

## THE FOUNDATIONS AND DECLINE OF THE UNIPOLAR MOMENT: A MACEDONIAN PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

The reconfiguration of the global order exerts a significant impact on the security, stability, and political and economic realities of smaller states. Although smaller countries like the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) lack the power to directly influence global processes and often face geopolitical realities, a window of opportunity remains for the state to take an active role in ensuring and defending national security and prosperity. The ability to discern core global trends is of critical importance for RNM in order to remain aligned with global developments in a way that safeguards its national security. The Macedonian academic community and political leadership should be aware that the current historical moment, marked by the vanishing of the so-called “unipolar moment” and the emergence of a “multipolar world” characterized by a new balance of power, constitutes an exceptional political and security challenge for all. RNM is not an exemption. Like other countries of Southeast Europe and the “Western Balkans,” RNM, as a deeply divided society, is struggling to navigate the complex terrain among preserving its multiethnic and multiconfessional cultural identity, ensuring interethnic and interreligious tolerance as an alternative to the “national security” concept, encouraging economic development as a “common ground” in fragmented society and adapting to global political and normative frameworks. This context demands an in-depth understanding of the fundamental dynamics of unipolarity, the underlying causes of the waning of the established unipolar order in international relations, and a clear grasp of the principles upon which the emerging global power equilibrium is being constructed.

**Keywords:** Macedonian political reality, “unipolar moment,” “multipolar world,” globalization, international organizations



## **Introduction – from “bipolarism” through “unipolar moment” to multipolar world**

The Republic of North Macedonia’s (RNM) historical trajectory and geopolitical position have played a decisive role in shaping its response to global political transformations. Situated at the crossroads of empires, ideologies, and contemporary power rivalries, people living on the territory that today is recognized as RNM have experienced centuries of contested identity, shifting sovereignty, and political redefinition. In the post-independence era, the country has navigated a complex legacy of deep historical, political, and ideological divisions, as well as ethnic and religious fragmentation, while striving for democratic consolidation, institutional reform, and regional integration.

The unique geopolitical location on the Balkan Peninsula played a significant role in shaping its strategic decisions and foreign policy priorities during the “unipolar moment.” It is extremely important to understand to what extent globalization has facilitated or constrained RNM’s socio-economic development. Foreign investment, regional trade frameworks, and international cooperation have opened opportunities for growth and modernization, but they have also fostered new forms of dependency. Emigration of skilled labor, driven by demographic pressures and limited domestic opportunities, represented a devastating blow to the country’s development model during the “unipolar moment.” In such conditions, Macedonia could not remain competitive in a rapidly shifting global economy dominated by technological acceleration and asymmetrical capital flows. Throughout the “unipolar moment,” Macedonian society has longed for, expected, and hoped for successful European integration and the country’s membership in the European Union. During that long period of over three decades, hope and enthusiasm turned into disappointment and the silence of quiet suffering. The academic community and political leadership of RNM are seeking answers to two key questions: what will happen to the country’s European integration in the post-unipolar world, and whether the European Union, facing internal political fragmentation, slowed enlargement, and growing geopolitical competition, will be able to maintain its influence. International relations experts and political scientists carefully and systematically study the question of how can and should the European Union position itself in relation to the issue of how does the unresolved bilateral dispute between RNM and the Republic of Bulgaria (a member of the European Union) and as such enjoys its full solidarity and support, possibly influence in the medium term on emerging or exacerbated tensions regarding the national identity dispute (the question of the origin of the nation, language, statehood, national heroes, etc.) and how this could reflect on the supranational integration of the countries of the Western Balkans, taking into account their inherent connections, influence and interdependence, and what are the risks of regional instability if the EU fails to offer credible long-term perspectives to candidate countries.

RNM must navigate the complex terrain between preserving its cultural identity and adapting to global political and normative frameworks. The country should maintain a sense of national distinctiveness while aligning with transnational standards on democracy, human rights, rule of law, and market liberalization. Externally driven reforms must acknowledge the limits imposed by fragile public trust in both domestic and European

institutions. The globalization and unipolar moment constitute two pivotal phenomena shaping the international order since the fall of the Berlin Wall. While the “unipolar moment” enabled the global dissemination of economic and political liberalization under the leadership of the United States, globalization itself laid the groundwork for the emergence of new, powerful actors on the international stage. These actors have gradually begun to alter the structural configuration of the international system (Mearsheimer, 2018). As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, a discernible transition from a unipolar to a multipolar iteration of the world order, including challenging the concept of “globalization” by the concept of “sovereignism,” is underway. In addition to China (PRC) and the Russian Federation (RF), states that consider themselves as great powers are increasingly assuming prominent roles in global affairs. This ongoing shift challenges the durability of the post-Cold War iteration of the international order and signals the reconfiguration of global power relations.

### **Global peace and political stability as the shared interest of the international community**

The collective interest of the international community must be conceived not in narrow or expedient terms, but as the sustained pursuit of global peace, political stability, sustainable development, and genuinely shared prosperity—objectives that must be realized free from the distorting influences of hegemonic ambition, the burdens of imperial legacies, or the persistence of neocolonial designs in new forms. Such an understanding implies that the legitimacy of any emerging global order depends on its ability to distance itself from historical patterns of domination and asymmetry, replacing them with principles of equity, reciprocity, and mutual respect. Institutions that internalize and uphold these principles are uniquely positioned to function as credible and durable frameworks for global cooperation, not merely coordinating interstate behavior but shaping a normative order oriented toward the common good of humanity. By embedding these commitments into their structures, procedures, and decision-making processes, such institutions can transcend the logic of power politics and become genuine vehicles of collective problem-solving and ethical stewardship at the global level. It is increasingly evident that any potential resolution to the ongoing crisis of global governance (Gill, 2015) cannot emerge from fragmented initiatives or rhetorical commitments alone, but rather requires the establishment of a comprehensive, inclusive, and genuinely binding agreement among those member states of the United Nations that possess both the political will and the material capacity to shape international outcomes in a decisive manner. Such states, by virtue of their effective power and institutional reach, are uniquely positioned to initiate and sustain the construction of a reconfigured global order. This prospective order would, by necessity and definition, assume a multipolar character, reflecting the diffusion of power across multiple centers rather than its concentration in a single hegemon or narrow coalition. Crucially, the envisioned order must not simply replicate historical patterns of competitive balancing or zero-sum rivalries; instead, it must be conceived as constructive in its institutional

design, peace-oriented in its overarching objectives, and normatively committed to fostering stability, cooperation, and equitable participation in the management of global affairs. Such a reconfiguration presupposes, as a necessary precondition, the emergence of international conditions and institutional frameworks that are firmly grounded in a clearly articulated and mutually recognized distribution of geopolitical rights, responsibilities, and “jurisdictions” among the principal pillars, or poles, of the nascent multipolar system. This does not merely involve the redistribution of material power, but the normative codification of roles within a global order in which legitimacy and authority are jointly acknowledged. In practical terms, it entails the gradual establishment of a carefully calibrated and consensually accepted geopolitical architecture in which the exercise of power is no longer unilateral or hegemonically imposed, but rather collectively structured and balanced across a plurality of influential actors. Such an arrangement would rest upon the principles of parity among great powers, the recognition and safeguarding of state sovereignty, and the maintenance of a dynamic equilibrium of strategic influence. Only through such institutionalized arrangements can multipolarity evolve beyond a descriptive condition of global politics into a coherent and sustainable system of governance capable of fostering stability, predictability, and cooperative problem-solving on a global scale.

The sustainability of any future global order will ultimately hinge upon the capacity of states to move beyond hegemonic impulses and the pursuit of unilateral advantage, committing instead to institutional arrangements that simultaneously reflect the empirical realities of power and the normative imperatives of justice. What is therefore fundamentally required is not the construction of a rigid or overly prescriptive framework that selectively instrumentalizes certain values to rationalize and legitimize narrow, self-serving national interests under the rhetorical guise of “universal” or “civilizational” imperatives. Rather, what is needed is the cultivation of a genuinely shared value system—an underlying normative consensus capable of transcending parochial claims and functioning as the moral foundation of a pluralist yet cooperative international society. While the former risks producing a system of governance built on opportunistic appropriations of values for power-political ends, the latter would provide a stable and principled basis from which universally binding norms, rules, and especially legal frameworks can be consistently derived and coherently applied. Such a foundation can endow a new order with both legitimacy and durability, ensuring that international law evolves not as an instrument of domination, but as an authentic expression of shared commitments to justice, equity, and peace. Such values must not be shaped, delimited, or constrained by frameworks of civilizational determinism, which presuppose the existence of deep, immutable, and inherently antagonistic divisions among cultural blocs and elevate these alleged cleavages into the primary organizing principle of global affairs. To anchor the future of international order in such paradigms would be to perpetuate conflictual logics and to undermine the very possibility of genuine understanding, mutual respect, and functionality in global governance. By contrast, the normative architecture of the international system must be grounded in universally affirmable ethical foundations—principles that can be acknowledged across cultural, political, and ideological boundaries, and that therefore transcend the instrumental calculations of geostrategic competition or the exclusivist claims of particular civilizations. Only through the institutionalization of such universally

grounded principles can we envision an international legal and political order that is not merely formally global, but substantively inclusive, equitable, and durable. In this sense, the legitimacy of the emerging order must derive from its capacity to embody and reflect the common aspirations of humanity as a whole, rather than to serve as a vehicle for the strategic narratives or hegemonic projects of dominant powers.

Things in the real world, when it comes to geopolitical dynamics, are unfortunately highly complex, both at the global level and across different regions of the planet. The interplay of political, economic, and security interests often produces overlapping and contradictory processes, making it difficult to achieve lasting stability or a coherent international order. After the end of the Second World War in 1945, a new world order was established, founded on the hegemony of the United States and the Soviet Union, marking the beginning of a bipolar era in international relations (Waltz, 1979). This Cold War period (1945–1991) was characterized by ideological and geopolitical confrontation between the liberal-capitalist West and the socialist East, as well as by the creation of a number of international institutions, such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, which became the pillars of postwar global governance. By the late twentieth century, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, a unipolar order emerged under U.S. leadership. The 1990s were marked by the expansion of liberal democracy, globalization, and market capitalism, alongside the strengthening of international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the European Union. However, already in the early twenty-first century, this order began to show signs of erosion. The wars in the Middle East, the global financial crisis of 2008, and the rise of new powers such as China, India, and Russia, as well as regional blocs, have gradually shifted the system toward multipolarity. In the contemporary era, the third decade of the twenty-first century, international relations are defined by complex processes of deglobalization, digital transformation, and regional fragmentation. Instead of a stable hierarchy, the global system now operates as a polycentric network of power in which geopolitical, economic, and technological interests intersect. This marks the emergence of a new phase of the world order, fluid, uncertain, and competitive, in which the principles of sovereignty, cooperation, and global governance are being redefined.

### **Globalism vs. sovereignty<sup>1</sup>**

The trajectory of globalization, as well as the evolving dynamics within the system of international relations, will largely depend on the interactions, alignments, and rivalries among the USA and PRC, RF, India, and some other countries or organizations that claim the attribute of “world power” (Hoogvelt, 2001). These developments underscore the complexity of global governance in a world characterized by competing strategic

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<sup>1</sup> Sovereignism in political discourse refers to an ideological and political stance that emphasizes the preservation or restoration of national sovereignty in opposition to processes of supranational integration and globalization. The term is used to describe movements that resist the transfer of authority from nation-states to supranational institutions.

visions and the diffusion of economic and geopolitical influence. Following the end of the Cold War bipolarity (East vs. West, USSR vs. USA), the global geopolitical landscape underwent a profound transformation. The bipolar structure that had been dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union gave way to a unipolar configuration of international order, in which the United States emerged as the uncontested hegemon, wielding dominant political, military, economic, and cultural influence across the globe. The core features of this so-called “unipolar moment” include the United States’ status as the sole superpower with unmatched global reach and capabilities (Cox & Stokes, 2012). Liberal democracy and free-market capitalism became the prevailing models for political and economic organization worldwide, promoted both by international institutions and through American soft power. The U.S. economy stood as the most robust, innovative, and deeply integrated component of the global economic system, acting as a central engine of growth and financial governance. Militarily, the United States maintains the largest defense budget and possesses advanced armed forces, enabling it to project power effectively to any region of the world. In cultural terms, American media, Hollywood cinema, and other forms of popular culture exerted significant global influence, often shaping social and cultural trends beyond national borders and contributing to a broader process of cultural globalization. This phase of “unipolarity” marked a historical high point in American primacy, reflecting a convergence of ideological, institutional, and material advantages that reinforced the country’s hegemonic role in structuring the immediate post-Cold War international order. The “unipolar moment” profoundly reshaped the nature of international relations, redefining the role of the United States within the global system. In assuming the mantle of global policeman, the United States frequently intervened in various regions of the world under the justification of maintaining international order (Chomsky, 2015), safeguarding its national interests (Onea, 2013).

While globalization has deep historical roots, its scale and intensity have increased dramatically due to advances in information and communication technologies (Mearsheimer, 2018). The liberalization of global markets and the political will to pursue integration at both regional and global levels have been made possible by the construction of a complex network of international organizations. The role of international organizations in preserving global stability, from a basic logical standpoint, fundamentally depends on several of their key characteristics, which vary in nature. Among the most essential of these is whether such organizations, supported explicitly or implicitly by the US both “hard” and “soft” power, are formally founded upon the principles of global multilateralism—that is, whether they respect the equality of interests and goals among all member states, and more broadly, among all actors within the international system. International organizations could only contribute meaningfully to the stability of the global order if they embody a legitimate and inclusive multilateral framework. If, instead, they serve merely as a façade or instrument for advancing the particular interests and objectives of a single dominant power or a narrow coalition of states—while only formally maintaining a multilateral appearance—then their capacity to foster true global stability is fundamentally undermined. Sustainable global governance, therefore, requires institutions that are not only representative and procedurally fair but also substantively committed to balancing power, mediating competing interests, and promoting norms that

reflect the shared responsibilities and mutual recognition among diverse international actors. In contrast to such “universalist” aspirations, we must distinguish another category of organizations: those that are inherently regional or particularistic in nature. These institutions are established, organized, and institutionalized around a specific axis of interests and objectives within a global context marked by fragmentation—by the absence of a singular, cohesive world order. Instead, they emerge within a geopolitical environment defined by competing poles of power, conflicting regional agendas, and differentiated visions of order and development. Such organizations reflect the realities of a divided international system and are structurally embedded within spheres of influence or strategic alliances that prioritize the interests of a subset of actors rather than the international community, whatever it means, as a whole (Karns et al., 2024). Their institutional logic, therefore, is shaped not by an inclusive global consensus but by the strategic calculus of coalition-building in a pluralistic and often conflict-prone world.

Globalization (for some “Procrustean bed” of modern times), in contrast to sovereignism, manifests itself most visibly through the internationalization of economic activity, including the expansion of global trade, transnational investment flows, the outsourcing of production, and the formation of complex global value chains. This economic dimension served as both a driver and a consequence of the liberal world order fostered by U.S. leadership in the post–Cold War period, reinforcing American influence while also laying the groundwork for new global dynamics and emerging economic powers. Globalization has also widened the gap between the rich and the poor, giving a strong argument and “wind in their sails” of the “sovereignist” side. While it has enabled integration into global markets and facilitated technological diffusion, the benefits of globalization have been distributed unevenly, intensifying global and domestic inequalities. The deepening interdependence among states on a global scale has also led to a relative erosion of national sovereignty. In an increasingly interconnected world, nation-states are often compelled to align their domestic policies with dominant global norms, standards, and practices—especially as shaped by international organizations in which they participate. This alignment frequently occurs not only through legal obligations but also through informal pressures within the global governance architecture.

### **The decline of European dominance**

Throughout numerous historical cycles, Europe has played a pivotal role in shaping global political, economic, and cultural realities. The European Union (EU) represents a unique political and economic peace project after WWII that has brought about a wide array of significant achievements over the past several decades—not only for its member states but also for the broader international community (Patel, 2018). The history of European integration is rich with examples of successful cooperation among European countries and of tangible improvements in the quality of life for the citizens of EU member states. Among the most important accomplishments of the EU is the long-term preservation of peace on the European continent following the devastation of the Second World War

(Greenwood, 1997). In response to the tragic fate endured by many European nations during the war, a number of primarily Western European states committed themselves to preventing future conflicts by establishing close economic and political cooperation. This strategic choice laid the foundations for a new model of supranational governance, rooted in interdependence, mutual trust, and the shared pursuit of prosperity and stability. The establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, followed by the creation of the European Economic Community in 1957, laid the institutional foundations of today's European Union and ensured long-term peace among its member states. Through a gradual process of integration, the EU has developed one of the largest single markets in the world, enabling the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people. Today, the noble idea and vision of the European Union project face major challenges and difficulties. Reaching its paramount with the launch of the EURO, the EU faced the reality that "union of states" (closely attached to NATO as its "political wing" and strongly manipulated by the "Brussels bureaucracy") is the EU's integration maximum and being "union state" is just a wishful thinking of "euro-enthusiasts."

A range of structural factors contributes to the stagnation of Europe's broader socio-economic development, including demographic trends, institutional inertia, political fragmentation, and the challenges of maintaining cohesion within the European Union itself. These limitations have constrained the continent's ability to project influence and adapt to the shifting dynamics of a nascent multipolar international system. The European Union, as the principal political and economic union of European countries, is also contending with significant internal divisions and political disagreements. One of the most striking illustrations of Europe's ongoing political fragmentation is Brexit—the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union on January 31, 2020, following the referendum held on June 23, 2016.

This momentous development has profoundly undermined the hope that European states might, in the foreseeable future, find the unity and political will necessary to act as a cohesive and strategic actor on the global stage. Brexit exemplifies the structural difficulties facing the EU's integration project and raises pressing questions about the Union's future coherence, influence, and legitimacy in an increasingly complex and multipolar world order. The rise of China as an economic and political superpower, along with the growing geopolitical and economic influence of India and the reassertion of Russia on the global political stage, has further marginalized Europe's international standing. The continued dominance of the United States in global affairs (Onea, 2013) further limits the scope for European international influence and diminishes its prospects for the kind of global leadership many within the EU have long envisioned. This vacuum has allowed external powers to step in and assert greater influence in managing and responding to regional crises, thereby undermining the EU's role as a credible and stabilizing actor in its own geopolitical periphery.

## **The influence of the European Union on the Macedonian socio-political reality**

RNM, as a European and Balkan country with a population of approximately two million and an underdeveloped economy, is inevitably affected by global political shifts, including the weakening of the European Union's global economic and political influence. The EU has long served as a key partner and source of support for the countries of the Western Balkans; however, its declining political authority and growing internal divisions have generated serious economic, political, and security challenges for the region. RNM's geopolitical position, internal political challenges, and aspirations for membership in international organizations have all played a decisive role in shaping its political dynamics and relations with global actors. The end of the unipolar moment and the weakening of the European Union's global political influence have posed significant challenges for North Macedonia's long-term aspirations, in the context of existing Macedonian foreign policy positions. Internal divisions within the EU, enlargement fatigue, and unresolved bilateral disputes—such as the identity-based conflict with Bulgaria—have delayed accession processes and diminished public confidence in the European project. Meanwhile, external powers such as Turkey, Russia, and China have sought to expand their influence in the Western Balkans, filling the vacuum left by a less assertive Europe. The rise of populism within Europe, as well as broader global power shifts, has further complicated the geopolitical environment in which Macedonia must operate.

## **Conclusion: Principles of future political evolution and strategic positioning**

Political evolution and strategic positioning of RNM have been deeply shaped by global political dynamics, regional influences, and the long-term process of European integration. As a small Balkan state with a complex historical legacy and modest economic resources, RNM has faced numerous challenges in its quest for stability, modernization, and international legitimacy. Its geopolitical location, historical experience under multiple empires, and post-independence transformation have situated the country at the intersection of regional tensions and global shifts. Over the past three decades, RNM has actively pursued membership in international institutions such as the EU and NATO, undertaking reforms in the judiciary, anti-corruption measures, and human rights in line with external expectations.

Globalization and regional cooperation have had a dual impact on the country. On the one hand, foreign investments, liberalized trade, and involvement in regional initiatives have supported economic development, institutional reform, and diplomatic engagement. On the other hand, dependency on international financial structures, brain drain due to labor emigration, and demographic decline have exposed the vulnerabilities of small economies in a globalized order. Despite these constraints, RNM has demonstrated strategic adaptability and a continued commitment to democratic reform and regional engagement. The country seeks to preserve its national and cultural identity while aligning with broader global norms and standards. It recognizes that successful transformation requires more than institutional

reforms—it demands a long-term vision supported by political continuity and societal consensus. The future of RNM will, hopefully, depend on its ability to balance domestic stability with international challenges, navigate regional complexities, and position itself not as a passive recipient of global trends, but as an active contributor to shaping regional geopolitical architecture.

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