

CHAPTER 2

DEMOCRATIC CONSENSUS AND CONTRADICTIONS: POLITICAL PARTIES, TRANSFORMATIONS AND ATTITUDES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Sevba ABDULA

Dr. Balkan Studies Foundation, North Macedonia, sevbaa@gmail.com

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.51331/EB09SA>

Introduction: Political Life and Trends in North Macedonia

Since its establishment as an independent state, North Macedonia has faced four fundamental issues arising from its multi-ethnic and multi-religious structure. The presence of various social groups and their ascendance to power have shaped the country's internal and external political preferences within this structural context. The heterogeneous nature of the state and society, particularly regarding issues related to the Albanian population; the overlap and disputes between Macedonian and Bulgarian identities; the international uproar generated by the assertion of Macedonian identity rooted in Ancient Greece by Greece; and the refusal of the Serbian Orthodox Church to recognize the Macedonian Orthodox Church have all contributed to the country's ongoing concerns about unity and security versus division.

These four issues have resulted in the inability to stabilize the Macedonian national identity in ethnic, religious, and historical contexts, leading to an incomplete process of "invention" or acceptance by regional states/societies. This process has caused the political fragmentation of Macedonians into nationalist/



conservative and socialist/social democratic blocs, while the involvement of various factions of Albanians in the political arena has often resulted in deep fragmentation. Similarly, these four issues have created obstacles to the country's integration with NATO and the EU, while simultaneously presenting opportunities for major powers such as Russia and China.

The period from North Macedonia's independence in 1991 until the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001 is characterized as a time of democratization and constitutionalization (Bértoa & Dane Taleski, 2015:5). However, this period also witnessed the suppression of groups outside the Macedonian population, issues of representation, and the failure to reflect democratic rights and freedoms across all segments of society, leading to internal conflict. Throughout the 1990s, influenced by the Bosnian War and particularly the Kosovo War in 1999, Albanians began to voice their demands for equality in status. The demand for an Albanian University in Tetovo, the flag crisis in Gostivar, and the banking crisis in Albania deeply affected Albanians and contributed to the escalation of armed conflict in 2001. The devastating outcomes of the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo prompted the international community to adopt a more diligent approach to the issue, leading to the involvement of EU and US diplomats in the negotiation processes and ultimately resolving the conflict. Throughout 2001, clashes between the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) and Macedonian security forces ended with the acceptance of proposed recommendations by Albanian leader Ali Ahmeti, who subsequently returned to politics. The Ohrid Framework Agreement, which granted many rights to ethnic groups living in the country outside of the Macedonians, played a crucial role in ensuring the internal political integrity and stability of the country through the recognition of democratic rights, equal citizenship, minority rights, and the strengthening of local governance (Ilievski, Z. & D. Taleski, 2009:355-367). From 2001 to 2006, North Macedonia made progress on its path toward EU and NATO integration, successfully addressing the Albanian issue, one of the four fundamental problems it faced structurally during this period.

Even after gaining independence, the country faced numerous challenges and processes of reconstitution. It managed to navigate significant historical ruptures, such as those in 1991, 2001, and 2017, while "somehow operating its democracy" amid international pressures. Although the fault lines of fragmentation in national, historical, and religious identity continue to exist, significant repairs have also been made. Issues that have persisted for over 30 years, such as the Macedonian-Albanian, Macedonia-Greece, Macedonian Orthodox Church-Serbian Orthodox Church, NATO membership, and EU negotiation processes, have

largely been resolved, achieving a degree of balance, except for the Macedonian-Bulgarian issue.

As a natural consequence of all these processes and the country's heterogeneous structure, it is possible to identify three distinct ideologies, dominant parties, or regime visions in the political landscape. The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Macedonian National Democratic Union (VMRO-DPMNE) has established a vision of North Macedonia centered on conservative-nationalist Macedonians, particularly designating the periods before 2000 and from 2008 to 2016 as foundational eras. The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), which unites social democrats, has emphasized common citizenship, social justice, and EU processes, asserting that the period from 2017 to 2023 represents their golden age. The Democratic Union for Integration (BDI), one of the most significant anchors of the regime established after 2001, has played a crucial role in framing Albanian identity as the second element of the state, serving as the flagship of Albanian nationalism and secularism. As a party with a founding leader from the 2001 internal conflict, the BDI continuously positioned itself as a representative of Albanian rights and representation, equal citizenship, and secular nationalism, and as a significant representative of the Western bloc. Over the last 20 years, North Macedonian politics has defined the boundaries of political struggle by producing these three foundational traditions and visions. As these three political traditions have approached the center of politics, they have attained power. Although the VMRO period from 2008 to 2016 shifted toward authoritarianism and extreme nationalism in its second term, it managed to secure power by forming ideological, ethnic, and political alliances. In the sociology of Macedonia, where Macedonian and Albanian nationalism serve as the main axis, the Social Democrats were able to seize and maintain power during the 2017-2023 period only by including a portion of Albanians, Turks, Roma, Bosniaks, and Serbs in their coalition. As these three foundational parties and their political agendas drifted away from central political issues such as human rights, the rule of law, common citizenship, accountability, effective bureaucracy, economic development, and equitable income distribution, voters also tended to distance themselves from them. It is also possible to add the "Albanian opposition bloc" to these three foundational parties and the regime. Particularly since 2016, the Albanian opposition, which consisted of multiple parties and later fragmented into several others, has operated within the framework of the BDI party. This opposition, which has loudly developed its critique based on political, legal, and economic corruption and decay, has been part of all governments from 2001 to 2023 (excluding 2008). Although the opposition reached 120,000 votes in 2016

and 95,000 votes in 2020, the BDI's relationships within the regime and on the international stage, its agility, and its expertise in tactics that would divide the opposition bloc and in electoral politics enabled it to overcome these challenges consistently. However, in the 2024 parliamentary elections, although the BDI established a broad coalition and reached 137,000 votes, the opposition, united under the name VLEN, managed to become a partner in the government with 107,000 votes, thus successfully sidelining the BDI's more than 20-year-long rule (Parlamentarni Izbori, 2020). In summary, this section focuses on the historical process of political periodization in North Macedonia. This periodization relates to the fundamental dynamics of political life, the trajectories of political parties, the framework of power and opposition, political ideologies, and the parliamentary election results and electoral districts of the selected periods.

Voter Behavior, Election Results, and Patterns

The political, historical, and sociological framework of North Macedonia has had a direct impact on the political system, parties, and government formation processes. The political crisis of 2001, which escalated into internal conflict, led to a significant rupture and transformation in the country's political landscape. In this context, the structure of elections held since 2002 has been shaped accordingly. Following the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, the general elections of 2002 marked the transition to an electoral system based on proportional representation, using the D'Hondt method for the allocation of votes. This system divides the country into six electoral districts, with each district electing 20 members of parliament. Furthermore, the inclusion of Albanian parties in every government has become a de facto necessity for political stability and ethnic representation (Dardan, 2016:9).

Between 1991 and 2024, North Macedonia has conducted a total of 11 parliamentary elections. In terms of the country's political history, the three elections prior to 2001 and the eight parliamentary elections held after 2001 represent significant milestones. It is possible to assert that the dates of elections and voter behavior are centered around the identity politics of the country. Voter turnout and the nationalist votes in the 3rd and 4th electoral districts, along with the approach to the Social Democratic Party (SDSM) in the 1st and 2nd districts, significantly influence election outcomes. Additionally, approximately 300,000 mobile voters have been observed to affect election decisions. These mobile voters tend to position themselves based on the political agenda of the relevant period, casting votes for social democrats in cases of increasing nationalism, authoritarianism, and corruption, or for nationalist or smaller parties when the

Macedonian identity is perceived to be under threat. It is also essential to note that issues related to the European Union, NATO, and relationships with Russia, as well as international relations with Greece, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and Serbia, play a significant role in the electoral politics of the country.

When we examine the elections from 2001 to 2024 in broad terms, it is evident that the nationalist party VMRO-DPMNE has won elections and formed strong governments in years when it surpassed 400,000 votes. With the exception of the 2002 elections, the SDSM has managed to seize power through coalitions in the 2016 and 2020 elections, receiving votes close to those of VMRO-DPMNE. In the Albanian bloc, it is noteworthy that the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI), which transitioned from an armed organization to a political entity after the 2001 crisis, has emerged as the leading party in all elections except for 2016, consistently receiving between 120,000 and 150,000 votes. Although the Albanian opposition parties received more votes than BDI in the 2016 elections, they were unable to participate in the government; however, in the 2024 elections, they managed to become coalition partners with VMRO-DPMNE despite receiving fewer votes than BDI, thus sending BDI into opposition for the first time.

Given that the country is divided into six electoral districts, it is important to evaluate the election results while considering the strong political positions of each district. In the first electoral district, which includes Skopje and its surroundings, an analysis of the eight parliamentary elections held between 2002 and 2024 reveals that VMRO-DPMNE's votes have ranged between 50,000 and 80,000, with an average of approximately 70,000 votes. In contrast, the SDSM's votes have shown significant volatility, ranging from 27,000 to 100,000. During its periods in power, the SDSM has approached 100,000 votes, yet in the 2024 elections, it experienced a substantial defeat, falling below 30,000 votes. Voters in this district have shown a tendency to punish the social democratic party. In the case of Albanian parties, achieving over 20,000 votes in this district is a crucial threshold; surpassing this threshold provides a significant advantage. The opposition has outperformed BDI in the 2016 and 2024 elections. In the second electoral district, the clear dominance of VMRO-DPMNE has emerged, as the party has maintained superiority over SDSM in all elections except for the 2002 election. The BDI has also solidified its position as the leading party in this electoral district throughout all elections from 2002 to 2024.

The 3rd and 4th electoral districts, along with the regions of Štip, Kumanovo, Strumica, Prilep, Kavadarci, and Bitola, are critical in determining the outcomes of elections in North Macedonia and the formation of the new government. Except for the 2002 elections, the primary question in these districts has been the

margin of votes between the VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM parties. VMRO-DPMNE has consistently emerged as the leading party in North Macedonia when it secures approximately 100,000 votes or more in any given election, thus enabling the party to establish a robust government. The results of the elections in 2008, 2011, 2014, and 2024 have reaffirmed its status as the dominant party. Due to the sociological dynamics of North Macedonia, Albanian parties have found it challenging to establish a significant presence in the 3rd and 4th electoral districts. In the 5th electoral district, the votes for VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM have shown a close trajectory, with the elections of 2024, 2014, and 2008 indicating that VMRO-DPMNE's votes have doubled those of SDSM during these periods, which correspond to times when VMRO-DPMNE established strong governments. In this district, the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI) has emerged victorious by securing the highest number of votes in all elections, except for the 2016 elections.

The 6th electoral district is characterized by a predominantly Albanian population. While SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE have received similar levels of support, SDSM achieved a significant advantage in 2002. In the 2016 and 2020 elections, SDSM was only able to level the playing field and regain power, while in all other elections, VMRO-DPMNE garnered a higher number of votes. This pattern illustrates the complexities and shifting dynamics within North Macedonia's electoral landscape, where ethnic and party affiliations play a crucial role in determining political outcomes. (Parlamentarni Izbori, 2012; Parlamentarni Izbori, 2020; Parlamentarni Izbori, 2024; Dardan, 2016:9-20)

Macedonian Political Parties, Hegemony, and Ideologies

Nationalist, Security-oriented, and Authoritarian Political Understanding: VMRO, 2006-2016, 2024

VMRO-DPMNE, also known as the Macedonian Internal Revolutionary Organization-Macedonian National Democratic Union, has historically been one of the most significant political institutions in Macedonia. With its conservative-nationalist discourse and policies centered around Macedonian identity, it shaped the political history of Macedonia between 2006 and 2016. The internal political repercussions of the Ohrid Framework Agreement led to the country's subjugation to Macedonian nationalist party rule during this period. Between 2006 and 2011, the party initially prioritized the economy and development, but later shifted

towards identity politics with the Skopje 2014 project, adopting a security-oriented and authoritarian stance (Aliu, 2023). The opposition responded vehemently by boycotting the parliament. The party can be characterized as the dominant party in Macedonia, having received 32% of the vote in 2006, 48% in 2008, 39% in 2011, 42% in 2014, 38% in 2016, 34% in 2020, and 44% in 2024. It particularly transformed the rural areas of Eastern and Southeastern North Macedonia into its electoral base, achieving victories in elections. During periods when its vote share fell below 40%, it raised the level of nationalist discourse and policies, reaching a 45% share in elections.

The government's post-2011 policy attempts to base Macedonian identity on Ancient Greece and Alexander the Great, which became evident through the Skopje 2014 project, exemplified VMRO-DPMNE's divisive, exclusionary, and othering policies. The identity policies aimed at separating ethnic Macedonians, backed by VMRO-DPMNE nationalists, from their Slavic identity in an attempt to establish continuity with the ancient Macedonians of Alexander the Great's era inflamed chauvinism among radical Macedonians, while also leading to polarization among ethnic groups within the country (Gjuzelov-Ivanovska, 2021:141).

On the other hand, scandalous incidents such as the Monstrum case (2012) and the Kumanovo events (2015)—which have been loudly claimed to have been orchestrated by the government—produced a discourse and policy associating the Albanian population with security-oriented measures. The period from 2011 to 2015 saw VMRO consolidating its power in both domestic and foreign policy, creating a governing profile that securitized other identities while placing Macedonian identity at its center in the pursuit of NATO membership. In other words, it escalated the Albanian issue in domestic politics while adopting a foreign policy that increased tensions with Greece and brought it closer to the Russia-Serbia axis (Abdula, 2017: 3).

Although VMRO-DPMNE portrayed itself as the dominant party between 2006 and 2016, it faced significant opposition from the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) during its second five-year term. The political crisis that began in 2011 and intensified in 2015 was evidenced in the 2016 parliamentary and 2017 local elections, showing that both VMRO-DPMNE and the BDI parties lost their standing among Macedonian and Albanian voters. The processes of staterhood, authoritarianism, corruption, arrogance, and the shift of the opposition outside of parliament are challenges faced by long-standing ruling parties. The situation that crystallized in the 2017 local elections indicated that voters in Macedonia had distanced themselves to a certain extent from the VMRO-DPMNE party, leading to a transition of power to the social democrats.

The period of constitutional changes from 2017 to 2023 resulted in a significant perception among the Macedonian populace that the unity and integrity of the state and national identity had severely eroded. Despite all the pressures from nationalists, various factors, such as the name change resulting from constitutional amendments, negotiations with Bulgaria over Macedonian identity, and the unprecedented allocation of the positions of Speaker of the Parliament and Prime Minister to Albanians, were reflected in the polls ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections.

In the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections, VMRO-DPMNE emerged victorious, securing both the presidency and a significant power with 58 parliamentary seats, which would largely shape the country for the next decade. The decisions made by SDSM during the 2017-2023 period, which were pivotal in Macedonian history, the leadership crisis within SDSM, the economic challenges brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, corruption, doubts and rumors regarding the rule of law, and the prominence of Albanian identity in public life to a level that unsettled Macedonians created a fertile ground for VMRO-DPMNE. Consequently, Macedonian voters opted to punish SDSM.

VMRO-DPMNE achieved a significant victory in the 2024 parliamentary elections. Compared to the 2016 election results, the party increased its votes in all electoral districts except for the 6th district, paving the way for a new era in Macedonian politics. VMRO-DPMNE received substantial support from the electorate, with 426,000 votes and 58 parliamentary seats. Additionally, the party's candidate for the 2024 presidential election, Gordana Siljanovski, won with 70% of the vote, totaling 561,000 votes, thereby laying the groundwork for a strong, long-lasting nationalist government in the country's political landscape (Parliamentary Elections, 2024).

Coexistence, Citizenship, and Equality Policies: The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)

Macedonian political life is primarily shaped by the VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM parties, which have emerged as two blocks through the alliance of various parties representing Macedonian interests. The ideology of hard nationalism, particularly during the early years of the VMRO-DPMNE government, expanded its national and international legitimacy through economic development narratives. Since 2011, the party has faced criticism for shifting the country's agenda towards identity politics and security policies while claiming that the opposition was constructing a new regime. The increased relationship between the opposition,

led by the social democrats, and the EU and the USA has pushed VMRO-DPMNE towards Russia and Slavic nationalism. Despite undergoing leadership, personnel, and narrative changes after numerous electoral defeats, SDSM has struggled to regain power. The controversial publication of wiretaps belonging to the ruling party in 2015 and support for street protests backed by the Open Society Foundation intensified its opposition stance (Ramet, S., 2017: 287-320).

In the 2016 elections, SDSM incorporated Albanians into its party leadership through citizenship discourse and vision, gaining significant support from Albanian voters by nominating them as candidates. The election of an Albanian as the Speaker of Parliament for the first time and the victory of an Albanian female candidate in Haraçinova, a symbol of the 2001 internal conflict, indicated that SDSM would pursue policies that transcend identity. However, opposing Albanian parties claimed that SDSM viewed this as a temporary tactical maneuver to escape VMRO-DPMNE's rule.

SDSM experienced a significant electoral victory in the 2013 local elections, winning 57 out of 81 municipalities and thereby strengthening its success in the parliamentary elections. The party established a strong advantage over VMRO-DPMNE in regions densely populated by Macedonian voters, particularly in eastern and southeastern Macedonia as well as the Skopje area. Compared to the 2013 municipal council elections, SDSM increased its vote share from 28.1% to 38.6%, gaining approximately 90,000 additional votes. The majority of the votes gained 60% came from municipalities in the Skopje region and surrounding areas (Karpoš, Center, Aerodrom, Gazibaba, Kisela Voda), while 40% came from municipalities in eastern and southeastern Macedonia (Kavadarci, Prilep, Negotino, Shtip, Sveti Nikole) (Abdula, 2017: 2).

The process that began with the opposition's refusal to accept the results of the 2014 parliamentary elections escalated into mass protests in 2015 and 2016, leading to one of the greatest crises in Macedonian political history. The opposition leader, Zoran Zaev, caused a significant public uproar on February 9, 2015, by sharing "real bombshells about Macedonia" derived from wiretaps he received from foreign intelligence services. The exposure of corrupt practices, including bribery and extortion, by various ministers and the intelligence director generated immense backlash from both the opposition and the public. On May 12, as the Interior Minister and other ministers resigned, large-scale protests funded by the Open Society Foundation began in front of the Prime Minister's office. As political relations deteriorated, the resignation of ministers and international pressure led to a political stalemate in the country. Amid this chaos, the EU representative Johannes Hahn mediated an agreement on June 2, known as the

Pržino Agreement, which included provisions for organizing elections on April 24, 2016, the resignation of the current government, the establishment of a caretaker government, media reforms, and the investigation of the coup attempt through wiretaps by a “Special Prosecutor’s Office.” Although Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski resigned on January 18, 2016, due to difficulties in implementing many of the agreement’s provisions, the parliamentary elections were postponed and ultimately took place in December 2016 (Abdula, 2020).

The parliamentary elections held in December 2016 heralded a significant change in Macedonian political life. The ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, faced the prospect of being ousted from power as the Social Democrats (SDSM) promised to develop policies based on coexistence, equal citizenship, and multiculturalism, positioning themselves against ethnic nationalism. Among their pledges was the recognition of Albanian as the second official language. SDSM aimed to usher in a new era in both domestic and foreign policy, believing that they could secure support from Albanian voters.

In the 2016 elections, although VMRO-DPMNE emerged as the leading party, its number of seats dropped from 61 to 51, while SDSM increased its representation from 34 to 49 seats. The failure of VMRO-DPMNE to reach an agreement with the largest Albanian party, BDI, during government formation negotiations worked in favor of SDSM. However, due to President Ivanov’s refusal to grant SDSM the authority to form a government—citing concerns over the potential for Albanian to be recognized as an official language and the securitization of the alliance formed by Albanian parties under Tirana’s leadership—new crises emerged.

The situation escalated dramatically on April 27, 2017, when Talat Xhaferi was elected as the first Albanian Speaker of Parliament in Macedonia’s history. This event provoked a fierce backlash from VMRO-DPMNE’s MPs and the public, culminating in protests that resulted in violence against SDSM leaders and the Albanian opposition leader (Abdula, 2020).

These events increased international pressure on VMRO-DPMNE and President Ivanov, leading to the eventual formation of a government coalition around SDSM and BDI. Under the leadership of Zoran Zaev, SDSM quickly shifted its focus towards resolving regional issues with Bulgaria and Greece. Aiming to address the name issue with Greece, Zaev leveraged the momentum gained from the municipal elections held on October 14-29, 2017, where SDSM secured significant victories. This culminated in the signing of an agreement with Greece on June 17, 2018, in Prespa, which stipulated that Macedonia’s name would be changed to North Macedonia. The agreement, which required ratification by both countries’ parliaments, also included provisions for definitive NATO membership.

Zaev was obligated to take the agreement through a constitutional process via a referendum. On September 30, 2018, citizens were asked whether they accepted the agreement between Macedonia and Greece to facilitate EU and NATO membership. Despite a 91% approval rate, the referendum suffered from a legitimacy issue due to only a 36% voter turnout, largely because VMRO-DPMNE urged a boycott (Abdula, 2020).

While the name change process unfolded, the Special Prosecutor's Office continued to announce decisions regarding investigations into VMRO-DPMNE officials from the previous administration. The former Prime Minister was convicted to two years in prison for the illegal purchase of an armored Mercedes vehicle worth approximately 600,000 euros during his tenure, a conviction upheld by higher courts. This sentencing increased pressure on the party and its MPs just ahead of the parliamentary ratification of the Prespa Agreement. On November 13, 2018, former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski announced via social media that he had sought asylum in Hungary due to death threats, further complicating the situation.

On January 10, 2019, the Parliament passed constitutional changes, including the implementation of the Prespa Agreement and the recognition of Albanian as an official language, achieving the required two-thirds majority through negotiations with several VMRO-DPMNE MPs involved in dubious activities.

The Prespa Agreement was officially enacted on February 12, 2019, despite President Ivanov's opposition. A significant milestone in the political transformation of Macedonia had been reached. The presidential elections held from April 21-05 saw the election of Stevo Pendarovski, supported by SDSM, Albanian parties, and the international community, marking the closure of an era. The country embarked on a path that emphasized two official languages, demanded equal citizenship, resolved the naming dispute with Greece, and anticipated NATO membership to be declared by the end of 2019. However, the political improvements were not matched by corresponding economic advancements, and the EU's failure to deliver on its promise regarding the negotiation date weakened SDSM's government (Abdula, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the postponement of the early parliamentary elections initially scheduled for 2020 until July 15, forcing the country to be governed by a technical government from January onward during both the election and pandemic periods. Discussions regarding the election date, trust in institutions, failures in combating the pandemic, and the significant increase in cases and deaths following the lifting of pandemic-related restrictions directly influenced the electoral process. All research indicated the presence of a

low-participation election and a significant segment of the population (over 35%) that would abstain from voting for various reasons. The majority of the public perceived institutions, the economy, and the legal system as problematic, particularly due to the effects of the COVID-19 crisis (Abdula, 2020).

In the pre-pandemic period, the ruling coalition led by the Social Democratic Union (SDSM) enjoyed a more favorable image due to the political reforms undertaken between 2017 and 2019. The international and regional agreements, domestic political trials, constitutional changes, the election of an Albanian Speaker of Parliament, the official recognition of the Albanian language, and the political transformation resulting from the name change led to NATO membership and the initiation of EU accession negotiations. It was anticipated that the security and internal peace/integrity issues faced over the 30-year history of the Republic would be addressed through alignment with NATO and European culture/institutional structures. In this context, the current ruling bloc claimed to meet demands for a strong state, legal system, and economy by positioning EU and NATO membership at the center of their future perspective, while the opposition bloc, referencing the pandemic, criticized the sluggish and untrustworthy state, corruption, and failed economic policies to solicit votes from the electorate.

Regarding the parliamentary elections, participation in the 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local elections was affected by COVID-19, resulting in turnout around 50% and valid votes dropping to approximately 900,000. The implications of whether voters would go to the polls played a decisive role in the outcomes. For the 2024 parliamentary elections, doubts arose over the effectiveness of the SDSM's election strategy, which was built on the principles of shared citizenship, reforms, and the EU vision, emphasizing that these values should not be jeopardized between 2017 and 2023. Additionally, it was evident that the leadership vacuum created by the resignation of Zoran Zaev, the main architect of the SDSM government, following failures in local elections, was not adequately filled by the current Prime Minister and party leader, Dimitar Kovačevski (Abdula, 2024:3).

The "erosion" experienced by the social democratic government concerning national identity, along with economic issues, had a significant impact on Macedonian voters. The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a period of severe contraction, borrowing, and inflation. The economy contracted by 6.1% in 2020, and from 2020 to 2023, it recorded an average growth of only 0.25%. While inflation was around 1% during the 2010s, it peaked at 14.2% in 2022. Increases in food and energy prices greatly affected the daily expenses of the populace. Borrowing became one of the most significant issues in the country over the last four years. Public debt reached 60% of GDP, while external debt reached 82% of GDP in 2022,

the highest level in the country's history. Key indicators for a social democratic government, such as income distribution, minimum wage, average salary, and unemployment rates, showed at least some improvement, with no significant regression. The average salary rose to 49,397 denars in 2023, the highest level in the country's history, while the minimum wage reached 20,000 denars (Abdula, 2024:3).

In a global context marked by the rise of far-right and far-left parties, it would be surprising for North Macedonia to remain unaffected. The popularity of Dimitar Apasiev's LEVICA and Maksim Dimitrievski's ZNAM parties has increased. In the 2024 elections, a significant segment of the electorate, which distanced itself from both VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM and expressed dissatisfaction with both parties, clearly gravitated towards these new formations. The 2024 elections represented the most challenging contest in the history of the SDSM. In 2024, SDSM experienced a loss of 180,000 votes compared to the 2020 elections and 280,000 votes compared to the 2016 elections. While they secured 49 seats in 2016 and 46 seats in 2020, they managed to obtain only 18 seats with 154,000 votes in 2024. Half of the votes lost in this election went to VMRO-DPMNE, while the other half was distributed between LEVICA and ZNAM (Waters, 2024:147-148).

Albanian Politics: Identity, Integration into the System, and Opposition

The Founding and Dominant Party of Albanians: BDI, 2002-2024

Since the 2002 parliamentary elections, the Democratic Union for Integration (BDI) has become an indispensable element of political life in Macedonia. In the elections of 2024, BDI received 14.1% of the votes, following 11% in 2020, 7.5% in 2016, 14.2% in 2014, 10.24% in 2011, 12.8% in 2008, and 12.1% in 2006, thus institutionalizing itself as the central party for Albanians over a span of 23 years. Although it has a left-leaning political program, it has transformed into a mass party that attracts votes from nationalistic, secular, conservative, educated, urban, and rural Albanian voters. The major factors triggering this transformation include its militaristic past, its position as a founding party in the Republic of North Macedonia post-2002, and the deep loyalty felt by the tens of thousands of Albanians it has embedded within the bureaucracy. The Albanian electorate, concentrated in Northern and Western Macedonia, has consistently made BDI their first political preference during the 2002-2023 period. However, in 2015, the sharing of surveillance information with the media by the Social Democratic

Union of Macedonia (SDSM) led to a decline in trust towards BDI. Public discussions about corruption in local governments, visible intra-party conflicts, and the party's indifferent stance towards religious sensitivities have raised concerns regarding its status as a mass party. This situation began to reflect in the preferences of Albanian voters during the 2016 parliamentary and 2017 local elections (Abdula, 2017: 2).

Compared to the 2014 parliamentary elections, BDI's vote decreased from 13.71% to 7.28% in 2016 (losing approximately 65,000 votes). Despite forming a pre-election alliance with SDSM, its votes fell from approximately 12.3% to 8.8% in 2017, a decrease of around 41,000 votes compared to the 2013 local elections. While maintaining its position as the leading party among Albanian voters, its share of the Albanian vote decreased by 18% in local elections and by 24% in parliamentary elections. In the Skopje region and Northern Macedonia (Çair, Studeničan, Butel, Kumanovo), BDI lost approximately 17,000 votes, translating to around 35% compared to the 2013 local elections, while in Western and Southwestern Macedonia (Tetovo, Gostivar, Kičevo, Struga), it lost about 24,000 votes, amounting to around 29%.

Although there were significant declines in the proportion of members elected to municipal councils, the pre-election alliance with SDSM prevented BDI from losing municipalities. While it won the fewest municipalities since its establishment (Plasnitsa, Kičevo, Čair, Tetovo, Saraj, Teartse, Dolneni, Debrar, Lipkovo, and Struga), it managed to retain municipalities of great importance. In municipalities like Čair, Struga, Tetovo, and Debar, BDI achieved significant victories against the Albanian opposition with the help of SDSM votes, albeit by narrow margins.

The reality that central parties are composed of internal coalitions and accommodate various political inclinations is also easily observable within the BDI party. The fact that ethnic nationalism serves as a common denominator for all political tendencies has triggered Albanian coalition-building through BDI. While factionalism does not arise due to strong leadership, it can be noted that external structures, which have transformed Albanian and religious values into an institutional movement, have created fault lines and fractures within BDI. The BESA Movement has emerged as a primary instrument contributing to BDI's vote loss in the 2016 and 2017 elections by influencing the current BDI electorate with themes of locality, autonomy, and authenticity. The Alliance of Albanians (AA), which combines traditional Albanian values with leadership, has also succeeded in influencing other dissenting groups dissatisfied with BDI but incompatible with BESA. Through a correct reading of the situation, BDI's pre-election alliance

with SDSM has prevented its vote loss from translating into a loss of municipalities; however, the sustainability of this situation will become clearer in future elections. Unless BDI undertakes internal reforms and changes its political discourse and actions, there is a high likelihood that it will transform into a core party of secular ethnic nationalists in the medium term (Abdula, 2017: 3).

In the 2024 elections, the Albanian front is experiencing significant excitement regarding the potential outcomes. The BDI's strategy of forming alliances with Turkish, Romani, and Bosniak parties for the first time is noteworthy, drawing parallels to the electoral success strategies employed by SDSM in 2016 and 2020 through centrist political policies and alliances. Additionally, BDI has made efforts to balance the opposition by bringing in many former opposition leaders and NGO leaders who had previously separated from opposition parties and established new ones. During SDSM's time in power, BDI successfully positioned itself as the most crucial element supporting the government, leading to the historic moment of having an Albanian (Talat Xhaferi) occupy the Speaker of Parliament's chair for the first time in North Macedonia. In 2024, the same individual was selected as the Prime Minister of the technical government, marking a significant achievement in the 30-year political struggle of Albanians. However, despite these successes, accumulated corruption allegations, accusations of nepotism within the state, criticisms of designing the opposition, and internal political struggles within the party have contributed to the formation of the largest opposition bloc among Albanians. With the support of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje from Kosovo, four political parties (the Alliance of Albanians, BESA, Alternativa, and Levizja Demokratike) formed an electoral alliance, creating a structure that will significantly challenge BDI in the first, second, fifth, and sixth electoral districts (Abdula, 2024: 4).

Albanian Opposition: Defeats, Divisions, and Power- PDSH, BESA Movement, Alliance of Albanians, and VLEN

Between 2002 and 2016, the PDSH party, which was central to the opposition, underwent numerous unsuccessful electoral campaigns. While various small parties emerged during this period, they failed to diminish PDSH's role as the primary opposition party. The 2016-2017 elections marked a significant shift, characterized by the emergence of a new opposition language and electorate as the VMRO-DPMNE-BDI governments lost substantial ground. The BESA Movement made a significant impact in these elections, and although the opposition collectively received more votes than BDI, their inability to unite and SDSM's preference for BDI as a government partner led to disappointment within the opposition.

BESA and the Alliance of Albanians managed to convince some of BDI's electorate, with BESA rising to become the second Albanian party competing with BDI around Skopje, while the Alliance of Albanians emerged as the most significant party attracting votes away from BDI in Western and Southwestern Macedonia. This situation was further exacerbated by the significant decline of PDSH, traditionally positioned as an opposition party to BDI, and the National Democratic Renaissance Party (RDK) in the 2016 and 2017 elections, indicating a shift of Albanian voters toward new political avenues.

In the second round of local elections, BESA and the Alliance of Albanians formed an electoral alliance, deciding to support each other under the slogan "the new will defeat the old." However, the expected positive outcomes of this alliance in 12 municipalities were not fully realized, resulting in success only in four municipalities (Gostivar, Vrapchishte, Zhelino, and Bogovinje). One of the primary reasons for this was BDI's ability to counter the pressure from this alliance with Macedonian votes.

In the 2016 elections, the BESA Movement garnered 57,868 votes (4.86%), securing five parliamentary seats. Despite being a new party, the results of the 2016 elections propelled BESA into a significant position. By appealing to young, religious, and reform-minded voters, BESA established a political consciousness and opted to remain in opposition with a firm stance against BDI and VMRO-DPMNE. However, in the 2017 local elections, it lost approximately 12,000 votes, reducing its share to 4.2%. The Alliance of Albanians, positioned as a derivative of PDSH, emerged as a conservative-nationalist party that preserves traditional Albanian values, gradually establishing itself as a strong political movement among Albanian voters, particularly in Western and Southwestern Macedonia. In the 2016 elections, it received 35,212 votes (2.95%) and secured two parliamentary seats, agreeing to become a key partner in the government with SDSM. The incident in which VMRO-DPMNE supporters stormed the parliament and attacked the leader of the Alliance of Albanians increased interest among Albanian voters in the party and its leader, reflecting in the 2017 local elections. In those elections, the party increased its votes by 35%, raising its overall share to 4.5% compared to the 2016 elections, gaining approximately 13,000 additional votes, with 70% of those coming from Western and Southwestern Macedonia, particularly Struga, Gostivar, and Kičevo municipalities. In the Skopje region and Northern Macedonia, it demonstrated the potential to become a significant electoral force by increasing its votes by 56% compared to the 2016 elections (Abdula, 2017: 3).

The BESA Movement viewed the traditionally religious Albanian values, particularly among rural populations and those newly migrated to urban areas, as its

voter base. While it expressed respect for Islamic values, it was cautious about associating with the Islamic thought that has developed since the 19th century, wary of nationalist and anti-Islamic elites.

The seven-year experience from 2015 to 2022 saw BESA face significant challenges alongside its internal conflicts, leading to inevitable disintegration within the movement. This resulted in the emergence of the Alternativa party just four years after its establishment, highlighting the inability to reach consensus on values, management, future perspectives, and threats during its formative stage. Throughout this seven-year period, both parties failed to develop narratives and policies that transcended Albanian conservatism, national secularism, and regionalism, often succumbing to the very three main axes/streams/ideologies they criticized, ultimately finding themselves integrated into the government of the regime they opposed.

Before the 2024 parliamentary elections, a notable figure emerged in Izzet Mexhiti, the former mayor of Çayır, who left BDI after a significant conflict with Artan Grubi, a deputy prime minister and key figure within BDI, to establish the Lëvizja Demokratike party. Alongside BESA Movement leader Bilal Kasami, Alternativa leader Afrim Gashi, and Alliance për Shqiptarët leader Arben Taravari, they formed the VLEN coalition, achieving significant success in the elections. The BDI's goal of becoming a central party, forming electoral alliances with various ethnic groups, led the Albanian opposition under the VLEN banner to conduct their electoral campaign along more nationalist lines. Coupled with VMRO-DPMNE's longstanding rhetoric and stance against the ruling BDI, VLEN secured 107,000 votes, achieving a 10.7% share and 14 parliamentary seats, marking the first time they entered the government and ending BDI's dominance (Waters, 2024: 148-150).

Conclusion

The political structure of North Macedonia is influenced by various variables, including social dynamics, inter-identity struggles, reflections of international politics, the quality of public administration, electoral strategies, and regional differences. Particularly, the political history after 2001 can be analyzed through three dominant ideologies and parties. The strong rule of these ideologies and parties has played a decisive role in shaping the opposition expressed in the streets, deep discussions with neighboring countries, and the relationships with international politics and institutions.

The electoral politics of the country are shaped significantly by the behavior of voters, especially in the first, third, and fourth electoral districts. The preferences of the volatile electorate directly affect the strategies of political parties and determine election outcomes. This section aims to reveal the necessary processes, developments, and pathways to understand the political dynamics of North Macedonia and provides a framework for this complex structure.

In conclusion, the political environment of North Macedonia is characterized by a multi-layered structure that is shaped not only by internal dynamics but also by international relations. In this context, the strategies of political actors and parties evolve in interaction with social change and transformation processes, playing a decisive role in the future of the country.

REFERENCES

- Abdula, S. (2017). Makedonya'da Yerel Seçimler ve Siyasal Değişim, *SETA Perspektif*, No:187, November 2017, 1-5.
- Abdula, S. (2020). Kuzey Makedonya'da Seçimler: Kurumsal İntibak ve Yeni Siyasal Çerçeve, *Fikircoğrafyası*, 12 Temmuz 2020, Accessed: <https://Fikircoğrafyası.Com/Makale/Kuzey-Makedonyada-Secimler-Kurumsal-İntibak-Ve-Yeni-Siyasal-Cerceve>
- Abdula, S. (2024). Kuzey Makedonya Siyasetinde Yeni Bir Döneme Doğru, *BSF Perspektive* 2, April 2024, 1-7.
- Aliu, M. (2024), İktidar, Tarih ve Mekan, Üsküp:İdefe Yayınları.
- Casal B. F., & Taleski, D. (2015). Regulating party politics in the Western Balkans: the legal sources of party system development in Macedonia, *Democratization*, 23(3), 545–567
- Dardan, B. (2016). The Politics of Electoral Systems in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, *Indiana Journal of Constitutional*, 2(1), .1-20.
- Ilievski, Z. & Taleski, D., (2009). Was The EU's Role in Conflict Management in Macedonia A Success?, *Ethnopolitics* 8 (3-4), 355–67.
- Ilievski, Z. (2007). Ethnic Mobilization of Macedonia. Eurac Research. <http://Www.Eurac.Edu/En/Research/Autonomies/Minrig/Documents/Mirico/Macedonia%20report.Pdf>.
- Kapidzic D.,& Stojarova V. (2021). *Illiberal Politics In Southeast Europe: How Ruling Elites Undermine Democracy*. London: Routledge, EU Integration, Comparative Southeast Europe Studies. 2021; 69(4): 561–574, De Gruyter Oldenburg, Policy Analysis.
- Ramet, S.P. (2017). *Macedonia's Post-Yugoslav Reality: Corruption, Wiretapping, And Stolen Elections. In Building Democracy in the Yugoslav Successor States: Accomplishments, Setbacks, and Challenges Since 1990*, Ed. S.P. Ramet, C.M. Hassenstab, And O. Listhaug, 287–320. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.”
- Majkovska, S. (2021), North Macedonia: Politics Versus Policy of EU Integration, *Comparative Southeast European Studies*, 69(4), 561-574.

Parlemantarni Izbori 2016, Access: <https://ep.sec.mk/election/results/electionType/parliamentary/electionYear/2016/electionRound/19>

Parlemantarni Izbori 2020, Access: <https://ep.sec.mk/election/results/electionType/parliamentary/electionYear/2020/electionRound/26>

Parlemantarni Izbori 2024, Access: <https://rezultati.sec.mk/mk/parl/r>

Waters A. (2024). An Analysis of the 2024 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in North Macedonia, *Contemporary Security Challenges and Strengthening the Resilience of the Countries of Southeast Europe 23-24 September 2024, Ohrid, Skopje* 2024, 9(2), 141-156