

North Macedonia: the right returns to power

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The centre-left government rule (2017–24) is nearing its end, and it has been characterised by significant changes and achievements: the state's official name was changed when a prolonged dispute with Greece over this issue was resolved, a Bulgarian blockade hampering the launch of membership talks with the EU was lifted, and the country joined NATO. At present, North Macedonia's internal situation is much more stable than in the previous decade, and ethnic tensions and conflicts, especially with its Albanian population, are much less intensive. Despite these successes, as a result of the elections held on 8 May, the right-wing parties will return to power. Their previous rule in 2006–16 was characterised by authoritarian tendencies and ubiquitous corruption. Their recent electoral success has its roots in promises to improve society's living standards, the public's disappointment at the slow pace of the reform of the state and the lack of quick progress in Macedonia's integration with the EU.

The sources of the success: social welfare slogans and increased assertiveness

The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), one of North Macedonia's oldest parties, came first in both the elections held on 8 May. In the parliamentary election it received almost twice as many votes as the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) which until recently ruled the country and in the presidential election it received almost three times as many votes. This result indicates that this party has regained the voters' support. After an almost decade-long rule, it had lost power in 2017 against the backdrop of corruption scandals and street protests following the publication of recordings which revealed authoritarian practices and attempts to fight the opposition using the secret services. The end of VMRO-DPMNE's previous rule was characterised by a prolonged conflict with the opposition, which destabilised the state. The European Union became involved in resolving this dispute. Nikola Gruevski, the then prime minister and the party's leader in 2006–16 became a symbol of that period. After ending his term as PM, he received a legally binding sentence and fled to Hungary, where he was granted political asylum.

Since 2018, the new party leader Hristijan Mickoski has attempted to distance himself from the party's former image (initially to an insignificant degree) and the organisation's narrative mainly focused on identity issues. The main emphasis was placed for example on criticising the agreements signed by the centre-left governments: an agreement with Greece regarding the change of the state's official name (the Prespa Agreement signed in 2018) and with Bulgaria (a treaty on friendship, a good neighbourhood and cooperation signed in 2017, and an agreement signed in 2022 to lift the Bulgarian veto regarding North Macedonia's

intention to launch its accession talks with the EU).

North Macedonia's new president is Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, who also ran in the previous presidential election in 2019 (she lost in the runoff to Stevo Pendarovski, having received 46% of the vote). In 2019 she declared an intention to hold a referendum to reinstate the state's former name. In recent years, VMRO-DPMNE gradually abandoned these demands and began to highlight its social welfare platform, which was reflected in the pre-election campaign (for example the party promised to raise pensions by 30%). When during her swearing-in ceremony, which was held on 12 May in Skopje, Siljanovska-Davkova decided not to use the state's modified name (using the form "Macedonia"), the European Union, Greece and Bulgaria reacted with disappointment and criticism. However, aside from similar symbolic gestures intended to appeal to VMRO-DPMNE's hard-core electorate no new attempts to revive the debate on the state's name at the international level and in regional relations should be expected.

In the previous decade, although consecutive VMRO-DPMNE governments declared their support for North Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic integration, they oscillated between the West, Serbia, Russia and China (Moscow criticised the demonstrations against right-wing rule held in 2014–17 and compared them to 'colour revolutions'). At present, it can be expected that the winning party will increase its involvement in the European integration process compared to its former rule prior to 2017, although it will likely be less prone to reaching compromises with the neighbouring states (than, for example, the centre-left governments). The agreement with Bulgaria, which was signed in 2022 on France's initiative, required Macedonia – as part of its EU membership negotiations – to amend its constitution to recognise the Bulgarian minority as one of the constitutive nations making up the Macedonian state. The new government may thus adopt a strategy of carrying out accession talks while postponing the introduction of the constitutional amendments which Bulgaria is expecting before the talks are concluded. In its initial response to VMRO-DPMNE's return to power, the Bulgarian leadership emphasised the need to be tough on Skopje in enforcing the provisions of the 2022 agreement.

It should be expected that the new government will also continue the cautious policy of providing political support to Ukraine which was pursued by the previous coalition. At the same time, intensification of relations with Serbia and Hungary may be likely, as President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán were among the first foreign politicians to have congratulated VMRO-DPMNE on its double victory.

The SDSM has suffered an electoral defeat despite its numerous achievements

The poor result obtained by SDSM was due to a prolonged crisis affecting this party, which has been ongoing since at least 2021, when after an unsatisfactory result obtained in the local elections Zoran Zaev stepped down as the party leader and the country's prime minister. The subsequent changes of the prime minister were unable to reverse this trend. In 2022 Zaev was replaced by Dimitar Kovačevski, and in January 2024 Talat Xhaferi, a representative of the Democratic Union for Integration, was appointed as the prime minister (he is the first ethnic Albanian in the history of independent Macedonia to hold this post).

SDSM's defeat and loss of power have resulted from the public's mounting disappointment at this party's rule. When taking power in 2017, it inspired high hopes within society regarding ambitious reforms and an overhaul of the state, a promise to punish those

involved in the scandals which occurred during the right-wing party's rule, and to improve the economic situation and return to the path of European integration. These hopes also helped Stevo Pendarovski, a member of this party, to win the 2019 presidential election.

The erosion of support for the centre-left began at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 saw a 4.5% drop in the country's GDP), and subsequently continued due to an energy crisis caused by an increase in electricity prices and the operation of technologically backward electricity infrastructure which frequently failed. The fight against corruption, which had been announced by the consecutive centre-left governments, was progressing too slowly (aside from the few exceptions including the sentence passed on Gruevski) and the public viewed its results as ambiguous.

Alongside this, during its seven-year rule the centre-left implemented a series of changes which are of major importance for the future of the Macedonian state. In 2020, the country joined NATO. Agreements with Greece and Bulgaria were also signed (although Macedonian society viewed them as controversial). This resulted in the opening of EU accession negotiations in 2022. In addition, major progress was achieved with international recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (which President Pendarovski was particularly determined to achieve). This Church emerged from Serbian Orthodox Church structures in the 1960s and for a long time was not recognised as canonical by other autocephalic churches. In 2022, the Ecumenical Patriarchate confirmed its autonomy and the Serbian Orthodox Church granted it autocephaly.

As regards internal policy, the party managed to significantly reduce the tensions and conflicts which were present in the previous decade, especially prior to 2017, and to meet the great majority of demands which the Albanian minority had been voicing for many years regarding its increased participation in state institutions. As a consequence, the position of the Albanian parties on the political scene has significantly improved compared to previous decades. This has contributed to a clear drop in ethnic and identity-related disputes in Macedonia's internal politics, which resulted in a consolidation of Macedonian statehood.

APPENDIX

Detailed election results

On 8 May, North Macedonia held a parliamentary election and the runoff to the presidential election. In both instances, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) came first. The presidential candidate endorsed by this party, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, won 65% of the vote, while the incumbent president Stevo Pendarovski representing the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) won 29%. The centre-left, which had ruled the country since 2017, was also defeated in the election to the 120-seat Assembly of the Republic. The Your Macedonia opposition bloc, with VMRO-DPMNE as its main component, won 41% of the vote, which translated into 58 seats. The European Front coalition came second; it is mainly made up of the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (Macedonian: DUI / Albanian: BDI), which until recently co-ruled the country, it won 15% of the vote (19 seats). The Coalition for European Future, which includes SDSM, came third with 14% of the vote (18 seats). The remaining seats were taken by the former Albanian opposition bloc

VLEN (Value) with 12% (13 seats), the radical Levica party with 6% (6 seats) and the populist ZNAM movement For Our Macedonia with 5% (6 seats). Since the bloc built around VMRO-DPMNE lacked three seats to win a parliamentary majority, it will most likely form a government coalition with the Albanian Value bloc.

The profile of the new president

Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova is 71 years old. She is a constitutional lawyer (she graduated from the University of Ljubljana and the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje). When Macedonia gained independence, she took part in the work of a parliamentary committee preparing a draft of the country's constitution. She was a minister without portfolio in the Branko Crvenkovski government (1992–4). She also cooperated with several UN bodies on issues linked with the development of local government structures in the region's states. She is married and has two children. She has been a member of VMRO-DPMNE since the early 1990s. Siljanovska-Davkova will be the first female president in the history of independent Macedonia.

In North Macedonia's cabinet political system the role of the president is limited.