

Macedonia has a new government: What next for the crisis-ridden state?

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A new government was finally appointed in Macedonia on 31 May, over five months after elections took place in December. [Jovan Bliznakovski](#) assesses the challenges facing the country's new prime minister, Zoran Zaev, and the potential for his government to bring an end to the political crisis that has plagued the country since 2012.



Following five months of political uncertainty since a [snap general election](#) in December, a new government of the Republic of Macedonia was finally appointed by the Assembly on 31 May. This was the latest episode of a political crisis that has afflicted the country since so-called “Black Monday” (in December 2012), when opposition MPs and journalists were forcefully removed from the parliamentary building during a discussion over the state budget.

The crisis accelerated in February 2014 when opposition leader, now prime minister, Zoran Zaev (SDSM) revealed evidence of illegal wiretapping conducted by the secret service. The December 2016 elections, conducted in accordance with a political agreement between the government and the opposition political parties, should have brought the crisis to a speedy resolution. However, the process was once again protracted due to political manoeuvring by the former ruling party, VMRO-DPMNE, which attempted to block the transfer of power. VMRO-DPMNE's leader and former prime minister Nikola Gruevski and other top party officials are now facing charges of abuse of power, illegal wiretapping and corruption.



The new Prime Minister, Zoran Zaev. Credits: [Naskotaska90](#) (CC BY-SA 4.0)

In January, VMRO-DPMNE failed to form a parliamentary majority, having obtained 51 seats in the 120-seat parliament in the elections. The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), which obtained 49 seats, claimed the mandate to form a government, but President Gjorgje Ivanov refused to deliver authority for them to enter power. Meanwhile, VMRO-DPMNE MPs filibustered the procedure for the election of a parliamentary speaker, delaying the

process for a month before the parliamentary majority decided to act unilaterally and elect a speaker.

Talat Xhaferi from the ethnic-Albanian political party DUI was elected as speaker on 27 April, but an angry mob [stormed the parliament](#) and physically attacked MPs from the SDSM, DUI and the Alliance for Albanians (AA). The MPs were held in the building for several hours, before the police finally reacted to protect them. Subsequent public information fuelled allegations of malfeasance from top police officials regarding the violence in the parliament and evidence of VMRO-DPMNE MPs assisting the perpetrators by opening the doors of the building and providing directions.

The incident provoked a strong response from the international community. Deputy Assistant Secretary in the US State Department Hoyt Brian Yee visited the country, upon which President Ivanov finally delivered the mandate to Zaev in mid-May. The negotiations resulted in the SDSM and the ethnic-Albanian parties DUI and AA coming together to form the new government. Contrary to public expectations, however, the newly formed ethnic-Albanian party “Besa” did not join the government cabinet, refusing to work together with the DUI and demanding concessions that the SDSM found unacceptable.

The formation of the new government brought to an end the 11-year old on power enjoyed by VMRO-DPMNE. It is also the first time the SDSM has been in power since 2006. Despite losing 9 MPs between two election cycles, the DUI will retain its position as the main junior coalition partner – a status it has held continuously since 2008. The newly formed AA completes the parliamentary majority of 62 MPs.

The new government

The public has high expectations for the new government. **Zoran Zaev**, now finally installed as the new prime minister, has promised to reinvigorate Macedonia’s EU and NATO accession processes, which remain in limbo due to the naming dispute with Greece. He has also promised to dismantle so called “state capture” across all branches and levels of government and create conditions for the country’s Special Public Prosecutor to get to the bottom of the wiretapping affair. His policy programme aims to either remove or radically revise several of the policies introduced by VMRO-DPMNE.

With regard to the country’s inter-ethnic relations, the government programme envisages advancement of the official use of the Albanian language and the languages of the other communities present in Macedonia. The language issue is controversial among the public and was one of the key factors that motivated the attack on the Assembly on 27 April. The government’s approach was promoted strongly by the SDSM during the campaign for the December elections.

Finally, economic development and raising living standards are singled out as top priorities in the government programme and in Zaev’s recent statements. Creating a “just tax system”, raising the levels of the minimum wage and the wage in the public sector, supporting domestic enterprises, reducing poverty levels, and making social protection and healthcare more accessible are some of the points that were singled out during Zaev’s initial speeches to parliament.

In terms of personnel, the government is composed of both former office holders and some fresh faces. The SDSM-vice president and former Deputy prime minister in charge of European Integration, **Radmila Shekerinska**, and **Nikola Dimitrov**, former chief-negotiator in the name dispute with Greece and former ambassador to the United States and the Netherlands, take the posts in the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Foreign Policy. University professors **Dragan Tevdovski** (Finance) and **Renata Trenevaska-Deskovska** (Education and Science), the cultural worker **Robert Alagjovovski** (Culture), and the former Interior Minister in the technical government **Oliver Spasovski** (Interior) are among the other members of government proposed by the SDSM.

The DUI-proposed members include the former Minister of Health **Bujar Osmani** (Deputy prime minister in charge of European Integration), the former mayor of the Struga Municipality **Ramiz Merko** (minister without portfolio) and

the former Minister of Agriculture **Sadula Duraku** (Environment). The AA participates with two members, **Arben Taravari** (Health) and **Suhejl Fazliu** (Local Self-Government).

The government cabinet now includes a total of 26 members (prime minister, deputy prime ministers, ministers and ministers without portfolio): 18 are filled by the SDSM, six by the DUI and two by the AA. Only four of the members are women. The public has been critical towards the government size and the gender disbalance, but also towards the appointment of some of the DUI's cadres and the appointment of **Kocho Angjushev** (Deputy prime minister in charge of economic affairs). Osmani, Merko, Duraku and Angjushev were recently targeted by the media in relation to previous corruption scandals.

Will the new government end the crisis?

Even with a new government formed, it is yet to be seen whether this is the long-awaited turning point in Macedonia's political drama. VMRO-DPMNE might still make a few attempts to block the transfer of power at the lower institutional levels. Much will depend on whether the new government succeeds in loosening the 'state capture' associated with the former ruling party. This will be the real test of whether the government can bring about a conclusion to Macedonia's political crisis, or whether this will just be another episode in its development.

The bigger picture is that the new government will have to break from the negative governance practices that have long been present in Macedonian society. VMRO-DPMNE's rule was criticised for the presence of clientelism, patronage, nepotism, and corruption at all levels, but these deficiencies have a much longer history in the country. The government must show determination to effectively break the vicious cycle of corruptive practices, and it will have to start by getting its own house in order first.

On 31 May, Macedonia may have made a significant step in its democratic development. The international community must react accordingly and help the country to tackle the immediate challenges it faces. The EU's neglect of the internal political situation prevented democratic process under Gruevski, despite the clear and credible signals on the developments issued by the political opposition, civil society and independent journalists. In the same way, the international community has allowed Macedonia's name dispute with Greece to isolate the country when it comes to EU-NATO integration, and has thus contributed to the internal political climate that allowed Gruevski to strengthen his position. It surely goes without saying that such mistakes should not be repeated in future. This stands both in relation to Macedonia, but also to the other countries in the region.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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