



THE DISAPPOINTMENT TOWARDS THE WEST NURTURES ANTI-DEM- OCRATIC SENTIMENTS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Without credible external encouragement from the EU, the lack of trust in the vision of local politicians can play a significant role in weakening democracy in North Macedonia.

The Western Balkans remains one of the most vulnerable targets in the ongoing battle for influence. The region is a central target of Russian influence, which intensified after the invasion of Ukraine last year. The region proves to be a fertile ground for political and societal influence, disinformation, and corrosive capital due to the various levels of state and media captivity, ethnic tensions within and between states, and the history of Russian cognitive bias.

Russia uses disinformation campaigns and illicit financing as powerful weapons to undermine the democratic institutions of the Western Balkans. These tools also facilitate China and other authoritarian countries in expanding their influence.

OBSTACLES ON THE PATH TO THE EU

In North Macedonia, external actors found fertile ground for economic, political, and social influence. However, this space, which in the past was mainly associated with populist and autocratic political preferences among the population, recently changed its face. The country obtained EU candidate status in 2005 but formally started accession negotiations only in 2022.

The unexpected Bulgarian veto in 2020 triggered even deeper frustration, Euroscepticism, and anti-Western sentiment among citizens. Moreover, while the country struggles with internal democratic reforms, several EU member states have hindered and sometimes made it impossible to rejoice in the progress towards the EU.

The Greek veto at the NATO summit in 2008 and the inability of EU member states to reach an agreement on starting accession negotiations, despite the support recommendations from the European Commission, demonstrated how inconsistent strategic decisions can jeopardize young and fragile democracies like North Macedonia.

In less than ten years, the government led by Nikola Gruevski transformed from a technocratic and reformist system into a populist, semi-authoritarian system. The political climate from 2008 to

2016 enabled third countries to offer a geopolitical platform that internal political actors could use to present as an attractive alternative to citizens, despite the official pro-Euro-Atlantic position.

By the end of Gruevski's rule, the wiretapping scandal led to nationwide demonstrations and political turmoil. These demonstrations resulted in a change of power favouring the Social Democrats. Undecided voters were attracted to the polling stations by the democratic atmosphere, while a significant portion of Albanian votes were given to an ethnic Macedonian party.

While the name dispute with Greece was resolved in 2018 with the Prespa Agreement, resulting in North Macedonia's NATO membership, the Social Democrats failed to fully deliver on their promises of progress in EU integration. Optimism began to decline, and frustration continued to grow. The French and Dutch vetoes in 2019 served as a springboard for domestic "political turmoil," giving a voice to extremist political players. In the 2020 elections, the [pro-Russian-oriented](#) party Levica won two seats and gained greater support in the 2021 local elections.

FALSE PERCEPTION OF NORTH MACEDONIA'S DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL

Additionally, the unexpected Bulgarian veto in 2020 sparked a higher level of frustration and Euroscepticism. The dispute was supposed to be resolved in 2022 during the French presidency of the Council of the European Union through the commonly known "French proposal." Although this proposal aimed to help the country's progress towards EU membership, the sense of unfairness in North Macedonia increased.

Many consider the proposed constitutional revisions intrusive Bulgarian interference in the country's internal affairs. In 2022, [the annual survey](#) by the Institute for Democracy showed that after the name change in 2018, the perception of the EU worsened. While 72% of citizens supported the integration process into the EU in 2018, in 2022, this support stands at 64%, with a steady decline since 2014 (80%).

The basis for Bulgaria's veto lies in the disputed history of North Macedonia, specifically regarding how the Bulgarian occupation of the country during World War II is taught in schools, the status of the Macedonian language, and the unresolved issue with the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia. The politicization of the EU integration process by domestic and foreign actors has fueled the widely spread idea that the political will to accept North Macedonia into the EU is more important than implementing the internal reforms outlined in the EU's conditions.

In fact, a recent [poll](#) showed that 49% of North Macedonia citizens believe that the country is unable to join the EU because neighbouring countries obstruct its path to the EU. In comparison, only 31% believe it is due to a lack of internal reforms, creating a false perception of domestic democratic potential and room for shifting blame and political manipulation regarding imperative democratic reforms.

FOREIGN INFLUENCES AS A SIGNIFICANT THREAT TO STABILITY AND DEMOCRACY

[Dissatisfaction with the current government](#), which citizens consider to have no influence in the country's foreign affairs, and a generally declining trust in the EU, affect political and social processes, opening the doors to external actors such as Russia, China, Türkiye and the

Arab states of the Persian Gulf – to exert influence. The disappointment that many citizens in North Macedonia feel towards the EU opens up space for Russia and other external actors in Macedonian society.

Russia has been particularly active in trying to exert its influence in North Macedonia, using tactics such as [disinformation and propaganda](#), providing financial support to political parties and engaging in cyber attacks. Russian influence has particularly focused on the country's political and economic institutions to undermine democratic processes and advance its interests. Russian support for the VMRO-DPMNE government during the wiretapping scandal and its media campaigns during the name dispute and NATO accession referendum have strained official relations between the two countries. In a [statement](#), Oleg Shcherbak, the former Russian ambassador to North Macedonia, issued a warning following the country's decision to join NATO. He stated, "If it came to a conflict between Russia and NATO, you [North Macedonia] will have the role of a legitimate target."

China's influence in North Macedonia is primarily economic, focusing on trade and investment through initiatives like the Belt and Road and China CEEC. However, Chinese investments have been marred by corruption scandals and have yet to significantly contribute to the country's economic development. Chinese projects, especially infrastructure projects, usually disregard socio-economic and financial sustainability and EU regulations, leading to high levels of debt and violations of the country's established anti-corruption mechanisms. Such was [the case](#) with the Miladinovci-Shtip and Kichevo-Ohrid highways, a Chinese investment shrouded in corruption scandals linked to high-ranking officials, including former Prime Minister Gruevski.

Public opinion prefers EU and G7 countries as economic partners compared to China. China lacks powerful platforms to promote its ideology and faces cultural differences that limit its influence.

Türkiye, a country with historical and cultural ties to North Macedonia, is also trying to expand its influence, especially among the ethnic Albanian population, using mainly soft power techniques through scholarships, educational exchanges, investments in cultural institutions and historical landmarks. Türkiye has provided financial and political support to various Albanian political parties and organizations to advance its regional interests. Türkiye's influence in North Macedonia is generally narrow, as evidenced by the lack of response from the Macedonian government regarding the "Gülenists", but there is no doubt that the country is present through its many approaches.

In addition to these actors, various extremist groups try to influence North Macedonia, especially by spreading extremist ideologies and radicalizing vulnerable groups.

Foreign influence in North Macedonia represents a significant threat to the country's stability and democracy. Reducing it requires joint efforts from both domestic and international actors. Without a credible external push from the EU, a lack of confidence in the vision of local politicians can play a significant role in weakening democracy.

Investments in building bottom-up support for democracy are crucial for North Macedonia. Western allies must take advantage of the vacuum created by the war in Ukraine. The EU must develop a better communication strategy regarding its investments, aid and support in North Macedonia. The EU must also restore 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 real option against the advances of authoritarian countries, support is increasingly falling. The EU and EU member

states must help create a constructive dialogue. Democratic forces must invest in building intra-party democracy to mitigate the potential influence of third actors through local politicians. Funding and support are needed to strengthen state institutions' capacities to build immunity to corrosive capital.

Ultimately, domestic efforts to fight corruption and build an independent judiciary are needed for the state to counter its potentially malign influences successfully. In both areas, reforms are making the least progress. Moreover, both areas are crucial in building trust in the political system. Progress can reduce populist demand, a sentiment radical political actors exploit. The influence of illiberal foreign actors may diminish as corruption diminishes and justice is strengthened, and it is, therefore, necessary to exert continuous pressure on political actors to pursue reforms.

One question remains: are the EU's efforts producing the desired results regarding democratization? Are we doing enough to develop our democracy? Public opinion and developments indicate that the answer to this question is no. Anti-democratic feelings among citizens are still strong even after three decades of democracy, and the hope for developing a democratic society is slowly fading.

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