

Macedonia

By Jovan Bliznakovski

Capital: Skopje
Population: 2.08 million
GNI/capita, PPP: \$14,310

Source: World Bank *World Development Indicators*.

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
National Democratic Governance	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.75	5.00	4.75
Electoral Process	3.50	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.50	3.75	4.00	4.00
Civil Society	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.50	3.25	3.25	3.25
Independent Media	4.25	4.25	4.50	4.75	4.75	5.00	5.00	5.25	5.25	5.00
Local Democratic Governance	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00
Judicial Framework and Independence	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.50	4.75	4.75
Corruption	4.25	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.25	4.50	4.75	4.75
Democracy Score	3.86	3.79	3.82	3.89	3.93	4.00	4.07	4.29	4.43	4.36

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. If consensus cannot be reached, Freedom House is responsible for the final ratings. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After more than two years of sharp decline in democratic development since the “Wiretapping Affair” in 2015, Macedonia managed to change course in 2017. General elections in December 2016 resulted in a near tie between the populist right-wing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) and the center-left Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). Yet the formation of a new government was resolved only at the end of May, led by the SDSM with junior partners representing ethnic Albanians, the longtime government party Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) and the rising newcomer Alliance for Albanians (AA). SDSM’s leader, Zoran Zaev, was sworn in as prime minister supported by a slim majority of 62 out of 120 members of parliament (MPs). The establishment of the SDSM-led government marked the end of several years of political crisis and 11 years of increasingly controversial rule by VMRO-DPMNE.

The democratic alternation of power proceeded with many difficulties, with VMRO-DPMNE strategically paralyzing the parliament and jeopardizing fragile interethnic relations in a bid to prevent its own imminent fall. After the party failed to negotiate a parliamentary majority in the early part of the year, VMRO-DPMNE-backed President Gjorgje Ivanov overstepped his constitutional prerogatives by refusing to hand over the mandate for creation of a new government to Zaev, who offered a majority of MP signatures as proof that government negotiations were ongoing. Ivanov cited, as an obstacle, the so-called Tirana Platform put forward by the ethnic-Albanian parliamentary parties as a condition for participation in a governing coalition. The platform, among other issues, demanded the advancement of Albanian language use on official communication, which was seen by ethnic-Macedonian nationalists as threatening for the country’s unitary character. Numerous protests took place between February and April in support of Ivanov’s decision and against the establishment of the SDSM-led coalition.

The protests led to the most critical event in the history of Macedonian democracy, when nationalist groups backed by VMRO-DPMNE violently entered the parliament on the night of 27 April when the new SDSM-DUI-AA majority elected a new speaker, the ethnic Albanian Talat Xhaferi (DUI). With police standing aside, the situation escalated resulting in more than 70 injuries, including MPs; party leaders Zaev (SDSM) and Zijadin Sela (AA); journalists; and members of the parliamentary staff. The MPs of the new majority were held for hours in the parliament building before police reacted to deescalate the violence. An investigation of the bloody night led to the apprehension and detention of more than 30 individuals, including VMRO-DPMNE MPs, police officials, and activists who were charged with “terrorist endangerment of the constitutional order and security.”

Despite VMRO-DPMNE’s efforts to prevent it, the appointment of Xhaferi marked the party’s fall from power at the national level, which triggered major changes in the Macedonian political landscape. Party leader Nikola Gruevski’s and VMRO-DPMNE’s popularity diminished throughout the year, culminating in the catastrophic October local elections when the party won only 5 mayoral posts, with SDSM winning in 57 out of 81 units, including the capital Skopje. Following the election, Gruevski submitted his resignation as party president and was replaced by the secretary general Hristijan Mickovski in late December.

International and domestic observation missions noted some improvement in Macedonia’s electoral process, particularly in the media environment, though long-term irregularities continued to prevail (i.e., politicized electoral bodies, voter intimidation and vote buying, sporadic violence, and doubts about the reliability of the voter registry). VMRO-DPMNE and the junior government partner AA separately stated that they did not recognize the election results yet, nevertheless, assumed the mayoral and municipal council posts they had won.

The new SDSM-led government initiated several moves directed at undoing VMRO-DPMNE’s capture of state institutions. A reform plan titled “3-6-9” (referring to the three-month phases of the implementation timeline) was adopted in July as a roadmap for Macedonia’s further reform efforts. By year’s end, results in implementing the envisaged measures seemed to be mixed, with institutions failing to

achieve the desired dynamics and quality of the reform process. In turn, the government acted swiftly on Macedonia's open issues with neighboring countries, agreeing to the long-awaited Friendship Treaty with Bulgaria and successfully reinstating UN-mediated talks with Greece regarding the name dispute, thereby boosting Macedonia's European Union (EU) and NATO hopes. The government also submitted for adoption the controversial Law on Languages, which aims to advance the use of the Albanian language in official communication, despite numerous criticisms on such a move fueled by the February–April protests.

Illiberal and ethnocentric groups backed by VMRO-DPMNE grew in prominence and activity during the year, contributing to the ferment of a new civil society landscape. These associations positioned themselves against the liberally oriented civil society that had played a key role in challenging VMRO-DPMNE's rule. Illiberal groups, joined under the movement "For a Common Macedonia," protested across the country from February to April against the creation of an SDSM-led government. These protests formed the background for the violent events in the parliament. In addition, the liberal segment of civil society came under threat from VMRO-DPMNE's attempted "de-Sorosization" during the first half of the year, when groups were targeted by prosecutors and financial authorities in a bid widely considered as undue pressure on the sector. The SDSM-led government, in turn, made important moves in the second half of the year that may help to repair the damaged relationship between the state and civil society.

Macedonian media remain strongly polarized along political lines. In the first half of the year, VMRO-DPMNE-backed media outlets demonized the opposition and the civil sector, and advocated the party's narrative on the supposedly drastic consequences of a transfer of power. The change of government, however, contributed to some positive developments in establishing credible media reporting, as acknowledged in OSCE-ODIHR's monitoring of the election campaign environment. By the end of the year, several media outlets biased in favor of VMRO-DPMNE had altered their reporting towards a more balanced and objective tone, while others had shut down due to financial crises. These abrupt changes demonstrated how dependent VMRO-DPMNE's media capture had been on the party's ability to "feed" its aligned outlets with public funds.

Macedonia's anticorruption efforts remain hindered by the operation of the judicial system. The Special Public Prosecutors' Office (SJO), formed in 2015 with a mandate to investigate allegations from the "Wiretapping Affair," was less obstructed in comparison to 2016, but its work is still significantly impeded by judges close to VMRO-DPMNE. Several of the SJO targets for investigation during the year ended up on the lam due to the courts' slow processing of requests for detention. The Basic Court (first instance) and Appeals Court (second instance) took divergent positions regarding the legality of using wiretaps as evidence in court proceedings, with the Appeals Court resolving the issue only in November when it decided in favor of the SJO demands for the use of recordings.

During 2017, the first court judgment in the wiretapping affair was issued against the former unit head in the counterintelligence service for destruction of evidence and wiretap equipment. A total of 24 cases against 165 individuals connected to the illegal wiretapping, abuses of power, and grand corruption revealed by the investigation remain at various stages in the Macedonian courts.

Score Changes:

- **National Democratic Governance rating improved from 5.00 to 4.75** due to political stabilization after the 2015–16 turbulence, and positive, albeit limited, measures by the new government to overcome the capture of state institutions.
- **Independent Media rating improved from 5.25 to 5.00** due to advances in overall media reporting in the country and the new regime's decision to end government advertising, which had been a mechanism enabling state capture.

As a result, Macedonia's Democracy Score improves from 4.43 to 4.36.

Outlook for 2018: The changed political landscape, which the October local elections dramatically confirmed, opens up possibilities for the new government to pursue its promised reform agenda. Thus, 2018 is likely to be a test of SDSM and DUI's commitments to reform. VMRO-DPMNE, which ended the year boycotting the parliament, also can have a decisive influence on the reform process. The normalization of parliamentary work, with full participation of both government and opposition parties, will most likely be a critical issue during 2018. Interethnic resentments over the proposed Law on Languages could also appear during the year, at the expense of already damaged ethnic relations. Macedonia's progress in the fight against corruption (as well as getting clear of the "Wiretapping Affair") will strongly depend on whether the judicial sector can move towards independent and impartial functioning. Finally, reinstated talks with Greece on the name dispute will occupy public attention, and the outcome will be critical to the country's EU and NATO bids.

MAIN REPORT

National Democratic Governance

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
4.00	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.75	5.00	4.75

- Macedonia's national democratic governance improved slightly in 2017 due to efforts by the new government to reinstate democratic principles and rule of law in the second half of the year. The January–May period was marked by VMRO-DPMNE's attempt to prevent a democratic alternation of power, culminating in violence inside the parliament building in April aimed at preventing the formation of a new government. The crisis fully exposed the country's fragile democracy and pervasiveness of VMRO-DPMNE's capture of state institutions. After May, the new SDSM-DUI-AA government launched a packed reform agenda based on the Urgent Reform Priorities of the European Union (EU), and ended the year with several open initiatives for legislative and policy changes. While the results of the reforms are still quite limited, the change in the executive's policy direction appears positive for Macedonia's democratic development.
- The new government was appointed on 31 May, six months after the December 2016 elections.¹ Endorsed by a slim majority of 62 out of 120 members of parliament (MPs), the cabinet of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev (SDSM) included political parties of the center-left SDSM coalition, and the two ethnic-Albanian partners DUI and AA² (although AA left the coalition in December in a fallout over the appointment of Minister of Health³). Prior to May, the country was run by a VMRO-DPMNE/DUI coalition government, with Emil Dimitriev (VMRO-DPMNE) performing the role of a technical/interim prime minister, while SDSM ministers within the technical government were dismissed from their posts after the 2016 elections.⁴
- The lengthy process of government formation commenced with VMRO-DPMNE's inability to reach a new coalition agreement with DUI in January.⁵ VMRO-DPMNE's strong anti-Albanian rhetoric, corruption charges against the party, and its diminished national and international reputation made it an unwelcome ally for the largest ethnic-Albanian party in the country. In March, the VMRO-DPMNE-backed President Gjorgje Ivanov refused to deliver a mandate for the formation of a new government to Zaev, even when the SDSM leader presented a document with 67 MP signatures as proof that government negotiations were ongoing.⁶ Ivanov's refusal contradicted the established practice of a purely ceremonial role by the president in regard to government formation.⁷ The transfer of power was effectively suspended also in the parliament between February and April, as VMRO-DPMNE MPs filibustered the constitutive session in order to prevent the appointment of Talat Xhaferi (DUI) as speaker.⁸
- Nationalist groups backed by VMRO-DPMNE held daily protests between February and April (see "Civil Society") against the prospect of an SDSM-led government, particularly against SDSM's election pledge to advance the use of the Albanian language in official communication. In January, a demand for official bilingualism in the whole territory of Macedonia was expressed by the ethnic-Albanian parliamentary parties DUI, Besa, and AA via a joint declaration (unofficially known as the "Albanian/Tirana platform") mediated by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama.⁹ Both VMRO-DPMNE and protesters from the "For a Common Macedonia" movement opposed the declaration, describing it as interference in internal affairs intended to break up the country along ethnic lines. The protesters also supported President Ivanov's decision not to hand the mandate to Zaev, and Ivanov himself cited the declaration as a reason for not handing the mandate to SDSM to form a coalition with the ethnic-Albanian parties.¹⁰

- The three-month stalemate ended on 27 April when the SDSM-led majority unilaterally elected ethnic-Albanian Xhaferi as speaker in an unconventional procedure¹¹ prompted by the refusal of outgoing speaker Trajko Veljanovski (VMRO-DPMNE) to allow a vote.¹² The majority's move sparked anger among the "For a Common Macedonia" protesters,¹³ who entered the parliamentary premises while police stood by. More than 70 people were injured as the mob stormed the chambers,¹⁴ including MPs, journalists, and party leaders Zaev (SDSM) and Zijadin Sela (AA).¹⁵ Video footage from security cameras emerged several weeks later showing VMRO-DPMNE MPs opening the building's main doors and assisting the protesters by providing directions towards the briefing room where most of the MPs were held for hours.¹⁶ An investigation completed in November led to indictments against VMRO-DPMNE MPs, police officials, and activists from "For a Common Macedonia" (see "Judicial Framework and Independence"). Despite the riots, the successful transfer of power in the parliament forced the hand of the executive, and Ivanov gave the mandate to Zaev in May,¹⁷ upon which a new government was established. Pressure on Ivanov to give the mandate also came from the U.S. and EU.¹⁸
- The transfer of power ended the 11-year rule of Gruevski's right-wing and populist VMRO-DPMNE. This shift in power seemed to ease societal tensions and public uncertainty, and affected citizens' support for politicians and political parties. A public opinion poll in August by the International Republican Institute (IRI) found a sharp rise in citizens' evaluation of the country as "peaceful and stable" (44 percent of respondents in comparison to only 5 percent in March).¹⁹ Zaev's appointment as prime minister also contributed to a rise in his own personal popularity and a corresponding fall of Gruevski's popularity: for the first time in more than a decade, public opinion polls found Gruevski not to be the most popular politician in the country.²⁰ These dramatic shifts in the political landscape were followed by a landslide victory for SDSM in the October local elections (see "Electoral Process" and "Local Democratic Governance").
- The election loss prompted a major change in VMRO-DPMNE's leadership: after 14 years, Nikola Gruevski submitted his resignation as leader of the party,²¹ and by the end of December the party congress elected Hristijan Mickovski (who had served as secretary general since July) as new leader.²² The process for Mickovski's election was criticized by several prominent figures within VMRO-DPMNE's group of MPs and top-level party officials, such as Antonio Miloshevski, Ilija Dimovski, and Trajko Veljanovski, who claimed Mickovski's backers were using election fraud, favoritism, and intimidation to ensure his victory.²³ Party organs dismissed the accusations, and Mickovski remained the only candidate. He was elected with 376 votes out of 428 delegates present.²⁴
- In July, the government adopted the reform plan "3-6-9,"²⁵ which followed recommendations for removing state capture outlined by the EU Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues (Urgent Reform Priorities), OSCE-ODIHR, the Venice Commission, and the civil sector. In November, the government expressed satisfaction with the plan's implementation, stating that more than 80 percent of the intended measures for the first three months had been completed within the envisaged time frame.²⁶ This claim was disputed in the monitoring conducted by national think-tank Institute for Democracy (IDSCS), which found that only 40 percent of measures had been completed by November.²⁷ The civil society alliance Network 23 found that, by the end of 2017, only six of the EU-endorsed Urgent Reform Priorities had been implemented, while 12 had not yet commenced implementation. A total of 25 measures have the status of "ongoing" implementation.²⁸
- In August, the SDSM-DUI-AA government put forward a proposal for a new Law on Languages, which would advance the use of Albanian language in official communication.²⁹ For many, adopting this law is seen as the last open question from the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement. With it moving close to adoption by the end of the year, President Ivanov in his annual address to the Assembly criticized the law as "unconstitutional" and dangerous for the country's unitary character.³⁰
- The new government also undertook several key moves to pull the country out of international isolation and bring it back on the path to EU and NATO membership. The most notable accomplishment was the signing of the Friendship Treaty with Bulgaria in August.³¹ The government also restarted talks

with Greece over the long-standing name dispute, with a new round of talks in December under UN mediation.³²

- The work of the Macedonian Assembly, for years marked by a sharp conflict between the government and opposition parties, deteriorated even further in 2017. MPs of the VMRO-DPMNE coalition successfully blocked all processes for the transfer of power between February and April, utilizing the possibilities for extended discussion provided by the Assembly Rulebook.³³ VMRO-DPMNE’s filibustering continued after the establishment of the new parliamentary majority, with the party managing to prolong the appointment process for the new chief public prosecutor (see “Judicial Framework and Independence”). In July, VMRO-DPMNE MPs formed 10 parliamentary groups in order to take full advantage of the possibilities for filibustering,³⁴ and refused to propose one of the five vice-presidents of the Assembly, a position allocated to the opposition.³⁵ Finally, following the November police action against organizers of the Assembly riots, VMRO-DPMNE accused the government of political persecution and initiated a boycott of parliamentary work, which remained in place at year’s end.³⁶

Electoral Process

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
3.5	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.5	3.75	4.00	4.00

- Macedonia’s elections continue to suffer from several long-term deficiencies. Impartial decision-making by chief electoral authorities remains hindered by the politicized environment, accuracy of the voter registry remains questionable, and election-day practices of voter intimidation and vote buying were reported during the October 2017 local elections. The election campaign also featured sporadic violence between political actors. In December, a major corruption scandal featuring discretionary financial bonuses from and for members of the State Electoral Commission (SEC) prompted resignations by eight of the nine commission members (see “Corruption”). New members will likely be appointed in 2018.
- The major electoral event of the calendar year was the local elections in October. Two major political parties did not recognize the results of the second round of voting: the opposition VMRO-DPMNE³⁷ and the junior government partner, AA³⁸ (although both parties subsequently accepted the mayoral and municipal council posts they had won).³⁹ Both parties claimed there had been major irregularities, allegedly steered by the SDSM-DUI coalition. OSCE-ODIHR concluded that the first round of the October elections “contributed to strengthening confidence in the democratic process,”⁴⁰ but the observation mission delivered a more critical assessment of the second round: in particular, it noted that the separation between state and party was undermined by PM Zaev’s open pledge of government support to municipalities with mayors from the SDSM-DUI coalition.⁴¹
- Originally scheduled for May,⁴² local elections finally took place on 15 October (first round) and 29 October (second round). Mayors are elected through a majoritarian model with two rounds, and local councilors through a proportional model with a single round, in a total of 81 units of local self-government (80 municipalities and the capital Skopje, which represents a local self-government unit with special status). Elections had been postponed as a consequence of the protracted political crisis, specifically the parliament’s inability to elect a speaker—according to the Electoral Code, local elections are scheduled by the speaker at least 70 days prior to their conduct.⁴³ After election of the speaker in late April, the parliamentary parties negotiated a new date,⁴⁴ agreeing to amend the Electoral Law to accommodate the extraordinary circumstances.⁴⁵
- The elections resulted in a completely changed political landscape in comparison to the 2013 local elections, bringing a landslide victory for SDSM, which now dominates local governance across the country (see “Local Democratic Governance”). A total of 59.51 percent of voters cast ballots in the

mayoral contest in the first round,⁴⁶ a lower turnout than the December parliamentary elections (66.79 percent)⁴⁷ and the first round of the local elections in 2013 (64.81 percent).⁴⁸ Forty-six mayors were elected in the first round and 35 in the second round.

- The elections were strikingly competitive, as a total of 258 candidates for mayoralties and 370 candidate lists (from 19 parties, coalitions, and independent lists) competed for office in the 81 units.⁴⁹ Most of the mayoral candidates came from SDSM (70) and VMRO-DPMNE (69), followed by Besa (20), DUI (18), DPA (17), and AA (16).⁵⁰ Gender imbalance remains a negative trend in Macedonian politics: the election observation platform “Mojot Izbor” found that only 15 of the 258 candidates for mayors were women,⁵¹ of which 6 were elected, the highest number of women mayors ever elected.⁵²
- The first- and second-round election days were assessed by OSCE-ODIHR as “orderly”⁵³ and “well managed,”⁵⁴ with “some reoccurring irregularities, including family/group voting and compromised vote secrecy.”⁵⁵ A total of 46 complaints were lodged by political parties for conduct of the first round of elections (most by VMRO-DPMNE),⁵⁶ and 103 for the second round (most by Besa).⁵⁷ All complaints were dismissed as unfounded by the State Electoral Commission (SEC).⁵⁸ ⁵⁹ Following the appeal process, the Administrative Court accepted one of Besa’s complaints for the second round, and a rerun was scheduled for a polling station in the Skopje municipality of Chair (which did not affect the final results).⁶⁰ OSCE-ODIHR noted that the SEC’s decision-making regarding the complaints largely followed political lines, did not adhere to the legally stipulated time frame, and that grounds for rejection were sometimes “unreasonable” and “challenged the rule of law and due process.”⁶¹
- Besides a number of irregularities, the election observers noted an improvement in the functioning of state institutions, which reacted to reports of possible infringements more swiftly than before. The domestic observation mission conducted by MOST particularly welcomed “the rapid and efficient reaction of institutions during the voting,” as responses to ballot photographing⁶² and the removal of unauthorized persons in and around polling stations were conducted in a more efficient manner than in previous election cycles.⁶³⁶⁴
- In the campaign period, OSCE-ODIHR noted “credible allegations of vote buying, pressure on voters, and isolated cases of violence”⁶⁵ while at the same time a general “improvement in the campaign environment and conduct.”⁶⁶ ⁶⁷ According to a 2017 survey by the INFORM project, 7.4 percent of respondents were offered money or favors in exchange for votes in the country.⁶⁸ During the elections, the Ministry of Interior registered a total of 55 reports of infringements in the electoral process, most of which involved destruction of political party premises (17), physical and verbal violence (13), and vote buying or violation of voting rights (9).⁶⁹ The bulk of these reports (44) were received in the campaign period before the first round of elections.
- The campaign featured several episodes of violence involving candidates and activists. An independent council candidate in the municipality of Kichevo, Alit Abazi, was shot and killed following a verbal argument that was officially found to be unconnected with the election process.⁷⁰ The incumbent mayor and candidate in the municipality of Shuto Orizari, Elvis Bajram from Sojuz na Romite (Union of Roma), an ethnic-Romani party from the VMRO-DPMNE coalition, was physically injured in a brawl with activists supporting his rival, Kurto Dudush (SDSM).⁷¹ The incumbent mayor of Karposh, Stevcho Jakimovski from GROM (in coalition with VMRO-DPMNE), received threats in front of the GROM party premises on election day.⁷² DUI supporters celebrated the second round win in the Skopje municipality of Chair by firing an automatic weapon.⁷³
- One of the major electoral problems in recent years has been the abuse of public resources by incumbent political parties for electoral gains. In May, the Constitutional Court annulled parts of Article 8 of the Electoral Code (provisions prohibiting use of public funds before elections), which it found to be in conflict with the constitutional principles of rule of law and equality and also containing inconsistent terminology (i.e., a lack of clarity in defining illegal actions among the various uses of public funds).⁷⁴ Other provisions against abuse of public funds for election purposes are still active in the Electoral Code and Criminal Code. In September, the government adopted a Declaration of Commitment for Free and Fair Elections, as well as guidelines for ministries, officials, and state employees in relation

to use of state property during election campaigns.⁷⁵ The October local elections showed that the risks of abuse are still present despite a favorable legal framework for prevention and sanctions.

- In addition, electoral campaign financing remains highly nontransparent. The Institute for Democracy (IDSCS) found that most political parties declared a higher level of expenses than income related to campaign activities in the October elections. VMRO-DPMNE remained by far the largest player, spending more than all other political parties combined.⁷⁶
- One of the major issues causing mistrust in previous years was the voter registry, considered strikingly inaccurate and designed to advantage VMRO-DPMNE. As a result of the political agreement in 2016, the registry was reviewed, leading to the removal of approximately 30,000 disputed entries before the December 2016 general elections. Yet, in September, the State Electoral Commission (SEC) announced that the registry would have 1,814,624 voters, thereby reverting to the old number.⁷⁷ This caused further public mistrust in the reliability of the registry during 2017.⁷⁸

Civil Society

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.25	3.50	3.25	3.25	3.25

- The year 2017 was eventful for Macedonian civil society. Illiberal and ethnocentric groups expanded their activities in support of VMRO-DPMNE’s attempt to prevent a democratic transfer of power. In the first half of the year, the independent sector was under constant attack from VMRO-DPMNE’s attempt at “de-Sorosization” utilizing state institutions. And while Macedonia’s legal framework may be considered enabling for civil society, political interference and threats toward the sector remained prominent. After May, the new government made several important moves that could help restore civil sector trust in the state.
- The first half of the year was marked by protests from the ethnocentric movement “Za zaednichka Makedonija” (“For a Common Macedonia”) backed by VMRO-DPMNE. Protests commenced in late February⁷⁹ and continued daily in Skopje, and sporadically in other cities and towns. Protesters supported President Ivanov’s decision to refuse to give the mandate to an SDSM-led government, and objected to demands from the so-called Tirana Platform, most notably the envisaged policies for advancement of the official use of Albanian language⁸⁰ (see “National Democratic Governance”). The movement gradually dispersed after the riots in the Assembly in April.
- Before the formation of the new government, civil society associations and activists were under constant threat from Gruevski’s “de-Sorosization” operation, which the VMRO-DPMNE leader announced emphatically after the December 2016 elections. In March, the Public Revenue Office, Financial Police, and Ministry of Interior, acting upon a warrant from the Public Prosecutor’s Office, conducted new financial checks on 13 civil society organizations,⁸¹ a move that was seen by many as undue pressure on the civil sector. A civic initiative called “Stop Operation Soros” (SOS) started operating in the first half of the year, aiming to support VMRO-DPMNE’s favored narrative about the liberal civil sector.⁸² The Minister of Interior stated in November that the investigations had been formally closed, as no illegal activities were revealed,⁸³ yet the targeted nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) complained that they had never received an official confirmation that the proceedings were terminated.⁸⁴
- Illiberal movements also gained some prominence at the local level. At the beginning of September, a civic initiative titled “Budenje” (“Awakening”) gathered signatures to hold local referendums in several municipalities against the alleged settlement of migrants and refugees from the Middle East.⁸⁵ These actions aimed to demonstrate civic support for VMRO-DPMNE’s narrative about the conduct of the SDSM-led government. Officials denied having any plans for settlements.⁸⁶

- The SDSM government annulled several decisions that were seen as harmful for the civil sector. In June, it annulled a decision for distribution of grants to civil society organizations⁸⁷ previously adopted by the VMRO-DPMNE government.⁸⁸ In July, it halted the VMRO-DPMNE-initiated process for the creation of a Council for Cooperation between the government and the civil sector, which the civil sector had boycotted.⁸⁹ In August, it increased the mandatory term for electronic consultations through the Single National Electronic Registry of Regulations (ENER) from 10 to 20 days.⁹⁰ And in October, it launched the mandatory publication of 21 documents issued by relevant ministries and state organs in a bid to improve transparency.⁹¹ The government also initiated a practice of publishing its decisions and meeting agendas,⁹² replying to a long-standing public demand. The process for creation of the Council for Cooperation between the Government and the Civil Sector was restarted in December, with authorities issuing a public call for the selection of 16 civil-sector representatives to become members of the council.⁹³
- In turn, civil society organizations were more welcoming to the call for contributions to the government’s Annual Program for 2018 as compared to previous years. A total of 18 organizations working in different sectors submitted their proposals, creating a higher level of contribution than in the previous two years combined.⁹⁴ In July, the group of independent civil society activists and experts that had developed the Blueprint for Urgent Democratic Reforms in 2016 released an upgraded version, aiming to align the document with the post-VMRO-DPMNE political reality.⁹⁵
- Several prominent members of the civil sector, including individuals affiliated with the “Colorful Revolution” protests against VMRO-DPMNE, entered the government, whether as MPs in the SDSM-coalition or at positions in the central⁹⁶ and local government (following the October elections).^{97 98} This prompted a range of critiques from both sides of the political spectrum, wherein employment was viewed as a reward for individual contributions to the disbandment of the VMRO-DPMNE “regime” rather than as a responsible use of public funds.
- There were controversies regarding the leadership of the Federation of Trade Unions of Macedonia (SSM). Following the appointment of Darko Dimovski as acting SSM president in November 2016, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MTSP) reinstated Zhivko Mitrevski as president, granting his appeal over the election process. Two violent incidents took place in SSM headquarters during the year, in January^{99 100} and August,¹⁰¹ between supporters of Dimovski and those of Mitrevski. In September, the Administrative Court ruled against Mitrevski’s appeal, confirming the legitimacy of Dimovski’s appointment.¹⁰² A subsequent election held in December changed the status of Dimovski from acting to regular president of the SSM.¹⁰³

Independent Media

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
4.25	4.25	4.50	4.75	4.75	5.00	5.00	5.25	5.25	5.00

- The condition of Macedonia’s independent media improved slightly in 2017, reflecting positive developments in the credibility of media reporting as a result of the change in power at the central level. Yet media outlets remain largely polarized along political, ethnic, and linguistic lines. Journalists and media workers remain in a precarious situation: many work without basic social security and benefits, not to mention for low wages. The media are still far from acting independently from political influence. According to the 2017 Balkan Barometer survey, 74 percent of respondents disagree that the media are independent of political influence,¹⁰⁴ and 55 percent disagree that the media can effectively scrutinize government.¹⁰⁵ The same survey found that 73 percent of respondents assessed the media as prone to corruption.¹⁰⁶
- The demonizing tone towards the opposition and civil activists, which the largest media outlets had promoted in favor of the former ruling VMRO-DPMNE, gradually decreased following the

appointment of the SDSM government. Independent monitoring of national TV outlets conducted by the Institute for Communications Studies (ICS) during January¹⁰⁷ and February¹⁰⁸ concluded that polarization of the media sector is prominent, with TV Sitel, TV Kanal 5, TV Alfa, and TV Nova significantly framing and presenting political events in line with VMRO-DPMNE views, while TV Telma, TV ALSAT-M, TV 24, and TV 21 report in a neutral tone and with a critical approach towards state institutions.¹⁰⁹ By the end of the year, this image was somewhat changed: the regular election monitoring conducted by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAVMU) found only two national TV outlets breaching the rules for balanced media coverage (TV Alfa^{110 111} and TV Nova,¹¹² who reported in favor of VMRO-DPMNE) and initiating misdemeanor proceedings against them. OSCE-ODIHR also reported more balanced media coverage in comparison to previous electoral cycles.¹¹³

- During 2017, and particularly after the change of power at the central level, several media that had aligned their reporting with the VMRO-DPMNE ceased to function (the daily newspapers *Dnevnik*, *Utrinski Vesnik*, and *Vest*; and the magazine *Republika*) or reportedly faced financial difficulties that impeded their work (TV Nova and radio Slobodna Makedonija).¹¹⁴ *Dnevnik* was the oldest private daily in Macedonia, established in 1996. In February, prior to the shutdown of the above three dailies (owned by Media Print Macedonia), journalists at the company organized a strike in protest of unpaid salaries and fees.^{115 116}
- In August, the SDSM-led government adopted a decision to abolish so-called government advertising in the media,¹¹⁷ which had been widely used by VMRO-DPMNE to establish its media capture. Later, in November, the government released draft amendments to the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, which seek to respond to weaknesses in the appointment procedure for key positions in media regulatory bodies, increase the annual budget of the public broadcaster, abolish state co-funding in the production of TV programs, and introduce a fourth TV channel on the public broadcaster intended for “smaller” minority communities (i.e., Turks, Romani, Serbs, Bosniaks, and Vlachs).¹¹⁸ The draft law was adopted in late December.¹¹⁹
- In September, the government adopted a decision to allow media and journalists to access data available at the Central Registry and Cadaster Agency,¹²⁰ thereby aiming to advance freedom of information. The decision was met with approval by the Macedonian Association of Journalists (ZNM) and Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (SSNM).¹²¹
- ZNM reported a total of 19 cases of attacks and intimidation towards journalists and media workers from the beginning of the year through September.¹²² According to the association, journalists and media workers were subject to nine physical attacks, five verbal attacks, and three death threats, and there were two cases of destruction of private property. Six of these cases were registered the night of the riots in the parliament, while two came during reporting from the protests of “For a Common Macedonia.” One physical attack against journalists was recorded while reporting on the initiative to gather signatures against the alleged camps for migrants. Two attacks involved a recording made by the attackers published on YouTube, including a case where the attacker spit in the face of a journalist.
- Two influential journalists, Dragan Pavlovic Latas and Ivona Talevska from the pro-VMRO-DPMNE TV Sitel, are awaiting trial for the cases “Tifani” (tax fraud by Talevska), “Total” (tax fraud by Pavlovic), and “Trevnik” (illegal construction by both).¹²³ The owner of pro-VMRO-DPMNE TV Nova, Sead Kochan, faces trial in the case “Trust” (abuse in public procurement).¹²⁴
- After 15 months of detention, journalist Zoran Bozhinovski received a court release on the basis of a prosecutor’s request.¹²⁵ The process against Bozhinovski for espionage, however, is still ongoing.

Local Democratic Governance

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00

- As in the last several years, developments in local democratic governance remained overshadowed by events at the central level connected to the national political crisis. According to the 2017 Eurobarometer survey, 67 percent of respondents tend not to trust local public authorities.¹²⁶ Moreover, more than half of the population, according to IRI’s August poll, are not satisfied with their mayors (58 percent, with 39 percent very unsatisfied) or their local councils (52 percent, with 32 percent very unsatisfied).¹²⁷ In addition, local self-government units remain financially weak and incapable of steering developmental programs and projects. BIRN’s research “Opshtinite pod lupa” (“Municipalities under scrutiny”)¹²⁸ found that in the period 2013–16, Macedonian municipalities invested in only 46.7 percent of the foreseen capital investments (roads, streets, water supply, schools, hospitals, public parks, etc.).¹²⁹ Twenty units of local government in the country had had their bank accounts reportedly blocked due to debts as of October 2017.¹³⁰
- The local elections brought major political shifts in local government. VMRO-DPMNE, which dominated municipal government in the last two election cycles with more than 50 mayors out of the 81 units, managed to retain only 5 units (the urban municipality of Kavadarci and rural municipalities of Ilinden, Petrovec, Sopishte, and Zrnovci).¹³¹ SDSM, on the other hand, progressed significantly, winning 57 mayoral positions, including the capital Skopje as well as the major urban municipalities of Bitola, Gevgelija, Kumanovo, Ohrid, Prilep, Shtip, Strumica, and Veles. SDSM also won in most of the municipalities that are part of the City of Skopje: Aerodrom, Butel, Centar, Gazi Baba, Gjorche Petrov, Karposh, Kisela Voda, and Shuto Orizari. DUI candidates won in 10 municipalities, including Debar, Kichevo, Sara, Struga, and Tetovo, while AA won in three, including the urban municipality of Gostivar. Other parties obtained one municipality each: Besa (Zhelino), Democratic Party of Albanians–DPA (Studenichani), and Democratic Party of Turks–DPTM (Centar Zhupa). Independent candidates became mayors in three municipalities (Brvenica, Chucher–Sandevo, and Rankovce).
- Election results seemed to be strongly influenced by the parties’ coalition strategies at the local level. Political partnerships were forged across all 81 units of local self-government and in specific units of relevance. Often, these partnerships transcended ethnic lines. SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE participated in the elections as leaders of large pre-election coalitions consisting of a number of smaller political parties, including ethnic-based parties of the so-called smaller communities. The SDSM coalition included a total of 22 political parties,¹³² while the VMRO-DPMNE coalition had 17.¹³³ SDSM and DUI translated their partnership from the central level to the local in several key municipalities. DUI openly supported SDSM candidates for mayor in Skopje and Kumanovo, while SDSM supported DUI candidates in the municipalities of Tetovo, Gostivar, Kichevo, Chair, and Struga.¹³⁴ The government party AA and opposition Besa established a coalition for the second round of elections, calling on their supporters for joint support across 12 municipalities.¹³⁵
- During August and September, 12 municipalities decided through their municipal councils to conduct referendums against settling migrants and refugees in their territories.¹³⁶ The State Inspectorate for Local-Self Government annulled the decision, arguing that it did not fall under local-government authority. The referendums, backed by VMRO-DPMNE, were scheduled to be conducted on the day of local elections in an attempt to mobilize support for the party.
- Four local referendums were held in 2017 in the southeast part of the country over the opening and operation of mines, and motivated by preservation of the environment. Referendums against mines were successful in the municipalities of Gevgelija (April),¹³⁷ Bogdanci (June),¹³⁸ and Dojran (July),¹³⁹ and unsuccessful in Valandovo (August),¹⁴⁰ where it did not meet the threshold of 50 percent of registered voters.

- During the year, and particularly in September, the Ministry of Interior opened criminal misdemeanor proceedings for abuse of official position and authority against several VMRO-DPMNE mayors, including the municipalities of Gjorche Petrov,¹⁴¹ Veles,¹⁴² Shtip,¹⁴³ Kriva Palanka,¹⁴⁴ Negotino,¹⁴⁵ Makedonski Brod,¹⁴⁶ and Berovo.¹⁴⁷ The former mayor of Bitola, Vladimir Talevski, is standing trial in the high-profile SJO case “Transporter,” where he faces charges of abuse of official position for financial gain from the municipality budget.¹⁴⁸
- In November, the Criminal Court issued probation convictions against two former VMRO-DPMNE members in the Council of Centar (the central municipality in Skopje) after they pleaded guilty in the “Violence in Centar” case.¹⁴⁹ ¹⁵⁰ The two councilors admitted to participating in a group that staged an attack on the municipality premises with the intention to intimidate Centar’s former mayor Andrej Zhernovski. This is a high-profile case in which the first defendant is Nikola Gruevski.

Judicial Framework and Independence

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.25	4.25	4.50	4.75	4.75

- The inability of Macedonia’s judicial institutions to respond to the “Wiretapping Affair” exposed the lack of impartial operation in this sector. As a result of the 2015 political agreement, the Special Public Prosecutor (SJO) was established and tasked with prosecuting on the basis of revelations from the wiretaps. Yet the SJO’s work remained hindered through most of 2017 due to deliberate resistance from VMRO-DPMNE-dominated courts. While some progress was made in the second half of the year, as court procedures advanced and the first judgment connected to the “Wiretapping Affair” was issued, judicial independence still remains an open issue for the country.
- The EU-commissioned Report of the Senior Experts’ Group on systemic Rule of Law issues from September notes that “control and misuse of the judicial system by a small number of judges in powerful positions to serve and promote political interests has not diminished in any significant respect”¹⁵¹ between 2015 and 2017. The group also found credible allegations of manipulating the automated system for random distribution of cases in order to funnel specific cases to “favorable” judges.¹⁵² Judicial institutions and the police are still largely mistrusted by the population: according to the 2017 Eurobarometer survey, 70 percent of respondents tend not to trust the country’s justice system and 61 percent mistrust the police—in both areas, these are the highest negative attitudes registered among all Western Balkan countries.¹⁵³
- In September, the SJO declared that most of the internal obstructions it had faced during the past two years had eased during 2017.¹⁵⁴ However, SJO requests for precautionary measures against top political defendants were rejected by the regular courts, and the courts often did not accept SJO indictments and evidence. The Criminal Court repeatedly refused demands for the detention of former prime minister Gruevski and several of his closest associates during the year.¹⁵⁵ The slow court processing of detention measures contributed to the flight of several SJO suspects, most notably, counterintelligence service employees Goran Grujevski and Nikola Boshkovski, who were on the lam from March¹⁵⁶ to October, when they were apprehended in neighboring Greece.¹⁵⁷ A businessman with strong ties to VMRO-DPMNE was also on the run from March to May following a decision for his detention in the “Trust” case.¹⁵⁸
- In addition, there were several public controversies over the use of wiretaps as evidence in court proceedings, with the Criminal Court (first instance) and Appeals Court (second instance) establishing divergent decisions. In September, the Appeals Court accepted wiretaps as evidence in the “Trista” case,¹⁵⁹ and in November in the cases “Tank,”¹⁶⁰ “TNT,” “Toplik,”¹⁶¹ and “Tenderi.”¹⁶² In all cases, the Criminal Court had previously rejected the wiretaps as evidence,¹⁶³

¹⁶⁴ as well as for the cases “Titanik,” “Tifani,” and “Trevnik.” In November, a Criminal Court judge initiated a procedure for the case “Traektorija” without excluding the wiretaps as evidence.¹⁶⁵ It can be expected that, following the fall decisions of the Appeals Court, the use of wiretaps as evidence will become a regular practice for Macedonian courts.

- In November, the case “Tvrđina” became the first of the “Wiretapping Affair” proceedings to result in a conviction, with the former unit head in the Administration of Security and Counterintelligence (UBK) Goran Grujevski sentenced to 18 months in prison for the destruction of wiretapping equipment.¹⁶⁶
- The government adopted a new Strategy for Reform in the Judicial Sector 2017–2021¹⁶⁷ in late November.¹⁶⁸ The strategy addresses deficiencies in the appointment, promotion, sanctioning, and dismissal of judges (to free the process from undue political influence); distribution of court cases without external influence; and incorporation of the SJO within the “regular” system of prosecutors in order to combat high-level corruption.¹⁶⁹ In July, the government established the Council for Judicial Reforms, a body consisting of experts and state officials tasked with providing advice in the process of drafting reform measures.¹⁷⁰ Several notable legal experts stated their intention to abandon the body in December, accusing the government of deliberate marginalization of the council.¹⁷¹ In November, the government proposed to abolish the Council on Determination of Facts, which conducts disciplinary procedures against judges, stating that the process should be delegated to the Judicial Council.¹⁷² It also proposed changes to the Law on Witnesses.¹⁷³ These amendments stipulate the SJO’s independence in assigning witness protection, a move that could facilitate faster closure of the “Wiretapping Affair.”
- Nearly three years after the revelations of the “Wiretapping Affair,” the state counterintelligence service still possesses direct and autonomous access to citizens’ electronic communications.¹⁷⁴ In November, the government launched a process¹⁷⁵ and established a working group on interception of communications¹⁷⁶ tasked with drafting legislation that would incorporate recommendations of the EU’s Urgent Reform Priorities in this area.¹⁷⁷ In late December, the government put forward a draft law for establishing a new operative and technical agency (OTA) tasked to perform wiretapping actions, removing such authority from the counterintelligence service (UBK).¹⁷⁸
- In August, the Ministry of Interior drafted a proposal for amendments to the Law on Police, according to which police forces may no longer use rubber bullets and tasers against individuals participating in groups that violate the public order.¹⁷⁹ Rubber bullets and tasers were first introduced in March 2015 when the VMRO-DPMNE government was facing major public protests.¹⁸⁰
- There were personnel changes at the top levels of the justice system during the year, once again exposing the close connection between political dynamics and staffing of the judicial sector. In August, the parliament dismissed chief public prosecutor Marko Zvrlevski (considered by many to be one of the key factors in the unwillingness of the prosecutor’s office to act on the “Wiretapping Affair”) following more than a month of obstruction by MPs from VMRO-DPMNE.¹⁸¹ The election of a new chief public prosecutor finally took place in late December, when Ljupco Jolevski assumed the post.¹⁸² Jovo Vangelovski became president of the Supreme Court in March,¹⁸³ Kole Shterjov was appointed as president of the Council of Public Prosecutors in August,¹⁸⁴ and Ivan Djolev became president of the Criminal Court in November.¹⁸⁵
- The most significant police action following the Assembly riots came in late November, when officers, acting upon a prosecutor’s warrant, apprehended more than 30 people suspected of “terrorist endangerment of the constitutional order and security,” including VMRO-DPMNE MPs, leaders and activists from the movement “For a Common Macedonia,” and police officials, including the former Minister of Interior from VMRO-DPMNE, Mitko Cavkov.¹⁸⁶ VMRO-DPMNE claimed “political persecution” and staged several small-scale protests against the police action.¹⁸⁷ The ombudsman declared in late December that it had found a violation of the right of

parliamentary immunity and presumption of innocence in the apprehension of the three VMRO-DPMNE MPs.¹⁸⁸ Most of the suspects remained under police detention until year's end.

- In November, the Criminal Court convicted 33 men of ethnic-Albanian background, most of them citizens of Kosovo, for acts of terrorism in relation to clashes in Kumanovo in May 2015.¹⁸⁹ The controversial events took place in the midst of the anti-Gruevski protests, and were sometimes described by observers as a joint attempt by the national secret services and armed groups to draw public attention away from the anti-government protests. Following the convictions, the government of Kosovo decided to provide financial aid to the families of individuals involved in the group, a decision that sparked public outrage in Macedonia.¹⁹⁰ In December, Prime Minister Zaev and his counterpart in Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj, agreed publicly that the two countries should push for an independent international investigation of the Kumanovo events in order to clear up the suspicion of Macedonian governmental involvement.¹⁹¹
- In a report published in October, the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture concluded, based on a monitoring trip in December 2016, that conditions in state prisons had further deteriorated: ill-treatment of prisoners, corruption, and favoritism were found to be widespread inside prisons, while the conditions in detention premises were described as "inhuman."¹⁹² The government proposed an amnesty law in September, which passed its first reading in December.¹⁹³ When adopted, the law should contribute to a reduction in the number of prisoners in the country and improved living conditions in penitentiary premises.

Corruption

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
4.25	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.25	4.50	4.75	4.75

- Despite considerable evidence of corrupt activities by top officials revealed in the "Wiretapping Affair," the fight against corruption in Macedonia remained insufficient in 2017. The SJO continues to be the most active institution engaged in combating corruption. Other institutions designed to lead the fight—namely, the Public Prosecutor's Office and State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC)—have continued to function under the influence of VMRO-DPMNE and sought to protect the interests of the party and its officials rather than the rule of law. The SCPC, in particular, which is formally designated as the main body guiding anticorruption policies and practices, remained stalled during the year. Furthermore, before the appointment of the SDSM-led government, the SCPC supported VMRO-DPMNE efforts to prevent a democratic alternation of power and contributed to the witch hunt against critical civil society associations. According to the 2017 Balkan Barometer survey, a majority of the country's population disagreed that the government is fighting corruption effectively (58 percent in total, with 34 percent strongly disagreeing).¹⁹⁴
- By the July deadline (stipulated as the time frame for SJO to open charges connected to the "Wiretapping Affair"), the prosecutor had initiated criminal proceedings against a total of 165 individuals in relation to 24 criminal cases, most of them connected to grand corruption and other forms of abuse of official position.¹⁹⁵ Charges were initiated against a number of former state officials and members of VMRO-DPMNE, including former prime minister Gruevski, businesspeople close to the party, and even journalists that openly supported VMRO-DPMNE's rule (regarding tax evasion and other crimes, see "Independent Media"). The full catalog of abuses involves various infringements in procurement procedures (cases "Trista," "Tank," "Tenderi," and "Traektorija"), election fraud (cases "Titanik" and "Titanik 2"), tax evasion ("Tifani"), illegal construction ("Trevnik" and "Toplik"), illegal wiretapping ("Target" and "Tvrđina"), and more. Many of these cases remain in the early phases, although the "Tvrđina" was closed in November

(see “Judicial Framework and Independence”). Currently, Gruevski and some of his closest associates face trial for the “TNT” case (abuse of power in demolition of a residential building)¹⁹⁶ and in the case of organizing a physical attack against the former mayor of Centar, Andrej Zhernovski.¹⁹⁷

- In December, the SJO declared it had begun exploring 7 new cases against 17 former ministers and deputy ministers, directors of state institutions, MPs, and journalists for various corrupt actions.¹⁹⁸ Also in December, a major scandal rocked the State Electoral Commission (SEC) following U.S. Ambassador Jess Baily’s revelation of discretionary financial bonuses that SEC members awarded themselves for their work on the October elections.¹⁹⁹ Strong public reaction over the revelation prompted resignation on moral grounds by eight of the SEC’s nine members, including the president of the commission, Aleksandar Cicakovski.
- Monitoring by the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCMS) of SCPC work found that, in the period January–June, the commission completely neglected its authority regarding abuse of public funds by individuals and political parties²⁰⁰ as well as protection for whistleblowers.²⁰¹ The same project also found major weaknesses in the SCPC’s implementation of anticorruption checks on legislation.²⁰² In May, the SCPC submitted its Annual Report to the Assembly,²⁰³ yet by the end of the year the parliament had failed to open discussions. Shortly after submission of the report, the civil society network Platform for Civil Society Organizations Combating Corruption publicly demanded that the parliament return the report for amendments because of the commission’s insufficient and non-comprehensive approach in presenting its activities.²⁰⁴
- In June, it was revealed that the SCPC had requested financial inspections of 22 civil society organizations and foundations, which was widely considered to constitute political pressure by VMRO-DPMNE against the independent civil sector.²⁰⁵ The commission issued a press release defending its decision, attempting to underline a malicious connection between the civil society organizations, SDSM, and international foundations supporting them.²⁰⁶
- In April, Igor Tanturovski—whose name appeared as a VMRO-DPMNE donor in 2012—was reelected as SCPC president with a mandate of an additional year.²⁰⁷ The mandates of current SCPC members expire in 2019.
- In November, the parliament, acting upon a government proposal, amended the Law on Public Procurement to abolish the Council of Public Procurement, a body viewed by many as contributing to major abuses and ineffectiveness in public procurement procedures.²⁰⁸ The public procurement process is still largely nontransparent and represents one of the major corruption risks in the country. Also in November, the government submitted for public consultation a draft for amendments to the Law on Protection of Whistleblowers, aiming to strengthen the whistleblower protection system in the country in line with recommendations issued by the Venice Commission.²⁰⁹

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¹ Sekularac, Ivana, “Macedonia’s parliament endorses new government,” Reuters, 1 June 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-politics/macedonias-parliament-endorses-new-government-idUSKBN18R3BP>

² The new cabinet consisted of 26 members (prime minister, deputy prime ministers, ministers and ministers without portfolio), of which 18 were filled by SDSM nominees, six by the DUI, and two by the AA. It adhered to the striking gender disbalance that is a long-term feature of Macedonian politics: four of the members are women. See: Bliznakovski, Jovan, “Macedonia has a new government: What next for the crisis-ridden state?,” EUROPP, 2 June

2017, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/06/02/macedonia-has-a-new-government-what-next-for-the-crisis-ridden-state/>

³ “Зијадин Села ја напушти владата на Заев” [“Zijadin Sela left Zaev’s government”], TV 24, 27 December 2017, <http://24vesti.mk/zijadin-sela-ja-napushti-vladata-na-zaev>

⁴ “Разрешени техничките министри Спасовски, Ременски, Николовски, Кирацовски” [“Technical ministers Spasovski, Remenski, Nikolovski, and Kiracovski have been dismissed”], TV 24, 26 December 2016, <http://24vesti.mk/razresheni-tehnichkite-ministri-spasovski-remenski-nikolovski-kiracovski>

⁵ Jakov Marusic, Sinisha, “Macedonia’s Gruevski Fails to Form New Govt,” Balkan Insight, 30 January 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-s-gruevski-fails-to-form-new-govt--01-30-2017>

⁶ Pajaziti, Naser, “President Ivanov doesn’t mandate Zaev to form the government: Albanian platform is anti-constitutional,” Independent Balkans News Agency (IBNA), 1 March 2017, <http://www.balkaneu.com/president-ivanov-doesnt-mandate-zaev-to-form-the-government-albanian-platform-is-anti-constitutional/>

⁷ According to the Constitution, Article 90, the President is “obliged [...] to entrust the mandate for constituting the Government to a candidate from the party or parties which has/have a majority in the Assembly.”

⁸ “Parliament: The new continuation of the constitutive session brings little hope for a resolution,” Meta, 19 April 2017, <http://meta.mk/en/parliament-the-new-continuation-of-the-constitutive-session-brings-little-hope-for-a-resolution/>

⁹ Mejdini, Fatjona, “Albanian Parties Set Terms For Macedonia’s Next Govt,” Balkan Insight, 8 January 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/albanian-parties-in-macedonia-seven-conditions-for-the-new-government-01-07-2017>

¹⁰ Mikhajlova, Marina, “Macedonia’s president calls on EU, NATO to condemn ‘Tirana platform,’” SeeNews, 7 March 2017, <https://seenews.com/news/macedonias-president-calls-on-eu-nato-to-condemn-tirana-platform-560681>

¹¹ A public opinion poll done in May by MCIC and Telma TV found that half of the respondents viewed the procedure of Xhaferi’s election as conducted in an illegitimate manner (49.1%). See: Jakovlevska, Gonca, “Перцепции и ставови за случувањата во Собранието на 27.04.2017” [“Perceptions and Attitudes Regarding the Events in the Assembly on 27.04.2017”], MCIC and Telma Tv, June 2017, <http://mcms.mk/images/docs/2017/percepicii-i-stavovi-za-sluchuvanjata-vo-sobranieto-27-4-2017.pdf>, p. 14

¹² Popovikj, Misha, “Violence in the Macedonian parliament: What happened and how should the EU respond?,” EUROPP, 28 April 2017, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/04/28/violence-macedonian-parliament-what-happened-eu-response/>

¹³ “Violence erupts as protesters storm Macedonia parliament,” EURACTIV, 28 April 2017,

<http://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/violence-erupts-as-protesters-storm-macedonia-parliament/>

¹⁴ Day, Mathew and Ruth Sherlock, “More than 70 injured as protesters storm Macedonia’s parliament and attack politicians and police,” The Telegraph, 28 April 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/27/protesters-storm-macedonia-parliament-social-democratic-leader/>

¹⁵ “Macedonia: protesters storm parliament and attack MPs,” The Guardian, 27 April 2017,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/27/macedonia-protesters-storm-parliament-and-attack-mps>

¹⁶ Jakov Marusic, Sinisa, “Video Shows MPs Aiding Macedonia Parliament Assaults,” Balkan Insight, 23 May 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/video-shows-macedonian-mps-assisting-parliament-assaults-05-23-2017>

¹⁷ “Macedonian President Gives Social Democrat Zaev Mandate To Form Government,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 17 May 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-zaev-new-government-ivanov/28493086.html>

¹⁸ Jakov Marusic, Sinisa, “Macedonian President Softens Stance After Meeting Yee,” Balkan Insight, 1 May 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonian-president-softens-position-after-meeting-yee-05-01-2017>

¹⁹ “Macedonia Poll: Spike in Optimism on Political Situation and EU Membership,” IRI, 18 September 2017, <http://www.iri.org/resource/macedonia-poll-spike-optimism-political-situation-and-eu-membership>. IRI’s poll also found a decline in the frequency of respondents perceiving the situation in the country as “intense and uncertain” (from 62% in March to 44% in August). See: “Public Opinion in Macedonia, August 4-21 2017,” IRI, 18 September 2017, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-9-18_macedonia_poll.pdf, p. 30.

²⁰ Two different public opinion polls arrived at similar findings. IRI’s poll in August found a favorable opinion of Zaev among 51% of respondents, compared to 32% for Gruevski (Ibid., p. 47). A poll conducted in September by MCIC and Telma TV found that Zaev enjoyed the highest level of public trust among politicians (26.2% of respondents declared highest trust in Zaev, compared to 19.7% in Gruevski) (see: “Во кој политичар имате најголема доверба?” [“Which Politician You Trust the Most?”], Top Tema na Vasha Strana Facebook post, 14 September 2017,

<https://www.facebook.com/toptemanavasastrana/photos/a.1818220818463272.1073741828.1664848277133861/2013463122272373/?type=3&theater>.

²¹ Jakov Marusic, Sinisha, “Gruevski Plans to Quit as Macedonia's VMRO DPMNE Leader,” Balkan Insight, 1 December 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-s-gruevski-announces-resignation-from-party-helm-12-01-2017>

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