

# Sowing Winds in Macedonia: The Decay of the VMRO-DPMNE



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### ABSTRACT

- The VMRO-DPMNE, Macedonia's ruling party since 2006, had become progressively illiberal during its years in power.
- In 2015, a government-brokered wiretapping scandal triggered unprecedented country-wide social unrest.
- An early parliamentary election was called for in 2016 and won by the VMRO-DPMNE, which failed to form a government.
- Two years after its defeat, the party is struggling to regain popularity and piece itself together.

*Keywords:* elections, illiberalism, Macedonia

### RESUMEN

- El VMRO-DPMNE, partido en el gobierno de Macedonia desde 2006, había entrado en una deriva iliberal durante sus años en el poder.
- En 2015, un escándalo de escuchas ilegales supuestamente ordenadas por el gobierno desencadenó protestas sociales sin precedentes en todo el país.
- Las elecciones parlamentarias anticipadas de 2016 fueron ganadas por el VMRO-DPMNE, que no consiguió formar gobierno.
- Dos años después de su derrota, el partido lucha por recuperar su popularidad y reorganizarse.

*Palabras clave:* elecciones, iliberalismo, Macedonia

The December 2016 parliamentary election was a turning point in Macedonia's recent political history. Rescheduled twice, it was preceded by aggressive waves of accusations between the government and its opposition. Amid civil unrest that had taken to the streets, a political intervention headed by the European Union (EU) pursued. The election saw former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's right-wing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO–DPMNE, hereinafter VMRO) losing 10 representatives in the Sobranie (Assembly) and leaving the party with 51 seats out of a total of 120. It also meant the opportunity of prolonging its time in government for another four-year term was lost.

Eventually, and after months of stalemate and negotiations, the long-time opposition party, the centre-left Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) led by Zoran Zaev, managed to gather a parliamentary majority and thus became the new ruling group with the support of the ethnic Albanian parties – amongst which traditional VMRO allies were found. The approval of the Sobranie to a SDSM-led coalition government on May 31<sup>st</sup> 2017 meant the overcoming of a political deadlock that had been gripping the country for months, while also putting an end to a progressively illiberal decade-long Gruevski rule.

Different readings can suggest why the VMRO suffered such a blow in the 2016 parliamentary election. A certain share of the direct causes had been brewing a long time before election day, and potentially foreshadowed a swift decline in voter support. Some other actors turned their back on the party only after the election's official results had been made public. This paper argues that the increasingly illiberal nature of the VMRO's and Gruevski's rule can ultimately explain their defeat

in the poll, alongside the roles played by national anti-corruption movements and the EU. It also highlights the key duty that the ethnic Albanian parties with representation in the Sobranie had in the coalition-making process and in the VMRO's eventual dismissal from government. Lastly, it explores the status that the VMRO is currently holding as the main opposition party in Macedonia.

## THE RISE AND THE FALL OF THE VMRO

The history of the Republic of Macedonia ever since its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 cannot be told without the VMRO as one of its foremost actors in the political arena. Founded in 1990, the party's *raison d'être* upon its birth was the ultimate attainment of Macedonian independence. Its acronym derived from the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), a 19<sup>th</sup>-century rebel movement which protested Ottoman rule; it was deliberately adopted by the founders of the party in an attempt to resuscitate the values of national sovereignty and independence from Yugoslavia. Originally conceived as centre-right Christian democratic, it gradually started to swerve towards right-wing nationalism.

The VMRO took part in Macedonia's first multi-party election in 1990 and exercised rule between 1998 and 2002. After one four-year term, and followed by a parenthesis of SDSM rule, the party again won the 2006 election led by young, Western-friendly technocrat Nikola Gruevski. Building on a nationalist and conservative agenda aimed towards the ethnic Macedonian electorate, Gruevski asserted a commitment to joining the EU and the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He appealed to the disenchanted SDSM voters through condemning the former government's corruption and their inability to boost the economy (Crowther, 2017: 749). A year later, in 2007, the VMRO became an observing member of the European People's Party (EPP), a clear indication of Gruevski's aspiration of fostering a modernizing and forward-looking image of Macedonia, both internally and externally.

During his years as Prime Minister, Gruevski steadily embraced a nationalist agenda that strived to appeal to the sentiments of the ethnic Macedonian population, in clear disdain to the ethnic Albanian minority – which constitutes around a quarter of Macedonia's population. Building on an ethnically exclusionist concept of the nation, Gruevski relied on devices that distracted the electorate from the economic problems the country was enduring. Simultaneously, its prospects of joining the EU and NATO were diminishing, hence the government's degree of accountability to Brussels became more and more limited (Crowther, 2017: 750).

Together with the push for sheer nationalist exaltation, Gruevski's rulings on the policy arena were slowly steering away from the ideal of liberal democracy and progressively pursuing illiberal tendencies. Not only did they target the independence of government-critical human rights advocacy groups and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), but also strived for the effective control of the media, the deterioration of judicial autonomy and the manipulation of elections. The gradual backlash on liberal-democratic values was jeopardizing the rule of law in Macedonia, an issue notified and warned against by a European Commission (EC) report elaborated in 2015.

Notwithstanding its landslide victory in the 2014 parliamentary election, the VMRO government's illiberal machinery was forced to take a detour on its way to full state capture. In May 2015, the SDSM leader Zoran Zaev made public that Gruevski's executive had orchestrated the illegal wiretapping on 20,000 phone numbers and had listened to private conversations of politicians, judges and other high-ranking figures in Macedonia (Reef, 2017: 171-172). The tapes also revealed how the government authorities had tried to cover up the killing in 2011 of 22-year-old Martin Neskovski, beaten to death by a policeman – a tragic event that, already then, had large crowds in Skopje take to the streets in sign of protest against police brutality.

The tape scandal was the straw that broke the camel's back. Large crowds in Skopje took to the street immediately in sign of protest, [demanding Gruevski and his cabinet to resign](#). The mass mobilizations dragged on for days without a clear solution to the crisis, until eventually the EU stepped in. Its mediation proved fruitful in the months to come: Gruevski was to step down in the beginning of 2016 in favour of an interim government made of VMRO and SDSM members. This was one of the main provisions enshrined in the so-called Pržino Agreement, which also scheduled early parliamentary elections for April 24<sup>th</sup>, later rescheduled for June 5<sup>th</sup>, as a way out of the deadlock.

Another wave of mass protest spread throughout the country in mid-April 2016 which further questioned the transparency and legitimacy of the VMRO. The Macedonian President –the country's head of state– Gjorge Ivanov, himself a member of the VMRO, [publicly announced a pardon](#) to all the party officials involved in the wiretapping scandal uncovered the previous year. Upon this, the protest movement, known as the “Colourful Revolution”, flooded the streets for weeks in the country's major towns with the ultimate aim of banishing the years-old encrusted VMRO establishment and ensuring the continuation of the prosecution processes against those responsible for the illegal wiretapping.<sup>1</sup>

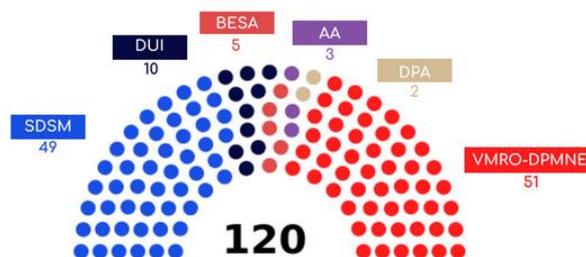
Meanwhile, political pressure was mounting ahead of the June election with very little prospect that it would be free and fair. Thus, after another round of EU-brokered talks among the parties' main leaders, it was finally determined that the early election would be rescheduled for the second and last time. The date was set for December 11<sup>th</sup>.

### REAPING WHIRLWINDS: THE DECEMBER 2016 ELECTION

Ultimately, the result of the election left no doubt that the VMRO had lost a good deal of its rooted support. The gap between Gruevski's bloc and its long-time opponent, Zaev's SDSM, was of barely two seats in the Sobranie – 51 to 49, a difference of fewer than 20,000 ballots (Fig. 1). While the VMRO saw itself facing a decrease in 10 seats since

<sup>1</sup> The movement was also used as a platform to protest the government-led “Skopje 2014” project, a costly architectural refurbishing of downtown Skopje financed through public funds and engulfed in widespread allegations of corruption.

FIG. 1 DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN THE SOBRANIE AFTER THE DECEMBER 2016 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION



Source: *Macedonia State Election Commission*

the last parliamentary election, held in 2014, the SDSM had increased by 15. The Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), a party catering for a big share of the country's Albanian minority and having acted as Gruevski's coalition partner since 2008, dropped from 19 to 10 seats. The Besa Movement, the Alliance for Albanians (AA) –two new parties with representation in parliament as of 2016– and the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) managed to pick up and share a decent proportion of the Albanian support that the DUI lost.

The vote count was distressing for both the VMRO and the SDSM leaderships: while stakes were high for the former, which strived to further consolidate its ruling power, the latter's expectations for a boost in support were crucial for its survival. Some hours later, as soon as the definitive results were made public, and given the two parties' closeness in percentage points, both opponents claimed victory and took to the streets in celebration, triggering a generalized atmosphere of confusion and agitation. Seemingly, an election that had been devised as the solution to the months-long crisis proved to instead deepen the tension.

The initial step in the unravelling of the political deadlock following the election outcome was the coalition-making negotiations, firstly undertaken by the VMRO after having gathered a higher number of seats in the Sobranie. Its consultations with the DUI, the VMRO's traditional Albanian coalition partner, were to prove more arduous than expected, though: a few weeks after the election, the DUI joined an Albania-brokered political platform composed of all the Albanian ethnic parties represented in the Macedonian parliament.

Two main conditions were put forth by the platform in order to renew its coalition deal with the DUI: first, for Albanian language to acquire official status throughout Macedonia and not only in the areas where the Albanian minority concentrates; and the continuing of the investigation over the incumbent government's wiretapping scandal. Gruevski's rejection to these demands meant breaking off the negotiations and dragging the country back to square one.

Upon the VMRO's failure to assemble a coalition, the chance to build a government was now in the hands of Zaev's SDSM, the second-largest party in the new Sobranie. According to Macedonia's constitution, the President is the authority in charge of overseeing the government-building process and handing over the mandate to each of the candidates in their attempt to muster a parliamentary majority. After Gruevski returned his mandate upon his party's failing in gathering enough supports, President Ivanov [refused to give Zaev the mandate](#) without a prior proof of attainment of a majority.

The SDSM's strife lasted for several weeks, acknowledging the status of the joint Albanian platform as kingmaker and trying to gain the backing of its members. By late February, Zaev had managed to gather the support of three out of the four parties in the platform after agreeing to their demand on the extension of the official use of the Albanian language, and thus endowing the SDSM with the long-awaited majority. However, and yet once again, Zaev had his mandate denied by President Ivanov under the latter's claims that the language agreement with the Albanian platform, along with its other demands, had the potential to destroy the country, and called for mobilization.

Ivanov's move sparked tensions throughout the country and many domestic and international authorities voiced their concern over what was seen as a trigger to perpetuating *sine die* Macedonia's political deadlock. The President did not budge on his stance until two months later, caving in to both internal and external pressures<sup>2</sup> and in the aftermath of an [episode of violence in the Sobranie](#) orchestrated by VMRO activists – an instance of national hysteria fuelled by the months-long stalemate. Eventually, on May 31<sup>st</sup>, Zaev was sworn in as Prime Minister with the backing of the DUI and the AA, after the Besa

Movement had withdrawn its support two weeks before the vote in parliament.

The VMRO's outrage could not be overlooked: it had been defeated after almost half a year of intense coalition talks, hence a decade of Gruevski rule had reached its end. As a result of its increasingly illiberal policies and the constant stream of corruption accusations, the party saw its legitimacy become gradually discredited as well as further downplayed by the wearing effects of the civil protests and the intervention of the EU authorities. The election fiasco and its 10-seat decrease in the Sobranie, after which the likewise heavily-penalized DUI –in a likely attempt to wash its image as a former Gruevski ally– turned its back on the party upon Gruevski's rejection of the Albanian platform's conditions, was the last nail in the VMRO's coffin.

## THE REMAKING OF A PARTY: THE VMRO IN OPPOSITION

Almost two years since the election, and after more than a year of SDSM rule, the VMRO is slowly trying to piece itself together after its fall from grace. Among its most prominent adjustments, Hristijan Mickoski, the acting Secretary General, was elected as new leader at the party congress in December 2017, replacing Gruevski upon his resignation. This choice arrived in the aftermath of the October 2017 local election, where the VMRO lost 51 of the 56 municipalities it controlled. It was yet another blow –the second in a row– in its election record, ultimately stressing its overwhelming loss of rooted support throughout the country.

The need for the VMRO to reinvent and reinvigorate itself in the eyes of the electorate has arguably become one of the most pressing goals since its defeat. A large proportion of its role as the largest opposition party in the Sobranie has been mostly played as the main outspoken SDSM foe. The major issue that has empowered the VMRO against Zaev's government has been the latter's negotiations with Greece regarding the so-called name issue, a diplomatic conflict involving Skopje and Athens that has dragged on since Macedonia's independence in 1991. Greece does not recognize Skopje's use of the name "Macedonia" since it hides, it claims, irredentist ambitions over Greece's northernmost region of Macedonia. This clash has been the foremost obstruction to Skopje's accession to the EU and NATO over the years, given the refusal from Greece to lift its veto over its

<sup>2</sup> Particularly important in this process was the role of Hoyt Yee, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State.

neighbour's potential membership under its constitutional name<sup>3</sup>. In the past months, however, Zaev's government managed to reach a negotiated way out of the dispute with its Greek counterpart, embodied in the Prespa Agreements.

The consultative referendum that took place on September 30<sup>th</sup> in virtue of this deal –where voters were implicitly asked whether they accepted the constitutional amendments that would change the country's name, *erga omnes*, to North Macedonia– was boycotted by the VMRO–DPMNE. The plebiscite did not reach the threshold of participation in order to be considered valid, which was interpreted as a victory by Mickoski's supporters.

All along, the VMRO has identified itself as the utmost advocate for Macedonia's national interests and has positioned itself against the deal with Greece, picturing it as a threat against the country's identity, culture and sovereign integrity. The Prespa Agreements, to its judgement, are a humiliation that Zaev –rhetorically portrayed as a traitor to the nation– has dragged Macedonians through. They are, the VMRO holds, part of a plan that began ever since the SDSM reached power after caving in to the Albanian platform's demands.

As of right now, the VMRO is the only party with representation in the Sobranie that does not accept the Agreements. This parliamentary schism has, of course, translated into a social schism, whereby the VMRO electorate overwhelmingly rejects the deal, and SDSM (as well as all Albanian parties') voters strive for its entry into force. It is yet another episode of party politics that has mutated into social fracture, also deepening the divisions between ethnic Albanians –who are immensely supportive of the deal– and ethnic Macedonians, as well as *within* ethnic Macedonians.

Prime Minister Zaev is still determined to pulling the deal through. Shortly after the referendum, his government submitted a motion for constitutional changes to the Sobranie. For it to succeed, the support of a two-thirds parliamentary majority was required<sup>4</sup> and, to the surprise of many, eventually

<sup>3</sup> One of these occasions was the NATO Bucharest Summit, held in 2008, where Greece's ban prevented the Alliance from handing Macedonia a formal membership invitation. This episode generated massive nationalist outrage in the country.

<sup>4</sup> For this majority to be reached and the motion to pass, at least 9 VMRO MPs had to explicitly support the deal by voting in favour.

attained<sup>5</sup>. Immediately after the vote, the VMRO leadership **expelled the seven party MPs** that had supported the Agreements upon accusations of treason.

At the time of writing, Zaev's executive is two voting rounds away from fastening the constitutional amendments: first, a simple-majority vote, to be held in the weeks to come; and, after that, another vote that will again require a two-thirds majority. The ratification by the Greek parliament, the very last step before the definitive entry into force of the Prespa Agreements, should follow shortly afterwards.

## CONCLUSIONS

The blow of the 2016 December election was a wake-up call for the VMRO, whose credibility and lawfulness before the electorate declined heavily during Gruevski's ten-year rule. His crackdown on liberties and the rule of law and his consummation of corruption as a state *modus operandi* delegitimized his government, which was further undermined by the growing social unrest and citizen revolutionary salience. Adding to this, Gruevski's poor tolerance to negotiations with the joint Albanian platform –whose role was key in the coalition-making process after the election– made the VMRO's longstanding ally, the DUI, turn its back on him and offer support to Zaev.

Two years later, Macedonia is at a crossroads between its past and its future, but more divided than ever. The Prespa Agreements is the closest the country has ever been to a resolution of the name issue and hence to its potential accession to the Euro-Atlantic club, yet the deal is still opposed by a wide segment of society, of which the VMRO is bearer. The fiasco of the September referendum has stressed the position of Mickoski's bloc as the only one genuinely watching for Macedonia's interests and safeguarding Macedonian identity – although only in the eyes of his own electorate. In the meantime, though, the party is weakening, falling behind and becoming more isolated by the hour.

<sup>5</sup> 80 MPs voted in favour of the deal and 39 MPs voted against.

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