

Student Mobilisation against Corruption in N. Macedonia and Serbia: The Potential for Regional Transnational Anti-Corruption Networks

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Abstract

This article examines the potential for regional transnational anti-corruption networks through a comparison of the student protest movement in Serbia and the “Who is Next?” initiative in North Macedonia. Both mobilizations emerged after fatal tragedies associated with institutional corruption and developed within hybrid political regimes. Drawing on newspaper reports, online materials, and semi-structured interviews with activists and key informants, the study applies qualitative discourse analysis to investigate diffusion, domestication, internalization, and externalization. The findings reveal shared anti-corruption frames, systemic demands, and similar repertoires of contention, alongside limited acknowledgement of cross-border learning and no reported organized cooperation over protest tactics. Neither mobilization primarily directed its demands towards supranational actors. However, Serbian students undertook international awareness-raising actions, whereas externalization remained absent from the Macedonian initiative. Interviewees expressed interest in regional cooperation but identified political, linguistic, organizational, and resource constraints. The article argues that corruption-driven protests can generate conditions for transnational collective action, while shared grievances and tactical similarities alone do not establish durable regional networks.

Southeast Europe

Introduction

After the contentious 2010s, which mobilised the Balkans from Ljubljana to Athens, the student protests in Serbia have once again put the region in the spotlight regarding mass mobilisations pleading for restitution of the rule of law and liberal societal change. Stemming from the human tragedy in Novi Sad, the students were recognised as the beacon opposing a regime embedded in competitive authoritarianism. Several months later, Macedonian students took to the streets following the deadly fire at a nightclub in Kochani, which took away 63 lives, and exposed all the weaknesses of a corrosive system based on structured institutional corruption.

This paper initially looks at the literature on the transnationalisation of social movements and hybrid regimes, with an emphasis on the region of Southeast Europe, as well as the literature on mobilisation against corruption, emphasising the importance of three pivotal processes: diffusion, domestication and externalisation. The third section is dedicated to the operationalisation of these processes, through the cases of two distinct mobilisations: the “Who is Next?” initiative in N. Macedonia and the student movement in Serbia. Building on the findings from the analysis, the paper examines the potential for regional transnational collective action against corruption in the Balkans. In regard to the methodological approach, the data collected from newspaper articles and online resources are strengthened with a limited number of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with activists and key informants in both countries. The primary and secondary data are analysed by applying qualitative discourse analysis (QDA).

Transnational Collective Action in Hybrid Regimes

Transnational collective action is oftentimes associated with coordinated activities by individuals, groups, or organisations from at least two countries, who mobilise for a common issue or goal, going beyond national borders. It refers to cooperation and communication across borders to influence social, political or economic dynamics at the national or supranational level. Della Porta and Tarrow define transnational collective action as “coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions” (della Porta and Tarrow 2005, 2–3). This paper aims to analyse the potential for transnational collective action in two neighbouring countries, North Macedonia and Serbia, through two distinct waves of contention, the student movement in Serbia (2024–2025) and the “Who is Next?” initiative in N. Macedonia in 2025. The case selection follows the logic of two waves of contention triggered by tragedies caused by institutional corruption, and operating in similar scope conditions, primarily the regime type. Both Serbia and N. Macedonia are characterised as transitional or hybrid regimes, with patterns of competitive authoritarianism. Hybrid regimes are defined as political systems with existing democratic institutions in which incumbents who abuse the state gain a significant advantage over their opponents (Levitsky and Way 2010), i.e. regimes that combine meaningful elements of democracy and authoritarianism, preventing the classification of these systems neither as liberal democracies, nor dictatorships (Diamond 2002). The most recent Nations in Transit report from 2024 underlines that both countries are defined as transitional or hybrid regimes, with democracy scores of 3.79/7 (N. Macedonia) (Vangelov 2024) and 3.61 (Serbia) (Burazer 2024), respectively. One significant difference which needs to be noted is the durability of the government. While the ruling establishment in Serbia has been governing the country continuously since 2012, the Macedonian government has been in power since June 2024, just nine months before the tragedy that triggered the mobilisation. I hypothesise that similar scope conditions regarding regime type and corruption as the same trigger for protest increase possibilities for transnational collective actions in the Balkans.

The literature on hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans, where both N. Macedonia and Serbia belong, underlines that authoritarian tendencies in the region are largely driven by clientelism, cronyism, media control, and weaknesses of EU conditionality, resulting in “stabilitocracies” that maintain stability at the expense of profound democracy (Bieber 2018; Džankić, Keil, and Kmezić 2018). In N. Macedonia, hybrid regime characteristics most vividly emerged during the rule of the VMRO-DPMNE government (2006–2017), when state capture and media control largely undermined democratic competition. Daskalovski argues that

clientelism and political party polarisation have transformed N. Macedonia's fledgling democracy into a hybrid regime (Daskalovski 2017). Previous research also underlines how the "Colourful Revolution" and previous mobilisations contribute to the process of democratization from below in an effort to dismantle the hybrid regime, underlining the role of coalition building between social movements and political parties, aided by the mechanism of international intervention, in order to help restore democratic pluralism and rebuild democratic state institutions (Stefanovski 2021). Other authors have focused on the normative dimension, suggesting that the Macedonian case shows how in hybrid regimes, citizen engagement can facilitate the emergence of deliberative democratic spaces (Abazi Imeri 2023). Lastly, Džankić, Keil and Kmezić examine how EU conditionality became a driver for democratic changes following citizens' mobilisation for reform (Džankić, Keil, and Kmezić 2018). These works classify the Macedonian case as hybrid resilience followed by partial (incomplete) democratisation, showcasing the oscillating character of the hybrid regime, depending on the current strength and level of engagement of civil society, paired with the level of external incentives. However, the latest tragedy in the Pulse nightclub in Kochani, resulting in 63 victims, once again showed the plethora of systemic shortcomings driven by corruption, partizanship, impunity, and institutional capture¹. The case of Serbia has been characterised as gradual autocratization, which has been slowly consolidating since SNS's coming into power in 2012. Bieber defines Serbia as an archetype of competitive authoritarianism where formal democratic practices such as elections, coexist with the informal power accumulated by President Vučić and the SNS. He underlines the grip over media, judiciary and compromised electoral processes, which are at the heart of Serbia's hybrid regime (Bieber 2018). Following a similar line, Vuković describes Serbia as a dominant-party hybrid regime, where the ruling SNS has monopolized both political and economic resources, but has managed to create a smokescreen through electoral pluralism². This is mostly a result of stable clientelist networks and the instrumentalization of economic policy for political gain. From a geopolitical perspective, Vachudova explains how ethnopopulism and weakened EU leverage have contributed to democratic erosion (Vachudova 2020). These works underpin how the hybrid regime in Serbia is sustained through institutional abuse, media capture, but also international legitimization in light of "stabilitocracy".

Della Porta situates anti-corruption mobilisations within the crisis of neoliberal governance and democratic legitimacy. She underlines that corruption does not function solely as a moral grievance, but a symbolic combination of wider systemic injustices such as clientelism, cronyism, elite impunity, and democratic decline. Through empirical examples, her research points out that oftentimes anti-corruption protests emerge when economic discontent and democratic aspirations cross paths. Such movements usually seek deep moral and political renewal (della Porta 2017), which is also the case in the two protest waves examined in this paper. Furthermore, della Porta and Mattoni define anticorruption activism as a form of moral and cognitive mobilisation, where civil society actors and individuals connect personal experiences of injustice with collective claims for transparency and accountability. They emphasise that anti-corruption mobilisation depends on the interactions between political opportunity structures and organisational resources (della Porta and Mattoni 2021). Contentious actions against corruption are not a novelty, neither in Serbia, nor N.

¹ Examples provided further in the text refer to four other cases which are a direct result of corruption, partization, impunity, and institutional capture.

² Vuković, Ivan. 2014. Party outcomes in hybrid regimes in the Western Balkans and beyond. PhD thesis. Budapest: Central European University

Macedonia. In regard to Serbia, anti-corruption protests have taken different forms, from small civic campaigns against the Milošević regime in the early 2000s, to larger protests such as “1 out of 5 million”. These mobilisations linked corruption to media control, partization, and democratic decay. Furthermore, anti-corruption frames in Serbia cut across ideological divides, however, constrained by relatively weak opposition parties and state pressure over civil society (Gordy, Ledeneva, and Cvetičanin 2025). Protests which took place during the last decade in N. Macedonia also had corruption at the forefront. The “Citizens for Macedonia” and the “Colourful Revolution”, as well as more nationalist movements such as “Bojkotiram” and the “Protest against the French Proposal”, addressed corruption from different angles, and were characterised by a strong anti-governmental frame (Stefanovski 2025). Although the “Colourful Revolution” in 2016, a pivotal moment of bottom-up anti-corruption mobilisation, managed to delegitimise the government and subsequently participate in effective regime change, showcasing the potential for “democratisation from below” (della Porta 2014), the current state of affairs in N. Macedonia shows that not much has changed compared to a decade ago in regard to substantial democratisation of Macedonian society. Trust in state institutions remains low, clientelism and cronyism are flourishing, and rampant corruption continues to substantially undermine good governance. The ‘Who is Next?’ initiative acts as a perfect example for this argument.

Transnational collective action has been a rather understudied area within social movement studies. More than two decades ago, della Porta and Tarrow edited a volume on transnational protest and global activism, largely focusing on key mechanisms and processes of transnational mobilisation, focusing mostly on cases from the West (della Porta and Tarrow 2005). A decade later, Tilly and Tarrow revisited transnational contention in the West, expanded on cases from the Middle East and Africa, and delved deeper into the mechanisms and processes of transnationalisation, as well as the difficulties of transnational mobilisation. However, their work evades Southeast European cases (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 193–212). That being said, this work aims to fill in the void regarding transnational contention in Southeast Europe, using two distinct mobilisations in N. Macedonia and Serbia. Through a mechanism – processes approach applied by the aforementioned authors, this paper also emphasises peculiarities of mobilising in hybrid regimes, putting political opportunity structures in the forefront.

In order to assess the potential for transnationalisation, I start by looking at the three most important processes discussed in social movement studies related to transnational contention: diffusion, domestication, and externalisation (della Porta and Tarrow 2005, 3). Diffusion is the most common and oldest form of transnational contention, which does not necessarily involve cross-border connections, but it requires that challengers in one country or region adopt and/or adapt organisational forms, frames, or targets similar to those in other countries or regions. Tilly and Tarrow argue that diffusion in a transnational context is the process of domestic controversy spreading into the politics of other countries (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 199). While assessing the grievances, the claims-making processes and the repertoires of contention of the two mobilisations, one will undoubtedly notice many similarities. The dominant anti-corruption frame, shared symbolism expressed through similar repertoires, as well as similar targets. Social movements learn from each other, and in the case of the two studied mobilisations, the shared learning processes are evident. Protesters from the “Who is Next?” initiative in N. Macedonia learned from the ongoing student protests in Serbia, while previously students in Serbia learned from the “Colourful Revolution” and the protests which preceded it in neighbouring N. Macedonia. In a similar

manner, contentious activities in N. Macedonia a decade ago, borrowed largely from the Arab Spring, while protesters in the Middle East drew on examples from the Maidan protests in Ukraine. These examples also point to the direction of brokerage, a variant of diffusion where groups or individuals deliberately connect actors from different sites of contention (Tarrow and McAdam 2005). In addition to the exponential growth of internet penetration during the last couple of decades in the Western Balkans, which undoubtedly boosts diffusion and brokerage, while discussing the two studied cases, one must factor in the geographical, cultural and linguistic proximity of the countries, which further amplifies these two processes.

Domestication is closely linked to internalisation, which refers to conflicts with external origin that have played out on domestic territory (della Porta and Tarrow 2005, 4), or international controversies which manifest as domestic contention (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 199). The dominantly Western literature speaks about domestication and internalisation with regard to social movements targeting supranational organisations like the EU, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), or the World Trade Organization (WTO). I already mentioned previous work underlining the importance of EU conditionality as well as the weakened EU leverage that contributed to establishing stabilitocracies in the region. Therefore, one of the assumptions is that the EU, or EU policies and institutions, could appear as legitimate targets in the claims-making process, while EU member states, or EU institutions such as the European Commission, could be appealed to as potential allies of the contentious actors, based on previous cases in the region, where the mechanism of international intervention has contributed to the relative success of movements (Stefanovski 2021; Pollozhani and Bieber 2025; Stefanovski 2025).

Assessing the potential for transnationalization of anti-corruption mobilisations in Southeast Europe eventually brings the discussion to the process of externalisation, which has been framed as attempts by national and international NGOs to stimulate transnational alliances with nationally weak social movements (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Sikkink 2005). This strand of literature underlines that social movements and other actors with clearly defined interests turn to international institutions, with the goal of mobilising resources that can be later used on the national level (della Porta and Tarrow 2005, 5). The strategy of externalisation, as it has been referred to by Chabanet (Chabanet 2002), is oftentimes a characteristic of national/domestic groups engaged in mobilisation that target the EU, aiming to put pressure on domestic governments for material or symbolic resources (della Porta and Tarrow 2005, 5).

Taking into consideration the research design and the data collection tools, this paper faces several limitations: It is based on two distinct case studies from two countries in the Western Balkans, which potentially limits the findings to N. Macedonia and Serbia. Although other recent and past mobilisations are taken into consideration and factored into the analysis, the emphasis is on two particular mobilisations, which can sometimes result in a rather narrow and focused interpretation, neglecting certain endogenous and exogenous factors. Another limitation is the low number of interviews. Only two semi-structured in-depth interviews (one per country) were completed and used to strengthen and validate the data largely gathered from secondary sources. Several interviewees cancelled or postponed interviews for various reasons, mostly due to the mobilisations being active, and movement actors were faced with limited time and uncertain articulation of some processes and developments. However, the two interviewees are of great importance and relevance, as both are protest organizers in their respective countries, as well as key informants regarding contemporary

political developments in their societal environment. Lastly, having in mind that the mobilizations are still ongoing, it is difficult to assess movement outcomes and their relative success, so all findings and conclusions need to be considered through the lens of possible changes over time.

Analysis of the Processes of Diffusion, Domestication, and Externalization through Claims-Making and Repertoires of Contention

Looking at the claims-making processes in the two studied cases, it is easily noticeable that a strong anti-corruption master frame prevails. I begin by assessing the core demands, formulated by the groups through deliberation leading to practising direct democracy, through one person – one vote decision-making. The core demands by the Serbian students had been coined by December 2024, during the second month of protest. The students demanded the following: 1) Publication of the complete documentation regarding the reconstruction of the Novi Sad Railway Station; 2) Confirmation from the relevant authorities of the identity of all persons for whom there is reasonable suspicion of physically assaulting students and professors, including initiation of criminal proceedings against them. If these individuals hold public office, they should be dismissed; 3) Withdrawal of criminal charges against arrested and detained students during the protests, as well as suspension of currently initiated criminal proceedings; 4) A 20 % increase in funding of state universities (Student demands n.d.). By the end of 26 December 2024, none of the demands had been met by the Serbian authorities (N1 Belgrade 2025). Following the largest protest rally in Belgrade on 15 March 2025, when an unknown device was used to cause panic among the crowd and disable the protesters, the students requested that state authorities unveil what had actually happened (Grujić 2025). This was the fifth demand by the students. The last structured demand was set forth by the students in early May 2025, when they asked for the immediate dissolution of the National Assembly and early parliamentary elections (Petrušijević 2025). The last demand signaled the shift towards more system-wide demands, rather than the previously stated demands that were more incident-based. Transparency, accountability and anti-corruption resonate from all six structured demands. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that following the tragedy in Kochani, the students from the University of Belgrade reacted regarding the treatment of the injured persons transported to the medical centre in Belgrade to receive medical treatment. As Serbian president Vučić visited the hospitalised persons accompanied by politicians and journalists, the Belgrade students raised concerns about violations of medical privacy and disruption of intensive care procedures. However, these demands are not part of the core analysis, as they were not carried out on a national level. “Who is Next?” initiative published its demands on 22 March 2025, less than a week following the tragedy at the Pulse night club in Kochani, and on the eve of the 24 March protests. The following demands were formulated: Transparent publication of all documents related to the operation of the Pulse night club, from its opening until the tragedy, by the following institutions: State Market Inspectorate, Ministry of Economy, State Inspectorate for Construction and Urban Planning, Ministry of Interior, Municipality of Kochani, Directorate for Protection and Rescue, and the Public Revenue Office; Disciplinary, criminal and/or political responsibility for all institutions that are found to have failed in their work related to the “Pulse” case; Accountability for everyone involved in the burned modular hospital in Tetovo³; Accountability for everyone involved in the

³ On the evening of 8 September 2021, a fire broke out in the modular hospital for COVID-19 patients in Tetovo, N. Macedonia. The fire killed 14 people, 12 of whom were patients and two were relatives of the patients. (Radio Free Europe 2021).

“Oncology” case⁴; Accountability for everyone involved in the “Durmo Tours” case⁵; Accountability for everyone involved in the “Besa Trans” case⁶; The Chamber of Hospitality Industry should start working on improving the services and operating conditions of hospitality facilities, and not just on deregulation and financial assistance from the state (Who is Next? n.d.). During the 24 March protest, further demands were issued to the Macedonian authorities: The state should introduce a new digital service, E – Inspectorate, which will provide a weekly and monthly overview of conducted inspections by the State Market Inspectorate, the Directorate for Protection and Rescue, and the State Inspectorate for Construction and Urban Planning, paired with an additional service resembling the 112 single European emergency number, where citizens could initiate an inspection. Another demand was related to increasing the number of qualified inspectors in state institutions. Lastly, activists demanded education and an increase in public awareness: marking objects with information related to the number of inspections and evacuations in case of emergency, such as the number of exits, level of oxygen, air humidity, etc. (Georgiev 2025). These demands largely coincide with those of the student movement in Serbia. The Initiative’s framing is rooted in anti-corruption by linking it to justice and accountability of state institutions, similarly to how students in neighbouring Serbia have demanded transparency and accountability for over a year, since the tragedy at the Novi Sad railway station. Furthermore, the “Who is Next?” linked the Pulse night club tragedy to previous major accidents which have profoundly hurt and bruised Macedonian society during the last several years, with the sole goal to underline corruption, impunity, and systemic failure.

In regard to the process of diffusion, it is important to underline that it can be assessed both nationally (in-country diffusion) and transnationally (cross-border diffusion). In-country diffusion in Serbia is massive, having in mind that the student movement is the largest mobilisation in the post-Milošević era, possibly even surpassing the protests which brought down the former Serbian president in 2000. Available data shows that thousands of large and small collective actions have taken place in over 400 locations across Serbia (Palac gore 2025). During the period from the beginning of the protests in November 2024, until March 2025, the Archive of Public Gatherings has documented an approximate growth of 120 new contentious sites per month (Arhiv javnih skupova 2025), or an average growth of four new settlements daily (Mašina 2025). Just in March 2025, at least 1,697 protests took place in at least 378 settlements throughout the country (CRTA 2025). These figures point to a very high intensity of in-country diffusion, spreading contentious repertoires and claims throughout the entire country. Similar trends have been noticed in N. Macedonia during the protests of the “Who is Next?” initiative, taking into consideration the smaller scope of the contentious action. The first protests organised by the “Who is Next?” initiative after the tragedy in Kochani were organised almost immediately, just two days after the tragedy, as already on 18 March citizens took the squares of several cities around the country. The largest gathering was organized on the central square in Skopje, where several thousand citizens were present (A1 On 2025), as well as in Kochani, Bitola, Shtip, Strumica, Ohrid, Kriva Palanka, Gevgelija, Delchevo, and Valandovo (TV 21 2025; TV 24 2025). To these contentious sites, one must add the protests which occurred between January and March, both in Skopje and in Negotino,

⁴Doctors at the Skopje Oncology Clinic allegedly subjected their patients to palliative care in order to resell their medications illegally: these are the horrific allegations in two controversial trials underway in N. Macedonia. (Samardžiev 2025).

⁵ The Durmo Tours case pertains to the Laskarci bus crash of February 2019, where a Durmo Tours bus crashed, killing 16 people and injuring over 30 others. The case's central issue was negligence in safety regulations

⁶ The “Besa Trans case” refers to a fatal bus accident in Bulgaria in November 2021, where 45 Macedonian citizens died when the “Besa Trans” bus crashed and caught fire.

the birthplace of the murdered Frosina Kulakova. The number of protest events in a compressed time period shows the strong intensity of the in-country diffusion, very similar to the student movement in Serbia. In both cases, the activation of the brokerage mechanism is present, by producing new connections between previously unconnected sites (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 31), which ultimately led to strong in-country diffusion. Assessing cross-border diffusion is much more complex, especially in times of enhanced communication and cooperation, and vast internet penetration. When discussing the two investigated cases, one must highlight the temporal proximity of the two mobilisations, as well as the geographical closeness of the two countries, and the cultural and linguistic similarities of the protesters. Therefore, one can make a valid assumption that the “Who is Next?” initiative adopted and adapted claims and repertoires from the student movement in Serbia, as the students in Serbia “learned” from previous mobilisations in the region and beyond. The “bloody hands” visuals, symbolising the blood on the hands of decision-makers that fail to claim responsibility and accountability, and the “silent repertoires”, through which protesters paid homage to the victims of the tragedies by mourning in silence for sixteen minutes, are just some of the examples that point to transnational cross-border diffusion. A member of the “Who is Next?” initiative does not recognise cross-border diffusion from Serbia into N. Macedonia:

We are not drawing inspiration from the protests in Serbia at all, in the sense that... ‘Look, they are protesting, and now we should protest!’ Or, ‘Look, they did this, so now we should do it as well!’ However, we were motivated from the fact that just several tens of kilometers from us to the North, people are protesting against something so big and powerful, and that they are going through a lot... It was not inspiration, but probably motivation. We are also very motivated from other protests worldwide, like protests in France, and other protests that happen around the world. For me, all these protests were like a wind in the back. Students in Serbia are fighting in much worse conditions than us. In comparison to the protests in Serbia, our protests are much more peaceful. I sometimes admire them a lot.⁷

Although the interviewed activist does not clearly acknowledge the adoption or adaptation of some of the frames and contentious repertoires from neighbouring Serbia, she shows clear motivation and aspiration for the “Who is Next?” initiative to follow the path of the student protests in Serbia, and shares her admiration for the resilience that her Serbian peers show. This once again reaffirms the argument that movements learn from each other, albeit sometimes tacitly and unintentionally.

The process of domestication and internalisation is non-existent in both cases, primarily because of the nature of the protests, i.e. closely related to transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption, which are areas that largely fall under the competences of national governments. Therefore, although corruption is a global phenomenon and oftentimes translates across state borders and undermines transnational governance, the student movement in Serbia and the “Who is Next?” initiative in N. Macedonia did not engage in claims making towards supranational actors. This is also evident from the claims-making process and the analysis of the central demands put forward by both sets of contentious actors. Key informants in the two countries also testify in this vein. An interviewee from Serbia elaborated in-depth on these issues:

⁷ Interview 1, conducted by the author, 2025.

The majority of international actors are traditional allies of president Aleksandar Vučić. For years now, they have referred to him as ‘Dear Aleksandar’, as Ursula von der Leyen oftentimes calls him. This has been EU’s position for a long time...The European Commission constantly turns a blind eye, and keeps releasing meaningless diplomatic statements. In the last period, in our country we had Kaja Kallas, Ursula von der Leyen, Antonio Costa, Marta Kos and others as guests. None of them gave a clear statement of support for the students, nor a direct statement to condemn the actions of the regime, especially regarding the repression. We understand why there is no condemnation. Mainly because the aforementioned individuals negotiate Serbia’s accession to the EU with the regime. Our movement constantly deliberates around questions related to the EU, whether we need EU’s support, etc. However, Europe and the EU are clearly not the target of these protests. Definitely not the direct target of the students... This relationship with the EU is very delicate, and I believe that this euroscepticism that is rather dominant among the students, is largely caused by the fact that European officials continuously support president Vučić...Regarding other international institutions, they neither help us, nor plan on cutting any support to the state, primarily because we are talking about the ongoing implementation of really large projects, for example the lithium mining project, or the Belgrade Expo project. For these projects, Serbia asks for loans, and receives them[...].⁸

The Serbian interlocutor highlights several reasons for the lack of claims-making towards supranational actors. The first reason stems from the official positions of many international actors, primarily the EU and many of its representatives, that continue to prefer “stabilitocracies” over core democratic values. A practice that has oftentimes been noted in the past throughout the region (Bieber 2018; Džankić, Keil, and Kmezić 2018). This attitude also influences rising euroscepticism among the Serbian youth, which pushes students to reflect on their positions towards the EU, as well as to perceive it as a movement foe. The Serbian students are also largely hesitant towards international financial institutions that fuel the regime with additional resources and legitimise it as a trusted partner.

The Macedonian interlocutor was much briefer, but sent a very similar message:

Our claims were channelled towards the domestic institutions. There were none towards supranational actors. From all the demands I have read, none is related to the international community. All demands are addressed to the government and to other domestic institutions.⁹

The process of externalisation varies between the two cases under study, at least in a wider sense of understanding of the concept, as both mobilisations did not engage in any claims-making towards supranational actors. However, in the case of the Serbian student movement, there were a couple of repertoires of contention used to appeal to the international audience. A cycling journey of 1,400 kilometres from Novi Sad to Strasbourg, and a relay ultramarathon of almost 2,000 kilometres from Novi Sad to Brussels were used as “red flags” to alarm members of European institutions about the gravity of systemic governance failures, strong overt state repression, and widespread corruption in Serbia (Civil Rights Defenders 2025). A youth’s appeal for transparency and accountability through innovative forms of peaceful repertoires. An interviewee from Serbia also reflected on these repertoires, and distinguished between the processes of claims-making and awareness-raising:

⁸ Interview 2, conducted by the author, 2025.

⁹ Interview 1, conducted by the author, 2025.

The students do not ask for support from the EU, although they would appreciate it. This is why the biking tour from Novi Sad to Strasbourg was very important, in order to raise awareness. This was the way for students to actively participate and liaise with the international community... To the best of my knowledge, during the bike marathon and the ultramarathon, no demands were made towards the supranational actors. Because the students didn't want to ask for anything from the Council of Europe, the European Commission, or the European Court for Human Rights. What I know is that letters have been sent to these institutions, but the content of these letters has not been published so far. I believe that the intention of these letters was to inform the international community of what is happening in Serbia, and to underline that the students' requests have not been fulfilled. It is worth noting that all these awareness-raising actions occurred after the 15 March protests. International courts were also informed about the 'sound cannon' that was used, and the effects it caused on the streets. However, this was much more awareness-raising and information-sharing rather than claims-making. The idea is to send a message that something big is happening down there, and it is very important, and we need support and 'people power'.¹⁰

Another aspect of externalisation refers to the attempts by national and international actors to stimulate transnational alliances with national social movements, in particular regarding prevention of corruption. Protesters from both mobilisations highlighted the will, as well as the potential to create regional transnational anticorruption networks, albeit unsure about the modalities of its potential establishment and operationalisation. An activist from N. Macedonia noted that:

The potential and the possibilities for a regional transnational anticorruption movement definitely exist. However, I cannot see how that could be operationalized. It is a realistic possibility, but I don't know how and when that could happen. And honestly, that seems like a really big thing, maybe too big to chew. I really like the possibility, but I don't see it happening soon.¹¹

A key informant from Serbia was also not overly optimistic regarding transnational cooperation, but shifted the discussion more towards initial bilateral cooperation between students and other non-state actors that can gradually grow into a bigger regional network, considering a number of objective limitations that need to be overcome:

I think that the chances for a regional anticorruption network exist. Something like that can happen. However, I am now thinking about what should happen in our countries for something like that to operationalise? An event of that size cannot happen just like that, out of nowhere. It should be something very big, and all of us will need to work jointly on that. I think that it will take years for that to happen. However, the first step towards achieving this goal is cooperation. Primarily cooperation between universities. For example: If students in Macedonia begin to protest once again, they can sit jointly with students from Serbia and discuss, take advice and start creating these networks. On the other hand, we are now learning actually how slow direct democracy is. A transnational movement of this kind would take a lot of time. It will be slow and inefficient. It takes a lot of time, energy and nerves to be wasted and invested. An additional obstacle is the political reality we live in. The relations between our countries are rather complicated. We cannot pretend that we are part of Scandinavia. For example: Could students from Macedonia, Serbia, and Bulgaria unite? Very difficult. Could students from Macedonia, Serbia, and

¹⁰ Interview 2, conducted by the author, 2025.

¹¹ Interview 1, conducted by the author, 2025.

Albania unite? Very difficult. I think that the first step should be fostering bilateral communication and cooperation¹²..

A synthesis of the key mechanisms and processes shaping the potential for regional transnational anti-corruption mobilisation showcased through the “Who is Next?” initiative in N. Macedonia and the student protests in Serbia is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Presence and absence of mechanisms and processes relevant for transnational mobilisation in the “Who is Next?” initiative in N. Macedonia and the student protest movement in Serbia

Mechanism/Process	“Who is Next?” initiative	Student protest movement
Brokerage	+	+
In-country diffusion	+	+
Cross-border diffusion	+	+
Domestication	-	-
Internalization	-	-
Externalization	-	+

Source: Own illustration.

Conclusions

The more classical works on hybrid regimes and competitive authoritarianism classify the case of N. Macedonia as “hybrid resilience” followed by partial democratisation, demonstrating the oscillating character of the hybrid regime, depending on the current strength and level of engagement of civil society, combined with the level of external incentives. On the other hand, the case of Serbia has been defined as “gradual autocratization”, which has been slowly consolidating and evolving since SNS came into power in 2012.

Both mobilisations have positioned the fight against corruption at the forefront, questioning the state’s efforts by questioning impunity, accountability and transparency. The “Who is Next?” initiative’s framing is rooted in anti-corruption by linking it to (lack of) justice and accountability of Macedonian state institutions, similarly to how students in neighbouring Serbia demand transparency and accountability for over a year, since the tragic fall of the canopy at the Novi Sad railway station.

In regard to the claims-making process in N. Macedonia, the clearly defined demands by the “Who is Next?” initiative were widely accepted across the country, and articulated through various repertoires. In the case of the student movement in Serbia, the process of diffusion was even stronger and more durable, resulting in much stronger in-country diffusion. Related to the targets, both mobilisations targeted “the system”, not willing to focus on particular state institutions, political parties, or individuals, in order to send the message for profound systemic changes that would address corruption systematically, and locate ordinary citizens in the midst of democratic processes, underlining the need for deliberation, inclusion, and bottom-up decision-making that would pave the way for the *demos* to regain sovereignty. One of the working hypotheses of this paper, based on previous research, was that the EU, or EU policies and institutions, could appear as legitimate targets in the claims-making process, while EU member states, or EU institutions such as the European Commission, could be appealed to as potential allies of the two mobilisations, taking into account examples from

¹² Interview 2, conducted by the author, 2025.

previous contentious actions in the region. However, based on the results, this hypothesis is largely rejected.

Reflecting on the cross-border diffusion, both the claims-making processes and the repertoires of contention point to strong similarities, which suggest cross-movement learning and adaptation of repertoires. However, interviewed activists in both countries stand ground that no organised cross-border cooperation and consultation regarding tactics took place. Activists even refuse any suggestions pointing towards inspiration from the other mobilisation, underlining that their actions are authentic and could serve as inspiration for other movements in the region and beyond. This points to the direction of unrecognised and unintentional learning, and furthermore to the concept of “unrecognised cross-border diffusion”.

Regarding the processes of domestication and internalisation, both mobilisations hold back in making claims towards supranational actors, albeit corruption exceeds borders and undermines both domestic and transnational governance. The argument of both contentious groups is that they want to emphasise the importance of transparency and accountability of domestic institutions, and underline domestic challenges and shortcomings. However, the difference in scope and resonance between the two mobilisations resulted in greater prominence of the Serbian student protests, mobilising international actors to react. Additionally, the two awareness-raising repertoires, which were aimed more towards the general international public than the EU *per se*, caused the latter to react and reprimand Serbian authorities, reminding them of their EU accession negotiation obligations.

The process of externalisation is clearly visible in the case of the Serbian student movement, stemming from the presented evidence. In the case of the “Who is Next?” initiative, the externalisation process has not been triggered at all, as neither the activists nor other actors have appealed to the international community.

Lastly, it is worth noting that interviewees showed readiness and openness to cooperate with other contentious actors from the region, primarily countries such as Montenegro, Kosovo, Albania or Bulgaria, but shared scepticism about the potential success of that endeavour, primarily due to ethnic and linguistic differences, as well as lack of resources to create durable cross-border solidarity networks. However, Serbian students show greater enthusiasm and optimism in comparison to the “Who is Next?” initiative. These findings resonate well with the hypothesis that corruption-driven protests in hybrid regimes show reasonable interest in engaging in regional transnational collective actions, and favour the possibilities for creating transnational anticorruption networks.

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