

Early Parliamentary Elections in Macedonia: More of the same or new beginnings?

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Rarely a year goes by without elections taking place in the Balkan region. More often than not, they are early parliamentary elections. While this is not a phenomenon exclusive to the region, it does reflect the fractious political environment in countries still struggling with the concept of political dialogue, consensus-building and stable institutions – just over 20 years since the break-up of Yugoslavia.

Promising signs in Serbia

In Serbia, early parliamentary elections took place on 17th March. Serbia's record in the organisation and conduct of elections is generally positive, as reflected in the successive OSCE/ODIHR election observation reports. This latest election was no exception.

The resounding victory achieved by the Progressive Party, the main party in the outgoing coalition, led by Alexander Vucic, should provide for a stable majority to guide the country through its EU accession, following the opening of negotiations last January.

As the recent history of the Balkans has shown, governing parties elected with strong majorities rarely augur well; they tend to end up in an erosion of democratic values and reinforced authoritarian behaviour.

The incoming government in Serbia now has a golden opportunity to reverse that trend. By building on the successful achievements of the past year – not least in the process of normalisation of relations with Kosovo – it can promote an inclusive approach to addressing the country's key challenges on the basis of broad political dialogue and consensus building; a sure guarantee of success.

Success for Serbia also brings dividends for the wider region. And with the country assuming the chairmanship of the OSCE in 2015, there will be an added incentive for the country's leaders to pursue a consensus approach, both internally and for the region as a whole.

Early elections in Macedonia

It is Macedonia's turn to hold early parliamentary elections on 27th April, to coincide with the second round of the regular presidential elections, the first round of which take place on 13 April.

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In normal, functioning parliamentary democracies with their inherent systems of checks and balances, elections give voters the opportunity to choose whether to keep the same government or to vote for an alternative; in other words, they have a real choice.

But if the system of checks and balances does not function as it should, as is the case of Macedonia, and the government controls the main state organs such as the judiciary, the public administration and, to all intents and purposes, the electoral process, then voter choice is a choice in name only. To cite the OSCE/ODIHR election observation report on the local elections that took place in 2013:

Partisan media coverage and a blurring of state and party activities did not provide a level playing field for candidates.¹

The report also states that

Allegations of voter intimidations persisted throughout the elections and the OSCE/ODIHR EOM observed several cases of apparent misuse of state resources for campaign purposes. This raised concerns about voters' ability to cast their vote "free of fear of retribution.

Since the election of the current Prime Minister, Nikola Gruevski, in July 2006, the country's record in the conduct of elections has been mixed. There was violence, with one fatality and several injured, in the parliamentary elections of 2008. While there have been improvements since then in the administration of the electoral process itself, the overall political climate in which elections take place has deteriorated. The fallout from the eruption of violence in the Parliament Chamber itself on 24 December 2012 set a dangerous precedent from which the country has yet to recover. Today, just over a month ahead of the elections, the political atmosphere is marked by increasing political tensions, particularly between the main governing party (the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity - VMRO-DPMNE) and the main opposition party (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia - SDSM), coupled with deep mistrust among the main ethnic communities in the country.

The intimidation tactics used systematically by the governing party against those who criticise it has generated a climate of fear in society as a whole. Even elected officials are not immune. The opposition mayor of Centar, a municipality in the heart of the capital where many of the statues and monuments of the controversial 'Skopje 2014' urban renewal project are located, has received three times as many visits from government inspectors in the first nine months of his election than the previous main governing-party mayor received in the four years of his mandate.

The adoption in recent weeks of a new media law, and amendments to the electoral code incorporating most of the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, give some cause for hope. However, much will depend on the manner in which both measures are implemented and whether the government changes its behaviour from previous elections to fully comply with the new measures.

The ban on starting construction works, the laying of cornerstones and inaugurating facilities built with public funds during the electoral period (part of the newly adopted measures) will be comparatively easy to control. Media images of government ministers wielding shovels and mixing cement - a common feature of previous elections - will hopefully be dropped from this one.

¹ OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, Warsaw, 9 July 2013: (<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/103411>).

What will be more difficult to monitor, however, will be the intimidation of public servants, which was also a regular feature of previous elections. For example, the OSCE/ODIHR election observation report of the 2009 presidential and local elections speaks of public sector employees being “particularly vulnerable to threats that their jobs would be in danger if they did not support the governing party.”

With one of the most bloated civil services in the region, the critical test will be for the governing coalition to refrain from such intimidation tactics. Unfortunately, weeks before the elections were officially announced, the government launched a recruitment drive for over 300 more civil servants.

Despite the new media law, the media remain almost totally under the control of the government, and warrant the worst media freedom rating of the entire Balkan region. The government is the largest single advertiser in the country, thus giving it unparalleled control over media outlets. Here too, there will need to be very careful monitoring of the situation during the electoral campaign.

As for the outcome, the governing party is hopeful that by combining the early parliamentary elections with the second round of presidential elections on 27th April, it will ensure that their candidate, the incumbent Mr. Ivanov (who does not have the support of the ethnic Albanian Democratic Union for Integration, the junior coalition partner in the government) will attain the required 40% threshold of votes. In the last election in 2009, a frantic mobilisation of voters in the last two hours of the election guaranteed his election, with just over 42% of the vote. The outgoing coalition government is likely to be re-elected.

Even if it consolidates its power, at the expense of an already weak opposition, will the main governing party change its behaviour to enable the country to move forward? Will it adopt a more consensus-driven approach to prevent the country from sinking further into instability?

The evidence from previous elections since 2006 do not give much cause for hope in this respect. However, despite appearances to the contrary, the country has lost much practical support internationally because of the government’s authoritarian and ethno-nationalist based policies. This may give the incoming government pause for thought.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the prospect of EU accession has had a major impact in promoting much-needed reforms and building stable institutions in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Yet, as reflected in all the internationally recognised indicators, such as those issued by Freedom House, Transparency International or Reporters without Borders, the goal of achieving effective democracy throughout the region remains very much a ‘work in progress’.

While some of the EU member states in the region do not themselves set the best example, the EU should nevertheless ensure that its enlargement strategy prioritises not just ‘economic governance’ but also ‘political governance’, particularly in those countries where political dialogue and consensus-building remains weak. It should do this by focusing both on political parties, in particular their youth branches, and by ensuring the involvement of civil society in policy development and decision-making, through targeted projects with well-established organisations, such as the Westminster Foundation, or similar entities.