

## Macedonia Had an Electoral Sea Change – Now for the Hard Part

### DPC – Eurothink Policy Note

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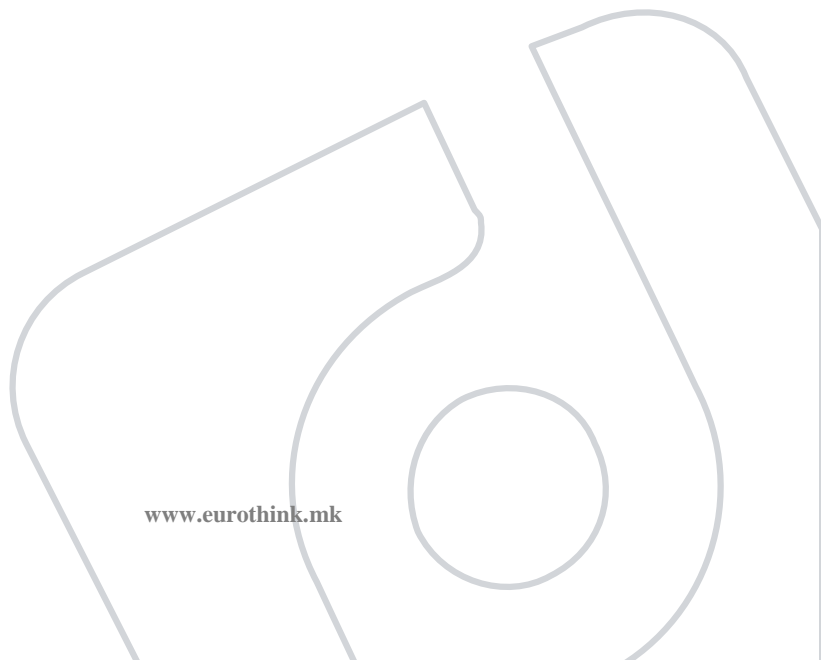


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It is difficult to overstate the scale of the electoral sweep of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev's Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) party in the October 15<sup>th</sup> municipal elections. Former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's party, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), lost power at the local level across the country. Zaev's victory, and that of his SDSM, following the June assembly of the coalition which included all ethnic Albanian parties, will reinforce the Zaev government's control – and political responsibility.

### **What Happened – the Election**

Municipal elections in Macedonia are majoritarian, which in this case means that those municipalities in which no mayoral candidate won more than 50% of the votes will go to a second round on October 29<sup>th</sup>. Turnout on October 15<sup>th</sup> was around 60%, a drop from the previous municipal elections in 2013 and also less than the 67% it was in the December 2016 parliamentary election. Of Macedonia's 80 municipalities (plus the City of Skopje), SDSM won 36 in the first round, plus the Mayor of the City of Skopje (which comprises eight municipalities); VMRO-DPMNE won only three. Of the country's major cities, only Štip and Kavadarci are in contention between the two. In Štip, a longtime VMRO stronghold, the vote gap was a mere 36 votes. The elections also demonstrate the buildup of SDSM's voter base among ethnic Albanians. The clearest example is the SDSM Mayor-elect of Aračinovo (a municipality with an ethnic Albanian majority in the Skopje Planning Region), Maliki Halimi, who won by a 3:1 margin over her nearest competitor from the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). The SDSM-VMRO gap in terms of aggregate votes across Macedonia was less stark – approximately 81,000 of 1,029,000 valid votes cast (rounded to the nearest thousand) – roughly 8%. The urban-rural divide in terms of party support has never been clearer.

The intra-Albanian dynamics are more fluid – and potentially fractious – within the ruling coalition. Alliance of Albanians' leader and candidate for Mayor of Struga, Zijadin Sela, is in a runoff with a DUI party challenger. Senior DUI figure and incumbent Mayor of Tetovo, Teuta Arifi, failed to win a majority and turnout was a dismal 48%; her nearest challenger was from Besa, but Alliance and Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) candidates also got significant numbers of votes. The alignment of these parties and their voters will be decisive. Gostivar, the second largest majority Albanian urban center in the country, also remains contested. SDSM will be pressured to choose sides in these races. The resulting frictions will complicate government consolidation and policy development. This may tempt the SDSM to consolidate gains with early elections, though that would risk generating electoral fatigue and delaying a shift to a focus on policy and delivery.

### **What Does This Mean? – The Chance for a Democratic Reset**

Sunday's election results signify several phenomena in Macedonian society, resulting from both Zaev's SDSM-led coalition assuming office four months ago and as a culmination of civic mobilization against Gruevski's authoritarian rule since 2014. First, and most importantly, the election demonstrated that the

fear barrier has definitively been breached. Gruevski's loss of control over the security apparatus (police, intelligence services), pressure mechanisms (various inspectorates), and more broadly the state administration led a greater proportion of voters to vote without fear of adverse consequences, such as loss of a job, than in the past. But the results also surely demonstrate a trend seen before in the region – a swing toward the party with momentum; aligning with the winner. The hope of securing (or maintaining) patronage in the form of employment or otherwise likely motivated some voters. Finally, many voters took the opportunity to punish Gruevski for his abuse of office. It was clear that he got the message. On election night he looked shaken at the popular rejection and vowed to assess the meaning of the defeat,<sup>1</sup> without addressing whether he would resign as party leader.<sup>2</sup> His continued control of the party is now open to question. No victory in the second round could ameliorate the scale of the loss VMRO-DPMNE has suffered. Fear of the consequences, along with a weariness of Gruevski's weighing the party down,<sup>3</sup> is surely now growing within the ranks.<sup>4</sup>

### **Bridging the Divisions**

The SDSM now carries a great deal of responsibility. Reforming Macedonia's governance system to prevent any figure or party from wielding the dominance of Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE, as well as to improve accountability mechanisms for the government and public sector, is essential. The misallocation of public resources toward the counterproductive symbolism of the Skopje 2014 nation-building project is already in the rearview mirror. Orienting the direction of public resources and policy toward improving the material lot of all Macedonia's citizens, including working to close the social divide which opened ever wider since the fall of socialism – across successive governments – must be an absolute priority.

There are other divides in Macedonia's body politic which demand attention. Since 2013, the mobilization of civic society bridged the division between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians than ever before in the country's history. In the 2016 general elections and Sunday's municipal election, diverse elements of society mobilized across ethnic lines to successfully challenge VMRO-DPMNE's

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<sup>1</sup> "Naturally, as President of the Party, I have the utmost responsibility for the electoral results. This is something that I have said in the past in my public appearances. For all this, the reasons, the results and the future direction of the party, we shall discuss after the end of the elections," *Everybody asks for Gruevski to resign: He takes responsibility, but not the guilt for the defeat*, TV 21, October 16, 2017, Quote starts at 0:52, and ends at 1:19; available at: <http://tv21.tv/mk/?p=149107>.

<sup>2</sup> *GRUEVSKI ACCUSED OF IRREGULARITIES, ANNOUNCED AN ANALYSIS OF THE DEFEAT BUT HE DIDN'T MENTION A RESIGNATION*, Meta.mk, October 16, 2017; available at: <HTTP://META.MK/EN/GRUEVSKI-ACCUSED-OF-IRREGULARITIES-ANNOUNCED-AN-ANALYSIS-OF-THE-DEFEAT-BUT-HE-DIDN-T-MENTION-A-RESIGNATION/>.

<sup>3</sup> "This electoral debacle was totally Gruevski's fault. I don't say VMRO-DPMNE's fault, because he is to be blamed for everything and the party leadership that was obediently following him because of their own lucrative interests," *This electoral debacle is totally Gruevski's fault and we'll pull up the strength to remove him from the party leadership*, Alon.mk, October 16, 2017, available at: <http://a1on.mk/archives/804867>.

<sup>4</sup> *The Reformists in Brussels for the second time: Gruevski is in the past, we now need a free Party Congress to elect a new leader*, 10bez10, October 18, 2017, available at: <https://10bez10.com/vesti/makedonija/7285-reformatorite-vtorpat-vo-brisel-gruevski-e-minato-sega-treba-sloboden-kongres-za-izbor-na-nov-lider>.

authoritarian consolidation. The votes cast by Macedonian Albanians for SDSM testify to that. The divide remains challenging; much can go wrong. Agreement on how best to represent local interests countrywide, but especially in ethnic Albanian areas, while also further developing a sense of common endeavor and responsibility, has yet to be reached. This is but one challenge facing SDSM and its coalition partners – DUI, Alliance of Albanians, and Besa.

But most raw right now is the division among ethnic Macedonians. VMRO-DPMNE's politics of resentment and messaging that SDSM would sell out the country's unity, territorial integrity, and independence had a decade to take root. It is hard to envision a stable democracy developing without ameliorating this split on the basis of some new social contract, which can draw not only a solid majority of ethnic Macedonians, but also Albanians and all other self-defined communities in the Republic of Macedonia – Turks, Roma, Torbesh, Aromanians, Egyptians, and so on. This will require developing a more inclusive and alternative narrative on Macedonia's history (for which there are historical grounds, going back to early 20<sup>th</sup> Century independence fighter Goce Delčev). What happens internally with VMRO's overwhelming defeat at the local level remains to be seen; surely this shift will whet the appetite of challengers to Gruevski, but it also may encourage an even deeper shift into polarizing nationalism. The development of a loyal – though assertive – opposition tradition in Macedonia must begin during Prime Minister Zaev's term of office.

As part of any new social contract, recalibrating the division of resources to ensure municipalities can meet their obligations to their citizens is now essential. The decentralization which followed from implementing the Ohrid Framework Agreement never confronted this issue adequately, reserving resources at the center – to be allocated effectively at party leader discretion, subject to non-transparent inter-party bargaining. There needs to be an intra-SDSM caucus in the municipalities for a new deal – which should generate cross-party resonance. Prime Minister Zaev, as a former mayor himself, understands this issue intimately – and surely recognizes the need to confront it.

### **Avoiding Temptations of Power – and Redefining Roles**

The temptations of power will be difficult to eschew. It is all too easy to fall into the comfort of a “we are the change, we are the reform” mentality. This is what occurred after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, when that country's citizens manifested their will for a shift peacefully – and at the ballot box three times. Perceived betrayal of that promise generated popular cynicism and detachment. This allowed the intended beneficiary of Russian-backed efforts to steal that election, Viktor Yanukovich, to return to power – with continuing disastrous results a decade later.

In cases when regimes are becoming authoritarian, or already are, it is natural for civil society and the opposition to align against the common adversary in power. This alignment in Macedonia began with the student protests in 2014, reaching its peak with the “Colorful Revolution” in 2016, when paint attacks and demonstrations against Gruevski's grandiose Skopje 2014 program sent a powerful symbolic message to the government. This alignment produced results. It is hard to conceive of the scale of the shift seen in the 2016 general elections and last Sunday's municipal elections without the civic

mobilization which began well before. After victory such coalitions typically collapse, as ideological differentiation becomes more evident when the common enemy has been defeated. Some from the civic sector also shift into politics; this has been the case in Macedonia, including former Eurothink colleagues. Others return to private sector life, the existential struggle which drew them in having been won.

Now a clarification and redefinition of roles is in order. The comfort zone on both sides of established personal relationships will be difficult to shift out of and will require affirmative effort to maintain. The role of civil society is to both act as an intermediary and advocate for popular interests in the public arena, as well as to inform the public policy debate. The invigorated coalition government, which came to victory in part because of the mobilization of civic actors behind them to reanimate Macedonian democracy, now affords the hope that civic actors can fulfill their roles. Their posture should be constructive – by their own lights – but also critical and principled. The government ought to prove accessible to policy analysis and advice, exercising its own role as either representatives or guardians of the public interest.

The international community also typically declares victory following democratic breakthroughs, shifting into its natural bilateral government-to-government gear. This happened infamously in Serbia after the fall of Milošević, one among many factors which helped stunt its democratic development – the consequence of which becomes more prominent with time. It is important that genuine, organic civil society efforts gain support (both financial and policy) to help drive and entrench Macedonia's democratic consolidation. Only if that effort is successful is the country's Euro-Atlantic integration – still desired by a solid majority of the country's citizens – possible. Achieving this desire will be the ultimate democratic breakthrough and the moment when declaration of victory by the international community is affordable and appropriate.

The manifest desire of Zaev and his cabinet to make up for lost time in that integration process resonates at a popular level. Efforts to resolve the name dispute with Greece to pave the way for NATO and EU membership will be difficult, though some gestures on the side of Macedonia should be relatively easy to enact in the immediate term (renaming the airport, and Skopje National Arena, and main north-south highway, for instance), undoing the gratuitous provocation undertaken by the Gruevski government. But Greece and the wider West also ought to be aware that goodwill has its limits within Macedonia's body politic as well. Athens should embrace the opportunity to finally resolve this issue and open the door to a more fruitful relationship between democracies whose citizens have faced real hardship and disappointment over the past decade. Germany and France, as well as the US and Britain, should encourage such an approach by Athens. Encouraging the government's bravery in addressing the divisions in Macedonia's society – political, ethnic, and socioeconomic – demands incentives for both Greece and Macedonia to end this dispute in the near term.

Macedonia's voters have generated the only positive news in terms of democracy development in the Balkans, by abandoning fear and voting in the hope of rebooting the country's rule of law, political accountability, and prosperity. SDSM's victory owes to the party's providing such a hope. The country cannot afford a letdown, and it appears that Zaev has learned that lesson. His statement on Monday

clearly indicates that the priorities should be the reforms and not new elections: “I don’t think about early Parliamentary Elections. Our priority is to conclude the second round of the Local Elections on October 29 and have free, fair, democratic and credible elections, as we had in the first round. Only then Macedonia will win. After the 29<sup>th</sup> we will have to see what we will have to do, but I see this electoral win as support for working more and doing the reforms, and not for new elections.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Zaev: I’m not even considering early Parliamentary Elections*, MK News, October 17, 2017, available at: <http://mkd-news.com/zaev-ne-razmislavam-za-predvreteni-parlamentarni-izbori/>.