

NOW LIVE: Nations in Transit 2024



NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2023

North Macedonia

TRANSITIONAL OR HYBRID REGIME

48
/100

Democracy Percentage	47.62 /100
Democracy Score	3.86 /7

LAST YEAR’S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

47 /100 Transitional or Hybrid Regime

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic. See the methodology.



Author

- Ognen Vangelov

Score changes in 2023

- **Local democratic governance rating improved from 4.00 to 4.25** to reflect a multi-year trend of improved local governance, including increased civic participation in local decision making and improved municipal transparency. Although municipalities remain underfinanced, the acceptance of proposals by the Association of Municipalities this year temporarily alleviated immediate financial pressures due to the rising costs of energy.
- **As a result, North Macedonia's Democracy Score improved from 3.82 to 3.86.**

Executive Summary

The year 2022 was tumultuous in North Macedonia due to increasing polarization between the government and the opposition. The government coalition—composed of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), the ethnic Albanian Democratic Union of Integration (DUI), and the smaller ethnic Albanian party Alternative—maintained a narrow majority in the Sobranie, the country's unicameral parliamentary Assembly. The opposition, led by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) and Levica (Left), along with some smaller ethnic Albanian parties, increased their efforts to call for early Assembly elections, which are otherwise due in 2024. These efforts focused on frequent parliamentary blockades with continuous filibustering in commissions, significantly hampering the Sobranie's capacity to pass laws and regulations throughout the year. A major concern over the blockades was the Assembly's inability to elect Constitutional Court judges to replace mandates that had ended. This threatens the court's functionality if the number of judges drops below the minimum required to take decisions. The court's paralysis was averted later in the year as the Assembly filled some, but not all, of the empty seats. The blockades also delayed the selection of officials for a number of state bodies and agencies.

The greatest point of contention between the government and the opposition during the year, which also led to significant public unrest, involved a temporary

resolution by the French presidency (January–June 2022) of the Council of the European Union (EU) to Bulgarian-Macedonian disputes over history and identity. Dubbed the “French proposal,” ¹ the solution was an effort to remove Bulgaria’s veto in order to start North Macedonia’s EU accession talks, which had been blocked since 2020. The proposal set forth a negotiation framework that satisfied Bulgaria’s demands ² but engendered bitter divisions between the government and the opposition, and enflamed mass protests after government officials signaled their acceptance of the proposal. Although largely peaceful, the protests sparked some incidents of violence. ³ The government formally accepted the proposal in mid-July, and immediately thereafter, the EU opened its first intergovernmental conferences with North Macedonia and Albania, since both countries were considered as a package for EU accession. But unlike Albania, North Macedonia was required to change its constitution to include the mention of ethnic Bulgarians, a stipulation that prompted the opposition to vow never to allow such a change—and to begin organizing a public referendum on the issue, which was unresolved by year’s end.

No major elections took place in 2022 except for repeat polls in three municipalities. Two were organized because they had failed to elect mayors during the regular elections in 2021; the third involved a municipal council dissolved for failure to approve the annual financial statement on time. Otherwise, political parties failed to reach a consensus on reforming the electoral law over merging the country’s existing six electoral districts into one nationwide district. Although the positions of the two-largest parties, SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, drew closer, the issue still divides some parties in the ethnic Albanian bloc.

The civic sector remained vibrant and active in the country in many policy areas, but there was still a lack of progress in funding civil society organizations (CSOs) during the year. Some government actions pose concerns, such as abrupt changes made to the funding method without consulting the Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society. There were also instances of verbal attacks, for example, when Prime Minister Dimitar Kovačevski accused NGO experts critical of the French proposal of creating hysteria and possibly serving the interests of third countries. ⁴ On the positive side, the LGBT+ Pride march organized in June was conducted without incident and supported by the Ministries of Interior and Defense.

The country's media landscape remained fragmented, with outlets divided along political and ethnic lines. Although freedom of speech and the media have been improving since the ouster of Nikola Gruevski's government in 2017, the media sphere is still strongly influenced by politics and business. Journalists are targets of verbal attacks and harassment, particularly on social media, but there have also been instances of physical attacks as well as abusive prosecutions by politicians. Many important reforms are still pending, such as one proposal to give journalists "official" status so that attacks would be treated as seriously as those against government officials. Other initiatives, like reforming the libel law and removing the ban on government advertising in private media, have been criticized as potential regressions in media freedom.

Local self-government in North Macedonia has long struggled with independent funding despite the numerous competences of municipalities, which, on average, receive more than half of their funding from government subsidies. The financial independence of municipalities is likely to be strengthened with the 2022 adoption of the Law on Funding Local Self-Government, which increases the share of VAT and other taxes collected by municipalities for the first time since 2015. Although not a complete solution, the new legal provisions address a longtime demand by local governments. Additionally, some improvements were noted during the year in local government transparency and citizen participation.

Justice institutions continued to be distrusted by an overwhelming majority of Macedonian citizens. According to expert analyses, ⁵ this distrust is a result of continued structural problems in the judiciary, such as insufficient independence and transparency, lack of funding, and ineffectiveness. On the positive side, a number of landmark trials against former high officials, including former PM Gruevski, were completed during the year. Additionally, several former high officials of the incumbent government are under prosecution, which signals some institutional willingness for improvement and strengthening judicial independence. Also, an important reform to digitalize the courts began in 2022 and is expected to increase their capacities. On the downside, the election of the new chief prosecutor for organized crime and corruption sparked controversy over potential politicization of the prosecutorial and judicial system, prompting the U.S. Ambassador to openly criticize these processes and appeal for increased transparency. At the end of the year, the Court of Appeals annulled verdicts by the

first instance court related to the 2015 mass wiretapping affair, an act widely viewed as a major setback in prosecuting high-level abuse of office.

Systemic corruption is another long-standing problem plaguing North Macedonia since its independence. High-risk areas include public procurements, party funding and campaigning, and discretionary powers in issuing permits and licenses. Public employment based on party membership or nepotism is also of high concern. On a positive note, the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption was particularly active in 2022 collecting evidence of possible corruption. However, the commission’s lack of executive authorities prevents it from actively pursuing cases. The Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime and Corruption also showed initiative in combating corruption, but the lack of funding and sufficient staff, as well as the controversy surrounding the new prosecutor, prevented it from achieving the necessary reform results during the year.

At-A-Glance

In North Macedonia, national governance is democratic but polarization between the government and the opposition seriously hampers institutions in performing their official tasks. Elections are generally free, but a lack of sufficient electoral reforms mars their transparency. The civic sector is vibrant and active in many policy areas, but funding remains a major concern. The country’s media landscape is diverse, and media are generally free to criticize the government, but many outlets continue to be strongly influenced by political and business interests. Local self-governance has broad competences, but problems with funding have made local governments dependent on subsidies by the central government. The public continues to largely distrust the judiciary, and although judicial institutions have made some efforts to improve their transparency and capacities, reforms have stagnated. Systemic corruption remains of high concern, yet some anticorruption institutions have shown initiative in investigating wrongdoing.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches.	3.50 /7.00
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- The year 2022 in North Macedonia was marked by continued polarization and conflict between the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)–led government and the conservative opposition led by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). Throughout the year, VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickovski demanded early parliamentary elections, while SDSM, in coalition with the ethnic Albanian DUI and other smaller parties, maintained a narrow majority in the Sobranie—North Macedonia’s 120-seat, unicameral parliamentary Assembly.
- A main issue of contention between the government and the opposition was the election of new Constitutional Court judges to replace four judges whose mandates had ended. The process was paralyzed in the parliamentary elections committee as the government and opposition MPs repeatedly clashed over nine proposed candidates. ⁶
- The president of the Constitutional Court, Dobrila Kacarska, appealed to the government and the Assembly to resolve the issue of the parliamentary blockade, saying that by the end of the year only four out of nine judges would be in place, which would render the Constitutional Court nonfunctional and the country would face a constitutional crisis. ⁷ Opposition MPs accused the government of attempting to install its loyalists on the court, thereby justifying their blockade of the committee and the long delay in selecting candidates. ⁸ After a protracted stalemate, the Assembly managed to elect two Constitutional Court judges at the end of October, but VMRO-DPMNE left the plenary session before voting, stating that the election was partisan. ⁹
- The opposition, led by VMRO-DPMNE along with Levica (Left), frequently blocked the work of the Sobranie throughout the year in its quest for early parliamentary elections. The opposition blocked the work of several parliamentary committees, which effectively paralyzed the appointment of numerous officials in various institutions and agencies, such as the Judicial Council, antidiscrimination commission, postal service agency, electronic communications agency, public broadcaster program council, and others. ¹⁰
- In May, VMRO-DPMNE upped the ante by announcing a total “active blockade” of the Assembly if no early elections were called, and also threatening to organize street protests and demonstrations. ¹¹ The “active

blockade” began on May 10; according to VMRO-DPMNE MP coordinator Nikola Micevski, the goal was to “thwart detrimental laws and policies” by the government, while discussions on rebalancing the national budget continued unhindered. ¹² Micevski stated that the government had refused dialogue in four key areas, and that the country was facing a national catastrophe. ¹³ The following month, VMRO-DPMNE organized mass protests to reassert its demand for elections, attracting thousands of supporters from across the country. ¹⁴ Prime Minister Dimitar Kovačevski and the ruling SDSM responded by a declaration of unity to maintain the parliamentary majority, thereby rejecting early election calls. ¹⁵

- The conflict between the government and the opposition took a sharp turn after a breakthrough in negotiations for the removal of Bulgaria’s veto on North Macedonia’s accession talks for EU membership. At the end of its EU presidency in June, France argued for the removal of the Bulgarian veto by introducing a negotiation framework, dubbed the “French Proposal,” which satisfied Bulgarian demands on historical and identity issues. ¹⁶ The opposition accused PM Kovačevski’s government of high treason by accepting the terms of the French proposal, while mass protests against the solution ensued with some instances of violence. ¹⁷
- The conflict continued in the Assembly with heated and inflammatory debates coming close to blows. ¹⁸ The government eventually accepted the French proposal, while the opposition vowed to organize a referendum on the issue. ¹⁹ In September, VMRO-DPMNE submitted a referendum initiative to the Assembly speaker that would effectively annul the 2017 Friendship Treaty between Bulgaria and North Macedonia. ²⁰ Assembly Speaker Talat Xhaferi (DUI) rejected the initiative on grounds that it was allegedly unconstitutional. ²¹ The smaller opposition party Levica submitted a new referendum initiative to the Assembly in early October. ²² Xhaferi rejected Levica’s initiative as procedurally flawed, ²³ with Levica resubmitting a modified referendum question in November. ²⁴ After a final rejection, Levica turned to the Constitutional Court, claiming that the rejection was unconstitutional and violated the rights of Macedonians. The court had yet to render a decision on the initiative at year’s end. ²⁵

Electoral Process 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process.

4.50
/7.00

- In 2022, North Macedonia held elections for the municipal council in Tetovo, and for mayors of Centar Zhupa and Mavrovo-Rostushe. The Tetovo elections were called when the previous council failed to adopt the annual financial statement on time. In accordance with the Law on Local Self-Government, the council was dissolved and the Assembly speaker announced special elections for August 20. ²⁶ The other two municipalities held mayoral reelections due to the legally insufficient turnout of at least one third of registered voters in the previous regular elections in 2021. ²⁷ The 2022 elections were monitored by 49 accredited observers from one national and one foreign organization. ²⁸
- All three elections were completed successfully, with the ethnic Albanian Besa party (in the opposition at the national level) winning 12 mandates on the Tetovo Council, ahead of ethnic Albanian DUI (part of the national ruling coalition) which won 11 seats. The ruling SDSM won just two council mandates, while its rival VMRO-DPMNE won four. The governing SDSM's mayoral candidate won in Mavrovo-Rostushe, while a candidate from the Democratic Party of Turks in Macedonia won the mayoral seat in Centar Zhupa where he ran uncontested for his third term. ²⁹ Although turnout was particularly low in Tetovo, at around 35 percent, the results were uncontested.
- The smaller parties of the government coalition at the beginning of 2022 conditioned their support for the government upon a change to the electoral code that would turn the proportional model from six electoral districts into one countrywide district. ³⁰ The country's two largest parties, SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, agreed to launch discussions in the parliamentary committee for political system and interethnic relations, ³¹ but progress soon stalled ³² due to disagreements from some of the ethnic Albanian parties. ³³ By May, the smaller governmental parties had threatened to withdraw support for the government unless the electoral code was reformed, due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February. ³⁴ In September, one of the initiators for the change, Democratic Alliance leader Pavle Trajanov, reiterated his demand for the Assembly to discuss amending the

electoral code, to no avail. **35** At year's end, the issue remained open among the political parties and it was uncertain when, or if, the reform would go forward.

- The OSCE/ODIHR issued its final report on the 2021 local elections and urged the government to “take immediate steps to renew the electoral reform process” in 2022. OSCE/ODIHR identified issues with electoral campaigns and political advertising, as well as the capacity of electoral management bodies. **36** According to the findings, these deficiencies marred the election's transparency and benefited larger parties in the electoral process. Otherwise, ODIHR assessed the elections as generally well-administered. **37**

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.

4.75
/7.00

- Civil society in North Macedonia is vibrant and proactive, and its relations with the government are coordinated by the Council for Cooperation between the Government and Civil Society, established in 2018. According to the latest report by the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCIC) and the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), the country's legal framework provides an environment for unrestricted freedom of association through the Law on Public Assemblies, Law on Civil Liability for Insult and Defamation, and Law on Free Access to Public Information. **38** However, council members from civil society organizations (CSOs) complained that the council's work had stalled in 2022 due to the government's sidelining of consultations on changes to the CSO legal framework, reforms in funding, and public administration reform. **39**
- Changes to the Law on Associations and Foundations were adopted in November specifying additional standards for names of associations and foundations. **40** In practice, this could potentially violate the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of association by modifying the association registration process. **41**

- The opening of two Bulgarian clubs in Bitola and Ohrid, both bearing names of controversial WWII figures, with Bulgarian politicians in attendance provoked public backlash and calls for reforming registration rules for using names of historical figures in North Macedonia. **42** While Bulgaria interprets the changes to the Law on Associations and Foundations as an attempt to restrict the rights of association of Bulgarians in the country, **43** the Commission for the Prevention of Discrimination found that it was the Bulgarian club in Bitola that had repeatedly offended and harassed individuals and families of the WWII Veterans' Association and severely discriminated against Macedonian people and other communities. **44**
- Reforms are still pending in the state's CSO funding methods despite decade-long demands from the civic sector. In 2022, the government unexpectedly, and without consulting the Council for Cooperation, changed the established method for funding CSOs through the General Secretariat, instead authorizing the Ministry of Political System and Inter-Community Relations to administer funding under a program titled "promotion of interethnic relations." **45** According to the council's CSO members, this funding method indicates only one priority area for allocation, vertically administered, as opposed to the previous practice of funding the entire civic sector through multiple allocations for various areas administered horizontally. **46**
- The government also failed to consult the Council for Cooperation in its latest report on public administration reform, despite the significant impact on civil society management. **47**
- During public debate over the "French proposal" for resolving the Bulgarian-Macedonian conflict, expert nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working on EU integration issues that expressed disagreement with the government came under fire from Prime Minister Kovačevski. The PM accused several NGOs of "creating the biggest hysteria in the country" and suggested that they were serving foreign interests. **48** In response, the expert groups claimed that such language and accusations were reminiscent of an earlier time when individuals were called "Sorosoids" and traitors. **49**
- North Macedonia's third Pride march was organized in the capital Skopje in June by LGBT+ organizations. The government declaratively supported the organization of Pride events in the country and ensured their security, but

opposition from some politicians, media workers, and conservative and religious groups remained palpable, particularly on social media. ⁵⁰

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.

3.50
/7.00

- The media market in North Macedonia remains fragmented, with 5 public TV channels, 3 public radio channels, 44 private TV outlets, and 62 private radio outlets, as well as 4 nonprofit radio outlets. ⁵¹ Many of these media operate in languages other than Macedonian.
- According to several monitoring agencies, media freedoms are improving in North Macedonia, but issues persist with strong political and business influence on outlets that has led to poor quality of information. Additionally, journalists are subject to attacks and abusive prosecutions. The courts, however, generally uphold freedom of expression. ⁵² For instance, MP and Levica leader Dimitar Apasiev sued journalists for publishing information he shared with them via SMS texts, claiming it was private correspondence protected by law, but the court dismissed the charges and acquitted the journalists. ⁵³
- In February, the government initiated a revision of the draft law on civil liability for insult and defamation, stating that the law needed to be fully harmonized with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). ⁵⁴ However, the draft was sharply criticized for including the term “negative opinion” as one of the grounds for liability. ⁵⁵ The Justice Ministry responded that the draft law would be amended during parliamentary debate. ⁵⁶ In mid-November, the Assembly passed the law with 62 out of 120 votes. According to the government, the law is among the most liberal libel laws in Europe. The opposition, however, claimed that the law was “terribly written” and, “without the incorporation of some of the opposition’s proposed amendments,” would have been even worse. ⁵⁷
- Other important reforms in the media sector stalled in 2022, such as adopting a legal definition that would treat attacks on journalists as seriously as those against officials, or reducing the maximum penalties for journalists

convicted of insult or defamation. ⁵⁸ The reelection of the Program Council of Macedonian Radio and Television (MRT) as well as the Council of the Audio and Audiovisual Media Services remained blocked in the Assembly, ⁵⁹ and future progress appears unlikely. ⁶⁰ Additionally, the public broadcasting services have exceptionally low ratings, thus providing little independent influence to objectively inform citizens with quality information about politics in the country. ⁶¹

- In June, the Association of Journalists of Macedonia published a report on attacks on media workers over the past five years, finding that women were more frequently attacked than men. Impunity for such attacks remains high, ⁶² with less than 10 percent of registered cases resulting in convictions. ⁶³ The association registered four violations of the rights of journalists in 2022. ⁶⁴ In another report, the Platform for Investigative Journalism and Analyses (PINA) revealed that over 81 percent of 103 female journalists surveyed had been subjected to online harassment, the vast majority on Facebook. ⁶⁵
- In July, several media associations reacted strongly to a proposed change to media laws that would remove the ban on government advertising in private media, asserting that such a practice would have catastrophic consequences for journalistic and editorial independence. ⁶⁶ Ultimately, the legislation remained unchanged, but a push for the government's initiative continues in the Assembly. ⁶⁷

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities.	4.25 / 7.00
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- North Macedonia has a single-tier local government system with 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje. Currently, VMRO-DPMNE (nationally in opposition) controls 42 municipalities and the Skopje City Council, ⁶⁸ whereas the independent mayor of Skopje was supported by VMRO-DPMNE during the local elections in October 2021. The ruling SDSM holds 16 municipalities, DUI (member of the ruling coalition) holds 11, while several smaller parties hold the remaining mayoral seats. ⁶⁹
- Municipality funding has been one of the chief longer-term structural obstacles to effective local self-government in the country, despite

significant competences at the local level. This issue continued in 2022, exacerbated in some cases by rising energy costs. The Association of Municipalities on several occasions appealed to the central government for urgent financial assistance in paying utility bills to avert a full financial collapse of the local government. **70** In September, the central government responded by accepting the association's proposal that schools pay a regulated rate for electricity (the same price paid by individual residents), thus temporarily alleviating some financial problems. **71**

- A significant number of municipalities, including the City of Skopje, began using tools for increased citizen participation in decision-making, such as citizen involvement in the budget process as well as citizen access to municipal financial indicators and budgets. **72** Also, in a number of municipalities, direct citizen participation has been organized via community forums that have directly contributed to the realization of socially inclusive projects selected by the public. **73** According to the NGO Center for Civil Communications, active transparency in municipalities rose from 60 percent in 2021 to 70 percent in 2022, an increase registered in all regions of the country. **74**
- In July, the Assembly amended the law on financing local self-government units to increase the tax share received by municipalities; accordingly, the value added tax (VAT) going to municipalities will increase incrementally—from 4.5 to 5 percent in 2022, then to 5.5 percent in 2023 and 6 percent in 2024. **75** Municipalities will receive more funds from personal income taxes as well—rising from 3 to 4 percent in 2022, then to 5 percent in 2023 and 6 percent in 2024. **76** According to government estimates, the funds going to municipalities will nearly double by 2024, rising from 2.8 billion to 5 billion MKD. **77** By some analyses, an average of 76 percent of municipal finances up to now have come from central government transfers and donations. **78**
- In May, the Ministry of Local Self-Government signed a cofinancing agreement for 10 projects for cross-border cooperation with Greece, with a total value of €7.6 million. **79** These projects will be implemented near the border with Greece, in Bitola, Gradsko, Konche, Negotino, and Strumica. According to Minister Goran Milevski, this agreement would support local economic development, new jobs, and tourism.

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.

3.25
/7.00

- In 2022, the general public's distrust towards judicial institutions and courts increased compared to the previous year. According to the RCC's Balkan Barometer, the percentage of distrust in the judiciary in North Macedonia is the highest among Western Balkan countries. ⁸⁰ A poll late in the year by the International Republican Institute (IRI) found that only 4 percent of citizens fully trust the judiciary. ⁸¹
- Among reasons for the public's continued dissatisfaction, according to a report by the Skopje-based Metamorfozis Foundation, are the lack of independence in both the courts and the prosecutor's offices, insufficient state funding, minimal transparency, ineffectiveness (due to the lack of prosecutors), and slow progress in digitalizing the judiciary. ⁸²
- Improvements were noted in the Judicial Council's efficacy in monitoring judicial accountability. In April, the council dismissed 5 judges for either inefficiency, conflict of interest, incompetence, or negligence. ⁸³ Additionally, over 40 judges and 10 prosecutors retired in 2022, despite the government's efforts to extend their mandates for another three years due to the purported shortage of new judges. This vote never reached the plenary parliamentary session due to the opposition's blockade, leaving these bodies chronically understaffed. ⁸⁴
- One major reform launched in 2022 by the new justice minister, Nikola Tupančevski, is digitalization of the courts, which is expected to be carried out in 186 courtrooms in 34 courts across the country. ⁸⁵ According to Minister Tupančevski, digitalization should improve judicial integrity, accountability, public trust, and protection of the judicial system itself. ⁸⁶ Yet, according to an analysis by the Metamorfozis Foundation, the progress in digitalization is expected to be slow since more than 200 laws will need to be amended and harmonized. ⁸⁷
- One case of horizontal accountability turned scandalous when personnel of the Chief Prosecutor for Organized Crime and Corruption, Vilma Ruskovska, raided the offices of the Director of Financial Police, Arafat Muaremi, based on an anonymous criminal charge initiated by citizens. ⁸⁸ Muaremi claimed

the search was illegal and demanded that Public Prosecutor Ljubomir Joveski review the procedure. He also asked for the dismissal of the judge who approved the search. ⁸⁹ Joveski promptly formed a review committee, which established that there were procedural mistakes by the Prosecution Office for Organized Crime and Corruption, ⁹⁰ and subsequently suspended Ruskovska. ⁹¹ In December, the Public Prosecutor's Disciplinary Committee launched disciplinary proceedings against Ruskovska, pending a final decision. ⁹²

- The 2022 election of a new Chief Prosecutor for Organized Crime and Corruption engendered controversy. For the first time, this election was carried out by all prosecutors in North Macedonia, ⁹³ electing Islam Abazi with 66 of 163 votes. ⁹⁴ However, reports emerged of Abazi's close relationship to top leadership of the ethnic Albanian DUI party, ⁹⁵ as well as evidence that he had little, if any, experience in prosecuting organized crime and corruption. ⁹⁶ The situation prompted criticism from the U.S. Ambassador to North Macedonia, Angela Aggeler, who commented that after spending millions of dollars in training judicial staff, the United States should expect a transparent and merit-based selection process. ⁹⁷
- Several landmark trials on fraud, money laundering, and abuse of state power ended during the year with guilty verdicts for former high officials from Nikola Gruevski's government. The former PM himself, while a fugitive in Hungary, was convicted in three separate cases for money laundering and abuse of power. Gruevski received numerous prison sentences, and his VMRO-DPMNE party was ordered to give up any stolen property.
- On the downside, the Court of Appeals annulled the first instance court's 2021 ruling against former secret police head Sašo Mijalkov in the largest scandal in the country's independent history—the mass wiretapping affair of 2015—returning the case for retrial. ⁹⁸ This decision sparked public outcry since the case against Mijalkov may reach the statute of limitations if the retrial is not completed by 2025. ⁹⁹ Additionally, controversies emerged in late 2022 with the resignation of the Judicial Council president, who claimed she had suffered pressure from the “judicial-business elite” ¹⁰⁰ coupled with accusations that the council had failed to administer timely control over judges' work, especially the excessive amount of time taken by the Court of Appeals to decide the Mijalkov case. ¹⁰¹

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives.

3.25
/7.00

- Systemic corruption remains a major problem, but some institutions, especially the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (SCPC), took proactive steps to tackle it in 2022. ¹⁰² In January, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for North Macedonia rose by 24 places. ¹⁰³ According to TI, this significant improvement reflects steps taken by the country "to prosecute high-level officials for corruption and strengthen independent oversight institutions." ¹⁰⁴
- Yet the prosecution of corruption has been slow and ineffective mainly as a result of insufficient resources and staff. ¹⁰⁵ According to data from the SCPC, out of 165 anticorruption initiatives, only 3 have reached the courts in the last 20 years. ¹⁰⁶ According to Slagjana Taseva, President of TI Macedonia, the problem stems not from the SCPC but from the Prosecutor's Office, which fails to act on initiatives by both the SCPC and other state bodies. ¹⁰⁷
- Among the most publicized corruption cases in 2022, former secretary general Muhamed Zekiri was arrested and placed in custody in April. ¹⁰⁸ According to the prosecution, Zekiri is suspected of embezzling €145,000 by rigging a tender procedure. ¹⁰⁹ He was officially indicted in October for damaging the state budget by almost €1.5 million. ¹¹⁰ However, investigative journalists revealed other possible high-level corruption in the incumbent government, such as cases in the energy sector involving former vice prime minister Kocho Angjushev and former government secretary general Dragi Rashkovski (on trial for abuse of office in another case). ¹¹¹ Additionally, despite public outcry, the government has failed to address alleged corruption involving Deputy Minister of the Interior Nazim Bushi, also investigated by the SCPC. ¹¹²
- The SCPC, in its February report on the 2021 local elections, noted that the country's political parties had not been transparent about donations received and therefore violated the transparency regulations the parties themselves adopted. ¹¹³

- The Chief Prosecutor for Organized Crime and Corruption opened a pre-investigation procedure into Credit Swiss bank accounts allegedly owned by two Macedonian citizens—businessman and former vice prime minister Mincho Jordanov and pharmaceutical tycoon Blagoj Mehandzhiski. ¹¹⁴ These are among the richest Macedonian citizens who have been accused of embezzling state resources, politically motivated deals, and high-level corruption. ¹¹⁵
- Public procurement remains a high-risk area for corruption and, according to SCPC president Biljana Ivanovska, is influenced by party donors. ¹¹⁶ The real ownership of companies participating in public bids is often not published alongside notifications of procurement awards, making it hard to track these business-political ties. ¹¹⁷ A highly suspicious case involves coal procurement by the public company ESM, as the same individual appears in the ownership structure of two of the three companies winning the tender. ¹¹⁸
- Corruption related to environmental issues largely goes unpunished, even though North Macedonia is one of the most polluted countries in the region. ¹¹⁹ Political elites often adopt or amend laws to suit their own profiteering, and abuse substantial discretionary powers in issuing licenses and permits. ¹²⁰

Author: Ogden Vangelov holds a PhD in Political Studies from Queen's University, Canada, and is Assistant Professor at University American College Skopje (UACS). His research focuses on autocratization in Central and Eastern Europe and the politics of ethnicity and nationalism, with publications on these topics in major international academic and policy journals. Additional projects focus on the politics of complex diversity in contested cities, as well as minority institutions and institutional domains of ethnolinguistic minorities in Central and Eastern Europe.

Footnotes

- ¹ Alejandro Esteso Pérez, “France’s EU proposal for North Macedonia teaches us that nationalism shall prevail,” *New Eastern Europe*, 22 August 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Top5nf>
- ² “Bulgarian lawmakers accept French proposal for lifting veto,” *European Western Balkans*, 24 June 2022, <https://bit.ly/3eDZecw>; “Elephants in Skopje – Balkan turtle race

and Ukraine”, European Stability Initiative, 15 July 2022, <https://bit.ly/3RtSGfz>; Florian Bieber and Nikola Dimitrov, “North Macedonia

- 3 “Полицијата спречи меѓуетнички инцидент на протестите” [The police prevented an inter-ethnic incident at the protests], DW, 6 July 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Yu2Gak>
- 4 One of the subjects of attack, Malinka Ristevska Jordanova, stated that “by accusing civil society organizations which have had a negative opinion of the French proposal (and all relevant organizations with EU expertise had a negative opinion) that they have created hysteria, the Government showed that not only does it not have a capacity to unite the citizens, but that it does not respect basic democratic standards and freedom of expression. The accusations against all who think differently that they were part of a ‘hybrid threat,’ which was not followed by an appropriate legal action, was an open threat from a position of power to silence the critics.”
- 5 “Следење на процесот на евроинтеграции: реформи во правосудство” [Tracking the Euro-integration process: reforms in the judiciary], Metamorfozis Foundation for Internet and Society, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3EyxnET>

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1850 M St. NW Floor 11
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 296-5101

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