

NOW LIVE: Nations in Transit 2024



FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2023

North Macedonia

68
/100

PARTLY FREE

<u>Political Rights</u>	29 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	39 /60

LAST YEAR’S SCORE & STATUS

67 /100 **Partly Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.



Overview

North Macedonia is a parliamentary republic. Unstable government coalitions are common, as are early elections. The government continues to struggle with corruption and clientelism. While media and civil society participate in vigorous public discourse, journalists and activists still face pressure and intimidation.

Key Developments in 2022

- A new coalition government led by Dimitar Kovačevski, a member of the Social Democrats (SDSM) and former deputy finance minister, was voted in in January. The previous prime minister—Zoran Zaev, also of the SDSM—had resigned due to the party’s poor showing in the October 2021 local elections.
- In July, the country experienced significant political turmoil over a French proposal that aimed to solve a dispute amid which Bulgarian officials were maintaining a veto on North Macedonia’s European Union (EU) accession. The French proposal sparked major opposition-led protests that lasted throughout the month. The proposal’s detractors said it contained unacceptable concessions to Bulgaria regarding North Macedonia’s history, language, and cultural identity. The demonstrations for the most part took place without incident.
- The illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces impacted economic conditions in North Macedonia. Inflation reached record levels, while economic and energy crises severely impacted consumer spending power and business confidence.
- North Macedonia carried out its first census since 2002 in September 2021, with final results published in March. The results showed a population decline of 9.2 percent since the last census.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	3/4
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The president is elected to as many as two five-year terms through a direct popular vote. President Stevo Pendarovski of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) won his first term in May 2019. Elections were held calmly and fairly, with minimal challenges.

The unicameral Assembly elects the prime minister and the head of government and holds most executive power. Parliamentary elections held in July 2020 resulted in a virtual tie, with the SDSM barely ahead of the opposition Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO–DPMNE). The SDSM formed a coalition government with smaller left-wing and ethnic minority parties, with Zoran Zaev serving as prime minister until resigning after the SDSM fared poorly in October 2021 local elections. Deputy Finance Minister Kovačevski became SDSM leader, and he and his cabinet won formal approval in January 2022.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

3/4

Members of the 120-seat Assembly are elected by proportional representation to four-year terms.

The July 2020 polls showed improvement from previous years, with instances of vote-buying, intimidation, and other misconduct reported less frequently. OSCE observers called the poll well-managed and free but criticized last-minute changes to the electoral framework.

In October 2021 local elections, the VMRO–DPMNE won 42 mayoral races, including Skopje's; the SDSM won 16, and the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), an ethnic Albanian party, won 11. Observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) called the elections competitive and largely fair but reported accusations of vote-buying, pressure on candidates to withdraw, and pressure on public employees to vote for specific candidates.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?	3/4
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The State Election Commission (DIK) presides over orderly and credible elections. However, electoral laws contain ambiguities and inconsistencies, many of which were introduced when authorities made changes but failed to harmonize them throughout the overall electoral framework. These include confusion surrounding candidate-registration rules and resolution mechanisms for election-related disputes.

OSCE observers praised the DIK’s administration of the October 2021 local elections, but said numerous vacancies contributed to inefficiency, and expressed concern about electoral-law amendments passed shortly before the elections. Voters also encountered biometric failures and other technical issues during the polls.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?	4/4
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The constitution protects the right to establish and join political parties, though patronage networks hamper democratic competition.

The main center-left and center-right blocs lost votes in the 2020 parliamentary elections to ethnic Albanian minority parties and Levica (Left) party, which won two seats and entered the Assembly for the first time.

Independent candidates face obstacles including requirements to collect a relatively high number of signatures for eligibility to run in some races. They are also struggle to gain media coverage and are disadvantaged under rules governing

the distribution of state funds for paid advertising. (In North Macedonia, paid campaign advertising in broadcast, print, and online media is exclusively funded by state budgets, a system the OSCE more generally notes has prompted concerns about clientelism.) Independent candidates are prohibited from running for the position of local councilor.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

3/4

In 2017, power rotated from the right-wing nationalist party, the VMRO–DPMNE—which had governed since 2006—to the left-leaning SDSM, which had governed through much of the 1990s and early 2000s. Before taking power in 2017, the SDSM had boycotted the parliament on several occasions over electoral-fraud claims and allegations that former prime minister Nikola Gruevski had directed a vast wiretapping and surveillance program. Elections since then have featured robust competition.

Opposition gains characterized the October 2021 local elections. The opposition VMRO–DPMNE won 42 mayoral races, while the incumbent SDSM won only 16 mayoral spots. Tetovo, a majority-Albanian city, saw a power shift after BESA, a small Albanian party, won the mayorship after an eight-year rule by DUI, the largest Albanian party.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

2/4

Voters are largely free to make political decisions, though reports of intimidation and vote buying remain an issue, especially among Roma and other socially vulnerable groups. Patronage networks remain influential in political life and can influence political outcomes.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	3 / 4
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There are no formal barriers that prevent various segments of the population from participating in political life, but in practice, structural barriers exist for some groups. Small ethnic political parties representing Albanians have sat in each ruling coalition, and Turkish, Serbian, and Bosnian minorities are comparatively well integrated. Roma remain politically marginalized.

Despite the introduction of parity laws and joint initiatives by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and electoral authorities, societal attitudes discourage women from participating in politics. Women represent 41.7 per cent of the Assembly but are not as well represented at the local level.

Small LGBT+ advocacy groups are politically active, but overall LGBT+ people have little political representation. An LGBT+ working group established in 2018 is active but not highly influential.

Census data released in 2022 showed a 9.2 percent population decline since the last count two decades ago, but that the ethnic makeup of the country remained mostly the same. Ethnic Albanians make up 24.3 percent of the population, remaining above the 20 percent legal threshold that grants certain official minority rights, such as the ability to make Albanian an official state language and to qualify for public-sector employment quotas. Members of the ethnic Turkish community—the country’s third-largest ethnic group—voiced concerns over the census results, claiming that they showed an unrealistically low percentage of Turks (3.86 percent).

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	3 / 4
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Elected representatives are generally able to craft and implement policy, but corruption prevents some from exercising their policymaking powers freely and to the fullest extent.

In May 2022, the opposition VMRO–DPMNE announced what it called an “active blockade” of the Assembly, and has since used filibustering tactics to stall the legislature’s work. It also launched an interpellation—a kind of formal questioning—of Assembly president Talat Xhaferi, which was resolved in his favor.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

2/4

Corruption remains a serious problem, and there is widespread impunity for corrupt government officials, including members of parliament and the judiciary. The EU praised the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption in its 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy report for North Macedonia, saying it had been “proactive” in addressing cases of cronyism, including in recruitment and appointments, and had opened cases against high-ranking officials. However, it also noted that anticorruption bodies were under resourced, and that corruption remains prevalent. The Council of Europe’s Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) reported that North Macedonia had not fully implemented its anticorruption recommendations in July 2022 report. Citizens cite corruption as one of the country’s main problems—one poll released in July 2022 showed that 4 in 10 young people said corruption motivated them to want to leave the country.

The new head of the Prosecutor’s Office for Organized Crime and Corruption was elected in spite of corruption concerns related to his ties with several political actors from DUI. Separately, investigative reports have found large differences between market and contract prices in public procurement procedures of some products with identical specifications.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

3/4

The law on open access to public information is inconsistently implemented across institutions. However, some progress has been seen concerning transparency. According to an August 2022 report by the Centre for Civil Communications (CCC), national and municipal governments improved somewhat in “active transparency” compared to 2021, with the government and Ministry of Defense topping the ranking. Active transparency means that these institutions publish information on their initiatives without anyone submitting a request for access to that information.

The Ministry of Finance continued its efforts to improve the transparency of public finance management. It has published data on the revenue and expenditure of public and state-owned companies quarterly. It also launched a new transparency tool on public debt, and published quarterly reports on the execution of local government budgets.

Government procurement decisions still cause controversy. In July 2021, the Assembly passed legislation allowing the Zaev government to bypass tender rules while negotiating a highway construction contract, which was met with criticism from civil society advocates. In December, the Constitutional Court declined to review that decision, allowing the government to negotiate directly with construction firms Bechtel and ENKA.

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 due to a multiyear pattern of increased transparency among government offices.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?	3/4
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The media landscape is deeply polarized along political lines, and private media outlets are often tied to political or business interests that influence their content. However, several critical and independent outlets operate, mainly online. Physical attacks against journalists continue to be reported.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

3/4

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion. However, Islamophobia is present in political rhetoric and in public discourse, and is directed primarily at the ethnic Albanian community and Roma.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

3/4

Academic freedom is largely respected, but corruption in universities is significant. Textbooks have minimally covered post-independence events, primarily because ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians interpret the 2001 civil conflict differently.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?

3/4

Allegations of widespread wiretapping and monitoring of private citizens, journalists, politicians, and religious leaders by the VMRO-DPMNE government helped bring about its ouster. The SDSM-led government has since taken steps to reform the security services. The Assembly passed a law limiting the secret police's surveillance activities in 2018. In 2019, the Directorate for Security and Counterintelligence (UBK) was replaced by the National Security Agency.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	3/4
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Constitutional freedom of assembly guarantees are generally well respected, though riot police who typically monitor demonstrations sometimes use disproportionate force, and property damage sometimes occurs during protests.

Several notable protests were held throughout July 2022, organized by the country's main opposition, VMRO-DPMNE, against a French proposal designed to unlock Bulgaria's veto on North Macedonia's EU accession. The protests took place without major incidents.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work?	3/4
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NGOs generally operate in a freer and safer environment under the SDSM-led government, and public institutions have become more responsive to civil society work. NGOs, particularly those that receive foreign funding, face pressure from the VMRO-DPMNE, Levica, and their supporters.

In July 2022, some NGOs faced government backlash due to their lack of support for the French proposal designed to resolve the Bulgarian veto in North Macedonia's EU path. Moreover, some journalists published work designating the opposed NGOs as "pro-Russian," which was later found to violate journalistic ethics by the Council of Media Ethics.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

2/4

Workers may organize and bargain collectively, though trade unions lack stable financing and skilled managers.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

2/4

Concerns remain about the efficacy and independence of the judiciary. The EU has stressed judicial reforms as a key priority for North Macedonia's accession bid.

The European Commission (EC)'s October 2022 report noted that North Macedonia had made some progress in enacting its judicial reform strategy, and called on Skopje to continue implementing judicial reforms. The judiciary is the least-trusted public institution in North Macedonia, according to recent polls. According to a 2022 survey sponsored by the International Republican Institution (IRI), only 4 percent of North Macedonia's respondents said they trusted the judiciary greatly, while 19 percent only "somewhat" trust it.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

2/4

Due process rights remain compromised by corruption and patronage within the justice system. Political interference in the work of prosecutors remains a problem, while judicial culture remains highly corrupt. The selective application of justice also persists, although some reforms intended to ameliorate the issue have been carried out.

The EC October 2022 report noted some progress in adjudicating corruption cases. However, cases related to the 2015 illegal wiretapping scandal remain

unresolved.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	3/4
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The threat of physical violence is generally low. While interethnic violence does occur in North Macedonia, such incidents have lessened in recent years.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	2/4
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While the SDSM-led government passed a comprehensive antidiscrimination law in 2020, in practice societal discrimination against some groups persists. Anti-Albanian sentiment is still prevalent in some circles. The Romany population faces significant discrimination. Laws prohibit workplace sexual harassment, but many instances go unreported. The rights of the LGBT+ individuals are limited. The US State Department Human Rights Report for 2022 noted that violence against LGBT+ individuals remains a problem in North Macedonia, and that local NGOs report that authorities often fail to investigate it adequately.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?	3/4
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Travel and movement are generally unrestricted. Corruption can hamper people’s ability to choose their place of employment or education freely.

In 2022, the European Court of Human Rights found that two primary schools in North Macedonia who had placed Romany children in segregated classes had

violated the children's right to nondiscrimination in conjunction with their right to education.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	3/4
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The right to own property and establish private businesses is generally respected, though corruption remains a barrier to free enterprise.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	2/4
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Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal, as is domestic violence, which remains common; both are infrequently reported. Police are not consistently responsive to survivors. In January 2021, the Assembly passed legislation to combat gender-based violence (GBV) in line with the Istanbul Convention.

Child marriage occurs in the Romany community. According to 2018–19 data from the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), 15.5 per cent of Romany women had been married or were otherwise "in union" before age 15.

A 2017 Administrative Court ruled in favor of gender affirmation in the country's official registry (a provision that would allow transgender people to update their identification and other documents). However, the legal changes have been delayed in the parliament due to a lack of support from several political actors.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	2/4
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Laws do not impose rigid barriers to social mobility, though rampant corruption can effectively hamper upward income mobility. Though the government's 2018–

22 economic formalization strategy has proven somewhat successful in addressing informal employment, the country's informal economy remains large, leaving many workers vulnerable to employer abuse.

The Assembly amended the labor code and minimum-wage legislation in January 2022, raising the minimum wage to 18,000 denar (around \$300) per month. Sunday was declared a nonworking day, ensuring some workers' rights.

Workers in the garment industry lack protections and are vulnerable to mistreatment. A 2022 study that featured data from seven regions found that around 1,000 textile workers were being paid less than the guaranteed 18,000 denar minimum wage.

Human trafficking remains a problem. The government has taken steps to better identify trafficking victims, notably at government-run transit centers that house migrants and refugees. However, government support for NGOs that aid trafficking victims is inadequate. According to the 2021 edition of the US Labor Department's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor*, Romany, Balkan Egyptian, and Ashkali children are vulnerable to forced labor, including forced begging.



On North Macedonia

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

67/100 **Partly Free**

Other Years

2024

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