


# Macedonia's election has opened the door to finally tackling the country's corruption problem

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Macedonia held elections on 11 December which took place against the backdrop of a major political crisis. [Misha Popovikj](#) assesses the results of the election, writing that although it remains unclear which parties will be able to form the next government, there has been a clear shift in the balance of power which opens the door to tackling corruption among elected officials.



On 11 December, the citizens of Macedonia voted on what international observers (the [OSCE/ODIHR](#)) indicated were 'competitive' elections. While this peculiar term might conjure up the image of a clear contest between candidates, it also demonstrated the distance Macedonia remains from the ideal of 'fair' and 'credible' elections. The latter term was the implicit goal set out by the European Union and the United States when it became clear that fair elections were not reachable in this small Balkan state.

In the immediate aftermath of the vote, the EU's High Representative, Federica Mogherini, alongside Commissioner Johannes Hahn, expressed their expectation that a 'swift formation of parliament and government and the implementation of reforms' would take place. But the most crucial question of all – which party has won the election – still remained unclear. After a prolonged declaration of the initial results on 12 December, [VMRO-DPMNE](#), the centre-right incumbent party of the Macedonian bloc, won the highest number of seats (51). However, just behind were the [Social Democrats](#) (SDSM), who came second with 49 seats. This signals an important shift in power compared to the previous elections in 2014, where VMRO-DPMNE won over 60 seats in parliament with the SDSM picking up 34.

The Albanian [Democratic Union for Integration](#) (BDI) were seemingly the biggest losers, dropping around 40% of their seats in parliament and falling to just 10. Meanwhile, a newly formed Albanian political party, the [Besa Movement](#), won 5 seats, and another new group, the Alliance of Albanians, won 3 seats, with the [Democratic Party](#)

of Albanians (from which the Alliance of Albanians was a splinter group) winning 2. In addition, the SDSM, who typically do not get many Albanian votes, received a significant proportion of support.

The final distribution of seats is nevertheless still unclear. Adding to this uncertainty is the fact that on 13 December, the SDSM contested the voting in some polling stations, claiming it will end up with more votes than VMRO-DPMNE. As such, the picture will remain complex until these issues are resolved.

### **Resolving Macedonia's political crisis**

The elections took place against the backdrop of a protracted political crisis. At the start of 2015, the SDSM began publishing recordings of telephone conversations that it alleged illustrated high level corruption and an abuse of power. They claimed these audio recordings were made by the state counter-intelligence service, which illegally intercepted thousands of officials, opposition members, journalists, businessmen and civil society activists.

During this period, there were two rounds of negotiations (in 2015 and 2016) between the four main political parties (VMRO-DPMNE, the SDSM, the BDI and the Democratic Party of Albanians) which ended with the [Pržino Agreement](#), which laid out a roadmap for the subsequent elections in 2016. The country also saw mass protests in 2015 and 2016. Meanwhile, the European Union developed priorities for urgent reforms in the country, outlining steps to improve the rule of law. These priorities ended up as a condition for starting EU accession negotiations. In addition, a loose coalition of NGOs drafted a Blueprint for Democratic reforms, which further developed the EU's urgent reform priorities as detailed tasks for decision makers.

Given this background, the campaign was unsurprisingly negative. VMRO-DPMNE played the nationalist card, accusing the leader of the SDSM, Zoran Zaev, of working against the interests of Macedonians by promising the country's Albanian population a bilingual state and some form of federalisation. This was an obvious political spin on the actual situation, given the Albanian language is already an official language in the country. However, it produced the desired effect and the bilingual issue was one of the hot topics of the elections, since it remains controversial in a society with complex inter-ethnic relations and the memory of an armed conflict in 2001. On the other hand, the SDSM emphasised the issues of crime and abuse of power, the main topics of the political crisis.

Whatever the final result, the elections have ultimately shifted the balance of power in parliament. The opposition is now much larger and very close in terms of seats to the previous governing majority. It therefore remains an open question as to which party will lead the next government. VMRO-DPMNE, having the largest number of seats, will be offered a mandate to do so by the President, but it is unknown how other parties, chiefly the BDI, will react.

The BDI had been in a coalition with VMRO-DPMNE, but this appears to have cost them dearly at the ballot box. On the other hand, the BDI could see their result as the symptom of an inevitable decline in support and decide to form a government with VMRO-DPMNE once more for the sake of securing the personal interests of its leaders. EU and US representatives might persuade them to do otherwise, however this scenario is not entirely impossible. The new Besa Movement appears even more reluctant to get into a partnership with VMRO-DPMNE. The support of some Albanians for the SDSM is also a clear signal they do not support a coalition with VMRO-DPMNE. On the other hand, a majority composed of the SDSM and all of the Albanian parties would be problematic because of the differences that exist within the Albanian bloc.

The third scenario would be a broad government, consisting of all parliamentary parties, and tasked with carrying out the necessary reforms required to tackle the apparent capture of the state by political actors (as shown in the events leading up to the crisis). This government would be obliged to provide an environment not only for competitive elections, but for fair elections.

This scenario would also reduce the costs associated with the two main Macedonian parties engaging in the ongoing name issue with Greece. However, having VMRO-DPMNE in the government, with looming criminal charges against their leader Nikola Gruevski and other high ranking officials, might prove to be counterproductive

towards securing sustainable and principled reforms.

## Where next?

While we wait for the outcome of the inter-party negotiations and are yet to learn who the real political winners are from the election, some elements are already clear. First, no matter which scenario plays out, there are conditions, at least in the parliament, to initiate a substantial reform process and deal with the urgent reform priorities which are a necessary condition for starting negotiations with the EU over accession. However, the Parliament has demonstrated passivity in recent history, and it is still unclear whether this new balance of power will bring back its oversight roles over the reform agenda and its implementation.

Second, this new power balance makes it unlikely there will be enough support to abolish the Special Public Prosecutor tasked with combating the high level corruption revealed by the SDSM's released recordings. This institution can play an important role in shaking the networks of corruption in the country and in initiating the criminal prosecutions of high level officials. With a more balanced level of power in parliament, other actors in the judiciary (mostly judges), will be more willing to work with integrity once the grasp of the political establishment decreases. Additionally, civil society gains more leverage as the new government will not be able to disregard pressure from below by mobilising a large parliamentary majority.

The long run effects are less clear, particularly with regard to the impact of corruption on society as a whole. Significant parts of the country now accept some form of corruption as simply being part of the 'rules of the game'. It could be argued that this underpins the relatively high level of support still received by VMRO-DPMNE and the BDI. But support for political parties is a far more complex issue and involves identity, a sense of belonging, social networks and personal or communal interest. It is therefore unrealistic to expect that voters will completely abandon party allegiances and switch sides without new actors in the field.

Macedonia is facing a long-term process. What is attainable in the short term is that public institutions will appropriately act against incriminated officials within political parties and bring them to justice if they abuse their power. This could reduce the potential for voter intimidation and loosen up the clientelistic ties that must be removed as a prerequisite for combating state capture. The people may not have dismantled this system in these elections, but they have nevertheless shook the foundations and provided the means for those actors with integrity within public institutions to continue on the path toward a fairer society.

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