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Democratic Stagnation and Nationalism in North Macedonia: Political, Institutional, and Social Challenge

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Abstract

This paper examines the factors contributing to democratic stagnation in North Macedonia during the period from 2009 to 2016. The country's democratic development has been marred by persistent challenges, including political polarization, institutional weaknesses, and issues of corruption. The period in question saw setbacks in democratic reforms, characterized by electoral irregularities, limited media freedom, and contentious inter-ethnic relations. These factors have undermined the consolidation of democratic institutions and hindered progress towards European integration. The study analyzes key political events, economic factors, and societal dynamics that have shaped North Macedonia's democratic trajectory during this critical period. By identifying these factors, the paper aims to provide insights into the complexities of democratic governance in transitional societies and the challenges of sustaining democratic norms amidst internal and external pressures.

Keywords: North Macedonia, Democratic stagnation, Political polarization, Institutional weaknesses, European integration.

Introduction

North Macedonia's journey towards democratic consolidation has been a tumultuous one, particularly during the period from 2009 to 2016. Despite initial optimism following its independence in 1991 and subsequent democratic reforms, the country has faced significant challenges that have hindered its progress towards robust democratic governance. This paper seeks to examine the factors that contributed to democratic stagnation during this critical period, analyzing political, institutional, and socio-economic dynamics that shaped North Macedonia's political landscape.

Political polarization emerged as a prominent barrier to democratic advancement in North Macedonia during the specified timeframe. The country's political arena was marked by deep-seated divisions among political parties, often leading to gridlock and policy paralysis. These divisions not only undermined consensus-building efforts but also perpetuated a climate of distrust and instability, further complicating the reform process.

Institutional weaknesses also played a pivotal role in impeding democratic development. Challenges such as corruption, inadequate rule of law, and inefficiencies within state institutions eroded public trust and confidence in the government's ability to uphold democratic principles. These shortcomings not only hindered effective governance but also fostered a culture of impunity that undermined the rule of law, exacerbating democratic deficits.

Economically, North Macedonia faced challenges that exacerbated political and social tensions. Persistent economic inequalities, high unemployment rates, and uneven regional development contributed to social discontent and political disenchantment among the populace. Economic grievances often intersected with political frustrations, creating fertile ground for populist movements and anti-establishment sentiments that further strained democratic institutions.

Moreover, the country's aspirations for European integration provided both opportunities and challenges for its democratic trajectory. While EU accession criteria encouraged democratic reforms, the slow progress and setbacks in meeting these requirements highlighted the gaps between North Macedonia's aspirations and its actual institutional capacity. The EU's role as a stabilizing force and a catalyst for reform remained crucial, albeit fraught with complexities and varying degrees of effectiveness.

In conclusion, the period from 2009 to 2016 represents a critical phase in North Macedonia's democratic journey, characterized by both aspirations for progress

and persistent challenges. By examining the interplay of political polarization, institutional weaknesses, economic disparities, and EU integration dynamics, this paper aims to provide insights into the complexities of democratic stagnation in transitional societies. Understanding these factors is essential for charting a path towards resilient democratic governance and sustainable development in North Macedonia and beyond.

From Democratic Transition to Nationalistic Regression

Many regimes have made commendable progress towards democracy over the last five decades. However, as they transition from authoritarian rule to democratic governance, a significant number have displayed striking similarities with their previous political experiences (Brownlee, 2007, p. 21). The assertion that "a substantial number of regimes have exhibited remarkable similarities with their past political experiences" is a key aspect to take into account when analyzing North Macedonia's political scenario. To unravel the puzzle of democratic stagnation in North Macedonia, it's imperative to scrutinize the factors that mold its political environment.

Factors such as historical background, organizational structures, financial resources, and ideological beliefs, among numerous others, have a considerable impact on whether, how, and how efficiently stakeholders will advocate for change or strive to resist it. Despite the visibility of political leaders at the forefront of politics, these less conspicuous factors consistently influence the options they encounter and the results they achieve (Brownlee, 2007, p. 21). The elements mentioned in the paragraph, including historical background, organizational structures, financial resources, and ideological beliefs, are vital to understanding the political dynamics that lead to democratic stagnation in any given nation, including North Macedonia. These factors shape the decisions and outcomes of political actors, including leaders, and can either facilitate or obstruct democratic progress. By scrutinizing these factors, we can delve deeper into the root causes of democratic stagnation and identify approaches for fostering democratic consolidation.

Scholars have started to categorize "hybrid regimes," which are authoritarian systems that incorporate elements of democracy like elections and parliaments. However, as the proliferation of new classifications outstrips the development and verification of explanations, these new authoritarian subcategories risk becoming intellectual dead ends (Brownlee, 2007, p. 25). The intricacy of North Macedonia's

political situation can be better comprehended by scrutinizing the concept of "hybrid regimes."

VMRO-DPMNE initially tempered its nationalist sentiments and embraced the ideological stance of a mostly conservative party. However, a resurgence of nationalism emerged shortly after the party regained power following their victory in the 2006 general elections. Typically, in Macedonia, parties with nationalist tendencies tend to moderate their nationalist rhetoric upon assuming power (as was the case with the ethnic Albanian DPA), yet in 2006, VMRO-DPMNE did the exact opposite (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012, pp. 1-11). Their actions not only exacerbated identity disputes within North Macedonia but also undercut the delicate process of democratic consolidation, leading to ethnic tensions within the country. The party's departure from the trend of reducing nationalist rhetoric after gaining power, as seen in other parties with similar nationalist leanings, must not be overlooked or dismissed. Failing to properly confront this issue only prolongs the damage that VMRO-DPMNE's actions have inflicted upon North Macedonia's democracy and social fabric.

A case in point is VMRO-DPMNE's conduct during and following the 2006 elections. By adopting the ultranationalists' fascination with Ancient Macedonia, VMRO-DPMNE leveraged its leading position within the ruling coalition to rename structures, erect monuments, and execute a government-led marketing campaign aimed at boosting national consciousness (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012, pp. 1-11). The party's preoccupation with Ancient Macedonia and its marketing drive does not consider the wider consequences of these actions on the country's democratic consolidation and interethnic relations. During this period, VMRO-DPMNE exerted total control over the nation, with all economic resources being utilized to craft a new identity and solidify nationalist rhetoric, thereby exacerbating identity conflicts and leading to ethnic unrest. The party's promotion of ultranationalist ideologies and initiatives resulted in broader challenges in North Macedonia, including corruption and a compromised judicial system.

The contentious Skopje 2014 project included the construction of numerous monuments symbolizing Macedonian historical figures. Additionally, several marketing initiatives like You are Macedonia were launched, for instance, one that amplified the military prowess of Alexander the Great. Utilizing its governmental authority to realize such endeavors, VMRO-DPMNE successfully mainstreamed many ultranationalist ideologies (Saveski & Sadiku, 2012, p. 4). The efforts exerted by VMRO-DPMNE to propagate ultranationalist ideologies into the mainstream through initiatives like Skopje 2014 and You are Macedonia not only destabilized

democracy but also resulted in ethnic conflicts, corruption, a jeopardized legal system, and other persistent problems.

By leveraging its governmental authority to endorse a selective and divisive national identity, VMRO-DPMNE further aggravated ethnic divides and deepened pre-existing identity disputes in North Macedonia. The significant allocation of economic resources to these initiatives led to allegations of corruption and fiscal misconduct, eroding faith in the government and its institutions. Ultimately, these actions countered the fortification of democracy and augmented the dominance of authoritarianism and nationalism in the country.

The nationalistic discourse adopted by VMRO-DPMNE has gained widespread acceptance, transcending the confines of radical ultranationalist groups. This was also bolstered by the party's official alliance with ultranationalist parties. Consequently, an escalation in nationalistic assertiveness among other ethnic groups has been noted, highlighting that nationalistic and ethnically driven discourse can trigger extremism across all factions. The broad acceptance of VMRO-DPMNE's nationalistic discourse has created a domino effect, resulting in a surge in extremism among other ethnic groups as well.

Rise of Nationalism: Key Factors in North Macedonia's Political Landscape

Macedonia's historical trajectory has been riddled with a plethora of hurdles resulting from challenging political circumstances. Crucial elements to note include that Macedonia's quest for independence remained unfulfilled owing to extensive Ottoman rule, even after the culmination of the Balkan Wars and WWI. Post WWII, Macedonia became part of Yugoslavia but continued to have minimal control over its governance. With the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Macedonia struggled to achieve international recognition, primarily due to a name dispute with Greece, which led to a Greek veto obstructing their membership in NATO and the EU. Further complications included Bulgaria's refusal to recognize the Macedonian language and Serbia's denial of the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The country was further plunged into turmoil in 2001 with an armed conflict. The acquisition of Bulgarian passports by some Macedonian citizens, a desperate bid to circumvent poverty and blockades, added fuel to the fire and bolstered Bulgarian claims.

Some academics argue that this strategy was implemented to tackle the imminent

threat of the denial of Macedonian identity, arising from the perception that Macedonia was a fabricated communist entity without any historical authenticity. Thus, it was perceived as lacking the vital attributes necessary for the establishment of an independent nation (Georgievska-Jakovleva, 2014, p. 47). The project's primary objective was to establish a link between the roots of contemporary Macedonians and ancient Macedonians, rather than their Slavic ancestry. This ambition may have been further amplified by the assertive stance taken by the Macedonian government, as demonstrated by the 2010 statement of Foreign Minister Antonio Milososki: "This is our way of saying [up yours] to them [Greece]... This project is about asserting Macedonia's identity at a time when it is under threat because of the name issue" (Bieber, The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkan, 2018, p. 59) Also, the challenges encountered during this period might have given rise to a variant of extremism within the Macedonian nationalist faction.

Alternatively, other scholars interpret the strategy behind Skopje 2014 as a response to the seemingly irrational decision by NATO and the EU to block the Republic of Macedonia from initiating full membership discussions (Georgievska-Jakovleva, 2014, p. 47). This viewpoint implies that the EU might be somewhat accountable for the events that transpired during the Skopje 2014 project. Their decision to prohibit Macedonia from initiating membership dialogues could have influenced the subsequent developments and tensions that ensued in the city.

For some scholars, the Skopje 2014 project aimed to alter the city's urban identity by introducing neoclassical-style buildings designed to outshine both the modernist constructions of the socialist era and the Ottoman-era architecture that symbolizes the city's Muslim heritage (Graan, 2013, p. 161). This component of the project can be perceived as an endeavor to eradicate the Ottoman cultural influences from the city. As a result, this may have increased frustration amongst the Albanian communities and other Muslim populations in Skopje, who constitute about 35% of the city's residents. The project's emphasis on particular historical roots could have unintentionally heightened existing strains and schisms within the city's diverse populace.

Some posit that the inception of the Skopje 2014 project was also a reaction to an alleged threat from the Albanian community concerning the state's legitimacy (Graan, 2013, p. 169). However, it is important to mention that the Albanian community has generally not challenged the state's legitimacy directly. Rather, they have aspired to become an integral part of it, demanding equal representation and rights within the country. Consequently, the project and its ramifications should be

evaluated within the larger framework of intricate interethnic relations in North Macedonia, where various communities seek inclusion and acknowledgment.

During the construction of a church in the Skopje Fortress—the Kale, initially intended for a museum and exhibition space, significant tensions emerged. The issue around the Kale turned into a fierce political confrontation between the Macedonian and Albanian coalition partners in the government, culminating in heavily politicized violence on the streets (Risteski, 2016, p. 57). In a bid to mollify the Albanian community's response, the ruling party agreed to erect three statues honoring Albanian historical figures and committed to constructing a notable square surrounding the Skanderbeg equestrian statue in the Cair district across the Vardar, an area predominantly resided in by ethnic Albanians (Skoulariki, 2020, p. 231). This resolution resulted in the city being split into two distinct sections: one occupied by Albanians, exhibiting a more Islamic and Ottoman cultural architecture, and the other inhabited by Macedonians, displaying a structure embellished with ancient Macedonian sculptures. Both statues and the squares surrounding them represent the parallelism, polarization, and segregation in Macedonian society (Risteski, 2016, p. 57).

The decision to construct a church near the square stirred disagreements due to the religious implications it introduced, as the square used to house a mosque until 1917 (Georgievska-Jakovleva, 2014, p. 51). This move was met with displeasure, as it potentially intensified religious tensions in the region and underscored the persistent conflict between varying religious and cultural influences within the city.

In addition to the friction generated by the church's construction near the square, the Muslim Religious Community voiced their dissatisfaction with the renovation of the Army Hall, an interwar edifice. They instead called for the restoration of the 16th-century Ottoman Burmali Mosque, demolished by the Serbian Army in 1925 before the Officers' Club was erected on the same site. This further emphasizes the continued conflict and responses to decisions perceived as favoring one religious or cultural group over another in the city.

The political dialogue in North Macedonia grew increasingly divided after the signing of the Prespa Agreement by Zaev's administration in June 2018. This agreement led to the country's renaming as the "Republic of North Macedonia" and confirmed that the "Macedonian language" is part of the South Slavic language group. It also stipulated that the nation's people, culture, and other attributes have no connection to the ancient Hellenic civilization, history, culture, and heritage of Greece's northern region, namely the Greek region of Macedonia (Prespa

Agreement, 2018). This name change incited a vehement response from the opposition nationalist party VMRO, which objected to the agreement. Nevertheless, the agreement effectively dampened the ambitions of the Skopje 2014 project, as the new name and the distinctions defined in the agreement resolved some of the controversial issues the project had brought up.

On assuming power, Zaev's government committed to ending the "Skopje 2014" project and established a commission to decide the project's venues and monuments' fate (Skoulariki, 2020, p. 234). However, it's worth noting that Zaev's government couldn't substantially remove or modify the statues and other structures erected during the project. Consequently, Skopje largely remains as it was constructed under the VMRO administration.

The Skopje 2014 project has been criticized on several fronts, including its exorbitant cost and the possibility that its monoethnic narrative of Macedonian history could exacerbate ethnic tensions. Critics argue that the project doesn't accurately represent the multiethnic reality of North Macedonia, with Albanians in the country possibly feeling marginalized. Moreover, they contend that the project's emphasis on Macedonian connections to antiquity could further sour relations with neighboring Greece. Critics also maintain that the project lacked adequate public consultation and could jeopardize the city's unique character.

Democratic Stagnation: Corruption, Authoritarianism, and Ethnic Divisions

From 2006 to 2016, North Macedonia was subjected to an increased wave of authoritarianism, rampant corruption, and an impasse in democratic development under the administration of the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE party. This era witnessed a drastic curtailment of political and civil liberties, as the reigning party, spearheaded by Nikola Gruevski, solidified its control through manipulation of state mechanisms, media censorship, and suppression of dissident voices. Widespread corruption characterized the government, with favoritism and nepotism becoming pervasive, resulting in an absence of transparency and accountability. Further, the nationalist party advocated a form of ethnocentrism that was exclusive and divisive, thereby escalating tensions between ethnic Macedonians and other ethnic groups. The amalgamation of these elements resulted in a standstill in democratic progress, thereby leaving the country's political realm fraught with instability and suspicion.

In a bid to further fortify its authority, the VMRO-DPMNE administration instituted a slew of laws and policies that intensified the already existing ethnic divisions in North Macedonia. The party's ethnocentric ideology catered primarily to the needs of ethnic Macedonians, thereby alienating the substantial Albanian community and other ethnic minorities. This strategy precipitated increased societal polarization and heightened tensions, as prejudiced policies marginalized these communities and curtailed their access to political representation, public services, and economic opportunities. The government's divisive strategy not only eroded the country's democratic foundations but also posed a threat to the precarious interethnic equilibrium that had been preserved since the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001. In essence, the VMRO-DPMNE's pursuit of a nationalist agenda at the expense of inclusivity and societal harmony played a significant role in the stagnation of democracy and the ascension of authoritarianism during their ten-year rule.

The European Commission's progress report in 2011 highlighted that the bodies responsible for combating corruption, such as the SCPC, the Anti-corruption Unit, and the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office, were under-resourced and inadequately financed, lacking a proactive strategy to tackle widespread allegations of corruption in crucial sectors, including public procurement and political party financing (European Commission Progress Report, 2011, p. 14). The local level law enforcement agents and judiciary, particularly in the area of petty corruption, remained insufficiently specialized.

Furthermore, the VMRO-DPMNE government introduced a series of laws and policies that exacerbated ethnic divisions and inflamed tensions. For example, in 2010, schools in Albanian regions boycotted a move to introduce Macedonian as a second language to first-grade elementary school students, a mandate previously reserved for fourth graders (Freedom House, 2011). In August 2012, the VMRO-DPMNE government proposed a bill to extend free health care and other services to members of the security forces who served in the 2001 conflict, a majority of whom were ethnic Macedonians, but not to the largely Albanian paramilitary veterans. This proposal led the DUI to consider leaving the coalition, resulting in a no-confidence vote in October, which Gruevski's government survived (Freedom House, 2013, p. 424).

These prejudiced policies not only undermined the democratic foundations of the country but also threatened to destabilize the delicate interethnic harmony that had been sustained since the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001. Ultimately,

VMRO-DPMNE's pursuit of a nationalist agenda at the expense of inclusivity and societal harmony was a significant factor in the stagnation of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism during their decade-long rule.

Factors That Led to Stagnation of Democratic Consolidation

The VMRO-DPMNE government, under the banner of ethnocentric nationalism, enacted policies that predominantly catered to ethnic Macedonians. This inclination marginalized other ethnic communities, accentuating social divisions and amplifying interethnic discord. The prioritization of ethnocentric nationalism disrupted democratic norms and posed a threat to the delicate equilibrium within North Macedonia's diverse society. During its time in office, VMRO-DPMNE aimed to secure its control over the judicial system, jeopardizing its impartiality and shaking the very foundations of the rule of law. By positioning allies in strategic judicial roles and exerting influence over judges, the government managed to skew legal procedures in its favor. This erosion of the judiciary further undermined democratic institutions and provided the ruling party with a shield against accountability.

Throughout the VMRO-DPMNE's rule, constraints on freedom of expression grew as the government sought to quell dissent and fortify its power. The administration targeted media outlets and journalists critical of its regime, employing scare tactics, litigation, and economic coercion to mute unfavorable coverage. Consequently, the media space grew increasingly saturated with pro-government narratives, stifling open discourse and curtailing public access to a broad spectrum of perspectives. The government also suppressed opposition by misusing state apparatus to harass and intimidate political adversaries. It leveraged its control over law enforcement and regulatory bodies to launch politically driven investigations and hinder opposition activities. These tactics further depleted the robustness of North Macedonia's democratic landscape, creating a scenario where dissent was muzzled and the ruling party's hold on power remained unopposed.

To conclude, the VMRO-DPMNE's ethnocentric politics, manipulation of the judiciary, repression of free speech, and suppression of the opposition primarily impeded North Macedonia's democratic consolidation. These actions fostered ethnic divisions, debilitated democratic institutions, and fostered a polarized and mistrustful societal environment. Consequently, the nation's stride towards a more inclusive and stable democratic system was significantly stalled during this decade-long period of nationalist governance. These assertions will be substantiated

through a detailed analysis of reports by Freedom House, the European Commission, and Transparency International, casting light on the challenges North Macedonia confronted in its journey towards democratic consolidation.

Ethnic Nationalistic Politics and Discrimination

The administration under the VMRO-DPMNE, characterized by ethnic nationalistic politics, widened the gap between ethnic communities, leading to a decline in the democratization process in North Macedonia. The country's public administration grappled with issues of underrepresentation of ethnic minorities, a problem noted by the European Commission Progress Report (European Commission Progress Report, 2011, p. 64). The organization highlighted the need for a more diverse and inclusive civil service. Moreover, the Secretariat entrusted with the enforcement of the Ohrid Framework Agreement struggled with a lack of strategic planning capacity and internal control standards (European Commission Progress Report, 2012, p. 55), which further intensified inter-ethnic disagreements.

Ethnic segregation was prevalent, with Albanians and Macedonians living in separate communities and attending different educational institutions, a fact stated by Freedom House (Freedom House, 2009, p. 435). The inadequate coverage of the post-independence period in school textbooks, primarily due to the differing interpretations of the 2001 conflict among these ethnic groups, served to deepen the divide. In 2012, the European Association of History Educators urged for a reform in history education, focusing on the issue of ethnically divided schools (Freedom House, 2013, p. 424). In a move that exacerbated tensions, the government approved school textbooks that portrayed the Albanian community negatively, perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

Issues related to language and symbolic representations remained a source of contention between ethnic Albanian and Macedonian Slav politicians. Disagreements revolved around wider use of the Albanian language, the public display of the Albanian flag, and the need for better representation of ethnic Albanians in government (Freedom House, 2009, p. 435). Although the 2017 language law sought to address these concerns by extending the official use of Albanian to all state-level institutions (Freedom House, 2020, p. 648), tensions persisted. The non-implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, twenty years since its signing, has remained a major source of inter-ethnic tensions. The Macedonian government's

apparent reluctance to enforce the agreement in full suggested a lack of genuine commitment to fostering unity and strengthening inter-ethnic relations within the country.

The Skopje 2014 project, initiated by the government, inadvertently exacerbated interethnic discord as community groups felt their heritage was marginalized (Freedom House, 2013, pp. 424-425). A palpable rise in interethnic tensions was observed in 2012 when an Orthodox church near Struga, predominantly inhabited by Albanian Muslims, was set ablaze. The trigger was reportedly the donning of costumes that were viewed as offensive to Islam by ethnic Macedonians at a neighboring carnival. This escalated to a series of clashes in Skopje and Tetovo, leading to injuries to over a dozen people. Later in the year, five Macedonians were brutally murdered, culminating in the arrest of 20 ethnic Albanians (Freedom House, 2013, p. 424). In 2013, a study by the Macedonian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights revealed that authorities underreported hate crimes and discriminatory incidents, often mislabeling them (Freedom House, 2015, p. 427). Politically charged cases like the 2014 ruling against six ethnic Albanians for the 2012 murders further strained relations. Ethnic Albanians decried the judicial process as opaque and influenced by Islamophobia (Freedom House, 2016, pp. 405-406).

These heightened tensions led to sporadic protests and violent riots, including those that took place in Skopje in 2013 involving both ethnic groups and the police (Freedom House, 2015, p. 424). The appointment of an ex-Albanian military chief as the defense minister further stoked the tensions, leading to violent outbursts in the parliament (Freedom House, 2015, p. 424). The following day saw a reactionary protest by ethnic Albanians, resulting in injuries and arrests (Freedom House, 2015, p. 424). As the 2014 elections approached, both ethnic Macedonian and Albanian political parties increasingly utilized nationalist rhetoric, leading to confrontations (Freedom House, 2016, p. 406).

Interethnic tensions continued to persist with episodic violent incidents between the two major ethnic groups (Freedom House, 2017, p. 414). A series of major clashes took place in April and May involving government security forces and purported ethnic Albanian militants. A border post near Kosovo was reportedly overrun by an Albanian militia in April. In May, a raid in an ethnic Albanian neighborhood in Kumanovo resulted in casualties on both sides, with the government alleging the targets were ethnic Albanian terrorists (Freedom House, 2017, p. 415). Critics, however, accused the VMRO-DPMNE of orchestrating these incidents to deflect attention from the wiretapping scandal.

North Macedonia saw a significant regression in its democratic status following revelations of grave irregularities in the 2014 elections. These insights were part of a larger scandal involving widespread government eavesdropping on political and religious leaders, journalists, and ordinary citizens, leading to a legislative boycott by the opposition party (Freedom of House, 2017, p. 414). The democratic instability was further heightened when President Ivanov denied the winning parties the mandate to form a government after the early elections in 2016, undermining North Macedonia's already shaky democracy.

In 2017, the political landscape shifted from the dominant center-right VMRO-DPMNE, which had held power since 2006, to the left-leaning SDSM, a party with a history of governing during the 1990s and early 2000s. This power transition was marred by conflict, however. When an SDSM-endorsed parliament speaker was appointed, it resulted in a violent assault on the assembly floor by VMRO-DPMNE supporters against SDSM lawmakers, including the party leader, leaving about 100 people injured (Freedom House, 2019, p. 576).

In summary, the VMRO-DPMNE government's endorsement of ethnic nationalistic politics and discriminatory actions against other ethnicities played a significant role in hindering the progression of democracy in North Macedonia. The incidents and issues described in the reports from the European Commission, Freedom House, and other sources, coupled with the overall trends observed during this period, underscore the difficulties faced by the nation in its endeavor to establish a more inclusive and robust democratic system.

Control of the Judiciary System: An Assessment of Corruption and Nepotism

According to the Freedom House report in 2006, the judicial system of North Macedonia was widely criticized for corruption and inefficiency. A government judicial oversight body proposed the dismissal of ten judges due to accusations of corruption or incompetence, of which six were eventually let go. An enormous backlog of 1.2 million cases also burdened the system, leading some to recommend that administrative officials handle minor offenses rather than the criminal courts (Freedom House, 2006, p. 435).

The Freedom House Report of 2008 continued to describe the judiciary as corrupt and incompetent. As part of North Macedonia's bid to join the EU, it was urged to strengthen judicial independence and reduce the case backlog. Yet the BDI party

walked out of parliament to avoid voting on measures that would increase the government's power to appoint and dismiss judges, allegedly protecting some individuals from prosecution (Freedom House, 2008, p. 430). The government's actions to exert control over the judiciary system can be seen as an attempt to marginalize the Albanian community, preventing them from being appointed as judges and prosecutors. This move further illustrates the government's intention to maintain control over the judiciary and weaken the representation of communities within the system.

Despite numerous appeals for reform and guidance from the European Union, the judicial system in North Macedonia has seen marginal improvement over time. Persistent problems such as corruption, incompetence, and a case backlog highlight the government's failure to effectively address these systemic issues. This stagnation not only impedes the country's efforts to join the EU, but also perpetuates the marginalization of certain communities, notably the Albanians, within the judiciary. The government's failure to tackle these long-standing issues illustrates a troubling disregard for the rule of law, equitable representation of all communities, and North Macedonia's ambition to fully integrate into the European Union.

The establishment of a Special Prosecutor in North Macedonia was a response to the 2015 wiretapping scandal, which revealed extensive government corruption, power abuse, and unlawful surveillance. Amid increasing public dissatisfaction and international scrutiny, the leading political parties in the country agreed to set up a Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) as part of the Przino Agreement. The SPO's primary role was to investigate and prosecute those involved in the scandal, ensuring a thorough and impartial investigation into the claims (Sinisa Jakov Marusic; Ivana Kostovska, 2015). The process of appointing the Special Prosecutor involved choosing an appropriate candidate with the involvement of both the majority and opposition parties in the parliament, and international stakeholders like the European Union and the United States. This process aimed to guarantee the independence, integrity, and professionalism of the Special Prosecutor. Once appointed, the Special Prosecutor was tasked with handling cases related to the wiretapping scandal, with hopes that their work would help restore public faith in the country's institutions and bolster the rule of law (Sinisa Jakov Marusic; Ivana Kostovska, 2015).

The selection of Katica Janeva as Special Prosecutor was a crucial step in North Macedonia's fight against corruption and in fortifying the rule of law. Nonetheless, a corruption scandal marred her term, surfacing just months after her

appointment. Janeva was accused of exploiting her position for personal benefit, a development which severely undermined her trustworthiness and the integrity of the Special Prosecutor's Office (Reuters, 2019). This controversy underscored the ongoing challenges that North Macedonia faces in curbing institutional corruption. The fallout from the scandal involving Janeva prompted doubts about the efficacy of the nation's anti-corruption strategies and the genuine commitment of its leaders to eradicate corruption and foster transparency within the judiciary.

The recent selections for judges and prosecutors in the North Macedonian judiciary system have provoked concerns over nepotism and cronyism, as a significant portion of the appointees are either politically connected or kin to sitting judges and prosecutors (Vecer, 2023). This seeming partiality compromises not only the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary system but also erodes public confidence in the rule of law. The widespread nepotism observed in these appointments impedes endeavors to enhance the country's judicial system and threatens to perpetuate a cycle of corruption and ineptitude. Tackling this problem is pivotal to establishing a judiciary that embodies transparency, independence, and accountability, and is committed to principles of fairness and equal justice for all citizens.

Undermining Democracy: Media Segregation and Government Control

Between 2006 and 2016, North Macedonia's democratic state encountered stagnation due to struggles in preserving free speech and ensuring media freedom. The government's meddling in the media, along with instances of censorship and surveillance, inhibited citizens' ability to access unbiased news and participate in frank political conversation, both of which are critical for a thriving democracy.

The segregation of media along ethnic lines further intensified societal and political rifts in the country, thereby undermining the democratic process and breeding mistrust among different communities (European Commission Progress Report, 2011, p. 6). This tension was further heightened by the government's partial enforcement of laws against media corporations and the Broadcasting Council's lack of transparency in their operations (European Commission Progress Report, 2011).

From 2006 to 2016, the media in North Macedonia were largely swayed by political and business interests, leading to the stifling of independent journalism and the propagation of narratives favoring the government. Increasing intimidation of journalists and selective legal enforcement against media corporations raised concerns as they contributed to the silencing of free speech in the country (European

Commission Progress Report, 2011, p. 63; European Commission Progress Report, 2012, p. 14) The lack of transparency in media ownership and poor enforcement against illegal media concentrations amplified these issues, creating a media landscape dominated by pro-government television channels, often the only news sources for many citizens, thereby limiting their exposure to a range of viewpoints and independent reports.

The repression of journalists and censorship of free speech in North Macedonia fostered an environment where differing voices were silenced, and the government's actions went mostly unchecked. This environment facilitated the government's control over information flow and its ability to mold public opinion, which undermined the pillars of a healthy democracy and left citizens with limited access to reliable, unbiased information.

North Macedonia's media outlets, much like its society, are profoundly segregated along ethnic lines (Freedom House, 2011, p. 407). The decline of media freedom and independence not only obstructed the development of a diverse media environment but also paved the way for government control and manipulation of information. This situation ultimately hindered democratic progress, as citizens were deprived of accurate and impartial information required for informed decision-making and active participation in the democratic process.

In order to rejuvenate democracy in North Macedonia, it's vital to address the challenges within the media landscape and guarantee freedom of speech, while also nurturing a culture of transparency and accountability within the government and its institutions. Doing so can encourage open dialogue, bolster trust among diverse communities, and set the stage for a more inclusive and resilient democratic system.

Conclusion

In summary, the period from 2009 to 2016 in North Macedonia witnessed significant challenges that impeded its path towards democratic consolidation. Political polarization, marked by deep divisions among political parties, undermined consensus-building efforts and perpetuated instability. Institutional weaknesses, including corruption and inefficiencies within state institutions, eroded public trust and hindered effective governance. Economic disparities and social discontent further exacerbated these challenges, contributing to political disillusionment and fostering populist sentiments.

The country's aspirations for European integration provided a framework for democratic reforms, yet progress was often hindered by slow implementation and setbacks. The European Union's role in promoting democratic values and supporting institutional reforms remained pivotal but faced challenges in addressing deep-seated political and socio-economic issues.

Moving forward, addressing these factors requires concerted efforts from both domestic stakeholders and international partners. Strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing transparency and accountability, and fostering inclusive economic growth are essential steps towards overcoming democratic stagnation. Additionally, promoting dialogue and reconciliation among political factions and addressing socio-economic disparities are crucial for restoring public trust and advancing democratic governance.

Ultimately, North Macedonia's journey towards democratic consolidation is a complex and ongoing process that demands sustained commitment to democratic principles, effective governance, and inclusive development. By learning from past challenges and leveraging international support, North Macedonia can navigate towards a future characterized by political stability, prosperity, and integration into the European community.

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