

# International Constraints on Democratic Backsliding

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

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## **Abstract**

Recent studies of democratic backsliding have considered international influences as one of the factors that could explain its different outcomes across countries. However, few empirical studies have been carried out to confirm it. This thesis contributes to the literature on democratic backsliding by attempting to empirically test the assumption that international influences can affect the trajectory of democratic backsliding by constraining it. It uses the concepts originally created to explain the international democratization of authoritarian regimes, including linkage and leverage (Levitsky and Way 2006), to examine the effects the West (the U.S. and the EU) might have on the countries in which democracy is deteriorating. Due to the lack of previous empirical confirmation, it first uses process tracing to find the hypothesized causal mechanism in the most likely typical case (North Macedonia). It then proceeds with an attempt to find a statistically significant relationship between linkage and leverage and the outcomes of backsliding using regression analysis. Both parts of the research confirm that international factors can indeed act as a constraint on democratic backsliding. Their relative importance compared to domestic factors has proven to be more challenging to determine.

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## Introduction

The world has seen many political leaders starting to deteriorate the quality of their countries' democratic institutions and avoiding accountability for abuses of power in recent decades. But, once this process starts, how far can it go? Why do some countries see only a moderate decline of their democracy before the backsliding process ends, while others witness an almost complete wipeout of institutional checks on power once everything is done? Finding the determinants of these outcomes is of increasing importance as the phenomenon of democratic backsliding continues to occur globally.

According to Cianetti and Hanely (2021, 67), scholarly interest in democratic backsliding “has exploded” during the last decade, “driven by uncertainty about the momentum of third-wave democratization”. The most referenced articles focusing on the phenomenon studied multiple of its aspects, including the form, causes, and sequence (Bermeo 2016, Waldner and Lust 2018, Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Trajectories of democratic backsliding and what explains their difference across countries is an aspect that has come to focus more recently (Laebens and Lührmann 2021, Boese et al. 2021, Wiebrecht et al. 2023). It assumes that the backsliding has begun; therefore, the causes that triggered it are not of primary interest. What is examined is the pathway the process takes.

The works referenced above rely on quantitative measurements of democracy – most often indices aggregated by the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem) – to determine that the trajectories of countries indeed differ. For example, this Institute's Episodes of Regime Transformations dataset shows that, from start to finish of their respective backsliding episodes, the scores of Bulgaria and Slovenia on the Electoral Democracy Index dropped only by 14,96%

and 19,45%, respectively, while the score of Belarus and Bolivia dropped by 55% each (Appendix 2). Some countries, like North Macedonia, recovered immediately following their backsliding episodes (made a U-turn); others, like Turkey, did not.

These differences among the countries represent the research puzzle tackled by this thesis. How might they be explained? Presumably, something must constrain the process of democratic backsliding sooner or later, at least in the countries that see a more moderate drop in their level of democracy. Articles published thus far have focused more systematically on domestic constraints. This thesis turns its attention to international ones.

International influences on democratization – a process opposite to democratic backsliding – have been a widely researched topic, especially since the end of the Cold War, when the West (primarily the United States and the European Union) significantly stepped up its democracy promotion efforts. One of the most influential theoretical explanations of the international factors of democratization was produced by Stephen Levitsky and Lucan A. Way (2005, 2006, 2010), who saw linkage to the West and Western leverage as the main factors explaining democratization in the post-Cold War world. Nevertheless, international influences on the reverse process have been a less researched area, with some authors suggesting that they deserve more attention (Wiebrecht et al. 2023, 19).

This thesis contributes to the literature on democratic backsliding by studying whether international factors can affect its trajectory. Specifically, it focuses on the period of three decades after the Cold War and asks the question of whether the West can constrain this process. The question does not assume that this is the only way in which international factors operate – other authors, for example, have researched whether linkages to non-Western countries can

contribute to the survival of autocratic regimes (Tansey et al. 2017). This study, therefore, focuses on one of the multiple forms of international influence.

Essentially, the research builds upon the literature on international democratization pressures directed at authoritarian regimes, which have been at the core of the studies of post-Cold War democratization. In this case, however, democratizing pressures are directed at the countries that, in many cases, have previously been democracies, but are experiencing democratic backsliding. This causal relationship, however, currently lacks strong empirical support and it is uncertain whether mechanisms linking international engagement and constrained backsliding exist at all.

This is the reason why the first part of the research will focus on the most likely typical case study (Beah and Pedersen 2012, 150). A case where both hypothesized cause(s) X (international engagement) and outcome(s) Y (democratic backsliding constrained) are present, along with favorable scope conditions, will be analyzed using process tracing. Using the concepts of Levitsky and Way, favorable scope conditions are regarded as high linkage to the West and high Western leverage. North Macedonia, a country in which democratic backsliding was constrained in the mid-to-late 2010s, fulfills all of these conditions and will be the subject of the case study.

The second part of the research zooms out and tries to answer the question of whether there is any generalizable relationship between linkage and leverage, on the one hand, and trajectories of democratic backsliding, on the other. For these purposes, an OLS regression analysis will be carried out, utilizing the measurements of democracy compiled by the Varieties of Democracy Institute. The population of cases will be taken from the Episodes of Regimes Transformation dataset, as well as the dependent variable – relative change of countries' electoral democracy score. Independent variables, linkage and leverage, will be measured (largely) using the operationalization laid out by Levitsky and Way in their 2010 book.

The reason for starting out with a case study and then proceeding to a quantitative analysis is the already mentioned sparsity of empirical research on international constraints on democratic backsliding, and the doubts expressed about its generalizability (Waldner and Lust 2018, 106). In other words, the probability of contributing to the literature by finding a causal mechanism in the case of North Macedonia is higher, due to it being a most likely typical case, than the probability of finding a statistically significant relationship between linkage and leverage and backsliding.

If, on the one hand, causal mechanisms in the case of North Macedonia are found and there is no significant relationship between the linkage and leverage and the outcome globally, it can be inferred that the causal mechanisms have a low level of generalizability. If, on the other hand, the quantitative analysis determines that a statistically significant relationship exists, it may imply that causal mechanisms present in the case of North Macedonia might be generalizable to other cases, or that other types of mechanisms might be present – both conclusions lay the foundation for a future research agenda.

The thesis proceeds as follows: In Chapter 1, I provide a literature review and discuss the most important theoretical concepts used in the research: democratic backsliding, its trajectories, international democratizing efforts, linkage and leverage. Chapter 2 presents the conceptualization, operationalization and empirical findings of the process tracing case study of North Macedonia, while, in Chapter 3, quantitative analysis is operationalized and carried out. The results are summarized and discussed from both the perspective of theoretical expectations and future research in the Conclusion.



# Chapter 1: Literature Review and Theoretical Concepts

## 1.1 Democratic backsliding: Definition and measurement

A necessary precondition for researching democratic backsliding is a definition and ways of measuring this phenomenon. Many articles in recent years have focused on these issues. This section offers a review of the debate and argues for the approaches that will be used in this thesis.

In a widely quoted essay, Bermeo (2016) defines democratic backsliding as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy”. Due to the number of institutions as well as actors that seek to debilitate them, it is an inherently multidimensional phenomenon. Waldner and Lust (2018, 95) define it as “a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime”, while Haggard and Kaufman (2021, 27) regard it “as an incremental erosion of institutions, rules, and norms that results from the actions of duly elected governments”.

Another highly quoted article, written by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019, 1096), opts for the term “autocratization” to describe the “substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy”. The authors prefer this term over “democratic backsliding” as it also covers the decline of institutional requirements in autocracies, which might have never been democracies to begin with; also, the term emphasizes active steps taken by political actors instead of the impression of involuntarily “sliding” (1099).

What most of the definitions have in common is, therefore, a change of political institutions in the direction of autocracy which is intentionally carried out by political actors. This is the definition this thesis will be operating with, opting for the term “democratic backsliding”. Even

though there are advantages to “autocratization” as an, indeed, more general term, “democratic backsliding” is still more conventional and used more widely (Waldner and Lust 2018, 94).

Following the logic of the definition, constraints on democratic backsliding are factors causing political actors to stop changing institutions in the direction of autocracy. If they are coming from outside the nation-state, they are international.

After defining “democratic backsliding”, the challenge remains how to measure it. Of 13 available datasets on regime types, Lueders and Lust find that only five provide a basis for measuring backsliding and, due to the fact that the datasets are based on different concepts, they give different answers to basic empirical questions (Waldner and Lust 2018, 96). Despite the differences, the most frequently used concepts among these five datasets are those of contestation and participation. In their own conceptualization of autocratization, Cassani and Tomini (2020, 277) define these two concepts by referring to the work of Robert Dahl: participation relates to citizens’ possibility to choose who rules and to have a say on politics, while contestation refers to the possibility to publicly oppose and criticize the conduct of the government, and compete for replacing it.

Among the existing democracy indices, V-Dem’s Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) is widely used in academic works focusing on backsliding (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, Riaz and Rana 2020, Haggard and Kaufman 2021, Wunsch and Blanchard 2022), sometimes in combination with indices compiled by other organizations, including Freedom House. EDI, which takes the values from 0 to 1, is also based on Robert Dahl’s concept of polyarchy, which includes the already mentioned (sub-)concepts of participation and contestation, and is aggregated from five main indices: freedom of expression, freedom of association, clean election index, elected officials index, as well as the measurement of the share of the population with voting suffrage

(Papada et al. 2023, 51). Indices on freedom of expression, freedom of association and clean election are each aggregated from multiple indicators which are based on ordinal measurements filled in by country experts. According to this method, a country is backsliding when it loses points on the Electoral Democracy Index (detailed criteria are presented in Chapter 3). Before opting for this form of measurement, this study also reviewed criticisms levied at it, as well as proposed alternatives.

According to Cianetti et al. (2018, 247), measurements based on institutionally focused indices provide an inaccurate image of the state of democracy, since they ignore its deliberative practices. Another, more recent article by Cianetti and Hanley (2021, 72), claims that a focus on linear movement backward or forward is problematic for analyzing countries that do not move (much) in either direction or that move erratically in contradictory directions.

An even more recent paper by Little and Meng (2023) challenges the “subjective measurement of democratic backsliding” used by indices such as V-Dem, Polity and Freedom House, which are based on the evaluations of the experts. Instead of these indicators, Little and Meng propose a series of objective, replicable measurements of democracy, including vote shares of the incumbents, *de jure* executive constraints and the number of journalists killed or jailed.

The argumentation that the Electoral Democracy Index is susceptible to subjectivity and does not cover all dimensions of democracy, such as deliberative practices, have validity. However, the “objective” measurements of democracy are also not sufficient to capture the situation in a country – even if, for example, an incumbent loses, that does not mean that democracy had not declined in the meantime; it might just mean that the process was constrained before democracy broke down completely, which is a crucial difference in terms of this thesis. And while V-Dem does not capture all dimensions of democracy, it still does it robustly, as evidenced by Wunsch

and Blanchard's (2022) article in which they were able to follow patterns of democratic backsliding along three dimensions: vertical, horizontal and diagonal safeguards.

Due to these reasons, as well as practical considerations of the availability of the data and measurements which the V-Dem and similar datasets provide while others, based on alternative forms of measurement, do not, this thesis will utilize the scores of the Electoral Democracy Index for measuring democratic backsliding.

## **1. 2 Different backsliding trajectories**

After defining the main concept of the thesis, this section turns to its primary research puzzle and reviews how other authors have tackled it, especially in recent years. The way in which this study contributes to the gaps in literature will also be addressed.

The 2018 article by András Bozóki and Dániel Hegedűs “An externally constrained hybrid regime: Hungary in the European Union” is an example of a relatively small number of existing studies which tackle the international influences on democratic backsliding. The authors argue that, while Hungary had backslid, it has not moved openly to authoritarianism because it is “externally constrained” by the European Union. They regard their study as a micro-level approach on the level of the EU.

A more recent analysis by Cop and Kılıçdaroğlu (2021) operationalized Levitsky and Way's concepts of linkage and leverage (discussed in the next section) in the case of Turkey's autocratization. They found that the intensity of Turkey's linkage to Europe could not compensate for the negative effects of the declining leverage over democratization and that, therefore, Levitsky and Way's argument that linkage matters more than leverage does not apply to Turkey (9).

Among the articles reviewed for this study, these two are the most similar to it in terms of focus. Both of them analyze international constraints of backsliding, the former finding them somewhat effective, the latter ineffective. Both articles conclude that Levitsky and Way's theory was wrong, since the two countries with high linkage to the West, Hungary and Turkey, started backsliding nonetheless. Where this thesis goes further than the two articles is its attempt to draw more generalizable conclusions about international constraints both through a theory-based causal mechanism and quantitative analysis, and a different interpretation of the role of linkage and leverage, which is described in the next section.

Other authors who wrote about the trajectories of democratic backsliding focused on the domestic factors influencing it. In "What halts democratic erosion? The changing role of accountability" Laebens and Lührmann found support for the idea that mechanisms of accountability have helped to halt democratic erosion (909). They break down the mechanisms of accountability into three aspects: vertical accountability – the exercise of political rights in free and fair elections and within political parties; horizontal accountability – the judiciary and other independent institutions, and legislative oversight; and diagonal accountability – the ability of civil society actors and the media to constrain governments (912).

Finally, there is a group of articles that includes both domestic and international elements into consideration. Boese et al. (2021) measured the effects of multiple independent variables on democratic resilience. Their analysis showed that judicial constraints are positively and significantly associated with resilience, as well as past experience with democracy, higher level of economic development and having democratic neighbors (international factor).

Additionally, in "State of the world 2022: defiance in the face of autocratization", Wiebrecht et al. determined that, during the last decade, there were at least eight autocratizing countries that

successfully halted autocratization and reversed the process (2023, 12). They identify five elements that contributed to this trend: executive constraints, mass mobilization, alternation in power, unified opposition coalescing with civil society, and international democracy support and protection (14); the final element was, as the authors stress without going into details, present in the case of North Macedonia, which is the subject of the case study in Chapter 2.

As this review shows, researchers of the trajectories of democratic backsliding have tackled both international and domestic factors, though they showed more readiness to systematize and generalize the latter category. This represents a contrast to the extensive attempts to explain international influences on the opposite process – democratization – at least in the period after the Cold War. The final section of the literature review focuses on the concepts from this literature, which it aims to adapt to this thesis.

### **1.3. International democratization efforts and democratic backsliding**

Authors studying international demonization efforts have conceptualized them in various ways: as conditionality, defined as issuance of threats and promises (Donno 2013, 708), economic and diplomatic pressures, hand-tying and socialization of domestic elites (Pevehouse 2002, 519-520) or strengthening domestic actors seeking democratic reform (Gleditsch and Ward 2002, 919). For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to note two aspects of these conceptualizations: they refer not only to national governments but also international and regional organizations; and they mostly conceptualize democracy promotion as an observable activity of international actors, rather than simply providing a role-model for others to emulate. The causal mechanism in Chapter 2 will be based on these two aspects.

Even at that time of high optimism for global democracy, however, international democratization efforts did not always lead to the same outcomes. While major changes in the international environment undermined the stability of many closed regimes and encouraged the rise of electoral ones – which Levitsky and Way defined as competitive authoritarian – many of these regimes did not complete a transition towards democracy (Levitsky and Way 2010, 17, 21-22). The authors attributed the differences to three factors: linkage, leverage and organizational power (23-24).

According to the authors, Western leverage is the degree to which governments are vulnerable to external democratizing pressure, while linkage to the West refers to the density of ties and cross-border flows between particular countries and the United States, the European Union (EU), and Western-led multilateral institutions (2006, 379). Organizational power was included in their 2010 book, referring to the scope and cohesion of state and governing-party structures. Where linkage is high democratization of competitive authoritarian regimes is likely. In low-linkage cases, high organizational power should bring authoritarian stability. However, where organizational power is low and Western leverage is high, governments will be vulnerable even to weak opposition challenges (Levitsky and Way 2010, 70-71).

Various aspects of Levitsky and Way's theory have been criticized (Bogaards and Elischer 2016, 8-10, Tolstrup 2013) and it seems fair to conclude that time has proven them wrong when it comes to their certainty that high linkage, especially when coupled with high leverage, will necessarily lead to democratization or prevent democratic backsliding. That being said, this does not mean that these factors do not matter at all. While, in a more recent article, Levitsky and Way concede that "Western linkage and leverage had lost much of their force" (2020, 53), they also note that, on the international front, "the liberal West may be down, but it is hardly out".

“Western democracies remain the world’s most influential states... Unlike in previous periods in history, moreover, no legitimate alternative model has emerged to challenge liberal democracy in the early twenty-first century”, they wrote (2020, 56).

As was indicated in the previous sections, this study sees no obstacles to utilizing the concepts originally formulated for international democratization efforts, including linkage and leverage, for the analysis of international constraints on democratic backsliding. The difference is that this time, international actors are not attempting to democratize an autocratic regime but to stop a backsliding regime from further deteriorating the country’s democracy. This, however, does not imply that the activities of international actors, such as conveying threats or promises to the domestic actors, have changed, nor that the linkage and leverage have no influence.

This study interprets linkage and leverage as conditions that increase the likelihood that democratic backsliding will be constrained internationally, for the same reasons Levitsky and Way believed they will contribute to democratization. In other words, it might have been too optimistic to assume that they would prevent any backsliding from happening, but it can still be hypothesized that they will have an influence on the trajectory of backsliding once it has started.



## **Chapter 2: Qualitative Part – Case Study of North Macedonia**

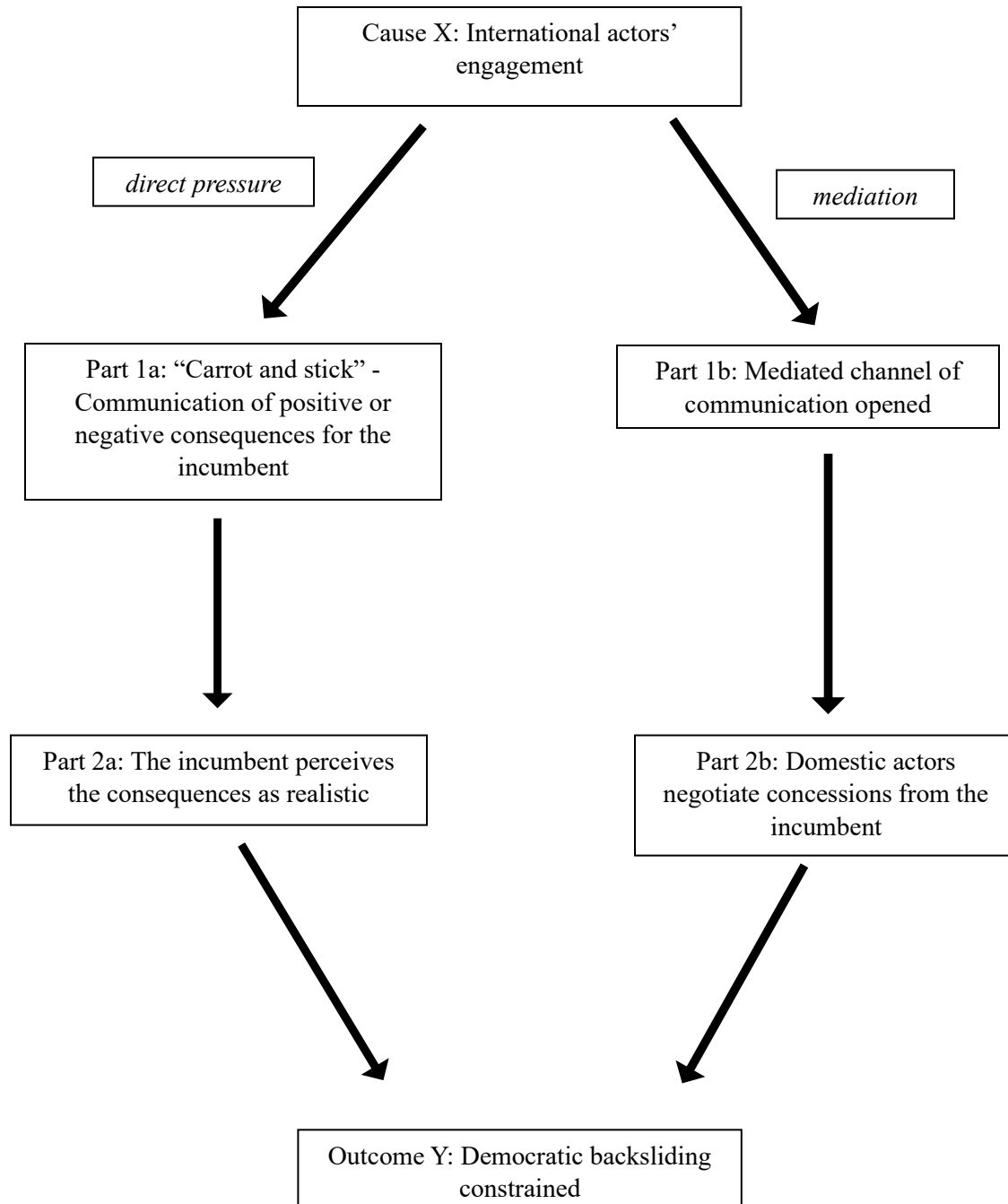
### **2.1 Research design**

The aim of this part of the research is to confirm, due to the sparsity of evidence, whether a mechanism of international constraints on democratic backsliding exists at all. For this purpose, the method of process tracing on a most likely typical case – a country where cause, effect and favorable scope conditions are present – will be used (Beach and Pedersen 2012, 151). If the research fails to find a mechanism in this case, it is hard to expect that it can be found anywhere else.

#### **2.1.1 Conceptualization and operationalization of causal mechanisms**

This section conceptualizes and operationalizes the relationship between Cause X: International actors' engagement with Outcome Y: Constraints on democratic backsliding. Two realized processes, in which the hypothesized cause is the starting point of the process, and which features a fixed sequence of intervening steps (Rohlfing 2012, 157), are proposed.

Figure 1 Theorized causal mechanism



**Cause X: International actors' engagement** is based on the assumption elaborated in the previous Chapter that international democratizing efforts consist of observable actions, therefore,fore includes any activity of international actors – foreign governments or international organizations – that involves interaction with domestic political actors. *The focus of the interaction is the improvement of democratic institutions of the country.* The interactions might include complex diplomatic activities such as negotiations, mediation, or facilitation, or more usual activities such as meetings, exchange of messages, or public diplomacy. By democratic institutions, this thesis considers elements of V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (Chapter 1, Section 1). At this stage, trace evidence of such interactions happening is enough to confirm the existence of Cause X, though accounts of the content of the interaction can also serve as evidence.

This conceptualization includes two mechanisms through which international actors can contribute to the constraining of democratic backsliding. The first mechanism, *direct pressure*, is more straightforward. **Part 1a: Communication of positive or negative consequences for the incumbent**, envisages the communication of the readiness of the West to use instruments of reward or punishment at its disposal vis-à-vis the country in question (“carrot and stick” approach).

Levitsky and Way (2010, 17) mentioned external assistance, military and diplomatic pressure, and political conditionality as forms of pressure related to democratization. The conceptualization of this thesis is based on the same forms of pressure, which are aimed not at democratizing authoritarian regimes, but rather at constraining the ongoing democratic backsliding. Evidence type for this part of the mechanism is account evidence of the content of

the interaction, as well as explicit policy positions taken by the Western institutions which connect actions of the incumbent with consequences.

In order to make concessions, the incumbent needs **to perceive the consequences as credible and realistic (Part 2a)**. This is, of course, not always the case and is the reason why some attempts to constrain democratic backsliding externally might fail. There might be, furthermore, a discrepancy between negative consequences for the country and for the incumbent personally. In this case, also, account evidence of the content of the interaction is necessary to prove the existence of this part of the mechanism.

In addition to direct pressure, this conceptualization includes *mediation* as an alternative mechanism connecting Cause X and Outcome Y. As was mentioned in the previous Chapter (Section 2), several authors have recently considered domestic constraints on democratic backsliding, such as activities of the opposition, media, and civil society (Boese et al. 2021, Laebens and Lührmann 2021). This thesis proposes that these constraints need not be parallel or unconnected to the international constraints – they might work together. The proposed form this can take is mediation on the part of international actors.

In this conceptualization, international factors **open the channel of communication (Part 1b)** between the representatives of the incumbent government and the pro-democratic forces (opposition parties, social movements). The other side can, then, **negotiate concessions from the incumbent (Part 2b)**, based on the potential domestic leverage it possesses. This mechanism envisages that the main pressure still comes from within the country, but that the international engagement was a significant element in arriving at Outcome Y because it enabled negotiations between the two sides. For Part 1b, trace evidence of the opened channel of communication

between the two sides is sufficient, while for Part 2b accounts of the participants are necessary pieces of evidence.

Finally, **Outcome Y: Democratic backsliding constrained**, can take two forms. It is either prevention of the further deterioration of democratic institutions that would have happened had Cause X not been present, or, on the other hand, any improvement of the democratic institutions that have experienced recent backsliding. The second form might lead to a U-turn or the reversal of the process (Wiebrecht et al. 2023, 19).

Evidence for the outcome, in this case, includes traces and accounts of planned activities that would have extended democratic backsliding but which have not taken place. If there is a reversal and improvement of the functioning of democratic institutions, this can be measured by account evidence, as well as pattern evidence, which includes quantifiable indicators such as the balance of television reporting or the number of reported violations during an electoral process.

Element of the mechanism	Observable manifestations
Cause X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trace evidence of the interactions taking place</li> <li>• Accounts of interaction with the aim of improving democracy</li> </ul>
Part 1a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accounts of the participants of the interactions</li> <li>• Explicit policy positions taken by the Western institutions</li> </ul>
Part 2a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accounts of the participants of the interactions</li> </ul>
Part 1b.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Traces of meetings and/or shuttle diplomacy takes place between the actors in which international actors serve as mediators</li> </ul>
Part 2b.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accounts of the participants of the interactions</li> </ul>
Outcome Y	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accounts of the incumbent giving up on the previous intention to make a move that would further deteriorate institutions</li> <li>• Accounts of the reduction of anti-democratic practices in real-life (for example, loosening of control over the media)</li> <li>• Changes in the patterns of functioning of democratic institutions</li> </ul>

Table 1 Observable manifestations of the causal chain

### 2.1.2 Description of the case

North Macedonia (known at the time as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; in the following text, sometimes the informal name Macedonia will be used) experienced a steady process of democratic backsliding under the government of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), led by Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, which took power in 2006. The backsliding included the decline in media freedoms and the abuse of parliamentary procedures by the ruling party (Bieber 2018, 60-61), reduced independence of the judiciary (Damjanovski 2016), and electoral process marred with irregularities, such as voter intimidation and inadequate separation between party and state activities (OSCE/ODIHR 2014). Following the 2014 snap parliamentary election, the largest opposition party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) refused to accept the results, accusing the government of massive fraud, and started boycotting parliamentary sessions (Risteska 2015).

Many of the government’s authoritarian practices were unveiled in early 2015, when the leader of the SDSM Zoran Zaev released thousands of recordings leaked by a former state intelligence officer (Bieber 2018, 147). The recordings apparently revealed a direct involvement of senior government and ruling party officials in corrupt and criminal activities, including election rigging (Damjanovski 2016). The “Wiretap affair” deepened the already present political crisis and led to intensive diplomatic involvement of the U.S. and the EU.

The case fulfills all conditions for being the most likely one in terms of the presence of the hypothesized causal mechanisms. Macedonia was subjected to international democratizing engagement after the outbreak of the political crisis in early 2015. The activities of the Western

representatives became less intense only two years later, in May 2017, after the new government took power following snap elections. The period from February 2015 to May 2017 is, therefore, the timeframe that will be used for the analysis.

Crucially, Macedonia was, at the time of its backsliding, a country with a high linkage to the West. Its average linkage score during that period was 1, which is the maximum value (calculation of linkage explained in Chapter 3, results available in Appendix 3). Due to the amount of Chinese foreign aid during this period, especially in the early 2010s, the Western leverage over the country was assessed as moderate, according to the methodology developed by Levitsky and Way (Chapter 3 and Appendix 4). Not counting this factor, however, it can be said that Macedonia was significantly susceptible to Western influence, being a simultaneous candidate for European Union and NATO membership. Furthermore, there are no countries that can be regarded as more suitable typical cases based on the linkage and leverage scores.

### **2.1.3 Data collection**

The primary sources for the process tracing of the case of Macedonia were six semi-structured interviews conducted from 11 to 30 May 2023 (listed in Appendix 1). Four interviews were conducted with the direct participants of the events: one of the leaders of the SDSM, the main opposition party at the time; a senior EU diplomat posted in the country; an expert facilitator from the European Commission; and a European politician serving as a mediator. Additionally, two interviews were conducted with the members of civil society and academia who closely followed the events during the timeframe of the research.

These sources, especially the accounts of direct participants, can contain a degree of bias in terms of overemphasizing the role of their respective organizations (opposition party, European

Commission etc.) in constraining democratic backsliding in Macedonia. Therefore, all interviewees were asked questions about the same events, which enabled triangulation of sources: domestic politicians, foreign politicians, career diplomats, and members of academia do not represent the same type of source, given their different perspectives and interests. If their accounts of the events are the same, it increases their reliability.

In addition to primary sources, official documents, publications of non-governmental organizations and academic literature were also analyzed. For the purposes of gaining insight into the context, an extensive review of news reports was carried out; however, they were not considered as evidence, unless they represent traces of meetings taking place.

## **2.2 Empirical analysis**

Analysis of the developments in North Macedonia (at the time Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, FYRM) from 2015 to 2017 show at least three instances of hypothesized outcomes: adoption of the Przino agreement in June/July 2015; implementation of the agreement from July 2015 to October 2016; and prevention of VMRO-DPMNE's obstructions of the transition of power in the spring of 2017. All three outcomes were preceded by the hypothesized Cause X: international actor's engagement, and therefore qualify for analysis with the aim of detecting hypothesized causal mechanisms.



### 2.2.1 Przino agreement adoption

#### *Cause X: International actors' engagement*

There are multiple pieces of evidence of international actors' engagement with Macedonian political actors before the agreement was reached, mostly following the revelation of the wiretapped conversations in February 2015.

From March 2015 onwards, three Members of the European Parliament – Eduard Kukan, Ivo Vajgl, and Richard Howitt – mediated the talks between the main government and opposition parties. The focus of these meetings was the improvement of the functioning of democratic institutions, which can also be gathered from the Conclusions of the European Union Council on General Affairs welcoming their work (Council of the European Union 2015).

In addition to the MEPs, representatives of Macedonian political parties held multiple meetings, individually or together, with EU and U.S. diplomats from March to July 2015. The participants of these meetings themselves openly confirmed that their focus was the improvement of democratic institutions following the revelations made in February (for example, Marusic 2015).

In addition to this, European Commission recruited a group of independent senior rule of law experts to travel to Macedonia and carry out an analysis of the situation and provide recommendations to address these issues in problematic areas (Senior Expert's Group 2015). In May 2015, European Commission also requested mediation expert Peter Vanhoutte to restart his facilitating efforts in the country, where he had been active since 2013.

*Part 1a of the mechanism: “Carrot and stick”*

The empirical analysis failed to find any specific account evidence of a direct “carrot and stick” approach on the incumbents leading up to the Przino agreement. One of the interviewees recounts the reluctance of the EU to get involved in the first place, emphasizing that the Union “wanted to stay impartial” and “did not want to get involved in the domestic politics”. According to him, what motivated the international actors to get involved more intensely were events unrelated to democracy – the armed clashes in the city of Kumanovo, which took place on 9 and 10 May 2015 and had an inter-ethnic component. After that, according to this interlocutor, the aim of the EU was for the leaders just to sit down and resolve issues together (Interview, diplomat).

At one point, according to this interviewee, the opposition SDSM was ready to meet with the ruling VMRO without the presence of the international actors, but the ethnic Albanian Democratic Union of Integration party (DUI) refused to do it, which is why the meetings between the party leaders took place in the presence of the EU and the U.S. Ambassadors. Two additional interviewees described the initial involvement of the international actors as a “reflex”, based on the previous relationship Macedonia had had with the West, rather than a deliberate attempt to affect the country’s democracy. (Interview, opposition leader; Interview, expert #1) “This takes place at least since 2001 (the year of the violent conflict between Albanian militia and the Macedonian state, stabilized by international community). As soon as there is a quarrel, there is a reflex that internationals are here”, a country expert said.

Furthermore, the opposition leader interviewed for this research believes that, until mid-June, Gruevski was expecting international involvement to be beneficial for him and help him delegitimize the protests of the opposition. Another interviewee agreed that the international

actors, especially Commissioner Johannes Hahn, were initially reluctant to intervene and that situation changed only gradually (Interview, expert #2).

Given the fact that this element of the causal mechanism is missing, it can be concluded that the causal mechanism “direct pressure” was not present in this instance.

*Part 1b of the causal mechanism: Mediated channel of communication opened*

While there is no empirical evidence for the causal mechanism of “direct pressure”, the evidence supporting the alternative mechanism, “mediation”, is present. According to an interviewee, after the talks with the presence of the EU and U.S. ambassador started in Skopje, “everybody was in shock that they were able to speak to each other”. This interlocutor recounts the constructiveness shown by at least some of the participants of the discussion. (Interview, diplomat). This is a clear piece of evidence of the mediation channel being opened by the involvement of international actors.

*Part 2b of the causal mechanism: Domestic actors negotiate concessions from the incumbent*

The research has also found evidence supporting the claim that the domestic actors had used the mediation channel provided by the international actors to negotiate concessions. According to the interview with the opposition leader, initial proposals that came from the EU were “close to nothing and they were used to push the opposition to make concessions, and not the government”. What changed the situation and provided the opposition with leverage were persistent daily anti-government protests that were taking place simultaneously with negotiations, triggered by the revelations in the wiretapped conversations (Interview, opposition leader).

The final version of the Przino agreement and the annex for its implementation was the result of a “daily struggle, a long negotiation process” (Interview, opposition leader). This account supports the causal mechanism in which international actors provide mediation, while negotiation is done by the domestic actors. An expert interviewed for this research remarked that “if there hadn’t been protests and social mobilization, nothing would have happened”, but added that the EU contributed by coming up with a technical and institutional approach to the issues, which also fits the hypothesized mechanism of mediation (Interview, expert #2).

*Outcome Y: Democratic backsliding constrained*

Przino agreement of 2 June and the protocol of 15 July contributed to the constraining of democratic backsliding primarily by getting the incumbent leader to publicly commit to early elections and policy solutions which would, at least to a certain degree, reduce the level of the advantage he enjoyed in a previously uneven playing field. Political leaders agreed to a transitional government that would prepare early elections, scheduled for 2016. Opposition SDSM committed to ending its boycott of parliament.

All of this represents evidence of the constrained democratic backsliding due to the fact that the initial position of the government was that it would agree neither to an early election nor a transitional government. If all had stayed the same even after the revelation of serious indications of election rigging, it would represent a major failure of accountability and an instance of further democratic backsliding.

## 2.2.2 Przino agreement implementation

### *Cause X: International actors' engagement*

The implementation of the Przino agreement effectively lasted from July 2015 to October 2016, when the parliament was dissolved for early elections. Over this period, there is an abundance of evidence of international actors' engagement. According to the senior diplomat interviewed for this thesis, since July 2015, the representatives of the European Union and the United States were meeting with the Macedonian political actors "on a daily basis" (Interview, diplomat). Mediators from the EU repeatedly visited the country. European Commission's expert for facilitation Peter Vanhoutte worked closely with the working groups for the implementation of the elements of the agreement in the second half of 2015 and the first months of 2016.

A more unusual and, therefore, stronger piece of evidence is the meeting the Ambassador of the United States Jess Baily and the Ambassador of the European Union Aivo Orav had with the Prime Minister of the technical government (elected after Gruevski's resignation) Emil Dimitriev at the end of January 2016. The Ambassadors delivered the Prime Minister a letter of three criteria for assessing whether there are conditions for a free and fair election scheduled for April (Interview, diplomat). The importance of this moment is discussed below.

### *Part 1a of the mechanism: "Carrot and stick"*

The implementation phase of the Przino agreement features some account evidence that points to weaker forms of pressure on the incumbents, as well as one instance in which pressure was stronger – the postponement of the election date. As was confirmed by multiple interviewees, the international actors never issued open threats to the VMRO-DPMNE. Some mediators appealed

to them only in terms of “moral responsibility” for the future of their country, which cannot be considered a form of pressure (Interview, mediator #2).

On the other hand, there are accounts of diplomats on the ground using a form of pressure – sharing unofficial messages about the possibilities of different forms of sanctions (Interview, diplomat). This use of a “stick” was never done openly and the EU diplomats did not comment on the official government inquiries about them. The forms of sanctions that were discussed as a result of these activities mostly focused on the financial assistance to FYRM and the possibility for some members of the regime to “land” on the sanctions lists of the Western countries.

The one instance in which the pressure became clearer was at the beginning of 2016, when VMRO-DPMNE insisted on sticking to the originally agreed election date, 24 April, even though the commitments on the improvement of electoral conditions from the Przino agreement had not been fulfilled. That, according to one interviewee, was one of the rare examples when the international community acted to directly influence domestic institutions (Interview, mediator #1). According to this account, U.S. and EU Ambassadors produced three criteria for fair electoral conditions knowing that they would not be fulfilled in time. Subsequently, United States Ambassador communicated that the elections held in April would not be acceptable (Interview, mediator #1; Interview, diplomat; Interview, opposition leader), implying that the international community would not recognize their legitimacy, which can be classified as a “stick”.

The only open form of pressure that came from the West during this time was the “conditional” recommendation of the European Commission for Macedonia to open EU accession talks. The recommendation, Commission stated in its November 2015 report, depended on the

implementation of the Przino agreement. In the previous six years, this recommendation was given to the Council of the European Union without such form of conditionality.

*Part 2a of the mechanism: The incumbent perceives the consequences as realistic*

This part of the mechanism, due to the indirect forms of pressures described in the previous section, is difficult to prove, as there was no specific interaction with the incumbent which would have proven that he perceived potential consequences as realistic. The senior diplomat interviewed for this research, however, believes it to be the case, claiming that Gruevski “got the messages” through his associates (Interview, diplomat).

Opposition leader believes that the prospects of an informal diplomatic isolation, in which Macedonia would have been seen as “off-track” was the most serious threat for Gruevski. “He was always successful because he was the nationalist leader who could oppose the West but also be accepted by Western leaders, and he won the elections by playing both games. And then it became clear that he will not be getting the second part” (Interview, opposition leader). This was especially threatening given the fact that it made the coalition partner, the ethnic Albanian party DUI, start to reconsider the partnership, without which VMRO-DPMNE did not have the majority. (Interview, opposition leader; Interview, expert #1).

Both expert interviewees agree that Gruevski would probably have gone for the elections in April even if the opposition boycotted them had it not been for the pressure of the West (Interview, expert #1; Interview, expert #2). This also represents a weaker form of evidence, since it is based on a counterfactual. The experts also believe that the EU conditionality regarding the opening of accession talks was not important for the incumbent, primarily due to the unresolved name issue with Greece that kept the country blocked in its Euro-Atlantic aspirations at the time.

*Part 1b of the causal mechanism: Mediated channel of communication opened*

During the time of the implementation of the Przino agreement, international actors kept the channels of communication between Macedonian political actors open through facilitation carried out by Peter Vanhoutte, talks in the presence of the Ambassadors, and mediation by the Members of the European Parliament. The general approach to the negotiations was not to intervene nor propose any solutions (Interview, mediator #1).

*Part 2b of the causal mechanism: Domestic actors negotiate concessions from the incumbent*

It is hard to assess whether the mediation channels during this period enabled the opposition to negotiate further concessions from the government. According to a report by facilitator Peter Vanhoutte, by mid-November 2015, four months after the start of the implementation, VMRO-DPMNE started obstructing the negotiation process by using delaying tactics. Key decisions related to the separation of party and state and the functioning of media in the run-up to elections were stalled. This situation was never fully overcome (Vanhoutte, unpublished report).

On 20 July 2016, once again under the mediation of the EU, additional amendments introduced a Temporary Commission for media oversight and required citizens with “questionable” voter registration data to actively re-register for these elections (OSCE/ODIHR 2017, 6).

*Outcome Y: Democratic backsliding constrained*

A clear constraint on democratic backsliding during the implementation of the Przino agreement was the postponement of the election date. Without international pressures, elections would probably have taken place earlier and there would have been a high probability of opposition not recognizing the results, further deteriorating the functioning of democratic institutions in the



country. The fact that the results of the December 2016 election were accepted by all sides, which was not the case in 2014, was stressed as an improvement (Interview, expert #1).

There are also accounts about the improvement of electoral conditions due to the, at least partial, implementation of the Przino agreement. The review of the voter registry removed only a small number of suspected surplus voters, but it did raise confidence in the process and thus motivated a higher turnout (Interview, opposition leader). The presence of opposition-nominated ministers in the technical government also managed to constrain VMRO's strategy of abuse of public resources to some extent (Interview, expert #1). Election monitors also detected more balanced coverage in terms of allotted time on television compared to 2014, though the opposition still received more negative coverage than the ruling party (OSCE/ODIHR 2017, OSCE/ODIHR 2014).

Therefore, in this case, all three types of observable manifestations listed in Table 1 are present. This strongly indicates the presence of the outcome.

### **2.2.3 Transition of power**

#### *Cause X: International actors' engagement*

Following the December 2016 election, which saw VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM winning an almost equal number of seats in the parliament, the future government depended on the support of ethnic Albanian parties. After the failure of Nikola Gruevski to secure support for another term in office, VMRO-supported President Gjorge Ivanov refused to hand over the mandate to SDSM leader Zoran Zaev to form a new government, over his alleged readiness to make significant concessions to Albanian parties. Ivanov was widely seen as overstepping his ceremonial constitutional prerogatives by doing this (Bliznakovski 2018).

On 27 April 2017, the day of the election of a new speaker of parliament, ethnic Albanian Talat Xhaferi, by the new parliamentary majority, nationalist groups backed by VMRO-DPMNE violently entered the parliament, injuring more than 70 people (Bliznakovski 2018). The acts of violence were widely condemned by the international community, and the diplomatic negotiations over the transition of power became intense (Interview, expert #2).

Trace evidence of the engagement of international actors, such as the President of the European Council Donald Tusk and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Hoyt Yee, are their meetings with President Ivanov (Marusic 2017).

*Part 1a of the mechanism: “Carrot and stick” & Part 2a of the mechanism: The incumbent perceives the consequences as realistic*

Account evidence from the direct participants of the interactions is missing in this part of the research, given the fact that, at this point of the political crisis, a smaller number of people were involved. Therefore, indirect accounts of people who either participated or closely followed the events are the only available evidence. However, no contradiction has been found among multiple interlocutors, all of whom agree that international pressures played a crucial role in this instance.

Multiple interviewees saw the violence in the parliament as the definitive turning point and crossing of the line in the eyes of the West (Interview, mediator #2; Interview, expert #1; Interview, expert #2; Interview, opposition leader). According to one of them, political threats but also specific threats regarding people from VMRO-DPMNE were the strongest then, and included rumors of blacklisting individuals by the Western countries (Interview, opposition leader).

*Part 1b of the causal mechanism: Mediated channel of communication opened*

At this point, there was neither mediation nor direct negotiations between the incumbents and the new majority. The violence in the parliament, which was preceded by weeks of pro-VMRO protests, was a sign that the situation had become “all or nothing” for the party at this point, which eliminated any space for negotiations. This causal mechanism did not exist in this instance.

*Outcome Y: Democratic backsliding constrained*

Had the incumbents been able to intimidate the opposition by violence or persist in violating the constitutional norms by not handing over the mandate for the formation of the new government, this would have represented a serious instance of democratic backsliding. This did not happen, and the causal mechanism of direct international pressure was detected as an explanation.

## **2.3 Discussion**

Empirical analysis of the international engagement in the case of North Macedonia from 2015 to 2017 has found the existence of mechanisms that constrained democratic backsliding. They were present either in the form of mediation or, in some instances, direct pressure. The most difficult part of the causal mechanism to prove was 2a: The incumbent perceives the consequences as realistic, for the reason that the interactions in which the negative consequences were communicated either did not exist or their participants were not available for this research. The evidence for this part of the causal mechanism, therefore, remains indirect, though the high level of agreement among the sources increases its likelihood.

It is worth noting the explanation for why the international actors engaged in the crisis in North Macedonia in the first place – it was done reluctantly and as a reaction to general instability rather than democratic backsliding. It was also a “reflex”, building upon the already established practice of the West to react to instabilities in North Macedonia and, perhaps, the wider region. These explanations reduce the generalizability of the case of the Macedonian case.

If the evidence is judged against dimensions of uniqueness and certainty, regarded as continuums (Beach and Pedersen 2012, 102), it can be assessed that it mostly possesses moderately high uniqueness and low certainty. A highly unique (smoking gun) test would, in this case, probably be accounts of direct conversations with Gruevski or other high-ranking members of the regime in which threats of sanctions were explicitly conveyed (for part 1a of the causal mechanism), along with subsequent conversation in which regime member admits his concern over the sanctions (for part 2a of the mechanism). Such evidence was not found, simply because there were no such conversations; rather, according to the interviewees, any such threats were communicated more vaguely and indirectly. This, therefore, represents evidence of a lower level of uniqueness than a smoking gun test, but that level is not insignificant.

On the other hand, none of the evidence gathered for this study was able to explicitly disconfirm all other alternative hypotheses, which in this case would attribute the outcome Y to the engagement of domestic, rather than international actors. Such evidence would, probably, have the form of the accounts of opposition and all other domestic actors accepting the authoritarian behavior of the government, with international actors rejecting it. Given the fact that opposition, civil society and social movements opposed the government’s actions, and no accounts of different behavior were provided by the interviewees, it is only possible to say that mechanisms

of international constraints existed, but not that they were the only ones. There is an equifinality between international and domestic constraints.

The outcomes of international engagement can also be regarded as modest. The West only applied direct pressure when it seemed that the situation might get drastically worse, while all sources indicate that the improvement of electoral conditions was moderate at best. In other words, international constraints on democratic backsliding seem to have stopped the further downward path of the backsliding trajectory, but the subsequent U-turn is not explainable by it.

## Chapter 3: Quantitative Part – Do linkage and leverage matter for democratic backsliding?

### 3.1 Variables, data and models

The population of cases for the analysis will be all countries that experienced democratic backsliding since the end of the Cold War and the start of more significant international democracy promotion by Western countries. This population consists of all “autocratization episodes” from the V-Dem’s Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset that began during or after the year 1990, and whose backsliding episode has been completed by 2022 (the final year available at the time of writing), a total of 63 cases (Appendix 2).

According to V-Dem’s methodology, an autocratization episode begins with an initial  $-0.01$  decrease on the Electoral Democracy Index and a total decrease of at least  $-0.10$  throughout the episode. The final year of an episode is the one with a negative change less than or equal to the initial decrease, prior to an annual increase ( $+0.03$ ), cumulative increase ( $+0.10$ ), or stasis period of 5 years (Edgell et al. 2020, 18).

The dependent variable, **backsliding**, is operationalized to capture the different outcomes of democratic backsliding processes. It is calculated as a total relative change in the EDI score during a backsliding episode (the difference between the score at the beginning and at the end is divided by the score at the beginning). Table 2 summarizes the population’s descriptive statistics. The episodes are also equally distributed between the 1990s and 2000s, with a slight decrease in 2010s (which is also explained by the exclusion of the cases which started in 2010s but have not finished).

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimal change	Maximal change	Started in the 1990s	Started in the 2000s	Started in the 2010s
Relative change in EDI	0.415	0.159	0.150	0.783	24	24	15

Table 2 Backsliding variable descriptive statistics

The main independent variables are **linkage score** and **high leverage**. Both of them are aggregated from several indicators, mostly following the methodology laid out by Levitsky and Way (2010). As Table 3 shows, the **linkage score** is aggregated from four components: 1) economic ties; 2) social ties; 3) communication ties; 4) membership in the Organization of American States (OAS), membership, or candidacy in the EU.

The values for each of the first three dimensions are calculated as the mean for the years during which the country is backsliding. This measurement was chosen due to the fact that autocratization episodes took place over the period of 30 years and differed in length. The value of trade or immigration at the beginning of an episode could be quite different from the values at the end; the average score during the entire episode was a more appropriate measurement in this case.

For each of the four dimensions, following Levitsky and Way, each country is given a score (1–5) based on its ranking relative to all non-Western countries in the world (5 = highest quintile; 1 = lowest quintile). The scores on the four dimensions are summed into a total score, which was recalculated so that scores range from 0 to 1.

Component	Method of calculation	Scores	Source(s)
Economic ties	The average extent of trade with the U.S. and the EU (the value of exports and imports over GDP) during backsliding	1 to 5, based on the ranking relative to all non-Western countries (1 lowest, 5 highest)	World Bank, International Monetary Fund
Social ties	The average number of immigrants to the U.S. and the EU over the total population during backsliding	Same as Economic ties	U.S. Department of Homeland Security; Eurostat; OECD
Communication ties	Per capita average annual Internet access during backsliding	Same as Economic ties	World Bank
(Potential) membership in the EU or OAS	The status of the country is considered during the backsliding episode	1 – no relationship; 2 – EU Neighbourhood Policy; 3 – OAS membership; 4 – EU membership; 5 – EU candidacy	EU, OAS

Table 3 Components of linkage

Levitsky and Way did not specify how countries should be ranked on a scale from 1 to 5 based on their (potential) membership in the Organization of American States or the European Union. I measured this element in the following way: 1 indicates that a country has no “special” relationship with either organization; 2 indicates that a country is a part of the European Union Neighbourhood Policy; 3 indicates that a country is a member of the OAS; 4 indicates membership in the EU while 5 indicates active candidacy for the EU.

Membership and candidacy in the European Union are considered a higher form of linkage in this operationalization due to the higher level of integration between the states in the EU compared to OAS (Furtak 2015). The former includes supranational elements, while the latter is



an intergovernmental organization influenced by the hegemonic interests of the United States, including when it comes to democracy promotion (Boniface 2002, 337). Candidacy for membership in the European Union is scored higher than the membership itself due to the “passive leverage” that the attraction of membership represents (Vachudova 2005, 103), and which disappears following a country’s entry to the EU. Finally, European Neighbourhood Policy is considered a higher level of integration than a mere third-country relationship due to special benefits provided to the members, including greater access to EU markets and institutions.

Another way in which this operationalization differs from Levitsky and Way’s original methodology is that, for social ties, the annual number of immigrants rather than general travelers to the U.S. and the EU is calculated. This was changed due to the lack of availability of data on total travelers to the EU based on their country of origin. Immigrants are taken as a substitute, and their number is, naturally, significantly lower than the number of travelers. Nevertheless, it is still suitable as an indicator of a country’s social ties to the West, due to the permanent links that the diaspora creates between the U.S. and the EU and their country of origin. The second way in which the data differ is the exclusion of international voice traffic from the dimension of communication ties due to the lack of availability of data.

Western leverage, meanwhile, can be low, medium, or high. It is low when a country is either a large economy, a major oil producer, or has the capacity to use nuclear weapons. Leverage is medium when a country is either a medium economy, a secondary oil producer, a country where there exists a major security-related foreign-policy issue for the United States and/or the EU or when a country receives significant bilateral aid, the overwhelming dominant share of which comes from a major power that is not the EU or the United States. Just like for the leverage, the

values for each of the first three dimensions are calculated as the mean value for the years during which the country is backsliding. Countries were assigned the values of indicator variables (1 or 0) for each of the three categories (low, medium and high leverage).

Low leverage		
Component	Method of calculation	Source(s)
Large economy	Average nominal GDP larger than \$100 billion during backsliding (adjusted for inflation)	World Bank
Major oil producer	Produces more than one million barrels of crude oil per day on average	U.S. Energy Information Administration
Nuclear power	Access to nuclear weapons	International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons: ICAN
Medium leverage		
Medium economy	Average nominal GDP between \$50 and \$100 billion during backsliding	World Bank
Secondary oil producer	Produces between 200,000 and one million barrels of crude oil per day on average	U.S. Energy Information Administration
Competing foreign policy/security policy issues	Analysis of the official documents	Security strategies of the U.S. and the EU
Black knight assistance	Foreign aid more than 1% of GDP, majority of which from non-Western sources	World Bank, OECD, aiddata.org
High leverage – none of the above		

Table 4 Components of leverage

Levitsky and Way did not describe a systematic way to evaluate whether a country represents a major security-related foreign-policy issue for the U.S. and the EU. The values of this indicator variable were determined by the following criterium: a country received the value of 1 when it was mentioned as a security issue in the national strategic documents of the U.S. (National Security Strategies) and strategic documents of the European Union (European Security Strategy, European Union Global Strategy) which were relevant at the time they were backsliding;

otherwise, it received the value 0. Specifically, it was observed whether support for an allied regime or protection against a rogue regime was named as a strategic interest: this would indicate that the promotion of democracy was not a primary interest in that country.

This way of measuring might be biased due to the fact that not all security issues related to specific countries might be published, for strategic reasons, or their importance might be understated. Nevertheless, this approach is as close to systematic measuring as possible without doing in-depth country studies, which was impossible due to the number of cases in the population.

Another component that represented a challenge in terms of measurement was “black knight” assistance – significant foreign aid received primarily by non-Western governments at the time of backsliding. Some countries, in particular Russian Federation, are not transparent about their bilateral aid, so their data were not included. Therefore, the estimates of this component can be considered conservative. Nevertheless, 11 out of 63 cases were found to be a recipient of this form of assistance, mostly coming from the People’s Republic of China.

Due to a relatively small population of cases (63), as well as the small number of countries over which the West had low leverage, only one leverage indicator will be tested statistically: high leverage, a dummy variable indicating that a country did not belong to either one of the two remaining categories. These are the countries over which the U.S. and the EU had high leverage during their autocratization episodes.

The main theorized relationship in this study is between the dependent variable **backsliding** and the independent variables **linkage score** and **high leverage**. The empirical formula for this basic model looks as follows:

$$backsliding = const + \beta_1 linkage\_score + \beta_2 high\_leverage$$

Based on the theoretical discussions and expectations on the relationship between Western influence and democratic backsliding, two hypotheses can be made:

H1: Regression coefficients for **linkage score** are expected to be *statistically significant* and *negative* when it comes to **backsliding**.

H2: Regression coefficients for **high leverage** are also expected to be *statistically significant* and *negative* when it comes to **backsliding**.

Additional models will account for other factors that might constrain a country's democratic backsliding. The first one will control for the economy (average GDP per capita at the time of backsliding) and initial level of democracy – EDI score at the beginning of backsliding. Both factors were discussed by other authors (for example, Boese et al., 2021, 894), as potential constraints on democratic backsliding. Furthermore, the models will include two types of *domestic institutional constraints* on democratic backsliding – legislative and judicial constraints on the executive (Laebens and Lührmann 2021, 920).

These two mechanisms of horizontal accountability are also measured by V-Dem's indices: Judicial constraints on the executive index and Legislative constraints on the executive index (Edgell et al. 2020, 50). Both indices are intervals from 0 to 1 and are aggregated from multiple sub-indices. They are not a part of the Electoral Democracy Index which accounts for the dependent variable in the models.

## 3.2 Results

Table 5 contains the results of the regression analysis. The first model contains only the independent variables of interest – linkage\_score and high\_leverage, which are both statistically significant at the 0.01 level of significance and are both negative.

These results imply that, holding all other things constant, a country's relative loss of points on EDI would be smaller by 0.24 if it had the closest relationship with the West (linkage score = 1) compared to a country that has no relationship with the West (linkage score = 0). Also, a country over which the West has high leverage, holding other things constant, would lose 0.13 points less than a country over which the West has weaker leverage. The constant is 0.573, meaning that a country with no significant relationship with the West is expected to lose more than half of its EDI score *ceteris paribus*.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	backsliding		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
linkage_score	-0.246*** (0.071)	-0.203** (0.084)	-0.224** (0.085)
high_leverage	-0.130*** (0.035)	-0.126*** (0.036)	-0.106*** (0.037)
start_score		-0.142 (0.142)	0.094 (0.167)
average_gdp_ppp		-0.00000 (0.00000)	-0.000 (0.00000)
judicial_constraints			-0.059 (0.093)
legislative_constraints			-0.181* (0.098)
Constant	0.573*** (0.037)	0.634*** (0.070)	0.620*** (0.073)
Observations	63	63	59
R <sup>2</sup>	0.285	0.300	0.353
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.261	0.252	0.279
Residual Std. Error	0.137 (df = 60)	0.138 (df = 58)	0.134 (df = 52)
F Statistic	11.947*** (df = 2; 60)	6.213*** (df = 4; 58)	4.736*** (df = 6; 52)

*Note:*

\* \*\* \*\*\* p < 0.01

Table 5 Regression results

The coefficients do not change dramatically with the addition of control variables, implying that there is no strong correlation between them. The significance level for the linkage score drops to 0.05 after more predictors are added, while for leverage it remains at 0.01. The only other predictor that shows statistical significance at the level of 0.1, is the legislative constraints which also, expectedly, has a negative coefficient, implying a reduction in the amount of democratic

backsliding when increased. Notably, the economic variable (GDP per capita) seems to have absolutely no influence on the outcomes of democratic backsliding.

These results confirm both hypotheses related to the expected values of linkage and leverage. Nevertheless, the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) remains relatively low at 0.285, 0.3, and 0.353 per model, respectively, meaning that only about a third of the variation in democratic backsliding is explained by these variables. Models were diagnosed for normality and heteroskedasticity of residuals, as well as multicollinearity (Appendix 5).

### 3.3 Discussion

Overall, the quantitative analysis has found that a statistically significant influence of the West on the outcomes of democratic backsliding does exist. This can be confirmed by analyzing individual cases in the table of backsliding episodes and linkage and leverage scores (Appendix 2 – Appendix 4). For example, a country with high levels of linkage and leverage, such as Slovenia, has dropped only 0.194 (or 19.4%) on its Electoral Democracy Index even though its backsliding process lasted ten years. Countries with lower linkage and leverage scores, such as Belarus, tend to lose more (0.554 or 55.4% in six years).

This trend, however, might be changing and might only be applicable to the countries which started and finished their democratic backsliding from 1990 to 2022. As was already mentioned, countries that started backsliding in the 2010s or even earlier but have not finished the process according to V-Dem's criteria were not included in this study, because it is impossible to evaluate the ongoing backsliding trajectories. However, among those countries are some that have a relatively high Western linkage and leverage, but still suffer from a significant loss in EDI scores, including Hungary, Poland, and Serbia. They may represent a signal that the international

constraints on democratic backsliding are losing influence, which can be a subject of future research.

Just like in Levitsky and Way's theory, the linkage has proven to be more significant than leverage in this thesis' OLS regression model. Of course, the analysis has shown that neither linkage nor leverage can explain much of the variability of democratic backsliding, even when the measurements of horizontal constraints are added, leading to the conclusion that other factors, which were not included in the model, can further explain the puzzle. These factors, which were more difficult to measure, might include the activities of the opposition parties, social movements, protests, independent media and civil society.

The issue of measurement remains important for the interpretation of the results. As mentioned, V-Dem's EDI scores, which were at the core of the quantitative analysis, are criticized for being based, at least partially, on subjective evaluations. The measurement of leverage scores in this study also included a subjective element of analyzing whether the West had a competing security interest in a country or not. As already stated, though unfortunate, these elements seem to be unavoidable while measuring these phenomena. Furthermore, the measurement of linkage and leverage was not carried out in complete accordance with Levitsky and Way's methodology and it is unclear in which way this would have changed the scores.



## Conclusion

In this thesis, I attempted to study international influences on the trajectories of democratic backsliding, specifically whether the democratizing activities of the West can constrain this process. Unlike previous works which tackled this issue largely descriptively or just as one in a series of variables, the aim of this study was to draw theoretical and more generalizable conclusions.

In the first part of the research, I managed to prove the existence of two theorized causal mechanisms linking the engagement of international actors and the constraints on democratic backsliding in the case of North Macedonia. The evidence I collected primarily through elite interviews was not the strongest possible on the dimension of uniqueness, but it was sufficient to prove that international engagement can constrain backsliding in two ways: by direct pressures and by creating a mediation channel, through which the opposition can successfully negotiate concessions from the government.

In the second part of the research, I went a step further in an attempt to find general tendencies and conducted a quantitative analysis on the relationship between linkage to the West and Western leverage, on the one hand, and one of the main aspects of backsliding trajectories – how much democracy in a country deteriorates during one such episode. I studied all the cases of backsliding (or “autocratization”) since 1990 as conceptualized and operationalized by the V-Dem Institute.

The regression analysis showed a statistically significant relationship between these variables. Given the fact that linkage and leverage were regarded as favorable scope conditions for the

causal effect and causal mechanisms that I discovered in the case of North Macedonia, this is an encouraging sign of the possibility that these mechanisms can be found elsewhere.

The optimism that once existed about the ability of international actors positively influences democracy, at least among liberal internationalists, has seemingly disappeared. This thesis proves that they can still make a contribution, in a more convincing way than previous works published in recent years, which only hypothesized this possibility.

That being said, the conclusions of the study also have limits. For one thing, the mechanism discovered in North Macedonia has proven only that international constraints are operating in the instances of preventing further deterioration, rather than contributing to significant reversals (U-turns). The research, also, did not manage to disconfirm parallel influences of domestic factors. This was also not achieved by the regression analysis, whose relatively low coefficient of determination shows that international variables explain only a limited amount of the backsliding variability, even when considered together with structural factors such as the economy and some forms of domestic factors, such as judicial and legislative constraints.

The conclusion of these findings is, therefore, that the trajectory of backsliding can be explained by multiple factors, some domestic and some international, whose relative influence is hard to assess. This situation looks poised to become even more complex, as the international influence of non-Western actors continues to grow.

Furthermore, the generalizability of the findings might be limited geographically and temporally. In the case of North Macedonia, the increased engagement of international actors seems to have been partially explainable by the geographical location of the country, its recent history, and the history of the wider region. Even if the conclusions are more applicable to the region than the

world as a whole, the findings remain valuable due to the still high number of small countries with extensive ties to the West, many of which are going through their own processes of democratic backsliding.

On the other hand, some cases featuring high linkage and leverage were not included in the regression analysis of the second part of the thesis given the fact that their backsliding has not finished yet. Nevertheless, even now it can be seen that they would have made the relationship less statistically significant – despite high scores on the ties to the West, countries like Hungary and Serbia have already lost a significant percentage of points on their respective Electoral Democracy Indices. This might be further proof that the West is truly losing its influence and, if the same analysis was repeated in five years' time, the results may not have been statistically significant anymore.

All of this further illustrates the complexity facing the researchers of democracy and democratic backsliding. It is difficult to detect all factors and estimate their relative importance, and even more difficult to predict where the process of backsliding will end up. For many citizens of these countries, however, this is a question of vital importance for their future. The research, therefore, needs to continue.

## Appendix 1. - List of interviews

- **11 May 2023:** One of the leaders of the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM) and leaders of the opposition from 2006 to 2017 (conducted via Zoom)
- **15 May 2023:** Expert facilitator Peter Vanhoutte (permission to reveal identity granted), engaged in FYRM from 2013 to 2016 (conducted via Zoom)
  - Mr. Vanhoutte also provided an unpublished report on the process of facilitation
- **16 May 2023:** European Union politician and mediator during the political crisis (conducted via Skype)
- **19 May 2023:** Expert on North Macedonia, member of the academia and civil society (conducted via Zoom)
- **23 May 2023:** Senior diplomat posted in FYRM during the political crisis (conducted via Zoom)
- **30 May 2023:** Expert on North Macedonia, member of the academia and civil society (conducted via Zoom)

## Appendix 2. - Autocratization episodes

autocratization episode	start	end	start score	end score	backsliding
Algeria	1992	1993	0.351	0.173	0.507122507
Armenia	1994	1997	0.607	0.394	0.350906096
Azerbaijan	1993	1996	0.365	0.241	0.339726027
Bahrain	2011	2017	0.223	0.121	0.457399103
Bangladesh	2002	2007	0.505	0.205	0.594059406
Belarus	1995	2001	0.554	0.247	0.554151625
Benin	2018	2020	0.723	0.423	0.414937759
Bolivia	2006	2020	0.754	0.332	0.559681698
Bulgaria	2001	2018	0.722	0.614	0.149584488
Burkina Faso	2014	2015	0.61	0.376	0.383606557
Burundi	2009	2016	0.407	0.167	0.58968059
Central African Republic	1999	2004	0.358	0.223	0.377094972
Comoros	1999	2000	0.439	0.227	0.482915718
Ecuador	2007	2013	0.703	0.545	0.224751067
Egypt	2013	2014	0.298	0.136	0.543624161
Estonia	1991	1992	0.801	0.452	0.435705368
Fiji_1	2000	2001	0.351	0.259	0.262108262
Fiji_2	2006	2007	0.539	0.137	0.745825603
Guinea-Bissau	2012	2013	0.452	0.289	0.360619469
Haiti_1	1992	1992	0.33	0.191	0.421212121
Haiti_2	2001	2004	0.434	0.246	0.433179724
Honduras	2006	2010	0.564	0.411	0.271276596
Ivory Coast	2000	2000	0.387	0.275	0.289405685
Lesotho_1	1994	1995	0.503	0.314	0.375745527
Lesotho_2	2015	2017	0.628	0.509	0.189490446
Liberia	2003	2004	0.345	0.241	0.301449275
Libya	2014	2014	0.54	0.277	0.487037037
Madagascar_1	1997	2002	0.551	0.425	0.228675136
Madagascar_2	2009	2010	0.501	0.226	0.548902196
Malawi	1999	2005	0.561	0.44	0.215686275
Maldives	2012	2016	0.614	0.359	0.415309446
Mali	2007	2013	0.625	0.331	0.4704
Moldova_1	1998	2005	0.604	0.464	0.231788079
Moldova_2	2013	2017	0.658	0.522	0.20668693
Nepal_1	2000	2003	0.39	0.219	0.438461538
Nepal_2	2012	2013	0.533	0.279	0.476547842

Niger_1	1996	1996	0.548	0.295	0.461678832
Niger_2	1999	1999	0.392	0.259	0.339285714
Niger_3	2009	2010	0.573	0.267	0.534031414
North Macedonia_1	2000	2000	0.566	0.458	0.190812721
North Macedonia_2	2005	2012	0.619	0.452	0.269789984
Pakistan	1999	2000	0.39	0.204	0.476923077
Papua New Guinea	2007	2013	0.519	0.42	0.190751445
Peru	1990	1992	0.67	0.253	0.62238806
Philippines	2001	2005	0.591	0.476	0.194585448
Republic of the Congo	1994	1998	0.467	0.164	0.64882227
Russia	1993	2012	0.502	0.282	0.438247012
Rwanda	1993	1995	0.3	0.104	0.653333333
Slovenia	2011	2021	0.872	0.702	0.194954128
Solomon Islands	2000	2001	0.511	0.269	0.473581213
South Korea	2008	2014	0.846	0.718	0.151300236
Sri Lanka	2005	2006	0.524	0.386	0.263358779
Suriname	1991	1991	0.734	0.456	0.378746594
Tajikistan	1992	1995	0.309	0.173	0.44012945
Thailand_1	1991	1991	0.392	0.215	0.451530612
Thailand_2	2005	2007	0.549	0.188	0.657559199
Thailand_3	2013	2014	0.502	0.153	0.695219124
The Gambia	1993	1995	0.466	0.101	0.783261803
Turkey	2005	2017	0.677	0.285	0.579025111
Ukraine_1	1996	2004	0.561	0.38	0.322638146
Ukraine_2	2010	2014	0.608	0.408	0.328947368
Yemen	2013	2016	0.376	0.113	0.699468085
Zambia	2010	2017	0.532	0.344	0.353383459

Source: Varieties of Democracy Institute, Episode of Regime Transformation (ERT) dataset

### Appendix 3. Linkage scores

Autocratization episode	Trade over GDP	Immigration over population	Average internet	Membership in EU/OAS	Sum	linkage_score
Algeria	4	2	1	1	8	0.25
Armenia	3	5	3	1	12	0.5
Azerbaijan	2	4	2	2	10	0.375
Bahrain	3	4	5	1	13	0.5625
Bangladesh	2	1	1	1	5	0.0625
Belarus	3	3	3	1	10	0.375
Benin	2	1	1	1	5	0.0625
Bolivia	2	4	3	3	12	0.5
Bulgaria	5	5	4	4	18	0.875
Burkina Faso	2	1	1	1	5	0.0625
Burundi	2	2	1	1	6	0.125
Central African Republic	3	1	1	1	6	0.125
Comoros	1	1	2	1	5	0.0625
Ecuador	4	5	3	3	15	0.6875
Egypt	2	2	3	1	8	0.25
Estonia	5	5	5	1	16	0.75
Fiji_1	2	4	3	1	10	0.375
Fiji_2	1	4	3	1	9	0.3125
Guinea-Bissau	3	2	1	1	7	0.1875
Haiti_1	3	5	1	3	12	0.5
Haiti_2	2	5	2	3	12	0.5
Honduras	5	4	3	3	15	0.6875
Ivory Coast	3	1	2	1	7	0.1875
Lesotho_1	2	4	1	1	8	0.25
Lesotho_2	4	1	2	1	8	0.25

Liberia	5	4	1	1	11	0.4375
Libya	5	3	2	1	11	0.4375
Madagascar_1	3	1	2	1	7	0.1875
Madagascar_2	3	1	1	1	6	0.125
Malawi	2	1	1	1	5	0.0625
Maldives	2	1	4	1	8	0.25
Mali	2	2	1	1	6	0.125
Moldova_1	5	4	4	1	14	0.625
Moldova_2	5	5	3	2	15	0.6875
Nepal_1	1	2	1	1	5	0.0625
Nepal_2	1	3	2	1	7	0.1875
Niger_1	1	1	1	1	4	0
Niger_2	2	1	1	1	5	0.0625
Niger_3	2	1	1	1	5	0.0625
North Macedonia_1	5	5	4	2	16	0.75
North Macedonia_2	5	5	5	5	20	1
Pakistan	1	2	1	1	5	0.0625
Papua New Guinea	2	1	1	1	5	0.0625
Peru	1	4	1	3	9	0.3125
Philippines	4	4	3	1	12	0.5
Republic of the Congo	5	4	1	1	11	0.4375
Russia	4	3	4	1	12	0.5
Rwanda	2	2	1	1	6	0.125
Slovenia	5	4	5	4	18	0.875
Solomon Islands	1	1	2	1	5	0.0625
South Korea	3	3	5	1	12	0.5
Sri Lanka	3	3	2	1	9	0.3125
Suriname	5	4	1	1	11	0.4375



Tajikistan	2	2	1	1	6	0.125
Thailand_1	3	4	5	1	13	0.5625
Thailand_2	3	2	4	1	10	0.375
Thailand_3	3	2	3	1	9	0.3125
The Gambia	3	3	3	1	10	0.375
Turkey	3	3	4	2	12	0.5
Ukraine_1	4	4	3	2	13	0.5625
Ukraine_2	4	3	3	2	12	0.5
Yemen	1	2	2	1	6	0.125
Zambia	1	1	1	1	4	0

## Appendix 4. – Leverage scores

Autocratization episode	Large economy	Major oil producer	Nuclear weapons	Low leverage	Medium economy	Secondary oil producer	Competing issues	Foreign aid larger than 1%	“Black knight” assistance	Medium leverage	High leverage
Algeria	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Armenia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Azerbaijan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Bahrain	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Bangladesh	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0
Belarus	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Benin	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Bolivia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Bulgaria	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Burkina Faso	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Burundi	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Central African Republic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Comoros	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Ecuador	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0
Egypt	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	0
Estonia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Fiji_1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Fiji_2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Guinea-Bissau	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Haiti_1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Haiti_2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Honduras	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Ivory Coast	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1

Lesotho_1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Lesotho_2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Liberia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Libya	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Madagascar_1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Madagascar_2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Malawi	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Maldives	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Mali	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Moldova_1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Moldova_2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Nepal_1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Nepal_2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Niger_1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Niger_2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Niger_3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
North Macedonia_1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
North Macedonia_2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Pakistan	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0
Papua New Guinea	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Peru	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Philippines	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Republic of the Congo	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Russia	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Rwanda	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
Slovenia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Solomon Islands	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
South Korea	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

Sri Lanka	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Suriname	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Tajikistan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Thailand_1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Thailand_2	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Thailand_3	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
The Gambia	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0
Turkey	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0
Ukraine_1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Ukraine_2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Yemen	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0
Zambia	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0

## Appendix 5. – Model diagnostics

Models	Shapiro-Wilk Test (W) for residuals	p-value	Breusch-Pagan Test (BP)	df	p-value	Variance Inflation Factor	
Model_1	0.98915	0.8546	3.0275	2	0.2201	Linkage score	1.006997
						High leverage	1.006997
Model_2	0.98985	0.8852	4.9688	4	0.2905	Linkage score	1.392085
						High leverage	1.073240
						Start score	1.313350
						Average gdp ppp	1.390933
Model_3	0.98447	0.653	3.8031	6	0.7033	Linkage score	1.398370
						High leverage	1.088798
						Start score	1.784686
						Average gdp ppp	1.384399
						Legislative constraints	1.878747
						Judicial constraints	1.714310

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