Unsettling Parallels: Déjà vu with Macedonia – and how to have a happier ending

By Kurt Bassuener

As I bang-out my draft case study on the political dynamic since the Ohrid Framework Agreement in Macedonia for my dissertation, I've been gripped with a strong feeling of recognition. The situation in the country since the country's chance at a democracy and accountability reset with the departure of the regime of former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski last May, bringing a coalition led by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev to power, reminds me of the aftermath of Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution – which I witnessed firsthand as political analyst for the OSCE election observation mission. This does not bode well.

But the parallels between Macedonia now and Ukraine then are numerous. The governments which preceded the breach had become increasingly isolated internationally for large-scale corruption and unsolved crimes. By 2002, President Leonid Kuchma had become so politically radioactive that at the Prague NATO summit, the George W. Bush administration insisted that the country nameplates be in French so Bush did not have to sit next to Kuchma. Recordings of evident leadership malfeasance were integral to stoking public discontent in both cases. Nikola Gruevski's government, already the target of civic mobilization, was exposed in recordings obtained by the opposition to be engaging, with his political partners (including current governing coalition member the DUI), in a kaleidoscopic array of abuses of power – including efforts to cover up a murder. As part of an internationally mediated effort, Gruevski formally withdrew from office (but remained the power behind the new placeholder). Kuchma certainly had similar designs with his prime minister, Viktor Yanukovych.

In each case, political opposition to the leadership drew on a wide array of public dissatisfaction with corruption and arrogance of power. Viktor Yushchenko (known during the campaign by the shorthand "Yu"), previously head of the National Bank and one-prime minister, was widely embraced as the end of a popular battering ram to break-up cozy government-business-criminal ties, allowing Ukraine to be able to move forward toward functioning democracy and rule of law.

In both Ukraine 2004 and Macedonia recently, Russia was directly engaged in supporting the "party of power" and seeming bulwark against further Western entrenchment. Russia was widely suspected to have been involved in the infamous dioxin poisoning of Yushchenko, which he only narrowly survived and from which he was permanently disfigured.

Attempts to steal the 2004 presidential election led to a popular outpouring of popular frustration, as well as a civic-opposition unity toward the goal of ending the Kuchma regime and preventing an even more blatantly compromised continuation of the political system. But this was a necessary alliance for the popular interest on the part of existing and well-developed civil society and the political opposition, not a permanent amalgamation of these interests. As a close friend remarked to me on the Maidan on one of those frigid winter nights "we shouldn't really be chanting 'Yu-schen-ko!' We should be chanting 'U-krai-ina!'" The 17 days and nights of protest finally forced the captured state institutions, including the Supreme Court and Central Election Commission to perform their tasks professionally, rather than as mere adjuncts to the executive. The Verkhovna

Rada – the parliament – was also a scene of the action. As in Macedonia, Western diplomatic engagement was critical in Ukraine – including in deterring violence from the authorities.

Yushchenko was duly elected in a repeated second round of the electoral process. The New Year's celebration on the Maidan was effectively a victory party, with all the major figures of the Orange Revolution – including not only Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, but also oligarch and now-President Petro Poroshenko and then-Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili. While the mood was overwhelmingly positive, one could also sense a with the hope a deep undercurrent of hard-won skeptical entitlement. The mood could have been distilled as "*we* gave *you* this chance to change this place. Don't blow it."

Returning in April 2005, just 10 weeks after my departure, the momentum had clearly evaporated, with internecine strife among the egos in the ruling coalition being the dominant theme. President Yushchenko, while widely thought personally not corrupt, was surrounded by those who were evidently so – and trying to make up for lost time. While his personal tenacity and decency were generally intact, his will to confront allies effectively and lead was widely questioned – even from these early days.

Friends of mine who had previously been apolitical, but who had involved themselves deeply in the Orange Revolution, began to check-out and become cynical. This only intensified over the coming year. There had been high hopes in Ukraine that a democratic breakthrough would open the door to EU and NATO membership, but the appetite for either was definitely not there in 2005. This did not help.

But the main failure was completely homegrown. Aside from wanting to end the Kuchma-Yanukovych era and declarations of wanting to move West, the Our Ukraine-led government had no unifying drive. Nor did it possess the political will to fundamentally change Ukraine's corrupt and unaccountable political operating system.

Like Yanukovych (known by the shorthand "Ya"), Gruevski was not an aberration, but rather an embodiment of a pre-existing system of politics. While his Donetsk-based, oligarch-funded (and Moscow-aligned) Party of Regions was down, it maintained its constituency. By the time of the next elections, "Ya" was the only figure from the 2004 elections whose constituents felt he hadn't let them down.

Like Yanukovych, Nikola Gruevski remains on the scene. He's installed a puppet leader of VMRO-DPMNE, but as with the previous government, nobody is fooled that this changes anything. He knows relinquishing control is likely to mean worse than just the end of his political career. Moreover, there is no guarantee of Prime Minister Zaev's success; VMRO retains ability to impede progress at a parliamentary level. He can bide his time.

Of course, as with all parallels, there are limitations. Macedonia has an EU membership possibility that Ukrainians who demonstrated in the Maidan in late 2004 hoped in vain for. Macedonia, luckily, does not have Russia as a neighbor; but it does, however, have Russia's closest allied state in the Western Balkans, Serbia, next door. President Vučić has not been shy about making clear how

unwelcome the democratic regime change in Macedonia was, underscoring that he would not allow a "Macedonian scenario" to unfold in Serbia. In fact, I would argue that in some ways, Macedonia is to Serbia what Ukraine is to Russia. If accountable democracy – pressed for from below and then emplaced through electoral politics – can succeed in the "little brother" country, it can succeed with the "big brother" too…

In both Ukraine and Macedonia, popular mobilization and electoral regime changes had at their root a pent-up demand for dignity and accountability. They also came about as a result of blossoming civic self-confidence and overcoming of fear. Both embodied societal hunger for deep and structural change – and justice.

Prime Minister Zaev was elected on a platform of building "One Society;" his attraction of 30-40,000 ethnic Albanian voters was both unprecedented and crucial. Through research from the autumn through February 2018, it is clear that Zaev, Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov, and Defense Minister Radmila Šekerinska are still widely believed to be sincere in their goals of building an integrated, just society in Macedonia, along with remediating the institutional rot and policy malpractice that led to Macedonia's going from leader to laggard in the EU accession process. The latter – NATO membership and opening membership negotiations with the EU – are clearly the most evident priority. This has already achieved results with Bulgaria. Protests in both Greece and Macedonia against a bilateral accommodation on the 27-year running "name issue" have complicated, but not derailed these efforts.

But at the same time, there is an echo of the creeping doubt and malaise I heard and felt in post-Orange Revolution Ukraine. As with Yushchenko's poisoning, emblematic crimes and unsolved mysteries under the Gruevski regime continue to haunt Macedonia's politics. While there are numerous examples, including the "Monster" and "Sopot" cases, I will highlight a singular and I believe pivotal one: The firefight in Kumanovo on May 9, 2015 between Macedonian police and army and Albanian militants left 8 police officers and 10 Albanians dead. While a court convicted 33 of 37 defendants in early November, most of them with long prison sentences, nobody I spoke to – including government officials – believes this is the full story. Nor is there any evident Western appetite for an independent commission to investigate the matter, despite the Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn's call for one on the day of the operation.

The issue is perhaps emblematic of the challenge facing the Zaev government. The EU – and not only the EU – clearly has no appetite for uncovering and airing the full story of what occurred in Kumanovo. But this is embedded in a wider disposition to dissuade the Macedonian government to proceed assertively on justice reform and review of unsolved cases. The potential disruption of smooth process would impede the ability to declare progress. In its pent-up hunger for external validation, the Zaev government is effectively outsourcing the steering of the country's transition to the EU, rather than prioritizing demonstrating substantive accountability to Macedonia's people. This is a grave mistake, for the EU will settle for – indeed *insist* upon – far less than the majority of citizens of Macedonia desire: systemic change and justice.

But adhering to the EU's prescriptions to the exclusion of domestic priorities also feeds into a vulnerability Macedonia shares with 2005 Ukraine: elites who wish to maintain their positions or

regain them. As several people underscored in interviews, while Gruevski may have perfected the use of public politics for personal gain in Macedonia, he hardly invented it. And furthermore, he didn't do it alone. His junior but essential partner was the Albanian DUI, which became the initially reluctant partner (at least from Ali Ahmeti's perspective) of the SDSM to form the Zaev government. The impression a cynic could draw from this partnership, reinforced in local elections last October, is that the SDSM doesn't want to *change* the system, but *control* it.

Parties in power do not reform, so the likelihood of DUI cleaning up its own act, absent judicial pressure, is zero. But even when outside power, they don't necessarily do so – see VMRO-DPMNE. Nor do they necessarily strategize about what to do – and how to go about it – if they get back. This seems evident now with the Zaev government, which is effectively treating the EU as its primary constituency, in the hope of obtaining deliverables (such as an invitation to join NATO or the launch of EU membership talks) with which to campaign for a stronger parliamentary majority next year.

Zaev's leadership of the SDSM represented a major and welcome shift in the party's approach, messaging, and ambition for the country and society. There is no question that the challenges facing it – including prosaic problems like just equipping their stripped offices – are massive. The concentration of all decision-making power under Gruevski hollowed Macedonia's institutions, much as the columns on the facades of the many new buildings in Skopje sound hollow when knocked upon. There is a clear capacity deficit which will take time and resources to remediate.

But at least as debilitating is the lack of evident progress on developing a wider strategy of what "One Society" could entail, how it could draw upon the pent-up energies of citizens across the political and ethnic spectrum. A broad civic constituency for such change is latent, but has not been catalyzed by either the government or civil society. This void is slowly, but surely, being filled with frustration.

Nor is the choice either/or. DPC and I have long championed the aspirations of those who wish to join the EU and NATO as functioning democracies. The shifts since 2015 in the West also demonstrate that just joining these communities – indeed, being present at their creation – cannot insulate one's democracy from internal (and external) challenge. Maintaining liberal democracy and rule of law is a constant obligation of citizens and their institutions. Achievement of entry criteria should be graded strictly and fairly. But nobody should suffer the illusion that these checklists alone reflect a healthy democratic polity.

So, despite the messages Brussels may be sending to temper the pace or depth of reform, Prime Minister Zaev has to decide who his real bosses are – his citizens, or the members of the clubs he wants to join. Counterintuitive (and contrary to admonitions he will surely hear), deciding on the former does not mean abandoning the latter. Rather, generating popular support through delivering on justice and accountability will give him and his compatriots *greater* leverage, not just with the European Commission, but with the citizens of the EU's member states who ultimately need to accept Macedonia as an ally or fellow member – some of them in direct referenda. If an ambitious reform effort (with necessary breaking of crockery) succeeds, all will be forgiven with the EC bureaucracy and member state governments. Even a vigorous good faith effort could fail. But such a failure – of incomplete success – could prevent deep rollback. Not making the full-bore attempt

amounts to failure *by default* – and a betrayal of the opportunity the government has been given. That's the choice Prime Minister Zaev and Macedonia's true believing reformers have before them. They can no longer postpone it.