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In the Line of Fire: A (Geo)Political Crisis in Macedonia

Tomasz Żornaczuk

The prolonged public protests in Macedonia aim to interrupt the undemocratic reign of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. However, the increasingly uncertain political situation in the country is also a challenge for the whole region and opens the door for international actors who are not interested in stabilising Macedonia through Euro-Atlantic integration. That is why the European Union should assist in a swift return of the country to the democratic transition path, which passes through a solution to the dispute with Greece over the name "Macedonia."

A Euromaidan in Skopje? The anti-government demonstrations that have lasted from 5 May are together an event without precedent in Macedonia. The protest first took the form of a tent camp in front of the seat of government, with the crowd announcing its intended resilience until Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski's resignation and the appointment of a temporary cabinet with the participation of the opposition. Never in the history of independent Macedonia had dissatisfaction with the ruling powers take such a pronounced form. Next, the opposition gathered Macedonians and ethnic minorities, including Albanians, with whom relations in society have remained strained since an internal conflict in 2001. Then, and yet another first, the protests resulted in the resignation of the most-discredited officials: the ministers of Interior and Transport as well as the head of the Administration for Security and Counterintelligence (who is also Gruevski's cousin). Despite this, the officials' successors are close party colleagues of the prime minister or—as in the case of the new head of the departments—were appointed in violation of the constitutional principle of civilian supervision over the office. This shows that the government is not interested in calming the situation, which is becoming an increasingly serious challenge not only to the stability of the Balkans but also in relations between the EU/U.S. and Russia.

The anti-government protests are a response to an even deeper political crisis. Recordings that have been unveiled since the beginning of the year by the opposition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) confirmed earlier speculation by critics of Gruevski's conservative government of widespread and illegal influence under the prime minister and his inner circle from the ruling party, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). These include charges of misdoing in state institutions, such as nepotism, corruption in tenders, or appointing judges to carry out specific tasks. Especially shocking to the public was a recording confirming the use of forgery in the local elections of 2013 (dozens of people from outside Macedonia were registered to the same address during the run-up to the election in order to increase support for the ruling party) and another indicating the responsibility of the police in the death of a participant in a support rally for VMRO-DPMNE after they won the general elections in 2011. Despite broad public outrage, Gruevski still enjoys considerable support—visible in part by the pro-government tent camp in front of parliament—and is able to mobilise a sizable portion of the electorate.

Enigma in Kumanovo. The reluctance of the government to accept the protesters' demands deepened after police took action in Kumanovo on 9 and 10 May, in which they targeted members of the National Liberation Army (UÇK), an Albanian paramilitary group. The events are not clear, muddled by the prosecutor's chaotic release of information about the number of casualties on the UÇK side (which dropped from 14 initially to 10), the professionalism of the police (eight policemen were killed and more than 50 houses damaged), as well as the passive attitude of Gruevski's Albanian coalition partner, the Democratic Union for Integration. Its leader, who had previously been in UÇK, Ali

Ahmeti, commented on the events in Kumanovo with surprising restraint compared to the past when he had been very critical of any actions aimed at the Albanian population. All of this leads to a widespread belief, especially among communities supporting the opposition, that the operation was planned within the prime minister's circle and was aimed at creating a distraction from the actions to discredit the government and increase a sense of unity among the Macedonian population against the Albanian minority.

Talks in Strasbourg. Gruevski's increasingly difficult position has been used by the left-wing opposition, especially along with the scandalous recordings, to call for the resignation of his cabinet. The strength of SDSM's president, Zoran Zaev, who is the leader of the protests, increased after he was invited by Commissioner Johannes Hahn, in charge of EU enlargement negotiations, to the bloc's talks with the government, which were held under the auspices of the Union in Strasbourg and continued in Skopje. In the course of the negotiations, Gruevski offered a quick early election, which was not acceptable to Zaev, aware as he was of government control over state institutions and, therefore, over the course and results of the voting (OSCE had earlier pointed out irregularities). The opposition demands a national unity government be formed composed of representatives of VRMO-DPMNE, SDSM and the Albanian parties, as well as holding parliamentary elections in the spring of 2016. Until then, the temporary government would set electoral law and take measures to increase media freedom and the independence of the courts. However, the coalition's agreement on Zaev's demands would probably mean not only a reduction in illegal government control over state institutions but also could lead SDSM to power and to criminal charges being levied against the current prime minister and his colleagues. The fear of this prospect may lead Gruevski to maintain power at any cost, which, in the most pessimistic scenario, may be an attempt to quell the protests if they gain momentum.

Back to the Game in Moscow. Russia, which until recently had been expressing moderate interest in Macedonia, is trying to use the crisis to increase its influence in the Balkans on the one hand, while on the other, it is trying to heat up the conflict with the EU and U.S. Moscow's response to the protests was definitely confrontational: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov suggested that the West is responsible for the events in Skopje and Kumanovo, which he said were aimed at a change of government because of its resistance to joining the West's sanctions against Russia. The obvious conclusion from Lavrov's words is that the Kremlin is interested in porting internal conflict to the international level and building its next field of rivalry with Brussels and Washington. Moscow's idea is to use the crisis to keep Macedonia's integration process with the EU and NATO blocked, as well as to maintain the country's support for the Turkish Stream gas pipeline project, which aims to supply raw material to the EU via Macedonia and other countries. What is more, by suggesting that Bulgaria and Albania are preparing to break the country into parts, the Kremlin is trying to use historical resentment and Macedonians' fear of territorial divisions to strengthen Russia's position in the region. The interest in Macedonia, which in Russia's strategy has had much less attention than Serbia or Bulgaria, is confirmation that the Balkans have returned to the mainstream politics of the world's powers. Recently, the U.S. also expressed above-average interest in the region, including in Macedonia, where together with the EC representatives it has tried to mediate the negotiations between the opposition and the government. The signal for this increase in active American policy there came from U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, who in February said that Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro (as well as Georgia and Moldova) are "on the line of fire" between the U.S. and Russia.

Which Way to Brussels? The decline of democratic standards in Macedonia derives from the lack of progress in Euro-Atlantic integration, the responsibility for which belongs both to Gruevski's government and the EU itself. Until 2008, when Greece—objecting to the use of the name "Macedonia"—blocked the country's accession to NATO (although the technical conditions had been met) and, the following year, also the start of membership negotiations with the EU (contrary to the recommendation of the European Commission), Skopje had been the most successful in the Western Balkans in terms of democratic reforms. Among them were its efforts to combat corruption, improve security and enhance freedom of the press.¹ To return to that positive trend, changes are needed in Macedonia and the EU, of which the latter should not limit its activities to mediations between the government and the opposition or to a threat to send a special envoy to Macedonia should the parties fail to reach an agreement.

The condition for Skopje's return to the path of democratic transformation—regardless of rules—is to restore the prospect of membership in NATO and, above all, to start talks on accession to the EU. The clear guidelines in the framework of negotiations proved to be an effective instrument for stimulating reforms and strengthening democratic institutions in other Balkan countries that had experience with authoritarian rule. Because it is clear that the road for Macedonia to the Union passes through Athens, after stabilisation of the political situation in Skopje and appointment of a new government, the EU should focus on activities aimed at establishing a constructive dialogue with Greece and motivating both parties to conclude an agreement that would allow the start of membership negotiations with a final resolution of the dispute before their completion. Since the Greece-Macedonia conflict is a direct cause of Skopje abandoning the democratic transition, the EU should know that disregarding this problem will result in other, perhaps deeper political crises, because Macedonia will remain even further behind its neighbours in the Western Balkans in terms of development and integration with the EU, and thus vulnerable to the politics of other countries that are not interested in Skopje's Euro-Atlantic integration.

¹ See: T. Żornaczuk, "Macedonia: From Balkan Leader to Sick Democracy," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 69 (664), 20 May 2014.