



**WESTERN BALKANS AT THE CROSSROADS:
DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING
AND EXTERNAL ACTORS' INFLUENCE**

Vulnerable Democracies: The Effect of Foreign Influence on the Political and Social Life in North Macedonia

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Abstract

This study analyses the effects of foreign influence on political and social life in North Macedonia, focusing on the effects of the prolonged EU integration process, as opposed to the influence exerted by non-western actors, particularly Russia, China, Türkiye, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. The study focuses mainly on political and social forms of external influence. It assesses the vulnerability of the political subjects and citizens to external influence, investigating how political party behaviour contributes to the polarisation and undermining of North Macedonia's

democratisation efforts. The analysis uses available public opinion data and literature review, including media sources. Overall, the study shows that the frustration from the "fading" EU promise leaves extra room for potential malign influence on the political and social life of the country, contributing to existing economic challenges and the already low trust in democratic institutions, and further challenging the democratisation process in North Macedonia.

I. Introduction

The war in Ukraine has significantly changed the geopolitical landscape in Europe, particularly impacting the political situation in the Western Balkans. The influence of external actors such as Russia, China, Türkiye, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf (also referred to as the Gulf States) have been present in the past; however, with the new emerging situation, their impact could significantly change and, in certain social and political contexts, strengthen. North Macedonia's sluggish EU integration process, following decades of various blockades, recently culminated with the French proposal to lift the Bulgarian veto, generating more frustration and polarisation among the citizens (Pollozhani 2022; Rechica 2022), and expanding the space for potential malign influence on the country's democracy. The effect of third parties can be seen through the clear signs of political polarisation: populism by several political subjects (Rechica, Bliznakovski, and Popovikj 2022), economic crisis exacerbating inequality, and low trust in democratic institutions (Bliznakovski et al. 2021). The concord between these conditions has put new strains on the country's political and social life and the overall democratisation efforts.

The current political system in North Macedonia is largely a result of the power-sharing agreement of 2001 ('Ohrid Framework Agreement' 2001). This system understands a democracy with mostly consociational traits. The political parties with the majority vote from the ethnic Macedonian and the ethnic Albanian "political blocks" usually form the government (Markovikj and Popovikj 2015). While society is relatively reconciled on an ethnic level, with sporadic escalations and low involvement of religious authorities in daily politics, there is still a tendency for an ethnically driven political and social organisation with low trust and interaction between the ethnic communities. This fragile political and social setting often serves as a fertile ground for internal and external factors to generate instability or exert influence.

The crowded and underpaid media sector, with high levels of polarisation and fake news proliferation (Oxenham 2019; Trpkovski 2019; Greene et al. 2020a), coupled with low levels of media literacy (Shopar, Kjupeva, and Temenugova 2016), further facilitates potential efforts by external actors. Despite ethnic fragmentation being an embedded part of the country's political system, the people of North

Macedonia tend to care more about the economic outlook of the country and the widespread corruption and impunity (International Republican Institute 2022). The Ukraine war has further increased citizens' concerns over economic stability and security. In August, inflation hit a record high of 16.8%; food price inflation reached 25.9% (World Bank 2022), while public debt rose by 5.8%, accounting for 58.6% of the state GDP (Ministry of Finance 2022). The economic crisis has further exacerbated inequality, with 21.8% of the population at risk of poverty (State Statistical Office 2022). Moreover, the government struggles with establishing safeguards against corruption, and introducing good governance practices remains the "Achilles' heel" in the democratisation process of North Macedonia (European Commission 2022). The worsening economic situation and high levels of corruption (Transparency International 2023), combined with low trust in institutions and low expectations from established political parties, allow third actors to wield political polarisation among citizens and create space for internal destructive political narratives.

Regarding the research methods, the assessment is done through available public opinion data and literature review, including media sources. This study draws from public opinion surveys looking at citizen preferences, existing literature from research studies on similar or related topics, academic literature and related local data sources and surveys, and policy briefs and studies produced by international and local civil society organisations (CSOs). The data were collected through desk research and available databases and analysed through qualitative and thematic analysis of documents. It is organised into three parts. First, it gives insights into the negative effects of the prolonged EU integration process on society. Secondly, it gives a more in-depth analysis of the Russian, Chinese, Turkish, and Gulf States' influence on the country's political structures and social life. Finally, it offers some policy recommendations for possible future steps to build the resilience of political actors to external influences that could undermine democratisation processes in the country. Overall, the study shows how external influence exacerbates political polarisation and populism by radical political subjects, worsens economic challenges, and contributes to already low trust in democratic institutions while challenging democratisation.

II. The EU Promise

Ebbs and flows of progress characterise the European integration process of North Macedonia. The country gained candidate status to join the European Union (EU) in 2005; however, it conditionally opened accession negotiations only in 2022, making it the longest-standing EU candidate in the Western Balkans. While the country visibly struggles with internal democratic reform (Freedom House 2022), certain EU member states have put difficult obstacles and, at times, impossible tasks in the country's EU path.

The long-standing name dispute with Greece prevented the country from joining the EU and NATO for decades. The Greek veto in the 2008 NATO summit, coupled with the inability of the EU member states to agree on the beginning of accession negotiations despite the European Commission's (EC) favourable recommendations, demonstrated how inconsistent strategic choices could jeopardise new and fragile democracies such as North Macedonia's. In less than a decade, the then right-wing government, led by Nikola Gruevski, took advantage of the circumstances to change its technocratic and reformist course into a populist semi-authoritarian regime (Kacarska 2017). While the official position in favour of a full Euro-Atlantic path was maintained, the political environment from 2008 to 2016 gave third countries a chance to offer a geopolitical platform, which internal political actors used to present as an attractive alternative to the citizens (Popovski 2018). By the end of his rule, Gruevski faced country-wide protests due to the wiretapping scandal (Dimishkovski 2016; Jakov Marusic 2017a). These protests would bring about a shift in power in favour of the Social Democrats. The democratic spirit brought undecided voters to the voting booth (turnout at 66,8%) and, for the first time, a recorded large number of Albanian votes for an ethnic-Macedonian party (Tahiri 2016; 360 degrees 2017).

The new government designed its platform mainly on the country's Euro-Atlantic prospects, resolving the name dispute with Greece in 2018 (Nimetz 2020), and leading to North Macedonia's accession to NATO in April 2020. However, positive outlooks began to fade when the Social Democrats failed to deliver on their promise for progress in the EU accession (Jakov Marusic 2019). The France and Netherlands veto in 2019 served as a launch pad for internal political frustration, giving a platform to radical political actors. Levica (the Left), a pro-Russian, radical, and self-proclaimed left-wing party, gained two MPs in the 2020

elections and further support in the 2021 local elections. The unexpected 2020 Bulgarian veto fuelled even deeper frustration, Euroscepticism, and anti-western sentiment among citizens (Velinovska, Nikolovski, and Krichner 2022). Bulgaria's veto is based on the contestation of North Macedonia's history. Specifically, the Bulgarian occupation during WWII being taught in schools, the status of the Macedonian language, and the issue of Bulgarian minorities in North Macedonia, which was previously unresolved (Pollozhani 2022; Heil 2022; Jakov Marusic 2020; 2021).

In 2022, the dispute was set to be resolved during the French presidency of the Council of the European Union through a proposal colloquially known as the "French Proposal." While this proposal was set with the idea of helping the country move forward in its EU path, the sentiment of injustice has become stronger in North Macedonia (Rechica 2022). Many people viewed the proposal's suggested constitutional amendments as an improper intrusion by Bulgaria into their country's internal affairs (Sloboden Pecat 2022; MKD 2021). Since the country's name change in 2018, the attitude toward the EU has worsened. While 72% of the citizens supported the EU integration process in 2018, this support is at 64% in 2022, following a steady drop since 2014 (80%) (Damjanovski 2023). The politicisation of the EU integration process by certain EU member states has also led to the belief that the implementation of domestic reforms requested by the EU is less important than the EU's political will to accept North Macedonia into the EU (International Republican Institute 2021). In fact, 49% of the citizens of North Macedonia believe that the reason the country is not able to join the EU is that neighbouring countries obstruct its path toward it. In comparison, only 31% think it is due to the lack of internal reforms, which creates a false perception of domestic democratic potential and blame shifting (Damjanovski 2023). In general, frustration with the current government lacking agency in foreign affairs (Rechica 2022), and with the EU, has had both political and social impact, and created entry points for influences of external actors such as Russia, China, Türkiye, and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

III. Political and Social Influence of Third Actors

The Russian Support

North Macedonia and Russia established bilateral ties in the early 1990s and have since signed several economic and cultural cooperation agreements. The two countries share cultural and religious similarities (Trpkovski 2018; Najcevska 2022; Bechev 2019; Karčić 2022; Himes and Stronski 2019); however, depending on the historical era, bilateral relations have shifted from cooperative to hostile and vice versa (Pankovski 2020, 26–42). In recent history, this shift happened during the 2015 political turmoil in North Macedonia, when the generally friendly relations between the two countries deteriorated swiftly.

The opposition Social Democratic Party of Macedonia (SDSM), led at the time by Zoran Zaev, released tapes to the public claiming evidence that Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's administration had illegally surveilled more than 20,000 people, including ministers, politicians, businesspeople, journalists, academics, and others (Dimishkovski 2016; Jakov Marusic 2017b; DW 2016; RFE/RL 2017). Gruevski accused the opposition of cooperating with "foreign intelligence services", for which legal proceedings were initiated against Zaev (Gjorchev 2016; Jakov Marusic 2019a; Angelov 2017). The political turmoil prompted a more active role of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Russian Embassy in Skopje, mainly through public statements and social media.

In response to the wiretapping scandal, the Russian MFA released a statement praising the government's stance and demanding a "thorough examination of the incident" (Brsakoska Bazerkoska and Spasov 2019). The then-government supporters often quoted these statements, fuelling widespread hysteria on possible "foreign intelligence service" surveillance and interference in the country's politics (Kostojchinoski 2016). The then right-wing government of Gruevski mainly furthered this narrative, while the Russian Embassy in Skopje would issue statements condemning the country-wide protests (Gjorchev 2016).

The Russian media campaign intensified after the 2017 government change, mainly in 2018, when the Prespa Agreement was concluded, resolving the

three-decade-long name dispute with Greece and opening the country's path toward NATO and the EU. The same year, a nationwide referendum was held in response to the agreement. According to some government sources, journalists, and independent experts, several online disinformation campaigns were launched to sway public opinion in favour of boycotting the referendum (Harding, Belford, and Cvetkovska 2017; Greene et al. 2020b). Twitter's automated bots greatly aided the online campaign for boycotts and artificially boosted their presence on social media by extensively sharing the hashtag #boycott (Zafeiropoulos 2019). Despite the successful boycott campaign, with a turnout of 37%, the referendum was deemed successful by the government (Jakov Marusic 2018). The campaign's size and the involvement of both domestic and foreign actors highlighted the vulnerabilities of the Macedonian democracy to disinformation and foreign influence (Pankovski and Rechica 2022).

These events contributed to further deteriorating of the official ties between Russia and North Macedonia. Russia asserted that the ultimate motivation behind the name change was to ensure and hasten Skopje's membership in NATO against the population's wishes (Gotev 2018). Oleg Shcherbak, the former Russian Ambassador to North Macedonia, issued a warning following the country's decision to join NATO. He stated that: "if it came to a conflict between Russia and NATO, you [North Macedonia] will have the role of a legitimate target" (EWB 2018).

Following the name dispute settlement and the NATO membership ratification, North Macedonia attempted to gradually enhance its official relations with Russia, primarily for economic reasons, leading to the then prime minister Zaev attending the Russia-North Macedonia economic forum in Skopje (Jakov Marusic 2019b). There were concerns about the possible Macedonian alignment with Russian politics; however, Zaev adamantly refused such allegations, stating, "This is not a message. We are working on improving our standards. We are doing everything to bring benefits to our people. There is no alternative to the EU and NATO" (Jakov Marusic 2019b).

On the other hand, parties like the Left, the “United Macedonia,” and the Democratic Party of the Serbs (DPS) have not refrained from publicly advocating for the country’s geopolitical reorientation toward Russia or the Eurasian alliance (Nechev and Nikolovski 2021, 48–74; Pankovski 2020, 26–42). The United Macedonia party expressly proposes the exit of the country from NATO and reorientation toward the Eurasian Union. Additionally, Alexander Dugin, a political philosopher dubbed “Putin’s Brain”, attended the United Macedonia founding conference (Nechev and Nikolovski 2021, 48–74). The DPS cultivates close ties with Moscow, while its leader, Ivan Stojiljković, also an MP, supports the Russian regional initiative to establish militarily neutral territory in the Balkans (Kuczyński 2019). Stojiljković has also been connected to Goran Zivaljević, a former deputy director of the Security Intelligence Agency of Serbia (BIA), who according to some reports, was spotted in the videos of the violent attack in the Assembly of North Macedonia in April 2017 (Nenadović 2017; Insajder 2017; BETA 2017). However, despite their openly pro-Russian stance, these parties mainly use pro-Russian narratives to boost their local support (Pankovski 2020, 26–42), as both parties fare poorly in elections (State Election Commission 2020).

Since strained relations between North Macedonia and Russia have deepened since the start of the war in Ukraine, the approach of these parties has changed. In March 2022, North Macedonia was added to the “enemy list” of countries that joined EU sanctions on Russia (Kajosevic 2022). Moreover, since the start of the war, North Macedonia has expelled several Russian diplomats found in breach of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (Al Jazeera 2022). These political actors were harshly condemned by these actions, but more prominently by the Left party (Antropol 2022), which as opposed to the “United Macedonia” and DPS, has garnered more support in elections and public discourse.

There are growing concerns about the rising ratings of the Left, which is quickly becoming the fourth party measured by public support (International Republican Institute 2022).

In the 2020 early parliamentary elections, they gained two MPs. They have since publicly declared to form a strategic alliance with Russia and China and revoke the country’s NATO membership (Levica 2023). After the gains in the 2021 local elections, the Left became the only relevant political party with an alternative foreign policy proposal (State Election Commission 2020). The two MPs met with the Russian Ambassador in Skopje on the Parliament premises shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Jakov Marusic 2022). The Left used Moscow’s preferred language to describe the Russian invasion of Ukraine and accused Bujar Osmani, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, of being a “Russophobe” (Trajkovska 2022). They have openly aligned with Russia over the war in Ukraine, and its members have recently conducted official visits to Russia (Levica 2022). Their narrative is mainly anti-Western and endorses a possible Eurasian Union, which according to a poll in 2021, is supported by 75% of the voters of the Left (Velinovska, Nikolovski, and Krichner 2022).

In the parliament, the majority and the opposition rarely agree; however, at the beginning of the war in Ukraine, they jointly adopted a declaration supporting Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. However, the declaration was not supported by two MPs from the Left and one from the DPS (The Assembly of North Macedonia 2022).

More than half of the Left’s supporters (56%) justify the Russian military aggression against Ukraine, making up the highest level of approval compared to other parties (Velinovska 2023). The overwhelming majority (90%) of their sympathisers are against supplying weapons to Ukraine, and 95% are against economic sanctions against Russia (Velinovska 2023). Moreover, 73% of the Left’s supporters believe Russia’s attack on Ukraine to be a reaction to NATO provocations that Moscow could not ignore (Velinovska 2023). Their voice is highly popular among the dissatisfied youth (Velinovska 2023), while their narrative, in addition to being pro-Russian and anti-Albanian, is highly polarising and populist (Bosilkov 2021). Future political gains could pose political destabilisation and impasse in the parliament.

China's Endeavours

North Macedonia reinstated bilateral relations with China in 2001 after a short disruption due to North Macedonia's recognition of Taiwan in 1999 (Nikolic 2005). Since reinstating diplomatic ties, the countries have signed several trade, economic, and cultural cooperation agreements. There have been several high-level meetings with the right-wing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) government until 2016, and the SDSM-led government later.

The meetings have mainly focused on economic cooperation and possible future investments by China. Li Keqiang, Premier of the People's Republic of China, remarked that China is prepared to "dovetail the Belt and Road Initiative with North Macedonia's development policy," with motorways as milestones of that cooperation (China Plus 2019). Former prime minister Zaev also stated that North Macedonia benefited from the cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries (China Plus 2019). China also gained recognition and praise during the Covid-19 outbreak for its operations in the region by sending protective gear and money to the Ministry of Health through the Chinese Embassy in Skopje and was able to position itself in the public opinion as a major donor during the crisis (Pankovski 2020, 26-42).

Despite some marginal efforts, Chinese political influence is rather limited. China mainly invests in deepening economic ties with the country through the Belt and Road and China

CEECA initiatives (previously known as 17+1) (Nechev and Nikolovski 2020). On the other hand, the Chinese economy, especially infrastructure projects, usually disregard socioeconomic and financial sustainability and EU regulations, which leads to high levels of debt and infringement in the country's established anti-corruption mechanisms (Pankovski 2021; Nechev and Nikolovski 2020). Such was the case of the Miladinovci-Shtip and Kichevo-Ohrid highways, a Chinese investment marred by corruption scandals involving high officials, including former prime minister Gruevski (Nechev and Nikolovski 2020). Moreover, Chinese investments have yet to prove crucial for the country's economic development. An analysis of foreign direct investments conducted by the Institute for Democracy shows that Chinese investments are sporadic and never reached a spot among the top 15 investors in the last 24 years. On the other hand, the data show that in 2021, over 75% of FDI valued at 4.8 billion EUR originated from EU countries and other G7 members (IDSCS_Skopje 2022). Additionally, only 11% of the citizens think that China should be the main economic partner of the country, opposed to 49% who think it should be the EU, and 21% in favour of the US (Velinovska 2023).

Unlike Russia, China lacks substantial platforms for advancing its ideology or promoting its positions. China-related outlets have a negligible impact on public opinion and the media landscape. Although it supports some NGOs, their influence on society is limited, while cultural differences prove substantial.

Türkiye's "Friendship"

North Macedonia and Türkiye established diplomatic ties in the early 1990s and have since signed several important bilateral agreements for cooperation in various economic and cultural fields. Türkiye has also been one of the steadiest supporters of North Macedonia's bid to join NATO (Nikolovski 2019) and has consistently donated to the armed forces (Ministry of Defence 2019). In 2019, Türkiye ratified the NATO Accession Protocol for North Macedonia, fulfilling its strategic commitment to North Macedonia's membership in the alliance. Beyond defence, the Turkish government has generously supported large economic, cultural, and educational projects in various areas. In 2020, the year for which the most recent figures are available, North Macedonia was among the top 10 recipients of aid

from Türkiye on European soil, with 5.75 million dollars (TIKA 2020).

Moreover, the Turkish Cooperation and Agency (TIKA) have reported around 500 projects primarily focusing on education and health in the last 6 years (TIKA 2021). TIKA funding trends show that Türkiye mostly invests in countries with a strong Muslim community, as such significant amounts are donated to North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania (Kočan and Arbeiter 2019). Türkiye is also among some of the biggest investors in the country in the last three decades (IDSCS_Skopje 2022).

Relations between the two countries are mostly friendly, often reiterated during high-level bilateral talks. Moreover, Türkiye's influence is mainly built around creating legitimacy for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government and its internal political agenda in Türkiye rather than igniting a shift in an alliance against the West. Around 2011, when relations between the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Gülen movement in Türkiye deteriorated, the struggle for dominance and influence also moved to the Western Balkans, mainly through the constant push to extradite persons they allege to be part of the "FETO" (Fetullahist Terrorist Organization). In 2021, Ankara requested the deportation of 86 alleged "Gülenists" and the extradition of 20 of them (Jakov Marusic 2021); however, there have been no extraditions so far. The Ministry of Justice of North Macedonia responded that it would act according to domestic legislation, and international standards and agreements, while maintaining good relations with Türkiye (Jakov Marusic 2021).

In 2018, the Turkish Maarif Foundation started its activities by establishing the Maarif International Schools in Tetovo, a majority Albanian city, in a bid to oust the Yahya Kemal Schools linked to Fethullah Gülen (Jakov Marusic 2016). Today the Foundation counts five educational institutions across the country (Dünyada Türkiye Maarif Vakfı 2022), while it has also provided thousands of academic scholarships to Macedonian students in Türkiye (Zdravkovska 2017; Kanal 5 2019). Additionally, the Association of Turkish Non-Governmental Organisations (MATUSITEB), an association of around 60 organisations focusing mostly on religious, cultural, and educational issues, funded mainly by the Turkish government and TIKA,

actively advocates for the Turkish community through meetings with high-level political officials (Pankovski 2020, 26-42; President of North Macedonia 2021). Turkish influence is also evident in the media sphere through establishing local offices of Turkish media companies. Particularly, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the North Macedonia desk of the Anadolu Agency frequently reports and broadcasts content on Türkiye, while the recently established Turkish Radio Television (TRT) has reached thousands of followers across platforms targeting younger audiences (TRT Balkan MK 2022; TRT World 2022).

Turkish political influence in the Western Balkans can be best explored through the perspective of former Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who in his work *Strategic Depth*, states that Bosniaks and Albanians should be the focal point of Türkiye's Balkans policy (Aydıntaşbaş 2019). Once he was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, Davutoğlu turned his attention not just to Bosnia and Albania but also to North Macedonia and Serbia (Aydıntaşbaş 2019). As such, in North Macedonia, the AKP has often been linked to Movement BESA, a minority Albanian party; however, a more thorough investigation of party connections to Türkiye is lacking (Musai 2016). On the other hand, Türkiye has traditionally cultivated close links with several ethnic Turkish parties, which generally lack political agency and have no significant gains in elections (State Election Commission 2020). Türkiye's influence in North Macedonia is generally narrow, as witnessed by the lack of response from the Macedonian government regarding the "Gülenists." While there is no doubt that the country is present through its many approaches, its influence is rather limited.

A Business Friend: The Arab States of the Persian Gulf

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are the three Arab states of the Persian Gulf (also referred to as the Gulf States) with which North Macedonia has maintained not-so-intensive diplomatic ties in the last two decades. While Qatar has its Embassy in Skopje, Saudi Arabia covers North Macedonia from its Embassy in Tirana, and UAE covers North Macedonia from its Embassy in Sofia. On the other hand, North Macedonia is present in Qatar and the UAE.

There are only a few political and symbolic linkages between North Macedonia and the Gulf States, and these ties are largely centred around business opportunities in North Macedonia. The VMRO-DPMNE-led administration

actively set up talks with high-ranking Gulf State delegates. As a result, the Emir of Qatar visited North Macedonia in 2011, and bilateral agreements were signed in business, culture, education, and health (Qatar Embassy 2022). After the first visit, the former prime minister Gruevski made several trips to the Gulf States (Pankovski 2020, 26-42). Visits and diplomatic relations continued even after the 2017 political shift and change in government in North Macedonia. In May 2020, Qatar provided eight tons of protective gear for managing the Covid-19 situation through the Qatar Fund for Development, stating that "the country could always count on aid and support from the state of Qatar" (Gina 2020). Political influence-seeking

and symbolic politics could be viewed as moderate forms of influence-seeking. The number of gestures made varies by country and have little to moderate impact on policy making and little to no media coverage. Essentially, there is

no alignment between the programmes of local parties and the foreign policy objectives of the Gulf States, and the ties remain largely based on economic interests.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

The 2022 International Republican Institute poll showed that in terms of foreign policy, 57% of citizens strongly or somewhat agree that North Macedonia's interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with Russia, as opposed to 60% who agreed in a poll conducted in 2021 just before the war in Ukraine (International Republican Institute 2022). Türkiye is seen positively, as 87% of respondents strongly or somewhat agree that strong relations serve the country's best interests, just as the EU and the US are seen as important allies with whom North Macedonia needs to maintain strong relations (International Republican Institute 2022).

In 2021, a third of the respondents (31%) chose Serbia as the biggest donor in the country during the Covid-19 crisis, leaving behind the EU with 14% and China with 13%. However, this perception did not coincide with the factual situation (Velinovska, Nikolovski, and Krichner 2022). This perception swiftly changed in 2022, with only 3% recognising Serbia as a major donor (Velinovska, 2023). The shift in opinion demonstrates the significant influence Serbia's vaccination diplomacy had on the Macedonian

population through the early opening of its border for immunisation and the early pandemic transfer of their quota of vaccinations to North Macedonia, and it also demonstrates the fragility of public opinion to external influences.

Regarding the war in Ukraine, opinions have not shifted significantly, and pro-western attitudes are still dominant (Velinovska, 2023). However, on the statement that "Russia's attack on Ukraine is a reaction to NATO provocations that Moscow could not ignore," the results show that 51% of the respondents agree with such statement (36% completely; 15% to some extent), while 38% completely or to some extent do not agree (29% completely, 9% to some extent). Moreover, with the European narrative that the victory of Ukraine means the victory of Europe, Macedonian respondents have a somewhat divided view of this analogy. The results show that almost half of the respondents (48%) do not agree with this statement (34% completely, 14% to some extent) (Velinovska, 2023). While citizens rationally recognise the importance of the alignment with the EU and the US, anti-western narratives have taken hold.

Policy recommendations

- ✘ The EU must develop a better communication strategy regarding its investments, aid, and support in North Macedonia. Although Covid-19 aid from the EU was far more significant, other external actors could pompously demonstrate their marginal support as far more important. Such events must be anticipated and undercut in the future.
- ✘ The EU must rebuild its credibility in North Macedonia through substantial engagement on both sides to resolve the Macedonian - Bulgarian dispute. Although public opinion polls show that the EU is a vital player and can continue to offer a genuine option as opposed to the advances made by authoritarian countries, support is dropping increasingly, from 80% in 2014 to 64% in 2022 (Damjanovski, 2023). The EU and EU member states must aid constructive dialogue.

- ✘ Democratic forces must invest in intra-party democracy to mitigate potentially malign influence from the third actors through local politicians. Political party structures in North Macedonia are highly centralised and leader-oriented; thus, little engagement is needed from party leaders to influence larger public opinion. The highly concentrated power in the hands of few political actors makes the citizens far more vulnerable to external influence (out of which some forms may be malign), as third actors need far fewer resources to reach a wider audience. Donors must work more directly with political actors.
- ✘ Funding and capacity-building support are needed to solidify state institution capacities in order to build immunity to corrosive capital. Institutional lack of capacity is best illustrated by the effects of Chinese capital in North Macedonia, which has impacted various policy areas, including anti-corruption. Donors and civil society must focus efforts on building good governance mechanisms in crucial institutions to reject potential malign capital.
- ✘ Lastly, internal efforts are required to fight corruption and build an independent judiciary in order to counteract potentially malign influence. Both areas are where reforms are least progressing. Moreover, both areas are crucial in trust building. Progress could decrease populist demand, a sentiment easily used by radical political actors such as the Left, who have gained significant support. The influence of illiberal foreign actors could decrease as corruption decreases and justice strengthens, and continuous pressure on political actors to follow through with reforms is a must.

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