



Research Article

© 2025 Fatmir Xheladini

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

State Building in Fragile Contexts: The Ohrid Agreement and European Integration in North Macedonia

PhD Fatmir Xheladini

University of Tetovo, North Macedonia

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/ejels-2025-0017>

Abstract

This manuscript examines the security challenges and institutional fragility in North Macedonia before and after the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, focusing on the role of ethnic divisions, institutional exclusion, and the absence of an inclusive state identity. Through a theoretical approach grounded in international relations and state-building literature, this paper argues that the construction of a mono-national state and the marginalization of the Albanian population have undermined the legitimacy and authority of state institutions. The Ohrid Agreement represents a turning point toward establishing a more inclusive political order, through mechanisms of power-sharing, proportional representation, and the integration of security with the country's ethnic realities. The manuscript highlights that, despite notable progress, interethnic tensions, socio-economic challenges, and political polarization remain structural sources of fragility. In this context, North Macedonia's aspirations for European Union membership are seen as drivers for improved governance, democratic consolidation, and the overcoming of ethnic cleavages, promoting institutional reform, rule of law, and the strengthening of social cohesion. However, the integration process remains complex and vulnerable to internal tensions and external pressures, requiring sustained and inclusive efforts.

Keywords: state security, Ohrid Framework Agreement, institutional fragility, ethnic identity, Albanians in North Macedonia, political representation, power-sharing, security community, European Union, integration process.

1. Introduction

The political security of a state is an important dimension that directly affects its stability and development. In the classical sense, often attributed to Max Weber, security is defined as the necessary monopoly of the use of force within and beyond the borders of a given territory (Weber, 1919). The state must ensure full control over the use of legitimate violence to guarantee order and sovereignty. However,

this traditional approach to international relations, such as that of the Westphalian system, faces complex challenges in multiethnic regions such as North Macedonia, where ethnic and political tensions threaten the state's monopoly on force.

This manuscript aims to analyze the main security challenges of North Macedonia after independence, with a particular focus on the Ohrid Agreement (2001) as a key instrument for managing ethnic conflicts and guaranteeing the constitutional rights of Albanians as a fundamental community in the state. Based on academic literature and classical theories of political security, the different dimensions of security, the authority of the state, the role of institutions, and the challenges that still remain for the consolidation of stability in the region will be examined.

In the classical sense, according to Weber (1919), the state is characterized by the possession of a monopoly of legitimate violence. This authority is essential for the effective functioning of the state and the guarantee of security within its territory. However, in a context of rapid developments with a high density of changes in the methodology of interaction between states, we encounter a series of changes that fundamentally affect such a definition of security.

The classical Weberian definition becomes even more elusive in geographical contexts and the accumulating abilities of power by states, as can be referred to in terms of demography, economic resources or even the potential of military power. In this regard, another dimension of analysis or definition is presented, which states, depending on the conditions, measure the monopoly of power.

Various analysts extend the way in which a state should approach the distribution of institutional authority depending on the internal cultural and ethnic divisions of the population and the strength and stability of the institutions with which it operates. In this case, weak states, such as the case of North Macedonia after the breakup of Yugoslavia, where state authority is fragile, due to weak institutions and lack of control over the entire territory, create spaces for conflicts and challenges to sovereignty. In weak states, this monopoly is often challenged by non-state armed groups, lack of institutional cohesion and lack of clear authority over a given territory or even over control of other areas of authority, making it more difficult to guarantee security and the extension of authority (Rakipi, 2008).

In this regard, a more modern and multidimensional context is needed for analytical use and Katzenstein (1996), as one of the prominent scholars in this field, argues that security is not only a product of military power, but also of institutional interdependence and shared norms of cooperation. This approach helps to understand the challenges associated with building trust between different communities within a multiethnic state, such as North Macedonia (Katzenstein, 1996).

Adler and Barnett (1998) further expand this concept, seeing security as a social and political process that must incorporate trust-building mechanisms and cooperation, as well as address cultural and identity factors that can fuel conflict if not adequately addressed (Adler & Barnett, 1998). From this perspective, the security challenges in North Macedonia are more than just military or political challenges; they are related to the intersection of identities and the need for a comprehensive dialogue to meet the conditions of existing groups in the state.

2. Security and Stability Challenges in North Macedonia: A History of Fragile Institutions and Politics

When North Macedonia gained Independence it inherited institutional structure from former Yugoslavia, that in its functions were weak without genuine experience of democratic functionalities and experience. The capacity of the institutions to provide necessary public services was limited, while the transformation incurred decrease and the effectiveness of the state apparatus to guarantee law and order. One of the most visible dimensions of institutional fragility was the politicized bureaucracy and lack of professionalism in the public administration. The selection of employees was often influenced by party or ethnic affiliation, creating a clientele's system that hindered the effective functioning of the state (Elbasani, 2013).

In the aftermath of independence in 1991, another of the pressing issues that North Macedonia faced was deep ethnic tensions and social cohesion, especially between the Macedonian and Albanian communities. These tensions culminated in the 2001 conflict, which raised serious concerns about the stability of the state and security throughout the region (Vankovska, 2012). The conflict centered on demands for recognition of the rights of Albanians, including the use of the Albanian language and equal participation in state institutions.

Furthermore, the judicial system has suffered from political interference, corruption, and a lack of independence. This has produced a widespread perception that justice is not equal for all citizens, especially ethnic minorities. These perceptions have often been used to justify polarizing attitudes and increase interethnic tensions. After declaring independence the mainstream perception was created that Republic of Macedonia built its institutions on the basis of a concept of an exclusively Macedonian state identity, which often excluded the Albanian element and other ethnic communities from equal representation and inclusion. The 1991 constitution defined Macedonia as a state of "Macedonians and others living in it", establishing a symbolic and political hierarchy based on ethnicity (Reka, 2001; Bieber, 2008).

This constitutional formulation was criticized as asymmetrical and exclusionary, limiting the collective rights of Albanians as a constituent ethnic group. This was also reflected in the policies of representation in the administration, police, army, education and economy. The 2001 conflict demonstrated the limitations of the state in monopolizing the use of force and in managing ethnic tensions. The Macedonian army failed to resolve the political issues underlying the conflict, while the National Liberation Army (NLA) used armed rebellion to demand change (Vankovska, 2012). This period brought about a deep crisis of political security, highlighting the need for international mediation and a political solution.

3. The Ohrid Agreement: A turning point for security and institutional consolidation

The Ohrid Agreement, was one the rare intra-societal agreements signed in August 2001 with international mediation and it constitutes a key moment in the history of

North Macedonia. It was achieved as a compromise agreement that aimed to stop the violence and create a new institutional and constitutional framework for ethnic coexistence and security (Tzifakis, 2010).

The agreement included important measures such as the decentralization of power, the use of Albanian as an official language in areas where Albanians constitute at least 20% of the population, and the proportional participation of Albanians in security forces and state institutions (Elbasani, 2014). This was considered a major victory for the Albanian community and an important step towards stabilizing the state.

However, efforts to implement the agreement faced serious challenges. Due to the compromises made in the agreement, opposition and resistance to full implementation from some Macedonian political groups and even within the Albanian community was very rampant, creating new tensions. The implementation of decentralization and the use of the Albanian language in practice was often slow and incomplete (Tzifakis, 2010; Elbasani, 2014).

In order for a state to achieve a degree of stability it is required to expand its state authority and legitimacy as key instruments to guaranteeing security, especially in multiethnic states. An argument that is put forward by A. Rakipi (2008) suggests that in weak states, where institutional capacities are limited and sovereignty is fragmented, security challenges are more pronounced. North Macedonia after 2001 remained an example of this phenomenon, where state authority was not always able to implement the Ohrid Agreement at all levels (Rakipi, 2008).

But in order to make a comprehensive engagement and extension to this position as is the specific case of North Macedonia, Adler and Barnett (1998) suggest argue that building security requires more than formal state authority, it also requires engaging and building trust between communities, through social and political mechanisms that promote coexistence and mutual acceptance. In North Macedonia, lack of trust has been a key factor hindering the consolidation of a lasting peace (Adler & Barnett, 1998).

4. Multidimensional security perspective and the need for a comprehensive approach

One of the notions important to be considered in this regard, it is important to have an multidimensional approach to the security model that we are looking for the country, where in addition to the military aspect, the political, economic and social dimensions of security should also be taken into account. In a region like the Balkans, where historical, economic and political challenges are interconnected, this approach is particularly important.

In this context, the security challenges in North Macedonia cannot be solved only through political reforms or military force, but require a comprehensive approach that includes economic development, improving social conditions and building dialogue between communities (Katzenstein, 1996; Bechev, 2017).

One of the most important achievements of the Ohrid Agreement was the integration

of the constitutional rights of Albanians into the Constitution of North Macedonia, recognizing them as a community with equal status. This included the use of the Albanian language in public administration and equal participation in state institutions (Vankovska, 2012).

However, the implementation of these rights has been a difficult process, which has often caused resistance and new political tensions. The challenge lies in changing mentalities and strengthening institutional mechanisms that enable coexistence and respect for the rights of all communities (Elbasani, 2014).

Beyond the political and ethnic dimensions, socio-economic aspects play a key role in the stability and security of any state, especially in a multi-ethnic and post-conflict society like North Macedonia. Poverty, high unemployment, economic inequalities and the lack of sustainable development are factors that create the right environment for social and political tensions.

North Macedonia, during the period of transition from a planned economy to a market economy, has encountered major socio-economic challenges. Unemployment remains a serious problem, especially among young people and minority communities, including Albanians (World Bank, 2023). An unemployed population with limited economic prospects is more susceptible to radical ideologies and can be easily exploited by political actors or groups seeking benefits through conflicts.

Economic opportunities remain one important factor in the perception of inequalities between ethnic communities and still seem to be one of the main sources of social discontent. Although since in recent times there has been progress there is very few employment opportunities for access to quality education, employment and public services compared to the regions where Most of Macedonian communities live (Bechev, 2017). This creates a sense of exclusion and undermines the building of mutual trust, which is essential for security and stability.

Due to economic reasons there is strong movement especially of the youth on related Internal and external migration, especially of young people, and it is seen as another socio-economic factor with a significant impact. Many young Albanians and Macedonians seek opportunities abroad due to the lack of employment and poor economic prospects (UNDP, 2022). This not only weakens the human capital of the country, but also creates a deep gap between generations and communities, making social dialogue and cooperation difficult.

Internal migratory movements generate and are characterized by uneven regional development, with Albanian-majority areas often poorer and less economically developed than Macedonian-majority areas (Elbasani, 2014). This inequality reinforces ethnic divisions and hinders the construction of a common state identity. Socio-economic aspects directly affect political security by creating social tensions and worsening inter-ethnic relations. A weak economy and lack of opportunities contribute to increased dissatisfaction and the potential for social conflict or even violence.

As Katzenstein (1996) argues, security is not simply a military issue, but also a product of social and economic stability. In this context, addressing socio-economic

inequalities, sustainable security and can generate a more stable and inclusive participation of the communities which in turn can produce the desired effect of coherently extending state authority.

5. Conclusion

The institutional fragility of North Macedonia before and after independence cannot be understood without addressing the deep ethnic divisions and exclusionary policies that characterized the period before the Ohrid Agreement. The lack of a comprehensive state-building vision turned institutional representation into an ethnic clash, weakening social cohesion and trust in institutions. This perspective is consistent with various theories of political community building, analysis and state authority, as well as the need to build a stable community through inclusion, norms and legitimate institutions.

References

- Adler, E. and Barnett, M. (1998). *Security Communities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bechev, D. (2019). *Historical Dictionary of North Macedonia*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Buzan, B., Wæver, O. and de Wilde, J. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Council of Europe (2001). *The Ohrid Framework Agreement*. [online] Available at: <https://rm.coe.int> [Accessed 27 May 2025].
- Deutsch, K.W. et al. (1957). *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Elbasani, A. (2013). *European Integration and Transformation in the Western Balkans: Europeanization or Business as Usual?* London: Routledge.
- European Commission (2024). *North Macedonia 2023 Progress Report*. Brussels: European Commission.
- Freedom House (2023). *Nations in Transit: North Macedonia*. [online] Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org> [Accessed 27 May 2025].
- Katzenstein, P.J. (1996). *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mitrany, D. (1943). *A Working Peace System*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.
- Phillips, J. (2004). *Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels in the Balkans*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Rakipi, A. (2008). *Weak States and Security*. Tirana: Albanian Institute for International Studies.
- Rousseau, D.L. and van Evera, S. (2000). *Assessing Causes of Ethnic Conflict*. *Security Studies*, 9(3).
- UNDP (2022). *Social Cohesion and Security in North Macedonia: Challenges and Perspectives*. Skopje: UNDP Country Office.
- Vankovska, B. (2007). *The Role of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in the Consolidation of Peace in Macedonia*. *Southeast European Politics*, 8(2),