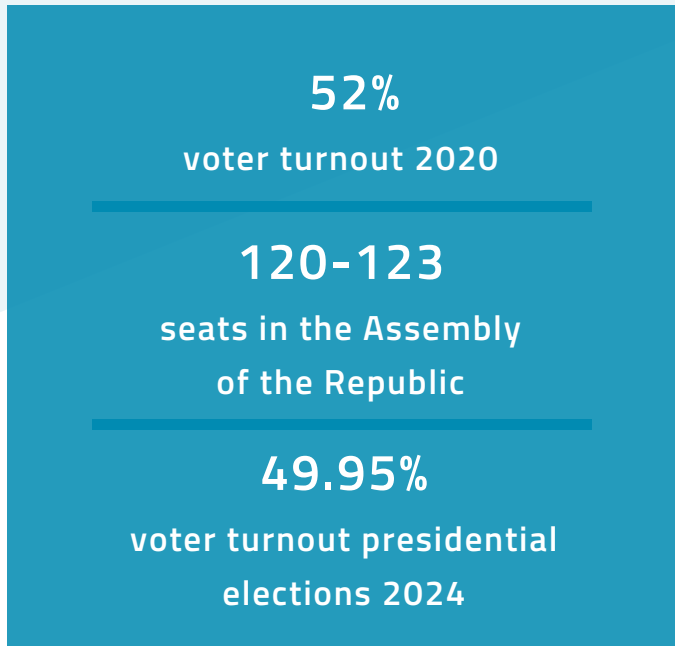


Briefing on

Elections in North Macedonia

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About the elections

On 8 May 2024, North Macedonia will hold early parliamentary elections in addition to the second round of presidential elections, as no candidate received a majority in the first run on 24 April 2024. In the parliamentary elections, about 1.8 million Macedonian citizens will elect 120 representatives in the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. Three additional seats may be given to representatives of out-of-country Macedonians if they reach the threshold, meaning that the number of votes cast must equal the threshold for winning one in-country seat in the previous elections in 2020. This has never happened before.

Facing opposition pressure, the main political parties decided to organize parliamentary elections two months earlier than foreseen. In January, a caretaker government under Talat Xhaferi was appointed to prepare for elections within a 100-day mandate. Xhaferi is the country's first ethnic Albanian prime minister. The power-sharing system created by the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001 led to a political environment in which parties dominantly cater to their own ethnic communities.

Political Context

After the last parliamentary elections in 2020, the *Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)*, the *BESA Movement*, the *Democratic Union for Integration (DUI)* and the *Alliance for Albanians (AA)* and *Alternativa* formed a government under Prime Minister Zoran Zaev (SDSM). Zaev resigned in late 2021 after his party's losses in local elections, in which the *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)* won in 42 out of 80 municipalities, including the capital Skopje. Dimitar Kovačevski (SDSM) was appointed as the new prime minister. The entire period was marked by the Covid-19 health crisis; the aftermath of the Prespa-Agreement with Greece, which resulted in the country's name change to the Republic of North Macedonia; the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which resulted in high inflation rates; as well as the bilateral dispute with Bulgaria.

Neighbouring EU member state Bulgaria agreed not to veto North Macedonia's path towards EU accession on the condition that the "community of Bulgarians" is enshrined into North Macedonia's constitution – according to the so-called "French proposal" put forward in June 2022.

The ratification of this proposal by SDSM and all ethnic Albanian parties in the parliament is highly disputed, especially among ethnic Macedonians, and has led to protests and societal polarization. Especially VMRO-DPMNE seems to benefit from the people's frustration, as they oppose the constitutional change, viewing it as "another humiliation of the Macedonians", although they do not oppose EU membership per se. At the same time, Bulgaria itself faces snap elections in June 2024.

Although the previous bilateral dispute with Greece, hindering North Macedonia's European and transatlantic integration, was resolved by committing to the Prespa Agreement, its implementation is still incomplete. The government did not meet the deadline of changing all official identification documents and car license plates to the new name by 12 February 2024, leaving around a third of citizens without valid documents. As a result, around 600,000 Macedonians are either stuck in their country or stranded abroad, since their outdated passports do not allow them to travel. Nonetheless, participation in the current elections is still possible with the old documents.

Presidential Elections

The first round of presidential elections took place on 24 April 2024. Seven candidates, among them two ethnic Albanians, competed in the elections. Although the office is primarily ceremonial and comes with limited political influence, the party-backed candidates could de facto extend the parliamentary election campaign with the presidential campaign. The presidential elections count as the first indicator of potential results in the parliamentary elections. With a turnout of almost 50%, the candidate supported by VMRO-DPMNE, Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, received 40.1% of votes, while the incumbent President Stevo Pendarovski, who is supported by the SDSM, landed in second place with 19.9%. Both candidates will compete for office in the runoffs on 8 May parallel to the parliamentary elections.

The turnout in the second round must be at least 40% of registered voters to be counted as valid. In this regard, it will be interesting to see who the ethnic Albanian voters will support in the second round. Pendarovski has a higher chance of attracting ethnic Albanian voters, whereas Siljanovska-Davkova might attract more voters from the remaining ethnic Macedonian candidates, who have a more critical stance towards Pendarovski. There is, however, also a chance for Albanians and supporters of Levica to silently boycott the presidential elections altogether and thereby threaten the necessary turnout, if there is no candidate they want to support in the second run.

Main Electoral Lists and Their Campaigns

| Lists | Lead candidate | Political Orientation | European party |
|--|---------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| For a European Future (SDSM & Partners) | Dimitar Kovačevski | Centre-left | PES |
| Your Macedonia (VMRO-DPMNE & Partners) | Hristijan Mickovski | Centre-right | EPP |
| European Front (DUI, DPA) | Ali Ahmeti | Centre-right, Albanian | - |
| European Alliance for Change (BESA, DD, Alternativa, AA) | Bilall Kasami | Centre-right, Albanian opposition | - |
| Levica | Dimitar Aspasiiev | Left-wing, nationalist | - |
| ZNAM | Maksim Dimitrievski | diverse | - |

As the biggest opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE competes in these elections in coalition with other small parties under the slogan “Macedonia is yours again!”. The party program caters to ethnic Macedonians and opposes the government party SDSM, which they frame as elitist and accuse of having “sold out” their people. This populist stance is paired with statements about a return to old pride and their unwillingness to call the republic by its constitutional name “North Macedonia”. Although pro-European, VMRO-DPMNE is also campaigning against the French proposal for constitutional change to meet Bulgaria’s demands. This political program seems to address the concerns of many Macedonians, who are frustrated with the stagnation in the EU accession process due to bilateral disputes. Furthermore, the weak management of the multiple crises the country faced in the last government period has led people to look for a political alternative, which they found in VMRO-DPMNE. The SDSM, on the other hand, campaigns the slogan “No giving up on the future”, which indicates they want to continue their political course as opposed to a drastic change that a VMRO-DPMNE government would push for.

With that, the party tries to spread narratives about how they would provide stability, security, predictability and a European future – although their recent actions do not always align with EU standards in terms of rule of law. There needs to be a stronger commitment to the fight against corruption, as well as improvements in media freedom.

The leftist Levica opposes both the Prespa Agreement as well as an agreement with Bulgaria and portrays itself as EU-sceptic. Although economically left-wing, the party circles around Macedonian nationalist rhetoric and proclaims an Albanophobic agenda. There is also a new player in the political arena – the party ZNAM was founded in 2023 by former SDSM politician Maksim Dimitrievski, who positioned it as an alternative to SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE.

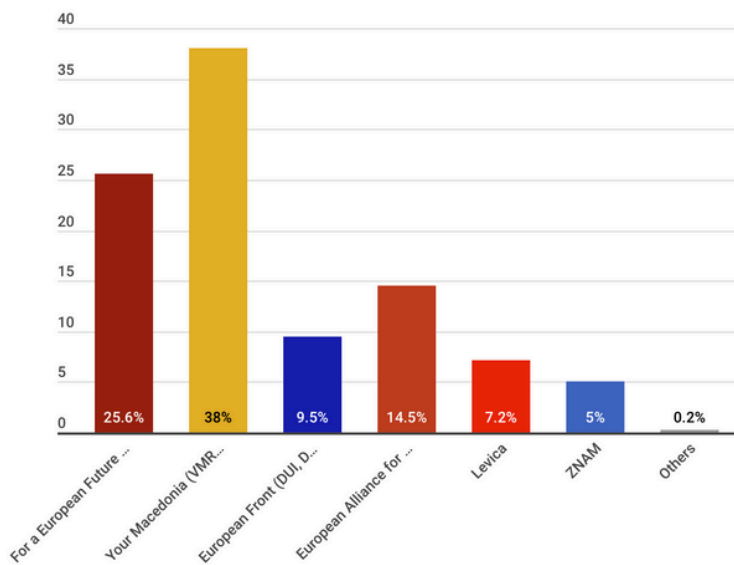
As for the Albanian parties, an opposition coalition named “European Alliance for Change” made up of the BESA movement, Alternativa, AA and the Democratic movement (DD) formed itself to challenge the two-decade reign of the DUI and received informal support from Kosovo’s governing Vetëvendosje.

DUI and the *Democratic Party of Albanians* (DPA) will compete under the name “European Front” against the Albanian opposition list for votes from the ethnic Albanian minority in the country.

Polls and Outlook

The first round of presidential elections served as a first test of voter support in the parliamentary elections, but also in all other recent opinion polls the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE landed the first spot with 35-40%, followed by SDSM with 20-25%.

A poll by the *Center for Political Research and Communications* (CRPC) with 1,250 respondents from 20 April 2024 found the following support:



Although VMRO-DPMNE's victory is likely, a government change will depend on potential coalitions after the elections. Their biggest coalition potential lies with the joint Albanian opposition as well as ZNAM. However, it is unclear if VMRO-DPMNE will compromise on key issues that are unpopular amongst their own electoral base. SDSM would most probably opt for another coalition with the European Front, but it is still uncertain if both will receive a sufficient majority to do so. In both scenarios, there remains an evident will for a future within the EU, yet with different obstacles on the way to reaching this goal. A continuation of the incumbent government bears the risk of another period of insufficient reforms, while a VMRO-DPMNE-led government runs the risk of steering further away from the country's EU accession, due to unwillingness to compromise on a solution with Bulgaria and back-pedaling on the agreement with Greece, as the refusal to call the country “North Macedonia” demonstrates.

While VMRO-DPMNE's success in the parliamentary election seems to be clear, the results of the presidential elections are proving to be more unpredictable. It remains interesting who of the two presidential candidates will mobilize voters in their favour for the runoff on 8 May.

In the framework of a panel discussion series, the **Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe** analyzes parliamentary elections in the countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The event is jointly organised with the Political Academy of the Austrian People's Party and the Karl-Renner-Institut.