
THE IMPACT OF THE PRESIPA AGREEMENT ON ANTI-CORRUPTION POLICIES AND INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract: The Prespa Agreement, signed in 2018 between North Macedonia and Greece, represented a major geopolitical breakthrough that significantly accelerated North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Beyond resolving a longstanding bilateral dispute, the Agreement created favorable conditions for implementing comprehensive governance reforms aligned with the European Union's political accession criteria. Among the most important reform priorities has been strengthening anti-corruption policies, improving institutional accountability, and reinforcing the independence of democratic institutions.

This paper examines the impact of the Prespa Agreement on anti-corruption governance in North Macedonia during the period 2018–2026. It explores whether the intensified European integration process has contributed to improving institutional capacities for preventing and combating corruption, enhancing transparency, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and promoting the rule of law. Particular attention is devoted to the functioning and independence of key oversight institutions, including anti-corruption bodies, judicial institutions, and public administration.

The research employs a qualitative methodology based on document analysis, comparative policy analysis, and the examination of reports published by the European Commission, Transparency International, GRECO, SIGMA/OECD, the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, and other international organizations. These sources provide measurable indicators for evaluating institutional reforms and governance performance.

The findings indicate that although North Macedonia has adopted important legislative and institutional reforms following the Prespa Agreement, their practical implementation remains uneven. Political polarization, limited institutional capacity, inconsistent enforcement of anti-corruption legislation, and concerns regarding judicial independence continue to undermine reform effectiveness. Nevertheless, EU conditionality has served as an important driver for promoting transparency, accountability, and institutional modernization.

The paper concludes that the Prespa Agreement has indirectly contributed to strengthening anti-corruption governance by accelerating European integration and reform processes. However, achieving sustainable institutional accountability requires stronger political commitment, greater institutional independence, consistent implementation of anti-corruption policies, and enhanced public trust in democratic institutions.

Keywords: Prespa Agreement; Anti-Corruption; Institutional Accountability; Good Governance; European Union Integration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The quality of democratic governance is closely associated with the effectiveness of anti corruption policies and the accountability of public institutions. Countries pursuing membership in the European Union are expected to establish transparent governance systems founded upon the rule of law, judicial independence, democratic accountability, and effective public administration. For North Macedonia, these principles have become increasingly significant since the signing of the Prespa Agreement in June 2018, which resolved the decades-long dispute with Greece and removed one of the principal political obstacles to the country's Euro Atlantic integration. The agreement subsequently enabled North Macedonia to become a member of NATO in 2020 and facilitated the advancement of its European Union accession process.

Although the Prespa Agreement primarily addressed a bilateral political dispute, its broader implications extend beyond foreign policy. By revitalising North Macedonia's European integration agenda, the Agreement intensified reform requirements concerning democratic governance, judicial independence, public administration, and anti-corruption policies. The European Commission has consistently identified corruption as one of the principal structural challenges affecting democratic consolidation and public trust in North Macedonia. Consequently, compliance with Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) of the EU acquis has become increasingly important for measuring institutional performance and governance quality.

Anti-corruption governance represents more than the adoption of legal frameworks; it requires effective institutions capable of implementing legislation impartially, ensuring transparency, and maintaining public accountability. International organisations, including the European Commission, the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), Transparency International, OECD/SIGMA, and the World Bank, have

repeatedly emphasised that sustainable anti-corruption reforms depend upon institutional independence, professional public administration, effective judicial systems, and political commitment. While North Macedonia has adopted numerous legislative reforms following the Prespa Agreement, questions remain regarding the consistency and effectiveness of their implementation.

Existing academic literature frequently analyses the Prespa Agreement from the perspectives of international relations, diplomacy, constitutional change, and regional security. Comparatively fewer studies have examined its indirect influence on governance reforms, particularly concerning institutional accountability and anti corruption policies. This paper seeks to address that gap by investigating whether the political momentum generated by the Prespa Agreement has translated into measurable improvements in governance performance between 2018 and 2026.

The principal objective of this research is to examine the relationship between the Prespa Agreement, European Union conditionality, and the development of anti corruption policies in North Macedonia. Specifically, the study aims to evaluate institutional reforms affecting transparency, accountability, judicial independence, and public administration while identifying the principal obstacles limiting effective implementation.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- To what extent has the Prespa Agreement accelerated anti corruption reforms in North Macedonia?
- How has European Union conditionality influenced institutional accountability following the Agreement?
- What institutional challenges continue to hinder effective implementation of anti corruption policies?
- Which governance reforms are necessary to ensure sustainable institutional accountability during the EU accession process?

By analysing institutional developments between 2018 and 2026, this paper contributes to the broader literature on Europeanisation, democratic governance, and public sector reform in the Western Balkans. It argues that the Prespa Agreement should be understood not only as a diplomatic settlement but also as an indirect catalyst for governance transformation, whose long term effectiveness depends upon consistent implementation of reforms rather than legislative adoption alone.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design based on document analysis and comparative public policy analysis. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research examines institutional developments, governance reforms, and policy implementation rather than testing causal relationships through quantitative methods. The analysis focuses on identifying changes in anti-corruption policies and institutional accountability following the implementation of the Prespa Agreement.

The research relies primarily on secondary data obtained from official reports published by the European Commission, GRECO, OECD/SIGMA, Transparency International, the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, the World Bank, the Regional Cooperation Council, and the Open Government Partnership. These documents provide internationally recognised indicators regarding governance quality, judicial independence, transparency, public administration reform, and anti-corruption performance. Their comparative nature enables the assessment of institutional progress over time while reducing potential bias associated with single-source evaluations.

Document analysis was complemented by comparative policy analysis examining institutional developments before and after the Prespa Agreement. Particular attention was devoted to reforms concerning the independence of oversight institutions, implementation of anti corruption legislation, transparency in public administration, judicial effectiveness, and compliance with European Union political accession criteria. Comparative assessment allows the identification of both legislative progress and implementation gaps that continue to affect institutional performance.

The period analysed covers 2018-2026, corresponding to the implementation phase following the Prespa Agreement and the subsequent acceleration of North Macedonia's European integration process. This timeframe enables an assessment of whether political commitments undertaken after the Agreement have translated into sustainable institutional reforms and measurable improvements in governance.

Although the study relies extensively on authoritative international assessments, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, institutional reforms remain ongoing, and some policy outcomes may require additional time before their long term effectiveness can be fully evaluated. Second, the analysis is based primarily on qualitative institutional evidence rather than quantitative statistical modelling. Nevertheless, triangulating multiple international sources enhances the reliability and validity of the findings while providing a comprehensive understanding of anti corruption governance in North Macedonia.

3. RESULTS

The findings demonstrate that the Prespa Agreement has indirectly influenced anti corruption governance by accelerating North Macedonia's European integration process and increasing compliance with European Union

political accession criteria. Although the Agreement did not explicitly prescribe anti corruption reforms, it created favourable political conditions for strengthening democratic institutions, improving public administration, and reinforcing accountability mechanisms. These developments have largely been driven by EU conditionality, whereby progress in accession negotiations depends upon measurable improvements in the rule of law, judicial independence, and institutional integrity.

One of the most significant developments after 2018 has been the strengthening of the legislative framework governing corruption prevention and conflict of interest. Reforms have focused on harmonising national legislation with the EU *acquis*, increasing transparency in public procurement, strengthening whistleblower protection, and improving mechanisms for asset declaration and conflict-of-interest monitoring. The adoption of strategic documents, including the National Strategy for Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest (2021-2025), reflects a more systematic approach towards preventing corruption across public institutions. Nevertheless, international monitoring reports consistently indicate that legislative reforms have progressed more rapidly than their practical implementation.

Institutional accountability has also improved through the increased role of the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (SCPC). Since its institutional restructuring, the Commission has demonstrated greater operational independence and has expanded its oversight of asset declarations, public procurement procedures, conflict of interest cases, and political financing. Its public reporting has contributed to greater institutional transparency and increased public awareness regarding corruption risks. However, the effectiveness of the Commission continues to depend upon cooperation with prosecutorial authorities and the judiciary, where delays in judicial proceedings and inconsistent enforcement continue to undermine accountability.

Judicial reform represents another important area influenced by the European integration process. European Commission progress reports repeatedly acknowledge legislative efforts aimed at improving judicial independence, merit based appointments, and disciplinary procedures. However, concerns remain regarding political influence over judicial institutions, limited public confidence in the justice system, and inconsistent application of anti corruption legislation. These challenges reduce the deterrent effect of anti corruption measures and continue to affect perceptions of institutional impartiality.

Public administration reform has similarly advanced following the Prespa Agreement. Successive governments have adopted measures intended to improve professionalisation, digitalisation, merit based recruitment, and administrative transparency. Digital public services and increased access to governmental information have contributed to reducing opportunities for discretionary decision making and administrative corruption. Nevertheless, OECD/SIGMA assessments indicate that institutional capacity remains uneven across ministries and public agencies, while political appointments continue to affect administrative professionalism in certain sectors.

International governance indicators present a mixed picture regarding North Macedonia's progress. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index has shown only modest improvements during the post-Prespa period, suggesting that public perceptions of corruption remain relatively high despite legislative reforms. Similarly, the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators demonstrate gradual progress in government effectiveness and regulatory quality, while improvements in the control of corruption and rule of law remain comparatively limited. These findings indicate that institutional reforms require sustained implementation before measurable governance outcomes become fully evident.

The findings further reveal that political polarisation continues to represent one of the principal obstacles to effective anti corruption governance. Frequent political confrontations have delayed legislative initiatives, weakened institutional continuity, and reduced public confidence in democratic institutions. In several instances, anti corruption investigations involving politically exposed persons have generated allegations of selective justice, reinforcing perceptions that institutional independence remains vulnerable to political influence. Consequently, although formal institutional structures have improved considerably since 2018, their practical effectiveness remains dependent upon consistent political commitment and the preservation of institutional autonomy.

Overall, the results suggest that the Prespa Agreement has functioned as an indirect catalyst for governance reform rather than as a direct anti corruption instrument. The acceleration of European integration created stronger incentives for institutional modernisation, increased external monitoring, and greater alignment with European governance standards. Nevertheless, sustainable progress depends not only on adopting legislation but also on strengthening implementation capacity, judicial independence, administrative professionalism, and public trust in democratic institutions.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the Prespa Agreement has had an important indirect impact on anti corruption governance in North Macedonia by accelerating the country's European integration process and strengthening the political incentives for institutional reform. Although the Agreement primarily resolved the bilateral dispute between North Macedonia and Greece, its implementation opened a new phase of European integration in which

progress became increasingly dependent on fulfilling the European Union's political accession criteria, particularly those concerning the rule of law, judicial independence, democratic accountability, and good governance.

The analysis confirms that significant legislative reforms have been adopted since 2018, including improvements in the legal framework governing corruption prevention, conflict of interest, public administration, and institutional transparency. These reforms correspond with the recommendations consistently issued by the European Commission, GRECO, OECD/SIGMA, and Transparency International. Nevertheless, the evidence also demonstrates that legislative harmonisation has not always translated into effective institutional practice. The persistence of political polarisation, selective implementation of legislation, limited administrative capacity, and concerns regarding judicial independence continue to affect the overall effectiveness of anti corruption policies.

The increased institutional role of the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption represents one of the most important governance developments during the analysed period. Its enhanced investigative capacity, public reporting, and monitoring of conflict of interest cases have contributed to greater transparency and public accountability. However, the Commission's effectiveness ultimately depends on cooperation with prosecutorial authorities and an independent judiciary capable of enforcing anti-corruption legislation consistently and impartially.

These findings support broader theories of Europeanisation, which argue that European Union conditionality serves as a powerful catalyst for institutional reform in candidate countries. In North Macedonia, the prospect of EU membership has encouraged governments to adopt extensive legislative reforms and modernise public administration. However, the research also illustrates one of the principal limitations of conditionality: while external incentives can encourage institutional change, they cannot alone guarantee effective implementation or long term political commitment. Sustainable governance reform ultimately depends upon domestic institutional ownership, professional public administration, judicial independence, and public confidence in democratic institutions.

Overall, the results suggest that the Prespa Agreement should be understood not merely as a diplomatic settlement but as a strategic political milestone that created favourable conditions for governance reform. Its long term significance lies in its contribution to strengthening institutional accountability through the broader process of European integration rather than through direct anti corruption provisions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the impact of the Prespa Agreement on anti corruption policies and institutional accountability in North Macedonia between 2018 and 2026. Using qualitative document analysis and comparative policy analysis, the research evaluated whether the acceleration of the European integration process contributed to strengthening governance reforms, institutional transparency, and accountability mechanisms.

The findings indicate that the Prespa Agreement indirectly contributed to improving anti corruption governance by facilitating deeper engagement with the European Union accession process. Since 2018, North Macedonia has adopted important legislative reforms, strengthened oversight institutions, modernised elements of public administration, and increased alignment with European governance standards. These developments demonstrate the significant influence of EU conditionality on domestic institutional reform.

Despite these achievements, the research also identifies several structural challenges that continue to limit reform effectiveness. Political polarisation, inconsistent implementation of legislation, limited administrative capacity, insufficient judicial independence, and fluctuating public confidence remain significant obstacles to sustainable institutional accountability. Consequently, legislative reform alone cannot ensure effective anti corruption governance without consistent implementation and institutional independence.

Based on these findings, several policy recommendations emerge. First, institutional independence should be further strengthened through transparent appointment procedures and protection from political interference. Second, anti corruption legislation should be implemented consistently across all public institutions. Third, judicial reforms should continue to prioritise efficiency, professionalism, and impartiality. Finally, greater investment in public administration capacity, digital governance, transparency initiatives, and civic participation would contribute to increasing public trust and improving accountability.

In conclusion, the Prespa Agreement has proven to be more than a foreign policy achievement. It has functioned as an important catalyst for democratic governance reforms by reinforcing North Macedonia's commitment to European values and institutional modernisation. Nevertheless, the long term success of these reforms will ultimately depend on sustained political commitment, effective institutional implementation, and continued adherence to the principles of transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.

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