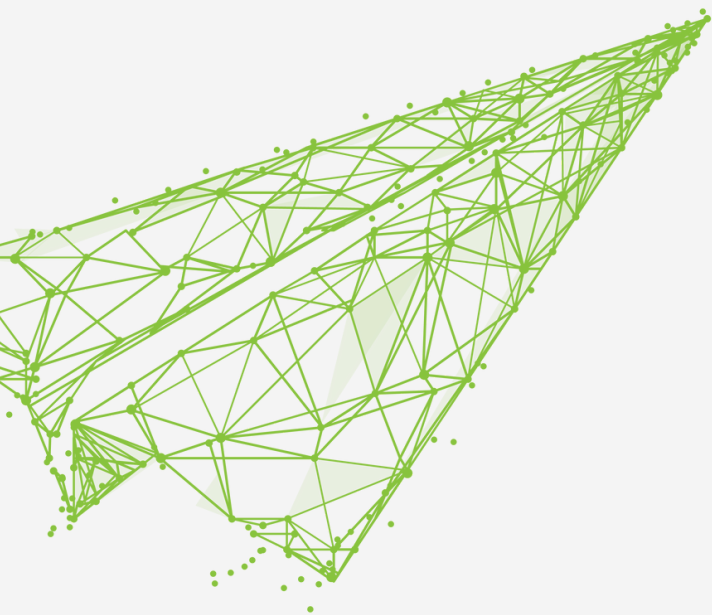


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# THE 2024 ELECTIONS IN NORTH MACEDONIA – KEY TAKEAWAYS AND WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR



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## Key takeaways

The 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections in North Macedonia occurred amidst increased Euroscepticism due to unmet high expectations for progress towards EU membership and failed promises to deliver justice and the rule of law in the country. Against this background, the Macedonian opposition party Vnatrešna revolucionerna organizacija–Demokratska partija za makedonsko nacionalno edinstvo (VMRO–DPMNE) won both presidential and parliamentary elections. The next, and first female, president, Gordana Siljanovska Davkova, is a former member of the liberal party and a university professor. After eight years in opposition, and following the consequences of Nikola Gruevski's administration, VMRO–DPMNE will have a chance to rule the country over the next four years alongside a president elected with their support, while having dominated local governance since 2021. VMRO–DPMNE will have a majority in the parliament with 58 MPs, which enables them to form a coalition government without the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), who were in power for 20 years from 2002 and now have 18 MPs. VMRO–DPMNE's coalition partner VLEN/VREDI will join the government with the support of 14 MPs. The Social Democratic Union for Macedonia (SDSM), divided and affected by an inner split within the party, will move into opposition with only 18 MPs. Their former party allies from ZNAM will have six MPs, as will the radical left and anti-establishment party Levica.

While the polls confirmed VMRO–DPMNE's lead, the loss of votes for SDSM was staggering, marking their worst performance since the country's independence. ZNAM is partly the reason for SDSM's weak performance, having managed to enter the Assembly with six MPs only a couple of months after their formal establishment. This new party is also a likely candidate in the new government. Levica managed to triple their current number of MPs, but will almost certainly remain in opposition.

Considering the nationalistic rhetoric during the election campaign and its importance for mobilising supporters, it is clear that the topics of nationalism and interethnic relations have regained ground in domestic politics. Nationalism was used by most actors (DUI, VLEN, VMRO–DPMNE, ZNAM and Levica). This has had an important effect on the loss of liberal ideas in the country and poses a challenge for political actors campaigning on progressive platforms and concepts of citizenship.

The election process, however, was peaceful and in line with international standards, with a relatively high turnout. This aspect should not be understated, especially considering the ongoing criticisms of the weak democratic capacity in the Western Balkans and the concerning trends in some of North Macedonia's neighbouring countries. The partial boycott of the vote by the Albanian community did not raise major concerns about the conduct of the elections. The almost immediate peaceful transfer of power at the presidential level, just four days after the second round of the presidential elections, was also a positive example in this respect.

## What to watch out for?

### ***Government formation process***

The talks on government formation are ongoing, and there were no major surprises during the post-election period. As announced during the election campaign, VMRO–DPMNE has reached out to VLEN to discuss the possibility of forming a government with them, meaning that DUI will move into opposition after an extended period of governance. The leadership of DUI has not taken this lightly and, since the elections, has been sending public messages that they are the legitimate representatives of the Albanians who 'should' be included in the government.

Moreover, they have sent open political threats that if DUI is removed from the government, this will have consequences for the security of the country. This will be the first transfer of power in the Albanian political block since 2008. A further question mark over DUI's positioning is their relationship with the country's president, as some of their most prominent members and, overall, a significant number of Albanian voters boycotted the second round of the presidential elections.

### ***Risk of a return to old practices***

Given VMRO–DPMNE's convincing victory and its overwhelming majority at all levels of government, there are concerns as to the potential return to autocratic modes of governance, as experienced after 2008 when the party had a similar majority in parliament. The party leadership has not distanced itself clearly from major wrongdoings of the wiretapping crisis and the party's financing. Memories of strong conservatism coupled with pressure on civil society and overall state capture persist. As a result, there is a pressing need to publicly support liberal ideas and groups in order to prevent a potential and likely turn to conservatism and authoritarianism.

### ***European integration***

With this majority in parliament, VMRO–DPMNE has a chance to show their discursive commitment to European integration in practice. Much of their criticism of SDSM has been related to the latter's inability to make substantive steps towards integration. The implementation of the Reform Agendas for the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans' is an opportunity for the EU to facilitate some of the key reforms in fundamentals and economic integration through substantial EU financial support. For this to materialise, VMRO–DPMNE would need to endorse the Reform Agenda prepared by the outgoing SDSM-led government. Even though the plan is not linked directly to the constitutional changes required for the holding of the second intergovernmental conference and the continuation of the EU accession negotiations, progress will be difficult without them. On the constitutional amendments, Hristijan Mickovski, leader of VMRO–DPMNE, repeated after the elections that, as a government, they would expect some kind of movement on the Bulgarian side, which is unrealistic.

### ***Relations with the neighbours***

The upcoming transition of power will impact the relations between North Macedonia and its neighbouring countries. Despite a number of concerns, the outgoing government held a positive record on regional cooperation, having signed the Prespa Agreement with Greece on the resolution of the name dispute and an agreement on good neighbourly relations with Bulgaria. VMRO–DPMNE strongly opposed both of these agreements at a level of discourse, underpinning the new president's decision not to say North Macedonia but rather 'Macedonia' in her inauguration speech, which was watched closely by both domestic and EU policy- and decision-makers. Despite the announcement of the president's cabinet that, in official communication, she would use the country's constitutional name, Mickovski publicly supported her action not to do so and announced that she would continue along these lines. These actions triggered alarm bells in Greece and the EU, creating strains in the overall relationship, and served as a reminder of the fragility of these agreements without movement on EU accession. Lastly, the change of government will also have repercussions on Western Balkans relations overall. While the previous government coalition was focused on building ties with Albanian and Serbian leadership in tandem while supporting Kosovo internationally, the potential inclusion of VLEN in the government would mean stronger connections to the Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti, as he has campaigned publicly for VLEN in North Macedonia.