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Abdullah Sumrahadi[1], Agriffina Evita Martha Gurning[2] and Harryanto Aryodiguno[3]

[1] President University, Jababeka, Indonesia & Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0394-9855

[2] President University, Jababeka, Indonesia

[3] President University, Jababeka, Indonesia, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4825-1469

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Abdullah Sumrahadi.

Email: abdullah.Sumrahadi@president.ac.id

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# Unpacking the Debate: What YouTube Comments Reveal About Political Equality in America

**Abdullah Sumrahadi, Agriffina Evita Martha Gurning and Harryanto Aryodiguno**

*Abstract*

Technological advancement and political engagement have positioned social media platforms as salient forces in the contemporary political sphere. Notably, YouTube has evolved into a prominent medium, surpassing conventional media constraints and redefining political information dissemination and reception modalities. This paper investigates YouTube's function within the United States political context, scrutinizing its influence on public opinion formation, political discourse, and democratic mechanisms. Specifically, by analyzing audience sentiment expressed in comment sections of popular news and political channels addressing socio-economic equality within the United States, this study aims to delineate the factors that modulate audience engagement with political content. By elucidating these dynamic interactions, this investigation contributes to a refined comprehension of how digital platforms, such as YouTube, construct political narratives and facilitate democratic participation. The resultant findings offer critical insights for scholarly discourse concerning digital democracy, civic engagement, and the evolving paradigm of digital political communication.

*Keywords:* YouTube, political engagement, public opinion, digital democracy, social media platforms

## Introduction

The contemporary political sphere is characterized by a significant reconfiguration driven by the convergence of technology and politics, wherein social media platforms have ascended to positions of considerable influence (Olaniran & Williams, 2020; Kolotaev & Kollnig, 2021). This digital media evolution has inaugurated a new political communication paradigm, fundamentally altering information dissemination and consumption (Hoferer et al., 2020). Notably, YouTube has emerged as a prominent and dynamic platform, effectively surpassing the limitations of traditional media formats, reflecting a broader cultural "televisualization" or "YouTubification" (Thornton, 2009). This study is predicated on acknowledging YouTube's substantial capacity to shape political narratives, modulate public discourse, and facilitate citizen engagement within American politics.

Scholars have begun to study YouTube because it is no longer just for fun; it is a significant source of political information that affects how people think and talk about politics in the US. This vast collection of political videos, including campaign coverage and citizen journalism, shapes how political stories are told (Mostafa et al., 2023). There is concern that YouTube's algorithms, which show people content they are likely to agree with, might create "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles," reinforcing existing beliefs and worsening political divisions.

Beyond its effects within the US, YouTube's worldwide reach raises important questions about how it shapes global views of American politics (Timcke, 2021). Its ability to reach diverse international audiences adds a layer of complexity to its impact on America's image abroad and its diplomatic efforts, essentially promoting global connections. By examining the interactions between political figures, content creators, and viewers using three YouTube video examples, this article aims to better understand how digital platforms influence US democracy and politics. The exploration of United States Politics through the lens of YouTube has been an evolving field of study since 2014, marked notably by LaChrystal D. Ricke's seminal work, "The Impact of YouTube on United States Politics," published by Lexington Books. Ricke underscores YouTube's significance as the most trafficked video–sharing site globally, exerting a substantial influence on the political internet. The book focuses on YouTube's crucial role in establishing the contemporary media landscape and its impact on political communication in the United States. Ricke's perspective has progressed in many situations, as previously noted. However, there was a research gap regarding how people respond to information on the YouTube site that depicts politics in the United States and whether it will promote peace

or mayhem in the future. As a result, no strategy is in place to make the YouTube platform more successful.

Indeed, YouTube's evolution reflects broader shifts in media consumption habits, providing new opportunities for public participation in political discourse (Alzubi, 2023). Current research trends explain how political movements use the platform to rally supporters, communicate information, and organize events. YouTube emerges as a dynamic platform for grassroots activity, allowing political actors to communicate directly with their audience and develop a sense of community (Fujiwara et al., 2024). The evolution of studies on the role of YouTube in US politics has occurred in various circumstances, demonstrating the platform's dynamic influence on modern political communication. However, as the digital ecosystem evolves, experts face new obstacles and opportunities in evaluating YouTube's impact (Boulianne et al., 2024). Researchers can gain insights into how YouTube impacts political discourse, involvement, and perceptions, as well as democratic government in the digital age, by investigating user behaviors, platform dynamics, and sociopolitical situations.

## Problem Identification

Ricke's output on "The Impact of YouTube on United States Politics" has been essential in advancing our understanding of this platform's revolutionary significance (Ricke, 2014). Ricke's study has served as a foundational text for understanding how YouTube has become integral to political campaigns and communication strategies. Ricke explores YouTube's evolution as a political communication tool, highlighting its complex impact on politicians and citizens alike. While Ricke acknowledges the importance of consumers' media consumption patterns, Ricke also investigates other factors, such as YouTube's algorithmic character, the influence of content providers, and the larger media ecosystem (Donnellan et al., 2020). At the same time, the platform has evolved as an essential tool for campaigning, promoting debates, engaging constituents, and encouraging contact between citizens and political officials alike.

Studies that monitor the evolution of YouTube's impact on US politics throughout time may shed light on its future impacts. By tracking changes in user behavior, alterations in political messaging methods, and creating new political communication trends, academics can foresee and minimize potential hazards while maximizing the platform's benefits to democratic governance (Tarvin, 2021). We aim to

study the impacts that overcome everyone's media consumption habits. Indeed, it will be a far more extensive study. In this article, we will only discuss the positive and negative outcomes of the individuals' consumption, which will be studied from the comment sections of the YouTube content picked by us.

This study intends to create a comprehensive framework that defines the platform's influence on new media dynamics and soft power by evaluating the feelings voiced in YouTube videos about US politics (Gallarotti, 2015). As a public space for electronic content, YouTube offers a wide range of information that can be accessed. The wide range of influence of YouTube on this may open the dissemination of information about public opinion and the mobilization of social movements, which leads to the sentimental opinions of the public that may be analyzed. One of YouTube's unique aspects is its democratized nature, which enables anyone with an internet connection and a camera to become a content creator and political pundit. This democratization has resulted in a cacophony of voices across the ideological spectrum, thereby widening political debate.

Furthermore, the sale of political content on YouTube raises concerns about corporate influence and the commercialization of political discourse. Interrogating the sentiments conveyed in YouTube political videos allows us to determine the contours of power and influence in the digital arena and design tactics to harness the platform's potential for constructive social change. Despite its undoubted significance, the subtle nature and far-reaching impact of political opinion conveyed in YouTube videos are little known (Bowyer et al., 2017). YouTube's decentralized structure poses unique obstacles and opportunities for understanding its viewers' perspectives on US politics.

The new media theory explores the transformation functions of digital technologies on communication, culture, and society, examining how the internet and other digital technologies may contribute to the public. The power of digital technologies will vary and will not close the possibility of various issues. The article uses new media theory to better comprehend YouTube's distinctive characteristics as a digital platform for political communication. Soft power refers to the ability of a country or an entity to influence interactions that shape international relations, which are more appealing and credible (Gray, 2011; Gallarotti, 2015). Soft power can help a country's global status, create diplomatic contacts, and form alliances by appealing to shared ideals and goals.

The dynamics of US politics on YouTube are strongly affected by new media theory and the concept of soft power (Kaleem, 2023). As a digital platform, the new media

theory explains how YouTube facilitates interactive and decentralized communication, allowing multiple political views to arise and engage directly with audiences (Setiawan et al., 2020). While soft power is important, political figures, organizations, and influencers utilize YouTube to project cultural norms, ideologies, and narratives that engage and persuade viewers. They may affect public opinion, generate support, and increase their impact domestically and internationally by capitalizing on the platform's global reach and the appeal of compelling multimedia content (Finlayson, 2022). As a result, to explore further the sentiments conveyed by viewers in YouTube videos about US politics, we are utilizing a theoretical framework based on new media theory and integrated with the notion of soft power (Jin, 2024). This theoretical approach offers a complete lens through which to examine the complex dynamics of political discourse in the digital environment.

## Research Method

This study will use a qualitative approach to answer the research topic. According to Nassaji (2020), the qualitative approach in research is to acquire and analyze data without modification while explaining it as clearly as possible (Nassaji, 2020). Supported with the Internet Research Method (IRM), a compelling research instrument that allows for efficient, cost-effective data collection while also providing access to large samples and new demographics (Claire et al., 2016). This approach aims to demonstrate a set of methodological guidelines and a disciplined approach to the culturally oriented study of technologically mediated social interaction that occurs via the internet and related information and communication technologies (Kozinets, 2020), and this research employs a qualitative approach to internet netnography research method (Viljoen, 2022).

The research technique prioritizes collecting extensive data on audience responses to YouTube material about US politics on popular news and political channels. This method is motivated by an awareness of the depth and complexity inherent in user-generated content on YouTube, particularly viewer comments, which serve as an important source of qualitative data (Sui et al., 2022). The research uses this methodology to find underlying themes, patterns, and attitudes expressed by viewers, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the role of YouTube in affecting public perceptions and opinions on politics, as well as informing future research and platform moderation efforts (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024).

## Research Framework

The study's scientific approach attempts to provide vital insights into the numerous emotional and ideological facets of political discussion on YouTube. Through a careful analytical approach, we hope to improve the understanding of how YouTube is a powerful influencer in changing public views and ideas about US politics in the digital age. This article goes beyond understanding the audience's emotional responses and ideological inclinations toward the political narratives disseminated through the curated videos.

Central to this discussion is the identification of YouTube's growth as an important forum for political activity, where varied voices and perspectives combine, impacting the formation of collective narratives and attitudes (Vlahovic et al., 2023).

Three well-known content creators - Ben Shapiro, Mr. Beat, and CrowderBits - were chosen to implement this strategy, each reflecting a unique perspective on politics.

1. Channel: Ben Shapiro ( https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBDfMQ27Asw )
1. Channel: Mr. Beat (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pb7Bmew6Nlg )
1. Channel: CrowderBits (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjmSZ1b0wwo )

In addition, three content items from the United States News and Politics YouTube channel were selected to provide a diverse representation of political information on the platform. The exact YouTube video links provided for each content creator/channel act as operationalizations of the selected content for analysis, allowing immediate access to the videos under consideration. The focal point of analysis lies in the comment sections of these videos, where viewer sentiments, opinions, and interactions related to political discourse are captured. To manage the scope of analysis, the top 10 comments from each video were systematically selected, resulting in a total sample of 30 comments.

This article has limitations, including a constrained scope due to selected channels and videos, which may introduce biases. The reliance on top comments provides valuable insights but represents only a fraction of overall viewer engagement. Additionally, the research in this article is conducted within a specific temporal context, capturing sentiments at a particular point in time, which may evolve due to changing events and social dynamics. Acknowledging these limitations, this article offers a comprehensive exploration of sentiment expression within YouTube channels focused on News and Politics, providing valuable insights into the digital

landscape of political discourse. By addressing these limitations, we will enhance the validity and reliability of our findings, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the role of YouTube in shaping public perceptions and opinions on political matters.

Before we go far, understanding the definition of terms related to the research topic is paramount for establishing a solid foundation and context for the study. Each term encapsulates key concepts and principles that are central to the investigation of political discourse on YouTube. For instance, grasping the concept of netnography provides researchers with a methodological framework for analyzing online communities and interactions, while familiarity with terms like viewer engagement and sentiment analysis equips researchers with tools for understanding audience behavior and attitudes towards political content. Moreover, definitions such as ideological orientation and digital public sphere offer insights into the broader socio-political dynamics at play within digital spaces. By comprehending these terms, researchers can navigate the complexities of the research topic more effectively, ensuring that their analyses are grounded in a thorough understanding of the underlying concepts and phenomena.

1. YouTube refers to a video-sharing platform where users can upload, view, and interact with various types of video content, including but not limited to entertainment, education, and news.
2. Political discourse encompasses exchanging ideas, arguments, and opinions about governance, policies, and societal issues.
3. Sentiment analysis computationally identifies and categorizes opinions, attitudes, and emotions expressed within textual data, such as social media posts, reviews, and comments, to understand public sentiment toward a particular subject.
4. New media refers to digital forms of communication and expression that utilize computer technology and the internet, allowing for interactive, user-generated content and distribution through online platforms like YouTube, social media, and blogs.
5. Soft power refers to the ability of a country or entity to influence and persuade others through non-coercive means, such as cultural diplomacy, international cooperation, and the dissemination of information and ideas, often facilitated by new media channels.

6. Social policy refers to government actions, programs, and interventions designed to address social problems, promote social justice, and enhance the well-being of citizens.
7. Political internet refers to the interconnected network of digital platforms, websites, and online forums where political information is disseminated, discussions are conducted, and vivid engagement is fostered.

## Findings and Discussion

By analyzing the three curated YouTube videos on US Politics, we identify that these are the current sustainable issues in the United States and are raising various perspectives.

### Ben Shapiro DEBUNKS Viral 'Systemic Racism Explained' Video

The content debunks the concept of systemic racism by examining aspects such as educational policy, redlining, and unconscious bias, suggesting that racism cannot account for all disparity. The content refutes the concept that all inequality stems only from systematic racism, emphasizing the role of human choices and societal variables in affecting results. By covering numerous factors such as education, work, and wealth accumulation, the movie emphasizes the varied nature of inequality, encouraging a more comprehensive approach to addressing societal concerns. While acknowledging the historical consequences of slavery and segregation, the film emphasizes the importance of focusing on present policies and practices in order to build a fairer society.

The content pushes viewers to rethink their ideas about systematic racism and seek other reasons for societal inequality using examples such as redlining and educational chances. The content promotes a joint effort to alleviate injustice and build a more inclusive society. Finally, the content encourages viewers to move beyond oversimplified narratives of systematic racism and instead participate in meaningful discussions and activities that promote equality and opportunity for everyone.

### The One Political Issue That Unites All of Us

The content script explores how corporate welfare brings people together across party lines, emphasizing the detrimental impact of subsidies, tax benefits, and exclusive contracts on taxpayers. It underlines the importance of reform in addressing this issue. It also states that corporations frequently use campaign contributions and incentives to influence politicians.

The content states how the media has a key influence in defining the public view of corporate welfare, as it frequently fails to highlight the negative consequences of government subsidies and tax benefits on taxpayers. Here, it underscores the need for citizen engagement and action in fighting for policy changes that address corporate welfare while promoting economic fairness and equity.

### THIS Is How You Fix "Systemic Racism" | Louder With Crowder

The conversation centers on systematic racism, classism, family structure, and education in the United States, emphasizing historical context, present challenges, and possible remedies. The content discussed how systemic racism and classism are interwoven concerns influencing opportunities and outcomes in the United States. Personal responsibility, educated decision-making, and healthy family structures are critical in resolving systemic issues and effecting generational change, especially in the educational system.

The content emphasizes the complicated interplay of institutional racism, classism, and historical disadvantage, underlining the importance of taking a nuanced approach to effectively addressing these issues. In this context, there are also proposed solutions, such as school choice and teacher training, highlighting the significance of systemic reforms in education to promote fair access and quality for all kids, regardless of background. The dialogue promotes a balanced approach to systemic concerns, enabling productive debates about solutions prioritizing education, family values, and personal agency for positive social change.

## Analysis

The selection of these three contents represents a deliberate effort to include a wide range of perspectives and engagement types in the analysis. The study aims to thoroughly explain how YouTube impacts public views and opinions on politics and social policy in the digital era by studying content from creators with diverse ideological orientations and presentation techniques. In this section, we are using the ethnography method to understand online communities to curate the comment sections of the curated content, as follows:

Table of Analysis of Data Sentiment Comments

| Positive | Negative |
|---|---|
| "Jamal, what a perfect name to use on a video talking about racism." | "Let us talk about racism." "This is Jamal" Come On." |
| "As a black woman, I was not raised with people mentioning perspectives like Ben. Moreover, I can say this opened my mind. I notice many times when people say things about race, that there is nothing to back it. Alternatively, often times the situation seems to be more about qualifications, culture and socio economics status than race. What I learned is that the lack of details can often distort the picture." | "Why is Jamal "African American" but Kevin is "white"? Shouldn't Kevin be "European American" or Jamal be called "black"? Obviously because they want to frame "white" as a politician entity as well as a racial identity." |
| "To accuse others for one's own misfortune is a sign of lack of education. To accuse oneself shows that one's education has begun. To accuse neither oneself nor others shows that one's education is complete." Epictetus." | "Literally every generation ahead of mine were farmers and barely went through schooling. It's very aggravating to have someone sit and tell me that my parents, grandparents, and great parents were handed great education and employment opportunities. It's actually very enraging. Especially since my name is Kevin." |
| "Privatize profits and socialize losses" "I wish every American got a pie chart each year showing them how their tax dollars were spent." | "How do we stop racism? Stop talking about it. I'm going to stop calling you a white man, and I'm going to ask you to stop calling me a black man." - Morgan Freeman. I also think people have lost their minds focusing on this topic so much." |
| "This kid is going to be all right. No victim mentality has his stuff together, articulate, and willing to listen." | "They literally picked the most stereotypical names for these two kids." |

| | |
|---|---|
| "The kid is one of the most intelligent, articulate, and mindful people I have ever come across! His arguments as an unprepared 19-year-old put the interviewer to the test and even logically won on many areas. Congratulations to him and his family and he is an example to how people should conduct themselves in heated debates." | "The way his plant is just right in front of the lamp when there's a perfectly empty space next to the lamp for it to go…" |
| "For this kid to be this mature, articulate, and put together at just 19 is crazy. I was an idiot at 19. Can't imagine a universe where he won't succeed in life," | "The video Ben watched was exactly what was taught to me in college. I left that class feeling like everything was my fault and there was nothing I could really do about it. I realize now that the class was only showing half of the picture. It scares me that Universities are allowing this curriculum and that I was so easily convinced, why are they trying so hard to separate white people and black people?" |
| "Proud of this young man, he represented himself very well. He asked all the right questions (thumbs up emoji)" | "The nerve to pay out bonuses by using bailout money from the taxpayer is a level of evil that is almost impressive." |
| "LWC should hire this youngster and put him on your show every once in a while. Thoroughly enjoyed this conversation!" | "I never understood why the idea of a family with nothing being given a thousand dollars is outrageous, while the cruelest and laziest and wealthiest of us all being given a billion dollars is somehow a good thing." |
| "It's so refreshing to hear an honest and respectful conversation that is absent of irrational emotionalism and ad hominem." | "My greatest concern is how to recover from all these economic and global troubles and stay afloat especially with the political power tussle going on in US." |

| | |
|---|---|
| "This kid's parents should be very proud. He's a class act and already very much an adult. Wonderful." | "The fact that the government still gives the fossil fuel industry free money despite everything is absolutely insane to me." |
| "This is one of the best conversations I've seen in a while. Good Luck kid." | "Makes perfect sense since both political parties are corporate-owned. Corporate lobbyists write the bills that often later become laws. We are no longer a republic, but a corporatocracy led by a super-rich oligarchy." |
| "These kinds of conversations are what the Change My Mind series really needs to shoot for. We all know you are gonna outsmart an emotionally guided, speaks without even a shred of thought, nonsensical, desperate to be heard, college student that shouldn't be there to start with, given their state of mind. This gentleman portrayed a logical argument that results and ACTUAL positive outcomes and results that can be real world applied. Hat's off." | "Theodore Roosevelt would be so disappointed if he knew big corporations got power again." |
| "I was thinking "whoa kid really knows how to think for himself and is not in the least bit intimidated by opposition" and then he said he was homeschooled and everything made sense (face with tears of joy emojis). I'm on year 2 of homeschooling my kids and this is why." | "Any time I hear a corporation describe as "too big to fail", I think it might be time for that corporation to be broken into smaller pieces that can fail." |

| | |
|---|---|
| | "As a UAW member on the edge of a strike due to corporate greed, and the fact they consume our tax dollars and tell us that it's our fault they might go bankrupt while making 21 billion combined in the first 6 months of this year really makes this video hit home." |
| | "I like how you said near the end, "the left tends to criticize the businesses, the right the government, but what some don't realize is those groups are often on the same team; a team which none of US are on" This is so true. Looking at politics itself, both political parties even have things they do to play for this super- team of the government and big businesses, which lends some credibility to the phrase "2 wings, 1 albatross." The albatross preys upon the people and keeps us divided under each of its wings, and obscures its true intentions with partisan garbage that in the end is relatively trivial. I wish the general populace could see this and understand we all have a common enemy to wrangle. The combined force of Big Corp & the federal government is extremely powerful and oppressive and needs to be culled, from both halves of the whole." |

The first content, anchored by Ben Shapiro, is noted for its conservative views and sharp political commentary. Shapiro's channel has a big viewership of people who are interested in conservative opinions on current events and political topics. By integrating Shapiro's content in the analysis, the study hopes to capture the feelings and interaction patterns of viewers who subscribe to conservative ideas. Mr.

Beat hosts the second content, which focuses on educational political programming, providing historical insights and intelligent commentary on social and political concerns. Mr. Beat's program, which focuses on giving information in an approachable manner, appeals to viewers wanting a deeper understanding of political events and their historical context. In the last content, hosted by the team of CrowderBits provides a unique blend of comic and sarcastic comments on politics and current events. This program, hosted by Steven Crowder, combines humor and political analysis, appealing to those who prefer a humorous approach to serious problems. By incorporating CrowderBits into the analysis, the study hopes to investigate how humor and satire influence opinions of social policy and political discourse on YouTube.

Overall, viewers appear to express a mix of favorable and negative sentiments about United States politics on popular YouTube channels concerning news and politics. Viewers praised the young person in the video's maturity, articulateness, and critical thinking skills, as well as the respectful and honest nature of the conversation, and the youngster's ability to ask pertinent questions and engage in meaningful dialogue. Furthermore, other remarks express admiration for the person's capacity to think independently, which they credit to homeschooling.

On the other hand, negative sentiments encompass criticism directed towards the selection of stereotypical names for the individuals in the video, frustration with the discussion of race and identity, discontent with the state of education and the portrayal of certain topics in academia, criticism of corporate influence in politics and economic policies and disillusionment with the political system. Overall, while there are positive remarks regarding the individual's performance and the quality of the conversation, there are also significant criticisms directed towards various aspects such as racial framing, education, corporate influence, and political dynamics. These sentiments suggest a nuanced and multifaceted perspective among viewers, indicating both appreciation and dissatisfaction with the portrayal of political issues in the analyzed YouTube videos.

Interpreting sentiments from the top 10 comments on each video is crucial, yet it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations (Jones & Brown, 2021). Furthermore, conducted within a specific temporal context, the research captures sentiments at a particular moment, which may evolve over time due to changing events and social dynamics. Therefore, the top 10 comments on each video taken from the selected YouTube channel can be interpreted as a negative sentiment. Also, this result can answer the research article's question about sentiments viewers

express in YouTube videos regarding the United States Politics Popular Channel, YouTube News & Politics, which shows negative sentiments (Garcia et al., 2020). The positives and negatives spread by the viewers in those comment sections may overcome the impact of the equality of US politics, especially in a hostile online environment that is a barrier to political engagement.

## Conclusion

In this research, we will explore the political discourse prevalent within the YouTube platform, focusing on the sentiment viewers express through comments. Through the lens of netnography, an in–depth analysis of viewer comments across channels such as Ben Shapiro, Mr. Beat, and CrowderBits was conducted to uncover the nuanced ways sentiments manifest in online political communication. Our research question, which centers on what kinds of sentiments viewers express in their own viewing of YouTube videos about United States Politics on Popular YouTube Channels on News and Politics.

By studying qualitative data obtained from audience comments, we found that viewers who watched videos about news and politics expressed negative sentiments on the YouTube platform. The findings of this study revealed a slew of underlying factors for the outpouring of unfavorable feelings in the arena of YouTube politics. Ideological differences, as well as dissatisfaction with political leadership and socioeconomic challenges, were major contributors. Viewer comments expressed a wide range of emotions, including rage, irritation, and disappointment. Furthermore, the study revealed that negative sentiment was frequently caused by viewers' proclivity to gravitate toward content that confirmed their pre-existing opinions and biases.

While negative sentiment was prevalent across the investigated YouTube channels, it varied based on various parameters, including the channel's ideological stance, content type, and audience demographics. This study highlighted the major influence that negative sentiment plays in affecting political beliefs, conversation, and interactions inside the YouTube ecosystem. Despite its contentious character, negative emotion can be seen as a manifestation of democratic involvement and societal expression, highlighting the diversity of voices and perspectives present within the digital public sphere.

Ultimately, this study sheds light on the motivations, dynamics, and ramifications of audience expression on YouTube, offering valuable insights for content creators

and platform moderators. The crucial role of YouTube social media analysis in studying international relations in the digital era is marked by the penetration of the internet and the dominance of other social media platforms (Oloo, 2021). YouTube has become a transformative force that goes beyond mere entertainment. The importance of YouTube's social media analysis for studying international relations in the field of democracy in the United States lies in its ability to reveal the diverse and often fragmented landscape of public opinion. YouTube has become a platform for various interest groups, political organizations, and individuals to voice their views, criticize government policies, and mobilize support for specific political agendas. Through the analysis of video content, comments, and user interaction patterns, international relations scholars can gain a deeper understanding of public sentiment toward democracy issues, the level of online political participation, and the potential for polarization and radicalization that may occur.

In the field of public policy, YouTube social media analysis provides valuable insights into how policy issues are perceived, debated, and responded to by the public. Policymakers can use data from YouTube to measure public support for specific policies, identify potential resistance, and understand citizen concerns and aspirations (Koechlin, 2018). Video content created by civil society organizations, advocacy groups, and individuals affected by specific policies can provide grassroots perspectives often missed by traditional research methods. This analysis helps formulate more responsive, inclusive, and accountable policies. Through video testimonies, documentaries, and online campaigns, they can reach a broad audience, build solidarity, and pressure governments and stakeholders to act. Analysis of these contents helps international relations scholars understand the dynamics of online social movements, the effectiveness of digital advocacy strategies, and how civil rights issues are constructed and fought for in the digital age.

The influence of YouTube social media analysis on international relations studies is not limited to the domestic context of the United States. YouTube facilitates cross-border interactions and information exchanges between countries as a global platform. What happens on YouTube in the United States, whether in terms of political discourse, policy debates, or social movements, can quickly spread and influence public opinion and political dynamics in other countries. Phenomena such as the spread of extreme political ideologies, the emergence of online populist movements, and the mobilization of support for global issues such as climate change and social justice often gain momentum through platforms such as YouTube (Luders et al., 2022). Therefore, international relations scholars must integrate YouTube

social media analysis into their research frameworks to comprehensively understand the increasingly connected global political landscape. This analysis will not only help in understanding the internal dynamics of the United States but also in identifying global trends, analyzing the influence of transnational forces, and predicting potential international conflicts and cooperation. Understanding how information and narratives circulate and influence public opinion on YouTube is becoming increasingly important in the era of disinformation and information warfare.

However, it is important to acknowledge that YouTube's social media analysis has challenges and limitations. The large and growing volume of data requires sophisticated and interdisciplinary analytical methods, combining techniques from political science, sociology, communication, and computer science. In addition, issues such as algorithmic bias, content manipulation, and data privacy must be seriously considered in research. Developing ethical and responsible methodologies ensures that YouTube's social media analysis provides accurate and valuable insights for studying international relations. In conclusion, YouTube's social media analysis is an invaluable tool for studying international relations, particularly in understanding the dynamics of democracy, public policy, and civil rights in the United States and their impact on the world. Its ability to uncover public opinion, track the spread of information, facilitate advocacy, and connect actors across borders makes it a rich and relevant data source. By addressing the associated methodological and ethical challenges, international relations scholars can harness the potential of YouTube analysis to generate a deeper understanding of the complexities of global interactions in the digital age and their implications for world peace, security, and prosperity. Integrating YouTube social media analysis into international relations studies is no longer an option but a necessity to remain relevant and able to analyze the ever-changing realities of global politics.

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# A Changing Europe and the Security of the Western Balkans

Amir Shaban

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Amir Shaban
South East European University, Tetovo, North Macedonia

https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7952-1066

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amir Shaban.

Email: amirshaban93@gmail.com

BALKAN JOURNALS

*Abstract*

The current global context, particularly in Europe, has heightened the importance of security concerns, as the significant changes that have occurred and are anticipated pose a considerable threat to peace and stability. The Western Balkans has identified European integration as a fundamental strategy for achieving lasting peace and stability. In light of the recent escalation of security threats in Eastern Europe, particularly the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the urgency of addressing these risks has intensified. Effective protection against such threats necessitates a unified European policy that encompasses both the EU member states and the countries of the Western Balkans.

The Western Balkans is a political notion with multiple geographical definitions. The Western Balkans, a region that includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo, was the area where East and West were divided throughout the Cold War. Today, the countries of the Western Balkans that have passed the transition period still face the difficulties of their consolidation or the stability of bilateral agreements. Although they are located on the European continent with cultural diversity in a narrow space, they still need to be put in the European integration and security process.

In this context, the Western Balkans remains a critical region within the broader European framework, where stability, peace, and security require both internal reforms and external support. The integration of these countries into the EU is not only vital for regional peace but also for the collective security of Europe as a whole. This paper examines the dynamics of Western Balkan integration, the security challenges the region faces, and potential pathways toward a more stable and secure European future.

*Keywords:* Europe, security, peace, conflicts, Western Balkans, stability.

## Introduction

Following the end of communist regimes in the early 1990s, the Western Balkans became a site of severe political turmoil, exposing the fragility of democratic structures. The events that unfolded after 1989 suggested not the conclusion of history, as commonly believed, but rather the collapse of efforts to establish and sustain peace in the region.

With the end of the communist regime in the Western Balkan region, it seems that only the hope for a close integration of the Western Balkans in the EU can end the ongoing political and economic instability. The socio-political phenomena of nationalism and integration in the Western Balkan region are especially interconnected. A central dimension of this paper provides the areas of interaction between democracy, the rule of law, nationalism, and integration.

Starting from the basic hypothesis that integration in the EU represents an instrument of conflict resolution and ensuring peace, in which case it seems necessary to identify in a differentiated manner the preconditions and conditions under which integration in the EU, in a truly sustainable way, it can create peace in the Western Balkans, especially in the case of the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. This paper aims to contribute to a more peaceful and stable future in the Western Balkans, with the expectation that the tragic events of the 21st century mark the end of a turbulent period rather than the beginning of future instability.

The main integration tasks can be summarized in four points:

- Keeping the peace;
- Achieving a greater multipurpose potential;
- Solving a specific task; and
- Gaining a new self-understanding and role identity.[1]

The EU's support for the Western Balkans' European integration is evident. A clear perspective on membership is essential for the stability of the region. Enlargement should remain one of the EU's priorities, despite the many challenges it is currently facing. The accession process must be pursued with vigor and rigor as one of the

1 Karl W. Deutsch: Frieden und die Problematik politischer Gemeinschaftsbildung auf internationaler Ebene [Peace and the problem of the creation of political communities on the international plane], in: Dieter Senghaas (ed.): Den Frieden denken, Frankfurt 1995, p. 363.

EU's top priorities, according to the clear and strict conditions that are the basis of all accession processes - nothing more, nothing less.

It would be advisable for all countries in the Western Balkans region to set up national councils on European integration or other similar bodies that would bring together high-level political authorities and key civil society organizations regularly, to make the EU integration process more transparent and publish it more widely.

## Enlargement Policy

The EU's main enlargement strategy, from the beginning, has been based on the policy of conditionality. In 1993, the European Council meeting in Copenhagen proposed the Copenhagen Criteria, the successful completion of which would determine the level of success in terms of integration for all countries aspiring to join the EU. The criteria aim at the stability of institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and the protection of minorities, the existence of a functional market economy, as well as the capacity to withstand competitive pressure and market forces within the European Union; as well as the ability to undertake the obligations of membership, including the realization of the goals of the political, economic and monetary union. In 1995, the Madrid European Council added two more conditions: the regulation of administrative structures and the transposition of EU legislation into national legislation.

In addition to these general conditions which determine and evaluate the individual merits of the candidate countries, the EU offers the "regional approach", with political and economic conditions for the Western Balkans as a basis for a coherent and transparent policy in terms of developing relations in the field of trade, financial assistance, and economic cooperation, as well as contractual relations, allowing a necessary degree of flexibility. This EU strategy is intended to serve as an incentive, not a deterrent, for countries aspiring to membership.

Regional integration is a necessary process as it encourages peace and stability in the region, through the encouragement of reconciliation, good neighborliness, and good political relations, helps to overcome nationalism and tolerance, and promotes mutual understanding and political dialogue in the region. Such treatment was considered useful to be institutionalized, especially after the end of the NATO intervention in Kosovo. For this purpose, the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe was created, which aimed to create and strengthen peace and security in Southeastern Europe, to restore stability and prevent conflict.

EU institutions and EU Member States should regularly include representatives from Western Balkan countries in EU summits, as proof that the EU considers this region as part of its future and to encourage an informed debate about the political, economic, and social impact of enlargement policy.

The Western Balkans have undeniably been shaped by the profound transformations that occurred across Europe. However, unlike the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the region did not transition peacefully toward European integration but was instead engulfed by the tragic wars of the 1990s. It was only after prolonged conflict and hardship that a regional system of states was established. Since then, these states have collectively pursued the only viable path for ensuring stability and prosperity for their citizens: the path toward European integration. The Western Balkan states are now facing similar challenges, as other European states have in the past. The first and foremost task is to create the conditions for lasting peace. This is possible only through dialogue and the creation of trust, building the way for partnership and eventual friendship among the people in the Balkans.

The challenge of European integration can stimulate the advancement and functioning of democratic institutions, capable of managing and progressing in the cultural, economic, institutional, and political fields. The efforts made in the direction of integration in the EU will create the conditions of a modern market economy and increase the country's capacity to compete within the EU and on world markets.

The EU should develop specific policies for countries with high ethnic tensions. Given the unresolved status of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which may impact regional stability, the Union's relations with the countries of the Western Balkans should adopt a more regional approach. This would include applying uniform accession criteria and assessing achievements through the Stabilization and Association Process, as well as emphasizing regional cooperation.

## The Security Threat from Russian Influence in The Western Balkans

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, concerns were raised about the impact on stability in the Western Balkans. So, senior EU officials immediately expressed the need to support non-NATO countries that could be the next target of Putin's aggression, including the Western Balkans. Even the High Representative of the EU for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, after having emphasized that Russia will not stop in Ukraine, said that the level of security

in the Western Balkans should be increased, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which can face destabilization from Russia.

Russia has maintained and continues to maintain close relations with Serbia and the Bosnian Serb leaders in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Under the leadership of Milorad Dodik, Bosnian Serbs have adopted an increasingly assertive separatist stance in recent years. This led to warnings that the peace accords that ended the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s could fall apart.

In June 2022, then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that Bosnian Serb secession in BiH was supported by Moscow as part of Putin's attempt to undermine Bosnia's Euro-Atlantic integration and its stability and that the Western Balkans could not be allowed to be another playground for Putin's pernicious pursuits.

Although Serbia is a candidate for EU membership, it has not joined the EU sanctions against Russia. Russia has supported Serbia's position towards Kosovo, where neither Serbia nor Russia has recognized Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. The EU has mediated talks between Kosovo and Serbia, leading to a series of agreements aimed at normalizing relationships. However, these have not been fully implemented, and tensions have escalated again since 2021, with Russia and Serbia accusing the Kosovo government of provocations.

The Western Balkans have consistently been classified as a particular target of Russian disinformation, with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia the most affected. Frequent themes of disinformation operations include demonizing the US and NATO, portraying the EU as weak and divided, advertising Russian military power, and reinforcing threat perceptions, myths, and ethnic tensions. The Western Balkans region is strategically important for NATO and the EU, but there are reasons for concern, and great caution is needed against any eventual escalation of Russian destabilization. The EU has repeatedly called for the importance of dialogue in the region, as well as for an end to the secessionist movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the re-engagement of Serbia and Kosovo in the talks mediated by the EU.

## Progress in EU Accession

In June 2003, the Thessaloniki EU summit declared for the first time that Western Balkan countries were eligible to become EU members in the future (Council of the EU, 2003). Since then, only Croatia has completed the accession process, becoming an EU member on 1st July 2013.

The most advanced EU candidate in the region (Montenegro) is still far from the end of the negotiation process. Serbia is less advanced than Montenegro, and the other three countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia) are at the beginning of membership negotiations. Kosovo is a potential candidate but must wait for official candidate status and formal recognition of its independence from all EU member states.

In the table below, I have presented the main stages and the timeline of the accession process of the six countries of the Western Balkans and Croatia.

The first phase – the negotiation, signing, and ratification of Stabilization Association Agreements (SAAs) between the EU and individual countries – was completed by North Macedonia and Croatia early, but took longer for other countries. Usually, the free trade chapters of the SAA, which did not require the completion of a long ratification process in all EU member states (because only approval by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU), were entered into force earlier (sometimes much earlier, as in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina).

Table 1: Western Balkan countries, EU accession progress

| **Country** | **SAA: entry into force** | **Membership application** | **EU candidate status** | **Decision to open accession negotiation** | **Status of accession process, April 2024** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Albania* | 2009 | 2009 | 2014 | 2020/2022 | Initial phase |
| *BiH* | 2015 | 2016 | 2022 | 2024 | Preparatory stage |
| *Kosovo* | 2016 | 2022 | | | |
| *Montenegro* | 2010 | 2008 | 2010 | 2012 | Advanced |
| *North Macedonia* | 2004 | 2004 | 2005 | 2020/2022 | Initial phase |
| *Serbia* | 2013 | 2009 | 2012 | 2013 | Partly advanced |
| *Croatia* | 2005 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | EU member, 1st July 2013 |

*Source: Bruegel based on Council of the EU, European Commission, Steinbach (2024), Dabrowski (2014), Dabrowski & Myachenkova (2018).*

Overall, the accession process of the Western Balkans has been slow compared to the Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. Although both the EU member states and the Balkan applicants share responsibility for the limited progress in the enlargement process, the narrative often

disproportionately attributes the blame to the applicants.

EU member states' political momentum and enthusiasm for further enlargement waned during the 2010s and early 2020s. As a result, they were slow to initiate accession negotiations with certain candidates, and in some cases, veto power was strategically employed. As long as all enlargement-related decisions require the unanimity of all member states, the EU's common position will be determined by the most reluctant countries.

Due to the politicization of the unanimity requirement in the EU enlargement decision-making process, some countries used their veto power to advance their national interests, subjecting North Macedonia to repeated instances of such practices. For more than a decade, Greece blocked the start of EU membership negotiations, demanding that it change its country's name (this veto also blocked North Macedonia's admission to NATO). When the then Republic of Macedonia finally accepted this request and signed the Prespa agreement in 2018, it had to wait to agree and implement the Revised Enlargement Methodology.

Bulgaria challenged North Macedonia on issues related to the claimed Bulgarian roots of the Macedonian nation and language. In June 2022, under pressure from the EU, the Bulgarian parliament waived its veto to allow the start of EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia. However, the conflict remains unresolved, and Bulgaria is still seeking changes to the North Macedonian constitution.

The EU also took active steps in speeding up Western Balkan accession. Bosnia and Herzegovina became an EU candidate in December 2022 and was invited to start accession negotiations in March 2024. On 8 November 2023, the European Commission announced a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans for 2024-2027, worth €6 billion (of which €2 billion is grants and €4 billion concessional loans). The Council's presidency and the European Parliament provisionally approved this package on 4 April 2024.

Apart from providing additional financial assistance to the region, the EU aims to accelerate its economic convergence, set incentives to speed up governance and economic reforms, normalize Serbia-Kosovo relations, accelerate the integration of candidates into the Single European Market, and boost intra-regional integration through the Common Regional Market.

## Conclusion

The Western Balkan countries were given a geopolitical chance to become EU members at the beginning of the twenty-first century after a decade of tragic intra-regional conflicts, which accompanied the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. The EU integration prospect has helped to mitigate the previous conflicts and create positive political and economic dynamics in the region, which dominated the period until the early 2010s. However, more than 20 years after the Thessaloniki summit, only Croatia has joined the EU. The remaining six countries are still stuck at various stages of the accession process, with no or little progress in recent years.

The blame for the slow pace of EU accession can be shared between EU member countries and the candidates. Some EU countries lost interest in continued enlargement and have used this process to satisfy their nationalist domestic agendas. Meanwhile, the Western Balkan candidates stopped progressing or even backtracked in the key areas of democratic institutions, the rule of law, anti-corruption, and protecting minorities. There has been no further progress in the normalization of Serbia-Kosovo relations.

The full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine has put EU enlargement back on top of the policy agenda. Three Eastern Partnership countries (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia) and Bosnia and Herzegovina have received EU candidate status, and Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina have been invited to start accession negotiations. However, the prospect of moving fast in accession negotiations is rather limited in most cases.

Another political incentive for the candidates would be rewarding the progress in accession negotiations with earlier access to specific EU common policies and institutions. Such a perspective was outlined in the Growth Pact for the Western Balkans.

Western Balkan countries are already closely integrated economically with the EU. Their accession to the EU will further strengthen economic links and help accelerate income per capita convergence, as happened in countries that joined the EU previously. It can both economically and politically stabilize the region, which borders several EU member states directly and serves as a land bridge between the southeast of the EU (Greece and Bulgaria) and its central European part. It can also help minimize the interference of external powers such as Russia and China.

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# Functioning of The Media in North Macedonia During COVID-19 and Respecting Journalistic Ethics

Dashmir Idrizi

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Dashmir Idrizi
University of Tetova, Tetova, North Macedonia
https://orcid.org/0000-0000-0000-0001

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dashmir Idrizi. Email: dashmir.idrizi@unite.edu.mk

BALKAN JOURNALS

*Abstract*

Ethics is the study of human behavior through the lens of moral principles. It helps us understand what is right or wrong and how we make decisions that affect others. In journalism, ethics form the foundation of professionalism. A journalist's most important asset should be ethical integrity. Yet, today, this principle is often overlooked. We live in an era of rapid and uncontrolled information sharing. Journalists sometimes fail to report even basic facts accurately. In more serious cases, they may violate individuals' rights through careless or sensational reporting. Social media has made this worse. Now, anyone can present themselves as a journalist simply by creating a page and posting content, regardless of training or accountability. This flood of information has created a dangerous imbalance: we have more quantity of news, but less quality. As a result, ethical standards in journalism are weakening. This trend became especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when misinformation spread rapidly and caused real harm. To rebuild trust, media professionals must return to core ethical principles: verify information, respect privacy, avoid sensationalism, and prioritize public interest. Media organizations should also develop clearer guidelines and provide training in ethics, especially during times of crisis. These steps are essential to ensure that journalism serves society, not harms it.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, information, media, ethics

## Introduction

Ethics is the study of human behavior through the lens of moral principles. It helps us understand what is right or wrong and how we make decisions that affect others. In journalism, ethics form the foundation of professionalism. A journalist's most important asset should be ethical integrity. Yet, today, this principle is often overlooked.

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This flood of information has created a dangerous imbalance: we have more quantity of news, but less quality. As a result, ethical standards in journalism are weakening. This trend became especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when misinformation spread rapidly and caused real harm.

To rebuild trust, media professionals must return to core ethical principles: verify information, respect privacy, avoid sensationalism, and prioritize public interest. Media organizations should also develop clearer guidelines and provide training in ethics, especially during times of crisis. These steps are essential to ensure that journalism serves society, not harms it.

## Media Functioning During COVID-19

The media has long been one of the first elements in society to be misused during times of crisis and conflict. Often, even before a conflict fully emerges, different groups attempt to take control of media channels to shape narratives in their favor. As it's been said, "Those who don't directly experience a conflict often become part of it because of the media."

In early 2020, during the months of January and February, initial reports of COVID-19 emerged from several countries. The virus quickly escalated into a global threat, reaching over 210 countries. On January 30, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a public health emergency, urging governments to act swiftly to protect their populations (World Health Organization, 2020).

On February 11, the WHO officially named the disease "COVID-19," in an effort to standardize the terminology and avoid regional stigmatization. Despite this, many world leaders continued to publicly refer to it as the "Chinese Virus," a label that contributed to rising tensions and social division (Rogers et al., 2020).

These narratives had real consequences. Across the world, individuals of Asian descent experienced discrimination and verbal abuse. In one case, a video circulated on social media showed a Macedonian citizen insulting and verbally attacking a group of Asian tourists. Shockingly, he recorded and posted the incident himself. The video sparked widespread condemnation from the public, with many demanding institutional responses to address the racism (Alsat-M, 2020).

In the Republic of North Macedonia, some early news reports on COVID-19 began appearing in January. However, widespread media coverage only intensified after February 26, when Health Minister Venko Filipche announced the first confirmed case in the country. Although preventive measures such as border screenings had already been introduced on February 24, most media outlets focused solely on official statements from the Ministry of Health. It took over two months before journalists were allowed access to hospitals and frontlines where patients were being treated.

This delay prompts an important question: Were the media in North Macedonia prepared to handle a crisis of this scale? The answer seems to reflect a broader systemic issue, not just within the media, but also in the state's institutional readiness. While journalists often lacked access to critical information, this was partly due to governmental restrictions rather than negligence.

Nevertheless, the situation underscores a vital ethical challenge: In times of crisis, the media must go beyond passive reporting and take an active role in seeking the truth, ensuring transparency, and protecting public interest. Relying solely on official narratives can leave the public vulnerable to misinformation, fear, and social division.

To improve media response in future emergencies, several steps are essential. Media outlets should establish crisis-reporting protocols, invest in investigative journalism, and ensure their staff are trained in ethical reporting under pressure. At the same time, governments must recognize the media as a key public ally — not a threat — and facilitate open access to information that can aid in public awareness and safety.

## Reporting of the First Cases of COVID-19 in North Macedonia

On February 24, 2020, the national broadcaster Alsat M aired a report titled: "Coronavirus: Authorities Warn of Stronger Controls at All Border Crossings." The piece announced reinforced screening procedures at border points and airports, particularly for passengers arriving from high-risk areas. The alarming developments in Italy had triggered a sense of urgency in North Macedonia.

In an emergency meeting, the Commission for Infectious Diseases decided to set up designated spaces at border crossings, where passengers from high-risk destinations would be questioned by border police. These officers would then coordinate with public health centers.

Health Minister Venko Filipche urged citizens to avoid traveling to affected areas unless absolutely necessary. He also mentioned that more detailed guidance — including possible restrictions on school trips — would follow after a meeting of the Crisis Management Center (Dosja.al, 2020).

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that, at that point, no Macedonian citizens in Italy had tested positive for the virus. However, around 23,000 Macedonian nationals were living in the affected regions of Lombardy and Veneto. The death toll in Italy had risen to seven, and panic was spreading as roughly 50,000 residents in the north of the country prepared for a weeks-long quarantine. Stores were being emptied, and all sports and cultural events were canceled. In response, countries such as Croatia and Greece canceled all student trips and excursions to Italy.

## National Coverage of the First Confirmed Case in North Macedonia – February 26, 2020

Several media outlets reported the country's first confirmed COVID-19 case on February 26, 2020. TV21 published a piece titled: "The First Case of Coronavirus Is Confirmed in Macedonia – Health Institutions Call for Calm!"

The report stated that a 50-year-old woman who had returned from a month-long stay in Italy tested positive. She had proactively presented herself at the Infectious Diseases Clinic in Skopje after experiencing symptoms similar to those reported internationally. She was immediately hospitalized and isolated. According to authorities, she had traveled from Belgrade to Skopje in a van with other passengers who were later contacted for screening.

Minister Venko Filipche addressed the media:

"The patient who arrived at the clinic at around 03:00 has tested positive for COVID-19. She is the first confirmed case in Skopje. Let me repeat what we have been consistently saying: there is no reason to panic" (Portalb.mk, 2020).

Epidemiologist Zharko Karaxhoski, chairman of the Infectious Diseases Commission, emphasized that the case was expected:

"This situation is under control and did not catch us by surprise. We anticipated new cases in Europe. Keep in mind that Italy alone has 14 million residents. We cannot completely stop the movement of people, goods, and capital. According to WHO health regulations, such transfers cannot be fully prohibited."

Officials at the Infectious Diseases Clinic told TV21 that the patient's condition was stable. Despite the confirmed case, interim Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski stated that borders would remain open and that no bans on public gatherings or holidays would be implemented at that time.

By this point, three other suspected cases had been reported in North Macedonia — individuals who had recently returned from Italy and Dubai — but all tested negative. Meanwhile, neighboring Greece confirmed its first case, Croatia reported two infections, and Italy's confirmed cases rose to 400, with 12 recorded deaths.

## TV KLAN Macedonia – The First Case of Coronavirus

On February 26, 2020, TV KLAN Macedonia reported the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in North Macedonia. A 50-year-old woman had entered the country via the Tabanovce border crossing in the early morning hours, traveling in a van alongside other passengers. Upon arrival, she voluntarily presented herself to the Infectious Diseases Clinic in Skopje, reporting symptoms of illness. Although she had been unwell during her stay in Italy, she had not been tested for COVID-19 while there (Hajro Jajaga, 2020).

The patient was immediately placed in intensive care and isolated from other individuals in the clinic. Health Minister Venko Filipche stated:

"Epidemiologists are currently working to trace her contacts and determine who she traveled with and where those individuals are now. The primary objective is to isolate anyone who may potentially carry the virus, even if they currently show no symptoms. A 14-day

isolation is required in such cases. Since she became ill while still in Italy, we believe her incubation period may have passed during her stay there."

During a press conference, technical Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski addressed concerns about public gatherings, such as carnivals or political events. He emphasized that decisions would be made based on ongoing assessments from the crisis headquarters:

"For now, we see no reason to implement any restrictions. However, the crisis team will remain in continuous session, monitoring the situation and responding accordingly" (Musliu, 2020).

Spasovski repeatedly called for both individual and collective responsibility in preventing the virus's spread. He urged companies with employees recently returned from Italy to allow them to self-isolate for at least 14 days. The same advice was extended to schools and childcare institutions.

While the initial case did not cause widespread panic, two additional infections were confirmed on March 6, this time outside the capital. The patients, who had returned from Italy on February 27, sought medical assistance in the city of Dibra on March 2.

## Media Challenges and the Ethics of Information

The early days of COVID-19 coverage in North Macedonia revealed significant weaknesses in media communication. Notably, the quality and clarity of public information declined as reporting became more fragmented and influenced by ethnic and political narratives. The subjectivity of certain reports compromised the neutrality expected in times of crisis.

This raises critical questions about media ethics, particularly the responsibility to provide verified, unbiased information that serves the public good. As the pandemic unfolded, the role of the press became even more vital — not only in informing the population but also in avoiding unnecessary fear, misinformation, or discrimination.

## SHENJA TV – North Macedonia Confirms First Case of Coronavirus

North Macedonia officially recorded its first case of COVID-19 on February 26, 2020. Minister of Health, Venko Filipche, announced that the patient was a 50-year-old woman who had recently returned from Italy, entering the country by bus through the Tabanovce border crossing. According to Filipche, she had already passed the incubation period and had been sick for two weeks while in Italy. She had not been

tested there but was directed to the Infectious Diseases Clinic upon arrival in Skopje, where she was immediately isolated and placed under appropriate care.

"The patient has been placed in the isolation unit at the Infectious Diseases Clinic. Epidemiological analysis shows that she stayed in Italy for about a month and had already been ill there. Since she received treatment while abroad and has shown no new symptoms since entering the country, we believe she no longer poses a risk of spreading the virus," said Minister Filipche.

He also emphasized that all individuals who may have come into contact with the patient would be tested and monitored, with updates to follow.

Technical Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski assured the public that the case was being handled in full accordance with established protocols and that all necessary services were prepared to respond effectively.

"The situation is under control. All state institutions are equipped with personnel and resources, and they are adhering to safety standards and protocols. There is no cause for panic. Citizens should continue to follow the recommendations issued by the Ministry of Health," said Spasovski.

Dr. Zharko Karaxhovski added that the patient was conscious and under constant medical supervision. He emphasized that she had no contact with other individuals upon entering the clinic, reducing any potential risk of transmission.

Further details regarding the patient and public health response were expected in Minister Filipche's scheduled press conference later that evening at 8:00 p.m.

## Media Ethics Under Fire: The Tetovo Tragedy

While the early management of the first COVID-19 case demonstrated professionalism and caution, a tragic incident in Tetovo on September 8, 2021, revealed critical flaws in media ethics. That day, a devastating fire broke out at the modular COVID hospital, resulting in the deaths of 14 patients and family members.

Instead of handling the tragedy with sensitivity, several media outlets published graphic images of the victims and the remains of the hospital. These visuals, shared without proper consideration for the victims' dignity or their families, sparked widespread public outrage.

Footage showed panicked relatives running amidst chaos, while unethical digital platforms prioritized clicks over compassion, circulating disturbing images that

breached all journalistic standards. This behavior stood in stark contrast to traditional media — television, print, and radio — which largely maintained ethical boundaries in their reporting.

## Survey on Media Ethics During COVID-19

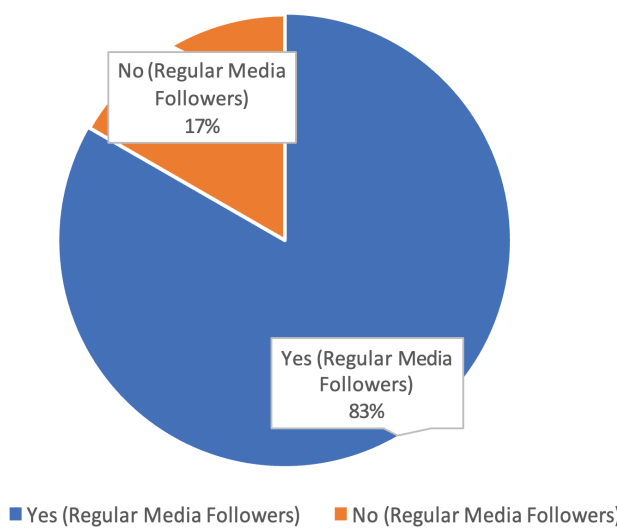
In order to assess the performance of the media during the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly regarding their ethical standards in both news reporting and other public broadcasts—we conducted a survey using an electronic form. The goal was to determine how the public perceived the media's ethical responsibility during this critical time.

The survey was completed by 300 citizens of various age groups, offering diverse perspectives. The results are summarized as follows:

### Media Consumption Habits

Respondents were first asked whether they regularly follow media—whether written or electronic. 83.3% stated that they are regular media followers. 16.7% indicated they do not follow the media frequently. This shows a high level of media engagement among the surveyed population.

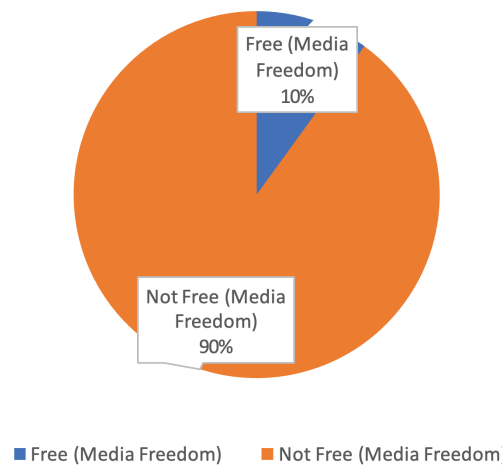
Figure 1: Regular Media Followers Survey Result



## Perception of Media Freedom

To understand public opinion on media freedom in addressing social, economic, or political issues, respondents were asked how freely they think the media operates in North Macedonia. 90% believed that the media lack transparency and do not operate freely. Only 10% felt that the press enjoys freedom of expression. This points to a significant level of public distrust in the media's independence and transparency.

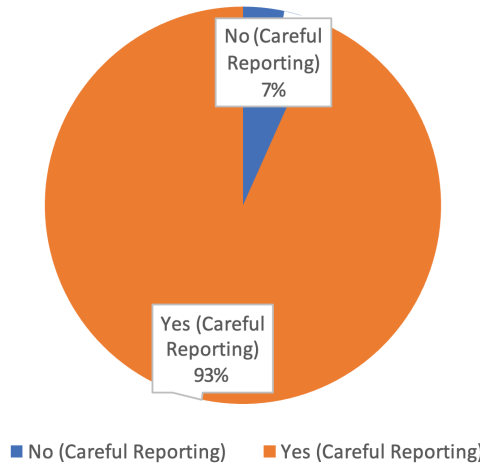
Figure 2: Perception of Media Freedom




## Ethics in Reporting Sensitive Issues

Respondents were asked whether journalists should exercise greater caution when reporting on sensitive topics like COVID-19. 93.3% agreed that journalists should be more careful when reporting sensitive issues. Only 6.7% believed that such caution is unnecessary. The overwhelming majority demands more responsibility in media coverage during crises.

Figure 3: Should Journalists be More Careful Reporting Sensitive



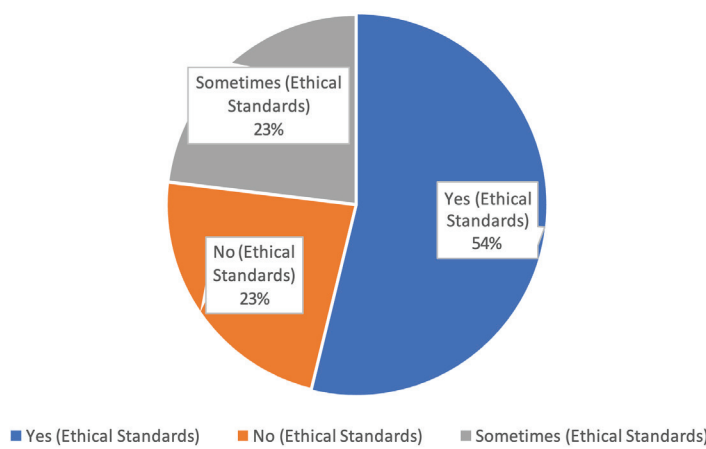

## Ethical Standards on Social Media

In the final question, respondents were asked if news content on social media should be held to higher ethical standards. They had three answer options:

- 53,8% answered Yes
- 23,1% answered No
- 23,1% answered Sometimes

(Note: Some respondents selected more than one option, indicating mixed views.)

Figure 4: Should Social Media News Contain More Ethical Standards?



While a strong majority supports the need for ethical improvement, a portion of the audience remains uncertain or unconvinced, highlighting the complexity of public attitudes toward digital media.

The survey results reflect a clear public expectation for more ethical, transparent, and responsible journalism, particularly during times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Key takeaways include:

- A demand for better media freedom and transparency.
- A widespread call for ethical sensitivity when reporting health-related news.
- A need for stricter ethical standards on social media platforms, where misinformation often spreads unchecked.
- News organizations and social media platforms should implement stricter editorial guidelines, fact-checking procedures, and ethical codes—especially when covering topics that impact public health, safety, and trust.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, media ethics go beyond just professional standards—they also reflect moral responsibility. Consider a situation where a journalist witnesses an accident and an injured person needs help. The journalist must decide whether to act based on their professional duty or their moral obligation. The key question is: should saving a life take priority, or is reporting public information more important?

Journalists must rely on ethical codes to make these decisions. These codes prioritize the public interest over personal interests, helping journalists avoid mistakes and stay focused on their role to inform responsibly.

The media earns public trust by being a platform of truth. Today, much of the truth is uncovered not by journalists, but by the public itself. As the "fourth estate," the media has a duty to maintain high standards of accuracy and accountability.

In reporting on sensitive events, such as the fires in Tetovo and Bulgaria, media outlets must be careful. Ethical guidelines were violated when graphic images of victims were published. This is unacceptable and must not happen again in the future.

## Suggestions for Media Ethics in Crisis Situations

Publishing distressing images that violate the dignity of victims and their families should be avoided. In times of crisis, media should prioritize accurate, well-sourced information over sensational stories. Journalists should remember that behind every story, there are real people. Ethical considerations should guide how sensitive topics are reported.

By following these guidelines, the media can ensure that it upholds its critical role in society—providing trustworthy, ethical journalism that serves the public's best interests.

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Gjeraqina Leka[1] and Ebrar Ibraimi[2]

[1] University of Tetova, Tetovo, North Macedonia, https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5404-0976

[2] University of Tetova, Tetovo, North Macedonia, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3008-1019

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gjeraqina Leka,

Email: gjeraqina.leka@unite.edu.mk

BALKAN JOURNALS

# The Pivotal Role of EU Engagement in North Macedonia: Internal Cohesion Implications amid Geopolitical Challenges

Gjeraqina Leka and Ebrar Ibraimi

*Abstract*

This paper aims to explore the crucial role that the EU plays in shaping North Macedonia's political and societal security dynamics, with a particular focus on how the recent security shifts in Europe and beyond may transform this relationship. By drawing on the Regional Security Complex Theory, developed by Buzan and Waever (2003), the paper seeks to reflect the EU's historically stabilizing role in North Macedonia. Given this country's delicate security position, the paper argues that EU integration represents a security cornerstone strategy. However, the recent geopolitical developments give rise to new political and societal challenges in North Macedonia, especially as external pressures from global powers increase while EU support and attention decrease. The article asserts that the ability of the EU to preserve its role as an anchoring factor in North Macedonia is continuously being diminished as a consequence of the recent security evolutions, regionally and globally. The prolonged EU integration process and the geopolitical volatility in Eastern Europe weaken the EU's vital influence, which might furthermore deepen internal ethnic cleavages, erode democratic governance, and amplify regional insecurities. In such a context, a reassessment of the EU's role as an equilibrator of North Macedonia's multiple security issues is of paramount priority, particularly in light of the increasing influence of Eastern powers, which aim to exploit the local disappointment with the EU perspective. The paper concludes with recommendations on strengthening the EU's engagement with the Western Balkans, ensuring that the region remains on an unambiguous path toward full EU membership, amid new security threats.

*Keywords*: EU, security shifts, North Macedonia, geopolitics, regional security

## Introduction

In North Macedonia's case, foreign policy, despite its universally accepted role in ensuring the country's survival within the international anarchical system (Donnelly, 2015; Korvela, 2018), has served as a unifying force domestically. Scholars widely agree that integration strengthens inter-ethnic relations and delays in the process risk exacerbating tensions and domestic instability. Many of them view NATO and EU membership as critical to North Macedonia's sovereignty and internal stability, functioning as a "glue" in a multiethnic society facing societal divisions. The broad national consensus on international integration reflects its promise of political, economic, and security benefits across ethnic divides (Pendarovski, 2012; Marolov, 2014; Vankovska, 2017; Nuhija, 2013). As demonstrated by the Prespa Agreement, which resolved the long-standing name dispute with Greece, the EU's involvement was critical in facilitating consensus between the country's ethnic groups, thus reinforcing national cohesion (Bechev, 2022). The agreement not only allowed the country to join NATO but also initiated a pre-entry screening phase with the European Union (Manzinger, 2020). However, just as the path to EU integration seemed unblocked, a new challenge arose with Bulgaria. Bulgaria's demands, focusing on historical and identity-related issues, posed a new barrier to North Macedonia's EU accession (Vangelov, 2023). In November 2020, Bulgaria refused to adopt a negotiating framework, insisting that North Macedonia make constitutional amendments acknowledging what Sofia regards as their shared history (Brunnbauer, 2022). This veto effectively decoupled North Macedonia from Albania in October 2024, which was allowed to proceed with opening negotiations (Taylor-Brace & Gotov, 2024).

The Bulgarian blockade underscores the fragility of the EU accession process, as individual member states can influence the enlargement agenda in line with their national interests (Brunnbauer, 2022). Bulgaria's demands have placed North Macedonia in a precarious position, where it is required to navigate between domestic pressures and external demands. The ongoing stalemate not only hampers the country's progress toward EU membership but also undermines the shared vision of Euro-Atlantic integration, which has served as a unifying force between the country's two major ethnic groups, Macedonians and Albanians (Vasilev, 2011; Serwer, 2018). Without a cohesive objective, there is a possibility of renewed ethnic tensions, which could have an impact on the country's internal stability and regional relations.

The above predicament, which links the absence of EU integration as a cohesive objective to inter-ethnic instability and further regional insecurity, is evidenced by past situations when North Macedonia was under Greece's blockade, and these blockades disrupted the country's EU integration prospects. The Greek veto regarding the name dispute with North Macedonia introduced notable challenges, with emerging differences in foreign policy orientations between the ethnic Macedonian and Albanian communities potentially influencing the cohesion of the state. As Vankovska (2017) explains, external pressures coupled with internal ethnic divisions resulted in a fragmented and incoherent foreign policy approach.

The split between the two ethnic groups during the Greek blockade further highlights how blockades to EU integration can exacerbate internal divisions. As Pendarovski (2012) notes, the Euro-Atlantic agenda became a divisive factor between Macedonian and Albanian communities, especially after 2008, when the blockade stalled Macedonia's NATO and EU aspirations. Perceiving delays in political processes, members of the Albanian community supported accelerated approaches to dispute resolution, whereas among the ethnic Macedonian community, there were concerns that independent diplomatic efforts might impact national interests and interethnic relations (Nuhija, 2013). The growing gap between the two groups, as reflected in their differing attitudes toward external threats and the EU integration process, raised concerns among politicians and analysts about the potential for heightened tensions based on divergent foreign policy strategies and perceptions of national identity (Koppa, 2001).

Besides the stalled EU integration process due to Bulgaria's blockade, the EU's pivotal role in stabilizing North Macedonia is being further diminished by recent geopolitical shifts, notably the war in Ukraine. The conflict in Ukraine has shifted the EU's focus toward Eastern Europe, draining attention and resources from the Western Balkans. This redirection of priorities weakens the EU's presence and influence in the region, leaving a vacuum that other actors, particularly Russia, are eager to fill. As many scholars argue, Russia seeks to undermine the EU's efforts in the Balkans by capitalizing on regional instability and unresolved societal divisions (Malaj & Mahmutaj, 2023; Polovic, 2023). This trend is noteworthy in a context where the EU, historically regarded as a stabilizing presence, faces challenges in maintaining its influence.

Without tangible progress toward EU integration, North Macedonia becomes increasingly vulnerable to external influences, particularly from Russia. Scholars emphasize that Russia's engagement in the region often aims to destabilize

Western-aligned states by leveraging societal divisions (Stronski & Himes, 2019; Bechev, 2017; Polovic, 2023; Zivotic & Obradovic, 2022). The weakening of EU engagement creates conditions that external actors may seek to exploit, given the region's strategic importance. In North Macedonia, the stalled accession process has strained existing societal dynamics, and without a strong and unifying European perspective, there is a risk that nationalist actors could pursue alternative strategies, further challenging social cohesion and regional stability.

This paper is built around the thesis that the EU's diminishing influence amid ongoing geopolitical and regional challenges—such as the war in Ukraine and the stalled EU integration process for North Macedonia— may contribute to growing societal divisions, democratic challenges, and tensions in regional relations, with possible implications for stability in the Western Balkans. As the EU's focus shifts away from the Balkans and towards more immediate security concerns, such as the conflict in Eastern Europe, external actors like Russia find fertile ground to expand their influence, drawing on unresolved societal dynamics in North Macedonia. The absence of a tangible EU integration process creates a power vacuum that authoritarian regimes exploit, promoting nationalist agendas that undermine democratic institutions and the rule of law. The Western Balkans, though geographically part of Europe, remain politically outside the EU framework, making it a vulnerable area that, if destabilized, could contribute to wider security concerns across the continent. Given the intricate security linkages between the EU and the Western Balkans, the region's instability could eventually reverberate back into the EU itself, undermining both regional and European security as a whole, as Buzan and Weaver's Regional Security Complex Theory suggests. It is therefore important for the EU to recognize that overlooking security developments in the region may have implications not only for the Western Balkans but also for broader European stability.

The objective of this paper is to evaluate the European Union's role and response in North Macedonia and the broader Western Balkans through the lens of Buzan and Weaver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). RSCT provides a framework for understanding how security dynamics within a region are interconnected and how external actors, like the EU, can either stabilize (if present) or destabilize (if absent) these systems. By applying RSCT, the paper will assess how the EU's diminishing influence, compounded by geopolitical shifts such as the war in Ukraine and internal blockades like the Bulgarian veto, has affected the region's political stability, inter-ethnic relations, and democratic governance. Furthermore, the paper

aims to offer strategic recommendations on how the EU can regain its balancing role, reinvigorate its engagement in the Western Balkans, and address the regional security complexities that pose threats not only to local stability but also to the broader European security architecture. These recommendations will focus on revitalizing the EU's integration process, strengthening democratic institutions, and countering malign influences from authoritarian regimes that exploit the current vacuum of power.

## Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

Since the security dynamics are, by nature, relational, analyzing the security issues of North Macedonia would require analysis within its regional context. The regional level explains the way security is sufficiently linked with other units. Buzan and Waever (2003) define the Regional Security Complex as "a set of units whose major processes of securitization, de-securitization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another" (p. 44). The relations within regions are characterized by patterns of amity and enmity, caused usually by historical or cultural factors, and the closer these states are located physically, the greater their security interaction may be. Thus, the standard form of RSC is characterized by rivalry, power balancing, or alliance building among the main powers of the region; however, the latter may also be penetrated by external powers (pp. 40-44).

North Macedonia is located within the Balkans, a region which moved from being almost a complex in its own right, through the process of *Balkanization,* in the early 90s, to a subcomplex of the wider Europe-EU regional complex by the late 90s. The fact that security issues in the Balkans of the 90s, such as ethnic cleansing, wars, and dehumanization, were substantially different from the issues within the region of Europe, motivated scholarly attempts to delimit this region as a world region, separate from that of Europe. The counter-argument to this position, however, is that the Balkan region was never completely independent from European influence. In this context, Todorova (1997) argues that it would be a mistaken approach to view the Balkans independently of the wider entanglements, in particular of the socio-economic and intellectual formations of Western Europe, as they have had certain influences over the realities in the Balkans. The interaction of the Balkans with the wider European security dynamics oscillated from being almost independent to merging into one European regional complex.

Buzan and Weaver (2003) argue that the Balkans' region, within which North Macedonia is located, cannot be considered as a separate RSC, since its developments did not take place in an isolated fashion. The internationalization of North Macedonia's issue(s) and the level of international involvement in it may be an example that illustrates the above argument. The fact that external actors exert their influence on the formation of events in the Balkans causes the latter to be considered part of the EU-Europe RSC. Such involvement by external actors, besides deriving from their perception of the Balkans as 'part of us', or as 'Europeans', is also demanded and expected by the Balkans' local actors. The opening of an EU perspective for the Balkan countries, including North Macedonia, would become a signal of Europe's perception of the Balkans as part of the European RSC. The question then is where does Macedonia stand in relation to EU-Europe as a world region, and how do its security issues interact with the latter? In order to answer these questions, an overview of the main security patterns within EU-Europe region will be provided below.

Analyzing the security patterns within Europe in the post-Cold War period, Buzan (2003) argues that two dominant issues became almost the main organizing principles of this region. The first issue was the determination to avoid returning to the old Europe and the balance of powers, which had caused devastating wars. The result of this determination brought about the project of integration as the ultimate solution. The second issue stood in contradiction to the first, as it maintained that integration would threaten national identity. In relation to the first issue, it is precisely the Balkans, the "Europe's ghost reminding it of the risks of war" (p. 357). Furthermore, during the 90s, the ethnic conflicts, typical for the Balkans, would become a security issue for Europe due to their possibility of dragging the big powers into opposing sides of the conflict and reinstalling power politics among the main EU states. These conflicts are therefore related to the calculations of the EU integration/fragmentation effects. In other words, EU integration becomes a security dimension that would prevent the return of Europe to the infamous past, by disabling wars and power balancing. To the EU, whereas the German-French relationship represents the conflicting past of Europe, acting against conflicts, such as in Bosnia or Kosovo, represents the way of defending a peaceful future. Thus, EU integration, according to Buzan, represents a security strategy more so for the states with a concrete and realistic EU membership perspective, such as Hungary at the beginning of the 2000s (and what would be most of the Balkan states today). This is so since the integration mechanism within such states may help downplay other security issues, such as ethnic issues, until the state reaches a stronger position (as an EU member) before reopening them.

In contrast to its more limited role during earlier Balkan crises, the European Union adopted a more proactive approach during the 2001 conflict in North Macedonia. At that time, the EU had already demonstrated its commitment to deeper engagement in the country by signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2001. By opening a pathway toward potential EU membership, Europe conveyed a clear message of support for North Macedonia's European future. Six months into the conflict, the EU, in coordination with the United States, played a key role in facilitating negotiations that led to the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which was developed with the contribution of legal experts, including Robert Badinter. Following the agreement, the EU maintained a sustained presence in North Macedonia, supporting post-conflict reforms and political stabilization. In 2005, the country's progress was recognized through the granting of EU candidate status (Dobbins et al., 2013, p. 51).

As of 2024, the EU integration process continues to play an important role in fostering greater cohesion among different communities within North Macedonia, including ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. Polls indicate that the prospect of EU membership remains a shared aspiration across these groups, despite differences in historical experiences and perspectives (Damjanovski, 2023; IRI, 2023). The EU integration agenda offers a common framework for cooperation, supporting both societal and political stability. As Nuhiu (2019) notes, the EU's conditionality emphasizes the protection of human rights, democratic governance, and the rule of law — principles that contribute to strengthening the institutional resilience of diverse societies such as North Macedonia.

The societal role of the EU in the domestic realm extends beyond mere political alignment; it creates a framework for both ethnic Macedonians and Albanians to work towards a common future within the European fold. In the absence of this integrative vision, as seen during the periods of stalled EU accession due to external blockades (e.g., the name issue with Greece), these groups have at times pursued distinct strategies, which can pose challenges to national cohesion. The shared aspiration for EU membership acts as a stabilizing factor, helping to maintain interethnic stability.

## The Historical Role of the EU in North Macedonia's Security

The European Union has historically played a critical role in stabilizing North Macedonia's political and societal security, acting as a mediator and facilitator for peace

and development. The EU's influence, particularly through its enlargement process and conditionality framework, has provided the country with both external legitimacy and internal stability. EU integration has consistently been linked to maintaining internal ethnic cohesion and bolstering democratic governance. The EU's emphasis on good governance, rule of law, and minority rights—embedded within its accession criteria—has created a framework for North Macedonia to resolve conflicts and promote political cohesion (Nuhija, 2013).

The EU's role in supporting the stabilization of North Macedonia became particularly evident following the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which brought an end to the conflict between the Albanian and Macedonian communities. The OFA established a foundation for a multiethnic political framework, introducing power-sharing mechanisms that enhanced the participation of all major communities in governance. Through its conditionality mechanism, the EU linked the implementation of the OFA to North Macedonia's progress toward EU membership. This approach provided incentives for the country's political leadership to undertake reforms aimed at strengthening inclusive governance and promoting political participation across communities, thereby contributing to the country's overall stability (see Reka, 2008; Serwer, 2018; Risteska, 2013; Marolov, 2013).

Furthermore, the EU's involvement extended beyond political stability. The promise of EU integration acted as a unifying force in a country with a complex societal fabric. Both Macedonians and Albanians viewed EU membership as a common objective that would bring economic development, security, and international legitimacy. According to Vankovska (2017), EU and NATO membership were perceived as not only foreign policy goals but also essential to the internal security of the country, serving as a 'glue' to keep the society together (pp. 6-7).

Another landmark example of the EU's stabilizing role is the resolution of the decades-long name dispute between North Macedonia and Greece through the Prespa Agreement in 2018. The EU played a key role in mediating this conflict, which had blocked North Macedonia's NATO membership and EU accession talks for over a decade. By resolving the name issue, North Macedonia was able to move forward with NATO membership and open pre-entry talks with the EU. This agreement not only enhanced North Macedonia's external security but also reinforced internal political cohesion. (Manzinger, 2020; Bechev, 2022)

In sum, the EU's historical role in North Macedonia has been that of a stabilizer, providing both a framework for ethnic reconciliation and a path for integration

into the broader European community. Its role in resolving the name dispute and fostering regional diplomacy illustrates the EU's influence in maintaining internal and external security, underscoring the critical importance of continued EU engagement in the region.

## The Impact of the Prolonged EU Integration Process

The prolonged and stalled EU integration process has significantly weakened the European Union's influence in North Macedonia, creating internal divisions, slowing domestic reforms, and intensifying societal disillusionment. Despite initial high hopes for EU membership, the country's path toward integration has been repeatedly obstructed, first by the Greek veto over the name dispute, and more recently by the Bulgarian veto concerning historical and national identity issues. This delay has diminished the EU's credibility as a transformative force and a mediator in resolving ethnic tensions and fostering democratic reforms.

According to Pendarovski (2012), North Macedonia's strategic orientation toward EU and NATO membership has long served as a unifying factor for its ethnically polarized society. Both ethnic Macedonians and Albanians initially saw EU integration as the ultimate means to secure political stability, sovereignty, and economic prosperity. However, as the accession process has stagnated, largely due to external blockades, this consensus has started to fray. While support for EU integration remains particularly strong among ethnic Albanians, segments of the ethnic Macedonian community have shown growing skepticism and disillusionment due to the prolonged accession process (IDSCS, 2024). The Bulgarian veto, which demands constitutional changes acknowledging a shared history, has been a significant roadblock in the country's EU integration process. Despite the resolution of the name dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement, the subsequent blockade by Bulgaria has not only delayed the opening of EU negotiations but also strained relations between North Macedonia's two largest ethnic communities. After overcoming the name dispute with Greece through the Prespa Agreement in 2018, North Macedonia's path toward integration seemed clear, with the country officially joining NATO in 2020. However, the veto imposed by Bulgaria has left the country in a prolonged pre-accession limbo, creating a sense of frustration and disillusionment, particularly among ethnic Macedonians. This situation has highlighted differing attitudes between North Macedonia's two largest ethnic communities. While support for EU integration remains strong among ethnic Albanians,

particularly regarding a swift resolution of the Bulgarian dispute, segments of the ethnic Macedonian community have shown increasing skepticism toward the process (360 Stepeni, 2025).

As a result of persistent external blockades hindering North Macedonia's progress toward EU integration, public sentiment has increasingly shifted towards skepticism about the benefits of EU membership. This growing Euroscepticism is evident in recent opinion polls. The latter underscores the decline in support for EU membership, particularly among ethnic Macedonians, and demonstrates the growing divide between the country's two largest ethnic communities. According to a 2023 public opinion analysis by the Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis (IDSCS), only 60% of the overall Macedonian population supported the country's EU membership prospects, marking the lowest level of support to date. More notably, the poll revealed a significant ethnic gap, with 57% of ethnic Macedonians expressing support for EU membership, compared to 78% of ethnic Albanians (IDSCS, 2023). This declining support is further complicated by the fact that only 12% of the population identifies as openly Eurosceptic, while a growing proportion—approximately 30%—remains undecided or apathetic about the country's EU future. This shift reflects a deepening sense of frustration and pessimism, which view the stalled integration process as evidence of the EU's declining relevance to North Macedonia's political and economic stability. The continuous delays, compounded by the Bulgarian veto, have eroded the initial optimism and consensus that once united the country's diverse ethnic groups around the goal of EU accession.

The data presented above illustrate the important role that the EU integration process continues to play in shaping interethnic relations in North Macedonia. As Koneska et al. (2023) observe, the ongoing dispute with Bulgaria over issues of national identity presents challenges to social cohesion, with segments of the ethnic Macedonian community increasingly perceiving certain EU-related demands as sensitive to questions of sovereignty. Political leaders from the ethnic Albanian community have largely taken a more reserved approach toward these bilateral disputes, leaving the management of identity-related negotiations primarily to the ethnic Macedonian leadership. Nonetheless, this divergence carries the risk of deepening societal divisions, particularly if the prospect of EU integration becomes increasingly elusive.

The EU's decision to separate the accession paths of Albania and North Macedonia carries important implications for both the country's external positioning and internal cohesion (Taylor-Brace & Gotov, 2024). Externally, North Macedonia's

accession process remains slowed by unresolved issues with Bulgaria, while Albania advances toward opening its first negotiating cluster (Stojanovic, 2024). This situation places North Macedonia at a disadvantage internationally and creates uncertainty about its European trajectory, raising concerns about potential external influences whose interests may not align with the country's European aspirations. Internally, the divergence in accession progress may introduce pressures on societal cohesion, as segments of the population with strong support for EU integration may experience frustration. Managing these dynamics carefully will be essential to preserving North Macedonia's stability and shared commitment to the European integration path.

Beyond the political and societal tensions already outlined, North Macedonia's prolonged EU integration process also leaves unaddressed a set of wider internal security challenges. Issues such as organized crime, irregular migration flows, socioeconomic inequalities, and governance weaknesses persist as underlying vulnerabilities (Crisis Group, 2020; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022; Arnaudov, 2024). These factors not only strain institutional capacities but also undermine public trust in democratic processes, creating fertile ground for political fragmentation and societal polarization. While not always directly linked to external actors, such challenges can be exacerbated by regional instability and the slow pace of EU integration, emphasizing the need for comprehensive internal reforms alongside broader geopolitical engagement.

## Geopolitical Shifts and Their Impact on North Macedonia

The geopolitical security shifts, particularly the war in Ukraine, have significantly diverted the EU's attention from the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, further complicating the region's EU integration prospects. As articulated by Kolarski (2022), the war in Ukraine has imposed a series of urgent tasks on the EU, such as securing energy supplies and sanctioning Russia, which has redirected its focus away from the Balkans. This shift, coupled with the slow pace of the EU enlargement process, exacerbates existing frustrations in North Macedonia, where citizens and political actors have long been disillusioned by the stalled accession process, further delayed by Bulgaria's veto.

Hasic et al. (2020) argue that these delays create a vacuum in the EU's traditional role as a stabilizer in the region. The EU has long played a stabilizing role in the Western Balkans, utilizing its enlargement policy to promote political and societal

reforms aimed at integrating these countries into the European framework. However, with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the EU's resources have been increasingly diverted to support Ukraine's defense and reconstruction efforts. As Dopchie and Lika (2024) point out, the EU's response to the war in Ukraine has seen a significant allocation of resources to countries in Eastern Europe. For instance, Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status for EU membership in 2022, a process that was notably expedited due to the geopolitical urgency of integrating these states into the EU as a countermeasure to Russian aggression (Regi, 2024). This fast-tracking of Eastern European states stands in stark contrast to the slow progress made by Western Balkan countries, particularly North Macedonia, which has been a candidate for EU membership since 2005. This redirection of the EU's focus has left the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, in a precarious position, where they must contend with both internal and external security challenges with less EU engagement than before. North Macedonia, which has faced blockades to its EU accession from neighboring Bulgaria, now faces a delayed integration process due to the EU's prioritization of Eastern Europe. This further prolongs the country's vulnerability to destabilizing influences, which seek to expand their presence in the region through political and economic channels (Jakesevic, 2024).

## Tying the findings to the RSCT theory

Relying on Buzan and Waever's Regional Security Complex Theory (2003), the insecurity in North Macedonia is best understood as a catalyst for potential instability within the wider Western Balkans region. RSCT emphasized the security interdependence within certain regions, where the stability or uncertainty of one state impacts tremendously the other neighboring states. In North Macedonia's case, the stalled EU integration process, combined with existing societal sensitivities, creates conditions that could challenge internal stability and, by extension, impact the broader Western Balkans region, where peace remains delicate and certain disputes unresolved.

North Macedonia occupies a unique and important position within the security dynamics of the Western Balkans. Its geopolitical significance, combined with its diverse societal composition, has made the country a focal point for both internal and external security considerations. Scholars have noted that the state's orientation toward EU and NATO integration has played a critical role in supporting internal cohesion by fostering shared aspirations across different communities. However, prolonged delays in the integration process, particularly the separation of Albania and North Macedonia's accession paths, risk straining this delicate balance. Recent

observations suggest that segments of the population, particularly among those with strong support for European integration, have expressed growing frustration over the bilateral disputes that hinder the country's progress (Neziri cited in Ramadani, VOA, 2024). If not carefully addressed, such sentiments could place additional pressure on societal cohesion and political stability.

According to Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), instability in North Macedonia can have broader implications, as societal tensions and nationalistic sentiments are interconnected across the Western Balkans. The interdependent nature of the region's security environment suggests that unrest in one area may impact the overall stability of the complex. States within the Western Balkans share comparable vulnerabilities, shaped by historical legacies, societal divisions, and institutional challenges. This fragile stability is further influenced by the involvement of external actors who may seek to shape regional dynamics for strategic purposes.

The diplomatic challenges between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, combined with the stalled EU integration process, have created conditions that external actors may seek to influence. Russia, in particular, has been identified as leveraging regional instability to challenge the EU's and NATO's presence in the Western Balkans (Jakesevic, 2024). By reinforcing existing societal and political divisions, such external engagement can complicate efforts toward democratic consolidation and regional stability. Within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), external powers are often seen as 'penetrators' that exacerbate internal vulnerabilities and hinder conflict resolution. These dynamics are reflected in broader patterns of external involvement in parts of the Western Balkans where European integration enjoys significant public support.

Uncertainty surrounding North Macedonia's EU integration prospects carries important implications for European security. Within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the Western Balkans is considered an integral component of the broader European security architecture. Given the region's geographical and political proximity to the EU, developments in the Western Balkans can have a direct impact on European stability. The credibility of the EU as a security actor may be challenged if it is perceived as unable to advance the enlargement process, particularly in cases like North Macedonia. Prolonged stagnation could create a gap that external actors might seek to exploit for strategic purposes. With the EU's resources already stretched due to the war in Ukraine, maintaining engagement in the Western Balkans remains an important priority for safeguarding regional and broader European stability.

## Conclusion and Recommendations for Revitalizing EU Engagement

The EU's commitment to the Western Balkans remains a complex and developing concept, marked both by achievements and continuous challenges. Whereas critics underline risks related to stagnation and potential weakening of EU's credibility as a security actor, it is just as important to acknowledge the fact that EU's conditionality has historically served as a powerful instrument in promoting democratic reforms, strengthening good governance, and fostering institutional sustainability in states aspiring to join it (Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). This dual nature of the EU reflects its transformative potential as well as the difficulties in sustaining momentum toward full integration. In the face of renewed geopolitical challenges and internal challenges within the region, there is an urgent need for the EU to revitalize its role, reassert its commitment, and enhance its strategic focus on the Western Balkans in order to ensure regional and wider European security.

To address the challenges that North Macedonia and the wider Western Balkans face, the EU should adopt a multifaceted and proactive strategy. In the center of this approach should lie the determination to accelerate the EU integration process for North Macedonia. The delayed process has caused disappointment and euroscepticism, undermining the trust in the EU enlargement process, which is merit-based. The application of such a membership model may counter these effects, allowing candidate countries like North Macedonia to participate in key programs and policies of the EU, such as the Single Market and the climate agenda, even before full membership is achieved (Tcherneva, 2023). Such an approach would offer tangible benefits, would rebuild trust, and would signal progress, addressing thus the stagnation caused by bilateral disputes and political delays (Dopcchie & Lika, 2024; Tcherneva, 2023).

Equally critical is the enforcement of the EU's conditionality mechanism, particularly in areas such as the rule of law and good governance. The democratic backsliding and the rise of 'stabilitocracies' in the region have undermined the reform efforts, necessitating a stronger EU stance against corruption and state capture (Scazzieri, 2021). The prioritization of these reforms as preconditions to further accession talks would stabilize the political landscape of North Macedonia and would curb the influence of external authoritarian regimes. By engaging actively with the political elites and civil society, the EU may ensure that the reforms are implemented consistently, fostering resilient, democratic, and functioning institutions.

Alongside the above recommendations, the EU should also counter the increasing influence of external actors, in particular of Russia, whose destabilizing activities threaten regional stability. The strengthening of security partnerships with the Balkan States is essential, and in North Macedonia's case, this may include financial and technical support for cybersecurity infrastructure and combating disinformation, which aims to further polarize the country on ethnic and political grounds (Jakesevic, 2024).

The revival of the EU's credibility in the Western Balkans is among the most crucial steps in addressing the pressing challenges. The EU should respect its commitments to integrate the region into its structures, while offering a clear and time-bound roadmap for membership, by officializing the 2030 enlargement target with concrete milestones (Tcherneva, 2023). This would signal a renewed commitment to the region and would mitigate the risk of democratic and stability backsliding, which could otherwise push the Western Balkans towards alternative, yet dangerous geopolitical alignments.

In conclusion, revitalizing EU engagement with North Macedonia and the Western Balkans requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both the internal and external factors contributing to instability. By accelerating the accession process, prioritizing governance reforms, fostering inter-ethnic dialogue, and countering external influences, the EU can regain its balancing role and prevent further deterioration of security conditions in the region. These steps are not only crucial for North Macedonia's stability but also for ensuring the long-term security of the entire Western Balkans and the EU itself.

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**Isa Kasum**
Ankara University, Ankara, Turkiye
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4498-2344

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Isa Kasum
Email: ikasum@ankara.edu.tr

BALKAN JOURNALS

# Illiberal Playbooks: A Comparative Study of Viktor Orban and Donald Trump's Populist Strategies

**Isa Kasum**

*Abstract*

The purpose of this study is to redefine populism, which exists in many countries that make up the international community and is understood as a political phenomenon, and to analyze the possible similarities between Prime Minister Viktor Mihaly Orban of Hungary (2010–present) and current President Donald John Trump of the United States. In this context, the study identifies two areas of focus: the theoretical approaches to populism and the effects of populism on the representative democracy of a nation-state. Considering the theoretical approaches and interpretive analyses of populism, it can be concluded that both Viktor Orban and Donald J. Trump can be regarded as populist leaders from political-strategic and ideal-discursive perspectives. The theoretical approaches to populism described in this article allow for the construction of a theoretical framework aimed at understanding the populist phenomenon and the dynamics of contemporary populist leaders.

*Keywords:* Populism, Viktor Orban, Donald J. Trump, Populist Leaders, International Politics

## Introduction

Populism has been a highly debated concept in every era. Despite extensive discussions by numerous researchers, including Laclau (2005), Muller (2016), Moffitt (2016), and Hawkins (2017), there is no consensus on how to conceptualize it. The term is often used interchangeably with "anti-establishment" regardless of political ideology, and it is closely associated with emotional states, particularly anger and frustration, both among leaders and their voters (Muller, 2016, p. 1).

In recent years, Viktor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister since 2010, has exemplified a distinctive type of right-wing populism. Orban's strategy has involved positioning himself as the protector of Hungarian identity and European Christian values against perceived threats such as immigration and liberalism. His rhetoric has mobilized fears related to national sovereignty and identity, leveraging xenophobia and Euroscepticism to consolidate political power (Haraszti, 2015; Illes, Korosenyi, & Metz, 2018). Orban's populism not only challenges domestic liberal democratic institutions but also strains Hungary's relationship with the European Union, as his administration actively dismantles judicial independence and curtails media freedoms (Deak, 2013).

This study is divided into three sections. The first section presents theoretical approaches to populism. The second section discusses the impacts of populism on democracy. Finally, the third section analyzes Viktor Orban's leadership within the framework of populism, comparing it with that of Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States, and examining how these leaders have reconfigured their respective political landscapes. The relevance of this study lies in the unprecedented challenges that contemporary democracies face amid the global resurgence of populist movements. While extensive literature exists on populism as a theoretical concept, there remains a significant research gap in understanding how specific manifestations of populist leadership transform democratic institutions over time. This gap is particularly pronounced in comparative analyses that examine populist governance across different regional contexts and political systems. By investigating the parallel yet distinct trajectories of populism in Central Europe and North America, this research addresses the urgent need for empirically grounded frameworks that can help predict democratic vulnerabilities and resilience in the face of populist pressures.

Viktor Orban's Hungary represents a critical case study in the European context, where his Fidesz party has systematically reconfigured constitutional

arrangements, media landscapes, and civil society spaces since returning to power in 2010. Orban's "illiberal democracy" model offers insights into how populist leaders can transform democratic systems from within while maintaining electoral legitimacy and regional influence within the European Union framework.

Donald Trump as 45th President of USA (2017-2021) and as current 47th President of USA, provides us a complementary case studies of populism in a presidential system with stronger institutional checks and balances. His administration's approach to governance, characterized by executive assertiveness, polarizing rhetoric, and challenges to established institutional norms, presents valuable comparative material for understanding how populist leadership operates within different democratic contexts.

Through this comparative analysis, we seek to identify patterns of institutional transformation, discursive strategies, and policy implementations that characterize populist governance in established democracies. By investigating these case studies through the lens of international relations theory, this research contributes to our understanding of how populist leadership affects not only domestic political arrangements but also regional power dynamics and international institutional engagement. The implications extend beyond these specific cases to inform broader scholarly debates about democratic resilience, institutional adaptation, and the evolving relationship between populism and global governance structures in the contemporary international order.

## Theoretical Framework of Populism

Due to the broad field of study encompassed by populism, scholars have developed multiple theoretical approaches to understand its nature. Benjamin Moffitt categorizes populism into four distinct approaches: ideology, strategy, discourse, and political logic. His work emphasizes the dynamic nature of populism and how it is contextually performed through these frameworks (Moffitt, 2016).

Other political scientists, such as Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostiguy, classify populism into three main approaches: ideological, strategic political, and socio-cultural approaches. This distinction highlights the varying lenses through which scholars analyze populism, focusing either on the belief systems, political behavior, or cultural patterns inherent in populist movements.

Cass Mudde, following Rovira Kaltwasser, identifies four broad approaches: ideological, folkloric, political strategy, and socioeconomic. These frameworks reflect how populism functions as both a political tool and an adaptive ideology that mobilizes people through appeals to shared identities and grievances (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

This article integrates insights primarily from the works of Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, who offer an in-depth analysis of four key approaches.

## Political Strategy Approach

According to Kurt Weyland and Raúl L. Madrid, the political strategy approach emphasizes populism as a strategy employed by charismatic leaders to gain and exercise power through direct, unmediated support from followers. Leaders like Trump and Orban align with this view, as both circumvent traditional political intermediaries, such as political parties or institutions, to appeal directly to the masses. This approach is especially prominent in Latin America but extends globally, particularly in the way Trump's personality-driven campaigns and Orban's consolidation of power through electoral mandates reflect a populist strategy (Weyland & Madrid, 2019).

## Ideational Approach

This approach views populism as a "thin-centered ideology," as articulated by Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser and Cass Mudde. It divides society into two antagonistic groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite," with populism positing that politics should reflect the general will of the people. Both Trump and Orban leverage this rhetoric, with Trump often invoking a narrative of the "forgotten man" against the elite establishment, while Orban frames his policies as representing the authentic national identity against foreign influence (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

## Discourse Approach

Benjamin Moffitt describes populism as a discourse that constructs a binary opposition between "the people" and "the elite." For Trump, this discourse manifests in his frequent attacks on political elites and mainstream media. Orban similarly presents the Hungarian government as the defender of national interests against the "Brussels bureaucracy" and foreign actors (Moffitt, 2016).

## Socioeconomic Approach

Populism in this context, particularly relevant in Latin America, relates to economically irresponsible policies designed to temporarily satisfy popular demands, often resulting in financial crises. While not purely an economic populist, Trump's emphasis on trade protectionism and Orban's nationalist economic policies resonate with aspects of this approach (Weyland, 2019).

"Populism is a thin-centered ideology that ultimately divides society into two homogeneous and opposing camps: the 'pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite,' and posits that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (volonte generale) (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6).

Defining populism as a "thin-centered ideology" aids in understanding the often-asserted malleability of the concept. An ideology is a comprehensive set of normative ideas about human and societal nature, as well as the organization and goals of society. This implies that populism can take on very different forms, and from this perspective, populism should be understood as a kind of mental map through which individuals analyze and comprehend political reality (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 6-7). In short, populism encompasses three fundamental concepts: the people, the elites, and the general will (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 9).

Although theoretical approaches have been examined previously, this study also considers Benjamin Moffitt's perspectives:

- *Discourse:* This approach has recently proven popular in the literature on populism in "Europe and Latin America." It views populism as a discourse that pits "the people" against "the elite" or "oligarchy." At this point, populism is often seen as a specific style of political expression that is evident in speech or text (Moffitt, 2016, p. 30).
- *Political Logic:* This approach, cited by Moffitt in the book, conceptualizes populism as a political logic that has the greatest influence in politics and social theory, drawing on Ernesto Laclau's conceptualization of populism. In a series of articles and in his book "On Populist Reason" (2005), Laclau argues that previous attempts to define populism necessarily fail because they focus on situating the ontic content of populism rather than capturing the ontological status of the concept. Populism is not just any political logic. Laclau claims that any political project is based on a division between two rival enemy groups, as outlined below. This vision is even related to the ideal vision proposed by Cass Mudde. In the aforementioned book, Laclau states:

"Populism involves a division of the social stage into two camps. This distinction presupposes the existence of certain privileged signifiers that condense the meaning of a whole enemy camp ('regime,' 'oligarchy,' 'dominant groups'; for the enemy, 'the people,' 'the nation,' 'the silent majority,' the oppressed and downtrodden)." (Laclau, n.d., p. 87).

"In Laclau's formulation, the 'people' thus becomes the subject of any renewed and effective political project, and indeed, the very essence of what is political. In this regard, if the people are the subject of politics, then populism is the "logic of politics" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 32).

## Effects of Populism on Democracy

According to Cass Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, the relationship between democracy and populism creates uncertainty, skepticism, and concern in both academic and practical realms. The connection between these two terms has always been a subject of intense debate. Mudde and Kaltwasser express the issue as follows: "Although we are far from reaching a consensus, it is not an exaggeration to argue that traditional views suggest populism poses an inherent danger to democracy" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 79). The most notable recent advocate of this position is the French intellectual Pierre Rosanvallon, who argues that populism should be understood as a "pathology" and as a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of representative democracy (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 265).

American political scientist Benjamin Moffitt poses a crucial question in his book "The Rise of Populism": "Is populism good or bad for democracy?" Despite various opinions expressed in newspapers, editorials, academic journals, and books over the past two decades, this remains the key question that authors continually seek to answer. Moffitt notes that while some depict populism as an enemy of democracy—a view particularly prominent in contemporary European discussions, evident in the frequent handshakes of populist candidates in national and European elections—others see it as a remedy for the democratic deficits that characterize many modern political systems. In this perspective, populism is viewed as a way to restore the "people" to their rightful place as the sovereign voice of democracy (Moffitt, 2016, p. 137; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 79).

This study examines two main approaches to the relationship between populism and democracy, following Moffitt's work: those who view populism negatively and those who see it positively:

1) *Populism as a negative force for democracy*: As outlined above, arguments against populism include the notion that it constitutes a "pathology" of democracy, as defined by Rosanvallon. In this context, populism tends to be positioned as a dangerous "other" to democracy or as a resurgence of "older, more archaic forms of politics." Most of the arguments against populism trace back to the nineteenth century, associating the idea of the "people" with "uncontrollable crowds" and "mob mentality." Consequently, populism is characterized as a phenomenon to be viewed with fear and concern (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 139).

Although the approach has been particularly studied in Europe, the Latin American region should also be emphasized. There are numerous authors who have worked on populism in Latin America, especially influenced by the "political-strategic approach to populism." Here, despite the achievements of certain figures, the following perspective is offered:

> *"Orban, Gruevski, and Kaczyński have consolidated political power by weakening democratic checks and balances in their respective countries. While these leaders emphasize national sovereignty and cultural preservation, they are also seen as threats to democracy. They have abused the procedures and norms of democratic governance, deploying exclusionary rhetoric and shifting toward authoritarianism, where political opposition and civil society are constrained under increasingly centralized control"* (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018, p. 1183; Weyland & Madrid, 2019, p. 15).

Those who perceive populism as a threat to democracy face the problem that populism heavily undermines the democratic column, thereby putting liberal measures, such as the protection of minorities or checks and balances, at risk (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 141).

2) *Populism as a Positive Force for Democracy:* In this view, populism is regarded as a fundamental element of democracy due to its emphasis on popular sovereignty, its appeal to the majority, and its strong criticism of those who distort democracy. Indeed, leaders like Morales and Chavez are portrayed as heroes who have helped the poor in their countries, while figures like Grillo are seen as individuals who empower people by enhancing initiatives (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

According to Moffitt, this argument is most prominently presented in the academic literature by those who subscribe to Laclau's view of populism as a political logic. Laclau advocates for the adoption of a normative model of democracy, which he describes as "radical democracy," asserting that "radical democracy is always populist" (Laclau, n.d., p. 169) According to Laclau, "the construction of the people is

an indispensable aspect of democratic functioning" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 141). It is clear that this approach does not view populism as a pathology of democracy; rather, it sees populism as an essential feature of democracy. In this context, Laclau's support for populism is reflected in his visits to Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela at the invitation of Morales, Correa, and Chavez, respectively" (Kazin, 2017, pp. 6-7).

Similarly, there are other academics who express support for populism. For example, Michael Kazin, a historian and professor at Georgetown University, argues that populism has the potential to "*improve the common good*" in the United States, but he is also concerned about its right-wing manifestations (Moffitt, 2016, p. 142). On the other hand, a critical approach to liberalism must also be considered. In this sense, for the proponents of populism, the liberal aspect of liberal democracy is seen as going 'too far' by prioritizing the rule of law and individual rights over the democratic aspect. These criticisms view liberalism as a means to restrict democratic participation or as a way for the 'elites to maintain continuous control over the political sphere.' Populism offers a way to correct this situation (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 82). In addition, scholars Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser explain that populism exploits the tensions inherent in the nature of liberal democracy, which seeks to find a harmonious balance between majority rule and minority rights. Similarly, they describe populism in theory as being 'more negative in terms of public contention for democracy and more positive in terms of political participation (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 84).

For example, populism acts as a 'democratic corrective' by giving voice to voters who feel unrepresented by the elites. Populists often achieve this by politicizing issues that are not typically discussed by the elites but are deemed acceptable by the 'silent majority. This is possible when discussing the economic and political integration of marginalized sectors in contemporary Latin America. This issue has become one of the most urgent matters of the past decade, "largely due to the rise of leftist populist presidents such as Chavez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia", who have successfully politicized the dramatic levels of inequality in their countries (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 81).

Both interpretations are correct to a certain extent. Populism can function as either a threat or a corrective to democracy, depending on the electoral power and the context in which it arises. However, there are still debates surrounding both terms. In short, populism is 'primarily democratic,' but it contradicts the dominant model of liberal democracy in the contemporary world. Populism argues that nothing should restrict the '(pure) will of the people' and fundamentally rejects the

concepts of pluralism, as well as minority rights and the 'institutional guarantees' that should protect them (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 4).

## Comparison of Former President Donald J. Trump of the United States and Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary

The political-strategic approach emphasizes a personalistic leadership style, where power is concentrated in the hands of a charismatic figure who engages directly with the masses, bypassing institutional checks and balances. This approach is exemplified by both Trump and Orban, who have built loyal followings through direct appeals to national identity, sovereignty, and opposition to elites. Trump's strategy was rooted in rallying against the political establishment and the media, while Orban leveraged anti-EU rhetoric to present himself as the defender of Hungary's national interests (Moffitt, 2016; Weyland & Madrid, 2019). Discursive approach analyzes populism as a form of political discourse that pits "the people" against "the elite" or foreign "threats" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Trump frequently invoked the narrative of the "forgotten Americans" left behind by political elites and framed mainstream media as "the enemy of the people." Similarly, Orban has framed Hungary's national identity as being under attack by the European Union and foreign philanthropists like George Soros, portraying himself as the protector of "the people" from external influence (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018).

The rapid consolidation of executive power, systematic marginalization of institutional oversight, and punishment of perceived opponents reflect a playbook well-established in Hungary since 2010. Particularly noteworthy is the velocity with which democratic guardrails are being tested—from the wholesale dismissal of inspectors general to the unprecedented involvement of private citizens like Elon Musk in governmental restructuring. These actions represent not incremental shifts but rather structural challenges to the separation of powers doctrine fundamental to American constitutionalism. The willingness of congressional Republicans to acquiesce to these overreaches further compounds the institutional vulnerability, creating what political scientist Larry Jacobs has characterized as a "vacuum" in which traditional accountability mechanisms have been functionally neutralized.

Parallels with Hungary's democratic backsliding extend beyond institutional capture to include the weaponization of cultural rhetoric and media control - hallmarks of modern authoritarian governance. Trump's executive orders targeting diversity

initiatives and the marginalization of mainstream media in favor of sympathetic outlets mirror Orban's successful strategy of cultural entrenchment and narrative control. What distinguishes this situation from conventional political realignment is the systematic nature of these changes and their explicit orientation toward dismantling rather than reforming existing structures. As demonstrated by recent court interventions blocking certain executive actions, the judiciary currently stands as the primary institutional check against this accelerated transformation. However, the historical pattern in Hungary suggests that judicial independence itself becomes vulnerable once other democratic institutions have been sufficiently weakened. This raises profound questions about the resilience of American democratic institutions and whether the constitutional safeguards designed to prevent concentration of power remain adequate against determined efforts to circumvent them (Smith, 2025).

Methodical confrontation with academic institutions and independent media in Donald Trump's second administration bears striking procedural and ideological resemblance to Viktor Orban's established governance model in Hungary. While superficially appearing as cultural or partisan policy shifts, both leaders' approaches represent systematic attempts to dismantle institutional pluralism, a cornerstone of liberal democracy. The evidence is particularly compelling in their parallel targeting of universities: Orban's restructuring of Hungarian higher education through foundation models that installed political loyalists in governing positions and the forced relocation of Central European University mirrors Trump's current strategy of linking research funding to ideological compliance and pressuring institutions like Columbia University to modify their internal governance. These actions reflect what political scientists describe as "democratic backsliding" where democratically elected leaders gradually hollow out democratic institutions while maintaining electoral legitimacy, creating what scholar Fareed Zakaria termed "illiberal democracy." What distinguishes these governance models from conventional conservative policymaking is their explicitly transformative purpose; both leaders frame their actions not as policy adjustments but as necessary correctives to perceived institutional capture by ideological opponents they characterize as "liberal elites" or "globalists." Orban's fifteen-year consolidation of power demonstrates the potential long-term trajectory of this governance approach, suggesting Trump's accelerated implementation represents not improvisation but deliberate strategy. The Hungarian case study reveals how seemingly disparate actions-restructuring academic funding, marginalizing critical media, and deploying populist rhetoric against "enemies of the people" function as complementary components of a

comprehensive system designed to neutralize potential centers of opposition. This parallel raises profound questions about the resilience of American institutional safeguards against democratic erosion, particularly when congressional oversight mechanisms appear increasingly ineffective at constraining executive overreach legitimized through populist mandates (Jolley, 2025).

The Hungarian-American relationship under Viktor Orban represents a critical case study in how illiberal democratic regimes strategically navigate relationships with democratic superpowers while preserving their autocratic governance structures. Orban's calculated approach to the Trump administration demonstrates sophisticated diplomatic maneuvering, evidenced by Hungary's selective compliance with U.S. security priorities while maintaining its autocratic trajectory. As the text explicitly notes: "The government committed itself to higher defense spending and renewed a defense cooperation agreement with the United States. It launched a military modernization program that will jettison practically all Russian hardware." Simultaneously, Hungary "did not step back one inch from its cordial relations with Russia and China; it even rushed to offer a contract to Chinese telecoms giant Huawei to roll out the country's 5G network." This selective compliance illustrates how Orban exploited the ideological shift in U.S. foreign policy under Assistant Secretary Wess Mitchell, who discontinued democracy support programs, including "a $700,000 fund established to support media freedom", based on the premise that criticism had pushed Hungary toward rival powers. Mitchell's approach effectively "mitigated the repercussions on U.S.-Hungarian relations" that would have followed Hungary's forcing the U.S. accredited Central European University out of the country, demonstrating how autocrats can successfully reframe democratic backsliding as secondary to great power competition (Hegedus, 2025).

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's reaction to potential Trump-Putin negotiations illustrates a deeper alignment between Hungary's foreign policy and broader Eurasian strategic ambitions. By characterizing the prospect of U.S.-Russia talks as "Hallelujah," Orban not only reveals ideological sympathy for Trump's geopolitical posture but also affirms Hungary's long-standing deviation from mainstream EU consensus on Russia. This endorsement reflects Orban's broader vision of an illiberal European order, where nation-states prioritize pragmatic bilateralism and sovereignty over collective European foreign policy frameworks. His optimism regarding Russia's reintegration into Europe's economic and security structures through Trump's mediation signals a desire to shift the continent's strategic trajectory—one that accommodates rather than isolates Russia. Such positioning

not only questions the efficacy of current EU sanctions and policies toward Moscow but also foregrounds Hungary's role as a geopolitical outlier within the EU (Koromi, 2025).

Authoritarian populism, as defined by Míriam Juan-Torres and colleagues, reflects a convergence of two previously distinct political phenomena: authoritarianism and populism. Traditionally, authoritarianism refers to a political system or style where executive power is centralized, opposition is suppressed, and institutional checks are weakened or dismantled (Linz, 2000). Conversely, populism is a rhetorical and ideological frame wherein a leader claims to represent "the pure people" against a "corrupt elite," irrespective of the leader's actual policies or ideological leanings (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

What distinguishes authoritarian populism as a political style is that it combines the institutional erosion and executive aggrandizement of authoritarianism with the majoritarian and anti-elite rhetorical strategies of populism. The result is a flexible, emotionally resonant style of politics capable of gaining mass appeal while simultaneously undermining liberal democratic norms (Thulin, 2025).

Viktor Orban, Hungary's Prime Minister, has emerged as the archetype of Europe's nationalist-populist movement, perfecting a model of "illiberal democracy" that has inspired right-wing leaders across the continent. His governance since 2010 represents a masterclass in democratic backsliding, executed through what political scientists call "constitutional capture" - systematically rewriting Hungary's institutional framework to entrench Fidesz's power while maintaining a veneer of democratic legitimacy (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018). Unlike the performative populism of leaders like Trump, Orban's approach is institutional and methodical, transforming Hungary into what he proudly calls an "illiberal state" that rejects "Western-style liberal democracy" as obsolete (The Guardian, 2014).

Like other populist leaders, Orban frames his policies in opposition to a globalist elite and positions Hungary as a defender of Christian Europe. This anti-globalization stance resonates with his base, especially as he opposes EU-mandated refugee quotas and emphasizes national sovereignty (Friedman, 2017). Orban's Fidesz party also exemplifies the strategic use of populism, functioning as a personal vehicle for his political ambitions, similar to Trump's use of the Republican Party to advance his populist agenda.

Viktor Orban, Prime Minister of Hungary, has become a prominent figure in Europe's nationalist-populist movement. Since his return to power in 2010, Orban

has systematically pursued a shift toward illiberal democracy, which he openly described as a non-liberal state model designed to preserve national sovereignty and cultural identity. His governance style emphasizes executive dominance, reducing the autonomy of key democratic institutions such as the judiciary, media, and civil society. Using his party, Fidesz, as a tool for personal and political control, Orban exemplifies the political-strategic approach to populism, where a strong leader consolidates power and bypasses institutional checks through constitutional reforms (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018, p. 1173).

Orban's populist rhetoric draws on nativist discourse, presenting Hungary as the last defender of Christian Europe against external threats such as the European Union and immigration. His opposition to EU refugee quotas and liberal European values has galvanized domestic support, particularly among rural and conservative voters who perceive globalization and foreign interference as existential threats (Friedman, 2017).

In line with the discursive approach to populism, Orban's speeches often frame politics as a battle between "the people" and foreign or domestic elites, be they the EU, NGOs, or liberal intellectuals (Moffitt, 2016, p. 30). Political dominance has been reinforced by constitutional engineering. Fidesz leveraged its supermajority in the Hungarian parliament to alter electoral laws, centralize media ownership, and limit judicial independence. These changes serve to entrench the ruling party's power, ensuring political control even without majority popular support.

Orban's populism operates on three interlocking levels:

*Institutional Takeover:* Using Fidesz's parliamentary supermajority to pack courts (reducing the Constitutional Court from 15 to 11 judges while filling vacancies with loyalists), rewrite electoral laws (gerrymandering rural districts to guarantee Fidesz victories), and neuter checks on executive power.

*Information Control:* Through media laws that forced over 500 outlets to consolidate under the pro-government KESMA alliance by 2018, creating what Reporters Without Borders calls "a propaganda machine" (RSF, 2020).

*Civil Society Suppression:* The "Stop Soros" laws (2017-2018) criminalized aid to undocumented migrants and forced NGOs receiving foreign funding to register as "foreign-supported organizations" - a tactic borrowed from Putin's Russia.

"Real Hungarians" - ethnically Hungarian, Christian, and rooted in rural traditions. His 2022 speech declaring "we are not mixed-race" exemplifies this

ethno-nationalist vision. A rotating cast of villains, including Brussels bureaucrats, George Soros (portrayed as the puppet-master of migration), and "Soros-funded" NGOs. His 2015 referendum campaign against EU refugee quotas featured billboards asking "Want migrants? Vote Brussels!" (Moffitt, 2016).

This rhetoric resonates powerfully with Hungary's rural poor and aging population, groups left behind by globalization. Orban's government fuels these fears while offering tangible rewards, like 2018's "slave law" extending overtime work hours, framed as protecting Hungarian jobs from migrant labor (Friedman, 2017). Orban's influence extends beyond Hungary. He hosts the annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest, attracting far-right figures like Spain's Vox leaders. His "family protection" policies (banning LGBTQ content in schools, constitutional definition of marriage as heterosexual) have become templates for Poland's Law and Justice Party and Serbia's Vučić. Yet, unlike Trump's transactional alliances, Orban builds institutional networks, like his $1.7 billion renovation of the Mathias Corvinus Collegium to train conservative European elites (Journal of Democracy, 2021).

As a result, Hungary has experienced democratic backsliding, marked by the erosion of liberal norms and an increase in delegative governance, where the leader claims to embody the will of the people directly, sidelining formal political processes (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018; Weyland & Madrid, 2019, p. 15). Orban's leadership reflects broader trends in populism, especially among right-wing leaders in Central and Eastern Europe. Similar to Poland's Law and Justice Party under Jarosław Kaczyński, Orban follows what scholars describe as the "illiberal playbook," in which democratic procedures are formally maintained but manipulated to restrict opposition and strengthen executive control (Perspectives on Politics, 2021). While Orban's critics argue that his rule undermines democracy, his supporters see him as defending Hungary's sovereignty against external influences and reviving national pride (Journal of Democracy, 2018).

It is quite difficult to define Trump as an absolute populist. In fact, many political scientists describe him as not only populist but also nationalist, racist, neoconservative, and even fascist. However, according to Dylan John Riley, a sociology professor at the University of California, the extreme hybridity embodied by Trump suggests that it is futile to assign him to a broad classification such as fascism, authoritarianism, or populism. "Despite exhibiting racist, nationalist, and sexist characteristics, Trump at least demonstrates the latter" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 51).

Donald Trump's populism was rooted in his performative defiance of political norms, his anti-establishment rhetoric, and his ability to frame himself as the authentic voice of the "forgotten" American people. His rejection of political correctness, globalization, and traditional political elites was not just ideological but deeply strategic, positioning him as a disruptive force against a corrupt system. His 2016 campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again" (MAGA), was a masterclass in populist mobilization, vague enough to allow diverse interpretations yet potent in its emotional appeal to voters disillusioned by economic decline, cultural shifts, and perceived elite betrayal. Trump's genius lay in his ability to weaponize resentment, transforming grievances into a unifying political identity.

A key pillar of Trump's populism was his direct, unfiltered communication style. His use of social media, particularly Twitter, allowed him to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and speak "directly to the people," reinforcing his image as an outsider battling a rigged system. This approach exemplifies what Moffitt (2016) calls the political-strategic model of populism, where leaders cultivate a personalistic bond with followers while vilifying opponents as illegitimate or corrupt. Trump's narrative framed immigrants, globalist elites, and the "fake news" media as existential threats to "real Americans," creating a Manichean worldview that simplified complex issues into a struggle between "us" (the virtuous people) and "them" (the parasitic elites). His presidency further solidified his populist credentials through relentless institutional attacks. He routinely undermined democratic norms, challenging electoral outcomes, dismissing judicial rulings as biased, and labeling critical media as "enemies of the people." This erosion of trust in institutions was not incidental but a deliberate strategy to position himself as the sole defender of the people's will. His demand for personal loyalty over institutional allegiance aligns with Weyland and Madrid's (2019) strategic populist model, where leaders prioritize personalistic authority over systemic checks and balances (Weyland & Madrid, 2019).

Why is it so difficult to define populism? One possible answer is that populism is a "thin ideology"—it does not offer a comprehensive socio-economic program but instead builds on a moralistic dichotomy between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). Unlike fascism or socialism, which prescribe specific political and economic orders, populism is parasitic, attaching itself to other ideologies (nationalism, socialism, etc.) while maintaining its core antagonistic rhetoric. Trump's populism was ideologically fluid, sometimes nativist, sometimes economically protectionist—but always centered on the claim that he alone could restore power to "the people."

While Trump's populism energized a significant portion of the electorate, it also exposed the limits of populism in entrenched democracies. Unlike Viktor Orban, who systematically dismantled Hungary's democratic institutions, Trump faced robust resistance from courts, the press, and bipartisan political actors (Bozoki & Hegedus, 2018, p. 1175). His failure to overturn the 2020 election underscored the resilience of American institutions, illustrating how strong democracies can contain populist excesses (Weyland & Madrid, 2019).

A second lens through which to analyze Trump's populism is the discursive-ideological approach. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, populism constructs society as a binary struggle between the "true people" and "self-serving elites," claiming that politics should reflect the "general will" of the masses. Trump epitomized this framing—his rhetoric was saturated with appeals to "the people" while demonizing Washington insiders, corporate media, and globalist elites. His pledge to "drain the swamp" was not just a campaign slogan but a foundational populist promise to purge the system of its corrupt gatekeepers (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Linguistic analysis of Trump's speeches reveals his mastery of populist discourse. A study by Oliver and Rahn (2016) found that Trump's rhetoric was uniquely effective in its simplicity, repetition, and divisive framing—frequently employing "us vs. them" language, invoking external threats (immigrants, China), and attacking elites in accusatory terms. His 2016 Republican National Convention speech and inaugural address were particularly telling. Gonzalez and Del Fresno (2018) note that Trump's use of possessive pronouns ("our country," "your voice") fostered a collective identity among his supporters, reinforcing the idea that he alone represented their interests. Phrases like "I am your voice" or "I stand with you" positioned him as a messianic figure—a tribune of the people against a hostile establishment (Barbera Gonzalez & del Fresno, 2019).

Trump's self-presentation as a "benevolent strongman"—a leader who would act for the people rather than empower them—further illustrates his populist style. Political scientist Pippa Norris observed that Trump's rhetoric often framed him as a singular savior, declaring, "I alone can fix it" (Friendman, 2017). This paternalistic populism reinforced dependency on his leadership rather than fostering grassroots political agency.

## Conclusion

This study set out to understand why populist leaders like Viktor Orban and Donald Trump, despite employing similar strategies, produced starkly different political outcomes. The findings reveal that while both leaders relied on anti-elite rhetoric and institutional attacks, their impacts were ultimately determined by the strength or weakness of their respective democratic systems. Orban's success in transforming Hungary into an illiberal democracy contrasts sharply with Trump's inability to fully reshape American governance, highlighting the critical role of institutional resilience in curbing populism's excesses.

The key variable explaining this divergence is institutional permeability. Hungary's post-communist democracy, with its centralized power structure and flexible constitution, allowed Orban to exploit procedural loopholes. His Fidesz party used its supermajority to pack courts, rewrite electoral laws, and muzzle the press, systematically disabling checks on executive authority. In contrast, the U.S. system's robust safeguards—an independent judiciary, federalism, and a free press functioned as firewalls against Trump's norm-breaking. This structural mismatch explains why Orban could institutionalize populism, while Trump's influence remained more rhetorical than systemic.

Orban vilified Brussels bureaucrats and George Soros; Trump railed against the deep state and fake news. Yet their structural impacts diverged sharply. Orban's rhetoric translated into lasting policy changes, such as constitutional amendments banning same-sex adoption. Trump's proposals, like his travel bans or border wall, were frequently blocked or diluted by institutional pushback. This contrast underscores Mudde's observation that populism's "thin ideology" allows it to adapt to local conditions, producing either democratic erosion or gridlock depending on context.

These cases refine our understanding of populism's threat. First, they demonstrate that populism serves as a stress test for democracies. Second, Orban's illiberal playbook succeeds where constitutions lack safeguards like independent electoral commissions. Third, time in power matters Orban's 14-year tenure enabled entrenchment, whereas Trump's single term limited institutional damage. For policymakers, the lessons are clear: defending democracy requires hardening institutions, preserving media pluralism, and shielding civil society from state repression.

Ultimately, Orban and Trump prove that populism's danger lies not in its rhetoric but in the vulnerabilities, it exploits. As populism evolves globally, this institutional lens remains essential for diagnosing risks and crafting defenses.

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Ivan Ivanov
International Balkan University, Skopje, North Macedonia
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8476-3460

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Ivan Ivanov.
Email: ivan.ivanov@ibu.edu.mk

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# Global Power Transitions: Kissinger, Brzezinski, Zakaria, And The Future Of Multipolarity

**Ivan Ivanov**

*Abstract*

This paper examines the shifting dynamics of global power and international order through the perspectives of key geopolitical thinkers: Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Fareed Zakaria. It explores the decline of the global system dominated by the "Political West," as well as the rise of new geopolitical actors, and the challenges posed by economic globalization, political instability, and the restructuring of power. The paper situates these arguments within the broader debate on transforming from a unipolar to a multipolar world, assessing the implications for international stability and global governance. As traditional Western-led structures weaken, new regional and economic powers are asserting themselves, challenging existing geopolitical norms and alliances. Kissinger emphasizes the necessity of a carefully managed global balance, Brzezinski warns of the potential disorder caused by geopolitical awakenings, while Zakaria highlights the economic undercurrents driving this shift. By analyzing their perspectives, this study provides insight into the potential scenarios for the future of global power distribution and the policy adaptations necessary to manage this transition. It further examines whether the West can recalibrate its strategic approach to retain influence in a more complex and decentralized world order. Understanding these shifts is critical in determining whether multipolarity will lead to greater global cooperation or intensified competition and fragmentation.

*Keywords:* Unipolarity, multipolarity, geopolitics, western supremacy, global order

## Introduction

The global order experienced significant transformations over the past century while transitioning from the dominance of a system mostly led by the "Political West" to the rise of new geopolitical actors. The gradual redistribution of political power among states, economic globalization, and technological advancements are some of the variables that have driven this shift. The international system after World War II, primarily shaped by the winners of the war and institutions such as the United Nations, NATO, and the Bretton Woods framework, initially ensured Western hegemony. However, emerging economies, particularly in Asia and Latin America, have challenged this dynamic while fostering a more multipolar world. These changes have triggered debates among scholars and policymakers regarding their long-term consequences, whether they will lead to a more balanced and cooperative global structure or possible instability and geopolitical fragmentation. The struggle within the unipolar world, characterized by US dominance, has given way to a number of regional power struggles, where nations like China, India, and Russia play increasingly influential roles in global affairs. The growing influence of regional blocs, the disputes of global leadership as well as the challenges posed by emerging conflicts are pointing out the need for adaptive diplomatic strategies. As the world is moving toward a multipolar framework, assessing these dynamics is crucial for forecasting future power structures and their implications for global stability.

Understanding the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity necessitates engagement with foundational theories in international relations. Polarity, defined as the distribution of power among states within the international system, has long been a key concept in explaining patterns of cooperation, conflict, and stability. Kenneth Waltz, in his seminal work *Theory of International Politics* (Waltz, 1979), introduced the notion of polarity as a structural feature of the international system. Waltz emphasized that unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar systems each exhibit distinct dynamics of stability. According to him, bipolar systems, exemplified by the Cold War era, are inherently more stable than multipolar ones due to simpler balance calculations and reduced risk of miscalculation. In contrast, multipolar systems, characterized by multiple great powers, tend to produce shifting alliances and greater uncertainty, increasing the likelihood of conflict. John Mearsheimer, a leading figure in offensive realism, further argued that the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to seek maximal power. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Mearsheimer, 2001), Mearsheimer posits that unipolarity

is inherently unstable because it encourages other states to engage in balancing behavior to counter the dominant power. Thus, the erosion of American primacy and the emergence of new regional powers can be understood as a natural systemic response predicted by realist theory. In contrast, liberal internationalist scholars such as G. John Ikenberry contend that the post–World War II liberal order, rooted in institutions, rules, and norms, provides mechanisms for managing transitions peacefully. Ikenberry argues that the decline of unipolarity need not lead to global instability if emerging powers are incorporated into existing frameworks of cooperation and governance. However, he also warns that the erosion of these frameworks could lead to fragmentation if not carefully managed. Moreover, constructivist perspectives highlight the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping the international system. From this view, shifts in polarity are not merely the result of material changes in power capabilities but are also influenced by evolving perceptions of legitimacy, leadership, and order (Ikenberry, 2011).

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks offer a spectrum of interpretations about the ongoing transition. While realist theories emphasize structural inevitabilities and power struggles, liberal theories suggest opportunities for managed adaptation, and constructivist approaches stress the contingent role of norms and identities.

Against this theoretical backdrop, the insights of Kissinger, Brzezinski, and Zakaria offer valuable case-specific interpretations of the broader structural shifts underway. They offer distinct yet interconnected perspectives on the crisis of global power. As leading figures within the realist school of international relations, they emphasize the role of power dynamics, strategic competition, and pragmatic statecraft in shaping the evolving global order.

Kissinger emphasizes the importance of a carefully managed world order based on diplomatic strategy, historical continuity, as well as pragmatic leadership. He argues that geopolitical stability hinges on a balance of power where great powers engage in diplomacy rather than confrontation. His approach draws from historical precedents, particularly the European balance of power system, and underscores the role of strategic statecraft in facing global conflicts.

Brzezinski highlights the consequences of geopolitical awakening where the redistribution of power challenges the existing world order and requires new strategic frameworks. The analysis of Brzezinski are focusing on the importance of Eurasia as the central arena of global influence while stressing that shifts in economic

and military power within this region will determine the future geopolitical alignments. He also warns of the potential instability arising from nationalism, regionalism, and ideological conflicts that could disrupt existing power structures.

On the other hand, Zakaria focuses on the steady decline of unipolarity and the emergence of a multipolar system driven by economic and political shifts. He examines how emerging economies, such as China and India, are reshaping the global governance, and at the same time, are challenging the Western hegemony, and fostering an era where power is distributed among multiple actors. His perspective emphasizes economic influence as a key driver of global power rather than purely military capabilities.

While Kissinger, Brzezinski, and Zakaria all recognize the decline of American dominance, their perspectives diverge significantly on the implications and prescriptions for the future. Kissinger argues that global stability requires a carefully maintained balance of power, cautioning against hasty adjustments to emerging multipolar realities. Brzezinski, in contrast, acknowledges the inevitability of multipolarity but sees American strategic adaptation as critical to preventing global disorder. Zakaria, however, sees multipolarity as a largely economic transformation, downplaying the traditional great-power rivalry emphasized by Kissinger. These differences highlight the need for nuanced policymaking, where economic shifts, military considerations, and diplomatic strategy must align to prevent instability.

By examining their perspectives, it becomes evident that transitioning from a Western-dominated global order to a multipolar system is not a uniform process but a contested and dynamic shift influenced by economic transformations, regional ambitions, and strategic rivalries. This paper explores their interpretations of global power, analyzing how their theories contribute to understanding the evolving international system. While the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity is widely acknowledged, the implications of this shift remain contested. This paper argues that multipolarity is not merely an emerging reality but an inevitable consequence of economic globalization, regional power assertions, and the evolving geopolitical landscape. However, whether this shift fosters global stability or deepens fragmentation depends on the strategic choices made by key actors in the international system.

## Henry Kissinger's Realpolitik: Balancing Global Stability and Strategic Adaptation

In his 2014 article published in *The Wall Street Journal*, Henry Kissinger argues that the world is experiencing a deep crisis of order, with the international system facing unprecedented instability. The ideas presented in this article are further elaborated in his book *World Order*, published the same year. According to Kissinger, the pursuit of global stability has historically been led by Western societies, shaped by their core values. Following World War II, the United States emerged as the main global leader as a nation founded on the principles of freedom and democracy.

Kissinger argues that America's postwar development strategy was fundamentally rooted in the expansion of democracy and economic liberalism as the means of ensuring lasting peace. This vision was premised on the belief that human beings, as rational actors, inherently strive for peaceful compromises and pragmatic solutions. Consequently, the global proliferation of democratic governance and open markets was seen as a mechanism to establish a structured and predictable international order. The rise of free markets, according to Kissinger, not only facilitated individual prosperity but also strengthened societal cohesion, while replacing economic protectionism and international rivalry with interdependence and shared economic interests (Kissinger, 2014).

Kissinger claims that the Western attempt to establish a world order proved very successful. Independent sovereign states governed most of the world. Spreading democracy became a common aim. The Internet allowed global communications and financial networks to work in real time. In this time of US dominance, from 1948 until today, the world order functioned based on American idealism and the traditional European concept of statehood and balance of power. According to him, the crisis started because of the increasing pressure on the fundamental unit of international order – the state. The EU does not yet have the attributes of a state that provokes an internal vacuum of power and imbalance at its borders. Parts of the Middle East are falling apart along sectarian and ethnic lines. They are pitted against each other, leading to the phenomenon of failed states that have no control over their territory. Conflicts and armed confrontations are present in Asia and Africa as well. Apart from this, there is also a conflict between the international economy and the political institutions that govern it. This weakens the feeling of a common goal, which is, on the other hand, necessary for the existence of a world order.

The economy is becoming increasingly global, whereas the world's political structure is still based on nation-states. While economic globalization tends to neutralize state borders, foreign policy aims to reaffirm them by emphasizing conflicting national interests or ideals of order. Globalization of the economy contributed to decades marked by economic growth, with sporadic economic crises.[1] That leads to the appearance of winners and losers. Winners will try to preserve the existing system in any way possible. In contrast, losers will try to find a way out of the crisis by denying or interrupting the functioning of the global economic order.

Unlike the globalization of the economy, the international order is facing a paradox. Namely, prosperity depends on the success of globalization, but the process itself provokes political reactions that often usurp the very aims of globalization. Another weakness of the actual international order is the absence of an advisory body of the great powers through which they would cooperate on the most important issues preoccupying the world today. Although there are many international forums, these do not offer long-term strategies but rather undermine the attempts to reach such strategies, reducing their entire activity to debates on tactical issues and declarative commitments. If willing to stay relevant, the modern structure of international rules and standards cannot exist only in the form of declarations. According to Kissinger, that structure must be cherished as something that results from common beliefs. If this does not happen, there will be no great war among countries, but a creation of spheres of influence that are now present in specific internal political structures and types of governance. Each of these spheres of influence will try to prove its power over another sphere of influence, presenting the other as non-legitimate. Conflict between regions in the sphere of influence of great powers might represent a more significant problem than conflict between states.

The striving to move from the international order that we now have towards a world order demands a mutually consistent strategy to shape the concept of internal order in various regions, leading to establishing relations between those regions. However, this might bring about additional problems and crises. This is because a radical attempt to establish law and order in a region might simultaneously provoke turmoil in other regions. When a country has military predominance in one region, apart from establishing internal order, it might provoke a crisis in other parts of the world. This is something that we witnessed happening at that moment.

1 Latin America in the 80s, Asia in 1997, Russia in 1998, the USA in 2001 and 2007, and the EU in 2010.

Kissinger sees the exit from the current system crisis and chaos in the international order in creating a world order that would stimulate individual dignity, participative government, and international cooperation, per agreed-upon rules. However, in order to reach that point, several stages need to be completed. In order for the United States to have a responsible role in the evolution of world order in the 21st century, it must be ready to respond to the following questions:

1. "What do we seek to prevent, no matter how it happens, and if necessary alone? The answer defines the minimum condition for the survival of the society. What do we seek to achieve, even if not supported by any multilateral effort? These goals define the minimum objectives of the national strategy.
2. What do we seek to achieve, or prevent, only if supported by an alliance? This defines the outer limits of the country's strategic aspirations as part of a global system.
3. What should we not engage in, even if urged by a multilateral group or an alliance? This defines the limiting condition of American participation in the world order.
4. Above all, what is the nature of the values that we seek to advance?
5. What applications depend in part on circumstance?

The same questions apply in principle to other societies." (Kissinger, 2014, p. 296).

While Kissinger's vision prioritizes diplomatic engagement and power equilibrium, Brzezinski's perspective shifts the focus toward the role of global political awakening and the challenge of managing a world where mass political participation increasingly shapes international relations. Unlike Kissinger, who views order as a product of state-led diplomacy, Brzezinski sees public mobilization, nationalism, and ideological realignments as the forces that will define the future balance of power.

## Zbigniew Brzezinski - Geopolitical Awakening and The Redistribution of Power

According to Zbigniew Brzezinski, we live in a time of crisis of global power, where the traditional structures of international dominance are being disturbed and reshaped. This transformation is led by several interrelated factors: the dynamic shift of the global gravitational center from the West towards the East, the acceleration

of global political awakening, and the shortcomings of American foreign policy since the 1990s when the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Brzezinski, 2012). Brzezinski argues that the economic rise of China, India, and other emerging markets has redefined the geopolitical landscape while gradually eroding the Western-centric world order that had been dominant for centuries. This eastward shift of power is not solely economic but also political, as nations in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America seek more significant influence in global governance. The spread of digital communication, social media, and increased global connectivity has also fueled political consciousness and activism among previously marginalized populations. This "global political awakening," as Brzezinski calls it, has led to more frequent challenges to established power structures, including anti-government protests, populist movements, and demands for a more multipolar world (Brzezinski, 2012).

At the same time, Brzezinski critiques the failures of American foreign policy in managing this transition. He argues that the engagement of USA in prolonged military conflicts, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, diverted attention from the broader strategic goal to maintain a global leader. Policy miscalculations in economic as well as diplomatic spheres have also contributed to growing resentment against Western interventionism. With that in midn, it is harder for the US to sustain its influence. Instead of adapting to the new realities of global power, Washington has often relied on outdated tactics typical to the Cold War era that no longer align with the multipolar nature of international relations. Brzezinski warns that unless the US adjusts its strategic vision, fostering stronger alliances and embracing diplomatic rather than military dominance, it risks further decline in global standing. He advocates for a more pragmatic and cooperative approach, urging American policymakers to recognize unilateralism's limits and actively shape a stable, multipolar world order rather than resisting its emergence (Brzezinski, 2012).

In his book Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power, he states that the world today is interactive and independent and that, for the first time, this is a world in which problems related to the survival of humanity dominate over traditional international conflicts. Unfortunately, he argues that most global powers have yet to provide global cooperative answers to the new and increasingly complex challenges that the survival of humanity depends on. He mainly refers to environmental, climate, socio-economic, food-related, and demographic challenges here (Brzezinski, 2012).

He states that the unpredictability of modern international relations stems from the changing distribution of global power and the new phenomena of mass political awakening. With the strengthening of China's influence and the fight for resources, security, and economic advantage of newly arisen powers such as Russia, India, or Brazil, the potential for wrong assessments and conflicts also rises. Therefore, the United States must try to build broad geopolitical foundations for constructive cooperation in the global arena while handling the growing tensions of the increasingly restless global population. In the abovementioned book, Brzezinski tries to answer four questions that he identifies as most important:

1. What are the implications of the changing distribution of global power from the West to the East, and how is it being affected by the new reality of a politically awakened humanity?
2. Why is America's global appeal waning, what are the symptoms of America's domestic and international decline, and how did America waste the unique global opportunity offered by the peaceful end of the Cold War? Conversely, what are America's recuperative strengths and what geopolitical reorientation is necessary to revitalize America's world role?
3. What would be the likely geopolitical consequences if America declined from its globally preeminent position, who would be the almost-immediate geopolitical victims of such a decline, what effects would it have on the global-scale problems of the twenty-first century, and could China assume America's central role in world affairs by 2025?
4. Looking beyond 2025, how should a resurgent America define its long-term geopolitical goals, and how could America, with its traditional European allies, seek to engage Turkey and Russia in order to construct an even larger and more vigorous West? Simultaneously, how could America achieve balance in the East between the need for close cooperation with China and the fact that a constructive American role in Asia should be neither exclusively China-centric nor involve dangerous entanglements in Asian conflicts?" (Brzeziński, 2012).

Answering these questions, he is convinced that, in the following period, America's role in the world will remain a key one. However, that would only be possible if America does not succumb to the ignorant mentality of a military state and does not surrender to hypocritical cultural hegemonism. If that happens, America would only add to the gloom of this changing world. According to him, the world needs an economically vital America that is responsible in terms of power, strategically

shaped, internationally respected, and historically enlightened in its global confrontation with the new East. Brzezinski claims that ideas for the historically inevitable fall of American power are fashionable in America. In his view, this is periodic pessimism that is neither new nor always justified. Not even the belief that the 20th century is an "American century," which started after World War II, managed to prevent the occasional stages of upset regarding the long-term future of America. Until 1991, the US remained the only global superpower on the world stage. Not only the 20th but also the 21st century would be American. The victory of liberal democracy was declared not only as decisive but also final. Moreover, since liberal democracy developed originally in the West, it was implied that the West would become a reference for the entire world. However, this hyperoptimism was short-lived. Brzezinski blames this on the culture of self-indulgence and deregulation that began during Clinton and continued during Bush. This led to the bursting of the foreign exchange bubble during the transition between the 20th and the 21st century and a total financial disaster in 2008. The expensive unilateralism of Bush Jr. led to decade-long wars in the Middle East and the sliding of overall American foreign policy. After 2008, a fatal economic depression was avoided by a thread, which suddenly forced America and the majority of Western countries to recognize the system's unsustainability of unregulated greed.

According to Brzezinski, another unpleasant news for the future of the American status as a leading global power is the incredible unification of economic liberalism and state capitalism in China and other Asian states. That unification showed a surprising economic growth and technological innovation capacity in those countries. Brzezinski concludes that the US must renew and look for a comprehensive and long-term geopolitical vision capable of responding to the challenges of an altered historical context. According to him, only a dynamic and strategically oriented America and a united Europe can promote a greater and stronger West, capable of entering into an open dialogue with an increasingly more assertive and confident East. If that fails, Brzezinski is convinced that a geopolitically fragmented, egocentric West might spiral into a historic disaster, similar to China in the 19th century. In contrast, the East might not resist the temptation to repeat the self-destructive rivalries of 19th-century Europe. This represents a serious long-term risk to the survival of some jeopardized countries, the security of global common goods, and global stability in general.

## Fareed Zakaria – Post-American World

Out of the multitude of authors who demonstrate, as Brzezinski states, periodic pessimism about the historically inevitable decline of American power in the 21st century, we focus on Fareed Zakaria and his book "Post-American World" which was published in 2008.

At the time of publication of this book, despite the uncertain wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US was a leader of the world created after 1989. The first reaction was suspicion in Zakaria's thesis, as it appeared that neither China, post-Soviet Russia, nor any other country would be able to jeopardize America's position as the leader in the world. The fall of 2008 will mark the eruption of a world economic crisis on Wall Street, expanding to the entire developed world and lasting in various forms until this day. Zakaria's thesis that American leadership and the so-called unipolar world are in crisis will, in the meantime, be accepted by some of the leading US theoreticians (Kagan, 2008; Kupchan, 2012; Ikenberry & Leviathan, 2011). According to Zakaria, we are witnessing a comprehensive transformation and transition towards a new era that is not well understood. It is not about the decline of America but the success and growth of 'all others.' Namely, the success and growth of the West began in the 15th century and accelerated in the 18th century. That process resulted in modernity, science and technology, trade and capitalism, and the agricultural and industrial revolution. This will also lead to the success of 20th-century America, allowing it to become the most powerful nation since Ancient Rome and dominate the global economy, politics, science, and culture. However, this will also form the basis for the 'success of others,' most visible in Asia (China and India), but not only in Asia. The evidence and statistics in his book support this thesis well. We are living in a unipolar world created after the fall of the Berlin Wall, only at the political and military level, Zakaria claims. In every other dimension- industrial, financial, economic, social, and cultural – the power distribution is changing, freeing itself from American domination. This, however, is not an anti-American, but rather a post-American world. Since 2008, the so-called 'post-American world' has been facing permanent crises that the US is no longer able or willing to resolve on its own. Here, we refer to the global economic crisis that is still hovering over the world economy, wars in the Middle East, especially Syria, the war in Ukraine, Iran's nuclear program, North Korea's nuclear arsenal... For these challenges, the US is looking for partners with whom they can act or allies who can share these crises and challenges. Thus, for instance, controlling North Korea's nuclear arsenal requires cooperation with China, whereas addressing Iran's nuclear program involves

collaboration with Syria and Ukraine. However, in both cases, a common geopolitical adversary remains Russia. This suggests that the "post-American" world is increasingly multipolar, a reality acknowledged by leading American theorists. They recognize that the foundations of today's power in China, Russia, India, and Brazil stem from a process initiated in the United States during the 1970s, known as globalization.

According to Zakaria, the research he conducted and published in his book "Post-American World" points out that we are yhe witnesses to the biggest changes in a shift of power in the world only in the past few centuries. Namely, for the first time in at least 300 years, the non-Western actors have been reinforced so that they have started dominating the global scene. However, this does not mean that the West will be destroyed politically and that America will disappear. He believes that America will remain the strongest economic power in the foreseeable future and that the West will continue to be important. However, it will have to share its power with new actors – cultures and civilizations that it traditionally dominated, colonized, and underestimated. The process of establishing a new balance in the world, according to Zakaria, is the 'great narrative of our time.' Economic power is a basis for political, diplomatic, and military power (Zakaria, 2008).

However, in Zakaria's view, the Chinese are not overly interested in becoming a 'world cop.' They are willing to let America take over that role, benefiting from the stability established in such a way. However, America will no longer be free to act, and its army will still be the biggest in the world. However, its financial destiny entirely depends on China's goodwill in continuing to buy its debts. This, of course, does not match the global world hegemon title, says Zakaria. According to him, China, India, Brazil, and many other countries have learned their lessons from capitalism. That is the first story – natives rose above their masters and marked the end of the existing world order. Zakaria claims that the new one will basically be built according to the Western model but will be managed by non-Western countries (Zakaria, 2008).

The transformation of a unipolar world into a multipolar one brings its dangers. Zakaria's concern arises from the fact that we are entering a period of significant transition, and riots and violence usually accompany such periods. The American and German hegemony era is fading out, the existing order is collapsing, and the new order has not stabilized itself yet. Such times are perilous. Zakaria knows that people dislike most of the things America does. However, historically speaking, the three decades of that unipolar world were a period of political stability and

unprecedented peace. If China and the US should enter into conflict in any way, Zakaria states that we should say goodbye to globalization and a stable world order. The irony of the 'success of others', Zakaria believes, is that it is mainly the result of American ideas and actions: the pressure to open markets and introduce democracy, embraced by trade and technology. In such a new multipolar world, America must adapt and become a sort of 'global mediator,' substituting Bush's 'cowboy unilateralism' with the role of a superpower that establishes alliances, sets the behind-the-scenes agenda, defines problems, initiates consultations, and provides compromises..., concludes Zakaria (2008).

Instead of a fast decline of American power, Zakaria foresees that it will remain strong, thanks to its educational system and the arrival of young immigrants, which will allow for a much better demographic image than that of Europe and a large portion of Asia (Japan, South Korea), where a smaller number of workers is supporting an increasing number of the unproductive aging population. According to him, today's economies are distinguished by ideas and energy. A country must be a source of either ideas or energy. The US has been and can be the most significant, endless global source of new ideas – big and small, technical and creative, economic and political, while leaving managerial imperialism.

The growth of others is evident, but this is a slow process. At the same time, this process provides the US with a key role, but a different one. This new role is significantly different from that of a traditional superpower. This role requires consultations, cooperation, and even compromise. The power of such a superpower will stem from setting goals, defining key points, and creating coalitions.

In order to implement any specific or constructive strategy, the US must, to a certain extent, adapt. According to Zakaria, America must stop twitching in fear, creating a climate of panic and paranoia, and has provoked strategically wrong moves. America must first restore its self-confidence. In order to continue progressing in this new era filled with challenges and in order to succeed while others are also on the rise, America must pass the most important exam: to be a beckoning and captivating place for young students, just as it was for a then 18-year-old Fareed Zakaria a generation ago.

## Conclusion

The transition from unipolarity to multipolarity represents one of the most significant shifts in the contemporary international system. While the era of American

primacy, characterized by the unipolar moment following the Cold War, is drawing to a close, the emerging multipolar world is not yet fully consolidated. Theoretical frameworks on polarity transitions suggest that multipolar systems historically tend to be less stable than bipolar or unipolar ones, given the complexity of balancing power among multiple actors (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2014). Whether the current transition will reinforce global cooperation or fuel instability remains a critical and unresolved question.

Through the perspectives of Kissinger, Brzezinski, and Zakaria, it becomes evident that the unipolar system's erosion is shaped by economic globalization, the rise of new regional powers, and the internal fragmentation of Western-led institutions. Kissinger emphasizes the necessity of strategic power balancing to manage multipolarity, reflecting classical realist concerns about systemic instability. Brzezinski, meanwhile, underscores the role of political awakenings and regional dynamics in complicating efforts to sustain a coherent world order, adding a sociopolitical dimension to the classical balance-of-power analysis. Zakaria's interpretation, in contrast, portrays multipolarity primarily as an economic phenomenon, suggesting that peaceful coexistence among rising powers remains possible if interdependence continues to deepen. Thus, the theoretical implications of the transition are complex. Realist theories predict heightened instability in a multipolar world, but liberal theories offer hope that institutional frameworks and economic ties might moderate power rivalries.

Whether multipolarity leads to cooperation or conflict will depend on the strategic choices of major powers and the ability of global institutions to adapt to new distributions of influence. In this light, the West, and particularly the United States, faces a critical juncture. Retaining relevance in a multipolar system will require moving beyond Cold War-era paradigms of unilateral dominance toward strategies that emphasize partnership, flexibility, and economic innovation. A nuanced and theoretically informed understanding of polarity transitions can guide policymakers as they navigate this uncertain future. Embracing the realities of multipolarity, rather than resisting them, offers the best chance to foster a stable and cooperative international order.

As the global system decentralizes, the West's ability to maintain a leading role depends on its willingness to embrace necessary reforms. If the policymakers from the West heed the strategic lessons outlined by Kissinger, Brzezinski, and Zakaria, they may still reconfigure their influence to remain central in the evolving multipolar order. However, if the West remains reactionary and mostly focused on

containment rather than constructive adaptation, its relative decline will accelerate, leading to a fragmented, unpredictable international landscape where *interregnum* is inevitable. "There are numerous definitions of the term interregnum and, at the same time, numerous interpretations that have been the product of various historical contexts. Depending on the needs, the term itself and its application offered explanations of current, temporary and irregular events, caused by a variety of symptoms, trends, historical ordeals, personalities, and so on. In general, the interregnum is a time interval indicating the interruption of a certain continuity. This time interval between two periods (what was and what is coming) is most often used in defining the temporal space from the end of the reign of one sovereign ruler until the coming to power of another, that is, its successor." (Ivanov, 2023)

Europe, on the other hand, is facing an existential crisis as it increasingly loses relevance in global geopolitics. The recent communication between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin underscores this shifting dynamic, highlighting how Europe is no longer at the forefront of strategic decision-making. This interaction exemplifies how shifting U.S. priorities and the erosion of Western cohesion are no longer theoretical concerns but active forces driving strategic realignments.

The transatlantic relationship that was once the pillar of Western strength is now being redefined, and under the current U.S. administration, American priorities are likely to shift away from Europe toward more direct engagements with global power centers. This signals that Europe may struggle to assert its influence in shaping the future global order, further deepening the challenges of Western cohesion. Whether the emerging multipolar world leads to constructive cooperation or dangerous fragmentation will ultimately depend on the strategic foresight, restraint, and adaptability demonstrated by today's leading global actors.

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**Katerina Buchkovska**
International Balkan University, Skopje, North Macedonia
https://orcid.org/0000-0000-0000-0001

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Katerina Buchkovska, Email: katerina.buchkovska@ibu.edu.mk.

BALKAN JOURNALS

# Cyber Diplomacy: Securing The (Digital) Future

**Katerina Buchkovska**

*Abstract*

The 21st century has faced a new reality – modern warfare does not occupy only the realms of classical weaponry and armaments. Securing the country`s welfare does not depend solely on traditional diplomacy and robust economic policies. The word 'cyber' opened the door to a new realm of challenges for states in redefining security, diplomacy, and governance in the increasingly interconnected world. The governments have become targets of multiple cyberattacks that have seriously disrupted the normal functioning of institutions and had a great impact on the everyday life of their citizens. It is cyberspace that has become the most critical domain for economic, political, and military activities, thus elevating cybersecurity as an increasingly vital national and international priority.

Cyber diplomacy focuses on the use of diplomatic strategies and negotiations to address and manage issues arising in cyberspace, from protecting critical infrastructure and building resilience to cyber-attacks to establishing international norms in the cyberspace. Despite progress, there is an absence of universally accepted framework for cyberspace governance.

Cyber diplomacy plays vital role in the international relations for securing a peaceful digital future, as states and international organizations work to create cyber policies that promote stability and resilience in cyberspace. As the digital age evolves, cyber diplomacy is becoming international practice in global security positioning itself as an integral part of the foreign policy. It's the place where technology and international relations intersect.

*Keywords:* cyberspace, cyber diplomacy, security, international relations

## Introduction

The 21st century is marked by rapid technological advancements, especially in AI, internet communication, and digital networks. Every day, new technological innovations emerge, reshaping industries, economies, and societies. This accelerated progress increases the level of global interconnectivity, transforming and changing the way individuals, organizations, and nations interact.

However, this rapid evolution also brings about new challenges, particularly in the sphere of security and global stability. As technological solutions advance, so do the threats associated with them. One of the biggest challenges arises in the sphere of digital realm including cyber security risks, misinformation, data privacy concerns and the ethical implications of AI. The dynamic nature of technological progress demands continuous adaptation and vigilance to mitigate emerging risks and ensure that these innovations contribute positively to global development.

One of the main questions is how to safeguard the digital landscape in the global international world? How to secure nations' digital stability and infrastructure and how to encourage responsible behavior among nations throughout the world?

Nowadays, threats are becoming invisible. While traditional warfare and terrorist attacks involve visible, tangible threats, the cyber realm has redefined what may become a threat to national stability and security. It is no longer the tanks, drones, or weapons and ammunition of a foreign intruder. It is not the long-range rockets or any other high-tech weaponry of the 21st century. Instead, what could bring a country to its knees is a single click—one that may in second's compromise its digital systems, cripple its infrastructure, and undermine its national security.

From this point, governments and countries are faced with the new reality. Securing the country`s welfare does not demand solely robust national intelligence, solid economic policies, and educational and health reforms. It also requires engaging efforts to secure the nation`s cyberspace. It demands new perspectives and initiatives in the challenging realm of cyber diplomacy. The governments have become targets of multiple cyberattacks that have seriously disrupted the normal functioning of the state system and had a great impact on the citizens` privacy, everyday life, and safety. While cyber issues were previously treated by states mainly as technical issues and with no real interest, nowadays they have moved to the forefront of their foreign policy agenda. Cyberspace has become the most critical domain for economic, political, and military activities, while cybersecurity has grown into one of the most important priorities among the nations of the modern world.

This article deals with the role of cyber diplomacy in the international society and its impact on the realm of a nation`s security in the digital age. A clear understanding and precise definition of emerging terms such as cybercrime, cyber-attacks, cyber espionage, the Internet of Things, data privacy, and cyber risks are crucial for implementing effective cyber policies and raising awareness about the significance of cyber threats. Nations must invest significant efforts in developing and supporting cyber diplomacy and encourage capacity-building measures in improving nations` cybersecurity skills and strengths through sharing expertise, training, and technology transfer.

## What is Cyber Diplomacy?

Cyberspace has become a major focus of international relations, and most countries have inserted cyber issues into their foreign policies by adopting cyber strategies, harmonizing cyber laws, and redefining the security landscape and protocols. Cyberspace is increasingly becoming serious political space shaped by various interests, policies and strategies. Nowadays, cyberspace is not the domain reserved only for the IT specialists but it has become the central piece of nation`s security strategy.

In this political landscape, cyber diplomacy has become international issue, one that merges the countries' interests and strategies in the sphere of cyber security. Cyber diplomacy may be seen as the new diplomatic field that becomes increasingly demanding at international level due to the fact that it incorporates issues of high importance for each nation.

Understanding the rise of cyber diplomacy is essential for recognizing the efforts, opportunities, and challenges involved in regulating cyberspace. Effective regulation can establish guiding principles, norms, and frameworks for addressing cyber-related issues. Moreover, cyber diplomacy plays a crucial role in shaping responsible state behavior in the digital realm.

In an attempt to give a clear definition of what the term cyber diplomacy means, there are many interpretations and efforts to clarify its function and importance. However, we may define cybersecurity as an application of diplomatic techniques and negotiations in international relations that deal with and regulate cyberspace-related issues (Radanliev, 2024). According to other studies analyzed, cyber diplomacy is defined as a term that incorporates the use of diplomatic tools and mindsets to resolve issues arising from the international cyberspace whereas the

use of cyber tools to promote broader diplomatic agendas as well as the use of diplomatic techniques and mental modes to analyze and manage cyber problems are separate but interdependent activities (Attatfa et al., 2020).

Regardless of the specific definition used, they all share a common concept: cyber diplomacy serves as a vital tool for enhancing cybersecurity, safeguarding national interests, and fostering mutual trust among nations in the digital realm. Its main role is to harmonize the efforts of governments and nations in regulating the norms and guidelines of international cyberspace. Cyber diplomacy aims to assist in dealing with the difficulties and obstacles in the cyber sphere with the clear role to promote responsible behavior, preserve stability in cyberspace, and, most importantly of all, to assist the process of developing national cybersecurity policies.

Cyber diplomacy becomes as indispensable part of the international cooperation. Countries collaborate on developing cyber standards, guidelines and norms in direction of building resilient cyber space and safe digital environment. External attacks and threats combine social engineering tactics with advanced cyber techniques, posing serious political and security risks to a nation's cybersecurity landscape.

Therefore, it is of crucial importance for cyber diplomacy to act proactively in international cyber governance, to coordinate efforts in the creation of cyber laws, agreements, and norms in order to reduce the risks from cyberattacks and cyber terrorism. To do so, cyber diplomacy has to assist the process of confidence-building measures among nations in order to facilitate the process of mutual trust and willingness to support a harmonised and mutually accepted legal framework that will guide the responsible behaviour in cyberspace.

One of the main goals of cyber diplomacy is the identification of cyberattacks. It becomes more and more difficult to identify the attacker due to the advanced hacking technologies and the fact that the cyber-attack might originate from any point on the globe, which makes the process of identifying the perpetrators very difficult and time-consuming. To that end, cyber diplomacy must engage in developing effective mechanisms to combat cyber threats by fostering cooperation not only among states but also involving private corporations. Given the private sector`s crucial role in the cyber realm, its involvement is essential in strengthening the global cybersecurity efforts.

It is very important to mention the interconnection between diplomacy and cyber diplomacy and their complementary role. While diplomacy is defined as the

process of conducting negotiations between representatives of states (Attatfa et al., 2020), addressing many global issues, cyber diplomacy focuses on the use of diplomatic strategies and negotiations in international relations to address and manage issues arising in cyberspace. Cyber diplomacy can be defined as diplomacy in the cyber domain, or, in other words, the use of diplomatic resources and the performance of diplomatic functions to secure national interests with regard to cyberspace (Barrinha & Renard, 2020). While in traditional diplomacy, security risks might involve terrorism, separatist movements, economic destabilization, or pandemic, the cyber diplomacy deals only with vulnerability to cyber threats and cybersecurity.

## Terms Connected to Cyber Diplomacy

To better understand the concept of cyber diplomacy, it is useful to define related terms that are commonly associated with it. One of the most frequently used terms in this context is digital diplomacy. Digital diplomacy, also referred to as e-diplomacy, involves the use of modern technologies and social media by diplomats to support and enhance their traditional activities (Manor, 2016). This includes a wide range of diplomatic functions, such as public diplomacy, international negotiations, crisis communication, and consular services. By leveraging digital tools, diplomats can engage more effectively with global audiences, facilitate international cooperation, and respond swiftly to emerging challenges in the digital age (Barrinha & Renard, 2020). In short, digital diplomacy uses technology for diplomatic goals.

**Cyber norms**, on the other hand, may be defined as established principles and rules/ guidelines that regulate government action in cyberspace. Many professional norms in cyberspace might have begun as best practice, and most of them have been written into laws, but not all of them have become legalized (Finnemore, 2017). Cyber norms actually lay the groundwork for collective expectations for state behaviour in cyberspace. They are the solid foundation on which regional and bilateral agreements around state behaviour in cyberspace are built and create a mutually reinforcing set of agreements and expectations.

**Cyber terrorism** poses a serious threat to disrupt and incapacitate critical national infrastructure through the use of the internet. It is also used as a tool for intimidation of people through dark web or deep net activities. Mainly, it refers to a cyber-attack perpetrated by terrorist groups or individuals with the goal to disrupt,

damage, or threaten critical infrastructure, governments, or societies by intimidation and psychological pressure. These attacks can include hacking, spreading propaganda, disrupting communication networks, or launching cyberattacks on financial, military, or energy systems. Cyber terrorism poses a significant threat as it can cause widespread fear, economic losses, and even physical harm. Given the growing reliance on digital technology, combating cyberterrorism requires enhanced international cooperation among nation-states, intelligence sharing, and the development of robust cybersecurity measures.

**Information warfare** is a concept where technology is used to influence opinions and perceptions in public. It involves tactics such as cyber-attacks, propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, and psychological operations to influence public opinion, disrupt decision-making, or weaken infrastructure. Governments, military forces, and non-state actors use information warfare to shape opinions, spread false information, and undermine trust in institutions. In the digital age, social media, cyber espionage, and hacking play a crucial role in modern information warfare, making it a critical aspect of national security and global conflicts.

**Cyber espionage** covers issues of legal principles governing state behavior in cyberspace. It's a type of cyber-attack that hackers use to attack business or government entity. These are usually very expensive and complicated cyber-attacks that use malicious softwares. Cyber espionage is used for gaining strategic advantages over rival entities in the field of politics, economy, business and technological sectors. Cyber espionage is usually initiated by government-based intelligence organization.

**Cyber warfare** is a concept that is closely related to cyber espionage, but it is not the same. For example, cyber espionage could be used to build the nation state capabilities in the sphere of intelligence as preparation for cyber war. On the other hand, cyber warfare is an attack on government and civilian infrastructure with the goal of disrupting the critical systems and paralyzing the functionality of the state system. Usually, the perpetrator is a nation state, but in some cases, the attacks could be carried out by terrorist organizations or non-state actors. In international cyber legislation, there is still no clear definition of whether a cyber-attack may constitute an act of war. Activities such as espionage, sabotage, electricity disruption, denial of service (DoS), propaganda, or economic disruption are considered cyber warfare.

## Cyber Diplomacy in Action, Challenges and Barriers

The growing significance of digital transformation and technologies in geopolitics has elevated cybersecurity to a top priority for governments. States are increasingly focused on strengthening the diplomatic dimension of cybersecurity and are committed to developing robust national and international cyber diplomacy strategies.

Despite the increasing need for cyber diplomacy and cyber diplomats, there remains little substantive comparative research on how states have adapted their governance structures to meet this challenge. According to Barrinha and Renard, "Dozens of ministries have been creating offices exclusively dedicated to cyberspace and appointing 'cyber diplomats'. This move has concentrated more international cyber policy activities in foreign affairs ministries, elevating the issue in government hierarchies and increasing the level of international activity of each state in cyberspace" (Barrinha & Renard, 2020).

The first state to establish such structures was the United States during the term of President Barack Obama through the Office of the Coordinator of Cyber Issues in 2011. The US also pushed other, mainly Western, like-minded states and ROs to act in the cyber domain, including Germany, the EU, Japan, and Australia (Barrinha & Renard, 2020). The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) was established in 2018. It is a federal agency that functions as a component of the US Department of Homeland Security, dealing with issues of cybersecurity and infrastructure protection across all levels of government. The Agency is coordinating cooperation among US states on cyber programs, cybersecurity, and protection and prevention from cyberattacks. In 2021, during the Biden administration, Congress established the Office of the National Cyber Director (ONCD). This Office advises the President on cybersecurity policy and strategy and is a part of the Executive Office of the President at the White House. The US Cyber Diplomacy Act of 2021 also addresses key aspects of international cyberspace deliberation, and the Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy was created in 2022, along with the appointment of a US Ambassador at Large for Cyberspace and Digital Policy, Nathaniel C. Fick (Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy).

In Europe, awareness of cybersecurity has grown significantly, with all 27 EU member states now having developed their own cyber strategies and ten of them (Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, France and Spain) have appointed cyber ambassadors, envoys and representatives (Latici, 2020).

In addition, The European Union Agency for Network and Information Security (ENISA) is critical component of the EU cybersecurity infrastructure and it serves as network and information security agency with the main goal to assist the EU member countries and EU institutions in harmonization of cyber legislation, creating shared standards and norms important for cybersecurity activities. One of the main goals of the Agency is to protect the EU's digital and critical infrastructure by building cybersecurity resilience and promoting collaboration among the member countries. Furthermore, the EU has established the Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox as part of its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) to provide a coordinated diplomatic response to malicious cyber activities. This framework includes a range of measures, from political dialogues and diplomatic engagement to sanctions, aimed at strengthening cybersecurity and deterring cyber threats.

However, besides all of these efforts in the cyber field, cyber diplomacy is confronted with numerous roadblocks and challenges on the path to secure and safe cyberspace. One of those challenges is the difficulty of tracking cyberattacks. Having into consideration the international character of cyber threats, the attack may originate from any geographical point in the world. This makes the prosecution of the perpetrators a very difficult task.

Another significant challenge to cyber diplomacy is the absence of unified international legislation. Defining the term cyber-attack has many different interpretations in many national strategies and legislations. This is a serious burden to the process of coordination and cooperation among countries. The international legal framework for cybersecurity is not unified and is continually changing. In addition to this, many countries have different national interests and priorities, and balancing the national security priorities and international cooperation might become a troublesome process. Given that cyberattacks may be state-sponsored, they have the potential to escalate conflicts and increase mistrust among nations.

While the US, EU countries, Japan, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom have invested substantial resources in building cybersecurity resilience, many developing countries face challenges due to a lack of resources, guidance, and infrastructure to address cybersecurity effectively. Bridging this gap and providing support to developing countries through assistance from more developed nations is essential for effectively addressing international cyber threats.

Besides many multinational initiatives and cyber agencies, there are many obstacles on the road to successful cyber diplomacy. Cyber risks and threats are becoming

increasingly dynamic, making the prevention of cyberattacks an ongoing challenge for cyber diplomats. Building on existing institutions and creating a more complex global cooperation framework in the domain of cyberspace is essential in building coherent and strong cyber diplomacy.

Regular cooperation on cyber issues among countries is an important factor in developing partnerships in cyberspace. Building trust among governments is critical for lowering the risks of future cyber threats and attacks. In case of cyber emergencies, countries should establish direct contact channels and an information exchange system that would improve the capacities for adequate cyber response. Joint cyber exercises, capacity-building measures, and technical cooperation on issues of cybersecurity are essential elements in developing a crisis management system among governments. This will enable authorities to manage cyber crises more effectively, minimizing potential damage and preventing escalation.

Another significant challenge to cyber diplomacy is the rise of artificial intelligence and the emergence of new technologies such as blockchain and the Internet of Things (IoT).

The integration of AI into cybersecurity has profound implications for cyber diplomacy. Governments must address critical issues such as AI ethics in cybersecurity and the development of guidelines and procedures for its responsible use in cyber operations. However, despite the risks, AI, when properly used, can greatly benefit cyber diplomacy. It can analyze vast amounts of data, enhance threat detection, and improve the identification and prevention of cyberattacks.

IoT security is becoming an increasingly complex challenge as IoT devices and networks operate globally, transcending national borders. The expanding connectivity of devices increases the attack surface, making systems more vulnerable to cyber threats. Therefore, cyber diplomacy must prioritize international cooperation to develop unified cybersecurity standards and safeguard IoT systems (Lu, 2023).

On the other hand, blockchain technology operates as a decentralized system, ensuring secure and transparent transactions without the need for a central authority. Beyond its association with cryptocurrencies, blockchain has the potential to benefit various sectors, including optimizing international trade and assisting governments in areas such as secure data management, digital identity verification, and transparent supply chain tracking (Tripathi et al., 2023).

## Conclusion

The global digital transformation is continuing to reshape the lives of people, businesses, and institutions. The rise of Artificial Intelligence has a very strong impact on many economic, political, and security issues. Digitalization creates a more connected and globalized world, creating more opportunities for open markets, innovation, and prosperity. It actually increases the quality of life for everyone.

As the world becomes more dependent on cyberspace, the number of malicious cyber activities has grown. Cyber-attacks have become more and more severe over time, more complex and sophisticated. There is an increase in cyber incidents and attacks on critical infrastructure, democratic institutions, media, and businesses. Cyber-attacks do happen, and they pose a significant threat to political stability, economic development, and democratic processes. The war in Ukraine and the usage of high-technology cyber weapons have just accelerated the need for a more complex and careful approach in cybersecurity.

Therefore, states and governments are focusing their efforts on creating a safe and secure cyberspace to protect national interests and priorities. Nations are committed to working more closely to develop unified principles and standards, ensuring responsible state behavior. This is where cyber diplomacy becomes crucial, as it plays a key role in addressing the complexities of the digital environment and ensuring international collaboration in cyberspace.

Cyber diplomacy complements traditional diplomacy and is key to uniting nations in strengthening cyber resilience. All states and non-state organizations play critical role in advancing cyber diplomacy and strengthening its role in the process of development unified cyber legislation. Countries should strengthen cooperation in threat intelligence sharing, cybersecurity awareness, and joint cyber prevention measures. Cyber laws and international conventions establish norms and procedures that help safeguard data privacy, protect digital rights, and uphold cybersecurity standards.

Governments, international organizations, and NGO`s should amplify their efforts to support effective national policies and raise civil society awareness concerning the importance of cyber threats. Cyber capacity building and cybersecurity training are essential for strengthening the capabilities of both governments and the private sector.

Cyber diplomacy plays a crucial role in defining the government's incident response strategy and cyber crisis management systems. It is an essential prerequisite in building rapid detection, solid defense, protection, and prevention from future cyberattacks and incidents. The security of cyberspace presents a top national strategic priority. Only by creating secure cyber systems, the use of the internet and opportunities of the new modern technologies can be maximized and beneficial for all.

Cyber diplomacy remains a developing and evolving field, but given the increasing significance of cybersecurity as a rapidly growing domain, it is becoming a key priority in foreign policy. Strengthening cyber diplomacy is essential for fostering international peace, enhancing mutual trust, and promoting cooperation among nations in cyberspace.

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# The Impact of Religion on Gender Equality - Case Study: Japan

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**Nikola Mirkovic**
University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7200-9753

We declare no conflicts of interest.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nikola Mirkovic
Email: nikolamirkovic1998@gmail.com

**Nikola Mirkovic**

*Abstract*

The theoretical framework of this paper is the influence of religion on gender equality in the contemporary world. More precisely, in contemporary Japan. This paper aims to analyze the position of women in Japan, a country that has shaped its cultural and social structure through syncretic religions and partly through Christianity. To analyze this phenomenon, we will explore and compare teachings on the position of women in the religions present in this country, and thus examine the correlation between religion and gender equality. In addition to the descriptive analysis, official statistical data from several relevant sources will be shown. This paper does not seek to present religion as the most significant or only factor shaping the position of women but rather aims to highlight this issue from a perspective that has, to some extent, been neglected.

*Keywords:* Japan, gender equality, syncretic religions, women, religion

## Theoretical Framework

The traditional role of women in Japan is defined by the concept of the "three submissions": young women obey their fathers, married women obey their husbands, and older women obey their sons (Kitamura, 1982). Inglehart and Norris argue that gender inequality is one of the most pervasive forms of social inequality and exists throughout the world, with varying degrees of intensity in different regions. These differences are primarily due to cultural heritage, historical development, geographical location, and, last but not least, the religious norms prevailing in society (Inglehart, 2003). Religion has a profound and complex influence on the position of women. This influence varies from one religion to another, as do their teachings on gender differences and equality. Similarly, Peach argues that for a full study of this topic, the influence of religion may now be a more important variable than race or ethnicity (Peach, 2006). To this, Peach's view, we add the observation that the status of women in religion reflects the status of women in society as a whole, considering cultural, political, and geographical factors (King, 1995). This interpretation portrays religion as the most influential factor determining the position of women.

Each religion consists of different norms, creates different institutions, and is built on different cultural and historical foundations. The influence of individual world religions on the position of women is very diverse, so we should ask ourselves: To what extent do religions determine the status of women and the level of gender inequality (Klingorova & Havlicek, 2015)? Different religious teachings result in significant variations in rights and the status of women, which is manifested in the general position of women in the legal regulations of countries. For example, Buddhism, which allows women to be members of monastic orders, differs significantly from Roman Catholicism, which still has a problem when it comes to accepting female clergy. On the other hand, Islamic societies represent a specific case that has been thoroughly researched by Stephen Fish, who emphasizes the subordination of women as one of the key causes of authoritarianism that occurs in some Islamic countries. He indicates that religious ideas have a strong influence on the question of the position of women in society as one of the indicators of democratization (Fish, 2002).

A more concrete metric is provided by the Global Gender Gap Index, which offers a quantitative basis for comparing the position of women in different countries. When considering the religions present in Japan, it is observed that of the 32 worst-ranked countries, four are Christian and one is Buddhist (Bhutan). On the

other hand, at the top of this index are countries such as Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Denmark, all Protestant countries in Northern Europe (Global Gender Gap Report, 2020).

Only two countries have a larger gender gap between men and women than Japan in the East Asian region, namely Papua New Guinea and the island nation of Vanuatu (The population of this country is slightly more than 300,000 inhabitants). The smallest gap is in New Zealand.

Table 1: Gender Gap Rankings in East Asia and the Pacific (2020)

| East Asia and the Pacific | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Country | Rank | | Score |
| | Regional | Global | |
| New Zealand | 1 | 6 | 0.799 |
| Philippines | 2 | 16 | 0.781 |
| LAO PDR | 3 | 43 | 0.731 |
| Australia | 4 | 44 | 0.731 |
| Singapore | 5 | 54 | 0.724 |
| Thailand | 6 | 75 | 0.708 |
| Mongolia | 7 | 79 | 0.706 |
| Indonesia | 8 | 85 | 0.700 |
| Vietnam | 9 | 87 | 0.700 |
| Cambodia | 10 | 89 | 0.694 |
| Brunei Darussalam | 11 | 95 | 0.686 |
| Fiji | 12 | 103 | 0.678 |
| Malaysia | 13 | 104 | 0.677 |
| China | 14 | 106 | 0.676 |
| Korea Rep. | 15 | 108 | 0.672 |
| Myanmar | 16 | 114 | 0.665 |
| Timor-leste | 17 | 117 | 0.662 |
| Japan | 18 | 121 | 0.652 |
| Vanuatu* | 19 | 126 | 0.638 |
| Papua New Guinea | 20 | 127 | 0.635 |

Source: The Global Gender Gap Index 2020; East Asia and Pacific (Global Gender Gap Report, 2020)

This suggests a link between religious affiliation and gender equality, but the results also imply consideration of other necessary factors that may influence gender equality, such as economic development, political institutions, and social contexts. Such a comprehensive analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, which will focus exclusively on religious factors.

Japan is dominated by syncretic religions such as Shintoism and Buddhism, which have specific attitudes toward gender roles. It is therefore important to consider how these religious traditions of Japan influence the country's gender equality.

## Religious and Social Image of Japan

Japan is an ethnically homogeneous country, with a predominantly Japanese population that makes up almost 98% of the total. However, religiously, the situation is much more complex. Japan, like many East Asian countries, is characterized by syncretism, that is, the phenomenon in which religions intertwine and influence each other. In Japan, this phenomenon is particularly present, as people practice multiple religions at the same time, creating a dynamic and sometimes confusing religious landscape. Such an approach to religion is less common in countries with dominant monotheistic traditions, where religious affiliation typically involves strict doctrinal adherence. In Japan, religion is practiced in a more flexible manner, without the rigid rules of affiliation found in the three largest monotheistic religions.

Table 2: Religious Affiliation in Japan (2025)

| | |
|---|---|
| Shinto | 70,5% |
| Buddhism | 67,2% |
| Christianity | 1,5% |
| Other | 5,9% |

Source: Religious image of Japan (The World Factbook, 2025)

According to research, about 39% of Japanese people now believe that religiosity is a prerequisite for morality and a good value system, a significant increase from 29% in 2002 (PEW, 2020). However, it is important to note that religions in Japan are not understood as strictly defined belief systems, but rather as philosophies of life that are generally integrated into everyday life and social customs. For example, Shintoism does not have a defined rite of initiation, which makes it closer

to cultural and social customs than to a religion with a clear act of accession. This raises the question of whether surveys that measure religiosity in Japan are truly accurate, considering that there is a lack of clear boundaries between religious practices. Therefore, it may not be possible to measure it as precisely as in other religions.

These demographic and religious characteristics of Japan form critical foundationsfor understanding the impact of religion on gender equality. Sometimes the influence of religion on women's social roles and gender equality in Japan is less visible, but it isn't less important for understanding its impact.

## Women in Japanese Society – A Historical Overview

*Article 14. All of the people are equal under the law, and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic, or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status, or family origin* (The Constitution of Japan, 1946).

Women globally make up less than 40 percent of the workforce and only 25 percent of all managerial positions. On the other hand, they do 75 percent of the unpaid care work. Is it correct to say that the main challenge in the nineteenth century was the fight against slavery, in the twentieth century the fight against totalitarianism, and in the twenty-first century the fight for gender equality (Eweye & Nagano, 2021)? The Japanese constitution guarantees women's rights in marriage, in the workplace, and in education, and they gained the right to vote after World War II. However, although the constitution guarantees their rights, the inequalities that exist deep in society are not easily overcome.

World War II had a big impact on Japan. One of the symbolic moments of the impact of the Western wave on the East was the public radio speech of Emperor Hirohito, who "lost his divine status" when the people heard him for the first time (Vekovic, 2022). At that time, the Allies, especially the USA, used the opportunity to impose their influence and soft power on Japan, including on the issue of women's rights. Japan was a strictly patriarchal society, but American officers encouraged Japanese women to organize and form women's groups that would fight for the improvement of the status of women. After the withdrawal of American forces, these groups split into smaller factions. The myth of the "full-time housewife" had a great influence on the women's movements of the 1950s and 1960s. One group of women wanted economic independence, while the other advocated the protection of motherhood instead of financial independence. The media actively promoted

images of happy women in households, who were secure and happy mothers. According to a 1981 survey, approximately 69% of women believed that women's happiness was linked to marriage, and 68% believed that their role was to take care of the family, while men were the ones who should work outside the home. This high identification of Japanese women with their families has created one such movement, which has been called "full-time housewives" (Kobayashi, 2012). Asian values highly value loyalty to the family, where even the state should be built on family and moral foundations (Park, 2006). If we recall that Mircea Eliade said that the Japanese live like Confucians, it is clear that Asian values that were born from the philosophy of Confucianism are the foundations of this attitude.

Polarization in Japan on this issue continues to grow since not everyone agrees that women should live according to the patriarchal model. Most women's groups, who wanted economic independence, focused their activities on promoting female workers in unions that were closely linked to left-wing political parties. A feminist movement was created and called "housewife feminism".

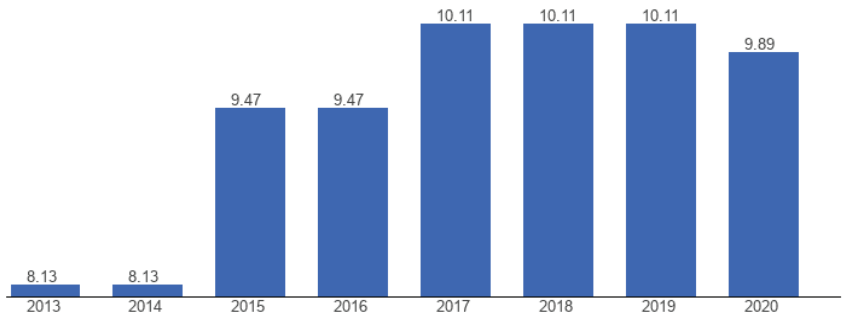
Feminism in Japan was not entirely a counterpart to the feminism that dominated the planet and established religious dogmas. In Japan, centuries-old cultural heritage created a specific model of feminism. This new feminist group preferred to focus its activities on solving the problems of everyday life, mainly issues of education, living environment, and from the perspective of "mother" and "housewife", rather than "woman". They were less interested in the big global political issues that shook the world during the Cold War (Kobayashi, 2012).

In Japan, in the 1970s, the "Women Who Fight" movement also emerged, fighting against sexism in Japanese society, previously provoked by potential changes in abortion laws (Mackie, 2003).

## Women in Japanese Society - Today

How are women represented in the most important positions in Japan today? In 2021, women held only 45 seats in parliament, while men held 420 seats. This is a very low percentage, which shows that Japan still has a long way to go towards true gender equality. Japan ranks 164th in terms of representation of women in Parliament (Japan: Women in Parliament, 2025).

Table 3: The Percentage of Women in the Japanese Parliament




Source: Percentage of women in the Japanese parliament between 2013 and 2020 (Japan: Women in Parliament, 2025)

It seems that today the Japanese are aware of the advantages and benefits of improving gender equality as they see the economic, social, and political gains that arise from the inclusion of women, but this level should be higher. For this reason, the economy and the government are under pressure to find a permanent solution (Eweje & Nagano, 2021). After World War II, feminist movements have become increasingly frequent, and the following part of the text analyzes how much religious and cultural heritage has made the position of women in Japanese society more difficult or easier. Although the constitution is quite democratic and liberal, without analyzing the norms and rules that are much older than the constitution, we can not understand the position of women in this or any country. It refers to the culture and the key religious practices that are present in Japan, which will be analyzed below.

## Christianity in Japan

*Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now, as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything* (The Bible, 2018).

These words from the Bible point to the patriarchal character of Christianity in its beginnings. The great world religions were created at a time when men were far more privileged than women, which is not surprising when interpreting their teachings and regulations. Mircea Eliade said that the Japanese are born

as Buddhists, live as Confucianists, and die as Shintoists (Vekovic, 2022). Where is Christianity in this? Christianity makes up only 1.5% of the population, so no more than 2,000,000 people (The World Factbook, 2025). It seems quite insignificant compared to the total population of 124,000,000. Although the number of Japanese who declare themselves Christians is minor compared to the aforementioned religious traditions, the globalism that has swept Japan comes from the Christian USA. Christianity is not deeply rooted in Japan, yet globalization and the rapid entry of Western cultural and religious influences have led to changes in Japanese society. Japanese intellectuals, especially in the period between the world wars, were influenced by Western ideas. However, there were also opponents of these currents who warned of the dangers of Western consumerism and culture. One of the most prominent representatives of this opposition was Takasu Yoshijiro, leader of the ultranationalist New Oriental Society, who in 1928 argued that Japanese consumerism imitated Europe and America. This view was present long before today's global society, but it highlighted the profound influence that Western culture had on Japan. There were no limits to American power, "influencing lifestyle, religion, language, and the entire culture" (Sato, 2003).

It is precisely because of the multivocality of all religions that Christianity has the potential to support a whole range of ideologies, and this can be seen through historical review. Multivocality refers to the phenomenon that religion can support both democracy and authoritarianism in different circumstances. However, this does not necessarily apply to democracy itself, but also to its components, such as gender equality. Thus, already in the middle of the 20th century, it changed the dynamics completely differently from previous religious practices and had a positive impact on gender equality. Globalization has made this change visible in Japan as well, which is reflected in the slight improvement in the position of women and the emergence of feminist movements.

## Shintoism in Japan

Shintoism is based on four pillars: family and tradition, love of nature, physical purity, and service to the gods. The importance of the Japanese woman's role as a mother has already been mentioned, and the gods in this polytheistic religion are often represented in pairs as male and female gods, such as Izanami and Izanagi, who, according to mythology, created Japan (Dickinson, 2020). However, Shintoism does not allow women to visit certain sacred sites. Although laws have

prohibited such a practice since 1872, it has not been fully respected. During World War II, when almost the entire male population was mobilized to fight against the United States in the Pacific, women and daughters of men were charged with performing priestly duties. Most women proved to be very capable in these tasks. After the end of the conflict in 1945, the "Shinto Shrine Association" was formed, which recognized and allowed women to serve in the Shinto religion, but also welcomed their participation in this role. This tradition in the priesthood continues today (Hartz, 2009).

This religion never spread far from the Japanese coast. It originated in small fishing villages and can be considered inclusive. Unlike Islam or Christianity, it never had an organized missionary movement. There is no formal way to access this religion; the Japanese merge into it, just as they would become part of a family or some other group (Hartz, 2009). Its closed nature did not allow globalization to significantly change it regarding the role of women, but even without that, it has shown the ability to be favorable to women. It can be concluded that Shintoism has the potential for the wider inclusion of women in everyday life. Historical and geopolitical circumstances are the catalysts for such changes when it comes to gender equality.

## Buddhism in Japan

Japan is a democratic country, but one of the categories where it receives slightly lower scores according to Freedom House is the treatment of women (Freedom House, 2022). Does Buddhism have any influence on this? In some Buddhist sources, women are seen as the weaker sex, who cannot make decisions for themselves and are therefore dependent beings. This is a simplified interpretation and is specific to certain parts of India, but not in other countries.

It has already been mentioned that women can be nuns in this religion. In Buddhism, four groups of Buddhists have been established, namely monks, nuns, male laypeople and female laypeople. Completely independent of the gender of these four groups, they are all equally responsible for the development of this religion. Although this is so, in some circles there is a tendency to think "If it is bad, it is because of the nuns, if it is good, it is because of the monks". Americans were introduced to Buddhism during World War II. American Buddhists were of a different mind; they wanted to remove the strict cultural restrictions that existed and thus managed to free women in Buddhism in America from certain pressures to a significant extent. Therefore, Buddhism in the USA is specific and is marked by the

great influence of women in it, which is rare in Asia. In Asia, women have limited opportunities both in terms of authority and in terms of responsibility (Kabilsingh, 1998).

The issue of abortion rights is, as in many countries, very sensitive. Buddhism holds that abortion is murder (Kabilsingh, 1998). In any case, abortion is not allowed in Japan, except under certain conditions. These exceptions include threats to the health of the pregnant woman, pregnancy resulting from rape, and other specific circumsatnces. Despite the ban, certain exceptions to the law are quite broad, and abortion is relatively common. Interestingly, anyone who attempts to perform an abortion without the consent of the woman's husband will be prosecuted. In addition, abortifacient drugs are not legal.

If we look at the number of women in Parliaments of countries where Mahayana Buddhism has a strong influence (Japan, North Korea, South Korea, China and Vietnam), we will see that Japan has the lowest percentage. In China it is 25%, in North Korea 16%, in South Korea 17%, in Vietnam 27% and in Japan around 10% (Women in National Parliaments, 2025).

Of course, the issue of gender equality is not the only thing that makes a country a democracy or an authoritarian one, so in this case, we cannot say that a country is more democratic just because of that. Democracy in Japan is also not questionable.

## Conclusion

Do women in Japan, at all, want to participate actively in public life? The fact is that equality in every sense is necessary for the progress of society, but all nations have developed under different philosophies and social circumstances. In this way, perhaps women in Japan, under the philosophy of Confucian values, considered their role in the family as the most important, and their role in public life as insignificant, compared to the family. As Alfred Stephan himself argued, democratic potential can be found in Confucianism. For example, Taiwan and South Korea have used elements of the Confucian heritage in the fight to support democracy (Stepan, 2000).

Reviewing the religions covered in this work, it became clear that each of them has the potential to be an ally, but also a fierce opponent, to feminist movements. Correlation analyses of variables representing gender inequality in countries have yielded results showing that gender inequality is greater in selected countries with

greater religiosity (Klingorova & Havlicek, 2015). If a religion does not deviate at all from its principles, this will likely result in a worse position for women. In Japan, syncretism has led to a complex situation in which, among other variables, the position of women is shaped by several religions. Each of these religions has a certain level of flexibility.

For example, Huntington also investigated the question of whether there is a strong correlation between Western Christianity and democracy. Confucianism, however, has shown that this is too narrow a view. This theory is based on a simple premise, which is that today's democracy originated in Christian countries in the West and that it can survive only there. However, the thesis that Christianity is key to the economic progress of society is not entirely correct. Huntington, in his "Third Wave," states that there is a reverse example, which is South Korea. This is one of the countries shaped by Asian and Confucian values , and which is proof that economic development helped the development of Christianity, because Korea flourished economically during the time of Buddhism, and only later did its inhabitants begin to partially convert to Christianity (Huntington, 2004).

By analyzing the religions that significantly influence the politics and life of Japan, it is possible to see that the position of women in Japan is largely shaped by Asian values. Shintoism, Christianity and Buddhism are multivocal religions, i.e. they have the potential to be allies of both democracies and authoritarian regimes. Therefore, political and social circumstances can use religion to both improve and worsen the position of women.

Japan is a democratic country, and the gender issue is significantly shaped by Confucian values, which prioritize the family. The role of the mother in the family is crucial and respected, and is more important than individual achievement. This does not mean that the general situation remains static, as women in Japan are playing a prominent role in the public sphere.

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**Rawnak Miraj Ul Azam**

American International University- Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh

https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7818-895X

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Rawnak Miraj Ul Azam.

Email: rawnak.miraj@gmail.com

BALKAN JOURNALS

# Acknowledging Nature's Intrinsic Rights through Biophilic Constitutionalism

**Rawnak Miraj Ul Azam**

*Abstract*

This research explores Biophilic Constitutionalism, a framework integrating biocentric/eco-centric values into legal orders to recognise nature's intrinsic rights. While existing literature extensively debates the philosophy of nature's rights, it lacks practical guidance for implementation, particularly internationally. This study investigates: (1) How can Biophilic Constitutionalism be effectively integrated into legal frameworks? and (2) What institutional mechanisms can balance human needs with nature's rights? Using a mixed-methods approach, this research combines legal doctrinal analysis, comparative case studies (e.g., Ecuador, New Zealand), and environmental ethics theory. It examines legal instruments, case law, and governance structures, identifying best practices and implementation challenges. The study analyses the potential of "Guardians for Nature" and explores the feasibility of an International Environmental Court. Findings reveal uneven implementation of nature's rights due to conflicting human interests. Key challenges include defining nature's rights, establishing representation, and reconciling ecological needs with development. The study proposes a Biophilic Constitutionalism framework, emphasising comprehensive legal standing for nature, participatory governance, and the "principle of ecological necessity." This research contributes a comprehensive framework for implementing Biophilic Constitutionalism nationally and internationally, offering practical guidance for policymakers and activists. Its findings have significant implications for environmental law and policy, potentially improving biodiversity and ecosystem protection.

*Keywords:* biophilic constitutionalism, legal personhood, ecological governance, environmental law, international law, sustainability, biocentrism, ecocentrism

## Introduction

The catastrophic collapse of the Brumadinho dam in Brazil in 2019 served as a stark reminder of the devastating consequences that can arise when human activities disregard the delicate balance of ecological systems (Watts, 2019). The torrent of toxic mud and tailings unleashed by the dam's failure not only obliterated communities and extinguished human lives but also ravaged the surrounding environment, contaminating waterways, destroying habitats, and leaving a scar on the scenery that will persist for generations. This tragedy highlights a fundamental truth: human well-being is inextricably linked to the health and importance of the natural world. Our actions, driven by economic imperatives and often blind to long-term ecological consequences, reverberate through the tangled web of life, impacting not only the immediate environment but also the planet. The Brumadinho disaster is not an isolated incident. It is a symptom of a broader environmental crisis characterised by alarming rates of biodiversity loss, accelerating climate change, and widespread ecological degradation (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021). Scientists warn of a sixth mass extinction event, driven primarily by human activities, with species disappearing at an unprecedented rate (Kolbert, 2014). Climate change, fueled by the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation, is disrupting weather patterns, causing sea levels to rise, and threatening ecosystems worldwide (NASA, n.d.). The cumulative effect of these environmental challenges poses a grave threat to the planet's life support systems and calls into question the very sustainability of human civilisation. Despite growing awareness of the environmental crisis, current legal approaches have proven inadequate to address its root causes. Traditional environmental law, while important in regulating pollution and managing natural resources, often operates within an anthropocentric framework that prioritises human interests over the well-being of nature (Stone, 1972). This anthropocentrism is evident in the way nature is often treated as property, a resource to be exploited for human benefit. Even seemingly progressive legislation, such as the US Endangered Species Act, which aims to protect threatened and endangered species, can be undermined by economic considerations. For example, the Act's "God Committee" provision allows for exemptions to species protection in cases where economic benefits are deemed to outweigh the value of preserving a species (Mann & Plummer, 1995). This highlights the inherent tension between human economic interests and the preservation of biodiversity within existing legal frameworks. The very language of "endangered *species*" reinforces the anthropocentric view, focusing on the human *use* of nature, even

if that use is simply appreciation, rather than the intrinsic value of the species themselves.

The literature on environmental law and ethics reveals a growing dissatisfaction with anthropocentric approaches and a burgeoning interest in frameworks that recognise nature's intrinsic value. Early critiques, like Christopher Stone's (1972) seminal work "Should Trees Have Standing?", challenged the legal system's anthropocentrism by advocating for legal rights for natural entities. This call for recognising nature's legal standing has resonated with subsequent scholars and activists, contributing to the development of biocentric and eco-centric philosophies. Aldo Leopold's (1949) "land ethic," emphasising the interconnectedness of all living things and extending moral consideration to the land itself, provided a foundational text for eco-centric thought. Arne Naess's (1973) "deep ecology" further explored this interconnectedness, advocating for a radical shift in human consciousness and a reduction in human interference with nature. Holmes Rolston III (1988) contributed significantly to ecological ethics by exploring the concept of intrinsic value in nature, arguing that natural entities possess inherent worth independent of their instrumental value to humans. These philosophical developments have paved the way for the emergence of "Biophilic Constitutionalism," a framework that integrates biocentric and eco-centric values into legal and constitutional orders. The Ecuadorian Constitution (2008), with its recognition of *Pachamama*'s rights, stands as a landmark example of constitutionalising nature's rights, inspiring similar legal reforms in other countries. The granting of legal personhood to natural entities, as seen in the cases of the Whanganui River in New Zealand (New Zealand Parliament, 2017) and the Atrato River in Colombia (Constitutional Court of Colombia, 2016), further demonstrates the evolving legal topography. Scholarly work on ecological governance, such as that by Daly and Farley (2004), explores the institutional changes needed to effectively represent nature's interests in decision-making processes. The challenges of reconciling human needs with nature's rights, addressed by scholars like Taylor (1986) in his work on respect for nature, remain a central concern. The need for international cooperation in protecting transboundary ecosystems and establishing global ecological governance, as discussed by Sands (2003) in his work on international environmental law, highlights the global dimension of Biophilic Constitutionalism. However, the practical implementation and potential conflicts arising from recognising nature's rights, as well as the need for robust international enforcement mechanisms, continue to be debated and require further scholarly attention. The growing body of case law, including the *Vilcabamba River* case in Ecuador (Ecuadorian Court, 2011), provides

valuable insights into the practical application of nature's rights in legal contexts. This evolving literature highlights the growing recognition of the limitations of anthropocentrism and the urgent need for legal and ethical frameworks that prioritise ecological integrity and interspecies justice.

The doctrine of Biophilic Constitutionalism posits a fundamental restructuring of national and international legal orders, shifting away from an anthropocentric framework that views nature as mere property towards a biocentric or eco-centric paradigm recognizing nature's intrinsic rights (Stone, 1972; Leopold, 1949). This emerging legal philosophy argues that the current environmental crisis, evidenced by biodiversity loss and climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021; Kolbert, 2014), stems from a legal system that prioritizes human interests over the inherent worth of the natural world (Merchant, 1980). Biophilic Constitutionalism advocates for the explicit acknowledgment of nature's rights within foundational legal documents, drawing inspiration from examples like the Ecuadorian Constitution's recognition of *Pachamama*'s rights (Ecuador Constitution, 2008) and the granting of legal personhood to natural entities such as the Whanganui River in New Zealand (New Zealand Parliament, 2017) and the Atrato River in Colombia (Constitutional Court of Colombia, 2016). At its core, this doctrine calls for a move beyond regulatory approaches that merely manage human impacts on the environment towards a system that empowers nature to possess legal standing and participate in decisions affecting its well-being. This necessitates the exploration of innovative governance mechanisms, such as the establishment of 'Guardians for Nature,' to represent ecological interests (Daly & Farley, 2004). Furthermore, Biophilic Constitutionalism deals with the complex challenge of reconciling potential conflicts between human needs and nature's rights, suggesting principles like 'ecological necessity' to guide decision-making (Taylor, 1986). Extending this doctrine to the international arena requires a critical reassessment of state sovereignty and the development of international legal instruments, potentially including an International Environmental Court, to enforce nature's rights on a global scale (Sands, 2003; Stone, 1974). Ultimately, Biophilic Constitutionalism envisions a legal transformation that embeds ecological values at its heart, developing a more just and sustainable relationship between humanity and the natural world.

This research is guided by two central and interconnected research questions: (1) How can the principles of Biophilic Constitutionalism be effectively integrated into national and international legal frameworks to ensure the recognition and

protection of nature's intrinsic rights? (2) What institutional and governance mechanisms are necessary to effectively balance human needs with the inherent rights of nature within a Biophilic Constitutionalist framework? These questions seek to move beyond theoretical discussions of nature's rights and investigate the practical challenges and opportunities of implementing these rights in concrete legal and political contexts. They further explore how such a framework can mediate the inevitable tensions between human development and ecological preservation, aiming to establish a pathway towards a more just and sustainable coexistence.

The primary objective of this research is to develop a comprehensive framework for Biophilic Constitutionalism, outlining its core principles, exploring its legal implications at both national and international levels, and proposing concrete mechanisms for its implementation. This involves analysing existing legal instruments, case law, and constitutional provisions that recognise nature's rights, identifying best practices, and proposing innovative solutions to address the challenges of ecological governance. The research will draw upon a variety of methodological approaches, including legal doctrinal analysis, comparative legal research, case study analysis, and theoretical exploration of environmental ethics and political philosophy. It will examine specific examples of legal frameworks that have incorporated nature's rights, analysing their strengths and weaknesses and drawing lessons for future implementation. Furthermore, the research will explore the potential role of various actors, including legal scholars, policymakers, environmental activists, and international organisations, in promoting and implementing Biophilic Constitutionalism.

This paper argues that a fundamental shift in legal paradigms is necessary to effectively address the environmental crisis. We propose that "Biophilic Constitutionalism," a framework that recognises nature's intrinsic rights, offers a pathway towards a more just and sustainable future. Biophilic Constitutionalism moves beyond the anthropocentric view of nature as a mere resource and embraces a biocentric or eco-centric perspective, acknowledging the inherent worth of all living beings and ecosystems, independent of their utility to humans (Leopold, 1949). It calls for the incorporation of nature's rights into national constitutions and international legal instruments, granting legal standing to natural entities and empowering them to participate in decision-making processes that affect their well-being. This approach requires a radical rethinking of our relationship with the natural world, moving away from a paradigm of domination and exploitation towards one of respect, reciprocity, and ecological citizenship.

This paper is structured as follows: Section II will investigate the historical roots of anthropocentrism and its legal manifestations, analysing how traditional legal systems have codified the concept of nature as property. Section III will explore the emergence of biocentrism and ecocentrism, examining the philosophical foundations for recognising nature's intrinsic value and rights. Section IV will articulate the core principles of Biophilic Constitutionalism, discussing its practical implications for constitutional design, legal personhood, and ecological governance. Section V will analyse the potential for Biophilic Constitutionalism at the international level, exploring the need for new international legal frameworks that recognise nature's rights. Finally, Section VI will conclude by summarising the key arguments and offering a call to action for the adoption of Biophilic Constitutionalism as a guiding principle for a sustainable future.

## The Anthropocentric Worldview and Its Legal Manifestations

The environmental crisis we face today is not merely a product of recent industrial practices or technological advancements. Its roots lie deep within the dominant worldview that has shaped human interactions with the natural world for centuries: anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism, the belief that humans are the central or most important beings in the universe, has profoundly influenced our philosophical, religious, economic, and legal systems, leading to the instrumentalisation of nature and its subsequent exploitation (Merchant, 1980). Understanding the historical trajectory of this anthropocentric worldview is crucial for comprehending the limitations of existing legal frameworks and the urgent need for a paradigm shift towards Biophilic Constitutionalism. One of the key intellectual currents that contributed to the rise of anthropocentrism is Cartesian dualism, articulated by the 17th-century philosopher René Descartes. Descartes's separation of mind and matter, with humans possessing a rational soul and nature reduced to mere mechanical matter devoid of consciousness or intrinsic value, created a philosophical framework that justified human dominion over the natural world (Descartes, 1637). This dualistic view paved the way for the scientific revolution and the rise of industrial capitalism, which further solidified the idea of nature as a resource to be exploited for human benefit. The Judeo-Christian tradition, with its emphasis on human dominion over creation as expressed in the Book of Genesis, also played a significant role in shaping anthropocentric attitudes towards nature (White, 1967). While interpretations of these texts vary, the idea that humans were granted stewardship over the Earth has often been interpreted as a license for

exploitation, contributing to a sense of human exceptionalism and a disregard for the intrinsic value of non-human life. It is important to acknowledge that religious traditions also contain within them countercurrents that emphasise stewardship and respect for creation. These alternative readings, however, have not been historically dominant.

The concept of nature as property, a cornerstone of traditional legal systems, is a direct manifestation of this anthropocentric worldview. Roman law's concept of *res nullius*, meaning "nobody's thing," provided a legal framework for treating nature as property that could be owned and exploited by humans (Maine, 1861). This principle, which initially applied to wild animals and other unowned resources, was later extended to land and other natural resources, solidifying the idea of nature as a commodity to be bought and sold. This commodification of nature has had profound consequences, leading to the destruction of ecosystems, the displacement of indigenous communities, and the degradation of the environment.

Existing environmental law, while attempting to mitigate the negative impacts of human activities on the environment, largely operates within this anthropocentric framework. Regulations, such as those under the Clean Air Act in the United States, often focus on controlling pollution levels and managing natural resources, but they rarely challenge the underlying assumption that nature exists primarily for human use (EPA, n.d.). The "command and control" approach, which relies on setting standards and imposing penalties for violations, has been criticised for its limited effectiveness and its failure to address the systemic causes of environmental degradation. While these laws are necessary and have delivered some benefits, their anthropocentrism limits their effectiveness. They do not address the foundational problem of nature's lack of legal standing.

The limitations of this anthropocentric approach are evident in several landmark legal cases. *Sierra Club v. Morton* (1972) exemplifies the narrow view of "injury" that prevailed in environmental law for much of the 20th century. The Sierra Club's attempt to sue on behalf of Mineral King Valley, arguing that the proposed development of a ski resort would harm the valley's aesthetic and recreational value, was initially rejected by the court. The court held that the Sierra Club lacked standing to sue because it had not demonstrated a direct economic injury. This decision highlighted the anthropocentric bias in the legal system, which recognised only human interests as worthy of legal protection. While the Sierra Club ultimately gained standing, the case highlighted the difficulty of protecting natural areas for their own sake, rather than for their instrumental value to humans.

The *Tellico Dam* case (Tennessee Valley Authority v. Hill, 1978) further illustrates the prioritisation of economic development over environmental protection. The Supreme Court initially halted the construction of the Tellico Dam because it threatened the endangered snail darter, a small fish found only in the Little Tennessee River. However, Congress subsequently passed legislation exempting the dam from the Endangered Species Act, effectively overriding the court's decision and allowing the dam to be completed. This case demonstrated the power of economic interests to trump even the strongest environmental protections, revealing the inherent limitations of a legal system that prioritises human needs over the preservation of biodiversity. The creation of the so-called "God Committee" under the Endangered Species Act, which allows for exemptions to the Act based on economic considerations, further underlines this point.

These cases, and countless others, demonstrate the inherent limitations of an anthropocentric legal framework in addressing the environmental crisis. By treating nature as mere property and prioritising human interests above all else, existing legal systems have contributed to the degradation of ecosystems and the loss of biodiversity. A fundamental shift in perspective is needed, one that recognises the intrinsic value of nature and its right to exist and flourish, independent of its utility to humans. This shift requires moving beyond the limitations of anthropocentric legal frameworks and embracing a new paradigm of Biophilic Constitutionalism.

## The Emergence of Biocentrism and Ecocentrism

The limitations of anthropocentrism in addressing the environmental crisis have led to the development of alternative ethical frameworks that challenge the human-centered worldview and emphasise the intrinsic value of nature. Biocentrism and ecocentrism, while distinct in their focus, both represent a significant departure from anthropocentrism, offering a more holistic and ecologically informed understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural world. Exploring the philosophical foundations of these perspectives is crucial for understanding the ethical underpinnings of Biophilic Constitutionalism.

Biocentrism, at its core, emphasises the inherent worth of all living organisms, regardless of their utility to humans (Taylor, 1986). It posits that every individual life, from the smallest microbe to the largest whale, possesses intrinsic value, meaning that it is valuable in and of itself, not merely to an end. This perspective challenges the anthropocentric view that only humans possess intrinsic value,

extending moral consideration to all members of the biotic community. Biocentrism promotes respect for all life forms and calls for a shift away from instrumentalising nature for human purposes.

Ecocentrism, building upon biocentric principles, broadens the scope of moral consideration to include entire ecosystems and the complex network of relationships that connect all living things (Leopold, 1949). It recognises that individual organisms are not isolated entities but are integral parts of complex ecological systems. Ecocentrism emphasises the importance of maintaining the integrity, stability, and beauty of these ecosystems, even if doing so requires limiting individual rights or sacrificing the interests of species. It prioritises the well-being of the whole over the interests of individual parts, recognising the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of preserving ecological balance.

Aldo Leopold's "land ethic," articulated in his seminal work *A Sand County Almanac*, is a cornerstone of eco-centric thought (Leopold, 1949). Leopold challenged the traditional anthropocentric view of land as mere property, arguing that it should be viewed as a community to which humans belong. He extended the boundaries of ethical consideration to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, arguing that we have a moral obligation to preserve the integrity and beauty of the land. Leopold's land ethic calls for a shift in our thinking about our place in the world, from conquerors of the land to members of a biotic community.

Arne Naess's "deep ecology" further developed the philosophical foundations of ecocentrism, emphasising the interconnectedness of all living things and the importance of ecological wisdom (Naess, 1973). Deep ecology challenges the anthropocentric worldview that underlies modern industrial society, arguing that we must fundamentally rethink our relationship with nature. Naess proposed a set of principles that emphasise the intrinsic value of all life, the importance of biodiversity, and the need for a radical reduction in human interference with the natural world.

Holmes Rolston III has made significant contributions to the development of ecological ethics, exploring the concept of intrinsic value in nature in great depth (Rolston, 1988). He argues that natural entities, including individual organisms, species, and ecosystems, possess inherent worth independent of their instrumental value to humans. Rolston's work has provided a strong philosophical foundation for recognising the rights of nature and for developing legal frameworks that protect the integrity of ecosystems.

The concept of "rights of nature" flows directly from the recognition of nature's intrinsic value. If nature possesses inherent worth, then it follows that it has certain rights, including the right to exist, flourish, and evolve (Stone, 1972). These rights are not granted by humans but are inherent to nature itself. Different formulations of nature's rights have been proposed, ranging from specific rights for individual species to more general rights for ecosystems. The Ecuadorian Constitution, for example, recognises the rights of *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) to exist, persist, maintain, and regenerate its essential cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes (Ecuador Constitution, 2008).

Despite the growing acceptance of biocentric and eco-centric principles, several challenges and critiques have been raised. Some argue that recognsing nature's rights is impractical, as it would be difficult to enforce these rights and would inevitably conflict with human interests. Others express concern that biocentrism and ecocentrism could lead to misanthropic policies that prioritise the well-being of nature over the needs of humans.

However, these critiques often misunderstand the nuanced nature of biocentric and eco-centric ethics. Recognising nature's rights does not necessarily mean sacrificing all human interests. Rather, it calls for a more balanced and ecologically informed approach to decision-making, one that considers the long-term consequences of human actions in the natural world. It emphasises the importance of finding ways to reconcile human needs with the well-being of nature, recognising that human flourishing is ultimately dependent on the health and importance of the ecosystems we inhabit. Moreover, the concern about misanthropy ignores the fact that human well-being is deeply intertwined with the health of the planet. Protecting nature is ultimately an act of self-preservation.

The shift towards biocentrism and ecocentrism represents a profound transformation in our understanding of our place in the world. It challenges the anthropocentric worldview that has dominated human thought for centuries and offers a more ethical and sustainable foundation for our relationship with the natural world. By recognising the intrinsic value of nature and its inherent rights, we can begin to build a future where humans and nature can thrive together.

## Biophilic Constitutionalism: A Framework for Legal Transformation

The philosophical shifts towards biocentrism and ecocentrism, as discussed in the previous section, necessitate a corresponding transformation in our legal and constitutional frameworks. Biophilic Constitutionalism offers such a framework, integrating biocentric and eco-centric values into the very foundation of our legal orders. It represents a move beyond traditional environmental law, which focuses on regulating human activities that impact nature, towards a system that recognises nature's intrinsic rights and empowers it to participate in the legal and political processes that affect its well-being.

Biophilic Constitutionalism can be defined as a framework that integrates biocentric and eco-centric values into constitutional and legal orders, recognising nature's intrinsic rights, promoting ecological interconnectedness, and striving for interspecies justice. It seeks to reorient our legal systems away from anthropocentrism and towards a more ecologically sensitive approach, one that acknowledges the inherent worth of all living beings and the interconnectedness of all ecosystems. This framework calls for a fundamental restructuring of our legal and political institutions, ensuring that they are guided by principles of ecological sustainability and respect for nature's rights.

A crucial aspect of Biophilic Constitutionalism is the constitutionalisation of nature's rights. This involves incorporating provisions into national constitutions that explicitly recognise the inherent rights of nature. The 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution is a pioneering example of this approach, enshrining the rights of *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) in its foundational legal document (Ecuador Constitution, 2008). These rights include the right to exist, persist, maintain, and regenerate its cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes. The Ecuadorian Constitution's recognition of *Pachamama*'s rights represents a significant step towards a biocentric legal order, providing a powerful legal basis for protecting nature from exploitation and degradation.

Beyond constitutional recognition, Biophilic Constitutionalism also explores the concept of legal personhood for nature. Granting legal personhood to natural entities, such as rivers, forests, or mountains, allows them to possess legal rights and to be represented in legal proceedings (Stone, 1972). This concept, while still evolving, has gained traction in recent years. The Whanganui River in New Zealand and the Atrato River in Colombia have both been granted legal personhood, recognising their inherent rights and empowering them to be represented in decisions

that affect their well-being (New Zealand Parliament, 2017; Constitutional Court of Colombia, 2016). This recognition has profound implications for legal standing and representation, allowing for the protection of these natural entities even when direct human interests are not at stake.

The implementation of Biophilic Constitutionalism also necessitates a transformation in ecological governance. Traditional governance structures, often dominated by human interests, are ill-equipped to address the complex challenges of ecological sustainability. Biophilic Constitutionalism calls for the establishment of new institutions and processes that ensure the representation of nature's interests in decision-making. One proposed approach is the creation of "Guardians for Nature" or similar bodies, tasked with representing the rights and interests of nature in legal and political forums (Daly & Farley, 2004). These guardians would act as advocates for nature, ensuring that ecological considerations are fully integrated into policy decisions. Furthermore, Biophilic Constitutionalism promotes participatory governance models that involve diverse stakeholders, including indigenous communities and environmental organisations, in decision-making processes that affect the environment.

A central challenge in implementing Biophilic Constitutionalism is reconciling human needs with the rights of nature. Inevitably, conflicts will arise between human activities and the preservation of ecological integrity. To address these conflicts, a "principle of ecological necessity" could be employed. This principle would prioritise the protection of ecosystems and biodiversity in cases where human activities pose a significant threat to ecological integrity. It would require a careful assessment of the ecological impacts of human actions, ensuring that development decisions are guided by principles of sustainability and respect for nature's rights. This would require a move away from cost-benefit analyses that focus solely on short-term economic gains and towards a more holistic assessment that considers the long-term ecological consequences.

Several case studies illustrate the practical application of Biophilic Constitutionalism. The *Vilcabamba River* case in Ecuador provides a compelling example of a court recognising the rights of nature (Ecuadorian Court, 2011). The court ruled in favor of the Vilcabamba River, recognising its right to flow freely and protecting it from proposed mining activities that would have harmed the river's ecosystem. This case demonstrates the power of constitutional provisions recognising nature's rights to protect natural entities from human exploitation.

In the United States, while federal law has not yet embraced the concept of nature's rights, several local communities have adopted ordinances recognising these rights. For example, Grant Township, Pennsylvania, enacted an ordinance recognising the rights of nature within its boundaries (Grant Township Ordinance, 2017). These local initiatives, while limited in scope, represent a growing movement towards the recognition of nature's rights at the grassroots level.

Biophilic Constitutionalism offers a transformative vision for the future of law and governance. By integrating biocentric and eco-centric values into our legal systems, we can move beyond the limitations of anthropocentrism and create a more just and sustainable world. The constitutionalisation of nature's rights, the recognition of legal personhood for nature, the development of ecological governance structures, and the implementation of principles like ecological necessity are all key elements of this framework. While challenges remain, the growing number of cases and initiatives recognising nature's rights suggests that Biophilic Constitutionalism is gaining momentum and has the potential to reshape our relationship with the natural world.

## Biophilic Constitutionalism at the International Level

The challenges of environmental degradation transcend national borders, demanding collaborative solutions at the international level. While national legal frameworks are essential for implementing Biophilic Constitutionalism, their effectiveness is limited when addressing global environmental problems like climate change, biodiversity loss, and the destruction of transboundary ecosystems. Current international environmental law, while important, suffers from significant limitations that hinder its ability to adequately protect the planet. Therefore, extending the principles of Biophilic Constitutionalism to the international arena is crucial for achieving global ecological justice and ensuring the long-term health of our planet.

Existing international environmental agreements, while numerous, are often criticised for their focus on state sovereignty and their predominantly anthropocentric approaches (Sands, 2003). Many treaties prioritise the interests of states over the well-being of nature, focusing on regulating human activities that impact the environment rather than recognising nature's intrinsic rights. Furthermore, the enforcement mechanisms of international environmental law are often weak, relying primarily on voluntary compliance and lacking effective sanctions for violations. This lack of binding enforcement power undermines the effectiveness of

international agreements and allows states to prioritise short-term economic gains over long-term environmental sustainability.

To address these limitations, there is a growing call for the development of an Earth Charter or a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Nature. Such a document would establish fundamental principles for ecological justice and global ecological governance, recognising the intrinsic rights of nature and setting forth ethical guidelines for human interactions with the natural world (United Nations, 2000). It would serve as a moral compass for international environmental law, guiding the development of future treaties and agreements and promoting a global ethic of respect for nature. This would require a shift away from the current emphasis on state sovereignty towards a more eco-centric approach that recognises the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of protecting the planet.

Another crucial step towards strengthening international environmental law is the potential establishment of an International Environmental Court (IEC). Such a court would have the jurisdiction to adjudicate disputes related to environmental harm and enforce nature's rights at the international level (Stone, 1974). It could provide a forum for hearing cases brought on behalf of nature, ensuring that environmental concerns are given due consideration in international legal proceedings. While the establishment of an IEC faces significant political and logistical challenges, it represents a crucial step towards creating a more robust and effective system of international environmental governance.

International organisations, such as the United Nations (UN) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), play a fundamental role in promoting Biophilic Constitutionalism and facilitating its implementation at the national level. These organisations can provide platforms for dialogue and cooperation among states, promoting the development of international environmental law and promoting best practices for ecological governance. The UN, through its various agencies and programs, can play a key role in raising awareness about the importance of recognising nature's rights and promoting the adoption of Biophilic Constitutionalism at the national level. The IUCN, with its expertise in conservation and environmental science, can provide valuable scientific information and guidance to states seeking to implement biocentric and eco-centric policies.

The protection of transboundary ecosystems, such as the AmaSon rainforest or the Arctic region, presents unique challenges for international environmental law. These ecosystems, which span across national borders, require international

cooperation based on principles of ecological integrity. Biophilic Constitutionalism offers a framework for addressing these challenges, emphasising the importance of protecting the ecological integrity of transboundary ecosystems and recognising the rights of nature within these shared spaces. This requires moving beyond traditional notions of national sovereignty and embracing a more collaborative approach to environmental governance, one that prioritises the health of the ecosystem over the narrow interests of individual states. International agreements that recognise the rights of nature within specific transboundary ecosystems, similar to the recognition of legal personhood for rivers or forests, may be an effective way to protect these essential ecological assets.

Implementing Biophilic Constitutionalism at the international level requires a fundamental shift in our thinking about international law and governance. It demands a move away from the traditional focus on state sovereignty and towards a more eco-centric approach that recognises the interconnectedness of all life and the intrinsic value of nature. The development of an Earth Charter, the establishment of an International Environmental Court, the active engagement of international organisations, and the adoption of collaborative approaches to protecting transboundary ecosystems are all crucial steps towards achieving this goal. By embracing the principles of Biophilic Constitutionalism at the international level, we can create a more just and sustainable future for all.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that the current environmental crisis, characterised by biodiversity loss, climate change, and widespread ecological degradation, necessitates a fundamental shift in our legal and ethical frameworks. The dominant anthropocentric worldview, which treats nature as a mere resource for human exploitation, has proven inadequate to address the root causes of environmental destruction. We have demonstrated how traditional environmental law, while important in regulating human activities, operates within this anthropocentric paradigm and fails to recognise the intrinsic value and inherent rights of nature. This paper has presented "Biophilic Constitutionalism" as a transformative framework for legal and societal change.

Biophilic Constitutionalism, as defined in this paper, integrates biocentric and eco-centric values into constitutional and legal orders. It moves beyond the anthropocentric focus of traditional law by recognising nature's intrinsic rights,

promoting ecological interconnectedness, and striving for interspecies justice. We have explored the philosophical underpinnings of this framework, drawing on the insights of key thinkers like Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess, and Holmes Rolston III, who have challenged the anthropocentric worldview and emphasised the inherent worth of all living beings and ecosystems. The paper has analysed the practical implications of Biophilic Constitutionalism, including the constitutionalisation of nature's rights, the recognition of legal personhood for natural entities, the development of ecological governance structures, and the implementation of principles like ecological necessity. We have examined real-world examples of these principles in action, such as the Ecuadorian Constitution's recognition of *Pachamama*'s rights, the granting of legal personhood to rivers in New Zealand and Colombia, and legal cases where nature's rights have been successfully asserted.

Furthermore, this paper has addressed the crucial need to extend the principles of Biophilic Constitutionalism to the international level. We have critiqued the limitations of current international environmental law, highlighting its focus on state sovereignty and its anthropocentric bias. We have advocated for the development of an Earth Charter or a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Nature to establish fundamental principles for ecological justice and global ecological governance. The potential establishment of an International Environmental Court, the crucial role of international organisations in promoting Biophilic Constitutionalism, and the specific challenges of protecting transboundary ecosystems have also been discussed.

The implications of Biophilic Constitutionalism for national and international legal orders are far-reaching. At the national level, it calls for a fundamental rethinking of constitutional design, moving beyond traditional human-centered approaches to incorporate provisions that explicitly recognise nature's rights. It also necessitates the development of new legal mechanisms for representing nature's interest in legal proceedings and policy decisions. At the international level, Biophilic Constitutionalism requires a shift away from state sovereignty and towards a more collaborative, eco-centric approach to environmental governance. It calls for the development of new international legal instruments that recognise nature's rights and promote ecological justice on a global scale.

Beyond the legal debate, Biophilic Constitutionalism has profound implications for society's relationship with nature. By recognising the intrinsic value of nature, it challenges the dominant paradigm of human domination and encourages a more respectful and reciprocal relationship with the natural world. It promotes a sense

of ecological citisenship, recognising our interconnectedness with all living things and our responsibility to protect the planet for the future. Biophilic Constitutionalism also has the potential to transform our economic systems, moving away from unsustainable models of growth and consumption towards a more ecologically sustainable approach.

This paper concludes with a call to action. We urge legal scholars to further develop the theoretical framework of Biophilic Constitutionalism and explore its practical implications for legal reform. We call on policymakers to embrace the principles of Biophilic Constitutionalism and work towards incorporating nature's rights into national constitutions and international agreements. We encourage environmental activists to advocate for the implementation of Biophilic Constitutionalism and to hold governments and corporations accountable for their environmental actions. And finally, we invite all citizens to embrace a more biocentric and eco-centric worldview, recognising our interconnectedness with nature and acting as responsible stewards of the Earth.

The environmental crisis is a challenge of unprecedented scale, but it is not insurmountable. By embracing the principles of Biophilic Constitutionalism, we can create a more just and sustainable future for both humans and nature. This requires a fundamental shift in our thinking, our values, and our legal frameworks. It demands a move away from anthropocentrism and towards a more holistic and ecologically informed understanding of our place in the world. While the task ahead is significant, we believe that it is possible to create a world where humans and nature can thrive together, a world where the rights of all living beings are respected, and the integrity of ecosystems is protected. This is the vision that Biophilic Constitutionalism offers, a vision that we believe is essential for the future of our planet.

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Vildan Drpljanin
Cyril Methodius University, Skopje, North Macedonia
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4219-9412

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Vildan Drpljanin
Email: drpljaninvildan@gmail.com

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# Beyond Boardrooms: A Brief Exploration of Corporate Governance Models

**Vildan Drpljanin**

*Abstract*

This article critically examines employee representation in corporate governance through a comparative global lens, focusing on two primary models: employee participation in governing bodies and share ownership. By analyzing the historical evolution and legal frameworks of corporate structures, this study explores the potential for fostering inclusive corporate environments that integrate employees into both decision-making and financial outcomes. Drawing on comparative examples from Germany, the United States, China, and the United Kingdom, the research investigates how different models of employee engagement influence organizational loyalty, job satisfaction, and productivity. Particular attention is given to the canvas of corporate landscape, where such models remain underdeveloped despite broad alignment with EU legal standards, such as the example of North Macedonia. This analysis highlights the need for legislative reform to incorporate effective employee engagement strategies tailored to North Macedonia's economic and legal framework. By combining legal analysis with a comparative study, the paper provides recommendations for establishing resilient engagement models that could redefine corporate governance and enhance business resilience. These insights would bridge existing gaps in Macedonian and regional corporate law, fostering a more democratic, equitable, and worker-based corporate environment.

*Keywords:* Corporate governance, workers' representation, share ownership, comparative analysis, employee participation.

## Introduction

Corporate governance plays a pivotal role in shaping the efficiency, accountability, and sustainability of modern organizations. As economies become more complex and globally interconnected, the question of how workers/employees participate in corporate decision-making has gained increasing attention. The traditional top-down governance model, which concentrates decision-making power in the hands of executives and shareholders, is being challenged by alternative frameworks that advocate for greater employee involvement. These models, ranging from employee representation on company boards to direct financial participation through stock ownership, offer distinct pathways for fostering engagement, motivation, and long-term organizational success.

This article explores the comparative advantages and limitations of employee representation in governance structures versus stock ownership as a mechanism for corporate participation. Employee board representation is often framed as a means of democratizing corporate decision-making, enhancing transparency, and strengthening communication between management and workers. By contrast, employee stock ownership is designed to align individual financial incentives with corporate performance, encouraging personal investment in the company's success. Each model carries inherent benefits and risks, from the potential for increased organizational commitment and productivity to vulnerabilities such as financial exposure in cases of corporate failure.

While extensive research has been conducted on employee engagement models in jurisdictions such as Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning their applicability to North Macedonia. The country's corporate governance framework primarily follows traditional hierarchical structures, with limited provisions for participatory management or employee shareholding. Despite the constitutional recognition of labor as a foundation for governance, the practical implementation of employee participation remains largely underdeveloped in both legislative and corporate practice. The absence of legal provisions regulating employee involvement in decision-making further underscores the need for an in-depth academic inquiry into the potential benefits and challenges of these models within the Macedonian context.

The conducted research critically examines the role of employee participation in corporate governance, assessing its impact on key organizational outcomes such as transparency, corporate culture, decision-making efficiency, and economic performance.

Through a comparative analysis of global best practices and domestic legal frameworks, the research seeks to offer practical recommendations for policymakers and business leaders considering reforms to corporate governance structures. With the ongoing discussions surrounding amendments to the Law on Trade Companies, this study is particularly timely, as it provides a scholarly foundation for evidence-based policymaking in the evolving corporate landscape of North Macedonia. Ultimately, by evaluating the effectiveness of these models in fostering a more inclusive and dynamic corporate environment, this research contributes to the broader discourse on corporate governance and labor rights in transitional economies.

## The Model of Worker Codetermination

The benefits of worker involvement in corporate governance far outweigh the challenges, to the extent that some scholars consider employee participation in company management one of the most significant achievements of modern capitalism (Erik & von Thadde, 1999). Employees, as key stakeholders, have a vested interest in preventing asset misappropriation or value reduction by controlling shareholders, directors, or managers (Koevski & Spasevski, 2023). Some theorists even suggest that the exclusion of workers from decision-making could lead to unionization and radicalization of demands, ultimately resulting in greater costs for companies (Parkinson, 1997), albeit a better but seemingly unrealistic outcome for workers globally at the moment. However, the success of worker codetermination depends on the adaptability of corporate culture, management structures, and the company's specific objectives (M. Colin, 1988). Several theoretical frameworks have emerged to explain worker participation in corporate governance.

In the United States, various theories of employee participation have been developed. The workplace democracy theory argues that since directors and managers are elected by shareholders, employees, who must adhere to company rules, should have a voice in shaping them. This theory posits that corporate decisions should involve all who work within the company.

The pluralist theory of worker participation, which emerged in the early 20th century, does not perceive employees as a distinct class with opposing interests to capitalists. Instead, it views them as a fluid, voluntary group whose composition is constantly evolving (Tsuk, 2003). Pluralists argue that multigroup representation, rather than class struggle, underpins modern governance, rejecting the notion that employees require special treatment.

The progressive or communitarian theory (also known as the neutral arbitrator model) posits that delegating authority to a board of directors to act as a neutral arbitrator in resource allocation fosters employee integration into corporate structures (O'Connor, 2000). This approach prioritizes long-term investment in human capital over short-term shareholder gains.

The fiduciary theory of employee participation suggests that, beyond contractual obligations, the relationship between directors and employees should be viewed through the lens of fiduciary duty (Koevski & Spasevski, 2023). This perspective implies that courts should protect employees as the weaker party in disputes, recognizing the trust inherent in long-term employer-employee relationships.

The human capital theory considers specialized employee skills as a form of investment that grants workers a stake in corporate decision-making (Roberts & van den Steen, 2003). This theory argues that companies frequently invest in employee development, and employees, in turn, invest in their own skills, creating a shared long-term interest.

Despite these theoretical developments, none have gained significant traction in the United States due to the dominance of the Anglo-American corporate governance model, in which directors and managers are accountable solely to shareholders (Piketty, 2020). Unlike the U.S., most European corporate governance models adopt a broader stakeholder approach, incorporating employee participation based on principles of social democracy (O'Connor, 2000).

The continental European model of corporate governance emphasizes social dialogue and multi-stakeholder representation (Scholz & Vitols, 2019). The European Works Council Directive mandates procedures for informing and consulting employees, though it does not prescribe specific governance structures. The proposed Fifth EU Directive (1972) initially sought to institutionalize employee participation through board representation or consultative councils but was withdrawn in 2001, illustrating the divergence between theoretical and practical applications of worker codetermination. Nonetheless, the EU continues to advance worker participation through corporate social responsibility frameworks, emphasizing fair labor standards, sustainability, and anti-corruption initiatives.

Although the directive was never adopted, the European Commission's 2001 Green Paper on Corporate Social Responsibility sought to promote sustainable corporate governance practices, including labor rights protections, community engagement, and ethical business conduct. Similarly, the World Bank Institute for Corporate

Governance supports corporate social responsibility programs aimed at reducing corruption, enhancing environmental sustainability, and ensuring fair labor standards.

Recent European regulatory efforts have also sought to strengthen employee participation. The European Trade Union Confederation, in its guidelines on Directive 2019/1151, advocates for stricter regulations on director disqualification and enhanced shareholder engagement in corporate governance. Additionally, EU Directive 2017/1132 codifies protections for employee rights during corporate restructurings, particularly in cross-border mergers, to prevent exploitation. The Non-Financial Reporting Directive further mandates large companies (with over 500 employees) to disclose non-financial data such as their social and environmental impacts, reinforcing corporate transparency and accountability.

Nevertheless, some scholars also argue that codetermination may disadvantage minority shareholders, particularly in supervisory boards. When majority shareholders allocate board seats in collaboration with workers, they may limit representation for minority investors. Additionally, critics contend that codetermination increases governance costs, deters external investment, and pressures firms to raise employee wages based on board-level financial disclosures. These concerns will be explored in greater detail in subsequent sections, assessing the broader implications of worker participation in corporate governance (Davis & Hopt, 2013).

## The German Model of Worker Codetermination

The German system of codetermination mandates employee representation on supervisory boards in large corporations. Companies with more than 2,000 employees are legally required to have supervisory boards composed of 50% employee representatives (Hansmann, 1990). This model emerged as part of a broader political compromise between labor and capital (Kathleen, 1991), influenced by Germany's strong union tradition dating back to Otto von Bismarck's social policies.

Codetermination is a core feature of German corporate governance. The supervisory board, mandatory for all joint-stock companies regardless of stock exchange listing, plays a pivotal role (Neuman & Roe, 1999). Special legislation enacted in 1951 and 1952 institutionalized equal worker representation in key industries such as coal and steel. The Co-Determination Act of 1976 extended this principle to all large corporations, marking a historic agreement among Germany's leading political parties and trade unions. Depending on workforce size, supervisory boards

consist of 12, 16, or 20 members, with equal representation for employees and shareholders.

Codetermination operates at two levels: (1) within individual work units through works councils, which provide employees with decision-making influence over workplace matters, and (2) at the corporate level, where employees and unions participate in supervisory board governance.

The 1976 law had two major effects. First, decision-making costs increased due to the diversity of interests represented on supervisory boards. Second, instead of a simple shareholder-management relationship, companies now navigate a multipolar governance structure, which, while potentially reducing executive control, also introduces flexibility and coalition-building opportunities. To circumvent these regulations, some companies restructured into smaller entities to avoid compliance. In practice, labor representatives often held preliminary meetings before supervisory board sessions to consolidate their voting positions, ensuring a united front against shareholder dominance, which was very beneficial for the workers.

In 2004, the One-Third Participation Act was introduced, requiring companies with at least 500 employees to have at least one-third of their supervisory board seats occupied by employee representatives. This law replaced the 1952 legislation and reinforced protections against retaliation for employee board members.

Today, there remains a strong political and social consensus in Germany that codetermination is a successful model, particularly in mitigating labor-capital conflicts. Employee representatives can influence senior management appointments and business strategy, fostering long-term stability. Unlike in adversarial models, German codetermination discourages rigid labor-versus-capital divisions, promoting cooperative governance (Brouthers & Bamossy, 1997).

However, challenges persist. Employee representatives may be placed in difficult positions when voting on decisions that negatively impact workers. This dynamic can weaken oversight, shifting power to executive boards. Additionally, financial scandals have exposed cases of corruption among labor representatives, who, in some instances, misused company resources for personal luxuries. Despite these drawbacks, codetermination remains a defining feature of German corporate governance and continues to shape broader European labor policies.

## Experiences from France, USA, Slovenia, and Croatia

In an interconnected continent where best practices influence one another, the German codetermination model cannot be examined in isolation. Several countries have implemented variations of worker participation in corporate governance, reflecting different legal, economic, and cultural contexts (Klaus, 2004).

Worker participation in France is facilitated through two members of the works council attending board meetings in an advisory capacity. If worker shareholding exceeds 8% of a company's capital, at least three employees must be appointed as directors. However, French law allows but does not mandate worker co-determination in all circumstances. The effectiveness of worker participation has been hindered by the fragmentation of trade unions along ideological lines (communist, socialist, and Christian democratic), resulting in weaker collective representation (Addison et al., 2017).

On the other hand, attempts to introduce codetermination in the U.S. have emerged through three legislative proposals:

- Workers' Compensation Act (2018): Proposed by several senators, including Tammy Baldwin and Elizabeth Warren, this bill sought to grant workers one-third of board seats.
- Responsible Capitalism Act (2018): Introduced by Elizabeth Warren, this bill proposed employee representation on 40% of corporate boards in companies with over $1 billion in revenue.
- Corporate Responsibility and Democratic Planning Bill (2019): Proposed by Bernie Sanders, this bill called for employees to elect 45% of board members in companies with at least $100 million in revenue or publicly traded status.

Unlike Germany's two-tier system, these proposals aimed to integrate employee representatives within a single-tier board structure. Had Sanders' bill been enacted, codetermination would have applied to 3,437 companies employing 31 million workers, while Warren's proposal would have covered 1,237 companies with 29 million employees. However, none of the three bills have been passed into law.

Slovenia follows a German-style codetermination system but retains elements of socialist-era labor values (Hofstede, 1980). The Act on Employee Participation in Management (1993, amended in 2001 and 2007) established works councils as the main form of worker representation. Estimates suggest works councils exist

in 80% of medium and large companies, though other studies report lower figures. Employee representation on supervisory boards varies from one-third to one-half in larger firms and at least one-quarter on boards of directors.

In Croatia, the Law on Trade Companies (Article 256, paragraph 2) allows company statutes to provide for employee representation on supervisory boards. The Law on Labor Relations (Article 164) further stipulates that:

- One supervisory board member must be an employee representative, elected by the workers' council.
- If no workers' council exists, employees elect their representative via secret ballot.
- Employee-elected members have equal legal standing as other board members.

The European Works Council Directive (EWC) provides a framework for worker involvement in multinational companies within the EU. Studies indicate these councils enhance communication, transparency, and shared decision-making, ultimately improving employee morale and engagement. Increasing attention is given to hybrid models that integrate worker representation and share ownership, such as Spain's Mondragon Corporation, where employees are both decision-makers and shareholders, fostering long-term stability and resilience.

Specific to the Macedonian context is the question of how employee involvement would be implemented in a one-tier system. In the German model, employee representatives serve on the supervisory board as part of a two-tier system. Logically, in a one-tier system, they would be positioned as non-executive board members. This arrangement would grant employees a role similar to that of supervisory bodies, enabling them to influence decisions and oversee management without direct participation in daily operations. This balance allows for oversight and representation of employee interests while maintaining managerial independence.

Conversely, if employees were positioned as executive members, they would be actively involved in daily management, potentially creating challenges in governance and role distribution. Thus, a one-tier system with non-executive employee representatives could offer a more effective, transparent model that has a higher chance for implementation and broadly aligns both employee and corporate governance interests. However, this research will consider both approaches, allowing for a potential shift in perspective before reaching final conclusions.

## The American Model of Stock Ownership

An alternative model of employee involvement is stock ownership, primarily implemented through employee ownership plans or similar stock-based schemes (Hogan, 2001). This model aligns employees' financial interests with the company's success, fostering a sense of economic connectedness and motivating employees to contribute actively to organizational performance. In the United States, employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs) are widely used in private companies (Palladino, 2021). Research by the National Center for Employee Ownership (NCEO) indicates that firms with substantial employee ownership tend to exhibit stronger performance indicators, such as higher productivity, profitability, and employee retention (NCEO, 2025).

Since employees in the U.S. do not typically participate in management based on their labor, they have sought influence through stock ownership and pension funds. Granting shares to employees creates a tangible link between their efforts and the company's financial results, increasing engagement and commitment. The case of WinCo Foods, a U.S. supermarket chain operating under an employee-shareholder ownership model, exemplifies this approach. By granting employees significant ownership stakes, WinCo has achieved high job satisfaction, low turnover, and strong financial growth. The company, headquartered in Boise, Idaho, operates 89 stores with an estimated revenue of $5.3 billion, annually distributing approximately 20% of total salaries in shares.

Employee ownership can take different forms. In direct ownership models, employees can freely buy and sell shares, while in indirect models, shares are held in investment funds on their behalf (McDonnell, 2012). Some companies also grant employees limited voting rights in shareholder meetings without full ownership privileges. Over the past two decades, employee ownership in the U.S. has grown significantly, with various structures emerging, including ESOPs, profit-sharing plans, and retirement plans with stock components. These models are attractive due to favorable tax treatment and their role in restructuring salary payments and benefits (Douglas & Blasi, 2023).

The United Kingdom presents another example of employee ownership through the John Lewis Partnership, a fully employee-owned enterprise. Employees participate in decision-making via democratic structures while also benefiting from financial ownership. Research suggests that this hybrid model, combining participative management with share ownership, creates a motivated workforce with a strong sense of loyalty and shared responsibility for corporate success.

A regional example is the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where employee stock ownership is regulated by the Law on Commercial Companies. Article 205 allows a company's statute to authorize a special class of shares for employees, subject to approval by the company's assembly or supervisory board. However, the law limits the total nominal value of employee shares to 5% of the company's share capital. Additionally, Article 206 stipulates that these shares can only be transferred among employees and become void upon an employee's death or termination of employment. These provisions indicate a semi-restricted model of employee shareholding (Vukadinović, 2012).

While employee share ownership offers economic benefits, such as aligning employee and company interests, it also presents challenges. Companies often resort to issuing shares to employees when external financing is difficult to obtain (Davis, 2008). Employees, in turn, may accept reduced salaries in exchange for equity, particularly when a company faces financial difficulties (Davis, 2009). This dynamic can create a system where trust between employees and management is not guaranteed from the outset.

Employee shareholding can also reshape corporate governance (Hirschman, 1970). Instead of traditional union organization, employees can form shareholder groups or pension funds, giving them a stake in institutional shareholder movements (Fey & Beamish, 2001). This shift allows them to collectively reach ownership thresholds required for board representation (Dhanaraj et al., 2007).

Furthermore, the nature of employment relationships is evolving, with increased labor mobility and market openness raising questions about long-term employee loyalty to a single company (Freeman, Lazear. 1995). Hybrid models, such as Spain's Mondragon Corporation, offer an alternative by combining ownership with participative management (Contractor & Lorange, 1988). This research explores such models to assess how they balance decision-making influence and financial incentives, aiming to identify the most effective approaches for sustainable employee engagement and corporate performance (Ferreras, 2017).

## Comparative Analysis: Employee Representation vs. Stock Acquisition

A review of research on both models examines their impact on employee engagement and organizational performance (Alchian & Demsetz, 1972). Employee representation on company boards is primarily regarded as a mechanism for democratic participation, granting workers a voice in corporate governance. This model

fosters trust, strengthens communication between management and employees, and makes employees feel valued, which enhances engagement. However, direct financial incentives in this model are typically limited, potentially reducing its ability to motivate employees as effectively as stock ownership (Ginglinger et al., 2011).

Conversely, employee stock ownership creates direct financial incentives for employees to invest in the company's success. Research consistently demonstrates that financial ownership leads to increased personal investment in company performance, translating into higher productivity and commitment (Greenfield, 2004). However, the stock ownership model is not without its challenges. The collapse of the company Enron is often cited as a cautionary example of the risks associated with employee stock ownership. Many Enron employees had substantial portions of their retirement savings invested in company stock, which became worthless when the company failed, leading to financial devastation for employees. This case highlights the importance of diversification and regulatory safeguards to protect employee shareholders from excessive financial exposure to corporate risks.

This research places the threshold for the comparative analysis of these two prominent models of employee engagement on how these models influence key organizational outcomes, including corporate culture, transparency, company law, employee motivation, decision-making power, loyalty, and overall organizational performance (Hofstede, 1991). These models represent two distinct paradigms of employee participation: one based on governance and strategic influence and the other on financial ownership and alignment with corporate success (Biondi et al., 2007).

The answers to these questions and an intensive public discussion would contribute to the current discourse in business law, organizational behavior, and corporate governance by providing a comprehensive understanding of how different employee involvement models shape company culture, improve productivity, and enhance workforce engagement. The findings here can offer little practical insights for policymakers, business leaders, and scholars interested in fostering more inclusive and sustainable organizational environments through innovative approaches to employee engagement, but the theme opens questions particularly in light of the proposed amendments to the Companies Act in North Macedonia.

## Corporate Governance and Workers Involvement in North Macedonia

The primary legal framework governing the topics explored in this article within domestic legislation is the Law on Trade Companies. However, in its current form, neither this law nor any other part of domestic legislation explicitly regulates employee participation in corporate governance. This legal gap creates an opportunity for detailed research and analysis to identify best practices and propose legislative solutions. The potential need for amendments to existing provisions should be a key focus in the realm of corporate governance in the country, particularly in light of recent discussions on proposed changes and the drafting of a new Law on Trade Companies.

In Macedonian company law, employee participation in decision-making is a constitutionally guaranteed right. Article 58, paragraph 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia states: "Ownership and labor are the basis for governance and participation in decision-making." This constitutional right is further operationalized through Article 342, paragraph 4 of the Law on Trade Companies, which states: "The participation of employees in the management of the company is regulated by law." Despite this provision, no specific law regulating employee participation in management has been adopted since the enactment of the Law on Trade Companies in 2004. This legislative inaction reflects the broader treatment of labor's role in corporate governance and raises questions about the commitment to implementing participatory management models (Koevski & Spasevski, 2023).

This lack of regulation is particularly striking given Macedonia's historical background. The country was part of the workers' self-management system practiced in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) for several decades. However, Macedonian corporate governance has not widely accepted participatory models, nor are they currently regulated. This research, therefore, examines whether their introduction could yield positive results in terms of employee engagement and corporate performance (Honnold, 1995).

It is important to distinguish between employee participation in management and the legal obligation outlined in Article 368, paragraph 3 of the Law on Trade Companies. According to this provision, "If the board of directors has more than one executive member, the members of the board of directors shall determine by majority vote which executive member is specifically responsible for employee issues and relations with them." This requirement pertains to an executive member of the board of directors elected by the shareholders' meeting, rather than by employees

themselves. Thus, it does not constitute genuine employee representation in decision-making bodies.

In the context of cross-border corporate operations, employee rights related to participation in management are primarily recognized within cross-border mergers. Specifically, Macedonian law provides for employee participation in the management of the newly formed entity following a cross-border merger, in accordance with the Law on European Companies. Similarly, the Law on European Works Councils establishes a framework for informing and consulting employees in multinational companies operating within the European Union. The application of both laws in North Macedonia is directly linked to the country's EU accession process.

Surprisingly, certain Macedonian legal provisions explicitly prohibit employees from participating in company supervisory bodies. For example, an employee cannot be elected as a member of a supervisory board or as a controller in a limited liability company. Additionally, employees are prohibited from serving on supervisory boards in insurance companies and banks. While restrictions in the financial sector may be argued due to sector-specific risks and regulatory concerns, which are not persuading arguments either, there is especially little or no justification for prohibiting employee participation in supervisory bodies of limited liability companies.

In general, Macedonian law limits employee involvement in corporate governance, when there is any, to consultation and information-sharing mechanisms. The Law on Labor Relations includes provisions for informing employees, defined in Article 94-a, paragraph 1 as "the transfer of data by the employer to the employees' representatives so that they can familiarize themselves with and examine the information." Paragraph 2 further defines consultation as "the exchange of opinions and the establishment of a dialogue between the employees' representatives and the employer." These obligations apply to companies with more than 50 employees, public enterprises, and institutions with over 20 employees. However, this framework does not grant employees any formal decision-making authority.

Employee stock ownership is similarly underdeveloped in North Macedonia's legal system. Initially, Article 281 of the Law on Trade Companies allowed for the allocation of "free shares or shares at a preferential price" to employees. However, this provision was repealed in 2007. Interestingly, the same legislative amendments reintroduced the possibility of establishing funds from which employees could acquire shares of a joint-stock company free of charge or at a preferential price. Despite this, employee stock ownership remains rare in practice.

Nonetheless, some initial efforts to implement employee participation models have emerged. Since January 1, 2022, the private clothing factory 'Vabo' in Shtip has been managed by its workers, who operate the factory, oversee production, and determine salaries based on output and market performance. Another example is 'Wienerberger' from Vinica, where 120 employees were awarded 20 shares each in 2022 as a reward for their contributions. These cases raise the question of whether North Macedonia should consider a modern adaptation of the positive aspects of the socialist self-management system within its contemporary capitalist framework. The science is clear that employee representation in management bodies or stock ownership schemes would enhance corporate stability and workforce innovation. Thus, Macedonian corporate law, which currently lacks significant provisions for employee involvement, must evolve to include mechanisms for both employee representation in management and financial participation through share ownership.

## Concluding Observations

Scientific research on employee engagement models highlights the differing impacts of employee representation on corporate boards versus stock ownership on organizational outcomes. Representation enhances participation in decision-making, fostering a collaborative and transparent work environment. Conversely, stock ownership aligns employee interests with corporate success by providing financial incentives. Both models have advantages and limitations, and emerging research suggests that hybrid models combining participatory management with financial incentives may maximize employee engagement and organizational performance.

Despite extensive global research on employee engagement models in countries such as the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom, North Macedonia lacks systematic studies on these models within its corporate governance and labor market frameworks. The country's legal and organizational structures primarily emphasize traditional top-down management, with little exploration of participatory governance or employee ownership. Consequently, the potential benefits of these models remain largely unrealized.

This article is particularly relevant for North Macedonia as it provokes an in-depth analysis of how employee engagement models could be adapted and implemented in the local context. By addressing this research gap, the findings aim to offer valuable

insights for policymakers, business leaders, and scholars interested in modernizing corporate governance, fostering greater employee engagement, and enhancing organizational performance in a developing economy like North Macedonia.

Ultimately, this area of research has the potential to reshape Macedonian corporate governance by bridging the gap between employee engagement and legal frameworks. Through a rigorous analysis of employee representation and stock ownership models, the business sector can contribute to the modernization of national law and align Macedonia with global best practices. Especially in times when workers are leaving the country in drastic numbers, labor shortages are increasing, and companies frequently complain about their inability to pay bonuses or properly reward high-performing employees without the additional burden of taxes and social contributions.

Findings of this kind provide actionable insights with broad implications, not only for legal research and policy development but also for the future of business in North Macedonia. At a time when workforce shortages are a pressing issue across multiple sectors, empowered and engaged employees are essential for sustainable growth, innovation, and corporate success.

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