

Four months of Parliamentary boycott by the opposition lead Nikola Gruevski to convene early general elections in Macedonia

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ANALYSIS
1 month before
the poll

On 15th April the Sobranie, the only Chamber of Parliament in Macedonia, was dissolved by 79 of the 120 MPs and early general elections were convened for 5th June by Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)). According to the electoral law the election has to be organised within 60 days following dissolution. This decision follows the political crisis that Macedonia has been experiencing since the beginning of 2011.

An early election after political crisis

Indeed since 28th January the opposition forces – the Social Democratic Union, SDSM and the Albanian Democratic Party, PDA-PDSH (i.e. 38 MPs in all) – decided to boycott the sessions of Parliament in protest against the freezing of the bank accounts of media tycoon Velij Aramkovski, owner of the TV channel A1 and the newspapers Vreme, Shpic and E Re. Velij Aramkovski was arrested with 16 of his employees in December 2010; he is accused of tax evasion to a total of 4.1 million € – an accusation that he denies. The freezing of bank accounts “is undemocratic and reveals an authoritarian regime which deserves no legitimacy” stressed the opposition leader, Branko Crvenkovski (SDSM), who demanded the organisation of early general elections.

“Nikola Gruevski is only interested in one thing: hiding his own crimes. He wants to bury the truth and remain with his own lies and his own media which are his megaphones,” declared the opposition leader. “Nikola Gruevski now has the Parliament he wanted, a parliament without an opposition,” he added. Four months after the start of the opposition’s boycott the head of government which is a coalition of his party and the Albanian speaking Democratic Union for Integration (DUI-BDI) finally gave in to the opposition forces’ requests. “The Prime Minister had no other choice but to respond to the opposition’s request,” explained the director of the institute Euro-Balkan, Jovan Donev.

The VMRO-DPMN qualified the opposition forces decision “as a crime contrary to the interests of Macedonia and its perspective for a European future.” “The irresponsible behaviour of some politicians may ruin the results that we have achieved,” declared parliament’s spokesperson Trajko Veljanovski who denounced the ‘artificial political crisis’ created by the opposition parties.

The SDSM which indicated that it would not give up its boycott of Parliament announced that it would take part in the next general elections. According to a poll by the Pavel Satev Institute three-quarters of the Macedonians (72.3%) are against the boycott undertaken by the opposition. The SDSM asked for the revision of the electoral lists and of the constituencies prior to the election; they also asked for a new law which would stop the government from promoting the pro-State media. The head of government granted the first two requests.

A Difficult Socio-Economic Situation

Macedonia has been experiencing a socio-economic crisis and also an almost permanent political crisis for the last three years. On 19th January last Skopje had to resort to foreign aid and obtained a 2 year loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF): 390 million € in the first year, and a sum that may rise to 475 million € overall. Macedonia has been granted this loan as part of a security loan, which is a credit line designed for member countries that have sound economic bases and an excellent history of implementing healthy policies but which are still vulnerable from an economic point of view. Many analysts fore-

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cast that this loan will not be enough and that the country will soon be obliged to turn to foreign sources for aid once more.

GDP growth totalled 1.2% last year and is due to reach 3.5% in 2011. Unemployment affects around one third of Macedonians and 30% of the population lives below the poverty line. The average salary is 250€, i.e. very much below the European average. A recent poll revealed that half of Macedonian high school students (49.5%) wanted to leave their country in the next ten years. The lack of professional opportunities and social disorder are the main reasons that motivate emigration.

"We have not witnessed the progress we expected," declared Stefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy on 6th April as he spoke of Macedonia. He pointed out that rapid reform was vital in the area of political dialogue, judicial administration and the civil service and also in terms of countering corruption; reform with regard to the freedom of expression and the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement (the peace agreement signed by the main Macedonian parties on 13th August 2001 to end the violence that was ongoing in the same year between the government forces in Skopje and the Albanian guerrilla (National Liberation Army)). "We have reached a critical moment: Macedonia can either take the path towards the EU for our mutual benefit, or it can regress," indicated Stefan Füle.

Since the return of former President of the Republic (2004-2009) Branko Crvenkovski as its leader the SDSM has been working to strengthening its profile as a leading party amongst the electorate. It is trying to take advantage of the – real – discontent of the people in order to return to power.

Branko Crvenkovski accuses Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski of not having succeeded in finding a solution to the problem of Macedonia's name which has led to conflict with Greece for the last 20 years. Since 1991 Athens has refused the idea of Macedonia taking this name believing that this is part of its own heritage (Macedonia is the name of a province in the north of Greece). Athens pretends that the use of this name may lead Skopje to claim certain territories in this Greek province. Macedonia joined the UN in 1993 under the provisional name of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). It has been an official candidate of the EU since 2005 and hopes to launch membership negotiations that are in stalemate because of the

dispute over the country's name.

The last general elections (1st June 2008) also took place early after the rejection of Macedonia's membership bid to join NATO in April 2008, a rejection that came after Greece's veto over the country's name.

On 4th May last former leader of the party and former Prime Minister (May-June 2004 and November-December 2004), Radmila Sekerinska was appointed as the SDSM's candidate for these general elections. "Radmila Sekerinska is synonymous to Macedonia's integration into the EU, she enjoys the respect of Brussels and Washington," declared Branko Crvenkovski who said that he did not want to be a member of the government if his party wins the elections on 5th June.

The mayor of Gostivar, Rufe Osmani founded his own political party at the end of March, National Democratic Renaissance (RDK). "The Ohrid Agreement has not achieved its historic goal because it was conditioned by the 20% principle, an ironic, anti-Albanian act. Today Macedonia is the same as it was in 2001: the violence against and repression of Albanians continues," he declared. "We shall fight for Albanians to be acknowledged as the second constituent people of Macedonia, that the Albanian language is defined as the second official language nationally and that the decentralisation of power is greater than it is now," added Rufe Osmani.

The RDK is due to stand alone but although it has rejected any coalition with the two main Albanian speaking parties – the Democratic Union for Integration led by Alija Ahmeti and the Albanian Democratic Party led by Menduh Thaci – it has not ruled out the possibility of working with New Democracy led by Imer Selmani.

The Macedonian Political System

The Parliament (Sobranie), which is mono-cameral, comprises 120 members elected by proportional representation (Hondt method) for a 4 year period. During the general elections the country is divided into 6 constituencies which each elect 20 MPs. The electoral system guarantees the representation of the minorities (Albanian, Turk, Serb, Rom, etc.) as it does that of women since the electoral lists have to include at least 30% of the opposite sex. The political parties, party coalitions and groups with at least 500 members are allowed to run in the general elections.

5 political parties are represented in the present parliament ¹:

- the Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), lies to the right of the political scale and was founded in 1990 by former Prime Minister (1998-2002) Ljubco Georgievski and has been led since 2005 by outgoing Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, has 63 seats;
- the Social Democratic Union (SDSM), an opposition party led since May 2009 by former President of the Republic (2004-2009), Branko Crvenkovski, has 27 seats;
- the Albanian Democratic Party (PDA-PDSH), was created in 1995 by Arben Xhaferi and is led by Menduh Thaci, has 11 seats;
- the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI-BDI), a member of the present government coalition is led by Alija Ahmeti. Successor to the UCK (officially dismantled in 1999), it has 18 seats;
- the Party for a European Future (PEI), was founded by intellectuals and businessmen and defines itself as centrist. It is led by Fijet Canoski, and has one seat.

All of the polls are forecasting victory on 5th June for the VMRO-DPMNE with less seats than before however (the party holds the absolute majority at present). According to the director of the institute Euro Balkan, Jovan Donev the opposition has very little chance of winning but "the SDSM will play the opposition unification card in order to reduce the comfortable majority that the coalition 'For a Better

Macedonia' enjoys right now."

According to the last poll by the Institute for Democracy and the association Centre for International Cooperation the VMRO-DPMNE is due to win 22% of the vote ahead of the SDSM with 10%.

As for the Albanian speaking parties the Democratic Union for Integration is said to be in the lead with 5%, the Albanian Democratic Party is due to win 1.9%.

More than a quarter of those interviewed (28.1%) say they do not think they will vote on 5th June next and 16.4% say they still have not made their choice.

Outgoing Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski is the political personality in whom Macedonians are most confident (20%). Only 4.6% of those interviewed say they trust Branko Crvenkovski ; 4.3% approve of Ali Ahmeti; 2.9% Radmila Sekerisnka; 2.3% Rufe Osmani; 1.7% Imer Selmani and 1.6% Menduh Thaci.

According to a poll by Orites, economic issues and unemployment are the electorate's priorities. One quarter of them (24%) believes that the VMRO-DPMNE is the best placed to counter problems such as unemployment and poverty.

Interior Minister Gordana Jankulovska announced on 19th April that Skopje had formed a task force devoted to the security of the elections on 5th June next.

Reminder for the General Election Results of June 1st 2008 in Macedonia

Turnout : 57,06%

Political parties	No. of votes won	% of votes won	No. of seats won
For a Better Macedonia, a 19 party coalition led by the Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)	481 602	48,80	63
Sun-Coalition for Europe, an 8 party coalition led by the Social Democratic Union (SDSM)	233 362	23,65	27
Democratic Union for Integration (DUI-BDI)	125 997	12,77	18
Albanian Democratic Party (PDA-PDSH)	83 678	8,48	11
Party for a European Future (PEI)	14 473	1,47	1
Others	47 710	4,79	0

Source : National Electoral Commission of Macedonia

1. Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for National Unity led a coalition of 19 parties called "For a Better Macedonia" in the general elections on 1st June 2008. The Social Democratic Union (SDSM) led an 8 party coalition called "Sun-Coalition for Europe."

The Party led by Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski is due to retain power in Macedonia

1, 828 380 Macedonians (of whom 7,258 live abroad) are being called to ballot on 5th June next to elect the 123 members of the Sobranija, the only chamber in Parliament (the assembly will comprise 3 additional MPs due to the vote of the electorate abroad).

The democratic nature of this election is the focus of the electoral campaign.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has dispatched a delegation of observers led by Julian Peel Yates. This includes 12 international experts who will be based in Skopje and 20 observers who will cover all of Macedonia. A delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe also travelled there on 17th and 18th May. The latter insisted on the importance of the free, peaceful, democratic nature of the general elections and on the need for all political parties to acknowledge the election results. The Council of Europe spoke of the vital renewal of the electoral rolls which have been criticised since 1994. Indeed Macedonia has registered 1.8 million people on the electoral rolls for a total population of 2 million inhabitants, which implies an abnormally high number of voters.

"The electoral campaign will be dirty and full of negative energy," declared Klime Babunski, professor of communication at the Institute of Sociological, Political and Legal Research in Skopje. The leaders of 30 political parties have signed an electoral code of good conduct.

On 8th May the TV channel A1, property of the media tycoon Velij Aramkovski, who is on trial for money laundering and tax evasion to a total of 4.1 million € and who has been in prison for the last five months, broadcast a documentary by Natasa Stojanovska and Saska Cvetkoska revealing the pressure made by the authorities on certain civil servants in order that they provide names of voters who are prepared to give their votes to the party in office – the Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) in exchange for the upkeep of their jobs or a promise of employment for one of their family or friends. Employees had to provide the names of fifteen people and executives 30.

The Macedonian Electoral Committee (DIK) led since 13th April last by Boris Kondarlo has said nothing for the time being about the scandal revealed by the TV channel. Similar pressure had already been denounced during the previous elections on 1st June 2008 and the presidential election on 22nd March and 5th April 2009.

The TV channel A1 has said that it supports the opposition parties in the election on 5th June: the Social Democratic Party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), as well as those positioned on the right of the political scale, United for Macedonia (OM), the Revolutionary Organisation-People's Party (VMRO-NP) of former president of the Republic (1998-2002) Ljubco Georgievski, the Democratic Rightwing and Dignity as well as the Democratic Albanian Party (PDA-PDSH) of Menduh Thaci, National Democratic Renaissance (NDP-RDK), created at the end of March by Rufi Osmani, and New Democracy (DR) of Imer Selmani (ND-DR).

Velij Aramkovski's trial started on 23rd May in Skopje. It was immediately postponed until 13th June, after the election. Macedonians living abroad are being allowed to vote for the first time in these elections. The Sobranija will therefore soon have three more MPs (one representing the voters living in Europe and Africa, the second representing those living in America and the last representing those living in Asia and Oceania). Macedonians living in Europe were the greatest in number to enrol for the general elections on 5th June next (4,653). Any candidate living outside of Macedonia and who wanted to stand in the election had to collate the signature of at least one thousand voters.

The Electoral Campaign of the "Macedonian" Parties

The three main "Macedonian" parties – the Revolutionary

Organisation-Democratic Party for National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) led by outgoing Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, the Social Democratic Union (SDSM) led by Branko Crvenkovski and the Liberal Democratic Party support entry into the EU and NATO, the end of the battle between Skopje and Athens and the development of relations with the Diaspora. Macedonia's membership of the EU is the number one priority of these three parties. The Liberal Democratic Party also says that if it wins the election Skopje will be ready to join the 27 in the last year of the next legislature, i.e. in 2014. According to Dimitar Mircev, former Ambassador for Macedonia in Slovenia (1993-1997) and political analyst the closeness of the political programmes explains the attacks and battles seen during the electoral campaign. "The parties focus on what is happening to the others rather than offering real, precise projects," he said.

The main opposition party, the Social Democratic Union (SDSM) is running in coalition with 14 other parties under the banner "For our Future". Its candidate for head of government, former Prime Minister (May-June 2004 and November-December 2004), Radmila Sekerinska, is campaigning on an increase in investments in infrastructures and in agriculture as well as for social aid for the poorest. She says she will do everything necessary to solve the problem of the official name of Macedonia which has caused a problem between Skopje and Athens and is preventing Macedonia from joining NATO and from progressing on the path towards European integration. Former President of the Republic (2004-2009), leader of the SDSM, Branko Crvenkovski advised outgoing Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski to give up his post as head of government if his party won the general election. "Do as I did, give up office. Free Macedonia of Nikola Gruevski and Branko Crvenkovski," he declared. The VMRO-DPMNE has concluded an alliance with 23 other parties thereby forming the biggest coalition in the country's history. Its programme is entitled "Renaissance in 100 steps: development and progress". It includes exactly 1,185 projects for the continued reduction of taxes, a decrease in VAT on tourism from 18% to 5% and new subsidies. The VMRO-DPMNE has chosen to use new technologies and social networks in the electoral campaign. Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski has 43 000 friends on Facebook (against 11, 000 for his main adversary Radmila Sekerinska). Analyst Vadimir Bozinovski of the Institute for Political Research in Skopje stresses that the presence of the party in office on the internet explains its lead in the polls. "The novelty of this election

lies in the use of Facebook, blogs and the political parties' internet site," he said.

The electoral campaign of the Albanian speaking parties

The Democratic Union for Integration (DUI-BDI) the VMRO-DPMNE's partner is being criticised by the other parties which represent the Albanian speaking minority for having forgotten its campaign promises. Moreover its leader Alija Ahmeti and some of his colleagues have been accused of being agents of the secret services of former Yugoslavia. The Macedonian legal authorities acquitted them of this deeming that it did not having enough evidence.

The tradition in Macedonia dictates that the Albanian speaking party which wins the greatest number of votes in the general elections enters government whichever party leads the government coalition. This explains why Alija Ahmeti is undertaking a campaign that states he was forced to govern with the VMRO-DPMNE, a union that he had not wanted.

The DUI-BDI has made the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement (a peace agreement signed by the main Macedonian parties on 13th August 2001 to put an end to the fighting between the government forces in Skopje and the Albanian guerrilla, the National Liberation Army) the focus of its electoral programme. It insists on the fact that it will demand, before deciding to take part in the government, a signed agreement on the respect of its programme.

The strengthening of the rights of the Albanian speaking population, the appointment of a member of the Albanian minority to one of the country's key positions (President of the Republic, Prime Minister or leader of Parliament) and the introduction of Albanian as an official language across the entire Macedonian territory are the three main points in the programmes of the Albanian Democratic Party (PDA-PDSh), led by Menduh Thaci, and of New Democracy (DR), a newly created party by Imer Selmani. Albanian is only an official language in the towns where at least 20% of the population speaks Albanian; in addition to this the law makes a representation of the country's leading minority obligatory in the civil service only.

Menduh Thaci declared that he would never take part in a government led by Nikola Gruevski again. Imer Selmani has said that he would demand that his party's programme be included in the political agenda before thinking about joining the government. Finally the leader of National Democratic

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Renaissance (RDK), Rufi Osmani declared that he would not govern with Branko Crvenkovski's Social Democratic Union. According to Imer Ismaili, professor at the University of Tetovo, Nikola Gruevski government's lack of knowledge of the Albanian speakers' requirements over the last six years explains the present demands made by the Albanian speaking parties. "His government has damaged Macedonia a great deal and has also spread mistrust between the country's two main ethnic groups," declared Imer Ismaili. The Democratic Union for Integration and the Albanian Democratic Party signed an agreement to avoid hate speeches and provocation and also for the acknowledgement of the

election results.

The election result will depend on the Social Democratic opposition's ability to motivate the electorate which has still not decided, i.e. around 35% just one week before the election. The VMRO-DPMNE, which won the presidential election on 22nd March and 5th April 2009 and the local election on the same date, is in a strong position. According to the polls the party of outgoing Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski is due to stay in office.

The electoral campaign started on 15th May and will end on 4th June.

The Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for National Unity led by Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski retains power in Macedonia

RESULTS

The Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) led by outgoing Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski won the elections on 5th June in Macedonia. It won 38.98% of the vote and 56 seats according to results that are still incomplete. The Social Democratic Union (SDSM), the main opposition party led by former President of the Republic (2004-2009), Branko Crvenkovski, won 32.78 % of the vote (42 seats).

As for the Albanian speakers, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI-BDI) led by Alija Ahmeti, member of the outgoing government won 10.24% of the vote. It came out ahead of the Albanian Democratic Party (PDA-PDSh) led by Menduh Thaci which won 5.90% of the vote and National Democratic Renaissance (RDK), a party created at the end of March by the mayor of Gostivar, Rufi Osmani, won 2.67% of the vote.

Finally the Revolutionary Organisation-People's Party (VMRO-NP) of former President of the Republic (1998-2002) Ljubco Georgievski won 2.51% of the vote.

Turnout totalled 63.48%, i.e. +6.31 points more in comparison with the last election on June 1st 2008. The general election therefore motivated the Macedonians, nearly half of whom said that they were tired of the incessant political quarrels, according to a poll published during the electoral

campaign.

The manager of the Macedonian Electoral Commission, Josif Josifovski said that the general elections on 5th June had been the best organised in Macedonia's history. The police engaged 7000 men to guarantee the security of the polling stations. Moreover 3,500 local observers and 330 from abroad were asked to monitor the election. Some minor incidents were observed however.

«It is my pleasure to announce to you that the Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Unity and the coalition 'For a better Macedonia' which it leads are the victors in this general election. We have won 55 of the 123 seats in the Sobranie (single chamber in Parliament),» declared outgoing Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. «A majority of the Macedonians acknowledged that things changed in 2006 when a group of young politicians came to power. In these times

of international economic crisis and the prevention of our entry into NATO and the EU by Greece most of the electorate chose those who can best manage the country's problems,» he added.

The head of the outgoing government campaigned on the need to continue reform so that his country could enter the EU and NATO. He promised to increase retirement pensions by 24.2% by 2015 as well as employees' salaries in the civil service, unemployment benefits and social aid. Nikola Gruevski has also promised to bring unemployment down (which affects around one third of the working population) under the 25% mark. In terms of taxation the VMRO-DPMNE is not due to introduce any further taxes and will bring down taxes on SMEs to zero if their annual revenue is below 3 million dinars (50,000 €). Small trading companies with an annual revenue of between 3 and 6 million dinars (between 50 000 and 100 000 €) will be able to choose a specific tax regime. Finally the VMRO-DPMNE is due to bring VAT down on tourist products. «This victory is a great responsibility. We now have to implement the measures that we have promised. We must solve Macedonia's problems rapidly and become a NATO and EU member, a vital factor for our nation and our dignity,» stressed the outgoing Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski who concluded: «As of tomorrow we shall continue to serve the citizens.»

The leader of the Social Democratic Union, Branko Crvenkovski, said he was pleased with his party's performance on

5th June. His satisfaction lies in the increase in the number of seats won by his party (SDSM) in the Sobranie. «You have seen what we can do with 18 seats (the SDSM had 18 seats in the outgoing parliament), can you imagine what we can do with more than 40 MPs?» declared the opposition leader. The VMRO-DPMNE will probably join forces with the Albanian speaking party that came out ahead in the election i.e. the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI-BDI), to form the next government. It should succeed in bringing Macedonia out of the serious socio-economic crisis in which it finds itself right now. During his visit to Skopje on 6th April last European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Stefan Füle, pointed to the need for rapid reform in terms of political dialogue, justice, civil service and the fight to counter corruption, as well as the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement (a peace agreement signed by the main Macedonian parties on 13th August 2001, to put an end to the conflict between the government forces in Skopje and the Albanian guerrilla, the National Liberation Army, which had been ongoing for years). Nikola Gruevski is also due to counter unemployment and the lack of professional opportunities (a poll revealed that half of Macedonian schoolchildren 49.5% wanted to leave their country within the next ten years) and to reduce poverty (the average national salary is 250€ per month, a figure that is clearly below the European average with 30% of Macedonians living below the poverty line).

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