



# Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia Political briefing:**  
**Public manifestations of dissatisfaction with the SDSM government**  
**by (former) allies**  
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## **Context**

As a relatively small country, Macedonia in the recent years has developed a lively and heated public debate. Macedonian public personae are opinionated, and do not hesitate to voice their opinion publicly – especially when it is critical of incumbent officials. Even in the least democratic times under Gruevski when a number of oppositional media outlets were shut down or defunded, thanks to social media, critical voices were loudly echoing in the public debates. This trend of vocal political commentary seems to be continuing in the era of Zoran Zaev and the SDSM-DUI governing coalition.

Political opponents (in the first place VMRO-DPMNE and their supporters) have been traditionally and somewhat uncritically opposed to all of the moves of the government. This has been a result of the political polarization and the juxtaposition of the major political parties in a zero-sum constellation, and adopting of war-like political culture. In that sense, even if they agree with the policies of Zaev's government, VMRO-DPMNE would find a way to publicly express an antagonistic attitude; even when declaring support under the premise of national interests, they would find a way to express their opposition.

However, one of the most significant developments in the beginning of 2018 was the growing number of manifestation of dissatisfaction and open criticism of the government expressed by current and former allies and supporters who have notable presence and outreach in the public discourse. This has shown that after the initial optimism about the new government, many actors are now taking a step back and voicing a critical opinion. While this does not automatically imply a new political crisis, split or overturn of the government, or creation of new cleavages, it marks a substantial difference compared to Macedonia's political culture of the past decade, whereby there were monolithic blocks, with the governments never being criticized by people close to them. In some ways, this can be considered a new moment in the political development

of Macedonia. Depending on the ideological lenses one is wearing, this new moment can be interpreted either as a sign of burgeoning democratic spirit and political pluralism (and as such a good thing), or as a sign of splintering, fragmentation and political entropy (and as such a bad thing).

Below, we analyze some of the most notable recent outbursts of criticism and confrontation with the government by a former minister in the Zaev government; a former head of the largest civil society foundation that was politically aligned with Zaev during the political crisis; and two journalists who were among the most fierce critics of the VMRO-DPMNE governments, and initially supportive of the SDSM government.

### **Taravari's open letter to Zaev**

Arben Taravari is an accomplished doctor of medicine (a neurologist) who is a notable member of the Alliance for Albanians (AA), a new political party of the ethnic Albanians, founded on the idea that the previous political representatives of the ethnic Albanians, in the first place DUI, are corrupt and illegitimate. The AA managed to enter parliament after the 2016 elections, winning two seats. Putting aside the antagonism towards DUI, the two deputies from the AA supported the proposed coalition between SDSM and DUI, thereby helping them to reach the necessary number of votes. The president of AA, Ziadin Sella was almost killed in the April 27 events, which made him and the AA hero in the eyes not only of ethnic Albanians, but many of the opponents of the VMRO-DPMNE. Once the new government was formed, Taravari became Minister of Public Healthcare, but he soon stepped down in order to run for a mayor of Gostivar, a town with majority Albanian population in Western Macedonia in the local elections 2017. In the run-off for the title of mayor, Taravari had to compete against the coalition SDSM-DUI, which significantly affected his chances, but at the end he won the elections. After becoming mayor of Gostivar, he has had issues with the Government over education policy (with some of his competences being stripped by the Ministry of Education). Over

time, the AA adopted an openly confrontational attitude towards Zaev's government, which culminated with the open letter Taravari sent Zaev through the media.

In the letter, Taravari expresses outrage at Zaev for allowing DUI to sabotage the new local government in Gostivar, in retaliation for the lost elections, at the cost of the ordinary people. Moreover, Taravari uses the case of Gostivar as a pretext to blame Zaev for betraying the ideals of the fight against Gruevski, and for giving in to the corrupt governing ways of DUI. Taravari says Zaev had had an opportunity to be a national hero, but he missed it due to bad political judgments, making too many compromises and surrounding himself with the wrong people. The letter has a strong personal overtone, with Taravari arguing that he knows Zaev up-close and that he observed him from the standpoint of a professional neurologist. He uses heavy words to describe the Prime Minister, and among other things blames him for being hypocritical. Taravari argues that even though a year ago Zaev enjoyed great popular support even among Albanians, today he is despised both by Macedonians and Albanians. Finally, he warns Zaev not to become like Gruevski, and asks him to change course while he still can, but also to replace the people around him.

### **Milcin's criticism of the new government**

Vladimir Milcin is a former director of the Foundation Open Society Macedonia of more than twenty years. A theater director by vocation, in the past he has been also affiliated with the SDSM. In the period 2008-2016 he was one of the most vocal critics of the VMRO-DPMNE governments and one of the key figures in creating a broad anti-government movement which brought together various non-governmental organizations, grassroots movements and individual activists, all of who later entered a coalition with SDSM. Milcin has therefore been targeted by VMRO-DPMNE and its supporters using various forms of legal, political and media pressure; while becoming one of the most influential

voices among the supporters of SDSM and the civil society actors (a lot of whom are now part of the government structures).

In an op-ed targeting the new government, Milcin targets the former activists now turned government bureaucrats, and the SDSM-led government in general. In the text, Milcin expresses awareness that many of the people around the new government had somewhat felt intimidated by his recent criticism, and therefore he doubles down on his rhetoric. Among other things he called on Zaev to replace corrupt and incompetent cadres, and to come up with a strategy to tackle corruption on all levels; called for the institutions to investigate and charge the corrupt officials from DUI who were accomplices in the VMRO-DPMNE crimes; and for the government to be open and transparent about the negotiations regarding the name dispute. His words have then resonated through social media, as many activists who have formerly had ties with him, but also respected him as one of the key actors in the resistance against Gruevski have shared his text on social media.

### **Criticism by Trickovski and Sekulovska**

The last years of the Gruevski regime were marked by particular repression of critical media and media workers, which resulted with a number of repressed journalists to embrace Zaev and SDSM and support them throughout the political crisis and early on in their term in power. However, some of these journalists have recently also voiced various criticisms. For instance Branko Trickovski, an experienced journalist, editor and columnist, who had personally greatly struggled with the rule of VMRO-DPMNE, has been a hardline critic of the Gruevski regime and has been rather supportive of the SDSM government, recently wrote an article in which he rhetorically asked himself and the like minded readers how long should they keep on giving the government chances to prove that they can live up to the expectations. Trickovski points to the lack of intellectual and ideological depth of SDSM, while pointing to particular shortcomings in their rule, in particular in the way they cope with the challenge of making a shift in the public sphere. He argues that SDSM did not capitalize

on the historic moment by giving up on the victorious narrative (in the battle with VMRO-DPMNE) and not following through on their rhetoric of treating VMRO-DPMNE as a criminal organization, but rather engaging in quasi-peacemaking practices. He concludes that SDSM lacks political will and vision to rule, lacks political imagination in order to dismantle the leftovers from the Gruevski regime, and has demonstrated that it has inadequate political cadres.

Comparable tone was to be met in an op-ed by Biljana Sekulovska, another vocal critic of the Gruevski regime, and initially a supporter of the Zaev government. Sekulovska wrote in a particularly ironic way that “we must not by any means criticize the Zaev government” addressing the excuses made by government officials and their supporters for the unfulfilled promises. Sekulovska alludes on an emerging phenomenon of self-imposed censorship among the media, who despite the many shortcomings of the Zaev government, are refraining from engaging in a more critical coverage of the government because of the manufactured sense of prolonged crisis and borderline emergency situation.