto* acknowledgment of Macedonian linguistic distinctiveness in official diplomatic practice, even though Bulgaria did not formally recognize Macedonian as a separate language. After merely two decades of stagnation, further progress was achieved in 2017, when the SDSM–DUI government in North Macedonia signed the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria (UNITED NATIONS, 2017). The document established a Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues and outlined numerous cooperation initiatives, including infrastructure development projects intended to enhance economic cooperation. Bulgaria also was committed to supporting North Macedonia’s Euro-Atlantic integration, and both countries

reaffirmed their respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Despite these commitments, Bulgaria adopted a more assertive stance in 2019, when its parliament approved the so-called National Framework Position and Parliamentary Declaration, outlining conditions for supporting North Macedonia's EU accession (COUNCIL OF MINISTERS OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA, 2019; NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA, 2019). This position was later annexed as a unilateral statement to the Council conclusions of 2020, paving the way for the country's official veto later that year.

Bulgaria's demands address several key areas. It requests that the Negotiating Framework avoid explicit recognition of a distinct Macedonian language, while emphasizing its Bulgarian linguistic roots. Bulgaria also expects constitutional amendments recognizing the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia as a constituent group, making this a prerequisite for further progress in accession negotiations. Additionally, Bulgaria calls on North Macedonia to refrain from supporting claims regarding the existence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. As Buldioski and Tcherneva (2020) argue, this marked a significant shift, as Bulgaria "broke the taboo on involving historical disputes in enlargement negotiations", and reinforces the notion of politicization of enlargement, too.

Minority protection represents a particularly sensitive and politicized dimension that became the center of the expected constitutional changes. Similarly to Greece, Hungary, and Croatia, Bulgaria maintains a strong interest in its kin-minority residing in neighboring states. Given the above-detailed historical preconceptions, the country has actively sought to pressure countries to formally recognize the Bulgarian minority in their national legislation—such as reportedly in Albania (HAJDARI, 2025, p. 39)—, to influence smaller minority groups—such as the Gorani community in Kosovo (CHERESHEVA, 2017)—to declare themselves Bulgarian, or to undertake symbolic steps rooted in its national narrative, such as the attempt to rename Dimitrovgrad, a predominantly Bulgarian-inhabited town in Serbia, to its original Bulgarian name, Tsaribrod (PIEŃKOWSKI, 2018).

The willingness of these minority groups to declare themselves Bulgarian also has practical dimensions. Bulgaria's EU membership provides tangible incentives for individuals in neighboring countries to claim Bulgarian identity, as Bulgarian citizenship grants access to EU labor markets. In the context of North Macedonia, "Bulgaria's diaspora-citizenship regime, which is built on the doctrine that Macedonians are of

Bulgarian origin and therefore eligible for citizenship upon declaring that origin” (VANGELOV, 2025), has resulted in more than 210,000 citizens of North Macedonia being issued Bulgarian citizenship between 2007 and 2025 (DARIKNEWS.BG, 2025). Thus, these figures alone, combined with Bulgaria’s ethno-historical narratives, provide Bulgaria with a strong argument for demanding that the Bulgarian minority be included in the North Macedonian constitution.

A partial breakthrough was achieved under the French EU Presidency in 2022, when a compromise proposal enabled North Macedonia to formally open accession negotiations and hold its first intergovernmental conference. The so-called European Proposal, more precisely the Second Protocol, is a legally binding component of the Negotiating Framework, which, among other aspects, requires constitutional amendments recognizing the Bulgarian minority before further progress can occur (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA, 2022, p. 23). While Bulgaria has formally lifted its veto, the accession process remains contingent upon North Macedonia fulfilling these conditions. The European Proposal once again underscored the asymmetric relations between EU member states and candidate countries, and showed the politicization of enlargement through bilateral, political disputes.

3. Albanian positions, interest, and engagement

The historical and identity-related dispute with Bulgaria takes place in a political environment that is highly favorable to the Albanian political corpus. The SDSM–DUI government’s main objective continues to be the country’s steadfast Euro-Atlantic integration (EUROPEAN WESTERN BALKANS, 2020a), which aligns with Albanian political interests. Given the shared understanding of and efforts to advance North Macedonia’s accession to the EU, there is no rivalry between the two nations (Macedonians and Albanians, respectively) in the domain of foreign affairs; rather, this realm serves as the glue that holds them together as parts of the federative multination-state, primarily on the basis of their mutually shared objective.

Under the premierships of Zoran Zaev and later Dimitar Kovačevski, the Albanian political role, presence, and influence—exercised through inter-institutional positions, also in the executive branch of power—provided the community with formal access to

shaping foreign affairs. To secure a stable government, SDSM depended on its Albanian coalition partner; thus, DUI could serve as “the kingmaker in the government formation process” (MARCHL, 2020), allowing Albanian political leadership to acquire its highest level of formal participation to date. These strong institutional positions were illustrated by Artan Grubi and Bujar Osmani, who assumed leading cabinet roles as First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Political System and Inter-Community Relations, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, respectively (EUROPEAN WESTERN BALKANS, 2020b). Osmani’s position provided the most direct—and official—access to shaping foreign policy, including the ongoing bilateral dispute with Bulgaria.

In the meantime, Albanian political actors remained aware that, given the nature of North Macedonia’s bilateral issues concerning Macedonian identity, it is ultimately the Macedonian political elites who define the negotiating positions. Nevertheless, after 2017—and especially following the formation of the new government in 2020—the Albanian political bloc’s inter-institutional positions rendered DUI, as one interviewee argued, ‘omnipotent’ in almost all fields of governance. This was combined with positive momentum following North Macedonia’s accession to NATO, seen as the successful outcome of resolving the name dispute with Greece, which strengthened Albanian expectations that their key foreign policy priority of EU accession would soon be realized.

Bulgaria’s formal veto, however, caught Albanian political elites by surprise. They once again found themselves stalled, due to a bilateral dispute of a historical and identity-related nature, an issue that did not directly concern them as an ethnic group. The fear of failing to deliver EU accession to their Albanian electorate—and thus potentially losing electoral support—combined with their increased level of political representation within the executive branch (particularly in foreign affairs), sparked heightened proactiveness, engagement, and a strong desire to see the Bulgarian dispute resolved. In the eyes of Macedonians, however, their political presence and engagement raised the question of (il)legitimacy.

3.1. Political legitimacy and credibility

Legitimacy and credibility played central roles in framing political narratives about Albanian participation and engagement. Macedonian political elites—notably the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (*Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство*, hereinafter VMRO–DPMNE)—criticized SDSM for including Albanian politicians in foreign policy matters, especially in bilateral disputes. VMRO–DPMNE described Osmani (Minister of Foreign Affairs) as someone “who negotiated about the Macedonian identity and the Macedonian language [, and who] has no credibility” and that during negotiations, his presence was seen as “highly controversial” (REPUBLIKA ENGLISH, 2025). This political narrative claims that Albanians, as some interviewees phrased it, ‘would sell out the state’ because they allegedly do not understand Macedonian sensitivities regarding identity-related issues. Hence, Albanians were and continue to be portrayed as illegitimate representatives who work against state-level and/or Macedonian interests in negotiations.

Ahmeti, the leader of DUI, also met with Bulgarian representatives; his political activity was on par with his foreign policy actions when the name dispute with Greece was still unresolved (MARUSIC, 2013), and it was likewise perceived as illegitimate by VMRO–DPMNE. On several occasions, the Albanian politician called for “taking concrete steps and assuming [political] responsibility” (RADIO SLOBODNA EVROPA, 2021) in resolving the bilateral dispute and unblocking North Macedonia’s EU integration. Furthermore, Ahmeti commented on issues concerning history, underlining that Albanians of North Macedonia do care about Macedonian history; for instance, he claimed that Goce Delčev, in the spirit of good neighborly relations, cooperated with Albanians (SKOPJE1.MK, 2020) and wore a fes, a traditional Albanian hat.

Although Osmani was not seen as a credible negotiator by Macedonian political elites, he was, in fact, the minister responsible for managing both foreign affairs and EU integration. His formal political engagement was substantial, surpassing the activities of SDSM. Interviews even suggest that their Macedonian coalition partner willingly allowed him to take charge of the issue, given the backlash to potential concessions from (ethnic) Macedonian society. As a result, Albanians, notably Osmani, demonstrated formal and visible political engagement in the Bulgarian historical and identity-related issue.

3.2. State-level representation or personal ambitions?

Aside from criticism towards credibility and legitimacy, there are contradictory narratives regarding Osmani's professional and/or personal agenda. The politician, described by interviewees as 'an ambitious minister', may have had personal ambitions that pushed him toward a swift agreement with Bulgaria. Having witnessed the international success of the Prespa Agreement while serving as Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European Affairs, Osmani may have sought to make a similar political impact. As DUI's candidate in the 2024 presidential elections (EURONEWS ALBANIA, 2024; DEMJANSKI, 2024), he could have campaigned on bringing the country closer to the EU. To do so, he needed a tangible success, just as the Prespa Agreement was for the ruling coalition.

In contrast, as foreign minister, Osmani was (and have been) expected to represent state-level, rather than personal or exclusively Albanian interests. The above-mentioned ambitions, echoed by multiple interviewees, also reinforce the Macedonian narrative that Albanians, given the lack of shared elements of identity with the majority ethnic group, were unable and unwilling to safeguard national interests. Taken together, these narratives suggest that Osmani may have blurred the lines between his official role and personal ambitions. At the same time, after the adoption of the European Proposal, he came to absorb much of the blame, contributing DUI's "eroding popularity" (REPUBLIKA ENGLISH, 2025) among Albanian voters.

3.3. Connecting state-level issues with the ethnic agenda

There are three principal themes through which the Albanian political corpus has sought to incorporate its own demands into the European Proposal or to link them to the required constitutional amendments. Although these (sometimes hypothetical) demands—particularly the redefinition of constituent peoples and official languages in the constitution—are not new, the so-called 'double (Badinter) majority'⁵¹ gives them significant bargaining instruments.

⁵¹ The so-called 'double majority' or 'Badinter formula', introduced by the OFA and reflecting the principles of consociational democracy, requires two concurrent majorities for certain legislation to pass: a general parliamentary majority and a majority among representatives belonging to ethnic communities not in the majority population. In practice, that means that without the support of Albanian parties in the legislative

First, the Second Protocol foresees that North Macedonia “will create the necessary comprehensive legal framework for the full opening of the archives [...] of the former communist-era state security services [...] in the period 1945–1991” and provide “clear opportunities for free, unrestricted and timely access, research, right of use, publication and institutional storage and preservation of relevant documents.” (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF BULGARIA, 2022). This provision suggests that it does not apply exclusively to Bulgarians but can also include North Macedonia’s Albanians, potentially having a future negative impact on interethnic relations.

Second, the legal process of adopting constitutional changes would create an opportunity for Albanians to redefine the wording concerning their legal status within the state, particularly in the preamble. According to the Constitution, “the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia, the Macedonian people, as well as citizens living within its borders who are part of the Albanian people [...]” (REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA, 2019, Preamble); this formulation distinguishes between the Macedonian people and citizens belonging to other ethnicities. A renewed constitutional debate could therefore enable Albanian political actors to advocate for a redefinition of their role, specifically seeking recognition as equal constituent peoples. This aspiration is reflected in their political objective to “amend the country’s constitution to add Albanians as a founding ethnicity of the country” (MARUSIC, 2021).

This change could also redefine the nature of North Macedonia, potentially transforming the country into a constitutionally recognized binational state. Admirim Aliti, former Minister of Information Society and Administration, for example, explained the inclusion of Bulgarians by stating that “our constitution confirms that apart from Macedonians and Albanians, there are also other nationalities who live in North Macedonia” (EURONEWS ALBANIA, 2022). This statement indicates that the Albanian political leadership already perceives Macedonians and Albanians as equal, constituent elements of the state; what is missing is the symbolic and formal recognition of this political reality in the country’s highest legal document. This position was reaffirmed already year later, in 2017, by all major Albanian political parties, which called for “the strict implementation of the principle of multi-ethnicity in the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, where Albanians are recognized as the state-forming people” (TELEGRAFI, 2017). The

process, the implementation of constitutional amendments is legally unfeasible. Thus, their approval is a legal necessity that cannot be procedurally circumvented or bypassed.

constitutional amendments would therefore provide the necessary legal platform to institutionalize this longstanding⁵² demand, demonstrating the Albanian political corpus' internal unity and long-term continuity in its constitutional and political objectives.

Third, the constitutional amendments would also pave the way for changes to the definition of the Albanian language in the Constitution (SI, 2023). Although the OFA significantly improved the status of the minority languages, Albanian being the most prominent one, it is not explicitly listed as an official language in the constitutional text. Hence, Article 7 of the Constitution only states that “the Macedonian language [...] is the official language... [and] any other language spoken by at least 20 percent of the population is also an official language” (REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA, 2019, Art. 7). While this provision effectively applies only to Albanian—given the demographic size of Albanian minority relative to other ethnic groups—it does so indirectly, without explicitly naming the language. Albanian political actors have therefore sought to replace this indirect formulation with explicit constitutional recognition of Albanian as a co-official language.

The 2018 Law on the Use of Languages already expanded the official use of Albanian across public institutions nationwide, particularly in municipalities where Albanians constitute at least 20 percent of the population (MARUSIC, 2024b). However, this legal document,⁵³ often referred to as the “officialization of the Albanian language as the second official language” (BALKANWEB, 2024), does not constitutionally define Albanian as a co-official language; a situation Albanian political actors continue to seek to change. Such recognition would, first and foremost, have symbolic significance, formally reinforcing the binational character of the state.

3.4. The reception of the European Proposal

The European Proposal became part of North Macedonia's Negotiating Framework. In doing so, it further reinforced the politicization of enlargement and set a precedent by introducing political issues as legally binding elements of the accession process. The

⁵² Even before the OFA, the Albanian political actors emphasized constitutional recognition of their status (RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY, 2001) as constituent peoples of North Macedonia.

⁵³ The law was reviewed by the Venice Commission in 2019, which expressed concerns regarding its scope, finding it excessive (VENICE COMMISSION, 2019). In 2024, the Constitutional Court of North Macedonia delayed its ruling on the revision of the law to a later date (TESTORIDES, 2024).

adoption of the documents by the North Macedonian parliament and government, amid opposition boycotts (EURONEWS, 2022) and widespread demonstrations (DEUTSCHE WELLE, 2022; DIMITRIEVSKA, 2022), raised multiple concerns. The bilateral agreement lacked public consultations, parliamentary consensus, kept its contents and requirements for the country largely undisclosed, and was hastily accepted by the government.⁵⁴

The reception of the European Proposal, especially the Second Protocol, strengthened anti-Albanian narratives and fueled mistrust toward DUI politicians, particularly Osmani. The foreign minister was accused of acting against the national interest, which—given the sensitivity of the issue for Macedonian identity—had previously been framed as allowing no compromises with Bulgaria (MARUSIC, 2022; INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE, 2024). Moreover, a year before the European Proposal, the North Macedonian parliament—including members of both the governing coalition and the opposition, Macedonians and Albanians alike—adopted a resolution outlining how bilateral negotiations should be conducted and defining potential red lines. The resolution called for “unequivocal respect” for the “autochthony of the Macedonian nation, its historical, linguistic, cultural and religious continuity” (MARUSIC, 2021). In the view of many Macedonian political elites, the European Proposal—and Osmani, too—disregarded these principles, including the prior interethnic consensus on the matter. Conversely, Osmani failed to represent national positions—which, as foreign minister, he was mandated to uphold—and thereby undermined national unity.

The Albanian reading differs starkly from the Macedonian narrative. According to interviews, Osmani did not ‘sell out the Macedonian identity vis-à-vis Bulgaria’; rather, by placing minority protection at the forefront—and by framing it as a constitutional requirement—the agreement was seen as safeguarding identity. The perception among Albanian interlocutors is that bilateral negotiations concerned two separable themes: minority issues (i.e., the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia and their constitutional

⁵⁴ Although a play-by-play reenactment of the events leading up to the signing and adoption of the European Proposal is beyond the scope of this analysis, a brief timeline is presented to better visualize what had transpired in July 2022. On 16 July, the North Macedonian parliament held a debate on the Negotiating Framework and the Second Protocol without knowing the exact composition of the latter document (RFE/RL’S BALKAN SERVICE, 2022). It adopted its conclusions, which the government accepted the following day during a special session. This session granted Osmani permission to sign the Second Protocol, which he did in Sofia, Bulgaria on 17 July (BTA, 2025). On 18 July, the European Council adopted the Negotiating Framework alongside the Second Protocol; this meant that bilateral obligations became part of North Macedonia’s legally binding requirements, notably the constitutional amendments. Lastly, the EU held the first intergovernmental conference with North Macedonia on 19 July, marking the formal start of the membership negotiations process (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2022).

inclusion) and questions related to history, language, and identity. A compromise was thus brokered that returned debates on historical matters to the Joint Multidisciplinary Expert Commission on Historical and Educational Issues.⁵⁵ These subjects, described as ‘politically unnecessary issues’, were to be addressed ‘by intellectuals’, whereas minority protection was not seen as affecting Macedonian identity, language, or history.

The European Proposal, and especially the constitutional amendments it envisages, generated divergent public perceptions along ethnic lines. For many Albanians, it represented a victory, as the path toward EU integration was unblocked once again (POLITIKO, 2022). For many Macedonians, however, fears of renewed concessions—similar to those made in the dispute with Greece—combined with a revived narrative of “national betrayal” (TELEGRAFI, 2022). This perception stems from the view that identity-related issues are ‘Macedonian problems only’, leading to the claim that Osmani not only mishandled Macedonian identity but also failed to represent state-level interests. As one interviewee argued, it was a ‘mistake made but not admitted’. Two competing interpretations thus emerge: one portraying the agreement as successfully preventing Macedonian identity issues from becoming central accession requirements, and the other characterizing Osmani’s actions as a “political and strategic mistake” (STOIMENOVA, 2025).

4. Life after the European Proposal

The parliamentary elections of 2024 marked the end of the SDSM–DUI coalition, the return of the largest right-wing political party, and the continuation of a stalemate concerning the required constitutional amendments. The new cabinet, headed by the VMRO–DPMNE consists of the For Our Macedonia (*За Наша Македонија*) party and the Albanian VLEN Coalition⁵⁶ (in Albanian: *Koalicioni VLEN*; in Macedonian:

⁵⁵ It must be noted, however, that the Second Protocol also foresees progress on these sensitive historical questions, particularly considering Bulgaria’s firm positions (as discussed in the previous chapter) regarding the ethnogenesis and language of Macedonians.

⁵⁶ The VLEN Coalition is the electoral partnership of four Albanian parties: the Besa Movement (in Albanian: *Lëvizja Besa*; in Macedonian: *Движење Беса*), the Alternative (in Albanian: *Alternative*; in Macedonian: *Алтернатива*), the Democratic Movement (in Albanian: *Lëvizja Demokratike*; in Macedonian: *Демократско Движење*), and the Alliance for Albanians (in Albanian: *Aleanca për Shqiptarët*; in Macedonian: *Алијанса за Албанците*). In terms of foreign policy objectives, all parties are firm supporters of the country’s EU integration; hence, the paper, if not indicated otherwise, will treat their coalition as a homogenous political entity.

Коалиција Вреду; hereinafter VLEN), which had positioned itself as the opposition of and alternative to DUI. The continued stagnation of EU integration greatly contributed to the government change, as the high levels of public dissatisfaction were also driven by perceptions that the previous governing coalition had made excessive concessions to Bulgaria (COUNCIL OF EUROPE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY, 2025).⁵⁷ Conversely, VMRO–DPMNE has taken an “uncompromising position” (GJONI, 2025), opposing the constitutional amendments under the European Proposal, arguing that North Macedonia must first receive binding guarantees from Bulgaria and the EU that no additional political conditions would be imposed in the future (ЈОСИФОВСКА, 2022), and that constitutional amendments shall “come into force after North Macedonia joins the EU” (EURONEWS ALBANIA, 2023). This chapter highlights how, under these new political circumstances, Albanian parties can and have been navigating to reach their foreign policy objectives.

The foreign policy objectives of Albanian political parties—including VLEN and DUI, now in opposition after more than two decades—have remained consistent, with EU integration as their central strategic priority. Before the elections, VLEN agreed not to cooperate with Macedonian parties unwilling to resolve the bilateral dispute with Bulgaria (KOSOVO ONLINE, 2024) and to pursue resolution within the first six months in power (KIRILOV & ANGELOVA, 2024). This deadline, however, had already passed, testifying not only to VMRO–DPMNE’s reluctance to resolve the bilateral issue but also to VLEN’s inability to influence (mainly internal) policy.

The current political configuration resembles the third period under VMRO–DPMNE (2008–2017), as outlined in the Introduction. The government change altered the balance of power between coalition partners: while Albanian actors continue to prioritize resolving bilateral disputes to advance EU integration, their influence on governance, including foreign policy, has weakened due to a weaker institutional position (TELEGRAFI, 2024). Formally, their capacity to shape policies—including negotiations with Bulgaria—has become limited, if not nonexistent. Unlike DUI under the SDSM-led coalitions, VLEN is not the kingmaker anymore, which decreases its strategic position within the government.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Other reasons include North Macedonia’s poor economic situation, and the numerous political scandals involving DUI and its senior leadership that weakened the party’s legitimacy and popularity both among its Albanian electorate and within the broader Macedonian society (KOBESZKO, 2024).

⁵⁸ The cabinet (as well as the parliament) is dominated by VMRO–DPMNE with its 58 seats, followed by VLEN with 14 and ZNAM with 6 representatives. This means that VMRO–DPMNE was not reliant on

Today, Albanian parties' efforts remain constrained by the priorities of their Macedonian coalition partner. Unlike DUI in coalition with SDSM, VLEN lacks the leverage and political capital to pressure VMRO–DPMNE (KOSOVO ONLINE, 2024), particularly on identity and sovereignty issues—all part of the bilateral dispute with Bulgaria. Consequently, Albanian actors' limited formal access to executive decision-making, makes them institutionally constrained in resolving bilateral disputes, highlighting the asymmetrical nature of power-sharing in North Macedonia.

The proposed constitutional amendment has broader political implications. Macedonian elites resist change, fearing further Bulgarian demands. Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski stated that North Macedonia requires “clear and explicit guarantees from the European Council that Macedonian identity and the Macedonian language will not be challenged [...] and that bilateral disputes will no longer be allowed to influence the accession process” (NOVINITE.COM, 2025). This political demand aligns with the public opinion: a survey by the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” (2023) found that almost two-thirds of respondents oppose making the constitutional amendment a prerequisite for accession negotiations, including 80 percent of Macedonians and 32 percent of Albanians (pp. 11–12).

In the meantime, EU integration remains a politically valuable goal for both Macedonian and Albanian parties. However, given the Albanian electorate's pro-European orientation, stagnation in the accession process carries greater political risks for Albanian actors, as seen in DUI's loss of power. Moreover, the EU's 2024 decision to decouple Albania's and North Macedonia's accession processes (MARUSIC, 2024a) may weaken Albanian parties' credibility in North Macedonia, echoing similar concerns like in the post-Bucharest Summit period. The prospect that Albania may join the EU faster (just like it did with NATO) reinforces perceptions among Albanians in North Macedonia that their Euro-Atlantic aspirations are constrained by factors beyond their control. Mitropolitski (2014) similarly concludes that Albanians' patience may end if North Macedonia's integration process remains stalled (p. 324). This situation under the VMRO–DPMNE cabinet ties the hands of the Albanian political corpus, creating growing frustration, fear of losing their electorate's support, and limited access to political influence.

cooperation with either Albanian or Macedonian parties to form a government; this is also reflected in the number of ministerial positions allocated to VLEN's representatives and foreshadows their weaker ability to influence policy.

5. Conclusion

Bulgaria's veto and the subsequent adoption of the European Proposal demonstrate how external conditionality—the politicization of enlargement—and internal power dynamics jointly shape North Macedonia's EU accession trajectory. While Albanian political actors have consistently supported the Euro-Atlantic integration as a strategic priority, their prominent role—especially in the executive branch of power—in negotiations with Bulgaria over historical and identity-related issues generated domestic political contestation. This case study illustrates that although Albanian political actors have gained greater access to institutional decision-making and demonstrated an increased capacity to shape foreign policy, their influence remains contested and may carry unintended consequences for interethnic cohesion. Foreign affairs, more specifically, the strategic objective of Euro-Atlantic integration, served as a binding force among distinct nations within a federative state that could have easily broken down.

The perceived connection between their support for EU-mandated constitutional amendments and the advancement of Albanian constitutional and political claims inside the country has further reinforced suspicions regarding the strategic motivations of the Albanian political leadership. Consequently, while Albanian political actors function as consistent proponents of EU integration, their capacity to shape foreign policy remains structurally constrained by shifting political coalitions, as witnessed after the parliamentary elections in 2024. This case study thus underpins a broader structural dynamic: the policy impact of the Albanian political corpus remains contingent upon domestic political configurations and interethnic power balances.

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Declaration of research ethics permission



Corvinus University of Budapest
Office of the Vice-Rector for Research
Research Ethics Committee
H-1093 Budapest, Fővám tér 8.

File number: KRH/366/2024
Administrator: Krisztián Ágai
Extension: 5196
Attachment: -

Principal Researcher: Ferenc Németh PhD student
Email: ferenc.nemeth2@stud.uni-corvinus.hu
Project title: Perception, Interest, and Engagement: Albanian Participation in North Macedonia's Bilateral Issues.

DECLARATION

On the basis of the fully completed review questionnaire and the supporting professional documents relating to the submitted request for research ethics approval the Committee grants the request and

grants the research ethics approval for the research.
The research shall be conducted in accordance with the review questionnaire.

JUSTIFICATION

The Committee's assessment is as follows:

The attached documents such as the project plan worked out for the referred application, the declaration form designed for this purpose and fully completed by the applicant are compliant with the principles formulated in article (6) of the *Provisions of the Rector No 2/2020. (V. 26.) on setting up the CUB Ad Hoc Research Ethics Committee, and on issuing research ethics permissions*, which governs these provisions and the planned research is in accordance with the CUB's research strategy and institution building plan. *Please note that the declaration forms issued in the annexes 2.a, 2.b and 2.c of the referred Provisions of the Rector shall be completed and signed in all cases during the course of the research.* The decision set out in the operative part was made by the Committee on its meeting of Dec 10th, 2024.

Budapest, December 13th, 2024



[Signature]
Prof Dr. Zoltán Oszkár Szántó
Vice Rector for Faculty and Research
Chair of the Research Ethics Committee

Research Ethics Review Questionnaire for Research Involving Human Subjects

1. számú melléklet

Kutatásetikai ellenőrző kérdőív humán érintettségű kutatásokhoz
Nem orvosi és nem pszichológiai humán vizsgálatok esetén, elsődleges kutatás

1. Válaszoljon az alábbi kérdésekre a tervezett kutatásra vonatkozóan:	
a.) Milyen eljárásokat alkalmaz annak biztosítására, hogy a résztvevők beleegyezése megfelelő információ, tájékoztatás birtokában történjen? (A vizsgált személynek előzetesen, önkéntesen (ésszerűtlen kényszerszeryakorlástól és indokolatlan meggyőzéstől mentesen) és minden lényeges információ birtokában kell beleegyezést adnia a részvételhez. A tájékoztatásnak minden esetben tartalmaznia kell a beleegyezés visszavonásának jogát.) Válasza tartalmazza a tájékozott beleegyezési nyilatkozatot is, amit a kutatás résztvevőinek ad. (Részei: Tájékoztatás a kutatásról és a Részvételi beleegyezés nyilatkozat) Minden résztvevőt az interjúra való, írásban történő felkéréskor, valamint az interjú előtt szóban (személyesen) tájékoztatom a kutatás legfőbb pontjairól. Ezek közé tartozik a Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem és a doktori program, illetve a kutatást végző személy bemutatása, a disszertáció elkészítésének menete, a kutatási téma, a módszertan, a kutatási kérdések, valamint a disszertáció tervezett befejezési időpontjának ismertetése. Hangsúlyos szerepet kap az anonimitásra és a kutatásban való önkéntességre való felhívás, a beleegyezés bármikori visszavonásának joga, valamint az, hogy az interjú során elhangzott információkat kizárólag a doktori disszertáció elkészítésére fogom felhasználni. A részvételi beleegyezési nyilatkozatot még az interjú előtt, elektronikus levélben továbbítom tanulmányozásra az interjúalanyoknak, a személyes interjú előtt pedig szóban ismertetem és átbeszéljük annak pontjait. A teljeskörű tájékoztatás után történik annak aláírása. A használni kívánt részvételi beleegyezési nyilatkozatot e dokumentumhoz csatoltam.	
b.) Hogyan tervezi a kutatás résztvevőinek elérését, toborzását? A résztvevők nem érezhetik azt, hogy részt „kell” venniük a kutatásban. Hogyan biztosított az önkéntesség? A résztvevőket elektronikus levél formájában keresem meg, ezt követően pedig írásban, esetleg – a résztvevő igényei szerint – telefonon tartjuk a kapcsolatot kizárólag az interjú részleteinek megbeszélése (pontos időpont és helyszín, illetve a részvételi beleegyezési nyilatkozat) érdekében. Írásban és az interjú előtt szóban is hangsúlyos szerepet fog kapni többek között az, hogy nem kötelező a megkeresésnek (vagyis az interjúigénynek) eleget tennie az alanyoknak; beleegyezését az interjú előtt és közben bármikor visszavonhatja. A résztvevő interjúalanyoktól a kutatás folytatásához javaslatokat kérek arra vonatkozóan, hogy véleményük szerint kikkel lehetne bővíteni az interjúalanyok körét.	

c.) Hogyan biztosítja a kutatási adatok bizalmas kezelését? A kutatás hogyan biztosítja a titoktartást, a névtelenséget és azt, hogy ne legyenek azonosíthatók a kutatás résztvevői? Figyeljen arra, hogy a beazonosíthatóság nemcsak a név alapján történhet. Mindenki aláír-e titoktartási nyilatkozatot, aki hozzáfér az adatokhoz (pl. kutatócsoport tagjai, interjúvoló, átitró, finanszírozó)? A kutatás során maximálisan biztosítom azt, hogy a titoktartás és a névtelenség fennmaradjon, illetve azt, hogy ne legyenek azonosíthatók a kutatásban résztvevő alanyok. A részvételi beleegyezési nyilatkozat aláírása előtt felhívom a figyelmet arra, hogy a kutatási adatokat kizárólag én kezelem, ahhoz más, illetéktelen személy nem férhet hozzá. A kutatásban – az anonimitást figyelembe véve – nem fognak szerepelni az interjúalanyok nevei vagy olyan motívumok (életkor, nem, állampolgárság, etnikum, munkakör, lakóhely, politikai hovatartozás), amikből az olvasó következtetni tudna az adott interjúalany kilétére. A részvételi beleegyezési nyilatkozatot az összes interjúalany és jómagam is aláírjuk, kivétel nélkül.	
d.) Hogyan tervezi az adatok publikációját, disszeminációját? Ki kap visszajelzést az eredményekről és milyen formában? (pl. ha egy szervezetben történik a kutatás, kap-e külön a szervezet visszajelzést és hogyan? Ha résztvevő akciókutatás keretében történt a vizsgálat, hogyan történik az adatok disszeminációja? Hogyan minimalizálják a nemkívánatos azonosítást (pl. álnevek használata, kulcsinformációk megváltoztatása, összesített formában történő adatközlés?)) A kutatás a doktori disszertációhoz szükséges, az interjúk során összegyűjtött adatokat kizárólag annak elkészítéséhez, összesített és rendszerezett formában használom fel. Az interjúalanyokat mindezekről tájékoztatom, a disszertáció elkészülte után egy köszönőüzenet keretében megküldöm azt részükre.	

2. Jár-e a kutatás:	IGEN	NEM
a.) kockázattal, potenciális kárral, vagy bármi negatív következménnyel a résztvevők számára? (pszichológiai, érzelmi, fizikai, szociális, gazdasági, jogi stb.)?		X
b.) kockázattal vagy veszéllyel a kutatók számára?		X
c.) kockázattal, kárral, negatív következménnyel egyéb személyek, szervezetek számára? (pl. finanszírozó testület, szervezet, ahol terepmunka zajlik, stb.)		X
d.) olyan helyzettel, ahol a beleegyező nyilatkozat nem lehetséges (pl. nagy tömeg)?		X
e.) gyerekek/ kiskorúak vagy gyámság alá vontak részvételével? (Hogyan történik a kiskorú és a szülői/ gondviselői tájékoztatás, beleegyező nyilatkozat megszerzése? Intézményen keresztül elérésnél hogyan történik az Intézményi engedély kérése?)		X
f.) egyéb sebezhető csoportok részvételével: mentális/ fizikai betegek vagy mentálisan veszélyeztetett egyének, rabok, más sérülékeny, kiszolgáltatott csoportok tagjainak (pl. gyermeket váró nők, idősek, diákok, fegyveres szervezetek tagjai, diszkriminált csoportok) a részvételével? (Itt különösen fontos tisztában lenni a speciális csoportokra kialakított törvényi szabályozással.)	X	
g.) kutatóval egyenlőtlen hatalmi helyzetben lévő kutatási alanyok részvételével? (pl. oktató hallgatói körében, szervezeti vezető beosztottjai körében toboroz kutatási alanyokat. Hogyan biztosított az önkéntesség?)		X
h.) kapuőrök/ a csoport érdekeit képviselő személy igénybevételével a kutatási alanyokhoz történő eljutásban? (amikor nem közvetlenül jutunk el a kutatási alanyokhoz, hanem pl. iskolaigazgató révén tanulókhöz eljutás, munkahelyi vezető, titkársági dolgozó révén alkalmazottakhoz – itt felmerül a kérdés, hogy nem volt-e kikényszerített a részvétel.)		X
i.) a vizsgált személyek tudatos félrevezetésével, vagy a vizsgálat természetére vagy céljára vonatkozó információk eltitkolásával?		X

j.) aránytalanul nagy pénzügyi juttatással vagy egyéb juttatással a vizsgálat résztvevői számára? (ami túlmutat a költségtérítésen és az idő ésszerű kompenzálásán)		X
k.) külföldi kutatási helyszínnel, külföldi terepmunkával?	X	
l.) összeférhetlenségi problémákkal? (kutató és szervezetének pénzügyi érdekeltségei okoznak-e összeférhetlenségi problémát? A finanszírozó szervezet érdekeltségei okoznak-e összeférhetlenségi problémát?)		X
m.) adminisztratív, személyes vagy titkos adatok felhasználásával, amihez külön hatósági engedélyek szükségesek?		X
n.) azon túli adat, információ, eredmény megosztással, amelyre a kutatási alanyok engedélyt adtak?		X
o.) olyan vizuális vagy vokális módszerek alkalmazásával, amely alapján azonosíthatók a kutatási alanyok? (videófelvétel, hangfelvétel – hogyan lesz biztosítva a névtelenség, a biztonságos (azonosítókat és válaszokat elkülönítő/ korlátozott hozzáféréssű) adattárolás és a megsemmisítés stb.)		
p.) Interneten, közösségi médián keresztül lekérdezéssel, adateléréssel (pl. fórumok, chat roomok)? (Válaszában tárgyalja, az adatok nyilvánosságát (nyitott/ korlátozott hozzáférés), az adatfelhasználás szabályozását, a tájékozott beleegyezés megszerzésének módját vagy ennek hiányában az indoklást, az adatok tárolását stb.)		X
q.) terepmunkával egy vagy több szervezetben? (A szervezet a végső publikációkban meg lesz-e nevezve? Milyen etikai kérdések merülnek fel a szervezeti kutatással kapcsolatban? Lesz-e disszemináció a szervezet számára? Különös körülménnyel kell eljárni, ha a kutató az adott szervezetben dolgozik, hiszen ebben az esetben a kutató kerülhet kiszolgáltatott pozícióba, stb.)		X
r.) érzékeny, intim témák tárgyalásával? (Droghasználat, szexuális élet, stb.)		X
s.) másodlagos adatok felhasználásával? (Válaszában részletezze az adatfelhasználás indoklását, az adatelérés módját, az adatok nyilvánosságát, hozzáférést/ mutassa be az eredeti adatgyűjtést és személyes adatok esetén a tájékozott beleegyezésre vonatkozó információkat.)		X

Az interjúk többsége ugyan egy kisebbségi csoport tagjaival zajlik, de ettől nem lesz (politikailag) érzékeny a téma és a kutatás sem. Az albán kisebbség helyzete és jogi képviselete megfelelő Észak-Macedóniában, illetve a kutatás sem az albánok kisebbségi helyzetéről szól. A kutatás (és az interjúk) során a csoport hozzáállását vizsgálom az ország kétoldalú vitáihoz. Ettől függetlenül az interjúalanyokat biztosítani fogom arról, hogy az interjúkészítés önkéntes, illetve bármikor félbeszakítható, ha úgy érzik, hogy számukra érzékeny vagy túl átpolitizált/politikai a téma.

t.) egyéb etikai kockázatokkal, kérdésekkel?		X
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A kutatásom középpontjában az észak-macedóniai albánság külpolitikában betöltött szerepe áll. Ennek kutatásához a legjobb módszerek az bizonyul, ha a témát külföldi kutatási helyszínen (az észak-macedóniai Szkopje és Tetovo városában), szakértői interjúk készítésével is megtámogatom. A külföldi interjúkészítések során ugyanazokat az elveket alkalmazom, mintha a kutatás magyarországi körülmények között zajlana le. Etikai problémák és kockázatok felmerülését a külföldön történő kutatás során nem látom. Az interjúk (egyben a disszertáció) nyelve angol.

A / Amennyiben kérdőív 2. pont alatti részében bármelyik kérdésre IGEN-nel válaszolt,

- a.) akkor a táblázat alatt fejtse ki a választát, hogy a kutatás mely aspektusa miatt válaszolt az adott módon;
- b.) indokolja meg, hogy miért úgy szükséges végrehajtani a kutatást, ahogy végrehajtásra kerül;
- c.) ismertesse, hogyan gondoskodik az etikai problémák kezeléséről, a kockázatok minimalizálásáról, kezeléséről.

B / Az alábbi nyilatkozatokat minden kutatás esetén szükséges megtenni!

- a.) Nyilatkozom, hogy a vonatkozó kutatásetikai szabályozást megismertem, annak rendelkezéseit elfogadom.
- b.) Nyilatkozom, hogy az adatokat az adatvédelmi szabályozásnak megfelelően kezeli a kutatásban valamennyi kutató, közreműködő.
- c.) Nyilatkozom, hogy a kutatás tervezése és végrehajtása során az egyetemi etikai szabályozását, az engedély rendelkezéseit betartom és valamennyi kutatásban résztvevő kutatóval, közreműködővel betartatom.

Név: Németh Ferenc

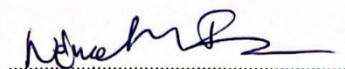
A kutatásban betöltött pozíció: doktorandusz, a kutatás felelőse/végrehajtója

Kutatás megnevezése: „Perception, Interest, and Engagement: Albanian Participation in North Macedonia's Bilateral Issues” (a doktori disszertáció munkacíme)

Kutatás tervezett ideje: 2024. december – 2025. január

Pályázat/ Projekt megnevezése, melynek a kutatás része: doktori disszertáció

Dátum: 2024. november 27.



aláírás

Consent to participating in the research

Consent to participating in the research⁵⁹

Name of the research project:	Perception, Interest, and Engagement: Albanian Participation in North Macedonia's Bilateral Issues
Designation of the relevant research topic:	Fieldwork (semi-structured interview) for doctoral dissertation
Name of person conducting the research:	Ferenc Németh

1. By virtue of my signature I hereby confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated with regard to the above project/research and the relevant data processing.
2. I was given the opportunity to weigh the information and to raise any questions.
3. I have understood that my participation is voluntary, and I have the right to cease my participation freely at any time without being obliged to offer any justification. In such cases, I may request to have data that has been recorded about me so far erased.

I have understood that my data will be featured on an anonymous/non-anonymous basis in any publication of the research.

4. I have understood that an audio/video recording will be made of the interview/focus group, that such recording will be stored securely and will be destroyed within a time limit of of completing the research.
5. I have understood that my data are only accessible to persons working in the project/research or

I consent to have my anonymous/non-anonymous data stored/archived and made available for use by other researchers (here further details should be added on confidential treatment).

⁵⁹ The main statement (shown in bold) serves as a basis for the consent; the optional parts (shown in italics) may be modified/ cancelled/ complemented if necessary)

6. I consent to my oral statements/photos being published with/without the indication of my name.
7. I agree to be contacted in the future with regard to this research/other future research.

I consent to take part in the above project/research.⁶⁰

Done at,

Name of participant	Date of birth	Signature

I have provided full information and received the consent.

Done at,

Name of person conducting the research	Signature
Ferenc Németh	

⁶⁰ If the person lacks full legal capacity (e.g. younger than 18), the consent of the guardian/parent is also required. Please fill in the relevant form, too.

List of participants

Participant ID	Background/Sector	Location	Interview Date ⁶¹
P01	international organization	Skopje	November 28
P02	civil society/nonprofit	Skopje	November 28
P03	civil society/nonprofit	Skopje	November 28
P04	civil society/nonprofit	Skopje	November 29
P05	civil society/nonprofit	Skopje	November 29
P06	government/public sector	online	December 10
P07	academia	online	December 10
P08	civil society/nonprofit	Skopje	December 11
P09	former government/public sector	Skopje	December 11
P10	former government/public sector	Skopje	December 12
P11	private sector	Skopje	December 12
P12	former government/public sector	Skopje	December 13
P13	government/public sector	Skopje	December 13
P14	government/public sector	Skopje	December 16
P15	academia	Tetovo	December 17
P16	academia	Tetovo	December 17
P17	academia	Tetovo	December 17
P18	former government/public sector	Tetovo	January 6
P19	private sector	Tetovo	January 6
P20	civil society/nonprofit	Tetovo	January 8
P21	government/public sector	Tetovo	January 8
P22	government/public sector	Skopje	January 22
P23	private sector	online	January 23
P24	academia	online	January 23
P25	private sector	Skopje	January 24

⁶¹ November–December interview dates refer to 2024; January interview dates refer to 2025.

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- Németh, F., 2026. Ride-or-die supporters? Albanian narratives on Euro-Atlantic integration. *Polarities*, 7(SI), pp. 73–96.
- Németh, F., 2025. Mit adott Észak-Macedóniának a Preszpa megállapodás? *Pro Minoritate*, Spring 2025, pp. 111–130.
- Németh, F., 2024. Mindent az euroatlanti integrációért: A macedón–görög névvita az észak-macedóniai albánok szemszögéből. *Pro Minoritate*, Spring 2024, pp. 87–104.
- Németh, F., 2023. Versenyfutás az albánok kegyeiért? In: T. Ördögh, ed. *Válság egykor és ma*. Budapest: Ludovika Egyetemi Kiadó, pp. 125–142.
- Németh, F., ed., 2023. *Foreign Policy Review: The Western Balkans in Changing World Dynamics*. Annual issue 2023/01. Budapest: Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.
- Németh, F., Ármás, J. and Orosz, A., eds., 2022. *Politics and Nationalisms in the Western Balkans*. Budapest: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade.
- Németh, F., 2022. Az albán politikai tér változásai Észak-Macedóniában. *Pro Minoritate*, Winter 2022, pp. 89–112.
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- Németh, F., 2020b. Kinek előnyös Észak-Macedónia NATO-csatlakozása? *KKI Elemzések*, 8(32), pp. 3–9.
- Németh, F. and Orosz, A., 2019. Észak-Macedónia: Cseberből vederbe? *KKI Elemzések*, E-2019(40), pp. 3–9.
- Németh, F. and Braun, A., 2017. Perspectives and challenges. *National Security Review: Periodical of the Military National Security Service*, 2017(1), pp. 92–115.
- Braun, A. and Németh, F., 2016. A foglyul ejtett állam. *Dél-Kelet Európa: Új nemzetközi kapcsolatok / South-East Europe: International Relations Quarterly*, 7(4).
- Németh, F., 2016. Fegyveres konfliktusok és válságkezelés Macedóniában. *Dél-Kelet Európa: Új nemzetközi kapcsolatok / South-East Europe: International Relations Quarterly*, 6(4), pp. 1–8.