

Macedonia: All even, advantage Gruevski

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A snap parliamentary election was held in Macedonia on 11 December. According to preliminary results the strongest support (38% of the vote) was won by the coalition focused on the centre-right party VMRO-DPMNE, which has governed the country since 2006, seeing it win 51 out of the 120 seats. The opposition coalition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) came in second (49 seats). Both parties announced they had won the election. The Albanian minority, which accounts for at least 25% of the country's population, will traditionally be represented by the centre-right party Democratic Union for Integration (DUI, 10 seats), which has co-governed the country with VMRO-DPMNE since 2008, and the conservative Democratic Party of Albanians (2 seats). Two new Albanian parties which strongly insist on more rights being granted to the Albanian minority will also make their debuts in parliament: the BESA Movement (5 seats) and the Coalition for Albanians (3 seats). The EU has positively evaluated the election process and emphasised the need to form a new government as soon as possible.

The election was called due to the political crisis brought about in February 2015 when the opposition revealed recordings proving that the phones of most senior state officials had been illegally tapped on a massive scale by the Macedonian secret services. This scandal showed the scale on which the state institutions had been subordinated to the government led by Nikola Gruevski, the leader of VMRO-DPMNE. This culminated in his resignation in January 2016 and to the snap election (as a consequence of engagement by the EU and the USA).

Commentary

- The snap election has weakened Gruevski, as this is the first time he will be unable to negotiate with potential coalition partners as the dominant power. However, VMRO-DPMNE will most likely remain in power by forming a coalition with the largest Albanian party, DUI. A coalition formed by DUI with the Social Democrats from the opposition is the less likely scenario as this would require the participation of a third coalition partner. The strengthening position of DUI (even though it achieved a worse result than previously) and the presence of new Albanian forces in parliament will most likely make this party more inclined to focus more on protecting the interests of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia.
- The outcome of the election is a success for SDSM, the opposition party led by Zoran Zaev, which won over 50% more votes than in 2014. It owes this result above all to the

scandal provoked by the decision of President Gjorge Ivanov (nominated by VMRO) to cancel the prosecution of the politicians involved in the phone-tapping scandal. The opposition has used this as undeniable proof that Gruevski's party only wants to protect its own interests and not lead the country out of political crisis. The Social Democrats' promises to take radical measures to bring Gruevski's team to account and SDSM's gestures addressed to the Albanian minority ahead of the election were also vote winners.

- If a new Macedonian government is formed again by the previous coalition (VMRO-DPMNE and DUI), Zaev's party and the opposition groupings representing the Albanian minority will have very strong instruments to obstruct the government in parliament, and this is likely to provoke regular political crises. The opposition may hope that the EU will put pressure on the government to clear up the irregularities revealed as a result of the phone-tapping scandal. Nevertheless, the EU has hinted to Skopje that political stability in Macedonia – a key country on the Balkan migration route – is a priority for the European Community.