



Weekly Briefing

North Macedonia political briefing:

**The governing Social Democratic Union suffers a heavy defeat at the
2021 Macedonian municipal elections**

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The governing Social Democratic Union suffers a heavy defeat at the 2021 Macedonian municipal elections

Summary

The 2021 Macedonian municipal elections were held in two rounds, on the 17th and 31st of October. Citizens had the opportunity to vote for members of the municipal councils and mayors in 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje. Following the first round it became clear that the outcome of the elections will be drastically different from the previous local elections held in 2017, which had been won by the ruling Social Democratic Union (SDSM). In this election cycle, it was the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE, which achieved a resounding victory, by winning almost every major city in the country including the city of Skopje. On a social level, the heavy defeat of the SDSM was seen as a demonstration of public dissatisfaction not only with the work of municipal councils and mayors, but also with the work of the Government as a whole. On a political level, it destabilized the central Government, which became especially clear when Prime Minister Zaev resigned on the 31st of October.

The 2021 Macedonian municipal elections were the seventh local elections to take place in the country since its independence in 1991. Organised in two rounds, on the 17th and the 31st of October, the elections gave citizens an opportunity to elect members of the municipal councils and mayors in 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje, which will constitute the local government for the next four years.¹ The National Election Commission (DIK) announced that 303 lists for mayors and 567 lists for municipal councillors had been verified to participate in the elections. Nineteen parties and coalitions filed their lists of candidates for mayor and municipal councillor positions, while citizen groups nominated lists for 64 independent candidates.² The political campaign lasted 19 days during which the candidates presented their

¹ Mayors are elected through a majoritarian system. If a mayoral candidate does not receive more than 50 percent of votes, a runoff election between the two highest finishers in the first round will be held two weeks after Election Day. Municipal councilors are elected under the proportional representation system, with closed lists in each municipality. Source: https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_faqs_elections_in_north_macedonia_2021_local_elections_october_2021.pdf, accessed on 31.10.2021

² 2021 Local Elections in North Macedonia: Elections with historic consequences, published on 13.10.2021, available at

programs. One specific feature of these elections were the two multi-ethnic pre-election coalitions on the lists. On one side, there was the coalition of the ruling parties, headed by the Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and three ethnic Albanian political parties – DUI/Democratic Union for Integration/, Besa and DPA/Democratic Party of Albanians. On the other there is the coalition of opposition parties, headed by the conservative- right wing VMRO-DPMNE and the parties from the Albanian block- Alliance for Albanians and Alternative.³

Results

A total of 1,824,864 voters were registered for the 2021 local elections. According to the Electoral commission the voter turnout was 49% in the first round and 44% in the second round of elections. In the first round, mayors were elected in 34 municipalities, whilst a second round was held for 46 municipalities and the city of Skopje.⁴ In between the two rounds Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, the SDSM leader, urged people to vote in large numbers, saying the mayoral race in Skopje was key to implementing his cabinet vision and policies. What is more, Zaev stated that in the case of losing the city of Skopje to the opposition he would unconditionally resign. Thus, even before the end of the local elections it became clear that they would be consequential for the central government as well.

Following the second round on the 31st of October, the results painted a contrastingly different picture to the local elections in 2017. VMRO-DPMNE won 42 municipalities plus the city of Skopje, compared to only 16 won by SDSM. By comparison, at the local elections in 2017, the SDSM won 57 mayoralties and VMRO won only 5. DUI won 11 mayoralties, compared to its 10 places in 2017, however it lost two key mayoralties to its Albanian competitors, the Alliance of Albanians (AA) and the Besa Movement, the latter of which is part of the ruling coalition. Alliance for Albanians won 3 mayors, Besa won 2. DPA, GROM and DOM/LDP had one mayor each. In terms of municipal councils, the results were as follows: VMRO-DPMNE obtained 468 councillors, SDSM - 396, DUI - 169, Alliance for Albanians -

<https://www.ifimes.org/en/researches/2021-local-elections-in-north-macedonia-elections-with-historic-consequences/4942> accessed on 15.10.2021

³ Ibid

⁴ State Electoral Commission, 2021 Local Election Results, available at <https://rezultati.sec.mk/mk/mayr/r1/2> accessed on 11.11.2021

82, Levica - 49, BESA - 36, LDP-DOM - 27, DPTM - 16, DPA - 8. The remaining parties won between 1 and 3 councillors each.

A specific feature of this electoral cycle was also the high number of independent lists, which participated in the elections in several cities. The election programs of the independent initiatives were very similar to each other and largely focused on environmental issues and concerns about urban construction, air quality and animal rights.⁵ The independent lists won a total of 64 councillor positions across the country.

More than a victory for VMRO-DPMNE, the election results can better be described as a defeat for the SDSM. On a social level, SDSM'S heavy defeat was seen as a demonstration of public dissatisfaction not only with the work of municipal councils and mayors, but also with the work of the Government as a whole. In the last few months alone, the Government was implicated in numerous corruption scandals involving high-ranking officials. The mishandling of the Covid 19 pandemic culminated in September, when a fire at the modular Covid hospital in Tetovo took the lives of 16 people and PM Zoran Zaev refused to accept the resignation of the Minister of Health, Venko Filipče. As the campaign for the local elections was unfolding, it became apparent that the country was also facing an imminent energy crisis, in addition to the existing economy and health crises. At the same time, SDSM's foreign policy was also subject to continuous and wide social criticism. The cumulative effect of such factors led to a dramatically diminished support for the SDSM. Although the elections were for the local level, their outcomes very quickly reverberated on the central government level. On the 31st of October, after the results of the local elections became clear, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev announced his resignation both from the position of Prime Minister as well as in his capacity as leader of the ruling SDSM. "The responsibility for this outcome is mine and I'm resigning as prime minister and as leader of the Social Democratic Union," Zaev said at a news conference at party headquarters.⁶ However, under the country's constitution, the Parliament has to vote to accept

⁵ Sonja Stojadinovik, "Cleaning out the sludge"

available at <https://kosovotwopointzero.com/en/cleaning-out-the-sludge/> published on 08.10.2021, accessed on 15.10.2021

⁶ North Macedonia PM announces resignation after election loss, 01.11.2021, available at

<https://apnews.com/article/europe-elections-local-elections-northmacedonia-skopje-1edf324bbcc88a4239d625e2884fc794> accessed on 01.11.2021

Zaev's resignation. Many have doubted that this will indeed take place, in light of Zaev's failure to accept the resignation of the Minister of Health only one month earlier. Hristijan Mickoski, the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, called for early parliamentary elections to be held. "The governing party is now delegitimized, and this is a new reality. The best way now is early elections," Mickoski said, after declaring victory in the local election.

If the previous local elections in 2017 displayed a complete change on the political scene in favor of the social democrats, the 2021 local elections represented the turn of the tables in favor of VMRO-DPMNE. On a social level, the heavy defeat of the SDSM was seen as a demonstration of public dissatisfaction not only with the work of municipal councils and mayors, but also with the work of the Government as a whole. On the political level, PM Zaev's resignation marked the beginning of a new political crisis in the country, with multiple open-ended scenarios. The first scenario is that the current ruling majority (which commands a small majority of 62 MPs in the National Assembly) will remain in place, albeit reformed under a new leadership. The second scenario is that the ruling majority will collapse, and a new government will be negotiated by the opposition parties. The third scenario is that snap elections are held. As 120 days are required to organise elections, the earliest date when elections could be held is February 2022. That would however mean organising another election cycle in the midst of an ongoing health, energy and economic crisis. In the meantime, while the three scenarios are being negotiated, the focus will be on Zaev's possible successor as the head of the party and the Government.