



## **Tetovo extraordinary municipal election of 20 August 2022: a local earthquake with national shockwaves**

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## Introduction

Voters in the municipality of Tetovo headed to the polls on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> of August to vote in an extraordinary election for the members of the municipal council for the remainder of its term of office (2024).

With North Macedonia facing multiple crises and early parliamentary elections potentially around the corner, the Tetovo election was seen as a test of voters' negative attitudes towards a discredited central government often suggested by recent polls.

### **Context: a highly polarised national scene mirrored at local level**

Regular local elections were held in North Macedonia on 17 and 31 October 2021. In Tetovo, the leader of Movement Besa, Bilal Kasami, comfortably won the mayoral race in the second round (54,84%) against outgoing office holder Teuta Arifi (Democratic Union for Integration), amidst numerous corruption scandals and popular outrage regarding the total lack of accountability following the Tetovo tragedy of September 2021, when 14 citizens lost their lives in the flames of a modular Covid clinic.

Despite losing the mayoral race, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) won the municipal council election with 26,37% and 10 councillors, with Besa ranking second at 21,82% and 8 councillors. Kasami forged on 18 November 2021 a coalition with opposition forces VMRO-DPMNE (4), the Alliance for the Albanians (3) and the Citizens Initiative "Better for Tetovo" (2), ensuring a narrow majority (17) in the 31-member council.

In parallel, dramatic developments were taking place at central level, with mounting tensions between DUI and Besa, the two main Albanian coalition partners of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM):

- While OSCE-ODIHR and local observers had noted widespread electoral engineering, intimidation and vote buying from the ruling parties, including DUI, the latter also showed clear tendencies towards manipulating judiciary and administrative authorities to claim municipalities lost in regular voting, notably the municipality of Želino held by Besa since the 2017 local election.
- One of the main outcomes of the 2021 local election was the resignation of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, following the severe loss of his party against VMRO-DPMNE which won the vast majority of municipalities predominantly inhabited by Macedonians. The end of the Zaev era came also as a result of the blockade of EU integration processes due to a persisting Bulgarian veto to opening accession talks with North Macedonia and Zaev's disastrous track record on the internal stage – lack of implementation of reforms, galloping corruption and criminality and daily scandals such as the Tetovo hospital tragedy and the Besa Trans bus tragedy in Bulgaria for which no one has been held accountable. Overall, it had become clear that the winds had turned from SDSM to VMRO-DPMNE in the Macedonian camp, with the latter set to form the next government.

In this context, Besa, which had run on a joint ticket with SDSM at the 2020 general election, shifted allegiance and supported the opposition in filing a no-confidence motion supported by 61 out of 120 MPs and put for voting on 11 November 2021. However, one of the most vocal opposition MPs and among the first signatories of the motion, Kastriot Rexhepi (Besa), went missing just ahead of the Parliament vote and released a video later in the day to justify his withdrawal from the motion. By many, this was seen as a school case of MP's blackmailing and buy off by the SDSM-DUI ruling coalition and state security structures.

Following the aborted no-confidence motion, Besa officially left the government on 9 December and was replaced by the Alternative, a party that originates from a scission within Besa and was until then in a pre-electoral cartel with the Alliance for the Albanians, holding 4 out of the 12 seats of the joint parliamentary group. On 16 January 2022, Parliament voted for a reshuffling of the government, now led by former deputy minister of finance Dimitar Kovackevski (SDSM) and composed of SDSM, DUI, the Alternative and the Albanian Democratic Party (ADP), counting together 64 MPs.



## Tetovo municipal council blockade and extraordinary election: what was at stake?

Upon Kasami's investiture as mayor, what happened in Tetovo is essentially a transfer of central level tensions into the life of the municipality.

Kasami started his term with strong accusations towards outgoing DUI mayor, Teuta Arifi, blaming her of major mismanagement leading to a public debt worth € 24 million – the annual budget of Tetovo is around € 27 million – and subsequent freezing of municipal bank accounts. In addition, Kasami filed several cases with the public prosecution against Arifi for abuse of office related to fictitious employment contracts, expropriations and public infrastructure works. No charges have been filed against Arifi as of yet, while it has been reported the U.S., the EU and Turkey have rejected her name as North Macedonia's proposed ambassador to those places.

DUI responded with counter accusations of abuses with employment contracts and public tenders, while using its tenure of the Ministry of Education and Science to suspend Kasami's competences in appointments, promotion and transfers of public servants.

These tensions, coupled with transfers of councillors between DUI and Besa as well as the promotion of a Besa councillor to the executive and his non-replacement in the council, weakened Kasami's already fragile majority. As a result, the municipal council failed to pass the 2021 budget discharge by March 31<sup>st</sup>, as provided for in the Law on Local Self-Government.

Following a weeks-long ping-pong game between the central level and the municipality of Tetovo, the government dissolved the Tetovo council on June 14<sup>th</sup>. One week later, Parliament speaker Talat Xhaferi endorsed the government decision and proclaimed extraordinary elections for the municipal council of Tetovo on August 20<sup>th</sup>.

It is worth noting that the municipalities of Mavrovo-Rostuša and Centar Župa were also heading back to the polls as the legal requirement for a turnout of at least one third of the total number of registered voters was not met in these municipalities in the 2021 local election.

The stakes of the Tetovo election were multiple and far reaching.

Moreover, Tetovo hosts a significant number of Macedonian citizens accounting for around one third of the municipal population, and is therefore an important battleground for Macedonian parties as well.

With early parliamentary elections potentially looming around the corner, the August 20<sup>th</sup> Tetovo election was therefore seen a critical test for all political forces in the country as they prepare for the next national campaign:

- For Kasami's Besa, this election was the opportunity to secure a strong municipal majority for the remainder of the mayoral term but more importantly, to establish itself as a leading Albanian opposition force, able to unroot DUI, which has been ruling for two decades almost without interruption.
- DUI on its hand was aiming to prevent Kasami from being able to efficiently run the municipality and further grow his party from his stronghold. DUI was also testing its newly elected local leadership, breaking away from a corrupt old guard gravitating around Teuta Arifi and other DUI founders.
- The main outsider of this election was without doubt the Alliance for the Albanians (AfA), the largest Albanian opposition party which recently elected its new leadership, both at local and central levels, including a new

**“TETOVO IS THE THIRD LARGEST MUNICIPALITY OF THE COUNTRY WITH ALMOST 85,000 INHABITANTS. GIVEN ITS STATUS AS THE “CAPITAL OF ALBANIANS” IN NORTH MACEDONIA, TETOVO IS SAID TO SET TRENDS IN ALBANIAN POLITICAL LIFE IN THE COUNTRY.”**

Secretary General from Tetovo. This election was therefore a crucial test for the Alliance for the Albanians to confirm its new leadership and its standing as the leading opposition force in the Albanian camp.

- On the Macedonian side, Kovacevski’s SDSM was running mostly to limit damage in light of an increasingly hostile Macedonian public opinion. All recent national level polls have been calamitous for SDSM following the endorsement in Parliament of the French proposal to lift Bulgarian veto on EU accession talks, perceived as a threat to Macedonian national identity, and a disastrous track record in internal politics, at all levels.
- For VMRO-DPMNE, the Tetovo election was the opportunity to confirm its supposed significant lead vis-à-vis SDSM, its stature as the next senior ruling party and its leader as the next Prime Minister. Indirectly, VMRO is seeking to break away from its track record of collaboration with DUI under the Gruevski era and has been building bridges with Albanian opposition to send the message to its electorate that a coalition government without corrupt DUI is possible.
- Smaller Albanian and Macedonian parties and independent initiatives such as the DAP, the Alternative, the Left and the Citizens Initiative “Better for Tetovo” were fighting to make an entry or stay in the municipal council and remain somehow relevant.



### The campaign among Albanian parties: main characteristics and issues addressed

The campaign took place from July 29<sup>th</sup> until August 18<sup>th</sup>. Due to the symbolic and electoral importance of Tetovo and the likelihood of early parliamentary elections, the campaign for the local council took a different character going beyond the local stakes. This was manifested firstly in rhetoric, with party leaders saying that this wasn’t just a local election but one that would determine the trajectory of their parties in the future. Furthermore, all parties concentrated their central resources into the campaign: large meetings, the frequent presence of the party leaders as well as senior government officials such as ministers, directors, etc., made Tetovo a battleground of power-demonstration.

It is important to note that the timing of the campaign wasn’t favourable for any of the parties due to the holiday seasons and relatively high temperatures. This was confirmed by a low turnout rate of 35.31%, almost 10% lower than the previous local elections. Nevertheless, almost all parties ran door to door campaigns and held relatively large meetings to demonstrated their mobilisation capacities.



However, given the summer recess, candidates had plenty of space to explain their messages in the media. In TV21 there were interviews with most of the lists, with three representatives each. Besides list interviews, TV21 organised a final debate with all parties on the last day of the campaign. TV Koha organised a number of debates as well.

The campaign was relatively calm and without incidents. At the end of the campaign, list leaders sat down for a coffee after the final TV debate.

### Democratic Union for Integration

Slogan: “Together for Tetovo”

List leader: Faton Ahmeti

DUI’s campaign was characterised by three main elements:

1. Following the recent reorganising of their Tetovo branch, DUI slightly distanced itself from the Arifi administration, failing to mention Teuta Arifi and admitting some mistakes, while even saying they learnt the lessons from past mistakes;
2. DUI asked Tetovars to give them a majority in the council, in order to act as a check and balance to the Mayor, to increase transparency and accountability;
3. DUI's main selling point was that due to its position in central government, it would be able to attract more investments to Tetovo. To strengthen this argument, the government organised during the campaign the inauguration of an important investment in Tetovo, a Next.e.GO Mobile electric car production plant linked to "Ecolog International", a multinational company founded by Tetovar businessman Nazif Destani.



DUI targeted the young voters by organising a concert as a closing meeting whereby a relatively large crowd of young people was evident.

Besides the deliberate target on youth and the distancing from Teuta Arifi and former local branch chair Florin Besimi who were not much present during the campaign, there was a tendency to bring back older figures who have felt marginalised following reforms of the Tetovo branch.

A picture of Faton Ahmeti with Hazbi Lika, another former DUI mayor with a dubious track-record, as well as a relatively large meeting with "DUI veterans" showed a clear tendency to reconcile the two wings.

### *Movement Besa*

Slogan: "Majority for Tetovo"

List leader: Besar Durmishi

Besa ran a catch all campaign, under the overarching theme "A majority for Tetovo" needed to push their project forward without blockades. Some of Kasami's initiatives such as the asphaltting the "Straso Pinxur" road and increased transparency in municipal spending, were promoted as progress that shouldn't be stopped but further empowered.

While Besa was attacking DUI's fictitious jobs practice, Kasami was also accused of playing the same game with the job contracts to reward party activists.

A distinctive element of Besa's campaign was the strong presence of, something that wasn't seen previously or at least not so clearly with other parties. Besa women campaigned separately and in large groups in the streets of Tetovo.

### *Alliance for the Albanians*

Slogan: "Give voice to the youth"

List leader: Abdullah Osmani

The Alliance for the Albanians targeted the youth of Tetovo, with a list composed only of young people, half of them female.

AfA was in an unfavourable outsider situation, competing against a well-consolidated and well-resourced party such as DUI and Besa, already holding the mayoral office and campaigning for a municipal majority.

Moreover, AfA couldn't position itself properly in these elections as it was in coalition with Besa in the outgoing council and couldn't attack Kasami's track-record. AfA chose to campaign against DUI and Arifi's legacy but quickly got lost in the fierce competition between Besa and DUI.

The main themes that AfA addressed were the following: putting an end to DUI and Besa's fictitious jobs practices, stopping youth migration blamed on DUI's mismanagement, and building better infrastructure (roads, parking, schools, etc.).

### **Albanian Democratic Party**

Slogan: "For the centre/capital of Albanians"

List leader: Visar Palloshi

ADP's overarching campaign message a localist one, claiming to return the dignity of the city of Tetovo and of Tetovars.

ADP ran a grassroots campaign and was probably one of the most active in the streets of the city, distributing flyers and talking to people. ADP also held two relatively large meetings and their representatives were relatively well articulated in debates, promising concrete solutions to problems such as parking places, stray dogs, etc.

### **The Alternative**

Slogan: "Tetovo has got an Alternative"

List leader: Faton Selami

The most evident element in the Alternative's campaign was a show of power, with seemingly large meetings bringing together party officials from around the country, including ministers, MPs and directors.

Content-wise their campaign was focused almost only on infrastructure related projects: cultural spaces, parcs, schools, parking, a municipal stadium, and better roads.

### **Citizens' Initiative "Better for Tetovo"**

Slogan: "Better for Tetovo"

List leader: Elmedina Abdullai

"Better for Tetovo" ran a campaign focused on the following points:

1. Civil society vs. political parties: the list distanced themselves from political parties claiming that they are not held ransom by private funders and that their decision-making is independent and non-clientelist;
2. Professionalism: the list promoted the professional achievements of its candidates, something that supposedly differentiates them from political parties' activists;
3. Past experience: outgoing council members donated their council allowances to charity and ensured more transparency by requesting that council meeting sessions are transmitted online.

However, the enthusiasm that surrounded "Better for Tetovo" in the 2021 election quickly diminished, partly because they were lost in DUI-Besa battle but also because their selling points on transparency and progress were appropriated by Kasami who has proven constructive and fought the same battles.

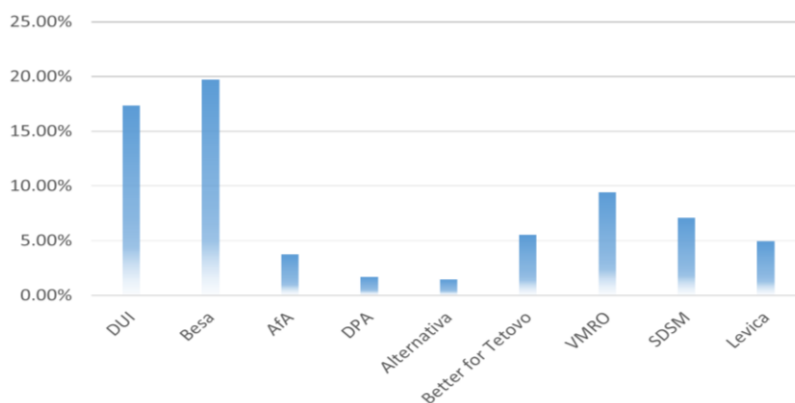


### **Results: unexpected wins and losses**

One of the few if not the only opinion poll released ahead of the extraordinary local election in Tetovo, was from the Center for Research and Political Communication. According to this poll, voting intentions were as follows: Besa 19.7% , DUI 17.35%, VMRO-DPMNE 9.4%, SDSM 7.1%, Citizens Initiative "Better for Tetovo" 5.55%, the Left 4.95%, Alliance for the Albanians 3.75%, ADP 1.45% and Alternative 1.45%.



### Which party list will you vote for in the next council election on 20 August?

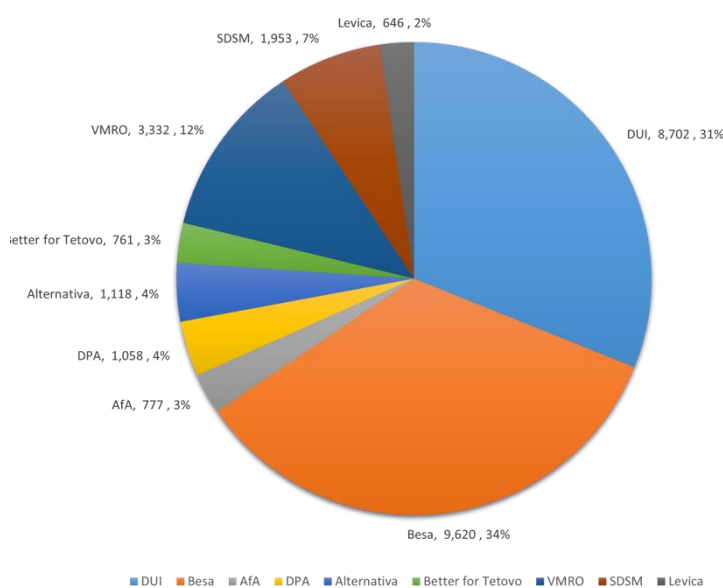


Source: CRPC, August 2022

As often the case with polls, the final results took however a relatively different turn.

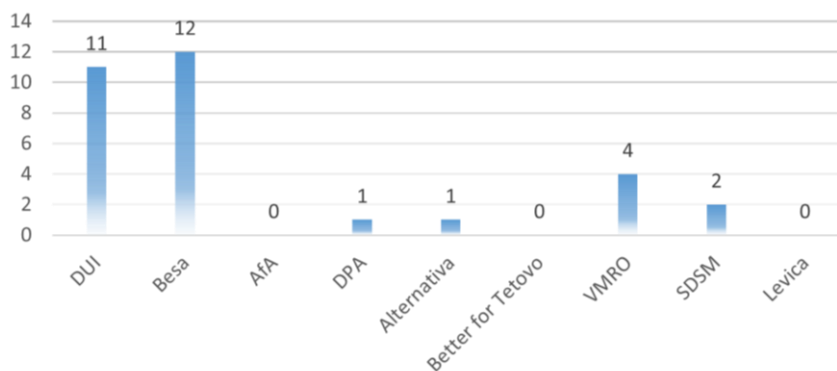
Indeed, Movement Besa won the election with 9,620 votes but corresponding to 34% of the vote. Besa is followed by DUI with 8,720 votes or 31%. However, the shock of this election was Afa which got only 777 votes or 3%. VMRO-DPMNE (12%) has a comfortable lead over SDSM (7%), comparable to the 2021 results.

### Final results of the 20 August elections

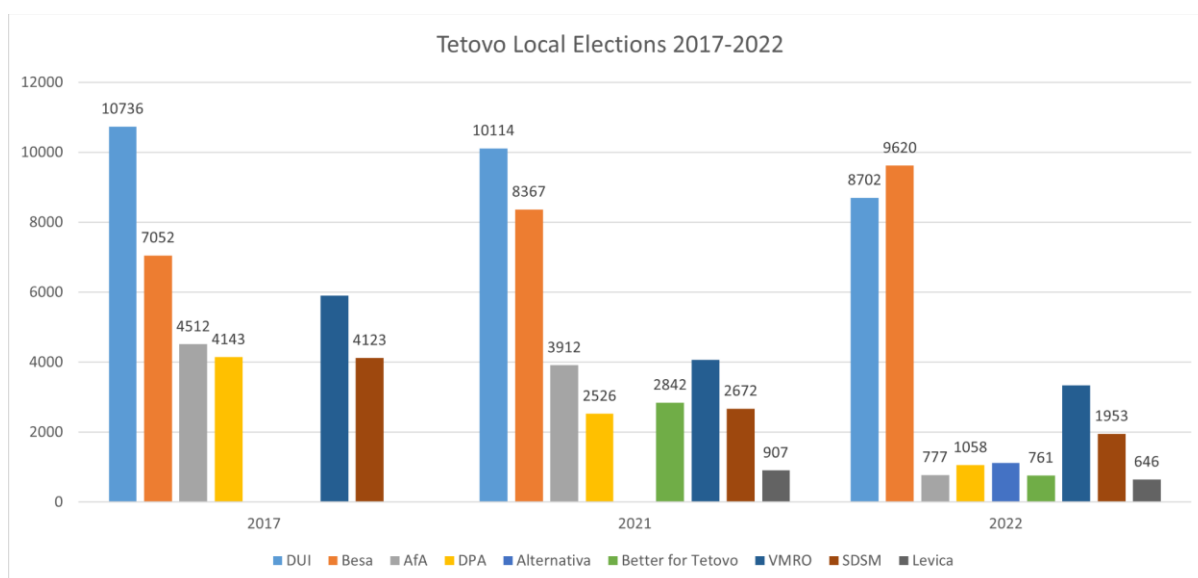


Converted into seats, Movement Besa leads with 12 council members, next is DUI with 11, VMRO-DPMNE 4, SDSM 2, Alternative 1, and ADP 1. The Alliance for the Albanians and “Better for Tetovo” leave the municipal council. This configuration puts Bilal Kasami on a good course to create a stable majority with VMRO-DPMNE, not needing support of government parties.

## FINAL RESULTS BY COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVES



The turnout was 35.31%, i.e. 29,690 votes in total. This was 23% or 8,860 votes less compared to the 2021 local elections. As a result, all lists experienced decreases in the number of votes, except Movement Besa which saw a 15% compared to 2021. The highest decrease was experienced by AfA (80%, or 3,135 votes) which was a tormenting result from the biggest opposition Albanian political party. The tables below provide the results of political parties over 2017-2022 and changes in votes since the 2021 election.



Party/year	2017	2021	2022	2021-2022 change	Change in votes
DUI	10,736	10,114	8,702	-14%	(1,412)
Besa	7,052	8,367	9,620	15%	1,253
AfA	4,512	3,912	777	-80%	(3,135)
ADP	4,143	2,526	1,058	-58%	(1,468)
The Alternative	-	-	1,118	?	?
Better for Tetovo	-	2,842	761	-73%	(2,081)
VMRO	5,903	4,062	3,332	-18%	(730)
SDSM	4,123	2,672	1,953	-27%	(719)
Levica	-	907	646	-29%	(261)





## Conclusion: main takeaways

The Tetovo election of August 20<sup>th</sup> indeed confirmed voters' negative attitudes towards the central government but it was much more than that. This election was an earthquake with serious national level implications.

DUI played and it lost. For the first time in its history, Ali Ahmeti's party, which happens to have its headquarters in Tetovo, is not the first party in the municipal council. It seems DUI has definitely lost the Pollog region, the biggest reservoir of Albanian votes in North Macedonia: out of the nine municipalities of the region, DUI currently holds only the two rural municipalities of Bogovinje and Tearce. The two urban centres, Tetovo and Gostivar are run by Besa and the Alliance for the Albanians respectively. If it is true that the Pollog region makes and unmakes the future of Albanian political parties, then it seems Albanians are ready to send DUI into opposition.

Besa is without doubt the biggest winner of this election. The party confirms Tetovo, the city of its leader, as its stronghold and profiles itself as a serious force to reckon with in the Albanian camp as parties are gearing up for early parliamentary elections.

The biggest shockwave of the Tetovo election was felt at the Alliance for the Albanians, without doubt the biggest loser. The party's collapse in this election, which for the first time won't be represented in the Tetovo municipal council, led within 24 hours to the resignation of its leader, Ziadin Sela. The party has announced it will embark on a new restructuring and leadership contest barely 5 months following Sela's election as chairman and 2 months after the constitution of its local branches.

Among losers is also Prime Minister Kovacevski's SDSM which loses 27% of its votes compared to last year, confirming the downward trend of a party that has been holding to central power always as a loser and only thanks to support from Albanian parties.

VMRO-DPMNE is the other winner of this election and the message from its leadership has been clear: double victory VMRO-Besa against the government, hinting to increased collaboration between the two parties towards the formation of the next government.



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