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

**Doctoral Dissertation
Thesis Booklet**

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I. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE TOPIC

The 35-year-long political history of North Macedonia,¹ from the perspective of international relations and security studies, encapsulates more than just bilateral issues and interethnic dynamics. 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. 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. It 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.

Buzan's typology on nation-state relations provides the theoretical backbone for this research and explains how national security and interethnic struggles are interconnected. 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

¹ 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 dissertation 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.

more exposed to challenges aimed at national security, including separatism, fueled internally or externally, and secessionism.

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. Like a federative state, an imperial state is also “vulnerable to threats aimed at their national divisions” (Buzan, 1983, p. 49). 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.

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. 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.

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. Second, the EU integration processes of Albania and North Macedonia have been decoupled, 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.

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?

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.

II. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter details the research methodology and the structure of the dissertation. 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. 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.

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. 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.

Prior to the interviews, participants were provided via e-mail with a "Consent to Participate in Research" form, detailing the nature of the research, data protection measures, and procedures for data collection and processing. 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. All 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).

The dissertation has certain limitations, arising from its scope, definitions and methodology:

- it does not deal with kin-state, kinship, or kin-minority politics;
- it treats the Albanian political corpus as a single entity, unless contrasting views in this domain are evident;
- the research argues that foreign policy priorities are shared between citizens and (Albanian) political parties and that the foreign policy actions taken by these actors are in sync with the desires of their electorate.

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 to examine Albanian interests, perceptions and engagement in North Macedonia's bilateral disputes and Euro-Atlantic integration. The first article deconstructs the building blocks of Albanian foreign policy interests and examines their seemingly unwavering support for Euro-Atlantic integration. The second publication focuses on Albanian political participation in resolving the name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia. Building on their heightened political role in a federative state, the third publication examines the ongoing identity-related dispute with Bulgaria.

The three separate yet logically interrelated case studies, accessible in the Appendices, 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.

III. SCIENTIFIC RESULTS

This chapter summarizes the dissertation's theoretical and empirical findings.

Euro-Atlantic integration as a political–societal framework:

- integration into Western politico-military alliances represents the Albanian political corpus' most consistent foreign policy objective;
- when viewed beyond its institutional and welfare dimensions, 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 are understood as mechanisms that can ensure the protection and advancement of the Albanians' constitutional and collective rights and, contribute to sound interethnic relations.

On Albanian approaches and perceptions:

- 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;
- Albanians recognized identity sensitivities affecting the Macedonian majority and deferred to Macedonian leadership on identity-related issues;
- 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;
- albeit these differences, a pro-integration consensus persists across ethnic lines.

Deconstructing Albanian engagement in foreign affairs:

- 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;
- after 2001, Albanian actors shifted from informal, indirect influence to formal, institutionalized participation, including coalition participation, ministerial leadership, diplomatic communication, public advocacy, and networking;
- 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;
- Albanians also linked foreign policy developments to domestic constitutional objectives, aiming to reinforce societal security through legal mechanisms.

The interconnectedness of foreign policy and interethnic relations:

- foreign policy in North Macedonia cannot be analyzed independently from interethnic relations, as the two are mutually constitutive;
- foreign policy, especially Euro-Atlantic integration, serves as a rare convergence point that offers strategic benefits to both communities, despite their differing underlying motivations;
- 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 within their own (Albanian electorate).

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;
- while interethnic rivalry has not manifested *directly* in foreign affairs, mistrust remains and is often projected onto political narratives by blaming minority actors;
- as the research concluded, foreign policy is not a *direct* arena of interethnic rivalry, but Albanian participation generates or *can* generate internal tensions;
- Buzan's framework may 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.

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