



Weekly Briefing

North Macedonia political briefing:

Macedonian politics in 2020

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

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Introduction

The Republic of North Macedonia (hereinafter Macedonia) heads into 2020 after another tumultuous year of domestic division and infighting, disappointment in terms of its foreign affairs, and with a date of yet another early parliamentary election. The country is mired in new grand corruption scandals implicating parts of the SDSM-led government, while the old ones concerning the VMRO-DPMNE-led governments from the past are still to be successfully concluded. Ethno-nationalism and ethno-partisan tribalism is still a major mobilizing force among different communities. At the same time, the hope that the situation in the country can be improved is shared only by a minority of Macedonian citizens, as most of them feel let down by the political elites. In such a situation, it is quite difficult for one to remain optimistic when it comes to Macedonian politics in 2020.

Elections and Party Politics

The central political event in 2020 will be the early parliamentary elections, scheduled for April 12, 2020. These will be the fifth early elections in the country in a row (after the ones in 2008, 2011, 2014, and 2016), planned to be held few months ahead of the regular time (December 2020). The last regular parliamentary elections were held in 2006. As early elections mean that there is some kind of dysfunction or disruption that prevents the incumbent government of successfully doing its daily work, one can deduce that the Macedonian system has experienced such disruptions for fourteen years now.

SDSM enters 2020 as the most dominant political force in Macedonian politics. After coming in power in 2017, it has swept the local elections the same year, managed to maintain and solidify its position while performing the most unpopular political act one could imagine – changing the name of the country – and in 2019, had its candidate, Stevo Pendarovski, winning the Presidency of the Republic (thus SDSM now has the triple “crown” in the executive power – leads the government, dominates the local self-government, and has a President out of its ranks). SDSM has also seemingly tamed its ethnic Albanian coalition partner DUI. SDSM's primary objective in 2020 would be to become the largest party in Parliament (in 2016,

VMRO-DPMNE won the biggest number of MPs), and its secondary objective would be to ensure that DUI – just as in 2016 – will not side with VMRO-DPMNE in a case of VMRO-DPMNE winning the largest number of seats in the Parliament.

Yet, despite SDSM's strong position, the outcome of the elections is far from certain. The early elections have been called in a context of major disappointment with the country's bid to start accession talks with the European Union (EU) and in the time of another grand corruption scandal. After changing the name of the country, the SDSM and DUI-led government expected a smooth and successful ride on the international scene, which did not materialize. The difficult decision to rename the country was only justified as a trade-off for the prospect of quick EU negotiations start (and by extension, a quick accession to the EU, portrayed not only as a strategic goal, but rather as a *raison d'être* for the SDSM-DUI elite), and most of the resources and legitimacy of the Macedonian government were thus invested in this effort. The negative news from Brussels were therefore a major blow for the position of the government, and a wing in the sails for VMRO-DPMNE, who has doubled down on the criticism of the government, arguing that the change of the name of the country was done in vain, and that it is the incompetence of the ruling coalition that has led to the debacle at the international stage. This is what sets the stage for the SDSM vs. VMRO-DPMNE political war ahead of the elections in 2020. The “Racket” affair (to be discussed below) has added fuel to these tensions.

Based on the precedent of the political crisis in 2015-2016 and the Przhino Agreement, Macedonia enters 2020 with a compound government that will not be led by Zoran Zaev, who had to step down as part of the process of securing fair conditions for the organization of the elections. For the 100 days leading up to the elections, the government will be led by the new Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski, who served as Minister of Interior in Zaev's government, and is one of the top figures in SDSM and Zaev's confidant. As part of the agreement between the political parties, VMRO-DPMNE has appointed two ministers in the compound government: the new Minister of Interior (Nakje Chulev) and the new Minister of Labor and Social Policy (Rachela Mizrahi). Furthermore, VMRO-DPMNE is to appoint deputies in all other ministries (SDSM will do the same in the ministries headed by VMRO-DPMNE cadres).

The existence of the compound government poses a number of questions. It is likely that there will be problems related to the cooperation and coordination between ministers coming from opposing political forces. One aspect is the actual, day-to-day policy work – especially in the crucial sectors of the Interior and Labor and Social Policy. However, another potential ground for conflict may be the disagreement on the implementation of the Prespa

Agreement and the renaming of the country. While VMRO-DPMNE as a political party did not make any significant political moves to prevent or reverse the renaming of the country, some of its cadres have employed a confrontational rhetoric. Any display of such rhetoric from an official position may complicate the relations with Greece and imperil the implementation of the Agreement.

At the same time, tensions are not to be expected only between the major parties, but also within parties, and in particular SDSM. Its leader and former Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev, in the two and a half years in power has concentrated a lot of power in his inner circles, and established himself as the most powerful figure in the country, with a broad and comprehensive portfolio. However, he enters 2020 on the sidelines. While the incumbent Prime Minister, Oliver Spasovski, is widely believed to remain loyal to Zaev until the elections, he lacks the charisma and popular support Zaev enjoys. At the same time, an impartial political scientific analysis should always account for potential power plays behind the curtains to take place. In other words, with Zaev on the sidelines, there would be a leadership vacuum to be filled. This opening, in that sense, may be exploited not only by opponents, but also by partners of the former Prime Minister.

VMRO-DPMNE, on the other hand, has been on a downward trajectory ever since falling from power. Scores of their high ranking members have been investigated and indicted on corruption charges, and party officials have been found guilty for their involvement in the April 27, 2017 incident. The party has been trying to build a new image, while at the same time not fully distancing from the old faces. It has been struggling to promoting itself as a pro-Western, moderate right-wing party, while trying to cater to the support of ethnic Macedonians angry and victimized by the name change. On a few occasions, VMRO-DPMNE has called for protests, but these protests had a very low turnout, demonstrating the decline of the mobilization machine that the party once had. In 2020 VMRO-DPMNE will have an opportunity to capitalize on the shortcomings of the SDSM-led government, but it is questionable how much capacity it will have to seize the moment.

DUI remains the largest party in the ethnic Albanian voting bloc, although it is being increasingly challenged by smaller parties, including Alliance for Albanians and Besa. In 2020, it will work to maintain its position as a “king-maker” - hoping that one more time neither SDSM nor VMRO-DPMNE wins enough votes to form a government without DUI's votes in Parliament. This would mean that as the elections are approaching, DUI will pursue an increasingly ethno-nationalist agenda, and potentially even enter in conflict with SDSM, in order to strengthen its position among ethnic Albanian voters. An alternative scenario is a pre-

electoral coalition between SDSM and DUI, which would be an unprecedented move in Macedonian politics; however, this seems quite unlikely at the current juncture.

2020 may perhaps see the emergence of new political actors (such as the “Your Political Party,” an initiative started by liberal and green activists online) or the rise of smaller previously existing ones (such as Levica [the Left Party]). Nevertheless, as history has shown over and over again, the triumvirate of Macedonian party politics (SDSM – VMRO-DPMNE – DUI) has a strong resilience towards outsiders. Even though the electorate is greatly disappointed and disillusioned with the current state of Macedonian politics, it is to be expected that the three big parties will be the ones dominating the Parliament; what remains unknown is how they will group/ coalesce? Hypothetically, a continued compound coalition may also be in the works, if the outcome of the elections show SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE in somewhat of a tie.

Struggle with (Anti)Corruption

Aside from the renaming of the country and the developments at the international stage, another defining feature of Macedonian politics in 2020 will be the handling of major corruption cases. The legal system is in a major crisis, after only a small number of VMRO-DPMNE officials charged with various instances of abuse of power in the period 2006-2017 were successfully brought in front the face of justice, while the majority of them managed to somehow evade it. They have been either found not guilty, released, or pardoned; managed to win their appeals in cases when they were sentenced; and received suspended sentence or simply escaped in cases where they were supposed to head to prison. It remains to be seen whether in 2020 this trend will be reversed or it will only advance further.

That Macedonia enters the year mired in another large-scale corruption scandal – that is the “Racket” affair – which has implicated among others the former Chief Special Prosecutor Katica Janeva, as well as people that were close to the SDSM leadership – and allegedly some Party officials as well – is not a good sign for the war against corruption and the promotion of the rule of law in the country. The gist of the “Racket” affair is that the Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) was taking part in the blackmail of suspects for corruption (from the VMRO-DPMNE era), asking for large sums of money, and in return offering lenience and impunity. The explosion of the affair has been a major blow for the work of the SPO, which is now all but a relic from the past, but also threatens to bring down SDSM officials, especially if new evidence or leaks emerge in the course of the coming year.

When the legal system is under-performing, political warfare is set to increase. It is therefore to be expected that in 2020 Macedonian politicians will continue to make outrageous statements and lead smear campaigns against each other, they will use all sorts of leaks and materials to support their agenda, and will deepen the already irreversibly deep political divisions in the country. They will create two parallel spheres of public deliberation and bubbles of information, which would make the assessment of truth impossible. Fake news will be the standard for political communication, and in the cacophony of accusations, those who will yell louder will win.

In sum, 2020 will be another year of difficult, painful, political developments in Macedonia; however, at this point, this will be nothing out of the ordinary for the country.