



# Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia Political briefing:  
Macedonia's politics in 2018**  
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## **Macedonia's politics in 2018**

The year 2018 will have to answer three important questions about Macedonia's politics: 1) will Gruevski and his collaborators be sentenced for organized crime?; 2) will the SDSM-DUI coalition be stable?; and 3) what will be the impact of the name issue on the domestic political landscape?

### **Will Gruevski and other former VMRO-DPMNE senior officials go to prison?**

In 2017, Macedonia's new ruling party, SDSM managed to gain power primarily running on anti-corruption platform with a promise to end the impunity of Nikola Gruevski and other high-level officials from VMRO-DPMNE. While still managing to win more votes in the parliamentary elections in 2016 than SDSM, once out of the government, Gruevski has been delegitimized as a corrupt, unprincipled figurehead who has tried to have his cake and eat it – and therefore suffered a political debacle at the local elections in 2017. On the way out, he had failed the expectations of numerous supporters and failing to deliver the promises to his cronies.

By the end of 2017, VMRO-DPMNE experienced a leadership change, with Gruevski planting his handpicked successor, Hristijan Mickovski, a rather moderate politician with a background in business, at the helm of the party. Rumors say that Gruevski has personally chosen a path that would soften VMRO-DPMNE and make it more cooperative, in order for him to get more favorable treatment regarding his corruption charges in return.

For SDSM, the total victory over VMRO-DPMNE came sooner than anyone expected. However, their rule can only be sustained only if the anti-corruption investigations against Gruevski and his collaborators in 2018 wrap up with harsh sentences – something that so far has not happened.

Of course, according to the political system of Macedonia and the division of powers whereby the judiciary is independent, SDSM cannot just arrest

Gruevski and throw him in prison. Instead, this is something reserved for the Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO), established in coordination with the EU and the US as an extra-constitutional institution with a limited mandate, in charge only for crimes arising from the contents of the intercepted wiretaps. VMRO-DPMNE has problematized the independence of the SPO.

And even though in 2018 the process against Gruevski seems less politicized than before and only happening in the domain of legal affairs (after getting in power SDSM has stated it will not interfere in the work of the judiciary), in reality it remains a deeply political question. SDSM's legacy greatly depends on the fate of Gruevski - if in 2018 he walks away free, many of SDSM's supporters will end up disappointed, while this will give new life to VMRO-DPMNE. At the same time, sending Gruevski to prison will result with huge boost for support of SDSM, and further turbulence within VMRO-DPMNE – which may either lead to a new period of a dominant party rule (with SDSM being the dominant party), or in case there is a public reaction by Gruevski's supporters, new societal conflicts.

A conviction for Gruevski would not be anything new in the region of Southeast Europe. In Slovenia, Croatia and Romania, former Prime Ministers have been sentenced for corruption. But the region has also seen other leaders, being persecuted and walking away. 2018 will give us the answer what happens in the case of Macedonia.

### **Will DUI remain untouchable?**

During the post-election impasse in early 2017, as a third political force in the country, DUI had effectively the last say in who forms a government. As SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE were almost tied and unable to form a government on their own, forming a coalition with DUI was a precondition for getting in power. VMRO-DPMNE failed, and SDSM succeeded re-establishing the coalition that ruled Macedonia 2002-2006. As a party founded from the ranks of the guerilla fighters of 2001, DUI is now in power 2002-2006 and 2008-2018,

and likely until 2020 (and beyond). It is almost a permanent fixture in the governing structures.

However, DUI, an ethnic Albanian party, has been for a long time considered an accomplice of whatever crimes Gruevski and VMRO-DPMNE are responsible for (they were coalition partners for 8 years). While remaining the largest Albanian party, it had lost significant part of the Albanian vote; moreover, the turnout of ethnic Albanians at the elections 2016 and 2017 was rather low. During the local elections, DUI employed a strategy of cooperation with SDSM that helped it fend off the surge of new ethnic Albanian parties.

Therefore, it is very likely that in 2018, even though there are no elections, DUI will face the challenge of more confrontational opponents among ethnic Albanians. One such force is the Alliance for Albanians led by Ziadin Sela, a party that even though formally is part of the governing coalition of SDSM and DUI, in practice is acting critically of DUI (and of SDSM's strategic cooperation with DUI). Its support of the Zaev government is said to be motivated just by the idea of holding VMRO-DPMNE out of power. Yet, after the local elections in 2017, the Alliance adopted a more confrontational posture, which may give way for even deeper conflicts in 2018. A deeper division between DUI and the Alliance for the Albanians in 2018 may lead to a deep crisis in the government coalition led by SDSM.

At the same time, SDSM also faces deep criticisms for having DUI in its coalition, although this will not lead to loss of its support among ethnic Macedonians (however, it has damaged SDSM's reputation among ethnic Albanians). What is considered a particularly concerning issue by the broader public, however, is the fact that DUI has so far seemed to be spared from the investigations issued by the SPO. DUI is believed to be a highly corrupt political party, and its leaders have been historically involved in a number of scandals. The fact that the SPO has spared them and that they have gained the status of untouchables, while advancing with numerous cases against VMRO-DPMNE officials, is by many considered at best an evidence of double standards of the

SPO, and at worst, a political agenda, which either way challenges the legitimacy of the process.

### **How will the name issue affect domestic politics?**

In 2018, for Macedonia the decisive issue, both in terms of domestic and foreign affairs, will be the question of resolving the decades-long name issue with Greece. A solution of the name issue is central to unlocking the country's double integration in NATO and EU, and the key for regional integration. Nevertheless, finding a solution, and in particular, communicating the solution to the Macedonian public, would be the hardest and riskiest task for any politician from the Macedonia, ever. One reason for it is the rather extensive demand from the Greek side, to change Macedonia's name "erga omnes" – meaning for all situations and usages, including domestic and international use, while also implying a change in the name of the ethnicity and the language, changes to be reflected in Macedonia's Constitution and on the citizens' ID cards. This is considered rather humiliating by the majority of ethnic Macedonians. As for the state, aside from the emotional costs, a change of the name and all the previously issued ID cards and passports would also entail a number of financial and institutional costs.

Aware of the situation, SDSM has therefore promised that before any solution is accepted, Macedonia will hold a referendum. An eventual referendum on the name will be likely linked to Macedonia's NATO bid, in order to both downplay the gravity of the national question, and help people reframe it as a rather pragmatic step. However, while holding a referendum would help SDSM to perhaps secure consent for a change of the name, it will also give a chance for backlash and new escalation of ethnic identity politics. In fact, it is hardly conceivable that ethnic Macedonians would vote for a change of the name of the country of that scope. But it is quite possible that they will turn against SDSM and Zaev.

The name dispute with Greece also touches upon symbolic politics. Under Gruevski, the "Skopje 2014" project was considered to be the main symbol and

as put forth by a former Minister of Foreign Affairs, an open statement towards Greece, who contests the usage of ancient Macedonian past. In this sense, there was no doubt that the project is materialization of resentment against Greece (in addition to this, there were many other shady surroundings when it came to the project). Because of this, but also a number of domestic reasons (violation of urban plans, corruption, non-democratic implementation and just the project not meeting aesthetic standards), over the years, among opposition forces a tacit consensus developed, that once Gruevski is removed from power, “Skopje 2014” will be deconstructed. While in opposition, SDSM also employed sharp rhetoric against the project, and it also partnered with civic movements that had organized protests and were calling for deconstruction of the monuments and buildings. However, even in the early days of their rule, SDSM had changed the tone and argued that they need to be careful and meticulous in dealing with the project. The main argument now has been that deconstruction of the project will be costly, and that the government cannot afford that costly operations. So far there have not been any steps taken towards actual dismantling of the controversial statues that bother Greeks the most (those of ancient Macedonian kings, for instance) – but also that bother the locals. It is therefore an open question whether 2018 will be year when Macedonia will finally get rid of (some parts of) Skopje 2014.

Aside all the symbolic politics, at the end of the day, one must not forget that basically the whole future trajectory of Macedonia and perhaps even the Balkans rests upon the question whether there will be permanent agreement on the name issue, or not. In terms of the domestic political scene, it will definitely be a test for the endurance of SDSM, but also may give a chance for resurrection of VMRO-DPMNE or creation of a new right-wing party/movement. Yet again, DUI will be in a favorable position, as ethnic Albanian voters are much more willing to make a compromise about the name issue; in this sense, DUI can put additional pressure on the ethnic Macedonian parties.

However, the main problem with the name issue is that even if the status quo prevails (no new name is agreed), the reactivation of the topic itself arouses negative sentiments and affects the behavior of political actors. In other words, even if Macedonia solves the name issue, a crisis may follow because what is success for one part of the population (a name change), will surely be seen as humiliation by the others, and vice versa.