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Macedonia: the centre-right cedes power

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On 17 May, President Gjorge Ivanov, formerly of the centre-right VMRO-DPMNE party, entrusted the leader of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia party (SDSM), Zoran Zaev, with the mission of forming a new government. Zaev, who is supported by a coalition including not only his Social Democrats but also three ethnic Albanian groups, has 20 days to form a cabinet. President Ivanov's decision came after the SDSM's leader gave a written assurance that the new government will protect the sovereignty of the country, the unitary nature of the state and its territorial integrity, and will not be subject to the influence of other states, which in the context of Macedonia means Albania above all.

The President's decision, which has been positively evaluated by the EU and the US, ends a period of political stalemate which began as a result of the early general elections on 11 December 2016. These were won by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), which had been ruling since 2006, although they only won 1% more votes than the opposition SDSM. Consequently, the attitude of the parties representing the Albanian minority, who make up around 25% of Macedonia's population, was crucial for the formation of a future government. The leaders of the three ethnic Albanian parties (the Democratic Union for Integration [DUI], the BESA Movement and the Coalition for Albanians [AzA]) entered the post-election negotiations with a joint list of demands, including strengthening the status of the Albanian language and increased funding for Albanian municipalities. The ethnic Albanians' proposals also included changes to the flag, coat of arms and anthem of the state. After the failure of the Albanian parties' talks with Nikola Gruevski, the long-time Prime Minister and leader of the victorious VMRO-DPMNE, they started negotiations with the opposition SDSM party.

Agreement between the Social Democrats and the ethnic Albanian parties which gave the future government a parliamentary majority was reached in February, but until 17 May President Gjorge Ivanov refused to entrust the SDSM's leader with the task of forming a government. He argued that such a coalition taking power would threaten the constitutional order, including the unitary nature of the state. For the last two months Gruevski's party had tried to force the opposition to agree to early elections, and the SDSM & the three Albanian parties had sought to bring about a vote of confidence for a Zaev government without President Ivanov's consent. The rise in political tension was accompanied by daily demonstrations by Gruevski's supporters, who were protesting against the implementation of the Albanians' demands. The tension reached a climax on 27 April, when a deputy from the Albanian minority was voted speaker of the parliament thanks to the votes of the

opposition, leading to the building being stormed by demonstrators. As a result of fights between the demonstrators, MPs and the police, more than a hundred people were wounded, including Zoran Zaev.

Commentary

- The SDSM, the three Albanian parties and the VMRO-DPMNE, which has ruled for the last eleven years, only agreed to make concessions after the events of April in Parliament, probably out of fear that they could lose control over their followers as the ethnic and political dispute escalated. The agreement between the two major ethnic-Macedonian parties, the SDSM and the VMRO-DPMNE, is crucial to the compromise achieved by these groups, which probably would not have come about without the involvement of the US and the EU.
- It cannot be ruled out that one element of the agreements between the SDSM and the VMRO-DPMNE was a guarantee that Gruevski and his closest associates would not incur any liability in connection with the bugging affair disclosed in 2015, which highlighted the numerous abuses and authoritarian nature of the VMRO-DPMNE government. It is, however, unlikely that the SDSM agreed to an informal amnesty for all the VMRO-DPMNE activists implicated in these abuses of power. Explaining and resolving the bugging scandal (which primarily affected the VMRO-DPMNE, as well as the SDSM to a lesser extent) was the opposition's flagship slogan and one of the conditions of the agreement which the VMRO-DPMNE and the opposition reached (with the participation of the EU) in 2015. In recent days, the special public prosecutor's office set up for this purpose has launched an investigation into the finances of Gruevski's party. We should assume that the new government, in contrast to the previous one, will not interfere with the work of the special public prosecutor's office, and that at least some of the corrupt mid-level activists of the VMRO-DPMNE will be held accountable.
- Out of fear of being called to account for their eleven years in power, the VMRO-DPMNE party will probably impede the work of parliament (as the SDSM has done so far) and stoke disputes within the coalition, counting on the quick collapse of the government and further early elections. The first and foremost challenge to the stability of the coalition and the new government will be the tension between DUI, the largest ethnic Albanian party, and the newer Albanian groups, the BESA Movement and AzA, which have emerged in opposition to the DUI's policies. They are all competing for the same electorate, and so the new Albanian forces are likely to disparage the DUI, highlighting its previous long-term cooperation in coalition with the VMRO-DPMNE.
- The SDSM government will also have to meet the expectations of the heterogeneous group of voters who elected the coalition it leads. We should expect the Albanian groups to make strengthening minority rights their main demand, which will bring forth negative reactions from the ethnic Macedonians. Another challenge for the new government will be the public's expectations that the country will make progress on the road to Euro-Atlantic integration (entrance to the EU is supported by 72%, and to NATO by 71% of the public). In this issue it will be a matter of essential importance to resume talks with Greece (after an eight-year break) on the name of the state in connection with the Greek

blockade of Macedonia's process of accession to the EU. Unblocking talks on accession to the European Union and NATO, however, would require good will and commitment from key member states.

- The country's political crisis, which has been ongoing since 2014, and the bugging affair have strengthened the desire in Macedonian society for a purification of the political scene, to which the SDSM has reacted by declaring it will settle accounts with the corrupt governments of the VMRO-DPMNE's period in office. If the special public prosecutor's office has any success connected with the scandals resulting from the bugging affair, this will result in public condemnation of corruption, nepotism and clientelism. However, it is unlikely that the opposition's electoral victory will lead to a real fight against these phenomena, because they are systemic in nature, and were also present during the years when the SDSM held power (1991-8 and 2002-6). The public institutions, which the VMRO-DPMNE packed with its own people, will now most likely be staffed mainly by SDSM activists, who have been in opposition for almost eleven years. We should expect the continued politicisation of the state administration to impede the necessary economic reforms (unemployment amounted to almost 24% in 2016) as well as any implementation of the demand to increase political transparency, which will contribute to a decline in support for the ruling party.