

European
Policy
Institute.
Skopje

Annual Report - EPI

2024

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A Word from Our Director

As 2024 draws to a close, I am filled with hope and pride as I reflect on a year of bold steps and collective impact at the European Policy Institute (EPI). This year has marked a turning point—not only have we persevered through challenges, but we’ve also embraced new horizons, reinforcing our commitment to North Macedonia’s democratic future and European integration.

A historic milestone shines brightly: for the first time, EPI is leading a regional initiative, the “WB Reform and Growth Monitor,” launched in December to drive evidence-based reforms across the Western Balkans. This leadership role amplifies our voice and vision, fostering collaboration to accelerate the region’s EU path. Alongside this, our fourth Deliberative Poll engaged 135 citizens in shaping national discourse, while our recognition at the World Forum for Democracy affirmed the power of inclusive dialogue—a beacon in uncertain times.

Our research, from the 9th Shadow Report on Chapter 23 to actionable insights on the Growth Plan, continues to light the way for the rule of law and governance reforms. Partnerships with regional networks, the EU, and global allies have strengthened our efforts, proving that, united, we can bridge divides and inspire progress. These achievements reflect our growing influence and unwavering resolve.

Looking to 2025, the horizon brims with promise. Our regional leadership sets the stage for a deeper impact, while our work in citizen engagement and policy reform offers hope for a more just society. I am immensely grateful to our team, volunteers, and partners—your dedication and passion are the heart of our success. Together, we are not just navigating change; we are shaping it, building a future where every voice counts and Europe’s embrace draws nearer.

Simonida Kacarska
Director, European Policy Institute

Strengthening the Rule of Law: Highlighting Our Impact



9th
SHADOW
REPORT

In 2024, EPI solidified its role as a steadfast advocate for the rule of law, delivering rigorous analysis and fostering dialogue to support North Macedonia's EU accession journey. With the support of the European Union, our efforts under the "Building Bridges for a Common Future: Rule of Law in View of EU Accession" project illuminated progress and challenges, offering a hopeful blueprint for legal and democratic reforms.

Central to our work was the publication of the 9th Shadow Report on Chapter 23 (October 2023 - September 2024), a comprehensive assessment of justice, freedom, and security aligned with EU standards. Building on our monitoring matrix, this report provided actionable recommendations for policymakers and civil society, reinforcing our position as a critical observer in the accession process.



4
QUARTERLY
BRIEFS



Complementing this, we produced four quarterly briefs tracking rule-of-law developments. These timely insights offered stakeholders a nuanced lens on legal reforms, serving as key references ahead of European Commission country reports.

Our engagement extended beyond research to spark meaningful dialogue. The policy dialogue “Rule of Law in EU Members and Candidate Countries: Challenges and Lessons Learned” on 20 March 2024 convened 59 participants, including national institutions, CSOs, and EU representatives, to share insights. The annual conference “Forum Europaeum 2024: Rule of Law Instruments in View of EU Accession” on 12 July 2024 drew 131 attendees, amplifying discussions on governance tools essential for integration. A second policy dialogue on 24 December 2024, “Discussion on the Shadow Report on Chapter 23,” engaged 42 participants, where we presented our findings to experts, media, and officials.



EPI's outputs reached wide audiences through op-eds, podcasts, and infographics. The four podcasts recorded throughout the year, alongside two infographics including Judicial Governance Models and updates to the MERC 23 database with screening materials and ECJ judgments, enhanced accessibility and awareness of rule of law issues.



Looking ahead, our work sets a foundation for 2025. The 9th Shadow Report and quarterly briefs provide a roadmap for reforms, while our dialogues foster collaboration across sectors. As North Macedonia navigates EU accession, EPI remains committed to advancing legal integrity and democratic principles, bridging today's efforts to tomorrow's progress.



Joint Action for Human Rights: Enhancing Parliamentary and Civil Society Engagement



PRESENTED
UPR RECOMMENDATIONS
IN GENEVA

In 2024, EPI continued to champion human rights in North Macedonia, strengthening the synergy between parliamentary bodies and civil society organisations (CSOs) through our “Joint Action for Human Rights” project. This initiative, a collaborative effort with the Parliamentary Institute of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia, the Human Rights Advisor of the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office, and other key stakeholders, advanced protections and advocacy, fostering a hopeful vision for a more inclusive society.



A standout moment was our engagement in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process during its fourth cycle. In mid-February, EPI participated in the 46th Pre-session in Geneva, delivering a statement on behalf of a coalition of CSOs, including project grantees. We spotlighted critical issues: the independence and pluralism of the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination and violations of economic, social, and cultural rights for persons with disabilities, notably their right to inclusive education. Through advocacy meetings with multiple permanent missions, we successfully pushed for these recommendations to be raised and adopted during North Macedonia's review in May 2024. This effort elevated local concerns to the global stage, reinforcing the power of collective action in driving human rights reforms.

Closer to home, EPI focused on building capacity among parliamentarians and staff to engage meaningfully in human rights processes. In March, we organised a capacity-building workshop equipping parliamentary services with the knowledge, skills, and tools needed for effective UPR participation. This laid the groundwork for a November study visit to the Kingdom of Sweden, where MPs and staff exchanged best practices with their Swedish counterparts. The visit explored coordination mechanisms for UPR reporting, institutional roles, recommendation monitoring, and CSO contributions to democratic processes. These exchanges, bridging North Macedonian and Swedish experiences, inspired new approaches to parliamentary oversight and accountability, planting seeds for lasting impact.

Looking forward, the "Joint Action for Human Rights" project remains a cornerstone of EPI's mission. The adopted UPR recommendations offer a roadmap for policy change, while enhanced parliamentary capacity promises stronger oversight. As we build on these gains in 2025, we are committed to fostering a human rights framework that uplifts every citizen, paving the way for a just and equitable future.



Partnerships and Collaborations: Amplifying Impact through Strategic Alliances



LAUNCHED
A REGIONAL
PROJECT

In 2024, EPI's strategic partnerships reached new heights, with our leadership of the "WB Reform and Growth Monitor" marking a historic milestone as being a lead in our first regional project. This achievement, alongside collaborations with networks like Think for Europe Network (TEN) and key EU partners, amplified our impact across the Western Balkans, driving reforms and fostering hope for a unified European future.



Launched in December 2024, financed by the European Union, “WB Reform and Growth Monitor” positions EPI at the helm of a three-year initiative within the TEN framework. This project empowers CSOs to shape the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans across its four pillars, promising evidence-based monitoring, policy dialogue, and capacity-building grants. Starting with its inception this year, we laid the groundwork for systematic reform tracking, setting the stage for publications and advocacy in the next three years. This leadership role underscores EPI’s growing influence, bridging national efforts to regional progress.

Our coordination of “Pathways to EU Integration: Advancing the Dialogue on the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans” with TEN complemented this vision. In the Reform and Growth Facility’s early phase, we hosted public events in Skopje, Sarajevo, Tirana, and Pristina in December, igniting CSO-led discussions on its implementation. National policy updates informed stakeholders, while a regional researchers’ workshop in Skopje shaped three forthcoming expert analyses—two baselines for monitoring methodology and institutional mapping and one on EU Single Market integration. As part of the IGNITA platform, funded by Open Society Foundations-Western Balkans, this project strengthens a regional alliance fostering collaboration and innovation to accelerate the Western Balkans’ EU path.

In 2024, EPI expanded its regional engagement through the EU TACSO 3 People to People (P2P) On-Demand program, organizing a study visit and networking event, “Bridging Economic and Rule of Law Criteria for EU Integration in the Western Balkans,” on 6–7 November in Brussels. This initiative united leading Western Balkan think tanks and CSOs to strengthen monitoring practices, enhance advocacy skills, and align with EU standards, contributing to the EU Rule of Law Report and the Growth Plan. Day one featured discussions with DG NEAR, the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Parliament, and International IDEA, focusing on fund management, absorption capacity, and CSO roles in Growth Plan transparency. Day two, with EPD, Bruegel, CSE, TEPSA, and EUROPEUM, honed conditionality mechanisms, monitoring methodologies, and NextGenerationEU insights, culminating in joint statements on the rule of law and regional integration strategies.

EPI’s role in “WeBER 3.0 Western Balkan Enablers for Reforming Public Administration,” alongside TEN and Vienna’s Centre for Public Administration Research (KDZ), advanced public administration reform (PAR). Three CSOs from North Macedonia began re-granting projects in March: the Consumers Organization of Macedonia launched a 10-month effort to digitize public communal services in Ohrid; the Center for Social Innovation Blink 42-21 initiated a 10-month project enhancing public services via the digital platform Community; and Pro Local embarked on a 14-month project bringing digital municipal services closer to Bitola’s citizens. Supported by workshops in Belgrade (22–24 April) and Skopje (17 December), their reports on PAR mainstreaming in transparency, accountability, and service delivery were presented at the National Working Group meeting in December. Before launching the fourth PAR Monitor cycle in October, we revised the PAR Monitor Methodology to align with Sigma/OECD principles and published a policy brief in December based on 2021/22 results. The Regional WeBER PAR Platform Meeting on 5–6 November in Skopje, with 77 participants, blended strategy sessions with panels on PAR’s EU membership role.



Through the “For Justice” project with the Blueprint Group, EPI bolstered judicial reform alongside partners like the Foundation Open Society Macedonia. From January to June, we monitored the Strategy for Judiciary Reforms (2024-2028), publishing six short analyses on topics like restoring trust in the Judicial Council and ensuring unified court practice. Our legislative inputs shaped legal drafts, while the final conference on 25 June, “Judicial Reforms - What Happened to the Independence and Efficiency of the Judiciary?”, engaged state institutions and CSOs in three panels, amplifying reform priorities.

These alliances bridged local and regional goals. As we look to 2025, “WB Reform and Growth Monitor” stands as our flagship, amplifying our partnerships with TEN and EU bodies. This leadership fuels our optimism, driving sustainable reforms and a shared European destiny.



Advocacy: Elevating Reforms and Strengthening Partnerships



ENGAGED
IN MORE THAN **50**
ADVOCACY EVENTS

In 2024, EPI elevated its advocacy efforts, engaging in over 50 strategic meetings, conferences, and workshops to advance North Macedonia's EU integration and strengthen regional partnerships. Our participation spanned local, regional, and international platforms, amplifying our research and fostering dialogue on the rule of law, human rights, and governance reforms.

We kicked off the year with impactful engagements, including a mid-January event by Transparency International Macedonia on the National Integrity Assessment System, highlighting executive dominance in anti-corruption frameworks. In February, our advocacy culminated at the 46th UPR Pre-session in Geneva, where we met with permanent missions (Sweden, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, EU Delegation) to secure recommendations on discrimination and disability rights, later coordinating with the OHCHR UN Resident Coordinator's Office and the German Embassy in Skopje. That month, we moderated the "Re-thinking the Fundamentals Cluster Benchmarks for Ukraine" conference in Brussels, shaping EU accession strategies with Ukrainian and European stakeholders.

Spring saw robust participation, from the European Economic and Social Committee’s Civil Society Week in March—contributing to a July 2024 EESC resolution—to a mid-March meeting with the Judicial Council President as part of the Blueprint Group, advancing judicial trust initiatives. In April, we joined the Netherlands Embassy to discuss inter-ethnic relations and collaborated with Roma CSOs on operational plans for the 2024-2025 National Action Plans. May’s Western Balkans Civil Society High-Level Conference in Ljubljana reinforced our push for CSO inclusion in enlargement, while June’s Aspen Institute conference in Berlin featured our Program Director moderating a session on reducing political polarization.



Summer advocacy included the Berlin Process Preparatory Forum in Skopje (July), producing recommendations for the October Summit, and a Clingendael Academy training in the Netherlands, where we presented the Rule of Law Roadmap to Ukrainian civil servants. In September, our Director moderated the Tirana Connectivity Forum’s “Reforming and Enlarging” session, while October engagements with North Macedonia’s Deputy Prime Minister, Ministers of Justice and European Policy, and the TEN network’s Enlargement Package discussion in Belgrade solidified our policy influence. November’s Belgrade Security Conference panel on the Growth Plan and a study visit to Sweden (27-28 November) with MPs and the Parliamentary Institute furthered UPR coordination alongside meetings with the Council of Europe’s INGO delegation on civic space.

Closing the year, December’s National Convention on the EU plenary and PAR National Working Group meetings showcased our sectoral mainstreaming reports, while advocacy with the Ministry of Justice and All for Fair Trials reinforced judicial reform priorities. These efforts, from Brussels to Skopje, elevated reforms and deepened partnerships, positioning EPI as a catalyst for a democratic, European future.





Citizens Consultations: Fostering Engagement and Policy Impact



HELD THE **FOURTH**
DELIBERATIVE POLL
WITH **135 PARTICIPANTS**

In 2024, EPI deepened its mission to empower citizens as vital voices in North Macedonia's democratic and European journey. Through innovative platforms and impactful research, we fostered engagement that resonated nationally and earned global recognition, lighting a path of hope for inclusive policymaking.



The year's flagship effort was our fourth National Deliberative Poll, held on 6-7 July 2024, uniting 135 citizens from across the country. Partnering with the Deliberative Democracy Lab at Stanford University and backed by the National Endowment for Democracy, this event explored the effects of international security dynamics, EU policies, and North Macedonia's EU and NATO membership on the nation's future. Participants engaged in 11 focus groups, crafting questions for expert panels featuring politicians, civil society leaders, and academics. Evaluations affirmed its impact: 65.4% strongly agreed it offered a valuable window into diverse perspectives, while 57.1% found plenary sessions extremely valuable. The evaluation showed that participants believe that Deliberative Polling allows them to learn more about the topics, but also about the views of others, highlighting how structured dialogue builds understanding and consensus.

Complementing this, EPI amplified citizen insights through the 2024 release of New Geopolitical Developments and the Impact on North Macedonia, a report stemming from local deliberative events held in 2023. This publication, alongside the National Debate on State Positions in International Relations, enriched the discourse on Euro-Atlantic integration. A key moment came in a public session with the Parliament's Defense and Security Committee, where we presented Deliberative Poll results to MPs.



A pinnacle achievement was the recognition of our initiative "Fostering Political Pluralism and Democratic Values" at the World Forum for Democracy in November 2024. Selected among 40 initiatives from 200 global submissions under "Citizen Engagement for Democratic Renewal," EPI presented in Lab 5: A Seat at the Table: Enhancing the Role of Marginalised Groups in Public Discourse. Building on four Deliberative Polls and prior local events, this accolade underscored our role in creating inclusive platforms that combat division and strengthen social cohesion.



Services and Consultancy: Enhancing Expertise and Impact



EMPOWERED MARGINALIZED
COMMUNITIES WITH **WORLD BANK**

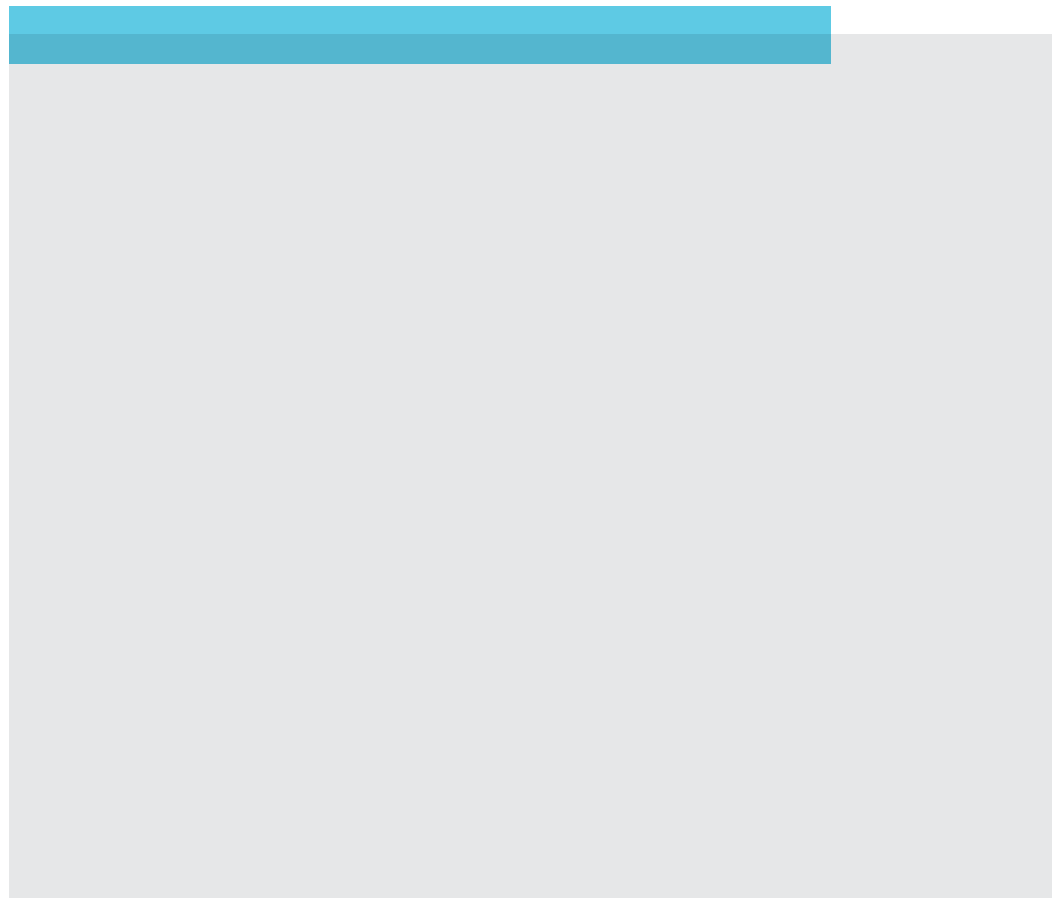
In 2024, EPI's consultancy and research services reinforced our reputation as a pivotal actor in advancing fundamental rights, social accountability, and reform processes across North Macedonia and the region. Through partnerships with esteemed organizations like the World Bank and the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), we delivered expertise that shaped policy and empowered communities, fostering a hopeful vision for inclusive progress.

Our consultancy with the World Bank, "Strengthening the Delivery of Social Protection through Social Accountability," advanced the welfare of marginalized groups, including Roma and returnees. In municipalities like Kumanovo and Shuto Orizari, we implemented the Community Score Card approach, facilitating dialogues between social service beneficiaries and providers. These engagements yielded joint action plans to enhance service delivery, empowering vulnerable populations to influence the systems that serve them. This work bridged local needs to actionable solutions, showcasing EPI's commitment to tangible impact.

EPI's long-standing role as a research organization for FRA's FRANET network continued to inform EU-level human rights discourse. In 2024, we provided data and research for FRA's annual report, building on past contributions like 2023's thematic insights. This partnership underscored our capacity to deliver evidence-based analysis, reinforcing policies that protect fundamental rights across Europe and North Macedonia.

Our analytical legacy shone in our annual assessment of the European Commission's 2024 Country Report on North Macedonia, published as *No Swerving,... but No Acceleration Either*. Continuing a tradition since 2011, this analysis evaluated progress and stagnation in the EU accession journey, offering stakeholders a critical lens on reform priorities. We amplified these findings at a high-profile event with TEN and DG NEAR, held on a Thursday in late 2024. Featuring a keynote by Gert Jan Koopman, Director-General for EU Neighbourhood & Enlargement Negotiations, the event explored the 2024 Enlargement Package and the state of democratic institutions in the Western Balkans, drawing a robust audience.

These efforts bridged research and engagement, fostering trust among stakeholders. The World Bank initiative empowered communities, while FRA and EC analyses informed high-level policy.



Visibility, Communications, and Events: Expanding Influence and Fostering Dialogue



MORE THAN **200**
MEDIA MENTIONS



20 EVENTS
WITH OVER
760 PARTICIPANTS



MORE THAN
400K REACH
ON SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2024, EPI amplified its influence through strategic communications, robust media presence, and impactful events, cementing our role as a leading voice on European integration and governance in North Macedonia. With over 200 media mentions, 20 events engaging more than 760 participants, and a surging digital footprint, we fostered dialogue that resonated locally and beyond, illuminating a path toward informed public discourse.

- ✓ Our media presence underscored EPI's prominence, with more than 200 articles and appearances across national and international outlets. National coverage dominated, spotlighting our analyses on EU accession, rule of law, and democratic reforms. International features, such as Politico and European Western Balkans, elevated our insights globally.
- ✓ EPI's 20 events in 2024 drew over 760 participants, blending policy dialogues, workshops, and public debates. Highlights included the fourth Deliberative Poll (6-7 July, 135 participants), exploring Euro-Atlantic integration, and "Forum Europaeum 2024" (12 July, 131 attendees), delving into rule of law instruments. The Regional WeBER PAR Platform Meeting (5-6 November, 77 participants) and "Advancing Regional Cooperation" (21 October, 74 attendees) showcased our regional influence.
- ✓ Our digital reach soared, reflecting broad engagement. On Facebook, we grew to over 9,800 followers, achieving 376.4K views in 2024. X expanded to over 1,400 followers, LinkedIn to 1,400, and Instagram to 1,200. This growth, paired with 30 publications, ensured that our research shaped public and policy narratives.
- ✓ Looking to 2025, our visibility fuels optimism. From leading regional debates to engaging citizens, EPI's communications and events have built a platform for progress. As we expand our influence, we remain committed to fostering dialogue that drives North Macedonia toward a democratic, European future.

Internal Development: Strengthening Organisational Capacity

In 2024, EPI strengthened its organizational core, equipping ourselves to lead, monitor, and advocate with greater impact as North Macedonia advances toward EU integration. Through the “Building Bridges for a Common Future: Rule of Law in View of EU Accession” project, supported by the European Union, we invested in tools, expertise, and team development, building a resilient foundation for a hopeful future.

- ✓ Our Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) tool, refined since its 2023 training debut, remained a cornerstone of our internal growth. In 2024, we actively applied this framework to systematically assess outcomes, ensuring our efforts aligned with strategic goals in an evolving policy landscape.
- ✓ Professional development took center stage with a focus on mentorship. We launched a rule of law traineeship, selecting a candidate who embarked on a mentorship journey under senior staff guidance. This initiative cultivated emerging talent, equipping them with practical skills while enriching our team’s expertise with fresh perspectives. Concurrently, we engaged an EU-based CSO for external mentorship on rule of law advocacy. Selected in September, the expert collaborated with our team to draft a work plan, enhancing our advocacy capabilities through shared knowledge and EU-aligned insights. These efforts nurtured a culture of learning, strengthening our capacity to influence policy effectively.
- ✓ Our communications strategy evolved through targeted enhancement. We enlisted a communication expert to assess and refine our approach, with a particular emphasis on transparency. The expert delivered specialized training to the EPI team, followed by a detailed report with actionable recommendations. This investment bolstered our ability to convey complex ideas clearly, ensuring our growing regional role—exemplified by “WB Reform and Growth Monitor”—is matched by impactful messaging. Coupled with this, we initiated upgrades to our website’s design and accessibility.
- ✓ As we take on leadership of “WB Reform and Growth Monitor” and deepen our regional presence, our enhanced capacity ensures we meet rising demands with agility and precision. Looking to 2025, EPI stands poised to amplify our impact, leveraging a stronger, more skilled team to advance democracy and EU integration with unwavering commitment.

