

Macedonia

Country:

Macedonia

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Partly Free

Political Rights:

4

Civil Liberties:

3

Aggregate Score:

57

Freedom Rating:

3.5

Overview:

The political and security situation in Macedonia declined markedly in 2015. In February, Zoran Zaev, head of the opposition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), alleged that the government of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski had sponsored an enormous wiretapping program carried out by the country's secret service. Under the program, more than 20,000 people may have had their private conversations illegally recorded. The leaked contents of some of the wiretaps, which Zaev released periodically, suggested among other things that members of the governing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) had engaged in significant vote-rigging schemes during the 2013 local and 2014 parliamentary elections. The scandal led to the resignations in May of the interior and transportation ministers, as well as the country's intelligence chief.

Major clashes took place in April and May between government security forces and what officials said were ethnic Albanian militants. In April, police said a border post near Kosovo had been overrun by an Albanian militia, while in May, 14 gunmen and 8 Macedonian security officers were killed when the officers raided part of an ethnic Albanian neighborhood in Kumanovo; the government characterized the operation's targets as ethnic Albanian terrorists. Critics of the government, including Zaev, accused the VMRO-DPMNE of orchestrating the incidents to distract attention from the wiretapping scandal.

A June political agreement brokered by the European Union (EU) called for early elections by April 2016 and the appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate the wiretapping scandal. However, tensions between the government and opposition remained high at year's end, and full implementation of the agreement was in doubt.

Trend Arrow:



Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 22 / 40 (-1) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 6 / 12 (-1)

Members of the unicameral, 123-seat Assembly are elected to four-year terms by proportional representation. The Assembly elects the prime minister, who holds most executive power. The president is elected to a five-year term through a direct popular vote. Most postindependence elections have met international standards.

Both presidential and early parliamentary elections took place in 2014. The bloc led by the VMRO-DPMNE won 61 parliamentary seats, followed by the SDSM with 34 seats. The ethnic Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI)—the VMRO-DPMNE's coalition partner—won 19 seats, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) won 7 seats, and two minor parties took one seat each. Gruevski retained his post as prime minister, and in the presidential election, incumbent Gjorge Ivanov of the VMRO-DPMNE was reelected. The SDSM rejected the election results, claiming that the ruling party had manipulated the vote. After months of opposition boycotts and growing political deadlock, in June 2015 the EU brokered an agreement calling for new elections by April 2016.

The 2014 elections were criticized by international observers for a number of shortcomings, most of them regarding the campaign period. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe noted that while the elections were “efficiently administered,” the separation between party and state in the campaign was not always sufficient or clear, and several instances of alleged voter intimidation were reported.

Some of the wiretapped conversations released by the opposition in 2015 appeared to indicate that senior VMRO-DPMNE figures had engaged in election fraud during both the 2013 local and 2014 parliamentary elections. The opposition also voiced concern about the snap elections to be held in 2016, claiming that the voter rolls were riddled with the names of nonexistent voters.

The parliament adopted a number of changes to the electoral code in November 2015 as part of the EU-backed political agreement, addressing key opposition concerns. However, the quality of implementation, particularly regarding an audit of the voter list, remained unclear at year's end.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 10 / 16

The constitution protects the right to establish and join political parties. The center-right VMRO-DPMNE has won every parliamentary election since 2006, ruling in coalition with a number of parties representing ethnic minorities. The left-leaning SDSM held power through much of the 1990s and early 2000s, and is currently the leading opposition party.

Ethnic Albanians make up about 25 percent of the population. One of the two main political parties representing Albanians has sat in each ruling coalition, and certain types of legislation must pass with a majority of legislators from both major ethnic groups in the Assembly. Macedonians living abroad can elect up to three Assembly members.

Politically fraught violence between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians continues to erupt periodically. However, following the May 2015 violence in Kumanovo—which some opposition figures attributed to a government plot to fray interethnic relations in order to distract from the

wiretapping scandal—thousands of ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians protested together against Gruevski's administration.

C. Functioning of Government: 6 / 12

Following the 2014 elections, the SDSM refused to recognize the legitimacy of the new government and commenced a parliamentary boycott. Even after the EU-brokered political agreement in June 2015, strained relations between the government and opposition hampered the regular operation of state institutions. It remained unclear at the end of the year whether the deal would be successful in resolving the crisis.

Corruption is a serious problem in Macedonia. While anticorruption legislation is in place, and measures to clarify party funding and prevent conflicts of interest have been strengthened, implementation is weak. Graft and misconduct are widespread in public procurement. The judiciary lacks experience handling high-level corruption cases, and greater interagency cooperation is needed to identify problem areas in anticorruption efforts, according to the European Commission (EC). The Public Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime and Corruption suffers from low administrative capacity. Macedonia was ranked 66 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 35 / 60 (-2)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 10 / 16 (-1)

The constitution provides for freedom of the press. However, Macedonian media are subject to political pressure and harassment, resulting in self-censorship. Media outlets are divided along ethnic lines. Wiretap recordings released by the opposition in 2015 appeared to reveal conversations between high-level government functionaries and the staff of several major television stations—including the public broadcaster and Sitel, a private, progovernment television station with national reach—indicating that the government was directly influencing editorial policies. The government in October introduced draft legislation that would prohibit the release and republication of content from the wiretaps, drawing sharp criticism from independent observers and the opposition. Internet access is unrestricted.

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion. A long-standing dispute between the breakaway Macedonian Orthodox Church and the canonically recognized Serbian Orthodox Church remains unresolved. Islamophobia is present in the rhetoric of politicians and in public discourse.

Although academic freedom is generally unrestricted, the education system is weak by European standards. Textbooks barely cover the postindependence period, primarily because ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians interpret the 2001 civil conflict differently. Increasingly, schools are becoming ethnically segregated.

Space for free private discussion contracted in the wake of the opposition's credible allegations of widespread government wiretapping and monitoring of private citizens, journalists, politicians, and religious leaders.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 8 / 12

Constitutional guarantees of freedoms of assembly and association are generally respected. Student and opposition protests that began in 2014 continued in 2015. Largely peaceful, student-led demonstrations against the VMRO-DPMNE held early in the year were replaced by violent clashes in May between opposition groups and the police, which, combined with the violence in Kumanovo, prompted the EU to step in and help broker the agreement reached in June. Despite the agreement, a sense among much of the Macedonian opposition that the Gruevski government was illegitimate fueled calls for extraparliamentary activism. A group on the progovernment side, the Citizens' Movement to Defend Macedonia, hosted its own events at which the opposition was typically accused of being backed by foreign interests seeking Gruevski's ouster.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) generally operate freely but are often polarized along political lines. A lack of resources for Macedonia's Government Unit for NGO Cooperation has hampered a strategy to promote cooperation between the government and civil society, according to the EC.

Workers may organize and bargain collectively, though trade unions lack stable financing and skilled managers, and journalists have reportedly been fired for their union activities. Macedonia's largest public-sector union, the Workers' Union of Education, Science, and Culture, reported that its members were pressured by government officials as well as progovernment media and unions while striking in January 2015.

F. Rule of Law: 7 / 16 (-1)

Improving judicial independence, impartiality, and efficiency remains a priority for Macedonia, which has been carrying out comprehensive reforms of the judiciary over the past decade. However, fundamental problems remain, including concerns over the weak independence of the Constitutional Court. The EC in its 2015 report noted recent "backsliding" on previous years' progress, which it attributed to "actual and potential political interference" in the judiciary's work. The ability of the special prosecutor investigating the wiretapping scandal to work freely in the coming year was seen as a crucial indicator of the justice system's effectiveness.

In April, police said several dozen masked gunmen wearing insignia of a disbanded ethnic Albanian paramilitary group had temporarily seized a border post near Kosovo, during which time they detained four Macedonian security officers. In May, 14 gunmen and 8 Macedonian security officers were killed when police raided a mostly Albanian neighborhood in Kumanovo, a town in the country's north; the government characterized the gunmen as ethnic Albanian terrorists. While the events prompted some unease over the potential for communal violence in Macedonia, many experts downplayed such concerns, noting the multiethnic nature of the antigovernment protest movement. Critics of the government claimed that the ruling party had orchestrated the incidents to fan ethnic tensions and distract from the wiretapping scandal.

In 2015, Macedonia emerged as a major transit country for hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing violence in the Middle East and elsewhere as they sought to reach more receptive European countries to the north. Rights groups and others condemned Macedonian police for numerous instances of violence against the refugees.

Roma, ethnic Albanians, and other vulnerable groups face discrimination. Minority groups have criticized the ongoing Skopje 2014 urban development plan, arguing that its themes ignore their heritage and present a monoethnic image of the country.

A 2010 antidiscrimination law does not prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, and anti-LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) sentiment is widespread.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 10 / 16

Travel and movement are generally unrestricted. Membership in a party within the ruling coalition is often an informal precondition for employment in the public sector. While the government has streamlined procedures to launch a business, licensing fees can be prohibitively expensive. Unemployment has been estimated at about 27 percent, but the actual figure may be smaller given Macedonia's sizeable shadow economy.

In 2014, the VMRO-DPMNE proposed a constitutional amendment that would narrow the definition of marriage, making it applicable only to a relationship between a man and a woman. The parliament voted to approve the amendment in January 2015, and took further steps to complicate the possibility of future civil-union legislation being enacted.

While women in Macedonia enjoy the same legal rights as men, societal attitudes limit their participation in nontraditional roles, and women rarely participate in local politics. In Albanian Muslim areas, many women are subject to proxy voting by male relatives. Forty women were elected to the 123-seat legislature in 2014. Despite the ongoing implementation of a strategy against domestic violence, it remains a serious problem, as does the trafficking of women for forced labor and sex work.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

Source URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/macedonia>