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Preconditions for success or failure: analyzing the mechanisms enabling or blocking democratic openings in North Macedonia's 2015 mass mobilization

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This article examines the 2015 mass mobilization in North Macedonia, a landmark episode in the country's democratic trajectory. Triggered by the release of wiretaps implicating top government officials in corruption and abuse, the protests united diverse societal groups in opposition to the ruling VMRO-DPMNE-led regime. While the movement succeeded in delegitimizing authoritarian rule and forcing political negotiations, it fell short of securing meaningful representation for grassroots actors in the resolution process. Using Michel Dobry's framework of multisectoral mobilization and drawing on interviews, media reports, and academic analyses, the article explores the internal dynamics of the protest coalition. It contrasts the informal, grassroots-driven Protestiram movement with the more institutionalized Citizens for Macedonia (CfM) coalition, supported by opposition parties and foreign donors. Although both shared a demand for democratization, differing priorities and unequal access to resources led to the marginalization of leftist grassroots groups. The article also assesses the European Union's role in the crisis. While EU mediation and the Priebe Report were pivotal in resolving the standoff and diagnosing institutional weaknesses, the EU's emphasis on elite negotiations and stability over participatory reform reinforced existing asymmetries within civil society and limited the transformative impact of the protests. Ultimately, the article argues that the 2015 mobilization was a critical moment of democratic resistance, but its potential was undercut by internal fragmentation, political co-optation, and externally mediated solutions that excluded bottom-up actors from meaningful influence.

KEYWORDS

mass mobilization, North Macedonia, Colorful Revolution, democratization, EU democracy promotion

1 Introduction

What accounts for the central or peripheral role of protests and civic mobilization in the processes of democratization in illiberal and authoritarian states? And how the EU, while having a central role in the resolution of political crises, also enables civic actors or hinders them from having a greater influence in political transition? We investigate these highly consequential issues by focusing on the celebrated case of the protest movement in North Macedonia (Armakolas et al., 2019),¹ which contributed to the process that brought an end to the government of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, a decade long tenure characterized by illiberal trends and increasingly authoritarian governance (Mitevski, 2018; Petkovski and Nikolovski, 2018). While recurrent protests took place between 2015 and 2017, our focus is on the movement that took place in 2015 and overlapped with the height of the political crisis in the country, with dense political developments that initiated the gradual collapse of the ruling coalition, and with intensive involvement of external actors, primarily the United States and European Union, in the democratization efforts.

The broader subject of the present study touches upon broad academic fields with decades' long-established tradition of scholarship: democratization (O'Donnell et al., 1986), international promotion of democracy by the EU and other liberal actors (Carothers, 1999; Grimm and Leininger, 2012; Grimm and Mathis, 2015; Levitsky and Way, 2016), social movements and contentious politics (Tarrow, 2022; Tilly et al., 1999; Della Porta and Diani, 2015), and civil society (Edwards, 2011, 2009). Despite the obvious inter-linkages, these long traditions of scholarship have often followed separate and parallel paths. Della Porta has emphasized the gap that exists between democratization research and the literature on social movements (Della Porta, 2014a,b). Similarly, social movement research, often focusing more on conflict and antagonism, and civil society studies, typically highlighting the autonomous sphere between the state and the market, have had divergent normative and theoretical underpinnings, resulting in limited interaction and exchange between them (Della Porta, 2014a,b, 2020).

The present article does not have the ambition to engage extensively with these massive bodies of theoretical work; instead, it is empirical research driven work that only selectively uses theoretical insights, and especially the conceptual framework of multisectoral mobilization as developed in the project “EMBRACE—Embracing change: Overcoming obstacles and advancing democracy in the European Neighborhood” (Rennick et al., 2024). The point of departure for our analysis is the idea that mass popular uprising are acts of multisectoral mobilization (Dobry, 1986, 1983). They are moments of high fluidity and “desectoralization,” leading to new “configurations,” or “reconfigurations” that are amenable to a measure of democratic progress and certain democratic gains. Accordingly,

“configurations” are constellations of actors and alliances, institutions, structures and distribution of power, and discursive and symbolic frameworks.

Democratic gains are possible in the context of this reconfiguration enabled through popular mobilization, but the outcome, and especially the effectiveness of protest movements to influence the course of events—its ability to produce democratic gains, to contribute to the process of democratization or to be fully blocked—depends on several factors that are either internal or external to the movement itself. In addition, influential external actors, in our case the EU and its democracy promotion, are also in direct or indirect interaction with the new configuration of agents and structures that are produced as a result of the political fluidity. Essentially, the EU and other key external actors may aid or hinder the civic forces in their ambition to influence the process of political transition (Rennick et al., 2024).²

This framework will allow us to investigate the full complexity of the civic mobilization in North Macedonia and appreciate the nuances in the convergencies and divergencies among the broad variety of groups involved. It will also allow us to shed light on its interactions with the critical influence exerted by the EU over political developments in North Macedonia during the political crisis.

2 Situating the analysis

The civic mobilization in North Macedonia has been a subject of academic inquiry, with scholars elaborating on various key dimensions of its emergence, evolution and success. Stefanovski (2020) highlights the crucial role of the international community, primarily the EU and USA, in influencing developments in North Macedonia and examines the impact of the civil unrest through the temporary convergence of interests of citizens/civil society organizations and political parties in the “Citizens for Macedonia” platform. On his part, Fonck (2018) focuses on the role of the European Parliament in the mediation of the political crisis.

Pudar Draško et al. (2019) compare social movements' characteristics and ability for struggle against illiberal tendencies and to incite political change in Serbia and North Macedonia. They consider the high degree of coordination between the civic actors and the political opposition in North Macedonia as an “impressive synergy” and a “major agent of democratic political change”. Pudar Draško et al. also consider as key success factors the protesters' ability to generalize from single issue grievances to the wider problem of illiberalism in the country, the positive impact of the legacy of previous civic protests and mobilisations, and the anchoring to the agenda of the country's prospect of integration into the EU and NATO.

¹ Republic of North Macedonia is the current name of the country that was known until 2019 under its constitutional name of Republic of Macedonia and agreed to change its name as part of a solution to the bilateral dispute it had with Greece over the use of the term Macedonia.

² For more details on the theoretical framework see Rennick et al. (2024). Contentious Politics after Popular Uprising: Assessing How EU Democracy Promotion Can Help Bottom-Up Actors Achieve Small-Scale Democratic Gains. EMBRACE Project Publications.

Markovikj and Damjanovski (2022) track the emergence, success and later dissolution of North Macedonia's Colorful Revolution to show that the social energy that brought together diverse and loosely connected social and political forces dissipated once the common target, the VMRO-DPMNE government, was removed from office. This was the “adhesive factor holding together” the multitude of protest groups, whose lack of common goal became more than apparent when VMRO-DPMNE lost power.

Pollozhani and Bieber (2025) highlight the learning process from successive waves of mobilisations that strengthened the power and fine-tuned the practices of the protest movements, the increasingly broadened social base of the movement and the effective alliance with a strong opposition party, and the international support as critical factors of success of the civic mobilization in North Macedonia.

Overall, the existing literature, despite acknowledging the multiplicity of actors within the protest movement, tends to highlight the significance of the high degree of coordination and alignment between the protesters and the formal political opposition. This is often considered a key reason for the success of the mobilization. Moreover, there is a broad agreement in the existing literature that the support by the international community was another key factor that made the protest movement successful. The present article takes stock of these important works and aims to shed light on issues that we believe require additional analysis and exploration. More specifically, while we acknowledge the protest movement's contribution to the political change in North Macedonia, we examine the reasons why the bottom-up coalition failed to materialize the advantage they had had and to take part directly in the negotiations, as well as to understand to which extent and how they managed to have their demands heard and taken onboard.

For that purpose, we will investigate the specific configurations of agency within the coalition of protesters itself, the overall political dynamics within the movement and its relations with the political elites. We will also investigate aspects of the support of external actors, primarily the EU, to understand the nuances in the external support to the civil mobilization as well as how that external influence impacted on the dynamics of protest. To achieve these objectives, we relied on a qualitative research framework that generated original data, and we coupled these with publicly available secondary material collected through desk and archival research. We engaged in a careful reconstruction of key developments using data from semi-structured interviews with actors directly involved in the protests and the politics of the time as well as media reports and scholarly works.

Overall, we argue that the 2015 protest movement in North Macedonia demonstrated the potential of grassroots, cross-ethnic mobilization against the increasingly authoritarian government. Although initially united in its calls for democratization, the movement was ultimately fragmented due to deep ideological divides, organizational disparities, and political co-optation. The informal leftist groups that brought energy and inclusivity in the protests lacked the resources, structure, and international support to play a more effective role. In contrast, formal civil society actors, aligned with the center-left opposition and backed by international

actors, were better positioned but also more susceptible to co-optation. The main opposition party SDSM played a central role in maneuvering between street protests and elite political negotiations, ultimately sidelining more radical grassroots demands. On its part, the EU intervened decisively only after the political crisis took a turn to more serious consequences with the wiretap scandal and it pushed for a controlled transition, which prioritized stability over democratic inclusiveness. While the EU's involvement ensured a smoother political transition, it also reinforced elite dominance and excluded most of the protest movement from meaningful influence, creating a two-tier civic sector. Few EU-required reforms were implemented and key issues in rule of law and governance remained unresolved, as documented in the 2015 and 2017 Priebe Reports. In conclusion, while the protest movement delegitimized authoritarian rule and sparked regime change, its transformative potential was limited by internal divisions and the dominance of elite-driven, internationally mediated political processes.

In what follows, we first provide a brief recap of the key political developments in the country during the period under investigation. Subsequently, we divide our analysis in two main sections. The first analyses the various dimensions and characteristics of the protest movement to understand its internal dynamics, structure, strengths and weaknesses. The second section focuses on the role of the EU in managing the political crisis and charting a path to its peaceful resolution as well as in engaging in multiple ways with the various civic actors involved in the protest movement. We end our analysis by drawing some broader conclusions about the intersection of civic mobilization and EU tactics and policies in response to political crisis that point to broader lessons learned for the future of EU democracy promotion.

3 Retracing the drivers and triggers behind the mass mobilization in North Macedonia

Between 2006 and 2017, North Macedonia was ruled by a VMRO-DPMNE-led government, a predominantly ethnic-Macedonian and center-right party, member of the European's People Party (EPP), with Nikola Gruevski as Prime Minister. It was a coalition government that also included an ethnic-Albanian party, according to a power sharing model defined by the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA). The OFA was signed in 2001 as a peace deal brokered by the international community, notably the US and EU, ending an internal, inter-ethnic armed conflict between ethnic-Albanian insurgents and the Macedonian security forces. Starting from 2008, VMRO-DPMNE's main partner in the coalition was the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). The governing coalition implemented much of the OFA and kept a lid on large-scale conflict, but trust at the grassroots lagged, with episodic inter-ethnic violence, segregated schooling, and identity-politics symbolism hampering deeper integration (International Crisis Group, 2011).

The Bucharest NATO summit (April 2008) and the Greek de facto veto to the country's NATO accession was a turning for the VMRO-DPMNE-led governing coalition. Nikola Gruevski's rule

started to take an authoritarian direction, gradually establishing control over all the sectors which are meant to provide checks and balances in a democratic society, including the media and the judiciary, as well as the public administration. According to Freedom House, the country went from being a semi-consolidated democracy to a hybrid (semi-authoritarian) regime in less than a decade, with all the indicators related to democracy and governance worsening (Freedom House, 2014). In terms of media freedom, the period 2009–2014 marked a drop from the 34th to the 123rd place in the Reporters without Borders ranking (Актуелно, 2015). By 2015, the country was widely seen as a textbook case of state capture in the Western Balkans, where ruling elites systematically subordinated state institutions to party and personal interests.

This period included recurrent early elections—in 2008, 2011 and 2014, which served as strategic tool for the government to secure support in key moments to extend its rule. While elections were usually labeled as free by the OSCE/ODIHR, their reports included indications that fairness lacked, noting blurred lines between the state and the party, use of state assets for party purposes, government control over the media and public broadcaster, as well as other shortcomings creating an uneven playing field for the opposition (OSCE, 2015). In the April 2014 elections, Nikola Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE secured another majority, but the opposition social-democrats (SDSM) alleged fraud, and consequently boycotted the legislature (Hova, 2014).

The mass mobilization in North Macedonia started in 2015 and continued recurrently throughout 2016 and until 31 May 2017, when a change in government happened and an SDSM-led coalition came to power. It followed a protracted period of political instability and recurrent sectoral mobilizations. The first tangible germs of the resistance appeared in 2007, in the form of leftist activists in the country and their student association *Lenka*, set up in 2008. They advocated ideas of social justice, inspired by a poem with the same name authored by the 2nd World War revolutionary poet Kocho Racin. Then, in 2009 students of architecture mobilized against the decision to build a church on the main square (*Prva Arhibrigada*). The protests were crushed by violent protests of Orthodox religious practitioners, which, as was later revealed, were orchestrated by the government (Open Society Foundation – Macedonia, 2018).

In 2011, the murder of the young Martin Neshkoski by a special police force officer during the celebration of VMRO-DPMNE's election victory triggered mass protests against police brutality and led to the creation of *Protestiram* (I protest) movement. In June 2012, the movement *Solidarnost* (Solidarity) was formed by the more progressive members of *Lenka*, accounting for the first ideological split within the leftist movements ("true vs. fake," or more progressive leftists). They continued to co-exist in the subsequent period and their activists are instrumental in the mass mobilization through the *Protestiram* movement re-launched in 2015 and in 2016.

During the period 2011–2014, there were also a number of other protests related to issues of social justice, urban planning, media freedom, and gender: the increase of the price of electricity led by the AMAN movement; the legislative proposal for mandatory payment of social contributions for contract workers; the mega-project Skopje 2014, seen as a symbol

of both poor urban planning and corruption; the constrained right to abortion, etc.

In December 2014, there were mass student protests against the newly adopted law on higher education, organized in a *Student Plenum*. At one point there were over 10,000 students/protesters reported on the streets, supported by one part of the professors (*Professors' Plenum*). Finally, the government ceded to the pressure and withdrew the controversial law.

A notable erosion of democratic governance standards was a common thread that underpinned all the grievances by seemingly different protester groups, which, over time, channeled into popular anger against the government. The illiberal practices of the ruling coalition at the time manifested through a strong executive, weak institutional checks and balances, and clientelist political parties (Gjuzelov and Hadjievska, 2019).

Except for the student protests at the end of 2014, most of these movements were short-lived, small and focused on a single issue. However, they contributed to building a revolutionary momentum and played the role of a platform to establish contacts and build a coalition of activists, civil society organizations and opposition parties, which was crucial for the quick and effective mobilization of the 2015 protests (Delibašić et al., 2019).

On 9 February, 2015, the leader of the opposition social-democratic party (SDSM), Zoran Zaev, initiated the release of wiretaps, claiming to have in his possession recordings of conversations involving over 20,000 citizens, including politicians, businesspeople, NGO activists, journalists, public intellectuals and even foreign diplomats. The wiretaps were allegedly illegally recorded by the counter-intelligence service (Radio Free Europe, 2015). The recordings contained allegations of corruption and other serious wrongdoings by high-level government officials, including the then-prime minister Nikola Gruevski, leader of the ruling center-right VMRO-DPMNE party. Mass protests organized by *Protestiram* erupted on 5 May, when a recording was published of a conversation involving the Minister of Interior at the time, alleging that she tried to cover up Neshkovski's murder back in 2011.

The weeks that followed abounded in protests, culminating on 17 May 2015, as well as daily marches, the setup of a "Freedom camp" in front of the government and other activities used by the protesters to publicize their demands, pressure the government to accept responsibility for the wrongdoings from the wiretaps and resign (Open Society Foundation – Macedonia, 2018). The crisis reached a temporary end with the Przhino Agreement, negotiated and signed on 2 June 2015 between the leaders of the four main political parties—two from the government and two from the opposition, in the residence of the EU Ambassador in Skopje (European Parliament, 2015; Markovikj and Damjanovski, 2018). Triggered by the wiretaps and right before the negotiations started, the EU published a report on the urgent reform priorities for the country to implement, drafted by a senior group of experts and containing recommendations on the path toward democratization, which became known as the "Priebe report."

The resolution of the crisis followed its path and led to a political normalization and a new—and initially highly promising—governing coalition which stayed in power for several years, albeit with a debatable success record in the domestic front. While bottom-up actors—activists, students, social movements,

civil society organizations, and other grass-root stakeholders, including ordinary citizens, were the main driver behind the popular uprising forcing the government to the negotiation table, in the end they failed to be directly represented in the crisis resolution where political parties dominated. This mismatch between the desires and activism of bottom-up actors and the political realities of the resolution of the crisis is one of the main focuses of this article.

4 Understanding bottom-up coalitions in North Macedonia

This section examines the structure, internal characteristics, operational qualities and effectiveness of the protest movement in North Macedonia. This is done by adopting, but also adjusting for the specificities of the Macedonian case, five key dimensions identified and elaborated by Rennick et al. (2024): (a) *Quality and internal cohesion*, i.e., the internal ideological and organizational diversity of the movement (breadth and depth of the coalition), but also whether it operated in a relatively cohesive manner, despite ideological and operational diversity, (b) *Networking capacity and resource endowment*, i.e., the ability of different groups within the protest movement to gain support and mobilize resources in support of their mobilization efforts and ideological agenda, (c) *Autonomy*, i.e., the willingness and ability of different groups of the protest movement to maintain a political agenda and course of action independently of the political objectives and activity of formal political parties, (d) *Constellation of power*, i.e., the political landscape of powerholders during and after the end of an authoritarian regime; moreover, through “constellation of power” we consider the degree to which different protest groups and the protest movement as a whole aim to achieve a formal alignment with agenda of the main formal political opposition, but also the way that the protests groups found themselves at the receiving end of formal politics’ efforts to incorporate the protest movement in its ranks, and (e) *Channeling and uptake of demands*, i.e., the processes through which the protest movement attempted to influence the agenda of the negotiations for the resolution of the crisis and its effectiveness in achieving adoption of protesters’ demands by political elites and decision makers. We review the above criteria and draw conclusions about the structure, characteristics and effectiveness of the protest coalition.

4.1 Quality and internal cohesion

The period of mass mobilization in 2015 marked, probably for the first time in the country’s history, a great degree of unity between all the ethnic and societal groups that participated in the protests (Lokalno, 2015). The protest movement was seen as a rare symbol of reconciliation and overcoming ethnic polarization, as well as an opportunity to end nationalism in the country. While DUI avoided open confrontation with their coalition partner VMRO-DPMNE, ethnic Albanian citizens also felt affected by the state capture and dominance of political parties in all walks of life. Although they participated in the 2015 mobilizations more selectively than ethnic Macedonians, their role was nonetheless significant. Albanian opposition parties, student groups, and prominent civil society

activists joined the protests in a display of cross-ethnic solidarity, which helped reinforce the view that the crisis was not an ethnic struggle but a collective demand for democratic accountability (Balkan Transnational Justice, 2015).

The protest movement was also very heterogeneous from an ideological point of view, including many sectoral movements with their own objectives, which were at times not only competing but even antagonistic, ranging from far-left, liberal and centrist, up to moderately conservative. The unifying factor was the government’s wrongdoings and the revelation of the highly undemocratic nature of its rule, which served as the mobilizing factor for a sizeable portion of thus-far passive segments of society and enabled the previously unlikely coalition between social movements and the opposition parties.

Several contesting groups could be identified: the leftist movements, led by *Solidarnost*, but supported by trade unions and ordinary people, united under the slogan *Protestiram*; the main opposition social-democratic party (SDSM) and its supporters, including party activists from other cities who were recurrently brought to protest in Skopje; the formal part of civil society—NGOs, which later joined a coalition with the SDSM and other smaller opposition parties (Open Society Foundation – Macedonia, 2018).

From the outside, the protests were seen as a united bloc fighting a common enemy—the government.³ But the mobilization was rather a “dual track” between two main movements: the informal and grass-root leftist activists united in *Protestiram* and the coalition Citizens for Macedonia (hereafter CfM) consisting of opposition parties (SDSM) and formal civil society organizations. The goals and tactics of these two main movements at times converged and sometimes went in different, even opposite directions. Overcoming these internal divisions initially enabled unprecedented mobilization. The inherent differences—and subsequently diverging priorities, enabled inclusiveness and quality of the deliberations, but also in the end made the internal coordination and reaching an agreement difficult.

In essence, both tracks demanded accountability for the allegations in the wiretaps, resignation of Gruevski’s government, elections and institutional democratization. However, the vagueness of the concepts used by both sides and the lack of an inclusive discussion forum rendered difficult to reach a common understanding on the path forward. There were also profound disagreements about how to organize the protests, when to intensify, who should make those decisions etc, conditioned by the increasingly diverging objectives of the two camps as the mobilization went on.

Namely, the leftist movements that emerged during the European financial and economic crisis initially focused on socio-economic issues, advocating against the “neo-liberal” order. In their words, they were fighting for democracy and social justice, while the liberals⁴ were fighting for democracy and against what they labeled—a dictatorship.⁵ Given that the protesters did not represent

³ Online interview with one of the key figures of the *Protestiram* movement, 20.01.2024.

⁴ By liberals, leftist activists refer to the more mainstream centre-left political option and the formal civil society activists – later united in the Citizens for Macedonia coalition.

a unified front in terms of demands and priorities, nor did they have a clear internal structure of decision making and formulating specific demands, it was difficult to agree on anything more than the minimum or to more specific formulations than the vague request for democratization. The liberals managed to convince the public that the problem was the then-Prime Minister, and not the overall system in place.⁶ Thus, social justice became secondary to democratization even for the leftist movements because they saw the undemocratic structure of the state as the main obstacle for achieving social justice (see text footnote 7).

Thus, the mass mobilization had the objective of bringing down the “regime,” in its dual meaning: of overthrowing the ruling governing coalition and of ending a political system imbued with strong authoritarian tendencies, a “captured state.” Democracy was understood as typical representative/liberal type of democracy, in the narrow sense of organizing free and fair elections, which was the “lowest common denominator” that all involved movements and stakeholders could agree upon. Hence, the request to establish a level-playing field for free and fair elections, in the basic and narrowest sense of democracy, was essentially the goal accepted by all the protesters and a precondition for paving the way for democratization.

Although in the CfM there were no formal structures or “democratically” elected representatives to relay civil society positions to the SDSM leadership, coordination was done in a rather informal way, through a “liaison” group of people who used to be both civil society analysts/activists and close to the SDSM and who served as a bridge between the party and the formal civil society within the coalition.⁷ There were also a number of online discussion groups where opinions were shared and where the SDSM leadership could draw inspiration (see text footnote 8).

While *Protestiram* clearly voiced demands for a broader crisis resolution format and an inclusive democratization process (Balkan Insight, 2015), the CfM coalition seemed content with SDSM’s participation in the political party leaders’ meetings. Although they openly called for reforms and the implementation of the Priebe Report, this was done primarily for ensuring level playing field at the elections (Metamorphosis, 2016). As they assessed that there were no conditions conducive to free and fair elections in 2015, since the necessary reforms were not implemented, the elections were postponed to June 2026.

4.2 Networking capacity and resource endowment

The student movement, as the immediate predecessor of the 2015 mobilization, represented a success story that inspired later protests, as the students managed to convince the government to withdraw the controversial law on higher education. They did not have significant resources, but had a clear organization in place—a *Student Plenum* and decision-making process with

a general assembly, voting rules and deliberations that lasted for hours, leading to defined and clear demands.⁸ Every student could take part in the general plenums where demands were initially discussed and formulated, and vote.⁹ They had appointed negotiators that talked directly to government representatives and proposed solutions in the spirit of a constructive, and not only critical approach. There was no leader, but different representatives took turns to talk to the media to avoid the identification of particular individuals/faces with the protest and to avoid backlash from the government against specific individuals (see text footnote 10). Their activism was supported by the *Professors’ Plenum*, who helped them collect resources through voluntary contributions in boxes (see text footnote 10). On the other side, there was a counter-plenum of professors close to the government who tried to dissuade, delegitimize and discredit the protests, to no avail. That type of coordination was not in place later, during the 2015 protests.

Protestiram, the more leftist and less structured part of the 2015 protest movement, was seen as the more genuine and efficient component of the protests, mobilizing ordinary people who did not identify with the politicians in the CfM, who leftist activists discounted as being rich and part of the corrupt system (see text footnotes 4 and 10). However, unlike the CfM coalition and just like the Student Plenum, *Protestiram* consisted of informal groups that did not count on funding from external sources, but rather on the meager voluntary contributions of time and money from their activists (see text footnotes 4 and 10). The horizontal and loose structure, of *Protestiram* as an umbrella movement mobilizing different social groups, movements and organizations with different grievances, priorities and interests, was one of the main weaknesses undermining its chances for survival. The lack of hierarchy and cohesion became obvious during deliberations over key issues, including whether they should join forces with the opposition party SDSM and how to do it without being fully co-opted.

In such a context, the CfM coalition easily became the dominant in the protest movement because of its significant resource base, including funding, access to media and opposition politicians, as well as relations with the EU Delegation, other embassies and the international community more broadly. Contrary to *Protestiram*, the CfM coalition benefitted from the structure and financial support of both the SDSM and donors like the Open Society Foundation. The latter was instrumental in providing financial support to the protests and the maintenance of the freedom camp, including through the formal CSOs that it was financing, and which were very vocal in the protests. The formal civil society organizations also had benefitted from substantial project funding in the years leading up to the process, including from the EU, its member states, as well as other powerful foreign donors supporting democracy, like the US. The established communication channels and trust explain why they were included in consultation processes by the international community during the protests and political negotiations.

5 Interview with a key figure of the leftist movement, Skopje, 27.11.2023.

6 Interview with one of the key figures of the *Protestiram* movement, Skopje, 13.02.2024.

7 Online interview with a key student activist, 22.02.2024.

8 Online interview with a student activist, 22.02.2024.

9 Interview with a professor supporting the Student plenum, Skopje, 28.11.2023.

4.3 Autonomy

During the period 2009–2014, all the protest movements were constantly trying to emphasize that their struggle was not about—or against the government or the ruling party, but idealistic and ideological—about specific issues and goals. Therefore, in virtually all the cases of grass-root, sectoral protests until the mass mobilization in May 2015, protesters were very wary of the involvement of political parties and tried to distance themselves from formal politics. In some cases, they even published social media posts declining the support of the opposition or raised banners mentioning that they do not want to be associated with a political party. The main reason was the lack of trust to cooperate with political parties and the awareness that it could delegitimise the activists (Staletovic and Pollozhani, 2023).

In the eyes of ordinary people, and in the words of most activists we interviewed, political parties on both sides and their continuous, although interchangeable grip on power are to be blamed for recurrent political crises, underdevelopment and dysfunctional institutions. Moreover, the wiretaps revealed alleged wrongdoings by both the ruling parties and the opposition, further enhancing the conviction that for years political elites have undermined the state, amassed fortunes and enjoyed impunity. The SDSM, which ruled the country in the 1990s and between 2002 and 2006, was considered as corrupt and bad as the ruling parties in 2015 (Staletovic and Pollozhani, 2023) (see text footnotes 4 and 10). Therefore, political parties in general were considered to be the origin of the problem, rather than the solution to the crisis, and grassroots activists who fought the government did not want to be associated with the SDSM as the main opposition party either.

This, however, did not prevent attempts and pressure by the opposition to capitalize on the protests. Even during the student protests in 2014 there were perfidious attempts by the opposition to influence the *Student Plenum* and score political points.¹⁰ While it was initially only a student movement against a law that undermined the university autonomy, as it grew in size, it attracted politically motivated activists who wanted to expand its goals to democratization, civic liberties, media freedom etc. (see text footnotes 10 and 12). These divisions were later on channeled into the 2015 protests at the time when the CfM coalition was formed, leading to internal splits and inability to speak with one voice, ultimately dissipating the strength of the protest movement.

4.4 Constellation of power

In societies such as North Macedonia, political parties are not only instruments for gaining and organizing power but also function as clientelistic machines that redistribute state resources and provide public services—ultimately serving another purpose: securing their hold on power by repeatedly winning elections. VMRO-DPMNE was seen as a “machine party,” which could be defined as a “non-ideological organization, interested less in political principle than in

securing and holding office for its leaders and distributing income to those who run it and work for it” (Günay and Dzhic, 2016). In a situation of state capture, the ruling party had leverage to pressure the protesters’ (or their family and friends), threatening them with the loss of jobs, access to public services, contracts, etc.¹¹ The allegations revealed in the wiretaps confirmed many rumors that the government had previously dismissed and laid the state capture out in the open. Therefore, they lent credibility to those threats, making it obvious that VMRO-DPMNE had strong control not only over public institutions, regulatory bodies and inspection services, but also over non-governmental sectors like the media, academia, judiciary, and even the private sector through their clientelistic and patronage networks. Over time such pressure influenced the enthusiasm and activism, especially in the *Protestiram* ranks whose activists did not enjoy protection by the big opposition party.

Different co-optation and influence tactics were also used by the opposition SDSM against the *Protestiram* activists and leaders in order to take control over the mobilization and bend the leftist movement that did not always agree with the SDSM and did not accept their dominance.¹² They included both “sticks and carrots” as tools—promises and threats, largely enabled and made credible by the asymmetric relationship between the SDSM officials who were established and well-connected politicians and business people, and the protesters who were mostly young people, students and NGO activists.¹³

Over time, the protests became increasingly controlled by the SDSM through the CfM. As the *Protestiram* leaders did not identify with the CfM because of their profound mistrust in political parties and fear that they would be instrumentalised by the SDSM, they did not accept that SDSM would take full control of the protests and were gradually side-lined.¹⁴ Some activists, however, joined the SDSM, either for strategic reasons, as they believed that the only way to topple the regime would be by joining forces with the opposition that could provide a structure and funding, or for personal reasons, attracted by promises to get jobs and high level positions in the new government or Parliament.¹⁵

After the May 17, 2015 protest, the CfM coalition continued its activities (with)in the Freedom Camp, while *Protestiram* developed its own, parallel protest agenda through daily marches—the so-called “Every day at 6!”. Attempts to interfere with or obstruct the activities of *Protestiram* activists continued, as SDSM recurrently tried to infiltrate their own people in order to disrupt the protests by convincing people not to go, change the route of the marches to suit their own needs or influence the protesters’ attempts to set up a Plenum as a coordination body, mirroring the successful structure of the student protests in 2014 (see text footnote 17). Over time and faced with pressure by the SDSM leadership, people who did not want to be controlled by the opposition party became disenchanted

¹⁰ Statement by Anastasija Petrevska, in Bejkova, 2020.

¹¹ Online interview with one of the leaders of the *Protestiram* movement, 20.01.2024.

¹² Interviews with two of the leaders of the *Protestiram* movement, online on 20.01.2024 and in Skopje on 13.02.2024.

¹³ Separate interviews with four *Protestiram* activists during the period November 2023 – February 2024.

¹⁴ Interviews with two of the key figures of the *Protestiram* movement, online on 20.01.2024 and in Skopje on 13.02.2024.

¹⁵ Online interview with a student leader and activist, 22.02.2024.

and gradually exited the overall protest movement, while party supporters entered in great numbers (see text footnote 17).

The leftist activists' fears were confirmed when the SDSM reached a compromise to their satisfaction in the Przhino talks and had the protests immediately ended. Instead, the *Protestiram* movement wanted the protests to continue, as they were aware that once people accept the solution and stop protesting, it would be difficult to maintain the energy and get them back on the streets if needed (see text footnote 14). SDSM formally left the CfM coalition on September 1st, 2015 when they put an end to the boycott and resumed their participation in the Parliamentary sessions (Faktor, 2015).

4.5 Channeling and uptake of demands

In the formal civil society part of the CfM coalition, there was a feeling that their voices were heard by the SDSM, although their suggestions were not always taken on board.¹⁶ There was a perception that what the SDSM was doing resonated with the CSOs in the CfM. However, if the SDSM did not agree with something that the civil society proposed, they could still go along with doing what they thought best in the formal negotiations with the political parties, indicating a largely asymmetric relationship between the main opposition party and the civil society involved in the protest movement.

There were two indirect ways for the civil society to channel their demands in the negotiation agenda. The EU Delegation, member states' embassies and the US Embassy in Skopje, held regular meetings with representatives of different CSOs and movements on different occasions and were aware of their positions.¹⁷ In addition, the technical negotiator hired by the European Commission, Peter Vanhoutte, organized meetings with the civil society to inform them about the course of the negotiations and receive their feedback (see text footnote 20). Still, there was not a direct representative of the protest movement in the negotiations and closed-door meetings between political party representatives were the preferred, despite this being seen as an "undemocratic" crisis resolution format. It is also unclear who or on what grounds was making the selection of organizations to be invited for consultation, as the leftist organizations felt largely excluded from the process. They tried to have their own representatives at the negotiating table but failed in that endeavor. In the end the grassroots movement did not have a channel to represent their ideas and felt they did not exert any influence over the outcomes.¹⁸

Still, given how vague the final text of the Przhino Agreement is, it was not difficult to make a link with the overall demands of the protesters, as these were also very general, subscribing to democracy and EU accession.¹⁹ The problem appeared later with the specific solutions and their implementation. For instance, in terms of the Special Prosecutor, she had to be approved by the

government and opposition leaders, the same people that were mentioned in the wiretaps and who she was supposed to investigate. Therefore, the civil society input went in some form into the pipeline, but what came out in terms of the implementation was a compromise that many protesters did not subscribe to. Still, most accepted it as the maximum possible outcome that the SDSM could obtain from the negotiations at the time (see text footnote 19).

5 The role of the EU and engagement with bottom-up actors

In this section we turn our attention to the EU's role in the resolution of the crisis and, especially, to the way that the EU responded to the protest movement and its demands. We start by a brief recap of the EU democracy promotion policies in North Macedonia up to the start of the 2015 political crisis. We then briefly review developments around two key EU-led resolution efforts: the Przhino Agreement and the Priebe reports, before in the end we focus more specifically on the measure of EU's acknowledgment and promotion of the protesters' agenda and demands as well as on the EU's intricate role as both an outside-in player engaging with formal political actors and as—in principle—an external supporter of civil society and civic activism, which are part and parcel of any genuine democratization process.

5.1 The priorities of EU democracy promotion until 2015

Since the country's independence in 1991, the EU's democracy promotion in North Macedonia has gone in parallel with conflict resolution and stabilization efforts (Ilievski and Taleski, 2009; Risser and Paes, 2014). The EU had provided substantial support for institution building and democracy, helping the country to align itself with the EU *acquis* and reform to fulfill the membership criteria (Demjaha, 2020; Kacarska, 2013). However, the assistance was largely targeted to achieve alignment in certain key areas, while practical implementation of the legislation remained weak. For instance, there was overall very little support for the Parliament, both in its legislative and oversight capacity, or for building a political dialogue and fostering cooperation between the political parties,²⁰ hence it was difficult for such a semi-functional institution to play a potential role in the crisis resolution.

The EU (alongside the US) had played a major role in directly mediating all the political crises prior to 2015, which usually occurred because of fallouts between the political parties (Kacarska, 2014). External involvement in each occasion was indispensable because it was seen as the only way to ensure basic contact and communication between the parties in a situation where there was not even a minimum level of trust to engage in negotiations, but also a guarantee that the undertaken commitments would be implemented.

16 Interview with an activist from a civil society organization participating in the CfM, Skopje, 27.11.2023.

17 Online interview with Peter Vanhoutte held on February 15, 2024.

18 Interview with a key figure of the *Protestiram* movement, Skopje, 13.02.2024.

19 Interview with the then-leader of a US organization based in Skopje, 13.02.2024.

20 Interview with NDI representatives, Skopje, 20.12.2023.

Despite the democratic backsliding that lasted over several years, the EU's direct and critical role in defending democracy in the period preceding the mass mobilization was invisible or inexistent, to the point that it was sometimes accused of being complicit in the VMRO-DPMNE's rule. The first European Commission report accusing the government of state capture was issued in 2015. This could be attributed to the degree of state capture and the fact that many of the allegations, though assumed or heard "on the grapevine," were never laid bare, investigated or proven. The wiretaps indicated many wrongdoings that had been covered up by the broad clientelistic network of the government and its proxies. Once they were made public in such an irrefutable manner, the European Commission had a strong anchor to call foul and had to stand up for its core values: it called for immediate action by the institutions, became more critical of VMRO-DPMNE and supportive of the protests as much as they could, given their diplomatic mandate in a country that is not an EU member, with all the respect for sovereignty and the election outcome (see text footnote 19).

On the other hand, the wiretaps also revealed the inefficiency of the EU-sponsored reforms, especially the ones aimed at strengthening rule of law in the previous decade. The EU Court of Auditors also confirmed this finding in its 2019 and 2022 reports on the impact of EU assistance on rule of law, stating that despite some contribution to positive developments, there has been limited progress and fundamental challenges persist, mainly because of lack of domestic ownership and political will (European Court of Auditors, 2022). The wiretaps revealed the full-scale state capture, including the lack of impartial and independent judiciary—courts and prosecutors. This not only fuelled the protests, but also implied that it would be impossible for accountability and justice to be achieved through the established, formal institutions and that *ad-hoc*—extra-institutional solutions may be needed.

Still, the public opinion in the country was largely favorable toward the Western countries and organizations, seeing them as traditionally helpful for consolidating the region; the same view was largely shared among the protesters. The recognition of the EU's role in successive political crises in the country, and the high popular support for EU membership, were seen as key factors shaping the receptiveness toward the EU's intervention in 2015 and enabling its positive outcome.

5.2 The Przhino Agreement

In 2015, the EU and US Ambassadors to Skopje, mediated the negotiations leading up to the Przhino Agreement, assisted by the technical mediator hired by the European Commission. By default, the main actors were the four main political parties, although EU representatives, including the negotiator, met on regular basis with selected CSOs and institutional representatives.²¹

The options seemed limited to reach a swift solution in a different manner or setting. The Assembly was not considered a potential venue for discussion or oversight, on one hand because of the SDSM boycott and their reluctance to return to the Parliament without any government concessions. More broadly as well, even in the previous period the Assembly did not properly exercise its constitutional power and was not the highest embodiment of democracy, but merely a tool of the executive. In that context, its oversight role had completely atrophied. An egregious example of the Assembly's ineffectiveness and inability to host a meaningful and substantial democratic debate was the 2012 scandal during the vote on the state budget, when the opposition (and media) representatives were violently thrown out of the Parliament building (Prizma, 2014). That case also made it into the Priebe report because the investigation committee established by the Parliament never did its work.

The text of the Przhino Agreement, with its compromise and provisions, also reflected the profound mistrust in the regular judicial and legislative system, supported also with the wiretaps. Hence, the mediators opted for political solutions that were outside of the country's legal and institutional order, but entailed institutional and legal consequences, such as the dissolution of the government or creation of a technical government ahead of the elections to level the playing field, the adoption of new or modification of existing legislation, even the creation of a new institution—the Special Prosecution Office (SPO). All the solutions stemming from the political agreement required legal changes that were subsequently adopted in the Assembly without any examination or discussion. This created legal confusion and even contradiction between different laws, opening dilemmas regarding the legality—and even constitutionality of some decisions, with the SPO being the most problematic case (Open Society Foundation – Macedonia, 2018).

That logical sequence was in a way necessary because of the lack of mutual trust and dysfunctionality and capture of the institutions, especially the judiciary. However, it also highlighted the limitation and inefficiency of extra-institutional solutions to bring about substantial change, as well as the limited impact the EU-sponsored reforms had achieved in building the country's institutions and creating a democratic environment conducive to the resolution of political fallouts, making it indispensable to resort to extra-institutional solutions. As seen in the following years, while such informal practices may be effective in the short run, they weaken formal institutional designs and empower personalized networks of political elites, which in turn undermines long term democratization efforts.

After the adoption of the Przhino Agreement, the EU also actively used accession conditionality to push for its implementation. In the context of the publication of the 2015 EU country report, the recommendation to start accession talks that the country had since 2009 became largely conditional upon the implementation of the agreement and the organization of free and fair elections. On October 27, 2015, the Ambassadors—of the EU, USA, UK, France, Germany and Italy published a strong statement calling upon VMRO-DPMNE to respect the Przhino Agreement and SDSM to stop publishing new wiretaps (Makfax, 2015).

²¹ Online interview with Peter Vanhoutte held on February 15, 2024 and online interview with Reinhard Priebe held on February 19, 2024.

Various EU actors, like the Commission, Parliament and key member states displayed an overall unified approach to the resolution of the crisis. In February 2015, enlargement Commissioner Hahn asked for Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to engage with the local political parties, and three MEPs, from the major political groupings in the European Parliament got involved in the mediation, paving the way later for the launch of a Jean Monnet dialogue.²²

This particular strategy of the European Commission was driven in part by the need to ensure impartial mediation and mitigate the concern that the EU Commissioner who came from the EPP family would not be seen as impartial. Still, it was the Commission that selected the MEPs and, through the EU Delegation present on the ground, was responsible for providing the expertise and the logistics. While the two MEPs from the EPP and S&D groups were often absent from the talks which started to take place in a more intensive manner in the residence of the EU Ambassador in Przhino in May and June 2015 (leaving most of the time only the rapporteur Vajgl in Skopje), they are considered crucial for the breakthrough achieved on July 15. Namely, they were invited to re-join on June 14 for the second part of the Przhino talks when the SDSM was convinced to return to the Parliament, largely as a result of the mediation of the social-democrat MEP, Richard Howitt (Fonck, 2018).

5.3 The Priebe reports

Upon the publication of the first wiretaps, the European Commission convened a group of senior experts coordinated by Reinhard Priebe to prepare a report on the systemic weaknesses related to rule of law, which was published on June 8, 2015. They examined issues such as the interception of communications, human rights, judiciary, media, electoral code, and provided recommendations. The report drew from previous European Commission reports, Venice Commission recommendations, as well as several dozens of meetings with relevant stakeholders at all levels and sectors, including civil society organizations, suggested to the experts by the EU Delegation in Skopje.²³ It focused on rule of law, going beyond the narrow understanding of democracy as merely free and fair elections. Many of their recommendations had already been put forward previously by international and independent bodies but not acted upon by the government. The experts were not involved in the discussions on the implementation or the actual implementation of the recommendations. A follow-up report published in September 2017 indicated that most recommendations from the first report had not been implemented.

With the report, the EU worked on a double track. It sought a quick solution to the political crisis on the short term and expected that the new government would implement the Priebe Report on the mid-term. As they quickly realized that the incumbent government was not willing to implement the recommendations, a change of government became for them a pre-condition to the implementation

of the Priebe report, hence they became supportive of the opposition and preferred to engage with the CfM. However, the report had the merit of streamlining the intellectual debate and providing basis to formulate the protesters' demands for democratization, indicating a bottom-up and top-down convergence of the ideas on what needs to be done.

5.4 Support for civil society

In the beginning of the 2015 protests, the EU did not engage directly with the bottom-up actors but rather waited to see in which direction the situation would evolve and encouraged dialogue. Still, amidst general capture of the democratic channels prior to the mobilization and the inexistence of checks and balances that could lead to democratization, the formal civil society sector resisted the subjugation tendencies and became one of the rare actors willing to challenge "the regime." This segment of civil society has been traditionally and predominantly funded by foreign donors, primarily the EU and its member states. In that context, the long-standing EU support, including funding for the civil society partly enabled the very existence of such a burgeoning sector that managed to mobilize and protest for democratization.

The CfM and the opposition parties used the protests as a pressure point to get the government on the negotiation table, but also as leverage to ask for support from the EU and the international community. As we have seen above, however, bottom-up actors did not manage to get a seat at the table and be a direct actor in the resolution of the political crisis and democratization processes in 2015. Although the EU, as the mediator in the negotiation process, had certain leverage to shape the meetings and the agenda, it only allowed for an indirect channel for the bottom-up actors to present their demands and opted to keep the format of (political party) leaders' meetings. While the engagement of political parties was important in resolving the crisis, their vested interests to seize or keep power, the inability to recognize and work together for the national interests, as well as the lack of trust by the citizens in what political parties represent and do, undermined the legitimacy and potential of that process to bring about genuine democratization.

The protesters had hoped to receive support from the EU—not necessarily financial, but political backing, because they felt that they were fighting a very powerful adversary and it would have been seen as protection against the pressure (see text footnote 9). But, during the 2015 crisis the EU was quite reserved, wary to maintain communication channels open with the government and opting to support the dialogue between the parties instead. The financial support mostly came from the EU and other Western donors in the form of longer-term projects to formal CSOs that were part of the CfM coalition. While it did not explicitly relate to the protests, the support was in the broader realm of democratization. *Protestiram* and the leftist movements did not have financial support by third parties and only counted on the small-scale contributions of their members and activists.

In that context, it is questionable whether and to which extent the EU understood the internal divisions and nuances inside the protest movement or whether they knew how to manage them. As an unintended result of this configuration, CfM, the group that was

²² The MEPs included: Ivo Vajgl—the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) rapporteur from the country, Eduard Kukan—European People's Party and Richard Howitt – Socialists & Democrats.

²³ Online interview with Reinhard Priebe, 19.02.2024.

largely financed by the donor community but was also linked to the political opposition, managed to acquire and hold a dominant role in the protest movement; they had the resources, organizational structure and strategy to impose their own views and demands over the rest of the protest movement, and subsequently in the negotiation agenda, to the extent that the protesters' views were incorporated in it.

6 Conclusions

The 2015 protest movement in North Macedonia showed the potential of broad-based bottom-up mobilization, but was ultimately fragmented, co-opted, and overpowered by established political forces and the formal political process, largely supported by the international community. The protests represented a historic moment of temporary unity across ethnic and ideological lines in North Macedonia. United by a common enemy and an overall objective to see the end of an illiberal regime, rather than necessarily agreeing on how comprehensive the socio-economic and political changes should be, various societal sectors and political groups joined forces. However, this unity masked deep ideological and organizational divisions, especially between the grassroots leftist movement and the formal political opposition which was in coalition with civil society groups and united under the umbrella initiative Citizens for Macedonia. The overall objective of bringing the end of the VMRO-DPMNE-led government enabled a convergence in mobilization, despite significant divergence in political thinking and ultimate political goals. All groups were united by opposition to the authoritarian regime and demands for democratization, but only the lowest common denominator of establishing a level-playing field for holding free and fair elections emerged as a minimal shared goal. The subsequent steps and what was considered needed for a genuine political change proved much more complex and divisive issues, which eventually also led to disunity and the dissipation of the collective protest movement.

Significant differences also emerged in the organizational structure, resources and, eventually, the leverage of different groups in the protest movement. Despite their widely recognized authenticity and mobilization energy, informal leftist groups lacked the organizational capacity, the funding and the international support to become key players in the protest movement. Their horizontal, decentralized approach fostered inclusivity but also hindered strategic decision-making and sustainability. In contrast, the formal civil society groups, in direct communication and/or alignment with formal politics and the international community, had both the resources and the vision to take part in the influence game surrounding the process of regime change. This led to a growing asymmetry and the eventual sidelining of the more leftist grassroots actors. The autonomy of the overall protest movement was also partly eroded by the political co-optation of the mobilization energy by party politics, and especially the opposition SDSM, which proved highly skilful in maneuvering both the revolutionary moment in the streets and the complex political party negotiations.

Yet, on the whole, the power and influence of even the better organized protest movement groups proved more symbolic than

actual. They had a crucial role in cementing the revolutionary moment that delegitimised the illiberal governance of the VMRO-DPMNE-led coalition, but their influence in decision making was minimal. At the behest also of the EU mediation efforts, the negotiation process that led to the regime change, was dominated by formal political actors. Civil society and the protest movement lacked direct representation in the formal negotiations and top-down solutions were prioritized by the political parties and the international community alike. The success of the political transition—and some would argue its overall democratic legitimacy—was offset by the political compromises stricken in the process, as was highlighted by the case of the formation of the Special Prosecution Office. The transition to a new, more democratic governance was initiated with high hopes for many, but also great disillusionment for some of the most genuine actors involved in the protest movement. For many activists, the outcome could be justified only as the best possible under the difficult circumstances, for others it was a betrayal of the soul of the pro-democracy movement.

A lot can also be said about the role of the EU in the process and its democracy promotion agenda. EU-sponsored reforms prior to 2015 had a weak impact in the country, especially on the judiciary and rule of law, while some would argue that the EU remained passive as North Macedonia was sliding to authoritarianism and state capture under the VMRO-DPMNE-led government. Pre-2015 civic protests did not manage to sensitize the EU and move the needle in its pressure toward the Skopje government. It was only after the wiretap scandal broke that the EU realized that it had “a ticking bomb” in its hand and mobilized to prevent the escalation of the crisis. The revelations created a sense that justice could not be achieved through the formal institutions that were fully controlled by the governing parties. This, and the concerns over the resistance of the cemented VMRO-DPMNE regime, justified the use of extra-institutional and *ad hoc* mechanisms to deal with the crisis.

The externally mediated political compromise that came in the form of the Przhino Agreement largely bypassed formal institutions and created new, but still contested structures, such as the Special Prosecution Office. These solutions reflected mistrust in institutions and resulted in legal ambiguities and democratic trade-offs. While effective on the short-term, such informal arrangements weakened institutional legitimacy in the long run.

The EU maintained a back-channel with parts of the civil society, maintaining a steady but limited input from the non-formal political actors. It also prioritized the mainstream civic actors when it came to funding and political voice, effectively contributing to a “two-speed” civic sector. But even the “high speed” groups did not have major influence. In essence, the protest movement was excluded from the formal process of negotiations, with only limited input offered through informal channels.

On the plus side, the EU was more effective in pushing implementation of the agreed upon political measures by using accession conditionality and linking reform to the progress toward EU membership. Moreover, a noteworthy plus on the EU involvement's balance sheet were the 2015 Priebe Report and its 2017 update. The 2015 Priebe Report documented the systemic weaknesses in rule of law, judiciary, media, and electoral processes, while its 2017 update confirmed that, despite the change

in government, lack of political will and drive left many of the key problems unaddressed. The two reports offered an honest assessment of the political-legal malaise in the country and an effective tool for use by domestic and international actors alike.

With a hindsight of almost a decade, we can conclude that the solutions that seemed optimal in 2015 were merely a quick-fix for the main opposition to return to the formal political process, bringing about a temporary end to the political crisis. Cosmetic changes presented as leveling the playing field only led to new elections where VMRO-DPMNE again won the most votes. The work of the SPO, strongly supported by the international community with words and funds, was marred with scandals, and the lead special prosecutor who was supposed to pursue high-level corruption ended in prison for corruption herself. Most of the wiretaps did not translate into due prosecution and court cases, facing instead a statute of limitations. Against such a backdrop, the question remains whether a stronger protest coalition, represented at the negotiation table, with common positions supported by the international community could have pressed political elites into better solutions, leading to a sustainable democratization process.

The political crisis in North Macedonia in 2015 demonstrated that while civic mobilization can successfully delegitimize authoritarian rule and trigger regime change, its transformative potential is ultimately limited by both internal divisions and the dominance of external, elite-driven processes. The EU's response, though decisive in putting an end to the political crisis, prioritized stability and elite negotiations over inclusive engagement with the protest movement. This approach, while effective in the short term, reinforced existing power asymmetries and excluded most of the protest movement from having a meaningful influence. The EU's reliance on top-down, elite-driven solutions and its reliance on the formal, better-resourced civil society organizations ultimately sidelined more radical, grassroots demands for democratization and systemic change. This not only dissipated the strength of the protest movement, but also led to incomplete and, as seen later on, sub-optimal solutions. A key lesson for future EU democracy promotion is that a singular focus on stability and political negotiation, without direct inclusion of and support for bottom-up actors, may undermine the long-term goal of genuine democratization and instead perpetuate elite dominance.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants received an official approval by the Institutional Review Board (Ethics Committee) of University of Konstanz, dated October 5, 2023. Uni Konstanz was the scientific lead of the project. The approval was subsequently confirmed by the Ethics Committee of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) as the organization responsible for the implementation of the field research. The participants

provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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