

## GLIGOROV, SOCIAL CHANGE AND STATEHOOD

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the political and historical role of Kiro Gligorov in the making of Macedonian statehood through a sociological lens. Focusing on the decisive period of the early 1990s, it analyses how Gligorov's leadership intersected with broader processes of social change, state-building and identity formation in the post-Yugoslav context. The study draws on Piotr Sztompka's sociology of social change, as well as broader debates on agency and structure, to conceptualise Gligorov as an individual actor operating within a dense web of institutional, geopolitical and cultural constraints.

The paper pursues two main aims: first, to analyse the role of Gligorov in the political development and consolidation of the Republic of Macedonia; and second, to explore how his presidency interacted with wider socio-economic and socio-cultural transformations in Macedonian society. Methodologically, the paper is designed as a qualitative case study based on interpretive analysis of primary and secondary sources, including political speeches, interviews, constitutional documents and existing historiographical and political science literature.

The analysis suggests that Gligorov combined moderation, legalism and pragmatic international engagement in ways that contributed to the peaceful emergence and consolidation of Macedonian statehood in a highly turbulent regional environment. At the same time, his public role helped to shape patterns of democratic culture, conflict avoidance and political discourse that extended beyond his formal mandates. By linking an individual-centred analysis of political leadership with a sociological reading of historical change, the paper contributes to broader discussions on the role of political actors in critical junctures and processes of state formation.

**Keywords:** Macedonian statehood; social change; political leadership; Yugoslav dissolution; transition

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**UDK:** 342.511(497.7)

**Date of received:**

22.01.2026

**Date of acceptance:**

26.02.2026

**Declaration of interest:**

The authors reported no conflict of interest related to this article.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The historical setting of President Gligorov's political career has been widely discussed in historiography and political science (Glenny, 1996; Ramet, 2006; Woodward, 1995; Denitch, 1996). Seen from a broader historical angle, Kiro Gligorov emerges as an important actor in one of the most unstable phases of twentieth-century Europe, shaped by the breakup of multinational states, sudden border changes, and new struggles over identity in the post-socialist region (Malcolm, 1994; Bose, 2002; Brown, 1994; Woodward, 1995). In these circumstances, political decisions were inseparable from institution-building, economic and social disruption, and an international battle for recognition and legitimacy (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Huntington, 1991; Rustow, 1970; Skocpol, 1979).

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

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

The analysis is grounded in Piotr Sztompka's sociology of social change, which stresses the mutual shaping of structural conditions and human agency in moments of historical rupture (Sztompka, 1994). Related theoretical debates similarly argue that individual action is always situated

within institutional and cultural settings that simultaneously open possibilities and impose limits (Giddens, 1984; Archer, 1995). From this perspective, Gligorov's historical significance is approached not only through personal qualities, but also through the domestic and international environment that framed his options. The article contributes empirically by offering a systematic sociological account that moves beyond biography and diplomatic history, and theoretically by applying Sztompka's "hero of social change" idea to the concrete challenges of post-Yugoslav state formation.

Methodologically, the study uses a qualitative case study design centred on the formative phase of Macedonian independence, from the early 1990s to the end of Gligorov's presidency. The empirical base includes selected presidential speeches and public statements (parliamentary addresses, New Year's messages, key televised interviews), memoir and interview material where Gligorov reflects on his decisions, constitutional and legal documents from the early 1990s, and documents from international organisations such as the United Nations and the OSCE concerning Macedonia and the UNPREDEP mission, complemented by secondary scholarship on Yugoslav dissolution, Macedonian politics, and preventive diplomacy. The case study focuses on several decisive turning points—the 1991 independence referendum and Constitution, early obstacles to international recognition, interethnic tensions in the first half of the 1990s, and the deployment of UNPREDEP—and uses historically informed interpretive analysis to track how Gligorov framed key issues, defended particular choices, and advanced narratives about peace, democracy, and statehood, consistent with agency/structure approaches (Sztompka, 1994; Giddens, 1984; Archer, 1995).

## **2. Geopolitics, Identity and Interethnic Tensions**

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

Macedonia's independence was shaped by a wider regional environment marked by instability, shifting alliances, and competing national agendas. As the SFRY collapsed, the institutional and security framework that had

previously structured political life disappeared, and the successor states had to define their own survival strategies under uncertain conditions (Bose, 2002; Woodward, 1995; Glenny, 1996). This broader reordering can be connected to interpretations of nationalism that treat it as a modern, historically produced phenomenon grounded in particular institutions and cultural narratives (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Brubaker, 1996).

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

Externally driven pressures also intersected with domestic tensions in a vulnerable multiethnic society. The Republic of Macedonia entered independence with a large Albanian minority and other communities whose rights, political status, and representation became central issues of negotiation and contestation. The political leadership therefore faced overlapping challenges of democratisation, institutional consolidation, and interethnic accommodation (Bieber, 2002; Daskalovski, 1999). The constitutional settlement was expected to uphold civic equality while also acknowledging collective identities, at a time when regional memories of violence and conflict were still very present.

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

In this context, liberal-democratic values were not just abstract ideals. Equality of citizens, pluralism, and human rights became concrete benchmarks by which the new state's democratic legitimacy would be measured both internally and by international actors (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Huntington, 1991). A society emerging from a one-party socialist order was expected to institutionalise political competition and resolve disputes through formal procedures rather than coercion. Whether this

worked depended not only on constitutional arrangements but also on political behaviour—especially the readiness to compromise, restrain nationalist rhetoric, and accept limits shaped by international norms.

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

### **3. Socioeconomic Transformation and Internal State-Building**

Gligorov's presidency began at the moment when the new state entered a deep political and economic transition. After arguing for economic reform while Macedonia was still part of the SFRY, he now had the space to pursue an economic transformation agenda in an independent setting. The move away from a socialist, self-managed economy toward a market-based model was only one element of a much wider shift that touched almost every area of social life (Bornarova, 2011; Trajkovski, 2007; Daskalovski, 1999).

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

A key consequence was a visible reshaping of social stratification—what classical sociology would describe as changes in the “class structure” (Skocpol, 1979; Bourdieu, 1998). New property relations, altered employment security, and unequal access to resources contributed to the emergence of new economic elites, while other groups lost the protections they previously relied on. For many citizens, rising unemployment, insecurity, and emigration became everyday realities (Bornarova, 2011; Trajkovski, 2007).

At the same time, Macedonia had to replace a broad but imperfect system of social protection with a more targeted welfare approach, precisely when state resources were limited. The situation was made harder by external shocks, including sanctions on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Greek embargo, which further narrowed the country’s development options (Woodward, 1995; Ramet, 2006). Political leaders were therefore forced to navigate between budget limits and strong public expectations for fairness, protection, and redistribution. In this setting, Gligorov’s leadership unfolded under pressure from conflicting demands.

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

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

context in which Macedonia did not descend into large-scale political violence or institutional collapse.

#### **4. Leadership Style, Democratic Culture and International Positioning**

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

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

His foreign policy also shaped the stability of the country. The deployment of the UN preventive mission (UNPREDEP) represented a precedent in the history of the United Nations and a strategic move that provided international protection of Macedonia's territorial integrity (Gow, 1997; Stefanova, 1997; Ackermann, 1999; Lund, 1996; Özçelik, 2008; Ekinci, 2003). This step indicates his understanding of the importance of international mechanisms and diplomacy for preserving national security and fits broader debates on preventive deployment and conflict prevention in post-Cold War Europe (Bose, 2002; Woodward, 1995). UNPREDEP is frequently cited in the literature as a rare example in which preventive diplomacy contributed to reducing the risk of conflict escalation in a potentially volatile environment (Ackermann, 1999; Stefanova, 1997; Lund, 1996).

A second important aspect of his leadership concerns economic and social policy. While he supported market reforms and privatisation, he also insisted on the need for social cohesion and preservation of basic social protections. In a period when many other countries in the region

experienced dramatic social fractures, including hyperinflation, mass unemployment and open conflicts around privatisation, Macedonia's trajectory was relatively more gradual, although by no means free of problems (Trajkovski, 2007; Bornarova, 2011; Brown, 1994).

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

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

His role in building Macedonia's foreign policy was not limited to the early recognition of the state. He set long-term guidelines that emphasised good neighbourly relations, European integration and active participation in international organisations such as the United Nations, the OSCE and the Council of Europe (Bose, 2002; Ramet, 2006).

A crucial moment for understanding his leadership style is the assassination attempt on 3 October 1995 in Skopje. The attack, in which Gligorov was seriously injured and his driver killed, could have become a trigger for political radicalisation, conspiracy theories and purges against alleged enemies. Instead, the official response, shaped in part by Gligorov himself, avoided such a turn. Public statements emphasised the need for calm, for letting institutions do their work and for avoiding speculation that could inflame tensions. Although the perpetrators were never officially identified, and the event remains a source of controversy, the political system did not slide into authoritarianism or open repression. This episode illustrates how, even in moments when a leader could have invoked a state of emergency to consolidate power, Gligorov chose to affirm institutional continuity and restraint.

In comparative perspective, this places Macedonia in contrast with some other post-Yugoslav cases where violence and political crises were followed by the concentration of power in the hands of charismatic or nationalist leaders.

### **5. Gligorov as a “Hero” in the Sociology of Social Change**

According to Sztopka, moments of “history-making” are shaped by the interaction of social structures and individual agency: actors can influence outcomes, but only within opportunities and limits created by their context (Sztopka, 1994). Agency/structure debates similarly stress that individuals are never fully free, since choices are conditioned by institutional legacies, cultural codes, and material constraints (Giddens, 1984; Archer, 1995). From this angle, Gligorov’s role is best understood not as a “great man” story, but as a case of how individual decisions intersect with broader processes of social change.

Sztopka argues that large transformations often become symbolically concentrated around particular individuals who are later perceived as “heroes” of a historical period (Sztopka, 1994). This “heroic” status does not imply moral perfection; rather, it reflects the perception that a person’s actions are closely tied to decisive turning points and embody certain values. In crisis periods, such symbolic mechanisms and forms of charismatic legitimation gain importance as societies search for meaning and direction (Sztopka, 1994).

In Macedonia, this dynamic can be seen in several emblematic episodes: during the 1991 referendum campaign, Gligorov framed independence through legality and continuity, stressing respect for minority rights and international obligations; after the 1995 assassination attempt, he again emphasised calm, institutional order, and rejection of revenge, reinforcing the image of a leader prioritising stability. He was often portrayed as a cautious, paternal figure above party conflict, which helped stabilise expectations amid regional violence.

This connects to classical understandings of charismatic authority as legitimacy grounded in attributed extraordinary qualities in times of uncertainty (Weber, 1978; Sztopka, 1994). In Gligorov’s case, charisma was not based on populist spectacle or emotional mobilisation, but on intellectual authority, composure, credibility, and a preference for negotiation over confrontation. His restraint after 1995, insistence on procedures, and avoidance of radical rhetoric strengthened his reputation as a stabilising figure (Ramet, 2006; Woodward, 1995).

The “hero of social change” concept also highlights contrast with other Yugoslav-succession leaders often analysed through nationalist mobilisation, war, and ethnic conflict. Where Gligorov is viewed as “heroic,” it is typically linked to compromise, avoidance of war, and preservation of a fragile peace—suggesting that “heroism” can also consist in restraint, institutional continuity, and preventing escalation.

At the same time, a sociological reading must recognise limits to his agency: structural problems of the 1990s—unemployment, clientelism, inequality, and unresolved identity disputes—persisted beyond his presidency. The hero-image does not remove these issues, but indicates that within the constraints of the time, his leadership mattered in steering Macedonia away from more destructive regional scenarios. Finally, the “heroic” dimension is reinforced by public memory: textbooks, commemorations, and media representations often cast him as a “father of the state,” illustrating how societies retrospectively assign meaning to critical junctures by selecting symbolic figures and anchor events.

## **6. Legacy, Public Memory and Ongoing Debates**

The legacy of Kiro Gligorov in contemporary Macedonian society remains contested and changeable. He is often recognised as the first president of the independent state, linked to moderation, continuity and the avoidance of war in a highly risky regional context. At the same time, political and ideological actors advance different interpretations of his decisions—especially on relations with neighbours, the management of the name dispute, and the direction and speed of economic reforms (Vankovska, 2013; Koneska, 2014; Risteski & Bliznakovski, 2019). Sociologically, these disagreements reflect broader struggles over how the recent past should be understood and what it should mean for present-day politics. For some, his readiness to compromise on symbols and formulations was a realistic strategy to secure peace and international recognition; for others, it was excessive accommodation that weakened the state’s later negotiating position. These tensions mirror wider divides between pragmatic and maximalist national-policy approaches.

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

room for more nuanced academic readings that foreground both achievements and constraints.

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

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

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

## 7. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the role of Kiro Gligorov in the making and consolidation of Macedonian statehood from a sociological perspective. Situated at the intersection of historical analysis and sociological theory, the study has highlighted how one political actor's decisions and style interacted with broader structural processes – geopolitical reconfiguration, socio-economic transformation and identity politics – during a critical juncture in European history.

The first research aim concerned Gligorov's role in the political development of the Republic of Macedonia. The analysis showed that his insistence on peaceful separation from Yugoslavia, on constitutionalism and on negotiated solutions with neighbours contributed to the emergence of an independent state that avoided war, despite strong external and internal pressures (Glenny, 1996; Woodward, 1995; Ramet, 2006). His

support for preventive deployment through UNPREDEP and for active engagement with international organisations further strengthened Macedonia's security and international standing (Gow, 1997; Stefanova, 1997; Ackermann, 1999; Lund, 1996; Özçelik, 2008; Ekinçi, 2003).

The second research aim focused on the interaction between his presidency and broader social and socio-cultural changes. Here, the paper argued that Gligorov's moderation, legalistic style and emphasis on dialogue helped to foster a political culture in which conflict was more likely to be processed through institutions rather than through violence. This did not eliminate social tensions or inequalities, but it reduced the likelihood that they would escalate into open conflict. In this respect, the Macedonian trajectory contrasts with some other post-Yugoslav cases, where the combination of nationalist mobilisation and institutional breakdown led to large-scale violence (Bose, 2002; Denitch, 1996; Malcolm, 1994).

Theoretically, the paper has used Sztompka's sociology of social change and broader debates on agency and structure to conceptualise Gligorov as a "hero" of a particular historical period, without turning this into hagiography (Sztompka, 1994; Giddens, 1984; Archer, 1995). The concept of "hero" is here understood not as a moral judgement, but as an analytical category referring to individuals whose actions become closely associated with decisive historical processes. In Gligorov's case, heroism consists not in spectacular acts of conquest or resistance, but in the capacity to maintain restraint, to navigate constraints and to prevent worst-case scenarios.

The paper's contribution is twofold. Empirically, it offers a structured account of Gligorov's role that connects political, socio-economic and symbolic dimensions. Theoretically, it demonstrates how concepts from the sociology of social change and political sociology can be applied to a concrete historical case, illuminating the interaction between individual agency and structural conditions in critical junctures. By highlighting a relatively peaceful trajectory of state formation in the post-Yugoslav space, the study also contributes to a broader understanding of negative cases in the study of violence and conflict.

At the same time, the study has clear limitations. It is based primarily on secondary literature and a selective use of primary sources, and it does not attempt a full reconstruction of all political decisions and negotiations of the period. Future research could deepen the analysis through systematic

examination of archival materials, comparative studies with other leaders in the region, or empirical studies of how different generations in Macedonian society today remember and evaluate Gligorov's role. Such work would allow for a more fine-grained understanding of how leadership intersects with social structures over time, not only at moments of dramatic transformation but also in the subsequent phases of consolidation and change.

Nonetheless, the case of Kiro Gligorov illustrates how, in periods of deep transformation, individual political actors can influence not only formal outcomes such as state independence, but also the tone and texture of public life – how conflicts are articulated, managed and resolved. In this sense, the making of Macedonian statehood is not only a story of borders, constitutions and international recognition, but also a story of how one leader's choices interacted with the hopes, fears and everyday lives of citizens in a small country navigating a dangerous historical moment. Recognising this complexity is essential for any balanced assessment of his legacy, and for a broader understanding of the relationship between agency and structure in modern political history.

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