



Weekly Briefing

Macedonia Political briefing:
Understanding the Regime Change in Macedonia in 2017 and its
Consequences
Anastas Vangeli

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Understanding the Regime Change in Macedonia in 2017 and its Consequences

Context

2017 was the year when after eleven years long rule of VMRO-DPMNE, a two years long protracted political crisis that brought the country on the verge of collapse, and after significant delays in the process of peaceful transition of power accompanied with a lot of dramatic events, Macedonia finally saw a change of guard at the helm of the country. As a conclusion to what has been a long period of protests, uncertain electoral outcomes, rumors of ethnic conflict, inability to form a government, obstruction of justice, and finally, a violent attack of politicians and journalists inside the Parliament (April 27 incident), in the summer of 2017, a new government led by Zoran Zaev of SDSM was sworn in. In October 2017, SDSM won the local elections in a landslide, effectively removing VMRO-DPMNE from all instances of power. By December of 2017, the first arrests of VMRO-DPMNE highly ranked officials as well as supporters of the party in relation to the April 27 Incident took place, while the long-time leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Nikola Gruevski, has hinted at resigning from the party leadership soon. In a nutshell, in less than a year, Macedonia has undergone a complete overhaul of its political landscape. Given the nature of the rule of VMRO-DPMNE that had a lot of autocratic elements, and given the nature of their removal from power that had a lot of characteristics of a “color revolution,” many consider the political change in Macedonia to approximate a “regime change.” However, whether these are just changes in terms of government personnel, or the new SDSM-led government will bring about the long desired substantial political reform, remains to be seen.

To understand the prospects of Macedonia’s politics, however, we need to understand first what happened in the country. And this is by no means easy. One obstacle is the fragmentation of the political scene and society in general.

During the crisis, Macedonia became a polarized society – where the binary logic between SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE has greatly shaped the way people understood the political developments. This report, therefore, tries to deconstruct both extremes, and offer an objective account on Macedonia’s trajectory of change.

How the political change happened

History is written by the victors. In the context of the Macedonian political change, that means that the new ruling coalition led by SDSM has gained the power over the discourse-shaping resources and has deployed its narrative of the political change. Its narrative, summed up, goes as follows: the rule of VMRO-DPMNE under Nikola Gruevski produced a lot of transgressions, and therefore VMRO-DPMNE deserved a severe punishment, which SDSM delivered. According to the official narrative, thanks to SDSM broadcasting leaked wiretaps that revealed the wrongdoings of VMRO-DPMNE, and thanks to its openness to embrace a number of other political and importantly, civil society actors, SDSM managed to gradually overthrow the regime from power, without significant violence or casualties. As the numerous newly appointed public relations officers of SDSM’s government say, “we managed to defeat the regime of VMRO-DPMNE using only a pen.” That its leader and other high-ranking officials were brutally attacked on April 27 is taken as an illustration of their heroism, and a justification for them to take high moral ground in the process of change.

Losers usually complain of foul play. VMRO-DPMNE, over the course of the protracted crisis and after being removed from power, has complained that SDSM conspired with foreign secret services to obtain the wiretaps, and that it conspired with ethnic Albanians and neighboring countries to illegally overthrow the VMRO-DPMNE government, promising in exchange great concessions, and paving the way for state collapse. They argued that SDSM provoked the public outrage on April 27, by illegally proceeding to elect the

former UCK commander Talat Xhaferi as Parliament Speaker, a move that enabled the proclamation of the new government (that Xhaferi had previously been coalition partner and minister in the government of VMRO-DPMNE has however weakened their case).

However, to properly understand the dynamics of the regime change in Macedonia one needs to move beyond the two mainstream discourses. In particular, while it is true that the core reason of the political crisis was the (revelation of evidence of) corruption of VMRO-DPMNE's rule, the mobilization of public discontent had a limited impact on the regime change in Macedonia. In reality, what brought an end to the "regime" of VMRO-DPMNE was the refusal of DUI, the largest Albanian party, to remain in coalition with them; as well as the political pressure applied by external factors: the United States and the European Union. The situation was exacerbated by the behavior of VMRO-DPMNE, and the president Gjorge Ivanov, which in fact catalyzed the political change.

While SDSM did manage to increase its support, it did not manage to win the Parliamentary elections in December 2016 (they narrowly lost) – perhaps because VMRO-DPMNE still could use the institutions of the state in its own advantage, but also because the strategy of SDSM during the political crisis contributed to the overarching narrative of "struggle between two parties" rather than the desired "people against corrupt politicians" narrative – resulting in less popular support than hoped for. However, while winning the largest number of votes, VMRO-DPMNE still needed to restore its coalition with DUI (the largest Albanian party), in order to form the government. DUI has used the moment of a political deadlock, and together with the smaller Albanian parties pushed for more rights for ethnic Albanians as a pre-condition for forming a coalition – but also, started growingly embracing anti-corruption and rule of law rhetoric – even though its officials were also rumored of corruption. Gruevski is believed to have finally agreed on the ethnic terms, but having stumbled on the anti-

corruption issues. Either way, unable to make a deal with DUI, Gruevski was not able to secure at least 50%+1 of the votes in the Parliament.

According to the Constitution, in such situation, the mandate for government formation should have immediately gone in the runner-up in the elections, in this case SDSM's leader, Zoran Zaev. Zaev was believed to have negotiated a deal with DUI. However, instead of respecting the constitution and transferring the mandate to form a government to the runner-up, Macedonia's President Ivanov (who is in charge of awarding the mandate) abused his power and significantly delayed the process, which led to deepening of the crisis. At the same time, the speaker of the Parliament, Trajko Veljanovski, was prolonging the constitutive session of the new Parliament over several months – with the goal to prevent a vote that would allow Zaev to circumvent Ivanov and allow the formation of a new government. Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE were employing an increasingly nationalist rhetoric, and have fueled the rise of an ethnic Macedonian nationalist movement. This culminated with the April 27 events orchestrated by people in and around VMRO-DPMNE in a desperate attempt to stop the formation of a new government.

On April 27, 2017, the parliamentary majority of SDSM and DUI indeed bent the rules of the Parliament, in order to elect a new Parliament speaker which paved the way for holding a vote on the new government – as the deputies from the parliamentary majority bypassed the official procedures. In an extra-ordinary procedure held in the aisle of the parliament (the stage was blocked by VMRO-DPMNE's deputies), the parliamentary majority elected Talat Xhaferi of DUI as a new Parliament speaker. In addition to the legal conundrums of the procedure, the election of Xhaferi was controversial given that he is a former Macedonian army deserter turned UCK guerilla commander in 2001, who then became minister for defense in the VMRO-DPMNE government. The response by the nationalist movement supported by VMRO-DPMNE was storming of the parliament under the pretext that the parliamentary majority committed an act of treason. Among the people who entered the

parliament, allegedly, there were infiltrated members of the security apparatus. People wearing masks attacked Zaev and other representatives of the parliamentary majority, some of these attacks considered attempted murder. The violence, however, had serious backlash for VMRO-DPMNE - it only strengthened the narrative of justified regime change.

The solution of the crisis, however, was not going to be possible without the international community. First, over the period of two years of political crisis, EU and US representatives were mediators of political dialogue, and have themselves issued strategic documents that still guide the process of power transition. Second, the controversial election of Xhaferi as speaker of the parliament was immediately recognized as legitimate by the international community, putting all objections to rest. Third, in the aftermath of April 27, a strong external political pressure was applied on President Ivanov, so that he does not further object to the formation of the new government. The only external actor that contested the process of the regime change was Russia; however, at some point, it also recognized the new government as legitimate.

All of this suggests that while SDSM's efforts and the mass mobilizations played an important role in ousting the corrupt government of VMRO-DPMNE, they were insufficient. At the end of the day the decisive factors were the switching sides of DUI as well as the external pressure of the international community – in the first place the EU and the US.

(How) did Macedonia change in 2017?

In what ways and to what extent has Macedonian politics transformed in 2017? The official narrative presented by SDSM is that with the political change, finally the end of the era of “Gruevism” is done. The new government portrays itself as comprised by freedom fighters, and devout liberal democrats, and is ethnically more inclusive than past governments. VMRO-DPMNE, on the other hand, blames SDSM for being national traitors who serve foreign interests and will do everything to appease ethnic Albanian nationalism.

However, a quick glance at the composition of SDSM's government reveals a complex coalition of various profiles. The two most powerful figures, Prime Minister Zaev and Vice Prime Minister Angjushev are tycoons who still yield significant economic power. The latter is rumored to represent a larger business clique, that used to be on good terms with VMRO-DPMNE, and has now switched sides. Zaev has also mended fence with a lot of former high-ranking figures from and around VMRO-DPMNE. Finally, the transfer of power would have not been possible if Zaev did not secure the support of the largest Albanian party DUI, which has for 8 years been crucial partner for Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE, thereby rehabilitating a significant portion of the regime that he originally condemned. This last point also delegitimizes the claims by VMRO-DPMNE that Zaev is exceptionally serving Albanian nationalism by being partners with DUI – he is simply continuing the trends started by his predecessor.

In terms of the political reforms and the public reaction, again, one may see that instead of the two extremes (SDSM's narrative of replacing authoritarianism with liberal democratic rule and VMRO-DPMNE's narrative of replacing patriotic with treacherous rule), a more realistic description would be that under SDSM, Macedonia sees change primarily in the government's rhetoric, with significant elements of continuity being visible in practice. For instance, even though SDSM has criticized VMRO-DPMNE of relying on an ever bulkier "propaganda machinery," the trademark of Zaev's government is the revamping of the public relations sector, with a new governmental department for publicity (so called "Ministry for Truth" by the public) being established, and a number of civil society activists employed as public relations officers that have perpetuated the polarizing political rhetoric. This has been interrelated with the process of "division of the prey" – as during the first governments of rule, Zaev and SDSM had to take care that all of their partners are rewarded for their loyalty (or indebted) with public offices – with political interest having precedence over governance priorities. For instance, even though

Macedonia is facing a public health crisis, the government has still not managed to agree on the appointment of a new Minister for Healthcare, as after the local elections the old minister became a mayor, while the power balance in the coalition shifted.

At the same time, while SDSM has presented a resolute pro-EU rhetoric (and politically, it has got the full political backing of the EU), it has stalled on many of the envisioned reforms (for which it has also been criticized by the EU), and most notably it has not changed many of the controversial laws established by VMRO-DPMNE in key areas (such as surveillance). Its newly appointed officials have already demonstrated certain unethical practices, and there have been indications for corruption as well. Finally, SDSM has inherited an elaborate and apt network of coercive and extractive state institutions, which it has also continued to use in a way that has alienated great portions of the population (i.e. there have been frequent raids of bars and restaurants under the pretext of financial or other kind of inspection). In this sense, while promising comprehensive reforms, the rule of SDSM continues as “business as usual.”

In the process of power transition, however, VMRO-DPMNE has faded in the eyes of its (former) supporters faster than anyone could assume. Still being the second largest political party, VMRO-DPMNE is in a state of internal disarray, bracing for an ever increasing number of its officials to be indicted on corruption charges. Nikola Gruevski, who by now visits the court once every few days – as he is persecuted for a myriad of cases – has significantly lost his public support. At the protests organized in response to the arrests related to the April 27 incidents, VMRO-DPMNE managed to attract miniscule crowds. Nikola Gruevski has hinted that he will be soon resigning from the position of party leader, which would be an end of an era for VMRO-DPMNE. At the same time, this sets the change for SDSM becoming an uncontested political force on the long term.