



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

# Should the West be wary of the new right-wing populist government in North Macedonia?



North Macedonia has a new president and a new parliamentary majority from the nationalist centre-right VMRO party after the most convincing result in the history of this young Balkan democracy.

Last Wednesday's elections **resulted** in another political shift, similar to seven years ago, when the current winners became the opposition following mass street protests.

VMRO's right-wingers convincingly defeated the social democratic SDSM, the main rival with whom they have alternated in power since the country's independence in the early 1990s and the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, of which North Macedonia was a constituent republic.

The new political shift raises concerns about new political instability in one of NATO's newest member states, which joined the Alliance in 2020. North Macedonia is also the second-smallest economy within NATO, with a GDP of around \$13.5 billion and a population of around 2 million.

The country's new president, law professor Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova (70), convincingly defeated the current president, social democrat Stevo Pendarovski, with almost 65% of the vote.

At the same time, her VMRO, with around 43% of the vote, will relatively easily form a majority in parliament in the coming days, which has a total of 120 seats.

## A long way to stable politics

Despite the convincing figures, North Macedonia cannot expect political life to stabilise any time soon, as the pendulum of political sentiment has once again swung to its extreme.

After seven years in power, the strongly pro-EU Social Democrats will become the opposition. During this time, after a long period of stalemate, they brought the country a little closer to membership of the Union and

made North Macedonia a member of NATO.

## The VMRO's close ties to Hungarian friends in Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's party indicate that North Macedonia would follow the Hungarian model of government

The right-wing VMRO will take its place convincingly and with great satisfaction given its humiliating departure from power in 2017, after which its then leader, Nikola Gruevski, secretly left the country due to serious **criminal charges** and sought refuge in Hungary, where he still resides today.

The VMRO's close ties to Hungarian friends in Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's party indicate that North Macedonia would follow the Hungarian model of government.

"Many citizens have been afraid of such a result because enormous power has ended up in the hands of a party known for abusing power", said the former prime minister, social democrat Dimitar Kovačevski.

## Eternal EU candidate

During the election campaign, the election winners pledged that the country would stay on the EU track, answering one of the population's most pressing demands for a rapid resolution of this issue.

Unfortunately, North Macedonia is considered the "eternal candidate" for EU membership because it was awarded candidate country status in 2006 but only **started** accession negotiations with the Union in 2022.

Difficulties with its neighbours have hindered accession, starting with Greece over the country's name, which Greece insisted be altered to North Macedonia, and have continued in recent years with Bulgaria.

## There is little prospect of serious progress towards EU membership if the authorities in Skopje do not respond to the demands of their Bulgarian neighbours

The dispute with Sofia is about the identity, language, and status of the Bulgarian community in North Macedonia. There is little prospect of serious progress towards EU membership if the authorities in Skopje do not respond to the demands of their Bulgarian neighbours to amend the constitution and include Bulgarians as a constituent nation.

The right-wing VMRO opposes the demands of its neighbours and owes much of its electoral success to populist rhetoric. It promised Macedonians the protection of national dignity and even a possible revision of the agreement with Greece on changing the country's name, which was concluded by the previous social democratic government in 2018.

## Pro-Russian sentiment of the new government

However, justified doubts followed the winners' assurances that they would accelerate the movement towards EU membership. The populist VMRO will have a duty to fulfil the expectations of voters regarding a tougher position on the demands of its neighbours, perceived as an unacceptable humiliation of identity agreed to by the previous social democratic government.

At the same time, there are high hopes that the government, led by VMRO President Hristijan Mickoski, will address systemic corruption, nepotism, manipulation of public procurement procedures, and the overall state of the economy. All of these issues have led to the emigration of up to 10% of the population over the last two decades.

The VMRO had a very poor record on all these issues when it was in power from 2006 to 2017. During this crucial period for the transition to

the rule of law and a market economy, North Macedonia was burdened by systemic corruption and economic backwardness while at the same time confronting its closest and economically more developed EU neighbours.

The future governing bloc does not question the current NATO membership and has announced full cooperation as an obligation under this membership.



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However, VMRO has long shown its affinity for Russia, and Moscow has long considered this party one of its political favourites in the Balkans.

The Kremlin described the large pro-European street protests that led to the overthrow of VMRO ten years ago as a "colour revolution" inspired and organised by the West.

Caution in implementing the new government's pro-EU and NATO policies also arises from the fact that Russian disinformation and propaganda channels heavily influence North Macedonia.

Some of the most important narratives from this network of influence have fertile ground with VMRO voters, such as messages about the "Slavic Orthodox Brotherhood" intended to deepen the inter-ethnic divide with the Albanians, who make up a quarter of the population of North Macedonia.

Western allies will thus be closely monitoring the future right-wing populist government to

see how dedicated it is to preserving NATO commitments and executing reforms that will bring the country closer to EU membership.