Critical Transdisciplinary Pedagogy in Response to Neoliberalism: Reimagining Higher Education for Democracy in North Macedonia

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Abstract

North Macedonia has been struggling to establish a participatory democracy since its transition as a Yugoslav successor state. During the 34 years since, widespread corruption and limited rights and freedoms have harmed citizenship and education. This study proposes the theoretical framework of critical transdisciplinarity, a politically engaged practice of dismantling disciplinary boundaries and hierarchical barriers to knowledge production, centering marginalized epistemologies to transform universities into spaces of resistance, resilience, and collective liberation. We apply this theory to analyze the context, global trends, and strategies for establishing democracy in North Macedonia that is grounded in civic participation through the transformation of higher education, while also recognizing its interdependence with primary and secondary education in cultivating learner agency and critical consciousness from an early age. Our work responds to the call by Templer (2014) for research on how neoliberal policies and corporate

interventions have shaped post-socialist Southeastern European universities, and on how to decolonize European and U.S. educational systems increasingly governed by market-driven benchmarks. By situating these reforms within an anti-oligarchic vision of education, this study positions higher education as a site of resistance to neoliberal commodification and as a catalyst for democratic transformation in the Western Balkans. The study is vital because research on how higher education can drive the democratization of the Western Balkans, specifically North Macedonia, is scarce.

Keywords: *North Macedonia, critical transdisciplinarity, democracy, civic participation, Western Balkans, Yugoslav successor states*

Democracy is, at best, dysfunctional in numerous geopolitical contexts, largely due to intentional and unintentional misinterpretations of the concept itself. In the past several years, organizations such as Freedom House have reported staggering numbers attesting to a dramatic increase in authoritarianism, oligarchic influence, compromised media freedom, and declines in civil liberties, freedom of expression and choice, and civic participation. Most notably, eight out of ten people lived in a "not free" or "partly free" country (Repucci and Slipowitz, 2022, p. 4) and, in 2020, the steepest democracy decline in the previous 12 years was recorded, with 73 countries marking decline in democratic principles (Gorokhovskaia et al., 2023).[1]

The Western Balkans are no exception. Despite three decades of international support, successor states of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia have made little progress in advancing democracy. A growing body of scholarship, both within and outside the region, traces democratic backsliding due to the anti-democratic forces of right-wing populism and ethno-political and "identity-

based divisions that promote polarization" (Milacic, 2022, p. 1474; See, also, Bermeo, 2016, 2022; Bernhard, 2021; Cleary and Öztürk, 2022; Ellison, 2022; Gessler and Wunsch, 2025; Gidron et al., 2025; Heller, 2020; Nord et al., 2025; Palacios, 2025; Williamson et al., 2024; Wunsch et al., 2025; Yuen and Lee, 2025). In the past three decades since democratization began in the Balkans, political elites in this southeastern European region have constructed a democratic façade by holding free- and fair-appearing elections and establishing legal guarantees for freedom of expression and constitutional systems of checks and balances (Kmezić, 2022). In practice, however, these elites use informal networks, clientelism, and media control to weaken democracy. Since democratic freedoms are only meaningful when political elites are held accountable by the rule of law, domestic regimes intentionally exploit the structural weaknesses of democratic institutions, using them to their own advantage (Dolenec, 2013; Kmezić, 2022; Kmezić and Bieber, 2017). All of these concerns have led to what Lavrič and Bieber (2021) has identified as "a marked crisis of democracy" throughout most nations in the Western Balkans.

This study responds to a call by Templer (2014) for research on how neo-liberal capitalist policies have shaped post-socialist eastern European universities and on how to decolonize European and, we argue, U.S., educational systems increasingly governed by market-driven benchmarks. The study focuses on one Balkan country, the Republic of North Macedonia,[2] which has been struggling to establish a participatory democracy. The legacy of the Yugoslav education system contributed to this struggle. During the Yugoslav era, Macedonia's education system was highly centralized and authoritarian, defined by rote learning and teacher-dominated classrooms that left little room for student agency or critical thought (Miovska-Spaseva, 2015). Curricula were prescribed at the state level with elements of the program that were "strictly prescribed" in which schools, teachers, and students "have no right to change anything,"

reflecting the broader lack of democratic engagement under one-party rule (Miovska-Spaseva 2015, p. 124). This rigid academic culture of memorizing "ready-made" knowledge and deferring to teacher authority not only served socialist ideological goals but also instilled an obedient, passive student posture (Miovska-Spaseva 2015). Critical pedagogy scholars liken this model to Freire's (1970) critique of "banking education", whereby students are treated as passive recipients, a dynamic that feminist educators have likewise critiqued for reinforcing patriarchal authority in the classroom. Even when late-Communist reforms in the 1970s nominally encouraged more student "self-activity" and participation, such initiatives were curtailed by the regime's insistence on Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy (Miovska-Spaseva, 2015), so traditional teacher-centered pedagogical approaches persisted into the final years of socialist rule.

After independence in 1991,[3] Macedonia began a halting transition toward more democratic and learner-centered education, but authoritarian pedagogical legacies still prove to be resilient. In the 1990s, major reform programs, which were often supported by international organizations and inspired by progressive educational thinkers, introduced interactive, student-centered learning aimed at replacing the old frontal, one-way teaching style with critical thinking and collaboration (Miovska-Spaseva, 2016). These efforts yielded some changes. For example, new civic education curricula used group discussions and role-play to teach concepts like responsibility and participation that had been previously neglected (Popova and Koskarov, 2017). However, the pace of change was slow and met with resistance. Many teachers trained under the former system struggled to adapt and continued relying on rote instruction; as Grozdanovska (2008) notes, there was a "lingering overemphasis on rote memorization over creative thinking" in post-socialist classrooms, stemming from the difficulty of changing entrenched teaching mentalities (para. 17).

Some educators have outright refused to adopt contemporary methods, protesting that they were not paid enough to do so. Furthermore, pedagogical faculties were often hesitant to embrace new feminist or critical pedagogical approaches, similarly arguing that their compensation was inadequate to adopt them. Finally, the persistence of top-down, exam-driven practices has meant that the democratization of society has only gradually filtered into higher education (Limani et al., 2021).

These shifts did not occur in a vacuum. North Macedonia's higher education transformation unfolded under the pressure of global capitalism from international financial institutions promoting market-oriented reforms to the Bologna Process aligning universities with European neoliberal norms. What appears as "neoliberal modernization" is better understood as the local face of a worldwide capitalist agenda in education (Robertson, 2008; Shore, 2010).

Indeed, the crisis of the public university in post-socialist societies was seized upon by global capital: underfunding by the state (a legacy of austerity) created an opening for what Santos (2010) calls a "radical democratic restructuring" from below, or, absent that, a takeover by market forces (p. 274).

Neoliberal restructuring also interacted with local ethnic and class inequalities. The push toward commodified, competitive higher education often neglected, and sometimes exacerbated, the divide between majority and minority communities, and between affluent and working-class students. North Macedonia's education system has faced longstanding challenges of ethnic segregation and unequal access, particularly for Albanian and Roma students, which market-driven reforms risk deepening (Bloodworth, 2020).

However, not all aspects of the Yugoslav education model were without merit. Scholars (Bondžić, 2010; Gashi and 2025; Ivić, 1992; Maskalan, 2022) have noted that its strong emphasis on universal, fee-free access to schooling at all levels, and nationwide literacy campaigns, particularly those targeting women and girls, and rural and ethnic minoritized populations, dramatically reduced illiteracy and created a broad foundation for social mobility (Jelusic, 2024; Miovska-Spaseva 2015; Morokvasic, 1983). Yugoslav policies promoted education for all but also encouraged girls to pursue all fields of study, including science and technical subjects. [Author 1] and [Author 2][4] witnessed and experienced firsthand the Yugoslav education model which emphasized universal literacy and gender equity, particularly in STEM, and still see the legacy of higher percentages of women scientists, engineers, and mathematicians in former Yugoslav states compared to that of Western Europe. Growing up, they saw women working in many different professions, including STEM. They saw messages everywhere urging girls to stay in school, from TV shows and posters to public events that celebrated women in every field. In their primary and middle school years, the state discouraged religion by sometimes sending inspectors to visit schools and ask students about their religious attendance. These measures, shaped by socialist ideology, not only discouraged religious practices but also expanded female literacy, increased women's participation in higher education, and opened opportunities in male-dominated fields. At the same time, the authors acknowledge that patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, pay gaps, and discrimination remained underreported in Yugoslavia (For more details, see Jelusic, 2024; Morokvasic, 1983).

The Yugoslav state's commitment to education as a public good meant that even in a system marked by central control, primary, secondary, and tertiary schools were well resourced relative to the region, and participation rates for both boys and girls rose steadily through the socialist period (Miovska-Spaseva

2015). These achievements, while embedded in an authoritarian framework, demonstrated that large-scale investment in equitable access to education had the capacity to produce tangible gains in literacy, enrollment, and gender parity, and these principles remain valuable in contemporary debates on democratizing education.

Since its independence from Yugoslavia, institutions in Macedonia have shown lack of potential to move the country towards the European Union. While corruption is widespread and the country is constituted as "partly free" by Freedom House (2025), civil liberties are assessed at 39 out of 60 possible points. National and regional studies conducted to measure political and social perceptions of citizens in the country show worrisome results (Mitevski, 2019), including recent research that citizens have been increasingly indoctrinated into believing strategic disinformation (European Partnership for Democracy, 2024). Corruption in higher education remains a particular concern, with studies showing that more than half of students in Skopje believe it is considerably or very present, undermining educational quality, deepening inequality, and eroding trust in academic institutions (Kosturanova, 2015).[5]

A small country like North Macedonia, with a population of 1.8 million across 9,821 square miles, should evolve. However, democracy in the country is fragile given widespread systemic problems with rule of law, equal rights for all minoritized and under-represented groups, social, gender, ethnic, and religious equity, quality education for all, quality and access to universal health care, freedom of speech, freedom of choice, independent journalism, and a government free from oligarchic influence.

Educators, researchers, and officers from Balkan nation education ministries, Council of Europe, and the European Union (EU) have assessed the capacity of

education as a driving force for democracy (Council of Europe, 2023, 2024; Jakšić-Stojanović, Dervišagić and Atanasova cited in Novi, 2024; Mäkinen and Kaasik-Krogerus, 2023; Ramet *et al*., 2017; Vukadinović, 2023). We build on this work by asking how higher education can drive the democratization of the Western Balkans. This study assesses the context, global trends, and solutions to establish a democracy based on civic participation, through improving higher education. Higher education must play a central role in providing the country with graduates educated with democratic ideals. In North Macedonia, higher education has been slowly drifting away from its role as a public good that strengthens democratic life. Increasingly, it is shaped by policies that see education mainly to feed the labor market, rather than as a space to develop engaged and critical citizens. In the post-socialist setting, this mindset, described by Carpenter et al. (2024), turns knowledge into something to be bought and sold, encourages the migration of skilled graduates, and ties universities to the interests of powerful global actors. To address these trends, higher education needs to return to its democratic roots by creating learning that expands beyond disciplines, fostering critical and creative thinking, strengthening community ties, and resisting the idea that its only value is in serving the market.

The Entrenchment of Neoliberalism

In her work, "Systemic Neoliberal Colonisation of Higher Education," Christine Morley (2024) argues that within the neoliberal university system, students, faculty and staff, and the research and scholarship conducted by faculty "are subordinated to managerial imperatives. University educators are denigrated and displaced by colonizing neoliberal practices that systematically invalidate and invisibilise academic work" (p. 571). Such "neoliberal managerialism" denigrates academic practices, diminishing their worth "to market calculations

that seek to manipulate and exploit profit" (p. 572). It also indicates the deeper logics of capitalism, a system that commodifies education and subordinates universities to capital accumulation goals. A truly critical transdisciplinary lens must therefore critique not only neoliberal ideology but the capitalist social relations underpinning it (Dafermos, 2023).

Perhaps surprisingly, neoliberal managerialism in the Western Balkans was evident in the final two decades under communist rule. In his study, "Between the Market and Solidarity: Commercializing Development Aid and International Higher Education in Socialist Yugoslavia," Peter Quinnan Wright (2021) analyzes how, during the economic crisis in Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 1980s,[6] institutions adopted market mechanisms to attract self-financing international students, contributing to the commercialization of higher education.

Neoliberal ideology has become so deeply entrenched that the emphasis on higher education as a tool for economic growth has overshadowed its original perspectives, such as viewing education as intrinsically valuable or as a means of advancing societal progress and the common good (Johnson *et al.*, 2024; Smyth, 2011). Neoliberalism is so pervasive within higher education that the focus on education for economic imperatives has replaced other foci most notably the like seeing education as valuable on its own or as a way to improve communities (Smyth, 2011). Put simply, "for capitalism, education is a market from which profits can be made" (Prendergast *et al.*, 2017, p. 28).

Learners in neoliberal educational environments are shaped to fit economic interests. This is the case in Yugoslav successor states which have experienced neoliberal economization (Bieber, 2018). Bartlett (2021) argues the "economic system of political capitalism has replaced the former economic system of

socialist self-management" where the "ruling elite dominates the economy" (p. 279). This domination extends to the realm of higher education where, similar to the US (Almino Francisco *et al.*, 2024; Atasay, 2015; Giroux, 2014; McLaren, 2016) and, increasingly, the EU and UK (Donskis *et al.*, 2019; Ljungqvist and Sonesson, 2024; Mäkinen and Kaasik-Krogerus, 2023; Muñoz, 2015; Papadakis and Drakaki, 2023; Pavlović, 2023; Prendergast, Hill and Jones, 2017), corporate and political power overrides academic freedom, particularly in academic programs.

University curricula in North Macedonia, and elsewhere in the region, is characterized by developing "technopreneurial" citizens. Aihwa Ong (2006a; 2006b) named "techno-preneurial citizenship" to describe the kind of citizen demanded by a post-industrial, service-oriented, technology-driven economy. Neoliberalism frames knowledge within an economically defined governmentality, stripping issues of their political dimensions and reframing them as technical problems (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017). It is unsurprising, given these trends, that most current scholarly publications on higher education in North Macedonia contribute to the neoliberalisation of higher education in the country. For instance, Milenkovska and Novkovska (2018) argue for a "total quality management system in higher education" in North Macedonia (p. 227). Eftimov et al. (2016) make the case that the "only way for fast adjustment" of higher education institutions in the country to increased demands for quality and competition from private and foreign universities, and reduced public funding "is to explore all possibilities for effective implementation of some of the most popular management concepts" such as balanced scorecard and performance management systems and other enactments of managerialism in higher education (p. 29).

The neoliberal restructuring of higher education in North Macedonia is not a side effect of "transition" but the deliberate outcome of capitalist reorganization on the semi-periphery. Under the ideological banners of "modernization," "European integration," and "human capital development," the country has implemented reforms that displace higher education's democratic and emancipatory potential in favor of its subservience to capital accumulation. As Carpenter et al. (2024) argue, human capital theory[7] has evolved from a simple economic idea into a rigid set of rules, built on a generic notion of a learner that ignores their history, social class and political voice. This ideological construction obscures the transnational relations of power, patriarchy, race, and coloniality that shape class relations and ensures that educational "investments" yield stratified returns in a global capitalist system predicated on uneven development.

In the Western Balkans, and especially in North Macedonia, this ideological construction has become the common policy language of post-socialist neoliberalism. Recent governance reforms link university funding to narrow performance measures borrowed from the EU's core economies, overlooking the country's structural dependence within the global capitalist system. From a dependency-theory perspective, these reforms are a form of neocolonial governance: they restructure local institutions to produce surplus labor for the core while legitimizing brain drain as "mobility". The result is the systematic extraction of intellectual and cultural capital from the periphery, facilitated by the very policies that claim to promote "competitiveness" and "growth."

In this configuration, the neoliberal university is not an engine of democratic deepening but an apparatus of ideological production, manufacturing consent for austerity, privatization, and depoliticized public life. Managerialist control, precarious academic labor, and standardized curricula work together to

extinguish the possibility of the university as a site of struggle. Critical pedagogy demands the opposite: a higher education system that confronts the logics of commodification and reclaims its public, democratic, and anti-capitalist mission (Giroux, 2014; Hill, 2012, 2021, 2022; Malot, Hill and Banfield, 2013; McLaren, 2016, 2020; Schwittay, 2023). Defending democracy in the Western Balkans therefore requires rejecting the ideology of the human capital theory regime and reimagining higher education as a site of collective resistance, anti-imperialist solidarity, and revolutionary praxis.

Challenges to the Democratization of Knowledge in North Macedonia

As the world is challenged by global threats of climate change, authoritarianism, armed conflict, decline in human rights, corruption, and nuclear proliferation, a holistic higher education would improve relations among people and assure lasting peace, foster creative problem-solving, critical inquiry, ethical awareness, and support lifelong learning (Barnett, 2011). Building on the concept of transdisciplinarity, Blessinger (2018) presents three major paradigm shifts that have taken place in universities across the developed world. First, lifelong learning should be offered through diversifying higher education institution types and enlarging study program offerings. The second paradigm shift is the democratization of knowledge. Blessinger (2018) conceptualizes democratization of knowledge as a move from elitist, restricted knowledge to a "knowledge abundance model," in which educational content becomes widely accessible through initiatives like MOOCs, OERs, and open universities. The third major shift is the emergence of a global knowledge society, particularly that which highlights and embraces knowledges in the Global South (Khamis, Bakry and Lengel, in press; Lengel, Atay and Kluch, 2020; Ofori, Tuleassi and Lengel, in press; Regmi, 2022). This shift supports equitable access to educational opportunities and increased access contributes to

the concept of education as a basic human right. These three paradigm shifts highlight universities' responsibilities to produce genuine knowledge through research and scholarship and to share this knowledge widely, making it available and accessible to all.

While global educational trends emphasize democratization and transdisciplinarity, higher education in the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia, is in its relative infancy compared to Western Europe. Universities in the Western Balkans developed mainly after World War II (Osmani and Jufusi, 2022). This is certainly the case in North Macedonia (See Table 1). Since that time, higher education policies and practices have varied across the region. Most notably, Kosovo experienced apartheid in higher education and other forms. From 1990 to 1999, Kosovo Albanian students were barred from universities, as was the Albanian language. Osmani and Jufusi (2022) argue that this apartheid led to "the very low quality of higher education" during the apartheid period (p. 87).[8]

Another notable aspect of higher education in the region, with the exception of Albania, is the legacy of Yugoslavian rule. North Macedonia's higher education system has inherited its structure from Yugoslav times. Although educational reforms have been adopted over the years after the country's independence, much of that structure has remained unchanged. One evident change implemented to align university curricula with market needs has been heavily criticized by stakeholders for not being fully executed according to their suggestions. As a result of the activity that business and industry elites imposed, public university officials proudly declare that they have fully aligned their study programs with the needs of the market, following direct suggestions from corporate stakeholders (Osmani-Ballazhi and Memishi-Fejza, 2020).

In 1991, the country inherited two public universities: Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј" во Скопје [Saints Cyril and Methodius University] in Skopje, founded in 1949, and Универзитет Битола [University of Bitola], founded in 1979, which was renamed Универзитет „Св. Климент Охридски"-Битола [The University St. Kliment Ohridski in Bitola] in 1994. Since then the country founded three more public universities between 1949 and 2016. Most of these five institutions have programs in economics and business, engineering and technology, computer and information sciences, economics, law, medicine, technical and agricultural sciences, tourism and hospitality, security, agriculture, pedagogy, and two institutes of tobacco and hydro-biology. None of the programs at the five public universities in North Macedonia have an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach as they only offer classes related to their specific respective fields.

Although North Macedonia avoided war, unlike other former Yugoslav republics, it remained on the edge of civil unrest due to political, economic, and social tensions. These tensions began with the adoption of the first constitution, which failed to acknowledge the country's multicultural makeup. One consequence was that ethnic Albanians, who were largely unable to access the public university system due to "minority quotas," established their own university in 1994, offering instruction in Albanian. The University of Tetova, as it was called, initially lacked government accreditation, sparking unrest in the western part of the country, where its campus is located (Pârlea, 2022).

Critical Transdisciplinarity to Reimagine Education in the Western Balkans

Public universities in the Western Balkans have lagged behind developments such as the adoption of transdisciplinary programs and the integration of digital

learning technologies. Degree programs at all public higher education institutions in North Macedonia are exclusively based on the field of study hence offer a limited transdisciplinary experience that fails to equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in a democracy.

A critical, ontological, transdisciplinary approach to higher education is needed throughout the Western Balkans. Basarab Nicolescu (2014a, 2014b) differentiates forms of disciplinarity as follows: First, multidisciplinarity involves learning across boundaries but remaining in the home of one particular discipline. Second, interdisciplinarity involves the transfer of methods from one discipline to another. Third, transdisciplinarity goes beyond disciplines, and interrogates understanding of the world by highlighting ontological pluralism. In other words, transdisciplinarity seeks to interrogate and redefine our understanding of the world by recognizing multiple layers of reality and ways of knowing.

We propose the theoretical framework of critical transdisciplinarity. Critical transdisciplinarity rejects the neoliberal reduction of transdisciplinary practice to a technocratic problem-solving tool for sustaining existing power structures. It considers disciplinary rigidity in the Foucauldian sense, with the meaning of the word "discipline" as to punish or to enforce obedience (Foucault, 1975; See, also, Freiband *et al*., 2022). Instead, critical transdisciplinarity aims to dismantle disciplinary silos while directly confronting the capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal logics that shape knowledge production. Critical transdisciplinarity refuses to treat knowledge as a commodity for competitive global markets. Rather it centers epistemologies from marginalized standpoints that are often erased or appropriated by elite institutions and discourses. Moreover, neoliberal universities are not neutral; they operate through racialized, gendered, and colonial hierarchies that a critical transdisciplinary approach must interrogate.

As scholars of decolonial education note, modern universities have been complicit with the ongoing coloniality project, perpetuating inequities and dismissing non-Western knowledge. Likewise, the burdens of academic instability and exclusion fall disproportionately on marginalized groups (women, working-class, and minoritized ethnic communities), revealing how neoliberal reforms reinforce intersecting oppressions (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Bhambra *et al.*, 2018).

In his article, "The Politics of Transdisciplinarity", Liam Greenacre (2022) argues for the need for transdisciplinarity to address complex problems (See, also, Metzer, 2020). The climate catastrophe, extreme economic injustice, and rising ethnonationalism, known as "wicked problems",[9] require critical transdisciplinarity. Thus critical transdisciplinary learning also carries a civic dimension: by fostering critical and creative thinking across domains, it helps produce well-rounded individuals capable of addressing wicked problems.

This vision of education is not entirely new. The transdisciplinary, civic-minded approach has roots in the early 19th century. The German philosopher and educational reformer, Wilhelm von Humboldt articulated a model of higher education that integrated diverse fields of knowledge and emphasized the formation of responsible citizens. Humboldt believed that students cannot become active citizens unless they acquire knowledge from different fields and develop a broad cultivation of mind and character. In her analysis of Humboldt's philosophy of education, Sabrina Bacher (2024) notes, "In lieu of embracing a competitive dog-eat-dog mentality, Humboldt envisions a world where people come together, combining their diverse talents to mutually enrich one another and collectively evolve as a unified humankind" (p. 179). The Humboldtian model, centered on the unity of research and teaching, the freedom to teach and learn, and the cultivation of broadly educated citizens, has

influenced European and U.S. higher education, inspiring liberal arts traditions and transdisciplinary approaches (Metzger, 2020; Reichert, 2019).

While often celebrated for resisting direct political and economic interference, critical pedagogical scholars note that Humboldt's vision was deeply elitist, designed primarily for a privileged social class, and rooted in Eurocentric ideals that excluded marginalized groups from full participation. Its emphasis on "solitude" and professorial authority risks reproducing hierarchical, exclusionary structures rather than fostering collective, emancipatory knowledge production. Moreover, as Ash (2014) and Dafermos (2023) argue, the Humboldtian ideal has rarely been realized in practice and is now increasingly undermined, or selectively appropriated, by neoliberal reforms that commodify education. For critical educators, the challenge is not to nostalgically revive Humboldt, but to radically democratize and decolonize the aspects of his model that valued intellectual freedom and civic responsibility, reframing them within a praxis-oriented, transdisciplinary framework committed to social justice, anti-capitalism, and the inclusion of historically excluded voices (Bacher, 2024).

Neoliberalism is also increasingly evident in EU universities. Ljungqvist and Sonesson (2023) argue that "the European education project is embedded within a neoliberal rationality which produces both discursive and material consequences" (p. 154). EU institutions have started to change their roles in the regional ecosystems through transforming from traditional knowledge-creation institutions into generators of social and business innovations. A study conducted by the European University Association found evidence that universities have begun to "integrate interdisciplinary approaches into teaching curricula and methods" and are preparing students to contribute to their societies and address current challenges (Reichert, 2019, p. 24).[10] Such

curricular innovation that merges technological innovation with social responsibility can lead to the formation of socially responsive and active citizens who can address local, regional, and global crises. Metzger (2020) suggests transdisciplinarity centers on integration of study by creating new undergraduate and graduate classes such as "The History of Technology" or "The Philosophy of Physics," which in turn would integrate humanities and sciences to create new approaches to scrutinizing pressing issues such as economic and environmental justice.

While these developments are laudable, there is an increasing influence on universities of corporations (Heller, 2016) and hard right politicians (Mackenzie, 2016). This is particularly so in the US. Last year, for instance, West Virginia University (WVU) moved to eliminate world language programs and other humanities courses, citing financial reasons. Academics across the US, WVU faculty, students, and students' families see the move as a substantial shift to vocational and trade education that has occurred in the U.S. for more than four decades (Hanlon, 2023; Kingson, 2023; Pettit, 2023). Further, increasing attacks on education at all levels from primary to tertiary by extreme right politicians and organizations undermine public education and its role in educating for democracy target inclusive curricula such as critical race theory (Maharaj et al., 2024). These efforts, identified as "educational neo-fascism" (Díez Gutiérrez et al., 2024, p. 125), are on the rise in Europe and the Americas.

Due to migration of families from North Macedonia to western Europe and the U.S., and with computer science becoming one of the most viable ways of securing relatively well-paid employment after graduation, universities in North Macedonia are seeing a rapid decline in students pursuing studies in social sciences, natural sciences, and the humanities. This leaves room for university and government leaders to phase out study programs, schools, or even entire

campuses. To avoid this, but at the same time help create graduates equipped with skills and knowledge to deal with pressing local and global issues, transdisciplinary programs should be created and offered, which integrate holistic approaches and diverse perspectives to complex socio-political, economic, and environmental challenges, through combining arts and sciences, humanities and sciences, and more.

Recommendations

Expand Teacher Unions' Influence on Curricula

Teacher unions are among the most important counterforces to neoliberalism in education, because they can defend the public good of education against market-driven reforms that prioritize efficiency, competition, and privatization over equity and democratic participation. The two most important teacher unions in North Macedonia are, first, Trade Union of Workers in Education, Science and Culture of Macedonia [Синдикат на работниците во образованието, науката и културата на Македонија or SONK] and, second, the Independent Academic Workers Union [Nezavisen Akademski Sindikat (NAkS)]. SONK has 27,000 members and supports teachers at all levels of education from primary to tertiary, while NAkS, with 250-300 members, represents university teaching and research staff.

However, the primary activity of SONK and NAkS has been salary negotiations and working conditions, with SONK achieving some meaningful wage increases for educators since 2019 and NAkS providing collaboration to strengthen the collective voice of educators. We recommend that these teacher unions expand their influence to address systemic challenges, such as lessening the rigidity of curricula, to allow for the development and implementation of

transdisciplinary curricula that aims to prepare students for democratic participation and current global crises. Teachers' unions should expand their advocacy into issues like curriculum design, pedagogical innovation, and the integration of sustainability and civic engagement into teaching which we think will be the only way to help overcome the rigidity and bureaucratic inactivity that currently blocks any kind of reforms in the education system in North Macedonia.

Such an expanded role is especially important given that many public universities in North Macedonia are still tied to outdated, rigid, and overly siloed curricula, with governance systems that leave little room for faculty or student input (Stevenson *et al*., 2025). By stepping into this space, higher education unions could become a united platform for driving reforms that bring in transdisciplinary learning, give students more voice and agency, and connect education to the skills and perspectives needed in today's world. At the same time, they could safeguard academic freedom and the integrity of teaching and research. Taking on this broader mission would not only help universities play a stronger role in North Macedonia's democratic development but also position them as active contributors to the country's EU integration efforts (Stevenson *et al*., 2025).

Incorporate Agentic Pedagogy in All Levels of Education in North Macedonia

While this paper focuses on higher education, democratic agency in learning must be cultivated well before students reach universities. Recent scholarship and practitioner-led initiatives in the US offer valuable insights for rethinking primary and secondary education in North Macedonia. Don Berg's (2024) *The Agentic Schools Manifesto* proposes that learning is most effective when

grounded in student well-being, when the purpose of education is to cultivate agency rather than merely transmit content, and when schools actively nurture students' psychological needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence.

Berg's agentic schools principles align with trends outside the Balkans toward student-centered learning from organizations such as the Aurora Institute and its advocacy for personalized education, and the Zinn Education Project, which emphasizes critical, justice-oriented curricula. Such approaches demonstrate how "agentic schooling" can embed democratic values early in the learning process by giving primary and secondary students a voice in shaping their educational experiences and connecting their studies to community engagement. Adapting these approaches in North Macedonia, through teacher training, participatory classroom practices, and locally relevant, student-led projects and community engagement, could help establish the roots of democratic, critical, and engaged citizenship long before students enter higher education.

Continuous teacher professional development is critical to implementing agentic pedagogy in the K-12 educational system in the country. Nonetheless, despite the legal provision requiring teachers to complete 60 hours of teacher professional development over the course of three years, teachers in North Macedonia report "very little participation in professional development" (Kitchen *et al.*, 2019, p.72). Kitchen *et al.* (2019) report that teachers in North Macedonia attend less professional development training compared to their counterparts in other countries. This systemic failure prevents a bottom-up educational development approach and has sparked public critique by civic organizations dealing with educational policy. To address this systemic dysfunction, as part of a civic engagement initiative, Limani (2025a) has designed a policy solution to offer the Ministry of Education and Science in the country a Finnish model for immediate implementation. Collaboratively

designed with Finnish experts, the model includes a new curriculum and encourages faculties (departments) of education at public universities to take over the continuous teacher professional development while replacing private providers, usually owned by oligarchs and party financiers.

Enhance Critical Thinking through Transdisciplinarity Curricula

Public universities in North Macedonia should provide students with critical transdisciplinary academic experiences. Research on "future-ready" education (Patel, Puah and Kok, 2022, p. 1) emphasizes the need for students to develop analytical and innovative thinking, complex problem-solving, active learning, leadership, resilience, and adaptability, alongside commitments to civic responsibility, global citizenship, and environmental stewardship. While universities in North Macedonia have made some progress in areas such as technology design and innovation, they are falling short in cultivating these broader capacities, particularly critical thinking, civic engagement, and sustainability-oriented values. The rigidity of current curricula in public universities in the country leaves little scope for integrating transdisciplinary studies that foreground democracy, environmental stewardship, and civic responsibility. For instance, the program only offers a range of classes from the field, in all six semesters of the BA program. What is slightly different in this program is that the list of elective classes goes slightly beyond the program, nonetheless, it is limited to pedagogy, psychology, and Macedonian and English languages, while other electives are only from *within* the field itself (Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј" во Скопје, 2023).

A study conducted by the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" in Skopje (Blizankovski et al., 2021) revealed that North Macedonia is highly susceptible to populism and populist discourse, which by and large results with

authoritarianism and the weakening of democracy (See, also, Mattioli, 2016). One of the reasons for this susceptibility is that citizens embrace conspiracy theories as true, while populist politicians misuse this weakness and gain politically through engaging in inflammatory rhetoric and rhetoric of fear.

The problems with citizen susceptibility to populism can be illustrated by the surprising lack of research methodology coursework in public universities in North Macedonia at the undergraduate and, in many cases, the graduate levels. More research-centered and evidence-based students, alumni, and faculty can play a part in reducing conspiratorial thinking. Further, as Limani (2025b) argues, the neglect of methodologies in higher education leads to faculties who are un- or underprepared to engage with their global peers in research and scholarship.

Expand Critical Literacies to Combat Disinformation

Critical pedagogy scholars (Apple *et al.,* 2022; del Junco, 2024; Gutiérrez-Ujaque, 2024; Kerruish, 2025; Medeiros Santos *et al.,* 2025) and digital literacy scholars (Bali, 2019; Cuevas-Cerveró, Colmenero-Ruiz and Martínez-Ávila, 2023) argue that it is necessary to provide students with "the acute awareness of the systemic relationship that media and digital information platforms have with interlocking systems of oppression" (Chomintra, 2023. p. 1). Kerruish (2025) argues "students need to cultivate skills that identify and resist the effects of global corporate digitisation on learning, reflection, and decision-making" (p. 13).

Information literacies are particularly relevant when combatting right-wing, populist, racialized disinformation (D'Errico et al., 2024). Lilja et al. (2024) argue "civic literacy approaches to disinformation hold that informed

citizenship largely results from the ability of schools and public education institutions to teach individuals the skills necessary to identify, understand, and reject false information" (p. 3). Populism and authoritarianism in North Macedonia reached a climax on April 27, 2017, when a group of mobsters stormed the parliament and severely injured democratically elected MPs. This incident has left an injurious mark on the already fragile democracy in the country. The study by Blizankovski et al. (2021) reveals a troubling public opinion, highlighting the lasting negative impact of a dysfunctional mandatory K-12 education system on its citizens. The ramifications of this dysfunction are further perpetuated in the higher education system in the country, which has been unable to fill in the knowledge and skills gap among students. The study revealed that there is a very low level of trust in democratic institutions in the country, with respondents ranking their trust, on a ten-point scale, as follows: 2.8 trust in the judiciary, 4.4 in the nation's president, and 3.5 in both the national government and the parliament (Blizankovski et al., 2021). What makes this low level of trust even more concerning is the high acceptance of conspiracy theories among citizens in the country, also found in the study. Specifically, the study revealed that as much as 53% of surveyed citizens partially agree and 8% fully agree that the world is run by a handful of powerful individuals who instructed the pandemic to be created in a lab (20% partially agree / 44% fully agree) and control climate by satellites and radars (14%/32%). Respondents also agree that the Ministry of Health inflates numbers of fatalities from COVID-19 (15%/30%), the virus was sprayed using airplanes (15%/31%), climate change is a hoax (9%/20%), and large media outlets mostly spread lies (23%/34%) (Blizankovski *et al.,* 2021).

Belief in disinformation is particularly important in that citizens are at risk of supporting the rise of alt-right populism and rising ethnonationalisms. Higher education can and should help citizens of North Macedonia overcome this

intellectual crisis. It can do so by equipping its students with the skills and values needed to achieve a functional democracy for all, based on a shared trust and inclusion. Moreover, universities must re-align their missions to contribute to the development of a new knowledge-based generation who will be equipped with civic, social, and democratic values. This generation will not only need and be able to foresee the future but will also need to create it and make difficult decisions both in certain and uncertain times. Countries which have invested human and material resources to developing higher education, have done so by systematically and incrementally improving the ecosystem through a national and widely accepted strategy. In North Macedonia, the state of higher education should be treated as a national emergency to re-align the whole human and material potential and create a new ecosystem based on collaboration, research, and with full access to scientific and scholarly discoveries.

Develop Justice-Focused Curricula

Justice-focused curricula are particularly needed in the Western Balkans, given enduring political and ethnic tensions in the region (Batrićević, Vujović and Janković, 2025; Nic Craith *et al.*, 2024; Tomovska Misoska *et al.*, 2020). Hunaepi *et al.* (2024) argue "through its focus on social justice" critical pedagogy:

> critiques and seeks to transform inequitable power structures, promoting educational practices that are equitable, participatory, and liberating. This aspect of critical pedagogy underscores its enduring commitment to understanding and actively changing the conditions perpetuating inequality and oppression (p. 3051).

Curricula should focus on various types of justice, including, but not limited to economic, gender, ethnic, and environmental justice. Building on the work of Apple (2019) and Fricker (2007) and Paraskeva (2017), Rushton *et al.* (2025) argue that justice-oriented curricula incorporates "a critical understanding" of complex problems such as "climate justice, which pays attention to the colonial and racial capitalist roots of the climate crisis where intersectional injustices (such as gender, race, intergenerational and disability injustices) persist" (p. 2). The authors attest that "A justice-orientated curriculum would actively include and value the epistemic contributions of historically marginalised groups to ensure that students have access to a diverse range of voices and experiences" (p. 3). Limani (2020) argues that a transformed K-12 education system in North Macedonia should focus on advancing human rights particularly due to the oppression of marginalized communities such as the LGBTQIA+ community, women, persons with disabilities, animals, and ethnic and religious minorities. Such a transformation "could act against testimonial injustice which has privileged some voices over others and develop students' criticality through questioning whose voices are represented and whose are missing, recognising and valuing diverse ways of knowing" (p. 3). One initiative is the "Curriculum for a Changing Climate" project in the UK which illustrates how learning about the climate catastrophe can be "integrated across the existing primary and secondary school curriculum rather than being siloed in science and geography" (Rushton *et al.*, 2025, p. 2; see, also, Keynejad, Yapa and Ganguli, 2021).

An emerging body of research analyzing environmental crises in North Macedonia (See Donevska, 2017; Kochubovski and Kendrovski, 2012; Nuredini and Memeti, 2025). Arsovski *et al.* (2018) reports that Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, "often tops the charts as the world's most polluted city" (p. 17). While the UN Sustainable Development Goals have been critiqued for promoting an agenda set by the Global North neoliberal interests, focus on

sustainable development goals is relevant to EU accession aspiring countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (Gafuri and Muftuler-Bac, 2021).[11] Given the climate catastrophe, there is a critical need for environmental sustainability studies, however these programs are not currently offered at public universities in North Macedonia. For example, these programs could be offered in a critical transdisciplinary approach, which would combine natural and social sciences and the humanities. This would give universities in North Macedonia the opportunity to keep current classes, professors, and programs in operation while at the same time transform them into relevant institutions that combine local knowledge and justice-focused teaching, research, and community engagement rooted in a critical transdisciplinarity that fights epistemic injustice.

Increase Community and Civic Engagement

Given the challenges to democracy in the region, youth and young adults in the Western Balkans have limited trust in state institutions. Andrea Trajković (2023), a young activist from the region, believes in possibilities for youth in the region to be more engaged and involved in their communities and civic life. She argues "the dual importance of genuine youth participation in these processes: internal development of the young person, acquiring critical thinking skills, and comparing perspectives necessary for forming beliefs, and the contribution to the democratisation of society" (para. 4). The Western Balkans Democracy Initiative (2019) found that only 10% of youth and young adults in North Macedonia have been involved in a civil society or non-governmental organization. Increased community and civil engagement, with organizations such as Qendra për Bashkëpunim Balkanik [Center for Balkan Cooperation] in Tetovo, Македонски Центар за Граѓанско Образование [Macedonian Civic Education Center] in Skopje, and Младински Образовен Форум [Youth

Educational Forum] in Skopje, can not only increase critical thinking and capacity to reduce ethnic tensions that exist in the region and the nation, but it can lead to young people feeling heard and acknowledged, something the Western Balkans Democracy Initiative (2019) reported was sorely lacking in North Macedonia.

The shift from a neoliberal system, which solely relies on input from local business leaders, into a transdisciplinary model, which is rooted into critical thinking, collaboration, innovation, creativity, and sustainability, is the way forward to assure higher education remains relevant in the society. Besides, transdiplinarity does not omit the importance of community engagement of faculty and students; on the contrary, it promotes a much stronger collaboration between academia and community, across various sectors, to tackle pressing issues, particularly environmental sustainable (Guerrero-Hernández, Rojas-Avilez and González-Weil, 2023; Meyer *et al*., 2017; Steiner and Posch, 2006; Ruggerio *et al*., 2024).

At present, study programs at the largest university in the country, Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј" во Скопје [University "St. Cyril and Methodius" in Skopje], are geared towards equipping students solely with skills in specific fields while providing them with no transdisciplinary learning opportunities whatsoever. One example is the Applied Physics program at the Institute of Physics. What is more, elective classes in all eight undergraduate semesters are focused on the fields only or within the range of the science of physics (Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј" во Скопје, 2023). A transdisciplinary approach would allow students to use their knowledge in physics and apply it while conducting internships with organizations such as Macedonian Ecological Society Research, Natura MK, Ecologists Movement of Macedonia, and Green Humane City who are working on the climate crisis, severe air pollution in

Skopje, and other environmental problems. Similarly, other programs could help increase community engagement. For example, the Faculty of Fine Arts could enhance their program to add community engagement while involving their students with local organizations to organize arts installations and exhibitions to fight the climate crisis, enhance rule of law, raise awareness for lack of access to public healthcare and public education by minorities and marginalized groups (See Bequette and Bequette, 2012).

However, changing curricula for any reason, including the addition of student internships, in the higher education system in North Macedonia is rather difficult. Under the 2018 Law on Higher Education (Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Education and Science, 2018), universities in North Macedonia enjoy full autonomy, which is intended to facilitate the democratization of knowledge by allowing institutions the freedom to teach, conduct research, and govern themselves (Republic of North Macedonia, Ministry of Education and Science, 2018). In North Macedonia, the Agency for Quality in Higher Education is responsible for quality assurance through its Accreditation and Evaluation Boards, which review and renew program accreditations every five years. The Evaluation Board also assesses the overall quality of study programs. Yet, bureaucracy still weighs down the system. Current laws allow limited changes to courses (about 20 to 30 percent per semester) and new courses can only be added during the five-year cycle if included in the original accreditation plan.

Increase Student Involvement

A small country like North Macedonia could easily achieve progress; however, it needs to build intellectual communities, especially among its younger adult citizens, who are gaining momentum in the country's demographic landscape

and as such, they are largely seen as the generation to make the necessary shift towards a more functional democracy.

A considerate number of young adults are currently undergraduate students in North Macedonia. The 2023-24 cohort registered 52.316 students in the whole higher education system in all levels (Државен завод за статистика, 2025). The report indicates that there was a slight decrease of 2.8% in the number of students registered for university studies compared to the previous cohort. Moreover, a notable element in the report is that women students constitute 58.7% of the total student body in the higher education system pursuing studies. Besides the general tendency for students to pursue studies abroad, 15,330 first year students and 52.316 overall students pursuing university knowledge is impressive and encouraging for a small country like North Macedonia. A rough calculation assesses the country could achieve a sustainable democracy if its 50,000 students are given the opportunity to increase their democratic competences through a formal university education across the curriculum and through co-curricular and extra-curricular engagement. In other words, if conducted properly, in 15 years, a large pool of educated citizens of North Macedonia could push civic and democratic processes of the country forward and maintain a more functional democracy for the country and its institutions. What is more, democracy and civilization go hand in hand and as such, they are solely dependent on education. Higher education must provide opportunities for students to grow and develop into global citizens who will possess robust knowledge about scientific, social, political, academic, and institutional processes.

Studies on student activism and engagement throughout university studies in North Macedonia (see Младински Образовен Форум, MOF [Youth Education Forum], 2015) show little or no engagement by students in campus life. More

precisely, the initial study by MOF (2015) found that 63.5% of surveyed students at UKIM (the largest public university in the country) had never voted on student government elections while 40% of them had never participated in student protests. What is more, the study found that more than 70% of students had never participated in the organization of any kind of event pertaining to student life on campus. This stands in contrast to recent events in neighboring Serbia, where students organized a nationwide protest movement in response to government policies. The scale, persistence, and nationwide coordination of these demonstrations offer a compelling example of how student activism can influence public discourse and challenge political leadership in the Balkans. The recent student protests in Serbia, and the response of students in Macedonia to this activism are important illustrations (Dinev, 2025; Kr., 2024; Николов, 2025). Such examples could serve as a source of inspiration for students in North Macedonia, showing that collective action, when strategically organized, can elevate student voices and push for broader democratic reforms. While the aim of this scholarly article is to provide solutions for creating active citizens upon graduation, establishing a factual situation of low student activism during studies aids the overall argumentation that a complete campus climate change is long overdue. Through a systematic interdisciplinary curricular reform and a student-centered inclusive campus climate, student activism both on-campus and upon graduation shall be increased. Education for democratic citizenship and education for sustainable development, once included in the curriculum, shall yield positive results. Similarly, student engagement on campus through research work, master teaching assistantships, and doctoral research assistantships, shall create a vibrant student-centered campus climate rather than one based on rigid bureaucratic administration, as it is presently.

Universities must carry out curricular changes to implement transdisciplinary higher education opportunities for students in North Macedonia. However, such

changes require a more complex approach, and may require major changes and larger investment in infrastructure and digitalization. Although the reformed curriculum model must be authentic and fit for the context, one or more curricular models may be taken as a foundation upon which to build. A transdisciplinary general education curriculum which would help prepare students in North Macedonia for active democratic citizenship must allow them to acquire skills and knowledge from a larger pool of humanistic and social scientific realms, by and large focused on academic integrity, academic writing, intercultural communication in a global world, moral issues, understanding global politics, understanding media and tackling mis- and disinformation, sustainability, natural science inquiry, understanding arts, understanding history, and developing critical thinking skills. A transdisciplinary curricular approach will help the country end the omnipresent challenge of understanding how a democracy should equitably work for everyone, particularly in a multicultural country such as North Macedonia. A key element of this transformation is collaboration with students, government institutions, and community and civil society organizations.

Increase Critical Pedagogy Scholarship in North Macedonia

Finally, and most importantly, critical pedagogical scholarship and practice in North Macedonia is desperately needed. It is largely unknown in the country, and "unfairly neglected in the Balkans" (Ćumura and Petrović, 2022, p. 959). Scholarly work interrogating higher education in the region would scrutinize institutional curricula, extra-curricular activities, and co-curricular activities and their impact on student civic and democratic competence during and after their studies. Responding to this need, Barnhardt and Limani (2022) developed an instrument for a large data collection operation to learn the extent to which universities prepare students for excellence, provide them with personal and

academic integrity, experience in ethical and moral reasoning, and opportunities to contribute to a larger community. This research will provide the academic community and policymakers in North Macedonia with a vigorous body of knowledge about the capacity of the system to prepare graduates who will help the country establish a functional democracy based on an overarching civic participation agenda. It will also contribute to students' "formation of critical consciousness…with the goal of acting as subjects in the creation of a democratic society" (Ćumura and Petrović, 2022, p. 963; See, also, Ćumura, 2015).

North Macedonia must simultaneously work to defend democracy and create new democratic ideals. Besides the obvious, education for democratic citizenship, particularly in the relatively new and fragile democracy of North Macedonia, will aid in the fight of the ever-present corruption in the country, prevent the return of autocracy, provide for a more just and free space for journalists to do their noble jobs, and keep oligarchs away from gaining control of the government.

Given that higher education in North Macedonia is understudied, we call for research that will scrutinize institutional curricula, extra-curricular activities, and co-curricular activities and their impact on student civic and democratic competence among students during and after their studies. While the fragility of the democracy in North Macedonia is concerning, what is more concerning is the corruption in universities is largely widespread, which is another area of research that is needed. More work is needed to assess the contexts, and propose implementing best practices (for instance, in Australia and Canada, where critical pedagogy scholarship often intersects with Indigenous educational theories of practices; See Furrey, 2023; Lowan-Trudeau, 2017; Simpson, 2014;

Wildcat *et al.*, 2014) to establish a democracy based on inclusive civic participation.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

While North Macedonia's education system has formally moved away from the overt ideologization of the Yugoslav period, it has retained substantial authoritarian characteristics in higher education pedagogy. The legacy of decades of teacher-centered, memorization-based schooling has proven hard to overcome, continuing to shape academic culture and dampen student agency even amid ongoing efforts at educational democratization. A critical transdisciplinary approach can respond to these concerns. This approach would democratize knowledge while research would be pursued in a transdisciplinary approach, in full autonomy and integrity. Similarly, scholarly and scientific pursuit should be internationalized. North Macedonia has a deep socialist legacy which is prevalent across the higher education sector and as such universities should strive to create international mentorship schemes for their professors and (post)graduate students. Research methodology is currently nonexistent in most undergraduate study programs in public universities in North Macedonia, including the programs taken as an example in this article (Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј" во Скопје, 2023). This must be revisited and amended timely as it undermines the value a university should have in society. Research methodology should become central in master and doctoral studies and to do that, a whole new research infrastructure should be built for each public university, with a mission of economic, social, and environmental justice.

For the country to establish a functional democracy, higher education institutions must play a critical role and help the process, beyond their curricula. Curricular interventions are necessary to democratize and diversify knowledge

acquisition through a plethora of transdisciplinary academic experiences; nonetheless, a university experience must enrich students' experiences through informal and non-formal engagements in university campus life, and beyond. Curricular and extracurricular activities, as well as immersion of each student in the creation of student life on campus and in the community, is what would provide both depth and breadth of knowledge for each student. Depth is usually provided through the engagement of the student in closely studying the subject matter from different perspectives and theories of knowledge, while breadth is provided through engagement in transdisciplinary liberal education. Emphasis should be given to research and the ability for professors and students to pursue it, independent of any outside impact. This includes a whole new vision on university reform whereby a new research infrastructure needs to be developed, including full access to scientific discoveries and research publications, and re-establishing a new relationship between academia and society.

Ensuring that the voices of students and faculty are heard and incorporated into reform processes is critical. A study by Cerovac (2021) found that students from the Western Balkans who engage in transdisciplinary learning, particularly through project-based or community-embedded work, report higher satisfaction, improved problem-solving skills, and stronger commitment to civic engagement. The study also found that faculty in the region similarly emphasize that such approaches break down entrenched disciplinary silos and better prepare graduates for complex societal challenges (Cerovac, 2021). A study conducted by the Western Balkan Alumni Association (WBAA) (2021) states that alumni in North Macedonia value curricula which integrate transdisciplinary skills with complex problem solving. However, students have voiced concerns over the lack of opportunities for such engagement within academic degree programs, pointing to a need for institutional strategies that embed transdisciplinary and community-based work across all study levels

(Kosanović, 2018). These findings align with research outside the region that provides evidence that student-led projects, when supported by faculty mentors, substantially increase both academic motivation and civic awareness (Choukrani *et al.,* 2024; Heydari *et al*., 2023). Therefore, future reforms in North Macedonia should explicitly incorporate these voices into curriculum design, policy frameworks, and quality assurance processes to ensure that transdisciplinary education is not only advocated in theory but practiced in meaningful, student-centered ways.

As discussed above, higher education must play a central role in providing the country with graduates educated with democratic ideals. Higher education reform in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans should be implemented autonomously by each institution while legal conditions should be fulfilled in an inclusive governmental agenda. While contemporary trends in higher education are reaching high standards of learning, teaching, and research, North Macedonia must catch up through implementing one or a combination of the recommendations that have been presented in this study.

This study has provided some recommendations for education institutions in the Western Balkans. While they are preliminary, it is our hope that our recommendations will encourage opportunities for dialogue within and outside the region. The region should pursue a higher education that goes beyond employability and focuses on creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, civic responsibility, environmental awareness, and global citizenship, to create active participants in a democracy. It should aim to transform universities, and all educational institutions, from engines of neoliberal reproduction into spaces of resistance, solidarity, and collective liberation.

Currently, higher education institutions in North Macedonia lack potential, resources, and policies to allow for students to gain skills and knowledge for democratic advancement. Their curricula and study programs are geared towards subject-specific topics, which hinders universities to be aligned with international higher education standards, leaving behind students in the country compared to their peers globally. Democracy and higher education should be aligned, not only in North Macedonia, but throughout the Western Balkans. An authentic higher education reform centered around the need to equip students with transdisciplinary education, focused largely on democratic ideals, civic skills, global citizenship, social activism, entrepreneurial skills, and digital skills for the future, is long overdue in North Macedonia. Higher education must become the cornerstone of democracy and lead democratic processes in the country. More than ever before, the country needs a new higher education ecosystem which would produce graduates dedicated to strengthening democracy by promoting civil rights, equity, public service accountability, transparency, and integrity.

Ultimately, the difficulties facing North Macedonia's universities are part of a wider global crisis in education under capitalism. A critical transdisciplinary approach shows that small reforms within neoliberal frameworks are not enough. What is required is a break from the logic of commodification and competition. Only by moving beyond capitalism's hold on academia can higher education be reclaimed as truly transformational.

Notes

1 In its most recent report, Freedom House (2025) ranks North Macedonia as "partly free". Civil liberties in the country were assessed at 39 out of 60 possible points. Political rights were assessed at 28 out of 40 possible points. These data are unchanged from the previous year (Freedom House, 2024). Elsewhere, Repucci and Slipowitz (2021) report that the U.S. had seen a decline of 11 points, the largest decline the country has ever noted, which placed the U.S. among the "25 countries that have suffered the largest declines" for the respective reporting period (p. 2). In 2022, the number of countries that noted democratic decline is lower (25 versus 60 in 2021 and 73 in 2020) (Gorokhovskaia *et al.,* 2023). Similarly, the number of countries that improved democratic principles went up from 25 in 2021 to 34 in 2022 (Gorokhovskaia *et al*., 2023; Repucci and Slipowitz, 2022).

2 Throughout this study, in order to avoid technical misunderstandings, the term North Macedonia will be used, rather than the Republic of Macedonia, Macedonia or FYROM found in international documents from the period before the name change to Republic of North Macedonia in 2019.

3 North Macedonia is the only former Yugloslav state that seceded peacefully from Yugloslavia after a referendum in September 1991 (Bačević, 2014; Vodlan, 2023).

4 Author names have been removed to ensure anonymous review.

5 See Nikolovski *et al.* (2020). Despite corruption at universities in North Macedonia, evaluating bodies such as Freedom House (2022) report that academic freedom is maintained at an acceptable level.

6 For scholarship on the economic crisis in Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 1980s and its impact on higher education, see Bačević (2014, 2016); Duančić (2025); Marković and Obadić (2017); Miladinovic (2025); Popivoda-Endresen (1979); Pribićević and Gligorijević (1973); Resulovic (1980); Šoljan (1991); Šoljan and Schutze (1989); Yarashevich and Karneyeva (2013).

7 Carpenter et al. (2023) cite OCED (2001) which defines human capital as "productive wealth embodied in labour, skills, and knowledge". In their critique of the concept, they authors argue "we labour under the narrative of human capital, which offers an untroubled story of class mobility at the personal and national levels through the investment of individuals in their skills, knowledge, and capacities, concretized in educational credentials" (p. 40).

8 For a detailed analysis of the minoritized status of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia and the formation of higher education in the Albanian language, see "Macedonia: Between Peacebuilding and Ethnic Polarization?" in *From class to identity: The politics of education reforms in former Yugoslavia* by Jana Bačević (2014) and 'The Quest for Albanian-Language University in North Macedonia during the Early 1990s' by Drenusha Kamberi, Gojart Kamberi, and Bajram Kamberi (2025). See, also, Bloodworth (2020) and Kule (2015).

9 For more on wicked problems, see, in particular, Anke Gruendel's (2022) work, 'The Technopolitics of Wicked Problems: Reconstructing Democracy in an Age of Complexity'.

See, also, Agustian (2025), Booth (2025), Heggart (2021), Jamal *et al.* (2021), Kostoulias (2024), and Yukawa (2015).

10 The universities in the study include Aalto University, Finland; Masaryk University, Czech Republic; Sorbonne University, France; Eindhoven University of Technology, in the Netherlands; Technical University of Munich, Germany; University of Manchester, UK; University of Minho, Portugal; University of Warsaw, Poland; and Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, Spain. For instance, the Sorbonne has adopted a new interdisciplinary curriculum that has attracted a larger number of students. The Technical University in Munich has intertwined social sciences and humanities with engineering curricula through a project-based approach in entrepreneurial and digital skills, and a mentored research approach to guide students to engage in technological innovation that can impact social change (Reichert, 2019).

11 At the first UNDP SDG Finance Academy for the Western Balkans, held in June 2024 in Bar, Montenegro, UNDP Resident Representative in Montenegro, Ekaterina Paniklova (cited in UNDP Montenegro, 2024) argued that achieving sustainability goals necessitates coordinated efforts between public and private sectors, as traditional financing methods alone are inadequate to meet these goals. This synergy is especially critical in the context of the Western Balkans nations seeking EU accession. Paniklova explained that in Montenegro, for instance, two-thirds of the actions outlined in the 17 SDGs are directly tied to EU accession criteria.

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Table 1:

Public Universities in North Macedonia *(arranged by year of founding).*

University	Year founded	Location	Academic units (faculties)	Research or other institutes	Number of teaching and research faculty members	Student enrollment	Notes
Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј "во Скопје [Saints Cyril and Methodius University]	1949	Skopje, North Macedonia	23	10	2,390	25,000+	
Универзитет „Св. Климент Охридски" - Битола [The University St. Kliment Ohridski in Bitola]	1979	Bitola, North Macedonia	10	1 (higher school); 1 scientific institute	374	4,200+	
Универзитет Гоце Делчев - Штип [*Univerzitet Goce Delchev Shtip;* Goce Delčev University of Štip (UGD)]	2007	Bitola, North Macedonia	12	3 academies	200+	8,300+	Founded to be a "higher level" vocational school. similar programs to UKO-B).
Mother Teresa University in Skopje [MTU] (Albanian: *Universiteti Nënë Teresa në Shkup*).	2016	Skopje, North Macedonia	5	8	114	3,500+	Civil Engineering and Architecture Informatics, Social Sciences, Technical Sciences, Technological Sciences.

Appendix 1

Public-Private not-for-profit Universities and Private Universities in North Macedonia (with campus locations)

Public-Private not-for-profit Universities in North Macedonia:

International Balkan University, Skopje

South East European University, Tetovo

Private Universities in North Macedonia:

American University of Europe (AUE FON), Skopje

ЕВРОПСКИ УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ [European University], Skopje

Euro College Kumanovo, Kumanovo

Faculty of Business Economics (FBE), Skopje

Integrated Business Faculty (IBI), Skopje

International University of Struga, campuses in Struga and Gostivar

Меѓународен Славјански Универзитет [International Slavic University G. R. Derzhavin], campuses in Sveti Nikole and Bitola

МИТ Универзитет [MIT University], Skopje

University American College Skopje – UACS, Skopje

University for Audiovisual Arts – European Film Academy ESRA, Skopje

University of Studies Struga "EuroCollege", Kumanovo

University of Tourism and Management, Skopje

Uluslarası Vizyon Ünversitesi [International Vision University], Gostivar

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