

## Parliamentary Elections in North Macedonia 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020

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In autumn 2019, the political leaders of the main North Macedonian parties agreed to organise early parliamentary elections on 12<sup>th</sup> April 2020. These snap parliamentary elections had to be postponed because of the Covid-19 crisis. The decision was taken in a party leaders' meeting hosted by President Stevo Pendarovski on 17<sup>th</sup> March. After a long debate over the election date, the main decision-makers agreed to hold the elections on 15<sup>th</sup> July. The agreement came amid a second spike of Covid-19 infections that started at the beginning of June. Since then, the country has registered an average of about 130 new cases per day. Prohibitive measures had to be reinstated, but the state of emergency as such was lifted by President Pendarovski on 12<sup>th</sup> June.

The Covid-19 crisis has hit the country at an inopportune moment: On 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2020, the then Prime Minister Zoran Zaev resigned and a caretaker government, led by Oliver Spasovski, general secretary of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and Minister of Internal Affairs under Zaev, took office. As required by North Macedonian law, the primary task of this transition government is to organize and carry out fair, democratic, and credible parliamentary elections. When the pandemic reached North Macedonia in mid-March, the parliament was already dissolved. In addition, the caretaker government could not function to its full capacity. In order to enable it to take over the legislative function and issue-decree laws in fight against Covid-19, President Pendarovski declared a 30-day state of emergency on 18<sup>th</sup> March and prolonged it three times.

The composition of the caretaker government under Oliver Spasovski largely reflects the previous government of Zoran Zaev – with an important difference: The main opposition party VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) nominated several (deputy) ministers, including the Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs, the Minister of Internal Affairs, and the Minister of Labour and Social Policy. Consequently, Parliament approval was overwhelming with 101 out of 120 members.

This vote can be regarded as quite exceptional, given that the political landscape in the country has been divided for many years. The division has been closely linked to long-time Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (VMRO-DPMNE) and his controversial identity politics. Wiretapping scandals and large-scale protests against him in 2015 led to his resignation in January 2016. Still, at the parliamentary elections in December 2016, he and his party took the first place with 39.4%. Following closely behind, the secret winner was the SDSM led by Zoran Zaev with almost 37.9%. After lengthy negotiations, Zaev was able to form a coalition government with support from the Democratic Union for Integration and the Alliance for Albanians on 31<sup>st</sup> May 2017.

**66.79%**  
Overall voter turnout in the  
2016 elections

**120 members of the parliament  
will be elected**

**Long Debate on  
New Election  
Date**

**Almost Three  
Months State  
of Emergency**

**Caretaker  
Government**

**Political  
Landscape  
Divided for  
Years**

## Blocked EU Negotiations

The main reason for the call for snap elections was the decision by the EU in October 2019 to delay the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia. Even though the reports of the EU Commission recommended opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, especially France blocked the decision. Emmanuel Macron emphasized that the EU needed to reform its enlargement process first, before opening accession talks with new countries. In addition, Paris questioned the level of implementation of reforms in both states and argued for the possibility to reverse the process of integration if necessary.

## Green Light by EU

Finally, after the European Commission had put forward proposals on a reform of the accession process (in general), France signalled willingness to change its position. On 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the Council of the EU gave a green light to opening of EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. Another major step for the country happened on 27<sup>th</sup> March, when it became NATO's newest member.

## Prespa Agreement

However, the non-decision in Brussels in October 2019 was a major blow for the government of Zoran Zaev and for the European ambitions of North Macedonia overall. For the sake of opening the accession talks with the EU, Zoran Zaev's coalition invested a lot, especially by changing the country's name. After a three-decade-long dispute with Greece, the governments in Skopje and Athens found a compromise. According to the Prespa Agreement, signed on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2018, the "Republic of Macedonia" had to change its name to "Republic of North Macedonia". In return, Greece accepted to support North Macedonia's EU and NATO accession.

## Not Valid Referendum

Domestically, the treaty and the renaming of the country were heavily criticized especially by VMRO-DPMNE. The government called for a non-binding referendum on the name change on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2018. 91% of the electorate voted in favour with a 37% turnout. Since the constitution requires a 50% turnout, the referendum was not valid. On 11<sup>th</sup> January 2019, 81 members of the parliament (more than a two-thirds majority) approved the constitutional changes regarding the renaming. Not only the deputies of the coalition, but also some opposition members of parliament voted in favour.

## Normalisation with Bulgaria

In order to pave his country's way to EU and NATO integration, Zaev also sought to normalize the relationship with Bulgaria, affected by differences over language, history and minority rights. On 1<sup>st</sup> August 2017, Zaev and his Bulgarian counterpart Boyko Borissov signed a friendship treaty in Skopje. The document binds Bulgaria to support North Macedonia's EU and NATO integration.

## Reforms and Ambivalent Results

When the SDSM came into power in 2017, Prime Minister Zaev announced to reform the country in a different way – with "more democracy, more freedom, and more justice." In May 2019, the European Commission recognized in its progress report the "taken steps to restore checks and balances and to strengthen democracy and the rule of law". The Freedom House noted in its reports 2019 and 2020 a continuous progress in comparison to the Gruevski years, but recalled some critical issues, especially the country's struggle with corruption. This form of crime considerably threatens the judiciary system of the country was proven by the so-called "racket" extortion case in summer 2019. It involved not only one of the wealthiest businesspersons and a well-known journalist, but also the then Special Prosecutor, Katiza Janeva. In June 2020, she was found guilty of misuse of office and sentenced to seven years in prison. The scandal also cast some shadows over Zaev's party.

A positive element and a pre-condition by the EU for the start of accession talks was the adoption of the law on the prosecution. The law that was adopted mid-February 2020 increases the competences of the regular Prosecution Against Organised Crime so that investigations in high-profile corruption cases are pursued.

### Economy before Covid-19

The North Macedonian economy performed quite well in the last two years: GDP growth was at around 3% or higher in 2018 and 2019. The unemployment rate went down from 24% in 2016 to 16.6% in 2019, but remained on a remarkably high level. In this context, it has to be borne in mind that hundreds of thousands of North Macedonians live abroad. Every year, around 20,000 people leave the country. In 2018, even more than 24,000 North Macedonians emigrated in search of a better job and life.

### Mitigation of Negative Effects

Covid-19 changed the economic outlook dramatically: According to the European Economic Forecast spring 2020, issued by the European Commission in May, the North Macedonian economy will shrink by 3.9% this year. In order to mitigate the negative effects of the virus on the health system and the economy, the government took a wide range of measures. The third package, adopted in May, is to address the revitalization, economic recovery and stimulation of consumption and industry. The measures are quite similar to those taken in Central European countries such as Austria.

### Deep Cleavages between Main Parties

Despite the fact that SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE are both being represented in the caretaker government, the election campaign is marked by the deep cleavage between the two parties. Unsurprisingly, the new surge of infections as well as the question on how to mitigate the negative economic effects are dominating the electoral campaign. The main opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, although present in the current caretaker government, is heavily criticising the government's and especially Venko Filipce's (Minister of Healthcare) approach. VMRO-DPMNE demands further restrictions, whereas the main government party Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) argues that the steep rise was a result of mass screening, the detection of asymptomatic cases and of several epidemic clusters. In this regard, Covid-19 also led to a worrying deterioration of the relationship between the two largest religious groups in the country, namely Orthodox Christians (mainly ethnic Macedonians) and Muslims (mainly ethnic Albanians). Orthodox Christians criticised that family gatherings during Ramadan provoked many new infections. In addition, they felt discriminated against as newly adopted restrictions affected the festivities of a Christian feast in June.

### Ongoing Debate on Prespa Agreement

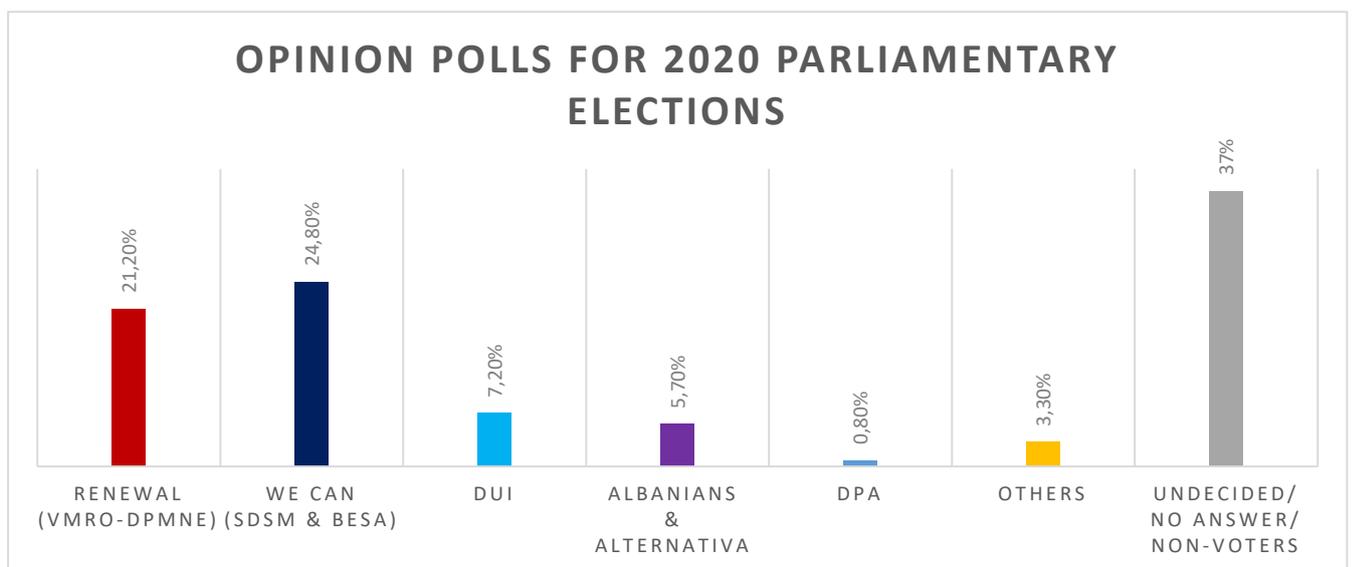
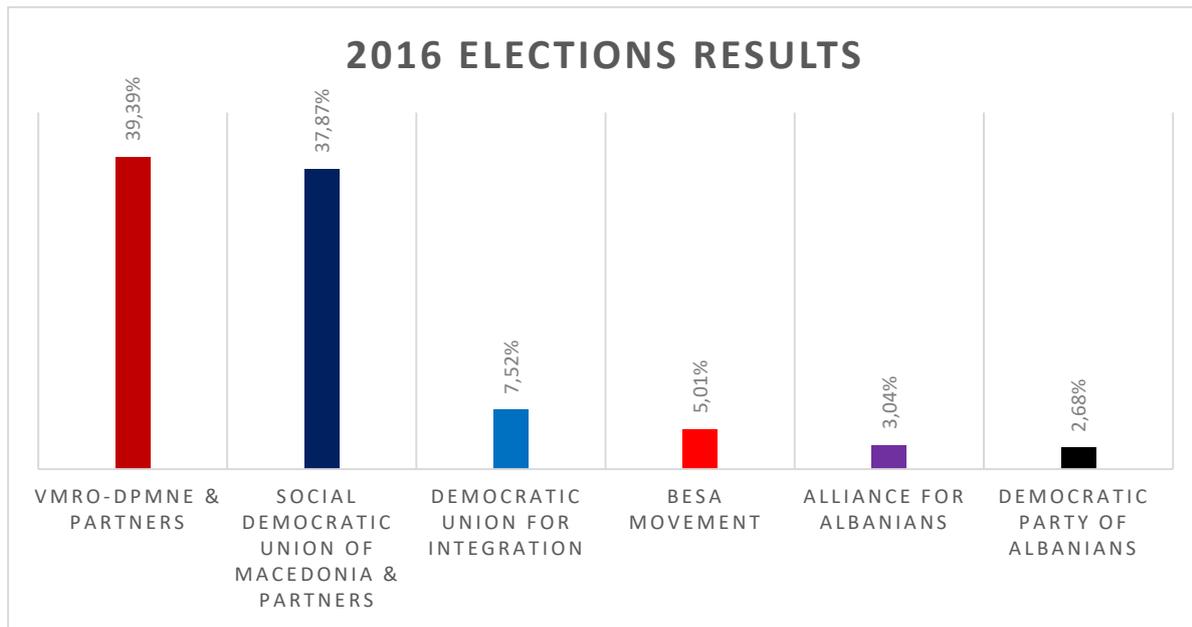
Covid-19 pushed the renaming of the country in the background, which remains however a contentious issue. VMRO-DPMNE still rejects the agreement with Greece. The question popped up again Mid-February, when the Parliament majority of SDSM and its coalition partners dismissed Labour Minister Rashela Mizrahi from VMRO-DPMNE for failing to use the country's new official name during a press conference. Prime Minister Spasovski accused her of violating the constitution by failing to respect the so-called Prespa Agreement and thereby endangering North Macedonia's European integration efforts.

### Crucial Role of Albanian Parties

Since ethnic Albanians make up roughly a quarter of North Macedonia's population of 2.1 million, the parties representing the minority often play a crucial role in the formation of coalitions. The biggest party so far, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) under Ali Ahmeti has been junior party in various governments in 18 of the last 20 years. Its leading role among ethnic Albanian parties is being challenged especially by two alliances: Two smaller parties, the Alliance for Albanians and the Alternativa party, joined forces. More importantly, the SDSM formed an election alliance ("We can") with the BESA movement – the first alliance between a mainly Macedonian party and an ethnic Albanian faction; the DUI reacted angrily and its members of parliament voted together with the VMRO-DPMNE party on several occasions.

### Pre-Election Poll

There are only a few polls on the outcome of the parliamentary elections. According to a survey published by the National Democratic Institute, a US democracy development organisation, at the end of June, the SDSM-BESA Movement alliance is slightly ahead of the VMRO-DPMNE-led alliance. It also shows that the electorate is disenchanted and disappointed with politics.



Source: National Democratic Institute

[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI\\_PPT\\_ENG\\_FINAL\\_PUBLIC%20VERSION\\_0.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_PPT_ENG_FINAL_PUBLIC%20VERSION_0.pdf)

Party	Main candidate	Political Ideology (Affiliation EP)
Renewal for Macedonia (led by VMRO-DPMNE)	Hristijan Mickoski	centre-right conservative, partly nationalist (EPP)
We can (led by SDSM, incl. the BESA Movement)	Zoran Zaev	centre-left, social-democratic (PES)
Democratic Union for Integration (DUI)	Ali Ahmeti	centre-right, Albanian minority interests
Coalition of the Alliance for Albanians and Alternativa	Ziadin Sela	centre-right, Albanian minority interests
Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA)	Menduh Thaçi	centre-right/right-wing, Albanian minority interests