

How Green Independents Broke Through in North Macedonia

Article by Hristijan Stanoevikj

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They are Green, independent, nominated by civic initiatives, and without party support. In October 2021, a record number vied for council and mayoral seats in North Macedonia. After 30 years of pluralism, major parties are seeing their voters turn to the newest players on the political stage: independent candidates. These are activists for whom local problems such as air pollution, urban chaos, and industrial pollution are a source of motivation to get involved in politics.

Together, the 56,085 votes (65,000 votes when Skopje is included) won by all independent lists for council seats represent the fourth political force in the country. That puts them right behind three noteworthy players: the right-wing coalition led by VMRO-DPMNE that won the local elections, then the left-wing coalition of SDSM that rules at the central level, and DUI which is the largest party of the Albanian ethnic minority.

The independent lists were separate from the only registered Green Party DOM (Democratic Renewal of Macedonia) which decided to run in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats for these local elections.

North Macedonia's transition has been marked by high levels of corruption, slow-paced reforms, low public administration scores, and accumulated pollution problems that endanger public health. Public dissatisfaction with the situation and the two main political forces of the last three decades set the stage for activists from the green movement to take power in local governments. These independent forces could bring about change in a country that is awaiting EU membership and is still in transition 31 years after seceding from Yugoslavia in 1991.

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The rise of independents

In almost half of the 80 municipalities and the Skopje City Council, at least one independent candidate won a council seat. In large urban areas and urban municipalities like Skopje, Centar, Karpos, Bitola, Tetovo, Kavadarci, Kicevo, Ohrid, but also in smaller rural municipalities there are as many as two to three independent councillors. Most of them gained the trust of the citizens on the basis of a green agenda dealing with urban and other problems of local communities.

In Skopje, the only independent councillors list that collected the required number of signatures was the Green Humane City. Their candidates, civil activist and “AirCare” creator Gorjan Jovanovski and activist and former councillor Dragana Velkovska, won two council seats and 4.02 per cent of votes. Green Humane City gained prominence during the mayoral candidacy of Ana Petrovska in Skopje. The renowned environmentalist won 4.33 per cent of the vote but failed to enter the second round.

According to Gorjan Jovanovski, citizen dissatisfaction, mistrust, and their great disappointment at the existing political options explains the record number of independent candidates and their success at the polls. “We are stuck in a cycle where we get disappointed with one party, we vote for another, and when we are disappointed with that one, we return to the first. We fail to see that we persistently choose the lesser evil instead of refusing evil at all. In these elections, many citizens decided either independently, or inspired by independents of Green Humane City, to unite and become a real third option,” said Jovanovski.

Green Humane City showed how to work transparently through a platform for direct democracy MojGrad (“My City”). Under the section “Sovet” (Council) it regularly publishes materials that councillors receive for each session. “Critically, each of our voters can see how Green Humane City votes for each point, and why they vote that way. On the same portal, we have published our amendments to the Budget of the City of Skopje on the topic of environment and ecology, as well as all our proposals for members of the Green Council of the City of Skopje with their biographies,” Jovanovski explained.

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Skopje activists against pollution and urban chaos

The independent list “Chance for Center” led by Jana Belceva won 11.68 per cent of the votes in the municipality of Centar in Skopje. In her previous term, Belceva was on the Social Democrats’ list as an activist and led the council in the central Skopje municipality. After the majority dismissed her efforts however, she resigned and went to the polls with an independent list, winning three council seats.

In the Skopje urban municipality of Karposh, civic activists from environmental organisations also united behind the “Independent for Karposh” list and won 7.90 per cent of the vote and two councillors.

The holder of the list was Nevena Georgievska from “O2 Initiative”, an organisation that organised air pollution protests. The second elected councillor is Tatjana Stojanovska, a civil activist from “I love Vodno”, an initiative for protection of Mount Vodno in Skopje which has been the site of intense construction and the destruction of greenery – Skopje’s lungs. Stojanovska also took part in large-scale protests against the construction of gas pipeline

along the ridge of the mountain. The list also included independent activists from the “We are Karposh” initiative, who fought against urban usurpation in the municipality of Karposh.

In Tatjana Stojanovska’s opinion, rapid urbanisation, shrinking greenery, and unfulfilled infrastructure needs were the main motivators to act through local government mechanisms. “I feel like a citizen who has the opportunity to be a representative in the local government and these are the positions from which we act. We pledge our own integrity as members of the Council, we do not have a party that gives us the answers and solutions, we have sought them ourselves before, through civil associations” said Stojanovska.

Now the councillors from “Independent for Karposh” have the opportunity to present the position of the ordinary citizen, who should be heard in the Council. “Citizens’ attention is due to previous efforts and struggles, it was not obtained only on the basis of promises, and the burden is even greater when citizens expect their vote in the council to be accepted, and our presence to give results, not just commitments” said Stojanovska.

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Green movements throughout North Macedonia

Eco-activists for Shar Planina National Park and a cleaner Tetovo in the north-west of the country have united behind the list “Better for Tetovo” (Më mirë për Tetovën). With Hamdi Sulemani as the list bearer, they won 7.41 per cent of the votes and two council seats.

For a long time, Tetovo residents have been facing a lack of water and green areas, polluted air, uncontrolled and poor construction as well as poor waste management. Additionally, the municipality as an institution faces a shortage of professionals ready to work in the interest of the citizens.

In the absence of alternatives, Sulemani believes it was expected for activists to engage and enter institutions in an attempt to force change from within. “Our approach remains the same as in the campaign: full commitment to a better Tetovo. Even though we have only two representatives in the council, we continue to function as a large group where we meet at least once a week to debate and prepare for the council sessions,” emphasises Sulemani. The councillors of “Better for Tetovo” are working on raising the transparency of the sessions of the Council, and are advocating for changing the urban planning, which do not envisage greenery in the city.

In Bitola, one of the largest municipalities in Pelagonia, the independent councillor list of Poinaku (“Differently”) has three councillors after winning 9.48 per cent of votes.

In the Southwest, dissatisfied former social democrats emerged as independent candidates

for councils through the “Ohrid Before All” list, led by Dimitar Veljanoski, winning 6.67 per cent of the votes and one councillor.

Several municipalities in the Southeast were also represented by independent councillor lists, mostly composed of civil activists fighting the opening of new gold mines in the resource-rich part of the country.

In three municipalities (urban center Strumica and the rural municipalities of Bosilevo and Novo Selo) they went by the name Stiga e (“It’s enough”) and won one councillor each.

The list of Gjorgji Tanushev from Strumica won 4.06 per cent, Stojanco Velkov from Bosilovo 6.44 per cent, and Kostadin Ristomanov from Novo Selo 9.72 per cent after which he was elected president of the council. In Bogdanci, the list led by activist Boris Vanchev won 11.75 per cent and one council seat, also based on the anti-mining platform.

Does the green movement have the potential to grow?

The further success and growth of the green movement depend on fulfilling promises to voters and delivering results.

“Although their success is great, a municipality is rarely composed of independent councillors who are capable of bringing about change. Every beginning is difficult, and this is the beginning of a non-partisan green movement within the institutions of our country. The green movement outside the institutions grew because their idea of change resonated with citizens. But if this remains only an idea, people’s zeal for change will be lost,” Stojanovska thinks. “It’s like we are entering a forbidden place, reserved only for party and not civic politicians,” she added.

Faced with resistance from the political representatives in the councils and problems in communication with municipal employees, the candidates believe their breakthrough is just the beginning of greater representation of green and independent candidates.

“Undoubtedly! Our movement was welcomed by the citizens even as traditional political parties targeted us. We already believe that a sound foundation has been laid upon which it is very important to build a sustainable vision. Commitment to a better life does not make sense without a commitment to protecting the environment,” Hamdi Sulemani asserts.

“Neither Skopje, nor North Macedonia, nor the planet have much time left if we do not start listening to, cooperating with, and trusting the green movements.”

The commitments and promises made during the election campaign must be fulfilled during the mandate. The independent councillors believe that there is always room for improvement. The public will recognise their struggle with the opposition inside the system, but the green agenda must be a priority.

For now, there are no clear indications whether the independent candidates will unite in a Green Party or join an already registered party with similar political views. The next parliamentary election will be a test for whether political leadership can seize the current momentum at the national level.

Citizens certainly need a sincere and committed green option that will fight pollution, illegal urbanisation, as well as the climate and energy crisis. This is evident by the occasional and rather unexpected successes of the green movements in Western Balkans, the rise of the greens in [Bulgaria](#), the Mozemo (“We Can”) in [Croatia](#), and the huge protests in [Serbia](#) by civil and green activists.

“Not only for it’s potential, but green local governments *must* grow. Neither Skopje, nor North Macedonia, nor the planet have much time left if we do not start listening to, cooperating with, and trusting the green movements. Climate emergency, the energy crisis, environmental degradation, auto-centrism of cities, unplanned (and illegal) urbanisation, are just some of the topics green movements address because we’re not only concerned about greenery but wider social problems too. It is time for change; it is time for Skopje to be a green and humane city,” urges Jovanovski.



Hristijan Stanoevikj is a journalist with 10 years of experience in Macedonian media. He dedicates his journalistic engagement to social and environmental issues. Stanoevikj is also active in the civil society sector, supporting associations and organizations that advocate for energy democracy, just transition and the prevention of the climate crisis. He has participated in several international conferences, seminars and trainings on reporting on environmental issues, energy and polluting industries.

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