

# RIDE-OR-DIE SUPPORTERS? ALBANIAN NARRATIVES ON EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

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**Abstract**

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

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

## Introduction

Foreign policy – more specifically, Euro-Atlantic integration – is a domain in which the interests of North Macedonia’s political elites are closely aligned. Membership in Western politico-military and economic organizations such as the UN, NATO and the European Union (EU) has been a foreign policy objective of successive governments since the country’s independence in 1991 (Marolov, 2013, p. 9; Bechev & Marušić, 2020, p. 2). This priority is also shared by both Macedonians and Albanians (Leka, 2021, p. 56); the latter constituting 24 percent of North Macedonia’s population of 1.8 million (State Statistical Office, 2022), making the Albanian community the most populous and politically significant minority group. Their political influence and importance, particularly after the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement (hereinafter OFA), as well as their role as so-called “king-makers” (Gjorgjoska, 2022, p. 3) in government formation, have been widely analyzed. Little attention,

however, has been paid to examining their foreign policy priorities, and the (seemingly) unwavering support for Euro-Atlantic integration.

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

### *Research design*

Joining Western politico-military alliances is one of the few unifying elements capable of symbolizing national cohesion in a divided, post-conflict, consociational democracy. Consociationalism, as defined by Lijphart (1969), is a form of governance that, through carefully designed, implemented, and monitored power-sharing mechanisms, ensures the participation of minority groups at various – including the highest – levels of the state (pp. 216–217). North Macedonia’s case demonstrates that the shared objective of Euro-Atlantic integration remains, even more than twenty-five years after the signing of the OFA, a unique phenomenon. Ethnic Macedonians and Albanians have few cross-cutting issues that hold significance for both groups and that can simultaneously be perceived as national, rather than merely local or ethnic concerns. Since traditional building blocks of identity, such as language, religion, history, or even a common adversary (Babuna, 2000; Piacentini, 2019; Andeva et al., 2022), cannot serve as the nexus of self-identification for both ethnic groups, the existence of a consensus on joining Western alliances represents a positive development<sup>1</sup> and can function as “social covenants” (Taleski & Pollozhani, 2016) in North Macedonia.

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

imposed retreat (p. 53) are utilized, thereby further strengthening the paper's theoretical framework.

In addition to comprehensive desk research on the evolution of the Albanians' foreign policy priorities since North Macedonia's independence, the paper draws on twenty-five semi-structured interviews<sup>2</sup>, conducted by the author of this article in North Macedonia in 2024, to address the following research questions:

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

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

## **Rocky road ahead: North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration**

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

### ***NATO accession***

Membership in NATO has long been a cornerstone of North Macedonia's foreign and security policy. Shortly after declaring independence, the Parliament voted to officially launch the country's bid to join the politico-military alliance (Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia, 1993). Although North Macedonia, like Croatia and

Albania, was left out of the so-called Vilnius Group – an informal platform of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European countries seeking NATO membership – and the first three post-Cold War enlargement rounds (1995, 1999 and 2004), it remained committed to achieving NATO's political objectives and technical standards. This included building closer ties with NATO through the Partnership for Peace (NATO, 1995) and the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NATO, 1996). In 2003, Albania, Croatia, and North Macedonia, under the auspices of the United States, created the Adriatic Charter to strengthen technical collaboration (U.S. Department of State, 2003). In this spirit, the country's National Defense Strategy had already been aligned with NATO standards by the new millennium.

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

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

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

The years 2018–2019 proved to be a watershed in unblocking North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. After a decade of ethno-nationalist politics that

stalled UN-led negotiations, the new government prioritized good neighborly relations and the resolution of bilateral disputes. The signing (2018) and ratification (2019) of the Prespa Agreement legally ended nearly thirty years of dispute over the name issue. Greece subsequently pledged not to block North Macedonia's accession to international organizations, including NATO and the EU (Prespa Agreement, 2018). As a result, more than a decade in the making, North Macedonia received an official invitation to join the alliance. Following ratification by all member states,<sup>3</sup> the country became NATO's 30<sup>th</sup> member (NATO, 2020), the last Southeast European state to do so to date.

Public support for NATO membership has traditionally been strong, even amid political turbulence. Approval peaked ahead of the Bucharest summit, when 92 percent of citizens supported accession (International Republican Institute, 2017, p. 55). However, attitudes shifted following Greece's veto: although 80 percent still favored joining the alliance in 2010, "approximately 65 per cent [...] were opposed to the country changing its name as the price for joining NATO" (Mulchinock, 2017, p. 241). Furthermore, data from 2015 showed that 70 percent of respondents would not support membership if it required a name change, while 68 percent would join under the FYROM designation (Capital.gr, 2011). By 2017, public opinion began to shift: polls by the International Republican Institute indicated that 77 percent supported NATO membership, and 57 percent were willing to accept a name change if it meant achieving Euro-Atlantic integration (2018, p. 21). These figures suggest that, while the majority consistently supported NATO membership, the bilateral dispute remained a major social and political divide, as also reflected in the 2018 referendum on the name change.<sup>4</sup>

### ***EU accession***

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

North Macedonia once had the potential to be among the first Western Balkan states to join the EU. It was the first to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement<sup>5</sup> with the EU in 2001 (Council & Commission, 2004), even before the EU had

formally/politically declared its openness to Western Balkan enlargement. Following the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, where the EU extended the prospect of membership to the Western Balkans, North Macedonia again led the region by submitting its membership application the following year. The European Council granted candidate status in 2005, based on a positive recommendation from the European Commission, paving the way for the technical and legal stages of accession (European Commission, n.d.). Up to this point, North Macedonia's EU path was on track.

Political issues soon impeded the accession progress. Despite consistent European Commission recommendations to open accession negotiations, the European Council could not achieve unanimity; starting in 2009, Greece blocked the progress, citing the unresolved name dispute by mirroring its stance during the NATO accession process (Koneska, 2019, p.57).

After a decade-long impasse, the Prespa Agreement resolved the name dispute, and Greece withdrew its objections. Yet, new obstacles quickly emerged: in 2019, France, Denmark, and the Netherlands opposed opening accession negotiations, citing the need to reform the EU's enlargement methodology and expressing reservations particularly about Albania (Butnaru-Troncoță, 2025, pp. 9–10). Since North Macedonia's integration progress had been "coupled"<sup>6</sup> with Albania's, concerns about the latter's readiness delayed both countries. Although North Macedonia was effectively a "victim" of objections over Albania's integration, France opposed "decoupling" these candidate countries (Tcherneva & Varma, 2019). Once the revised enlargement methodology, proposed by France, was adopted in 2020, all member states endorsed the formal opening of accession negotiations.

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

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

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

### **Foreign policy priorities of North Macedonia's Albanians**

The paper now turns to examining the foreign policy priorities of the Albanian political leadership. It argues that, based on earlier research and interviews, most foreign policy objectives – especially Euro-Atlantic integration – are shared with the Macedonian political bloc. The question of Kosovo and the advocacy for its independence, however, had created political divisions. Importantly, although the Albanian political corpus is not homogeneous – there are and have been numerous political parties representing the Albanian electorate since North Macedonia's independence<sup>7</sup> – their foreign policy objectives and general orientation toward the West remain a shared, uncontested feature. Therefore, out of simplification, the paper treats the political corpus representing the Albanian minority as a single entity.

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

Additionally, there is an understanding that North Macedonia's foreign policy has been shaped and controlled by the (ethnic) Macedonians, thus contributing to the voluntary retreat of Albanians. Undoubtedly, in the first decade after independence, the Macedonian leadership "controlled both the executive and the legislative branches of government" (Rossos, 2008, p. 278), including security and foreign policy. Besides, foreign affairs at this period were also a strong domain of the president; Kiro Gligorov, whose "advantages were his patriotism, his career in federal institutions, his political contacts and popularity, including among Albanians" (Todorova,

2020, p. 397), maintained strong partnership and coalition with the most prominent Albanian political party by offering them ministerial positions (Stefanova, 2008, p. 11). In the post-2001 period, “as a result of the evolution of the political system from semi-presidential to a more classical parliamentary system” (Leka, 2021, p. 51), the government assumed almost full control over conducting foreign policy. This shift, in theory, allowed Albanian foreign policy interests to be more pronounced, directly through the cabinet.

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

The Albanian political corpus has always given its approval to North Macedonia’s foreign and security policy objectives, namely accession to NATO and the EU (International Crisis Group, 2009). Although the group was preoccupied with domestic (internal) issues, it nevertheless showed commitment to the necessity of Euro-Atlantic integration. One can argue that, in this sense, these two political blocs jointly constructed the newly independent country’s foreign policy: while the Macedonian leadership set the red lines (especially regarding identity-related bilateral disputes), Albanians did not raise any concerns or reservations but remained supportive and pragmatic. In other words: instead of an imposed, a more voluntary retreat may characterize Albanian attitudes toward the country’s foreign affairs.

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

quickly, their pragmatism led them to remain supportive of Macedonian positions and to constitute a unified stance against Greece.

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

### ***Kin-state and kinship: Albania and Kosovo***

Albania holds a special position among Albanian foreign policy priorities. It is regarded not only as their kin-state<sup>8</sup> but also as a country that potentially leads by example in foreign affairs. For the Albanian political community in North Macedonia, Albania's integration into Western alliances serves both as an example and, in some cases, a cause for concern. Albania's NATO accession in 2009 demonstrated that once the country had surpassed North Macedonia on their joint integration path, frustration toward the Macedonian leadership and the sense of being left behind grew among Albanians in North Macedonia (Marusic, 2009). Albanian politicians were more inclined to raise concerns publicly and promise NATO and EU integration "with or without Macedonians" (A1 Televizija, 2009), yet they maintained respect for Macedonian positions vis-à-vis the name dispute even after Albania's NATO accession. The same tendency (frustration primarily) has been evident since Albania and North Macedonia's EU integration paths were decoupled in 2024.

Support for Kosovo and advocacy for its independence are also high on the Albanian foreign policy agenda. The Albanian community – comprising a unified bloc in the northwestern parts of North Macedonia near Kosovo's border – has lived in symbiosis with their Albanian compatriots in Kosovo since the Ottoman period. For Albanians in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, "Pristina and its university were historical, cultural, and intellectual centers of Albanian nationalism" (Serwer, 2018, p. 53), at the expense of Tirana.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Kosovo was the hub for future Albanian political actors in North Macedonia, too, and many of their defining politicians, especially from the Democratic Union for Integration (hereinafter DUI), were socialized in Kosovo.

The Kosovo War (1998–1999) and the subsequent declaration of independence (2008) have always resonated with the Albanian political corpus in North Macedonia. As Kosovo Albanians fled the armed conflict to North Macedonia, mainly to the Albanian-inhabited northwestern regions and to Skopje, "the country received

344,500 refugees – 15 times more than expected” (Donev et al., 2002, p. 184). Moreover, many Albanian insurgents from the armed conflict in North Macedonia (2001) had also taken part in the Kosovo Liberation Army (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*), including members of the leadership such as Fazli Veliu and the head of DUI, Ali Ahmeti (Naegele, 2002). Later on, Ahmeti himself also became the main advocate for Kosovo’s statehood and normalization of relations with Serbia (Sloboden Pecat, 2022).

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

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

### ***Western orientation as a means of countering threats***

Western orientation is an objective shared by Albanians in North Macedonia and elsewhere. In addition to supporting Euro-Atlantic integration, the EU and, more importantly, the United States are perceived as their strategic partners. There are at least two reasons behind the general pro-Western orientation among Albanians and their political representatives. First, the role of the United States (and NATO) in the Kosovo War and in brokering the OFA. Albanian politicians, in addition to the reasons discussed above, organized protests in North Macedonia in support of American intervention in Kosovo (International Crisis Group, 1998, p. 17) and also perceive the OFA “as a result of the pressure exerted by the USA, the EU, and NATO” (Marolov, 2013, p. 136).

Secondly, they also depict the U.S. as not only a guarantor of (their) local and regional security but also as an ally and protector against internal repression and malign influence.<sup>10</sup> Albanians perceive the West (especially the U.S.) as a counterbalance to nationalist tendencies among Slavs (Macedonians and Serbs) and to external influences, mainly from Russia and its local proxies. As Albanians have often been targeted by Russian disinformation campaigns aiming at “deepening the dividing lines between Macedonians and Albanians” (Metodieva, 2019, p. 18), they perceive U.S. actions countering these tendencies as beneficial to their well-being.

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

## **Narratives on Euro-Atlantic integration**

This chapter now lists the main narratives employed by Albanian politicians in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration. It examines how Albanian political leaders have framed and communicated support for joining NATO and the EU, both to their electorate and to the broader society of North Macedonia. Focusing on the Prespa Agreement, NATO accession, and the referendum on the country’s name change, the chapter highlights the rhetoric used by Albanian politicians and explores how the recent decoupling of Albania and North Macedonia in the EU integration process may negatively influence Albanian support for further EU accession.

### ***Euro-Atlantic integration as a strategic priority and symbol***

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

Afrim Gashi from Besa Movement described NATO accession as “the country’s strategic goal” (Georgievski, 2019) achievable only through settling the name dispute. Other politicians, such as Menduh Thaçi from the Democratic Party of Albanians and Xhevat Ademi from DUI, went further, arguing that Euro-Atlantic integration “is threatened by the delayed romantic nationalism of some leaders of the

Macedonian political elite” (Koleka, 2008). Thaçi also argued that although “their identity is very important for them but the road towards European and NATO is much more important for us [Albanians],” (Koleka, 2008), feeding into a widespread Macedonian perception that Albanians would ‘give up’ Macedonian identity for NATO membership. Some reports suggest that Albanian leaders even told their Macedonian counterparts that “getting into NATO was so important [for them] they could name the country after a soft drink” (Koleka, 2008). Rafiz Aliti from DUI went as far as to state that the lack of a compromise or solution to the name dispute would mean that “Albanians will integrate in EU and NATO with or without the Macedonians” (Eurasia, 2009). Albanian politicians also advocated for an “immediate compromise” (KOHA, 2018), stressing the urgent nature of resolving the issue and signaling openness to any proposal put to the table.

These statements, while provocative, primarily served to reassure Albanian voters of their leaders’ commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration, rather than to threaten Macedonian leadership or identity. For Albanians in North Macedonia, integration into Euro-Atlantic structures is highly important. For example, only 18 percent of Albanians perceived the preservation of the country’s name as more important than NATO and EU accession, while almost two-thirds of Albanian respondents favored integration (Marusic, 2010). Regarding EU integration, disparities in support between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians are also evident: polls by the Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” Skopje (2023) show that 78 percent of Albanian respondents support EU accession, almost 20 points higher than Macedonians’ support (Damjanovski, 2023, p. 5). While Macedonians’ support remained consistent two years later, the level of support among Albanians increased to 82 percent (Damjanovski, 2025, p. 5), signaling the importance of EU integration to this minority group. Given the high level of approval among Albanians for Euro-Atlantic integration, Albanian politicians – as confirmed by the interviews – could not refrain from openly pressuring their Macedonian counterparts to unblock bilateral disputes. Failure to do so would have risked alienating their own electorate.

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

Europe has long been at the center of Albanian political thought. The “West” – embodied by the EU and NATO – symbolizes modernity, progress, and security, in contrast to the East or even Turkey, which often represent backwardness or threat. Even Albanian writer Ismail Kadare stressed that Europe is “Albania’s

natural state. The only one” (Tirana Times, 2012); this statement also applies to the Albanian community in North Macedonia, as Euro-Atlantic integration has been “the guiding principle of their political and social activity” (Koha.mk, 2018) for decades. For Albanians, Western orientation is embedded in political identity, rooted in ideology and in the pursuit of security and stability. On the other hand, as one interviewee framed it, given internal and external threats perceived by the community, “the group cannot support anything else but Euro-Atlantic integration”.

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

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

### ***Security, stability and inter-ethnic relations***

Security remains the cornerstone of Albanian support for Euro-Atlantic integration. Albanian leaders, including Ahmeti, have repeatedly argued that NATO provides the best guarantee of Albanians’ internal security<sup>11</sup>, claiming that NATO accession represents “the victory [which] is in security and stability” (KOHA, 2018), just as the OFA represents the same goals concerning inter-ethnic relations. He also expanded the resolution of the name dispute to the Western Balkans; from a security perspective, it is important “not only for [North] Macedonia, but also for the region” (Telegrafi, 2017). Ahmeti further claimed that “in this period of uncertainty and geopolitical tensions and geostrategic resurgence, NATO is a key factor for the

country's stability" and that "membership in NATO is a guarantee of sovereignty, security and stability" (4NEWS.mk, 2022). More specifically, Grubi claimed that the OFA and Prespa Agreement are examples to follow "especially for the authorities in Pristina and Belgrade, to overcome the dispute and be rounded off with mutual recognition of independence between Serbia and Kosovo, which would contribute to the stability of the entire region" (Grubi, 2023).

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

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

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

In summary, Albanian narratives on Euro-Atlantic integration are deeply intertwined with security concerns, inter-ethnic relations, and the desire of joining the 'west'. Joining western politico-military alliances are viewed as a guarantee for inter-ethnic rights and stability as well as and ideological commitment. The persistence of

blockages and the recent decoupling of the EU accession paths of Albania and North Macedonia, however, risk eroding Albanians' support for Western integration.

### *Decoupling: 2008 again?*

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

The situation bears similarities to NATO's Bucharest summit. Since 2008–09, the Albanian political sphere has been particularly sensitive and reactive to any developments suggesting that Albania, their kin-state, had achieved milestones in its Euro-Atlantic integration path. When Albania joined NATO, growing frustration emerged among Albanians and their representatives in North Macedonia, leading to a more proactive approach and vocal statements emphasizing the necessity of resolving the name dispute. Separating the EU integration progress of Albania and North Macedonia may foreshadow a similar pattern: Albanian parties campaigning on promises of bringing the country closer to the EU could lose support as public disappointment and frustration grow. This, in turn, may result in harsher rhetoric from Albanian politicians directed at both the Macedonian leadership and Albanian parties in power.

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

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

## **Conclusion**

Examining the narratives on Euro-Atlantic integration among Albanians in North Macedonia provides a better understanding of how a minority group with significant political capital argues in favor of achieving its foreign policy priorities. Contrary to prevailing Macedonian narratives, foreign policy constitutes an important part of the narratives and campaigns of Albanian political parties, but for different reasons. While Albanians are driven by the desire not to be left behind by Albania and by

promises to their electorate, perceiving Western alliances as guarantees for their socio-economic and political rights in the country, Macedonians proceed with more caution. Due to identity-related bilateral disputes with their neighbors, the conviction that sacrifices must be made for Euro-Atlantic integration at the expense of Macedonian identity prevails. Although Albanians have shown pragmatism in dealing with Macedonian questions of identity, their electorate's frustration may impact their stances on this issue in the future. Nonetheless, foreign policy objectives – specifically integration into Western politico-military organizations – are shared among ethnic groups, making it one of the rare domains in which there is alignment of interests between Macedonian and Albanian political leaderships, even though perceptions of the added value and/or sacrifices differ.

For Albanians, Euro-Atlantic integration is primarily perceived through a security prism regarding their political and socio-economic positions. They understand these supranational structures as bodies or tools that can effectively mitigate potential internal and external risks challenging their communities' legal rights and general well-being. Internal risks include the fear of rising anti-Albanian rhetoric and ethno-nationalist tendencies among Macedonian politicians, while Serbian and Russian influences are identified as external threats. Additionally, Albania's example with its Euro-Atlantic integration serves both as a model and a source of concern; the fact that Albania has once again surpassed North Macedonia in the EU accession process (as it did with NATO membership) raises societal and political concerns that may negatively impact further Albanian support for EU integration in North Macedonia.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Other cross-cutting issues may include environmental protection and climate change, the fight against corruption and state capture, as witnessed in 2016 (Gjinovci, 2016; Staletović, 2023) and 2025 (Telegrafi, 2024), and economic challenges such as unemployment and brain drain.

<sup>2</sup> The author aimed to include interviewees from wide-ranging backgrounds. Regarding professional background, former and current decision-makers, representatives of public institutions (e.g., ministries responsible for foreign affairs and EU integration), as well as members of academia, research institutions, civil society, and journalism were interviewed. In terms of location, interviews were conducted in Skopje and Tetovo, allowing for the inclusion of more diverse perspectives, particularly given that Tetovo serves as the political, cultural, and social center of the Albanian community. All interviews were conducted in accordance with the highest ethical standards, ensuring full anonymity.

<sup>3</sup> Symbolically, the Greek parliament was the first to ratify North Macedonia's accession protocol (RFE/RL, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> The so-called name change referendum, a legally non-binding plebiscite, linked public acceptance of the Prespa Agreement to North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Although 94 percent of voters cast their ballots in favor, turnout was only 35 percent.

<sup>5</sup> The Stabilization and Association Agreement is a comprehensive legal framework governing EU-candidate relations, and is a key prerequisite for eventual membership.

<sup>6</sup> Coupling means that the accession processes of both countries—achieving the main milestones—are linked; if one lags, both are stuck.

<sup>7</sup> In North Macedonia, political parties are typically organized along ethnic lines, especially regarding mainstream parties representing Macedonians, Albanians, and other minorities. Based on the typology of Németh (2022), Albanian political parties, which emerged from the relatively homogeneous ethnic Albanian social strata, can be classified into three generations. The first generation emerged in the late 1980s and/or dominated the first decade of post-independence North Macedonia. It includes the National Democratic Party (in Albanian: *Partia Demokratike Popullore*; in Macedonian: *Национална демократска партија*), the Party for Democratic Prosperity (in Albanian: *Partia Për Prosperitet Demokratik*; in Macedonian: *Партија за демократски просперитет*), and the Democratic Party of Albanians (in Albanian: *Partia Demokratike e Shqiptarëve*; in Macedonian: *Демократска партија на Албанците*). The second generation, in the post-OFA period, is dominated by the Democratic Union for Integration (in Albanian: *Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim*; in Macedonian: *Демократска унија за интеграција*), while the third generation of parties emerged in the 2010s and includes the Alliance for Albanians (in Albanian: *Aleanca për Shqiptarët*; in Macedonian: *Алијанса за Албанците*), the Besa Movement (in Albanian: *Lëvizja Besa*; in Macedonian: *Движење Беса*), Alternativa (in Macedonian: *Алтернатива*), and the Democratic Movement (in Albanian: *Lëvizja Demokratike*; in Macedonian: *Демократско движење*). More on the political system and parties of North Macedonia, see: Abdula, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> According to Waterbury (2020, p. 799), a kin-state “represents the majority nation of a transborder ethnic group whose members reside in neighboring territories” and, apart from nurturing close social, cultural, political etc. ties with them, oftentimes sees itself as their protector.

<sup>9</sup> As Albania under Enver Hoxha broke off ties with Yugoslavia by the late 1940s and pursued international isolation by the 1970s, the country could not sustain its leading position among Albanians in Yugoslavia.

<sup>10</sup> The unwavering pro-Albanian stance of the United States, however, is debatable, especially in the case of the 2001 quasi-civil war in North Macedonia. While in Kosovo, the U.S. spearheaded NATO air strikes, it did not show the same level of military engagement or political willingness to support Albanian insurgents in North Macedonia (Perry, 2011). The U.S. was not interested in yet another unresolved conflict in Southeast Europe; security as a guiding principle outweighed the anticipated American support for North Macedonia’s Albanians.

<sup>11</sup> As noted by many interviewees, security is or should be a sensitive topic for Albanian politicians, especially Ahmeti, given his role in the 2001 civil war in North Macedonia, and the fact that DUI as a political entity grew out of the insurgents. In a sense, they went from being security threats to one of the biggest supporters of security through NATO integration.

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