




## **Weekly Briefing**

**North Macedonia political briefing:  
Operation “Broom:” Replacement of Top Figures in SDSM and in  
the Government in the Aftermath of the Presidential Elections**

**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](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)  
 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

# **Operation “Broom:” Replacement of Top Figures in SDSM and in the Government in the Aftermath of the Presidential Elections**

## **Introduction**

In the first round of the Presidential elections held on April 21, 2019, when the candidate backed by SDSM and DUI, Stevo Pendarovski, managed to win only 4.000 more votes than the candidate backed by VMRO-DPMNE, Gordana Siljanovska. Pendarovski went on to mobilize more votes in the second round (held on May 5) and win the elections. However, his performance – and the performance of the ruling coalition that backed him – was considered to be much worse than expected, especially when compared to the 2017 local elections, which the ruling coalition won by a huge margin. It was assumed that many people who had voted for SDSM and DUI in the past, in 2019 abstained from voting, being disappointed and disillusioned with the achievements (or lack thereof) of the government in the past two years. This was acknowledged by the top leadership of SDSM, including the President of the party and Prime Minister of the Republic of North Macedonia (hereinafter Macedonia), Zoran Zaev. In response to the underwhelming number of votes, their narrative was that “the citizens had sent the government a strong message.” The Government leaders claimed that they received, acknowledged and took that message very seriously. In response to the situation Zaev promised that he will work to fix the situation, and that the first significant move will be to replace some of the weakest links, i.e. ministers in the government, and other officials holding executive positions. To illustrate the resolve with which he was going to undertake such a sweeping move to remove inefficient and corrupt cadres, Zaev said that he will use a “broom” to clean up the party and the government. The term “broom” was promptly internalized in the Macedonian political vernacular, and dominated the news cycle and the political debate throughout the summer of 2019. This was a time when the SDSM-DUI government started to experience serious decline in popular support. According to the public opinion poll of the M-Prospect agency (May-June 2019), only 43.9% of the respondents approve the work of the government, whereas 51.2% disprove it – a significant decline from previous polls.

There have been various interpretations of the Operation “Broom” undertaken by Zaev. Some have considered it a mere publicity stunt, arguing that the replacements in SDSM and the government that were undertaken (and discussed in this paper) have not had any substantial meaning. Others argued that this was an unprecedented way of demonstrating responsibility

and accountability. Some voices argued that whatever changes would take place, were not a result of any kind of sense of responsibility, but rather a response by Zaev to the brewing intra-party competition inside SDSM and the governing coalition. This paper however, does not probe into the motives nor makes a political assessment of the Operation “Broom.” Rather, it provides a context and analysis of the replacements of party and government officials, as well as the political reactions and consequences of such moves.

### **First Phase of the Broom: Leaks, Replacements in SDSM and the MKC Controversy**

Before Zaev went on to propose a shuffle of officials in SDSM and the government, SDSM and its coalition found itself in the middle of an unexpected scandal. An audio recording that appeared on social media featured the member of parliament Pavle Bogoevski (a nominally independent member of the SDSM-led coalition who made a name for himself as an activist during the anti-government protests 2015-2017) allegedly making a phone call to a drug dealer, ordering drugs. The recording went quickly viral. Social media were abuzz with debates on the veracity of the tape, the true meaning of the conversation, and even the type of drug that Bogoevski was allegedly ordering (Bogoevski later claimed he was ordering marijuana for medicinal use for a family member, which prompted a discussion on the legal status of marijuana, with a number of activists arguing that Bogoevski should not be sanctioned for what he did). Bogoevski claimed that he was recorded by a taxi driver, and that the publication of the tape had political motivations. The case was additionally complicated because in that given period, Bogoevski was chairing the committee that decided on the Parliamentary immunity of ex-Premier Gruevski, who after being sentenced to a prison sentence for interfering in the purchase of an armored vehicle escaped and was granted asylum in Hungary. As the scandal escalated, Bogoevski eventually resigned from his position in the Parliament on May 23, after having chaired the session on the removal of Gruevski's immunity, becoming one of the few public officials in the history of Macedonia who had resigned because of ethical reasons. His ousting coincided with the start of the Operation “Broom” and can be considered as the first step towards the “sweeping” process inside SDSM and the ruling coalition. In the following period, there were other leaks about SDSM and government officials – including the mayor of Shuto Orizari who allegedly physically beat up a critic, and the Secretary General of the Government, Dragi Rashkovski, who allegedly fixed a public procurement procedure – but these cases did not solicit similar response and had less consequences than the one of Bogoevski.

The first step for SDSM was to “sweep up” the party ranks, and the party took the first measure on May 23. The leaderships of 78 municipal party organizations were replaced. Addressing the public, Zaev argued that the main reason is the dissatisfaction with the election results; he believed that the arrogance, unavailability and the preponderance of party staff was a major reason for the failure. On May 26, SDSM terminated the terms of the complete party leadership (six vice-presidents, three secretaries, and all of the members of the Executive Committee). In the most significant move, the Secretary General of the Party, Aleksandar Kiracovski, has been replaced by Ljupcho Nikolovski, who at the time held the position of Minister of Agriculture. Kiracovski had been a subject of a number of rumors regarding potential involvement in an extortion case that would go on to dominate Macedonian politics throughout all of the Summer of 2019; as well as in other instance of abuse of power. On June 16 a new SDSM executive committee was elected, which now consisted mostly of old faces (10 of the 16 members had returned). Nevertheless, SDSM claimed that it had made important shifts in the internal working of the party and introduced the principle of “continuous sweeping,” i.e. an internal system of monitoring and accountability. However, this was disputed by political opponents who argued that the replacements in SDSM were insignificant.

Around this time, there was a new scandal, this time surrounding the alleged replacement of the acting director of the Youth Cultural Center (MKC) Ruse Arsov with Arben Shaqiri, a pop-musician who has been very close to SDSM. MKC is considered the beacon of alternative culture. Arsov was held in very high regard by many artists and cultural workers who believed that he has done a great job in rejuvenating and managing MKC, making it one of the few bright spots in the otherwise gloomy atmosphere in the country. In response to the news about the impending replacement at the helm of MKC, dozens of cultural workers had signed a petition, in which they argued that based on the record of Arsov, juxtaposed against the lack of experience and familiarity of Shaqiri with the alternative culture, the government should reconsider its decision and, as they said, “do not touch MKC.” Notably, a number of the petitioners were former supporters of the SDSM government, some of them also being active participants in the protest movements 2015-2017. While MKC carries little political weight, the artists and cultural workers who got involved in the matter have a particularly influential voice in the public debate, and thus MKC emerged as another hot political issue related to the Operation “Broom.”

## **Second Phase: Replacements in the Government and Reactions**

The major question related to the the Operation “Broom” concerned the future make-up of the Government, and what would be the political consequences for the country. Initially, there were reports that SDSM and DUI started consultations about developing a vetting system for members of the government and employees in the public administration. By the end of May, SDSM announced that aside from the changes in the cabinet, a number of directors of publicly owned enterprises, publicly managed companies, directorates, agencies, funds and inspectorates will be also replaced as part of the Operation Broom. In the beginning of June, Prime Minister Zaev reframed the question of the make-up of the government as related to the question whether Macedonia will be awarded a date for kicking off the EU accession negotiations. Zaev had scheduled a meeting with the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, during which he expected to gain clear insight whether Macedonia will get “the date” or not. According to him, should Macedonia not be awarded a date for starting the talks, it was possible that he would disband the government and go for early elections. In case of Macedonia starting the negotiations, he would proceed with cadre replacements, and wait for the regular elections in 2020. He also claimed that he has a clear idea who needs to be replaced, and that these decisions have been negotiated with the various partners.

The Zaev-Merkel meeting took place on June 13; Zaev interpreted the conversations with the Chancellor as a guarantee that Macedonia will start its EU accession negotiations soon (which ultimately turned out to be wrong, as the opening of the negotiations has been delayed again), which meant that there will be no early elections, and that the government will undergo cadre changes. In the following period, the public debate was dominated by the question of the replacement of top officials, with various voices offering their explanation who needs to be replaced and why. According to a public opinion poll released by the news agency Makfax, the public was particularly dissatisfied with the work of several ministers – Sadula Duraki (Minister of Environment, DUI), Venko Filipche (Healthcare, SDSM), Bujar Osmani (Vice-Prime Minister in Charge of European Integration, DUI), Kocho Angjushev (Vice-Prime Minister in Charge of Economic Affairs, independent/ backed by the business community), and Oliver Spasovski (Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, SDSM). The fact that some of the most disliked Ministers came from the ranks of DUI meant that Zaev would have to deal with the rather crude junior coalition partner, whose leadership argued that they would not be replacing their ministers.

The replacements of top officials did not correspond to the public opinion as Zaev notably spared the Ministers with the worst reputation, in particular those of DUI. On June 23,

Zaev submitted the proposals for the replacements to Parliament. The former Minister of Agriculture Nikolovski (who became Secretary General of SDSM and thus could not keep his position) was replaced by Trajan Dimkovski. Naser Nuredini would replace Duraki in the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Spatial Planning, as Duraki would now lead the newly founded Ministry of Political System and Inter-Community Relations (Duraki has been particularly disliked by the public as he is seen as responsible for the immense air pollution). Naser Nuredini was proposed as a new Minister of Culture, and Goran Milevski a new Minister of Local Self-Government.

In the most significant part of the proposed replacements, Zaev nominated himself as a new Minister of Finance, replacing Dragan Tevdovski. Zaev justified this move by pledging that 2019 will be the year of the economy, and that he will need to be personally in charge of the finances for his plan to succeed. This proposal immediately aroused strong opposition by various sides. Political opponents as well as some experts argued that such a proposition is not in accordance with the Constitution. The national Anti-Corruption Commission also challenged the proposal. In response to the immense criticism and the apparent lack of legal basis for the proposal, Zaev had publicly withdrawn the proposal for him to serve as a new Minister of Finance. He argued that he will be an acting Minister of Finance, until a new Minister is selected.

The episode altogether yielded a number of reactions among SDSM's opponents. The opposition VMRO-DPMNE has argued that the replacements were only a publicity stunt and that no significant changes had taken place, which shows that the SDSM-led government is in decline. However, other political actors had harsh reactions too. The Alliance of Albanians that had at times been part of the governing coalition, argued that the “Broom” was an empty shell, and that Zaev had no courage to get rid of the worst and most corrupt cadres in his government. Besa, another smaller ethnic Albanian party that has been on and off part of the governing coalition has also criticized what they believed is a “cosmetic change.” The representatives of Besa left an actual broomstick in front of the Government building to mock Zaev. The small ethnic Albanian parties had particularly criticized the enduring position of DUI, who they consider especially incompetent and corrupt. However, criticism came from inside SDSM as well. On June 26, Petar Atanasov, a Vice-Minister of Education, has quit his post and has publicly criticized the government for inefficiency and failed reforms.

Operation “Broom” however is shaping up to last longer and stretch well into the Summer and Fall of 2019. Zaev announced that 200 officials will be replaced in July, and that the changes inside SDSM will continue on the short and medium term. The one question left

open, however, is how SDSM will deal with DUI, whose stubbornness, as some insiders have claimed, is a major problem for SDSM and the ruling coalition. At the same time, there is an increasing number of leaks and rumors about illicit and potentially illegal behavior of influential figures around SDSM, including their potential involvement in a major extortion affair. In conclusion, Zaev's government is certainly heading into its most difficult period after coming into power. As the public dissatisfaction and the pressure by opponents are building up, Zaev is caught between the public outcry and the political calculations, which certainly prevents the government (and the public) to focus on meaningful issues such as the reform process or the development of the economy, while threatening to pull the country into yet another political crisis.