



Weekly Briefing

Macedonia Political briefing:
Macedonia's Political Field after the Prespa Agreement
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

Macedonia's Political Field after the Prespa Agreement

Introduction

On June 17, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Macedonia (Nikola Dimitrov) and Greece (Nikos Kotzias) signed an Agreement by which Macedonia obliges to change its name, in exchange for Greece unblocking Macedonia's accession to the EU and NATO (more on this in the paper on Macedonia's external relations in June 2018). The name issue has already been the major topic in Macedonia's domestic politics in the past few months thanks to the lengthy negotiations between the two sides; with the signing of the Agreement, the intensity with which the name issue has been discussed in Macedonia's political debates increased to unprecedented levels. The notion of the change of Macedonia's name for both international and domestic use and the proposal to amend the Constitution to reflect this has polarized and divided the Macedonian public as well as the political actors in the country, continuing the trend of fragmentation of the social fabric. While the government of SDSM and DUI and their allies and supporters in the public sphere have been assertively promoting the Prespa Agreement as a major success for the country, a number of other actors have argued the opposite – that it is a major defeat, and its enactment needs to be prevented. There has been no (and there will be no) possibility for compromise between the two sides. Disgruntled citizens have taken to the streets to protest the Agreement, while social media had turned into political battlefield between the two camps. The President Gjorge Ivanov has also objected to the Agreement and decided not to play his part in its ratification and enactment, which led to outrage among the SDSM-DUI government and its supporters. This paper analyzes the immediate political developments after the Prespa Agreement was signed, focusing on the process of ratification, and on the political rhetoric of various actors.

Ratification of the Agreement

The majority in the parliament comprised of SDSM, DUI, DPA (Democratic Party of the Albanians), AA (Alliance of the Albanians) and BESA have been able to lead the process of ratification of the Prespa Agreement in Parliament. In parliament they have secured a simple majority in support of the motion (69 out of total 120 MPs voted for the ratification of the Agreement). Notably, however, one Member of Parliament, Prof. Ferid Muhic, nominally an independent but elected as part of SDSM's coalition, objected to the Agreement and voted against its ratification, attracting the scorn of other SDSM MPs and their supporters. The largest party in Parliament, VMRO-DPMNE, has opposed the ratification of the Agreement and left the work of the Parliament in objection to the way the ratification has been carried out.

The Agreement was first ratified by the Macedonian Parliament on June 20, 2018, only three days after the signing of the Prespa Agreement on June 17. This was done rapidly and with a sense of urgency – and arguably, without fully honoring the basic democratic procedures in the Parliament, especially since there was no debate or consultation on the Agreement beforehand. The ratification was fast-tracked, and done with very little debate in Parliament. It is also worth mentioning that the Law on Ratification was brought to the Parliament floor via the Parliamentary Committee on European Affairs (which is chaired by Artan Grubi, an MP from DUI), circumventing the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs (chaired by Antonio Miloshoski of VMRO-DPMNE). Classifying the Agreement as part of the European legislation and removing it from the Foreign Affairs Committee may have been an arbitrary move that has allowed additional acceleration of the procedure.

The President Gjorge Ivanov, however, refused to sign the Law on the Ratification of the Agreement. In an official letter sent to the Parliament, Ivanov has listed several arguments on why he is refusing to support the Agreement: in the presidential elections in 2014 he ran on a platform that was strictly against the change of the name of the country for domestic use and of any Constitutional

amendment regarding the change of the name; according to his interpretation, the Prespa Agreement by referring to issues beyond the naming of the country (i.e. history schoolbooks, etc) exceeds the scope of the previous UN resolutions on the name issue; according to him the Ratification procedure violated various aspects of the Constitution; and finally, he believes that the Agreement puts Macedonia in a state of subordination to a foreign country, which according to the Constitution is a crime.

After Ivanov's veto, the Law on the Ratification of the Agreement returned to Parliament, where the majority of 69 MPs again voted in its support on July 5, 2018. According to the Constitution, President Ivanov is now obliged to approve the Law; however, for this there is no deadline, meaning that he can delay the procedure until the end of his term. Without his approval, the Law cannot be published in the Official Gazette, meaning that it cannot become effective. This impasse has outraged the Government and the ruling SDSM-DUI coalition; Prime Minister Zaev has threatened to call for an impeachment vote against President Ivanov, while the Parliament Speaker Talat Xhaferi has pushed for finding a way to circumvent the President in the process. However, moving on without Ivanov's support would bring the process to an even more slippery legal territory.

Another challenging part of the process of the ratification of the Agreement is the referendum, to be held in September 2019. For one, the government will need to secure a majority among the citizens in support of the Agreement, which can be only done through a massive, but also further polarizing political campaign. Yet, even bigger challenge for the government will be to meet the threshold of 50% turnout, so that the referendum results can be considered valid. This means that they need to find a way to also secure a turnout among those who are against the Agreement. For this, they will need to work together with their political opponents, something that currently is not possible for reasons much deeper than the divergent perspectives on the referendum – as high-level members of VMRO-DPMNE are being tried for grand scale corruption, while

dozens of lower-level members are being tried for the violence in the Parliament on April 27, 2017.

Positioning of political actors

The leaderships of SDSM and DUI, the two governing parties, as well as Besa, DPA and AA have provided an unswerving political support for the Agreement, framing its potential success as a precondition not only for Macedonia's accession in the EU and NATO, but rather as a precondition for its survival. The leaderships of SDSM and DUI, in particular, played the most pivotal role in the publicity campaign before and after the agreement.

The major opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, positioned itself against the Agreement. It has organized several protests, and has voted against in Parliament. However, VMRO-DPMNE wants to maintain an image of a pro-European party, that is constructive and does not hurt the democratic process. Moreover, VMRO-DPMNE is a pro-NATO and pro-EU party. Therefore, it has been much less sharp compared to past occasions. Moreover, looking to the September referendum on the issue, the leader of VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski has called for the party supporters not to boycott the referendum, but rather to get out and vote against. So far, it was shown that boycotting is the most successful strategy for a referendum to fail; the fact that VMRO-DPMNE is ready to vote was seen as covert cooperation with SDSM in making the referendum a success.

In addition to the two major political blocs, the Agreement has also galvanized the political actions of non-parliamentary opposition. A number of nationalist grassroots movements and initiatives emerged, facilitated through social media. They have been vocal in criticizing the Agreement. Some of them have been not only critical towards SDSM and DUI, but also towards VMRO-DPMNE.

The Agreement has been harshly opposed by a number of small extra-parliamentary political parties that profile themselves as nationalist populist.

One such party has been “United Macedonia,” a pro-Russian extra-parliamentary party that played a visible role in the protests in the days after Skope and Athens reached the Agreement. In this, “United Macedonia” has embraced a radical nationalist rhetoric.

However, criticism for the Agreement has also come from the left wing of the political spectrum. The extra-parliamentary party Levica (The Left) and in particular one of its leaders, Dimitar Apasiev have been also vocal critics of the Agreement. Levica has based its rhetoric on the principle of self-determination and the pre-condition of sovereignty in international relations, while they have also opposed the rationale of the Agreement, that is becoming part of NATO. Levica opposes the accession to NATO based on anti-militarist, anti-imperialist grounds. It has also threatened legal action regarding the Agreement, arguing that it violates the Constitution of Macedonia).

Conclusion

The turbulent developments following the signing of the Prespa Agreement have been central to the reshaping of Macedonia’s political field and will determine its future trajectory. The political developments and prospects with regards to the ratification of the Prespa Agreement resemble a continuation of the “politics as war” and the weakening of the institutions of the system; the positioning of the various political actors in its aftermath shows that the country is again experiencing entrenchment of political actors. In many ways, Macedonia is gearing for yet another political crisis, with the legitimacy of the government, Parliament, President, and potentially part of the judiciary (should the disputes end up being brought to the court) being on the line.

The main challenge for the near future is that the problem of the acceptance of the Agreement is a zero-sum game; moreover, it is centered on a sensitive issue that stirs emotions among the population; and the arguments offered by all sides are hyperbolic. For everyone involved, not winning equals apocalypse. This gives little hope that a civil discussion will be established by the day of the

referendum. On the contrary, once the referendum is officially announced, it may further add fuel to the fire.