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North Macedonia elections: nationalists' comeback season

Ivana Ristovska

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North Macedonia elects the conservative, centre-right candidate Gordana Siljanovska Davkova as first female president and the parliament elects VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristian Mickoski as new Prime Minister. The comeback of the right to the seats of power is the result of the Presidential and Parliamentary elections (April 24th and May 8th), distinguished by a dense electoral campaign in a historical period during which the country is facing new challenges that hinder its path to joining the European Union. The issue of revising the Constitution, as desired by Sofia for the introduction of sections recognizing the Bulgarian minority in the North Macedonian territory, was indeed at the centre of the communication. Hence, the focus was placed on the concept of identity and on a more general clash between European integration (i.e. advancement of human rights) and national pride (i.e. protection of traditional institutions).

Introduction

North Macedonia officially began its journey towards the European Union in 2005, obtaining the candidate country status. Progress towards European integration was immediately suspended due to Greece's veto and the long diplomatic battle over the name change. Indeed, the objections started in 1991 when the country declared its independence from Yugoslavia and adopted the name “Republic of Macedonia”. Greece opposed to this, arguing that “Macedonia” implies territorial, historical, and cultural heritage from the homonymic northern Greek region¹. Skopje was then accused for decades of appropriating signs and figures that are considered emblematic of Greek culture – such as the use of Vergina Sun (royal symbol of the ancient Kingdom of Macedonia) and Alexander the Great as namesake of infrastructures, monuments, and places of cultural interest. On the other hand, the counterparty claimed for years this ambiguity had no territorial ambitions towards Greece, nor a cultural plunder: Skopje pointed out that the lands of the present-day country was part of historical evolutions of “Macedonia”, which has been influenced by wars, borders re-drawing, and different cultures.

In 2018, thanks to the negotiations (supported by US) led by Zoran Zaev of the centre-left party SDSM – *Social Democratic Union of Macedonia*² and the signing of the Prespa Agreement³, it was established that the official name would be the *Republic of North Macedonia*. The dispute also impeded the country's access to NATO – after the Agreement, in 2020 the member states officially allowed North Macedonia to become the 30th member of the Atlantic Alliance⁴.

However, complications in the EU accession process have not stopped. Disagreements with Bulgaria have again blocked the start of negotiations at the European level. The reasons essentially lie in Sofia's request to constitutionally recognize the Bulgarian minority presence⁵ on North Macedonian territory and to clarify the historical and identity ties between the two States⁶. After various resistances, in 2022 the North Macedonian government, at the time led by centre-left leader Dimitar Kovačevski (SDSM), accepted the terms (also known as “*French proposal*”⁷) expected by Bulgaria for the start of negotiations.

¹ Nimetz M. The Macedonian “Name” Dispute: The Macedonian Question—Resolved? *Nationalities Papers*. 2020;48(2):205-214. doi:10.1017/nps.2020.10.

² Socijaldemokratski sojuz na Makedonija.

³ Source: <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280544ac1>.

⁴ NATO, 2020, North Macedonia joins NATO as 30th Ally.

Source: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_174589.htm.

⁵ Dražaven zavod za statistika, SOOPŠTENIE Popis na naselenieto, domakjnstvata i stanovite vo Republika Severna Makedonija, 2021 – prv set na podatoci, 2022, Broj : 2.1.22.10.

⁶ Kamberi, D., 2023. An Overview of the Dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria through the Optic of International Law. *JUSTICIA—International Journal of Legal Sciences*, 11(19-20), pp.69-75.

⁷ Garding, S., 2019. North Macedonia: In Brief. USA: Congressional Research Service, (Report No: R45739).

The hesitations to accept the compromise were essentially driven by identity grievance and the awareness of the struggles to protect it in such a multi-ethnic society. The French proposal requires North Macedonia to amend its constitution to include the recognition of ethnic Bulgarians – who number 3,500 persons, according to the last census in 2021⁸; at the same time, Sofia does not acknowledge the Macedonian language (considered as a Bulgarian dialect) and its historical independence⁹. This stance, entrenched in Bulgarian political rhetoric, remains a significant obstacle fostering the opposition of the public sentiment: according to the first inquiry¹⁰ after the approval by Kovačevski, over 70% of North Macedonian citizens were against this constitutional reform, which is perceived as a threat to the national identity and a trigger step towards more inter-ethnic tensions within the country.

While both major political opponents seem to support the EU integration, the divergence is on how to address a new constitutional reform, and on the EU's long-term viability of this enlargement approach¹¹, focused on compromises over identitarian matters in a region where the historical resonance is still impactful. This issue has generated negative reactions within the national debate. The perception is that North Macedonia's identity is continually being questioned and that the political leadership is unable to protect the nation's interests. A strong opposition against the changes to the Constitution in the Parliamentary seats has been led from the centre-right party VMRO-DPMNE¹² (*Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity*), fuelling a widespread nationalist sentiment that brought many Macedonians to manifest and protest to oppose these new conditions for the accession to the European Union. In 2023, the political system remained under strain, with the governing coalition (composed by SDSM and the two Albanian parties – DUI and AA) facing the controversies. At the end of the year, snap elections were demanded by the opposition to resolve the crisis¹³.

The complex and dynamic political situation in North Macedonia has led to a strong polarization of the country.

The 2024 elections were therefore a crucial moment for the nation, and the outcome will significantly influence the country's European path: a road that requires political, economic, and legislative reforms to align with EU standards. This includes improvements in areas such as the rule of law, human rights, democratic governance, environmental sustainability, and a clear response to the structural problem of corruption.

⁸ Meta MK, 2022, Census results: 3,504 Bulgarians reside in North Macedonia and only 762 speak Bulgarian at home. Source: <https://meta.mk/en/census-results-3504-bulgarians-reside-in-north-macedonia-and-only-762-speak-bulgarian-at-home/>.

⁹ Panov, M.B., Cacanovska, R. and Angelovska-Panova, M., 2021. Macedonian Nation Between Self-Identity and Euro-Atlantic Integration: Implications of the Agreements with Bulgaria and Greece. In *Researching Yugoslavia and its Aftermath: Sources, Prejudices and Alternative Solutions* (pp. 223-252). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

¹⁰ Spasovski, A. (2022, July 7). Anketa na IPIS: Nad 70% od građjanite se protiv francuskiot predlog [IPIS poll: Over 70% of citizens are against the French proposal]. Source: <https://sitet.com.mk/anketa-na-ipis-nad-70-od-gragjanite-se-protiv-francuskiot-predlog>

¹¹ Vangelov, O., 2023, The French Proposal: A Turning Point in the Balkans or a Dead End?, University American College-Skopje. Source: https://hiia.hu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/mki_FPR_beliv_online_160-172_vangelov.pdf.

¹² Vnatrešna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija – Demokratska Partija za Makedonsko Nacionalno Edinstvo, VMRO-DPMNE.

¹³ House, F., 2024. Nations in Transit 2024-North Macedonia. *Democracy*, 46, p.100.

The Election Results

The 2024 elections¹⁴ in North Macedonia saw the participation of various parties¹⁵ and candidates, with particularly significant results¹⁶ for the country's political future. The first round of voting took place on April 24th, during which citizens expressed their preferences for the new legislative body and for the two candidates running in the presidential run-off, completed with a second vote on May 8th.

Voter turnout during these elections increased by about ten percentage points compared to the 2019 Presidential elections. At the heart of the political debate is the country's possible entry into the European Union in light of the constitutional amendments requested by Bulgaria for the recognition of its minority on North Macedonian soil.

The first round involved 53.41% of the population. The parliamentary elections in North Macedonia allocate 120 seats on a proportional basis. The results showed a clear victory for the right-wing coalition. With 43.32% of the votes, *Your Macedonia* (Tvoja Makedonija), led by the VMRO-DPMNE party and its leader Hristijan Mickoski¹⁷, is the group that will have the most influence in Parliament for the next four years. The centre-left, led by SDSM with the *Coalition for the European Future*, which has been in power in recent years, stopped at 15.37%, followed by the *European Front* (which includes the Albanian party DUI – Democratic Union for Integration) with 13.66%. The Albanian coalition VLEN obtained 13 seats with 10.64%.

During these elections, the first round of the presidential was also held. Conservative candidate Gordana Siljanovska Davkova (supported by the VMRO-DPMNE party) obtained 37.5% of the votes, significantly ahead of the incumbent candidate Stevo Pendarovski (SDSM), who received 18.5%. Voter preference was confirmed during the second round on May 8th, which marked the victory of North Macedonia's first female president with 65.14%.

Gordana Siljanovska Davkova thus took office at Villa Vodno, the official residence of the President, with an inaugural press conference¹⁸ that stirred some controversies. Referring to her role as head of state, Davkova omitted the use of the current name “North Macedonia”, which resulted from a long-standing diplomatic dispute with Greece that lasted over twenty years. By referring to the country simply as “Macedonia”, the new president continued her electoral campaign stance and positioning. President Davkova is openly opposed to the Prespa Agreement (2018) and by using the term “Macedonia” on the symbolic day of her inauguration not only led to the Greek ambassador's departure from the hall but also sent a clear message¹⁹.

The centre-right coalition, represented by the VMRO-DPMNE party, is now the clear and undeniable majority. A victory that is going to influence relations with neighbouring EU countries, particularly Greece and Bulgaria. These election results also represent the broader cultural climate, dominant in this small country in the Western Balkans.

¹⁴ Council of Europe, 2024, North Macedonia, source: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/electoral-assistance/elecdata-north-macedonia>.

¹⁵ Europe Elects, 2024, North Macedonia, source: <https://europeelects.eu/northmacedonia/>.

¹⁶ iVote Demokra, 2024, source: <https://rezultati-prv.sec.mk/en/parl/r>.

¹⁷ Redazione ANSA, 2024, North Macedonia, Mickoski to form government, source: https://www.ansa.it/nuova_europa/en/news/sections/news/2024/06/06/north-macedonia-mickoski-to-form-government_ded380e8-23ed-4596-a03d-f7cb1638f7c4.html.

¹⁸ Baccini, F., Use of the term 'Macedonia' still divides Skopje and Athens, for EuNews, 2024. Source: <https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/05/13/i-am-the-president-of-macedonia-newly-appointed-head-of-state-deletes-half-the-countrys-name-and-reignites-diplomatic-tensions-with-athens/>.

¹⁹ The President in North Macedonia has mainly a representative role, which is however fundamental for the country's political orientation.

Identity Talks

Since its independence in 1991, North Macedonia faced significant challenges to receive international recognition from its neighbours, compounded by internal ethnic disputes and regional instability²⁰ with inefficient state institutions, widespread corruption, unemployment and weak economic performances. This instability, although the country is notably a multi-cultural society, led the concept of “Macedonian identity” and its protection at the centre of the winning party’s agenda²¹. VMRO-DPMNE, specifically during ex-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski era, over the years has responded to the demand for populist politics setting the grounds for the latest campaign²² and the motto “Macedonia yours again!”²³.

Heavily media-focused campaigns, sparked by a heated debate on press freedom and the integrity of the electoral process. It is significant to mention that on the occasion of the elections, the Parliament approved a controversial amendment to the media law that lifts the ban on government and municipal advertising on television and media²⁴. This change, supported by the previous ruling party and the opposition, has raised significant concerns among journalists and press freedom organizations. The fear is the undue influence on independent infosystem and an increase in self-censorship.

In this regard, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe published findings and conclusions related to the elections, pointing out that the campaigns were generally competitive, but transparency and accountability in the financing system were weak due to minimal reporting obligations and limited oversight capacity²⁵. A context where a key role was made by social media as well – where hate speech on the basis of political preferences and ethnic identity, often abetted by parties as well, was widely spread during the campaigns²⁶.

The identity question significantly contributed to the defeat of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). The party was perceived as too accommodating towards the demands of Greece and Bulgaria. Despite successfully resolving the name dispute with Greece and securing NATO membership, many voters viewed these concessions negatively. The coalition with the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), a party representing the Albanian minority, also left many ethnic Macedonian voters dissatisfied. The delicate balance between appeasing international demands and maintaining national identity remains a contentious issue.

Taking stock of the reform process in North Macedonia reveals a mixed picture of progress and persistent challenges – beyond the issue of Bulgarian minorities. The country has made strides in resolving its long-standing disputes, such as achieving NATO membership and

²⁰ Cekikj, A., 2024, April. Populists in Government: The Case of IMRO-DPMNU’s Rule in North Macedonia 2006-2016. In *Perspectives on Populism* (pp. 271-298). Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG.

²¹ Gjuzelov, Borjan, and Milka Ivanovska Hadjievska. “Institutional and Symbolic Aspects of Illiberal Politics: The Case of North Macedonia (2006–2017).” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, Routledge, Jan. 2020, pp. 41–60.

²² European Forum, 2024, Elections Overview – General Elections in North Macedonia, source: <https://europeanforum.net/election-overview-general-elections-in-north-macedonia/>.

²³ Makedonija povtorno tvoja.

²⁴ Ahmatocić, S., 2024, Journalists fear North Macedonia’s new media law, Politico. Source: <https://www.politico.eu/article/north-macedonia-journalists-accuse-ruling-party-and-opposition-restrict-press-freedom-ahead-balkans-election/>.

²⁵ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2024, North Macedonia, Parliamentary Elections and Presidential Election – Second Round, 8 May 2024: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. Source: <https://osce.org/odihr/elections/north-macedonia/568270>.

²⁶ Kolovska V., North Macedonia Sees Surge in Online Hate Speech Around Elections, 2024, BalkanInsight, source: <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/06/06/north-macedonia-sees-surge-in-online-hate-speech-around-elections/>.

resolving the name issue with Greece. However, discrepancies remain rooted, particularly in governance, judicial reform, and combating corruption.

Efforts to reform the electoral system have stagnated, reflecting deep-seated political divisions and the reluctance of major parties to compromise on electoral districting.

The media landscape, despite recent legislative changes, continues to face concerns over independence and self-censorship, exacerbated by political influence²⁷.

Civil society, while vibrant, struggles with funding issues and limited government cooperation.

Sustained efforts are needed to strengthen democratic institutions, improve governance, and foster inclusive growth – which are required for the EU alignment process.

Conclusions

North Macedonia navigates its post-election landscape questioning the EU accession perspectives, and all the reforms that will be required to fit the criteria²⁸. Addressing corruption resolving bilateral disputes, and advancing in the integration process will shape the country's trajectory. The standstill relation with Bulgaria is likely to continue impacting North Macedonia EU membership²⁹ and the overall feeling of disillusionment.

In 24th June, North Macedonia's parliament elected Hristijan Mickoski (VMRO-DPMNE leader) as Prime Minister. Even if historical positions suggest a more nationalist approach, which might complicate relations with neighbouring countries and the EU, Mickoski stated the willing to work on attracting new investment, cutting taxes, and increasing incomes – all in all, by allying the common foreign policy with the EU and supporting Ukraine's defence. Alongside, in tune with the President Davkova's oath, the new Prime Minister in Skopje decides to name his country Macedonia³⁰.

Beyond the economic³¹ and emigration-related challenges³², the comeback season of nationalism will necessarily require a structural program against corruption in a country where clientelism is a well-known opponent of a progressive stability of the rule of law.

The return of a collective sense of traditionalism will also be critical on the development of gender equality and LGBTQAI+ rights³³. Even during the pro-European legislations, the government has not advanced laws to formally recognize same-sex relationships, nor a dedicated platform to engage in constructive dialogue for the protection of that part of the society³⁴.

However, the issue is clearly important for SDSM to re-build a comprehensive and efficient agenda based on:

²⁷ House, F., 2024. Nations in Transit 2024-North Macedonia. *Democracy*, 46, p.100.

²⁸ The Copenhagen criteria, which emphasize stability of institutions for democracy, rule of law, human rights and respect for minorities, environmental sustainability standards, and so forth.

²⁹ Tsonev, I., The Conservative resurgence in North Macedonia: Electoral Triumph amid a need for progressive agenda, 2024, Friedrich Naumann Foundation, source: <https://www.freiheit.org/node/44549>.

³⁰ Redazione ANSA, 2024, Macedonia Nord, fiducia a nuovo governo di Hristian Mickoski. Source: https://www.ansa.it/nuova_europa/it/notizie/rubriche/politica/2024/06/24/macedonia-nordfiducia-a-nuovo-governo-di-hristijan-mickoski_3a47a5c6-04bb-4fa7-8532-78924a1a7c97.html.

³¹ Li, N., Pihl Gade, T., Emigration, Business Dynamics, and Firm Heterogeneity in North Macedonia, 2023, International Monetary Fund, Working Paper No. 2023/268.

³² De Silva, S., Labour Migration in the Western Balkans, 2024, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, source: <https://www.cespi.it/en/eventi-attualita/focus-balceni/labour-migration-western-balkans>.

³³ Useful network resources provided by Reactor – Research in Action: <https://reactor.org.mk/en/>.

³⁴ Vangelov, O., Nations in Transit 2024 – North Macedonia, 2024, Freedom House (Dokument #2107354), source: <https://www.ecoi.net/de/dokument/2107354.html>.

- Strengthen the dynamics of its coalition, led by a frontperson that can relate to people's needs and inspired by transparency, anti-corruption, and rule of law;
- Reconnect with voters, by emphasizing national identity (which is a highly perceived issue) and stressing out the strategic/practical advantages of reaching EU stages as well;
- Promote social policies for a more inclusive society, working on health system, gender equality, and environmental justice.

To regain momentum in the enlargement discussion, North Macedonia need to make significant strides towards EU membership. The new government led by VMRO-DPMNE, in that sense, should work on meeting Copenhagen criteria. Other than be engaged in constructive dialogue with the neighbouring countries, indeed, the EU access goal can be achieved through juridical reforms to support independence in trial processes, and a reshape of its political causes: not only nationalism, but also a strong effort to fight clientelism and corruption, and some concrete results for the North Macedonian economy to retain its voters.

Ivana Ristovska, East Journal journalist