

Choosing stability over reforms: Why Macedonia's elections should be delayed

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*Following an EU-brokered agreement to solve a prolonged political crisis, Macedonian PM Nikola Gruevski handed in his resignation on 15 January, with a date for new elections being set for 24 April. This has in turn provoked a reaction from the main opposition party, which resumed a boycott of the Macedonian parliament, citing serious concerns over the integrity of the country's voting process and the state of its media. **Misha Popovikj** argues that sticking to deadlines rather than prioritising essential reforms risks worsening the crisis, and that the upcoming elections should be delayed until later in the year.*



Political negotiations aimed at resolving a prolonged political crisis in Macedonia, which dates back as far as the [last parliamentary election](#) in April 2014, have failed yet again. Following protests in May 2015, an EU brokered agreement involving the four main parties in the country was put in place, which stated that the main opposition party, the [Social Democratic Union of Macedonia](#) (SDSM), would end its boycott of the Macedonian parliament and new elections would be held 100 days after the resignation of the Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski – the deadline for which was 15 January 2016.

However, while Gruevski confirmed his resignation on 14 January, the SDSM has not accepted the last phase of the agreement, and is now challenging the elections scheduled for 24 April on the basis that necessary reforms to enable free elections to take place have not been completed. Zoran Zaev, the leader of the SDSM, has cited concerns over voting procedures and the state of the Macedonian media. The main claim is that the voter registry has been boosted with duplicates and illegitimate voters can cast more than one vote.

Gruevski and his party, the [VMRO-DPMNE](#), accused Zaev of prolonging the 'agony of the people' and claimed that preparations for free elections are easy to complete before April. The VMRO-DPMNE did not wait long and decided to push for elections in April by



dissolving the Parliament and appointing an interim government, following which the SDSM resumed their boycott of parliamentary sessions. It is predicted that a later date for the elections would provide more opportunity for the SDSM to close the current gap in polling figures, where the ruling party has a significant lead.

Johannes Hahn, the European Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, arrived in Skopje on 15 January with the aim of preserving the agreed timetable. A day after the announced failure to agree on the new elections, Commissioner Hahn seemed more in favour of completing the necessary reforms for free elections rather than pushing for an April date. However, the situation is changing day by day and Hahn now appears to be rigidly sticking to the stipulated date of 24 April – which is arguably the least essential part of the agreement.

The recent failures hardly came as a surprise. The political agreement assumes that the parties can resolve their

issues through political dialogue. However, it is extremely hard to imagine how this would be effective in a situation where the state institutions appear to have been captured by the private interests of actors in the ruling parties, the VMRO-DPMNE alongside the [Democratic Union for Integration](#) (BDI).

A large amount of evidence for this claim can be found in the audio recordings published by the opposition in the first half of 2015. These wiretaps indicated a high degree of corrupt behaviour within the institutions, including abuse of office, political appointment and influence over the judiciary, clientelism in the media, election fraud, and embezzlement. This is a textbook example of state capture. Meanwhile, the country was deemed a 'hybrid regime' in the Freedom House Nations in Transit [Report](#). Others have dubbed the system an 'empty democracy.'

Therefore the main flaw of the 2015 agreement was that it was designed around the idea that actors and parties with alleged involvement in these abuses are legitimate stakeholders in the resolution of the crisis. Calls by civil society and smaller political parties to be involved in the negotiations have effectively been ignored and these actors have had only a small advisory role.

Prior to the agreement there were [calls](#) by analysts for a long term transitional government as one of the solutions to the crisis. The duration was one of the cornerstones of this model as it was obvious that prior to any acceptable elections, there was a need to address a recommendation by the [OSCE](#) to dissolve the merging between state and party that has developed in Macedonia.

This is no ordinary exercise. It encompasses the deconstruction of state capture, a reduction of state influence over the media, and shrinking the existing clientelistic networks between the parties in power and citizens. The scale of the challenge is evident, for instance, in the fact that Freedom House ranks the independent media sub-index in Macedonia with the lowest grade compared to other sub-indices. Meanwhile a public opinion [study](#) in 2014 revealed that only a quarter of the population completely disagree with the statement that political parties should be responsible for providing employment. Of course this is not to provide an excuse for the country's political parties: on the contrary, institutions should acquire necessary standards of integrity as a tool against this pressure.

The EU agreement is much less ambitious than such proposals. The most significant reform in the agreement is the introduction of a Special Prosecutor, tasked with investigating the allegations found during the wiretapping scandal and drafting charges against those liable. The other reforms contained in the agreement are more geared towards election reforms than dealing with the more general issues that exist in Macedonia.

The agreement foresaw the inclusion of Ministers and deputies from the opposition in resolving the situation, which was intended to address the state/party overlap in the country. While some information concerning abuses of office have surfaced in the sectors of the ministries of Interior, Labour and Social Policy, and Agriculture, it is still questionable how much of a deterring effect this will have for potential abuse if elections are to be held soon.

The undealt issues remain the voter registry and the independence of the media. A recent monitoring [report](#) by the [Institute of Communication Studies](#) found that Macedonian media at present employ 'demonising discourse' against the opposition and markedly favour the ruling parties. The analysis suggests that the framing of the newscasts might be 'coordinated from a single source'.

The President of the State Election Commission stated on Sunday that the voting registry cannot be cleaned up in time for the elections in April. With allegations that many duplicate identities exist, this potentially serious vulnerability is easily exploitable, and it is to be expected that previous irregularities will be repeated.

The point of the agreement should have been that no matter which political party wins the next election, the reforms would ensure the development of democracy and good governance. Some of the dimensions of the agreement, such as election regulation and reforming the media, should have been negotiated between the political parties on one side and civil society organisations and professional associations on the other. This would have raised the ambitions and provided a better environment for democratic reforms.

However, with the VMRO-DPMNE and BDI deciding to dissolve the Parliament and determine the date of elections without consensus, the future of the agreement and the negotiations is now uncertain. Ministers from the opposition have remained in the interim government, but it is not clear whether they will ultimately accept their appointment. It is likely that the SDSM will be put under pressure by the European Commission to participate in elections in April. Should they eventually succumb to the pressure, it will be tactically important to hold on to these ministries.

With uncertain negotiations, two 'players' remain possible important actors in the upcoming period. One is the Special Prosecutor and it is crucial that in the near future, the public sees charges being brought against actors concerning election fraud and the abuse of office. This will initiate a process of regaining trust in Macedonia's institutions and act as a strong deterrent against possible abuses during future elections.

The second actor is civil society. As much of the public attention is drawn towards the outcomes of the negotiations, civic activism has declined and bottom up pressure against corrupt institutions has dissipated. These actors are important in ensuring as much pressure as possible against any attempts to halt necessary interventions in securing free elections. Even more so, they can play a role in a last attempt to move the elections to later in the year when one can expect better conditions for a credible contest.

On the surface, the European Commission has chosen *stability* over reforms. However, holding elections with the probability of a boycott by the opposition looks more like prolonging than managing the crisis. The hopes of Macedonia's citizens have been placed in Brussels, yet it was always up to domestic actors to successfully resolve the situation.

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