

ELIAMEP Briefing Notes

49 / 2016

December 2016

Elections in FYROM: The end of the two-year political crisis or more of the same?

by Bledar Feta and Pranvera Tika

Junior Research Fellows, South-East Europe Programme, ELIAMEP

On 11 December 2016, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) will hold its eighth parliamentary elections since independence. This is the third time the Skopje government has turned to early elections to try to unlock a two-year political stalemate in an effort to exorcize the ghost of the political and electoral past. Indeed, the successful completion of the electoral process and the formation of a stable government will offer an opportunity for the country to move forward. However, the picture is mixed. The domestic political scene does not offer enough reasons for optimism since the root cause of the crisis has not yet been addressed by the political class, while at the same time the deal made between the four main political parties leaves room for different interpretations after the elections. The biggest risk to the successful completion of the election procedure will be the contestation of the election results by the other political parties. Potential controversies arising after the elections may trigger a new round of street demonstrations and political boycotts, taking the country's political crisis deeper into uncharted waters. This scenario cannot be ruled out; particularly in light of the important and fundamental role that these elections play for the political future and the fate of the country's political parties and politicians. This increases the possibility for politics to heat up as the elections draw closer, causing electoral incidents or even after the electoral race. Such scenarios could fuel further social unrest in a country where public opinion is polarized not only politically and ideologically but also ethnically and religiously.

Political Turmoil – Parliament Boycotts and Street Demonstrations

Politics in FYROM have been long defined by a bitter confrontation between the two leading political parties, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) of Nikola Gruevski and the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM) of Zoran Zaev. After a decade of relative calm and stability, tension rose again in 2012 when lawmakers of SDSM, the country's main opposition party, were expelled from the parliament after physical altercations erupted over the budget. After an internationally brokered mediation, SDSM deputies returned to parliament but tension and inflammatory rhetoric between the ruling party and the opposition continued. In April 2014, political polarization increased further when SDSM refused to recognize the results of the early parliamentary elections. This proved to be a decisive moment, opening a Pandora's box of developments with highly uncertain outcomes. SDSM, the offspring of the Yugoslav-era League of Communists, accused the winning party VMRO-DPMNE of rigging the elections. The dispute continued and led to SDSM boycotting the parliament, which was followed by a series of cataclysmic internal developments such as massive social protests threatening to delegitimize FYROM's political system.

In autumn 2014, things were further complicated for the ruling party and its leader Nikola Gruevski when tens of thousands of students took to the streets to voice their frustration with the governmental plan to reform the universities, which they believed would limit their autonomy. This grassroots mobilization was not confined only to public protests but it was also followed by initiatives to develop policy proposals and demands. The appearance of a united, all-encompassing civil society front that organized massive protests with the potential to articulate demands for a new democratic citizenship was added to the mosaic of the political developments. In recent years, student protests have been a regular occurrence in many countries in the Balkan Peninsula, showing young people's desire to have greater say in their countries' politics. Soon after, student protests were followed by protest from other societal groups, such as teachers, university professors and workers. One novelty of this grassroots civic action was that the marches in Skopje managed to overcome ethnic divides between the Slavic and Albanian segments of society. Perhaps

Elections in FYROM: The end of the two-year political crisis or more of the same?

for the first time, thousands of Slav-Macedonians and ethnic Albanians protested together against the government and the ill-conceived reforms initiated by VMRO. Although this grassroots civic mobilization was the largest that the country had seen since independence, internal developments, such the wiretapping scandal, showed that the political class had failed to grasp the message, leading to an explosion of the dissatisfaction smoldering among the citizens due to a number of unresolved issues (media freedom, irresponsible governance, abuse of power, widespread corruption and authoritarian and clientelist practices) considered to be the root cause of the enduring malaise with FYROM's democracy.

Wiretapping Affair and the Kumanovo Incident

In February 2015, FYROM's ongoing political crisis intensified when the leader of the opposition Zoran Zaev published thousands of wiretapped telephone conversations which revealed corruption, electoral fraud and outright criminality at the most senior levels of government. Prime Minister Gruevski, who prior to the revelation of the scandal refused to resign as the opposition demanded, was now under pressure from weekly revelations of the wire-taped conversations, the so-called Zaev 'bombs', which referring to the Socialists' aim to destroy the foundation of Gruevski's popularity. Prime Minister Gruevski denied the authenticity of the recordings and accused Zaev of collaborating with unidentified, foreign secret services whose ultimate goal was the destabilization of the country. Russia also raised its voice against that forces that intended to undermine the legitimate government of Gruevski, giving a flavor of East-West geopolitical confrontation to the conflict. For Russia, Europe was to blame for orchestrating a 'colorful revolution' in a scenario similar to Ukraine. Despite Gruevski's declarations of "clean hands," the ex-Yugoslav republic, once hailed as a success story of the region, was now embroiled in a scandal that exposed its weak democracy.

In May 2015, a security incident raised the specter of ethnic conflict. FYROM faced its greatest security threat since 2001 when police forces clashed with a group of ethnic-Albanian paramilitaries in the border town of Kumanovo, leaving eight members of the special forces and ten militants dead. The operation and the subsequent investigation left many unanswered questions, and the timing and explanation of the incident became subject of extensive contestation between the government and the opposition. SDSM officials, along with some international observers and Albanian analysts, attributed the incident to a government plot to strain interethnic relations in order to distract the public from the wiretapping scandal. Zaev insisted that the government was aware of the group since two years before the incident and its decision to place the confrontation in Kumanovo, in a neighborhood densely populated by Albanians, would attract more visibility, distracting attention from the political difficulties of the government. In contrast, the ruling VMRO-DPMNE denied orchestrating/manufacturing a security incident and described their decision to operate in Kumanovo as an effort to combat terrorism. The Kumanovo incident also became a topic of confrontation between the government and the Albanian community who saw Gruevski's response as a move to further marginalize them. Inter-ethnic violent incidents are not uncommon in FYROM and many view PM Gruevski as having built his popularity and political success on patriotic or nationalist rhetoric which has negatively contributed to inter-ethnic coexistence (**on inter-ethnic tensions in FYROM see ["A dangerous inter-ethnic balance in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"](#)**). Yet, despite its gravity and fears at the time that incident could result in escalation of ethnic tensions, the public's attention was not turned away from the ongoing political crisis. The Kumanovo incident added yet more public frustration to the anger felt over corruption scandals and led thousands of citizens, including ethnic Albanians, to massive demonstrations demanding the resignation of the government. The participation of Albanians in these protests was seen as an opportunity to criticise their ethnic leaders for failing in their pursuit of the agenda of Albanian equality with Slav-Macedonians, and for their contribution to the political and social ills of the country. When some of the protests turned violent, an increasingly worried European Union intervened to achieve a settlement between the government and the opposition.

Elections in FYROM: The end of the two-year political crisis or more of the same?

Pržino Agreement, ‘colorful protests’ and the road to the abolition of the Agreement

In an effort to diffuse the political crisis, the EU arbitrated a negotiating process among the four main political parties – the Slav-Macedonian VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, and the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) and Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA). After several meetings in Brussels, Strasbourg and Skopje in June 2015, and after heavy pressure from the EU Enlargement Commissioner Johannes Hahn, the four political leaders agreed. The result was the Pržino Agreement that set out a roadmap for ending the political turmoil. The agreement included provisions to hold early parliamentary elections on 24 April 2016. Prior to that, the opposition would return to parliament and stop releasing wire-tapped material. It also envisaged that Gruevski would resign and a new provisional government would take office. The government agreed to clean up the electoral list that allegedly contains thousands of phantom voters/supporters of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE and DUI, giving the opposition equitable access to the state-owned media, with changes introduced in the electoral legislation and in the State Electoral Commission. In parallel, the EU demanded the appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate the alleged crimes revealed in the wire-tapped conversations while the plan for the formation of a parliamentary committee for investigation chaired by the opposition was also included in the agreement. The above provisions were considered necessary preconditions for holding free and fair elections.

The Pržino Agreement brought some calm after the storm caused by the wiretapping scandal and the Kumanovo incident. However in practice there was little genuine progress. The election date set for 24 April 2016 was postponed for 5 June, on the grounds of lack of even minimal preconditions for fair and democratic elections. The opposition summarized the problem as: first, the pre-electoral race was dominated by the media’s dependence on the government, a problem underlined also by international media watchdog *Reporters Sans Frontieres*; second, a serious problem was the alleged inclusion in the electoral rolls of, according to SDSM, 100.000 non-existent voters, or 12% of the electoral body, indicating the government’s failure to amend the electoral lists. The goal of holding the elections on the predefined date was put to the test when the president of the country, George Ivanov, issued a presidential decree pardoning 56 politicians involved in economic and political scandals. Arguably, the decision was an attempt to counteract the Special Prosecutor Court’s efforts to establish the rule of law and to continue the reforms outlined in the Pržino Agreement.

The decision sparked further tension and the country immediately saw a wave of massive protests demanding the retraction of the decision as well as the resignation of the government and the president in what was now being called Colorful Revolution. The protests, which continued for weeks, reflected a high diversity of political parties and actors that had previously been fragmented and sometimes solitary forces. The opposition SDSM also strongly associated itself with the demands of the protestors, asking at the same time for a boycott of the 5 June 2016 elections if the decision was not revoked and, furthermore, if the conditions of cleaning up the electoral rolls, media reforms and other criteria had not been met. As the decision of the President was not revoked even under pressure from the European Union, on 13 May 2016 when the deadline for presenting the parties’ electoral lists expired, no party presented their candidates except the ruling VMRO-DPMNO, and two other Slav-Macedonian parties, GROM and the Popular Movement. GROM decided to unite its forces with Gruevski while the Popular Movement decided to run independently. On the other hand, no Albanian party decided to run in the elections of 5 June including DUI, Gruevski’s main coalition partner. In light of the volatile scenario of holding elections with just one party in contention, European diplomats intensified their pressure on the country. In May 2016, after the Constitutional Court ruled that the dissolution of parliament ahead of the polls was unconstitutional, MPs re-convened and voted to delay the hugely controversial elections. In the end, after long negotiations on 31 August, it was decided that earlier parliamentary elections would be held on 11 December 2016. It had taken political parties more than one year to agree on the elections.

Elections in FYROM: The end of the two-year political crisis or more of the same?

Early Parliamentary Elections

In such an unstable situation from all points of view, these early elections are of great importance because on the one side they are considered key to ending the political turmoil and on the other they are seen as an important test for FYROM's democracy. The picture of FYROM's democracy and rule of law that emerged from developments over the last two years is still quite problematic, casting doubt on whether the political scene will decisively normalize. This situation has generated a high level of concern within the international community, with the European Commission including in this year's progress report on FYROM the holding of fair elections as a prerequisite for the country to advance its bid for EU accession.

Table 1: Results of 2014 Parliamentary elections

Political Party	Votes	%	Seats	Seats change
VMRO - DPMNE	481,615	42,98	61	(+5)
Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)	283,955	25,34	34	(-8)
Democratic Union for Integration (DUI)	153,646	13,71	19	(+4)
Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA)	66,393	5,92	7	(-1)
Citizen Option for Macedonia (GROM)	31,610	2,82	1	
National Democratic Revival (NDR)	17,783	1,59	1	(-1)

Source: State Election Commission

The election campaign has been dominated by the two main political parties, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM. VMRO-DPMNE has been in office since 2006. Despite the political crisis, Gruevski has denied any wrongdoing in relation to the wiretapping scandal and is seeking a new mandate, claiming among his successes a boost to the country's economy and the improvement of the welfare of ordinary people. Gruevski is pleased with his party's economic policies that have enabled FYROM to avoid recession and to maintain growth. Public polls give VMRO-DPMNE a clear advantage compared to SDSM. The big question is whether last year's massive protests will be transformed into a punishing vote against the VMRO-DPMNE-ruled government, rejecting another term of Gruevski in office. Some observers note that Gruevski and his close circle of associates have the greatest stakes in their party's success, since an opposition victory may signal the start of judicial processes against VMRO-DPMNE's top political echelon.

SDSM, which held power through much of the 1990s and early 2000s, is portraying itself as the only political option able to improve FYROM's democratic standards, to reform the country's economy, and to tackle high level corruption and social injustice. 2015 was a key moment for SDSM. Its leader Zoran Zaev re-invigorated country's opposition that had been long criticized as lethargic and ineffective against the ruling VMRO-DPMNE. However, this is not necessarily translated into votes, especially after SDSM's failure to consolidate a broader opposition coalition. In order to increase its voter support, the Social Democrats came out this year with several Albanian candidates in their electoral lists in an effort to earn the Albanian vote, with pledges to tackle social inequality. In this direction, Zoran Zaev has promised the amendment of the Constitution in favor of establishing two official languages. Zaev's declarations heightened the tone of the debate, with Gruevski adopting strong ethno-national rhetoric in his electoral mobilization. He accused SDSM of federalizing FYROM by making the Albanian language the second official language in the entire territory of

Elections in FYROM: The end of the two-year political crisis or more of the same?

the country. There has been an increase in traditional nationalist rhetoric by VMRO-DPMNE, which is now accusing the Slavic opposition of promoting the ethnic Albanian agenda. After all, one of the key demands that has emerged from ethnic Albanians is the federalization of FYROM, in order to secure their rights, and Albanian political parties have attempted to pursue this to revive their flagging popularity.

The Albanian Factor

In the Albanian camp, new political forces have emerged challenging mainstream politics by addressing sensitive political, economic and national issues. This has increased the headaches for the two long-established ethnic Albanian political formations - the Democratic Union for Integration of Ali Ahmeti (DUI) and the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) of Menduh Thaci. DUI, the governmental ally of VMRO-DPMNE, will face serious challenges to keep supremacy among Albanian voters. DUI's choice to adopt a moderate political stance towards domestic developments, especially in the case of Kumanovo, and its decision to remain in government after the wiretapping scandal has disappointed the Albanian electorate, which expected a more dynamic and change-oriented approach. However, the position of DUI is not a surprise, since over the years it has demonstrated political pragmatism by adopting tactical moves to avoid disrupting relations with its governing partner. Some observers believe that DUI has lost credibility in the eyes of Albanians due to its tactical acceptance of government decisions considered detrimental to the interests of ethnic Albanians. Such a political philosophy has produced disenchantment among Albanians, allowing space for the emergence of new actors in the Albanian political arena. The newly-established political forces will try to represent the interests of those Albanians who feel neglected by the current Albanian political class.

The BESA movement, created by a group of Albanian intellectuals, portrayed Ali Ahmeti as a servant and a political tool of Gruevski's alleged "corrupt politics", has raised expectations among the Albanian electorate. According to the latest poll results conducted by 'Brima Gallup' Besa is expected to receive 3.2 per cent of the vote, whereas DUI 6.5 per cent. BESA's main goal is to break the strength of DUI and DPA, which, they claim, have lost their initial mandate, the full implementation of the Ohrid Agreement and the equal representation of Albanians nationally. According to BESA's leader Bilal Kasami, the main strategic objective of new party will be the redefinition of the country through political dialogue and the active participation of the Albanians in political processes. On the contrary, "if there is not space for the dreams of Albanians, then Macedonia could disintegrate" BESA argues. They also believe that the confrontational style of politics must be left behind and a new path must be built, mainly through institutions. This change is necessary for FYROM to acknowledge its multiethnic character in practice. The dialogue between communities can shape the landscape of politics and become a vehicle for moving forward. This goal is also shared by the SDSM, whose position has shifted, as we have seen above, in order to penetrate the Albanian electorate.

Another newly-established party, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA)-Movement for Reforms, led by the mayor of Struga Zijadin Sela, is eagerly waiting to make gains from the DPA's electoral base. Sela is a long-standing figure in the DPA who failed to oust its leader Menduh Thaci. According to public opinion, DPA-Movement for Reforms is breathing down the neck of the old DPA with a difference of only 1.3 per cent. Menduh Thaci on the other hand remains hopeful the voters will opt for a new style of governance. The leader of DPA, the second largest Albanian party, emphasized in his campaign the pledge to forgive Albanians' debts to the state and full equality for both communities in the state budget. Thaci promised that if he wins the elections he will become the deputy prime minister and he will pay special attention to the Albanians who live in non-majority Albanian areas. It remains to be seen if there will be a rush of votes from the old DPA to the new DPA-Movement for Reforms. In addition, two prominent members of DUI, former secretary general Gezim Ostreni and head of the party general assembly Zuluf Adili, left to form a new party called Unity. The existence of this party may pose a threat to the DUI power base, shifting the political dynamic against the party of the Albanian leader Ali Ahmeti. With three new parties already on the rise, eagerly waiting to gain from DUI and DPA, the foundations of the old 'two by two' political formation may be in

Elections in FYROM: The end of the two-year political crisis or more of the same?

question. However, the leader of DUI is convinced that he will win the elections because according to him, only his party has a clear platform for Albanian voters. The program of his party is focused on five pillars: 1) economic equality, 2) consensual decision making, 3) the official use of Albanian language throughout the country, 4) rule of law, and 5) NATO accession. According to Ahmeti, equality of the two communities helps the country strengthen its Euro-Atlantic orientation.

Many ethnic Albanians seem fed up with their old politicians and see the emergence of new political actors as allowing them to challenge the entrenched philosophy of the old-established Albanian parties DUI and DPA. However, local analysts are skeptical about the growing number of Albanian parties because of the proportional electoral system, which will leave many parties outside parliament while their votes will be wasted. Whatever the outcome, the ethnic Albanian vote could be a determining factor in the formation of the new government after December elections, while the decision of which Albanian party will become part of the governing coalition will have important implications for the post-election period. The continuation of the current power sharing arrangement may mean repetition of the old politics. The alternative scenario of forming a coalition with a minor Albanian party could trigger another political crisis similar to that of 2006-2008, when DUI was left outside government despite winning more votes than DPA. The scenario of leaving the Albanian parties out of the future government altogether will end ethnic power sharing and could create a de facto split in the country along ethnic lines. This scenario, however, is less likely to happen.

What comes next?

All eyes are on the upcoming elections. The first test will be the organization of free and fair elections that will allow the recognition of electoral results by all political parties. However, their outcome remains unclear. It is up to the country's political forces not to allow these elections to become the source of yet another crisis. Any failure to organize free and fair elections could lead the country further into chaos and in this case it would likely lose its 'conditional' recommendation for a start to EU accession talks. At the same time, the country may lose the opportunity to increase public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process in a period when citizens are desperately in need of political representatives and democratic institutions they can trust. However, elections alone, even if they are in full accordance with international standards, are not enough to salvage FYROM's democracy. The second imperative for FYROM will be the creation of a stable government that will address the origins of the crisis – irresponsible governance, widespread corruption, authoritarian practices, abuse of power and human rights violations – in an effort to bring about the necessary reconciliation among political, social and ethnic groups to emerge from the political crisis.

Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)

Vas. Sofias, 10676 Athens, Greece | Tel. +30 210 7257 110 | Fax +30 210 7257 114 | E-mail eliamep@eliamep.gr

ELIAMEP offers a forum for debate on international and European issues. Its non-partisan character supports the right to free and well-documented discourse. ELIAMEP publications aim to contribute to scholarly knowledge and to provide policy relevant analyses. As such, they solely represent the views of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

Learn more about our work - Visit our website at www.eliamep.gr/en

Should you wish to **unsubscribe** from our mailing list please send a blank message to unsubscribe@eliamep.gr