Diplomatic Commentary and the Sovereignty Trap: Rethinking Political Reform in Macedonia

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Abstract: A tension exists within contemporary practices of American and European diplomacy, which formally acknowledge a Westphalian logic of state sovereignty but nonetheless violate this logic on a causal basis. This paper analyzes one example of this phenomenon. In Macedonia (now North Macedonia), American and European diplomats have long held a prominent role in the country's politics. On the one hand, these diplomats routinely signal the sovereign responsibility of the Macedonian state over political decision-making. At the same time, through media interviews and press conferences, these diplomats also publicly broadcast their policy preferences for Macedonia and thereby intervene in political decision-making. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, this paper examines the public speech of US and EU diplomats in Macedonia/North Macedonia and analyzes the rhetorical strategies by which they simultaneously assert and compromise the country's sovereign right over political decision-making. As the paper argues, this dynamic fueled perpetual anxiety about the character and quality of Macedonia's sovereignty.   Both Macedonian political leaders and US and EU diplomats thus engaged in recurrent assertions and evaluations of Macedonian sovereignty. However, rather than defusing public anxieties about Macedonia's sovereignty, these political performances only renewed and intensified them. In this context, the question of sovereignty functioned as a trap, that is, as an ever anxious space of sovereign performances that could not possibly satisfy the contradictory expectations placed upon them.

Note to ELAN readers: this manuscript will be the second chapter of book that I am writing, which analyzes and theorizes how American and European diplomats would use public commentary as a mode of political intervention in the Republic of Macedonia (now North Macedonia). The book draws on doctoral fieldwork conducted in 2003-4 in addition to fieldwork conducted in the 2010s to construct a longitudinal perspective on the phenomenon. As in much of my writing, this manuscript is not pure "linguistic anthropology." Rather, the linguistic anthropology is baked, like eggs and flour, into a cake that features other ingredients: socio-cultural anthropology, political anthropology, etc. In part, this is simply due to the way I think and write. But, it also results from my hope that this work with be accessible and interesting to non-linguistic anthropologists. That said, I also want to be interesting and relevant to linguistic anthropologists. So, I'd love to hear your impressions as to whether I struck a decent balance on this count. Also, this manuscript is still very much a draft. I plan to revise it and work on it more. So, your feedback on the argument, the organization, etc. will be most useful! Thanks for reading this. Best wishes, A

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"sovereignty is never without an adjective." (Philpott 1995: 357)

For a generation now, American and European diplomats have played an outsized role in the domestic politics of Macedonia.[1] Beginning in the 1990s, numerous foreign governments and international organizations, most notably, the United States, the European Union (née Community) and its member states, the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (née Conference), have variously contributed resources and sponsored activities that aimed to stabilize the young country amid the violence and volatility of Yugoslavia's break-up and its aftermath. Yet, alongside official funds and programs, the American and European presence in Macedonia was also displayed, and experienced, via the diplomats stationed in or dispatched to the country. Across the thirty years of an independent Macedonia, these diplomats have emerged as privileged commentators on Macedonian politics and political reform. With demonstrable regularity, American and European diplomats hold press conferences, give media interviews, issue reports, make public statements, and appear at ceremonial events. In these forums, they express expectations, offer assessments, broadcast recommendations, extend praise or issue warnings in relation to political decision making in Macedonia. Through such interventions in the Macedonian public sphere, the diplomats addressed, and thereby positioned, Macedonia as a "supervised state," to use

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[1] In February 2019, the Republic of Macedonia officially changed its name to North Macedonia, in accordance with the Prespa agreement signed with Greece. Since this chapter is based on research conducted prior to 2019, I use the name that was contemporaneous to the research. For more on the Prespa Agreement, see Neofotistos 2021.

Jane Cowan's (2007) apt term for countries subjected to international oversight and monitoring. I first noticed this phenomenon when conducting doctoral research in Macedonia in the mid-2000s but the practice was still on ample display during my last extended research visit in 2018. When American or European diplomats offered public commentary on Macedonian politics, they were of course enacting a professional role, representing the interests and activities of the governments and organizations that employed them. However, through their professional conduct and public commentary, these political elites also performed and constructed a particular understanding of the post-Cold War international order.

This chapter examines the public commentary of American and European diplomats in Macedonia, as well as how Macedonian politicians reacted to it, in order to gain insight into the ideals and concerns that organized this scene of international politics. For, when the diplomats would broadcast their expectations for or assessments of the Macedonian political process, they often employed rhetorical strategies that downplayed interventionist intention. In turn, Macedonian political actors often used their own encounters with the press to underscore the own control over political decision making. This combination of practices, to be detailed below, suggests that the foreign presence in Macedonia triggered deep and perpetual anxieties about the degree and quality of Macedonia's state sovereignty. Were the Americans and Europeans overstepping the bounds of diplomacy? Were Macedonian politicians too submissive to these powerful outsiders? This chapter argues that such concerns over Macedonian sovereignty came to organize the broader, internationalized field of Macedonian politics.

A note is thus warranted on the concept of political sovereignty. In the present day, the principle of sovereignty, conventionally understood as a state's monopoly of authority

over a territorially bound political unit, is often asserted as the basis of the contemporary

"national order of things" (Malkki 1994). This idea of formally equal, sovereign states

grounds institutions such as the United Nations and other, more general figurations of "The

Family of Nations" (Malkki 1994). Yet, as Cowan's research (2007, 2003) on the League of

Nations shows, practices of supranational supervision emerged alongside and even co-

constituted the modern regime of state sovereignty. The imaginary of an international order

of sovereign states thus obscures how powerful states' claims to territorial sovereignty

depend on and produce polities where sovereignty is variously compromised, supervised or

suspended (see also Bryant and Hatay 2020). To follow Yarimar Bonilla (2013: 156), "the

sovereign nation is a myth, an aspirational model at best, even within the space of the North

Atlantic, which has long relied on colonial markets, outsourced labor, and nonsovereign

enclaves in order to sustain its claims to modern sovereignty." Myths, however, are

powerful things. They inform how people understand the world and how they construe

their own actions (cf. Hozic 2009). The public speech acts of both American and European

diplomats and also Macedonian politicians thus provide revealing glimpses into how the

myth of state sovereignty operates in the world today.

In the particular case of Macedonia, anxieties about state sovereignty were

indissociable from the political role that the US, EU, NATO, OSCE and so on adopted in the

country following its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. Like elsewhere in Eastern

Europe, with the fall of state socialism, North Atlantic governments and organizations

quickly positioned themselves as stewards along a path of liberalizing, democratizing

political reform that came to be glossed as, "transition" (Graan 2013). In Macedonia, the

wars of Yugoslav secession and the armed conflict that engulfed the country in 2001 further

inflected the international presence in the country, as did Macedonia's formal pursuit of

NATO and EU accession in the 2000s and 2010s. Across the 1990s and 2000s, and continuing into the 2010s and 2020s, American and European governments and organizations thus organized and sponsored a wide variety of missions, programs, projects, trainings, etc., designed to encourage political reform and stabilization in Macedonia.

The active presence of "the international community" in Macedonia, however, confronted what Andrew Gilbert (2017, 2020) has called, "the democratization paradox." As Gilbert describes in the case of Bosnia, foreign-led campaigns to establish and mandate democratic governance in post-war or otherwise "transitional" settings amount to a contradictory effort to "impose democracy," that is, of "promoting democratic ends through undemocratic means" (Gilbert 2020: 36). American and European diplomats in Macedonia thus faced a recurrent challenge. On the one hand, they were expected to represent their governments' and organizations' interests in promoting democratizing and liberalizing political reform. On the other hand, they had to avoid, or counteract, the perception that political reform was an imposition that solely or primarily reflected American and European interests. The challenge, then, was to steer democratic reform, but without undermining the state sovereignty that would legitimize the reform as democratic.

Significantly then, within this context, American and European diplomats in Macedonia repeatedly issued an interesting disavowal. Despite their persistent and often intense participation in Macedonian politics, time and time again they would disclaim interventionist action and intention. Their involvements in Macedonian politics might be multiple, but they were *not* giving orders or making demands. They were *not* overstepping their roles as outside observers and they were *not* interfering in Macedonian lawmaking. Rather, they were there to support and help Macedonia. In ways direct and indirect, diplomats disavowed an interventionist role in Macedonian politics and in doing so, they

deferred questioning of what the active presence of foreign governments and organizations might mean for Macedonian sovereignty.

I witnessed such disavowals, in various guises and speech forms, oftentimes during my field research in Skopje but perhaps never so clearly as when I interviewed the US Ambassador to Macedonia, Lawrence Butler, in October 2004. During his time in the position, the ambassador had achieved some degree of notoriety for his often outspoken and candid remarks on political issues facing the country. This behavior had earned him a nickname, "Lawrence of Macedonia," that suggested a colonial dimension to the American presence in the country. During the interview, Butler proved to be a loquacious, sharp observer of Macedonian politics. Over the course of the conversation, he sketched out his view on Macedonia's political problems. As he saw it, cronyism permeated political parties as well as the economy, which in turn perpetuated insularity, myopia and resistance to change among the country's elites. What then of his vocal public commentary, I asked, what did it accomplish? Without missing a beat, the ambassador elaborated that his job was "not to tell [Macedonian political leaders] what to do" but rather "to assist and motivate" genuine political reform.

To assist and motivate. *Not* to tell them what to do. To paraphrase Saidiya Hartman (1997:10), such "strategies of disavowal" remove the American and European presence "from the domains that it in effect constitutes." Furthermore, in disavowing intervention, the diplomats also asserted the integrity of Macedonia's state sovereignty. If American and European governments and organizations were not telling Macedonian political leaders what reforms to implement, it followed that Macedonian political leaders were making their own sovereign decisions in their capacity as elected representatives of the Macedonian people. Yet, oftentimes these assertions of Macedonian sovereignty arose precisely at

moments when American and European actions appeared to compromise that sovereignty. Diplomats' disavowal of political intervention in Macedonia thus signaled a deeper set of anxieties around the sovereignty myth and the consequences of state supervision.

Although political theorists and statespersons alike often assume that the principle of territorial sovereignty grounds the modern international order (see Weber 1992), in historical perspective, this has never been quite true. Sovereignty is less a fact of the international order than a set of questions and arguments posed by it. What are legitimate sources for sovereign power? When are violations of sovereignty justified? Which expressions of state sovereignty conform to international norms and which do not? Such an understanding recognizes, following Cynthia Weber (1992: 200) that, rather than existing as universals, "the meanings of sovereignty and intervention are inscribed, contested, erased, and reinscribed through historical practices." The inability of decontextualized and dehistoricized formulations of the sovereignty concept to grapple with these histories is what renders them myth. It is in this sense that, Bonilla (2013: 156) argues that, "sovereignty is a fiction. It is not, and has never been, what it claims to be."

Yet, it is precisely this misfit between myth and history that unleashes anxieties about sovereignty. And so, sovereignty can be evaluated and rated. If found to either too much or too little for some particular state, interventions may be authorized to support, supplement, curtail, tame, discipline or (re)establish state sovereignty. As Bonilla (2013) elaborates, drawing on Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003), the sovereignty myth anchors a particular "geography of imagination" that categorizes some states as properly sovereign while others are classed as "failed states" or "in transition." This geography of imagination in turn authorizes a "geography of management" manifested through practices of state

building, international supervision, regime change, global governance, and indeed, diplomatic commentary.

However, as the Macedonian case illustrates, the geography of management organized by sovereignty's geography of imagination is often an anxious one beset by intractable, awkward paradox (cf. Stoler 2008). *Not* to tell them what to do, but to motivate and assist. These anxieties manifested in the practice and public words of American and European diplomats and also of Macedonian political leaders. They also provoked a wider ranging discussion of Macedonian politics in the 2000s and 2010s. Was EU and US intervention in Macedonian politics necessary and helpful? Or, was it excessive, humilitating, and counterproductive? Was it focused on the right things? In turn, were displays of Macedonian sovereignty too much or not enough? Was there any possible exit from the country's seemingly permanent transition?

This chapter traces how anxieties of sovereignty manifested within the Macedonian public sphere on politics and examines how political actors, both diplomats and Macedonian politicians, sought to dispel or channel these anxieties through public performances before the Macedonian press. In each case, the diplomats and politicians were responding to contradictions that resulted from the political relationships that constituted Macedonia's "supervised state." As mentioned, European and American diplomats had to maneuver the contradictions of "imposing democracy" (Gilbert 2017, 2020). Macedonian political leaders, however, faced a different paradox. For, when disavowing agency in Macedonia's political reform, European and American diplomats underscored how Macedonian political leaders were the ones responsible for Macedonia's political future. Yet, the diplomats also routinely reminded Macedonian publics that only one legitimate path existed for that future, namely, the "path toward Europe" (cf. Greenberg 2011) which was portrayed as a

promised land of prosperity, democracy, and security (cf. Böröcsz 2006, Velkonja 2005). Macedonian political leaders were thus faced with their own contradictory imperative: to make a sovereign decision but nonetheless to choose accordingly.

In what follows, I explore some of the discursive strategies that diplomats and Macedonian political leaders employed in order to navigate these paradoxes in their public discourse and performance. Ultimately, however, as analysis reveals, these paradoxes could not be easily surmounted, reconciled, or defused. Rather than settling or resolving questions about Macedonian sovereignty or Euro-American intervention, the actions of diplomats and political leaders only renewed and intensified them. That is, any performance or assertion of Macedonia's sovereignty would only provoke new doubts and anxieties about its lacks or excesses. In this way, the very question of sovereignty was a trap. Defined by paradox and contradiction, the question of Macedonian sovereignty— whether it was sufficient, appropriate, excessive, etc.—could ensnare actors in efforts to perform sovereignty or to disclaim intervention. However, such performances would only compel further attempts to tame or ignite, to assert or limit the dual forces of Macedonian sovereignty and international intervention. The sovereignty trap thus describes the structural doubt that foreign intervention casts on a country's independence and the spiraling assertions of sovereign (in)sufficiency that follow from it. As this chapter argues, such a sovereignty trap ultimately came to organize Macedonia's postconflict politics and so entrenched the paradoxes of Macedonia's supervised state.

Making Choices, Part One

To pee or not to pee? That was the question that Šašo Macanovski posed in an essay that

was published in an August 2004 issue of the weekly political magazine *Fokus.*[2] Better

known by his nickname, Trendo, Macanovski rose to fame through his clever, sarcastic and

funny writing on Macedonian politics and society. In 2004, his career was reaching new

heights. He both edited the popular online entertainment portal *On.net* and became a

household fixture as the inaugural host of the Macedonian-language version of the hit game

show franchise, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? (Koj saka da bide milioner?).* At the time,

then, Trendo was one of the most influential, and even beloved, media figures and political

commentators in Macedonia.

The Fokus essay was titled "*Svoeglavno, Svoeračno*," which might be translated as

"Stubbornly, Selfishly" but that, due to the roots of the words, also conveyed the sense of

"with one's own head, with one's own hands"—a wink to what is revealed as the essay's

focal question. The piece begins as Trendo relays a story about a recent evening when he

had to confront an unnamed problem while sitting on his worn-down easy chair. As he

considered the situation, he realized that the problem had one clear solution but he worried

that acting on it might bring him further troubles. Nevertheless, lacking other options, he

"formed a two-member committee consisting of his instinct and experience" and he gave

them the task to "work fast, efficiently and non-transparently." Before too long, the simple

conclusion was reached: Trendo, you must go urinate. So he did, an action that filled him

with a complete joy. However, it was not the physical relief of micturition that left him so

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[2] Trendo, "Svoeglavno, svoeračno," reprinted online at *On.net*, August 2004. Electronic document, http://star.on.net.mk/statija.asp?id=8345.

satisfied. No, said Trendo, the point was, "I took a piss without asking [US Ambassador]

Lawrence Butler what he thought about it."

Trendo's satire makes light of the political power that American and European

diplomats wielded in Macedonia while also giving a sense of the sheer regularity and scope

of diplomats' commentary on political issues. Whatever the problem might be—even

something that seemed as obvious as the need to urinate—diplomats would be there to

frame the choices and clarify the stakes. Trendo thus writes with faux disbelief when

reflecting on his unilateral decision to pee, as if such a decision would be unthinkable. As

the essay continues:

> Dude, seriously, I did it! Riskily, stubbornly, selfishly! I eased the terrible pressure on
> my bladder without seeking advice from the omnipotent Butler and without listening
> to his wit and wise analysis. The framework procedure[3] foresaw something
> completely different. Before I dare to go to the toilet, it would be my turn to find out
> what the Supreme One thinks about it: [to say] whether my decision is hasty or not,
> how it will affect my relations with the EU and NATO which lately I am so quickly
> approaching that it is only a matter of time before I start urinating with joy, whether
> this one-nation move violates a clause of the Ohrid Agreement, how the signal I send
> might echo in the acoustic toilets of Brussels and Washington...[4]

With Bakhtinian (1986) elan, Trendo recontextualizes the tropes that American and

European diplomats so commonly used in their public remarks on Macedonian politics:

comments on hasty decisions, on how decisions might affect the speed of Macedonia's

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[3] *Note to readers*: the allusion here is to the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), the treaty that ended the
2001 armed conflict in Macedonia, during which state security forces (i.e., police and military) clashed with
insurgents ostensibly fighting for improved rights and conditions for Macedonia's substantial ethnic Albanian
population. The OFA set out a series of legislative and constitutional changes that would improve minority
rights and representation in the country. Questions concerning the "implementation" of the OFA often
dominated Macedonian politics in the postconflict years. The 2001 conflict and OFA will be discussed more
thoroughtly in the book's introduction….

[4] Čoveče, pa jas na vistina go storiv toa! Riskantno, svoeglavno, svoeračno! Go namaliv užasniot pritisokot vo
moete babule bez da pobaram sovet od omnipotentniot Batler i da gi slušam negovite vasda pamenti i mudri
analisi. Ramkovnata procedura predviduvaše nešto sosema drugo: pred da se osmelam da trknam do kloset
redno e da doznaam sto za toa misli Vrhovniot: dali moeto rešenje e izbrzano ili ne, kako toa ќe se odrazi vrz
moite odnosi so EU i NATO kon vo posledno vreme tolku brzo se približuvam što samo e prašanje na den kora
ќe počnam da se podmočuvam od radost, dali ovoj ednonacionalen poteg se kosi so nekoja klauzula od
Ohridskiot dogovor, kako signalot što sum go pratil odeknal vo akustičnite toaleti na Brisel i Vašington...

Euro-Atlantic integration, on the sanctity of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, and so on. As I argue elsewhere (Chapter One, Graan 2016), through such comments, diplomats would telegraph American and/or European (dis)approval of policy proposals. Trendo thus parodies the linguistic register (Agha 2005) identified with diplomats and levels a critique of it by asserting the sheer banality of diplomats' seemingly incessant stream of evaluations and recommendations.

Yet, Trendo's satire also brings another aspect of diplomat's political commentary into relief: the tendency to present and evaluate the "choices" that confront Macedonia in what was understood as its ongoing process of political reform. The essay itself is constructed around a problem that requires a decision: to pee or not pee? This seems self-evident enough. But, as Trendo wryly observes, within Macedonia during the postconflict years, such decisions were often accompanied by diplomats' broadcasted advice and analysis, and this advice and analysis had a stock form. Diplomatic commentary would typically frame political issues in regard to its implications for Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration or for the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), that is, in regard to Macedonia's supposed security and prosperity.

For example, during the run-up to the 2004 referendum on a municipal redistricting plan[5], American and European diplomats took to the Macedonian media to broadcast their analysis of the vote's stakes. In a public letter, US Ambassador Lawrence Bulter wrote,

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[5] *Note to readers:* in 2004, the Macedonian government passed legislation that would reorganize municipalities in the country and imbue them with greater authority over governance and resources. The legislation fulfilled a requirement of the Ohrid Framework Agreement but it triggered vehement protest, especially among some members of the country's ethnic Macedonian majority who were still aggrieved by the conflict. A referendum movement quickly organized to repeal the legislation, and it gathered enough signatures to put the matter to a vote in November 2004. The 2004 referendum proved to be a significant turning point in Macedonian political history and I discuss it more depth in the book introduction and chapter one.

"Colleagues, Macedonians will soon face an existential choice between a Euro-Atlantic future and a past which promises only insecurity and poverty. For the good of Macedonia, I hope that they will choose the first one."[6] Similarly, when in Skopje two weeks later, US Secretary of War Donald Rumsfeld stated that, "The Macedonian people face a clear choice between a future in NATO and the EU, where stability and economic growth can blossom, or to return to the past."[7] Obviously, referendums by their nature present voters with a choice. What is significant here is how the diplomats framed that choice in public, invoking a spatio-temporal imaginary that linked "the future," "prosperity," and "Europe" in contrast to "the past," "insecurity," and although not stated, "the Balkans."

In framing political issues in relation to Euro-Altantic integration and the OFA, diplomats effectively reconstituted the choices facing Macedonian decision-makers. A choice between keeping the new redistricting plan or reverting to the old one was made into a choice between hastening Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration or risking being left outside of NATO and the EU. A choice between passing or not a set of language laws, which would grant entitlements to speakers of minority languages and especially Albanian, would be made into a choice between security and prosperity or a "return to the past." This practice of recontextualizing political issues, of making decisions into existential choices on Macedonia's future, was a common way in which American and European diplomats commented on, and sought to regulate, political discussion in the Macedonian public sphere (see Graan 2016, Chapter One).

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[6] "Антиреферендумски писма од Батлер," *Dnevnik*, September 29, 2004 http://star.dnevnik.com.mk/?pBroj=2598&stID=42768. Колеги, Македонците наскоро ќе се соочат со суштински избор меѓу евроатлантската иднина и минатото, кое ветува само несигурност и сиромаштија. За доброто на Македонија, се надевам дека тие ќе го изберат првото", го завршува Батлер писмото
[7] Saško Dimevski, "Ramsfeld ja potvrdi podrškata i pobara pogolemi reformi," *Utrinski Vesnik (Skopje)*, October 11, 2004. Also available as an electronic document, http://star.utrinski.com.mk/?pBroj=1598&stID=23819&pR=2.

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Significantly, then, in the essay, Trendo anticipates how American and European

diplomats might frame the choice that confronted him in his worn-down easy chair,

gesturing to its implications for EU accession, NATO membership, and so on. He also

refuses and circumvents such framings: Trendo decides to bypass diplomatic commentary.

Hence, his joy comes not from making a choice per se, but from acting outside of diplomats'

framing and approval of his decision.

In essence, Trendo revels in being a sovereign, that is, in inhabiting a particular

model of supreme, sovereign choice. From Agamben and Schmitt on the state of exception

to George W. Bush's self-characterization as the "decider," the act of authoring ultimate

decisions is a fantasy at the heart of sovereignty.[8] Trendo's joy was not that of making a

decision but of making a sovereign choice, of making a choice that was not answerable to

another.[9]

By this reading of the essay, Trendo contrasts the omnipotence of Euro-American

power, as embodied in Butler, with his unthinkable, ludic display of sovereign choice. In

doing so, the essay stages a classic opposition between sovereignty and intervention

(Weber 1992) and clearly expresses a desire for a sovereign Macedonia that could conduct

its own business without the interference of Americans and Europeans. Indeed, this desire

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[8] See Bryant and Reeves 2021, both for a critical account of the "Agamben effect" in anthropology and for an nuanced exposition of the desire for sovereign agency. See also Kivland 2012 for a useful summary of the strengths and limits of Agamben's take on sovereignty and the state of exception.

[9] Not surprisingly, then, Trendo's essay has a discernably conservative and populist ring to it. It should be noted, though, that the desire to make decisions unburdened by the oversight of American and European diplomats is not the same as the desire to choose policies that oppose Euro-Atlantic integration. Over the years in which I have conducted research in Macedonia, I have spoken with countless Macedonians who yearned for Macedonia's accession to the EU (n.b., North Macedonia joined NATO in 2019) but who also were fed up with American and European diplomats' conduct in the country. In practice, however, it was often politicians and parties on the right who were able to channel discontent with the foreign presence in Macedonia toward their own, often nationalist political ends.

was a particular structure of feeling for many in postconflict Macedonia and might rear its head in many contexts, and understandably so.[10]

Yet, there was an irony to Trendo's portrayal of postconflict Macedonian politics and the role of American and European diplomats within it. For, across their public commentary, US and EU diplomats routinely encouraged Macedonian leaders *to make a decision.* That is, in publicly "framing the choices" around some political matter, the diplomats also communicated that only Macedonians could decide on their country's political fate. Butler's and Rumsfeld's comments on the 2004 referendum on redistricting make this clear. But, even years later, during the 2018 referendum on the Prespa Agreement, American and European diplomats would emphasize how Macedonians had the right and duty to make their own choices. As Federica Mogherini stated at a press conference in Skopje on September 13, 2018, "remember that on the 30 of September when you go and vote at the referendum, you hold the keys to the future of your country. It is in your hands, and only in your hands, and nobody else can do it for you. And you cannot afford to stay silent and miss the opportunity to express yourself on what kind of future you want for your country." At this level, the sovereignty of Macedonia was not questioned. On the contrary, it was insisted upon. Yet, by so often framing the choices in stark, moralized language—where one choice promised a radiant future and the other renewed misery—diplomats enacted that contradictory imperative that required Macedonians to make a choice but to also choose accordingly.

Diplomats' regular, public insistence that Macedonians "make a decision" reflects several factors. For instance, as Kimberley Coles (2007) has shown with her work on

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[10] On popular desire for state sovereignty, for a state that is capable of governing on its own and of addressing citizens' needs, see Kivland 2012, 2020, Kurtovic 2019, Bryant and Hatay 2020).

international efforts to mount elections in Bosnia in the early 2000s, significant resources were expended to encourage voters to participate. Large voter turnout, aid workers reasoned, would add legitimacy and thus stability to newly formed governments. But, in addition, propaganda on voting was also envisioned as a vehicle for internationals to model a particular kind of democracy premised on elections, what Coles theorizes as the "Peer Presence" of internationals, that it is, the assumption that internationals' words and actions could teach Bosnians "proper" political practice. In consequence, the call to make a decision was supposed to model a preferred form of political participation and engagement. Andrew Gilbert (2020) comes to a similar conclusion in his own analysis of international intervention and political reform in postwar Bosnia. As Gilbert (2020: 23) explains, international official workers tended to assume that the political reforms that they advocated (e.g., electoral democracy, liberalization) had universal validity. In consequence, there was, "a reluctance by foreign agents to impose transformation or coerce Bosnian authorities in a heavy-handed way. Rather, with the right education, they expected Bosnians to recognize the right way and act to follow it willingly and on their own" (Gilbert 2020: 23). Elements of this assumption are also apparent in American and European diplomats' public commentary in Macedonia. Statements that it was up to Macedonians to decide on their political future expressed not only that Macedonians should make a choice but further that they ought to make the "right" choice.

Gilbert (2017, 2020) also underscores the political premium that international officials placed on "local ownership" of political reform in postwar Bosnia. On one level, local ownership over political reform, that is, local politicians' participation in and thus endorsement of foreign-initiated efforts at lawmaking, was seen as crucial for the legitimacy of reform. In addition, international officials also saw local ownership as necessary to the

sustainability of reform. It was thus presented as a precondition to the disengagement of international organizations, governments and agencies in Bosnia's postwar politics. Gilbert thus details the tremendous (if ultimately unsuccessful) labor that Wolfgang Petrisch, the UN High Representative in Bosnia and Hercegovina, undertook over 2001-2 to orchestrate signs of Bosnian parties' participation in and ownership over the reform process. In Macedonia, diplomats' calls on Macedonians and Macedonian political leaders to make a decision served a similar purpose.[11] Macedonians' decisions would signal "local ownership" over preferred political reforms. They could also be framed as substantiating diplomats' disavowal of political interference in Macedonian affairs.

Across these cases, the "paradox of imposing democracy" (Gilbert 2017, 2020) is on display. Coles' international aid workers are active in "designing" strategies for Bosnian democracy but required local participation if the strategies were to appear democratic at all. Similarly, Petrisch went to extraordinary lengths to avoid using his executive powers with the (failed) hopes of demonstrating local ownership over the internationally supervised state-building process. These empowered international actors thus sought to conjure signs of Bosnian sovereign decision making both through and despite the international presence. The same was true in postconflict Macedonia, with diplomats' recurrent focus on Macedonian decision-making. Here too, the international actors sought displays of

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[11] As Gilbert (2020) argues, in postconflict Bosnia, international actors often depended on local cooperation, both to achieve their stated goals and to legitimate the international presence in Bosnia. The situation in postconflict Macedonia has certain parallels with the Bosnian case, for example, diplomats did depend on and sought to recruit Macedonian partners to achieve their aims and they certainly had to maintain viable working relationships with political leaders from across the ideological spectrum. But, there were also significant differences between Bosnia and Macedonia. Most significantly, diplomats in Macedonia had neither the executive authority nor the responsibility of the United Nations in Bosnia. Macedonia also lacked Bosnia's federal structure, which entrenched power in constituent "entities" that were organized through competing ethno-national projects. (There were of course competing ethnonational projects in Macedonia but they were not entrenched in the same sort of constitutional structure.) In consequence, diplomats depended on Macedonian politicians less and the decision not to follow "international advice" was a "failure" that diplomats would hang squarely on Macedonian political leaders.

Macedonian sovereignty and evidence of "local ownership" over the reform process that would attest to the "maturity" of Macedonian democracy.

The irony, then, is that both American and European officials and Macedonian political leaders seemed to be on the same page: both groups wanted Macedonians to make sovereign decisions. On the one side, Macedonians resented[12] American and European involvement in political matters and yearned to make independent political choices, "without asking Lawrence Butler what he thought about it." Similarly, the American and European diplomats continually disavowed their own interventionist agency and urged Macedonians to make decisions, genuflecting toward Macedonian sovereignty and placing the onus of decision-making on Macedonian leadership.

So, what then prevented the alignment of the Macedonian desire to make sovereign decisions with the Euro-American desire that Macedonians make sovereign decisions? It is here that we encounter the sovereignty trap and the contradictions that grounded it. Diplomats were charged with directing Macedonian political reform but were required to disavow intervention. The consequence was ongoing public commentary that would frame and evaluate the "choices" that awaited Macedonian political leaders. In turn, Macedonian political leaders were expected to make sovereign choices but also to make choices in accordance with European and American preferences. In consequence, Macedonian political decisions were always tainted by the co-presence of European and American commentary. Any political decision reached by Macedonian lawmakers was born into a state of structural doubt: what the decision truly sovereign? Was it sovereign in the right way? Indeed, the sovereignty trap and the structural doubt that it creates underwrites

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[12] But mention how this was typically not so for Albanians…

Trendo's satire: For once, he wants a decision to be unencumbered by the imperative to choose, but to choose accordingly; he desires to make a choice that is unconstrained by the process and evaluation of Euro-American authorities. In Macedonia's supervised state, however, as Trendo recognized, such decisions were so unthinkable that they could make for a joke.

Taming Sovereignty

To some, the move to conceive sovereignty as a trap might imply cases where sovereignty has somehow gone awry, that is, exceptional cases or cases of perverted sovereignty. Such a view, however, treats sovereignty as something that states either have or they don't, what Rebecca Bryant and Madeline Reeves (2021: 9) call, "the impasse of sovereignty as either/or."   Such rigid conceptions of sovereignty not only overlook the fact that so-called exceptions to sovereignty are a global norm (Bonilla 2013) but can also fuel definitional and typological spirals as scholars pursue ever-revised yet normative accounts of state sovereignty. The effort to define sovereignty in political theory thus often obscures what sovereignty does, that is, how the sovereignty concept mediates forms of political aspiration, intervention, and dispute. To call sovereignty a trap is thus not to presuppose some normative standard by which judge some forms of sovereignty as "less than" or otherwise defective. Rather, the move reasons from ethnographic analysis—the examination of how sovereignty was invoked in postconflict Macedonian politics—to develop one account of how the sovereignty concept functions in contemporary world politics.

Anchoring this approach is Cynthia Weber's (1992:200) argument that sovereignty is by its very nature performative (see also Howland and White 2009, Hozic 2009, Kivland 2012, Rutherford 2012, Bryant and Hatay 2020, Bryant and Reeves 2021). Sovereignty is not something that states have, it is something that states enact – albeit within an international context in which norms of sovereignty are always in process. Yet, as Weber (1992) continues, such performances must be acknowledged by internal groups and other states in order to be effective (Rutherford 2012, cf. Philpott 1995). This recognition of sovereignty is mediated by (sets of) historically specific norms that shape the nature of sovereign enactment and that also authorize some states' claims to represent and police these norms. The norms of sovereign enactment are historically variable (Weber 1992[13], Philpott 1995) and they include norms that indicate when sovereignty can be violated legitimately. (Such norms do not overdetermine enactments of sovereignty but do inform how they will be evaluated by others…).

The norms that states, politicians, and organizations invoke to justify and evaluate enactments of sovereignty in particular historical periods can thus constitute unique "sovereignty regimes." Again, such sovereignty regimes do not exist without the enactment of the norms that they assemble: some states claim to represent the norms, other states challenge to them, and efforts emerge to explain away their contradictions. According to this conception, sovereignty is a concept that is always practiced, this practice varies historically, and the practice of sovereignty can diverge from its philosophical statement or justification.

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[13] Double check Weber's discussion of norms. She is critical of the focus on norms, arguing that they often naturalize the international order.

For example, Anthony Anghie's (2004) historical study shows how early formulations of the sovereignty concept were actually articulated to justify European colonization of the Americas. Early modern scholars argued that the expeditions organized by the Spanish and Portuguese crowns served as representatives of these sovereign monarchies. By this logic, the "failure" of American social groups to properly "welcome" the expeditions constituted an affront to Spanish and Portuguese sovereignty that justified military response and submission. In this case and the others that Anghie examines, the analysis situates a particular articulation of the sovereignty concept in its historical setting and does so by examining what kinds of political interventions it enabled. (Note here the contrast to scholars who might build a normative model of sovereignty based on the image of Westphalian peace).[14] Such analysis treats theories of sovereignty not in their own terms but in regard to their practical effects.

More generally, from this perspective, the history of sovereignty is less about how sovereign states developed and more about how the sovereignty concept authorized forms of conquest, domination and policing. For, assertions of sovereignty have often emerged as justifications for powerful polities to exert control over less powerful polities. Anghie's argument on the co-constitution of the sovereignty concept and nascent colonialism makes this clear. Iberian scholars articulated the sovereignty concept by way of describing how indigenous groups in the Americas had, by their reasoning, violated it. Military assault against these groups was thereby justified as a defense of sovereignty and as a necessary action to curb the group's purportedly aberrant sovereignty. Thus, if at times the doctrine of state sovereignty appeared to contradict the brutal practices of European colonialism (Pitts

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[14] For a recent review that address political myths about the Treaty of Westphalia, see Claire Vergerio, "Beyond the Nation-State," *Boston Review,* May 27, 2021. https://bostonreview.net/politics/claire-vergerio-beyond-nation-state

2004), Anghie demonstrates how, on a practical level, the doctrine of state sovereignty fueled colonialism.

In another example of a historical approach, Dipesh Chakrabarty also reflects on how concepts of sovereignty informed the practice of British rule in India. Drawing on Homi Bhabha (1992), Chakrabarty (2002:10) discusses a tension within Enlightenment historicity when it comes to colonies. Colonized peoples could appear in a "pedagogic" mode, as woefully backward and superstitious "peasants" in need of education before self-rule. Yet, colonized peoples might also appear in a "performative" mode, as expressing an organic sovereignty through spectacular acts of rebellion, protest, and electoral mobilization. According to ideologies of the civilizing mission, modernization, and post-socialist transition, "pedagogic" rule would result in the legitimate "performance" of political modernity. Chakrabarty (2002) thus identifies a version of the sovereignty trap—of an imperative to perform sovereignty all the while it is being undermined—in colonialist and imperialist ideology and governance. Significantly, this trap was predicated on colonial efforts to tame the sovereignty of the colonized.

In their own historicist approach to the sovereignty concept, Howland and White (2009) build on Anghie (2004) to argue that the so-called "recognition doctrine," that is, the norms by which state sovereignty is conditional on its recognition by other states, is itself of relatively recent vintage, emerging after World War Two and the waves of decolonization that followed it. This recognition doctrine, which arguably constitutes the currently dominant "sovereignty regime," has had significant geopolitical consequences. As Howland and White state (2009:7), it "served to replace society as the origin of law with sovereignty as a structure of power and decision making. Only the properly constituted sovereign states of Europe were in a position to recognize the sovereign status of other states, and this

practice has been institutionalized in the United Nations […] The important point is that

European states made demands upon non-European societies as to the laws by which the

latter were governed and, at the same time, constructed a body of international law that

privileged European practices." In this case too, one encounters an example of how the

enactment of sovereignty norms fuels and justifies inequality and political intervention.

Byrant and Reeves (2021:9) have asked, "despite… evidence that authority is never

singular and that sovereigns are never supreme, why do we continually revert to viewing

this array of actually existing sovereign options as 'exceptions' to the Westphalian 'rule'?"

One answer to this question would be that the identification of exceptions to "proper

sovereignty" is a core aspect of the sovereignty concept itself. It provides an alibi for

powerful states' interventions in places where sovereignty is labeled as untame. Yarimar

Bonilla (2013: 162) makes this point, arguing that:

> we must examine how claims to an exceptional "waning" or "failure" of sovereignty
> allows for interventions to be carried out in the name of freedom, democracy, and
> human rights—terms that are all integral parts of the seductive and prescriptive
> family of North Atlantic universals. The fact that "failed" or "occupied" spaces are
> expected to retain their nominal sovereignty allows these forms of intervention to
> be cast as strengthening (rather than undermining) local states, while simultaneously
> allowing foreign actors to abdicate responsibility for the internal instability their
> presence might cause.

Aida Hozic (2009:247) makes a similar point in regard to international intervention in the

Balkans, arguing that, "One of the reasons that sovereignty in the Balkans is so paradoxical

is that it is so frequently violated in the name of sovereignty itself." More broadly, a quick

survey of recent history is laden with examples of powerful states' efforts to tame and

reform the sovereignty of others, from full-on exercises in occupation and state-building, to

demands for structural adjustment and austerity, to the conditionalities of European

integration (Cowan 2007, Böröcz 2006, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004), to the power

of international indices and the "diplomatic profiles" (Ralph 2015) that they produce.

So often then, assertations of sovereignty and the demand to reform and perform

sovereignty amount to a trap by which powerful states demonstrate their power over and

intervene in other states. As Cynthia Weber expresses it (1992: 201), since "intervention

justifications are posed in terms of restoring or preserving the community-recognized

sovereign authority in a particular state (the monarch or the people), they are paradoxical,

"because they both recognize where sovereign authority in a target state might legitimately

exist as well as subvert that authority because the target state's sovereign authority is

represented or spoken for by a foreign state." However, rather than a problem to be

solved, such paradoxes are what make sovereignty effective in the global arena. The

paradoxes fuel continual efforts to make "right" forms of sovereignty. The sovereignty trap

is not a bug within the contemporary system of state sovereignty, it is a defining feature.

Making Choices, Part Two

Given the constant stream of diplomatic commentary on political issues in Macedonia, it is

perhaps not surprising that uncertainties, and even anxieties, over Macedonia's sovereignty

permeated the Macedonian public sphere on politics. The uncertainties focused less on

whether or not Macedonia was sovereign—such an academic concern would only lead to a

rabbit hole of definitions—than on whether or not Macedonia had the "proper" kind of

sovereignty. Was it "European" or "backwards"? Was it "respected" or "submissive"? In

Daniel Philpott's (1995: 357) pithy wording, "sovereignty is never without an adjective."

And, in the postconflict years, much political effort and much political speech was expended

to assert and to evaluate the quality of Macedonia's sovereignty. This is apparent in the

ways that both American and European diplomats and Macedonian political leaders participated in the Macedonian public sphere.

The Diplomats

Through the form and content of their public speech, American and European diplomats most often presented Macedonian sovereignty in two ways: as uncompromised but also as a work-in-progress. On one level, the very fact of diplomatic commentary presupposed that Macedonian sovereignty was still "immature," that it required guidance and oversight to realize its "European" potential. The substance of diplomats' commentary, those all-too-often invocations of the "path to Europe" and the dangers of "backsliding," echoed and extended this supposition. But, such commentary also risked the appearance of inappropriate meddling in Macedonian politics which would slight the country's sovereignty. Thus, on another level, diplomats deployed several discursive techniques by which to signal the autonomy of Macedonian sovereignty despite their prescriptive commentary on Macedonian politics. Such techniques provided strategies by which the diplomats could deflect, defuse, or disregard accusations of paternalist or neoimperialist conduct. Thus, alongside diplomats' perpetual commentary on how Macedonian politics should best proceed, there was a parallel, serial argument that Macedonian sovereignty was uncompromised, that Macedonian policy making was not set by outside interests.

One common way that the diplomats signaled the sanctity of Macedonian sovereignty was in their own self-positioning. They recurrently described their role in Macedonia as an advisory one, disavowing interventionist intent and agency. They were there to help, and, to echo Lawrence Butler, *not* there "to tell [Macedonian political leaders] what to do." For instance, Romano Prodi, when visiting Macedonia as President of the

European Commission just before the 2004 referendum on redistricting could say to

Macedonian audiences, "I will not tell you how to vote [on the referendum], but the citizens

of Macedonia are conscious of the consequences. This is a decisive moment and I hope that

the citizens will vote for a future in the EU, for peace and for progress."[15] In this example,

Prodi steps right up to the border of unabashed prescription. But even here, he couches his

exhortation as a "hope," and underscores the limits of his agency in proclaiming that "he

will not tell [one] how to vote."

   There were, however, other indirect ways in which diplomats would frame their

involvements in Macedonian politics as form of limited assistance. For instance, in a May

2004 interview with the spokesperson for the OSCE mission to Macedonia, I asked what she

thought of the various conspiracy theories that circulated about the international

community and alleged ulterior motives in Macedonia. She responded by stating how the

OSCE only operates in Macedonia by the invitation and renewed agreement of the

government, and that the organization can be asked to leave (or have its mandate changed)

at any time. In essence, she described how it was Macedonia's *choice* to allow the OSCE

mission. I countered though that such invitations often exist under direct and indirect forms

of political pressure. She responded by again stating Macedonia's choice in the matter,

continuing that, "if countries in transition desire Eurointegration they must be expected to

enact various reforms to meet European standards and... the OSCE mission is only there to

help these countries in reform and institution-building." But, she did acknowledge how a

refusal to renew an OSCE mission would damage Macedonia's international reputation,

what Michael Ralph (2015) theorizes as a "diplomatic profile" that mediates access to or

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[15] Ivana Serafimova, "Evropa ja saka Makedonija, no so nadminati problemi: Prodi ni go brači evroprašalnikot," *Vreme* (Skopje), October 2, 2004.

exclusion from international compacts and capital flows. The spokesperson continued that

"a hasty departure of the OSCE under domestic pressure would probably be a 'bad sign' in

the eyes of European authorities" even if it was a possible choice, one that both Russia and

Belarus had made.

Similarly, diplomats might assert limits to their presumed authority to comment on

Macedonian political affairs in their interaction with journalists. For example, in the

November 5, 2003 joint press conference of the EU, NATO and the OSCE, a journalist posed

a question to Sheena Thomson, the EU spokesperson, regarding the Macedonian

government's proposal to "reshuffle" ministerial posts. Thomson replied, "On the

reshuffle? Well, as I mentioned before in my statement, this is a positive move that the

Government should take. This is an opportunity to move forward the remaining reforms

required in the Framework Agreement. As to the detail of the Government reshuffle, that is

government business, that is political business, that is not for us to comment on." In

drawing a boundary between "government business" and that appropriately under the

purview of European and American diplomats, such speech acts presupposed some

fundamental preserve of Macedonian state sovereignty. In practice, though, the boundary

between appropriate and inappropriate commentary often seemed to be drawn in an

arbitrary and haphazard fashion. Diplomats might assert that their authority and activity in

Macedonia was limited but such claims did little to clarify where, and indeed whether, such

limits actually existed. On the one hand, then, diplomats' assertion that they lacked

authority to comment on "government business" presented American and European

governments and organizations as "impartial" actors offering "apolitical" or "technical"

advice (cf. Li 2007 on "rendering technical" and Gilbert 2016 "performing

humanitarianism"). On the other hand, however, such assertions typically failed to align

with the experience and impressions of Macedonian observers. Journalists, pundits, and ordinary news consumers widely recognized how American and European diplomats involved themselves in Macedonian political matters.

Diplomats' concern to avoid overstepping their roles in Macedonia also manifested in their use of indirect language. Rather than a stark language of conditionality (Schimmelpfenning and Sedelmeier 2004, Bieber 2011) that tied benefits to specific reforms, the diplomats would describe, for example, how Macedonia's "path to Europe would be more arduous" should reforms not be implemented. (See also Chapter One). Such language obscured the agency of the EU, US, NATO, etc. in determining whether or not Macedonia would be awarded membership in the EU and NATO or be offered other sorts of economic and political benefits. Instead, the diplomats spoke as mere observers, as weather forecasters, describing what might happen but taking no responsibility for it. Indirection thus anchored the "acceptable modes of impartiality" (Billaud 2015: 87) by which diplomats presented themselves. As Stefan Groth (2019) has argued, such diplomatic indirection is often necessary to preserve working relationships on which diplomacy depends, ones that often span disputes and conflicting interests.

In this way, the diplomats participated in and reproduced a more general register of global governance in which indirection is a crucial feature. As Birgit Mueller (2018:4) describes,

> Mechanisms of governance in international organizations use linguistic tools that produce a seemingly neutral expert discourse that draws on numerous statistical indicators and an abstract, vague, and naturalizing vocabulary. Several studies by sociolinguists have demonstrated how this new global language operates through impersonal verbal and nominal constructions. Identifiable authors are absent; the text displays an apparent neutrality and a propensity to use a vague lexical field with positive connotations.

Such language supported and performed diplomats' implicit and explicit claims to stand outside of the Macedonian political scene. They were not intervening in Macedonian politics, which might compromise Macedonian sovereignty. Rather, they were offering expert advice and technical guidance.

The claim that diplomats' role was merely advisory, however, rests on a particular language ideology that understands language as representational, as describing and denoting things in the world (see Kroskrity 2000). Accordingly, to make an observation is an innocent act; it merely represents a state of affairs or a possible chain of events and therefore stops short of intervention. My argument here, however, is that such observations do more than represent a state of affairs, they are also performative. They bring about a different social reality. For instance, they can spring a sovereignty trap.

Chapter One examines the performative effects of diplomatic commentary in greater detail (see also Graan 2016). But, pertinent here is how registers of expert indirection created and reproduced asymmetries between diplomats and Macedonian political leaders. As Summerson Carr (2011) theorizes, expertise is best understood not as a property that some social actors possess but as a quality that social actors enact. American and European diplomats' use of indirect speech was thus a primary way in which the diplomats enacted their expertise on Macedonian political matters, for instance, claiming the right and the ability to evaluate whether a particular policy proposal benefit or harm the country and its European integration.[16] Tellingly, Macedonian political leaders did not, and presumably could not, command this register of European expertise.

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[16] As Andrew Gilbert (2020) discusses, the international interventions that took place in the former Yugoslavia privileged not recognized expertise on the languages and history of Yugoslavia and the broader Balkan region. Rather, the "internationals" who participated in these interventions were recruited as experts on: conflict resolution, democracy promotion, civil society and so on. They were expected to be experts not on what

In commenting on Macedonian political affairs using a language of expert

impartiality, the diplomats claimed superior knowledge over the practice and practicialities

of democratic transition. This has both de-politicizing effects, "that render rule by experts,

that is, technocracy, superior to the rule of the people, that is, democracy" (Barnett 2016:

24) and it also places the diplomats as "trustees," who Tania Li (2007:4) defines as, "a

position defined by the claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for

them, to know what they need." As Li continues (2007:5), "The objective of trusteeship is

not to dominate others—it is to enhance their capacity for action, and to direct it." Such

self-positioning, however, should not occlude the fact that, as Kamari Clarke (2019) argues,

despite its pretensions to universal reason, practices of international expertise and the

presupposition of "knowing better," are grounded in histories of colonialism and racism.

Importantly, one regular way in which American and European diplomats performed

expertise was in framing the "choices" that confronted the Macedonian people and their

political leadership. Examples of this practice were analyzed above. The point here,

however, is that such public comments also enacted a form of "professional vision"

(Goodwin 1994) that functioned to identify, frame, and narrate particular aspects of a

political issue (e.g., its implications for Euro-Atlantic integration) as the most worthy of

consideration and attention. Such expert performance thus advance ways of seeing the

world and understanding a problem. Furthermore, in framing the choices, diplomats also

adopted the position of knowing experts keen to see whether Macedonians could

successfully tame powerful sovereign desires. That is, diplomats asserted their expert

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Yugoslav was but on what intervening powers thought that it should be. See Gilbert (2020:XX) for a deeper
analysis of the political and epistemic assumptions bound up the figure of the international expert.

authority to judge whether or not Macedonian political leaders expressed their sovereign

decision making in ways deemed "appropriate."

Through such behavior, the diplomats approached what Michael Barnett (2016) has

described as "international paternalism." As Barnett (2016:11) describes it, paternalism is

"the attempted or accomplished substitution of one person's judgment for another's on the

grounds that it is in the latter's best interests." In the Macedonian case, however, the

international actors did not impose their paternalist judgment on the country. Rather, they

broadcasted their judgments on the wager that Macedonian political leaders would also

"choose" them. Such framings thus "forced a choice" by politicizing and moralizing the

decision in no uncertain terms. Either the Macedonians' choice would be "good," that is,

"progressive," "European," and "democratic," or whether it would be "bad" and invoke the

violent spectre of indefinite but fearful "past" times.

If, then, democratic and parliamentary process is one defined by the consideration

of different choices (e.g., should the legislation be passed? Should the compromise be

struck? Which candidate will I choose to support?), European and American diplomats

recurrently "made" these choices into tests that would determine the character of

Macedonian sovereignty. Again, as Lawrence Butler stated in advance of the 2004

referendum vote, "The referendum gives citizens a chance to show their maturity and

wisdom for the future."[17] Yet, to be "mature" in this version of affairs, was not just to make

a democratic choice, but to make a choice that conformed with the paternalist vision of the

American and European diplomats.

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[17] "Референдумот ќе донесе несигурност." *Dnevnik,* September 24, 2004.
http://star.dnevnik.com.mk/default.aspx?pbroj=2568&stID=40537

The manner in which European and American diplomats positioned themselves and participated in the Macedonian public sphere on publics thereby perpetuated uncertainties and anxieties about Macedonian sovereignty. In short, the diplomats recurrently delivered mixed messages: that Macedonia was sovereign and fully responsible for its own political decisions, but that its sovereignty could not be trusted, that there were still tests to pass. Through such words and actions, diplomats made and remade the structural doubts about Macedonia's sovereignty that grounded the sovereignty trap.

Macedonian Political Leaders

For Macedonian political leaders, anxieties and uncertainties over Macedonian sovereignty created its own set of obstacles and opportunities. In the wake of the 2001 conflict, popular support for Euro-Atlantic integration soared, promising as it did security and prosperity, and so it was a clear point of national consensus. Yet, some ethnic Macedonians remained frustrated by the Ohrid Framework Agreement and its perceived concessions to the ethnic Albanian insurgency. Thus, while Euro-Atlantic integration was widely supported, the political question remained: on whose terms and at what cost? Macedonian political leaders thus developed their own strategies to perform Macedonian sovereignty and, in doing so, to authorize themselves as respected stewards of the national interest.

On one level, then, politicians from across the political spectrum often sought to achieve international recognition, either as a partner or a rival, that could be translated into political capital among domestic constituencies (cf. Gilbert 2017, 2020). Macedonian politicians might also leverage their strategic (non)cooperation in policymaking to broker compromises or steer final outcomes toward their own preferences. Such displays of

influence over or oppositional stances against European and American governments and organizations amounted to public performances in sovereignty in the conditions of Macedonia's supervised state. (Tellingly, then, Macedonian political leaders authorized themselves by claiming responsibility and power over Macedonian politics in contrast to the American and European diplomats who authorized themselves by disclaiming their responsibility and power over Macedonian politics.) Macedonian political actors could thus access and perform various forms of political agency despite, if also because of, the overbearing foreign presence in the country. Indeed, diplomats' commentary could often be interpreted as public efforts to rein in this agency or, at least, to channel it toward Euro-American political goals.

Yet, the pronounced, public presence of American and European diplomats within Macedonia's postconflict public sphere did often place Macedonian political leaders on awkward footing. Their own political stances might be undermined by diplomats' public disapproval, as was seen in the example of the VMRO's retraction of a threat to boycott the 2004 presidential election that was discussed in Chapter One. Or, should Macedonian political leaders align themselves with diplomats' policy preferences, they risked accusations of being "subservient" to outside interests, that is, of compromising Macedonian sovereignty. Macedonian politicians thus faced a double burden. Not only did they need to make choices in the sense of deciding which policies to suggest, promote and endorse but in addition, they needed to frame these policies as "choices" that they "made," that is, as actionable decisions over which they could claim authorship or ownership.

In order to navigate this threat of awkwardness, Macedonian politicians pursued a range of strategies. For example, political leaders who aligned themselves with the European Union and the United States found ways to claim agency over decision-making

despite the public profile of American and European diplomats. Thus, during the

campaigning that preceded the 2004 referendum on decentralization, Macedonian

president Branko Crvenkovski often presented himself as advocating for greater support and

assurances from the EU and US. As he stated in a press interview after a meeting with Javier

Solana, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, "From the EU and NATO we seek not

only declarative support and political statements, but also more concrete support as a clear

signal to the citizens of Macedonia that what we are implementing, which has encountered

difficulties and tensions, is in fact the right way."[18] In another interview following the

meeting, Crvenkovski explicitly denied foreign interference, "This has not been done under

pressure from anyone. It is a Macedonian decision, if for our country it is important for

Brussels to valorize the decision for decentralization in the right way."[19] Through such

interventions, Crvenkovski claimed authorship for the decentralization plan and agency over

European and American actors. He was not following their directives but they were heeding

his exhortations to comment on referendum. Corollary to this strategy was thus to portray

oneself as central to European and American actors, to suggest that they listened to and

even needed the politician in question, which of course, they often did.

Politicians supporting Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration also often portrayed

themselves as improving Macedonia's international image (*imidž* in the Macedonian

language), which was assumed to enhance Macedonia's standing and influence among

international actors. Chapter Six (see also Graan 2010) focuses on the Macedonian

discourse on *imidž*, exploring its premises and applications. Nevertheless, it is worth

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[18] "Претседателот Црвенковски во Брисел со Солана и со Шефер разговараше за актуелните случучвања во земјава." *Utrinski Vesnik*, July 27, 2004 http://star.utrinski.com.mk/?pBroj=1535&stID=19654&pR=2

[19] Светлана Јовановска, " И Брисел го боли глава од референдумот." *Dnevnik*, July 27, 2004. http://star.dnevnik.com.mk/?pBroj=2517&stID=37205

highlighting here how the discourse on *imidž* figured Macedonian political leaders as agents: by improving Macedonia's international reputation, they could secure unique benefits from the international powers understood to determine Macedonia's political future.

Politicians who took a more ambivalent stance toward American and European involvement in Macedonia sought not only to claim agency over international actors but also to assert Macedonian sovereignty in spite of international actors. While these political actors often positioned themselves as nationalists and conservatives, they might also emerge from within a wider ideological spectrum depending on the circumstances. Whether due to nationalist conviction, policy disagreement, or even spite (*inaet*) over Euro-American paternalism, these political actors would most commonly adopt a populist aesthetic, portraying themselves as defenders of "the people" against outsider or elite interests. The numerous referendums and boycotts that have punctuated political life in Macedonia are one outcome of this political stance. Referendums, in particular, provided a political form to claim and demonstrate the sovereignty of the people against the power of political elites. Thus, during the 2004 referendum campaign period, Pavle Trajanov, who was leader of the small Democratic Party which joined the coalition to support the repeal of the new decentralization plan, wrote in a newspaper op-ed, "parties are here to direct and move things, to provide the necessary logistics, but the last word is with the citizen, who with his signature and voice makes the decision for the future of Macedonia."[20]

Years later, Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski seized on this kind of politics with his spectacular but virulently nationalist project to remake the center of Skopje as a pantheon

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[20] ПАВЛЕ ТРАЈАНОВ, "Со решето не се плаши мечка." *Dnevnik*,
http://star.dnevnik.com.mk/?pBroj=2544&stID=38857

to Macedonian national heroes. While never outright rejecting Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, Gruevski redirected his attention to economic development, taking advantage of investment funds that found Macedonia desirable in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis (Mattioli 2020).   With money in the bank, Gruevski disregarded the skepticism of American and European diplomats and contrived an autonomous and unapologetically nationalist vision of Macedonia's future (Graan 2013, 2016). For many years, his assertions of (his version of) Macedonian sovereignty propelled his efforts to control Macedonian politics (Mattioli 2020).

In the postconflict years it was thus both Euro-American diplomats and Macedonian political leaders who worked to represent and perform some version of Macedonian sovereignty or to ground some particular kind of sovereignty regime. Such practices were efforts to "fix" sovereignty in two senses of the word. Representations and performances of Macedonian sovereignty both claimed to repair or improve an earlier, tarnished sovereignty but also to stabilize it, to fix it in place. But, because these performances were so often at cross purpose, performances instead served to perpetuate the status quo of Macedonia's supervised state. The sovereignty trap, that field of structural doubt produced around claims to Macedonia's political autonomy, demanded and provoked various assertions of Macedonian sovereignty, which only fueled diplomats' commentary that sought to tame sovereign desire into the "right kind" of sovereignty.

The Sovereignty Trap

Across the postconflict period, then, both American and European diplomats and Macedonian political leaders entangled themselves in the sovereignty trap when responding to that paradoxical imperative of late 20th century state-building that expected "transitional" states to make their own sovereign choices but also to choose in accordance with North Atlantic models of liberal democracy. In many ways, the sovereignty trap incorporated longerstanding colonial logics. American and European diplomats approached Macedonian politics in a paternalist, pedagogic mode, claiming the authority to help and assist, to teach and motivate, to evaluate and recommend within a process that promised Euro-Atlantic integration and its hegemonic framing of political modernity. At the same time, the diplomats and the institutions they represented expected performative displays of Macedonian sovereignty. Such displays were necessary to demonstrate Macedonia's autonomy and democracy. But, for diplomatic observers, they were also risky as they might betray or exceed the normative vision of political modernity to which the diplomats subscribed.

Macedonia's supervised state thus took the form of a vicious circle of commentary and response, of assertion and performance. In pedagogic mode, diplomats commented on Macedonian political affairs, publicly and regularly. In performative mode, Macedonian political leaders asserted Macedonian sovereignty. However, the contradictions of the sovereignty trap, which demanded sovereign display while simultaneously undermining it, meant that these two modes could never satisfy one another. International paternalism would always produce its discontents in the form of sovereign assertions that differed from paternalist assumptions, such as the referendums and boycotts that have frequently appeared in Macedonian politics. Diplomats would then respond with more commentary, that is, repetitive, serial efforts to label forms of sovereign display as (in)appropriate

according to the Euro-Atlantic vision of liberal democracy. The sovereignty trap thus defined an ever anxious space of sovereign performance, of performances that could not possibly satisfy the contradictory expectations placed upon them (cf. Trouillot 2000).

In claiming the authority to frame and evaluate the political choices that constituted Macedonia's process of postconflict political reform, the diplomats created a distinction between those already entitlted to sovereignty and those unprepared for it. Importantly, however, this distinction is not one that preceded transition's evaluation regime. Rather acts of evaluation served to make the distinction and thus to construct geopolitical hierarchies.[21]

So, yes, diplomatic commentary, as shown in Chapter One, resulted in a particular form of transnational governance that existed alongside other forms of paternalism, soft governance, and conditionality politics.[22] But, it was far from an all-encompassing power. Diplomatic commentary did succeed in shaping the tenor of political discussion and policymaking in Macedonia (see Chapter One) but, as I argue here, it also provoked and produced sovereign displays that challenged and refused the imperative to act accordingly. Diplomatic commentary thus was not only performed regularly, it also required regular patching, that is, new incentives, rewards and promises to shore up diplomats' authority and the credibility of Euro-Atlantic integration, in the face of referendums, boycotts and refusals. Tellingly, it was just before the November vote on the 2004 referendum that the United States government recognized Macedonia not as "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" but under its constitutional name, "the Republic of Macedonia."

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[21] Cf. Maria Todorova, Imagining the Balkans, p3, on Heisenberg and objects that exist as functions of their measurement.

[22] On the argument (in the SAGE handbook of Diplomacy) that diplomacy and governance have converged…

The sovereignty trap and its dynamic of the pedagogic and the performative thus perpetuates the structure of transition and the politics of the "not yet" (Boyer 2005) by which "transitional" countries continually approach an ever-receding telos of full membership within international compacts and the version of "political modernity" that they symbolize. But, perhaps, this transitional state could better be conceptualized as a politics of the "just enough." Through their public language practices, European and American diplomats and Macedonian political leaders variously performed "sovereignty" and the "international order." The effect, though, was not to establish the clear and firm sovereignty of Macedonia. Rather, the practices rendered the anxieties and ambiguities of sovereignty tolerable "enough." Disavowals of interventionist intent made foreign intervention just minor enough to be tolerable, at least for now. EU and US diplomats' recognition of Macedonian sovereignty just enough to avoid more serious protests against foreign interference. Macedonia political leaders conformed with EU/US policy just enough to maintain, with occasional patching, European integration as a political structure. This was not vast political transformation. It was not sweeping imperialism or colonialism. It was everyday efforts to reproduce a status quo that was tolerable enough, that is, to keep a status quo constituted by significant paradoxes and tensions from cracking.

So where does this leave us? Is there a way out of the sovereignty trap? As Yarimar Bonilla (2013: 163, 2015) has shown, several political movements in the Caribbean refuse Westphalian models of sovereignty, pursuing political settlements that are not realized in an autonomous nation-state. In doing so, Bonilla argues, they reveal how structural adjustment policies, international NGOs, humanitarian interventions, forms of international supervision, etc. have long belied the Westphalian ideal.   Such movements understand sovereignty

neither as romance or tragedy but as a sign under which power is brokered (Bonilla 2013: 164). In imagining and working toward futures that refuse sovereignty, such movements in effect refuse the sovereignty trap. They are also important reminders that sovereignty regimes do and have change over time. Such examples thus beg the question: what different kind of international order might diplomats and politicians, in addition to social movements, enact and create?

At present, though, Macedonia's long history of internationally supervised political reform attests to enduring power of the sovereignty myth and the forms of international intervention and governance that is enables. The 2018 Prespa Agreement is revealing here. Through the treaty, Macedonia agreed to change its name to North Macedonia in exchange for Greece's recognition of the Macedonian language and nationality and the end of Greek obstruction of Macedonia's accession to NATO and the EU. Both Macedonia and Greece had been under heavy international pressure to forge a compromise that would end the "name dispute" between the two countries, and the Prespa Agreement was a remarkable work of political pragmatism by which Macedonia "acted accordingly," fulfilling European and American calls to solve the impasse with Greece. The Agreement, however, provoked sovereign outrage in Macedonia, as many groups decried the name change as a national betrayal and a capitulation to Greece and the "international community." In response, the government called for a referendum on the agreement, hoping to trump the outrage with its own definitive display of popular sovereignty. As one might expect, American and European diplomats took to their podiums, broadcasting messages in support of the referendum and the agreement.

The referendum results, however, were inconclusive. The majority of people cast a vote overwhelmingly supported the Prespa Agreement and the name change. But, due to a

boycott of the referendum called by groups opposing the Prespa Agreement, voter turnout did not meet the threshold necessary to validate the result. All groups claimed victory. Diplomats and the government pointed to overwhelming support for the agreement that was registered in the referendum vote; opponents pointed to the low turnout and claimed to speak of a "silent majority" who rejected the agreement. Ultimately, the Prespa Agreement was passed by the parliaments in both Macedonia and Greece, leading to the birth of North Macedonia. But, a satisfying display of sovereign decision making was lacking, for agreement supporters and opponents alike. Rather, the agreement was "just enough" to continue Macedonia's decades long process of Euro-Atlantic integration, and as of this writing, North Macedonia still awaits membership in the European Union. It is not easy to escape from the sovereignty trap.

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