

North Macedonia: Disputed State and Bifurcated Society

Zoltán Egeresi

Introduction

During the last thirty years, North Macedonia had to face various controversies, the burden of disputed historical legacies as well as political scandals and even armed conflicts. Many of these issues stem from the country's 20th century history. After several revolts, the current North Macedonian state's territory became part of Serbia by the end of the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) and WWI (due to the Treaty of Neuilly, 1919) after nearly six centuries of Ottoman rule. In the interwar period, it constituted the district of Vardar (named after the main river of the region) without special rights or autonomy. After the Second World War, the then North Macedonia became a republic of Yugoslavia benefitting Josip Broz Tito's policy to counterbalance the Serbian hegemonic endeavours and to increase the numerically smaller nation's room for manoeuvre in the federal state.

Although the Yugoslav era brought some major improvements for the country, in comparison with other member states, it failed to abolish the relative economic underdevelopment vis-à-vis the more developed parts of the country. On the other hand, this era was crucial for the formation of the Macedonian identity as well. The Macedonian efforts were supported by Belgrade to strengthen their separate identity (partially) based on great historical ancestors and the Ancient Macedonian state, which raised concerns in Greece.

North Macedonia, as one of the smallest countries in the region, had to face several major problems after its declaration of independence: along with the political transition it had to settle the inter-ethnic conflict between the (Slavic) Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority, to find a solution to its name dispute with Greece that hindered its accession to international organisations and to begin an economic modernisation by adapting the challenges of the EU integration and globalisation. Its geopolitical location granted a special status. As North Macedonia occupies a strategic position between Serbia, Albania, Bulgaria and Greece, it is directly affected by its neighbours' national interests (see the naming and identity disputes) and has become the part of greater geopolitical games within the region (Greek–Turkish rivalry, Albanian question and so on). Thus, the country's labelling as a lamb surrounded by four wolves seems to be adequate.

This chapter aims at revealing the recent history of North Macedonia and shows how it intended to handle the above-mentioned challenges. It reveals the main features of the transition and describes the circumstances of the various disputes affecting the

North Macedonian statehood. It examines the road to the Ohrid Framework Agreement and the dynamics of inter-ethnic cooperation in the country. The chapter also shows the main political developments of the last nearly thirty years as well as the main features of its political institutions.

Transition Period

Being one of the member states of Yugoslavia, North Macedonia had to tackle similar challenges at the end of the 1980s to the others, such as rising nationalism and economic difficulties. Macedonia with a population of around 2 million people was the second smallest member state of Yugoslavia (after Montenegro). In economic terms, it was the less developed one and it relied greatly on the subsidies of the richer member states. Consequently, the dissolution of Yugoslavia pushed Macedonia in a dangerous position and caused a huge fall in the country's GDP.¹

The period of uncertainty with the threat of Serbian claims to incorporate the country into Serbia or the challenge of any Albanian secessionist movement fuelled Macedonian nationalism, which resulted in rallies for a 'United Macedonia' and for the protection of the prosecuted Macedonian minority in Northern Greece. Along with the regime changes in the region, these factors convinced the communist leadership to hold the first multi-party elections in November and December 1990. While no party was able to gain simple majority, Nikola Kljusev was requested to form a technocratic government. The parliament declared the Republic of Macedonia as a 'sovereign territory' (but not as an independent state) and elected Kiro Gligorov as President.² Although preliminarily the Macedonian politicians envisaged remaining within Yugoslavia, the summer of 1991 clearly showed that the dissolution of the state was unstoppable. Consequently, the government announced to hold a referendum on independence on 8 September 1991 where 95.3% of the participants voted for secession with a high, 75.7% turnout. After this result, a new constitution was adopted in November 1991 which outlined the country as a Macedonian state granting limited minority rights to its own 'nationalities' and pushed for centralisation. The nationalist overtone of the constitution, the references to the Ancient Macedonia and the lack of adequate minority rights infuriated the Albanian minority that made up some 25% of the population, and the neighbouring Greece as well, which resulted in the long-lasting naming dispute. Despite any difficulties, the country declared its independence on 21 November 1991.

Unlike Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia's secession from Yugoslavia took place without fighting. The fact that the proportion of the Serbian population in Macedonia was low and that the Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army had to use its capacities mainly in the Western part of Yugoslavia, paved the way towards a relatively calm process of self-determination.³

¹ BIDELEUX–JEFFRIES 2007, 448–460.

² BIDELEUX–JEFFRIES 2007, 412.

³ JUHÁSZ 1999.

The Troubles of Recognition and the Naming Dispute

Immediately after the declaration of independence, the country had to face three ‘recognition crises’. Firstly, the Serbian Orthodox Church refused to accept the independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Secondly, Bulgarians raised concerns about the Macedonian identity and language by claiming that Macedonian was a dialect of the Bulgarian. Despite this controversy, Sofia recognised the country among the first states, and in 1999, the two countries signed an agreement⁴ stating that Macedonian is a distinct language.⁵

The third, and probably the biggest challenge came from the South. For Greece, the chosen name of the country (Republic of Macedonia) and the Macedonian nationalism represented a threat towards its territorial integrity and consequently Athens refused the recognition of the country with its own name. Moreover, as Greece declared, the use of Ancient Macedonian symbols was contradictory and unacceptable, as it considered them its own.⁶

The Greek public opinion reacted harshly to the independence and its irritation had palpable repercussions overshadowing bilateral relations. The anger was expressed in huge demonstrations, like the ‘Rally for Macedonia’ in Thessaloniki (the capital of Central Macedonia, a province in Greece) in 1992, followed by other, minor ones. Athens decided to stand up against the usage of the term ‘Macedonia’ in its new neighbour’s official name, and successfully hindered Macedonia’s UN membership application for almost one year. Although the parties did not support the idea at the beginning, finally, the country became member of the UN under the name of ‘former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’ (FYROM). While this name was used for the successful UN application mainly, various states accepted this designation in the upcoming months. As Greece was unable to accept the use of the name of the country, Athens launched an embargo against the country in 1994, which lasted almost two years damaging significantly Macedonia’s economy.⁷

The two parties reached an interim agreement on 13 September 1995 in New York that ended the embargo and served as a *modus vivendi* in bilateral relations. The agreement forced Macedonia to modify its constitution and change the debated state symbols for more acceptable ones, such as removing the Vergina Sun from its flag. The two parties agreed to avoid to use the ‘naming dispute’ to hinder Macedonia’s accession to international

⁴ JUHÁSZ 1999.

⁵ Despite the agreements, the Bulgarian public opinion mostly perceives North Macedonians as Bulgarians speaking a distinct dialect.

⁶ The ambiguity over North Macedonia stems from ancient times. The present-day North Macedonia was part of the Ancient Macedonia that managed to conquer the Greek cities and the majority of the Persian Empire under Phillip II and Alexander the Great. After the death of Alexander, the Kingdom of Macedonia ruled the region that was conquered by the Romans in the 2nd century B.C. The Romans kept the name ‘Macedonia’ for the new province. The name persisted during the Byzantine era and appeared again in late Ottoman times used for a broad geographical region. At the beginning of the 20th century, the region of Macedonia was an area covering approximately 60 thousand km² and having a multi-ethnic population composed of Slavs, Albanians, Greeks, Jews and Turks and consisted of several Vilayets (Ottoman administrative units). This territory was divided between Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia as the result of the first and second Balkan War in 1912–1913. The present-day North Macedonia got its current borders in 1946 as a member state of Yugoslavia: firstly, under the name of People’s Republic of Macedonia, replaced by the Socialist Republic of Macedonia in 1963. Before declaring its independence in 1991, it dropped the “Socialist” word from its official name.

⁷ PÓKA 2017, 26.

organisations and Greece recognised Macedonia only under the provisional name of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; however, the upcoming decades showed that they did not manage to overcome the controversy and Athens blocked its NATO and EU integration.

In the following roughly two and a half decades, Skopje and Athens intended to find a mutually acceptable term. The Greek side opposed all the name-versions containing the word ‘Macedonia’, thus proposals such as “New Macedonia” or “Upper Macedonia” were refused. Athens supported several name-options, like “Vardar Republic” or “Republic of Skopje”, which were rejected by Skopje.

The situation was aggravated when Greece hindered successfully in 2008 North Macedonia’s invitation to join NATO, and in 2009 to launch EU accession negotiations with them. After this refusal, the Nicola Gruevski-led government opted for a more nationalistic narrative openly infuriating the Greeks: the so-called Antiquisation Campaign was launched to reinvigorate Macedonian identity. The ‘Skopje 2014’ project that aimed to reconstruct the downtown of Skopje by erecting ancient-style buildings and sculptures emphasising the ancient (Macedonian) history of the country clearly demonstrated the government’s willingness to resist Athens’s wishes and channel Macedonian nationalism to its own political support. A huge sculpture of Alexander the Great was placed in the heart of the town, while on the opposite side of the Vardar River, his father’s, Phillip II of Macedon’s statue was erected. Other towns also inaugurated statues of these two historical personalities of great importance. In addition, the international airport of Skopje was renamed to ‘Alexander the Great Airport’.

In the following years, the relations between Macedonia and Greece were mired in a stalemate.⁸ Despite the various terms proposed by the UN Mediator, Matthew Nimetz, the parties failed to agree. Skopje even issued a proceeding against Greece to the International Law of Justice claiming that Athens violated the interim agreement by objecting the country’s accession to NATO in 2008.⁹

The political developments in 2016–2017 brought changes in the naming dispute and the new, Zoran Zaev-led government gave fresh impetus towards the negotiations with Greece, which were resumed in January 2018. After the meeting with his Greek counterpart Alexis Tsipras in Davos, Zaev changed the name of Skopje’s airport and renamed the Alexander the Great highway to ‘Friendship Highway’. These positive gestures opened the way for further rapprochement. Finally, among the options proposed by Skopje, the two sides agreed to accept the name of “Republic of North Macedonia” to use for all purposes at the agreement signed at Lake Prespa, on 17 June 2018.¹⁰ The agreement stated: “The nationality of the Second Party shall be Macedonian/citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia” (Article 3/a). The agreement admitted that the official language of Macedonia is Macedonian. The two sides confirmed the current existing frontiers thus refusing any violations of them. The commitment towards the territorial integrity intended to prevent Greek concerns about any Macedonian territorial claims (Article 3 and 6). The agreement also stated that the parties acknowledged “that their respective understanding of the term “Macedonia” and “Macedonian” refers to a different

⁸ PÓKA 2017.

⁹ ICJ 2011.

¹⁰ Final Agreement 2019.

historical context and cultural heritage” [Article 7(1)]. Shortly, it ensured that for the Greeks the term of ‘Macedonia’ refers to their ancient region called ‘Macedonia’, which is connected to the Hellenic civilisation, culture and history, while for Macedonians the same expression refers to their own history unrelated to the Hellenic civilisation and heritage. The agreement also stipulated the formation of commissions to revise the textbooks and maps in both countries. The parties also concluded that the Macedonian language belongs to the South Slavic language group. The agreement also regulated the upgrading of diplomatic relations and envisaged further economic relations. Greece also promised to lift its objection towards Macedonia’s accession to NATO and the EU.

The Macedonian parliament ratified the agreement roughly two weeks later despite the main opposition party’s harsh objection. A referendum was held on the renaming issue on 30 September: 94.2% of the voters voted for ‘yes’; however, the low turnout (36.9%) clearly showed the lack of interest of the majority of the population.¹¹ After these controversial developments, the parliament voted to start the renaming process. Thus, as of the end of 2018, the naming dispute between Macedonia and Greece seems to be over. Athens also demonstrated its commitment to lift its resistance towards Macedonia’s accession to international organisations. In July 2018, Macedonia was officially invited to NATO.¹²

The Bifurcated Society: The Road to the Ohrid Agreement

Beyond the external challenges, like the naming dispute with Greece, the country had to face domestic, inter-ethnic tensions as well. According to the census of 1991 (boycotted by many Albanians, Turks and Roma which made a new census necessary in 1994), ethnic Macedonians constituted only 64.6% of the population of the country. The Albanians, living traditionally in the western and northern part of the country, along the borders with Albania and Kosovo, constituted some 20–25% of the whole population. According to the census of 1981, the proportion of those with Albanian identity was only 19.8%, while in 1991 it reached 21%, in 1994 it reached 22.9%, while the census of 2002 showed that some 25% of the country’s population declared themselves Albanians constituting the second biggest ethnic group.¹³ Taking into consideration their relatively higher birth rate, there were speculations that their number would be significantly higher after a few years. Albanian leaders frequently stated that the community’s real size is bigger than the official numbers, and they argued that around 40% of the population belongs to the Albanian minority.¹⁴

Despite the size of the Albanian population, the independent Macedonian state appeared to be exclusively Macedonian – this means for instance, that until the Ohrid Framework Agreement, Slavic Macedonians occupied more than 90% of the public

¹¹ Referendum 2018.

¹² PAMUK 2018.

¹³ The third biggest ethnic group, the Turks constituted only 4.5–3.5% of Macedonia while Gipsies (2.9–1.9%), Serbs (2.1–1.2%) constituted only a really small part of the population. Other ethnic groups, such as Vlachs, Torbeshes etc. gave the remaining 4–2%.

¹⁴ BIDELEUX–JEFFRIES 2007, 406.

sector jobs, police force and represented some 90% of the university students.¹⁵ The 1991 constitution also disappointed the Albanians as they got limited rights that made them feel second-class citizens.¹⁶ Although the usage of minority language was possible for local self-governments, the percentage of threshold to do so was too high (50%) and they did not get the right to use their language in the parliament. Furthermore, they also raised concerns about the lack of Albanian university education. Before the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Albanians usually pursued their studies at the University of Pristina due to which their number in the Macedonian higher education system was around 1–2%. This has changed after 1991 as after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Albanians living in Macedonia have become less mobile with no opportunity for a distinct university in the country.

Due to the marginalisation of the sizeable Albanian community, their political parties have campaigned during the 1990s and early 2000s to boost their rights and even to create a federal or a bi-national state, (some politicians went further by claiming the secession of the Albanian inhabited territories from Macedonia) without major success. Despite the minor achievements of the Albanian parties, the war in Kosovo and the refugee crisis – some 250–500 thousand people fled to Macedonia – created a huge economic burden for the country and intensified the tensions between the two communities.¹⁷

These tensions between the Macedonian and Albanian communities led to armed conflict in 2001. The insurgency lasted from January to September and resulted in around 4,000 people's death and nearly one hundred thousand people fled their homes.¹⁸ At the beginning, the insurgents were rather related to Serbia and Kosovo's Albanian community, but gained sympathy within many Macedonian Albanians, too. The insurgents established the National Liberation Army (UÇK – Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare), while later on another organisation, the Albanian National Army (AKS – Armata Kombëtare Shqiptare) emerged and continued the fight against the Macedonian state. The UÇK aimed at creating a federal state composed from an ethnic Albanian and a Macedonian part.

The majority of the Albanians in Macedonia did not support the armed conflict – the overwhelming majority of the Albanian deputies condemned the attacks.¹⁹ However, as later on the insurgency gained momentum, the Albanian parties also changed their discourse to a more radical one in line with the success of the UÇK and pushed for greater rights for the Albanian community.

Preliminarily, the centre of the Albanian belligerents was Tanusevci – a small village near the Kosovar border that played an important role in smuggling arms during the war of Kosovo – and they had frequent clashes with Macedonian armed forces. With the help of NATO forces, the Macedonian army could clear the area in March, so the rebels were relocated to the area of Tetovo and later they even managed to reach Skopje.²⁰

Despite the presence of international troops and efforts to control the situation, clashes were continuing near the Kosovar border and in the area of Tetovo. The ethnic tensions even reached a higher level when pogroms were taken place in Bitola in April 2001. In May,

¹⁵ BIDELEUX–JEFFRIES 2007, 407.

¹⁶ CSAPLÁR–DEGOVICS 2009, 190.

¹⁷ CSAPLÁR–DEGOVICS 2009, 192–193.

¹⁸ CSAPLÁR–DEGOVICS 2009, 200.

¹⁹ BIDELEUX–JEFFRIES 2007, 423–424.

²⁰ NÉMETH 2015, 3.

the then Prime Minister Georgievski managed to create with the support of the mediation of Javier Solana a unity government.²¹ Under NATO pressure, Georgievski announced that the government was ready to rewrite the constitution to provide greater rights to Albanians declaring them a constituent nation and promoting the Albanian language as the second official language in the state. Amnesty was also offered to the UÇK rebels.²² In spite of these offers, the conflict did not end, thus the government officially asked for the help of NATO that sent some 3,000 troops to the country. Due to the international pressure, negotiations were launched between the two belligerent sides on 18 July. The following weeks brought achievements in several issues culminating in the signature of the Ohrid Framework Agreement on 13 August 2001. The agreement included, among others, changes in the constitution, the introduction of a double majority system in the parliament providing the minorities more influence over the state affairs, acceptance of Albanian as second official language in municipalities where their percentage reached at least 20% of the total population, proportional representation of Albanians in the government administration, and law of enforcement as well as in the constitutional court, establishment of state-run Albanian higher education, amnesty for the militants who had not committed indictable crimes.²³

The breakthrough in the Albanian–Macedonian negotiations did not cease the conflict: several clashes occurred in the next weeks as the process of disarmament went slow. The Macedonian Parliament accepted the required constitutional and legal amendments during the upcoming month; on 7 March 2002, the amnesty law was passed.

Main Political Developments since the Regime Change

The communist leadership opened the way to the democratic transition in 1990. The first multiparty elections were held in November 1990 and won by the newly founded right wing, a nationalist party, the VMRO-DPMNE²⁴ under the chairmanship of Ljubčo Georgievski. While the party did not manage to acquire a simple majority, but it refused to enter in a coalition with any Albanian party, finally it was unable to form a government. Thus, an academician, Nikola Klijsev became the first Prime Minister of the independent country in 1991, being a non-partisan premier; he was taken down by a no-confidence vote in July 1992.²⁵

Due to the support of President Kiro Gligorov (renowned communist politician who became head of the country in early 1991), Branko Crvenkovski a young leader – the head of the former communist party that transformed into the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) – formed the government by giving ministerial posts for some Albanian politicians. This measure to co-opt prominent Albanian politicians to the system helped to preserve inter-ethnic peace in spite of the bloody wars in the neighbourhood. Although

²¹ CSAPLÁR-DEGOVICS 2009, 197.

²² BIDELEUX-JEFFRIES 2007, 434.

²³ BIDELEUX-JEFFRIES 2007, 441.

²⁴ The full name of the party: Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity. The party established itself as the heir of the VMRO, the late 19th century paramilitary movement fighting for Macedonia's independence.

²⁵ BIDELEUX-JEFFRIES 2007, 414.

incidents occurred between the two communities during the 1990s, these have not become a starting point of a major armed conflict. To preserve the fragile peace was eased by the presence of NATO forces: the organisation sent some troops as of 1992 in order to prevent the escalation of any inter-ethnic clashes. The strategic importance of North Macedonia was behind of this decision as any armed conflict would have repercussions to the whole region and would affect directly the NATO members like Greece or Turkey. In November 1992, the UN Security Council also decided to send some military personnel to the country.²⁶

The elections of 1994 resulted in the victory of the SDSM and Crvenkovski kept his power by creating a coalition with the Albanian Party for Democratic Prosperity and the Liberal Party. In the same year, Kiro Gligorov managed to win the presidential elections. The second Crvenkovski Government had to face growing inter-ethnic tensions as the Albanian community opened a private university in Tetovo in 1995 that was closed by the authorities and the rector, Fadil Sulejmani of the institution was arrested.²⁷ Notwithstanding the tensions, the two communities managed not to lose control and keep the inter-ethnic cooperation alive, thus the number of Albanian students accepted to Macedonian universities started to increase. In 1995, the government managed to conclude an interim agreement with Greece that lifted the economic embargo launched in 1993.

The relatively peaceful domestic political stage was disturbed by the assassination attempt against Kiro Gligorov in October 1995; the case was publicly linked to the mafia. The emerging corruption scandals, the high unemployment rate rising to 40% and growing inter-ethnic tensions and clashes damaged Crvenkovski's reputation; the Albanian coalition partner even withdraw its participation from the government. In such circumstances, the election in October and November 1998 brought the victory of the VMRO-DPMNE and Ljubčo Georgievski became the Prime Minister.

Georgievski managed to make some economic and diplomatic successes at the beginning of his premiership. He signed an agreement with Taiwan to contribute with financial support to the establishment of the first free-trade zone of the country, he also brokered a deal with Greece to launch a pipeline project from Thessaloniki to Skopje. Moreover, he was the one, who concluded an agreement with his Bulgarian counterpart, Ivan Kostov in 1999 by settling the 'Macedonian language issue'.²⁸

The war in Kosovo in 1999 also affected the country as several hundred thousand Kosovar refugees crossed the border from the North. The Macedonians were worried about the influx of Albanians, however, the majority of these refugees returned to their home in July 1999, after the end of the bombings. Although the war in the northern neighbourhood was over, and the threat of armed conflict seemed to be low, in January 2001 the situation changed dramatically when an Albanian insurgent bombed a train. The war in Kosovo that resulted in the introduction of international control and the de facto secession of the province from Serbia helped to articulate the Albanian minority's demands. Armed groups from Kosovo appeared in Macedonia and engaged in an armed conflict with the Macedonian military and law enforcement forces.

²⁶ BIDELEUX-JEFFRIES 2007, 415.

²⁷ CSAPLÁR-DEGOVICS 2009, 184.

²⁸ BIDELEUX-JEFFRIES 2007, 421.

As it was already mentioned, the international community that wanted to avoid the escalation of the conflict pushed the fighting parties to find a solution. Thus, they signed the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001 that intended to co-opt the Albanian minority into the state administration. Ali Ahmeti, former head of the UÇK had launched a new Albanian party called Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) in June 2002. Despite its shortcomings, the Ohrid Framework Agreement, managed to give better representation for the Albanian community and it contributed to decrease the number of clashes in Macedonia after 2002.

At the elections in September 2002, the SDSM and its allies (the 'Together for Macedonia' Alliance) got the most of the votes, while DUI became the strongest Albanian party. The victorious Macedonian coalition renewed the tradition to invite one of the Albanian parties to the government, thus Crvenkovski entered into coalition with DUI despite the antipathy of many Macedonians towards Ali Ahmeti. This political compromise and the stabilisation of the country had a positive effect on its EU integration prospects and the government submitted its application for EU membership.

As President Trajkovski died in an aircraft accident in 2004, new presidential elections were held in the same year where Crvenkovski acquired the majority of votes. He was followed by Hari Kostov as Prime Minister. Kostov's main political project was to implement the regulations of the Ohrid Framework Agreement concerning the local self-government. The proposed changes, like the readjustment of the municipality borders resulted in the promotion of the Albanian language in several places. This reform attempt created anger among Macedonians and led to several demonstrations. A referendum was held on this issue in November 2004 where 96% of the participants voted against it, but due to the low turnout (slightly more than 25%) the referendum was invalid.²⁹

Despite the success, Kostov unexpectedly resigned in 2004 and Vlado Bučkovski, the party's vice president became the next Prime Minister. In 2006, the Nicola Gruevski-led VMRO-DPMNE and its coalition allies won the elections. His victory represented a change in domestic political dynamics as he managed to keep the power for the upcoming roughly ten years. Despite the internal challenges, protests and scandals, the VMRO-DPMNE won the elections in 2008, 2011, 2014 and 2016.

All of these were early elections stemming from international failures, internal scandals and political stalemates. In 2008, the DUI proposed to hold early elections after Greece vetoed the country's bid for NATO membership. The ruling VMRO-DPMNE supported the idea and was able to become, again, the strongest party after the elections in July and entered into coalition with the DUI.

Due to corruption scandals leading to mass protests and parliamentary boycott of the opposition parties – mainly those organised by the SDSM – Gruevski called for early elections in 2011, one year before it was originally scheduled.³⁰ The alliance led by the VMRO-DPMNE managed to win the elections and form a new government by creating a new coalition with DUI. The cooperation between the two major governing parties broke up when they did not manage to reach an agreement concerning the common candidate for the presidential elections of 2014. Consequently, early elections were held simultaneously

²⁹ CSAPLÁR-DEGOVICS 2009.

³⁰ JAKOV MARUSIC 2011.

with the second round of the presidential elections. Both elections brought victory for the VMRO-DPMNE: the party got with its allies all together 61 seats, thus reached the simple majority in the parliament and its candidate, Gjorge Ivanov won the presidential elections with 55% of the votes.

The officially declared aim of the Gruevski-led government was to boost the economic development of the country and settle the ongoing dispute with Greece thus launching the country's EU and NATO accession process. The ambitions to solve the long-lasting naming dispute were proved to be too optimistic as Athens did not accept the Macedonian proposals and successfully objected the NATO invitation of the country. Thus, Gruevski chose to rely on Macedonian nationalism and launched the already mentioned Antiquisation Campaign. After the economic crisis of 2008–2009, even if the efforts of the government to boost the country's competitiveness had some results, they could not achieve a major change with regards to the traditionally high unemployment rate. The EU accession was also in a deadlock, mainly linked to the opposition of Greece and Bulgaria. The EU's criticism over the political instability and corruption in the country increased. Furthermore, Albanian parties also started to press more harshly the need for broader cultural rights.

Increasingly until the end of the Gruevski era, the intense political division between the Macedonian parties (i.e. the VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM) were deepening and led to frequent demonstrations, political crises and early elections. These tensions were boosted by corruption and other abuse of power related scandals. For instance, in 2015 because of a taping scandal, the SDSM left the parliament: Gruevski was accused to wiretapping some 6,000 opposition politicians and journalists by using the secret services.³¹

This serious political crisis was settled by the EU's mediation: the Prinzo Agreement signed in 2015 foresaw the resignation of the government at the beginning of 2016 and holding new elections in the same year, as well as the appointment of a new Special Prosecutor to investigate and the nomination of some Ministers by the SDSM.³²

Gruevski resigned according to the agreement; nevertheless, President Ivanov's decision to pardon 56 politicians involved in corruption scandals – jeopardising the Special Prosecutor's investigation – in April 2016 led to a new wave of mass protests (nicknamed 'colourful revolution'). Under this social pressure, Ivanov annulled his decision.³³

The particularity of the Macedonian party system always forced the VMRO-DPMNE to enter into coalition with Albanian parties, usually with the DUI: the right-wing party has never managed to get a strong majority and it always had to find a coalition partner against the left-wing SDSM. The political co-optation of the Albanian parties secured the power of Gruevski despite the scandals; however, after the December 2016 elections (where the VMRO-DPMNE got, again, the most of the votes),³⁴ he was not able to convince the Albanian parties to establish a new government. The DUI, which usually served as a trustable coalition partner for Gruevski, lost several mandates in favour of the emerging new Albanian parties, like the Besa or the Alliance for Albanians, which pushed its leadership to turn its back to the VMRO-DPMNE. Furthermore, in early 2017, the Albanian

³¹ MILANOV 2017, 4.

³² European Commission 2015.

³³ BRAUN–NÉMETH 2016, 5.

³⁴ SEKULARAC–CASULE 2016.

parties created an alliance and pressed for more rights and requested the fast resolution of the name dispute.³⁵

This political instability led to a stalemate that gave an opportunity to the left to acquire the power. SDSM leader Zoran Zaev entered into coalition talks with the Albanian parties open to accept a partnership. The negotiations led to an agreement that strengthened the status of the Albanian community and granted Zaev the adequate majority in the parliament. He declared his readiness to form a government in 2017; however, the president, Georgi Ivanov refused to nominate him to the Prime Ministerial post referring to ‘technical problems’ that hindered its nomination. The new political stalemate was handled by the pressure coming from the EU: Zaev finally could form its SDSM-led government in 2017 and made significant steps in solving the naming dispute thus facilitating the country’s accession to the EU and NATO.

Political Institutions

The Constitution

Macedonia accepted its constitution on 17 November 1991, after the successful referendum of independence. The preamble of the constitution stated that the “national state of the Macedonian people, in which full equality as citizens and permanent coexistence with the Macedonian people is provided for Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Roma and other nationalities living in the Republic of Macedonia”; this raised criticism among Albanians and other minority groups who felt intimidated and ignored by the emerging Macedonian nationalism. This highly disputed preamble was later modified (IV. amendment) by repealing the concept of the Macedonian national state.³⁶ The constitution went through major modifications after the signature of the Ohrid Framework Agreement that granted 15 amendments. These changes broadened the right of the Albanians. The constitution is divided into ten chapters where the tenth contains the amendments.

According to the constitution, the country is a parliamentary republic, where the government holds the power. The president has rather representative tasks; however, he or she can directly influence the domestic politics, like in 2017, when Gjorge Ivanov refused to ask Zaev to form a government despite his parliamentary support.

Electoral system

The president is elected by direct vote for a five-year-period in two-round elections. Parliamentary elections are held in every four year according to the law. It has been changed several times as the country used between 1990 and 1994 a plurality electoral system with, in 1998, a paralleled mixed system; in 2002, a proportional system was introduced with six

³⁵ MILANOV 2017, 10.

³⁶ See the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia 2011.

electoral districts.³⁷ As of 2018, the Parliament (Sobranie) consists of 123 seats from which 120 deputies are elected from six 20-seat constituencies based on a closed list proportional representation. In 2008, the Gruevski Government introduced some modifications in the system: it added three mandates that are single-member constituencies for Macedonians living abroad.³⁸

The constitution grants the right for referendum. The signature of 150,000 people eligible for voting is enough to hold the referendum. There were only three referenda in the country during the last thirty years: one about its independence in 1991, one about the administrative system in 2004 and one about the name of the country in 2018.

Administrative divisions

The fifth chapter of the constitution contains the provisions concerning the administrative system. At its declaration of independence, Macedonia was divided into 128 municipalities (opština) whose number was reduced to 80 under the administrative provisions of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. The agreement also gave more rights to the minority groups in the local self-government, thus the use of their language if their percentage reaches 20% within the administrative border of the municipality and the right to use their national flags.

The party system

The party system of Macedonia mirrors the internal divisions of its bifurcated society. Subsequently, ethnic parties dominate the political spectrum that seeks to reproduce the traditional left–right cleavages. Thus, there are two main Macedonian parties, the VMRO-DPMNE in the right and the SDSM in the left, which compete for power. The percentage of their political support is relatively similar, which means that they constantly replace each other at the government – except for the period of 2006–2016 when Nicola Gruevski hardly managed to create a pre-dominant party system favouring the right. Other Macedonian parties play a minor role in the political arena and they intend to enter into election coalitions with one of the two major parties. By doing this, they can secure a few parliamentary seats.

The VMRO-DPMNE was founded by Ljubčo Georgievski in 1990 and he ruled the party during the 1990s until his resignation due the electoral failure in 2002. He intended to stay behind the scenes and keep his leverage on his party; however, his protégé, Nicola Gruevski (former financial minister) rose to eminence and became independent. Georgievski later quit the VMRO-DPMNE. By creating his own clientele in the party, Gruevski managed to stay at the top until his resignation in December 2017³⁹ and he was followed by Hristijan Mickoski.

³⁷ ŠEDO 2010, 168.

³⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union s. a.

³⁹ IBNA 2017.

The introduction of a multi-party system pushed the ruling communist party, the League of Communists of Macedonia to evolve by renaming itself to the League of Communists of Macedonia – Party for Democratic Change (SKM-PDP). The political circumstances compelled the party elite to introduce even deeper transformation and reforms, which manifested in the foundation of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia in April 1991. The party positioned itself in the centre-left as a social democratic party. This change helped to win the parliamentary elections in autumn 1992. This victory cemented the party's rule during the 1990s as well as its leader's, Branko Crvenkovski's dominance in the SDSM. He remained the chairman until 2004, when he ascended to the presidency in 2004. After 2009, he assumed again the party leadership until 2013. After his resignation, Zoran Zaev was elected to the head of the SDSM.

For Albanians, two main parties are competing for their votes – usually each getting some 200–250 thousand of votes. In place of a 'classical' left–right political division, the main Albanian parties, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) and the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) identify themselves with the national cause. Their main aim was to strengthen the rights of the Albanian community and to facilitate and control the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. The DPA was established by a merger of two Albanian parties, the Party for Democratic Prosperity of Albanians (PDPA) and the People's Democratic Party (NDP), while the DUI was formed in 2002 by the Albanian leaders of the 2001 insurgency. Later on, after the 2008 elections, Gruevski switched from DPA to DUI, which has become the usual coalition partner for the VMRO-DPMNE for the upcoming years.⁴⁰

In 2016, the hegemony of the two main Albanian political parties was successfully challenged by new Albanian political movements like Besa or the Alliance for Albanians.⁴¹ These parties appeared as new political forces criticising the 'established' ones because of their involvement in corruption. Other minority groups, such as Turks or Vlachs also possess their own political parties that run in coalition with the VMRO-DPMNE and the SDSM.

Conclusion

Macedonia had to tackle with several major problems to overcome since its declaration of independence. Depending on how the past nearly thirty years are presented, the glass can be half empty or half full. The political elite managed to conclude the transitional period and to introduce a functioning multi-party system. Despite these achievements, the system itself is criticised by international actors: electoral manipulations and clashes during the elections appeared frequently since 1991 in the critics of the OSCE or the EU. The governmental abuse of power and corruption also appear as usual 'epithets' in descriptions about Macedonian domestic politics – however, it is far from being a unique case in the region.

Unlike in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, Macedonia's efforts to avoid civil war or large-scale ethnic conflict were also successful. Despite the relatively high proportion of one distinct minority group (Albanians give some 25–30% of the population)

⁴⁰ Balkan Insight 2010.

⁴¹ SEKULARAC–CASULE 2016.

and the presence of Macedonian nationalism, the local elite managed to find a seemingly viable solution to co-opt the minority under the strong support and pressure of the international community. The so-called Ohrid Framework Agreement signed in order to end the Albanian insurgency in 2001 made a huge step to accommodate Albanian demands and pacify the society, even if clashes occurred sporadically in the upcoming years.

The long-lasting naming dispute with Greece, paralysing the country's accession to the EU and NATO seems to be also solved after the agreement at Lake Prespa, in July 2018. After lifting the Greek obstruction to the transatlantic integration, the country's prospect to become a member in the above-mentioned organisations has increased. It was invited to NATO after the agreement, and the negotiations with the EU will get fresh impetus, especially if the political leadership manages to handle the constant problem of corruption and weak state of the rule of law.

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