



Freedom in the World 2013 - Macedonia

Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 23 April 2013

Cite as Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2013 - Macedonia*, 23 April 2013, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5180c903c.html> [accessed 13 June 2013]

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2013 Scores

Status: Partly Free
Freedom Rating: 3.0
Civil Liberties: 3
Political Rights: 3

Overview

Interethnic tensions flared in Macedonia in 2012, with incidents of violence between Macedonians and ethnic Albanians. In March, the former owner of a defunct opposition television station was convicted of tax evasion and other crimes amid ongoing concerns of political pressure on independent media. Meanwhile, the government survived a no-confidence vote in October, though political tensions remained high through the end of the year.

Macedonia, a republic in the communist-era Yugoslav federation, peacefully gained independence in 1991 as the federation dissolved. The country's legitimacy has since been threatened on several levels: Greece objects to the name "Macedonia," saying it implies a territorial and cultural claim to the Greek region of the same name; Bulgaria contends that the Macedonian language is a dialect of Bulgarian; and the Serbian Orthodox Church does not recognize the separation of the self-proclaimed Macedonian Orthodox Church. Internally, poor relations between the Macedonian Slav majority and the ethnic Albanian minority have raised doubts about the country's long-term viability.

Since independence, power has alternated between center-left and center-right governments, though an ethnic Albanian party has sat in each ruling coalition. In 2000 and 2001, Albanians mounted an armed insurgency, demanding better political representation. Unofficially, the insurgents also wanted control of smuggling routes in northwestern Macedonia. The August 2001 negotiations known as the Ohrid Accords prevented civil war, but violent incidents continue to erupt periodically.

The center-right Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) won parliamentary elections in 2006 and 2008; both polls were marred by significant voting irregularities, including ballot-box stuffing, and

preelection violence. University professor Gjorge Ivanov, running for the VMRO-DPMNE, won a 2009 presidential runoff against the SDSM's Ljubomir Frčkoski; international observers noted an improvement over the 2008 polls.

The opposition Social Democratic Party of Macedonia (SDSM) boycotted the parliament in January 2011, and the legislature was dissolved in April. Early elections that June led to a third consecutive victory for the VMRO-DPMNE-led coalition, which took 56 seats. The SDSM-led coalition followed with 42 seats; the ethnic Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) took 15 seats, the Democratic Party of Albanians captured 8, and the National Democratic Revival won 2. Nikola Gruevski secured a third term as prime minister. International observers called the polls competitive and transparent.

August 2011 marked the 10th anniversary of the Ohrid Accords. A month later, Macedonia celebrated the 20th anniversary of its declaration of independence, which the government marked by inaugurating a massive statue of Alexander the Great in downtown Skopje as part of the Skopje 2014 urban development plan. The statue exacerbated tensions with Greece, where Alexander is seen as a national hero. The dispute between the two countries over Macedonia's name remained unresolved in 2012, obstructing Macedonia's efforts to join NATO and the EU.

Interethnic tensions spiked in 2012. In January, arsonists attacked an Orthodox church near Struga, a majority Albanian Muslim village, after ethnic Macedonians wore costumes at a nearby carnival that were perceived as insulting to Islam. In early March, no fewer than 14 people were injured in interethnic clashes in Skopje and Tetovo, a majority Albanian town. A month later, five Macedonians were murdered at a lake outside Skopje. Authorities in coordinated raids in early May arrested 20 ethnic Albanians in connection with the murders, some of whom authorities described as radical Islamists. The Albanian community protested the arrests at a demonstration in the capital later in May. In December, a murder trial opened against six suspects, including four who were arrested in the May raids; the remaining two were being tried in absentia.

The government exacerbated ethnic tensions in August, when the VMRO-DPMNE proposed a bill to extend free health care and other services to members of the security forces who served in the 2001 conflict, most of whom were ethnic Macedonian, but not to the majority-Albanian paramilitary veterans. After the DUI threatened to leave the coalition over the bill, the opposition held a no-confidence vote in October, which Gruevski's government survived. In December, political tensions escalated when the government passed the 2013 budget after ejecting opposition leaders from the parliament, prompting public protests and opposition threats to boycott the March 2013 local elections.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Macedonia is an electoral democracy. Most postindependence elections have been deemed satisfactory by international standards. Members of the unicameral, 123-seat Sobranie (Assembly) are elected to four-year terms by proportional representation. The Assembly added three seats in 2011 for representatives of Macedonians living abroad. The president is elected to a five-year term through a direct popular vote, but the prime minister holds most executive power. Certain types of legislation must pass by a majority of legislators from both main ethnic groups.

Corruption is a serious problem. While relevant anticorruption legislation is in place, and existing measures to clarify party funding sources and prevent conflicts of interest were strengthened in 2012, implementation is weak. Graft and misconduct are particularly widespread in public procurement. The judiciary lacks a track record of handling high-level corruption cases, and greater cooperation is needed between supervisory bodies and law enforcement, according to the European Commission's (EC) 2012 progress report. Macedonia was ranked 69 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The constitution provides for freedom of the press. However, the country's media face political pressure and harassment, resulting in self-censorship, and media outlets are divided along ethnic lines. In December 2010, Velija Ramkovski, the owner of the pro-opposition A1 Television channel, and more than a dozen associates were charged with crimes including money laundering and tax evasion in a case widely regarded as politically motivated. During the investigation, A1 Television and three of Ramkovski's newspapers closed due to unpaid taxes. In March 2012, Ramkovski was convicted and sentenced to 13 years in prison. In June, the Broadcasting Council shut down A2 Television, Ramkovski's last remaining media outlet, after it began broadcasting political content and hired journalists who had worked at A1 before its closure. In November, the government decriminalized libel according to European standards, though steep new fines for libel were introduced, which journalists said would have a chilling effect. While the Broadcasting Council is not fully independent, in 2012 it began to enforce a law prohibiting politicians from owning broadcast media. Internet access is unrestricted.

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion. A long-standing dispute between the breakaway Macedonian Orthodox Church and the canonically recognized Serbian Orthodox Church remained unresolved in 2012. The January Orthodox church attack agitated ethnic and religious tensions. Hard-line Islamists reportedly control several mosques, with financing from Middle Eastern countries.

Academic freedom is generally not restricted, but the education system is weak by European standards. Textbooks barely cover the postindependence period, primarily because Macedonians and Albanians interpret the 2001 conflict differently. In August 2012, the European Association of History Educators urged history education reform. Increasingly, schools are becoming ethnically segregated.

Constitutional guarantees of freedoms of assembly and association are generally respected. On May 11, 2012, some 10,000 peaceful protestors marched in Skopje over the arrest of ethnic Albanians for the murder of five Macedonians in April. Workers may organize and bargain collectively, though trade unions lack stable financing and skilled managers, and there have been reports of journalists being dismissed from their jobs due to their union activities.

The government has not implemented a judicial reform strategy to replace one that lapsed in 2009. While the EC praised Macedonia for reducing case backlogs in 2012, it noted little progress on independence, impartiality, and competence. Stricter criteria took effect for admission to the Academy for Judges and Prosecutors (AJP), but the requirement that all new first-instance judges be AJP graduates is not being implemented. Prison conditions are generally unsatisfactory, with overcrowding and poor health care.

In June 2012, the parliament passed a lustration law aimed at removing former Yugoslav secret police collaborators from public office. The law allows the names of informants to be published online, which critics say raises concerns about privacy.

Roma, ethnic Albanians, and other vulnerable groups face discrimination. Minority groups say that the Skopje 2014 project ignores their heritage. A 2010 antidiscrimination law does not prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

While women in Macedonia enjoy the same legal rights as men, societal attitudes limit their participation in nontraditional roles, and women rarely participate in local politics. In Albanian Muslim areas, many women are subjected to proxy voting by male relatives. Thirty-four women were elected to the 123-seat legislature in 2011. Despite the ongoing implementation of a strategy against domestic violence, it remains a serious problem, as does the trafficking of women for forced labor and prostitution.

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