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THE ROLE OF AI-DRIVEN SOCIAL MEDIA NARRATIVES IN SHAPING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR EU INTEGRATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the public perception of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its algorithmic influence on the European Union (EU) integration debate in North Macedonia. Given the need for fulfilling important geopolitical obligations, such as the mandatory constitutional reform, North Macedonia finds itself at a crucial point where the organic public sphere transitions into an AI-driven one. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational survey approach (N=357), the current research explores the level of computational propaganda recognition among citizens and the impact on their geopolitical attitudes. The findings reveal that North Macedonia is home to a population that is highly aware of the online space and that everyone in the sample perceives the manipulative nature of algorithms and the deliberate dissemination of Eurosceptic content. Additionally, there is a clear pattern of stratification by ethnicity in terms of the so-called "trust gap", where Macedonians show higher levels of digital cynicism than their ethnic counterparts because of the targeted manipulation of identity-related content. Most importantly, this research uncovers a striking phenomenon of "Digital Resilience" where both Albanians and Macedonians exhibit overwhelmingly high personal commitment to EU integration despite recognizing the polarized and manipulated digital space.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Social Media, EU Integration, Computational Propaganda, Digital Resilience, North Macedonia, Algorithmic Polarization.

1. Introduction

North Macedonia's journey to membership in the EU remains critical and delicate as of 2026. The country is coping with the difficult task of meeting the structural conditions of the EU negotiating process, but the process itself remains blocked due to internal disputes, which are connected to the problematics of identity politics and mandatory constitutional reforms (Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje [IDSCS], 2025).

However, according to historical evidence, a comprehensive public consensus, without which the transition process cannot succeed, becomes possible only in an open environment. Yet, the central platform for forming such a public consensus, namely the

social media, experienced a paradigm shift that was brought about by recent technological advancements.

The nature of social networks evolved from the "organic" participatory logic of Web 2.0 into a much more artificial and tightly mediated space powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Bennett & Livingston, 2020). As of today, political communication on sites like Facebook, X, and TikTok is not only hosted but also actively steered by the algorithmic power of botnets, recommendation systems, and generative AI (Woolley & Howard, 2018). Nonetheless, in the Western Balkans, there is a different kind of challenge in this AI ecosystem. There have been reports that computational propaganda and narratives often prey on vulnerabilities already present in societies, which is dangerous for their cohesion to implement reforms as demanded by the EU (European Commission Progress Report, 2025).

Thus, the problem of integration of the EU in North Macedonia has turned from being a mere diplomatic question to a digital one. In case the dissemination of news is controlled by social media algorithms and narratives, it automatically leads to the formation of the "virtual union" of opinions. However, there is a notable lack of studies conducted in the region that would investigate the perceptions of its citizens regarding the phenomenon. It is important to ascertain whether the society realizes the fact that social media has become a space where AI reigns supreme.

Therefore, this study aims to quantitatively examine the perception of the role of AI-driven social media narratives in shaping public support for EU integration in North Macedonia. By conducting a bilingual empirical survey (Macedonian and Albanian), this research investigates the range to which citizens recognize the transition from organic to algorithmic social media, how they perceive AI's intent (information versus manipulation), and whether they believe this new digital shift actively helps or harms the national consensus on European integration.

2. Literature Review

The intersection of democratic transition, geopolitical integration, and digital communication has become a central focus of political science in the Western Balkans. For North Macedonia, the path toward European Union (EU) membership is not only negotiated in diplomatic corridors but is increasingly mediated by the digital public sphere. With the advent of AI, the architecture of social media platforms changes from user-created networks to AI-generated environments, leading to an evolution in the means of political persuasion. This literature review looks at three interlinked elements: the existing state of public opinion and geopolitics related to North Macedonia’s entry into the European Union (EU), the importance of social media as a tool for politics, and the emerging AI-related changes to these platforms.

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2.1 The Geopolitical Context: Perception and Challenges of EU Integration in North Macedonia

The development process of North Macedonia towards its EU membership has been associated with a period of geopolitical uncertainty due to various bilateral disputes and internal identity conflicts. The solution of the issue related to the country's name through the Prespa Agreement was supposed to give an opportunity for a more stable future development of Macedonia, but it got stuck at another obstacle. The next stage of negotiations is blocked since Macedonia cannot adopt obligatory constitutional changes – namely, the introduction of the Bulgarian minority into the preamble of the country's constitution, which was imposed according to the "French Proposal" in 2022 (European Commission, 2024).

Public perception regarding this integration process is highly complex and deeply polarized, yet general support for the European project remains high. According to the Balkan Barometer 2024, published by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), support for EU membership continues to be driven largely by economic expectations and the desire for improved standards of living. This is further confirmed by the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje (IDSCS, 2025), whose most recent analysis shows that 71% of citizens support North Macedonia's EU membership. However, this overarching support masks serious ethnic and political divides regarding the *conditions* of accession.

The most crucial challenge bringing into sharp relief this divide is the above-cited need for constitutional reform. According to data collected by IDSCS (2025), there exists a significant "support-consensus gap" between the two largest ethnic groups of the country. For those from the ethnic Albanian group, there is pragmatism that sees about 67% in favor of making the constitutional reform a necessity in order to clear the way for entry into Europe. Conversely, among those from the ethnic Macedonian community, there is steady opposition, with less than 14% in favor but about 80% opposed.

Consequently, while the "destination" of EU membership enjoys broad support, the "method" of reaching it has become a source of intense domestic resistance. Such an unpredictable situation renders the public sphere very sensitive to external disturbances and the political shaping of events. The current stand is causing tension within society, giving the digital space a significant area of battle. According to the European Commission (2024), political polarization has been a major obstacle to the Reform Agenda in the country. In such a politically polarized context, AI-powered social media algorithms are given all the material necessary to manipulate the emotions of the people of the country.

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2.2 The Evolution of Political Communication: The Role of Social Media

To understand the current digital vulnerabilities of North Macedonia, it is necessary to examine the foundational role social media has assumed in the region's political communication. Historically, transitional democracies in the Western Balkans suffered from highly polarized traditional media landscapes, often influenced by political or oligarchic interests. With the advent of Web 2.0, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (X) have become tools for democratization, presenting a new form of "virtual union," enabling citizens to bypass established gatekeepers and gain access to uncensored political dialogue (Bennett & Livingston, 2020).

According to literature concerning political communication in the region, social media played two roles: that of filling up the information vacuum and being a means for civic mobilization. Nevertheless, more and more attention has been paid to the negative aspect of such development in the region. The lack of regulation of online discourse led to its rapid transformation into computational propaganda. In such a way, political parties and proxy agents used social media to spread certain messages through coordinated activity, thus benefiting from their engagement-driven character. This inevitably leads to amplification of polarizations that prevent North Macedonia from integration into the EU (Woolley & Howard, 2018).

In the context of EU accession, social media has transformed the diplomatic process into a highly public, daily referendum. Complex legislative requirements, such as the alignment with the EU Reform Agenda or the adoption of minority rights frameworks, are routinely reduced to polarized digital quotes. Consequently, social media does not reflect only the public perception in North Macedonia; it actively constructs the cognitive boundaries within which citizens understand their country's geopolitical reality.

2.3 The Algorithmic Shift: AI-Driven Changes to Social Media

The most important trend in digital political communication today involves a shift from user-generated social media feeds into an environment that is controlled by Artificial Intelligence. By 2025-2026, the application of AI and machine learning systems changes completely the epistemological paradigm of social media platforms. There are two primary functions fulfilled by AI in social networks – firstly, AI determines the way content is distributed on the basis of hidden recommendation engines (such as the For You feed of TikTok), and secondly, it creates artificial content through deepfakes, automated bot-nets, and Large Language Models (LLMs).

The latest research highlights how AI technologies have been used in a comprehensive manner for increasing the hybrid threats and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in the Western Balkans region. As was pointed out

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during the EU-Western Balkans Media Literacy Conference that took place in Skopje towards the end of 2025, the rogue states and non-state entities make use of AI to conduct disinformation operations at a rate and scale never seen before (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2025). The algorithms take advantage of their weaknesses through the spread of emotionally charged messages targeted at specific identity issues revealed by the IDSCS survey.

For example, AI-based bots can create an illusion of popularity for the content that goes against EU or even create foundations movements against any constitution-related reforms. In addition, the use of AI in content generation raises issues with the accuracy of political information, creating the so-called "liar's dividend" when deepfakes alone make it hard for the population to believe real and true data about the EU reforms (Council of Europe, 2025). The business model of current social media is entirely based on engagement, not facts, which fits in very well with the intentions behind AI-powered misinformation.

The existing research makes it clear that the EU integration process for North Macedonia is characterized by polarizing influences rooted in identity, and that the use of algorithms on social media is perfectly poised to leverage these divides. Nevertheless, an empirical question still exists regarding awareness of these issues among the citizenry. While studies have found evidence of algorithmic bias and networks of bots, little research has been conducted to discover how the citizenry of North Macedonia views the unseen influence of algorithms as they consume politically related information online, and particularly given their ethnic and political divides. Whether the citizenry understands the role played by the algorithm and its implications for their future as a geopolitically relevant entity is critical for further analysis. This study addresses that gap by quantitatively measuring the perceived influence of AI-driven narratives on the fragile consensus for EU integration.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Framework

To investigate the public perception of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its influence on the European Union (EU) integration debate in North Macedonia, this study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational survey design. This methodology is grounded in the necessity of understanding the "algorithmic public sphere," a term increasingly used to describe how digital interactions are no longer purely human-to-human but are heavily mediated by machine learning (Noble, 2018). As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2018), a quantitative approach is the most effective way to identify trends and test the relationships between distinct variables within a specific population.

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In the current media environment, there is a need for a research approach that can help define the "digital consciousness" of the citizenry, due to the transition from social media being organic to becoming curated by AI. The strategic use of the cross-sectional research design takes into account the geopolitical needs of 2026 when North Macedonia reaches several key moments in the process of joining the European Union. The application of the quantitative survey method allows us to avoid the drawbacks of qualitative small-n approaches and gain statistical significance in defining the "invisible hand of AI."

3.2 Derivation of Research Questions and Hypotheses

The questions and hypotheses for this investigation are derived from the combination between two important dynamics, namely the emergence of "computational propaganda" and the particular geopolitical weaknesses which are typical in the Western Balkans region. As Woolley & Howard (2019) explain, technology – through social media automation tools and algorithms, for example – is frequently used to manipulate pre-existing societal divisions. In North Macedonia, the societal splits are mainly based on ethnicity and the controversy about the necessary constitutional changes needed for its European Union integration process.

The hypotheses can be derived from the theory called "Digital Resilience." If people become more aware that they have been fed with the manipulated information through their social media by AI algorithms, then their level of awareness may trigger the "cynicism effect," leading to reduced trust in institutional narratives, even in the pro-EU narrative. Alternatively, when citizens perceive AI as a neutral and rational machine that only processes data, then they may be easier to convince through positive narratives created by AI algorithms. These dynamics lead to the formulation of the following research questions and hypotheses:

- **RQ1:** What level of awareness do people in North Macedonia have about the transition from organically driven social media usage to AI-led digital experiences?
- **RQ2:** How does the perception of AI-driven manipulation (bots, deepfakes, and algorithms) correlate with individual support for or skepticism toward North Macedonia's EU integration? Based on these frameworks, the following hypotheses are established:
- **H1:** There is a positive correlation between high digital awareness and the perception that social media intentionally increases Euro-skepticism and ethnic polarization through AI algorithms.
- **H2:** The "Trust Gap" regarding digital information is ethnically divided; ethnic Albanian and Macedonian respondents will demonstrate significantly different levels of trust in AI-driven narratives, reflecting offline political divisions.

• **H3:** Individuals who strongly perceive that AI is manipulating the public debate will present lower personal confidence in the EU integration process, suggesting that digital distrust "spills over" into geopolitical distrust.

3.3 Participants and Sampling Strategy

The study targets a sample size of approximately 400 respondents (N~400). This size is determined by the need for statistical capability; for a national population of approximately 1.8 million, a sample of 400 provides a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error (Bryman, 2016). Participants were selected based on accessibility (convenience) within specific, pre-defined subgroups, designed to ensure that the demographic profile of the participants reflects the multiethnic reality of North Macedonia. Given the linguistic and cultural division of the country, the recruitment process will be carefully managed to ensure this diversity among ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. This is crucial because the EU integration narrative is often perceived differently through different linguistic perspectives. By ensuring a representative sample, the study can move beyond generalized assumptions and provide a more delicate, data-driven analysis of the "national" sentiment in 2026.

3.4 Data Collection Instrument

Data is collected via a standardized, self-administered bilingual (Macedonian and Albanian) questionnaire hosted on Google Forms. The choice of a bilingual instrument is not merely an administrative tool but a methodological need to ensure the "linguistic equivalence" of the findings. The questionnaire is divided into four thematic modules:

1. *Socio-Demographics:* Measuring variables such as gender, age, primary language, and education level.
2. *Digital Awareness Metrics:* Assessing self-reported familiarity with AI-driven social media mechanics.
3. *Perceived Algorithmic Influence:* Utilizing 5-point Likert scales to measure the degree to which respondents believe AI shapes the EU debate.
4. *Baseline Geopolitical Sentiment:* Measuring the respondent's personal viewpoint on EU membership to act as a comparative dependent variable.

3.5 Inferential Statistical Analysis and Techniques

To analyze the relationships between the measured variables and test the research hypotheses, the study uses several specific inferential statistical techniques. The use of these techniques is justified by the need to determine whether the observed patterns in

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the sample are representative of the broader population or just a result of random chance (Field, 2018).

• *Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r):* To test H1 and H3, the study applies the Pearson Correlation Coefficient. This technique is the standard metric for determining the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two continuous or interval-level variables (Pallant, 2020). By calculating the correlation between "Perceived AI Manipulation" and "EU Support," the researcher can quantify how digital skepticism effects geopolitical sentiment.

• *Independent Samples T-Test:* To test H2, an Independent Samples T-Test is used. This technique is utilized when comparing the mean scores of two distinct, unrelated groups - in this case, Macedonian-speaking versus Albanian-speaking respondents (Cohen, 2013). This allows the study to prove whether the "Trust Gap" in AI narratives is statistically significant among ethnic lines.

• *One-Way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance):* For broader demographic comparisons, such as differences across age groups (e.g., 18-24, 25-34, 35-44+), the One-Way ANOVA is used. According to Field (2018), ANOVA is essential for testing differences between three or more groups to ensure that variations are not due to sampling error.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This research follows a very stringent code of ethics that ensures all rights and privacy of participants remain unharmed. As per the EU GDPR and the standard ethics guidelines followed in academic research, the survey starts with an informed consent message. This informs the respondent that the participation is optional and that the information collected will only be used for academic purposes. In order to maintain absolute anonymity, no personal identification information is asked from the participant, such as name, IP address, or email ID. This is especially crucial in the case of political research in North Macedonia, where the respondent might be concerned about disclosing their opinion regarding constitutional reforms or ethnic division. Through absolute confidentiality, it becomes possible to obtain more reliable information in the data set.

3.7 Research Limitations and Constraints

While this methodology provides a rigorous framework for analysis, several implicit limitations must be taken into account. Firstly, using online surveys based on Google Forms and conducting a convenience sampling is bound to give preference to individuals that are digitally literate and have better access to the Internet. In such a way, there could be a possibility that there would be a "digital divide" bias as a result, since the opinions of the rural population or older people that use social media driven by artificial

intelligence less frequently may remain overlooked. Secondly, being a cross-sectional study, this survey reflects the state of affairs at the given moment only.

The use of self-reported data means that there is a chance for a "social desirability bias," which refers to the phenomenon whereby individuals answer based on their perception of the "correct" or "modern" perspective on artificial intelligence in Europe. Lastly, despite the advantages that result from using a bilingual questionnaire, there is the likelihood that the varied definitions of terms such as "algorithmic manipulation" can elicit varying emotions in Macedonian compared to Albanian. Overall, the strength of the sample and the use of statistical methods enable a solid foundation for studying AI's transformation.

4. Results Analysis

The transition from theory to empiricism in the study of this modern-day "algorithmic public sphere" within the context of the Western Balkans is a very important step. The methodological approach that was employed in this study aimed to take a snapshot of a particular historical momentum within the highly delicate period of North Macedonia's EU screening process in 2026. The analysis of this data provided insights into the cognitive mechanisms employed by a population facing conflicting forces: the rigid, institutional demands of geopolitical integration and the confused, hyper-personalized nature of AI-driven social media.

Rather than only analyzing how many people are familiar with technology usage, this paper focuses on studying the connection between digital literacy and geopolitical resilience. Thanks to descriptive and inferential statistics, the data allows the researcher to find out how the participants of the study analyze the complicated algorithms determining their news feed. This chapter will address demographic aspects and opinions, as well as the first research question related to the awareness of algorithmic propaganda. Three hypotheses will also be discussed here. Finally, the outcomes of the study will not be only statements of attitudes but will point to a population that is aware of its political surroundings in the face of computation-based manipulations.

4.1 Sample Characteristics and Baseline Geopolitical Sentiment

Following rigorous data cleaning to exclude incomplete entries, the final sample size produced N=357 valid, self-administered responses. This represents a strong and statistically significant group that closely approaches the initial methodological target of 400 respondents, offering a high degree of confidence and a low margin of error.

The demographic profile exposes a mature and politically active respondent base, opposing the common assumption that digital studies only capture the youth. The

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majority of respondents fall into the 35–49 age bracket (n=169) and the 50+ age bracket (n = 100), followed by younger cohorts aged 25–34 (n=71) and 18–24 (n=17). In terms of linguistic and ethnic aspects, the sample comprises 247 ethnic Albanian respondents and 110 ethnic Macedonian respondents. This dual linguistic distribution is essential, as it successfully captures the divided sociopolitical realities of the country, allowing for a comparative analysis of how different communities interpret identical digital facts.

Before measuring digital perceptions, it was necessary to establish a comparative base regarding personal sentiment toward European Union integration (Question 10). The overall support remains overwhelmingly high across the entire sample (M=4.33, SD =0.82 on a 5-point scale). When divided by ethnicity, the data shows really unified geopolitical aspirations. Both ethnic Albanian respondents (M=4.35) and ethnic Macedonian respondents (M=4.27) express strong personal support for EU accession. This unified baseline is an important factor, because it proves that the foundational "European dream" remains firm, providing the necessary context to evaluate whether the messy, AI-driven digital sphere threatens to wear away this consensus.

4.2 RQ1: The Recognition of AI and Algorithmic Control

Building upon these bases, the analysis addresses the first research question (RQ1): Do citizens recognize the structural shift from a natural (organic) social media environment to an AI-curated digital landscape? The descriptive statistics provide a definitive and definite affirmative.

Respondents broadly agree that social media is no longer a natural space but is controlled by algorithms that dictate the visibility of political news (M=3.81, SD=0.89). Interestingly, this awareness surpasses ethnic lines, with both Macedonians (M=3.85) and Albanians (M=3.79) sharing an almost identical recognition of the algorithmic architecture mediating their political realities.

Moreover, when assessing the main purpose of Artificial Intelligence in society, namely, in relation to automated botnets, deepfakes, and algorithmic feeds, most of the survey participants adopt a very distrustful attitude, considering that these technologies are used for manipulation purposes rather than for informing citizens (M=3.46, SD= 0.68). Importantly, the survey shows a very high level of agreement (M=3.76, SD= 0.86) about the fact that bots and artificial intelligence are deliberately used to increase the divide between ethnic groups and political parties in regard to highly controversial issues of the EU, such as constitutional changes. Thus, the conclusion is that the citizens of North Macedonia are quite digitally aware. People do not regard social networks as a neutral source for obtaining news; on the contrary, they see it as an artificially created battleground.

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4.3 Hypotheses Testing and Inferential Statistics (RQ2)

Having established that respondents recognize algorithmic manipulation, the analysis moves to addressing the second research question (RQ2) through inferential statistics. This phase tests the three established hypotheses to determine exactly how this digital perception links with the geopolitical integration process.

4.3.1 Hypothesis 1: Algorithmic Amplification of Euro-skepticism

Hypothesis 1 (H1) suggested that there is a positive correlation between high digital awareness and the perception that social media purposefully enhances the influence of Euro-skepticism and fear. To test this, a Pearson Correlation Coefficient was calculated between the perception of intentional algorithmic division (Q8) and the perceived overall impact of AI on the EU debate (Q7).

The statistical analysis resulted in a highly significant negative correlation ($r = -0.265$, $p < .001$). Within the structure of the survey instrument, lower values on the impact scale indicated an increase in "Euro-skepticism and fear," while higher values indicated an increase in "EU support." Hence, this negative correlation confirms the hypothesis: as a citizen's belief in the presence of polarizing bots increases, their consideration of the digital debate's curve becomes significantly more pessimistic. Thus, **H1 is strongly supported**. The public is right in recognizing that the design of AI curation, which favors high engagement and emotional content, heavily favors the argument against national integration in terms of suspicion, fear, and division.

4.3.2 Hypothesis 2: The Ethnically Stratified "Trust Gap"

Moving from general impact to specific vulnerabilities, *Hypothesis 2 (H2)* theorized that the trust gap regarding digital information is ethnically graded, reflecting the deeper offline sociopolitical divisions in North Macedonia. To test this, Independent Samples T-tests were conducted to compare the mean perception scores of ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian respondents.

Table 1 presents the findings, revealing an extremely large difference in terms of digital trust. In answering question Q9 about the confidence level in the authenticity of political posts on social media being created by ordinary citizens and not artificial intelligence or bots, ethnic Macedonians exhibited digital cynicism ($M=2.04$), while ethnic Albanians had a higher degree of confidence ($M=2.94$). The result has a very high statistical significance, $t(355) = 11.60$, $p < .001$.

Similarly, ethnic Macedonians felt much more strongly that AI is intentionally used to amplify ethnic polarization regarding EU requirements ($M=4.04$) compared to their

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Albanian counterparts (M=3.63), t(355) = -4.21, p < .001. Consequently, **H2 is strongly supported**. This digital layer logically mirrors the "offline" geopolitical reality. Because the mandatory constitutional amendments are perceived as they challenge Macedonian national identity narratives, the Macedonian demographic feels the effect of the algorithmic pressure. As a result, they are strongly aware of, and highly skeptical toward, manipulative digital operations surrounding this specific issue, creating a firm localized trust deficit.

Table 1. Mean Comparisons of Digital Perception and EU Support by Ethnicity

Variable Measured (Scale 1-5)	**Ethnic Albanian (n=247)**	**Ethnic Macedonian (n=110)**	**Total Sample (N=357)**
Confidence comments are real citizens (Q9)	2.94	2.04	2.66
Belief bots amplify polarization (Q8)	3.63	4.04	3.76
Personal support for EU Integration (Q10)	4.35	4.27	4.33

4.3.3 Hypothesis 3: The "Spillover Effect" vs. Digital Resilience

Moreover, Hypothesis 3 (H3) proposed the concept of "spillover effect" in which people feeling that AI is trying to manipulate the public discourse will have a negative attitude towards themselves, thus, leading to low self-confidence and support for the process of EU integration. This analysis will be done using Pearson correlation between the degree of bot polarization (Q8) and support for EU integration (Q10).

Surprisingly, however, the analysis did not show any significant correlation between the two variables ($r = 0.059$, $p = 0.266$). This means that whether a citizen personally desires to integrate with the EU or not is completely independent of their perception of AI manipulation of social media platforms.

Therefore, **H3 is rejected**. In contrast to digital mistrust leading to geopolitics-based mistrust, there is observed an intriguing and very encouraging trend called "Digital Resilience." The respondents manage to separate the medium from the message. They view the AI-driven social media landscape as toxic, manipulated, and artificially polarized, yet they do not allow this manufactured digital environment to erode their core geopolitical aspirations. They recognize algorithmic manipulation for what it is—a digital distortion—and maintain their strong, unified pro-European stance in spite of the computational propaganda designed to disrupt it.

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They see the AI-powered social media environment as poisonous, manipulated, and artificially divided; however, they will not let the artificial digital world destroy their fundamental geopolitical goals. They know that computational propaganda is nothing more than an artificial digital reality; therefore, they keep their strong pro-European stance in face of computational propaganda that seeks to dismantle it. The overall synthesis of the results is presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Summary of Inferential Statistical Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	**Variables Analyzed**	**Statistical Test**	**Result Value**	**Significance (p)**	**Conclusion**
H1: AI Amplifies Euro-skepticism	Bot Polarization (Q8) vs. EU Impact (Q7)	Pearson Correlation (r)	r = -0.265	p < .001	Supported
H2: Ethnically Stratified Trust Gap	Confidence in Citizens (Q9) by Ethnicity	Independent T-Test (t)	t(355) = 11.60	p < .001	Supported
H3: Distrust "Spillover" Effect	Bot Polarization (Q8) vs. EU Support (Q10)	Pearson Correlation (r)	r = 0.059	p = 0.266	Rejected

5. Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion of Key Findings

The empirical findings of this research provide a novel reassessment of the current workings of computational propaganda and artificial intelligence in the digital ecosystem of the Western Balkans. For decades, the general consensus within the field of political communication studies was that the implementation of automated algorithms and botnets automatically leads to the weakening of democracy, with populations being persuaded into polarized positions by an unstoppable AI-driven medium. Yet, the results obtained in this study, from the 2026 population of North Macedonia, clearly show a sophisticated public that actively negotiates its relationship with AI-driven media.

The confirmation of Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 explains that the citizens of North Macedonia are vastly aware of the "algorithmic shift." They accurately recognize that platforms like Facebook, X, and TikTok are no longer neutral hosts of public debate, but active actors that algorithmically may reward Euro-skepticism and fear. Also, the massive ethnic division in digital trust (H2) perfectly reflects the "offline" (real-life) geopolitical vulnerabilities of the country. Ethnic Macedonians showed significantly higher levels of digital skepticism and a stronger belief that bots are equipped to polarize the public regarding EU constitutional changes. This is a logical defensive reaction: because

the mandatory constitutional amendments are increasing fears that might indirectly challenge Macedonian historical and linguistic narratives. Rather than showing a lack of understanding, high levels of digital skepticism derives from intense, ongoing exposure to automated cyber threats.

The most important contribution of this research, however, lies in the rejection of Hypothesis 3 and the discovery of "Digital Resilience." Lack of a "spillover effect" in which digital distrust would turn into geopolitical distrust, is proof that Macedonian and Albanian citizens have the capability to separate the medium from the message. Even though they consider their social media accounts manipulative, toxic, and digitally polarized by AI algorithms, all respondents still showed a positive attitude toward EU integration. While the algorithmic bubbles succeeded in undermining trust in the digital public sphere, they are failing to shake the national consensus on the idea of Europe. Citizens understand that it is a computationally generated false impression and will not allow it to shape their geopolitical ambitions.

5.2 Strategic and Policy Recommendations

Although the existence of digital resilience is indeed very promising, it remains a fact that the digital public sphere is viewed as a manipulated one in its entirety, which carries serious implications for the sustainability of democracy in the years to come. Should the citizenry cease using social media as a platform for conducting politics, there would be created a vacuum, wherein only radical voices supported by bots could hold control over the national discussion. In light of the empirical results, the following strategic recommendations are proposed for state institutions, the Secretariat for European Affairs (SEP), and civil society organizations:

1. *Transition to "Algorithmic Literacy":* Traditional media literacy programs in North Macedonia have historically focused on identifying "fake news" and fact-checking. This is no longer sufficient. Institutions should shift their focus towards instilling "Algorithmic Literacy," which means educating people about how recommendation algorithms operate, how polarized information is artificially improved by algorithms, and how generative artificial intelligence produces the perception of popular support for a cause (known as astroturfing).

2. *Tailored, Emotionally Intelligent Institutional Communication:* State institutions and EU delegations must recognize the ethnically driven trust gap identified in this study. A monolithic public relations strategy for EU integration will fail. Any message aimed at ethnic Macedonians has to tackle the issue of identity insecurity head-on, recognizing the phenomenon of digital manipulation. On the other hand, communication directed at ethnic Albanians should focus on institutional progress and structural reform.

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3. *Algorithmic Bypass Strategies for State Actors:* Since social media that utilizes AI technology is designed to push away dry institutional information for high engagement polarization, governmental entities cannot use traditional social media broadcast to communicate any important information regarding the EU screening process to citizens. They need to devise "algorithmic bypass" tactics. These would include revitalizing the process of communicating directly with the citizenry, using safe digital means, town halls at a community level, and offline community leaders as communication vehicles for EU changes.

4. Legislative Alignment with the EU AI Act: To protect the digital public sphere, North Macedonia must urgently align its national cybersecurity and media broadcasting laws with the European Union's AI Act and the Digital Services Act (DSA). Forcing transparency for "political algorithms" and requiring strict labeling for AI-generated political content and bot accounts will legally force social media giants to "disarm" the local digital ecosystem.

5.3 Conclusion

With North Macedonia's attempt at meeting the equally immense demands of the European Union negotiation process in 2026, the fight for popular consent is not any longer confined within parliamentary and television screens, but in the hidden infrastructure of social media algorithm systems. This research aimed to quantitatively explore the effects of such a shift from a non-AI to an AI-dominated virtual space on the geopolitics of a country long torn apart by ethnic and political differences.

The findings can be seen both as a dire warning and as proof of the strength of democracy. In North Macedonia, the public sphere is changing fundamentally because of AI. The citizens understand that their online feeds are designed to create polarization and exacerbate fears regarding ethnicity, while at the same time increasing skepticism towards the process of European Union integration. The age of unfiltered social media is clearly over, having been replaced by computational propaganda aimed at the identity-based insecurities of the ethnic Macedonian population.

But despite all these algorithmic "manipulations", the goal of geopolitics remains intact for now. The refusal of the "spillover effect" shows how resistant people from North Macedonia, both ethnic Albanians and Macedonians, are online. Despite living in a digital contaminated environment, they still do not forget about their main aim of entering EU.

Finally, in conclusion, this study argues that AI and algorithmic processes have proven capable of disrupting the communications around EU integration, but not the need for it. Yet, depending forevermore on the resilience of citizens in the digital domain cannot be the only answer to the problem. In order for North Macedonia to successfully complete its "European adventure", urgent measures need to be taken by the institutions at home

and abroad to recover the digital public sphere from the control of algorithms, and to harness technology for democracy's sake.

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