

**ELONA GJATA**

**BILINGUALISM: AN INSTRUMENT  
BEYOND NATIONALISM – A CASE  
STUDY OF THE ALBANIAN  
COMMUNITY IN NORTH MACEDONIA**

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**Bilingualism: An Instrument Beyond Nationalism –  
A Case Study of the Albanian  
Community in North Macedonia**

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# **Bilingualism: An Instrument Beyond Nationalism – A Case Study of the Albanian Community in North Macedonia**

## **Introduction**

North Macedonia, a country with a diverse ethnic composition, was established as an independent state on September 8, 1991. The country declared its independence after a referendum in which the majority of citizens voted for separation from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It was later admitted to the United Nations on April 8, 1993, under the temporary name 'The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' due to a name dispute with Greece.

North Macedonia is a multi-ethnic country. It is home to various ethnic groups, including Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Serbs, Bosniaks, and other smaller groups, such as the Roma and Vlachs. The latest statistics, publicly released by the State Statistics Agency, are a testament to

this diversity. They are based on the results of the census held from September 5 to 30, 2021, and reveal the following ethnic composition of the country (see Table 1). North Macedonia, a country struggling with significant tensions and conflicts among its diverse ethnic groups, is especially marked by strained relations between Macedonians and Albanians along its western border. These tensions, which have far-reaching implications for the country’s stability, have been intensified by nationalist sentiments and vocal demands for political and cultural rights from various other ethnic minorities.

**Table 1:** Ethnic composition of North Macedonia according to the 2021 census

<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Macedonian	54.21%
Albanians	29.52%
Turk	3.98%
Roma	2.53%
Serbs	1.30%
Bosniaks	0.87%
Vlach	0.44%

The coexistence of ethnic communities in North Macedonia has been a complex issue throughout history. The use of languages is a critical aspect of ethnic coexistence in North Macedonia. The country’s constitution guarantees the Macedonian and Albanian languages as official languages for education and public communication.

On January 11, 2018, the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia approved the Law on the Use of Languages,

marking an important advancement in the use of the Albanian language. Although by law, Albanian has not yet been given equal status with Macedonian (which is still found in the text as “the language spoken by 20% of the citizens”, putting the name “Albanian language” in brackets), the Law has expanded its official use in central and local government institutions (see Ibrahim 2020: 16).

However, there have been debates and conflicts regarding their practical use. For example, one of the most discussed issues has been using the Albanian language in public institutions (see Murati 2022). Tensions between the respective communities have arisen due to claims of disrespect for their language in different contexts.

Several studies have been carried out regarding the linguistic situation in North Macedonia, which have addressed various issues. One of the topics discussed is Languages and identities in North Macedonia which is related to Legal and Political Challenges to State Formation (Andeva, Sela, Matovski 2022). There are studies that have addressed language and identity in the context of the Ohrid framework agreement and liberal notions of citizenship and nationality in Macedonia (Daskalovski 2002). Other studies are related to the use of languages in institutions in the public sector, both at the central and local levels, where the difficulties in their actual and practical implementation, as well as the various challenges, are addressed, which shows the need for continuous efforts to achieve an effective system (Sela, Matovski 2022). Studies in the framework of bilingualism or multilingualism are addressed in relation to the factors that have influenced its development, referring mostly to bilingual education in Macedonia (Hajrullai 2019). Linguistic diversity and the advantages of bilingualism/multilingualism in North Macedonia, referring to the Albanian community (settled in Gostivar), has been another subject that has been quite

discussed with this phenomenon (Banjica, 2016).

I aim to follow a new approach to the language situation in North Macedonia. This is about promoting bilingualism as an instrument or tool to oppose nationalist feelings in multiethnic societies, serving as a model for other multiethnic societies facing similar problems. This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the current state of bilingualism (Albanian-Macedonian) within the Albanian community in North Macedonia. It also seeks to analyze the policies and practices of bilingualism in Albanian-majority areas and beyond. The study will primarily focus on the younger generation in universities and high schools to examine their views on nationalism and attitudes toward the language.

To achieve these goals, in April 2024, I conducted fieldwork in two cities in North Macedonia, Skopje and Tetovo, where the percentage of ethnic Albanians is the highest. I used various methods to gather data, including participant observation in schools, universities, institutions, cafés, and bazaars where Albanians reside. I conducted participant observations and conversations with young people and different citizens in these cities. I also conducted some interviews using a semi-constructed questionnaire among different age and gender groups, and the preliminary results are discussed below<sup>1</sup>. Through interviews with different individuals, the research aims to create a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between language and nationalism in the Albanian community, making the research more inclusive and representative.

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<sup>1</sup> I consider these results preliminary because the study will be expanded to other cities in North Macedonia, such as *Dibra*, *Kërçova*, *Gostivari*, *Kumanova*, and *Struga*. These cities have a higher percentage of Albanians, and I aim to obtain more data for my research topic.

## Preliminary Results

For the initial phase of the study, 166 interviews were conducted with young people and different locals. The specific breakdown is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Location breakdown of the interviews and number of respondents

Location	No. of Respondents
Locals in Skopje	26
7 Mars School, Tetovo	24
Nikolla Shtejn high school, Tetovo	33
Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje	11
Students of the University of Tetovo	72
<b>Total</b>	<b>166</b>

The main findings of our study with student groups in Skopje and Tetovo are presented below.

### *Fieldwork in universities and schools*

Based on the results of the questionnaires provided to Albanian students at Cyril and Methodius University and the University of Tetovo, we focused on the relationship between this group of young people and the Macedonian language. Below is a summary of the data we collected from their answers to better understand the bilingualism phenomenon (Albanian-Macedonian) within this generation.

#### a) University Section

Average age: 21

Knowledge of Macedonian: Intermediate level (in most cases they only speak the language, a small part has both spoken and written competence).

The place where they learned it: School (as it is a compulsory language from the 4th grade of primary school).  
Using: Institutions, work relationships



The greatest interest: the Turkish language.

TV programs they follow: Albanian, Turkish, and English

The language used in the family: Albanian, Turkish

The language used in the cult premises: Albanian (while praying in Arabic)

The findings from the responses to the questionnaire given among high school Albanian students in Skopje and Tetovo are presented below<sup>2</sup>:

b) High school Section

1. Average age: 16 years

2. Compulsory languages taught at school: Albanian, Macedonian, English

3. Macedonian knowledge level: Basic spoken competence.

4. Use of Macedonian: Institutions

5. Interest in foreign languages: English and Turkish

6. TV programs they follow: Albanian, Turkish, English

7. Language used in the family: Albanian.

a) Based on students' conversation, it appears that they have not acquired above-average skills in Macedonian due to a lack of interest, as their local community is predominantly Albanian and does not prioritize the development of Macedonian language proficiency. Some have also indicated dissatisfaction with the quality of Macedonian language teachers. Immigration is another contributing factor, as most individuals plan to leave the country and prioritize learning German and English for future integration abroad. Additionally, the prevalence of inter-ethnic marriages leads to a more diverse linguistic environment and influences their approach to acquiring the Macedonian language.

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<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire was conducted in the following high schools: *Zef Lush Marku* in Skopje, *7-Marsi* in Tetovo, and *Nikolla Shtejn* in Tetovo.

b) Regarding the situation at the high school level, the Macedonian language is mandatory in Albanian schools. Still, many students lack interest in it as they see it as the language of the “other”. In addition, they find it challenging to understand because they have little interaction with the Macedonian community, surrounded mainly by Albanian speakers. Another argument raised by second-year students at the “7-Marsi” school in Tetovo is that they feel they do not have to learn the Macedonian language.

Based on the nature of these responses, one can infer that Albanian youth prioritize preserving their ethnic identity over their regional identity. If one agrees with this perspective, we might see it to remain loyal to their ethnic patriotism. These observations suggest an increasing sense of nationalism among the younger generation in urban areas with a larger Albanian population, such as the city of Tetovo, in this specific instance.

For instance, in Tetovo, the sense of nationalism among young people is stronger than in Skopje since the Albanian community makes up a larger percentage of the population. In Skopje, this feeling diminishes due to the city’s bilingual lifestyle, which puts constant pressure on residents for social integration. Additionally, the percentage of the ethnic Macedonian community is higher in Skopje than in Tetovo. Considering these results, I am interested in exploring the following research questions: How are language and nationalism manifested in smaller cities with a majority of Albanian residents? Is Macedonian perceived as the language of the “other”?

## **The Bazaar of Languages: Where Cultures Meet**

The Old Bazaar is part of the Çair municipality and has a significant concentration of an ethnic Albanian community. Below is a snapshot of the bilingualism situation in the Old Bazaar, which is quite intriguing and diverse.

Considering this evidence, we will explore the potential implications of bilingualism or multilingualism in the Old Bazaar. Does it contribute to the social integration of the Albanian ethnic community, or does it risk their ethnic identity?

To further explore this situation, I created a survey and interviewed a diverse group from different areas of the Old Bazaar, including various ages and genders. The majority of respondents were male, as they are often business owners in this area<sup>3</sup>. Upon analyzing the data, it became apparent that men in the Albanian community are not just bilingual, but often multilingual (like money has no ethnicity or language). In addition to speaking Albanian, they are also proficient in Macedonian, Serbian, and Turkish.

Mastery of the Macedonian language, including speaking and writing, is closely tied to its presence in the educational curriculum, where it is a mandatory language to learn. In the former Yugoslavia, those who pursued higher education completed their studies in the Macedonian language. On the other hand, proficiency in Serbian is related to its status as an official language in the former Yugoslavia. Additionally, some individuals also served in the military in Serbia or Croatia and were involved in trade deals with these countries.

The questionnaire distributed among citizens in the Old Bazaar was divided according to gender.

Women group: The respondents in this group speak Albanian, Turkish, and some Macedonian. They mainly use the Macedonian language at work, particularly when they work in Macedonian-led businesses and state institutions. Their proficiency in the Macedonian language is below

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<sup>3</sup> This suggests a patriarchal society where the male is the primary provider, resulting in a low percentage of female respondents.

average, and they typically only have speaking competence.

**Men group:** The respondents in this group are fluent in Albanian and have an above-average level of proficiency in the Macedonian language, both in speaking and writing. They are also fluent in Serbian and Turkish and have intermediate proficiency in English and German. They learned English and German while living abroad, as these languages were necessary for social integration in their new country. Their language skills, expanding beyond their native tongue, reflect the development of their lives in this society. This is a result of men being seen as the backbone of their families, which has also contributed to the growth of their language skills.

Several extralinguistic factors have influenced the development of bilingualism and the presence of multiple languages in the Albanian community. These factors include tourism, religion, and intercultural marriages. In Skopje, tourism has played a significant role in developing bilingualism. The Albanian and Macedonian languages are prevalent, along with a significant presence of the Turkish language due to the large number of Turkish tourists. Business development in the Old Bazaar, where the Albanian community is located, has also contributed to the bilingual environment (see Fig. 1, 2). The Turkish community, mainly in the Old Bazaar, is involved in various businesses such as clothing shops, selling lokuma (Turkish Delights), bridal wear, and tea shops, among others (see Fig. 3).

Religion is another influencing factor in the development of bilingualism. The Albanian community belongs to the Muslim faith, strengthening their connection with Turkey and the Turkish language. Interethnic marriages, particularly marriages between the Albanian and Turkish communities, also play a role in the practice of bilingualism/multilingualism.

I would like to add some very interesting additional information here regarding the Albanian community's learning of Turkish. This linguistic phenomenon is connected with the social title "sheherli" in the former Yugoslavia<sup>4</sup>. Other Albanian residents who did not know Turkish were not considered part of the citizen social class.

Bilingualism is practiced in the Old Bazaar, where Macedonian is used alongside the Albanian language. Throughout the market, all signs, such as street names and designations of cultural monuments, are displayed in both languages, as can be seen in photo example<sup>5</sup>. Based on the presence of bilingualism in the Old Bazaar, my question is: Is bilingualism respected in the city center of Skopje? From my observations and the evidence, the situation is unclear. However, it is noticeable that the further away we move from the Old Bazaar, the less the implementation of bilingualism related to the Albanian language is observed. This is noticed in the city center and some of the names of official institutions (as shown in Fig. 4, 5).

However, there are also cases where the implementation of bilingualism is present, such as the archaeological museum or its presence at the Skopje airport (as shown in Figs. 6, 7). Some private businesses in the city center have chosen to use only the Macedonian language for their signage, despite being located in an area with multiple language speakers (see Fig. 8, 9).

A good example of the parallel use of languages (Albanian-Macedonian) is the Mulliri i Vjetër Cafeteria, also known as the Albanian Cafeteria, nearby the Old Bazaar and Stone Bridge, which is quite popular among locals (see Fig. 10).

The presence of workers and customers from diverse

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<sup>4</sup> A social phenomenon that is similar to the situation in Kosova.

<sup>5</sup> I have full copyright responsibility for each photo in these examples, which are taken from my private archive.

ethnic backgrounds explains this situation. It is important to note that the Albanian employees in this cafeteria speak Macedonian with Macedonian customers and colleagues from the Macedonian community. On the other hand, employees from the Macedonian community do not speak Albanian with Albanian customers; they only communicate in Macedonian, both with customers and colleagues, as they do not know the Albanian language<sup>6</sup>. Once again, we see the development of bilingualism in the Albanian community in the city of Skopje.

## Conclusions

Bilingualism or multilingualism in the Albanian community in North Macedonia continues to be an issue that requires further observation and research. However, initial findings suggest that using multiple languages is closely linked to social changes. When comparing two time periods—during the former Yugoslavia and after its dissolution—it is evident that the use of two languages was more common (Macedonian or Serbo-Croatian)<sup>7</sup>. In the former Yugoslav government, it was closely related to education, military service in a country, and institutional service. However, nowadays, the factors that have most influenced the use of bilingualism/multilingualism in this community are tourism, religion, intercultural marriages, and immigration. However, this phenomenon is presented differently in the young generation. As far as their relationship with Macedonians is concerned, it is seen as the language of the “other”. By not learning it, they think

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<sup>6</sup> In my conversation with a boy from the Macedonian community who worked as a waiter in a restaurant hotel owned by an Albanian businessman, he told me that he could understand Albanian but could not speak it.

<sup>7</sup> The official language of the former Yugoslav Federation.

they better preserve their ethnic and linguistic identity.

As in the sketch by Key and Peele, the idea of “We are here, and they are there”. is present in North Macedonia. However, creating a familiar environment supporting all languages’ development could help improve inter-ethnic coexistence in North Macedonia. Neither language threatens the other; they can develop in parallel and independently.

As a researcher, I believe advocating for bilingualism is crucial for fostering connections and breaking down nationalist barriers in multi-ethnic societies.

Therefore, promoting bilingualism or multilingualism in a multiethnic society plays a vital role in its social and cultural integration. It strengthens ethnic identity, protects language rights, improves interethnic relations, strengthens democracy, and enables Albanian citizens to participate actively in the political processes and social life of the country.

## Photo documentary



Figure 1: Tailor shop (Ethnic Albanian tailor), Old Bazaar. The sign is in Albanian, Macedonian and Turkish.



Figure 2: Shoe Store in the Old Bazaar. The sign is in Albanian, Macedonian and English.





Figure 3: Turkish food shop serving Doner, Old Bazaar

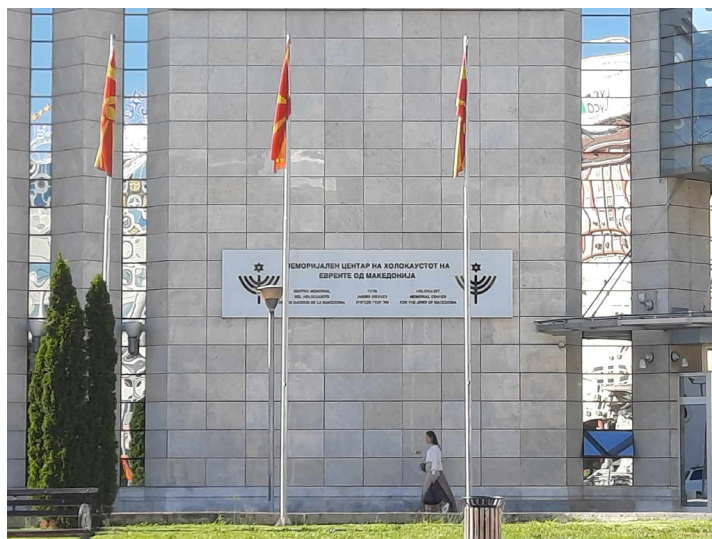


Figure 4 : Memorial Center of Holocaust, Skopje. Sign only in Macedonian.

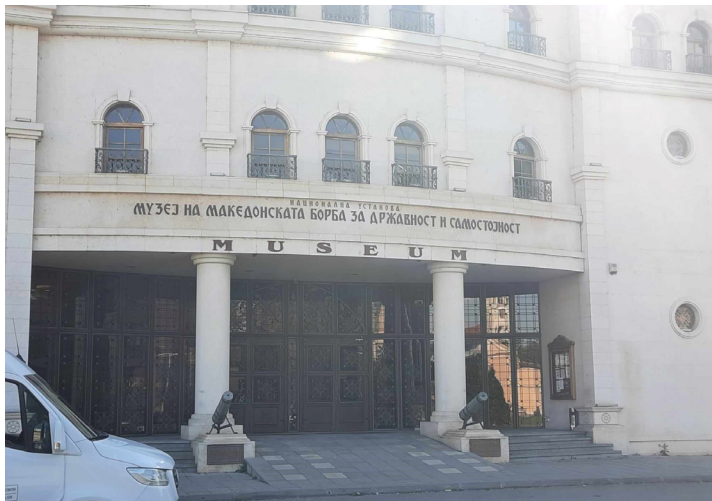


Figure 5: The National Museum in Skopje. Sign only in Macedonian.



Figure 6: Archaeological Museum, Skopje. Sign in Macedonian and Albanian.



Figure 7: Airport, Skopje. Sign in Macedonian, English, Albanian.



Figure 8: The shopping center of the city of Skopje. Sing only in Macedonian



Figure 9: Economic Bank, Skopje. Sign only in Macedonian.



Figure 10: “Mulliri i Vjetër”, Skopje



Figure 11: Stone bridge: The linguistic border<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I have full copyright responsibility for each photo in these examples, which are taken from my private archive.

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