



Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia political briefing:
Macedonian Politics in 2018**
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Macedonian Politics in 2018

Introduction

There were several political developments that marked 2018 in Macedonia, that can be analyzed as belonging to two inter-related processes: a) the domestic political contradictions regarding the prospects for resolution of the name dispute with Greece, and b) the political implications of the investigations, indictments and sentences of former government officials of VMRO-DPMNE on charges that range from grand corruption to plotting for terrorism and subverting the Constitutional order through inciting and coordinating the violence in Parliament that took place on April 27, 2017. These two meta-processes have dominated the domestic political agenda in 2018, and have had thorough and potentially long-lasting consequences on the future trajectory of the country. From today's vantage point, it seems that Macedonia's political crisis that started in late 2014, has still not been overcome, as the polarization and uncertainty in society are ever stronger.

The Name Issue

Greece's objection to the use of the name "Macedonia" by the Macedonian government has been a major source of political instability since the independence of the country. After the Interim Agreement signed in 1995, however, there was a period of stabilization in the relations between the two countries, which ended with the Greek veto for Macedonia's accession to NATO in 2008 and the subsequent "antiquization" campaign in Macedonia. In the last decade the name issue became an obstacle for Macedonia's accession to NATO and EU, which have been the two core strategic priorities to all Macedonian governments since the independence; this has made the name issue a strategic one. NATO and EU became stakeholders in the process, and have pushed for a solution. VMRO-DPMNE did not have success in their attempts to solve the issue and arguably have worsened the relations with Greece by 2016; however, the government led by SDSM, in power since 2017, has shown much more willingness to solve the issue. By 2018, it was clear that the name issue will be on top of their agenda; throughout the year, the efforts to solve the issue moved forward with unprecedented intensity, by all means possible, and at all costs. The major ethnic Albanian party, DUI, has also been vocally supporting a compromise.

In the first half of 2018, there were numerous meetings between the Macedonian and Greek heads of governments Zaev and Tsipras and chief diplomats Dimitrov and Kotzias (before he resigned). This was an example of opaque diplomacy, that for several months produced vague promises about what will be agreed, and when. The Macedonian government in the process demonstrated an unpredictable, often self-contradicting attitude, which however they justified on the basis of handling a rather sensitive issue that requires certain level of classification; on the other hand, their opponents blamed them for betraying the country and the people. The positions of the Macedonian government was challenged by the parliamentary opposition led by VMRO-DPMNE, and by a number of extra-parliamentary actors from all parts of the political spectrum.

On June 17, 2018, Macedonia and Greece signed the Prespa Agreement which stipulated that Macedonia will change its name into “North Macedonia” for universal use and will make a number of other Constitutional Amendments as required by Greece, while Greece committed to supporting Macedonia's accession into NATO and the EU. The agreement caused a number of and controversies, and lasting political divisions. While some citizens saw this as a big step forward, for others it was seen as a major defeat, with few opinions being voiced in between the two extreme interpretations. Paradoxically, while the Agreement had the purpose to solve the issue, at least on the short term, it managed to re-establish it as the most significant political lines of division that has hijacked the public debate and the policy processes in the country. In other words, the name issue completely took over the political agenda as it subsumed a number of other core issues.

For one, the name issue has been used by the SDSM-DUI government to cover up a lot of their other shortcomings. In this sense, the solution (and lack thereof) of the name issue served as an “excuse.” For instance, when faced with tough questions and criticism about the economic performance, government officials argued that among other things, things will get better once the name issue is solved. When asked about the lack of reforms, they have argued that a number of issues will have to wait until the name issue is solved.

At the same time, the name issue served in order to reframe a number of core issues as dependent on an urgent compromise with Greece – nothing could be anymore discussed outside of the new reference framework. For instance, as the overwhelming majority of ethnic Albanians were in favor of a compromise with Greece, while ethnic Macedonians were split with a slight majority was against, the name issue inevitably added new impetus to the discussion of inter-ethnic relations. Throughout a lot of these discussions, it was hinted that unless the name issue is solved, Macedonia may soon experience a new ethnic conflict.

This was related, on the other hand, to the international dimension of the name issue. The government, as well as the representatives of the NATO, EU, US and the Western European governments have shaped a discourse by which the solution of the name issue became a *de facto* political condition for Macedonia to join NATO and EU, but also a condition for maintaining stability and peace in the country and the region (not the least because it was argued that a failure would result in ethnic tensions). Yet, while the hypothesis on inter-ethnic tensions was never proved to be true, the name issue certainly led to perhaps the gravest and irreparable intra-ethnic political division (among ethnic-Macedonians).

As part of the Agreement, Macedonia held a referendum on the name change on September 30; however the official question on the ballot was rather complicated, and according to the critics, misleading (it read “Are you in favor of European Union and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between the Macedonia and Greece?”). While the government led the campaign in favor of the Agreement by stimulating a fierce nation-wide mobilization, there was no official campaign against – VMRO-DPMNE while opposing the Agreement, did not take a final stance, balancing between its desire to remain in good relations with the “international community” that overwhelmingly supported the Agreement on one hand, and the party membership that overwhelmingly opposed the agreement and called for boycott of the referendum on the other. As a result of its awkward political rhetoric, a number of nationalists have turned against VMRO-DPMNE as well. At the end of the day, despite the fierce governmental campaign, the referendum did not meet the needed threshold. Nevertheless, the outcome was still interpreted as a success by the government, as the vast majority of the voters voted in favor of the Agreement. This caused further polarization in the society, as now the solution of the name issue also touched upon discussion of core democratic institutions and processes.

Following the referendum, the process of changing the name of Macedonia moved to the Parliament, where the ruling coalition scrambled to win over the support from several opposition MPs in order to secure a two thirds majority in order to pass amendments to the Constitution. At this point, the name issue blended in with some of the most sensitive legal processes; as some of the VMRO-DPMNE MPs who are investigated, indicted or in some ways implicated in various legal cases split from their party, and voted in favor of the Constitutional amendments, whereas the government initiated a process of reconciliation that includes pardoning for some of these people. For breaking the ranks, the VMRO-DPMNE splittists have been severely criticized by their party as well as other actors who oppose the change of the name of the country. At the

same time, this has precipitated the implosion and the further weakening of VMRO-DPMNE.

Importantly, the name issue has inspired the emergence of new radical movements and given fuel to minor political parties in the country. As VMRO-DPMNE in the last months of the year has left an impression of being unable to consolidate its act, the vacuum on the political stage has been filled by a plethora of actors. President Gjorge Ivanov, who for the greater part of his nine years in office has been overshadowed by the rule of VMRO-DPMNE, has emerged as a fierce opponent of the name change, and refused to sign the Constitutional amendments. New ethnic nationalist movements (including a potent alt-right online movement that called for boycott of the referendum) have also thrived in the new constellation, and so have the rather fringe pro-Russian elements in society. However, many other actors outside of the mainstream – including some progressive and the radical left have also emerged as opponents to the name change. For a number of people, opposing the government on the name issue had little to do with the name issue itself, but rather with the mounting dissatisfaction. At the same time, no one seemed to sympathize with the awkward positions of VMRO-DPMNE.

Thus, the name issue, has greatly contributed to the reconfiguration of the Macedonian political scene. While SDSM and DUI did not gain much out of the process, VMRO-DPMNE lost significantly, but overall, the political space in the country pluralized. The net effect, however, has been strengthening of the position of SDSM and DUI.

Indictments and Sentences of Former Officials from VMRO-DPMNE

In 2018, the legal processes involving former government officials from the ranks of VMRO-DPMNE took full swing. Scores of high ranking VMRO-DPMNE members and their associates have been brought in front of the courts, and some of them have been already sentenced. The most high-profile case has been the one of Nikola Gruevski, the former Prime Minister, who was considered an unbeatable strongman for many years. In May 2018, Gruevski was sentenced to two years of prison for his involvement in the unlawful purchase of an armored vehicle that he later put to personal use. Gruevski appealed the decision, however, after the sentence was upheld, he was expected to start serving his prison sentence around November 9, 2018. In the most spectacular news of 2018, Gruevski somehow managed to flee the country, and taking a complicated route through Albania, Montenegro and Serbia, ended up

in Hungary, where he sought and was granted asylum on political grounds. In his public communication, Gruevski has been portraying himself as a victim of political prosecution fearing for his life.

Gruevski's escape was perhaps the greatest political earthquake Macedonia has experienced in 2018. The government has immediately argued that Gruevski was a coward and committed to securing his extradition from Hungary. Nevertheless, the public outcry was immense. Supporters of the government were disappointed that Gruevski was somehow allowed to escape. A lot of Gruevski's former associates, however, were angry at him – they said that by fleeing the country, he has left them to take all the punishment. A number of critical participants in the public debates, nevertheless, agreed that the government had a particular responsibility for the escape of the highest profile convict in Macedonia's history: the conclusion was that either the government was incompetent and failed to prevent him to escape, or had a secret agreement with Gruevski to simply let him walk away.

In response to Gruevski's escape and the mounting criticism, in November and December 2018, the prosecutors and the courts have intensified the rest of the processes against him and a number of other former officials. Sasho Mijalkov, Gruevski's cousin and a former head of the Secret Service, and Orce Kamchev, Macedonia's richest man and his close business associate, as well as a number of other VMRO-DPMNE high-fliers were taken into custody for the fear that they may also escape. At the same time, some of the major court cases against former officials from VMRO-DPMNE have revealed further evidence of potentially grave criminal acts, including the April 27, 2017 events. The current leadership of VMRO-DPMNE has blamed the government for undertaking political prosecutions, and has attempted at organizing mass protests in response, with no significant success. VMRO-DPMNE's leader Hristijan Mickoski has even argued that the end goal of the government is a total crackdown and a ban of his party.

The legal processes against VMRO-DPMNE have been greatly interlinked with the implementation of the Prespa Agreement. The change of the name of the country can only be done with a broad consensus; moreover, it takes a qualified majority in the Parliament. According to the statements by the government, VMRO-DPMNE has tried to bargain, offering its support in the process of the change of the name of the country, in exchange for pardoning, or reducing the sentences of its indicted members. VMRO-DPMNE officials, including Gruevski himself, have argued the opposite – that all the legal processes against them are one way to pressure them into supporting the change of the name of the country. So far, it seems that the former version is closer to the reality.

Taking all these developments into account, one can conclude that in 2018 Macedonia moved towards a new political reality: VMRO-DPMNE has been cornered and has substantially weakened; while SDSM and DUI, despite not having a particularly positive record, and despite all of the criticism, have managed to relatively strengthen their position. The ruling coalition had the upper hand in setting the tone on the name issue, but has also used the name issue against their political opponents.