

Freedom in the World 2022 - North Macedonia

Partly Free

67

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 28 / 40

[Civil Liberties](#) 39 / 60

Last Year's Score & Status

66 / 100 Partly Free

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

Overview

North Macedonia is a parliamentary republic. Tensions in the wake of a 2017 parliamentary crisis have receded, with subsequent polls being conducted in a calmer environment. North Macedonia 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 2021

- The ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) performed poorly in the October local elections while the opposition Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) did well, winning 22 mayoral races in the first round. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers called the polls competitive but also noted accusations of intimidation and vote-buying.
- Prime Minister Zoran Zaev announced his intention to resign after the local elections and formally stepped down in late December, after securing a renewed governing coalition. Deputy Finance Minister Dimitar Kovacevski then became prime minister-designate, remaining in that effective post at year's end.
- North Macedonia carried out its first census since 2002 in September, with final results expected in 2022. Members of the ethnic Albanian and Turkish communities voiced concerns over representation based on the results, though Zaev promised that the rights of established communities would not be affected.
- The Bulgarian government maintained its block on North Macedonian talks to join the European Union (EU) during the year, though Bulgarian prime minister Kiril Petkov expressed an interest in renewing talks with Skopje in a December interview.

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

The president is elected to as many as two five-year terms through a direct popular vote. President Stevo Pendarovski of the SDSM won his first term in May 2019, taking 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. OSCE observers called the election free and credible, despite some technical challenges involving voter rolls and infrastructure, among other issues.

The unicameral Assembly elects the prime minister, who is 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 VMRO-DPMNE. The SDSM formed a coalition government with smaller left-wing and ethnic minority parties, with Zaev's new cabinet being approved by the end of August.

Zaev announced his intention to resign in late October 2021, after the SDSM fared poorly in that month's local elections, and resigned as party leader in November. Zaev formally stepped down as prime minister in late December, after securing the Alternative Party's parliamentary support. Deputy Finance Minister Kovacevski became SDSM leader in mid-December and was named prime minister-designate a week after Zaev formally stepped down. Kovacevski's cabinet must be approved by the Assembly within 20 days of his appointment.

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. The SDSM won 35.9 percent of the vote and 46 seats, while the VMRO-DPMNE won 34.6 percent and 44 seats. The Democratic Union for Integration (BDI), an ethnic Albanian party, won 11.5 percent and 15 seats, while the Alliance for Albanians-Alternative Party alliance won 9 percent and 12 seats.

Local elections were held in two rounds in October 2021. The VMRO-DPMNE won 22 mayoral races in the first round based on preliminary results, while the SDSM won 9 and the BDI won 3. VMRO-DPMNE-backed candidate Danela Arsovska won the Skopje mayoralty in the second round, defeating SDSM incumbent Petre Shilegov. OSCE observers called the local contests 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

Election laws have deficiencies, though the overall accessibility of election results and reporting by the State Election Commission (DIK) has improved since 2019. Ambiguities in election laws that remain unaddressed include candidate-registration regulations and resolution mechanisms for election-related disputes. OSCE observers have previously expressed concerns about inaccuracies in the electoral roll.

In 2018, the government held a referendum to approve the Prespa Agreement, signed with Greece, to change the country's name to North Macedonia. While the referendum did not reach the required 50 percent turnout, 90 percent of voters who participated voted in favor. OSCE observers called the results credible but said content had been inadequately explained to voters, and the DIK lacked transparency in carrying out the poll. The Prespa Agreement was ratified in 2019, despite the low turnout.

OSCE observers reported that the DIK was transparent in reporting results from the October 2021 local contests. However, the DIK was affected by vacancies in some positions and by electoral-law amendments passed only in mid-September. 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

The constitution protects the right to establish and join political parties, though patronage networks hamper democratic competition. While violence occurred in the parliament in 2017, in response to the selection of a SDSM-backed parliament speaker, tensions have since lessened.

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

Independent candidates also participated in the October 2021 local elections. VMRO-DPMNE-backed Skopje mayoral candidate Arsovska, for example, ran as an independent. OSCE observers noted the Bosniak Democratic Union's first independent campaign in these elections, while parties

representing Serbian and Turkish communities additionally maintained their own campaigns.

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because more political parties and independent candidates are competing in national and local races.

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 of former prime minister Nikola Gruevski directing a wiretapping and surveillance program. However, competitive elections and the 2018 referendum reflected improvements in the country’s electoral system.

The October 2021 local elections were marked by opposition gains. The VMRO-DPMNE won 22 mayoral races in the first round, while their preferred candidate won the Skopje mayoral race in the second round.

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**

Ethnic Albanians make up 25 percent of the population according to the 2002 census, and a political party representing Albanians has sat in each ruling coalition. Roma remain politically marginalized, while Turkish, Serbian, and Bosnian minorities are comparatively well integrated.

A census was carried out in September 2021, though full results are not expected until March 2022. The BDI threatened not to recognize the results if ethnic Albanians represented less than 20 percent of the population, which is the legal threshold for the official use of a language and for public-sector employment quotas. Members of the ethnic Turkish community also voiced concerns over the census, though Zaev pledged that established communities would not lose rights due to the results.

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. Women represent 41.7 percent of the Assembly but are not as well represented at the local level. In the October 2021 local elections, women represented 45 percent of first-round local-council candidates, but only 8 percent of mayoral candidates were female. Only two women, including Skopje mayor Arsovska, won mayoral posts by the second round.

Small LGBT+ advocacy groups are politically active, but LGBT+ people have little representation in politics. Parliamentarians established an LGBT+ working group in 2018, however.

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**

The Assembly did not effectively function for much of 2017 due to VMRO-DPMNE attempts to prevent the formation of an SDSM-led government and due to the parliamentary altercation in which Zaev and other SDSM lawmakers were injured. A government was formed in mid-2017, allowing parliamentary activity to resume. The 2019 election of President Pendarovski, meanwhile, resolved an impasse between the legislature and executive that had persisted for years, as both bodies are now governed by the SDSM.

Parliamentary activity has sometimes been tense in recent years, however. In 2020, VMRO-DPMNE parliamentarians helped stall a proposal to allow Assembly members with COVID-19 or in isolation to convene online. In November 2021, after then prime minister Zaev voiced his intention to resign, the VMRO-DPMNE unsuccessfully attempted to replace the SDSM-led government through a no-

confidence vote. The proceedings were marred by accusations that an Assembly member was kidnapped to keep the SDSM-led government in power, though the individual in question later said he declined to attend the parliamentary session.

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. While the EU praised the pace of reform in a 2020 report, the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) reported that North Macedonia had not fully implemented its anticorruption recommendations in its April 2021 report.

In March 2021, businessman Jordan "Orce" Kamcev was detained after authorities considered him an active flight risk; in 2020, Kamcev was suspected of engaging in money laundering along with former prime minister Gruevski, who fled North Macedonia in 2018. Prosecutors successfully argued that Kamcev should remain in detention in a December 2021 hearing, claiming that he was planning to flee North Macedonia.

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. According to a May 2021 report released by the Centre for Civil Communications, national and municipal governments made relatively little progress in improving transparency.

A European Commission (EC) report published in October 2021 noted that the Finance Ministry made progress in enhancing transparency related to public expenditures, however. The EC report also noted the government's transparency in reporting on COVID-19-related purchases.

Government procurement decisions have caused 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.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 3 / 4

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, a wide collection of critical and independent outlets operates, mainly online.

A June 2021 report from the Association of Journalists of Macedonia counted 14 threats and physical attacks against journalists in 2020, while only 4 such incidents were recorded in 2019. More than half of the targets were female journalists.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public 3 / and private? 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 3 / indoctrination? 4

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

In February 2021, the Zaev government vowed to review existing textbooks over content that may be considered offensive to ethnic Albanians.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics 3 / without fear of surveillance or retribution? 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, which were believed to have surveilled targets at Gruevski's direction.

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. A Council for Civilian Supervision was created to provide additional security-sector oversight in 2019.

In February 2021, former UBK chief Saso Mijalkov received a 12-year prison sentence over his involvement in the wiretapping scheme. In December, he was allowed to leave prison after filing an appeal on another case and providing 11 million euros (\$12.5 million) as a guarantee against fleeing the country.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly? 3 / 4

Constitutional assembly guarantees are generally well respected, though riot police who typically monitor demonstrations are known to use disproportionate force. Property damage sometimes occurs during protests. Mass gatherings were restricted during 2020 in response to COVID-19, though protests were nevertheless held that year.

Several notable protests were held in 2021. In February, ethnic Albanians marched in Skopje, calling for the release of five ethnic Albanians who received prison terms over the 2012 murders of ethnic Macedonians. Police used shock grenades after participants threw rocks at them; at least seven officers were injured. In April, VMRO-DPMNE supporters were among those calling for the release of individuals who had been convicted over the 2017 parliament altercation in a Skopje event. In September, hundreds of protesters called for the resignation of then Tetovo mayor Teuta Arifi after a fire at a COVID-19 field hospital killed 14 people.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 3 / 4

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. However, NGOs, particularly those that receive foreign funding, face pressure from the VMRO-DPMNE and its supporters.

Levica members and leaders have also targeted civil society. In December 2021, a group of NGOs criticized Levica in an open letter, saying the party engaged in "hate speech" meant to delegitimize their work.

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 EC's October 2021 report noted that the government made progress in enacting its judicial reform strategy, though the EC called on Skopje to continue implementing its action plan.

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, 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.

Cases related to COVID-19 measure violations, the 2017 parliamentary altercation, and illegal wiretapping were affected by the pandemic during 2020, though the EC noted that progress on the adjudication of corruption cases was still achieved in its October 2021 report.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 3 / 4

The threat of physical violence has subsided significantly under the SDSM-led government. 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

The SDSM-led government passed an antidiscrimination law that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in 2019. The Constitutional Court struck it down over procedural issues in May 2020, though the parliament again voted in favor of the legislation that October.

Laws prohibit workplace sexual harassment, but the issue persists, as most instances are not reported.

Ethnic Albanians suffer from employment discrimination and anti-Albanian sentiment. Roma face significant discrimination, including in the workplace.

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. A 2021 report on discrimination provided to the EC noted that Romany students face segregation in educational settings, though the EC's October 2021 report noted that more Romany students were entering higher 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. Police are not consistently responsive to survivors. In January 2021, the Assembly passed legislation meant 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 percent of Romany women had been married or were otherwise "in union" before the age of 15.

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

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 2 / 4

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 considered amendments to the labor code and to minimum-wage legislation during 2021. Under the revisions, the minimum wage would rise to 300 euros (\$356) per month while Sunday would be declared a nonworking day except for employees providing certain vital functions. The revisions remained under consideration at year's end.

Workers in the garment industry are vulnerable to mistreatment, with employees sometimes earning less than the minimum wage. In February 2021, the Fair Wear Foundation and local NGO Glasen Tekstilec (Loud Textile Worker) reported that garment workers were sometimes forced to decline government aid by their employers.

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. Romany girls are vulnerable to trafficking for the purposes of child marriage.

According to the 2020 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.

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