



Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia Political Briefing:
Macedonia's Political Arena Ahead of Upcoming Presidential and
Parliamentary Elections
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Macedonia's Political Arena Ahead of Upcoming Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

Summary

Throughout March, the political attention shifted sharply towards the forthcoming double elections in Macedonia. Presidential elections are set for April 24, 2024, and parliamentary elections will follow on May 8, 2024, potentially alongside a second round of presidential elections, if a run-off is required. The campaign for these pivotal elections has already commenced, albeit informally, with major parties launching their propaganda campaigns. Notably, seven candidates have thrown their hats into the ring for the presidency. The VMRO-DPMNE party appears poised to clinch victory in the general elections. However, their ability to form a government hinges on their willingness to compromise on contentious issues that underpin their popularity. As election day draws nearer, the political atmosphere has been marred by various challenges, including obstructive tactics and both political and physical assaults. Adding to the intrigue, one of the presidential candidates found themselves blacklisted by the US State Department, injecting an additional layer of complexity into an already dynamic electoral landscape.

As Macedonia approached the presidential elections scheduled for April 24, 2024, followed by parliamentary elections on May 8, 2024, the political landscape was steadily intensifying. In March, all eyes were on the upcoming presidential elections, as political parties began unveiling their candidates. The period for collecting the 10,000 signatures needed to validate presidential candidates lasted from February 23rd until March 8th, 2024.¹ This process requires citizens to personally visit a state electoral office to submit their signatures. The signature collection process has frequently been labeled as "a political circus," especially as major political parties are known for employing clientelistic methods, directing their members to provide signatures for their preferred candidates. In contrast, smaller political parties face challenges in obtaining signatures, as they lack the party machinery and finances necessary to

¹ When the submitter of the candidate list for president is a group of voters, at least 10,000 signatures from registered voters on the Voter List must be collected, while when the submitter of the candidate list for president is deputies, at least 30 signatures from members of parliament must be collected.

mobilize support. Consequently, independent candidates and smaller political parties are often excluded from the presidential competition.

Eleven initiatives for collecting signatures were received by the State Electoral Commission, and out of those, seven candidates successfully obtained the necessary support.² Amongst them is outgoing President Stevo Pendarovski, candidate of the ruling Social Democratic Party (SDSM) who is running for a second five-year term. Just like in the 2019 elections, his opponent from VMRO-DPMNE will be Professor of law and Member of Parliament, Gordana Siljanovska Davkova. The other candidates are Bujar Osmani, incumbent foreign minister, candidate of the DUI political party; Biljana Vankovska, professor at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje, candidate of the Levica [Left] party; Arben Taravari, mayor of Gostivar, candidate of the Albanian 'Vredi' party coalition (opposition); Maksim Dimitrievski, mayor of Kumanovo, candidate of the new 'Znam' party; and Stevco Jakimovski, mayor of the Karpoš Municipality in Skopje.

The signature collection process evolved into a minor political battleground, with the two largest political parties accusing each other of soliciting signatures on behalf of smaller parties to fragment the electoral support for their opponents' candidates. There were even allegations of bribes being offered to citizens in exchange for their signatures. Nonetheless, this marks the first time the country will see such a plethora of presidential candidates - a total of seven. Additionally, it signifies the debut of Levica in the presidential elections, with Professor Biljana Vankovska, making history as the sole anti-NATO party contender in the country.

The USA blacklists one of the Presidential candidates

Less than two weeks after the candidates were confirmed, the US State Department blacklisted one of them. In their statement, the US State Department accused the candidate, Stevco Jakimovski, of involvement in corrupt activities during his tenure as mayor, alleging that he abused his official position to manipulate urban development and procurement processes

² State Electoral Commission [Известување за собирање на потписи за кандидати за Претседател на Република Северна Македонија] published on 22.02.2024, available at <https://www.sec.mk/izvestuvanje-za-sobiranje-na-potpisi-za-kandidati-za-pretседател-na-republika-severna-makedonija/>, accessed on 01.04.2024

for personal gain and the benefit of his associates.³ The statement added that his “actions undermined the rule of law and the public’s faith in the governments’ democratic institutions and public processes.”⁴ The State Department added that Jakimovski’s close family members will also be unable to enter the US.⁵⁶

Then, in a highly controversial development, the Macedonian government announced that it was considering using the US and UK blacklisting of individuals and companies as grounds for pursuing legal action against them within Macedonia. This was hinted at already in January when then-Foreign Minister and current Presidential candidate Bujar Osmani, announced that the Foreign Ministry was “launching a public debate with the goal of amending the law to allow the country to use the US blacklist of persons and firms as a basis for taking legal actions and restrictions against them.”⁷ There are two key mechanisms that legal changes should bring, the Foreign Minister, Bujar Osmani, said back in January. Firstly, institutions will be mandated to request all incriminating evidence held by the US concerning specific individuals or firms and relay it to domestic prosecution authorities. These authorities will be automatically tasked with initiating investigations based on this information. Secondly, should these investigations lead to charges being filed, individuals or firms implicated could face asset confiscation or freezing,

³ Designation of Western Balkan Officials Due to Involvement in Significant Corruption, published on 18.03.2024, available at

<https://www.state.gov/designation-of-western-balkan-officials-due-to-involvement-in-significant-corruption/>, accessed on 02.04.2024

⁴ Ibid

⁵ US Blacklists Former Top Prosecutor, Presidential Candidate, in North Macedonia, published on 18.03.2024, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/18/us-blacklists-former-top-prosecutor-presidential-candidate-in-north-macedonia/>, accessed on 01.04.2024

⁶ The number of prominent figures from Macedonia blacklisted by the US has increased in the last few years. In 2022, the US first blacklisted the former prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, as well as his close associate, the former chief of the now-disbanded secret police force, Saso Mijalkov. In 2023, it blacklisted the politician and long-standing mayor of Struga, Ramiz Merko, and a prominent businessman, Orce Kamcev. In October 2023, it blacklisted businessman Sergey Samsonenko, a dual citizen of Russia and Macedonia who resides in Macedonia. In December 2023, Macedonia’s former deputy prime minister and businessman, Koco Angjushev, was banned from entering the United States due to alleged involvement in “significant corruption”. Available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/01/12/north-macedonia-mulls-sanctioning-us-blacklisted-persons/>

⁷ North Macedonia Mulls Sanctioning US-Blacklisted Persons, published on 12.01.2024, available at

<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/01/12/north-macedonia-mulls-sanctioning-us-blacklisted-persons/>, accessed on 02.04.2024

temporary prohibition from holding public office for individuals, and exclusion from participating in public procurement bids until a verdict is reached.

While this process has been stalled, it underscores a deeply concerning trait among certain political entities – specifically, their tendency to seek alignment with decisions made by the USA, thereby encroaching upon Macedonia's sovereignty. What's even more troubling is the potential for this trend to evolve into a means of persecuting and silencing dissenters critical of US foreign policy and its global repercussions, particularly within the Balkan region and domestically in Macedonia. This isn't to suggest that individuals currently blacklisted by the USA aren't involved in corrupt activities, but rather that the current approach may pave the way for a more insidious agenda in the future, targeting not only corrupt officials but also those who challenge US dominance.

In view of this, US Ambassador's Aggeler's recent statement regarding the upcoming elections is quite ironic. Namely, she stated: "We closely monitor all elections, but we also monitor for any foreign interference, regardless of whether it comes from Russia or any other country. We will closely observe," says Aggeler.⁸ Considering the evident presence and interference of the US in domestic political processes, such statements seem to suggest that the US perceives itself as a domestic influence in the country.

Amendments to the Electoral Code

On March 7th, in a fast-track procedure, Parliament adopted amendments to the Electoral Code. The goal of the amendments, according to SDSM MP Martin Kostovski is to further specify the provisions of the existing legislation in order to ensure an inclusive electoral process for all participants in the elections.⁹ In addition to enabling voting in the upcoming presidential

⁸ Ageler: We closely monitor all elections, and we will observe whether there is any foreign interference, [Агелер: Будно ги следиме сите избори, ќе набљудуваме и дали има мешање од странство], published on 04.04.2024, available at

<https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/ageler-budno-gi-sledime-site-izbori-kje-nabljuduvame-i-dali-ima-meshanje-od-stranstvo/>, accessed on 07.04.2024

⁹Parliament adopts amendments to Electoral Code and Law on Higher Education, published on 07.03.2024, available at

and parliamentary elections with personal documents whose validity has expired up to nine months before the day of the elections, some of the amendments to the Electoral Code (EC), also include changes affecting the potential participation of independent candidates in the upcoming electoral processes. According to the existing provisions of the Electoral Code, for participation in parliamentary elections, independent candidate lists were required to collect at least 1,000 civil signatures from registered voters in the electoral roll in the specific electoral unit in order to enter the race for seats in the parliament. This is provided for in Article 61 of the Electoral Code, which underwent modification with the adopted amendments. Thus, instead of 1,000 signatures from registered voters in the specific electoral unit, candidates for parliamentary office will now need to secure at least one percent of the total number of enrolled voters in the electoral unit where they are running. Apart from independent lists for parliamentary candidates, the changes to the Electoral Code also have implications for the quota of signatures required for the participation of independent candidates for councilors and mayors in local elections.¹⁰

The latest amendments to the Electoral Code do not include the recommendations made by the OSCE. The amendments to the Electoral Code, according to the recommendations of the OSCE, are supposed to improve the transparency of the entire electoral process, but especially to prevent abuses in the area of advertising by parties with state funds in the media, which according to many experts constitutes continuous corruption and influence over the media. The text for the amendments was completed by the working group at the end of November, but the Assembly has not adopted them, despite claims by the largest parties that there is consensus among them regarding the acceptance of the OSCE recommendations.¹¹

<https://mia.mk/en/story/parliament-adopts-amendments-to-electoral-code-and-law-on-higher-education>, accessed on 07.04.2024

¹⁰ The amendments to the Electoral Code increased the quotas of civil signatures required for the participation of independent candidates in elections [Измените на Изборниот законик ги зголемија квотите на граѓански потписи за учество на независни кандидати на изборите], published on 08.03.2024, available at

<https://360stepeni.mk/izmenite-na-izborniot-zakonik-gi-zgolemija-kvotite-na-graganski-potpisi-za-uchestvo-na-nezavisni-kandidati-na-izborite/> accessed on 01.04.2024

¹¹ A new attempt to bring amendments to the Electoral Code before the elections [Нов обид да се донесат измени на Изборниот законик пред изборите], published on 05.03.2024, available at

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/nov-obid-da-se-donesat-izmeni-na-izborniot-zakonik-pred-izborite-/32848751.html> accessed on 07.04.2024

Party reshuffling before the elections

Twenty-four smaller political parties joined the largest opposition party VMRO-DPMNE and signed their coalition agreement on March 29th. As a result, the party has formed the largest election coalition. Some of the parties that have moved from the governing coalition bloc include the 'Democratic Alliance' [Демократски сојуз], 'Dignity' [Достоинство], and 'United for Macedonia' [Обединети за Македонија]. These parties are known for reshuffling their political alliances shortly before elections and for aligning themselves with the bloc that has the best chance of winning. Therefore, their decision to join VMRO-DPMNE represents an indicator that the party is likely to win the parliamentary elections.¹²

Party reshuffles were also apparent in the Albanian political block. On February 17th, Albanian opposition parties endorsed the declaration for the Albanian opposition union, deeming it "a significant stride towards consolidating Albanian parties" in the nation. The opposition coalition will be known as "VLEN," replacing its former name, the European League for Change (LEN). "The union is laying the foundations of a new era between the Albanian parties in the country, showing a common unity to face the challenges and to build a common vision for the future of the Albanians in the country", says the statement signed in Skopje. The declaration was also signed by Bekim Qoku, the advisor to the prime minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, whose party supports the Albanian opposition in Macedonia.¹³

The split in the Alliance for the Albanians party led to two separate congresses of the two wings in the party.¹⁴ Ziadin Sela, former leader of the Alliance of Albanians, announced that

¹² ВМРО-ДПМНЕ со коалиција од 24 партии, Мицкоски потпиша конечен договор за настап на парламентарните избори, published on 29.03.2024, available at <https://mk.tv21.tv/vmro-dpmne-so-koalitsija-od-24-partii-mitskoski-potpisha-konechen-dogovor-za-nastap-na-parlamentarnite-izbori/>, accessed on 07.04.2024

¹³ The Albanian opposition unites in Macedonia, including members of the VV, published on 17.02.2024, available at

<https://www.koha.net/en/arboretum/409672/the-albanian-opposition-joins-in-macedonia-which-is-also-a-member-of-vv-se>, accessed on 07.04.2024

¹⁴ The Alliance of Albanians was formed on the basis of the now weakened DPA party, as a principal Albanian opposition movement that exposes corruption and abuse of office by DUI. But DUI leader Ali Ahmeti was able to use the unprecedented level of state capture his party has achieved after over 20 years in power to get

he will join the ruling DUI party in the coming elections. Sela tried to create a faction in the Alliance of Albanians, opposed to the current leader and Presidential candidate Arben Taravari, after Taravari decided to join the opposition Albanian bloc VLEN. Taravari and Sela are in dispute over the leadership of the party – both organized meetings of the Alliance’s central committee with their loyalists and both insist that their meeting was legitimate. But they will both be able to field candidates within the larger groupings – Taravari with VLEN and Sela with DUI.¹⁵ The conflict between DUI and VLEN was heating up as the elections were drawing closer. After Taravari's billboard in the center of Skopje set on fire, he directly accused DUI of being involved in this incident and using force and intimidation. However, such accusations were promptly rejected by Osmani himself, who also accused Taravari of running a smear campaign.

Fair and Democratic Elections?

On March 18th, the election headquarters of President Pendarovski called all candidates to participate in a so-called master debate: “The previous period, through intensive communication between the election headquarters of all seven presidential candidates, has resulted in a consensus to hold two major so-called 'master debates'. In this way, in the spirit of democracy and transparency, the public will be able to follow an open debate on the issues advocated by the presidential candidates and their programs," the original statement informed.¹⁶ Then on 2nd of april, the president's electoral team informed that master debates won't be held. "However, unfortunately, despite the best intentions in this process and the collaboration among electoral teams, the political and media circumstances at the moment are not conducive to creating conditions for holding these 'master debates,' they stated in the announcement.¹⁷

initially Taravari, and now Sela, to support him. <https://english.republika.mk/news/macedonia/selas-faction-of-the-alliance-of-albanians-joins-the-dui-led-bloc-in-the-elections/>

¹⁵

¹⁶ Pendarovski Invites All Presidential Candidates to a Master Debate: We Will Lead a Positive and European Campaign [Пендаровски ги повикува сите кандидати за претседател на мастер дебата: Ќе водиме позитивна и европска кампања, велат од неговиот изборен штаб], published on 21.03.2024, available at <https://360stepeni.mk/pendarovski-gi-povikuva-site-kandidati-za-pretседatel-na-master-debata-ke-vodime-pozitivna-i-evropska-kampana-velat-od-negoviot-izboren-shtab/>, accessed on 07.04.2024

¹⁷ Ibid

In such a context, on April 2, 2024, in Skopje, the candidates for president of the country endorsed the Code of Fair and Democratic Elections. Six out of seven candidates for president of the country signed the Code of Fair and Democratic Elections at the State Election Commission (SEC). The only candidate who did not sign the Code was Stevcho Jakimovski. Jakimovski said that he will respect the Code but will not sign it unless the SEC guarantees the organization of debates, pointing out that certain candidates are heavily favored and campaign resources are not equally distributed. Biljana Vankovska - a candidate supported by the Left party, emphasized that she will sign the Convention, but she doesn't believe in it, calling it "an empty piece of paper," and requested television stations to organize debates with all presidential candidates.¹⁸ The presidential candidate, Professor Biljana Vankovska, and the Political Party Left on April 1, 2024 submitted an Initiative for the assessment of constitutionality and legality against the Instruction for broadcasters of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services for the 2024 Presidential and Parliamentary elections, requesting the imposition of an urgent interim measure to suspend the enforcement of this scandalous sub-legal act.

“We believe that the AVMU (Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services) is stepping outside the boundaries of the Constitution and the Electoral Code, arbitrarily interpreting its provisions directly to the detriment of our confirmed presidential candidate - by obstructing and depriving him of the right to equal access to the media and balanced media representation, thereby usurping even the minute of paid political advertising rightfully due to us by law!”, says the statement. Moreover it adds that “The credibility of the entire election, where independent candidates supported by a group of citizens are not treated equally, contrary to the law, and where candidates from major political parties, through their representatives in the SEC (State Election Commission) and the AVMU, are openly and unlawfully favored, is seriously questioned.”¹⁹

¹⁸ The presidential candidates signed the Code of Fair and Democratic Elections [Кандидатите за претседател потпишаа Кодекс за фер и демократски избори] published on 02.04.2024, available at

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/32888142.html> accessed on 07.04.2024

¹⁹ Press conference of the President of the Left Party, Professor Dr. Dimitar Apasiev, before the Constitutional Court [Прес-конференција на претседателот на Левица проф. д-р Димитар Апасиев пред Уставниот суд] published on 01.04.2024, available at

<https://levica.mk/pres-centar/pres-konferencii/%d0%b2%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%ba%d0%be%d0%b2%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b0-%d0%b8-%d0%bb%d0%b5%d0%b2%d0%b8%d1%86%d0%b0-%d0%b3%d0%be->

As an aggrieved party, the Left [Levica] will file criminal charges with the Basic Public Prosecution Office against all members of the AVMU and the SEC individually for the prosecution of organized crime and corruption - for the criminal offense of "Abuse of official position and authority". Furthermore, it will request an interim measure to impose a judicial ban on the disbursement of funds for the election campaign of all confirmed independent presidential candidates.²⁰

False polls published on the national broadcaster

The ruling party, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia released documents which, according to them, confirm that "the false public opinion surveys published on the National Television MTV were ordered by the headquarters of VMRO-DPMNE."²¹ According to SDSM, this involves the implementation of a whole scheme, an operational plan prepared by the Election Headquarters of VMRO-DPMNE on December 5, 2023, to disseminate fake surveys regarding party ratings and politicians, which were published on MTV. According to the party, there were also other activities such as disseminating fake news. "The documents with signatures confirm that the operational plan of VMRO-DPMNE contains what is actually happening," stated by SDSM. According to the party, the plan envisages creating a program twice a week analyzing surveys from IPIS by Vladimir Bozhinovski, which have already been aired on MTV, and also defined the composition of guests in the program to be analysts, with three from the opposition and one from the government. In response, the opposition party claimed that the documents were false and demanded an apology. Otherwise, they announced a defamation lawsuit. The editorial board of the national broadcaster MTV conveyed through a statement that the public service is facing unfounded attacks. They asserted that they fulfill their obligations in accordance with legal regulations and ethical norms, and any deliberate and unfounded undermining of citizens' trust in public institutions is, by definition, a harmful narrative. Nonetheless, the affair cast a dark light on the national broadcaster, as well as the

[%d0%be%d1%81%d0%bf%d0%be%d1%80%d0%b8%d1%98%d0%b0-%d1%83%d0%bf%d0%b0%d1%82%d1%81%d1%82/](#) accessed on 05.04.2024

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Party disputes: Who disseminates fake surveys and news? [Партиски препукнувања: кој пласира лажни анкети и вести?] published on 03.04.2024, available at

<https://www.dw.com/mk/sdsm-obvinuva-za-lazni-anketi-i-vesti-na-mrtv-vmrodpmne-najavuva-tuzba/a-68728457>, accessed on 05.04.2024

electoral processes as a whole, raising doubts about the tactics that are likely to be employed by all the actors involved in the process. This was further compounded several days later when the reporter who originally published the story was arrested.²²

As Macedonia edges closer to its crucial presidential and parliamentary elections in April and May 2024, the political landscape has grown increasingly turbulent. The pre-election period has been fraught with challenges and controversies that cast doubt on the fairness of the electoral process. The lead-up to the elections has witnessed a flurry of activity, with major political parties unveiling their candidates and intensifying their campaign efforts. However, the emergence of a diverse field of presidential candidates, with seven contenders vying for the highest office, has been overshadowed by allegations of manipulation and irregularities in the signature collection process. These issues underscore the ongoing struggles faced by independent and smaller political parties in navigating the electoral terrain. Moreover, the recent blacklisting of a presidential candidate by the US State Department has further complicated matters, sparking concerns about potential foreign interference in Macedonia's domestic politics. The controversy surrounding false surveys and news disseminated by the national broadcaster has further eroded trust in the electoral process, raising questions about media integrity and the fairness of the electoral environment. In this tumultuous climate, Macedonia's political arena grapples with significant challenges. Despite proclamations to uphold democratic principles, the advantage remains firmly with the larger political parties, equipped with the resources and networks to exert influence over the electoral process to their benefit.

²² Furkan Salihu Arrested: A video of the arrest is being shared on social media. [УАПСЕН ФУРКАН САЛИУ: На социјалните мрежи се споделува видео од апсењето], published on 07.04.2024, available at <https://faktor.mk/uapsen-furkan-saliu-na-socijalnite-mrezi-se-spodeluva-video-od-apsenjeto>