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Election Analysis

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# 2021 Local Elections in North Macedonia: A Prelude to Alternation of Power?

Jovan Bliznakovski\*

**Keywords:** North Macedonia, elections, VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, Zaev

## Introduction

Prior to the 2021 elections, North Macedonia had an entrenched tradition of local-level voting for the central-level incumbent. The party leading the central government has always won most mayoral positions at the local elections since they were first held in 1996, making the lower-level contest a simple showcase of the support for the ruling parties. The October 2021 elections were quite different: the opposition right-wing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (*Vnatreshna makedonska revolucionerna organizacija – Demokratska partija za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo*, VMRO-DPMNE) claimed a dominant win, resulting in a resignation of the ruling center-left Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (*Socijaldemokratski sojuz na Makedonija*, SDSM) Prime Minister (PM) Zaev and the appointment of a new government with changed personnel from the side of SDSM. This outcome is due to the general public's disappointment with the performance of the SDSM-led government, especially regarding persistent corruption, the inability to reinstate rule of law following the disclosed abuses from the *Wiretapping Affair* (2015), and the lack of further progress regarding EU-membership despite heavy national concessions such as the name change (2019). The election results can also be read as a symptom of the population's major disillusionment with the prospect of opening EU accession negotiations soon. Following these developments, a change of power can be expected, with VMRO-DPMNE eyeing to reclaim the central government (after their 2017 exit) at the next parliamentary elections which could take place as late as 2024.

## Context of elections

Political system, quality of democracy and elections

North Macedonia is a unitary parliamentary democracy with two tiers of government. National elections are held for members of parliament and president, while the government is appointed by the parliament. At the local level, the country is divided in a total of 81 local self-government units (80 municipalities plus the City of Skopje, the capital, which holds a special status).

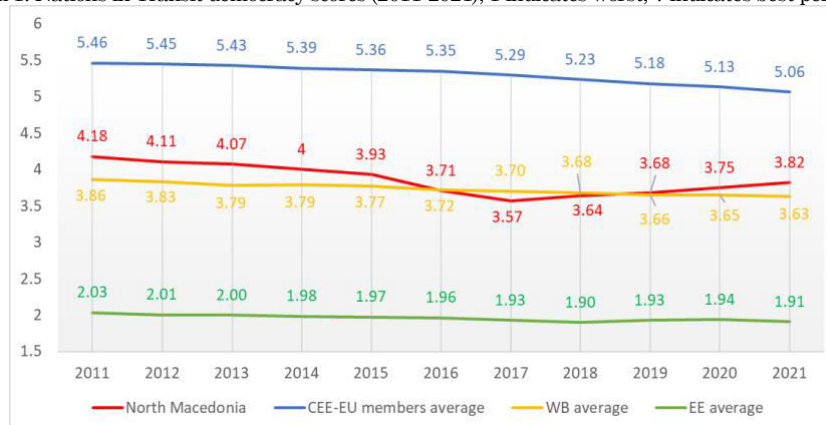
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Local elections are conducted every four years for mayors (under a majority system in two rounds with required turnout of 1/3 voters at unit level for election) and for members of the local representative institutions, the local councils (proportional system with closed lists).

Taken generally, North Macedonia lags in its quality of democracy compared to other former communist, now EU-member countries in Central and Eastern Europe. According to the Freedom House 2021 Nations in Transit ranking, North Macedonia is classified as a “transitional or hybrid regime”, with a democracy score which is close to the Western Balkan<sup>1</sup> average; lower than the average scores of the Central Europe EU members;<sup>2</sup> and higher than the former communist countries from Eastern Europe which are not EU members<sup>3</sup> (see Diagram 1). North Macedonia’s scores in three key indicators – national democratic governance, local democratic governance, and elections – are also at an intermediate level between the two groups of countries (Diagram 2). In 2021, North Macedonia was ranked highest in the whole Western Balkan region in national democratic governance and electoral process.

Diagram 1: Nations in Transit democracy scores (2011-2021), 1 indicates worst, 7 indicates best performance



Source: Freedom House

The country entered the 2021 elections facing several familiar recurring problems related to its democratic functioning. Political polarization between the two main political parties, SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, remained high during the year and continued to affect the normal work of the parliament.<sup>4</sup> The judiciary continued to suffer from political influence and public trust continued to decline<sup>5</sup> despite notable first instance verdicts in three high-profile cases during 2021.<sup>6</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.

<sup>2</sup> Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

<sup>3</sup> Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

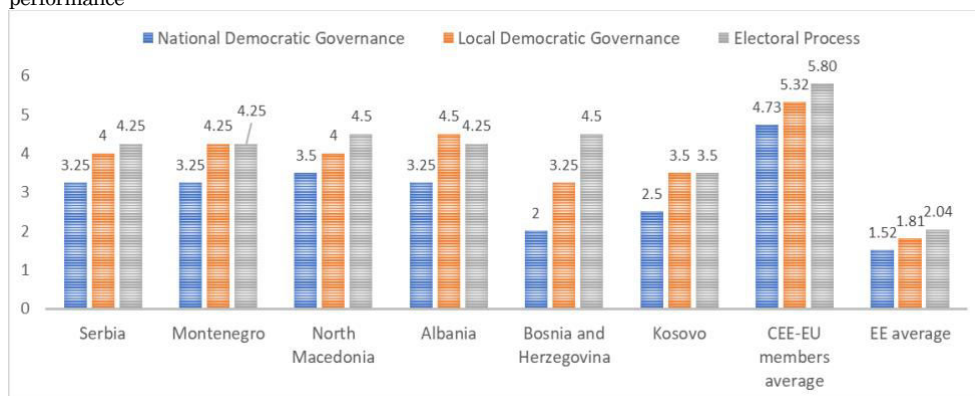
<sup>4</sup> European Commission. 2021. *North Macedonia 2021 Report* (accessed: 12 February 2022), 4.

<sup>5</sup> The latest edition of the Balkan Barometer survey (2021) found that significant majority of citizens (75%) disagrees that the judicial system works independently, a large increase of 26% in comparison to 2020. See: ACIT and EPIK Institute. 2021. *Balkan Barometer Public Opinion Analytical Report* (accessed: 12 February 2022), 120-21.

<sup>6</sup> Two important cases connected to the wiretapping from 2015, as well as one connected to the parliamentary riots from 2017, were concluded at first instance during 2021. See: Jakov Marusic,

country has a long unsuccessful history in dealing with corruption at the highest levels and the SDSM-led government was not immune to corruption scandals.<sup>7</sup>

Diagram 2: Nations in Transit scores in three indicators (2021), 1 indicates worst, 7 indicates best performance



Source: Freedom House

The October local elections were thus conducted with the backdrop of these deficiencies, and, likewise, featured many of the same problems as previous election cycles. According to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE-ODIHR) the elections were competitive with fundamental freedoms widely respected, but also characterized by legal shortcomings, “systemic advantages” for the largest parties, and an under-resourced electoral administration.<sup>8</sup> Women participation remained low in the mayoral contest (only 8%) but in line with the 45% legal quota in the councils’ lists.<sup>9</sup> The campaign was peaceful but dominated by negative rhetoric and mutual accusations instead of issue-based politics. Political parties continued to practice clientelism as means of political mobilization (OSCE-ODIHR noted cases of vote buying and voter intimidation)<sup>10</sup> and the central-level ruling parties started and completed a large number of infrastructure projects during 2021 worth millions of euros as means to attract voters.<sup>11</sup> The country has a history of abuse of state resources for electoral purposes. Media reporting continued to improve, during this election cycle, with OSCE-ODIHR concluding that it was generally “neutral in tone”.<sup>12</sup>

Sinisa. 2021. North Macedonia Jails Ex-Secret Police Chief in Wiretapping Case. *Balkan Insight*, 26 February 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022); Associated Press. 2021. North Macedonia: 4 jailed over 2017 parliament attack. *AP News*, 26 July 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Dimeska, Frosina. 2021. Five Things To Know About The Fall Of North Macedonia's Prime Minister. *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 02 November 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>8</sup> ODIHR Election Observation Mission. 2021. Republic of North Macedonia – Local Elections, 17 October 2021. Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions (accessed: 12 February 2022), 1.

<sup>9</sup> A total of 111 (19%) of the councilors’ lists were headed by women. See: ODIHR Election Observation Mission, *Republic of North Macedonia*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> ODIHR Election Observation Mission, *Republic of North Macedonia*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Mitevaska, Marija. 2021. Milioni za predizborna rekonstrukcija na ulici i patishta. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, 22 September 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>12</sup> ODIHR Election Observation Mission, *Republic of North Macedonia*, 2.

#### Party system and election contestants

North Macedonia has a multi-party system with 3.7/3.2 effective number of parties at the electoral/parliamentary level, per the results of the last parliamentary elections in 2020.<sup>13</sup> Being a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic society in which ethno-political conflicts have occurred in the past three decades, North Macedonia's party politics is characterized by division on ethnic lines.<sup>14</sup> Political parties typically mobilize among their co-ethnics and central governments have always been formed by coalitions of ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian parties (a necessity, given that a quarter of the population is ethnically Albanian).

The two biggest political parties in the ethnic Macedonian camp and fierce rivals are the center-right VMRO-DPMNE and the center-left SDSM, who have taken turns in ruling the country since the first multiparty elections. Both parties have endured corruption scandals while in power and have utilized their control of the institutions in political competition, developing a rivalry that has significant effects on the political polarization of the population. VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM ideologically diverge on a list of important national issues with the former developing a more ethno-nationalist narrative than the latter which provides an ideological appeal which is more multicultural and internationalist. Both parties have thrived during the decades while significantly relying on clientelist mobilization and patronage appointments in the institutions, managing to build a solid party base and loyal electorate.

The biggest ethnic Albanian party in the country is the Democratic Union for Integration (*Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim / Demokratska unija za integracija*, DUI), which has been a regular junior coalition partner in the government since 2002, apart from the 2006-2008. As VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, DUI has also been embroiled in numerous corruption and abuse of power scandals and has relied on clientelism and patronage to maintain its party base. DUI is the most moderate of all ethnic Albanian political parties in the country when it comes to the issue of advancing the rights of the Albanians, namely, promoting the full implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement as the sole solution. During 2021, the party announced that it has decided to rebrand itself to a "green" party.<sup>15</sup> Its closest competitors in these elections have been the AA-A coalition, a coalition consisted by Alliance for the Albanians (*Aleanca për Shqiptarët / Alijansa za Albancite*, AA) and Alternative (*Alternativa*, A), which has established itself as the second largest Albanian political force following the 2020 parliamentary elections, and Besa (which participated in the government at the time of the 2021 elections). Both AA-A and Besa ran a strong negative campaign against the DUI in the run-up to the elections.

All the above parties fielded candidates for the 2021 elections, and VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM did so in coalitions with many smaller parties, including

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<sup>13</sup> Casal Bértoa, F. 2022. Database on WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Hislope Robert. 2013. *Macedonia*, in: *The handbook of political change in Eastern Europe* (3rd ed.), edited by Berglund, Sten / Ekman, Joakim Ekman / Deegan-Krause, Kevin and Terje Knutsen. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Pub, 607-649.

<sup>15</sup> Neziri, Xhelal. 2021. North Macedonia's DUI's Takes Big Gamble on Green Makeover. *Balkan Insight*, 15 June 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

those of the smaller ethnic communities. In addition, more than a dozen smaller political parties/coalitions and non-partisan lists took part in the elections independently of the larger parties.<sup>16</sup> Levica, a declaratively anti-systemic leftist party with a strong ethno-nationalistic undertone who currently holds two Member of Parliament (MP) positions, the Democratic Party of the Albanians (*Partia Demokratike Shqiptare / Demokratska partija na Albancite*, DPA), a small Albanian party with one current MP, and the Liberal Democratic Party (*Liberalno-demokratska partija*, LDP)-Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (Demokratska obnova na Makedonija, DOM), a coalition of two parties which feature in SDSM's central government coalition, all fielded candidates in different localities across the country. Some parties acted in coalitions in specific localities and independently in other, e.g., Citizen Option for Macedonia (*Gragjanska opcija za Makedonija*, GROM), who fielded a mayoral candidate in one municipality while participating in coalition with VMRO-DPMNE in all others.

A total of 299 mayoral and 10,649 councilors' candidates (across 571 lists) took part in the elections, competing for 81 mayoral and 1347 councilors positions.<sup>17</sup> A relatively high number (in comparison to past election cycles) of non-partisan candidates (27) and lists (65) were registered.<sup>18</sup> Many of them (especially those competing in urban centers) participated under a green political agenda, and were an extension of grass-roots operations, putting local issues into focus and receiving national public attention. Others were created as a result of disagreement between SDSM's mayors and the party in the past four years.

Political developments relevant for the elections, campaign issues

In February 2015, the leader of the largest opposition party SDSM, Zaev, publicly disclosed the *Wiretapping Affair*, claiming that more than 20,000 people had been illegally wiretapped by high-level officials of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the year, Zaev continued to publish batches of the wiretapped conversations which revealed excessive abuse of power, corruption, and other misdeeds by PM Gruevski and his closest associates. Gruevski refused to step down and large public protests followed throughout 2015 and 2016,<sup>20</sup> leading to the early December 2016 elections in which VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM ended with almost equal number of votes and MPs.<sup>21</sup> The third largest party, DUI, refused to form a coalition with the former, paving a way for a new government following VMRO-DPMNE's 11 year rule (9 of which had been in coalition with the DUI). Attempting to prevent the inevitable, VMRO-DPMNE organized its supporters to storm the Parliament in April 2017 during the

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<sup>16</sup> An overview of the election contestants is available in the following source: Pankovski, Marko / Mihajlovski, Nikola / Naskova, Iva and Zdravko Stavrov. 2021. *The Republic of North Macedonia's 2021 Local Elections Handbook* (2nd ed.). Skopje: Konrad Adenauer Foundation in the Republic of North Macedonia and Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje, 47-136.

<sup>17</sup> ODIHR Election Observation Mission, *Republic of North Macedonia*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Pankovski et al., *The Republic of North Macedonia*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Georgievski, Boris. 2015. [Macedonia reels over evidence of Orwellian surveillance](#). *Deutsche Welle*, 27 February 2015 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Ozimec, Kristina. 2016. [Macedonia: 'Colorful Revolution' paints raucous rainbow](#). *Deutsche Welle*, 21 April 2016 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>21</sup> BBC. 2016. [Macedonia election: Conservatives win fragile parliamentary majority](#). *BBC News*, 12 December 2016 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

session in which the SDSM-led majority appointed a new speaker.<sup>22</sup> The angry mob attacked the present MPs and journalists leaving many injured before the police finally intervened. SDSM's bid was however deemed legitimate and a new government consisting of SDSM, DUI, AA and several smaller parties, led by Zaev, was eventually appointed.<sup>23</sup> Following the 2016 elections, SDSM has been victorious at each of the next three election cycles, the local in 2017 (which SDSM won by a margin of 57 to 5 mayoral positions over VMRO-DPMNE),<sup>24</sup> the presidential in 2019 and the early parliamentary in 2020, ruling the country alongside the DUI as main coalition partner.

Zaev came to power with the promise to reinstate rule of law and combat corruption following the deeds disclosed in the wiretapping scandal, but four-and-half years later the country is still in a complicated position regarding this issue. Many of its key actors still enjoy impunity, including former PM Gruevski who fled to Hungary in 2018,<sup>25</sup> while other top-level suspects manage to drag out their cases in complicated and lengthy court procedures. The special public prosecutor office which was established to prosecute the wiretapping cases in 2015 was shut down in 2020 after it was established that the chief prosecutor accepted a bribe to intervene on behalf of a suspect.<sup>26</sup> Zaev's own government was at the center of corruption scandals, corruption remained widespread at all levels and sectors, and by the 2021 local elections it seemed that the attempt to reinstate rule of law following the ousting of Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE from power had largely failed. Zaev's government, however, provided a decisive change of the pro-authoritarian course taken by predecessor Gruevski, as the country managed to return a pro-democratic trajectory in the last four years (revisit Diagram 1 for a historical overview of North Macedonia's Nations in Transit democracy scores).

Another of Zaev's key promises in 2017 was the removal of the blockade the country endured in European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) accession, active since 2008 due to the name dispute with neighboring Greece. He was more successful in this goal as during his tenure, although not yet fully, as North Macedonia managed to enter NATO (2020) but failed to start EU negotiations by the 2021 elections. The NATO entrance was made possible by the name-change agreement (2018) between North Macedonia and Greece in which the former agreed to add the designation "North" to its name.<sup>27</sup> The removal of the Greek veto in EU accession was however insufficient as eastern neighbor Bulgaria utilized its own position as EU member in 2020 and 2021 to prevent the beginning of the negotiations, demanding ethno-symbolic concessions from North Macedonia tied to the specificity of the

<sup>22</sup> BBC. 2017. [Macedonia parliament stormed by protesters in Skopje](#). *BBC News*, 28 April 2017 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Bliznakovski, Jovan. 2017. [Macedonia has a new government: What next for the crisis-ridden state?](#). *EUROPP. LSE Blogs*, 02 June 2017 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>24</sup> Pankovski et al., *The Republic of North Macedonia*, 30-31.

<sup>25</sup> RFE/RL's Balkan Service. 2018. [Hungary Reportedly Grants Gruevski Asylum: Macedonia Files Extradition Request](#). *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 20 November 2018 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Magleshov, Vasko. 2020. [Justice Denied: How North Macedonia's Special Prosecution Became History](#). *Balkan Insight*, 01 July 2020 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Hajdari, Una. 2019. [How a Name Change Opened the Door to NATO for Macedonia](#). *The New York Times*, 06 February 2019 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

Macedonian ethnicity, history and language.<sup>28</sup> In parallel to these developments, Zaev's government acted on deepening regional cooperation by joining the *Open Balkan* initiative with Serbia and Albania (2019).<sup>29</sup>

In summation, externally, Zaev's governments managed to revert the isolationist approach of predecessor Gruevski, but this seems to have come at a high internal cost. The lack of success in moving the EU integration process along despite great concessions of ethno-symbolic nature have likely contributed to the serious drop of support for Zaev in the run-up to the 2021 elections. The name-change decision was highly unpopular among the ethnic-Macedonian segment of the public<sup>30</sup> and the sheer fact that the concession did not provide advancement in EU integration worked extremely unfavorably towards Zaev's credibility. The dispute with Bulgaria, on the other hand, was a hot topic in the period preceding the elections, with VMRO-DPMNE repeatedly accusing SDSM and Zaev of giving up on Macedonian national interests by negotiating with the Bulgarians.<sup>31</sup>

In October 2021, Zaev's government was thus under increased public pressure over its inability to reinstate rule of law and deal with corruption in its own ranks, on top of the unsuccessful bid to commence EU accession negotiations despite the difficult ethno-political concession in the form of the name change and the negotiations with Bulgaria. All these issues entered the election campaign, in addition to topics such as the state of the economy, the level of unemployment, and the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. National issues were generally more publicly present than local ones throughout the campaign, and clearly played an important role in the specific electoral outcome witnessed in October 2021.

### **Election results**

North Macedonia conducted two election cycles during the COVID-19 pandemic, parliamentary elections in 2020 and local elections in 2021, and it seems that the pandemic has contributed to a general reduced turnout at the polls (see Diagram 3). At the 2021 elections approx. 50% of the registered voters participated in the two rounds, a 10% decrease in comparison to the first round in 2017. Two municipalities did not elect mayors (Mavrovo i Rostusha and Centar Zhupa) after failing to reach the required turnout of 1/3 of registered voters and will have to repeat the elections.

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<sup>28</sup> Jakov Marusic, Sinisa. 2021. Bulgaria Again Blocks North Macedonia, Albania, EU Accession Talks. *Balkan Insight*, 15 December 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

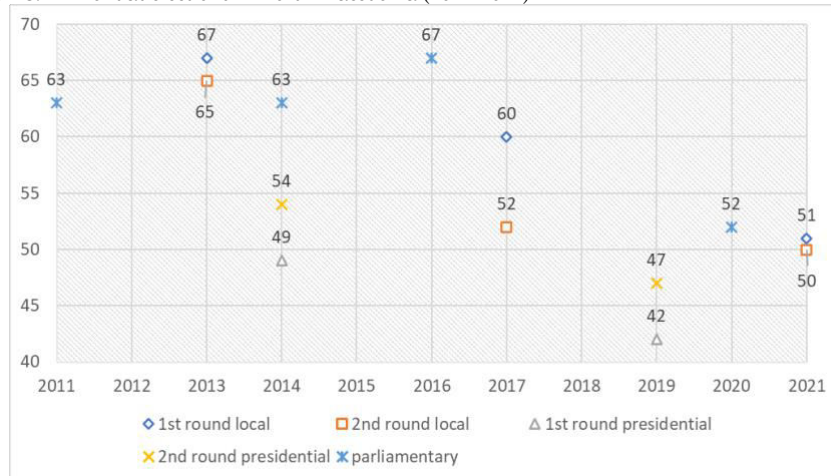
<sup>29</sup> Simić, Julija. 2019. Three countries agree mini Schengen in the Balkans. *Euractiv*, 14 October 2019 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>30</sup> In an orchestrated boycott from citizens and groups who opposed the name-change, the government-organized consultative referendum in 2017 on the issue failed to reach the required turnout and was considered invalid. See: RFE/RL's Balkan Service. 2018. Low Turnout Kills Key Macedonian Name-Change Referendum. *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 1 November 2018 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>31</sup> Trkanjec, Zeljko. 2021. Opposition demands North Macedonia government reveal Bulgaria talks. *Euractiv*, 09 June 2021 (accessed: 12.02.2022).



Diagram 3: Turnout at elections in North Macedonia (2011-2021)

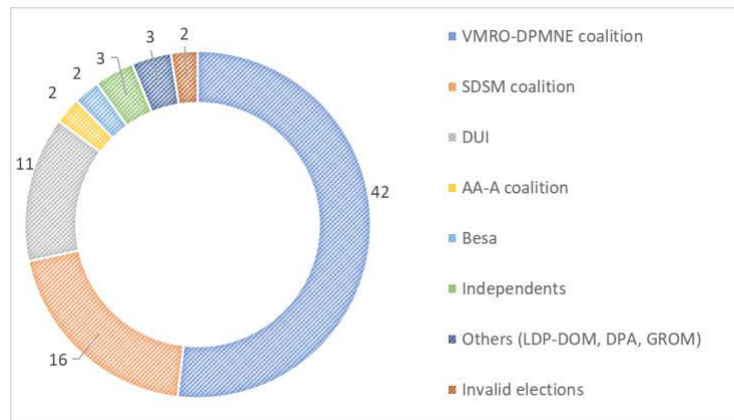


Source: State Electoral Commission

VMRO-DPMNE emerged as the clear winner, obtaining more than half (42) of all available mayoral positions (81) (see Diagram 4), including the City of Skopje (i.e., the capital, which has historically been an electoral arena in which the rivalry between the two largest parties has been extremely pronounced). VMRO-DPMNE also won most councilors' positions (469 of 1347 available) (see Diagram 5). The ruling SDSM trailed significantly in the mayoral contest, obtaining only 16 mayoral seats, and a total of 402 councilors. Beside Skopje, VMRO-DPMNE managed to win mayoral contests in many important urban centers around the country such as Bitola, Veles, Gevgelija, Kavadarci, Kochani, Ohrid, Prilep and Shtip. VMRO-DPMNE also won in most of the municipalities within the City of Skopje: Aerodrom, Butel, Gazi Baba, Gjorche Petrov and Kisela Voda. SDSM, on the other hand, managed to win once again in its "fortress" - the urban center at the south-east, Strumica, but also in several smaller towns in the east part of the country such as Berovo, Bogdanci, Valandovo, Delchevo, Kriva Palanka and Probishtip. Only one municipality within the City of Skopje (Centar) voted for an SDSM candidate.

The main junior coalition partner in the government, DUI, was a clear winner in the Albanian bloc, obtaining a total of 11 mayoral positions and 167 councilors (one additional mayoral position in comparison to 2017). The AA-A coalition and Besa obtained two mayors each and 83 and 36 councilors respectively, while DPA won one mayor and nine councilors. DUI won mayoral contests in Struga, Kichevo and Debar, Saraj and Chair, but lost in two of the most important urban municipalities in the west of the country, Tetovo and Gostivar, breaking a dominance in the former held since 2009. Gostivar was won for the second time in a row by an AA candidate, while the mayorship in Tetovo was captured by the leader of Besa.

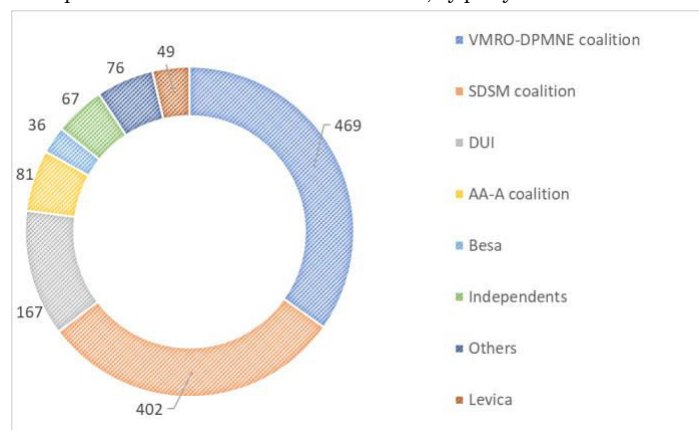
Diagram 4: Mayoral positions won at the 2021 local elections, by party/coalition



Source: Pankovski et al., *The Republic of North Macedonia, 161-162*.

Several smaller parties in the Macedonian bloc as well as independent candidates also won mayoral posts. Most notably, the Kumanovo municipality in the northeast of the country was retained by the former SDSM mayor who decided to run independently. The mayorship of the Romani-dominated Shuto Orizari was also retained by a former SDSM candidate who competed under the LDP-DOM coalition. Another SDSM-reject, the president of GROM, returned to the mayoral position in Skopje’s Municipality of Karposh after losing the race to an SDSM candidate in 2017 and previously heading the municipality in several mandates. Many other smaller parties and independent lists candidates captured councilors’ positions. Levica won 49, LDP-DOM 29, while a combined list of 14 smaller competitors won 47 positions. Non-partisans won a total of 67 councilors’ positions, including seats in the councils of the City of Skopje, Centar, Bitola, Gevgelija and Karposh.

Diagram 5: Councilors’ positions won at the 2021 local elections, by party/coalition



Source: Pankovski et al., *The Republic of North Macedonia, 161-162*.

As a consequence of the election results, a significant majority of the local government units (57) will be headed by a new mayor in the 2021-2025 term. Only 24 mayors managed to win reelection, and three of those have done so by changing party colors between 2017 and 2021. A total of 31 local units will be

headed by the same political party/coalition as in the previous term. Only two of the elected mayors are women.

### Outcome

The election result - which for the first time saw an incumbent party losing the local elections in North Macedonia - prompted a chain of events that led to the appointment of a new government, consisting of the same political parties, SDSM and DUI, but with a new PM, substantially changed personnel from the side of SDSM, and with the participation of Alternative instead of Besa. Zaev announced his resignation from both the PM and party posts straight after the closing of the polls on 31 October, stating that he takes full responsibility for the bad election results and expressing disappointment with the fact that the voters decided to support “the [same] politicians which in the parliament attempted to kill just four years ago”.<sup>32</sup> He also dismissed the idea of early elections. In a surprising move on 5 November, VMRO-DPMNE leader Mickovski announced the brokering of a new parliamentary majority consisting of VMRO-DPMNE, AA-A, Levica and Besa, with the last revealing that it decided to leave the government due to the animosity with the DUI.<sup>33</sup> Closely after, VMRO-DPMNE submitted a formal initiative the parliament signed by a majority of MPs (61 out of 120) for a vote of confidence to the government.<sup>34</sup> Zaev’s outgoing government nevertheless survived as one Besa MP surprisingly withdrew at the last moment stating that he did so in order to “preserve top state interests and the Euroatlantic integration [of the country]”,<sup>35</sup> but without giving further details to the public on the reasons behind his controversial decision. Besa and VMRO-DPMNE instantly accused of pressures on the MP, claiming that he was “kidnapped” or “bribed”, and Besa decided to expel him from the party soon after.<sup>36</sup> By the end of the month it was known that the Alternative was negotiating with the SDSM for entrance into government, and a deal was officially announced in the beginning of December,<sup>37</sup> shortly before SDSM’s internal elections for a new head of party.

SDSM’s intra-party elections took place on 12 December resulting in a landslide win for Zaev’s favorite and former finance deputy-minister Kovachevski,<sup>38</sup> who subsequently took over the government. The government appointed on 16 January 2022 with a slim 62/120 MPs majority is consisted of personnel from SDSM (1 PM, 3 vice-PM, and 11 minister posts), DUI (1 vice-PM and 5 minister

<sup>32</sup> Deutsche Welle. 2021. [Zaev podnese ostavka od premierskata i partiskata funkcija](#). *Deutsche Welle*, 31 October 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>33</sup> Jakov Marusic, Sinisa. 2021. [North Macedonia’s Opposition Claims New Parliament Majority](#). *Balkan Insight*, 06 November 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>34</sup> EWB. 2021. [Opposition parties file a request for a confidence vote in Zaev’s government](#). *European Western Balkans*, 08 November 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>35</sup> Deutsche Welle. 2021. [Kastriot Redzeqi objavi video i poracha deka e na vistinskata strana](#). *Deutsche Welle*, 11 November 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>36</sup> Deutsche Welle. 2021. [Liderot na Besa go iskluchi Kastriot Redzeqi od partijata](#). *Deutsche Welle*, 12 November 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>37</sup> Trajkovska, Mariela. [Alternative enters the Government with three ministerial posts](#). *Sloboden Pечат*, 5 December 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>38</sup> Jakov Marusic, Sinisa. 2021. [North Macedonia Ruling Party Elects Dimitar Kovacevski as Leader](#). *Balkan Insight*, 13 December 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

posts), Alternative (3 minister posts), and LDP (1 minister post).<sup>39</sup> This is a slight change from the previous Zaev government (active from August 2020) in which SDSM held an additional minister post and Besa (who participated instead of Alternative) held only one post. Just as in the previous term, only four of the 20 cabinet members are women, and all of them are from SDSM.

The new government saw the removal of several influential SDSM figures in the last several years, including long-term party vice-president and defense minister Shekerinska, health minister Filipche, and education minister Carovska. Non-partisan EU affairs deputy-PM Dimitrov who was a key figure in the agreement with Greece also did not feature among the new cabinet members. On the other hand, interior minister and former technical-PM Spasovski, transport and communications minister Bochvarski and economy affairs deputy-PM Bytyqi all kept their posts, while justice minister Maricikj took over the EU affairs deputy-PM post. DUI continued to manage the ministries for foreign affairs, economy and finance while giving up the ministry of information society and administration for the ministry of education, with much of the same personnel as during the 2020-2022 term. Alternative obtained the ministries of health and information society and administration while LDP continued to manage the ministry of local self-government. Kovacevski's government adopted a working program focused on five themes: economic growth, social inclusion and human resource development, rule of law and good governance, advancement of democracy and freedom, and EU/NATO integration,<sup>40</sup> thereby remaining consistent with the declared objectives of the preceding cabinet.

### **Conclusion: At a crossroad, again**

The October 2021 local elections brought major shifts in the political scene of North Macedonia. Zaev's early exit comes as an outcome of the unsuccessful attempt to revive rule of law and EU integration following a decade of pro-authoritarian and externally isolationist style of governance practiced by Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE. The introduction of the new PM and party president Kovacevski, on the other hand, comes as an attempt on the side of SDSM to minimize further "damage" in the run-up to the next parliamentary elections. It is also clear, following the elections, that VMRO-DPMNE currently command much higher electoral support than SDSM and that other smaller political actors (such as the smaller political parties and independent lists) can indeed inflict significant electoral losses for the bigger political parties. All this suggests that even more substantial changes at the top levels of government could be at hand following the next parliamentary elections which could take place as late as 2024, jointly with the presidential elections.

The October 2021 local elections also underlined the elevated level of polarization in the society when it comes to dealing with the prominent "grand" national issues mainly pertaining to the relationships with neighboring countries. While Zaev's proactive approach in the negotiations with Greece and

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<sup>39</sup> The January 2022 composition of the government can be accessed at the official website, [vlada.mk](http://vlada.mk) (accessed: 12 February 2022).

<sup>40</sup> Government of the Republic of North Macedonia. 2022. [Programa za rabota na Vladata na Republika Severna Makedonija za periodot 2022-2024 godina](#), 11 January 2021 (accessed: 12 February 2022).

Bulgaria returned positive outcomes in terms of overcoming some of the difficulties related to in EU/NATO accession, the effects of these moves have been internally detrimental for SDSM, substantially contributing to its weak electoral performance, and simultaneously improving the performance of the political parties which are against any negotiations with neighboring countries (e.g. VMRO-DPMNE and Levica). The fact that the country failed to open EU accession negotiations despite difficult ethno-symbolic concessions should work negatively for the future willingness of North Macedonia to implement further reforms for EU accession.

Once again, as on many occasions in the past decade, the country is at a crossroad regarding its future liberal-democratic development. The credibility of the pro-European political forces slowly diminishes because of EU's inability to offer a clear membership perspective for North Macedonia; and, likewise, the pro-democratic segment of the population arrived at bitter disappointment as soon as it became clear that Zaev's government was not up to the task of reinstating rule of law following the developments from 2015-2017. The possible return of VMRO-DPMNE to power will likely work unfavorably for the country's attempt to clear-out the *Wiretapping Affair*, as the party and its former officials are at the center of the scandal. It could also be expected that, when in power, VMRO-DPMNE will launch a "protective" role on the ethno-symbolic issues in the relations with the neighbors, which could possibly bring to reverting some of the international appraisal the country enjoyed in recent years by being constructive in dealing with the disputes. Such a turn would also likely negatively affect internal ethnic relations.

It seems that North Macedonia is headed for a difficult political situation in which party polarization will be further pronounced given the weakened political position of the ruling SDSM and the political mismatch between the central and local levels of governance. It remains yet to be seen how the October 2021 local elections will play out in the long-term trajectory of North Macedonia's democratic development.

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