

This article is published as part of a Special journal volume, which is supported by the Erasmus + Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence “**Technology and Innovations for Agenda 2030 - EU Global Leadership**” (**TIA2030**). The project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, Key Action: Erasmus+, Jean Monnet, Action Type: Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence, Project Reference: TIA2030 - ERASMUS-JMO-2023-COE-101127584.




Co-funded by
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Review article

Published online: March, 2026

GLIGOROV AND EUROPEAN PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY

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Abstract: This paper examines the political and historical role of Kiro Gligorov in the making of Macedonian statehood through a sociological lens. Focusing on the decisive period of the early 1990s, it analyses how Gligorov's leadership intersected with broader processes of social change, state-building and identity formation in the post-Yugoslav context. The study draws on Piotr Sztompka's sociology of social change, as well as broader debates on agency and structure, to conceptualise Gligorov as an individual actor operating within a dense web of institutional, geopolitical and cultural constraints. The paper pursues two main aims: first, to analyse the role of Gligorov in the political development and consolidation of the Republic of Macedonia; and second, to explore how his presidency interacted with wider socio-economic and socio-cultural transformations in Macedonian society. Methodologically, the paper is designed as a qualitative case study based on interpretive analysis of primary and secondary sources, including political speeches, interviews, constitutional documents and existing historiographical and political science literature. The analysis suggests that Gligorov combined moderation, legalism and pragmatic international engagement in ways that contributed to the peaceful emergence and consolidation of Macedonian statehood in a highly turbulent regional environment. At the same time, his public role helped to shape patterns of democratic culture, conflict avoidance and political discourse that extended beyond his formal mandates. By linking an individual-centred analysis of political leadership with a sociological reading of historical change, the paper contributes to broader discussions on the role of political actors in critical junctures and processes of state formation.

Key-words: Macedonian statehood, social change, political leadership, Yugoslav dissolution, transition

1. Introduction

The historical setting of President Gligorov's political career has been widely discussed in historiography and political science (Glenny 1996; Ramet 2006; Woodward 1995; Denitch 1996). Seen from a broader historical angle, Kiro Gligorov emerges as an important actor in one of the most unstable phases of twentieth-century Europe, shaped by the breakup of multinational states, sudden border changes, and new struggles over identity in the post-socialist region (Malcolm 1994; Bose 2002; Brown 1994; Woodward 1995). In these circumstances, political decisions were inseparable from institution-building, economic and social disruption, and an international battle

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for recognition and legitimacy (Linz and Stepan 1996; Huntington 1991; Rustow 1970; Skocpol 1979).

From the outset, this “battle” was primarily diplomatic. Gligorov’s long experience in federal Yugoslav institutions and his preference for legalistic argument equipped him to frame independence as a negotiated, internationally legible process – one that relied on recognition, multilateral engagement, and carefully managed relations with neighbours rather than coercion or symbolic escalation.

Periods of transition and “critical junctures” make leadership especially consequential, because choices taken then can determine a society’s direction for decades (Huntington 1991; Rustow 1970; Linz and Stepan 1996). Gligorov is analytically distinctive because his political experience stretches across two different state contexts: the federal system of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and, later, the independent Republic of Macedonia. That continuity likely gave him both practical knowledge of governance and heightened sensitivity to the dangers associated with state collapse and nationalist mobilisation.

Against this background, the paper has two linked aims. First, it examines Gligorov’s role in the political development and consolidation of the Republic of Macedonia through the lens of the “individual in historical context”. Second, it explores how his presidency connected with wider social and socio-cultural transformations in Macedonian society during the 1990s. Existing research often presents him as a leader associated with continuity, moderation, and pragmatic decision-making at a time when many neighbouring settings were marked by radicalisation, conflict, and polarisation (Danforth 1995; Ramet 2006; Roudometof 2002; Poulton 1995). Building on this view, the article asks: (1) how Gligorov’s leadership supported the consolidation of Macedonian statehood, and (2) how his public role influenced, mirrored, or interacted with the changing social fabric of the country in a period of deep transformation.

The analysis is grounded in Piotr Sztompka’s sociology of social change, which stresses the mutual shaping of structural conditions and human agency in moments of historical rupture (Sztompka 1994). Related theoretical debates similarly argue that individual action is always situated within institutional and cultural settings that simultaneously open possibilities and impose limits (Giddens 1984; Archer 1995). From this perspective, Gligorov’s historical significance is approached not only through personal qualities, but also through the domestic and international environment that framed his options. The article contributes empirically by offering a systematic sociological account that moves beyond biography and diplomatic history, and theoretically by applying Sztompka’s sociology of social change and the agency/structure debate to the concrete challenges of post-Yugoslav state formation.

2. Geopolitics, Identity and Interethnic Tensions

This section reports the main empirical findings of the qualitative case study. It draws on an interpretive reading of presidential speeches, constitutional and diplomatic documents, and key scholarship on the breakup of Yugoslavia and the early politics of independent Macedonia, using the theoretical lens presented earlier. The focus is on the ways geopolitical pressures, disputes over identity, and interethnic relations influenced the establishment and early stabilisation of Macedonian statehood.



Macedonia's independence was shaped by a wider regional environment marked by instability, shifting alliances, and competing national agendas. As the SFRY collapsed, the institutional and security framework that had previously structured political life disappeared, and the successor states had to define their own survival strategies under uncertain conditions (Bose 2002; Woodward 1995; Glenny 1996). This broader reordering can be connected to interpretations of nationalism that treat it as a modern, historically produced phenomenon grounded in particular institutions and cultural narratives (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Brubaker 1996).

In Macedonia, the state-building process immediately collided with external challenges that questioned or constrained national identity. The dispute with Greece over the name, Bulgarian arguments about the Macedonian language and nation, and unclear relations with the newly formed Federal Republic of Yugoslavia placed Macedonian diplomacy under exceptional strain (Danforth 1995; Roudometof 2002; Poulton 1995). As a result, building new institutions and securing international acceptance unfolded alongside efforts to defend identity claims – two tasks that progressed together and often made each other harder.

Gligorov's response was to treat these disputes as problems to be managed through sustained diplomatic work: building credibility with international organisations, keeping channels open with all neighbours, and presenting Macedonia as a predictable partner committed to international law. This approach aimed to "buy time" for internal institution-building while pursuing incremental breakthroughs – recognition steps, confidence-building measures, and pragmatic arrangements that reduced the risk that identity disputes would translate into security crises.

Externally driven pressures also intersected with domestic tensions in a vulnerable multiethnic society. The Republic of Macedonia entered independence with a large Albanian minority and other communities whose rights, political status, and representation became central issues of negotiation and contestation. The political leadership therefore faced overlapping challenges of democratisation, institutional consolidation, and interethnic accommodation (Bieber 2005; Daskalovski 1999). The constitutional settlement was expected to uphold civic equality while also acknowledging collective identities, at a time when regional memories of violence and conflict were still very present.

The transition was further complicated by the legacy of Yugoslav federalism, which combined a level of republican autonomy with strong centralised decision-making, and by the fact that many citizens still felt connected to the wider Yugoslav social and cultural space. For some, Yugoslavia's collapse was experienced as a painful break; for others, it created an opportunity for long-awaited national affirmation.

In this context, liberal-democratic values were not just abstract ideals. Equality of citizens, pluralism, and human rights became concrete benchmarks by which the new state's democratic legitimacy would be measured both internally and by international actors (Linz and Stepan 1996; Huntington 1991). A society emerging from a one-party socialist order was expected to institutionalise political competition and resolve disputes through formal procedures rather than coercion. Whether this worked depended not only on constitutional arrangements but also on political behaviour – especially the readiness to compromise, restrain nationalist rhetoric, and accept limits shaped by international norms.



Gligorov's political role can be understood as an ongoing effort to manage conflicting demands: calls for stronger national assertion on one side, and the need to avoid war and internal fragmentation on the other. His preference for peaceful disengagement from Yugoslavia, dialogue with neighbouring states, and step-by-step institutional strengthening was a way of operating within a narrow and risky strategic space (Ramet 2006; Woodward 1995). At the same time, Macedonia had to define its place within a broader regional security environment: it bordered countries involved in active conflicts and was part of a Balkan setting where NATO, the European Union, and other actors were invested in preventing further destabilisation. In that setting, Gligorov's stress on good neighbourly relations, multilateral engagement, and strict respect for international law functioned both as practical security policy and as a signal that Macedonia aimed to anchor itself in the emerging European security order rather than rely on unilateral military assertiveness.

3. Socioeconomic Transformation and Internal State-Building

Gligorov's presidency began at the moment when the new state entered a deep political and economic transition. After arguing for economic reform while Macedonia was still part of the SFRY, he now had the space to pursue an economic transformation agenda in an independent setting. The move away from a socialist, self-managed economy toward a market-based model was only one element of a much wider shift that touched almost every area of social life (Bornarova 2011; Trajkovski 2013; Daskalovski 1999).

Within roughly two decades, Macedonia went through strong, overlapping changes across several social subsystems: the economy (privatisation, liberalisation, new labour-market dynamics), social and welfare policy, politics (the establishment of multi-party democracy), the legal order, health care, education, culture, and broader value orientations. Research on post-socialist transitions shows that when multiple subsystems change at once, societies often see new forms of inequality, new lines of stratification, and new kinds of social risk (Skocpol 1979; Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1998; Archer 1995). In Macedonia, these shifts were fast and difficult, producing uncertainty and frequent recalibration, alongside resistance from parts of society.

A key consequence was a visible reshaping of social stratification – what classical sociology would describe as changes in the “class structure” (Skocpol 1979; Bourdieu 1998). New property relations, altered employment security, and unequal access to resources contributed to the emergence of new economic elites, while other groups lost the protections they previously relied on. For many citizens, rising unemployment, insecurity, and emigration became everyday realities (Bornarova 2011; Trajkovski 2013). These dynamics are also reflected in labour-market indicators: unemployment increased from roughly 24.5% (1991) to around 38.8% (1996) and remained very high in the late 1990s (World Bank Open Data, n.d., SL.UEM.TOTL.NE.ZS).

At the same time, Macedonia had to replace a broad but imperfect system of social protection with a more targeted welfare approach, precisely when state resources were limited. The situation was made harder by external shocks, including sanctions on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Greek embargo, which further narrowed the country's development options (Woodward 1995; Ramet 2006). Macroeconomic instability further constrained policy choices: consumer-price inflation was extremely high in the mid-1990s (e.g., 126.6% in 1994) before falling sharply in subsequent years (World Bank Open Data, n.d., FP.CPI.TOTL.ZG). At the same time, real output



pressures are visible in the trajectory of GDP per capita in constant prices, which captures the broader pattern of contraction and gradual recovery shaping living standards and social expectations during the transition (World Bank Open Data, n.d., NY.GDP.PCAP.KD). Political leaders were therefore forced to navigate between budget limits and strong public expectations for fairness, protection, and redistribution. In this setting, Gligorov's leadership unfolded under pressure from conflicting demands.

In his public framing, difficult reforms were often presented as a necessary price for long-term stability and eventual integration into European structures, providing a storyline that could help citizens interpret hardship. This did not remove dissatisfaction, but it supported the tendency for social tensions and protests to remain mostly contained within institutional and political procedures. As Sztompka argues, large-scale transformations are never purely structural; they also rework cultural meanings, expectations, and everyday practices (Sztompka 1994). In Macedonia, democratisation, market reform, and identity redefinition moved forward in parallel, and Gligorov's influence was expressed not only through formal decisions but also through how the transition was narrated and politically managed.

Even though the country faced serious problems and visible injustices, Macedonia avoided war and maintained basic institutional continuity in a region where state breakdown and violence were common. This cannot be explained solely through one individual, but Gligorov's style and choices contributed to keeping the transformation inside institutional boundaries and lowering the risk of a radical break. His public persona – calm, restrained, and oriented toward reason rather than emotional mobilisation – also shaped political expectations and offered a model of conduct during a period of uncertainty, becoming part of the broader context in which Macedonia did not descend into large-scale political violence or institutional collapse.

4. Leadership Style, Democratic Culture and International Positioning

It is important to note that Gligorov did not act in a vacuum. His leadership style was shaped and constrained by domestic political pluralism, by regional dynamics and by the expectations of international actors. He cultivated a style of communication that was measured, legalistic and oriented towards argument rather than emotional mobilisation. In a context where nationalist rhetoric elsewhere in the region often escalated tensions and legitimised violence, this approach can be seen as a deliberate choice to keep political conflict within institutional and discursive limits (Danforth 1995; Ramet 2006).

One of the elements that clearly reflects his capacity for strategic thinking is his use of international law and multilateral institutions. Having long experience within the Yugoslav federal structures and exposure to international diplomacy, Gligorov understood that Macedonia, as a small and newly independent state, could not rely on military power or coercion. Instead, it had to build its security through international recognition, legal agreements and participation in multilateral frameworks (Bose 2002; Woodward 1995).

In practice, this meant an explicitly diplomatic state-building strategy: prioritising membership and active participation in international organisations, seeking third-party mediation where bilateral talks stalled, and using formal agreements to stabilise Macedonia's external environment. His public messaging repeatedly linked sovereignty to responsibility – minority



protections, non-interference, and commitments to peaceful dispute settlement – because these were the “credentials” that made recognition and external support politically feasible for larger actors.

Although EC and later EU diplomacy could not stop the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the European framework remained central to Macedonia’s external strategy. Gligorov treated the European track not only as crisis management but as a long-term anchoring strategy: he framed Macedonia as a cooperative European partner, insisted on negotiated solutions, and used EU-led legal and diplomatic mechanisms to strengthen the country’s international position even when recognition and integration were slowed by regional disputes.

At the operational level, Gligorov’s team maintained regular communication with European envoys and capitals, aligning Macedonian positions with EC mediation steps and seeking to avoid being absorbed into the logic of wartime bargaining among the larger republics. This was especially visible in his emphasis on preventive international presence and confidence-building measures, as well as in the careful sequencing of independence, referendum legitimacy, and requests for recognition.

A key instrument of the EC effort was its legal-arbitration track: the Arbitration Commission of the Peace Conference (widely known as the Badinter Commission). The Commission’s opinions on the status of the federation and on recognition criteria reinforced Gligorov’s preference for legal argumentation and institutional ‘proof’ of statehood. Macedonia’s diplomacy therefore focused on demonstrating constitutional continuity, commitment to minority rights, and readiness to comply with emerging European standards that were being used as benchmarks for international recognition.

Within this framework, Gligorov positioned Macedonia as a ‘case for prevention’. He consistently communicated to EC representatives that Macedonia’s strategic priority was a peaceful and legally orderly exit from the collapsing federation, without territorial claims and without provoking neighbouring states. In the Carrington-led talks and related diplomatic contacts, he supported proposals that would keep channels open for a consensual transformation of the federation (for example, looser associations or confederal arrangements), while at the same time preparing for full sovereignty if a common framework proved impossible.

An important, and often underlined, dimension of Gligorov’s statecraft was his sustained engagement with the European Community (later the European Union) as the main external mediator in the early phase of the Yugoslav crisis. When armed conflict escalated in 1991, the EC launched a diplomatic initiative to prevent wider war, convening the Peace Conference on Yugoslavia under the chairmanship of Lord Carrington. The EC process relied on negotiated principles (ceasefires, protection of minorities, and respect for republican borders) and sought a political settlement that would allow the republics to redefine their relationship without violence.

5. EU and European Community diplomacy during the breakup of the SFRY

His foreign policy also shaped the country’s stability. Preventive deployment in Macedonia began in 1992 under UNPROFOR, and in 1995 it was reconfigured as a distinct UN mission, UNPREDEP. This development is often treated in the literature as an important precedent for preventive



deployment and an example of how multilateral mechanisms can help manage insecurity in fragile settings (Gow 1997; Stefanova 1997; Ackermann 1999; Lund 1996; Özçelik 2006; Ekinci 2010). Rather than offering direct security guarantees, the mission's contribution lay primarily in monitoring border areas, deterring potential spillover, and supporting confidence-building measures, thereby lowering the risk of escalation in a potentially volatile environment (Ackermann 1999; Stefanova 1997; Lund 1996). Gligorov's support for these arrangements reflects his awareness that, as a small newly independent state, Macedonia needed to rely on international law, diplomacy, and multilateral frameworks – an approach that aligns with broader debates on conflict prevention in post-Cold War Europe (Bose 2002; Woodward 1995). UNPREDEP is frequently cited in the literature as a rare example in which preventive diplomacy contributed to reducing the risk of conflict escalation in a potentially volatile environment (Ackermann 1999; Stefanova 1997; Lund 1996).

A second important aspect of his leadership concerns economic and social policy. While he supported market reforms and privatisation, he also insisted on the need for social cohesion and preservation of basic social protections. In a period when many other countries in the region experienced dramatic social fractures, including hyperinflation, mass unemployment and open conflicts around privatisation, Macedonia's trajectory was relatively more gradual, although by no means free of problems (Trajkovski 2013; Bornarova 2011; Brown 1994).

Moreover, Gligorov was aware that democratisation cannot be reduced to the introduction of elections. He emphasised the importance of parliamentary procedures, constitutionalism and the development of a political culture in which opponents are seen as legitimate competitors rather than enemies. This view resonates with broader theoretical understandings of democratic consolidation, which stress the internalisation of democratic norms by political actors and citizens (Linz and Stepan 1996; Huntington 1991; Rustow 1970).

One should also highlight his subtle but important influence on the media and public discourse. While the media system in Macedonia remained plural and often sharply polarised, Gligorov's refusal to engage in inflammatory rhetoric and his constant reference to the constitution and institutions set certain expectations about the tone and content of political communication. In this sense, his public persona contributed to the development of a more professional and responsible media practice, even if structural problems in the media sector persisted.

His role in building Macedonia's foreign policy was not limited to the early recognition of the state. He set long-term guidelines that emphasised good neighbourly relations, European integration and active participation in international organisations such as the United Nations, the OSCE and the Council of Europe (Bose 2002; Ramet 2006). A distinctive feature of this diplomacy was balance: maintaining dialogue with immediate neighbours while simultaneously anchoring Macedonia in wider European and transatlantic political spaces. By keeping the focus on rules, procedures, and multilateral norms, Gligorov sought to limit the leverage of maximalist identity claims and to prevent domestic polarisation from being amplified by external pressures.

A crucial moment for understanding Gligorov's leadership style is the assassination attempt on 3 October 1995 in Skopje. The attack, in which Gligorov was seriously injured and his driver killed, had the potential to fuel political radicalisation, conspiracy narratives, or retaliatory measures against perceived enemies. Instead, the immediate official response – shaped in part by Gligorov's



own public stance – emphasised calm, reliance on institutional procedures, and caution against speculation that could inflame tensions. Although the perpetrators were never officially identified and the event remains controversial, the publicly articulated approach after the attack prioritised restraint and institutional continuity rather than emergency-driven escalation. This episode therefore illustrates how, at a moment when leaders sometimes seek exceptional powers, Gligorov’s rhetoric and conduct signalled a preference for procedural order and political self-limitation. In comparative perspective, this places Macedonia in contrast with some other post-Yugoslav cases where violence and political crises were followed by the concentration of power in the hands of charismatic or nationalist leaders.

6. Gligorov and European (EC/EU) Diplomacy during the Yugoslav Crisis

A central strand of Kiro Gligorov’s international activity in 1991–1992 was sustained engagement with European Community (EC) diplomatic initiatives that sought to prevent the escalation of violence and to create an agreed framework for Yugoslavia’s transformation. While the dominant conflict theatres were elsewhere, Gligorov treated European mediation as decisive for Macedonia’s security: he aimed to “internationalise” Macedonia’s position early, anchor it in European legal-political processes, and reduce the probability that Macedonia would be pulled into a wider war.

In his London Conference statement (26 August 1992), Gligorov framed European mediation as a form of preventive security: “There are great expectations in the Republic of Macedonia that this Conference will ... create preventive conditions for surpassing new potential foci of crisis.” He warned that otherwise “violence and war ... will be an introduction into a wider ... Balkan and European war,” and linked regional instability to the fact that “for more than six months, the international recognition of the Republic of Macedonia is continuously being postponed” (Gligorov 1992).

Within the main EC-led mediation track – the Conference on Yugoslavia under the chairmanship of Lord Carrington – Gligorov’s approach combined principled restraint with tactical clarity. He consistently argued for solutions that avoided coercion and preserved inter-republic dialogue, at various moments favouring a reconfigured association or confederal formula as a non-violent exit from the crisis. At the same time, he signalled that Macedonia would not accept a settlement that subordinated its political will to decisions taken through force, nor one that would endanger its multiethnic balance or territorial integrity.

Carrington’s conference principles were also directly compatible with Gligorov’s legalistic approach. At the tenth plenary session in Brussels (9 March 1992), Carrington reiterated that the Conference was grounded in “no change of borders unless achieved by peaceful means and by agreement” (Carrington 1992). Earlier, as the republican presidents attempted to keep negotiations alive in 1991, the joint initiative associated with Gligorov and Alija Izetbegović was recognised as a serious compromise option: at the Stojčevac meeting (6 June 1991), the presidents agreed that “The proposal by Presidents Alija Izetbegović and Kiro Gligorov constitutes a solid basis to resume talks on regulating the relations between the Yugoslav republics” (HINA, as cited in Tuđman 2015).



Gligorov also followed closely the institutional-legal work that the EC attached to the diplomatic process. The establishment of the Arbitration Commission of the Conference on Yugoslavia (commonly referred to as the Badinter Commission) mattered for Macedonia because it translated political negotiations into legal opinions on statehood, borders, and recognition. Gligorov's strategy was to align Macedonia's decisions and constitutional steps with the emerging European criteria – including commitments to democratic governance, minority protections, and the inviolability of borders – so that Macedonia could be treated as a “legal case” rather than a military problem.

Gligorov repeatedly treated the Badinter Commission not only as an advisory body, but as a mechanism that could translate political deadlock into legal recognition. In the same 1992 statement, he invoked the Commission's report of 15 January 1992, noting that “only the Republic of Slovenia and the Republic of Macedonia fulfil the conditions to be internationally recognized” and that the “name ‘Macedonia’ does not imply any territorial claims” (Gligorov 1992). A contemporaneous UK parliamentary record similarly states that, after constitutional amendments and additional internationally binding statements, “Mr. Badinter ... then concluded that Macedonia did meet the 16 December conditions” (Macedonia - Hansard - UK Parliament 1992).

This European track was not purely technical. It was shaped by competing preferences among member states, shifting proposals for ceasefires and political formulas, and contentious debates over recognition. Gligorov's diplomacy therefore required continuous dialogue: communicating Macedonia's non-belligerent stance to European interlocutors, responding to successive European proposals, and managing the external sensitivities that affected Macedonia's pathway to recognition – most notably the disputes that delayed or complicated European acceptance of Macedonia's international status despite the republic's comparatively peaceful transition.

Taken together, Gligorov's engagement with EC/EU diplomacy illustrates a core feature of his state-building method: combining domestic restraint with external legitimacy-building. By investing in European mediation forums, legal arbitration mechanisms, and recognition debates, he sought to secure Macedonia's independence through negotiation, norms, and institutional guarantees rather than through confrontation. In this sense, European diplomacy was not an “add-on” to his leadership, but one of the main instruments through which Macedonia's independence project was made credible and internationally defensible.

7. Legacy, Public Memory and Ongoing Debates

The legacy of Kiro Gligorov in contemporary Macedonian society remains contested and changeable. He is often recognised as the first president of the independent state, linked to moderation, continuity and the avoidance of war in a highly risky regional context. At the same time, political and ideological actors advance different interpretations of his decisions – especially on relations with neighbours, the management of the name dispute, and the direction and speed of economic reforms (Vankovska 2010; Koneska 2014). Sociologically, these disagreements reflect broader struggles over how the recent past should be understood and what it should mean for present-day politics. For some, his readiness to compromise on symbols and formulations was a realistic strategy to secure peace and international recognition; for others, it was excessive accommodation that weakened the state's later negotiating position. These tensions mirror wider divides between pragmatic and maximalist national-policy approaches.



External assessments from the EC-led process contribute to the public image of Gligorov as a legalist and a restraint-oriented leader. Carrington's insistence that the Conference proceed on the basis of agreed rules – especially “no change of borders unless achieved by peaceful means and by agreement” (Carrington 1992) – closely matched the principles Gligorov articulated for Macedonia's policy. Likewise, the Badinter Commission's finding (as Gligorov quoted it) that Macedonia fulfilled recognition conditions reinforced later narratives that Macedonia's comparatively peaceful transition rested on deliberate constitutional and diplomatic positioning (Gligorov 1992).

Public memory of Gligorov is also shaped by generation. Those who lived through the 1990s often connect him to concrete experiences – referendum campaigns, speeches, the assassination attempt, and the wider atmosphere of uncertainty – while younger citizens encounter him mainly through textbooks, commemorations and periodic media retrospectives. Greater historical distance can encourage idealisation, but it also creates room for more nuanced academic readings that foreground both achievements and constraints.

Another part of his legacy lies in institutional patterns associated with his presidency. Emphases on constitutionalism, multilateralism and cautious reform influenced how elites later framed Macedonia's options, even when subsequent developments diverged. The continued prominence of “stability” and “European integration” in political discourse suggests that this basic orientation helped shape what counts as legitimate political goals.

These institutional patterns also shaped how later elites justified Macedonia's international trajectory. In debates about “pragmatism” versus “maximalism,” the EC recognition record is often treated as evidence that Gligorov's approach worked in practice: a UK parliamentary account of the period notes that, after Skopje's constitutional amendments and additional statements, “Mr. Badinter ... then concluded that Macedonia did meet the 16 December conditions” (Macedonia - Hansard - UK Parliament 1992). For supporters, this supports the view that restraint and legal compliance expanded Macedonia's room for manoeuvre; for critics, it highlights the limits of legalistic strategies when political vetoes and neighbour disputes remained decisive.

At the same time, persistent unresolved issues – prolonged disputes with neighbours, recurring interethnic tensions, and ongoing problems of corruption and clientelism – have encouraged criticism and counterfactual claims about whether a different strategy in the 1990s might have produced better outcomes. While such alternatives are hard to assess, it is clearer that Gligorov's leadership contributed to a specific combination of outcomes: international recognition, avoidance of war, and the establishment of a democratic institutional framework that, despite imperfections, endured.

Overall, his legacy is best seen not as a fixed record but as an arena of continuing interpretation, where politicians, intellectuals, citizens and external observers negotiate what the 1990s should signify for Macedonia's present and future.

8. Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of Kiro Gligorov in the making and consolidation of Macedonian statehood from a sociological perspective. Situated at the intersection of historical analysis and



sociological theory, the study has shown how his decisions and leadership style interacted with broader structural processes – geopolitical reconfiguration, socio-economic transformation and identity politics – during a critical juncture in European history.

Across the analysis, diplomacy emerges not as a secondary arena but as a core mechanism of state consolidation: recognition-seeking, multilateral security arrangements, and negotiated management of identity disputes formed the practical repertoire through which Macedonia reduced risk and expanded its room for manoeuvre.

Methodologically, the article applies a qualitative case study design focused on the formative phase of independence (1991 to the end of Gligorov's presidency). The empirical base draws on a defined corpus of primary and secondary sources: selected speeches and public statements, interviews and memoir material, constitutional and legal documents, and records of international organisations (UN/OSCE) related to Macedonia and the UN preventive presence (UNPROFOR/UNPREDEP), complemented by scholarship on Yugoslav dissolution, Macedonian politics and preventive diplomacy. Sources were selected based on relevance to critical turning points, the presence of institutional or normative justifications, and public or institutional salience. The analysis uses historically informed close reading and thematic coding to trace recurring frames (constitutionalism, international law, civic equality, restraint, compromise) across key episodes – the 1991 referendum and Constitution, early recognition obstacles, early interethnic tensions, and the evolution of the UN preventive presence – within an agency/structure approach (Sztompka 1994; Giddens 1984; Archer 1995). Claims about leadership effects are therefore presented as conditional and mechanism-based, supported by textual evidence and weighed against alternative structural explanations.

The first research aim concerned Gligorov's role in political consolidation. The analysis suggests that his emphasis on peaceful separation, constitutionalism and negotiated solutions with neighbours supported the emergence of an independent state that avoided war despite strong pressures (Glenny 1996; Woodward 1995; Ramet 2006). His support for preventive deployment and active engagement with international organisations strengthened Macedonia's security and international standing (Gow 1997; Stefanova 1997; Ackermann 1999; Lund 1996; Özçelik 2006; Ekinci 2010).

The second research aim addressed the interaction between his presidency and wider social change. The argument is that his moderation and legalistic style contributed to a political climate in which conflict was more often channelled through institutions rather than violence, even as inequalities and tensions persisted. In this respect, Macedonia contrasts with post-Yugoslav cases where nationalist mobilisation and institutional breakdown escalated into war (Bose 2002; Denitch 1996; Malcolm 1994).

Theoretically, the paper uses Sztompka's sociology of social change and the agency/structure debate to interpret Gligorov as an individual actor operating within constrained opportunities: not as a moral category, but as a way to connect leadership choices to decisive historical processes (Sztompka 1994; Giddens 1984; Archer 1995). Here, the emphasis is on restraint and the capacity to prevent worst-case scenarios rather than dramatic confrontation.



The article contributes by linking political, socio-economic and symbolic dimensions of leadership to sociological theories of historical change. Its main limitation is the selective nature of the primary corpus and the reliance on secondary literature; further work could extend the evidence base through archival research, comparison with other regional leaders, or studies of generational memory of Gligorov. Nonetheless, the case illustrates how leadership can shape not only formal outcomes such as independence, but also the tone of public life and the institutional management of conflict in periods of profound transformation.

Although the paper focuses on the political leadership of Kiro Gligorov and the making of Macedonian statehood, his approach can also be regarded through the lens of Agenda 2030 and its SDGs, which currently serve as one of the main frameworks for development at both the EU and global levels. Therefore, Gligorov's focus on institutional stability, incremental reforms, and constructive public diplomacy helped establish the foundations upon which long-term development, innovation governance, and international cooperation – principles that strongly align with contemporary sustainability agendas – could take root. In this sense, the Macedonian experience of state-building demonstrates how political innovation, diplomatic credibility, and cross-sector coordination function as important preconditions for sustainable modernisation. (United Nations - Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2016)

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