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Between Connection and Division: Social Media, Perceived Interethnic Hostility, and National Identity in the Albanian Diaspora from North Macedonia

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Between Connection and Division: Social Media, Perceived Interethnic Hostility, and National Identity in the Albanian Diaspora from North Macedonia

An exploratory cross-sectional survey

Abstract

Background: Social media may sustain diasporic identity while also circulating divisive interethnic narratives, yet identity reinforcement is not equivalent to ethnonationalist attitudes or online aggression. Methods: A bilingual online survey of Albanians from North Macedonia living in Switzerland, Italy and Germany yielded 35 responses (28–30 September 2026). Following documented data-quality and proxy-based eligibility exclusions, 30 respondents were analysed. Exploratory descriptive analyses, Spearman correlations, generation comparisons and robust regression models were supplemented by response-quality sensitivity checks. Results: Perceived national-content exposure was associated with respondents' sense that social media strengthened their Albanian identity ($\rho = .68$; $n = 29$), but was not reliably related to an ethnonationalist-orientation index. Perceived unequal rights correlated with ethnonationalism ($\rho = .69$). Support for unification and for Albanian–Macedonian coexistence were each endorsed by 50%, with 37% endorsing both. Second-generation respondents more often attributed a worsening view of Macedonians to social media (8/13 vs 1/15 in the first generation; Fisher's exact $p = .0036$). Reports of online conflict concerning national issues were common (23/29), but the survey did not measure cyberbullying victimisation or perpetration. Conclusions: The findings distinguish felt identity reinforcement from exclusionary political orientation and identify perceived interethnic hostility as a potential target for preventive research. The small non-probability sample, self-reports and cross-sectional design preclude causal or population-level conclusions.

Keywords: digital diaspora; social media; interethnic hostility; national identity; online aggression prevention

1. Introduction

Diasporic belonging spans territorial, familial and digital environments. Migrants may participate in host societies while sustaining ties to places of origin. Transnational approaches describe simultaneous ways of being and belonging (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004); digital-diaspora scholarship shows how dispersed communities communicate and circulate collective memories (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Candidatu et al., 2019). Such connectivity need not produce uniform political identities.

Digital platforms sustain language, history and intergenerational connections, but may also circulate grievances and hostile representations. Long-distance nationalism describes political investment in homelands from abroad (Anderson, 1998; Conversi, 2012). Online mobilisation varies across communities and settings (Chan, 2005; Nyangulu & Sharra, 2023; Kianpour et al., 2026). Digital communication can thus enable solidarity and intergroup antagonism.

National identification differs from exclusionary nationalism and aggression. Albanian cultural pride does not itself imply out-group devaluation or harassment. Political psychology distinguishes national attachment from unquestioning loyalty and exclusionary attitudes (Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Schatz et al., 1999). Methodologically,

perceiving negative out-group representations or reporting worsening attitudes is not equivalent to documenting an online-bullying episode.

Selective exposure, social ties and engagement-oriented ranking may reinforce salient content, although evidence links platform settings to polarisation and misinformation inconsistently (Germano et al., 2026; Kelm et al., 2023; Pamirzad & Chen, 2026). We therefore examine which perceived exposures correspond to distinct dimensions of belonging and interethnic attitudes. Prevention research must distinguish antagonistic content and interpersonal conflict from repeated targeting and victimisation; this survey measures the former only through self-reports.

Interethnic relations between Albanians and ethnic Macedonians have shaped North Macedonia since independence. The 2001 conflict led to the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which affirmed a multi-ethnic state and expanded inclusion, language rights and equitable representation (OSCE, 2001). Subsequent analyses describe continuing rather than completed adjustment (Daskalovski, 2025; Opašinova Šundovska, 2021). In this setting, "homeland" may refer separately to family, locality, kin-community and the state itself.

For minority diasporas, "homeland" may denote state, kin-nation or locality (Brubaker, 1996, 2005). Albanian migration from North Macedonia has generated village ties, remittances and investment beyond attachment to state institutions (Markov, 2017; Rydzewski, 2022). Reports from Kičevo describe a local remittance economy (European Stability Initiative, 2002), and the 2021 census enumerated many Albanian non-residents (State Statistical Office, 2022). Neither source supplies a representative comparator for this survey.

Generation may condition digital connection. Migrants born in North Macedonia have direct experience of its politics, whereas descendants born abroad may rely more on family accounts, visits and media. Research documents generational differences in transnational communication and identification with residence countries (Rinnawi, 2012; Levitt & Waters, 2002; Diehl & Schnell, 2006; ISTAT, 2020), alongside diverse Albanian-origin trajectories (Dushi, 2025). Offline contact and host-country circumstances remain alternative explanations.

We examine perceived interethnic representations and reported online conflict alongside identity, ethnonationalism, trust and homeland ties among respondents in Switzerland, Italy and Germany. The instrument concerned identity and belonging, not a diagnosis of cyberbullying. Here, online hostility denotes perceived antagonistic content and reported disagreements about national issues; repeated harassment, power imbalance and victimisation were not measured.

Five exploratory questions guide the study. RQ1 examines social-media exposure, Albanian identity and ethnonationalism. RQ2 considers homeland referents, attachment and institutional trust. RQ3 examines first- versus second-generation experiences. RQ4 asks whether pan-Albanian unification and Albanian–Macedonian coexistence can both be supported. RQ5 examines perceived interethnic hostility, misleading content, worsened views of Macedonians and national-issue conflicts online, and their cautious preventive implications. Analyses are hypothesis-generating, not causal.

2. Methods

2.1 Study design, recruitment, and analytic sample

The study used a cross-sectional online survey administered through Google Forms in Albanian and English. Responses included in the supplied dataset were submitted between 28 and 30 September 2026. Participants were recruited through diaspora networks among people described as Albanians from North Macedonia living in Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. The sampling strategy was therefore non-probability convenience recruitment rather than population-based sampling.

Thirty-five questionnaires were collected. Two invariant midpoint responders and three respondents meeting an indirect eligibility proxy (Macedonian as main home language and D1 rated 1 or missing) were excluded, leaving n = 30. Three near-straightliners (identical answers to at least 80% of attitude items) were retained in primary analyses but omitted from sensitivity analyses (n = 27). One participant selecting "both" for birthplace was not assigned a generation. The proxy cannot verify ethnicity, which was not directly requested.

2.2 Questionnaire domains and measures

The questionnaire covered demographics (A), social-media use (B), perceived content (C), identity and interethnic attitudes (D), homeland ties and trust (E), perceived effects and online conflict (F), and open responses (G). Agreement and trust used five-point scales. F10 asked about conflicts with friends or relatives arising from online national-issue discussions (no/sometimes/often); it did not measure initiators, repeated targeting, power imbalance or victimisation. Inapplicable generation-dependent responses were recoded as missing. A voting item was excluded because its interpretation against 2024 election procedures was unclear (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024).

To reduce reliance on single items, seven composite measures were calculated as unweighted means of conceptually related items. Table 1 summarises the construction of these indices and their internal consistency in the analytic sample. All indices met conventional exploratory thresholds for acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's α ranging from .74 to .90.

Table 1. Composite indices used in the analysis (analytic sample n = 30).

Index	Items	Conceptual content	Cronbach's α
Perceived exposure to national content	C1, C2, C4, C5, C6	Glorification, negative portrayals, unification content, algorithmic reinforcement, emotionally engaging national content	.81
Ethnonationalist orientation	D6, D8, D9, D10	Unification, ethnic priority, social distance, diaspora duty to defend national cause	.87
Importance of Albanian identity	D1, D2	Identity centrality and pride	.85
Perceived connecting effect of social media	F1, F2, F4, F7	Identity strengthening, political following, proximity to origin, connection with homeland	.77
Perceived divisive effect of social media	F3, F5, F9	More negative view of Macedonians, distance from state, increased interethnic tension	.75
Trust in state institutions	Government, parliament, judiciary	Institutional trust in North Macedonian state institutions	.90
Homeland attachment and interest	E8a, E8b, E8d	Emotional attachment, political interest, intergenerational maintenance of ties	.74

A central analytic distinction was made between identity and ethnonationalism. The identity index captured the subjective importance and pride associated with being Albanian, whereas the ethnonationalist index incorporated territorial unification, ethnic priority over intergroup cooperation, social distance in the intimate domain, and a perceived diaspora obligation to defend the national cause. This distinction follows the broader literature showing that national attachment and exclusionary nationalism are related but not equivalent constructs (Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Schatz et al., 1999).

2.3 Statistical analysis and robustness checks

Valid denominators, proportions and descriptive statistics are reported. Spearman correlations assess associations; Mann–Whitney tests compare generations with rank-biserial effect sizes. Exploratory OLS models use HC3 robust standard errors; continuous predictors and outcomes are standardised, but binary indicators are not. Model samples are complete cases. With approximately 30 respondents, estimates are imprecise and non-causal. Supplementary Material S1 specifies procedures, denominators, confidence intervals and models.

Sensitivity analyses excluded three near-straightliners (n = 27) and estimated partial rank correlations controlling for agreement tendency in non-overlapping items. The latter is not a validated acquiescence adjustment. Benjamini–Hochberg correction across 11 selected associations is reported descriptively, not as a preregistered confirmatory test family (Supplementary Material S1).

Interpretation emphasises magnitude, uncertainty and stability, especially the links between exposure and perceived identity strengthening, inequality and ethnonationalism, and generation and reported worsening views of Macedonians. Online conflict remains a descriptive outcome, not a measure of bullying.

2.4 Data verification and reproducibility

The bilingual export contained 35 submissions; the documented exclusions yielded 30 primary cases and 27 sensitivity cases. The indirect eligibility proxy cannot establish ethnicity. The 1,000 non-missing response codes checked against the export pertain to all 35 original records, not only the analytic sample.

Seven composite indices were reconstructed (Cronbach's α = .743–.903). Principal descriptives, correlations and four HC3 regression models were reproduced to rounding. Supplementary Material S4 contains code and aggregate results; respondent-level records are not publicly distributed (see Data availability). Reproduction requires access to the author-held cleaned dataset, exported privately as CSV.

2.5 Ethical and reporting considerations

All 35 bilingual survey submissions included affirmative adult informed-consent responses. Given the small sample, the analysis does not publicly release respondent-level data, time stamps, or open-ended responses. Preliminary AI-assisted empirical outputs were independently recalculated and critically interpreted by the researchers. The institutional ethical determination and authorised data-access arrangements are specified in the Declarations.

3. Results

3.1 Sample profile

The analytic sample was predominantly male (63%) and concentrated in the 35–44 age group (43%). Respondents lived in Switzerland, Italy, and Germany, with Switzerland accounting for the largest share among those with valid country data. Just over half (53%) were born in North Macedonia, while 43% were born in the country of residence. The first and second generations were similar in age but differed substantially in education: 62% of second-generation respondents held a university degree compared with 13% of first-generation respondents. The second generation was also more concentrated in Switzerland. Table 2 presents the core sample characteristics.

Table 2. Sample profile (n = 30; valid percentages).

Characteristic	Distribution
Country of residence (n = 29)	Switzerland 45%; Italy 31%; Germany 24%
Gender	Male 63%; female 37%
Age	18–24: 23%; 25–34: 20%; 35–44: 43%; 45–54: 10%; 55–64: 3%
Birthplace	North Macedonia 53%; country of residence 43%; both 3%
Years abroad if born in North Macedonia (n = 17)	<5 years 18%; 5–10 years 24%; 11–20 years 41%; >20 years 18%
Place of origin	Tetovo 37%; Skopje 33%; Kumanovo 17%; Kičevo 7%; Gostivar 7%
Education	Primary 7%; secondary/vocational 57%; bachelor 23%; master/PhD 13%
Language at home (n = 29)	Albanian 62%; residence-country language 28%; mixed 7%; Macedonian 3%
Questionnaire language	Albanian 60%; English 40%

The geographic concentration of origins is notable: Tetovo and Skopje together accounted for 70% of respondents. This clustering, combined with network-based recruitment, reinforces the need to interpret the study as a description of a particular convenience sample rather than as a representative portrait of the wider Albanian diaspora from North Macedonia.

3.2 Social-media use and content diet

Social-media use was intensive. Seventy-three per cent of respondents reported spending more than two hours per day on social media, and 83% used WhatsApp or Viber groups daily or several times per day. Instagram (77%), Facebook (73%), and YouTube (67%) also had high daily-or-more use. Figure 1 shows the frequency profile across platforms.

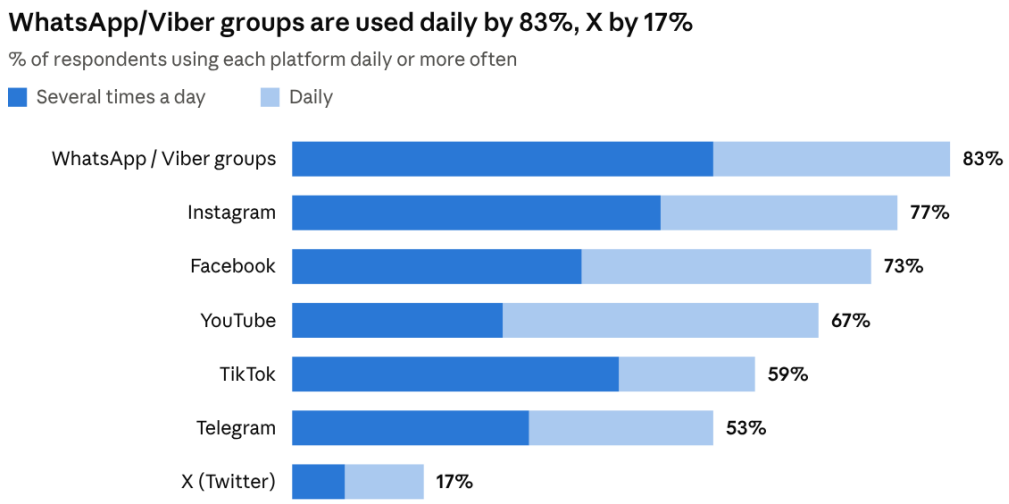


Figure 1. Daily or more frequent use of social-media platforms. Source: diaspora survey, 28–30 September 2026; n = 30 (TikTok n = 29).

What respondents followed was more strongly oriented towards identity and community than towards homeland news. Cultural content was followed often or very often by 70%, historical content about Albanians by 67%, and diaspora pages or groups by 66%. In contrast, only 7% often or very often followed news about North Macedonia, and 21% followed political parties or politicians at that frequency. As illustrated in Figure 2, the digital relationship to the homeland in this sample was therefore primarily cultural-historical rather than conventionally news-political.

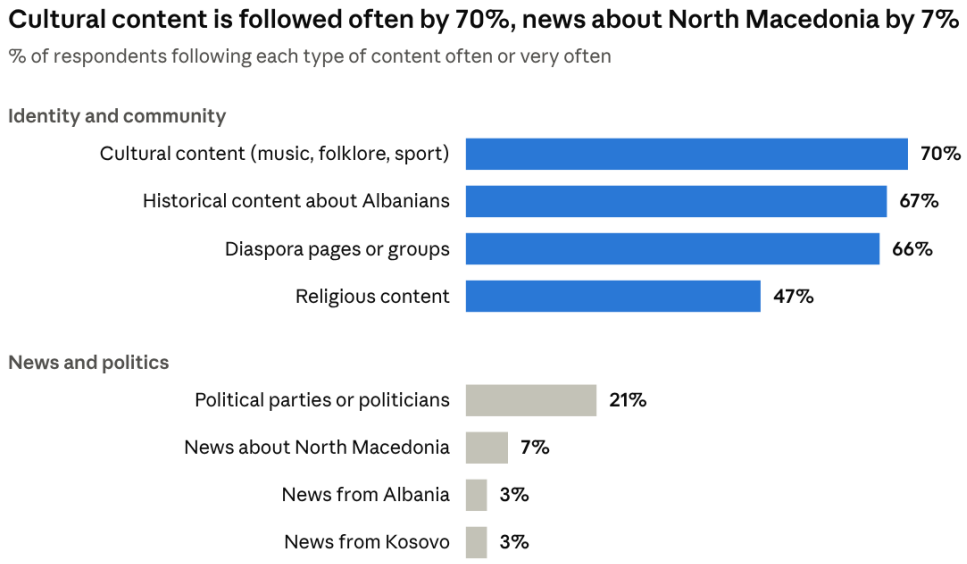


Figure 2. Types of content followed often or very often. Source: diaspora survey, 28–30 September 2026; n = 30, with minor item-level missingness.

North Macedonia news was encountered principally through online portals (77%), social-media pages or influencers (50%), and family or friends (50%). Most respondents consumed rather than posted national content: 60% rarely or never posted about Albanian national issues and 10% did so often. Men reported more identity-

oriented content than women (M = 4.33 versus 3.06, Mann–Whitney $p < .001$); younger participants used TikTok more frequently. No clear generation difference in time online or identity-content following was established.

3.3 Perceived national content and algorithmic reinforcement

On perceived social-media content, 16/30 respondents (53%) reported frequent exposure to glorifying national history (C1); 8/30 (27%) reported frequent negative portrayals of Macedonians (C2), and 12/30 (40%) reported negative portrayals of Albanians (C3). Sixteen of 30 (53%) reported seeing material about interethnic relations that they personally considered false or manipulated (C7). These are perceptions of content and accuracy, not verified observations of hate speech or misinformation. The overall exposure index captured several distinct forms of national content, including emotionally engaging and algorithmically reinforced posts. This measurement breadth argues against interpreting the index as a direct measure of hostility or aggression.

Perceived exposure to content glorifying Albanian history correlated with the importance of Albanian identity ($\rho = .69$). Respondents who perceived more algorithmic reinforcement were more likely to attribute identity strengthening to social media ($\rho = .60$), but these self-reports do not identify exposure direction or platform effects. Exposure to unification content was associated with support for unification in an unadjusted analysis, whereas the association attenuated when the agreement-tendency proxy was controlled. Both favourable and hostile content may be selectively noticed by respondents with pre-existing attitudes.

3.4 National identity, ethnonationalism, and coexistence

Being Albanian was an important part of self-definition for 67% of respondents, and 59% expressed pride in Albanian achievements. Exactly 15/30 (50%) supported eventual unification of Albanian-inhabited lands and 15/30 (50%) endorsed coexistence with Macedonians in one state; 11/30 (37%) endorsed both, whereas 3/30 backed unification and rejected coexistence. Perceived inequality of rights was endorsed by 43%, and 37% reported discomfort at the prospect of a close relative marrying a Macedonian. Table 3 separates these self-reported attitudes from perceptions about social-media effects; neither measures behaviour or online victimisation.

Table 3. Selected national-identity, interethnic, and perceived social-media-effect items.

Item	Statement (abridged)	M	Agree %	Disagree %
D1	Being Albanian is an important part of who I am	3.77	67	17
D6	All Albanian-inhabited lands should one day be united	3.37	50	23
D7	Albanians and Macedonians can live well together in one state	3.37	50	23
D4	Albanians still do not have equal rights with Macedonians	3.30	43	17
D9	Uncomfortable if a close family member married a Macedonian	3.03	37	30
F1	Social media strengthened my Albanian national identity	3.34	55	34
F3	Social media made my view of Macedonians more negative	3.00	31	31
F7	Social media connects diaspora with homeland more than it divides	3.34	48	21
F9	Nationalist content on social media increases interethnic tension	3.46	54	25

The positive association between unification and coexistence was itself statistically robust ($\rho = .52$, $p = .003$; $\rho = .43$ after removing near-straightliners; partial $\rho = .41$ after controlling for agreement tendency). Support for unification also correlated positively with feeling that North Macedonia is one's country ($\rho = .56$, $p = .001$; controlled $\rho = .39$, $p = .033$). These counter-intuitive positive relationships suggest layered rather than mutually

exclusive political identities: respondents could simultaneously endorse a symbolic or aspirational pan-Albanian idea, accept coexistence with Macedonians, and retain some attachment to North Macedonia as a state.

The ethnonationalist-orientation index had a mean of 3.29 and median of 3.50. Its strongest correlate among the examined items was the belief that Albanians still lack equal rights relative to Macedonians ($\rho = .69$; agreement-controlled $\rho = .64$). By contrast, perceived exposure to national content, overall time online, posting national content, and following historical content were not robustly related to ethnonationalist orientation. This contrast is central to the paper: national-media exposure was closely linked to felt identity reinforcement, whereas the more exclusionary attitudinal cluster tracked perceived political grievance more strongly than digital exposure.

3.5 Homeland ties and institutional trust

Homeland ties were strong in material terms but weakly institutional. Ninety-three per cent of respondents reported sending money or other support to family or community in North Macedonia at least occasionally, 50% owned property or investments there, and another 13% planned to do so. Half expected to return to live in North Macedonia either within five years or later in life, although 40% were uncertain. When asked what "homeland" evoked first, 53% selected their town or village of origin, compared with 20% selecting North Macedonia as a state. Pan-Albanian or Albania-centred responses were comparatively uncommon.

The referent of "homeland" varied by generation. Among 16 first-generation respondents, 12 (75%) named their town or village of origin and four named North Macedonia as a state. Among 13 second-generation respondents, four named the hometown (31%), four the country of residence (31%), three Albania or Albanian lands (23%), and two North Macedonia (15%). This small-sample contrast suggests a change in the meaning, rather than simply the intensity, of homeland attachment; it warrants replication across host countries. Ethnographic research has documented continuing village ties and changing intergenerational homeland narratives (Vathi, 2015; Kadriu, 2020; Wessendorf, 2007). All three Albania-centred responses in the second generation originated in Switzerland, highlighting the possibility of host-country clustering rather than a universal generational pattern.

Institutional trust was low: 77% distrusted the government and judiciary, and 70% distrusted parliament and Macedonian political parties. The state-trust index showed no stable association with identity, ethnonationalism, digital exposure or attachment ($|\rho| \leq .22$). National polling from 2022 also reported substantial distrust of North Macedonian institutions (International Republican Institute, 2022), but those results concern a different population, period and response scale. Such comparisons contextualise the finding; they do not demonstrate statistical equivalence or distinctiveness of the diaspora. Government partisanship and changes over time may also influence these attitudes (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2021).

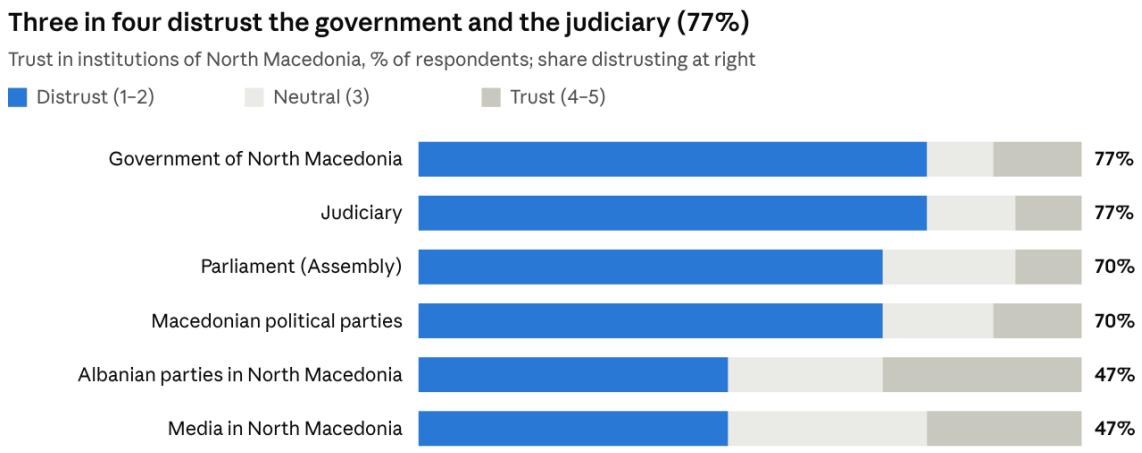


Figure 3. Trust in institutions of North Macedonia. Source: diaspora survey, 28–30 September 2026; n = 30.

Material and emotional forms of attachment were nevertheless mutually reinforcing. More regular remittances were associated with stronger homeland attachment ($\rho = .47$, $p = .009$), and more frequent visits were associated with plans to return ($\rho = .41$, $p = .023$). Political interest in North Macedonia correlated with following parties and politicians online ($\rho = .54$, $p = .003$). These findings suggest that the "homeland" operating in diasporic life may be better understood as a layered combination of locality, kinship, culture, property, and political interest than as trust in state institutions.

3.6 Perceived effects of social media and generational differences

Reports of social-media influence were ambivalent: 16/29 (55%) said their Albanian identity had been strengthened (F1), whereas 15/28 (54%) perceived nationalist content as increasing Albanian–Macedonian tension (F9). Nine of 29 (31%) agreed that social media had made their view of Macedonians more negative (F3). On the separate conflict question (F10), 23/29 (79%) reported that online discussions about national issues had led to conflict with friends or relatives at least sometimes (16 sometimes, seven often); six reported none. These reports cannot be classified as cyberbullying episodes. Connecting and divisive perception indices were positively related ($\rho = .66$, $n = 29$), consistent with perceived benefits and costs coexisting within respondents.

The largest generational contrast concerned F3. Eight of 13 second-generation respondents (62%; Wilson 95% CI 36–82%) agreed that social media made their views of Macedonians more negative, compared with one of 15 first-generation respondents with a valid F3 response (7%; 95% CI 1–30%). The ordinal comparison yielded Mann–Whitney $p < .001$ (rank-biserial $|r| = .79$), and the dichotomised comparison yielded Fisher's exact $p = .0036$. The difference survived omission of near-straightlining responses and remained prominent in small adjusted models. Interpretation must consider differing country of residence, education, offline contact and cohort histories.

Table 4. Selected differences between first- and second-generation respondents.

Outcome	First generation	Second generation	p	Effect
F3: social media made view of Macedonians more negative	M = 2.27 (SD 0.88); 7% agree	M = 3.85 (SD 0.80); 62% agree	< .001	r = .79

Outcome	First generation	Second generation	p	Effect
Perceived divisive effect index	M = 2.80 (0.86)	M = 3.76 (0.66)	.006	Second generation higher
Perceived connecting effect index	M = 3.02 (0.85)	M = 3.71 (0.74)	.041	Second generation higher
Perceived exposure to national content	M = 3.19 (0.93)	M = 3.28 (0.71)	.757	No evidence of a difference (imprecise)
Ethnonationalist orientation	M = 3.14 (0.96)	M = 3.44 (0.99)	.480	No evidence of a difference (imprecise)
Importance of Albanian identity	M = 3.78 (1.28)	M = 3.81 (1.09)	.982	No evidence of a difference (imprecise)
Homeland attachment and interest	M = 3.12 (0.98)	M = 3.10 (0.91)	.929	No evidence of a difference (imprecise)

The pattern therefore does not support a simple assertion that the second generation was more ethnonationalist: no reliable group differences were detected in identity importance, the ethnonationalism index or national-content exposure, although small samples make null results inconclusive. What differed most strongly was the attributed influence of social media on out-group views. The outcome measures a perception of change, not observed change, hostile conduct or bullying.

3.7 Robust associations and exploratory multivariable models

Table 5 reports nine central correlations and response-quality sensitivity checks. The additional selected relationships linking grievance with ethnonationalism and connecting with divisive perceptions are detailed in Supplementary Material S1. In an exploratory Benjamini–Hochberg sensitivity adjustment across 11 selected correlations, the principal exposure–identity-strengthening (q = .00030), grievance–ethnonationalism (q = .00029), unification–coexistence (q = .0065) and connecting–divisive-perception (q = .00040) associations retained low adjusted p values. This is not a substitute for preregistration, and several nominal or subgroup associations did not remain stable across response-quality checks.

Table 5. Central Spearman correlations and robustness checks.

Association	ρ main	ρ strict	ρ partial
Exposure × social media strengthened Albanian identity (F1)	.68***	.62***	.62***
Exposure × ethnonationalist orientation	.25	.08	−.01
Time on social media × ethnonationalist orientation	.14	.04	.02
Posting national content × ethnonationalist orientation	.26	.32	.16
Historical content × ethnonationalist orientation	.32	.18	.02
Importance of Albanian identity × ethnonationalist orientation	.41*	.29	.19
Ethnonationalism × trust in state institutions	−.05	−.23	−.09
Unification (D6) × coexistence (D7)	.52**	.43*	.41*
Unification (D6) × North Macedonia is my country (D3)	.56**	.49**	.39*

*Note. Strict sample removes three near-straightliners (n = 27). Partial correlations control for the respondent's mean agreement across other attitude items. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.*

Four exploratory OLS specifications reproduced the principal results with HC3 robust standard errors. In the identity-strengthening model (n = 28), national-content exposure had a standardised coefficient of .46 (SE .19,

95% CI .08–.84) after adjustment for identity importance and generation. For ethnonationalist orientation (n = 29), perceived unequal rights was associated with the outcome (β = .69, SE .11, 95% CI .48–.90), whereas exposure was imprecise. In the F3 model (n = 28), the second-generation indicator corresponded to 1.31 standard-deviation units higher perceived negative influence (HC3 SE .26, 95% CI .80–1.82), adjusting for exposure, age and gender. Replacing age and gender with education and residence in Switzerland yielded 1.53 (95% CI .94–2.12; n = 27). These post hoc models are sensitive to model specification and small-cell counts; full estimates appear in Supplementary Material S1.

Table 6. Exploratory OLS models with HC3 robust standard errors.

Predictor	Model 1: F1 identity strengthening	Model 2: ethnonationalism	Model 3: ethnonationalism	Model 4: F3 negative view
Exposure to national content	.46* (.19)	.13 (.34)	.32 (.17)	.31* (.13)
Importance of Albanian identity	.34 (.19)	.35 (.30)	—	—
Time on social media	—	.01 (.29)	—	—
Albanians lack equal rights (D4)	—	—	.69*** (.11)	—
Second generation	.39 (.27)	.29 (.45)	.10 (.26)	1.31*** (.26)
Age	—	—	—	−.14 (.14)
Male	—	—	—	.38 (.33)
R^2 (adjusted R^2)	.61 (.56)	.23 (.10)	.63 (.58)	.67 (.62)

*Note. Outcomes and continuous predictors are standardised; coefficients for dummy variables are differences in outcome standard deviations. Model sample sizes were n = 28, 29, 29, and 28 for Models 1–4, respectively. * p < .05. *** p < .001. Models are exploratory because of the small ratio of observations to predictors.*

4. Discussion

4.1 Identity reinforcement is not the same as ethnonationalist intensification

Perceived national-content exposure corresponded to reported identity strengthening but not consistently to the ethnonationalist index. This supports a distinction between national attachment and exclusionary attitudes (Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Schatz et al., 1999), not a claim that digital exposure is harmless. The survey measured perceptions, not observed content, harassment or longitudinal change.

Belonging and aggression should not be conflated: stigmatising ethnocultural expression can obscure targeted abuse (Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Schatz et al., 1999). These exploratory indices cannot diagnose aggression.

Perceived unequal rights was the strongest correlate of ethnonationalist orientation. Literature on the Ohrid settlement and subsequent ethnic relations provides context but not causal evidence (OSCE, 2001; Opašinova Šundovska, 2021; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2023; Dzigal & Nikodinovska, 2024; Reporting Diversity Network, 2025). Prevention should distinguish ethnic belonging and political grievance from threats, dehumanisation and harassment.

4.2 Layered political orientations: unification, coexistence, and state belonging

Unification and coexistence were positively associated rather than opposing poles, with more than one third of respondents endorsing both. Unification also related positively to identifying with North Macedonia as one's country. These findings challenge mutually exclusive labels but remain vulnerable to agreement tendency and questionnaire interpretation.

Unification might signify kin-solidarity, a distant ideal compatible with coexistence, or genuinely conflicting commitments. Open responses cannot discriminate these meanings. Historical surveys indicate that unification support may change when conflict costs or territorial stability are considered (International Crisis Group, 2004; Judah, 2002; Demi & Çeka, 2019). These sources cannot establish individual motivations here.

European integration offers another possible frame, but political commitments can shift. Reports on EU support and diaspora mobilisation show contextual variation (Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" Skopje, 2025; Euronews, 2021; Koinova, 2013). Present data cannot distinguish symbolic endorsement from likely action.

The results are compatible with relational accounts of multiple, situational attachments rather than binary national identities (Candidatu et al., 2019; Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Future interviews should separate symbolic preference, concrete territorial demands, state identification and willingness for everyday interethnic contact.

4.3 The second generation and the mediated homeland

The largest group contrast concerned perceived effects of social media, not baseline identity or ethnonationalist orientation. Respondents born abroad more often attributed a worsening view of Macedonians, and also greater homeland closeness, to social media. This coexistence is descriptively important but not a measured media effect.

A "mediated homeland" account is plausible: people born abroad may rely more on inherited family stories, periodic visits and digital representations than migrants with direct homeland experience (Rinnawi, 2012). However, platform choice, schooling, host-country context and offline encounters could provide alternative explanations.

Differences in education and country of residence were substantial between generations. Small adjusted models did not remove the F3 group contrast, but cannot eliminate confounding, selection or reporting-style effects. No group was demonstrably more ethnonationalist, and prospective mixed-method data are needed before attributing perceived changes to platform exposure.

Offline intergroup contact, multilingual experience and host-country narratives may shape generational interpretations of digital content. Research on interethnic online contact and Facebook illustrates contextual variation (Žeželj et al., 2017; Asimovic et al., 2021, 2023), while youth surveys identify cohort influences (OSCE Mission to Skopje, 2024; Topuzovska Latkovikj et al., 2019). Future studies should measure offline friendships, platforms and actual exposure before inferring media effects.

4.4 A local and material homeland, but a weakly trusted state

Local and familial homeland attachment coexisted with low state trust. Village ties, remittances and property are documented among Albanian emigrants (Markov, 2017; Rydzewski, 2022); Kosovo-diaspora comparisons are contextual only (UNDP, 2014; Möllers & Arapi-Gjini, 2024). Neither this convenience sample nor historical sources establish the prevalence of these patterns in the wider population.

Political engagement may operate through local rather than national institutions: diaspora mobilisation reportedly contributed to a municipal contest in Kičevo in 2013 (Agich, 2013). Migrants' everyday support networks may instead be organised predominantly in their country of residence (Dahinden, 2005). These examples illustrate overlapping practical and political forms of transnational involvement, not generalisable behaviour in the current sample.

This distinction accords with transnational and digital-diaspora approaches that situate belonging in relationships and practices as well as institutions (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Candidatu et al., 2019). Diaspora engagement policies should not assume remittances, cultural identity, electoral participation and state trust form a single dimension.

4.5 What is specific to a minority diaspora?

Locality-centred belonging is not unique to minority diasporas (Fox, 2003; Halilovich, 2012; Wessendorf, 2007). This sample combines local attachment, Albanian kin-community identification and weak identification with North Macedonian institutions. Any claim of distinctiveness remains speculative without a matched majority-diaspora comparator and probability sampling.

Other minority diasporas show varied homeland, state and kin-nation ties (Najdovski, 1997; İmamoğlu, 2026). These parallels are not statistical controls. Between-population nationalism comparisons require equivalent instruments, contemporary fieldwork and comparable samples.

4.6 Social media as an amplifier of salience rather than a single-direction cause

Nearly half perceived feedback in which engagement with national content brought more such content into their feeds. Engagement-oriented ranking is a plausible mechanism (Germano et al., 2026), but no platform logs or randomised exposure data were collected. The strong exposure–identity-strengthening correlation therefore supports neither causal amplification nor a conclusion about actual online hostility.

Experiments and observational studies suggest heterogeneous relationships between curation, selective exposure and political polarisation (Kelm et al., 2023; Pamirzad & Chen, 2026). Users' prior identities, offline social ties, attention and platform affordances may all contribute to the self-reports observed here. No single mechanism can be isolated.

Positive correlations between connecting and divisive perceptions suggest that the same digital environments can be experienced as culturally supportive and interethnically contentious. Their consequences require direct study of content, social networks and offline contact.

4.7 Implications for online-hostility prevention and future research

For prevention, national identification, derogatory representations, online disagreement and cyberbullying must remain distinct. Assessment should document targeted insults, repetition, threats, coercion, power imbalance and victimisation rather than pathologise ethnic expression. Because these behaviours were not measured here, the following proposals require testing.

Diaspora organisations and educators could pilot multilingual media literacy, source verification and moderated Albanian–Macedonian dialogue, distinguishing cultural affirmation from manipulated or derogatory material. Activities should address generational needs without assuming greater aggression among descendants born abroad, and assess psychological safety, constructive contact and harassment-reporting access.

Platforms and civil society could improve moderation and reporting for Albanian- and Macedonian-language content while separating disagreement from targeted abuse. Further research should directly measure victimisation, aggression, offline contact, platform exposure and longitudinal change. This survey establishes neither cyberbullying prevalence nor algorithmic causality or intervention efficacy.

Policy should safeguard cultural belonging while responding to demonstrable harassment. A preregistered multicountry study could test associations between hostile exposure, misinformation, offline contact, generation and independently measured victimisation or aggression, accounting for recruitment networks and countries.

5. Limitations and future research

Convenience recruitment yielded only 30 respondents across three residence countries. The sample cannot represent the wider diaspora; historical benchmarks provide context, not equivalent population estimates. Small country and generational subgroups limit precision and adjustment for confounding.

The instrument lacked direct ethnic self-identification; three cases were excluded using an indirect proxy, alongside two invariant responders. Alternative eligibility rules could change estimates. No direct observation of platform content, repeated harassment, victimisation or behavioural aggression was collected, limiting applicability to cyberbullying research.

Cross-sectional retrospective reports of perceived media influence cannot establish attitude change. Reverse causality, selective attention and common-method bias remain possible. Public feeds and private family messaging were also combined in the questionnaire (Madianou & Miller, 2013).

Near-straightliner exclusion and agreement-proxy adjustment partly address response styles, but are no substitute for validated scales or preregistration. Multiple exploratory tests further increase chance and selection findings despite descriptive multiplicity correction.

Precision is limited: the Wilson interval for F3 agreement among second-generation respondents (8/13) is approximately 36–82%. Non-significant comparisons are inconclusive. Future multicountry longitudinal and mixed-method studies should assess both generations, offline intergroup contact, education and residence context.

Sparse open responses do not support thematic saturation. Interviews could clarify homeland, coexistence, national unity and online conflict; prospective diaries or content sampling could distinguish perceived from actual exposure.

Taken together, these limitations make the current contribution conceptual and hypothesis-generating. The aggregate analyses and cleaning decisions are documented in Supplementary Materials S1–S4 to support scrutiny without exposing individual responses publicly.

6. Conclusion

In this exploratory sample, perceived digital reinforcement of Albanian identity did not consistently correspond to ethnonationalist orientation. Perceived unequal rights was more strongly associated with ethnonationalist attitudes, while support for unification could coexist with Albanian–Macedonian coexistence. Homeland ties were often local and material despite low institutional trust. Respondents born abroad more often attributed worsening views of Macedonians to social media, and online national-issue conflicts were commonly reported. These perceived experiences do not establish cyberbullying, platform effects or population prevalence. Historical benchmarks offer context rather than direct comparison. Larger, preregistered studies measuring aggression, victimisation, offline contact and prospective change are necessary before drawing causal or preventive conclusions.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: The study was approved by an institutional ethics committee (details withheld for blind review) and was conducted in accordance with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Participation was voluntary and limited to adults, and all 35 respondents gave informed consent within the questionnaire before answering.

Consent for publication: This article contains no participant-identifying quotations, individual case descriptions, photographs or other identifying material.

Data availability: Aggregate findings, variable definitions and reproducibility code are included in Supplementary Materials S1–S4. Participant-level records are not deposited publicly because of small-sample re-identification risks; restrictions are addressed separately in the submission metadata.

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