



North Macedonia

PARTLY FREE

63
/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	24 /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	39 /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS
59 /100 **Partly Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



Overview

TOP

North Macedonia, formerly known as Macedonia, is a parliamentary republic. A left-leaning government has calmed tensions after the 2017

parliamentary crisis that paralyzed normal political activity. In 2019, the government changed the country's name to enable its potential accession to the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Macedonia continues to struggle with corruption, and while the media and civil society participate in vigorous public discourse, journalists and activists face pressure and intimidation.

Key Developments in 2019

- In August, the country's outgoing special prosecutor, Katica Janeva, was arrested on extortion and bribery charges.
- In February, after lawmakers passed legislation to change the country's name from Macedonia to North Macedonia, the government signed the requisite accords to join NATO. Ratification of North Macedonia's membership by current NATO member states is expected in 2020.
- In October, North Macedonia was prevented from EU accession due to opposition from the French government. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev responded by calling snap elections, which are scheduled for 2020.

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?

2 / 4

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 the May 2019 elections. He won with 51.7 percent of the vote against opponent Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova's 44.8 percent. Voter turnout was 46.7 percent—a

low figure, but one consistent with recent North Macedonian elections. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) sent a monitoring mission that determined that the election was free and credible, despite some technical challenges involving voter rolls and technological infrastructure, among other issues.

The unicameral Assembly elects the prime minister, who is head of government and holds the most executive power. The formation of a new government was delayed for months after the 2016 elections, as former president Gjorge Ivanov refused a request from the SDSM to form a government after the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian Unity (VMRO–DPMNE), which had won a plurality of seats, was unable to cobble together enough support to form its own coalition. VMRO–DPMNE deputies, meanwhile, filibustered a vote to install an SDSM-backed Assembly speaker, Talat Xhaferi, a member of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), an Albanian party.

In April 2017, after Xhaferi was finally elected, VMRO–DPMNE supporters stormed parliament and violently assaulted several opposition leaders, including Zaev and Radmila Šekerinska Jankovska, a former prime minister. In May 2017, following mediation by the US State Department, the SDSM and their Albanian coalition partners were finally able to form a government, with Zaev as prime minister.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because the 2019 presidential election was administered fairly and peacefully and allowed voters to make an informed choice between candidates.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?	2 / 4
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Members of the 120-seat Assembly are elected by proportional **TOP** representation to four-year terms. Parliamentary elections last took place in 2016. An OSCE monitoring mission deemed the polls “competitive,” but said issues with the media and voter rolls had “yet to be addressed in a

sustainable manner,” noted instances of voter intimidation, and concluded that the polls were marked by “a lack of public trust in institutions and the political establishment.” The formation of the SDSM-led government in 2017 marked a democratic transfer of power between parties and ended the period of political uncertainty that followed the 2016 polls.

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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Election laws have deficiencies, though the overall accessibility of election results and reporting by the State Election Commission improved in the 2019 presidential elections. Ambiguities in election laws that have yet to be addressed include regulations governing the registration of candidates, and resolution mechanisms for election-related disputes. Additionally, OSCE observers expressed concerns about inaccuracies in the electoral roll.

In September 2018, the government held a controversial referendum to approve the Prespa Agreement, signed with Greece in June, to change the country’s name to North Macedonia. Voter turnout was only 37 percent, below the 50 percent required for the results (90 percent in favor of the agreement) to count. OSCE observers noted that the referendum results were credible but its content had been inadequately explained to the public, and the election commission lacked transparency in carrying out the poll. Analysts expressed concern about a social media disinformation campaign, which reportedly originated in Russia, urging Macedonians to boycott the vote.

In January 2019, the government ratified the Prespa Agreement, despite inadequate voter turnout for the referendum. The country’s name change, from Macedonia to North Macedonia, was officially confirmed by **TOP** parliament.

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?

3 / 4

While the constitution protects the right to establish and join political parties, vast patronage networks hamper democratic competition. The 2017 violence in parliament was in response to the election of an SDSM-backed parliament speaker. Around 100 people were injured in the altercation. Tensions between the parties decreased in 2018 and 2019.

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 transferred from the right-wing nationalist party, VMRO–DPMNE—which had been in power since 2006—to the left-leaning SDSM, which had held power through much of the 1990s and early 2000s. Before taking power in 2017, SDSM had boycotted parliament on several occasions over claims of electoral fraud, as well as over allegations that the administration of former prime minister Nikola Gruevski had directed the secret service to operate a massive wiretapping and surveillance program. As of 2019, however, after the competitive 2019 election and the credible 2018 referendum, a sense of genuine electoral legitimacy has returned to North Macedonia. Although the VMRO–DPMNE has continued to accuse the government of political **TOP** impropriety in advancing its agenda, there is little evidence of government interference in politics and all parties have campaigned freely.

Score Change: The score has improved from 2 to 3 because undue pressure on opposition forces has decreased in recent years.

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
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While voters are largely free to make political decisions, reports of intimidation and vote buying remain common. Patronage networks remain influential in political life and can influence political outcomes.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	3 / 4
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Ethnic Albanians make up about 25 percent of the population, and a political party representing Albanians has sat in each ruling coalition. Certain types of legislation must pass with a majority of legislators from both major ethnic groups (Albanians and Macedonians) in the Assembly. In March 2018, the SDSM-led government passed a new language law extending the official use of Albanian to all state-level institutions, including parliament. North Macedonia's Roma community, however, remains politically marginalized.

Despite the introduction of parity laws, and joint initiatives on behalf of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and electoral authorities, societal attitudes discourage women from participating in politics. Some women are disenfranchised through the practice of family voting. Despite these challenges, the first female defense minister was appointed in 2017.

Small LGBT+ advocacy groups are politically active, but LGBT+ people have little representation in politics.

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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?

2 / 4

For much of 2017, parliament did not function effectively due to VMRO –DPMNE attempts to prevent the formation of an SDSM-led government, as well as the parliamentary altercation in which Zaev and other SDSM lawmakers were injured. However, the formation of the new government in the middle of 2017 ushered in a return to more normal parliamentary activity, which continued throughout 2018 and 2019. Nevertheless, post-Prespa legislative activity is still marked by a tense atmosphere.

The election of Stevo Pendarovski as president in May 2019 resolved the impasse between the legislature and executive that had existed for much of the last three years, as both bodies are now governed by the SDSM.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

2 / 4

Corruption remains a serious problem, and there has been widespread impunity for corrupt government officials, including members of parliament and the judiciary.

In August 2019, Katica Janeva, North Macedonia's outgoing special prosecutor appointed in 2015, was arrested for extortion. The scandal has shaken the people's faith in the government, which claims to be aggressively tackling the country's long-standing corruption problems. Local papers reported that Janeva allegedly joined two others, including reality television star Bojan Jovanovski, in blackmailing the well-known businessman Orce Kamcev.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

2 / 4

The law on open access to public information is inconsistently implemented. While the government has pledged to undertake reforms aimed at increasing its transparency, it has yet to register concrete progress.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

3 / 4

North Macedonian journalists are subject to political pressure and harassment, and physical attacks continue to be reported. In March 2019, the Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers held a protest against Bekir Asani, a senior official in the DUI, who had allegedly threatened the head of the AJM, Naser Selmani, over a Facebook post by Selmani that criticized Asani's behavior during a traffic dispute. However, according to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), attacks against journalists have declined in frequency since 2017.

North Macedonia's 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, the state of media freedom has improved somewhat in 2019, as the SDSM-led government has not commandeered media broadcast time. The mass surveillance and wiretapping of journalists' phones that took place under the VMRO-DPMNE government has not been repeated. A wide collection of critical and independent outlets operate and are found mainly online.

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Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because pressure on journalists has eased in recent years.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?	3 / 4
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The constitution guarantees freedom of religion. However, Islamophobia is present in the rhetoric of politicians and in public discourse and is directed primarily at the ethnic Albanian community.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?	3 / 4
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Academic freedom is largely respected. Yet, corruption in universities is significant, and the large-scale emigration of young scholars has been detrimental to the country's research institutions. Many textbooks minimally cover the post-independence period, 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
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Allegations of widespread wiretapping and monitoring of private citizens, journalists, politicians, and religious leaders by the previous VMRO –DPMNE government helped bring about its ouster. The SDSM-led government has taken some steps to reform the national security service, which was widely believed to have carried out the surveillance program under former prime minister Gruevski's direction. In December 2018, the parliament passed a law that removed the secret police from overseeing surveillance, bringing it under greater civilian control. Privacy advocates

TOP

believe that this legislation will reduce potential abuse of surveillance powers. As a result, private discussion has been less constrained.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	3 / 4
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Constitutional guarantees of freedom of assembly are generally well respected. However, protests have sometimes given way to property damage, and are typically monitored by riot police. In June 2018, a protest in Skopje against the Prespa Agreement turned violent when the police fired tear gas and flash grenades into the crowd to disperse the demonstration.

In June 2019, North Macedonia hosted its first Pride parade in the capital Skopje. The event was well attended. While conservative religious and nationalist groups opposed the event, it transpired peacefully.

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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The government has indicated support for civil society. However, groups that focus on human rights– and governance-related work, and particularly those that receive foreign funding, face pressure from the VMRO–DPMNE and its supporters.

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E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	2 / 4
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Workers may organize and bargain collectively, though trade unions lack stable financing and skilled managers, and journalists have reportedly been fired for their union activities. The informal economy is large, leaving many workers vulnerable to employer abuse.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	2 / 4
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Concerns remain about the efficacy and independence of the judiciary. The EU stressed judicial reforms as a key priority for the new government's accession bid. In 2018, the government adopted a number of reforms aimed at enhancing judicial independence, including the strengthening of mechanisms to address misconduct by judges. However, not all of the judicial reforms promised by the government had been implemented at year's end.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	2 / 4
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Due process rights remain compromised by corruption and patronage within the justice system, in which the public has little confidence. Political interference in the work of prosecutors remains a problem. The selective application of justice also persists, although the government has carried out some reforms intended to ameliorate the issue. The 2019 arrest of the special prosecutor has also weakened the SDSM government's overall anticorruption agenda.

F3 0-4 pts

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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 has subsided significantly under the tenure of the SDSM government, although discursive politics in the country remains emotionally charged. In February 2019, police successfully prevented an attack planned by supporters of the Islamic State (IS).

There are occasional outbreaks of interethnic violence in Macedonia. In 2015, 18 people were killed in violent clashes between police and a group of Albanian extremists in Kumanovo as well as near the border of Kosovo. However, such incidents have been less frequent in recent years.

Score Change: The score improved from 2 to 3 because interethnic tensions that led to violence in the past have receded.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

2 / 4

A 2010 antidiscrimination law does not prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, and anti-LGBT+ sentiment is widespread. In August 2019, Prime Minister Zaev faced an outcry after using a homophobic slur in responding to a question on the corruption charges against former special prosecutor Janeva. His statement and subsequent apology were severely criticized and seen as inadequate by local journalists, as well as by the North Macedonian office of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights.

Laws prohibit workplace sexual harassment, but the issue persists as most instances are rarely reported.

Albanians suffer from discrimination in employment and anti-Albanian sentiment has flared in recent years. The Roma people face employment and other discrimination.

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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

Travel and movement are generally unrestricted. Corruption can hamper people's ability to freely choose their place of employment or 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

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

Rape, including spousal rape, is illegal, as is domestic violence, which remains common; both are infrequently reported. The government and some NGOs provide services to victims of domestic violence.

A 2017 ruling by the Administrative Court allowed people to change their gender in the country's official registry.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

2 / 4**TOP**

Laws do not impose rigid barriers to social mobility, though rampant corruption can effectively hamper individuals from rising to higher income levels.

Human trafficking remains a problem. The government has taken some steps to better identify trafficking victims, notably at government-run transit centers that house migrants and refugees. However, government support to NGOs that aid trafficking victims has decreased.



On North Macedonia

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

63/100 Partly Free

Other Years

2019

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