

A perfect storm: Macedonia's political chaos and the refugee crisis

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*Macedonia has been experiencing a prolonged political crisis, with the country's Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski, resigning in January this year ahead of new elections intended to be held in April. **Dejan Marolov** writes on the roots of the crisis and how the present standoff between the ruling party and the opposition has developed. He argues that resolving the political stalemate will be vital if Macedonia is to meet a number of key challenges it faces, such as the country's location on one of the main routes for asylum seekers and migrants to travel into northern Europe.*



The Republic of Macedonia is facing possibly the toughest political crisis in its existence (if we exclude the armed conflict from 2001). As a result of the crisis, which was initiated by a phone tapping scandal, an EU-mediated agreement, known as the 'Przino agreement', was reached between the main political parties in July 2015 to undertake a series of measures to resolve the situation. This was to culminate in new, fair and democratic elections, which were set for April 2016. The resignation of the country's Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski, was part of this agreement – and it was this element that generated a particularly large level of attention.

The roots of the current crisis

Gruevski has been Prime Minister from mid-2006, which means he has governed the country for almost 10 years. As leader of the ruling [VMRO-DPMNE](#), he has won four successive elections. This continuous period in office has made him the country's longest serving Prime Minister. Under his leadership, VMRO-DPMNE has managed to see off as many as four leaders from the opposition [Social Democratic Union of Macedonia](#) (SDSM): Vlado Buckovski in 2006, Radmila Shekerinska in 2008, Branko Crvenkovski in 2011 and finally Zoran Zaev in 2014.

It is nevertheless interesting to note that in spite of having the longest consecutive mandate in Macedonia since the country's independence, Gruevski has yet to finish a whole four year term as Prime Minister. This is because the last three parliamentary elections were early elections held before the end of the anticipated four year period in government. The reasons for this stem from various external factors and the actions of the opposition, who have managed to bring about early elections, but also reflect attempts by Gruevski to capitalise on favourable polling ratings by calling snap elections at an opportune moment.

Despite this, the present leader of the opposition SDSM is still Zoran Zaev – the man who lost the parliamentary elections in 2014. He has refused to recognise the last election results and immediately after the voting process ended, he announced that he had evidence the contest had been unfair and undemocratic due to pressure on the public administration, the 'buying' of votes, inspection pressure being placed on businesses, and threats directed at individuals receiving social support.

However, Zaev did not submit any complaint to the State Election Commission (DIK) in the legally provided terms. It should be mentioned that alongside the parliamentary elections in 2014, Zaev also stated that he does not recognise the results from the presidential elections which were held at the same time. An interesting side-issue is that the Albanian partner in the government, the [Democratic Union for Integration](#) (DUI), also refused to recognize the results from the presidential elections because of their request for a consensual President. The difference between the SDSM and DUI was that the DUI announced their position before the elections took place.

The phone tapping scandal and plans for new elections

A certain lull followed these events until the release of recorded conversations – which have been labelled ‘bombs’ in the public discourse – at the beginning of 2015. Previously, Zaev had alluded to the existence of these recordings in several interviews, citing them as proof of the government’s undemocratic behaviour. He has stated in the past that this evidence will bring down the Prime Minister and that Macedonia needs a technical government capable of organising new democratic elections.

On the other hand, the Prime Minister accused Zaev of trying to blackmail him with certain recordings in order to force the creation of a technical government. After this, Zaev began issuing the taped conversations via a series of press conferences, while the public prosecution filed a process against him for possible criminal acts of violence against representatives of state organs – a case that came to be termed ‘Putsch’.



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Initially, Gruevski and the VMRO-DPMNE stated that there wouldn’t be early parliamentary elections as a result of the scandal. A large number of the party’s supporters who defended this line believed that the crisis should be resolved through legal proceedings, keeping in mind the ‘Putsch’ case against Zaev. Meanwhile the SDSM maintained the stance they had held since the 2014 elections: that a technical government is necessary for conducting new elections and a legal solution is not a viable option given the institutions of the country are controlled by the governing party.

Now at the start of 2016 the stances of the two main parties have essentially reversed. Following Gruevski’s resignation and new elections being called, the SDSM now prefers a legal resolution, while the VMRO-DPMNE wants a political resolution as fast as possible via the organisation of early elections. The reasons for this switch are related to the work of the Special Public Prosecutor’s office, which was established under the Przino agreement and is investigating possible violations of the law related to the taped conversations. At the same time, the VMRO-DPMNE has an advantage over the SDSM in the latest polling figures.

Political chaos

Despite these recent developments, more than a year and a half after the 2014 elections, Zaev’s initial request – for a technical government to organise early elections – has largely been achieved. Following Gruevski’s resignation, this is what is now taking place, which could be viewed as something of an accomplishment for the opposition. Meanwhile, two government ministers and the Director of the Administration for Security and Counterintelligence have also filed their resignations.

Gruevski’s resignation was welcomed in a rather triumphant manner by the SDSM, and was broadcast across the world via international media. But in Macedonia everything is not always as it seems. The resignation took place in accordance with the Przino agreement, which stipulated that the Prime Minister was obliged to resign 100 days before the new elections. However, as some of the Macedonian media have reported, it was actually agreed that this should be turned into a legal resolution and should apply to every Prime Minister in the future.

Little attention has also been paid to the fact that the resignation of the Prime Minister will have a delayed action in the sense that it is restricted by the scheduling of the elections. As it happens, Gruevski made his resignation at a time when Macedonia had received a conditional recommendation by the European Commission for EU accession negotiations to begin. The conditions required for the negotiations to begin were that the full terms of the Przino

agreement should be implemented. Nevertheless, the resignation of the Prime Minister has already been noted in the Parliament, which elected Emil Dimitriev (from the VMRO-DPMNE) to lead the transitional government on 18 January.

The situation in Macedonia is now relatively unusual. Under the Przino agreement, the opposition was to become a part of the transitional government, with two Ministers being appointed (in the ministries for Internal Affairs, and Labour and Welfare) and three Deputy Ministers (in the ministries for Finance, Information Society and Administration, and Agriculture). As such, no formal opposition exists at present in a legal sense. Additionally, under the Przino agreement, Deputy Ministers will be entitled to veto decisions made by Ministers.

In the meantime, a Special Prosecutor has been elected, which in effect will function as a parallel actor to the existing Prosecutor. Parliament was dissolved on 18 January, however with a postponed implementation until 24 February. The date for elections is intended to be 24 April and the Constitution states that elections should be organised 60 days after the dissolution of Parliament. All of these developments mean that even for a Professor based in the country, it is becoming increasingly difficult to explain Macedonia's political system.

To add to the confusion, after the dissolution of the Parliament, the SDSM, which had only just reentered the Parliament after a boycott following the 2014 elections, decided to leave it again. The reason given was that they cannot be part of elections until freedom of the media and balanced reporting is guaranteed, as well as a general cleaning of the electoral register. This is despite the SDSM already accepting that it would take part in the elections on 24 April by accepting the Przino agreement.

Although the picture is still unclear, the early indications are that the SDSM's Ministers will stay in the government until 24 February, when the Parliament will dissolve. Their Ministers will therefore participate under a form of postponed resignation: something similar to the postponed resignation of the Prime Minister, and the postponed dissolving of the Parliament itself.

The need for a solution

How is all this possible? The answer lies in the way the decision making process operates in the Republic of Macedonia. In practice, the decisions for the most important issues are made by the four leaders of the biggest parties in the country: two Macedonian and two Albanian parties. This practice was established during the crisis in 2001 and is, unfortunately, backed by international actors. Because of this, the Parliament has been reduced to little more than a forum for formalising premade decisions made by the four membered 'Tribal Council' with mediation from external countries, most notably the EU and the United States, whose representatives facilitated the Przino agreement.

As these international actors are in essence guarantors of the Przino agreement, there is almost no chance that the SDSM's intention to try and derail the elections will prevail. However, if the goal of the Przino agreement was to organise fair and democratic elections which will be credible and finally recognised by all participants, then this will clearly not be accomplished without participation by the opposition. Still, some compromises will have to be found concerning their request for reformed electoral lists. This problem is more complicated than it might appear as there has not been an official census in Macedonia due to a desire among the political elite to avoid disturbing certain ethnic positions. A compromise will also likely have to be found in relation to the issue of freedom of the media and possibly even postponing the date of the elections (probably only by 2-3 months).

On the other hand, with the polling showing an advantage for the VMRO-DPMNE, it is likely that the ruling party will stay in power following the elections, albeit perhaps without as large a victory as in previous years. The future of Gruevski himself, however, is harder to predict: he may return as Prime Minister, charged with resolving long-standing problems such as the name dispute with Greece, or he could simply remain as President of the VMRO-DPMNE.

The one thing that is certain is that Macedonia will have to resolve its issues if it is to deal with a number of significant challenges that lie on the horizon. Internally, the key factors that still need to be addressed are the building of viable institutions which are functional, professional and independent from political influence; establishing the Parliament as the pillar of democracy; ensuring the rule of law; and organising credible elections which are recognised by all participants.

Externally, Macedonia is also likely to be deeply affected by the migration crisis, which may return with a greater intensity in the spring. If the Schengen area is gradually suspended, with an increasing number of borders closed, the problems for a small country of two million citizens, which lies on the main route into northern European countries like Germany, are obvious. This year will therefore be a key test for Macedonia as a country, and especially for its political institutions.

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