

# North Macedonia Security Threats in the Third Decade of XXI Century: Institutional and Political Framework as a Key Determinant of Instability

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## Abstract:

North Macedonia in the post-Yugoslav frame was the only republic that has declared independence without any military clashes, as a consequence of the independence declaration. Such circumstances has, on the European level, promoted this state as a so-called oases of peace in the Balkans, bearing in mind the war challenges in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija. North Macedonia, on contrary, has faced with armed clashes on its territory at the beginning of the XXI century. It was clashes in the northern and western parts of the state between Macedonian security forces and self-declared Albanian armed groups. The realistic purpose, from the side of Albanian paramilitary groups, for the armed attacks against military and police forces of North Macedonia was never confirmed, bearing in mind just finished war on Kosovo and Metohija territory, but also the position of Macedonian Albanians, as a dominant ethnic minority which, in that moment has had active role in political and social life within that state. There are many studies and researches that have different positions, stating that the goal of the armed attacks by Albanian armed groups was separation of Macedonian territory for the purpose of creating Great Albanian state, while, from the other side, including the official version of the leaders of that paramilitary groups, was the position that human rights for Albanian society in North Macedonia was the purpose of the battles. But, in this paper our goal is not to find out the purpose of the armed clashes in North Macedonia during the 2001, but to determine what are the main security risks and threats for North Macedonia, whether and to what extent ongoing challenges and threats are ethnically motivated, how much relations between Macedonians and Albanians within North Macedonia are misused as a political instrument and, as a essential question - what is the key determinator of the stability of North Macedonia in the upcoming period. Methodological concretization will be used as an analytical tool in the process of triple analyses, on the political, social and ethnic level, which should lead us to the answers. Triple analyses will be used as an empirical tool, while, from the stands of structural realists, we will try to find out the answer about the security issues which are facing small states in international relations, respectively whether they are exporters of instability, do they have capacities to lead sovereign security policy and what are key determinants of their security mosaic. The ultimate, essential goal of the research would be to show up that North Macedonia does not have ethnic security challenges and threats, that its security mosaic essentially is not endangered from “imported” threats and, finally, that its stability and sustainability depends on internal threats which have raised as a consequence of challenges within the institutional and political framework.

Keywords: North Macedonia, security threats, institutional and political challenges, sustainability

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## **Introduction**

Since the research given by first scholars within the science of international relations, there were clear positions related to the security threats faced by small states. There was a precise parallel between small states and their capacities (economic, political, military, etc.), from one side, and their security threats, from the other side. General position was established that small states are in a huge manner limited in facing with security threats because of the lack of the resources, previously mentioned as capacities. Protection of political sovereignty and territorial integrity were classical, or so-called “hard” security threats of the small states that were continuously endangered by the bigger regional and global powers. Classical realists were firmly positioned to these claims. But in such scenario, from today’s perspective, it would be almost unreal conclude that small states still exist within the international relations framework. But it is reality. On the world map there are numerous of so-called small and micro states with substantially limited capacities and resources when it comes to security threats. But, if we back to so-called classical security threats, after World War II, it was established OUN international framework which precisely places small and micro states on the same ground with great and regional powers and provides them a certain international security in the context of potential endangering of their political sovereignty and territorial integrity. And in a huge manner, probably, this is the *raison d’état* of existence and sustainability of such group of independent states. This principle of equality was generally respected, except in the few cases in the world, including the Western Balkans issue with Kosovo and Metohija. But from today’s perspective, we are witnessing contemporary and ongoing security threats, especially within small and micro states, including developing ones group, which OUN infrastructure could not manage, especially those security threats raised by internal institutional and political grounds. In fact, those are security threats which could not be managed by the traditional security and defense mechanisms, including mechanisms given by international defense organizations. On that basis, North Macedonia represent a so-called textbook example about the phenomena of how internal - institutional and political instability produces threats which are endangering not only North Macedonia’s efficiency and effectiveness as an independent state, but also endangers its pillars of statehood, as those are political sovereignty and territorial integrity, including its sustainability as a whole.

### **1. ECONOMIC UNSUSTAINABILITY**

According to the latest data from the State Bureau of Statistics, almost 452,000 people in North Macedonia live below the poverty line. The state debt reached a record level of over 7.1 billion euros, or more than 60 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) (Mitevaska, 2022).

Since its independence in 1991, North Macedonia has made progress in liberalizing its economy and improving its business environment. Its low tax rates and free economic zones have helped to attract foreign investment, but they are still low relative to the rest of Europe (Moody’s Analytics, n.d.). Some businesses complain of opaque regulations and unequal enforcement of the law. In fact, corruption and weak rule of law remain significant problems (Moody’s Analytics, n.d.).

From the other side, president of the Union of Trade Unions of North Macedonia, Slobodan Trendafilov explains that the cost of living in his country is really high and even domestic workers cannot survive on the salary they receive. As he explains, the cost of living in North Macedonia is increased by 13 percent last year and this shows that Macedonian citizens have so much less income in their family budget (Kosovo Online, 2024). From the other side, Trendafilov expresses his concerns by the position of domestic, Macedonian, companies, which strategy for the future is compensation for qualified domestic work force with the importation of labor, instead of retention of domestic qualified workers with increase in wages and more acceptable working conditions (Kosovo Online, 2024).

Additionally, the new data show that in 2022 compared to 2021, the number of active population in North Macedonia has decreased by almost 12,000. The trend of labor force outflow does not stop, but “imports” from abroad are also on the way. Companies from the construction sector, trade, and hospitality are warning that they are facing a labor shortage and that they are ready to import it from abroad. On the labor market, through intermediary agencies, contacts is already established between foreign workers and domestic companies (Meta, 2023).

From third side, actual economic trends in North Macedonia still are not promising. Economic growth slowed to 1% in 2023, from 2.2% in 2022. At the same time, the labor market lost momentum towards the end of 2023, with employment stagnating in the fourth quarter. Labor market participation, already low, dropped further in 2023. The labor force continued to shrink, in particular concerning young workers. The outlook for the forecast period is more muted than in recent years, as employers will have to accommodate higher wages while already faced with a shortage of qualified labor supply (European Commission, 2024, pp. 150–151). When it comes to FDI, inflows in North Macedonia totaled €616.7m in 2023, 17% lower than a year before, data by the country’s central bank shows. FDI inflows during the fourth quarter of 2023 reached €232.6m as a result of intercompany lending, while increased investments in equity stood at €49m (Dojan, 2024).

Fourth, but from the economic and sustainability perspective, substantial security challenge for North Macedonia is the question of emigration. In fact, it is a real problem “that North Macedonia is continuously facing during the last thirteen years caused by the unwillingness of the national and public system to face with the modern security challenges that are not related to the so-called “traditional” or “hard” threats of sovereign states, such as threats to political sovereignty and territorial integrity” (Arnaudov, 2022, p. 27). As Arnaudov explains “low living standards, low income, lack of jobs for qualified labor, together with political clientelism and corruption have greatly contributed to the encouragement of increasing emigration in Macedonian society” (Arnaudov, 2022, p. 28). “The Macedonian political elite has not found an appropriate strategy that, on the one hand, will attract foreign investors and thus dynamize the Macedonian economy, while, on the other hand, keep the young and qualified workforce in the country in order to have basic capacities and prerequisites for attracting foreign investments” (Arnaudov, 2022, p. 28), adds Arnaudov and, at the same time, refers to the statement of Gocevski and Gjurovski who claim that “the theories of security and peace unequivocally indicate that one of the key factors for the promotion and preservation of world peace is precisely raising the level of economic development of countries” (Arnaudov, 2022, 30).

From today’s perspective, the economy largely generates the internal stability of a country, including its sustainability. The economy has actually become a kind of foundation of sustainability, because it has a multiple impact on all other streams, but at the same time it can itself be a consequence of the policy and institutional framework. In the case of North Macedonia, and based on existing knowledge, extremely limited institutional capacities and a markedly high level of political corruption, as part of the pervasive corruption in Macedonian society, are key contributors to limiting the economic performance of this country, which lead to the fact that the poor economy is not only a consequence, but also one of the generators of emerging consequences - such as the previously mentioned migration. The economy of North Macedonia is actually a “hostage” of political and institutional inefficiency that contributes to the creation of new security challenges on the internal level, which eventually raise the question of the country’s sustainability, because they are a danger in themselves, and at the same time, the state infrastructure is unprepared to face even the “imported “ challenges.

## 2. POLITICAL INSTABILITY

The political instability of North Macedonia is a kind of traditional phenomenon in this country, which, on the one hand, can be attributed to the fact that it is a developing country, while, on the other hand, it can be attributed to the actions of political elites contrary to the interests of the state. In fact, the political instability in North Macedonia can be analyzed in two ways: as a consequence of the country's institutional inefficiency and weakness; on the other hand, as an additional generator in the process of weakening institutions, and thus the entire state infrastructure. However, the essence of political instability is not the question of whether it is a consequence or a generator, but the fact that it affects the creation of new security and internal challenges that further weaken the functioning capacities of this country.

On the social level, political instability affects the process of social polarization of this country - on a party, national, religious and economic basis.

"Trench" policy management by political leaders has a negative impact on reaching social consensus on key state issues. A "trench" division is created between party sympathizers, and the political game is increasingly perceived as a battle ground in which winners and losers are assumed.

On the other hand, the multi-ethnic mosaic of the country is threatened, because political leaders instrumentalize the national and ethnic interests of the people they represent. Thus, at the political level, the thesis about the marginalization of one ethnic group at the expense of another, as well as limited rights along ethnic and national lines, is promoted. And such a trend is still very current, bearing in mind this year's parliamentary elections in that country. Namely, the political "conflict" between the Albanian parties reached the level of open verbal threats between the political leaders of the Albanians, which also influenced the instrumentalization of the Albanian ethnic factor in North Macedonia for exclusively political purposes. But in the essential context, such instrumentalization can contribute to social destabilization along ethnic lines. Such a political trend additionally endangers the internal security environment of North Macedonia and creates potential risks for inter-ethnic disagreements at the basic, social level, which in the long run can threaten the country's sustainability in the given political format defined by the Constitution.

Thirdly, religion is also politically instrumentalized and exploited in political confrontations between elites in the daily-political scoring of points. In this way, imaginary dangers from one or another religious group are created, which increases tensions within the Macedonian society along the religious vertical.

And when it comes to economic conditions, political instability threatens the economic stability of this country twice: initially, it affects the attraction of foreign investors, bearing in mind the fact that large and strategic investors avoid politically unstable investment destinations; on the other hand, political instability is collapsing the internal merit system, endangering the labor market and largely contributing to the negative emigration trends of the able-bodied and qualified population.

According to Arnaudov, „the main problem in North Macedonia is the lack of political consensus on any state issue. Regardless of whether it is about the country's foreign policy course, internal political decisions, or decisions that directly concern the citizens of that country. The largest parties on the political spectrum of North Macedonia have always had conflicting opinions and this was visible in the past period, which greatly weakened the position of that country in resolving bilateral issues“ (Arnaudov, 2022a, p. 112).

### 3. INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESS

"When it comes to the institutional infrastructure of the Republic of North Macedonia, we have to point out that there are numerous institutional problems which accompany the change of the political elite, and are continuously piling up despite the rhetorical insistence on the necessity of public administration reform as one of the key preconditions on the way to European integration. Numerous international organizations and institutions in their annual reports emphasize the necessity of public administration reforms, emphasize its cumbersomeness, as well as the inefficiency in providing services to citizens. Political elitism, pervasive corruption, and incompetence are one of the main challenges of the institutional system in the Republic of North Macedonia", explains Arnaudov in one of his research.

This is very easy to establish in key documents that directly concern the achievement of the country's foreign policy goals, such as the annual reports of the European Commission, bearing in mind the fact that North Macedonia, after joining NATO, sets membership in the European Union as its primary foreign policy and strategic goal.

If we put our focus on public administration reform, as one of the key pre-conditions on the so-called EU path, we will find out, according the 2023 European Commission report, that North Macedonia did not reach any improvement in the previous period: "North Macedonia is moderately prepared in the reform of its public administration. Limited progress was made in the reporting period with the adoption of the new public administration reform strategy and the accompanying action plan in July 2023. Despite having started the process 5 years ago, the country still has not adopted the revised legislative framework for human resources management, which includes the revised law on administrative servants and the law on public sector employees and new legal provisions on top level of management" (European Commission, 2023, p. 13). Further, in the same report it is noted that "legislation in North Macedonia has not yet taken on board the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption's recommendations on nepotism, cronyism and political influence in the recruitment of public sector employees and in the appointment of members of supervisory and management boards. Improvements in accountability in the public administration are undermined by the failure to adopt the new law on state organisation" (European Commission, 2023, pp. 13-14).

On the basis we have mentioned previously, European Commission openly states that last year's recommendations were only partially addressed and in the report for 2023 requests from the Macedonian authorities to:

- adopt and start implementing the revised law on administrative servants, the revised law on public service employees and the legal provisions on top management service;
- adopt and start implementing the law on state organisation and other related laws in line with the recommendations on the new organisation of state administrative bodies;
- ensure full implementation of the law on general administrative procedures by completing the digitalisation of institutions' registers and data exchange, and simplifying electronic procedures (European Commission, 2023, p. 14).

The so-called recommendations from the European Commission actually represent a kind of instructions that bear witness to the limited capacities of the institutional framework of North Macedonia, its weakness in terms of effectiveness and its external dependence, which bears witness to the political independence of the country, which has become a questionable category under threat as a result of internal challenges and threats.

But, the major institutional challenges for North Macedonia is not public administration reform - but pervasive corruption and organized crime. North Macedonia is facing with both phenomena in each institutional level which blocks any potential reform process or measures in the sustainability direction. Organized crime, as an external factor, boosts corruption within institutional framework as a mechanism for further weakening of it - making it unable for facing with internal challenges and risks. From the other side, corruption, as an internal institutional factor, essentially blocks any potential for reforms, as a consequence of its networkness with organized crime, as a consequence of political nepotism and as a consequence of weak and corruptive personnel which at the basic level are blocking implementation of the principles and measures which leads to the direction of stable and reliable state institutional framework.

Re-calling to the previously mentioned report by the European Commission from 2023, corruption is also defined as one of the key obstacles for North Macedonia: "The country is in between some and moderate level of preparation in the prevention and fight against corruption. No progress was made. Corruption remains prevalent in many areas and is an issue of concern. Delays and reversals in trials of high-level corruption cases increased, resulting some cases in the expiration of the statute of limitations. The Criminal Code was amended through an expedited parliamentary procedure. The maximum legal penalties for specific corruption-related criminal offences were reduced, having implications on the application of the statute of limitations and affecting, halting or even terminating, a large number of high-level corruption cases, including from the former Special Public Prosecutor's Office (SPO). The amendments also hamper the authorities' ability to investigate and prosecute such offences. This is a matter of serious concern. Efforts to improve the functioning of the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption should continue, especially by allocating additional funding for the recruitment of specialist staff. Additional human resources and financial means should also be made available to the PPO, investigative centres and law enforcements units in charge of investigating corruption. The sectors most vulnerable to corruption require targeted risk assessments and dedicated actions" (European Commission, 2023, p. 21).

From the other side, from the perspective of organized crime, as a phenomena that in a huge manner endangers the institutional framework of North Macedonia, European Commission report states following: "Certain forms of crime, such as money laundering and financial crimes still need to be addressed more effectively. The capacity of the National Coordination Centre for the Fight against Organised Crime needs to be improved. Coordination remains crucial for all stakeholders involved in fighting organised crime, including coordination between prosecutors and police. Most of the recommendations from last year remain valid. In the coming year, North Macedonia should in particular:

- Improve its track record on investigations, prosecutions and rendering convictions in organised crime and money laundering cases with a focus on confiscation of proceeds of crime;
- Adopt and implement the necessary legislation for an Asset Recovery Office;
- and strengthen human and financial capacities of the law enforcement agencies investigating organised and serious crimes, financial crimes and money laundering" (European Commission, 2023, p. 40).

Similar findings have been reached also in the 2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices prepared by US State Department in which, in the case of North Macedonia, it is stated following: serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence and threats of violence against journalists; serious government corruption ("North Macedonia - United States Department of State", 2024).

Concretely, this report lists several domains which are representative example about internal challenges North Macedonia is facing:

- „The courts operated with significant delays, especially in high-profile corruption and multidefendant cases. High-profile trials and their appellate reviews were often prolonged on various procedural, health-related, or unexplained grounds.
- Freedom of expression was undermined by justice system ineffectiveness, lack of transparency regarding media advertising by state institutions, inappropriate conduct on behalf of public officials in their interaction with journalists, pressure on journalists investigating corruption, disinformation, hate speech in online and social media, and self-censorship.
- There were numerous reports of government corruption. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) argued that as the country’s largest employer, the government’s dominant role in the economy created widespread opportunities for corruption.
- There were significant delays in trials involving serious corruption, with only a few concluded as of September, including those against former government officials“ (“North Macedonia - United States Department of State”, 2024).

In fact, North Macedonia is facing intersecting determinants and the consequences of internal security challenges and risks that threaten the stability of the country at all levels, and in the long term call into question its sustainability. As such, internal challenges make the country's institutional infrastructure incapable of facing "imported" or so-called global threats, challenges and risks, which makes North Macedonia even more vulnerable. Although it is a small country, with limited political, military, economic, diplomatic and energy resources, the assumption of a stable political, economic and institutional environment on the internal level would create preconditions for the sustainability of this country in the given international framework. While, faced with the internal challenges that we mentioned in this paper, this country becomes a double target for contemporary challenges and threats: domestic and "imported".

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Bearing in mind the current challenges that North Macedonia is facing internally, which we can freely define as authentic security challenges and risks for this country, we can state that these same challenges and risks will represent essential security issues until the end of the third decade of the 21st century for case study country. North Macedonia is actually facing internal security challenges, on the political, institutional and economic level, which permeate and intertwine as determinants and consequences. As such, these challenges largely render the country’s institutional infrastructure inefficient and ineffective, which in the medium term threatens the fragile internal stability on all grounds, while in the long term it threatens the country’s sustainability, given its limited capacities and the pervasive nature of internal security challenges. North Macedonia’s membership in NATO also testifies to the fact that these are security challenges that require only internal action to deal with them. North Macedonia’s NATO membership, as such, has contributed very little to overcoming the existing internal security challenges. NATO, as the largest defense and security organization in the world, despite its numerous mechanisms in the direction of improving the security and defense capacities of its members, failed in the case of North Macedonia to create a reliable and long-term sustainable ally, precisely because of the country’s internal weaknesses that “rock” the comprehensive institutional infrastructure, namely corruption, crime, political instability, emigration of the able-bodied and qualified population, revanchism. In such circumstances, membership in any international or regional security and defense organization does not mean creating stability and ensuring sustainability on the internal level, which can be seen through this paper in the case study of North Macedonia.

That is why in this paper, on the one hand, we tried to explain how much internal institutional "anomalies" affect the security circumstances of a country in contemporary international relations, while, on the other hand, to indicate how much internal security challenges determine the sustainability of a country in the current world order, along with the fact it is a country that is in no way threatened by "imported" threats to its political independence and territorial integrity. In fact, we came to the conclusion, on the example of North Macedonia, that developing countries, with significantly limited economic, political, military and diplomatic resources, are most endangered as a result of internal institutional challenges and that it is internal security risks that determine stability, and then sustainability of these countries.

Based on the above, we conclude, in the case of North Macedonia, that the following steps are necessary towards the essential stabilization of the country, and then ensuring its sustainability:

- Revision of the constitutional framework that will prevent the long-term political crises through a model of strengthening the position of the president of the country in relation to the executive power (government) - as an arbitrator in a de facto two-and-a-half party system

- Prohibition of registration and existence of political parties with ethnic, national and religious characteristics
- Changes in the electoral system to one electoral unit, so that each candidate for deputy has the same "value"
- Revision of the criminal code for corruption and crime in the direction of increasing prison sentences, including the ban on public functions
- Revision of the criminal code in the domain of financial and economic crime in the direction of increasing prison sentences
- Creation a national strategy (mid-term) for identification, management, coordination and facing of modern and current internal security challenges, threats and risks.

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