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Between Democratic Backsliding and EU Integration: Explaining Diverse Democratic Paths in the Western Balkans

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List of Abbreviations

AJM	Association of Journalists of Macedonia
CARDS	Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CSAC	Commission on State Aid Control
CSOSI	Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index
DPS	Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
DUI	Democratic Union for Integration
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
GONGO	Government-organized non-governmental organization
HLAD	High-Level Accession Dialogue
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
MP	Member of Parliament
MRT	Makedonska Radio Televizija
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OCCS	Office for Cooperation with Civil Society
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
REM	Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media
RRA	Republic Broadcasting Agency
RTS	Radio Televizija Srbije
RTV	Radio Televizija Vojvodine
SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SDSM	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia
SLAPP	Strategic lawsuit against public participation
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
SPS	Socialist Party of Serbia

TACSO	Technical Assistance for Civil Society Organisations
TAIEX	Technical Assistance and Information Exchange
TEU	Treaty on European Union
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UÇK	National Liberation Army (Macedonia)
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy Project
VMRO-DPMNE	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity

1. Introduction

On 21 June 2003, the EU-Western Balkans Summit of Thessaloniki came to an end. This summit is often referred to as the most crucial milestone in the accession process to the EU of Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia[1], Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo – generally and hereinafter referred to as the Western Balkans. The summit marked the starting point of a long process of close cooperation between Brussels and the region. The status of potential candidates was finally granted to all invited countries, while it was recognized that "the future of the Balkans is within the European Union" (European Commission, 2003). At the beginning of the 2000s, one could not look at the situation in Southeastern Europe without a genuinely optimistic view. Having witnessed the fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Yugoslavia, and Albania between 1989-1991, the "end of history" narrative permeated every discourse in Western European countries, whereas the cruelest conflicts in Europe since the end of the Second World War – the Yugoslav Wars – had come to an end. The EU's transformative power and conditionality mechanisms had proven effective in delivering economic development and democratic consolidation in CEE, while the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe was picking up pace in fostering regional cooperation. EU Enlargement was widely regarded as "the most successful tool of EU foreign policy" (Vachudova, 2005). Moreover, the imminent accession of eight CEE countries, after little more than a decade of democratic experience, was seen as tangible proof of the EU's success, and there was a strong belief in European circles that the Western Balkans would soon follow suit.

However, today the year 2023 marks the 20th anniversary of the Thessaloniki Summit and the situation in the region could not look grimmer. First off, only one of the countries invited to Thessaloniki has since succeeded in joining the EU – Croatia in 2013 – while the remaining six are still deadlocked at three different accession tiers. This slowdown in the enlargement policy has led many to speak of a new phenomenon of "enlargement fatigue", indicating the EU's waning capacity to absorb new members (O'Brennan, 2014). Moreover, the last two decades have witnessed a return of semi-authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. The few years of democratic

[1] North Macedonia was until February 2019 known as the Republic of Macedonia, and provisionally as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) due to a naming dispute with Greece. In order not to cause confusion and for reasons of convenience, I will use the term "North Macedonia" throughout the period of analysis.

reforms at the beginning of the new millennium were abruptly interrupted by the return of nationalist and populist parties starting in the mid-2000s. Despite coming to power on pro-European and reformist platforms, political formations such as Nikola Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE of North Macedonia and Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) soon began to slowly erode the liberal democratic institutions of their countries (Bieber, 2020). As Figure 1 shows, this trend has been common to all Western Balkans states, which today have democratic scores below 2003-2004 levels and appear far behind EU standards. These new authoritarian practices in the Western Balkans can be inscribed in a broader framework of global democratic backsliding, a third "reverse wave" of democratization that has hit several countries around the world since the mid-2000s (Bermeo, 2016; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

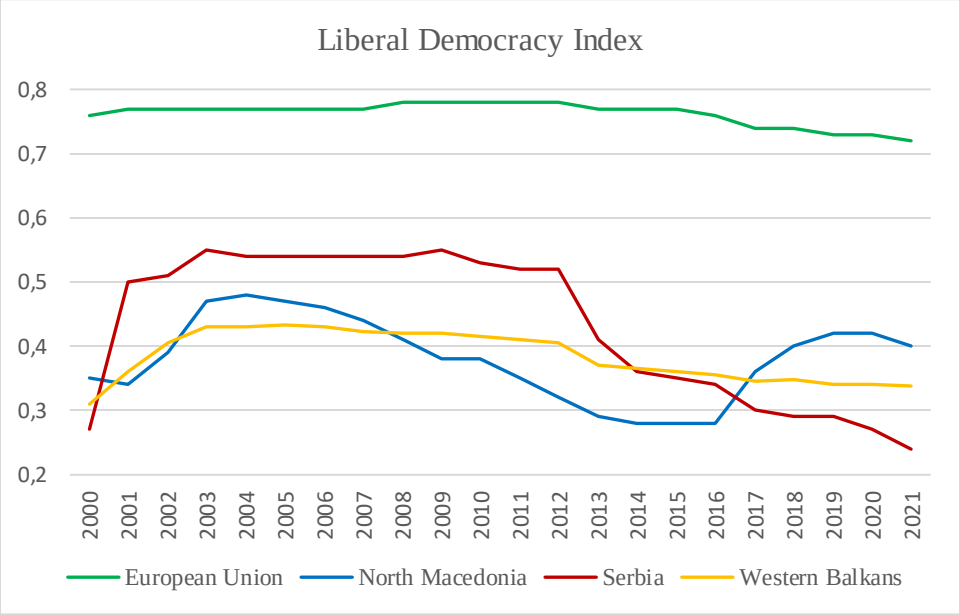

***Figure 1**: Liberal Democracy Index (2000-2021). Scores from low (0) to high (1). Source: V-dem.net.*

Without entering into debates on whether it would be more correct to speak of "stagnation" or whether the Western Balkans had ever achieved democratic status in the first place, this thesis refers to backsliding as a slow erosion of the democratic quality of government within a country, regardless of whether this regression occurs in a consolidated democracy or a semi-authoritarian regime. This issue appears extremely relevant as it is often pointed to as the most worrying challenge in terms of EU accession and the main determinant of enlargement fatigue. Moreover, it appears surprising in light of the successful democratization of CEE countries: given the same level of EU conditionality and interest, one would expect the same effect of the EU's

transformative power. Generally, scholars tend to point to the region's past legacies and peculiar history as the main determinant of backsliding (Elbasani, 2013; Kmezić, 2020). However, looking closely, one realizes that the democratic problems in the Balkans are not only of domestic origin but that the EU is also at fault (Džankić et al., 2019). In particular, some contributions in recent years have noticed a "decoupling" between the increasing formal compliance with EU membership criteria and the declining democratic standards in the region (Richter & Wunsch, 2020). Consequently, this leads me to suspect that not only is EU conditionality ineffective in stopping illiberal practices but that the EU may be actively responsible for their consolidation.

What is more, in recent years some Western Balkan countries have managed to reverse this de-democratizing trend (see Figure 1). Most notably, North Macedonia managed to oust Gruevski from government in 2016, in the aftermath of the wiretapping scandal that hit the ruling political class. Similarly, in 2020 Montenegrin voters succeeded in ending the 30-year uninterrupted government of Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). Therefore, from a European studies perspective, the situation in the Western Balkans presents a double puzzle. On the one hand, given the EU's interest and strong presence in the region, one would expect a clear trend toward democratization. On the other, considering the EU's uniform approach to the Western Balkans and the countries' similar history, one would expect their democratic trajectories to follow the same pattern. However, this does not seem to be the case, as shown above. From the foregoing, the following research question arises: *What explains the diverse democratic paths of Western Balkan countries?* My hypothesis, which emerges from the analysis of theories of democracy, is that no single approach can explain this research conundrum, but that both structuralist and agency theories must be considered, as well as external and domestic factors.

Consequently, the primary objective of this thesis lies in the reconciliation of structure-based and actor-based theories, a theme inherent to much social science research (Sewell, 1992; Mahoney & Snyder, 1999). Although many scholars of democratization tend to focus on either structural factors or the choices of relevant actors, this thesis agrees that only a comprehensive framework can explain the Western Balkans' situation. This appears even more true for the most studied theme since the time of Aristotle (i.e. democracy), a complex issue that cannot be unfolded by single determinants. Therefore, a synthesis of different approaches is necessary, and this research aims to lay the groundwork for an integrative and comprehensive approach. Second, being a theory-based study, this thesis aims to study whether hypotheses designed at different times and for different

geographical regions still survive the passage of time and the test of the Western Balkans. The objective is not only to explain the democratic situation in the region but also to measure the explanatory power of the selected theories and to determine whether the results can be generalized to the world as a whole. Last, this thesis does not aim to be only an academic exercise but also presents a practical side. Indeed, the study of the conditions that have led to and worsened the democratic backwardness in the region – as well as the factors that have allowed countries like North Macedonia to reverse course – aims to highlight where the relevant political actors should intervene, and could thus function as a policy recommendation for action.

The remainder of the present thesis is divided into five parts. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework on which the study is grounded. First, it investigates theories of democratic backsliding and external democracy promotion and dwells on Levitsky and Way's (2006) theory of linkages and leverage. Based on the authors' assumptions, a first hypothesis on the diminishing levels of EU linkage and leverage in the region is set forth. Then, the chapter describes the limitations of this theory and turns to other academic contributions – such as Tolstrup's (2013) – focusing on the role of domestic actors rather than external conditions. A second hypothesis that assumes different degrees of strength of the ruling elites and the civil society opposition is formulated accordingly.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology by which the research was conducted. It first lays out how the concepts developed have been operationalized through the definition of proxies, and how data have been gathered from primary and secondary sources. Then the qualitative methodology is described. The thesis focuses on two case studies – Serbia and North Macedonia – which are compared using Mill's method of difference. Hypothesis testing is applied to the study of selected documents through a process-tracing analysis.

Chapter 4 aims to empirically detect the diminishing linkage and leverage of the EU in the Western Balkans. In order to assess the degree of leverage, the chapter looks for competing issues on the EU leaders' agenda that would point to the presence of a stability-democracy dilemma. To this aim, both European Council conclusions and EU politicians' declarations are analyzed. In order to study the linkage between the region and the EU, the communication linkage is selected whilst the level of media freedom is used as a proxy. Accordingly, the European Commission's progress reports are analyzed with the aim of highlighting how the countries' media sectors have evolved over time.

Chapter 5 turns to the role of domestic actors, assuming different degrees of strength for ruling elites and opposition actors in countries with different democratic outcomes. To study the organizational power of governing parties, Commission's progress reports are studied over time. Conversely, to retrieve the resilience of civil society in the two countries under analysis, the annual reports of the Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index (CSOSI) are examined.

Last, the final chapter reiterates the main findings and draws conclusions. Both the structural and agency assumptions are confirmed by the empirical analysis, although neither manages to solve the research puzzle on its own. Hence, the need to develop a comprehensive theory that operates a synthesis of the approaches considered is established. Further research on democratic processes should examine how to develop this integrative approach, for which the present work provides the theoretical and methodological foundations.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section investigates the literature on democratization, democratic backsliding, and external democracy promotion to develop a theoretical framework from which to derive some hypotheses to test. As the democratic backwardness in the Western Balkans is the central conundrum of this thesis, I first consider what theories have been put forward by scholars to explain the phenomenon. First off, from an overview, it appears clear that the literature on democratic backsliding has still not produced a powerful theory. Indeed, the hypotheses set forth so far have been adapted either from the literature on democratization – and then reversed – or from theories of democratic breakdown (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018). Waldner and Lust (2018) give an overview of the several hypotheses set forth and distinguish between economic, political, and cultural determinants of democratic regression, between agency-based and structural approaches, and lastly introduce the category of international factors. Since this study is interested in the role played by the EU in the rise of semi-authoritarianisms in the Western Balkans, I consider below the hypotheses on the international determinants of de-democratization and, in particular, analyze theories on external democracy promotion.

Overall, no grand theories of external democracy promotion have been developed, mainly due to two factors: on the one hand, the fragmentation of the research field – with diverse aims and very different areas of application –, and the high diversification of democratization theories, on the other (Leininger, 2019). Initially, when studying the famous Third Wave of democracy, transitologists have rather ignored external structural factors, opting to focus on domestic agency-based mechanisms that led to the collapse of autocratic regimes (Rustow, 1970; O'Donnell et al., 1986). Since the 1990s, the literature has gradually started paying attention to international factors, and later led to the incorporation of the influence of external actors into the picture. This literature was led by studies on Europeanization focusing on the impact of Europe on domestic politics: these studies underscored the EU's transformative power as the main factor driving the transition of former communist countries (Börzel & Risse, 2003; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). However, as the literature on external democracy promotion just started to develop, it already presented a crucial shortcoming. This approach was indeed rather normative, considering the EU – and Western actors in general – only as positive determinants, while only a few studies considered the negative externalities of Europeanization. Therefore, when the Europeanization

approach failed to explain the lack of consolidated democratization in the Western Balkans and the subsequent enlargement fatigue, it attributed its cause to domestic factors within the region's states (Elbasani, 2013).

Being interested in the weakness of the EU's transformative power, I examine the theories that question the EU's role as a promoter of democracy. In the first decade of the 21st Century, two approaches have emerged as leading theories of democracy promotion. In 2004, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier developed the external incentives model, an actor-centered governance approach that focuses on the rational choices and bargaining of relevant actors (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Two years later, Levitsky and Way offered a similar approach focused on the interaction between external democracy promotion and domestic response. Their hypotheses were deeply grounded in structuralist premises, rather than considering the rational choices of relevant actors. In a seminal article (Levitsky & Way, 2006), they proposed two new lenses through which to analyze the effectiveness of international influences on democratization: Western leverage and linkage to the West.

Leverage is described as "the degree to which governments are vulnerable to external democratizing pressure" (Levitsky & Way, 2006, p. 379). This pressure for democratization can be exercised in several ways, such as diplomatic persuasion, conditionality, and punitive measures. However, the effectiveness of this pressure – and thus the degree of leverage – is determined by three factors. First and foremost, power asymmetry related to state size and economic strength. According to the authors, this determinant is the strongest in explaining leverage since weak states with smaller economies are clearly more vulnerable to external pressures. Second, the presence of alternative regional powers able to provide political and economic support. Indeed, the existence of "black knights" (Hufbauer et al., 1990) as alternative sources of support can mitigate Western leverage and may result in Western actors no longer being perceived as the "only game in town". Third, the existence of competing issues on Western foreign policy agendas may undermine the level of leverage. That means that in those countries where the EU and other Western actors have major economic and security interests at stake, democratic demands may take a back seat to stability and security priorities.

Overall, leverage raises the costs of authoritarian practices; nonetheless, its impact on democratization has been limited (Crawford, 2001). Thus, leverage being a necessary but insufficient condition, Levitsky and Way introduce a second mechanism of international pressure:

linkage, i.e., "the density of ties and cross-border flows between particular countries and the [West]" (Levitsky & Way, 2006, p. 383). Linkage operates across five dimensions: economic, geopolitical, social, communication, and transnational civil society. According to the authors, linkage raises the costs of authoritarian repression in a more consistent way than leverage, tightening the democratizing countries much closer to the Western orbit. Furthermore, Western linkage "enhances the effectiveness of leverage" (Levitsky & Way, 2006, p. 386) by increasing the scope and consistency of external pressure.

In rather general terms, Levitsky and Way conceive that by intersecting high/low linkage inputs with high/low leverage, there are four possible outcomes, ranging from a situation of high linkage and leverage to one of low linkage and leverage. In the former case, the target country or region experiences consistent and effective democratizing pressure. In this context, authoritarian leaders are unlikely to survive, and democratization is probable even in the face of unfavorable domestic conditions. This leads the authors to conclude that the successful transitions to democracy of CEE countries – and their rapid accession to the EU – were mainly due to the presence of high Western leverage and linkage. The authors point out that also Croatia, Serbia, and the other countries of the Balkan region have shown a clear democratizing pattern from the early 90s up to 2005 thanks primarily to the strong linkage with the EU and Western institutions in general. It follows, that nothing prevents one from believing that they would follow the same pattern as the countries of CEE (Levitsky & Way, 2006; 2007). However, since then these countries have not experienced democratic consolidation, as Levitsky and Way would have expected, but have rather entered a phase of slow de-democratization (Bieber, 2020). Of course, the authors were writing at the dawn of the "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), and could not have foreseen this global democratic recession.

Therefore, this thesis aims to test the structuralist hypotheses set forth by Levitsky and Way in light of the new development in the politics of the Western Balkans. The authors themselves have not come back to their theory and updated it, so it appears interesting to check whether their premises are still valid more than 15 years after they were first proposed. Since the democratic outcomes have changed, I assume that their input – namely the level of linkage and leverage – must have changed as well. Consequently, the countries of the Western Balkans are presumably no longer in a context of high linkage and leverage but are slowly moving away from it. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that linkage and leverage are, above all, structural variables, products of

geographical and historical factors and long-term processes. It follows that they are less amenable to short-term manipulation by individual policy choices. Therefore, I must presume that Balkan countries are not entering a phase of low linkage and leverage but are rather drifting away from a high-linkage context at a very slow pace. This hypothesis goes hand in hand with these countries' gradual backsliding from consolidated democracy into the "gray zone" (Carothers, 2002): they are still within the realm of democracy but experiencing a decrease in quality. From the foregoing considerations, a first hypothesis follows: during the period of democratic backsliding in Western Balkan countries, I expect *lower levels of both EU leverage and linkage to the EU (H1)*.

Nevertheless, Levitsky and Way's theory presents some major shortcomings common to all structuralist approaches (Schmitz & Sell, 1999). First and foremost, structural theories fail to explain why countries with similar geographical, historical, and cultural conditions present different outcomes. Indeed, according to Levitsky and Way, the density of linkages is more or less carved in stone, and hence its levels must be similar across countries with roughly the same historical and geographical features. This understanding is made explicit by the authors in a subsequent paper (Way & Levitsky, 2007) where they compare the regions of CEE and the Western Balkans with the former USSR. While the formers have experienced stronger democratization thanks to their geographical and sociocultural proximity to the EU, the latter countries are still highly autocratic. The authors point to the different levels of linkage and leverage as the main (and only) explanatory factor for this trend, whilst they account only superficially for intra-regional variation.

In order to overcome the shortcomings of structuralist approaches, the literature on the international determinants of democracy has focused on the role of human agency. Already in the 70s and 80s, Third-wave transitologists guided by the pioneering work of Rustow (1970) started exposing the weaknesses of modernization approaches. Indeed, structural factors alone cannot explain the democratization of the former communist countries without taking into account the strength and organization of domestic elites. This approach is also applied by Tolstrup (2013, 2014) when he criticizes the model proposed by Levitsky and Way. Tolstrup finds that the authors' assumptions on the non-amenability of linkages are flawed, and consequently holds that the density of a country's ties to the West is determined not only by structural features but also by domestic actors. In particular, the scholar mainly refers to the role of so-called "gatekeeper elites"

(Tolstrup, 2013), divided into ruling and oppositional elites; still, he also acknowledges the importance of civil society movements and NGOs (Tolstrup, 2014).

However, also Levitsky and Way did recognize in a later contribution the role of the "organizational power of incumbents" (Way & Levitsky, 2010) by adding the levels of state coercive capacity and party strength to their structural theory. Nevertheless, the authors did not include policy choices or opposition strategies and thus considered the role of domestic actors as rather passive and structurally determined. Conversely, Tolstrup (2013) argues that domestic elites should not be perceived as mere objects of external influence, but rather as active factors shaping the country's linkage to the West and democratic trajectory. The author analyzes the role of elites in the five dimensions of linkages identified by Levitsky and Way and concludes that clearly, linkages are not only structurally determined. Consequently, if the different strength of domestic actors affects the degree of democracy promotion, domestic agency can account for intra-regional variation and not only across regions. Having detected that linkages are amenable to actor choices, Tolstrup analyzes what guides agency in the first place. By looking at the motives and preferences of political elites, the scholar sets forth two sets of explanations derived from the transitologist literature: rationalist or strategic motives and value-driven motives. This distinction was first outlined by March and Olsen (1989) who distinguished between the "logic of consequentiality" and the "logic of appropriateness". Political actors guided by the first tend to carefully weigh the costs and benefits associated with a certain decision. On the other hand, value-driven elites will pursue a given policy when they perceive it to be in line with their personal ideals or with what they perceive as state values.

Nevertheless, in practical terms, testing the consideration behind elite choices and decision-making in general is difficult and, more importantly, data is seldom readily available. Therefore, what scholarly research should do is analyze the conditions that shape the ability of ruling elites to perform gate-keeping, as argued by Tolstrup (2013, 2014). Although the author does not provide a coherent framework of analysis across his contributions, he mainly identifies three dimensions along which the strength of governing actors can be measured (Tolstrup, 2013, pp. 728–729). These dimensions are derived from the literature on authoritarian stability and were mainly developed to study how post-communist elites "resisted to contagion" (Way, 2009): first, the unity of the ruling elites, second, the level of government control over the economy, and last, the political constraining capacity of the ruling party. Following, Rustow's (1970) seminal study, Tolstrup's

analysis feeds into an elitist understanding of democratization, as the behaviors of "ruling political elites" and "oppositional elites" are taken as the main determinants of democratic outcomes (Tolstrup, 2013, p. 720).

Nonetheless, since Rustow's study, many scholars have shifted attention to democratization from below, arguing that also the role of civil society must be taken into account (Diamond, 1994; Gill, 2000; Wnuk-Lipiński, 2007). Tolstrup does mention civil society elites as crucial actors to perform gatekeeping and favor democratic reforms; however, the scholar fails to put them on the same level of ruling actors and fails to grasp their social – rather than elitist – nature. On the contrary, this thesis takes into account a bottom-up approach to democratization, agreeing with the literature that attributes pre-eminence to civil campaigns and mass protests (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Moreover, it agrees with Della Porta (2020) in the importance of "building bridges" between civil society and social movements studies, as the two cannot be kept separate at times of political crisis. The strength of civil society opposition must be taken into account both as a factor influencing the government's decisions – in terms of "audience costs" – and as a dynamic actor in itself able to shape the country's direction in terms of democratic paths. Although NGOs may not necessarily strive for more liberal democracy, it is generally acknowledged in the literature that a vibrant civil society is a key actor in creating an enabling environment for democracy to thrive (Diamond, 1994; Mercer, 2002). However, in order to perform constructive action in countering authoritarian practices and achieve political change, civil society opposition needs "unity, resources, and momentum" at a higher level than ruling elites (Tolstrup, 2013, p. 734).

The comparison between the strength of the ruling elites and the level of organization of the opposition and civil society makes it possible to study under which conditions a semi-authoritarian trend can survive or break down. This approach recalls the transition game used by Przeworski (1991, p. 62) to explain transitions to democracy through game theory. In a nutshell, transitions are likely to happen when ruling elites realize the stronger organizational power of civil society opposition either because they had underestimated it or because repression is unlikely to succeed. Although the model cannot be used in the Western Balkans' case where political actors are still in a context of democracy – however limited –, its general assumptions might prove useful for the present analysis: the strength of opposition – whether resilient to repression or unforeseen – is a necessary premise for potentially ending democratic backsliding.

The present thesis aims to test the considerations developed by Tolstrup and the agency-based literature in general. The hypotheses analyzed seem to explain the different democratic paths within regions and could thus be useful for the present study. Indeed, de-democratization is far from being a uniform trend in the Balkan region, where some countries are sliding faster towards authoritarianism while others have managed to reverse this path. In this light, I aim to test whether the different levels of strength of domestic actors can account for the different democratic outcomes within the region. From the foregoing, the following hypothesis is derived: in Western Balkan countries with different democratic paths, I expect *different levels of strength and organization of ruling elites and civil society opposition (H2)*.

All in all, this study aims to reconcile structural with agency-based approaches – as attempted by several other scholars in the literature (Mahoney & Snyder, 1999; Schmitz & Sell, 1999). I agree with Tolstrup (2013, p. 735) that "neither structures nor actors can be given absolute primacy" but should rather be seen as complementary. Moreover, I argue that in the case of the Western Balkans, structural approaches can explain the relative decreasing leverage of the EU in the region but cannot account for intra-regional variation. At the same time, actor-centered explanations do account for different national outcomes but do not shed much light on the role played by structural and EU-related factors in the overall trend of democratic backsliding. By testing the two hypotheses derived from the literature, this thesis shows the explanatory power of the two approaches, however partial. Consequently, as drawn up by Mahoney and Snyder (1999, p. 7), it defines the theoretical and methodological "building blocks" of both approaches and thus setting the stage for their potential synthesis into an integrative approach. It is from these theoretical considerations that the methodological approach outlined in the following chapter derives.

3. Methodology

After discussing the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis, this chapter illustrates how the empirical research was conducted. First, it shows how the concepts developed earlier were operationalized and how the relevant data were selected and gathered. Then, it evaluates the case selection and shows which methods were applied to study the collected data.

In order to operationalize the abstract concepts of linkage and leverage, two proxies have been developed to assess their development over time. First off, in line with Levitsky and Way's (2006, p. 383) theory, I have analyzed the presence of competing objectives on the EU agenda as an indicator of diminishing EU leverage in the Western Balkans. I have thus identified the European Council conclusions as the primary sources where the priorities of the EU could emerge. Indeed, this institution "define[s] the general political directions and priorities" of the Union (Art. 15(1) TEU), and thus its meetings' conclusions give an idea of what issues are on top of the EU leaders' agenda. However, although these data may account for the EU's overall approach to the region, they say little about the EU's objectives towards individual accession countries. Hence, I have also examined the individual statements by EU leaders on the selected countries. I have retrieved them from primary sources such as institutional websites and online newspapers, and selected the most controversial ones in order to bring out the presence of competing goals.

Turning to linkages, among the different types identified by Levitsky and Way (2006), I have selected the communication linkage as a proxy. The selection was made on the basis of the greater accessibility of relevant data – as opposed to less accessible data on diaspora communities or links with EU executives, for example – and the relevance of the media sector to the democratic consolidation of the country. While the data on leverage were retrieved from the European Council website due to their predominantly political nature, the data on media ties appear more technical and were therefore gathered from an analysis of the Commission's progress reports on enlargement countries. In particular, Chapter 10 on "Information society and media" and Chapter 23 "Judiciary and fundamental rights" under freedom of expression have been examined to see how the media linkage developed over time. The linkage has been studied both from a top-down perspective to assess whether the domestic media sector has evolved according to EU recommendations, and from a bottom-up approach to study whether an environment conducive to the free flow of information has been established. The relevant data has been grouped according to three areas

outlined in the 2014 "Guidelines for EU support to media freedom and media integrity in enlargement countries" (DG Enlargement, 2014a), the first document setting the EU standards on media freedom for candidate countries. First, the establishment of the legal, institutional, and political conditions necessary to create an environment conducive to media freedom. Second, the improvement of the internal governance of media outlets, relating to both finance and professional ethics. Last, increasing the capacity and strength of journalist professional organizations as well as the resilience of individual journalists.

In Chapter 5, I turn to the analysis of domestic actors' role in fostering or halting democratic backsliding. First, I look at the strength and organization of the ruling elites along three dimensions identified by Tolstrup (2013, pp. 728–729) which are mainly derived from the literature on authoritarian stability (Magaloni, 2008; Way, 2009). First, the unity of the ruling elites, expressed by the ideological cohesion and institutionalized consensus built within the governing coalition. Second, the level of government control over the economy, demonstrated by the degree of centralization and state ownership of key enterprises and sectors. Last, the political constraining capacity of the ruling party, i.e. its ability to anticipate opposition groups and marginalize them from the political arenas. Therefore, the Commission's annual reports have been analyzed to retrieve information on how governing parties fared across these three dimensions, and how their strength and grip on power evolved over time. Two chapters of the reports were examined in particular: on the one hand, the Chapter on democracy and the Copenhagen political criteria – in particular the subsections on government, elections, and parliament – and on the other, the chapter on the Copenhagen economic criteria – focusing on privatization and the influence of the state on the economy.

Then, the role of civil society opposition in the countries under analysis was examined, highlighting whether NGOs operated in an enabling environment and how their strength and organization evolved over time. Three dimensions were again adopted to measure the differences between civil society contexts in Serbia and North Macedonia. These dimensions are identified in the DG Enlargement's "Guidelines for EU support to Civil Society in Enlargement Countries", the first document defining EU civil society standards for candidate countries, which was further developed in 2022 (DG Enlargement, 2014b; DG NEAR, 2022). First, the presence of a legal framework enabling the exercising of freedom of assembly and association. Second, a viable financial environment allowing NGOs to reach economic stability and independence. Last, the

degree of political cooperation among civil society organizations and between NGOs and the government to promote successful advocacy and foster political reforms. However, the Commission's reports provided little information on the state of civil society in the accession countries, mainly due to their government-to-government approach. Thus, I have turned to the more comprehensive CSOSI, a USAID-sponsored project that produces reports assessing the strength of civil society in developing countries. Three dimensions in particular were examined, mirroring the sectors identified by the EU Guidelines: legal environment, financial viability, and advocacy.

Overall, the data analyzed was mainly qualitative, with the few exceptions of the illustrative graphs retrieved from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) institute and the CSOSI. Nonetheless, the methodology applied to study the relevant data was purely qualitative. The case study approach was used with a twofold objective: on the one hand, to shed light on the regional trend of democratic regression and stagnation in the Western Balkans; on the other hand, to show the intra-regional variation in democratic pathways, i.e. how countries that share some common characteristics, such as being subjects of EU conditionality, present different democratic outcomes. The selection of Serbia and North Macedonia as case studies is motivated by three reasons. First, these countries have been often pointed to as the frontrunners of democratic decline in the region (Stojarová, 2020; Gafuri & Muftuler-Bac, 2021). Indeed, illegal and illiberal practices have reached unparalleled levels in these countries, making the study of democratic backsliding more straightforward and detectable. Second, both countries found themselves at different accession tiers during the reporting periods and experienced very different accession paths. North Macedonia was the first Western Balkan country to gain candidate status in 2005, but no formal progress towards enlargement was made during the VMRO-DPMNE government. In contrast, Serbia was granted candidate status in 2012, and since then the SNS-led government has managed to open accession negotiations in 2014 and talks have proceeded steadily. Being this study grounded in a European perspective, it is important to consider the countries' different accession statuses as a crucial variable determining, on the one hand, the different levels of EU engagement and, on the other, the different perceptions of the EU at the two tiers. Last but not least, democratic backsliding has followed different trends in the selected countries. While in Serbia competitive authoritarian leaders are still in power, the 2016 elections in North Macedonia have ousted the ruling elites, halting many years of profound democratic erosion.

Consequently, the inclusion of a state where democratic backsliding seems to have stopped and partially reversed allows the application of Mill's Most Similar System Design. The comparative method appears particularly useful due to the small number of cases of analysis. Although Serbia and North Macedonia share many similar political, historical, and social features, the in-depth application of Mill's method of difference exposes those conditions that have led the two countries down different democratic paths. As outlined in the previous chapter, this research aims to test theory-based hypotheses with a twofold objective. On the one hand, it attempts to find explanations in the general literature for the different democratic paths of the countries; on the other, it aims to test the generalizability claims of these hypotheses and whether they survive the Western Balkan test many years after they were first formulated, thus contributing to the literature in assessing their explanatory power.

The hypotheses formulated aim to study developments in Serbia and North Macedonia during their years of semi-authoritarian rule. Therefore, the timeframe of analysis will be different for the two countries, as they experienced democratic regression in two partially overlapping periods. For Serbia, relevant data will be retrieved between the years 2012-2022, while for North Macedonia between 2006-2016. The hypothesis-testing and the effective analysis of the gathered data will be carried out through process tracing, a methodology used to assess whether a potential cause influenced a certain outcome. Thanks to its "within-case" method, this approach appears particularly useful in the present thesis, as it makes it possible to trace the conditions that allowed the emergence of certain democratic patterns in the Western Balkans and to analyze their development from a historical perspective (Collier, 2011).

4. The European Union in the Western Balkans: Leverage and Linkage

4.1. The EU's leverage: competing issues on the EU Agenda for the Western Balkans

From the very beginning of the accession process of the Western Balkans, the EU pursued multiple objectives simultaneously, due to the very nature of the region, lying at the juncture of peacebuilding, state-building, and democracy promotion. The different nature of these objectives did not automatically mean that they were mutually exclusive; on the contrary, the EU's initial approach was to consider them complementary and necessary for a comprehensive approach. However, in practice, the promotion of democracy and stability did not go hand in hand, as when looking at the EU's approach, the literature clearly identified the emergence of a "stability-democracy dilemma" (Richter, 2012; Börzel & Lebanidze, 2017; Smith et al., 2021). Not only has the mere presence of two objectives undermined the effectiveness of the instrument of political conditionality, but also the fact that security concerns have always prevailed over the promotion of democracy. As a result, the EU's preference for stability over democracy has led to the emergence of a new type of political trend that scholars have named "stabilitocracy", a regime where non-democratic practices persist and "the West has turned a blind eye to this while simultaneously preaching the virtues of democracy and the rule of law" (Pavlović, 2017; Bieber, 2018, p. 276).

This section investigates the goals and aims of the EU in its approach to the Western Balkans, in particular Serbia and North Macedonia. It shows that the EU has indeed pursued different objectives at the same time, often sidelining the promotion of democracy in favor of other objectives detrimental to democracy itself. In the following paragraphs, I analyze how the EU's interests and objectives have changed in its approach to the Western Balkans. First, I examine the conclusions of the European Council to determine whether democracy or stability-related concerns were at stake when the Western Balkans were discussed. After assessing the existence of this dilemma in the EU agenda, I dive into the individual statements of EU leaders regarding Serbia and Northern Macedonia to study whether they reflect the conflicting objectives identified at the general EU level.

4.1.1. The stability-democracy dilemma in European Council conclusions

Starting with the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, democracy promotion has been the utmost priority of the EU agenda in its approach to the region. The "values of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human and minority rights" constituted the very first point of the declaration that concluded the Thessaloniki meeting (European Commission, 2003). Moreover, the first pillar of the Thessaloniki Agenda read that the EU's regional approach was to be centered on "promoting stability and democratic development" thus placing the two objectives on an equal footing by closely linking them together (Council of the European Union, 2003). However, fifteen years later, the language used by the EU looks quite different. In 2018, the Commission adopted a new strategy to boost to the stalled enlargement process: "A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans" (European Commission, 2018a). These six flagship initiatives reduced significantly the wide-raging concept of democracy promotion to the mere strengthening of the rule of law. At the same time, two other priorities had taken the center stage: the reinforced engagement on security and migration together with the push to foster reconciliation and good neighborly relations.

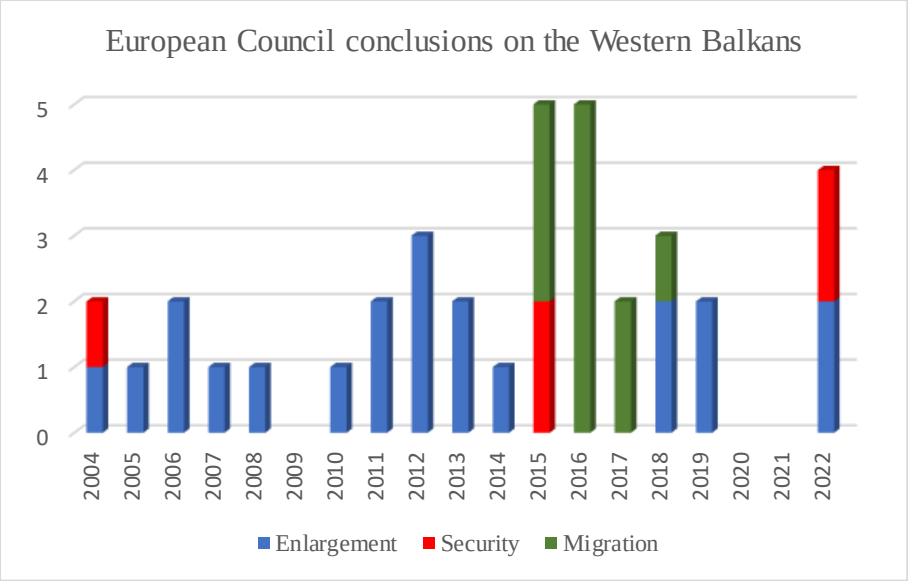

***Figure 2**: European Council conclusions on the Western Balkans since the Thessaloniki Summit grouped by topic. Source: consilium.europa.eu.*

By analyzing the European Council summits where Western Balkan issues were discussed, three macro-topics tended to emerge: enlargement-related, security-related, and migration-related issues. Each European Council conclusion concerning the Western Balkans has been assigned to one of these three dimensions, depending on the main focus tackled by EU leaders. Figure 2

summarizes the main findings and gives an overview of how the attention of the EU has shifted from one issue to the other over the years.

Overall, three main phases can be identified. First, since the Thessaloniki summit until 2014, the topics of enlargement and domestic reforms were discussed regularly at European Council meetings. With the exception of the March 2004 summit – where the incidents of the 2004 Kosovo Unrest were discussed – all the conclusions focused on the political reforms implemented by the region's countries. This momentum of the EU's focus on enlargement peaked around 2012-2013 when several important developments took place. In 2012, Serbia was granted official candidate status, while Montenegro opened accession negotiations. In 2013, after the signing of the landmark Brussels agreement between Belgrade and Pristina, the EU-Serbia Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) entered into force, whereas the negotiations for the EU-Kosovo SAA were launched. At the same time, the achievement of these highly visible political agreements marked the end of the EU's enlargement-centered approach to the region. Negotiations continued at a technical level, while the European Council shifted its focus to other issues. The end of this phase was marked by the election of the Juncker Commission when the newly elected president announced that "the EU needs to take a break from enlargement" (Juncker, 2014).

The second phase lasted from Juncker's announcement up until mid-2018. In these years the enlargement topic ceased to appear on the agenda of the European Council, which shifted its attention to the new challenges on the rise in the region. Indeed, counterterrorism came back high on the EU agenda due to the increasing number of foreign fighters returning to the Balkans, an issue that pushed for enhanced security cooperation and the implementation of tougher policy measures to contain extremisms (Beslin & Ignjatijevic, 2017; Metodieva, 2018). More importantly, the 2015 migration crisis suddenly brought over a million people to the European continent to request asylum. Since most of these people came from the Middle East, the Balkan Route became the main entry point into the EU. Moreover, border closures by EU Member States created a bottleneck in the two Balkan countries at the center of the route: Serbia and Northern Macedonia. The tension put increased pressure on these countries to change their asylum policies as well, which often led to pushbacks and the illegal use of force by national authorities (Weber, 2017).

In this regard, a clear turning point was the adoption of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, where Ankara agreed to increase border security and stop irregular border crossings into the EU (European Council, 2016). The deal helped to lift some pressure from EU Member States and the

Western Balkans, and allowed for the normalization of the debates on the region. This development is evident when looking at the conclusions of the European Council: whereas between 2015 and 2016 the topic of migration was always present in the debates of EU leaders, from 2017 onwards business-as-usual issues started to reappear. In 2017, it became clear that focusing exclusively on stability and enlargement was not sustainable for either the EU or the Western Balkans. In his State of the Union address on September 13, Commission President Juncker affirmed that the region needed "a credible enlargement perspective", putting the rule of law and fundamental rights reforms back at the forefront (European Commission, 2017).

The third phase officially began in mid-2018, when the European Council resumed discussing enlargement at its June summit. Already in May 2018, at the EU-Western Balkans meeting in Sofia, the primacy of democracy was back in the foreground, accompanied, however, by stability-focused issues such as the fight against foreign terrorists and migration (European Council, 2018b). Moreover, the new Commission strategy "A Credible Enlargement Perspective" was adopted in August 2018, which revived the enlargement-focused approach coupled with a reinforced engagement on security and migration. Several factors allowed the shift of the EU's attention and the normalization of its approach to the Western Balkans. Firstly, the EU-Turkey Statement was a decisive factor in easing the refugee pressure on EU borders and in the Western Balkans, helping to bring the discussion back to a state of normality. Secondly, the resolution of the political crisis in North Macedonia and the subsequent signing of the 2018 Prespa Agreement made it possible to rediscuss the opening of accession negotiations, which had been stalled for years due to the Greek veto. Last, the adoption of the Joint Action Plan on Counter-Terrorism for the Western Balkans in October 2018 set the course for boosting counter-terrorism cooperation and relegated the topic to a more technical and less political sphere.

2018 was certainly a decisive year for the EU's re-engagement in the region, as the newly inaugurated phase appeared as a Hegelian synthesis of the previous two. The focus on enlargement and democracy reforms had returned to the European Council agenda, however along with stability concerns and issues. Moreover, after years in which accession reforms were discussed at a technical level, in 2018 the EU decided to send a strong political message by establishing 2025 as a target date for accession. Since then, debates on enlargement and rule of law reforms have reappeared regularly on the EU agenda, both at the European Council meetings and in the EU-Western Balkans summits.

Today, however, two new crises seem to have opened a new phase for the EU goals in the region. Between 2020-2021, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic has completely attracted the efforts of EU leaders, while the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has again appeared as a new challenge to the EU's security. Nonetheless, while the first crisis has made the enlargement topic completely disappear from European Council conclusions between 2020-2021, the second one has brought the region back to the center of the EU focus. On the one hand, the Ukraine war highlighted the importance for the EU to draw its neighborhood closer to its orbit, thus prompting a renewed emphasis on the enlargement process – culminating in the opening of negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia and the granting of an official candidacy to Bosnia. On the other hand, the conflict has brought the EU's attention to the Balkans as a region at risk of insidious interference by Russia. Therefore, security has re-emerged in European Council debates, focusing on increasing resilience against hybrid threats and promoting energy cooperation as a means to break away from the region's dependence on Russian supplies. Furthermore, the year 2022 has seen the migration issue resurface again due to a 152% increase in migrant arrivals compared to the previous year (Frontex, 2022). The issue took the center stage at the December 2022 EU-Western Balkans summit and even led to the adoption of the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans to tackle the new border challenges (European Council, 2022).

To conclude, the shift in the EU priorities for the Western Balkans can be easily explained by an overview of the main regional issues of the past decade. The emergence of security- and migration-related challenges between 2014 and 2018 has confirmed the presence of conflicting objectives on the EU agenda since democracy and rule of law concerns have often been overlooked to privilege stability. This contradiction appears even more starkly when looking at the controversial declarations of EU leaders in Serbia and North Macedonia, as analyzed in the next section. Last, 2022 seems to have opened a new phase of EU engagement in the Western Balkans which risks focusing again on security and migration: in order to avoid the re-emergence of the stability-democracy dilemma, the EU needs to make sure that rule of law and fundamental rights are not sidelined in the progress of enlargement reforms.

4.1.2. The priorities of EU leaders in Serbia and North Macedonia

Turning to the individual declarations of EU leaders, the democratic situation in Serbia and North Macedonia appears to have been addressed differently by different actors. Indeed, there is a clear discrepancy between the concerned reports of civil society organizations and democracy groups –

such as Freedom House, V-Dem, or Reporters without Borders – and the official communications of EU institutions and politicians. Warnings of undemocratic practices in the two states have often met with silence in the Commission's country reports. For instance, when in the midst of the refugee crisis Serbia and North Macedonia closed their borders often through illegal means (Weber, 2017), their country reports made no mention of pushbacks and refoulements at all (European Commission, 2016a, 2016b). By this means, the EU manages to keep stable its neighborhood as well as its internal public opinion, while Balkan strongmen avoid blame. EU officials often look the other way, as in the case of former Enlargement Commissioner Hahn, who, when questioned about the worrying reports of media censorship in Serbia, referred to them as "only rumors" (BIRN, 2015).

Oftentimes, EU politicians do not limit themselves to turning a blind eye to the democratic backsliding, but even publicly endorse Balkan leaders and praise their practices. The reasons behind this approach can be traced back to the general EU priority for stability in the Western Balkans, be it in the management of migrant flows, in the normalization between Serbia and Kosovo, or in countering foreign interferences. This stability-driven interest is often coupled with the national interests of the endorsing politicians (Hillion, 2010) as well as the interest of their European party family (Zweers et al., 2022). The following paragraphs offer an overview of some of the most controversial declarations by EU politicians. What this analysis shows is that when different goals clash, the goal of promoting democracy is always put on the back burner, while the interest in stability and security prevails.

In *Serbia*, since he was elected prime minister in 2014, Aleksandar Vučić has found his greatest supporter in Angela Merkel. The former German chancellor has indeed a long record of downplaying the misdeeds of semi-authoritarian leaders, having long ignored the claims of civil society against the illegal practices of Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán (Politico, 2018). Merkel appears to have followed the same pattern in her relationship with Vučić. In February 2018, she received him in Berlin saying she was "impressed" by the success of Serbia's reform progress (German Federal Government, 2018). Similarly, in April 2018, she underlined the "very good reform record" of the Serbian government (Richter & Wunsch, 2020, p. 53). What is interesting to note is that both these statements came a few weeks before the publication of the rather critical 2018 Commission report on Serbia that had retrieved several issues on the functioning of democratic institutions in the country (European Commission, 2018b). Moreover, in 2021, Merkel

described Vučić as a leader that "does not make false promises", especially in his cooperation with Kosovo (German Federal Government, 2021). However, when looking at how the Serbian president has dealt with the issue, it is hard not to spot the many incongruences of his approach (Dragojlov, 2020).

Even the former president of the European Council Donald Tusk has been a vocal supporter of Vučić and his government. In April 2018, he delivered a heartfelt speech in Belgrade where he described the Serbian president as a "friend", a "soul mate", and a "strong patriot", raising some eyebrows among civil society (European Council, 2018a). Moreover, on the occasion of the 2020 Serbian legislative elections, Tusk has been quite vocal in support of Vučić and his party. First, he wished him "good luck" praising his economic success and strong leadership, whereas after the elections he was the first to congratulate him (Subotić, 2020). Both remarks were met with harsh criticism by civil society and Serbian opposition since the tweets contained no mention of democracy or the transparency of elections. Opposition leader Dragan Đilas underlined in an open letter how Tusk has overlooked the state of democracy in Serbia (Đilas, 2020), while scholars pointed to the fact that the elections had been thwarted by the fact that the parliamentary campaign was run by the president himself (Subotić, 2020). What is more, ironically, the last Freedom House report had just downgraded Serbia from a "semi-consolidated democracy" to a "hybrid regime" when Tusk's remarks arrived.

The reasons behind Tusk's public support for Vučić can be traced back to the same as Merkel's. First, the Serbian president is regarded by EU leaders as the main interlocutor in the region, given the socio-economic weight of his country. Second, he is seen as the main guarantor of stability and security in the region, especially with regard to the highly sensitive issue of Kosovo, which worries EU actors the most. Last, these public endorsements can be also explained by the actors' belonging to the same European political family: the European People's Party (EPP).

These reasons however cannot account for the favoring stance of Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi towards Vučić. While it is no surprise that Orbán has often played down the democratic concerns surrounding Vučić's Serbia – being himself the main example of the "illiberal democracy" model within the EU – the position of the Hungarian Commissioner appears more controversial. Although the independence of the Commission's members should be "beyond doubt" (Art. 17(3) TEU), Várhelyi has appeared to be following his government's interests by pushing for the candidacy of Serbia above all. An investigation by Politico revealed that on

multiple occasions his cabinet has watered down the language of official reports concerning Serbia's democratic shortcomings (Wanat & Bayer, 2021). During Várhelyi's mandate, Serbia has managed to open four new negotiating chapters – despite no progress on rule of law reforms or in the talks with Kosovo – while North Macedonia has been stalling in spite of positive developments in democratic standards and the solution of the naming dispute. According to critics (ibid.), Várhelyi has not acted as an honest broker with Skopje in the interests of the Hungarian government, which is giving political asylum to former North Macedonian Prime Minister Gruevski – on whom an international arrest warrant hangs for the 2015 wiretapping scandal.

In *North Macedonia*, EU leaders sought to adopt a more cautious approach in their relations with Gruevski and his government, given the long and serious series of violations of democratic standards, culminating in the wiretapping scandal that erupted in spring 2015. Nevertheless, the EPP never stopped supporting its affiliated Macedonian member VMRO-DPMNE. In the wake of the 2015 protests, the European party spokesperson said that the "eavesdrop scandal had not shattered the EPP's confidence in [Gruevski]. […] He shall be left to govern the country" (Gotev, 2015). Still today, the Macedonian party is listed as an associate member of the EPP.

However, what gave the final push to EU support for the semi-authoritarian government of North Macedonia was the migrant crisis of 2015. Gruevski proved a fundamental ally for those countries that were most affected by the influx of refugees from the Balkan Route such as Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary. These governments exerted intensive pressure on the North Macedonian government to close the migrant route and proved willing to turn a blind eye to the illegal pushback practices of national authorities. This stance appeared clear at the EU level as well, when a European Parliament resolution of 10 March 2016 called the Balkan country "a responsible partner" in coping with the huge inflow of migrants (European Parliament, 2016). EU politicians have even taken a step further by publicly endorsing Gruevski and his party at the December 2016 national elections. Amidst the peak of the wiretapping scandal and rising concerns for the Macedonian democracy, Austrian foreign minister – and future prime minister – Sebastian Kurz delivered a very controversial speech at an election rally for VMRO-DPMNE, being pointed to as the perfect example of stabilitocracy promotion (Bieber, 2020, p. 98ff). Kurz stated that: "Macedonia is a very important partner for Austria, and we are particularly grateful for the support we received from Macedonia in 2015 and 2016. The refugee crisis was a major challenge for Austria. Without your government, we wouldn't be able to close the Balkan Route" (Marusic,

2016). The blatant disregard for VMRO-DPMNE's undemocratic practices appeared even more starkly in 2017 when Gruevski and his associates were filed with several criminal charges. During the local election race, the former prime minister received the public support of both Hungarian leader Orbán and Slovenia's Janša. Besides praising VMRO-DPMNE's "success story", the former stated: "We count on Macedonia's role in preventing this swarm [of migrants] and that's why I always supported and will continue supporting Gruevski" (Marusic, 2017). Once again, no mention was made of the government's democratic failures, while national interests related to stability and immigration were allowed to prevail.

4.2. The Western Balkans' communication linkage to the EU

After having analyzed the decreasing leverage of the EU in the Western Balkans due to the presence of competing issues on the EU agenda, I now turn to the state of the linkages between the region and the EU. Among the several types of linkages identified by Levitsky and Way (2006, p. 383ff), this section studies the "communication linkage", or "flow of information". Hence, the state of media freedom in Serbia and North Macedonia – and its evolvement in accordance with EU rules – is used as a proxy to study to what extent Balkan media have Europeanized and thus strengthened the communication linkage with the EU. Therefore, this section looks at the exchanges between the two sides regarding the media sphere, with a special focus on media freedom as an enabling factor for the smooth flow of information.

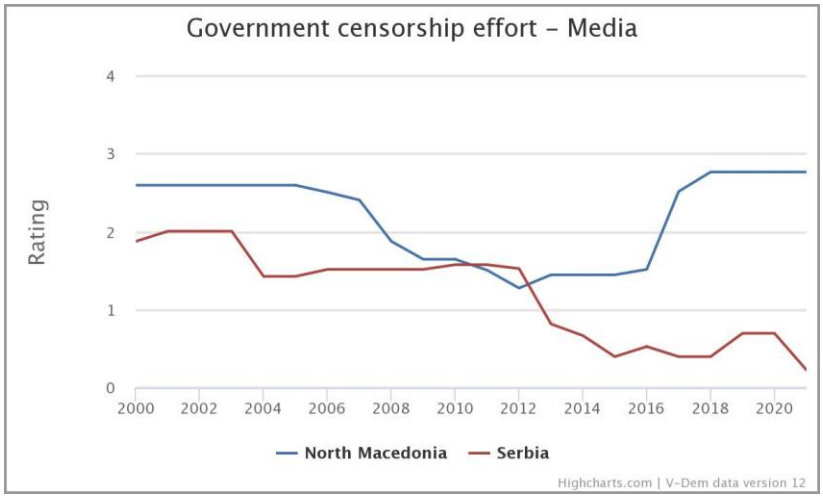

***Figure 3**: Government Censorship Effort - Media (2000-2021). The index measures the government attempt to censor media from high (0) to low (4). Source: V-Dem.net.*

The degree of media freedom is a crucial factor in assessing the democratic patterns of Western Balkan countries. Nowadays, the state of health of the broadcasting and information sector in the Western Balkans remains of general concern, as the coming to power of SNS and VMRO-DPMNE has started a slow deterioration of media freedom in the two countries (see Figure 3). The EU has thus become increasingly committed to shaping the countries' legislation on the matter since media freedom has started being considered a "fundamental element for the democratization of the Enlargement countries" (Brogi et al., 2014, p. 7). From a general point of view, the EU's commitment and linkage to the Balkan media sector appears to have strengthened in the past years. EU funding schemes have widened in size and scope – especially through the Civil Society Facility (European Commission, 2023a), while the number of exchanges and meetings at the regional level has increased (European Commission, 2023b). Nevertheless, in order to study the real state of the communication linkage between the EU and Serbia and North Macedonia, it does not suffice to look at the overall picture. Hence, this section studies the country-level exchanges between the two sides: how the EU impacts the domestic media sector, how the countries respond, how the EU reacts to the developments, and so forth. This exchange is tracked in the Commission's annual report on accession countries – Chapters 10 and 23. The following sections trace the evolution over time of the media linkage in Serbia and North Macedonia during the period of democratic backwardness, in order to assess whether the free flow of information actually weakened.

4.2.1. The media linkage in Serbia

From the perspective of the *enabling environment*, there has been an overall consistency in the Commission's reports for Serbia since 2012. Every year, the Commission confirmed that the legal framework relating to the media sector is in place and that the alignment with the acquis is "moderately advanced". However, the reports registered no progress from one year to the other, and this reform stagnation has been described since 2018 as "a matter of concern" (European Commission, 2018b, p. 25). Only in 2014 and 2021, the reports showed some degree of progress in the media sector, thanks to the adoption of three laws to implement Serbia's 2011 media strategy (European Commission, 2014a) and an action plan to carry out the new media strategy drafted in 2020 (European Commission, 2021). The adoption of these strategies was explicitly requested by the Commission in order to foster alignment with the EU acquis, especially with the 2010 Audiovisual Media Services Directive – one of the few pieces of EU law that regulates broadcasting activities.

Looking at the institutional capacity, several bodies in Serbia contribute to the creation of an enabling environment for media freedom. The Republic Broadcasting Agency (RRA) performed the monitoring function of the broadcasters' activities. Although its internal transparency improved, there were serious concerns about the appointment procedure of its members, questioning the body's independence from political pressure (European Commission, 2012a, 2013b). In 2014, the RRA was succeeded by the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), which nevertheless showed the same shortcomings as its predecessor. The initial problems noted by the Commission's reports in the early days of the REM are still present in 2022, without any de facto improvement (European Commission, 2022). What is more, new issues have gradually been added over the years. First, although the 2014 Law on Electronic Media – which defines the scope of REM and aligns it with the EU acquis – entrusted the body to the draft of an audio-visual media strategy, the adoption of such strategy has been delayed by REM and now appears as "outdated" (European Commission, 2020, p. 82). Second, on multiple occasions the Commission has reprimanded REM for not effectively monitoring broadcasters, while the little follow-up to its reports has been highlighted. For instance, in 2016 and 2017 REM found that no commercial station met its program content obligations under the law; however, the body did not issue any kind of sanction (European Commission, 2018b). Third, there are major concerns regarding the independence of REM, which the Commission (2016a, 2018b, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022) recommended to strengthen in order to safeguard media pluralism. In particular, the political influence on the appointment procedure of REM members represents a serious issue. Since 2016, the REM Council had acted with only six members out of nine and an acting president. Despite the persistent Commission recommendations, only in late 2020 did REM fill the vacant posts, returning to full capacity thanks to the mediating role of the European Parliament (European Commission, 2020, 2021). Last, in recent years, the lack of transparency in REM decisions has emerged as a primary concern in Commission reports. In 2022, REM awarded four media service licenses for national TV broadcasting to the same previous holders. The decision was harshly criticized since these channels had received warnings from REM due to the breach of their obligations under Serbian law. It was indeed not clear how the allocation process complied with the transparency requirements recommended by the Commission (2022, p. 39). Furthermore, lack of transparency and political independence often result in biased decisions. In 2022, REM analyzed

two broadcasted videos using discriminatory terminology but only publicly condemned the one seen as criticizing the authorities (European Commission, 2022, p. 40).

The failure of REM in creating an enabling environment for media freedom has particularly emerged during the election campaigns in Serbia. The Commission has criticized the handling of the media coverage by REM and public authorities, also making reference to the findings of the ODIHR. According to the Commission, REM remained "passive" during the campaign periods, failing to tackle the unbalanced media coverage (European Commission, 2020, 2021, 2022). Indeed, during all Serbian elections, the Commission detected that most media with national coverage – TV channels and newspapers – promoted government policy, while those outlets with alternative views had little outreach. In 2021, it was estimated that 93% of national TV air time was given to members of the ruling party and they were generally portrayed positively (European Commission, 2021, p. 36). Similarly, in 2022, 90% of coverage in private TV channels was allocated to the president and members of the government (European Commission, 2022, p. 40). In both 2020 and 2022, although REM adopted ad hoc rules for the media conduct during the elections, these were not mandatory for private media outlets, which was not in line with the EU-sponsored Law on Electronic Media (European Commission, 2020, pp. 34–35, 2022, p. 39). Also REM's methodology for monitoring the election campaign as well as the selection of channels to be included in the monitoring procedure was criticized for lacking consistent and comprehensive criteria (European Commission, 2022).

Concerning the *internal governance of media outlets*, some reforms were undertaken by Serbia to comply with the EU standards and guidelines. Nonetheless, the same issues that were found by the Commission at the dawn of the backsliding period in 2012 are still present today, as shown by the last Commission report (2022). The reason for this persistence is related to the delayed and incomplete media privatization process required by the EU, both in terms of funding and ownership. Privatization was a necessary step to bring the country in line with EU law provisions on state aid. However, by setting the deadline for privatization by 2015 in its media strategy, the Serbian government managed to delay a process that was already due in 2005 (European Commission, 2014a). Furthermore, once the privatization was formally completed in December 2015, many media outlets remained state-funded, on the one hand, while the benefits in terms of transparency and independence are yet to be seen, on the other. This latter aspect was stressed by the Commission itself in 2016 when it acknowledged that the "privatization of state media outlets

has not led to greater transparency of ownership or funding sources, including state funding" (European Commission, 2016a, p. 19). Furthermore, there are several reports that many of the privatized public media ended up in the hands of owners connected to the Serbian ruling party, who were able to recover expenditures through subsidies from local authorities (Castaldo & Pinna, 2018, p. 275). Therefore, a reform strongly pushed for by the EU aiming to increase media independence ultimately resulted in decreasing it.

Putting an end to state funding to media outlets has proved particularly difficult in a country with limited financial resources and where state funds represent between 25 and 40% of the advertising market (Castaldo & Pinna, 2018, p. 275). This environment has allowed for the spread of self-censorship practices, as media outlets and journalists became vulnerable to informal pressure from politicians. Insufficient funding meant that articles criticizing high-level political figures could lead to the loss of crucial contracts and publicity for media outlets, as set out in Commission reports (European Commission, 2012a, 2014a, 2015a, 2016a, 2018b, 2019, 2022). Alternative solutions to remedy the financial instability of media outlets proved unable to provide security and stability, also owing to their temporary nature. The outcomes of these solutions were tracked in the Commission reports especially in regard to the main public service broadcaster in the country: Radio Televizija Srbije (RTS) and Radio Televizija Vojvodine (RTV). First, a law amendment in 2015 allowed for an extension of state funding up to 2016 to allow for a smoother transition, despite heavy criticism by the Commission (2016a). Law amendments allowing for an extension of state finance have continued to date for RTV. On the other hand, RTS has stopped being included in the state budget, although public co-financing is still possible (European Commission, 2021). Second, a monthly subscription fee as a temporary measure to partially finance RTS and RTV was introduced in December 2015. This measure as well was welcomed with criticism as causing uncertainty about the stable financing of public broadcasters (European Commission, 2016a). The fee was increased by 15% in January 2020, but still the temporary nature of the financing model makes RTS and RTV vulnerable to political influence (European Commission, 2020, p. 35). Third, state co-financing of media to meet public interest obligations was introduced. It was favored by the EU for not being detrimental to market equality, provided it respected transparent and fair procedures (European Commission, 2018b). Nonetheless, the Serbian Press Council found that those media outlets with the most violations of the journalistic code of conduct were still

continuing to receive public co-funding, pointing out the lack of effective control by monitoring authorities (European Commission, 2021, 2022).

Also state withdrawal from media ownership proved challenging, as the annual report testifies. Since the privatization of state media, lack of transparency in ownership structures persisted as a hallmark of the media environment (European Commission, 2018b). Since December 2015, only thirty-four out of seventy-three public media outlets were privatized, while the remaining thirty-nine were either closed, transitioned to other sectors, or handed over to their employees (Castaldo & Pinna, 2018, p. 275). Moreover, several of the media companies sold since 2015 ended up being purchased by Telekom Srbija, whose largest shareholder is the state (European Commission, 2020, p. 35). To date, according to the last Commission report (European Commission, 2022, p. 40), "the privatization process of the media sector has yet to be completed".

From the perspective of the *journalist organizations' strength*, concern over the little protection provided to journalists has appeared constantly in the Commission reports since 2012. Despite numerous EU recommendations, Serbian authorities have done little to strengthen the job security of journalists and create an environment conducive to the performance of their profession. Consequently, many issues constantly recurred. First and foremost, the weak resiliency of journalists and professional associations can be traced back to the financial instability of the media sector. The importance for media outlets and freelancers to intercept advertisements and state funds makes journalists more vulnerable to soft influence and self-censorship. As reported by the Commission (2020, 2021, 2022), this endemic economic instability has drastically worsened since the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis. Moreover, this flawed financial environment is coupled with a weak legal context that provides little if any job security to journalists. This in turn has favored the phenomenon of "tabloidization" – first spotted by the Commission in 2016 (European Commission, 2016a, p. 21) – as well as the publication of unchecked information or outright fake news (European Commission, 2016a, 2021). Threats and violence to journalists and associations are commonplace, and despite the EU's recommendations, little has been done. Public officials rarely condemn such offences, investigations and charges are seldom pursued, and convictions are even more exceptional (European Commission, 2013b, 2014a, 2019). Furthermore, verbal attacks on media organizations are often carried out by high-ranking officials themselves. For instance, in 2014, then prime minister Vučić called some OSCE officials "liars" for critically reporting on media freedom in Serbia, while in 2015, he attacked the BIRN investigative group and even

claimed the EU was behind this attack (Castaldo & Pinna, 2018, p. 276). More recently, in March 2021, serious smear campaigns and verbal attacks against journalists took place in the Serbian parliament, not least by the leader of the ruling party caucus; what is interesting to note is that these offences took place even after an EU-demanded code of conduct was adopted in December 2020 (European Commission, 2021, p. 35).

Nevertheless, progress reports also recorded some positive developments – mainly thanks to the EU recommendation and support. In 2013, defamation was finally decriminalized after numerous requests by the Commission (2013b). Still, the number of accusations against journalists did not decrease dramatically and remained a serious concern, leading to the organization of an ad hoc meeting on SLAPPs in 2021 (European Commission, 2022, p. 38). In 2013, a special commission was created with the task of solving the cases of three journalists murdered between 1999 and 2001, but despite the EU's great emphasis on the issue only one case has been brought to court so far, while the other two are still under investigation (European Commission, 2013b, 2022). The Press Council – the self-regulatory body supervising the respect of the journalists' ethical code – has also experienced some improvements. In 2016 it stepped up its efforts in monitoring, and has since recorded an increasing number of breaches of the journalistic code year after year; only in 2021 did for the first time the Press Council register a decrease in attacks on journalists (European Commission, 2016a, 2022). In 2016, a memorandum of understanding was signed between journalist organizations and government officials in order to enhance job security for journalists but has yet to retrieve any concrete results (European Commission, 2018b, 2019). Last, in 2020 a new platform was established to register cases of pressure on media thanks to an agreement among ten journalist associations. This development has also enabled swifter communication between journalists and authorities and has stepped up the media associations' role in providing protection; nevertheless, it has led to little follow-up in implementation terms (European Commission, 2020, p. 33f). All these reported developments turned out to be only cosmetic rather than a real breakthrough in strengthening media organizations. Despite the slow but progressive alignment with EU law, the implementation of such measures by Serbian authorities is still missing. This lack of progress is also frustrating and reducing cooperation among journalists' associations. In 2019, media organizations halted their participation in the Standing Working Group on journalists' safety due to the lack of results, whereas in 2021 most of them withdrew from the working group in the aftermath of the March 2021 smear campaigns in the Serbian parliament (European Commission,

2019, 2021). Although already back in 2012 the Commission called for "a more comprehensive and proactive approach by the police and the judiciary" (European Commission, 2012a, p. 51), to date there has been no concrete implementation.

To sum up, the Serbian media linkage with the EU has drastically weakened since 2012. Although one would expect a stronger EU commitment in accession countries, the Commission's recommendations have rather contributed to the "de-Europeanization" of the media sector, as the case of the EU-demanded privatization reform has shown (Castaldo & Pinna, 2018). The EU has not contributed to the creation of a media environment enabling freedom of expression and Serbia is slowly drifting away from European norms and standards. Looking at the formal legal compliance, the communication linkage appears stronger; however, at the implementation level the reality is much different. State funding allows for biased coverage and favors the dominance of media close to the government. Liberal and independent journalists and newspapers are sidelined and are subject to constant attacks by pro-government tabloids – "Informer" being the most prominent example (Bieber, 2020, p. 128) – and public officials themselves. All this hampers the smooth flow of information between Serbia and the EU and ultimately reduces the communication linkage between the two sides.

4.2.2. The media linkage in North Macedonia

From the perspective of the *enabling environment*, North Macedonia's linkage to the EU and European standards on media got increasingly weaker during the reporting period. Overall, the Commission reports showed initial progress and a gradual alignment with EU standards. However, by the second term of the VMRO-DPMNE, European cooperation and influence appeared to be fading away (Brogi et al., 2014, p. 54). The departure from EU norms and recommendations is even more evident than in Belgrade: while the Commission's reports on Serbia only recorded "no progress" in convergence, reports on North Macedonia mentioned "deterioration" and "backsliding" in freedom of expression (European Commission, 2013c, 2014b, 2015b).

The deterioration of the media linkage can be witnessed in the transformation over time of the regulatory authority, i.e. the Broadcasting Council. In the first years under analysis, this body greatly contributed to the alignment with the acquis. In 2007, new legal procedures were adopted in order to ensure its independence and tackle political interferences (European Commission, 2007). In 2008, the Broadcasting Council adopted guidelines and a rulebook on sanctions to foster

the implementation of existing legislation, whereas a memorandum of understanding was signed to strengthen its monitoring capacity (European Commission, 2008). Ahead of the 2009 elections, the body adopted a manual on balanced coverage of elections campaigns, while in 2010 it stepped up its engagement in market monitoring activities (European Commission, 2009, 2010). Already during this initial period, the Broadcasting Council showed several shortcomings: it appeared to be understaffed, not financially stable, and it seemed clear that its guidelines were not respected by broadcasters – as shown by the uneven coverage during the 2009 elections (European Commission, 2008, 2009). Nevertheless, the 2011 amendments to the Law on the Broadcasting Council – adopted without any public debate – were the "first steps made by the ruling party to impose political control over the other media" (Brogi et al., 2014, p. 55): the reform raised the number of the Council members from nine to fifteen, with the six new members appointed by the President and other government-controlled bodies (European Commission, 2011, p. 17). Since then, the implementation of the EU media acquis has become increasingly problematic, as the independence of the body was ultimately compromised.

Similar to Serbia, the legal framework and actual implementation of media rules show a high degree of discrepancy. In 2005, a new Broadcasting Law that fostered greater alignment with EU law was adopted. Nonetheless, its implementation was not ensured in any of the subsequent years, as noted by all progress reports (European Commission, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009). The Law became even more obsolete after the adoption by the EU of the 2010 Audiovisual Media Services Directive. This lack of alignment prevented the participation of North Macedonia in several EU-sponsored projects – such as the "Creative Europe" MEDIA Program – and weakened the country's communication linkage even further. In order to remedy these shortcomings, the new Law on Audiovisual Media Services was adopted in December 2013. Nevertheless, throughout its adoption procedure several stakeholders continued raising concerns about the potential worsening of media freedom (European Commission, 2013c, 2014b). The EU was highly involved in the law-making process, as the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange Instrument (TAIEX) was employed. However, although the 2015 amendments to the law brought it in line with EU standards, the drafting process was harshly criticized for having been not transparent and with limited consultation (Brogi et al., 2014, p. 55; European Commission, 2014b, p. 28). Another example of this discrepancy is offered by the High Level Accession Dialogue (HLAD) launched in 2012 between North Macedonia and the EU, which strongly focused on media freedom reforms

(European Commission, 2012b). Although this process was aimed at strengthening the communication linkage between the two sides, its promises have been "far from being achieved" (Brogi et al., 2014, p. 55) as the policy implementation in the country has rather worsened media freedom since then.

Furthermore, several issues constantly reappeared on the Commission's reports throughout the period under analysis, showing the progressive detachment of the North Macedonian media sector from the EU despite the formal legal alignment. First, the implementation of the law on public access to information was not ensured (European Commission, 2006, 2016b). Second, despite the condemning ODIHR reports, uneven coverage of the political elections persisted and even worsened from 2008 to 2009, 2011, and 2014 (European Commission, 2008, 2009, 2012b, 2014b). Third, the executive's control and pressure on the media sector, as well as the VMRO-DPMNE government's lack of enforcement efforts, erupted during the 2015 wiretapping scandal. As the Commission (2016b, pp. 19–20) noted, the crisis paralyzed the adoption of the even most urgent reform priorities, and the media themselves "reflect[ed] the strong polarization of society along political lines".

With regard to the *internal governance of media outlets*, the issues reported by the Commission in the first years under analysis reappeared in all subsequent reports. Like in the Serbian case, the main challenges referred to the media outlets' lack of financial resources, which in turn has generated an environment of economic – and consequently political – dependence on government funds. This appears especially true for Makedonska Radio Televizija (MRT), the national public broadcaster, whose pro-government bias has been condemned in numerous Commission reports (2008, 2009, 2012b, 2015b, 2016b). The fact that state advertising has been directed primarily to pro-government data has compromised the professional ethics of media outlets and has asserted the dominance of those private broadcasters closely linked with the ruling party (European Commission, 2008, 2013c, 2015b, 2016b). Moreover, nearly all progress reports have regretted the lack of transparency in funding, licensing, and ownership processes. As a consequence, all these shortcomings have produced a biased media outlet environment and the decreasing EU ability to influence the media sector in North Macedonia. Hence reducing the overall communication linkage between the two.

A few reform efforts in line with legislative alignment with the acquis have been promoted; nevertheless, they resulted in limited, if any, development in the media outlet landscape. In 2007,

new legal procedures have been adopted to foster the political independence of the MRT, while the 2010 amendments to the Broadcasting Law aimed at strengthening its financial stability (European Commission, 2007, 2010). In 2012, several TV channels were requested to amend their ownership structure (European Commission, 2012b). Between 2014 and 2016, government ads were first made public and then suspended; nevertheless, no transparency was ensured in either of the processes (European Commission, 2014b, 2016b).

Moreover, there have been several events harshly criticized by the EU that have exposed the growing weakness of media outlets' governance. The most controversial has been the closing down in 2011 of the private TV station A1. Being an important channel critical of the government, the procedure has raised concerns about proportionality and selectivity. Furthermore, several other newspaper and media outlets were shut down, further weakening the plurality of the media landscape (European Commission, 2011, p. 16). The following year, even the A2 TV channel saw its license revoked by the new government-controlled Broadcasting Council, a decision that raised allegations of a discriminatory and non-transparent approach (European Commission, 2012b, p. 14). Lastly, the wiretapping scandal exposed the broad and deep political interference in the editorial policies of media outlets, particularly the MRT, as the interceptions implied that members of the executive "had threatened public service journalists' job-security if they did not report along the 'desired' lines" (European Commission, 2015b, p. 58).

From the perspective of the *journalist organizations' strength*, there have been few developments that have enhanced the country's media sector and its linkage to the EU. In 2010, the first independent trade union of journalists was set up, followed by a new syndicate in 2016; nevertheless, working conditions in media outlets have been constantly worsening during the reporting period (European Commission, 2011, 2016b). Dialogue was improved by the establishment of the 2011 Roundtable between the government and the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) – the main media professionals' association. The process led to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in 2012 which identified the decriminalization of defamation as its main challenge. In 2013, thanks to the EU-brokered agreement between political parties, the Law on Defamation was adopted as it amended the Criminal Code in line with the Commission's recommendations (European Commission, 2011, 2012b, 2013a, 2013c). This represented a positive development of the media sphere since previously libel charges always resulted in heavy penalties in relation to the average wage – which was "contrary to European case law" (European

Commission, 2011, p. 42). Nevertheless, the number of defamation claims kept rising in the following years, with 580 libel charges raised in 2014 alone; moreover, many of these were soon dropped, exposing how the practice of SLAPPs has remained de facto unaddressed (European Commission, 2014b, p. 45).

Several other issues related to the weakness of journalists' associations recurred in Commission reports. Physical intimidation and violence remained a feature of the North Macedonian media landscape, with some exceptional events. On December 24, 2012, several journalists were forcefully removed together with opposition MPs from the plenary hall of the Macedonian parliament, in order to prevent them from reporting on the approval of the contested budget (European Commission, 2013c, p. 6). In the aftermath of the 2015 wiretapping scandal, cases of harassment and damage to journalists' property experienced a new upsurge, culminating on 12 April 2016 in the wounding of several media journalists during an anti-government protest by the police (European Commission, 2015b, p. 57, 2016b, p. 20). The wiretaps themselves revealed the climate of constant pressure and unlawful surveillance on journalists and even led to the further polarization of professional associations. In 2015, a new explicitly pro-government journalist association was founded which contested the activities of the AJM; at the same time, the majority of complaints about media content started being raised by the media against other media, once again testifying to the growing polarization of the professional environment (European Commission, 2015b).

To conclude, the North Macedonian case also shows the weakening of the media linkage with the EU in the period 2006-2016. The clear disregard of the Commission recommendations and the progressive deterioration of the media sphere has turned Skopje away from European rules and standards. This de-Europeanization has generated a biased media landscape where political pressure and self-censorship are commonplace. This environment has allowed for constant biased coverage in media reports – especially during elections – whereas independent and liberal media outlets are sidelined if not outright shut down, as in the case of A1 TV. Therefore, although the partial alignment with EU media law would suggest a stronger linkage between the two sides, the failed implementation of Commission recommendations tells otherwise. The EU has failed to foster an enabling media environment, and the subsequent context has gradually thwarted and restricted the free flow of information, thus reducing Skopje's media linkage with Brussels.

5. The Role of Domestic Actors in Serbia and North Macedonia

5.1. The strength of ruling elites: ideological unity, economic resources, and political constraining

This first section moves beyond the structuralist theory of linkage and leverage by shifting focus to the role and strength of the ruling parties in Serbia and North Macedonia. Setting aside the values and preferences of ruling elites, this section focuses rather on their sources of power. Tolstrup (2013, pp. 728–729) identifies three main sources of authoritarian stability which he borrows from the literature (Magaloni, 2008; Way, 2009). First, the unity of the ruling elites, expressed by the ideological cohesion and institutionalized consensus built within the governing coalition. Second, the level of government control over the economy, shown by the degree of centralization as well as by the state ownership of key enterprises and sectors. Last, the political constraining capacity of the ruling party, i.e. its ability to pre-empt opposition groups and sideline them in the political arenas. Thus, this section studies the Commission's annual reports on Serbia and North Macedonia – as well as other relevant data – in order to show how the strength of semi-authoritarian leaders has increased or reduced during their years in government.

5.1.1. The SNS in Serbia

From the perspective of the *unity of the ruling elites*, it seems clear that since 2012 the Serbian government has experienced a greater level of cohesion – both at the ideological and practical levels. Before 2012, multi-party coalition governments were characterized by weak policy coordination and deep divisions in which individual party interests tended to prevail. Since 2012, however, a new policy of consensus and unity seems to have been established among governing parties. In practical terms, this new momentum for government unity can be spotted in the reduced composition of cabinets – with 19 ministers in 2012, further reduced to 16 in 2014 (European Commission, 2012a, 2014a) – and in the decision-making procedures – since crucial political deliberations tend to be taken by unanimity (European Commission, 2013b, p. 7). At the same time, the strongly hierarchical and bureaucratic structure of government procedures, together with the informal coordination mechanisms between members of the executive, have allowed for greater unity of the Serbian government. This consensus can also be found in ideological terms. Ruling elites seem to share a "majoritarian friend-foe understanding of democracy" (Bertelsmann Transformation Index, 2016, p. 27) that on the one hand has generated greater polarization in the

political scene, while on the other it has enhanced the executive's compactness on key policy goals. The coalition government remained united on several crucial issues, first and foremost its commitment to EU integration and to resolving the dispute with Kosovo, which allowed it to distinguish itself from the previous coalition governments – divided on many if not all objectives (European Commission, 2012a, 2013b).

The unity of the ruling coalition has been further strengthened since 2014, as the early elections witnessed a new dominance of the SNS over the political system. Although the party won an absolute majority of seats, it decided to form a coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and other minority parties with the aim to co-opting them and not allowing them to gain a profile within the opposition (European Commission, 2014a). The new majority of almost 80% of the Serbian parliament has greatly sidelined the opposition. More importantly, however, it has established the SNS grip on power, leading to a coalition with political objectives flattened to those of the leading party and the dominance of Prime Minister Vučić on the system (European Commission, 2014a, 2015a). Since 2014, the Commission has reported an improved consistency of the Serbian government, although due to the preeminence of the SNS over its partners. In 2017, the coalition agreed to support Vučić as the unified candidate for the presidential elections – which he won in the first round with 55% of preferences. In parliament, the ruling coalition reached a greater unity also in their practices by fast-tracking the great majority of their legislative proposals and setting forth hundreds of irrelevant amendments to motions coming from the opposition (European Commission, 2018b, 2019). Furthermore, the SNS has reached an unprecedented level of party membership base with over 750.000 registered members – more than that of the League of Communists. This unprecedented support has resulted in lower voter volatility and has allowed for the SNS colonization of public administrations and institutions (European Commission, 2020, 2021).

This increased dominance of the SNS, combined with the extreme weakness and fragmentation of the opposition, has resulted in a strong polarization of the political scene. In 2019, opposition parties started boycotting parliamentary activity while in 2020 they boycotted legislative elections. The new parliament coming out of the ballot represented the apex of the unity and power of the ruling coalition since only seven out of 250 members of parliaments decided not to join the governing majority (European Commission, 2019, 2020, 2021). This situation paved the way for even greater consensus within the SNS-led coalition and increased the government's top-down

approach to the political scene – which had already been aggravated during the Covid-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2020). Nevertheless, the absence of viable pluralism generated the first signs of discontent in Serbian politics and within the government itself. This situation became apparent in the early 2022 elections when the opposition returned and SNS did not manage to reach an absolute majority by itself for the first time since 2014 (European Commission, 2022). Although its grip on power and its allies remains strong, the SNS must now rely more on its coalition partners, as the party has had to open up to new parties representing Croat and Bosniak minorities. Therefore, although the SNS could count on greater control and coalition unity ever since coming to power, the 2022 elections prompt us to reconsider whether the greater reliance of SNS on its partners with more diverse interests could lead to less coordination and thus to more instability.

Regarding *government control over the economy*, the Commission's reports show an interesting trend in the Serbian government's behavior since 2012. When coming to power, the SNS had promised to carry out a privatization reform to foster greater decentralization and transparency of the national economy, in line with the acquis. This promise has actually been respected from the perspective of formal legislative alignment with EU law; nonetheless, it failed at the implementation level, due to the increasing indirect presence of the state leading to greater concentration, state aid, and party patronage. State aid and other activities are not problematic per se, but they do represent a source of power for ruling parties when accompanied by unlawful extractive practices such as budgetary non-transparency, party patronage in public companies, and rigged public procurement (Pavlović, 2020).

On the one hand, the SNS-led government has delayed the privatization reform. As the V-Dem indicator "State ownership of economy" shows (Figure 4), privatization has stagnated for many years in Serbia, even slightly retroceding in 2012 when the SNS came to power. Despite making it a priority of its policy objectives, the process has been revived by the government only in the summer of 2014 with the adoption of the Privatization Law (European Commission, 2014a). Although the law set the deadline for decentralization at the end of 2015, only marginal results have been achieved, forcing the government to continually prolong the process – de facto until today, since the target level of privatization has not yet been reached (European Commission, 2015a, 2016a, 2018b, 2021, 2022). Privatization was also delayed by the government with the closure of the Privatization Agency in February 2016 (European Commission, 2016a). However, when privatization reforms formally happened, they often lacked transparency or actual follow-up

(European Commission, 2016a, 2018b). An example of this trend is provided by the electricity and gas sectors. Although the government formally liberalized the market in 2015, only 5% of the population left the public distributor due to the fact that the state still controls prices (European Commission, 2015a). Moreover, the unbundling of the gas sector has proved most challenging due to the government's unwillingness to provide third-party access to national provider Srbijagas, progressively delaying its implementation (European Commission, 2020, 2021, 2022).

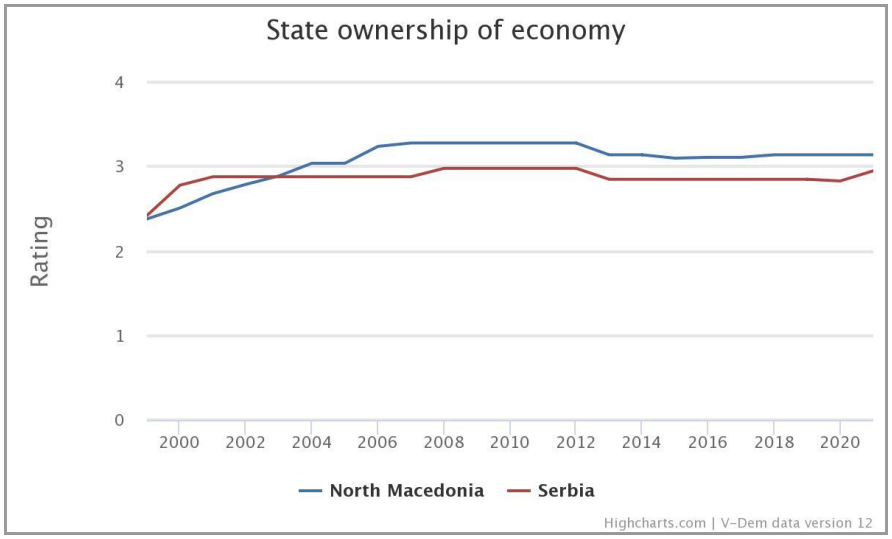

***Figure 4**: State ownership of economy (2000-2021). Value 0 represents a situation in which all capital is directly controlled by the state, whereas for value 4 very little capital belongs to the state. Source: V-dem.net.*

On the other hand, financial aid to state-owned enterprises has provided them with privileged status in some key sectors, sometimes even amounting to outright monopoly. Serbia spends around 3% of its GDP on state subsidies to state-owned enterprises, making it one of the highest aid providers in Europe (European Commission, 2018b). In general terms, although there has been an overall reduction of direct state ownership, in some sectors state-owned enterprises have expanded, as in the case of Srbijagas or Telekom Srbija (European Commission, 2019). Government control over the economy has also been ensured by the little transparency and the diminishing control of state aid and privatization practices. The authority of the Commission on State Aid Control (CSAC) has been constantly weakened by the government and its lack of personnel and operational independence has been recurrently denounced by the Commission (2013b, 2019, 2021). In particular, it is commonplace for the government to not notify the CSAC ex ante, thus limiting the effective control for the transparency of state aid procedures. Furthermore, the governance of state-owned enterprises themselves remains under strong political influence – especially in key sectors

such as gas, electricity, and telecommunications – as the appointment of acting managers instead of transparent nomination processes is more and more frequent (European Commission, 2019).

Concerning the *political constraining capacity of the ruling party*, the Commission reports note an increased ability of the SNS to sideline opposition groups ever since coming to power in 2012. The party did so by skewing the level playing field in its favor and infringing its prerogatives by harassing the opposition. There are mainly two institutional arenas in which the ruling party's strength can be assessed: the parliament and the elections. In the first, the governing coalition has made use of several practices to reduce the potential influence exerted by opposition parties and distort the proper exercising of the legislative function. Among these, the Commission (2019, p. 8) reported the executive's practice of "merging unrelated laws under one discussion point, and proposing hundreds of amendments irrelevant to the content of legislation". Furthermore, since 2012, Commission's reports deplore the increasing use of urgency procedures to pass laws, a behavior that peaked in 2016 with the fast-tracking of 65% of the total number of laws examined (European Commission, 2018b, p. 6). This practice has been used extensively for the most controversial government-sponsored laws – e.g. the problematic reform of the Central Bank Law in August 2012 (European Commission, 2012a). Oftentimes, the ruling parties have abused their agenda-setting power by making last-minute changes to the parliament's agenda and by avoiding the discussion of legislative proposals set forth by the opposition (European Commission, 2016a, 2018b). The parliament's oversight role has also been undermined since no discussion of the Ombudsman's annual report has been allowed since 2014 (European Commission, 2019, p. 14). Moreover, the number of committees chaired by the opposition has been progressively reduced to only two in 2019 (European Commission, 2012a, 2014a, 2016a, 2019). As a result, all these practices by the ruling coalitions have not enabled opposition groups to participate effectively in the legislative process. The situation has been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 elections, impeding any viable pluralism. The last progress report registered some improvements, such as the reduction of urgent procedures; nevertheless, the Commission once again stressed that the "effectiveness, autonomy, and transparency of Parliament, including the role of the parliamentary opposition, need to be strengthened *unequivocally*" (European Commission, 2022, pp. 12, emphasis in original).

In the electoral arena, the Commission's reports noted widespread use of election-day fraud as well as "strategic manipulation of elections" (Bermeo, 2016). An increasing number of blatant frauds

have been reported in all elections since 2012, reaching a peak by affecting 10% of all Serbian polling stations in 2020 (European Commission, 2020, p. 9). Among these practices, there were breaches in ballot secrecy, violence, intimidation, and instances of family voting. More worryingly, despite the numerous calls by the opposition for a proper investigation, all the allegations have been dismissed by the prosecution (European Commission, 2013b, 2015a, 2016a, 2019). Candidates to national and local elections were also given unequal conditions depending on their political background, with significant campaign finance disparities, improper pressure on public employees to support the incumbents, and misuse of administrative resources (European Commission, 2016a, 2018b, 2020, 2022).

Overall, the process tracing of the relevant data from the Commission's Serbia reports shows that over time the SNS has been able to rely on a great and growing degree of strength and organizational capacity. In all three areas identified in the literature, the ruling elites in Serbia appear able to firmly control coalition unity, key economic sectors, and instruments of political coercion. In recent years, Commission reports seem to note some new developments, such as the partial weakening of the SNS at the 2022 elections, the slow progress of privatization reforms, and the decreasing use of fast-tracking legislation. Nevertheless, it appears too soon to judge whether these improvements could have an impact on the democratic trajectory of the country in the near future.

5.1.2. The VMRO-DPMNE in North Macedonia

From the perspective of the *unity of the ruling elites*, North Macedonian governments during the period under analysis showed a much lower degree of coordination and ideological cohesion compared to the Serbian case. This degree of disunity can mainly be traced back to the very composition of North Macedonian society and the structure of the party and decision-making systems. Approximately a quarter of the country's population is ethnic Albanian and therefore political competition is only organized within ethnic groups, while multi-ethnic parties struggle to gain a foothold. The Ohrid Framework Agreement even established a double majority system – or "Badinter majority" from the name of the French jurist who introduced it – in which governments need the support of the majority of both ethnic communities to approve crucial issues. In sum, the ethnic party system itself is conducive to division, forcing cooperation among political groups with very different priorities – a practice established in North Macedonia since 1992 (Crowther, 2017).

In the first two years after coming to power in 2006, the Commission's reports highlighted the clear ideological heterogeneity of the first VMRO-DPMNE-led government. Prime Minister Gruevski formed a coalition with five parties which led to a lack of effective internal coordination, with occasional tensions among partners (European Commission, 2006, 2007). Although the coalition reached some degree of agreement on foreign policy issues, it struggled to find consensus on internal reforms – especially on the use of the Albanian language. The situation was further aggravated by the difficult cohabitation with President Crvenkovski (SDSM), whose election in 2004 was severely contested by the VMRO-DPMNE and who on several occasions refused to enact the majority's laws (European Commission, 2008). The government coalition also enjoyed little legitimacy because it did not include the most popular Albanian party – i.e. the DUI – among its ranks, a long-standing practice in North Macedonian politics. This led to frictions between DUI and VMRO-DPMNE, with the former criticizing the latter for not enjoying a Badinter majority, and the Prime Minister questioning the democratic credentials of the Albanian party, being founded by the leader of the separatist militia UÇK (European Commission, 2007). Yet, after the 2008 elections, the two formations opted and managed to form a coalition between themselves.

Since 2008, the Commission's reports note an interesting trend in the VMRO-DPMNE-DUI coalition governments. On the one hand, they point out the coalition's resiliency over time, highlighting how elites often managed to set divisions aside with the aim of maximizing power and riding the sharp cleavage with the opposition. On the other, they report a clear lack of ideological congruence often deepened by ethnic issues. This disunity, setting the North Macedonian case apart from that of Serbia, can be found in several aspects. First, on multiple occasions, the Commission's reports show that although elites agreed on several policy priorities – such as EU integration and NATO accession – they often disagreed on how to reach these goals (European Commission, 2008, 2011, 2014b). Second, coordination within the government appeared quite weak, with inter-ministerial groups and committees failing to meet for long periods, sometimes over a year (European Commission, 2009, 2010, 2011). Third, disagreements between the two ruling parties appeared most evident during presidential elections. In 2009, both parties set forth their own candidates, but when the ethnic Albanian contender did not pass the first turn, DUI did not endorse the candidate of its coalition partner. In 2014, DUI proposed to agree on a consensual candidate, but the idea was rejected by VMRO-DPMNE. This led the Albanian party to boycott the elections and, after the re-election of President Ivanov, it contested his legitimacy

and deserted his official inauguration (European Commission, 2009, 2014b). Fourth, several ethnic-related controversies strained the relations between the ruling parties. In 2010, the VMRO-DPMNE proposed introducing Macedonian language teaching from the first year of primary school, while later that year it announced the controversial "Skopje 2014" urban project – aiming to give the capital a more classical Macedonian appeal, in line with the government's policy of antiquization (European Commission, 2010). In 2011, the construction of a church-shaped museum within an ethnically mixed area led to inter-ethnic clashes where members of DUI led the protests (European Commission, 2011). The ruling of VMRO-DPMNE and DUI was also marked by several inter-ethnic killings and violent conflicts, such as the 2012 Smilkovci lake killings, and the 2015 clashes in Gošince and Kumanovo. Although the government played a crucial role in alleviating the tensions, those episodes revealed that ruling elites held "different points of view concerning the status of victims of the 2001 conflict" (European Commission, 2012b, pp. 7–8). Last, the population census proved challenging for the ruling coalition which did not manage to agree on how to carry it out and whose methodology was labeled as controversial by both political formations. Planned for 2011, these disagreements led to its interruption, and no consensus was ever found to resume it (European Commission, 2012b, 2013c, 2014b). The final straw to the cohesion of the ruling elites was the 2015 wiretapping scandal and the subsequent political crisis. The coalition first lost its Badinter majority due to the defection of some MPs, and later lost its unity in the way it decided to face the opposition's protests. Whereas VMRO-DPMNE remained more rigid, DUI preferred more democratic means, and even aligned with SDSM and the opposition in threatening to boycott the scheduled elections and force their postponement twice (European Commission, 2015b, 2016b).

Concerning *government control over the economy*, the Commission's reports show a much more advanced level of privatization of the economy in North Macedonia compared to Serbia. The free interplay of market forces is described as "well advanced" (European Commission, 2008, p. 26), whereas state ownership and state aid are very low compared to the Serbian levels. Also Figure 4 shows the diminishing control exercised by the state over the economy, a process that has continued steadily in North Macedonia since the late 1990s, while in Serbia it has been de facto stagnating since the early 2000s. Although Gruevski had promised to review the privatization process once in power, this never happened; yet, the coming to power of the VMRO-DPMNE has somehow managed to halt its progress (see Figure 4).

The Commission's reports between 2006 and 2008 note continuous progress in the liberalization of the economy while state intervention continued to decline. The government retained control over thirty state-owned enterprises, which amounted to about 15% of the country's GDP and were mainly concentrated on telecommunications, energy, and public utilities (European Commission, 2006, 2007, 2008). In 2006, the state-controlled electricity company was tripartite into the generation, transmission, and distribution sections, and the latter was sold. Most of the government's shares in the landline telecom company were also disposed of, leaving the state in control of only 2% of them (European Commission, 2006, pp. 19–20). By 2008, progress reports described privatization as "largely completed" (European Commission, 2008, p. 26) and the institutional set-up was in place to monitor state influence.

This situation changed in 2009 when the economic crisis provided an opportunity for the government to increase its presence in the economy. State aid measures increased, leading to distortions in electricity and energy prices, while the asset value of state-owned enterprises started growing. The share of the private sector declined and several anti-crisis measures increased the government involvement in the economy, for instance through debt-equity swaps for troubled companies (European Commission, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012b). Furthermore, since 2011-2012, the Commission's reports have recorded an interesting trend. On the one hand, state assets started decreasing slightly but steadily, and direct state aid declined as well thanks to the strengthening of the legal framework. On the other hand, the government has increased its indirect influence on market competitiveness by making use of several policy instruments such as tax exemptions, public guarantees for loans to state-controlled companies, rescheduling of payment contracts, and non-transparent firm inspections and fines (European Commission, 2014b, p. 21). Moreover, in 2012 the government delayed the privatization of several state-owned enterprises, while in 2014 it postponed the full liberalization of the electricity market by five years (European Commission, 2012b, 2015b). Therefore, although during the reporting period the VMRO-DPMNE-led government operated in a situation of low state involvement in the national economy and low levels of state aid, it still managed to slightly increase its indirect influence by exploiting the economic crisis and making use of various policy instruments.

From the viewpoint of the *political constraining capacity of the ruling party*, the Commission's reports seem to confirm the greater capacity in parliament of the North Macedonian opposition compared to the Serbian case. This is in large part due to the power-sharing mechanisms that

require the establishment of a double majority to pass relevant laws. Thus, when VMRO-DPMNE-led governments did not enjoy such majorities, they proved less able to sideline the opposition, as was the case between 2006-2008 and after 2015. Moreover, the great heterogeneity and polarization of North Macedonian society forced ruling parties to promote consensus in parliament and enlarge the prerogatives of the opposition. For instance, since 2008 the National European Integration Council was established and chaired by the opposition (European Commission, 2008, p. 8). By 2010, public hearings were introduced to improve scrutiny of the government as well as new rules establishing the right of the opposition to table issues on the parliamentary agenda (European Commission, 2009, p. 7, 2010, p. 7).

However, from 2008 onwards, a new pattern of government behavior began to emerge. Ruling elites started to make use of more explicit instruments limiting the opposition's prerogatives and, moreover, during the successive institutional boycotts of the opposition, the ruling parties took advantage of their absence to pass controversial laws. In the summer of 2008, the vice-president of the SDSM was arrested and, during the opposition's boycott of parliament, 172 laws were enacted under the emergency procedure in less than a month (European Commission, 2008, p. 9). In 2011, a new boycott launched by the opposition – following the closing of the independent A1 TV by the government – allowed ruling elites to pass over 200 acts among which figured some controversial pieces of legislation such as the Law on Lustration, and amendments to the Constitution and the Electoral Code (European Commission, 2011, p. 6). Last, on December 24, 2012, a large number of opposition MPs were removed from the parliament's plenary hall as they contested the adoption of a controversial budget. During the subsequent political crisis, on the one hand, the government tried to reach a consensus thanks to the mediation of EU institutions (European Commission, 2013a), while on the other, it managed to enact crucial laws limiting committee future discussions of budgets (European Commission, 2013c, p. 7). The improper use of urgent procedures was also reported in the following progress reports, accompanied by the practice of frequent legislative changes to recently-adopted laws (European Commission, 2014b, 2015b, 2016b). The absence of opposition from parliament also meant a lack of effective checks on the government, especially on the intelligence services at the heart of the wiretapping scandal (European Commission, 2015b, p. 7). However, when opposition parties reconvened in parliament in 2016, the work of the inquiry committees on the scandal was undermined by the absence of

VMRO-DPMNE members, which led to the failure of all three committees to submit their final reports (European Commission, 2016b, pp. 7–8).

In the electoral arena, however, the Commission's reports retrieve many of the irregularities noted in the Serbian case, both in the form of election-day frauds and strategic manipulation in the pre-electoral period. On multiple occasions, the Commission condemned the government for its lack of transparency in certain practices, such as undeclared donations, underpriced advertising in the media, intimidation of voters, and biased media coverage, in particular of the public broadcaster, which tended to favor the government and criticize the opposition (European Commission, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2014b). Nevertheless, the main difference with the Serbian case can be found in the better follow-up in North Macedonia, since many of the reported violations received effective judicial responses – especially for the 2008 elections (European Commission, 2008, 2009). As in Serbia, North Macedonia ruling elites also called for early elections every two or three years to maximize their power. However, they were unable to do so in 2016 when opposition pressure was too strong, and were thus forced to postpone elections twice until an even playing field could be guaranteed (European Commission, 2016b).

Overall, the analysis of the Commission's progress reports shows a lower degree of strength and organizational capacity of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE compared to its Serbian counterpart. First, the party did not appear in firm control of the coalition unity, largely due to the ethnic character of the party system and power-sharing arrangements. Second, although it managed to delay the liberalization of some key sectors, it operated in a context of advanced privatization and low levels of state aid. Last, however, it employed the same tactics of the SNS to maximize the marginalization of the opposition both in parliament and in the electoral competition arena. Nonetheless, when the North Macedonian opposition organized itself in concert with civil society and eventually enlisted the DUI, even the political leverage of the ruling party proved insufficient to prevent its downfall.

5.2. The strength of civil society opposition: legal framework, financial viability, and advocacy

This second sub-chapter turns to opposition actors, focusing on civil society organizations. As I expect the NGOs of Serbia and North Macedonia to have different strengths, I compare their state of health and resources during the years of competitive authoritarianism. The comparison of

relevant country reports is carried out along three dimensions identified by the DG NEAR "Guidelines for EU support to Civil Society in Enlargement Countries" (DG Enlargement, 2014b; DG NEAR, 2022). First, the legal framework for a conducive environment; second, the enabling financial environment; and last, the political cooperation with public institutions to foster reforms. Therefore, the CSOSI country reports are analyzed to measure the difference in the strength of civil society organizations in Belgrade and Skopje, and whether the conditions for a conducive environment are present.

5.2.1. The Serbian case

Regarding the *legal framework*, Serbian civil society organizations operate in a less developed context compared to North Macedonia, as the CSOSI "legal environment" scores in Figure 5 show. Nevertheless, the country's performance experienced some improvements during the first SNS-led government between 2012-2014. In this period, CSOSI reports show the proactivity of the government's Office for Cooperation with Civil Society (OCCS), a key body established in 2010 with the task of creating an enabling legal environment (USAID, 2012b). Thanks to this fruitful cooperation, the Serbian government adopted several pieces of legislation enhancing the legal framework, such as the 2014 Guidelines for Transparent Financing (USAID, 2014b). At the same time, the reports on Serbia from 2012-2014 record several issues related to the civil society's legal environment that recur in subsequent reports, either because they were not addressed or because they even worsened. First, Serbian civil society organizations faced increasing pressure from government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), which were often set up to compete in specific tenders for public funds in order to indirectly rig the public procurement process. Second, NGOs faced unfavorable tax treatments with constant increases in VAT values (USAID, 2012b). Third, organizations often lack the legal capacity and administrative knowledge that would enable them to untangle the complex regulatory framework, especially at the local level (USAID, 2012b, 2013b, 2014b). Last, although the legal environment offers numerous means for NGOs to participate in policymaking, most proposed amendments and recommendations are ignored or outright rejected (USAID, 2012b).

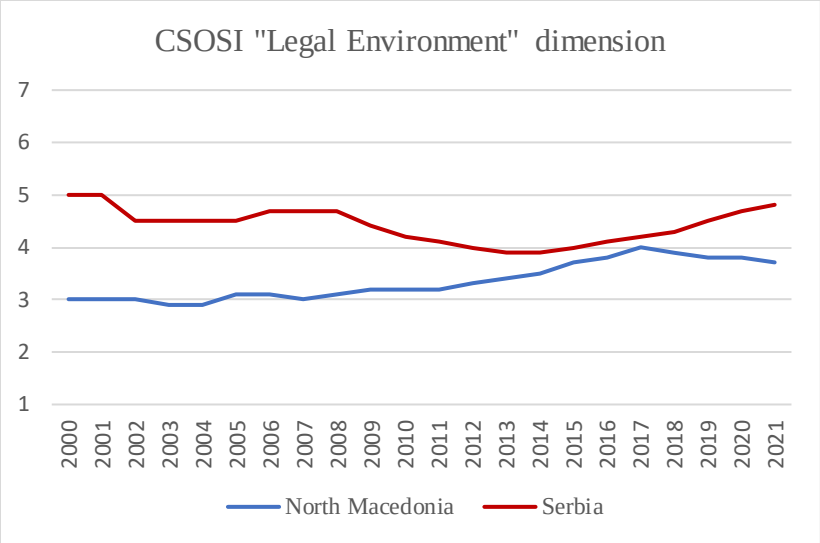

***Figure 5**: CSOSI "Legal Environment" dimension (2000-2021). The Index measures the strength and overall viability of civil society sectors from 1 (high) to 7 (low). Source: csosi.org*

Starting with 2015, country reports record a clear deterioration of the Serbian legal framework for civil society. In this period there was no legal improvement, and new laws meant to introduce positive changes proved controversial or without effective follow-up. For instance, the 2018 Law on Local Self-Government aimed to introduce more public participation of civil society in local decisions but turned out to be a mere "pro forma" (USAID, 2018, p. 2). In 2021, the Strategy for Creating an Enabling Environment for the Development of Civil Society was drafted; nevertheless, its drafting process was labeled as "contentious" due to the short and non-participatory timeframe, and the government's unwillingness to address crucial issues (USAID, 2021, p. 2).

The deterioration of the Serbian legal environment can be mainly traced back to two types of developments: negative legal changes and state impediments, sometimes turned into state harassment with no effective judicial follow-up. Among legal changes, a new Law on Social Entrepreneurship was introduced in 2015 which clearly hinders the efforts of civil society to found and operate social businesses (USAID, 2015b). In 2016, the government introduced new criteria for associations in order to get public funds, while in 2017, introduced new security measures to protect against terrorism financing but that limited greatly freedom of association (USAID, 2016b, 2017). Moreover, in 2018 the Law on Providing Free Legal Aid prohibited lawyers from providing pro bono legal advice, which is one of the main activities carried out by NGOs; this system was strengthened by the introduction of disciplinary measures against lawyers and associations infringing the law provisions (USAID, 2018, 2019). In 2019, new regulations regarding street

actions introduced several limitations to the right to protest such as the need of permits, often coupled with arbitrary demands or the random collection of fees (USAID, 2019). Last but not least, in 2020 the key OCCS was closed down and its activities were transferred to a newly established Ministry. The decision, besides having been taken with no consultation with civil society, clearly undermines the political independence of the task and even risks being canceled in case of the suppression of the Ministry (USAID, 2020).

Concerning state impediments, government actions have severely limited the legal environment. An increasing number of civil society initiatives met with harsh opposition from the government, often coupled with verbal threats by public officials which were not followed by court proceedings (USAID, 2015b, 2016b). Public space for civil society organizations continued to shrink, as did access to public information, hampering the work of NGOs. In 2019, several controversial court cases exposed the subtle state harassment of civil society – see the case of Aleksandar Obradović (USAID, 2019). In 2020-2021, state harassment increased in many forms. Arbitrary financial inspections were carried out against civil society organizations critical of the government. Moreover, the practice of denying approvals for protests and assemblies continued, leading to several cases of police banning properly notified assemblies. Last, the mass environmental protests held since late 2021 have seen increasingly questionable behavior by police officers, who intimidated participants, did not identify themselves, and failed to protect protesters from extremists and hooligans (USAID, 2020, 2021).

Turning to the *financial viability* of civil society, Serbian associations enjoy a lower degree of stability compared to North Macedonia, as shown in Figure 6. What is remarkable, however, is the clear improvement during the SNS period of government, as the CSOSI "financial viability" score moved from 5.3 in 2012 to 4.4 in the last USAID report (2021). Yet, when analyzing the annual reports, it is easy to see that this positive development is not the result of a more substantial commitment on the part of the state, but rather the opposite. The greater availability of funds to NGOs derives from the constant increase in foreign aid, first and foremost from the EU, under the Civil Society Facility (European Commission, 2023a). Also aid from other foreign actors such as the UN has grown over time, together with bilateral donations from EU Member States, primarily Germany (USAID, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). Financial support has become more accessible also thanks to a new 2012 law enabling NGOs to receive co-funds from the state and foreign donors (USAID, 2012b, 2013b). At the same time, another factor for a more enabling financial

environment has been the improvement in civil society's fundraising instruments. Since the economic crisis, NGOs have become more aware of the need to diversify their revenue sources and have stepped up their use of crowdfunding (USAID, 2013b, 2015b, 2016b, 2018).

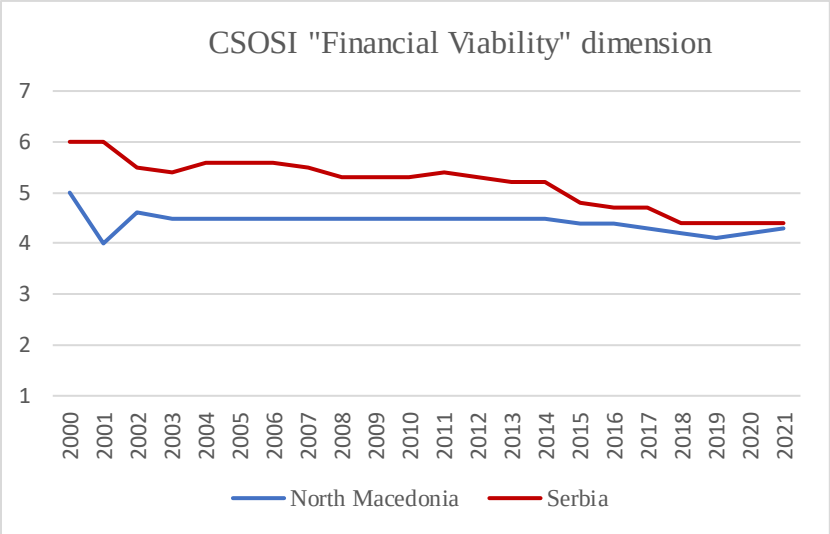

***Figure 6**: CSOSI "Financial Viability" dimension (2000-2021). The Index measures the strength and overall viability of civil society sectors from 1 (high) to 7 (low). Source: csosi.org.*

On the other hand, CSOSI reports show a decreasing willingness of the Serbian executive to offer public funds to civil society. The reduced availability of state funds is often traced back to exogenous causes, such as the Great Recession, the floods that hit Serbia in 2014, and the Covid-19 crisis. However, in addition to the quantity of public funds available, their quality has also declined, as evidenced by numerous reports of reduced transparency in their allocation (USAID, 2014b, 2015b, 2016b, 2017, 2019, 2021). Moreover, since 2013, no official data on public funds to civil society organizations has been published (USAID, 2016b). Irregularities in public calls are commonplace, as the few available funds are often directed towards GONGOs, a practice that has increased since the Covid-19 crisis (USAID, 2020, p. 5). Political interference is also spotted in the different distributions of the revenues from court fines: although these should be equally redistributed, only 10% went to civil society whereas most went to state institutions (USAID, 2016b, p. 214). Furthermore, although donations from businesses have increased over time, this trend has not occurred among companies close to SNS (USAID, 2018). The lack of proper financial management systems has been criticized in all annual reports, especially at the local level. Last, fundraising activities of civil society organizations and external support are mainly focused

on the short term, producing an endemic instability for the sector in the long run that has been further exposed by the economic crisis (USAID, 2012b, 2014b, 2019).

From the viewpoint of *political cooperation and advocacy*, Serbian NGOs experience a lower influence on their government's decisions compared to their North Macedonian counterparts. However, as shown in Figure 7, the first period of SNS-led governments was characterized by an improvement in the country's advocacy score. Until 2015, the Serbian civil society sector witnessed a great deal of cooperation among NGOs that often managed to form large coalitions with high visibility and impact (USAID, 2012b). This fruitful period was enabled by the role of the OCCS, the "key communication point between national authorities and civil society organizations" (USAID, 2012b, p. 4). The initiatives of societal associations improved in number, in quality, and in range; moreover, also the organizations' lobbying mechanisms were stepped up becoming more long-term rather than ad hoc (USAID, 2014b, p. 199). Consequently, civil society's initiatives garnered great influence and support in the policy-making process and occasionally led the government to change policy – as in 2013, when two Ministers were replaced following intensive campaigns (USAID, 2013b, p. 187).

Nonetheless, starting in 2015, efforts to influence the action of the government began deteriorating, whilst political authorities appeared to be less responsive. CSOSI reports point to the beginning of the first executive headed by Vučić and the refugee crisis as the causes of this shift. Parliament and government became less willing to cooperate and NGOs were often excluded by decision-making processes, functioning as mere observers (USAID, 2015b). There are numerous references where the recommendations of civil society have been ignored or directly rejected. Moreover, it was clear that "cooperation between the state and civil society relies on the attitudes of individual government officials, rather than on institutionalized relations", a factor that makes advocacy even more difficult (USAID, 2016b, p. 215). Besides the little influence exercised by civil society, ruling politicians started treating NGO initiatives as if they were direct attacks against them. This led to several cases of drafts and working groups being kept secret without any public record or discussion with civil society, the OCCS suffering severe budget cuts, and often only GONGOs being invited to working groups to maintain an appearance of transparency (USAID, 2017, 2018, 2019). This deterioration reached its apex in 2020, with de facto no cooperation of civil society with both national and local authorities. This situation was partly due to the absence of viable opposition in parliament and the subsequent government's decision to close down the OCCS. As

a consequence, the executive refused to include the recommendations of civil society, as in the case of the crucial reform of the electoral process (USAID, 2020, p. 6).

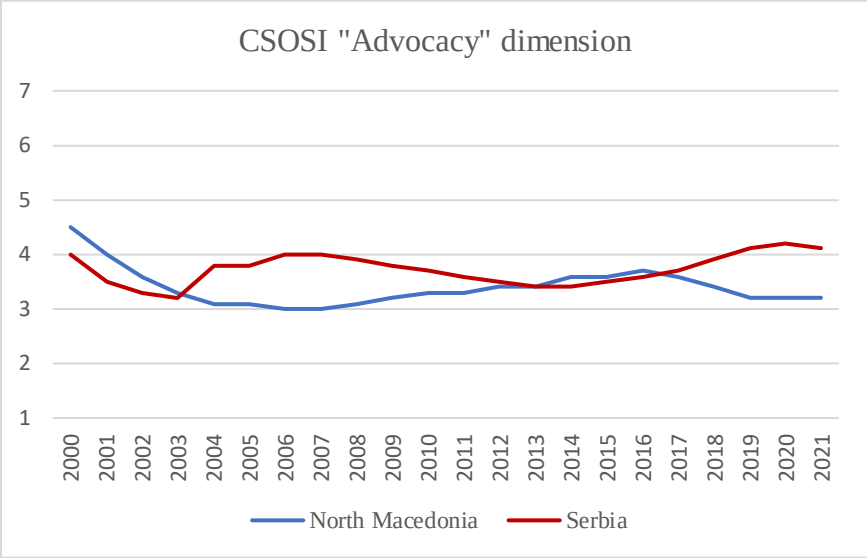

***Figure** 7: CSOSI "Advocacy" dimension (2000-2021). The Index measures the strength and overall viability of civil society sectors from 1 (high) to 7 (low). Source: csosi.org*

However, the year 2021 recorded a reversal of the downward trend that began in 2015. This slight improvement was due to the proactivity of the environmental movement that organized a series of protests across the country. Thanks to the coupling with several advocacy efforts, the movement obtained important results and forced the government to take a step back, for the first time since SNS came to power. The contentious Law on Expropriation was withdrawn in December, while several other controversial drafts were taken back to the parliament for reconsideration (USAID, 2021, p. 6). However positive, these results appeared to be the exception to the rule and, to date, do not represent a real change in the impact of Serbian civil society on the political sphere. The last CSOSI report states that "non-cooperation is the norm" (USAID, 2021, p. 6): the new Ministry that replaced the OCCS seems to be clearly politically oriented in favor of the participation of GONGOs, while an increasing number of organizations have left the government's working groups due to the reduction of space allocated to them.

Overall, the analysis of the annual reports exposes the weak role of civil society organizations in Serbia in all three dimensions examined. First, a conducive legal framework has not been established, as no positive reforms have been adopted since 2014; on the contrary, several controversial decisions – such as the abolition of the OCCS – have been passed, along with instances of state impediments and harassment of NGOs. Second, despite a general improvement,

the financial stability of civil society has not been achieved, as several endemic issues remain. Last, political cooperation among NGOs and with the government has not been institutionalized and largely depends on the political attitude of the executive. Furthermore, with the sole exception of 2021, street actions have never achieved policy shifts, being rather limited by coercive measures.

5.2.2. The North Macedonian case

From the perspective of the *legal framework*, the North Macedonian civil society operated in a more conducive environment compared to Serbia. As shown by Figure 5, the legal environment score in Skopje always fared better, except for its lowest point in 2017, which nevertheless was close to the highest Serbian score. The graph records a deterioration of the legal framework during the VMRO-DPMNE rule, especially since the start of the second term in 2008. However, the CSOSI reports show that the legal system was in place throughout the period of analysis, and was even further established in 2010 (USAID, 2010). Another clear difference with Serbia resides in the fewer cases of direct state harassment. While Serbian reports denounced the persistent occurrence of state impediments and restrictions, reports on North Macedonia rather refer to a general atmosphere of "mistrust" between government and civil society (USAID, 2009, 2012a). Only on two occasions were state harassment and coercions visible: first, during the 2013 environmental protests, where policemen forcefully terminated the initiative (USAID, 2013a), and then during the 2015-2016 political crisis. In the latter case, tensions reached unprecedented highs, with excessive use of force by the police and undue use of criminal investigations and charges. Similarly, Prime Minister Gruevski – backed by an increasingly proactive GONGO sector – threatened "disobedient" NGOs by promising an overhaul of civil society through a "de-Sorosization" plan (USAID, 2016a, p. 148).

Deterioration of the legal environment in North Macedonia was mainly due to legal changes, whose frequent use also contributed to uncertainty among civil society organizations. In 2008, the Law on Lobbying introduced major limitations to the participation of citizens and NGOs in decision-making processes, as participation became open only to "invited" entities (USAID, 2008, p. 158). Between 2008 and 2010, the government managed to postpone the long-awaited Law on Citizen's Associations and Foundations, allowing it to introduce some amendments such as the establishment of excessive fines on non-complying NGOs (USAID, 2010, p. 131). In 2012, several legislative developments introduced threats to the independence of NGOs: among them, the

Lustration Law instituted the practice of selective investigations into possible collaborations of civil society members with the communist regime (USAID, 2012a). Last, amendments to the 2015 Law on Police introduced numerous restrictions on freedom of association, equipping police officers with tougher tools to repress protests (USAID, 2015a, p. 151).

Another factor sets North Macedonia's legal environment apart from that of Serbia. While there have been no legislative improvements in Belgrade since 2014, several laws strengthening the civil society environment were introduced in Skopje during the VMRO-DPMNE rule. In 2007, new amendments made the registration of NGOs quicker and easier, also removing it from the influence of local judges (USAID, 2007, p. 156). The 2010 landmark Law on Citizen's Associations and Foundations introduced two main improvements to the legal framework: first, it allowed NGOs to engage in economic activities, and second, entitled organizations engaged in humanitarian and social activities to greater tax and customs exemptions (USAID, 2010, p. 131). In 2011, several legislative amendments were set forth by civil society groups thanks to increasing cooperation fostered by facilitators such as the EU-based TACSO (USAID, 2011). In 2014, the positive collaboration between government and civil society led to the formulation of many positive drafts aimed at improving dialogue, enhance government funding and lift administrative burdens from NGOs (USAID, 2014a). Last, while in Serbia pro bono legal advice had been banned, this has been permitted and regulated in North Macedonia by the 2009 Law on Free Legal Aid (USAID, 2010, 2016a).

From the perspective of *financial viability*, this is the dimension in which the North Macedonian civil society is weakest. Yet, North Macedonia's score shown in Figure 6 appears to fare better than Serbia's, despite the obvious catch-up in recent years. In fact, while Serbian NGOs have increased their financial stability ever since the coming to power of SNS, the North Macedonian score has stagnated during the reporting period. Nevertheless, beyond these diverging overall trends, an analysis of CSOSI reports shows clear similarities between the civil societies of the two countries. First and foremost, North Macedonian NGOs remained highly dependent on foreign aid as well. 90% of their budgets came from international donors such as the EU – through enlargement instruments like CARDS and IPA – and the US; but also from bilateral financial support, mainly from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (USAID, 2007, 2012a, 2015a). The strong dependence of civil society organizations on foreign donations is evident from the fact that when these increased, so did the overall financial sustainability score, as in 2015 (USAID, 2015a).

Another crucial similarity lies in the negligible role played by state funds in the financial sustainability of the civil society environment. According to the CSOSI reports, only 22% of North Macedonian NGOs received public funds, and with widely varying amounts, which, however, represented no more than 10% of their budgets on average (USAID, 2013a, 2015a, p. 153). Moreover, the allocation of these funds was described as non-transparent and, what is more, most of the available funds did not go to civil society actors, but rather to political parties or religious associations (USAID, 2014a). However, what sets the case of North Macedonia apart from that of Serbia is the role played by the business sector. Since 2011, CSOSI reports note a growing interest of private companies in collaborating with civil society, raising the amount of funds allocated as part of their corporate social responsibility programs (USAID, 2011, 2012a, 2013a, 2014a). Financial support has been disbursed either in the form of ad hoc public calls or donations programs (USAID, 2012a). Local government funds and philanthropic donations have also experienced an increase over time, the former thanks to the financial and technical assistance provided by EU programs (USAID, 2012a, p. 4), the latter due to numerous humanitarian crises – such as the 2014 and 2016 floods or the 2015 refugee crisis (USAID, 2014a, 2015a, 2016a).

The financial sustainability of the North Macedonian civil society presents a number of endemic problems, largely common to Serbia. Most NGOs lack fundraising skills, whereas only very few can count on sound financial management systems (USAID, 2006, 2008, 2011). Another constraint is represented by the country's slow economic growth which explains the little public funds available (USAID, 2008, p. 159). Furthermore, although NGOs are aware of the need to diversify their sources, this goal is far from being achieved, as most of them are heavily dependent on foreign donations (USAID, 2015a, 2016a). Lastly, the most important factor of financial vulnerability is determined by the dependence of NGOs on donations, which has led to the development of project-based planning rather than focusing on long-term stability (USAID, 2011, 2015a, 2016a).

From the viewpoint of *political cooperation and advocacy*, North Macedonian civil society organizations have generally fared better than their Serbian counterparts, despite the overall deterioration of their "advocacy" score during the VMRO-DPMNE government (see Figure 7). CSOSI reports show some similarities with Serbia mainly due to the North Macedonian atmosphere of mistrust between government and civil society. NGOs usually perceived to be invited to policymaking only to fulfill EU requirements and maintain an appearance of transparency. However, their proposals were often ignored, and their means to affect decision-

making were often restrained by the ruling elites' frequent resort to expedited procedures (USAID, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2014a, 2015a). This, in turn, prompted NGOs to exercise self-censorship as a way of circumventing government's obstacles; at the same time, political parties have been actively involved in civil society leading to the mass registration of GONGOs – with the clear aim of disrupting cooperation between government and civil society (USAID, 2008, 2011, 2014a, 2016a).

However, the analysis of CSOSI reports for North Macedonia shows some clear differences with the Serbian case relating to the success of civil society's advocacy initiatives. First, the institutional framework and the informal means to foster cooperation – such as the Regulatory Impact Assessment instrument and the Government Unit for Cooperation with the NGO sector – were in place. These tools have been improved over time and, coupled with increasing advocacy at the informal level, have enabled more efficient cooperation between government and NGOs. Consequently, cooperation has not only increased in quality but also in quantity, as shown by an analysis of the reports over time (USAID, 2006, 2007, 2011, 2012a, 2013a). Second, every annual report refers to new instances of successful advocacy by NGOs – a clear difference with Serbia, where only a few of them were reported. In 2006, fifty NGOs lobbied for the withdrawal of some worrying amendments to the Law on Citizen's Associations, while in the following years newly-formed coalitions obtained several advocacy successes on various issues: rights for people with disabilities, consumer protection, domestic violence, and abortion rights (USAID, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009). In 2014, important advocacy successes were scored in the field of environmental protection and LGBT+ rights, while in 2015, amendments to the Asylum Law to enable foreign nationals to legally pass through the country were adopted thanks to the lobbying of human rights activists in the midst of the refugee crisis (USAID, 2014a, 2015a). Third, while in Serbia the success of the 2021 protests was an exception to the rule, in North Macedonia street actions regularly achieved policy changes. Most importantly, although no unified civil society platform was formed, North Macedonian NGOs increasingly came together, and the number of NGO coalitions grew over time (USAID, 2006, 2011, 2014a, 2015a, 2016a). There are several examples of civic demonstrations that forced the government to reconsider its policies. In 2011, forty-five youth organizations succeeded in convincing Parliament to withdraw the Youth Act after holding protests in front of Parliament (USAID, 2011, p. 134). In 2012, the pressure of several NGOs led the government to lift its ban and allowed the widely-participated March for Peace (USAID,

2012a). At the end of 2014, student protests were organized to oppose the Law on Higher Education, which as a result was withdrawn by the government (USAID, 2015a, p. 155). Most relevantly, however, protests reached a new peak in 2015-2016 due to the wiretapping scandal: NGOs increasingly came together in ad hoc coalitions while grassroots mobilization grew stronger. The Colorful Revolution, led by the Protestiram movement, expanded considerably after the President granted a pardon to fifty-six officials involved in the scandals: the protesters made numerous demands – the revocation of the pardon and the calling of free elections, among others – most of which were met, allowing a peaceful solution to the political crisis (USAID, 2016a, p. 153). In July 2016, a group of NGOs presented the Blueprint for Urgent Democratic Reforms aimed at providing guidelines to relevant stakeholders to restore democratic standards and ultimately hold free elections – a document that proved crucial in the subsequent months (USAID, 2016a).

Overall, the analysis of the CSOSI annual reports shows greater strength of North Macedonian NGOs compared to their Serbian counterparts in all three dimensions under scrutiny. First, the legal framework for a conducive civil society was in place and improving, while cases of state harassment were more negligible compared to Belgrade. Second, the financial viability fared generally better, thanks to the role played by corporate donations; nevertheless, this was not the most crucial factor setting the two countries apart. Last, North Macedonian civil society was much more successful in promoting cooperation among NGOs and with the government. Moreover, a larger number of advocacy initiatives and street protests led to policy changes, the most important of which in 2016 succeeded in creating the conditions to favor a peaceful regime transition.

6. Conclusion

Overall, this study has argued that the diverse democratic paths of the Western Balkans can only be explained through the reconciliation of multiple approaches, as no single theory can account for the complex political developments in the region. Whereas the literature on democratization, democratic transitions, and external democracy promotion tends to focus on single explanatory factors, this thesis finds that, applied to the Western Balkans, these theories do not suffice by themselves. Both structural and agency-based approaches should be taken into account, as well as external and domestic factors. This finding is not the consequence of the region's exceptionalism, but rather inherent to the nature of social science research, especially when dealing with the highly complex theme of democracy and its determinants. Hence, throughout the analysis of relevant documents, this study confirms the assumptions related to the thesis's research question. The evidence confirms that the proposed theories should be seen as complementary rather than alternatives. In fact, if one only examines external structural factors – e.g. the EU's linkage and leverage in the Western Balkans – one cannot explain why North Macedonia has halted its democratic regression. Parallelly, when analyzing the strength of domestic actors in Serbia and North Macedonia, the role played by structural and EU-related factors is inevitably overlooked. Therefore, a reconciliation of multiple approaches is necessary to explain the double puzzle posed by the Western Balkan democratic environment.

This thesis has retrieved several key findings that shed light on the mechanisms that allowed for democratic backsliding in the region in the first place and those that took Serbia and North Macedonia on two different democratic courses. First, evidence from the European Council conclusions from the Thessaloniki Summit to date shows the clear emergence of the stability-democracy dilemma identified by the literature (Richter, 2012; Smith et al., 2021). Between 2014-2018, democracy concerns and rule of law reforms have disappeared from the discussions of the EU's heads of state and have been substituted by issues related to security and migration. Moreover, as an overview of some declarations of EU leaders shows, the EU appears to have turned a blind eye to illiberal practices in Serbia and North Macedonia. This arrangement, which benefits both EU politicians and the Balkan ruling elites, confirms the presence of competing and not complementary objectives on the EU's agenda for the region, which in turn reduces the EU's leverage, as per hypothesis.

Second, the degree of linkage between the EU and the Western Balkans appears to be diminishing when examining the flow of information between the two sides. The Commission's progress reports show that the EU has not contributed to the creation of a media environment enabling freedom of expression, and therefore both Serbia and North Macedonia have been drifting away from European standards and rules. The Commission's recommendations have been either disregarded or have rather contributed to the de-Europeanization of media sectors. Moreover, there appears to be a clear discrepancy between the legislative alignment with EU guidelines and the actual implementation of new norms. In all three areas analyzed – namely, the presence of an enabling environment, the internal governance of media outlets, and the strength of journalist organizations – political influence has emerged and has increasingly hampered the smooth flow of information by sidelining or even shutting down independent media. Consequently, both Serbia's and North Macedonia's linkage with Brussels appears to have reduced over time along with the level of media freedom, as assumed.

However, when turning to domestic agency explanations, the paths of Belgrade and Skopje show clear differences. Taking into account the strength of the ruling elites, the Serbian SNS proved to be more resilient than the VMRO-DPMNE in all three aspects analyzed. While Serbian executives showed a great degree of cohesion and policy coordination, the North Macedonian coalition was constantly undermined by its inter-ethnic character and disagreed on several key issues. Furthermore, the Serbian government appeared firmly in control of crucial economic sectors as well as of instruments of political coercion in parliament and the electoral arena. On the contrary, the analysis of the Commission's reports shows that Gruevski's government operated in a context of advanced privatization and low state aid, and its political constricting capacity was highly restrained by the power-sharing mechanisms of the North Macedonian political system.

Last, the civil society environment and the degree of NGO organization varied greatly between the two countries, as per hypothesis. Serbian civil society organizations operated in a non-conducive legal environment and have not yet achieved financial stability despite the improvement in foreign aid. Moreover, their cooperation with the government depends solely on the political attitude of public officials, whilst street actions are still to achieve any substantial policy shift. Conversely, North Macedonian NGOs – although not enjoying long-term financial sustainability either – have demonstrated to operate in a more enabling legal and political environment. Above all, advocacy

initiatives and street protests led to numerous policy changes, culminating in the 2016 Colorful Revolution that successfully created the conditions for a smooth government handover.

However, this research presents several limitations and points of criticism. First of all, the process of operationalization proved the most challenging: on the one hand, the transposition of systematized concepts into measurable variables was not always so straightforward, having to capture wide-ranging concepts such as linkage and leverage; on the other, the absence of relevant data – either because it was not accessible or was only available in Serbian or Macedonian – forced the formulation of proxies that did not always fully capture the respective underlying ideas. Second, the study of the complexity of democracy and its determinants inevitably generated some theoretical shortcomings. For instance, many concurring factors have been ignored such as the role of culture in explaining democratic outcomes. Moreover, democracy has been considered the ending point of this analysis without considering the possibility of reverse causality, i.e. whether the type of regime did not determine structural conditions and actors' behaviors. In this sense, this thesis risks being overly deterministic in assuming that, given certain inputs, I must necessarily retrieve certain results, whereas, in reality, the issue of democracy is much more complex than that. Third, this sometimes oversimplistic approach also emerged in the methodology applied. The study of domestic factors as well as regional actors often turned out to be too "black and white", faced with a much more nuanced reality. For instance, the EU has been treated as a single bloc while the diverging interests of Member States have been neglected. Similarly, the Manichaeist contraposition between government and civil society did not take into account many other relevant groups such as the economic elites. This inevitably stems from the simplification of reality made by theoretical approaches, which when applied to different contexts struggle to cope with the complexity of reality. Last, this study failed to isolate agency-based from structural factors during the empirical research. In Chapter 4, the role of EU officials and local government decisions emerged as key determinants of the level of linkage and leverage – as predicted by Tolstrup (2013). In parallel, Chapter 5 pointed out the constraining action of structural variables – such as the inter-ethnic composition of the North Macedonian society – on the activities and choices of Western Balkan entities. This shortcoming, however, feeds into my main thesis, according to which no one theory is able to explain democratic pathways on its own, and thus prompts a synthesis of the approaches considered.

To answer the question of how this thesis is relevant and how it contributes to scholarly debates, I point to three main factors. First, by partially agreeing with both structural and agency theories in terms of their explanatory power, this research makes a pitch for their complementarity and their reconciliation in the study of democratic processes. Although this approach is not new in social studies (Sewell, 1992), this thesis intervenes in the political literature by bringing new evidence and updating the debate with recent and current events. While not proposing its own integrative approach, this analysis has laid the groundwork "building blocks" for its synthesis, by establishing explanatory variables, temporal focus, use of comparison, and level of analysis – as outlined by Mahoney and Snyder (1999, p. 7ff). Second, from a theoretical perspective, this analysis confirms and updates the explanatory power of existing theories: on the one hand, it applies well-known academic approaches to a new scenario and geographical area – the troubled democratic consolidation in the Western Balkans; on the other, it tests theories formulated before the occurrence of the "third reverse wave" against the new trend of democratic backsliding. Last, from a practical point of view, by studying what distinguishes the Serbian democratic path from the North Macedonian one, this thesis highlights which conditions favor democratic regression and which foster pluralism. Though these findings might contribute to the general literature on democracy, they are more relevant to students of European studies and EU enlargement. Indeed, they indirectly point out in which policy areas and sectors the EU should intervene to stimulate reforms in order to promote positive change and an enabling environment for democracy.

What is important to emphasize is that this thesis does not imply that North Macedonia is now fully democratic or even on the path to consolidated democratization: as Figure 1 shows, since 2019 the country has halted its positive trend of democratic reforms and has even slightly regressed without reaching its 2004 peak. This scenario has been spotted in recent literature, as Gjuzelov and Hadjievska (2020, p. 55) argue that "the new political establishment has already started showing the first signs of some of the institutional aspects of illiberal politics". Notably, some have predicted that the same factors that have constrained VMRO-DPMNE's semi-authoritarian practices may hinder democratic consolidation, since "there are strong structural reasons to believe that the interethnic honeymoon in Macedonia will not last" (Ceka, 2018, p. 155). Although it seems too early to judge whether these results risk undermining the positive achievements of the government change, this thesis has attempted to strike a positive note on the prospect of democracy for the region. Twenty years after the Thessaloniki Summit, the situation in the Western Balkans

does indeed look grimmer, but the region's countries show to have developed structural antibodies to re-establish democratic premises and that transformation can be achieved when relevant actors manage to muster "unity, resources, and momentum" (Tolstrup, 2013, p. 734). Further research should investigate whether the assumptions outlined in this thesis hold true for future developments in the dynamic politics of the Western Balkans, in light of their forthcoming accession to the EU.

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Summary

This thesis investigates the diverse democratic pathways of the Western Balkan countries in the last two decades and studies them through the lens of structural and agency approaches. My interest in this topic stems from the relevance of the democratic situation of the region to its accession prospect. Indeed, although having been promised EU membership already at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit, six Western Balkan countries – Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo – are still deadlocked at three different accession tiers. The main reason adduced for this "enlargement fatigue" is the poor democratic performances of the region's countries, which have been stagnating and even regressing since the mid-2000s. This pattern can be inscribed in a broader trend of democratic backsliding that has hit several countries worldwide; nevertheless, it appears puzzling when confronted with the successful democratic transition of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Although both regions shared geographical proximity with the EU, some historical features, and were subject to the same degree of EU conditionality and interest, they experienced very different democratic patterns. Generally, scholars point to the Western Balkans' domestic inefficiencies to explain the failure of the EU's transformative power. However, only recently the literature has started realizing that the EU is also at fault, especially when analyzing the decoupling between the slow progress towards EU accession and the declining democratic standards in the region. At the same time, in more recent years some Western Balkan countries have experienced a democratic course change, managing to oust semi-authoritarian leaders and halting the trend of democratic backsliding.

Hence, from a European studies perspective, the political situation in the Western Balkans presents a double puzzle. On the one hand, given the EU's interest and strong presence in the region, one would expect a clear trend toward democratization. On the other, given the EU's uniform approach to the Western Balkans and the similar history of the countries, one would expect their democratic trajectories to follow the same pattern. However, this does not seem to be the case. Therefore, this thesis seeks to explain and give reasons for the diverse democratic pathways of Western Balkan countries. My hypothesis, which emerges from the analysis of theories of democracy, is that no single approach can explain this research conundrum, but that both structuralist and agency theories must be considered, as well as external and domestic factors.

Thus, the objective of this study is threefold. First and foremost, by highlighting the benefits and shortcomings of both structural and actor-centered approaches, this thesis aims to make a pitch for their reconciliation and feeds into the existing literature on this topic by adding new evidence. Moreover, by setting the theoretical and methodological "building blocks", this study lays the groundwork for their potential synthesis in a new integrative approach. Second, from a theoretical perspective, this thesis tests the explanatory power of existing theories, by applying them to new geographical and temporal contexts to shed light on both Western Balkan politics and the theories themselves. Last, from a practical viewpoint, by studying what distinguishes those countries going down the de-democratizing path from those that have reversed this trend, I highlight which conditions favor democratic regression and which foster pluralism. Though these findings might contribute to the general literature on democracy, they are more relevant to students of European studies and EU enlargement, as they indirectly point out in which policy areas and sectors the EU should intervene to promote an enabling environment for democracy.

Since I suspect the EU's negative role in the Western Balkans' poor democratic performance, I start by investigating structural theories that consider international determinants of democracy promotion. Levitsky and Way's theory of linkage and leverage is selected for its strong explanatory power. Moreover, it appears interesting to study whether the theory's assumptions still apply, having been written on the eve of the global trend of democratic backsliding. According to the scholars, the EU's democracy promotion is more efficient in those regions where the EU's leverage and the region's linkage to the EU are stronger. The level of leverage and linkage can be measured by several factors but nonetheless, they remain structural variables resulting from long-term processes and thus not amenable to short-term policy changes. Consequently, although the Western Balkans remain in a situation of relatively high linkage and leverage, my hypothesis is that they are slowly drifting away from it, witnessing a reduction of linkage and leverage levels (H1).

On the other hand, although structural approaches can explain the general trend of democratic regression in the Western Balkans, they cannot account for intra-regional variations in geographical areas with roughly the same features. To solve this shortcoming, the literature since Rustow's milestone study has often turned to agency explanations. Indeed, Tolstrup demonstrates that levels of linkage and leverage are amenable not only to structural features but also to domestic actors. Through an elitist approach, the scholar argues that the focus should be shifted to "gatekeeping elites" in order to measure their level of strength and power. However, while focusing

on ruling actors with an approach that owes much to the literature on authoritarian stability, Tolstrup neglects the role of civil society and democratization from below. This thesis integrates the scholar's approach with the literature focusing on the role of civic opposition, in particular agreeing on the need to build bridges between social movement studies and studies on civil society. Consequently, the Chapter on agency studies the role of both ruling elites and civil society opposition. The underlying assumption – in line with the game theory literature on democratic transitions – is that the strength of governing actors is constrained by the perceived organizational power of the opposition, which appears as a necessary premise for potentially ending democratic regression. Thus, a second agency-based hypothesis is outlined, foreseeing different degrees of strength for ruling elites and civil society opposition in those countries with different democratic outcomes (H2).

In order to answer the paper's research question, I apply a qualitative methodology based on a case study approach. Serbia and North Macedonia are selected for three main reasons. First, they stand out as frontrunners of democratic backsliding in the Western Balkan and thus illiberal practices appear more straightforward and detectable. Second, both countries found themselves at different accession tiers during the reference periods and experienced very different accession paths: while North Macedonia saw no formal progress towards enlargement during the VMRO-DPMNE government – despite being the first Balkan country to be granted candidate status in 2005 – Serbia managed to open accession negotiations in 2014 and talks have been proceeding more or less steadily since then. Last but not least, democratic backsliding has followed different trends in the selected countries. While in Serbia competitive authoritarian leaders are still in power, the 2016 elections in North Macedonia have ousted the ruling elites, halting many years of profound democratic erosion. Accordingly, the inclusion of countries with different democratic outcomes but similar historical, political, and social features allows the application of Mill's Most Similar System Design, which exposes those conditions that have led the two countries down different democratic paths.

This thesis tests existing theories – and the derived hypotheses – through a process-tracing analysis. Thanks to its "within-case" method, this methodology enables me to trace the conditions that allowed the emergence of certain democratic patterns in the Western Balkans and to analyze their development from an in-depth historical perspective. The timeframe of analysis is different for the two countries, as they experienced democratic regression in two partially overlapping

periods: for Serbia, relevant data is retrieved between the years 2012-2022, while for North Macedonia between 2006-2016. The data – mainly qualitative in nature – were retrieved from various primary and secondary sources. The first group includes European Council conclusions and EU leaders' declarations retrieved from institutional websites and online newspapers. The second comprehends the European Commission's progress reports on enlargement countries and the Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index (CSOSI) annual reports, as well as the relevant academic literature on the matter. Some graphs reporting quantitative data retrieved from V-Dem or CSOSI websites are also added to the study, but only for the argumentative and illustrative purpose of the qualitative analysis.

Turning to the empirical analysis, Chapter 4 discusses the degree of linkage and leverage of the EU in Serbia and North Macedonia. The operationalization of such abstract concepts is performed through the formulation of proxies. According to Levitsky and Way, the level of leverage is affected, inter alia, by the presence or not of competing issues on the EU agenda. Therefore, this section retrieves information from the European Council conclusions and EU leaders' declarations that hint at the emergence of a "stability-democracy dilemma". The European Council is selected for its role in defining the general priorities and political direction of the Union. Overall, the analysis of European Council conclusions seems to show the disappearance of democratic reforms in the Western Balkans from the EU agenda between 2014-2018. This pattern was determined by several factors. On the one hand, the Juncker Commission's policy of suspending enlargement; on the other, the emergence of new security- and stability-related concerns determined by the return of foreign fighters and the outbreak of the so-called migration crisis. During this period, concerns about the democratic situation in Western Balkan countries disappeared from EU debates and were substituted by efforts to step up the security system of these countries and their border control. Moreover, when it comes down to the country level, the EU leaders' statements on Serbia and North Macedonia seem to reflect this general trend. What is more, not only politicians decided to turn a blind eye to the illiberal democratic practices of Gruevski in North Macedonia and Vučić in Serbia, but even appeared to actively endorse them despite blatant scandals – e.g. the wiretapping affaire in Skopje. These findings, on the one hand, confirm the presence of conflicting goals on the EU agenda for the region. On the other, they feed into the literature on "stabilitocracy", arguing that the EU not only pursues non-complementary objectives but even shows a clear preference for stability over democracy. In turn, this evidence hints at the diminishing level of EU leverage.

Turning to the Western Balkans' linkage to the EU, I analyze one of the five dimensions identified by Levitsky and Way, namely the communication linkage. The selection was made on the basis of the greater accessibility of relevant data and the relevance of the media sector to the democratic consolidation of the country. Media freedom is used as a proxy and the linkage level is studied both from a top-down perspective to assess whether the domestic media sector has evolved according to EU recommendations, and from a bottom-up approach to study whether an environment conducive to the free flow of information has been established. The relevant data are grouped according to three main areas identified by the 2014 EU Guidelines on media in enlargement countries. First, the establishment of a conducive environment, second, the internal governance of media outlets, and third, the resilience of journalist professional organizations and individual journalists. The data are gathered from the Commission's progress reports and, in particular, Chapter 10 on "Information society and media" and Chapter 23 on "Judiciary and fundamental rights" under freedom of expression are examined to study how the media linkage developed over time. The empirical evidence suggests that the media linkage has indeed diminished in both Serbia and North Macedonia during the reporting period. The Commission's progress reports show that the EU has not contributed to the creation of a media environment enabling freedom of expression and therefore both countries have been drifting away from European standards and rules. In all three areas analyzed, political influence has emerged and has increasingly hindered the smooth flow of information by sidelining or even shutting down independent media. What is interesting to note is that, on an overall level, the EU's engagement in the sector appears to have increased along with journalist exchanges between Brussels and the region, and even progress reports also show increasing legislative alignment. Nonetheless, when looking at the actual implementation, the analysis demonstrates that the free flow of information has diminished, owing to widespread reports of biased media coverage and the sidelining of independent journalists and media outlets. In turn, the linkage between the two sides has decreased as well.

However, the analysis of domestic actors shows a clear difference between the role of elites and civil society in the two Western Balkan countries. First, I examine the strength of ruling elites and its development over time, thanks to the analysis of the Commission's reports. Three dimensions derived from the literature on authoritarian stability are primarily studied: the ideological cohesion of the ruling coalition, the level of government control over the economy, and the executive's

political capacity to constrain the opposition. The evidence suggests that the performances of Serbian and North Macedonian elites are much different. On the one hand, the process tracing of the relevant data from the Commission's reports shows that over time the SNS has been able to rely on a great and growing degree of strength and organizational capacity across all three dimensions. Serbian ruling elites appear able to firmly control coalition unity, key economic sectors, and instruments of political coercion. On the other hand, Gruevski's government showed a lower organizational degree compared to its Serbian counterpart. First, the party did not appear in control of the coalition unity, largely due to the ethnic character of the party system; second, it operated in a context of advanced privatization and low levels of state aid; and last, its political constraining capacity was highly limited by the power-sharing mechanisms of the North Macedonian political system.

Parallelly, the civil society opposition in the two study cases showed different levels of strength. Thanks to the process tracing of CSOSI reports, the environment and performances of NGOs have been analyzed in three main areas identified by the 2014 EU guidelines on support to civil society in enlargement countries. First, the legal framework in which they operated, second, their financial viability, and last, the level of advocacy and political cooperation with public institutions. On the one hand, annual reports expose the weak role of civil society organizations in Serbia in all three dimensions examined. No positive reforms have been adopted since the advent of Vučić to power, and financial stability remains a long way off for the NGO sector. Moreover, political cooperation between NGOs and the government largely depends on the political attitude of the executive, while advocacy actions have never achieved policy shifts, being rather limited by coercive measures. On the other hand, North Macedonian civil society enjoyed greater strength compared to the Serbian one. A legal framework for a conducive civil society was in place and improving, while financial viability fared generally better, thanks to the role played by the private sector. Most notably, North Macedonian civil society was much more successful in promoting cooperation among NGOs and with the government. Above all, advocacy initiatives and street protests led to numerous policy changes, culminating in the 2016 Colorful Revolution that successfully created the conditions for a smooth government change.

This thesis and its findings appear relevant for three main reasons. First and foremost, since partially agreeing with both structural and agency theories in their explanatory power, this research makes a pitch for their complementarity and their reconciliation in the study of democratic

processes. Although this approach is not new in social studies, this thesis intervenes in the political literature by bringing new evidence and updating the debate with recent and current events. While not proposing its own integrative approach, this analysis lays the theoretical and methodological groundwork for its synthesis. Second, from a theoretical perspective, this thesis confirms and updates the explanatory power of existing theories. On the one hand, it corroborates the assumptions of previous academic approaches on the new geographical area of the Western Balkans. On the other, it confirms the validity of theories formulated before the occurrence of the "third reverse wave" against the new trend of democratic backsliding. Last, by studying what distinguishes the Serbian democratic path from the North Macedonian one, this research contributes to the literature on EU enlargement by highlighting which conditions favor democratic regression and which do not. In this light, the thesis findings on the different conditions in the two countries represent useful policy recommendations for EU policymakers, indicating in which areas the EU should take action to promote democratic change.

However, this thesis also presents some limitations and shortcomings. Some are partially owed to the process of operationalization which proved challenging due to the abstract and wide-raging character of most concepts used, on the one hand, and to the little availability of relevant data, on the other. Others are inherent to the study of democracy and democratic trends, given the complexity of the issue. In this light, the thesis assumptions appear too deterministic, leaving out other important explanatory factors or reverse causality. Moreover, from a methodological perspective, the empirical analysis struggles to keep structural and agency factors separate, as both determinants concurred in the explanation. Nevertheless, this shortcoming feeds into my main thesis, according to which no one theory is able to explain democratic paths on its own, and thus prompts a synthesis of the two approaches considered. Further research should revise the theoretical and methodological groundwork set by this thesis in order to outline an integrative approach that could explain new democratic trends.

Overall, this thesis shows the explanatory power and shortcomings of both structural and agency approaches in accounting for the Western Balkan democratic situation. Moreover, on a practical side, it concludes on a positive note. Twenty years after the Thessaloniki Summit, the situation in the Western Balkans does indeed look grimmer, but the region's countries show to have developed structural antibodies to re-establish democratic premises. The changing nature of the Western Balkans' democratic paths makes them an interesting topic that however needs a constant update.

Further research should investigate whether the assumptions outlined in this thesis hold true for future developments in the dynamic politics of the region, in light of its forthcoming accession to the EU.