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## Illiberalism, revolution and the 2016 Macedonian elections: The effects of social movements on electoral accountability

Intersections. EEJSP

7(4): 32–51.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v7i4.828>

<http://intersections.tk.mta.hu>

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### Abstract

To what extent are social movements capable of steering voters' choices in illiberal societies? Through the empirical exploration of Macedonia's 2016 Colourful Revolution, this study examines the potential of Anti-Corruption Movements (ACMs) to inflict electoral punishment on illiberal leaders. It adopts a corruption-based conception of illiberalism, whereby 'the misuse of public office for private gain' in the shape of bribery, nepotism, clientelism, and misuse of public party funding presents itself as one of the foremost components of illiberal rule. Drawing from original survey data and a set of semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Colourful Revolution and members of the Macedonian civil society, this paper sheds light upon the effects of ACMs on electoral behaviour and, ultimately, on the political potential of ACMs in the reversal of a country's illiberal course. The study finds strong indicators pointing to the Colourful Revolution's encouraging role in stoking increasingly negative perceptions towards Macedonia's illiberal government ahead of the 2016 election, but primarily among voters that had not supported the main government party in the previous election.

**Keywords:** corruption, elections, illiberalism, Macedonia, social movements, voting behaviour

## 1 Introduction

The emergence and spread of illiberal democracy have given rise to a novel field within the study of contemporary politics. Illiberalism, located in a 'grey zone' between liberal democracy and autocracy (Kapidžić, 2020) as it arguably exhibits elements of both, is marked by several common traits. Illiberal politics and policies are often built upon regimes of weak governmental accountability, a poor and biased application of rule of law standards (Pech & Scheppele, 2017), and election manipulation (Bermeo, 2016). They furthermore have a high prevalence of corruption and clientelistic networks spanning across different levels of government and State administration (Rocha Menocal, Fritz & Rakner, 2008). In this light, many social movements, as organised actors of civil resistance, have become aware of the fight

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against illiberalism and corruption (della Porta, 2017a; Pirro, 2017). These Anti-Corruption Movements (ACMs), besides being diverse and holding protests as their most common tactic, can contest political malfeasance from below—potentially, also in illiberal systems.

This article contributes to research into the effects of social movements on political and electoral outcomes. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), hereinafter ‘Macedonia’<sup>1</sup>, provides a case of entrenched elite illiberalism where electoral accountability can prosper. The ‘Colourful Revolution’ refers to a series of protests that took place in Macedonia during the spring and early summer of 2016. This contentious episode showcased the features and repertoire of an ACM, where it played a critical role in calling out political corruption and, ultimately, in electorally punishing the governing party, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (*Vnatreshna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija – Demokratska Partija za Makedonsko Nacionalno Edinstvo*, VMRO–DPMNE). The extent to which the Colourful Revolution contributed to changes in voting behaviour, leading to VMRO–DPMNE’s fall from grace, forms the core of this article.

Through a mixed-methods approach, the study draws from two different sets of primary data. The first data source consists of semi-structured interviews with representatives of Macedonian civil society, all linked, to different extents, with the 2015 political crisis and with the Colourful Revolution in 2016. The second data source consists of an original survey dataset featuring a sample of 1,066 respondents, all members of the Macedonian electorate, in order to measure large-scale political attitudes and voting habits at an individual level. The article analyses the interview testimony alongside the survey, providing qualitative support to the quantitative evidence.

## 2 Unravelling the link between illiberalism and corruption

Since the concept was first mainstreamed by Zakaria (1997), illiberalism has become recognised as a *sui generis* system of governance. Having comfortably settled in the ‘grey zone’ of the democracy-autocracy spectrum, illiberal polities occupy an unspecified, fluid space somewhere between a full liberal democracy and an outright authoritarian order. Illiberal systems, while maintaining a liberal-democratic façade through regular elections, showcase features that deviate from typical democratic standards. Through institutional and symbolic channels, illiberal systems tend to rely on nationalism as a legitimising source (Rupnik, 2016) and, through the steady dismantling of checks and balances, strive to shield electoral advantages for the incumbents (Pech & Scheppele, 2017).

Research claims that corruption and opaque clientelistic networks of exchange prevail among the ruling elites of illiberal regimes. Rocha Menocal, Fritz, and Rakner (2008, p. 34) argue that illiberal systems ‘are driven by personalised interests, and public officials often act to further their own gains without much concern about a broader sense of the public good’, the result being ‘the persistence of clientelistic structures and high levels of corrup-

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<sup>1</sup> Usage as per its constitutional name before February 2019. In line with the Prespa Agreement of the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 2018, the country went on to adopt its current official name, i.e., ‘Republic of North Macedonia’. As this study refers to events prior to this Agreement, it uses the contemporary country name.

tion, especially when citizens have few means of holding elites to account.' Kubbe and Loli (2020) point out the overall rising corruption trends in countries with illiberal governments which, in some cases, have been described as pervasive (Krastev, 2018).

Defining corruption is a topic of debate in itself (Kurer, 2015; Philp, 2006). Several scholars rely on its most widespread normative outlining: 'the misuse of public office for private gain' (Jiménez and García, 2008; Kurer, 2005; Riera et al., 2013). Corrupt practices are usually characterised by double-party exchange relationships in either horizontal or vertical directions (Carvajal, 1999) and include such activities as bribery, nepotism, clientelism, misappropriation, and misuse of public party funding, among others (De Vries & Solaz, 2017; Nye, 1967). Several accounts offer insights into the impact of corruption on the economy and revenues of a country (Del Monte & Papagni, 2001; Pani, 2010; Rose-Ackerman, 1997), on its development (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2011; Mauro, 1995) and on its equality and poverty levels (Chong & Calderón, 2000; Gupta, Davoodi & Alonso-Terme, 2002). Higher exposure to corruption is also associated with a weaker political culture overall, including a lower belief in the political system (Caillier, 2010; Seligson, 2002) and lower voter turnout (Carreras & Vera, 2018; Chong et al., 2015). The rising migration of skilled workers (Dimant, Krieger & Meierrieks, 2013; Poprawe, 2015) and the weakening of the judiciary's independence (Buscaglia & Dakolias, 1999; della Porta, 2001) have likewise been identified as potential consequences of political corruption.

## 2.1 Illiberalism and corruption in the Western Balkans

During the 1990s, the seven republics that constitute the so-called 'Western Balkan' region—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and Serbia—initiated the establishment of their independent State structures, including the institutionalisation of their civil and political systems. During the early 2000s, several underwent the timid consolidation of competitive multi-party politics and the slow advancements towards democratisation and economic reform (Bieber, 2018; Crowther, 2017; Pavlović, 2019), mostly through progressively neoliberal agendas and support for integration into the European Union (EU). In the late 2000s, however, authoritarian patterns of governance re-emerged, marked by declining press freedom and by stronger and more informal control over State institutions. This governance shift has partly been interpreted as a consequence of the EU's lack of transformative power and direct support for democratic rule in the region (Bieber, 2018). The EU is the most influential external partner of the Western Balkan countries (Keil, 2013), but 'the [2007-8] economic crisis and a cascade of follow-up crises' (Bieber, 2020, p. 31) resulted in the member states becoming less engaged with democratic improvements in the region, and generally disinterested with the EU's enlargement policy (Szołucha, 2010; Vachudova, 2013).

For nearly two decades many governments in the region have moved toward perpetual power through the implementation of illiberal policies—many of which included the establishment and consolidation of corrupt networks and clientelistic structures. Scholars have unpacked empirical examples in, among others, Montenegro (Komar, 2020), Serbia (Keil, 2018; Pavlović, 2019), Croatia (Dolenec, 2013) and Kosovo (Beha & Hajrullahu, 2020; Coelho, 2018). Over the years, ruling parties have engaged in political practices aimed at undermining political opposition and institutional accountability, resulting (in most cases) in dimin-

ished electoral and judicial repercussions (Komar, 2020). These practices include electoral manipulation through voter intimidation (Kera & Hysa, 2020; Pavlović, 2019), biased media reporting (Micevski & Trpevska, 2015), the control of public resources for the benefit of party loyalists (Kapidžić, 2019), and the weakening of checks and balances through control over the judiciary (Crowther, 2017; Gjuzelov & Ivanovska, 2020).

Moreover, illiberal leaders in the Western Balkan countries tend to show similar traits in the way they consolidated themselves at the helm. As Bieber (2020, p. 33) explains, ‘leaders such as [Serbian President Aleksandar] Vučić, Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, president of the Bosnian entity Republika Srpska and later Serb member of the State Presidency Milorad Dodik, and Montenegrin Prime Minister and President Milo Đukanović were able to capture Western imagination as young, pragmatic reformers,’ whose rise to power as ideologically-moderate personalities was met with the approval of EU governments (Bennett, 2016).

### 3 Corruption voters and corruption challengers

#### 3.1 Punishing corruption at the polls

As a factor that conditions a major share of today’s political, economic and social phenomena, top-down and bottom-up efforts to fight corruption have been diverse in implementation and results (Sampson, 2010). The holding of elections, a core element in liberal-democratic multi-party regimes, have occasionally proved an effective tool to combat corruption (Bågenholm, 2013b; Shabad & Słomczyński, 2011). By no means, however, has it been an infallible instrument (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013; Persson, Rothstein & Teorell, 2010). Research on the potential leverage of an electorate when deciding a corrupt incumbent’s political fate relates to ‘electoral accountability.’ This concept describes the process of an incumbent’s re-election or replacement through an electorate, whereby voters will—through retrospective assessment—consider their choice at the polls according to the incumbent’s performance (Ashworth, 2012; Svoboda, 1995). In this case, it is the perceived level of incumbent corruption that influences the electorate.

When analysing successful electoral accountability action—that is, the removal of a corrupt incumbent through an election—voting behaviour is the determining trigger. By drawing from experiments and surveys, previous literature on electoral accountability has identified a range of variables that condition choice at the polls vis-à-vis a corrupt political leader. At the macro-level, for instance, the economic voting premise holds that voters hold the government responsible for economic events (Lewis-Beck & Paldam, 2000). Thus, leaders’ performance in the economic realm is decisive for their political survival. Accordingly, even when a public office holder has engaged in corrupt or malfeasant behaviour, voters will judge their overall performance from an economic perspective despite public awareness of the scandal (Carlin, Love & Martínez-Gallardo, 2015).

At the micro-level, public perception of corruption can contribute to electoral accountability (Ecker, Glinitzer & Meyer, 2016; Seligson, 2002). Furthermore, the presence of a novel, less-corrupt alternative can compound electoral accountability pressure (Engler, 2016; Klačnja, 2015). Perception of corruption is often fostered by the media, which plays a substantial role in the portrayal of malfeasant leaders and their scandals (Costas-Pérez, Solé-Ollé & Sorribas-

Navarro, 2012). Furthermore, access to information conditions the level of political awareness of the electorate, which acts as an important trigger for electoral accountability (Klašnja, 2017). Riera et al. (2013) find some evidence for a positive correlation between voters' political sophistication and electoral punishment of corrupt incumbents, though in left-party voters only. Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz (2013) claim that more politically aware citizens are less affected by partisan influences when assessing corruption cases. As far as ideology and partisanship are concerned, most scholarly research suggests that the higher the level of partisanship, the higher the chances for a voter to support their own party regardless of it being involved in a corruption scandal (Ecker, Glinitzer & Meyer, 2016; Eggers, 2014). This correlation appears more salient in right-wing voters, who seem to be more tolerant of irregular activities when these affect their party (Anduiza, Gallego & Muñoz, 2013) and thus more partisan (Jiménez & García, 2018).

### 3.2 Accountability from below: Anti-corruption movements

A neglected aspect within the study of electoral accountability is the role played by agents of contentious politics and, more specifically, by social movements. Tarrow and Tilly (2009) define social movements as 'a sustained challenge to power holders in the name of a population [...] by means of public displays of that population's worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment.'

In recent years, many new movements have become aware of the fight against corruption and have adopted it as an ideology of their own. Donatella della Porta's (2015; 2017a; 2017b) accounts on what she terms 'anti-corruption from below' depict the birth of such movements as a consequence of neo-liberal economic privatisation and deregulation processes, among other factors. These have largely translated into a decline in both citizens' rights and institutional trust, interpreted as a crisis of legitimacy. Within this terminology, ACMs have been defined as 'varying forms of collective action in reaction to [...] high-level or political corruption' (Pirro, 2017, p. 775). The motivations behind ACM action are diverse: some action is encouraged by the high corruption levels (Margarit, 2015), while other is triggered by a perceived lack of government effectiveness (Gingerich, 2009; Peiffer & Álvarez, 2016).

ACMs' tools of action are no different from those deployed by other social mobilisations; and protest is their most visible representation (Tilly & Tarrow, 2006). Demonstrations and other forms of street performance aim at conveying a message both externally, towards the authorities or the media, and internally, among the protestors themselves, be it with or without a violent component (Machado, Scartascini & Tommasi, 2011). Street demonstrations have played a significant role in European politics since the late twentieth century, particularly in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (Murtagh, 2016; Olteanu & Beyerle, 2017). Several authors have already pointed towards post-socialist societies' low levels of civic participation (Howard, 2003; Tarrow & Petrova, 2007), suggesting that that endows protests with a special relevance when they do take place.

Research on social movements' political repercussion has primarily focused on their effects over policy agenda-setting and governmental decision-making processes (Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2005; Kitschelt, 1986; Murtagh, 2016; Pettinicchio, 2017); while movement impact on the electorate and their voting inclinations has received less attention (Amenta et al., 2010). Bågenholm (2009; 2013a) addresses the politicisation of corruption—that is, the adop-

tion of anti-corruption discourses for electoral purposes—and claims it is particularly salient in Central and Eastern Europe. His findings strongly hint at the idea that the overall success of anti-corruption parties in this region during the early twenty-first century was a sign of voters' general approval of platforms that held corruption as their prevalent issue.

While much of the literature seems to circumvent the gap between ACM activity and its effects on electoral accountability, it nevertheless provides insight into the potential of corruption-focused mobilisations and their ability to contest political malfeasance from below. While existing scholarly research has acknowledged the media's leverage on the electorate, for instance, it has generally failed to account for a similar electoral influence wielded by ACMs.

#### 4 Corruption and revolution in Macedonia

From the start of the twenty-first century Macedonian political life revolved around the quasi-supreme rule of one party, VMRO–DPMNE, and one man, Nikola Gruevski. As party leader since 2003, Gruevski brought a modernising and youthful image to Macedonia's main right-wing force. His campaign built upon nationalist elements and a pro-European agenda including seeking membership in both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU, which helped him win the 2006 parliamentary elections and become Prime Minister (Crowther, 2017).

The years that followed Gruevski's electoral victory were marked by a swift turn to the right alongside a visible crackdown on civil rights and freedoms (Grozdanovska Dimishkovska, 2012). Civil society and non-governmental groups critical of the regime were harassed and their independence undermined (Crowther, 2017); key media were taken over and transformed into a 'propagandistic setting' (Micevski & Trpevska, 2015); and the judicial authority had been rendered almost powerless against government elites. Additionally, aggressive rhetoric towards Macedonia's Albanian community, which makes up around a quarter of the country's population, intensified. The government concurrently launched the so-called 'Skopje 2014' architectural embellishment project, whereby more than 130 monuments and façade reconstructions in the capital were completed as part of a nation-building endeavour, ostensibly aimed at promoting classical Macedonian identity. VMRO–DPMNE's successive electoral victories in 2008, 2011, and 2014 suggested this program would continue.

May 2015 marked the beginning of the end for Gruevski's leadership. Zoran Zaev, the head of the country's main opposition party, the left-wing Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (*Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija*, SDSM), revealed that the VMRO–DPMNE government had been involved in a series of wiretapped conversations that confirmed accusations of 'widespread corruption, illegal influence on the judiciary [and] pressures on the media' coming from Gruevski's entourage (Petkovski, 2015, p. 45). Around 20,000 phone numbers had been surveilled and approximately 670,000 conversations illegally monitored (Reef, 2017), laying bare electoral fraud, extortion and abuse of power (Micevski & Trpevska, 2015). The tapes also revealed the government's responsibility for the cover-up in 2011 of the murder of young activist Martin Neshkovski, beaten to death by police forces—a controversial case that had already led to protests against police brutality (Marušić, 2011).

The tape scandal exposed institutionally-entrenched corruption affecting all layers of Macedonian administration—and directed by Gruevski's VMRO–DPMNE. After the release

of these ‘political bombs’, as they were called, protests erupted and were met with police violence. Demonstrations persisted and, two months later, a solution to the deadlock was brokered by the EU: the Przhino Agreement (Crowther, 2017). This deal included Gruevski’s resignation in January 2016 in favour of an interim government made of VMRO–DPMNE and SDSM members, and early parliamentary elections initially scheduled for 24 April, later re-scheduled to 5 June.

By March 2016, as fallout from the tape scandal, several of Gruevski’s entourage was under investigation by the newly-established Special Prosecution Office (SPO) (Petkovski, 2015). Yet the political crisis deepened: on 12 April President Gjorgje Ivanov, himself a member of VMRO–DPMNE, pardoned some party officials facing charges and criminal investigations linked with the wiretapped conversations. This was an attempt, Ivanov claimed, to overcome the deadlock and act in the country’s best interest (Marušić, 2016a; Reef, 2017). Notwithstanding his intentions, this move provoked outrage and triggered another massive wave of protests, starting in Skopje and rapidly spreading across the country. The opposition and many citizens understood Ivanov’s decision ‘as a clear intention to protect party officials from prosecution, exacerbating thus the perception of the impunity of political elites’ (Milan, 2017, p. 838).

This wave of anti-government mobilisations was a turning point in Macedonia’s history of contention, inasmuch as it displayed a new repertoire of action and showed remarkable differences with the 2015 demonstrations, namely an earlier episode of the same contentious cycle. The protest series became known as the Colourful Revolution (*Sharena Revolucija*) after protesters fired paintballs and hurled paint-filled balloons at government buildings and monuments in the centre of Skopje—itsself a symbol of Gruevski’s ‘Skopje 2014’ project. Street demonstrations took place almost every day all over the country into July, and online activism spread within and beyond its borders. The Colourful Revolution showed intersectional and interethnic components, bringing together ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians of all ages, as well as uniting protestors standing up for diverse series of demands, spanning from the improvement of the economic situation to the protection of sexual minority rights (Ozimec, 2016). By early July, President Ivanov had revoked the pardons (Marušić, 2016b) and a new date for early elections had been set for 11 December after another EU-brokered agreement between the parties.

The election results spoke to the ACM’s effect on the outcome: the gap between VMRO–DPMNE (38.14 per cent of votes) and SDSM (36.66 per cent of votes) was fewer than 20,000 ballots, equivalent to two seats in the 120-seat parliament—a remarkable difference from the parliamentary election two years prior, where VMRO–DPMNE won 42.97 per cent and SDSM 25.34 per cent. This time, though Gruevski still won 51 seats to Zaev’s 49, SDSM managed to form a coalition government with the Democratic Union for Integration (*Demokratska Unija za Integracija - Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim*, DUI), the country’s largest ethnic Albanian party and formerly VMRO–DPMNE’s governing coalition partner. SDSM thus attained executive power and ended a decade of VMRO–DPMNE government.

## 5 Data and methodology

Through a mixed-methods approach, we can determine the extent to which the Colourful Revolution contributed to changes in voting behaviour, ultimately leading to VMRO–DPMNE’s fall from power. It draws on two sets of primary data. The first data source consists of

six semi-structured interviews with Macedonian civil society representatives—all linked, to different extents, with the 2015 political crisis and with the Colourful Revolution in 2016. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their high level of involvement with the movement, either through active participation at the protests or through substantive engagement in academic or journalistic terms. The interviews centred on the political and electoral impact of the Colourful Revolution, particularly on voter perceptions. The interview questions addressed the political context prior to the protests, the purposes and principles underpinning their creation, and their perceived consequences before and after the 2016 parliamentary election.

The second data source consists of an original survey dataset featuring a sample of 1,066 respondents. The online survey, conducted between July and September 2019, was circulated across the Macedonian electorate with the objective of measuring ordinary people's attitudes and behaviours—many of which, including individual-level voting patterns, are not directly observable through alternative methods (Halperin & Heath, 2012). The sample was restricted to Macedonian nationals above voting age on 11 December 2016, the date of the election. The survey included different blocks of questions in the Macedonian language, encompassing voting habits and party preference, perceptions of corruption, and individual attitudes towards the Colourful Revolution.

Online surveys imply some methodological limitations: a younger, urban, higher-educated and more computer-literate respondent profile will potentially prevail in the sample and, most probably, be overrepresented. Table 1 shows the sample demographics accord with these expectations. Of 1,066 respondents, only 24.5 per cent are 41 or older; those aged 26 to 30 alone make up 25 per cent of the respondents, followed by the 36 to 40 group (17.7 per cent) and 31 to 35 group (17.3 per cent). In terms of education, 76.1 per cent completed at least a bachelor's degree, meaning only 23.9 per cent of responses came from voters with no university education. Urban dwellers are well represented among the respondents: 71.7 per cent live in towns with more than 10,000 inhabitants—more than half in the capital, Skopje. Male participation in the survey was disproportional at 61.2 per cent, versus 38.5 per cent of females. Finally, in national-ethnic terms, an overwhelming 93.2 per cent identified as ethnic Macedonian.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics (n=1066).

Age (%)

≤25	26–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51–55	56≥
15.5	25.0	17.3	17.7	11.1	7.0	4.0	2.4

Gender (%)

Male	Female	Other
61.2	38.5	0.3

Residence (%)

Urban	Rural	Abroad/Prefer not to say
71.7	18.6	9.7

*Education (%)*

Primary	Secondary	Technical/ Vocational school	Bachelor	Master	PhD
0.5	15.7	7.7	48.8	23.7	3.6

*Ethnicity (%)*

Macedonian	Albanian	Other
93.2	1.6	5.2

Source: original survey dataset.

## 6 Analysis

### 6.1 The many colours of Macedonia's 2016 protests

The political and social context in Macedonia during the years that preceded the Colourful Revolution was one where illiberal practices had flourished and where a significant sense of frustration and anger prevailed among segments of the population. Gruevski's time in power generated an opaque and unaccountable system of governance where police brutality, illegal State media financing and smear campaigns against political critics were widespread. An atmosphere of fear had emerged and, as a consequence, so had the feeling of growing humiliation and grievances towards the executive. In this context, corruption scandals involving members of the government or party loyalists were frequent—as was the perceived impunity surrounding their cases. Public perception of corruption, as an inherent feature of illiberal governance, was very high.

The 2016 Colourful Revolution represents the culmination of a years-long cycle of contentious politics in Macedonia. Even though its triggering moment was President Ivanov's decision to pardon officials involved in the illegal wiretapping scandal, the feelings stemming from the 2015 'political bombs' managed to resurface again in 2016. Although the illegally-taped conversations had been released a year before, they remained as a source of grievance that, over 2016, steadily contributed to intensifying frustration with and rejection of the government. The 'bombs' had an overwhelming effect on many, numbed by the astounding volume of information that had entered the public domain: 'I will use this metaphor of the dead frog experiment: you slowly boil the frog, and the frog doesn't realise it's being killed,' said an interviewee (Interview 2). The first days of the Colourful Revolution became the point of convergence for broad groups of unsatisfied citizens, a majority of which had protested against police brutality and other social issues in 2011, 2014, and 2015. In this febrile context, the taped conversation revealing the government's mismanagement over the brutal murder in 2011 of young activist Martin Neshkovski acted as an incendiary trigger.

The Colourful Revolution's anti-corruption message was overarching, providing reliable grounds to consider this movement an ACM. President Ivanov's controversial pardon decision exemplified both elite impunity and lack of justice, as the State's upper echelon moved to torpedo the SPO's criminal investigations of the wiretapping scandal. This move revealed

a deeply corrupt and clientelistic political system under the tight control of VMRO-DPMNE, where the rule of law and institutional independence were completely hijacked by the ruling elite. The Colourful Revolution constituted itself as an anti-impunity and pro-justice movement that channelled public outrage over corruption.

At the outset, the street protests emerged without a clear narrative or objective, but rather as an immediate response to injustice and corruption following Ivanov's pardons. Broadly, they sought to defend the SPO investigation of the wiretapped conversations scandal. Days later, following the gradual incorporation of political parties into the protests—as SDSM became a major driving force—it steadily evolved into an ideologically-uneven conglomeration of groups that conveyed different, even opposing, demands. Many civic-oriented factions rejected SDSM's involvement in the protests:

Many people reacted when they saw them [SDSM] in the protests. They didn't want them to be there as an opposition party. But after a while, people just softened their mood and acknowledged that somebody would be in power after VMRO-DPMNE fell. The lesser of two evils that we had back then were SDSM and its people. (Interview 5)

The movement, at risk of fracturing along political divergences and tactics, instead broadened its ideological scope and became an all-encompassing civic-political movement. Aware of its internal divisions, protest organisers opted for a practical and relatable path, namely bringing down the common enemy, the VMRO-DPMNE leadership. This option was also the most achievable in the short run:

People were ready to do whatever it took just to get rid of these bastards. That was the dominating feeling. Even accepting [SDSM leader Zoran] Zaev even though they didn't like him, even though they were suspicious [of him], because these bastards, this guy [President Ivanov] decided to pardon the criminals, decided to hamper the work of the SPO, which back then was much more popular than the political leaders of the opposition. (Interview 1)

Highly diverse civic participation represented the many colours of the movement. In time, the Colourful Revolution constructed itself as an ideologically, ethnically, and demographically cross-cutting mosaic of contentious politics where the fight against injustice and corruption was understood as the overarching motif. Through its demands, the movement aimed to topple Gruevski's government and bring officials involved in the 2015 wiretapping scandal to justice.

## 6.2 The electoral impact of the Colourful Revolution

Elections to parliament were held on 11 December 2016. The momentum of the Colourful Revolution had waned through the summer; political parties—both incumbents and opposition—campaigning intensely ahead of the vote. In the framework of the 2015 Przhino Agreement, a caretaker government had been installed to supervise the road towards elections.

As the election results came in, it became clear that SDSM had almost overtaken VMRO-DPMNE, which finished just 20,000 votes ahead (SEC, 2016). The tally contrasted sharply with the previous parliamentary election, held only two years before, where VMRO-DPMNE had obtained almost twice as many votes as SDSM. In 2016, predictably, SDSM benefited from the Colourful Revolution, gaining much of the ACM's protest vote against VMRO-

DPMNE. As the survey data in Table 2 illustrates, voting trends in the 2016 elections proved to be transformative and reflected the will of many for political change.

**Table 2.** Voting preferences at the 2014 and 2016 parliamentary elections in Macedonia.  
Figures refer to number of respondents (n=1066).

	<b>SDSM</b>	<b>VMRO-DPMNE</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Did not vote</b>	<b>Do not know/ Prefer not to say</b>
2014	200	274	76	320	196
2016	311	204	69	300	182

Source: original survey dataset.

The survey data shows that SDSM expanded its support base while VMRO-DPMNE support shrank. The abstention rate decreased only slightly, though. This presents an intriguing case of vote transfer, displayed in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Vote transfer between the 2014 and 2016 parliamentary elections in Macedonia.  
Figures refer to number of respondents (n=1066)

		<b>2014</b>				
		<b>SDSM</b>	<b>VMRO-DPMNE</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Did not vote</b>	<b>Do not know/ Prefer not to say</b>
<b>2016</b>	SDSM	170	39	19	65	18
	VMRO-DPMNE	5	169	1	22	7
	Other	3	7	44	12	3
	Did not vote	21	49	8	202	20
	Do not know/ Prefer not to say	1	10	4	19	148

Source: original survey dataset.

Two main observations can be inferred from the vote transfer survey data. First, alongside electoral support from the party's traditional voters, SDSM gained a major share of 'new' 2016 voters that had refrained from voting in the 2014 elections, as well as winning over some former VMRO-DPMNE voters and voters from other parties. A common feature of many new SDSM voters, regardless of previous voting preference, was the conviction that VMRO-DPMNE had to be stripped of power. The political appeal of Zaev's party was uneven across different segments of the population—as many non-affiliated or traditionally-abstaining voters viewed SDSM with suspicion—but there was an explicit consensus around the idea that voting for SDSM was necessary in order to oust Gruevski: 'the polarisation that the circumstances of these elections created made a lot of those people aware to come out and [...]

punish Gruevski, and the only way to do this was to vote for SDSM' (Interview 4). As one of the interviewees put it, the 2016 elections presented a simple dichotomous dilemma: 'you either want VMRO[-DPMNE] to stay in power or SDSM to dismantle what they created' (Interview 1). Several interviewees confirmed the impact of politically independent voters and former abstainers, who played a large role in broadening SDSM's support base. This group included traditionally unaffiliated voters, members of the Macedonian diaspora who travelled back to the country in order to cast a vote, as well as voters that used to support other minor parties. An example of the latter came from many members of Macedonia's Albanian community, who in 2016 gave their vote to SDSM as a way to protest against the performance of DUI.

The second observation is that the relative decrease in VMRO-DPMNE's support in 2016 can be explained by the abstention of a considerable number of the party's traditional voters, rather than by a vote transfer to SDSM. All things considered, and as happens with traditional SDSM voters, most traditional VMRO-DPMNE voters remained loyal to the party. VMRO-DPMNE's ideological principles tend to lean towards identity-oriented questions, which engender an extremely loyal party support base among like-minded voters. As a result, the polarised political context preceding the 2016 elections did not contribute to a transfer of votes to SDSM. If anything, as one interviewee explains, 'the highest level of punishment that a traditional VMRO-DPMNE would provide to their party would be not going to the polls, or maybe [...] scribbling something on the ballot, but *not* voting for SDSM' (Interview 4).

Table 4 assesses the extent to which vote transfers were an effect of the Colourful Revolution. The survey data portrays a diverse array of voters' perceptions of the Colourful Revolution—and, more specifically, of whether this ACM impacted voter choice.

Among those voting for SDSM, unsurprisingly, a strongly negative perception of incumbent corruption prevailed. Irrespective of their voting choice in 2014, all segments overwhelmingly rated the VMRO-DPMNE-led government as 'corrupt' or 'extremely corrupt.' Furthermore, there is a clear indication in the data that individuals that also voted for SDSM in 2014 exhibited the highest rate of corruption perception towards VMRO-DPMNE (0.98). These voters, alongside those voting for Others in 2014 but supporting SDSM in 2016—closely followed by former abstainers—showed the highest participation rates in the Colourful Revolution street protests (0.58, 0.38). On the other hand, while former VMRO-DPMNE voters were not enthused by the demonstrations and rarely took part (0.18), they were the segment whose perceptions towards VMRO-DPMNE were the most negatively affected (0.49).

Predictably, rates for incumbent corruption perception, demonstration participation, and negative impact on incumbent perception were the lowest among those voting for VMRO-DPMNE in both 2014 and 2016. This segment had the least negative view of the incumbent government in terms of corruption awareness (0.52). Moreover, the Colourful Revolution had a very low impact on the way these voters came to perceive the VMRO-DPMNE-led administration (0.09). This suggests high rates of partisanship and party loyalty from VMRO-DPMNE voters, further confirmed by the low rates of demonstration participation and negative impact on incumbent perception exhibited by those voting for VMRO-DPMNE in 2014 but abstaining in 2016 (0.04 and 0.06, respectively). For over half of these voters the Colourful Revolution did not change their incumbent corruption perceptions (0.55). These perceptions were, at the same time, already considerably negative (0.79). This might be the reason why they decided to punish their party through abstention.

**Table 4.** Perceptions towards the Colourful Revolution according to vote transfer between the 2014 and 2016 parliamentary elections. Unless otherwise stated, decimal figures stand for percentage of respondents

2014	2016	Incumbent corruption perception	Participation rate	Negative impact on incumbent perception	Perception unchanged
SDSM	SDSM	0.98	0.58	0.42	0.40
VMRO-DPMNE		0.87	0.18	0.49	0.33
Other		0.97	0.58	0.37	0.42
Did not vote		0.92	0.38	0.35	0.42
SDSM	VMRO-DPMNE	0.90	0.20	0.60	0.40
VMRO-DPMNE		0.52	0.01	0.09	0.56
Other		0.90	0	1	0
Did not vote		0.61	0	0.18	0.68
SDSM	Did not vote	0.95	0.38	0.24	0.38
VMRO-DPMNE		0.79	0.04	0.06	0.55
Other		1	0	0.25	0.63
Did not vote		0.84	0.06	0.22	0.53

Source: original survey dataset.

Indicator 1. *Incumbent corruption perception.* Mean average of respondents' corruption rating of the VMRO-DPMNE/DUI government as a whole, and of VMRO-DPMNE as senior member of the government (0 = not corrupt, 1 = extremely corrupt).

Indicator 2. *Participation rate.* Rate of respondents claiming to have taken part as demonstrators in the Colourful Revolution street protests.

Indicator 3. *Negative impact on incumbent perception.* Rate of respondents claiming that the Colourful Revolution street protests contributed to a change in perception towards the government, either negatively or extremely negatively.

Indicator 4. *Perception unchanged.* Rate of respondents claiming that the Colourful Revolution street protests did not contribute to a change in their perception towards the government, neither positively nor negatively.

## 7 Conclusion

Macedonia's Colourful Revolution provides an interesting example of how an ACM targeting an illiberal incumbent can channel citizen frustration and foster electoral accountability. Furthermore, this study paves the way towards a deeper understanding of illiberal regime change. Given the paucity of research in this field, the article contributes to knowledge of the effects of ACMs on the electoral punishment of illiberal incumbents. Adopting a corrup-

tion-based understanding of illiberalism, the study has drawn from a set of semi-structured interviews with members and representatives of Macedonia's civil society as well as from an original survey dataset featuring a sample of 1,066 respondents from the Macedonian electorate. Future studies can provide further tests of this article's findings by relying on alternative data sources, such as official barometers and polls, or methods like focus groups, which can provide more accurate assessments of voting trends and attitudes. The article findings suggest that the electoral impact of the Colourful Revolution, although present to a certain extent, was highly contingent upon partisan and ideological criteria. Whereas the Colourful Revolution had a visible impact among certain segments of the electorate, especially in terms of encouraging increasingly negative perceptions of VMRO-DPMNE, this effect registered most among groups less loyal to VMRO-DPMNE. Simultaneously, the Colourful Revolution did not sway traditional VMRO-DPMNE voters. However, a large majority of traditional VMRO-DPMNE voters showed high corruption perceptions about their party—a logic that likely pushed some of these voters to abstain in 2016. Many, however, still supported VMRO-DPMNE at the polls.

The positive electoral impact of the Colourful Revolution was felt mostly among those who in 2014 voted for SDSM or Others, or among those who abstained. A considerable share of these voters saw in the Colourful Revolution's street protests the ideal momentum to oust VMRO-DPMNE. While some perceived this chance in their role of SDSM loyalists, others saw the unprecedented social convergence through a more pragmatic, less party-based lens—where the common goal was VMRO-DPMNE's and Gruevski's fall from power. Suspicion was high among non-SDSM supporters, but awarding electoral legitimacy to Zaev's party was understood as the way to rid the country of VMRO-DPMNE's corrupt polity. Even members of Macedonia's ethnic Albanian minority joined the protests and granted electoral support to SDSM as a way of protesting against DUI, the community's own corrupt incumbent.

Polarisation between the traditional electorates of the country's two main political parties, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, further complicated the process of rendering the party vote spectrum more permeable and porous—which could have contributed to a larger vote transfer from VMRO-DPMNE to SDSM. The findings confirm the difficulty in Macedonia of reaching out to voters who are part of the opponent's electoral body.

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