BRJ

Balkan Research Journal

VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 1

ISSN: 2955-2516

BALKAN JOURNALS

BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 1

e-ISSN 2955-2524

Balkan Research Journal © 2025, BRJ

Volume 2 - Issue 1 | May 2025

Address of the Editorial Office
Makedonsko - Kosovska Brigada no. 29, 1000 Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia

brj.ibupress.com

Published by Balkan University Press

Editor in Chief

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Marijana Klemencic
ELT Department, Faculty of Education, International Balkan University, NORTH MACEDONIA

Editorial Secretariat

Asst. Sonaj Bilal
PCG Department, Faculty of Education, International Balkan University, NORTH MACEDONIA

Editorial Board

Prof. Dr. Zübeyde Sinem Genç
Department of English Language Teaching, Faculty of Education, Bursa Uludağ University, TURKIYE

Prof. Dr. Sonja Stojmenska Elzeser
Institute of Macedonian Literature, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, NORTH MACEDONIA

Prof. Dr. Tatjana Glušac
English Language Department, Faculty of Law and Business Studies "Dr. Lazar Vrkatić", SERBIA

Asst. Prof. Dr. Nurdan Kavaklı-Ulutaş
English Language Teaching Department, Izmir Demokrasi University, TURKIYE

Prof. Dr. Marianthi Karatsiori
Educational and Social Policy Department, University of Macedonia, GREECE

Assoc. Prof. Mevludin Ibish
Faculty of Law, International Balkan University, NORTH MACEDONIA

Asst. Prof. Seyhan Murtezan Ibrahimi
TLT Department, Faculty of Education, International Balkan University, NORTH MACEDONIA

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Liza Alili Sulejmani
Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, International Balkan University, NORTH MACEDONIA

Asst. Prof. Dr. Elena Parnadzieva Stanoevska
Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, International Balkan University, NORTH MACEDONIA

Asst. Prof. Dr. Marija Stevkovska
ELT Department, Faculty of Education, International Balkan University, NORTH MACEDONIA

Content

Articles

From Local Streams to Regional Dreams: Envisioning a Just Green Transition in the Western Balkans 1
Aida Kapetanovic

Democratic Stagnation and Nationalism in North Macedonia: Political, Institutional, and Social Challenge 15
Flamur Ismaili

Promoting Cultural Awareness and Autonomous Learning in Higher Education: A Case Study 33
Igballe Miftari-Fetishi

Challenges in Interpreting Studies: Students' Perspective and Views 45
Marina Pappa

Social Turbulence and Transformation in the Balkan Region: Challenges of Active Inclusion for Victims of Human Trafficking – A Case Study of Young Girls in North Macedonia 57
Natasa Dimeska and Marjan Dabeski

The Victim's Right to Compensation 77
Shkelqim Veseli and Besa Arifi

Globalization and Regional Conflicts of the Contemporary Era 85
Rilinda Maqellara Memeti

Book Review

Tekkes and Tombs of North Macedonia, by İsmail Güleç and Mümin Ali
Balkan University Press 2024 103
Book Review by: Asst. Prof. Dr. Uğur Öztürk

BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

© IBU

DOI: https://doi.org//10.69648/XWKD7658

Balkan Research Journal(BRJ), 2025; 2(1): 1-14

brj.ibupress.com

Online ISSN: 2955-2524

Application : 01.04.2025

Revision : 20.04.2025

Acceptance : 15.05.205

Publication : 30.05.2025

Kapetanovic, A. (2025). From local streams to regional dreams: envisioning a just green transition in the Western Balkans. Balkan Research Journal, 2(1), 1-14.

https://doi.org//10.69648/XWKD7658

Aida Kapetanovic

RECAS research fellow, University of Rijeka (Croatia) and Belgrade (Serbia)

Aida Kapetanovic, PhD, is now research fellow at RECAS programme of the Universities of Rijeka (CAS SEE) and Belgrade (IFDT).

Paper was presented at International Balkan Conference "Social Turbulence and Transformation in the Balkan Region", February 24-25, 2025, International Balkan University, Skopje, North Macedonia.

Acknowledgements: This research project is supported by Open Society Foundation Western Balkans, ERSTE Foundation and Rockefeller Brothers Fund

I declare no conflicts of interest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Aida Kapetanovic, Email: aida.kapetanovic@sns.it

BALKAN JOURNALS

From Local Streams to Regional Dreams: Envisioning a Just Green Transition in the Western Balkans

Aida Kapetanovic

Abstract

The implementation of the EU Green Agenda for the Western Balkans has led to a surge in hydropower projects in the region. These initiatives faced the opposition of peripheral rural communities, resulting in local conflicts that scaled to the regional level with the support of environmental organizations and experts. These conflicts represent a new form of environmental mobilization in the region, engaging local communities marginalized from civil society activism. Through a case study of the regional network "Let's Defend the Balkan Rivers," this paper explores the key issues driving mobilization for river protection and the mechanisms that enabled local struggles to scale to the regional level. It employs frame analysis of media content, movement documents, and semi-structured interviews with activists to examine the movement's cultural repertoires of collective action. It argues that grassroots opposition to hydropower projects has unveiled interconnected issues of environmental threats and democracy. Furthermore, it highlights how a deep emotional attachment to rivers motivated local communities to engage in collective action, fostering solidarity that bridged local rootedness with transnational cooperation. Drawing on environmental sociology, political ecology, and social movement studies, the research aligns with emerging scholarship from post-socialist Eastern Europe, which seeks to situate locally embedded forms of environmentalism within broader academic debates and global trends.

Keywords: Grassroots environmentalism, river protection, regional network, green transition, frame analysis

Introduction

With the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, the countries in the region committed to achieving climate neutrality by 2050, motivated by the goal of EU accession (Berishaj, 2021) and the urgency to tackle the impacts of climate change and rising temperatures (Kovacevic, 2021). This commitment unlocked investments and subsidies for renewable energy, that was directed towards expanding power generation capacity, rather than prioritizing energy efficiency improvements in outdated infrastructure (Gallop, 2021). In a water-rich region, investments in the hydropower sector emerged as the most suitable strategy to align with the EU agenda, while tackling economic, energy, and environmental challenges (Dogmus & Nielsen, 2020; Gallop, 2021). Between 2012 and 2024, more than 3,000 hydropower plants were planned, with small hydropower plants (SHPs)—generating less than 10 megawatts—accounting for over 90% of the projects (Schwarz, 2025). To be attractive to investors, these projects were subsidized by the state through a feed-in tariff system, that ensures the purchase of produced energy for 12 to 15 years at four times the market price. While benefiting from substantial incentives, SHPs have contributed only marginally to overall energy production, accounting for approximately 3.6% of the region's total electricity generation (Gallop, 2021). Moreover, SHPs fall under the category of water abstraction or run-of-river plants, which differ from traditional dams as they channel water through a system of pipes directly from the riverbed, without significant storage capacity. As a result, they divert large portions of water over long distances, significantly impacting even the smallest rivers and creeks (Schwarz, 2022).

Local communities in peripheral rural areas that rely on the rivers for water supply were mostly affected by these projects. Witnessing dry river beds, logging of large areas of forests for access roads, and construction machines showing up without notice, they started opposing these projects. Local struggles unfolded across the region, gaining the support of environmental organizations and experts and scaling to the national and regional level. These river protection mobilizations represent a significant shift in the region's environmental activism. Challenging traditional NGO-led environmentalism, these movements were driven by peripheral rural communities that have long been marginalized from political participation and often stigmatized as nationalist and conservative. Therefore, they have often been overlooked by academic scholarship and framing of civil society activism (Bilic & Stubbs, 2015). Conversely, grassroots resistance to small hydropower projects managed to unite local initiatives, environmental activists, and experts,

fostering coordinated efforts for river protection. Led by movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, the network "Let's Defend the Balkan Rivers" was established to enhance cooperation and mutual support in defending the region's natural resources.

This paper explores the issues that fostered grassroots mobilization for river protection and the cultural repertoires that facilitated the development of local struggles into a regional network. It builds on previous research on river protection movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and the current case study of "Let's Defend the Balkan Rivers". It combines environmental sociology, political ecology, and social movements studies, exploring the social and political implications of environmental threats, and the cultural and symbolic dimensions of local environmental conflicts. This perspective aligns with emerging scholarship on environmental activism(s) in post-socialist Eastern Europe, which seeks to situate locally embedded forms of environmentalism within broader academic debates and global trends.

The following sections will explore the theoretical framework and methodological approaches used in this research, followed by empirical sections that include the case study of the regional network and frame analysis. The concluding section will discuss the main findings and their implications.

Theoretical Framework

This research builds on theoretical debates at the intersection between environmental sociology, political ecology, and social movements studies. It draws on the concept of environmental justice, which emphasizes the social and political dimensions of environmental issues by linking the unequal distribution of environmental harms with exclusion from decision-making and lack of recognition of specific communities, identities, and cultures (Escobar, 2008; Martinez-Alier et al., 2016; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014).

Scholarship on Locally Unwanted Land Use (LULU) movements has highlighted how local struggles opposing large-scale projects are able to articulate broader values such as democracy and the defense of common goods (Della Porta & Piazza, 2008). Additionally, literature on water struggles has underlined the connection between resistance to the commodification of water and claims for democracy and sovereignty (Muehlebach, 2023). However, local environmental conflicts can generate diverse interpretations of locality and of place, shaping different political

choices regarding land and resource use (Jerolmack & Walker, 2018; Kojola, 2020; Pellizzoni, 2014). Therefore, this research engages with literature that explores the cultural meanings attributed to place and how these shape collective identities (Massey, 1994; Ruiz & Domon, 2012) and collective action (Devine-Wright, 2009; Kojola, 2020).

This theoretical framework enables to align with recent research trends on environmentalism in post-socialist Eastern Europe which seek to situate local forms of environmentalism(s) in relation to global trends and broader academic debates. This scholarship challenges dominant literature on environmental activism and civil society in post-socialist Eastern Europe that has focused on processes of NGOization (Jacobsson & Saxonberg, 2013) and Europeanization (Carmin & Vandeveer, 2004; Fagan & Carmin, 2011; Fagan & Sircar, 2015). It adopts a critical perspective toward normative approaches to environmentalism development in post-socialist Eastern Europe, which have utilized Western models and categories as benchmarks for analysis and evaluation, overlooking the specificities and potentials of local grassroots forms of environmentalism (Fagan & Buzogany, 2022; Jehlicka & Jacobsson, 2021; Müller, 2020). Shifting the focus on local forms of environmental activism(s), emerging scholarship explores socialist legacies of environmentalist practices and organizations (Jehlicka & Jacobsson, 2021; Kurtovic & Hromadzic, 2020), opposition to urban development projects (Fagan & Ejdus, 2022; Milan & Dolenec, 2023), and struggles over resources and environmental justice (Pesic & Vukelic, 2022; Rajkovic, 2020; Velicu & Kaika, 2017). This paper contributes to this body of literature, situating local and regional environmental struggles in relation to broader global dynamics and academic debates. It seeks to challenge dominant understandings of civil society in the post-Yugoslav context, where civic engagement is often associated with urban, middle-class, educated, NGO-driven activism (Bilic & Stubbs, 2015; Touquet, 2015), and rural peripheries are frequently stigmatized as conservative, backward, or nationalist (Bougarel, 1999; Gordy, 2000; Jansen, 2005).

Methodology

The research employs qualitative research methods derived from social movements studies. It adopts a case-study approach that provides a "thick" understanding of social events or processes (Snow, 2013) within their specific context. This methodology allows for an in-depth investigation of the regional network "Let's

Defend the Balkan Rivers", examining the mechanisms that enabled the scaling of local struggles to the regional level, its internal functioning, coordination, and outcomes. Moreover, frame analysis is employed to examine the meaning-making processes that characterize collective action. Frames are defined as interpretative schemes through which collective actors interpret reality and mobilize bystanders. Framing is approached as a processual, dynamic, and relational phenomenon that highlights the agency of movement actors in shaping interpretations that resonate within specific cultural contexts (Lindekilde, 2014; Snow et al., 2019).

The analysis draws on the movement's public discourse based on materials retrieved online such as banners, protest speeches, documents, videos, media statements, as well as 34 semi-structured interviews with activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, building directly on previous doctoral research focused on the river protection movements in these two countries.

The Regional Network "Let's Defend the Balkan Rivers"

In July 2021, 28 organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo*, Montenegro, and Serbia gathered in Sarajevo and launched the regional alliance "Let's Defend the Balkan Rivers". This initiative, led by activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, who had previously built transnational cooperation, aimed to develop coordination, mutual support, and knowledge exchange to address the threats of SHPs across the region. Two years later, in September 2023, a new regional gathering occurred in the municipality of Pluzine, in Montenegro, in the vicinity of the Komarnica River Canyon. There, new organizations from the region joined the alliance, reaching over 40 initiatives cooperating to tackle problems related not only to hydropower development but also to the expansion of critical mineral mining. The alliance advocates for the adoption and enforcement of laws to protect rivers and the environment, as well as the protection of activists from legal harassment and lawsuits filed by investors.

A leading role in the creation of the regional alliance was played by river protection movements that emerged in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Coalition for the Protection of Rivers of BiH was established in 2016, bringing together local initiatives, environmental organizations, and experts from across the country. One of the first local struggles occurred in the early 2000s when residents of the Fojnica municipality organized a blockade to protect the Zeljeznica River. In August 2017, a 500-day blockade in Kruscica, following an

attack by special police, inspired other local initiatives. In 2020, residents along the Neretvica River protested against 15 small hydropower projects. Meanwhile, inhabitants of Foca mobilized against illegal construction on the Bjelava River. In East Sarajevo, two young girls who led protests in defense of the Kasindolska River were sued for defamation by a Belgian investor, fostering an anti-SLAPP campaign in response. Beyond coordinating and supporting local struggles, in July 2022, the Coalition achieved a ban on new small hydropower projects July 2022 in the Federation of BiH Entity. Currently, hydropower projects threaten the upper course of the River Neretva, under the administration of the Republika Srpska Entity. Due to the filling of the Ulog hydropower plant reservoir, in summer 2024, the river recorded historically low water levels. Several other projects are planned on the upper Neretva, including the Gornji Horizonti project. Diverting water for power generation, this project threatens to significantly reduce the river flow and cause saltwater intrusion into fertile lands in Herzegovina. Activists are calling on the Republika Srpska authorities to declare the upper course of the Neretva a protected area. The support of the regional alliance is playing an important role in their efforts to protect the river.

In Serbia, the movement opposing small hydropower projects emerged from the villages of Stara Planina, a mountain range in southeastern Serbia, at the border with Bulgaria. In 2018, residents of the villages of Temska, Paklestica, Topli Do, and Rakita organized themselves through the Alliance of Local Communities and later formed the movement "Defend the Rivers of Stara Planina", which brought together environmental activists and experts from across Serbia. While the movement successfully secured the ban of small hydropower projects from the Spatial Plans of Dimitrovgrad, Pirot, and Knjazevac, local struggles continued in other parts of Serbia. In December 2022, in the village of Dadince, in the municipality of Vlasotince, locals organized a four-month-long blockade to prevent the construction of an SHP on the Rupska River. During their struggle, they were visited by the "Brave Women" from Kruscica and other activists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, who, through this gesture of solidarity, expressed the deep connections between river protection struggles in the region. Although small hydropower projects were canceled from the spatial plans of a dozen municipalities, no ban was obtained at the national level. For this reason, local struggles continue and are increasingly supported by the regional alliance. These include the defense of the Studenica River near the town of Usce in the municipality of Kraljevo, opposing the construction of the seventh SHP in the area. Since local authorities have ignored multiple petitions

against the project, local organizations submitted a complaint to the Bern Convention. They argue that the Studenica River is a key ecological component of the Golija Nature Park and Biosphere Reserve and that the project goes against the explicit will of the local population. Another local struggle is currently being fought in the municipality of Prijepolje over the Ratajska River, which is the source of water supply for the residents of the villages Ratajska and Ravne. Local residents and environmental organizations have launched a legal campaign for the protection of the river through the establishment of a protected area.

Local struggles supported by the regional network include efforts to protect the Komarnica River and its canyon in Montenegro from the construction of a hydroelectric dam that would flood the canyon to create a reservoir. Local organizations and experts have demonstrated the immense value of the Komarnica Canyon in terms of biodiversity and nature conservation, hosting a quarter of Europe's most important habitats for plant and animal species. The Komarnica River is protected as a Natural Monument and Nature Park, and it has been proposed to increase its level of protection through EU and international legislation and the establishment of a National Park.

The regional movement exhibits a heterogeneous composition. Originating from local struggles of communities inhabiting small villages and towns, it evolved into a broader mobilization that encompassed diverse constituencies. This included younger NGO activists, as well as academics and experts whose engagement contributed to the struggles through data-driven arguments. The repertoires of contention employed by the movement are equally diverse, reflecting both institutional and disruptive strategies (Tilly, 2019). On one hand, activists deploy legal and bureaucratic tools, including litigation, petitions, and participation in public consultations, to challenge the procedural legitimacy of environmental impact assessments and permit processes. Additionally, there has been strong advocacy for legislative measures, beginning with demands for a ban on small hydropower projects. On the other hand, more confrontational tactics such as mass protests, blockades, and the physical guarding of rivers underscore the embodied and spatial dimensions of resistance, emphasizing the river not only as a natural resource but as a contested socio-ecological space. Furthermore, activists engaged in direct action practices such as riverbank clean-ups, the restoration or creation of beaches and recreational spaces, as well as cultural and artistic events, all of which contribute to the symbolic and material reclaiming of riverine landscapes.

Framing River Protection: From Local Struggles to Regional Cooperation

"Water is the source of life and cannot be subject to privatization and trade. Water is not personal property but a human right" (ACT, 2021). This statement, issued by one of the organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina following the first regional meeting, reflects shared aspects of the framing activity that united communities across the region in defense of the rivers. First of all, it draws on the frame of life that underpins the struggle for river protection. Rivers are understood as vital sources of life for the communities that depend on them for water and sustenance, as well as for the flora and fauna they support. From the very beginning, local communities used slogans like "rivers are life" and "water is life," expressing how rivers constitute their mean of survival. The articulation of this frame, however, was not limited to the survival of the inhabitants, but was extended to an ecological understanding of riverine ecosystems in which both human and non-human are embedded and interdependent (Hromadzic, 2024; Rajkovic, 2020). This frame extension (Snow et al., 2019) enabled the scaling of the issue from a local concern to a broader meaning that mobilized environmental activists and experts across the region. Promoting the privatization and commodification of rivers, small hydropower projects were perceived as a threat to life itself. This framing aligns with the conceptualization of water struggles as forms of vitalist politics (Muehlebach, 2023) that unveil the destructive logic embedded in neoliberal capitalism, which expands extractive practices into all spheres of existence. In contrast, water movements articulate counter-politics that center life itself as the foundation of value, resisting the reduction of living systems to commodities. Moreover, the resistance to SHPs confronts the undemocratic mechanisms that characterize the approval and construction of hydropower projects, which include the exclusion of local communities from decision-making processes, widespread corruption in the allocation of concessions, and the prioritization of private over public interest. Framing the projects in terms of democratic deficit, the movement exposes the deep entanglement of ecological degradation with questions of political participation, the rule of law, and sovereignty. The framing of these injustices resonated with a broader critique of the political and economic processes that characterized the post-socialist transition in the region, referring to the implementation of neoliberal policies that led to the privatization of public assets and are now targeting natural resources (Kurtovic, 2022). These were embedded into systems characterized by widespread corruption, which cemented the collusion between private and public actors. Acting as "growth machines" (Della Porta & Piazza, 2008), they promote a form of

development that prioritizes economic and political benefits for private actors, to which the interests of citizens and the environment are subordinated. By framing river protection as a matter of democracy and justice, the movement makes visible the inherently political and social dimensions of water struggles (Muehlebach, 2023). In doing so, it aligns with broader conceptualizations within environmental justice and political ecology that emphasize access to natural resources, participation in decision-making, and power asymmetries in environmental governance (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014).

Emotions play a crucial role in the movement's framing activity. At the local level, the motivation to engage in collective action is driven by a profound emotional connection to the rivers, which inhabitants express through positive emotions, individual and collective memories, ways of life, and legacies passed down through generations. The rivers shape the places where people grew up, learned to swim, fished, and nurtured relationships. Confronted with the threat of destruction, this emotional attachment to the rivers became explicit, creating a cultural repertoire for collective action (Devine-Wright, 2009; Kojola, 2020; Threadgold et al., 2018) By framing the rivers as possessing transcendent value, local communities convey an emotional rationale for taking action to defend them (Ruiz & Domon, 2012) standing in opposition to the market logic that drives their destruction. Place-based attachments often serve as powerful cultural repertoires in local environmental conflicts, when landscapes imbued with deep symbolic meaning are threatened by environmentally harmful projects. However, such attachments can foster conservative or exclusionary notions of belonging to place (Massey, 1994; Pellizzoni, 2014). In contrast, within the regional river protection movement, local attachments were rearticulated into a shared sense of "we-ness" (Hunt & Benford, 2004) that transcends local boundaries and connects diverse constituencies. Locals framed their emotional and material attachment to rivers as a tie to their immediate territory, which simultaneously links them to others across the region. This connection was expressed not only symbolically, but also through concrete acts of solidarity, as exemplified by the Brave Women of Kruscica participating in the blockade of the inhabitants of the village of Dadince, in Southern Serbia. In addressing them, one of the Brave Women expressed the shared nature of their fight for the Balkan rivers. Echoing this sentiment, an activist from Montenegro remarks: "We are close, we have interconnected nature, our rivers have no borders. We share the same problems with our neighbors. And our strength lies in unity." (Interview retrieved from documentary film "The Wave of Unity", Panic & Stanimirovic, 2023)

Her statement highlights the foundations of regional solidarity and unity within the regional river protection movement. On the one hand, it reflects a shared recognition of the common challenges and threats faced by local communities across national borders. On the other hand, it unveils the awareness of the ecological interconnectedness of the region, where rivers and ecosystems transcend political boundaries. In this context, activists articulated the frame of unity as a collective action frame that responds to both shared grievances and ecological interdependence, constructing solidarity and cooperation as the primary means for advancing environmental justice across the region.

Conclusions

The regional movement "Let's Defend the Balkan Rivers" has brought to light the wide-ranging environmental, social, and economic consequences of hydropower development in the region. Emerging from local opposition to small hydropower projects in peripheral rural communities, the movement expanded by linking dispersed struggles and fostering collaboration with environmental organizations and experts. This process was enabled through the development and articulation of shared interpretive frames that gave meaning to collective action. Among the first frames to shape the regional narrative were the frame of life and the democracy frame, which together articulate a broader claim to the right to water. The frame of life emphasizes the ecological interconnectedness of rivers and broader ecosystems, opposing their commodification. In turn, the democracy frame exposes patterns of political exclusion, the prioritization of private interests, and systemic corruption in environmental decision-making, situating the movement within wider demands for environmental justice. The locals' rationale for taking action was grounded in the deep emotional attachment to rivers that triggered the reaffirmation of place-based collective identities. These localized experiences of belonging scaled up into a transnational sense of unity, based on a shared belonging to rivers and a collective commitment to protect them. Through the regional alliance, this unity was transformed into structured cooperation and mutual support across diverse local efforts, framed by activists as the most viable strategy for achieving common goals.

Ongoing efforts are focused on translating these demands into concrete legal and policy initiatives at various scales. A significant initial success has been the legal ban on small hydropower projects, achieved in many municipalities and at the entity level in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, further advocacy

is necessary to secure a ban at the national level. While the ban is a major step forward, it has limitations, as it applies only to new concessions for small hydropower projects and does not ensure permanent protection. Therefore, broader efforts for river protection have intersected campaigns for biodiversity and forest conservation to achieve the highest levels of protection through the establishment of National Parks and integration into EU and international legal frameworks. In this sense, regional cooperation is crucial for defining common strategies and advocating for transboundary cooperation by the authorities. Additionally, there is a need for concerted efforts to enhance expert, data-driven knowledge regarding the threats posed by the mining of critical raw materials. The movement is also addressing democratic deficits by building anti-SLAPP awareness and promoting local community participation in decision-making and environmental governance. While a top-down approach to the green transition in the region has revealed contradictory environmental, social, and political effects, the coordinated struggles for river protection in the Balkans are creating opportunities for solutions to emerge from local communities. These solutions are grounded in local knowledge and experiences and advocate inclusive and democratic processes. This bottom-up initiative could pave the way for meaningful efforts toward a just green transition in the region.

This paper engages with the growing body of literature on environmentalism in post-socialist Eastern Europe by situating local and regional environmental struggles within the context of broader global dynamics and ongoing academic debates. By analyzing the cultural repertoires of river protection struggles and mechanisms of regional cooperation in the Balkans, this research challenges conventional understandings that often marginalize rural communities and their grassroots activism. It highlights the potential and specificities of locality and place-based belonging in developing environmental movements. By integrating theoretical frameworks from environmental sociology, political ecology, and social movement studies, this research seeks to contribute to the discourse on environmental activism in the region and offers insights into the broader implications for environmental and climate justice. Ultimately, it aims to foster a more inclusive understanding of environmentalism that recognizes the vital role of local communities in shaping sustainable futures.

References

Berishaj, V. (2021). Decarbonisation of the region – a sustainable and just energy transition. Green Transition and Social (in)Justice, 10, 32–35.

Bilic, B., & Stubbs, P. (2015). Unsettling "The Urban" in Post-Yugoslav Activisms: Right to the City and Pride Parades in Serbia and Croatia. In K. Jacobsson & S. Saxonberg (Eds.), Urban grassroots movements in Central and Eastern Europe (pp. 119–138). Ashgate Pub.

Bougarel, X. (1999). Yugoslav Wars: The 'Revenge of the Countryside' between Sociological Reality and Nationalist Myth. East European Quarterly, 32(2), 157–175.

Carmin, J., & Vandeveer, S. D. (2004). Enlarging EU Environments: Central and Eastern Europe from Transition to Accession. Environmental Politics, 13(1), 3–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/0964401041000168511 9

Della Porta, D., & Piazza, G. (2008). Voices of the Valley, Voices of the Straits: How Protest Creates Communities. Berghahn Books. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781845458621

Devine-Wright, P. (2009). Rethinking NIMBYism: The role of place attachment and place identity in explaining place-protective action. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 19(6), 426–441. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.1004

Dogmus, O. C., & Nielsen, J. Ø. (2020). The on-paper hydropower boom: A case study of corruption in the hydropower sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ecological Economics, 172, 106630. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2020.106630

Escobar, A. (2008). Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1198wg2

Fagan, A., & Buzogany, A. (2022). Beyond Europeanization: Political ecology and environmentalism in Central and Eastern Europe. Environmental Politics, 31(7), 1203–1213. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2022.2147652

Fagan, A., & Carmin, J. (2011). Green activism in Post-Socialist Europe and the Soviet Union. Routledge.

Fagan, A., & Ejdus, F. (2022). Lost at the waterfront? Explaining the absence of green organisations in the Don't let Belgrade D(r)own movement. Environmental Politics, 31(7), 1289–1308. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2020.1720473

Fagan, A., & Sircar, I. (2015). Europeanization of the Western Balkans. Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137319050

Gallop, P. (2021). Prospects for independent action in the Western Balkans' energy transition. Green Transition and Social (in)Justice, 10, 9–13.

Gordy, E. D. (2000). Turbasi and Rokeri as Windows into Serbia's Social Divide. Balkanologie, 4(1). https://doi.org/10.4000/balkanologie.774

Hromadzic, A. (2024). Riverine citizenship: A Bosnian city in love with the river. Central European University Press.

Hunt, S. A., & Benford, R. A. (2004). Collective Identity, Solidarity, and Commitment. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements (pp. 433–457). Blackwell Publishing Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999103.ch19

Jacobsson, K., & Saxonberg, S. (Eds.). (2013). Beyond NGO-ization: The development of social movements in Central and Eastern Europe. Ashgate.

Jansen, S. (2005). Who's afraid of white socks? Towards a critical understanding of post-Yugoslav urban self-perceptions. Ethnologia Balkanica, 09, 151–167.

Jehlicka, P., & Jacobsson, K. (2021). The importance of recognizing difference: Rethinking Central and East European environmentalism. Political Geography, 87, 102379. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102379

Jerolmack, C., & Walker, E. T. (2018). Please in My Backyard: Quiet Mobilization in Support of Fracking in an Appalachian Community. American Journal of Sociology, 124(2), 479–516. https://doi.org/10.1086/698215

Kojola, E. (2020). Who Speaks for the Place? Cultural Dynamics of Conflicts Over Hazardous Industrial Development. Sociological Forum, 35(3), 673–695. https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12620

Kovacevic, N. (2021). How to restore social well-being and whether decarbonized energy is possible in the Western Balkans. Green Transition and Social (in)Justice, 10, 36–39.

Kurtovic, L. (2022, May 18). Riverine Struggles Against Plunder and Dispossession: Water Defenders in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina. Europe Now Journal. https://www.europenowjournal.org/2022/05/17/riverine-struggles-against-plunder-and-dispossession-water-defenders-in-postwar-bosnia-herzegovina/

Kurtovic, L., & Hromadzic, A. (2020, March 24). Socialist Greens: On Vernacular Environmentalisms. Society for Cultural Anthropology. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/socialist-greens-on-vernacular-environmentalisms

Martinez-Alier, J., Temper, L., Del Bene, D., & Scheidel, A. (2016). Is there a global environmental justice movement? The Journal of Peasant Studies, 43(3), 731–755. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1141198

Massey, D. B. (1994). Space, place, and gender. Univ. of Minnesota Press.

Milan, C., & Dolenec, D. (2023). Social movements in Southeast Europe: From urban mobilisation to electoral competition. East European Politics, 39(4), 577–587. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2023.2267991

Muehlebach, A. K. (2023). A vital frontier: Water insurgencies in Europe. Duke University Press.

Müller, M. (2020). In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South. Geopolitics, 25(3), 734–755. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1477757

Pellizzoni, L. (2014). Territorio e movimenti sociali. Continuità, innovazione o integrazione? Poliarchie, 2, 5–33.

Pesic, J., & Vukelic, J. (2022). Europeanisation from below at the semi-periphery: The movement against small hydropower plants in Serbia. Sociologija, 64(1), 5–27. https://doi.org/10.2298/SOC2201005P

Rajkovic, I. (2020). Rivers to the People: Ecopopulist Universality in the Balkan Mountains. Society for Cultural Anthropology. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/rivers-to-the-people-ecopopulist-universality-in-the-balkan-mountains

Ruiz, J., & Domon, G. (2012). Relationships between rural inhabitants and their landscapes in areas of intensive agricultural use: A case study in Quebec (Canada). Journal of Rural Studies, 28(4), 590–602. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2012.09.005

Schlosberg, D., & Collins, L. B. (2014). From environmental to climate justice: Climate change and the discourse of environmental justice. WIREs Climate Change, 5(3), 359–374. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.275

Schwarz, U. (2022). Hydropower Projects on Balkan Rivers – 2022 Update. RiverWatch & EuroNatur.

Schwarz, U. (2025). Hydropower Projects on Balkan Rivers – 2024 Update (6). RiverWatch & EuroNatur. https://www.legaltoolkit4rivers.eu/1-introduction/

Snow, D. A. (2013). Case Studies and Social Movements. In D. Della Porta, B. Klandermans, D. McAdam, & D. A. Snow (Eds.), The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements (1st ed.). Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm022

Snow, D. A., Vliegenthart, R., & Ketelaars, P. (2019). The framing perspective on social movements: Its conceptual roots and architecture. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, H. Kriesi, & H. J. McCammon (Eds.), The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements (2nd ed., pp. 392–410). Wiley-Blackwell.

Threadgold, S., Farrugia, D., Askland, H., Askew, M., Hanley, J., Sherval, M., & Coffey, J. (2018). Affect, risk and local politics of knowledge: Changing land use in Narrabri, NSW. Environmental Sociology, 4(4), 393–404. https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2018.1463673

Touquet, H. (2015). Non-ethnic Mobilisation in Deeply Divided Societies, the Case of the Sarajevo Protests. Europe-Asia Studies, 67(3), 388–408. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1019430

Velicu, I., & Kaika, M. (2017). Undoing environmental justice: Re-imagining equality in the Rosia Montana anti-mining movement. Geoforum, 84, 305–315. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.10.012

BRJ BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

© IBU

DOI: https://doi.org//10.69648/JVQE3564
Balkan Research Journal(BRJ), 2025; 2(1): 15-32
brj.ibupress.com
Online ISSN: 2955-2524

Application : 02.04.2025
Revision : 18.04.2025
Acceptance : 19.05.2025
Publication : 30.05.2025

Ismaili, F. (2025). Democratic stagnation and nationalism in North Macedonia: political, institutional, and social challenge. Balkan Research Journal, 2(1), 15-32. https://doi.org//10.69648/JVQE3564

Democratic Stagnation and Nationalism in North Macedonia: Political, Institutional, and Social Challenge

Flamur Ismaili

Flamur Ismaili
International Balkan University, Skopje, N. Macedonia

https://orcid.org/000-0003-3254-7126

Asst. Prof. Dr. Flamur Ismaili, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Law, International Balkan University

We declare no conflicts of interest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Flamur Ismaili.
Email: flamur.ismaili@ibu.edu.mk.

BALKAN JOURNALS

Abstract

This paper examines the factors contributing to democratic stagnation in North Macedonia during the period from 2009 to 2016. The country's democratic development has been marred by persistent challenges, including political polarization, institutional weaknesses, and issues of corruption. The period in question saw setbacks in democratic reforms, characterized by electoral irregularities, limited media freedom, and contentious inter-ethnic relations. These factors have undermined the consolidation of democratic institutions and hindered progress towards European integration. The study analyzes key political events, economic factors, and societal dynamics that have shaped North Macedonia's democratic trajectory during this critical period. By identifying these factors, the paper aims to provide insights into the complexities of democratic governance in transitional societies and the challenges of sustaining democratic norms amidst internal and external pressures.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Democratic stagnation, Political polarization, Institutional weaknesses, European integration.

Introduction

North Macedonia's journey towards democratic consolidation has been a tumultuous one, particularly during the period from 2009 to 2016. Despite initial optimism following its independence in 1991 and subsequent democratic reforms, the country has faced significant challenges that have hindered its progress towards robust democratic governance. This paper seeks to examine the factors that contributed to democratic stagnation during this critical period, analyzing political, institutional, and socio-economic dynamics that shaped North Macedonia's political landscape.

Political polarization emerged as a prominent barrier to democratic advancement in North Macedonia during the specified timeframe. The country's political arena was marked by deep-seated divisions among political parties, often leading to gridlock and policy paralysis. These divisions not only undermined consensus-building efforts but also perpetuated a climate of distrust and instability, further complicating the reform process.

Institutional weaknesses also played a pivotal role in impeding democratic development. Challenges such as corruption, inadequate rule of law, and inefficiencies within state institutions eroded public trust and confidence in the government's ability to uphold democratic principles. These shortcomings not only hindered effective governance but also fostered a culture of impunity that undermined the rule of law, exacerbating democratic deficits.

Economically, North Macedonia faced challenges that exacerbated political and social tensions. Persistent economic inequalities, high unemployment rates, and uneven regional development contributed to social discontent and political disenchantment among the populace. Economic grievances often intersected with political frustrations, creating fertile ground for populist movements and anti-establishment sentiments that further strained democratic institutions.

Moreover, the country's aspirations for European integration provided both opportunities and challenges for its democratic trajectory. While EU accession criteria encouraged democratic reforms, the slow progress and setbacks in meeting these requirements highlighted the gaps between North Macedonia's aspirations and its actual institutional capacity. The EU's role as a stabilizing force and a catalyst for reform remained crucial, albeit fraught with complexities and varying degrees of effectiveness.

In conclusion, the period from 2009 to 2016 represents a critical phase in North Macedonia's democratic journey, characterized by both aspirations for progress

and persistent challenges. By examining the interplay of political polarization, institutional weaknesses, economic disparities, and EU integration dynamics, this paper aims to provide insights into the complexities of democratic stagnation in transitional societies. Understanding these factors is essential for charting a path towards resilient democratic governance and sustainable development in North Macedonia and beyond.

From Democratic Transition to Nationalistic Regression

Many regimes have made commendable progress towards democracy over the last five decades. However, as they transition from authoritarian rule to democratic governance, a significant number have displayed striking similarities with their previous political experiences (Brownlee, 2007, p. 21). The assertion that "a substantial number of regimes have exhibited remarkable similarities with their past political experiences" is a key aspect to take into account when analyzing North Macedonia's political scenario. To unravel the puzzle of democratic stagnation in North Macedonia, it's imperative to scrutinize the factors that mold its political environment.

Factors such as historical background, organizational structures, financial resources, and ideological beliefs, among numerous others, have a considerable impact on whether, how, and how efficiently stakeholders will advocate for change or strive to resist it. Despite the visibility of political leaders at the forefront of politics, these less conspicuous factors consistently influence the options they encounter and the results they achieve (Brownlee, 2007, p. 21). The elements mentioned in the paragraph, including historical background, organizational structures, financial resources, and ideological beliefs, are vital to understanding the political dynamics that lead to democratic stagnation in any given nation, including North Macedonia. These factors shape the decisions and outcomes of political actors, including leaders, and can either facilitate or obstruct democratic progress. By scrutinizing these factors, we can delve deeper into the root causes of democratic stagnation and identify approaches for fostering democratic consolidation.

Scholars have started to categorize "hybrid regimes," which are authoritarian systems that incorporate elements of democracy like elections and parliaments. However, as the proliferation of new classifications outstrips the development and verification of explanations, these new authoritarian subcategories risk becoming intellectual dead ends (Brownlee, 2007, p. 25). The intricacy of North Macedonia's

political situation can be better comprehended by scrutinizing the concept of "hybrid regimes."

VMRO-DPMNE initially tempered its nationalist sentiments and embraced the ideological stance of a mostly conservative party. However, a resurgence of nationalism emerged shortly after the party regained power following their victory in the 2006 general elections. Typically, in Macedonia, parties with nationalist tendencies tend to moderate their nationalist rhetoric upon assuming power (as was the case with the ethnic Albanian DPA), yet in 2006, VMRO-DPMNE did the exact opposite (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012, pp. 1-11). Their actions not only exacerbated identity disputes within North Macedonia but also undercut the delicate process of democratic consolidation, leading to ethnic tensions within the country. The party's departure from the trend of reducing nationalist rhetoric after gaining power, as seen in other parties with similar nationalist leanings, must not be overlooked or dismissed. Failing to properly confront this issue only prolongs the damage that VMRO-DPMNE's actions have inflicted upon North Macedonia's democracy and social fabric.

A case in point is VMRO-DPMNE's conduct during and following the 2006 elections. By adopting the ultranationalists' fascination with Ancient Macedonia, VMRO-DPMNE leveraged its leading position within the ruling coalition to rename structures, erect monuments, and execute a government-led marketing campaign aimed at boosting national consciousness (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012, pp. 1-11). The party's preoccupation with Ancient Macedonia and its marketing drive does not consider the wider consequences of these actions on the country's democratic consolidation and interethnic relations. During this period, VMRO-DPMNE exerted total control over the nation, with all economic resources being utilized to craft a new identity and solidify nationalist rhetoric, thereby exacerbating identity conflicts and leading to ethnic unrest. The party's promotion of ultranationalist ideologies and initiatives resulted in broader challenges in North Macedonia, including corruption and a compromised judicial system.

The contentious Skopje 2014 project included the construction of numerous monuments symbolizing Macedonian historical figures. Additionally, several marketing initiatives like You are Macedonia were launched, for instance, one that amplified the military prowess of Alexander the Great. Utilizing its governmental authority to realize such endeavors, VMRO-DPMNE successfully mainstreamed many ultranationalist ideologies (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012, p. 4). The efforts exerted by VMRO-DPMNE to propagate ultranationalist ideologies into the mainstream through initiatives like Skopje 2014 and You are Macedonia not only destabilized

democracy but also resulted in ethnic conflicts, corruption, a jeopardized legal system, and other persistent problems.

By leveraging its governmental authority to endorse a selective and divisive national identity, VMRO-DPMNE further aggravated ethnic divides and deepened pre-existing identity disputes in North Macedonia. The significant allocation of economic resources to these initiatives led to allegations of corruption and fiscal misconduct, eroding faith in the government and its institutions. Ultimately, these actions countered the fortification of democracy and augmented the dominance of authoritarianism and nationalism in the country.

The nationalistic discourse adopted by VMRO-DPMNE has gained widespread acceptance, transcending the confines of radical ultranationalist groups. This was also bolstered by the party's official alliance with ultranationalist parties. Consequently, an escalation in nationalistic assertiveness among other ethnic groups has been noted, highlighting that nationalistic and ethnically driven discourse can trigger extremism across all factions. The broad acceptance of VMRO-DPMNE's nationalistic discourse has created a domino effect, resulting in a surge in extremism among other ethnic groups as well.

Rise of Nationalism: Key Factors in North Macedonia's Political Landscape

Macedonia's historical trajectory has been riddled with a plethora of hurdles resulting from challenging political circumstances. Crucial elements to note include that Macedonia's quest for independence remained unfulfilled owing to extensive Ottoman rule, even after the culmination of the Balkan Wars and WWI. Post WWII, Macedonia became part of Yugoslavia but continued to have minimal control over its governance. With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Macedonia struggled to achieve international recognition, primarily due to a name dispute with Greece, which led to a Greek veto obstructing their membership in NATO and the EU. Further complications included Bulgaria's refusal to recognize the Macedonian language and Serbia's denial of the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The country was further plunged into turmoil in 2001 with an armed conflict. The acquisition of Bulgarian passports by some Macedonian citizens, a desperate bid to circumvent poverty and blockades, added fuel to the fire and bolstered Bulgarian claims.

Some academics argue that this strategy was implemented to tackle the imminent threat of the denial of Macedonian identity, arising from the perception that Macedonia was a fabricated communist entity without any historical authenticity. Thus, it was perceived as lacking the vital attributes necessary for the establishment of an independent nation (Georgievska-Jakovleva, 2014, p. 47). The project's primary objective was to establish a link between the roots of contemporary Macedonians and ancient Macedonians, rather than their Slavic ancestry. This ambition may have been further amplified by the assertive stance taken by the Macedonian government, as demonstrated by the 2010 statement of Foreign Minister Antonio Milososki: "This is our way of saying [up yours] to them [Greece]... This project is about asserting Macedonia's identity at a time when it is under threat because of the name issue" (Bieber, The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkan, 2018, p. 59) Also, the challenges encountered during this period might have given rise to a variant of extremism within the Macedonian nationalist faction.

Alternatively, other scholars interpret the strategy behind Skopje 2014 as a response to the seemingly irrational decision by NATO and the EU to block the Republic of Macedonia from initiating full membership discussions (Georgievska-Jakovleva, 2014, p. 47). This viewpoint implies that the EU might be somewhat accountable for the events that transpired during the Skopje 2014 project. Their decision to prohibit Macedonia from initiating membership dialogues could have influenced the subsequent developments and tensions that ensued in the city.

For some scholars, the Skopje 2014 project aimed to alter the city's urban identity by introducing neoclassical-style buildings designed to outshine both the modernist constructions of the socialist era and the Ottoman-era architecture that symbolizes the city's Muslim heritage (Graan, 2013, p. 161). This component of the project can be perceived as an endeavor to eradicate the Ottoman cultural influences from the city. As a result, this may have increased frustration amongst the Albanian communities and other Muslim populations in Skopje, who constitute about 35% of the city's residents. The project's emphasis on particular historical roots could have unintentionally heightened existing strains and schisms within the city's diverse populace.

Some posit that the inception of the Skopje 2014 project was also a reaction to an alleged threat from the Albanian community concerning the state's legitimacy (Graan, 2013, p. 169). However, it is important to mention that the Albanian community has generally not challenged the state's legitimacy directly. Rather, they have aspired to become an integral part of it, demanding equal representation and

rights within the country. Consequently, the project and its ramifications should be evaluated within the larger framework of intricate interethnic relations in North Macedonia, where various communities seek inclusion and acknowledgment.

During the construction of a church in the Skopje Fortress—the Kale, initially intended for a museum and exhibition space, significant tensions emerged. The issue around the Kale turned into a fierce political confrontation between the Macedonian and Albanian coalition partners in the government, culminating in heavily politicized violence on the streets (Risteski, 2016, p. 57). In a bid to mollify the Albanian community's response, the ruling party agreed to erect three statues honoring Albanian historical figures and committed to constructing a notable square surrounding the Skanderbeg equestrian statue in the Cair district across the Vardar, an area predominantly resided in by ethnic Albanians (Skoulariki, 2020, p. 231). This resolution resulted in the city being split into two distinct sections: one occupied by Albanians, exhibiting a more Islamic and Ottoman cultural architecture, and the other inhabited by Macedonians, displaying a structure embellished with ancient Macedonian sculptures. Both statues and the squares surrounding them represent the parallelism, polarization, and segregation in Macedonian society (Risteski, 2016, p. 57).

The decision to construct a church near the square stirred disagreements due to the religious implications it introduced, as the square used to house a mosque until 1917 (Georgievska-Jakovleva, 2014, p. 51). This move was met with displeasure, as it potentially intensified religious tensions in the region and underscored the persistent conflict between varying religious and cultural influences within the city.

In addition to the friction generated by the church's construction near the square, the Muslim Religious Community voiced their dissatisfaction with the renovation of the Army Hall, an interwar edifice. They instead called for the restoration of the 16th-century Ottoman Burmali Mosque, demolished by the Serbian Army in 1925 before the Officers' Club was erected on the same site. This further emphasizes the continued conflict and responses to decisions perceived as favoring one religious or cultural group over another in the city.

The political dialogue in North Macedonia grew increasingly divided after the signing of the Prespa Agreement by Zaev's administration in June 2018. This agreement led to the country's renaming as the "Republic of North Macedonia" and confirmed that the "Macedonian language" is part of the South Slavic language group. It also stipulated that the nation's people, culture, and other attributes

have no connection to the ancient Hellenic civilization, history, culture, and heritage of Greece's northern region, namely the Greek region of Macedonia (Prespa Agreement, 2018). This name change incited a vehement response from the opposition nationalist party VMRO, which objected to the agreement. Nevertheless, the agreement effectively dampened the ambitions of the Skopje 2014 project, as the new name and the distinctions defined in the agreement resolved some of the controversial issues the project had brought up.

On assuming power, Zaev's government committed to ending the "Skopje 2014" project and established a commission to decide the project's venues and monuments' fate (Skoulariki, 2020, p. 234). However, it's worth noting that Zaev's government couldn't substantially remove or modify the statues and other structures erected during the project. Consequently, Skopje largely remains as it was constructed under the VMRO administration.

The Skopje 2014 project has been criticized on several fronts, including its exorbitant cost and the possibility that its monoethnic narrative of Macedonian history could exacerbate ethnic tensions. Critics argue that the project doesn't accurately represent the multiethnic reality of North Macedonia, with Albanians in the country possibly feeling marginalized. Moreover, they contend that the project's emphasis on Macedonian connections to antiquity could further sour relations with neighboring Greece. Critics also maintain that the project lacked adequate public consultation and could jeopardize the city's unique character.

Democratic Stagnation: Corruption, Authoritarianism, and Ethnic Divisions

From 2006 to 2016, North Macedonia was subjected to an increased wave of authoritarianism, rampant corruption, and an impasse in democratic development under the administration of the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party. This era witnessed a drastic curtailment of political and civil liberties, as the reigning party, spearheaded by Nikola Gruevski, solidified its control through manipulation of state mechanisms, media censorship, and suppression of dissident voices. Widespread corruption characterized the government, with favoritism and nepotism becoming pervasive, resulting in an absence of transparency and accountability. Further, the nationalist party advocated a form of ethnocentrism that was exclusive and divisive, thereby escalating tensions between ethnic Macedonians and other ethnic groups. The amalgamation of these elements resulted in a standstill

in democratic progress, thereby leaving the country's political realm fraught with instability and suspicion.

In a bid to further fortify its authority, the VMRO-DPMNE administration instituted a slew of laws and policies that intensified the already existing ethnic divisions in North Macedonia. The party's ethnocentric ideology catered primarily to the needs of ethnic Macedonians, thereby alienating the substantial Albanian community and other ethnic minorities. This strategy precipitated increased societal polarization and heightened tensions, as prejudiced policies marginalized these communities and curtailed their access to political representation, public services, and economic opportunities. The government's divisive strategy not only eroded the country's democratic foundations but also posed a threat to the precarious interethnic equilibrium that had been preserved since the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001. In essence, the VMRO-DPMNE's pursuit of a nationalist agenda at the expense of inclusivity and societal harmony played a significant role in the stagnation of democracy and the ascension of authoritarianism during their ten-year rule.

The European Commission's progress report in 2011 highlighted that the bodies responsible for combating corruption, such as the SCPC, the Anti-corruption Unit, and the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office, were under-resourced and inadequately financed, lacking a proactive strategy to tackle widespread allegations of corruption in crucial sectors, including public procurement and political party financing (European Commission Progress Report, 2011, p. 14). The local level law enforcement agents and judiciary, particularly in the area of petty corruption, remained insufficiently specialized.

Furthermore, the VMRO-DPMNE government introduced a series of laws and policies that exacerbated ethnic divisions and inflamed tensions. For example, in 2010, schools in Albanian regions boycotted a move to introduce Macedonian as a second language to first-grade elementary school students, a mandate previously reserved for fourth graders (Freedom House, 2011). In August 2012, the VMRO-DPMNE government proposed a bill to extend free health care and other services to members of the security forces who served in the 2001 conflict, a majority of whom were ethnic Macedonians, but not to the largely Albanian paramilitary veterans. This proposal led the DUI to consider leaving the coalition, resulting in a no-confidence vote in October, which Gruevski's government survived (Freedom House, 2013, p. 424).

These prejudiced policies not only undermined the democratic foundations of the country but also threatened to destabilize the delicate interethnic harmony that had been sustained since the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001. Ultimately, VMRO-DPMNE's pursuit of a nationalist agenda at the expense of inclusivity and societal harmony was a significant factor in the stagnation of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism during their decade-long rule.

Factors That Led to Stagnation of Democratic Consolidation

The VMRO-DPMNE government, under the banner of ethnocentric nationalism, enacted policies that predominantly catered to ethnic Macedonians. This inclination marginalized other ethnic communities, accentuating social divisions and amplifying interethnic discord. The prioritization of ethnocentric nationalism disrupted democratic norms and posed a threat to the delicate equilibrium within North Macedonia's diverse society. During its time in office, VMRO-DPMNE aimed to secure its control over the judicial system, jeopardizing its impartiality and shaking the very foundations of the rule of law. By positioning allies in strategic judicial roles and exerting influence over judges, the government managed to skew legal procedures in its favor. This erosion of the judiciary further undermined democratic institutions and provided the ruling party with a shield against accountability.

Throughout the VMRO-DPMNE's rule, constraints on freedom of expression grew as the government sought to quell dissent and fortify its power. The administration targeted media outlets and journalists critical of its regime, employing scare tactics, litigation, and economic coercion to mute unfavorable coverage. Consequently, the media space grew increasingly saturated with pro-government narratives, stifling open discourse and curtailing public access to a broad spectrum of perspectives. The government also suppressed opposition by misusing state apparatus to harass and intimidate political adversaries. It leveraged its control over law enforcement and regulatory bodies to launch politically driven investigations and hinder opposition activities. These tactics further depleted the robustness of North Macedonia's democratic landscape, creating a scenario where dissent was muzzled and the ruling party's hold on power remained unopposed.

To conclude, the VMRO-DPMNE's ethnocentric politics, manipulation of the judiciary, repression of free speech, and suppression of the opposition primarily impeded North Macedonia's democratic consolidation. These actions fostered ethnic divisions, debilitated democratic institutions, and fostered a polarized and mistrustful

societal environment. Consequently, the nation's stride towards a more inclusive and stable democratic system was significantly stalled during this decade-long period of nationalist governance. These assertions will be substantiated through a detailed analysis of reports by Freedom House, the European Commission, and Transparency International, casting light on the challenges North Macedonia confronted in its journey towards democratic consolidation.

Ethnic Nationalistic Politics and Discrimination

The administration under the VMRO-DPMNE, characterized by ethnic nationalistic politics, widened the gap between ethnic communities, leading to a decline in the democratization process in North Macedonia. The country's public administration grappled with issues of underrepresentation of ethnic minorities, a problem noted by the European Commission Progress Report (European Commission Progress Report, 2011, p. 64). The organization highlighted the need for a more diverse and inclusive civil service. Moreover, the Secretariat entrusted with the enforcement of the Ohrid Framework Agreement struggled with a lack of strategic planning capacity and internal control standards (European Commission Progress Report, 2012, p. 55), which further intensified inter-ethnic disagreements.

Ethnic segregation was prevalent, with Albanians and Macedonians living in separate communities and attending different educational institutions, a fact stated by Freedom House (Freedom House, 2009, p. 435). The inadequate coverage of the post-independence period in school textbooks, primarily due to the differing interpretations of the 2001 conflict among these ethnic groups, served to deepen the divide. In 2012, the European Association of History Educators urged for a reform in history education, focusing on the issue of ethnically divided schools (Freedom House, 2013, p. 424). In a move that exacerbated tensions, the government approved school textbooks that portrayed the Albanian community negatively, perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

Issues related to language and symbolic representations remained a source of contention between ethnic Albanian and Macedonian Slav politicians. Disagreements revolved around wider use of the Albanian language, the public display of the Albanian flag, and the need for better representation of ethnic Albanians in government (Freedom House, 2009, p. 435). Although the 2017 language law sought to address these concerns by extending the official use of Albanian to all state-level

institutions (Freedom House, 2020, p. 648)**,** tensions persisted. The non-implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, twenty years since its signing, has remained a major source of inter-ethnic tensions. The Macedonian government's apparent reluctance to enforce the agreement in full suggested a lack of genuine commitment to fostering unity and strengthening inter-ethnic relations within the country.

The Skopje 2014 project, initiated by the government, inadvertently exacerbated interethnic discord as community groups felt their heritage was marginalized (Freedom House, 2013, pp. 424-425). A palpable rise in interethnic tensions was observed in 2012 when an Orthodox church near Struga, predominantly inhabited by Albanian Muslims, was set ablaze. The trigger was reportedly the donning of costumes that were viewed as offensive to Islam by ethnic Macedonians at a neighboring carnival. This escalated to a series of clashes in Skopje and Tetovo, leading to injuries to over a dozen people. Later in the year, five Macedonians were brutally murdered, culminating in the arrest of 20 ethnic Albanians (Freedom House, 2013, p. 424). In 2013, a study by the Macedonian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights revealed that authorities underreported hate crimes and discriminatory incidents, often mislabeling them (Freedom House, 2015, p. 427). Politically charged cases like the 2014 ruling against six ethnic Albanians for the 2012 murders further strained relations. Ethnic Albanians decried the judicial process as opaque and influenced by Islamophobia (Freedom House, 2016, pp. 405-406).

These heightened tensions led to sporadic protests and violent riots, including those that took place in Skopje in 2013 involving both ethnic groups and the police (Freedom House, 2015, p. 424). The appointment of an ex-Albanian military chief as the defense minister further stoked the tensions, leading to violent outbursts in the parliament (Freedom House, 2015, p. 424). The following day saw a reactionary protest by ethnic Albanians, resulting in injuries and arrests (Freedom House, 2015, p. 424). As the 2014 elections approached, both ethnic Macedonian and Albanian political parties increasingly utilized nationalist rhetoric, leading to confrontations (Freedom House, 2016, p. 406).

Interethnic tensions continued to persist with episodic violent incidents between the two major ethnic groups (Freedom House, 2017, p. 414). A series of major clashes took place in April and May involving government security forces and purported ethnic Albanian militants. A border post near Kosovo was reportedly overrun by an Albanian militia in April. In May, a raid in an ethnic Albanian neighborhood in Kumanovo resulted in casualties on both sides, with the government

alleging the targets were ethnic Albanian terrorists (Freedom House, 2017, p. 415). Critics, however, accused the VMRO-DPMNE of orchestrating these incidents to deflect attention from the wiretapping scandal.

North Macedonia saw a significant regression in its democratic status following revelations of grave irregularities in the 2014 elections. These insights were part of a larger scandal involving widespread government eavesdropping on political and religious leaders, journalists, and ordinary citizens, leading to a legislative boycott by the opposition party (Freedom of House, 2017, p. 414). The democratic instability was further heightened when President Ivanov denied the winning parties the mandate to form a government after the early elections in 2016, undermining North Macedonia's already shaky democracy.

In 2017, the political landscape shifted from the dominant center-right VMRO-DPMNE, which had held power since 2006, to the left-leaning SDSM, a party with a history of governing during the 1990s and early 2000s. This power transition was marred by conflict, however. When an SDSM-endorsed parliament speaker was appointed, it resulted in a violent assault on the assembly floor by VMRO-DPMNE supporters against SDSM lawmakers, including the party leader, leaving about 100 people injured (Freedom House, 2019, p. 576).

In summary, the VMRO-DPMNE government's endorsement of ethnic nationalistic politics and discriminatory actions against other ethnicities played a significant role in hindering the progression of democracy in North Macedonia. The incidents and issues described in the reports from the European Commission, Freedom House, and other sources, coupled with the overall trends observed during this period, underscore the difficulties faced by the nation in its endeavor to establish a more inclusive and robust democratic system.

Control of the Judiciary System: An Assessment of Corruption and Nepotism

According to the Freedom House report in 2006, the judicial system of North Macedonia was widely criticized for corruption and inefficiency. A government judicial oversight body proposed the dismissal of ten judges due to accusations of corruption or incompetence, of which six were eventually let go. An enormous backlog of 1.2 million cases also burdened the system, leading some to recommend that administrative officials handle minor offenses rather than the criminal courts (Freedom House, 2006, p. 435).

The Freedom House Report of 2008 continued to describe the judiciary as corrupt and incompetent. As part of North Macedonia's bid to join the EU, it was urged to strengthen judicial independence and reduce the case backlog. Yet the BDI party walked out of parliament to avoid voting on measures that would increase the government's power to appoint and dismiss judges, allegedly protecting some individuals from prosecution (Freedom House, 2008, p. 430). The government's actions to exert control over the judiciary system can be seen as an attempt to marginalize the Albanian community, preventing them from being appointed as judges and prosecutors. This move further illustrates the government's intention to maintain control over the judiciary and weaken the representation of communities within the system.

Despite numerous appeals for reform and guidance from the European Union, the judicial system in North Macedonia has seen marginal improvement over time. Persistent problems such as corruption, incompetence, and a case backlog highlight the government's failure to effectively address these systemic issues. This stagnation not only impedes the country's efforts to join the EU, but also perpetuates the marginalization of certain communities, notably the Albanians, within the judiciary. The government's failure to tackle these long-standing issues illustrates a troubling disregard for the rule of law, equitable representation of all communities, and North Macedonia's ambition to fully integrate into the European Union.

The establishment of a Special Prosecutor in North Macedonia was a response to the 2015 wiretapping scandal, which revealed extensive government corruption, power abuse, and unlawful surveillance. Amid increasing public dissatisfaction and international scrutiny, the leading political parties in the country agreed to set up a Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) as part of the Przino Agreement. The SPO's primary role was to investigate and prosecute those involved in the scandal, ensuring a thorough and impartial investigation into the claims (Sinisa Jakov Marusic; Ivana Kostovska, 2015). The process of appointing the Special Prosecutor involved choosing an appropriate candidate with the involvement of both the majority and opposition parties in the parliament, and international stakeholders like the European Union and the United States. This process aimed to guarantee the independence, integrity, and professionalism of the Special Prosecutor. Once appointed, the Special Prosecutor was tasked with handling cases related to the wiretapping scandal, with hopes that their work would help restore public faith in the country's institutions and bolster the rule of law (Sinisa Jakov Marusic; Ivana Kostovska, 2015).

The selection of Katica Janeva as Special Prosecutor was a crucial step in North Macedonia's fight against corruption and in fortifying the rule of law. Nonetheless, a corruption scandal marred her term, surfacing just months after her appointment. Janeva was accused of exploiting her position for personal benefit, a development which severely undermined her trustworthiness and the integrity of the Special Prosecutor's Office (Reuters, 2019). This controversy underscored the ongoing challenges that North Macedonia faces in curbing institutional corruption. The fallout from the scandal involving Janeva prompted doubts about the efficacy of the nation's anti-corruption strategies and the genuine commitment of its leaders to eradicate corruption and foster transparency within the judiciary.

The recent selections for judges and prosecutors in the North Macedonian judiciary system have provoked concerns over nepotism and cronyism, as a significant portion of the appointees are either politically connected or kin to sitting judges and prosecutors (Vecer, 2023). This seeming partiality compromises not only the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary system but also erodes public confidence in the rule of law. The widespread nepotism observed in these appointments impedes endeavors to enhance the country's judicial system and threatens to perpetuate a cycle of corruption and ineptitude. Tackling this problem is pivotal to establishing a judiciary that embodies transparency, independence, and accountability, and is committed to principles of fairness and equal justice for all citizens.

Undermining Democracy: Media Segregation and Government Control

Between 2006 and 2016, North Macedonia's democratic state encountered stagnation due to struggles in preserving free speech and ensuring media freedom. The government's meddling in the media, along with instances of censorship and surveillance, inhibited citizens' ability to access unbiased news and participate in frank political conversation, both of which are critical for a thriving democracy.

The segregation of media along ethnic lines further intensified societal and political rifts in the country, thereby undermining the democratic process and breeding mistrust among different communities (European Commission Progress Report, 2011, p. 6). This tension was further heightened by the government's partial enforcement of laws against media corporations and the Broadcasting Council's lack of transparency in their operations (European Commission Progress Report, 2011).

From 2006 to 2016, the media in North Macedonia were largely swayed by political and business interests, leading to the stifling of independent journalism and

the propagation of narratives favoring the government. Increasing intimidation of journalists and selective legal enforcement against media corporations raised concerns as they contributed to the silencing of free speech in the country (European Commission Progress Report, 2011, p. 63; European Commission Progress Report, 2012, p. 14) The lack of transparency in media ownership and poor enforcement against illegal media concentrations amplified these issues, creating a media landscape dominated by pro-government television channels, often the only news sources for many citizens, thereby limiting their exposure to a range of viewpoints and independent reports.

The repression of journalists and censorship of free speech in North Macedonia fostered an environment where differing voices were silenced, and the government's actions went mostly unchecked. This environment facilitated the government's control over information flow and its ability to mold public opinion, which undermined the pillars of a healthy democracy and left citizens with limited access to reliable, unbiased information.

North Macedonia's media outlets, much like its society, are profoundly segregated along ethnic lines (Freedom House, 2011, p. 407). The decline of media freedom and independence not only obstructed the development of a diverse media environment but also paved the way for government control and manipulation of information. This situation ultimately hindered democratic progress, as citizens were deprived of accurate and impartial information required for informed decision-making and active participation in the democratic process.

In order to rejuvenate democracy in North Macedonia, it's vital to address the challenges within the media landscape and guarantee freedom of speech, while also nurturing a culture of transparency and accountability within the government and its institutions. Doing so can encourage open dialogue, bolster trust among diverse communities, and set the stage for a more inclusive and resilient democratic system.

Conclusion

In summary, the period from 2009 to 2016 in North Macedonia witnessed significant challenges that impeded its path towards democratic consolidation. Political polarization, marked by deep divisions among political parties, undermined consensus-building efforts and perpetuated instability. Institutional weaknesses, including corruption and inefficiencies within state institutions, eroded public trust

and hindered effective governance. Economic disparities and social discontent further exacerbated these challenges, contributing to political disillusionment and fostering populist sentiments.

The country's aspirations for European integration provided a framework for democratic reforms, yet progress was often hindered by slow implementation and setbacks. The European Union's role in promoting democratic values and supporting institutional reforms remained pivotal but faced challenges in addressing deep-seated political and socio-economic issues.

Moving forward, addressing these factors requires concerted efforts from both domestic stakeholders and international partners. Strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing transparency and accountability, and fostering inclusive economic growth are essential steps towards overcoming democratic stagnation. Additionally, promoting dialogue and reconciliation among political factions and addressing socio-economic disparities are crucial for restoring public trust and advancing democratic governance.

Ultimately, North Macedonia's journey towards democratic consolidation is a complex and ongoing process that demands sustained commitment to democratic principles, effective governance, and inclusive development. By learning from past challenges and leveraging international support, North Macedonia can navigate towards a future characterized by political stability, prosperity, and integration into the European community.

References

Bieber, F. (2018). The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkan. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Brownlee, J. (2007). Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization. New York: Cambridge University Press.

European Commission Progress Report. (2011). HE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA 2011 PROGRESS. Brussels: European Commission.

European Commission Progress Report. (2012). The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2012 Progress Report. Brussels: European Commission.

Feedom House. (2019). Freedom in the World 2018, The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

Freedom House. (2006). Freedom in the Word 2006, The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Freedom House. (2008). Freedom in the Word 2008, The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Freedom House. (2009). Freedom in the World 2009, The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. .

Freedom House. (2011). Freedom in the World 2011, An annual survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefi eld Publishers, Inc.

Freedom House. (2013). Fredom in the World 2013. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

Freedom House. (2013). Freedom in the World 2012 The Annual Survey of Political Rights And Civil Liberties. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Freedom House. (2015). Freedom in the World 2014, The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc. .

Freedom House. (2020). Freedom in the World 2019, The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Maryland: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

Freedom House. (2016). Freedom in the World 2015, The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

Freedom House. (2017). Freedom in the Word 2016, The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

Georgievska-Jakovleva, L. (2014). The Project Skopje 14: Between Social Cohesion and Social Disintegration. Culture,8, 43-56.

Graan, A. (2013). Counterfeiting the Nation? Skopje 2014 and the Politics of Nation Branding in Macedonia. American Anthropological Association, 161-179.

Prespa Agreement. (2018, June 17). Retrieved from Government of the Republic of North Macedonia: https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/spogodba-en.pdf

Reuters. (2019, August 20). North Macedonia's prosecutor questioned over extortion scheme. Retrieved from Reuters: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-north-macedonia-investigation-idUSKCN1VA1LG

Risteski, L. S. (2016). Monuments and Urban Nationalism. The Skopje2014 Project. Antropologija , 50-70.

Saveski, Z., & Sadiku, A. (2012). The Radical Right in Macedonia. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung; International Policy Analysis, 1-11.

Sinisa Jakov Marusic; Ivana Kostovska. (2015, September 15). Macedonia Parties Clinch Deal on Special Prosecutor. Retrieved from BalkanInsight: https://balkaninsight.com/2015/09/15/macedonia-talks-on-special-prosecutor-reach-deadline-09-14-2015/

Skoulariki, A. (2020). Skopje 2014: Antiquisation, urban identity and the rejection of Balkan otherness. Herodotos Publications, 225-259.

Vecer. (2023, 02 21). Sinovi, snai, kerki i sopruzi na politicari – novi sudii i obviniteli! [Sons, daughters-in-law, daughters, and wives of politicians – new judges and prosecutors!]. Retrieved from Vecer: https://www.vecer.press/

BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

© IBU

DOI: https://doi.org//10.69648/VYGF5080

Balkan Research Journal(BRJ), 2025; 2(1): 33-44

brj.ibupress.com

Online ISSN: 2955-2524

Application : 03.04.2025

Revision : 18.04.2025

Acceptance : 21.05.2025

Publication : 30.05.2025

Miftari-Fetishi, I. (2025). Promoting cultural awareness and autonomous learning in higher education: A case study. Balkan Research Journal, 2(1), 33-44. https://doi.org//10.69648/VYGF5080

Igballe Miftari-Fetishi

International Balkan University, Faculty of Education, Skopje, North Macedonia

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0008-4550

We declare no conflicts of interest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Igballe Miftari-Fetishi, i.miftari@ibu.edu.mk

BALKAN JOURNALS

Promoting Cultural Awareness and Autonomous Learning in Higher Education: A Case Study

Igballe Miftari-Fetishi

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to promote autonomous learning and cultural awareness among professors and students in higher education. The issue of whether students should be actively involved in the learning process and regarded as collaborators in course materials, topics and plans is an ongoing issue. In regard to the assumption that the professors are in charge of the educational process and in regard to the cultural awareness issue that accordingly, the student should not be asked to participate in course content or suggest topics, the case study, in fact, explores ways how autonomous learning can be introduced and the outcomes of the process.

Participants in the case study are 30 students of IBU, of various fields (ELT, PCG and VA) who were enrolled in the course Program development in the previous semester (Fall 2024). The implementation of autonomous learning was simultaneously conducted through the different tasks and projects that the students were asked to complete along the course. The first phase consisted of determining the goals and defining students' needs. The second phase consisted of student support and empathy. Students learned to trust the process and to work on their own and in groups and to provide feedback. They designed their own plans, presented and taught their peers and reflected on the process afterwards. The last phase consisted of course-material experts. In this phase, students were asked to modify course materials, more specifically, to develop an additional chapter for the primary source (the course book). Students were additionally advised to complete personal portfolios. The portfolios provide students' feedback and reflections on the process, alongside their progress in the course. The procedure along with the outcomes of the process will be presented further in the paper.

Keywords: autonomous learning, cultural awareness, higher education, reflection, collaboration

Introduction

In contemporary teaching, the learner is required to actively partake in the learning process and to undertake responsibility of his/her own learning. Hence, "learner autonomy as a concept "erupted" as a necessity of defining the shift from traditional teaching to interactive teaching i.e the shift from teaching to learning (from teacher- to learner). The process hereby takes into consideration factors that help foster and maintain better learning, self-motivated learning and helps learners' in the discovering of who they actually are, what they actually like and how they learn best" (Miftari, 2015, pg. 101). The term autonomy therefore not only refers to the teacher and teaching instruction i.e. "how I teach" but also includes the learners' reflection i.e. "how I learn best and what can I do for improvement?" Additionally, it is a way of thinking about your own learning, reflecting on the process and on achieving overall success. Dickinson (1993) states that autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his/her learning and the implementation of those decisions. She also states that autonomous learners are capable of selecting appropriate learning strategies and making use of them; they are able to selfaccess, to assess their use of different strategies, and to evaluate their own learning (Dickinson, 1993, pgs. 330-331). Accordingly, we should therefore regard autonomous learning as a two-way process, on the one hand it includes the teacher and how well he/she knows the learners needs for both material and strategy adaptation and on the other, it involves the learners who partake as active participants in the process, ensuring that their preferences and suggestions are heard and implemented. This issue, as we will see later in the paper, is time-consuming, requires flexibility, patience and is quite challenging, however, the outcomes of the process are interestingly successful. According to Little (1991): "Autonomy is essentially a matter of the learners' psychological relation to the process and content of learning…a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action (1991, pg. 4). Additionally, Benson & Voller (1997) state that the term autonomy has come to be used: 1) for situations in which learners study entirely on their own; 2) for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in selfdirected learning; 3) for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education; 4) for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning; 5) for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning (1997, pg. 2). Benson et. al. (2003) proposed that developing learner autonomy is a socio-cultural process in which cultural background and learning experiences play a crucial role. Accordingly, learner autonomy refers to the capacity

to self-monitor one's learning process to participate actively in culturally accepted ways within a community of practices. (Benson, 2013)

Benson (2013) also suggests that the word capacity implied learners potential to be involved in autonomous learning, such as setting goals of learning, selecting appropriate learning materials and conducting reflection. This would not be possible without taking into consideration the learners needs, therefore, learner autonomy is also perceived as the representation of the inherent psychological needs of an individual.

Autonomy and the Cultural Awareness Issue

Teacher accountability is a term quite often used to describe the role of the teachers in the everyday profession; teachers should have expertise, additional qualifications, teacher trainings etc. in order to be employed. The role of the teacher in the overall success of the learners or group of learners is crucial. As a result, teachers are responsible for the scores, for student satisfaction and are also responsible for the teaching. In terms of introducing autonomous learning, the cultural awareness factor plays a major role.

Hence, prior to introducing the issue and implementation of autonomous learning in my course, it is important to brief you on the cultural assumptions related to teachers and teaching. Namely, in the Balkans and the region, the matter of including learners in the process of planning, teaching and design is regarded as negative. This is due to the stereotyping (or hypothesis) that defines the teacher as the sole collaborator in the teaching process and including the learners in the decision-making process is regarded as lack of the teachers' fulfillment towards the obligations of the chosen profession. As a result, teachers who are willing to promote autonomous learning should introduce it slowly and in small tasks. The procedure of events, along with student feedback and comments, which are original sources from their portfolios, are provided below. They serve as evidence of students' reflection on the process and their overall satisfaction. Along the way, you will notice that the students' reflection asserts that they did not have any previous experience with autonomous learning, referring here to needs analysis, students learning styles profiles etc. Additionally, the students were introduced to the notions during lectures and along the course. This implies that in their previous learning experience, students did not have a say in what they wish to learn, they could not provide suggestions and they were not actively involved in the learning process. The saying

"learning by doing" was not practiced previously and this was a new matter for them. The bitter truth made it even more challenging for implementation, however, the results proved the process to be worthwhile.

Accommodating Learners to the Teacher, the Peers and the Tasks

For effective collaboration to occur, it is very important for teachers to establish a rapport with the learners. The first step is accommodating the learners to the teacher, the course and to one-another. It is crucial for the learners to feel secure and to be able to communicate their needs, to provide suggestions and to collaborate together. The learners need to trust the process and need to be aware of the benefits that autonomous learning has and its' positive outcome.

Hence, the procedure began firstly as an introduction to the course and to the goals, along with the learners needs. The students were asked three basic questions:

- What do you know about planning?
- What is it that you need to learn about planning?
- How can we get there? Any suggestions?

The students were quite surprised with the set of questions. Apparently and according to their personal experience, they lacked previous brainstorming activities that would "predict" the course relevance or content. Later, in their portfolios, they made sure to mention this fact:

> "We also wrote down what our expectations were from the class and the professor told us that we would need to make this portfolio by the end of the course- a monument to everything we did throughout the course…we were introduced to Exit tickets and could only exit class when answering the exit ticket question."(Student portfolio source, 2024)

The group as previously mentioned, consisted of 30 third-year students, of three different departments. The variety in the department fields meant that the needs and goals would normally differ; hence, the materials along with the instruction were a challenge as of day one. Another feared obstacle was group acquaintance level i.e. how well would the group get along and collaborate in the tasks and activities and also, the readiness for them to partake in projects and presentations together. At the beginning, the group was very quiet, they were uncertain about what to expect, most of them did not know me (it was a first acquaintance) and were therefore shy to participate.

> "I remember during the first week of coming back to classes, sitting down with friends and discussing the potential of this course. New course with a new professor, we weren't quite sure what to expect. I think a few of us weren't expecting to have two pedagogical classes in the first semester, but it turned out to be a lot better than we expected." (Student Portfolio source, 2024)

I gradually began to give them more authority but also required more. At some point, the students began to actively provide support in the decision-making process and provide suggestions. They began to perfectly work together in peers and groups and were not afraid to present. I explained to them that we would make portfolios together- that they would be collecting every single task or assignment in a folder and that we would get back to the overall progress by the end of the course. I then took advantage of the group differences and required from the students to choose any one specific skill that they wished to present and teach to the group. In peers, students of the different departments designed lesson plans, decided on the aims and materials and co-taught. The activities varied from painting and drawing, to counseling and interview, to language teaching activities. The students worked very well together. They presented the activities, discussed their importance and answered questions. Afterwards, they were asked to self-reflect on the process. They were taught to not only plan and teach but to additionally reflect on the process (theory versus practice).

> "My favorite assignment from this class was when we had to do presentations, us as teachers, and teach the class a skill. It was the one assignment that caused us the most stress, but it was the most fun and energizing assignment we have done to date. We presented abstract art, entitled: An introduction to watercolor abstract art". (Student portfolio material, 2024)

Additionally, apart from the co-teaching experience and planning, we were also covering the course materials and topics from the course book. We were examining and discussing the importance of each topic in planning and were comparing the necessity of each one for the different fields i.e. some fields needed complementary chapters and skills. As a result, I decided to put students into the "expert position" namely, I asked them to analyze the chapters of the course book and to decide what they could additionally add as a chapter of their own (relevant to their field of studies). We termed this "course-book modification".

> "The last assignment was to add a chapter that we thought would fit in and be on the same level of importance in the book. We all got into groups and started thinking. After some discussion with my partner, out of the ideas we had written down, we decided to

go with project development, which would come after the chapter Material development". (Student Portfolio source, 2024)

The results of the task were surprisingly good; students actually thought about the process and gathered ideas. The topics were listed in order of importance and students conducted a voting strategy process, in which, the most relevant topics would be chosen. During this phase, students distinguished among the topics and with clear argumentative feedback argued for or against. They discussed the issue of relevance, do-ability and effectiveness of the chosen topic and within a very cooperative atmosphere, chose the best among topics.

Table 1.

Brainstorming task

Think of the topics in the course book. Are they equally relevant?	How could students be involved in the process? (their level, interest, cooperation)	How will this be accomplished?
What skill/topic could be added?	The second list should consist of what skills/ topics students wish to learn.	Present and discuss them with the group. Vote for or against the proposed chapter ideas. Explain why.
Together with peers, make a list of most important/least important chapters.	Make a draft of argumentative feedback regarding your choice.	IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

Following the thinking, voting and selection of the new chapters, the teams began working on the chapter material. The main aim was to develop course content that would be in-line with their fields of study and would also serve as additional material (which they concluded as needed). Two sample-chapters are provided below.

Table 2.

Student chapter sample A

Our contribution-Project Development **Chapter: Project Development** **Introduction** After working out the needs analysis, the goals, aims, and objectives, and defining the materials needed, the educators are in a position to introduce project development into the course schedule. Project development will be defined here as the gathering of information and resources and then using that knowledge to create a project. The key to developing a successful project is to aid the students in similar ventures they will encounter throughout their lives. They need to know how to gather research and resources properly and how to use and present them effectively, whether that be in front of a few people, an amphitheater full of students, a business meeting etc.
1. Research Analysis: Why is research important? 1.1. AI: Friend or Ally? 1.2 Good VS Bad Research 2. Project Presentation: How to use the information you have efficiently? 2.1. Gathering and Presenting Research 2.2. How to communicate your research 2.3. Practice makes perfect 3. Activities 4. Aims and objectives 5. Summary 1 Research Analysis: Why is research important? Before diving into the project, students need to first learn what and how is research done. Research isn't simply one online search or one forum and to call it a day of hard work.

1.2. AI: Friend or Ally?

AI is often viewed negatively due to concerns about job displacement, lack of transparency in decision-making, and the potential for bias in algorithms. These concerns arise from the rapid development of AI technologies and uncertainty about their long-term societal impact. But that doesn't mean AI can't be used for something good.

AI can significantly enhance and accelerate research across various fields by automating tasks, analyzing large datasets, providing insights, and enabling new approaches to problem-solving.

AI is transforming the research process by making it faster, more efficient, and more accurate. Whether it's through data analysis, simulation, automation, or improving collaboration, AI empowers researchers to make groundbreaking discoveries, solve complex problems, and push the boundaries of knowledge in a variety of fields, including medicine, environmental science, engineering, and beyond.

It all depends on how it is used, we cannot blame AI for students misusing it but with how most of the population is used to having the world at their fingertips, using AI to do their work is not much of a shock.

1.2. Good VS Bad Research

Some don't realize that there are correct and incorrect ways to do research, and you shouldn't only look for information that supports your idea but also research that goes against it, one well-written document does not hold well against ten documents that go against it.

Liza Azemi, Sara Popovska

Table 3.

Student chapter sample B

Chapter: Effective Communication

Introduction

Effective communication is a cornerstone of teaching. It enables educators to convey information clearly, concisely, and effectively. This chapter will equip students with the skills to transfer knowledge and teach their courses with confidence and precision.

Body

Types of Communication

Communication can take various forms, each with its strengths and limitations.

- **Verbal Communication**
- *Pros:* Immediate feedback, personal interaction, conveys tone and emotion effectively.
- *Cons:* Can be misinterpreted without supporting visual aids, less effective for complex ideas without repetition or clarity.
- **Non-Verbal Communication**
- *Pros:* Reinforces verbal messages, conveys emotions, and supports understanding through gestures or visuals.
- *Cons:* Can be ambiguous if not aligned with verbal communication, culture-specific interpretations.
- **Written Communication**
- *Pros:* Provides a permanent record, effective for detailed instructions or complex information.
- *Cons:* Lacks tone and immediate feedback, can lead to misunderstandings if poorly written.
- **Visual Communication**
- *Pros:* Engages learners, simplifies complex ideas, supports retention through visuals like charts, graphs, or slides.
- *Cons:* Requires technical skills, can distract if overused or poorly designed.

Assignment:

Prepare a project that includes a classroom presentation using at least two types of communication (e.g., verbal and visual). Evaluate the effectiveness of your approach based on audience feedback.

Self-Management and Time Management

Successful communication also depends on the ability to manage one's time and deliver the right amount of information within a given timeframe.

- **How Much Information to Deliver:**
- Start with the core message.
- Add supporting details sparingly, ensuring clarity and engagement.
- Use examples and questions to keep learners involved.
- **Time Management Tips:**
- Break sessions into manageable chunks with clear objectives.
- Allocate time for questions, interaction, and recap.
- Use tools like timers or schedules to stay on track.

Assignment:

Document your progress on a teaching project daily for a week. Reflect on how you managed your time and how it affected your communication effectiveness.

Practice

Effective communication improves with practice. Developing habits like journaling can refine one's ability to organize thoughts, reflect on experiences, and track growth.

Assignment:

Keep a journal until the end of the semester. Document your communication experiences, challenges, and improvements. Analyze your progress and share insights in a final reflection paper.

Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Communicate effectively and confidently, minimizing anxiety.
- Foster improved teaching practices through clarity and self-awareness.

(Sandra Kostovska Besarta Musliju, Melisa Sadikovik)

A Brief Summary on the Activities and on Student Feedback

The procedure of events began as an introduction to autonomous learning and as a form of collaboration between the teacher and the students and between student peers. The experience not only promoted collaboration and feedback, but also promoted autonomous learning within the tasks. Students not only had the chance to gather information, but they also had the chance to explain to the others the importance that the chosen chapter had for them and their distinguished fields. The main aim was to make students aware of the following: the importance of good materials, the importance of having definable goals in their teaching, the relevance of the learners needs and the overall importance of autonomous learning. Accordingly, "willingness for autonomous learning refers to the learners' tendency and inclination to actively set learning goals, select appropriate learning methods and engage in self-monitoring during the process. This concept emphasizes students' pro-activity an self-regulation in learning, which are crucial for life-long learning and personal development. (Wang, 2024, pg. 4)

Chen and Pan (2015) proposed three dimensions to represent foreign language learning autonomy: learner responsibility, the ability to conduct autonomous learning and different autonomous learning activities. Students were not only introduced to autonomous learning, but they were also active participants in the process. They shared their thoughts and ideas and admitted that the process helped them learn together and develop their individual growth. They noticed their strengths and their weaknesses and they could reflect on the skills and competences that needed improvement. Accordingly, in their portfolios, students provided clear insights on the process and what they considered helpful:

> Program development played a key role in enhancing my knowledge and learning by providing structure, clear objectives and new learning opportunities. The quality of the course allowed me to engage with the topics in a structured way and provided a solid foundation before moving on to more advanced topics. Even though there was some scheduling conflict with another class, the program proved highly valuable, and I was able to learn a great deal despite the challenges. These initiatives not only helped me understand the theory but also provided practical applications, allowing me to relate what I learned in class to real situations. An activity in class that focused on teamwork and course learning also improved my communication and collaboration skills, which are important for my personal, educational and professional development. This cycle of continuous learning and development kept me disciplined and motivated. Overall, the development program gave me the tools and confidence to solve problems, develop creativity, and learn effectively while planning for the future. Remarks about myself: I want to improve my time management to be more productive and balance my responsi-

bilities to create more space for tasks and projects. By better organizing and prioritizing my time, I hope to utilize my time and discover new opportunities for growth and learning. (Ana Marija Stefanovksa, Portfolio source, 2024)

Conclusion

The paper not only presents autonomous learning, but also provides the outline of the activities, together with the students' reflections of the process and feedback. Hence, it not only provides insights of teacher beliefs, but also provides the outcomes of the process and how well all was managed. The spontaneous procedure allowed for the learners to not only be themselves, but also taught them to trust the process and to collaborate. The portfolio sources provided evidence of student satisfaction, as they were not used to such teaching/learning in their previous education. The experience serves not only as an introduction to autonomous learning but it also serves as a model of theory and practice, implementation and reward. It serves as a model of implementation for teachers who wish to apply autonomous teaching and learning but are afraid to do so due to the above-mentioned factors and issues.

References

Benson, P. & Voller, P. (1997). Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning. London: Longman.

Benson, P. (Ed.). (2013). Teaching and researching autonomy. (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Benson, P. Chik, A. & Lim, H. Y. (2003). Becoming autonomous in an Asian context: Autonomy as a sociocultural process. In D. Palfreyman, & R.C. Smith (Eds.), Learner autonomy across cultures (pp. 23-40). Palgrave Macmillan.

Chen, H.I. & Pan, H. H. (2015). Learner autonomy and the use of language learning strategies in a Taiwanese junior high-school. Journal of studies in Education, 5(1), 52-64. https://doi.org/10.5296/jse.v5i1.6972

Dickinson, C. & Wright, J. (1993).Differentiation: a practical handbook of classroom strategies. Coventry: National council for educational technology.

Miftari, I. (2015). The concept of learner autonomy- A focus on metacognitive reading strategies at University Level, Promoting learner autonomy in higher education. Chapter 7., pg.101.

Little, D. (1991). Learner Autonomy. 1: Definitions, Issues and Problems. Dublin: Authentik.

Shikun, Li and Guofang, Li (2024). Revisit English Learner Autonomy Among Chinese Non-English Major Students During the COVID-19 Lockdown, SAGE Open October-December 2024: 1–18 DOI: 10.1177/2158244024128897journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo

Wang, L., & Li, W. (2024). The impact of AI usage on university students' willingness for autonomous learning. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14100956.

BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

Challenges in Interpreting Studies: Students' Perspective and Views

© IBU

DOI: https://doi.org//10.69648/ADJI6229
Balkan Research Journal(BRJ), 2025; 2(1): 45-56
brj.ibupress.com
Online ISSN: 2955-2524

Application : 01.04.2025
Revision : 20.04.2025
Acceptance : 15.05.2025
Publication : 30.05.2025

Pappa, M. (2025). Challenges in interpreting studies: Students' perspective and views. Balkan Research Journal, 2(1), 45-56
https://doi.org//10.69648/ADJI6229

Marina Pappa
Ionian University, Corfu, Greece

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1372-1013

I declare no conflicts of interest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Marina Pappa.

Email: mpappa@ionio.gr

BALKAN JOURNALS

Marina Pappa

Abstract

Interpreting is a complex task that involves linguistic, cognitive, and cultural dimensions. Interpreting is a skill that extends beyond linguistic proficiency to encompass cultural awareness, rhetorical understanding, and emotional intelligence. Interpreters must not only translate words but also capture the speaker's intent, tone, and emotions while maintaining accuracy and neutrality. In this paper, the challenges that novice interpreters encounter, particularly in political discourse, academic and professional training, in the framework of simultaneous interpretation, are explored. A questionnaire was administered to novice interpreters, and their views concerning their expectations were recorded. In theory and practice, there have been multiple approaches in order to enhance novice interpreters' training according to the findings and conclusions of extensive research in psychological, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics dimensions of interpreting. In this study, we shed light on challenges in interpreting studies as perceived by students and graduates.

Keywords: Interpreting, challenges, psychological, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics dimension of interpreting.

Introduction

Interpreting is a complex task that involves linguistic, cognitive, and cultural dimensions. Interpreters must not only translate words but also capture the speaker's intent, tone, and emotions while maintaining accuracy and neutrality. We explore the challenges novice interpreters encounter, particularly in political discourse, academic and professional training, in the framework of simultaneous interpretation. A questionnaire was administered to novice interpreters, and their views concerning their expectations were recorded.

In theory and practice, there have been multiple approaches in order to enhance novice interpreters' training according to the findings and conclusions of extensive research in psychological, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics dimensions of interpreting.

Weissmann (2012) considers that all forms of linguistic teaching contribute to the training and refinement of students' linguistic competences. The main issue is how to calibrate translation and interpreting training in order to meet the needs of the students.

Chen En Ho (2021) resumes the elements that are essential for effective interpreting preparation. "Developing situational awareness is essential, which entails the sensitivity to all contributing factors in a particular setting or context to the success of the task. Secondly, training in both languages is equally important, even for postgraduate–level programs, as it is the foundation of successful application of interpreting skills or strategies."

Franz Pockhacker (2023) insists on the contribution of Ingrid Kurz to interpreting studies, by insisting on her research on skills acquisition and expertise in cognitive psychology and studies on interpreters' personality.

The multidimensional dimension of interpreting is handled by Bendazzoli (2020). The concern to improve interpreters' performance is handled through materials, noting that there is a need to have multimedia and multimodal material, in order to have the springboard for further progress in the study of interpreting beyond the textual level.

In this study, we shed light on challenges in interpreting studies as perceived by students and graduates. Since students perceive the complexity of the interpreting skills, it is interesting to investigate their perceptions when dealing with political discourse and when calibrating their learning path in interpreting studies.

Research often registers the elements that add complexity and difficulties in simultaneous and consecutive interpreting and suggests pedagogical approaches to improve performance. Meanwhile, the perception of students in their initial approaches is important in order to have an outline of self-assessment, expectations, and weaknesses.

Interpreting is a skill that extends beyond linguistic proficiency to encompass cultural awareness, rhetorical understanding, and emotional intelligence. Political discourse, academic training, and simultaneous interpretation, especially in European institutions, present unique challenges, requiring specialized strategies to ensure accuracy and fidelity. This paper examines these challenges and discusses available methods to enhance conference interpreter training programs, integrating insights from a questionnaire conducted among novice interpreters.

Political discourse is inherently persuasive and strategic, having rhetorical devices such as repetition, metaphors, and emotional appeals. Interpreters must handle these elements while ensuring fidelity to the original speech. For instance, in political discourse at the European Parliament, references to historical events and current international issues require careful rendering to preserve both emotional impact and diplomatic neutrality.

Interpreters must convey the speaker's emotions without internalizing them, maintaining professional detachment while reflecting the appropriate tone. This balance is particularly challenging in speeches addressing sensitive topics such as war, discrimination, or humanitarian crises.

Political speeches often involve rapid delivery, shifts in pitch, and pauses that add rhetorical elements. The challenge for interpreters is to match these nuances while ensuring coherence in the target language. To manage these challenges, interpreters employ strategies such as paraphrasing, adjusting emphasis, and omitting redundant phrases to maintain fluidity and focus on core messages.

In the framework of challenges of simultaneous interpreting for novice interpreters (Pappa, 2022), when handling political discourse at European institutions, the challenges were registered by novice interpreters (Kikides, 2025) based on political speeches by leaders such as Emmanuel Macron and Nicolas Sarkozy. The political leaders use distinct persuasive techniques that interpreters must mediate, including logical structuring (Macron's approach) and emotional appeals (Sarkozy's style). In the framework of an effective approach to interpreting strategies from French into Greek, interpreting methods and approaches in simultaneous interpretation

in European Institutions, from French into Greek, were studied by comparing interpreting approaches to the speeches of the Presidents of the French Republic. This approach (Kikidis, 2025) revealed the various options concerning the choice of the most effective rendering of the meaning and the effective rendering of argumentation and emotional appeals.

Exploring Students' Expectations -Method

In order to explore students' expectations, questionnaires were drawn focusing on the communicative skills, the qualities students consider necessary for a successful interpreter, and their expectations in terms of the key pedagogical elements. The online questionnaire has closed-ended questions that were developed around questions concerning parameters that influence interpreters' performance and observations about Greek-speaking students' performance in interpreting. Data collection in interpreting studies is difficult because of the limited number of students, but 1rst year interpreting students, 2nd year interpreting students, and graduates of a Greek-speaking university responded. The mother tongue was Greek, and students' working languages were English, French, and German in the Greek context. The questions focused on the perceptions of students concerning communicative skills, the need to improve sociolinguistic skills, the integration of professional ethics in training, issues of sociocultural awareness, phonetic awareness, personal practice issues, and active class participation.

The questionnaire (Valantasi, 2025) was administered to interpreting students and graduates. As some universities introduce interpreting studies at the third or fourth year of undergraduate studies, 1rst year interpreting students were actually 3rd year undergraduate students. Most of them were C2 learners in English or French. The questionnaire was also administered to novice interpreters concerning their expectations for their training and views on acquiring skills.

Findings

The findings reveal perceptions of interpreting studies by students and novice interpreters. Regarding sociocultural awareness, there is consensus on its significance and the prioritization of its characteristics for interpretation. At the same time, it is emphasized that all aspects of sociocultural awareness are considered critical, as students are required to recognize and adapt them accordingly in every interpretative process. A similar agreement is observed concerning the improvement

of phonetic awareness, although perfection is expected to be achieved within the framework of professional practice.

As for communication skills, students agree that comprehensive familiarity with all aspects is necessary. However, there are variations in the priorities students set regarding the skills they wish to focus on, which contrasts with the views of graduates. On a practical level, graduates emphasize the need for in-depth training in all communication skills, given that they are required in various professional environments.

Additionally, there is broad agreement among students on the necessity of personal practice in interpretation. Everyone recognizes the importance of individual effort, both in the practical application and theoretical foundation of their skills. Furthermore, the value of classroom participation is highlighted, as it combines practical training with theoretical instruction on topics such as ethics and attire. These issues are deemed crucial for shaping their professional identity and are met with unanimous agreement. In summary, there is consensus among students regarding their expectations for academic training and professional achievements. Studies on students' perceptions of interpretation training reveal that:

First-year students focus on theoretical foundations and linguistic skills. Second-year students emphasize the need for more practical exercises and real-life exposure. Graduates acknowledge the value of academic training but identify gaps in professional readiness.

Graduates face significant challenges transitioning from academic settings to professional environments, including handling fast-paced speech in live interpreting, managing complex terminologies, and working without pre-session materials.

According to the questionnaire, a significant percentage of students and recent graduates expressed the view that their training did not sufficiently prepare them for real-world interpreting. The most common concerns were a lack of exposure to real-life speech variations, insufficient training in handling stress, and limited practice with specialized terminology.

Interpreters must be aware of cultural nuances, idiomatic expressions, and non-verbal communication to ensure accurate interpretation. Phonological awareness is also crucial for understanding various accents and speech patterns. More than 50% of survey respondents indicated that dealing with different accents and regional dialects was one of their greatest challenges, emphasizing the need for exposure to diverse linguistic variations during training.

Ethical considerations are often overlooked in academic training but play a vital role in professional practice. Incorporating ethics courses into the curriculum would help students address real-world dilemmas such as neutrality, confidentiality, and impartiality. The questionnaire results showed that 62% of interpreters had encountered ethical dilemmas in their careers.

Key issues concern familiarity with the field of interpreting requires a continuous expansion of knowledge and skills, both academically and professionally. The development of communication skills—both linguistic and sociolinguistic—as well as familiarity with current affairs that may relate to future interpreting assignments, are critical areas requiring ongoing deepening. At the same time, exploring the limits and potential of each trainee interpreter proves to be crucial for their professional advancement.

The majority of students, especially those in the early stages of their academic education, recognize that the successful completion of interpreting studies demands significant personal effort. This view is confirmed by graduates, who emphasize that intensive personal work during training is essential for successfully entering the professional field.

The importance of active participation in the educational process is reflected in student evaluations regarding their classroom attendance. From the sample, two first-year and three second-year students rated their participation with an eight (8) out of 10, and two graduates rated it with a nine (9), while all others gave a ten (10), where ten (10) indicates that class attendance is considered "absolutely essential."

This overall evaluation highlights the significance of academic training as a foundational factor for the development of communication skills, the improvement of working languages, the enhancement of encyclopedic knowledge, and the awareness of current events. Through their academic education, students gain confidence and lay the groundwork for their future professional training, which will continue to grow through their work experience.

It is interesting to see the focus of students in the following question, where everyday life is considered crucial for sociocultural awareness. Rank, in order of importance, the 4 (four) characteristics of sociocultural awareness that you consider most important for interpretation.

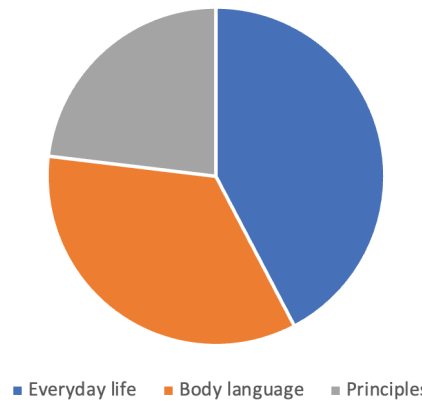
Values, principles

Body language

Living conditions

Daily life

Figure 1. Student focus areas



Interpretation constitutes a complex and demanding process that requires the development of various linguistic and communicative skills. Communicative abilities, which include both linguistic and sociolinguistic competencies, are considered fundamental for the effective practice of interpreting. From the beginning of their studies, students are called upon to recognize the importance of these skills and to understand how strengthening them can decisively contribute to their professional path as interpreters.

Specifically, among first-year students in the sample, it was observed that just one (1) student, having acknowledged the importance of interpretive skills, believes that an in-depth focus on phonology and articulation will significantly contribute to the development of their interpreting abilities. This approach ranks semantics, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling as lower priorities. The remaining two (2) first-year students share a similar stance, with a slight variation between grammar and vocabulary.

Similarly, in a sample of second-year students, one (1) student places emphasis on phonology and articulation as the top priority, followed by semantics, grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. On a phonological level, students believe that once they

fully understand the meanings of the signifiers in their working languages, they will be able to adjust intonation and place emphasis in their speech accurately in order to express more subtle semantic distinctions.

At this stage, the enhancement of vocabulary and grammar is deemed crucial, as students focus on the precise use of syntactic structures and their expressive ability in order to produce concise and comprehensible interpretations. The ability to distinguish and convey subtle semantic differences in their languages constitutes a critical factor for their success in the professional field.

Conclusion

Interpreting is a multifaceted skill requiring cultural awareness, rhetorical understanding, and emotional intelligence. By refining training programs, emphasizing real-world exposure, and equipping interpreters with coping mechanisms for high-pressure situations, the field of interpretation studies can continue to evolve and meet the demands of an increasingly globalized world. The integration of findings from a questionnaire highlights key areas for improvement in interpreter education and professional practice, offering a data-driven approach to addressing common challenges in the field.

The answers revealed that the students' main concern was the distance between proficient performance in a foreign language and effective carrying out of mediation tasks, and especially interpreting. There are clear indications of the main areas that interpreting teaching should focus on in order to strengthen novice interpreters' performance. Further studies are needed in order to integrate specific tasks that enhance interpreters' performance and conduct calibration experiments in order to adopt the most efficient path towards successful acquisition of interpreting skills.

Appendix

The questions were as follows:

1. Do you believe that you will improve your communicative language skills? If yes, in which area do you think you will deepen your knowledge the most?

a.) No, I do not believe so.

b) Yes, I believe so. In language skills.

c)Yes, I believe so. In sociolinguistic skills.

d)In both.

2.In which area, in order of importance, do you think it would be desirable to deepen your knowledge?

a) Vocabulary

b) Grammar

c)Phonology

d)Articulation

e) Spelling

f) All the above

3.Regarding sociolinguistic skills, in which area, in order of importance, do you think it would be desirable to deepen your knowledge?

a) Politeness conventions

b) Expressions of folk wisdom

c) Stylistic level

d) Dialects/idioms

e) All the above

4.Do you consider it important to have a course in the curriculum regarding the professional ethics of an interpreter?

a) Strongly agree

b) Agree

c) Neither agree nor disagree

d) Disagree

e) Strongly disagree

5.Rank, in order of importance, the three (3) characteristics of sociocultural awareness that you consider most important for interpretation.

a) Values, principles

b) Body language

c) Living conditions

d) Daily life

6.Do you believe that you will have the opportunity to perfect your general phonetic awareness of your working languages?

a) Yes

b) No

7. Do you believe that successful completion of studies requires a lot of personal practice?

a) Yes, a lot.

b) No, I will manage with little.

c) I believe that everyone has a different way of studying and practicing.

d)At a normal level, neither too little nor too much.

8. Is there another area you believe should be explored further in class?

a) Improving language skills

b) A more detailed approach to current issues

c) Interpreter practice with videos

c) All the above

9. On a scale from 1 to 10, how important do you consider active class participation?

10. Do you think your appearance plays an important role when providing interpreting services at events?

a) Yes

b) No

c)My appearance does not matter, only my performance as an interpreter.

References

Bendazzoli, C., Bertozzi, M. & Russo, M. (2020). Du texte aux ressources multimodales : faire avancer la recherche en interprétation à partir d'un corpus déjà existant.[From Text to Multimodal Resources : Advancing Interpreting Research Using an Existing Corpus] Meta, 65(1), 211–236. https://doi.org/10.7202/1073643ar

Ho, C. E. (2021). What does professional experience have to offer? An eye tracking study of sight interpreting /translation behaviour. Translation Cognition Behavior.

Kikides, G**.** (2025). Analysis of interpreting methods and approaches in simultaneous interpretation in European institutions from French into Greek: Speeches of the Presidents of the French Republic (Unpublished dissertation). Ionian University.

Poeckhacker, M. (2023). Pioneering interpreting studies: The extraordinary case of Ingrid Kurz, Interpreting 25:2.

Pappa, M. (2022). Trends in interpreters' training and students' attitudes. In The 7th International Language, Culture and Literature Symposium / 7. Uluslararası Dil, Kültür ve Edebiyat Sempozyumu.

Valantasi, M**.** (2025). Students' attitudes and perceptions regarding their initial academic and professional training (Unpublished dissertation). Ionian University.

Weissmann, D. (2012). La médiation linguistique à l'université : Propositions pour un changement d'approche. [Linguistic Mediation at the University : Proposals for a Change in Approach] In ELA. *Études de linguistique appliquée*, (167), 313–323.

BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

© IBU

DOI: https://doi.org//10.69648/TLAT1039
Balkan Research Journal(BRJ), 2025; 2(1): 57-76
brj.ibupress.com
Online ISSN: 2955-2524

Application : 05.04.2025
Revision : 20.04.2025
Acceptance : 20.05.2025
Publication : 30.05.2025

Dimeska, N., & Dabeski, M. (2025). Social turbulence and transformation in the Balkan region: challenges of active inclusion for victims of human trafficking – A case study of young girls in North Macedonia. Balkan Research Journal, 2(1), 57-76. https://doi.org//10.69648/TLAT1039

Social Turbulence and Transformation in the Balkan Region: Challenges of Active Inclusion for Victims of Human Trafficking – A Case Study of Young Girls in North Macedonia

Natasa Dimeska and Marjan Dabeski

Natasa Dimeska[1] and Marjan Dabeski[2]

[1] PhD University "St. Cyril and Methodius" – Skopje, Institute of Social Work and Social Policy, North Macedonia, https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6932-3305

[2] MA candidate, University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Faculty for Law, Kichevo, North Macedonia, https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3807-6529

Paper was presented at the Social Turbulence and Transformation in the Balkan Region Conference, Skopje, North Macedonia. We declare no conflicts of interest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Natasa Dimeska.
Email: dimeskanatasa@yahoo.com

Abstract

Human trafficking in the Balkan region represents a critical human rights issue amid ongoing social upheaval and transformation. This study investigates the intricate challenges related to the social inclusion and reintegration of trafficking survivors, mainly focusing on young female victims in North Macedonia. A mixed-methods approach was employed, which included qualitative interviews with survivors, social workers, policymakers, and law enforcement officials, as well as comprehensive reviews of legal frameworks, policy documents, and statistical data. Key statistics include: nearly 70% of identified victims in North Macedonia are minors (average age ~15), women and girls constitute approximately 72% of global trafficking victims, and annual reported cases in North Macedonia range between 150–200—with forced marriage cases totaling 17 and increasing incidents of online exploitation among adolescents. The findings highlight various reintegration obstacles, such as structural limitations (e.g., inadequate shelter capacity and chronic funding shortages), significant psychological trauma, and widespread societal stigma, all compounded by gaps in existing legal and institutional support systems. Although North Macedonia's legal framework complies with international standards, survivors frequently struggle to access education, employment, and community resources. Recent initiatives aimed at increasing deterrence through stricter sentencing and specialized judicial practices indicate a positive yet inconsistent legal response. This paper offers specific, evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to create sustainable reintegration strategies for young trafficking survivors in North Macedonia and the larger Balkan area.

Keywords: human trafficking, social inclusion, reintegration, human rights, legal protection

Introduction

Human trafficking survivors face profound challenges in returning to normal life after their exploitation ends. Reintegration is understood as the process of recovery and socio-economic inclusion following a trafficking experience. This process is multifaceted: survivors must attain safety, stable living conditions, health care, education, and employment to rebuild their lives. In North Macedonia, young female survivors of trafficking often encounter systemic shortcomings that impede this reintegration process. Services may be fragmented, legislation can have gaps in protection, and coordination between agencies is frequently weak. These challenges are not unique to North Macedonia; similar patterns appear across the Western Balkans.

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the reintegration of human trafficking survivors—especially young women—in North Macedonia, using structural–institutional and trauma-informed theoretical frameworks. A structural perspective recognizes that reintegration success depends not only on individual recovery but also on addressing pre-existing vulnerabilities and systemic factors (e.g., poverty, legal status, social exclusion) that persist after trafficking. A trauma-informed lens emphasizes that services must be delivered with an understanding of the profound psychological trauma survivors carry, necessitating care that promotes safety, empowerment, and healing. By integrating these frameworks, the paper identifies critical gaps in current reintegration efforts and highlights evidence-based practices.

The analysis begins by reviewing legal frameworks and institutional structures in North Macedonia and neighboring Balkan countries, establishing the context in which reintegration services operate. It then examines the characteristics of survivors and the key barriers they face at structural, psychological, and societal levels. Comparative case studies from Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina offer insights into regional best practices and pitfalls. Particular emphasis is placed on education, vocational training, and labor inclusion programs as proven avenues for survivor empowerment. The evolution of shelter systems – from immediate crisis care to longer-term support – is explored to underscore the importance of continuity in aftercare. Finally, the paper concludes with concrete recommendations to strengthen reintegration pathways, informed by both the findings in North Macedonia and successful approaches in the Balkan region. The aim is to provide scholars, policymakers, and practitioners with a research-driven foundation for improving the reintegration of trafficking survivors into society and the labor market.

Legal Frameworks and Institutional Structures in the Balkans

The Balkans region has made notable strides in establishing legal and institutional responses to human trafficking. However, significant disparities remain in the effectiveness and coherence of these frameworks across countries. The following section examines the structural and institutional context in North Macedonia, using it as a case study, and highlights both progress and persistent challenges in aligning with international standards.

Structural–Institutional Context in North Macedonia

North Macedonia has developed an anti-trafficking legal framework that aligns with international standards, yet implementation gaps remain. The country is a party to the UN Palermo Protocol (2000) and the Council of Europe's Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005), committing it to provide protective measures and reintegration support for victims. National legislation has seen positive amendments in recent years. Notably, the *Law on Foreigners* (2018) introduced a recovery and reflection period and renewable residence permits on humanitarian grounds for trafficking victims. This ensures foreign victims are given temporary legal status to stabilize and decide on cooperation with authorities. Additionally, North Macedonia amended its Criminal Code to include a non-punishment clause for trafficking victims, so that those forced into illegal acts are not prosecuted. In 2022, the *Law on Payment of Monetary Compensation to Victims of Violent Crimes* was adopted, establishing the possibility of state compensation for victims of human trafficking. The designation of the national Ombudsman's Office as the National Rapporteur on Trafficking is another institutional step welcomed by experts.

Despite this progress in the legal framework, there are systemic weaknesses in execution. Formal identification of victims remains very low, typically only a few cases per year, which suggests many survivors are not being brought into the protection system. For instance, aside from one atypical case in 2021, the annual identified victims in North Macedonia has ranged between two and nine. This raises concerns that frontline institutions (police, social workers, labor inspectors) may lack capacity or coordination to detect and refer victims, a point underscored by GRETA (Council of Europe, 2023) in its evaluations. A GRETA visit report noted *"a shift to labour exploitation as the predominant form of exploitation"* in North Macedonia, indicating evolving trafficking trends (from primarily sexual exploitation to more cases of forced labor) that require adaptive institutional responses. Labor inspectors

have been trained under recent initiatives, but GRETA urges clearer mandates and more resources for the Labor Inspectorate. This is vital for the proactive identification of labor trafficking victims and the enforcement of labor rights.

Inter-agency coordination in North Macedonia is formalized through a National Commission and a National Mechanism for Referral of Victims of Trafficking. However, gaps in practice are evident. A 2021 review highlighted that victims can fall through bureaucratic cracks: one case involved a teenage girl who approached authorities for help but was not recognized as a trafficking victim until she persisted in reporting her situation. This suggests that frontline institutions sometimes fail to "connect the dots" and properly apply victim identification criteria, reflecting either insufficient training or weak inter-agency communication. North Macedonia's government funds a program for victim reintegration on paper, listing employment, housing, and continued education as key elements. Yet, after leaving shelter care, survivors commonly face unemployment and housing instability, indicating a disconnect between policy and reality. The country currently lacks specialized reintegration programs to facilitate the economic inclusion of survivors. For example, there are no dedicated schemes to place victims into jobs or support their entrepreneurship. Even existing general employment measures are out of reach – the national Employment Service Agency does not adjust its programs for trafficking survivors or safeguard their data, so survivors avoid registration out of privacy and safety concerns. These structural gaps point to an urgent need for strengthening institutional support and coordination for reintegration in North Macedonia.

Regional Legal Commitments and Coordination Mechanisms

Across the Balkans, countries share similar legal commitments against human trafficking, yet implementation effectiveness varies. Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have all criminalized human trafficking and established national anti-trafficking strategies. They collaborate through regional bodies and exchanges (often under the framework of EU accession reforms or the South-East European Law Enforcement Center). All have institutions akin to national coordination committees and referral mechanisms to streamline victim identification and assistance. However, each country's system reveals distinctive strengths and shortcomings that influence reintegration outcomes.

Serbia's legal framework has evolved, with recent amendments introducing reflection periods and temporary residency for foreign victims (paralleling North Macedonia's laws). Serbia also appointed a National Rapporteur (within the

Ombudsman's office) to independently monitor anti-trafficking efforts. This structural move is lauded as improving oversight. Yet, the practical enforcement in Serbia faces challenges similar to North Macedonia's. GRETA's third report on Serbia (2023) notes that trafficking cases are often re-qualified to lesser offenses during prosecution, and victims may not be informed of plea bargains. This undermines justice and can retraumatize survivors. Serbia's framework for victim compensation is underutilized; victims rarely obtain restitution, prompting calls for a state compensation fund and better use of asset seizure from traffickers. On a positive note, Serbia has specialized anti-trafficking police and prosecutors, and it has recently reopened a state-run emergency shelter for trafficking victims. Still, no shelter for adult male victims exists in Serbia to date, reflecting a regional trend where services for men and boys lag behind those for women and children.

Albania presents a somewhat different institutional picture. As a primary country of origin for trafficking victims, Albania has invested in comprehensive victim support structures largely run in partnership with NGOs. Four main institutions offer rehabilitation and reintegration services: three NGO-run shelters (e.g., *Different and Equal* in Tirana, *Vatra* in Vlora, *Another Vision* in Elbasan) and one state-run National Reception Centre in Tirana. This network, supported by the Albanian government and international donors, provides a range of services including shelter, medical and psychological care, legal assistance, and vocational training. Albania's National Referral Mechanism is relatively well-developed, and the country has implemented a *National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Human Beings (2021–2023)* that explicitly emphasizes reintegration (unicef.org). Albanian law also contains innovative provisions like the *Law on Social Enterprises*, which mandates that 30% of employees in certified social enterprises should come from marginalized groups (explicitly including trafficking survivors) (assets.publishing.service.gov.uk). Such structural measures aim to create labor market openings for survivors and are a model of institutional support through legislation. Nonetheless, Albania faces its own difficulties in practice: accessing public services can be bureaucratic and slow for survivors, and long-term funding for reintegration programs remains a concern. An Albanian study noted that while numerous frameworks exist on paper guaranteeing employment, health, housing, and economic aid to survivors, significant gaps and challenges persist in translating those into effective support (unicef.org). This indicates that strong NGO involvement continues to be critical in Albania to fill implementation gaps.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has a complex administrative structure (with multiple entities and cantons) that complicates its institutional response to trafficking. BiH has acceded to the same international conventions and has national anti-trafficking legislation. In practice, NGOs are central to victim support in BiH, running shelters and providing services with government funding support. For example, NGO-run shelters in BiH ensure that each child victim is appointed a legal guardian and that specialized accommodations are available – one NGO shelter reportedly established a *separate facility specifically for child trafficking victims*, and another set up accommodation for male victims. These are notable practices in the region, addressing categories of survivors often overlooked elsewhere. Still, coordination between state agencies (such as social services, law enforcement, and immigration authorities) can be inconsistent. The Council of Europe launched a project in 2022 to bolster BiH's capacity to provide essential support and access to justice for trafficking victims. The project focuses on training key groups and ensuring victims can obtain compensation from traffickers' seized assets. BiH authorities have acknowledged that while emergency assistance (shelter, medical care) is usually provided, long-term reintegration support is underdeveloped, partly due to limited resources in social protection systems. As in its neighbors, ensuring sustainable funding and multi-year programs for survivors remains a pressing structural challenge.

Balkan countries have put in place broadly adequate legal frameworks and institutional bodies to combat human trafficking and assist victims. However, systemic shortcomings – from under-identification of victims and patchy inter-agency coordination to insufficient long-term support measures – hinder the journey from victimhood to survivor empowerment. These shortcomings set the stage for examining how they manifest in the lives of survivors and what barriers women, in particular, face when trying to rebuild their lives after trafficking.

Survivor Characteristics and Reintegration Barriers

Understanding the personal profiles of trafficking survivors is essential for designing effective reintegration strategies. In the Balkans, and particularly in North Macedonia, survivors often face deeply rooted structural and institutional barriers that hinder their recovery and social reintegration. The following section explores these challenges, focusing on the socioeconomic vulnerabilities, age and gender profiles, and systemic obstacles that shape the post-trafficking experience.

Structural and Institutional Barriers

Survivors of human trafficking in North Macedonia (and the Balkans generally) often come from socially and economically vulnerable backgrounds. Many are young women with limited formal education and scarce employment history, factors that traffickers exploit and that later complicate reintegration. For instance, a large proportion of identified victims are minors or young adults. UNICEF (2024) reported that in North Macedonia, 70% of identified trafficking victims in recent years were children, an alarming figure far above the global average. In Serbia, data from 2017 to 2022 show that almost half of the identified victims were children, and most were female. This means reintegration programs frequently deal with adolescents or women in their early twenties who have missed out on schooling and come with complex trauma.

Survivors typically face legal and economic hurdles that are structural in nature. Lack of personal identification documents, for example, can impede access to services. Traffickers may have confiscated IDs, or survivors may never have been properly registered in the first place. Without an ID, they struggle to access healthcare, social benefits, or legal employment. Even with ID, legal status can be a barrier for foreign victims: though North Macedonia and Serbia provide temporary residency to foreign victims, navigating the bureaucracy can be daunting, and the short duration of permits can leave victims insecure about the future. Ensuring trafficking victims have legal status is a precondition to reintegration, as it entitles them to services and rights in society. Residence insecurity undermines any attempt to find work or stability.

Another structural barrier is the availability and accessibility of services, especially at the local level. Reintegration requires a coordinated package of support – housing, healthcare, psycho-social counseling, education, and job assistance. If any of these services is missing or hard to reach, the whole reintegration process can falter. In North Macedonia, specialized services for survivors exist primarily in the capital or in NGO-run facilities; rural areas lack local reintegration programs. Survivors returning to small communities may find there are no counselors trained in trauma, no job opportunities that fit their needs, and pervasive social stigma (explored further below). Even basic financial support can be hard to obtain. North Macedonia offers a modest economic assistance stipend to unemployed trafficking victims, but very few survivors successfully receive it. The application is time-consuming, requires proof of a rental agreement and other paperwork, and many victims are discouraged by bureaucracy or discrimination when they apply.

Another institutional shortcoming is the lack of tailored economic reintegration programs. As noted earlier, North Macedonia has no special work integration measures for trafficking survivors, and even general active labor market programs do not accommodate their needs. Serbia and Bosnia also have few, if any, dedicated state-run employment programs for this group. This means survivors must compete in the general job market, often with substantial disadvantages (low education, skills gaps, trauma-related disorders).

Psychological and Societal Challenges (Trauma-Informed Considerations)

Beyond structural issues, survivors face deep psychological wounds and societal obstacles that any reintegration effort must address. Trafficking survivors commonly experience Complex Trauma – prolonged captivity, violence, and abuse result in complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), depression, anxiety, and difficulties in trusting others. A trauma-informed framework stresses that services need to account for these effects. For example, survivors may have impaired concentration and memory (making it hard to succeed in school or training initially), or they may experience triggers and panic attacks in work or public environments reminiscent of their exploitation. Unless reintegration programs integrate mental health care and trauma-informed practices, survivors might drop out of school, quit jobs abruptly, or avoid seeking help, perceiving environments as unsafe.

Trauma-informed care means creating an environment of physical and emotional safety, empowering survivors in decision-making, and being sensitive to triggers in all interactions. This approach is backed by mental health models such as Judith Herman's stages of trauma recovery (establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma narrative, and restoring connection to community). In practical terms, a trauma-informed reintegration program in North Macedonia would ensure that shelter staff and vocational trainers are trained in trauma awareness. It would allow survivors choices (for instance, in what vocational skill to pursue) to promote a sense of control and agency that trafficking stripped from them. It would also provide long-term counseling and peer support. As one U.S. State Department guide notes, *"a trauma-informed approach includes an understanding of the physical, social, and emotional impact of trauma on the individual"* and adjusts services accordingly. This is crucial in the Balkans context, where formal mental health services are often limited. In North Macedonia and its neighbors, psychological support is generally available during the shelter stay, but aftercare counseling is scarce. Many survivors return to communities where therapists or support groups are nonexistent.

Expanding trauma-informed aftercare, possibly through community-based NGOs or tele-counseling, is an important recommendation emerging from this analysis.

On a societal level, stigma and marginalization present significant barriers. In conservative social environments, victims of sex trafficking (the majority of female cases) may be shamed or blamed for their experience. Instead of receiving empathy, they can encounter rejection from their families or communities. This stigma can be acute in smaller towns or rural areas of North Macedonia and elsewhere in the Balkans, where traditional norms prevail. Young women returning from trafficking may be seen as "dishonored" or as willing prostitutes, an extremely damaging misperception that isolates them and undermines reintegration. Even when families are supportive, the broader community might gossip or ostracize, making it hard for survivors to reintegrate socially or find jobs. Employers might be hesitant to hire a known trafficking victim due to prejudice or so-called "reputational" concerns. Such societal attitudes inflict *secondary victimization*.

Survivors of trafficking may have strained family relationships or a lack of family support. Some were trafficked by family members or sold by relatives, which is a profound betrayal that complicates a return to the family home. Others fear bringing shame or danger to their families if traffickers retaliate. Even well-intentioned families might not know how to deal with the psychological aftermath. Reintegration efforts must often work with survivors' families to educate them about trauma and how to support their daughter's (or son's) recovery. In some Balkan cases, alternative support networks or *"second families"* through mentoring programs have been beneficial. The involvement of survivor mentors or survivor-led organizations (where former victims guide new ones) can provide the understanding and hope that families or society may not readily give.

Survivors' reintegration is impeded by a lattice of barriers: institutional gaps (legal, economic, service delivery) and human factors (trauma, stigma, disrupted relationships). A successful reintegration model must be comprehensive, tackling everything from securing identity papers and stable housing to healing psychological trauma and overcoming social exclusion.

Comparative Case Studies and Regional Best Practices

While all countries in the Balkans face challenges in supporting trafficking survivors, some have begun piloting innovative approaches to improve reintegration outcomes. This section presents a comparative look at practices in the region,

starting with North Macedonia, where notable initiatives coexist with critical service gaps. By analyzing these emerging efforts and persistent shortcomings, we can identify both lessons learned and opportunities for regional improvement.

North Macedonia: Gaps and Emerging Initiatives

In North Macedonia, the journey of a trafficking survivor typically involves an initial rescue or escape, a stay in a shelter, and then an attempt to re-enter society. The primary shelter in the country is run by Open Gate – La Strada North Macedonia, an NGO that has been at the forefront of victim assistance for over two decades. This shelter (sometimes referred to as a transit center or rehabilitation center) provides crucial immediate care, accommodation, medical attention, counseling, and legal aid. However, as Open Gate staff themselves note, *"the reintegration process is very slow and difficult because there aren't many services for victims' reintegration after they leave the shelter"*. This candid observation encapsulates North Macedonia's core gap: post-shelter support. Once a survivor exits the safe house, often due to time limits or resource constraints, she faces a precipitous drop-off in structured support. There are no transitional housing programs or halfway homes funded by the state to bridge the move to independent living. Many survivors have nowhere to go except back to the very communities or even families where they were recruited, risking re-trafficking or abuse. Recognizing this, Open Gate has advocated for expanding shelter capacities and creating local alternative centers for longer-term support. Recently, some mobile teams have been established (with international project support) to do field outreach to vulnerable groups and potential victims in North Macedonia. These teams aim to improve identification and also assist known victims in remote areas, but they are few and not institutionalized yet.

On the positive side, North Macedonia's authorities, under international guidance, have started to incorporate economic empowerment into reintegration strategies on paper. The new National Strategy for Combating Trafficking (2021–2025) includes actions for vocational training and employment of victims. Additionally, the government has begun involving civil society organizations more actively in policy development. Open Gate and other NGOs participate in working groups and campaigns as equal partners. However, these policy-level initiatives will need concrete backing – budget allocations, trained personnel, and effective case management – to change the on-the-ground reality.

A specific shortcoming in North Macedonia is the limited scope of the national reintegration program. While the Ministry of Social Policy, Demographic and Youth

(MSPDY) nominally has a program covering housing, education, and employment, in practice, its reach has been minimal. Few trafficking survivors have benefited from state housing or education scholarships. As mentioned, survivors rarely access public employment services due to confidentiality concerns. One recommendation is for MSPDY to create a confidential referral pathway with the Employment Service Agency, so survivors can enroll in active labor measures (like skills training or subsidized jobs) without exposing their victim status to potential stigma or danger. Also, data-sharing protocols could be improved: currently, the lack of a specialized data system means trafficking cases are often handled ad hoc. The commitment to develop a functional database of trafficking cases could, if realized, help track survivor needs and services provided, enabling better follow-up.

North Macedonia can draw inspiration from its neighbors to pilot solutions. For instance, establishing a small grants program for survivor entrepreneurs (an approach IOM has tried elsewhere) or partnering with companies to create trainee positions for survivors would be new in North Macedonia.

Education, Vocational Training, and Labor Market Inclusion

One of the most critical components of survivor reintegration is achieving economic independence, which heavily relies on education and inclusion in the labor market. Evidence from international research and regional practice consistently shows that survivors who gain skills and secure decent work are far less likely to be re-trafficked or exploited again, and they tend to recover a sense of dignity and agency. This section delves deeper into education and vocational initiatives as evidence-based practices, drawing on both global literature and Balkan-specific programs.

Education forms the foundation of reintegration for young survivors. Many trafficking victims, especially girls, have had their schooling interrupted or never progressed beyond primary education. Completing secondary education is a pivotal goal. As noted in the Albania study, *"young survivors who are supported to complete high school have a better chance of finding decent employment"*(unicef.org).

High school diplomas open doors to formal employment that would otherwise be shut. Moreover, some survivors aspire to higher education; those who manage to enroll in university or professional colleges often experience not only improved job prospects but also personal empowerment and social acceptance. Internationally, NGOs like *World Education* and *UNICEF* have implemented "second-chance

education" programs for trafficking survivors, demonstrating positive outcomes in literacy and numeracy gains and subsequent job placement.

However, pursuing education must be balanced with survivors' immediate needs. A survivor living in a shelter might also be a young mother or have pressing financial responsibilities (supporting family members, for instance). Thus, flexible and survivor-centered educational pathways are recommended. Examples include part-time schooling, distance learning, or vocational high schools that combine education with practical training. In Serbia and North Macedonia, there have been instances where survivors were enrolled in such vocational high schools (for trades like culinary arts or caregiving), allowing them to finish schooling while directly acquiring job skills.

Beyond formal education, vocational training is the cornerstone of reintegration programs worldwide. Training should be market-oriented: programs must ensure that the skills taught match real employment opportunities in the region. If there is demand for hairdressers, IT technicians, or cooks, training programs should align with those fields rather than over-saturating survivors in, say, sewing if local textile jobs are scarce. Identifying sectors open to hiring women with non-traditional backgrounds is key. In this regard, public-private partnerships can be very helpful.

Another best practice is incorporating life skills and soft skills training alongside vocational skills. A trauma-informed vocational program will recognize that survivors might need coaching in things like communication, teamwork, time management, and confidence-building. Role-playing job interviews, teaching how to prepare a CV, and basic financial literacy (budgeting one's salary) can greatly enhance the effectiveness of technical training.

Labor market inclusion also depends on broader economic conditions. High unemployment rates, especially among youth in North Macedonia (which historically are quite elevated), mean survivors are re-entering a competitive market.

Evidence-based practices also highlight the importance of *holistic support alongside economic initiatives*. Survivors can't focus on training or work if they are hungry, ill, or worried about their safety. Therefore, successful labor inclusion programs ensure basics are covered: safe housing, childcare for survivors with children, medical care (including trauma therapy), and legal aid if there are ongoing court cases against traffickers. Many programs globally adopt a case management approach:

a case manager coordinates the various services and keeps the survivor engaged and supported throughout. This is an area North Macedonia could strengthen by formalizing case management roles within the Social Work Centers or NGOs dedicated to trafficking cases.

Evolution of Shelter Systems and Post-Shelter Support

Shelter systems are often the first point of contact for rescued trafficking victims and form the backbone of initial rehabilitation efforts. In North Macedonia and the Balkans, shelter services have evolved over the past two decades from rudimentary safe houses to more structured rehabilitation centers. However, gaps remain in the continuity of care once survivors exit shelters, making the evolution of post-shelter support a critical area for development. This section examines how shelter models have changed over time and why the "post-shelter" phase – including transitional housing, community integration, and long-term support – is as important as the shelter stay itself.

Initial Phase – Crisis Shelters

- In the early 2000s, as Balkan countries grappled with human trafficking emerging as a serious issue, the primary response was the establishment of crisis shelters.
- These were often secure, confidential locations where victims (mostly women and children) could stay immediately after being removed from a trafficking situation.
- They provided short-term accommodation—sometimes limited to a few weeks—focusing on safety, basic medical care, and initial counseling.
- North Macedonia's first shelters were set up by NGOs like Open Gate, in coordination with law enforcement and the Ministry of Interior.
- At that time, the understanding of victims' longer-term needs was still developing, so shelters were seen largely as temporary refuges.
- Similarly, Serbia and Bosnia relied on NGO shelters (often with donor support) to receive victims identified by police or at the borders.
- A major evolution since then has been the recognition that a brief shelter stay is insufficient for true recovery and reintegration.

Extended Rehabilitation Centers

- By the 2010s, many shelters had transformed into more comprehensive rehabilitation centers.
- Shelter stays became longer—several months, and in some Albanian cases up to a year or more, depending on individual progress.
- Services expanded to include:
  - Psychological counseling
  - Legal assistance
  - Education (on-site classes or tutoring)
  - Creative therapies (e.g., art therapy, music therapy, group counseling)
- The goal shifted to not only keeping survivors safe but also starting to rebuild their lives from within the shelter.
- Centers began developing individual reintegration plans early on:
  - Assessing whether a survivor needs continued schooling
  - Identifying vocational interests
  - Addressing any health issues
  - Tracing family for potential reunification

PostShelter Bottleneck: Transitional Housing

- The real bottleneck arises post-shelter: once survivors have stabilized and are ready—or required to leave, where do they go next?
- In an ideal continuum:
  - Survivors move into transitional housing, such as semi-independent apartments or group homes, for 6–24 months with light supervision and continued support.
  - They contribute a small amount to rent (often subsidized), gain life skills, and continue work or education.
- This model helps bridge the gap between protective shelter and total independence.
- In Serbia, NGO ATINA provides such support by renting apartments with periodic social worker visits.

- Unfortunately, in North Macedonia, there is currently no formal transitional housing for trafficking survivors.
  - Many survivors have nowhere to go except back to families or communities where they were recruited, risking re-trafficking or abuse.
  - Others must live alone with minimal support.

Barriers: Funding and Policy Constraints

- The absence of post-shelter housing is linked to funding and policy prioritization:
  - It is easier (politically and logistically) to justify funding an immediate-response shelter than long-term housing.
- However, evidence shows transitional support greatly improves reintegration outcomes:
  - The UNODC Toolkit recommends transitional housing or assisted lodging as a preferred practice.
- Without it, many survivors risk housing insecurity, homelessness, or falling back into vulnerable situations.

Need for Follow-Up Services

- Best-practice guidelines (e.g., IOM, NEXUS Institute) emphasize that reintegration must include monitoring and assistance well after shelter exit, often up to 1–2 years.
- Follow-up services can include:
  - Regular check-ins
  - Continued counseling (e.g., bi-weekly therapy)
  - Mentorship
  - Emergency assistance (e.g., rent help if a survivor loses a job)
- In North Macedonia, follow-up has been largely ad-hoc by NGOs and not institutionalized or resourced.
- A formal "Reintegration Support Service" within the social protection system could coordinate:
  - Transitional housing, counseling, and referrals to community resources

Community-Based Reintegration (Emerging Practice)

- A newer concept emphasizes building support structures within the survivor's community, rather than relying solely on shelters.
- This includes:
  - Training community mentors
  - Connecting survivors with local resources (e.g., supportive employers, women's groups)
- The rationale: Reintegration means living independently in the community, so early community engagement is vital.
- It must be balanced with confidentiality and safety concerns.
- Community support can also help reduce stigma when local influencers or organizations publicly endorse reintegration.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Reintegrating survivors of human trafficking into society and the labor market is a complex, long-term endeavor that tests the effectiveness of social services, legal protections, and community compassion. This research-driven analysis has highlighted the systemic shortcomings in North Macedonia's current reintegration framework – including gaps in services after shelter, inadequacies in legislation implementation, and weak inter-agency coordination – while also drawing on comparative insights from Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Grounded in structural–institutional theory, we recognize that true reintegration necessitates changes in the socio-economic structures around survivors (such as accessible education, inclusive labor markets, and supportive legal institutions). A trauma-informed perspective reminds us that policies and programs must be attuned to the psychological scars of survivors, fostering environments of safety, trust, and empowerment.

Several key findings emerge from this study. First, North Macedonia's policy framework, although improved on paper, is not yet delivering sufficient practical support to survivors. Legislative advances (reflection period, victim compensation law, etc.) and strategic commitments (reintegration as a stated priority) have not translated into robust programs on the ground. Identified victims are few, suggesting many victims remain undetected and therefore unreached by any support.

Those who are rescued receive good care during immediate rehabilitation, but face unemployment, housing instability, and social exclusion when that short phase ends. Second, survivors–mostly young women and often minors–face multifaceted barriers: economic marginalization, disrupted education, mental health challenges, and stigma, which existing systems address only partially.

In light of these findings, the following specific recommendations are offered to enhance the reintegration of human trafficking survivors in North Macedonia, with relevance to the broader Balkan context:

- **Establish a Formal Post-Shelter Reintegration Program:** North Macedonia should create a structured program under the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (in partnership with NGOs) dedicated to post-shelter support for trafficking survivors. This program would provide transitional housing (e.g., rent-assisted apartments or group homes) for up to 12–24 months for survivors leaving shelters. It should also include ongoing case management for each survivor, ensuring they have help in accessing healthcare, psychological counseling, education, and job opportunities after shelter exit. The program can draw on Albania's NGO best practices and Serbia's transitional models, institutionalizing them with government backing. Clear admission criteria, confidentiality safeguards, and referral pathways from shelters into this program should be defined. Funding could come from a mix of state budget (perhaps reallocating part of anti-trafficking funds) and international donors initially, with a plan for sustainable state funding in the long term.
- **Strengthen Inter-Agency Coordination and Data Management:** To address identification and service gaps, North Macedonia's National Commission on Trafficking should be empowered to improve real-time coordination between police, social services, labor inspectors, and NGOs. A practical step is developing a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) database or case tracking system that securely logs each identified victim and the services provided to them. This would facilitate accountability – e.g., ensuring that once a victim is identified, social workers follow through with reintegration support and monitor progress. Regular multi-disciplinary case review meetings (at least quarterly) should be mandated, where agencies discuss each ongoing case's status and needs. The Labor Inspectorate's role must be clarified and strengthened with resources so that labor exploitation cases are detected early and referred to assistance, especially given the shift towards labor trafficking. Additionally, appointing specialized reintegration focal points in key agencies (one in the

Employment Service Agency, one in the Ministry of Education for school reintegration, etc.) would improve the expert handling of survivor cases.

- **Expand Education and Vocational Opportunities:** Based on evidence, North Macedonia should ensure survivors can continue their education and gain marketable skills. The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with NGOs, could launch an "Education Second Chance" scheme for trafficking survivors, which might include scholarships for secondary education completion, free enrollment in vocational schools. Partner with businesses and the Chamber of Commerce to create trainee programs reserved for trafficking survivors (even a small quota, say 5 placements per year in major companies, can make a difference).
- **Implement Economic Empowerment and Employment Incentives:** To combat the critical barrier of unemployment, innovative measures are needed. The government could set up a Survivor Entrepreneurship Fund, offering small grants (or micro-loans with forgiveness conditions) to survivors who propose viable small business ideas – be it opening a beauty salon, a tailoring shop, or an online handicrafts store. Training in basic business skills and mentorship from experienced entrepreneurs (perhaps through a civil society initiative) should accompany this. In parallel, introduce incentives for employers: for example, wage subsidies for companies that hire a certified trafficking survivor for at least 12 months, similar to disability employment incentives.
- **Enhance Trauma-Informed and Psychological Support Services:** Integrating trauma-informed principles into every stage of reintegration is essential. It is recommended to train all professionals who work with trafficking survivors – law enforcement, social workers, shelter staff, vocational trainers, health providers – in trauma-informed care. The goal is to ensure understanding of trauma responses and to foster a compassionate, non-judgmental approach. Practically, a long-term mental health support plan should be part of each survivor's case plan. The Ministry of Health can collaborate with NGOs to provide free counseling sessions for at least a year post-shelter. Peer support groups led by trained survivors could be piloted in North Macedonia, giving survivors a space to connect and support each other in healing. Where possib-

le, involve survivor voices in designing these support services – for example, consult survivors on what timings or modalities (group vs individual therapy, creative therapies, etc.) work best, to ensure uptake.

In closing, the reintegration of human trafficking survivors, particularly young women in North Macedonia, is at a pivotal juncture. The issue has been recognized in strategies, and some groundwork has been laid. Still, a concerted effort is required to build a holistic, enduring support system that truly enables survivors to reclaim their lives. Structural–institutional reform, ensuring that laws, institutions, and resources are marshaled in support of victims, combined with trauma-informed care, which fosters empathy, empowerment, and respect for survivors' dignity, form the dual pillars of an effective reintegration framework. The experiences from North Macedonia and its Balkan neighbors demonstrate that while the challenge is great, progress is attainable through sustained commitment, collaboration, and innovation. By implementing the recommendations above, North Macedonia can make significant strides towards a future where survivors of trafficking are not just rescued from their past, but also fully reintegrated as thriving, empowered members of society, free from re-exploitation and filled with hope for the future.

References

Council of Europe. (2005). *Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings*. https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking

Council of Europe. (2023). *GRETA third evaluation report on North Macedonia: Access to justice and effective remedies for victims of trafficking in human beings*. Strasbourg.

Law on Foreigners. (2018). Ministry of Interior & Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Republic of North Macedonia

UNICEF North Macedonia. (2024). Children constitute seventy percent of all identified victims of human trafficking from North Macedonia [Press release]. UNICEF North Macedonia.

BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

The Victim's Right to Compensation

Shkelqim Veseli and Besa Arifi

© IBU

DOI: https://doi.org//10.69648/EJOL2859

Balkan Research Journal(BRJ), 2025; 2(1): 77-84

brj.ibupress.com

Online ISSN: 2955-2524

Application : 28.03.2025

Revision : 21.04.2025

Acceptance : 21.05.2025

Publication : 30.05.2025

Veseli, S., & Arifi, B. (2025). The victim's right to compensation. Balkan Research Journal, 2(1), 77-84. https://doi.org//10.69648/EJOL2859

Shkelqim Veseli and Besa Arifi

[1] South East European University, Tetovo, N. Macedonia, https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4033-5871

[2] Phd candidate, South East European University, Tetovo, N. Macedonia, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5611-5358

[Author] is now at [New Affiliation].

Paper was presented at «Social Turbulence and Transformation in the Balkan Region, Law and Goverance", date 24.02.2025, International Balkan University, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia, North Macedonia. We declare no conflicts of interest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Shkelqim Veseli, shkelqim.veseli123@gmail.com and second author Besa Arifi b.arifi@seeu.edu.mk

Shkelqim Veseli, shkelqim.veseli123@gmail.com , tel. 0038975289959

Besa Arifi, b.arifi@seeu.edu.mk , tel. 0038972422898

BALKAN JOURNALS

Abstract

Whenever the term victim is used, almost everyone is aware that someone has suffered harm or something has happened to them that is contrary to their interests. The word victim is derived from the Latin word, "victim" and the verb vincere, vaincere and has the meaning of sacrifice, suffering, damage, victimization, destruction of property, while the science which deals with its study is called victimology. The word victim essentially means the person or group that has suffered, that has been harmed as a result of various actions whether caused by man, animals, natural disasters, etc. In general, we are talking about human, animal and plant victims, and with an expression characterized the whole process of human suffering, which is called, "victimization", which means an indefinite number of wrongdoings that endanger, annihilate, damage and threaten the basic goods and values of man. In fact, when the term victimization is used, it is thought about the ways, routes, forms of injury, its scale and intensity (Halili, 2011). Victims according to the legislation, respectively the positive provisions of Republic of North Macedonia, but also according to various legalities in the world, enjoy many rights, among which the victims have the right to compensation for damage. Damage compensation can be calculated in moral and material compensation. The moral compensation is not foreseen with positive provisions; however, it is presented as a satisfaction of the sentence which is imposed on the perpetrator or perpetrators, while the material compensation is defined with positive legal provisions. We can conclude that moral compensation is presented in cases when the victim feels in himself that the goal has been achieved and the perpetrator has been given the deserved punishment, while material compensation is realized in a certain legal procedure and the perpetrator or the state in certain cases performs compensation.

Keywords: victim, compensation for damage (moral, material), criminal offense, violence.

Introduction

The right to compensation has been recognized since antiquity, with various forms of redress evolving across different historical periods. Traditionally, the nature of compensation depended on the type of harm inflicted. However, due to prevailing family structures and social norms, incidents such as domestic violence were rarely acknowledged or formally addressed, limiting the possibility for victims to seek redress. Over time, societal circumstances have significantly changed, leading to the development of comprehensive legal frameworks. Today, the positive legal systems of nearly all modern states recognize and guarantee the rights of victims, including the right to compensation. In line with this global trend, the legal system of the Republic of North Macedonia has established a set of rights aimed at protecting and supporting victims, similar to provisions for other categories of crime (Halili, 2011).

The rights of victims are safeguarded by the Constitution, as well as by specific legislative instruments such as the Law on Criminal Procedure and the Law on the Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

Under the legal framework of the Republic of North Macedonia, any individual who has suffered harm—whether through bodily injury, material loss, or non-pecuniary damage such as emotional distress—has the legal standing to initiate a claim for damages. This right is exercised through the institution of a proprietary legal claim, which may be pursued within criminal proceedings. The proprietary claim may include demands for monetary compensation, restitution of unlawfully acquired or retained property, or annulment of a legal act that has caused harm. In instances where the injured party is covered by life or other types of insurance, the claim may also be directed to the relevant insurance provider in accordance with applicable contract and insurance law provisions (Law on Criminal Procedure Official Gazzete of RM, number 150/2010, 100/2012, 142/2016 and 198/2018).

The adjudication of proprietary legal claims is within the competence of the court conducting the criminal proceedings. The Criminal Procedure Code provides for two principal outcomes regarding such claims. First, if the court renders a conviction, it may decide on the proprietary claim either in full or in part. If the court adjudicates only part of the claim, the injured party is advised to pursue the remainder through civil proceedings. Second, if the defendant is acquitted, the indictment is dismissed, or the proceedings are otherwise terminated, the court will refer the injured party to assert the proprietary legal claim before a competent civil

court. This procedural structure aims to ensure that victims have access to compensation without prejudicing the rights of the accused or the integrity of the criminal process (Law on Criminal Procedure Official Gazzete of RM, number 150/2010, 100/2012, 142/2016 and 198/2018).

General Data on Victims and the Right to Compensation for Damage

Regarding the meaning of the word victim, there are many definitions, however, as more acceptable, the definition is calculated on the basis of the provisions of the Declaration on the fundamental principles of justice for victims of crime and abuse of power, and on the basis of this declaration, as victims are considered persons who individually and collectively have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial loss of their rights, as a result of acts or omissions, which violate the criminal law in force in the Member States, including those laws, which prohibit the abuse of power. Also, it is very important to note that on the basis of this declaration as victims are counted all those who have suffered various damages regardless of faith, race, gender, age, ethnicity, political opinion or any other difference. They have suffered enough damage to be counted as victims (Halili, 2011).

The victim is the passive subject of the criminal offense which has caused him harm by committing the criminal offense. The victim may be a natural or legal person who has been harmed.

The right to compensation is guaranteed by legal provisions and in all cases the victim, based on the provisions of the Law on Criminal Procedure of RNM, can submit a legal claim for property, in order to compensate the damage caused to him. All damages can be repaid. Not all damages can be compensated, depending on the type of criminal offense, the damage caused also varies, so the cause-and-effect relationship is what determines whether the damage can be compensated or not. Looking at this point of view it is not a question of damage which is legally provided for compensation, but for damage for which there is no way of compensation, eg. The crime of murder can be compensated for by human life? The dead can be brought back? Or, violence in the family? Can the mental and spiritual suffering of either the direct victim or the suffering of other members who witness domestic violence be compensated? There is no price that can compensate, harmony in the family and spiritual comfort. However, compensation is possible in many criminal offenses. For example, in the criminal offense of theft, the stolen item can be

compensated, or in the criminal offense of serious bodily injury, all medical expenses must be compensated, etc.

Compensation under the United Nations Declaration on Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power shall include the restitution of property or compensation in cash for damage suffered or profit lost, the reimbursement of expenses incurred in connection with victimization, expenses incurred in connection with services provided for the rehabilitation of health conditions, physical, psychological, moral damages. So, all damages and expenses related to the restoration of the attacked rights" (Halili, 2011).

Proprietary Legal Claim (Law Definition for the Victim Right to Compensation)

The victim has the right to compensation for the damage and all other rights determined according to the positive legislation of RNM. To compensate for the damage, a property claim must be submitted, which may be related to the compensation of the damage, the return of the goods or the abrogation of the given legal case, and in case the victim enjoys life insurance or any other type of insurance, the claim is also submitted to the insurance agency. The legal property claim in criminal proceedings is filed by an authorized person or a victim. The legal proprietary request is submitted to the body that files the criminal complaint or the court of first instance where the procedure takes place. The request must contain facts about the type and height of compensation and if it is not filed until the indictment is filed, the authorized person will be notified that the same can be filed at the latest until the conclusion of the main hearing in the court of first instance (Law on Criminal Procedure ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia" no. 150/2010).

"The legal claim is decided by the court. With the verdict by which the accused is found guilty, the court fully decides on the proprietary legal request or in part, while for the remaining amount of the proprietary legal request it instructs the injured person to implement it in the dispute. If the evidence in the criminal proceedings does not provide sufficient grounds for the full or partial trial of the property claim, while for their supplementary provision there is a risk of unreasonable prolongation of the criminal procedure, the court shall instruct the injured party to implement the property claim in the dispute. When the court will approve a judgment by which the accused is acquitted of the charge or by which the charge is rejected or when by decision it will terminate the criminal procedure, it will instruct

the injured party that the property legal claim can be realized in the dispute. When the court is declared incompetent for the criminal procedure, it shall instruct the injured party that the legal proprietary claim may be filed in the criminal procedure that the competent court shall initiate or continue" (Law on Criminal Procedure ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia" no. 150/2010).

It is important to note that the person authorized until the conclusion of the main session in the criminal proceedings, can waive the proposal of the proprietary legal request and realize the same through the dispute. In the event that such a proposal is rejected, such a proposal may not be submitted again.

Moral and Material Compensation for Violence in the Family

According to the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, "Domestic violence is the ill-treatment, insult, endangerment of safety, physical harm, sexual violence or other psychological, physical or economic violence that causes a feeling of insecurity, threat or fear, including threats of such acts, against a spouse, parents or children or other persons living in a marital or extramarital community or in a joint family economy, as well as against a current or former spouse or extramarital partner or persons who have a common child or are in a close personal relationship, whether the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim or not" (Law on prevention and protection from violence against women and domestic violence, Official Gazzete of RNM nr.24/2021 and 39/2025)).

Based on the definition of domestic violence, the question is rightly asked whether family harmony, spiritual suffering, integrity and human dignity among family members can be compensated!! There is no price that can compensate for family harmony.

Excellent relations between family members are a prerequisite for the family to function and to have the real role that it actually has, the nucleus of society. The spiritual suffering, integrity and human dignity among family members is also not compensated at any price.

The very fact that domestic violence is used, whether mental or physical, shows that the family does not function, respectively, falls into the category of fallen, degraded or, as criminological literature knows, criminogenic families, respectively families that present potential for deviant behavior.

We can conclude that there are no scales that can measure the value of moral compensation or there is no moral compensation in this type of violence, respectively domestic violence, while material compensation is possible through the foreseen legal procedure either through the dispute or through the proprietary legal claim.

Victims of Violent Extremism and Terrorism, and Their Compensation

Victims of violent extremism and terrorism as terrible types of crimes differ and have their own special or specific characteristics from victims of other crimes. Among the characteristics that differ from the victims of other crimes are: in most cases the victims who suffer from terrorist or extremist attacks are not known to the victimizer (perpetrator), the number of victims from such attacks is very large, violently desiring to attack or change any ideology, religion or political attitudes indirectly automatically as victims of such an attack also count all those individuals or groups belonging to an ideology. Such religion or political attitude which is attacked, individuals or groups of people suffer from such attacks only because they are at a certain moment in a particular place where the attack occurs as extremists and terrorists have public places and frequented by as many people as possible, and if the simplest crimes are less thought or imagined, a preliminary and detailed strategy is drawn up in these types of crimes in order that the damage may be as great as possible. It is also worth noting that unlike other crimes where victims want to hide, perpetrators of terrorist attacks or violent extremists do not hide and do not hesitate to take responsibility for the attack and the consequences caused.

The classification that can be given to victims of violent extremism can be different. We will mention two classifications by which every victim of violent extremism or even terrorism is identified, and that we distinguish direct victims of violent extremism and indirect victims of violent extremism, as well as another classification into then and later victims, can also be classified on the basis that depending on what type of extremism it is, political, religious, ethnic, national or racial, while with the classifications mentioned at the beginning each victim of violent extremism or terrorism is identified. By direct victims of violent extremism, we mean all those individuals, groups of people, or the entire population of a country or state that has suffered harm whether related to bodily integrity, life, property, or other emotional or material damage as a result of violence caused for the purpose of violent change of ideology, religion, or policy in the territory in which the violence is exercised, while indirect victims are considered all those people who suffer

indirectly or indirectly as a result of extreme violence caused for the purpose of realizing the above-mentioned interest. Victims are those who suffer at the moment of extreme violence, while all those people who suffer in any form after a certain ideological, religious or political change through violence are considered as later victims, and the consequences of such change are continuous and longer-lasting (Veseli, 2018).

Since very severe penalties are foreseen for these offenses, in accordance with Article 53 of the Law on Criminal Procedure of RNM, the state is obliged to compensate victims of terrorism.

Conclusion

The criminal legislation of the Republic of North Macedonia provides significant rights for victims. Exactly all types of compensation provided for in the United Nations Declaration can be realized in the Republic of North Macedonia, either through the filing of a property claim or the holding of a special dispute for the realization of the damage caused.

The treatment of victims of domestic violence and victims of violent extremism is characteristic as these acts are increasingly present. In domestic violence of concern, there is a high number of criminality, since in most cases this type of crime is not reported to the competent authorities, while in violent extremism and terrorism victims are in most cases random and cannot be found an adequate method for their compensation.

The problem that the literature seeks and must find a solution is presented in the concretization of several types of compensation, namely: compensation of fear, stress, trauma, honor, violation of authority, inflicting shame or in other words, spiritual damage. In all these cases, the victim cannot realize effective and fair compensation, therefore, in this regard, it is necessary that the legislators, in cooperation with all relevant factors aware of this problem or victim hood, concretize some kind of compensation for these damages, although it is very difficult, however, so far the literature considers this problem as a flaw.

Considering the above-mentioned conclusions, these recommendations are given:

1. Concretization of compensation for domestic violence and victims of violent extremism and terrorism.

2. Concretization of compensation for spiritual and emotional damage.

The recommendations given, can have an impact on the prevention of crime and especially on violence, respectively domestic violence. A challenge but also an adequate solution would be to determine the compensation of damage for each criminal offense separately.

References

Halili, R. (2011). *Victimology*. Prishtina, Kosovo.

Veseli, S. (2018). *War against violent extremism: Regional aspects of the Balkans* (Master's thesis). University of Tetovo, Tetovo, North Macedonia. Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. (2021). *Law on prevention and protection from violence against women and domestic violence* (No. 24/2021). *Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia*.

Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. (2010, 2012, 2016, 2018). *Law on criminal procedure* (No. 150/2010, 100/2012, 142/2016, 198/2018). *Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia*.

BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

Globalization and Regional Conflicts of the Contemporary Era

© IBU

DOI: https://doi.org//10.69648/UINO2375
Balkan Research Journal(BRJ), 2025; 2(1): 85-101
brj.ibupress.com
Online ISSN: 2955-2524

Rilinda Maqellara Memeti

Application : 30.03.2025
Revision : 19.04.2025
Acceptance : 22.05.2025
Publication : 30.05.2025

Maqellara Memeti, R. (2025). Globalization and regional conflicts of the contemporary era. Balkan Research Journal, 2(1), 85-101
https://doi.org//10.69648/UINO2375

Rilinda Maqellara Memeti
South East European University

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9581-4140

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rilinda Maqellara Memeti. Email: rilinda.maqellara@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between globalization and regional conflicts in the contemporary era, focusing on specific case studies that illustrate the multifaceted impacts of global interconnectivity on local strife.

The ongoing war in Ukraine serves as a critical example of how geopolitical rivalries and economic dependencies shape conflict dynamics, prompting a re-evaluation of traditional security paradigms. The genocide in Gaza highlights the humanitarian crises exacerbated by globalization, revealing the complexities of international responses and the role of media in shaping perceptions.

Similarly, the evolving governance structure in Syria demonstrates the influence of external actors and regional powers in shaping conflict outcomes and post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

Turkey's role in regional conflicts and the role of its diplomacy were particularly emphasized, as it navigates its position between global powers and regional responsibilities.

As regional conflicts continue to unfold, the contemporary era is expected to witness further polarization and fragmentation, with rising nationalism and protectionism potentially challenging multilateral cooperation. The interconnected nature of today's global society may result in the spillover effects of regional conflicts, influencing global economics, migration patterns, as well as international security dynamics.

The findings indicate that an understanding of globalization's impacts is essential for effective conflict management and for anticipating future geopolitical trends in a rapidly changing global landscape.

The paper posits that addressing regional conflicts through a global lens is crucial for fostering sustainable peace and stability in an increasingly interconnected world.

Key words: Globalization, regional conflicts, contemporary era

Introduction

Globalization and regional conflicts of the contemporary era is a highly relevant and multifaceted topic, reflecting the interconnected nature of today's world and the intricate dynamics at play across various regions.

The landscape is currently marked by numerous complex and interconnected conflicts that have significant implications for international stability, economic development, and humanitarian conditions.

- The ongoing war in Ukraine, sparked by geopolitical tensions and territorial disputes, has not only caused a humanitarian crisis but also reshaped global alliances and economic policies. It has led to widespread sanctions, affecting global supply chains, particularly in energy and food.
- Hamas - Israeli war and the Middle East continues to experience turbulence, with the conflict in Syria persisting despite numerous international interventions and peace efforts. The complex geopolitical dynamics involving regional powers like Iran and its influence across various territories add layers of complexity to the regional stability.
- Additionally, localized conflicts and civil unrest in other regions, driven by ethnic, religious, and political tensions, further contribute to international challenges. These conflicts often result in displacement, economic disruptions, and heightened global security concerns.

The international community faces the critical task of navigating diplomacy, humanitarian aid, conflict resolution, and long-term development strategies to foster peace and stability.

Analyzing these situations requires a multidisciplinary approach, considering historical, political, and socio-economic factors, and emphasizes the importance of collaborative global efforts to mitigate conflict and promote development. "As outlined in the New Agenda for Peace, United Nations Member States hold both the responsibility and the capability to fulfill the shared commitments set forth in the UN Charter," he stated. He highlighted that the Secretary-General's good offices, along with the efforts of his envoys, remain available—not only to prevent and mediate conflicts, but also to serve as an impartial platform for Member States to come together and find mutually acceptable solutions.

"In a world growing ever more divided, we need at least one institution that all can trust," he emphasized. He urged that no effort should be spared in the pursuit of de-escalation and trust-building. "This requires the courage to genuinely listen to others and consider their views in good faith," he added.

He also stressed the vital role of regional frameworks and institutions in building bridges, noting: "In times of heightened tensions, it is our collective duty to do everything within our power to uphold the system of collective security that our predecessors established (United Nations, 2023).

Globalization and Its Phenomenology in War Conflicts

Globalization involves the ongoing transformation of global political institutions, organizational structures, and socio-economic relations. However, during times of military conflict, the focus of these transformations tends to shift away from political aspects and becomes increasingly centered on financial and economic support (Artemenko et al., 2024).

At its core, globalization can be defined as the growing economic interdependence among the world's nations, gradually shaping them into a unified global system governed by its own dynamics and developmental trends.

This phenomenon is both complex and contradictory. On one hand, globalization fosters the growth of prosperous nations and draws people from less developed countries in search of better opportunities. On the other hand, it simultaneously addresses longstanding challenges while giving rise to new ones—particularly in the global economy—such as social differentiation and polarization.

Therefore, globalization must be recognized as an objective reality—neither wholly positive nor entirely negative. It offers vast opportunities but also poses significant risks to humanity. In essence, globalization is a multifaceted process that demands thorough and critical analysis, as its consequences are as varied and far-reaching as the phenomenon itself. When considering its substance, it is no exaggeration to say that the consequences of globalization have profoundly shaped the historical trajectories of entire nations across every continent. However, these impacts manifest in distinct ways depending on regional and national contexts. One notable example is the process of European integration, where globalization has played a significant and multifaceted role. Let us examine this influence in greater detail (Svirko, 2014).

A clear understanding of how globalization affects perceptions and experiences of war is critical for several reasons, including the following:

- Influence on National Identity,
- Media and Communication,
- Economic Interdependence,
- Humanitarian Perspectives,
- Technology and Warfare,
- Migration and Displacement,
- Perceptions of Threat.

Globalization can lead to new security threats, such as terrorism and cyber warfare, which are not confined by national borders. These changing perceptions of threat can influence both domestic and foreign policies on defense and security, and shape public opinion about military engagements.

In summary, understanding how globalization affects perceptions and experiences of war allows for a more nuanced analysis of conflicts in a contemporary context. It aids policymakers, scholars, and the general public in recognizing the interconnectedness of global events and promotes informed discussions about responsibility, intervention, and the nature of modern warfare.

- Importance of the globalization and its effects on perceptions and experiences in regional conflicts

Globalization is essential in shaping how regional conflicts are perceived and experienced, influencing public awareness, economic impacts, cultural dynamics, security considerations, and humanitarian responses. By understanding these dynamics, stakeholders can adopt more comprehensive approaches to conflict resolution that consider both local and global contexts, facilitating cooperation and promoting peace.

This conceptual framework underscores the multifaceted nature of globalization-related conflicts. These tensions reflect a growing global resolve among people to advocate for alternative approaches to the dominant model of globalization, seeking greater participation in decisions that shape the planet's future—a resolve that can be viewed as democratic in the broadest sense.

Yet, the persistent disconnect between global unity and true integration within the current world order suggests that tensions and conflicts are likely to continue. These challenges will endure until global institutions and governance structures evolve to address both the universalizing forces and the localized impacts of globalization (Lerche, 1998).

The Russian - Ukrainian War: Current Status and Expectations

The Russian-Ukrainian War represents the pursuit of the Russian Federation's political objectives through military means, primarily aimed at reasserting influence over territories lost following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A key moment marking the beginning of this conflict is 20 February 2014, when Russia initiated operations to annex Ukraine's Autonomous Republic of Crimea.

On 21 February 2022, the Kremlin officially recognized the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic as independent entities—an act that paved the way for their eventual annexation by the Russian Federation. Just three days later, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, marking a new and more aggressive phase of the war, intended to reestablish Russian political dominance over the country.

The Essence of Ukraine War

The essence of the war in Ukraine—particularly the dramatic escalation in 2022—centers on a complex interplay of historical grievances, geopolitical rivalries, and struggles over national identity. Several key elements define the nature of this conflict:

- Historical Context and National Identity

The roots of the conflict lie in Ukraine's historical ties to Russia during its time as part of the Soviet Union. Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has faced ongoing challenges in forging a cohesive national identity, influenced by both Western ideals and longstanding connections with Russia.

This internal struggle is further complicated by regional divisions: western Ukraine generally supports European integration, while eastern regions have maintained stronger cultural and political ties to Russia. These divisions have significantly shaped the dynamics of the conflict.

Geopolitical Tensions and Russian Expansionism

A core driver of the war is Russia's ambition to reassert its influence in the post-Soviet space. Moscow perceives NATO's eastward expansion and Ukraine's aspirations to join the European Union as direct threats to its strategic interests and traditional sphere of influence.

In this context, the war is emblematic of Ukraine's fight to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of external aggression. Ukraine's pursuit of deeper ties with the West reflects its broader goal of establishing independence from Russian dominance.

Military and Humanitarian Aspects

The war has evolved into a protracted military conflict characterized by significant battles, strategies, and devastating consequences for both combatants and civilians.

The war has led to a massive humanitarian crisis, with millions displaced, civilian casualties, and widespread destruction. This aspect highlights the human cost of geopolitical conflicts.4. Global Implications

International Response in Ukrainian war

The war has triggered a robust international response, with Western nations supporting Ukraine through military aid, sanctions against Russia, and diplomatic efforts. This reflects a broader struggle between authoritarianism and democratic values on the global stage.

Geopolitical Realignments

The conflict has also led to significant shifts in global alliances and energy dynamics, impacting not only Europe but worldwide, as countries reassess their security strategies and economic dependencies.

Cultural and Ideological Dimensions

Identity and Resistance: The war has sparked a strong sense of national identity and unity among Ukrainians, fostering a cultural resistance against perceived oppression. This is reflected in the widespread nationalism and solidarity within the country.

Narratives of Democracy vs. Authoritarianism: The conflict embodies a struggle between democratic aspirations in Ukraine and authoritarian tendencies in Russia, influencing global discourse around governance and human rights.

The War and its Historical Development

The broad trajectory of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched on February 24, 2022, can be summarized in several key phases.

Initially, Russia launched a major assault with the apparent goal of toppling the Ukrainian government and potentially installing a pro-Moscow regime. However, this plan was quickly thwarted by strong Ukrainian resistance. In the second phase, Russia was forced to retreat from significant portions of territory in northern and eastern Ukraine, relinquishing nearly half of what it had seized in the initial weeks of the war.

During the summer and fall of 2022, Ukraine went on the offensive, successfully reclaiming several eastern cities and the strategically important city of Kherson in the south. By the end of that year, the front lines largely stabilized.

In 2023, Ukraine launched a broad counteroffensive, making limited gains but ultimately falling short of its objectives. Russian forces, having adopted more effective defensive tactics, proved more resilient than during their initial invasion. Ukraine's progress was hampered by Russia's extensive fortifications and the Ukrainian military's limited resources and manpower. In early 2024, Russia initiated its own counteroffensive, achieving modest territorial gains in the eastern regions of Ukraine. These advances were partly enabled by Ukraine's failure to establish strong defensive positions in some areas—still hoping to resume offensive operations—and by delays in receiving U.S. military aid, which was not approved by Congress until spring.

As 2024 progressed, the front lines hardened, and a strategic stalemate took hold. Neither side appeared capable of achieving a decisive breakthrough heading into 2025. Over the winter of 2023–2024, Russia shifted tactics by targeting Ukraine's power infrastructure, inflicting major damage. With roughly half of Ukraine's electricity production capacity either significantly impaired or destroyed, this campaign caused serious hardship and may be repeated in the coming winter as a form of political pressure.

One of Ukraine's most notable achievements has been its naval campaign in the Black Sea. By damaging or sinking more than half of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, Ukraine forced the remaining vessels to retreat further east. Additionally, Ukraine's attack on the Kerch Bridge has likely disrupted Russian logistics and supply lines to Crimea (O'Hanlon et al., 2024).

Future Scenarios for the Resolution of the Conflict, Considering the Role of International Actors, Potential Negotiations, or Further Escalation.

In general, all analyze is based on scenarios for the resolution of the conflict, consider the role of international actors, potential negotiations, or further escalation. All wars, regardless of their duration or nature, ultimately come to an end. Since the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many predictions about the conflict's conclusion have surfaced—yet as the war has dragged on, several of these forecasts have become increasingly unlikely.

To anticipate how the war might end, it is crucial to understand the objectives of each side. From the outset, Russia's intentions were somewhat ambiguous. Was its aim to conquer all or part of Ukraine, expand its borders, or gain leverage in negotiations with the West? Initially, Russia appeared confident in achieving broad goals, but as Ukrainian resistance grew fiercer and exacted significant costs, Russia's objectives shifted. Today, Russia seems more open to negotiations, focusing mainly on securing territorial gains, ensuring Ukraine remains neutral, and preventing direct NATO involvement.

Ukraine's objectives, by contrast, are more straightforward: the restoration of its territorial integrity and eventual membership in NATO. While reclaiming occupied territory is a key goal, it remains a challenging task. Ukraine also seeks continued NATO support throughout the conflict and hopes to secure membership afterward, though it recognizes its limited leverage in negotiations. The ultimate outcome will depend heavily on Russia, the United States, and its allies. For the latter two, the primary aims are to defend Ukraine's sovereignty while preventing the conflict from escalating or drawing them directly into the war.

Donald Trump's election as U.S. President suggests a possible shift toward reduced American support for Ukraine. At the same time, Ukraine's deployment of U.S.-supplied missiles and Russia's retaliatory use of ballistic missiles mark significant escalations in the conflict. These recent developments call for a reassessment and update of existing scenarios.

Under the Trump administration, the U.S. is expected to reduce its support for Ukraine. The escalating attacks from both sides may be interpreted as strategic efforts to strengthen their positions ahead of any potential decline in American assistance. Barring unexpected events—such as a regime change or nuclear escalation—before the start of Trump's term, the following scenarios are among the most likely outcomes:

1. The Trump administration's reluctance to continue supporting Ukraine could pressure both Russia and Ukraine to enter negotiations. In this context, Ukraine is likely to secure some form of security guarantee. Under mutual pressure to compromise, Ukraine may agree to become a neutral zone, positioned between NATO and Russia. However, the long-term viability of this arrangement is uncertain, as the Ukrainian population may eventually feel compelled to align with one side or the other.
2. Secondly, the possibility for the conflict to reach a deadlock. A U.S. withdrawal would lead to a loss of motivation for its allies to persist with support and to a loss of incoming resources for Ukraine. In this scenario, while Europe remains committed to protecting Ukraine, the ongoing war becomes increasingly unsustainable for European states.

   On the other hand, Russia achieves some key military objectives and is prepared to the potential halting of hostilities, having secured the occupied territories. If a ceasefire were to be signed, a comprehensive peace agreement would be far from being reached due to conflicting interests. Hypothetically, Ukraine would be unable to join NATO, which aligns with Russia's interests.

   The conflict would remain frozen and unsolved, opening to the possibility for future escalation. However, this scenario would pose significant domestic challenges for the Russian leadership, as they would need to justify the loss of thousands of lives for limited territorial gains and their inability to decisively conclude the war they initiated.
3. A significant reduction in U.S. and European support could lead to Ukraine's defeat. Despite Ukraine's continued requests for assistance, European countries may gradually lose motivation, resulting in increasing divisions among them. This shift would give Russia a substantial advantage, potentially allowing it to seize additional territories and exert indirect political control over Ukraine.

   While a full Russian conquest of Ukraine is unlikely and strategically undesirable—due to direct borders with NATO members like Romania and Poland—Ukraine risks becoming a satellite state similar to Belarus. This outcome would considerably weaken NATO over time and might prompt some member states to reassess their commitment to the alliance.
4. A U.S. withdrawal does not necessarily mean a decline in European commitment, as the conflict directly affects Europe's geographic security. However,

this escalation could prolong the war and eventually compel direct European involvement to halt further Russian advances. Such a development might lead to a full-scale war between NATO and Russia.

5. Final, Building on the premise of a U.S. withdrawal, if Europe intensifies its support for Ukraine, Russia may still sustain military operations over an extended period, supported by allied states such as North Korea, China, and Iran. However, over time, Russia could face significant economic and military strains, gradually depleting its capacity to exert leverage.

This eventual exhaustion would give Ukraine a substantial advantage in negotiations, potentially enabling it to reclaim occupied territories. Over the long term, this could even pave the way for Ukraine's membership in NATO. However, achieving this outcome would require the conflict to persist for a considerably prolonged period.

Predicting the end of any war is inherently complex due to the multitude of factors at play, many of which are beyond the control of the parties involved. This complexity introduces a high level of uncertainty and sometimes challenges conventional theories of war termination.

Nonetheless, based on the current information about the Ukraine conflict and insights drawn from the new U.S. strategy under the elected President and past foreign policy priorities, the scenarios outlined above represent some of the most plausible paths toward resolution.

These scenarios depend on evolving dynamics—including geopolitical shifts, internal political pressures, and the strategies pursued by Ukraine, Russia, and international actors. Recognizing these variables highlights the need for continuous analysis and flexible approaches to understanding and anticipating the conflict's trajectory (Mammadov, 2024).

Israeli -Hamas War

Overview of the Gaza Conflict

The situation in Gaza represents a complex and tragic dimension of the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict, raising critical issues surrounding the concepts of genocide, humanitarian law, and the ethics of military engagement. Addressing these issues requires nuanced understanding and dialogue aimed at achieving lasting peace while ensuring the protection of human rights for all parties involved.

The Gaza conflict is part of the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict, characterized by cycles of violence, political strife, and humanitarian crises. Gaza, governed by Hamas since 2007, faces ongoing military actions from Israel, which views Hamas as a terrorist organization threatening its security.

- Atrocities and Humanitarian Impact,
- Genocide Considerations,
- Israeli Justifications and Security Concerns,
- International Law and Human Rights.

From the view of Legal Framework, the conduct of both sides in the conflict is scrutinized under International law, including humanitarian law and human rights law.

Accusations of war crimes have been made against both Israel for its military actions and Hamas for targeting civilians and using human shields.

There have been persistent calls from various international and local organizations for accountability regarding actions taken during the conflict, including demands for investigations into alleged war crimes.

On October 7, the State of Israel swiftly declared war on Hamas in Gaza following a brutal attack, and its leadership has since reiterated that military operations will not cease until all objectives are met—chief among them, the destruction of Hamas. However, three months into the Israeli ground invasion of the Gaza Strip and as the conflict enters a new phase, it remains unclear whether this primary objective is realistically achievable, and what the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have concretely accomplished so far.

The attack by Hamas, which resulted in the deaths of at least 1,400 Israelis, marked a devastating collapse of Israel's longstanding security strategy. The magnitude of the failure by Israel's intelligence and security forces—as well as the government officials overseeing them—cannot be overstated.

This crisis has exposed the inadequacies of the previous deterrence model, which was built on the assumption that Hamas could be contained through advanced technological defenses and periodic, limited military operations. That strategy has now been fundamentally discredited.

The first challenge is how to stabilize Gaza. While Israel cannot and should not assume direct responsibility for governing the territory, it must act responsibly by enabling relevant stakeholders and international partners to address the

humanitarian needs of the Palestinian civilian population and to prevent the resurgence of terrorist threats.

Secondly, Israel must formulate a new security strategy—one that goes beyond its previous deterrence model—to effectively safeguard its borders and ensure the safety of its citizens.

The potential for broader regional destabilization is significant, particularly in areas adjacent to the conflict such as Egypt, the West Bank, and Lebanon. The conflict is deeply multi-dimensional, heavily influenced by Iran's network of proxy forces seeking regional dominance.

Complicating matters further, Israel proposed the relocation of Palestinians from Gaza to the Sinai Peninsula—a plan that was firmly rejected not only by Egypt but also by other regional actors, the United States, and the European Union, all of whom opposed the notion of forced displacement.

The humanitarian crisis facing Palestinians in Gaza, combined with the hardline stance of the Netanyahu government, is placing significant strain on Israeli-American relations. The moral capital Israel initially held at the start of its military operations is rapidly eroding.

Currently, the Israel-Hamas conflict presents overlapping dynamics: the risk of further escalation, the potential for regional military action against Iran, and simultaneous efforts aimed at political and military de-escalation. A critical question remains—can U.S. policy effectively manage the conflict and maintain its strategic influence in the region?

Signs of regional spillover are already evident. The Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and the looming threat of war with Hezbollah in Lebanon exemplify how the conflict could expand. These developments threaten to destabilize the broader Middle East, jeopardizing access to vital energy supplies—particularly oil and gas—which could, in turn, trigger significant global economic repercussions.

There is no doubt that Israel's war in Gaza will have far-reaching implications for the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East (Bordas, 2024).

Unprecedented Scale and Magnitude

Israel's response to the deadly Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023, has brought the population of Gaza to the brink of collapse. By October 7, 2024, the Israeli military offensive had resulted in the deaths of more than 42,000 Palestinians, including

over 13,300 children, and injured more than 97,000 others. Many of these casualties occurred in direct or deliberately indiscriminate attacks, often annihilating entire multigenerational families.

The scale and speed of destruction have been described by experts as unprecedented in any 21st-century conflict. Entire cities have been leveled, and critical infrastructure, agricultural lands, and numerous cultural and religious sites have been destroyed. As a result, vast areas of the Gaza Strip have been rendered uninhabitable (Amnesty International, 2024).

Us-Israeli Relations

While the United States continues to support Israel in its war against Hamas, tensions between the two governments—and their leaders—appear to be growing. The conflict has also had a noticeable impact on public opinion in both countries, with Americans and Israelis increasingly viewing each other's leadership more negatively than in recent years. Broader attitudes on the U.S. role in the conflict are shifting as well.

In Israel, there is strong support for U.S. diplomatic engagement: approximately 72% of Israelis want the United States to play a major role in helping to resolve the war. In contrast, Americans are more divided on the issue. While a majority of U.S. respondents (55%) agree that their country should be involved in ending the conflict, they are more likely to favor a minor role (35%) than a major one (20%). Another 27% believe the U.S. should not be involved at all—a view held by only 10% of Israelis.

In the United States, support for a major diplomatic role varies by political orientation. Those on the ideological left are more likely to back robust U.S. involvement than those in the center or on the right. In Israel, however, support for U.S. involvement is consistent across the ideological spectrum.

Religious affiliation also influences views. Among Americans, 45% of Jewish respondents support a major U.S. role in resolving the war, compared to 27% of Muslim respondents. In Israel, both Jewish (74%) and Arab (62%) citizens express general support for strong U.S. diplomatic engagement (Silver, 2024).

Turkey's Role in the Regional Conflicts

- *An analysis of Turkey's role in regional conflicts, particularly focusing on the Ukrainian war, the Hamas-Israel conflict, its relations with Israel and the USA, and the new political establishment in Syria.*

Turkey's Role in the Ukrainian War- Support for Ukraine

Turkey has taken a firm stance in support of Ukraine since the onset of the conflict, primarily by condemning Russia's aggression and calling for the respect of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Turkey's historical ties to Ukraine and its advocacy for the Crimean Tatars have influenced its position.

Turkey has supplied Ukraine with military drones, which have played a significant role in Ukraine's defensive operations against Russian forces. This military cooperation has solidified Turkey's position as a key player in the conflict.

Turkey has also sought to position itself as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia, hosting high-level talks aimed at achieving a ceasefire and facilitating grain exports through the Black Sea.

Turkey's Role in the Hamas-Israel Conflict

Support for Hamas: Turkey has historically supported Hamas, both politically and diplomatically. Turkish leaders have openly criticized Israeli military actions in Gaza and have positioned themselves as advocates for Palestinian rights, contributing to Hamas's legitimacy within the broader Islamic context.

Humanitarian Aid: Turkey has provided humanitarian assistance to Gaza and has called for international action to address the humanitarian crises resulting from Israeli military operations. This support aligns with Turkey's broader foreign policy of championing Muslim causes.

Relations with Israel: While Turkey has had a contentious relationship with Israel, marked by periods of severe tension, it has also engaged in diplomatic efforts and attempts to normalize relations, particularly in response to shifts in regional dynamics. Recent years have seen attempts to mend ties, driven by economic considerations and geopolitical interests.

Turkey's Relations with the USA

Strategic Partnership: Turkey's relationship with the USA has fluctuated, influenced by varying foreign policy objectives, such as Turkey's stance on Syria, its

procurement of Russian military hardware, and its support for different factions within the Syrian conflict.

Collaboration and Tensions: While the two countries have cooperated on several issues, including NATO commitments, tensions have arisen due to the U.S. support for Kurdish groups in northern Syria, which Turkey views as terrorist organizations.

Regional Influence: Turkey seeks to assert itself as a regional power, often competing with U.S. influence in the Middle East. This pursuit can lead to divergences in strategy and alliances within the broader context of U.S. foreign policy.

Turkey and the New Political Establishment in Syria

Turkey has conducted several military operations in northern Syria in an effort to combat Kurdish forces and to establish a buffer zone against potential threats to its border. These operations are aimed at influencing the evolving political landscape in Syria.

Turkey has supported various Syrian opposition groups in their fight against the Assad regime, positioning itself as a key player in the Syrian civil war. This involvement aligns with Turkey's regional strategy of countering Iranian influence and promoting a Sunni Arab order.

Turkey remains engaged in diplomatic efforts regarding Syria, including participation in talks with Russia and Iran as part of the Astana Process, while also seeking to negotiate the return of Syrian refugees to Turkey.

Summary and Future Expectations

Most interstate conflicts ultimately conclude through negotiated settlements rather than outright victories. Such outcomes often require mediation by actors perceived as neutral by all parties, particularly when neither side is capable of unilaterally imposing a resolution. In the case of the war in Ukraine, few states are positioned to serve as effective mediators. However, Turkey stands out as a potential candidate, despite not being entirely neutral.

As a NATO member and one of the few suppliers of military equipment to Ukraine early in the conflict, Turkey has taken a clear strategic stance. Its relationship with Ukraine extends beyond transactional arms sales—such as the provision of drones—to a broader strategic defense partnership. Nonetheless, Ankara has carefully cultivated a diplomatic posture aimed at balancing its Western alliances with continued engagement with Russia.

Since the war began, Turkey has made concerted efforts to mediate, despite criticism from Western allies. These efforts have yielded concrete outcomes. On July 22, 2022, Turkey—alongside the United Nations—successfully brokered the Black Sea Grain Initiative, establishing a humanitarian shipping corridor that became a vital lifeline for an estimated 349 million people reliant on Ukrainian grain exports. Turkey's balancing act is not limited to the Ukrainian theater. It also competes and cooperates with Russia in other strategic arenas such as Syria and Libya. This broader context of calibrated diplomacy could serve as a foundation for meaningful U.S.–Turkey coordination aimed at achieving a sustained ceasefire in Ukraine.

A future Trump administration would have the opportunity to leverage Turkey's unique position. While Ankara has strongly supported Ukraine's right to self-defense and sovereignty—including supplying UAVs and other military hardware—it has also refrained from joining Western sanctions against Russia. Moreover, Turkey has preserved crucial energy ties, facilitating the continued transfer of Russian gas, which remains vital to the Russian economy.

Turkey's dual-track approach underscores its potential as a pragmatic mediator. If strategically engaged, its role could help create conditions conducive to ending the conflict in a way that aligns with both Ukrainian interests and broader regional stability (Atalan, 2024).

Conclusion

The future of globalization is likely to be characterized by a nuanced and multifaceted evolution rather than a simple continuation or reversal.

It will involve a blend of increased regionalism, technological advancement, geopolitical competition, cultural exchange, and socio-environmental considerations.

The trajectory of globalization will depend on how nations navigate these dynamics, balancing cooperation with the challenges posed by identity, security, and sustainability.

Providing adaptive responses to these complexities will be essential for shaping a more inclusive and equitable global future.

References

Amnesty International. (2024). *Amnesty International investigation concludes Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza*. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-International-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/

Artemenko, F. Y., Hovorov, Y. I., Maksymova, I., & Kostiuk, V. (2024). The impact of conflict on contemporary global dynamics: Integration, globalisation, and polarisation trends. *Multidisciplinary Reviews*. Retrieved from ResearchGate.

Atalan, Y. (2024). *What role can Turkey play in Ukraine negotiations?* Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS).

Bordas, M. (2024). Hamas-Israel war: A brief analysis of first two phases of war. *European Scientific Journal, 20*(11), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2024.v20n11p1

Humanitarian Situation Update 226 | Gaza Strip. (2024, October 4). *OCHA*. Accessed October 29, 2024, from https://tinyurl.com/yrkwy5ar

Mammadov, A. (2024). Opinion – Five scenarios for the war in Ukraine under a Trump presidency. *E-International Relations*. https://www.e-ir.info/

O'Hanlon, M. E., Rocha, A., Roehse, S., & Yadwad, M. (2024). *What next on the war in Ukraine?* Brookings Institution.

Pew Research Center. (2024). *How Americans and Israelis view one another and the U.S. role in the Israel-Hamas war*. Pew Research Center.

Silver, L., & Smerkovich, M. (2024). *Assessing the future in light of the war*. Pew Research Center.

Lerche, C. O. III. (1998). *The conflicts of globalization*. The International Journal of Peace Studies. Retrieved from https://www3.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol3_1/learch.htm

UNHCR. (2024). *Regional flash update 7: Syria situation crisis*. https://www.unhcr.org

UNHCR. (2024). *Syria situation*. Global Focus. https://www.unhcr.org

United Nations. (2023). As geopolitical tensions escalate, United Nations, regional organizations must strengthen cooperation, preventive diplomacy, speakers tell Security Council. *United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*. https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc14548.doc.htm

.

BRJ BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

Tekkes and Tombs of North Macedonia

by İsmail Güleç and Mümin Ali

Balkan University Press 2024

© IBU

Balkan Research Journal Vol. 2, Issue 1 (2025): 103-105

Balkan University Press

https://doi.org//10.69648/PDTG4595

© Balkan University Press

www.ibupress.com

Book Review by:
Asst. Prof. Dr. Uğur Öztürk

Asst. Prof. Dr. Uğur Öztürk

Bandırma On Yedi Eylül University, Türkiye

Orcid ID: 000-0003-3773-9696

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Uğur Öztürk, Email: uozturk@bandirma.edu.tr

The book titled *Tekkes and Tombs of North Macedonia*, written by İsmail Güleç and Mümin Ali, is a valuable study that comprehensively covers tekkes and shrines, which are an important part of the Ottoman-Turkish cultural heritage in the Balkans. This book, published by Balkan University Press in 2024, holds the distinction of being the inaugural publication of the "Academic Studies" series.

North Macedonia is a strategic geography, located in the southeast of Europe, and became one of the ancient centers of Turkish presence after it came under Ottoman rule in 1389. The Turks, who constitute approximately 4% of the population today, continue their presence in the region not only demographically, but also through structures such as mosques, inns, baths, fountains, as well as dervish tekkes and shrines inherited from their ancestors.

BALKAN JOURNALS

These structures, beyond being merely architectural works, function as living witnesses of Muslim identity, faith, and culture. In this context, Güleç and Ali's work aims to determine the current status of tekkes and shrines in North Macedonia and to emphasize the critical role of these structures in cultural continuity.

The book provides a comprehensive geographical overview of the tekkes and shrines throughout North Macedonia. The work covers in detail the tekkes and shrines in many cities and villages, including Skopje, Bitola, Ohrid, Kichevo, Tetovo, Gostivar, Veles, Ovce Pole's villages, Chashka villages, Shtip and its villages, Strumica, Radovish, Prilep, Debar, Struga, Konche, Valandovo, Kumonovo, Kavadarci, Vinica, Center Jupa, Kochani, Resen, and Demir Kapija.

The structural composition of the book provides the reader with a systematic guide by addressing the tekkes and shrines of each city or region separately. For example, the Skopje section includes specific structures such as the Tekke of Hazinedar Rıfâi, Yahya Kemal's, Tophane Sadi, Paşa Yiğit Bey, İshak Bey, and the Tekke of Gazi Baba. This methodical organization makes the work quite useful as a reference source, allowing researchers to easily access information on specific topics. This detailed listing in the table of contents of the book reveals how comprehensive the documentation is.

This work implies a connection between tangible cultural heritage (the physical structures of the tekke and shrines) and intangible cultural heritage (related beliefs, customs, literature, and collective identity). The book positions the presence of these artifacts in the region as an indicator of the cultural richness of North Macedonia, beyond being merely historical structures, and as living examples of cultural memory and practice. This holistic perspective is an important thematic contribution that goes beyond a simple inventory study and offers a more in-depth examination of cultural continuity. The book shows that these structures are not just relics of the past, but also dynamic centers that influence the current identities of the Muslim communities in the region and transmit them to future generations.

While preparing this work, the authors used two main methodological approaches together. Firstly, they identified existing tekkes and shrines by conducting a comprehensive literature review and systematically listed them according to cities and villages. This preliminary preparation made the fieldwork more focused and efficient. In the second stage, the authors visited all cities and villages where lodges and shrines were located and recorded both their existing appearances, and the customs practiced.

This direct observation and on-site investigation provided the authors with the opportunity to collect invaluable empirical data. In the field, they observed first-hand that some shrines were not in place and that some were on the verge of disappearing. They also attempted to document the local customs and religious practices still practiced in these sacred places. This first-hand perspective adds significant originality and timeliness to the study, distinguishing it from studies based solely on archival research.

While the empirical strength and comprehensive documentation of the *Tekkes and Tombs of North Macedonia* are indisputable, there are areas where their academic depth could be further enhanced. The book opens the door to a deeper and more open engagement with established theoretical frameworks such as heritage studies, post-Ottoman identity, or memory studies. For example, examining how these sites function as "places of memory" (lieux de mémoire) in a post-imperial context or how theories of cultural resilience can be applied offers the opportunity to move the contribution of the work from a superior documentary study to a more in-depth analytical study.

İsmail Gülec and Mümin Ali's book, *Tekkes and Tombs of North Macedonia*, is an indispensable resource for scholars, researchers, and cultural enthusiasts interested in the Ottoman-Turkish heritage in North Macedonia and the wider Balkans. The book demonstrates its value as both a comprehensive inventory and a critical snapshot of a rapidly disappearing cultural landscape, emphasizing its urgency and importance. The book brings together the tangible and intangible dimensions of the multicultural presence in the region, strongly emphasizing the central role of these structures in preserving cultural identity.

The book is a call for greater awareness and determined efforts to protect historical sites. It makes recommendations for the recognition and preservation of these structures. It suggests new avenues for future research, such as more in-depth monographic studies on specific tekkes or shrines, more in-depth examination of the intangible heritage associated with these sites using ethnographic methods, or socio-anthropological studies on changing community perceptions and interactions with this heritage.

In conclusion, this work, the *Tekkes and Tombs of North Macedonia*, is a resource that academic libraries, research institutions, and scholars in the fields of Ottoman history, Balkan studies, cultural heritage, theology, and diaspora studies can refer to.

BRJ BALKAN RESEARCH JOURNAL

BALKAN JOURNALS

VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 1 | MAY 2025 brj.ibupress.com