
Republic of Macedonia in Political Crisis

During 2015 one of the biggest corruption scandals, if not the biggest, in the short history of the Republic of Macedonia broke out and exposed how the right-wing populist party VMRO-DPMNE (Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity), which was in power since 2006 (2006-2016) managed to acquire huge amounts of wealth and become one of the wealthiest political parties in Europe. The wiretapping scandal showed that the VMRO-DPMNE used in many cases its position in government in order to accomplish an illegal phone-tapping program against more than 20,000 people, including government officials. However, this soon proved to be only just the tip of the iceberg. The wiretaps transcripts involving both co-ruling parties VMRO-DPMNE and DUI (Democratic Union for Integration) as well as many of their partners from all layers of society uncovered transferring of public money and property into private hands, collusion with some media outlets and purge of others, political prosecution, electoral fraud, buying votes and some plots reserved for crime fiction, such as the cover-up murder committed by the former prime minister's bodyguards. After these wiretaps revealed the murder committed by some members of the personal guard of the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, huge demonstrations took place in May and June 2015. Almost one year later, in April 2016, new demonstrations took place after the president, Gjorge Ivanov, decided to pardon the officials who were involved in criminal cases revealed by the wiretaps. This second wave of demonstrations was also a protest against the police brutality which in many cases was oversized. These anti-government protests which broke out — although the most crowded in the history of Macedonia— were not equal to the magnitude of criminal revelations and this because a significant part of the population remained indifferent to the political drama. One of the reasons for this public indifference was that the wiretaps came from the opposition party SDSM (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia) and not from an independent means of media. Despite the fact that the leadership of the SDSM exposed criminal activities organized and accomplished by VMRO-DPMNE and DUI, at the end of the day the accusations turned into a cross-party battle

between the two biggest parties of the Republic of Macedonia (VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM). As a result, many people decided not get involved in this inter-party struggle for power which in turn significantly degraded the impact of the wiretaps scandal as well as the mass protests. Another reason is that many citizens are involved within these corrupt networks that the wiretaps revealed. Since the economy of Macedonia is ruined and does not offer many chances for personal development it has become a fertile ground for the ruling parties (VMRO-DPMNE and DUI) in order to create new clientelism networks and effectively control the previously existing ones. In this way many citizens trade political power for minimum wage salaries, jobs in the public sector and administration, pensions, access to healthcare etc.

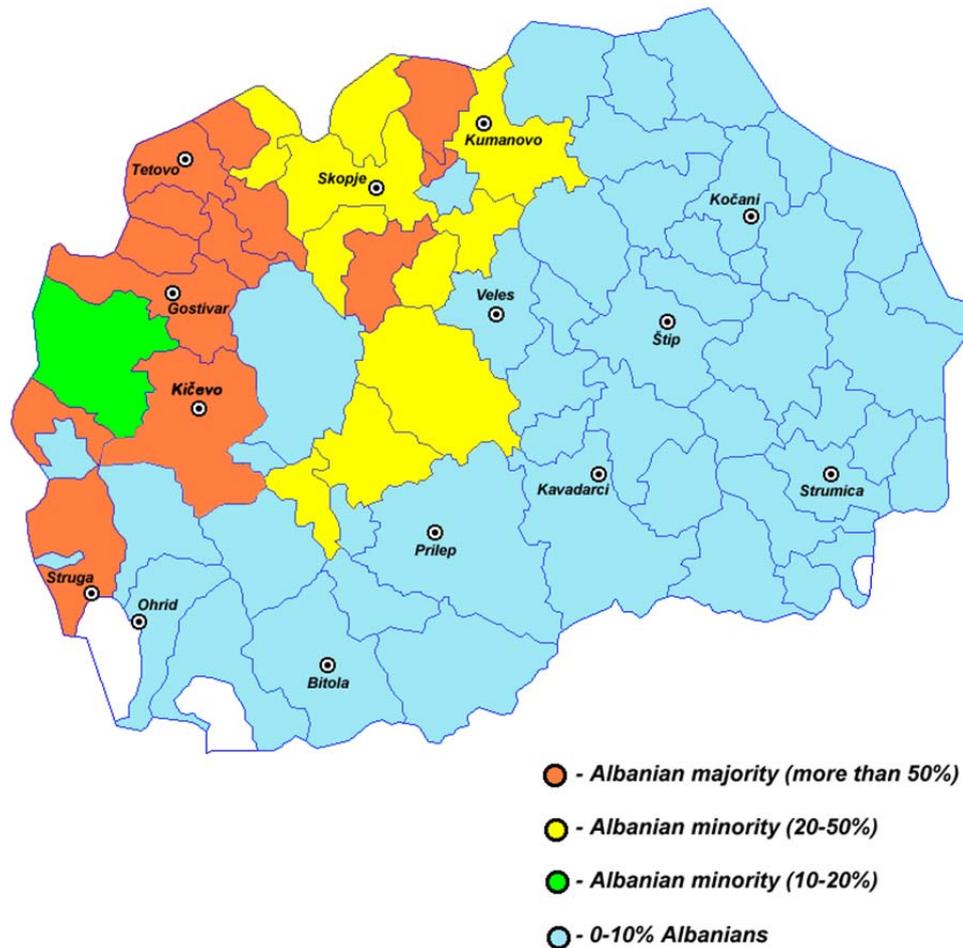
This state-capture situation was not invented exclusively by the VMRO-DPMNE. What VMRO-DPMNE did was to enhance and upgrade this situation which had its roots in the neoliberal policies of the 1990s. During this period the ruling party SDSM and the patronage of the IMF and the World Bank, were responsible for the selling off of many public factories and companies to private investors, concentrating much of the public wealth in the hands of a small economic elite which resulted in most of the country's current economic inequalities. Both the governments of VMRO-DPMNE (1998-2002) and SDSM (2002-2006) had allowed and continued these practices. These policies resulted today in the highest inequalities in Europe as well as in high percentages of extreme poverty: 9,1% of the population live today on less than two dollars per day and 22% of the Macedonians living below the poverty line while the unemployment percentage is higher than 23,1%. At the same time more than 550,000 citizens left the country in order to find a better future. Finally, another huge problem is that the exports of the country are roughly around 4 billion dollars while its imports are around 6,2 billion dollars.

But the problems of the Republic of Macedonia do not end here. After the parliamentary election on 11 December 2016 and the failure of both VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM to secure the necessary parliamentary majority (61-seats) the country has been without a functioning government. Actually the SDSM leader, Zoran Zaev, managed to create a livable coalition in order to form a new government but the President, Gjorge Ivanov, did not award him the governmental mandate until the 17th of May 2017, as we will discuss more extensively later.

The Republic of Macedonia is also facing other problems such as international recognition, ongoing unresolved neighborhood issues and internal ethnic tensions. More specific Macedonia is still in dispute with its south neighbor, Greece, since the later does not accept the official use of the name

Macedonia. This issue is very important and threatens not only the prestige of the country but also its economy since it has been proved extremely vulnerable towards economic embargos such as the one imposed by Greece in the past (1994-1995). Another unresolved issue remains the ongoing situation with Bulgaria. It is estimated that around 100,000 citizens of Macedonia have already acquired Bulgarian passports, which can provide them an access to the EU and also make them citizens of Bulgaria. However, the most important problem the country is dealing with is the tensions between the supporters of the two major parties (VMRO-DPMNE-SDSM) as well as between the ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians and the political tensions that these relations produce. In many cases severe episodes have occurred such as the violent clash in Kumanovo in May of 2015. In Kumanovo eight Macedonian policemen and ten militants were killed while 28 were arrested (identified as members of the National Liberation Army) during the episodes and it became clear that the government must handle this problem sensitively. Tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians are also clear on the cultural and social level. Last February several thousand people have protested in Skopje against a political agreement that would ensure the wider use of the Albanian language. The protests in Macedonia's capital began in the end of February when Zoran Zaev, after gaining the support of a number of Albanian citizens, he presented signatures from the three Albanian political parties proving that he has the necessary support in parliament in order to form a new government. In fact, this was the first time a Macedonian Party (SDSM) was able to attract a wide proportion of DUI's voters, which is the major Albanian political party in the country. The three Albanian political parties decided to support Zaev as he promised the enactment of a law aiming to the backing broader use of the Albanian language in the country. Since the Albanian language is now an official language only in the areas where Albanians consist of more than 20% of the population it is easily understandable why the Albanian parties of the country, as well as more and more citizens of Albanian origin, support Zaev. The majority of the protesters appeared to be supporters of the VMRO-DPMNE, which has opposed to the proposed bill making Albanian Macedonia's second official language and they demonstrated with slogans against the proposed bill such as "No to bilingualism" and "This is our red line."

Ethnic map of the Republic of Macedonia



On March 1, the president of the Republic of Macedonia, Gjorge Ivanov, announced that he would not award a governmental mandate to the leader of SDSM, Zoran Zaev, despite the fact that he has the necessary support in parliament in order to form a new government. Zoran Zaev presented to the President, Gjorge Ivanov, a livable governing coalition after coming to an agreement with the largest Albanian majority party DUI (Democratic Union for Integration) which previously participated in the government with the VMRO-DPMNE. According to the President, Gjorge Ivanov, the SDSM party had violated the constitution and acted against the national interests by agreeing to an “Albanian platform” of maximalist ethnic-minority demands, such as the mandatory official use of the Albanian language, even though the Albanian population is the majority only in the west part of the country. Furthermore, this “Albanian platform” had been founded for the country’s ethnic Albanian parties by the prime minister of Albania, Edi Rama, at a public meeting in Tirana and many Macedonians accusing Rama of not only interfering in the politics of their country but also of violating the sovereignty of the Republic of Macedonia.

On April 28 Gjorge Ivanov has made an appeal to the nation for calm, after hundreds of demonstrators invaded the country's parliament in protest at the election of the Albanian origin Talat Jaferi in the position of Parliament Speaker. During this invasion the demonstrators were shouting, throwing chairs and attacked some of the deputies such as the SDSM leader Zoran Zaev. President Gjorge Ivanov later made a statement in which he claimed that the election had "violated" the constitution, but nonetheless called appealed for "reasonable and responsible behavior". The clashes inside and outside the parliament resulted in more than 75 injuries, included 22 policemen and three deputies.

Finally, Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov awarded the governmental mandate to the leader of the SDSM, Zoran Zaev. This happened only after Mr. Zaev provided assurances to the President that his new Government would guarantee the protection of the sovereignty, independence, unitary character, territorial integrity and multi-ethnicity of the Republic of Macedonia. Furthermore, Zoran Zev stated that he would “guarantee the protection of the Constitutional order and territorial integrity of the Republic of Macedonia as a whole” and that “no document, platform, declaration, act or action that go against the above mentioned positions shall and will not in any way be a condition or basis for the establishment and functioning of a Government of the Republic of Macedonia.” The leader of the SDSM announced his Government few days later. However, it is still uncertain whether the new Government under Zoran Zaev could be able to lead the country out of its political crisis. This will depend to a large extent on the reaction of the supporters of the VMRO-DPMNE as it is still uncertain how they will perceive this development as well as on the reaction of the leader of the Vparty Nikola Gruevski. On the other hand, after the commitments Zoran Zaev made to the President of the country, it seems more difficult to proceed with all the reforms he promised to the Albanian population of the Republic of Macedonia.

Written by Panagiotis Skaltsounis

Pecob'Staff