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Savica Dimitrieska

International Balkan University, Skopje, Republic of
North Macedonia,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9808-6647>

Liza Alili Sulejmani

International Balkan University, Skopje, Republic of
North Macedonia,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6796-4627>

We declare no conflicts of interest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be
addressed to Savica Dimitrieska. Email: savica.dimitrieska@ibu.edu.mk

Eco-Consumerism: A Paradox of Opposing Ideas

Savica Dimitrieska, Liza Alili Sulejmani

Abstract

Consumerism and ecology are two opposing phenomena that rest on entirely different principles. Consumerism supports excessive use of goods and services, which leads to increased production, i.e., higher usage of natural resources, raw materials, energy, equipment, and labor. On the other hand, ecology advocates for the sustainable consumption of resources, minimizing energy and land use, and environmental protection. The continuous rise of production and consumption leads to deforestation, depletion of natural resources, water and air pollution, natural disasters, climate change, and a severe loss of biodiversity. Human activities threaten the health and life of all living things on the planet. Consumerism simultaneously fosters economic growth and enhances individual well-being, while also exerting a profound and often detrimental impact on environmental sustainability. However, a healthy environment is not compatible with prevailing consumer behavior, characterized by consumerism and increased production.

The paper, based on both secondary and primary data, aims to explore whether consumerism and ecology can converge in pursuit of ensuring survival, sustainable well-being, and a future for humanity.

Keywords: consumerism, ecology, natural resources, energy, environmental protection

Introduction

Throughout history, people have consumed goods and services to satisfy their needs. However, the quantity of goods they consumed has varied over time. The significant consumption of goods and services was recorded at the beginning of the 20th century, during the Industrial Revolution. Prior to this period, only the wealthy and powerful could afford to spend heavily on goods and services. With industrialization and urbanization, products became widely available to the general population at affordable prices and in quantities they desired. Cultural values started to change, consumption eventually became ubiquitous, and modern consumerism emerged (Stearns, 2006). This era was marked by the emergence of modern marketing, which came after the concepts of production, product innovation, and aggressive selling. Marketing emphasized understanding and meeting consumer needs with an excessive quantity of goods, avoiding what is known as “marketing myopia.” It supports the large consumption of products and services for the personal satisfaction of consumers. The famous phrase “Consumer is the king!” flooded the educational marketing textbooks and literature. The rise in consumer demand not only improved individual standards of living and personal satisfaction but also stimulated production and contributed to overall economic growth. So, from an economic and especially from a marketing point of view, the consumption of products is a positive trend that fosters economic growth and enhances individual consumer satisfaction. Products that were once a luxury became standard objects in many households. People started to purchase goods, since buying was no longer a distant dream, but instead a daily practice that could both satisfy personal needs and boost national economies. People spend not only on necessities or for meeting functional needs, but also for satisfying emotional, prestige, and status needs. The new paradigm is “you are what you own” (Lage et al., 2022). And another expression from that period is FOMO, or fear of missing out, the fear of having nothing when others have everything (Rivera & Lallmahomed, 2016).

However, over time, this pattern has evolved from ordinary levels of consumption to an excessive and compulsive practice known as consumerism. Consumerism, as obsessive consumption, occurs at the expense of the environment, and its rise presents a growing, continuous, and alarming threat to ecological systems. The environmental degradation driven by consumerism is substantial, as evidenced by numerous expert analyses and reports. According to the United Nations 2025 Report, the most pressing environmental problems include climate change, extreme weather, rising sea levels, an increase in floods, heatwaves, and wildfires.

Additional significant concerns encompass air and water pollution, biodiversity loss, deforestation, soil degradation, the depletion of natural resources, and the escalating problem of waste management. And all these problems are the result of human activity.

The contradiction between these two phenomena, consumerism and ecology, that is, humans against nature, is intensifying. A balanced and pragmatic approach to reconciling these opposing ideas lies in the promotion of eco-consumerism and societal marketing that support the consumption of products that are both environmentally conscious and socially responsible. This perspective does not reject consumption per se, but rather encourages the purchase of products that either do not harm the environment or whose environmental impact is minimized to the greatest extent possible.

Literature Review

Eco-consumerism unites the two contradictory terms ecology and consumerism. Driscoll's (2025) simplest definition of eco-consumerism is that it is the practice of purchasing with a focus on the environmental impact of products. (hybrid cars, organic textiles, and sustainably sourced food items, which are believed to support both ecological and social welfare). This is where the term pro-environmental behavior comes from, which means conscious behavior that reduces the negative environmental impacts of one's actions (Uribe et al., 2023). Consumers are changing their behavior and buying products that are environmentally certified or have eco-labels. (Peter & Lister, 2010). According to Korkmaz & Altan (2024), ecological products (eco-friendly products) should be defined as products that are renewable, reusable, recyclable and preserved and do not pollute the world. They should have the following vital qualities: a) they do not have negative effects on living beings; b) they protect nature; c) they use limited resources in their disposal, d) they are renewable and can be recycled and e) they contain materials which do not harm the environment. According to Durif et al. (2010), an ecological product is one whose design and features (including production and strategy) use recyclable (renewable/toxic free/biodegradable) resources and which improves environmental impact or reduces environmental toxic damage throughout its entire life cycle. Based on the use of environmentally friendly products, consumer behaviors can also be categorized. Kostadinova (2022) explains that according to human's main life functions, consumer behavior can be ecological in the following areas: nutrition (food waste

reduction, sustainable diets, etc.), mobility (use of environmentally friendly transport, fuels and vehicles, car-sharing, etc.), housing (sustainable building, energy and water conservation, etc.), clothing (preference for ethical clothing, organic fabrics, etc.), education (teaching sustainable living, promoting sustainability, etc.), health (healthy and environment-friendly lifestyles) and leisure (sustainable tourism, leisure practices with low resource intensity, etc.).

Considering that eco-consumerism means several things (such as using ecological products, eco-behavior of consumers, eco-labels and certification, ecological gap, etc.), the following table presents some of the more significant eco-terms that are increasingly used in the literature on eco-consumerism.

Methodology

This paper uses secondary and primary data to explain and analyze its purpose. Primary data was collected through a survey for which a questionnaire with open and closed questions was prepared. The questionnaire was electronically distributed in the period July-August 2025 and collected were relevant answers from 90 respondents. The analysis of the questionnaire was done using descriptive statistics.

Discussion and Analysis

In recent years, many primary surveys have been conducted on consumer sentiment regarding the purchase of ecological products. If there is no “ecological gap” involved, the answers are very optimistic and in a positive direction for preserving the environment and using ecological products. Namely, according to the results of the primary survey, 99% of respondents are willing to pay an extra price for ecological products. Almost the same high percentage of 98% of consumers in the survey believe that individual actions of purchasing environmentally friendly products can save the environment. In the Global Outlook on Sustainability Report of the American market research company Mintel for 2024, a paradoxical change in consumer behavior towards ecological activities has been recorded. On the one hand, the belief that the end of the planet is approaching, but on the other, the increasing purchase of ecological products is astonishing (Mintel, 2025). The study reports that half of the respondents believe that their own individual actions can help the environment (Brown, 2024). However, there are different consumer behaviors for different products. Thus, in our own research, the most purchased environmentally

Table 1

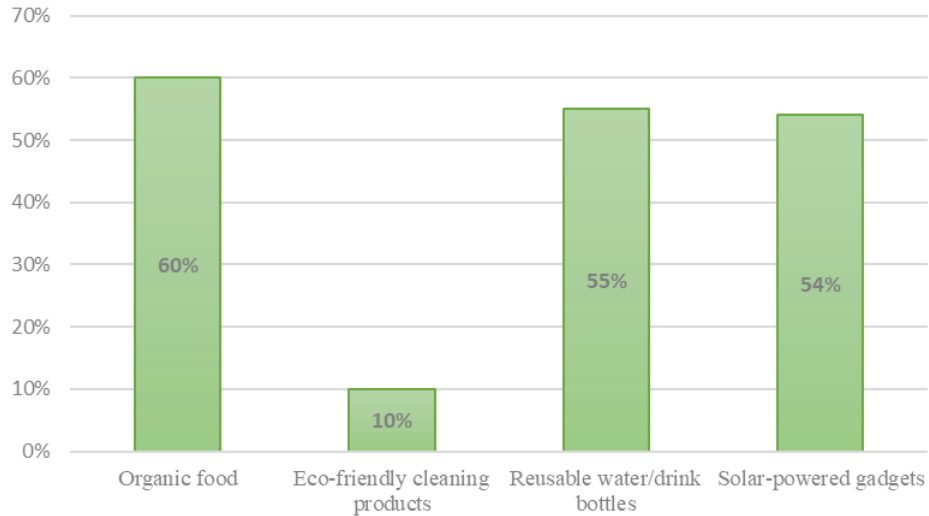
Small Eco-Dictionary

ECO TERMINOLOGY	
Anthropogenic	Originating in human activity
Biodegradable	A product or substance that can decompose naturally (by bacteria or living organisms). Meaning no waste to landfill!
Eco-anxiety	Psychological distress and constant fear of the harm that humanity may suffer due to environmental problems (water pollution, air pollution, climate change, loss of biodiversity, etc.)
Ecological footprint	A measure of negative impact a person or activity has on the environment.
Fossil Fuels	A fossil fuel is formed over millions of years from organic matter such as plants and other life forms. Fossil fuels include coal, natural gas, oil and petroleum
Greendex	The Greendex is a quantitative study whereas participants were asked questions about their energy use, consumer product use, transportation practices, beliefs about the environment and sustainability, and knowledge of environmental issues. The answers were then calculated to churn out a Greendex score—the relative environmental impact of a person's consumer choices. Individual scores are averaged to create a mean score for each country. The Greendex measures the impact of the average consumer in each country surveyed; it does not measure the environmental impact of a total country.
Greenhouse Effect	Problem caused by increased quantities of gases such as carbon dioxide in the air. These gases trap the heat from the sun, and cause a gradual rise in the temperature of the Earth's atmosphere.
Greenhouse Gas	A gas that contributes to the greenhouse effect. Carbon dioxide, methane and chlorofluorocarbons (CFC's) are examples of greenhouse gases.
Green gap (ecological gap)	Consumers claim to buy environmentally friendly products and are concerned about the environment, but they do not show this in reality in supermarkets.
Green Living	A lifestyle which seeks to limit harm to the environment.
Greenwashing	Misleading information and false claims by companies that they are "green", when in reality they are not, which is a deception for consumers
IPCC – The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change	United Nations body for assessing the science related to climate change.
Organic	The production of food or farming methods that doesn't use chemicals.
Renewable Energy	Energy which is collected from renewable resources like the sun, wind, waves and geothermal heat.
Slow Fashion	Reducing your consumption of clothes and purchasing quality instead of quantity, i.e. clothing items that can last for years or even a lifetime.
Sustainability	Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (United Nations Brundtland Commission, 1987)
Waste Stream	A waste stream follows a product from its source to its disposal, whether that's in landfill or recycling.
Water Footprint	It measures the amount of water used to produce each of the goods and services we use.
Zero Waste	A popular new movement where individuals and families try to create no waste which will end up in landfill. Often they try to limit the amount they send to be recycled as well.

friendly products are food, water bottles or bottles for other beverages, and the use of energy-efficient electrical appliances (Figure 1).

Figure 1

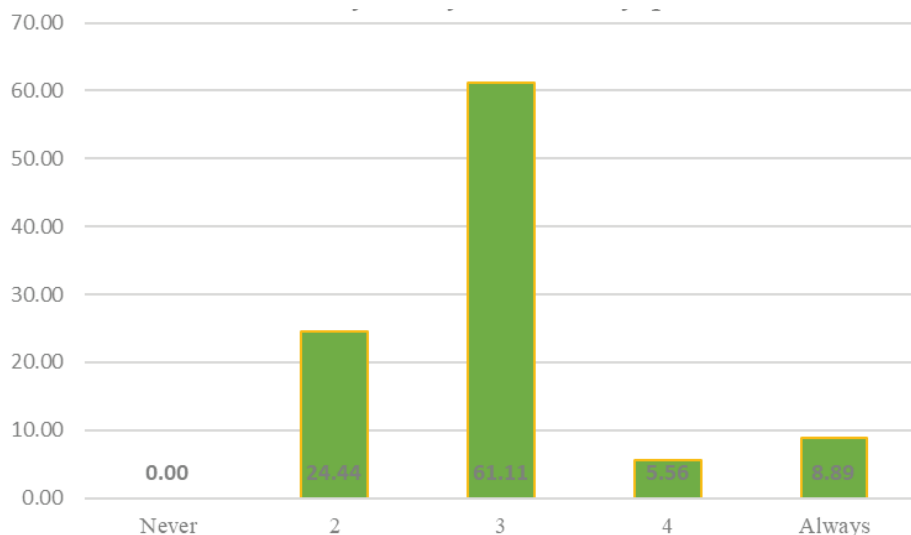
Mostly purchased eco-products



Globally, in the food industry, consumers are increasingly interested in organic food, and 27% of them are looking for alternatives to meat. In the fashion industry, 62% of consumers want to buy brands that use environmentally friendly materials in production. The largest percentage, 73% of consumers, consider product energy efficiency to be the most important in electronic purchases. In global markets, energy-efficient devices and appliances are increasingly being offered (Brown, 2024).

Figure 2

Frequency of buying eco-products

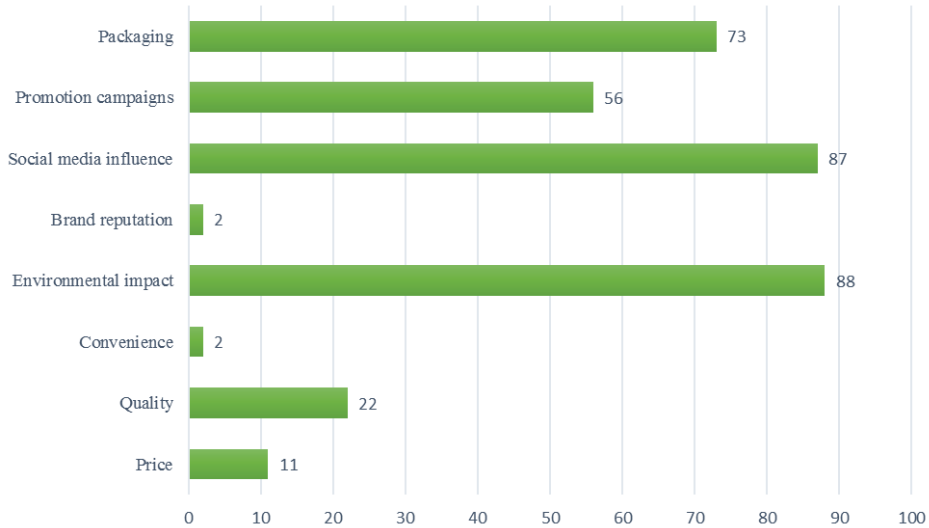


When asked about the frequency of purchasing ecological products, the respondents' "unexpected" answer was that it has never happened that they did not buy ecological products. This means that they are constantly looking for ecological products in the market to satisfy their needs. This speaks of high environmental awareness among consumers about purchasing and consuming ecological products.

When asked what factors influence consumers to buy ecological products, the results also confirm a high level of environmental awareness. Consumers mostly buy ecological products because of their willingness to protect the environment (88%). Second place, 87%, belongs to the influence of social media. For consumers, price is not an important factor, 11%, which confirms the claim that they are willing to pay a higher price for environmentally friendly products.

Figure 3

Factors influencing the environmental behaviour of consumers

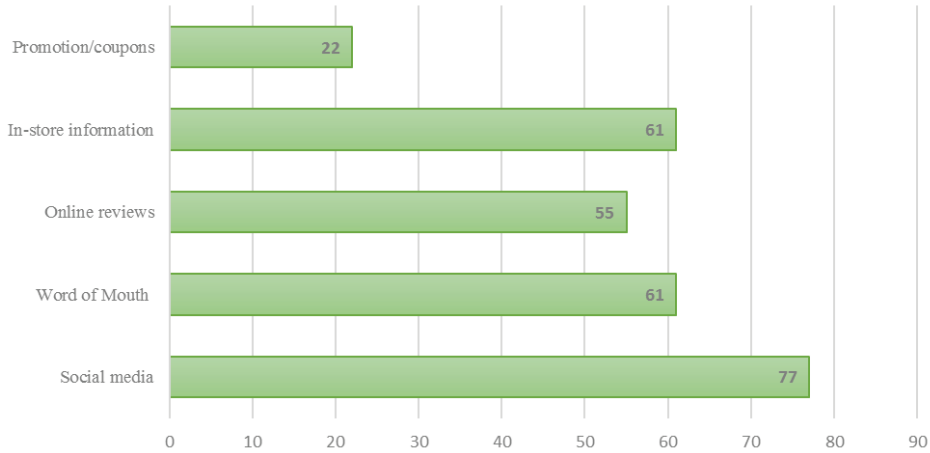


However, it should be noted that eco-consumption of products differs across generations. Globally, research shows that 68% of Generation Z and 64% of Millennials are more interested in purchasing eco-friendly products, while only 51% of Generation X and 43% of Baby Boomers share such a sentiment (Brown, 2024). This generational divide is stimulating many brands to tailor their sustainability messaging to younger consumers.

In the following figure, it can be seen that the most powerful tools for spreading information about eco-consumerism are social media and Word of Mouth. This shows that consumers trust other consumers, friends, colleagues, and relatives to buy eco-products. These are indicators that can be used by all stakeholders (government, media, environmental NGOs, businesses, etc.) that promote a clean environment.

Figure 4

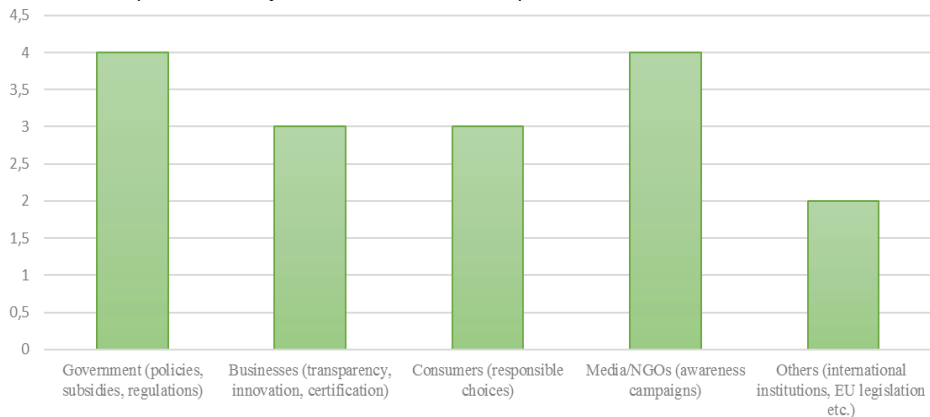
The most influential sources of information about eco-products



It is understandable that all stakeholders should care about environmental issues, but according to consumers, the government, as well as the media, are most responsible for promoting eco-consumerism.

Figure 5

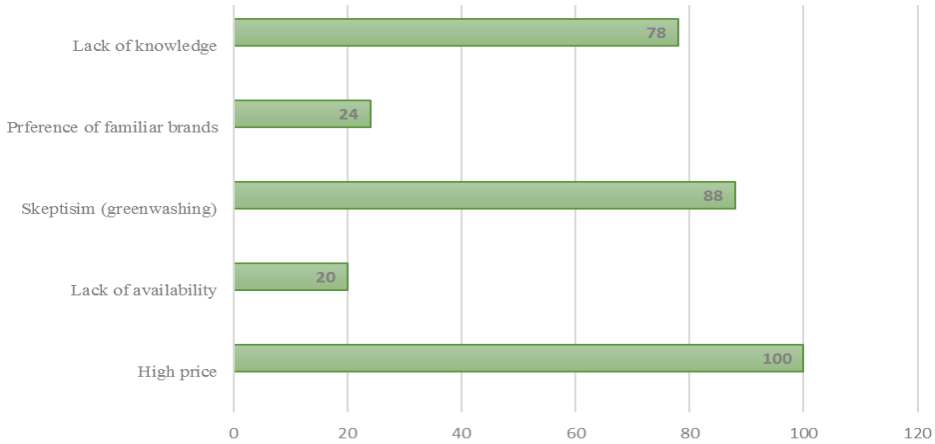
The most responsible body for eco-consumerism' promotion



The last question is very important and several conclusions should be drawn from it about the limiting factors for purchasing ecological products.

Figure 6

Limiting factors for buying eco-products



Although respondents are willing to pay extra for environmentally friendly products, they still consider price to be a limiting factor (amazing 100% of respondents share this sentiment). Environmentally friendly products are more expensive and businesses need to work more productively to reduce their cost. Businesses will also have to work to reduce and eliminate greenwashing and spread skepticism among consumers regarding their claim that they are focused on producing and promoting environmentally friendly products, which is not the case in reality.

Conclusion

Alarming data on environmental problems were presented at the World Economic Forum in Davos 2025. The Global Risk Report prepared by Elsner, Atkinson and Zahidi (2025) for the World Economic Forum lists global risks ranked by severity over the short and long term. In 10 years, all the top global risks are related to environmental threats.

Table 2

Global risks ranked by severity over the short and long term



Source: Elsner, M, Atkinson, G., Zahidi, S. (2025). Global Risk Report 2025. World Economic Forum

Eco-consumerism, as a new direction in consumer behaviour, must be actively supported and promoted by all stakeholders. Consumers need to adopt more sustainable habits if they wish to lead healthier, longer lives and ensure a liveable planet for future generations. Every individual can make a significant impact by caring for the environment in the places where they live, work, socialize, and engage in recreational activities. Businesses have a crucial role to play by offering environmentally friendly products that are backed by credible eco-labels and environmental certifications. Likewise, governments should create policies and incentives that encourage sustainable practices in industry, transportation, and commerce. Ultimately, all stakeholders—individuals, businesses, and governments—must fulfil their ecological responsibilities to secure a better future for generations to come. Accelerating progress towards achieving climate and nature goals is critical for the health of the planet and its people. (World Economic Forum, 2025) One of the

strongest messages of the forum which can also serve as a conclusion is that of Jesper Brodin, CEO of IKEA, according to which: “This is a transformation. It’s not a small change. It’s one of the biggest potentially we have experienced in hundreds of years, maybe in humanity.” We must all make an effort so that both we and nature can live.

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Ümmi Murati
Istanbul, Turkey

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0172-2934>

mail: ummimurati@gmail.com

Bursa Uludağ University, Institute of Social Sciences,
Department of Philosophy and Religious Sciences /
Religious Education

Isa Bey Madrasa in Skopje- A Historical and Pedagogical Assessment

Ümmi Murati

Abstract

This study provides a historical and pedagogical assessment of the Isa Bey Madrasa in Skopje, established in 1469 within the framework of the Ottoman waqf system. The research aims to examine how the madrasa contributed to the institutionalization of religion-based education in the Balkans while preserving social belonging and cultural continuity. Using an archival-historical and comparative analytical approach, the study traces the transformations of the institution from its Ottoman foundation to its present form. Although educational activities were periodically interrupted by wars, political changes, and regime transitions, the madrasa was repeatedly restructured and managed to sustain its existence. Reopened in the 1984–1985 academic year, it continues today as one of the central institutions providing formal religious education in North Macedonia. Its curriculum combines classical Islamic sciences with social sciences, natural sciences, and language courses, reflecting a synthesis of tradition and modern pedagogy. However, issues such as the language of instruction, the right to mother-tongue education, social representation, and diploma equivalency remain ongoing challenges. Overall, the study reveals that the Isa Bey Madrasa embodies both continuity and transformation in the fields of religion, culture, and education in the Balkans.

Keywords: Isa Bey Madrasa, Skopje, Ottoman education, waqf system, pedagogy, cultural continuity, archival-historical analysis

Introduction

The expansion policy of the Ottoman Empire aimed not only at gaining new territories through military means but also at establishing a permanent system of governance and a sustainable cultural order in the conquered lands. In line with this strategy, the construction of religious, social, and educational institutions in newly conquered regions played a crucial role in maintaining both social stability and the continuity of state authority. Therefore, the establishment of educational institutions was considered an inseparable part of the Ottoman strategy of conquest. In the Turkish-Islamic urbanization model, the waqf¹ system emerged as a central element in the creation and sustainability of public structures. Mosques, masjids, madrasas, zawiyas², tombs, darüşşifas³, and other social service institutions were not only built through waqfs but were also financially supported by them, allowing these institutions to continue their functions for many years (Ergin, 1939; İnbaşı, 2018).

During the Ottoman period, education was primarily organized through official madrasas. Alongside these formal institutions, mosques, libraries, tekkes⁴, and zawiyas served as informal complementary spaces for learning. This reflects the multi-dimensional and comprehensive nature of the Ottoman educational system (Ayverdi, 1953).

Madrasas were not merely academic spaces limited to classrooms; they were comprehensive educational complexes that met students' needs for accommodation, nutrition, and research. Dormitories, libraries, baths, and kitchens were integral parts of madrasa structures (Akyüz, 2010). In the Ottoman tradition of conquest, building a madrasa alongside a mosque in newly conquered cities was seen as a strategic step, aimed not only at providing religious and scholarly services but also at training administrative personnel necessary for state governance (Miftar, 2022). Through this approach, both religious-cultural and political centralization were successfully established in the conquered regions. Existing scholarship on Ottoman madrasas can be grouped into three primary thematic areas. Studies focusing on architecture and institutional design (e.g., Ayverdi 1953; Akyüz, 2010)

- 1 An Islamic charitable endowment whose revenues are designated for public or religious purposes.
- 2 A small Islamic religious lodge or Sufi retreat, often functioning as a place for worship, education, and social service.
- 3 An Ottoman-era hospital and medical treatment center, often attached to religious or charitable complexes and funded through waqf endowments.
- 4 A Sufi lodge used for spiritual instruction, social gatherings, and religious education.

emphasize the structural features of madrasas and highlight their role as multi-functional educational complexes. Some scholars portray madrasas primarily as stable institutions of Islamic religious learning (Ayverdi, 1953; Akyüz, 2010), while others emphasize their adaptation to local and political realities, arguing that curricula and institutional functions evolved significantly in the post-Ottoman period (Hızlı, 2020; Hasan, 1992). This contrast reveals that the madrasa should not be understood as a static structure but as a dynamic institution shaped by shifting social and economic conditions. The second group of sources approaches the subject through the waqf system and administrative economy (Özgüdenli, 2012; Miftar, 2022), demonstrating how financial sustainability shaped educational capacity and social services. A third strand examines the pedagogical and intellectual dimensions of madrasa education, especially the balance between traditional religious sciences and rational disciplines (Hızlı, 2020; Hasan, 1992). However, these works generally treat the Ottoman period independently and rarely explore how these institutions adapted in the post-Ottoman context. By comparing architectural foundations, waqf-based administration, and pedagogical transformation across periods, this study contributes a more integrated and critical perspective, showing how the İsa Bey Madrasa combined historical continuity with modern educational reforms.

Before the Ottoman rule, Skopje had been under the influence of various cultures and states and had maintained its importance as a strategic center throughout history. Following the incorporation of Kosovo into Ottoman territories during the reign of Sultan Murad I, Skopje was conquered in 1389 during the rule of Sultan Bayezid I by Paşa Yiğit, who became known as the “Conqueror of Skopje” (Uzunçarşılı, 2011). Following Ottoman rule, the city acquired an Islamic-Turkish urban identity, adorned with mosques, madrasas, caravanserais⁵, and bathhouses, and became an important administrative center in the region.

Archival records and historical documents reveal that during the 15th and 16th centuries, there were twelve active madrasas in Skopje (Ayverdi, 1953). Among the prominent ones were Meddah Madrasa, Emir İsmail Madrasa, İshak Bey Madrasa, İsa Bey Madrasa, Sultan Murad Madrasa, Yahya Pasha Madrasa, Mustafa Pasha Madrasa, and Karlı Pasha Madrasa (Ramadani, 1998). These institutions served as centers of religious and scholarly education, not only contributing to

5 A large roadside inn used in the Ottoman and Islamic world to provide accommodation, food, and shelter for travelers and merchants, often supported by waqf endowments.

the dissemination of knowledge but also fostering the rooting of Ottoman culture and civilization in the region through the teaching of language, fiqh, and rational sciences.

Among these madrasas, one of the most notable examples is İsa Bey Madrasa, built in the 15th century. Structurally, it holds a unique position among the Ottoman religious educational institutions in the Balkans, designed to support both religious and basic social education. Its foundational aim was not only the teaching of religious sciences but also the strengthening of social dynamics and the reinforcement of religious identity. Thus, İsa Bey Madrasa should be regarded not merely as an educational institution but also as a carrier of cultural continuity and a central pillar in the construction of social identity.

The fact that it is the only madrasa in North Macedonia that has continued to exist under the same name from the Ottoman period to the present day, despite experiencing interruptions, gives the İsa Bey Madrasa special significance. Today, it continues to serve as a formal religious educational institution under the Islamic Religious Union of North Macedonia, playing a vital role in ensuring the continuity of religious services in the region.

This study aims to analyze the historical development and pedagogical role of the İsa Bey Madrasa within the broader framework of Ottoman educational institutions and their post-imperial transformations. The analysis is guided by a theoretical lens grounded in educational continuity theory and cultural transmission models. This approach allows the study to evaluate the İsa Bey Madrasa not merely as a historical building, but as a living institution that negotiated change, reproduced knowledge, and sustained communal identity across centuries. By employing the concepts of educational continuity and institutional adaptation, the study seeks to reveal how the madrasa functioned as both a transmitter of tradition and a mediator of social change. Although numerous studies have examined Ottoman madrasas from architectural or religious perspectives, few have focused on their pedagogical evolution and the continuity of their functions in the post-Ottoman Balkans. This research therefore fills a significant gap by providing an integrated historical-pedagogical evaluation supported by archival data and comparative analysis. However, there is still a lack of research that examines how Ottoman madrasas continued to function, transform, or adapt in post-imperial Balkan societies. This study addresses this gap by providing a historical and pedagogical analysis of the İsa Bey Madrasa from its foundation to the modern period. Accordingly, the central research question of this study is: How did the İsa Bey Madrasa preserve

Ottoman pedagogical and institutional features while adapting to post-imperial social and political environments?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical approach based on archival material, waqfiyya records, Ottoman yearbooks, and institutional documents of the Islamic Religious Community. Secondary scholarly literature on Ottoman educational institutions and contemporary religious schools in the Balkans is used to support the analytical framework. A comparative reading of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman periods highlights institutional continuity and transformation. Additionally, a pedagogical lens—drawing on educational continuity theory and cultural transmission models—allows the curriculum, language policy, and diploma recognition debates to be evaluated within a modern secondary-education context. This mixed approach makes it possible to connect historical analysis with contemporary policy and pedagogical concerns.

Pedagogical Evaluation

The contemporary educational model of Isa Bey Madrasa demonstrates a shift from a purely classical madrasa structure to a hybrid form that integrates tradition with modern secondary-school pedagogy. The curriculum combines Islamic sciences with social sciences, natural sciences, foreign languages and technology courses, reflecting a multidimensional approach to student development. Practical components—such as leading prayers, public recitations, and community-based religious duties—function as applied pedagogical training rather than theoretical instruction alone. This indicates that the institution aims to produce graduates capable of serving both religious and civic roles. Therefore, the madrasa today operates not only as a place of religious learning but also as a modern educational institution aligned with contemporary secondary-school standards in North Macedonia.

Isa Bey Madrasa During the Ottoman Period

The Ottoman Empire did not limit itself to establishing a political order in the territories it conquered; it also aimed to create a lasting structure in areas such as settlement policies, urbanization, and the institutionalization of education. In this context, the waqf system became one of the most important instruments of

Ottoman administration. Waqfs not only ensured the sustainability of newly built institutions but also contributed to the stabilization of social order. A waqfiyya⁶ is defined as an official document that specifies how endowed properties will be used for charitable purposes and how they will be managed. These documents are of great importance as they provide detailed information about the administration of the waqf, the allocation of income and expenditures, the number and salaries of employees, the methods of covering expenses, and the groups or individuals who can benefit from the waqf (Özgüdenli, 2012).

Isa Bey, referred to in historical sources as Gazi Isa Bey or Ishakbeyoğlu Isa Bey, was an important sanjak bey who served during the reign of Murad II (Emin, 2023). His father, Gazi Ishak Bey, was raised as the adopted son of Paşa Yiğit, a frontier lord who played a crucial role in the conquest of Skopje, and he provided significant services in strengthening Ottoman dominance in the region (Emecen, 2000; İnalçık, 1954).

Following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, Isa Bey played an active role in the Ottoman conquest campaigns in the Balkans, participating in various military operations with his brothers across Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia. Known as the founder of the cities of Sarajevo and Novi Pazar, Isa Bey made great contributions to the development of Ottoman institutional and cultural presence in the region. In Skopje, he commissioned the construction of mosques, masjids, caravanserais, khanqahs, baths, and madrasas, leaving a permanent mark on the city's religious and social life (Elezović, 1926; Asani, 2010).

Isa Bey's waqfiyya, dated 874 Hijri/1469, is considered one of the most comprehensive examples of the classical Ottoman waqf tradition in the territory of present-day North Macedonia. This waqfiyya was first published by Gliša Elezović and is a highly detailed document measuring 6.72 meters in length, 26 centimeters in width, and consisting of 305 lines (Elezović, 1926; Ayverdi, 1953). The document provides extensive details about the madrasa's founding purpose, structural features, and sources of income.

According to the waqfiyya, Isa Bey built a madrasa with ten-room and an adjoining zawiya in Skopje (Elezović, 1926). To ensure the madrasa's financial sustainability, commercial buildings such as the Çifte Hamam, surrounding shops, nineteen shops located in front of the Ishak Bey Bazaar, and the Kapan Han were dedicated

6 The official legal deed that records the conditions, revenues, personnel, and management of a waqf foundation.

to the waqf as revenue-generating assets (Miftar, 2022). The waqfiyya states: “*I will build a madrasa for those who seek knowledge, and this madrasa will consist of a specified number of rooms.*” Additionally, it stipulated that each student residing in the madrasa would receive 10 dirhams⁷ daily, two loaves of bread, and two bowls of meat-based food per meal, while the *mudarris*⁸ would be paid 20 akçe⁹ per day. This illustrates how Ottoman educational institutions supported both the academic and social needs of their students (Elezović, 1926). Furthermore, the waqfiyya specified that the *mudarris* must possess sufficient knowledge in fundamental religious sciences and be qualified to teach recognized classical texts (Hızlı, 2020).

Although no direct document regarding the madrasa curriculum has been found, the waqfiyya’s condition that “the positive sciences (philosophical sciences and astronomy) should not be taught” provides significant clues about the institution’s educational approach (Elezović, 1926). This divergence from the typical classical Ottoman curriculum likely stemmed from Isa Bey’s pragmatic approach to the conditions of his time.

Alongside the madrasa, Isa Bey also established a highly valuable library. Founded in 874 Hijri/ 1469, this library became one of the most comprehensive in North Macedonia, containing a collection of 332 volumes comprising 215 different works. The collection included not only religious sciences but also works from other disciplines such as philosophy and medicine. The presence of texts by prominent scholars such as Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Ibn Sina, and Hippocrates, along with dictionaries and books on logic, demonstrates the library’s intellectual diversity (Miftar, 2022; Hasan, 1992). Since its foundation, Isa Bey Madrasa has had to pause or completely halt its educational activities on several occasions. The first interruption occurred in 1689, during the Austrian General Piccolomini’s occupation of Skopje. During this invasion, the city was devastated by a massive fire, which forced the madrasa to suspend its educational activities, while its library suffered severe damage (Bažrami, 2005; İnbaşı, 2018).

According to Albayrak’s work “*The Last Period Ottoman Scholars*”, Hayreddin Efendi, who was born in 1287/1870 in the village of Nikoştak, Kumanovo district, part of the Kosovo Vilayet, began his studies at Skopje Gazi Isa Bey Madrasa in March 1302/1884 and later went to Istanbul in 1313/1895 to complete his education

7 A medieval silver coin used as a unit of currency in Islamic territories.

8 The chief instructor or teacher in a madrasa.

9 The principal silver coin of the Ottoman Empire, used as the basic monetary unit until the 19th century.

(Albayrak, 1996). This indicates that the madrasa, which had been damaged in 1689, resumed its activities in 1884. Furthermore, according to the 1321/1903 edition of the Ottoman Education Yearbook (*Maarif Salnamesi*), the *mudarris* of the madrasa at that time was Nabi Efendi, and the student population was recorded as thirty-nine (*Salnâme-i Nezaret-i Maarif-i Umumiye*, 1321).

In his 1932 publication, Salih Asım Bey noted that there were twelve madrasas in Skopje, four of which were unusable, while the remaining eight had continued educational activities until roughly twenty years earlier (Asım, 2004). Based on this information, it is plausible that Isa Bey Madrasa was among the eight institutions that remained active during that period. These records clearly demonstrate that Isa Bey Madrasa held a central role in educational activities in Skopje throughout the Ottoman era. The limited availability of information and documents concerning Isa Bey Madrasa during the Ottoman period restricts the ability to fully evaluate its educational programs and practices. However, the existing records reveal that the madrasa functioned not only as a religious institution but also as a social, cultural, and economic hub for the local population. Its long-standing continuation of educational activities highlights the durability and influence of the Ottoman institutional structure in the Balkans.

The Position of Isa Bey Madrasa in the Post-Ottoman Period

With the end of the Ottoman Empire's political rule in the Balkans and the conclusion of World War I, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (1918-1929) was established in 1918. This new political entity continued to exist under the name Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929-1941) after 1929. Along with the establishment of the kingdom, the multi-religious and multicultural social fabric of the Balkan region was reshaped under a centralized nation-state model (Güveloğlu, 2019).

In the post-Ottoman period, the continuity of religious education was of vital importance for the Muslim community, not merely as an educational policy issue but also as a crucial means of preserving religious and cultural identity. Changes in the political system brought religious institutions under state supervision, raising significant concerns about the future of Islamic institutions. During this time, one of the most pressing questions for the Muslim community was under what conditions and in what manner Islamic education would be sustained. Although information on the religious organization of Muslims in North Macedonia following the Balkan

Wars and World War I is limited, it is clear that this period was marked by a serious institutional vacuum. Muslims within the borders of the SHS Kingdom were granted international minority status through Article 10 of the 1919 Minorities Treaty. According to this article, the family and personal matters of Muslims would be regulated according to their own religious traditions. In this treaty, Muslims were defined as a “Religious Community” (Vjerska Zajednica) (Babuna, 2024).

During both the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and later the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Islamic Religious Union of North Macedonia operated as an organization affiliated with the Islamic Religious Presidency in Sarajevo. The Vidovdan Constitution of 1921 was based on the principle of religious freedom and theoretically aimed to grant equal rights to all religious communities. Articles 12 and 109 of the constitution included provisions guaranteeing the legal status of religious minorities, particularly the Muslim community. During this period, a central institution called Vakufska Direkcija was established to manage the religious affairs of Muslims in Yugoslavia, and above it, a Council of Scholars (Ulema Meclisi) was formed. This structure was of great importance for organizing activities related to the Muslim population in the region (Derviş, 2014).

The Law on Muslims, issued on January 31, 1930, and the Muslim Constitution, adopted on July 9, 1930, were significant steps toward institutionalizing the religious governance of the Muslim community. These regulations included legal provisions for the election processes of muftis and members of the Council of Scholars. However, during this period, religious institutions were largely forced to operate under strict state supervision (Popovic, 1995). The first major institutional step in the field of education during the post-Ottoman era was the reopening of the Meddah Madrasa in 1920 through the efforts of the ulema. This madrasa aimed to continue the traditional Ottoman educational model (Aruçi, 2002). However, in 1924, the King Alexander Madrasa was established in line with the state’s modernization policies, adopting a Western-style educational approach intended to integrate state ideology into the educational sphere. The lack of acceptance of this madrasa by the Muslim population led to its closure in 1936 (Memiş, 1984). While the Meddah Madrasa’s sole focus on traditional religious sciences proved insufficient in meeting the societal needs of the period, the ideologically Western-oriented approach of the King Alexander Madrasa was not embraced by the Turkish and Albanian Muslim communities of North Macedonia. The limitations of these two institutions created the need for a new madrasa that could balance religious and rational sciences while training qualified religious leaders suited to the needs of society. In

response to this need, the Isa Bey Madrasa, which had been built in the 15th century but remained closed for a long time due to various reasons, was reopened in 1936 under the leadership of the Islamic Religious Union (Erken & Çençiler, 2019).

The reopening of the Isa Bey Madrasa symbolized not just the revival of an institution but also an attempt to preserve its historical legacy while adapting to the educational requirements of the modern era. The inauguration took place with a ceremony befitting its historical significance. On Friday, October 2, 1936, the opening day began with a recitation of the *Hatm-i Sharif* at Isa Bey Mosque, followed by speeches in front of the madrasa, and concluded with a *Mevlid-i Sharif*¹⁰ at Sultan Murad Mosque after the Friday prayer. The large public participation demonstrated the profound societal importance of this reopening (Bajrami, 2005). The curriculum of the newly opened Isa Bey Madrasa was organized as a four-year educational program combining classical Islamic sciences with modern pedagogical and scientific subjects. In addition to core religious disciplines such as Qur'an recitation, tafsir, hadith, aqidah, fiqh, ethics, and Islamic history, vocational courses such as pedagogy, citizenship, imamship, and administrative knowledge were included. Language education covered Arabic, Turkish, Serbian-Croatian, and optionally German or French. Moreover, natural sciences such as geography, mathematics, physics, and chemistry, along with hygiene, calligraphy, art, and physical education were also part of the curriculum (Bajrami, 2005). This program was widely accepted by both traditional scholars and the public as it successfully integrated religious and modern sciences (Asani, 2010). In this way, the madrasa aligned with the classical Ottoman model in the Balkans, aiming to raise individuals equipped with both religious knowledge and a sense of public responsibility.

The school's charter, curriculum, and dormitory regulations were prepared by the Council of Scholars (Ulema Meclisi) of the period. According to this program, the madrasa was tasked with training imams, teachers (*muallims*), and other religious officials. Graduates of the madrasa were eligible to continue their higher education in theological faculties in Sarajevo and various Arab countries. During the 1939-1940 academic year, the madrasa had a total of 145 students. While the exact number for the 1940-1941 academic year is unknown, it is estimated that around 180 students were enrolled at that time (Veseli, 2005). During World War II, Skopje and its surroundings suffered extensive destruction once again, which

10 A ceremonial recitation celebrating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

forced Isa Bey Madrasa to cease its activities (Jahyai, 2017; Redzebi, 2013). In the post-war period, a new political era began in Yugoslavia under the socialist regime led by Tito. Initially, the regime pursued strict and restrictive policies toward religious institutions. The institutional vibrancy that had existed during the kingdom period declined sharply; in a country where approximately two million Muslims lived, only the Gazi Husrev Bey Madrasa in Sarajevo was allowed to continue functioning, while all other madrasas and theological faculties were shut down (Karčić, 2015; Erken & Çençiler, 2019). Over time, the regime's harsh stance began to soften, and by the 1960s, a more moderate approach to religious life emerged. This allowed for the partial restructuring and expansion of Islamic institutions, bringing religious education back, albeit in a limited capacity, to the public sphere.

Between 1918 and 1941, during the periods of both the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, twelve madrasas were actively operating, particularly in regions with dense Muslim populations, including North Macedonia. This reflects the institutional resilience displayed by Muslim communities to preserve their religious and cultural identities following the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, in response to the growing anti-Islamic attitudes and cultural assimilation pressures of the 19th century, madrasas became not only educational institutions but also central pillars of communal identity, religious continuity, and traditional knowledge transmission. The teaching staff of these institutions largely consisted of individuals who had received advanced religious education both domestically and abroad, particularly in Istanbul, Cairo, and Skopje. This positioned the madrasas as vital bridges of knowledge between local communities and the broader international Islamic scholarly network (İdriz, 2021).

After World War II, the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1992) reorganized religious institutions in line with the structure of the federal system. With the 1974 Constitution, freedom of religion and conscience was granted constitutional protection, explicitly stating that religious institutions were independent from the state and that establishing schools for worship and the training of religious leaders was a fundamental right. However, this freedom largely remained theoretical, as in practice it was limited by the state's centralized educational policies. During this period, religious education was carried out only in mosques and within the framework of restricted programs called "Verska Obuka" (religious instruction). These classes were held exclusively on weekends, and participation required written consent from parents. Between 1945 and 1991, religious education practices

were inconsistent and underwent frequent changes, largely shaped by the political and ideological climate of the period (Aruçi, 1998). Muslim communities in North Macedonia continued their efforts to preserve their religious education tradition through various informal methods, though these efforts remained limited for a long time. The return of religious education to an institutional structure only became possible in the early 1980s (Veseli, 2005). In 1979, the Islamic Religious Union of North Macedonia (KMIB) took significant steps toward the reopening of the Isa Bey Madrasa. As a result of these initiatives, the madrasa resumed its activities in the 1984-1985 academic years as a private educational institution, recognized by the Ministry of Education of North Macedonia and financed by the KMIB (Kettani, 1997).

The primary goal of reopening the madrasa was to train religious leaders—such as imams, khatibs, and preachers—who could serve in the religious affairs of the Muslim community. In 1984, educational activities began in a newly constructed building located in the village of Kondova, near Skopje, marking a revival of the region's religious education tradition. Today, the madrasa continues its mission, graduating over 200 students annually to meet the demand for religious personnel in the region (Redzebi, 2013). When it reopened in the 1984-1985 academic year, the madrasa offered a four-year program with a comprehensive curriculum encompassing both classical Islamic sciences and human and social sciences. The religious sciences component included Qur'anic recitation (*Qiraat*), theology (*Aqidah*), Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*), principles of jurisprudence (*Usul al-Fiqh*), Qur'anic exegesis (*Tafsir*), Hadith, ethics (*Akhlaq*), and leadership/preaching (*Imamat/Da'wa*) courses (Asani, 2010). These courses aimed to provide students with a strong foundation of Islamic knowledge and to train individuals capable of serving effectively in religious services. To enhance historical and cultural awareness, courses on Islamic History, Ottoman History, and the History of Islamic Culture and Civilization were included in the curriculum, enabling students to understand the development of Islamic civilization within a historical context. In addition, Calligraphy courses were offered to preserve traditional aesthetics and writing culture (Redzebi, 2013). This curriculum reflected a multi-dimensional educational model, aiming not only to equip students with religious knowledge but also to foster social leadership, intellectual growth, and adaptation to modern scientific thought.

Initially, the educational process was designed exclusively for male students. However, starting from the 1990-1991 academic year, it was expanded to include female students through an open education model, significantly increasing the

institution's social inclusivity (Zekaj, 2002). This reform facilitated women's access to religious knowledge while reinterpreting the madrasa's historical mission through the lens of social equality and justice, contributing to a more inclusive institutional identity. By remaining faithful to its historical roots while continuously adapting to changing circumstances, Isa Bey Madrasa has established itself not only as a school but also as a center of knowledge and spirituality in the regional memory. Its ability to survive through centuries of political, social, and cultural transformations demonstrates its indispensable role in rebuilding and sustaining Islamic identity in the region. This continuity has been possible due to the institution's capacity for transformation, allowing it to be rebuilt after interruptions while maintaining its traditional core. In this way, Isa Bey Madrasa stands out as a dynamic educational institution that both preserves the heritage of the past and responds to the needs of the present.

Isa Bey Madrasa Today

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, North Macedonia declared its independence and transitioned to a multi-party democratic system. This marked the beginning of a new era in state-religion relations. Article 19 of the Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion and belief, establishing the legal basis for religious communities to obtain legal personality and to operate independently from the state. Article 19 explicitly states:

"Freedom of religion and belief is guaranteed. Everyone has the right to practice their religious rites, either alone or with others, collectively or individually. Religious communities and groups possess legal personality and are separate from the state. Religious communities have the right to establish places of worship, organize religious ceremonies, train clergy, and provide religious education." (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, 1991, Article 19) This constitutional foundation provides a legal framework that supports the activities of institutions offering religious education in North Macedonia. However, due to the principle of secularism, these activities maintain limited connections with the state's official education system and are largely carried out under the initiative of the religious communities themselves.

North Macedonia's population is composed primarily of Christian Orthodox Macedonians, with a significant Muslim minority that includes Albanians, Turks, Bosniaks, and Roma communities. This diverse demographic structure is reflected in the representation of different religious traditions within the educational

sphere. For Muslim communities, Islamic education holds great significance as it ensures the preservation of religious identity, the training of religious leaders, and the transmission of religious values to younger generations (Pajaziti & Kasami, 2012). According to the Constitution of North Macedonia, the Islamic Religious Community is recognized alongside the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Evangelical Methodist Church, and Jewish Community as equal before the law and independent from the state. These religious groups, as well as others, are free to establish their own faith-based schools and charitable organizations (İdris & Ali, 2016). However, by law, religious communities cannot receive financial support from the state.

Isa Bey Madrasa operates as a four-year secondary-level formal religious education institution in North Macedonia. Students who successfully complete primary education and meet the specified application requirements may pre-register and participate in the admissions exam. The exam consists of two main sections: one evaluating religious knowledge, and the other measuring general intellectual aptitude. The psychological and pedagogical assessment component of this exam is based on internationally recognized models and adapted from assessment systems developed in Ljubljana, Slovenia (Murati, 2015). Since gaining independence, the legal status of the Isa Bey Madrasa—and more broadly, of secondary education institutions affiliated with religious communities—has remained at the center of ongoing debates and uncertainties in North Macedonia. The legal framework concerning the official recognition of religious schools has exhibited significant instability due to inconsistencies in governmental policies implemented at different periods.

In this context, in 2024, the Parliament of North Macedonia granted the Isa Bey Madrasa the status of a “private high school” in order to provide a permanent solution for students who, due to the non-recognition of the madrasa’s diplomas, had been unable to gain university admission. The then-Minister of Education and Science, Jeton Shaqiri, presented the official document approving the conditions of the Isa Bey Madrasa’s curriculum and instructional program to the Head of the Islamic Religious Community and to the public (Time Balkan, 2025).

However, this decision was soon annulled by the Constitutional Court of North Macedonia (Yeni Balkan, 2025). The Court declared that the change in status was contrary to the existing constitutional provisions and legal regulations, thereby nullifying the decision taken by the previous government. This development triggered a new and extensive public debate within the country regarding the status of religious educational institutions. Following a change in government, the issue was

once again brought to the national agenda and subjected to a detailed evaluation within the framework of the principles of equality in education, freedom of religion, and legal recognition.

As a tangible outcome of these initiatives, on July 29, 2025, the Parliament of North Macedonia adopted the “Law on the Equivalence of Religious Schools.” The government’s decision to approve this draft law was received with great satisfaction by the Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia and was described as a long-awaited but historically significant step in the field of religious education (Time Balkan, 2025). With the enactment of the “Law on Secondary Education Institutions of Religious Communities,” also known as the “Madrasa Law,” the Isa Bey Madrasa officially attained equal status with all other secondary-level schools in the country (Medreseja Isa Beu, 2025). Through this legal regulation, the diplomas of madrasa students are now officially recognized, which significantly strengthens the legal standing of religious educational institutions and makes a vital contribution to the re-establishment of institutional stability within the national education system. Following the introduction of mandatory secondary education in North Macedonia after 2000, interest in enrolling at the madrasa increased. In response to this demand, new branches of Isa Bey Madrasa were established in different cities (Ali, 2024). These branches expanded geographical accessibility and played a strategic role in broadening the reach of religious education services across the country.

Opening of Isa Bey Girls’ Branches

The Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia initiated new efforts in the early 2000s to increase access for female students to formal religious education. As a result, during the 2004-2005 academic year, the first girls’ branch of the madrasa opened in Tetovo (Kalkandelen). This branch, operating in a building owned by the Tetovo Muftiate, is regarded as a milestone for gender equality in religious education in the region (Arif, 2010). The opening of this girls’ madrasa not only provided equal opportunities for access to religious knowledge but also supported women’s active participation in religious life, challenging traditional social structures. Thus, the initiative represented not just an educational development but also a significant socio-cultural advancement.

Skopje Isa Bey Girls’ Madrasa: Following the success of the Tetovo branch and increasing demand, another girls’ branch was established in Skopje during the 2006-2007

academic year. Initially, only one class was available, but as interest grew, the number of classes increased, allowing a broader student body to be accommodated. This demonstrated the strong interest and need for religious education among female students. The Skopje branch combines modern educational facilities with classical Islamic sciences, serving as a model institution for other religious schools in the region.

Gostivar Isa Bey Girls' Madrasa: To meet the educational needs of the local population, a third girls' branch opened in Gostivar during the 2008-2009 academic year, operating in a building owned by the Gostivar Muftiate (Redzebi, 2013). In the Gostivar branch, Albanian is the sole language of instruction. While this meets the religious education needs of the Albanian population, it has also become a limiting factor for Turkish-origin students, restricting their participation. Demographic data indicate that the Turkish community represents a significant portion of the region's population. However, the absence of Turkish as a language of instruction creates an imbalance in representation, reducing access to religious education for Turkish-speaking students. Curriculum Reforms Over the years, the curriculum of Isa Bey Madrasa has undergone several reforms to align with changing social and pedagogical needs. In 1996, the first major reform was implemented: some courses were merged, others were removed entirely, and new subjects, such as mathematics, were introduced. By 2010, courses in modern sciences, such as chemistry, physics, and didactics, were added, resulting in a more scientific and contemporary curriculum (Ali, 2012). These changes reflect the madrasa's mission to provide students with a strong foundation not only in religious sciences but also in modern academic disciplines. Consequently, graduates are prepared to serve as qualified religious leaders while also being equipped with contemporary academic knowledge.

Structure of the Current Curriculum

The current curriculum, designed by the Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia, aims to support students' religious and academic development through a balanced structure. It consists of five main subject groups:

Religious Sciences: Qiraat, Aqidah, Tafsir, Fiqh, Siyar al-Nabi, Hadith, Qur'anic Studies, Usul al-Fiqh, Kalam, Islamic History, Akhlaq, and Islamic Art History.

Social Sciences: Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology, History, Geography.

Natural Sciences: Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Mathematics.

Language Courses: Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Arabic, English.

Other Subjects: Information and Technology, Physical Education. (Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia, 2024; Official Website of Isa Bey Madrasa, 2024). This structure prevents religious education from being limited to religious knowledge alone, ensuring holistic student development. The diversity of language courses reflects the multicultural character of the Balkans and prepares students to compete in an international context.

Isa Bey Madrasa's different branches not only implement a shared curriculum but also organize social and cultural activities that support students' personal development and social integration. Students actively participate in choirs, theater performances, literature reading sessions, and sports clubs, enriching the social dimension of madrasa education beyond academics. The school magazine, "Ikre", published twice annually with contributions from talented and volunteer students, encourages literary production and provides a platform for student expression. These activities promote multifaceted student development while highlighting the madrasa's focus on social responsibility and self-confidence as central educational values (Sejdini, 2019). The madrasa's educational model goes beyond theoretical religious instruction by providing students with hands-on experience through practical religious services.

During Ramadan and religious holidays, students in their 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years are sent to various regions across the country to lead prayers as imams, deliver sermons, and conduct Qur'an recitations (*mukabele*¹¹) (Murati, 2015). This practice strengthens their professional skills while fostering direct religious and social interaction with local communities. Additionally, programs such as Mevlid-i Sharif ceremonies, choir performances, and theatrical plays organized on special religious days further strengthen the madrasa's ties with the broader community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

With its deep-rooted history extending from the Ottoman era to the present day, Isa Bey Madrasa has played a significant role in the religious life and cultural development of the Muslim community in North Macedonia, becoming one of the key institutions shaping the spiritual fabric of the region for centuries. The madrasa has

11 A traditional Ramadan practice in which participants collectively recite and listen to the Qur'an.

contributed to the preservation of Islamic consciousness by leading the training of religious cadres, serving not only as an educational center but also as a repository of historical memory, facilitating the transfer of values between generations. After the end of Ottoman rule, Isa Bey Madrasa was reopened twice and, despite various challenges, has continued to exist in different forms over time. Today, it operates without interruption as an active religious education institution. Thus, the madrasa is not merely a place where religious officials and community leaders are trained, but also fills an important gap in addressing deficiencies in religious education in North Macedonia. The absence of religion classes in state school curricula further underscores the necessity of alternative institutions to meet the religious needs of society. This makes Isa Bey Madrasa a valuable center not only for religious purposes but also for academic research on the region's socio-cultural structure, serving as a primary case study for understanding the interconnections between collective memory, cultural identity, and religious education.

An important stage in the madrasa's development has been efforts to increase community participation. The institution has aimed not only to transfer religious knowledge but also to strengthen social solidarity. Students and faculty members have actively participated in various social responsibility projects, fostering strong connections with the community and ensuring that the institution's educational philosophy extends beyond the curriculum to emphasize public benefit.

The original 1469 waqfiyya limited the madrasa's educational activities solely to core Islamic sciences, reflecting the religious and social needs of that period. During the Ottoman era, madrasas were tasked with training individuals who would provide religious guidance to society, and Isa Bey Madrasa focused on areas such as Qur'anic studies, Hadith, and fiqh. However, over time, political, social, and cultural changes rendered this traditional framework insufficient. The collapse of the Ottoman administration introduced new political systems and social dynamics, demonstrating that an education model based exclusively on traditional religious sciences could no longer meet contemporary needs. Therefore, while staying faithful to the spirit of the waqfiyya, the madrasa underwent structural and content-based reforms to adapt to modern circumstances.

This transformation should not be seen as a deviation from its historical mission but rather as a reflection of the institution's commitment to preserving its heritage while transmitting it to future generations. Educational institutions must balance respect for their historical roots with the necessity of addressing the social and cultural realities of their time. Isa Bey Madrasa has embraced this approach,

preserving traditional values while adopting a modern educational framework capable of meeting contemporary needs.

Located in Skopje, Isa Bey Madrasa stands not only as a religious education institution but also as a cornerstone in shaping the identity of Muslim communities in the Balkans, thanks to its historical heritage and institutional memory. Its reopening during the 1984-1985 academic year marked a pivotal moment for the re-institutionalization of Islamic education following the socialist regime. However, today the madrasa's language policies have sparked sociolinguistic debates. In particular, the exclusive use of Albanian as the language of instruction in branches for female students creates accessibility and representation issues for students of Turkish origin. Demographic data show that Albanians and Turks together form the largest Muslim population in North Macedonia. Yet, the presence of Turkish-language education in only one branch supported by the Republic of Turkey creates a perception of structural inequality.

Considering Isa Bey Madrasa's historically multicultural character, the right to education in one's mother tongue is not only a pedagogical concern but also a matter of social belonging and identity formation. The choice of instructional language directly affects the student population; the absence of Turkish-language education limits access for Turkish students and disrupts equitable social representation. Therefore, it is crucial for the Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia to review its language policies through a democratic framework, ensuring that both Albanian and Turkish communities have fair access to education in their mother tongue. Religious educational institutions play a vital role not only in the transmission of faith but also in promoting social harmony, cultural diversity, and societal cohesion.

In recent years, the official status of religious educational institutions in North Macedonia has experienced significant fluctuations. The government's decision to recognize the Isa Bey Madrasa at the secondary education level in 2024 was subsequently overturned by the Constitutional Court; this annulment weakened years of institutionalization efforts and created serious grievances for students who had commenced their education expecting official recognition. The inconsistent recognition of madrasas as equivalent to state high schools has fostered an environment of uncertainty and distrust. Such fluctuating decisions have not only led to individual disappointments but have also negatively impacted access to higher education, employment opportunities, and the broader perception of social justice and equality. When the issue was revisited in early 2025, discussions led to a government

decision, by majority vote, to grant diploma equivalency. While this step provided short-term stability, it highlighted the clear necessity for a transparent and inclusive consensus mechanism involving the Constitutional Court, the Ministry of Education and Science, and religious communities to achieve a permanent and trustworthy solution. The minimum framework for this mechanism should include the determination of a core curriculum by the Ministry of Education and Science, encompassing mathematics, natural sciences, and state/applied language courses, while granting religious communities the flexibility to incorporate their own theological and religious content. Furthermore, accreditation and equivalency criteria should be defined by independent, transparent, and measurable indicators based on concrete metrics such as teaching hours, teacher qualifications, infrastructure, and assessment. A monitoring commission, with the participation of the Constitutional Court, the Ministry, and representatives of religious communities, should be established to oversee and supervise its implementation. This approach would preserve the state's educational standards and oversight responsibility while safeguarding the constitutional right of religious communities to offer education that reflects their values. Consequently, the sustainability of equivalency achieved through short-term political decisions will only be possible through binding institutional solutions that consider the triple aspects of legal guarantee, pedagogical consistency, and social legitimacy. This process will contribute to structuring all religious educational institutions in North Macedonia, not just the Isa Bey Madrasa, in accordance with the principles of equality, transparency, and long-term stability in education.

The findings of this study highlight the Isa Bey Madrasa as a valuable example of how historical religious institutions can adapt to changing political and social conditions while remaining faithful to their foundational mission. The archival and pedagogical analysis presented here contributes to the academic literature by demonstrating that Ottoman educational institutions in the Balkans were not static structures, but dynamic actors capable of institutional transformation. In practical terms, the case of the Isa Bey Madrasa offers insights for contemporary policymakers, heritage scholars, and religious education planners seeking to balance tradition with modern educational needs. The study shows that sustainable religious education in multicultural societies requires flexible curricula, mother-tongue accessibility, and legal stability in diploma recognition.

Isa Bey Madrasa, with its multi-layered structure combining historical heritage and modern educational needs, is more than just a school; it is a symbol of cultural

continuity, religious identity, and social solidarity. Its ability to preserve its institutional identity and rebuild itself despite interruptions demonstrates that it is one of the strongest examples of the Islamic educational tradition in the Balkans. However, for this mission to continue, the institution must undergo innovative restructuring that remains faithful to its historical roots while adapting to modern demands. A system built on educational equity, mother-tongue rights, and constitutional guarantees is not only essential for the future of Isa Bey Madrasa but also for all religious education institutions in North Macedonia. Without such a framework, it will not be possible to achieve a lasting resolution to the structural problems in religious education.

To address the structural challenges faced by the Isa Bey Madrasa today, a multi-layered policy approach is required. First, the language of instruction should be regulated through a pluralistic and inclusive framework that guarantees equal access to mother-tongue education for both Albanian- and Turkish-speaking students. Second, a stable legal mechanism for diploma recognition must be established in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and religious communities, preventing sudden policy reversals that negatively affect students' academic and professional futures. Such reforms would not only ensure institutional continuity but would also contribute to social cohesion, cultural rights, and educational equality in North Macedonia. In this respect, Isa Bey Madrasa represents both continuity and transformation: it preserves the classical Islamic sciences while adopting a hybrid curriculum that includes social sciences, natural sciences, and foreign languages, along with practice-based pedagogical components. Recent legal developments—such as the madrasa's recognition as a private secondary school and the 2025 legislative proposal supporting diploma equivalency—show that the status of faith-based secondary schools is no longer only a cultural or religious matter, but has become part of broader educational and minority-rights policy debates in North Macedonia. This study is limited to archival material and secondary literature, yet future research could incorporate field interviews, school records, or comparative work with Bosnian and Albanian madrasas to deepen the pedagogical perspective. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate that Isa Bey Madrasa continues to function as a vital institution connecting historical heritage with modern educational expectations, forming a unique bridge between tradition and contemporary schooling.

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Dr. Bekim Maksuti

University of Tetova, Tetovo – North Macedonia

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3463-0696>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Bekim Maksuti, University of Tetova, Tetovo – North Macedonia.
Email: bekim.maksuti@unite.edu.mk

Ukraine Crisis Between Russia's Expansion, US Promises, and Missing European Agenda

Bekim Maksuti

Abstract

The dissolution of the Soviet Union reshaped the geopolitical order of Eastern Europe and elevated Ukraine as a strategically pivotal state situated between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic sphere. This paper examines the Ukraine crisis as a manifestation of the re-emergence of classical geopolitics and great-power competition in Europe. It argues that while Russia has pursued a coherent strategic agenda aimed at maintaining influence in its near abroad, the European Union has struggled to formulate a consistent and forward-looking policy toward Ukraine. Drawing on geopolitical theory (Mackinder, Brzezinski) and contemporary international security literature, the study analyzes the evolution of Russia's expansionist approach, U.S. security commitments, and the EU's fragmented strategic response. The paper contends that the absence of a unified European agenda has contributed to prolonged instability, culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and ongoing conflict through 2025. It concludes that a coherent European strategic framework—combining deterrence, long-term security guarantees, and political integration—is essential to shaping a sustainable European security architecture.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, US, Germany, Crimea, European agenda, geopolitics

Introduction

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine has occupied a central position in the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. Its geographic location, demographic composition, agricultural capacity, and control over critical energy transit corridors have placed it at the crossroads of competing political, cultural, and strategic influences. Early scholarship in geopolitics identified Ukraine as essential to the balance of power on the European continent. Brzezinski (1997), for instance, argued that the preservation of Ukrainian sovereignty is a prerequisite for preventing the re-consolidation of Russian imperial influence in Eurasia. Similarly, Freedman (2023) notes that the contest over Ukraine reflects broader structural tensions within the international order, particularly between territorial revisionism and the norms of sovereignty established after 1945.

Despite its strategic importance, Ukraine has faced enduring internal vulnerabilities. Political polarization, regional identity divides, and recurring economic crises have hindered the development of stable state institutions. The 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013–2014 Euromaidan movement demonstrated societal demands for democratic reform and alignment with European institutions. However, these developments also intensified competition between Russia and the West over Ukraine's strategic orientation. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support for separatist militias in Donbas constituted a fundamental breach of European security norms. The situation escalated further when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, resulting in the largest military conflict in Europe since the Second World War.

The European Union's response to the crisis has revealed both institutional evolution and structural limitations. While the EU has increasingly provided macro-financial assistance, military aid, and diplomatic support, scholars such as Siddi (2022) argue that the Union has struggled to act as a coherent geopolitical actor due to divergent national interests among member states, historical dependencies on Russian energy, and the absence of an integrated security architecture. As a result, the EU has often reacted to events rather than shaping them.

This paper argues that the Ukraine crisis illustrates the return of classical geopolitics in Europe and exposes the European Union's inability to formulate a unified strategic agenda. The study contributes to the scholarly debate by (1) situating the Ukraine conflict within a long-term geopolitical framework, (2) critically assessing the tensions between EU normative power and strategic capacity, and (3)

proposing that European stability depends on the development of a coherent and sustained policy toward Ukraine grounded in strategic rationality.

Review of Theoretical and Empirical Literature

The academic debate on the Ukraine crisis has evolved significantly since 2014, moving from analyses of regional conflict to broader questions of international order, great-power rivalry, and European strategic autonomy. Early interpretations emphasized the reassertion of classical geopolitics in Europe, drawing on Mackinder's (1942) *Heartland Theory* and Brzezinski's (1997) argument that Ukraine's sovereignty is essential to preventing the reconstitution of a Russian empire. Subsequent scholarship has sought to contextualize the crisis within competing frameworks of realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism.

From a realist perspective, Mearsheimer (2014; 2023) and Charap & Colton (2017) view the war as a predictable consequence of NATO enlargement and Western encroachment into Russia's perceived sphere of influence. According to this view, Russia's actions are defensive responses to the erosion of its strategic buffer zone. However, liberal and constructivist scholars challenge this deterministic approach. Freedman (2023) and Plokhly (2021) argue that Ukraine's crisis stems from the clash between normative and revisionist orders—between the European Union's values-based diplomacy and Russia's coercive geopolitics.

A second stream of literature focuses on European strategic (in)coherence. Analysts such as Siddi (2022) and Meister (2023) highlight the EU's inability to act as a unified geopolitical actor due to internal divisions and dependency on Russian energy. This argument is reinforced by scholars of European security (Forsberg & Haukkala, 2016; Ikenberry & Deudney, 2023), who stress that the Ukraine conflict exposed the limits of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and underscored NATO's renewed centrality. The German *Zeitenwende* moment, though symbolically transformative, has yet to deliver full strategic coherence across Europe.

More recent studies explore the regional implications of the Ukraine crisis, particularly for the Western Balkans. Authors such as Reka (2015), Ferati (2013), and Pula (2015) emphasize that the conflict has redefined the balance between adaptation and dependency in small states' foreign policies. The war has not only reactivated security dilemmas but also revived the question of Europe's unfinished integration project. This literature underlines that countries like North Macedonia navigate a

dual challenge: maintaining Euro-Atlantic alignment while avoiding renewed geopolitical subordination.

Finally, an emerging body of scholarship addresses the normative dimension of European geopolitics. Ingebritsen (2006) and Thorhallsson (2018) propose that small states derive influence through participation in multilateral institutions and adherence to shared norms rather than through material power. Applying this framework to the Balkans suggests that post-2022 European security will depend on whether smaller states can transform alignment into agency — moving from formal membership toward genuine co-ownership of collective security.

Taken together, the literature reveals a growing convergence around the view that the Ukraine crisis represents a structural turning point in the post-Cold War order. Yet, gaps remain in understanding how peripheral European states reinterpret their strategic identities in this shifting context. This study contributes to filling that gap by situating North Macedonia and the Western Balkans within the broader reconfiguration of Europe's geopolitical and normative landscape after 2022.

The Status Quo's End

The post-Cold War order in Eastern Europe rested on an implicit equilibrium in which Ukraine maintained formal independence while remaining economically and politically linked to Russia. This “status quo” was sustained through energy interdependence, political influence networks, and Moscow's expectation that Ukraine would not pursue rapid integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. However, this balance began to erode in the early 2000s as public support for closer ties with Europe grew and successive Ukrainian governments signaled their intention to deepen cooperation with the European Union and NATO.

The turning point came in 2013–2014 with the Euromaidan protests, which emerged in response to President Viktor Yanukovych's decision to suspend the signing of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement. The demonstrations quickly evolved into a broader demand for democratic accountability and alignment with European political norms. The collapse of Yanukovych's government and the formation of a pro-European leadership in Kyiv challenged Russia's strategic assumptions and triggered a decisive shift in Moscow's policy toward Ukraine.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 marked the end of the post-Cold War geopolitical settlement. The operation demonstrated not only Russia's willingness

to use military force but also the effectiveness of hybrid strategies combining information warfare, intelligence operations, and local proxy mobilization. While the European Union, the United States, and NATO condemned the annexation and imposed sanctions, their responses remained largely reactive and incremental. Scholars such as Charap and Colton (2017) argue that Western actors underestimated both the depth of Russia's geopolitical commitment to maintaining influence in Ukraine and the strategic value Moscow placed on Crimea as a military and symbolic asset.

Moreover, the EU's internal fragmentation weakened its ability to formulate a unified crisis response. Member states differed in their assessments of Russia, their energy dependencies, and their threat perceptions. Germany, for example, continued to emphasize diplomatic engagement, while Poland and the Baltic states advocated stronger deterrence measures. These disagreements revealed structural limits to the European Union's capacity to act as a strategic actor in high-stakes geopolitical crises.

The end of the status quo was therefore not merely a consequence of Russia's actions, but also the product of Europe's inability to anticipate or prevent them. The annexation of Crimea signaled that geopolitical competition in Europe had re-emerged and that long-held assumptions regarding the stability of borders, the durability of international law, and the deterrent power of economic interdependence could no longer be taken for granted. The crisis fundamentally altered the strategic landscape in Europe and set the stage for the more expansive conflict that unfolded in 2022.

Ukraine Hostage to Geopolitics

Ukraine's strategic significance is deeply rooted in its geography, economic resources, and civilizational identity, placing it at the center of a geopolitical contest between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community. Classical geopolitical theorists identified Ukraine as a decisive territorial and political space in the struggle for influence over Eurasia. Mackinder's Heartland theory posited that control over Eastern Europe—particularly the region between the Baltic and Black Seas—was instrumental to shaping the balance of power on the continent. Brzezinski (1997) later reformulated this logic, asserting that without Ukraine, Russia cannot reconstitute an imperial sphere; with it, Russia regains the capacity to project power deep into Europe and Central Asia.

Following independence, Ukraine attempted to navigate this geopolitical tension through a policy of “multi-vector diplomacy,” balancing relationships with Russia, the European Union, and the United States. However, this approach masked underlying structural vulnerabilities, including dependence on Russian energy supplies, entrenched oligarchic economic interests, and inconsistent political reform. These factors made Ukraine susceptible to external pressure and internal contestation over its geopolitical direction.

The period after 2014 exposed the limits of Ukraine’s strategic autonomy. The annexation of Crimea and the subsequent conflict in the Donbas region constrained Kyiv’s ability to assert full territorial sovereignty, while the presence of Russian military and intelligence networks reinforced Moscow’s leverage. Scholars such as Mearsheimer (2014; 2023) argue that the conflict should be interpreted through the lens of the security dilemma: NATO and EU expansion were perceived by Russia as existential threats, leading Moscow to act decisively to prevent Ukraine’s integration into Western institutions. However, this interpretation has been widely debated, with authors such as Kulyk (2020) and Plokhyy (2021) emphasizing Ukrainian agency and the role of domestic political identity in shaping foreign policy preferences.

Ukraine’s geopolitical position became even more precarious after Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022. The conflict transformed Ukraine into what Jackson (1990) refers to as a “quasi-sovereign state”: internationally recognized, diplomatically supported, yet lacking full control over its territory. Although Ukraine exercises strong political legitimacy and national cohesion, ongoing war conditions and foreign military dependency limit its strategic autonomy.

At the same time, the war reshaped Ukrainian national identity, consolidating support for European integration and deepening alignment with NATO. What had once been a contested orientation between Eastern and Western identity has, since 2022, solidified into a broad societal consensus favoring a Western trajectory. This shift challenges long-standing Russian narratives that positioned Ukraine as culturally and historically inseparable from the Russian sphere.

Yet Ukraine’s future remains contingent on external actors. While the United States plays the central role in military assistance and deterrence, the European Union remains divided in its strategic posture. The persistence of these divisions—rooted in energy interdependencies, historical relations with Russia, and divergent threat perceptions—continues to inhibit the emergence of a unified European strategic

framework. As a result, Ukraine remains not only a battlefield but also a *geopolitical hinge*: its fate will decisively influence the future security architecture of Europe.

The Annexation of the Crimea Completed Act

The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 marked a decisive rupture in the post-Cold War European security order. It represented the first forcible change of internationally recognized borders in Europe since 1945 and signaled the return of territorial revisionism as a tool of statecraft. Russia justified its actions through claims of historical entitlement, the protection of Russian-speaking populations, and the defense of national security against what it framed as NATO's eastward expansion. However, as Kramer (2015) and Allison (2021) demonstrate, the annexation was neither spontaneous nor merely reactive; it was the product of long-term strategic planning and the consolidation of military infrastructure in the Black Sea region.

Crimea holds exceptional geopolitical significance for Russia. Sevastopol provides the Russian Navy with access to the Black Sea and, through the Turkish Straits, to the Mediterranean. Control over Crimea enhances Russia's capacity to project naval power, secure southern flank defense, and influence maritime trade routes. The peninsula also carries symbolic resonance in Russian national mythology, tied to narratives of imperial legacy and wartime sacrifice. These strategic and symbolic dimensions underpin Moscow's refusal to consider any negotiation over the status of Crimea, despite international sanctions and diplomatic pressure.

The Western response to the annexation exposed both the strengths and weaknesses of the European Union's foreign policy system. Economic sanctions imposed by the EU and the United States signaled political resolve and imposed long-term costs on the Russian economy (Smeets, 2020). Yet sanctions alone did not alter Russian behavior, nor did they prevent the escalation of conflict in eastern Ukraine. The Minsk I (2014) and Minsk II (2015) agreements, negotiated under Franco-German leadership, temporarily reduced active hostilities but failed to produce a durable settlement. Analysts such as Forsberg and Haukkala (2016) argue that these diplomatic efforts were constrained by incompatible strategic objectives: Russia sought recognition of its sphere of influence, while Ukraine and its Western partners insisted on sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Germany's role during this period exemplified the European Union's strategic dilemmas. While Berlin sought to balance deterrence and dialogue, internal political pressures, economic interests—including dependence on Russian natural

gas—and historical narratives of reconciliation shaped its approach. As Meister (2023) notes, these tensions limited Germany's capacity to lead a coherent European response, reinforcing the perception of the EU as a fragmented geopolitical actor.

The annexation of Crimea was thus not an isolated event, but a structural turning point. It demonstrated that the normative framework that had underpinned European stability since 1991—based on territorial sovereignty, legal order, and economic interdependence—could be challenged by military force. It also revealed that geopolitical competition in Europe had entered a new phase, in which power projection, deterrence, and strategic alignment would once again define the continent's security architecture.

The New Geopolitical Reality After 2022

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marked the most significant transformation of the European security landscape since the end of the Cold War. The invasion represented not only an escalation of the protracted conflict that began in 2014, but also a direct challenge to the post-1945 principles of territorial sovereignty and the European norm against interstate war (Freedman, 2023). The scale, speed, and strategic objectives of the invasion revealed Russia's intention to reassert dominance over Ukraine and, by extension, reshape the balance of power in Europe.

The war catalyzed profound geopolitical shifts. NATO, which had faced questions regarding its strategic relevance in the decade prior, regained cohesion and strategic clarity. The alliance significantly expanded its force posture along its eastern flank, while Finland and Sweden's decisions to join NATO overturned decades of military neutrality. According to Smith (2024), the invasion reversed years of strategic ambivalence and reaffirmed the centrality of collective defense in European security politics.

The conflict also triggered a major reorientation of European defense and foreign policy. Germany's announcement of the *Zeitenwende* (historic turning point) signaled a departure from its post-Cold War restraint, including commitments to increase defense spending and reconfigure its energy relationships (Meister, 2023). At the EU level, unprecedented macro-financial assistance, coordinated sanctions packages, and military support through the European Peace Facility demonstrated institutional adaptability and political resolve (Siddi, 2022). Yet, despite these

policy shifts, internal divisions persisted regarding long-term strategic objectives and the future of European security autonomy.

Ukraine's response to the invasion significantly reshaped its state identity and international alignment. The war accelerated national cohesion, strengthened public support for NATO and EU integration, and transformed Ukraine from a security recipient into an active actor shaping European strategic discourse. Zelenskyy's leadership, along with widespread societal mobilization, reinforced Ukraine's image as a frontline defender of the European normative order. However, Ukraine's ability to sustain resistance remains heavily dependent on Western economic, military, and technological support. As Treisman and Greene (2024) note, the long-term outcome of the conflict hinges on external security guarantees and institutional commitments.

Meanwhile, Russia has deepened its strategic alignment with non-Western partners, particularly China and Iran, reshaping global geopolitical networks. China's role has been especially consequential, as Beijing has provided economic and diplomatic support to mitigate the effects of Western sanctions while simultaneously positioning itself as a potential mediator in the conflict. This dynamic illustrates the broader global implications of the Ukraine war, situating it within a reconfigured international order defined by intensifying systemic rivalry between democratic and authoritarian models of governance (Ikenberry & Deudney, 2023).

By 2025, the conflict remains unresolved, characterized by dynamic frontlines, sustained Western assistance, and ongoing Russian efforts to consolidate territory in eastern and southern Ukraine. The war has effectively ended the European post-Cold War settlement and initiated a new era of geopolitical competition. The future security architecture of Europe will depend on whether the European Union can develop the strategic coherence necessary to move beyond reactive crisis management and articulate a long-term framework for Ukraine's security, reconstruction, and institutional integration.

The repercussions of the Ukraine war extend beyond the immediate conflict zone, redefining strategic dynamics across Europe's periphery. In the Western Balkans, these shifts have compelled states to reconsider their alignment within the evolving Euro-Atlantic order.

Geopolitical Repositioning or Retrieval to Quiescent Alliances

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine marked a watershed in the evolution of Europe's geopolitical structure, compelling both major and minor actors to reassess their strategic alignments. For North Macedonia and the broader Western Balkans, this moment revived an enduring dilemma: whether the region's engagement with Euro-Atlantic structures represents a genuine geopolitical repositioning — an adaptive and forward-looking integration within collective security frameworks — or merely a retrieval to quiescent alliances, characterized by passive dependency and inherited loyalties.

This section argues that the post-2022 security landscape reveals a hybrid reality: states are repositioning themselves rhetorically within Western institutions, yet structurally remain constrained by traditional dependencies and regional fragilities. This duality embodies the paradox of small-state geopolitics in a multipolar world.

In theoretical terms, *geopolitical repositioning* denotes a deliberate recalibration of a state's strategic orientation in response to systemic disruptions, implying agency, innovation, and adaptation. Conversely, *retrieval to quiescent alliances* reflects continuity and inertia — the reactivation of historically comfortable alignments shaped by dependency and survival instinct rather than strategic choice.

Drawing on the small-state literature (Thorhallsson, 2018; Ingebritsen, 2006; Keohane, 1969), this analysis situates the Western Balkans within a broader pattern of limited-power diplomacy, where alignment choices are driven less by coercion than by the search for legitimacy, protection, and international recognition. However, as the post-Ukraine order reintroduces hard security competition, these states must navigate between structural dependency and adaptive repositioning — between being protected and being proactive.

Europe's reaction to the Ukraine crisis underscores both unity and divergence within its geopolitical posture. The *Zeitenwende* policy announced by Germany in 2022 symbolized a rhetorical break with post-Cold War complacency, yet its implementation has been uneven, revealing a persistent tension between Atlanticist loyalty and continental pragmatism. This ambiguity has direct implications for smaller states in Europe's periphery. For North Macedonia and its neighbors, the EU's cautious enlargement stance and inconsistent application of conditionality have limited the incentives for genuine reform. Instead, they encourage symbolic alignment — participation in Euro-Atlantic structures without the material transformation of governance and defense capacities. In this sense, what appears as repositioning

often functions as *retrieval*: a return to dependency on external guardianship for legitimacy and security, reminiscent of the stabilocratic bargains that dominated the Balkans in the early 2000s.

The Western Balkans now serve as a microcosm for Europe's evolving geopolitical logic. On one side, NATO's expanding defense perimeter integrates states like North Macedonia into a shared deterrence architecture, reinforcing trans-Atlantic solidarity. On the other, the region remains exposed to hybrid pressures — disinformation, energy dependency, and political polarization — which external actors exploit to maintain influence.

The interplay between these forces has produced what might be termed “adaptive dependency”: the capacity of small states to adopt Western rhetoric and frameworks while relying on external actors for protection and resources. This adaptive dependency is not passive; rather, it reflects a calculated effort by small states to maximize security returns without overextending their limited capacities. Yet, it also constrains their strategic autonomy and deepens the asymmetry between formal alignment and substantive transformation.

Historically, the European continent has oscillated between phases of ideological confrontation and pragmatic accommodation. From the Concert of Europe to the post-Cold War order, the preservation of equilibrium has often outweighed ideological purity. Today's cautious recalibration by states such as Germany and France, particularly regarding energy ties and regional diplomacy, signals a partial return to this logic — a retrieval of quiescent alliances driven by strategic fatigue rather than renewed vision.

In the Balkans, this dynamic manifests through the tolerance of hybrid regimes and the prioritization of “stability over democracy.” Western actors increasingly accept limited reforms in exchange for geopolitical reliability, replicating patterns of selective engagement reminiscent of earlier spheres of influence. North Macedonia's integration thus reflects both progress and paradox: its accession to NATO in 2020 represented a major repositioning, but the stagnation of

The post-Ukraine moment challenges small European states to reconcile agency with dependency. For North Macedonia, the key test is whether Euro-Atlantic integration can evolve from formal membership to functional empowerment — transforming the country from a recipient of stability to a provider of it. This transition requires not only external guarantees but also internal reform resilience and regional leadership.

This paper's original contribution lies in identifying this *liminal condition* — a middle ground where geopolitical repositioning and retrieval coexist. North Macedonia exemplifies a broader regional pattern in which states navigate between normative convergence with the West and pragmatic accommodation with enduring dependencies. Recognizing this hybrid state is essential for understanding the incomplete and contested nature of European transformation after 2022.

Ultimately, Europe's periphery reveals the true tension of the post-Ukraine order: The West's capacity to project values versus its reliance on old patterns of control. The Western Balkans' future — and North Macedonia's within it — will depend on whether geopolitical repositioning can outpace the gravitational pull of quiescent alliances. The challenge, therefore, is not only to secure inclusion within Euro-Atlantic structures but to redefine the meaning of belonging — from dependency to co-ownership of Europe's collective security and political destiny.

Conclusion

The unfolding geopolitical dynamics in Europe since the Ukraine crisis reveal that the continent has entered a new era of strategic ambiguity — one that tests both the endurance of Western values and the resilience of its institutional architecture. The original contribution of this paper lies in identifying the dual trajectory facing Europe's periphery, particularly the Western Balkans: the tension between geopolitical repositioning as adaptive transformation, and retrieval to quiescent alliances as the reactivation of historical dependencies.

For North Macedonia and the wider region, this dilemma is not theoretical but structural. The war in Ukraine has revived old patterns of alliance politics while simultaneously demanding a redefinition of strategic identity. The future of Europe's southeastern periphery will therefore depend less on rhetorical alignment with NATO and the EU, and more on the capacity of these states to transform formal commitments into substantive democratic and institutional change. The sustainability of Euro-Atlantic integration is thus contingent upon internal resilience, reform continuity, and the ability to resist the gravitational pull of external influence — particularly from Russia and other revisionist actors.

Germany and the European Union stand at the center of this strategic recalibration. Their response to the ongoing crises — from Ukraine to the Western Balkans — will determine whether Europe consolidates a coherent geopolitical identity or returns to the cyclical pragmatism of the past. The call for a "revival of rationalism,"

to borrow Joschka Fischer's expression, is not simply an intellectual appeal; it represents a moral and strategic imperative for Europe to reconcile its ideals with its interests.

In conclusion, the current historical moment demands more than containment or diplomacy — it requires a conscious renewal of Europe's founding principles: pluralism, the rule of law, and collective security. North Macedonia's experience serves as a microcosm of this broader transformation. Its trajectory demonstrates that the West's strength lies not merely in deterrence, but in its capacity to inspire reform, build trust, and sustain a community of shared values. Whether Europe achieves true geopolitical repositioning or retreats into quiescent alliances will depend on its ability to translate solidarity into strategy — turning crisis into coherence.

Future research should further explore how peripheral states operationalize this balance between dependency and agency within emerging European defense frameworks.

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Fjola Ejupi

Faculty of Law, South East European University, Tetovo, North Macedonia, 0009-0006-0731-475X, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Law, South East European University, Tetovo, North Macedonia

Besa Arifi

Faculty of Law, South East European University, Tetovo, North Macedonia, 0000-0001-5611-5358, Full Professor, Faculty of Law, South East European University, Tetovo, North Macedonia

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Fjola Ejupi

Email: fe23426@seeu.edu.mk



Barriers to Justice: Access to Legal Protection for Victims of Gender-Based Violence in North Macedonia After the Istanbul Convention

Fjola Ejupi, Besa Arifi

Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a pervasive violation of human rights, affecting millions worldwide. In response, the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention sets comprehensive standards to prevent violence against women and ensure victim protection and access to justice. North Macedonia ratified the Convention in 2017, signaling its commitment to tackling GBV legally and institutionally. However, this paper critically examines the extent to which victims in North Macedonia can access effective legal protection post-ratification. Drawing on legislative analysis, institutional reports, and socio-cultural studies, it reveals enduring systemic, cultural, psychological, and procedural barriers that limit justice access. The study underscores the gap between formal reforms and lived realities, highlighting the need for deeper structural and cultural transformation to fulfill international obligations and protect vulnerable populations.

Keywords: gender-based violence, Istanbul Convention, access to justice, North Macedonia, legal protection

Introduction

Gender-based violence remains one of the most serious global human rights challenges of the 21st century. Defined broadly, GBV refers to violence directed at individuals based on their gender identity or roles, disproportionately affecting women and girls across physical, sexual, psychological, and economic domains (United Nations [UN], 2020). The World Health Organization estimates that approximately one in three women globally has experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2021).

In the context of the Western Balkans, historical legacies of conflict, transitional justice processes, and persistent patriarchal norms complicate the eradication of GBV. North Macedonia, a multi-ethnic post-socialist society, reflects many of these challenges, where violence against women is both a public and deeply private issue, intertwined with societal power dynamics and cultural traditions (Kamberi & Mekic, 2018).

The Istanbul Convention, formally known as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, represents a landmark international treaty adopted in 2011 to provide a comprehensive legal framework addressing GBV. It not only criminalizes a broad spectrum of violence but also mandates victim-centered protection measures and systemic prevention (Council of Europe, 2011). By ratifying this Convention in 2017, North Macedonia pledged to align its laws and institutions with these international standards.

This paper seeks to critically analyze how this ratification has impacted victims' access to legal protection and justice in North Macedonia. Access to justice in GBV cases encompasses the ability to report violence safely, receive appropriate legal remedies, and obtain protection and support services. Despite legislative reforms, many victims face formidable barriers. This study investigates these barriers from multiple perspectives: institutional, socio-cultural, psychological, and procedural.

Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach, the paper contributes to the understanding of the complex challenges in translating international legal commitments into effective protections for vulnerable populations in transitional societies.

The Istanbul Convention and North Macedonia's Legal Framework

The Istanbul Convention: Goals and Obligations

The Istanbul Convention, adopted by the Council of Europe in May 2011 and entering into force in August 2014, represents the first binding regional instrument explicitly dedicated to combating violence against women and domestic violence. Its significance lies in its comprehensive approach combining prevention, protection, prosecution, and integrated policies (Council of Europe, 2011).

Article 3 of the Convention defines violence against women as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination. It requires states to criminalize all forms of violence against women, including physical, psychological, sexual violence, stalking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and sexual harassment (Articles 33-54). The Convention also mandates the establishment of effective protection measures, including restraining orders, victim support services, and appropriate training for professionals dealing with GBV.

Key principles enshrined in the Convention include a gendered understanding of violence, the importance of victim safety and autonomy, and the prohibition of mediation or reconciliation in criminal cases related to domestic violence (Articles 48-49).

The Convention also emphasizes the importance of multi-agency cooperation involving police, judiciary, health services, social workers, and NGOs to ensure a holistic response (Articles 9 and 10).

Ratification and Legislative Reforms in North Macedonia

North Macedonia signed the Istanbul Convention in 2012 and ratified it in October 2017, thereby assuming international legal obligations to prevent and combat GBV and domestic violence within its jurisdiction (Official Gazette of North Macedonia, 2017).

To comply, North Macedonia undertook substantial legislative reforms, notably amending its Criminal Code and revising domestic violence legislation.

Criminal Code Amendments

The Criminal Code reforms, enacted in 2020, expanded the definitions of domestic violence to include psychological and economic abuse alongside physical and sexual violence (Criminal Code of North Macedonia, 2020). Notably, stalking was

explicitly criminalized for the first time, aligning with the Istanbul Convention's standards.

Penalties for repeated offenses and violence resulting in severe harm were increased, and the law introduced formal mechanisms for protection orders, allowing courts to issue immediate restraining orders to safeguard victims.

The amendments also included provisions to remove obstacles for victim participation in trials, such as protecting victim anonymity and using video testimonies to minimize retraumatization.

Domestic Violence Law Revisions

The Law on Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence was revised in 2021, consolidating legal measures and institutional mandates related to GBV response (Official Gazette, 2021). This law codifies procedures for issuing protection orders, defines roles for police, social services, and judiciary, and creates frameworks for inter-institutional coordination.

The law explicitly prohibits mediation or reconciliation processes in cases of domestic violence, reflecting a key Istanbul Convention mandate aimed at preventing secondary victimization and power imbalances in judicial proceedings.

Policy Framework and Institutional Developments

In addition to legal reforms, North Macedonia adopted the National Action Plan for Prevention and Protection Against Domestic Violence 2019-2023, outlining strategic priorities including prevention campaigns, capacity building, victim support services, and data collection (Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, 2019).

Institutions such as the Inter-Agency Coordination Body on Domestic Violence were established to facilitate multi-sector collaboration, monitor implementation, and coordinate efforts among ministries, law enforcement, healthcare, and NGOs.

Despite these progressive frameworks, resource allocation remains limited, and implementation gaps persist.

Challenges in Harmonizing Law and Practice

While the legal framework has been modernized, the translation of statutory provisions into effective practice faces significant obstacles. Studies indicate that many law enforcement and judicial professionals lack adequate training on Istanbul Convention obligations and victim-centered approaches (HERA, 2022).

Furthermore, the criminalization of psychological violence and stalking, while present in law, is underutilized in practice due to evidentiary challenges and institutional reluctance.

The persistent use of mediation in some cases contradicts legal prohibitions, revealing tensions between formal rules and ingrained institutional habits (Helsinki Committee, 2021).

Thus, the legislative progress provides a foundation, but the practical realization of access to justice for GBV victims depends on addressing systemic institutional and societal barriers

Institutional Barriers to Accessing Justice

Law Enforcement Challenges

The role of law enforcement is pivotal in ensuring victims of gender-based violence can safely report crimes and receive immediate protection. However, research reveals multiple institutional shortcomings within North Macedonia's police services that inhibit effective responses to GBV complaints.

First, police officers often lack specialized training on the dynamics of domestic violence and trauma-informed approaches, leading to victim-blaming attitudes or disbelief (OSCE, 2020). According to a 2019 survey by the Macedonian Helsinki Committee, over 40% of GBV victims reported feeling disregarded or inadequately supported by police during initial reporting (MHC, 2019).

Secondly, police frequently treat domestic violence as a "private matter," minimizing its seriousness and delaying intervention (Jovanovska & Velkoska, 2021). This approach is inconsistent with the Istanbul Convention, which explicitly states that domestic violence is a public crime requiring immediate state intervention (Council of Europe, 2011, Art. 18).

Thirdly, the procedures for obtaining and enforcing protection orders are hindered by bureaucratic delays and lack of coordination between police and judiciary (UN Women, 2021). Reports indicate that some protection orders are not enforced promptly, exposing victims to continued risk (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The overall consequence is a justice system that, at the frontline, is often inaccessible, intimidating, and sometimes re-traumatizing for survivors.

Judicial System Limitations

The judiciary in North Macedonia plays a critical role in ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable and victims' rights are upheld. However, systemic issues compromise judicial effectiveness in GBV cases.

One significant problem is the low level of judicial awareness and sensitivity toward GBV. Judges and prosecutors often lack specialized training on gender-based violence and the Istanbul Convention's mandates (OSCE, 2021). This can result in inadequate consideration of evidence related to psychological abuse or coercive control, which are often subtle and difficult to prove.

Further, the slow pace of judicial proceedings contributes to prolonged victim suffering and deters them from pursuing justice (Council of Europe, 2020). Court delays in North Macedonia have been attributed to insufficient staffing, procedural inefficiencies, and heavy caseloads (Transparency International, 2022).

Another notable issue is the underutilization of protective measures, such as restraining orders and victim anonymity provisions. Data from the Ministry of Justice show that protective measures are granted in fewer than 50% of eligible cases, signaling gaps in enforcement or judicial discretion (Ministry of Justice, 2022).

Moreover, reports from advocacy organizations highlight a lack of victim-centered courtroom procedures, including limited use of video testimonies and the absence of adequate psychological support during trials (HERA, 2022). Such deficiencies can increase victim trauma and reduce participation.

Coordination and Institutional Capacity

Effective response to GBV requires coordinated action among multiple institutions: law enforcement, judiciary, social services, healthcare, and civil society. While North Macedonia has established inter-agency bodies to enhance cooperation, challenges remain.

Institutional fragmentation, unclear mandates, and insufficient communication impede timely and coherent responses (UN Women, 2021). Social workers and healthcare providers report inadequate protocols and training for GBV case management, affecting victim referrals and support continuity (Health Rights, 2020).

Furthermore, resource constraints limit institutional capacities. Shelters and crisis centers are underfunded and cannot meet the demand for safe accommodation

and comprehensive services (Amnesty International, 2022). These gaps contribute to secondary victimization and reduce trust in formal justice mechanisms.

Socio-Cultural Barriers and Gender Norms

Patriarchal Social Structures

North Macedonia's socio-cultural context is strongly influenced by traditional patriarchal values, which dictate gender roles and family hierarchies. Such norms often justify male dominance and control, contributing to the normalization and invisibilization of violence against women (World Bank, 2021).

Patriarchal attitudes manifest in community acceptance of "family matters" being kept private, discouraging victims from seeking external help (Kamberi, 2019). This cultural expectation places pressure on women to maintain family unity at the expense of personal safety.

The stigma attached to victims of GBV is a powerful deterrent. Survivors may be labeled as "dishonorable" or blamed for provoking violence, leading to social isolation or even retaliation (Human Rights Watch, 2020). This victim-blaming culture not only silences survivors but also affects the willingness of witnesses to testify.

Impact of Ethnic and Religious Diversity

North Macedonia is a multi-ethnic country, with significant Albanian, Turkish, Roma, and other minority communities. The intersection of ethnicity, religion, and gender creates additional layers of complexity in accessing justice for GBV victims.

In some communities, conservative religious or cultural traditions exacerbate gender inequalities and restrict women's autonomy (UNDP, 2022). For example, in Roma communities, women face compounded discrimination and marginalization, with limited awareness or trust in formal institutions (Amnesty International, 2021).

Language barriers and lack of culturally sensitive services further marginalize minority women. NGOs report that Roma women often encounter discrimination when seeking police protection or social services (Open Society Foundation, 2020).

Social Pressure and Family Influence

In many cases, family members discourage victims from pursuing legal action, either to protect the family's reputation or due to economic dependence on the

perpetrator (Kamberi & Mekic, 2018). This social pressure frequently results in underreporting of GBV incidents.

Women may also fear escalation of violence or loss of custody of children if they engage with the justice system (HERA, 2022). These fears are not unfounded, as judicial processes sometimes inadequately address these concerns.

Psychological Barriers Affecting Victims' Access to Justice

Trauma and Its Impact on Reporting and Participation

The psychological consequences of gender-based violence profoundly affect survivors' ability and willingness to engage with legal processes. Victims of GBV often experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and feelings of shame and guilt (Campbell, 2002). These symptoms can impair memory, communication, and decision-making capacity, complicating the reporting of abuse and participation in investigations or trials.

Research in North Macedonia has shown that many survivors delay or avoid reporting violence due to fear of retraumatization during police interviews or court appearances (HERA, 2022). The prospect of recounting traumatic experiences multiple times, often in unsupportive environments, deters many from seeking formal justice.

Fear of Retaliation and Safety Concerns

Fear of further violence or retaliation from perpetrators is a significant psychological barrier. Women may hesitate to report abuse if they believe law enforcement or judicial measures will not provide adequate protection (UN Women, 2021).

This fear is often compounded by experiences of ineffective enforcement of restraining orders or protection measures. Reports document cases where victims were subjected to threats or attacks even after legal interventions were initiated, undermining confidence in the system (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Distrust in Institutions

Historical mistrust of state institutions, rooted in past corruption, political interference, and inefficiency, further discourages survivors from engaging with justice mechanisms (OSCE, 2020). Victims may anticipate judgment, discrimination, or lack of confidentiality, which can discourage disclosure.

This institutional distrust is exacerbated in marginalized communities, such as the Roma minority, where systemic discrimination and social exclusion are prevalent (Amnesty International, 2021). The intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status creates unique psychological barriers for these victims.

Secondary Victimization in Justice Processes

Secondary victimization refers to the additional trauma survivors experience due to insensitive or inappropriate treatment by authorities during investigation and judicial proceedings (Campbell, 2002). Examples include intrusive questioning, victim-blaming attitudes, and lack of privacy.

In North Macedonia, advocacy groups have documented frequent cases where survivors felt re-victimized by police and judiciary, including skepticism about their credibility or pressure to reconcile with perpetrators (HERA, 2022). Such experiences can deter victims from pursuing further legal action and deepen psychological harm.

Procedural and Legal Obstacles

Reporting and Documentation Challenges

The process of reporting gender-based violence in North Macedonia involves several procedural hurdles. Victims often face complicated and time-consuming administrative requirements to file complaints and initiate legal proceedings (OSCE, 2020).

Insufficient documentation or improper collection of evidence, especially in cases of psychological abuse or sexual violence, results in weak prosecution cases (Council of Europe, 2020). Law enforcement officials frequently lack training in forensic documentation and victim interviewing techniques, undermining evidence integrity.

Accessibility and Language Barriers

For minority groups and victims in rural or remote areas, access to legal protection is further constrained by geographic and linguistic obstacles. Limited availability of interpreters and legal aid in minority languages restricts meaningful participation in judicial processes (Open Society Foundation, 2020).

The absence of accessible information on legal rights and procedures exacerbates confusion and discourages victims from engaging with formal justice mechanisms.

Lengthy Judicial Procedures and Case Backlogs

The protracted duration of court proceedings in GBV cases is a major impediment to justice. Extended waiting times not only increase victims' stress but may also result in loss of evidence or witnesses (Transparency International, 2022).

Case backlogs in North Macedonia's courts, caused by understaffing and resource constraints, have been well-documented (Ministry of Justice, 2022). Delays undermine victims' trust in the system's capacity to deliver timely protection and accountability.

Inadequate Victim Protection Measures

Despite legal provisions for protection orders, their application remains inconsistent. Some courts issue protection orders only after significant delay or upon victim insistence, exposing survivors to ongoing danger (Helsinki Committee, 2021).

Moreover, the enforcement of restraining orders depends heavily on police responsiveness, which varies widely. Lack of continuous monitoring mechanisms means perpetrators may violate orders with minimal consequence.

The legal framework does not always adequately address complex cases involving multiple forms of violence or psychological abuse, leaving victims vulnerable to further harm.

Case Studies and Data Analysis

Overview of Gender-Based Violence Statistics in North Macedonia

Accurate and comprehensive data on gender-based violence is essential for understanding the scale of the problem and evaluating the effectiveness of legal protections. North Macedonia faces challenges in data collection due to underreporting and inconsistent recording practices.

According to the Ministry of Interior's 2022 report, approximately 3,500 cases of domestic violence were registered in that year, marking a slight increase from previous years (Ministry of Interior, 2022). However, experts estimate that the actual incidence is significantly higher, as many victims do not report violence due to fear, stigma, or distrust (UN Women, 2021).

The National Statistical Office's 2021 survey on women's experiences with violence indicated that nearly 35% of women aged 15 and older have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence since age 15 (National Statistical Office, 2021). This data highlights the widespread prevalence of GBV despite legislative advances.

Case Study: Institutional Response to Domestic Violence in Skopje

A 2020 study by the HERA NGO examined 50 domestic violence cases reported to police and courts in Skopje. It found that only 40% of cases led to the issuance of protection orders, and only 25% proceeded to prosecution (HERA, 2020). The majority of victims reported dissatisfaction with police responsiveness and lack of follow-up support.

Interviews with victims revealed that fear of retaliation and social pressure to maintain family cohesion often influenced decisions to withdraw complaints. Several victims reported experiencing secondary victimization from judicial personnel, which discouraged continued engagement with the legal system.

The study concluded that while legal frameworks exist, their implementation is hampered by institutional weaknesses and socio-cultural factors, leaving many victims without effective protection or justice.

Case Study: Access Barriers for Roma Women

Roma women face particularly severe barriers in accessing legal protection due to intersecting discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status.

A 2019 report by Amnesty International detailed cases where Roma women experienced police refusal to take complaints seriously, lack of interpreters, and social workers' failure to provide adequate support (Amnesty International, 2019). These women often live in segregated communities with limited access to public services and face heightened vulnerability to GBV.

The report emphasized the need for culturally sensitive outreach and institutional reforms to address these disparities.

Comparative Insights: Lessons from Regional Neighbors

Comparing North Macedonia's experience with neighboring countries such as Serbia and Albania reveals common patterns of legislative reforms outpacing institutional capacity and cultural change (Council of Europe, 2020). Regional cooperation and knowledge exchange could enhance responses to GBV by sharing best practices and harmonizing implementation strategies.

Conclusion

North Macedonia's ratification of the Istanbul Convention marked a significant milestone in its commitment to addressing gender-based violence and enhancing victims' access to legal protection. The country has made commendable strides in modernizing its legal framework, criminalizing various forms of abuse, and establishing institutional mechanisms aimed at a coordinated response.

However, this research reveals that legal reforms alone are insufficient to guarantee effective access to justice for GBV victims. Persistent institutional shortcomings, including inadequately trained law enforcement and judiciary personnel, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inconsistent enforcement of protective measures, continue to impede victim protection.

Moreover, deep-rooted socio-cultural barriers, patriarchal norms, stigma, ethnic and linguistic marginalization, and family pressures severely restrict survivors' willingness and ability to seek justice. Psychological impacts such as trauma, fear of retaliation, and distrust in state institutions further compound these challenges.

Procedural obstacles, including complex reporting requirements, lengthy judicial processes, and lack of victim-centered practices, create additional hurdles to justice.

Case studies and data analyses underscore the gap between formal legal standards and the lived realities of survivors, highlighting systemic issues in institutional responses and service provision, particularly for marginalized groups such as Roma women.

Ultimately, fulfilling the Istanbul Convention's promises requires not only continued legal reform but also sustained efforts to transform institutional culture and societal attitudes. Only through comprehensive, multi-level approaches can North Macedonia bridge the gap between law and practice and ensure that victims of gender-based violence receive the protection, support, and justice they are entitled to.

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Hamza Ateş

Istanbul Medeniyet University, İstanbul, Türkiye

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0975-0062>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Hamza Ateş

Email: ates.hamza@gmail.com.



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Administrative Legacies of Ottoman and Habsburg Empires in the Balkans: A Comparative Analysis

Hamza Ateş

Abstract

The Balkans have historically been a region of great geopolitical significance, shaped by the administrative, cultural, and social influences of two major empires: The Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire. These empires ruled over the region for centuries, leaving a profound impact on governance structures, religious dynamics, and urban development. Despite their shared control over parts of the Balkans, their administrative approaches differed significantly, leading to long-lasting regional distinctions.

The Ottoman Empire implemented a decentralized yet hierarchical system. The millet system allowed religious communities to administer their own legal and educational affairs, fostering a diverse and multicultural society. Additionally, the waqf (endowment) system contributed to social welfare, funding mosques, schools, and public services. The Ottoman legacy remains evident in the urban architecture, linguistic influences, and socio-economic structures of modern Balkan states. Conversely, the Habsburg Empire employed a more centralized and bureaucratic model, focusing on strict control and uniformity. The Balkans under Habsburg rule experienced heavy taxation, compulsory military conscription, and Germanization policies, particularly in Croatia and Slovenia. The Austro-Hungarian legal system, with its emphasis on codified laws and secular governance, influenced modern state-building in the region. The empire's impact is still visible in urban planning, Baroque architecture, and centralized governance structures.

This study examines the contrasting administrative legacies of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires in the Balkans, evaluating their influence on contemporary socio-political institutions. By analyzing historical governance models, the paper highlights the enduring effects of these empires on modern nation-state formation in Southeastern Europe.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Habsburg Empire, Balkans, administrative structure, administrative legacy.

Introduction

The Balkan Peninsula, shaped by centuries of imperial rule, remains deeply marked by the contrasting legacies of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. These empires governed Southeastern Europe through distinct legal, bureaucratic, and political frameworks, producing divergent institutional cultures that continue to influence the region's governance and state-society relations (Barkey, 2008: 9–11; Judson, 2016: 4–6). The Ottoman Empire embraced a pluralistic model rooted in Islamic governance, with decentralized structures such as the *millet* system and patrimonial land tenure (İnalçık, 1973: 104–106; Barkey, 2008: 15–17). In contrast, the Habsburgs pursued administrative centralization, legal codification, and bureaucratic standardization, particularly under Enlightenment-era reforms (Deák, 1990: 44–46; Judson, 2016: 7–8). These diverging logics led to enduring path dependencies.

Post-imperial trajectories reflect these foundations. Ottoman successor states like Bosnia and Albania exhibit communalism, legal pluralism, and informal governance, while Habsburg-influenced regions such as Croatia and Slovenia show stronger legal formalism and institutional continuity (Jelavich, 1983: 94–96). Reform efforts often mirror these inherited norms: Weberian models face resistance in post-Ottoman settings, yet resonate more readily in former Habsburg territories (Elbasani, 2009: 17–19; Brusis, 2005: 293–295). This paper adopts a comparative-historical approach, utilizing imperial edicts and recent scholarship to show that these imperial legacies are not relics but living frameworks shaping governance possibilities. It challenges simplistic East-West binaries and highlights both empires' adaptive strategies in governing diverse, multilingual peripheries (Judson, 2016: 11–13; Barkey, 2008: 22–24). Understanding these institutional memories is essential for interpreting contemporary administrative cultures and reform trajectories across Southeastern Europe.

The Ottoman Administrative Framework in the Balkans

Ottoman governance in the Balkans was characterized by a flexible and layered administrative logic, designed to manage the region's complex geography and deep ethno-religious diversity. Rather than enforcing uniform centralization, the empire developed a segmented and stratified model of rule that combined vertical state authority with localized forms of adaptation and control. This system, rooted in pragmatic governance and institutional pluralism, allowed the empire to maintain stability over vast and heterogeneous territories (Barkey, 2008: 93–95).

A critical moment in the formalization of Ottoman provincial administration was the 1864 Vilayet Law of the Tanzimat period, which established a hierarchical structure consisting of *vilayets* (provinces), *sanjaks* (districts), and *kazas* (subdistricts), each governed by centrally appointed officials such as *valis*, *mutasarrıfs*, and *kaymakams* respectively (İnalçık, 1973: 120–122). While these officials operated under the authority of the central government in Istanbul, their effectiveness depended on their ability to negotiate local dynamics and cooperate with established notables. This hybrid arrangement enabled administrative penetration without entirely displacing existing communal authority structures. Crucially, the drawing of administrative boundaries was guided less by ethnic coherence and more by considerations of security, economic utility, and geopolitical control. For instance, the Vilayet of Kosovo was designed to assert imperial presence over strategic trade corridors and highland regions rather than to reflect ethno-linguistic realities (Jelavich, 1983: 56–58). The territorial logic of this structure left a lasting imprint, with many post-Ottoman Balkan states adopting similar frameworks in their national administrative divisions.

One of the foundational mechanisms for early Ottoman control was the *timar* system, a form of prebendal land tenure in which revenues from agricultural land were allocated to cavalry officers (*sipahis*) in exchange for military service. This system allowed for the integration of local elites—often including recently converted Christians—into the imperial military-administrative apparatus, thereby extending loyalty to the center while retaining a measure of local embeddedness (İnalçık, 1973: 104–106; Barkey, 2008: 74–76). However, by the 17th century, the decline of cavalry warfare and the growing costs of a centralized standing army led to the erosion of the *timar* model. The rise of tax farming (*iltizam*) and the increasing autonomy of provincial notables (*ayans*) ushered in a more monetized and fragmented fiscal regime, often resulting in intensified exploitation and diminished central oversight.

Another pillar of Ottoman administration was the *millet* system, which granted a degree of legal, educational, and religious autonomy to non-Muslim communities, most notably Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Armenians. These communities operated through their own institutional frameworks under the supervision of religious leaders such as patriarchs or chief rabbis, who served as intermediaries between the state and their flocks (İnalçık, 1973: 215–217; Barkey, 2008: 142–144). While this system provided a pragmatic means of managing diversity and ensuring relative peace, it also entrenched sectarian divisions by reifying religious identity

as the basis of political and legal membership. By the 19th century, with the rise of nationalist ideologies and growing communal assertiveness, the *millets* became loci of ethno-religious mobilization and separatist ambitions (Subotić, 2021: 80–81). Thus, a framework originally intended to sustain imperial cohesion inadvertently contributed to its fragmentation.

Urban governance and socio-economic integration were further supported by the *waqf* (endowment) system, which played a vital role in funding public infrastructure and embedding Ottoman-Islamic institutions in the urban fabric of Balkan cities. Wealthy individuals—often provincial elites or religious figures—established *waqfs* to finance mosques, madrasas, caravanserais, hospitals, and other public utilities. Cities like Sarajevo, Skopje, and Bitola became sites of dense institutional development thanks to such philanthropic investments (İnalçık, 1973: 258–260; Barkey, 2008: 109–111). While *waqfs* relieved the central treasury and legitimized imperial authority at the local level, they were also vulnerable to mismanagement and elite capture, particularly in the declining centuries of the empire. Nevertheless, their durability—many continued to function even under post-Ottoman regimes—underscores their significance as semi-autonomous instruments of urban governance.

Legal pluralism constituted a core feature of Ottoman administrative practice. The empire maintained a tripartite legal structure in which *sharia* (Islamic law), *kanun* (imperial decrees), and *‘urf* (customary law) operated simultaneously. Muslims were primarily judged under *sharia*, administered by state-appointed *kadis*, while non-Muslims had access to their own religious courts in matters of personal status. In mixed cases or disputes involving state interests, imperial courts retained jurisdiction (İnalçık, 1973: 281–283; Barkey, 2008: 172–174). This system allowed for a high degree of procedural flexibility and context-sensitive adjudication but also created jurisdictional ambiguities and potential for forum-shopping. In the 19th century, efforts to rationalize the legal order led to the creation of *nizamiye* (secular) courts and the promulgation of codified law. Nonetheless, the empire continued to tolerate legal hybridity, reflecting its underlying ethos of governance as pragmatic accommodation rather than rigid standardization.

In short, the Ottoman administrative framework in the Balkans was shaped by a distinctive combination of hierarchical control and local autonomy, religious pluralism and legal flexibility, fiscal decentralization and strategic central oversight. This governance model prioritized functional adaptation over ideological uniformity, enabling the empire to maintain order in an exceptionally diverse frontier

region for centuries (Shusharova, 2017). Its institutional legacy—visible in territorial subdivisions, communal identity structures, urban foundations, and legal pluralism—continues to influence the political and administrative cultures of many post-Ottoman Balkan states. While modern nation-states have often distanced themselves from this imperial past, its foundational logics remain embedded in the region's governance imaginaries and institutional practices.

The Habsburg Administrative Framework in the Balkans

The Habsburg Monarchy's expansion into the Balkans following its territorial acquisitions from the Ottoman Empire in the late 17th and early 18th centuries marked the beginning of a deliberate project of administrative centralization and bureaucratic consolidation. In contrast to the Ottoman model of decentralized governance and confessional pluralism, Habsburg rule sought to impose a uniform state architecture across a highly diverse imperial realm. This process was driven by both pragmatic state-building imperatives and Enlightenment rationalism, particularly under the reigns of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, whose reformist agendas aimed at restructuring provincial administration, law, and education in line with absolutist modernization ideals (Judson, 2016: 108–110).

Central to this transformation was the standardization of governance across the monarchy's newly acquired southeastern provinces. Administrative reforms weakened the traditional power of local estates, abolished many feudal privileges, and introduced hierarchical, professionalized bureaucracies answerable directly to the imperial center in Vienna. German was institutionalized as the primary language of administration, which facilitated bureaucratic coherence but alienated non-Germanic populations (Ingrao, 2000: 146–149). These policies were most extensively implemented in Croatia-Slavonia, the Kingdom of Dalmatia, and the Military Frontier (*Militärgrenze*), each of which experienced different degrees of integration into the Habsburg bureaucratic order. The Military Frontier, a militarized zone governed separately from civilian authorities, became a particularly stark example of direct imperial oversight, governed through military chains of command and serving as a buffer zone against perceived Ottoman threats.

Institutional modernization included the introduction of population censuses, cadastral mapping, and rationalized tax collection systems. These reforms dramatically increased state infrastructural power and fiscal capacity but simultaneously eroded traditional forms of local autonomy. The imposition of standardized legal

and bureaucratic norms often clashed with entrenched local practices and identities, producing tensions that would later fuel nationalist mobilization, particularly among Slavic populations in the empire's southern and eastern peripheries (Deák, 1990: 63–66). As such, the Habsburg administration was both a vehicle for modernization and a catalyst for ethno-political conflict.

Legal codification was a core pillar of the Habsburg administrative logic. Efforts to replace customary and plural legal systems with universal, rationalized codes culminated in the *Codex Theresianus* and, later, the *Allgemeines Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch* (ABGB), which aimed to enshrine a civil law tradition applicable across the monarchy (Judson, 2016: 145–147). These codes reflected the Enlightenment belief in law as a neutral, universal framework for adjudicating rights and obligations. In Balkan territories such as Transylvania and Croatia, however, these reforms encountered resistance due to longstanding legal pluralism rooted in Roman, Hungarian, and customary traditions. Despite such friction, Habsburg authorities pressed forward with a model of legal subjecthood grounded in individual rights, secular authority, and hierarchical adjudication—concepts largely alien to the communal and discretionary legal traditions inherited from Ottoman rule.

Religious governance under Habsburg administration differed fundamentally from the Ottoman *millet* system. Rather than institutionalizing religious pluralism through communal autonomy, Habsburg rulers, particularly Joseph II, pursued a policy of ecclesiastical integration and confessional homogenization. Josephinist reforms subordinated church authority to the state and privileged Roman Catholicism as the ideological cornerstone of imperial identity (Ingrao, 2000: 174–176). In regions with significant Orthodox or Muslim populations—such as Bosnia, Dalmatia, and parts of Croatia—this policy produced alienation and, at times, open resistance. The Serbian Orthodox Metropolitanate of Karlovci, though recognized by the state, was instrumentalized as a vehicle for imperial surveillance and control. Confessional policies also permeated symbolic and material domains, with religious education, public iconography, and institutional architecture reflecting the state's attempt to produce a Catholic-imperial civic ethos (Jelavich, 1983: 89–91).

Education was another foundational tool for fostering administrative uniformity and political loyalty. Under Maria Theresa's school ordinances and subsequent Josephinist reforms, the Habsburg state expanded secular education, trained teachers in state curricula, and sought to inculcate imperial loyalty through instruction in the German language and Enlightenment values (Deák, 1990: 88–90). These

reforms aimed to replace ecclesiastical and vernacular education with state-centered models. Yet, in multilingual regions, this policy proved deeply ambivalent. While it succeeded in creating a literate, administratively capable elite aligned with imperial authority, it also equipped these elites with the linguistic and historical tools to articulate nationalist agendas. Croatian, Slovenian, and Romanian intellectuals, for instance, repurposed state-sponsored education to mobilize ethnic consciousness, draft historical narratives, and challenge the homogenizing pressures of imperial rule (Judson, 2016: 162–165).

Cultural institutions—including museums, academies, and historical societies—were likewise mobilized to shape imperial identity. While officially framed as embodiments of enlightened cosmopolitanism, these institutions became contested spaces where competing national histories were constructed and disseminated. In the Balkan provinces, these arenas often reflected the double bind of Habsburg governance: an aspiration to forge imperial unity through modernization, coupled with the reality of entrenched cultural heterogeneity and increasing national assertiveness. In sum, the Habsburg administrative framework in the Balkans combined rationalization, centralization, and modernization with cultural assimilation and confessional regulation. Its strengths lay in its ability to create standardized legal and bureaucratic structures that undergird many contemporary governance systems in the region. However, its limitations were equally pronounced: it often failed to accommodate local diversity in a meaningful way and, in doing so, inadvertently seeded the very nationalist movements that would later undermine imperial cohesion. The legacy of Habsburg administration thus resides not only in institutional blueprints and legal codices, but also in the cultural contradictions, political tensions, and identity negotiations that continue to shape the post-imperial trajectories of Southeastern Europe.

Comparative Analysis of Ottoman and Habsburg Governance

The Ottoman and Habsburg empires embodied divergent models of imperial rule. The Ottoman system relied on decentralized, pluralistic governance rooted in local autonomy, religious communities, and patrimonial authority (Barkey, 2008: 75–78). Provincial governance functioned through negotiated authority, often with significant local discretion. In contrast, the Habsburg Empire, particularly from the 18th century onward, advanced a centralized, bureaucratic model, emphasizing codified law, fiscal discipline, and administrative standardization, especially under

Maria Theresa and Joseph II (Ingrao, 2000: 115–117). These differing logics shaped imperial cohesion and state capacity. The Ottoman approach enabled religious co-existence and adaptable governance but struggled with enforcement and fiscal consistency. Habsburg administration promoted predictability and integration but often provoked resistance in its multiethnic provinces (Judson, 2016: 122–124). Ottoman legitimacy was built on patronage and communal loyalty; Habsburg authority emphasized legal-rational governance, shaping contrasting public cultures.

Religion played a defining role in both systems. The Ottomans institutionalized religious diversity through the *millet* system, granting autonomy to non-Muslim communities (Barkey, 2008: 106–110). Conversely, the Habsburgs promoted Catholicism as a hegemonic faith while tolerating others under state oversight, particularly after the 1781 Patent of Toleration (Judson, 2016: 178–180). These models had long-term consequences: Ottoman governance reinforced communal solidarities, while Habsburg policies fostered more standardized civic identities—albeit through coercive assimilation. Today, these legacies are visible in differing approaches to religious freedom, church-state relations, and minority rights across Southeastern Europe.

Bureaucratic recruitment also reflected distinct imperial visions. The Ottomans relied on the *devşirme* and *kul* system, creating a loyal elite detached from local roots (İnalçık, 1973: 201–204). The Habsburgs increasingly drew bureaucrats from educated local populations, fostering a professional civil service and enabling elite integration, particularly among urban minorities (Judson, 2016: 132–134). While the Ottoman model limited local advancement, the Habsburg approach cultivated administrative professionalism and secular bureaucratic norms—differences still echoed in public sector structures today.

Land tenure and taxation offer further contrasts. The Ottoman *timar* system granted land in exchange for military service, with the state retaining ultimate ownership and relying on intermediaries (İnalçık, 1973: 145–147). The Habsburgs, especially after 18th-century reforms, implemented direct taxation, cadastral surveys, and legal titles. Reforms like the Hungarian *urbarial laws* converted feudal dues into cash rents (Ingrao, 2000: 165–167). These divergent property regimes shaped rural economies, agrarian relations, and continue to inform contemporary land governance, with clearer cadastres in former Habsburg areas and more fragmented tenures in post-Ottoman regions.

Urban form and legal culture also diverged. Ottoman cities were structured around religious institutions and communal neighborhoods (*mahalles*), reflecting social

segmentation (İnalçık, 1973: 119–122). Habsburg urbanism prioritized zoning, infrastructure, and civic monumentalism (Judson, 2016: 140–144). Legally, the Ottoman Empire maintained pluralism—balancing Sharia, imperial decrees, and custom—whereas the Habsburgs moved toward codified, secular legal systems influenced by Enlightenment rationalism (Ingrao, 2000: 172–175). These legacies persist in legal culture: post-Habsburg societies tend to exhibit stronger adherence to formal legal norms and secularism, while post-Ottoman contexts retain more legal pluralism and informality.

Finally, heritage and memory reflect these imperial imprints. In public narratives, Habsburg legacies are often associated with European modernity and institutional sophistication, while Ottoman architecture and traditions are variably celebrated or marginalized, depending on national identity politics. Thus, beyond governance, imperial legacies continue to shape institutional practices, urban aesthetics, and civic imaginaries in the Balkans. Table 1 presents a comparative analytical framework for examining the distinctive administrative styles of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires as manifested in the governance structures of the Balkans.

Table 1.

Ottoman vs. Habsburg Administrative Styles in the Balkans

Dimension	Ottoman Empire	Habsburg Empire
Governance Model	Decentralized, negotiated pluralism (millet system, local autonomy)	Centralized, codified bureaucracy with structured hierarchy
Legal System	Pluralistic (Sharia, Kanun, customary law) with community-specific jurisdictions	Uniform civil and criminal law under imperial codifications
Religious Governance	Millet autonomy granted to religious communities	Catholic confessional hegemony with regulated toleration of others
Bureaucratic Personnel	Patrimonial, devşirme-based elite recruitment; military-administrative fusion	Professionalized civil service with career ladders and legal qualification
Land Tenure and Taxation	Timar system (military-feudal obligations); informal revenue farming common	Cadastral land surveys; state peasant reforms (e.g., Urbairal Patent)

Dimension	Ottoman Empire	Habsburg Empire
Urban Governance and Planning	Organic, functional urbanism with guild control and religious zoning	Rationalist, geometric urban planning with infrastructural investment
Local Autonomy	Strong in practice (e.g., ayans, janissary cities), often informal	Limited, formally regulated through imperial decrees and supervisory bodies
Civic Identity and Belonging	Communal belonging over imperial identity	Gradual civic identity formation through imperial citizenship reforms
Mechanism of Legitimacy	Dynastic-religious legitimacy (Caliph-Sultan); symbolic sovereignty	Legal-rational legitimacy (laws, reforms, bureaucracy) under monarchic rule
Administrative Rationality	Customary, pragmatic, informal	Rule-bound, document-driven, formalistic

Enduring Legacies in Contemporary Southeastern Europe

The administrative legacies of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires continue to shape governance across Southeastern Europe. These divergent imperial trajectories have produced distinct institutional patterns, evident in state organization, legal enforcement, and bureaucratic culture. Former Habsburg territories—such as Slovenia and Croatia—tend to exhibit greater bureaucratic coherence, legal formalism, and fiscal discipline (Brusis, 2005: 292–295). In contrast, post-Ottoman states like Bosnia and North Macedonia often rely more on informal institutions, patronage networks, and fragmented legal frameworks (Elbasani, 2009: 260–263).

These variations reflect historical path dependencies rather than deterministic outcomes. Habsburg rule fostered hierarchical professionalism and centralized authority, while the Ottoman system emphasized local autonomy and negotiated governance. These embedded administrative norms continue to shape public expectations of state behavior. They also influence the adoption of European Union governance standards, with Habsburg-influenced states typically aligning more rapidly with EU *acquis* requirements. Table 2 systematically compares the administrative legacies of Ottoman and Habsburg governance in the Balkans, elucidating their divergent institutional logics and long-term implications for state formation and bureaucratic development.

Table 2.*Administrative Legacies of Ottoman and Habsburg Rule in the Balkans*

Legacy Dimension	Ottoman Legacy	Habsburg Legacy
Public Administration Culture	Informality, clientelism, negotiated authority	Rule-based, hierarchical, and procedural governance
Legal System	Legal pluralism (religious courts, customary law)	Codified civil law, continuity with Austro-Hungarian legal codes
Religious Governance and Tolerance	Confessional pluralism; autonomous religious communities (millets)	Confessional regulation; Catholic dominance with toleration under state control
Bureaucratic Structure	Weak institutional continuity; patrimonial appointments	Strong institutional memory; merit-based bureaucracy
Corruption and Accountability	Personalized governance, limited oversight	Formal accountability, bureaucratic supervision
Municipal Autonomy	Guilds and religious endowments controlled urban affairs	Structured municipal governance; local councils integrated into central state
Urban Morphology and Infrastructure	Organic city growth; limited public infrastructure planning	Grid-planned towns; emphasis on transport, sanitation, public buildings
Judicial Practices	Communal justice; limited appeal mechanisms	Layered court systems; appeal rights and legal recourse established
Education and Civil Service Training	Religious schooling dominated; no standardized civil service training	Imperial academies and law schools; bureaucratic education systems

Legacy Dimension	Ottoman Legacy	Habsburg Legacy
Citizen-State Relations	Subject-based, indirect, often communal relationships	Direct civic engagement with state through legal frameworks and institutions
Minority Rights Legacy	Recognition of identity groups, but within hierarchical order	Early development of equality discourses, especially post-1867
Transition to Modern Statehood	Fragmented, uneven modernization; reliance on religious institutions	Stronger continuity into 20th-century state structures (especially in Croatia, Slovenia)

Imperial legacies continue to shape governance, legal culture, and identity in Southeastern Europe. The divergent administrative traditions of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires have produced persistent institutional path dependencies, visible in state organization, public trust, and EU accession trajectories. In former Habsburg territories, law has long been viewed as a rational tool of governance—formal, codified, and professionally administered (Ingrao, 2000: 172–175; Judson, 2016: 182–184). By contrast, post-Ottoman regions inherited a pluralistic legal culture, where Sharia, kanun, and customary law coexisted (Barkey & von Benda-Beckmann, 2013: 8–10). These differences influence public trust in the judiciary: formalism and proceduralism dominate in Croatia or Slovenia, while informality and mediation remain common in Bosnia or Kosovo. Legal Europeanization has progressed more rapidly in Habsburg-influenced states, while post-Ottoman ones often struggle with judicial fragmentation and limited engagement with formal courts.

The Ottoman *millet* system institutionalized religious communalism, fostering durable but sectarian identities (Barkey, 2008: 106–112). In contrast, the Habsburg model promoted secular, territorial identities through administrative integration and education, though often in tension with ethnic nationalism (Jelavich, 1983: 117–119). These legacies continue to shape political institutions: Bosnia’s consociationalism echoes Ottoman pluralism, while Croatia’s unitary governance reflects Habsburg administrative centralism. Institutional path dependency is evident in state capacity and administrative culture. Former Habsburg areas (e.g., Slovenia, Vojvodina) retain Weberian traditions: merit-based recruitment, rule-bound bureaucracy, and centralized oversight (Judson, 2016: 162–165). Post-Ottoman

systems remain more fragmented, personalized, and clientelist, reflecting historical patterns of delegated authority and elite mediation (Inalcık, 1973: 185–187; Elbasani, 2009: 260–263). These divergences affect responsiveness to external reforms—Habsburg-style systems adapt more readily to EU standards; Ottoman-derived administrations often require context-sensitive approaches.

Urban form also bears imperial marks. Ottoman cities (e.g., Sarajevo, Skopje) feature organic layouts and religious centers, reflecting communal and inward-facing spatial logic (Inalcık, 1973: 119–122). Habsburg urbanism emphasizes civic monumentalism, zoning, and rational design (Judson, 2016: 140–144). These patterns persist in planning institutions and public space governance. In heritage discourse, Habsburg architecture is often valorized, while Ottoman heritage is either marginalized or politically contested—though inclusive conservation efforts are increasingly reshaping this landscape (Barkey, 2008: 118–120).

Both empires managed religious diversity, but through distinct mechanisms. Ottoman governance institutionalized communal autonomy, while the Habsburgs promoted religious tolerance within a unified civic framework (Judson, 2016: 178–182). These legacies influence current models of minority rights: Bosnia reflects Ottoman-style consociational pluralism, whereas Croatia and Slovenia exhibit more individualized, secular rights regimes. The Ottoman absence of secular institutions delayed modern statehood in places like Albania or Kosovo, while Habsburg regions benefited from early bureaucratization and nationalist education. Bosnia's complex consociationalism mirrors overlapping imperial inheritances. Serbia reflects a hybrid path, balancing centralism and pluralism. Croatia, leveraging its Habsburg legacy, aligns more closely with EU governance standards (Ingrao, 2000: 179–181; Jelavich, 1983: 117–119).

Ottoman and Habsburg legacies continue to inform administrative performance, legal reform, urban identity, and political culture across the Balkans. While Habsburg traditions generally foster greater institutional continuity and legal formalism, Ottoman legacies underpin communalism, informality, and negotiation-based governance. Recognizing these histories is essential for designing effective reform strategies, aligning with EU standards, and promoting post-conflict reconciliation. Rather than remnants of the past, imperial inheritances remain embedded in the present, shaping the contours of Southeast European governance (Table 3).

Table 3:

Endurance of Imperial Administrative Legacies

Criterion	Ottoman Legacy (e.g., Bosnia, Albania)	Habsburg Legacy (e.g., Croatia, Slovenia)	Which Shows Greater Endurance?
Institutional Continuity	Fragmented, informal	Structured, centralized	Habsburg
Legal Culture	Pluralist, personalized	Codified, rule-bound	Habsburg
Bureaucratic Professionalism	Patronage-based	Career-based	Habsburg
Urban Governance	Communal/religious endowments	Municipal-civic	Habsburg
Minority Management	Millet system	Confessional supervision with equality claims	Ottoman (for pluralism)
State Legitimacy	Dynastic-symbolic	Rational-legal	Habsburg
Citizen Trust in State Institutions	Low to moderate	Moderate to high	Habsburg
Political Behavior	Clientelist, factional	Civic, party-oriented	Habsburg

While both empires have left enduring administrative footprints, the Habsburg legacy exhibits greater resilience in shaping modern bureaucratic norms, legal expectations, and civic infrastructures. Its emphasis on proceduralism, public administration training, and institutional coherence provided a more transferable template for post-imperial state-building. This is especially evident in EU accession processes, where countries with Habsburg administrative heritage (e.g., Croatia, Slovenia) adapted more seamlessly to EU *acquis communautaire*, reflecting their compatibility with European norms of legality, transparency, and governance. The Ottoman legacy, by contrast, while valuable in promoting religious pluralism and local self-governance, bequeathed a more fragmented and informal state apparatus. This has complicated post-communist transitions, especially where institutions are expected to act autonomously from political patronage—a legacy difficult to overcome without major cultural shifts.

Evaluation: Assessing the Legacy of Imperial Governance Models

The governance structures of contemporary Southeastern Europe cannot be fully understood without a critical engagement with the enduring legacies of Ottoman and Habsburg rule. These empires, which administered the Balkan Peninsula for centuries through fundamentally different administrative logics, have left behind more than mere institutional relics. They have bequeathed what might be termed governance *habitus*—deeply ingrained dispositions, norms, and relational patterns through which citizens engage with authority, law, and the state apparatus. The comparative legacy of these imperial formations continues to shape institutional performance, legal behavior, state legitimacy, and reform trajectories in the region.

The Ottoman Empire governed through a system of decentralized pluralism. Authority was dispersed across multiple layers—sultanic, provincial, and communal—enabling negotiated rule and accommodating the region's ethnic and religious heterogeneity. The *millet* system institutionalized confessional autonomy, allowing religious communities a significant degree of self-governance in matters such as education, personal law, and social welfare (Barkey, 2008: 106–110). This pluralism proved adaptive for managing diversity and minimizing overt conflict in multi-ethnic settings. However, it also inhibited the emergence of unified civic identities and a standardized legal-administrative system. The Ottoman preference for delegated authority and local mediation over bureaucratic penetration led to a governance environment that prized flexibility over predictability, and informal consensus over formal rule-making.

By contrast, the Habsburg Empire pursued a rationalized and centralized governance model. Grounded in Enlightenment ideals and absolutist state-building, it sought to replace fragmented legal and administrative traditions with a unified bureaucratic framework. Through codified law, standardized procedures, and a professional civil service, the Habsburgs introduced administrative uniformity that fostered a shared understanding of public authority and rule-bound behavior (Judson, 2016: 140–144). This system, though often coercive in its imposition, laid the groundwork for modern legalism, merit-based bureaucracy, and civic trust in the institutional integrity of the state. It also cultivated a normative orientation toward procedural justice and public accountability—elements largely absent in Ottoman-influenced territories.

Yet, neither imperial legacy is free from critique. Ottoman governance's reliance on local notables and communal elites fostered patron-client relations that persist today in the form of politicized administrations, weak judicial enforcement, and widespread informality. Habsburg centralization, though effective in building state capacity, was often resented in peripheral regions, where it was viewed as culturally homogenizing and politically repressive (Ingrao, 2000: 165–167). Moreover, the administrative rationality it promoted, while technically efficient, could become unresponsive to local cultural forms of legitimacy and social cohesion. In short, both traditions offer resources and risks for contemporary governance.

The path-dependent nature of these legacies is most visible in the realm of public administration. Former Habsburg territories such as Slovenia, northern Croatia, and Vojvodina tend to display stronger bureaucratic institutionalization, legal compliance, and capacity for procedural governance. Their administrative cultures align more easily with the European Union's *acquis communautaire*, facilitating smoother convergence in areas such as civil service reform, regulatory oversight, and anti-corruption frameworks. Conversely, in post-Ottoman territories such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, informal governance practices, ethno-political bargaining, and overlapping jurisdictions often impeded the consistent implementation of reforms (Brusis, 2005).

Crucially, these divergences are not simply legacies of the past but active frameworks of perception and practice. Citizens socialized in Ottoman-influenced regions may view the state less as a neutral arbiter and more as a negotiable actor embedded within networks of reciprocity and group loyalty. This affects everything from how laws are followed and contested, to how bureaucrats are recruited and public goods are allocated. In turn, this shapes the design and outcomes of institutional reform efforts. For example, anti-corruption measures that assume individual compliance with universal rules may falter in environments where collective identity and relational trust override formal legality.

European Union-driven reform programs often assume a Weberian model of public administration—rule-bound, impersonal, and procedurally consistent. This model resonates well with the institutional inheritance of Habsburg governance, where the rule of law and bureaucratic neutrality were historically embedded. In Ottoman-influenced regions, however, the imposition of this model can produce resistance or superficial compliance, as it clashes with localized expectations of governance based on mediation, discretion, and communal representation. Reforms premised on uniformity thus risk reproducing structural exclusions and

legitimacy deficits if they ignore the historically contingent foundations of public authority.

Nevertheless, imperial legacies also offer constructive resources for reimagining governance in plural societies. The Ottoman *millet* system, for all its limitations, provided a historically grounded mechanism for managing religious diversity within a single polity. In contexts such as Bosnia or North Macedonia—where ethnic pluralism remains deeply entrenched—elements of institutional pluralism inspired by this model may inform the development of power-sharing mechanisms, communal representation structures, or decentralized legal arrangements that protect group rights while sustaining national cohesion. These adaptations must, of course, be critically assessed and reframed within contemporary democratic standards to avoid reifying sectarianism.

Similarly, the Ottoman tradition of administrative decentralization—adapted to modern participatory frameworks—may provide a useful counterbalance to the alienation often caused by over-centralized governance. In this regard, Ottoman-inspired flexibility, when coupled with democratic accountability, can support hybrid institutional designs that combine localized responsiveness with national coordination. Habsburg legacies, in turn, continue to provide valuable templates for professionalized administration, regulatory predictability, and civic integration—assets that remain essential for consolidating democratic governance and sustaining EU alignment.

Thus, the optimal path for institutional transformation in Southeastern Europe lies not in privileging one imperial legacy over another, but in strategically synthesizing their respective strengths. A hybrid model that integrates Ottoman pluralism and local legitimacy with Habsburg proceduralism and institutional coherence may offer the most viable framework for inclusive, resilient, and democratically grounded governance. This would require not only policy innovation but also a profound rethinking of reform paradigms—away from transplant models and toward historically attuned, culturally embedded approaches.

Conclusion: Rethinking Governance Through Imperial Legacies

The comparative analysis of Ottoman and Habsburg governance in the Balkans reveals that imperial rule did not merely impose administrative structures—it generated enduring political cultures, legal epistemologies, and modes of state-society interaction that continue to shape contemporary institutional realities. Far from

being historical residues, these imperial legacies constitute living frameworks that inform public administration, legal behavior, identity formation, and reform trajectories across Southeastern Europe.

The Ottoman model, rooted in negotiated authority, legal pluralism, and communal autonomy, cultivated flexibility and adaptability in ethnically and religiously diverse contexts. However, its reliance on informality and delegated governance produced fragmented administrative systems, which continue to manifest in contemporary challenges such as clientelism, legal inconsistency, and weak institutional accountability. Conversely, the Habsburg emphasis on codification, bureaucratic rationalization, and legal uniformity contributed to the consolidation of rule-bound governance, but often at the cost of excluding ethno-linguistic minorities and provoking nationalist backlash.

These divergent traditions have engendered distinct institutional path dependencies. States with Habsburg administrative heritage—such as Slovenia, Croatia, and parts of northern Serbia—tend to exhibit stronger bureaucratic coherence, legal formalism, and alignment with EU governance norms. Post-Ottoman states—such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania—often display institutional hybridity, decentralized authority, and enduring communal segmentation. While neither trajectory is deterministic, each creates specific constraints and opportunities for institutional reform, democratization, and European integration.

Crucially, the analysis underscores that contemporary governance reform cannot succeed through technocratic transplantation alone. EU-driven reforms that prioritize procedural homogeneity must be re-calibrated to account for historically embedded administrative cultures. In this respect, Ottoman decentralization and legal pluralism—when critically adapted—may offer normative resources for inclusive governance in plural societies, just as Habsburg legacies continue to support formalized legal systems and administrative capacity-building.

Rather than viewing the Ottoman and Habsburg legacies as antithetical, a more productive approach lies in synthesizing their respective strengths through institutional hybridization. Governance models that combine the procedural integrity of Habsburg rule with the pluralist flexibility of Ottoman administration may better address the democratic deficits, ethno-political tensions, and administrative fragmentation characteristic of the region. This requires not only historical awareness but also political creativity and normative commitment to inclusive, adaptive governance.

Ultimately, Southeastern Europe's administrative futures cannot be disentangled from its imperial pasts. Acknowledging the layered inheritances of empire—rather than suppressing or romanticizing them—provides a more grounded basis for institutional design, regional cooperation, and conflict mitigation. In this light, imperial legacies are not simply historical contingencies but active variables in the evolving political landscape of the Balkans. They offer both analytical insight and normative guidance for scholars, policymakers, and reformers seeking a more plural, resilient, and democratic Southeastern Europe.

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Leonora Bajrami

South-East European University, Tetovo, N. Macedonia
0009-0008-9758-2655

PhD Candidate,

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Leonora Bajrami.

Email: lb32351@seeu.edu.mk



Dilemmas of the Foreign Policy of Small States in the Western Balkans: Between Integration and Geopolitical Insecurity

Leonora Bajrami

Abstract

This paper analyzes the foreign policy dilemmas of small states in the Western Balkans within the context of an increasingly fragmented and multipolar global order. In this environment, where power is distributed among the United States of America, the European Union, Russia, China, and Turkey, the small Balkan states face complex and often contradictory choices. On one hand, they view European and Euro-Atlantic integration as the strategic horizon of their development and security, while on the other hand they remain vulnerable to the economic, political, and cultural influences of other powers.

The paper is based on a constructivist theoretical framework that emphasizes the importance of identity, perceptions, and interactions in shaping the foreign policy interests of small states. Methodologically, it employs a comparative analysis of six states in the region: Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, drawing on official documents, national strategies, public discourses, and academic literature.

The central argument is that although small states face structural constraints and depend on great powers, through flexible diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and balancing strategies they manage to create presence and minimize uncertainties. The paper contributes to the literature on the foreign policy of small states by highlighting the interconnection between security, integration, and economic development in the context of the new international order.

Keywords: small states, foreign policy, Western Balkans, multilateral diplomacy, security.

Introduction

The past decades have brought significant transformations to the global geopolitical landscape. The war in Ukraine, the U.S.–China rivalry, tensions in the Middle East, as well as global challenges such as climate change and mass migration, have created a highly unstable new international order. In this environment where the interests of great powers collide, small states must maneuver carefully, as they constitute an integral part of the international system. About two-thirds of the members of the United Nations fall into this category. They operate within the same broad political and economic environment as all other states. In their foreign policy, they pursue the same security objectives and employ the same diplomatic tools as larger states. However, the lack of significant military or economic capabilities to influence global developments directly forces small states to define their role and strategies in a system where power is distributed asymmetrically.

The Western Balkans, due to its strategic position, historical legacy, and ethnic complexity, remains a region highly sensitive to international developments. Following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the conflicts of the 1990s, the states of the region have faced major challenges in state-building, ensuring stability, and defining their foreign policy orientation.

This paper aims to analyze the survival and development strategies of the small states of the Western Balkans within the new global order, examining how they manage the dilemmas between Euro-Atlantic integration and the influences of other powers.

Methodology

This study employs a combined theoretical and empirical approach, tailored to the analysis of the foreign policy of small states in the Western Balkans within the context of a fragmented global order. The methodology is based on two main pillars: the constructivist theoretical framework and comparative analysis.

The theoretical framework of the study is grounded in constructivism, which emphasizes the role of identity, perceptions, and social interaction in shaping foreign policy interests. The constructivist approach is complemented by elements from small-state security theories, particularly Thorhallsson's *Shelter Theory*, as well as the classical literature of Keohane, Rothstein, and Vital on the capacities and structural limitations of small states.

The study adopts the method of comparative analysis, examining six Western Balkan states: Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This method aims to identify: similarities in foreign policy patterns, differences in diplomatic strategies, and domestic factors influencing external orientation. Comparative analysis was chosen as the primary method because it enables a systematic evaluation of state behavior in historically, geopolitically, and institutionally similar contexts.

The study relies on qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including reports from international institutions (EU, NATO, Freedom House), academic publications and theoretical works on small states, as well as analyses from regional and international think tanks. The use of secondary sources is appropriate for this type of study, as the focus is on the interpretation of policies and discourses rather than the collection of primary data.

Theoretical Framework: The Role and Security of Small States

The main challenge in studying small states lies in defining what constitutes a small state. This issue is complex, as many scholars do not rely solely on objective criteria such as geographic size or population. Thus, if we refer only to quantitative concepts, small states are viewed as countries that often depend on a few key export products and a limited number of foreign trade partners, and that build their international legitimacy through multilateralism, participation in international organizations, and the promotion of normative values such as human rights, democracy, and sustainable development. Therefore, the concept of a “small state” is not limited only to territorial size, population, or economic–political power but is linked to the capacity to influence the international system.

Smith, Pace, and Lee, in their recent discussion on small states, raise a fundamental question: should small states be categorized along geographic, demographic, or economic lines, or do institutions, resources, and power hold the key (Hey, 2003, p. 2)? Meanwhile, a more rational (qualitative) approach emphasizes that small states are those that cannot independently shape the global order but must maneuver within the hierarchies established in the international system. Hans Morgenthau, one of the classical realists, defines a small state as a state that is unable to impose its will on a larger state. For this reason, the concept of a “small state” is more appropriate when grounded in the perceptions that leaders and citizens have about their state and its role within the international hierarchy.

According to Keohane (1969), small states are those that cannot secure their defense through their own capabilities but depend on the support of great powers. Rothstein (1968) and Vital (1971) stress that such states often compensate for their lack of power through multilateralism and active diplomacy.

In an insecure international system, the issue of security becomes a central dimension of the foreign policy of small states. According to Jervis (1978), the security dilemma arises when the defensive measures of one state are perceived as a threat by others, creating spirals of mistrust and tension. This logic is clearly visible in the Western Balkans, where any action to strengthen sovereignty is often interpreted as a provocation by neighboring states.

According to *Shelter Theory* (Thorhallsson, 2018), small states seek security and prosperity through connections with international organizations and alliances with great powers. This explains why Western Balkan states view integration into NATO and the EU as an economic, political-diplomatic, and security shelter, as well as a guarantee of stability and international recognition.

Analysis of the Western Balkan States

The small states of the Western Balkans share common characteristics: limited economic and military capacities, dependence on external assistance, and aspirations to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures. The weakening of the international subjectivity of small states in the Western Balkans is linked to the concentration of power, state capture, and the lack of democratic reforms by their leaders, which has created serious dilemmas in their foreign policy and strategic orientation (Berisha, 2024). The six Balkan countries, despite historical and political differences, are characterized by a similar style of governance, classified as “hybrid regimes,” where the dominance of strong leaders, clientelism, ethno-nationalism, and the lack of democratic consolidation directly influence the dynamics of regional cooperation (Freedom House, 2024). These governing models create an environment in which personal and political interests often dominate over institutions, producing selective and strategically motivated cooperation initiatives. An illustrative example is the rapprochement between Aleksandar Vučić and Edi Rama who, although coming from states with historical rivalries, have managed to build joint economic projects, such as the Open Balkan initiative, conceived as a regional market between Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia (Mirkovic, 2024).

However, each state has developed different political strategies. Kosovo represents a case of survival diplomacy. Since the declaration of independence in 2008, it has built its foreign policy around international recognitions and Euro-Atlantic integration. Nevertheless, the lack of membership in the UN and NATO on one hand, and persistent tensions with Serbia on the other, keep Kosovo in a highly fragile position. Despite this security dilemma, support from the United States and the EU provides it with a “security umbrella.” Albania, as a NATO member since 2009, pursues an active foreign policy promoting integration and stability. Its participation in international missions and engagement in regional initiatives increases its diplomatic profile. North Macedonia, after joining NATO in 2020, has secured a framework of collective security; however, its EU integration process has been hindered by disputes with Bulgaria, creating political and societal frustration. Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina are more exposed to Russian influence and internal ethnic tensions, which limit their capacity for independent action. Serbia, although a candidate for EU membership, follows a balanced policy between the West and the East, maintaining close relations with Russia and China. This strategy of “multi-vector balancing” provides flexibility but increases regional uncertainties.

According to the Clingendael Institute report (2025), tensions in northern Kosovo, separatist tendencies in Bosnia, and the lack of progress in the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue remain the biggest threats to regional stability. Although the EU has reiterated its commitment to the region’s integration, the process remains slow and often conditional. As a result, these states remain vulnerable and with limited capacities to protect their interests in the international arena, making EU and U.S. pressure and support essential to halt regressive tendencies.

Security Transformations in the Balkans After the War in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has significantly heightened geopolitical tensions and restored the centrality of security in the foreign policies of small states. For the Western Balkans, it has exposed both their dependence on Western security guarantees and the risks posed by Russian influence. Kosovo and Serbia continue to perceive each other as existential threats. Meanwhile, countries such as Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are increasingly focused on non-traditional risks, including cyberattacks, foreign interference, and energy vulnerability. Albania and Montenegro are experiencing strong Russian influence and hybrid security challenges, while North Macedonia is consolidating its Euro-Atlantic orientation (Marleku, 2025).

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains the most fragile case, where internal ethnic tensions and the destabilizing role of actors such as Milorad Dodik expose the country to the risk of fragmentation and external interference. Overall, after 2022, the region is facing a far more complex security environment in which traditional threats coexist with new hybrid and cyber challenges (Bushati, 2025).

As major powers such as the United States, Russia, and the European Union openly pursue policies based on national interests, the small states of the region are compelled to adapt to this new reality, where balancing has become increasingly difficult. Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia demonstrate that foreign policy is deeply shaped by domestic factors, partisan dependencies, and international pressure—reflecting institutional weaknesses and a lack of strategic coherence. The rise of right-wing parties in the EU and the United States adds further instability, making the resolution of outstanding issues—such as the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue—even more distant. In this context, the survival of small states requires rapid adaptation to the shifts of global actors, as acting outside this rhythm risks producing new crises and regional instability. Meanwhile, the outcome of peace negotiations in Ukraine is expected to be a key factor shaping foreign policy behavior in the Balkans (Ibrahimi, 2025).

The small states of the Western Balkans, therefore, face a strategic dilemma: maintaining their Euro-Atlantic orientation while not excluding cooperation with other actors. This “careful balancing” is a defining feature of the diplomacy of small states in today’s multipolar order

Conclusion

In everyday international relations, small states continually face limitations imposed by their restricted possession of key power resources. At the same time, the international system is changing in multiple dimensions, and these transformations increasingly constrain the actions of small states. The new global circumstances—particularly the war in Ukraine—have made it more difficult for small states to secure a respected position and to realize their foreign policy interests, especially when priorities are not carefully defined in accordance with existing conditions and capabilities.

The small states of the Western Balkans operate in a complex environment where security, integration, and identity are closely intertwined. While structural constraints prevent them from exerting significant international influence, flexible

diplomacy and multilateral cooperation enable them to protect their national interests.

This study concludes that, despite the challenges, small states can leverage their advantages through:

- maintaining a consistent orientation toward the EU and NATO,
- adopting careful balancing strategies toward major powers, and
- strengthening their role as constructive actors in the region.

In the new fragmented global order, the survival and success of small states will depend on their ability to combine multilateral diplomacy with internal reform and the building of inter-state trust across the region.

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Arlinda Hasani

Phd candidate. South East European University,
Faculty of Law, Tetovo, N. Macedonia,
<https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7807-4670>

Ismail Zejneli

Prof. Dr., South East European University, Faculty of
Law, Tetovo, N. Macedonia,

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8545-142X>

Correspondence concerning this article should be
addressed to Arlinda Hasani,
Email: ah32353@seeu.edu.mk

Social and Cultural Aspects of Domestic Violence in Kosovo

Arlinda Hasani, Ismail Zejneli

Abstract

In our society, marriage and the family enjoy special protection, and these are guaranteed by the Constitution. The institution of marriage and family relations are regulated by family law and are protected by criminal law. There are many forms of domestic violence, such as physical violence, psychological violence, violence against children, violence against women, violence against parents, etc., and unfortunately, we encounter almost all types in the society we live in today. Domestic violence is often seen more as a private matter rather than a violation of fundamental human rights, which hinders the proper addressing of cases and encourages the silence of victims. In many cases, due to social stigmatization and fear of judgment or losing family status, victims are reluctant to report the violence. Furthermore, economic inequality and the low employment rate of women strengthen their dependency on abusive partners, forcing them to remain in violent relationships. Effective addressing domestic violence requires an integrated approach and inter-institutional cooperation. This includes not only the implementation of existing laws but also the provision of protective and rehabilitative services, as well as the creation of mechanisms for monitoring violence and protecting victims.

Keywords: domestic violence; patriarchy; victim stigmatization; economic dependence; gender equality

Introduction

This paper addresses the social and cultural aspects of domestic violence in Kosovo, analyzing the impact of traditional norms, patriarchal culture, the stigmatization of victims, economic dependency, and the role of education in this phenomenon.

Therefore, the study of this paper will analyze the social impact on the perception of domestic violence, the education of perpetrators, the role of education in changing violent behaviors, and empowering victims, education in schools and communities, the age of the perpetrator as a factor of domestic violence, the gender of the perpetrator as a factor of domestic violence, the number of family members as a factor of domestic violence, etc.

The study of this paper will particularly focus on the role of education as a key instrument in changing attitudes and behaviors that encourage violence. Through educational programs, perpetrator training, and victim empowerment, violence can be reduced and discriminatory social norms transformed.

In addition, the need for a coordinated inter-institutional approach is emphasized, where cooperation between the state, civil society, and the international community should be continuous in order to provide effective protection for victims and the rehabilitation of perpetrators.

The paper concludes that domestic violence in Kosovo cannot be treated merely as an individual problem, but as a complex phenomenon closely linked to social and cultural norms. Therefore, for effective addressing, not only the implementation of existing laws and strategies is required, but also a gradual transformation of the social mentality that would lead towards gender equality and the elimination of violence.

Social Norms: How Culture and Society Influence the Perception of Domestic Violence

The family represents the living community of parents and children, as well as other relatives if they live in a common household (Zejneli, 2007, p. 88). Criminal law contains a series of provisions that ensure protection from domestic violence. Healthy families and family relationships have long been considered fundamental conditions for a successful generation and a stable society with a secure perspective for the future. Family conflicts, conflicts between husband and wife, conflicts between parents and children, multiple divorces, family abandonment, and child

abandonment are increasing the number of victims every day (Aliu & Zejneli, 2017, pp. 213–221).

Domestic violence is a behavior driven by the need for control. It can start with threats, disturbing calls, and stalking (such as following the victim when they go to work and threatening them), progressing to unwanted sexual relations, physical confrontations, and even worse, to death. Domestic violence is usually not an isolated incident and often becomes more severe and more frequent over time. Many perpetrators are not violent in other relationships, such as at work or with friends (Aliu & Zejneli, 2017, pp. 213–221). They constantly deny domestic violence and the significance of this violence. When confronted with their abusive behavior, they tend to blame their partner for provoking them or refuse to accept responsibility.

In Kosovo, traditional norms and patriarchal culture have a significant impact, as they influence domestic violence to be seen as a private matter. Men are viewed as the primary authority in the family, while women are treated as submissive and forced to comply. Traditional norms contribute to the silence of victims of domestic violence, as their fear stems from the prejudice and stigmatization they may face from society. This silence makes it difficult to report cases and conduct research related to domestic violence (Kosovo Women's Network [KWN], 2015, p. 40).

In many rural families, reporting an abusive husband is considered shameful, and for the sake of honor, women are forced to remain silent to avoid being excluded from the family and separated from their children, especially in patriarchal families where divorce is viewed negatively. Unfortunately, the family is the one that influences these cases negatively, as they do not allow the victim to report the case, telling her: *"Don't report it, you must preserve the family's honor, it will become very public."* These are some of the reasons that prevent the victim from reporting the violence, as she experiences insecurity and fear of losing her family and financial support, which forces her to stay in an abusive relationship (Association of Journalists of Kosovo, 2025).

According to a 2019 UN Women study, 31% of people believed that violence is a private family matter and that neighbors should not intervene, while 29% perceive violence as a normal part of every family relationship (UN Women, 2019).

Victim Stigmatization

The two main factors influencing the stigmatization of victims of domestic violence are gender inequality and women's economic dependence. This occurs due to inappropriate treatment by authorities, as victims feel blamed, often lacking information about their rights and protective mechanisms, and receiving inadequate treatment from the police and their lawyers. They feel the need to report violence in order to receive support, but they also have the sense that, as victims, they will be blamed again. According to a 2023 report by Amnesty International, these are some of the obstacles that victims face at every stage, and naturally, this improper, blame-shifting approach toward the victim, coupled with the denial of information, has negative effects on reporting and pursuing cases of domestic violence (Amnesty International, 2023).

In Kosovo, victims remain silent due to shame and fear of stigmatization. This climate of silence occurs because violence is seen as an issue that should be resolved within the family. According to OSCE's 2019 testing, it was found that family members often expect the victim to forgive the perpetrator for the sake of the family or even the children. Furthermore, family members have an emotional and psychological impact on the victim, telling them things like *"Don't break the family over a single kick"*, *"Don't break the family over a slap,"* etc. For this reason, many victims remain silent due to social shame and do not report the case (OSCE Mission in Kosovo, 2019).

The impact of economic dependence plays a significant role in reporting cases, as women feel powerless and lack alternatives. According to statistics, only 17-18% of women are employed in Kosovo, and their property ownership is minimal. Due to this economic dependence, victims feel *"guilty"* when seeking help, as they cannot live without financial income (Amnesty International & BIRN, 2023).

The Role of Education in Changing Violent Behaviors and Empowering Victims

Violence is any act or failure to act by one person toward another that results in harm to physical, moral, psychological, sexual, social, or economic integrity. Domestic violence is defined as any act of violence between individuals who are or have been in a family relationship (Zejneli, 2018, p.86).

Education is the key to sustainable cultural change. In 2022, the Presidency of Kosovo issued several recommendations for the prevention of domestic violence, recommending that the logistical capacity of the Kosovo Police be increased for teams monitoring and handling domestic violence cases, that free legal aid be provided to victims regardless of their socio-economic status, and that cooperation for awareness be strengthened so that victims are aware of free legal assistance. Additionally, the integration of anti-violence modules in primary and secondary education levels, revision of school textbooks to include gender equality, increasing the number of psychologists and pedagogues in schools, and inter-institutional cooperation were recommended (President of Kosovo, 2022).

The OSCE structure in Kosovo bases its mission on the adoption and implementation of non-discriminatory legal frameworks and policies, placing special emphasis on the empowerment of women, gender equality, and women's rights. At its core, its mission is to create programs to improve women's access to property and inheritance rights. Its mission also supports the police in conducting gender-sensitive investigations in cases of domestic violence and supports the Women Judges and Prosecutors Forum to encourage a diverse and representative justice system. According to the OSCE, interventions should be made, and attention should be paid to the education of professionals, starting with the police, social services, journalists, and preventive programs. Therefore, there should be gender-sensitive training and education for perpetrators to change their behavior (OSCE & Council of Europe, 2019).

As for the role of education in changing violent behaviors, it represents a key instrument for changing behaviors that encourage domestic violence, acting on three levels:

Education of Perpetrators

The Government of the Republic of Kosovo and the Ministry of Justice, in cooperation with the Council of Europe, presented the first National Program for the treatment of perpetrators of violence against women in 2023, a program that has been unique in the region (Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo, 2023). Through this program, a different model is introduced, which includes: integrated psycho-social treatment, inner transformative change, supported by international expertise and piloted in the institutional field. Based on the standards of the Istanbul Convention, the program aims to balance criminal responsibility with

rehabilitative psychosocial interventions. The ultimate goal of this program is not only punishment but also providing a path for transformation to reintegrate into society with shared values.

The program is based on successful psycho-social models aimed at preventing the recurrence of abusive behaviors, by combining these elements (Council of Europe, 2021).

- Analysis of the factors that provoke domestic violence;
- Training for controlling the perpetrator and developing their emotional intelligence;
- Improvement of communication with the family and the development of a responsible role within the family;
- After release from correctional institutions, continuous support and supervision should be provided.

The National Program for the Treatment of Domestic Violence Perpetrators started its first pilot phase at the Dubrava Center, where a 6-month psycho-educational training was held, with the participation of about 20 perpetrators of violence (in-mates). This training aimed at: changing behavior, raising awareness about responsibility, and improving family communication (Council of Europe, 2024).

A key component of the program was also raising awareness about the consequences of violence on children, who often experience severe psychological trauma either as witnesses or direct victims.

Through the pilot program in Dubrava, it is expected to contribute to:

- The implementation of the Istanbul Convention (Article 16);
- The integration of punishment and rehabilitation;
- After release, building capacities for monitoring their behaviors and attitudes.

The Council of Europe, in collaboration with the Kosovo Academy of Justice, has launched the HELP platform (Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals). This platform is a type of course for legal professionals on domestic violence and violence against women. These courses aim to change the handling of cases by institutions and to build a more sensitive approach toward victims (Council of Europe & Kosovo Academy of Justice, 2020).

More than 50 participants took part in this course, following seven online modules under the supervision of local trainers. The course included judges, prosecutors, police officers, and victim lawyers. The benefits from this course are:

- Empowering justice professionals, such as judges, prosecutors, police officers, and victim lawyers, to respond more sensitively in handling domestic violence cases.
- Developing knowledge in adopting international standards, including the Istanbul Convention and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights.
- Harmonizing local laws with international standards, enabling professionals to act in accordance with the needs of the local jurisdiction.

The Kosovo Women's Network (KWN) and the Council of Europe, in collaboration, organized a conference titled "*Breaking the Cycle of Violence*," where it was recommended that there be development of education programs and rehabilitation of perpetrators within the legal framework. These should include:

- To organize trainings to raise awareness about the consequences of domestic violence that will be displayed;
- To encourage changes in attitudes and gender norms among men as potential perpetrators of domestic violence;
- After institutional treatment of domestic violence cases, there should be continuous monitoring (Kosovo Women's Network & Council of Europe, 2023).

Education and Empowerment of Victims

The Organization for Social Integration and Development – Follow Up, is one of the organizations that supports women and girls who have experienced domestic violence. Its goal is to assist in the reintegration process into society, as well as advocate and educate to spread its message as widely as possible (Follow Up, Education & Advocacy, 2023).

Follow Up has implemented programs for professional training, provided psychological and legal support to victims, and offered necessary equipment for life after sheltering, with the aim of reintegrating victims into society by contributing to building self-confidence and integration.

International studies show that training or programs held for education and empowerment of women lead to a reduction in violence, by creating more self-confidence, increasing self-esteem, and enabling them with communication skills.

Education in Schools and Communities

The Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Education in Kosovo, as part of their global campaign “*16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence*,” organized educational discussions in the early hours of class at “*Ahmet Gashi*” Primary School in Pristina. These discussions focused on gender equality and domestic violence in the school environment. The students were informed about promoting gender equality, reporting violence in schools, and how to influence their communities and families to support victims of violence (KosovaPress, 2024).

As part of this campaign, the organizations UNFPA, UN Women, and local institutions have organized informational sessions in schools in Gjakova, Gjiilan, Dragash, and other municipalities, focusing on raising awareness about domestic violence and protection from violence (UNFPA Kosovo, 2024).

The Age of the Perpetrator as a Factor in Domestic Violence

The connection between age and crime has been studied for a long time. Quetele (Ketele) considers age as one of the most important factors influencing crime trends (Zejneli, 2018, p. 116).

Researchers try to explain the causes of crime variability depending on age groups and the factors that affect the spread of crimes among younger populations (Telegrafi, 2023). They emphasize various factors, among which the most important are: the demographic composition of the population, the importance of the younger age group in society, and the high level of activity among these age groups.

According to statistics and reports on domestic violence cases, the age group between 20 and 50 years shows the highest level of domestic violence. Violence within these age groups results from a life stage marked by stress related to economic responsibilities, long-term stability, and family roles, which can lead to aggressive behavior toward family member (Telegrafi, 2023).

According to international studies, it is found that men aged 18-35 are considered perpetrators of violence due to:

- Experiencing violence during childhood;
- Harsh economic conditions (poverty, unemployment);
- High hormone levels, such as testosterone;
- Social norms, tradition, and culture (World Health Organization [WHO], 2023).

Statistical and psychological analyses show that individuals of young and middle age are more involved in acts of violence due to various psycho-social, cultural, and economic reasons.

Table 1

A comparative overview of Kosovo with the countries in the region regarding age groups that have committed domestic violence

Country	High-risk group	Year	Comments
Kosovo	20–40 years old	2023	The highest number of reported cases
Albania	25–44 years old	2022	The same problematic group according to INSTAT (Institute of Statistics of Albania)
North Macedonia	30–50 years old	2022	Greater focus on unemployed men

Gender as a Factor in Domestic Violence

Gender is the primary factor in domestic violence, where patriarchy and legal insecurity favor men as perpetrators of violence, while women, females, and children remain the primary victims who are limited in their ability to seek protection from institutions. Case studies of domestic violence in Kosovo and the region show that men are primarily the perpetrators of domestic violence, while women, females, and children are the main victims of violence, despite some exceptions.

UN Women highlights that 54% of women over the age of 15 have experienced physical, psychological, or sexual violence from their partners (UN Women, 2024).

There is a great injustice toward victims regarding the reporting of cases, which are met with irresponsible treatment, both by the police when receiving information

about reporting domestic violence cases, and a lack of concrete protection. Victims are stigmatized, especially women from minority communities (Amnesty International, 2023).

UN Women has published a regional meta-analysis titled “*Voices of YOUth*,” which addresses gender-based violence, stereotypes, gender roles, and toxic masculinity, with the attitudes and experiences of young people in the Western Balkans (UN Women – Voices of Youth, 2023), they reported that toxic masculinity is more associated with the aggressor, meaning the dominance of masculinity is more widespread in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Albania, which represents a dangerous factor for the continuation of violence in future generations.

32% of young people surveyed reported that they had been witnesses or victims of violence against women, either in their families or in public spaces. Over 60% of the men surveyed declared that they support the patriarchal stereotype, stating that the husband is the “*head of the family*.”

It can be concluded that due to stigmatization, fear, and shame from society, the main obstacles preventing young people, especially young girls, from reporting violence or participating in awareness-raising campaigns for violence prevention are significant.

The Number of Family Members as a Factor in Domestic Violence

Families with more members are more exposed to violence due to economic capacity, limited living space, shared psychological stress, and tension within the family, which can lead to an increase in conflicts and violence within the household. According to data, the average number of family members in Kosovo in 2023 was 5.2, the highest in the Western Balkans, which means that multiple generations live together, including grandparents, parents, and children, who may affect the limitation of their privacy and increase daily stress (Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2024).

International studies show that families with more than six members experience tension and domestic violence, and this occurs due to:

- Lack of privacy and physical space;
- Unequal gender responsibilities;
- Unemployment and economic stress within the family (Frontiers in Public Health, 2023).

The most frequent cases of violence occur in municipalities with rural populations because their families are extended, where social control is lower, and institutional intervention is more difficult (Kosovar Centre for Security Studies [KCSS], 2024).

Women living in large families in Kosovo have reported that due to family pressure and support, they are forced to remain silent and raise their children in a tense family environment (Reddit, 2022).

To address the negative impact of violence in families with a large number of members, economic and psychological support for large families is essential. The state and municipalities should provide social assistance, training for parents with many children to help reduce stress, a key factor in violence. Community centers should be created in rural areas, offering activities, legal and psychosocial counseling for women and children, especially for those women experiencing violence. The creation of special courses related to the economic empowerment of women would positively impact women so that they are not dependent on their abusive partners. Regular awareness campaigns should be held, either through television, social media, or schools, to inform families about the fundamental rights of women and children and to break the myths, enabling them to live in a family without violence and stress.

Conclusion

Domestic violence in Kosovo is a complex social and cultural phenomenon, influenced by patriarchal norms and traditional expectations for gender roles. These norms affect the perception of violence as a private issue, hindering the reporting of cases and reinforcing the economic dependence of victims. Social stigmatization, fear of prejudice, and the lack of financial independence force victims to remain silent, making it more difficult to access legal protection mechanisms and the appropriate social services (Kosovo Women's Network [KWN], 2015).

Education and training are key instruments for changing the mentality and behaviors that fuel violence. Educational programs for perpetrators, victim empowerment, and training for legal professionals contribute to raising awareness about the consequences of violence, improving institutional responses, and empowering victims to seek protection and justice (Council of Europe, 2019; Council of Europe & Academy of Justice of Kosovo, 2020; Follow Up, Education & Advocacy, 2023).

In addition to individual treatments, community education and awareness campaigns in schools and municipalities promote gender equality and change social perceptions that sustain domestic violence (UN Women, 2019; UNFPA Kosovo, 2024).

Only the combination of legal enforcement, education, awareness, and the gradual transformation of social mentality can lead to the elimination of violence and the securing of fundamental rights for all family members. In conclusion, domestic violence should not be treated merely as an individual or family problem.

It is a phenomenon closely linked to cultural and social structures, and addressing it requires a combination of legal, social, educational, and psychological measures, as well as a long-term commitment to gender equality and the protection of human rights (Lomazzi, 2023).

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Sead Dzidal

International Balkan University, Skopje, North Macedonia, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8280-7712>

Sanja Adzaip Velichkovski

International Balkan University, Skopje, North Macedonia

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sead Dzidal

Email: sead.dzidal@ibu.edu.mk s.adzaip@ibu.edu.mk

The Influence of Social Media on Young People: On Digital Addiction and Its Psychological Implications

Sead Dzidal, Sanja Adzaip Velichkovski

Abstract

This paper summarizes recent survey findings with previous psychological research to analyze the usage of social networking platforms in daily life and its implications for digital hygiene, self-regulation, and mental well-being. The study is particularly focused on populations susceptible to digital dependency, such as the young people.

The analysis reveals a strong tendency towards immediate and frequent social media engagement upon waking and before tasks, alongside a complex emotional landscape ranging from mood enhancement to feelings of sadness and irritability upon disconnection. Furthermore, a significant portion of the surveyed population demonstrates a struggle with controlling their social media use, including failed attempts at cessation and the prioritization of digital engagement over essential life functions like sleep.

Furthermore, the study employed the Social Networking Addiction Scale (SNAS) among 246 young adult respondents, revealing challenges with self-regulation and behavioral control. These findings collectively suggest a concerning trend of digital dependency, echoing warnings from researchers regarding attention degradation, compulsive usage, and the exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities by digital platforms.

Keywords: social media, addiction, communication, young people, education

Introduction

In the contemporary digital landscape, social networking sites (SNS) have become deeply interwoven into the fabric of daily life, transforming communication, information consumption, and social interaction. While offering numerous benefits, the pervasive presence of these platforms has raised significant concerns regarding their potential to increase dependency and negatively impact user well-being, attention management, and self-regulation. This paper draws upon survey results detailing user behaviors and perceptions related to social media use, while integrating these findings with external psychological research to illuminate the complex effects of the users' digital engagement. This paper also investigates the extent to which young adults demonstrate behavioral and emotional indicators of social media addiction. The main aim is to identify the prevalence of addictive social media behaviors and discuss their implications for the mental health and well-being of the users.

Pervasive Digital Habits and the Gateway Phenomenon

The proliferation of digital technologies has catalyzed deep changes in the behavioral patterns of young individuals. One significant development is the formation of “pervasive digital habits”, frequent, often automatic engagement with digital devices, applications, and social platforms. These habits may function as gateways towards more problematic or addictive forms of social media use among young adults.

Pervasive digital habits manifest in various behaviors, such as frequent checking of digital devices, responding to notifications, switching between apps, and habitual use of social networks in s.c. non-optimal contexts (e.g., during study, before sleep). Spencer et al. (2011) explored checking habits and demonstrated how brief, repetitive inspections of dynamic content, often in response to micro-rewards or cues, reinforce behavior and increase overall usage. Meanwhile, mobile technology habits have been linked with individual differences in impulse control and preference for immediate over delayed rewards (delay discounting), indicating that cognitive and affective traits moderate the intensity and risk of these habits transitioning to maladaptive use.

The gateway phenomenon refers to the idea that habitual, relatively benign digital behaviors may pave the way for more compulsive or harmful engagement with social media. For young people, this process often begins with pervasive use, such as frequent smartphone checking or moderate social media involvement. It gradually

escalates through deeper psychological dependence, mood regulation through social media, withdrawal symptoms, and conflict in life domains. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies suggest that higher general screen exposure or pervasive digital habits are significantly associated with poorer sleep quality, increased psychological distress, and lifestyle disruptions.

Furthermore, problematic social media use among adolescents has been linked to negative eating habits, reduced physical activity, and risk behaviors such as smoking or alcohol use.

In summary, the gateway phenomenon states that pervasive digital habits are not only incidental or neutral features of young people's lives, but potential precursors to more harmful patterns of social media addiction. Understanding this trajectory has clear implications for prevention and education. Interventions aimed at reducing preemptive engagement (e.g., limiting notifications, mindful checking, etc.) and strengthening self-regulation may help interrupt the gateway process toward addictive behavior.

Methodology of the Survey

Given that young individuals represent one of the most active demographic groups on social media platforms, concerns regarding social networking addiction have become increasingly relevant to their developmental processes. The rapid expansion of digital interactions has raised important questions about compulsive usage patterns and their psychological implications, particularly in relation to personal, social, and professional domains. To address these concerns, the study adopted a quantitative, survey-based methodology to examine the extent of social networking addiction among young adults.

The research sample was composed of 246 young adults, aged 18–29, primarily university students in North Macedonia. A convenience sampling method was used due to accessibility and online data collection constraints. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and all respondents provided informed consent. Young adulthood represents a formative developmental stage during which individuals actively establish social networks, construct personal and professional identities, and rely extensively on digital media for communication, entertainment, and educational purposes. Investigating social networking addiction within this group, therefore, provides critical insights into its potential effects on mental health and overall well-being.

The primary instrument employed was the Social Networking Addiction Scale (SNAS) instrument, which demonstrated high internal consistency. This validated tool, developed by Shah Nawaz and Rehman (2020), assesses multiple dimensions of excessive social media use and dependency. Data collection was conducted through an online survey, chosen for its efficiency in reaching a large number of participants while ensuring both accessibility and anonymity. The questionnaire utilized a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, allowing respondents to indicate the degree of their engagement in behaviors associated with social networking. This scaling method enables a systematic analysis of behavioral and emotional patterns characteristic of addiction, including salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse.

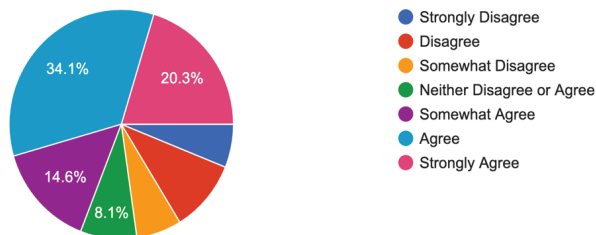
By identifying the prevalence and patterns of addictive social media behaviors, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on digital behavior and psychological health.

Survey Results

The survey results highlight a strong inclination among respondents to engage with social networking sites at the very start of their day and prior to initiating other activities, suggesting deeply rooted digital habits.

Figure 1.

Summarized results for the statement: I go to social networking sites instantly after waking up in the morning

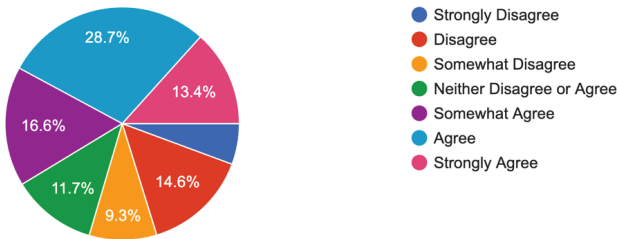


The survey results reveal a strong tendency among respondents to engage with social networking sites immediately upon waking. Out of 246 participants, a significant majority, approximately 69%, reported agreeing to some extent with the statement “I go to social networking sites instantly after waking up in the morning.” Specifically, 34.1% agreed, and 20.3% strongly agreed, while an additional 14.6% somewhat agreed. In contrast, only a small fraction of respondents

expressed disagreement, with less than 25% falling into the “somewhat disagree,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree” categories. These findings suggest that checking social media first thing in the morning is a normalized and potentially habitual behavior for a large portion of the population.

Figure 2.

Summarized results for the statement: I check my social networking account before starting any task or activity



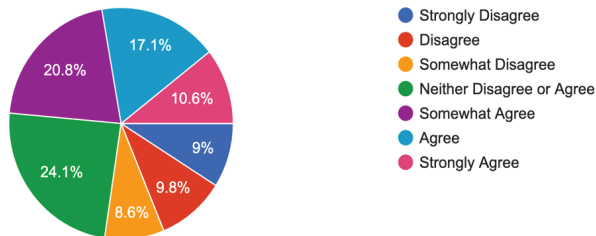
The data from the second survey statement, “I check my social networking account before starting any task or activity”, provides further evidence of pervasive digital habits among respondents. Out of 247 individuals, a majority indicated varying levels of agreement with the statement. 28.7% agreed and 13.4% strongly agreed, totaling over 42% of participants who consciously acknowledge engaging with social media prior to beginning any form of task or activity. An additional 16.6% somewhat agreed, reinforcing the notion that a significant portion of users have integrated social media into the initial stages of their daily routine. On the other hand, approximately 24% of respondents expressed disagreement to varying degrees, suggesting a smaller, yet notable segment that resists this behavior. These results suggest that for many individuals, checking social media has become a psychological or behavioral gateway to productivity, possibly a form of digital priming or procrastination. This raises questions about attention management, cognitive dependency, and the psychological impact of pre-task digital engagement, particularly in contexts where focus and discipline are essential.

Combined, these findings suggest a concerning trend of digital dependency. The act of checking social media has, for many, become a default behavior at the start of both the day and new activities. This aligns with recent psychological research on habit formation, cognitive offloading, and the role of dopamine reinforcement in smartphone use. According to Alter (2017), digital platforms exploit psychological

vulnerabilities to form habitual loops, often triggered by cues such as waking up or facing a task. Similarly, Newport (2019) warns of “attention residue” where frequent, low-effort digital engagements degrade focus and deep work capacity. This behavior may reflect a broader societal shift where social validation, digital presence, and algorithmic engagement take precedence over mindful routines. The implications are significant, not only for productivity but also for mental health, self-regulation, and emotional well-being.

Figure 3.

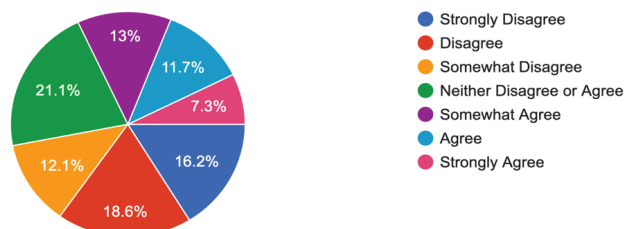
Summarized results for the statement: Social networking helps me lift my mood.



This survey statement indicates a mixed but generally positive sentiment regarding social media’s impact on mood. A significant portion of respondents agreed that social networking helps lift their mood, with 20.8% “Somewhat Agree” and 17.1% “Agree,” totaling 37.9%. An additional 10.6% “Strongly Agree,” bringing the total who agree to some extent to 48.5%. Conversely, a considerable number expressed disagreement: 9.8% “Strongly Disagree,” 9% “Disagree,” and 8.6% “Somewhat Disagree,” for a combined 27.4%. The largest single group of respondents, 24.1%, selected “Neither Disagree nor Agree,” indicating a substantial portion of the population holds a neutral stance on this issue.

Figure 4.

Summarized results for the statement: I feel sad when I am unable to log in to social networking sites.

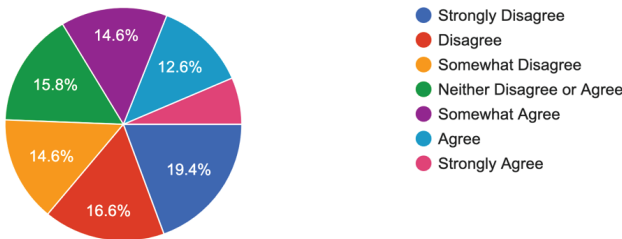


The data from this item indicate that respondents experience mixed emotional responses when disconnected from social media. This particular question explores feelings of sadness when unable to access social networking sites. A notable percentage of respondents indicated some degree of agreement with this statement: 13% “Somewhat Agree,” 11.7% “Agree,” and 7.3% “Strongly Agree” collectively representing 32% of participants. This suggests that a meaningful segment of the population may experience negative emotional states when disconnected from social media. In contrast, a larger proportion of respondents disagreed, with 16.2% “Strongly Disagree,” 18.6% “Disagree,” and 12.1% “Somewhat Disagree,” totalling 46.9%. Similar to the first survey, a significant number of participants, 21.1%, were neutral, selecting “Neither Disagree or Agree.”

The comparative analysis of the two previous charts suggests a nuanced relationship between social networking and user emotion. While a large portion of the population finds social media beneficial for mood enhancement, a smaller but still significant group experiences negative feelings of sadness when access is denied. These findings highlight both the perceived positive benefits and the potential for emotional dependency associated with social networking. Further research could explore the characteristics of individuals within the different response categories to better understand the factors influencing these varied emotional responses.

Figure 5.

Summarized results for the statement: I become irritable whenever I cannot log in to social networking sites.

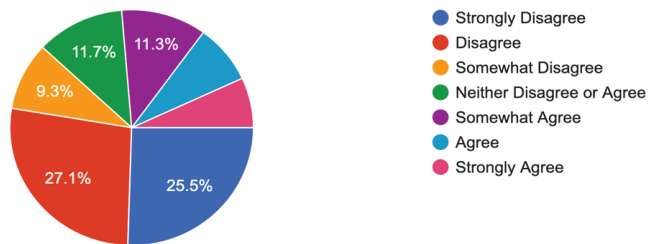


With the statement, “I become irritable whenever I cannot log in to social networking sites,” the emotional impact of social media inaccessibility was analyzed. The responses are distributed across a spectrum, with a notable portion of participants expressing a degree of irritability. Specifically, 14.6% “Somewhat Agree,” 12.6% “Agree,” and 9.4% “Strongly Agree,” which collectively represent 36.6% of

the respondents who experience some form of irritation. This indicates that a significant minority of the survey population may be experiencing withdrawal-like symptoms when disconnected from social media. Conversely, a larger proportion of respondents disagreed with the statement: 19.4% “Strongly Disagree,” 16.6% “Disagree,” and 14.6% “Somewhat Disagree,” totaling 50.6%. The remaining 15.8% of respondents took a neutral stance, selecting “Neither Disagree nor Agree.”

Figure 6.

Summarized results for the statement: I try to hide the time I spend on social networking sites.

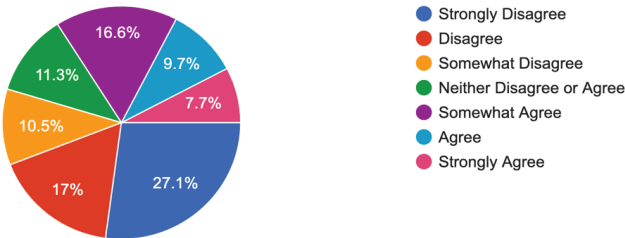


The survey statement, “I try to hide the time I spend on social networking”, investigates a behavioral dimension of social media use. The data reveals a strong inclination among respondents not to hide their social media usage. A substantial majority expressed some form of disagreement with the statement: 25.5% “Strongly Disagree,” 27.1% “Disagree,” and 9.3% “Somewhat Disagree,” for a combined total of 61.9%. This suggests that the majority of the population surveyed feels little need to conceal their social media activity. In contrast, a smaller segment of the population indicated that they do attempt to hide their usage: 11.3% “Somewhat Agree,” 7.3% “Agree,” and 4.9% “Strongly Agree,” totalling 23.5%. The remaining 11.7% of respondents maintained a neutral position.

The comparative analysis of the two charts highlights a potential discrepancy between emotional dependency and outward behavior. While over a third of respondents experience some level of irritability when unable to access social media, a much smaller proportion feel the need to hide their usage from others. This could imply that while the emotional attachment to social media is notable for some, it does not necessarily translate into a secretive behavior pattern for the majority of the population. Further academic inquiry could explore the motivations behind this behavior and the demographic factors associated with each response group.

Figure 7.

Summarized results for the statement: I ignore my sleep because I have/want to be on social networking sites.



This statement explored the potential for social media use to interfere with essential life functions, such as sleep. This chart indicates that for a segment of the population, social networking has a negative impact on sleep patterns. The percentage of those who agree with the statement is as follows: 16.6% “Somewhat Agree,” 9.7% “Agree,” and 7.7% “Strongly Agree,” totaling 34%. This suggests that a significant minority of the respondents are prioritizing social media use over sleep. A larger portion of the respondents, however, disagreed with the statement: 27.1% “Strongly Disagree,” 17% “Disagree,” and 10.5% “Somewhat Disagree,” for a combined total of 54.6%. The remaining 11.3% of respondents held a neutral view.

Figure 8.

Summarized results for the statement: I have tried to stop using social networking sites but have failed.

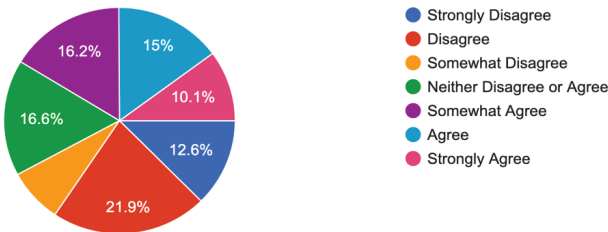


Figure 8 shows the answers to the survey statement, “I have tried to stop using social networking sites but have failed,” which examines self-perceived lack of control over social media usage. The data reveals a significant portion of the population

that has attempted and failed to reduce their social media use. The combined percentage of those who agree with this statement is substantial: 16.2% “Somewhat Agree,” 15% “Agree,” and 10.1% “Strongly Agree,” which totals 41.3%. This suggests that a notable segment of the surveyed population may be experiencing difficulties in controlling their social media habits. Conversely, a majority of respondents indicated they have not had this experience, with 12.6% “Strongly Disagree,” 21.9% “Disagree,” and 13.5% “Somewhat Disagree,” combining to 48% who disagree. A smaller proportion, 16.6%, remained neutral, selecting “Neither Disagree nor Agree.”

In sum, there is a concerning pattern of social media use for a considerable portion of the surveyed population. While a substantial minority reports an inability to successfully reduce their social media use, a similar percentage also admits to sacrificing sleep for the purpose of being online. These findings point to the existence of a population segment that exhibits signs of compulsive social media use, characterized by failed attempts at cessation and the disruption of a basic biological need.

Figure 9.

Summarized results for the statement: I am unable to cut down the time I spend on social networking sites.

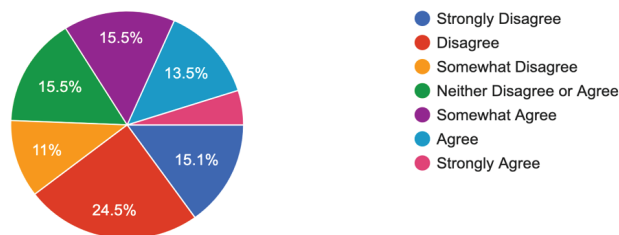
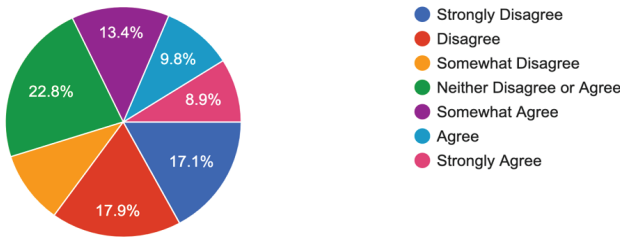


Figure 9 presents a strong indication that a significant portion of the survey group struggles with regulating their social media use. A substantial number of respondents agreed with this statement: 15.5% “Somewhat Agree,” 13.5% “Agree,” and a smaller 6.4% “Strongly Agree,” totalling 35.4%. This suggests that over one-third of the participants perceive themselves as lacking control over their social media consumption. Conversely, a larger portion of the respondents expressed disagreement: 15.1% “Strongly Disagree,” 24.5% “Disagree,” and 11% “Somewhat Disagree,” combining to 50.6%. The remaining 15.5% of respondents held a neutral position.

Figure 10.

Summarized results for the statement: My repeated attempts to reduce the time I spend on social networking sites have failed.



The statement: “My repeated attempts to reduce the time I spend on social networking sites have failed,” delved deeper into the behavioral aspect of this struggle. The responses here are more varied, with a large neutral group. Those who agreed with the statement represent a considerable minority: 13.4% “Somewhat Agree,” 9.8% “Agree,” and 8.9% “Strongly Agree,” totalling 32.1%. This figure indicates that nearly one-third of the respondents have a history of unsuccessful attempts to moderate their social media use. A similar-sized group of respondents disagreed with the statement: 17.1% “Strongly Disagree,” 17.9% “Disagree,” and 10% “Somewhat Disagree,” combining to 45%. The largest single group of respondents in this survey, at 22.8%, selected “Neither Disagree or Agree,” suggesting that many participants have not yet attempted to reduce their usage or do not feel strongly about the success of their attempts.

In conclusion, a notable segment of the population struggles with controlling their social media usage. The results from the chart, where 35.4% of respondents state an inability to cut down their time, are largely consistent with the 32.1% in the next chart who report failed attempts to do so. The discrepancy lies in the neutral response group of the second chart, which is significantly larger, potentially due to a difference in wording that focuses on “repeated attempts” rather than a general inability. These findings suggest a pattern of compulsive social media use among a considerable portion of the population, characterized by both the desire to reduce usage and the inability to do so effectively.

Key Findings of the Research

Overall, the data demonstrate a consistent pattern of habitual and emotionally charged engagement with social media, with one-third to two-fifths of respondents showing signs of dependency or failed self-regulation attempts.

Despite valuable insights, this study has several limitations, including self-report bias, lack of age segmentation, and reliance on descriptive statistics without inferential analysis. Future research should employ mixed methods or longitudinal designs to strengthen the findings.

The key findings of this research align with recent psychological research on habit formation and cognitive dependency. As Alter (2017) posits, digital platforms are designed to exploit psychological vulnerabilities, leading to the formation of habitual loops often triggered by common cues like waking up or facing a new task. Furthermore, Newport (2019) warns about “attention residue”, where frequent, low-effort digital engagements can degrade focus and deep work capacity. This pattern of immediate and pre-task social media engagement reflects a broader societal shift where “social validation, digital presence, and algorithmic engagement take precedence over mindful routines,” impacting productivity, mental health, and self-regulation

The relationship between social networking and user emotion is complex and nuanced, encompassing both perceived positive benefits and the potential for negative emotional dependency. While a larger proportion of respondents do not experience negative emotions, the existence of a substantial group that does underscores the “potential for emotional dependency associated with social networking”. These findings suggest that for some, social media access is intertwined with emotional well-being, leading to distress when access is disrupted.

The main findings of this study highlight several key areas of concern regarding social media use:

1. *Pervasive and Habitual Engagement- Social media has become a deeply ingrained habit for many:* A significant majority, approximately 69%, engage with social networking sites immediately after waking up. Over 42% of users also check their accounts before starting any other task or activity, suggesting that for many, social media acts as a “psychological or behavioral gateway” to productivity or a form of procrastination. These habits align with research on digital platforms exploiting psychological vulnerabilities to create habitual loops. It is important to note that while

many respondents exhibit habitual engagement, this does not necessarily equate to clinical addiction. Rather, it indicates a continuum of dependency behaviors that warrant early intervention.

2. Complex Emotional Dependency- The emotional impact of social media is multifaceted: A large portion of users (48.5%) feel that social networking helps lift their mood. Despite the mood-enhancing benefits, a significant minority experiences negative emotional states when unable to access social media. Approximately 32% feel sad, and 36.6% become irritable when they cannot log in, indicating withdrawal-like symptoms for a substantial group.

3. Struggle with Self-Regulation and Control: A considerable segment of the population demonstrates a lack of control over their social media consumption. 41.3% of respondents reported having tried to stop using social media but failed. Similarly, 32.1% confirmed that their repeated attempts to reduce time spent on these platforms were unsuccessful.

4. Prioritizing Social Media: This lack of control extends to disrupting essential life functions. 34% of users admitted that social networking negatively impacts their sleep patterns, prioritizing online engagement over a basic biological need

These findings collectively suggest a concerning pattern of compulsive usage that degrades attention, impacts emotional well-being, and overrides self-regulation mechanisms.

Conclusions

The survey results, when considered alongside established psychological frameworks, give a comprehensive picture of the profound impact of social media on individuals' lives. The habits of checking social media immediately upon waking and before tasks show a deep-seated digital dependency that can degrade focus and hurt mental well-being. While social media offers mood-enhancing benefits for some, a significant portion experiences negative emotional states, including sadness and irritability upon disconnection, indicating potential emotional dependency and withdrawal-like symptoms. Crucially, a considerable segment of the population struggles with self-regulation, exhibiting failed attempts to reduce social media use and prioritizing it over essential functions like sleep

The survey findings, paint a clear picture of the profound and often problematic integration of social media into daily life. A deep-seated digital dependency is

prevalent, characterized by the compulsive checking of social media upon waking and before engaging in other activities. This behavior can degrade mental focus and overall well-being. This aligns with warnings from researchers like Newport (2019) about “attention residue” and Alter (2017) regarding the exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities by digital platforms. While social media may offer mood-enhancing benefits, there is a significant potential for emotional dependency. A considerable number of users experience negative emotions such as sadness and irritability when disconnected, which are indicative of withdrawal-like symptoms. For many individuals, social media use has moved beyond mindful interaction to become a compulsive behavior. This is evidenced by a widespread struggle with self-regulation, demonstrated by failed attempts to reduce usage and the prioritization of digital engagement over essential functions like sleep.

These findings suggest that for many, social media engagement has surpassed mindful interaction to become a compulsive behavior, indicative of “early warning signs of social media addiction”.

The implications of these trends are significant, extending beyond individual productivity and attention management to broader issues of mental health, self-regulation, and emotional well-being, particularly among young people who are growing up deeply immersed in digital environments. The findings reveal early warning signs of social media addiction for a notable portion of the population and underscore the need for further academic inquiry into user dynamics, with the goal of developing effective strategies that promote healthier and more mindful digital habits.

The findings highlight the urgent need for digital literacy programs and educational initiatives that promote self-regulation and mindfulness in technology use. Institutions should integrate discussions on digital hygiene and attention management into curricula to mitigate the risks of compulsive social media behavior among young people.

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Kire Sharlamanov

Faculty of Law, International Balkan University Skopje,
North Macedonia

Ethnic Nationalism and Democracy: The Case of North Macedonia

by Flamur Ismaili

Published by Balkan University Press

Book Review by:
Kire Sharlamanov

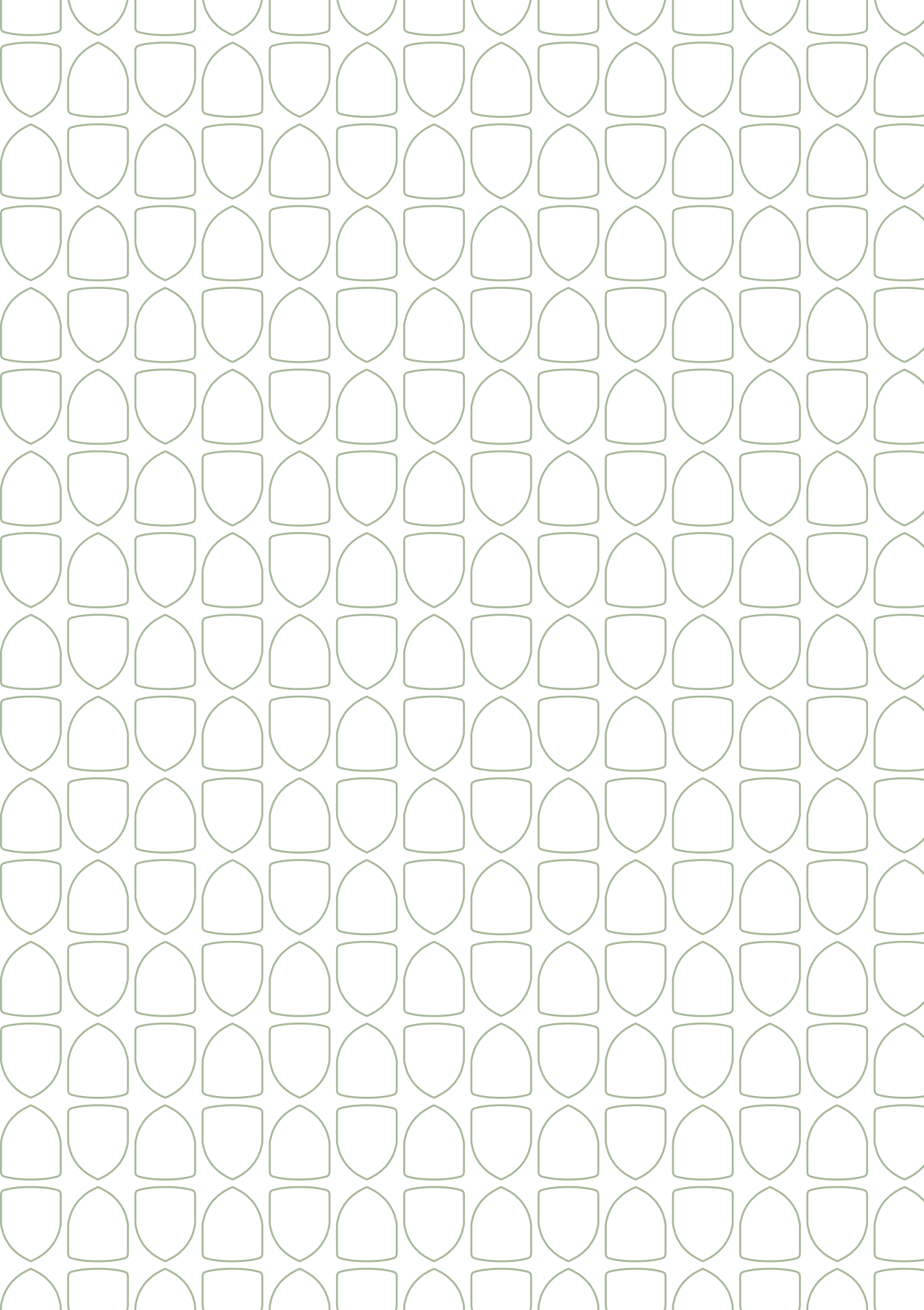
The book *Ethnic Nationalism and Democracy: The Case of North Macedonia* offers a profound analysis of the relationship between ethnic nationalism and democratic development in North Macedonia, exploring identity, governance, and integration in a multi-ethnic context.

Ethnic nationalism and democracy are closely related and very important topics that determine the framework in which the everyday life of citizens is placed. The analysis of their structural relations has both theoretical and practical significance. Especially when it comes to a specific country like North Macedonia, for which there is a lack of more serious academic literature. Hence, the undertaking of the author of the proposed book Asst. Prof. Dr. Flamur Ismaili is bold and pioneering for the development of similar research in the future.

The book "Ethnic Nationalism and Democracy: The Case of North Macedonia" is a significant academic undertaking written in 7,458 words. It is logically and methodologically correctly divided into six chapters: 1. Introduction, 2. Methodological Approach, 3. Theoretical Approach of the Challenges to Democracy and Democratization with a focus on Western Balkans, 4. Literature Review, 5. Post Ethnic – Conflict Period: Rise of Authoritarianism and Challenge of Democracy Promotion in North Macedonia, 6. Conclusion.

The chapters are interconnected in such a way that each chapter provides a basis for understanding the next. The intention is obvious to start its analyses from the most abstract concepts in the categorical apparatus of the social sciences, and later to sharpen the focus, which ends with an analysis of specific examples and situations. The six chapters of the book together form a whole that explains the nature of the relationship between ethnic nationalism and democracy in North Macedonia. This book therefore establishes a foundation for understanding the complexities of democratization in multi-ethnic societies, using North Macedonia as a case study and examining the broader impact of ethnic nationalism on intergroup relations and democratic dynamics. This book delves into the role of identity, with a particular focus on the multi-ethnic societies of the Western Balkans. The complex interplay of ethnicity, language, religion, and history often fuels intergroup tensions. These dynamics are crucial for understanding not only the societal fabric but also the political discourse in North Macedonia.

The author of the book, Asst. Prof. Flamur Ismaili, demonstrates an enviable knowledge of ethnic nationalism, democracy and the way in which these phenomena are structured and incorporated into everyday life in North Macedonia. The literature used in the book is extensive, relevant and current. A good side of the book is the connection of the theoretical approach illustrated with practical examples. The writing style meets academic criteria, and at the same time is accessible to a wider readership, which could contribute to the popularization of the book beyond academic circles.





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