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Much More Than Local Politics: 2025 Local Elections in North Macedonia and their impact on the democratic development and the European integration

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Abstract

In October 2025 North Macedonia held local elections. The ruling coalition achieved a decisive victory on the elections that confirmed their solid approval rate following the victory on the last parliamentary elections in 2024. Still, instead of focus on the local issues, the campaign turned into campaign on major national issues including the stalemate in the process of EU integration of the country. The increased societal polarization along political and ethnic lines followed by low voters' turnout has a potential of creating a crisis in the functioning of the democratic political system. The paper analyses the political context in the country, the outcome of the elections and its impact on the democratic development of the country including its EU integration.

1. Introduction

On 19 October 2025 more than 1.8 million registered voters had the right to vote on the regular local elections in North Macedonia to elect mayors and members of the Municipal Councils (local parliaments) in 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje. The voters could vote in 3,475 polling stations depending on the registered place of residence of the voter. The elections were very competitive with a total number of 886 voting lists out of which 577 for municipal councils and 309 for the mayoral race.¹ The runoffs (second round) of the elections only for the mayoral races were organized in 33 municipalities in which no candidate got more than 50 % of the votes of those who voted in the first round. Additionally, because of the legal provision that at least one third of the registered voters must vote to have valid elections, in four municipalities (three rural municipalities and the town of Gostivar) the elections were declared invalid, and the voting was repeated on 11 January 2026². The elections, according to the long-term practice, were monitored by accredited long- and short-term observers from OSCE/ODIHR and other international organizations as well as accredited domestic observers³.

The results of the elections were a “triumph” for the ruling right-wing party VMRO-DPMNE⁴ since the party and their coalition managed to win the mayoral posts in 54 municipalities and the city of Skopje. The oppositional social-democrats SDSM managed to win the mayoral posts in 6 municipalities (mostly smaller towns except for Centar municipality in Skopje). DUI managed to win the mayoral posts in 6 municipalities. Another coalition party in the Government ZNAM managed to win in 1 municipality (their leader Maksim Dimitrievski won

¹ International Foundation for Electoral Systems, Elections in North Macedonia: 2025 Local Elections, available at: <https://www.ifes.org/tools-resources/election-snapshots/elections-north-macedonia-2025-local-elections>.

² BTA, Four Municipalities in North Macedonia hold Repeat Elections after Low Turnout in October, available at: <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/balkans/1041210-four-municipalities-in-north-macedonia-hold-repeat-elections-after-low-turnout-i>.

³ OSCE, Election Observation Mission, available at: <https://odhr.osce.org/odhr/elections/north-macedonia/595909>.

⁴ Balkan Insight, North Macedonia Ruling Party Celebrates Triumph in Local Elections, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/10/20/north-macedonia-ruling-party-celebrates-triumph-in-local-elections/>.

another term in the town of Kumanovo), the Roma Union managed to win in 1 municipality (Šuto Orizari municipality in Skopje), a party of the Turkish community won in 1 municipality and in 2 municipalities independent candidates managed to win. If the clear win of VMRO-DPMNE over the oppositional social-democrats SDSM was largely expected by the public, the win of the Coalition “VLEN”, a coalition of several parties representing the ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia, over the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), a party that dominated the “Albanian political scene” in the country for more than two decades, was the real surprise of these elections. Namely, VLEN managed to win in 9 municipalities. But more important than the fact that VLEN managed to outnumber DUI in the number of municipalities in which they won is that VLEN managed to win in the urban centers in which ethnic Albanians make most of the population like Čair municipality in Skopje, Tetovo and Debar and in Struga won an independent candidate supported by them.⁵ In Gostivar DUI managed to win only after the elections were repeated in January 2026 since, as said, the elections in the first round weren’t valid due to the voters’ turnout below the legal minimum. DUI also lost the mayoral post in Kičevo to VMRO-DPMNE, a result that was especially important to the ruling party, but also very important for the constantly sensitive inter-ethnic relations in the country.⁶

The turnout in the first round of the elections was 48.30 % and in the second round 41.24 which confirmed the steady declining of the turnout in the 12 years compared with the 67 % turnout on the local elections in 2013.⁷

2. Political context of the elections

Although North Macedonia significantly improved its performance in the organization of the elections compared to the time from 2006 till 2016 in which now fugitive former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski of VMRO-DPMNE ruled the country and the country was labeled as “captured state” by the European Commission⁸, the political parties (out of which the ruling parties bear the greatest responsibility) didn’t manage to comprehensively reform the electoral system and to implement the recommendations given by OSCE/ODIHR. Although the general assessment of the elections was that the fundamental democratic standards were met and that

⁵ Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa, North Macedonia: Mayoral Office more Attractive than Minister and MP, available at: https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/en/cp_article/north-macedonia-mayoral-office-more-attractive-than-minister-and-mp/.

⁶ Balkan Web, Elections in RMV: Albanians Lose the Municipality of Kicevo after 16 Years even though They are Majority. Mickoski’s VMRO Wins, available at: <https://www.balkanweb.com/en/elections-in-the-RMV-Albanians-lose-the-municipality-of-Kercova-after-16-years-even-though-they-are-the-majority-VMRO-and-Mickoski-take-over-the-city/#gsc.tab=0>.

⁷ Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa, North Macedonia: Mayoral Office more Attractive than Minister and MP, available at: https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/en/cp_article/north-macedonia-mayoral-office-more-attractive-than-minister-and-mp/.

⁸ European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document: The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2016 Report, available at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/f9ea936c-5ddb-41dd-99ec-5ac2956aa588_en?filename=20161109_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf.

the elections were “competitive, orderly and peaceful”⁹, still important negative practices from the previous election cycles both on national and local level were repeated. The monitoring mission of the Council of Europe pointed to the increased political polarization and the insufficient women representation among the candidates. The monitoring mission of OSCE/ODIHR remarks went deeper in pointing to the structural deficiencies in the electoral system that are continuously repeating from one to another election cycle which jeopardizes the democratic development of the country. Among other things, ODIHR stressed “the continuing involvement of government officials in the campaign that blurred the line between state and party” and the pressures on public sector employees and numerous cases of voter buying that were reported. Additionally, the absence of improvement in campaign finances reporting was noted including the “lack of proceedings against candidates that failed to comply with reporting requirements by the institutions tasked with campaign finance oversight which further weakens the public trust”. Finally, the mission also addressed the issue of the distribution of state funds for advertising to the political parties and candidates and concluded that the existing formula heavily disadvantages the parliamentary parties without a parliamentary group (at least 5 MPs are needed to form a parliamentary group), the non-parliamentary parties and the independent candidates.¹⁰

The mentioned provision by ODIHR in the Electoral Code¹¹ is especially problematic since the basis for the distribution of the state funds for advertising of the candidates depends solely on the results of the parliamentary elections while being applied also for the presidential and local elections that are separate branches of power. The described situation leads to deeply unfair treatment, especially of the independent candidates by effectively placing them in an unequal position with the other candidates.

Besides the deficiencies in the electoral process, the electoral campaign was marked by high and deepening political polarization in the politics and generally in the society. Apart from the issues important for the functioning of the municipalities and local communities that are expected to be in the center of the political campaign in “normal” political circumstances, the campaign was marked by heated rhetoric, strong statements, and discrediting campaigns against the political opponents with focus on national issues including the European integration of the country. In that regard, the local elections effectively turned into continuation of the

⁹ Council of Europe, Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Orderly and Peaceful Local Elections in North Macedonia, but Lack of Coverage of Local Issues, Women’s Representation and Political Polarisation Among Issues of Concern, available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/-/orderly-and-peaceful-local-elections-in-north-macedonia-but-lack-of-coverage-of-local-issues-women-s-representation-and-political-polarisation-among-issues-of-concern>.

¹⁰OSCE, Voters had Distinct Choices in North Macedonia’s Local Election Runn-Off, but Not All Candidates had Equal Campaign Conditions: International Observers, available at: <https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/elections/600761#:~:text=Worrying%20allegations%20of%20pressure%20on,the%20country%20until%202012%20November.>

¹¹ Section 2, article 75 and onwards of the Electoral Code of the Republic of North Macedonia, available at: https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/migrate/electoral_code_of_the_republic_of_north_macedonia_february_2019_english.pdf.

campaign of the last parliamentary elections in 2024 in which VMRO-DPMNE had a landslide victory against the incumbent government led SDSM in coalition with DUI. The campaign for the last parliamentary elections, except on legitimate concerns and accusations about cases of high corruption and lack of significant progress in the fight against organized crime, had its focus on accusations of “national treason” because of the compromise on including the ethnic Bulgarians as ethnic community (minority) in the constitution of the country that the previous government accepted on request of the Council of the EU.¹² The accepted compromise was accepted to lift the veto imposed by Bulgaria to open the first cluster of the accession negotiations for membership of North Macedonia in EU.¹³

Shortly before the start of the electoral campaign SDSM’s leader Venko Filipče made a provocative political move by proposing a declaration to all parties in the Parliament, especially to the ruling coalition, that shall “define the positions and red lines of North Macedonia when it comes to the integration in the EU, and that Bulgaria, once again, obstructs the country’s integration, official Skopje should seize the negotiations with Sofia”.¹⁴ The purpose of the Declaration, according to Filipče, was to unblock the integration process by adopting the necessary constitutional amendments, but at the same time to deny Bulgaria any credible justification to further block the country’s European path. The proposal immediately became topic of the campaign. PM Hristijan Mickoski accused SDSM and DUI of “underestimating the nation and playing on a short memory card” and said that the citizens need “clear vision and not tricks”¹⁵

Significant aspect of the political context during the election is the mentioned low voters’ turnout. The declining turnout is a clear sign of the growing voter disillusionment with the mainstream political parties and in general with the politics in the country mostly because of the unaddressed cases of high corruption among leading politicians, the clientelist networks constantly “cultivated” by the political parties and the feeling that by voting one can’t change anything in the politics in a system completely dominated by political oligarchy.¹⁶ One fact that supports this conclusion is the relative electoral success of the “anti-establishment” radical party “Levica”, especially in Skopje.

¹² Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2024: North Macedonia, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/nations-transit/2024#:~:text=2%20In%202022%2C%20hostilities%20peaked,5>.

¹³ Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on Enlargement, North Macedonia and Albania, available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11440-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

¹⁴ Skopje Diem, Filipce Proposes Parliamentary Resolution for Country’s EU Integration, available at: <https://skopjediem.com/uncategorized/filipce-proposes-parliamentary-resolution-for-countrys-eu-integration/#:~:text=SDSM%20leader%20Venko%20Filipce%20said,already%20left%20in%20the%20past>.

¹⁵ MIA, Mickoski on Filipce’s Parliament Declaration Proposal: We Need Clear Vision of Valid Arguments, Not Trickery, available at: [https://mia.mk/en/story/mickoski-on-filipches-parliament-declaration-proposal-we-need-clear-vision-of-valid-arguments-not-trickery#:~:text=Kavadarci%2C%2030%20August%202025%20\(MIA,a%20clear%20vision%20and%20strateg](https://mia.mk/en/story/mickoski-on-filipches-parliament-declaration-proposal-we-need-clear-vision-of-valid-arguments-not-trickery#:~:text=Kavadarci%2C%2030%20August%202025%20(MIA,a%20clear%20vision%20and%20strateg)

¹⁶ European Forum, Election Overview: Local Elections in North Macedonia, available at: <https://europeanforum.net/election-overview-local-elections-in-north-macedonia/>.

Another reason for the low turnout is the fact that although the country faced mass emigration in the last decade, the voters' list wasn't updated since most of the recent emigrants kept the residence address in the country and the authorities didn't show initiative to solve the problem by changing the legislation and implementing it. The voters' list for the local election had almost the same number of voters as the entire population according to the last census from 2021.¹⁷

Last, but not least, the main progressive opposition in the country SDSM faces crisis of credibility among the voters and internal problems that were visible even before the electoral defeat in 2024 and after the party went into opposition only intensified. The party elected new leader and leadership, but the effect of that change is for now modest. The lower approval rates of the party and the still unfinished process of internal renewal of the party are opening the possibility of a long-term crisis that is dangerous not only for SDSM, but even more for the democracy in the country since the ruling party may acquire unchallenged power and instead of having progressive alternative, the opposition voters may start seeing an alternative in the radical political forces that already exist in the country.¹⁸

3. What to expect in North Macedonia

North Macedonia is again at a crossroad. Unfortunately, what seemed to be a successful transition after the decade long authoritarian rule of the former PM Nikola Gruevski now looks like a past. The current condition of the country looks more like reversing the clock toward the past than advancing in achieving its strategic goals. Unlike a decade ago when the geopolitical circumstances in Europe were favorable for the process of changing the autocratic rule and renewing the democratic transition of the country, the current situation is far from favorable.

The stalemate in the European integration will have long-term negative consequences both on the democratic and the socio-economic development. For smaller countries in territory and population that economically rely on EU and its member states there isn't realistic alternative except integration. Short term political gains for the ruling elite from the awakened nationalism and fully justified frustration of the people because of the unfair obstacles on the way can turn into strategic mistake leaving the country even more vulnerable to future obstacles and unfair treatment.

Attempts for such political gains were visible during the election campaign when the mentioned accusations "for national treason" for accepting the constitutional changes were revived by the

¹⁷ Telma TV, Kod, <https://telma.com.mk/2025/11/10/kod-kolku-chini-avionski-let-od-shvajczarija-za-kichevo-dsk-za-kandidatite-koi-se-reklamiraa-so-sobirane-gubre-veli-etichko-prashane-kakvi-trikovi-imashe-za-lokalnite-izbori/>.

¹⁸ European Forum, Election Overview-General Elections in North Macedonia, available at: <https://europeanforum.net/election-overview-general-elections-in-north-macedonia/#:~:text=State%20of%20the%20economy%20and,the%20reputation%20of%20the%20party.>

ruling party VMRO-DPMNE. At one point that campaign overshadowed the local issues that would normally dominate local elections. On a long term, such accusations are increasing the political polarization and create negative feelings among the citizens towards the process that instead of being objective and merit-based is turned into political blackmailing by some member states. The country must focus on pursuing its own national interest by going through the process as fast as possible without further unnecessary delays. Good example is the neighboring Albania, that showed visible determination in implementing reforms in rule-of-law especially the fight against organized crime and high corruption, but also managed to mobilize its administrative capacity to fulfil the obligations on its side. The effort toward full EU membership needs to be a joint one: although the primary responsibility for the necessary decisions lays in the Government, the constructive approach by the opposition is also very important for the success of the process.

One specific feature of North Macedonia is the importance of preserving the good inter-ethnic relations. Once the nationalism gains ground in politics it can also turn in undesired direction and awake the ghosts from the past. If the stalemate in the process is prolonged for a longer period it may create increased inter-ethnic polarization and even radicalization. The stalemate could be abused by radical political forces to blame the other community. Among ethnic Albanians voices that would blame the ethnic Macedonians for the situation could gain support and among ethnic Macedonians negative feelings that ethnic Albanians aren't sensitive for the core identity issues for their community may develop. To prevent such possible negative development all pro-European political forces in the country must intensify the efforts to unblock the integration of the country as an issue that unites all ethnic communities. On its part, the EU should put more effort to prevent situations of blockade of the process because of obviously bilateral issues that aren't in line with the Copenhagen criteria.

Finally, SDSM remains the only progressive alternative in the country. But the status of leading force even in opposition isn't given for eternity. The party needs complete reformation and renewal of its political profile. The process of reforms must include creation of policy alternatives, bringing in the party people that have both leadership capacity and proven credibility in the public and development of new kind of communication with the current and potential voters. To achieve that the party leadership must think unorthodoxly and open the party to more direct democracy to attract younger voters while strengthening its internal organizational structure and party's discipline.

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