



BULLETIN

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
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Macedonia: From Balkan Leader to Sick Democracy

Tomasz Żornaczuk

The new parliament of Macedonia,¹ which began working on 10 May, lacks any members from the largest opposition party, and the largest Albanian party in the ruling coalition later joined them in boycotting the swearing-in of the new president on 12 May. This is a result of both accusations of undemocratic methods of governance, and a lack of compromise within the government. The correlation between the deterioration of democracy in Macedonia and the obstacle to its European integration caused by its naming dispute with Greece is becoming more and more evident. The EU should be more active in its efforts to return Macedonia to the path of democratic transformation.

A Partial Parliament after the Election. The results of the 27 April parliamentary election in Macedonia were not recognised by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), the largest opposition party. This was due to accusations against the ruling Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation—Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO–DPMNE) of electoral fraud and use of state institutions for partisan purposes. VMRO–DPMNE, which has been ruling since 2006, called an early parliamentary election for the third time in a row. The party won again, earning 43% of the vote and 61 seats (compared to 55 in the previous term) in the 123-member parliament. The opposition from SDSM received 25.3% of votes and 34 seats (eight fewer than before). The Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), which represents the Albanian community and was a coalition party in the last governments, won 13.7% of votes and 19 seats, while the Democratic Party of Albanians gained 5.9% of the vote and seven seats.

The official reason for the early parliamentary election was a dispute in the VMRO–DPMNE and DUI coalition over a common presidential candidate. The election was timed in such a way that it coincided with the second round of the presidential election. This may therefore indicate a desire on the part of the government to cause an increase in turnout in the parliamentary election, which, with both the controversial campaign and the way the election was conducted, would benefit the ruling party, even more so since the coalition of the previous term will be maintained, this time with an increased mandate. Also, a VMRO–DPMNE candidate, Gjorge Ivanov (55.3% of votes), will hold the presidency for a second time. The Albanian DUI boycotted the presidential election, did not recognise the result, and, just like SDSM, did not participate in the swearing-in of the president.

Democracy Problems in Macedonia. Such a post-electoral political situation in Macedonia overlaps with broad criticism from the opposition and non-governmental organisations regarding non-democratic methods of governance. The allegations concern the government's total control over the most influential media, which support the ruling parties and are unfavourable towards the opposition, a situation that was also evident during the electoral campaign. Among many examples is the fact that, apart from two small television channels, the most important media have not reported on corruption scandals involving politicians from the ruling parties, including recordings of the prime minister Nikola Gruevski referring to the setting of compensation in the sale of one of Macedonia's banks. In contrast, the mainstream media reported extensively from the prime minister's press conferences, at which he criticised the opposition for revealing the recordings from many years ago only a week before the parliamentary election. Both

¹ For the purpose of the text, Macedonia is used as the name of the country. Its constitutional name, used by most EU and NATO members in bilateral relations, is the Republic of Macedonia. The UN and the EU uses the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

television stations that published materials discrediting the prime minister have been criticised by the state agency for the media. This could have a further negative impact on the already virtually non-existent freedom of the media in Macedonia. In the 2014 World Press Freedom Index, the country suffered a further decline and took the 123rd place out of 180 countries classified. It was the worst result in Europe except for Belarus, Russia and Ukraine.

Moreover, allegations relate to widespread corruption and nepotism. According to NGOs, government officials were obliged to make their families vote for the ruling party, confirmed by a photograph of the ballots. Also, cases have been revealed of groups of Macedonians from outside the country being registered in Skopje in order to get more votes. Furthermore, the government controversially increased some social benefits (for example, pensions, subsidies for farmers) before the election, and engaged the media in promoting government actions. Such methods can bring about the desired effect in a country that has about two million inhabitants, a nominal average GDP per capita of about \$5,000 per year, and an unemployment rate of about 30%. In addition to this, among other issues, the recently reported case of Sasho Mijalkov, head of the Office for Security and Counter-Intelligence since 2006 (and a close cousin of the prime minister) has revealed the large-scale concealment of assets (real estate, shares in companies) with no consequences. Such situations contribute to the fact that a country that, until a few years ago, was a pioneer in the Balkans in the fight against bribery, is now increasingly seen as a state blighted by systemic corruption.

The allegations also relate to the judiciary and other state institutions (the prosecution, and other relevant government agencies), which do not respond to well-known violations of the law, or even perpetuate undemocratic practices (the National Electoral Commission is among them). Many of the above-mentioned irregularities, as well as others, were among the criticisms in a post-election report prepared by the OSCE observers.

Integration with the EU. The priorities of the new government include EU and NATO membership, the resolution of the naming dispute with Greece, the fight against corruption and organised crime, economic development, and the reduction of unemployment. However, where there are low democratic standards, these declarations may again be overshadowed by measures for the sustainable maintenance of the power of the ruling parties.

Macedonia was the first country in the Western Balkans to sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2001. The country introduced reforms that meant it was able to obtain the status of EU membership candidate as early as in 2005, was more effective each year in the fight against corruption (then a sensation in the Balkans), was able to ensure freedom of the press (then ranked 34th in the world), and undertook action in internal affairs, which led to the abolition of visas to the EU in the first round of visa liberalisation for the region. This meant that, in the last decade, Macedonia (alongside Croatia) became the most advanced country in the Balkans in terms of EU integration.

The end of the country's democratisation was signalled by linking the bilateral name dispute between Skopje and Athens, with Greece blocking Macedonia's progress towards integration with the EU until the conflict is resolved (the same applies to membership in NATO). Athens took such a position despite the European Commission's repeated recommendation from 2009 onwards to open EU accession negotiations with Macedonia. So far, neither UN representative activities nor the High Level Accession Dialogue between the EU and Macedonia (inaugurated in 2012), the crisis in Greece and the need for EU support nor even the opinion of the ICJ in favour of Macedonia have managed to settle the dispute. The government in Athens expects the initiative to be taken by the government in Skopje, which in turn builds public support for intransigence. This situation negates the prospect of further integration with the EU and leads to alternative, often non-democratic, methods of building political popularity in Macedonia.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The decline of democratic standards in Macedonia is reported by the opposition within the country, but also by international organisations and non-governmental bodies, both national and foreign. Given the atmosphere around the recent parliamentary and presidential elections, and the situation that has resulted from them, it is hard to predict a positive change. Following the general trends and the accumulation of problems, further actions incompatible with European values cannot be ruled out.

A solution to the two decade-long bilateral Macedonian–Greek dispute is now even less likely, since the government in Athens, despite its commitment to the enlargement policy and its current presidency of the EU Council, does not show effective initiatives in this regard. In contrast, the government of Macedonia, with a weak international position due to domestic politics, is aware of the fact that the proposition of a realistic project regarding the change of name will undermine Macedonian national identity, and thus public political support for the authorities.

The direction of Macedonia's development in the last few years demonstrates the correlation between a lack of progress in EU integration and the decline of democratic standards. Thus, the impulse to return to the path of reform would restore a real prospect of EU membership. A dialogue focused on resolving the dispute between Macedonia and Greece under the auspices of the EU could prove helpful, as, for example, was the case of the Belgrade–Pristina talks led by the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy with the participation of the European Commission. Despite its imperfections, dialogue has proven to be the most effective instrument of EU foreign policy in the context of dispute resolution, and has led to significant progress in integrating the Balkans with the EU. Therefore, one of the flagship tasks of the new High Representative and Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy should be to initiate such a dialogue between Athens and Skopje, in order to make it possible for Macedonia to return to the path of democratic transition. An alternative could be a need for normalisation of the economically and politically destabilised country, which, in the case of further stagnation—a likely outcome, and one that could carry the consequence of ethnic unrest—which would be a more difficult and costly task to deal with.