

Chasing Shadows

Comparative Dynamics of Autocratization
in post-Communist Countries

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Public Policy, and International Relations
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Professor András Bozóki

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, **Zdravko Veljanov**, candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Central European University Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy, and International Relations, declare herewith that the present thesis titled “Chasing Shadows: Comparative Dynamics of Autocratization in post-Communist Countries” is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 11 February 2026

Zdravko Veljanov

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) was used in this work. I, Zdravko Veljanov, have reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content, claims, and references. An overview of the use of GenAI is provided below.

- I used Claude, <http://claude.ai> to debug R codes and fix resulting plotting errors. The tool was used to provide explanation of why some errors emerged. An example prompt is when adding layers to a plot some are overwritten, how to avoid it, fixing colors for plotting, and confirming the dictionary words comprehensiveness (e.g. word endings in Macedonian).
- I used ChatGPT, <https://chatgpt.com> to debug R codes and fix resulting plotting errors. The tool was used to provide explanation of why some errors emerged. An example prompt is when adding layers to a plot some are overwritten, how to avoid it, fixing colors for plotting,
- I used Grammarly, <https://www.grammarly.com>, to proofread parts of the dissertation.

Abstract

The ongoing autocratization wave has shown us the incremental decline and hollowing out of democratic qualities from within. The thesis explores the mechanisms by which autocratic leaders dismantle democratic qualities without dismantling their façade. The sequential multi-method setup of cross-case analysis using QCA to detect conditions present at the onset of the autocratization episode, and the in-depth process tracing of the two case studies that reveal the mechanisms that intensify the autocratization sequence. The fuzzy-set QCA maps the pathways, while the computational text and network analysis trace the processes. This approach illustrates how onset conditions and intensification mechanisms operate distinctly, yet together in regime transformation periods.

The QCA analysis of 28 autocratization episodes across 21 post-Communist countries demonstrates the complexity of autocratization episodes and establishes three findings. There are multiple and distinct configurations that lead to onset of autocratization episode. The equifinality also illustrated that no single condition is necessary or sufficient to produce the outcome on its own. Subsequently, different combination of institutional weakness, polarization, corruption, regional trends, and political stability initiate an autocratization episode in different contexts. The analysis shows the three distinct pathways to autocratization: democratic hijacking of the incumbent party, institutional subversion, and crisis-driven leadership.

The case studies leverage the temporal distinction from the onset of the episode and trace how the autocratic dyad operates during extended episodes. The two typical case studies of North Macedonia and Serbia entered the autocratization period with high polarization and political instability stemming from unresolved bilateral conflicts. The case studies trace the feedback loop of the autocratic dyad that reinforces polarization and corruption as democratic qualities within the countries deteriorate. In North Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski's government channeled public resources into the "Skopje 2014" project, a massive construction project that reimaged the city in his nationalist and ideological vision. The dissertation uses quantitative text analysis of speeches and statements, such as (il)liberal dictionary and word-embeddings to demonstrate how the implementation of illiberal rhetoric has fueled polarization and shielded corrupt practices. The wire-tapping revelations in 2015 and sustained international pressure disrupted the feedback loop and interrupted the autocratization episode. Serbia's autocratization episode followed a similar path, with the flagship project "Belgrade Waterfront" and major reconstruction projects throughout the country carried out through

opaque procedures that helped fuel corruption practices. The computational text analysis of prominent SNS members illustrates the progression of illiberal rhetoric, weaponized as a tool of the regime, and instrumentalized for regime legitimization.

The dissertation advances three contributions. The autocratic dyad bridges the literature on hybrid regimes' autocratization, polarization, and corruption by illustrating how it can intensify once an autocratization episode begins. The cross-case analysis demonstrates the advantages of QCA in identifying multiple pathways through different configurations that cause the onset of an episode. Empirically, operationalizing political speeches and statements using dictionary-based and machine-learning tools, in combination with networked approaches, allows us to track the autocratization sequence, with potential applicability to other similar autocratization episodes.

Acknowledgments

There is no particular irony in writing a dissertation about autocratization at the Central European University, an institution that a long-standing autocrat tried to erase. And this is where it all began, from Budapest to Vienna, and back and forth. The CEU persists and continues to teach, educate, research, and produce original research. As such, it is a privilege to have been able to work on and complete this dissertation within this tradition. Thank you, CEU, for the privilege of completing my master's and, now, my doctoral education and training.

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List of Abbreviations

CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CPI	Corruption Perception Index
CA	Contracting Authority
CRI	Corruption Risk Index
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DOS	Democratic Opposition of Serbia
DS	Democratic Party (Serbian political party)
DSS	Democratic Party of Serbia
DUI	Democratic Union for Integration
ERT	Episodes of Regime Transformation
ESA	Enhanced Standard Analysis
EU	European Union
fsQCA	Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GLoVe	Global Vectors for Word Representation (language learning algorithm)
IPI	Index of Public Integrity)
IRL	Investigative Reporting Lab (North Macedonia)
ISI	Illiberal Speech Index
LDI	Liberal Democracy Index
MKD	Macedonian Denar (currency in North Macedonia)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

OFA	Ohrid Framework Agreement
PA	Purchasing Authority
PiS	Law and Justice Party
PM	Prime Minister
PP	Public Procurement
QCA	Qualitative Comparative Analysis
QTA	Quantitative Text Analysis
SDSM	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia
SEE	South Eastern Europe
SLAPP	Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation
SMMR	Set-Theoretic Multi-Method Research
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
SPS	Socialist Party of Serbia
SRS	Serbian Radical Party
TI	Transparency International
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
VMRO-DPMNE	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity
WB	World Bank
WBs	Western Balkans

1 Introduction

On 27 April 2017, a group of protesters stormed the Assembly in Skopje, assaulting opposition lawmakers as they attempted to elect a new speaker and form a new government that would replace the ongoing VMRO-DPMNE. This episode known as "Bloody Thursday" was not an isolated expression of unrest. It was a dramatic manifestation of a deeply polarized society whose peaceful transfer of power rested on the willingness of the incumbent to leave the PM office. Few years earlier, in 2015, a wiretapping scandal had revealed through thousands of leaked recordings systematic abuse of institutions and underscored corrupt practices, electoral manipulation, judicial capture, and extensive media control. The events of April highlighted the hollowing out from within of North Macedonia's remaining democratic institutions. What was left was the façade of competitive politics. Several hundred kilometers to the north, Serbia under Prime Minister and President Aleksandar Vučić displays remarkably similar patterns. Elections continued to be held, but they produced predetermined outcomes on an increasingly skewed field. Courts and the assembly function, but they serve executive interests rather providing oversight. Like Gruevski, Vučić continued to seek integration into international organizations, on the one hand, and systematically capturing state institutions for partisan advantage, on the other hand. Although both regimes rely on external legitimacy to operate, stability has been instrumentalized to undermine democratic governance.

These parallel trajectories of the two Western Balkan (WBs) countries raise a puzzle that motivates this dissertation. North Macedonia and Serbia share similar structural conditions, including post-Communist legacies, EU candidate status, comparable levels of economic and democratic development, and exposure to the same regional and international pressures (Morlino, 2024; von Soest, 2024). Despite the overall positive expectations for consolidating democratic processes both experienced rapid democratic erosion. What explains the accelerated decline? Why do some configurations of conditions produce autocratization, while others do not? And, ultimately, once such an episode begins, through which mechanisms do they unravel?

More than three decades after the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, Central and Eastern Europe remains a natural laboratory for the study of regime change, democratic quality, and party politics. The region has witnessed a substantial accumulation of transformative processes: the simultaneous development of the introduction of a market economy, nation-building, and democratization created unique, challenging conditions for institutional development (Linz & Stepan, 1996). A series of electoral defeats and colorful revolutions across the region, starting with the Slovak elections in 1998 and peaking with Kyrgyzstan's revolution in 2005, appeared to complete the democratization process in most countries. In the aftermath of the fall of communism and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the democratization trajectories in the region offered valuable lessons about the rise, development, consolidation, and stability of processes. Despite the shared communist past, the twenty-nine countries from the region represent an unusual set of states, with culturally homogeneous or heterogeneous societies, with stable borders and unresolved territorial disputes, differentiated economic development, and political regimes ranging from consolidated democracies to consolidated autocracies (V. Bunce et al., 2009, p. vii).

This is compounded by the global crisis of democracy, which has not spared these countries. In fact, many of them represent prime examples of the reversal

of democratic qualities. Rule of law, political pluralism, and the separation of powers are constantly undermined and hollowed out as democratic decay takes hold within each country. After two decades of democratic progress, the share of countries democratizing has flipped to the point where more countries are autocratizing than democratizing. As more and more countries have regressed in succession, the new wave of autocratization has been ushered into the research agenda. These developments are threatening the reversal of democratic progress made since 1990 (Gerschewski, 2021; Lindstaedt, 2021; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Tomini, 2017). The extent of the backsliding was most evident in 2020, when for the first time in two decades the share of autocracies in the world surpassed that of democracies (Lindstaedt, 2021, p. 1). More troubling still, large countries such as India, Brazil, and Turkey, as well as EU member states such as Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and Czechia, have shown unmistakable signs of democratic deterioration. Elections continued to be held, albeit under a growingly skewed field, preventing the regimes from offering much more in terms of consolidation. Countries with weaker institutions have showed particularly vulnerability to clientelistic networks and state capture, and those lacking robust democratic institutions have struggled to contain the authoritarian abuse, widespread corruption, and increasing polarization (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019; Lindstaedt, 2021).

The post-Communist countries have been at the forefront of this autocratization wave, displaying various forms of democratic erosion as reflections of the regional conditions, while sharing common features with global patterns. An already fragile democratization process has failed to fully consolidate, paving the wave for new autocratization episodes (Bieber, 2018; Lange et al., 2017). The region's countries can be grouped into four broad categories according to their development since the fall of communism. First, the fast liberal democratizers of the 1990s and early 2000s which have already joined the EU. Second, the candidate countries or prospective candidates from the Western Balkans which were moving between electoral democracies and electoral autocracies. Third, the partial democratizers, former-Soviet

countries, which had several efforts through revolutions to democratize. Fourth, countries from Central and Western Asia that stayed closed autocracies. In the 2000s, some Western Balkan and former Soviet Union countries were making a U-turn after the lost decade of democratization in the 1990s; for a while, it seemed they could follow a similar path to their Central and East European counterparts (Jano, 2010). The democratic breakthrough coincided with the EU's Thessaloniki Summit on the Western Balkans enlargement (Trauner, 2011) and explored the possibility of integrating even further (Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine). Nonetheless, structural deficiencies coupled with inconsistent international support slowed democratization (Dolenec, 2013; Richter & Wunsch, 2020). Before consolidation could take root in some Western Balkan countries, a new autocratization wave began to sweep the region.

The existing literature offers partial answers. Scholars have identified polarization as a primary drive of autocratization (Somer et al., 2021), documented the effect of corruption (Apergis & Pinar, 2023; Fazekas & Tóth, 2016), and traced the role of weak institutions or unfavorable regional trends (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Meyerrose, 2020). Nonetheless, these factors are most commonly explored in isolation or treated as competing explanations. We argue that understanding autocratization requires a configurational approach that incorporates various combinations of conditions, recognizing the potential interactions. Specifically, we contend that various configurations operate not as competing pathways, but as mutually reinforcing components of a self-sustaining and reinforcing mechanism that accelerates the erosion of democratic qualities. Therefore, the dissertation advances a theoretical framework centered on the continuous and reinforced interaction between polarization, (democratic stability) and corruption as the primary mechanisms driving autocratization in a post-Communist competitive authoritarian context. We conceptualize them as an autocratic dyad, i.e., mutually constitutive elements of a self-reinforcing cycle in which both components reinforce each other.

This dissertation addresses two interconnected research questions: (i) The first question focuses on the onset of the autocratization episode, aiming to identify which combinations of factors are associated with sustained democratic erosion. It acknowledges the potential for configurational rather than additive explanation, i.e., it is not the individual factors, but their conjunctural combination that produces the outcome. Subsequently, it asks, **under what configurations of conditions do autocratization episodes emerge across the post-Communist countries?** (ii) The second question shifts from onset conditions to process mechanisms, examining how the interaction and feedback loop among polarization, political stability, and corruption drive democratic erosion during an episode of autocratization. While the first question identifies the conditions present at the onset of an autocratization episode, the second question traces **how the autocratization episodes unfold once they begin and why some are reversed while others are not?** More specifically, it aims to address how these conditions translate into institutional decay through the identified pathways.

The relationship between these questions reflects the logic of nested analysis in comparative research (Rohlfing, 2012). The cross-case analysis focuses on the identification of configurational patterns across post-Communist countries, while the within-case analysis unpacks the mechanisms that operate in typical cases. To address these questions, the dissertation employs a sequential multi-methods research design by combining qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) with detailed case studies. In the first stage, QCA provides a systematic comparison across the universe of our cases, post-Communist countries, and identifies conjunctural combinations and configurations of conditions that cause the beginning of an autocratization episode. The approach is particularly suited as it acknowledges the existence of different pathways through which democratic erosion occurs across post-Communist countries. Through fs-QCA, we identify which configurations of conditions (polarization, political stability, regional trends, corruption, and institutional stability) are associated with the onset of the identified autocratization

episodes. In the second stage, the case studies of North Macedonia (2008-2016) and Serbia (2012-on) explore how the autocratization episodes unfold.

The dissertation makes three contributions to autocratization scholarship. First, theoretically, it identifies an interaction that links polarization and corruption through a reinforcing cycle that perpetuates institutional decay. Moving beyond the question of whether these factors matter individually, the dissertation examines their interaction as mutually reinforcing components of a self-sustaining mechanism. Corrupt practices erode institutional constraints that enable further polarization, which insulates corruption from accountability. Second, the analysis demonstrates the value of nested QCA analysis to identify configurational pathways and typical cases, followed by an in-depth exploration of case studies to examine the mechanisms. As a result, the analysis combines the strengths of cross-case and within-case approaches, thereby addressing the limitations of large-N analysis and single-case studies. Third, combining an original and comprehensive corpus of statements and speeches by ruling political actors in North Macedonia and Serbia with large-scale and granular procurement data enables the dissertation to examine the evolution and semantic deployment of illiberal rhetoric (proxied through the illiberal speech index) with the formation of corruption networks linked to landmark government projects, thus providing systematic tracking of rhetorical strategies.

The dissertation is structured as follows. The second chapter situates the dissertation within the relevant literature on autocratization, tracing the development of studies on the contemporary understanding of autocratization (or democratic backsliding). The chapter reviews the conceptual debates regarding autocratization and autocratization episodes, examines the various theoretical families associated with it, and identifies the research gap it aims to address. The third chapter develops the theoretical framework and underscores the importance of the selected approach for identifying and explaining what drives the autocratization episode. The fourth chapter outlines the research design and methodology, explaining the logic of sequential multi-methods analysis and justifying the operationalization of

conditions and outcomes. The chapter specifies the data sources and the size and importance of the collected data. The fifth chapter presents the QCA analysis, which ascertains the configurational pathways associated with autocratization episodes across the post-Communist countries. The analysis reveals three distinct pathways. The sixth and seventh chapters provide detailed case studies of North Macedonia and Serbia, tracing the identified mechanism through empirical analysis of government communication, speeches and statements, and creation of corrupt networks, through procurement data. The North Macedonia chapter explores the Gruevski regime with particular focus on the role of the mega project ("Skopje 2014"), which represented a key pillar of the regimes domestic policies. Serbia's chapter employs a similar approach by focusing on Vučić's reign and the implementation of major national construction projects, including the relevance of Belgrade Waterfront. The dissertation concludes by synthesizing the cross-case and case studies' findings and discussing the broader implications for autocratization studies across the post-Communist region.

2 Autocratization in Comparative Perspective

The puzzle this dissertation seeks to address, as indicated in the introduction, manifests in the different configurations that lead to the onset of autocratization episodes in post-Communist countries and disentangle sequences and loops through which the episodes unfold. This chapter examines the literature on third-wave autocratization and, more narrowly, autocratization within the context of post-communist countries. Following Huntington's influential work on democratization waves, scholarly attention for decades focused on democratic transition and consolidation (Huntington, [1993](#), p. 16). From the transition and consolidation of Latin American countries to the post-Communist regimes, scholars have explored a multitude of institutional, economic, and cultural factors that contributed to democratic stability and consolidation (Linz & Stepan, [1996](#); O'Donnell et al., [1986](#)). Nevertheless, the past several years have seen a mushrooming of literature that refocused its attention on autocratization (S. B. Bermeo, [2011](#); Cassani & Tomini, [2018](#); Haggard & Kaufman, [2021](#); Lührmann & Lindberg, [2019](#)). From studies focusing on whether we are experiencing autocratization at all (Levitsky & Way, [2015](#)), to studies that argue that it is indeed autocratization (Boese et al., [2021](#)). Such scholarly efforts have significantly contributed to operationalization, identification of modes of autocratization, identification of causal mechanisms, and comparisons with related concepts. Despite the rising importance and the growing number of studies on the topic, identifying the causes and causal mechanisms of

autocratization remains contested. Much effort has been dedicated to redefining autocratization (Cassani & Tomini, 2018; Pelke & Croissant, 2021; Skaaning, 2020), clustering the different autocratization episodes under an umbrella trend of wave (Boese et al., 2021; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Tomini, 2021), and identifying sequences during the autocratization episodes (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Riaz & Rana, 2024; Sotiropoulos, 2023a).

Studies have shown the importance of polarization and restrictive economic practices that allow incumbents to selectively redistribute public funds (Bauer et al., 2021; Lindstaedt, 2021; Riaz & Rana, 2024; Somer et al., 2021). Lindstaedt (2021, pp. 127–193) identifies corruption, globalization, and authoritarian populism as causes, and highlights the importance of context. Hajnal (2024) notes a direction of influence from polarization to corruption and, ultimately, to backsliding, while Apergis and Pinar (2023) find evidence within the EU that corruption fuels polarization, providing platforms for illiberal and populist parties to rise and, subsequently, increasing the potential for democratic erosion (Bochsler & Juon, 2020). Consequently, Prelec (see Barrington et al. (2022, see pp. 130-134)) and Riaz and Rana (2024) suggest that a more eclectic approach is recommended that incorporates a feedback loop or a configurational arrangement among the potential causes of autocratization. For instance, some cases might have multiple conditions present at the onset of the episode, and as a result of institutional constraints, these weaknesses can be undermined by the incumbent. While some episodes of autocratization begin immediately upon coming to power, others involve a gradual decline that occurs over time. Moreover, the regional democratic environment can influence the direction and speed of autocratization. Domestic resilience could also halt or mediate the process, provided that there are sufficiently strong domestic institutions. Nonetheless, recent empirical findings show that even with initial resilient conditions, autocratic-minded incumbents can erode these checks.

After a brief overview of the global autocratization pathways, the chapter zooms in on the post-communist region. We explore the potential conditions of autoc-

ratization investigated in the literature. The last section of the chapter discusses the gaps in the literature and explains how the current study will address them. Domestic-driven factors as well as regional trends have featured prominently in the existing literature on autocratization as steps toward providing evidence and uncovering patterns of configurations. The dissertation argues that, once an autocratization episode starts, it is incumbent-driven autocratization by complex interactions between polarization and corruption-enabled networks that have led to state capture. While the literature has sufficiently explored the impact of polarization on autocratization, corruption as a cause of autocratization remains underexplored. Moreover, the use of configurational patterns as a method for identifying conditions features even less.

2.1 Debates on Autocratization Concept

The current wave of autocratization differs from the previous autocratization regarding the mode, breadth, and extent of autocratization, including the universe of cases that have experienced erosion. The gradual erosion of democratic and institutional qualities has substituted for the sudden death of democracy through coups. The extent of decay does not always indicate a reversal of regime type, i.e., not all liberal or electoral democracies that have undergone autocratization reverted back to electoral autocracies. Given that most deficiencies stemmed from the lack of consolidation of the liberal component of democracy, subsequent rollbacks in these countries mainly affected this dimension. These rollbacks were neither sudden nor significant, unlike coups from the previous era. Still, rather than setbacks, the changes were gradual and conducted under the banner of law, which makes it challenging to identify, let alone investigate and study (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 1095). To empirically explore these occurrences, the first task we need to undertake is to provide a definition of autocratization and to propose conceptualizations and measurements of the three core concepts: autocratization,

autocratization wave, and autocratization episode (Boese-Schlösser et al., 2024; Lott, 2024).

The initial signs of democratic rollback stimulated researchers and academics to explore what are the drivers of such developments. As a result, a body of scholarly literature emerged with efforts to establish a concept that captures these developments. Prior concepts, such as democratic backsliding (N. Bermeo, 2016; Issacharoff, 2023; Keman, 2023; Waldner & Lust, 2015), democratic regression (Erdmann, 2011), democratic decoupling (Ding & Slater, 2021), democratic erosion (Kneuer, 2021; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021), or de-democratization (Bogaards, 2018), have democracy as the focus, and at a conceptual level, they are unified in the process they try to explain - movement away from democracy or declining (core) democratic features (Jee et al., 2019). Nevertheless, empirical evidence shows that recent developments occur across all regime types, necessitating a concept applicable to a broader universe of cases.

Considering the infancy of the field and the potential it offers to explore various concepts, the extant developments on autocratization (and all related similar concepts) continue to struggle to unify the conceptual debate. The initial challenge that emerges from the discussion is to determine whether this abundance of new concepts describe different empirical realities or whether the proliferation results from the nascent character of the field's (re)emergence and its difficulty in differentiating the opposite process of democratization studies (Cassani & Tomini, 2020). To better understand this conceptual "confusion", Haggard and Kaufman (2021) suggest looking at the constellation of cases that underwent democratization transformation during the third-wave (28), as it is vital to understand the conditions in which democratic and autocratic institutions within these regimes coexist (see Cassani & Tomini, 2020, pp. 275–276). Starting with one of the more established concepts in the field, democratic backsliding, Waldner and Lust (2015) and N. Bermeo (2016) stress that the concept entails configurations in which a regime experiences gradual or fine-grained changes through discontinuous events rather

than one-time coups. The main domains where backsliding occurs are competition, accountability, and participation (Waldner & Lust, 2018, p. 95).

Furthermore, this phenomenon can take place in both autocracies and democracies (Tomini, 2024, see). At the conceptual level, while it makes sense to look at the three dimensions, horizontal, vertical, and diagonal accountability within democracies, the same will be more challenging within authoritarian regimes, because some simply cannot slide back more (see Sinkkonen, 2021, p. 1176). Other similar concepts, such as democratic erosion, democratic regression, or de-democratization, face similar challenges in distancing themselves from democratic bias, as they are closely connected to circumstances that take place primarily within liberal democracies.

Therefore, we aim to focus on a concept applicable to both democracies and autocracies, one denoting a process that can explain the departure or transition of a regime toward autocracy. Developments across a variety of regime types, from Hungary, Turkey, Russia, Venezuela, and even the USA, from the past two decades created empirical possibilities for such. Autocratization, defined as a process moving away from democracy and toward autocracy, offers a less loaded explanation compared to other concepts such as democratic backsliding or erosion (Tomini, 2024). Autocratization covers under its umbrella any process of regime change that shifts direction away from democracy. Our decision to focus on the term autocratization as a process towards autocracy through gradual and state-led debilitation of political institutions and the erosion of democratic qualities allows us to extend the scope of cases beyond democracies and include hybrid regimes. The process implies endogenous, willful erosion of democratic qualities by incumbent governments. Its incremental and open-ended-ness stresses the continuous nature of such actions and government strategies.

Democracies born out of the third-wave of democratization are particularly vulnerable to the new autocratization processes (Bieber, 2020; Lührmann & Lindberg,

2019). Post-Communist countries underwent an accelerated democratization process in the 1990s and 2000s. Still, many have since sustained a substantial and prolonged erosion of democratic qualities, with an increasing number of regimes shifting toward autocracy. Central and Eastern Europe provides illustrative examples: while countries like Hungary, Poland, Serbia or North Macedonia epitomize the gradual dismemberment of democratic features (Bochsler & Juon, 2020; Bogaards, 2018; Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018), others, including Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Slovenia, exhibit milder erosion that have not yet culminated in regime changes (Hanley & Cianetti, 2024), nonetheless deserved a more careful consideration in cross-country analysis. These trends have shifted scholarly attention back to the dynamics of democratic erosion (Cassani & Tomini, 2018; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Tomini & Wagemann, 2018). Key developments focus on exploring the country's susceptibility to autocratization on multiple dimensions and from various sources (both domestic and international) (Meyerrose, 2020; Przeworski, 2019; Tomini, 2017). The decision to use autocratization helps us to better capture the direction of change toward autocracy, and not merely static regime characteristics or highlighting only specific regime typologies. This strategy helps us to better explore the processes driving democratic decline in these contexts.

2.2 Context and Drivers of Autocratization

The literature on autocratization has moved beyond the description of instances of democratic erosion into the identification of systematic patterns in its causes and mechanisms (Bieber, 2020; Cassani & Tomini, 2018; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Lührmann, 2021; Maerz & Schneider, 2021; Somer et al., 2021). Although there is a variation across countries and regions regarding the speed or pace of autocratization, there are many commonalities as well, such as the gradual nature of the process. The expansion of cases experiencing autocratization during the 2010s corresponded with an increase in empirical investigations, with paradigmatic cases such as Hungary, India, Turkey, and Brazil among the most prominent examples across different continents (Croissant & Tomini, 2024). This section reviews existing explanatory factors, such as agency-driven causes centered on polarization and executive strategies, structural and institutional capacities, the political economy of corruption and state capture, and regional developments that affect domestic processes.

2.2.1 Agency-driven Causes

Agency-based explanations underscore how and to what extent political actors deliberately undermine democratic institutions. Incumbents, or agents, can restrict competition and enable clientelistic, collusive, and corrupt practices (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Knutsen, 2023) or drive political polarization (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Schedler, 2024; Somer et al., 2021), finding themselves at the center of the proposed theoretical framework. Somer et al. (2021, pp. 931–934) underscore the association between different types or degrees of polarization and the loss of democratic qualities, with the strength of this effect holding across various time lags. Polarization is also associated with increased government intimidation of the opposition (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021, p. 286) as well as increasingly divisive rhetoric (Jenne, 2018). Contemporary scholarship has adapted these insights to

explain incumbent-driven autocratization, in which elected executives maintained a democratic facade, despite the systematic erosion.

Recent scholarship identifies polarization as a key explanatory factor. It establishes that high levels of polarization deepen societal divisions and prevent cooperation among political actors, and in the process weaken democratic governance and accountability. Extreme or pernicious polarization, as Somer et al. (2021) define it, provides opportunities for incumbents to more easily erode democratic qualities. Polarization also makes it easier for leaders to justify undemocratic measures as "necessary" to restore order or protect national interests. Globally, we observe countries with increased levels of polarization, such as the UK or the US, without regime transition. Conversely, countries located within the hybrid regime spectrum, such as North Macedonia, Serbia, or Bulgaria, have culminated in more divisive polarization and a resulting state capture. Therefore, the polarization-autocratization nexus warrants further attention (Selçuk, 2024). And how such theorized mechanisms are operationalized and explored is illustrated by Hajnal's (2024) exploration of how pernicious polarization can also affect the functioning and governance of institutions, weaken the checks, and balances and enable corrupt practices.

Haggard and Kaufman (2021) identify three interrelated mechanisms through which polarization enables autocratization. First, pernicious polarization creates political blockades that allows executive to justify overreach in their powers. If normal democratic processes do not function, the application of extraordinary measures becomes justifiable. Second, the elimination of moderate alternatives through realignment of party systems enables (would-be) autocrats to capture legislatures and/or courts and concentrate power. Third, the cumulative nature of the process begins to erode the opposition's capacity to act, resulting in continuous division. Accordingly, the public cannot perceive the cumulative damage until it is too late. The cumulative damage can also trigger a domino effect of institutional capture. The submission of each accountability actor, such as inefficient legislatures or

courts, allows the executive to obtain additional resources, which in turn provides opportunities for further co-optation (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021) and limits the maneuvering space for accountability calls. Through these developments, it becomes harder to expose corruption and to keep the executive in check. This cascading logic explains that once it starts, the autocratization can be accelerated by additional factors, i.e., each captured institution collects additional resources.

The common aspects across these mechanisms are the exploitation of democratic procedures to undermine democratic substance. Arbatli and Rosenberg (2021) illustrates the operationalization of mechanisms that link polarization to erosion. Their analysis demonstrates that the higher levels of government intimidation of the opposition are strongly associated with political polarization. Evidence from Hungary or Turkey exemplifies how polarization allows incumbents to frame opposition harassment as a legitimate measure of defense against external threats. Such harassment mechanisms restrict competition and affect democracy. The connection demonstrates how rhetorical strategies translate into institutional consequences.

Lastly, the continuous and incremental accumulation of power by executives (executive aggrandizement) at the expense of other branches constitutes the institutional manifestation of these dynamics. Laebens (2023), investigating 26 cases, conceptualizes aggrandizement as the mechanism through which democratically elected executives weaken the electoral and horizontal accountability without suspending democratic institutional functioning. For some scholars, executive aggrandizement represents the dominant pathway to autocratization (N. Bermeo, 2016). Nonetheless, despite its prominent role in autocratization, Laebens (2023) also stresses that not all cases of executive aggrandizement lead to democratic breakdown (only one in four for her analysis), highlighting the potential of institutional and societal resistance to halt the erosion trajectory. Moreover, the findings also provide an opportunity to understand further why, in some instances, autocratization fails to consolidate.

The variation and operation indicate that polarization is necessary but not sufficient. To what extent it contributes to the onset of an autocratization episode depends on interactions with other insufficient conditions. The configurational approaches can help us to explore how polarization reacts to different conditions, instead of treating it as an isolated variable.

2.2.2 Structural and Institutional Conditions

Economic development has long figured prominently in the regime change scholarship. The contemporary autocratization wave challenges the traditional modernization explanations, which rely on GDP, income, or modernization levels, inequality, and redistribution. Current democratic erosion processes are observed in wealthy countries, such as the US and Poland, and across varying levels of inequality, suggesting the limited predictive power for autocratization (Waldner & Lust, 2018, pp. 101–103). More promising proxies can be located in capturing the distributive power of state resources. This includes the funds at the incumbent’s disposal that enable him to narrow economic competition or create an environment prone to clientelism, collusion, and corruption. Such insights connect the economic factors to agency-driven explanations, by focusing not on wealth itself, but rather on how political actors deploy public resources for partisan goals (Broms et al., 2019; Dávid-Barrett & Fazekas, 2020).

Consequently institutional capacities or the ability of the state to implement policies or maintain services can shape the trajectory of autocratization. This allows incumbents to take a hold and advantage of what is already established at the organizational level. Levitsky and Way (2010) identify organizational capacities, alongside linkages to the West and leverage over domestic actors, as key determinants of post-Cold War regime trajectories. More recently, Seeberg (2021) demonstrates that high state capacities, when captured by autocrat-minded incumbents, enable them to rely on local agents for subtle manipulation. Such steps range from media bias to restrictions on domestic monitors to even the co-optation

of more serious challengers. Nevertheless, the relationship between capacity and autocratization is not linear. On the one hand, weak state capacities are easier to capture; they prove less efficient instruments. On the other hand, strong institutions, although more challenging to capture, once captured can be more efficiently exploited to entrench authoritarian rule. For instance, the relatively high capacity in Hungary enabled Orbán to more systematically implement comprehensive changes (Bozóki & Fleck, 2024). The key setting appears to be not the absolute capacity but the balance between institutional strength and availability of resources at the incumbent's disposal.

Following the arrival of an autocratic-minded incumbent, the sequencing of institutional erosion tends to follow a predictable pattern, allowing researchers to investigate how autocratization trajectories unfold. Sato et al. (2022)'s analysis of global autocratization episodes stresses that erosion begins with horizontal accountability. It affects the oversight mechanism, which is followed by challenges to diagonal accountability, such as restricting media and civil society. Last, the skewing of electoral field can help the incumbent to gain complete control over institutional capacities. Therefore, protecting the horizontal accountability institutions, may be crucial for preventing autocratization, considering the role they have on the trajectory if subsequent capture takes place.

Through the World Bank's Government Effectiveness Index we show that the institutional gains achieved across the post-Communist countries during the 1990s and 2000s were significantly eroded by the 2010s autocratization wave. The pattern indicates that institutional development proves fragile when faced with determined incumbent subversion. This process that is further weakened in the post-Communist context when faced with weakened external anchors, the EU.

2.2.3 Political Economy: Corruption and State Capture

Corruption has been endemic in post-Communist countries, with already high levels enabling incumbents to abuse their position and perpetuate extractive practices that frequently culminate in state capture (Treisman, 2013). Corrupt practices may precede autocrats. However, over time, incumbents can also extend such strategies to distribute systematically public goods for private gain (Lambsdorff, 2006; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006; Mungiu-Pippidi & Heywood, 2020; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016). Incumbents manage to extract state resources and distribute them to close family or friends, thereby weaving networks that further strengthen their grip on power. The allocation of such assets, for instance, through public procurement awards, enables the development of network-like structures that provide for personal and party enrichment (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Kaufmann, 2023; Rivera et al., 2024).

For increasingly authoritarian-minded autocrats engaging in corruption can be a double-edged sword, trying to balance a conflicting pressure to rein and limit corruption, while simultaneously engaging in it (Carothers, 2023). What emerges within such regimes are good governance and institutional facades allowing incumbents that determines institutional governance structure to divert public gains to close members (Moene & Søreide, 2015). This institutional setup prevents democratic consolidation, within democratizing countries, or help fuel an autocratization episode within cases where this process is underway (Drapalova et al., 2019). In this regard Mungiu-Pippidi shows that entrenchment of corruption indicates further backsliding among electoral democracies as it allows the extractive nature of established institution to serve the incumbents and prevent development of inclusive institution and democratic consolidation (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2023, pp. 82–90).

Within the post-Communist region, Innes (2014, 2016) stress that parties manage to establish control over state institutions, and party-state capture is instrumentalized for political purposes (Goetz, 2001). Keil (2018) explores how the emergence of

strong leaders restructured the domestic political system for personal or party benefit. He presents descriptive evidence for countries in the WBs region. Still, he highlights that such practices extend (or are borrowed) from places beyond the WBs (see also Hajnal et al. (2025)). Similar developments of gradual state capture through corrupt organization that involves collusion among prominent institutions and elites can also be observed in Hungary during Orban's tenure (Jancsics, 2024), Georgia during Saakashvili, or even extensive collusive practices in Bulgaria during Borisov's tenure (Plaček et al., 2019). During their tenure, these incumbents have systematically subordinated bureaucracies and the media to partisan control. When oligarchic networks are closely connected with the ruling political elite, we can observe penetration of state institutions. The establishment of new discretionary structures allowed government parties in post-Communist countries to incapacitate formal state institutions (Grzymala-Busse, 2007), or repurpose them in line with party needs. The effect is even more pronounced in the context of those regimes that have been dominated by strong personalistic incumbents (Chang & Golden, 2010). However, resilient (political) competition constraints corrupt behavior, highlighting the relationship between polarization, institutional capacities, and corruption. This action is particularly limited when opposition actors are labeled as foreign agents, the competitive dynamics that might otherwise constrain incumbents' malpractices disappear (Meagher, 2005). As a result, we observe a mechanism in which polarization enables corruption by shielding it rhetorically and eliminating actors who might otherwise expose it.

The number of available indicators that aim to measure corrupt practices or risks of corruption range from perception indices such as Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), ability to control corruption (WB Control of Corruption), or the Index for Public Integrity (IPI) that aims to bridge those factors that generate and constraint corruption (for greater overview see, (Mungiu-Pippidi & Fazekas, 2020, pp. 8–13). It is necessary to connect the appropriate measurement within the contemporary studies of democratization (and by extension more

recent autocratization) for better and closer identification of how corruption can harm democratic qualities (E. Warren, 2004). Fazekas and Kocsis (2020) focus on micro-level corruption measures, as a substitute for expert assessment or national corruption data, using public procurement data, and identify a series of "red flags" that signal riskiness. Such indicators include single bidding, contracts receiving one bid, the tendency to use non-open procedures, restricting competition and bypassing competitive processes, shortened advertisement periods, preventing potential participants from timely information acquisition, and network concentration, or contracts disproportionately awarded to connected and favored firms. Their analysis demonstrates that Fidesz-affiliated companies increase after 2011 (Bozóki & Fleck, 2024; Fazekas & Tóth, 2016). Similar trends can also be observed with the availability of additional funds, such as the EU funds, which allow for incumbent-favored contract distribution (Fazekas & King, 2019). The availability of such funds can be redirected from governance development to patronage financing, with similar trends observable in candidate countries as well. The methodology of tracking procurement patterns, compared to perception assessments, offers additional tools for tracing corruption. It provides the possibility for exploring potential corruption networks by exploring the connectedness between state institutions and economic operators (Villamil et al., 2022, 2024).

The polarization-corruption relationship represents an underexplored area with growing empirical evidence across countries. Despite the more recent scholarly focus, such as Hajnal (2024, 2025), who find that polarization, particularly when opponents are regarded as enemies, weakens accountability and leads to increased corruption, while Brown et al. (2011) find evidence of corruption constraint in the presence of political polarization. Additionally, Apergis and Pinar (2023) find that corruption has damaging effects, distancing voters from mainstream parties and allowing the emergence of "anti-corruption" populists whose divisive rhetoric further polarizes society (Kartal, 2025). The operation through feedback dynamics is the interaction that this dissertation theorizes. The theoretical tools

required to model the feedback dynamic remain underdeveloped in the extant literature. The tendency to treat them as competing or parallel causes, either through polarization's rhetorical mobilization or corruption's material extraction. And while it is helpful to investigate in this way, this approach obscures the benefits when jointly modeled. Polarization shields corrupt actors from accountability, while the extraction of funds provides additional resources for further polarization. The sequential multi-method design aims to capture these dynamics of increasingly illiberal rhetoric that shift accountability from corrupt practices to discrediting political actors.

2.2.4 Regional Developments

Domestic trajectories, however, do not unfold in isolation. Instead, they take place within international contexts that can constrain or enable autocratization. The literature on democratic diffusion documented how trends in one country affected neighbors during the democratization wave, from Slovakia in 1998 to Serbia in 2000 and later Georgia and Ukraine in 2003/2004 (V. J. Bunce & Wolchik, 2010, 2011; Levitsky & Way, 2006). The mechanisms used in each case display a high level of similarity and comparability across the rest of the cases (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006, pp. 463–464). Contemporary scholarship has shifted its attention to autocratic diffusion by focusing on how practices spread across borders.

Not all shared practices represent diffusion. It is also necessary to differentiate between diffusion of autocratic practices (uncoordinated horizontal spread) and cooperation (deliberate coordination among autocrats). Weyland (2017) argues that contemporary autocrats tend to pursue pragmatic interests rather than ideological missions. These distinctions matter for understanding regional dynamics, particularly in the region of the Western Balkans, where mimicry of successful authoritarian techniques appears more common than intentional and coordinated anti-democratic cooperation. Hall and Ambrosio (2017) catalogue the strategies that incumbents borrow from one other and subsequently adapt to domestic

contexts. Orbán's techniques have been emulated across Central Europe, while Gruevski's long incumbency provided learning lessons on the limits of such strategies. Günay and Džihic (2016) trace similar practices by linking three WBs countries, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, and Turkey, with evidence of close cooperation across borders. Such cases are also linked to Rama's illiberal tendencies.

Despite the positive effect of the EU during the democratic diffusion wave (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005), the established mechanisms have also been exposed to show limits when it comes to constraining or preventing democratic rollback. Uncertainties regarding Western Balkan countries and preference for maintaining stability in the region have allowed incumbents to take advantage of them (Bieber et al., 2017; Primatarova et al., 2012). Richter and Wunsch (2020) demonstrate, through their mechanism of money, power, and glory, the unintentional consequence of EU conditionality in supporting local autocrats. Through reform pressures and EU funding, entrenched incumbents have access to additional financial resources that help them weave clientelistic networks (money). The top-down approach to conditionality prevents non-executive actors from serving as an efficient accountability watchdog and thus concentrates resources and authority in the central government (power). Continuous contact and support from high-level EU (or US) officials legitimize incumbents regardless of their domestic and democratic credentials (glory). This well-intended external engagement can paradoxically enable the very outcome it seeks to prevent.

These findings are directly linked to what Bieber (2018, 2020) identify such trajectories as stabilitocracies. Hybrid regimes with considerable democratic shortcomings, with extensive external support for their legitimacy in exchange for maintaining stability and cooperation or regional conflict management. Sotiropoulos (2023a) shows that such regime arrangements cannot deliver what they aim to produce without becoming redundant. Instead, they rely on producing instability to justify their continuity, and in some cases longevity, while receiving (Western) support. The framework is particularly pertinent where incumbents, despite their external

legitimacy support, systematically capture domestic institutions. The concept illustrates the blurred line between how stability is framed in the region. Whether it leans towards a rhetorical commitment to democracy or a practical prioritization of political stability. For instance, Montenegro under Đukanović represented a consolidated stabilitocracy. The regime leveraged NATO and EU membership despite evidence of state capture. Through computational language models, such as word embeddings in our case studies, we aim to capture these contextual trends.

The international dimension, thus, does not operate as an independent cause of autocratization, but rather as a permissive condition that shapes the activities of domestic actors, within the opportunities provided to them. The increasing importance of China across the Western Balkans region, or the renewed presence of Russia and Eastern Europe and Central Asia complicate the role of democracy promoters (Soyaltin-Colella, 2023). Their role as "black knights" provides autocratizing incumbents with alternative sources of investments or diplomatic support (Tolstrup, 2013, 2015). Despite the multiple influencing international factors, autocratic and democratic, Domestic conditions continue to represent the primary explanatory factor. In the presence of already eroded democracies, driven by polarization or corruption, external factors can offer little protection with limited involvement.

2.3 Gaps and Contribution

The review of the autocratization literature shows that the concept is slowly managing to achieve consolidation, indicating a process in which a regime moves slowly toward autocracy. However, there are gaps concerning the scope and extent of cases analyzed that this dissertation aims to address. The complexity of autocratization suggests that configurational analysis, which rests on conjunctural causation and equifinality, may prove particularly appropriate. The presence of mutually reinforcing conditions provides promising opportunities to use qualitative

comparative analysis. Therefore, the dissertation's QCA design aims at filling this gap. Theoretically, we take into consideration the important shift of extant literature from structural preconditions to political processes driven by agency and political economy. The distinctiveness of the post-Communist region and its relevance for the autocratization wave warrant additional attention. Although paradigmatic cases such as Hungary and Poland are central to this study, other Western Balkan cases offer equally valuable insights and lessons. While North Macedonia and Serbia are the central case studies, the systematic attention remains on the entire region. Empirically, the modeling of polarization and corruption in the presence of political instability through advanced computational large language models and network analysis traces the choices and strategies of incumbent autocrats.

3 Theoretical Framework

The previous chapter has identified gaps in the current autocratization studies. From a theoretical point of view, current studies tend to focus on the individual effects of polarization, institutional capacities, corruption, regional diffusion, or political stability. Systematic analysis of their interaction remains underdeveloped. From a methodological point of view, studies focus either on individual cases and small case analysis or large-N studies that encompass global developments. Although it is still in its early days, the growing research agenda on autocratization over the past several years has highlighted the need to develop more comprehensive theories, conceptual frameworks, and case-selection criteria.

The chapter aims to build on the relevant literature and identified research to put forward a theoretical framework at the cross-case and within-case levels to address these gaps. It elaborates a reinforcing mechanism that explains the accelerated democratic erosion dynamics, once the autocratization begins. An essential point that guides this chapter concerns the distinction between onset conditions, those present and identified once the autocratization began, and a process mechanism, how these conditions evolve during the autocratization episode. The investigation of the first research question, under what configuration of conditions do autocratization episodes emerge, requires a cross-case focus in order to identify factors present at the onset. The second question, how autocratization episodes develop once they begin and why some are reversed while others are not, requires a tracing mechanism through which we explore which initial conditions translate into sustained erosion.

3.1 Situating the Theoretical Contribution

Considering the importance of domestic structural conditions as explanatory conditions, existing studies almost inevitably associate autocratization episodes with specific incumbents and their actions. Ascendance into power can therefore create early opportunities for increased power concentration (Barrington et al., 2022; Seligson, 2002), and, consequently, reduced public trust in the existing political institutions (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). Limiting economic competition by allowing the distribution of public funds to close friends of the incumbent creates fertile ground for generating corrupt practices, which can extend to even systematic state capture. Such corrupt practices play a crucial role in eroding political trust, creating rifts within society and weakening democratic institutions, thereby paving the way for autocratic tendencies. The widespread perception of corruption among citizens makes them more susceptible to authoritarian leaders' promises of cleaning the system of the corrupt political elites and provides a platform and opening for populist parties (Pérez-Gabaldón et al., 2025). Through systematic application of favoritism, Gürakar (2016) argues that the early development of clientelistic networks in Turkey was beneficial for Erdogan in limiting economic and political competition from the opposite-minded. Continuous practice allows a selected group of elites to gain power, dismantle the pillars of accountability and good governance, thereby exhibiting characteristics of state capture (Barrington et al., 2022, see 130-131).

This is particularly dangerous in highly polarized environments, where extreme political (or the existence of ethnic) divisions already make it easier for leaders to justify authoritarian measures as necessary for national unity or security (McCoy & Somer, 2024; Svolik, 2018). Autocrats' pressure on the media can range from harassment of journalists to, for instance, how state funds are redistributed across different media in the country (Markov & Đorđević, 2024). Media manipulation is an important tool for autocrats when trying to solidify their autocratic tendencies.

Control over the media allows incumbents to reinforce their narratives of stability and order and present information as shaped by the regime. Additionally, it presents opposition parties or movements as threats to national security. As a result dissenting voices do not have sufficient capacity to access information, are silenced or preemptively delegitimized. The weakening of institutions allows incumbents to expand their powers. These steps create executive aggrandizement that reduces the horizontal checks and balances of the parliament (Laebens, 2023). When executives centralize power, the erosion of institutional safeguards creates an environment where the rule of law is selectively enforced to serve the interests of the incumbent.

Two recent studies aimed to consolidate the relationship between polarization and corruption. Hajnal (2024) posits that polarization fuels corruption through the mechanisms of weakened vertical accountability, while Apergis and Pinar (2023) underscores the effect of corruption on polarization through the mechanism of incoming anti-corruption populists. Consolidating the two conditions, the dissertation argues that given the contextual possibility, both conditions operate simultaneously once the episode is underway. It evolves into a feedback loop that produces accelerated erosion. At the economic level, through redistribution of public funds, incumbents can create patronage networks and dependence on the party for public employment. Such accommodations enable the incumbents to develop informal patronage networks that dominate the political landscape (Magyar & Madlovics, 2022, pp. 14–15). The intersection of the two can, in the last instance, lead to state capture, an extreme form of corruption. Although state capture is historically exemplified when private entities seized political power, in recent cases, it has occurred when political elites effectively capture the state apparatus (David-Barrett et al., 2023).

The cases examined in this dissertation show dynamics that allow incumbents to actively exploit state resources through partisan redistribution (corrupt practices) and preempt the opposition's potential through polarization and illiberal rhetoric.

3.2 Components and Conceptual Framework

Polarization here refers to the systematic deployment of discourse that frames politics as an existential conflict, whereby the opposition is designated as a factual threat to national interests rather than a legitimate competitor (Smilova, 2021). Illiberal rhetoric, which we operationalize through speeches and statements of government officials, is used to identify multiple processes. First, it helps the incumbent to mobilize around identity- or territory-based claims. Second, it delegitimizes the opposition by presenting them as foreign agents, traitors, or complicit in destabilizing the existing order. Third, it frames executive oversight institutions and their representatives as obstacles to the people's will. Considering the victory of the ruling party when elections were held, there is no space for dissenting opinions, considering them as unacceptable, illegitimate, or contrary to the will of the people. Fourth, and last, it transforms communication by equalizing governance questions with confrontational personal questions, i.e., constructive criticism of government policies represents national betrayal. Subsequently, this dissertation conceptualizes polarization as elite-driven rhetorical polarization (Elfes et al., 2026; Engelhardt, 2025; Gajewska et al., 2024). The analytical focus is on how the ruling elite, Prime Ministers, Presidents, or ministers, employ illiberal and delegitimizing discourse to discredit opposition competition or formulate criticism as a threat. This conceptual decision aligns with the underlying empirical strategy, which operationalizes polarization through elite speeches and statements, semantic framing, and discourse patterns. Relying on Maerz and Schneider (2020), the Illiberal Speech Index, validated and expanded by Wagner et al. (2025), provides the methodological foundation for tracing the four aspects. In addition, word embedding techniques capture the semantic connections in the said discourse, and in particular with terms directly connected to the established literature.

In this framework, corruption explores the extent to which public officials use public resources for the benefit of the party and personal enrichment. It aims

to trace how restricting economic competition has created conditions favorable to risky tendering practices, which in turn, have evolved into organized network concentration (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). In captured states, the regime conducts its activities through corruption. It finances political activities and binds economic actors to the ruling elite. Repetition of these practices creates networks of interconnected economic actors with state institutions that eventually evolve into systemic corruption. This system of clientelistic networks over time becomes the regime's primary governing mechanism. All flows, contracts, development funds, or public employment are through party channels, binding economic operators into a woven web of dependence. The mechanism through which we explore such practices concerns mega-project politics. Such projects provide opportunities and resources for discretionary allocation thereby creating ideal conditions for extraction. The Skopje 2014 and Belgrade Waterfront projects, combined with the many construction works, exemplify this mechanism, with contracts repeatedly awarded to connected companies and a tendency to result in cost overruns or contract amendments. Procedural violations, in which the highest-level political actors allow implementing all measures to get the project done, indicate systematic extraction instead of administrative incompetence (Staletović, 2024).

Both conditions also function within the parameters of constant political instability. In both case studies, persistent bilateral disputes disrupt the normal functioning of the institutions and the opportunity to discuss and build a compromise. Instead, incumbents tend to perpetuate instability, allowing them to substitute democracy and governance debates with issues of security and regional developments. Within this context, both polarization and corruption tend to reinforce each other at the expense of democratic qualities and functioning democratic institutions. The crucial theoretical contribution of the dissertation lies in the specified feedback loop that describes how polarization and corruption interact inside the context of constant political instability. They do not function in isolation or operate independently. Instead, these items are mutually constitutive and reinforce each

other. The theorized feedback dynamics show that each iteration or interaction strengthens the mechanism by expanding resources and narrowing the space with respect to accountability.

The development of clientelistic networks through institutional capture and binding media to serve party interests are a channel through which it all develops. Corruption helps party-friendly media with financing, such as commercials and subsidization, which in turn amplify polarizing narratives (Mitić, 2019; Vladislavljević, 2020). Moreover, competing media are disproportionately scrutinized, harassed, or even forced to close. Media ownership concentration tends to produce a severely constrained information environment (Benazzo et al., 2025). Captured media reinforces polarizing discourse that delegitimizes independent journalism as foreign-sponsored opposition activity. It prevents critical reporting from conceivably exposing corrupt behavior, but it also acts as a precautionary measure against investigative journalism.

The second channel concerns the gradual development of clientelistic networks of mutual dependencies. Beneficiaries of corrupt awards receive preferential treatment, which helps the incumbent to mobilize a base for polarizing campaigns. On the one hand, economic operators have material interests in the regime's continuation. The deployment of grandiose national projects helps implement these tendencies. Polarization, in turn, helps preserve and validate the need for such projects by justifying them as national interests. These channels operate in concert and reinforce each other. The framework explains why in countries such as North Macedonia or Serbia autocratization proceeded extensively. The interaction perpetuates with each increment of polarization, further funding corrupt practices, which in turn prevents exposure (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Comparative Periodization: North Macedonia and Serbia

Feedback Phase	North Macedonia		Serbia	
	Period	Critical Markers	Period	Critical Markers
Latent	2006–2008	Reform rhetoric	2012–2013	Anti-corruption promises
Activation	2008–2010	NATO veto trigger, 2/3 majority	2013–2017	2/3 majority, Waterfront
Reinforcing	2010–2015	Skopje 2014 capture	2017–2024	Telekom, network density
Terminal Phase	2015–2016	<i>Political crisis</i> ^a	2024–present	<i>Critical</i> ^b

Source: Author’s illustration based on theoretical and empirical expectations

^a Crisis triggered by wiretapping scandal.

^b No equivalent shock; feedback loop is still intact.

Although polarization and corruption are theorized as mutually reinforcing parts during the autocratization episode, partial sequences are expected to account for initial rises in illiberal rhetoric that precede or coincide with early forms of discretionary resource distribution.

Economic competition tends to become more constrained as illiberal rhetoric intensifies, as evidenced by increased single-bidding participation, greater reliance on non-open procedures, and rising contract concentration. Significant corruption opportunities should coincide with the identified mega projects and be accompanied by escalating discourse (Čamprag, 2019; Huda, 2022). Companies that tend to be favored and are close to the regime tend to be better off during this period compared to a regime change, if observable (Scheiring, 2021). These actors tend to be awarded with repeated contract amendments. The rhetorical shielding ought to reflect a discourse where the opposition is represented as a foreign actor, an enemy of the state, or completely disregarded in important political issues. This is accompanied by escalated delegitimizing discourse framing mega projects as

matters of national interest. Lastly, over time, we observe eroding democratic qualities as evidenced by deteriorating horizontal accountability and declining democracy indices.

Figure 3.1 visually presents the theoretical framework depicting the self-sustaining dynamics. The proposed framework guides the case studies mechanisms and primarily applies to hybrid regimes in post-Communist countries, characterized by partial institutional consolidation. The figure captures the main theoretical claim that polarization and corruption are interactive parts of a integrated mechanism. The bidirectional nodes illustrate the feedback loop. Political instability is a vital onset condition that allows incumbents to take advantage of uncertainty about power distribution and regime continuity and equips them with the possibility of using exceptional measures. Ethnic or national contestations provide an opportunity for polarizing mobilization. Incumbents can frame political competition in existential terms. External threats, bilateral or territorial disputes, create conditions for the justification of power concentration. Access to limited resources (not-rich countries) generates distributional preferences (through patronage or clientelism). The degree of institutional capacities helps set the parameters of the scope conditions by lowering the costs or assessing the extent of institutional capture. The weak institutional capacity score similarly provides incumbents with opportunities to capture institutions and instrumentalize them for the party's benefit. Countries located in the intermediate zone, such as rapidly reorganized post-Communist countries with formal institutions but lacking embeddedness, allow incumbents to exploit them while keeping the democratic facade intact.

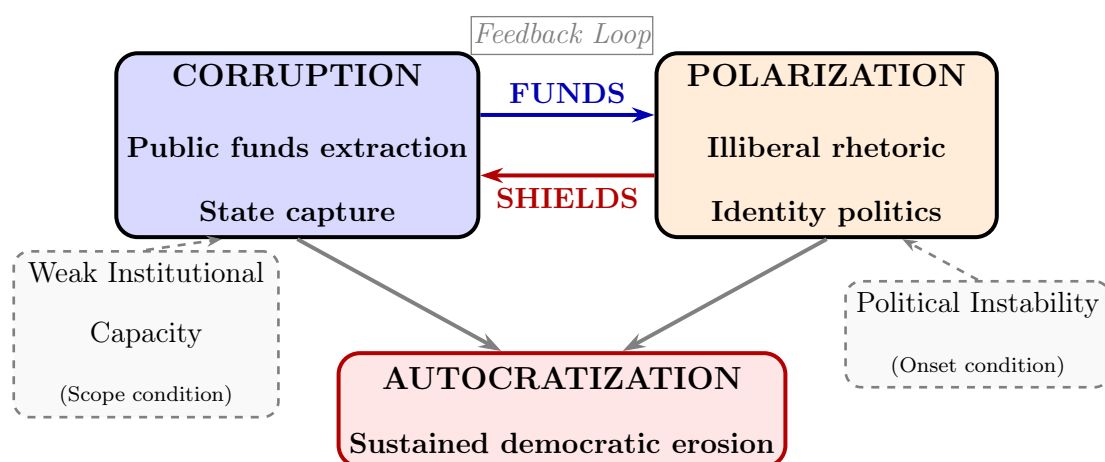


Figure 3.1: Polarization and corruption loop

Source: Author's illustration

4 Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Research Design

To address the research questions posed in the previous sections, this chapter delineates how the proposed research design combines, in the first stage, cross-case qualitative comparative analysis with, in the second stage, a qualitative analysis of the 2 case studies. The primary objective of the dissertation is to understand the conditions that lead to autocratization episodes and the temporal dynamics of what happens during these episodes. This complementary approach ensures both breadth and depth in understanding the episodes and processes of autocratization in post-Communist countries. By combining these two stages within a sequential multi-methods design, we aim to uncover not only the conditions under which autocratization occurs but also how it unfolds. More specifically, the dissertation aims to:

- Identify the configuration of conditions that are necessary and/or sufficient for an autocratization episode (through QCA analysis)
- Explore the sequences of events and mechanisms that cause erosion of democratic qualities during the identified autocratization episodes (through case study)

An essential part that guides the research design relates to the distinction between onset conditions and process mechanisms. Onset conditions are those present and identified at the beginning of the autocratization episode, while process mechanisms

concern how these conditions evolve over the course of the autocratization episode. The distinction more extensively elaborated in the theoretical framework chapter, has direct methodological implications. The first question requires a cross-case focus in order to identify factors present at the beginning of the episode. The second question, which explores sequences of events requires a tracing mechanism through which initial conditions translate into gradual, yet sustained erosion. Neither question can be sufficiently addressed using a single method, which motivates the sequential multi-method design.

We have seen in the previous two sections, literature review, and theory, that much of the literature on autocratization investigates through (comparative) cases studies (Günay & Dzihic, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Kneuer, 2021), uses large-N analysis using country-years as units of analysis (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2018), or is still on a theoretical level trying to elaborate on the conceptualization of autocratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Pelke & Croissant, 2021; Sinkkonen, 2021). Few studies (Tomini, 2017, chapter 3) employ exploratory QCA in order to investigate autocratization or modes of autocratization (Cassani & Tomini, 2018). Our approach follows a similar direction, however, based on the operationalization proposed by (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) and (Pelke & Croissant, 2021). The dissertation focuses on the period following the third-wave of autocratization, from the early 1990s to the present (2023), in the former post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Western Balkans.¹ The study focuses on the temporal and spatial scope due to the historical significance of major political and economic transformations, the substantial variation of outcomes and processes (both in terms of autocratization and earlier in democratization), and the prevalence and significance of autocratization trends of some crucial cases. Limiting the scope to the post-1990 period and excluding identified autocratization

¹**Central and Eastern Europe:** Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia. **former Soviet Union:** Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan. **Western Balkan:** Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia. Mongolia, which is also V-Dem coded as part of the region, as a **former Soviet Union satellite state**

episodes stems from theoretical considerations in the literature, which delineate the properties of these changes as substantially different from those of previous waves of autocratization. We identify 28 episodes of autocratization across 21 countries. In our analysis, we have excluded autocratization for the period 1990-1999 due to the inherent instability of some regimes in the initial period after declaring independence for most of them. We have also excluded two additional cases where autocratization episodes took place in closed autocracies (code 0 in V-Dem's regime type data).

The first step identifies the conditions present at the onset of the autocratization episodes. QCA enables systematic comparison across cases, revealing patterns and combinations of factors that lead to similar outcomes (Ragin, 2009, 2014). QCA's configurational approach is particularly suited to this study because it acknowledges the diversity of post-Communist countries, recognizes the multitude of paths of erosion of democratic qualities, and allows for the exploration of multiple conjunctural combinations of conditions that can eventually lead to the onset of autocratization (Schneider, 2008, See similar application,). The identification of the key conditions is followed by an in-depth examination of the potential mechanisms that will unravel how the autocratization process is taking shape. The follow-up case study allows us to explore the temporal dynamics of autocratization episodes in typical cases using comparatively similar data. Following the QCA analysis, the case studies are conducted to explore the dynamics, sequences, and mechanisms of the initiated autocratization episodes. In terms of temporal scope, the case study period of analysis is after the onset of the autocratization episode.

The present chapter outlines the logic and justification of the research design, selected methodology, and broad overview of the data collection and availability processes. This distributed structure allows operationalization decisions to be explored and evaluated alongside the analyses that inform them in their corresponding chapters. Accordingly, detail about calibration decisions and the distribution of the QCA analysis are provided in Chapter 5, together with the cross-case analysis.

detail on data collection, processing, cleaning, and data operationalization for the case studies are presented in Chapters 6 and 7. Chapter 6 detail the data collection of speeches and statements from the government portal of North Macedonia, an independent magazine (Fokus), and public procurement data available at the national procurement portal. It also provides information on thresholds, processing choices, illiberal speech index design and validation, and word embedding thresholds. Similar information is provided for Chapter 7, Serbia's case study, which uses public procurement data, collected speeches and statements from the ruling SNS, and its cross-validation using "Danas" newspaper.

4.2 Applied Methods

4.2.1 Qualitative Comparative Analysis

Through qualitative comparative analysis, we can explore causal complexities by identifying asymmetrical relationships between conditions and the outcome, equifinality, and conjunctures (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). Furthermore, the tradition of studying comparative politics, topics such as transitions to or from democracy (Schneider, 2008), and ethnic or political mobilization is in the spirit of QCA, as originally presented by Ragin (Ragin, 2014, chapter 8). The benefit of QCA in the study of autocratization is that it identifies multiple pathways leading to the same outcome, i.e., there is more than one possible explanation (Ragin, 2009, pp. 54–63). It is important to stress that what differentiates QCA from other statistical methods is that the existence of a plurality of pathways does not imply that these solutions are competing with each other, nor that they represent alternative solutions (Tomini, 2017, see 53). Rather, it implies that the outcome can be reached via different pathways. To deal with this, we capitalize on the possibility of studying conjunctural causation.

At the core of conjunctural causation is the idea that conditions (or variables) do not operate in isolation and, in most cases, are not solely responsible for the

occurrence of the outcome or yielding substantive and significant results (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012, on the idea of conjunctions, 43–47). Considering this premise, QCA allows us to explore how these conditions interact with each other and operate in order to explain our outcome. Tomini (2017, p. 50) notes that integrating different sets of explanatory variables can offer a fresh perspective in the study of transitions from democracy. Last but not least, we have seen that cases that move toward democracy and cases that move away from democracy or move toward autocracy do not necessarily follow linear paths. Instead, what could explain the first pathway of cases is an entirely different configuration from the latter ones (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012, pp. 53–54, 79).

QCA's advantage lies in its inherent idea of a case-oriented nature that allows us to consider the contextual differences across countries, thereby capturing the diverse set of potential combinations that emerge. The heterogeneity of countries that autocratize and the paths they take further substantiates the fitness of this approach. Autocratization can take root through an incumbent or opposition takeover, or the when institutions gradually erode unable to provide necessary conditions for democracy functioning. One of the main contributions the research makes is to highlight the importance and focal point of agency within the reverse process, i.e., autocratization. Therefore, QCA can also help us identify cases that we can explore in greater detail.

The outcome of interest is autocratization episode onset, operationalized following Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) and Pelke and Croissant (2021). An autocratization episode is identified when a country experiences a continuous and gradual decline in the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) for four or more consecutive years. Our sample contains episodes that have lasted for four years at least, but some episodes have been ongoing more extended periods of time, e.g., Hungary since 2010 or Serbia since 2013.²

²Episodes occurring within closed autocracies, where the V-Dem's regime type is coded as 0, are excluded from the analysis. These systems do not provide meaningful space for political competition.

The QCA model includes five conditions - polarization, institutional capacity, regional trends, corruption, and political stability - that are derived from the theoretical framework. These conditions indicate that autocratization is not an outcome that is arrived at by a single condition, but rather a combination of conditions. All conditions are measured at the onset of the autocratization episode or in the immediate period preceding it, in the case of lagged conditions. detail of these decisions are provided in Chapter 5. The temporal specification operationalizes the theoretical distinction the dissertation outlines, between conditions present at the onset of the episode (for QCA analysis) and the process mechanisms explored after the onset. The detailed operationalization, calibration decisions and thresholds are presented in Chapter 5 and its accompanying Appendix of Chapter 5 - QCA results.

4.2.2 Process Tracing

We supplement the cross-case analysis with two case studies whose goal is to untangle the events and sequences that take place during an autocratization episode. The advantage of case studies is their ability to focus on within-case differences within each unit of observation. This setup allows us to account for the differences across countries. Moreover, the sequential design presents us with the opportunity to explore the conditions present at the onset (the 1 in the truth table). Through SMMR - set-theoretic multi-method research - framework for selecting our typical cases, the method provides researchers with a multitude of choices to explore mechanisms to investigate the properties of the episodes (Rohlfing, 2012; Rohlfing & Schneider, 2018; Schneider & Rohlfing, 2013, 2016; Schneider & Wagemann, 2012).

The qualitative part of the dissertation analyzes the two case studies in greater detail through process tracing. As a method, it focuses on within-case analysis of how the mechanism operates in the real world (Beach & Pedersen, 2016, 2019; Bennett & Checkel, 2015; King et al., 2021; Mahoney, 2012), and tracing how

the autocratization episode unravels in relation to applied rhetoric and corrupt practices. In this research, we investigate how an autocratization episode unfolds through a feedback loop that reinforces corrupt practices through intentional polarization strategies of incumbents. The application of such illiberal rhetoric, together with the increased risk of corruption in the context of country instability, leads to further erosion of democratic qualities, which in turn fuels the episode. The feedback loop is explored in light of two mega-projects within the two case studies.

The process-tracing investigates whether the two elements have displayable fingerprints that can be unraveled. The mechanism illustrates how polarizing rhetoric helps mobilize by invoking national interests and dissociating the opposition from them. This creates space to generate resources through corruption-risk practices, which are in turn shielded by the same illiberal rhetoric. Over time, the regime establishes dense clientelistic networks, favoring friendly and connected companies. The feedback loop allows strong incumbents to centralize power and undermine the democratic qualities of established institutions.

To explore this, the case studies rely on an integrative data collection strategy. First, we collect a large corpus of statements and speeches by ruling political elites from the central government (or party) portals. Using advanced computational language models, such as quantitative text analysis (Bécue-Bertaut, 2019; Jacobi et al., 2018; Kwartler, 2017; Neuendorf, 2017; Welbers et al., 2017), we investigate the rhetoric of incumbents over time, drawing on the Illiberal speech index methodology (Maerz & Schneider, 2020; Wagner et al., 2025) supplemented by word embedding techniques that capture the semantic relationships in political discourse (Almeida & Xexéo, 2019; Bakarov, 2018; Bamler & Mandt, 2017; Mikolov et al., 2013; Rodriguez & Spirling, 2022).³

³Detail overview of the word embeddings approach is available in the Appendix of Chapters 2 to 4.

Second, public procurement data is collected from national portals, supplemented with open-access data from the Open Tender database (Government Transparency Institute, 2026), and expanded for Serbia (from the old portal) through a Government Transparency Institute data share.⁴ The data help us explore contracts related to the main project through filtering based on keywords present in the tender descriptions and location, collusion developments, and network analysis (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Kolaczyk & Csárdi, 2014; Rawlings et al., 2023; Wachs & Kertész, 2019).

The added value of the case studies is to interpret the roles and different interactions among the agents that drive the autocratization episode, as well as the circumstantial factors that can impede or accelerate the dynamic.

4.2.2.1 Case Selection

This section explains the case selection process, which is guided by the researcher's theoretical and narrower regional interests, thus focusing on the post-Communist countries. The selected cases are countries that have experienced autocratization episodes during the post-Cold War period, based on a set of predefined conditions - reduction in the levels of V-dem's liberal democracy index (LDI) in four consecutive years. The post-Cold War period, or more specifically, after 2000, serves as a useful framework, as theoretical and empirical evidence shows the different mechanisms at play between this autocratization wave and previous autocratization waves. There are no arbitrary decisions,⁵ and only autocratization episodes that take place within closed autocracies are excluded from the analysis, as these systems do not provide (or provide extremely little space) for political competition. The temporal scope of the analysis ranges from 2000 to 2023.

⁴opentender.eu. We would like to thank the Government Transparency Institute for providing us data on Serbia.

⁵We have only recoded Serbia's starting point to 2013, as for some reasons the data showed a brief interruption between 2015 and 2016 the broke the first episode and registered a new episode. From empirical point of view, we treat this as a single episode.

The case selection follows our strategy of identifying (potential) autocratization episodes. Using the techniques of Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) and Pelke and Croissant (2021) with the 2025 wave of V-Dem's data (Coppedge et al., 2025), we identify countries that have experienced a decrease in their liberal democracy index scores in at least four consecutive years. These cases are identified as autocratization episodes, i.e., where the outcome is present. Globally, we have identified 109 cases across 83 countries for the period 1990-2023. In the first stage, we have removed cases that see movements within closed autocracies and include only episodes after 2000.⁶ As a result, we arrive at 28 cases.^{7,8} Following the QCA's results, several of the countries that have experienced an autocratization episode are viable cases for an in-depth investigation, as they show different mechanisms at work.

The case selection followed the SMMR framework guidelines for selecting cases after QCA analysis (Rohlfing & Schneider, 2018). The framework distinguishes between (i) typical cases, those that exhibit high membership in both the sufficient configuration and the outcome; (ii) deviant cases consistency, those that exhibit high membership in the sufficient configuration, but low membership in the outcome; and (iii) deviant cases coverage, those that exhibit high membership in the outcome, but low membership in sufficient coverage (I.-E. Oana et al., 2021). Considering the relevance of typical cases for process-tracing due to the presence of both conditions and outcome, and permitting the mechanism to be connected to it, we proceed to focus on this comparison.

⁶2000 is used as a cutoff point to restrict the potential influence of the post-Communist split for some countries by allowing several consecutive years of independence

⁷Last iteration of the Episodes of Regime Transformation dataset (ERT) identifies 2006 as the starting point for Hungary's autocratization episode. However, we split the country into two different periods, Hungary 2006-2010 and Hungary 2010-on, due to their qualitative differences.

⁸Cases: Albania 2013, Armenia 2003, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2002, Bulgaria 2001, Bulgaria 2017, Croatia 2013, Georgia 2000, Georgia 2008, Georgia 2017, Hungary 2010, Kyrgyzstan 2012, Kyrgyzstan 2019, Latvia 2007, Lithuania 2013, Moldova 2005, Moldova 2013, Mongolia 2000, Montenegro 2013, North Macedonia 2008, North Macedonia 2021, Poland 2014, Romania 2001, Romania 2021, Russia 2000, Russia 2012, Serbia 2013, Slovakia 2006, Slovenia 2016, Ukraine 2010.

North Macedonia (2008-2016) and Serbia (2013-2023) are selected as typical cases identified by the SMMR framework comparable. Both have lengthier autocratization episodes, and the comparable comparative data allows for the exploration of the theorized mechanism. Both cases have relatively comparable data sources and collected datasets, such as speeches of head of states and governments (and ministers), and public procurement data. The case selection process takes into account the dissertation's narrower interest in the WBs region, and data availability for more detailed exploration of the processes. Despite these methodological and theoretical considerations, we ensure that the selected typical cases of autocratization are representative of broader patterns. The researcher's contextual familiarity and expertise in the WBs enhance the depth and potential nuance of the within-case analysis. The case selection is based on selecting cases considered typical, i.e., we observe both the presence of the condition and the outcome. (Rohlfing, 2012).

The collection of speeches and statements by prominent party members, and elected officials, allows the dissertation to tap into the discourse and track polarizing practices through increasing tendencies to resort to illiberal rhetoric. Using dictionary and machine learning methods, the dissertation identifies yearly and person's trends as well as illustrative examples of such illiberal rhetoric. The North Macedonia speeches dataset contains 20169 speeches or statements, which have been subset to 2423 speeches that have sufficient length. The Serbian dataset contains 15 377 speeches or statements, of which 3317 contain sufficient length that can be used for the analysis.

The case studies go beyond perception related indicators for corruption measurement in order to capture potential repetitive dealings between state institutions and connected suppliers. Although perception based indices provide possibility for comparability across cases, they still suffer from potential biases, as more prominent cases can be weighted substantially more compared to other practices. Although such assessment of prominent high profile cases are well detailed, there is limited evidence for systematic assessment of the transaction that proceeded without in-

stances of corruption. Therefore, relying on other data sources, the analysis moves to red flags and corruption risk indices (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016). The data allows for validation of the said indicators using statistical methods (binomial regression models) of all relevant concepts (red flags). Moreover, the granularity of data provides essential evidence for case studies, by tracking temporal and institutional trends and practices. Therefore, the presented transactional approach provides methodological advantages aligned with case studies. The public procurement dataset of North Macedonia contains over 500 000 tenders, 144 616 of which are only one lots that have sufficient information for relevant variables. The Serbian dataset contains over 600 000 contracts (307 565 from the old source and 295 637 from the new source), of which 200 845 have been initially identified for the analysis. Both datasets are further subset to focus on the specific projects that highlighted the importance of the terms, Skopje 2014 and Belgrade Waterfront and other major (re)construction projects (extended).⁹

4.2.2.2 Integrating Cross-case and Within-case Analysis

The sequential design does not represent a merely additive function but it represents an integrative framework. The SMMR framework specifies how the QCA and process-tracing findings inform each other. In other words, the QCA shapes how process-tracing is implemented. It identifies sufficient conditions, as traced in the case studies, through our truth table and subsequent minimization, and the case typology (typical, deviant-consistency, deviant-coverage) guides our case selection process and analytical mechanism. The integration addresses the limitations of the individual methods. QCA can identify configurations that produce the outcome, while process-tracing can trace mechanisms within cases but cannot establish cross-case patterns on its own, or identify which configurations activate the mechanism for that purpose.

⁹More details about the case studies datasets are contained in the respective case study chapters

Central to the integration process is delineating what each method captures temporally. QCA's section operates at the cross-case level aiming to capture the conditions at the episode's onset, or which configurations are present when the autocratization episode begins. In contrast, the process-tracing of the two case studies follows the temporal unfolding of the mechanisms through the episode by observing sequences, feedback dynamics, and interactions that elude the cross-sectional analysis. This allows us to explore whether some conditions that are present at the onset continue to be present during the episode, or other conditions also emerge during the autocratization process. For instance, some function as triggers at the onset, while others intensify or entrench the processes once these are underway. The theoretical framework conceptualizes the case studies through the polarization-corruption nexus, supported through institutional weaknesses and partial influences from foreign actors.

Polarization and instability create favorable conditions for autocratization to commence, by for instance delegitimizing institutional constraints. The clientelistic networks that develop through corrupt practices, and illustrated through networks of affiliations require time to consolidate. Patterns illustrated through the series of descriptive statistics in the next chapter illustrate this point. North Macedonia and Serbia as two typical cases of autocratization within the post-Communist space exhibit this nexus of presence of polarization and corruption and institutional vulnerabilities, accompanied with the absence of political stability. The case studies that follow expand the conditions present at the onset with the interaction of corrupt networks that emerge during the autocratization episode. Therefore, the dissertation design underlines the importance of QCA for establishing the configurational present at the onset, and the case studies reveal the mechanisms that produce sustained democratic erosion.

Set-theoretic Analysis of Post-Communist Countries

Autocratization, which is defined as the gradual erosion of democratic qualities within democracies and autocracies, rarely results from a single cause. Rather, it results from complex interactions of multiple conditions, such as the actions of incumbents, economic difficulties, and/or structural (institutional) weaknesses, each providing distinct pathways towards autocratization (N. Bermeo, 2016). Contemporary autocratization literature has moved beyond the democratic breakdown paradigm (Linz & Stepan, 1978), and places greater focus on the influence of political agents, the importance of institutional design, and accompanying contextual conditions (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021). This chapter explores five causal conditions: polarization, corruption, political stability, institutional capacity, and regional trends, to better understand their interplay in initiating autocratization. Studying autocratization in the post-Communist region is particularly crucial considering its unique political and historical contexts. The region offers a particularly compelling laboratory, being the front-runner in testing configurational theories of autocratization. The region, through dramatic transitions from authoritarian communism to various forms (and degrees of) democracy and hybrid regimes, provides a distinctive setting to observe the reverse processes of democratization,

i.e., how established democratic qualities are slowly eroded. These countries share similar and comparable starting points (communist rule); nevertheless, they have experienced substantially divergent pathways towards democratization and its reversal over the past decades. This variation allows us to explore how different combinations produce similar outcomes, and still consider the importance of context. A better understanding of these dynamics within the post-Communist region can yield valuable insights into similar emerging trends or comparable challenges in other regions.

While the existing literature has explored these factors in isolation and individually (McCoy & Somer, 2024; Sotiropoulos, 2023a), or integrated a broader range of factors (Tomini, 2017), this analysis contributes through a systemic configurational examination of the post-Communist region. This approach helps to move beyond linear causal models or single-country studies, instead capturing the complexity and multiple pathways (equifinality) of autocratization episodes. This chapter is the first of two empirical stages in the dissertation's sequential multi-methods design. The chapter aims to identify the configuration of conditions present at the onset of an autocratization. By contrast, the following case studies trace the mechanisms underlying the process. The following chapter is divided as follows. In the next section, we discuss the data collection process and our final dataset. This is followed by an in-depth discussion on the conditions and outcome of the fsQCA analysis (Ragin, 2000, 2009, 2014). In the last two parts, we present the results and discussion from the research.

5.1 Conceptual Framework and Data

The central analytical tool used in this chapter is qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), a set-theoretic method developed by Charles Ragin (Ragin, 2014). Unlike traditional statistical analysis (large-N), whose focus is on identifying an isolated causal effect of single variables, QCA explicitly focuses on combinations (or configurations) of multiple conditions that together can lead to the specific outcome. In practical terms, QCA aims to identify the different combinations of the identified conditions that lead to the same outcome, autocratization episodes. More specifically, the analysis employs a fuzzy-set QCA (fsQCA), a variant suited to dealing with nuanced or gradual processes (Ragin, 2000). Fuzzy sets allow us to assign partial membership scores to cases, representing a varying degree to which a case belongs to a particular set.¹ Notably, the configurational approach recognizes that certain factors become critical only in combination with others. For instance, polarization may contribute to the erosion of democratic qualities only when coupled with domestic institutional weaknesses that allow incumbents to exploit and employ corrupt practices. Similarly, regional autocratization trends may amplify domestic political (in)stability that negatively affects democratic qualities. By explicitly considering these interdependencies, the analysis provides deeper insights into combinations that trigger autocratization episodes, thereby offering a richer understanding of the complexity inherent in the processes of democratic erosion in the post-Communist space.

To compile the dataset for our cross-case QCA analysis, we combined several different data sources. We relied on data from V-Dem (and accompanying datasets V-Party and Episodes of Regime Transformation), to operationalize autocratization episodes and regional trends. Data from the World Bank (WB) for institutional capacity and political stability (Kaufmann & Kraay, 2024), and data from Transparency International (TI) to operationalize corruption (Transparency International,

¹The QCA analysis in R has been conducted using I. E. Oana and Schneider (2018) and Duşa (2018) respective SetMethods and QCA packages.

2025).² The novel dataset integrated from these sources is compiled to identify and filter autocratization episodes in the post-Communist region, and used to analyze systematically autocratization episodes through a configurational approach. The dataset enables systematic comparison of how various combinations of conditions create different pathways across countries that share similar transition experiences but followed divergent trajectories.

We elaborate on how polarization, corruption, institutional capacity, political stability, and regional developments interact to produce autocratization episodes. This process follows the configurational approach outlined in the theoretical framework and research design section. In total, we identify 28 autocratization episodes across 21 post-communist countries for the period 2000-2024 (see Figure 5.1). Some countries have experienced multiple episodes during this period, explaining why the number of episodes exceeds the number of countries.

The analysis follows QCA's logic of equifinality, which recognizes that multiple pathways can produce the same outcome (Ragin, 2014). To identify the configurations and pathways, we employed a three-step analytical approach. First, we examine whether there are conditions that can jointly explain autocratisation episodes.³ The SUIN analysis explores whether a group of conditions, while individually unnecessary, might jointly form a configurational necessary set (I.-E. Oana et al., 2021).

Second, we conduct a sufficiency analysis using the truth table approach to identify configurations that consistently lead to autocratization. The truth table contains the empirical evidence by separating cases into one of the logically possible combinations (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). The process involves examining all

²For more detail on the dataset see Appendix 2

³This causal complexity for necessary conditions can be addressed by investigating the combinations of conditions. For this purpose we conduct a SUIN analysis. SUIN stands for "sufficient, but necessary part of a factor that is insufficient, but necessary for an outcome"(Schneider & Wagemann, 2012, p. 79) Combinations of the SUIN conditions are represented from logical OR and constitute supersets. From this it follows that if statements of necessity contains logical AND or logical OR operator contains at least one SUIN condition. Such groups of conditions represent an equivalent of a higher order constructs.

possible combinations of the five conditions ($2^5 = 32$ possible combinations), and demonstrating which combinations show high consistency (reliably high results with the outcome), and coverage (empirically relevant across the cases).

Third, we apply enhanced standard analysis (ESA) to extract the most theoretically meaningful solutions. ESA helps us address conflicting simplifying assumptions about unobserved cases, contradictory claims of necessity, and impossible remainders that contradict the theoretical expectations (I.-E. Oana et al., 2021).

Calibration strategy

A crucial step in the fsQCA is the calibration of outcome and conditions into fuzzy-set membership scores. The calibration process transforms raw scores from the data collection and processing into values between 0 and 1. This represents the degree of membership in conceptual sets. Following best practices (I.-E. Oana et al., 2021), we specify three qualitative anchors for each condition: full-membership (1), cross-over point (0.5), and full non-membership (0). Table 5.1 presents the calibration thresholds for all conditions. These are investigated in detail and justified in the next section.

The thresholds are based on the empirical distributions and take into consideration theoretical expectations. For instance, we bear in mind that the region does not score highly on most conditions, and the calibration accounts for this contextual factor. An example would be corruption. Although the Transparency International index ranges from 0 to 100, and the top twenty least corrupt countries have scores above 70, considering this for our sample would have resulted in a skewed distribution or almost no cases of non-members. To test the robustness of the specifications, we have also tested alternative calibration thresholds. The conducted sensitivity analysis for each condition aims to assess the stability of the results. The results of the robustness tests are presented in Appendix (B.3) of Chapter 5, robustness tests.

Table 5.1: Calibration Thresholds for QCA Conditions and Outcome

Condition	Original Range	Full Out (0)	Crossover (0.5)	Full (1)	In Source
Polarization	V-Dem scale	1.8	0	-1.8	V-Dem political polarization
Corruption	0-100	55	40	25	TI Corruption Perception Index
Regional Trends	0-1	0.7	0.54	0.2	V-Dem LDI (lagged regional mean)
Institutional Capacity	-2.5 to 2.5	-0.8	0	1.1	WB Government Effectiveness
Political Stability	-2.5 to 2.5	-1.5	-0.2	1.5	WB Political Stability Index
Outcome	Autocratization episode: ≥ 0.05 LDI decline over ≥ 4 consecutive years				

Source: Author's operationalization based on theoretical expectations and data

Note: For Polarization and Corruption, higher original values indicate *less* of the condition (less polarized, less corrupt). Calibration inverts this so that full membership (1) represents high polarization and high corruption, respectively. Full membership of Regional Trends indicate democratization tendencies in neighboring countries. For Institutional Capacity, full membership (1) indicates strong organizational/institutional state capacities. For Political Stability, full membership (1) indicates presence of stability, with the inverse (0) indicating non-political stability.

5.2 Operationalization and Data

Drawing on the contextual autocratization literature, we focus on five key conditions that theory suggests interact to trigger an autocratization episode. Polarization as a mechanisms that enables authoritarian behavior (Somer et al., 2021), corruption that erodes legitimacy in institutions and decline people's trust (Barrington et al., 2022; Sotiropoulos, 2023a), weak institutional capacity that fails to constrain executive power aggrandizement (Benasaglio Berlucchi & Kellam, 2023; Laebens, 2023), political instability that enables a window of opportunity for incumbents to consolidate power (N. Bermeo, 2016), and regional autocratic diffusion that provides support to incumbents from like-minded entities (Günay & Dzihic, 2016; Lebanidze, 2020).

The analysis covers 28 autocratization episodes across 21 post-Communist countries, operationalized through a sustained decrease in democratic qualities of the LDI. The approach allows us to move beyond the single case studies and scale back from the large-N analysis by focusing on episodes as the unit of analysis instead of country-year.

5.2.1 Outcome - Autocratization Episode

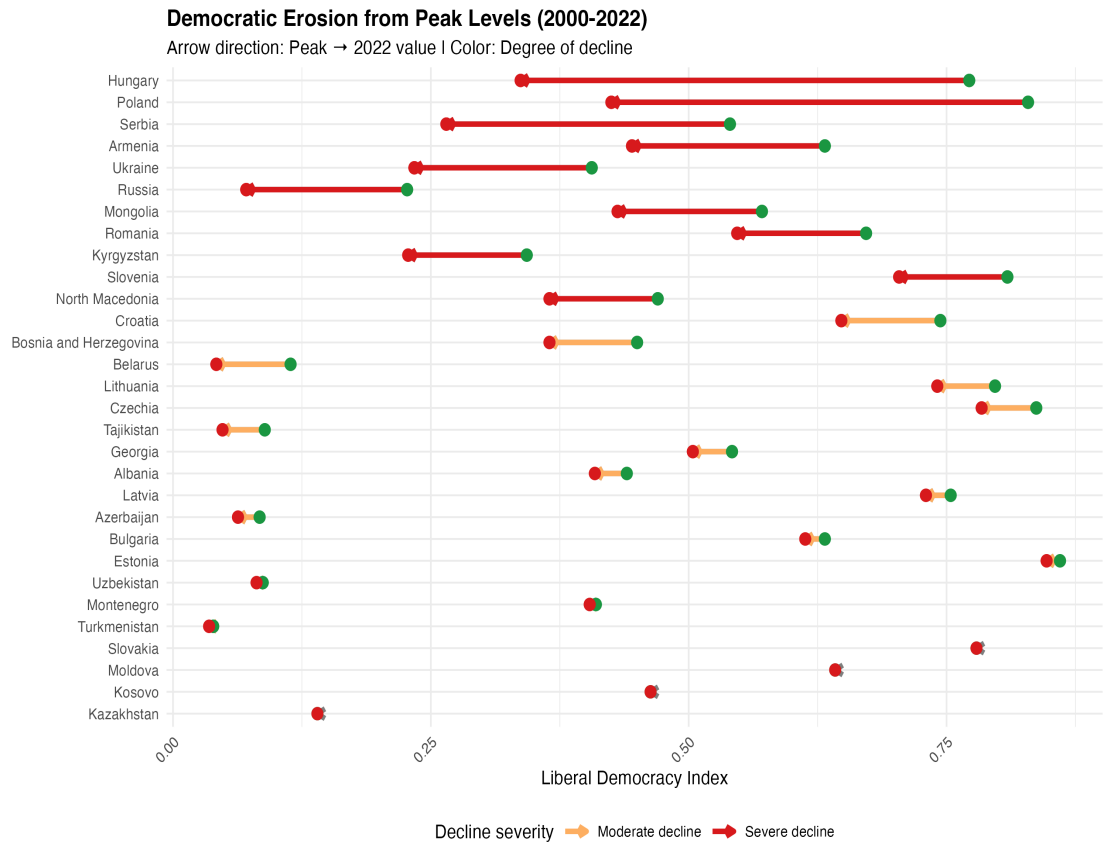
Autocratization refers to the gradual erosion of democratic institutions, norms, and practices within the existing political system. It unfolds incrementally and can cause autocratization episodes. To identify autocratization episodes, the dissertation operationalized the outcome on the basis of cumulative and sustained declines in the LDI scores. Following Luhrman's framework Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), we operationalized autocratization as a sustained decline in the Liberal Democratic Index (LDI) of at least 0.05 points over a minimum of 4 consecutive years. Some autocratization episodes pertain beyond the four-year threshold, with Hungary and Serbia representing such typical cases. Such processes emphasize and can capture the gradual, persistent nature of democratic erosion across multiple dimensions.

The definition captures a widespread democratic decline across the post-Communist region, which has become an archetypal space of the third-wave autocratization. Between 2000 and 2022, 21 of 30 countries have experienced autocratization. Some countries have experienced multiple autocratization episodes during the period of analysis. For instance, Bulgaria, Georgia, North Macedonia, and Romania have each experienced an autocratization episode at some point in the 2000s, which was followed by improvements in democratic qualities, and then another reversal in the late 2010s or early 2020s. Some of the most prominent and in-depth investigated cases include Hungary and Poland. Hungary, during its autocratization episode, which is still ongoing, is the most extreme case. Between 2010 and still on going, under Prime Minister Viktor Orban, the country descended from a consolidated liberal democracy to an electoral autocracy, dropping 0.41 points on its LDI. Similarly, Poland, under Jarosław Kaczyński and his ruling PiS party, and Serbia, under Prime Minister and President Aleksandar Vučić and his SNS party, have also been severely affected with substantial declines in democracy scores. The prominence of Hungarian and Polish cases is partly due to their EU membership, a club of liberal democratic countries, which allowed some other episodes of autocratization to go under the radar.

Compared to their peak LDI scores, Figure 5.1 illustrates the distinct patterns, severity, and timeline of democratic backsliding across the region of interest. It presents the decline (if any) of the LDI score from its highest score. The arrows capture the full trajectory of decline, indicating how each country has fallen from its most democratic period. By measuring the score, the figure reveals the extent to which countries have reversed their democratic progress. Autocratization affected countries across the entire spectrum, from highly democratic ones, such as the EU member states (e.g., Slovenia and Czechia), to countries with already poor democratic qualities, such as Kyrgyzstan and Russia. Moreover, some autocratization episodes also occur among electoral autocracies, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Russia. Severe autocratizers are countries that have been most severely affected

by the decline of their democratic qualities. These cases also illustrate a prolonged autocratization period.

Figure 5.1: LDI developments: post-Communist countries



Source: Author's calculations based on V-Dem data

5.2.2 Conditions and Calibration

To explain these autocratization episodes, the analysis rests on five conditions that capture the country's structural characteristics, the incumbent's agency, the system's institutional characteristics, and events in the immediate neighborhood. The conditions are derived from theory or have been examined as individual explanatory variables in the existing literature. It considers some of the unique post-Communist specificities that interact with our conditions. Weak institutions and initial higher levels of corruption, bordering systemic corruption, polarization (tied to ethnic wars in the Balkans or inter-state conflicts in the Caucasus, and anti-communist ideological divisions in Central Europe), and discouraging regional

dynamics linked to the international dimension, such as prospects of integration are the contextual and background conditions for this set of cases (Lebanidze, 2020; Sotiropoulos, 2023a). Limiting the analysis to five conditions may exclude other explanatory factors⁴; however, some of our conditions can also be proxied by others, thus indirectly accounting for them. The conditions in our analysis are calibrated as fuzzy sets to capture the gradation between cases that have experienced a more substantial decline in some of the conditions.

5.2.2.1 Political polarization

Political polarization is one of the most present explanations in recent studies of autocratization processes. It operates not only as a single explanatory factor but also as a part of configurational patterns that require systemic evaluation through clusters of cases. In order to precisely discern the role of polarization in autocratization processes, it is necessary to examine how different agents interact with the existing institutions, take into consideration temporal patterns, and the constraining possibilities of structural conditions. These patterns can generate multiple pathways to autocratic onset. Considering how polarization is operationalized by the incumbents, we can consider the multiple potential to employ multiple strategies. It can delegitimize the opposition, erode democratic norms, facilitate authoritarian appeal, enable anti-pluralist practices, or divide citizens through illiberal statements. Opposition leaders, parties, or even citizens who oppose the incumbent policies are portrayed as existential threats to the political system. The literature is replete with examples of how incumbents drive polarization to further their agenda and remain in power, all the while gradually breaking democratic qualities (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Somer et al., 2021).

The data draws from the V-Dem's (societal and political) polarization indicator, which captures the extent to which society divides into antagonistic camps characterized by mutually exclusive allegiances. It is lagged by 1 year to capture the

⁴For instance, economic inequality through GINI index, ethnic fractionalization or social instability

state of polarization in the year leading to the onset of the autocratization episode. It reflects 'us versus them' dynamics within the political system, encompassing political elites' polarization and broader societal divisions (Coppedge et al., 2021).⁵

The data reveal three distinctive patterns among post-Communist countries that challenge the linear assumptions about polarization and autocratization. The most striking example is the pattern of severe polarization characterized by dramatic temporal dynamics in which polarization increases precede (and accompany) the autocratization episode, suggesting its role as an enabler of subsequent autocratization. The levels of polarization increase vary across cases, from more dramatic, intensive rises over a short period to prolonged increases, indicating different pathways that contribute to erosion (Somer et al., 2021).

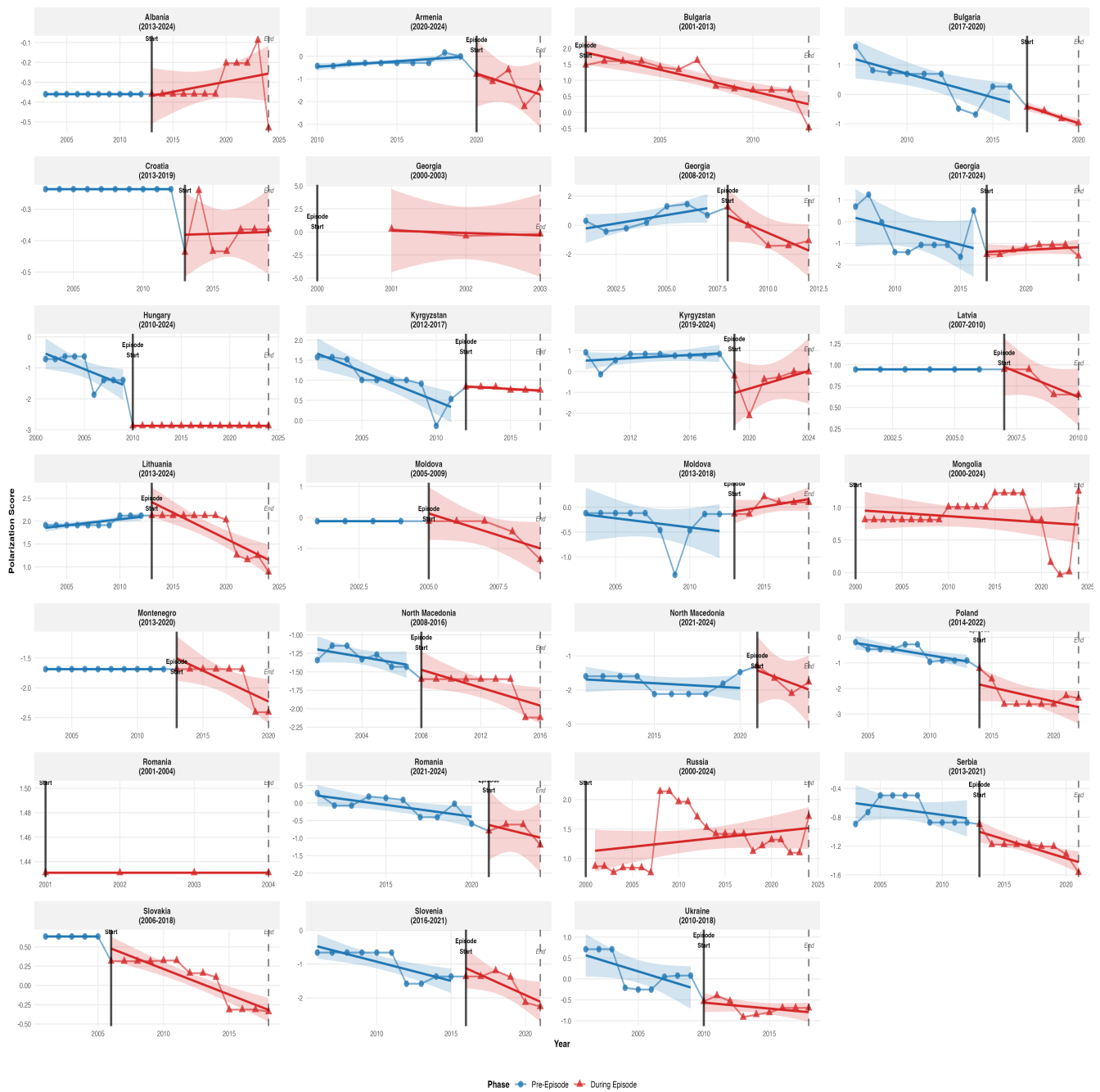
A second pathway is observed across cases that have experienced more moderate polarization fluctuations. This pattern reveals a more complex relationship, which may be enabled or constrained by other conditions, between polarization and autocratization. The most challenging pattern, the third pathway, is in cases where polarization is absent or experienced only at a minimal level. It entails cases with a persistently high level of polarization (high baseline and chronic polarization) or a very low level of polarization that remains stable. Such patterns indicate possible pathways towards an autocratization episode occurring in the absence of polarization or simply bypassing it.

We observe a striking development in countries that have experienced severe polarization, which represent the same group of cases that are also democratic backsliders, in Figure 5.2. For these cases, polarization precedes autocratization episodes by creating enabling conditions. Moreover, the magnitude of polarization increase correlates with the magnitude of erosion of democratic qualities. For example, a moderately polarized country such as Hungary in 2003 experienced

⁵The political polarization scores are calibrated so that higher negative values (-1.8) indicate higher degree of polarization, indicating fully membership into the set. The crossover point for set membership is 0.

intensified polarization that only deteriorated after 2010. In the post-2000 period, consolidated regions such as Central Europe have witnessed the most significant rise in polarization levels. Although polarization is an essential explanatory condition for autocratization episodes, we also note that not all cases experienced a substantial worsening before their respective autocratization episodes. Some cases, such as Montenegro, already had a very high level of polarization before the episode began. While polarization trends offer important insights into the country's trajectory, it is also important to consider how polarized a country is at the onset of an autocratization episode, i.e. the initial starting point of our data. This is particularly important in conjunction with other potential explanatory conditions. The varying temporal relationships across the different patterns suggest the potential for multiple pathways through which polarization operates. The heterogeneity in polarization changes indicates that polarization operates within a broader configuration of conditions, rather than acting as an independent cause of autocratization.

Figure 5.2: Polarization developments: post-Communist countries



Source: Author's calculations based on V-Dem data

5.2.2.2 Corruption

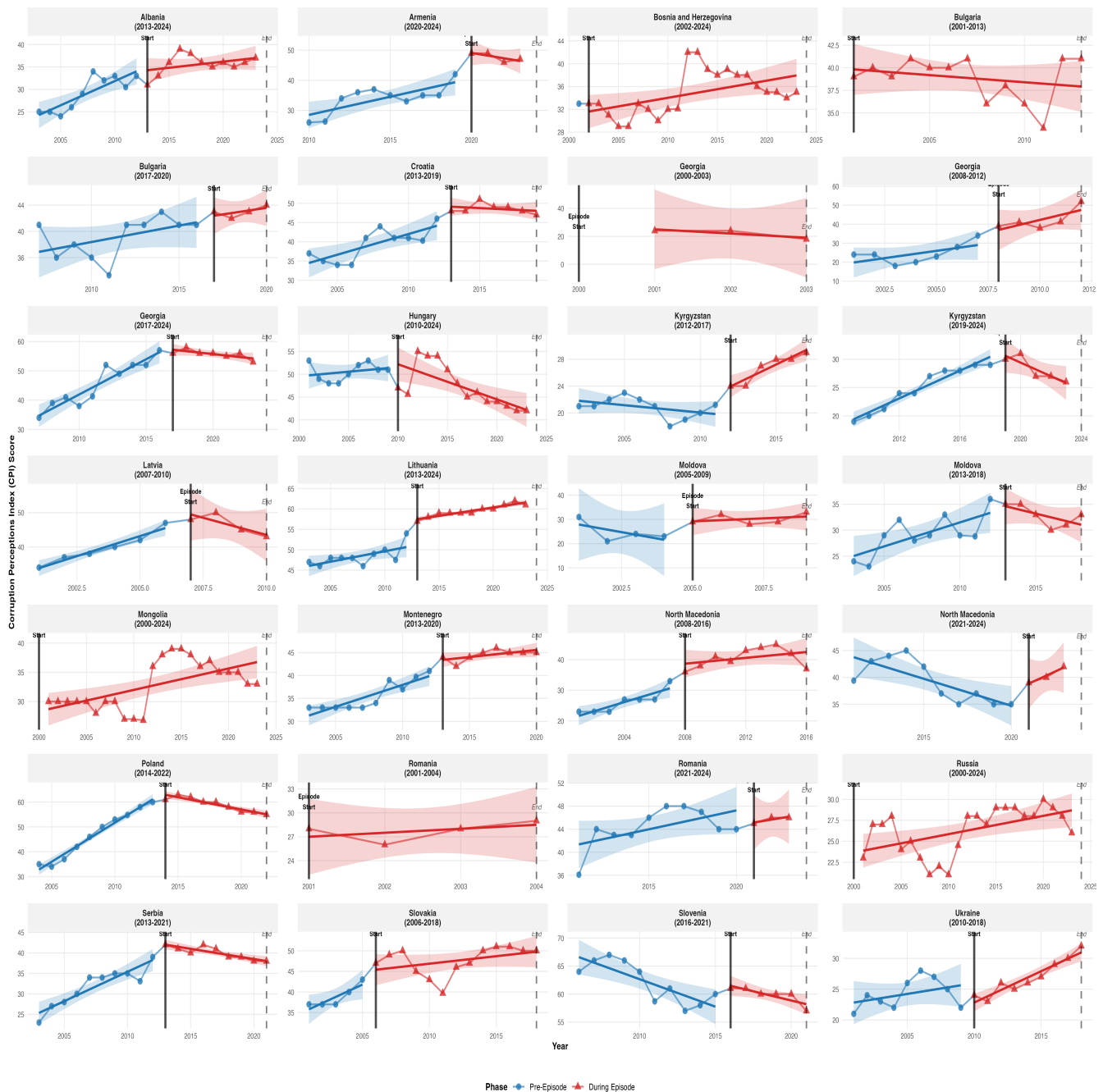
Corruption has been closely associated with processes of autocratization, both as a cause and a condition. It has a profound anti-democratic potential that lies in the potential to undermine equality. Widespread corruption tends to exclude citizens from active participation in democratic activities, violating the principle of equal participation and reducing citizens' trust in institutions. Existing studies point to systemic corruption stemming from the communist legacy, which political actors can exploit by mobilizing the system to their advantage and promoting corrupt practices (V. J. Bunce & Wolchik, 2010). Some forms of corruption, such as favoritism in the allocation of public funds, nepotism in employment, patronage, and cronyism, can directly affect equality and people's trust in institutions. By abusing entrusted power for private gain, corrupt elites and incumbents hollow out mechanisms of accountability, co-opt state resources, and silence opposition voices (Rothstein, 2011). Such subversion of democratic norms can enable autocratizing incumbents to entrench their power by rewarding loyalists and creating patronage networks that become deeply embedded in the political system (Fierăscu, 2019). The channeling of resources concentrates wealth among the incumbent's close collaborators and reshapes the competitive landscape in the incumbent's favor. It can affect the media landscape (through editorial policies), obtain large construction projects or consulting services under favorable conditions.

To examine corruption (perception or risk), the study relies on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), which scores perceived levels of corruption on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (highly clean). The advantage of using CPI lies in its coverage of all (post-Communist) countries. As such the indicators allows to more precisely compare cases using a pre-defined and validated and definition and. For the purposes of QCA, the data are lagged by one year to capture the levels of corruption preceding the autocratization episodes. The approach aims to establish temporal precedence. Nevertheless, as Prelec notes, it is also important to recognize the ability of incumbents to adapt their behavior and

to transform their corrupt practices into more systematic forms of state capture (Barrington et al., 2022, p. 133).

The data (Figure 5.3) reveals different levels of corruption and directions reflecting varying pathways through which corrupt practices interact with other conditions and autocratization. Cases experiencing the most severe corruption demonstrated dramatic deterioration in perceived governance qualities, with corruption levels worsening before or during the autocratization episode. However, some cases experienced declining levels of corruption before the autocratization episode that have persisted, or were reinforced, during the episode. Such patterns suggest that corruption can play a role of both an enabler of autocratization, but also serve as an accelerating mechanism. The initial conditions create vulnerabilities that can be carefully exploited and expanded into corrupt networks in order to consolidate power. A second pattern of moderate corruption worsening covers cases with more modest rates, indicating conditions in which other conditions compensate in driving autocratic outcomes. The clusters of cases within this group tend to have worse conditions at the outset. The last pattern is countries that do not note any substantial changes in their corruption levels. It includes cases with relatively stable initial high or low levels of corruption. Across the former group of cases, constant exposure to corrupt practices creates permanent vulnerabilities for autocratic rule.

Figure 5.3: CPI developments: post-Communist countries



Source: Author's calculations based on TI data

Taken together, corruption is best understood as an enabling environment for autocratization. It cuts across many aspects by weakening institutional safeguards, fostering public disillusionment, and providing incumbents with political and financial resources and opportunities to exploit them while consolidating their rule. This is a fertile ground for incumbents to further strengthen their polarizing actions,

suggesting the potential for the two conditions to act as a feedback loop. In most extreme cases, incumbents can fully capture the state and permanently distort the level playing field. In Russia, over the decades, Prime Minister/President Putin managed to fully capture state resources and severely restrict any political and economic competition. In some cases, such as Ukraine under Viktor Yanukovich or even Bulgaria under the long tenure of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, such efforts have been rebuffed or overcome (Montenegro and North Macedonia). In the absence of free and fair elections that stimulate political and economic competition, corruption tends to increase the risk of democratic deterioration and serving as an early warning of an autocratization episode (McMann et al., 2017). Even EU member states such as Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria continue to struggle to tackle corruption, which has stalled deeper EU integration and more substantial democratic consolidation. Corruption has thus moved from being considered as a deviant outside behavior to a leading state principles exercised by incumbents (Bozóki & Fleck, 2024, pp. 132–134), as illustrated in Figure 5.3.

5.2.2.3 Regional trends

The post-2000 period, recognized as the third reverse wave of democratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), has witnessed democratic backsliding across multiple regions worldwide. Among the 19 geographic regions tracked by V-Dem data, eight have experienced democratic decline. These descriptive trends indicate that autocratization is not an individual or isolated instance. Instead there are regional patterns that indicate systematic diffusion of autocratic practices and legitimizing narratives. The post-Communist region, and particularly Central and Eastern European countries, emerged as the second most affected region globally, with countries moving substantially towards autocracy (an average LDI decline of 0.075 points). Other than the post-Communist region, only Central America noted a more severe regional democratic erosion during this period. The post-Communist region proved to be especially vulnerable to such spillover effects. Therefore when

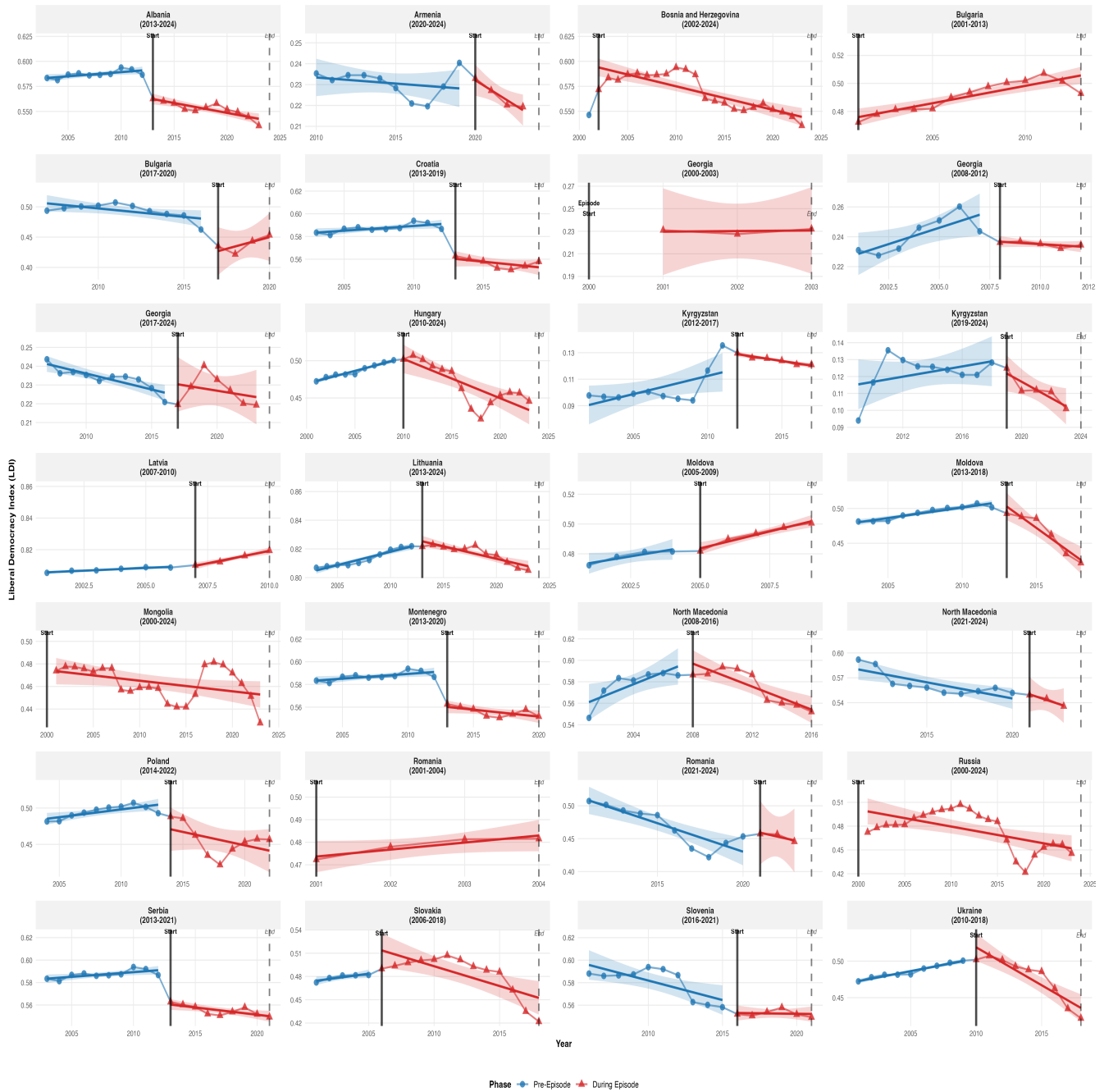
exploring trends and developments, it is necessary to consider the interconnected political networks (of political parties), shared institutional past (deeply integrated into the communist network), and economic challenges. Taken together it has created pathways for autocratic learning and reinforcement. For instance, Orban's pioneering of 'illiberal democracy' concept resembled similar occurrences in Poland (under PiS), Vučić (under SNS) in Serbia, and even Gruevski's (VMRO-DPMNE) experimentation in North Macedonia (Bochsler & Juon, 2020; Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Plattner, 2020; Rupnik, 2022). Moreover, similar media capture techniques, judicial interference, and civil society restrictions spread across the region through policy borrowing and continuous innovation.

To address this temporal challenge, we operationalize the regional democratic context (regional trends) using a one-year LDI lag that will capture the overall trajectories in the country's immediate environment prior to the onset of the autocratic episode. The lag helps us establish temporal precedence, i.e., measuring regional conditions before the episode begins. The lag also helps us balance the potential temporal sensitivity and allows us to capture recent shifts in political dynamics.⁶ This strategy can help us to also potentially trace developments that align with theories on opportunistic structures, policy borrowing, and learning potential. Disaggregating these regional trends to the episode level data, we can observe three distinct trajectories of regional dynamics. The accelerated erosion cluster, noted in cases such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovakia, Hungary, and, more recently, Armenia, underscores the unfavorable conditions these cases have faced in halting democratic erosion and reversing this wave. These episodes tend to cluster after 2010, when the Post-communist region experienced intensified backsliding (Figure 5.4). However, some cases of autocratization also took place when regional trends drove towards increased democratization. The second cluster of cases, the reversal trajectory, indicates that another potential pathway is that

⁶For instance, if an autocratic episode begins at year X, the aim of the condition is to capture the preceding conditions (X-1), period when incumbents were formulating their potential erosion strategies.

countries can still autocratize despite regional dynamics favoring the opposite, triggering the likely source of domestic-regional configurations that can trigger. Bulgaria, Latvia, and Moldova faced precisely this scenario in the mid-2000s. Lastly, some countries tend to experience multiple autocratic episodes interspersed with periods of recovery and stabilization. However, within such cases, we can also observe a volatile episodic cluster. Such outcomes potentially indicate that neither domestic institutional factors nor regional contexts alone determine the outcome.

Figure 5.4: Regional LDI developments: post-Communist countries



Source: Author's calculations based on V-Dem data

What emerges from these trends is that while the post-Communist region, overall, experienced decline on average, individual countries have shown resilience within and improvements during overlapping periods. The heterogeneity that occurs justifies our episodic approach to investigating onsets of autocratization periods, allowing us to potentially capture how a country responds differently to regional

contexts depending on the different configuration of co-present conditions. In addition, sequencing matters given the distinctive contexts in the 2000s (more marginal erosion) and the 2010s (more substantive erosion). Such stratification demonstrates that the meaning and mechanisms of regional influence evolved over time. Closer connections among the "illiberal axis" in the 2010s have more easily enabled the sharing of "best practices" and provided a platform for authoritarian learning. Therefore, rather than assuming a uniform regional effect, the dynamics underscore the importance of QCA's configurational logic, that of regional trends intersecting with domestic polarization, corruption, or institutional quality.

5.2.2.4 Institutional capacity

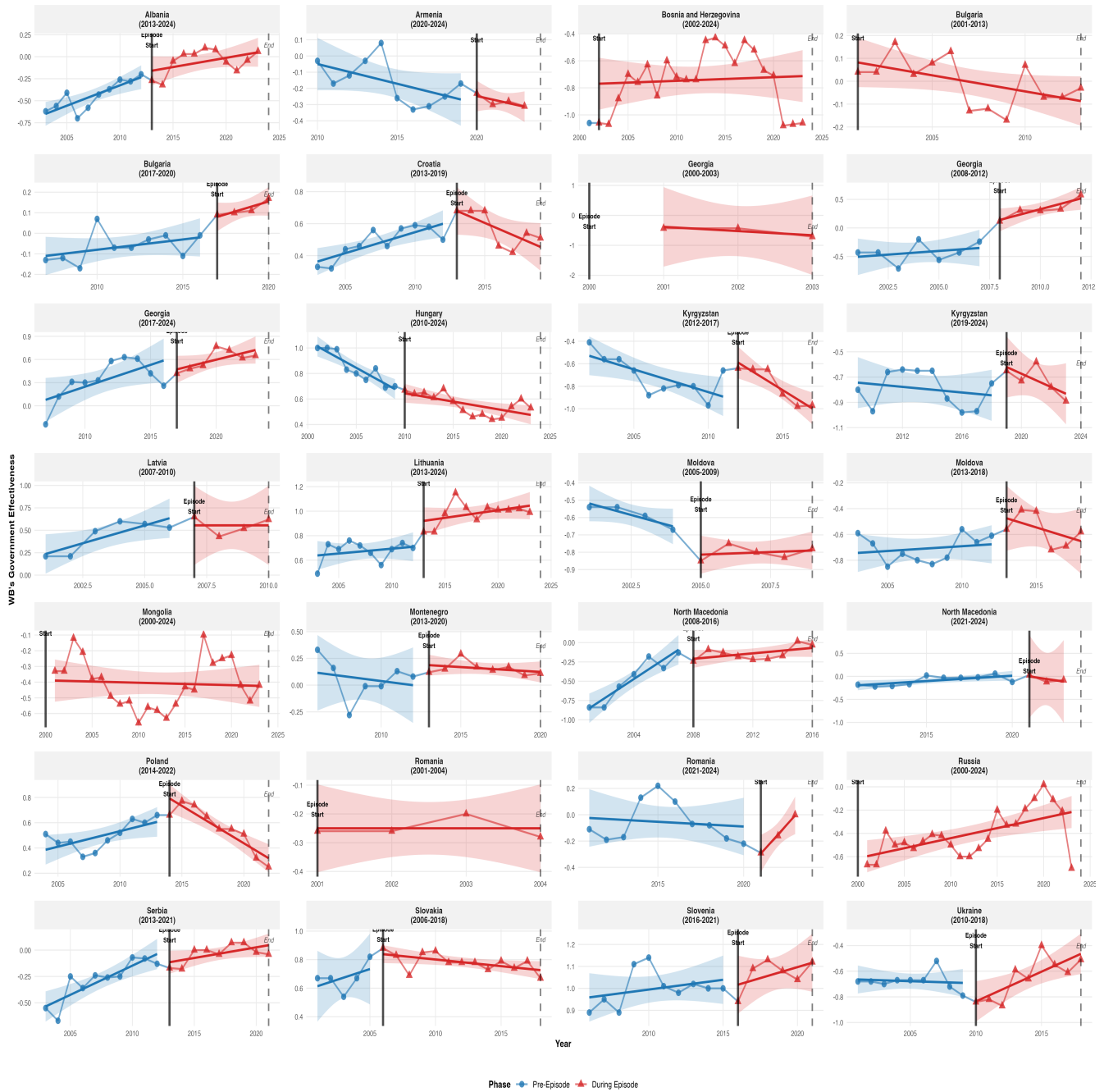
The emphasis on developing strong institutions in the immediate transition from communism began to be seen as a potential tool for would-be autocrats to sustain their power. This mechanism challenges earlier findings that strong and efficient bureaucracies can constrain autocrats. Recent research has shown that strong institutional capacities can also reduce regime stability, increase autocratic survival, and enable efficient authoritarian control. Post-communist countries offer a distinctive context for exploring the association between institutional capacity and autocratization, considering their communist legacy of centralized apparatuses with limited meritocracy and efficiency subordinated to loyalty (Scheppele, 2018). The liberalization period of the 1990s produced markedly different trajectories. Countries such as Estonia or Slovenia developed professionalized public sectors, while countries such as Moldova, Georgia, or North Macedonia continued to struggle and underperform in their professionalization efforts (Grzymala-Busse, 2007). The resulting varying institutional features have shaped pathways in the region. Within countries with weak institutional capacities, incumbents take advantage of fragmented networks to consolidate their influence and build up patronage networks, leading to opportunistic autocratization (Goetz, 2001). Nonetheless, autocratization also takes place within countries with strong institutional capacities,

where incumbents repurpose the administrative apparatus to effectively implement illiberal norms, leading to strategic autocratization (Kornai, 2015). As a result, the institutional capacities are weaponized and used as instruments of autocratization (Sitter & Bakke, 2019).

To operationalize institutional capacity, we use the World Bank's government effectiveness index, which captures the quality of public services and the civil service's independence from political pressure, the quality of policy formulation, and the effectiveness of implementation (Kaufmann et al., 2011). The index aggregates data from multiple sources to provide a comprehensive examination of administrative capacities. The index captures both institutional structure and actual performance (its values range from -2.5 to 2.5, with higher values indicating better governance). Its structure is particularly appropriate for examining the post-Communist region as it captures the technical capacities of public officials (bureaucracy) and their insulation from political pressure, which represent crucial dimensions affected by communist legacies.⁷

⁷Calibration and distribution of scores are available in Appendix (B) of Chapter 6.

Figure 5.5: Institutional capacities trends within post-Communist countries



Source: Author's calculations based on World Bank data

The period between 2000 and 2023 reveals striking diverging trends. Central European countries - Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland - showcase the most substantial decline accompanying their autocratization episodes (Figure 5.5). Such countries showed significant improvements in their institutional capacities during the 1990s and 2000s, but their gains were quickly followed by tendencies toward autocr-

tization. The improvement and decline cluster of countries follows the strategic autocratization mechanism of repurposing the administrative apparatus. The existence of autocratization onset in the presence of strong institutional capacities contradicts some theoretical assumptions, and it has instead been shown that it can also be an instrument of consolidation. For instance, in Hungary, the institutional safeguards were quickly dismantled, and their deterioration accelerated with the return to power of Viktor Orbán. Their relatively strong institutional position might also suggest that the administrative capabilities were merely instrumentalized for partisan purposes, consistent with the strategic autocratization pathway. Meanwhile, cases such as Kyrgyzstan, Russia, or Belarus achieved only marginal improvements from low starting points, fitting within the opportunistic pattern - incumbents instrumentalized institutions to consolidate their patronage networks. Conversely, the Western Balkans' opportunistic pattern goes hand in hand with the EU's conditionality processes (Staletović & Bieber, 2024, pp. 491–493). Within these constraints, most institutional improvements were mostly cosmetic in order to satisfy chapters and requests put forward by the Union. Such partial reforms proved to be inefficient in the face of strong authoritarian incumbents.

The 2010s emerge as a critical juncture across cases from both pathways, with accelerated changes in government effectiveness coinciding with the autocratization period. Lastly, some countries combine both approaches. Waves of democratic improvements and backsliding have become more frequent, and changes in the extent of government effectiveness have preceded each reversal. For instance, Georgia's Rose Revolution improved institutional capacities through certain efforts to professionalize them, however, these efforts proved to be volatile (V. J. Bunce & Wolchik, 2011). The descriptive developments validate our approach to consider institutional capacities as a potential condition as we aim to chart the pathways that lead to an autocratization episode. It also suggests that, depending on the initial conditions and trajectories, we can expect varying interactions with the other conditions. The decline among cases with relatively strengthened capacities points

to institutional capture and repurposing. In contrast, persistently low capacities across the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Western Balkans exploit vulnerabilities to autocratic capture and opportunism. As a result, instead of looking at it as an isolated cause, the analysis aims to show that the association is contingent on how state capabilities are deployed and by whom.

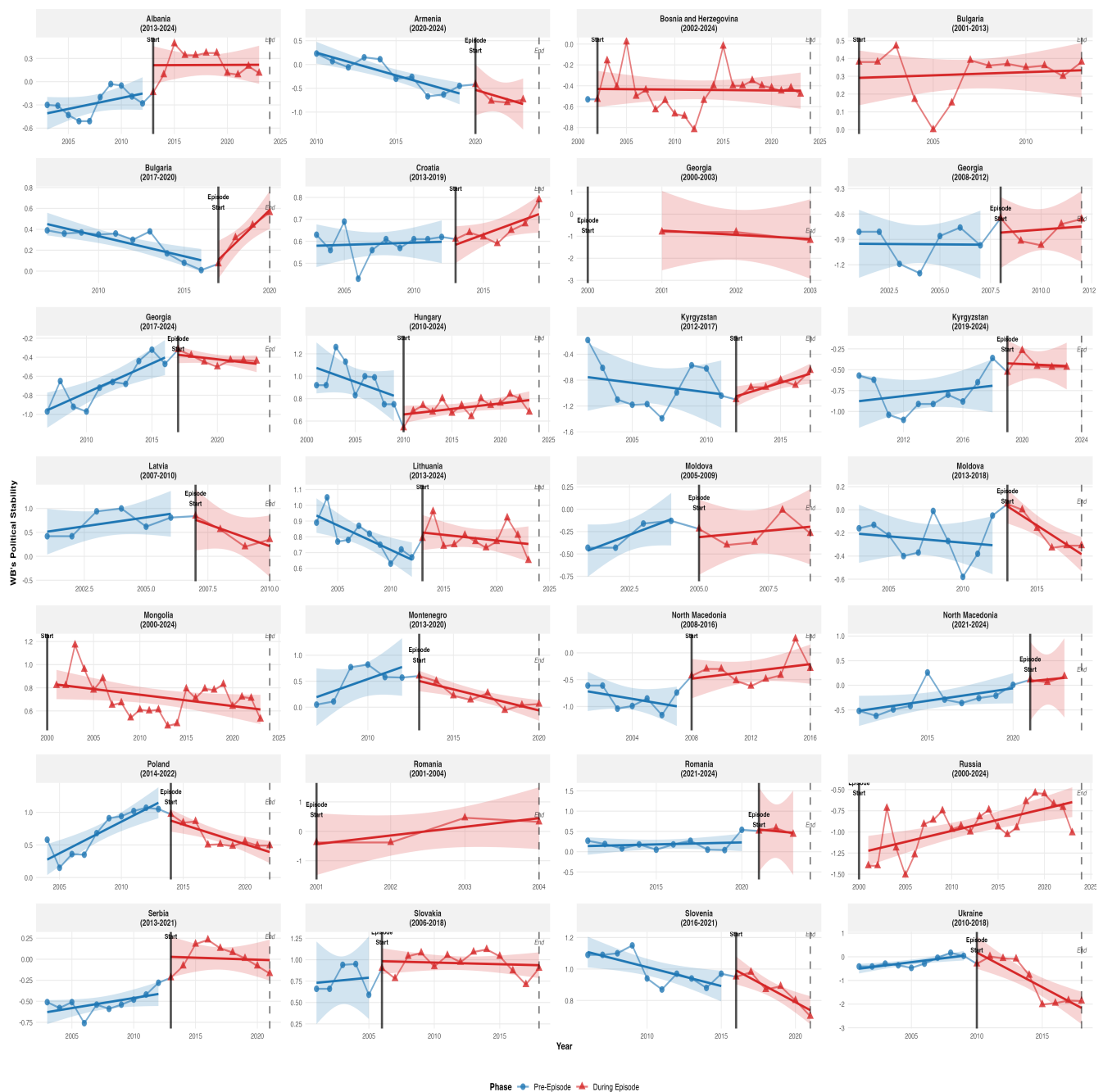
5.2.2.5 Political stability

Since the fall of communism, many post-communist countries have struggled with ever-present political instability. The transition from authoritarian rule often left weak state institutions in place, creating fertile ground for periodic crises. From ethnic wars in the former Yugoslavia to major conflicts in the Caucasus, and a series of unresolved cross-border issues, such as in Transnistria and Moldova, which have marked the region with persistent sources of tension. Such unresolved conflicts and persistent elite fragmentation have a tendency to resurface periodically. Such developments have made the regimes vulnerable to shocks and elite manipulation (Tudoroiu, 2015). The strategic exploitation of instability discourse has emerged as the defining feature of contemporary post-communist politics. Incumbents have extensively used the pretext of potential instability as a tool to destabilize political and economic processes, and they often present themselves as indispensable guardians of order (Sotiropoulos, 2023a). Many countries in the region continue to be susceptible to recurring episodes of instability and vulnerability to shocks often wrapped in early elections or frequent government shuffles, which erode public trust and give rise to illiberal rhetoric (Bieber, 2020).

To carefully examine these dynamics, we use the World Bank's Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism Index, which aims to capture the likelihood of politically motivated violence and the quality of governance in maintaining order (Kaufmann et al., 2011). Although such activities stop short of violence, they still signal political turmoil. The index provides cross-national and temporal comparability, capturing potential governance instability and perceptions thereof,

on a scale of -2.5 (highly unstable) to +2.5 (highly stable). Its inclusion of different dimensions can also potentially obscure some qualitative differences among cases, given the broad spectrum of activities it covers. However, the instability that primarily concerns this dissertation refers to subtle and incremental changes, which can be better nuanced through the qualitative study we propose.

Figure 5.6: Political stability developments within post-Communist countries



Source: Author's calculations based on World Bank data

Regions such as the Western Balkans and the Caucasus that experienced conflicts in the immediate post-communist period have demonstrated significant improvements in political stability over the past decade. The establishment of institutional and social mechanisms for managing conflicts has aided these cases from further deterioration, but many frameworks remain fragile. However, many cases that have initially achieved relative stability have experienced notable decline. For instance, the frequent political crises in Bulgaria led to its persistent inability of governing coalitions to complete a full term (Analytica, 2024). Repeated elections and across-party bickering create political instability and volatility within the country, and in the region. Even countries such as Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary have experienced volatility over the past decade (Figure 5.6).

The underlying instability has left many regimes in the region vulnerable to shocks and elite manipulation. As a result of recurring instability, many countries experience a weakening of public trust, which gives rise to illiberal rhetoric. In line with the expected tendencies of gradual changes during this latest autocratization wave, the current episodes of instability tend to manifest in subtler forms, such as party system volatility, frequent government shuffles, or early elections. This makes instability a strategic resource for incumbents in their efforts to centralize authority, control media, and narratives. Instability can also fragment the opposition, as in Serbia since SNS rose to power, or even diminish institutional credibility (Petrović, 2025). During periods of instability, incumbents tend to present themselves as guardians of order and guarantors of stability (Bieber, 2020). Understanding how instability, or absence thereof, operates in configurations with other institutional capacities and agencies, such as elite behavior, is essential for interpreting the mechanism of current autocratization.

Having delineated the operationalization (and calibration in the Appendix B of Chapter 5) of the conditions and outcome, the chapter now turns to the analytical moment and exploring the configurational analysis.

5.3 Set-Theoretic Analysis

5.3.1 Analytical Moment

The analysis of autocratization in the post-Communist countries reveals a striking paradox: autocratization has taken place under diverse configurations of conditions, challenging some conventional assumptions about the prerequisites for backsliding. Our dataset, constructed and operationalized from various sources, captures 28 episodes of autocratization between 2000 and 2024. The episodes range from severe institutional collapse in weak states to sophisticated state capture mechanisms in more consolidated countries. Rather than following a uniform pattern, the episodes cluster around three patterns.

Moreover, what makes the analysis compelling is the variation of starting conditions at the onset of the episodes. While some episodes began under extremely polarized societies (Hungary, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia), others emerged within depolarized societies with weak state capacities (Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine). Despite the presence of a stable political environment (Slovenia and Poland), there were still backsliding trends. Table 5.2 systematically maps the raw scores status for all conditions across all episodes. The substantial variation across these conditions provides the empirical foundation for identifying distinct autocratization pathways. The heterogeneity indicates that autocratization operates through multiple pathways, requiring configurational setup in order to understand how different combinations generate similar outcomes. The three clusters reveal important temporal and spatial diffusion, particularly the concentration of the most protracted autocratization episodes in the Balkans and Central Europe starting from the end of the 2000s and beginning of the 2010s. Earlier autocratization episodes across the post-Soviet space also indicate the potential of institutional legacies, geopolitical pressure, and trends in the region (Brusis, 2024, pp. 502–503). Such patterns suggest that it is necessary to go beyond individual case studies to broader regional comparative patterns. The variation in

combinations of conditions across these clusters signifies that multiple pathways to autocratization exist.

The first cluster consists of post-transition consolidation failures that experienced backsliding shortly after their initial transition, primarily concentrated in the 2000s. The cluster of these cases never fully democratized, but rather stayed in the grey-zone of hybrid regimes, carrying their state weaknesses, a legacy of instability and susceptibility to corruption. North Macedonia, Moldova, and Georgia stretch across the entire post-communist region. Such cases tend to have low initial democratic qualities, weak institutional capacities and a predilection for corruption. Cases such as Moldova's 2005 episode occurred in a context of relatively low institutional capacity, and high levels of corruption. Despite the colorful revolution and substantial attempts to reform the system, Georgia quickly started to autocratize (Donno, 2013, p. 24). It suggests that in the immediate post-transition period, autocratization was influenced by institutional failures that were unable to rein in corruption or abate polarization.

The second cluster of polarized backsliders illustrates the illiberal turn among states with relatively strong initial democratic and institutional capacities. Typical and well-established cases in the literature include Hungary and Poland, with strong government effectiveness and politically stable societies, yet with growing levels of polarization (Apergis & Pinar, 2023). The polarization as a driving condition resulted from a series of scandals in the preceding years and during a decisive political mandate. The ruling elite managed to polarize the society between its camp and a weakened political opposition. Similarly, despite the strong bureaucracy, during the mid-2010s, Slovenia experienced increasingly affective polarization and chronic government instability (Malčič, 2023). Such sequences demonstrate that in robust countries, autocratization tends to be initiated by elected officials who amplify and exploit societal divisions, creating a vicious circle in which institutional dysfunction further fuels those divisions.

The most recent cluster of contemporary autocratization drift covers episodes such as Bulgaria, Romania, North Macedonia, and Armenia. The cases cover more complex patterns, combining elements from the previous clusters. Despite the relative domestic political stability and improvements in institutional capacities, we still observe an erosion of democratic qualities. The implication relates to the gradual nature of these autocratization episodes are gradual, without significant disruptions to the institutional and political systems of the countries. The importance of domestic stability is particularly striking when we consider that for some of the solutions, take place in conjunction with polarization. Leaders who are not concerned with political instability can nevertheless polarize society and use the institutional setup to their advantage by developing close networks of friends through patronage practices or favoritism (Mares & Young, 2019, pp. 137–139).

Moreover, Bieber (2020) and Sotiropoulos (2023a) indicate the stabilizing nature of some incumbents in cases closely related to the integration into the EU. In other words, incumbents position themselves as guarantors of domestic security vis-à-vis international actors. EU-associated countries managed to either more deeply integrate or advance on their EU path by achieving some form of democratic breakthrough (The Macedonian Momentum after Gruevski's electoral loss in 2016), but still democratically deteriorate. For instance, Georgia's autocratization episode beginning in 2017 takes place in the context of improved institutional capacities and moderate levels of polarization. Such shifts point to ever more sophisticated tools during this process that operate through subtler forms of institutional exploitation and potential media manipulation.

Table 5.2: Raw scores - QCA conditions

Cases	Polarization	Corruption	Regional trends	Government effectiveness	Political stability
Albania 2013	-0.36	33.0	0.56	-0.27	-0.14
Armenia 2020	0.00	42.0	0.23	-0.23	-0.42
Bosnia and Herzegovina 2002	-1.71	33.0	0.57	-1.06	-0.53
Bulgaria 2001	1.30	35.0	0.47	0.04	0.38
Bulgaria 2017	0.27	41.0	0.44	0.09	0.07
Croatia 2013	-0.24	46.0	0.56	0.68	0.61
Georgia 2000	0.06	23.0	0.23	-0.60	-1.64
Georgia 2008	0.70	34.0	0.24	0.12	-0.65
Georgia 2017	0.51	57.0	0.22	0.42	-0.32
Hungary 2010	-1.40	51.0	0.50	0.67	0.54
Kyrgyzstan 2012	0.53	21.2	0.13	-0.64	-1.10
Kyrgyzstan 2019	0.84	29.0	0.12	-0.65	-0.53
Latvia 2007	0.95	47.0	0.81	0.65	0.84
Lithuania 2013	2.12	54.0	0.82	0.83	0.79
Moldova 2005	-0.12	23.0	0.48	-0.85	-0.22
Moldova 2013	-0.14	36.0	0.49	-0.56	0.05
Mongolia 2000	0.81	43.0	0.47	-0.29	0.35
Montenegro 2013	-1.69	41.0	0.56	0.12	0.60
North Macedonia 2008	-1.43	33.0	0.59	-0.24	-0.43
North Macedonia 2021	-1.48	35.0	0.55	0.03	0.11
Poland 2014	-0.90	60.0	0.49	0.66	0.97
Romania 2001	1.43	29.0	0.47	-0.26	-0.38
Romania 2021	-0.59	44.0	0.46	-0.29	0.51
Russia 2000	0.87	24.0	0.49	-0.66	-1.09
Serbia 2013	-0.87	39.0	0.56	-0.17	-0.22
Slovakia 2006	0.64	43.0	0.49	0.88	0.90
Slovenia 2016	-1.37	60.0	0.55	0.94	0.95
Ukraine 2010	0.08	22.0	0.50	-0.84	-0.30

Source: Author's calculations based on collected and processed datasets (V-Dem, World Bank, TI)

The results of the QCA identify three forms of solutions: conservative, intermediate, and the most parsimonious. The solutions differ in terms of the number of conditions they include, e.g., by keeping the logical remainders (rows with "?") off the table. The dissertation's focus is on the most parsimonious solution, which includes all logical remainders during the minimization of the truth table. The methodological

approach for presenting QCA results involves investigating necessity, followed by a sufficiency analysis illustrated with a truth table and solution tables.

5.3.1.1 Necessity analysis

Our fuzzy set QCA analysis reveals that there is no single condition across all cases that is necessary for an autocratization episode to be initiated. The presence of polarization or strong institutional capacities is closest to it. The results confirm that autocratization operates through multiple distinct pathways and results from a configuration of conditions. However, the analysis uncovers compelling patterns that permeate across sets of cases, and each represents a distinct (causal) logic with clear empirical manifestations. This highlights the value of approaching and investigating the puzzle through the exploration of configurational patterns rather than isolated variables and models.

As Table 5.3 demonstrates, no single condition achieves the conventional necessity threshold of 0.9 consistency (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). The highest necessity scores are observed for regional developments (TREND, 0.76) or when there is a tendency for neighboring countries to also experience declining LDI scores. The presence of political instability (STABILITY, 0.73) and high polarization (POLAR, 0.72) also tends to be relevant conditions. Even though these values tend to fall below the conventional threshold, the necessity analysis suggests that these conditions are highly relevant and frequently present at the beginning of the autocratization episode. The (relatively) high scores of their relevance (Relevance of Necessity - RoN) confirm these results, indicating non-trivialness. The absence of any necessary conditions indicates theoretical significance that confirms our theorization that post-Communist countries do not follow a single causal recipe. Instead of a single condition causing erosion of democratic qualities, it is a different configuration that enables the multiple pathways. The results motivate the sufficiency analysis, presented in the next section, which identifies the combination of conditions that tend to interact to produce an outcome.

Table 5.3: Analysis of necessity

	Cons.Nec	Cov.Nec	RoN
CORRUPT	0.57	0.49	0.61
POLAR	0.72	0.67	0.75
CAPACITY	0.55	0.60	0.76
TREND	0.76	0.61	0.65
STABILITY	0.73	0.63	0.69
~CORRUPT	0.67	0.70	0.81
~POLAR	0.56	0.54	0.69
~CAPACITY	0.68	0.57	0.65
~TREND	0.56	0.64	0.80
~STABILITY	0.58	0.62	0.77

Source: Author's calculations

5.3.1.2 Sufficiency analysis

Since no single condition is necessary, we shift the analysis to exploring sufficient configurations (combinations of conditions that lead to an autocratization episode). The initial truth table identified nine rows (combinations of conditions) that lead to the outcome, and these rows are populated with cases (Table 5.4). Further, seven rows cover the rest of the cases, however, the results are not sufficiently consistent. The sufficiency analysis (see Table 5.4) highlights several recurring pathways.⁸ The most consistent configurations cluster around those featuring high polarization and high institutional capacities in more democratic regions, and around those involving polarization in the presence of corruption in less democratic regions. Such configurations suggest that, depending on the context and environment, polarization operates across different configurations. It can be used as a tool for systematic capture, or it can serve as a facilitator of existing vulnerabilities.

⁸Table B.4 in Appendix B.2 of Chapter 5 presents the Truth Table for the absence of the outcome ($\sim Y$).

The distribution of cases across clusters also validates our earlier descriptive analysis: CEE cases as part of the polarization paradigm; WBs cases as part of polarization in the presence of high corruption levels and weak capacities; and former Soviet Union cases in which institutional legacies are exploited. The presence of logical remainders ("?") also indicates the potential clustering of cases that tend to follow similar patterns. These patterns do not occur at random, and are closely related to historical developments, thus overall providing support for the configurational approach.

Table 5.4: Truth table - sufficiency analysis for the presence of the outcome (Y)

POLAR CORRUPT TREND CAPACITY STABILITY OUT n incl PRI Cases										
7	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0.892	0.699	Georgia 2017
6	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	0.890	0.715	Mongolia 2000
24	1	0	1	1	1	1	2	0.851	0.698	Hungary 2010,Poland 2014
22	1	0	1	0	1	1	1	0.828	0.617	Romania 2021
20	1	0	0	1	1	1	3	0.821	0.625	Croatia 2013,Montenegro 2013,Slovenia 2016
8	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	0.806	0.508	Bulgaria 2017,Slovakia 2006
25	1	1	0	0	0	1	3	0.765	0.471	Bosnia and Herzegovina 2002,North Macedonia 2008,Serbia 2013
16	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	0.775	0.362	Bulgaria 2001
15	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0.737	0.327	Georgia 2008
30	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0.736	0.431	Moldova 2013
28	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0.731	0.328	North Macedonia 2021
26	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0.729	0.404	Albania 2013
29	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0.696	0.348	Moldova 2005
4	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	0.667	0.261	Latvia 2007,Lithuania 2013
13	0	1	1	0	0	0	6	0.646	0.363	Georgia 2000,Kyrgyzstan 2012,Kyrgyzstan 2019,Romania 2001,Russia 2000,Ukraine 2010
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0			
3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0			
9	0	1	0	0	0	0	0			
11	0	1	0	1	0	0	0			
32	1	1	1	1	1	0	0			
5	0	0	1	0	0	?	0	0.893	0.676	
2	0	0	0	0	1	?	0			
10	0	1	0	0	1	?	0			
12	0	1	0	1	1	?	0			
14	0	1	1	0	1	?	0			
17	1	0	0	0	0	?	0			
18	1	0	0	0	1	?	0			
19	1	0	0	1	0	?	0			
21	1	0	1	0	0	?	0			
23	1	0	1	1	0	?	0			
27	1	1	0	1	0	?	0			
31	1	1	1	1	0	?	0			

Source: Author's calculations

While the truth table reveals the diversity of sufficient conditions, it also points to the potential to minimize and simplify these configurations in order to arrive at a more explicable pattern, and without losing explanatory power. The multiple configurations with many conditions, suggest that potential complexity could mask more parsimonious solutions. Therefore, subsequent minimization and the enhanced standard analysis (ESA) systematically examines the necessity of each specific condition is essential to produce the outcome, or it can be logically minimized and eliminated, Table 5.5.⁹ ESA addresses three analytical challenges that are not covered by the standard analysis. First, it handles simplifying assumptions. These assumptions concern the possibility that the same logical remainder could theoretically support contradictory solutions. Second, contradictory claims that emerge from the claims of necessity. Third, impossible remainders represent situations that are logically possible, however, are empirically implausible (I.-E. Oana et al., 2021).

Systematically analyzing each challenge allows us to produce solutions that are theoretically defensible and statistically significant. The minimization process shows that the 16 rows containing cases (or the 9 rows with a sufficiently high consistency threshold) can be reduced to three potential pathways. The process implies that the reduction logic can combine multiple surface-level configurations that share a common core. For instance, configurations that share polarization in combination with other conditions can be minimized to a pathway where polarization is the key determinant. The result is a solution that uses fewer conditions, a most parsimonious solution. This solution presents the core conditions. However, it is important to keep into mind the conditions that are present with the conservative and intermediate solution, particularly for investigating what happens after the onset of the episode.

⁹Table B.2 and Table B.3 in the Appendix B.2 of Chapter 5 presents the conservative and intermediate solutions.

Table 5.5: Sufficiency analysis - most parsimonious solution

Configuration	inclS	PRI	covS	covU	Cases
POLAR*~CORRUPT	0.839	0.729	0.547	0.075	Croatia 2013, Montenegro 2013, Slovenia 2016; Armenia 2020; Romania 2021; Hungary 2010, Poland 2014
~CORRUPT*TREND	0.825	0.709	0.554	0.091	Mongolia 2000; Georgia 2017; Bulgaria 2017, Slovakia 2006; Armenia 2020; Romania 2021; Hungary 2010, Poland 2014
POLAR*~TREND*~STABILITY	0.782	0.513	0.377	0.109	Bosnia and Herzegovina 2002; North Macedonia 2008; Serbia 2013
Solution (M1)	0.775	0.653	0.747		
Source: Author's calculations					

Although the parsimonious solution for the cases of interest does not include corruption, this is due to the fact that the condition is minimized. The condition is present in the intermediate solution, and corruption is present in our truth table, indicating high corruption levels at the onset of the autocratization episode. Corruption is minimized in the most parsimonious solution because it also covers cases with non-autocratization, meaning corruption is not a necessary component. Nonetheless, in our theoretical specifications, we have also highlighted that the presence of corruption enables and intensifies erosion once the episode begins. Polarization triggers the episode, while corruption fuels its progression. Although absent in the minimized solution, the result also indicates the relevance of corruption through mechanisms that emerge during the episode, which can be captured by process-tracing.

5.3.2 Configurational Pathways

The strength of the QCA lies in its configurational approach with the potential to identify equifinality. The configurations can be thought of as different pathways under which democratically elected incumbents cause erosion of democratic qualities and onset an autocratization episode. The complexity of pathways that each

case takes can be further explained in a configuration setup by minimizing the conservative and intermediate solutions to arrive at the most parsimonious solution, as shown in Table 5.5. The results show that already several pathways are at play, with the conditions that are present across cases being minimized, grounding each of these pathways in the specific cases associated with it. Across a substantial number of cases, autocratization takes place in spite of democratizing regional trends. The lack of institutional capacities provides incumbents with an opportunity to take over key national institutions that can maintain them in power. Similarly, the interplay between polarization and the other conditions offers fertile ground for autocratization. Given incumbents' reliance on societal divisions to maintain control over citizens, or at least segments of the citizenry, the polarization pathway is a prime example for further and more in-depth analysis. Indeed, prominent cases of autocratization, such as Hungary, Romania, Serbia, and North Macedonia, show potential for additional analysis of this configuration path. Therefore, considering the nature of the process, the gradual decline of democratic qualities at the hands of democratically elected leaders, and based on the QCA findings, we can discuss the different modes of autocratization:

- Democratic hijacking, where the dominant party takes advantage of its mandate to rewrite, or at least attempt to rewrite the rules;
- Institutional subversion through corruption and takeover of institutional capacities of state agencies and courts during a declining trust and a demobilized public, leading to state capture;
- Crises-driven leadership where leaders use emergencies and divides to consolidate their power, taking advantage of high levels of polarization and lack of political stability.

The first pathway of polarized backsliders captures what we term as democratic hijacking. This configuration covers Hungary 2010, Poland 2014, Slovenia 2016, Croatia 2013 (see Table 5.5, first configuration). The polarized backsliders foster

extreme societal polarization by hijacking established institutions and rewriting the rules of the democratic game, despite relatively strong institutional capacities. Despite the presence of stable institutions (capacities) and positive regional trends, high polarization cases allowed incumbents to equip against a democratic opposition and erode checks and balances (Hungary 2010, Poland 2014 episode, and Slovenia's episode, under Orban or Kaczyński). The pattern challenges some conventional expectations regarding the need for weak institutional capacities or the role of corruption at the onset of the episode (Levitsky & Way, 2010) as well as the presence of corruption. Instead, the pathways illustrate how democratically elected leaders (parties) can weaponize societal polarization to dismantle systematically democratic institutions. The nature of the pathway makes it particularly dangerous, considering its *modus operandi* through democratic procedures, e.g., by framing substantial (institutional) changes as necessary responses to existential threats.

The second pathway, institutional subversion, operates through a "procedural capture" of democratic processes from within. The configuration covers some recent autocratization episodes such as Armenia 2020, Romania 2021, Bulgaria and Georgia 2017 etc. (see Table 5.5, second configuration). The presence of positive democratic trends during the initial stages provides cover and strengthens legitimacy, considering the expectations of democratic diffusion and progress in such contexts. The sequence can lead to prolonged democratic institutional crisis, such as the Bulgarian government's inability to maintain a full term since 2017 or Georgia's (2017-2018) constitutional changes to align with the EU, resulting in political crisis among political elites and a further downward spiral that persists (Analytica, 2024). The pathway succeeds as it exploits a vulnerability of (liberal) democracy relating to procedural legitimacy and institutional constraints.

The third pathway, crisis-driven leadership, captures the Western Balkans cluster - Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within this pathway, polarization helps incumbents to sharpen divides. It simultaneously allows them to develop corrupt networks to consolidate control, while relying on their skills

to manage external and domestic crises. Such processes produce mutually reinforcing dynamics of elite capture and societal division. Unlike the first pathway, the Western Balkans did not manage to strengthen their institutional capacities during the democratic consolidation periods. In addition, persistent instabilities continue to plague these cases, further strengthening the vicious cycle of democratic deterioration. Incumbents tend to exploit such instability crises to consolidate their power, and in combination with the polarizing rhetoric and reduced international pressure, provide pretexts for further institutional power-grabbing. The gap between stability discourse and stability reality is precisely what autocratization leaders exploit. They present themselves as guarantors of stability, while in practice, stability is absent. Such conditions fit with the narrative of stabilitocracies (S. Pavlović, 2017). The case of North Macedonia's 2008 episode exhibits these patterns. The 2008 NATO rejection, the deteriorating relationship with Greece, and the 2009 announcement of the "Skopje 2014" project deepened the ethnic relations. It allowed the PM Gruevski to consolidate power and pursue increasingly authoritarian practices.

5.3.3 Case Selection for Process Tracing

The case selection for additional in-depth analysis is based on the two most typical cases. Using the smmr function (I. E. Oana & Schneider, 2018), we have identified North Macedonia's 2008 and Serbia's 2013 episodes as typical cases that are comparable. The systematic case selection analysis provides us with a viable basis for exploring case comparisons. Our narrower focus on developments in Western Balkan countries indicates a typical comparison of Serbia and North Macedonia's autocratization episodes, which occupy the analytical center of the pathway. The cases are examples of a configuration wherein polarization operates within the context of institutional instability. Their positioning within the cluster of cases without substantial institutional reforms and prone to state opportunistic capture by incumbents can help us explore in more detail how the episodes unfold

once the onset starts. Two pathways with the enhanced standard analysis lead to autocratization episodes in the two comparative typical cases, with a lack of political stability. Two of the identified modes of autocratization, crises-driven leadership and institutional subversion, provide greater explanations for these cases. Although ideological entrenchment of the dominant party is present, the lack of factual possibility to rewrite the rules makes it a less likely pathway to be taken. Institutional takeover and staffing public offices with party loyalists, combined with crises-driven leadership, such as the ability to deal with self-instigated crises (Bieber, 2018), is how these cases unravel.

Table 5.6: SMMR results - case selection)

Solution	Term	Pair	TYP1	TYP2	UniqCov	Best	MostTyp
<i>Term: POLAR*~ CORRUPT</i>							
		5	Hungary 2010	Romania 2021	none	1.175	both
		8	Poland 2014	Romania 2021	none	1.425	typ2
		2	Hungary 2010	Poland 2014	none	1.456	typ1
<i>Term: ~CORRUPT*TREND</i>							
		21	Armenia 2020	Mongolia 2000	both	2.120	none
		23	Mongolia 2000	Poland 2014	typ1	2.347	none
		3	Mongolia 2000	Hungary 2010	typ1	2.367	typ2
		19	Armenia 2020	Poland 2014	typ1	2.385	none
		10	Armenia 2020	Hungary 2010	typ1	2.406	typ2
<i>Term: POLAR*~TREND*~STABILITY</i>							
		1	North Macedonia 2008	Serbia 2013	both	1.928	typ1
		2	—	—	none	—	none

Source: Author's calculations

6 "Words Made Stone": State Capture through Speech and Façade in North Macedonia

North Macedonia represents a typical case of autocratization, with the gradual erosion of democratic institutions under the decade-long rule of VMRO-DPMNE and Nikola Gruevski. The country experienced a notable erosion of key democratic qualities. The VMRO-DPMNE rule effectively transformed the promising democratization story into a hybrid regime. Key checks and balances were systematically undermined even as the government continued to maintain a façade of electoral democracy. By 2016, deep into a 2-year political crisis, the European Commission had openly characterized the country as a "captured state", citing the deep involvement of the party in the judiciary, media, security, and other state institutions (See (Džankić, 2018; Popetrevski, 2017)). Taking into account its temporal sequence and connections with regional autocratization episodes, it can also be said to be one of the precursors. This makes the autocratization episode all the more important to be explored in detail. The deterioration of democratic qualities during the period of VMRO-DPMNE and Nikola Gruevski provides essential evidence on how polarization and institutional capture (through the development of corrupt networks) can be employed for the benefit of the incumbent (party). The case best illustrates how polarization, in the absence of political stability, can erode important democratic qualities and facilitate the capture of institutions through

the careful nurturing of corrupt networks. Between 2008 and 2016, the ruling VMRO-DPMNE centralized political power and created a political order that systematized corruption, evolving into a captured state. It situates the Macedonian experience within the regional context of the Western Balkans, often described in the literature as regimes of stabilitocracy (Sotiropoulos, 2023b).

As a post-Communist country, North Macedonia was among the few countries that avoided military conflict(s) in the 1990s. Unlike Bosnia and Herzegovina, there was no war, unlike Serbia, it avoided the continuous rule of an autocrat, and unlike Kosovo, it escaped the existential challenges. However, compared to more advanced Ex-Yugoslav peers (Slovenia), the country continued to exhibit structural vulnerabilities, and its institutional capacities failed to develop. As a consequence, successive governments failed to build practical institutional constraints comparable to those of other post-Communist countries (Dawisha & Parrott, 1997). Moreover, an unresolved name dispute with Greece has also postponed the country's international integration. Such developments created space for the exploitation of the domestic political elite. A series of failed economic privatization efforts, lack of sufficient political plurality among all ethnic groups, and increasingly destabilizing regional outlook, caught the country and initiated an internal conflict that eventually resulted in the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) and a(n informal) consociational political arrangement.

A strong, autocratic leader would not have had trouble capturing and exploring the institutions. On the back of the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit for European integration, the country noted marginal improvements in the quality of democracy and institutional capacity were pointed out in the first half of the 2000s, paving the way for a brief democratization spell (Sotiropoulos, 2002). After a period of sustained democratic development (Levitsky & Way, 2010), a newly reelected and "reformed" VMRO-DPMNE returned to power. A young and reform-oriented leader, on the back of economic modernization promises and reforms, spurred economic growth and strengthening of institutional capacities. During the period

2001-2006, the country has noted considerable improvements in its democracy scores (Bardos, 2008). A decentralization reform helped improve representation, and as a result, the country was awarded the candidate country status in 2005. The return to power of VMRO-DPMNE in 2006 also initially stimulated economic reforms and improvements in institutional capacities. As a result, the country was on track to democratic consolidation, representing a small success story of a potentially functioning consociational arrangement.

However, another roadblock to joining another international organization (NATO) in 2008 marked a substantial shift in the ruling party's direction. Beyond the deterioration of the bilateral issues, the outcome represents a fundamental rupture in the country's post-independence trajectory. Public frustration with the Greek intransigence slowly turned inward (Siegel, 2010). The party managed to mobilize in the face of this backlash and used the name issue as its main party point to obtain a sweeping majority in the Assembly during the early summer 2008 elections. The lack of movement in its European integration process has further enabled the ruling party to leverage the current voters' mood and strengthen its position as guarantors of what it means to be a "Macedonian" and of how to protect its patriotic values. As a result, a protracted polarization emerged through a domestic "Antique narrative" that divided the population into supporters of nationalistic rhetoric and opponents (Vangeli, 2011). The mega project aimed to reinvent the face of Skopje and capture what has been "lost" from Ancient Macedonia, "Skopje 2014" (Staletović & Pollozhani, 2023). In addition to polarization and an ongoing capture of state institutions, corruption was institutionalized through the discretionary redistribution of public funds under the guise of the "Skopje 2014" project, blending public and private interests.

Specifically, the case demonstrates three core theoretical propositions from the elaborated theoretical framework (See Chapter 3). First, polarizing rhetoric pre-emptly criticism from the opposition and delegitimizes oversight over the executive. Lack of oversight provides cover to the incumbent from direct accountability. Sec-

ond, resources extracted through corrupt contracts awarded to close friends and collaborators create clientelistic networks that can further the incumbent's agenda. Third, the mutually reinforcing mechanisms accelerate and deepen the democratic erosion process, pushing the country towards a captured state. The benefits of the Macedonian case lie in the direct evidence emerging from the wiretapped recordings that illustrate the coordination of discursive strategies and resource extraction. The evidence of such dealings is elaborated in the following analysis.

6.1 Data, Methods, and Argument

The case study employs a set of methods to trace the development of illiberal rhetoric during the autocratization, and the institutional vulnerabilities that the governing VMRO-DPMNE exploited to nurture corrupt networks, resulting in a captured state. The chapter looks into three streams of data. First, using quantitative text analysis (QTA) of collected speeches and statements by all Prime Ministers for the period 2011-2023. We use the data to trace changes in public rhetoric over time, and more specifically, compare the extent of illiberal rhetoric of Gruevski, as an architect of the autocratization episode, with the PMs who came after him. Second, to cross-validate the semantic application of word embeddings the trained model has been applied to weekly columns of a respected weekly magazine, "Fokus". Third, we use public procurement data collected for the period 2008-2023, with a particular focus on contracts awarded during the construction of the mega project "Skopje 2014". It relies on identifying contracts and connections between national or regional authorities with specific suppliers based on a series of potential "red flags".

The QCA analysis identified North Macedonia as a member of what we designated the crisis-driven leadership pathway. The pathway is characterized by high polarization, the absence of autocratizing trends and non-political stability. Moreover, the presence of corruption (1) in the sufficiency analysis indicates the relevance of

the condition for the mechanism exploration. The study aims to provide mechanistic depth to the configurational findings. The established framework analysis postulates a feedback loop in which the lack of trust in institutions, generated by the exploitation of corrupt networks, sustains the regime's polarizing propaganda. An increasingly polarizing rhetoric polarizes society and undermines democratic qualities. The framework grounds and expands on established frameworks of competitive authoritarianism, autocratization, and democratic erosion where polarization features extensively (Bieber, 2018; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Tomini, 2017) and integrates the feedback loop of erosion of institutional qualities through corruption (Apergis & Pinar, 2023; Sotiropoulos, 2023a).

To explore the polarizing rhetoric of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, we analyze a corpus of speeches and statements web-scraped from the official site of the Government of North Macedonia and processed into an original dataset.¹ The analysis is based on supervised learning (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013), using a dictionary-based method of illiberal rhetoric (Maerz & Schneider, 2020). We deployed a two-step approach in our quantitative text analysis. First, using dictionary-based methods, we explored the level of illiberalism in the speeches of Prime Ministers between 2012 and 2024. The dictionary has been based on the liberal/illiberal dictionaries advanced by Maerz and Schneider (2020) and Wagner et al. (2025). It has been adapted to the local language to also capture the multiple forms of the same word.² Second, using word embeddings, we explore more closely how discourse is employed, i.e., whether specific terms are used within their semantic meaning or a new conceptual universe is developed..³ To test the robustness of the analysis, we have also collected and analyzed data from non-

¹The textual data processing in R has been done using Benoit et al. (2018) quanteda package.

²The completeness of word forms have been cross-checked with AI-assisted tools Claude 4.5

³The R package text2vec (Hellín et al., 2023) has been used to train the word embeddings, while the lemmatization has been conducted with spacyR using the largest Macedonian language model "mk_core_news_lg" (Georgievski, Borijan and Todosovska, Marija, 2025). The lemmatization texts are processed in batches of 10. The model has 250 dimensions, at a learning rate of 0.1

governing officials, namely columnists from the weekly "Fokus", using the same tuning parameters.⁴

The method allows for the systematic identification and exploitation of rhetorical patterns that contribute to mapping anti-pluralist rhetoric, which represents a crucial step towards the systematic erosion of democratic qualities at the hands of the incumbent. Having also collected texts for the Prime Ministers who followed Nikola Gruevski, we can systematically compare the rhetoric. The speeches and statements were collected from the official government portal <https://vlada.mk/node/> or <https://arhiva.vlada.mk/node/>. The entire dataset contains 20169 speeches and statements for the period 2011-2023. The first filter in the dataset related to excluding speeches and statements that were not from a Prime Minister. Second, a large share of the collected data was excluded because it consisted only of short statements issued on behalf of the prime ministers. The dataset initially explored contains 2423 speeches or statements for the six persons who served as elected or technical prime minister. The dictionary-based and word embeddings analyses use only a subset of these speeches, i.e., those that are longer than 1200 words, which roughly corresponds to 10 minutes of speech, 251 speeches or statements in total.⁵ The speeches and statements are analyzed using computational text analysis methods in order to identify patterns of illiberal discourse, polarizing rhetoric, and commitment to democracy. We analyzed the corpus to trace the shifts in political language using natural language processing applied by Maerz and Schneider (2020) and their illiberal speech index (ISI).

The index aims to capture liberal vis-à-vis illiberal rhetoric in each speech, and identify potential cues that can indicate increased intolerance towards democratic institutions or generate divisions within the society. This also allows us to more closely investigate illiberal speeches and look for patterns and structures that the

⁴Technical details about word embeddings and metrics is available in the Appendix of Chapter 6

⁵Zaev has 114, Kovachevski 97, Gruevski 28, Spasovski 10, Khaferi and Dimitriev had only 1 such speech. And these 2 were excluded from the analysis and plotting

speakers tend to stress. It is a dictionary-based scaling of public discourse relying on a set of words that capture the prevalence of illiberal terms (words expressing anti-pluralism and authoritarianism) relative to liberal terms (words signaling support for civil liberties or tolerance). Recent studies (Wagner et al., 2025) applied (and extended) the dictionary to a set of European countries to explore various policy dimensions. We additionally validate the dictionary by comparing yearly averages with V-Dem's liberal democracy index. We utilize the index to explore the rhetoric, primarily of the former Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, whose ruling party VMRO-DPMNE presided over the long autocratization episode, and was the architect of the mega-project "Skopje 2014". Moreover, collected PMs' speeches following Gruevski's ousting from power in 2016 also allow for comparison of how the rhetoric developed. Considering the roller-coaster trends of the brief democratization period, followed by another autocratization sequence, we expect to see a similar trend in the language used by the Prime Ministers. Furthermore, to support our scores and show the added value of using textual data (speeches and statements) in exploring political elite rhetoric, we use word embeddings. Word embeddings deal with the limitations of dictionary-based approaches by representing terms as dense vectors in multi-dimensional semantic space, where proximity is defined by patterns of co-occurrence. We trained a 250-dimensional GloVe embeddings using `text2vec` package in R with a window of 10 words to explore the semantic neighborhood of selected words (Pennington et al., 2014). Frequently the meaning of their statements emerges through association, and the semantic company that the concepts keep. Word embeddings help us identify not whether a given speech or statement contains a specific word, but rather how closely its semantic content aligns with theoretically significant concepts (Almeida & Xexéo, 2019; Mikolov et al., 2013). For instance, a speaker may never pronounce "erosion" or "autocratization", but still construct a discourse in which democratic constraints appear as obstacles.

To measure how corrupt networks have emerged in North Macedonia, we rely on data collected from the open public procurement portal (<https://e-nabavki.gov.mk/PublicAccess/Home.aspx#/home>) and data obtained from the Open Tender portal (<https://opentender.eu/start>). The collected data is merged, cleaned, and processed to design a single dataset..⁶ It relies on the composite corruption risk index (CRI) to assess the riskiness of tender dealings between state institutions and economic operators (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016). The CRI aggregates multiple "red flags" that indicate elevated levels of corruption in contracting procedures. Such risks allow discretionary awards to close collaborators of the regime, exclusion of "unfriendly" participants, or those close to the opposition, and systematic suffocation of any competition. The aggregated CRI is constructed to help us craft a network to map the relational structure between specific state institutions (those closely involved in the Skopje 2014 project) with accompanying suppliers and identify clientelistic dependence that characterizes state capture (Fazekas et al., 2024). The advantage of the network analysis approach lies in its ability to reveal structural features of corruption, such as repeated awards or concentration, which are the architects of patronage. Such transactions remain invisible when investigated in isolation or if incomplete (Villamil et al., 2022, 2024; Wachs & Kertész, 2019). Investigative Reporting Lab Macedonia (IRL) (2016) contains a database of basic information on contract sizes awarded in relation to Skopje 2014, which largely overlaps with our identification strategy using keywords.⁷

We construct a procurement network that maps the relationships between contracting authorities (CA) and suppliers. Each contract award creates a connecting line between the two. The thickness indicates the repeated dealings, number, and value of contracts, while the color of the circles and squares indicates their riskiness (red represents high risk). The network visualization identifies patterns that are beyond

⁶Detailed information about processing steps, size of the data, and indicators used are available in Appendix C of Chapter 6, C.4.1- C.4.3

⁷We verify this for certain suppliers whose total award during this period mostly overlaps to what we find.

the descriptive overview..⁸ To isolate the contracts pertaining to Skopje 2014, we apply filtering based on keywords, see Table C.7, using the tender description field from the collected data. Applying this selection method has resulted in 2625 contracts, with 1541 awarded during VMRO-DPMNE's (and Gruevski's) ruling period and 1084 project-related contracts awarded after the regime change. The keywords span four broader categories monuments and sculptures, architectural elements (facades), project-specific references ("Warrior on a horseback"), and construction categories (fountains, boats, etc.).

6.2 Initial conditions

The rise to power of Nikola Gruevski in 2006 marked a new era in Western Balkan politics, with eloquent technocrats focusing on economic modernization, market reforms, and European integration. His initial commitment was concerned with tackling corruption, strengthening institutional capacities, and accelerating the European integration process. The return to power of the conservative VMRO-DPMNE in 2006 came during a period of a marginal democratization momentum. The country was carefully navigating between stabilizing ethnic fragility through the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) and strengthening democratic institutions necessary for democratic consolidation (Risteska & Daskalovski, 2011), which, in certain respects, were at odds with the OFA.

In terms of its broader regional situation, the country found itself occupying a middle ground among the post-Communist countries. On the one hand, still lacking behind the Central and Eastern European democratizers (i.e., not a consolidated democracy), and, on the other hand, in a much more favorable position compared to some Central Asian entrenched autocracies (Turkmenistan) or slightly better than some of its neighbors (e.g., Montenegro, Serbia, Albania). Despite the weaknesses of the electoral process, elections in North Macedonia remained competitive, as

⁸More detailed technical explanations about the parts of the network are available in Appendix C of Chapter 6, C.4.4.

illustrated by the continuous turnover of power. Nevertheless, liberal protections remained underdeveloped and weak. Underneath the surface of such democratic competition lay a more hazardous reality. It is a middle ground between a consolidated democracy (to which party elites alluded) and an authoritarian regime (the position of its critics), which illustrates a state of affairs similar to hybrid regimes (Stefanovski, 2016). Democratic forms, elections, and institutions function, however, none are contested, free, or autonomous. Understanding the pathway taken by this political order to descend into state capture throughout a good part of a decade requires comprehension that goes beyond the individual deficiencies into the complexity of the multiple intersecting vulnerabilities.

North Macedonia entered the Gruevski period with almost the highest liberal democracy scores noted for the country (see V-Dem's LDI), high levels of polarization, with a tendency to improve, favorable regional conditions, with a tendency toward democratization, low but improving institutional capacities, and high corruption scores. Institutional weaknesses resulting from the executive's substantial dominance and a lack of thorough structural reforms represent the most significant challenge, allowing would-be autocrats to take advantage (Ragaru, 2008). Party lists for parliamentary elections were closely crafted with dominant parties' national coordination, appointments were closely linked to parties, and presiding over particularly sensitive cases received guidance "from above". Media outlets continued to rise, indicating increased pluralism. Nevertheless, ownership or support followed a different pattern. The media remained heavily dependent on the parties in power and on political favor. Despite numerous structural challenges, Gruevski's government has managed to progress in terms of foreign policy within its first two years in power. The pending visa liberalization process and the potential invitation to NATO membership are the two highlights (Siegel, 2010).

Nonetheless, the failure to materialize of the latter resulted in early 2008 parliamentary elections, which allowed the party to obtain a simple majority in the Assembly and a 2/3 majority with its coalition partner (Democratic Union of Integration

- DUI). This symbolized a marked shift in government priorities. The failure of international politics led to a change in government, with the announcement of a mega project ("Skopje 2014") to reinvent relations with its neighbors and advance a different domestic strategy to stay in power. One that is based on patriotism and heightened nationalism amid expanding illiberal actions. The established structural weaknesses allowed the ruling VMRO-DPMNE to reinvent institutional purposes from ones serving the general population to those that are instrumentalized for the benefit of the party. Moreover, as a result of the "Skopje 2014" project, ethnic relations started to deteriorate and be manipulated for the benefit of the ruling parties (Ragaru, 2008; Staletović & Pollozhani, 2023). Polarization has been increasing, leading to greater political instability. Corruption in the form of new networks of dependent clients of government funds fundamentally restructured the country's political economy and became the primary instrument of political control. Despite the enabling regional environment (Bulgaria joining the EU, Serbia's democratization momentum, Montenegro and Kosovo's relatively smooth independence movements (Levitsky & Way, 2010)), North Macedonia started a pathway of autocratization (Sotiropoulos, 2023a). In addition to the substantial structural weaknesses, the country's autocratization episode was heavily dependent on the undertaken decisions of the incumbent Prime Minister - Nikola Gruevski. These initial conditions map directly onto the theoretical framework. These were present during the post-independence period and made it possible to trigger the autocratization episode. The disappointment with the 2008 NATO Summit and the lack of an integration process triggered the development of the "Skopje 2014", which prevented domestic democratic consolidation and perpetuated bilateral disputes to dominate through the paradigm of stability-governance.

6.3 The Autocratization Episode

North Macedonia's erosion of democratic qualities and subsequent autocratization display signs of a typical autocratization episode, increasing polarization and weakening institutional capacities, allowing incumbents to exploit and expand their corrupt networks, creating a vicious circle. The transformation transpired not through a single breakthrough, but rather through cumulative interactions: increased illiberalizing rhetoric that polarized the population, weak institutions that were unable to constrain the executive, and systematic corruption that enabled capture and patrimonial distribution of state resources. VMRO-DPMNE has managed to quickly establish control over all aspects of democratic life in the country. Dividing the media into supporters of the regime, e.g., Sitel (a national television), Republika (a weekly magazine), or Dnevnik (a daily newspaper) that slowly shifted its editorial policy until dying out in 2012 (Rusi & Spasovska, 2013). The "Skopje 2014", starting after 2009 and extending beyond 2014, transcended symbolic politics. The mega project's estimated costs exceeded more than 300 million EUR (Balkan Insight, 2016; Fokus, 2015), and certain estimates going for more than 500 million EUR, created unprecedented opportunities for resource extraction through systematic corruption. We expect to find a narrower distribution of contracts that tend to be riskier in their award process. Thus, the extracted resource financed the creation of a clientelistic network, becoming the primary governance mechanism of the regime.

The hypothesized mechanism from our theoretical framework explores how the episode has unraveled. VMRO-DPMNE's shift from a pro-liberalizing and integration party into a driver of democratic erosion came into four stages. An initial period of reforms (2006-2008) marks the first stage. The 2008 NATO summit marked a substantial shift in the political direction of the country. While still firmly committed (at least in their rhetoric) to integration, increasingly polarizing practices mark the second stage. The launch of the "Skopje 2014" has deepened the

bilateral problems, pushing the parties further apart and, hence, from integration. The third period (after 2010 and until 2015) is defined by significant violations of media freedom. For instance, the closure of A1 TV, Vreme and Koha newspapers, and the demise of the newspapers Vest, Dnevnik and Utrinski Vesnik, have been present almost since the independence, which came during this stage (Rusi & Spasovska, 2013). Moreover, the "Skopje 2014" project was in full swing and had already shown evidence of exceeding the initially estimated costs several times over. The last stage is the slow decline of the regime marked by mass protests (student and opposition), increasing scandal revelations, and the need for a special prosecution, and the setup of a technical government without the direct involvement of Nikola Gruevski. The two sections of polarization and corruption focus on the final two periods identified in Table 6.1.

Gruevski's transformation from economic reformer and pro-integrationist to staunch supporter of the traditional and "Macedonian" was facilitated not only through the institutional transformation and resource extraction, but also through the parallel transformation of the political discourse. Schneider and Maerz (2024)⁹ already explored the potential to identify tendencies of democratic erosion in the speeches and statements of Presidents and Prime Ministers. The comprehensiveness of the collected data allows us to analyze how Gruevski's rhetoric evolved, its situational context, and most importantly for our case, how it compares to the Prime Ministers (and other ministers) who have succeeded him. The computational analysis that follows employs both the traditionally-based dictionary method (Maerz & Schneider, 2020) and advanced semantic embedding techniques to systematically examine the discursive transformation of Macedonian Prime Ministers across political speeches and statements delivered between 2011 and 2023. The dual approach allows us to examine the semantics of the evolving political concepts, trace the mechanisms that challenged democratic norms, explore the instrumentalized stability discourse,

⁹CEU - Political Science Department Seminar

and the construction of alternative political legitimacy frameworks (see Table 6.1 for an overview).

Table 6.1: Periodization of the mechanism in North Macedonia

Period	Polarization (SHIELDS)	Corruption (FUNDS)	Feedback
2006–2008	Low; reform rhetoric	Low; standard practices	Latent
2008–2010	Moderate; antiquity narrative emerges	Moderate; Skopje 2014 announced	Activation
2010–2015	High; opposition delegitimized	High; systematic capture	Reinforcing
2015–2016	Extreme; foreign agent (Soros) framing	Extreme; exposed by wiretaps	Political crisis

Source: Author's periodization

The table illustrates the co-evolution of the two parts of the mechanism over time. The first two segments are beyond the scope of the analysis,¹⁰ and the analysis focuses on the reinforcing parts of the political crisis.

6.3.1 Echoes of Division - how illiberal rhetoric evolved as democracy eroded

The systematic and continuous dismantling of democratic institutions and practices raises important questions about the employed mechanism and its extrapolation to other similar cases. Therefore, it is necessary to more closely examine it in the case of the Macedonian autocratization episode. While the structural

¹⁰This decision also partly rests on the lack of available data. While we have collected public procurement contracts from 2008 onwards, the period 2008 to 2010 data is of poor quality - missing relevant variables, and unreliable. We have also connected Gruevski speeches before 2011 by transcribing them from those available on YouTube and publicly available, however, there are too few yearly observations compared to the later periods

conditions and tactical strategies of VMRO-DPMNE, and more specifically Nikola Gruevski, have received wider consideration (Bieber, 2020; Günay & Dzihić, 2016), the discursive dimensions of the autocratization episode remain underexplored. How did Gruevski's rhetoric evolve to justify illiberal practices? To what extent were certain concepts (e.g., stability, identity) instrumentalized and redefined to serve authoritarian ends? How did political discourse evolve beyond Gruevski's incumbency that normalized practices and semantic contexts?

The first two years (2006-2008) of Gruevski's first government term have been marked by the reform agenda, focusing on economic liberalization and a more conducive business climate. Despite the significant disagreements in the past, on specific topics, political elites did manage to achieve a somewhat consensus, e.g., (almost) similar views on the disappointment after the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit from Gruevski and Crvenkovski (Siegel, 2010). The turning point came after 2008, and became more prominent with the implementation of the activities related to the project "Skopje 2014". This section will demonstrate and compare Gruevski's anti-pluralism rhetoric with the prime ministers who followed his departure from office. The rhetoric will illustrate the continuous condemnation of all societal actors, lack of compromise, and increasingly authoritarian tendencies. Particularly challenging were the last three years of Gruevski's tenure as Prime Minister, marked by continuous increases in the level of illiberalism.

After 2010, we can observe increasingly more aggressive, illiberal and polarizing measures undertaken by the incumbent. Concerning media, the closure of A1 national television in 2011, followed by the closure of several prominent newspaper outlets, *Vreme*, *Koha e Re*, *Dnevnik*, *Vest*, and *Utrinski Vesnik*, has accelerated the anti-pluralist and democracy erosion trends. Electorally, the imprisonment of an opposition candidate, Ljube Boshkovski (a former prominent member of VMRO-DPMNE), after the June 2011 elections restricted political and electoral competition (Gjuzelov & Hadjievska, 2020). Lastly, the removal of the opposition and media during the 2013 budgetary vote, and the poorly conducted 2014 parliamentary

elections, represented the final point when the government had also started to lose support from the international community.

According to our analysis using the illiberal speech index (ISI), 2012 is the most illiberal year, regarding the speeches and statements produced by PM Gruevski 6.1, and significantly higher compared to his successor Zaev (see Zaev's ISI scores in Appendix of Chapter 6, Figure C.2).¹¹ It is during this period that the most blatant violations of the fragile parliamentarism have been violated when the opposition MPs were physically expelled as they tried to block the ruling party's budgetary vote. Journalists from the parliament have also been removed as the pressure on media independence and institutional accountability mounted (Rizankoska & Trajkoska, 2019). The episode further exposed the government's intolerance of dissenting voices and set the tone for escalating polarization that will perpetuate since. While the opposition highlighted the ruling party's growing authoritarian tendencies, the government's narrative underscored that the opposition's aims are against the nation.

Furthermore, the episode accentuated the substantive marginalization of the opposition and more profound divisions of those who are right and can make decisions for the people (Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE) and the illegitimate opposition. For instance, during a reaction concerning a letter of concern from the opposition MPs, Gruevski made efforts to delegitimize it by referring to it as a product of his main rival (Branko Crvenkovski), and not that of the MPs. Therefore, he aims to question whether the opposition even represents a democratic actor in the society. The rhetoric fuels polarization by doubting not the opponents' arguments, but their very right to participate in democratic debate, questioning their procedural legitimacy. By framing the opponent not as a political actor, but rather as a

¹¹Validation results of the ISI index with the V-Dem's Liberal component are available in Appendix 3, Figure C.1. It shows a positive correlation of 0.59, which is statistically significant with a p-value = 0.05. The dictionary in this context performs similarly or outperforms recent findings by (Wagner et al., 2025). The ISI original scores have been rescaled to show higher positive values for a higher level of liberal speech. 2016 and 2024 were omitted from the validation as these years contained only a few speeches by the technical Prime Ministers, Emil Dimitriev and Talat Xhaferi.

"master puppeteer" that operates from the shadows ,it will set a precedent (for the events of 2015-2017) for the increased vilification of the opposition and its connections with foreign services in their efforts to replace a democratically elected government of VMRO-DPMNE. Notwithstanding the severe democratic violations, the opposition parties did not manage to generate sufficient international pressure, and the regime continued to receive support from international actors, most prominently the European Union.

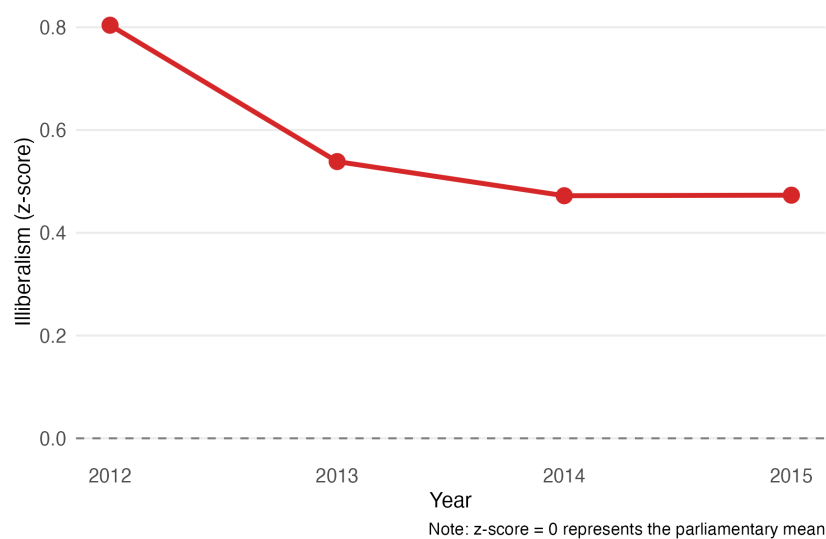
When Gruevski delegitimizes the opposition (see quote below), what we observe is the shielding mechanism. He transforms the accountability calls into evidence of treason and association with a center that controls all activities. What it manages to accomplish is to preemptively discredit potential corruption allegations as non-existent, and simultaneously mobilize supporters by positioning himself as the defender (here of the name Macedonia):

"... such a reaction from your side did not surprise me at all and was completely expected, together with the tone in which it was written, and you know that it was written by one hand, which hides behind your signatures, a principle adequate for everything else in your party... The politics that some opposition leaders have promoted until now, as politics of a bent spine and hiding reality, I do not accept as a method in politics and attitude toward one's own people. If someone speaks reality and truth then he is emotional, inappropriate, or quarrelsome. But if someone lies to his own people that he is changing their name to a temporary reference and that this reference will last only 2 months, is he a visionary? Are these your values? I personally do not accept this. I do not accept hypocrisy as an expression of politics." (Влада на Република Северна Македонија/Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2012).¹²

¹²Author's translation from: "... една ваква реакција од ваша страна воопшто не ме изненади и беше целосно очекувана и тоа токму заедно со тонот со кој е пишувана, а и самите знаете дека е пишувана од една рака, која се крие зад вашите потписи, принцип адекватен на се останато во вашата партија... Политиката што досега ја промовираа некои од лидерите на опозицијата, како политика на свиткан рбет и криење на реалноста, не ја прифаќам како метод во политиката и однос кон сопствениот народ. Ако некој ја каже реалноста и вистината тогаш тој е емотивен, непримерен или кавгаџија. А ако некој го лаже сопствениот народ дека му го менува името во привремена референца и дека таа референца ќе трае само 2 месеци е визионер? Тоа ли се вашите вредности? Јас лично тоа не го прифаќам. Не го прифаќам лицемерието како израз на политиката."

Moreover, associating the opposition as the main responsible actor concerning the challenges of the country¹³ alludes to moral absolutism. It frames the debate between truth-tellers and those who represent the people (him and his party - us), and those who lack moral courage and weaklings, or those that "bent spine" (the opposition - them).¹⁴ There is a lack of middle ground for legitimate disagreement; you either tell the truth or lie. The different stances on how to approach a critical bilateral/international challenge without a strong national position or consensus among the political elites made the divisions even more pronounced. During this period, it was extremely challenging to support effective institutional dialogue between the incumbent and the opposition, who were essentially marginalized from all important democratic processes.

Figure 6.1: Nikola Gruevski: Temporal Development of Illiberal Discourse



Source: Author's calculations based on collected speeches and statements

VMRO-DPMNE and Gruevski's power remained largely uncontested and difficult to challenge during 2013 as well. As a result, Gruevski's rhetoric continued to discredit the opposition as those who do not work in the interests of the country and its people. The most illiberal speeches were delivered during the commemoration

¹³Although he was a prominent minister in the 1998-2002 VMRO-DPMNE-led government

¹⁴Similar metaphors have been used by the Macedonian President, Gjorge Ivanov, by naming the current democracy in the country as "Kosmodisk democracy."

of 2 national holidays that the party managed to correlate with VMRO-DPMNE's activities, namely 2 August (Ilinden Revolution) and 23 October (day of VMRO-DPMNE). The repeated insistence on using "our fatherhood" and "our national identity" and linking today's VMRO-DPMNE's achievements with Ilinden and ASNOM (two important statehood days for the country), Gruevski tends to collapse past achievements (belonging to all people) with the incumbent government.¹⁵ The initial boycott of the opposition for the 2013 local elections was immediately framed by Nikola Gruevski as an act serving only the personal interests of the opposition leader and as coming at the expense of the country's international reputation. While the government portrayed its own actions as necessary to protect the state, the opposition was depicted as holding the country hostage:

"...we are in a complex moment of our recent history; the opposition announces a boycott, creating chaos everywhere, damaging the country's image and executing a shameful agenda of its leader" (Влада на Република Северна Македонија/Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2013).¹⁶

Electoral manipulation proceeded during the 2013 local elections, and in particular the contested municipality of Center, were crucial for the "Skopje 2014" project. The media has also been affected by this sustained erosion. What continued to restrict media freedom is the ongoing practice of SLAPPs by the regime, particularly directed at journalists. 54 such cases have been noted in 2012 alone, an increase from 21 noted in 2021 (Benazzo et al., 2025). Moreover, the death, under suspicious conditions, of a prominent journalist resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of another journalist, Tomislav Kežarovski, who was investigating it. Yet, despite all eroding measures, the European Union continued to enable the ruling party, becoming more complicit (Popetrevski, 2017).

¹⁵Nikola Gruevski, speech of 2 August 2013, Government of the Republic of (North) Macedonia Archive, available at: <https://arhiva.vlada.mk/node/6993>.

¹⁶Author's translation from Macedonian: "...наоѓаме сложен момент во нашата понова историја. опозицијата најавува бојкот на изборите, правејќи опасен преседан, создава хаос насекаде, руши имиџот на земјата надвор, одработувајќи срамна агенда на лидерот." Nikola Gruevski, speech of 12 February 2013, Government of the Republic of (North) Macedonia Archive, available at: <https://arhiva.vlada.mk/node/5800>.

The decline in 2014 is more reflected in Gruevski's strategic shift than in ideological changes conditioned by political circumstances. VMRO-DPMNE and Gruevski experienced increased pressure from the international community to compromise with the opposition following highly problematic parliamentary elections, where the party consolidated power, while the opposition refused to accept parliamentary mandates. As a result, we observe a more technocratic approach with greater focus on "reforms" as required by the set of EU conditionalities. The regime's aim has been to anchor domestic reforms to supranational accountability frameworks, signaling responsiveness to international signals and requirements (Hudson, 2023). Greater emphasis has been placed on improving the courts to align judicial reforms closer to EU standards through potential constitutional reforms:

"...increase the number of judges on the Judicial Council is proposed for further strengthening judicial independence...align with international standards...and fulfill GRECO recommendations" (Влада на Република Северна Македонија/Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2014a).¹⁷

Similar constitutional changes in the past, and countries undergoing similar autocratization processes, have been detrimental to fair play and keeping the playing field level. Rather, the effect has been greater judicial control, exemplified by the existence of a "notebook" that records "judges' performance" kept by the Minister of Internal Affairs (Bassuener, 2015). Other reforms emphasized throughout the year included improving the country's economic conditions by attracting foreign investment and implementing the party's projected national infrastructure projects, strengthening fiscal discipline by establishing constitutionally guaranteed stability mechanisms, and improving educational conditions for students. Such statements, with substantially more positive dynamics and spin, focus on implementing projects through successful tendering procedures:

¹⁷Зголемувањето на судиите членови на Судскиот совет се предлага за натамошно јакнење на независноста на судството...усогласување со меѓународните стандарди во областа на правосудството...и исполнување на препораките на ГРЕКО. <https://arhiva.vlada.mk/node/9046>.

"...means 670 projects are implemented or in progress... The policy of attracting foreign investments is one of the most successful policies of the government." (Влада на Република Северна Македонија/Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2014b).¹⁸

On average, Gruevski tended to be more liberal throughout the entire year. This short interlude of more considerate rhetoric coincides with only a minor decline of Macedonia's democracy score according to V-Dem.

However, the challenge to VMRO-DPMNE's position emerged in late 2014 and intensified in 2015. As a result, we observe another illiberal shift. The illiberal shift began immediately following the opposition leader, Zoran Zaev, release of the first wiretapped recordings in February 2015. Following the authoritarian playbook of discrediting the opposition and creating an enemy of the state, Gruevski's statements and actions set the latest polarization tone in the country. The official narrative of the ruling party became the involvement of a foreign intelligence agency that aimed to manipulate, a Soros-funded organization that aimed to destabilize the country, subsequently generating existential threats to the nation of "Macedonians" (Hudson, 2023). This tone has been set as early as 25 February 2015"

"Zoran Zaev threatened me with the publication of illegally recorded telephone conversations involving almost the entire state leadership unless I accepted his demand for the formation of a technical government — an offer I refused. I also indicated that on several occasions he told me that he had obtained the material in cooperation with a foreign intelligence service, and that there is solid and indisputable evidence for these statements." (Влада на Република Северна Македонија/Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2015a).¹⁹

Such framing aims to delegitimize the opposition by associating it with foreign espionage services, transforming domestic accountability into an attack on sovereignty,

¹⁸670 проекти се спроведени или се во тек на нивна реализација... Политиката на привлекување странски инвестиции е една од најуспешните политики на владата. <https://arhiva.vlada.mk/node/9446>.

¹⁹Author's translation: "Зоран Заев ми се закани со објавување на нелегално снимени телефонски разговори од речиси целиот државен врв доколку не го прифатам неговото барање за формирање на техничка влада, понуда која јас ја одбив. Посочив и дека неколку пати тој ми кажа дека материјалот го прибавил во соработка со странска разузнавачка служба и дека за тие негови изјави постојат цврсти и непобитни докази." <https://vlada.mk/node/10216>.

by distracting the nation from asking questions about the content of the recordings and, by defocusing from "who produced the recordings and for what purpose?" Consequently, Gruevski and the VMRO-DPMNE have positioned themselves as guarantors of national identity and stability. The increased frequency of revealing information forced the regime to translate foreign services into a specific culprit, namely, George Soros and the Soros network of non-government organizations in the country. Similar networks established as mobilizing targets have emerged in other countries, most significantly in Hungary:

*"SDSM is a hostage of the Soros group...Our political opponents are SDSM and their satellites, among them a group financed by Soros...who always use their large budget to finance projects supporting SDSM" (Влада на Република Северна Македонија/Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2015b).*²⁰

Within the same highly illiberal speech, two further points are important to stress the ambivalent position towards international organizations that have slowly started to unmask the autocratizing trends in the country, despite the regime's fervent claims of democratic promotion:

*If someone is trying to help the country, that is the Western (European) countries, who are primarily interested in protecting their interests...Our goal is a democratic society integrated in the NATO and EU(Влада на Република Северна Македонија/Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2015b).*²¹

Despite such claims, the behavior of VMRO-DPMNE and Gruevski during this period has been erratic at best, without full commitment to establishing a dialogue "[Hence] Ilija Dimovski abandoned the negotiations [with van Haute]".²² Van Haute served as EU's envoy to broker the Przhino Agreement of reconciliation.

²⁰Author's translation: "СДСМ е заложник на соросовата групација... Наши политички противници се СДСМ и нивните сателити меѓу кои и групацијата финансирана од Соросовиот ... со својот дебел буџет финансираат проекти за поддршка на СДСМ." <https://arhiva.vlada.mk/node/11564>.

²¹Ако некој пробува да помогне во овој период се токму дел од западните земји, тие тоа го прават за да го заштитат првенствено својот интерес ... Нашата крајна цел е демократско општество интегрирано во НАТО и ЕУ. <https://arhiva.vlada.mk/node/11546>.

²²Затоа и Илија Димовски во еден момент ги напушти преговорите. <https://arhiva.vlada.mk/node/11546>.

The terminology deployed by Gruevski in this crucial speech from December 2015 strips the opposition of autonomous agency, resembling its position from 2012, but goes even further, reconstituting them as instruments of external manipulation. The actions have raised the stakes of political competition and have severely polarized the population, making the next parliamentary elections a referendum on democracy, as much as it was the case in Slovakia in 1998. The theme of VMRO-DPMNE's, and particularly Gruevski's, victimhood has been reinforced during the New Year's address (Gruevski's last day as a Prime Minister). The political crisis has been elevated to being the most severe challenge of the country (despite previous military conflicts):

"A year in which a political crisis occurred—certainly the most difficult in the history of independent Macedonia... aimed at achieving a clear political goal: changing the government of the Republic of Macedonia, a government elected only a few months earlier by a convincing majority of the citizens of Macedonia in organized elections that no one, except our political opponent, declared unfair or undemocratic." (Влада на Република Северна Македонија/Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2015c).²³

Despite the evident rampant corruption, state capture, and polarized society, any accountability evades actions and rhetoric by disappearing from all accounts and is replaced by illegitimate means of acquisition of state power by the opposition. Most significantly, the European Commission uses the designation of "state capture" in North Macedonia (European Commission, 2016). Although Gruevski tried to balance the evident illiberal practices in 2012 and 2013 with a balanced and technocratic approach in 2014, the emergence of the severe political crises has rapidly altered the landscape, with the opposition increasingly more supported by foreign governments, organizations and institutions. Faced with a plethora of evidence for corruption and power abuse that erode democratic qualities, the regime resorted to qualitatively different rhetoric - one centered on external threat

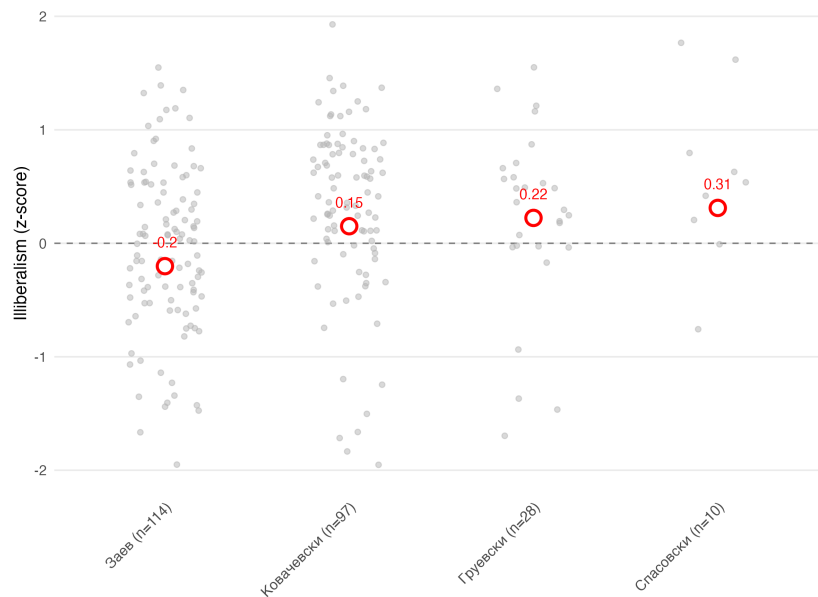
²³Author's translation from: "Година во која се случи политичката криза, сигурно најтешката во историјата на независна Македонија...со кое се сакаше да се постигне јасна политичка цел, промена на власта во Република Македонија, и тоа на само неколку месеци претходно избрана од убедливото мнозинство граѓани на Македонија на организирани избори, кои никој друг освен нашиот политички опонент не ги прогласи за нефер или недемократски" <https://arhiva.vlada.mk/node/11692>.

construction, enemy designation, and victimhood claims for the purpose of stronger nationalist mobilization. The extensive use of such rhetoric aligns with Somer et al. (2021)'s framework of pernicious polarization in which political elites deliberately design binary in-group/out-group narratives to delegitimize the opposition's efforts to challenge the incumbent, and help the incumbent to mobilize support. The deterioration of the regime's vocabulary is supplemented with its use of Schedler's menu of manipulation to stay in power (Schedler, 2002), and what Levitsky and Way (2010) elaborate on tilting the level playing field by deploying state resources for the benefit of the party.

What fits within these dynamics of interplay of external support and domestic push is the concept of stabilitocracy (Kmezić & Bieber, 2017) captures the regime's efforts to navigate between the push of international organizations for more efficient reforms and increased freedoms, while trying to balance the stability in the country. The quantitative shift in illiberalism scores - from below corpus mean in 2014 to substantially above in 2015 (and 2012-2013) - reveals the mechanisms through which Gruevski's regime operated. Failing domestic reforms, unresolved bilateral issues, and international integration stagnation allowed the regime to create an external threat ascription that redirects attention from domestic abuse of institution and state capture. Enemy naming transformed political opponents into agents of foreign powers, simultaneously positioning himself as the victim, equivalent to that of historical martyrdom, and as the defender of national interests. The shift in power has also brought a period of potential consolidation, whereby PM Zaev tended to be more liberal, on average, in his speeches and statements (Figure 6.2).²⁴ The Nonetheless, this was a relatively short-lived period that stumbled due to further bilateral issues (now with Bulgaria). The assumption of the PM position of Kovachevski resulted in the beginning of another autocratization episode, which also corresponds to another period of increased illiberal statements.

²⁴Compared to other figures that display individual temporal developments, this figure filter only lengthier speeches and statements by each prime minister.

Figure 6.2: Speaker-speech level - Illiberalism speech index



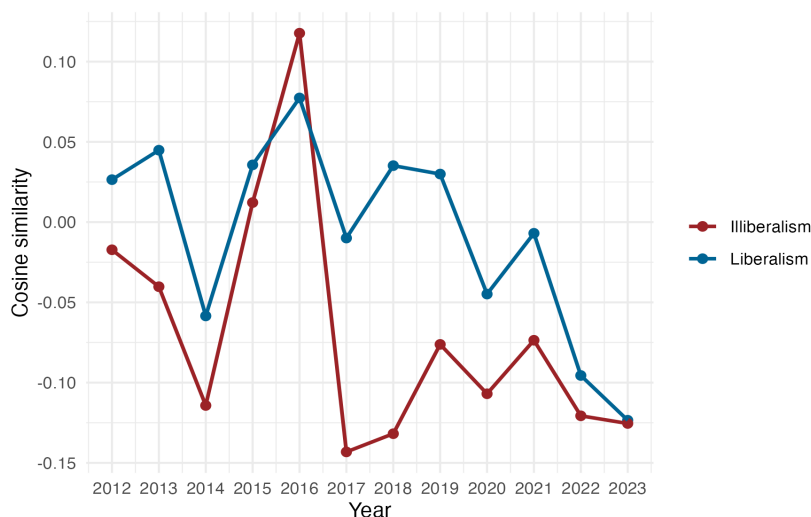
Source: Author's calculations based on collected speeches and statements

The dictionary-based approach indeed captures some of the illiberal vocabulary deployed by the Macedonian prime ministers; however, this only captures the surface of political discourse. A more nuanced approach using word embeddings allows us to capture the use of specific phrases in a given context, such as exploring semantic associations that structure political discourse.²⁵ Figure 6.3 indicates the semantic development of the illiberal and liberal dictionaries across the years. 2012 and 2013 are periods where we observe specific stability in how terms associated with illiberalism or liberalism are used. Although illiberal elements are significantly more present, there is still justification for liberal rhetoric. However, in 2014, there was a dramatic rupture and a period of destabilization. It is the peak of institutional capture and a greater focus on discourse revolving around our unity, threats, or exclusion. The period represents disrupting the connection of liberal

²⁵To test the validity of the trained model, we explore the cosine similarity of concepts that we would expect to be antonyms or not to be used in the same context. The results confirm the expected direction of the selected pairs within the model, and are presented in Appendix C of Chapter 6, C.4.

frames with liberal values, and instead relying more on frames that are semantically different.²⁶

Figure 6.3: Speaker-speech level - Illiberalism speech index



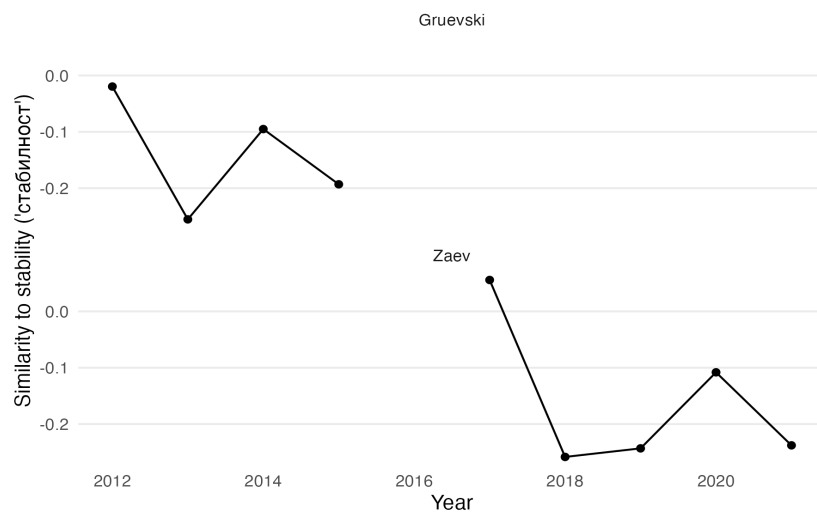
Source: Author's calculations based on collected speeches and statements

These aggregate yearly findings show variation at the speaker level with relevant concepts for our exploration. We expect that speakers rarely speak plainly about their (illiberal) intentions. What has emerged in Gruevski's last years in power (after 2012) and perpetuated in the region since, is the concept of stabilitocracy, capturing the dynamics of international-domestic interactions, in which western actors, primarily the EU, prioritize preserving stability at the expense of democratic consolidation (Kmezić & Bieber, 2017). The approach implies that western actors tolerate authoritarian governance practices in exchange for managing potential conflicts. Instead of complementing democratic governance, the term serves as a distinct legitimization register. Leaders tend to invoke stability without invoking its importance to democratic values. Our results show such trends for both Prime Ministers, Gruevski and Zaev. Although Zaev's initial use of stability related to its conceptual meaning, by 2018, it had already shifted its meaning (see Figure 6.4). Constant negative cosine similarity indicates usage that is not reflected in the

²⁶2016 is an outlier due to the lack of a sufficiently large corpus of speeches. There was a technical Prime Minister and fewer ministerial collected speeches and statements.

intended meaning of the concept. For instance, the high negative values in 2013 for Gruevski represent a reflection and response to the crises that ended the year 2012, the removal of MPs and media from the Assembly. The use is an indication and potential warning of destabilization. Results for 2013 and 2015, another year with a major crisis for the regime, largely overlap in this regard.²⁷

Figure 6.4: Speaker-speech level - Illiberalism speech index



Source: Author's calculations based on collected speeches and statements

Looking more closely, the use of stability provides greater support to the stability thesis in the country. It does not merely represent a theme among many others, but serves as a signifier that structures political legitimization in North Macedonia (and the Balkans more broadly). The terms most closely associated with stability rather than being closer to democratic governance are indicative of the security dimension (Table 6.2).²⁸ The three clusters that emerge from this neighborhood connect stability with the absence of conflicts or threats, which represent the baseline concern for the war-ravaged region (**security cluster**). **Regional cluster** positions the stability of North Macedonia in a closer configuration with the EU. Last, the **economic and development cluster** associates stability with

²⁷Zaev's rapid shift of the stability discourse after 2018 represents a reflection of the continued difficulties to implement the Prespa Agreement and translate the Agreement into the promised Euro-Atlantic integration of the country.

²⁸The cosine similarity between democracy and stability is 0.205 or almost half as the cosine similarity between security and stability, 0.407

material advancement and investment climate. What remains absent as semantic neighbors are terms associated with democracy, freedom, or elections. The analysis shows that stability is not closely connected with democratic consolidation, but it rather occupies a conceptual space structured around security concerns and regional positioning. While speeches by the Prime Ministers show negative (cosine) similarity to the term's standard semantic meaning, indicating the distorted, op-eds by independent journalists remain closer to the genuine and conventional term's connotation, see Table C.3 in Appendix D.3 of Chapter 6.²⁹

Table 6.2: Semantic Neighborhood of "Stability" (стабилност)

English	security	peace	region	safety	prosperity	economic	factor	regional
Macedonian	безбедност	мир	регион	сигурност	просперитет	економски	фактор	регионален
Cosine Similarity	0.407	0.384	0.373	0.368	0.365	0.314	0.310	0.308

Source: Author's calculations based on word embeddings results

The analysis using the traditional dictionary-based method and word embeddings supported us in disentangling the increasingly illiberal developments in North Macedonia at the hands of PM Gruevski. The patterns we unraveled showed us the increasing proclivity of Gruevski to instrumentalize his rhetoric and further polarize the society during periods of insecurity (Petkovski, 2016). This is best illustrated in his technocratic pivot in 2014, during a period of increased consolidation of power, compared to 2012 and 2015, when the opposition was more mobilized. The word embeddings have further cast light on how discourse is applied, by tracing the proximity of the use of stability across the tenure of Gruevski (and later Zaev). Taken together, the results shed light on how leaders navigate not only institutional and financial constraints but also discursive repertoires adapted to shifting political circumstances. Polarization analysis demonstrated how illiberal rhetoric systematically constructed a binary friend-foe distinction, a group that supports the party and national interests, and a group that has been corrupted by foreign interference and aims to dismantle everything that represents being a "Macedonian".

²⁹We explore how stability is used by non-politicians, using op-eds' texts over the same period of analysis and applying the same analytical steps for the analysis of said texts. For this purpose we have collected op-eds and other articles from the weekly "Fokus" Figure C.3.

Protracted use of such practices, and especially towards the end of the Gruevski regime, when it became particularly pronounced, eroded the possibility of shared understanding necessary for democratic accountability (Ordanoski & Angiolillo, 2025). A trait that persisted since. Stability became the crucial paradigm for the Macedonian political elite, consequently restricting the potential for democratic development and consolidation, at the expense of stability and security.

The discourse represents only one dimension of VMRO-DPMNE's strategy during this autocratization episode. The illiberal language acquires significance only in relation to the material arrangements it enables and legitimates. Gruevski's framework of the wiretapping scandal as a foreign-induced crisis aimed at destabilizing the country and obstructing VMRO-DPMNE's legitimate election as a ruling party served to delegitimize the opposition that threatened to expose the state-captured institutional system. The discursive and institutional dimensions are intertwined and reinforced in the Macedonian autocratization episode. What transpires is a polarizing rhetoric that weakens the oversight mechanisms and enables, while the captured state resources are deployed to sustain their political dominance. The stabilitocracy's semantics, explored using a set of computational methods that showed decoupling of stability from democracy and consolidation, finds its correlate in the institutional arrangements explored in the next section.

It explores the hollowing out of institutional constraints and funneling of public resources towards closed friends and companies. The analysis benefits from tailored corruption measurement that goes beyond country-year classifications and is better suited to exploring how intricate networks are constructed. Therefore, the analysis moves from how Gruevski spoke to how his government governed (and for whose benefit). It does this by exploring the networks developed by the regime when awarding tenders and contracts, which tend to be riskier, with particular focus on public resources used for the "Skopje 2014" project.³⁰ The original analysis

³⁰The project extended well beyond 2014, and new monuments or projects were developed until the end of 2016, and established maintained beyond this.

has demonstrated the mechanism through which polarizing rhetoric shields a component of the autocratic part. Gruevski's propensity to discredit the opposition as foreign actors, frame accountability demands as foreign interference, and create an environment in which allegations of corruption are considered as politically motivated. The following section explains how the funds component has mobilized resources to build a dense clientelistic network.

6.3.2 Monuments to Corruption: Institutional decay and state capture during VMRO-DPMNE and Gruevski's incumbency

The analysis of illiberal rhetoric in the previous section illustrated the means through which Gruevski delegitimized the opposition, instrumentalized the state institutions for the benefit of the party, and eventually constructed enemies. The computational text analysis revealed that discourse was used as a political instrument. What remained implicit in the analysis was the question of purpose. The strategic use of rhetoric implied strategic objectives aiming at insulating governance from accountability, but what specifically was being insulated? The network designed to connect political elites with business elites provides the answer. Public resources flowed to regime-friendly beneficiaries while simultaneously advancing its nationalist agenda, which mobilized supporters. Rhetoric and extraction operated as integrated components of a single regime strategy. The hybrid regime of stabilocracy that evolved in the country operates not only through words that protect deeds but also through systematic manipulation of institutions and resources, leading to political elites' state capture (Kaufmann, [2023](#); Sotiropoulos, [2023a](#)). The integration sheds light on why the QCA analysis identified both polarization and non-political stability as mechanisms in North Macedonia's autocratization pathway. These were naturally reinforcing factors that shielded the regime (using words) from accountability and generated resources using patronage networks.

Stabilitocracy required legitimation through discourse and material foundations, both of which were enabled by the "Skopje 2014" project.

The stalled international integration has removed substantial external constraints on Gruevski's regime, creating conditions conducive to incremental capture of state institutions. The main pathway was the announcement of the "Skopje 2014" mega project that aimed to reinvent the capital with fountains, monuments, and strengthen national identity through antiquity-inspired facades (Eastblog, 2016). The visible "acquisition" of Skopje's skyline was deeply intertwined with VMRO-DPMNE's illiberal nationalist rhetoric that championed nationalist symbolism, asserting a proud historical narrative while faced with challenging bilateral issues. The project was advocated as a means to make the central Skopje area more beautiful and cement the Macedonian identity. Nevertheless, the project became Gruevski's centerpiece for patriotism. Behind the patriotic facade, Skopje 2014 was plagued with opaqueness, waste resources, and mounting allegations of corruption. The makeover costs skyrocketed several times from EUR 80 million to more than EUR 300 million, with later estimates rising to more than EUR 640 million, or an 8-times increase (Balkan Insight, 2016).³¹

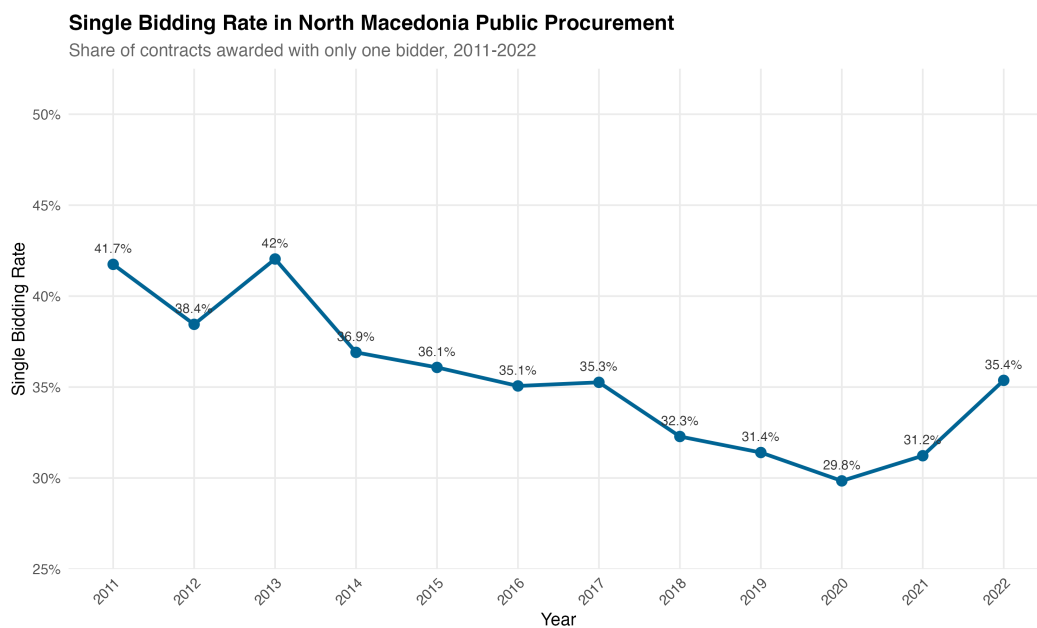
It takes advantage of publicly collected available public procurement data to construct networks for tenders of the City of Skopje and the relevant ministries, the Ministry of Transport, and the Ministry of Culture, to explore repeated tendering procedures.³² The channeling of state resources to connected actors through public procurement became the primary mechanism of corruption and capture (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2013) - systematically rewarding party loyalists through tendering "corruption-risky" tendering procedures, constructing patronage networks of binding beneficiaries. Figure 6.5 shows the tendency to have higher levels of constrained competition during the 2011-2014 VMRO-DPMNE period. For instance, compared to 2011 or 2013, when the almost 42 percent of tenders tended

³¹Wiretapped conversations revealed tender manipulated procedures and kickbacks related to awarded contracts.

³²Full detail on the collected data can be found in Appendix of Chapter 6, Table C.5.

to be awarded with only a single bidder, the post-2017 period noted substantial improvements by reducing these rates by almost a third, or more than 12 percentage points. These events coincide with descriptive evidence about closely connected economic operators with state institutions. TO better understand the connections we model the public procurement contracts into a network that explores these relationships. Public procurement contracts can be modeled as a bipartite network with one node representing the purchasing authorities - government institutions, public bodies or national agencies, while the second node representing the economic operators - selected supplier for a particular tender. An edge that connects a buyer and supplier indicates that at least one contract has been established between the two (For more details on analyzing networks, see (Borgatti et al., 2022). More details on elements of network are presented in Appendix C4 of Chapter 6).

Figure 6.5: State of competition in North Macedonia



Source: Author's calculations based on collected public procurement data and Open Tender data

A core feature of the Skopje 2014 was awarding contracts to close business allies of the regime through risky procedures. Throughout the rule of Gruevski, the regime has developed structural dependence, recurring ties of state institutions, and specific suppliers within the time frame of analysis. There was a high prevalence of

only a single bidder participation, tenders awarded in non-publicized procedures, and with short advertisement periods. Moreover, additional costs of unforeseen activities were the general rule that followed the contract award. For the purpose of the analysis, we have scoped existing studies and other media publications to identify keywords that will help us identify tenders associated with the project Skopje 2014, and similar projects that have been conducted following the change of regime.³³

The higher propensity to risky corrupt dealings does not capture accidental single-bidding but rather aims to capture more profound structural clientelistic trends. The risky contracts associated with Skopje 2014 were associated with a handful of state institutions. The Ministry of Culture had some of the highest-risk tenders. The reliance on external vendors associated with allied authoritarian countries, including contracts for artistic goods, not only aligns with the government's orientation after 2010, but has also helped to circumvent domestic scrutiny. To illustrate such awards, contracts were awarded to Samsonov Aleksandr Maratovich (Самсонов Александр Маратович), Troshin Sergej Nikolaevic (Трошин Сергей Николаевич), and Kaminina Ekaterina Viktorovna (Каминина Екатерина Викторовна) with CRI scores of almost 0.9 for contracts related to VMRO Museum's paintings. The procurements of these paintings depicting Macedonian struggles under the communist regime were not purely decorative purchases, but rather fit in with the rhetoric dynamic of history reproduction (Skordos & Trajanovski, 2024; Trajanovski & Hadjievska, 2023). In essence, it represented the material embodiment of a historical enactment for what Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE constantly invoked and stood for. The parliamentary speeches that celebrated the Macedonian identity and its connections with ancient kingdoms served as a reference to a mythology that has been simultaneously constructed through this project (Petkovski, 2016).

³³Detailed list of words is present in the Annex C.7. There are 1541 tenders associated with Skopje 2014 project and 1084 similar tenders following the regime change. There is a substantial difference of corruption riskiness between the two sets. The average corruption risk index score following the regime change is 0.38 compared to 0.47 during VRMO-DPMNE's period.

Both parts, polarization through illiberal rhetoric and corruption through institutional decay, reinforce, lend credibility to each other, and justify their mutual existence. Other highlighted institutions include the Municipality of Center and the City of Skopje, which represent the location for the large majority of the project monuments. Together with the Government Service Office and the Ministry of Transport and Communication, these institutions collectively represented the vehicles for Skopje 2014's spending spree.

Table 6.3: Public Procurement Activity and Skopje 2014–Related Contracts, North Macedonia 2011–2017

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
All public procurement contracts (NMK)	3,573	6,419	10,989	13,932	11,381	14,908	11,066
Skopje 2014–related contracts	150	232	309	211	138	352	153
Skopje 2014 share of total contracts (%)	4.2	3.6	2.8	1.5	1.2	2.4	1.4
Source: Author's calculations based on data from Open Tender and the author collected data							

An investigation following the mayoral change of the Municipality of Centar in 2013 revealed that due to opaque procedures and uncompetitive bidding practices, losses in the amount of EUR 8 million occurred (Deets, 2022).

As Milanovski notes,

“The authors’ fees were unreasonably high and in breach of the foreseen criteria. The public procurement procedures for casting the monuments, mostly in Italy, were very poorly executed. This resulted in serious damage [to the budget] of over 8 million euros, just in terms of casting the monuments.”
(as quoted in (Balkan Insight, 2016), 2016).

Moreover, funneling of funds was done through local companies with political connections, such as BauerBG, which has received seventy-one tenders (identified by our analysis) in the period 2011 to mid-2017, and only eight tenders following the regime change. This amounts to MKD 2.57 billion (or almost EUR 42 million), designing one of the most influential clientelistic nodes (See Table 6.4).³⁴ The

³⁴These numbers largely overlap to what has the investigative media group "Prizma" identified in connection with Skopje 2014. They report EUR 43 million or MKD 2.6 billion (Investigative Reporting Lab Macedonia (IRL), 2016)

repetition of contracts and the use of "additional works" clauses, which tended to expand contracts and their value without new tenders, were common practices. Fifty-seven such tenders were involved for the period 2011-mid-2017, and only two afterwards. In the Municipality of Centar, procurement contracts identified as high-risk were explicitly titled "unforeseen works not included in the initial contract," indicating a preplanned strategy to avoid competition. Cost overruns and contract amendments are classic red flags and a disguise for favoritism and corruption (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2013). The average corruption risk scores of all companies are above 0.4, or almost 15% higher than the average country's risk. The high dependence of such companies on "favor" from Gruevski's regime has made them vulnerable in the period after the regime change. Without the clientelistic networks, some major companies, such as "Beton", have slowly faced liquidity and bankruptcy problems (SeeNews, 2023), or could not compete in a more competitive environment, such as BauerBG, without close ties.

Table 6.4: Highest Skopje 2014 contracts

Supplier group	Awarded value	Mean Risky tenders
Bauer BG (Бауер БГ)	2,574,705,072	0.4
Beton (Бетон)	2,459,860,533	0.4
Granit (Гранит)	1,728,917,299	0.4
Makedonija AD (Македонија АД)	1,214,182,353	0.4
Lamone Moreda	633,866,239	0.5
Pelagonija (Пелагонија)	604,866,456	0.4
Hemkostav AD – Skopje Branch (Хемкостав АД – Подружница Скопје)	603,754,954	0.7

Source: Author's calculations

The project did not merely bring strain to public funds, but it exemplifies the systematic erosion of institutional checks under Gruevski's illiberal regime. Normal democratic oversight was sidestepped, and the frequent use of amendments for most contractual works bypassed the possibility for competition. Even the reconstruction of buildings that were legally not allowed proceeded, such as the example of the renovations and upgrades of the Assembly building despite the fierce protests of the academic community and legal prescriptions (Eastblog, 2016). Most of

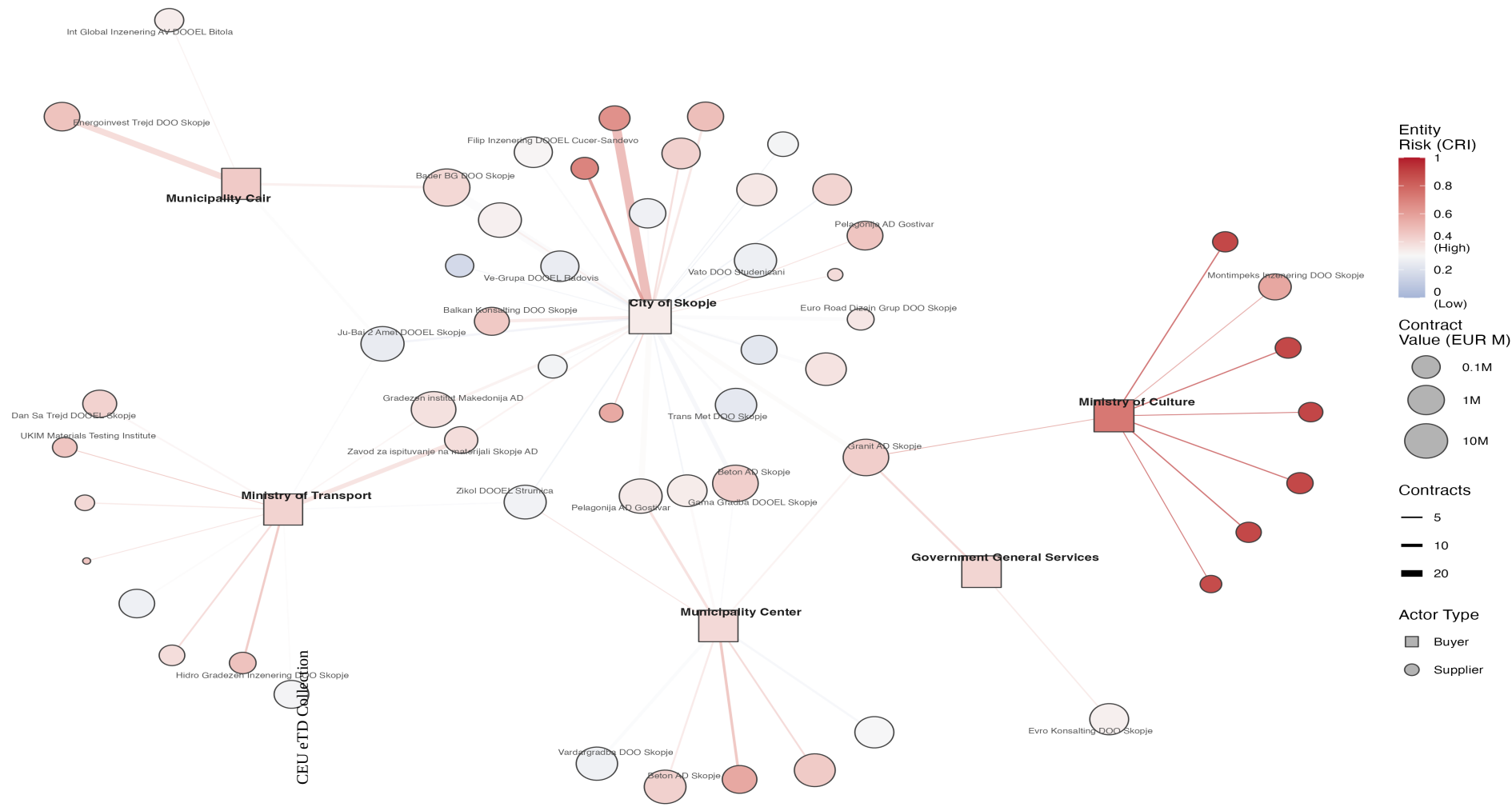
the initiatives during the initial stage of the Skopje 2014 were completed by the Municipality of Centar at the behest of the Government, with frequent urban planning changes. The disregard for legal norms has sidelined the possibility of the opposition acting in a meaningful manner (Staletović & Pollozhani, 2023). This represented only one part of the complete domination of VMRO-DPMNE. The second part is concerned with binding important domestic economic actors. Considering the vast amounts allocated for the major projects, the regime needed to create co-dependent economic actors. As a result, domestic companies became extremely reliant on government work (Staletović, 2024). The incremental state capture did not come from the business elites over the policy-making processes in the country, but rather the closest people to PM Gruevski have systematically captured the country's economy and institutions. In such a clientelistic environment, accountability in the country has slowly deteriorated (Deets, 2022), as the country's freedoms were slowly eroded one by one.³⁵

³⁵The World Press Freedom Index noted a deterioration from 34th globally ranked in 2009 to 116th in 2012.

Figure 6.6: Most prominent connections in North Macedonia

Procurement Network Structure: Skopje 2014 Project

Buyer-supplier relationships among key public institutions, 2010-2017



Note: Squares represent public buyers; circles represent private suppliers. Node and edge color intensity indicates Composite Risk Index (CRI), with red signaling elevated corruption risk. Edge width reflects number of contracts; node size reflects total contract value. Only major suppliers labeled.

Source: Author's calculation of network analysis

The key figure in the process was the Prime Minister. The release of the wiretapped materials by the Social Democrats alleged that Gruevski master minded the entire project. The government was the primary driver of the project, with municipalities and associated ministries as its implementers.

As Milanovski notes,

“I cannot say whether hypothetically Gruevski could be prosecuted in relation to this case, but our probe, as well as the wiretaps, suggest that he was the central figure in the Skopje 2014 project, so I am sure he bears responsibility.”
(as quoted in *(Balkan Insight, 2016)*, 2016).

However, the recordings did not merely reveal individual malfeasance. Rather, it exposed the integration of discourse and extraction that allowed the regime to maintain power as long as it did. The Special Prosecution’s investigations have indeed revealed numerous wrongdoings by both contractors and public officials, from ministries exceeding their authority to breaches of institutional prescriptions, such as procurement laws. The sheer breadth of the compromised entities comes closer to what the European Commission described as a captured state (Popetrevski, 2017), while the emerging regime type was not merely a generic hybrid regime, but rather a stabilitocracy (Kmezić & Bieber, 2017). The project supported and nurtured the authoritarian tendencies of the incumbent (party) and reinforced the autocratization sequence in the country. Through subversion of established procedures, it prevented active participation of the opposition or the wider civil society, and it allowed for illiberal rhetoric to flourish, for instance, in defense of some buildings or monuments.

The network visualization illustrates the connections through which resources flowed. The tender data showcases the flow of set funds through contracts between institutions and economic operators. It also provides integrated evidence to support and complement the partial and descriptive findings of individual research projects that investigated the importance of Skopje 2014 for Gruevski’s corrupt schemes. Together with the deployed rhetoric, these schemes provide integrated evidence of

regime strategy. This integration has broader implications for understanding hybrid regimes, whereby discursive strategies (polarization or nationalist mobilization) and material strategies (state capture, patronage, and resource allocation) can function as a unified system. The instrumentalized state or local institutions (ministries and municipalities) indicate the difficulty to restrain executive aggrandizement in regimes with weaker organizational capacities. Their repurposing to implement the nationalist agenda through the monuments and defend it with government-approved rhetoric re-affirms the established theoretical feedback loop. The centrality of a unifying project (Skopje 2014 in the case of North Macedonia) of national importance with broader consequences for domestic power distribution helps us explore similar trends in other countries.

The chapter has traced the theorized mechanism through the case of North Macedonia, focusing on the period after 2010, and demonstrated how polarization and corruption operated as mutually reinforcing components of VMRO-DPMNE and particularly Nikola Gruevski's regime strategy. The analysis confirms the shielding/funding dynamic, in which we illustrated that Gruevski's rhetoric tended to use delegitimization of the opposition to distract from corrupt dealings. Moreover, the use of the term "stability" demonstrated a semantic decoupling from what it tends to be associated with democracy or governance. The extraction of resources, an unusual share of contract amendments, or concentrated contract award revealed the close clientelistic ties. The sheer volume of the contracts related to Skopje 2014 and the many-fold increase is verified through this analysis. The case also demonstrates the analytical value of such mega projects, which serve the interests of illiberal leaders for the study of autocratization. Skopje 2014 was not incidental, but a well-crafted strategy, a symbolic vehicle for mobilization and extraction. The next chapter zooms in on another autocratization episode that happened (as is still ongoing) in Serbia during the rule of SNS and Aleksandar Vučić.

7 "The Stability Trap": The Trajectory of Serbia's Autocratization Episode

In June 2014, Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić unveiled before the cameras the "Belgrade Waterfront" project, a 3-4 billion USD investment project for the transformation of the capital's riverfront. The announcement framed Serbia as "Europe's Gateway" (Government of the Republic of Serbia, [2014](#)). It epitomized Vučić's dual strategy since one of grandiose development and masking of systemic institutional capture. And while its announcement promised much, the implementation continued to be shrouded in corruption (Grubbauer & Čamprag, [2019](#)). A decade since this announcement, the project remains incomplete, its contracts concealed in opacity, and its legal framework designed to circumvent prescribed procedures. The trajectory from that announcement to its current state as a typical case of a country whose democratic qualities eroded encapsulates how the autocratization episode proceeded. It was not a dynamic rupture with democratic norms, rather a gradual integration of nationalist rhetoric, institutional capture, systematic corruption that relies on preserving stability at the expense of improved governance (D. Pavlović, [2020](#)).

Serbia represents a typical and crucial case of autocratization from the former post-Communist countries and in contemporary backsliding studies. The chapter builds on the QCA findings (See chapter 5), by investigating the trajectory of Serbia's autocratization episode, with illustrative examples of how polarization,

corruption, and regional developments contribute to democratic backsliding. It is positioned at the intersection of several important phenomena and exhibits important markers also present in other autocratization cases. The case exemplifies the mechanism through which rhetorical illiberalism and systematic corruption reinforce one another over time. In the period from 2013, the ruling Serbian SNS party centralized power and engineered a political order that systematized corruption to levels even higher than the 1990s.

As a post-Communist country, Serbia has experienced violent conflicts and wars in the 1990s, while a colorful revolution in 2000 overthrew the dictatorial regime of Milošević and set the country on a democratization path. The democratization era ushered in a series of institutional reforms targeting political and economic liberalization. The need to form broader governing coalitions among political parties contributed to reducing polarization in the country. V-Dem's data shows improvements in political polarization scores between 2000 and 2010. Although the starting levels of corruption perception during Milošević's period set the bar too low, during the 2000s decade Serbia has noted the most substantial improvement in the corruption perception index. Frequent government turnover, accompanied by peaceful transfers of power, indicated the maturing of the democratization process, albeit it remained lethargic and protracted (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Countries in the neighborhood, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Croatia, have already democratized, while Montenegro and North Macedonia are also undergoing democratization. By 2012, Serbia's democracy scores had peaked despite the underlying institutional structural weaknesses. Frailties that persisted and would eventually be exploited by the incoming party.

A government turnover in 2012 replaced the ruling DSS-DS coalition in another peaceful transfer of power. However, the new ruling coalition with SNS as a junior partner started to exercise greater control than its senior partner, Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS). During this period, Serbia became an EU candidate country and started the negotiation process. Despite the generally stable regional trends, two

of its neighbors have also been undergoing a period of democratic backsliding. Hungary was at the beginning of the new Orban term, who has just successfully passed constitutional reforms with profound electoral effects. North Macedonia was at the peak of its autocratization episode, with PM Gruevski having a firm grasp on all levels of power in the country. The two examples served as templates and political cover for Vučić, signaling the possibility of an authoritarian path and anti-liberal rhetoric despite the closer association with the EU. The unveiled Belgrade Waterfront project served as a signal of the direction in which the country was moving in. The goal of the regime was getting it done regardless of the means, including intensive protests (Kralj, 2023), creating fertile ground for the misuse of institutions.

After 2 years as a junior partner, the 2014-early elections produced a dominant electoral victory with Vučić becoming a Prime Minister. The rise to power marked a sharper turning point, since coming to power, the country has experienced stagnation followed by a gradual, but continuous decline. The increased political stability was deceptive (Ristić, 2014). Instead of fostering stronger institutions and consensus, it ushered a period of systemic institutional abuse and eventually state capture. Parliament has been completely weakened, the media systematically restricted, political opposition sidelined, and a slower transition to a stronger Presidential system was on its way (Burazer, 2021). Political polarization is already evident in the population's stark division over the EU integration process, on the one hand, and the country's closer ties to Russia and China, on the other hand, have deepened further. Over the years, Vučić continued to erode the checks and balances, while concentrating power into his hands through the PM and later Presidential position (Günay & Dzihic, 2016). The chapter traces the trajectory of the integration of two mechanisms: strategic deployment of illiberal rhetoric that fosters polarization through vilification of all societal actors, and the deployment of corruption networks using public funds to loyal supporters.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, we underline the puzzle of the case, introduce the data for the analysis, and bring the identified framework of analysis. Second, we examine the initial conditions at the onset of the autocratization episode. It extends the results of the QCA analysis and interprets their significance and connections regarding Serbia. Third, the main part of the chapter looks at how the autocratization episode unraveled in light of the feedback loop between corruption and polarization. The findings rely on tracing the anti-pluralist rhetoric of SNS and the development of its corruption network. Last, we summarize the case study and interpret the current state and status of the regime.

7.1 Data, Methods, and Argument

To trace the development of the autocratization episode, we explore the interplay and feedback loop between corruption and polarization. The chapter combines three streams of original data with a unifying theoretical framework. The first stream of data relies on quantitative text analysis (QTA) of collected speeches and statements by Prime Minister and President Vučić for the period 2012-2023.¹ We use the data to track changes in public rhetoric over time. The data help us explore the increasingly polarizing and anti-pluralist rhetoric. The second stream of data relates to public procurement contracts collected for the period 2013-2022. The data mainly focuses on publicly awarded contracts for major construction projects or services, identified through a list of keywords. The exploration of the data relies on identifying contracts that are at a risk of corruption due to a series of 'red flags'. The established framework of analysis posits a feedback loop in which corruption breeds distrust in institutions and sustains polarizing propaganda by concentrating media and economic power in the regime's hands. Moreover, increasingly illiberal rhetoric polarizes society and undermines democratic qualities. The framework builds on established frameworks of competitive authoritarianism, autocratization,

¹Our data extends from 2009 to 2025, but since the focus of the study is from 2012, we subset the fully collected dataset

and democratic erosion, where polarization features most prominently (Bieber, 2020; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021; Tomini, 2017) and integrates the feedback loop of risk of corruption (Apergis & Pinar, 2023; Hajnal, 2024; Sotiropoulos, 2023a).

To explore the polarizing rhetoric of the President (and former Prime Minister) we analyze a corpus of speeches and statements web-scraped from the official site and processed into an original dataset. The analysis is based on supervised learning (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013), using a dictionary-based method of illiberal rhetoric (Maerz & Schneider, 2020; Wagner et al., 2025). This approach methodically distinguishes between words signaling liberal and illiberal rhetoric, i.e., anti-pluralism and authoritarianism. References to enemies, threats, and patriotic unification relative to anti-pluralism and references to rights, pluralism, and tolerance relative to liberal-democratic values. Each speech receives an Illiberal Speech Index (ISI) score between 0-1, with a higher risk indicating a greater incidence of illiberal language. The method allows for systematic exploration of and identification of rhetorical patterns that contribute to identifying anti-pluralist and polarizing behavior of autocratizing executives. The texts were collected from three sources: <https://www.sns.org.rs/novosti/saopstenja?page=1>, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/sekcija/249/saopstenja-vlade.php>, and <https://www.predsednik.rs/pres-centar/vesti>.

The entire dataset contains 15 377 speeches or statements for the period 2012-2022. However, the majority of the dataset is very short speeches or statements, which were excluded from the analysis. The analysis dataset entails 3317 speeches or statements containing at least 1000 words² for the top most prominent members of the SNS, with at least 30 speeches or statements for each person. Most observations with 1931 or almost 2/3 of the entire sample are from Aleksandar Vučić, which further highlights his dominant role within the party and Serbian politics. The speeches and statements are analyzed using computational text analysis methods in order to identify patterns of illiberal discourse, polarizing rhetoric, and commitment

²which is approximately 4 pages in length or 10 minutes

to democracy. We analyzed the corpus to trace the shifts in political language using natural language processing and Maerz and Schneider (2021) Illiberal Speech Index (ISI) tools.

The index has been designed, and its validity verified (Wagner et al., 2025), to measure liberal vs. illiberal rhetoric in each speech. It is a dictionary-based scaling of public discourse that aims to capture the prevalence of illiberal terms. These express anti-pluralism and authoritarianism relative to liberal terms, and thus signal support for civil liberties, tolerance, or pluralism. Each speech is aggregated at the level of year to receive coefficients of propensity to use liberal or illiberal terms. Higher scores, on a scale 0-1, indicate the prevalence of liberal rhetoric. The index is also validated by comparing yearly averages with the V-Dem's liberal democracy index. The index allows comparison of how the SNS (and Vučić's) rhetoric developed over time. Given the state of democracy in Serbia, which has been eroding continuously and gradually, we expect to see increasingly illiberal rhetoric.

Furthermore, to support our scores, we explore the semantic representativeness of the texts through the application of word embeddings. More often, the meaning of their statements emerges through association, and the semantic company that the concepts keep. For instance, a speaker may never pronounce "erosion" or "autocratization", but still construct a discourse in which democratic constraints appear as obstacles.³ We trained a 100-dimensional GloVe embeddings using the text2vec package in R through 50 iterations and focusing only on terms that appear at least 5 times (Hellín et al., 2023; Pennington et al., 2014). To test the robustness

³Word embeddings is an unsupervised approach to language modeling. Word embeddings focus on the company in which a specific word is situated. It explores the meaning of word and how it is correlated with the linguistic context. It focuses on a narrow window around the word (it can be specified), and as a result it can better capture the semantic properties in the language. We can pinpoint which words appear near each other across a large corpus of text. Words appearing in similar contexts receive similar mathematical representations, thus identifying conceptual associations that are elusive even for qualitative analyses. This allows the approach to be more sensitive to temporal tendency of how the word is applied

of the analysis, we have also collected and analyzed data from non-governing officials, namely columnists from the daily "Danas".

To analyze corruption risks and explore how networks are created, we utilize data of public procurement contracts with particular focus on works contracts and identify potential corruption-risk hotspots, such as large infrastructure projects, and the Belgrade Waterfront project. Recent literature advances the use of big data approaches, beyond expert assessments, surveys, or experiments, to objectively measure potential risks of corruption (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016; Villamil et al., 2022; Wachs & Kertész, 2019), highlighting the potential benefits, such as completeness of data and the potential to explore how procedures and practices are implemented. The data is collected from the official procurement portal.⁴

The data is subset to focus on contracts related to construction works, also including awards associated with the Belgrade Waterfront. For each contract we calculate a Corruption Risk Index (CRI). The public procurement data offers an addition to explore corruption risks in addition to the perception based methods used in the QCA analysis. Relying on granular data, the CRI identifies objective characteristics of contracts that create opportunities to expand on corrupt practices. It is based on a series of red flags that jointly aim to identify limited competition (measured through the number of bidders participating in the tendering procedure), procedural shortcuts (measured by the type of procedure used in the contracting process or the length of the bidding process), or concentration of suppliers. Each contract has a score of 0 (no risk) to 1 (high risk). The index does not prove that corruption has occurred, rather, it establishes parameters under which corruption becomes possible and consequently enables corrupt practices or establishes corrupt networks..⁵

⁴I would like to thank the Government Transparency Institute for providing the procurement data from the old public procurement portal

⁵The CRI aims to operationalize corruption risk through objective indicators that can be measured across countries and time using large datasets. Instead of measuring corruption directly or estimating it through expert assessments, which is inherently difficult, the CRI identifies characteristics that create opportunities for corrupt practices. Moreover, some systems tend to employ one or the other form of malpractice, and relying on a single red flag might obscure the situation as it stands. Each red flag is validated through a carefully designed procedure. See more detail in Appendix D.4

The CRI incorporates multiple risk factors and aggregates a series of red flags, including limited competition (measured by the number of bidders), procedural choices (measured by the length of the advertisement period, average organizational decision-making speed, and procedure type), market and buyer concentration, and contracting with tax haven companies. Each contract in the dataset was scored on each of the dimensions and aggregated to obtain a single CRI score for each contract. Higher CRI scores are associated with contracts that tend to be riskier. To develop the network analysis, we focus on the relationship between specific purchasing authorities and suppliers, and calculate to what extent there are contracts that have a higher probability of being riskier and are awarded to the same companies (Fazekas & Tóth, 2016).

It allows for systematic comparison over time, considering that the identification of patterns that may not be apparent in individual cases, and the tracing of clusters of clientelism and how state capture has developed in Serbia (Kaufmann, 2023, On state capture). Serbia's procurement data is collected from two sources. An old source that was in use until 2019, and a new source after 2020. The dataset contains 307565 contract-level observations from the old source, and 295637 contract-level observations from the new source. Many of the observations contain a substantial number of missing values, which has reduced our data to around 40 percent of the entire dataset, 200845. Nevertheless, it still represents a substantive representation of the procurement system in Serbia.⁶

The analysis proceeds in three analytical stages. First, we establish the onset conditions by linking Serbia's initial situation with the QCA pathway. Second, we trace the rhetorical polarization through advanced computational language models using quantitative text analysis, which demonstrates the consolidation of illiberal discourse following Vučić's power consolidation. Third, we map corruption networks showing how resources repeatedly flowed to similar suppliers. Lastly,

⁶Technical detail about the process of constructing the bipartite network is available in Appendix D.4.

we demonstrate the feedback loop through polarizing rhetoric that frames opposition actors as foreign agents, and its shielding using resources acquisition and distribution.

7.2 Initial conditions

Serbia entered the 2010s with a slightly positive democratic momentum. Polarization has never been lower, with moderate to lower levels of societal polarization (-0.64 on a scale of -4 to 4) of V-Dem's polarization index. Additionally, a series of corruption reforms have also improved experts' perception of corruption, with the highest scores (42/100, with higher scores indicating less corruption), according to the Corruption Perception Index, in 2013. The structural reforms have also shown its effect at the beginning of the 2010s, with improved scores in government effectiveness and increased political stability in the country. However, the autocratization trends from some neighboring countries (Hungary, North Macedonia, Montenegro) have also started to affect Serbia. A government turnover in 2012 replaced the ruling DS and DSS in a new and peaceful transfer of power, indicating some level of democratic consolidation. Serbia's democracy scores were the highest in 2012, and for V-dem, but also similar results are obtained with our ISI calculations. Nonetheless, institutional structural weaknesses continued to represent a challenge for Serbia's democracy. These initial conditions place Serbia within the third autocratization pathway in our QCA analysis. The simultaneous intensification of multiple conditions would characterize Serbia's trajectory, each reinforcing the others in a feedback loop traced by the rest of the chapter.

The incoming party has eventually exploited these frailties. At the onset of the autocratization episode in, 2013, SNS was part of the governing coalition as a junior partner, although it exhibited substantially more control than the governing party. After a two-year period, 2012-2014, and another round of early elections, SNS assumed major dominance and Vučić became Prime Minister. Lack of political

stability, exemplified by weak ruling majorities, has been substituted with the strong dominance of SNS (Vladislavljević, 2024). An increasing political stability was deceptive in practice. Rather than being based on consensus and strong institutions, it ushered a period of systematic institutional abuse that eventually led to state capture. A largely compliant parliament could not restrict or control the consolidation of power in the hands of the Prime Minister.

Economic fragility and openness to prioritize stability and development over institutional strengthening created a favorable environment for furthering corruption practices. The levels of corruption started to increase, and political polarization was on the rise again. The unconsolidated institutional framework made it particularly prone to corruption. Inconsistent application of the law, strict and to the letter for opponents and broad for party supporters, has further nourished this environment. Despite recommendations to explore cases of corruption, the government ignored the opinion of the anti-corruption agency. Belgrade Waterfront is an emblematic rather than exhaustive case for our analysis. The project's deliberate exclusion from prescribed procedures, and the adoption of special law and procedures, in addition to the bilateral agreements with investors (e.g., the UAE), mean that direct contract-level evidence is inevitable (Perić, 2020). However, the opacity of the legal architecture constructed around the project exemplifies the modus operandi of autocratizing regimes that create parallel structures to prevent oversight. The project aimed to show how the government can attract investments and deliver development. However, as is the case with such projects (as it was the case with "Skopje 2014"), these investments (and tenders) tend to be prone to corrupt practices and a lack of transparency. From the onset, this approach prioritized getting things done, regardless of the means, thereby creating fertile ground for systemic misuse of the institutions and state capture.

Despite the democratic reforms of the 2010s, many institutions remained vulnerable to political influence. Oversight bodies and regulatory agencies remained understaffed, while public administration posts have been staffed with party loyalists.

The politicization of the public administration and the tendency to use public jobs for party members have developed into carefully crafted patronage networks that would erode the fragile professionalization of the bureaucracy. The governing party has slowly started installing loyalists to all positions (Spasojević, 2022). These factors developed a power structure with rapid executive aggrandizement and fewer internal break points with a leadership structure determined to exercise complete domination over the political landscape in Serbia (Castaldo, 2020). Coming from an "authoritarian-minded" background (splitting from SRS), SNS did not waste too much time consolidating media ownership and structure and shrinking the space of NGOs to operate.

By 2013, regional trends had also created permissive conditions for further erosion. Hungary under Orban has already implemented the new constitutional changes, including a significant electoral reform that permanently distorted electoral competition. The changes provided a legal-institutional template for capture that Vučić slowly embraced. In North Macedonia, PM Gruevski commanded a strong majority in the parliament, the opposition has either been harassed (Ljube Boshkovski after the 2011) or oppressed (removal of the opposition from the Assembly in December 2012). Moreover, the implementation of the Skopje 2014 has added another dimension for combining resource extraction and nationalist monumentalism. Media freedom has been severely restricted with frequent defamation claims against journalists, threats of incarceration, and the diminishing the role of the assembly as a rubber-stamping institution under the control of the executive. Montenegro has also been enduring the long rule of Đukanović. The emergence of alternative partnerships (Serbia's close cooperation with Russia, China, and the UAE (Bieber, 2020)) fostered opportunities for cooperation of like-minded regimes. For Vučić these co-occurrences served as a template for political cover and signaled a possibility of an authoritarian path and normalization of anti-pluralist rhetoric, even with the possibility of EU (dynamic). As a result of these trends, the landscape in the region has enabled the practice of flawed strategies that continue to emphasize

the stability (in the region), at the expense of any meaningful democratization or toleration of undemocratic practices (Zweers et al., 2022, ch. 2). Instead of warning, these regional precedents served not as warning, but as playbooks. Regional autocratization trends indeed constitute an important onset condition; however, in the context of Serbia, they should also be interpreted alongside the EU's lukewarm oversight and substantial bandwidth provided to national leaders to maintain stability, first and foremost (Grimm & Mathis, 2015).

7.3 The Autocratization Episode

The rise to power of SNS, first with the 2012 parliamentary elections, marked a turning point for Serbia. Since assuming power, the country's democracy has stagnated and started to decline. The country's decline from promising democratizer to textbook autocratizer exemplifies how power concentration can enable the incumbent to exploit corrupt, clientelistic, and polarizing practices to solidify its rule. Over the coming years, Vučić, under SNS's rule, has slowly eroded checks and balances and concentrated power into his hands, through the Prime Ministerial and later Presidential position. The parliament has been weakened, independent media has been restricted, and political opposition has been sidelined. Political polarization, already present with the stark division of the population over EU integration, has deepened further in the years after SNS rose to power. Moreover, observer groups have also accused the party of abusing state resources to secure support (Dramac Jiries et al., 2020), by awarding contracts to close friends in exchange for political support. The party managed to quickly establish control over key economic sectors and state resources through the application of selective legal reforms and informal pressure. The urban mega-project 'Belgrade Waterfront' provides an opportunity of authoritarian entrepreneurialism with favorable conditions and a source of corruption (Perić, 2020). The start of the project coincides, with SNS assuming power with the project characterized from the

onset with numerous irregularities, lack of procedural planning and implementation (Čamprag, 2024; Zeković et al., 2023, On lack of transparency, See).

In our theoretical framework and based on our QCA results, we have hypothesized a mechanism that can help us elaborate on how the episode unraveled. Vučić rise and consolidation came in three stages. The first period coincides with the party's co-formation and the pre2012 period. The second period concerns the stabilization of the party's influence during the 2012-2014 period (and de-facto) dominance of the government. The first two years of SNS participation in a governing coalition (2012-2014) show a minor deterioration of the country's polarization assessment. For instance, V-Dem's polarization index shows a worsening from -1.04 to -1.08 in 2013 and a more substantial deterioration in 2014, -1.33.⁷ Similar trends can be observed in our textually analyzed data for all SNS members. The 2014 parliamentary elections victory coincides with an increase in the use of illiberal rhetoric, with average ISI scores rising from 0.45 in 2014 to 0.52 in 2025. The third period, which coincides with the autocratization episode, is the first term as a Prime Minister (2014-2017) and, even more importantly, the Presidential years in office (2017-on). During the first two periods, as was the case with Prime Minister Gruevski in North Macedonia, Vučić came into power on the promise of profound anti-corruption reforms. Nevertheless, it was a short-lived period, considering that as soon as the party was elected into government, institutional capture and power consolidation began (see table 7.1 for an overview).⁸

⁷On a scale of -4 to 4, where lower scores indicate higher polarization levels

⁸Additional overview of other indicator developments see Appendix 4, table A.3.

Table 7.1: Periodization of the Mechanism in Serbia

Period	Polarization (SHIELDS)	Corruption (FUNDS)	Feedback
2012–2013	reform rhetoric	anti-corruption agenda	Latent
2013–2017	increasing polarization, stability narrative emerges	Belgrade Waterfront (new procedures)	Activation
2017–2024	"stability" semantically captured, opposition delegitimized	RIO, Telekom acquisition, single bidding 60%	Reinforcing
2024–present	extreme polarization; foreign agent framing	state capture exceeds 1990s levels	Critical

Source: Author's periodization

7.3.1 Rhetorical Polarization and Illiberal Turn in Discourse

The Illiberal Turn in Political Speech - SNS and Autocratization

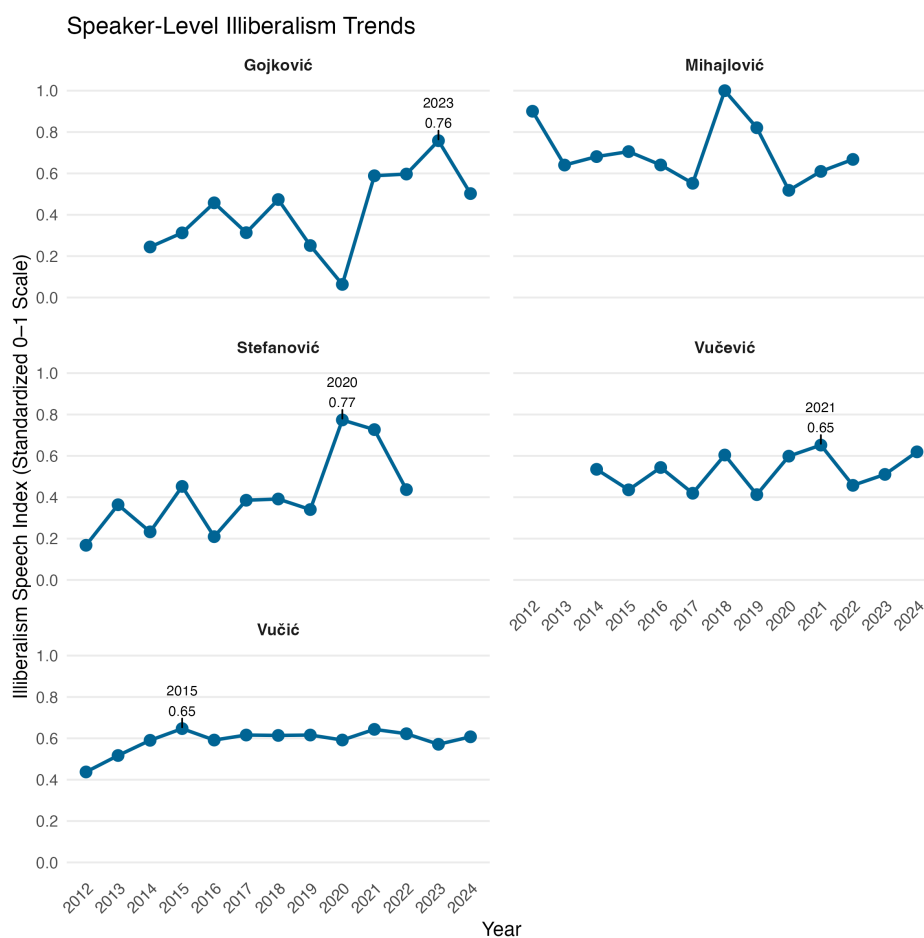
The period following 2012 represents a decisive shift in Serbia's political landscape. After a decade of relative institutional pluralism and inter-party cooperation, the rise to power of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Aleksandar Vučić initiated a steady reconfiguration of political discourse and power relations. This section will illustrate the rising anti-pluralism rhetoric by Vučić, and other high-ranking SNS members. The rhetoric normalizes the vilification of all societal actors that do not agree with the official SNS proposals and does not allow for compromises. The analysis shows that such rhetoric intensified over time, although there were early warning signs even before ascending to power.

Between 2013 and 2023, this transformation became increasingly visible in the public rhetoric of the governing elite. One of the most salient features of this discursive transformation has been the normalization of illiberal language across SNS leadership. This rhetorical shift was not limited to Vučić alone, but diffused

widely among party elites, indicating a broader institutional strategy rather than an isolated personal style. On the one hand, some members, such as Miloš Vučević, consistently employed illiberal and anti-pluralist frames from the beginning of their public roles. On the other hand, members, such as Nebojša Stefanović, showed a substantial increase in such rhetoric over time. This reflects a rhetorical adaptation aligned with the party's central messaging strategy.

Figure 7.1 illustrates these divergent trajectories by comparing the Illiberal Speech Index (ISI) scores for selected prominent SNS members. The data indicate that, although there is variation in the intensity and temporal dynamics of illiberal rhetoric, the broader pattern confirms its entrenchment as a communicative norm within the party. Gojković's initially more balanced rhetoric has intensified since 2020. The convergence of the speakers towards the more illiberal spectrum after 2020 indicates greater institutionalization of discourse as a party orthodoxy. This section offers a closer look at how these rhetorical practices contribute to Serbia's autocratization process. In particular, it examines how the language of SNS elites serves both as a reflection of and a mechanism for undermining democratic pluralism—by delegitimizing opponents, polarizing society, and reconfiguring the meaning of key political concepts.

Figure 7.1: Speaker-level ISI



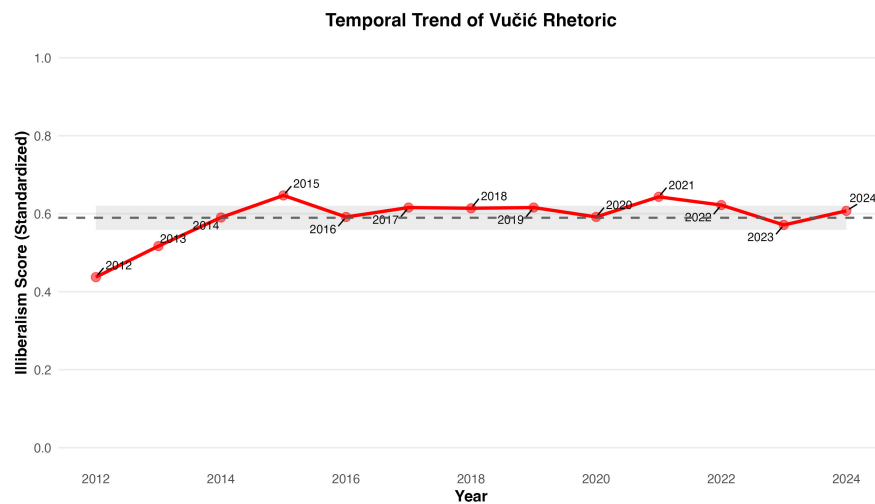
Source:

Author's calculations are based on collected speeches and statements

2015 appears to mark a critical turning point in Serbia's autocratization episode. Not only do democratic indicators begin to show sharper decline, but Vučić's political rhetoric also intensifies in both illiberal content and polarizing tone. This spike is not coincidental. It is the first year in which he obtained 2/3 majority control and complete domination over the executive. The Belgrade Waterfront project moved from announcement to implementation, and accompanying accommodation has started to be carried out. Courts began to be staffed with party loyalists, and state employment was also reserved for hard-working party members (Spasojević, 2022). The collected data also reveals that it is the peak year of illiberal tropes for Vučić (Figure 7.2). It is also important to note the trend for ISI spikes in the years after the elections. There is a sharp increase in 2015 compared to 2014, with a

similar increase in 2021 after the 2020 elections. These 2 years significantly deviate from the mean usage, making it important to explore in more detail. These post-electoral spikes, particularly 2015 and 2021, suggest that periods following dominant electoral victories, when the regime feels most secure, are when the illiberal rhetoric intensified. The rhetorical intensification documented in Figure 7.2 corresponds to a critical juncture in which institutional and discursive consolidation proceeded hand-in-hand.

Figure 7.2: ISI Trends - Aleksandar Vučić



Source:

Author's calculations are based on collected speeches and statements

Quantitative text analysis confirms this shift: several of Vučić's speeches in 2015 register high Illiberal Speech Index (ISI) scores (with some surpassing **0.7**, on our illiberal index) indicating a strong presence of anti-pluralist and authoritarian language.⁹

One particularly illustrative example is Vučić's public statement on 24 December 2015, delivered in response to opposition criticism and as the end-of-year summary of what had gone by. The statement symbolizes the personalization of political

⁹Validation results of the ISI index with the V-Dem's Liberal component are available in Appendix D1-D2 of Chapter 7, Figure D.1. It shows a negative correlation of -0.63, which is statistically significant with a p-value = 0.038. The dictionary in this context performs similarly or outperforms recent findings by (Wagner et al., 2025). The dictionary shows even greater correlation and construct validity with the civil liberties component (V-Dem) with a correlation of -0.81 and p-value = 0.0025, Figure D.2 in Appendix 3

legitimacy by subordinating institutional criticism to the status of 'unpatriotic'. This strategy reflects a broader rhetorical strategy that presents opposition voices as irrational and envious of the leader's effectiveness, and not as challengers in a democratic competition:

"I will annoy them even more by working even harder... I have nothing to say to them. That speaks best to the level of freedom in our country and the kind of dictatorship they supposedly live in. I am proud of our Serbia because of that. I will respond to them with my work—the very thing that irritates them the most. And what bothers them most of all is that I work on Saturdays and Sundays, without the need to clock in—that I can work more than anyone else." (Srpska napredna stranka, 2015b).¹⁰

Vučić escalates verbal polarization, emphasizing his own industriousness as a counterpoint to his detractors and presenting himself as a tireless servant of the people. Political legitimacy is framed outside democratic accountability by re-framing criticism as personal jealousy and positioning his response through his "work" as opposed to constructive dialogue. His stress on productive governance and considering his critics not as interlocutors to be answered, but as opponents to be outperformed. There are comparative notes on how, for instance, Gruevski in North Macedonia retorted to the opposition party accountability inquiries or his dedication to work and state needs.

More significantly, the same speech incorporates symbolic appeals to national identity and the Serbian Orthodox Church, reinforcing the fusion of religion, culture, and state. Vučić underscores the historical and spiritual significance of Kosovo, invoking the legacy of Saint Sava and the Nemanjić dynasty. In essence, Vučić tended to present himself as defender (and savior) of Serbian interests on Kosovo (Milačić, 2024a):

"...the church is located in the valley where Saint Sava was born and where the Nemanjić court once stood. According to him, both the Church and the

¹⁰"Нервираћу их још више, још већим радом... Немам шта да им одговорим. То најбоље говори о слободама у нашој земљи и у каквој диктатури живе. Поносан сам због тога на нашу Србију. Ја ћу њима одговорити својим радом, оним што их највише нервира, а више од свега их секира то што радим и суботом и недељом, без обавезе убацивања картица, то што могу да радим више од свих."

people have exhausted their capacities, and assistance is needed to continue building the temple, which will not only be a place of worship but also a venue for cultural events. He emphasized that plans were underway to complete the church's roof in the coming year and noted regretfully that there is no temple dedicated to Saint Sava in the region where the first Serbian educator was born." (Srpska napredna stranka, 2015b).¹¹

This blending of religious symbolism with political messaging illustrates Vučić's use of illiberal rhetoric and also relies on religion as a unifying aspect of all patriotic Serbs to consolidate authority (Vulović, 2023). It frames the leader as both a hard-working technocrat and a protector of national heritage and faith, thereby claiming issue and policy ownership across broad range of topics and narrowing the space for pluralism and democratic dissent.

The strong rhetorical structure is prevalent throughout the entire year. Using his stable majority and, still, an important role as a guarantor of stability in the region, Vučić increasingly positioned Serbia as a country that combines economic progress, regional stability, and commitment to national values with an unwavering dedication to the European path. Such an approach to how Vučić operates is also hypothesized and illustrated by Bieber et al. (2017). It simultaneously appeals to the needs of the domestic audience, and convincingly expresses Serbia's commitment to the EU. He framed Serbia's success as both a regional achievement and a global recognition of Serbian resilience and discipline:

"I see a future in which we defeat injustice through our strength and success, a future in which the global media speak of the great Serbian achievement in fighting the deficit." (Srpska napredna stranka, 2015a)¹²

This rhetoric of strength and international recognition was often paired with messages of peace and strategic stability. Vučić emphasized Serbia's desire to act as a constructive regional player:

¹¹"... црква налази у долини у којој је рођен Свети Сава и у којој су били двори Немањића. Према његовим речима, црква и народ су исцрпили своје могућности и потребна је помоћ за даљу изградњу храма, који неће бити само место верских, већ и културних дешавања. Он је нагласио да је планирано да се у идућој години покрије црква и указао да је жалосно што нема храма Светом Сави у крају у којем је рођен први српски просветитељ."

¹²"Видим будућност да побеђујемо неправду нашом снагом и успехом, да сви светски медији говоре о великом српском успеху у борби против дефицита."

"Serbia wants peace and stability in the region, and our policy will not change." (Srpska napredna stranka, 2015a).¹³

One of the most rhetorically powerful appeals concerned interethnic coexistence. Vučić invoked the long-term necessity of shared life with Bosnia's Muslim population:

"[We] will have to live with Bosniaks for the next 100, 200, 300 years, and we must live with each other, not merely next to each other — even though there are people who still cannot understand that." (Srpska napredna stranka, 2015a).¹⁴

Taken together, these rhetorical elements construct an image of Serbia as a state committed to economic modernization, regional peace, and European integration, while fiercely defending its cultural identity and national pride (Vučković & Radeljić, 2024). Such an approach prevents any opposition party from laying a claim on domestic issues, considering that he and his party are the true defenders of Serbs, nor to foreign policy, considering that his party and he as a leader can only guarantee stability (and peace) in the region and are the path to the EU. In Vučić's vision, integration and sovereignty are not opposites but mutually reinforcing (Tournois, 2022). This form of narrative resonates powerfully with a broad domestic audience and supports the stabilitocratic framing of the regime. These qualitative examples based on highly illiberal speeches or statements are next extrapolated to the entire dataset by estimating to what extent each high-ranking SNS member tends to use illiberal rhetoric, and more importantly, the semantic context in which it is used. The quantitative analysis helps us explore underlying patterns and semantics employed by leading SNS figures.

Similar levels of illiberal rhetoric are found across most members of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) for whom we have collected speeches and statements,

¹³Србија жели стабилност у региону...и да се политика Србије неће променити.

¹⁴"...и да ћемо са Бошњацима морати да живимо наредних 100, 200, 300... година и то једни са другима, а не једни поред других, иако има људи који то не могу да разумеју."

as illustrated in Figure 7.3.¹⁵ The overall rhetorical tone within the party leans strongly toward the illiberal spectrum, with scores higher than 0.6, there is still a notable variation among individual speakers. On the relatively more moderate or liberal end of the spectrum are figures such as Orlić and Stefanović, who exhibit less frequent use of anti-pluralist or exclusionary language, captured by our dictionary. Their rhetoric, while still aligned with party orthodoxy, tends to be more procedural and balanced in tone.

By contrast, individuals such as Siniša Mali and Zorana Mihajlović occupy the illiberal core of the party's discursive practices, with scores above 0.7. Mihajlović, in particular, has played a prominent role both politically and rhetorically. Originally affiliated with the G17 Plus party, she quickly ascended through the SNS ranks after its consolidation of power. While serving as Minister of Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure, she was a key figure associated with the flagship "Belgrade Waterfront" project (Stevanović, 2025). Her public statements during this period, especially during electoral campaigns, reveal a marked reliance on illiberal rhetorical tropes — invoking loyalty to the party (Srpska napredna stranka, 2019c), and unity among the people, while simultaneously discussing the potential dangers for Serbia (and the region) and the need for stability and regional leadership (Srpska napredna stranka, 2019a, 2025).

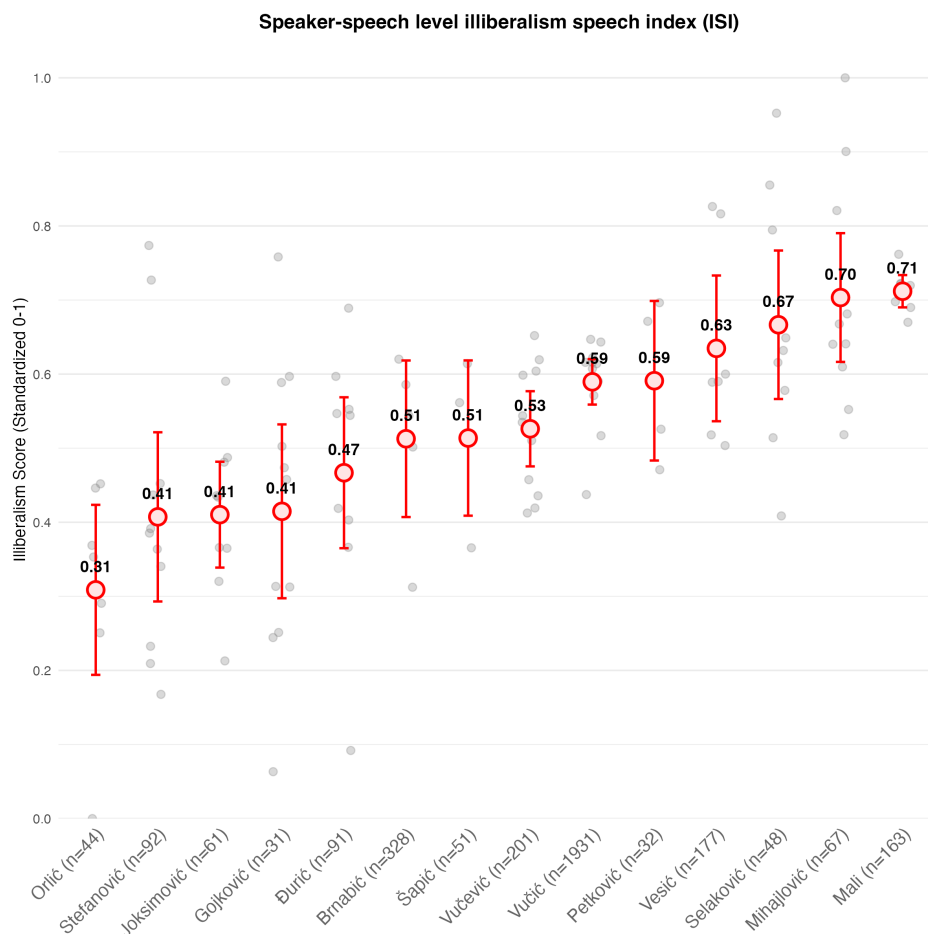
Mihajlović's prominence in the party's public messaging strategy, alongside her role in delivering high-profile infrastructure projects, illustrates how rhetoric and governance were strategically intertwined in SNS's consolidation of power (Srpska napredna stranka, 2019b). Moreover, her name has surfaced in connection with alleged irregularities surrounding state-owned enterprises, most notably in relation to the "Telekom Srbija" corruption scandal. Such associations not only highlight the blurred boundaries between political power and economic networks in contemporary Serbia, but also suggest that illiberal rhetoric often help to preemptively protect

¹⁵Each dot represents the average ISI score for each year that there are observations for the speakers. The close clustering for speakers such as Mali and Vučić indicates that there in their statements and speeches they do not diverge much

party elites from scrutiny by framing critics and investigative media as hostile or foreign-influenced.

Overall, the distribution of ISI scores across SNS figures reflects a cohesive yet stratified rhetorical strategy. Illiberal discourse tends to be the norm among a range of SNS key figures. This unity reinforces the party's populist-authoritarian image and contributes to the normalization of anti-pluralist and polarizing language in public life.

Figure 7.3: Speaker-level ISI



Source: Author's calculations based on collected speeches and statements

"Stability First" - Discursive Foundations of Authoritarianism

Vučić's period is marked by closer ties to authoritarian regimes, particularly Russia and Middle Eastern countries, the "Belgrade Waterfront" investment, and the start

of EU negotiations. The speech from 15 August 2013, introduced as a "Marshal Plan for Serbia", already hints at the direction in which Vučić sees Serbia moving (Srpska napredna stranka, 2013). Although the overall rhetoric during this period is relatively moderate, this particular speech stands out as highly illiberal, scoring 0.6 on the ISI scale. It combines Vučić's image as a reformer that is committed to economic and governance changes with a narrative of openness to negotiations. However, the bottom line is the prioritization of Serbia's national interests.

Economic reform and investment promotion have been central themes in Vučić's rhetoric, particularly during his early tenure as Prime Minister. His speeches repeatedly framed Serbia's modernization as contingent upon creating a stable, competitive, and rules-based business environment. Central to his vision has been economic reforms' à la Gruevski. Low tax rates to attract investments, design a mega project that can be instrumentalized. For instance, Vučić emphasized the goal of reducing construction permitting times to one month—far below the status quo—while simplifying bureaucratic procedures to attract investors and spur development.

*"We must ensure the rule of law and fight for the best possible business environment in this part of Europe... We told the World Bank that we want to be better and more efficient than Georgia and Macedonia in the number of days needed to obtain a construction permit, and to reduce it to one month. Today, you can't do that even in a year. Procedures must be simplified; we must encourage business, construction, and development (Srpska napredna stranka, 2013)."*¹⁶

Beyond reform, Vučić adopted a distinctly open approach to international investment, portraying Serbia as a globally connected and ideologically neutral destination for capital. Partnerships with countries and friends beyond the Western European states are beneficial for Serbia. It allows for the cultivation of an investment climate with a broad range of actors. Vučić helps to position Serbia as

¹⁶"Морамо да обезбедимо владавину права и изборимо се за најбољи могући амбијент за бизнис у овом делу Европе. Био сам на састанку с људима из Светске банке.. Рекли смо да хоћемо да будемо успешнији и бољи и од Грузије и од Македоније у томе.. да тај рок скратимо на месец дана, а данас то не можете да урадите ни за годину, да процедура буде поједностављена, да подстичемо бизнис, градњу, развој."

a "non-aligned" actor that aims to balance economic pragmatism with political alliances. However, the emphasis is on the importance of keeping the associations transactional.

*"We must first create a business environment for Western European countries, for Russia, for China, for those who have an interest in entering here. And then the Emirates will be the cherry on top (Srpska napredna stranka, 2013)."*¹⁷

This blend of economic liberalization rhetoric and defensive populism—portraying himself as a reformer beset by unreasonable critics—allows Vučić to present reforms as both technocratic necessity and patriotic mission. Whether advocating for the “Belgrade Waterfront” project or hypothetical high-tech ventures such as chip factories, his speeches frame tangible results, not ideology, as the ultimate measure of success. Such an approach can clearly divide the citizens of whether you support us and trust, unquestionably, the steps we take, or you oppose our policies and do not want what is best for Serbia.

*"In the end, what matters is the result — whether we will build a chip factory here or not, whether we will finally, after fifty years of marketing stories, be able to build Belgrade Waterfront or not (Srpska napredna stranka, 2013)."*¹⁸

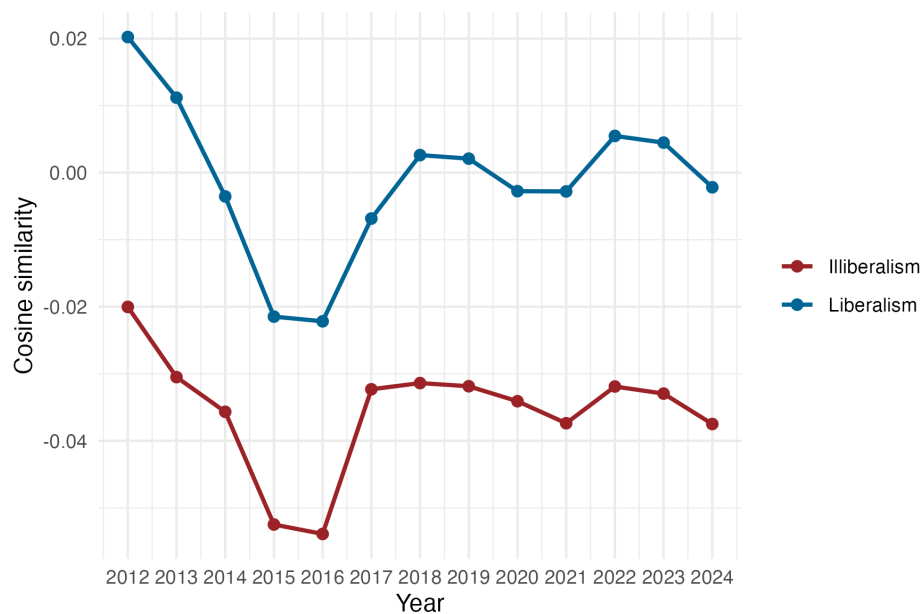
It requires one to tread carefully in the international field, but also appease the domestic audience (EU, yes, but keeping Russia and China close too). This semantic inversion suggests a reframing of the term, possibly to contest or relativize the conventional meaning of stability, or to associate it with an authoritarian form of order. The accent is on prioritization of regime durability over democratic responsiveness. Figure 7.4 traces the yearly semantic proximity of political rhetoric to liberal and illiberal values defined in the dictionaries. We observe a particular telling discursive rupture between 2014 and 2017, during which even liberal rhetoric’s semantic use became systematically opposed to its values. During this period, speakers stopped

¹⁷"Морамо пре свега да направимо амбијент за западноевропске земље, за Русију, Кину, за оне који имају интерес да овде уђу. А онда ће нам Емирати бити шлаг на торту."

¹⁸"На крају ће бити важан резултат - да ли ћемо овде направити фабрику чипова или не, да ли ћемо... градити Београд на води или не."

using liberal values as a positive frame and instead began to contextually distance themselves. Based on the training and the ability of word embeddings to capture semantic nuances, this does not imply that there is a reduction in liberal words or a random fluctuation. Instead, it shows that liberal concepts are being invoked and used less affirmatively, and appearing in increasingly more delegitimizing, critical, or defensive contexts. It indicates that the target terms show a negative in contexts semantically opposite to their reference (liberalism). In other words, as Figure 7.4 shows, liberal-related terms cease to function as a normative anchor in political speeches and statements of the SNS political elite. For instance, democracy can appear in the context of "so-called western democracy" or "so-called liberal values" or "EU values". This is particularly telling with some keywords, such as "stability". The semantic inversion suggests that the intentional use of this discursive weaponizes the liberal vocabulary against liberal-democratic norms.

Figure 7.4: Yearly liberal vs illiberal rhetoric (dictionary-based word embeddings)



Source: Author's calculations based on collected speeches and statements

One of the most revealing linguistic differentiators between the "more liberal" and "more illiberal" speakers within the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) concerns the rhetorical use of the term *stability*. To explore this, we apply a word embedding

approach, which allows for the semantic context of a word to be interpreted in relation to its neighboring terms in a high-dimensional space. The dictionary method has helped us capture which words are used, while word embeddings will help us explore how words are used. Contexts matter, and more importantly, semantic context gives us a window on how to better interpret such computational language models. From a theoretical perspective, *stability* is a crucial concept in the region's political discourse—frequently invoked by both domestic and international elites to frame policy continuity, state resilience, or regime legitimacy, such as in Serbia (Bieber, 2020; Grimm & Mathis, 2015; Richter & Wunsch, 2020). However, recent scholarship finds that the term can also be ideologically flexible and can be deployed to signify either democratic consolidation or authoritarian entrenchment.

Word embeddings allow us to investigate *how stability* is used, beyond its frequency, by analyzing the semantic fields in which it is embedded. When we examine the cluster of concepts most closely associated with stability in the SNS discourse, a revealing pattern emerges. Table 7.2 presents the closest semantic neighbors to *stability*. Given the strong association between stability and each of the concepts reported in Table 7.2 (similarity scores over 0.5), we can infer that the associations are non-trivial and indicate stable co-occurrence patterns across the corpus. This semantic neighborhood suggests that stability functions primarily in the context of regime preservation and control, instead of institutional resilience and democratic consolidation. The usage reveals three distinct semantic clusters:

A **security-related cluster**, comprising terms such as *peace* and *safety*, suggests that stability is frequently framed in the context of preserving order. He recalled how his outreach had been met with hostility — notably surrounding his visit to Srebrenica (statement from 2015):

"When I extended a hand and offered dialogue, stability, strategic conversations about the future, I received threats and messages warning me not

to come to Srebrenica because my safety could not be guaranteed." (Srpska napredna stranka, 2015a).¹⁹

A **preservation cluster**, featuring words like *preserve*, reflects the defensive use of stability as a justification for resisting change—particularly reform that might unsettle existing power arrangements. For instance, a statement regarding the issue with Kosovo highlights the context of the cluster (statement from 14 May 2021)

"We were ready in May, in June; we are always ready, because a frozen conflict is not good. You see how it ends: every five years, someone unfreezes it. We don't want that—to leave the conflict to future generations, but to reach some kind of compromise...As for whether we will succeed, I cannot guarantee, because it takes two to tango. We will see what the other side thinks and whether they are ready for dialogue." (Srpska napredna stranka, 2021b).²⁰

A **spatial-temporal cluster**, anchored around terms such as *region* and *future*, positions stability in geopolitical and strategic terms, emphasizing long-term regional goals and international alignment. Vučić continued to frame Serbia's geopolitical orientation as firmly anchored in Europe, but on its own terms — proud, independent, and dignified. He encouraged citizens to view national unity and economic growth as directly correlated with international respect (speech from 2015):

"We will be respected in proportion to how united and economically strong we are. We expect progress on the European path, and we will always safeguard our freedom, pride, dignity, and honor." (NSPM, 2015).²¹

¹⁹"Његова рука није прихваћена и да је, када је нудио договор, стабилност, стратешке разговоре о будућности, добио претње и поруке да не долази у Сребреницу јер му се не гарантује безбедност."

²⁰"Били смо спремни у мају, у јуну, увек смо спремни, јер замрзнут конфликт није добар. Видите како се заврши, на сваких пет година неко га одмрзне. То нама не треба, да оставимо конфликт будућим генерацијама, већ да направимо некакав компромис...А, да ли ћемо успети не могу да гарантујем, јер је за танго потребно двоје. Видећемо шта мисли друга страна и да ли су спремни за дијалог."

²¹"Наводећи да ћемо бити толико поштованији колико будемо јединственији и економски јачи, грађанима је поручио да очекујемо напредак на европском путу и да ћемо увек чувати своју слободу, понос и достојанство и образ."

Notably absent from the semantic field are terms directly associated with democracy, governance, or pluralism. This indicates that, within SNS discourse, stability is largely decoupled from democratic ideals and instead associated with hierarchical control, technocratic governance, and continuity of what scholars describe as *stabilitocracy* (Kmezić & Bieber, 2017).

Table 7.2: Semantic neighbors of stability (“стабилност”)

стабилност	мир	сачувамо	сигурност	сачува	региону	очува	будућност	важно	безбедност
<i>stability</i>	<i>peace</i>	<i>preserve (we)</i>	<i>security</i>	<i>preserve (he/she)</i>	<i>region</i>	<i>preserve (he/she)</i>	<i>future</i>	<i>important</i>	<i>safety</i>
1.0	0.89	0.71	0.68	0.66	0.65	0.62	0.59	0.57	0.56

Source: Author’s calculations

To examine how this concept functions in everyday political rhetoric, we further explore the contextual use of *stability* in speeches by Aleksandar Vučić with that of Nebojša Stefanović, positioned closer to the liberal end of the ISI spectrum. Figure 7.5 displays the contextual valence of *stability* by speaker, measured as a deviation from its expected semantic neighborhood. Positive scores indicate alignment with conventional, positive connotations (e.g., peace, governance, democracy, order), while negative scores suggest deployment in inverted or ambivalent contexts (e.g., rhetorical distancing, irony, or contradiction). Scores near zero indicate inconsistent or neutral usage. Additional explorations of non-governing official texts are presented in Appendix D3 of Chapter 7 (see Figure D.3.)²²

The results show that Stefanović consistently uses the term in alignment with its standard, positive meaning, reinforcing its role as a normative good within democratic discourse. In contrast, Vučić’s use reveals a divergent trend.²³ In 2012, the first year of analysis, his use of stability tends to be closer to the prototypical semantic neighborhood. However, starting from 2013-2014, as Vučić consolidated power within the party, his use of the term stability drifted towards the negative and

²²We collected data from the daily "Danas" to explore how the same terms have been employed by non-governing officials that still work with political-related topics. The results presented in Figure D.3 indicate semantic drift from how Aleksandar Vučić uses it.

²³Although there are substantial differences in the number of speeches (1931 and 92), the length of both corpora exceed minimum thresholds for the GloVe training.

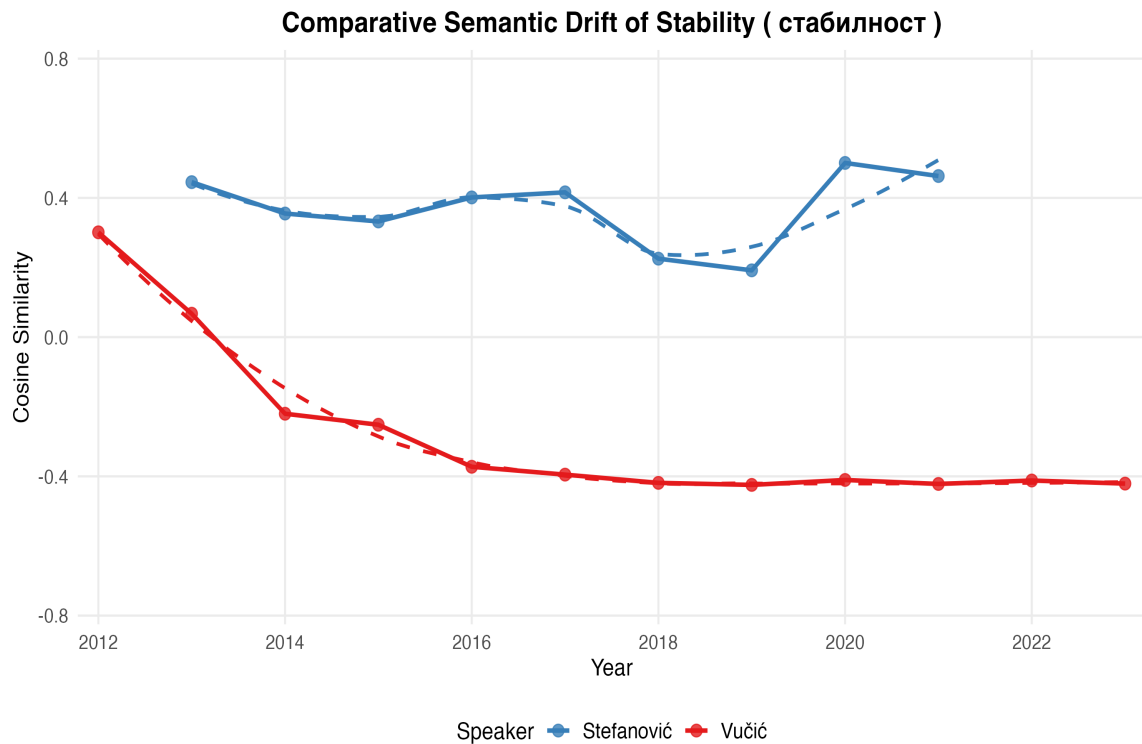
ambiguous semantic territory. By 2016, and consistently onward, his connotation carries a meaning fundamentally different from the its democratic meaning. This does not represent a stylistic variation, but implies a semantic capture of a core political concept. This divergence is particularly telling in the broader context of Serbia's autocratization. Vučić's redefinition of *stability* aligns with the logic of competitive authoritarianism: the term is instrumentalized not to indicate pluralist balance or institutional resilience, but to justify centralized control, delegitimization of opposition, and preservation of the status quo. It is essential for Vučić stability as a security guarantee to remain an important paradigm in the region.

"...being equated with the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, and portrayed as someone willing to act on his behalf in the Balkans...That is normal and informally part of an agreement to bring down Serbia. This began during the period of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS). They are not attacking me because of my appearance or alleged threats, but because Serbia is advancing rapidly (Srpska napredna stranka, 2023)." ²⁴

In this framework, rhetorical appeals to stability serve to preempt dissent, pacify external criticism, and recast political monopoly as a form of national strength. The use of advanced semantic modeling here makes visible what traditional content analysis might miss: that even seemingly benign political concepts can undergo ideological drift when filtered through illiberal speech practices.

²⁴"...да га изједначавају са председником Руске Федерације Владимиром Путином и да је спреман да ради све у његово име на Балкану. То је нормално и неформално део договора да сруше Србију. То је почело у време ДОС-а. Не руше они мене због дебелих усана или снајпера, већ зато што Србија брзо напредује..."

Figure 7.5: Semantic Drift - stability



Source: Author's calculations based on collected speeches and statements

After 2020, the illiberal rhetoric and polarization were extremely high. The use of illiberal phrases reached levels above 0.62 and 0.65 on average. At the same time, V-Dem's liberal democracy scores, or any of its components, have never been lower. The opposition boycotted the 2020 elections, and the COVID crisis prevented any form of coherent opposition actions. The next parliamentary elections in 2022 did not improve the situation much. Media workers who tend to report the crisis in an unfavorable frame often represent the executive's wish list, and increased clashes among MPs indicate only further drifting apart and unsustainable levels of political and societal polarization. Moreover, harassment of opposition figures and civil organization and groups continued to represent an important tool in Vučić's playbook, despite the lack of research attention (Tripkovic, 2025). MP Vladimir Đukanović called for arrests of employees from the CSO Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability, while simultaneously freeing intelligence officers

imprisoned for killing an independent journalist in 1999. Such actions aim to send a message to independent media about the impunity of the system and tendency to use corrupt practices (Milačić, 2024b). The practice of Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) extended to journalists due to spreading misconstrued panic and unrest (Markov & Đorđević, 2024; Savage, 2025). The rise of the polarizing actions and illiberal rhetoric has intensified the processes of autocratization in Serbia. In the 2021 V-Dem report, the country (along with Hungary) served as a flagship case of how gradual autocratization takes place. Areas that were especially affected were freedom of expression, media, and the propensity to rig elections (European Western Balkans, 2021), and already rampant corruption that led to state capture. State capture levels have already exceeded those in the early 2000s period, capture of the rule of law institutions had similar levels. At the same time, the extent of the executive's influence over policy processes is even greater compared to the peak Milošević period (Kaufmann, 2023, Data from: <https://r4d.org/resources/state-captureindex/>).

The divisive rhetoric has proved to be an important and successful tool across many actors (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021), but it is only one side of the autocratization in Serbia. Rhetorical polarization delegitimizes oversight actors, allows for procedural shortcuts, and normalizes selective and biased implementation of such procedures. The second mechanism that challenged democracy and enabled erosion of democratic norms explores the ruling elite's incremental capture of institutions and establishment of clientelistic networks. Through large-scale corruption, political and economic elites erode institutional qualities, reduce trust in institutions, and capture the policy processes in the country. The capture in Serbia did not stem from the traditional use of the concept of state capture, i.e., oligarchs (Hellman et al., 2003), but rather from the political elite restricting economic actors and making them dependent on the state (David-Barrett et al., 2023). The rhetorical patterns documented in this section did not exist in isolation and without substantial material support. The instrumentalized deployment of such rhetoric provided

cover for the institutional capture and delegitimized any scrutiny of it. Labeling opposition actors as foreign-influenced constructed a discursive immunity while weaving a clientelistic network.

7.3.2 From Words to Networks: Corruption Dynamics and Networked State Capture

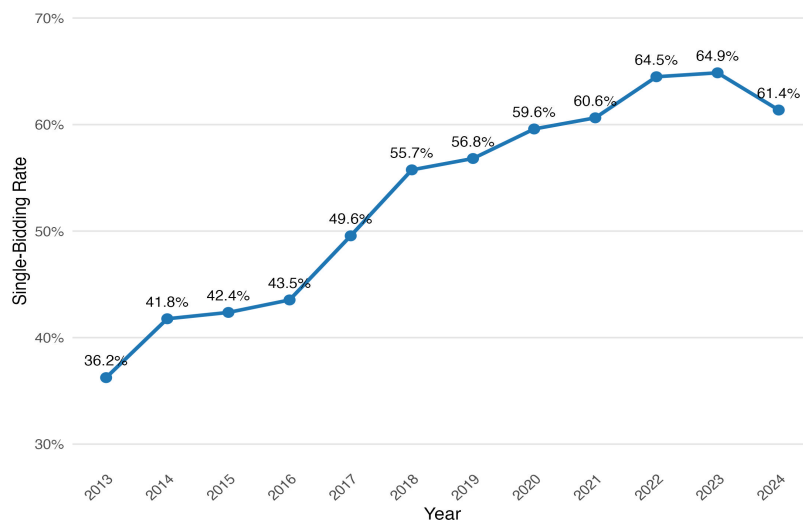
The preceding section illustrated how illiberal rhetoric became a dominant form of communication among the SNS elites, particularly Vučić, by constructing political legitimacy around personal industriousness, stability preservation, and dismissal of criticism as foreign-influenced. However, polarization driven solely through rhetoric alone cannot sustain the emerging hybrid regime in Serbia. The rhetorical shifts functioned as a justification to normalize new forms of communication, to consolidate power, to delegitimize dissent, and to frame loyalty. Words are connected to material interests and resources to reward loyalty, design dependencies to warrant compliance, and networks to perpetuate the regime. Under such conditions, with oversight institutions completely overrun by the executive and loyal party members, large-scale corruption could flourish unchecked.

We now turn to the material infrastructure underlying Serbia's autocratization episode. Recent scholarship, Apergis and Pinar (2023), Hajnal (2024), and Lindstaedt (2021), emphasize the importance of exploring how both conditions affect the erosion of democratic norms. Increased polarization sidelines opposition, watchdogs, and hampers strong oversight over the executive. This allows the executive to abuse access to resources and how they are distributed. Both mechanisms reinforce each other over time. Increased corruption generates inefficient economic outcomes and allows political elites to explore the corruption-issue in order to limit opposition influence (Apergis & Pinar, 2023), while the unfriendly elements of the polarization (or pernicious polarization) can undermine democratic accountability, leading to more corruption (Hajnal, 2024).

The rhetoric indicates the reform-oriented nature of Vučić's initial term, emphasizing the need to attract more investment, regardless of its origin, and to more easily eliminate domestic obstacles (procedures). At the aggregate level, indicators such as Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, World Bank's Control of Corruption, and even various V-Dem's indicators on corruption within the executive, legislative, and public offices have shown increasing corruption trends and worsening control. Moreover, Transparency Serbia (2021) shows that adopting anti-corruption reforms without enforcing them properly became the norm, starting from a reluctance to tackle corruption under Vučić. This institutional setup empowers influential actors to selectively implement what they consider to be good for them. The perception or expert-based measurements can help us illustrate annual trends or general direction. However, to explore in more detail processes and mechanisms, the dissertation relies on two additional resources, corruption through public procurement data and computational network analysis (Villamil et al., 2022, 2024, Detailed debate on the method's merits). Public procurement accounts for approximately 10 percent of the country's GDP (OECD 2020), representing a substantial share of potential funds misallocation. Corruption in public procurement in Serbia has already received some attention at the case study level (Dávid-Barrett et al., 2016). Such projects are considered of extreme importance for nation-building, or in some consolidating regimes, nation rebuilding. By its very nature, they tend to divide the population (Vangeli, 2011). Moreover, evidence also shows that the active involvement of the executive in shaping the rules for (and around) the project can have a profound impact on institutional structure (Grubbauer & Čamprag, 2019). It weakens horizontal accountability by allowing the executive to intervene through urgent procedures that lack transparency, and often expand to potentially target opposition and restrict competition. An instance is the direct award of the main construction of the Kula Belgrade to Impresa Pizzarotti, or the corrupt affiliation of its co-managers (N1 Info, 2021). Such restrictive trends can be observed through the rising tendency to have only a single bidder for tenders.

The documentation of a progressively closing to competition system raises red flags about the riskiness of creating close networks of institutions with only favored suppliers. Instead of being exceptional, the prevalence of single bidding becomes the norm in Serbia. Transparency International has already flagged the difficulty that potential participants are facing and, consequently, the dwindling trust in the procurement process (Figure 7.6). Moreover, the timing of the closing competition is also telling. As the autocratization episode progressed, the rate of single bidding became more prominent. Two sharp jumps are particularly noteworthy, between 2016 and 2018, when it increased by 12 percentage points. It corresponds to the period of increased executive concentration, power consolidation, and transition of Vučić from Prime Minister to President.

Figure 7.6: State of competition in Serbia



Source: Author's calculations based on Serbian public procurement data

Fast-tracking of permits (for the benefit of the investor), tax breaks, and provision of contracts to companies registered in tax havens, creation of special rules (and laws) became emblematic of cronyism and evasion of democratic oversight, fundamentally altering the institutional environment in Serbia (Zeković et al., 2023). The project, as was the case of "Skopje 2014" serves as a central example of how corruption can be instrumental in the friendly provision of funds to close allies of the ruling party.

However, unlike the "Skopje 2014" project, none of the works or services directly for the site have been conducted through open or transparent procedures. Although, as Perić (2020) cites their study, initial suggestions regarding the importance and openness of the project have also been shared also by the SNS member Vučić (Statement from 2012 in Politika). Moreover, Transparency Serbia (2014) raised questions about the vagueness and opacity of the project. Nonetheless, we can still explore the potential networks of institutions that would have been (partially) responsible for the implementation of the project. The assumption is that if we already see a high tendency of corruption risk for regular procurement practices, the main project, which is not transparent, could be substantially riskier.

Therefore, we aim to leverage this information by focusing on how specific purchasing authorities, for instance Ministries or Public Bodies from Belgrade, conduct their procedures. Overall, the CRI scores in Serbia have substantially increased over the past decade, rising to above 0.5 in 2020, and slightly lower than 0.5 (0.48) for the period 2021-2024.²⁵ There is a great variation in contract-distribution even within the same purchasing authorities. Moreover, while it is interesting that there is a cluster of institutions that only appear with a single substantial contract, sometimes several million EUR, and are marked as extremely risky, the analysis explores and maps repeated interactions. By constructing the network, we can also explore in which cases purchasing authorities tend to conduct less risky procedures and map the potential pool of suppliers. One of the top purchasing authorities is the public agency Belgrade Land Development, which also features connections to the Belgrade Waterfront project. However, few open contracts are identified in the dataset in relation to this. Nevertheless, the richness of data enables the identification of contracts through extensive keywords filtering. The emblematic function of Belgrade Waterfront in the analysis illustrates the continuous closure of competitions (e.g., here through the adoption of Lex Specialis). The opacity of the project is not incidental but represents a constitutive part of the project's

²⁵Detailed definition, operationalization and thresholds for the Serbian CRI are available in Appendix D4 of Chapter 7.

political function.²⁶ The framework that surrounds the project exemplifies what Perić (2020) terms "authoritarian entrepreneurialism" - the construction of parallel governance structures.

There are almost 400 related contracts and a corruption risk score is higher than 0.3. However, some of its contracts that are related to media marketing or other consulting services tend to be among the riskiest categories. Another important institution was the Ministry for Construction, Transport, and Infrastructure.²⁷ It is an institution that can green-light and allow the construction of buildings in the projected site to proceed or halt. On average, it is an institution with some of the riskiest contracts, with an average CRI score of 0.52. However, when working with some suppliers, the CRI score increases significantly. For instance, its contracts for software and consultancy services are flagged as extremely risky, with a CRI score of 0.6, with only a single bidder under an extremely short advertisement period (less seven days) participating in the tendering procedure. The Ministry played a key role in Serbia's most ambitious infrastructure reinvention, which is also marked as a potential source of corruption risk (Soyaltin-Colella, 2023). Such major projects were treated as political trophies, and their implementation relied on the adoption of special laws and procedures, drafted behind closed doors.

Beyond the publicly available contracts, for some of the most prominent infrastructure deals, negotiation takes place at the bilateral level between executives. These bilateral agreements also have to pass special procedures in the Serbian parliament before approval and restrict competition to participation in the country of financing, as was with the Chinese-funded highways (Agatonović, 2021, quoting Vladisavljev), or the Morava Corridor, again without a usual competitive process. The usual justification for such special procedures refers to its national importance. As a result, non-open procedures and single bidding are on the rise, implying risks of corruption and resulting in greater citizens' distrust towards processes.

²⁶Also a potential learning curve from the Skopje 2014, when government officials started to face the consequences of the project through investigations of the Special Prosecutor

²⁷Same institution responsible for the reconstruction of the unfortunate Novi Sad railway

Probably the most prominent case that has implications beyond its area of operation is Telekom Srbia.²⁸ The case relates to the purchase of Kopernikus Technology, as well as the acquisition of Prva TV and O2 through companies in tax havens (Cuckić, 2020). The media capture in Serbia extends beyond this deal with further media outlets such as Pink and Happy operating as apologists to SNS politics. Overall, these dealings had a significant effect on the constriction of the media landscape and space for unbiased reporting since SNS came to power (Vladislavljević, 2020). Telekom is one of the suppliers that is most represented in the dataset, with over 1200 government contracts, mostly awarded in restricted competition (0.9 average single bidding rate). The most prominent example, however, is a tender from 2021 received under the name of one of its subsidiaries ("Telekom Srbija A D Beograd Wireless Media Doo Beograd") that has received a contract for almost EUR 50 million for the *"Implementation and maintenance of the central system for calculating salaries in the public sector"*. The tender is flagged as of moderate risk, as it has received only two bids, and the winner is a company that has a market share of almost 65 percent. Despite the allegations, the government's stance on the issues has often been dismissive, as illustrated in the rhetoric section above, suggesting that whatever the deal is, it is in Serbia's best interest.²⁹

Beyond the individual contracting dyad, the network analysis in Serbia indicates structurally elevated risks. These structural revelations are driven by conditions that enable a risky environment, allowing for a systematic configuration of contracting authorities and suppliers. Figure 7.7 identifies the contracting authorities that may be closely connected to some of the most important projects for the ruling party. Each network is surrounded by dense and internally cohesive sets of suppliers, which, unlike in North Macedonia, indicate more closed operational

²⁸Interestingly the Telekom case featured prominently in North Macedonia as well relating to financing, but also closely linked to the illegal and widespread VMRO-DPMNE's wiretapping

²⁹"Serbia is indeed on its path toward the European Union, and I promised myself that for a while I would refrain from saying anything. . . . However, I would point out a few unfair matters. It is not an issue — you may mention Telekom." Србија јесте на путу ка Европској унији и себи сам обећао да нећу рећи ниједну реч неко време. . . . Али бих издвојио неколико нефер ствари. Није проблем, можете да помињете Телеком. (Srpska napredna stranka, 2021a)

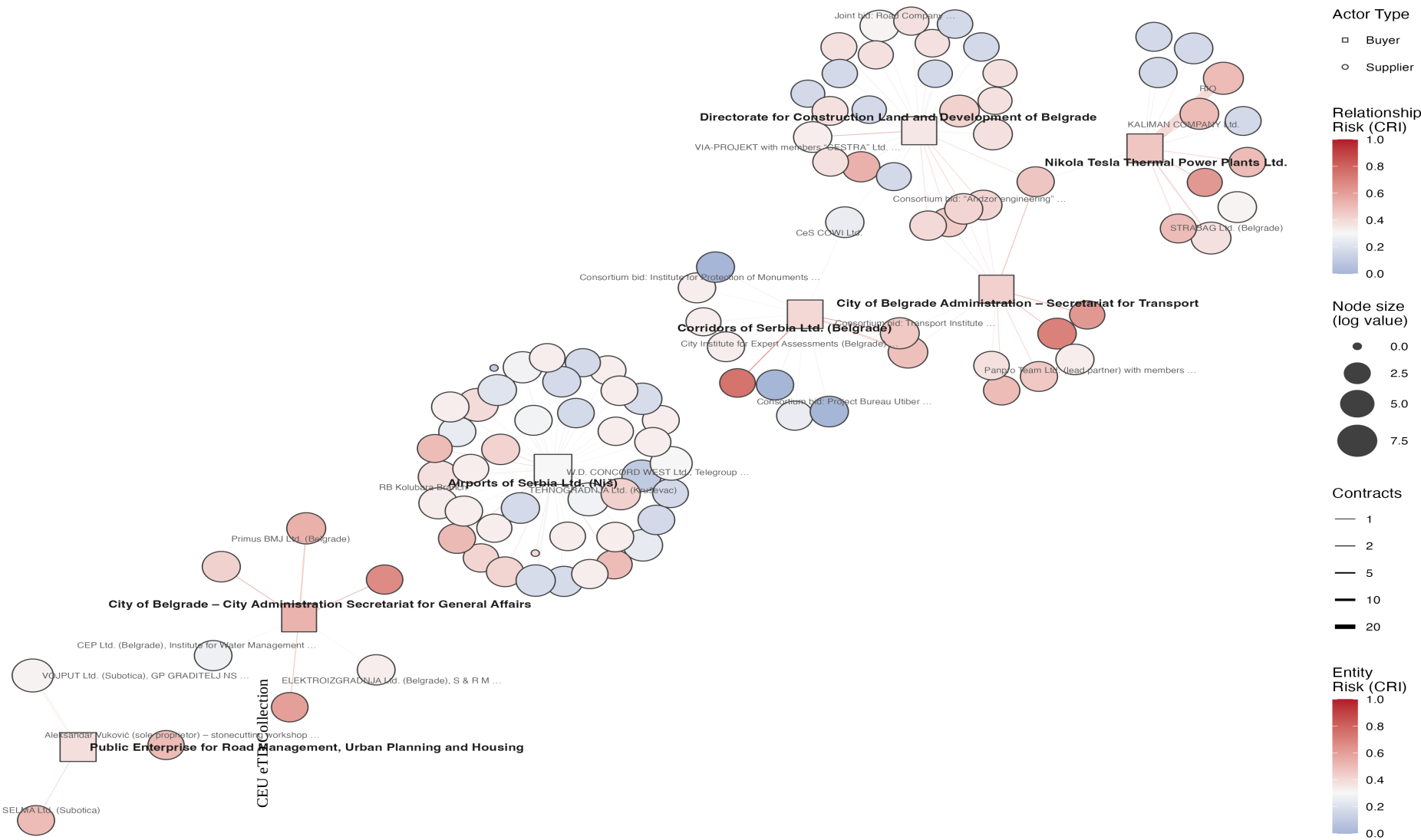
structures. The multiple CAs connected to the City of Belgrade, as was the case in Skopje, are closely related to the urban redevelopment of the city. The Thermal Power Plants integrate the importance of energy resources in Serbia. The central nodes (links) of these authorities function as structural hubs that repeatedly engage in overlapping sets of suppliers across multiple tenders.

The figure also shows that the elevated risk scores are not randomly distributed, but concentrated around these clusters. These repeated contracting patterns represent more than just episodic deviations. Looking more closely at the connection between Thermal Power Plants and RIO, we note an extremely thin red line, connecting a contracting authority (marked as risky) and a supplier also marked as highly risky. The riskiness of both nodes and edges is the result of the restricted competitiveness. There are in total 38 contracts for services and works between the two actors, with average elevated risk scores (CRI is higher than 0.5 on average). A similar pattern is observed with the STRABAG supplier and affiliated consortia. Repeated contracting with limited competition. The data indicates at least 16 contracts (from the filtered subset) with contracted amounts exceeding EUR 8 million. Even contracting authorities such as Airports of Serbia (Nis), tend to create repeated contracting, that on the edge, shows riskiness. Its relevance stems from the institutional transformation taking place under the regime. The airport was transferred from municipal to government control, culminating in its incorporation into Airports Serbia (Aviation Pros, 2018). The move was widely criticized by the media as a loss of local economic agent and viewed as an imposition of state-exercised control over local activities (Mitić, 2019). A move indicating power concentration. This move effectively recentralized control over this institution, reversing local control into direct (executive) one. This institutional consolidation came with politically appointed entities for oversight. The multiple contracts extend beyond more specialized markets into regular supplies and services.

The network structure broadly mirrors the practice of state-captured contracting institutions operating through clusters of bound economic actors. Within these

parameters, repeated interactions through favorable contracting, limited supplier turnover, and increased density around the edges with elevated corruption risk values reinforce over time. The efficiency-driven processes are replaced with informal coordination and patronage-based allocation, whereby centralized state activities maintain leverage over economic actors. Subsequently, the network visualizes a form of state-capture through the institutionalized concentration of high-risk procurement. Even protests and objections against some contracting practices had little effect on the ruling parties' dealings, best illustrated in the case of "RIO" (Stuehlen & Anderl, [2024](#)).

Figure 7.7: Most prominent PA-Suppliers connections



Note: Squares represent public buyers; circles represent suppliers. Node and edge color indicate the Composite Risk Index (CRI). Edge width reflects the number of contracts; node size reflects total value (log scale). Labels standardized to Latin script for readability.

Source: Author's calculation of network analysis

The trajectory of how the government's economic development is going to develop by the SNS has already been marked in 2012/2013 with some of Vučić's landmark statements. Perić and Maruna (2022) discourse analysis of media reports identifies authoritarian tendencies in expression and policy implementation. The increased practice of single bidding and non-open procurements for which special procedures are required in the literature and existing empirical evidence is a clear signal for corruption-related practices. These "investments" have helped the government to consolidate its power, allowing elites to reward loyalty, although such contracts tend to be riskier, by 4 percentage points. Moreover, acquiring media outlets or awarding telecommunication contracts, under similarly opaque procedures, extends the influence of the ruling party, fostering a state of dependence on public funds for many private companies (extensive clientelism). The restructuring of procedures to fit investment needs constructed a system in which public funds and influence became conditional on the extent of party loyalty (extensive party patronage). As a result of the many different forms of corruption (and eventually state capture), these forms of governance became a mechanism of regime maintenance in Serbia and were used as justification for consolidating power and centralizing control.

Serbia's autocratization trajectory demonstrates the spiraling effect of the polarizing rhetoric and corruption that accelerated the autocratization processes. Unlike the interrupted autocratization episode in North Macedonia (after the 2015/2016 political crisis), Serbia's trajectory continued unobstructed for more than a decade. The comparative implication represents sobering empirical evidence for the broader regional developments. In the absence of external disruptions, indicating the importance of international democracy promoters to focus on institutional and governance strengthening, the self-sustaining autocratization mechanism is hard to halt and/or reverse.³⁰ The absence of such exogenous shocks opens new avenues for research by focusing on conditions that can break autocratic processes. This moves the analytical framework from identifying conditions that enable autocratization

³⁰The intensity and propensity of the past year protests offer some hope, but intermediate electoral results also illustrate the difficulty of regime change without external support

episodes to identifying conditions that cause the interruption of such episodes. The analysis lays the groundwork for comparative future research that extends beyond the two countries. Exploring similar patterns within the Eastern European region or former Soviet Union states. Such investigations also rest on the availability of similar data structures can provide comparability of results and hence generalizability of findings.

8 Conclusion

The dissertation set out to explain under what conditions autocratization episodes occur in post-communist countries, not through dramatic ruptures or coups, but rather through the gradual hollowing of institutions by leaders who came to power through democratic means. It does so by exploring the mechanisms by which such episodes unfold. It integrates the conditions identified in the cross-case analysis to underscore how they operate and interact to perpetuate the erosion of democratic qualities. The empirical puzzle of the dissertation explored why some countries experiencing similar structural pressures succumb to autocratization while others prove resilient. The theoretical puzzle addressed how the mechanisms explored in the extant literature, such as polarization, institutional decay, external influence, or corruption, operate to cause democratic backsliding. The sequential multi-method design combines the collected and integrated data from multiple sources, using qualitative comparative analysis. The in-depth case studies take advantage of elites' speeches using computational text analysis, and public procurement data using network analysis, to address both dimensions of the puzzle.

The QCA analysis of 28 autocratization episodes across 21 post-Communist countries revealed three distinct pathways through which incumbent-led democratic erosion proceeds. The first pathway is polarization, even in the absence of corruption. Two prominent and well-established cases in the literature, Hungary and Poland, are members of this pathway, along with Romania's 2021 initiated autocratization episode. These configurations capture examples where political

leaders exploit societal divisions to delegitimize the opposition actors, and gradually concentrate power by weakening horizontal accountability. The second pathway stresses the importance of regional autocratization tendencies, exemplified with the cases of Georgia, Armenia, and Bulgaria. All these episodes take place after 2017 as the third-wave of autocratization was in full swing across the region. The configuration represents a volatile context that can spill into neighboring countries and create opportunities for incumbents to justify similarly oppressive actions and concentrate power. The third pathway allows incumbents to take advantage of high levels of polarization and lack of political stability in the country to concentrate their power and erode democratic institutions. North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are associated with this pathway. Unresolved domestic (and bilateral) issues allow incumbents to frame the dispute as a political problem with them as the only possible solution. North Macedonia's unresolved issue with Greece, Serbia's Kosovo issue, and Bosnia and Herzegovina complicated domestic institutional setup, are a prime example of how incumbents can instrumentalize it to divide the population (polarizing it), perpetuate political instability, and eventually misappropriate financial resources through institutional weakening, corruption, and state capture.

The findings present new pathways that allow us to explore autocratization episodes by treating conditions (or variables) not as merely independent, but rather as conditions that operate in conjunction, making their effect contingent on the presence or absence of other factors. High polarization in a stable regional democratic environment can yield different outcomes compared to high polarization amid regional democratic backsliding trends. Corruption in the presence of institutional weaknesses can accelerate erosion and allow political elites to capture the state. Using a sequential multi-method design the analysis moves identifying the conditions under which autocratization episodes are initiated to understanding how these configurations generate erosion of democratic qualities in practice. The case studies of North Macedonia during the incumbency of Nikola Gruevski and Serbia

during the incumbency of Aleksandar Vučić traced the mechanisms through which polarization and regional trends have contributed to institutional decay and the role of corruption in incrementally capturing the state.

The computational text analysis of executives' speeches and statements in both countries revealed that illiberal rhetoric functions not as an ideological expression, but as a political instrument. In North Macedonia, Gruevski's prevalent use of terms associated with illiberal rhetoric varied. Using the dictionary-based model, we noted the highest tendency to use illiberal words in 2012 and 2015. The first point marks the peak of the Skopje 2014 project and the regime's power. With the rule consolidation in 2014 and the lack of credible opposition in the Assembly, we observe improvements. However, the events from 2015 with the publishing of the wiretapped recordings have put the regime in a more aggressive and defensive mode, consequently noting an increase in illiberal rhetoric. When the documented evidence was presented, the opposition became an agent of foreign intelligence services, adopting a paradigm of those who defend the country and what it means to be a Macedonian, patriots, and servants of foreign interests whose primary aim is to divide the Macedonian population. Demands for accountability essentially became attacks on Macedonian sovereignty. The aim is to polarize and capture a strategic transformation, not an ideological conversion.

Serbia under Aleksandar Vučić exhibited similar patterns with a distinct tone. The regime's unique position vis-à-vis the EU and Western actors, on the one hand, and China and Russia, on the other hand, called for a more nuanced interpretation. Aleksandar Vučić and SNS's rhetorical strategy was designed to combine nationalist appeals (e.g., concerning the Kosovo issue) with a carefully cultivated image of stability (in the region) and European integration (EU negotiations). The polarizing rhetoric constructed the opposition as an existential threat to Serbian progress and agents of foreign interests (parallel usage, as it was the case in North Macedonia). Within both cases, we observe consistent suppression of economic competition and rewarding of economic elites closer to the regime. The analysis showed that, in

both cases the rhetoric served a specific function in the autocratization process. It delegitimized the opposition, such as the case when Gruevski swiftly dismissed the opposition's SDSM concerns about the state of democracy, and implying they serve the interests of former party Presidents. Similarly, Vučić sidelines the opposition as those who do not really want to do anything for Serbia, while he is indeed the one who is constantly working (even on weekends), and all for the benefit of Serbia. Moreover, exceptional measures are justified to protect the material benefit from accountability. Taking all necessary steps, and avoiding prescribed norms, to make it easier to produce practical results, such as built roads, highways, or projects such as the "Belgrade Waterfront". Similar corrupt practices and how they were shielded in North Macedonia were revealed from the wiretapped recordings, with the most blatant example of asking for (%) share (as bribe) for the highway Kicevo-Ohrid (Balkan Insight, 2015).

Table 8.1: Comparative Dimensions: North Macedonia and Serbia

Dimension	North Macedonia (Gruevski)	Serbia (Vučić)
Critical Juncture	2008 NATO veto	2014 electoral win
Flagship Project	Skopje 2014 (€500–680M)	Belgrade Waterfront (€3–4B)
Peak ISI Score	0.62 (2012) ^a	0.65 (2015, 2021)
Stability Semantic Drift	Negative from onset of data	Negative by 2014
Regional Enabler	EU bandwidth, Hungary	EU bandwidth, Hungary, Russia
Exposure Mechanism	Wiretapping scandal (2015)	Ongoing (no equivalent shock)

Source: Author's description

^a We use standardized z-scores ISI scores in North Macedonia; Serbia's ISI scores are on 0–1 scale. Direct numerical comparison should account for scale differences; both analysis are interpreted as relative changes to other speakers within the country.

The growing illiberalism, which further polarized the society has been operating as part of a broader government strategy to concentrate power and create intertwined networks of political and economic interests for the benefit of the ruling party elite (Transparency Serbia, 2021). The two major projects in each country,

"Skopje 2014" and "Belgrade Waterfront", exemplified how corruption incapacitates other societal and political actors from seeking accountability (horizontal or vertical). The projects have taken advantage of bypassing prescribed procedures, required safety measures, or even proper planning (Transparency International, 2023; Transparency Serbia, 2014). Non-transparent contracting was present in North Macedonia, with many contracts awarded through non-publicized procedures or under opaque conditions. Serbia went even further with Vučić, highlighting the strategic importance of these projects and the need to be careful to whom they are given. The network analysis reveals a hub-and-spoke structure with major institutions serving as the hub that control transactions and through which connected suppliers "efficiently" route various goods, works, or services. The structure has created dependent economic operators that are unable to compete across different environments and are completely vulnerable. The bankruptcy or marginalization of some major construction companies in North Macedonia after the change of regime illustrates this vulnerability when the hub (ministers and mayors in charge) are replaced from their offices.

More broadly, the findings demonstrate that risky corruption networks in hybrid regimes, such as the stabilitocracies in North Macedonia and Serbia, generate not only private enrichment but are an invaluable political resource. The economic dependency leveraged for loyalty fund patronage systems requires institutional capture to sustain itself. Long term, such incremental capture of all institutions led to state capture by the incumbent parties, further eroding democracy. The autocratization process that is driven by the polarizing illiberal rhetoric and institutional weakening that perpetuates corrupt practices is functionally integrated, in which the rhetoric protects corrupt practices from scrutiny. At the same time, the captured public resources are used to fund the patronage system, which accordingly amplifies polarizing messaging.

The dissertation advances the understanding of autocratization episodes in three ways. First, it provides a configurational explanation to autocratization episodes

using QCA. It shows that autocratization episode can onset through a combination of specific conditions rather than single causes (e.g., studies on polarization, institutional capacities). The configurational approach reveals that the five identified conditions in the literature, namely polarization, institutional capacities, corruption, regional democracy trends, and political stability, depend on what else is present. For instance, we have observed the presence of polarization in different pathways, assuming that how it operates in the context of the autocratization episodes in Georgia 2017 and Armenia 2020 is different from the autocratization episodes in Serbia 2013 and North Macedonia 2008, provided the presence of different additional conditions. Moreover, the presence of polarization in cases that experienced democratic hijacking, such as Hungary 2010 and Poland 2014, compared to the use in crises-driven societies (absence of political stability and corruption (see Truth Table 5.4)).

Second, the dissertation integrates discursive elements, such as illiberal rhetoric and polarization, with the material dimension of corruption and state capture. The dissertation is set to explain how these two mechanisms have jointly hollowed out the institutional constraints over the executive, thus allowing them to protect extraction and fund rhetoric. The feedback loop between corruption and polarization is evident in the temporal dynamics of both cases. Gruevski's shift from highly illiberal to moderate between 2012 and 2014 has been interrupted by the exposure of the wiretapping scandal. The event marked a shift from more technocratic language (in 2014) to a conspiratorial enemy construction (2015 onward). This step served to delegitimize the accountability demands by the opposition, which threatened to expose the documented corrupt arrangements of key VMRO-DPMNE figures. We can observe similar illiberal dynamics across Vučić's rhetoric. Before coming to power as prime minister, 2012-2013, he tended to be more moderate than during the period that followed.

Third, the dissertation demonstrates the value of the multi-method sequential design for studying complex political processes. The QCA identified patterns

across cases that would be invisible in single case studies or overlooked in large-N models. Complementary to this, the case studies have provided valuable insights using advanced computational large language models and network analysis to capture the semantic context of political speeches and the corrupt networks of state institutions with economic elites. Thus, the integrated understanding arising from the sequential design helped us to identify the pathways to autocratization episodes and understand how an episode unravels. The actor-centered approach and applicability of the same methods across other cases, provided the availability of sufficient data, further adds to the broader generalizability of findings to other post-communist cases.

The findings of the dissertation carry important implications for democratic resilience. Although institutions remain formally democratic, incumbents take advantage through legal channels to carry out their illiberal agenda. The functioning of parliaments, elections, and media remains, however, what changes beneath are the parameters through which they operate. Parliaments become rubber stamps for the dominant executive, frequently circumventing procedures. In contrast elections become less and less competitive, with practically non-existent opposition actors in Serbia and largely sidelined in North Macedonia for large periods of the autocratization episode. Such institutional mimicry conceals contemporary autocratization processes by masking illiberal practices behind a democratic facade, making it difficult to identify, prevent, or revert. Yet these cases also suggest there are limits to these strategies, offering a hope of reversal.

The 2015 wiretapping scandal in North Macedonia catalyzed the regime's downfall, despite the numerous and often aggressive attempts of the regime to prevent it. The Colorful Revolution, a predominantly civil movement, demonstrated that plain exposure of state capture, provided that there is also sufficient international pressure, can mobilize the opposition and reverse the autocratization episode, the so-called Macedonian momentum (Bieber et al., 2017). Serbia's trajectory remains more contested. However, the recent year-long protests offer pressure

points against the incumbent. Despite the positive developments, the findings from the dissertation caution against overly optimistic expectations about what comes next once the autocratization episode ends. Following the departure of Gruevski, North Macedonia noted modest improvements in democratic qualities. However, the absence of sustained and far-reaching governance reforms ultimately left underlying vulnerabilities unaddressed, contributing to the onset of a new autocratization episode from 2021. The credibility of sustained reforms is therefore dependent on different operating mechanisms that go beyond the scope of this work.

The work also recognizes potential limitations. Despite the numerous robustness tests and alternative specifications, modified specifications or new data can produce different outcomes. The case studies provide detailed insight into the mechanism, and additional exploration of cases outside the Western Balkans region can additionally strengthen the generalizability. The autocratization episodes are treated as a unit of analysis, but these episodes vary in length and depth. And while the dissertation aimed to address these concerns by focusing on comparable focal points, the mega projects within the two cases, alternative developments across other cases without such events, can provide additional insights into different mechanisms. The importance of opposition strategies is evident in the literature on democratization and, to a certain extent, in the literature on resistance to autocratization. While we take into account the steps taken by the opposition, particularly the role of opposition in the modification of Gruevski's regime behavior, future studies can aim to explore how it integrates and what the role of opposition is in preventing polarization and exposing corruption.

The regimes explored in this dissertation did not break down, rather, they were incrementally eroded. The erosion took place as a result of leaders' decisions and actions who claimed democratic mandates while systematically dismantling institutions. The monuments and facades that today represent the face of Skopje's cityscape stand as physical testaments to processes of nationalist symbolism funded

through corrupt(ion) procurement and legitimation purchased with state resources that embellished the outside of the institutions, while making them hollow inside. The dissertation began with a puzzle about the conditions of democratic erosion and the factors that fuel the autocratization episode. The analysis culminated in the assessment of how informed strategies and choices may mitigate democratic erosion and create more resilient democratic institutions.

A Appendix of Chapters 2 to 4: Descriptive Trends, Mechanism Indicators, Methods

A.1 Descriptive Trends

This appendix presents supporting empirical evidence for the dissertation's theoretical framework. Table [A.1](#) presents the regional changes in democracy across regions using the Vdem's liberal democracy index (LDI). We can observe marginal improvements in democracy between 2000 and 2022 across some regions, mostly in those that historically were associated with low democracy scores. Nonetheless, post-communist countries located in Eastern Europe are the second most democratic backsliding region (-0.075), only behind Central America, underscoring the significant autocratization dynamics across the post-Communist countries.

Table A.1: Regional Changes in Liberal Democracy (2000-2022)

Region	2000	2022	Change
Southern Asia	0.221	0.288	0.067
Oceania	0.510	0.569	0.059
Northern Africa	0.116	0.152	0.036
Western Africa	0.308	0.336	0.028
Caribbean	0.423	0.450	0.028
Central Asia	0.086	0.106	0.020
Middle Africa	0.162	0.179	0.017
Eastern Africa	0.231	0.248	0.017
Southern Europe	0.544	0.552	0.008
Southern Africa	0.426	0.430	0.004
South-Eastern Asia	0.234	0.236	0.003
Northern Europe	0.812	0.807	-0.005
Western Asia	0.223	0.217	-0.006
South America	0.530	0.514	-0.016
Western Europe	0.817	0.798	-0.019
North America	0.784	0.740	-0.044
Eastern Asia	0.452	0.400	-0.052
Eastern Europe	0.522	0.447	-0.075
Central America	0.469	0.367	-0.102

Source: Author's calculations based on V-Dem data

A.2 Mechanisms Overview

Tables A.2 and A.3 operationalize the autocratic mechanism periodization by tracking key indicators across feedback loop phases. The Illiberal Speech Index (ISI) captures rhetorical polarization (using standardized z-scores for North Macedonia), V-Dem’s polarization index measures societal division, single bidding rates proxy corruption risk in public procurement, and the Corruption Perception Index reflects aggregate governance quality. Together, these indicators are used to trace the polarization and corruption mechanisms in the respective case studies of North Macedonia (chapter 6) and Serbia (chapter 7)

Table A.2: Mechanism Indicators by Period: North Macedonia

Period	ISI (z)	V-Dem Pol.	Single Bid %	CPI	Feedback
2006–2008	n/a	–0.89 to –1.12	28–35% (est.)	33–36	Latent
2008–2010	n/a	–1.12 to –1.45	38–45% (est.)	36–41	Activation
2010–2015	0.8 to 0.47	–1.45 to –2.18	52–68%	42–45	Reinforcing
2015–2016	0.47 to 0.47	–2.18 to –2.35	62–68%	42–37	Political crisis

Source: Author’s calculation

Note: ISI scores are standardized (z-scores); positive values indicate above-average illiberal rhetoric. ISI data unavailable before 2012.

Table A.3: Mechanism Indicators by Period: Serbia

Period	ISI	V-Dem Pol.	Single Bid %	CPI	Feedback
2012–2014	0.42–0.45	–1.04 to –1.33	36–42%	39–42	Latent
2014–2017	0.52–0.65	–1.33 to –1.58	43–50%	40–41	Activation
2017–2020	0.57–0.63	–1.58 to –2.01	56–60%	39–41	Reinforcing
2020–present	0.62–0.65	–2.01 to –2.24	61–65%	36–38	Self-sustaining

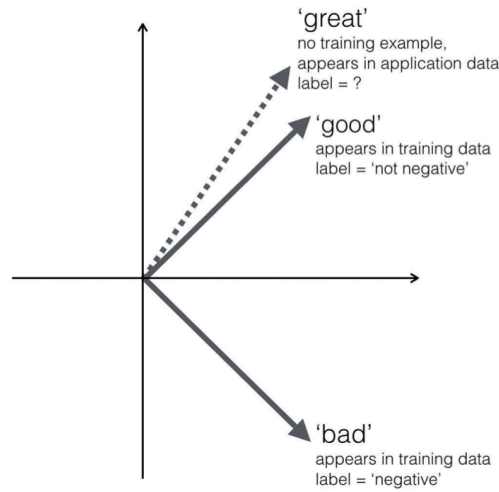
Source: Author’s calculation

Note: ISI scores are on 0–1 scale (higher = more illiberal). For North Macedonia, standardized z-scores are used due to different corpus characteristics; see Table A.2.

A.3 Word Embeddings

Word embeddings help in determining the context in which tokens of interest (i.e., words) are embeddings. It relies on the distance between such vectors to determine the semantic similarity of the underlying concept they signify within the built corpus where the tokens are explored (Rodriguez & Spirling, 2022). They represent vectors by their collocations by inferring meaning of a given token through the company it keeps. As such the word is investigated by its co-occurrence as a vector, i.e., words that tend to appear in similar context will have a closer geometric distance and similar meaning to another (Zhang, 2024), or semantically similar (Elekes et al., 2017). The approach allows us to track semantic changes across different speakers, parties, or institutions concerning the usage of specific words. Word embeddings can be use on already trained dataset or alternatively this can be trained with sufficiently large corpus. If the word, trained "good" with non-negative label and "bad" trained with negative label, are expanded to explore their relationship to the word "great", which can be perceived to have a closer distance to "good" although it has not been observed before. This approach is superior to other language models, such as bag-of-words for example, as it allows to take into account the context of usage. Rudkowsky et al. (2018) illustrate, see Figure A.1, how trained word embeddings position within a given context. Further natural language processing approaches can leverage larger corpora of textual data.

Figure A.1: Word embeddings approach to text analysis



Source: For more details, See (Rudkowsky et al., 2018, p. 144)

To best find the distance between similar tokens (words), word embeddings rely on calculating the cosine similarity. For instance, Mikolov et al. (2013) explains that this approach aims to identify what is "small, as biggest is to big. The model through training can extrapolate that the word in questions is "smallest", which in turn yields the new position. Adding dimensions and further training and context allows the extrapolation of such abstract concepts, see Equation A.1.

$$\mathbf{V}_{\text{smallest}} = \mathbf{V}_{\text{biggest}} - \mathbf{V}_{\text{big}} + \mathbf{V}_{\text{small}} \quad (\text{A.1})$$

Cosine similarity represents the estimation of the similarity between two n-dimensional vectors, in this context tokens or words, by looking at the cosine value from the angle of the two (Jatnika et al., 2019). The distance can be illustrated as following, see Equation A.2. If two words, for instance, "stability" and "order" frequently appear in similar contexts their vectors will point in similar directions, producing high similarity. Conversely, unrelated words such as "stability" and "curiosity" will yield low similarity, or closer to zero. Negative similarity emerges in the context with opposite meanings although a similar context is applied. The estimation

normalizes vector length, thus allowing similarity to reflect contextual usage and particularly suitable for political corpus studies.

$$\text{cosine_similarity}(\mathbf{v}_{\text{word}_i}, \mathbf{v}_{\text{word}_j}) = \frac{\mathbf{v}_{\text{word}_i} \cdot \mathbf{v}_{\text{word}_j}}{\|\mathbf{v}_{\text{word}_i}\| \|\mathbf{v}_{\text{word}_j}\|} \quad (\text{A.2})$$

For the North Macedonia analysis we use SpacyR package (adopted through Python, see (Georgievski, Borijan and Todosovska, Marija, 2025)). Access to larger corpora of data through different years allows to further contextualize the semantic meaning using temporal word embeddings (Di Carlo et al., 2019), which allow researchers to capture drifts. For instance how the context of the word evolved over time, or used by different speakers can be illustrated as following, see Equation A.3:

$$\mathbf{v}_{\text{stability}_{\text{autocratic}}} \approx \mathbf{v}_{\text{stability}_{2015}} - \mathbf{v}_{\text{stability}_{2006}} + \mathbf{v}_{\text{regime continuity}} \quad (\text{A.3})$$

B Appendix of Chapter 5: QCA

B.1 QCA calibration

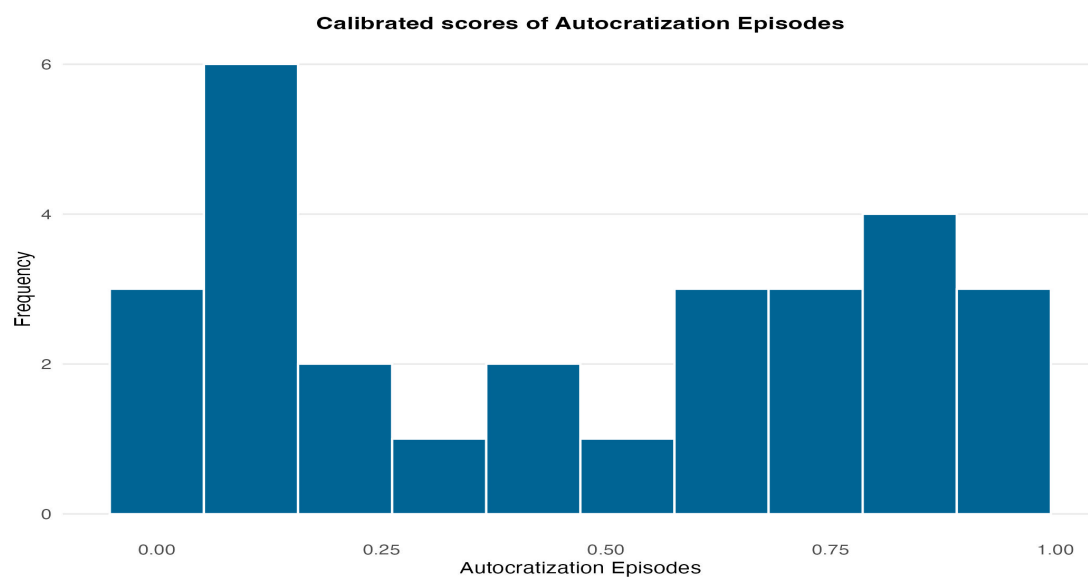
B.1.1 Operationalization

Constructing the dataset required addressing identifying systematic criteria to delineate thresholds to differentiate autocratization episodes from temporary democratic fluctuations by requiring decline over a period of 4 years. Closed autocracies, such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan or Belarus has been altogether excluded from the onset.

B.1.1.1 Autocratization Episode

As we have elaborated in the main text, autocratization episodes are operationalized based on the decline of V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index. Our calibration approach for inclusion and exclusion is then based on the size of decline. Episodes that have sustained more substantial decline, with at least -0.3 are considered to be full members. The crossover point is set at -0.1, while the exclusion from threshold is set at -0.01, i.e., only marginal sustained decline (Figure B.1).

Figure B.1: Autocratization calibration

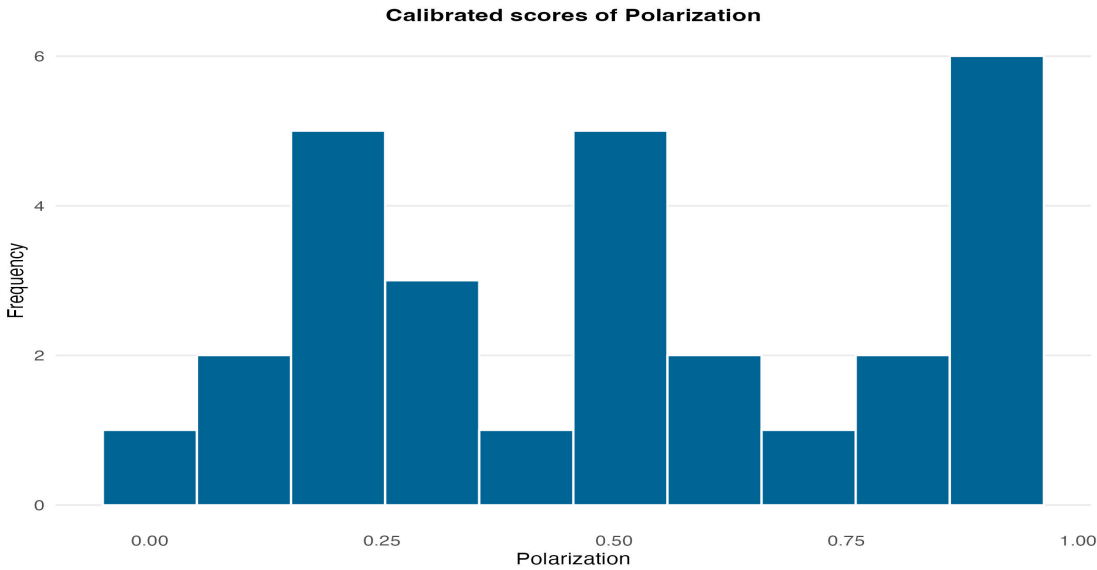


Source: Author's calculation

B.1.1.2 Polarization

We operationalize polarization from V-Dem's political polarization indicator. The indicator aims to capture to what extent a society is divided into antagonistic camps. The converted interval measurement of the variable ranges from -4 to 4, with our crossover point set at 0, which resulted in slightly more cases where polarization is present, the exclusion and inclusion thresholds are set at 1.8 and -1.8 respectively. However, consider the already high trends in the regions of interest, we set a slightly more conservative thresholds to avoid classifying countries where polarization is medium as members (Figure B.2).

Figure B.2: Polarization calibration



Source: Author's calculation

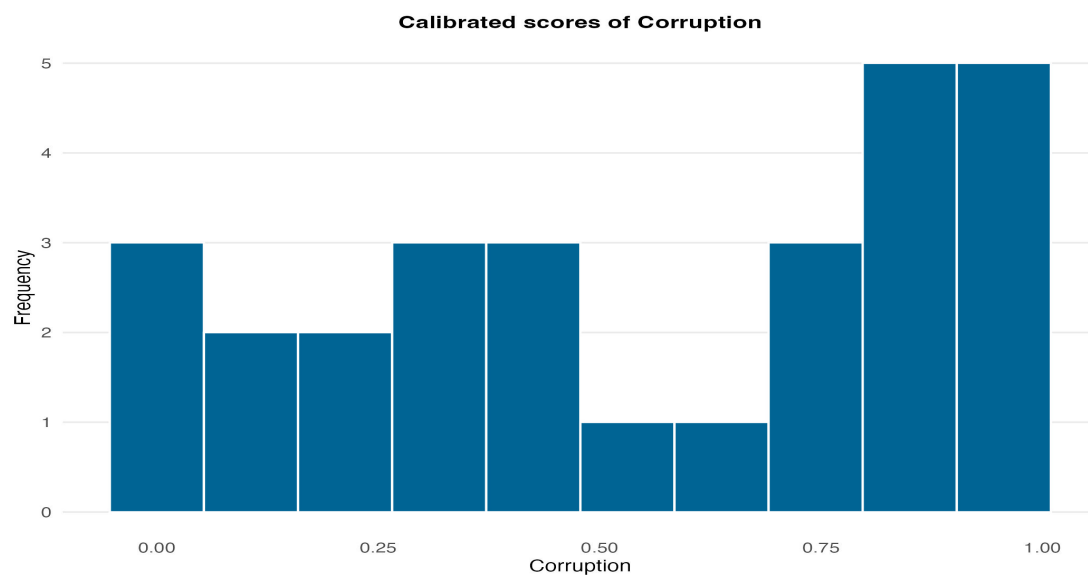
B.1.1.3 Corruption

The data for TI's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) is divided into a historical dataset that contains values for the period 1998-2012 and the current dataset, which contains values for the period 2012-2024. The data have been processed, so that values from the historical dataset (on a scale of 0-10) are normalized and adjusted to the later version, and standardized country names to fit our main dataset names. The process also included processing countries such as Yugoslavia or changed country names (Czech Republic/Czechia) and imputing these values to their respective countries. We proceed similarly with the operationalization and calibration. Transparency International's CPI uses expert assessments to score countries on a level of 0 to 100 regarding their perceived levels of public sector corruption.¹ More corrupt countries are with lower scores, which required changing the direction of the indicator to fit the outlined research purpose, i.e., higher scores to indicate the presence of corruption. For this purpose prior to calibration of the condition, we reoperationalized the condition by subtracting

¹from 1996 to 2011 the scale went only to 10, and was rescaled appropriately during our data processing stage.

each country's score from 100. To account for the regime type of our cases, mostly transitioning countries classified as electoral democracies or electoral autocracies, and our distribution (more substantial distance between some cases), we set the crossover point at 40. Cases with scores higher than 55 are considered as non-members, while cases with high-level of corruption, less than 25 are considered as full members of the set (Figure B.3).

Figure B.3: Corruption calibration



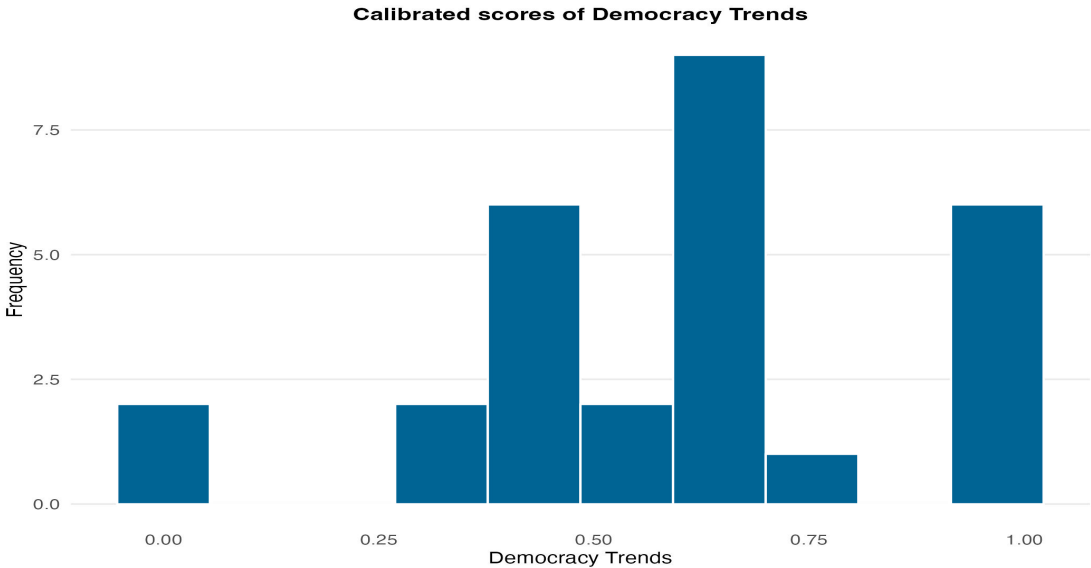
Source: Author's calculation

B.1.1.4 Regional Democracy Trends

Regional democracy trends are important contextual condition to account for the various developments in the autocratizing country's neighborhood. Autocratization rarely occurs in isolation with potential diffusion or ripple effects of similar developments from neighboring countries. Moreover, neighboring countries can share vulnerabilities as well, such as potential for protests or exporting authoritarian practices to incumbents with similar proclivities. Along similar lines, developments in neighboring countries can also serve as warning signals to incumbents on how to react, for example to opposition demands and towards the media. Using the geographical position of countries, as coded by V-dem, we have calculated mean developments of the liberal democracy index in the previous year for each autocra-

tization developments. The condition aims to capture whether there is a potential for spillover effects across borders. Although some neighboring countries might share similar borders, the fact that their episodes take place at different time, it creates a different score for such cases. Our crossover point is set at 0.54, with cases above 0.7 as full members, and below 0.2 as non members (Figure B.4). There is a greater clusters of cases between 0.45 and 0.7, which made the crossover less robust during the robustness tests (see next subsection on Robustness tests).

Figure B.4: Regional democracy trends calibration



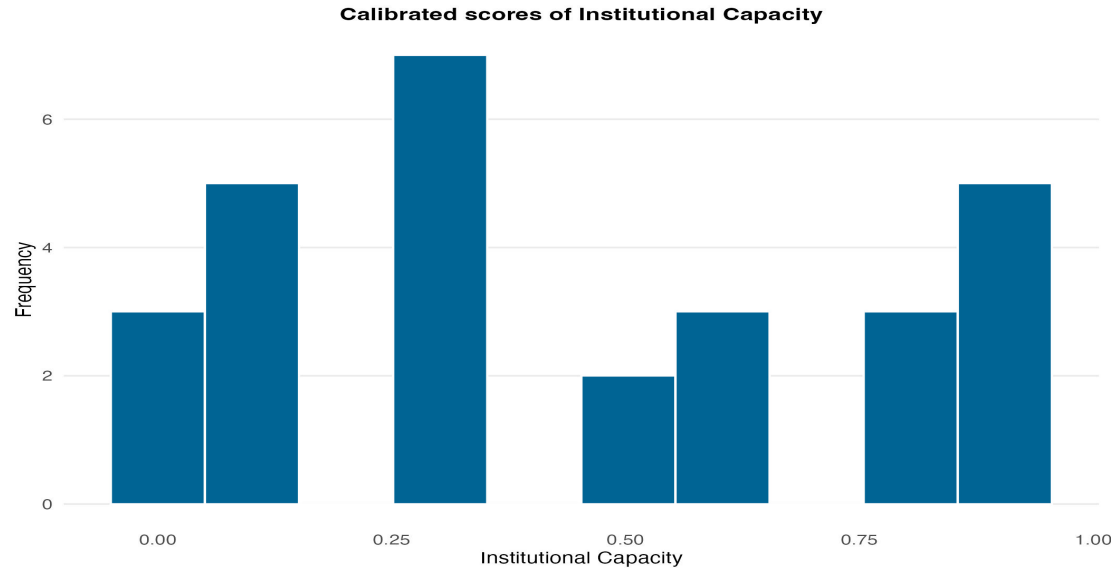
Source: Author's calculation

B.1.1.5 Institutional Capacities

Institutional capacities reflects the state's ability to enforce rules, implement policies and maintain control - all crucial aspects for potential authoritarian stabilization. By operationalizing institutional capacities through the WB's government effectiveness, we aim to capture the incumbents potential to centralize power and undermine opposition, e.g., through strong bureaucracy. Furthermore, stronger institutional capacities can also help to boost legitimacy and refrain from overt violence. WB's indicator scores range from -2.5 to 2.5, with higher scores indicating stronger institutional capacity. For our operationalization strategy, we have used 0

as a crossover point, with scores above 1.1 as full members, i.e., countries that have better institutional capacities, and less than -0.8 as non-members, i.e., countries that lack institutional capacities (Figure B.5).

Figure B.5: Institutional capacity calibration

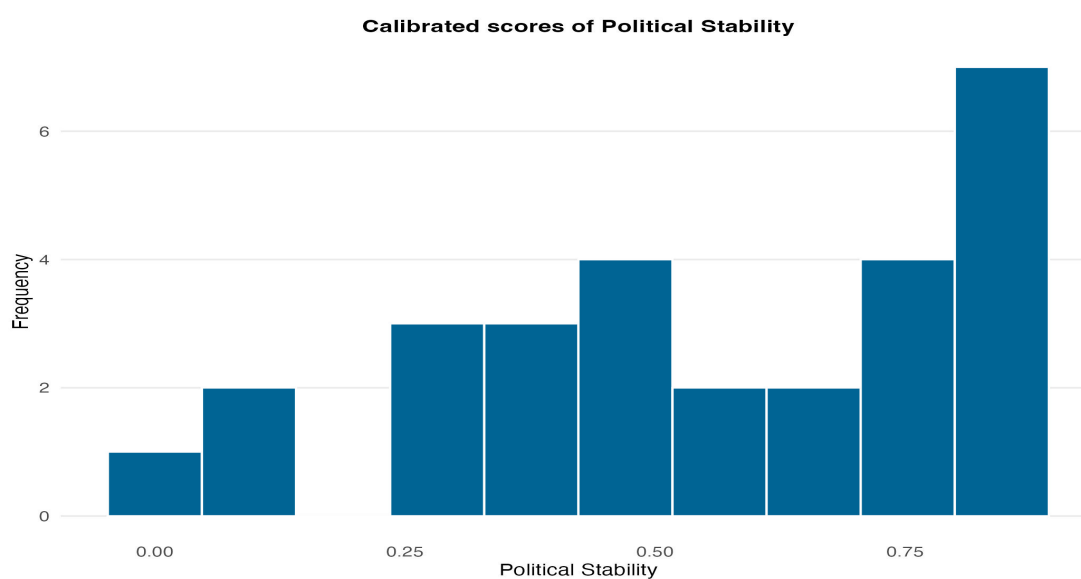


Source: Author's calculation

B.1.1.6 Political Stability

World Bank's Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism aims to capture the potential for instability, national security. Indirectly, the index can also factor in potential unstable developments that can result from various ethnic, linguistic conflicts. As a proxy for greater ethnic or linguistic fractions, lower score represent a potential instability within the country, while higher scores indicate lack of potential political conflict, and better consensual practices. The literature on democratization has shown that homogeneity does help with the democratic consolidation, but consolidation is still a possibility in muliti-ethnic/linguistic/religious society (Lijphart). To calibrate political stability, we use World Bank's index that is on a scale of -2.5 to 2.5, with higher scores indicating lower potential for instability. We set our cross-over point at 0, with -1.5 a threshold for cases not-being members, and 1.5 threshold for cases being full members (Figure B.6).

Figure B.6: Political stability calibration



Source: Author's calculation

B.1.2 Calibrated Scores

Table B.1 presents the calibrated scores distribution for all conditions - Polarization, Corruption, Regional (democratic/autocratic) trends, institutional capacity, and stability - and the outcome, LDI decline during the autocratization episode. The calibration process transforms raw empirical scores of our collected and combined dataset (from various data sources) into set membership scores ranging from 0 to 1. Following established calibration protocols, we employed the direct method of calibration that relies on theoretical and empirical points for each condition. The exclusion threshold, crossover point, and inclusion threshold have been determined based on the substantive knowledge of the explored countries and the distributional properties of the data.

Table B.1: QCA - calibrated scores

	POLAR	CORRUPT	TREND	CAPACITY	STABILITY	AUT
Albania 2013	0.64	0.80	0.40	0.27	0.52	0.15
Armenia 2020	0.50	0.40	0.93	0.30	0.38	0.82
Bosnia and Herzegovina 2002	0.94	0.80	0.36	0.02	0.32	0.45
Bulgaria 2001	0.11	0.73	0.64	0.53	0.73	0.40
Bulgaria 2017	0.39	0.45	0.71	0.56	0.61	0.21
Croatia 2013	0.60	0.24	0.40	0.86	0.80	0.53
Georgia 2000	0.48	0.97	0.94	0.10	0.04	0.05
Georgia 2008	0.24	0.76	0.93	0.58	0.27	0.09
Georgia 2017	0.30	0.03	0.94	0.76	0.43	0.82
Hungary 2010	0.91	0.10	0.58	0.86	0.78	0.99
Kyrgyzstan 2012	0.30	0.98	0.97	0.09	0.12	0.08
Kyrgyzstan 2019	0.20	0.90	0.97	0.08	0.32	0.63
Latvia 2007	0.18	0.20	0.01	0.85	0.86	0.06
Lithuania 2013	0.03	0.06	0.01	0.90	0.85	0.21
Moldova 2005	0.55	0.97	0.62	0.04	0.49	0.11
Moldova 2013	0.56	0.69	0.60	0.11	0.61	0.67
Mongolia 2000	0.21	0.36	0.64	0.25	0.72	0.91
Montenegro 2013	0.94	0.45	0.40	0.58	0.80	0.10
North Macedonia 2008	0.91	0.80	0.30	0.30	0.37	0.72
North Macedonia 2021	0.92	0.73	0.46	0.52	0.63	0.09
Poland 2014	0.81	0.02	0.61	0.85	0.88	0.99
Romania 2001	0.09	0.90	0.64	0.28	0.40	0.05
Romania 2021	0.72	0.31	0.67	0.26	0.77	0.85
Russia 2000	0.19	0.96	0.61	0.08	0.12	0.69
Serbia 2013	0.81	0.55	0.40	0.35	0.49	0.87
Slovakia 2006	0.26	0.36	0.61	0.91	0.87	0.24
Slovenia 2016	0.90	0.02	0.44	0.92	0.88	0.78
Ukraine 2010	0.47	0.97	0.58	0.04	0.44	0.73

Source: Author's calculation

B.2 QCA Sufficiency Analysis - Additional Solutions

The conservative solution in Table B.2 offers 4 potential pathways to autocratization. Each pathway consists of at least three conditions (presence or absence) that lead to the outcome. The findings reveal equifinality to autocratization with our proposed case study mechanism exploring one of the four possible important pathways. Polarization is important for the Central and Eastern European, and EU member states, which leads to autocratization in the presence of strong institutional capacities and relative domestic political stability. In line with our theoretical expectations (for the case studies) presence of corruption and polarization, and absence of political stability feature in it. It supports the claim that corruption is not universally necessary, but it operates as a part of a specific configuration. Its unique coverage explains autocratization episodes not covered by the other pathways.

Table B.2: Sufficiency analysis - conservative solution

Configuration	inclS	PRI	covS	covU	Cases
~CORRUPT*TREND*STABILITY	0.829	0.694	0.513	0.067	Mongolia 2000; Bulgaria 2017, Slovakia 2006; Romania 2021; Hungary 2010, Poland 2014
~POLAR*~CORRUPT*TREND*CAPACITY	0.816	0.568	0.311	0.020	Georgia 2017; Bulgaria 2017, Slovakia 2006
POLAR*~CORRUPT*CAPACITY*STABILITY	0.819	0.681	0.454	0.063	Croatia 2013, Montenegro 2013, Slovenia 2016; Hungary 2010, Poland 2014
POLAR*CORRUPT*~TREND*~CAPACITY*~STABILITY	0.765	0.471	0.342	0.110	Bosnia and Herzegovina 2002, North Macedonia 2008, Serbia 2013
Solution (M1)	0.777	0.644	0.711		

Note: inclS = Consistency; PRI = Proportional Reduction in Inconsistency; covS = Raw Coverage; covU = Unique Coverage. ~ denotes absence of condition.

Source: Author's calculations

The intermediate solution presents three pathways, compared to the four in the conservative, with at least two conditions. The Central and Eastern European, and EU member states, continue to be included in the polarization-driven pathway for their episodes in the 2010s and early 2020s. Georgia and Bulgaria's episodes tend to be driven by the presence of regional democratic backsliding trends, despite the absence of corruption at the onset of the episode. The Western Balkans cluster minimized the corruption condition, but still represents an important pathway leading to autocratization.

Table B.3: Sufficiency analysis - intermediate solution

Configuration	inclS	PRI	covS	covU	Cases
POLAR*~CORRUPT	0.842	0.731	0.548	0.073	Croatia 2013, Montenegro 2013, Slovenia 2016; Romania 2021; Hungary 2010, Poland 2014
~CORRUPT*TREND	0.829	0.711	0.558	0.091	Mongolia 2000; Georgia 2017; Bulgaria 2017, Slovakia 2006; Romania 2021; Hungary 2010, Poland 2014
POLAR*~TREND*~CAPACITY*~STABILITY	0.773	0.497	0.358	0.107	Bosnia and Herzegovina 2002, North Macedonia 2008, Serbia 2013
Solution (M1)	0.776	0.652	0.746		

Note: inclS = Consistency; PRI = Proportional Reduction in Inconsistency; covS = Raw Coverage; covU = Unique Coverage. ~ denotes absence of condition. Intermediate solution incorporates directional expectations for logical remainders.

Source: Author's calculations

Table B.4: Truth table - sufficiency analysis for the absence of the outcome ($\sim Y$)

	POLAR	CORRUPT	TREND	CAPACITY	STABILITY	OUT	n	incl	PRI	Cases
194	4	0	0	0	1	1	2	0.872	0.715	Latvia 2007,Lithuania 2013
	15	0	1	1	0	1	1	0.872	0.673	Georgia 2008
	16	0	1	1	1	1	1	0.872	0.638	Bulgaria 2001
	28	1	1	0	1	1	1	0.869	0.672	North Macedonia 2021
	29	1	1	1	0	1	1	0.838	0.652	Moldova 2005
	26	1	1	0	1	1	1	0.816	0.596	Albania 2013
	30	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.800	0.569	Moldova 2013
	13	0	1	1	0	1	6	0.794	0.629	Georgia 2000,Kyrgyzstan 2012,Kyrgyzstan 2019,Romania 2001,Russia 2000,Ukraine 2010
	8	0	0	1	1	0	2	0.800	0.492	Bulgaria 2017,Slovakia 2006
	25	1	1	0	0	0	3	0.782	0.509	Bosnia and Herzegovina 2002,North Macedonia 2008,Serbia 2013
	7	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.750	0.301	Georgia 2017
	22	1	0	1	1	0	1	0.723	0.383	Romania 2021
	6	0	0	1	1	0	1	0.723	0.285	Mongolia 2000
	20	1	0	0	1	0	3	0.692	0.354	Croatia 2013,Montenegro 2013,Slovenia 2016
	24	1	0	1	1	0	2	0.656	0.302	Hungary 2010,Poland 2014
	5	0	0	1	0	?	0	0.777	0.324	
	1	0	0	0	0	?	0			
	2	0	0	0	1	?	0			
	3	0	0	0	1	?	0			
	9	0	1	0	0	?	0			
	10	0	1	0	1	?	0			
	11	0	1	0	0	?	0			
	12	0	1	0	1	?	0			
	14	0	1	1	1	?	0			
	17	1	0	0	0	?	0			
	18	1	0	0	1	?	0			
	19	1	0	0	0	?	0			
	21	1	0	1	0	?	0			
	23	1	0	1	0	?	0			
	27	1	1	0	0	?	0			
	31	1	1	1	0	?	0			
	32	1	1	1	1	?	0			

Source: Author's calculations

B.3 QCA Robustness Tests

The robustness test for polarization is stable. Exclusion range is robust upwards but sensitive downwards. The cross-over point is robust, indicating that the analysis result holds even with modest shifts in ambiguity around membership. The inclusion threshold is also robust in both directions, particularly the values for the downward direction (Table B.5).

Table B.5: Robustness Ranges for Calibration Thresholds - Polarization

Calibration Point	Lower Bound	Threshold	Upper Bound
Exclusion	1	1.8	–
Crossover	-0.1	0	0.5
Inclusion	-4.1	-1.8	-1.2

Source: Author’s calculation

The exclusion ranges from our robustness tests on corruption are robust in both direction indicating that the findings are stable even with substantial shifts. The crossover point is more sensitive in the upper bound and more robust in the lower bound, but the results remain stable. The inclusion ranges are also robust in both ranges, with the upper bound range going until it reaches the crossover point (Table B.6).

Table B.6: Robustness Ranges for Calibration Thresholds - Corruption

Calibration Point	Lower Bound	Threshold	Upper Bound
Exclusion	44.5	55	64.5
Crossover	37	40	41.5
Inclusion	–	25	39.5

Source: Author’s calculation

The exclusion threshold is robust between 0.6 and 1, meaning it can be adjusted upward and moderately downward without changes to the analysis results. The

crossover point is less robust, however, this stems from the greater clustering of countries whose regional democracy scores are close to the crossover point. The inclusion threshold, similar to the exclusion threshold, is robust in both directions, lower and upper bound (Table B.7).

Table B.7: Robustness Ranges for Calibration Thresholds - TREND

Calibration Point	Lower Bound	Threshold	Upper Bound
Exclusion	0.65	0.70	1.80
Crossover	0.54	0.54	0.54
Inclusion	0.10	0.20	0.45

Source: Author's calculation

Capacity's thresholds are also moderately stable. The exclusion threshold has no lower bound and is robust in its upper bound. The crossover point also offers some flexibility in its upper and lower bound. Last, the inclusion threshold is robust both in upper and lower bound (Table B.8).

Table B.8: Robustness Ranges for Calibration Thresholds - CAPACITY

Calibration Point	Lower Bound	Threshold	Upper Bound
Exclusion	–	-0.80	-0.25
Crossover	-0.10	0.00	0.05
Inclusion	0.35	1.10	–

Source: Author's calculation

Stability's calibration shows to be highly robust regarding its exclusion threshold, with the robustness ranges uncovering high upper and lower bounds. The crossover point is moderately sensitive with its lower bound, but more sensitive when it comes to its upper bound. The inclusion thresholds are also highly robust in both directions (Table B.9).

Table B.9: Robustness Ranges for Calibration Thresholds (STABILITY)

Calibration Point	Lower Bound	Threshold	Upper Bound
Exclusion	–	-1.15	–
Crossover	0	0.00	0.00
Inclusion	1.35	1.5	–

Source: Author’s calculation

C Appendix of Chapter 6: North Macedonia Case Study

C.1 Illiberal dictionary (in Macedonian and English)

Table C.1 (and Table C.2 translated in English) represents the dictionary of words used for the identification of liberal and illiberal terms used for the calculation of the ISI within the speeches and statements. These are the conceptual architecture of the ISI. It operationalizes illiberalism not as absence of liberal reference, but aims to capture references related to illiberal practices, such as existential threat. The words in table have been presented with only their root/stem meaning. For instance in our analysis words that would be expanded with additional endings to denote male, female or plural have been presented in the table as one. The full R code, available upon request, that accompanies the dissertation, includes the full list of words. The dictionary is based on Wagner et al. (2025) and Maerz and Schneider (2020). Additional validation tests on whether the index captures liberalism is conducted in relation to V-dem's liberal democracy index. Figure C.1 shows the correlation of rescaled ISI scores, whereby higher scores indicate greater propensity to use liberal speech. The results reported in Table C.1 indicate that the constructed dictionary captures the intended construct and outperform similarly constructed dictionaries.

Table C.1: Illiberal Speech Index: Dictionary Root Terms

Illiberalism		Liberalism	
стабилност	херој	демократија	слобода
дестабилизација	слава	права	еднаквост
хаос	чест	човекови права	правда
анархија	гордост	избор	неправда
опасност	непобедлив	глас	фер
немири	величество	транспарентност	нефер
терор	почит	плурализам	солидарност
субверзивен		либерализам	хармонија
татковина	семејство	ЕУ интеграција	жена
територија	брат	преговори	девојка
наследство	мајка	соработка	ЛГБТ
единство	татко	медиуми	геј
идентитет	предци	инклузивност	лезбејка
име/спор		вклучување	квир
народ			трансроден
религија	патриот	малцинство	дискриминација
христијанство	лојалност	мултиетнички	маргинализација
ислам	морал	мултикултурализам	угнетување
црква	дисциплина	етнички	репресија
муслиман	принцип	домородец	потиснување
бог	доверливост	разновидност	малтретирање
исус	враќање	инвалид	нетрпеливост
алах		пол	
предавство	војник	авторитарност	корупција
вероломство	милитаризам	автократија	кршење
незаконит	сепаратист	диктатор	геноцид
срам	антинационален	фашизам	суровост
зло	антипатриотски	расист	притвор
негативен	против државата		
болест	против татковината	разоружување	прифаќање
монарх	перверзник	демититаризација	почитување
полиција	порнографија	човечност	доброволен
јубилеј	неприличен	невиност	меѓуверски
минаре	сесилен		

Source: The dictionary is based on Maerz and Schneider (2020) and Wagner et al. (2025), and expanded with morphological variations for Macedonian language

Note: Root terms only. Full dictionary includes all morphological variants (noun cases, verb conjugations, adjective declensions, definite/indefinite forms). Example: “срам” encompasses: срам, срамот, срамота, срамотата, срамен, срамна, срамно, срамни, срамните. Full illiberalism dictionary with the stem word variations: 531 word . Full liberalism dictionary with the stem word variations: 515 words.

Table C.2: Illiberal Speech Index: Dictionary Root Terms (English Translation)

Illiberalism		Liberalism	
stability	hero	democracy	freedom
destabilization	glory	rights	equality
chaos	honor	human rights	justice
anarchy	pride	elections	injustice
danger	invincible	voice	fair
unrest	majesty	transparency	unfair
terror	respect	pluralism	solidarity
subversive		liberalism	harmony
fatherland	family	EU integration	woman
territory	brother	negotiations	girl
heritage	mother	cooperation	LGBT
unity	father	media	gay
identity	ancestors	inclusiveness	lesbian
name / dispute		inclusion	queer
people			transgender
religion	patriot	minority	discrimination
Christianity	loyalty	multiethnic	marginalization
Islam	morality	multiculturalism	oppression
church	discipline	ethnic	repression
Muslim	principle	indigenous	suppression
God	reliability	diversity	harassment
Jesus	return	disabled	intolerance
Allah		gender	
betrayal	soldier	authoritarianism	corruption
treachery	militarism	autocracy	violation
illegal	separatist	dictator	genocide
shame	anti-national	fascism	cruelty
evil	anti-patriotic	racist	detention
negative	against the state		
disease	against the fatherland		
monarch	pervert	disarmament	acceptance
police	pornography	demilitarization	respect (recognition)
jubilee	indecent	humanity	voluntary
minaret	sedentary	innocence	interfaith

Source: The dictionary is based on Maerz and Schneider (2020) and Wagner et al. (2025)

C.2 ISI Dictionary Validation

Table C.3 presents the results of the ISI validation using V-Dem’s Liberal democracy index (LDI). The positive correlation R^2 of 0.589 indicates that increase in illiberal rhetoric (our standardized illiberal z scores indicate higher values for the more illiberal it is) is significant at 0.1 (p-value 0.057). The observed association supports the claim that shifts in the illiberal rhetoric move in tandem with regime-level trajectories. The changes are particularly relevant for the context of North Macedonia where changes in rhetorical emphasis precede and accompany institutional transformation.

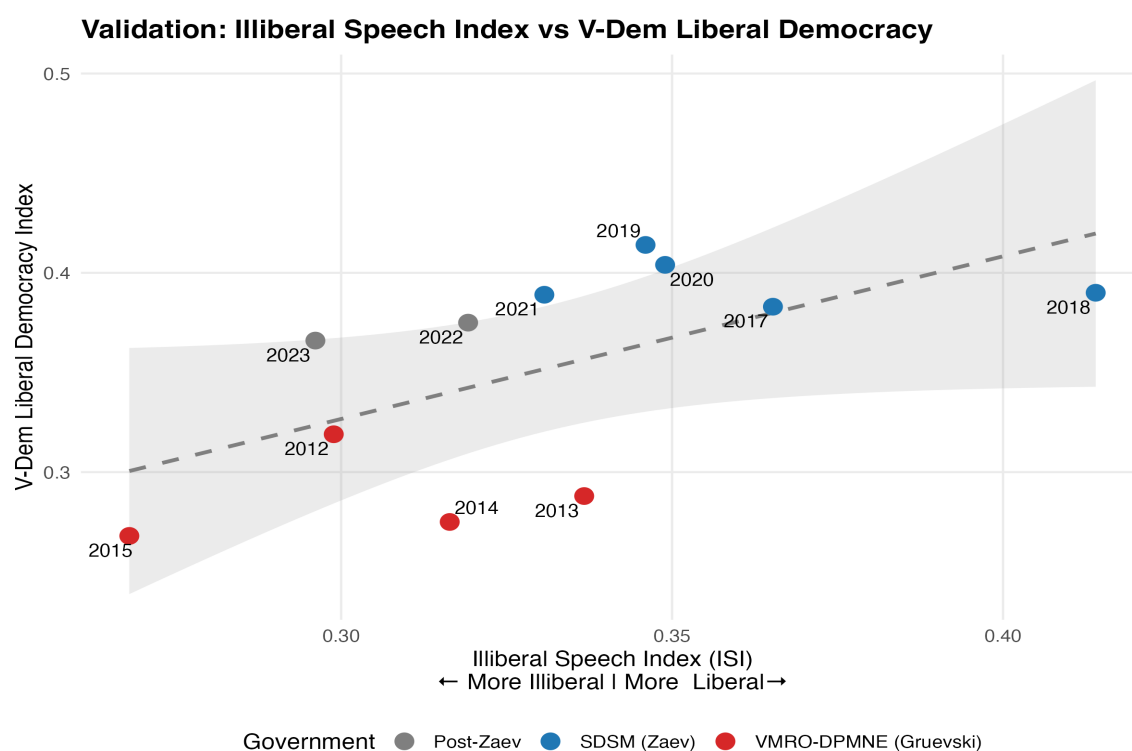
Table C.3: Construct Validation: ISI and V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index

Statistic	Value
Pearson correlation (r)	0.589
Test statistic (t)	2.186
p -value	0.057
n (years)	11

Source: Author’s calculations

Table C.1 provides the visualization of this validation process. Each dot represents aggregated scores at the year level, with red dots indicate Gruevski’s period and blue dots are the years after the regime change. We observe constantly higher illiberal rhetoric and lower LDI scores when Gruevski was Prime Minister. 2016 is intentionally omitted as there was technical Prime Minister and relatively few observations were collected.

Figure C.1: Illiberal Speech Index Validation - V-Dem's Liberal Component



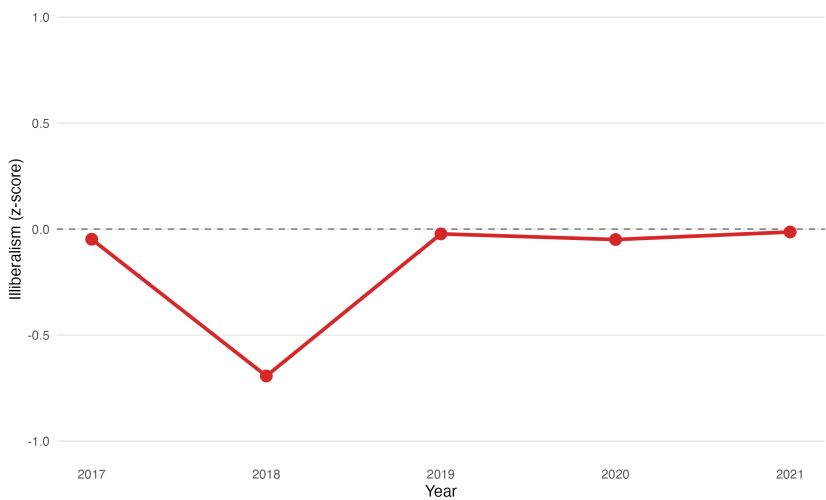
Source: Author's calculations based on collected speeches and statements and V-dem's liberal democracy index

C.3 Model Results - ISI and Word Embeddings

C.3.1 Model Results - Illiberal Discourse

Table C.2 illustrates Zaev’s temporal dynamics using the Illiberal Speech Index (ISI). Contrary to Gruevski’s dynamics 6.1 we observe negative z-scores indicating prevalence of liberal speeches.

Figure C.2: Zoran Zaev: Temporal Development of Illiberal Discourse



Source: Author’s calculations based on collected speeches and statements

C.3.2 Model Results - Word Embeddings

Table C.4 further contextualizes the illiberal discourse by mapping the semantic relationship using key word embeddings trained on the Prime Ministerial speeches. The sharp semantic separation between peace and crisis, stability and chaos indicate a sharp binary separation, while context such as democracy and stability or corruption and justice share weak distance in the analysis. The patterns are consistent with the transitional rhetoric environment in which liberal commitments coexist with illiberal rhetoric.

Table C.4: Semantic Relationships Between Key Political Concepts in Macedonian Discourse

Term 1 (English)	Term 2 (English)	Cosine Sim.	Interpretation
<i>Panel A: Antonymous Pairs</i>			
мир (peace)	криза (crisis)	−0.049	Semantic opposition
стабилност (stability)	хаос (chaos)	0.015	Sharp binary
единство (unity)	поделба (division)	0.024	Sharp binary
правда (justice)	корупција (corruption)	0.093	weak distance
<i>Panel B: Governance Concepts</i>			
народ (people)	власт (power)	0.121	weak distance
слобода (freedom)	безбедност (security)	0.163	weak distance
демократија (democracy)	стабилност (stability)	0.205	Weak association
опозиција (opposition)	влада (government)	0.263	Shared political context
реформа (reform)	развој (development)	0.264	Conceptual proximity

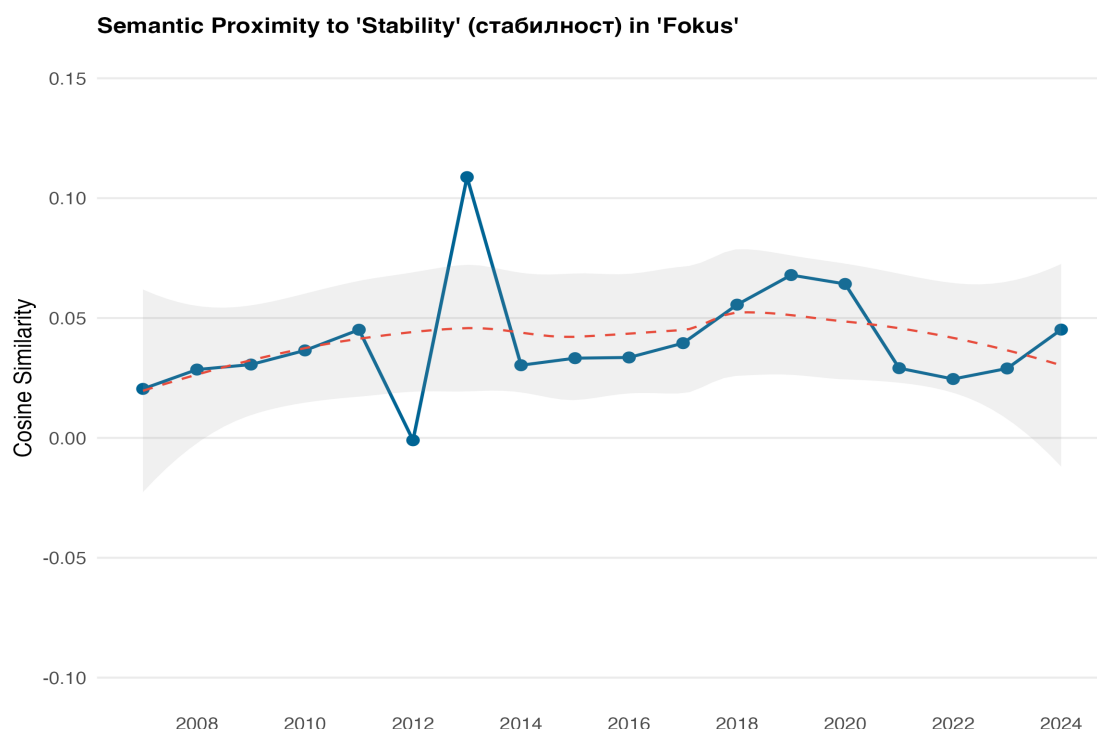
Source: Author’s calculations

Note: Cosine similarity ranges from −1 (semantic opposition) to +1 (semantic identity). Values computed from GloVe word embeddings trained on speeches and statements from Macedonian Prime Ministers. Negative values indicate vectors pointing in opposite directions in semantic space.

C.3.3 Model Results - Word Embeddings Validation (Concept of Stability)

As robustness check for the analysis of the PM speeches and statements, we have examined the temporal trends in Fokus, a major Macedonian weekly magazine. The fokus was to collect op-eds and related articles that deal with political and political-economic topics. The articles were collected from <https://fokus.mk/category/fokusova-arhiva/>, and contain in total 540 articles. We have applied the same preprocessing as with the collected speeches and statements. This included same stopwords, white space trimming, lowercase characters and removal of punctuations. Moreover, we have also used the same SpacyR language model ("mk_core_news_lg"), split the data into same number of batches (10), same minimum term count (5), and same threshold for removal of rare words (0.001). Moreover, our window for the term use was the same as with the speeches and statements analysis (skip_grams_window = 10), with 250 dimension and 250 iterations (Georgievski, Borijan and Todosovska, Marija, 2025). The core idea was to replicate the steps used for the main analysis and check whether the language model indeed captures the intended semantic relatedness (cosine similarity) between two words. The results reveal patterns that corroborate our findings. The positive values of Figure C.3 suggest that outside the executive rhetoric the text embedding sits in the same semantic neighborhood as stability (стабилност) is discussed in the contexts that align with its conventional meaning (political continuity, political predictability). This contrast strengthens the validity of the main analysis by demonstrating that the illiberal semantic property of "stability" is not a general property of the Macedonian language, but a political framing.

Figure C.3: Use of stability by non-political actors



Source: Author's calculations based on collected op-eds and articles from Fokus, 2007-2024

C.4 Model Results - Corruption Analysis

C.4.1 Descriptive Overview of Public Procurement Collected Data

Table C.5 shows the number of tender with one lots. This is essential for our data analysis. The keywords strategy enables the selection of procurement contracts that are related to Skopje 2014 project or related activities. Since the public procurement portal organizes the data at tender level, it means that no concrete information is available for the individual lots if one tender has multiple lots. Due to the extremely low share for the period 2008-2010 coupled with low quality data we remove these years completely. For the rest of the observational period we keep all one-lot observations that have a match with our keywords. Although this

strategy is not optimal, the higher data quality allows us to make stronger claims on the findings.

Table C.5: Number of unique one-lot tenders in the standardised NMK procurement dataset, 2008–2022

Year	Unique one-lot tenders	All collected tenders	Share of all (%)
2008	747	15 891	4.7
2009	1 038	25 592	4.1
2010	1 157	25 518	4.5
2011	3 573	12 891	27.7
2012	6 419	24 903	25.8
2013	10 989	31 262	35.2
2014	13 932	34 835	40.0
2015	11 381	37 204	30.6
2016	14 908	41 778	35.7
2017	11 066	43 804	25.3
2018	15 421	51 410	30.0
2019	14 894	49 776	29.9
2020	13 960	50 530	27.6
2021	14 520	48 541	29.9
2022	10 611	47 685	22.3

Source: Author's calculations from PP data

C.4.2 CRI - Definitions and Validation

The Corruption Risk Index (CRI) is a composite indicator applied to evaluate corruption risks in public procurement. We define corruption in public procurement as a set of practices that violate the principles of open competition, deliberately favoring one or few bidders to the detriment of others. Such practices reduce competition, often resulting in higher prices and potentially lower quality of goods or services. It harms the public budget and undermines trust in public institutions. The calculation of the index is based on Fazekas and Tóth (2016), and later extended with additional indicators ('red flags') Fazekas and Kocsis (2020), and uses single bidding, tenders where only one bid is submitted, as a proxy tool for corruption. CRI represents an average of all available 'red flags'. The assumption rests on the literature findings that in otherwise competitive markets, single bidding reflects barriers to competition and possible favoritism. The CRI

framework uses a regression-based approach to identify procurement practices that are statistically associated with single bidding and thus represent heightened corruption risk. These indicators are not intended to prove actual corruption but to highlight areas where the risk is significantly elevated, signaling potential foul play by authorities and providing actionable insights for policymakers and oversight bodies. The 5 indicators, that comprise the CRI, are validated by testing their statistical significance with single bidding, while controlling for relevant contract and market characteristics, such as the size of the contract, the type of procurement, the procurement market, year when it took place, and the region of the authority. Presence of significant and positive associations support the validity of these indicators (Fazekas et al., 2024, For more detail see also).

Table C.6 operationalizes the thresholds for each of the red flags that comprise the corruption risk index (CRI). These factors do not presuppose illegality, but they identify systematic deviations from competitive and transparent norms that are associated with corruption risk. Each individual red flag is defined and then validate using regression modeling.

Table C.6: Corruption Risk Indicators and Thresholds (North Macedonia)

Indicator	Definition	Low (0)	Medium (0.5)	High (1)
Decision period manipulation	Length of decision period between bid submission deadline and award decision	≥ 59 days	27–58 days	≤ 26 days
Length of advertisement period	Length of time allowed for bid submission	≥ 15 days	—	≤ 14 days
Procedure restrictiveness	Level of competition implied by procurement procedure type	Open procedure	Restricted / competitive dialogue	Negotiated without publication
Benford’s law	Distribution of prices based on Benford’s law	Acceptable / close conformity	—	Marginally acceptable / nonconformity
Buyer concentration	Concentration of awards by contracting authority	< 0.02	0.02–0.07	> 0.07
Single bidding	Number of bids submitted	≥ 2 bids	—	1 bid
Tax haven registration	Supplier registered in tax haven jurisdiction	No	—	Yes

Source: Author’s thresholds from PP data

C.4.3 Keywords for Contract Filtering

To identify contracts from the large database of contracts, we use a carefully designed keywords method that is connected to the title or description of the tender. Moreover, since certain operations related to the project, e.g., services extend beyond Gruevski’s period, we can compare contracts before and after the

regime change. We designate 2017 as the year of government turnover. Based on the keywords table C.7, we identify 1541 contracts during VMRO-DPMNE and Gruevski's period, and 1084 after. By anchoring the contract selection in projects-related terminology our strategy aims to minimize the selection of false positive for the network analysis

Table C.7: Key Macedonian Procurement Keywords Related to the Skopje 2014 Project

Macedonian phrase	keyword	/ English translation
скулптури		sculptures
уметнички слики		artistic paintings
масовна сцена		large-scale scene / mass scene
катна гаража		multi-storey parking garage
плафон		ceiling
музеј на ввро		VMRO Museum
драмски театар		Dramski Theatre
реконструкција		reconstruction
автопат а		motorway A
споменик		monument
фонтана		fountain
сплав		floating platform / raft
фасада		façade
градска плажа		urban beach
коњаник на коњ		equestrian statue
уставен суд		Constitutional Court
постамент		pedestal
фигура		figure
фигури		figures
бисти		busts
биста		bust
композиција		composition
барок стил		Baroque style
колонида		colonnade
плоштад македонија		Macedonia Square
порта македонија		Porta Macedonia (Triumphal Arch)
спомен обележја		memorials
македонска борба		Macedonian Struggle
три врби		Three Willows
изградба на објектот на		construction of the building of

Source: Author's keywords' selection

C.4.4 Model Results - Network Analysis

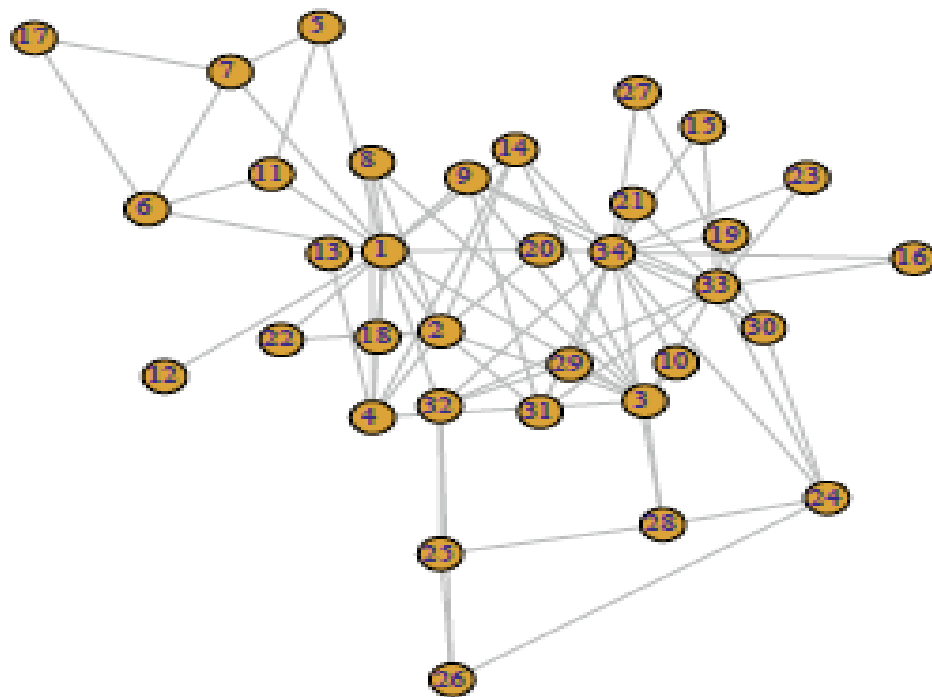
Several network measures provide insights for diagnostics for procurement analysis, although the interpretation requires adaptation. The networked approach used in the chapter is composed of nodes, edges and node attributes and edge attributes (Borgatti et al., 2022; Wachs & Kertész, 2019).

- **Nodes** represent the two distinct actor types, state institutions that are the contracting authorities, and private suppliers that offer their service, work or good. In our analysis as state institutions we consider the relevant Ministries, municipalities (including the City of Skopje) that were involved in planning or implementation of projects related to Skopje 2014.
- **Edges** connect the contracting authorities with private suppliers when a contract is awarded. The edges are weighted based on 2 attributes, the value of contracts and the number of awarded contracts. These attributes aim to capture the magnitude and intensity relationship with repeated dealings.
- **Node attributes** include the average CRI scores across all contracts that involve the specifically identified actor. It aims to identify systematically risky contracting authorities and suppliers.
- **Edge attributes** include the mean CRI score for the specific contracting authority-supplier relationship. It allows for identification of risky dyadic relationship.

The network representation allows for more complex and extensive explorations of relationships that are undetectable with simple descriptive investigation. Through parameters such as degree centrality, we can locate unusual contracting authorities who tend to award contracts to specific suppliers, increasing concentration and potential favoritism. Degree centrality represents the number of contracted distinct suppliers that the number of distinct buyers provided contracts to. Repeated contracting helps us differentiate one-off transactions from sustained clientelistic

relationships (Borgatti et al., 2022, Chapter 9). Community detection can identify clusters of closely connected actors. Lastly, the visualization also allows us to see if certain suppliers tend to operate beyond the realm of specific buyers, i.e., to what extent is the network interwoven. Figure D.4 illustrates an undirected network (Kolaczyk & Csárdi, 2014). The network approach provides a structural lens through which relationships of corrupt risky practices can be analytically identified and analyzed. Well defined networks using public procurement data require detailed data on unique buyer and bidder identification codes, information on market (codes), contract award information, and additional data to construct other valid indicators. By combining weighted edges with CRI-based nodes it aims to unravel and differentiate isolated transactions with durable and repeated contractual relationships.

Figure C.4: Speaker level ISI



From (Kolaczyk & Csárdi, 2014, p. 36)

D Appendix of Chapter 7: Serbia Case Study

D.1 Illiberal dictionary (in Serbian and English)

Table D.1 represents the dictionary of words used for identification of illiberal terms with the speeches and statements, and calculation of the illiberal speech index scores. The dictionary is based on Maerz and Schneider (2021) and Wagner et al. (2025). Additional validation tests of whether the dictionary measures and captures its intended purpose are available in Figure D.1, which validates the dictionary with V-Dem's liberal component, and D.2, which validates the dictionary with V-Dem's civil society component. The high negative correlation results and low p-value indicate that it captures the construct as intended. The words have been preprocessed to remove white space, numbers, punctuation, additional tabs, and lemmatized using the R's `udpipe` package that works with Serbian Cyrillic (Wijffels, 2024). The package helps us capture variations of the same words that are based on use of specific endings or cases. All terms were processed using the "`udpipe`" R package (Wijffels, 2024), which provides lemmatization for Serbian in Cyrillic and Latin. The process of lemmatization allows us to capture the morphological variations of terms, such as case endings, plural denotations or verb conjugations. The preprocessing pipeline also removed white space, punctuation, standardized upper-/lower-case letters and additional formatting. The word embeddings model has been trained using `text2vec` package. The number of dimensions (100) and iterations (50) follow scholarship practices that allows us to capture suitable semantic meanings and not overwhelm the machine learning process.

Table D.1: Liberalism vs. Illiberalism terms

Illiberalism		Liberalism	
против_наше_земље	славе	прихватање	укључивање
сепаратиста	херој	поштовање	инклузивност
против_нације	славно	ауторитарност	невин
војник	домовина	права	међуверски
против_домовине	наслеђе	аутократија	међурелигијски
стабилност	незаконит	потискивање	либералан
алах	част	избор	медји
суверзивни	непобедив	транспарентност	мултикултуралност
свемоћни	почаст	сарадња	преговори
територија	ислам	кршење	угњетавање
анархија	наслеђе	корупција	плурализам
терор	исус	добровољно	репресија
издаја	јубилеј	окрутност	инвалиди
издајник	милитаризам	дијалект	хармонија
хаос	лојалност	демититаризација	домородачки
вероломство	минарет	етничка	неправда
христ	величанство	притвор	нетрпељивост
издаја	материца	геј	правда
хришћанство	монарх	диктатор	лезбејка
јединственост	муслиман	пол	ЛГБТ
хришћани	морал	разоружавање	маргинализација
јединство	негативан	геноцид	мањине
црква	непристојан	дискриминација	мултиетнички
незаконит	патриота	девојке	куир
опасност	перверзник	разноликост	расиста
преци	полиција	разноврсност	сестра
дестабилизација	порнографија	једнакост	солидарност
браћа	понос	фер	трансродна
болест	принцип	фашизам	нефер
дисциплина	поносан	слободан	глас
зло	повратак	слобода	жена
породица	религија	малтретирање	жене
отац	поузданост	холистички	
предак	немири	људска_права	
бог	срамотно	човечност	

Source: The dictionary is based on Maerz and Schneider (2020) and Wagner et al. (2025), and expanded with morphological variations for Serbian language

Table D.3: Liberalism vs. Illiberalism Terms (English Translation)

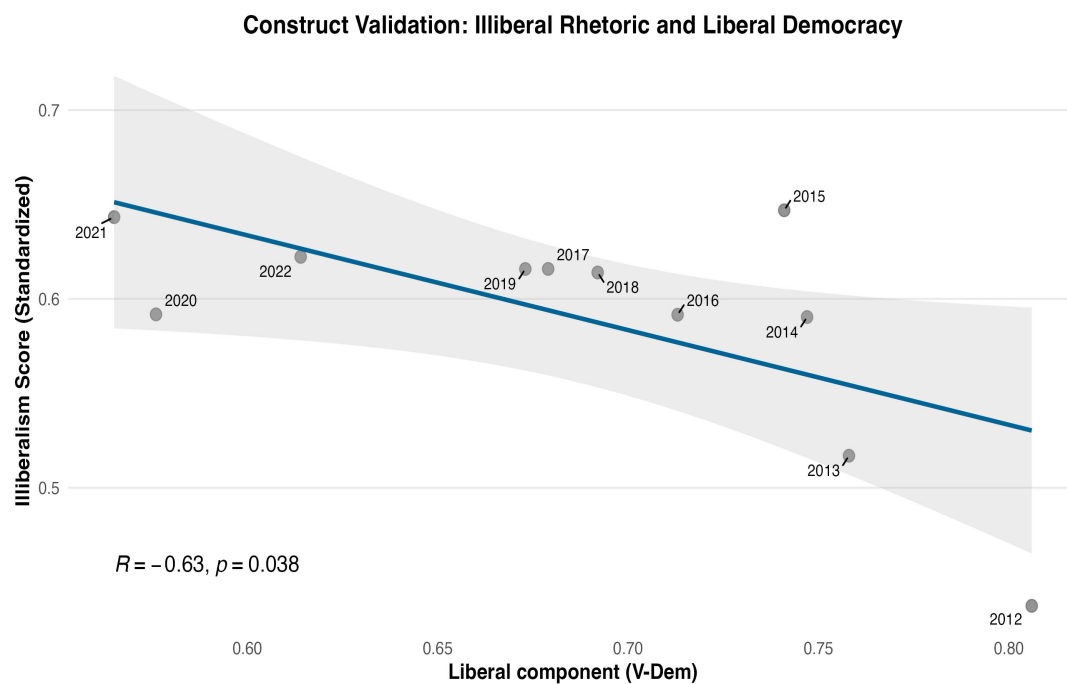
Illiberalism		Liberalism	
against_our_country	celebrations	acceptance	inclusion
separatist	hero	respect	inclusiveness
against_the_nation	glorious	authoritarianism	innocent
soldier	homeland	rights	interfaith
against_the_homeland	heritage	autocracy	interreligious
stability	illegal	suppression	liberal
Allah	honor	elections	media
subversive	invincible	transparency	multiculturalism
almighty	tribute	cooperation	negotiations
territory	Islam	violation	oppression
anarchy	heritage	corruption	pluralism
terror	Jesus	voluntary	repression
betrayal	jubilee	cruelty	disabled
traitor	militarism	dialect	harmony
chaos	loyalty	demilitarization	indigenous
treachery	minaret	ethnic	injustice
Christ	majesty	detention	intolerance
betrayal	womb	gay	justice
Christianity	monarch	dictator	lesbian
uniqueness	Muslim	gender	LGBT
Christians	morality	disarmament	marginalization
unity	negative	genocide	minorities
church	indecent	discrimination	multiethnic
illegal	patriot	girls	queer
danger	pervert	diversity	racist
ancestors	police	plurality	sister
destabilization	pornography	equality	solidarity
brothers	pride	fair	transgender
disease	principle	fascism	unfair
discipline	proud	free	voice
evil	return	freedom	woman
family	religion	harassment	women
father	reliability	holistic	
ancestor	unrest	human_rights	
God	shameful	humanity	

Source: The dictionary is based on Maerz and Schneider (2020) and Wagner et al. (2025)

D.2 ISI Dictionary Validation

Figure D.1 presents the construct validity of the constructed dictionary used for the Illiberal Speech Index (ISI) against V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) for the period 2012-2022. Each point represents an aggregated yearly score based on the speeches (y-axis) against the V-Dem's LDI yearly scores (x-axis). The strong negative correlation ($R^2 = -0.63$) and low p-value ($= 0.038$) confirm that the constructed dictionary captures the intended construct. The baseline period (2012) of both high LDI scores and low ISI scores indicate the relatively favorable starting point of the analysis in terms of democratic structure and used rhetoric. The cluster of 2014-2019 indicates the period of illiberal rhetoric intensification that continued into the 2020s.

Figure D.1: Illiberal Speech Index Validation - V-Dem's Liberal Component

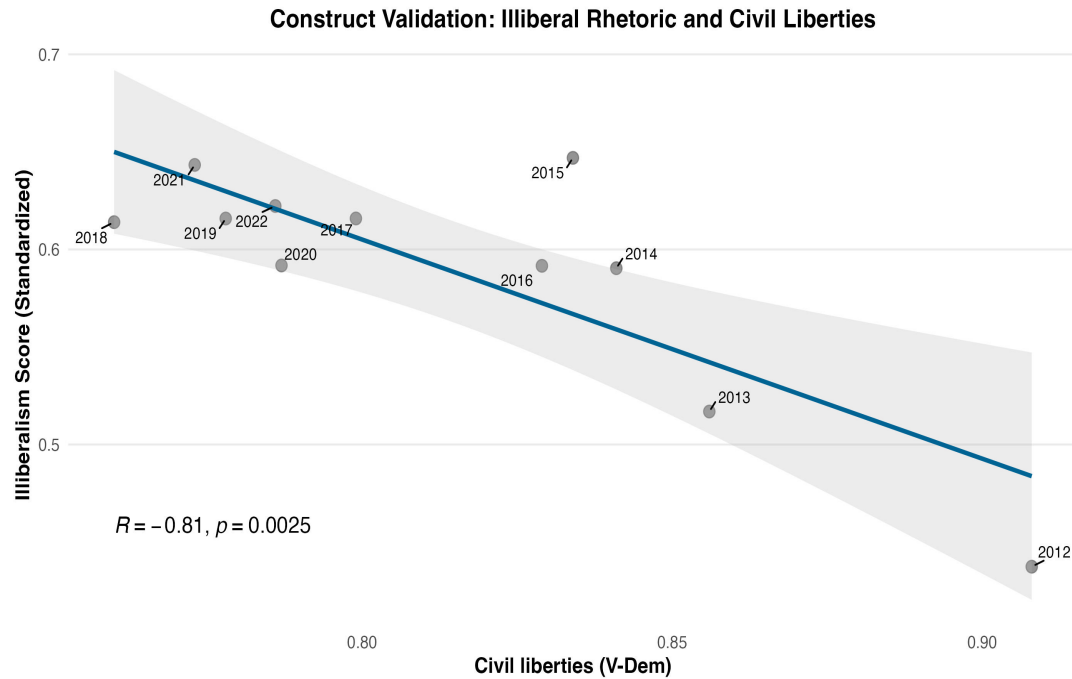


Source: Author's calculations based on collected speeches and statements

Figure D.2 also aims to validate the construct of Illiberal Speech Index (ISI), this time against V-Dem's Liberal civil liberties scores for the period 2012-2022. The

higher negative correlation ($R^2 = -0.63$) low p-value ($= 0.0025$) reinforces the findings that the dictionary captures the intended meaning. The results outperform similar analyses.

Figure D.2: Illiberal Speech Index Validation - V-Dem's Civil Liberties



Source: Author's calculations based on collected speeches and statements

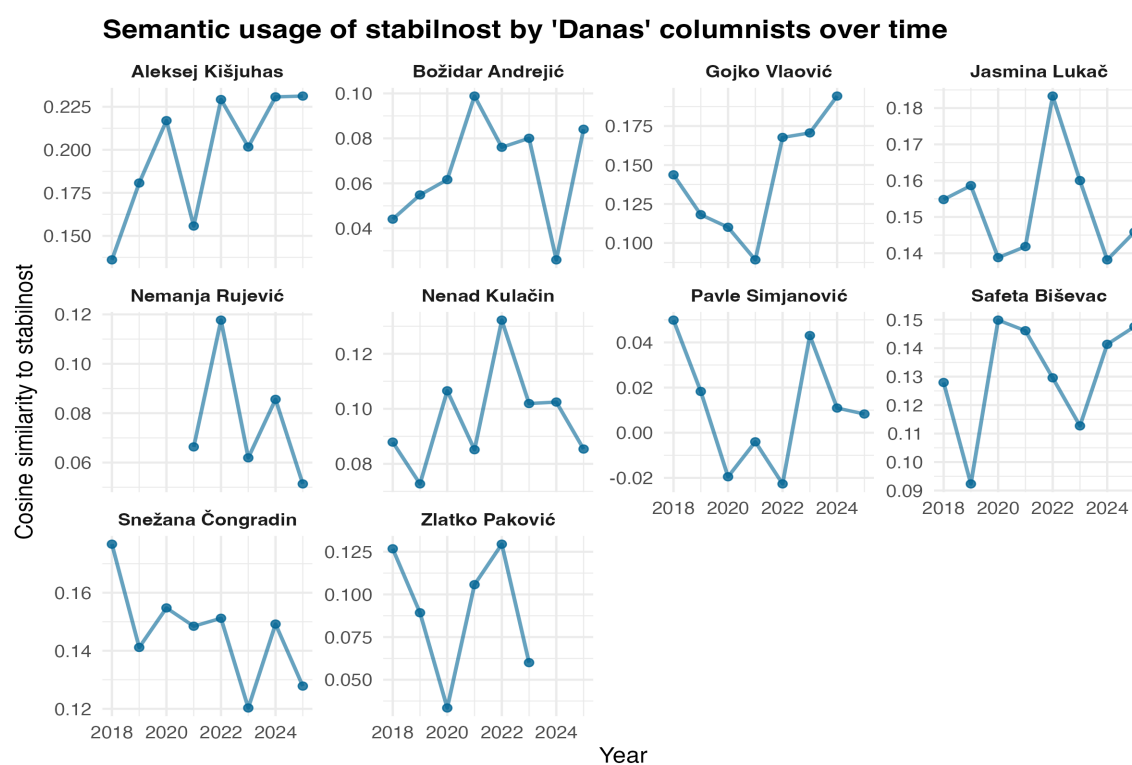
D.3 Model Results - ISI and Word Embeddings

D.3.1 Model Results - Word Embeddings Validation (Concept of Stability)

Figure D.3 presents the use of the key term stability by independent political commentary. We use 8156 collected commentary from "Danas" - <https://www.danas.rs/kolumna/> for the period 2018-2025. The data has been collected from the main page and processed in R. The processing steps included in this analysis mirror the ones applied for the main text word embeddings, including the use of

the R's "udpipe" package for lemmatization. Moreover, the other preprocessing steps included defining years and authors, removing additional white spaces, lower case characters, and stopwords. The word embeddings model used the "text2vec" package focusing on terms that have been mentioned at least 5 times. The analysis uses a context window of +/- 10 words, which falls within the framework of semantic analysis. The large number of tokens from the texts allowed us to create 250 dimensions, which aims to capture nuanced meanings. Additionally, we down-weight word co-occurrences of 10 to prevent such pairs from dominating the language model. We use a learning rate of 0.10 with 250 iterations, which counts the number of passes over the co-occurrence matrix. Danas represents one of Serbia's last remaining independent media outlets. Showing how the term stability operates within this critical space offers insights into how the broader discursive field within which stabilitocracy operates. This additional robustness analysis aims to show the different context for the use of the term. The positive cosine similarity of each of the top 10 most contributing authors during this period indicate that when the authors engage with the term stability it is within the semantic context of governance and institutional questions. The findings indicate contrasting views from the governing officials, i.e., despite the variation the general positive trends implies use of "stability" without the semantic distortions of the concept.

Figure D.3: Use of stability by non-political actors -



Source: Author's calculations based on collected op-eds and articles from "Danas", 2018-2025

D.4 Model Results - Corruption Analysis

D.4.1 Descriptive Overview of Public Procurement Data

Table D.5 presents the distribution of collected public procurement data per year. The data is collected from two portals the legacy portal (<http://portal.ujn.gov.rs>) covering tenders up to 2019 and the new and current portal version (<https://jnportal.ujn.gov.rs/>) used from 2020 onward.¹ The sharp discontinuity in 2020 and the lower counts in 2024 reflect a source transition.

Table D.5: Serbia: Collected public procurement data

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Contracts	10846	24168	30039	29113	30119	33491	34072	3322	27764	28892	27456	6789

Source: Author’s calculations

Table D.6 shows the number of contracts identified through our keywords analysis implemented to capture large-scale infrastructure, prestige, and symbolic projects (e.g., highways and corridors, airports, industrial zones, monuments, and Belgrade Waterfront). The keyword list was implemented in both Cyrillic and Latin to account for orthographic variation in Serbian political and administrative texts. The list is available below (see Table D.8). The resulting sample represents a narrower sample to focus on some of the key major projects that the government has conducted public tendering procedures.

Table D.6: Serbia: Keyword filtering (Infrastructure and Symbolic Projects)

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Keyword-selection	48	94	96	95	121	81	111	31	299	326	263	48

Source: Author’s calculations

¹I would like to extend my gratitude to the Government Transparency Institute for sharing the data

D.4.2 CRI - Definitions and Validation

The Corruption Risk Index (CRI) is a composite indicator applied to evaluate corruption risks in public procurement. We define corruption in public procurement as a set of practices that violate the principles of open competition, deliberately favoring one or few bidders to the detriment of others. Such practices reduce competition, often resulting in higher prices and potentially lower quality of goods or services. It harms the public budget and undermines trust in public institutions. The calculation of the index is based on Fazekas and Tóth (2016), and later extended with additional indicators ('red flags') Fazekas and Kocsis (2020), and uses single bidding, tenders where only one bid is submitted, as a proxy tool for corruption. CRI represents an average of all available 'red flags'. The assumption rests on the literature findings that in otherwise competitive markets, single bidding reflects barriers to competition and possible favoritism. The CRI framework uses a regression-based approach to identify procurement practices that are statistically associated with single bidding and thus represent heightened corruption risk. These indicators are not intended to prove actual corruption but to highlight areas where the risk is significantly elevated, signaling potential foul play by authorities and providing actionable insights for policymakers and oversight bodies. The 5 indicators, that comprise the CRI, are validated by testing their statistical significance with single bidding, while controlling for relevant contract and market characteristics, such as the size of the contract, the type of procurement, the procurement market, year when it took place, and the region of the authority. Presence of significant and positive associations support the validity of these indicators (Fazekas et al., 2024, For more detail see also).

Table D.7: Corruption Risk Indicators and Definitions

Indicator Name	Definition and Risk Thresholds
Single Bidder	Indicates whether only one bid was submitted for the contract. Low risk: More than one bid received. High risk: Only one bid received.
Advertisement Period Length	Number of days between the publication of the call for tenders and submission deadline. Low risk: 12+ days. High risk: 1–11 days or missing.
Decision Period Length	Number of days between submission deadline and contract award announcement. Low risk: 31+ days. Medium risk: 18–30 days or missing. High risk: 1–17 days.
Supplier Dependence	Share of a supplier's contract value from the same buyer in a given year. High values may indicate preferential treatment or personal ties.
Tax Haven	Flags contracts awarded to suppliers registered in tax havens. Based on Financial Secrecy Index by the Tax Justice Network.

Source: Author's thresholds from PP data

D.4.3 Keywords for Contract Filtering

Table D.8: Infrastructure and Symbolic Project Keywords (Serbia)

Cyrillic (Serbian)	Latin (Serbian)	English Translation
Аутопут	Autoput	Highway
ауто-пут	auto-put	Highway
путеви	putevi	Roads
Београд на води	Beograd na vodi	Belgrade Waterfront project
саобраћајница	saobraćajnica	Traffic artery / roadway
обилазница	obilaznica	Bypass / ring road
коридор	koridor	Transport corridor
аеродром	aerodrom	Airport
индустријска зона	industrijska zona	Industrial zone
државних симбола	državnih simbola	State symbols
споменик	spomenik	Monument
фонтана	fontana	Fountain
Трг Републике	Trg Republike	Republic Square
Косово и Метохију	Kosovo i Metohiju	Kosovo and Metohija

Source: Author’s keywords’ selection

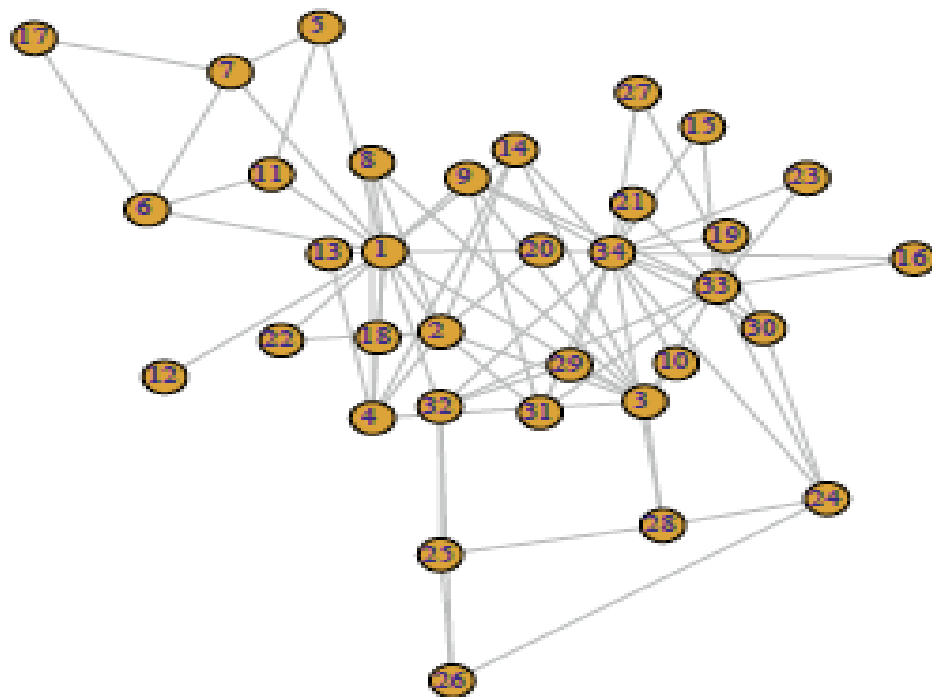
Note: Keywords are used to identify speeches and statements referring to large-scale infrastructure, prestige, and symbolic projects. Both Cyrillic and Latin spellings are included to capture orthographic variation in Serbian political discourse. English translations are provided for transparency and reader accessibility.

D.5 Model Results - Network Analysis

The network analysis is used to investigate the structural patterns related to corruption risks through the application of the CRI. The networks aims to capture the interactions of the purchasing authorities and suppliers and explore their relationship, such as awarding contracts, by exploring the extent to which these contracts tend to be risk. For that purpose, we create nodes, or vertices, and edges, or links. The nodes in the graph correspond to a unique entity. Since one entity can award or receive multiple contracts, these are aggregated at the node level. Edges

represent the contractual relationship between purchasing authorities and suppliers in a way that each edge connects a purchasing authority to a supplier and can reflect the number of awarded contracts. Moreover, for a better representation each node is awarded additional attributes, such as the total number of contracts between purchasing authority and supplier, the total value of these contracts and the average CRI score of these interactions. We construct a bipartite network, where one set of nodes represent purchasing authority and the other suppliers and the edges can only connect across sets. The network structure and its attributes provide insight into (i) systemic capture - purchasing authorities repeatedly awarding contracts with high CRI to the same suppliers, (ii) monopolization - suppliers with high degree of betweenness (supplier to many buyers) and as a result dependence on it, (iii) corruption hotspots - where the edges are particularly risky (Kolaczyk & Csárdi, 2014; Rawlings et al., 2023). Figure D.4 illustrates an undirected network (Kolaczyk & Csárdi, 2014)

Figure D.4: Speaker level ISI



From (Kolaczyk & Csárdi, 2014, p. 36)

To capture the references related to large scale infrastructure, symbolic and related project we have conducted data filtering using keywords. A list of keywords, in Serbian cyrillic and latin, and their English translation is provided in Table D.8. The approach cover coverage in orthographic variation that is inserted in the fields tender description and tender title

Table D.10: Nonparametric Comparisons - riskiness of repeated contracting

Variable	W Statistic	p-value	Sig.
Edge Centrality	35 880 361	1.17×10^{-5}	***
Contract Value	22 593 412	$<2 \times 10^{-16}$	***

Source: Author's calculations

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