

# North Macedonia

Last update:	22 februari 2022
Population:	2,065,092 (World Bank 2021)
Prime minister:	Dimitar Kovačevski
President:	Stevo Pendarovski
Governemental type:	Parliamentary democracy
Ruling coalition:	SDSM, DUI, Besa
Last election:	2020 (parliamentary elections)
Next election:	2024 (parliamentary elections)
Sister parties:	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)

For a long time, North Macedonia has been considered a relative success story in the region: no major conflicts, a fairly successful state-building process, and no territory issues. After years of showing dedication to the Ohrid Agreement – the 2001 peace deal between the North Macedonian government and ethnic Albanians – and implementing reforms, the country received EU candidate status in December 2005. The promises of European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) membership (by 2008 the criteria for entering NATO were fulfilled) are important tools in uniting Macedonians with Albanian minorities.

However, the long-standing name dispute with Greece had long been stagnating the EU integration process and NATO membership, as Greece had been vetoing the opening of the accession negotiations. In addition, the ruling conservative Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) party of Nikola Gruevski, in power between 2006 and 2016, misused the lack of progress on the European road to establish an authoritarian regime and to engage in a nationalist identity-building project. In the context of nationalism, ethnic conflicts are influencing the political landscape.

Each election, the VMRO-DPMNE and Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) end up in a close tie. The VMRO-DPMNE is mainly focused on ethnic Macedonians, while the SDSM is more accommodating towards the country's ethnic minorities. Following the 2020 elections, the SDSM formed a coalition with the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), which represents the Albanian minority. DUI demanded an ethnic Albanian Prime Minister. During the strenuous coalition talks, the parties agreed to appoint an ethnic Albanian Prime Minister for the last 100 days of the mandate. The government has been challenged by a struggling economy and Bulgaria's continuing veto of starting EU accession negotiations. In 2022, PM Zaev was replaced by Dimitar Kovačevski after a big defeat in local elections.

## Political Situation

North Macedonia is a parliamentary republic with the prime minister as the head of government. The political organisation of the country was determined in the 1991 Constitution. The Assembly, or the Sobranija, is the only chamber of parliament and comprises 123 members. The assembly members are elected by proportional representation for a four-year term in office. In general elections, North Macedonia is divided into six constituencies electing 120 MPs each. Three seats are elected by representatives of the Macedonian citizens living abroad: one from Europe, one from North America and one from Asia and Australia.

The combination of a lack of European perspective and nationalism has proved to be a serious threat to democracy and stability in North Macedonia: manipulation and fraud at the elections, control over the judiciary and weakening of the rule of law and media freedom, a non-functioning parliament and growing dissatisfaction among the Albanian minority. It is to hope that recent developments to overcome the postponement of EU accession talks will be successful. The prospect of EU membership could prove vital to make sure politics becomes less steered by ethnic conflicts.

### January 2022: Kovačevski replaces Zaev

In October 2021, Zoran Zaev resigned as PM after he suffered a large defeat in local elections. His party SDSM lost support in important municipalities, Skopje among others, to the VMRO-DPMNE. On January 17, 2022, a new coalition was approved, led by

Dimitar Kovačevski. Kovačevski was appointed leader of the SDSM in late 2021, being Zaev's favorite pick. He was earlier deputy finance minister in Zaev's cabinet. He faces many challenges, one of which being difficult talks with Bulgaria. This is needed to formally start EU accession negotiations.

In June 2022, Bulgaria said that it would drop its veto regarding North Macedonia, a move welcomed by Skopje as well as Brussels. However, a difficult path still lies ahead as the Bulgarian proposal still needs revision according to Kovačevski and is "unacceptable in its current form". Bulgarian parliamentarians have already indicated that a constitutional amendment in North Macedonia is key to their approval, and that they are ready to put up another blockade if necessary.

### **The 2019 Zaev "Extortion Scandal"**

The previous progressive government led by Zoran Zaev (Social Democratic Union, SDSM) made promising steps in the fight against corruption and restoring the rule of law. However, the alleged wrongdoing of the Special Prosecutor for Organized Crime, Katica Janeva, has been a setback. It started when a well-known businessman, Bojan Jovanovski, was arrested on suspicion of extortion. Shortly after that, La Verita, an Italian right-wing newspaper released videos and audio recordings which allegedly showed that the Janeva was offering leniency to Jovanovski and another businessman in exchange for cash. She was arrested on August 21.

The situation escalated for Zaev's government, when, in one of the audiotapes, Jovanovski mentioned he met Zaev and suggested that he wouldn't "make any problems". Zaev stressed he had nothing to do with the scandal, but it had already caused a lot of commotion. The VMRO-PPMNE pressed for Zaev's resignation, stating that the government has not done enough against corruption and one of the tops of that is involved in criminal activities. The EU was concerned too, not unsurprising, as it had asked North Macedonia to implement judicial reforms and anti-corruption measures.

### **Historic dispute leads to 2018 name change**

There has been a dispute going on over the country's use of the Republic of Macedonia as its official name. A region in Northern Greece shares the same name and is also closely connected to Alexander the Great and Philip of Macedon. Greece holds the opinion that by using 'Macedonia', the country implies claims on Greek territories. As a result, it had been using the label Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) since joining the United Nations in 1993. Originally planned as a temporary solution, it remains in use until recently. Because of the dispute, the accessions to the EU and NATO have been blocked by Greece.

To solve the issue, North Macedonia agreed to change its flag by removing the Vergina Sun and proceeded to add a passage to its constitution, which is supposed to make clear that the country does not claim any Greek territories. Furthermore, the main airport and a highway to Greece were renamed beginning 2018 to disconnect it from Alexander the Great. The historical figure has been declared exclusively Greek concerning the country's Hellenic heritage. The Greek side accepted the use of 'FYROM' as an official name and agreed on a possibility of continuing EU accession talks. In January 2018, the two Prime Ministers Zoran Zaev and Alexis Tsipras met and announced faster negotiations to resolve the years-long dispute.

After an almost three-decade-long dispute, North Macedonia and Greece finally settled on a historic name change agreement on June 17th, 2018. Prime Minister Zaev and his Greek counterpart Tsipras signed a landmark agreement at Lake Prespa. According to this agreement, Macedonia's name was officially changed to "Republic of North Macedonia." In exchange for this, North Macedonia expects accelerated NATO membership and EU-accession talks, and Athens promised not to block their initiatives anymore. The language of the country will still be "Macedonian," and the citizens will be referred to as "Macedonians" or "Citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia." This was an important part of the agreement for the Macedonians who wanted to protect their identity.

The agreement was answered with international and local praise, but also with protests from nationalist factions in both countries. After the Prespa Agreement was ratified by both parliaments – which was a major challenge – it had to be supported by a majority of Macedonia's citizens. On September 30th 2018 a non-binding referendum was held, inquiring the public opinion on the name-change deal. The turn-out was below the 50% threshold, as only 36.8% of the Macedonians participated in the referendum. However, among those participants, 91% voted in favour of a name change, hopeful that it would remove a significant impediment to EU and NATO membership.

Despite the low turn-out, the government saw the outcome as a green light to implement the name change. On October 8th, the government adopted a motion to undertake the constitutional changes, and on January 11th the parliament agreed upon the change. On January 25th, the Greek parliament also approved by 153 votes to 146 on the name change, ending the diplomatic dispute between the countries. North Macedonia is the first country in modern times (except for Austria after World War I) that

forcefully had to change its name.

### **2016 elections see important change in rule**

Following the resignation of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, new elections took place on 11 December 2016. Gruevski had been in power since 2006 up to 18 January 2016, in a coalition with the Albanian party; Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). The 2016 election saw Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE remain the largest party with 51 seats, but only by a slim margin. Zaev's SDSM became the election's biggest winner, increasing its number of seats from 34 to 49. After one year of political deadlock, Zaev was able to form a coalition with ethnic Albanian parties and has been the country's prime minister until 2021.

### **Pressure on 2016 elections**

In previous elections won by Gruevski, the opposition boycotted the parliament. They did this because the elections often lacked transparency and were rigged. Eventually, the opposition refused to participate in the parliamentary process. The incumbent government repeatedly dismissed these claims, adding that the opposition is simply afraid to go to the ballot box. Following this, the State Electoral Commission decided to investigate if registered voters were deceased, lacked citizenship or did not have the right age. Eventually, the opposition also received the support of the EU and the US for their critique of democracy in Macedonia.

On 21 February 2016, the EU and the US sent a joint letter pressuring the government to postpone the date of the elections. Initially, elections were set for 24 April 2016, but they were postponed to 5 June 2016. The letter further declared that not all conditions needed to organise credible elections had been met, such as the clean-up of the electoral roll, the creation of a level playing field for all political players, media reforms ensuring objective and unbiased election coverage and measures to separate state and party political activities. As such, the external interference arranged prerequisites for the elections. As the above mentioned main conditions were not met on time it was decided to postpone the elections again, this time to December 2016.

### **Lead up to Gruevski's resignation: the wiretapping scandal**

In 2015 opposition leader Zaev from the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) accused Gruevski and the secret police of wiretapping over 20,000 people including ministers, opposition politicians, journalists, judges, foreign ambassadors and activists. The Special Prosecution Office (SJO) led the investigation into the wiretaps and pressed charges against high ranked government officials, including the prime minister and minister of interior. Nonetheless, President Ivanov pardoned all politicians facing criminal investigations in the wiretapping corruption scandal, leading to a peak in political instability in 2016.

The mass street protests that followed this, united Macedonians and Albanians in their call for better living standards, the fight against corruption and the end of the Gruevski rule. Pressured by the EU and US, Gruevski agreed to step down and call early elections. The EU mediated Przino Agreement between position and opposition determined that SDSM would take part in the transition government that would prepare free and fair elections. The main conditions were to establish an independent public broadcaster and to clean up the voting register. The wire-tapping scandal marked the end to an ongoing political crisis, in which the parliament was blocked by the main opposition party SDSM. It was not the first time the SDSM had boycotted parliament, which happened in 2013 too.

### **2013 political crisis**

The political crisis started with a disagreement over the draft budget for 2013. On Christmas Eve 2012, during a session of the parliament, the budget was on the agenda, but the main opposition party SDSM stated that instead of following the principles and rules commonly used during such a session, several violations took place. Draft versions were kept away from opposition MPs including the SDSM, which were not able to get voting cards, while media representatives could not work freely in the room. After opposing the constitutional and legal breaches, scuffles broke out between members of the ruling centre-right VMRO-DPMNE party and the SDSM MPs in which opposition members were forcibly evicted from the plenary room.

Before this outburst of violence, all journalists had already been removed from the room, either on their own feet or dragged by policemen. Following this event, the SDSM decided to boycott the parliament sessions, which ultimately lasted for more than two months and threatened to derail local elections that were supposed to be held on 24 March 2013. The SDSM stated that it would renounce the boycott only when the local elections were held together with early parliamentary elections.

These events have triggered a succession of demonstrations in North Macedonia. On 19 February a former leader of the now-disbanded ethnic Albanian separatist armed group was chosen to become the new Minister of Defence. In a reaction to this appointment, clashes took place in Skopje against ethnic Albanians of Macedonians, which was followed days later by a violent demonstration of ethnic Albanians.

The political crisis was resolved at the beginning of March, after a mediation effort by EU Enlargement Commissioner at that time, Štefan Füle, and European Parliament Rapporteur for North Macedonia, Richard Howitt (S&D Group in the EP). The SDSM agreed on 1 March to return to parliament and to run in the local elections. These elections were held on 25 March and 7 April. The victory was declared by North Macedonia's ruling VMRO-DPMNE, under the lead of Nikola Gruevski.

### **Ethnic rivalries and minority representation**

The country, which had been relatively spared from inter-ethnic violence after the break-up of Yugoslavia, underwent great tensions from 2001 onwards when the Albanian minority started demanding more rights. The 1998-1999 war in Kosovo forced thousands of Albanians to flee to North Macedonia. Since then, the Ohrid Agreement, signed with the support of the European Union and NATO, had guaranteed a unitary Macedonian state, reinforced by its EU candidate status since 2005. Nonetheless, violence keeps on sparking regularly.

After the reforms necessitated by the Ohrid Agreement, minority representation has increased. From 2006 until the 2008 parliamentary elections, the DPA was the main vehicle for Albanian representation in government, despite being the smaller of the two ethnic Albanian parties. This led to resentment with the DUI and considerable tensions between supporters of the two parties. After the 2008 elections, Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski announced that the ruling 'For a better Macedonia' coalition would from now on govern in a coalition with the biggest ethnic Albanian party, which is the DUI with 18 seats. Several minority lists of smaller minorities were also part of the 'For a better Macedonia' coalition, including lists of North Macedonian Serbs and Turks.

Despite their increasing representation, Albanians still claim unequal involvement in government ministries and public enterprises. This figure contradicts the Ohrid Agreement principle, which states that "the multi-ethnic character of Macedonia's society must be preserved and reflected in public life", notably in the public administration. The recent agreement between SDSM's coalition with DUI, to install an ethnic Albanian as Prime Minister for the last 100 days of the mandate, is an important breakthrough. DUI also gained two important ministries, namely Foreign Affairs and Finance & Economy.

### **Women's rights and female representation**

The first real changes in women representation in parliament were reached after the 2002 elections. The percentage of female deputies rose from 7.5 per cent (1998) to 17.5 per cent. After the 2008 parliamentary elections, this share went further up to 32.5 per cent. The rise in women participation was facilitated by the successful lobbying campaign of different women rights NGOs to secure a constitutional amendment obligating parties to include at least 30 per cent women candidates in their election lists. After the 2020 elections, 39% of representatives in parliament were female.

Women's rights organisations, such as Kvinna till Kvinna, have not stopped there. The country has implemented several laws on gender equality, but it does not allocate any funds to implement them. Gender based violence remains one of the most pressing issues. An OSCE survey in 2018 concluded that 45% of women in North Macedonia responded saying that they had experienced psychological, physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner. As in many other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic and following lockdown measures have disproportionately negatively affected women. There were few measures to support working parents, often causing women to cut-back working. The country also saw an increase in domestic violence against women.

### **LGBTI rights**

Homosexuality has been legal in North Macedonia since 1996, but same-sex couples still do not enjoy the same rights and privileges as opposite-sex couples. North Macedonia decriminalized homosexuality in order to join the Council of Europe, as this was a precondition. In 2015, a constitutional law was adopted in parliament, which defined that marriage was defined solely as a union between a man and a woman. As such, no same-sex is not legally recognized. Sexual orientation was also scrapped from the list of the anti-discrimination laws in the workplace, in 2010. More recently, however, minor steps have been taken to improve the situation for LGBTI people.

In 2019 a new anti-discrimination law was adopted that did include sexual orientation and gender identity. Throughout 2020 parliament struck down on the anti-discrimination law though. Another positive sign was the first Pride that was organised in Skopje in 2019, with an estimated 1,000 participants. Some state officials also joined the march, but there were also some violent incidents. Most North Macedonian citizens, especially the rural parts, remain conservative in their opinion of homosexuality. North Macedonia's EU candidacy will have had quite an impact on the country's LGBTI legislation already. During 2020, however, the LGBTI community was disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 measures.

## Parliamentary Elections

### Parliamentary elections of 2020

Originally, parliamentary elections were scheduled to be held on 12 April 2020. However, less than a month prior to this date, the President, the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, the Prime Minister and representatives of seven political parties agreed to reschedule due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of this decision, North Macedonia had relatively few COVID-19 cases. Nonetheless, in order to avoid a national health crisis and to be able to put more effort into handling the pandemic, rather than into being reelected, all parties agreed that postponement would be the best option. On 15 July 2020, the elections were held at last.

The 2020 parliamentary elections had a turnout rate of only 51% and was marked by many new smaller parties running against the established factions. However, despite this development, the outcome was to be expected. Just like the previous election results in 2016, the SDSM and the VMRO-DPMNE had an extremely close tie. The SDSM in coalition with the Besa Movement obtained 46 seats, while the runner-up won 44. The DUI won 11.8% of the votes this year, which gives them 16 seats. This is a good recovery for the party, since last elections they went from 19 to 10 seats. Alliance for Albanians in coalition with Alternative received 8.9% of the votes, equaling 12 seats. The Left got 4% (1 seat) of the votes, and Democratic Party of Albanians with 1.6% of the votes won 1 seat in the parliament. In order to have a majority, parties need 61 seats.

### Election results

Party	%	Seats
Social Democratic Union Macedonia (SDSM) and Besa Movement - "We Can"	35.8 %	46
Internal macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)	34.5 %	44
Democratic Union for Integration (DUI)	11.8 %	16
Alliance for Albanians and Alternative	8.9 %	12
Left	4 %	1
Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA)	1.6 %	1

### Aftermath of the election

Even though the "We can" coalition of the SDSM and the Besa Movement won the elections, they needed to form a coalition with DUI to have a majority in parliament. The coalition talks between these parties were difficult. "We can" stated during their campaign that they would not let an Albanian become Prime Minister if they secured the win. However, the DUI demanded during the talks that if they were to form a coalition with "We can", an Albanian should fill this position. Eventually, the different factions agreed that Zoran Zaev, leader of the SDSM would become Prime Minister until the last 100 days before the next elections, when an Albanian will be appointed. In addition, it was agreed that Talat Xhaferi, member of the DUI, will remain speaker of the parliament. The coalition now has 62 of the 120 seats in parliament.

The new government will mainly tackle the country's corruption and crime, improve its justice system and make sure that North Macedonia is ready for EU integration. The latter is an important matter since the EU accession talks are expected to start at the end of 2020. Furthermore, creating more job opportunities, increasing salaries, helping low-income families and environmental improvement are part of the agenda. After the elections, the Left Party filed around two thousand complaints regarding issues during the electoral process. The faction did not completely trust the results because the State Election Commission had been hacked, which they stated caused for inconsistencies between the casted votes and the data that was entered into the software. However, none of these complaints were actually taken care of.

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## Presidential Elections

### Presidential elections of 2019

On April 21st, the voting polls for the first round of presidential elections opened in North Macedonia. Stevo Pendarovski, supported by the ruling Social Democratic coalition (SDSM), won this round with a small margin of a few thousand votes ahead of his rival Gordana Siljanovska, who is backed by the right-wing opposition party VMRO-DPMNE. It was a close call: as Pendarovski seized 42.8% of the votes and Siljanovska 42.2%. The third presidential candidate, Blerim Reka, obtained 10.6% of the votes. He's supported by two ethnic Albanian parties. The voting turn-out was the lowest since the country's independence. Only 41% of the people cast their vote, just slightly above the required 40% threshold for a legitimate result.

Although it was feared that the turn-out would be below 40% in the second round on May 5th, in the end, 46% of the eligible voters cast their vote. Pendarovski won the presidency with 51.7% of the votes, surpassing Siljanovska who received 44.7%. The remaining 3.61% were void. The victory of Stevo Pendarovski is expected to fortify the Social Democrats' agenda and raises hopes to enter EU accession talks end 2019, and to become the 30th NATO member state by 2020.

The elections were dominated by a deep division over the name-change agreement with Greece and reflected a split between the pro-Western and the nationalist camp. Pro-European voters supported Pendarovski and the adoption of "Republic of North Macedonia" as the new name of the state. Pendarovski is in favour of the name-change deal with Greece, as it removes the biggest impediment to EU and NATO integration. Nationalists, on the other side, oppose the agreement and support Siljanovska, who promised to never use the new name. Despite being pro-European, she is opposed to the name-change, arguing that North Macedonia makes too many concessions and that the country will lose parts of its identity. In the run-off elections, both candidates aimed to appeal to the Albanian ethnic minority that voted for Reka in the first round, hoping that it would give them the decisive advantage.

## Social Democratic Parties

### Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)

Party Leader: Zoran Zaev

Number of seats: 31

<http://www.sdsm.org.mk>

The social democratic SDSM was formed as a successor to the League of Communists in the FYROM soon after independence in 1991. From September 1992 to 1998, and from 2002 to 2006, the SDSM was the largest party in the North Macedonian parliament and the main party in the government, and has shown a moderate and reconciliatory attitude towards ethnic minorities in North Macedonia. Since the legislative elections of July 2006, the SDSM – embedded in the Together for Macedonia Coalition – had been in opposition.

The SDSM's support-base is historically Macedonian and particularly strong in rural areas. The leadership of the "catch all" pre-electoral coalition - with members from Vlachs, Roma, Serbs, Bosniaks and Turks – provided the party with a unique, although limited and by no means permanent, cross-ethnicity appeal. The importance of this was demonstrated in the election victory of the coalition, which benefited from a solid base of Albanian support where the opposite VMRO-DPMNE could not.

The July 2006 legislative elections constituted a disappointment for the SDSM. The 'Together for Macedonia Coalition' only garnered 32 seats in the 120-seat parliament and lost its governing position to the VMRO-DPMNE. The country's meagre economic results over the previous four years can be seen as the main reason for the SDSM failure to stay in power. Besides that, the SDSM has some issues with its image as a social democratic party. It had suffered from the party's cooperation with the Liberal Democratic Party in the 'Together for Macedonia Coalition' and the painful reform measures that were needed in order to meet requirements for the EU negotiations.

The party made a comeback in 2016, when the party managed to gain 49 seats. This was just 2 seats less than the VMRO-DPMNE. However, it was the SDSM which allowed itself to form a stable government in the following year. In the four years afterwards, the party hoped to speed-up the country's EU accession process. In preparation of the 2020 elections, which were

postponed at first due to COVID-19, the party took part in the We Can Alliance. This alliance managed to gain 46 seats in total, with the SDSM holding 31 currently. This was a minor loss, but the alliance remained the country's largest, ahead of the VMRO-DPMNE alliance. Following the elections, the SDSM took a leading role in the formation of a government with a wide variety of minor political parties.

SDSM is a full member of the Socialist International and a PES associate member.

## Other Parties

### Democratic Party for Macedonian national unity - Internal Macedonian revolutionary organisation (VMRO-DPMNE)

Party Leader: Hristijan Mickoski

Number of seats: 36

<http://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk>

The present-day Christian Democrat and anti-Communist VMRO-DPMNE lies in the historical lineage of the 1893 Macedonian patriotic revolutionaries, whose sole aim was "liberating the Macedonian people from Ottoman yoke". The party was founded on 17 June 1990 in Skopje, and describes itself as a Christian Democratic party which supports the admission of North Macedonia to NATO and the European Union. It is ethnically based, claiming that "the party's goals and objectives express the tradition of the Macedonian people on whose political struggle and concepts it is based".

After boycotting the 1994 Assembly elections, the VMRO-DPMNE came to power in November 1998 on the basis of a program of economic reform. Ljubčo Georgievski was appointed Prime Minister and the party formed a coalition government with the Democratic Alternative (DA) and Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA). Also in this period the VMRO-DPMNE led a 'government of national unity' that negotiated the ethnic crisis of 2001 by signing the Ohrid agreement. However, enduring ethnic tension and the failure/disinclination to shake off its grassroots hard-line North Macedonian nationalism ultimately cost the party re-election in 2002.

It was during the negotiations for the Ohrid Agreement that the seeds of an inner-conflict were sown that, after the dismal 2002 parliamentary elections and subsequent defeat at the 2004 presidential elections, plunged the VMRO-DPMNE into turmoil. Two competing factions emerged which tore the party apart. The supporters of present VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikolali Gruevski formed the first faction. He was a former Finance Minister at the time, untainted by charges of corruption and was received by party moderates as the Great White Hope. Gruevski's tenure has seen the VMRO-DPMNE follow a generic pro-Europe, pro-'civil society' platform at the expense of its characteristic political nationalism.

Radical nationalist supporters of the previous VMRO-DPMNE leader Ljubčo Georgievski dominated the second faction. This group strongly opposes the terms of the Ohrid Agreement, which Georgievski denounced in 2002 as an international conspiracy against ethnic Macedonians. Georgievski for a long time still managed to wield substantial influence because he took sole control over the party's finances before being forced out of the party headship in May 2004. In June 2004 his faction split off from the VMRO-DPMNE to become the VMRO-People's Party.

The VMRO-DPMNE has overcome its internal struggles and became North Macedonia's largest party after the 2006 elections. It managed to expand its support base during its years in power, and won 63 out of 120 seats in the 2008 elections, granting the party's election block an outright majority in parliament. Party leader Nikolai Gruevski after the 2006 elections became Prime Minister, and remained so after the 2008 elections. In 2009, the party had another two major successes. While the VMRO-DPMNE-led coalition 'For a better Macedonia' won in 56 out of 84 municipalities, the party's proposed presidential candidate Gjorge Ivanov also won the presidential election.

In more recent times the party has had to hand over power again to the SDSM. The VMRO-DPMNE remained the largest party after the 2016 elections, but the SDSM managed to form a government. Also after the 2020 elections, the VMRO-DPMNE did not manage to gain enough of a mandate to govern again. Its coalition, called Renewel, managed to gain 44 seats in parliament. This was just 2 seats less than the SDSM-led We Can coalition. Since then the party itself has held 36 seats in parliament, which makes it the largest party.

### Democratic Union for Integration (DUI)

Party Leader: Ali Ahmeti  
Number of seats: 15  
<http://www.bdi.org.mk>

The Democratic Union for Integration (DUI, or Bashkimi Demokratik per Integrim, BDI) was formed 3 months before the elections in June 2002. It is the successor to the Albanian National Liberation Army, which fought the FYROM security forces in 2001 in the battles preceding the Ohrid Agreement. Although once on the black list of the American State Department for terrorism, it appears that party leader Ali Ahmeti is sincere in his newfound commitment to the democratic process.

In 2004 the party reaffirmed its commitment to Albanian integration in a confident multi-ethnic North Macedonia, decentralisation of power, eradication of corruption and organised crime, and for a stable FYROM integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures. Before the 2006 elections, DUI formed an electoral coalition with the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP) and the Democratic League of Bosniaks. This election bloc won 17 seats in parliament and DUI again became the biggest party for Albanians in North Macedonia. However, the party was not invited to join the government. In protest, the party boycotted the first sessions of the parliament and staged several road blockades in the summer of 2006.

Resentment over being left out of the coalition in favour of the smaller Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) also led to tensions between the two ethnic Albanian parties in North Macedonia, which ultimately culminated into election violence during the 2008 parliamentary elections. In these elections, the DUI won 18 seats, again becoming the biggest ethnic Albanian party of the country. It became part of the new ruling coalition. The party has maintained an important role in forming governments. Since 2008 it has never been in opposition, always forming a coalition with either the VMRO-DPMNE or SDSM.

### Alliance for Albanians and Alternative

Party Leader: Ziadin Sela  
Number of seats: 12  
<https://www.aleanca.eu>

The Alliance for Albanians is an ethnic Albanian party founded in 2015. The party is in coalition with Alternative. Just like the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) it focusses on Albanian minority interests. The party is classified as centre-right though, with DUI classified as centre-left. The party holds some more conservative views on many issues. The party managed to gain 12 seats in the 2020 parliamentary elections, increasing its number from 3. It has served as an opposition party since then.

### Besa

Party Leader: Bilall Kasami  
Number of seats: 4  
<https://levizjabesa.mk/>

Lëvizja Besa was formed in November 2014, as an ethnic Albanian party, by Zeqirija Ibrahim, Bilal Kasami and the chief editor of 'Shenja' magazine, Afrim Gashi. The party aims to win more rights and respect for Ethnic Albanians in Macedonia and represent those who feel the 'establishment' Albanian parties are out of touch. It managed to gain 4 seats in the latest 2020 election and has since then been part of the governing coalition.

### Left

Party Leader: Dimitar Apasiev  
Number of seats: 2  
<https://levica.mk>

The Left is a socialist party founded on 14 November 2015. The party is best classified as left-wing to far-left. During the 2020 elections, the party managed to gain 2 seats, after which it became an opposition party.

### Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA)

Party Leader: Menduh Thaci  
Number of seats: 1  
<http://www.pdsh.org>

The Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA, or Partia Demokristiane Shqipërisë, PDSH) was founded in 1995 when the youth generation of PDP politicians, led by Arben Xhaferi, who had arrived from Kosovo, broke away to form a separate party. Xhaferi's goals included recognition of Albanians as a constituent nation, rights to language and education, proportional representation in existing institutions and the demand for a separate university in Tetovo on the border with Kosovo. In 1998, the DPA carried its popular, radical agenda into government after forming a surprise partnership with the rightist bloc dominated by VMRO-DPMNE and in 2002, along with its former government partner, went into opposition to the SDSM and DUI.

Prior to the 2006 elections the DPA campaigned alone and vowed revenge on DUI. The party collected 11 parliamentary seats and, although smaller than DUI, formed again a coalition with VMRO-DPMNE. This led to resentment with the DUI and considerable tensions between the two ethnic Albanian parties in the country, which ultimately culminated in the violent incidents marring the 2008 parliamentary vote. After this vote, the VMRO-DPMNE decided to govern with the biggest ethnic Albanian party, the DUI, and the DPA returned to opposition.

In more recent years the party has steadily declined and currently only holds one seat in parliament. However, it is part of the broad governing coalition led by the SDSM. The party is best classified as an Albanian minority interest party, centre-right to right-wing in its political views.

## Biographies

### Dimitar Kovačevski

Prime Minister

Since 17 January 2022, Dimitar Kovačevski is the prime minister of North Macedonia. He previously was deputy minister in Zoran Zaev's second cabinet (2020-2022).

Kovačevski, 48 years old, was an assistant professor at two universities in Skopje - the New York University of Skopje, and the University American College Skopje, where he worked at the Faculty of Business Economics and Management. He has been a member of the SDSM party since 1994.

After a large defeat in the 2021 local elections, Zaev resigned as PM and leader of the SDSM. In subsequent negotiations with opposition parties, Zaev survived a vote of no-confidence, preventing early elections. Kovačevski accompanied Zaev during these negotiations. On December 12, 2021, Kovačevski won internal party elections as the favorite pick of Zaev. Subsequently, he became PM in January 2022.

### Stevo Pendarovski

President

Stevo Pendarovski (3 April 1963) was elected president of North Macedonia on May 5th, 2019. His public career started as deputy minister for Public Relations in the Ministry of Internal Affairs between 1998-2001. Moreover, he was the head of the Analytical and Research Department of the ministry during the same period. He obtained his Bachelor of Law from Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, and then pursued a Master degree and a Ph.D in political science at the same university.

From 2001 to 2004 Pendarovski was National Security and Chief Foreign Policy Adviser under President Boris Trajkovski, a position he occupied again from 2005 to 2009 under President Branko Crevenkovski. He has been Professor in International Security, Foreign Policy and Globalization at the University American College in Skopje since 2008. Pendarovski is a member of the Social Democratic Union (SDSM) and has been the party's presidential candidate since the April 2014 presidential elections.

### Gjorge Ivanov

## Former President

Gjorge Ivanov, born on 2 May 1960 in Valandovo, is the former President of the Republic of Macedonia. Ivanov finished primary and secondary school in his hometown Valandovo. At the age of 27 he moved to the Macedonian capital Skopje, which has since been his permanent residence. His professional career started in 1988, when he became an editor at Macedonian Radio and Television, the national broadcasting station. He later taught political theory and political philosophy at the Law Faculty in Skopje. In 1999, he became a visiting professor for the Southeast European programme at the University of Athens in Greece.

Ivanov became politically active in the Yugoslav era, when he pushed for political pluralism and a market economy. He is the founder and honorary president of the Macedonian Political Science Association and one of the founding members of the Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis, a leading analytical centre in Macedonia. On 25 January 2009, the strongest party in the Macedonian parliament, the conservative VMRO-DPMNE, appointed Ivanov as the party's presidential candidate for the 2009 presidential elections, which they won.

On 16 April 2009, Ivanov received the presidential certificate from the State Election Commission. The main vision, which Ivanov promotes as president, is the Macedonian model of a multi-ethnic society and a Pax Europaea, a united Europe living in peace and respecting the diversity and identity of the nations of Europe.

## Zoran Zaev

### Former Prime Minister

Zoran Zaev was born on 8 October 1974 in Strumica, and is the leader of SDSM. In the local elections of 2005, Zaev was chosen as mayor of the municipality of Strumica. In 2009 and 2013, he was re-elected in that position. Previously he served in parliament for several years. In 2008, he was elected to be the vice-president of SDSM, until he became the leader of the party after Branko Crvenkovski stepped down. After receiving a majority of votes at the congress of the party, he became president of SDSM in 2013.

During 2015 he was in charge of the publication of the wiretapped conversations that deadlocked Macedonian politics. Macedonia's public prosecutor charged Zaev with espionage and with making violent threats aimed at the government to 'undermine the goals of the constitutional order'. Given all this, in the 2016 parliamentary elections, the VMRO-DPMNE managed to obtain the highest number of seats. However, the party was accused of obstructing the government formations that followed, in order to circumvent prosecution for corruption. As the SDSM was the leading opposition party, President Gjorge Ivanov initially wanted to prevent Zaev from forming a government with parties representing North Macedonia's ethnic Albanians. He argued that such a coalition would undermine Macedonia's territorial integrity.

As a result of the dispute, the EU and NATO urged the president to allow government formations with the involvement of the opposition. Consequently, the North Macedonian president Gjorge Ivanov asked Zaev to form a government, in order to curb fears of ethnic violence in the country. Six months after the elections, in May 2017, a coalition was formed between the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), and the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA). Zaev pledges to boost economic growth, aims to bring corruption to a halt, and is an advocate for European integration.

## Source

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