

Undoing a Hybrid Regime: What Lessons Can Be Extracted from the Case of North Macedonia?

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ABSTRACT

This study primarily aims to draw attention to the role of the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) in North Macedonia's¹ transition from a hybrid regime to a standard democracy from 2015 to the present. The stability of the country has been of paramount importance for the Western interests, thus the EU and US have continuously supported successive governments to uphold the de-facto power-sharing system that prevailed since its independence in the early 1990s. By employing Levitsky and Way's theoretical framework of linkage and leverage, this study aims to elucidate the decisive roles played by the EU and the US in cultivating the conditions necessitated for North Macedonia's gradual democratic transition after 2015. To do this it addresses political developments in North Macedonia, discusses the problems that aroused during this transition period, which are inherited in a lack of democratic culture and widespread corruption, and finally, suggests that as the Macedonia example demonstrated, EU support and tutelage is critical during such challenging transitions.

Keywords: Western Balkans, Hybrid regimes, Corruption, Democratization, EU Conditionality

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Introduction

Following the work of Levitsky and Way in 2010, there has been a looming literature regarding the scope and dynamics of political processes in which eroding democratic institutions allow for competitive authoritarianism. This study aims to contribute to literature highlighting the possible dynamics of processes undermining a competitive authoritarian regime. Recent research on the issue (Guacalla et al. 2021; Welsh 2013; Morgenbesser 2019; Nelson 2014; Volpi 2020; Akgemci 2022) demonstrates that thanks to existing rigged yet at least regular elections and at large yet de-potentiated civil societies, these regimes saw their grip on state institutions suffer severe ebbs and flows and even become endangered. Some extreme examples exist, such as that of Honduras in 2021, when the autocrats were ejected without discernible external support to the dissidents (W. Freman and Perello 2022).

1 Macedonia and Greece signed the Prespa Accord in June 2018, which ended the decades long feud between the two nations on the name of the republic. In February 2019 Macedonia's name changed to North Macedonia.

Under the light of those fresh examples, Carothers (2018) remarks that this kind of regime, or “spin dictatorship” if paraphrased from Treisman (2022), which refrains from destroying the whole organized opposition and democratic institutions, is frequently very fragile and unstable. Hence, the views entailing the lifespan of competitive authoritarian regimes and conditions that keep them intact may begin to change. However, we still need further study to figure out how this kind of regime ends through democratic ways, how the state institutions rusted by partisanship return to their routine, and, curiously, what happens to the masters of the previous regime.

In their seminal work, which is frequently referred to in the relevant academic works today, Levitsky and Way (2010: 3-5) stated that the post-Cold War democratic transition literature could not provide reliable data on democratic consolidation because it presumed that the threshold of democracy was certainly, furthermore irreversibly, exceeded in polities where multi-party politics took place. In the same year, Levitsky and Way found some 35 regimes whose democratic characters were questionable, although they met Robert Dahl’s “procedural minimum” (quoted in Levitsky and Way 2010: 4). Dahl described democracy as a system installed upon with four primary elements, i.e., regular competitive elections, civil liberties, free media, civil society, and absentee of aristocratic, military, or religious tutelage over the will of the elected to govern. However, Levitsky and Way pointed out that even when all these conditions were met, the playing field between those in power and the opposition could be critically skewed, and consequently, democratic competition could be undermined to a serious extent. No doubt, in all kinds of democratic regimes, the incumbent might get involved to some extent in patronage, pork-barreling, clientelism, and privileged access to media and finance; yet this does not necessarily mean that these advantages were used to destroy the capability of the opposition to compete (Levitsky and Way 2020: 53). However, in some countries, the incumbent could use state institutions and resources to suppress opposition and make the change of power almost impossible through free elections. Thanks to unequal access to public finance, the incumbent could subjugate even the private sector – mostly with fraudulent public tenders – and turn it into a regular financier of its policies. Despite the lack of systematic pressure on the free media, the incumbent could gain effective control over a large segment of news media by politicizing state media and selectively distributing state advertisements while helping its allies gain control of private media (Levitsky and Way 2010: 10-12).

The incumbent could also weaken civil society by putting into play government-organized or government-co-opted non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) to divert attention from the agenda of dissidents (Naim 2007). It could create twin associations and chambers to weaken more organized and effective interest representation and dilute public support for undesirable policies. The incumbent could even grant an easy electoral victory by packing election commissions and ballot committees with loyal partisans, preparing dubious voter lists, appealing to various electoral malpractices such as double voting, using fictitious names, and exchanging ballot boxes at polling centers. The already diluted civil society would react meekly, and the judicial bodies dominated by loyalists would reject the opposition’s formal complaints regarding electoral irregularities.

Some experts, including Diamond (2005) and Zakaria (1997), believed that even if incumbents ignored civil rights and broke the law, they could still be considered electoral democracies or illiberal democracies if they held regular elections to select their leaders. Stepan and Linz (2013) criticized the optimism of students of comparative politics and suggested replacing “democratic” with a prefix that better connotes autocracy. This was just what Levitsky and Way did; they severed the regimes with such characteristics from the family of democracies and incorporated them into the family of autocracies. The study they published in 2020 proved them true; contrary to positive expectations, it seemed many nations (32 out of 35) sustained authoritarian practices. Moreover, in certain nations, the current leader has tightly held control unchangeably, resulting in a complete shift toward authoritarianism. Even within the so-called zone of democracy of the European Union (EU), some black sheep appeared (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018; Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa 2021).

This study primarily aims to highlight the leading roles played by the EU and the US in facilitating North Macedonia’s transition from a hybrid regime to a standard democracy following the electoral success of the political opposition in the country led by the social democrats. It also seeks to elucidate the problematic nature of this transition period attributed to the deficient political culture and entrenched corruption, which is inherited from the flaws in the political system itself. Accordingly, the study begins with a section that elaborates on the democratic backsliding in North Macedonia between 2006 and 2015 through a comparative political perspective. Then it addresses the political reform process following the electoral success of the opposition, which was conducted under the guiding principles of the Przino Agreement of 2015 and the EU Commissioner Reinhard Priebe’s report. Finally, the last section is allotted to the lessons that can be drawn from the experience of North Macedonia since 2016, which has been marked by some serious setbacks despite close EU/US tutelage and support.

Two-way Effects of Linkage and Leverage

Levitsky and Way (2010: 37-45) argue that the conditions of the post-Cold War era led to the rise of competitive authoritarian regimes. Many autocrats realized the cost of authoritarianism once the liberal West became the only external supporter, discovering that they could sidestep the process of democratization by placing emphasis solely on elections. This strategy allowed them to give the appearance of democratic legitimacy while maintaining a firm grip on the reins of power (Levitsky and Way 2010: 37-45). The autocrats created democratic institutions as a gimmick mainly due to their vulnerability vis-a-vis the Western democracies-led financial institutions, but they adeptly emptied them. A significant shift was evident in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, including Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine, as they could not resist EU conditionality from 1990 to 2008. As for Macedonia, Levitsky and Way (2010: 124-128) described it as one of the most vulnerable nations to external pressure because of very intense multilateral relations with the West. They saw the constitutional changes in the early 2000s as a critical turn that paved the way for further democratization in this multi-ethnic country, dictated mainly by the EU and United States (US). Simultaneously, Albania and Moldova remained unstable authoritarian regimes en route to democracy, while Russia steadily evolved into full authoritarianism. As of

2019, the authors announced that of the 35 competitive authoritarian regimes that they identified until 2008, 15 turned to democratization, six first democratized and then regressed, 10 remained unchanged, and four turned to authoritarian regimes. Türkiye, Montenegro, and Hungary were the newcomers on the list now. They classified Macedonia and Serbia as regimes in limbo between liberalization and competitive authoritarianism and Albania as oscillating between competitive and full authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2020: 50-56).

The result of the research showed that some of the near periphery nations of the EU remained resilient to the considerable pressure from the latter to democratize themselves, and even some of them entirely derailed from the path of democratization. However, on the other side, the economic, financial, diplomatic, military, scientific and cultural ties with the EU and United States on the governmental or civilian axes had the potential to increase the international repercussions of autocratic abuses. Furthermore, they contributed to the growth of the segment in those societies that valued democratic principles – albeit the incumbent might abuse individuals’ limited right of revealing information in such a way as “to contribute to the procedural legitimacy of the authoritarian regime” (Bayer and Tafazzoli 2024: 7). Nevertheless, the authors pointed out that in those countries, reform efforts were insincere, normative concerns were marginalized, and Europeanization was just a myth. One of the points that this study aims to highlight is the recent political change in Macedonia. It could be an excellent example of how the same level of EU-US influence and connection can be crucial in ending a flawed democracy.

Some other convincing views substantiate the research that strives to explain the reasons behind the Western failure to spur democratization even in the near periphery. Levitsky and Way (2010: 4) argued that the West was content with Dahl’s procedural minimum, which cared only about regular elections; yet, for instance, why did the EU enact such treatment toward the Western Balkans? Some regional experts (Kmezić 2019; Bieber 2018; Pavlovic 2017) carried the debate to a parallel dimension by pointing out that competitive authoritarian regimes and so-called “stabilitocracies” had discernible commonalities. The term “stabilitocracy” refers to political systems that lack democracy but maintain external legitimacy due to their ability to stabilize their immediate surroundings. Their authoritarian nature enabled them to effectively address internal issues, including ethnic conflicts that could have external consequences. Bieber notes that the exchange of Western aid and backing for non-democratic governments has occurred for several decades. However, it is apparent that the EU’s recent turn inwards and lack of interest in expansion, particularly following the 2008 global financial crisis, has significantly impacted its leniency towards these regimes. The EU’s passive strategy is understandable in the face of the unpleasant truth that conflicts in the Western Balkans have been only extinguished rather than resolved.

It is essential to acknowledge that EU and US diplomacy played a crucial part in ending the hybrid regime in Macedonia after 2015. Careful mediation was necessary as the growing political tensions in the country were posing a threat to not only the fledgling democracy but also to the fragile ethnic peace. In 2006, when Nikola Gruevski came into power, he tried to get rid of the Badinter majority, also known as the double majority, which allowed Albanian deputies in the parliament to prevent the legislative process from moving forward. To do this, he formed

alliances with smaller parties and excluded the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), the main party representing ethnic Albanians, from the coalition government (Daskalovski 2019). In fact, his actions demonstrated that he was willing to go against the principles of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) characterized by a set of power-sharing arrangements between ethnic majority Macedonians and other minorities, particularly Albanians, as well as the longstanding political custom of power-sharing since Macedonia gained independence in 1991. This custom had always ensured that leading ethnic Macedonian and Albanian parties held respective junior and senior roles in successive coalition governments. The crisis with the DUI ended after the 2008 elections, and ethnic Albanians' situation improved slightly. However, it was observed that soaring nationalism in the country, which fleshed itself out in flamboyant construction projects such as Skopje 2014, began to alienate the Albanian minority (Krisafi 2020). In addition, it appears that the coalition partners tacitly agreed to further ethnic segmentation to maintain their dominant position within their respective ethno-economic spheres. Hence, the current socio-political landscape was at odds with the foundational tenets of the OFA, which sought to establish a pluralistic democracy. Additionally, this environment created a convenient environment for pervasive corruption at the national and local levels.

In the realm of regional politics, a wealth of research is devoted to examining the political and economic changes experienced by nations in the Western Balkans. These studies offer a nuanced analysis of the intricate political and economic factors and a direct insight into the transition from authoritarianism to democracy during the 1990s and the emergence of hybrid regimes in the 2000s. Nonetheless, case studies examining the conditions of transitioning from a hybrid regime to a standard democracy remain insufficient, with only a handful of countries such as Macedonia serving as examples. Levitsky and Way (2010) stated that at the beginning of the 1990s, Macedonia was likely to become an authoritarian regime due to its bulging public bureaucracy, weak private sector, narrow middle class, impotent political opposition, and civil society. A decade later, they disclosed that the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) [VMRO from now on] administrations of the populist right managed to transform the nation into a hybrid regime despite the EU's conditionality policies.

Fortunately, since 2015 the country has undergone a drastic change and returned in a few years to, at least, a standard democracy. The primary objective of this text is to emphasize the Western (EU and US) linkage and leverage, as defined by Levitsky and Way, which played a significant role in facilitating favorable conditions for a gradual democratic transformation in North Macedonia. It is important to emphasize that the influence exerted by the EU and United States on Macedonia is unique due to the ethnic conflict in the country that poses a threat to regional security. This situation is almost unprecedented and requires careful consideration. Mainly the EU played a crucial role as a third party in the negotiations between the opposition and the incumbent, leveraging its substantial capabilities to establish a foundation for equitable electoral competition. Furthermore, its influence extended to forming political alliances following the 2016 elections. On the other side, the case hints that in situations where external influence is absent, the process of transition to democracy may face significant obstacles due to partisan interests, corruption, infringement of civil liberties, and even slander, blackmail, and extortion, particularly in societies that lack political culture.

Rise of Fall of Hybrid Regime in Macedonia 2006-2015

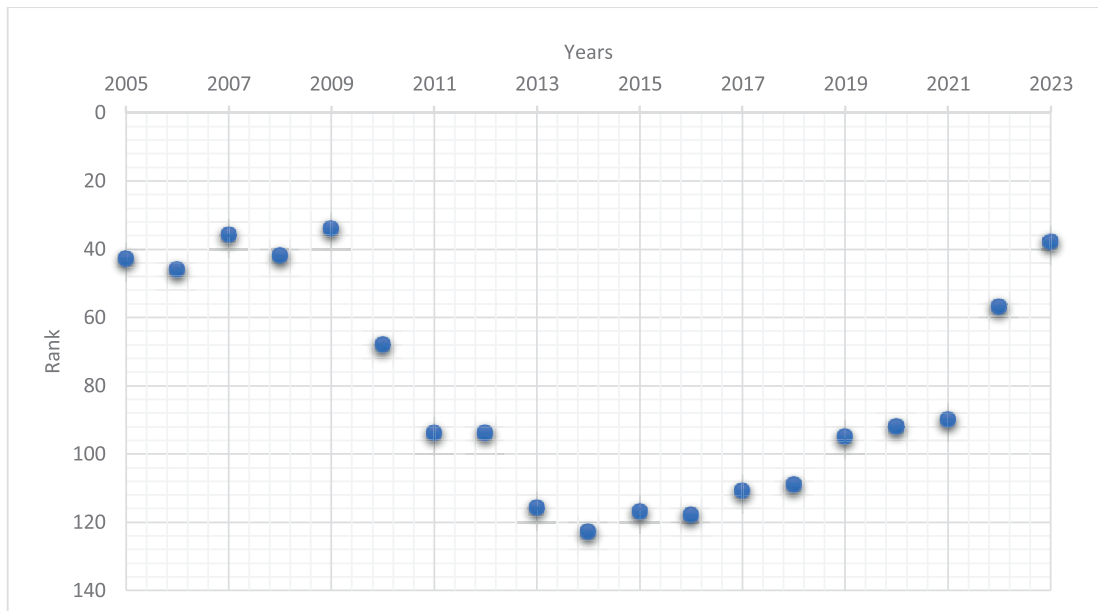
The stability of Macedonia has been of great importance to the West, and successive governments have always received external support to maintain the de facto power-sharing system at home since its independence. Ultimately, due to its size and thus its digestibility, Macedonia became the first Western Balkans country that the EU turned a green light for formal arrangements leading to full membership. Although most of the Macedonian political leaders had initially felt frustrated with the EU's support for the OFA process in the early 2000s, they, like their Albanian counterparts, eventually acknowledged that the EU's push for political reforms through the agreement also offered a binding assurance to full membership in the Union (Reka 2008: 62). Although the nationalist rhetoric of the VMRO undermined the increasingly fragile Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)-DUI coalition, the democratization process in Macedonia continued after the VMRO's electoral victory in 2006. Nonetheless, the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest dramatically turned the tide, as the Greek veto on Macedonia's membership in the organization because of the ongoing dispute on the name of the republic dragged the country, with the words of Vangelov (2019), to a primordial type of nationalism, which most benefited the VMRO. The early elections in 2008 then gave a parliamentary majority to the VMRO; yet, under pressure both from within and without – from the DUI blocking the legislative process and the EU and United States – Nikola Gruevski had to form a coalition government with the ethnic Albanian DUI. However, the Greek veto blocking the path toward integration into transatlantic structures and the loss of appetite in the EU for expansion due to the sudden financial crisis enabled the VMRO leader to evade Western attention and bolster populism to strengthen their hold on power (Vachudova 2019: 79; Auerbach and Kartner 2022: 546). The opposition social democrats reacted to the government's extravagance, while nationalist fervor alarmed the ethnic Albanian minority. They realized that Gruevski's populism threatened their political gains in the post-Ohrid period. Thus, backed by the pro-government media, Gruevski adopted an offensive strategy particularly toward his social democrat opponents (Marusic 2017a).

During the presidential elections and following local elections in 2009, the symptoms of competitive authoritarianism were not observed clearly. Although the reports of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers included allegations of civil servants being coerced to vote for the ruling party's candidate and election boards being staffed by VMRO sympathizers, they acknowledged that the elections were generally conducted under equitable conditions (OSCE 2009). Following the elections, VMRO engaged in a conspicuous effort to eliminate or marginalize individuals purportedly aligned with the opposition from the state bureaucracy (Dzankic 2018: 92). In fact, following his securing of the parliamentary majority in 2008, Gruevski had already begun deploying loyal individuals in critical institutions that played a crucial role in the fight against corruption. The situation reached a critical juncture, prompting the EU Commission to caution Skopje against the illegal dismissal of judges within the State Audit Office and the obstruction of essential duties of the Council of Judges and Prosecutors by the VMRO representative (Auerbach and Kartner 2022: 13).

Prime Minister Gruevski also pursued a conscious strategy that resulted in private media losing neutrality. The opposition media, especially the influential TV channel A1, became the

government's target. Police raided its headquarters and arrested its owner Velija Ramkovski and 13 other employees. The raid seemed to have aimed to convey a stern message to opposition media members that they might be subjected to more aggressive measures beyond the customary tactics of misusing defamation legislation, politically biased allocation of state advertisement, exorbitant penalties, and undermining job security. According to the index published by Reporters Without Borders (see Table 1), the freedom of the press experienced a continuous decline during the tenure of the successive VMRO governments from 2006 to 2016. Between 2005 and 2009, the country was classified among the nations that upheld freedom. However, media freedom experienced a significant decline and reached its lowest point in 2014, ranking at 123rd. Only under the SDSM-led coalition government's leadership did the media freedom score appear to have expeditiously reached the pre-VMRO level. It should also be noted that in 2016 Freedom House finally changed Macedonia's status from partly free to a transitional/hybrid regime (see Table 2).

Table 1. Ebbs and Flows of Media Freedom in the North Macedonia, 2005-2023²



In February 2015, the state capture orchestrated by Gruevski was brought to light by Zoran Zaev, the leader of the primary opposition party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). Zaev publicly divulged the contents of phone conversations between VMRO dignitaries and various members of academia, civil society, the upper echelons of the bureaucracy, and the judiciary – albeit through illegal wiretapping. The tapes disclosed the incumbent's “direct influence on the judiciary including dismissing criminal charges against government ministers, appointment of party loyal judges, selective prosecution of political opponents” and its strategies to rig elections such as “using fictive voters, fake ID cards,

² Reporters without Borders (RSF), Index, <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2004> (accessed September 29, 2023).

buying votes, registering up to 50 such voters at individual addresses, intimidation of public servants to vote accordingly, attempts of stealing election material, misuse of police and public administration for party agenda” (Dzankic 2018: 9-10). Gruevski reacted by ordering the prosecution of Zaev for the alleged coup attempt; yet, the tapes had already stirred up the streets. Finally, upon the increasing pressure from the EU and the United States, he had to allow the formation of a Special Prosecutor Office (SJO) to investigate the scandal.

After the release of the investigation report, which revealed the potential involvement of the prime minister in the corruption allegations, President Gjorge Ivanov, who had previously been elected as the VMRO candidate in 2009, issued a presidential pardon to a group of public figures both from the government and opposition suspected of engaging in corrupt activities, including illegal eavesdropping. However, the decision led to a surge of protesters on the streets because several VMRO officials, likely to be charged with crimes, were among those granted clemency. Despite the public reaction to the disputable constitutionality of the presidential act, state institutions quickly enforced the pardon. Also, the Constitutional Court, which was predominated by the members appointed from the VMRO quota, hastily expressed its opinion in favor of Ivanov’s act. Eventually, the independent prosecutor’s investigations were stalled, and suspects arrested or detained were released. Developments infuriated further the demonstrators on the street; they continued their protest by painting public buildings, statutes and monuments in central Skopje because they took them the symbols of the expensive and allegedly corrupt urban renewal project (so-called Skopje 2014) of the VMRO government, which was the reason why foreign press called the events “Macedonia’s colored revolution.” As demonstrators erected tents in front of government buildings and declared they would not disperse unless Ivanov withdrew his pardon, the EU decided to take a decisive step to change the course of the crisis.

The mediation of the EU Commissioner for Enlargement Johannes Hahn and EU Parliament member Richard Howitt paid off, and the VMRO leadership was persuaded to negotiate with the opposition in Przino in mid-July 2016 on the date and conditions of the next general elections (Staletovic 2016). The 2016 December parliament elections brought a Pyrrhic victory to Gruevski’s VMRO. Although it managed to garner the majority of votes (38%) nationally and could retain its leading position by winning 51 out of 120 seats, it could not achieve a parliamentary majority. The results raised tensions further in the political landscape, which had already been tense and complex. VMRO leadership encountered pressure from the party’s nationalist flank, which grew increasingly vocal against political concessions to the DUI. Meanwhile, the allegations circulated that Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, after contacting the EU and US ambassadors during the crisis, persuaded the DUI leaders to take sides with the SDSM-led opposition (Trajkova and Silvana Neshkovska 2018: 314-315). Hence, now that it lost its Albanian partner in the DUI, the VMRO failed to form a coalition government.

Nevertheless, despite the VMRO’s failure, President Ivanov resisted passing the mandate to the SDSM to form government while the VMRO deputies paralyzed the whole process. On the very day (27 April 2017) when the parliamentary blockade of VMRO, which lasted almost a month, ended, ultra-nationalists stormed the parliament. This incident turned

more traumatic quickly because rumors that Gruevski had designed events to create an excuse to declare martial law began circulating in the national media. Camera records showing some VMRO deputies assisting and guiding attackers in parliament corridors reinforced suspicions (Marusic 2017b). Escalation of tensions potentially affecting even overall inter-ethnic relations in the country alarmed the EU and US diplomats. Eventually, after a series of official contacts with Western officials, President Ivanov acquiesced to hand over the mandate to the SDSM on 17 May 2016 (Bliznakovski 2017).

Acting prudently, the SDSM presented the whole process as a sincere return to the EU axis and EU reform process. After the SDSM unearthed the tapes, a delegation of EU experts headed by the former Commissioner Reinhardt Priebe had visited the country in April-May 2015. Priebe had conveyed to the Gruevski government their recommendations on the problems relating to the rule of law, the structure of the judiciary, political and personal rights, and the struggle against corruption (EU Commission 2015). Gruevski had ignored them all. Now, the SDSM announced that it would implement the structural reforms recommended in the Priebe Report. The EU responded positively by immediately sending Johannes Hahn to Skopje (Marusic 2017c). SDSM embarked upon reform by scrapping the controversial Council for Disciplinary Liability and Evaluation of Judges, which was formed in 2015 despite the existence of another constitutional body charged with the disciplinary affairs of judges. The VMRO had passed the law establishing it without due public debate, prompting protests from the opposition. Skopje had also not heeded calls of the OSCE's Venice Council to review the legislation. The tapes revealed that the VMRO government used the Council to pressure the judiciary's members (Marusic 2017d).

The SDSM government prepared a draft agenda of reform priorities just before Hahn's official visit to convince the European Commission to resume its recommendation for Macedonia's EU accession talks. As the government acted to enforce the reform as envisaged in the Priebe Report, it also showed that it was ready to take serious steps to solve its protracted conflicts with its EU member neighbors, primarily Greece and Bulgaria. However, in the parliament, VMRO deputies adopted a strategy of prolonging the legislative processes to prevent the government from enacting quickly the EU-endorsed laws (Marusic 2017e). Finally, the resistance of VMRO deputies was broken when the SJO finalized its investigations on 30 June and shared with the public the dossiers including VMRO's senior members' affiliation with the cases of corruption, money laundering and electoral fraud. In August 2017, despite VMRO deputies' protest and withdrawal from the parliament commission for corruption, the government managed to sack Chief State Prosecutor Marko Zvrlevski, who had allegedly been a key figure of the political tutelage and domination over the judiciary during the VMRO rule (Marusic 2017f).

At the end of June 2017, the SJO announced charges in 17 cases and demanded the arrest of Gruevski and some former ministers. However, Skopje's Criminal Court rejected the demands by the SJO for the arrest and detention of the VMRO's top executives (Marusic 2017g). Even at this critical moment, the SDSM continued to act with restraint lest the process should look like revanchism. In November 2017, the government announced a Strategy for Change in the Judiciary in congruence with the recommendations of the EU and established a

Council for Judicial Reform. In November 2017, the government announced the formation of a Strategy for Change in the Judiciary as proposed by the EU. The regulations regarding the judiciary had to be through the parliament with a two-thirds majority, and the VMRO veto was still possible; yet, this time, VMRO deputies conceded to enact laws on the Judicial Council and Courts. Reformists also focused on the National Intelligence Agency (UBK), which had become overtly partisan during the VMRO governments. In the same vein, in November, the government brought some bills, in compliance with the Priebe Report, aiming to improve civilian control over the security services, mainly depriving them of the mandate to conduct the technical surveillance process (Marusic 2017h).

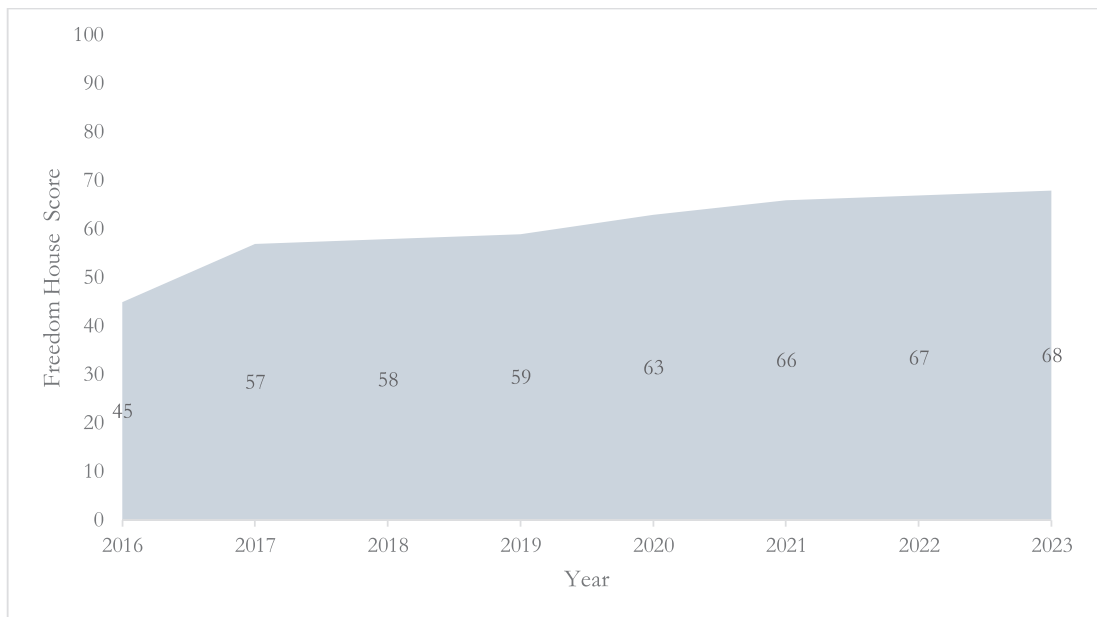
As discussed below, some civil society organizations criticized the SJO investigations on corruption, with some even alleging that they became a sort of witch hunt against ex-government officials (Marusic 2018a). However, the positive effects of the process should not be ignored. To keep public attention alive, the SJO codenamed the investigations, in almost half of which Gruevski and his entourage were suspects (Marusic 2018b). Although Gruevski avoided arrest and retained his position as party leader, his loss of prestige due to public attention to the process encouraged a group within the VMRO that wanted to restore intra-party democracy. This moderate faction did not openly support Gruevski's extremely populist campaign against negotiations on the name issue with Greece and preferred a lower profile (Marusic 2018c). This new political conjuncture undoubtedly encouraged the SDSM government to act to get rid of the historical name dispute with the Greeks. The surge in the ranks of VMRO following the reveal of SJO dossiers shook Gruevski yet did not finish him. However, following the disclosure of the results of local elections on 15 October 2017, which marked the strong support of citizens to the SDSM's anti-corruption policy, the Gruevski wing lost control of the party. The VMRO had won 56 of 81 municipalities in the 2013 local elections, whereas SDSM had been successful only in four. At the beginning of December 2017, coincidentally, upon the arrest of 36 people, including VMRO deputies, for their roles in the parliament raid, Gruevski submitted his resignation to the party administration, which immediately decided to set up an extraordinary party congress for electing a new chairperson. Not long after the election of Hristijan Mickoski to the party chairmanship, Gruevski suddenly appeared in Budapest requesting political asylum from his close friend, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban. With this scandalous development, a period in Macedonia came to an end.

In Lieu of Conclusion: Back to Basics in North Macedonia

Under the light of the political process, it is hard to say that Macedonia ultimately moved away from the characteristic of a hybrid regime – at least as this study is being conducted. As shown in the Table 2, the data of Freedom House justified that the country, which had regressed to the category of a hybrid/transitional regime in 2016, managed to advance to the category of partly-free in 2018. There has been progress, albeit accompanied by setbacks, in the areas of democratization and the rule of law since the year 2018. One of the most tragic events in this process was regarding the SJO, which played a decisive role in the transition process in the country. The SDSM government gave utmost importance to the continuation of the SJO investigations, which had to be finalized at the end of June 2017 and found an intermediate

solution by attaching the Office to a special department to be established in the Ministry of Justice (Marusic 2018d). Thus, according to critiques, the government could continue to swing the Damocles' sword on partisan groups in the state bureaucracy. As mentioned above, strong criticism had already arisen in the EU because some experts likened the government's acts to a witch-hunt against opponents. Meanwhile, another shock wave hit the nation in August 2019 when the head of SJO, Katica Janeva, was arrested for racketeering, seriously undermining the credibility of the government's anti-corruption drive (Marusic 2019a).

Table 2. Transition to Democracy in North Macedonia³



Macedonia's return to democracy justifies Levitsky and Way's views, entailing the importance of the scope and depth of relations with the West. On the other side, if the Western Balkans is in question, one issue also should not be overlooked; recently, China and especially Russia helped the autocrats in the region resist the inducements and sometimes pressures, particularly from the EU, on struggle with corruption, the rule of law, and fundamental rights. The cordial relations between Gruevski and Russian President Vladimir Putin peaked in mid-2013 when the Russian energy giant Gazprom announced its investment plans in Macedonia. When protests started to rock the capital Skopje after the tape scandal in 2015, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov immediately backed Gruevski by claiming that Western secret services stirred the unrest, just as they had done in Maidan events in 2014 (Matioli 2021: 211). Lavrov remarked that the events began when Skopje refused to join sanctions against Russia and supported the Turkish Stream gas pipeline project, which stalled because of the EU's opposition (Buckley 2015). Lavrov also hastily described skirmishes between an Albanian armed group and Macedonian forces in Kumanovo as an Albanian-Bulgarian plot to divide Macedonia (Nikolovski 2019). President Putin denigrated the 2016 elections as a Western

³ Compiled by the author from the Freedom House "Nations in Transit" data since 2016.

fait accompli and encouraged President Ivanov not to pass the mandate to the opposition to form the government (Bechev 2017: 190-197). As understood from the corruption dossiers, the party magnates also had lucrative joint ventures with the Chinese partners. However, even though they have become increasingly displeased with the EU, most Macedonians still do not see Russia as an alternative to the West; it should be noted that the Russian prestige in the country has continuously decreased since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. In fact, as found out in recent polls, Türkiye and China have gradually started to fill this gap (CISR 2022; Vuksanovic 2023). However, as remarked by the current President Stevo Pendarovski, despite disappointments, the presence of the EU remains the guarantee of democracy and the rule of law in Macedonia (Pendarovski 2023).

It was inevitable that some problems related to the rule of law would emerge while the newly elected SDSM attempted to remove the relics of the previous regime; yet many thought that this would remain a simple glitch that could be circumvented under the careful oversight of the EU. However, as it turned out, those who claimed that autocracy haunted the country again began to find an increasingly larger audience. Ironically, while in early 2019, the EU conditioned the progress in the accession talks with Skopje's finding a solution to the status of the problem of the SJO, a few months later, the head prosecutor of the critical judicial body, Katica Janeva, was arrested on suspicion of extortion and abuse of office. The SJO became the flagship of the Zaev reforms in the judiciary, and the scandal overshadowed what had been done so far. It even extended to the 1TV, which became the symbol of free and impartial broadcasting of the new era. The station lost its financial support for its owner's arrest and had to end its broadcast after a while (Marusic 2019b). Of course, the allegations that the controversial practice of financing private media from the state budget returned through the back door and that the previous clientelist relations between media bosses and political parties were re-established began to circulate in the media more frequently (Apostolov 2020).

Macedonia had to undergo a new test in the same year when France closed the doors to full membership to Macedonia and Albania at the European Council meeting. When turned away from NATO and the EU in 2008, the previous Prime Minister Gruevski had exploited the frustration of the Macedonian majority for electoral support. However, this time, Zaev tried to calm the Macedonian public by stating that despite his disappointment, his country did not give up on its ideal of EU membership and that the alternative to the EU was corruption and extremism, as observed in the previous period. Upon this demoralizing development, the prime minister demanded snap elections (Marusic 2019c). The leaders of SDSM were optimistic about the country's NATO membership prospects after the Greek veto was lifted. They planned to leverage this historic moment for their election campaign. However, the outcome was less than ideal – SDSM won by a slim margin of 46 seats, compared to VMRO's 44 seats. SDSM's disappointment continued with the local elections in November 2021. Considering the circumstances, this could be interpreted as a lack of confidence, and Zaev chose to resign. SDSM, under new leadership from Dimitar Kovačevski, faced another challenging test soon thereafter. Local elections were scheduled for 12 April 2021, and the coalition government transferred its mandate to an electoral government at the start of the year. Yet, the government had to cancel the local elections due to the coronavirus pandemic. As reported in the national media, this period of struggle with the pandemic was marred by some symptoms of democratic

backsliding as spotted throughout the world, such as increased pressure on free media (Marusic 2020a). Nevertheless, Reporters Without Borders, a global free media watchdog, announced in 2020 that North Macedonia performed better than the previous year, as it ranked 92nd, slightly better than neighboring Serbia and worse than Albania and Kosovo (Marusic 2020b).

The lessons drawn from the political developments in Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo, considered other examples of hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans, are somewhat controversial. It should be noted that the political balances in those countries have increasingly become dependent on the nature of their relations with the so-called “black knights” of Russia and China. For example, in Montenegro, Milo Djukanovic seems to have “possibly temporarily” suspended his political career without being penalized (Keil 2018: 65). In Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, the leader of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), who had been in power since 2007, eventually ascended to the presidency, albeit he was charged with war crimes in the Hague and was forced to resign in late 2020 to respond to the charges. Aleksander Vucic, the leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in Serbia, is known for his closeness to Putin, and he still maintains his power despite increasingly vocal opposition to his rule in the country. On the other side, it is possible to say that a more discernible political process of return from a hybrid regime to a standard democracy has been observed in Macedonia. This process showed that the increasing pressure from the EU and United States, which were seriously concerned with preserving the post-OFA political structure in the country, was at least as effective as the domestic social dynamics and civic resistance. This must be the reason why SDSM leaders defined their policies as resuming the EU-oriented democratization reforms, which had gone in tandem with the post-OFA regulations since 2001.

However, some observers claimed that, as of 2019, the Zaev government was lost in the details and reverted to the typical practices of the VMRO era. Reforms related to justice and corruption could not progress, and social support to the government was drained as it frequently failed to fulfill its economic promises (Földi 2018). Undoubtedly, the same circles claimed that the presidential elections on 5 May 2019 would serve as a litmus test for the government. Thus, the failure of the SDSM candidate Pendarovski to win a majority in the first round would be a serious warning to Zaev. On the other side, according to critiques, on the eve of the pandemic, Zaev’s scorecard was not very bright, particularly in the realms of the rule of law and free media. Although, as aforementioned, media freedom continued to improve after Zaev’s resignation in December 2021, it seemed that the new government had a lot to do in the realm of the rule of law. According to a public opinion poll by the non-governmental Center for Legal Research and Analysis in mid-2019, the majority of the members of the judiciary confirmed the failure of government reform for judicial independence and impartiality, a third of the judges said that other institutions continued to exert pressure on the courts, and 40% of judges stated that disciplinary measures were not carried out objectively (Marusic 2020c). The EU is undoubtedly frustrated with the collapse of the SJO. Although a bill that gave permanent status to the SJO was pushed through the parliament on 12 February 2021, this institution had already lost its credibility in the eyes of the public. The victory of the SDSM with a slight margin in the general elections on 15 July 2020 should be read as the continuation of public support for the reform process despite all its shortcomings. However, as careful observers pointed out, whoever comes to power in Macedonia will have difficulty purifying himself of

the practices that have long permeated the Macedonian political culture. Although the country seems off the radar of students of hybrid regimes, whether this situation persists depends on the SDSM's democratic performance in the days to come.

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