# RESILIO ACCESS
# Country Report
# North Macedonia

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## 1. Introduction

The development of rule of law in North Macedonia has been shaped by democratic breakthroughs, institutional crises, ambitious reform efforts and persistent governance challenges. Since gaining independence in 1991, the country has maintained a democratic political system and avoided major disruptions to its constitutional order. But political interference in public institutions, corruption and limited administrative capacity have repeatedly challenged the consolidation of the rule of law. The past decade has exposed both the vulnerability and the resilience of the country's democratic institutions.[1]

The contemporary institutional framework of North Macedonia was shaped by the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) of 2001.[2] Reached after an armed conflict between the state security forces and ethnic Albanian insurgents, the agreement introduced constitutional and political reforms for greater minority rights, decentralisation and political inclusion. While the OFA stabilised the country and restructured its institutions to formally accommodate ethnic diversity, it also institutionalised a governance model based on power-sharing and ethnic bargaining that continues to shape political and institutional development.[3]

The most severe challenge to democratic governance emerged during the political crisis of 2015–2017, though its roots lay in the gradual concentration of political power and weakening of institutional checks during the preceding decade. The publication of illegally intercepted communications ("wiretapping scandal") in 2015 revealed allegations of state capture, political interference in the judiciary, media capture, electoral irregularities and widespread clientelism.[4] In response, the European Union (EU) facilitated the Przino Agreement. The Priebe report identified systemic deficiencies in judicial independence, oversight mechanisms, public administration and media freedom, providing a

[1] European Commission, North Macedonia 2024 Report, SWD(2024) 693 final; European Commission, 2025 Rule of Law Report: Country Chapter on the Rule of Law Situation in North Macedonia SWD(2025) 930 final.
[2] Ohrid Framework Agreement, signed August 13, 2001, https://cdn.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/2/8/100622.pdf (last checked: 5.8.2026).
[3] Florian Bieber, "Power Sharing and the Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement," in Power Sharing and the Implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, ed. Florian Bieber (Skopje: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2008), 7–40.
[4] European Commission, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2016 Report, SWD(2016) 362 final.

roadmap for urgent reforms.[5] The crisis culminated in the disputed election of Talat Xhaferi as Speaker of the Assembly and the violent events of 27 April 2017. It was ultimately resolved through parliamentary and institutional mechanisms, allowing the formation of a new government.[6]

The subsequent period saw significant foreign policy achievements alongside uneven domestic reforms. The Prespa Agreement resolved the name dispute with Greece and enabled North Macedonia's accession to NATO in 2020. Successive reform efforts produced limited improvements in judicial independence, corruption control and institutional effectiveness.[7]

The EU accession process has remained the country's principal external driver of democratic development, but its transformative effect has become increasingly complex. Bilateral disputes (such as the Prespa Agreement and the Friendship Treaty with Bulgaria) have increasingly dominated relations with the EU. As accession has stalled largely due to external disputes rather than domestic performance, political attention has shifted away from unresolved governance challenges, weakening incentives for sustained structural reform.

The peaceful transfer of power following the 2024 elections reaffirmed the stability of the constitutional framework, despite continued political polarisation. Against this background, North Macedonia presents a paradoxical case of rule-of-law resilience. The country has repeatedly weathered severe political and institutional crises without abandoning democratic procedures or its strategic commitment to European integration. But persistent governance weaknesses continue to constrain institutional performance, producing a resilience profile characterised by enduring strengths alongside persistent structural vulnerabilities.[8]

[5] European Commission, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1420776/1226_1514885605_20150619-recommendations-of-the-senior-experts-group.pdf (last checked: 5.8.2026).
[6] Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2018: Macedonia (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2018); Florian Bieber, The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
[7] European Commission, North Macedonia 2024 Report.
[8] Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), Republic of North Macedonia Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, 24 April and 8 May 2024: ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report (Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR, 2024).

## 2. Analysis of the country case along the RESILIO-ACCESS model

### 2.1. The most important primary resilience resource: Regime Legitimation

Among the primary resilience resources identified by the RESILIO-ACCESS framework, regime legitimation is North Macedonia's strongest resource. Measured through the rational-legal legitimation indicator by Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), it captures the extent to which governments justify political authority through constitutional procedures, legal norms, democratic institutions and elections, rather than through charismatic leadership or extra-institutional claims. The indicator measures governments' rhetorical commitment to the law, rather than their actual compliance with rule-of-law principles. North Macedonia performs considerably better on this variable than on corruption control, judicial effectiveness, regulatory enforcement or constraints on government powers. There is a notable divergence between the rhetorical commitment to constitutional and legal legitimacy and the quality of rule-of-law implementation. This pattern suggests that constitutional and legal arguments remain the dominant language through which political authority is justified, even though the implementation of rule-of-law principles remains uneven.

The significance of this resource lies not in demonstrating effective compliance with constitutional norms, but in showing that political actors continue to perceive constitutional and legal justification as necessary for claiming political authority. Governments can invoke constitutional principles strategically, particularly during periods of intense political contestation. But the repeated reliance of governing and opposition actors on constitutional provisions, parliamentary procedures, elections, legal mandates and European legal standards suggest that constitutional legitimacy remains the dominant framework through which political authority is justified and contested.

The political crisis of 2015–2017 provides the clearest example of both the vulnerability and the resilience of North Macedonia's constitutional system. The wiretapping scandal exposed evidence of state capture, political interference, media capture and abuse of executive power.[9] The EU-facilitated Przino Agreement provided a framework for political dialogue and reform, while the Priebe Report documented systemic deficiencies in judicial independence, executive accountability and oversight,

[9] European Commission, Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues.

illustrating the divergence between constitutional justification and institutional practice.[10] The episode illustrates the distinction between rational-legal legitimation and rule-of-law performance – although political actors continued to justify the resolution of the crisis through constitutional procedures and negotiated agreements, international assessments revealed profound weaknesses in the functioning of those institutions.[11]

The crisis reached its most dramatic point on 27 April 2017, when protesters stormed the Assembly following the disputed election of Talat Xhaferi as its Speaker. These events demonstrated the fragility of democratic institutions and the extent of political polarisation within society.[12] Yet the political transition was ultimately completed through parliamentary procedures and the formation of a new government. The political conflict continued to be framed largely through competing interpretations of constitutional procedures, parliamentary rules and electoral legitimacy, rather than through the rejection of the constitutional order itself.

The Prespa Agreement of 2018[13] further illustrates the complexity of regime legitimation. Although the consultative referendum failed to meet the turnout threshold and the subsequent constitutional amendments remained highly contested, supporters and opponents framed their positions through constitutional provisions, parliamentary procedures, referendum rules and legal mandates.[14] The dynamic resurfaced following the adoption of the EU negotiating framework, which incorporated Bulgaria's demand for constitutional recognition of the Bulgarian community as a precondition for advancing North Macedonia's EU accession process. This again placed constitutional amendments at

[10] European Commission, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2016 Report (; Senior Experts' Group, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Assessment and Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues 2017.
[11] European Commission, Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues; Senior Experts' Group, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Assessment and Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues 2017; Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2018: Macedonia.
[12] Bieber, The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans.
[13] Final Agreement for the settlement of the differences as described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the establishment of a strategic partnership between the Parties (Prespa Agreement), https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280544ac1 (last checked: 5.8.2026).
[14] State Election Commission of the Republic of Macedonia, Referendum on State Level Held on 30 September 2018: Final Results (Skopje: State Election Commission, 2018); Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, Amendments XXXIII, XXXIV, XXXV and XXXVI to the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia (Skopje: Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2019).

the centre of the country's relationship with the EU, reigniting contestation over national identity and sovereignty.

Governments have frequently invoked 'European standards' and the EU acquis to justify major political decisions. Constitutional amendments, legislative reforms and institutional changes have been presented as necessary to fulfil obligations arising from the accession process or to align domestic legislation with European standards. This dynamic was also evident during the adoption of the 2023 amendments to the Criminal Code, which the government justified as harmonisation with the EU acquis and relevant European directives. Yet the amendments were subsequently criticised by the European Commission for weakening the anti-corruption framework and negatively affecting the prosecution of high-level corruption cases.[15] This episode illustrates how European integration became incorporated into the domestic language of rational-legal legitimation.

The 2024 elections provided another example of the centrality of rational-legal legitimacy.[16] Although ODIHR identified shortcomings relating to campaign conditions, misuse of public resources and the broader electoral environment, political authority continued to be derived from constitutional electoral procedures.

These developments demonstrate that North Macedonia's relatively high level of regime legitimation should not be interpreted as evidence of consistently strong rule of law performance. Rather, they show that political actors continue to justify their authority through constitutional procedures, elections, parliamentary rules, legal mandates and European legal standards, even when the legality or appropriateness of their actions is contested. Throughout the period under consideration, international assessments have documented shortcomings in judicial independence, corruption control, institutional accountability and the implementation of reforms. North Macedonia shows how rhetorical commitment to constitutional and legal legitimacy can coexist with persistent weaknesses in the practical realisation of rule-of-law principles. Constitutional and legal arguments remain the dominant framework through

[15] European Commission, North Macedonia 2023 Report, Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2023) 693 final; European Commission, North Macedonia 2024 Report; European External Action Service, "18th Meeting of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement Subcommittee on North Macedonia on Justice, Freedom and Security," Delegation of the European Union to North Macedonia, December 7, 2023.
[16] OSCE/ODIHR, Republic of North Macedonia Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, 24 April and 8 May 2024.

which political authority is claimed, challenged and defended, even when institutional performance falls short of these constitutional ideals.

Aside from regime legitimation, several other primary resilience resources contribute to the resilience of rule of law in North Macedonia. Civil liberties constitute one of the country's stronger resources. Freedom of association, assembly and political participation remain broadly protected, allowing civil society organisations (CSOs), political opposition and citizens to engage in public debate and advocacy – despite persistent challenges affecting the quality of democratic governance.[17]

Equality before the law and fundamental rights also represent comparatively stronger dimensions of the country's rule-of-law profile. The legal framework generally provides robust protections of civil and political rights and incorporates extensive safeguards of minority rights, reflecting constitutional developments and obligations stemming from the OFA and the EU accession process. Challenges remain regarding the effective enforcement of legal protections and perceptions of selective enforcement.[18]

Several primary resources remain comparatively weak and continue to constrain overall rule-of-law resilience. Constraints on government powers are still affected by political influence over institutions and the limited effectiveness of oversight mechanisms. Open government and transparency have improved in several areas since 2015 but continue to face implementation challenges. Particularly significant weaknesses are evident in corruption control, regulatory enforcement, civil justice and judicial capacity. Despite repeated reform initiatives and substantial external support, concerns regarding the independence and effectiveness of key public institutions, judicial efficiency, the enforcement of regulations and high-level corruption continue to feature prominently in both domestic and international assessments.[19]

### 2.2. The most important subsidiary resilience resource: Civil Society

Among the subsidiary resilience resources, civil society and academic freedom are North Macedonia's strongest assets. They provide independent expertise, public scrutiny and democratic accountability,

[17] Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2024: North Macedonia.
[18] European Commission, North Macedonia 2024 Report; Framework Agreement.
[19] European Commission, North Macedonia 2024 Report; Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2024 (Berlin: Transparency International, 2025); World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index 2024 (Washington, DC: World Justice Project, 2024); European Commission, 2025 Rule of Law Report.

helping compensate for weaknesses in formal oversight institutions. Their contribution has been particularly important during periods of political crisis, when researchers, universities, watchdog organisations, investigative journalists and CSOs have sustained public debate and monitored institutional performance.

The contribution of civil society to rule-of-law resilience was particularly evident during the political crisis of 2015–2017. CSOs, investigative journalists, legal experts and independent researchers played important roles in documenting governance deficiencies, analysing institutional shortcomings, informing public debate and advocating for accountability. The Colourful Revolution was the most visible expression of civic mobilisation, but watchdog organisations also monitored elections, assessed reform implementation, contributed expert analysis and engaged with European institutions throughout the crisis.[20] In many respects, civil society acted as an informal accountability mechanism at a time when formal oversight institutions were politically constrained or lacked sufficient credibility.

Following the change of government in 2017, the role of civil society evolved from mobilisation towards institutional monitoring and policy engagement, focusing on judicial reform, anti-corruption policies, public administration reform, media freedom and EU accession.[21] The development of specialised think tanks and policy-research organisations further strengthened the base for public debate and policymaking. This shift was already visible during the 2015–2017 crisis, when a broad coalition of civil society organisations and independent experts jointly produced the 'Blueprint for Urgent Democratic Reforms' in July 2016, offering a detailed roadmap of institutional and legislative measures across the judiciary, anti-corruption, elections, media and public administration as a civil society-driven complement to the Przino process.[22]

Civil society's role in resilience extends beyond influencing public policy. By producing independent evidence, monitoring public institutions, supporting investigative journalism, providing legal expertise and facilitating public debate, civil society has often compensated for deficiencies in institutional

[20] European Commission, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2018 Report, SWD(2018) 154 final; Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2018: Macedonia (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2018).
[21] European Commission, North Macedonia Report 2024.
[22] Blueprint for Urgent Democratic Reforms (Skopje, 2016), https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Blueprint_ANG_WEB.pdf (last checked: 5.8.2026).

oversight and contributed to preserving democratic checks and balances beyond formal constitutional agreements.

Nevertheless, civil society faces significant structural challenges as a resilience resource. Most organisations working on governance, rule of law, media freedom and anti-corruption remain heavily dependent on international donor funding. Domestic funding is limited and fragmented, corporate support remains severely underdeveloped. Project-based funding cycles frequently encourage short-term interventions rather than long-term institutional development, making it difficult for CSOs to retain experienced staff, invest in organisational capacity or undertake sustained strategic advocacy. The principal challenge facing civil society in North Macedonia is long-term organisational sustainability.[23]

Academic freedom represents another important subsidiary resource, complementing the contribution of civil society by supporting independent research, public debate and evidence-based policymaking. Direct political interference in teaching and research remains relatively uncommon, but concerns persist about the institutional autonomy and long-term capacity of higher education institutions. Public investment in higher education remains among the lowest in Europe, contributing to limited research capacity, ageing academic staff and continued brain drain.[24] Public universities remain subject to administrative restrictions on recruitment, as new employment positions require the prior approval of the Ministry of Finance. While these measures are primarily justified on fiscal grounds, they reduce institutional autonomy, constrain the renewal of academic staff and limit the long-term development of research capacity. The principal risks to academic freedom in North Macedonia stem less from direct censorship than from chronic underinvestment and administrative dependence, both of which gradually undermine the sector's ability to contribute to democratic resilience.

Other subsidiary resources remain comparatively weaker. Electoral democracy continues to provide a legitimate framework for the peaceful transfer of political power, though elections are characterised by persistent political polarisation and recurring concerns over the misuse of public resources and

[23] Daniel Stanoeski, Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development: Country Brief for North Macedonia 2024, https://mcms.mk/images/docs/2025/MM_Brief_Report_for_North_Macedonia_-_2024.pdf (last checked: 5.8.2026); European Commission, North Macedonia 2024 Report.
[24] Elma Demir, ERA Country Report 2024: North Macedonia, https://www.enlargement-infohub.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/ERA-Country-Report-2024-North-Macedonia.pdf (last checked: 5.8.2026)).

inflammatory political rhetoric. Public deliberation remains constrained by highly polarised political discourse and limited cross-party consensus-building. The media environment continues to be affected by political polarisation, economic vulnerability of media outlets and concerns about ownership concentration. Citizen participation beyond electoral cycles remains comparatively weak despite periods of large-scale civic mobilisation – reflecting broader trends of declining institutional trust and political disengagement.[25]

The findings suggest that North Macedonia's subsidiary resilience is supported primarily by the capacity of a relatively well-developed community of CSOs, researchers and policy experts to generate independent knowledge, monitor institutions and sustain democratic accountability. Broader civic participation beyond electoral cycles remains comparatively limited. Preserving this resilience will increasingly depend on protecting the civic space and academic freedom and strengthening the structural conditions necessary for their long-term sustainability – including predictable funding, institutional autonomy and the capacity of independent organisations to retain expertise and contribute to public policymaking.

### 2.3. The most important stressor: Clientelism and Regime Corruption

Clientelism is the most significant challenge to rule-of-law resilience in the RESILIO-ACCESS model for North Macedonia. Although regime corruption is also one of the country's highest stress indicators, it should be understood as a manifestation of a broader clientelist governance rather than an isolated phenomenon. Political patronage, informal networks of influence and the politicisation of public institutions have shaped the country's governance for decades, undermining institutional autonomy, effectiveness and accountability.

Clientelism has long been one of the defining characteristics of North Macedonia's political system. Successive governments have faced allegations of political appointments, patronage-based employment, preferential allocation of public resources and the use of state institutions to consolidate political influence. These practices have weakened merit-based public administration, reduced institutional autonomy and blurred the distinction between party and state. Corruption is the

[25] OSCE/ODIHR, Republic of North Macedonia Presidential and Parliamentary Elections, 24 April and 8 May 2024; Reporters Without Borders (RSF), 2025 World Press Freedom Index (Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

mechanism through which clientelist networks distribute resources, maintain political loyalty and reproduce patterns of institutional dependence.[26]

The political crisis of 2015–2017 exposed the extent to which clientelist networks had penetrated state institutions. The crisis demonstrated that the principal challenge to the rule of law was the concentration of political influence across institutions that were expected to operate independently.[27]

The post-2017 reform agenda sought to address many of these structural weaknesses. Reforms of the judiciary, intelligence services, public administration and anticorruption framework were initiated. The State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) emerged as a more active and independent institution following its reconstitution in 2019. The SCPC significantly increased its public visibility and contributed to identifying conflicts of interest, monitoring political financing and strengthening integrity standards across public institutions. Although these reforms have not fundamentally dismantled clientelist patterns of governance, they have enhanced public accountability by contributing to the institutional capacity to detect, expose and deter abuses of public office.[28]

Despite important institutional reforms after 2017, political decisions have undermined progress. The 2023 amendments to the Criminal Code (which reduced penalties for certain corruption-related offences and affected ongoing high-profile cases) attracted criticism from the European Commission, the SCPC and domestic civil society. The episode illustrates how political elites have retained the capacity to reshape the legal framework in ways that weaken accountability, demonstrating the continued resilience of clientelist governance despite formal institutional reforms.

The intensity of anti-corruption efforts has closely followed the dynamics of the EU accession process. During periods when accession negotiations were moving forward and the prospect of membership appeared credible and proximate, the EU's leverage over domestic reform actors was correspondingly

[26] European Commission, North Macedonia 2024 Report; OECD, Public Administration in the Republic of North Macedonia 2024: Assessment against the Principles of Public Administration, SIGMA Monitoring Reports (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), https://doi.org/10.1787/071bad9d-en; Bieber, The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans.

[27] European Commission, Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues; Senior Experts' Group, Assessment and Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues 2017.

[28] State Commission for Prevention of Corruption, Annual Reports, 2019–2024 (Skopje: State Commission for Prevention of Corruption, 2020–2025); European Commission, North Macedonia Report 2024.

high – this translated into sustained pressure on the government to deliver tangible results on anti-corruption benchmarks. Conversely, prolonged stalemate caused by bilateral disputes and declining enlargement momentum weakened external leverage, reducing the incentives for consistent implementation and allowing reform efforts to lose momentum.

The broader governance model has proven considerably more resilient than individual reform initiatives. The "Reket" affair, involving the Special Prosecutor's Office, severely undermined public confidence in one of the most important accountability mechanisms established after the political crisis. At the same time, successive European Commission reports have continued to identify widespread corruption, political influence, uneven reform implementation and limited judicial effectiveness, suggesting that reforms strengthened some accountability mechanisms without dismantling the underlying clientelist structures. Clientelism remains a critical vulnerability that constrains North Macedonia's broader rule-of-law resilience.[29]

Other stressors play a comparatively less significant role in North Macedonia. Organised crime remains an important security and governance concern, particularly given the country's geographical position along regional trafficking routes. [30] However, its impact on the rule of law stems primarily from its interaction with existing governance weaknesses, such as corruption, political influence and limited institutional capacity, rather than from organised crime acting as an autonomous driver of democratic backsliding.

Similarly, formal restrictions on CSOs remain limited compared with several other countries in the region. The principal challenges facing civil society relate to financial sustainability, dependence on international donor support and limited domestic funding opportunities. Similarly, media censorship is less pronounced than indirect forms of political and economic influence over the media environment, such as ownership concentration, financial dependence and political polarisation.[31]

[29] European Commission, North Macedonia Report 2024; Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2024.
[30] Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Global Organized Crime Index 2023 (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023).
[31] European Commission, North Macedonia Report 2024; Reporters Without Borders (RSF), 2025 World Press Freedom Index (Paris: Reporters Without Borders, 2025).

Physical violence and anti-system mobilisation have generally been episodic rather than structural stressors. Although events such as the storming of the Assembly on 27 April 2017 represented a serious challenge to democratic governance, they remain exceptional rather than defining features of the country's political system. Periods of large-scale civic mobilisation, including the Colourful Revolution and protests related to constitutional changes of EU integration, have largely remained within the broader democratic framework and have not fundamentally challenged the constitutional order. States of emergency did not constitute a persistent source of stress for North Macedonia's rule-of-law resilience during the period under consideration. The COVID-19 pandemic did necessitate a temporary state of emergency in 2020 during which the government exercised emergency powers in the absence of a sitting Parliament. While this raised concerns over executive oversight and the use of decree-based governance, these measures remained temporary and were not subsequently institutionalised as a broader mechanism for weakening democratic institutions or the constitutional order.

The principal challenge to rule-of-law resilience in North Macedonia is the persistence of a clientelist governance model that continues to shape the functioning of public institutions. Corruption is less a root cause than a visible manifestation of broader patterns of political patronage, institutional dependence and informal influence.

**3. The effect of the EU integration process**

The EU accession process has been the principal external driver shaping rule-of-law resilience in North Macedonia. Throughout the past two decades, EU conditionality has provided the overarching framework for legislative reforms, institutional development and democratic consolidation. During periods of political instability – particularly the 2015-2017 crisis – the EU played a central role in facilitating political dialogue (the Przino Agreement) and defining reform priorities (the Priebe Reports), reinforcing constitutional governance and institutional accountability. The accession process has strengthened resilience by providing a framework for reforms of the judiciary, public administration and anti-corruption system as well as promoting transparency and institutional oversight and supporting the participation of civil society in reform processes.[32]

[32] European Commission, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Recommendations of the Senior Experts' group on Systemic Rule of Law Issues (Priebe Report), 2015; European Commission, North Macedonia Report 2024.

These developments have contributed directly to the resilience resources identified in this report. EU conditionality has reinforced the importance of constitutional procedures and legal institutions, strengthening regime legitimation. Sustained financial and technical support has enabled CSOs to expand their role in policy monitoring, public accountability and evidence-based advocacy. The accession process has also strengthened institutions such as the SCPC and encouraged greater alignment with European governance standards, even if implementation has been uneven.

However, the transformative power of EU conditionality has gradually become constrained by the evolution of the enlargement process itself. Over the past decade, politically sensitive issues such as the Prespa Agreement, the treaty with Bulgaria and subsequent commitments related to the negotiating framework have come to dominate domestic political debate and relations with the EU. These developments reflect the country's continued commitment to European integration, yet they also illustrate how the enlargement process has increasingly been influenced by geopolitical considerations and bilateral disputes alongside the traditional reform agenda.

As a result, structural domestic challenges (such as clientelism, corruption, judicial independence, public administration reform and regulatory enforcement) have often received less political attention than the accession negotiations. Repeated delays in the accession process – despite significant political compromises – have reinforced public perceptions that progress primarily depends on external factors. This dynamic has allowed political actors to frame limited reform outcomes through the lens of enlargement politics, reducing political pressure to address persistent governance deficiencies.

The EU accession process has had a dual effect on rule-of-law resilience. It has strengthened important resilience resources by anchoring democratic institutions, constitutional governance and civil society, while also contributing to a political environment where external political disputes have at times overshadowed the need for deeper structural reforms. North Macedonia’s experience demonstrates that the effectiveness of EU conditionality depends on the adoption of reforms as well as maintaining a credible accession perspective that keeps domestic governance transformation at the centre of the enlargement process.

**4. Conclusion**

North Macedonia exhibits a relatively modest level of rule-of-law resilience, characterised by the coexistence of important resilience resources and persistent structural vulnerabilities. Although the

country has experienced severe political crises and episodes of democratic backsliding over the past decade, these have not resulted in the abandonment of constitutional governance or democratic competition. However, these resilience resources have not been sufficient to overcome long-standing weaknesses in institutional performance, accountability and the implementation of reforms.

Regime legitimation is the country's strongest primary resilience resource. Despite political polarisation and contested institutional decisions, political actors have continued to justify their actions through constitutional procedures, parliamentary processes, elections and legal arguments, reinforcing the constitutional framework as the accepted arena for political competition. Civil society – supported by a comparatively strong community of researchers, universities and policy institutes – has also played an important role in sustaining public scrutiny when formal oversight institutions have been less effective.

Resilience continues to be constrained by the persistence of clientelist governance. Corruption, political influence over public institutions, weak implementation of reforms and limited administrative autonomy reflect deeper structural patterns that undermine the effectiveness of the rule of law – particularly in corruption control, regulatory enforcement, judicial effectiveness and constraints on government power. Although EU conditionality has reinforced constitutional governance and institutional reform, its transformative influence has weakened as enlargement has become shaped by bilateral disputes and geopolitical considerations.

North Macedonia demonstrates that rule-of-law resilience should not just be equated with institutional effectiveness. Democratic systems can remain resilient despite weak institutional performance – when political authority continues to be exercised and contested through constitutional procedures and when independent societal actors retain the capacity to monitor power and sustain public accountability. But this resilience has clear limits; the future trajectory of rule-of-law resilience in North Macedonia will depend less on the creation of new formal institutions than on the capacity to ensure that existing institutions operate with greater autonomy, accountability and effectiveness. Without sustained progress in addressing the underlying structures of clientelism and strengthening institutional autonomy, resilience risks being reduced to the mere capacity to preserve democratic continuity – rather than the capacity to achieve substantive improvements in the quality of governance.

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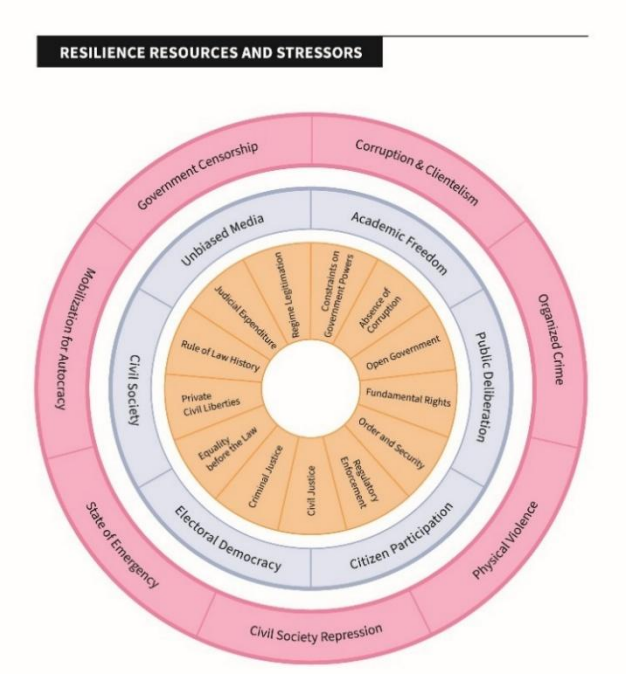
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**About the project**

RESILIO-ACCESS investigates the resilience of the rule of law in the current (potential) candidate countries for EU accession. The project explores how to measure resilience and how to assess the potential of the EU's enlargement policy toolbox to foster sustainable resilience in the region. Resilience here means the capacity of the rule of law to prevent, cope with, or recover from hazardous events or incremental threats – without losing its core function, structure, and purpose.

**About the paper**

This paper is part of the **RESILIO-ACCESS Country Reports**, a collection of compact analyses that assess the source of rule of law resilience in EU aspirant countries by using the analytical framework of the RESILIO-ACCESS model.




The RESILIO-ACCESS model is based on *three* dimensions: The system of the rule of law itself provides *primary resilience resources* such as an effective judicial system, the protection of fundamental rights, and democratic elections. These resources are embedded into a social environment with *subsidiary resilience resources* such as civil society, academia, and the media. However, these resources are constantly being challenged by *threats* such as autocracy, corruption, violence, or censorship. The characteristics of each dimension, their interactions and their conditions of resilience resources determine the overall resilience capacity of the rule of law.

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