



Research Article

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Deliberating in the Gray Zone: North Macedonia's Hybrid Regime and Deliberative Democracy Exercise

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Abstract

Deliberative polling has emerged as a promising method for promoting democratic reform and citizen engagement in various contexts, however, its potential and limitations in hybrid regimes, where democratic governance is challenged by a mix of democratic and authoritarian features, remain relatively unexplored. This paper focuses on the case of North Macedonia, as a country that has undergone significant political and societal transformation especially in the recent years. Despite efforts to promote democratic reforms, the country continues to face challenges in terms of ensuring democratic governance and citizen participation. In a hybrid regime, like North Macedonia's, political leaders might not be inclined to value citizens' input, and the media environment might not be free from influence, which limits access to varied and reliable sources of information. Civil society organizations may also encounter limitations on their operations, and institutional assistance may be insufficient. Additionally, the population's diversity could make it difficult to reach and build trust with citizens. In this context, deliberative polling represents an opportunity to engage citizens in meaningful political dialogue and institutional reform. This paper examines the potential of deliberative polling as a tool for promoting governance in North Macedonia and highlights the challenges and limitations faced in this process.

Keywords: deliberative poll, hybrid regime, authoritarian, democracy.

1. Introduction

Democracy around the world is in crisis. In general, the state of democracy worldwide indicates a lack of progress (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022). Looking at the global picture, 2022 fell short of expectations for democracy, as it was anticipated that the lifting of pandemic-related restrictions might result in an improvement in the overall score. Both the Freedom House Report 2022 and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (EIU) 2022 indicate that the state of democracy around the world is facing significant challenges and setbacks.

According to the Freedom House 2022 report (Freedom house report, 2022), global democracy has declined for the 16th consecutive year, with authoritarian regimes on the rise in many countries, exploiting the pandemic to crack down on civil society, human rights, and the rule of law. Similarly, the EIU Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021) shows a decline in global democracy for the first time in years, citing factors such as the erosion of civil liberties and the rise of populism. At the same time the EIU Democracy Index for 2022 suggests (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022) that the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges for democracy, with governments implementing emergency measures that have curtailed civil liberties and democratic norms. Both reports highlight the need for urgent action to strengthen democratic institutions and values, including increased transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in decision-making processes.

On the other side there are also more nuanced perspectives, which argue that that democracy is not necessarily in crisis, but rather is facing new challenges that require innovative solution (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). While the idea of democracy is under threat from forms of authoritarianism by which democratic forms are turned into non-democratic processes, an available tool which could address the problems often invoked but almost never implemented, is deliberative democracy (Fishkin, 2018).

This form of democracy aims to blend people's own deliberations with equal consideration of their resulting views. However, democratic reforms have faced a dilemma between two key values: political equality and deliberation. Many democratic institutions have given more power to the people, but citizens often lack knowledge or incentive to engage in political matters, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation by one-sided persuasion (Fishkin, 2018).

Deliberative polling is a method that seeks to involve citizens in democratic decision-making on issues where they lack information or have failed to confront trade-offs in public policy. It brings together a representative sample of citizens to learn about an issue, deliberate with one another, ask questions of experts, and express their opinions. Deliberative polling can improve public understanding and engagement in the policy-making process, enhancing the quality of democratic governance. However, it is crucial to carry out this method in a fair and transparent manner, with sufficient resources and support from civil society organizations (Siu, 2022). As a polling method, the Deliberative Poll seeks to account for the preferences and opinions of citizens both before and after they have had an opportunity to arrive at considered judgments based on information and exposure to the views of fellow citizens (European Policy Institute, 2018).

In most countries, the majority of citizens do not engage in-depth thinking about public policy issues, which can create a gap between the will of the people and the decisions made. While some may believe that the public is not capable of engaging in such discussions, it is believed that they are competent, but often feel that their voice does not matter (Fishkin, 2017).

Deliberative polling has the potential to enhance democratic decision-making by promoting a more informed and thoughtful public debate. It overcomes the limitations of traditional public consultation methods, which has been criticized for being

elitist, unresponsive, and unrepresentative (Fishkin et al., 2017) such as public hearings, by providing citizens with access to high-quality information and a structured opportunity for respectful and informed discussion. Although deliberative polling is not a panacea (OECD, n.d.) and may not be appropriate for all decisions, it offers a promising approach to enhancing public participation and deliberation, and promoting a more informed and considered public debate (Williamson, & Barrat, 2022). Experiences from other countries show that political elites have at times employed deliberative initiatives to co-opt civil society and validate their policies rather than genuinely participating in dialogue and decision-making. This emphasizes the need to guarantee that deliberative processes are truly transparent and inclusive, and that every participant has equal chances to contribute and influence the outcomes (Fiket et al., 2022). Deliberative polling has been used in various contexts worldwide, from local community consultations to national policy debates.

2. Importance of democratic reform in hybrid regimes

Hybrid regimes refer to political systems that combine democratic and authoritarian elements (Robinson & Milne, 2017). Although hybrid regimes exist in different parts of the world and are marked by a variety of cultural backgrounds, histories, and challenges, they face common barriers to achieving democracy (Obuch, 2014).

Hybrid regimes share a number of characteristics (Ekman, 2009). Firstly, hybrid regimes lack a cultural background of democratic values, owing to their lack of previous democratic experience. Secondly, such regimes often face significant economic difficulties due to historical debts and dependence on external aid while there is also insufficient and unequal economic growth to effectively improve the living standards of significant portions of the population who are in poverty or facing precarious economic circumstances (Larry, 2008). Lastly, hybrid regimes exhibit democratic deficits in the political sphere, such as a weak balance of power, an executive exceeding their authority, or the curtailment of public space. Despite having democratic institutions and processes like elections and civil liberties, these regimes still limit political participation and civil society (Ekman, 2009).

Other characteristics are the prevalence of populist politics, lack of accountable leadership, and non-transparent decision-making processes (Menocal et al., 2008). National legislatures and political parties, which are essential for the functioning of democracy, often lack trust and credibility. The public is frustrated with the shallow political participation beyond elections and weak governmental accountability, informal practices often take precedence due to disputes over the “rules of the game,” with formal institutions perceived as biased or unfair (Menocal et al., 2008). The rule of law is applied unevenly, and the equality of citizens before the law is uncertain, as corruption and selective justice practices undermine trust in formal institutions (Ibid.). Weak state capacity is coupled with growing demands for inclusion in decision-making processes and enhanced state accountability, potentially leading to instability. Furthermore, clientelist systems persist or even intensify when effective checks and balances and accountability to citizens do not replace the potential for au-

thoritarian top-down control. Additionally, the inability to manage ethnic, regional, and religious differences in a peaceful and inclusive manner is another factor contributing to hybrid regimes (Larry, 2008).

While there is not standardized strategy for consolidation of democracy, among the strategies for promoting democratic governance are strengthening civil society, improving electoral processes, and promoting transparency and accountability.

Civil society organizations have a crucial role to play in encouraging transparency, accountability, and citizen participation, especially in hybrid regimes, however their engagement in these regimes is challenging and risky (Obuch, 2014). NGOs and other organizations may face legal and bureaucratic obstacles to their work, including funding restrictions and registration requirements. There are various ways in which civil society can promote democratic governance, including advocating for policies that aim to improve democratic institutions and tackle corruption. These organizations can also monitor the implementation of policies and hold elected officials accountable for their actions. Additionally, civil society can educate citizens on their rights and the importance of democratic governance and facilitate dialogues between citizens and the government. In conclusion, civil society engagement is essential for enhancing democratic governance in hybrid regimes by addressing their challenges and promoting citizen involvement, resulting in sustainable democratic reform (Jayasuriya, & Rodan, 2007).

3. Case of North Macedonia

Given the complicated political context, history of political instability and ethnic tensions and ongoing challenges of democratic governance, North Macedonia represents an interesting case study for exploring the potential of deliberative polling in a hybrid regime.

Prior to the change of government in 2017, North Macedonia experienced a notable deterioration in democratic governance, marked by the emergence of authoritarian tendencies, state capture, and political institution privatization (European Commission, 2016). Issues such as party clientelism, corruption, and illiberalism were widespread. Additionally, political interference in the judiciary and selective justice dominated. Nonetheless, with the election of a new government in June 2017, there was a renewed sense of optimism for democratic reforms in the post-authoritarian era. Several critical areas of intervention were identified as priorities: firstly, the restoration and reinforcement of the country's essential democratic institutions; secondly, the resolution of persistent structural democratic deficiencies and thirdly, the improvement of political pluralism and social cohesion.

Today, one of the key challenges facing North Macedonia it is still the status as a "hybrid regime".

According to the latest EIU's global democracy index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022), North Macedonia is among three countries that were upgraded from "hybrid regimes" to "flawed democracies" in 2022. North Macedonia's score improves marginally, from 6.03 in 2021 to 6.10 in 2022, owing to improvements in its civil liberties score, while its functioning of government score declines.

According to Freedom house North Macedonia (Freedom house report, 2022) is rated partly free in freedom in the world in 2022. The report indicates that corruption continues to be a significant issue, and corrupt government officials, such as parliamentarians and judges, have largely gone unpunished. Private media outlets are frequently linked to political or business interests, resulting in a heavily politicized media landscape.

In the varieties of democracy, North Macedonia is classified as an “electoral democracy” with an overall score of 0.55/1 and a global rank of 82/179 countries (V-Dem Institute, 2023). The reports states that North Macedonia is among four countries that democracy broke down as a result of autocratization but got re-instated. As regards the judicial constraints on the executive the score is 0.45/1 which represents decline in comparison to the score post-change of government in 2017. The same is for mobilization for democracy score which is 2/4 in comparison to post-2017 period when it was around 3.5/4. The data indicate that North Macedonia still has a long way to go in terms of strengthening its democratic institutions and practices.

The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) states that the country’s political transformation index score is 7.60 which means defective democracy and governance index score is 6.30 out of 10, which is considered a moderate level of democracy (BTI, 2022). The report notes that while there has been partial progress toward its goals to curtail state capture and strengthen democracy, the fight against corruption remains one of the biggest issues. The report also highlights the need for further efforts to strengthen democratic institutions and ensure a level playing field for all political actors.

In the World Press Freedom Index (2022) North Macedonia was ranked as the 58/180 country in the world for press freedom in this index, with a score of 68.44 (out of 100) climbing 33 positions comparing to 2021. According to the report overall environment remains favorable to press freedom and allows for critical reporting, although the transparency of the institutions is rather poor. Due to strong political polarization, the media can be subjected to pressure by the authorities, politicians, and businessmen.

Overall, these indexes suggest that North Macedonia still faces challenges related to democratic governance, civil liberties, and media freedom, despite some slight improvements in certain areas over the past year. National governance in North Macedonia is deemed democratic, but it still has notable deficiencies. Political parties and leaders wield a great deal of influence over the democratically elected legislative body. Furthermore, the population is highly polarized along both political and ethnic lines (Transit, 2022).

With the preliminary opening of accession negotiation with the EU in July 2022, the restoration of democratic standards and practices towards building a more inclusive society regains prominence. While there has been progress made in governance, particularly in terms of institutional reforms, upholding fundamental rights and freedoms and participating in regional initiatives, there remains an issue with corruption that undermines citizens’ confidence in institutions and leads to poor performance in key governance indicators such as political stability, rule of law, and accountability (United Nations, 2021). Furthermore, despite the government’s efforts to implement the laws, there is a pervasive feeling that public consultation is only done in a per-

functory manner. According to Balkan Barometer (2022) there is slight improvement of citizens participation in decision making process. However, it is stated that only 7% have claimed to have participated in public consultations and most often through protesting or expressing views in social networks. In North Macedonia, those that have not participated (57%) have stated sentiments such as powerless, distrustful or careless as reasons (Transit, 2022).

Some of the specific challenges facing North Macedonia's democratic governance include:

- The political climate in North Macedonia is deeply divided, with pronounced rifts between the ruling party and the opposition. Political parties frequently prioritize their own agendas over the public welfare, contributing to a polarized political landscape. This has resulted in a scarcity of collaboration and negotiation, making it arduous to enact reforms and implement policies. The lack of agreement and cooperation on significant policy matters has impeded the country's ability to tackle pressing social and economic issues. The obstacles and tardiness in commencing EU accession talks have led to a decline in the general support for EU integration and intensified political polarization within society (United Nations, 2021). Further discussions on the electoral model and constitutional changes required to initiate the first stage of EU negotiations may exacerbate political polarization, degrade public discourse (United Nations, 2021) and potentially lead to a backlash in the democratic process and result in growth of political extremism (BTI, 2022).
- North Macedonia is a multiethnic country, and tensions between different ethnic groups have at times flared up, posing a challenge to democratic governance. Ethnic identification is strong and serves as a tool for political mobilization (BTI, 2022). Among recent controversies are the debate around the inclusion of ethnic self-identification on official ID cards, increased ethnic demands in the last stages of the negotiations for the new governing majority, the continuous use of ethnonationalist rhetoric by VMRO-DPMNE (BTI, 2022). Earlier in 2021 and 2022 the debate on the law on use of languages and the census pointed to the fragility of the relations between two largest communities in the country. Ensuring that all citizens feel represented and included in the political process is crucial to maintaining stability and promoting democracy. The French proposal for start of EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia has caused tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians during 2022 (Welle, 2022). The forthcoming discussion regarding constitutional amendments required for EU accession may potentially harm inter-ethnic relationships (United Nations, 2021).
- Corruption is a persistent key issue in North Macedonia (BTI, 2022), with concerns around the independence of the judiciary, lack of transparency in government decision-making, and links between political and economic elites. This undermines democratic governance by eroding public trust in institutions and promoting impunity. Although there has been some advancement in tackling corruption, the country still has a long way to go. Corruption is prevalent across all levels and sectors of the state, and the country's anti-corruption policy has significant

deficiencies. Notably, high-profile corruption scandals frequently occur, and the key institutions tasked with implementing anti-corruption measures often lack efficacy (Transit, 2022). SELDI's Corruption Monitoring System suggests that nations that had the prospect of joining the EU ahead of them had made significant progress in tackling corruption, however this correlation does not hold true for North Macedonia (SELDI, 2022). Even more, this mechanism shows that there is increase in corruption from the previous monitoring cycle in 2019. Citizens in North Macedonia perceive corruption pressure to be even more likely now than it was in 2014-2016 (SELDI, 2022). The ongoing crisis may lead to a situation where it becomes challenging to deliver vital services at both the central and local levels, potentially intensifying the push for early elections (United Nations, 2021).

- The rule of law remains weak in North Macedonia, with some reports indicating that the judiciary is vulnerable to political influence while the political will for difficult judiciary reforms seems weak among the governing parties (BTI, 2022). The perception is prevalent that North Macedonia's judiciary is politicized, which is illustrated by the justice system's incapacity to tackle the rampant malpractice of senior officials that was exposed in the "Wiretapping Affair" (Transit, 2022). The handling of organized crime cases, extended trials, and punishments being carried out slowly all contribute to a decrease in public trust in the judiciary system (United Nations, 2021). The prevalent culture of impunity in the country erodes public confidence in institutions and the government's capacity to implement laws in an equitable and unbiased manner. As indicated by the Balkan Barometer 2021 survey, a significant majority of citizens (75%) believe that the judicial system is subject to political influence, which is the highest percentage among all Western Balkan nations. This reflects a 25% increase compared to the figures from 2020 (Transit, 2022).
- Despite progress made in the past few years, concerns about media independence and the potential for government intervention in the press still exist in North Macedonia. The country's media environment is divided along political and ethnic lines, creating obstacles for outlets to remain free from influence. Additionally, media professionals face difficult socio-economic conditions (Transit, 2022). The media is generally perceived as vulnerable to political interference and corruption. According to the Balkan Barometer 2021 survey, nearly half of the population (48%) entirely disagrees with the notion that the media is free from political influence (Transit, 2022).
- Despite the presence of many active civil society organizations in North Macedonia, there are concerns around the limited space and lack of dialogue for civil society. The CSOs are still not perceived as real partner by the state institutions (Trpovska & Velickovska, 2021). In 2021 there were still challenges with anti-CSO campaigns from select political parties. Negative discussions surrounding civil society activists also circulated on social media and closed chat groups. The area in which the biggest deterioration was noted for 2022, is the area of Government - CSO cooperation. A worrying development is the work of the Council for Cooperation between Government and CSOs with government's ignoring of its key

recommendations and conclusions, which is its basic competence as an advisory body to the Government. During 2022, cooperation with several ministries has deteriorated to a worrying extent, including absence of not only substantive but even pro-forma communication and dialogue with the civil society. This is especially worrying as, only until recently, this cooperation and consultation with civil society in North Macedonia was its most positive strength (BCDNS, 2023).

4. Deliberative polling and its potential to address some of the challenges faced by North Macedonia's hybrid regime

The European Policy Institute (EPI), Skopje based think tank, pioneered a fresh approach to public consultations in North Macedonia that allows authorities to listen to citizens' direct opinions, thoughts, and positions on democratic and reform processes (EPI, 2018). The European Policy Institute (EPI) has conducted three deliberative polls in North Macedonia in 2017, 2019 and 2022 focused on issues related to the democratic and economic reforms, democratic institutions and equality for all and electoral reforms.

The outcomes of the deliberative polls in North Macedonia conducted by the European Policy Institute (EPI) indicate that deliberative polling has the potential to serve as a valuable instrument in advancing democratic reform in hybrid regimes. In these kind of regimes, open dialogues and inclusive participation of all stakeholders are often absent, which leads to authorities ignoring citizens' perspectives. As the national reform agenda has gained significant public attention, authorities have shown an increased willingness to consider public input. This methodology could be particularly advantageous in formulating policies and measures that aim to address citizens' needs and concerns in a sustainable manner.

The first deliberative poll conducted by European Policy Institute (EPI) was in 2017 and it tackled issues related to democratic and economic reforms. The results of the first deliberative poll show impact of the national EU debate on citizens' attitudes, with a significant proportion of participants expressing the importance of EU membership, particularly in relation to democratic and economic reforms. According to the results only a small fraction of the participants believed that North Macedonia meets the democratic criteria for EU membership, with a majority calling for urgent reforms in areas such as rule of law, judiciary, public administration, and media. There were also positive expectations regarding economic reforms and joining the EU economic area. The question of the country's name (at that time still not changed) remained a contentious issue that continued to affect the perceptions of EU integration. Nevertheless, a significant percentage of citizens would accept a constitutional name change as long as the name "Macedonians" and the Macedonian language are guaranteed. Inclusion of citizens in the EU integration debates has a significant impact on their critical perception of the process, leading to increased support for the country's EU membership (European Policy Institute, 2018).

The second deliberative poll was conducted in 2019 and it tackled issues related to democratic institutions and equality of citizens towards strengthening social cohesion of the country. The final comparative results from the analysis of attitude chang-

es before and after the debate of the second deliberative poll showed a significant improvement in participants' knowledge of the EU's minimum standards, highlighting the impact of information and the debate's format. The debate led to a substantial increase in the number of participants who believed that denying medical assistance based on sexual orientation (16%), refusing services based on ethnicity (6%), and denying employment based on ethnicity (7%) would be considered illegal under the EU's minimum standards (European Policy Institute, 2018).

The third deliberative poll in 2022 was dedicated to electoral reforms with focus on electoral districts and out-of-country voting and candidate lists for members of Parliament and voter registration. The key findings of the third deliberative poll and changes in attitudes towards electoral reforms discussed during the deliberative polling event show that the inclusion of the general public in electoral reform dialogues was viewed as highly important, with past electoral reforms being somewhat unsuccessful (European Policy Institute, 2019). Participants consistently supported one electoral district covering the entire country, and post-debate, they also favored establishing a minimum vote threshold for parties to win a parliamentary seat and introducing open lists. Participants believed that the electoral system should reduce party centralization and encourage MPs to be accountable to their electorate, strengthening the quality and accountability of the legislative branch. During the event, 74% of participants strongly agreed that the Deliberative Polling event was a great opportunity to learn about people who are different from them and their lives (EPI, 2022a). The participants showed high support for wider involvement of the general public in electoral reform dialogues, with statistically significant differences appearing only in support for one electoral unit covering the entire country with a minimum vote threshold. After the debate, participants expressed lower support for the idea that six electoral districts lead to more stable government coalitions and improve MP accountability (European Policy Institute, 2018). Significant differences were observed in responses regarding who should be involved in the electoral reform process, with political parties being the most supported both before and after the debate. The representation of women on candidate lists was also discussed, with 27.9% of participants being informed that the mandatory percentage of female representation on candidate lists is 40% (EPI, 2022b).

The implications of these results are the following:

- **Deliberative polling can increase citizen engagement:** The EPI deliberative polls in North Macedonia have shown that citizens are willing to engage in dialogue on policy issues, have a desire to be part of the decision-making process and that citizens who participate in these discussions tend to become more informed, engaged, and empowered. This can be particularly important in hybrid regimes where citizens may feel disengaged from the political process due to corruption, limited civil liberties, and a lack of trust in institutions.
- **Deliberative polling can provide decision-makers with a better understanding of citizens' preferences:** The EPI deliberative polls in North Macedonia have shown that citizens' preferences on policy issues can change after deliberation. Decision-makers can use this information to develop policies that are more reflective of citizens' preferences and priorities.

- Deliberative polling can promote social cohesion: The EPI deliberative polls in North Macedonia have been successful in bringing together citizens from different backgrounds and socio-economic groups. This can promote social cohesion and reduce polarization in hybrid regimes, where social divisions and political polarization can be barriers to democratic reform.
- Deliberative polling can have an impact on policy-making: The EPI deliberative polls in North Macedonia have had some impact on policy-making. The success of the initiatives was mainly attributing to its favorable impact on both the general public and participants' perceptions. For instance, more than 90% of participants regarded the plenary session and the event as valuable, with over 70% rating it as extremely valuable. Additionally, the deliberative poll had a wide reach, attracting significant attention from the media and political spheres, and it was attended by the country's highest elected officials. This demonstrates that deliberative polling can be a useful tool for promoting democratic reform by providing decision-makers with valuable input from citizens.

Overall, the EPI deliberative polls in North Macedonia have shown that deliberative democracy can be a useful tool for democratic reform in the country's hybrid regime context, as it allows citizens to engage in informed and respectful dialogue, and provides decision-makers with a better understanding of citizens' preferences and priorities. However, more research is needed to explore the long-term impact of deliberative democracy on North Macedonia's democratic governance.

5. Conclusion

In hybrid regimes, several contextual and institutional factors can affect the success of deliberative polling. These include political will, media freedom, civil society engagement, institutional support, and public trust. Incorporating deliberative initiatives is relatively easier in countries with well-established and well-resourced democracies. However, it can be more challenging in emerging or weak democratic systems where there is a lack of a strong culture of civil participation. Therefore, careful attention should be paid to these factors (Williamson & Barrat, 2022). In brief, deliberative democracy has the potential to enhance democracy, but it also poses challenges that necessitate a shift in both process and culture.

While deliberative polling has shown promise in North Macedonia, there are certain factors that can affect its success. One of the main challenges is the hybrid nature of the country's political system, that can create a hostile environment for civic engagement and political dialogue, and limit the impact of deliberative polling. Other challenges include limited resources for civil society organizations, the influence of vested interests on public policy, and the lack of trust in political institutions. Despite these challenges, deliberative polling can still be a valuable tool for promoting democratic governance, provided that these factors are taken into account.

Overall, deliberative polling offers a promising approach to strengthening civil society and democratic institutions in hybrid regimes, and should be considered as part of a broader strategy for promoting democratic reform and good governance.

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