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Contextualizing Peace-Building Environments from a Sustainability Perspective: Findings of a Pilot Study in North Macedonia

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Abstract

Sustainability constitutes a key element of peace, which denotes not only the absence of war but also the presence of social conditions and capacity that enable the attainment of development outcomes in areas vital to basic human needs. Under this premise, this study explores how and which areas of sustainability may contribute to efforts to establish lasting peace in conflict-affected, fragile settings. It draws upon the framework of “circles of sustainability” to provide a preliminary trends analysis of the peace-building environment in North Macedonia. We have cross-referenced relevant policy documents with the public opinion of the citizens. The results obtained from this method yielded both similarities and differences, such as the fact that the economy was ranked second in both policy documents and public opinion. Differences emerged with regard to the prioritization of ecological and cultural aspects, with policy documents privileging ecology and public opinion heavily focusing on cultural factors. In light of the latest manifestations of cultural tensions during the referendum process on changing the country’s name, it becomes both an urgent and challenging task for policy-makers to consider which cultural aspects are important to the public and how they can be addressed.

Keywords

North Macedonia, sustainability, peace-building, capacity, circles of sustainability.

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Introduction*

Sustainability implies a lasting capacity within society that enables the satisfaction of its current and future needs without jeopardizing life support systems on Earth.¹ Its relationship with peace is recognized in the contemporary peace-building policy agenda, which was formally introduced by the United Nations (UN) in the early 1990s as part of the world body's efforts to "identify and support structures which tend to strengthen and solidify peace to avoid a relapse into conflict."² In this strategic approach, peace is conceptualized as opposed to conflict which may take a violent form, especially when the basic human needs of society (e.g. physical safety, food security, access to regular income, freedom from oppression and discrimination) go unmet by governing authorities.³ The specific experiences of many "post-conflict" countries also point to the fact that the formal end of armed clashes through political settlements does not necessarily indicate transition to durable peace.⁴ It has been documented by development agencies that countries where citizens remain vulnerable to economic, political and environmental shocks (e.g. financial crises, military takeovers and disasters) due to weak or corrupt governance and public service delivery systems are prone to repeated cycles of violence.⁵ Consequently, it has become a widely-shared consensus in international policy circles that lasting peace requires longer-term engagement with the development of self-sustainable structures and mechanisms that have the potential to support the capacity of society to manage its internal tensions and cope with external challenges.⁶

The inclusion of a sustainability perspective within peace-related policy frameworks in the international arena represents an understanding that sustainability refers to an ongoing process. It entails strengthening society's structures and relationships that allow for a more effective management of natural, human, and institutional resources. In this process, producing domestic assessments of sustainability may help identify potential vulnerabilities, and consequently contribute to the taking of preventive measures against their potential or actual "adverse impacts on social and natural systems that are fully focused on people's needs."⁷

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This paper aims to offer a preliminary trend analysis of sustainability in a conflict-affected, fragile setting. It reports on a pilot study undertaken in North Macedonia, which has experienced an inter-ethnic peace-building process since the signing of the internationally brokered Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) in 2001. The study was conducted between July 2015 and December 2016 and sought to address two basic questions: (1) How does sustainability appear in the official policy documents the Macedonian state authorities have produced to consolidate peace in the post-Ohrid era? and (2) How does it appear in people's perceptions? The analysis of both policy documents and citizen attitudes draws upon the concept of "circles of sustainability," which Scerri and James developed as an integrated analytical model to examine sustainability as an overarching social condition that has economic, political, ecological and cultural aspects.⁸

The case of North Macedonia is both interesting and relevant to the objective of understanding the contextual dynamics of the planning and implementation of internationally promoted peace-building frameworks for at least two major reasons. Firstly, North Macedonia, which, despite differing from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Kosovo in terms of the timing and intensity of ethnic conflict and the degree of international involvement, illustrates the basic

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parameters and inherent limits of the international community's approach to conflict transformation: i.e., sustainable peace-building through democratic state-building. Prior work by Susan Woodward, for instance, suggests that varieties of state-building processes have come into existence in the Balkans because of the diverging treatment towards the states that emerged from the former Yugoslavia. Woodward asserts that the model of independent states in the cases of BiH, Macedonia and Kosovo "was drafted by outsiders, either U.S. government lawyers (from the State Department and the National Security Council) or U.S. and EU diplomats" who did not write the required foundational documents in the countries' native languages. In fact, according to Woodward, "they were not even translated into local languages at the time and [are] in some provisions, not even translatable."⁹ The aim of these externally drafted constitutions was solely "to end wars between parties (three in

Bosnia and Herzegovina, two in Kosovo and two in Macedonia)” and accept the sovereignty claims of the favored parties while also enforcing a fait accompli of minority rights on the rest of the populations.¹⁰ Disregarding the ethnic and cultural nuances of the region, problems of ethnic divisions were merely shoved aside during the state-building process, resulting in three states that have been struggling to reach sustainable societal harmony.

Secondly, despite its seemingly multicultural democracy, North Macedonia has continued to be affected by turbulent politics ranging from corruption scandals to the contested conclusion of the almost three-decade long name-dispute with Greece. It has also been plagued by ethnic and cultural divides that have run even deeper in the post-Ohrid era.¹¹ Given the potential effects of this state of affairs on the fragile conditions of peace in the country, (and elsewhere, such as BiH, where there has been increasing emphasis on ethnicity as once again reflected in the results of the recent elections,¹² and Kosovo, where talks of a land swap between Serbia and Kosovo may reignite deep-seated ethnic disputes),¹³ it becomes fair to ask: To what extent can cultural and ethnic tensions be excluded from the formal processes of creating and maintaining the types of social systems and relationships that are conducive to the sustainable management of resources? We would like to note that it is our intention to conduct similar research in the future in BiH and Kosovo, which appear to have common structural and institutional foundations.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of sustainability as a means of peace and elaborates on the “circles of sustainability” concept. Using the “circles of sustainability” framework, the next section provides an analysis of the relevant policy documents and social attitudes on sustainability in North Macedonia. Our findings demonstrate a sharp contrast between the understandings of sustainability by the survey respondents and Macedonian policy planners. The policy implications of these findings will be discussed in the conclusion.

Social Sustainability as a Means for Durable Peace

Identifying and assessing the conditions of durable peace has been a key area of interest for both researchers and policy planners since Johan Galtung’s seminal work on negative and positive peace.¹⁴ The distinction Galtung made between the two states of peace originates from the recognition that violence may take different forms and it cannot be equated with the “material manifestation of coercion” because the threat of violence as a “mechanism of social control” remains “latent in social relations.”¹⁵ In other words, the absence of

direct or personal violence (i.e. negative peace) does not necessarily denote peace, because structural and indirect or cultural manifestations of violence (such as social injustices and inequalities) undermine its durability. A similar point has also been taken up by other researchers, who, by drawing attention to different types of inequalities, such as those relating to income distribution¹⁶ and access to resources by cultural groups,¹⁷ have sought to shed light on the dynamics of social and political stability.

Galtung's conceptualization of peace as a relational phenomenon has guided the UN's policy of peacebuilding introduced in the post-Cold War era with the objective of addressing the "root causes of conflict."¹⁸ In this policy framework, durable peace associated with conflict transformation is conditioned on the presence of institutions, structures and relationships that enable societies to meet their basic development needs and improve the quality of life of their members in an equitable and inclusive manner.¹⁹ A more recent example of the recognition that society's sustainability capacity and peace mutually reinforce each other is the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, which identifies the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies as one of the key components of the UN's *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs):

...The new Agenda recognizes the need to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies that provide equal access to justice and that are based on respect for human rights (including the right to development), on effective rule of law and good governance at all levels and on transparent, effective and accountable institutions.²⁰

Yet sustainability, which is about improving long-term human wellbeing, entails making choices as to which needs should be prioritized and how they should be pursued to promote social peace and prosperity.²¹ The concept of "circles of sustainability"²² may provide a helpful tool to investigate the requirements of sustainability that are dependent on subjective concerns and judgments. It aims to combine the analysis of both top-down policy planning processes and bottom-up community attitudes through use of a comprehensive "social life questionnaire". In this methodological model, sustainability

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is taken as a social condition that is shaped by different forms of social relations, practice and meaning across four conceptual domains: politics, economy, ecology and culture.²³ By treating sustainability as the “social” element that constitutes an overall category of enquiry, the “circles of sustainability”

approach aims to investigate the ways in which humans live and relate to each other and the environment, and highlight the prevailing objectives and ambitions at both the policy-making and community levels.²⁴ Political, economic, ecological and cultural characteristics all interact with each other within specific social contexts, and this integrated approach may help clarify the relationships between issues in different domains.²⁵ This is done by dividing the four domains into seven subdomains which give a coherent and meaningful sense of the social through outlining themes for each domain, as shown below.²⁶

Domains of Sustainability as a Social Phenomenon

<p><i>Ecology</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Materials and Energy - Water and Air - Flora and Fauna - Habitat and Settlements - Built-Form and Transport - Embodiment and Sustainance - Emission and Waste <p><i>Economics</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Production and Resourcing - Exchange and Transfer - Accounting and Regulation - Consumption and Use - Labour and Welfare - Technology and Infrastructure - Wealth and Distribution 	<p><i>Politics</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organization and Governance - Law and Justice - Communication and Critique - Representation and Negotiation - Security and Accord - Dialogue and Reconciliation - Ethics and Accountability <p><i>Culture</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identity and Engagement - Creativity and Recreation - Memory and Projection - Beliefs and Meaning - Gender and Generations - Enquiry and Learning - Wellbeing and Health
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Surveying policy documents to contextualize official discourses of sustainability, and mapping out community perceptions of sustainability are the two

main components of the “circles of sustainability” approach we have incorporated into our study that aims to deliver a snapshot of North Macedonia’s sustainability by bringing together analyses of relevant policy frameworks and community attitudes. We have used NVIVO (a qualitative data analysis software) to review the above domain themes in the policy documents Macedonian authorities have produced, and a “social life questionnaire” for capturing community attitudes. The questionnaire, composed of 50 questions (10 demographic questions and 10 for each of the four domains), was administered in Skopje and Tetovo. It was available in both paper and online versions and in Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish and English languages.

An Overview of the Peacebuilding Process in North Macedonia

Before outlining North Macedonia’s sustainability profile, it would be worth providing some brief information on the background of the peacebuilding process in the country. North Macedonia was the only constituent part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to gain independence without war. However, preexisting tensions between Slav Macedonians and ethnic Albanians escalated in the period post-independence from former Yugoslavia, particularly following the intensification of the armed clashes between separatist Albanians and the Serbian security forces in Kosovo in 1998, and NATO’s military intervention a year later.²⁷ For many Macedonian Albanians, who, according to the 1994 census, comprised about 23% of the population,²⁸ the state structure was based on unfair institutional arrangements. For instance, the constitution designated Macedonian Orthodox Christianity as the state religion and Macedonian as the only official language of the country, while prohibiting the use of Albanian in parliament and higher education.²⁹ In addition, Albanians were underrepresented in local government, law enforcement and security institutions, and subject to systematic discrimination in day-to-day life.³⁰ While Albanians felt that they were treated as second-class citizens, Slav Macedonians feared that the Albanians’ long-term objective was secession and even the creation of a “Greater Albania” through uniting with their co-nationals in the region.³¹

The mounting tensions, fueled by a widely-shared sense of exclusion and victimhood, escalated further in March 2001 when the newly formed paramilitary organization, the National Liberation Army (NLA), embarked on a rebellion in the largely Albanian-populated Northwestern part of the country. Clashes with the Macedonian army led to the displacement of more than

150,000 people – around 7% of the country’s population.³² Compared to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) which fought for independence from Serbia, the NLA had limited political objectives and achieved most of them through the internationally-brokered Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) signed in August the same year.³³ The OFA granted Albanian language an official status in municipalities where it is spoken by at least 20% of the population, stipulated its use in education and parliament, and introduced proportional ethnic representation in public administration and the formation of a power-sharing arrangement to better integrate Albanians and other ethnic minorities into a unitary state structure in exchange for the cessation of violence by all parties.³⁴ The OFA also assigned a disarmament and stabilization role to NATO, which deployed a small force of 3,500 troops to collect the weapons of rebels. The following year, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), founded by Ali Ahmeti, the NLA’s political leader, joined the coalition led by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), successor to the League of Communists of Macedonia. The inclusion of the DUI in the government met strong opposition from some ethnic Macedonians who viewed it as a dangerous concession to Albanian “rebels” and “terrorists.”³⁵ The 2006 parliamentary elections resulted in the victory of the conservative-nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO DPMNE) which chose the second largest Albanian party, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), as its coalition partner. Nikola Gruevski’s VMRO and Ahmeti’s DUI formed a coalition shortly after the snap elections in June 2008 and dominated the country’s politics until the December 2016 elections.

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in the rule of law. For instance, the storming of the Parliament by VMRO DPMNE supporters in protest against the election of ethnic Albanian MP Talat Xhaferi, a former guerrilla, as speaker of the Parliament, made the world news in April 2017. Images showing SDSM leader Zoran Zaev, who report-

edly agreed to the recognition of a country-wide official status to the Albanian language as a precondition for the formation of a coalition, covered in blood, came as a shock for NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and other European leaders.³⁶ The attacks were indeed the latest in a prolonged political crisis facing the country since early 2015, when Zaev released recordings of phone conversations, which appeared to reveal that former prime minister Gruevski's government was illegally surveilling more than 20,000 citizens, including journalists, academics, civil society personnel and even members of its own government. Through mediation from the EU, a special prosecutor was mandated by the parliament to launch an investigation into the allegations of spying and corruption.

In May 2018, Gruevski was found guilty of abusing his powers over the purchase of a luxury vehicle.³⁷ Shortly after the Appeal Court's verdict later in October, which confirmed his two-year imprisonment, Gruevski fled to Hungary where he announced he had been granted political asylum by PM Viktor Orban, well-known for his staunch opposition to asylum.³⁸ A more recent example of the country's vulnerabilities may be seen in the escalating tensions during the name-change referendum as part of the Prespa Agreement concluded in June 2018 to resolve a long-standing dispute with neighboring Greece and pave the way for North Macedonia's membership in NATO and the EU.³⁹ While supported by ethnic Albanians, the deal received strong criticism from both the Macedonian and Greek opposition, highlighting lingering national sentiments in the region. Indeed, Macedonians who opposed the agreement linked their ethnic and cultural identity to the name 'Macedonia'. From their perspective, by agreeing to the name change imposed by Athens and Brussels, Zaev had humiliated the country. President Ivanov, for instance, described the deal as "historical suicide" and called for voters to boycott the referendum.⁴⁰

Data Gathering and Presentation

The data for this pilot study was extracted from two kinds of sources: policy documents and reports in the framework of sustainability, and surveys conducted by Macedonian residents in 4 different languages (Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish and English). In order to combine top-down and bottom-up approaches, 64 policy documents/reports on sustainability available in English and 296 survey responses were used for the empirical evaluation of this study.

The data pool for the survey demonstrates a satisfactory gender ratio (47.1% female and 52.9% male), while there appears to be a gap in education levels, age and economic well-being. More than half of the survey participants indicated that they have bachelor degrees or higher academic qualifications. Approximately 65% of the participants were between the age groups of 20-29 and 30-39. Most participants also seemed to be comfortable with their financial situation; 52% of respondents indicated that they were “comfortable” and 34% chose the “well-off” option.

The following section clarifies the details on how the raw data was processed. Before explicating the details of the data and its results, the authors would like to emphasize that we are not testing any hypothesis in this analysis and are aware that it is not a representative sampling. Rather, our study is a preliminary trend analysis conducted for illustrative purposes only. The findings should therefore be considered as suggestive. We are planning to extend the research with a nationally representative sampling in the future.

For the aggregation of our data pool we used snowball sampling. This helped us find other participants during field research. ATLAS.ti’s word cruncher was used to extract the count of words that were mentioned within the text of the documents. These raw word counts were added up manually for each domain of the circle of sustainability. Synonyms and related words were considered when adding words to these domains. For instance, “clean water,” “water,” and “drinking water” are all part of the water and air pillar of “ecology”. Through this method, a simple content analysis of the policy documents was processed.

We compared the content of policy documents to that of the survey responses by identifying how much importance is focused on an issue. We also hand coded the survey responses by classifying each response after the demographic questions into two general categories of “significant” or “insignificant” issues.

Significant for

- “Strongly Agree” and “Agree”
- “Passionately Concerned,” “Very Concerned” and “Concerned”

Insignificant for

- “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree”
- “Not at All Concerned” and “Not Concerned”

From this data, we can gather that “culture” appears as the most important aspect of sustainability for the participants.

	Survey	Policy Documents
Ecology	1,501 (24.06%)	23,120 (40.65%)
Politics	1,496 (23.98%)	9,534 (16.76%)
Economics	1,553 (24.89%)	17,526 (30.82%)
Culture	1,689 (27.07%)	6,683 (11.75%)

Table 1: Emphasis on each circle of sustainability in the survey and policy documents

Findings

The findings of this pilot study reveal a sharp contrast between the understandings and requirements of sustainability held by the survey respondents and the country’s policy planners. While “culture” is the most important aspect for participants, “ecology” was the most mentioned element of sustainability in policy documents, with “culture”-related content mentioned the least. “Politics” is relatively similar in both, ranking at 3 in policy documents and 4 in survey responses. “Ecology” and “politics” rank higher in the policy documents, but “politics” has a relative similar ranking for both the survey and policy documents (ranking fourth and third respectively). For both the survey responses and the policy documents, “economics” and “ecology” are ranked closely to each other (second and third respectively for the survey and second and first respectively for the policy documents). This relative closeness in rank is also illustrated in the content of the policy documents.

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One possible explanation for “culture”-related concepts to be less relevant in policy documents might be a rationalization by the country’s policy-makers and bureaucrats that including cultural issues in strategic frameworks could inflame inter-ethnic tensions, which can easily turn into violent confrontation. In February 2011, for instance, around 100 ethnic Macedonians and Albanians were involved in clashes at the fortress in Skopje over the con-

struction of a museum-church that resulted in the injury of eight people, including two police officers.⁴¹ The killing of five Macedonians in 2012, and the sentencing of the Albanian defendants to life imprisonment for “terrorism” two years later triggered a wave of violent protests in the capital.⁴² Furthermore, a police operation in ethnically mixed-Kumonovo in May 2015 left eight members of the security forces and fourteen Albanians, including former liberation fighters from Kosovo, dead.⁴³ The timing of the offensive, just days before the opposition’s planned anti-government demonstrations in protest of the wiretapping revelations raised concerns among local and foreign political analysts.⁴⁴ Johannes Hahn, the EU’s enlargement commissioner, was quoted in the media as stating that the violent event “cannot and should not distract from the very serious internal political situation” and it “should not be used to introduce a further complexity by injecting ethnic tensions into the situation.”⁴⁵

An alternative explanation for the lesser emphasis on culture in the policy documents might be that the country’s electoral politics makes transformative policy interventions in the area of culture too politically costly. The OFA, which ended the armed conflict in 2001, introduced proportional representation and power-sharing to generate sustained peace through facilitating the representation of minority groups in the political and institutional realm. The power-sharing model, designed to reconcile the Macedonian position on maintaining a unitary state structure with Albanian demands for greater exercise of parliamentary influence,⁴⁶ institutionalized ethnicity as the basis of the country’s governmental and institutional structuring. Indeed, the governments (including those formed before the OFA) in North Macedonia have always been ethnic coalitions made up of a large Macedonian party and a minor Albanian party.⁴⁷ The introduction of proportional representation and power-sharing has only formalized this system, which gives the country’s politicians little incentive to respond to the cultural demands of all Macedonian citizens. Hence, the policy focus on the overarching ecological, economic and political issues rather than cultural factors may be understood as a manifestation of the country’s elites’ tendency to keep culture as an exclusive area to use for political gains at the ballot box.

On the other hand, the public, according to the survey results, is concerned with the survival of their cultural beliefs and values. In a historically divided society with a recent experience of violent conflict such as North Macedonia this may not come as a surprising development. The majority Slav Macedo-

nians who dominate state power tend to view the society as Macedonian in cultural terms, whereas the minority Albanians who emphasize the multi-cultural character of the society mostly live in the Northwest parts of the country.⁴⁸ Even in mixed areas such as Skopje or Kumanovo, Albanians and Slav Macedonians have maintained almost entirely segregated social and economic relations, living in different villages or urban quarters.⁴⁹ Due to the religious divide between Islam and Orthodox Christianity, inter-marriage is also a rare event.⁵⁰ The 2001 violence represents the clash of these two, completely different visions of the society.⁵¹ As evidenced by the persistence of ethnic political parties, the inability of ruling coalitions to pursue strategies around issues that cut across ethnic differences, incidents of ethnically motivated violence, and the lack of political will to address past human rights violations, North Macedonia has been “far from [an] integrated society.”⁵²

Considering the developments in North Macedonia since the wiretapping scandal, the survey questions assigned to each circle are especially indicative of society’s sentiments. One of the main problems that the leaked conversations brought back to the surface was the ethnic tensions that the OFA had sought to mitigate. The implementation of the OFA was modelled through ethnic power-sharing between the two biggest Macedonian and Albanian parties, VRMO-DPMNE and DUI, that had governed the country for almost a decade since 2008. However, rather than using the OFA as a strategic guideline to develop the foundations of a multi-ethnic society, the two parties “turned the agreement into an instrument for seizing state resources and expanding their patronage networks,” which are difficult to dismantle.⁵³ At the same time, the power-sharing model provided the coalition partners with a scapegoat for the setbacks that citizens encountered.⁵⁴

In addition to revealing large-scale illegal surveillance and abuse of power by the Gruevski government, the wiretap recordings also contained some denigrating conversations between VMRO officials about ethnic Albanians that posed a serious political challenge to Ahmeti, whose years of coalition partnership with Gruevski had already significantly shattered his “old rebel credibility” and claim to promote community interests.⁵⁵ It appears that Zaev’s SDSM, which increased its seats from 34 to 49 at the December 2016 elections, attracted at least twice as many Albanian votes as the DUI.⁵⁶ VMRO and DUI, which tended to use the ethnic makeup of the country to generate political power and leverage, were the two biggest losing parties in the elections.⁵⁷ In addition to the DUI, which won 10 seats, three other Albanian par-

ties gained representation in the parliament – with the newly formed BESA Movement receiving 5, the Alliance of Albanians 3, and the Democratic Party of Albanians 2. As noted earlier, except for 2006-8, the ruling coalitions were formed between the Macedonian and Albanian parties that won the majority of the votes from their constituencies. During the 2014 elections, the VMRO had the majority of the parliamentary seats (61 out of 120) and its inclusion of the DUI was rather a procedural decision.⁵⁸ Even though they had fewer seats, the “Albanian camp” had better bargaining power and chance to push their agenda as their support was crucial for the formation of a new coalition led by the VMRO or SDSM.⁵⁹

Shortly before Gruevski received a mandate to form a government from President Ivanov in January 2017, the DUI initiated a platform with the BESA Movement and DPA and encouraged the adoption of a series of demands as preconditions for the formation of a government. These demands put little emphasis on tackling corruption and the rule of law weaknesses that underlie North Macedonia’s deep-rooted political crisis, and were largely focused on essentially difficult-to-accept ethnicity-based preconditions such as the extension of the official status of Albanian across the country and the start of talks to change the flag and national anthem.⁶⁰ In making these demands, Ahmeti had sought to promote the idea that VMRO and SDSM have the same attitude toward Albanians and ensure the return of Albanian votes during the 2017 elections.⁶¹

As a result, it is essential to briefly consider how the exploitation of ethnic tensions, along with the facts of the political scandals, may have affected the public’s perceptions of the government and their responsibility for sustainability. To start with attitudes on cultural safety, half of the respondents (51%) feel either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the safety of communities and freedom of cultural expression in their locality, while 19% of the respondents fall on the opposite end of the spectrum. Even though it is difficult to identify the ethnic breakdown of survey respondents, as some of the participants completed the English version, the share of negative responses, somewhat close to the ratio of the Macedonian Albanians in the population, may reflect the minority Albanians’ safety concerns due to these rising tensions. However, the survey results, regardless of participants’ ethnic background, indicate that there are mixed-to-positive feelings toward ethnic and cultural freedom. Over three fourths of the respondents (79%) feel that people living in their locality are free to celebrate their own rituals and commemorations publicly. While

there is a significant consensus that ethnic minorities can practice their traditions freely, it does not mean that those specific minorities agree on this statement. Since our survey did not ask for ethnic identity beforehand, there is no means of proving that ethnic traditions are satisfyingly practiced. Future research may add ethnicity as a controlling variable and highlight these ethnical and cultural relations more precisely. Currently, even official documents make reference to culture only minutely.

Cross-referencing with the government documents, only 11.75% of the content is comprised of the circle of culture (See Figure 1), the lowest out of all within the documents. This somewhat reinforces the idea that ethnicity and culture are merely touched on to avert criticism towards corruption and authoritarianism. From another perspective it can also reinforce the idea that the ethnic matters of society were never formally considered as an aspect to improve upon, which might suggest that the majority Macedonian party was still deeply discriminating toward Albanians.

On a side note, the results suggesting that culture is less emphasized in governmental documents could be explained by North Macedonia's vulnerability to external pressure, specifically from the EU, which it aspires to join in the years ahead. Given the fact that North Macedonia's NATO accession process is on its way to being finalized, as more than half of the members, including Turkey,⁶² have ratified the accession treaty,⁶³ and that the EU has announced that the prospect of accession talks will be opened no later than October 2019,⁶⁴ North Macedonian government documents would naturally be inclined to highlight aspects that do not display issues of ethnic tension. Any implication in formal policy frameworks of ethnic dissonance within Macedonian society is likely to slow down or even halt the accession processes for both international organizations, as it may be used as a reference point for requiring additional governance reforms. Such a reaction from the EU could be discerned during the Kumonovo incident mentioned above.

The survey results also exhibit a consensus that the Macedonian state institutions are deeply flawed. This is illustrated by the 83% of the respondents who felt "concerned," "very concerned," or "passionately concerned" about the corruption of local institutions, and a meagre proportion of agreement (12%) on the government's capacity to make decisions and laws that are good for their lo-

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cal lives. This feeling of public distrust in the country's politicians and institutions is not exclusive to ethnicity, which was only used by the governing authorities to create a smokescreen that diverts attention from more pressing issues such as unemployment, which reached 31% in 2012 and regressed to 22% in 2017, or the fact that around a quarter of the population lives under the poverty line.⁶⁵ Additionally, there is little hope among the public that they can influence the authorities surrounding them: 34% of respondents believe this is possible, while 27% disagree. These responses display an uncertainty and split in society's level of trust toward state institutions and authorities. In relation to the government documents, the circle of politics seems less of a concern, only constituting 17% of the total content. The lack of concern about stable institutions or a solid judiciary system could be credited to the system that the prior majority parties have set up.

When it comes to the economic aspects of sustainability, the circle of economics is the second-highest out of all the content of the policy documents (30.82%). Looking at the content of the gathered documents, matters pertaining to North Macedonia's economy appear to be one of the most important priorities of the government. The policy emphasis on economic issues notwithstanding, the survey responses suggest that the public is highly concerned about matters of living standards or slumps in the local economy. For instance, around two-thirds of respondents (67%) do not believe that wealth is distributed widely enough in their locality so that all can enjoy a good standard of living. Furthermore, a significant majority of the participants (79%) are, to various extents, concerned about a slump in the local economy. However, despite this negative outlook most of the respondents (70%) agree that economic growth can be compatible with environment sustainability, suggesting that the respondents do not think of this relationship as binary. This is also relevant to the environmental sensibility of the public as discussed below. Yet, trust in local or governmental institutions to mitigate economic fluctuations are at very low levels. Considering the corruption scandals, these negative public attitudes are not surprising at all.

Last but not least, ecology also displays significant disparities between the public and the government. In terms of participants' satisfaction with the environment they live in, positive responses (45%) outweigh negative ones (23%). However, only 21% of the participants expressed confidence in the ability of experts to find a solution to environmental problems, suggesting that citizens' reported levels of satisfaction with the environment might just

be based on personal attachment, not because governments and experts are effective at managing ecological and environmental issues. This pattern is also reflected in participants' views on the role of their surrounding environment in their identity, with 41% feeling that their identity is bound to the local natural environment and landscape in which they live.

Regarding data collection locations, we would like to note that we have chosen only Skopje, the nation's capital and biggest city, where Macedonians form the majority of the population, and the Northwestern city of Tetovo, mainly populated by ethnic Albanians. The ethnic composition of the cities and the status of the respective dominant communities may have impacted the respondents' perceptions about the weight of the cultural factors that were highlighted. Furthermore, using only two big cities could also explain why the respondents identified themselves as financially comfortable. People who are financially comfortable may be inclined to emphasize societal or "high-political" issues. The financial background of the respondents may become a limiting factor for the data when considering the possibility of the extent to which the responses of people living in rural places may differ from those of city-dwellers. At first thought, rural locations' responses would most likely differ in the areas of "environment" and "economy". Considering the scale of towns and villages, and their relative lack of urban infrastructure, some basic needs such as transport or access to electricity could be much more essential to survey respondents. Conversely, due to lower average incomes and the opportunity to grow basic produce for nourishment, most respondents would not assign as much significance to general economic issues such as growth or unemployment as city-dwellers might.

Another characteristic of the data collected is the fact that the resulting percentages of the circles are not drastically different from each other. This could be indicative of how the public perceives each circle as a fundamental component of the complete whole of the concept of sustainability. That is to say, each circle should be equal parts of a whole. Naturally, given its capabilities, each state can only show so much attention to each circle through specific policies. Our results suggest that the North Macedonian state seems to significantly favor one over the other, specifically ecology (40.65%) and economy (30.82%) over the others. While there are certainly going to be differences in each area, concerns may arise when an area of sustainability such as culture is primarily neglected in the content of policy documents (11.75%). As Luc Rychler points out, sustainable peace not only requires "the absence of vio-

lence” but also “the elimination of unacceptable political, economic and cultural forms of discrimination.” Sustainability in North Macedonia can only become potent if the core of issues is tackled in a more comprehensive and integrated manner. Considering the historical background of the conflict in North Macedonia and the way in which ethnic issues have been addressed, much like in BiH and Kosovo, the limited attention given to culture in the policy documents is noteworthy. Nevertheless, as this is a pilot study designed to provide a preliminary trends analysis, further research may need to be undertaken, not just in North Macedonia, but also in similarly “peace-rebuilt” Balkan countries, in order to reach more decisive conclusions.

Notwithstanding such limitations, the study should provide further insight for policy-makers, for instance, with regard to the interaction between geographical context and the construction of identity and how these factors can have implications for the policy level. As noted earlier, ecology is the most mentioned circle within the policy documents, and culture is the least. The emphasis in the survey on the cultural aspects of sustainability and the respondents’ perceptions of the relevance of the landscape to identity, on the other hand, draws attention to the point that outcomes in one circle are linked to processes in another. Interdependencies between circles require policies that are designed from a holistic perspective. In the context of ecological sustainability, for instance, the consideration and integration of local meanings, understandings and relations into policy frameworks may provide a useful guideline for policy planners in their efforts to better respond to the development needs of the community and improve its members’ quality of life.

Conclusion

In this paper, we took sustainability as the center of our contextualized analysis of North Macedonia, which has been undergoing a peacebuilding process since the short-lived violent conflict in 2001. Our analytical approach, based on the “circles of sustainability” concept, sought to demonstrate how sustainability appears in policy documents and people’s perceptions. By ranking each “circle of sustainability” for policy documents and survey responses through number of mentions and “significance” scales respectively. By juxtaposing the bottom and the upper echelons of the Macedonian political spectrum, we have concluded that the circle of “culture” is the most significant aspect for the survey participants, while the circle of “ecology” is the most important for policy documents. However, there is an alignment in ranking for the circle of “economics” which is ranked in second place for both the surveys and poli-

cy documents. Due to North Macedonia's economic and political handicaps, both the government and the people seem to be concerned on a similar scale.

However, it is difficult to say the same thing about the circle of culture, which is addressed in our survey but ranks lowest in the policy documents. Moreover, deducing from our survey responses, a majority of participants do not encounter ethnic and cultural discrimination, leading us to deduce that ethnic and cultural tensions, which were perceived by only a minority of the public according to our respondents, may have been incited by the earlier governing authorities. On the other hand, recent political developments such as the Prespa Agreement and the subsequent September 30th referendum indicate that bilateral relations are still heavily affected by ethnic and cultural factors. Under these circumstances, our study has merely touched the tip of the iceberg of the ethnic and cultural dynamics that pervade political life in the Balkans. With that being said, future analysis could introduce ethnicity to the survey responses, allowing the research to control for ethnic background, clarifying which ethnic groups perceive there to be ethnic strife. Such studies could also make use of integrated models of sustainability with the top-down/bottom-up approach applied in this research as basis for other cases, such as BiH's new internal politics or the direction of the Prishtina-Belgrade dialogue.

Perhaps most disturbingly, despite being the fuel of conflict in North Macedonia and the Balkans in general, ethnic and cultural factors are largely neglected in the policy documents. There are significant differences between the public's and government's perceptions of circles such as "ecology" or "culture," each ranking differently in survey responses and policy documents. Considering the region's historically fraught background in terms of ethnicity and culture, it may be advisable for policy planners to take into account the public's perceptions toward culture as revealed in this study. By encouraging future research to focus on the cultural- and identity-based aspects of sustainability, a more comprehensive understanding of ethnic tensions and their legitimate sources may also be established.

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