THE DOMESTIC IMPACT OF FOREIGN POLICY: THE CASE OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Njomza OSMANI[1*], Gjeraqina LEKA[1*]

[1]*Faculty of Law, MK*
Corresponding author e-mail: njomza.osmani@unite.edu.mk; gjeraqina.leka@unite.edu.mk;

Abstract

This article brings to attention the domestic impact that possibly is produced by a state's foreign policy orientation. Dwelling on the case of North Macedonia, the article explores the challenges the state faces in fulfilling its foreign policy strategic objectives. It further tries to correlate these challenges to internal relations. In other words, the paper analyzes the impact that a NATO and EU oriented foreign policy has over inter-ethnic relations domestically, focusing on the external blockades to these foreign policy objectives and their relation to domestic developments. This relationship derives from the authors' assumption that foreign policy orientation serves as a unifying factor of the two biggest ethnic groups in the country, hence every threat (external in this case) to foreign policy objectives may possibly result in domestic cleavages between the ethnically different groups. In efforts to accumulate evidence for the laid hypothesis, the article uses empirical data gathered through interviews with political actors, researchers, and academics, in the period 2017-2020. The aim is to evaluate whether foreign policy influences domestic relations between different social groups, illustrating this relationship through the case of North Macedonia.

Keywords: foreign policy, EU and NATO membership, inter-ethnic relations, North Macedonia, external threats..

Introduction

 "Albanians will join NATO and the EU, with or without the Macedonians", stated a senior official of the biggest Albanian party in Macedonia, the Democratic Union for Integration, in 2009 (Radio Free Europe, 2009). This statement caused a huge stir in the public opinion, followed by reactions and counter-reactions between the Macedonian and Albanian communities. Similar statements followed soon by other public figures, raising concerns about a new inter-ethnic division, which wasn't caused by the constitutional structure nor by power-sharing issues, but rather by the timetable of EU and NATO. In such context, an interest developed to carry out a study which would explore the reasons behind a newly-emerged inter-ethnic division, which seemed motivated more by external than by internal factors. This situation seemed even more paradoxical, as up to that point, international integrations represented the most consensual policy which united the two otherwise divided ethnic groups.

 A research question which guides this paper is whether foreign policy orientation may play a role domestically or act as an influencer of inter-ethnic relations, more specifically? This inquiry is further supported by an observation of the inter-ethnic resemblance of attitudes on the international integrations agenda, a similarity that is rarely noticed in different policy areas, especially in the domestic ones. The impediment of the international integration agenda by the aggravation of external bilateral disputes, however, seems to complicate the relationship between international and national integration. Precisely, such complex developments, triggered an interest in us to research and explore whether there is a relationship between international and national integration, and how such relationship is affected by the presence of external disputes, using the case of North Macedonia and its past and current disputes with the neighboring states. We expect this paper to offer

an interesting scientific contribution, as it would link foreign and domestic policy by studying foreign policy ties and challenges, and their ability to create divisions or unification between different ethnic groups. Furthermore, this research is expected to shed light over the factors which dominate the foreign policy debate within a multi-ethnic state, with few inter-ethnic commonalities.

Foreign policy and inter-ethnic relations

In many studies on North Macedonia's inter-ethnic relations, the roots of these relations have been searched within the internal factors. Foreign policy and the possibility of it influencing these relations and vice-versa, have remained in the margins of the scientific interest. In the context of North Macedonia, this paper's argument is that the relationship between foreign policy and inter-ethnic relations has varied in different periods of time. At first sight it seems that foreign policy had little to no influence on the relationship between the two biggest ethnic groups. This impression derives from the fact that the disputes between Macedonians and Albanians, since independence onwards, have developed around internal political issues. In this context, Albanians haven't contested the name/nation of Macedonia and neither its ancient past. Although Albanians boycotted the independence referendum in 1991, their contestation towards the new state had to do with the constitutional order and not with the symbols of the state.

Although at first impression foreign policy seems to not influence the internal disputes, which result from the fragile inter-ethnic relations, several authors (ex. Engstrom, 2002, Daskalovski 2004, Vankovska 2017, etc.) make a correlation between the two, by analyzing the inter-ethnic perceptions of the bilateral relations of North Macedonia. Engstrom (2002) claims that the contestation of the Macedonian ethnic identity by the neighboring countries is reflected in the contestation of the Albanian ethnic identity by the ethnic Macedonians. The pressures by Bulgaria, Serbia, and Greece, which contest the authenticity of the ethnic identity of Macedonians, makes the latter fearful for their existence. Hence, such external contestation causes an enhancement of nationalism among the Macedonian ethnic group, in an effort to establish their ethnic and national (state) identity. Such assertion of the Macedonian national identity, in response to external contestation, in turn, leads to the Albanians' need of asserting their own identity. The reason why these two identities clash instead of cohabiting, according to Ackerman, is precisely foreign policy and its specific challenges. In other words, the author argues that if the Albanians demand to become a constitutive people by changing the constitution is accepted by the Macedonian side, then the state would no longer be a unitary state but rather a bi-national one, with two constituent nations. Thus, "without a state of its own, the Macedonian nation would become an easy target for those Balkan neighbors" who have claims over its national identity elements. (Ackermann, 2000, p.15).

Nonetheless, foreign policy, as much as it is a dividing factor between the two ethnic groups, it also represents a unifying factor. The unifying effect of foreign policy lays in the strategic orientation of the country. Besides the bilateral challenges of this country, its foreign policy is also preoccupied with the integration of the country into the international structures such as NATO and EU. This orientation, as much as it represents a strategy for the external security of a small and weak state, it is also a way of maintaining the internal stability, by satisfying and bringing closer the two otherwise alienated ethnic groups. According to Vankovksa (2017), the objective of North Macedonia to access NATO and EU is closely linked to the country's internal affairs. According to her, "belonging to NATO and EU is seen as the ultimate way to achieve and secure the country's sovereignty and state security. Furthermore, NATO and EU are much more than usual foreign policy goals - they are tightly related to the internal state of affairs, including interethnic peace and stability" (pp.6-7). Within an ethnically polarized society, as is the case with North Macedonia, foreign policy, namely the international integration into organizations such as EU and NATO, may be the strongest dimension able to forge an inter-

ethnic consensus. In Vankovska's (2017) words "The society deeply divided along ethnic/religious/language lines sees NATO (and EU for the same reason) as a glue to keep society together" (p.6). The international integration agenda of the country has enjoyed the highest level of support regardless of ethnicity and has been interpreted as an all-national consensus and a long-term solution to the problems, especially in the political and economic sphere (p.3). All polls carried out until the present day show a high support among ethnic Macedonians and Albanians for the EU and for NATO (above 60%) (IDSCS and MCMC 2013, IDSCS 2016, IPRS, ISHR, and FAC 2016, etc.).

But the bilateral issues seem detrimental to foreign policy's glue effect for Macedonians and Albanians. Consequently, foreign policy transforms from a unifying into a dividing factor between the ethnic groups. The bilateral disputes condition North Macedonia's international integration agenda, and indirectly, they impact negatively the relationship between the two ethnic groups. The reason for such an impact derives from an ethnical perception of the bilateral open issues and lack of a unified state identity which would help forge commonalities between the two ethnic groups.

Since foreign policy in North Macedonia may serve as a mechanism for achieving internal and external security, the blockade caused by Greece in 2008, may be perceived as a dramatic turn not only in the international realm but also in the internal affairs. In the international aspect, according to Koneska (2014), within the governing party of that time, VMRO, the consensus over NATO and EU integration as the only foreign policy alternative began to fade, due to being conditioned with the change of the state's constitutional name. According to Pendarovksi (2012), the government began to mark a subtle shift in the foreign policy orientation, as some of its representatives began arguing against the unconditional commitment towards NATO and EU membership.

In the internal aspect, the contestation of identity, which derived from the bilateral disputes, sparked ethnic nationalism in efforts of identity building. The result of this approach was also the project "Skopje 2014", in which, Maleski (2013) views the correlation between foreign policy challenges and ethnic nationalism. Namely, he views Macedonians' nationalism as the cause, which has infuriated the neighbors, such as Greece and Bulgaria, who in turn, have obstructed North Macedonia's integration into EU and NATO (p.23). However, the opposite argument is that the external contestation of North Macedonia's identity and consequently its Euro-Atlantic objectives, may be a cause for a rise in nationalism within this ethnic group. Being a multi-ethnic state, however, the intensified efforts of one ethnic group to establish a dominant nationalistic narrative and appropriate the state identity, may be perceived as a threat for the existence of the other ethnic group, therefore putting to risk the already fragile inter-ethnic cohabitation.

According to Pendarovski (2012), the EU and NATO agenda, especially since 2008 onwards, became a dividing factor between the two communities. Due to the different perceptions of the ethnic groups over the external disputes, the Republic of North Macedonia found it difficult to forge a unifying stance over their resolution. As these pressures affected international integrations of North Macedonia, the Macedonian and Albanian community began to deepen their gap of positions regarding NATO and EU. According to Nuhija (2013, p.6), most of Albanians even feel as 'hostages' of the Macedonian political inertness regarding the external obstacles to the Euro-Atlantic integrations. Nuhija argues that Albanians regard the Macedonian politicians' approach towards the bilateral open issues as insufficiently serious and committing. Consequently, the Albanian political factor has carried out several separate diplomatic offensives, in pursuit of unblocking the integration processes and reaching a solution. These efforts, however, have not been met with support and appreciation by the Macedonian ethnic group, interpreting them as uncoordinated actions leading to internal mistrust and division.

The empirical data elaborated below, analyze the role that foreign policy plays over inter-ethnic relations in North Macedonia. These data, however, are gathered in a period when the bilateral open disputes persisted, therefore the respondents' perceptions of the relationship between foreign policy and inter-ethnic relations are heavily conditioned by the existing circumstances of that time. Therefore, these findings should not be considered as an attempt to make predictions on how such relationships would develop in the future, but rather as an analysis of the potential tendencies based on the existing conditioning factors of the time of data collection.

Foreign policy a unifier and divider of ethnic groups

The findings reveal a double domestic impact produced by the foreign policy of North Macedonia. When asked about the state's foreign policy strategic objectives, the respondents reveal the existence of an inter-ethnic consensus over an EU and NATO integration foreign policy orientation. And when asked about other priorities of North Macedonia's foreign policy, some of them also point to the economic aspect, but only as an addition to the two main above-mentioned goals.

Besides establishing the foreign policy objectives in a direct way, the data provide an implied meaning as well. Within an ethnically divided society, where inter-ethnic integration is a slow and difficult process, and the economic conditions disadvantageous, the findings present a common vision around which both ethnic groups are brought together. Through the declared positions of the respondents, an inference may be made that foreign policy serves as the most unifying dimension of policy between the two biggest ethnic groups.

Another interesting dimension of analysis is the support both organizations, NATO and EU, enjoy equally according to the respondents' discourse. Whereas in the public opinion there are voices which draw a distinction between the two organizations, supporting integrations into the EU but not into NATO, the findings of this research do not reflect such distinction. Both EU and NATO are mentioned jointly by the interviewees whenever they refer to the foreign policy objectives. Such indiscriminating support derives from all major parties and both ethnicities.

Whereas the findings indicate the unifying role that an EU and NATO oriented foreign policy produces over the inter-ethnic relations, there appear different stances when the external obstacles to these objectives are brought into the picture. Hence, when asked about the impact that foreign policy challenges may have domestically, the majority of respondents point to an inter-ethnic division. The findings imply that such division derives from the existence of an ethnic perception towards the external bilateral contests. The inter-ethnic division is characterized by the different perceptions, between the Macedonians and Albanians, over the external contests, and especially over the one with Greece over the then constitutional name of the state (Republic of Macedonia). But this division is also characterized by a different inter-ethnic perception over EU and NATO integration. This may seem paradoxical, as we already stated that the data establish an inter-ethnic unity over the integration agenda of the country. How is this division appearing later in the data set explained? The inter-ethnic division over EU and NATO integration results as a consequence of the connection between the external contests and the integration agenda of North Macedonia. Since the foreign policy agenda is closely related to the resolution of bilateral contests, the perception over the first dimension (external factors) is ultimately reflected over the second dimension (international integration).

The second dimension is the epilogue of this division, which, according to the data, has a potential of worsening if the conditions presented by the external factors persist. Based on the attitudes of the respondents, two hypothetical potentialities and a third explanation arise. The first is a potential for further escalation of inter-ethnic division over bilateral contests and consequently over international integrations, and the second is the de-escalation of inter-ethnic division and emergence of inter-ethnic unity based on a changed political

approach over bilateral contests and consequently over international integrations. The third explanation does not relate bilateral contests with inter-ethnic relations.

According to the respondents, the potentiality of each scenario's development depends on the state's official approach to the resolution of the bilateral disputes. One approach is described as a higher foreign policy action/initiative towards the external threats.   Throughout the empirical indications, from nearly all interview subjects, such high action or initiative is described as a policy of compromise, which would be characterized by bilateral agreements, that would close the contests with the neighbours and would consequently open the country's path towards Euro-Atlantic integrations. The contrary approach, a low foreign policy initiative/action or status quo would lead to continuation of external blockades and thereof to deteriorated inter-ethnic relations. However, the findings indicate that such approach has existed in the past, namely, under the VMRO rule, and since the change of government, has been replaced by a proactive foreign policy, focused on compromise and resolution of external disputes.

By describing the political developments on the basis of their perceptions, the respondents provided data which testify to how higher foreign policy actions towards external bilateral pressures, which lead to their resolution, provide opportunity for inter-ethnic rapprochement and ultimately unification. According to most empirical evidence, such inter-ethnic unity is demonstrated by both Macedonians and Albanians. This demonstration is either expressed directly, or indirectly, through the expression of support for the current foreign policy behaviour towards the neighbours. From such support, we may infer the conclusion that the ethnic groups have developed closer attitudes than before towards foreign policy, which in turn, has helped further the rapprochement of the ethnic groups. This rapprochement, as an end process, may lead to an advanced stage of inter-ethnic integration under a European identity.

Conclusion

The analysis of the empirical findings seems to point to the existence of a relationship between the three main elements of the research triangle: bilateral disputes – foreign policy – inter-ethnic relations, while the knot of this relationship appears to be foreign policy.   Foreign policy, as the findings indicate, examined free of external pressures stemming from bilateral open issues, results as a significant role player over the unification of ethnic groups, otherwise divided. This happens due to the existence of same inter-ethnic preferences over the international orientation of the state, as nearly all research subjects express. Such indications may help future research reach a conclusion that foreign policy, by influencing the supra-ethnic consciousness of the different ethnic groups, may help the construction of a state/national identity based on civic values. The recurring data in the research on the relationship between foreign policy and inter-ethnic relations provide indications on the role of security and integration played by foreign policy. In other words, the empirical findings enhance our understanding on foreign policy's double role within a small, multi-ethnic state: that of security and integration. The findings suggest that through international integrations, foreign policy aims to enhance the small state's status in the international realm, but also to forge internal, inter-ethnic integration. Consequently, this enables foreign policy to perform its double security role, by guaranteeing a small state's security both in the international and domestic environment.

The foreign policy international posture, as the case of North Macedonia demonstrates, is the most consensual factor between the two major ethnic groups, thus reflecting a stabilizing role within the domestic realm of a multi-ethnic country. By qualifying foreign policy as "the most general and widest consensus, national and political", international integration is viewed as a factor which affects national integration between different ethnic groups, just as much or even more than other internal factors. Although the empirical findings do not provide thorough elaborations on the reasons for a unified support of the double integrative agenda, they indirectly allude to supra-ethnic or civic values and institutions that the Euro-Atlantic perspective projects.
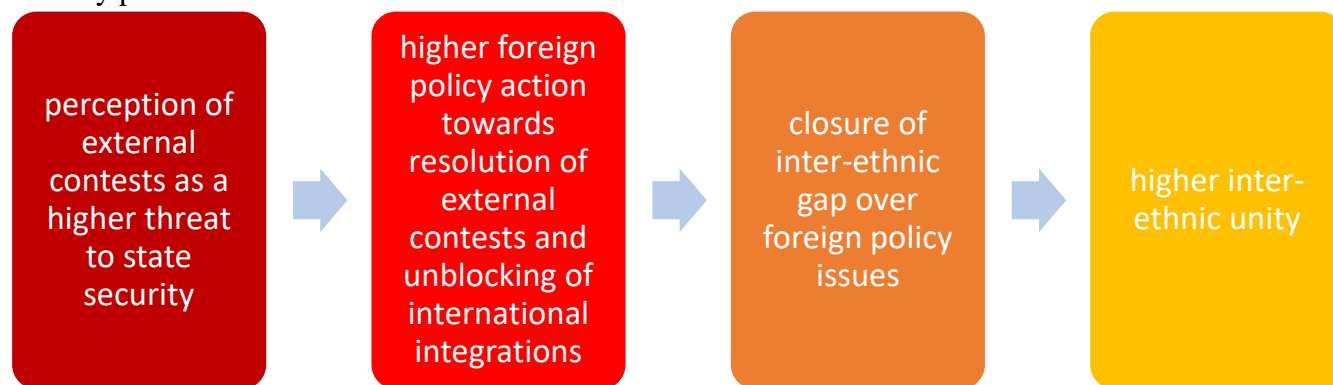
Such perception over international integrations, however, changes when foreign policy becomes conditioned by external threats. Since the external threats, which derive from the bilateral contests North Macedonia has with its neighbors, consist of identity disputes which affect the state and the majority ethnic group, they are not perceived identically by the two ethnic groups, Macedonians and Albanians. The interview subjects indicate that with the distinctive perceptions the gap between the two ethnic groups begins to emerge. The empirical indications seemingly show that the division between the two ethnic groups is mostly reflected over the foreign policy approach towards the external threats. It is argued, within the empirical findings, that since these threats obstruct the international agenda of the country, the inter-ethnic perception begins to diverge not only over the foreign policy approach towards these bilateral contests, but also towards the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the country. The empirical findings indicate that the Macedonian ethnic group, being highly more affected by the external threats, demonstrates greater reservation towards a proactive foreign policy, which would attempt quicker resolution of the bilateral contests with the neighbors. Consequently, in nearly all of the respondents' understanding, this ethnic group shows the same reservation towards the Euro-Atlantic process as well, which being blocked by the bilateral contests, is transformed into an indirect factor of pressure to North Macedonia's foreign policy.

As the findings show, such reservation, however, is not as evident within the Albanian ethnic group, which seems to be much less affected by the bilateral threats. Furthermore, since Albanians are portrayed by nearly all interview subjects as strong supporters of the Euro-Atlantic agenda, and since this agenda is stalled due to the external contests, they maintain that the Albanians demand a more proactive foreign policy, which would resolve these contests as quickly as possible, and consequently unblock the EU integration. But the indications suggest that the situation is completely different with the Macedonian ethnic group. The findings show that here emerges the gap of perceptions between Macedonians and Albanians in relation to foreign policy's approach to external threats. There is evidence, by a handful of respondents, which shows that such gap, may only be widened if the status-quo of foreign policy persists. In such case, relying on the empirical indications, we may assume that the longer external threats linger, the further apart the two ethnic groups would grow, to a point where their division turns into open antagonism and tension.

The research into the presence of external threats provides some insight and indication that strong ethnic identification prevails over national or state identification. In the presence of external pressures, the cohabitation between ethnic and national identity, as Foon (1986, as cited in Shulman 1996) argues, appears to become impossible. This is because the two ethnic groups begin making conflicting demands in regard to the foreign policy of the state. At this point, the data results provide some supportive indications to Shulman's second part of his main argument in the National integration and foreign policy in multi-ethnic states (1998), according to which, foreign policy becomes an object of political contestation among groups who do not share the same vision of it.

However, another significant finding in the empirical data reveals that the above developments already belong to the past. The empirical indications show that such relationship, between foreign policy status quo and inter-ethnic division, has marked a turning point with the change of government, in 2017. The data pinpoints to a change in the perception of the external threats and consequently in the foreign policy approach to them. This turning point seems to occur as a result of a change in perception towards external threats and their effect over foreign policy, precisely in the Macedonian ethnic group. The research highlights some of the respondents' assessment of the international integrations' stall as a greater security threat than the change of state and ethnic identity elements. Hereby, the empirical indications suggest that the perception of Macedonians begins to approach that of the Albanians. Such change in security perception, is expressed in the empirical findings as a starting point for a higher inter-ethnic support of a more proactive foreign policy approach, which would

attempt to resolve external disputes and consequently unblock the Euro-Atlantic agenda. In sum, the empirical indications show that as a result of a change in perception towards security and threats, a turning point in North Macedonia's foreign policy emerges, which, in turn, helps forge an inter-ethnic unification. Such analysis is visually presented below:

| perception of external contests as a higher threat to state security | → | higher foreign policy action towards resolution of external contests and unblocking of international integrations | → | closure of inter-ethnic gap over foreign policy issues | → | higher inter-ethnic unity |

The elaboration above reveals the complex role that foreign policy plays domestically, in terms of inter-ethnic relations. The study establishes a unifying role that foreign policy plays between the two biggest ethnic groups, i.e. Macedonians and Albanians, since both project a high level of support for such orientation. This role encounters difficulties at the moment when foreign policy is faced with external conditions which block the international integration agenda of the country. Consequently, foreign policy turns from an object of unification between different ethnic groups to an object of contestation between the latter, due to a different vision they have about it. As the data used for the purposes of this paper, a change in the level of foreign policy initiative/action, and an inter-ethnic involvement in such initiatives, may help harmonize inter-ethnic positions in efforts to resolve persisting external constraints and dynamize the international integration process.

References

[1]. Ackermann, A. (2000). Making Peace Prevail: Preventing Violent Conflict in Macedonia (Syracuse Studies on Peace and Conflict Resolution). Syracuse, NY, USA: Syracuse University Press.

[2]. Daskalovski, Z. (2004). Democratic consolidation and the 'stateness' problem: The case of Macedonia. Global Review of Ethnopolitics, 3(2), 52–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/14718800408405165

[3]. Engström, J. (2002). The power of perception: The impact of the Macedonian question on inter-ethnic relations in the Republic of Macedonia. Global Review of Ethnopolitics, 1(3), 3–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/14718800208405102

[4]. Koneska, C. (2014). Policy Consensus During Institutional Change: Macedonian Foreign Policy Since Independence. The Foreign Policies of Post-Yugoslav States, 97–121. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137384133_5

[5]. Maleski, D. (2013). On Nationalism, Identity and the Foreign Policy of Macedonia. New Balkan Politics, (14). Retrieved from http://www.newbalkanpolitics.org.mk/item/on-nationalism-identity-and-the-foreign-policy-of-macedonia#.XooQgIgzbIU

[6]. Nuhija, B. (2013). The impact of postponed accession of Republic of Macedonia in the Euro-Atlantic structures to the inter-ethnic relations. New Balkan Politics. Published. Retrieved from http://140.234.252.185/c/articles/89445327/impact-postponed-accession-republic-macedonia-euro-atlantic-structures-inter-ethnic-relations

[7]. Pendarovski, S. (2012). Macedonian Foreign Policy 1992-2011: Aspects of internal and international legitimacy. Skopje, Macedonia: Magor LTD Skopje & University American College Skopje.

[8]. Shulman, S. (1996). International and National Integration in Multiethnic States: The Sources of Ukrainian (Dis)Unity. Retrieved from https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/105150

[9]. Shulman, S. (1998). National integration and foreign policy in multiethnic states. Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, 4(4), 110–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537119808428548

[10]. Vankovska, B. (2017). Lilliputian Foreign Policy: The Case of the Republic of Macedonia. Security Dialogues, 8(1–2). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319618247_Lilliputian_Foreign_Policy_The_Case_of_the_Republic_of_Macedonia_Security_Dialogues_vol_8_no_1-2_2017