ETHNIC NATIONALISM AND DEMOCRACY:

THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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Flamur Ismaili is currently an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Law, International Balkan University in Skopje and the Head of Balkan Research Center at IBU. His academic journey began at South East European University, where he completed his law degree, before continuing his studies in Türkiye with a government scholarship. He earned both his Master's and PhD in International Relations at Gazi University in Ankara. During his time in Ankara, he gained valuable diplomatic and administrative experience, first as Secretary at the Embassy of North Macedonia and later as an Immigration Officer and subsequently as a Consular Officer at the Royal Norwegian Embassy. In 2022, he was recognized as the PhD student with the highest academic performance among all international scholarship recipients in Türkiye. With a blend of academic and professional experience, his research and teaching interests focus on international Law, democracy and democratization processes, the Balkans, and international relations.

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Foreword

This book presents a detailed and scholarly analysis of the relationship between ethnic nationalism and democratic development in the Republic of North Macedonia. It explores how national identity and ethnic divisions have shaped the country's political evolution, especially in the context of post-communist transition and European integration. The author uses a multidisciplinary approach, combining insights from political science, history, and international relations to offer a comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing democracy in multiethnic societies.

The book places North Macedonia within broader academic debates on ethnic conflict, democratization, and regional geopolitics. It contributes significantly to Balkan studies and comparative politics by examining how internal and external factors influence democratic processes in a deeply divided society. The structure of the book is clear and logical, consisting of six main chapters. Each chapter builds on the previous one to develop a strong argument about the role of ethnic nationalism in shaping democratic outcomes.

The introduction defines the research problem and places the case of Republic of North Macedonia and Macedonian nationalism within the literature on ethnic conflicts and democratization.

Chapter 2 presents the methodological framework, clearly defining the research questions and the analytical parameters.

Chapter 3 provides a solid theoretical foundation, bringing together key perspectives from democratization theory, constructivist approaches to identity, and studies on nationalism. The sections that deal with the legacy of authoritarianism and external influences, including the role of the European Union, give important insights into how international actors shape domestic democratization processes.

The literature review in Chapter 4 is one of the strongest parts of the book, combining historiographical depth with contemporary political analysis. This chapter examines the evolution of Macedonian nationalism, interethnic relations, and constitutional arrangements, offering a detailed overview of identity formation in a contested political environment.

Chapter 5 offers a rich empirical analysis of the post-conflict period (2006–2017), discussing authoritarian rule, ethnic tensions, and political and democratical stagnation. The detailed discussion of the Skopje 2014 project, corruption scandals, and institutional weaknesses shows how nationalist policies obstructed democratic consolidation. The chapter also pays attention to the Prespa Agreement and

Republic of North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, highlighting the tension between nationalism in Republic of North Macedonia and the pressures of international actors as external democratizing initiatives.

Overall, this book is a well-researched and carefully structured study of how ethnic nationalism affects democracy in North Macedonia. It demonstrates a deep understanding of both theoretical debates and empirical realities. The author successfully connects local developments to broader international trends, making the book relevant for scholars of comparative politics, conflict resolution, and European integration.

Finally, the inclusion of key documents, such as the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the Prespa Agreement, makes the book a valuable reference for both scholars and policymakers.

This book offers a clear and well-researched analysis of how ethnic nationalism shapes democratic development in the Republic of North Macedonia. By combining theoretical perspectives with real-world examples, it explains the complex relationship between identity, governance, and political change in multiethnic societies. The study connects local developments to broader regional and international trends, making it a valuable resource for scholars in comparative politics, conflict resolution, and European integration.

While some parts may be challenging for readers unfamiliar with Balkan history, the book remains accessible due to its clear structure and academic tone. It is especially

recommended for postgraduate students, researchers, and policymakers who seek a deeper understanding of democratization in multiethnic states. Its combination of theoretical insight, historical depth, and practical relevance makes it a valuable contribution to the field of political and international studies.

Prof. Dr. Bejtulla Demiri
International Balkan University
Skopje, September 2025

Introduction

The odyssey towards democratic governance is often more convoluted in multi-ethnic societies, where the dynamics of diverse cultures shape their unique paths. This thesis is an in-depth exploration of these intricacies in the context of North Macedonia, a multi-ethnic society situated in the Western Balkans, where the echoes of ethnic nationalism persistently reverberate.

The process of democratization is a mosaic of contradictions, presenting challenges that range from structural transformations to human rights issues. This research attempts to unravel these challenges, contrasting theoretical aspects of democratization with practical realities in the Western Balkans. Such an approach lends a holistic perspective to the region's political evolution.

The democratization journey in the Western Balkans has been notably tumultuous, yet fascinating, with North Macedonia's multi-ethnic composition offering a rich tapestry for study. As the region navigates its voyage

towards democracy, the external influence of entities like the European Union inevitably shapes its trajectory. An integral part of this research is, therefore, understanding the EU's role in fostering or inhibiting democratization within this geopolitical context.

Finally, no discussion of democratization in this region would be complete without addressing the specter of past authoritarian rule. The authoritarian legacy often poses formidable obstacles to the democratic transition, casting long shadows that affect every aspect of the democratization journey.

This study, thus, lays the groundwork for understanding the complexities of democratization in multi-ethnic societies, focusing on North Macedonia as a case study, and exploring the overarching effects of ethnic nationalism on intergroup relations and democratic processes.

Moving beyond the preliminary analysis of democratization, the research explores the role of identity, particularly in the multi-ethnic societies of the Western Balkans. The intricacy of identity, tangled within the lines of ethnicity, language, religion, and history, often becomes a breeding ground for intergroup tensions. These dynamics are not only central to understanding the societal structure but also the political discourse in North Macedonia.

The thesis further investigates the consequences of nationalism within multi-ethnic societies. Nationalism, although a potent unifying force, can also be a destabilizing element, particularly in societies rich with ethnic diversity. It creates an 'us versus them' dichotomy that can negatively impact democratic processes. The impact of nationalism is

analyzed within the broader context of its implications for democracy and intergroup relations in North Macedonia.

In the Western Balkans, the scars of nationalism and unresolved tensions are still fresh, frequently fueling conflicts and affecting democratic progression. These underlying issues form the crux of our study, providing an understanding of the delicate balancing act that societies in this region must perform to progress towards democratic stability.

Moreover, the research delves into the harrowing chapter of ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, a haunting reminder of the dangers of extreme nationalism. The ripple effects of these atrocities were felt deeply in Macedonia, altering its demographic and political landscape. Through this analysis, the research provides a contextual understanding of the challenges that North Macedonia faces today in its journey towards democracy.

In the journey through the identity formation and historical dynamics of Macedonia, we engage with the enigmatic 'Macedonian Question.' This multifaceted exploration allows for a detailed analysis of the genesis of national identity, territorial claims, and the cultural conflicts that have shaped the discourse in the Balkans. This research offers a comprehensive view of the entangled historical, political, and cultural controversies that define Macedonian identity.

As we delve further, we untangle the intricate evolution and complexities of Macedonian nationalism. This evolution is a testament to the dynamic nature of nationalism and how it continues to shape the country's identity and politics. We present an array of diverse perspectives on

Macedonian nationalism to offer a nuanced understanding of its multifaceted impact on interethnic relations. This exploration unveils the numerous ways nationalism continues to influence Macedonia's political, social, and cultural landscape, thereby affecting its journey towards democratic governance.

The interplay between nationalism and interethnic relations becomes an integral part of the conversation as we progress through the journey. The research examines the various ways that the complexities of nationalism have influenced intergroup dynamics and the broader democratic process in Macedonia.

The exploration then turns towards North Macedonia, highlighting its navigation through the trials of independence, identity conflicts, and interethnic relations. As the country transitioned from independence to inclusivity, it had to grapple with the intricate web of ethnic tensions and nationalism, a journey that forms the crux of our study.

A deeper exploration of nationalism and ethno-political dynamics enables us to understand the complex inter-ethnic tensions in North Macedonia. We delve into the diverse ethnic identities and the conflicts that ensue, adding another layer of complexity to the multi-ethnic fabric of the nation. The study also underscores the ethno-cultural divides, particularly between the Macedonian and Albanian communities, that punctuate the country's political and societal landscape.

This research doesn't shy away from the challenges of multiculturalism. It investigates the theory and practice of multiculturalism, highlighting the obstacles that stand

in the path of a harmonious multiethnic society. A critical aspect of this study is the constitutional evolution of North Macedonia, as the country searches for an identity that respects and represents its rich ethnic diversity.

We turn our attention to North Macedonia's journey to democracy, focusing on the challenges and progress that have marked its path. The study deeply examines the nation's democratic evolution, underlining the inherent complexities and adaptations needed in the electoral system of a multiethnic state.

Special attention is paid to the overlooked concerns of the Albanian community during North Macedonia's democratic transition, offering a fresh perspective on the intricacies of a multiethnic democracy in the making. This part of the study reaffirms our commitment to understanding North Macedonia's democratic journey from all angles, acknowledging the unique challenges that each ethnic community faces.

In the process, we explore the profound impact of ethnic conflict on North Macedonia's democratic evolution. This investigation offers a lens through which we view the relationship between strife and society and how it shapes a nation's political destiny.

In a pivotal section of the study, we delve into the struggle of the Albanian community, focusing on the intersection of conflict and democratization. This exploration provides a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by this community in the context of North Macedonia's evolving democracy.

From there, we turn to the crucial Ohrid Framework Agreement. The power, recognition, and equality fostered by this agreement have significantly impacted multiethnicity in North Macedonia. However, the study doesn't shy away from acknowledging the challenges in implementing the Ohrid Framework Agreement, shedding light on the gaps between policy and practice.

The research then broadens its scope to encompass the international dimension of democratization. An analysis of the Europeanization policy highlights the external influences on North Macedonia's democratic journey. The role of EU assistance in fostering democracy is given special attention, emphasizing its crucial part in nurturing the country's evolving democratic governance.

Our narrative eventually brings us to the post-ethnic conflict period in North Macedonia, a time marked by the rise of authoritarianism and the challenges of democracy promotion. It's in this crucial period that we navigate the complex dynamics between democratic consolidation, the lingering legacy of authoritarianism, and the role of the EU.

The study presents an in-depth analysis of North Macedonia's journey from democratic transition to nationalistic regression. It unpacks the intricate process, shedding light on the back-and-forth between democracy and nationalism that marks the country's political landscape.

Furthermore, we probe the waves of transition and the corresponding challenges in democratic development. This exploration forms a comprehensive view of North Macedonia's progress, setbacks, and future prospects in its pursuit of a fully consolidated democracy.

The research also delves into a critical period from 2006 to 2017, characterized by the rise of nationalism and intensification of ethnic struggles. This timespan marks a transformative era for North Macedonia, filled with tumultuous events that continue to shape the nation's political and social landscapes.

We dissect the struggle over national identity in our exploration of the road to recognition. This struggle is reflective of the deep-seated tensions and conflicts ingrained in the multiethnic society of North Macedonia. The journey to national identity has been marked by difficult negotiations and complex political maneuvering, factors that have significantly influenced the course of the nation's democracy.

A significant portion of this research is dedicated to understanding the naming dispute and its impact on multiethnicity. The naming dispute, a contentious issue with deep historical roots and far-reaching political implications, has had a profound influence on the nation's multiethnic fabric.

An intriguing aspect of the research delves into the Skopje 2014 project, a controversial initiative that stands at the intersection of nationalism, corruption, and interethnic tensions. This project not only transformed the physical landscape of North Macedonia's capital but also left an indelible impact on its social and political fabric.

The research further delves into the antiquization of identity and the subsequent rise of nationalism, key factors that have significantly shaped North Macedonia's political landscape. The tension between preserving the past and embracing a

multiethnic present and future forms a complex backdrop to the country's democratic journey.

Moreover, the study explores the challenges of democratic stagnation, characterized by corruption, authoritarian tendencies, and ethnic divisions. These issues, which have hindered the development of a fully consolidated democracy, provide essential insights into the realities of North Macedonia's political sphere.

The research ventures into an extensive evaluation of the factors leading to the stagnation of democratic consolidation. It uncovers a multitude of underlying causes, each contributing to the complexity of North Macedonia's democratic transition.

Among these, we delve into ethnic nationalistic politics and discrimination, both of which have created considerable roadblocks in the country's democratic evolution. Further, the research explores the control of the judiciary system, providing an in-depth assessment of corruption and nepotism and how these practices undermine the democratic principles of fairness and justice.

The study takes a hard look at the undermining of democracy through media segregation and government control, a situation that exacerbates ethnic divisions and hinders democratic discourse. It also exposes the grim reality of political suppression and electoral irregularities, which have further contributed to the stagnation of democratic consolidation.

Corruption, in its myriad forms, also comes under scrutiny, with an emphasis on its crippling impact on democratic

progress. This is further illustrated by examining the state of press freedom and the consequences of ethnic divisions on media independence and diversity.

Lastly, the research delves into the infamous wiretapping scandal, a significant event that presented immense judicial challenges and spurred a quest for accountability. This incident serves as a stark reminder of the systemic issues that need addressing for the successful advancement of democracy.

The research culminates by examining the critical transitional period from Macedonia to North Macedonia, scrutinizing the threats and opportunities following the government change in 2017. This era marks an important shift in the nation's history, presenting both challenges and opportunities for democratic development.

The study examines the landmark Prespa Agreement in detail, recognizing its role in combating ethnonationalism and promoting multiethnicity. This agreement represented a major diplomatic breakthrough, laying a roadmap for peace, cooperation, and unity among different ethnic communities.

It further investigates the process of overcoming ethnonationalism and the path to democratic consolidation post-NATO membership. With North Macedonia's acceptance into the NATO alliance, it has embarked on a new trajectory, one that holds significant implications for its multiethnic democracy. The country's experiences and strategies in navigating this path shed light on its ongoing efforts to foster a more inclusive and stable political landscape.

The segment of the study also focuses on external influence in interethnic relations and democratic consolidation in North Macedonia. Recognizing that the country's democratic journey is not happening in isolation, the study scrutinizes the role of international alliances and initiatives.

The Berlin Process emerges as a significant influence in this context. The research discusses how this initiative, aimed at accelerating the integration of Western Balkan countries into the European Union, is facilitating the consolidation of democracy in North Macedonia. This process represents a pivotal step towards bridging the gap between aspiration and reality in the country's democratic development.

The research concludes with an in-depth exploration of plural societies and conflict management, particularly focusing on power sharing in multiethnic societies such as North Macedonia. In societies marked by a diversity of ethnic identities, the management of intergroup relations and the prevention of conflict are of utmost importance.

Drawing from the theoretical frameworks proposed by scholars such as Arend Lijphart, the study argues for the merits of consociationalism, a form of government involving power sharing in ethnically divided societies. The research examines the principles and applications of consociationalism, explaining how it might offer a path towards a more harmonious, stable, and democratic North Macedonia.

Furthermore, the study underscores the imperative of constitutional changes for a more inclusive democracy in North Macedonia. It argues that for the country to navigate the complex terrain of multiethnic democracy, there is a

need for constitutional and institutional reforms. These changes must ensure fair representation, respect for all ethnic communities, and the effective prevention of conflict. Through a detailed analysis of these issues, the research presents a thorough and comprehensive examination of the democratic challenges and opportunities faced by multiethnic societies.

Finally, this study is mainly based on the central statement "In multi-ethnic societies, the rise and manifestation of ethnic nationalism can significantly impact intergroup relations and the quality of democracy, as exemplified by the case of North Macedonia. This research seeks to demonstrate that, under differing government regimes with varying degrees of ethnic nationalism, North Macedonia's path towards democratic consolidation and improved inter-ethnic relations has been significantly affected. Moreover, this study argues that power-sharing in a form of consociationalism and robust international efforts towards democratization can provide effective mechanisms to mitigate ethnic tension and foster a healthier democracy in such multi-ethnic contexts.

Contribution and Significance of the Study

The impact of ethnic nationalism on intergroup relations and democracy, especially in multi-ethnic societies such as North Macedonia, has profound implications not only for the nation's socio-political fabric but also for international stability. As ethnic nationalism has been linked to increased tension and conflicts within multi-ethnic societies, understanding its dynamics can contribute to

policy formulation and interventions aimed at reducing these tensions and fostering peace and coexistence.

Moreover, North Macedonia's unique historical and political context, as well as its experiences with various governments' different approaches to managing ethnic relations and democratic processes, makes it a significant case study. The insights drawn from the North Macedonian context can potentially be applied to other multi-ethnic societies grappling with similar issues.

The research also contributes to the ongoing academic discourse on the nexus between nationalism, interethnic relations, and democracy. By analyzing the impacts of ethnic nationalism and governmental strategies on the state of democracy and ethnic relations, it contributes nuanced understanding to these intricate dynamics. It fills the gap in existing literature by presenting an in-depth examination of North Macedonia's unique case and the role of annual reports in assessing democratic progress and interethnic relations.

However, this research has potential practical implications. Policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and other stakeholders working on ethnic relations, democracy, and peacebuilding can use the findings to guide their actions and strategies. By understanding the effect of ethnic nationalism and its management on democracy and interethnic relations, these stakeholders can develop more effective interventions, promote democratic principles, and encourage peaceful ethnic coexistence.

This study is of high significance for Turkish literature. There is a paucity of comprehensive research on North Macedonia,

particularly from the lens of ethnic nationalism, intergroup relations, and the impact on democracy. Therefore, this thesis will fill a significant gap in the existing body of literature.

The examination of North Macedonia offers a unique case study. It navigates its complex history of identity formation, nationalistic policies, interethnic struggles, and democratic evolution within the framework of the geopolitical realities of the Western Balkans. By focusing on the transformative period from independence, the study uncovers the intricate links between nationalistic politics, democratic progression, and intergroup dynamics.

Furthermore, the research is distinctive as it analyses the situation in North Macedonia according to different governmental approaches towards ethnic relations and ethnocentric policies. It not only tracks the progress year by year through an extensive analysis of annual reports, but also compares different governance periods, underscoring how political shifts have influenced the trajectory of democratic development and ethnic relations in the country.

Given the unique insights it provides and the significant gap it fills in the existing literature, this thesis stands to make a substantial contribution to Turkish academic discourse on multi-ethnic societies, particularly with reference to the Western Balkans.

In the broader sphere of International Relations, this research holds valuable implications. It delves deep into the intricacies of ethnicity and nationalism, issues that continue to shape global politics and international relations. Understanding these dynamics in the specific context of

North Macedonia offers a fresh perspective on how multi-ethnic societies navigate their internal challenges while interacting with regional and international actors.

Additionally, the investigation of the role that external influences like the European Union and other international actors play in North Macedonia's interethnic relations and democratic consolidation contributes to the literature on international influences on domestic policies. It illuminates the mechanisms through which international norms, policies, and assistance can impact ethnic relations, state-building, and democratic transition processes in multiethnic societies.

Furthermore, the exploration of consociationalism as a solution to ethnically divided societies contributes to the ongoing debate in International Relations regarding conflict management and power-sharing mechanisms in multi-ethnic states. By examining the application of consociationalism in the North Macedonian context, the research offers valuable empirical evidence that will inform and shape this debate.

In essence, the thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of how ethnic nationalism influences democracy and intergroup relations, showcasing North Macedonia as a unique case study. Consequently, it will enrich the discipline of International Relations with new theoretical insights and empirical data, and spark further academic discourse on similar multi-ethnic societies around the world.

Methodological Approach

The objective of this research is to understand the intricate dynamics of ethnic nationalism and its impact on intergroup relations and democracy in multi-ethnic societies. In this regard, North Macedonia serves as the case study. The methodology of this research is rooted in qualitative analysis, fortified by an exhaustive review of pertinent secondary data. This approach facilitates a detailed exploration of North Macedonia's complex socio-political landscape.

The foundation of this research lies in its thorough examination of secondary sources such as contemporary books, academic publications, and annual reports from internationally recognized organizations such as Freedom House, the European Union, the U.S. State Department, and Transparency International. These sources provide invaluable insights into the manifestations of ethnic nationalism, interethnic relations, and the evolution of democracy in North Macedonia over time.

This research adopts a comparative analysis of these annual reports, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the changes, progressions, and potential regressions in the state of ethnic nationalism, democracy, and interethnic relations in North Macedonia. A temporal perspective is adopted to track the fluctuations during different political eras, specifically contrasting the periods of rule by the nationalistic VMRO-DPMNE and the Social Democrats, and their respective impacts on the country's democratic and interethnic climate.

In addition to secondary data analysis and time-based comparison, this study undertakes a detailed examination of the policies implemented by different governments in North Macedonia, particularly their strategies concerning ethnic relations and ethnocentric policies. The qualitative assessment of these policies provides crucial insights into how governmental decisions shape the dynamics of ethnic nationalism and impact interethnic relations and the overall state of democracy.

In doing so, this research not only analyses the consequences of these policies but also seeks to understand the underlying intentions and ideologies that guide them. Specifically, this includes comparing the periods of rule under the nationalistic VMRO-DPMNE party and the Social Democrats, respectively. The comparison allows for a more nuanced understanding of the correlation between political ideologies, governmental policies, and the state of democracy and interethnic relations.

This analysis is critical in identifying the political mechanisms that exacerbate or mitigate ethnic nationalism

and tension in multiethnic societies. Understanding these mechanisms could inform future policies and interventions aimed at improving interethnic relations and democratic stability in contexts similar to North Macedonia.

This methodological approach emphasizes not just the visible outcomes of governmental action but also the underlying political currents that inform these actions. Therefore, it enhances the richness and depth of the study, providing a multifaceted view of the research problem.

This approach reinforces the validity of the study by allowing for a deeper exploration of the dynamics of ethnic nationalism, its impact on interethnic relations, and the role of democracy in a specific multiethnic societal context.

Significant historical and political phenomena, such as the Macedonian identity question, the ethno-cultural divides, the Ohrid Framework Agreement, and the country's transition to the name 'North Macedonia' are dissected in detail. These elements provide necessary historical and socio-political context to fully comprehend the influence of ethnic nationalism on North Macedonia's democratic journey and interethnic relations.

This research also considers broader regional dynamics in the Western Balkans and how they have influenced the politics, ethnic relations, and democratic evolution in North Macedonia. Specifically, the breakup of Yugoslavia, the wars in the Western Balkans, and the influx of refugees from Kosovo have had substantial implications on the national landscape of North Macedonia. Although these topics are not the main focus of the research, they provide crucial

context and background to the current state of affairs in the country.

The analysis of these historical events and their aftermath allows for a more comprehensive understanding of North Macedonia's political, ethnic, and democratic complexities. It sheds light on how regional dynamics and inter-ethnic conflicts can spill over national borders, impacting neighbouring countries and their internal affairs. This nuanced analysis is instrumental in comprehending how these larger regional events have shaped North Macedonia's unique experience with ethnic nationalism, interethnic relations, and democracy.

The multi-layered approach of this research, including the analysis of these broader regional phenomena, reinforces the depth and breadth of the study. It contributes to the robustness of the findings and ensures a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in North Macedonia and their historical context within the Western Balkans. Therefore, it further strengthens the validity and reliability of the research.

However, it should be noted that these analyses are brief and intended to provide relevant contextual understanding rather than a detailed dissection of these events. They are instrumental in recognizing how external factors and regional dynamics have shaped the internal policies and interethnic relations in North Macedonia.

By incorporating these broader regional considerations into the research, the study does not only limit itself to the internal politics of North Macedonia but provides a larger, more holistic picture of the country's position within

the Western Balkans region. This ultimately enhances the richness and depth of the research, offering a multifaceted understanding of the complexities associated with ethnic nationalism, intergroup relations, and democracy in multi-ethnic societies.

In addition to the analysis of regional dynamics and the comparison of different political eras within North Macedonia, this research also incorporates a historical analysis of the Macedonian Question. The Macedonian Question, a complex issue pertaining to the ethnic, historical, and territorial disputes over what constitutes 'Macedonia', has been a critical factor in shaping North Macedonia's socio-political landscape.

The research delves into the Macedonian Question during different historical periods, including the Ottoman period, during the existence of Yugoslavia, and after 1945. It critically examines how these historical trajectories have shaped the ethnic nationalism and interethnic relations in North Macedonia, and their consequent implications for the country's democratic progress.

Disputes with neighboring countries such as Bulgaria and Greece over the Macedonian identity and name have played a significant role in the nation's internal dynamics. The controversies and debates surrounding these issues are analyzed in detail in this study, based on the content analysis of the most recent academic works, books, and scripts.

This historical and contextual approach to the research allows for a more profound understanding of the current situation in North Macedonia. It provides critical insights into how past conflicts and disputes continue to influence

the present, shaping the interactions between different ethnic groups and impacting the country's democratic consolidation.

These historical and regional contexts enrich the study, enhancing the breadth and depth of the research. It provides a more comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of ethnic nationalism, its impact on interethnic relations, and the role of democracy in the multiethnic societal context of North Macedonia. The inclusion of this analysis further reinforces the validity and reliability of the research, contributing to a well-rounded understanding of the complexities at play in multi-ethnic societies like North Macedonia.

An integral aspect of this research involves a detailed analysis of North Macedonia's legal framework that governs ethnic relations and democratic principles. Specifically, the study includes a comprehensive review of the first constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia and its subsequent amendments. This examination provides critical insights into the evolution of the nation's legal provisions concerning ethnic relations and democracy.

Moreover, this study draws on the theory of consociationalism developed by Arend Lijphart, which advocates for power-sharing as a potential solution to manage ethnic conflicts in deeply divided societies. Through a careful comparison and analysis, the research examines how consociationalism, as a governance model, could fit into the complex multiethnic society of North Macedonia. This includes an exploration of how elements of consociationalism, such as grand coalitions, proportionality, minority veto, and segmental autonomy,

could potentially be integrated into North Macedonia's political and legal system to manage and mitigate ethnic conflicts.

This combination of theoretical, legal, and political analysis enriches the study and enhances its comprehensiveness. It further allows for an examination of not just the existing issues and conflicts, but also possible solutions that could be considered for North Macedonia's ongoing challenges with ethnic nationalism, intergroup relations, and democratic consolidation. This approach further contributes to the validity and reliability of the research, providing a balanced perspective on the multifaceted issue of ethnic relations in multiethnic societies like North Macedonia.

Ethical guidelines for academic integrity have been strictly adhered to throughout the research process, ensuring correct citation of all sources and avoiding intellectual theft. In terms of reliability and validity, the usage of globally recognized annual reports, the meticulous analytical approach, and a commitment to transparency about the research process all contribute to the robustness of the findings.

While the findings from this research provide comprehensive insights into the North Macedonian context, the inherent limitations of qualitative research mean that these findings may not be generalized to all multi-ethnic societies. Despite this, the strategies employed in this study aim to present a well-rounded understanding of the effects of ethnic nationalism on interethnic relations and democracy within multi-ethnic societies.

Defining the Questions

In the following thesis, we aim to address several key questions that have emerged from the context of ethnic nationalism within multi-ethnic societies, with a particular emphasis on the case of North Macedonia. These inquiries are essential as they aim to explore the complexities of intergroup relations, democratic processes, and political systems in diverse social fabrics.

1. How does ethnic nationalism impact intergroup relations and the democratic process in multi-ethnic societies, with a particular focus on North Macedonia?

This question seeks to delve into the impact of ethnic nationalism on the dynamics of intergroup relations and the democratic process in multi-ethnic societies. Using North Macedonia as our central case study, we aim to explore how ethnic nationalism shapes social, political, and economic interactions within and between different ethnic groups and how it influences the overall democratic climate of the nation.

2. What are the specific challenges posed by ethnic nationalism to democratic transitions and consolidations within the context of North Macedonia, and how have these been addressed?

By focusing on the unique challenges brought about by ethnic nationalism in the process of democratic transitions and consolidations, this question aims to assess the particular obstacles encountered in North Macedonia. We will explore these issues and evaluate the strategies and measures that have been implemented to mitigate their impact.

3. In what ways can power-sharing systems like consociationalism contribute to strengthening a multi-ethnic society in North Macedonia?

Finally, this question allows us to examine the potential role and effectiveness of power-sharing systems, specifically consociationalism, in fortifying a multi-ethnic society in North Macedonia. We aim to investigate the potential of such systems to build trust, strengthen institutional integrity, and foster social cohesion among different ethnic groups.

By examining these critical questions, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between ethnic nationalism, democratic processes, and power-sharing mechanisms in the context of North Macedonia's multi-ethnic society. The subsequent evaluation will offer a nuanced perspective on the nation's ongoing challenges and potential pathways towards a more inclusive and harmonious future.

This thesis serves to conduct a meticulous exploration of the relationship between ethnic nationalism and intergroup relations, with a focus on its implications for the democratic process in multi-ethnic societies such as North Macedonia. The objective is not merely to delineate the nature of these complexities, but also to illuminate the nuances of how they interact with one another within a socio-political landscape.

Through the lens of North Macedonia, the goal is to shed light on the multifaceted impact ethnic nationalism can have on societal dynamics, interethnic interactions, and the democracy-building process. The specific challenges that ethnic nationalism introduces in the midst of democratic

transitions and consolidations will be thoroughly analyzed, with an emphasis on understanding how these challenges have been and can be effectively navigated.

One key objective of this thesis is to explore the role and potential of power-sharing mechanisms like consociationalism in fortifying multi-ethnic societies.

Theoretical Approach of the Challenges to Democracy and Democratization with a Focus on Western Balkans

The process of democratization in the Western Balkans has been marked by persistent challenges that hinder the consolidation of democratic governance. While the region has made notable progress since the conflicts of the 1990s, issues such as ethnic nationalism, weak institutions, corruption, and external geopolitical pressures continue to undermine democratic reforms. These obstacles have produced fragile democracies that often struggle to balance the demands of EU integration with entrenched domestic political dynamics. The following section will examine these challenges in greater detail, highlighting how they shape political stability, interethnic relations, and the prospects for long-term democratic consolidation.

The Challenges of Democratization in Multiethnic Societies: A Closer Look at the Balkans

The genesis of democracy as we understand it today can be traced back to the inception of the American Revolution in 1776. Before this milestone, it would be incorrect to say that any nation had embarked on the path to democratic rule, as voting rights were exceedingly curtailed, and political affairs were predominantly under the control of the privileged few (Grugel, 2002, p. 37). Moreover, up until the end of the 1800s, democracy faced formidable opposition from the ruling elite, and its practical implementation was hindered by the nation's rudimentary state. It was not until the 20th century that democratic representation truly expanded to include all citizens. Also, until the latter part of the 19th century or beyond, the institutions in most nations were regularly found to be deficient when compared with contemporary standards (Grugel, 2002, p. 37). Understanding the historical progression of democracy reveals a narrative of struggle, transformation, and progression. It's a testament to the human aspiration for freedom and equal representation. In ancient societies, political power was confined to a select few, the elite, who governed according to their interests. The inception of the American Revolution in 1776, however, marked a crucial turning point, setting a precedent for a new kind of governance - democratic rule. This transformation was neither swift nor unopposed. It took centuries for the concept to be embraced and implemented globally. Throughout this time, political power gradually shifted from the elite towards the general population, despite resistance

from those in authority. Moreover, the democratization process was not just about giving citizens the right to vote; it was also about building robust institutions to support democratic practices. However, these institutions often fell short of modern standards until much later. Thus, the journey towards true democracy has been a slow, but steadfast process, continually evolving to more inclusively represent the people's will.

Democratic processes first took root in Britain, some parts of Western Europe, the United States, and a few British colonies, including Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. This development was catalyzed by well-established geographical boundaries, enabling the growth and stabilization of nation-states, and subsequently, a gradual amplification of state powers (Grugel, 2002, p. 37). The swift progress of capitalism in these regions played a crucial role in their early democratization. Capitalism encourages competition, individual rights, and private property ownership, which align well with democratic values. The quick growth of capitalism stimulated economic prosperity and social mobility, which in turn increased demands for political representation among broader sections of society. Additionally, capitalism's promotion of a free-market economy and private enterprise contributed to a more diversified and independent citizenry, less dependent on aristocratic or governmental patronage.

The end of the Soviet Union spurred the rise of independent states in Central and Eastern Europe, prompting widespread optimism and international support—particularly from regional organizations like NATO—for the potential of

establishing sustainable democracies in these regions, Russia, and the former Soviet Republics (C.Pevenhouse, 2005, p. 1).

The primary focus of the democratic movement until the start of the 21st century was the right to vote. The journey towards democracy was typically incremental for most countries. A standard pattern was that previously neutral legislatures, under restricted suffrage, would divide along party ideologies and participate in partisan elections. The initial concern was about contestation - the right for opposition parties to participate in elections and potentially seize power (Przeworski, 2000, p. 16). Democracy's practical implication suggests that one must be careful in evaluating elections, as a triumph can potentially lead to the establishment of an authoritarian regime. This situation was seen in many African nations following their independence. Przeworski proposes that a government can be classified as democratic only if the losing parties are given the opportunity to participate, triumph, and assume office in future elections (Przeworski, 2000, p. 18). However, the statement, "A government is only democratic if the losers are permitted to participate, win, and take office" could be critiqued for its oversimplification of democracy. Democracy is not only about the transfer of power but also about how power is exercised. It should guarantee fundamental human rights, equality, and justice, irrespective of the political alignment of the ruling party.

According to Hendriks, there are four models of democracy;

- **Pendulum democracy:** Resembling a clock's pendulum, this model sees political power repeatedly swing

between two opposing political factions, epitomized by the Westminster model.

- **Voter democracy:** Merging direct public rule with aggregate decision-making, citizens actively participate by casting their votes in plebiscites, from local meetings to expansive referendums.

- **Participatory democracy:** This model, encompassing self-governance and integrative decision-making, is demonstrated in instances of communal self-rule and citizen deliberation. It ensures minorities are included, not simply outvoted by a numerical majority.

- **Consensus democracy:** Characteristically indirect and integrative, this model employs representatives from societal sections as primary decision-makers, striving for consensus and wide-ranging support. Commonly seen in countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, and Austria, it is designed for historically divided societies, giving birth to its alternate name - consociationalism democracy (Hendriks, 2010, pp. 27-28).

The thesis will focus on evaluating consensus democracy as a suitable model for multiethnic societies. Given its emphasis on integrating diverse viewpoints and striving for consensus among different societal sections, this model aligns well with the power-sharing needs inherent to multiethnic societies. Its system is rooted in collaboration and coalition-building, which allows for effective power distribution, thus fostering inclusivity and harmony in diverse social landscapes.

The classification of democracies into parliamentary, mixed, and presidential forms has been a hot topic of late. In a

parliamentary system, the administration is subject to the legislature's confidence. Contrarily, in a presidential system, the ultimate authority lies with the elected president. A blend of the two is seen in mixed systems, where the government is held accountable by both the legislature and the president (Przeworski, 2000, pp. 30-31). A distinct feature of parliamentary systems is the legislature's power to oust the administration, a right not conferred in presidential setups. However, some institutional configurations don't align exclusively with either type and are referred to as premier-presidential, semi-presidential, or hybrid systems, based on the chosen nomenclature (Przeworski, 2000, pp. 30-31). As democratic systems evolve, it's critical to note that the most successful ones are those that are flexible and can adapt to societal changes. The ability to evolve and integrate diverse voices, maintain transparency, and ensure the rule of law underpins democratic development.

When looked at from a different angle, the question of how and when common citizens can have a real influence over political leaders arises. The lack of stability in the state and the supremacy of informal systems over formal structures present significant challenges to democratization. A democratic voting population cannot control a state that is unable to regulate itself. The mere practice of holding routine competitive elections, even if conducted transparently, does not guarantee voters the ability to exercise control over their representatives (Holmes, 2015, p. 55). With regard to democracies in the Balkans, these issues find resonance. The region has been grappling with similar challenges, primarily due to ethnic divisions. These divisions often result in an environment where informal networks and

relationships take precedence over formal democratic institutions, undermining the democratization process. The inherent instability from these ethnic divisions and the consequent politicization have made it challenging to establish robust democratic institutions that can ensure fair representation and effective governance. Hence, much like the larger issue at hand, Balkan democracies also struggle with empowering their citizenry to have meaningful influence over their political leaders. The ethnic divide, far from being merely a sociocultural issue, directly affects the political landscape and the path to democratization in these countries.

Elected administrations will not face questioning or resistance in the time gap between elections unless specific societal and institutional criteria are met. These encompass the presence of a legitimate opposition party, a legislative body where the opposition has the power to hold the administration accountable, and a just legal system that guarantees guilt determination by neutral judges before any sentence is passed. Other necessities include multiple channels of information, like nationwide TV news, not subjected to government regulation, and an active civil society that can peacefully protest without the threat of coercion or physical violence from security forces (Holmes, 2015, p. 55). Countries devoid of these institutional or societal prerequisites are devoid of a functional democratic governance system. The process of democratization in multiethnic societies stalls in the absence of these conditions, leading to an escalation of inter-ethnic conflicts, a surge in ethnic nationalism, and divisions among different ethnic groups within the country. It underscores the importance

of these fundamental conditions in maintaining social harmony and democratic values in diverse societies, and their absence could have dire implications for the stability and unity of such societies.

Authentic, working democracy has primarily originated from socioeconomic advancement, enhanced self-expression values, and the establishment of democratic institutions. Surprisingly, modern democratization strategies have often neglected these foundational principles. Human liberation, arguably the most vital component of democracy, has been largely dismissed by an extensive body of scholarly work (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, pp. 299-300). Regarding Balkan societies, their unique challenges and transformations also play into this discourse. These societies have transitioned from communism to states plagued by ethnic conflicts and deep-seated animosities. This tumultuous journey, coupled with the scars of the past, has left a significant impact on the democratic process. The shift from authoritarian regimes to a new form of governance has not been straightforward or uniform across the region. The legacy of ethnic conflicts and hostilities, many of which have roots in the past, continues to fuel division and hinder the establishment of robust democratic institutions.

In fact, there is an increasing body of research that investigates the role of procedural factors in either facilitating or hindering democratization processes. Discussions continue over the political implications of different institutional models on transition results, with somewhat mixed conclusions. Nevertheless, there seems to be a general consensus suggesting a positive link between parliamentary

systems and the sustainability of new democracies (Makarenko & Meville, 2015, pp. 274-275). Furthermore, challenges related to nation-building and state formation, often a common feature in post-Communist societies, can present further roadblocks to democratization (Makarenko & Meville, 2015, pp. 274-275). The democratization process in Western Balkan countries also encounters specific issues. After enduring turbulent histories marked by ethnic conflicts and transitioning from authoritarian rule, these countries face unique challenges in their democratization journey. The unresolved tension of ethnic divisions and the struggle to build cohesive national identities often impede the smooth transition to democratic governance. Despite the establishment of democratic institutions, deep-seated ethnic animosities and memories of past conflict can undermine the effectiveness of these structures and the citizens' faith in them. Democracy bereft of strong institutions may precipitate instability and disorder. As many theoretical and empirical evidences have highlighted, the processes of state-building and democratization can occur side by side and strengthen one another. The intertwined nature of state formation and democratization has been confirmed through empirical assessments of regime shifts in a range of African governments undergoing transition (Makarenko & Meville, 2015, pp. 274-275). This structural weakness can lead to political instability, weaken the rule of law, and compromise the quality of democratic governance. The lack of well-defined and well-enforced institutional rules can create a power vacuum, susceptible to manipulation and exploitation by political elites, potentially leading to corruption and cronyism. Such is the case of Western Balkans.

Alternatively, Horowitz highlights a number of prominent difficulties that present themselves in the democratization process. These include a constitution that, despite enjoying popular support, urgently requires extensive overhaul; a society that is severely fractured; a nation with a violent past, teetering on the brink of a massive upheaval; a multitude of issues that extend beyond just constitutional concerns; a civil society that has been repressed by years of dictatorial rule; and military powers that may not have initially succumbed passively to a sudden change (Horowitz, 2013, p.31). In such circumstances, the unity of the nascent institutions was not the sole determinant of success. The ability to carry out the transition without violence was just as crucial (Horowitz, 2013, p. 31). The problems that Horowitz identifies are indeed resonant with the experiences of Western Balkan countries. These nations have faced, and continue to grapple with, similar challenges in their democratic journeys. The legacy of authoritarian rule, societal polarization, entrenched military powers, the need for comprehensive constitutional reforms, and a history marked by violence are issues that have complicated the democratization process in this region.

In 1991, Yugoslavia fractured into several warring nations, only half a year after elections where ethnic nationalism held substantial sway (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005, p. 4). Further variables that notably impeded the democratic process encompassed lower economic growth rates, underdeveloped industrial sectors, amplified ethnic discord (as evidenced in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia), and even outright civil wars (Makarenko & Meville, 2015, p. 280). The consequences of ethnic divisions continue to

pose a major impediment to the consolidation of democracy. In the Western Balkans, the persistence of these divisions often undermines democratic institutions, exacerbates societal polarization, and can fuel political instability. Ethnic tensions, if left unresolved, can hamper the development of a shared national identity, which is key to fostering a sense of civic duty and trust in democratic processes. Therefore, addressing these divisions is a critical challenge to be overcome in the pursuit of democratic consolidation in this region.

From a human development perspective, the key virtue of democracy is its ability to empower individuals. Democracy, when protecting civil and political rights, grants people the capacity to determine the course of their private and public spheres. However, it's worth noting that not all forms of democracy contribute equally to human growth. It's specifically the liberal component of democracy that champions personal liberties and aligns closely with human development (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, p. 149). Eminent writers propose that it's civic attributes such as trust, tolerance, and self-efficacy that enable democratic institutions to operate effectively. They also maintain that the resilience of a democratic system is reliant on the society's embrace of democratic values, demonstrated through their day-to-day exchanges (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005, pp. 157-158). In multiethnic societies, the application of a democratic model that does not cater to the diversity can create challenges for individuals in their daily interactions. Such a system can foster a sense of alienation among different ethnic groups, exacerbate ethnic tensions, and hinder social cohesion. Individuals might find it difficult

to connect with others outside their ethnic group, affecting social, economic, and political engagements. Therefore, it is critical that the democratic system in a multiethnic society ensures fair representation, promotes interethnic dialogue, and fosters a shared sense of citizenship to support the diverse interactions that make up everyday life.

Conceptualizing Democracy: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Applications

Originating from the Greek words demos and kratia, "democracy" translates to "the people's governance." It fundamentally upholds the principle that all public affairs are driven and regulated by the people, directly or via their elected representatives who are accountable to them (Hendriks, 2010, pp. 21-22). In essence, democracy represents a governing system where the citizenry has an equal stake in decision-making, either directly or through their elected proxies who operate under their influence and control (Hendriks, 2010, pp. 21-22).

The notion of democracy encompasses a multitude of values deemed admirable in political, and occasionally in socio-economic contexts. These entail qualities like representation, accountability, equality, active participation, dignity, rationality, safety, and liberty, to name a few (Przeworski, 2000, pp. 13-14).

According to Pevenhouse, democracy can be defined by three fundamental pillars: the existence of competitive elections, the granting of suffrage to all adults, and the assurance of minority rights as well as respect for civil freedoms (2005, p. 3).

In a democratic system, active participants do not forfeit their rights to partake in subsequent competition, negotiations, advocating for beneficial policies, exerting pressure on the government, or pursuing legal recourse (Przeworski, 2000, p. 18). Simplistically, democracy can be defined as a decision-making process within any group, organization, or society where each member has an equal chance to participate and express their views (Beetham, 2005, pp. 2-3). Beetham establishes that democracy rests on several key principles:

- "All members are affected by the decisions of the group.

- Every individual, once mature, has the capacity to discern what is the most beneficial or least harmful course of action, for both themselves and the collective.

- Long-term better decisions will come from situations where all perspectives have been openly debated and contested.

- In cases where discussion and deliberation don't lead to a unanimous agreement, a vote should be taken by all participants.

- The principle of "one person, one vote, one value" encapsulates the broader notion that all individuals hold equal significance" (2005, pp. 2-3).

Holmes suggests that a democracy is a system designed with dual purposes: first, to grant the state enough power to restrain individuals from using force and deception maliciously, and second, to prevent the state itself from misusing its power and resorting to deceit for its collective gain (Holmes, 2015, p. 55).

In the definition of democracy, elements such as "accountability," "responsibility," "responsiveness," or "representation" are often overlooked, while principles like freedom, human rights, political rights, liberties, and citizen engagement are highlighted (Przeworski, 2000, pp. 33-34). These factors play a vital role in a comprehensive understanding of democracy.

Furthermore, the definition of democracy extends beyond these fundamental aspects. Accountability, which is crucial for a functional democracy, is often not explicitly mentioned, yet it is integral to the effectiveness of the system. Indeed, democracy can be seen as a governing system that not only values representation, freedom, human rights, political rights, liberties, and citizen participation but also places a premium on accountability.

Moreover, freedom of media plays an essential role in a thriving democratic system. Often referred to as the fourth branch of power, alongside the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches, the media serves as a watchdog, monitoring the actions of government and providing the public with information necessary for informed decision-making. Without a free and independent media, the transparency and accountability that underpin democracy could be significantly undermined. Therefore, it's crucial to consider this aspect when defining and evaluating a democratic system.

Elections hold a prominent place in democratic philosophy as tools for political accountability. They function as a disciplinary measure that ensures elected representatives align their actions with the preferences of their constituents

(Fearon, 1999, pp. 56-57). The risk of losing future elections acts as a deterrent for elected officials who might otherwise neglect their obligations to voters, despite the considerable challenge voters face in keeping a close eye on politicians' activities (Fearon, 1999, pp. 56-57). Schumpeter encapsulates the eighteenth-century concept of democracy as follows: democracy is an institutional arrangement for making political decisions. It aims to actualize the common good by allowing people to elect representatives who are tasked with enacting the collective will (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 250).

This definition implies that there is a universally accepted "common good" that clearly separates right from wrong, and that the only disagreement lies in the speed with which we should reach this ideal (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 252).

However, this viewpoint faces several issues:

- "It's practically impossible to persuade everyone about the existence of a shared good via logical deduction. Even the most well-meaning individuals often have differing ideas about what is best for society.

- Even if we could reach consensus on a common goal (the end result), we would still have disagreements over the methods to achieve it. For example, everyone might agree on the goal of maintaining health, but there could be disputes about vaccines and other healthcare practices.

- The proponents of this definition often took a utilitarian approach, suggesting that the common good is what benefits each individual the most" (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 252).

In his work "Democracy in Plural Societies" (1977), Lijphart suggests that in nations divided by substantial religious, ideological, linguistic, cultural, or ethnic differences, democracy can be established and maintained if elites opt for a unique set of institutions characteristic of consociational democracy (Lijphard, 1977, p. 25). Lijphart describes a consociational democracy by four key traits:

- The formation of a 'grand coalition' government, involving the political leaders from all significant sections of the pluralistic society,
- The implementation of a mutual veto,
- The practice of proportionality,
- The assurance of a high level of autonomy for each segment to manage its own internal matters. (Lijphard, 1977, p. 25)

In his book "Patterns of Democracy", Lijphart posits that consensus democracies can be considered as more compassionate and humane states (Lijphard, 1977, p. 293). They typically have lower rates of imprisonment, execute fewer death penalties, provide stronger protection for the environment, contribute more towards foreign aid, and allocate higher budgets for social welfare (Lijphard, 1977, p. 293).

Elections are the cornerstone of democratic governance, providing the process by which officials are chosen for various roles. This principle can be operationalized by examining the specific offices that are filled as a result of the elections (Przeworski, 2000, pp. 19-20). Przeworski stipulates the following procedural prerequisites:

- • "The appointment of a chief executive officer, who is effectively responsible for governing the country, even if they don't hold an official title. The executive must be either directly or indirectly selected through democratic elections and should be accountable to the electorate or a representative body elected by the public.

- • Elections should be conducted to select members of the legislature, which can be a congress, assembly, or parliament. The proposition here is that for a regime to qualify as democratic, it must have an elected legislative body.

- • The electoral process should offer voters a wide range of choices, presenting candidates from diverse political parties." (2000, pp. 19-20)

Additional procedural stipulations could be defined, and in a democracy, political resolutions, reached via an equitable voting procedure where every citizen has an equal say and the majority's decision prevails, are limited by a constitutionally defined set of individual rights that protect individuals from both the majority and the government's encroachment (Talisee, 2009, pp. 23-25). From a procedural standpoint, a particular political decision's validity hinges on the fact that it was produced through a just process that gives each citizen an equal opportunity to influence the decision-making and safeguards individuals from undue intervention, even if it comes from a democratic majority (Talisee, 2009, pp. 23-25). By the procedural logic, the justification for democracy rests in its ability to offer citizens a relatively effective and peaceful method for making political choices and facilitating political transformations (Talisee, 2009, pp. 23-25).

Hendriks outlines the following essential prerequisites for a practical, sustainable democracy that operates at a larger scale:

- "Representation through elected officials.
- Elected representatives are tasked with the oversight and endorsement of government activities.
- A feasible democracy is predominantly indirect and based on representation.
- Elections that are regular, unbiased, and transparent.
- Regular electoral cycles enable citizens to freely and voluntarily express their views.
- Access to alternative sources of information: Citizens have the right and capability to gather knowledge from sources beyond governmental control.
- Freedom of expression: Individuals have the right to share their thoughts on all relevant political and administrative issues, including those that are critical or skeptical.
- The right to organize and gather.
- Freedom to form associations: Voters have the liberty to establish associations and groups of their choice, including independent interest groups and political parties.
- Inclusive citizenship and civil rights: No adult, permanent member of the political community is excluded a priori from the above-mentioned opportunities and rights, encompassing the ability to vote both passively and actively as well as the right to stand for or participate in elections." (2010, pp. 23-24)

Democracy, as applicable to the context of the Western Balkans, can be understood as a system of governance which embraces the full range of civil and political rights, including freedom of speech, the right to a fair trial, and equality before the law. It is a dynamic process that facilitates regular, free, and fair elections, allowing every citizen to participate equally and have their voice heard. The democratic society in the Western Balkans encourages an active civil society and provides a safe environment for the expression of a multiplicity of opinions, including those critical of the government. It ensures freedom of the media, often referred to as the "fourth power" alongside the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches. In the Western Balkan context, recognizing the region's history of ethnic divisions and conflicts, the democracy also encompasses elements of consociationalism. This involves grand coalitions of political leaders from all significant social and ethnic segments, a mutual veto allowing any segment to block decisions detrimental to their interests, proportional representation in government positions and decision-making bodies, and a high degree of autonomy for each segment to manage their internal affairs. This aspect of democracy promotes social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, necessary for a stable and effective democratic process.

The Transition to Democracy: Overcoming Legacies of the Past and Navigating Current Challenges

The collapse of former Communist regimes in Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1980s redefined the discourse and practices around state sovereignty, bringing it into sharp focus (Mostov, 2008, p. 39). This period saw a power vacuum

created by the downfall of these governments, which various elites competed to fill, aiming to gain control over the benefits tied to state authority within the international framework. Amid the prospect of political and economic restructuring, leaders of emerging political movements and newly-formed parties grappled with the challenge of distinguishing themselves in the imminent political power struggles (Mostov, 2008, p. 39). These developments unfolded in a climate of profound economic turmoil, fragile democratic alliances, and feeble public institutions. Yet, the remnants of ethnocratic rule persisted, as did the language and processes of state- and nation-building, serving both as obstacles and readily accessible tools for reactionary politics (Mostov, 2008, pp. 51-52). Regrettably, the shadow of these past attitudes still looms large in the region's contemporary hardline border politics. These entrenched perspectives include a resigned acceptance of inherent disparities and immutable differences between groups, a conflation of tolerance with treachery, a propagation of communalism, and a constriction of civic participation to mere endorsement of ethnically-driven leadership and interests. Such attitudes continue to perpetuate divisions, impeding the progress towards inclusive and tolerant societies that are essential for genuine democratic growth in the region.

The rapid expansion of democratic systems during the last quarter of the 20th century, initially in Southern Europe, followed by Eastern Europe, and eventually in parts of South America and Asia, branded this era as the Century of Democratic Victory (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005, pp. 19-20). Over time, it's likely that this democratization will contribute to global peace and stability. However, it's worth noting that

the initial stages of a transition to democracy often trigger conflict, rather than peace, in the short term (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005, pp. 1-3). Nations in the midst of transitioning often experience a higher risk of war, particularly when they lack the critical political institutions required for democracy to function effectively. These institutions include an effective government, established rule of law, well-structured political parties engaged in free elections, and a reliable news media (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005, pp. 1-3). The journey towards democratic governance in the Western Balkans, subsequent to the breakup of Yugoslavia, has been intricate and fraught with obstacles. Following Yugoslavia's disintegration, the region underwent dramatic political and socioeconomic transformations as the emergent states endeavored to establish autonomous democratic structures and assimilate themselves into the European and international economic order. However, enduring vestiges of historical ethnic conflicts, economic volatility, and ingrained corruption served as formidable impediments to these ambitions.

The path to democratic reform was laden with challenges, primarily triggered by the brutal conflicts that swept across the region in the 1990s, leaving a legacy of deep-seated ethnic animosities and territorial discord. The complexity of the democratic transition was amplified by the varying stages of democratic evolution, distinct historical narratives, and unique ethnic demographics that characterized each state.

Nationalism is an ideology that tends to be appealing to ruling classes who feel their power threatened in regimes transitioning towards democracy (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005,

pp. 1-3). Despite nationalism's proclamation of people's right to self-rule, it doesn't inherently ensure that governance will be wholly accountable to the average citizen through democratic procedures upheld by the rule of law (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005, pp. 1-3). Nations striving towards democracy without establishing robust public accountability systems may find themselves at risk of falling into the grips of nationalist conflict (Mansfield & Snyder, 2005, pp. 1-3). Moreover, the transition necessitated comprehensive institutional reforms, building of a viable market economy, and promotion of the rule of law, human rights, and minority protections – tasks that were often impeded by issues of political will, capacity, and persistent corruption.

Beetham explores the various inheritances that nations transitioning to democracy have to deal with after transitioning from different types of authoritarian rule:

- "Under the legacy of Military rule – The primary concern involves ensuring enough military support for a new civilian government to prevent it from being overthrown, considering the military's obvious physical capability to do so. The secondary concern revolves around addressing the grievances of the family members and victims of human rights abuses perpetrated by the military.

- Post-Communist government - Key challenges involve dismantling the command economy and establishing a free-market system, as well as breaking the monopoly of the communist party.

- Multi-Party system - The formation of political parties to contest public office is a critical step in the

transition from any authoritarian regime to an electoral democracy." (2005, pp. 75-82)

The transition to democracy has had to grapple with diverse legacies left by different types of authoritarian regimes. Communist systems, single-party republics (Beetham, 2005, pp. 82-83). But notwithstanding these obstacles, there has been meaningful advancement in the region's democratic evolution, chiefly stimulated by the prospects of integration with the European Union. The aspiration for EU membership has motivated these nations to implement necessary reforms and aim for enhanced political stability, economic development, and societal healing. Yet, the process of democratic consolidation in the Western Balkans remains a work in progress, with considerable efforts still needed to actualize democratic values and secure a stable and prosperous future for the region.

The Intricate Journey Towards Democracy in the Western Balkans

Cultural shifts have seen periods of democratic stability, as well as democratic disintegration, followed by episodes of authoritarianism. Commencing from the late 18th century, the first wave of democracy progressively expanded the number of democratic governments until approximately 1930 (Grugel, 2002, pp. 32-33). The second wave, albeit smaller, began with the outright military defeat of the Axis powers in 1945. (Grugel, 2002, pp. 32-33). The forces of democratization, primarily the American, British, and French allies, made significant headway in the occupied territories of Germany, Japan, and Austria. Concurrently, elements of democracy began to emerge in several Latin

American regions. According to Huntington, a third wave of democratization was triggered in 1974 with Portugal's transition to democracy, which was soon followed by similar shifts in Greece and Spain (Grugel, 2002, pp. 32-33).

In the 1950s, theorists primarily concentrated on identifying socio-economic or socio-cultural prerequisites for the process of democratization, while the focus in the 1980s shifted towards the significance of political maneuvering and strategic activities. Detailed quantitative studies across various nations have been carried out to investigate the correlation between the level of democracy and metrics such as GNP growth, equality, and infant mortality rates (Chan, 2004, pp. 57-59). Other research underscored the importance of specific political culture and centered around the unique attributes of individuals within democratic societies (Chan, 2004, pp. 60-64). The advent of capitalism, resulting from the dissolution of feudalism characterized by personal and forceful obligations binding peasants to noblemen, fostered socio-economic conditions conducive to the rise of representative democracy. This was largely due to the empowered social classes that have consistently backed democracy, such as the working class and autonomous capitalist farmers (Roper, 2013, p. 196). The fall of alternative socialist economic models further reinforced the supremacy of an extreme free-market ideology, setting it as the global benchmark for economic policy, which includes policies of major international financial institutions (Beetham, 2005, pp. 102-103).

Regional IOs can support the solidification of democracy by offering nascent democracies the means to commit

to specific policies credibly, by lending international endorsement to new regimes, by helping deter anti-regime forces from opposing the burgeoning regime, and by providing resources to assist leaders in gaining the allegiance of significant elite factions (Pevenhouse, 2005, p. 15). This indicates the significant role international organizations can play in the process of democratization.

The conditions necessary for the establishment and sustenance of democracy can appear virtually endless. Two key factors often highlighted include a certain degree of socioeconomic development, specifically GDP per capita, and a civic political culture that promotes democratic values and practices (Makarenko & Meville, 2015, pp. 271-272). Additionally, the absence of deep-rooted social, ethnic, or religious divisions, which can disrupt democratic processes, is also seen as a critical precondition for democracy (Makarenko & Meville, 2015, pp. 271-272). Another set of barriers to the democratization process can stem from societal cleavages, such as those based on ethnicity, religion, or regionalism (Makarenko & Meville, 2015, pp. 271-272). Expanding on this, preconditions for democratization and the subsequent stability of democracy often revolve around both structural and cultural elements. Structurally, a stable economic base with equitable income distribution can help foster an environment conducive to democratic practices, as it minimizes social tensions and encourages broad participation in the political process. Culturally, a society with respect for democratic norms, including tolerance for diverse viewpoints, adherence to the rule of law, and an engaged citizenry, helps lay the groundwork for a successful democracy. Moreover, a robust

civil society, including independent media and a variety of interest groups, can bolster democratic processes by providing checks and balances on power. Furthermore, functioning state institutions, which provide a sense of national identity and unity and effectively manage conflicts, are also essential for the flourishing of a democracy. All these factors interplay to create an ecosystem that supports the growth and sustainability of democratic governance.

In the context of the Western Balkans, these preconditions for democratization carry specific weight. Post the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the region has faced significant challenges that need to be overcome to fully embrace democracy.

Economically, the Western Balkan nations are still in the process of transitioning from their socialist past to market economies. Despite significant progress, disparities in wealth distribution and socioeconomic development persist across and within countries, hindering the creation of a stable economic base conducive to democratic stability.

The impact of cultural factors is also substantial. The legacy of ethnic conflicts and persistent nationalistic sentiments have challenged the establishment of a civic culture that values democratic norms, tolerance, and pluralism. Differences based on ethnic and religious identities have often been used to gain political advantage, which has complicated the democratic transition process.

Civil society, although progressively evolving, is still developing its role in these countries. The strengthening of civil society organizations and independent media is essential to foster democratic discourse and hold governments accountable.

Moreover, state institutions in these countries are still in the process of being fully democratized. Issues such as corruption, weak rule of law, and lack of institutional transparency remain significant hurdles.

Challenges to Democratic Transition in the Western Balkans: The Role of EU and External Influences

The theoretical understanding of democracy and the process of democratization have faced significant challenges in the Balkans. By the end of 2001 or beginning of 2002, the discrepancy in democratic development between the Western Balkan republics and Eastern European countries became alarmingly apparent. Despite the establishment of relatively stable governments across all Western Balkan nations, successful conduct of numerous elections without major anomalies, and some encouraging economic progress during the transition and democratization period, these factors were insufficient to alleviate ethnic tensions and foster enduring stability (Gadjanova, 2006, p. 5). Unlawful economic activities, business malpractices, uneven and sluggish economic growth, a dearth of significant foreign investment, energy deficits, serious infrastructure shortcomings, as well as urban and rural poverty are all intrinsically linked to ineffective governance (Mostov, 2008, p. 53). Public trust in democratic institutions is critically low, and the general sentiment about the region's future prospects remains largely bleak (Gadjanova, 2006, p. 5). In the course of the transition and democratization period, the European Union (EU) was expected to have a

significant influence on the development of democratic institutions by encouraging sustainable systems and initiatives encompassing all Western Balkan nations. Regrettably, the absence of a clear strategic vision from EU institutions has led to a persistence of longstanding ethnic divisions, an uptick in authoritarian tendencies, a failure to fully democratize, deficiencies in civil society, violations of human rights, and an increasing trend towards individualization of institutions, among other challenges. These continue to constitute substantial obstacles in the path of the Western Balkan nations' democratic development.

The EU was prompted to adopt a more engaged and accountable approach toward the countries in the region in the aftermath of the ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia and NATO's military intervention (Gadjanova, 2006, pp. 5-10). June 2003, at the European Council held in Thessaloniki, the EU underwent a dramatic shift in its perspective toward the Western Balkans. Before these Western Balkan countries could be considered for EU membership, they were required to undertake the necessary political, economic, and administrative reforms within their respective countries (European Commision, 2003). However, even two decades post the Thessaloniki European Council, full EU membership remains a distant goal for the Western Balkan nations. At the time of this thesis writing, Serbia has initiated negotiations, while Macedonia has also begun the process, contingent upon the inclusion of the Bulgarian community in its constitution. Albania has started negotiations as well as the screening process. Kosovo, on the other hand, has applied for candidate status and continues to await visa liberalization. Bosnia and Herzegovina maintains its status

as a potential candidate, a designation granted by the EU during the Thessaloniki EU Council.

The EU's hesitation to offer a defined pathway towards integration for the Western Balkan countries, subsequent to the easing of visa regulations, created a disconnect in their integration with the rest of Eastern Europe and intensified security concerns in the region (Gadjanova, 2006, pp. 11-12). During the transition to democracy in the Western Balkans, key issues emerged, including the ascendancy of nationalist politics, ethnic clashes, and the rise of authoritarianism (Gadjanova, 2006, pp. 11-12). The transition period in the Western Balkans was riddled with problems and complexities. The fallout from the wars of the 1990s lingered, marked by unresolved disputes, ethnic tensions, and economic challenges. The political landscape was characterized by weak institutions and rampant corruption, which often led to a lack of faith in the democratic process. Nationalistic sentiments remained strong, often exacerbating ethnic divisions and contributing to political instability. The lack of a strong civil society hampered the promotion of democratic values and human rights. Furthermore, the transition period also saw the rise of authoritarian tendencies, which further hindered the democratization process. These issues collectively represented significant hurdles in the path towards building resilient democracies in the Western Balkan nations.

Almost two decades of conflict have left Southeastern Europe grappling with unresolved ethnic and national tensions, weak government structures, and unstable political alliances struggling to uphold the rule of law and earn public trust.

Economically, the region suffers from corruption, illicit trading and trafficking, energy deficits, inhospitable environments for investment, prevalent poverty, and escalating wealth and income disparities (Mostov, 2008, p. 51). The lack of resources for public goods has contributed to public discontent and social unrest, making it challenging to sustain infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and schools, ensure payment of public employees' salaries and pensions, and provide even basic health and welfare benefits (Mostov, 2008, p. 53). As a result of the insufficient EU funds aimed at strengthening institutions and managing the transition, particularly during the democratization period in Western Balkan countries, several problems persist. Serbia has managed to maintain relative economic stability, largely due to its state-building efforts post-Yugoslavia's dissolution and the institutional building experience accumulated during Tito's era. However, the rise of authoritarianism, deficiencies in human rights and the judicial system, as well as rampant corruption and organized crime, have significantly undermined the democratic structure in the country. This further emphasizes the importance of EU intervention and strategic support in steering the transition and democratization processes towards stability and success.

During the period of transition and democratization, Western Balkan nations struggled to shed their communist mindset and adopt policies promoting openness, accountability, transparency, effective governance, and community empowerment - principles that are inherently commendable and universally acceptable (Sampson, 2003, pp. 137-138). The EU's lack of vision in supplying transitioning countries with the necessary funds to bolster democratic values has resulted

in the formation of a democratic regime that remains unstable and susceptible to collapse under the influence of an authoritarian leader. This theory is exemplified by figures like Nikola Gruevski, the former Prime Minister of North Macedonia, and the current Prime Ministers of Albania and Serbia, Edi Rama and Alexander Vucic, respectively. The latter two remain in power, demonstrating authoritarian tendencies. The scenarios underline the crucial need for the EU's strategic foresight and support in securing democratic processes, particularly in countries vulnerable to regression into authoritarian rule.

The uncertainty surrounding the transition period undermined the EU's standing in the region, paving the way for the emergence of an entirely new set of foreign actors (Sampson, 2003, pp. 145-146). These new players entered the field armed with their unique perspectives on risk, uncertainty, anxiety, security, and insecurity, as well as the resources required to implement their ideologies (Sampson, 2003, pp. 145-146). One such prominent player is Russia, whose influence in the region has not always been conducive to its progress. Russia's involvement often appeared to destabilize rather than assist the democratization process, leading to increased political tension. The use of energy politics to exert control, support for nationalist and separatist movements, and the spreading of disinformation are among the tactics that have reportedly been used. This negative impact not only undermines the sovereignty and democratic progression of Western Balkan nations but also poses a significant challenge to the EU's efforts in promoting stability and integration in the region. Thus, a comprehensive strategy is required to counteract

such external influences and ensure the consolidation of democratic institutions.

Legacy of Authoritarianism and Ethnic Nationalism: Obstacles to Democratic Transition in the Western Balkans

In the case of multiethnic federations such as the USSR and Yugoslavia, recent scholarly consensus suggests that the design of political institutions either reinforced pre-existing titular national identities or facilitated the development of new ones. The central administrations in Moscow and Belgrade allocated substantial resources towards mass education and the promotion of national languages (Timothy, 2010, pp. 148-152). Furthermore, they encouraged the growth of native national elites, providing them with significant resources to manage the national-federal unit. The Serbian elites, in particular, held notable representation in the military and security forces compared to their Croatian and Slovenian counterparts, an aspect of great significance during the transition period (Timothy, 2010, pp. 148-152).

Yugoslavia's geopolitical positioning between the East and the West diluted international influences pushing for democracy (Linz & Stepan, 1996, pp. 238-239). For reasons primarily linked to a 'divide and rule' strategy, US foreign policymakers accorded Yugoslavia an implicit privileged status among Communist nations. As a result, when 1989 came about, many of those in power across the various republics could resist full democratization and liberal values by leaning on their nationalist stances against their

neighbors and internal minorities (Linz & Stepan, 1996, pp. 238-239). This resistance created a legacy that continues to pose a major barrier to the full consolidation of democracy in Western Balkan countries. The deep-seated ethnic tensions and nationalistic sentiments, fueled and exploited during the transitional period, remain a pressing challenge. The lack of adequate democratic reforms and the persistence of such divisive ideologies have hindered the progress of democratic consolidation, underscoring the need for more robust measures to address these longstanding issues.

The Western Balkans face the daunting task of overcoming a deep-rooted authoritarian past. Furthermore, a considerable portion of the population perceives that the transition to democracy in their countries has been enforced from above, by both the local elite and international entities, while domestic politics remain deeply divided along ethnic and party lines (Sakellariou & Sotiropoulos, 2014, p. 5). Moreover, there still exist unsettled issues of statehood, the rule of law faces obstacles, corruption is rampant, public administration is tainted by politics and inefficiency, the absolute freedom of the media is not fully ensured, and civil society continues to be weak (Sakellariou & Sotiropoulos, 2014, p. 5).

Following the fall of Communism, security worries shifted towards promoting amicable relations, curtailing nationalism, and reinforcing the nascent democracies (Pridham, 2005, p. 37). However, in the context of the Western Balkans, warfare overshadowed other issues in numerous countries in the region during the first half of the 1990s, rendering security the paramount concern (Pridham, 2005, p. 37). The legacy of Communism remains

a substantial hurdle in the Western Balkans. The region's political and societal structures are still grappling with the vestiges of an authoritarian era that continue to impede their democratic progress. Authoritarian tendencies, lack of political transparency, systemic corruption, and the prevalence of nationalistic ideologies all trace their roots back to the Communist period.

Inequitable political competition persists as a remnant of the communist era in post-communist societies (Vachudova, 2005, p. 26). However, citizens typically have limited understanding at the onset of the transition about the alternative strategies for reform and, once these reforms commence, which groups are reaping the benefits (Vachudova, 2005, p. 26).

The legacies manifesting in post-communist societies can be encapsulated as follows:

- The incumbent authorities may intentionally use their powers to maintain a weakness among their adversaries. While groups that operate on patron-client relationships thrive, potential opposing factions may be institutionally and financially hindered.

- Independent media outlets may lack strength, while the ruling parties may still retain control over state-run television and substantial sections of the print media. State-controlled television, in particular, can be highly influential, especially when a large number of citizens do not actively seek alternative sources of information, even if available.

- The electorate may be highly responsive to ethnic nationalism. Such nationalism distorts individual and group preferences that would naturally evolve in a liberal democracy by fostering severe ethnic divisions on all politically significant issues. This can erode social unity and present politics as a win-lose competition for influence between distinct ethnically defined groups. Politicians may use this to rally the nation into defending the budding democratic state against ethnic minorities or neighboring countries (Vachudova, 2005, pp. 16-17).

Challenges of Transition in Post-Communist Societies

Some nations that emerged from communist rule have transitioned into liberal democracies with operational market economies, while others continue to be governed by authoritarian regimes with only minimal economic reforms implemented (Vachudova, 2005, p. 11). A number of them occupy a middle ground, having established democratic institutions on paper but practicing illiberal politics, coupled with some level of economic reform but highly skewed markets (Vachudova, 2005, p. 11). The path to democratization in post-communist societies is fraught with numerous challenges. Firstly, the lingering influence of authoritarianism often results in an uneven playing field for political competition. New democracies grapple with remnants of authoritarian rule, such as lack of political transparency, systemic corruption, and strongman politics. Secondly, these societies often lack the robust civil institutions and culture of civic engagement necessary for a healthy democracy. Thirdly, economic transition can be a painful process, often resulting in increased income

inequality and social disruption, which can undermine support for democratic reforms. Finally, these societies often struggle with divisive nationalist sentiment and unresolved ethnic tensions, which can destabilize the political environment and hinder democratic consolidation. It is thus crucial to undertake concerted efforts in political education, economic restructuring, and fostering civil society to surmount these hurdles.

In nations where the fall of communism gave way to a political framework lacking competition, it is reasonable to anticipate the curtailment of liberal democratic institutions and comparatively sluggish advancements toward a market-based economy (Vachudova, 2005, p. 11).

Initial public backing for democracy was rather feeble and had limited opportunities to rally behind opposition elites (Horwitz, 2005, p. 6). In some instances, democratic transitions that were only partially realized faced threats and even rollback at the hands of leaders with authoritarian inclinations and their supporting political factions. These leaders exploited the public's ambivalence concerning the advantages of the reform trajectory (Horwitz, 2005, p. 6).

The durability of democracy advancement initiatives could be in doubt if they continue to be implemented from a top-down perspective (Pridham, 2005, pp. 12-27). In societies transitioning from communism, the development of a fresh constitution and democratic institutions has triggered changes in the actions of political elites (Pridham, 2005, pp. 12-27). The transition process entails discussions about the constitutional arrangement, establishing guidelines for political rivalry, and disassembling authoritarian

institutions. The creation of a consensus among elites signifies a substantial step towards concluding the transition process and involves the repeal of laws that are incompatible with a democratic society (Pridham, 2005, pp. 12-27).

The Role of Identity in Constructivist Theory and International Relations

Broadly, identity serves as a means of connecting oneself with others. It forms a crucial part of an individual's social existence by determining their alignment with various collectives - be they based on ideology, nationality, or religion. The concept of identity is multifaceted: an individual can concurrently associate with or see themselves as part of multiple groups.

Elaborating on this, identity can be understood as an integral part of a person's self-concept and how they view their place in the world. It can be influenced by personal experiences, familial upbringing, societal norms, and cultural background. Whether conscious or subconscious, these elements can shape an individual's values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, which in turn define their association with certain communities. Thus, identity is not static, but rather an evolving reflection of one's interaction with the various societal, cultural, and personal factors. It acts as a compass guiding individuals through social situations, fostering a sense of belonging and helping define relationships with others. Ultimately, identity is a dynamic and complex construct, intricately woven into the fabric of an individual's life, influencing their choices and shaping their worldview.

Constructivist theory posits that states, much like individuals, can shape the perceptions others hold of them by associating with specific principles, ideals, or inclinations (Kapitonenko, 2022, p. 108). It suggests that states' foreign policy decisions are not merely derived from rational judgments but also influenced by their self-perception and interpretation of others, often fueled by glorified versions of their own historical narratives (Kapitonenko, 2022, p. 108).

Identity's significance in constructivism is due to its ability to expose the impact and character of norms on state conduct (Kapitonenko, 2022, pp. 109-110). When viewed from an individual's perspective, the concept of self-consciousness is crucial — the internal "self" interprets and assigns meaning or identity based on external factors, primarily how it is perceived by others (Kauppi & Viotti, 2020, p. 154). Thus, the constructivist view emphasizes the role of social constructs and mutual interpretations in shaping a state's behavior and decisions.

Kapitonenko, referencing Wendt, suggests that various international social structures arise from differing methods of arranging world order. This includes three kinds of anarchy: Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian. Hobbesian anarchy is defined by states viewing each other as enemies, a concept that aligns seamlessly with Hobbes's depiction of a 'war of all against all,' where military might is crucial. Lockean anarchy involves competition, deterrence, conflict management, and the balance of power. States regard each other as rivals or opponents and may resort to violence, albeit sparingly. Kantian anarchy represents a state of amicable relations, or the anarchy of friends (Kapitonenko, 2022,

p. 109). Expanding on this, the classification of anarchies that shape the structures is crucial as they incorporate the concept of identity into the theories of international relations. Social structures elucidate the various identities that states can assume in any given circumstance, most notably, the adoption of specific identities during their conduct of foreign policy. These anarchic structures, therefore, not only affect the actions of states but also their sense of self and how they perceive and relate to others in the international arena.

The term 'international relations' was evidently introduced by Bentham (Haas, 2017, p. 3). One of the primary objectives of international relations scholars was to eradicate warfare as a tool of state policy (Haas, 2017, p. 3). On occasion, separate international relations departments were established, starting with Aberystwyth University in 1919, based on the belief that the best understanding of global affairs comes from a truly interdisciplinary approach (Haas, 2017, p. 6). However, it's frequently noted that the discipline of International Relations (IR) is overly centred on Western perspectives. A significant portion of mainstream IR theory is criticized as simply being a generalization of Western history (Eun, 2018, p. 1). IR scholarship has traditionally concentrated on issues relevant to the major powers within the Western-focused Westphalian system. IR is frequently accused of celebrating, defending, or promoting the West as the dominant influencer and the ultimate normative reference in global politics, thus marginalizing those outside the Western context (Eun, 2018, p. 1).

The pressing issue within international relations theory relating to identity pertains to the discernment of a specific identity's existence.

First, one would look for habitual actions consistent with this identity and interpretations such as US attempts during the Cold War to block the expansion of Soviet influence in the Third World and Western Europe;

Second, one would monitor the discourse or combination of language and techniques employed to maintain these practices (Kauppi & Viotti, 2020, p. 155).

Identity is subject to influences from a myriad of sources. These may be endogenous, emerging from within the state, such as broad societal cultural aspects or military doctrines driven by the internal political power distribution. Moreover, identities can also be shaped by factors like race, gender, nationality, religion, or ideology (Kauppi & Viotti, 2020, p. 155). Empirical investigations have looked into the formation of a shared identity among the Western North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members during the Cold War. Essentially, while the interactions among states play a crucial role in formulating the norms, shared interpretations, and institutions that govern international relations, these factors reciprocally impact the identity and behavior of the states themselves (Kauppi & Viotti, 2020, p. 155).

Deciphering Identity: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

Defining identity is a complex and ambitious task that spans across various disciplines. As highlighted by Fligstein et al. (2012), professionals from fields such as psychology,

sociology, anthropology, and political science have exhibited interest in studying the formation and characteristics of the concept. Although the term 'identity' is widely used in everyday language, its essence is not fully encapsulated or thoroughly elaborated by the definitions found in dictionaries (Panzera, 2022, p. 93). The shift towards identity has been especially significant in applied linguistics around the turn of the millennium. The discourse on identity in this field was arguably initiated by Bonny Norton's criticism of second-language acquisition researchers, whom she accused of failing to incorporate theories of social identity and power into understanding the process of second-language learning (Block, 2022, p. 1).

The term "identity" and its counterparts in different languages have been employed as technical terms in Western philosophy for a long time, starting from ancient Greek philosophy to modern analytical philosophy. As Brubaker and Cooper suggest, the concept of identity has been utilized to tackle enduring philosophical dilemmas related to the constancy amid observable changes and the unity in the face of evident diversity (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 2).

Fearon, from his analysis of everyday language and discourse in social science, offers an interpretation of the term "identity". He contends that identity currently has two interrelated meanings - social and personal. In the social context, an identity refers to a set of individuals identified by a specific label and differentiated by rules that determine membership and typical characteristics (Fearon, 1999, p. 2).

When it comes to personal identity, it involves unique attributes that a person takes exceptional pride in or

perceives as unalterable yet socially significant. Even though one can use "identity" to denote personal features that aren't easily expressed in terms of a social category, Fearon argues that our contemporary understanding of identity implies that social categories are intrinsically tied to the basis of an individual's self-esteem (Fearon, 1999, p. 2). Personal identity is essentially a compilation of a person's attributes or aspects. These could be physical characteristics, affiliations to social groups, individual-specific beliefs, ambitions, desires, ethical values, or personal style elements (Fearon, 1999, p. 23). The intricacy of the term "identity" gained significant attention during the 1960s. It rapidly diffused across different academic disciplines and national borders, finding its way into journalistic and academic vocabulary, and becoming pervasive in both social and political discourse and practice (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 3).

The process of identity categorization is part of a broader series of processes that ascribe certain traits to individuals belonging to the same group. While the cognitive processes involved in these operations seem to share some universal features, the content of these categories is shaped by historical constructs (Dorronsoro & Grojean, 2018, p. 6). Therefore, a person's identity consists of two fundamental aspects. Firstly, their name, which primarily distinguishes them from others, and secondly, that deep-seated, elusive essence that represents one's true self, for which we lack an accurate term (Joseph, 2004, pp. 1-2).

Brubaker and Cooper categorize identity into two main classifications: a category of practice and a category of analysis (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 5). In its role as a

category of practice, identity is employed by individuals in daily situations to comprehend their own selves, their actions, and to identify commonalities and differences with others (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 5). Furthermore, it is leveraged by political strategists to convince people to perceive themselves, their interests, and their challenges in a specific manner, to assure certain individuals that they share an identity while being distinct from others, and to organize and legitimize collective action along certain lines (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 5).

Identity is seen more as a delineation than a specific area, and a collection (Dorronsoro & Grojean, 2018, p. 4) of distinctions takes precedence over satisfying a specific list of criteria. Nonetheless, identity can be tactically reinterpreted by elites who manipulate rationality devoid of the unique values and perceptions of their group (Dorronsoro & Grojean, 2018, p. 5). Checkel and Katzenstein suggest that identities signify communal self-perceptions shared in public discourse, political symbols, collective memories, and power competitions among elites (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009, p. 4). Identities exceed being mere identifiers of social and geographical connections—they are not just ethnographic categorizations or common perceptions. They also represent loyalties indicating a level of access to resources amid group rivalry or unequal cooperation (Dorronsoro & Grojean, 2018, p. 8).

Fabbrini characterizes political identity as the self-perception of a group of political players as articulated through the institution's norms, values, and objectives. In this view, political identity is not a rigid construct but

a socially constructed reality. It emerges from strategic maneuvers carried out by influential political actors with decision-making power, who aim to leverage the institutional logic to augment their influence within the institution and advocate for the institution's mission (Fabbrini, 2019, p. 19). Political identity encompasses two distinct yet commonly merged aspects, the differentiation of which is crucial for analysis. One aspect pertains to how political activities and institutions foster processes of individual and collective identification and differentiation; the other involves how this process of identification forms the basis for political loyalty in a political community (Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009, pp. 30-31). The term identity additionally signifies 'the state of being identical'. Personal identity also harbors ambiguity, ranging from one's name serving the 'deictic' function of pointing to an individual, to the 'semantic' function of indicating who that person truly is (Joseph, 2004, p. 2).

The Complexity of National Identity in Multiethnic Societies

National identity began to take shape as a political issue with the advent of national sentiment, which originated locally during the late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period amidst confrontations with superior authorities or nearby administrations. These national sentiments were reformed from the late eighteenth century onwards and throughout the nineteenth century, coinciding with the emergence of the modern nation-state. Despite many nation-states having a rather erratic territorial history and best characterized as unintentional entities, there was a felt

need for a logical territory—a homeland—for a well-defined community (Renes, 2022, pp. 5-6). According to Smith (2010, p. 13), Alaranta defines a nation as a "designated human community living in a perceived homeland, possessing shared myths and history, a distinct public culture, and shared laws and customs for all members" (Alaranta, 2015, p. 15). Further, Alaranta adds another definition of national identity, describing it as "the ongoing regeneration and reinterpretation by the members of a national community of the array of symbols, values, myths, memories, and traditions that constitute the unique heritage of nations, and the varying identification of individual members of that community with that heritage and its cultural components" (Alaranta, 2015, p. 15). Essentially, national identity represents a continuous societal struggle over the power to delineate who "we" are as a nation (Alaranta, 2015, p. 15).

In every nation, regionalism posed a challenge to nationalism, as regional factions perceived themselves as distinct from the overall nation, creating their own emblems, anthems, and other symbols (Renes, 2022, pp. 7-9). The establishment of nation-states was a process of nation-building where these emergent entities delineated themselves along ethnic lines, primarily based on language and religion. The concept of ethnicity itself became more rigidly defined in the context of burgeoning nationalism (Renes, 2022, p. 7). For an extended period, ethnicity was a vague concept associated with language, religion, lineage, territory, and economy (Renes, 2022, p. 7). As per Bereketeab, national identity signifies feelings, awareness, cognition, belonging, and commonality that foster the desire to live collectively (Bereketeab, 2017, pp. 6-16). While "state" denotes political

organization, "nation" denotes consciousness and sentiment (Bereketeab, 2017, pp. 6-16). National identity and the state are intricately connected, with each having an impact on the other. The identity of a nation, which emerges from shared histories, beliefs, values, and symbols, is typically reinforced by state institutions and policies. On the other hand, the nature of the state - its political structure, governance mechanisms, and policies - can also shape the development and evolution of national identity. For instance, the state might promote certain cultural practices, languages, or historical narratives, which can strengthen national identity. Conversely, a strong, unified national identity can contribute to the stability and legitimacy of the state, promoting social cohesion and a shared sense of purpose among its citizens. In multiethnic societies, the relationship between national identity and the state can be more complex. Promoting certain cultural practices, languages, or historical narratives might lead to tensions and conflicts among different ethnic groups. When the state promotes one culture or ethnicity over others, it can create a sense of marginalization or exclusion among those groups that do not identify with the promoted culture. If a state emphasizes a specific ethnic identity at the expense of others, it may disrupt inter-ethnic harmony and fuel tensions. The state's role in these societies should ideally be to encourage mutual respect and understanding among various ethnic communities, promoting multiculturalism and inclusivity rather than favoring one group over others.

The process of reconstructing national identity is not a task solely for the political elite; it should encompass all societal sectors. A successfully redefined national identity

must mirror the richness and variety of its constituent identity groups, requiring a blend of grassroots and top-down strategies, the acknowledgment of grievances, the fulfillment of aspirations, and the making of compromises (Bereketeab, 2017, p. 14). Adding to this, the process of reshaping national identity is a complex undertaking. In multiethnic societies, if the strategy adopted is not inclusive, if it fails to engage all ethnicities in the construction of the national identity, then the creation of a cohesive national identity becomes a daunting challenge. This failure to include and respect all ethnicities could pose severe threats to the operational efficiency of the state and could even spark ethnic conflicts. The emergence of such conflicts could result in the ascendance of ethnic nationalism and cause deep societal divisions. Therefore, the importance of an inclusive approach in the politics of reconstructing national identity cannot be overstated. Instead of advocating for a singular national identity, the state could emphasize a more pluralistic approach to national identity. This can be achieved by recognizing the diversity of cultures, languages, and traditions present in the society, and treating them as equally important components of the nation's collective identity. Such an approach can help to manage inter-ethnic relations, prevent conflicts, and promote a sense of belonging and unity among all citizens, regardless of their ethnic background.

The case of North Macedonia following its independence illustrates the complexity of managing national identity in a multiethnic society. After gaining independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, North Macedonia grappled with the task of defining its national identity amidst a diverse population,

with a significant ethnic Albanian community alongside its Macedonian majority.

Present-day political climates place significant emphasis on economic stability, especially in the shaping of national identity within multiethnic societies. The competitive nature of environments, coupled with territorial variations in value chains, as well as challenges posed by automation and intelligent machines, have all contributed to perceived and actual economic disparities. These factors also create uncertainty about the stability of both the economy and personal circumstances (Panzera, 2022, pp. 28-29). Additionally, the ascendance of nationalism and populist parties is generally more beneficial in states that are not multiethnic. Recognition of identity and the formation of a national identity, when coupled with consensus and support for nationalist and populist parties, carries the risk of posing serious threats to democracy. The emerging trend in multiethnic societies is the attempt to embrace an economic identity, refraining from aggressive nationalist and populist policies amongst different ethnic groups. This approach seeks to harmonize diverse ethnicities by focusing on shared economic goals and prosperity, promoting unity and peace, and reducing the potential for conflict and division.

In multiethnic societies that could form an economic identity could also result on a solid attachment to places facilitates inter-actions among territorial actors that don't necessarily speak the same language but are interested in the proper functioning of their economic systems and, therefore, identify the opportunity of making exchanges

and trades establishing communication codes, conditions for reliability, alliances, partnerships and collaborations (Panzera, 2022, pp. 28-30). Overall, North Macedonia's experience underscores the importance of promoting inclusivity, respecting cultural diversity, and managing inter-ethnic relations carefully in multiethnic societies. It shows that while defining national identity is a complex process, it can contribute positively to social cohesion and stability when handled with sensitivity and care.

The Complexity and Consequences of Nationalism in Multiethnic Societies

Nationalism, as a political ideology, has long been a staple of international politics. It typically manifests as an emphasis on the precedence of one's nation over all others, or the assertion of a nation's right to self-determination. This focus can extend to prioritizing one's ethnic group above others in multiethnic societies. Lately, however, nationalism is frequently associated with a rhetoric that opposes globalization and international cooperation, favoring domestic needs and interests.

This trend raises critical questions about the resurgence of nationalist politics in today's global landscape, and its implications for international cooperation. The effects of globalization have been so profound and, in many instances, disruptive, that it has resulted in a populace that harbors distrust and resentment towards immigration, globalization, and the political establishment. In multiethnic societies, the rise of nationalist and populist politics has exacerbated divisions between the majority ethnic group and minority

groups. These circumstances present a significant challenge and an evolving dynamic in the sphere of global politics.

Elie Kedourie, as referenced by Joseph, posits that nationalism is based on the belief that humanity naturally segregates into distinct nations. These nations are recognizable by certain unique traits, and the only valid form of governance is self-rule based on these national distinctions (Joseph, 2004, p. 96). Bosworth proposes that the concepts of nationalism and nations were conceived simultaneously, emerging during the period of Enlightenment and culminating in the French and Industrial revolutions (Bosworth, 2007, pp. 58-59). Schulz defines a nation as an extended community, bound by a unique sense of kinship, underpinned by a collective memory of past sacrifices and a willingness to make future sacrifices (Schulze, 1996, pp. 97-98). A nation, in Schulz's view, exists as a psychological construct, residing in the thoughts and aspirations of its members, and fades away when it no longer pervades their consciousness (Schulze, 1996, pp. 97-98). Smith provides a comprehensive definition of a nation as a named population sharing a historic territory, common myths, and historical memories, a unified public culture, a collective economy, and uniform legal rights and duties for its members (Smith, 1995, p. 57). He further defines ethnics as named population units that share common ancestry myths and historical memories, components of a shared culture, a connection with a historic territory, and a degree of unity, particularly among their elites (Smith, 1995, p. 57).

Bieber (2018, p. 520) views nationalism as an ideology that places immense value on one's nationhood, distinguishing it from other groups, and fostering its preservation and

political representation. As per Smith's interpretation, nationalism serves as a potent ideological force to establish and preserve the identity, unity, and autonomy of a group, some members of which consider it to be a real or potential nation (Smith, 1999, pp. 18-19). Bieber also draws a distinction between ethnic and civic forms of nationalism. The former is grounded on the notion of a shared lineage, making it less inclusive, while the latter is premised on the concept of citizenship, thereby allowing individuals to join the nation. Nowadays, the degree to which nationalism is inclusive or exclusive is a critical determinant, which can hinge on concepts of common descent, narratives of native origins, or adherence to specific values (Bieber, 2018, p. 521). Adding to this, the level of exclusion was particularly notable in Macedonia under the VMRO. This party utilized ethnic nationalism as a tool to emphasize the exclusivity of Macedonian identity and consolidate power, often at the expense of the nation's diverse ethnic groups. This approach served to heighten ethnic tensions and hinder the development of a more inclusive, civic form of nationalism.

According to Smith, the world is witnessing a rebirth of ethnic nationalism, of religious fundamentalists, and of group antagonisms which were thought to have been long buried (Smith, 1995, p. 2). Ethnic protests for autonomy and secession, wars of national irredentism, and explosive racial conflicts over labor markets and social facilities have proliferated on every continent (Smith, 1995, p. 2).

Bieber points out that nationalism is not a spontaneous occurrence but must be nurtured, with its constituents being convinced of their belonging to a particular group.

The strength of nationalism within a society can be gauged through several indicators, such as underlying or structural elements, citizenship that excludes, socioeconomic marginalization, and more overt and immediate aspects like media narratives, support for nationalist parties, and violence against specific groups (Bieber, 2018, pp. 520-521). In multiethnic societies, nationalism doesn't just appear; it necessitates a constellation of factors to come together. For nationalism to become intense, a pivotal moment of crisis is needed, which can be ideological, economic, institutional, or social (Bieber, 2018, p. 521). Adding on to this, the disintegration of Yugoslavia can be seen as a critical event and a profound crisis that sparked ethnic nationalism in the Balkans. The rise of ethnic nationalism, political parties along ethnic lines, conflicts among minority groups, border disputes, and the preservation of the status quo in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo all pose significant challenges to fully establishing an economic identity and democracy in the Western Balkan region. The dissolution of Yugoslavia has left a lasting legacy for nearly three decades, which has contributed to the rise of authoritarianism in the region.

Bieber notes that democracies in their nascent stages often prove to be highly susceptible to extreme forms of nationalism. There are primarily two reasons for this: firstly, during the democratization process, it becomes necessary to establish new rules and institutions that define the political community (Bieber, 2018, pp. 520-523). Key considerations include whether the state is a nation-state, whether a core nation enjoys privileged access to citizenship, and whether ethnic kin are allowed to vote or if certain

groups are excluded (Bieber, 2018, pp. 520-523). Secondly, political competition in such unconsolidated democracies is flawed, and nationalism offers a straightforward, ready-made ideology that can compete in the marketplace of ideas (Bieber, 2018, pp. 520-523). Building on this, the case of North Macedonia can be illustrative. After gaining independence, North Macedonia found itself grappling with defining its political community while trying to balance the interests of its ethnically diverse population. The democratization process was challenged by competing nationalist ideologies, often stoked by populist political groups, which complicated the country's efforts to create inclusive institutions and laws. This scenario underscores the susceptibility of emerging democracies, like North Macedonia, to the forces of virulent nationalism.

Smith postulates that nations and nationalisms are not just the results of modernity but also active contributors to it (Smith, 1995, pp. 2-3).

He suggests that nations and nationalism form the fundamental underpinnings and dynamics of both the modern and pre-modern eras. The phenomena of modernization and modernity serve primarily as vehicles that allow nations to be realized in our contemporary world (Smith, 1995, pp. 2-3). From the dawn of human civilization through the present, the concept of nation and the drive of nationalism have played pivotal roles in shaping societal identities, influencing policy, and guiding the course of history.

Historical and Modern Challenges of Nationalism

The development of centralized and culturally unified states was catalyzed by three significant revolutions, profoundly reshaping the political landscape. By the dawn of the twentieth century, Europe was segmented into a system of states characterized by bureaucratic efficiency and rational governance. These state-making concepts and methodologies were also intentionally imparted to overseas colonies. In this transformative milieu, the phenomenon of nationalism surfaced, leading to the creation of nations.

Essentially, the origins of nationhood can be found in the early Middle Ages, when Saxon and Frankish kings began to unify the territories that would eventually become 'England' and 'France', a process mirrored in the formation of Spanish, Swedish, and Polish states, followed by the emergence of Russia, Hungary, and Holland, as well as semblances of centralized states in the Islamic world, including Fatimid Egypt, Savafid Iran, and to a lesser degree, the Ottoman Empire (Smith, 1988, p. 130).

The potency of national ideas stems from their ability to blend truth with untruth, accomplishment with disaster, triumph with victimhood, making it difficult to separate these elements. From one angle, nations have thrived since 1789 in a context of scientific and material development, social unity, and general satisfaction (Bosworth, 2007, p. 13). The shift from feudalism to capitalism signified a remarkable increase in economic integration, altering customs, trade, and commodity exchange, leading to the gradual establishment of a unified occupational system throughout a territory (Smith, 1988, pp. 130-133). Additionally,

a cultural and educational revolution transpired, where the construct of a sovereign state replaced the concept of the divine, promising tangible salvation (Smith, 1988, pp. 130-133). However, throughout this same timeframe, nations have also cultivated exclusion, hierarchy, and acts of violence, including murder, genocide, and both local and global warfare (Bosworth, 2007, p. 13). Any narration of a nation's history, as well as the broader tale of nations, must accommodate both triumphs and failures, matters of life and death, virtue and vice, the constant and the capricious (Bosworth, 2007, p. 13).

Smith maintains that the essence of ethnic and national bonds will continue to endure despite any subsequent social and political changes, even as their forms may evolve (Smith, 1995, p. 4). In the words of renowned French philosopher Ernest Renan, "The nation, like an individual, is an outcome of a long history of efforts, sacrifices, and devotion. The cult of ancestors is the most legitimate of all, as they have shaped us into who we are today" (Renan, 1893, p. 261). Elements like geography, language, music, and symbols all hold significance, but shared history is often considered a fundamental commonality within a nation - not in the professional, critical sense, but as a continuous thread that weaves the past, present, and future together (Bosworth, 2007, p. 29). Furthermore, Smith, referencing Van den Berghe's work, proposes that nations and ethnic groups are essentially larger versions of kinship units, constructed from the same nepotistic impulses for inclusive fitness that smaller clans and families exhibit, with markers like color, language, and religion signaling biological connections (Smith, 1988, p. 4).

Interplay of Modernism and Nationalism: Unresolved Tensions and the Pursuit of Stability in Southeastern Europe

The interaction of modernism and nationalism in Southeastern Europe presents a complex and multifaceted exploration of socio-political dynamics. In this region, the effects of the modernist movement—characterized by the rejection of tradition, a push towards innovation, and the encouragement of critical thinking—interplayed with nationalistic ideals, which often emphasized ethnic identity, cultural continuity, and political autonomy. The journey of modernism and nationalism in Southeastern Europe, thus, paints a fascinating tableau of cultural shifts, political changes, and societal transformations. It offers insights into how these forces shaped the identity, consciousness, and destiny of nations in this part of the world. The ensuing dialogue and sometimes conflict between modernism and nationalism have left indelible imprints on the region, echoes of which continue to be felt in the present day.

There exists a concerning possibility that instead of progressing in alignment with the rest of Europe, the Balkan nations may continue to lag behind. The goal of achieving integration, which is a crucial element for stabilizing the region, could become increasingly unattainable (International Commission in the Balkans, 2005, pp. 10-14). The current circumstances aren't just unworkable; they also risk thrusting the region into a renewed phase of dangerous volatility. Strategies that solely address prevailing economic and societal issues, while neglecting unresolved status

matters, have proven ineffective (International Commision in the Balkans, 2005, pp. 10-14).

The region of the former Yugoslavia is nestled among three of the world's major religions: Christianity, Islam, and Orthodoxy. After the death of Tito in 1980, nationalist sentiments began to resurface (Oliver, 2005, p. 4). Slobodan Milosevic ascended from anonymity to dictatorship and subsequently to the Serbian Presidency, primarily exploiting an issue he largely manufactured himself: the alleged oppression of the Serbian minority in the southern province of Kosovo (Oliver, 2005, p. 4). One of the critical decisions sparking the resurgence of nationalism in the Balkans, which led to devastating wars, was made by the Serbian Assembly in March 1989 (Oliver, 2005, p. 4). The Assembly rescinded the political autonomy granted by Tito to the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina. Now, with the votes from these provinces under his control, and guaranteed support from Montenegro, Milosevic commanded four of the eight votes in the Federal government. By reducing Macedonia to a vassal state, he was able to manipulate the Federal Constitution at will and consolidate Serbia's dominance across Yugoslavia (Oliver, 2005, pp. 3-7). As reported by the independent Kosovar Albanian Association of Trades Unions, 115,000 of the total 170,000 people were dismissed from their jobs (Oxford University Report, 2000, pp. 16-17). More critically, widespread human rights violations occurred, including random arrests, torture, and imprisonment without trial. Albanians were charged with "verbal crimes" and brought to police stations for "informative talks." The extent of these abuses has been reported by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch,

and the Council for the Defense of Human Rights in Kosovo (Oxford University Report, 2000, pp. 16-17).

Following the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Balkan nations were split into Western Balkan countries and others, with the former experiencing greater isolation in their international relations. Persisting nationalist policies and the growth of authoritarianism over recent decades have tested democracy and progress in the region, and the last four major conflicts, rooted in a tangle of political, religious, economic, ethnic, and historical factors, have added to this complexity.

Some believe that the wars in the region, particularly in Bosnia, were an unavoidable historical consequence, arising from deep-seated religious and ethnic grudges which, while suppressed under Tito, exploded into violence following his death (Oliver, 2005, p. 3). As the remnants of communist structures metamorphosed into new political entities, established elites managed to weather the regime change, converting their prior influence into new political and economic dominance (Elbasani, 2013, pp. 9-10). Specifically, the breakup of Yugoslavia stands out due to how its leaders ignited nationalist rhetoric and ethnic disputes as a strategy for retaining power, often in the absence of a formidable opposition presenting alternative options (Elbasani, 2013, pp. 9-10). This manipulated nationalism and power retention tactics have significantly contributed to the continued lack of modernization in the region. Despite the changing political landscape, the region has struggled to fully integrate with the contemporary world. With old structures maintaining control, the necessary reforms for modernization have been slow, and in some cases, entirely absent. This has resulted

in stagnation, keeping the region somewhat isolated from the progressive changes observed elsewhere in the world.

Following the 1990s, a period marked by the climax of ethnic-based nationalist politics leading to several wars and skirmishes, the nations of the Western Balkans were confronted with the challenge of establishing national identities centered on universal principles of democracy, human rights, and free market economics (Nordman, 2016, p. 151). These nations have attempted to address this challenge with the support of international organizations such as the European Union, amongst others. However, despite these efforts, considerable obstacles persist. The transformation is a complex process and requires sustained commitment, both from the countries themselves and the international community, to ensure that the past patterns of nationalism and division do not reemerge.

The countries of the Western Balkans, after a period of turbulent and conflict-ridden transformation following the fall of communism, have made strides in moving away from the toxic and exclusionary nationalist politics that once dominated their sociopolitical landscapes (Elbasani, 2013, pp. 3-5). However, it's important to note that despite these advances, the region still grapples with significant challenges. The status quo, while relatively stable, carries within it seeds of fragility and potential disruption. Kosovo and Bosnia, for instance, remain delicate and unresolved issues, often teetering on the brink of instability. Serbia continues to assert an aggressive stance towards Kosovo, maintaining a charged atmosphere. Furthermore, in Macedonia, ethnic divisions persist, threatening the fragile

peace that currently holds. The country is still under the shadow of external influences, with Bulgaria imposing conditions that directly threaten Macedonia's identity and national integrity. All these factors contribute to a sense of unease that permeates the region, hinting at potential flashpoints that, if not addressed effectively, could disrupt the tentative stability that currently exists in the Western Balkans. It underscores the necessity for continued vigilance and proactive engagement to ensure these issues are appropriately addressed to secure lasting peace and stability.

The endeavor of state-building in the Western Balkan region, which involves defining borders, solidifying national unity, and enhancing institutional capabilities, is still an ongoing and, at this point, unfinished process (Elbasani, 2013, pp. 12-13).

Chauvinistic Nationalism in the Balkans: Historical Evolution and Contemporary Impact

The influence of nationalism on worldwide peace and stability is a complex and contentious topic, often resulting in two starkly contrasting standpoints. Some perceive nationalism as a crucial foundation for ensuring tranquility and security, whereas others contend that it is fundamentally warlike and imperialistic. These differing viewpoints can be traced back to the ambiguous ideological nature of nationalism and its integration with other political philosophies, giving rise to various conflicting nationalist ideologies (Heywood, 2015, p. 97). Expansive nationalism espouses the notion of a nation's inherent dominance over others. The tail-end of the 19th

century underscored the antagonistic facet of nationalism, as European powers vied for African territories, seeking national prominence and their so-called 'rightful place' in the world. This form of nationalism became associated with militaristic administrations during the 20th century, notably Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and the Japanese Empire (Heywood, 2017, pp. 250-251) and also here could be included and the Balkans countries of Albania (Greater Albania), Bulgaria (Greater Bulgaria), Croatia (Greater Croatia), Hungary (Greater Hungary), Romania (Greater Romania) and Serbia (Greater Serbia).

The birth of nationalism and formation of nation states in the Balkans presented a challenging contrast to the deep-rooted traditions and daily experiences of the majority of its people. The rise of nationalism and the establishment of states in the region, following the decline of the Ottoman Empire's influence in the 18th century, were often accompanied by ethnic cleansing (Carmichael, 2002, p. 12). The inability of the diverse nations in the Balkans to work together and the enduring historical animosities that divide them can be traced back to the advent of nationalism and contemporary interpretations of historical occurrences.

This is because the geographical distance from the cradle of nationalism seemed to correlate with a distortion in its original form. Even the core concepts of nationalism such as a constitution, freedom, or republicanism were seen to have distinct interpretations in the more easterly regions of Europe. Those brought up in the Orthodox world, untouched by the scientific revolution, renaissance, reformation, or enlightenment, were naturally inclined to ascribe unique

meanings to the principles of nationalism. This was particularly true for the people of the Balkans who had experienced centuries of Muslim rule (Sugar, 1995, p. 8).

The first seeds of nationalism in the Balkans were brought over from Western and Central Europe, often through historical and ethnographic works penned by local scholars about their own communities. The concept of Herderian cultural nationalism, which underscored inherent and, by implication, political connections among speakers of the same language, was introduced by several prominent intellectuals towards the end of the 18th century and the start of the 19th century. This notion was advanced significantly through the work of Jernej Kopitar, the imperial librarian of the Habsburg Empire (Carmichael, 2002, pp. 12-13). Clerics and entrepreneurs were among the first in the Balkans to broach the topic of nations and nationalism in the modern context (Sugar, 1995, p. 9). However, the process of documenting popular knowledge became deeply intertwined with the 'fabrication' or reshaping of national identities in the Balkans. Other Balkan communities, like the Bulgarians and Albanians, began to delve into their medieval or other historical origins from the 18th century onwards, leading to an alignment primarily based on national rather than regional or dynastic affiliations (Carmichael, 2002, pp. 12-13). The development of nationalism in the Balkans unfolded in unique ways, shaped by local dynamics, historical contexts, and the influences of the Ottoman Empire, which had a profound impact on the region. The weakening of the Empire's grip allowed new ideas, such as nationalism, to take root. This created a space for local intellectuals and leaders to conceive and foster national identities that went

beyond traditional religious or regional identifications. Balkan nationalism was thus not a mere imitation of Western ideologies but a complex and adaptive response to both internal and external changes. This distinct evolution of nationalism contributed to the region's historical trajectory and continues to shape the Balkans' socio-political landscape to this day.

Nationalism in the Balkans has often been closely associated with chauvinism. The moment the concept of the nation-state started to resonate in this region, most Balkan people perceived it not as the rule of a majority ethnic group within a given territory, but as an exclusionary principle aimed at other ethnic components (Sahara, 2001, p. 129). This version of nationalism usually expresses itself through ideologies of ethnic or racial dominance, thus intertwining nationalism and racialism. Through a chauvinist's lens, their own people are viewed as unique, special, or even 'chosen', while other groups are considered weak, inferior, hostile, or even threatening (Heywood, 2015, p. 98).

An extreme instance of this can be seen in the nationalism that soured the relationships among Balkan nations in 1848 and has shaped their relations ever since. An egocentric, superior form of nationalism made interactions among the future Yugoslav nations challenging. The Serbs, proud of their won independence war, believed themselves to be the rightful leaders of all South Slavs. However, their western neighbors did not share this perception, viewing the Serbs as problematic, uneducated, and lacking finesse (Sugar, 1995, p. 12). The first Serbian uprising offered a clear demonstration of this tendency. Starting in 1807, they began

to assault other Muslim groups. Hence, from their inception, national movements in the Balkans incorporated ideologies of chauvinism and ethnic cleansing, and subsequent developments of nationalism have done little to alter this characteristic (Sahara, 2001, pp. 129-130).

Ilija Garasanin (1812-1874) exemplifies Balkan nationalism, having laid the groundwork for the policy of Greater Serbia. It seemed that Nikola Pasic (1845-1926), the then Serbian Prime Minister, had abandoned this policy when he signed the Korfu agreement on 20 July 1917, leading to the creation of Yugoslavia (Sugar, 1995, p. 12). However, Garasanin's idea, aimed at unifying Bosnia, Southern Serbia, and the Republic of Kosovo in an effort to restore the medieval Serbian state, did not take into account the rights of the non-Serbian population in those areas (Sahara, 2001, s. 129-130). And as a result, the nationalists in Yugoslavia argued that the previous regime had betrayed the principal national goals of their respective nations and thereby lost the right to rule over that particular nation (Pavkovic, 2000, pp. 85-86).

The disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s brought another case in point of Serbian ethnic nationalism leading to atrocities. This period saw the outbreak of the Bosnian Genocide, where Serbian nationalist forces, driven by the vision of a Greater Serbia, committed mass murder and ethnic cleansing against Bosnian Muslims, leading to a devastating loss of lives. Similarly, the tensions between Serbia and Kosovo escalated, causing a grave humanitarian crisis, marked by widespread violence and the displacement of numerous people. These instances underscore the enduring and damaging impacts of chauvinistic nationalism

in the Balkans, emphasizing the need for reconciliation and a more inclusive understanding of nationhood.

Ethnic Nationalism and the Horrors of Ethnic Cleansing: A Study of Yugoslavia's Violent Dissolution

The disintegration of Yugoslavia was marked by severe human rights infringements, including large-scale expulsions and civilian massacres within the region (Bar-Tal & Cehjic-Clancy, 2014, p. 130). By the close of the previous century, inhabitants of the former Yugoslavia were forced to face the substantial devastation and extreme violence that took place in various areas between 1991 and 2001. The collapse of the Yugoslav federal state, accompanied by brutal violence, instigated alterations in economic, political, and familial domains, disrupting the social fabric of everyday life.

Regrettably, the calculated propagation of ethnic nationalism and targeted violence, aimed at segregating or eradicating communities based on forced ethnic identities, achieved their goals in numerous regions of the countries emerging from the ruins of former Yugoslavia. As these new states achieved independence, their governments started setting the rules defining who could stay, who could work, who could vote, who would be entitled to medical insurance or other benefits, and who could own real estate (Haydan, 2013, p. 100). While the political transition in some areas proceeded without violence, it generally encompassed mass murders, systematic ethnic cleansing, and actions leading to the displacement of 3 million people from their homes. Ethnic communities that were targeted by these systematic

ethnic cleansing crimes and other atrocities included those in parts of Kosovo, Mostar, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, and Vukovar (Spini et al., 2014, pp. 4-10).

Hence, the intense nationalism seen in the former Yugoslavia wasn't just about conjuring up supposed "ancient" communities; instead, it was about making the existing diverse ones unthinkable. Following the disintegration of the League of Communists, the 1990 free elections witnessed the victory of nationalism in its most traditional form in each republic: Serbia was for the Serbs, Croatia for the Croats, Slovenia for the Slovenes, and Macedonia for the Macedonians (Haydan, 2013, pp. 84-96).

As nationalist parties rose to power in the various Yugoslav republics following the 1990 elections, they reformed their respective republican constitutions, grounding the state's legitimacy in the sovereignty of the nation defined ethnically. While others could be citizens in this setup, they couldn't expect to have a share in state control (Haydan, 2013, pp. 84-96). After gaining power, victorious nationalists in each republic began implementing frameworks of constitutional nationalism - constitutional and legal systems designed to secure the supremacy of the majority ethno-national group. The transition from state socialism to state chauvinism can be observed in the expressions of state identity and purpose embodied in the various republican constitutions (Haydan, 2013, pp. 84-96). These constitutional changes, centered around ethnonationalism, set the stage for a subsequent escalation in ethnic conflict across the Balkans. This environment of exclusion and majority dominance not only disenfranchised minority groups but also spurred

sentiments of fear, hatred, and retaliation among different ethnicities. With nationalism serving as both the political doctrine and justification for power consolidation, minority groups became increasingly vulnerable to persecution. As a result, the Balkans region became a hotbed for systematic ethnic cleansing, a horrifying consequence of extreme nationalism. The attempts to establish ethnically homogenous territories through violent means were deeply rooted in this newly adopted state chauvinism.

'Ethnic cleansing' refers to the sustained and systematic effort to suppress a group differing in ethnicity or religion, with the ultimate goal of expelling or completely eradicating it (Ahmed, 1995, p. 7). During the Yugoslav Wars of Dissolution in the 1990s, primarily unfolding in Kosovo, Bosnia, and Croatia, the term 'ethnic cleansing' was widely adopted by global media. It was used to portray the mass murder and forced displacement of populations perceived as different based on ethnicity, religion, or language (Carmichael, 2002, pp. 1-2).

According to Ahmed Akbar, 'ethnic cleansing' has evolved into a 'metaphor for our time.' The phrase or similar constructs, such as the 'cleansing of terrain,' were certainly employed in the former Yugoslavia during the 1980s and 1990s. They built upon previous similar terminologies used by nationalist writers and ideologues. At the Hague Tribunal, Paul Garde defined ethnic cleansing as a practice where actions are taken to eliminate members of a specific ethnic group from a particular territory, aiming to make the area 'ethnically pure' (Carmichael, 2002, pp. 1-2).

The conflicts in the former Yugoslavia didn't solely target individuals; they also assaulted communities, aiming at their layered histories and memories. Institutions of faith, including churches and mosques - symbols of cultural identity - were systematically demolished. Yet, most significantly, these wars were attacks on interfaith and multicultural societies (Elcheroth et al., 2014, p. 231). The goal of the ethnic cleansing and persecution was not only to eradicate memories of cross-ethnic alliances but also to make the existence of such diverse communities unthinkable in the future (Elcheroth et al., 2014, p. 231). Ethnic nationalism, with its emphasis on ethnic homogeneity and purity, provided the ideological fuel for these attempts to annihilate diverse communities and erase shared histories. It bred an environment where difference was viewed as a threat, thereby justifying extreme measures such as ethnic cleansing to uphold the supposed integrity of the ethnic nation.

Ethnic cleansing orchestrated by Serbs has been characterized as a deeply horrific series of acts, encompassing mass killings, systematic assaults, sexual violence against Muslims and other groups, sustained bombardment of innocent civilians in Sarajevo and other places, forced removals of entire villages, and cruel treatment of detainees in prison camps. The relentless ethnic cleansing and genocide perpetrated against the country's Muslim population resulted in the deaths of over 200,000 Bosnians (Power, 2013, pp. 295-327). In Bosnia, the deliberate use of rape as a weapon of war was confirmed by countless international bodies and media outlets. Although rape is an appalling, but known, consequence of conflict, usually perpetrated by

soldiers amidst warfare, its implementation in the Balkans was frighteningly calculated. The participation extended beyond soldiers; civilians, administrators, and students - ordinary people - were drawn into these acts, either as direct participants or observers (Ahmed, 1995, p. 19). On the other side, the Yugoslav National Army surrounded Kosovo and systematically shredded the Albanians' identification papers, birth certificates, and property deeds, and they looted everything in sight. Milosevic's forces drove more than 1.3 million Kosovars from their homes, some 740,000 of whom flooded into neighboring Macedonia and Albania (Power, 2013, pp. 449-450). On the contrary, the Yugoslav National Army encircled Kosovo and systematically destroyed identification documents, birth certificates, and property ownership records belonging to Albanians, while also looting everything they could. The forces under Milosevic's command displaced more than 1.3 million Kosovar residents, of which approximately 740,000 sought refuge in nearby Macedonia and Albania.

The trajectory of the war was guided by the principle of solidifying a nation-state by purging minorities. A bureaucracy orchestrated by a majoritarian regime can accomplish this in a state where the majority population is large and dominant. However, when such a majority's control isn't assured, alternative strategies, including military conquest and subsequent forced displacement of the undesired population, are employed (Haydan, 2013, pp. 104-105). This form of violence, targeted at ethnic communities in times of unrest, has roots in both religious and nationalistic traditions of European thinking and political conduct. Christian hostility towards other faiths

predates the Middle Ages and was evident in historical events like the Crusades, the persecution of Jews, Muslims, and religious dissenters such as the Cathars and Anabaptists (Carmichael, 2002, p. 3).

Ongoing Impact of Ethnic Nationalism in Western Balkan Politics

Ethnic communities often find themselves both as victims and as perpetrators of violence in the state's context. It's not unusual to witness the emotive potency of xenophobic movements in even the most progressive modern societies. To comprehend how identity can be exploited and why threats to identity can incite the fiercest and most violent defenses of selfhood, we must examine the relationship between individual psychological identity constructs and the intermediating forces of culture, leadership, and history (Wilmer, 2002, pp. 21-22). The shift towards democracy in the Western Balkans was marred by a surge of violence, and it was not only the advocates of ethnic cleansing who resorted to aggressive actions. With the escalating desire to accumulate as much as possible for oneself and one's loved ones, people began to exhibit less concern for the rights and interests of others, leading to increasingly reckless behavior (Kecmanovic, 2002, pp. 3-5).

Even though contemporary Western Balkan nations seemingly adopt certain liberal institutions, the prevailing political paradigm is fundamentally non-liberal. This is illustrated by the predominance of nationalism as the core ideological bedrock of the state and the political-economic practices primarily aimed at enriching a small coterie of

nation-building elites (Mujanovic, 2018, p. 9). To put it simply, ethnic nationalism has been a fundamental and constructive component of the flexible authoritarianism exhibited by the Balkan elites. In these nations, ethnicity is seen as the pivotal and sole basis for social cohesion, thereby making it the only relevant category of identity (Mujanovic, 2018, p. 10). The imprint of ethnonationalism is characterized by myths, collective memories, value systems, and traditions unique to each national group in the Western Balkans. These are further complemented by conducive external conditions, an individual's personal predilection towards similar ethnonationalistic behavior, and a group mentality that is universally observed (Kecmanovic, 2002, pp. 69-70). It's evident that the nations here continue to draw on ethnic identities to reinforce boundaries, and these identities often become political tools for shaping policy. Ethnonationalist rhetoric persists in influencing internal and external policies, causing tension and has the potential to destabilize the region further.

It's been observed that in the 1980s, with mounting pressures for democratization, astute politicians realized that they needed public support to maintain power. The most accessible source of support for these politicians came from nationalism, and consequently, in each republic, the most influential political parties that emerged were established based on ethnic affiliation (Dzalto, 2018, pp. 1-52). Nationalism in the Balkans isn't an inherent occurrence, but rather, a strategically designed political agenda by the elite. When nationalism became a state-endorsed program, it began to address the tangible material and economic grievances of the general population. This was because the

new elites started to divert class resentments and funnel these grievances into reactionary ethnonationalism, as a means to legitimize their rule (Mujanovic, 2018, pp. 21-29). The diversion of socio-economic grievances into ethnonationalist sentiments has often exacerbated interethnic tensions and conflicts. It has created a social and political climate where identity is tied to ethnicity, which in turn has led to deep divisions among different ethnic groups. This has often hindered dialogue and cooperation, creating a cycle of mistrust and hostility that is hard to break.

The inaugural large-scale display of nationalism in post-Tito Yugoslavia was the Albanian uprising of 1981. What began as a response to socio-economic concerns swiftly transitioned into a political rebellion, advocating for a reformation of Kosovo's status within the Yugoslav federation (Dzalto, 2018, p. 79). Within the republics, the relationship between majority and minority groups exposed several potential fractures: perceived or actual discrimination against minorities, a propensity for majority rule and office holding to align with ethnic demographics, and a minority population large enough to sustain a critical or dissenting political voice, yet insufficient to translate political demands into policy shifts (Wilmer, 2002, p. 42).

As ethnic nationalism took center stage, notably during the 1990s wars, the new regimes endorsed fresh heroic cults such as ethnic paramilitary leaders, adventurers, ordinary criminals freed from foreign prisons to become political figures or patriotic combatants in the Balkan wars, political firebrands, and gangsters turned-war criminals (Abazovic & Velikonja, 2014, pp. 97-98). These individuals were glorified

by the state-controlled media as great patriots. The new heroic cults even celebrated gangsters and former regular criminals transformed into war criminals, but promoted by state propaganda as heroes of what was depicted as liberation wars (Abazovic & Velikonja, 2014, pp. 97-98). It is broadly concluded that ethnic intolerance escalated in Croatia and most other regions of former Yugoslavia post-war. It may initially seem that Kosovo and Macedonia offer supportive evidence for the ethnic hatred theory, given the already high levels of intolerant attitudes in these regions in 1990 (Sekulic, 2014, pp. 49-50). Macedonia was establishing the first constitution, which identified the Macedonian people as the state-forming nation, which sparked discontent among the significant Albanian minority. The Albanian community felt excluded and marginalized, fearing that the constitution's ethno-nationalistic framing would lead to institutionalized discrimination and limit their rights and participation in Macedonian society. This initial dissatisfaction among the Albanians foreshadowed the ethnic tensions and conflicts which will be elaborated in the chapters to come.

A Comparative Analysis of Ethnic Nationalism

In Weber's perspective, ethnic groups and nations can't be distinctly defined by a shared characteristic of their members. Elements such as language, religion, common ancestry, and even visible physical differences can all form the foundation for ethnic and national differentiation (Vujacic, 2015, p. 52). The key principle of ethnic nationalists is that nations are determined by a shared heritage, typically involving a common language, faith, and ethnic lineage (Muller, 2008, pp. 18-35).

According to Smith ethnic communities are human populations distinguished by both members and outsiders as possessing the attributes of:

1. an identifying name or emblem;
2. a myth of common ancestry;
3. shared historical memories and traditions;
4. one or more elements of common culture;
5. *a link with an historic territory or 'homeland'; and*
6. *a measure of solidarity, at least among the elites.* (Wilmer, 2002, p. 256)

From this perspective, we can define an ethnic group as a named human population with shared ancestry myths, collective historical memories, one or more shared cultural elements, an association with a homeland, and a degree of solidarity, especially among the elites (Smith, 1999, p. 13.). Smith also systematically considers spatial issues. He argues that a sense of belonging, memory, and community member attachment to an ancestral or historical territory seen as exclusively theirs is, alongside autonomy, unity, identity, authenticity, dignity, continuity, and destiny, one of the common themes in various forms of nationalism. Nationalism is always a battle for land control; it's a way to construct and interpret social space (Duancic, 2020, pp. 12-13). Ethnicity is a dynamic concept based on language, race, religion, sentiment, and history (Duancic, 2020, p. 98). Each instance of status reversal brought back bitter memories and instances of persecution that further reinforced them. All status differentiation markers along ethnic or national lines were present. The overlay of religious, ethnic, and linguistic status differentiation markers, coupled with continuous status/power reversal sparking negative historical memories,

solidified each group's unity as a community of political destiny (Vujacic, 2015, p. 58).

Ahmed, referencing Walker Connor (1993), added to the discussion by merging ethnicity and nationalism into the term 'ethnonationalism'. He emphasizes the irrational and emotional sources of ethnonationalism and its power to shape group behavior (Ahmed, 1995, p. 7). Ethnonationalism, also known as ethnic nationalism (Leoussi, 2001, pp. 81-84) is essentially historical communities founded on shared memories. A common history ties generations together, each adding its experiences to the collective memory, and defines a population in terms of experienced time sequences, which communicate the historicity of their experiences to later generations. In other words, historical sequences offer 'forms' for future experiences, providing channels and shapes for their interpretation (Smith, 1988, p. 25).

Ethnic nationalism, in the context of the Balkan wars, can be defined as an ideological movement where a nation's identity and unity are fundamentally tied to ethnic lineage, often characterized by shared language, religion, history, and cultural practices. This ideology posits the 'nation' as an extension of a distinct ethnic group, advocating for the political autonomy and territorial sovereignty of that ethnic group. In the Balkan wars, ethnic nationalism frequently led to attempts at ethnic cleansing and genocide to establish ethnically homogeneous regions, a reflection of a fervent desire to preserve and prioritize a particular ethnic identity within state boundaries. The resulting conflict, driven by competing ethnic nationalisms, significantly reshaped the geopolitical and demographic landscape of the region.

Literature Review

The existing literature on democratization in the Western Balkans is enriched by a range of institutional and scholarly sources that consistently highlight the region's democratic shortcomings. EU Progress Reports remain a key reference, providing annual assessments of governance, rule of law, and institutional reforms in the context of EU integration. Similarly, reports by Freedom House and the U.S. State Department emphasize persistent issues such as media freedom, corruption, and political polarization, often categorizing Western Balkan states as "partly free" or "transitional." These sources, alongside academic studies, offer a comprehensive basis for analyzing the gap between formal commitments to democratic norms and the realities of their implementation, which will be further explored in the subsequent analysis.

Macedonia: A Journey through Identity Formation and Historical Dynamics

Macedonians trace their roots back to the time of Caranus, believed to be the first king of the Macedonians, a tribe thought to be closely related to the Hellenes, and flourishing from 808 to 778 BC. The victories of Alexander the Great against Persian forces at Granicus, Issus, and Gaugamela marked the end of the Persian Empire, which was replaced by a Macedonian Empire that stretched from Europe to Egypt and India. However, contemporary Macedonian historians are less concerned with the fact that the ancient Macedonians were certainly not of Slavic origin (Phillips, 2004, p. 17).

The term "Macedonia" is often used in a variety of ways, which may confuse many. Most commonly, and perhaps most accurately, it is used to refer to the region in the Balkans encompassing the three Turkish provinces of Salonika, Monastir, and Kosovo, located between the regions of Adrianople and Albania (Harris, 1913, p. 205).

The question of the ownership of the Macedonia region arose following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–8. As per the Treaty of San Stefano, all of Macedonia - encompassing today's Republic and two regions now part of Bulgaria and Greece - was slated to be incorporated into Greater Bulgaria, established during the same period. This agreement caused significant unrest in the Balkans, exacerbating existing tensions and fueling expansionist ambitions (Reuter, 1999, pp. 28-29).

The Treaty of San Stefano in 1878 sparked a period of intense discord and uncertainty in the Balkans. The proposed integration of Macedonia into Greater Bulgaria was met with severe resistance, leading to a diplomatic crisis. The international community intervened with the Congress of Berlin held the same year, revising the Treaty of San Stefano. The revised treaty denied the creation of Greater Bulgaria, and Macedonia was returned to the Ottoman Empire, much to the dissatisfaction of the Macedonian people and their Bulgarian, Greek, and Serbian neighbors.

In the following decades, numerous factions vied for influence over the region, reflecting its ethnic and cultural diversity. Nationalist movements emerged among the various ethnicities, each seeking to assert their unique identity and secure self-determination. This period witnessed the growth of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), which fought for Macedonian autonomy from the Ottoman Empire.

Simultaneously, the Great Powers of Europe, recognizing the strategic importance of Macedonia, sought to exert their influence over the region. The geopolitical situation in the Balkans grew increasingly unstable, marked by a series of revolts and uprisings against Ottoman rule.

In 1903, the Ilinden-Preobrazhenie Uprising was the most significant revolt, led by IMRO, against the Ottoman Empire. Although the uprising was suppressed, it succeeded in drawing international attention to the Macedonian question.

Finally, in the years leading up to the First World War, the region witnessed the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, where the

Ottoman Empire's control over the Balkans was contested by the Balkan League (Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and Bulgaria). The League was victorious, and Macedonia was partitioned among these countries in the Treaty of Bucharest in 1913. This marked a pivotal point in Macedonia's history as the region was divided, setting the stage for conflicts that would continue well into the 20th century.

In the wake of the First World War and the ensuing territorial rearrangements, Bulgaria experienced significant territorial losses. At the same time, both Greece and Yugoslavia expanded their borders, each annexing parts of Macedonia (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 11). The question of whether today's Macedonia fulfills the original intentions of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) or the ambitions of the Macedonian Christians of the 19th century is subject to ongoing historical debate. However, the narrative is contested by Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia. The struggle for control over Macedonia sparked the Balkan wars, and post the Second Balkan War in 1913, Serbia colonized the portion of Macedonia it received, incorporating it into Yugoslavia, the land of the Southern Serbs (Phillips, 2004, p. 16).

During the interwar period, the region of Macedonia underwent significant political and social changes. As a part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the part of Macedonia which fell under Yugoslav control was officially known as 'Southern Serbia' or the 'Vardar Banovina'. During this period, the official policy of the Yugoslav state was one of forced 'Serbianisation' of the local Slavic population, leading to tensions and resistance amongst the local population.

In contrast, the Greek part of Macedonia saw the implementation of a policy of 'Hellenisation', aiming to assimilate the Slavic-speaking population into the Greek national identity.

Meanwhile, the Bulgarian part of Macedonia continued to have a strong sense of Bulgarian national identity, which was reinforced by the state. However, the IMRO, though weakened, remained active and continued to push for a united, independent Macedonia.

The period between the First and Second World Wars was marked by a number of significant international developments, including the rise of fascism and the onset of the Great Depression, which greatly affected the political and economic stability of the region. By the time World War II began, the region of Macedonia remained a contested area, with each part continuing to be influenced by its respective national government and external powers.

The newly formed states in the region, including Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria, along with movements advocating for Macedonian autonomy, all asserted rights over the territory and its people. These claims were based on various criteria—language, religion, history, domestic customs, national consciousness—that best supported their national narratives. Consequently, the "Macedonian Question" rose to prominence, symbolizing the shift from the politics of empires to that of nation-states (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 1).

The issue remained contentious and debatable both domestically and internationally well into the first half of the 20th century, even after the 1919 Paris Peace Conference

carved out national borders slicing through the region (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 1).

In 1944, Macedonia was officially recognized as a federal republic within Tito's innovative structure, and the inhabitants were identified as the 'Macedonian' people, a distinct group within the Yugoslav federation (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 12). This marked the inception of what was previously known as "southern Serbia" or "the Vardar Banovina" as the "People's Republic of Macedonia" (Danforth, 1995, pp. 56-57). As per the narrative of Greek nationalist historiography, it was during this period that the term "Macedonian" was first used to signify a specific ethnic or national group (Danforth, 1995, pp. 56-57). This formation of a Macedonian nationality can be viewed as a significant transformation or a shift of identity for the people of the region, who were, in essence, imbued with a new 'Macedonian' national ideology (Danforth, 1995, pp. 56-57). Tito's decision to create this new nationality had clear political intentions. His aims were to diminish Serbia's influence, counterbalance the Bulgarian inclinations of the Slavs in Yugoslav Macedonia, and lay the groundwork for a United Macedonia that would include both Greek and Bulgarian Macedonia as part of the new Yugoslavia (Danforth, 1995, pp. 56-57). Beyond these reasons, it's plausible that Tito had an additional strategic motive. By forming the People's Republic of Macedonia and recognizing the Macedonians as a separate people, Tito likely hoped to garner their support and solidify his position. Recognizing and validating their unique identity could have been a strategic move to secure their loyalty and their votes.

The Macedonian communists remained persistently anti-Serbian and strived to achieve a semi-independent status within the burgeoning Yugoslav federation. Macedonian leaders highlighted their commitment to achieving the highest level of autonomy possible and refusing any attempts from Belgrade to revive any form of 'Greater Serbian' dominance. Such sentiments intensified after Skopje's liberation in November 1944, exemplified by an ASNOM decree issued on 3 December 1944, which prohibited the return of Serb colonists to Macedonia amidst growing anti-Serbian sentiment (Roudometov, 2002, p. 186).

The communist victory in Vardar Macedonia coincided with the proclamation of Macedonian independence and the explicit recognition of Macedonian national identity (Roudometov, 2002, p. 109). This identity had been nurtured before 1945 through various cultural processes. Initially, the Bulgarian church dispute before 1878 heightened the Slavic Macedonians' consciousness of their unique cultural identity. However, transitioning from the Ottoman model of religious association to the modern nation concept involved choosing from several competing affiliations. Serbs, Bulgarians, and Greeks all sought the allegiance of Macedonia's Slavic-speaking population (Roudometov, 2002, p. 109). The elevation of Macedonian national identity also revolved around the deliberate building and fostering of a unique national consciousness, which was intricately linked to the process of state-building post-1945. This was a multi-faceted endeavor that involved an array of social, political, and cultural aspects. One of the significant components of this was the official recognition and standardization of the Macedonian language in 1945. This served as a crucial

marker of national identity, distinguishing Macedonians from their neighboring nations.

In addition to this, education and historical narratives played a significant role in shaping Macedonian national identity. The government invested heavily in education, particularly in creating a national curriculum that emphasized Macedonian history and culture. Particular attention was given to the narrative of a continuous Macedonian identity, from the times of the ancient kingdom of Macedon through to the modern day. This historical narrative was instrumental in creating a sense of continuity and unity among the people, reinforcing their unique Macedonian identity.

Moreover, efforts to standardize folklore, traditions, and customs further accentuated the distinctive identity of the Macedonian people. These cultural expressions served not only as reminders of shared heritage but also as tools to enhance national pride and unity. Collectively, these efforts helped consolidate the Macedonian national identity, positioning it as a central pillar in the post-war nation-building process.

The dynamics of 'identity' and 'difference' as social constructs are central concerns, especially in areas like the Balkans where ethnicity has been both essentialized and stigmatized. The narrative that the Yugoslav war was sparked by deep-seated ethnic animosities was not only propagated by local leaders, who harnessed divisive ethno-nationalism for their power base, but also echoed by Western journalists and policymakers (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 2).

These explorations of identity politics are extended to contemporary Macedonia by anthropologists and historians. The debate around Macedonian identity encompasses migrant communities in Australia, North America, and Europe, who find themselves entangled in the ethnic politics of their host countries. It also involves citizens of three separate Balkan states (The Republic of Macedonia, Greece, and Bulgaria) that have pursued unique nation-building strategies (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 2). Moreover, it involves various international and state entities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and other interested outsiders. Although many discussions are directly related to the region, Macedonia is defined not just as a geographic region but also as a globally significant discursive space. Thus, the concept of Macedonia, both as a territory and a name, becomes an intersection point for different narratives around civil society, multiculturalism, and international cooperation, as well as ethnic tensions, age-old hatreds, and national security (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 2). It's clear that these dimensions of identity and difference have played a significant role. The formation of Macedonian national identity didn't occur in isolation but was a complex process influenced by various internal and external factors. As Macedonian identity continued to solidify post-1945, it not only had to contend with its own historical narratives and cultural distinctions but also had to navigate the broader political dynamics and ethnic tensions that characterize the region. Therefore, understanding the Macedonian identity necessitates a consideration of these complex local, regional, and global dynamics.

The Macedonian Question: A Historical Analysis of National Identity, Territorial Claims, and Cultural Conflicts in the Balkans

The issue of Macedonia has been one of the most intricate national and territorial dilemmas in modern Europe, a complexity that was evident during the Second World War. The borders of Macedonia were indistinct and not universally agreed upon. Linguistically, the region was diverse; until the end of World War II, Macedonians spoke a variety of dialects related to both Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian (Tomasevich, 2001, pp. 156-157). Moreover, the delineation of Macedonia and the national identity of its people were subjects of contention. There had been no Macedonian state since the days of the Macedonian kings in the 4th century BC. During the intervening period until 1912, Macedonia had been a part of numerous empires, such as the Roman, Byzantine, Bulgarian, Serbian, and the Ottoman, which resulted in fluctuating borders (Barker, 1999, p. 4).

There have been disputes, especially among Serbian historians, over whether the Skopje region in the northwest is a part of Macedonia or 'Old Serbia'. Generally, the accepted geographical boundaries of Macedonia include the hills north of Skopje and the Shar Mountains to the north; the Rila and Rhodope Mountains to the east; the Aegean coast around Salonika, Mount Olympus, and the Pindus mountains to the south; and Lakes Prespa and Ohrid to the west (Barker, 1999, p. 4).

The Macedonian question emerged in 1870 when Russia successfully persuaded Ottoman Turkey to permit the

establishment of an independent Bulgarian Orthodox Church, or Exarchate. This new institution's jurisdiction extended into parts of the Ottoman province of Macedonia, which quickly entangled Bulgaria in conflicts with both Greece and Serbia (Barker, 1999, p. 3). The Greek Patriarch in Constantinople denounced the newly autonomous Bulgarian Church as schismatic, leading to vehement Greek opposition to the expansion of Bulgarian ecclesiastical, cultural, and national influence in Macedonia (Barker, 1999, p. 3). The significance of the Macedonian question cannot be overstated. It was not merely an issue of religious affiliations and cultural influences, but it was closely intertwined with the politics of nation-building and territorial claims in the Balkan region. The question influenced the interplay of power among countries like Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and later, the Republic of Macedonia.

The persistence of Serbianization policies in Yugoslav Macedonia under the newly formed Yugoslav state led to a substantial emigration of Macedonians towards Bulgaria. Many of these emigrants harbored a militant resentment towards Yugoslavia, or more specifically, Serbia. From Bulgaria, they operated against Yugoslavia primarily through the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), established in 1893 (Tomasevich, 2001, p. 159). This significant movement of Macedonians to Bulgaria further complicated the issue. It underscored the tensions that had arisen due to cultural and national affiliations, and demonstrated the profound impact these had on the demographic shifts in the region. This scenario heightened the importance of the Macedonian question as it highlighted the ongoing struggle for the Macedonian identity, as well

as the political tensions stemming from these dynamics in the Balkan region.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, Macedonia turned into a point of contention among Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria. Each of these nations staked their claim to the region, leveraging historical and linguistic grounds (Wachtel, 1998, p. 90). These persistent disputes over Macedonia's affiliation were central to the issue's inception. The claims made by Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria, each asserting its own cultural, historical, or linguistic ties to Macedonia, formed the basis of the Macedonian question, underlining its complexity and long-standing nature.

The creation of the People's Republic of Macedonia in 1944 officially sanctioned the Macedonian national identity and provided this population with a prospective national homeland (Roudometov, 2002, pp. 93-104).

The Macedonian question, a key issue in Balkan history and politics for more than a hundred years, resulted from the territorial disputes between Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece. These conflicts ignited the Balkan wars in 1912 as each state sought to substantiate their territorial demands based on factors like national consciousness, ethnic identity, linguistic ties, and religious affiliations of the area's residents (Danforth, 1995, p. 36). Since the establishment of the current international borders in Macedonia in 1913, and particularly after the People's Republic of Macedonia became a federated state of Yugoslavia post World War II, the focus of the Macedonian Question has shifted. The debate now centers on the existence of a distinct Macedonian nation and the reality of Macedonian minorities in Bulgaria

and Greece (Danforth, 1995, p. 36). The formation of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the linguistic and religious identity debates, and the conflicting claims of Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria all contributed to the inception and development of the Macedonian Question. These threads intertwine to form a complex narrative of national identity and regional geopolitics.

Following the post-1945 era, the "old" Macedonian Question, concerning whether the people of Macedonia were Serbs, Bulgarians, or Greeks, experienced a notable shift (Roudometov, 2002, pp. 105-106). Firstly, the Serbs relinquished their claim over the population of Macedonia. Despite having a Serbian minority in the People's Republic of Macedonia, they no longer formed part of the main contention (Roudometov, 2002, pp. 105-106).

Secondly, the transnational nation-building efforts carried out by the FYROM and Macedonian immigrants led to the emergence of the "new Macedonian Question" (Roudometov, 2002, pp. 105-106). In stark contrast to pre-1945 disputes, the new conflict now pivoted on the Macedonians' assertion of being the sole indigenous people of Macedonia. They claimed exclusive rights to Macedonia's land, including its cultural heritage (Roudometov, 2002, pp. 105-106). This new direction had significant implications. The post-1945 "new" Macedonian Question was no longer primarily a geopolitical territorial issue, at least not in the "realist" interpretation of those terms (Roudometov, 2002, pp. 105-106). The "new" Macedonian Question has evolved into a dispute about identity. It brought to the forefront issues related to nationality, history, and the very definition of

what it means to be Macedonian. This led to contentious relationships with neighboring nations, particularly Greece and Bulgaria, as the newly formulated Macedonian identity came into conflict with their historical and territorial narratives.

As we entered the 1990s, the Macedonian Question, with its focus on identity and territorial claims, re-emerged as a paramount issue in Balkan politics, unfolding across an array of platforms and contexts. Key figures such as politicians, scholars, journalists, and leaders of local ethnic groups became embroiled in the discourse, which found its way into governmental press releases, academic literature, public relations pamphlets, and both national and local newspapers. The ongoing debate even sparked press conferences, academic seminars, and political demonstrations in various global cities, such as Athens, Thessaloniki, Skopje, Brussels, New York, Toronto, and Melbourne (Danforth, 1995, pp. 45-46).

The complexity of defining "Macedonia" further fuelled the issue. Confining Macedonia exclusively to its ancient past disregarded its modern-day existence, failing to acknowledge the Republic of Macedonia's independence in 1991 and its predecessor, the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, which became a constituent republic of former Yugoslavia in 1944. This limited perspective also neglected the recognition of the Macedonian language, a Slavic language distinct from Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian, which has been acknowledged as a separate language for over a century and standardized about fifty years ago.

On the other hand, identifying Macedonia strictly as the Republic of Macedonia overlooked the Greek region known as Macedonia. This narrow view failed to recognize the extensive presence of the Greek language and culture in Macedonia, which spans from antiquity to the present day (Danforth, 1995, p. 3). The 1990s ushered in a significant shift in the Macedonian Question. While territorial disputes had dominated previous debates, the identity crisis inherent in the "new" Macedonian Question became the focal point, with its influence shaping both regional politics and the broader international discourse on the definition and boundaries of national identities.

Macedonian Identity: Historical, Political, and Cultural Controversies

The elusive nature of Macedonian identity has long been a subject of intense debate and scrutiny, often igniting political, historical, and cultural controversies. Caught in the intricate web of the Balkan Peninsula's turbulent past, the Macedonian identity has been at the epicenter of contentious discussions over nationhood, territorial claims, and linguistic and cultural heritage. The subjectivity of these factors and their interpretation further amplifies the ambiguity surrounding the Macedonian identity. This intricate narrative, which weaves together the threads of history, politics, and culture, paints a complex and compelling portrait of a nation striving to assert and define its unique identity amidst geopolitical and internal challenges.

The complexities inherent to Macedonian identity are not only a product of historical circumstances but also a manifestation of political machinations and socio-cultural evolution. The issue has been compounded by the historical interference of neighboring nations, each asserting their own claims on Macedonia, contributing to the ambiguity of the Macedonian national identity (Danforth, 1995, p. 77). Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and Albania have all professed territorial and historical ties to Macedonia, projecting their respective national identities onto the region and its people. While Bulgarians viewed Macedonia as an extension of Greater Bulgaria, Greeks fervently argued that Macedonia was an integral part of Greece. Serbia insisted that Macedonia was southern Serbia, and Albania identified parts of it as segments of Greater Albania, an alleged homeland of the ancient Illyrians (Danforth, 1995, p. 77).

Amidst these convoluted claims, the unique identity of Macedonians has been consistently challenged. Macedonia's ethnically diverse population has been subjected to identity denial, their language and nationality often dismissed. For example, they were typically regarded as South Serbians, essentially erasing their unique Macedonian identity and pushing them toward assimilation with the Serbian populace (Tomasevich, 2001, p. 15). This scenario significantly undermined their prospects for participating in the nation-building process and led to a resistance against Serbian, Greek, and even Bulgarian governments (Wachtel, 1998, p. 72).

Contrary to the assertions of Macedonian nationalist historians, the genesis of Macedonian national identity is

not rooted in the era of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C., nor does it originate from the time of Saints Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century A.D. (Danforth, 1995, p. 77). Instead, the pivotal moment in the formation of a distinct Macedonian identity can be traced back to 1944, with the establishment of the People's Republic of Macedonia by Tito. This event serves as a watershed in our understanding of the evolution of Macedonian identity, marking the birth of a distinctive national consciousness.

the Macedonian identity has been subject to numerous external influences and conflicting claims. Its inherent ambiguity reflects the interplay of historical forces, geopolitical interests, and the quest for cultural and national affirmation amidst a complex regional dynamic. This discussion underscores the enduring challenge of defining Macedonian identity within its multifaceted historical, political, and cultural context.

The initiation of a distinct Macedonian national identity and culture is traced back to this era, marking the inception of the conceptualization of a unique Macedonian national community. It encapsulates the intricate historical progression where a fraction of the Slavic-speaking populace of Macedonia evolved a Macedonian national identity (Danforth, 1995, p. 77). This evolution also led to the adoption of the renowned ancient figure, Alexander the Macedonian, as the forefather of their nation. The curious dichotomy, where Macedonians, being Slavs, embraced a non-Slavic figure like Alexander, is a point of contention that often lacks a satisfactory explanation (Jakovina, 2014, p. 39). It is also noteworthy that the 'Skopje 2014' project was an

effort to strengthen this connection to ancient Macedonian identity. However, it not only fueled ethnic nationalism but also sparked conflicts with Greece, a topic which we will delve into with greater detail in the ensuing chapter.

Tito effectively navigated geopolitical tensions with Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia by forming an independent Macedonian republic within the boundaries of Yugoslavia, thereby dampening Serbian and Bulgarian territorial aspirations (Boeckh, 2014, p. 25). Interestingly, even before 1945, many Slavic inhabitants of Macedonia identified as "Macedonians", although this self-identification was primarily linked to a regional rather than a national sense of identity.

However, the state-directed efforts of Greece and Serbia to create cultural uniformity inadvertently spurred a shift, transforming the regional label of 'Macedonian' into a national identifier. Serbia's plan backfired dramatically, and the Yugoslav communists encountered only minimal resistance from the Serbs when they established the Macedonian Republic post-1945 (Roudometov, 2002, p. 109).

The emergence of the Macedonian state, including its name, symbols, language, and history, became one of the most hotly disputed issues in the Balkans. Even Greek historians and politicians who are typically moderate in their views refuse to recognize the term 'Macedonian' to categorize the state that developed on their northern border, or its predominant population and language (Drezov, 1999, p. 47). Bulgarian scholars and politicians generally accept 'Macedonia' as a geographically and politically valid label, yet they universally reject the concept of a distinct Macedonian nation and language prior to 1944, with many

even denying their existence post-1944. Moreover, even the most composed Serbian intellectuals continue to question the historical presence of any established ethnic identity amongst Slavs in what is now Macedonia, before the 20th century (Drezov, 1999, p. 47). This general disagreement regarding the Macedonian state and its identity highlights the persistent ambiguity and contention surrounding Macedonian identity. This ambiguity has its roots in historical and geopolitical complexities and serves as a constant source of dispute and negotiation in Balkan politics.

Regarding the ancient Macedonians, the only things that can be said with any certainty are that they were not of Slavic origin, they were active in spreading Hellenic culture throughout the world, and that they were completely hellenised many centuries before the Slavs started to settle in the Balkans. Bulgarians either deny the contemporary reality of a Macedonian nation and language, or – when they do acknowledge it – ascribe it entirely to Serbian, and Titoist propaganda (Drezov, 1999, p. 51).

Slavic Macedonians share significant ethnic similarities with Bulgarians, yet they underwent substantial Serbianization efforts during the interwar period (Horwitz, 2005, pp. 42-43). Serbian settlers were encouraged to migrate to Macedonia, and an educational campaign was launched to indoctrinate children with the belief that 'I am a true Serb like my father and my mother.' However, these 'fathers and mothers' had already been dislocated from the Yugoslav state (Livanios, 2008, p. 23). The Serbization attempts were part of a broader plan aimed at redefining Macedonian identity in terms of Serbian nationalism. This campaign extended beyond the

education system to encompass various aspects of social life, aiming to instill a Serbian identity within the Macedonian populace. Despite these efforts, the distinctiveness of Macedonian culture and identity persisted, complicating the Serbization process. This further underscores the multi-layered complexity and ambiguity of Macedonian identity, caught as it was between various nationalist projects.

Despite acknowledging the existence of a Macedonian state, Bulgaria denies the presence of a distinct Macedonian nationality, asserting that Macedonians are in fact Bulgarians. Serbian nationalists, on the other hand, continue to view Macedonia as "South Serbia" and have refrained from recognizing the Republic of Macedonia (Danforth, 1995, p. 27). Such external contestations and negations of Macedonian identity constitute significant challenges to the self-assertion and preservation of the Macedonian identity and classical violation of international law.

As per Greek historical narratives, it was only in 1944 that the term "Macedonian" began to signify a distinct ethnic or national community (Danforth, 1995, p. 56). The birth of a Macedonian nationality is portrayed as a calculated modification or makeover, similar to a "mutation experiment" or a "surgical procedure". This narrative suggests that the Slavs of Macedonia, who were perceived as individuals with an underdeveloped sense of identity, were purposefully imbued with a 'Macedonian' national consciousness (Danforth, 1995, p. 57). This portrayal can be linked to the challenges and complications surrounding the construction and recognition of Macedonian identity, often entangled in broader socio-political dynamics and conflicting national narratives.

The sustainability and independence of Macedonia were critically endangered, both domestically and internationally, due to various nationalist ideologies and movements. In January 1992, the Albanian minority in Macedonia, constituting over a fifth of the republic's populace, conducted a referendum that overwhelmingly supported their political and territorial autonomy, with the aim to establish their own state, the Republic of Ilirida (Danforth, 1995, p. 26). Both Greece and Bulgaria viewed the acknowledgment of Macedonian national identity as problematic, as it posed questions about the existence of Macedonian national minorities within their territories, specifically within Greek Macedonia (Roudometov, 2002, p. 110).

Bulgaria, perpetuating its stance from the 20th century, continued to negate the uniqueness of the Macedonian language and the existence of a separate Macedonian national identity (Dodovski, 2012, p. 94). Although Bulgaria officially renounced any territorial ambitions, it still contended that Macedonians were 'Bulgarians by descent,' allegedly deceived by Macedonian propaganda that Bulgaria claimed was fabricated by the Serbs (Dodovski, 2012, p. 94). This argument showcases the persisting challenges faced by the Macedonian identity, particularly in relation to Bulgaria, which continues to dispute the Macedonians' distinct national identity to this day.

In 1999, Macedonia and Bulgaria reached an agreement to address several bilateral issues, which included the language dispute between the two nations (Vangelov, 2019, p. 8). Before the agreement, Bulgaria had maintained its stance of refusing to sign bilateral documents following the usual

protocol, which involved versions in Bulgarian, Macedonian, and English. This reflected Bulgaria's official policy, which saw the Macedonian language as merely a dialect of Bulgarian, thereby denying its recognition as a separate official language (Vangelov, 2019, p. 8). This historical dispute over the Macedonian language has ramifications that extend into the present day, affecting not just linguistic recognition but also broader aspects of Macedonian identity. This has been particularly evident in recent debates surrounding key historical figures and cultural symbols. Bulgaria has asserted claims over a number of these figures, suggesting that they were ethnically Bulgarian rather than Macedonian. These disputes over historical figures and cultural icons play a crucial role in shaping national narratives, and by extension, national identity. They also underscore the complex, intertwined history of the region, where the distinction between 'Bulgarian' and 'Macedonian' is not always clear-cut. These ongoing controversies serve as a reminder of the intricate and delicate nature of nation-building and identity formation, particularly in regions with diverse ethnic and cultural histories.

Evolution and Complexities of Macedonian Nationalism

The contemporary Macedonians are predominantly Slavic in descent, bearing little ancestral or cultural connection to the ancient Macedonians who inhabited the region over a millennium before the Slavs arrived in the Balkans (Roudometov, 2002, p. 13). This historical dichotomy further underscores the intricate complexities that underpin the evolution of Macedonian nationalism. As noted earlier, the

formation of a distinct Macedonian national identity didn't start until the 19th century, well after the Slavs established themselves in the region. This identity was born not from an ancient lineage but from the crucible of modern historical and socio-political dynamics.

The source of Macedonian nationalism is deeply rooted in the historical and sociopolitical evolution of the region. It does not trace back to the times of Alexander the Great or Saints Cyril and Methodius, as often stated by Macedonian nationalists, nor does it start with the establishment of the People's Republic of Macedonia in 1944, as Greek nationalists assert. The actual emergence of a distinctive Macedonian national identity began in the 19th century. This awakening of a Macedonian ethnic nationalism was catalyzed by various intellectuals scattered across Thessaloniki, Belgrade, Sofia, and St. Petersburg. The culmination of these sentiments resulted in the formation of an independent Macedonian identity that evolved through decades of geopolitical tension and state-manipulated policies. This unique identity, continually embattled and subject to external influences, forms the core of Macedonian nationalism that we witness today.

Krste Petkov Misirkov, a prominent figure at the turn of the 20th century, stands out as a quintessential symbol of the burgeoning 'Macedonianism'. In his 1903 publication, "On Macedonian Matters", he robustly argued for the recognition of a distinct Macedonian nation, advocating for the acceptance and usage of a unique Macedonian language (Livanios, 2008, p. 14). This movement gained further traction with the contribution of Dimitar Vlahov, an influential figure

who authored one of the most critical works shaping the new Macedonian ideology, the book "Govori i Statii" 1945–1947 (Livanios, 2008, p. 198). Vlahov posited that Macedonians constituted a distinct nationality, grounded on the basis of shared territory, common economic conditions, a unifying culture, and a unique language (Livanios, 2008, p. 199). Both Misirkov and Vlahov played key roles in articulating and reinforcing the foundations of Macedonian nationalism.

The essence of Macedonian nationalist ideology pivots around two core principles: validation and acceptance. The Macedonians relentlessly strive to assert their unique historical, cultural, and national identity, seeking global recognition from political entities, individual nations, academia, and the global community (Danforth, 1995, p. 62). In their battle for acceptance, they have had to navigate through complex territorial and nomenclatural disputes instigated by Serbs, Bulgarians, and Greeks. Affirming their unique ethnicity, the Macedonians both in the Balkans and in diaspora steadfastly maintain their distinctiveness from Serbs, Yugoslavs, Bulgarians, or Greeks (Danforth, 1995, p. 62). In essence, the nationalism that we witness today among the Macedonians is a continuation of this century-old quest for distinctiveness and recognition amidst persistent external challenges to their identity.

According to the FYROM's official viewpoint, geographical Macedonia is the national homeland of the Macedonian nation. Its 1913 partition among Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia was a national disaster that divided Macedonians into different states, all set on acculturating them into the Greek, Bulgarian, and Serb nations (Roudometov, 2002, p. 6).

In sharp contrast to this viewpoint, Greeks and Bulgarians consider their struggles over Macedonia as part of their process of national liberation. They reject the Macedonians' claim to be a distinct nation. In their view, post-1945 communist-led nation building "fabricated" the existence of the Macedonian nation (Roudometov, 2002, p. 6).

As the collapse of the Yugoslav state became imminent, the evolution of Macedonian nationalism took a more unrestrained course (Reuter, 1999, p. 30). Following 1945, the creation of a Macedonian national identity took place amidst the broader process of state-building. Central to this was the effort to solidify a distinct cultural and historical narrative, while navigating the often fraught path of political self-determination.

Freed from the constraints of Yugoslav federalism, Macedonian leadership sought to consolidate their national identity internally while also striving for recognition on the international stage. This period saw a greater emphasis on cultural expressions of nationalism, including the development of literature, arts, and academia in the Macedonian language. Yet, throughout these endeavors, they grappled with regional pressures and contentious historical claims from their neighbors, which often complicated their quest for international legitimacy.

Indeed, the growth of Macedonian nationalism post-1945 was not just a spontaneous or purely internal phenomenon. It was shaped and driven by the dual pressures of internal nation-building and external geopolitics, navigating a complex regional and global landscape while trying to establish their own unique national identity.

Diverse Perspectives on Macedonian Nationalism and Its Impact on Interethnic Relations

The views concerning Macedonian nationalism present a spectrum of beliefs about the nation's ethnic heritage, with stances fluctuating from moderation to extremity. The more balanced perspective, often embraced by the Macedonian intelligentsia, recognizes their Slavic roots, thereby disassociating themselves from any lineage to the ancient Macedonians. This viewpoint was publicly acknowledged by Kiro Gligorov, the inaugural president of the independent Republic of Macedonia, who, in 1992, affirmed their Slavic ancestry dating back to the sixth century and distanced Macedonians from any connection to Alexander the Great (Danforth, 1995, p. 65).

In contrast, the more radical faction of Macedonian nationalists posits that the present-day Macedonians are not Slavs but the direct offspring of the ancient Macedonians, denying their Greekness. This assertion partly serves as a rebuttal to the Greek stance that labels Macedonians as 'Slavs' and not 'Macedonians'. In the eyes of these hardline Macedonian nationalists, the ideology of 'Slavism' is seen as a threat aiming to erase 'Macedonism' entirely (Danforth, 1995, p. 64).

A third perspective suggests a cultural amalgamation between the invading Slavs and the native ancient Macedonians in the ninth century, producing the modern Macedonians (Danforth, 1995, p. 65).

Analyzing these positions in terms of territoriality in Macedonian nationalism reveals an intricate interplay between identity and territory. Each of these beliefs seeks to establish a link between the Macedonian people and their homeland, whether by recognizing the historical arrival of Slavs, by asserting a direct lineage to ancient Macedonians, or by proposing a blend of Slavic and ancient Macedonian ancestry. This territorial claim not only reinforces their sense of belonging but also provides historical legitimacy to their nationalist aspirations. However, this simultaneously incites regional tensions due to overlapping historical and territorial claims with neighboring nations. Thus, the struggle to define Macedonian identity is inextricably linked to the quest for territorial affirmation, both of which remain key aspects of Macedonian nationalism.

The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation, updated with the descriptor 'Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity' (VMRO-DPMNE), is a prominent advocate of political nationalism in Macedonia. According to their own claims, they command a substantial membership base of over 100,000 (Reuter, 1999, pp. 28-47). The party notably advocates for the reconsideration of Macedonia's borders with Bulgaria, Albania, and Greece.

Despite their significant parliamentary representation, securing 38 of the 120 seats during the first free elections in November and December 1990, VMRO-DPMNE was unable to execute their border revisionist agenda (Reuter, 1999, pp. 28-47). This substantial electoral presence, however, underscores the party's influence and its potential capacity to shape national sentiments.

In the post-independence era, the VMRO-DPMNE has come to be seen by some as a bastion of nationalistic, and in some cases, extreme right-wing ideologies. Critics accuse the party of harbouring values that are fascistic and anti-democratic in nature, fostering animosity and division rather than unity and progress. Furthermore, detractors claim that the party takes an anti-European stance, potentially hindering Macedonia's broader integration into the international community. These contentious elements, according to critics, underline a concerning trajectory for Macedonian nationalism that seems to be anchored more in division and exclusion rather than inclusivity and democratic values.

As nationalist factions in Macedonia gained more structure, resources, and support, they started to command powers that were once exclusively held by the state. Consequently, the contest between Albanian nationalists and nation-states started to level out (Danforth, 1995, p. 36). After the ratification of the first constitution, issues arose concerning policies believed to be ethno-nationalistic, directed against the Albanian population in North Macedonia. Critics argue that these policies appeared to favor the majority Macedonian population, thereby marginalizing the Albanian minority. The constitution's perceived favoritism heightened tensions between the Macedonian majority and Albanian minority, escalating ethnic divides and potentially fueling Albanian nationalist sentiments. The growing influence of these nationalist movements implies that the issues of ethnic discrimination and minority rights remain crucial in North Macedonia's political and social landscape.

In light of these complex dynamics within North Macedonia's interethnic relations, we will delve deeper into the issue in the upcoming sections. Specifically, we will address the evolving manifestations of ethnic nationalism and its impact on interethnic interactions. By examining these factors, we hope to offer a comprehensive view of the state of ethnic relations in North Macedonia, laying the groundwork for potential solutions and avenues for promoting better understanding and coexistence among the country's diverse communities.

North Macedonia: Navigating Independence, Identity Conflicts, and Interethnic Relations

Following Slovenia and Croatia, Macedonia became the third republic from Yugoslavia to declare its independence. The transition towards independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was managed peacefully, thanks in large part to negotiations between Macedonia's newly elected president, Kiro Gligorov, and the leaders of the Yugoslav army (JNA), resulting in a smooth withdrawal of the army from Macedonian territory (Koneska, 2014, p. 98). The borders of the newly-formed Republic of Macedonia mirrored those of the previous Macedonian federal entity within the SFRY, spanning 25,813 square kilometers (Koneska, 2014, p. 98). The citizens of this new republic, known as Macedonians and speakers of the Macedonian language, endorsed a constitution through a referendum that formally established their new nation as the Republic of Macedonia (Nimetz, 2020, p. 207).

However, after Macedonia declared independence in 1991, Bulgaria acknowledged the fledgling state, but did not accept the ethnic identity or language of its majority population. The new Yugoslavian government balked at ratifying the border between Macedonia and Serbia, and the Serbian Orthodox Church rejected the status of its Macedonian counterpart. Meanwhile, Albania was grappling with its own transitional crises (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 3).

The nascent Balkan nation's subsequent objective was to gain entry into the United Nations as a successor state to Yugoslavia, which would ensure broader global recognition. However, Greece objected at the United Nations Security Council, arguing that the newly independent state's chosen name posed a security threat to Greece and the region (Nimetz, 2020, p. 207). Greece's diplomatic maneuver was successful; in 1993, the Security Council accepted Greece's perspective and admitted the fledgling nation into the United Nations under the provisional title of "the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" or "FYROM." This local naming dispute thereby evolved into an international issue, saddling the new country with an unwieldy name that was often disdainfully spoken as its acronym "FYROM" (Nimetz, 2020, p. 207).

This Greek-Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute of the 1990s resulted from the conflicting ethnocentric national narratives of each party involved. Greece vehemently contested the recognition of the newly formed state under the name "Macedonia" and the acknowledgment of Macedonians as a distinct nationality. From 1991 to 1995, Greece opposed the new state's efforts to secure formal recognition by the international community (Roudometov, 2002, p. 5).

The 1995 interim accord somewhat normalized relations between Greece and FYROM/Republic of Macedonia, but the matter persisted in public discussions (Roudometov, 2002, p. 5). After the flag dispute was resolved in 1995, leading to a significant decrease in overt hostility between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia, focus shifted back to internal politics, particularly the relationship between the majority ethnic Macedonians and the substantial ethnic Albanian population. Issues surrounding cultural and educational rights for Albanian citizens of the republic, already present during the Yugoslav era, have resurfaced (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 18). Despite the lessening intensity of the diplomatic disagreement post-1995, it remained a significant factor influencing both Greek and Bulgarian politics (Roudometov, 2002, p. 29). It's important to note that these issues, particularly the name dispute with Greece and the identity conflict with Bulgaria, continued to loom over the country for almost three decades. These long-standing disputes have shaped the national narrative and continue to impact inter-state relations in the region.

Following North Macedonia's independence in 1991, the newly formed nation faced a myriad of internal and external challenges. Chief among these issues were a surge in nationalism, ethnic tensions, politically driven ethnic divisions, and conflicts related to identity and ethnicity.

As a young nation, North Macedonia was confronted with a rising tide of ethnic nationalism, which was fueled by a strong desire to assert and protect the nation's cultural and political identity. This surge in ethnic nationalism was particularly problematic, as it often manifested itself in

ethnic discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion of minority groups. The political landscape in the country was also heavily influenced by ethnic affiliations, with political parties often aligning themselves with particular ethnic groups. This further exacerbated ethnic divisions and fostered an environment where political cooperation and dialogue were increasingly challenging.

Another pressing issue was the emergence of ethnic conflicts within North Macedonia's diverse population. These conflicts often stemmed from deeply-rooted historical grievances and differences in cultural and religious beliefs. The nation is home to a variety of ethnic groups, including Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Roma, Serbs, and others, each of whom have their own unique cultural and historical backgrounds. As these groups struggled to coexist within a shared national framework, tensions and misunderstandings arose, leading to sporadic outbreaks of violence and social unrest.

The political dynamics within North Macedonia were heavily influenced by a multitude of ethnically based political groups. Their ethnocentric goals added layers of complexity to the national political landscape, causing divisions that hindered the government's ability to tackle crucial issues. This fragmented environment fostered a lack of consensus and collaboration among diverse political entities, undermining governmental effectiveness and stalling national development.

Moreover, North Macedonia grappled with an array of identity and ethnic conflicts, stemming from various factions striving to affirm and protect their unique cultural identities within the wider multicultural fabric. These

conflicts took many shapes, from language disputes to controversies over naming public institutions, to clashes over the acknowledgement of minority rights. These enduring issues tied to identity further exacerbated ethnic tensions, obstructing attempts to cultivate societal unity and inclusion.

North Macedonia serves as an example of a state where governmental bodies, motivated by fears of neighboring countries' irredentism or concerns over maintaining national homogeneity, sought to assimilate, expel, or regulate citizens diverging from the national archetype (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 9). However, in the context of an increasingly multicultural world, where individual rights to religious, linguistic, and other cultural freedoms are increasingly valued, Macedonia's internal diversity began to be viewed as an asset to be preserved. This perspective led to the classification of local Macedonian communities with distinct linguistic or religious backgrounds as 'minorities' (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 9). Such categorization highlighted differences from the majority culture, often without thoroughly exploring perceptions of similarity and difference within the concerned community (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 10).

Alongside these domestic issues, North Macedonia faced an array of external pressures in its efforts to forge and sustain diplomatic ties with surrounding nations and international entities. Many of these external pressures were closely intertwined with the country's internal struggles, with issues like border disputes, resource allocation, and minority rights often having transnational ramifications.

These challenges not only obstructed the country's capacity to devise and execute effective policies but also strained its relationships with neighboring states and the international community. As of the time this thesis was written, North Macedonia had managed to resolve its dispute with Greece through the signing of the Prespa Agreement. Yet, Bulgaria's demands regarding the recognition of Bulgarian minorities in North Macedonia remained unaddressed, culminating in Bulgaria blocking North Macedonia's progress towards European integration.

From Independence to Inclusivity: Navigating Ethnic Tensions and Nationalism

The inaugural multi-party elections in Macedonia were held in November and December of 1990, with VMRO-DPMNE, a nationalist party, emerging as the victor over the reformed Communists. However, VMRO was unable to establish a government. Instead, a caretaker government was installed and sanctioned by the parliament to manage the country in a politically unbiased manner until significant statehood and independence matters were resolved. Macedonia proclaimed its independence on 8 September 1991, following a successful but somewhat ambiguous referendum question (State Election Commission, 2021). Shortly thereafter, on 17 November 1991, the Macedonian Parliament adopted the new constitution. However, the independence referendum was boycotted by the ethnic Albanian population, which, while not impacting the referendum's outcome, raised serious questions about the legitimacy of the nascent state among diverse ethnic groups (Koneska, 2014, p. 65). In response to the Macedonian constitution, Albanian parties

initiated a referendum to establish the state of Ilirida. However, the endeavor was unsuccessful due to the absence of international backing and the inadequate organization of political parties to undertake such a significant step. This highlights the challenges faced by minority groups in their quest for greater autonomy and recognition.

The initial decade of Macedonia's independence was characterized by regional instability and upheaval, including wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (1991–1995) and the escalation of conflicts in Kosovo, leading to NATO's intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. International recognition of Macedonia was postponed until April 1993, when the country was finally admitted to the United Nations under the provisional title 'the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Vangelov, 2019, pp. 4-6).

During the early stages of independence, ethnic Macedonians, who made up the majority in Macedonia (now North Macedonia), enjoyed full discretion in formulating the constitution, encompassing aspects related to inter-ethnic relations and empowerment. In contrast, ethnic Albanians, who constituted approximately a quarter of the population, initially displayed limited interest in these developments (Smajljaj, 2020, p. 119). However, the constitution would eventually emerge as a triggering factor for several nationalistic dilemmas, sparking ethnic discord within North Macedonia. The constitution's inadequate attention to the concerns and requirements of all ethnic communities, especially the Albanian minority, unwittingly laid the foundation for ethnic tension. Historical resentments, political maneuvers, and the rise of nationalism amplified

these tensions, establishing the constitution as a crucial determinant of the future course of inter-ethnic relations and conflicts in North Macedonia.

In the Yugoslav constitution of 1974, the Republic of Macedonia was deemed to be comprised of the Macedonian nation, with the Albanian and Turkish minorities specifically recognized as constituting entities (Smajljaj, 2020, p. 119). However, the post-independence constitution defined Macedonia (North Macedonia) as a national state of Macedonians, with other ethnic groups also being classified as Macedonians. This redefinition was viewed as discriminatory by ethnic Albanians, instigating a new period of unhealthy inter-ethnic relations, which eventually erupted into a civil war. The negative impact on inter-ethnic relations, exacerbated during the civil war, continues to resonate in the present day (Smajljaj, 2020, p. 119).

Nationalism has often been associated with a variety of conflicting notions. On one hand, it's tied to militarism, war, chauvinism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and extreme intolerance, including forced assimilation, authoritarianism, and parochialism. It has even been linked to extreme atrocities such as ethnic cleansing and genocide, earning it the label of the "most severe political disgrace of the twentieth century" (Brubaker, 2004, p. 132). Conversely, nationhood and nationalism have also been tied to more positive aspects, such as democracy, self-determination, political legitimacy, social integration, and civil religion. They have been associated with fostering solidarity, dignity, identity, cultural survival, citizenship, patriotism, and liberation from foreign rule (Brubaker, 2004, p. 132).

What distinguished the nationalism that emerged after Macedonian independence was its explicit nature and the newfound freedom it gave political elites to revisit and revise sections of history that supposedly were suppressed during the communist era. Macedonian political elites eagerly engaged in this exercise, which resulted in a backlash against the shared Slavic history narrative of Yugoslavia and a pivot towards the ancient roots of the Macedonian nation (Koneska, 2014, p. 67). This approach, however, led to significant internal and external issues. The overt nationalism and the fervor to emphasize an independent and ancient Macedonian identity created division and animosity, both within the diverse ethnic communities of North Macedonia and between the nation and its neighbors. Moreover, this aggressive reinterpretation of history raised concerns among international observers and organizations as well. They feared that the heightened nationalist rhetoric could not only disrupt the delicate inter-ethnic balance within North Macedonia but also destabilize the broader Balkan region.

The Albanian community consistently disputed the outcome of the 1994 census up until 2022. The official count identified Albanians as 23 percent of the Macedonian population, a figure which Albanian political leaders have contended, asserting instead that Albanians account for 30-40 percent of the population in Macedonia (Cline, 2004, p. 59). However, the census of 1994 did not count some 150,000 individuals, predominantly Albanians, as they were unable to meet the citizenship criteria for the new state. These conditions required individuals to provide evidence of their own birth or that of both parents within the territory of the present

republic, or alternatively, demonstrate a minimum of fifteen years of uninterrupted residence. This requirement was seen by many Albanians as a calculated policy to limit their potential parliamentary representation and thus their ability to veto constitutional changes (Gaber, 1997, p. 104). According to the late population registration data, it appears that the claims of discrimination in population numbers made by Albanian politicians and other ethnic groups in North Macedonia had some validity. As of 2022, of the total registered population in North Macedonia, 54.21 percent identified as Macedonians, 29.52 percent as Albanians, 3.98 percent as Turks, 2.34 percent as Roma, 1.18 percent as Serbs, 0.87 percent as Bosnians, and 0.44 percent as Vlachs (State Statistical Office, 2022). A higher population percentage is a strategic point in the ethnic Albanians' struggle for recognition as a constituent nation (Cline, 2004, p. 59).

North Macedonia's initial constitution was inadequate in addressing the rights and needs of the Albanian ethnic group. It failed to acknowledge them as a fundamental part of the nation. Primary issues involved the lack of legal recognition for their language in public and official circumstances, the non-existence of higher education institutions in the Albanian language, the inability to establish new Albanian-majority municipalities, and the underrepresentation of ethnic Albanians in public service. These outstanding issues significantly contributed to the inter-ethnic tensions, eventually culminating in the 2001 conflict. The Ohrid Framework Agreement, which signaled the end of the conflict, was a pivotal move towards resolving these issues and nurturing a more inclusive and equitable society.

From the time of the adoption of the Republic of Macedonia's Constitution in 1991 until the present day, there have been six changes, incorporating 32 amendments (Kambovski et al., 2020, p. 1). This frequency of alterations suggests that the original constitution may not have been appropriately designed to accommodate the varied multiethnic society of North Macedonia. Moreover, the predominant influence of majority Macedonian parties in driving these changes, with scarce participation from other ethnic groups, underscores the deficient attempts to encourage multiculturalism and inclusivity within the country's governmental and constitutional structure.

The Ohrid Framework Agreement laid the groundwork for the political and institutional dynamics in Macedonia following the conflict. Domestic politicians were able to shape the content of the peace agreement, ensuring that the resulting reforms would not negatively impact their political interests (Koneska, 2014, p. 59). Consequently, these rights have not yet been fully implemented.

Nationalism and Ethno-political Dynamics: Understanding Inter-ethnic Tensions in North Macedonia

As communist emblems were swiftly supplanted by ethno-national symbols, such as flags, coats of arms, religious motifs, national heroes, and myths, including public reburial of ethno-national 'saints and scholars', this catalyzed the growth of nationalism in North Macedonia. Owing to their emotive appeal and ambiguity, these symbols could be readily associated with a glorified ethnic past, evoking

notions of shared ethnic roots and perceived superiority (Malesevic, 2006, p. 180).

Amidst political uncertainty, economic hardship, and a crumbling state structure, an intense affiliation with one's ethno-national group became the sole beacon of security and certainty. Animosity and hatred directed towards other 'threatening' ethnic groups were inflamed during these volatile times. The calculated exploitation of these feelings and interests by political elites was glaringly apparent in mass media. Propagandistic messages, disseminated through these channels, significantly influenced whole populations, stoking deep-seated fears (Malesevic, 2006, p. 181). This climate of political instability and economic adversity, coupled with the disintegration of the state, only served to amplify nationalist sentiments, fostering a heightened sense of attachment to ethno-national groups. these phenomena led to a reinforcement of ethno-national identities and deepened divisions between ethnic groups. This exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts, ultimately posing significant challenges to the stability and unity of North Macedonia.

From 1992 to 1998, North Macedonia was under the governance of the center-left Social Democrats and their Albanian coalition partners, the Party for Democratic. The period from 1998 to 2002 saw the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE and their Albanian coalition partners, the DPA, take the reins. Following the inter-ethnic Macedonian-Albanian conflict in 2001, the Social Democrats regained power in 2002, only to be succeeded by the VMRO-DPMNE in 2006. The latter stayed in power until June 2017, when Gruevski was succeeded by Zaev.

Highly nationalistic stances have often been espoused by the leading moderate right-wing parties such as the ethnic Macedonian VMRO-DPMNE, the ethnic Albanian DPA, and at times, the VMRO-People's Party, United for Macedonia, and the Dostoinstvo party. Ultra-nationalistic entities, despite being generally smaller political entities advocating for more radical and often violent forms of nationalism, frequently collaborate or form coalitions with these major right-leaning parties (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012, p. 1). On the Macedonian side, ultra-nationalist parties include the TMORO-VEP, TMRO, the People's Movement of Macedonia (NDM), the VMRO-Democratic Party, and the globally known World Macedonian Congress (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012, p. 1). Nationalist postures and ultra-nationalistic ideologies permeated mainstream political parties, leading to the deepening of ethnic rifts. These nationalist parties, guided by their mission to establish a wholly Macedonian state within its complete territory, advocated for border revisions between North Macedonia, perceived as an artificial entity, and areas they consider to be parts of the Macedonian state, currently under Bulgarian and Greek control (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012, p. 1). These ambitions harbored by nationalist parties have had significant implications for North Macedonia's territorial integrity. While these objectives may appear improbable in light of current political circumstances in North Macedonia, it is noteworthy that the ruling political party, which held power for 12 years, employed populist, chauvinistic, fascistic, and ultra-nationalistic policies towards other ethnic groups. The ramifications of these policies on the consolidation of democracy in North Macedonia will be further discussed

in the subsequent chapter, as they have played a significant role in undermining the country's democratic foundations.

In the initial years until 1995, nationalism could be perceived as an intrinsic part of the ideological identity of VMRO-DPMNE. However, by 2006, the party embraced the ultra-nationalists' fixation with the Ancient Macedonia of Antiquity. As a dominant party in the ruling coalition, VMRO-DPMNE leveraged its position to rename infrastructure, build monuments, and run government publicity campaigns aimed at enhancing national consciousness (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012, p. 4). Additionally, the party carried out marketing campaigns such as "You are Macedonia," which, for instance, extolled the military prowess of Alexander the Great. Through such measures, VMRO-DPMNE managed to mainstream many ultra-nationalist perspectives, contributing to the escalation of ethnic tensions in North Macedonia (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012, p. 4). The spread of ultra-nationalist perspectives and actions amplified existing ethnic strains, compromising trust and cooperation between Albanian and Macedonian communities. This escalating friction led to a worsening social environment, with both communities growing more inward and defensive of their respective ethnic identities. As a result, the potential for meaningful dialogue and mutual comprehension between communities diminished, inhibiting collaborative growth and shared progress. This situation fostered further political division, hindering policies aiming to benefit all citizens, as pleasing one group often implied disregarding the other. Consequently, this created a persistent cycle of distrust and division, challenging the vision of true unity and advancement in North Macedonia.

Ethnic Identities and Conflict in North Macedonia

Ethnic identities of Albanians and Macedonians, rooted in distinct historical narratives, have played a crucial role in shaping the intergroup relations in North Macedonia. These narratives, tied to the ancient Illyrians and the medieval Slavic populations, underpin mutual perceptions and interactions, providing a backdrop for ongoing conflict (Bego, 2019, p. 2). National identity formation, often fostering divisions through ideological differences, has precipitated the notion of "the other" between Albanians and Slavs. Ethnic nationalism has been a primary driver for social fragmentation, giving rise to identity conflicts in the region, particularly evident in the early 20th century (Bego, 2019, pp. 2-5). Violent episodes during the 19th and 20th centuries, deemed as ethnic cleansing by Balkan states, targeted mainly Muslim populations in Bosnia and Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia. These events, rooted in the resentment towards groups associated with the Ottoman Empire, underscored the harsh reality of ethnic conflict, instigated by identity differences and historical grievances.

The tensions between Albanians and Macedonians emerged not only due to historical factors but also from the impact of the larger geopolitical dynamics. These tensions have been further exacerbated by the narratives propagated by respective communities, which often emphasize historical grievances and perceived injustices. It's important to note that these ethnic conflicts are not merely the result of ancient hatreds but rather a complex interplay of historical,

political, economic, and social factors, each influencing the other in ways that deepen the rifts.

According to Gottlieb, ethnic conflict has one thing in common: an obsessive preoccupation with issues of sovereignty, statehood, and national identity. The principle of self-determination, nonintervention in domestic affairs, respect for human rights, and rights of other ethnicities (Gottlieb, 1993, pp. 52-68).

In the context of North Macedonia's ethnic conflict, the common preoccupation with matters of sovereignty, statehood, and national identity has been a significant factor in the tension between the Macedonian majority and the sizable Albanian community. This tension is rooted in differing perceptions of the state's identity and the rights and status of different ethnic groups within the country. The principle of self-determination has played a critical role in North Macedonia's ethnic conflict. For example, the Albanian minority in North Macedonia has sought greater autonomy and recognition of their rights, often referring to the principle of self-determination. On the other hand, many ethnic Macedonians view such demands as a threat to the sovereignty and unity of the state, leading to conflict. Non-interference in internal conflicts is another principle that has implications in North Macedonia's ethnic conflict. However, given the nature of the dispute, it's been difficult for international actors to entirely avoid involvement. The Ohrid Framework Agreement, which ended the 2001 conflict, was facilitated by international mediators and included provisions for improving the rights and status of the Albanian minority. However, the implementation of the agreement's provisions has often been a contentious issue.

The nature of ethnic conflict, as observed in the nascent years of Macedonia's independence, refers to disagreements over the fundamental understanding and definition of the ethnic strife itself. These were particularly noticeable in relation to national identity debates, such as those emerging from the Greek-Macedonian dispute and the Macedonian-Albanian relationship dynamics (Sielska, 2021, p. 194; Sielska, 2018, pp. 80-81). These debates often centered around the right of the Macedonian state to self-determination and its ability to conduct its affairs without outside interference. However, the multi-ethnic makeup of the country, combined with historical grievances and external influences, complicated these issues. The Albanian minority, for instance, sought greater recognition and rights, bringing their interpretation of self-determination into conflict with the Macedonian majority's vision of a united, sovereign nation-state. Similarly, the Greek-Macedonian conflict brought international dimensions to these disputes, further complicating the application of non-intervention principles. These disagreements and conflicts over fundamental principles contributed significantly to the deterioration of inter-ethnic relations and the rise of radical ideologies.

When they took power in 2007, the nationalistic VMRO party set in motion symbolic changes aimed at reframing Macedonian identity. They renamed the airport to the "Alexander the Great" and arranged for the display of ancient artifacts in front of government buildings. This was part of a concerted effort to establish a tangible link between contemporary Macedonians and their ancient cultural heritage (Sielska, 2018, p. 80). This drive to project

an 'ancient identity' wasn't limited to symbolic gestures but extended into the education system, prompting changes in both curriculum and teaching methodologies (Sielska, 2018, p. 80). These actions proved to be significant as they fueled identity conflicts in North Macedonia. By asserting a singular narrative of Macedonian national identity rooted in ancient history, the authorities implicitly marginalized other ethnic groups, devaluing their contributions to the country's diverse cultural mosaic.

Ethno-Cultural Divides and Interethnic Relations: The Macedonian and Albanian Communities in North Macedonia

A study encompassing Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish communities revealed that a significant majority - 95% of Macedonian and Albanian and 84% of Turkish household heads - would disapprove of their sons marrying outside their nationality, with even higher percentages for their daughters (Gaber, 1997, pp. 103-105). The lack of mixed marriages between Muslim Albanians and Turks and Orthodox Macedonians testifies to the significant religious divide contributing to ethnic cleavages in North Macedonia. The report suggested that religious isolation was a fundamental factor underlying the perceived national and ethnic differences (Gaber, 1997, pp. 103-105). This supports the idea that, in the Balkans, religion has often served as a critical factor in distinguishing different ethnic groups (Poulton, 1997, p. 92). It's notable that most Macedonians associate themselves with Orthodox Christianity, whereas Albanians in North Macedonia follow Islam, predominantly Sunni. These religious disparities significantly influence their respective

cultural traditions, including ceremonies, holidays, and customs. Additionally, religion has a profound impact on social and familial structures. Although both groups value familial ties, Albanian families tend to maintain a traditional patriarchal structure, while Macedonian families have been moving towards a more modern, egalitarian family setup in recent years.

In many nations, ethnic majorities frequently exert significant control over their unique cultural, religious, and linguistic traditions. This controlling position facilitates their ability to safeguard and propagate narratives of their history and identity, which often align with the preferences of the majority group (Wilmer, 2002, p. 12). The case of North Macedonia offers a prime example of this dynamic. As the majority ethnic group, Macedonians have had access to the country's resources to cultivate, safeguard, and construct their cultural heritage and narratives. This access has allowed them to shape the nation's identity in a way that predominantly reflects their historical, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. Such power dynamics can inevitably influence interethnic relations, potentially marginalizing minority groups and exacerbating tensions.

Albanians have historically been marginalized and not fully integrated into the social, political, and cultural fabric of North Macedonia. As depicted in Macedonian cultural literature, the Albanian community is often portrayed as an isolated group living on the periphery of society (Wilmer, 2002, p. 99). They're described as enigmatic, speaking an unintelligible language, following tribal organization, practicing blood feuds, and maintaining distinctive habits

and attire. They are often depicted as perpetual underdogs. Their representation in Yugoslav literature, movies, and pop culture is minimal, and few famous Yugoslavs are acknowledged as Albanians (Wilmer, 2002, p. 99). They forget to mention the discrimination and the persecution of Albanian nationalities in North Macedonia during the Yugoslavia period, and also after the independence of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The control over the state's political and legal institutions, and the processes of assimilation, including both the creation of "minority" rights and protections and the crafting and modification of historical and civic identity narratives, lay predominantly in the hands of Macedonians (Wilmer, 2002, p. 12). The divergent political inclinations and aspirations have intensified the discord between the Macedonian and Albanian communities in North Macedonia. Albanians tend to be more supportive of integration into the European Union (EU) and NATO membership, whereas certain Macedonians lean towards pro-Russian and Serbian political tendencies.

In terms of language, the Macedonian and Albanian communities in North Macedonia are quite distinct. Macedonians primarily use the Macedonian language, a member of the South Slavic language group, while Albanians communicate in the Albanian language, a unique branch of the Indo-European language family. These languages, each with its own alphabet, grammar, and lexicon, contribute to the cultural chasm between the two communities.

Moreover, there are significant differences in traditional customs and practices between the two ethnic communities.

Macedonian folklore is deeply influenced by Slavic culture, including traditional music, dance, and attire. Conversely, Albanian customs are shaped by their Illyrian ancestry and the long-standing impact of Ottoman rule, resulting in a distinct Albanian cultural identity. These distinctions contribute to the intricate and diverse ethnic milieu of the country.

Multiculturalism: Theory, Practice, and Challenges

According to Miller, multiculturalism is seen as a normative concept, signifying an ideology that not only values cultural diversity, but also demands equal acknowledgement of varied cultural groups and asks the state to lend its support in different ways (Miller, 2006, p. 326). Typically, multicultural policies are aimed at advancing equality in all realms of societal life, fostering organizations that unite people from diverse ethnicities, religions, and cultures, and advocating for mutual respect and acceptance in educational institutions (Miller, 2006, p. 332). In addition, these policies often expand the choices available to individuals and push for equality by breaking down barriers and challenging prejudices that put ethnic and racial minorities at a disadvantage (Banting & Kymlicka, 2006, p. 2).

The term 'multicultural policies', lacks a universally agreed-upon definition and carries different implications in different nations. In some instances, 'multiculturalism' encompasses a broader spectrum of diversity, including aspects like gender, sexual orientation, disability, and others. Seen in this wider perspective, multiculturalism is almost synonymous with the politics of recognition (Banting et al., 2006, p. 51). This variation in the interpretation of

multiculturalism underlines its intricacy and dynamic nature (Kymlicka, 1995).

For a multicultural society to function effectively, it should instill a strong sense of unity and shared belonging among its citizens. Without this, it becomes difficult to make and enforce collective decisions, and manage conflicts (Parekh, 2006, p. 196). In essence, multiculturalism calls for reducing risks for all nationalities, social groups, and cultural communities, with the state assuming the role of a guardian of everyone's identity (Walzer, 1994, p. 102).

Gutmann (1994) presents a universalistic view of liberal democracy, emphasizing that multiculturalism demands political impartiality towards various conceptions of a good life and backs specific cultural values through public institutions, provided basic rights are upheld, citizens are not manipulated, and public officials remain democratically accountable (Gutman, 1994, pp. 10-11).

In the following discussion, we'll delve into the question of multiculturalism's success or failure in North Macedonia, with a specific focus on its constitutional framework and the potential challenges to preserving cultural identity. We'll critically examine the implementation and outcomes of North Macedonia's multicultural policies, the ramifications these policies might have on the unique cultural identities of different ethnic and social groups, and thus, provide a comprehensive understanding of the current multicultural landscape in North Macedonia.

In Search of Identity: Constitutional Evolution and Multiethnicity in North Macedonia

North Macedonia's journey towards establishing a multicultural and multiethnic society has faced numerous obstacles, primarily due to the enduring discord between the majority Macedonians and the minority Albanians. These challenges are deeply rooted in the historical and political context of the country. One of the main hindrances to fostering multiethnicity in North Macedonia can be traced back to the inadequacies of the country's initial constitution. The constitution did not offer provisions for decentralization, which would have enabled increased local authority and the accommodation of distinct ethnic groups' needs. This concentration of power has stirred discontent among minority groups, who have consistently advocated for more significant involvement in decision-making processes. Furthermore, the initial constitution did not institute affirmative action measures in public bodies, further sidelining the Albanian minority and other ethnic groups. This lack of policies has resulted in the underrepresentation of minorities in public institutions, engendering a sense of alienation and inciting divisions among ethnic communities.

By comparing the preambles of the constitution of North Macedonia passed in 1991, one can observe a shift in focus concerning the acknowledgement and representation of various ethnic groups within the country.

In the first preamble, it is stated:

"Starting from the historical cultural, spiritual and state heritage of the Macedonian people and from its centuries-old struggle for national and social freedom and to create your own state, and especially from the state-legal traditions of the Republic of Kruševo and the historical decisions of ASNOM and the constitutional-legal continuity of the Macedonian state as a sovereign republic in Federated Yugoslavia, from the freely expressed will of the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia in the referendum of September 8 1991, as well as from the historical fact that Macedonia was constituted as a national state of the Macedonian people in which ensures full civil equality and permanently coexistence of the Macedonian people with the Albanians, the Turks, Vlachs, Roma and other nationalities living in the Republic of Macedonia".... (Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022)

In the initial preamble, the emphasis is predominantly on the historical and cultural legacy of the Macedonian populace, while other ethnic groups, including Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Roma, and others, are merely classified as "nationalities" residing within the Republic of Macedonia. Such terminology suggests that the Macedonian people constitute the core nation within the country, with other ethnic groups being accorded a subordinate status as nationalities.

In connection with the "nationalities" expression in article 48, it is replaced by amendment VIII to Communities.

"Article 48: Members of the nationalities have the right to freely express, nurture, and develop their own and national identity peculiarities.

Amendment VIII Article 48: Members of the communities have the right to freely express, nurture, and develop their identity and the particularities of their communities and to use the symbols of their community." (Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022)

The revision to Article 48, which substitutes "nationalities" with "communities," indicates a transition in how the constitution regards the various ethnic groups in the nation. This alteration can be interpreted as an effort to foster a more inclusive method of recognizing and safeguarding the rights of different ethnic groups.

The original Article 48 emphasized the rights of "members of the nationalities" to articulate, foster, and cultivate their identity and unique national characteristics. However, by employing the term "nationalities," the constitution insinuated a hierarchical discrepancy between the dominant Macedonian nation and the remaining ethnic groups.

In 2001, the preamble of the constitution underwent revisions once more, largely due to pressure from the Albanian community following the conflict that occurred that same year.

"The citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia, the Macedonian nation, as well as citizens living within its borders who are part of the Albanian nation, the Turkish nation, the Vlach nation, the Serbian nation, the

Roma nation, the Bosnian nation and others, taking responsibility for the present and future of their fatherland, aware of and grateful to their predecessors for their sacrifice and dedication in their endeavors and struggle to create the independent and sovereign state of Macedonia.... " (Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022)

In 2019, the preamble of the constitution was subject to changes again, in which the sentence "as well as citizens living within its borders who are" was deleted and remains as follows:

"The citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia, the Macedonian nation, part of the Albanian nation, the Turkish nation, the Vlach nation, the Serbian nation, the Roma nation, the Bosnian nation and others, taking responsibility for the present and future of their fatherland, aware of and grateful to their predecessors for their sacrifice and dedication in their endeavors and struggle to create the independent and sovereign state of Macedonia. " (Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022)

The phrase "as well as citizens living within its borders who are" was interpreted as a potential attempt to marginalize other ethnicities, notwithstanding their significant presence in North Macedonia. This perception led to constitutional modifications on January 11, 2019 (Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022). In the 2019 version of the preamble, the phrase "as well as citizens living within its borders who are" was deleted. This phrase, while seemingly

innocuous, carried potential implications of marginalization for the various ethnic groups residing in North Macedonia. The wording suggested that these communities - such as Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Serbians, Roma, and Bosnians - while technically citizens, were somehow distinct or separate from the core Macedonian populace.

The term "part of," as employed in the 2019 revised preamble of the constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, introduces a degree of ambiguity in the status of various ethnic groups in the nation. It is susceptible to differing interpretations, which can cause tension and challenges in multiethnic societies.

From a sociopolitical perspective, the term "part of" could be interpreted as implicitly creating a dichotomy between the 'whole' (Macedonian people) and the 'parts' (Albanian, Turkish, Vlach, Serbian, Roma, Bosnian people, and others). This dichotomy may inadvertently propagate a sense of fractional or incomplete citizenship among those ethnic communities considered as a 'part.' It suggests a scenario where these communities are seen as components of society, but not necessarily as equal and integrated constituents of the national fabric.

In terms of discrimination or perceived second-class citizenship, this phraseology might convey that these ethnic groups, while forming a "part of" North Macedonia's citizenry, do not entirely amalgamate with the mainstream Macedonian populace. The ambiguity could be perceived as a lack of full affirmation by the constitution, contributing to a perception of these groups as secondary citizens. This distinction may inadvertently reinforce perceived

ethnic hierarchies and possibly perpetuate a sense of marginalization among these groups.

From a social standpoint, the consequences of such fractional recognition could impact these communities' sense of belonging and collective identity. It could foster feelings of alienation and otherness among these communities, which could, in turn, exacerbate social tensions and lead to further ethnic divisions within the society.

Politically, the issue of ethnic representation and recognition in the constitution can have significant implications. It can influence political discourse, party alignment, voter behavior, and policy decisions. The perception of partial recognition or potential marginalization can mobilize ethnic communities politically to fight for more recognition and better representation. Conversely, it can also fuel nationalist tendencies and exacerbate inter-ethnic conflicts.

Overall, the constitutional wording and its implicit messages play a crucial role in shaping the national identity, social cohesion, and political dynamics of a multiethnic country like North Macedonia. The inclusion of the term "part of" in the preamble warrants careful consideration and thoughtful discussion.

Moreover, the Population Census of September 2021 illustrated that other ethnicities combined constituted nearly half of the population in the Republic of North Macedonia (State Statistical Office, 2022). Among the total enumerated population, 54.21% identified themselves as Macedonians, 29.52% as Albanians, 3.98% as Turks, 2.34% as Roma, 1.18% as Serbs, 0.87% as Bosniaks, and 0.44% as

Vlachs (State Statistical Office, 2022). This data underscores the multiethnic nature of North Macedonia, demonstrating a diverse and complex fabric of communities that reside in the country. It highlights the necessity of acknowledging and representing all these ethnicities equitably, thus further reinforcing the significance of the constitutional amendments to promote inclusivity and equal rights for all citizens.

Articles 1 and 2 of the constitution emphasize the political regime that North Macedonia has embraced, and Article 69 explains that the system, unfortunately, is majoritarian.

Articles 1 and 2:

> "The Republic of Macedonia is a sovereign, independent, democratic and social state. The sovereignty of the RM is indivisible, inalienable, and non-transferable. In the RM sovereignty derives from the citizens and belongs to the citizens. The citizens of RM exercise their authority through democratically elected Representatives, through referenda and through other forms of direct expression."

Article 69:

> The Assembly may work if its meeting is attended by a majority of the total number of Representatives. The Assembly makes decisions by a majority vote of the Representatives attending, but no less than one-third of the total number of Representatives, in so far as the Constitution does not provide for a qualified majority (Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022).

Items 1 and 2 of Amendment X that replace Article 69:

> 1. The Assembly can take a decision if its sitting is attended by a majority of the total number of Representatives. The Assembly makes decisions by a majority vote of the Representatives attending, but no less than one-third of the total number of representatives, save where a different type of majority is provided by the Constitution.

> 2. For laws that directly affect culture, use of language, education, personal documentation, and use of symbols, the representatives attending, within which there must be a majority of the votes of the Representatives attending communities not in the majority of the population of Macedonia. Any dispute regarding the application of this provision is resolved by the Committee on Inter-Community Relations (Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022).

Article 69's second clause, known as the Badinter principle, represents a consociational veto right: for regulations directly impacting culture, language usage, education, personal documentation, and symbols, a dual majority—both in parliament and among non-majority community representatives—is required (Merdzanovic, 2015, pp. 389-390). While the Ohrid Framework Agreement has incorporated aspects of a consociational political system into North Macedonia, including the double majority or Badinter principle in Article 69, concerns linger regarding the risk of majority encroachment. Although the dual majority requirement is meant to safeguard non-majority communities concerning culture, language, education,

personal documentation, and symbols, the constitution lacks firm measures to prevent the majority from overriding minority interests in other areas.

Moreover, the Badinter principle itself could be modified through majority rule, potentially compromising the protections it's intended to offer minority communities. This flaw underscores the current constitution's limitations in effectively shielding minorities from overzealous majority actions.

In summary, while the Ohrid Framework Agreement has introduced some features of a consociational political system, the constitution of North Macedonia still lacks comprehensive mechanisms to prevent majority aggression against other minority communities. Addressing this gap is crucial to ensure the long-term stability and harmony of North Macedonia's diverse society.

Branislav Sarkanjac, a Macedonian philosopher, accentuates the obstacles to multiculturalism in North Macedonia, positing that "multiculturalism devoid of recognized identities is merely a pretense." He indicates that ethnic Macedonians, consistently denied external recognition, evolve into an "exasperated majority" internally. Sarkanjac underscores that mutual recognition and respect must precede everything else, as the postmodern discussion on national identity in the Balkans' context won't succeed without it (Dodovski, 2012, p. 94). This shared viewpoint implies that Macedonians are hesitant to accept the liberal idea of multiculturalism until their modern national narrative is widely acknowledged beforehand. This apprehension over losing national identity and the demand for recognition

contributes to the reluctance of Macedonian authors and the broader society to fully adopt multiculturalist policies.

The journey towards a multicultural society in North Macedonia has been obstructed by several factors, including the deficiencies of its initial constitution, the lack of affirmative action measures, the underrepresentation of minorities in decision-making processes, and insufficient support for minority language education. These issues have perpetuated long-standing conflicts between the Albanian ethnicity and Macedonian majority, impeding strides towards a genuinely inclusive and peaceful society. Addressing these challenges is crucial to nurturing an environment that celebrates and respects the array of identities that compose North Macedonia.

Democratization and Ethnic Conflict Prevention in North Macedonia

Challenges and Progress: Macedonia's Journey to Democracy

Invoking John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), Ramet points out that multiethnic societies can present significant hurdles to establishing stable, representative governments. The presence of diverse languages and cultural backgrounds can potentially impede the formation of a united public opinion, crucial for the functionality of such governments. However, Ramet also emphasizes that the complexities introduced by multiethnicity or multilingualism do not necessarily mean disaster for a state, unless accompanied

by other destabilizing factors (Ramet, 2019, pp. 353-354). So, although multiethnicity and multilingualism add complexity to the establishment of representative governments, they don't inherently threaten the state's stability.

In Yugoslavia's history, democratic elections at the federal level were absent. The Yugoslav federal National Parliament was chosen via an intricate indirect delegate system as per the 1974 constitution. After the League of Communists' disintegration at the 1990 party congress, there was no institution powerful enough in Yugoslavia to enforce federal elections. From the mid-1990s onward, several Balkan nations, including Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia, made adjustments to their power dynamics, often aimed at eradicating traces of authoritarianism. This often led to a reduction in presidential powers to align with their constitutions (Bakke, 2010, pp. 68-72). Despite VMRO–DPMNE becoming the most prominent party in Macedonia, the reins of government fell to former communists due to VMRO–DPMNE's failure or reluctance to form a coalition with an Albanian party (Bakke, 2010, p. 72). This resulted in the resurgence of former communists in Macedonia's government.

Emerging democracies are prone to experience institutional shortcomings, a natural outcome considering that the development and establishment of credible institutions require time. In regions including Macedonia, specific officials such as judges and police officers were comparatively underpaid. Moreover, the professional ethic that prioritizes public welfare over personal advantage wasn't firmly established. Post the downfall of the communist

organizational monopoly during 1989-90, Macedonia was marked by high corruption rates, emphasizing the persistent problem of corruption in the post-socialist world (Ramet, 2019, p. 355). The move towards democracy was characterized by institutional frailties, especially prominent in Macedonia due to an absence of professionalism and extensive corruption.

In Macedonia, by the mid-1990s, former communists had reclaimed power as the public lost faith in conservative parties. However, Macedonia was particularly plagued by corruption (Ramet & Wagner, 100, pp. 9-11). The nation's political dynamics were also influenced by Yugoslavia's federalization legacy, which played a role in perpetuating ethnic, religious, and regional divisions.

The nation carried the burden of structural economic inflexibility, pervasive corruption, and minimal foreign investment from its time as part of Yugoslavia (Irwin, 2010, p. 330). Macedonia grappled with not just corruption, but also a variety of problems such as lingering ethnic tensions, being the poorest nation in the region, and other socio-economic issues. These factors served to hinder the democratization process, making the transition to a stable, functional democratic system challenging.

Federalization contributed to the institutionalization of national disputes, specifically in Yugoslavia post-1974. Ethnic, religious, and regional divisions endured beyond the communist regimes, and socio-economic conflicts surfaced between those who benefited from and those who were disadvantaged by the economic transition. Parties from the former regime were equipped with experienced leaders,

extensive memberships, newspapers, office facilities, and other resources. In contrast, popular fronts and forums initially lacked these assets, despite their superior democratic legitimacy (Bakke, 2010, p. 71). In the case of Macedonia, the situation between Macedonian and Albanian political parties mirrored this pattern. Macedonian parties, which were part of the previous regime, had access to resources and experienced politicians. On the other hand, Albanian parties, despite their strong democratic aspirations, initially lacked the necessary resources and experienced leadership to effectively compete in the political arena. Apart from corruption, the country also struggled with persistent ethnic tensions, economic hardship, and various social issues hindering its democratic transition.

NATO and the EU have played an instrumental role in Macedonia, aiding democratic reform and performing peacekeeping roles among its citizens, both ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. EU membership has been proposed as a reward for democratic stability. The prospect of such an outcome enjoys popular support and allows the application of what is termed as "passive and active leverage" over Macedonia's political decisions (Irwin, 2010, p. 329). In the face of these challenges, the EU and NATO have been actively involved in encouraging democratic reforms, mediating conflicts, and offering EU membership as an incentive for stability in Macedonia.

Adapting Democracy: The Evolution of the Electoral System in a Multiethnic State

In the wake of Macedonia's independence in 1991, numerous political factions surfaced, each championing

distinct ideologies. The VMRO-DPMNE, a center-right party favoring conservative and nationalist principles, and the SDSM, a center-left party holding social democratic values and roots tracing back to the old Communist Party of Macedonia, ascended as primary players in the political arena. Concurrently, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) arose to voice the concerns of the country's Albanian minority, taking on a center-right political slant. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), though relatively minor compared to VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, emerged as a centrist entity espousing liberal and progressive ideals. From 1991 to 1998, these parties carved out the heterogeneous ideological landscape of Macedonian politics. Their rivalry had substantial influence over the nation's approach to subjects such as nationalism, minority rights, and socioeconomic strategies. The inauguration of these political factions coincided with the development of Macedonia's electoral infrastructure.

Following its independence, Macedonia ushered in political pluralism and a multiparty scheme, sparking a major transformation in its political terrain. The country's electoral framework experienced a series of metamorphoses, transitioning from a majoritarian system to a mixed model, before finally implementing a proportional representation system. This progressive shift was aimed at fostering a more comprehensive and democratic procedure, accurately mirroring the diverse inclinations of Macedonia's populace, including the Albanian minority. Further, the enfranchisement of the diaspora exhibited Macedonia's dedication to broadening political participation and representation for its citizenry, both domestically

and overseas. Notwithstanding these leaps forward in the electoral system, an independent Macedonia still confronted a multitude of hurdles.

While Macedonia made considerable progress towards establishing a more encompassing democracy, it was faced with significant obstacles as an independent nation. The country was subject to a Greek embargo until 1995 over the controversy surrounding its use of the name "Macedonia," while Bulgaria refused to acknowledge Macedonian nationality as separate from Bulgarian. Ethnic tensions between ethnic Macedonians and Macedonian Albanians escalated due to circumstances such as the inflow of Albanian refugees from Kosovo and the near-civil war in 2001 involving government forces and Albanian insurgents. Further, the country's development was obstructed by persisting issues of corruption, ethnic strife, and poverty, with its per capita Gross State Product (GSP) remaining considerably below the Yugoslav average before gaining independence (Irwin, 2010, pp. 229-230). The path to democratization taken by Macedonia post-independence failed to accommodate the country's multiethnic society adequately. The crafting of a national constitution that marginalized nearly 40 percent of other ethnicities exposed the inadequacy of the process in solving the intricate ethnic mosaic of the nation. Rather than enhancing relations among diverse ethnic groups, this approach to democratization served only to intensify tensions and promote further instability. It became paramount for Macedonia to cultivate a more inclusive and representative democracy that takes into account the varied interests of its multiethnic population to foster improved social harmony and advancement. In reaction to

these challenges and frictions, Macedonia's electoral system underwent several structural modifications.

The progression of the Macedonian electoral framework evolved through three distinct stages in an effort to better accommodate the diversity within its multiethnic population. Originally, the inaugural parliamentary elections in 1990 and 1994 employed a two-round majoritarian system within 120 single-member districts. This approach, however, failed to adequately address the multifaceted needs of a heterogeneous society. Consequently, during the 1998 elections, a hybrid model was instituted, wherein 85 MPs were selected through a majoritarian system and an additional 35 were chosen through proportional representation (Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, 1998). Ultimately, the country transitioned to a completely proportional model, segregating Macedonia into six electoral divisions, each with a nearly equivalent number of constituents (Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2002).

The Macedonian electoral system evolved through three stages in response to the ethnic tensions present within the country, highlighting the need for a more inclusive system that could better accommodate its multiethnic society. Initially, the first two free parliamentary elections in 1990 and 1994 utilized a two-round majoritarian system in 120 single-member constituencies. However, this approach proved to be inadequate for addressing the complexities of a diverse population. In 1998, a mixed model was implemented, electing 85 MPs through the majoritarian model and 35 through proportional lists. Eventually, the country adopted a fully proportional model, dividing Macedonia into six

electoral units with a nearly equal number of voters. These changes in the electoral system underscore the argument that a majoritarian system was not suitable for a multiethnic society like Macedonia, necessitating the evolution towards a more inclusive and representative system.

In 2011, three more electoral units were introduced to represent Macedonians living abroad. The seventh unit encompassed Europe and Africa, the eighth accounted for North and South America, and the ninth was representative of voters from Australia and Asia (State Election Commission, 2011). However, the logistical and financial demands of conducting elections across such extensive territories rendered this arrangement unviable. Regardless, the Macedonian political party, VMRO, managed to leverage state resources, including embassies and governmental organizations, to procure three additional MPs from the diaspora, committing significant funds to secure a majority in the assembly. This strategy further heightened existing tensions within the country, a topic that will be delved into in the forthcoming chapter. Despite these significant amendments to the electoral system, the devolution of power became a pivotal element in promoting justice and stability within Macedonia's multicultural society.

The act of power devolution is critical in promoting fairness within societies comprising diverse cultures. Interactions between various communities occur frequently at the local and regional levels, and acknowledging their differences at these stages substantially affects their viewpoints of one another and the state (Parekh, 2006, p. 212). In North Macedonia, the absence of adequate power

devolution has been a recurring issue that has amplified tensions within the nation. Particularly, inconsistencies in the allocation of resources and economic opportunities have become noticeable at the municipal level, with the central government's funds being distributed in a way that overwhelmingly benefits municipalities with a Macedonian majority. These imbalances and prejudiced practices continue to exacerbate existing tensions and remain a pressing concern in North Macedonia to this day.

Challenges in North Macedonia's Democratic Transition: The Overlooked Concerns of the Albanian Community

In 1991, a pivotal referendum in Macedonia set the stage for the country's future as an autonomous state. Most citizens voted for independence, leading to Macedonia's breakaway from the crumbling Yugoslav federation. Nevertheless, it's crucial to highlight that a considerable segment of the country's Albanian minority abstained from the referendum. This decision was mainly fueled by apprehensions that the emerging independent nation may not adequately safeguard the rights and concerns of the Albanian population. The Albanians' non-participation underscored the entrenched ethnic discord in Macedonia, providing an early indication of the trials the fledgling country would face in accommodating its diverse citizenry.

President Gligorov played a crucial role in reforming Macedonia's political milieu by morphing the Macedonian League of Communists into the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM). To cultivate legitimacy, he sought competitive elections and allied with an Albanian

partner. The importance of improvisational change is also exemplified by the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE. The party initially sprang from Macedonia's inaugural non-communist nationalist movement, the Movement for Pan-Macedonian Action (MAAK), under Ljubčo Georgievski's stewardship. Georgievski dismissed the idea of partnering with Albanian factions, insisting that "Macedonia can be only the national state of the Macedonian people" and referencing the "aggression of Albanian nationalists (Irwin, 2010, p. 332). The refusal to engage with Albanian parties, coupled with the rhetoric used, could be perceived as marginalizing the Albanian minority, intensifying strains, and fostering an unstable political climate that would later be inflamed by the country's inaugural constitution.

North Macedonia's shift towards democracy has been peppered with numerous hurdles. Many experts propose that the adoption of a consensual form of democracy might have helped avert the political upheavals and interethnic conflicts that the nation underwent. By guaranteeing that all groups had a voice in the decision-making processes and promoting a more inclusive political climate, consensual democracy might have led to a more stable and peaceful society in North Macedonia.

Veljanovska highlights several important factors that critics often overlook when they elaborate constitution of Macedonia after independence:

> "(1) This was the first time in history that Macedonians had the opportunity to establish an independent state and fully exercise their right to self-determination, as they had limited statehood traditions; (2) Albanians

were hesitant about the new state context, as they awaited a resolution to the broader "Integral Albanian Question," including the Kosovo issue, which was part of their post-Yugoslav imagined community; (3) the aspiration to create a "genuine" democratic model guided the constitution drafters of 16 developed democracies; (4) The Badinter Commission granted a positive opinion regarding Macedonia's international recognition."

Veljanovska's critique of the first Macedonian constitution accurately underscores key elements, but appears to neglect the apprehensions and entitlements of the country's Albanian community. The Albanians' reluctance to fully accept the new national structure is primarily due to the lack of adequate recognition or protection of their rights and identity. The constitution categorized ethnic Albanians and others as "different nationalities", denying them critical rights such as cultural identity preservation through education in their own language. This absence of recognition and representation resulted in discontent and strain among the Albanians in Macedonia. It was only with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement that these tensions began to decrease as it addressed key issues of the Albanian minority, like language rights and political representation.

The author further discusses the emergence of ethnic tensions as a result of ethnic insecurity caused by issues arising from regional and international relations, with the intention of reinforcing national identity (Vankovska, 2013, p. 13). It's important to acknowledge that these tensions have historical antecedents that go back to before the

break-up of Yugoslavia. Discrimination against the Albanian community during the Yugoslav era was prevalent, and their expectations for better recognition and rights after independence were largely unmet by the new constitution. Consequently, Albanians had to endure a ten-year struggle, including a conflict in 2001, to gain fundamental rights. Yet, many of these rights are still unconstitutionally withheld from them. The democratic transition in Macedonia was further impeded by ethno-nationalistic politics favoring the majority ethnic group, often to the detriment of minority rights and inclusiveness.

Instead of adopting clear strategies to accommodate, recognize, and represent minority groups within societal institutions, and taking initiatives like revising educational curricula to include the history and culture of different ethnicities, and setting rules to protect minority groups from neglect or stereotypes in the media (Kymlicka, Politics in the Vernacular, Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship, 2001, p. 46), North Macedonia chose a majority constitution. The Republic of North Macedonia ended up setting up a national, majoritarian constitutional system, which was unsuitable for its diverse population, rather than adopting a multicultural constitution which could have averted ethnic discord and tension.

Strife and Society: The Impact of Ethnic Conflict on North Macedonia's Democratic Evolution

The conflict in North Macedonia erupted on January 22, 2001, with a violent attack on a Tearce village police station

in the Tetovo region, carried out by the National Liberation Army (NLA). This event led to the death of one officer and the injury of three others. A few weeks after, an NLA group intimidated a Macedonian private TV crew in a remote village near the Kosovo border, sparking another violent encounter between the NLA and Macedonian police.

Initially, Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski and Premier Ljubcho Georgievski asserted that these insurgents were primarily members of the Kosovo Liberation Army crossing from Kosovo, purportedly with intentions to split North Macedonia and establish a Greater Albanian state.

Tensions had been steadily rising between the ethnic Macedonian majority and the ethnic Albanian minority since the establishment of the first constitution and the country's independence, culminating in a widespread atmosphere of despair, lack of communication, and mutual suspicion between both communities (Muhic, 2012, p. 78). On February 17, 2001, the NLA entered the border village of Tanusevci, igniting a conflict that quickly spread to the regions of Kumanovo, Lipkovo, and Tetovo, resulting in the deaths of 120 Macedonian soldiers and an undetermined number of NLA casualties (Muhic, 2012, p. 78). When the NLA later occupied the village of Aracinovo near Skopje, threatening urban warfare and attacks on key infrastructure, the conflict escalated significantly (Daskalovski, 2004, p. 9). The international community, spearheaded by EU envoy Javier Solana, orchestrated a ceasefire (Daskalovski, 2004, p. 9). Negotiations progressed despite occasional ceasefire violations, leading to an agreement on August 13 that allowed a NATO force to disarm the NLA. The European

Operation Essential Harvest started disarming operations on August 27 and finished within a month, leaving a small contingent to ensure the safety of international civilian monitors overseeing the implementation of inter-ethnic reforms.

The NLA claimed to fight for human rights and constitutional amendments to benefit Albanians in Macedonia. With international intervention, the Albanian community agreed to rein in the NLA in exchange for a government pledge to enhance the standing of Macedonian Albanians through constitutional changes. The Ohrid Framework Agreement eventually guaranteed special rights for the Albanian community by implementing these modifications. The conflict revealed that North Macedonia's system adopted during independence was insufficient to meet the Albanian community's needs and rights, leading to the tension and instability.

Several external factors also heightened the conflict in North Macedonia, including the name dispute with Greece, leading to an economic embargo, the Bulgarian identity issue, and the influx of refugees from Kosovo. These factors heightened the already strained atmosphere and played a critical role in escalating the conflict. The embargo significantly impacted North Macedonia's economy, placing additional strain on the nascent state. This economic instability further inflamed ethnic group tensions within the country.

North Macedonia experienced high unemployment, with between 25% to 35% of the workforce jobless. Furthermore, the GDP growth was notably low in the preceding years, projected to stay around 5% for 2001-2002 (Kim, 2001, p. 4).

The Albanian struggle: Conflict and Democratization

Reportedly, there were numerous clashes between Albanians and Macedonian law enforcement officers, primarily due to disagreements over the rights of the Albanian minority in the western part of Macedonia. The founders of the Republic of Macedonia in the early 1990s decided to use an emblem harking back to a period that predated the existing ethnic divisions, symbolically overlooking current tensions (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 18). This exclusion of other ethnic groups from the constitution drafting process was a precursor to the conflict that unfolded in 2001.

Long-standing disputes over the cultural and educational rights of the Albanian populace in the Republic, previously apparent during the Yugoslav era, were reignited after the institution of the first constitution (Cowan & Brown, 2000, p. 18). Following this, the Albanian minority found themselves grappling with securing their rights and cultural identity. Their aspirations included having the Albanian language recognized as an official language, fair representation in public and political spheres, and the availability of education in their language. However, the Albanian community's quest for these rights was fraught with obstacles, as they faced opposition from the majority Macedonian population and governmental authorities. Consequently, the pursuit for the acknowledgement and safeguarding of Albanian rights became a central point of contention throughout the post-independence era, escalating ethnic friction and ultimately sparking the 2001 conflict.

Historically, ethnic Albanians have been excluded from decision-making procedures within the country. During the initial decade of Macedonian independence, they endured political and economic prejudice, with Macedonians dominating all principal power centers. Additionally, Albanians were inadequately represented in public administration, and the use of Albanian in parliament and higher education was prohibited (Ripiloski & Pendarovski, 2013, pp. 135-136). Despite some attempts to rectify these issues through democratic means, these measures fell short.

Many Albanian analysts and scholars have consistently cited the constitution as a central instigator of the conflict. A number of academics argue that the conflict served as a stimulant for democratization and the progression of collective rights for Albanians. The Ohrid Framework Agreement, mediated by EU/US envoys and prominent party leaders, paved the way for significant constitutional changes in November 2001 (Vankovska, 2013, p. 95). This partial democratization, which overlooked specific societal segments, was a primary trigger for the conflict and the continued ethnic divisions that exist today. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the instances of political, ethnic, and racial discrimination during the Yugoslav regime and the initial decade of Macedonian independence.

Power, Recognition, and Equality: The Impact of the Ohrid Framework Agreement on Multiethnicity

The Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) represents a significant turning point in the history of North Macedonia, resolving ethnic disagreements and fostering a peaceful

and stable environment in the country. Key elements of the OFA consist of:

Power Decentralization: The OFA was designed to empower local governments, enabling them to exercise greater autonomy over community-related issues. This was especially relevant for municipalities with a majority Albanian population.

Minority Languages Recognition: The agreement recognized as official any language spoken by over 20% of the population. Consequently, the Albanian language, which satisfied this requirement, was officially recognized, facilitating its use in public institutions and formal communication.

Fair Representation: The OFA highlighted the importance of ensuring adequate representation of ethnic minorities in public administration, policing, and other state bodies. The intention was to reflect North Macedonia's diverse populace in these institutions.

Principle of Equality and Non-discrimination: The agreement embedded the principle of non-discrimination and equality for all citizens in the constitution, irrespective of their ethnic origins.

Power to Veto on Sensitive Matters: The OFA introduced the "double majority" principle in parliamentary decisions, providing minority communities with the ability to veto laws potentially impacting their rights, culture, or identity.

Education and Cultural Institutions: The agreement affirmed the right of ethnic communities to establish

educational and cultural institutions, guaranteeing the protection and enhancement of their culture and identity.

Trust-Building Measures: The OFA advocated for the disbandment of the National Liberation Army (NLA) and the formation of a multi-ethnic security force, with the aim of fostering trust among varying ethnic communities in the country (Secretariat for the Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, 2022).

The Ohrid Framework Agreement transitioned North Macedonia towards a form of consociational democracy, officially recognizing the Albanian ethnicity as a crucial part of the country, sanctioning the use of the Albanian language in public and institutional settings, allowing the formation of Albanian-language higher education institutions, constituting new municipalities with a majority Albanian population, and enhancing ethnic Albanian representation in public service (Smajljaj, 2020, pp. 120-121). However, the realization of these rights is yet to be fully achieved. While the Ohrid Framework Agreement marked the end of the civil war and inter-ethnic conflicts, it did not entirely dissolve inter-ethnic suspicions and rivalries. North Macedonia has evolved from a nation-state to a blend of national, civic, and bi-national state elements (Smajljaj, 2020, pp. 120-121). Despite being 22 years since its enactment, the agreement still faces challenges, particularly in terms of ethnic divisions, politics driven by ethnicity, and the persistent use of nationalist language within society.

Challenges in Implementing the Ohrid Framework Agreement

After numerous hurdles and difficulties in the early stages of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) execution, pressure from Albanian political parties culminated in the formation of the Secretariat for the Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (SIOFA) on April 5, 2004. The Secretariat's function and responsibilities included monitoring and coordinating the implementation of OFA clauses, ensuring adherence to its goals, and fostering dialogue between stakeholders to tackle any challenges that emerged during the execution phase. Furthermore, a crucial task of the SIOFA was to safeguard the Albanian community's representation in vital institutions, especially in highly significant ones such as the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other key organizations. The objective was to enhance equitable participation and involvement of the Albanian community in the country's decision-making processes (Ministry of Political System and Inter-Community Relations, 2019). In March 2019, the SIOFA was restructured into the Ministry of Political System and Intercommunity Relations, leading to an expansion in its duties and competencies. This adjustment aimed to enhance the emphasis on encouraging peace and cooperation between different communities within the country's political framework (Ministry of Political System and Inter-Community Relations, 2019). However, over time, some Albanian political parties have allegedly misused the SIOFA as a platform to employ their party supporters and use them for electoral campaigning, leading

to corruption, politicization, and bias within institutions, which considerably undermined the original goals of the OFA.

The first ten years of OFA implementation efforts were crucial, as Albanian political parties were not wholly dedicated to its fulfillment. Their lack of sincere commitment to carrying out the provisions of the OFA intensified the issues and tensions between North Macedonia's ethnic communities. Consequently, inter-ethnic suspicion and competition remained, impeding the possibilities for fostering unity and cooperation among different communities.

Additionally, the misuse of SIOFA for political advantage has redirected resources from its main goal of ensuring fair representation of the Albanian community within the institutions of North Macedonia. Important institutions such as the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were adversely affected by these actions, which obstructed the overall advancement of the OFA's implementation.

The landscape started shifting when the Secretariat for the Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (SIOFA) was restructured into the Ministry of Political System and Intercommunity Relations in March 2019. This change widened the Ministry's authority and aimed to enhance its commitment to encouraging unity and collaboration between varying communities within the nation's political milieu. However, the aftermath of the corruption, politicization, and factionalism from the first decade of the OFA's implementation persists, and addressing these institutional setbacks is imperative.

Looking ahead, it is vital that all political factions in North Macedonia, inclusive of Albanian parties, pledge themselves entirely to the efficient execution of the OFA. This commitment should involve safeguarding the equitable representation of the Albanian community in pivotal institutions and sincerely striving for inter-ethnic harmony and cooperation. By acknowledging the past errors and realigning with the original objectives of the OFA, the nation can aspire to surmount the entrenched ethnic splits and tensions that continue to resonate within its society.

Despite living within the same borders of the Republic of Macedonia, Macedonians and Albanians still find themselves divided by substantial social distances that pervade all aspects of life (Jashari & Simkus, 2013, p. 59).

In 1998, a denationalization law was enacted under the governance of VMRO-DPMNE, leading to significant property returns and financial compensation for the Macedonian Orthodox Church, inclusive of 10 million worth of government bonds in 2010. In addition, President Branko Crvenkovski signed a bill in 2007 permitting religious education in public schools (Zdravkovski & Morrison, 2014, p. 37). These instances underscore the prevalence of biased policies in North Macedonia's political narrative over the past twenty years.

Despite the participation of Albanian parties in ruling coalitions, policies favoring Slavic Macedonians have been executed. A prominent case is the 2009 initiative by the Gruevski government to stimulate birth rates in regions with a predominantly Slavic populace (Irwin, 2019, p. 187). This policy could be perceived as discriminatory, as it specifically

targets zones with larger Slavic Macedonian demographics, potentially amplifying the existing disparities and tensions between ethnic factions.

The Albanian professor Blerim Reka, in 2011, elaborated on the implementation of OFA and he stated that:

> *"The Ohrid Agreement resolved the conflict but did not address its root causes; The Agreement preserved the territorial sovereignty and integrity of Macedonia but failed to uphold the national integrity of minority citizens; Despite maintaining the unitary character of the state, the Agreement did not implement measures to ensure equal treatment for all citizens within this unitary state; The war in Macedonia focused on achieving equal status for all citizens rather than territorial claims; The National Liberation Army (NLA) stated from its sixth communique that their goal was not to divide Macedonia but to establish a unified democratic country with equal rights for all its citizens."* (Reka, 2011, pp. 12-13)

Given these circumstances, it becomes increasingly challenging to visualize the flourishing of European principles such as tolerance, multiculturalism, and diversity in a society that remains starkly divided. Instead of fostering cohesion, these policies have hardened divisions grounded in ethnicity, social standing, culture, gender, and age. These separations pose considerable barriers, stalling the progress of European principles in North Macedonia (Bianchini, 2013, p. 10). Factors such as ethnicity, social status, economic differences, cultural variances, and gender inequality continue to be major

sources of division, particularly highlighting the sizable gap between the majority Macedonian population and the Albanian community. These deeply rooted divisions present major hurdles in forming a united and inclusive society, signaling an urgent requirement for sweeping social and political reforms that aim at encouraging unity, advancing equality, and ensuring fair representation and opportunities for all constituents of North Macedonian society.

With the establishment of a new administration in 2017 and the incorporation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) into the constitution in 2019 (Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022), there have been notable advancements. Nevertheless, in spite of these progressions, issues and complications continue to persist, perpetuating a state of affairs in the country that remains susceptible to nationalist discourse. The forthcoming chapter will delve deeper into the current challenges, casting light on the obstacles that persistently affect the implementation of the OFA and the reconciliation process.

International Dimension of Democratization

The international dimension of democratization in the Western Balkans has played a decisive role in shaping political transitions and reform agendas. External actors, particularly the European Union, the United States, and various international organizations, have exerted significant influence through conditionality, financial assistance, and diplomatic engagement. While these interventions have often provided stability and direction, they have also highlighted the dependence of domestic reforms on external

pressure rather than on internal political will. This dynamic sets the stage for a deeper discussion of Europeanization policies, which remain the most comprehensive and long-term framework for fostering democratic governance in the region.

International Dimension; Europeanization Policy

As outlined by Anastasakis (2005), the concept of Europeanization represents both a tool and a target. It encompasses not just political but also socioeconomic and cultural dimensions, functioning as an ideology, symbol, and myth. Due to its historical and global characteristics that are all-encompassing, it carries a universal significance, affecting Europe internally and yielding external repercussions worldwide (Anastasakis, 2005, p. 78). Viewed as a multifaceted and bidirectional process, Europeanization unfolds along numerous trajectories and at different velocities (Stanivuković, 2018, p. 15). Its interpretation varies among countries or regions, symbolizing structural transformation and modernization for less economically developed European nations, while representing a process of consistent reform and adjustment for wealthier, more developed nations (Anastasakis, 2005, p. 78). In the Balkan context, Europeanization is commonly associated with the immediate embrace of democratic norms, human rights, improvements in diverse life sectors, fighting corruption, and human rights protection, among others.

The predominant focus of research in this area is on the alterations in domestic political systems that can be ascribed to EU integration. This area of study extends to countries that are in EU accession negotiations through their accession

package. This package forms an institutional bond between the EU and the prospective member states (Stanivuković, 2018, p. 13).

In the specific case of North Macedonia, the EU has fashioned a strategy of rewards aimed at Yugoslav successor states, inclusive of Albania. This strategy involves autonomous trade measures (ATMs) to enhance the market accessibility for these countries, later supplemented by Trade and Cooperation Agreements, and financial aid through the PHARE (Poland and Hungary Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) and OBNOVA (renewal) programmes (Bashev, 2011, p. 45). In the course of the 2000s, the phrases 'European vocation' and 'European future' grew in significance as NATO and the EU started to extend towards the Balkan region from 2004. Regional cooperation initiatives were perceived not merely as practical policy options, but also as a mission to extricate participating nations from their troubled histories (Bashev, 2011, pp. 75-76).

Regarding the EU's approach towards Western Balkan countries, it's fair to say the efforts to "de-Balkanize" the region have not yet achieved their intended outcomes. Although much effort has been put into mitigating conflict and inter-ethnic animosity through reconciliation, collaboration with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), and most importantly, participation in various integration plans (Bashev, 2011, pp. 75-79). However, the EU has not yet achieved its objectives in the region, as it continues to grapple with deep-rooted ethnic divisions, pervasive corruption, the resurgence of nationalist parties and rhetoric, the growth of authoritarianism, and

widespread underdevelopment across various sectors of the countries.

The EU is still wrestling with stubborn ethnic divides, endemic corruption, resurgence of nationalistic parties and rhetoric, expanding authoritarianism, and comprehensive underdevelopment in the countries' various sectors. The unresolved issues of Kosovo and Bosnia remain, and Serbia's continued assertiveness in the region causes apprehension. The EU's influence in the region is diminishing, eroding its credibility amongst the populace. This lack of confidence allows third parties, such as Russia, to increase their involvement, especially through their links with Serbia.

Despite the EU's considerable strides towards Europeanizing the region, it has fallen short in dealing with the fundamental issues. While talks have begun, the situation in the region remains largely static, and the problems have been momentarily stalled but not eradicated. It's vital for the EU to tackle these problems at their roots, reinforce its credibility amongst the populace, and devise enduring solutions that ensure lasting stability and growth in the Western Balkans.

Fostering the Democracy; The Role of EU Assistance

During the Zagreb Summit in November 2000, a meeting between the EU and Western Balkans, leaders from the latter committed to enhancing cooperation in diverse areas. These areas included political reconciliation, trade liberalization, combating organized crime, trafficking, and cross-border corruption. The summit's closing statement explicitly stated that deepening regional cooperation would coincide with rapprochement with the EU (European Commission, 2022).

The EU then set aside substantial financial resources to aid domestic institution-building and economic cooperation with neighboring countries.

In 2001, the EU initiated the CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization) program tailored for the Western Balkans. CARDS was anchored on a financial package of approximately 4.9 billion Euros that was allocated to the five Western Balkan countries from 2001 to 2006, and it also had a regional component (European Commission, 2022). However, it is crucial to understand that this funding was extended as a loan to the countries rather than a grant or direct financial aid. This means that the countries were expected to repay the funds over time, and it wasn't a form of free financial assistance.

After 2007, the European Union (EU) continued its efforts with the introduction of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), which succeeded the CARDS program. Since the start of the new millennium, the EU has leveraged cooperation agreements, EU-Western Balkans summits, financial support, and conditionality as tools to promote development in the region (Bashev, 2011, p. 58).

The Declaration at the Zagreb Summit was a turning point for North Macedonia, as it marked the initiation of the first stabilization and association agreement, indicating a critical phase in implementing much-needed reforms. The EU urged North Macedonia's leaders to proceed with their reforms in accordance with the provisions of the agreement (European Commission, 2022).

North Macedonia's progression was further enhanced by the outcome of the EU-West Balkans summit in Thessaloniki, held in June 2003 under the aegis of the Greek Presidency of the Council. The Thessaloniki Summit expanded the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) into a comprehensive enlargement framework, complete with all the political, financial, and institution-building instruments previously deployed in Central and Eastern Europe (EU-Western Balkan Summit Declaration, 2003, pp. 1-3).

This Summit was notable for explicitly outlining the characteristics of a democratic society and government, expressing our shared commitment to democracy, the rule of law, respect for human and minority rights, solidarity, a market economy, international law, peaceful conflict resolution, and regional cooperation (EU-Western Balkan Summit Declaration, 2003).

North Macedonia officially applied for EU membership on March 22, 2004, and was granted candidate status on December 17, 2005 (Bashev, 2011, p. 59). In 2009, North Macedonia received its first recommendation to initiate accession negotiations with the European Union as documented in the Progress Report. On June 26, 2018, the European Union Council drew conclusions that targeted June 2019 to kick off accession discussions and validated the first phase of the EU accession screening process. In the same year, North Macedonia's government put forth the Concept of Negotiating Structures (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022). By July 2019, the government completed the comprehensive legal framework needed to set up all relevant entities within the

negotiation structure. On June 18, 2019, the EU Council chose to reassess the enlargement matter, intending to make a definitive and meaningful decision by October 2019 at the latest. However, during its summit in October 2019, the European Union was unable to reach a unanimous decision to begin negotiations with North Macedonia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022). Despite initial recommendations and setting a date to begin accession talks, challenges arose due to France's call for an enlargement process overhaul and Bulgaria's demand for recognition of cultural and historical ties, which resulted in a temporary veto on North Macedonia's path to the EU. This veto was eventually lifted in June 2022, under the condition that North Macedonia recognize an ethnic Bulgarian minority within its constitution (Tidey, 2022, p. 20).

However, North Macedonia faces the daunting task of garnering adequate votes in Parliament to enact significant legislation, considering the constitution necessitates a majority of 80 out of 120 votes. With the opposition steadfastly against the proposed franchise, it becomes increasingly likely that early elections might be necessary, adding another layer of political uncertainty and hindering progress on key initiatives.

In the ensuing chapter, a deeper dive into North Macedonia's journey towards EU integration will be taken, focusing on the rise of ethnic rhetoric and nationalist opposition to the French proposal. The intricate interplay within the country's political landscape and the hurdles intrinsic to the accession process will be analyzed in depth. This will provide insights into the complexities that must be surmounted to make

significant strides. The current political landscape, rife with ethnic rhetoric and nationalist opposition, threatens the nation's democracy, stymies development, and obstructs the path to EU integration. For North Macedonia to overcome these hurdles, a robust and functioning democracy that transcends mere tokenism is vital.

Post-Ethnic Conflict Period: Rise of Authoritarianism and Challenge of Democracy Promotion in North Macedonia

In the post–ethnic conflict period, North Macedonia has experienced both progress and setbacks in its democratic trajectory. While the Ohrid Framework Agreement laid the groundwork for peace and interethnic power-sharing, the persistence of authoritarian legacies has hindered the deepening of democratic practices. Similar to other Western Balkan states, North Macedonia has struggled with clientelism, state capture, and weak rule of law, which have allowed semi-authoritarian tendencies to resurface. The European Union has played a central role in promoting democracy through conditionality and the promise of integration, yet the slow and often inconsistent accession process has created frustration and space for domestic elites to manipulate institutions. This dual dynamic—between external pressures for reform and internal resistance rooted in authoritarian traditions—captures the broader challenges of democracy promotion across the Balkans.

Challenges to Democratic Consolidation: The Role of the EU and Authoritarian Legacies

The term authoritarianism was originally introduced to denote types of modern dictatorships, in contrast to totalitarianism (Przeworski, 2019, p. 18). To better understand these systems, it's key to investigate their specific traits. In the context of North Macedonia, an authoritarian political structure could be described as one that has restrained, unaccountable political pluralism, lacks a guiding ideology yet possesses distinct mindsets, and does not widely encourage political mobilization, except at certain phases of its evolution. In this system, a leader or sometimes a small group wields power within formally vague, yet practically predictable limits (Przeworski, 2019, p. 25).

Crucial to these systems are formal democratic institutions. In authoritarian regimes, these institutions are seen as the main avenue to gain power, but those in power misuse the state, thus giving themselves an unfair advantage over their adversaries. In such a scenario, competition exists but is not equitable (Przeworski, 2019, pp. 25-26).

Elections and the existence of opposition movements also play a significant role in these political systems. These regimes often allow opposition groups to participate in elections, but do not facilitate the transition of power or fair elections that might jeopardize their stronghold (Brownlee, 2007, p. 6). Understanding the influence of manipulated elections on political competition is vital. Even though manipulated elections may not represent change

by themselves, they do serve as an observable measure of political competition, warranting deeper investigation into the roots of such rivalry. Even under conditions that are not free or fair, elections within authoritarian regimes provide insight into rulers, their detractors, and the level of support for competing factions in the broader public (Brownlee, 2007, p. 9).

The conflict in North Macedonia in 2001 shed light on democracy and multiculturalism. However, the post-2001 period was marked by the dominant authoritarian mentality in the Macedonian political landscape. Democracy became centralized and was primarily exercised by a small group intent on seizing the state, especially after 2006 when the VMRO took power. This transfer of power emphasized the difficulties posed by authoritarianism to the progress of true democratic practices in the nation.

Despite the EU's presence in the region, its main concern was upholding stability and preventing conflicts rather than fostering democratic traits like the rule of law, meritocracy, and broad representativeness. This strategy inadvertently supported the persistence of authoritarian tendencies in the region, thus constraining the move towards a more participatory and democratic society.

If we could analyze the EU's approach to North Macedonia's we can conclude that in Political terms, we can paraphrase as follows:

> *"North Macedonia took a significant step toward European integration as the first Western Balkan nation to sign a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the*

EU, which came into force in April 2004. The SAA aimed to liberalize trade, covering 95% of exports to the EU. The establishment of the Joint Parliamentary Committee in 2004 facilitated the monitoring of all aspects of EU-North Macedonia relations, particularly the SAA's implementation. In December 2005, the country achieved candidate status for EU membership, and by December 2009, its citizens were granted visa-free travel to the Schengen area.

In March 2020, the European Council endorsed the decision to initiate accession negotiations with North Macedonia. Following the Council's approval of the Negotiating Framework in accordance with the revised enlargement methodology, the EU commenced the opening phase of accession negotiations with North Macedonia on 19 July 2022" (Delegation of the European Union to North Macedonia, 2021).

The European Union (EU) recognizes the vital part civil society organizations play in North Macedonia, especially in assisting with the execution of structural changes as part of its EU accession journey. These organizations are key in rallying citizens, addressing their concerns, and advocating for sustainable growth. The EU promotes active collaboration with civil society, encouraging their participation in policy dialogues and providing financial aid through the Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA). From 2014 to 2020, the EU set aside EUR 24.3 million for civil society initiatives in North Macedonia (Delegation of the European Union to North Macedonia, 2021).

However, even though this EU funding is designed to assist civil society organizations in tackling North Macedonia's

principal challenges, the amount is considered insufficient for effectively addressing these problems. Furthermore, there is apprehension that these funds tend to be directed more towards NGOs with government connections, rather than being evenly spread among various organizations. This could lead to a monopolization of resources by a limited number, potentially undermining the overall influence of civil society. Moreover, the EU is currently lacking a holistic strategy to ensure fair fund distribution to all sectors of civil society in North Macedonia. This gap in a robust strategy might restrict the efficiency of the financial aid and hamper the overall development of civil society organizations in the nation.

To resist authoritarianism and promote democracy, the EU has used the Instruments for Pre-accession (IPA) to support structural reforms in North Macedonia, facilitating its path toward EU integration. The EU has injected €1.3 billion through the national IPA program since 2007, focusing on five key areas: rule of law and fundamental rights, democracy and good governance, environmental protection and sustainable connectivity, economic growth and human capital, and agriculture and rural development (Delegation of the European Union to North Macedonia, 2021). However, despite the EU's substantial financial backing from the IPA with the goal of countering authoritarianism and fostering democracy in North Macedonia, the impact of this investment has been restrained. Only 40% of the available IPA funds have been utilized by North Macedonia, leaving the majority (60%) untouched (Marija Spasovska, 2017). Factors such as a lack of political motivation, diminished capacity, and poor coordination have impeded efficient

expenditure and implementation of these funds, thereby reducing their potential to significantly advance democratic progress and resist authoritarian tendencies in the country.

Despite attempts by the EU to curb authoritarianism and endorse democracy in North Macedonia, a considerable proportion of the financial support provided through the Instruments for Pre-accession (IPA) comprises loans rather than grants. Moreover, a relatively modest €8.1 million was allocated for projects specifically targeting democracy and human rights enhancement from 2007 to 2020 (Delegation of the European Union to North Macedonia, 2021). This restricted funding, together with the lack of a far-reaching vision and strategy for the region, has been a hindrance to the advancement of democratic values, multiculturalism, and vital reforms in the nation. Thus, the EU's struggle to effectively solidify the region stems from an approach that fails to adequately address the core challenges and priorities necessary for sustainable democratic progression.

At the Bled Conference in Slovenia, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama criticized the EU for its handling of the COVID-19 vaccine distribution. Rama pointed out that initially, non-EU countries in the region were overlooked, compelling them to turn to China, Russia, and Turkey for vaccine assistance. He labelled the EU's actions a "disgraceful mistake," emphasizing that Albania, along with other countries, were left to fend for themselves during the crisis (Taylor, 2022). The EU's pandemic response has resulted in diminished credibility in the region, particularly in the Western Balkans. By prioritizing vaccine distribution to its members at the onset, the EU unintentionally engendered

a feeling of exclusion amongst neighboring countries. This perceived lack of unity and assistance during a worldwide crisis has cast doubt on the EU's dedication to promoting regional collaboration and stability, subsequently harming its reputation and sway in the region.

Postponed EU integration and unmet commitments from the EU pose a threat to democracy in the Western Balkans for several reasons. Firstly, the EU's integration process has given rise to Euroscepticism, which bolsters regional populists and weakens progressives (Gola & Boom, 2022). Secondly, the EU has faced criticism for inadvertently supporting "stabilitocracies" and overlooking democratic regression, as evidenced in Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić (Gola & Boom, 2022). Thirdly, the stagnation of integration may push Western Balkan nations towards other partners like Russia and China, whose authoritarian tendencies could further undermine regional democracies (Gola & Boom, 2022). The decade between 2006 and 2016 was a particularly difficult period for North Macedonia post-independence. The nation was led by Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski from 2006 to 2016, who consolidated his power through authoritarian methods, nationalist rhetoric, and the promotion of ethnic nationalism. His governance had a notable impact on the country's democratic consolidation, leading to the deterioration of democratic institutions, suppression of political opposition, and weakening of civil society. Gruevski's regime was marred by corruption, nepotism, and media manipulation, further eroding the rule of law and jeopardizing the nation's prospects for EU integration. Gruevski's influence continues to resonate in North Macedonian politics, underscoring the enduring

challenges to the nation's democratization and consolidation endeavors.

From Democratic Transition to Nationalistic Regression

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

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

scrutinizing these factors, we can delve deeper into the root causes of democratic stagnation and identify approaches for fostering democratic consolidation.

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

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

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

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

conflicts, corruption, a jeopardized legal system, and other persistent problems.

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

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

Transition Waves and Challenges in Democratic Development

In the years following the fall of communism, the prevalent trend was the emergence of hybrid regimes that balanced elements of democracy and dictatorship. This reflected a compromise between democrats and authoritarians, with

neither group able to enforce their desired political structure (Bunce et al., 2010, p. 325). It's important to note that such hybrid regimes often arise in weaker states, where border disputes and secessionist regions exist, and the relationships between majority groups and other communities can be strained and sometimes violent. The deficits in state capacity contribute to the inability of either democracy or authoritarianism to prevail (Beyme, 2019, pp. 324-326).

In the context of North Macedonia, the characteristics of hybrid regimes, as outlined by Beyme (2019), are undoubtedly applicable. The nation has faced obstacles in its democratic growth due to a blend of weak state capacity, tendencies toward secession, and tense relations between majority and minority groups. The shift from communism to democracy in North Macedonia was a quick and complicated process. The state faced difficulties in establishing robust democratic institutions and implementing effective governance, impeding the process of democratic consolidation. Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, North Macedonia encountered tensions with its Albanian population, ethnic tensions, and divisions which have posed significant challenges to the nation.

Post-independence Macedonian parties gravitated towards puritanism, which, according to Zafirovski (2007), includes political, moral-religious, and other cultural extremisms, as a distinctive element, consequence, or product of its authoritarian or totalitarian dominance in politics. This puritan political and social extremism manifests in radicalism, absolutism, intolerance, oppressive control, persecution, stringent legal rules and practices,

a regression towards a punitive justice system, among other things (Zafirovski, 2007, pp. 35-36). Zafirovski (2007, p. 35) highlights a concerning trend that Albanian and Macedonian parties have leaned towards an illiberal, strictly conservative, parochial, and monolithic political system rather than fostering liberalism, democracy, and a free civil society. This strategy has negatively impacted democracy and democratic institutions in the country. Through the perpetuation of such illiberal values, these parties have enabled state capture, leading to political authoritarianism in North Macedonia. Their failure to encourage a more encompassing and democratic political structure has undermined the potential for democratic consolidation and has deepened the divides within the country. The adverse effects of such illiberal politics prompt questions about the role of right-wing populism and extremism in North Macedonia.

To better comprehend the evolution of democracy in North Macedonia, it is critical to situate it within the wider scope of democratic transformation in Europe. Three distinct phases of democratic change in Europe have been identified in the literature on international relations:

- First wave: Occurring after the collapse of communist governments, this wave was marked by massive protests and sometimes agreements between communists and liberal oppositions to set up a liberal political and economic system (Bunce et al., 2010, pp. 326-327).

- Second wave: This phase involved the expansion of the European Union and its membership criteria, reinforcing democratic forces in Central and Eastern

European nations that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 (Bunce et al., 2010, p. 327).

• Third wave: This phase witnessed regimes that resisted the democratic tide becoming more authoritarian in response to the threat of democracy (Bunce et al., 2010, pp. 326-327). With these stages of democratic change in perspective, we can now delve into North Macedonia's specific democratic transitions.

North Macedonia's journey towards democracy can be delineated into several waves:

• The first wave of democratic transformation in North Macedonia began with its separation from Yugoslavia, marking the onset of democracy in a multiethnic state with a diverse array of ethnic communities. Nonetheless, the transition was fraught with difficulties as political parties hastily transitioned from communism to democracy overnight. The political and constitutional system adopted did not sufficiently address the intricacies of the country's multiethnic society, casting doubts over its ability to foster sustained democratic development.

• The second wave was characterized by the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) in 2001, aimed at mitigating ethnic tensions and promoting stability.

• The third wave happened in 2018 with the ratification of the Prespa Agreement, which resolved the long-standing name dispute and paved the way for Euro-Atlantic integration.

• The future trajectory of North Macedonia's democratic evolution remains unclear. The country faces the task of

putting a constitutionally concessional democracy into effect, despite the challenges experienced over previous decades; and the reality that its political system remains constitutionally majoritarian.

In summary, North Macedonia has traversed through three distinct epochs of democratic evolution, each marked by unique trials and accomplishments. The first epoch originated post North Macedonia's dissociation from Yugoslavia, signifying the inaugural pivot from communism to democracy. However, this transition was fraught with difficulties as political parties had to acclimatize swiftly to the nascent democratic milieu, and the political and constitutional blueprint failed to sufficiently accommodate the intricacies of the country's diverse ethnic composition. The second epoch was characterized by the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) in 2001, with a goal of quelling ethnic tensions and fostering stability. The third epoch commenced in 2018 with the ratification of the Prespa Agreement (Prespa Agreement, 2018), resolving the enduring dispute concerning the country's name and laying the groundwork for Euro-Atlantic integration. The future trajectory of North Macedonia's democratic evolution hangs in the balance as it navigates the practical implementation of a constitutionally concessional democracy (even though this point is disputed), whilst, from a constitutional standpoint, the political regime remains majoritarian. In the forthcoming sections, we will delve into the problems that accompanied each of these epochs in detail, illuminating the challenges that North Macedonia grappled with in its journey towards democracy.

Rise of Nationalism and Ethnic Struggle in 2006 – 2017 period.

The period from 1990 to 2006 can be characterized as a stage of continuous pluralization and power shifting in North Macedonia, followed by a phase from 2006 to 2017 that was dominated by the VMRO-DPMNE party and marked by a gradual decay of democratic practices (Bieber, 2018, p. 53). During the initial stage, the country witnessed the rise of numerous political parties and a gradual transition to democracy, with different parties leading the government at various times. However, the unresolved Albanian issue largely influenced North Macedonia in the 90s, leading to a conflict in 2001, which was eventually improved with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. The second phase was distinguished by the VMRO-DPMNE party's dominance, which led to an increased centralization of power, weakening democratic structures and processes. This era was fraught with allegations of state capture, undermining of independent institutions, and suppression of political opposition and civil society, thereby casting a shadow on North Macedonia's democratic trajectory and inter-ethnic relations.

In the early years of VMRO-DPMNE's rule, there were no apparent signs of a shift toward authoritarian tendencies. Gruevski, who emerged victorious from the intra-party power tussle following the party's loss of power in 2002, was seen as a pro-European reformist compared to the radical wing led by former Prime Minister Ljubčo Georgievski (Bieber, 2018, p. 56). The latter was known to oppose the Ohrid Framework Agreement and advocated for dividing

North Macedonia between Macedonians and Albanians. Despite his reformist stance, Gruevski was also associated with the endorsement of nationalistic symbols, including the approval of the large millennium cross above Skopje in 2001, which was viewed as an assertion of Macedonian dominance during a time of heightened ethnic tensions. In 2004, Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE party supported a referendum against municipal redistricting initiated by smaller nationalist groups (Bieber, 2018, p. 56), although it ultimately failed due to low participation.

The year 2008 marked a significant turning point for North Macedonia. There was a widespread expectation that the country would be invited to join NATO during the Bucharest summit in April that year, alongside Croatia and Albania. However, this invitation was blocked by the Greek government under Kostas Karamanlis, refusing membership to North Macedonia even under the provisional name 'the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (Reuters, 2008). VMRO-DPMNE reached its peak support during the 2008 elections, securing 48.78 percent of the votes, which translated into a solid majority of 63 (out of 120) parliamentary seats. Despite this outright majority, the party included the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI) in the new government, continuing the tradition of having an Albanian party in the coalition but replacing its former Albanian partner (Reuters, 2008).

During the time Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski was in power, North Macedonia underwent escalating ethnic tensions, especially between the dominant Macedonian community and the Albanian minority. The Gruevski

government faced claims of enforcing discriminatory policies that adversely impacted the Albanian population, fostering animosity and further polarizing the nation. His administration was also embroiled in allegations of criminal activity, corruption, and human rights abuses. Gruevski's provocative rhetoric targeting the Albanian community exacerbated ethnic tensions, contributing to a progressively volatile political environment. These elements critically hindered the country's democratic progression, strained interethnic relations, and cast a shadow on the likelihood of enduring peace and stability in North Macedonia.

In 2007, a police action in an Albanian village led to six fatalities and the arrest of 13 individuals, sparking indignation among the Albanian population. Albanian political parties alleged that the government engineered the operation as an act of retaliation against former National Liberation Army (NLA) soldiers, escalating tensions between the administration and the Albanian community, and raising alarm about the country's stability.

In 2010, the killing of an ex-NLA commander in a controversial police operation triggered public outrage. That same year, another operation ended with four Albanians receiving life sentences, a verdict met with considerable skepticism and claims of bias. In 2012, five Albanians were sentenced to life imprisonment for allegedly murdering five civilians on ethnic grounds. However, the court was unable to establish their guilt, and the accused rejected the prosecution's charges.

In 2015, the situation intensified when an operation against former NLA members in Kumanovo resulted in several

fatalities. This case remains unresolved, with significant doubts raised by journalists about the operation's legitimacy and the alleged presence of NLA members in the city. These incidents underscore the persisting ethnic tensions and mistrust between the government and the Albanian community, highlighting the pressing necessity for transparent investigations and a commitment to rebuilding trust and fostering unity.

Despite the police operations targeting the Albanian community, Gruevski managed to strengthen his support base, largely among the majority Macedonian population. However, these measures exacerbated ethnic tensions at a crucial juncture when the nation should have been moving towards increased unity and stability, particularly in the aftermath of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA). Instead of promoting reconciliation and inclusivity, Gruevski's tactics further divided the nation, undermining the intent of the OFA and deepening the rifts between the Macedonian and Albanian communities. This political strategy not only hampered the democratic growth of North Macedonia but also endangered its long-term prospects for peace and interethnic cooperation.

The unveiling of the Skopje 2014 project was a physical manifestation of nationalism, corruption, and authoritarianism. Initiated in early 2010, the project's first video presentation of the city center was orchestrated by the mayors of Skopje and the urban municipality of Centar, along with the Minister of Culture—all of whom were part of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE (Bieber, 2018, p. 59). In the following section, we will explore the Skopje 14 project in

terms of its influence on identity perception and inter-ethnic divisions within the country.

The Road to Recognition: Struggle over National Identity

Many scholars argue that a country has the right to choose its own name, often seen as one of the first acts of sovereignty for an emerging nation. However, this matter is not without controversy. The debate revolves around whether a state has unrestricted authority to pick its name and if the international community is bound to accept it without conditions. Alternatively, should there be limitations to a country's choice of name? Also, is it valid for other countries to pressure a name change through threats of non-recognition? (Queneudec, 2013, p. 56). While a detailed analysis of this issue would demand a deeper examination of international law than this study allows, it's important to highlight that ideally, a country's name should resonate with its geographical context and the historical narrative of its citizens. However, the global system often provides significant leverage to established nations through veto and embargo powers. A prime example is Greece's successful insistence on the renaming of Macedonia to "North Macedonia" after three decades of peaceful negotiations and hindering the latter's progress.

The conflict was sparked by Macedonia's declaration of independence in 1991 and its wish to be acknowledged under the name Macedonia, which Greece perceived as an encroachment on its national and cultural heritage in its northern region (Reimer, 2013, p. 61). Greece raised two primary arguments: one concerned territorial claims over

its northern region, known as 'Macedonia', and the other revolved around the use of the name as leverage for territorial ambitions (Lozanoska, 2013, p. 96). These accusations were leveled despite Macedonia's initial constitutional amendments renouncing any territorial claims (Lozanoska, 2013, p. 97). Another major point of contention for Greece was the historical legacy tied to the name "Macedonia." The Macedonians in the newly independent state were laying claim to the history of ancient Macedonia, a stance that Greece found wholly unacceptable. Ancient Macedonia, the birthplace of Alexander the Great, holds profound historical significance for Greece.

Moreover, Greece took issue with North Macedonia's use of symbols and references to ancient Macedonia. The inclusion of these symbols in North Macedonia's national flag, the way history was taught in schools, the naming of streets, and other public exhibitions were seen as confrontational by the Greek government. Greece contended that these actions symbolized an usurpation of Greek history and culture, which they deemed unacceptable.

The path towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict began in 1995 when the two countries signed a bilateral agreement known as the Interim Accord. In this agreement, Macedonia agreed to remove the Vergina Sun from its flag and both countries committed to peaceful negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations. Additionally, Greece conceded that it would not oppose Macedonia's application to join international organizations under the provisional name "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (Reimer, 2013, p. 61).

By 2008, Macedonia had succeeded in joining numerous international organizations, though none as significant as NATO. At the NATO Summit in Bucharest, Romania, in April 2008, Greece objected to Macedonia's (now North Macedonia) NATO membership due to the ongoing name dispute (Vukas, 2013, p. 117). Greece claimed that the unresolved name issue could pose a threat to regional stability and security, contradicting NATO's fundamental principles.

Greece's obstruction of Macedonia's bid to join NATO was a substantial diplomatic blow for the small Balkan country, which had been making efforts to join the alliance to bolster its security and international prestige. The Greek government clarified that they were not opposed to Macedonia's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, but insisted that the name dispute had to be settled first.

The Macedonian public were generally against any solution to the name dispute that would undermine their national identity. Many Macedonians felt that the European Union was pressuring them into a choice between EU membership and their national identity (Georgievski, 2013, p. 147). This attitude not only caused divisions among ethnic Macedonians but also increased tensions with the country's largest ethnic group, the Albanians.

For many Macedonians, a significant fear was the potential loss of identity if they agreed to change the country's name. This concern was based on the conviction that agreeing to a new name would mean letting go of their historical and cultural links to ancient Macedonia. To them, the name "Macedonia" was a vital element of their group identity, and

any compromise on this issue was viewed as a violation of their national pride and self-determination.

During this period, North Macedonia faced a number of security challenges, including ongoing tensions with its neighbors, internal political unrest, and increasing influence from external entities in the region. Greece's continuous veto of North Macedonia's NATO membership worsened these security problems, as the country was denied the advantages and safeguards that NATO membership provides.

In 2018, the deadlock was broken with the signing of the Prespa Agreement, which stated that the country's official name would change to "North Macedonia." This agreement addressed Greece's concerns and facilitated North Macedonia's prospective entry into the European Union and NATO. The Prespa Agreement marks a successful resolution to a longstanding conflict, underlining the significance of diplomatic discourse and compromise in settling intricate historical and cultural disputes.

Naming Dispute and Impact on multiethnicity

The persistent denial to recognize North Macedonia as an independent nation has significantly impacted its stability, amplifying friction between the dominant Macedonian group and ethnic Albanians, who constitute approximately a third of the total population (State Statistical Office, 2022). Nationalistic groups have played a major role in marginalizing the Albanian community, leading to a widening gap between these two major ethnic groups.

Throughout the prolonged name controversy with Greece, fears of intensifying ethnic tensions within the country were constant. These fears were grounded in the likelihood of the Albanian community exerting internal pressure to speed up North Macedonia's integration into Europe, particularly in favor of resolving the name dispute (Georgievski, 2013, pp. 146-147). However, the recent constitution has amplified these tensions due to its affirmation of the country as a Macedonian entity, treating other ethnic groups as secondary. Making Macedonian the official language and instituting citizenship laws viewed as discriminatory by Albanians, who had enjoyed unrestricted movement between Kosovo and Macedonia during the Yugoslav period, have also added to these tensions. Moreover, the limited provision of Albanian-language education at higher institutions indicates a reluctance to accommodate the Albanian community's needs (Caplan, 2013, p. 167). Due to increasing dissatisfaction with these issues, the Albanian community saw the European Commission's indecisiveness as an opportunity to leverage the unresolved situation to improve Albanians' status within the country (Caplan, 2013, p. 167). The government's approach towards Albanians was a convoluted mix of inclusion, demonstrated by their participation in the ruling coalition since 1991, and exclusion, apparent in the limitations imposed on higher education and language rights (Bieber, 2018, p. 54).

The name dispute also had considerable implications for other communities within the country. As the state was strained and incapable of addressing the needs of various groups, the economy took a significant hit. This economic downturn fueled further tensions among different

ethnic communities. The initial constitution's embrace of nationalist politics aggravated the situation, hindering the promotion of a unified and inclusive national identity among the diverse populace.

Instead of seeking a diplomatic resolution to the name dispute with Greece, the government under Gruevski inflamed the situation by renaming the main airport after Alexander the Great in December 2006, just months into his tenure. This action not only worsened the diplomatic ties between the two nations but also gave the Greek government a basis to accuse North Macedonia of inciting the Greek veto (Bieber, 2018, p. 57). Moreover, this move contributed to the escalation of inter-ethnic conflicts within the country, which would further degrade over the next few years, particularly due to the Skopje 2014 project that heightened tensions with Greece and within North Macedonia's various communities.

The Skopje 2014 project, a contentious and audacious urban renewal initiative, has not just heightened tensions with Greece but also exacerbated inter-ethnic disputes within North Macedonia. By selectively portraying history and promoting a Macedonian national identity to the detriment of other ethnic communities, the project has estranged non-Macedonian groups, hindering the creation of a more inclusive and united society. The upcoming section will delve deeply into the impact of this project on the country's future from an inter-ethnic perspective and the implications for national identity.

The impasse over the name has profoundly affected the multiple ethnic communities in North Macedonia. The deadlock has inhibited the country's economic growth,

leading to rising frustrations among various ethnic groups as they grapple with limited opportunities and challenges to their livelihoods. This economic stagnation has fueled a surge in nationalism, thereby intensifying conflicts between communities. Therefore, the name dispute and its associated issues have not only strained North Macedonia's relations with Greece but also had substantial implications for the unity and stability of the country's diverse ethnic communities.

Skopje 2014: A Controversial Project at the Crossroads of Nationalism, Corruption, and Interethnic Tensions

The Skopje 2014 project was a stark representation of nationalism, corruption, and authoritarianism. Initiated in 2010, the project was unveiled by the then-mayors of Skopje and Centar municipality, as well as the Minister of Culture, who were all members of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party (Bieber, 2018, p. 58).

The Skopje 2014 initiative was a grandiose plan designed to revamp the metropolitan scape of Skopje, North Macedonia's capital. The mission was to revitalize the city's architectural and cultural essence by erecting an array of buildings, monuments, and statues that symbolized the region's ancient and medieval past. Nevertheless, the project's emphasis on antiquating identity and adopting historical figures and symbols stirred significant debate and intensified the already tense relationship between North Macedonia and Greece.

Greece interpreted the Skopje 2014 initiative as a deliberate affront to its historical heritage and as an incitement that further justified its opposition to North Macedonia's entry into the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The project also had significant financial implications for North Macedonia's struggling economy. The considerable expense of the project, largely financed through public debt, contributed to a fiscal crisis in the country and placed a strain on public resources.

Furthermore, Skopje 2014 deepened ethnic divisions within North Macedonia by incorporating historical figures and symbols associated with Serbian history and anti-Albanian sentiment. This action estranged North Macedonia's significant Albanian community and amplified the potential for interethnic discord. In essence, although the Skopje 2014 project was conceived as a commemoration of North Macedonia's history and cultural identity, it ended up being a divisive and contentious endeavor with far-reaching political, economic, and social ramifications.

Within the framework of Skopje 2014, the project served as a catalyst for a substantial reworking of national history and a reimagining of ethnic Macedonian identity (Skoulariki, 2020, p. 226). A vital part of this reimagining was the attempt to create a direct lineage between contemporary ethnic Macedonians and the ancient Macedonian civilization, helmed by iconic figures such as Alexander the Great and his father, Philip II. By laying claim to these ancient historical figures and symbols, the project sought to bolster a sense of national esteem and historical continuity.

The Skopje 2014 project faced criticism for several reasons. Firstly, it overlooked and dismissed differing perspectives, particularly from the academic community that did not advocate for a historical continuum from ancient Macedonia and continued to emphasize the Slavic roots of contemporary Macedonians. Secondly, the project presented ample opportunities for corruption and graft. The independent investigation 'Skopje 2014 under scrutiny' recorded the costs of the initiative, which amounted to approximately 684 million euros by the end of VMRODPMNE's reign. The expenditures were used for the construction of over 70 monuments and sculptures, 28 buildings, four bridges, a triumphal arch, and a myriad of other structures and facades (Bieber, 2018, p. 60). Nonetheless, the link between today's ethnic Macedonians and the ancient Macedonian civilization remains a contentious topic among scholars, many of whom argue that any direct connection is questionable at best.

A major source of discontent with the "Skopje 2014" project, especially among North Macedonia's various ethnic groups, was the perceived attempt to dominate the nation's cultural identity. The project, in primarily promoting an ethnic Macedonian narrative and appropriating historical figures and symbols in a way that neglected the contributions of other ethnic groups, was seen as an effort to establish one particular cultural narrative's superiority. North Macedonia is a multicultural nation with a substantial Albanian community and smaller Turkish, Roma, Serbian, and other communities. The "Skopje 2014" project's explicit focus on ethnic Macedonian history and identity inadvertently marginalized these other communities, who felt that their cultural heritage and historical contributions were being

undervalued or overlooked in the overarching narrative that the project aimed to establish.

This perceived standardization of the nation's cultural identity further intensified interethnic tensions within the country, as communities felt isolated and disempowered by the project's narrow perspective. The promotion of a single historical narrative also hindered efforts to cultivate a more inclusive, multiethnic society in North Macedonia, where diverse communities could unite and celebrate their collective history and varied cultural heritage.

Antiquization of Identity and the Rise of Nationalism: Key Factors in North Macedonia's Political Landscape".

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

by some Macedonian citizens, a desperate bid to circumvent poverty and blockades, added fuel to the fire and bolstered Bulgarian claims.

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

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

could have influenced the subsequent developments and tensions that ensued in the city.

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

Some posit that the inception of the Skopje 2014 project was also a reaction to an alleged threat from the Albanian community concerning the state's legitimacy (Graan, 2013, p. 169). However, it is important to mention that the Albanian community has generally not challenged the state's legitimacy directly. Rather, they have aspired to become an integral part of it, demanding equal representation and rights within the country. Consequently, the project and its ramifications should be evaluated within the larger framework of intricate interethnic relations in North Macedonia, where various communities seek inclusion and acknowledgment.

During the construction of a church in the Skopje Fortress—the Kale, initially intended for a museum and exhibition

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

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

In addition to the friction generated by the church's construction near the square, the Muslim Religious Community voiced their dissatisfaction with the renovation of the Army Hall, an interwar edifice. They instead called for the restoration of the 16th-century Ottoman Burmali Mosque, demolished by the Serbian Army in 1925 before

the Officers' Club was erected on the same site. This further emphasizes the continued conflict and responses to decisions perceived as favoring one religious or cultural group over another in the city.

The political dialogue in North Macedonia grew increasingly divided after the signing of the Prespa Agreement by Zaev's administration in June 2018. This agreement led to the country's renaming as the "Republic of North Macedonia" and confirmed that the "Macedonian language" is part of the South Slavic language group. It also stipulated that the nation's people, culture, and other attributes have no connection to the ancient Hellenic civilization, history, culture, and heritage of Greece's northern region, namely the Greek region of Macedonia (Prespa Agreement, 2018). This name change incited a vehement response from the opposition nationalist party VMRO, which objected to the agreement. Nevertheless, the agreement effectively dampened the ambitions of the Skopje 2014 project, as the new name and the distinctions defined in the agreement resolved some of the controversial issues the project had brought up.

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

The Skopje 2014 project has been criticized on several fronts, including its exorbitant cost and the possibility

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

Democratic Stagnation: Corruption, Authoritarianism, and Ethnic Divisions

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

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

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

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

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

Factors that led to stagnation of Democratic Consolidation

The VMRO-DPMNE government, under the banner of ethnocentric nationalism, enacted policies that predominantly catered to ethnic Macedonians. This inclination marginalized other ethnic communities,

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

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

To conclude, the VMRO-DPMNE's ethnocentric politics, manipulation of the judiciary, repression of free speech, and suppression of the opposition primarily impeded North Macedonia's democratic consolidation. These actions fostered ethnic divisions, debilitated democratic institutions, and fostered a polarized and mistrustful societal environment. Consequently, the nation's stride towards a more inclusive and stable democratic system was significantly stalled during this decade-long period of nationalist governance. These assertions will be substantiated through a detailed analysis of reports by Freedom House, the European Commission, and Transparency International, casting light on the challenges North Macedonia confronted in its journey towards democratic consolidation.

Ethnic Nationalistic Politics and Discrimination

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

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

Issues related to language and symbolic representations remained a source of contention between ethnic Albanian and Macedonian Slav politicians. Disagreements revolved around wider use of the Albanian language, the public display of the Albanian flag, and the need for better representation of ethnic Albanians in government (Freedom House, 2009, p. 435). Although the 2017 language law sought to address these concerns by extending the official use of Albanian to all state-level institutions (Freedom House, 2020, p. 648)**,** tensions persisted. The non-implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement twenty years since its signing remained a major source of inter-ethnic tensions. The Macedonian government's apparent reluctance to enforce the agreement in full suggested a lack of genuine commitment to fostering unity and strengthening inter-ethnic relations within the country.

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

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

Albanian political parties increasingly utilized nationalist rhetoric, leading to confrontations (Freedom House, 2016, p. 406).

Interethnic tensions continued to persist with episodic violent incidents between the two major ethnic groups (Freedom House, 2017, p. 414). A series of major clashes took place in April and May involving government security forces and purported ethnic Albanian militants. A border post near Kosovo was reportedly overrun by an Albanian militia in April. In May, a raid in an ethnic Albanian neighborhood in Kumanovo resulted in casualties on both sides, with the government alleging the targets were ethnic Albanian terrorists (Freedom House, 2017, p. 415). Critics, however, accused the VMRO-DPMNE of orchestrating these incidents to deflect attention from the wiretapping scandal.

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

In 2017, the political landscape shifted from the dominant center-right VMRO-DPMNE, which had held power since 2006, to the left-leaning SDSM, a party with a history of governing during the 1990s and early 2000s. This power

transition was marred by conflict, however. When an SDSM-endorsed parliament speaker was appointed, it resulted in a violent assault on the assembly floor by VMRO-DPMNE supporters against SDSM lawmakers, including the party leader, leaving about 100 people injured (Feedom House, 2019, p. 576).

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

Control of the Judiciary system; An Assessment of Corruption and Nepotism

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

The Freedom House Report of 2008 continued to describe the judiciary as corrupt and incompetent. As part of North Macedonia's bid to join the EU, it was urged to strengthen

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

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

The establishment of a Special Prosecutor in North Macedonia was a response to the 2015 wiretapping scandal, which revealed extensive government corruption, power abuse, and unlawful surveillance. Amid increasing public dissatisfaction and international scrutiny, the leading

political parties in the country agreed to set up a Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) as part of the Przino Agreement. The SPO's primary role was to investigate and prosecute those involved in the scandal, ensuring a thorough and impartial investigation into the claims (Marusic & Kostovska, 2015). The process of appointing the Special Prosecutor involved choosing an appropriate candidate with the involvement of both the majority and opposition parties in the parliament, and international stakeholders like the European Union and the United States. This process aimed to guarantee the independence, integrity, and professionalism of the Special Prosecutor. Once appointed, the Special Prosecutor was tasked with handling cases related to the wiretapping scandal, with hopes that their work would help restore public faith in the country's institutions and bolster the rule of law (Marusic & Kostovska, 2015).

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

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

Undermining Democracy: Media Segregation and Government Control

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

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

laws against media corporations and the Broadcasting Council's lack of transparency in their operations (European Commission Progress Report, 2011).

From 2006 to 2016, media in North Macedonia were largely swayed by political and business interests, leading to the stifling of independent journalism and the propagation of narratives favoring the government. Increasing intimidation of journalists and selective legal enforcement against media corporations raised concerns as they contributed to the silencing of free speech in the country (European Commission Progress Report, 2011, p. 63; European Commission Progress Report, 2012, p. 14). The lack of transparency in media ownership and poor enforcement against illegal media concentrations amplified these issues, creating a media landscape dominated by pro-government television channels, often the only news sources for many citizens, thereby limiting their exposure to a range of viewpoints and independent reports.

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

North Macedonia's media outlets, much like its society, are profoundly segregated along ethnic lines (Freedom House, 2011, p. 407). The decline of media freedom and independence not only obstructed the development of

a diverse media environment but also paved the way for government control and manipulation of information. This situation ultimately hindered democratic progress, as citizens were deprived of accurate and impartial information required for informed decision-making and active participation in the democratic process.

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

Political Suppression and Electoral Irregularities

In April 2008, North Macedonia's Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski, initiated early elections slated for June that year. Gruevski cited the opposition's obstruction of crucial reforms as a hindrance to the country's aspirations to join NATO and the EU. However, multiple global monitoring organizations reported significant irregularities throughout the electoral process. These included attacks on party campaign offices, unequal access to media, ballot stuffing, and a pervasive atmosphere of violence both during campaigning and on election day. Accusations were also leveled at police officers for involvement in these irregularities, resulting in the suspension of 28 officers pending an investigation. About 10% of all votes cast at 197 polling sites were annulled due to these issues (Freedom House, 2009). These irregularities

in the electoral process, combined with the government's efforts to stifle the opposition, underscore the extent to which democratic procedures were compromised in North Macedonia from 2006 to 2016. The actions of the government not only undermined the integrity of the elections, but also hampered the ability of opposition parties to pose a substantial challenge to the ruling party, further leading to the stagnation of democracy in the country.

As per the Freedom House report, the political rights rating of Macedonia deteriorated from 3 in 2013 to 4 in 2014 due to significant flaws in the general elections of April and a subsequent legislative boycott by the opposition (Freedom House, 2016, p. 405). In July 2013, former Prime Minister Vlado Buckovski, along with four others, was convicted for illegal procurement of tank parts in 2001 (Freedom House, 2015, p. 426). This incident exemplifies the immense pressure exerted on the opposition by the government during this period, further highlighting the challenging political conditions under which opposition parties and leaders had to function. The heavy-handed tactics employed by the government exacerbated the fight for democratic progression in North Macedonia.

The opposition leveled accusations of election fraud at the ruling party and refused to acknowledge the election outcomes. The ruling party dismissed calls from the opposition for fresh elections, instead opting to allow the European Union (EU) to facilitate a resolution between the two major political parties. In a show of resistance, thirty-one newly elected opposition legislators initiated a legislative boycott by refusing to take their seats (Freedom

House, 2016, p. 405). However, despite their efforts to stand up against governmental pressure, the opposition faced a challenging task due to the government's extensive control over the state machinery to curtail the opposition. This further underscored the compromised democratic process in North Macedonia during this time, with opposition parties finding it difficult to counter a government that had considerable control over the country's institutions.

Wiretapped conversations released by the opposition in 2015 seemed to suggest involvement of senior VMRO-DPMNE figures in election fraud during both the 2013 local and 2014 parliamentary elections. The opposition also expressed apprehensions regarding the imminent snap elections in 2016, alleging that the electoral rolls were filled with the names of non-existent voters (Freedom House, 2017, p. 415).

The elections were postponed twice following the opposition's declaration of non-participation, citing an unfair influence of the government over media and issues with the voter lists. Subsequent to a June 2016 agreement aimed at addressing opposition's grievances, the elections were eventually conducted in December, which resulted in a narrow victory for VMRO-DPMNE (Freedom in the World , 2018, pp. 314-315). The formation of a new government was protracted for months after the December 2016 elections, as President Ivanov declined the SDSM's mandate request to form a government after the VMRO–DMPNE, the party with the largest number of seats, failed to gather sufficient support to form a government.

In April 2017, after Xhaferi's election as the President of the Assembly, supporters of VMRO–DMPNE stormed the

Assembly and brutally attacked several opposition leaders (Feedom House, 2019, p. 575). This event was emblematic of the rampant suppression and intimidation of opposition factions in North Macedonia during this era. The ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, was implicated in using state resources and the judicial system to muzzle opposition voices and curtail freedom of speech. Numerous opposition leaders were subjected to politically motivated arrests and defamation campaigns, and media entities critical of the government faced threats and censorship. These actions hampered the democratic process and fostered a climate of fear and uncertainty in the country.

Corruption and Its Impact on Democratic Progress

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index in 2005 placed Macedonia 103rd out of 159 nations, suggesting a significant corruption problem. Yet, the country has made strides against corruption over the following years. In 2008, its ranking rose to 72 out of 180 countries evaluated. By 2010, it had further climbed to the 62nd position out of 178 nations. In both 2011 and 2012, it ranked 69th out of 173 and 176 countries, respectively. In 2013, it moved up to 67th out of 177 countries, and in 2015, it was ranked 66th out of 168 countries, signifying a persistent issue of corruption (Transparency International, 2022). Corruption in Macedonia has negatively impacted economic growth and political transparency, undermined the integrity of national institutions, and stunted democratic progress. In Macedonia's multiethnic society, where ethnic tensions already exist, corruption can amplify these strains by cultivating inequality and eroding institutional trust.

Widespread perceptions of corruption can stir up resentment and feelings of exclusion among different communities, potentially escalating social and political divisions. Thus, tackling corruption is essential for Macedonia's enduring stability and prosperity as a democratic and inclusive nation.

The European Commission has highlighted that North Macedonia's present institutional framework and countermeasures are inadequate in effectively dealing with corruption. The existing legislation necessitates further modifications to better address corruption threats and enhance transparency in the public procurement sector. The internal control mechanism in both central and local administrations remains weak. The creation of efficient whistleblowing systems in both public and private sectors has yet to occur (European Commission Progress Report, 2012, pp. 12-13). Despite witnessing some advancements in recent years, the issue of frail institutions and rampant corruption still significantly impacts North Macedonia. This situation has been acknowledged in reports from several international bodies, including the State Department, the European Commission, and Transparency International. The European Commission has stated that the country's institutional infrastructure and the measures undertaken are insufficient to effectively counteract corruption. In addition, the State Department underscored the need for a more productive execution of anti-corruption initiatives and a strengthening of judicial independence. Moreover, Transparency International has consistently placed North Macedonia at a high corruption level compared to other nations. Without addressing these root problems, it seems likely that the nation's multiethnic society will persist

in facing substantial difficulties in areas of democracy, governance, and ethnic interactions (Transparency International, 2022; European Commission Progress Report, 2012; State Department, 2022).

Press Freedom and Ethnic Divisions

Media control in North Macedonia has been a persistent issue, with the government and various political groups attempting to sway the direction of news outlets. Despite some improvements over the years, issues surrounding transparency, the concentration of ownership, and editorial independence continue to plague the media landscape. According to reports from Freedom House, North Macedonia still falls under the category of "partly free" in terms of press freedom, underscoring the need for sustained action to encourage freedom of the press, safeguard journalists, and nurture a varied and independent media ecosystem. Both the international community and local civil society organizations are vital in supporting these goals and ensuring that North Macedonia's citizens have access to truthful and unbiased information.

In state-owned media, which serves as the primary source of information for most of the population, high-ranking positions are often filled by political appointees rather than career journalists. The media in North Macedonia regularly face criticism for their perceived lack of professionalism and failure to adhere to accepted journalistic standards. Offences such as libel, defamation, and slander continue to be treated as criminal acts, subject to penalties including fines and incarceration (Freedom House, 2011, p. 434).

Ownership of media in North Macedonia remains a complex issue characterized by lack of transparency, high levels of concentration, and pronounced political affiliations. The government's status as one of the largest advertisers raises alarm about the possible allocation of funds to TV stations that are pro-government. In certain cases, TV channels that make significant donations to political parties further blur the line between media and politics. This murky landscape places editors and journalists under increasing political pressure and intimidation, as noted in the European Commission Progress Report (2011). There have been instances of politically charged prosecutions, such as the case of the pro-opposition A1 Television channel's owner and several associates, who were charged with crimes like tax evasion in December 2010. This case was widely perceived as politically driven. The owner was subsequently convicted on various charges in March 2012 and received a 13-year prison sentence. In a follow-up event in June 2012, the Broadcasting Council shut down A2 Television after it started broadcasting political content and hired journalists formerly associated with A1. This sequence of events highlights the severe challenges independent media and journalists face in the country (Freedom House, 2015, p. 426). Throughout the year, media outlets aligned with the government levied intense criticism and threats against their rivals and independent journalists. Lawsuits on the grounds of libel, which can lead to financial penalties, are common against journalists. The public broadcast service, Macedonian Radio and Television (MRTV), operates without a steady, independent funding source, making it susceptible to political influence (Freedom House, 2011, p. 434). Media

ownership in Macedonia continues to be a contentious issue, with a lack of transparency, high concentration, and strong ties to political entities. The government's role as a significant advertiser has raised concerns about the potential manipulation of funds to favor television channels supportive of the government's agenda. Instances of politically motivated criminal charges and convictions, such as the case involving the owner of the pro-opposition A1 Television channel, underscore the challenges faced by independent media outlets and journalists in the country.

These issues have been further exacerbated by the government's use of state-controlled media to propagate nationalistic policies, which has contributed to increased tensions and mistrust, particularly among the Albanian community. The spread of divisive rhetoric and biased information through government-controlled media outlets has heightened feelings of alienation and uncertainty among community groups, undermining their trust in state institutions. This situation highlights the urgent need for reforms to ensure the independence and plurality of the media landscape in Macedonia, as well as the establishment of a public broadcaster free from political influence and with a secure funding source. Such steps are crucial for fostering an inclusive and diverse media environment that can effectively serve the needs of all communities in the country.

Journalists in North Macedonia frequently encounter political coercion and intimidation, which often leads to self-censorship, worsening the existing media issues (Freedom House, 2013). Both Macedonian and Albanian

communities leverage their respective language media to advance their interests and narratives, thereby escalating the separation between the two ethnic groups. The government's exploitation of public resources for its political gain further intensifies these divisions. Although Albanian political parties also try to disseminate their agenda via the media, they do so with significantly less resources.

This situation underscores the pressing need for reforms in North Macedonia's media sector that would encourage impartial reporting and cultivate a more inclusive media environment. By tackling these issues, the country can aim to close the gap between the different ethnic communities, fostering a stronger, more unified society.

While instances of reported attacks on journalists in North Macedonia saw a reduction between 2017 and 2018 as per the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), threats and intimidation continue. For example, in March, an AJM head was reportedly threatened by a high-ranking official of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), following a Facebook post in which the official's conduct during a traffic dispute was criticized (Freedom House, 2020, p. 650)**.** This incident is a reminder of the many obstacles journalists in North Macedonia face, including political pressure and harassment.

Media control in North Macedonia remains a crucial problem, with transparency, ownership concentration, and editorial independence raising concerns. The influence of the government on the media scene, coupled with the close relationship between political groups and media outlets, leads to a climate where journalists often feel the need

to avoid controversial topics. To nurture an independent and free press, North Macedonia must implement reforms promoting impartial reporting, ensuring journalists' safety, and fostering media diversity. Addressing these issues will not only enhance media freedom in the country but also bolster its democratic processes and societal unity.

Wiretapping Scandal: Judicial Challenges and Quest for Accountability

The North Macedonian wiretapping controversy, colloquially referred to as the "bombs" affair, began in 2015 and significantly disturbed the country's political environment. The then opposition party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), disseminated numerous wiretapped recordings that implicated senior government functionaries, including then Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, in various unlawful activities (Freedom House, 2017, pp. 414-415). These transgressions spanned corruption, election rigging, and misuse of power to the clandestine monitoring of journalists, judges, and political adversaries. The unfolding scandal spurred extensive public backlash, leading to widespread demonstrations and demands for the implicated parties' resignation. In response to the mounting crisis, the European Union and the United States facilitated a political deal called the Przino Agreement, offering a crisis resolution roadmap that involved creating a special prosecutor's office and holding early parliamentary elections.

The fallout from the wiretapping scandal led to the resignation of prominent government officials, including the ministers of the interior and transportation, and

the head of the country's intelligence agency. Amid the growing protests, Prime Minister Gruevski stepped down from his post in January 2016. However, the political situation escalated further in April 2016 when the president controversially pardoned 56 government officials who were under investigation for the wiretapping scandal (Freedom House, 2017, pp. 414-415). This move was perceived as a strategy to shield the implicated nationalist VMRO-DPMNE government, prompting further public outrage and protests, which eventually led to the reversal of the pardons. The president's intervention not only deepened the political crisis, but it also accentuated the critical need for transparency, accountability, and democratic reforms within the country. In the end, the wiretapping scandal revealed the vulnerability of North Macedonia's political institutions and the importance of adhering to the rule of law and maintaining systemic checks and balances.

A political agreement, mediated by the European Union in June, proposed early elections by April 2016 and the appointment of a special prosecutor to examine the wiretapping scandal (Freedom House, 2017, p. 415). However, despite these measures, the relationship between the government and the opposition remained strained at the end of the year, casting uncertainty over the complete execution of the agreement. The Freedom of House suggested that the special prosecutor's capacity to conduct their investigation into the wiretapping scandal unhindered in the upcoming year was viewed as a key measure of the justice system's effectiveness (Freedom House, 2017, p. 417). The scandal was based on recordings that gave significant evidence of various illegal activities and corruption perpetrated by the

government during the 2006-2016 decade. The exposure of these misdeeds resulted in the stepping down of crucial government officials, arrests and convictions of many top-level political individuals, and an increase in public indignation. The far-reaching impacts of the scandal led to the prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, absconding from the country to evade legal action. Gruevski sought and received asylum in Hungary, facilitated by his friend, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Under the Judiciary subtitle, it was noted that, despite the expectations placed on the special prosecutor to bring clarity and accountability to the wiretapping scandal, events took a disappointing turn when the chief special prosecutor was apprehended on charges of accepting bribes. These accusations entailed colluding with individuals who supported the government, significantly damaging the credibility and integrity of the inquiry. This incident further diminished public faith in the justice system and the government's resolve to confront the issues unveiled by the wiretapping scandal.

From Macedonia to North Macedonia: Threats and Opportunities after the Regime Change in 2017

In the post–ethnic conflict period, North Macedonia has experienced both progress and setbacks in its democratic trajectory. While the Ohrid Framework Agreement laid the groundwork for peace and interethnic power-sharing, the persistence of authoritarian legacies has hindered

the deepening of democratic practices. Similar to other Western Balkan states, North Macedonia has struggled with clientelism, state capture, and weak rule of law, which have allowed semi-authoritarian tendencies to resurface. The European Union has played a central role in promoting democracy through conditionality and the promise of integration, yet the slow and often inconsistent accession process has created frustration and space for domestic elites to manipulate institutions. This dual dynamic—between external pressures for reform and internal resistance rooted in authoritarian traditions—captures the broader challenges of democracy promotion across the Balkans.

Prespa Agreement: Combating Ethnonationalism and Promoting Multiethnicity

During the period from the signing of the Interim Agreement to the finalization of the Prespa Agreement, numerous direct interactions occurred between Prime Ministers Nikola Gruevski and George Papandreou. Despite the intention of these meetings and intermittent covert backchannel communications to make significant progress, they ultimately did not lead to substantial outcomes. Over a span of 24 years, there were intervals when productive discussions could not be pursued, highlighting the intricate nature of the negotiations and the necessity for persistence in resolving longstanding disputes to achieve mutually advantageous resolutions.

When Skopje was preoccupied with a serious confrontation between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians around

2001, Greece plunged into its financial crisis beginning in 2010, there were elections looming in either country (and there were many), or governments in either or both of the countries were in disarray, one had to sit back and wait, maintaining informal talks with the representatives, being careful not to stoke the fires of nationalist rhetoric, especially during election periods (Nimetz, 2020, p. 209).

The path to the Prespa Agreement was a lengthy and complicated one, characterized by a multitude of negotiations, diplomatic endeavors, and obstacles over more than two decades. The central conflict between Greece and the country now known as North Macedonia revolved around the latter's official name, which Greece contended suggested territorial ambitions over its northern region also called Macedonia. This disagreement hampered North Macedonia's ambitions to join NATO and the EU, thus making the resolution of the dispute a high priority for both countries.

After the 1995 Interim Agreement, there were several initiatives to resolve the issue, which included direct encounters between Prime Ministers Nikola Gruevski and George Papandreou and sporadic secret backchannel communications. However, for many years, these attempts did not yield significant results. It was only with the election of a new, reform-minded government in North Macedonia in 2017 that the chances for a resolution improved. This change in governance reopened the dialogue channels and encouraged constructive negotiations with Greece.

In June 2018, under the guidance of Prime Ministers Zoran Zaev of North Macedonia and Alexis Tsipras of Greece, the

two nations reached a groundbreaking agreement known as the Prespa Agreement. This historical accord dictated that the official name of the country would henceforth be the Republic of North Macedonia, thereby settling the longstanding name dispute.

The foreign ministers of both countries met in Thessaloniki in September 2017, publicly declaring their intention to commence discussions aimed at resolving the name issue. They agreed on a number of points during this meeting, such as renaming Skopje's airport and the highway leading to Greece, arranging a meeting between the prime ministers, and initiating negotiations with a preliminary draft agreement prepared by Kotzias (Heraclides, 2021, p. 226). Following this, in New York, special envoy Matthew Nimetz suggested concentrating on five potential names: North Macedonia, Upper Macedonia, Macedonia-Skopje, Vardar Macedonia, and Nova Macedonia. Post the initial meeting between the prime ministers, the Prime Minister of North Macedonia committed to executing measures to alleviate Greek concerns. He delivered on this commitment by renaming Alexander the Great Airport to Skopje International Airport, changing the Alexander the Great Highway to Friendship Highway, and implementing other similar changes. Moreover, the 'Skopje 2014 Program' was discontinued in February, with the Prime Minister of Macedonia denouncing it as a "senseless project" (Heraclides, 2021, p. 227). Amidst these measures, the Macedonian side began to comprehend the seriousness of the issue, realizing that failing to alter the country's name could lead to a difficult period with potentially significant consequences. The absence of an agreement could have

had detrimental effects both domestically and on North Macedonia's ambitions for regional and international integration. This understanding led the Macedonian government to adopt a more compromising position, which ultimately contributed to the successful negotiation of the Prespa Agreement.

The negotiation process between Greece and North Macedonia, initiated in February 2018 when Kotzias presented the initial draft agreement, was a meticulous and challenging task. Intended to be a balanced approach catering to the requirements of both parties, the discussions extended over four months and involved the careful formulation of several agreement clauses (Heraclides, 2021, p. 230). As the negotiations entered their final stage, the two remaining options for the compound name were "New Macedonia" and "North Macedonia." However, Dimitrov voiced concerns about the former choice, as it seemed to denote a shift away from the emotional connection many Macedonians had with their socialist past (Heraclides, 2021, p. 230).

The period from January to June 2018 was characterized by laborious negotiations, which, though politically draining and at times contentious, proved to be fruitful. Opposition and resistance were encountered from both sides, yet the negotiators' steadfastness and dedication to attaining a mutually agreeable resolution enabled them to triumph over these hurdles. The successful negotiation resulted in the historic Prespa Agreement, which not only resolved the prolonged name dispute but also set the stage for improved cooperation and understanding between Greece and North Macedonia.

In September 2018, the government conducted a contentious referendum to ratify the Prespa Agreement, which was signed with Greece in June to change the country's name to North Macedonia. The agreement received the support of more than 90 percent of voters. However, with a turnout of just 37 percent, the vote fell short of the 50 percent required for the results to be deemed valid (Freedom House, 2020, p. 647). As such, it failed to meet the constitutional stipulation for a 50 percent turnout, with abstention indicating refusal (as posited by President Ivanov). The constitutional modifications and the renaming of the country necessitated 80 votes in the 120-member Parliament (a two-thirds majority), implying that the government needed eight additional votes from the opposition VMRO-DPMNE (Heraclides, 2021, p. 232). Leaders from the VMRO-DPMNE, including President Ivanov, encouraged voters to abstain, contributing to the low turnout (Freedom House, 2020, p. 647). However, the necessary votes for the constitutional changes were eventually secured, with votes from VMRO-DPMNE members playing a decisive role (Heraclides, 2021, p. 232). Despite the process being clouded by allegations of coercion, bribery, intimidation, threats of incarceration, and other undemocratic tactics that infringed upon the rule of law, the constitutional changes necessary to enforce the Prespa Agreement were enacted. Even in the face of these contentious circumstances, and with President Ivanov refusing to accept the constitutional amendments, the persistence of both sides in resolving the enduring name dispute was evident.

In October, following the contentious referendum, the parliament proceeded to enact legislation to rename the

country. This move was seen as a significant step towards potential accession to the EU and NATO. Observers from the OSCE stated that the referendum was conducted impartially and that fundamental freedoms were upheld throughout the campaign, albeit they took note of the contentious content of the referendum (Freedom House, 2020, p. 647).

The Prespa Agreement was a vital measure for North Macedonia to meet numerous essential objectives. By resolving the deep-seated name dispute, North Macedonia aimed to break away from its international seclusion, cultivate improved relationships with its neighbors, and clear the path for EU and NATO membership. Furthermore, the agreement aspired to enhance domestic ethnic relationships, shifting away from the Macedonian ethnonationalism espoused by VMRO-DPMNE that had strained relations with the Albanian community.

Additionally, the Prespa Agreement defined the historical and cultural ties of North Macedonia, disavowing any connections to ancient Macedonia and underscoring its Slavic origins. This strategic reorientation was aimed at ensuring a safer future for the nation and discrediting the nationalist narrative perpetuated by VMRO-DPMNE. By addressing these aspects, the Prespa Agreement signified a pivotal moment for North Macedonia, laying the groundwork for a more stable, cooperative, and inclusive future, both domestically and with the global community.

Although the Prespa Agreement succeeded in resolving the long-standing name dispute between Greece and North Macedonia, it encountered substantial resistance from various factions in both nations. Among the contentious

elements was Article 7, 4 of the agreement, which explicitly stated that North Macedonia's citizens had no relationship with ancient Macedonians and that their language and cultural characteristics had no connections to the ancient Hellenic civilization, history, culture, or heritage of the region (Prespa Agreement, 2018). This specific provision ignited considerable opposition as it seemed to deny the people of North Macedonia a connection to their perceived historical and cultural lineage. Detractors contended that the agreement, while changing the country's name, also undercut its national identity and historical narrative. The intense opposition to the Prespa Agreement, particularly regarding Article 7, 4, echoed the emotional and cultural sensitivities associated with the issue. For many, the agreement represented a compromise that crossed a line, forcing a difficult reassessment of their understanding of their own history and identity. Despite the challenges and ongoing debate, the Prespa Agreement represented a vital stride towards reconciliation and cooperation between Greece and North Macedonia, setting the stage for a more stable and collaborative future in the region.

The international community displayed a keen interest in resolving the name dispute, motivated by concerns regarding potential instability or the escalation of tensions in the Western Balkans. Diplomatic interventions from various nations, including the United States, Germany, and the EU, had positive impacts on the negotiation process. Other nations with a stake in the region, including the United Kingdom, Austria, Slovenia, and the Nordic states, also supported efforts towards a peaceful and mutually agreeable resolution.

Third parties played a significant role in the resolution of the name dispute, providing support and encouragement while maintaining impartiality. The incentives and subtle pressure from these external actors were crucial in pushing for a solution. Moreover, the Albanian community within North Macedonia, which constitutes a substantial part of the population, demonstrated a united desire to resolve the issue. Political parties representing this community actively participated in the negotiation process and promoted sensible compromises (Nimetz, 2020, p. 209). Nonetheless, the active engagement of the Albanian community was met with challenges. Certain factions within the country perceived their eagerness to resolve the name dispute as a threat to Macedonian identity. They cast doubt on the Albanians' loyalty, suggesting they prioritized their interests over those of the country they co-inhabited. Despite these tensions, the Albanian community's involvement was critical in facilitating a resolution, contributing to a more stable and inclusive future for North Macedonia.

Settling the name dispute was essential for multiple reasons, including preventing the escalation of Macedonian nationalism and appeasing North Macedonia's large ethnic Albanian community. As Albania, a NATO member, made progress in EU integration, North Macedonia's ethnic Albanian community might have been further inspired by Kosovo's independence and rising ethnic Albanian nationalism. Implicitly supporting Greece could have inadvertently signaled to nationalists across the Balkans that North Macedonia was an 'abnormal' country without a secure and prosperous EU future (Daskalovski, 2023, p. 72). The Prespa Agreement also bore substantial geopolitical

significance, clearing the way for North Macedonia's integration into international organizations like NATO. By resolving the name dispute, the country manifested its commitment to regional stability and cooperation, thereby enhancing its NATO membership prospects. This development not only solidified North Macedonia's security but also contributed to the overall stability of the Western Balkans, ensuring the region could progress towards peace and prosperity.

Overcoming Ethno-Nationalism: Path to Democratic Consolidation Post-NATO Membership

The path of North Macedonia to NATO membership was a protracted and challenging process, primarily complicated by the unresolved name dispute with Greece. For a considerable period, Greece consistently blocked North Macedonia's NATO membership efforts, asserting that the use of the name "Macedonia" entailed territorial aspirations towards the Greek region bearing the same name. This deep-seated controversy, deeply ingrained in historical and cultural contexts, effectively hindered North Macedonia's NATO ambitions, placing the country in a state of geopolitical uncertainty. It was only after the name dispute's resolution through the Prespa Agreement and the subsequent adoption of the name "North Macedonia" that the nation's route to NATO membership was cleared, empowering the country to advance towards its strategic objectives and regional security.

On December 23, 1993, the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia enacted a significant resolution based on Article 121 of the national constitution, setting the stage for

North Macedonia's endeavor towards NATO accession. The resolution contained several crucial stipulations:

"The Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia pronounced the country's aspiration to be part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The responsibility of presenting the membership application to NATO fell upon the President of the Republic of Macedonia.

The decision would come into force on the day of its publication in the 'Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia.'

This decree marked the inception of North Macedonia's lengthy journey towards NATO membership, a journey that would eventually succeed after overcoming the obstacles set by the name dispute with Greece (Ministry of Defence of North Macedonia, 2021).

North Macedonia's trek towards NATO membership officially commenced when the country became part of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in November 1995 and established a Liaison Office at NATO in June 1996. North Macedonia's candidacy for NATO membership was officially recognized during the NATO Summit in Washington in April 1999 (Ministry of Defence of North Macedonia, 2022).

Despite advancements and meeting membership requirements, the invitation for North Macedonia to join NATO was consistently deferred due to the unresolved name issue with Greece. This situation persisted across various NATO summits until 2017 when North Macedonia's Parliament endorsed a Declaration aimed at accelerating reform and integration processes for EU and NATO

membership (Ministry of Defence of North Macedonia, 2022). As a component of this accession procedure, North Macedonia's Government constituted a Committee for the nation's integration into NATO and developed a Program for the Continuation of Reforms. Official accession discussions between North Macedonia and NATO were concluded on October 18-19, 2018.

After the signing of the NATO Accession Protocol on February 6, 2019, the ratification procedure was initiated in the parliaments and institutions of NATO member states. On February 11, 2020, North Macedonia's Assembly ratified the Protocol on NATO membership. Upon completion of the ratification process by all NATO member countries, North Macedonia officially ascended as a fully integrated NATO member on March 27, 2020 (Ministry of Defence of North Macedonia, 2022). The flag of the Republic of North Macedonia was raised at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels and other pivotal locations on March 30, 2020.

The Republic of North Macedonia has been instigating reforms in various sectors, encompassing the ministries of justice, interior, election legislation, media, environmental protection, and cybersecurity. Initiatives have also been undertaken to bolster relations with neighboring nations and to actively participate in international organizations (Annual Report of the Defence Ministry of North Macedonia, 2017). Nonetheless, according to EU and other reports, the country's progress has been slow and beleaguered by corruption and other problems. The only significant improvement has been witnessed in foreign policy, with North Macedonia's NATO membership emphatically accentuating its EU path.

This membership marked the cessation of the VMRO-DPMNE government's balanced foreign policy approach, which had earlier endeavored to maintain equilibrium between Russia and the EU. A positive outcome of NATO membership has been the new government's transition from ethnic nationalist policies towards more multicultural and inclusive strategies. This shift has facilitated better relations between the resident Albanian community and Macedonians, revealing the potential for enhanced unity and collaboration within the country. This supports my primary hypothesis that ethnic nationalism was the critical hurdle that kept North Macedonia in a state of stagnation for almost 30 years and exacerbated interethnic tensions. The recent progress demonstrates that diverting from ethnic nationalist policies can lay the groundwork for a more harmonious and prosperous future for the nation.

Undeniably, NATO membership has played a crucial role in paving the way for North Macedonia's transition towards democratic consolidation. However, the nation's path has been impeded by intense ethnic divides, predominantly between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian community. These divides were intensified by ethno-nationalistic strategies, especially during the ten years from 2006 to 2016 when the VMRO-DPMNE party held power. These policies led to societal disturbances, escalated tensions between the two main ethnic groups, and left North Macedonia only partially free in terms of achieving full democratic consolidation.

Despite this, North Macedonia continues to grapple with challenges. Issues such as corruption, sluggish economic

growth, and the residual effects of ethno-nationalistic policies persist in affecting the country's progression towards complete democratic consolidation.

External Influence in Inter Ethnic Relations and Democratic Consolidation

External influence has been a decisive factor in shaping interethnic relations and democratic consolidation in North Macedonia and the wider Western Balkans. Initiatives such as the Berlin Process have sought to foster regional cooperation, reconciliation, and economic connectivity, aiming to reduce tensions and strengthen democratic institutions. At the same time, the role of the European Union, NATO, and other international actors has been central in encouraging dialogue between ethnic communities and promoting frameworks for power-sharing. However, these efforts often clash with local political dynamics, where nationalist rhetoric and weak institutions continue to challenge long-term stability. The following discussion will examine how external mechanisms, particularly European integration and regional cooperation platforms, interact with domestic legacies to shape both opportunities and obstacles for democratic consolidation.

Berlin Process; Step toward the Consolidation of Democracy

The Berlin Process, launched in 2014 by then German Chancellor Angela Merkel, is a diplomatic endeavor that seeks to boost regional collaboration, economic development, and political stability in the Western Balkans.

This initiative targets countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, with the end goal of easing their integration into the European Union. The process places an emphasis on crucial domains like infrastructure connectivity, regional reconciliation, and robust governance in order to address the lingering issues that have obstructed the region's growth. Via yearly summits, participant nations cooperate on shared projects, share successful strategies, and strive towards building a safer, wealthier, and more interconnected region. While there have been several accomplishments through the Berlin Process, it also underscores the enduring hurdles that the Western Balkans must surmount in their bid to reconcile historical disputes and align closer with their European goals.

The Connectivity Agenda, focusing on physical, digital, and interpersonal connectivity, stands as the Berlin Process's most notable accomplishment. It has further streamlined the EU integration process for the Western Balkans without necessitating new mechanisms, institutions, or funding programs, but bearing in mind the ultimate goal of the enlargement process - EU membership (Nemeth, 2022). However, the path to regional collaboration and European integration in the complex context of the Western Balkans is complicated by lingering bilateral disagreements and unaddressed domestic issues (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2021, pp. 14-20). These homegrown challenges, encompassing political volatility, ineffective governance, economic disparities, and societal divisions, constitute considerable barriers to the region's journey towards the European Union. As the Western Balkan countries endeavor

to fulfill EU accession prerequisites, they are compelled to tackle these internal issues to establish a more stable basis for both regional cooperation and assimilation into the European community. Thus, any enduring strategy for the region's growth and advancement must consider both the external obstacles derived from bilateral conflicts and the internal dynamics that persistently hinder the chances of successful EU integration.

Significant strides in reform processes, addressing lingering bilateral and internal issues, and fostering reconciliation within and among societies in the region are crucial for boosting regional economic collaboration and laying the groundwork for steady growth (Marciacq, 2017, p. 7). The focus on "actual" progress underscores the difference between the result and the impact in the external Europeanization process. This is key to understanding the mixed outcomes seen in the transformation of Western Balkan states post-conflict over the past two decades, and the limited progress in economic and democratic governance in the region (Marciacq, 2017, p. 7). As outlined in the text, the shortfall in democratic consolidation continues to be a main concern in North Macedonia. The strategies employed by EU member states so far have not had a significant impact on inter-ethnic relationships in North Macedonia. However, the shift in power from the VMRO to the new government has significantly positively influenced the country's overall situation, including improvements in inter-ethnic relationships.

The enhancement in inter-ethnic relationships post the 2017 governmental change substantiates the hypothesis

that in North Macedonia, ethno-nationalistic policies can negatively impact inter-ethnic relationships and impede the strengthening of democracy. This is attributed to the existence of ethnic policies and laws that discriminate against certain communities in the country, as outlined in the earlier text. The positive shift in the political climate following the 2017 governmental transition shows that moving away from such nationalistic policies and adopting a more inclusive approach can promote better inter-ethnic relationships and aid in fortifying democracy in North Macedonia.

Open Balkan Initiative: Step Toward Strengthening Democracy

The Berlin Process and the Open Balkan Initiative are two notable ventures designed to bolster regional cooperation, economic development, and political equilibrium in the Western Balkans. Established in 2014, the Berlin Process is a crucial mechanism for enhancing the European incorporation of Western Balkan nations, focusing on facilitating infrastructure connectivity, regional peace-making, and good governance. On the other hand, the Open Balkan Initiative, inaugurated in 2021, strives to expedite regional economic integration by creating a zone of free movement for people, goods, services, and finances (Nemeth, 2022).

In a simultaneous progression in October 2019, the leaders of Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania independently proposed the "mini-Schengen" initiative, which aimed to establish the free circulation of people, goods, services,

and capital in the Western Balkans (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2021, p. 6). Follow-up discussions were held in November 2019 in Ohrid, North Macedonia, and in December 2019 in Tirana, Albania, to evaluate propositions for realizing the 'four freedoms' (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2021). Also, the aim of the open Balkan initiative was that western Balkan people will be able to work anywhere in western Balkan and also the relevant ministries had to work together for a VAT information sharing system (Government of North Macedonia, 2021). The Open Balkan Initiative, previously referred to as the "mini-Schengen" initiative, initially faced criticism due to its narrow focus, as it only involved Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania. This selective inclusion of Western Balkan countries brought forth questions about the initiative's capability to nurture a fully integrated and thriving regional environment. Detractors contend that leaving out significant stakeholders like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Kosovo could intensify existing divisions and disputes, thereby obstructing the broader aim of encouraging regional collaboration and stability.

Kosovo's incorporation into the Open Balkan Initiative, following the endorsement of the Economic Normalization Agreements at the White House Summit on September 4, 2020, represented a positive stride towards comprehensive regional integration. Kosovo's agreement to participate in the "mini Schengen" and execute agreements on highway, rail links, and flight routes with Serbia symbolized its dedication to promoting economic collaboration and enhancing connectivity in the Western Balkans (Balkan Policy Research Group, 2021, p. 25). Nevertheless, while this

progress is noteworthy, it alone is not sufficient to ensure the triumph of the Open Balkan Initiative, given the continuing disputes between Kosovo and Serbia. For the initiative to reach its full potential and facilitate enduring peace and stability in the region, addressing these contentious issues and fostering authentic reconciliation will be crucial.

Though the Open Balkan Initiative hasn't greatly influenced North Macedonia's domestic policies, it has positively altered Macedonian citizens' perceptions of Albania. Through the promotion of tighter integration and collaboration among participant countries, this initiative has improved Albanian-North Macedonian relations. This bolstered bilateral bond has also improved the atmosphere of inter-ethnic relations within North Macedonia, particularly between the Macedonian and Albanian communities. Hence, by encouraging economic unification and transnational cooperation, the Open Balkan Initiative has indirectly promoted better understanding, communication, and goodwill between these two neighboring countries, influencing North Macedonia's broader socio-political scenario.

The Open Balkan Initiative can also be interpreted as a proactive response to the European Union's hesitation to initiate accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania. Disappointed by the sluggish progress towards EU integration, these countries took control by participating in Serbia's project aimed at establishing a regional economic zone in the Western Balkans. However, it's crucial to consider that Serbia may have primarily initiated this project to assert its dominance over North Macedonia and Albania. By leading

regional integration initiatives, Serbia might have sought to expand its influence, molding the regional environment to match its strategic interests. Thus, while the Open Balkan Initiative encourages economic cooperation and integration, it might also be a vehicle for Serbia's regional ambitions.

There is an argument that the European Union's approach towards the Western Balkan countries hasn't been adequately serious or committed. This perspective is backed by comments from prominent EU figures such as French President Emmanuel Macron, who underscored the importance of a more united and stable Europe without jeopardizing the cohesion of the existing European Union. Macron suggested forming a new European organization - the European Political Community - that would enhance cooperation in multiple sectors, including politics, security, energy, transport, investment, infrastructure, and free movement of people, especially the youth (European Western Balkans, 2022). This proposal implies that while the EU recognizes the need to deepen its ties with the Western Balkans, it has yet to make concrete steps to expedite the integration process, further reinforcing the notion of the EU's deficient commitment to the region.

Plural Societies and Conflict Management: Power Sharing in Multiethnic Societies

Jarrett defines plural societies as those characterized by multiple distinct segments, which can be based on various factors such as ethnicity, race, language, culture, religion, region, ideology, among others. These divisions can

intersect, for example, a society could be segmented by both ethnicity and nationality or ethnicity and language (Jarrett, 2021, p. 37). Power sharing implies a distribution of authority and the ability to execute actions. It also necessitates that all involved parties have visible and significant roles in decision-making processes. This concept is often associated with positively perceived terms like "coalition" or "cooperative" government, and "consensual" and "inclusive" decision-making (O'Leary, 2013, pp. 1-3).

O'Leary (2013) explains that the goal of power sharing is the arrangement of political institutions to prevent the monopoly, of executive, legislative, judicial, bureaucratic, military, *or cultural power*. Four principal sets of instruments accomplish this goal;

1. "Political bodies (executive, legislative, judicial, and administrative) organized to ensure both "shared rule" and "selfrule" among the relevant agents;

2. Security bodies: militaries, police, and intelligence agencies,

3. Economic policies, principally wealth- sharing formulae, that reinforce the power sharing within the political bodies

4. Policies and practices that preserve cultural pluralism." (O'Leary, 2013, pp. 3-4)

5. Jarrett proposes that significant divisions or "segmental cleavages" occur when political lines align closely with significant societal differences (Jarrett, 2018, p. 46). He particularly emphasizes religion as a prominent cause of societal division (Jarrett, 2018, p. 47). Countries

like North Macedonia exemplify plural societies where divisions based on ethno-national lines are apparent. Jarrett identifies common traits of an ethnic community, which include a shared name, lineage, culture, historical memories, connection to a homeland, and a sense of unity (Jarrett, 2018, p. 47).

Quoting McGarry and O'Leary, Jarrett presents two strategies for mitigating conflict in plural societies (Jarrett, 2018, p. 48). One is integration, which rests on the idea that identities are mutable and can change; integrationists resist political activation along divisions such as ethnicity, nationality, culture, or religion (Jarrett, 2018, p. 47). The other strategy is accommodation, which usually considers identities as set and unchangeable. Proponents of accommodation seek to establish political structures that include and reflect a range of public identities (Jarrett, 2018, p. 47). This approach values the preservation of distinct identities while simultaneously promoting mutual understanding and collaboration among various ethnic groups. Accommodation contributes to a harmonious environment in which multiple ethnic communities can coexist without the need to assimilate into a single national identity. It also encourages political structures that permit a diversity of public identities, ensuring better representation for minority groups, thereby reducing the chances of conflict due to perceived marginalization or unequal treatment.

Consociationalism as a solution to ethnically divided societies

The fundamental notion of democracy within a majoritarian perspective is defined as the rule "by the majority of people", suggesting that the majority should govern and the minority should resist. However, the consensus model of democracy challenges this viewpoint (Lijphart, 1999, p. 41).

Expanding on Lijphart's work (2018), the relevance of consociationalism in diverse environments becomes evident. While a majoritarian democracy might be suitable for more homogenous nations, consociationalism and consensus-based democratic models are adept at addressing the specific difficulties encountered by societies fragmented along ethnic and religious lines (Ljiphart, 2018, p. 4). Through encouraging power sharing, inclusivity, and collaboration between various groups, consociationalism nurtures a political landscape that is stable and peaceful, meeting the needs and considerations of all societal segments. In doing so, consociationalism not only boosts democratic processes but also strengthens the enduring stability and resilience of diverse countries.

As a method for power sharing accommodation, consociationalism includes all significant factions within legislative and executive bodies, promotes proportionality in public administration, and leans towards proportional electoral systems (Jarrett, 2018, p. 49). This elite-centric, 'top-down' approach is especially effective in societies fractured along ethnic lines. By ensuring the inclusion of all major groups in the decision-making process, consociationalism adeptly navigates the challenges such

societies face, fostering stability and guarding against the sidelining of minority communities.

Consociationalism offers a power-sharing solution in societies that are deeply divided. It aims to manage conflicts and promote democratization in these societies by acknowledging and accommodating various ethnic or religious communities within government and societal structures based on proportionality (Doorenspleet & Maleki, 2018, p. 16). However, it risks intensifying divisions between these groups, who may become increasingly fundamentalized and isolated from one another (McCulloch, 2021, pp. 2-3). Yet, the success of consociationalism is often reliant on the readiness of previous adversaries to participate in arrangements and engage with each other (Doorenspleet & Maleki, 2018, p. 16).

Willingness, in this context, refers to the circumstances under which parties consent to distribute power, or consider power-sharing as a suitable framework for addressing and resolving their shared disputes (McCulloch, 2021, p. 4). However, in North Macedonia, the endeavor to establish a more consensual democratic system has been impeded by a lack of such willingness and a strong prevalence of ethnic nationalism. The intricate ethnic composition of the country, characterized by a Macedonian majority and a significant Albanian minority, frequently results in conflicts and discord over power-sharing provisions. The dominant ethnic nationalist attitudes within both communities obstruct consensus-building and mutual collaboration among distinct ethnic factions. This reluctance to engage in consociational power-sharing hinders the full

materialization of a comprehensive and consensus-driven democratic system in North Macedonia. To transition towards a more tranquil and stable political environment, it's essential for the country's political stakeholders to surmount these obstacles and display a greater willingness to partake in power-sharing configurations that cater to the desires and requirements of all ethnic communities within the country.

According to McCulloch, consociationalism remains a highly debated topic, with several key concerns frequently discussed. In summary, these concerns can be organized into three main categories:

> *"Adoption challenges: Consociationalism is hard to imple-ment because majorities and minorities have different pre-ferences for state structures, making consociational settle-ments rare.*
>
> *Functionality issues: Consociationalism is often seen as dy-sfunctional since it brings together diverse, reluctant part-ners, making consensus difficult to achieve and potentially leading to immobilism, deadlock, and ethnic outbidding.*
>
> *Modification and transition difficulties: Consociationa-lism is considered "sticky" as it locks in divisive identities, hindering a transition to majoritarian politics and making reforms or exits from consociational arrangements challen-ging"* (McCulloch, 2021, p. 3).

The Imperative of Constitutional Changes for a More Inclusive Democracy in North Macedonia

In majoritarian democracies, power is often centralized, while consensus systems aim to distribute power among

various groups (McCulloch, 2021, p. 13). For societies deeply divided along ethnic, religious, or cultural lines, a democratic model that emphasizes consensus, inclusivity, and expansive governing coalitions can be more effective and beneficial (Lijphart, 1999, pp. 20-25). This approach, known as consensus democracy, is particularly suited for addressing the challenges that arise in such diverse social contexts (Lijphart, 1999, pp. 20-25).

Sustaining democratic rule is typically more complex in divided societies compared to those with more homogeneity. The primary objectives of an effective power-sharing system are to encourage collaboration among political elites, facilitate democratic transition, and ensure long-term peace (McCulloch, 2021, pp. 5-13). Lijphart initially associated consociational democracy with both societal structure and democratic system characteristics. However, contemporary distinctions between consensus and majoritarian democracies hinge solely on the nature of their political institutions (Doorenspleet & Maleki, 2018, pp. 13-14). He advocates consensus democracy as an essential choice for constitutional designers shaping or reinforcing a country's democratic infrastructure (Lijphart, 1984, p. 209).

In the post-independence phase, Macedonia recognized power sharing as a vital political norm. However, the success of these institutional reforms did not adequately satisfy group preferences (McEvoy, 2015, p. 5). Albanians began to express that their cultural and identity needs were not sufficiently safeguarded within the new state, necessitating further constitutional and institutional amendments (McEvoy, 2015, p. 5). In such scenarios, the

successful implementation of a power-sharing structure can be obstructed by historical resentments, ethnic divides, and a lack of trust between different groups. These barriers can undermine the collaboration, compromise, and consensus-building that are critical for power-sharing arrangements. Moreover, such arrangements can unintentionally inflame tensions and competition, leading to instability and a higher likelihood of conflict. Thus, it's paramount to thoughtfully design and adapt power-sharing mechanisms to the distinct challenges of divided societies, in order to foster peace, stability, and democratic governance.

To maintain stable democracies, countries with deep societal divides of any nature require a consensus-based system of governance (Lijphart, 1984, p. 209). There are two ways to structure consociational institutions: predetermined or self-determined (McCulloch, 2021, p. 3). Predetermined, or corporate consociation, accommodates groups based on certain criteria like ethnicity or religion, often implementing tools like ethnic quotas and reserved seats (McCulloch, 2021, p. 3). Conversely, liberal consociation, or self-determined consociation, recognizes any significant political identities that emerge during democratic elections, whether they are rooted in ethnic or religious affiliations, or connected to subgroup or trans group associations (McCulloch, 2021, p. 3).

North Macedonia has embraced a dynamic liberal consociational system to adapt to demographic changes. In this system, Parliament members can choose to identify as part of 'communities not in the majority in the population of Macedonia.' Also, any laws affecting the autonomy

of local communities can only be passed with minority parliament members' approval (Fontana, 2017, pp. 102-103). North Macedonia practices liberal consociation, it isn't constitutionally established. The Macedonian power-sharing arrangement seeks to include a variety of political identities that emerge during elections, thereby ensuring a more inclusive and representative democracy. This approach fosters the integration of diverse societal groups into the political process, promoting cooperation and minimizing conflict potential. However, it's important to recognize that this system, given Macedonia's divided society, has its unique set of challenges.

The Ohrid Framework Agreement in North Macedonia was facilitated by the EU and NATO in 2001, and the main principles of power-sharing were suggested by external entities (Hulsey & Keil, 2021, p. 118). However, the influence of third parties was limited due to existing power-sharing elements in the government, like the grand coalition of Macedonian and Albanian parties since 1991, and the fact that the Ohrid Agreement only provided a power-sharing outline, with detailed and binding provisions being passed later by the Macedonian parliament (Bieber, 2013, p. 314). Since Macedonia's independence, coalitions have been formed between parties representing Macedonian and Albanian communities. Notably, this grand coalition commitment is not mandated by the Ohrid Framework Agreement or the Macedonian Constitution, even though collaboration between diverse group-representing parties is essential for decisions concerning local government, culture, education, language, and state symbols (Ohrid Framework Agreement, 2022). By the late 1990s, however,

many Albanians felt overlooked and discriminated against by the Macedonian majority (Hulsey & Keil, 2021, p. 119).

The fact that North Macedonia's Constitution continues to uphold a majoritarian system and does not constitutionally enforce power-sharing introduces potential risks for the Albanian community. The possibility remains that the majority could gain 63 seats and maintain power without needing the Albanian parties' support. Additionally, during significant national disputes, Macedonian parties frequently convene without including Albanian parties. Such situations have occurred in instances of constitutional amendments, name changes, or other nationally impactful situations, where decisions are made without considering the Albanian community's views, further aggravating divisions and instilling a sense of exclusion.

An instance of constitutional amendment that took place without Albanian party involvement was when Albanian representatives requested that the Albanian community be recognized as a constituent nation on equal footing with Macedonians. Although Albanian representatives chose to abstain from the parliamentary vote, the constitution was endorsed with majority Macedonian support (McEvoy, 2015, p. 160)**.** However, it is important to note that following the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001, the "double majority" or "Badinter majority" mechanism was introduced in North Macedonia. Nonetheless, this event underscores the possible risks and difficulties linked with the absence of constitutionally enforced power-sharing arrangements in North Macedonia. According to the Ohrid Framework Agreement (Ohrid Framework Agreement, 2022) and the

Constitution of North Macedonia (Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022), certain constitutional amendments necessitate the participation and endorsement of Albanian parliament members. The Ohrid Framework Agreement was formulated to address ethnic tensions and advocate power-sharing between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority. In line with the Agreement, the Macedonian Constitution was revised to introduce a "double majority" or "Badinter majority" voting system for certain critical decisions and constitutional alterations.

The "double majority" stipulation in the North Macedonian Constitution (Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022) necessitates the majority agreement of both the total number of parliamentary members (61 out of 120) and the representatives of non-majority communities (20 out of 120) to enact specific constitutional amendments or laws. These laws predominantly pertain to those that directly affect the culture, language use, education, personal documentation, and symbols' usage (Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022). This provision is meant to ensure the safeguarding of minority communities' rights and interests, especially the Albanian minority, during the decision-making process. Consequently, for certain constitutional amendments, particularly those influencing the rights and interests of the Albanian community, North Macedonia cannot amend the constitution without the Albanian parliament members' involvement and consent.

Despite the existence of power-sharing elements and a readiness to compromise, North Macedonia does not entirely embody a consociational democracy Lijphart (2018)

propounded that democracy could function effectively in divided societies provided specific conditions are met. He outlined these conditions into four attributes, further grouped into two categories: cultural autonomy and the other three elements (grand coalition, proportionality, minority veto) (Ljiphart, 2018, p. 1). Lijphart conceptualized consociational democracy based on four foundational principles: (a) power-sharing executives comprising representatives from all significant factions, (b) cultural autonomy for these groups, (c) proportionality in political representation, appointments to civil services, and distribution of government subsidies, and (d) a minority veto power on the most crucial issues such as minority rights and autonomy (Ljiphart, 2018, p. 3). Although North Macedonia displays some aspects of these principles, it does not completely epitomize a consociational democracy due to the lack of specific features, such as constitutionally enforced power-sharing arrangements.

Despite the presence of power-sharing elements, North Macedonia's democracy has certain drawbacks that hinder it from fully qualifying as a consociational democracy:

- Limited cultural autonomy: While the Ohrid Framework Agreement provides a degree of cultural autonomy for ethnic Albanians, there may exist areas where this autonomy is restricted or inadequately fulfilled.

- Disproportionate application of proportionality: Even though the Ohrid Framework Agreement introduced the "double majority" or "Badinter majority" voting mechanism to establish proportionality, this mechanism might not always be uniformly applied or effectively enforced. This discrepancy can lead to uneven

representation in politics, civil service appointments, and the allocation of government subsidies.

• Unsteady minority veto power: The "double majority" mechanism is designed to enable minority veto power on crucial issues. However, there could be circumstances where this power is not appropriately exercised, or decisions affecting minority rights and autonomy are undertaken without the required consent from minority representatives.

The Constitution of North Macedonia, which is majoritarian, doesn't formally designate the nation as a consensus democracy. This framework means that Macedonian parties could gain a majority by securing 61 seats in parliament, potentially undermining the influence of the Albanian party. This situation underscores the necessity for constitutional amendments in diverse societies. The application of veto power and explicit regulation of a consensus democracy model is vital for nurturing a more inclusive political landscape.

The majoritarian constitution has allowed instances where the Macedonian party VMRO secured a complete majority in parliament with 63 seats. This majority enabled VMRO to exercise governance with a narrow power base, even when an Albanian party was part of the coalition. The Skopje 2014 project stands as a glaring example of de facto majoritarian rule in the nation. Furthermore, when VMRO held a majority of 63 out of 120 seats, it was not obligated to endorse multiculturalism and bolster ethnic society. Conversely, they pursued policies that went against the interests of a large ethnic community, which comprises

almost 45% of the nation's populace. This example underscores the necessity for constitutional amendments to ensure fair power distribution and representation in North Macedonia, where the constitution currently remains majoritarian. VMRO's majoritarian governance approach has posed a significant obstacle to the objectives of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which aimed to institute a consociational democratic model in North Macedonia. The party's power concentration practice contravenes the principles of power-sharing, proportional representation, and minority veto power, which are vital for a functioning consociational democracy. Consequently, the Albanian community, among other minority groups, has encountered hurdles in obtaining equitable representation and power distribution. This situation further emphasizes the need for constitutional changes that advocate inclusivity and consensus-oriented governance in North Macedonia.

Conclusion

As we draw the discussion of this research to a close, it is crucial to revisit the objectives that were set out at the beginning of this study and reflect upon the significant insights that have emerged throughout. This thesis embarked on an ambitious journey to explore the complex interplay of ethnic nationalism, intergroup relations, and democracy in the multi-ethnic society of North Macedonia. It has striven to unravel the intricacies of ethnic tensions, political strategies, and the state of democracy, using the unique historical and political context of North Macedonia as a lens.

This comprehensive investigation, rooted in meticulous analysis of annual reports, empirical research, and in-depth case studies, has shed new light on the effects of ethnic nationalism on intergroup relations and democratic processes. It has delved into the unique challenges faced by North Macedonia, exploring the country's complex history of identity formation, nationalistic policies, interethnic struggles, and democratic evolution within the broader geopolitical realities of the Western Balkans.

By focusing on the transformative period following North Macedonia's independence, this research has explored the impacts of different governmental approaches towards ethnic relations and ethnocentric policies. Not only has it tracked the progress year by year, but it has also compared different governance periods, underlining the way political shifts have influenced the trajectory of democratic development and ethnic relations in the country.

The extensive exploration undertaken throughout this thesis has provided us with significant insights and generated key findings that deepen our understanding of the interrelation between ethnic nationalism, intergroup dynamics, and the democratic process. The following sections of this conclusion will delve into these critical findings, starting with the significant impact of North Macedonia's initial constitutional setup on the country's democratic journey and its interethnic relations.

Turning to the specifics of the findings, a crucial element that has emerged from this research concerns the impact of North Macedonia's first constitutional framework on the subsequent course of the country's socio-political development. It became evident through the research that the initial stages of democratic transition in North Macedonia, following its secession from Yugoslavia, did not fully cater to the needs and complexities of its multi-ethnic society. The constitution, as a foundational document setting the stage for democratic processes, did not incorporate an adequate system that could foster harmony in such a diverse societal structure. This development has led to a significant increase in interethnic tensions and discord.

This was evident in the period following the independence of North Macedonia when the initial constitution did not adequately accommodate the multi-ethnic makeup of the society, thereby leading to the rise of ethnically centered nationalistic policies. The discriminatory practices arising from these policies spurred a period of Albanian reorganization against the state system, fueling further tensions.

This oversight in the country's formative democratic stages has proven to be of significant consequence. It led to a continuous series of ethnocentric and nationalistic policies, effectively setting a roadmap for the nation's trajectory. Instead of setting up a robust democratic framework that encapsulates and acknowledges the multi-ethnic fabric of the society, the early stages of democratic transition focused predominantly on a majoritarian rule that disregarded the intricate ethnic dynamics at play. The result was an institutionalized bias that failed to address and reconcile the various ethnic groups' needs and aspirations.

This entrenched bias, in turn, fueled ethnic nationalism, as the policies rolled out tended to favor a particular ethnic group over others, exacerbating intergroup tensions and creating a strained environment that hindered the democratic process. The consequences of these ethnocentric policies have been far-reaching, influencing not only the intergroup relations within North Macedonia but also its relationships with neighboring countries and international stakeholders. It has raised critical questions about the inclusivity of the democratic process and the extent to which it accommodates the multi-ethnic nature of the society. Also posed direct

challenges to democratic transitions and consolidation in North Macedonia. This has been particularly noticeable in the periods of heightened nationalism, such as 2006-2017, where nationalistic policies effectively stalled the country's democratic progress and undermined its European aspirations. Moreover, such policies have resulted in the marginalization of the Albanian community from state institutions, causing further democratic deficiencies.

The findings of this research highlight that the initial misstep in the constitutional design had a domino effect on the political, social, and ethnic landscape of North Macedonia. The continued fostering of ethnocentric nationalistic policies led to an increased polarization within society and undermined the country's democratic consolidation efforts.

It, therefore, underlines the importance of a well-structured and inclusive constitutional framework in the early stages of democratic transition, particularly in multi-ethnic societies. It sheds light on the potential long-term consequences of overlooking the complexities of multi-ethnic societies during the transition period to a democratic system and provides a stark reminder of the importance of inclusive, well-thought-out policies for a peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic groups.

Continuing with the impacts of the initial constitution, it is essential to highlight the reactions it elicited among the various ethnic groups in the country, particularly the Albanian population. The constitution, designed primarily with a majority bias, inadvertently set the stage for a significant pushback from the marginalized groups, prominently the Albanians.

This group, feeling marginalized and discriminated against due to the constitution's majoritarian approach, began to reorganize and assert their rights against the state system. Their primary recourse was to use democratic channels to voice their grievances, turning to the parliament as the official platform. This period, spanning from the country's independence to 2001, was a particularly tense one. It was characterized by an escalating ethnic tension, widening divisions, and a growing sense of disenfranchisement among the Albanian population.

The exclusionary policies challenged the very essence of democracy, which thrives on inclusivity, representation, and equal rights for all citizens. The experience of the Albanian population underlines the potential pitfalls of a democratic system that does not adequately accommodate the ethnic diversity of the country. It further underscores the importance of ensuring that community rights are protected, and that all groups within a multi-ethnic society feel heard and represented.

These findings from North Macedonia present a compelling case of how ethnic nationalism and major ethnically institutional design, especially in the formative stages of a democratic system, can significantly impact inter-ethnic relations and the broader democratic process. The tense period that North Macedonia experienced following its independence from Yugoslavia underlines the importance of integrating all ethnic groups into the democratic process, ensuring fair representation, and respecting minority rights. Without these, not only is the health of the democratic system threatened, but it also risks exacerbating inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts.

The unwillingness of the Macedonian majority to address the Albanian community's concerns following independence, coupled with the lack of a strategic approach to create a genuinely inclusive multiethnic society, aggravated the situation further. The Albanian community's marginalization from state institutions, coupled with the predominant view that they posed a threat to the state structure, only served to widen the divide between the two main ethnic groups.

This volatile mix of disenfranchisement, neglect, and persistent resistance against the Albanians' struggle for equal rights led to an escalation of ethnic tensions and eventually culminated in the violent conflict of 2001. The conflict was a stark reminder of the destructive potential of unaddressed ethnic nationalism and the urgent need for a comprehensive and inclusive approach to managing ethnic diversity within a democratic framework.

The 2001 conflict underlines the severe consequences that can arise when there is a failure to acknowledge and respect the rights and concerns of all ethnic groups within a society. It illustrates the dangers of viewing ethnic diversity as a threat rather than a strength, and the pitfalls of a majority-oriented approach in a diverse society. The marginalization of the Albanian community, coupled with the Macedonian majority's resistance to their demands for equal rights and representation, exacerbated interethnic tensions and conflicts.

It is clear from this historical analysis that the neglect of communities' rights and the entrenchment of majoritarian policies can jeopardize not only interethnic relations but also the democratic integrity of a society. The lessons from North

Macedonia's experience should serve as a stark reminder to other multi-ethnic societies of the need to ensure inclusivity, equal rights, and fair representation in their democratic processes.

Moreover, this period fueled a deep-seated animosity between the two communities, which persists to this day. These divisions were reflected not only in society at large but also in the political arena. The political parties began to align themselves along ethnic lines, focusing on championing the rights of their respective communities rather than advancing national or public interest.

In this scenario, economic progress, improvements in living standards, and national and urban development became secondary considerations. The preoccupation with ethnic issues and the consequent neglect of broader development issues acted as a significant impediment to North Macedonia's overall growth and progress. It underscored the debilitating effect of ethnic nationalism on a country's holistic development and democratic processes.

The ethnic polarization of politics has further entrenched the divisions between the Macedonian and Albanian communities. This polarization has stymied meaningful dialogue and compromise between the communities, impeding the development of policies that are truly inclusive and beneficial to all. The resulting focus on ethnically driven politics has also diverted attention and resources away from critical national issues such as economic development, social welfare, and infrastructural growth.

The Macedonian case thus underscores the need for an approach to governance that does not merely cater to the

majority but actively seeks to ensure fair representation and consideration for all ethnic groups. It also highlights the need for political parties to move beyond ethnically driven agendas and to focus on the broader national interest. This shift would be a critical step towards fostering social cohesion, interethnic understanding, and inclusive democracy in multi-ethnic societies like North Macedonia

The persistent ethnic tension, deep-seated animosity, and the lack of political will to address the concerns of the Albanian community led to the unfortunate violent conflict in 2001. It also fostered a hostile political environment, defined primarily by ethnically motivated party politics. Economic prosperity, development, and overall progress of the country fell secondary to these ethnocentric struggles, severely impeding North Macedonia's path to comprehensive nation-building.

However, amidst this scenario of deep division and conflict, a beacon of hope emerged in the form of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) in 2001. The OFA, designed to end the conflict and pave the way for a more inclusive society, provided a spirit of a new era in North Macedonia.

This agreement, in essence, provided the foundation for constructing a multicultural society where all ethnicities, including the long marginalized Albanian community, could coexist peacefully. It introduced substantial constitutional and legislative changes that were aimed at enhancing the rights and representation of the Albanian minority and other ethnic communities in the political and public sphere. Mechanisms such as power-sharing, decentralization, and equitable representation marked

radical steps towards ensuring minority rights and preventing future conflicts.

Furthermore, this agreement fostered hope and optimism for a democratic North Macedonia, where ethnic coexistence, reconciliation, and interethnic cooperation could indeed be possible. While the challenges in managing ethnic relations in such a multi-ethnic society were far from over, the agreement ushered in an era where ethnic identities could coexist and thrive without threatening the integrity of the nation or leading to conflict.

The transition to the period following the agreement has not been devoid of challenges, and progress has been intermittent, underlining the complexities of managing ethnic relations in multi-ethnic societies. Nevertheless, the OFA has played a critical role in shaping North Macedonia's political and ethnic landscape and serves as a poignant reminder of the potential of legal and constitutional reforms, power-sharing mechanisms, and inclusive policies in promoting peace and multiculturalism.

As the thesis progressed, it became clear that a multi-ethnic society should not rely solely on an agreement that is a direct result of armed conflict and external pressures, and moreover, lacks clear mechanisms for its implementation. These factors can lead to further escalations during the agreement's execution and varying interpretations by different parties, in turn prolonging the conflict and deferring resolution. As seen with the OFA, the struggle for its implementation lasted 20 years, and still, parts remain without full enactment.

The major findings of this thesis thus suggest that North Macedonia cannot transition to a fully multi-ethnic society based merely on the OFA. Constitutional changes are unavoidable. In the North Macedonian context, these changes should be born from internal consensus, thereby ensuring national ownership of the process and taking into account the needs and aspirations of all ethnic communities. This would ensure the full integration of the previously marginalized Albanian community and others alike.

Through examining the journey of North Macedonia, from its early days of independence through the flawed constitution to the challenges of the OFA implementation, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of managing ethnic relations in multi-ethnic societies. This also demonstrates that building a genuinely multi-ethnic society requires not only the necessary constitutional reforms but also a broader socio-cultural shift towards accepting and celebrating multi-ethnic coexistence and the democratic values that underpin it. While the OFA brought an era of relative peace, the journey towards a fully democratic, multi-ethnic society is ongoing. This thesis contributes significantly to understanding the historical and ongoing challenges North Macedonia faces and proposes a pathway towards achieving its vision of multi-ethnic coexistence.

Furthermore, the willingness and cooperation at the elite level play a pivotal role in strengthening the multi-ethnic fabric of North Macedonia. In the absence of such, externally influenced attempts to push towards a more multi-ethnic society have unfortunately incited further ethnic nationalistic rhetoric and politics. This dynamic further

deepens the divisions between communities and positions the Albanian community, in particular, as collaborating with foreign actors against their own nation, a perception that only serves to further exacerbate the social divide.

The interpretation of external influences as interference rather than support has fueled nationalist sentiments, thereby creating a vicious cycle of ethnic tensions. It illustrates a complex challenge within the national political discourse of North Macedonia. The idea of sovereignty and self-determination can inadvertently conflict with the goal of multi-ethnicity if it is perceived as a concept pushed by external entities, rather than being organically accepted and practiced within the society.

These findings underscore the need for domestic political elites, across ethnic lines, to embrace the spirit of multi-ethnicity and diversity wholeheartedly. They should work towards fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding among the ethnic communities. North Macedonia's path towards a truly multi-ethnic society lies in the hands of these leaders. Their willingness to engage in constructive dialogue and their commitment to the vision of a multi-ethnic North Macedonia is key.

Moreover, they must reject the divisive politics of ethnic nationalism, and instead, pursue policies that bridge communal gaps, promote social cohesion, and emphasize the economic identity and shared goals. Only through such a comprehensive approach can North Macedonia successfully transform into a robust multi-ethnic democracy. These proactive steps towards understanding, cooperation, and reconciliation will be critical in shaping North Macedonia's

future as a truly democratic, inclusive, and multi-ethnic society.

Evidence supporting the hypothesis about the pivotal role of willingness and cooperation in promoting inter-ethnic harmony and societal progress can be found in the recent political history of North Macedonia. In the period between 2002 and 2006, when the Social Democrats and an Albanian party held the reins of power, there was a noticeable commitment to improving inter-ethnic relations and country development. This period is viewed as a constructive chapter in North Macedonia's journey towards a more inclusive and cooperative multi-ethnic society.

However, the dynamics shifted dramatically when nationalists ascended to power from 2006 to 2017. Despite the inclusion of an Albanian party in the coalition, the situation remained fragile. This period was marked by a stark contrast, where the ruling coalition relied heavily on ethnic nationalism to consolidate their votes. The frequent use of nationalistic rhetoric against the Albanian community heightened tensions and created an atmosphere of distrust and division.

These contrasting periods in North Macedonia's political history offer important lessons. They demonstrate the power and influence political elites hold over the trajectory of inter-ethnic relations and the democratic process in the country. When leaders choose to foster cooperation and mutual respect among different ethnic groups, the entire nation reaps the benefits in the form of social harmony and progress. However, when leaders exploit ethnic differences for political gain, it creates a detrimental impact

on inter-ethnic relations and stalls the country's overall development.

It is essential, then, for political leaders to prioritize nation-building over partisan politics. The use of divisive rhetoric for short-term political gains erodes the long-term goal of a cohesive, multi-ethnic society. North Macedonia's path towards a vibrant multi-ethnic democracy requires political elites to embrace an inclusive narrative that unites rather than divides, that fosters understanding and respect among all ethnic communities. This calls for a rejection of narrow nationalist ideologies and an embrace of the shared values and common goals that bind all citizens together.

The period from 2006 to 2017 marked a time of heightened ethnic nationalism in North Macedonia, presenting significant challenges to the democratic transition and consolidation of the country. The government of the time engaged in a number of policies that were largely ethnically nationalistic in nature;

1. Political Polarization: The period saw an increase in the divide between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, fueled by political rhetoric and policies that favored one ethnic group over the other. This heightened polarization had adverse effects on the democratic culture of the country. It hindered dialogue and consensus-building - key elements in any functioning democracy.

2. Marginalization of other communities: Ethnic nationalistic policies resulted in the marginalization of minority groups, particularly the Albanian community. They felt alienated from the state institutions, fostering

a sense of resentment and disillusionment that not only threatened social cohesion but also undermined the democratic process.

3. Erosion of Trust in Institutions: These policies resulted in a severe erosion of trust in the state institutions, deemed as biased and favoring a particular ethnic group. This loss of faith in institutions hampered the democratic functioning of the country, as democracy relies on the trust and participation of all its citizens.

4. Threats to Freedom of Expression: The rise of ethnic nationalism led to an atmosphere where freedom of expression was threatened. Voices of dissent or difference, particularly from the marginalized communities, were often silenced or ignored, leading to an undemocratic environment.

These challenges created by the surge in ethnic nationalism put a significant strain on North Macedonia's democratic processes and its journey towards becoming a more inclusive, multi-ethnic society. Ethnic nationalism, as the research finds, is not merely a sociopolitical issue, but a significant impediment to the democratization of a multi-ethnic society like North Macedonia.

The nationalistic policies enacted during this period had repercussions extending beyond the domestic sphere, impacting North Macedonia's standing and relations with international organizations and its aspirations for integration into the European community.

1. Delayed NATO Membership: North Macedonia's membership to NATO was considerably delayed due to the

nationalistic policies implemented by the government. Such policies ran counter to NATO's principles of democratic governance and protection of minority rights, causing concerns among the member states about North Macedonia's commitment to these principles. The protracted negotiations and delay in membership were a direct outcome of the detrimental effect these policies had on North Macedonia's international image and credibility.

2. Stalled European Aspirations: Similarly, the path towards European Union membership was impeded. The EU values respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. The nationalistic policies and the resultant societal divisions made it difficult for North Macedonia to demonstrate its commitment to these values, thus slowing down its progress towards EU integration.

These setbacks at the international level were not only a blow to the country's strategic goals but also had significant domestic implications. They perpetuated a sense of uncertainty and instability, further hampering democratic consolidation and interethnic relations within North Macedonia. These findings underscore the far-reaching consequences of ethnic nationalism, highlighting its capacity to not only disrupt domestic processes but also impede a country's international aspirations.

The events of the 2017 period mark a significant shift in North Macedonia's political trajectory, demonstrating the potential of proactive and inclusive governance to promote ethnic harmony, democratic consolidation, and

international integration. This period, characterized by the governance of the pro-West Social Democrats and their partnership with Albanian parties, provides compelling evidence for the hypothesis that political willingness and cooperation are instrumental in fostering a stable multi-ethnic society.

The positive outcomes from this period were multifold:

1. Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement: This period witnessed significant progress in implementing the provisions of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which had previously been stalled. The dedicated efforts of the new government in advancing the agreement's implementation marked a significant shift towards greater respect for ethnic diversity and community rights. This, in turn, helped in alleviating interethnic tensions and fostering a sense of unity within the country.

2. Improved Interethnic Relations: The inclusive governance model adopted by the Social Democrats led to noticeable improvements in interethnic relations. The visible representation of Albanian politicians in key positions, such as the President of Parliament and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, was an important step towards dispelling feelings of marginalization within the Albanian community. It sent a clear message of recognition and respect for the Albanian community's role in the country's governance, thereby contributing to enhanced interethnic harmony.

3. Successful International Integrations: Perhaps the most prominent achievement of this period was North Macedonia's successful integration into NATO, marking the

end of a long and contentious journey. The change of the country's name as per the Prespa Agreement resolved the dispute with Greece, paving the way for NATO membership. Concurrently, the government's initiatives to improve interethnic relations and consolidate democratic processes were recognized by the European Union, which opened negotiations for North Macedonia's accession.

4. Strengthened Democracy: The increased representation and recognition of minority groups, adherence to democratic values, commitment to international norms, and the intent to improve interethnic relations all contributed to strengthening the democratic system in North Macedonia.

The outcomes from this period reinforce the importance of political willingness and cooperation in shaping a multi-ethnic society. However, they also underline the notion that constitutional changes may still be necessary to ensure long-term stability and to safeguard the gains achieved from being eroded by potential future shifts in political will.

Consequently, this period serves as an important case study for multi-ethnic societies, illustrating how active political commitment towards inclusive governance can dramatically improve interethnic relations, democratic processes, and international standing. Yet, it also emphasizes the necessity of robust constitutional provisions to ensure that these positive changes are not transient, but rather embedded in the fundamental structure of the country.

In light of the above discussion, we see that the dynamics of interethnic relations, democratic consolidation, and international integration are interconnected in multifaceted

ways. The period from 2017 onwards stands testament to this intricate relationship.

Following a challenging period characterized by ethnic nationalistic policies, the new leadership, led by the Social Democrats and Albanian parties, brought about significant changes. The Ohrid Framework Agreement saw tangible progress in its implementation, which served as a foundation for improved interethnic relations. This inclusive approach resulted in Albanian politicians occupying key positions, mitigating the feelings of marginalization within the Albanian community, and fostering a sense of unity and shared identity.

Furthermore, the successful integration into NATO and the initiation of negotiations for EU membership were landmark achievements in the country's history, which were made possible by the government's steadfast commitment to enhancing interethnic harmony and consolidating democratic processes. This commitment, in turn, contributed significantly to strengthening the democratic system in North Macedonia.

These developments affirm the central role of political willingness and cooperation in molding a truly multi-ethnic society. They underscore the necessity of taking deliberate measures to recognize and respect diversity, which in turn promotes democratic consolidation.

While the period since 2017 presents an optimistic narrative of progress, the journey towards a truly multiethnic and inclusive society in North Macedonia is far from complete. One of the most significant stumbling blocks in this path

is the constitution, which continues to be a source of tension and disagreement among the country's ethnic communities.

The Albanian political parties have consistently pressed for constitutional amendments to better represent the multiethnic character of the country. On the other hand, resistance from the Macedonian side reflects the complexity of this issue and underscores the urgent need for a more comprehensive and inclusive solution.

The thesis has found that the current constitutional framework tends to marginalize the rights of the Albanian community by basing them on percentages. This percentage-based system has proven to be problematic and contentious. For instance, the provision that the Albanian language becomes official in cities where the Albanian population constitutes more than 20% inevitably raises questions about the status of areas where the population percentage might fall slightly below this threshold, say 19%. This percentage-based approach poses significant challenges to the spirit of multiethnicity and can trigger political implications that further strain interethnic relations.

Indeed, such a system stands in contrast with the principles of inclusivity and equality. It creates an artificial and arbitrary barrier to the recognition of community rights and language use, fostering a sense of marginalization and discrimination. This, in turn, risks feeding into ethnic tensions and conflicts, which could potentially undermine the democratic consolidation and international integrations that the country has achieved so far.

Given these challenges, the thesis suggests that constitutional changes that transcend the percentage-based system are critical for North Macedonia's journey towards becoming a fully multiethnic society. Such changes are necessary to ensure that all communities, regardless of their size, are recognized, respected, and protected within the state framework. This, in turn, will contribute to reinforcing the democratic foundations of the country and fostering a sense of shared national identity.

The need for political will and constitutional changes is essential in North Macedonia. Only through a deliberate and committed approach towards addressing these pressing issues can the country hope to move forward in its journey towards a truly multiethnic society where all communities feel recognized, valued, and included.

Current constitution of North Macedonia seems to straddle a middle ground between majority rule and consociationalism as suggested by Lijphart. This hybrid model further complicates the functioning of the country's institutions, contributing to governance challenges and institutional dysfunction.

Specifically, this mixed system creates judicial gaps and ambiguities in the constitutional framework. These gaps tend to hamper the progress of democratic consolidation as they leave room for conflicting interpretations, legal disputes, and power struggles. The mixed system, with its blurred lines and unclear rules, creates uncertainty and fosters an environment where the true spirit of democratic governance can be compromised.

This thesis finds that an improved power-sharing system would enhance the functioning of institutions, leading to progress, greater stability, and enhanced democracy. This entails revisiting and amending the constitutional provisions that create ambiguities and hinder efficient governance. In a multiethnic society such as North Macedonia, a clear and comprehensive framework for power-sharing is crucial. It ensures that all communities have adequate representation, and that the government can make decisions and implement policies effectively.

An essential part of a power-sharing system involves ensuring that minority rights are safeguarded, and these groups have a meaningful say in the administration. The present constitution in North Macedonia, a blend of majoritarian and consociational principles, has led to gaps in the judicial system and hindered institutional functioning. This mixed approach has inadvertently fueled intergroup tensions, particularly between the Macedonian majority and Albanian minority, due to the perceived marginalization in areas where the Albanian population falls short of the 20% threshold, among other factors.

This thesis has found that the lack of a robust power-sharing system is central to these problems. Adopting a more balanced and inclusive power-sharing model could help address these issues by fostering greater trust in the political and judicial system. In turn, this would empower the judiciary, providing it with the legitimacy and authority it needs to function effectively.

For instance, the institutions could benefit from constitutional amendments that define clear protocols

for power-sharing among different communities, provide specific guidelines for conflict resolution, and ensure that all citizens, regardless of their ethnic background, are treated equally under the law. Such amendments would fill the judicial gaps in the existing constitution, clarify the roles and responsibilities of different institutions, and ensure the smooth functioning of the democratic system.

In the long run, these constitutional revisions would promote interethnic harmony, institutional efficiency, and democratic growth. They would also bring the country closer to the ideal of a multiethnic society where all communities have an equal stake in governance and policymaking. Consequently, the need for constitutional changes becomes not only desirable but essential for North Macedonia to reach its full democratic potential.

Income inequality and financial discrimination also represent another significant challenge in North Macedonia, specifically impacting the Albanian community. This issue also ties in closely with the previously discussed elements of ethnic nationalism and the need for a more balanced power-sharing system.

Over the past thirty years, the marginalization of the Albanian community, both politically and economically, has led to a considerable wealth gap between the Macedonian and Albanian populations. This has resulted in a significant brain drain, with many members of the Albanian community emigrating to European countries in search of better opportunities.

This massive exodus is not just a loss of human capital; it's also a stark indicator of the systemic issues that plague

North Macedonia's societal fabric. The trend of preferential investment in predominantly Macedonian cities has only served to exacerbate this problem, creating a sense of financial discrimination and contributing to the escalation of inter-ethnic tensions.

This thesis has highlighted how this financial inequality further deepens the ethnic divide, leading to social and political instability. Addressing economic disparities and ensuring equitable distribution of resources is therefore an essential step in fostering multiethnic harmony, strengthening the democratic process, and promoting the overall development of North Macedonia.

This underscores the urgency for reforms at both the constitutional and policy levels. A power-sharing system that ensures political inclusivity and a socioeconomic strategy that promotes equitable development are crucial for North Macedonia's path towards a stable, multiethnic, and democratic society.

External influence, particularly from the European Union (EU), has undeniably been a pivotal driver towards developing a more inclusive multiethnic society in North Macedonia. The conditions laid out by the EU during the accession process have helped steer the nation towards reforms that promote multiculturalism and diversity. These reforms have, in turn, been instrumental in enhancing democratic processes, fostering interethnic harmony, and paving the way for progress and development.

However, it's equally important to acknowledge the potential downsides of external influences. While international entities advocate for the rights of marginalized communities

and push for structural reforms, these actions can sometimes inadvertently exacerbate ethnic tensions within the country. When these advocacy efforts are perceived by the majority as a threat or as an external intrusion, it can lead to a backlash, fueling a sense of nationalism that views these communities as collaborating with foreign powers against their own country. This dynamic was prominently observed in North Macedonia, where the advocacy for Albanian rights sometimes led to increased ethnic tensions.

Nonetheless, external influence remains crucial for the progression towards a functional multiethnic society in North Macedonia. It provides a platform for addressing minority rights, encourages democratic practices, and pushes for institutional reforms. However, the handling of such influence is equally significant. It is vital to ensure that these external pressures are managed in a way that facilitates the growth and strengthening of interethnic relations, rather than contributing to their strain.

This calls for a delicate balance and proactive engagement from the domestic political actors, who must communicate clearly with their constituents and help navigate these influences in a manner that fosters unity and communal harmony, rather than division. Building this understanding into the political and social fabric of North Macedonia is essential for its journey towards a stable, inclusive, and democratic society.

One of the examples is the Berlin process, which was evaluated in the thesis. The discussions typically revolve around themes such as economic growth and prosperity, youth engagement, justice and home affairs, and security

and migration. the Berlin Process has had substantial impacts on its internal politics. Firstly, it provides a roadmap and motivation for the country to implement democratic reforms, especially those enhancing interethnic relations and the rights of marginalized communities, which are prerequisites for EU membership. The process encourages North Macedonia to adopt European norms and standards, and reinforces the importance of interethnic reconciliation, tolerance, and diversity.

Secondly, the Berlin Process helps to foster regional cooperation by encouraging dialogue and collaboration among the Western Balkan nations. This is crucial for North Macedonia, given its historical ethnic tensions and conflicts. The regional collaborations, ranging from infrastructure projects to educational exchanges, contribute to breaking down nationalistic barriers and fostering a shared sense of regional identity.

Lastly, the Process has empowered civil society in North Macedonia, with an increased focus on youth engagement, a key component of the Berlin Process. This has helped to foster a new generation of Macedonians who are more open to diversity, thereby facilitating interethnic relations.

The recent attempt to launch the Open Balkan initiative by Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia is another poignant example of the region's challenges and complexities. The initiative, which sought to promote regional integration and cooperation, eventually ended due to its non-inclusive nature. The absence of Bosnia, Kosovo, and Montenegro - key players in the region - raised questions about the initiative's viability and potential for success.

This initiative serves as a sobering reminder of the ongoing complexities of developing multi-ethnic societies within the region. As North Macedonia continues its journey towards a truly inclusive, democratic, and prosperous multi-ethnic society, it must remain cognizant of these regional dynamics. Continued commitment to internal reforms, active engagement in regional cooperation mechanisms, and constructive utilization of external support will be vital in navigating these complexities and ensuring long-term stability and progress.

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