

NOW LIVE: Nations in Transit 2024



NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2024

North Macedonia

TRANSITIONAL OR HYBRID REGIME

46
/100

Democracy Percentage	46.43 /100
Democracy Score	3.79 /7

LAST YEAR’S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

48 /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.



Authors

- Ognen Vangelov

Score changes in 2024

- Judicial Framework and Independence rating declined from 3.25 to 3.00 due to the poor performance of the State Judicial Council and allegations of nepotism in the appointments of prosecutors and judges.
- Corruption rating declined from 3.25 to 3.00 due to a number of corruption allegations against high-level officials, as well as changes to the Criminal Code that reduced penalties for corruption and led to the dismissals of cases against former and current government officials.
- As a result, North Macedonia's Democracy Score declined from 3.86 to 3.79.

Executive Summary

An atmosphere of heightened political tension pervaded North Macedonia in 2023. The government, comprised of a coalition led by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and two Albanian parties, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) and the Alliance for Albanians (AA), continued a protracted standoff with the opposition, including the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) and the fast-growing Levica (the Left) party. This political polarization stems from deep divisions among the major political parties following the downfall of Nikola Gruevski's government in 2016. In 2017, VMRO-DPMNE attempted to block the formation of a new government by storming the parliament, which worsened these divisions. ¹ Tensions between the ruling coalition and the opposition intensified during the adoption of the Prespa Agreement in 2018, which resolved the longstanding name dispute with Greece. ² In 2022, hostilities peaked when the government accepted the "French proposal," which paved the way for North Macedonia to begin EU accession talks once it incorporated ethnic Bulgarians into the constitution. ³ In 2023, the opposition vehemently opposed constitutional amendments designed to include ethnic Bulgarians in the constitution as required by the EU. The opposition rejected the amendments and said it would "not accept alterations imposed under a Bulgarian dictate." Both parties exchange accusations: SDSM labels VMRO-DPMNE as anti-EU, ⁴ while VMRO-DPMNE charges SDSM with national treason, crime, and corruption. ⁵

In August, the government submitted its proposed amendments to the parliament for debate. However, the governing coalition could not muster the two-thirds majority needed to initiate the procedure for constitutional changes. Parliament Speaker Talat Xhaferi of DUI then indefinitely adjourned the parliamentary session in hopes of eventually securing enough votes, a move that generated intense criticism from the opposition. Opposition leaders said Xhaferi had violated the constitution and parliamentary rules that required the first vote (of several votes needed for a constitutional change) to occur within 10 days of the initiation of the procedure in parliament. ⁶

There were no elections or changes to the electoral framework in 2023. Legislative efforts to consolidate the existing six electoral districts into a unified nationwide district under a proportional representation system remained in a state of limbo. This longstanding initiative, predominantly advocated by smaller political parties, has gained tentative support from the two major political players, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM. Nonetheless, substantial disagreements persisted with Albanian parties and stymied reform efforts. The next parliamentary and presidential elections will occur in 2024.

Civil society is vibrant in North Macedonia but faces ongoing funding challenges that could undermine its long-term impact. Government-civil society cooperation through the Council for Cooperation has been marked by persistent tensions since 2022. In January, 15 civil society organizations (CSOs) published an open letter to Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski that sought clarity on the government's stance towards the council and expressed concerns about its commitment to the council's obligations. ⁷ With the government's declarative support, LGBT+ groups organized the fourth Pride March in June without any noteworthy incidents. However, conservative opposition to the march continues to resonate.

Freedom of expression is generally respected, but the media landscape remains notably fragmented, including along ethnic lines. Journalists, especially those who report on corruption and abuse of power, continue to face harassment and other challenges. The parliament, however, enacted provisions in 2023 to bolster protections for journalists. Under these provisions, assaults on journalists are equated with attacks on government officials, leading to more stringent penalties for perpetrators. ⁸ However, during its fact-finding mission to North Macedonia

in 2023, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom voiced apprehension about the outlook for journalism in the country, noting the absence of pluralism, subpar working conditions, and challenges to the sustainability of media companies. ⁹

North Macedonia's local self-government operates within a one-tier structure comprising 80 municipalities, with the City of Skopje holding special status. These municipalities wield significant authority but rely on central government funding. There were no substantial reforms to local government in 2023, but certain opposition-led municipalities claimed that the government was biased against them. ¹⁰ The independent mayor of Skopje, who the VMRO-DPMNE initially supported, had a contentious relationship with the City Council, leading to legislative gridlock. Tensions had escalated since the mayor accused VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM of corruption and ties to organized crime and distanced herself from the VMRO-DPMNE. However, the mayor has faced declining approval ratings, largely due to a sharp deterioration in the quality of municipal services. ¹¹

The judiciary remains one of North Macedonia's most criticized and distrusted institutions. It is widely perceived as ineffective and prone to corruption and political influence. Throughout 2023, the justice system remained under intense public scrutiny as it weathered controversies about the courts, prosecutors, and the State Judicial Council. In April, the council voted to remove its leader, Vesna Dameva. Dameva protested her removal and said it violated the council's procedural rules and was thus illegal. ¹² Dameva filed a lawsuit challenging her removal and lodged a criminal complaint. ¹³ Government officials, the president, foreign ambassadors, and the general public have expressed outrage over the series of scandals affecting this crucial judicial institution. Criticisms from EU-member state ambassadors and the US ambassador were especially palpable, highlighting the council's failure to eliminate undue influence in the judiciary. Moreover, the appointment of new prosecutors and judges with family connections to prominent politicians (including the son of parliament speaker Talat Xhaferi) solidified public perceptions of nepotism in the judiciary. ¹⁴

Corruption remains a major concern for both the public and other international actors, notably the EU and the United States, which both consistently criticize North Macedonia for failing to effectively tackle the problem. The US government has barred several politicians and businessmen from entering the United States

over corruption allegations, including Struga Mayor Ramiz Merko and former deputy prime minister Kocho Angjushev, who served in Zoran Zaev's government.

¹⁵ In 2023, a slew of high-level corruption and organized crime allegations took center stage in public discourse. Fresh revelations about the deadly 2021 fire that destroyed a temporary COVID-19 hospital in Tetovo and allegations of high-level corruption involving the State Oncology Clinic generated public outrage. Police raided the oncology clinic due to allegations that an organized employee network stole expensive treatments and traded them on neighboring countries' black markets. Furthermore, in September, the government moved quickly to unexpectedly introduce amendments to the Criminal Code that reduced penalties for abuse of office and participating in a criminal enterprise, as well as shortening the statutes of limitations for these offenses. The parliament quickly passed the legislation using a streamlined procedure under the banner of harmonization with EU legislation. This move also elicited widespread public outrage.

At-A-Glance

In North Macedonia, national governance operates democratically but grapples with significant challenges, primarily stemming from intense polarization between the government and opposition. While elections are typically free, crucial reforms in electoral legislation, recommended by relevant international organizations to enhance the electoral process, have stagnated. Civil society continues to actively participate and contribute to society, but its stability and influence are at risk due to precarious funding and government indifference. The media generally have the freedom to critique the government; however, the influence of political and business interests impacts their pluralism and quality. Local democratic governance holds significant authority but relies heavily on central government subsidies for funding. The justice system confronts substantial challenges, with widespread perceptions of ineffectiveness and strong political influence. Corruption remains the country's foremost challenge, and anti-corruption efforts have faced significant setbacks in 2023 due to revisions in the Criminal Code that reduced penalties and statutes of limitations for the crimes of abuse of office and criminal enterprise, leading to the impending demise of a number of active prosecutions.

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

- In 2023, the political system remained under considerable strain. The governing coalition, comprising the SDSM and two Albanian parties, the DUI and the AA (which replaced the Albanian party Alternative in the ruling coalition) along with several smaller parties, was locked in an ongoing confrontation with the principal opposition party, the VMRO-DPMNE, as well as the Left, a smaller opposition party.
- Legislation to amend the constitution to include Bulgarians and other minority communities was controversial. ¹⁶ The EU required including Bulgarians in the constitution to begin EU membership negotiations. VMRO-DPMNE and the Left (a growing opposition party that reportedly has close ties to Russia) ¹⁷ fervently opposed these constitutional changes, claiming that the government failed to build national consensus around the EU negotiation framework it had committed to. ¹⁸ They claimed that including ethnic Bulgarians in the constitution was at Bulgaria's insistence, not part of the EU's Copenhagen criteria for membership, and therefore unacceptable. ¹⁹ According to polls, 80 percent of Macedonians (North Macedonia's majority population) disapproved of the change, while 53 percent of ethnic Albanians supported it. ²⁰
- VMRO-DPMNE has demanded snap elections to resolve the crisis (parliamentary elections are scheduled for mid-2024). ²¹ In response, the governing coalition said it would hold snap elections if the constitutional amendments were passed first, a position that reinforced the impasse with the opposition. ²²
- Relations with Bulgaria remained tense throughout the year due to disagreements over history and identity. The relationship became more strained during the commemoration of Goce Delchev's birth in February. ²³ Delchev, whose tomb is in Skopje, is considered a key Macedonian national hero in North Macedonia but is also claimed by Bulgaria. For the first time, hundreds of visitors from Bulgaria announced their presence at the commemoration. ²⁴ The president deemed the event a security risk and there was a heavy police presence. ²⁵ Despite a few incidents at the border crossing with Bulgaria, the commemoration proceeded peacefully. ²⁶

- The opposition vehemently opposed the government’s agreement with the contractors Bechtel and ENKA to construct four highways in North Macedonia, assailing the lack of transparency in the contract and alleging that the deal was tainted by government corruption. ²⁷ It said the government had committed North Macedonia to debt slavery and violated the constitutionally guaranteed labor rights to enable Bechtel and ENKA to implement the deal. ²⁸

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
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- While elections in North Macedonia are generally free and aim to represent the country’s political diversity, international observers have highlighted a number of shortcomings related to the legal framework, election administration, voting rights, voter registration, pressure on voters, state and public employee involvement in political campaigns, campaign finance, electoral dispute adjudication, and media coverage. ²⁹
- No elections were held in 2023 and the government did not pass any legislation on the electoral system, despite the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s (OSCE’s) recommendation that North Macedonia reforms its Electoral Code well in advance of the elections scheduled for mid-2024. Several reform recommendations have been proposed, emphasizing key areas like the State Election Commission, voter registration procedures, and political advertising in the media. ³⁰
- One significant and long-debated electoral reform proposes merging the six proportional representation districts into one single nationwide district, which smaller political parties say would foster a more equitable electoral landscape. Smaller parties argue that the existing system imposes substantial constraints on smaller parties, providing larger parties with an unfair advantage. ³¹ The two largest parties, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, have supported the reform, but opposition remains among Albanian parties. ³²
- According to rules implemented before the 2016 elections to ensure fairness and transparency, a caretaker government that includes members of the opposition must assume control three months before election day. ³³ The

rule was followed during the 2020 parliamentary elections, and the new government formed after the 2020 elections informally agreed, as part of coalition talks, to appoint an Albanian prime minister three months before the subsequent election. **34**

- Meanwhile, the DUI, the junior partner in the governing coalition, announced that it would forego appointing an Albanian prime minister before the next elections if the parliament quickly passed the constitutional amendments on the inclusion of Bulgarians and snap elections could be quickly called. **35** VMRO-DPMNE, on the other hand, has insisted on snap elections and said it would forego the caretaker government requirement altogether so that elections could be held as soon as possible. **36**

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
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- Civil society in North Macedonia remains vibrant. CSOs are active and often assertive and vocal on a wide spectrum of pressing issues, including human rights, corruption, state administration, and, notably, the judicial system. The Law on Public Assemblies, the Law on Civil Liability for Insult and Defamation, and the Law on Free Access to Public Information all foster freedom of association. **37**
- Nevertheless, CSOs struggle to find funding and remain financially viable. The sector has persistently called upon the relevant authorities to devise a sustainable solution to enable CSOs to remain active. **38** According to the funding scheme that the government adjusted in 2022, central budget allocations are distributed through the Ministry of Political System in an untransparent manner. **39** As reported by the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCMS), the government provided only 4 percent of the funding CSOs received in 2022. **40** This figure falls significantly short of the ambitious 20 percent target outlined in the Government’s Action Plan for 2022-2024, which was designed to enhance government collaboration with civil society. **41**

- In January, 15 CSOs issued an open letter to the prime minister, urgently requesting a meeting. **42** They asserted that the government had neglected both CSOs and the Council for Cooperation Between the Government and CSOs. CSOs contended that the government had entirely disregarded the council, including its vital recommendations and conclusions that it provides according to its primary mandate to act as an advisory body to the government. **43** No meeting took place in 2023 and the request went unheard. **44**
- In June, LGBT+ groups organized the fourth Skopje Pride March, themed “Loud and Proud.” The march received verbal support from the government and also gained the backing of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense. **45** The march proceeded smoothly, but anti-LGBT discourse in the public sphere, especially on social media, remains conspicuous. **46** Groups like the “Od nas za nas” association have been accused of perpetrating hateful anti-LGBT comments online. Additionally, the government has not advanced legislation to formally recognize same-sex relationships, nor established a dedicated platform to engage in a constructive dialogue with LGBT+ organizations, as advocated by the Council of Europe’s European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance. **47**
- A series of protests erupted in 2023 due to widespread public dissatisfaction with the country’s conditions. The oncology clinic scandal spurred numerous protests to demand answers and justice. **48** Pensioners rallied for higher pensions and some government workers demonstrated for salary hikes. **49** The latter protests intensified following the Constitutional Court’s decision to lift the cap on high-level officials’ salaries, which gave these officials a 78 percent raise that starkly contrasted with the stagnant salaries of other public administration and private sector employees. **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
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- Despite its small size and weak economy, the country features a fragmented media market with numerous outlets, **51** particularly in broadcasting. This

causes financial challenges due to limited advertising sources and content deficiencies because journalism professionals are spread thinly. **52** A report from the EUI Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom underscores the need to develop local media initiatives that would be beyond the influence of political and commercial interests and would truly foster pluralism, as the current fragmented media landscape masks a lack of genuine diversity. **53**

- In 2023, a fact-finding mission by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) highlighted the uneven progress in media freedom, pointing to a rise in libel lawsuits despite recent amendments to defamation laws, limiting powerful actors' ability to file disproportionate and frivolous lawsuits. **54** Persistent challenges include poor working conditions for journalists. While high-level officials have generally avoided publicly denigrating journalists, in 2023 some politicians employed hostile language towards the media and faced no consequences from government institutions. **55**
- While the law protects freedom of expression, 37.7 percent of journalists surveyed by the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers said they have faced threats, including from owners of media outlets, editors, the audience, the business community, government officials, politicians, and the police. **56** Furthermore, the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, a press freedom group, documented three verbal and two physical attacks on journalists in 2023. **57**
- Investigative journalists, especially those probing corruption, increasingly face verbal attacks, mainly from influential business figures. These individuals and their companies often threaten legal action against journalists. In October, for example, the Investigative Reporting Lab (IRL) lost a defamation lawsuit filed by former deputy prime minister Kocho Angjushev, described by media groups as a classic SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation). **58** Journalists' associations assert that powerful interests use defamation lawsuits to publicly undermine journalists and suppress negative media coverage of influential companies. **59**
- In 2023, journalists protested twice against their poor treatment. In February, journalists marched against attacks, insults by politicians, unfair competition, unsafe working conditions, and challenging socioeconomic situations. **60** In November, they protested against the court's October

ruling against the IRL in Angjushev's defamation lawsuit, viewing it as an attempt to stifle independent media. ⁶¹

- In 2023, a report on disinformation and foreign influence revealed that citizens now get their news more from personal contacts than traditional media outlets. ⁶² However, the widespread distrust of traditional media outlets has enabled rampant disinformation. The report noted that 83 percent of respondents thought the disinformation problem was severe, with citizens believing the government has failed to effectively address the problem. ⁶³
- A 2024 report by the Institute for Communication Studies said politicians were the main source of harmful narratives in public discourse. ⁶⁴ The institute asserted that politicians use divisive rhetoric and unverified accusations to undermine their opponents, where the two major parties, SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE trade accusations: VMRO-DPMNE accuses SDSM of corruption, while SDSM labels VMRO-DPMNE as anti-EU. ⁶⁵ The study found that journalists could sometimes unintentionally amplify these narratives. ⁶⁶ The report also raised concerns about major political parties dominating primetime television and potentially spreading harmful narratives. It warned that these practices threaten democratic principles and undermine public discourse. ⁶⁷
- On a positive note, the government implemented amendments to the Criminal Code in February to equate attacks on journalists with attacks on government officials, resulting in lengthier prison sentences for perpetrators. ⁶⁸
- The government's efforts to reintroduce government advertising in private media for the first time since 2017 faced strong opposition from journalist organizations. They argued that such advertising previously undermined editorial independence, the quality of journalism, and stability in the media market. Media professionals asserted that these efforts imply government favoritism in purchasing advertising from its chosen media outlets in exchange for favorable coverage, potentially conflicting with European Commission standards. They criticized the potential lack of transparency in distributing public funds for state advertising, especially if it disproportionately benefits media with national licenses or covertly subsidizes government-affiliated outlets. ⁶⁹

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’s local self-government operates under a one-tier structure encompassing 80 municipalities, with the City of Skopje holding a special status. While these municipalities hold substantial local authority, their fiscal sustainability heavily depends on central government funding. Local government revenues are only around 5 percent of the nation’s GDP, which significantly lags behind the EU average of 11 percent. ⁷⁰ Furthermore, the amount of the local government budget allocated to salaries is a staggering 54 percent, the highest in the Western Balkan region. ⁷¹
- The financial stability of the City of Skopje has become a major concern. Members of the City Council alleged that the city was on the brink of bankruptcy in 2023, which Mayor Danela Arsovska denied. ⁷² Tensions between the mayor and the City Council grew after Arsovska distanced herself from VMRO-DPMNE, the party that initially supported her mayoral candidacy. She has criticized both major parties, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, for clientelism and corruption, exacerbating the ongoing disputes. ⁷³ However, the public believed that municipal services significantly worsened under Arsovska’s leadership, and citizens largely held her responsible. Additionally, Arsovska lost her role as president of the non-profit Association of Local Self-government Units (ZELS), which is traditionally held by Skopje’s top official and is known for selectively engaging with media and frequently clashing with journalists. ⁷⁴
- In September, the Commission for Monitoring Local Government Financing, composed of representatives from government ministries and local government representatives, met to discuss the allocation of the 2024 block grants that municipalities receive annually to finance major municipal services. Local government representatives raised concerns about the central government’s practice of adopting regulations without the commission’s prior consent, undermining the commission’s authority under the Law on Financing Local Government to act on behalf of municipal

governments. **75** This raises concerns about the sustainability of the progress made so far in the development of local democratic governance.

- Waste management remains a significant challenge in North Macedonia, especially in areas where EU directives demand substantial financial resources and expertise for implementation. **76**
- However, the Municipality of Prilep provided a positive example of a local government initiative. In March, the municipality announced that it planned to issue bonds for €5 million (\$5.4 million) to finance three city infrastructure projects and a solar panel project to generate renewable energy. **77**
- Local governments continued to utilize international support to improve infrastructure and equal representation in policymaking. In February, the European Investment Bank approved a €50 million (\$54 million) “framework loan” for North Macedonia to fund projects focusing on water supply, wastewater, and flood protection infrastructure in 80 cities or towns. **78** In July, Salar International and ZELS conducted a day-long training sessions in the pilot municipalities of Bitola, Ohrid, Novaci, Plasnica, Prilep, and Kichevo to ensure that gender was factored into local policymaking. **79**

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.	3.00 /7.00
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- The justice system continued to face harsh criticism and declining public trust in 2023. The judiciary was hampered by widespread perceptions that it was ineffective and prone to corruption and political influence. **80** In 2023, these institutions came under intense public scrutiny due to the lack of transparency in the State Judicial Council (responsible for overseeing appointments, promotions and dismissal of judges as well as safeguarding judicial independence from undue influence), dysfunctional courts, and prosecutorial misconduct, which all contributed to the erosion of public trust in the judicial system.
- In April, a polarized Judicial Council voted to oust its leader, Vesna Dameva. Dameva and her allies condemned her ouster, claiming that it violated the

council's procedures. ⁸¹ Dameva filed a lawsuit challenging her removal, as well as a criminal complaint. ⁸² Government officials, the president, foreign ambassadors, and the general public have all expressed deep concern that the string of controversies in the judiciary in 2023 could prevent it from executing its mandate. ⁸³

- In May, the Dutch ambassador said the Netherlands would suspend a longstanding project to fund the Judicial Council, claiming that the scandalous removal of Dameva rendered the council illegitimate. ⁸⁴ He noted increased political sway in all judicial bodies, from prosecutors to courts. ⁸⁵ EU Ambassador to North Macedonia David Geer also voiced disappointment about the poor results of reforms meant to protect the rule of law and fight corruption. ⁸⁶
- In June, judges Zoran Gerasimovski and Mirjana Radevska-Stefkova resigned from the Judicial Council amid calls from CSOs to dissolve the council because it contributed to declining trust in the judiciary and brought international criticism. ⁸⁷
- In July, Supreme Court judge Nake Georgiev abruptly resigned from the Judicial Council moments before his swearing-in. His resignation coincided with the selection of his son as a judge in a Skopje criminal court. While the official reasons for his resignation remained undisclosed, members of the Judicial Council, including former president Dameva, contended that Nake Georgiev's appointment to the Council would directly violate the Law on Courts if his son also held a judgeship. ⁸⁸
- The Austrian ambassador criticized North Macedonia's courts, urging the removal of judges, prosecutors, and public notaries implicated in delaying an Austrian investor's debt collection from a Macedonian company allegedly tied to former prime minister Zoran Zaev. The Embassy's public statement raised concerns about judicial integrity, threats to the rule of law, and possible criminal influence over the judiciary, while former prime minister Zoran Zaev denied any involvement and threatened the Embassy with a libel lawsuit. ⁸⁹
- Judicial appointments raised nepotism and political influence concerns in 2023. Several new appointees have familial ties to politicians in office or to other members of the judiciary. ⁹⁰ Among the most publicized were the appointments of Barlet Xhaferi, son of the parliament speaker, and Biljana Ivanova, daughter-in-law of a legislative general secretary. ⁹¹ Albulena Abazi,

the wife of the chief prosecutor for organized crime and corruption, was appointed as a public prosecutor. ⁹² Opposition parties, including VMRO-DPMNE, said these appointments raised doubts about the impartiality of a judiciary that appeared to be staffed with politicians’ relatives. ⁹³ A survey of judicial personnel indicated that employees believed that personal or political connections outweighed merit in determining who received promotions. ⁹⁴

- An OSCE survey of the judiciary revealed serious concerns about corruption among judges and prosecutors, particularly regarding biased expert witness opinions. Judges mentioned attorneys’ misuse of their procedural rights to postpone procedure and low-quality indictments, while prosecutors also worried about attorneys’ misuse of procedural rights during pre-trial procedure, as well as poor coordination with other investigative bodies. ⁹⁵

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.	3.00 /7.00
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- The European Commission’s 2023 Screening Report on North Macedonia indicated slow implementation of the National Strategy to Prevent Corruption and Conflicts of Interest (2021-2025). In 2022, the government only undertook 10 of the planned activities in the strategy, while corruption persisted in key sectors such as public infrastructure, tax administration, and public procurement. ⁹⁶
- Multiple corruption scandals caused widespread public concern in 2023. Corruption allegations marred a highway construction agreement between the government, American construction company Bechtel, and Turkish construction company ENKA. ⁹⁷ The Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis - Skopje” identified significant corruption risks in the project, observing that the Government, Parliament, and President circumvented legal safeguards, leading to a clandestine \$1.3 billion agreement devoid of transparency and accountability, thereby heightening the likelihood of corruption. ⁹⁸ Some of the companies contracted to supervise the Bechtel-ENKA project were already under investigation for corruption, further raising suspicions. Anticorruption watchdogs argue that a 2021 law enabling

the government to select a “strategic partner” for the deal facilitated the manipulation of public procurement regulations. ⁹⁹

- In August, public outrage flared over a report that suggested high-level corruption contributed to a deadly fire that destroyed a temporary COVID-19 hospital in Tetovo in 2021. The report alleged that the Ministry of Health evaded legal responsibility after corruption allegedly tainted the ministry’s tender for temporary hospital construction, which was awarded to a company linked to the former minister of finance in Zoran Zaev’s government. ¹⁰⁰ The investigation alleged that former minister of health Venko Filipche, Public Prosecutor Besir Aliu, and Aliu’s superior Ljubomir Jovevski failed to take preventive measures after the fire in the Tetovo hospital to protect patients in similar temporary hospitals, knowingly jeopardizing citizens’ lives and safety. ¹⁰¹
- In 2023, staff at the Skopje University Clinical Center’s Oncology Clinic were accused of stealing expensive cancer medications to sell on the black market in neighboring countries. Investigative reports by *Fokus* magazine implicated former directors, including a medical and organizational director, in a criminal enterprise. One director allegedly employed around 20 relatives who were involved in managing the hospital’s archive, while the supervision of medical histories and patients entering the treatment facility was overseen by another relative of one of the hospital managers. ¹⁰² The scandal also revealed significant mismanagement of the clinic that left it with €20 million (\$21.4 million) in debt. ¹⁰³ Auditors said procurement and pricing irregularities, logistical and scheduling chaos, and budget overruns compounded by neglect contributed to the debt. ¹⁰⁴
- In September, the parliament passed hasty amendments to the Criminal Code that could undermine anticorruption efforts. The revisions eliminated the mandatory prison term of at least five years for abuse of office linked to public procurements, meaning future perpetrators of the crime could avoid prison time altogether. ¹⁰⁵ Additionally, the parliament amended the article addressing “criminal enterprise” so that the crime’s maximum sentence was slashed from 10 years to 3. ¹⁰⁶ Further alterations to the code notably reduced the statute of limitations for corruption-related crimes and removed requirements for special investigative measures, such as surveillance or wiretapping of communication, for corruption indictments punishable by five years imprisonment or less. ¹⁰⁷

- Former special prosecutor Lenche Ristovska argued that the changes disproportionately affected corruption cases and could end several ongoing prosecutions. ¹⁰⁸ Constitutional Court President Dobrila Kacarska and Supreme Court judges also condemned the changes. ¹⁰⁹ Likewise, the “All for Fair Trial” coalition claimed that the amendments would automatically activate the statute of limitations in 14 court cases and potentially lead to the dismissal of corruption charges against more than 80 individuals, including former and current politicians. ¹¹⁰ The opposition voted against the changes to the code and said the governing party passed them to protect current officials who may face corruption prosecutions in the future. ¹¹¹
- In yet another controversial move, the government proposed an amnesty law in a streamlined procedure citing a necessity to resocialize convicted individuals and alleviate overcrowding in prisons by considering the country’s penitentiary capacities. ¹¹² The law would slash sentences for “lighter crimes” by 30 percent and immediately release all prisoners serving six months or less. ¹¹³ The opposition said the proposal would cause crime to rise and vowed to block it using all available legal means. ¹¹⁴ Ultimately, the law failed to secure legislative support, receiving only 17 votes in favor from MPs. ¹¹⁵

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Footnotes

- ¹ “Macedonia: protesters storm parliament and attack MPs,” The Guardian, 27 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/27/macedonia-protesters-stor...>

- 2 Sinisa Jakov Marusic, “Macedonia Referendum Records Low Turnout, Both Sides Claim Victory,” Balkan Insight, 30 September 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/09/30/macedonia-name-referendum-marks-lo...>
- 3 “Census results: 3,504 Bulgarians reside in North Macedonia and only 762 speak Bulgarian at home,” Meta, 31 March 2022, <https://meta.mk/en/census-results-3504-bulgarians-reside-in-north-maced...>
- 4 “СДСМ: Анти ЕУ ДПМНЕ и Мицкоски се виновни што не отвораме поглавја” [SDSM: Anti-EU DPMNE and Mickoski are to Blame for not Opening Chapters], A1on, 15 December 2023, <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/sdsm-anti-eu-dpmne-i-mickoski-se-vinovni-shto...>
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