

# [***North Macedonia to elect president after campaign focused on hot-button issue of EU membership***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BVX-2821-DYMD-634C-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

SKOPJE, North Macedonia — Voters go to the polls in [*North Macedonia*](https://apnews.com/hub/north-macedonia/) this week for the first round of the presidential election — [*the seventh such vote*](https://apnews.com/article/north-macedonia-early-elections-spring-eu-b147edad49399ef5bc463404309f2b7b) since the small landlocked Balkan country gained independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991.

Seven candidates are vying for the largely ceremonial position in Wednesday's vote. With more than 50% of the country’s 1.8 million registered voters needed for an outright win, the contest is almost certain to head to a second round, which will be held on May 8 along with parliamentary elections. Turnout must be at least 40% in the second round for the result to be valid.

The [*brief campaigning period*](https://apnews.com/article/north-macedonia-president-election-1c5fd32ef5e0daf6960bc1401aa00fe3) has focused on North Macedonia’s progress toward joining the European Union, the rule of law, fighting corruption, combating poverty and tackling the country’s sluggish economy.

The two front-runners, according to opinion polls, are incumbent President [*Stevo Pendarovski*](https://apnews.com/video/north-macedonia-skopje-government-appointments-and-nominations-stevo-pendarovski-gordana-siljanovska-davkova-4a9d91b278f04623bfb7ed01df5566d3), 61, who is seeking a second five-year term with [*support from the governing social democrats*](https://apnews.com/article/north-macedonia-government-resigns-elections-kovachevski-caretaker-93af67187044d22245049a05a280888d), and Gordana Siljanovska Davkova, 70, who is supported by the center-right main opposition VMRO-DPMNE coalition. It will be the second time Siljanovska Davkova is seeking the presidency, after losing it to Pendarovski in 2019.

The two have differed in their approach to North Macedonia’s hot-button issue of EU membership. The country has been a candidate to join the European bloc since 2005, but was blocked for years by neighboring Greece in a dispute over the country’s name.

That was [*solved in 2018, but Bulgaria has since been blocking*](https://apnews.com/article/f80542e5f11744fa976e1d8476d64f4d) North Macedonia’s EU bid in a dispute over language and cultural heritage. Sofia has said it will only lift its veto to EU membership if Skopje recognizes a Bulgarian minority [*in the country’s constitution*](https://apnews.com/article/germany-north-macedonia-constitutional-change-eu-membership-0dd7f4929e67c595683284821916c2b4).

EU membership negotiations with North Macedonia — and fellow-candidate Albania — began in 2022 and the process is expected to take years.

Pendarovski has called for the constitution to be changed to include the Bulgarian minority, while Siljanovska Davkova insists negotiations with the EU must be held under a new framework, and has remained publicly non-committal on the issue of the constitutional change.

Pendarovski said that if given a second term, he would “dedicate myself to building a ***politics*** of new realism on our way to the EU.”

Siljanovska Davkova agrees her country belongs in the EU, but insists on deep reforms. “Apart from reforms of the system and the mind, we also need vision, leadership and active commitment with expertise in the process itself,” she said in presenting her program.

Corruption is the other major issue on voters’ minds.

“There is an epidemic of corruption in this country that has affected every sector, every organization, and only by exposing the corrupt actors can we begin to help the country address these issues,” U.S. Ambassador to Skopje Angela Aggeler said last December, when she announced the expansion of a U.S. list with individuals suspected of corruption in North Macedonia.

One of the presidential candidates — Stevcho Jakimovski, the mayor of Karpos, a municipality in the capital — is included on the list of people designated by the U.S. State Department as being involved in corruption and therefore ineligible for entry into the United States.

Jakimovski has not been charged with any crime in North Macedonia, and the state electoral commission has said the State Department designation does not affect his eligibility to run for office.

Both Pendarovski and Siljanovska have emphasized the fight against corruption in their pre-election campaign.

“The judiciary is far from independent, judicial reforms are partisan,” Siljanovksa said. “Power is abused for corruption, stealing and personal enrichment, and there is no accountability, investigation and punishment except for some of the lowest echelons. Public procurement is a cancer.”

Pendarovski said fighting crime was the highest priority.

“I believe that the power of organized crime was underestimated, and I regret it because there has not been enough courage and perseverance in the fight with organized crime and corruption,” he said.

Although the president has no power to influence executive decisions, he or she can suggest judges for the country's constitutional and supreme court. Parliament, however, has the final say on the judges' election.

Other presidential candidates include law professor Biljana Vankovska, who’s running for the leftist party Levica, and Mayor Maksim Dimitrievski of the northern town of Kumanovo.

Two members of the country’s ethnic Albanian minority are also running: current Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani from the Democratic Union of Albanians, which is part of the governing coalition, and Arben Taravari from an opposition ethnic Albanian party.

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