

IDENTITY AS A GEOPOLITICAL BORDER IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

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Abstract. *Collective identity frequently serves as a foundational pillar in state-building and institutional consolidation. We consider forms of ethnic, religious, linguistic, or even cultural identity. The state and its borders are not placed at the center of our analysis. The purpose of this research is to analyze the identity cleavages that lead to geopolitical borders within the societies of South-East Europe. Ours hypotheses are: 1. the development of societal divisions in these states leads to geopolitical fragmentation and the construction of geopolitical borders within the society; 2. identity cleavages lead to geopolitical borders and vice versa, geopolitical cleavages lead to identity borders. Methodologically, this study relies on a qualitative, analytical, and comparative framework. The conceptual and theoretical paradigms are empirically anchored through targeted case studies, cross-referenced with public perception metrics and descriptive quantitative data. We propose the development of case studies on three countries in South-East Europe: 1. The Republic of Moldova; 2. North Macedonia; 3. Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Dynamics of Republika Srpska.*

Keywords: *Western Balkans, Republic of Moldova, border, identity, geopolitics, public perceptions.*

1. INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Traditionally, geopolitical and international relations studies have focused on the state and its linear, physical, and administrative borders as the primary pillars of spatial and political analysis. However, the complex realities of South-East Europe—particularly in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries—demonstrate that the deepest cleavages are not always those drawn on official maps, but those that make up and traverse the societal architecture. This paper proposes a paradigm shift, moving the analytical focus from state borders to identity borders, which are conceptualized as internal geopolitical boundaries within the studied societies.

The concept of identity—examined through its multiple facets: civic, ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, or alphabet-based—ceases to be a mere element of cultural heritage and becomes an instrument of political and strategic demarcation. In this geographical area, the nation-building process has followed sinuous trajectories, generating a fluid dynamic between borders and identity. This relationship is bidirectional: on one hand, a historical political or administrative border can crystallize a distinct identity over time; on the other hand, an internally fragmented identity tends to project new geopolitical borders into the public and electoral spheres.

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This dynamic often manifests through the tension between self-identification (how a community assumes its own belonging) and hetero-identification (attributes imposed by others or external actors). In South-East Europe, elements such as language and religion do not merely unite human groups; they function as clear geopolitical lines of demarcation. For instance, the use of the Cyrillic alphabet or affiliation with a specific Orthodox church structure (oscillating between competing centers of ecclesiastical authority, such as Bucharest and Moscow in the case of Orthodox churches in the Republic of Moldova) takes on major geopolitical significance, dividing communities based on regional vectors of influence. Essentially, the collapse of communism, in the absence of rapid and secure European integration, left an ideological vacuum quickly filled by radical nationalisms and armed conflicts. While these conflicts have apparently been frozen through international agreements, they tend to resurface amidst recent global crises, such as the Balkan wars of the 1990s and 2000s or the war in Ukraine, in the form of "Identity Revolutions" or secessionist movements heavily amplified by external logistical and ideological support.

2. METHODOLOGY

The *purpose* of this research is to analyze the identity cleavages that lead to geopolitical borders within the societies of South-East Europe.

Starting from the premise that the classical state dimension does not constitute the exclusive core of regional political dynamics, this investigation is grounded in the following central *hypotheses*:

- *Hypothesis 1 (H1)*: The development and deepening of societal divisions within South-East European states lead directly to geopolitical fragmentation and the construction of invisible geopolitical borders within the same society.
- *Hypothesis 2 (H2)*: There is a relationship of circular and reciprocal causality in the region; identity cleavages lead to and manifest as geopolitical borders, and conversely, geopolitical cleavages and pressures generate or reinforce identity borders within communities.

To guide the analytical framework and test the validity of the hypotheses, this research aims to answer a fundamental set of *research questions*.

- Q1: How does identity fragmentation within a society translate into geopolitical fragmentation at the state and regional levels?
- Q2: To what extent can identity construction at the micro-level (such as a family or a small village) serve as a catalyst for the emergence of a geopolitical border?
- Q3: How and under what conditions does identity volatility succeed in altering geopolitical choices over the medium and long term?
- Q4: To what extent do external factors (e.g., ideological and logistical support provided by third-party actors) succeed in instrumentalizing local ethno-linguistic cleavages to reverse a state's European integration path?

To validate the formulated hypotheses, this research adopts a *mixed-methods approach*, combining the qualitative analysis of official documents with the quantitative analysis of statistical data and public perceptions. The analytical dimension is structured across three complementary tiers:

1. *Analysis of the Regulatory Framework and Official Reports*: Population censuses, language laws, bilateral agreements, and security strategies will be examined to capture how states codify or attempt to manage identity diversity.
2. *Analysis of Survey Data (Public Perceptions)*: Particular attention will be paid to data from large-scale sociological research (e.g., Balkan Barometer, national polls,

referendum outcomes). These allow for the measurement of trust levels, perceived nationalism, barriers to regional cooperation, and the underlying rationales behind cast ballots.

3. *Comparative Case Study Approach*: The case study method will be applied to three state entities in the region, each illustrating a specific manifestation of identity borders functioning as geopolitical barriers.

To carry out this research, we propose the development of case studies on three countries in South-East Europe: 1. The Republic of Moldova; 2. North Macedonia; 3. Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Dynamics of Republika Srpska.

Through this tridimensional structure, the methodological chapter establishes a framework capable of demonstrating that, in South-East Europe, European integration and regional stability depend directly on the capacity to dissolve or reconcile these invisible geopolitical borders within societies.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW. THE INTERSECTION OF GEOPOLITICS AND IDENTITY BORDERS

The central pillar of this research involves demonstrating the interdependence between identity cleavages and geopolitical borders. We aim to analyze the mechanisms through which identity borders are geopolitically determined and, conversely, how geopolitical choices and strategies create or deepen existing identity cleavages within society.

On one hand, *geopolitics creates identity borders* when major international actors or domestic political elites exploit latent cultural differences to legitimize their spheres of influence or electoral strategies. In this manner, a simple dialectal nuance or confessional variance is ideologized and transformed into a rigid barrier. Citizens are driven to define themselves not just in relation to their neighbors, but in alignment with major geopolitical axes (the West/European Union/NATO axis versus the East/Russian Federation/Eurasian Union axis). External pressures and logistical or ideological assistance provided from the outside convert cultural distinctiveness into an instrument of societal security or insecurity.

On the other hand, *identity borders determine geopolitics*. The internal fragmentation of a society translates directly into geopolitical volatility and instability. A state's strategic path no longer represents a national consensus; instead, it becomes reversible and entirely dependent on the demographic or electoral balance between various ethno-linguistic communities. Identities assumed at the level of the individual, family, or small village serve as catalysts for major foreign policy decisions. Identity communities tend to perceive, choose, and act in diametrically opposed ways geopolitically, even when sharing the exact same geographical territory, benefiting from identical socio-economic conditions, and being subject to the same legal framework. This behavioral asymmetry proves that identity attachment and cultural security often override economic rationality or civic cohesion.

In traditional studies of geopolitics and international relations, spatial analysis has focused on the linear and administrative dimension of state borders as the primary pillars of sovereignty. However, the realities of South-East Europe demonstrate that the deepest cleavages do not follow official maps, but rather traverse the internal societal architecture. This necessitates an analytical paradigm shift: moving the focus from state borders to *identity borders*, conceptualized as internal geopolitical boundaries that fragment societies.

The nation-building process in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe has followed sinuous trajectories, generating a fluid and bidirectional dynamic between territory and identity.

Examined through its multiple facets, identity ceases to be a mere element of cultural heritage and becomes an active instrument of political and strategic demarcation. The concept of national identity entails two historical elements of specificity: identity rooted in ethnic belonging and identity born out of civic or citizen affiliation (Brie, 2016). In Western countries, identity was constructed around the civic dimension, where the territory of citizenship became the "national territory." Conversely, Eastern Europe followed a model in which ethnicity and cultural affiliation played the foundational role in identity construction (Flóra, 2011).

A defining characteristic of state architectures in the South-East European space is a chronic deficit or a fragmented state of legitimation. Through the conflation of statehood with a single ethno-national identity, alternative communities have been marginalized from the legitimation process, a fact that has functioned as a catalyst for inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions. This mechanism has led to the sacralization of state territory, considered the exclusive property of a single nation (Flóra, 2011), while simultaneously delegitimizing the contributions of other communities (Brie and Blaga, 2015). In highly diverse regions, achieving solidarity based on civic identity has been elusive, with competition and mutual distrust marking the first post-communist decades—as evidenced by the realities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) or the disputes between Serbia and Kosovo (Brie, Jusufi and Polgar, 2023; Polgar and Brie, 2024; Goga and Brie, 2026).

The 19th century was termed the "century of nationalities," characterized by a strong affirmation of national identity, national ideologies, and national movements aimed at realizing national ideals. The Napoleonic Wars contributed significantly to this effervescence of the national spirit. Furthermore, the national sentiment was frequently replenished in this process through religious emancipation.

In the Balkans, for example, peoples developed their national spirit through the shared struggle of Orthodox Christian populations against external Ottoman (Islamic) or Austro-Hungarian (Catholic-Protestant) oppression. Such associations were also facilitated by the geopolitical context of expanding Russian influence in this space. The pan-Orthodox discourse thus stimulated both the common struggle and the national ideals of these peoples. This rhetoric was extremely favorable to the process precisely because of a specific feature of Orthodoxy: the national church. The nationalistic rhetoric employed even by the Orthodox religious leaders of these Balkan peoples transformed national Orthodox churches into seeds of national emancipation and unification (Brie, 2018).

Historically, Albanian Muslim communities maintained strong structural links with the Ottoman Empire. Conversely, during the nineteenth century, when Orthodox Slavic peoples sought emancipation and separation from Ottoman rule, they found strategic support in their co-religionist "older brothers"—the Russians. These pan-Orthodox ties effectively transferred to the geopolitical arena following the disintegration of Yugoslavia. In contexts where Western support is absent, Serbs have traditionally sought geopolitical refuge in the East. This dynamic fosters a pervasive structural perception of a regional geopolitical rivalry, wherein Albanians are supported by the United States and Serbs by the Russian Federation.

A similar underlying logic appears to be reflected in North Macedonia, where the Muslim Albanian community has historically anchored its emancipation efforts in a privileged relationship with the West, contrasting with the position of the majority Macedonian Orthodox community—at least during the initial stages of this process. Within the analytical framework of this study, the Albanian community played a decisive role in driving North Macedonia's pro-Western orientation and fostering a constructive

partnership with the ethno-national majority. Crucially, this dynamic was not unidirectional; the majority Macedonian community itself functioned as a primary vector for European integration, recognizing that the perspective of EU accession remains the most viable mechanism to normalize the inter-ethnic climate and secure the stability of the young Macedonian state (Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2021).

3.1. Identity Expressions of Geopolitical Borders

Language, alphabet, and religion acquire expressions of geopolitical identity and can become instruments in the construction of geopolitical borders:

- ***Language as a geopolitical border.*** Linguistic distinctiveness has been systematically instrumentalized as a political weapon in the nation-building process (Brie, 2023). In Montenegro, public policies imposed the "Montenegrin language" as official through the 2007 constitution, replacing Serbian and generating identity-based friction (Morrison, 2018). Similarly, Bulgaria refuses to recognize the existence of an independent Macedonian language, viewing it as a Bulgarian dialect and demanding that the EU avoid using the term (Phillips, 2022; Marusic, 2017). In the Republic of Moldova, the promotion of "Moldovanism" as an identity distinct from Romanian served similar geopolitical objectives.
- ***The alphabet as a geopolitical border.*** The choice of a writing system constitutes an eminently political act (Alexe and Ciapai, 2021). The use of the Cyrillic alphabet by Serbs, in opposition to the Latin alphabet used by Croats or Albanians, functions as a major cleavage (Brie, 2024). In September 2021, the parliaments of Serbia and Republika Srpska adopted mandatory laws for the use of Cyrillic in public institutions and private companies (offering tax reductions), thereby stimulating Balkan nationalism (Serbia, 2021; Cyrillic Alphabet Mandatory, 2021). In the Republic of Moldova, the imposition of the Cyrillic alphabet was a weapon of the Soviet regime, and Cyrillic script for the "Moldovan" language is still maintained today in the separatist Transnistrian region.
- ***Religion as a geopolitical border.*** The denominational mosaic in the Balkans separates Catholics (Slovenes, Croats), Orthodox Christians (Serbs, Montenegrins, Macedonians), and Muslims (Albanians, Bosniaks), with religion serving as the axis along which national boundaries have been drawn. This fragmentation also affects the unity of Orthodoxy, as demonstrated by the contestation of the Serbian Church's hierarchy in Montenegro (Brie 2021). In the Republic of Moldova, religious affiliation is deeply intertwined with politics: Orthodoxy functions as a symbolic public good used by political parties to anchor geopolitical projects (Putină, 2011; Putină, 2025; Sprînceană, 2013), generating antagonistic discourses regarding the state's orientation (Baar and Jakubek, 2017). Two metropolises coexist: 1. The Metropolis of Chişinău and All Moldova (also called the "Moldovan Orthodox Church"), affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchate; 2. The Metropolis of Bessarabia and the Exarchate of the Plains, an autonomous church that is part of the Romanian Patriarchate. The two churches have frequently contested each other, maintaining tense relations that have been passed down to their parishioners. Moreover, this institutional division has reflected the geopolitical trends of Moscow and Bucharest. In the Republic of Moldova, the two churches carried the banners of a conflict that the two patriarchates could not afford to display openly themselves (Brie, 2021).

3.2. Geopolitical Polarization Determined by Identity Borders in the Three States

a. The Republic of Moldova: The Gagauz and Transnistrian Enclaves

The Republic of Moldova faces deep geopolitical polarization, which is driven by identity fragmentation rather than socio-economic or educational criteria. Citizens who embrace a Romanian identity support the European path, whereas the Russian-speaking, Gagauz, and Bulgarian minorities display a stable pro-Russian orientation (Brie, 2023). The Autonomous Territorial Unit (ATU) of Gagauzia represents a complex borderland community; although they are a population of Turkic origin, the Gagauz are Orthodox Christians and were heavily Russified during the Soviet period, becoming the most pro-Russian region of the state (Vintilă, 2025; Pârlog, 2012). The influence of the Russian Federation in ATU Gagauzia is structural, operating through economic, media, and memory policy mechanisms (Vintilă, 2025; Nantoi et al., 2016). Historical surveys conducted by the Institute for Public Policy (2015, 2021) highlighted that the option for the European Union in the southern part of the country was extremely limited, with over 80% of the population preferring the Eurasian Union (Nantoi et al., 2016). This identity-based resistance was empirically confirmed during the referendum on October 20, 2024, aimed at introducing the pro-European orientation into the constitution: at the national level, the "YES" option obtained 50.38% (CEC RM, 2026), but in ATU Gagauzia, 94.84% of voters voted "NO."

The situation is similar in the Transnistrian region, where 68.98% opposed the constitutional amendment.

b. Bosnia and Herzegovina: Consociational Paralysis and Republika Srpska

The institutional architecture established by the Dayton Agreement (1995) succeeded in stopping armed violence, but it formalized political representation exclusively on ethnic grounds (Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats), turning identity into a structural barrier (Džankić, 2015; Bose, 2002). BiH functions as an incomplete consociational system (Keil, 2013), where the decision-making process is paralyzed by the "ethnic veto" and the "vital national interest" mechanism, transforming any reform necessary for European integration into a zero-sum game.

Republika Srpska acts as a central actor in contesting the unitary state, promoting an autonomist and secessionist agenda under the leadership of Milorad Dodik (Bieber, 2020). The political elites in RS reinterpret Dayton as an instrument of entity sovereignty and present federal structures as an external imposition (Keil, 2016). The geopolitical orientation of RS is closely linked to its mother-state, Serbia, and the Russian Federation, a fact that dilutes loyalty toward the Bosnian state (Džankić, 2015).

IRI surveys (2025) and those of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC, 2024) factually confirm this structural cleavage. Public perception regarding nationalism as a major problem increased by 11% in 2025, but the asymmetry is blatant: 44% of respondents in the Federation of BiH consider it a huge problem, compared to only 20% in RS (IRI, 2025). Furthermore, external preferences are completely polarized: while Bosniaks and Croats express trust in the EU and identify Serbia and Russia as the identitarian security threats, Serbs in Republika Srpska point to the US as a major threat (39%), perceive Russia and Serbia as their primary allies, and attribute the responsibility for the war in Ukraine exclusively to the "West" (51%), thereby adopting a completely divergent information ecosystem (IRI, 2025).

c. North Macedonia: The Identity Veto and the Macedonian-Albanian Cleavage

North Macedonia represents a symmetrical case of intersection between internal identity-based bottlenecks and external constraints on the path to Europeanization. Internally, the ethnic balance is regulated by the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001), which provided guarantees and representation rights to the Albanian minority (Koneska, 2017). Although Ohrid secured peace, it institutionalized ethnic and linguistic identity as the primary axis of political mobilization (Abazi Imeri, 2025). Language and segregated education remain the main obstacles to building a shared civic identity (Sorrells, 2025; Piacentini, 2020).

Externally, the state was kept outside Euro-Atlantic structures for decades due to the dispute with Greece regarding its name and historical heritage. A compromise was reached through the Prespa Agreement (2018), which renamed the state "North Macedonia," allowing for NATO accession in 2020 (Prespa Agreement, 2018). However, this enthusiasm was cut short by a new veto imposed by Bulgaria based on criteria of history, language, and national identity (Damjanovski, 2025). Although Skopje accepted the "French proposal" in 2022 to include the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution to open EU negotiation chapters, the lack of a parliamentary majority and the rise to power of the conservative government led by Hristijan Mickoski in 2024 blocked the implementation of the reform (Testorides, 2025).

Sociological research highlights that minorities in North Macedonia are much more willing to accept external identity-based compromises than the majority population (Damjanovski, 2025). In the 2024–2025 period, 82% of ethnic Albanian respondents strongly supported EU accession and an exclusively Western geopolitical orientation (62%), displaying a pragmatic approach and paying limited attention to the identity dilemmas of Macedonians in relation to Bulgaria. Conversely, among ethnic Macedonians, support for the EU dropped to 56%, as society experienced an accumulation of frustrations and a deep radicalization: 59% of those who oppose accession motivate their decision by associating it with the loss of national identity and the changing of the country's name (Damjanovski, 2025; Velinovska & Sofeska, 2025).

The review of the specialized literature demonstrates that traditional, exclusively state-centric approaches are insufficient to understand the dynamics of integration in South-East Europe. Identity borders function as rigid geopolitical barriers within the studied societies. The success of European integration and regional stability depend not only on institutional reforms but directly on the capacity of states to dissolve or reconcile these invisible borders, thereby preventing their hybrid instrumentalization by external actors.

4. IDENTITY-DETERMINED GEOPOLITICAL BORDERS. CASE STUDIES

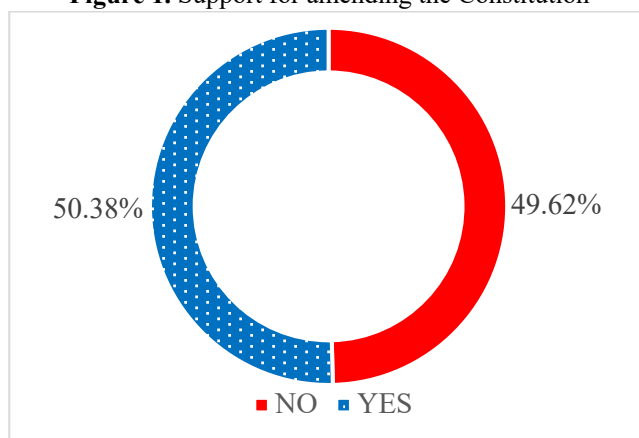
Our analysis aims to identify and analyze identity-based geopolitical borders within the three states selected as case studies. The logic of the argument is that at the community level, particularly regarding the geopolitical behavior and choices of various minorities, divergent directions can be observed in relation to the majority or state policy. Thus, identity provides a specific direction from a geopolitical perspective. As a result of this reality, even at the micro-level of small localities, major (global) or minor (regional or interstate) geopolitical lines of demarcation can manifest between ethnic, linguistic, cultural, or religious communities.

4.1. The case of Russians, Gagauzians and Bulgarians in the Republic of Moldova

Our previous research indicates that Moldovan society experiences both political and identity-based fragmentation regarding its foreign policy orientation (See more: Brie and Al. Solcan, 2025; Brie, 2016; Bărbulescu *et al.* 2016; Brie, Costea, and Toderaș, 2025; Brie, 2025; Brie, 2021; Brie, 2023).

Our analysis begins by highlighting a defining contemporary geopolitical reality: the existence of an internal geopolitical frontier within Moldovan society. While a majority of the population supports a pro-European foreign policy vector, this alignment remains fragile. Despite its current consolidation, this consensus remains susceptible to potential shifts and reversible trends. Beyond the numerous surveys indicating a strengthening pro-European trajectory in the Republic of Moldova, the constitutional referendum of October 20, 2024, remains a critical empirical benchmark (Brie and Putină, 2025). The question was: *Do you support amending the Constitution in order to join the Republic of Moldova to the European Union?*

Figure 1. Support for amending the Constitution



Source: own drawing with information from CEC RM (2026)

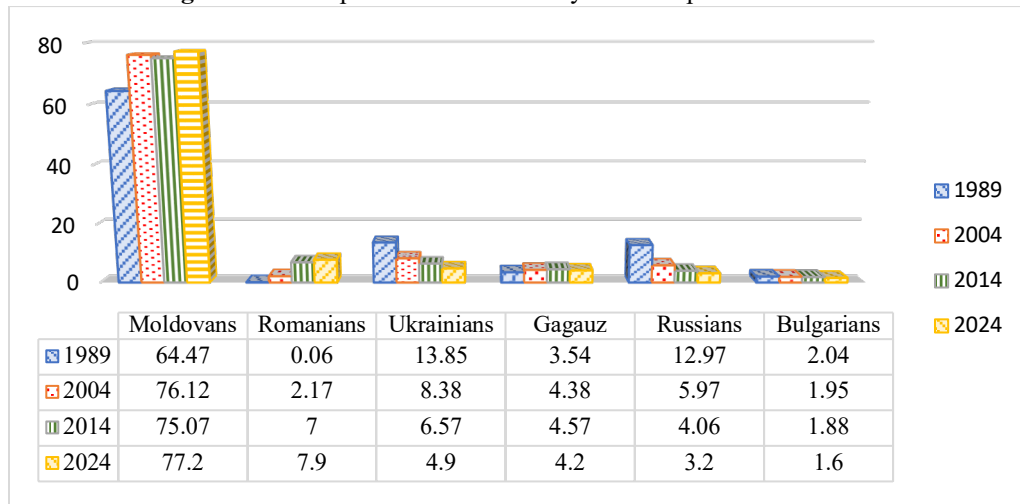
The chart illustrates an almost perfectly polarized electorate, where the marginal difference (50.38% for yes versus 49.62% for no) underscores a society fractured along deep-seated geopolitical lines. In the context of Moldovan politics, this statistical parity cannot be interpreted merely as a standard democratic disagreement over policy or European integration. Instead, it visualizes a profound, identity-driven geopolitical border that splits the domestic society into two distinct blocks.

The marginal difference demonstrates that the global geopolitical boundary between the West (EU/NATO) and the East (the Russian sphere of influence) does not merely stop at the state's external borders. It passes directly through the fabric of Moldovan society. It reflects a territorial and demographic friction where specific communities, ethnic minorities, and regions (such as ATU Gagauzia or the northern districts) vote systematically for the Eastern vector, while the capital and the diaspora push for the Western vector. The structural deadlock shown in the data proves that identity markers (language, ethnicity, memory politics) dictate geopolitical behavior. The society is evenly divided because individual and community identities are tied to competing historical narratives and media ecosystems. This structural polarization turns the state into a perpetual geopolitical

battleground. External actors can easily exploit the domestic identity-based fragmentation to stall reforms or shift the country's foreign policy vector during subsequent electoral cycles.

Alongside the strengthening of the Republic of Moldova's pro-European orientation, we believe that an important Romanian electorate is also consolidating, which supports the development of a strong European Romania that can support the Republic of Moldova's efforts in this process. The assumption of Romanian identity is also a cause (or perhaps a consequence) of the consolidation of a significant segment within the Republic of Moldova's population that supports the state's pro-European orientation.

Figure 2. Assumption of ethnic identity in the Republic of Moldova



Source: author's elaboration based on census data provided by BNSRM (2025a and 2025b)

The majority of the population identifies as ethnic Moldovan-Romanian (82.1%). The self-identified Romanian community has grown since the country gained independence (from 0.06% in 1989 – 2,477 people, to 2.17% in 2004 – 73,276 people, reaching 7.0% in 2014 - 192,800 people (BNSRM, 2025a), and 7.9% in 2024 (BNSRM, 2025b). Meanwhile, the proportion of Russian and Ukrainian communities within the total population has decreased. The share of Ukrainians fell from 13.85% in 1989 to just over 6.5% in 2014 and 4.9% in 2024. The phenomenon is similar in the case of the Russian community: from 12.97% (1989) to 4.06% (2014) and 3.2% in 2024 (BNSRM, 2025a and BNSRM, 2025b).

Table 1. Assumption of linguistic identity in the Republic of Moldova

	2004		20		20
	Number	%	Number	%	%
Moldovan	1,988,540	58	1,486,570	53	4
Romanian	554,814	16	652,394	23	33
Russian	540,990	16	394,133	14	15

Source: author's elaboration based on census data provided by de BNSRM (2025a and 2025b)

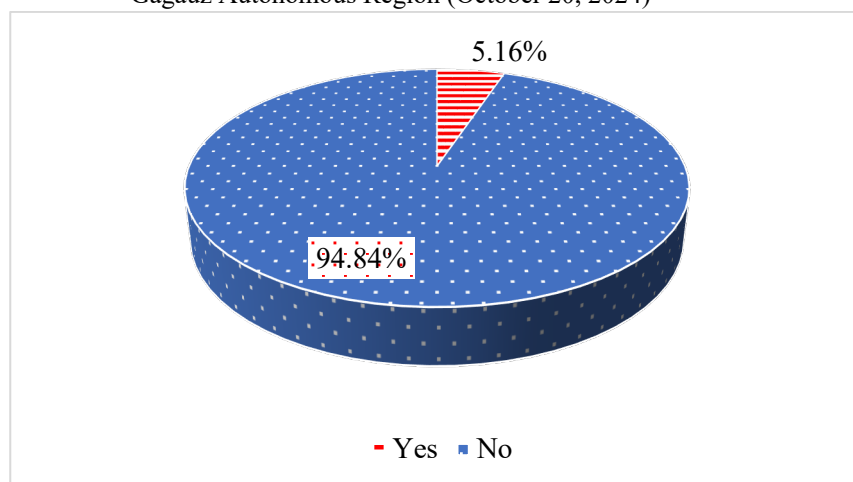
In terms of linguistic identity, censuses in the Republic of Moldova have revealed several trends (Brie and Putină, 2025):

- A continuous decline in the proportion of individuals claiming Russian as their native language, despite its persistent role as a primary language for a substantial non-Russian demographic (14.1% select Russian as their primary language, compared to only 4.06% who self-identify with Russian ethnicity).
- The steady consolidation of the broader Moldovan-Romanian ethno-linguistic bloc, which expanded from 75.2% in 2004 to 76.3% in 2014, with projections estimated to reach 79.2% in 2024.
- A concurrent strengthening of Romanian as a mother tongue alongside a paradoxically rising self-identification with the "Moldovan" linguistic label, with the latter group growing significantly from 16.4% in 2004 to 23.3% in 2014, and further to 32.2% in 2024.

This perspective directly informs our inquiry, as national consolidation among the Moldovan-Romanian ethno-linguistic population correlates with heightened pro-Western orientations and increased backing for EU accession.

This research aims to analyze the voting behavior within the ATU Gagauzia during the constitutional referendum of October 20, 2024. At a secondary level, we develop a comparative case study utilizing the Institute for Public Policy (IPP) database, which provides comprehensive sociological data on ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia—districts predominantly inhabited by Gagauz and Bulgarian communities. This serves to identify distinct behavioral and perceptual patterns within these identity-driven ethnic groups. The objective is to test the premise that specific minorities (in this case, Gagauz and Bulgarians) align with the Russian Federation and reject European integration due to deeply ingrained communal identities. Confirming this hypothesis would validate the model of an identity-fragmented society in the Republic of Moldova, wherein ethno-national and linguistic groups harbor diametrically opposed geopolitical orientations.

Figure 3. Vote in the referendum to amend the Constitution in view of EU accession in the Gagauz Autonomous Region (October 20, 2024)



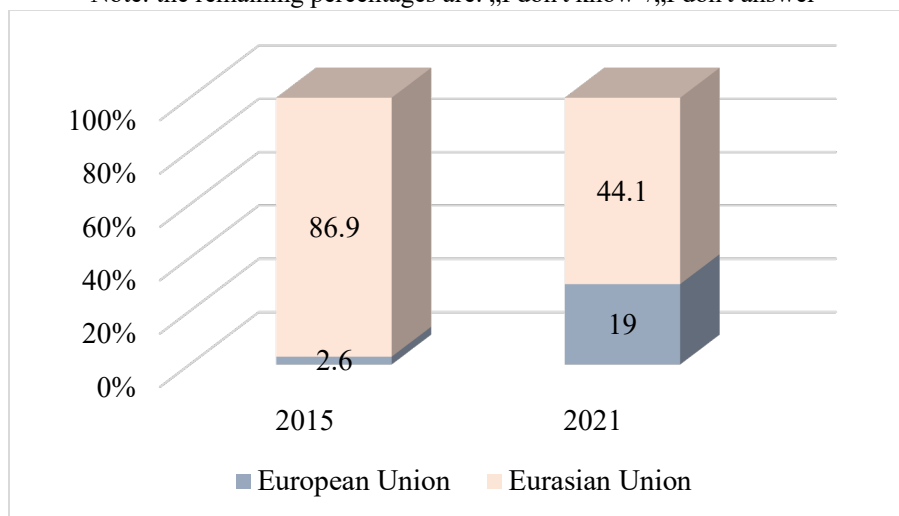
Source: own drawing with information from CEC RM (2026)

From a methodological perspective, our hypothesis can be tested more clearly within the compact Gagauz communities of the ATU Gagauzia. In this case, the identity borders revealed through the expression of geopolitical preferences becomes even more pronounced: in ATU Gagauzia, only 5.16% of voters supported accession to the European Union. Thus, out of a total of 57,847 valid votes cast, only 2,985 were in favor of amending the Constitution to enable EU accession, while 54,862 voters opposed this initiative (CEC RM, 2026). The Gagauz population overwhelmingly rejects the idea of accession to the European Union, a stance accompanied by a strong preference for geopolitical rapprochement with the Russian Federation (Brie and Goreainov, 2026).

IPP also measured external orientation preferences, which allows us to observe and analyze options expressed through an exclusive choice, eliminating the possibility of selecting both of the tested alternatives as preferred options. Moreover, respondents are placed in a situation that requires a more categorical choice, and the results can more clearly illustrate potential associations anticipated in relation to ethno-national and cultural-linguistic identity. The outcome of such a joint measurement of external preferences can contribute to clarifying analyses aimed at testing our hypothesis that, in the Republic of Moldova, there exists a cleavage in the choice of geopolitical options between these Gagauz and Bulgarian communities in the south and the majority option expressed by the Moldovan/Romanian community in the rest of the country. Evidently, as in the case of the Transnistrian region, the Russian or Russian-speaking community displays a consistent inclination toward pro-Russian and anti-European options (Brie and Goreainov, 2026).

Figure 4. Voting option in the event of a referendum with the possibility of choosing between joining the EU or the Eurasian Union in the ATU Gagauzia and Taraclia District (%)

Note: the remaining percentages are: „I don't know”/„I don't answer”



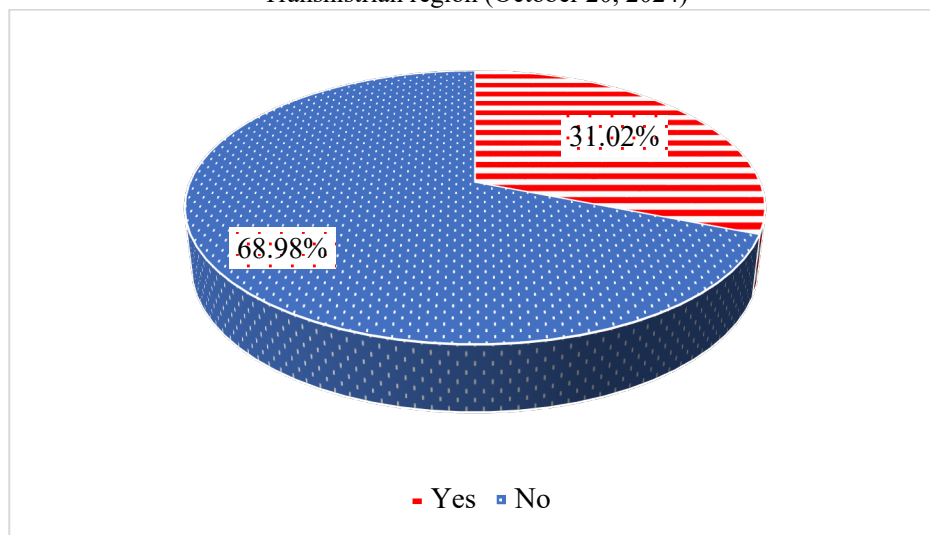
Source: own drawing with information from IPP, 2015, 2021

Support for EU accession in case of a referendum was very low in 2015 (2.6%), highlighting a correlation with the separate measurement of this option (the decrease was only 1% when measured jointly with the pro-Eurasian Union option). This could suggest that citizens who favor the pro-EU option hold more crystallized views, however, given the very small numbers involved, such an interpretation must be treated with caution.

More pronounced, however, are the dilemmas reflected in preferences for accession to either of the two unions in 2021 (19% in favor of EU accession and 44.1% in favor of accession to the Eurasian Union). Nevertheless, as in the categorical pattern observed in 2015, the Gagauz community in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia and the Bulgarian and Gagauz communities in Taraclia continue to show a stronger preference for accession to the Eurasian Union.

Only 31.02% of the citizens of the Transnistrian region answered “Yes”. Thus, 68.98% of the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region present at the polls voted against the accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union (CEC RM, 2026). As the majority of the inhabitants of the Transnistrian region assume the ethnic and linguistic Russian identity, we tend to deduce that this ethno-national community chose to vote against an initiative that would set the direction of Moldova's EU accession at the constitutional level.

Figure 5. Vote in the referendum to amend the Constitution in view of EU accession in the Transnistrian region (October 20, 2024)



Source: own drawing with information from CEC RM (2026)

This behavior, in our opinion, can be extrapolated to other regions or localities where the Russian-speaking community is in the majority (of course, we cannot say that all Russians or Russian speakers voted No in the referendum) (Brie, 2025). The main conclusion is that Moldovan society is geopolitically polarized along ethnic and linguistic identity lines. Thus, Moldovan citizens of Russian ethnicity or Russian-speaking citizens, as well as Gagauz and Bulgarians, tend to prefer closer relations with the Russian Federation in terms of the Republic of Moldova's external orientation. The findings point not only to the existence of clearly delineated identity borders within Moldovan society, but also to the presence of an identity cleavage characterized by antagonistic and divergent positioning with respect to East-West geopolitical options. This cleavage has the potential to acquire conflictual dimensions. This reality reaffirms the premise that, in the Republic of Moldova, there exists a source of societal insecurity that may be geopolitically exploited by both internal and external actors (Brie and Goreainov, 2026).

4.2. The case of the Albanians from North Macedonia

Historically, Albanian Muslim communities maintained close ties with the Ottoman Empire. In the nineteenth century, as Orthodox Slavic peoples in the region sought independence from the empire, they received vital support from Russia, driven by Pan-Orthodox solidarity. This geopolitical dynamic persisted even after the collapse of Yugoslavia. Lacking Western support, Serbia naturally looked East for strategic alliances. The region often appears as a clear-cut geopolitical battleground: Albanians aligned with the United States, and Serbs backed by Russia. This logic was initially mirrored in Northern Macedonia, where the Muslim Albanian community's emancipation efforts relied heavily on a strong partnership with the West, contrasting with the Orthodox Macedonian majority. The Albanian community played a decisive role in steering Northern Macedonia toward a pro-Western path and fostering cooperation with the ethnic majority. However, this was a mutual process. The Macedonian majority also actively championed European integration, recognizing it as a shared benefit. Today, the prospect of EU integration remains essential for stabilizing inter-ethnic relations and safeguarding the young Macedonian state (Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2021: 71-72). „The Albanian community in the Balkans did not have many favorable geopolitical options besides a close relationship with NATO, facilitated by the historical cultural-identity relationship with Turkey. Subsequently, in the context of US direct involvement in the region, it led to the reality of a natural choice” (Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2021: 72).

Figure 6. Ethnic distribution in the Western Balkans



Source: Library of Congress, *Ethnic distribution in the western Balkans*, 2008, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2008620837/>, accessed in 12.07.2026

In this context, a geopolitical fault line divides the two ethno-linguistic and religious groups: identity effectively transforms into a *geopolitical border*.

Our analysis aims to identify different positions regarding the external orientation of the state in relation to identity.

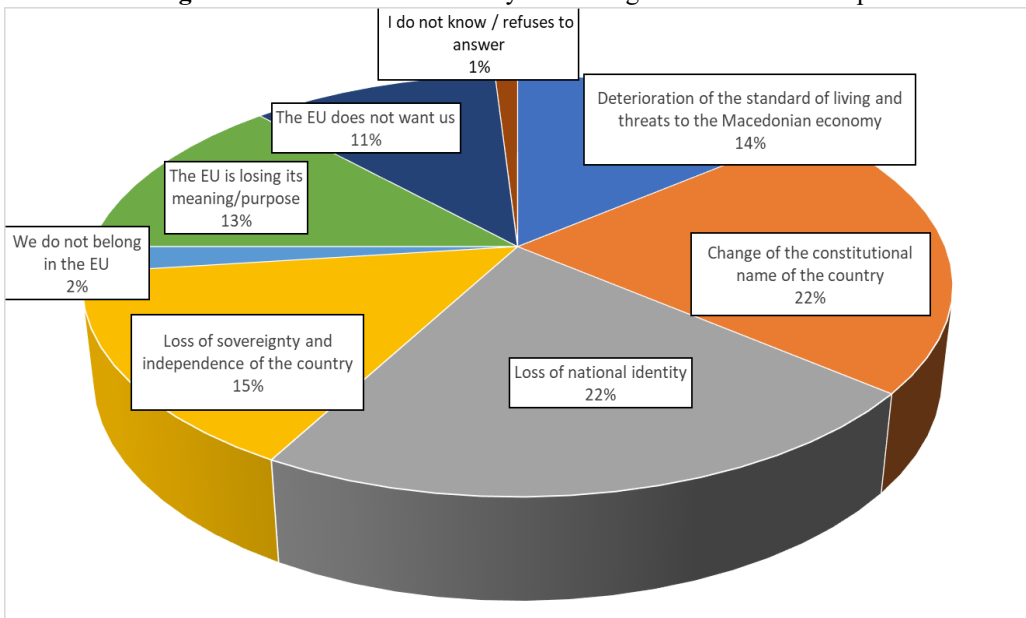
The focus is on the internal dispute between Albanians and Macedonians and the external conditioning on identity criteria that had in mind the integration into NATO (the current dispute with Greece for the name of the state) and the accession negotiations to the EU (the dispute related to the Bulgarian veto). We do not intend to present these provisions on this occasion (see for context and more details Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2021; Brie and Angela Solcan, 2025; Brie, 2023; Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2023).

The central premises and ideas are that: a. internal and external identity disputes have influenced the integration level and the process of rapprochement with the European Union; b. Albanians in North Macedonia are more willing than Macedonians to compromise on external identity disputes in order to ensure rapprochement with the EU and NATO.

We aim to develop a synthesis of opinion polls conducted in recent years to capture some trends recorded in relation to sensitive identity issues that have led to the identification of different identity behaviors in relation to geopolitical options or whether external orientation is influenced by identity.

Amid a perpetual cycle of identity disputes and a highly unpredictable geopolitical future, historical grievances and traumas rooted in identity crises continually resurface. This is evident as the long-standing name dispute re-emerges alongside ongoing tensions with Bulgaria. Driven by a perception that too many concessions have already been made, the public sphere is facing severe polarization, paving the way toward radicalization and political extremism.

Figure 7. What is the reason for your vote against EU membership?

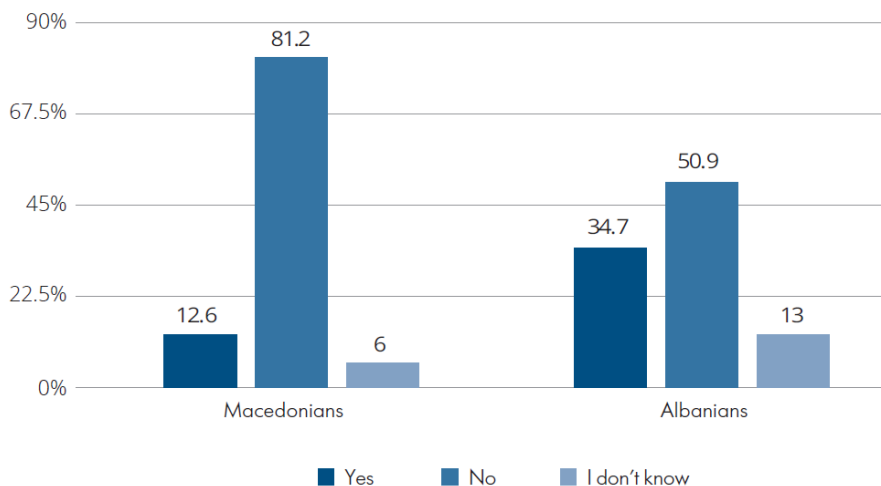


Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Damjanovski, 2025: 23 (public opinion survey research conducted in the period October-December 2024)

According to data from the aforementioned barometer, even the Albanian minority rejects altering the historical narrative merely as a concession for European integration—with only 34.7% of Albanians and a meager 12.6% of Macedonians

favoring such a compromise. This reluctance persists despite overwhelming pro-EU sentiment: general European integration is backed by 63% of ethnic Macedonians and a staggering 82% of ethnic Albanians (Damjanovski, 2022: 4; Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2023).

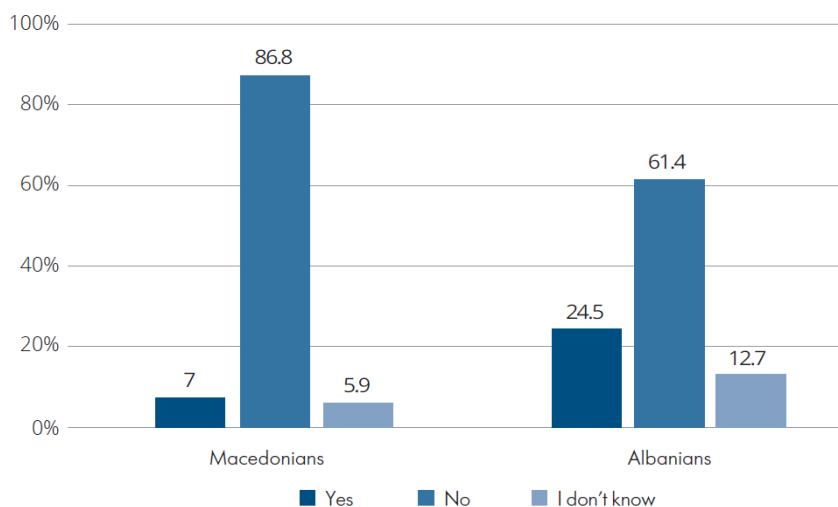
Figure 8. Do you think that North Macedonia should make concessions regarding the historical narrative in order to proceed with the EU integration? (%)



Source: Velinovska; Nikolovski and Kirchner, 2022: 8

Public opinion is even less open to compromise regarding the Macedonian language.

Figure 9. Do you think the the North Macedonia should make a concession regarding the language in order to proceed with the EU integration? (%)

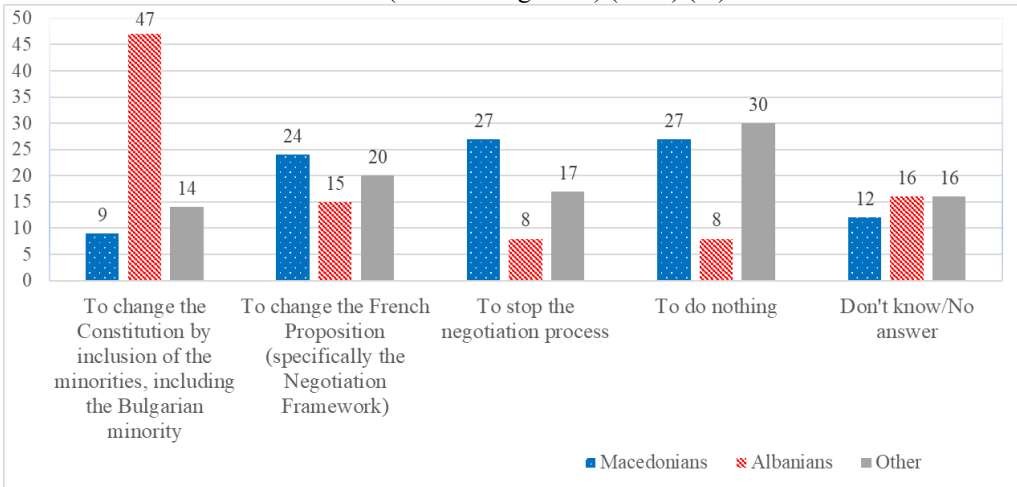


Source: Velinovska; Nikolovski and Kirchner, 2022: 11

The findings reveal a cohesive and nearly unanimous consensus among ethnic Macedonians, with 86.8% rejecting any linguistic concessions. Such compromises are similarly viewed as unacceptable by a narrower majority of ethnic Albanians, standing at 61.4% (Velinovska; Nikolovski and Kirchner, 2022: 11).

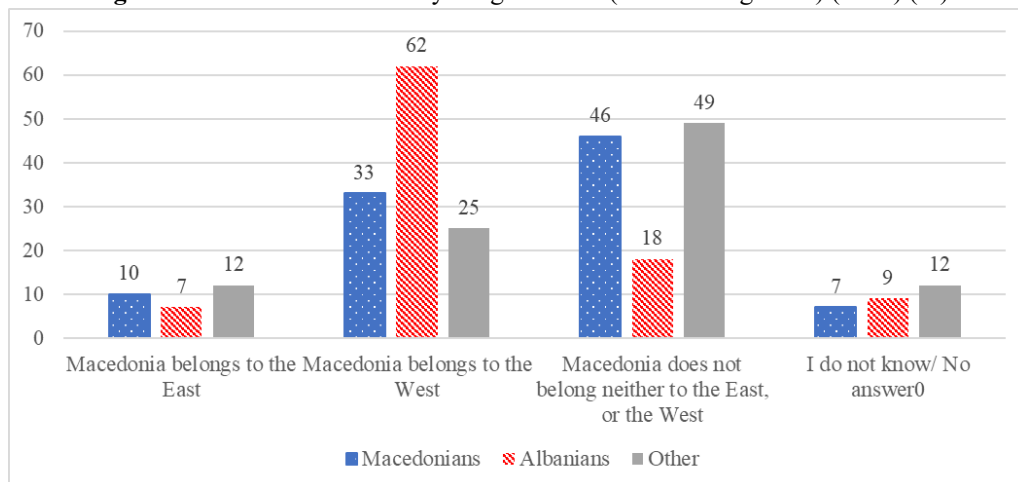
The radicalization of public opinion is directly mirrored in executive governance. The establishment of a conservative administration in Skopje, led by Hristijan Mickoski, institutionalized this lack of identity-related compromise into official state policy. By refusing to implement the agreed-upon constitutional amendments, the new government has severely complicated the country's EU accession process. This shift reflects a broader trend between 2022 and 2024, characterized by growing societal radicalization and a diminishing willingness to compromise. The resolution of constitutional changes regarding the Bulgarian minority—as mandated by the 2022 Macedonian-Bulgarian agreement—remains fundamentally stalled (Brie and Angela Solcan, 2025).

Figure 10. What changes do you think need to be made on the path towards the European Union? (ethnic background) (2024) (%)



Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025: 10

The Albanian minority in North Macedonia exhibits a significantly higher openness to compromise, remaining primarily focused on achieving European integration while showing less involvement in the identity-driven dilemmas surrounding Macedonian-Bulgarian relations. This pragmatic stance extends across highly sensitive issues, including historical narratives, the status of the Macedonian language, and the formal recognition of the Bulgarian minority. Consequently, the Albanian community serves as a compelling case study of how a minority group can become a powerful catalyst for a nation's Euro-Atlantic path, compelling the state to adopt a proactive approach and assume clear ownership of EU-related reforms (Brie, Jusufi, and Polgar, 2021: 86-87). This divergent perspective is clearly reflected in longitudinal data. While enthusiasm for EU membership has remained consistently high among ethnic Albanians at 82% in both 2021 and late 2024, support within the ethnic Macedonian majority has experienced a notable decline, dropping from 63% in 2021 down to 56% by the end of 2024 (Damjanovski, 2022: 4; Damjanovski, 2025: 50; Brie and Angela Solcan, 2025).

Figure 11. Which statement do you agree with? (ethnic background) (2024) (%)

Source: author's own preparations based on data collected from Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025: 17

Geopolitical alignment preferences in North Macedonia are deeply fractured along ethnic lines. The Albanian community has historically served as a critical anchor for the country's Euro-Atlantic trajectory. This divergence is explicitly quantified in recent empirical data: in 2024, pro-Western orientation commanded majority support among ethnic Albanian respondents at 62%, whereas it garnered a mere 33% approval within the Macedonian majority (Velinovska and Sofeska, 2025: 17).

4.3. The case of the Serbs from Republika Srpska

In the Balkans, national identity historically matured through the collective resistance of Orthodox Christian populations against external forces, namely the Ottoman (Islamic) and Austro-Hungarian (Catholic-Protestant) empires. This cohesion was further reinforced by the geopolitical expansion of Russian influence in the region, where a Pan-Orthodox discourse actively catalyzed both shared resistance and national aspirations. This rhetoric proved exceptionally effective due to a defining characteristic of Eastern Orthodoxy: the autocephalous national church. The highly patriotic discourse championed by Balkan Orthodox religious leaders effectively transformed these national churches into hotbeds of national emancipation and unification. The Slavic Orthodox communities within Bosnia and Herzegovina, alongside the Serbian populations, have historically been shaped by the geopolitical and cultural gravity of the Russian-Orthodox Eastern sphere.

Under the 1995 General Framework Agreement for Peace, the country is recognized as a single sovereign state under international law, divided into two semi-autonomous entities: the *Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina* and *Republika Srpska*¹. This intricate constitutional structure was expanded in 1999 through the Brčko Arbitration Final Award, which created the Brčko District. Operating as a condominium under joint ownership of both entities but under the state's direct sovereignty, this neutral, self-governing administrative unit functions outside entity jurisdiction to safeguard regional stability and

¹ Republika Srpska is the official name of the "entity". The concept of "Republic of Srpska" is a claim-making concept that could be used to designate and justify a stronger existence of a republican statehood.

multi-ethnic governance (Spahić and Čustović 2024, 28). Bosnia and Herzegovina represents a classic case of a deeply divided, post-conflict society where ethnic, religious, and political identities frequently clash. While the institutional framework designed by the Dayton Agreement successfully halted the war, it simultaneously institutionalized ethnic cleavages by formalizing the political representation of the three "constituent peoples"—Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs (Džankić 2015, 15; Goga and Brie, 2026).

Figure 12. Political map of Bosnia and Herzegovina



Source: Toal and Maksic, 2011

“The political path that Republika Srpska is following clearly illustrates the tensions among the three ethnic groups” (Goga and Brie, 2026). Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape, turning Bosnia and Herzegovina into an arena where conflicting foreign policy orientations are starkly exposed. While the leadership of Republika Srpska has cultivated close political ties with the Russian Federation, the Bosnian state—backed by the European Union and NATO—continues to pursue Euro-Atlantic integration (Turčalo, 2025, 6-13). This geopolitical polarization further deepens the country’s internal identity borders. European integration is perceived differently across communities: for Bosniaks, it represents state consolidation, whereas for the Republika Srpska elites, it is viewed as a threat to their political autonomy. Therefore, domestic identity conflicts have become inextricably linked to regional geopolitical rivalries, transforming European integration from a technical reform process into a highly charged political and symbolic choice (Turčalo, 2025, 14-16).

The demographic structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects its deeply rooted historical diversity. According to the 1991 census, the population comprised approximately 43.5% Bosnian Muslims (now recognized as Bosniaks), 31.2% Serbs, and 17.4% Croats, with the remainder consisting of other minorities or individuals identifying as Yugoslavs (Burg and Shoup, 1999, 26).

Table 2. Ethnic structure of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina 1991 vs 2013

	1991		2013	
Total population	4.377.033		3.531.159	
Bosniaks	1.902.956	43,5%	1.769.592	50,1%
Croats	760.852	17,4%	544.780	15,4%
Serbs	1.366.104	31,2%	1.086.733	30,8%
Others	347.121	7,9 %	130.054	3,7 %

Source: Statistika.ba. 2013

In the post-conflict era, political identity transcended communal boundaries to become fundamentally territorialized. Because community and space grew inseparable, any administrative or electoral reforms faced deep-seated resistance. Within this framework, institutional reform is perceived as a redistribution of power between groups. This spatial-ethnic alignment is clearly illustrated by the 2013 census, which showed that the demographic structure of Republika Srpska had become overwhelmingly Serb-dominated (Goga and Brie, 2026: 43-44).

Table 3. Ethnic structure of the population of Republika Srpska 1991 vs 2013

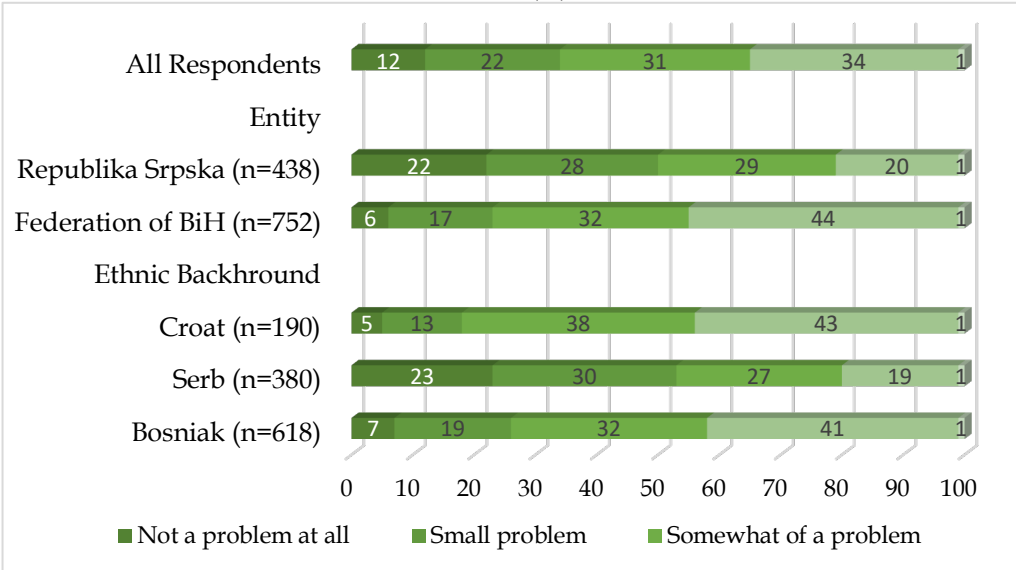
	1991		2013	
Total population	1.572.615		1.228.423	
Bosniaks	441.077	28,0%	171.839	14,0%
Croats	144.129	9,2%	29.645	2,4%
Serbs	872.610	55,5%	1.001.299	81,5%
Others	114.799	7,3%	25.640	2,1%

Source: Statistika.ba. 2013

Public opinion data reveals deep, systematic cleavages between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska regarding domestic integration, geopolitical alignment, and foreign policy vision.

A closer analysis reveals significant disparities between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska regarding perceptions of nationalism. While 44% of respondents in the Federation consider nationalism a major problem and another 32% view it as a moderate concern, only 49% of those in RS see it as either a big (20%) or moderate problem (29%). From an ethnic perspective, Bosniaks and Croats hold similar views, expressing notable concern over the societal impact of nationalism, whereas Serbs tend to be significantly less worried about this issue (IRI 2025, 53; Goga and Brie, 2026: 51).

Figure 13. Nationalism considered as a problem by the entities and ethnic groups in BiH, in 2025 (%)



Source: IRI 2025

Security threat perceptions mirror this sub-national divide, revealing two distinct geopolitical paradigms. In the Federation, threat anxieties are oriented eastward, with respondents identifying Serbia (42%) and Russia (23%) as the primary threats. Republika Srpska reverses this pattern, identifying the United States as the main adversary (39%) while marginalizing Russia and Serbia (IRI 2025, 60). This asymmetry highlights a deeply polarized geopolitical imaginary driven by ethnic identities, where the Federation fears regional and Russian influence, while RS projects threats onto Western actors (Goga and Brie, 2026: 55).

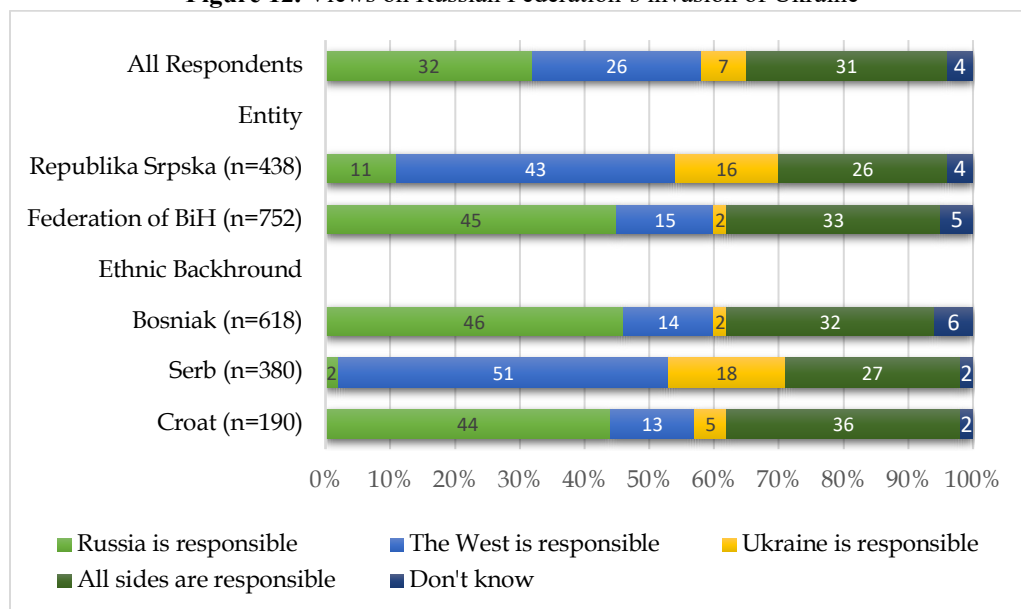
Table 4. Most significant threat

Most Significant Threat	All respondents	Entity		Ethnic background		
		Federation BiH (n=752)	Republika Srpska (n=438)	Bosniak (n=618)	Serb (=380)	Croat (n=190)
Serbia	28%	42%	5%	42%	<1%	40%
USA	18%	6%	39%	9%	42%	1%
Russia	16%	23%	5%	23%	1%	28%
EU	4%	1%	8%	1%	9%	2%
UK	3%	<1%	8%	-	9%	<1%
Germany	3%	1%	7%	1%	8%	1%
Croatia	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	-
Albania	2%	-	4%	-	6%	-
Hungary	1%	1%	-	1%	-	1%
France	1%	-	2%	<1%	2%	-
None	10%	10%	11%	9%	12%	10%
Don't know	9%	11%	5%	9%	4%	15%

Source: IRI 2025. Note: Spontaneous response; top 10 responses plus None and Don't know/Refused displayed.

The same deep polarization between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska, as between the main ethnic groups, is observed in the attitude towards the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. „In the Federation, responsibility is overwhelmingly attributed to Russia (45%), while only 15% point to the “West” and a marginal percentage to Ukraine (2%), suggesting a clear alignment with the dominant interpretation in the Euro-Atlantic space. On the other hand, in the Republika Srpska, an almost symmetrical reversal of these perceptions is observed: only 11% point to Russia as the main responsible party, while 43% attribute the blame to the Western countries, and 16% to Ukraine. It reflects an internalisation of an alternative narrative framework critical of Western actors. The same cleavage is reproduced at the ethnic level: Bosniaks (46%) and Croats (44%) predominantly point to Russia, while Serbs show an opposite orientation, attributing responsibility mainly to the “West” (51%) and to a significant extent to Ukraine (18%), with only 2% blaming Russia” (IRI 2025, 84; Goga and Brie, 2026: 56-57).

Figure 12. Views on Russian Federation’s invasion of Ukraine



Source: IRI 2025

All of these suggest not only divergences of opinion but also the existence of geopolitical borders between ethno-religious and linguistic communities.

CONCLUSIONS

The empirical evidence across the analyzed case studies strongly validates *Hypothesis 1*, demonstrating that the deepening of internal societal divisions directly causes geopolitical fragmentation and erects invisible, yet rigid, geopolitical borders within the same country. The reciprocal alignment of security threat perceptions and ethnic allegiances confirms *Hypothesis 2*, proving the existence of a circular causality where micro-level identity cleavages manifest as external geopolitical alignments, which in turn reinforce internal identity borders.

This research underscores that identity cleavages (ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, or even alphabetic) and geopolitical alignments share a deeply symbiotic, mutually reinforcing relationship. Identity is no longer merely a cultural descriptor; it functions as an active internal geopolitical border. There is an identity cleavage, with antagonistic positioning, divergent in relation to East-West geopolitical options.

This internal polarization directly translates into divergent, antagonistic geopolitical paradigms at the sub-national level. Public opinion data highlights a stark rift in security imaginaries and threat perceptions between communities. On a systemic scale, the collapse of communism, coupled with prolonged ambiguity regarding European integration, has allowed extreme ethno-nationalisms to fester. While the conflicts of the 1990s appeared to be frozen, the compounding global crises since 2008—culminating in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—have unfrozen these fault lines, instigating localized "Identity Revolutions". These internal fractures create profound societal insecurity that is actively weaponized and logistically leveraged by both domestic elites and external revisionist actors. European integration has ceased to be perceived as a routine, technocratic reform process; it has evolved into a deeply polarized, symbolic, and easily reversible geopolitical choice.

This study demonstrates that internal identity disputes are linked to broader regional and global geopolitical competition. In the absence of a decisive, unambiguous, and firm integration strategy from the European Union and NATO, these internal geopolitical borders will continue to harden.

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