



Weekly Briefing

Macedonia Political briefing:
The Aftermath of the 2017 Local Elections in Macedonia
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Summary

In October 2015, Macedonia held the seventh local elections since its independence. At present, Macedonia has 80 units of the local government, while the City of Skopje is a special entity. Overall there were two types of ballots: one for the election of mayor of the municipality, and one for the members of the council of the municipality. Citizens of the municipalities that comprise the City of Skopje in addition to voting for the mayor and council members of their municipality, also voted for a mayor and members of the council of the City. The first round of the elections was held on October 15, and in the municipalities where a mayor was not elected after the first round, a run-off was held on October 29.

The elections were won by a significant margin by the ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). Such outcome of the elections saw a major surprise, and a complete reversal of the political map of Macedonia. In the previous local government, the vast majority of the municipalities was held by the former ruling party, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). After the 2013 they had mayors in 56 out of 80 municipalities, while SDSM had mayors in only 4. After the 2017 elections, SDSM won 54 out of 80, while VMRO-DPMNE won only 5 municipalities, only one of which is an urban area (Kavadarci). Among the ethnic Albanian parties, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) won 10 municipalities (it had won 14 in 2013). In addition, the Alliance of Albanians (AA) won 3 municipalities, the movement Besa, the Democratic Party of Albanians and the Democratic Party of the Turks in Macedonia each won 1 seat, while 3 municipalities were won by independent candidates.

Overall, the elections were peaceful, although some incidents occurred during the campaign. One notable incident was the shooting, and later on the

death of an independent candidate for a seat in the council in Kichevo; there has been also an arson attack of the family house of a candidate for a mayor in Gjorche Petrov (Skopje), and a beating of a candidate in Shuto Orizari (Skopje). However, the general assessment by international observers at the day of the voting was that all standards for free and fair elections were maintained. While VMRO-DPMNE has tried to contest the results, they have been overall accepted as legitimate, and a transition of power on the local level is already underway.

Significance

The local elections were the first elections organized by the government led by Zoran Zaev that came in power in the summer of 2017. They were organized with a delay of few months, due to the protracted political crisis and the delayed establishment of the new government. From the parliamentary elections in December 2016 until the establishment of the new government, there was roughly a half a year period of uncertainty, mass protests, and violence in the parliament. This period, in the eyes of the new government, as well as the European Union and the US has been seen as a period of transition from what has been deemed as an illegitimate rule of the government led by VMRO-DPMNE in the last several years, in particular after the revelation of evidence of significant abuse of power after 2015. The local elections were therefore framed as an important milestone in concluding the period of transition of power.

The interpretation of the local elections as the final act of the transition of power has been also based on the fact that the largest governing party, the SDSM is not the largest political party in the Parliament as in 2016, VMRO-DPMNE managed to win more votes than them, but did not manage to secure support from other parties in the parliament, and was unable to form a government. Given the timing and context, thus, the local elections were therefore considered to be a form of a quasi-plebiscite on the work of the new government. Therefore, even these were local elections, the campaign and the

political discourse surrounding them was very similar to the one of the parliamentary elections of 2016. The central role was played by the two charismatic leaders, the Prime Minister Zoran Zaev of SDSM, and the former Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski of VMRO-DPMNE. The elections were also a test of the coherence of the governing coalition, which is currently comprised of SDSM, DUI and AA. As explained in detail in the last section, the SDSM-DUI link was strengthened by these elections, but they have alienated the AA.

Overall, the elections helped cement the power of SDSM, but have also put an extreme pressure on it. In the first months of its rule, SDSM had not been able to make a significant progress and deliver on its key promises, related to anti-corruption and economic renewal. One excuse for SDSM has been that they had one more battle to fight – the one of the local elections – before being able to govern seamlessly. Having won that battle, now expectations of the population are ever higher.

Why SDSM managed to win in a landslide?

The outcome of the elections was unforeseen by analysts. It is said that even the most optimistic voices within SDSM did not predict victory by such a huge margin, especially in many areas that are considered to traditionally vote for VMRO-DPMNE. There are a few explanations how SDSM managed to pull such a surprise off.

First, VMRO-DPMNE has not managed to adjust to the new circumstances. After being 11 years in power, Gruevski and his party are not used to functioning as an opposition on the national level. While in power, VMRO-DPMNE's rule was sustained by the ability to utilize public funds in order to “grease” its voting machinery – in the form of subsidies, promises of employment via the public administration, as well as offering a friendly regulatory attitude to party loyalists. Moreover, VMRO-DPMNE has also used the privileged and resourceful position of a governing party to amplify its voice

through public and private media. There have been also rumors (but also evidences, and cases being processed by the Special Prosecutor's Office) of electoral irregularities in terms of voters oppression and counting the votes in the past, which were another instrument that helped VMRO-DPMNE sustained its rule. With being in opposition, VMRO-DPMNE suddenly lost a lot of its instruments and was not able to mobilize its voting machinery. It is also quite possible that the instruments previously used by VMRO-DPMNE, have now been used by SDSM. The VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski has blamed SDSM for electoral fraud; however he himself being suspect of electoral fraud in the past, he failed to mobilize the public behind his claims.

Moreover, VMRO-DPMNE has been under immense pressure since the publication of leaked intercepts of their communication. Many former state officials and high-ranking party officials including Nikola Gruevski and his closest associates have been charged by the Special Prosecutor's Office. This has led to weakening of the party, both externally and internally. While previously appearing to be monolithic, now VMRO-DPMNE also faces internal divisions. During the campaign, the party did not demonstrate sense of coherence and consistency, and therefore lost a lot of support.

Second, SDSM has been strategically targeting and co-opting various coalition partners and civic movements in its structure. A number of SDSM officials today are former employees in non-governmental organizations, journalists and grassroots activists. It has also profiled itself as a unified voice against Nikola Gruevski, but also as the only legitimate voice against Nikola Gruevski – which meant extending a hand of friendship towards dissenting voices within and around VMRO-DPMNE; but also attacking smaller independent political actors as traitors and potential VMRO-DPMNE collaborators. While these moves have been at times seen as unprincipled and unethical, they have brought results for SDSM.

SDSM has also managed to take advantage of the ethnic identity politics, and mobilized a significant number of Albanian voters, both independently and in cooperation with DUI (more on that in the next section).

Finally, Macedonian citizens are utilitarian voters – they vote for the party that they believe will provide greatest benefits from themselves. Macedonia is a relatively poor country where the public sector is the largest and most secure source of employment, and where many actors depend on the subsidies or favors by the state. Therefore, they are inclined to vote for the party in power. Once SDSM managed to oust VMRO-DPMNE from the central power, it has automatically overtaken its status as a dominant party in the Macedonian political system, and a preferred party for Macedonian voters. The support by external actors such as the EU and the US for the Zaev government has greatly facilitated this process.

New elements of ethnic identity politics

SDSM under Zoran Zaev has introduced a particular novel element, and that is bridging the ethnic barrier in terms of recruiting party members and voters. SDSM has involved a number of Albanians in the top leadership and therefore managed to attract some ethnic Albanian votes in 2016. However, the major motive for Albanians to join SDSM has been first their contempt for Nikola Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE, and the contempt towards the largest Albanian party DUI which was part of Gruevski's coalition for nine years. Albanian voters also distrusted the PDSH (older Albanian party, which was also close to Gruevski), while were vary of supporting the newly formed Albanian parties AA (pronounced nationalist discourse) and Besa (pronounced religious discourse). Notably, however, the majority of Albanian voters do not vote which by many is interpreted as a form of political protest.

During the local elections, however, SDSM went one step further. Having rehabilitated DUI (as its presence in the Parliament was necessary to form a ruling coalition), now SDSM formed pacts with DUI in several municipalities

with it, including in the City of Skopje, where Albanians are 23% of the population, and some of the municipalities within Skopje are Albanian-dominated. The deal was that DUI will support SDSM's candidate for mayor of Skopje and in Macedonian-dominated municipalities, while SDSM will support DUI's candidates in a number of Albanian-dominated municipalities across the country. The support consisted of both not nominating own candidates to compete with the coalition partner's ones, but also in pro-actively seeking party members and supporters to vote for the coalition partner.

While this was a successful strategy for both SDSM and DUI, it has also backfired to a certain extent. Overall, its ever closer relationship with DUI is seen by voters of all ethnic background and in particular among ethnic Albanians as a betrayal of the anti-Gruevski struggle. While in opposition SDSM heavily criticized DUI as an accomplice to VMRO-DPMNE, and the new moves are seen as rehabilitation of DUI. In some Albanian-dominated areas, Albanian parties such as AA (which is also part of the government) complained that with the intervention of SDSM, ethnic Macedonians have compromised the will of the majority of ethnic Albanians.