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# MACEDONIA: A NEW BEGINNING?

*Besir Ceka*

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Macedonia, a landlocked country of two million situated in the heart of the Balkans, is a struggling democracy and aspiring EU and NATO member that has seen much trouble in its 27 years of independent existence. The most recent bout of turmoil began in February 2015, when then-opposition leader Zoran Zaev of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) released a raft of audio recordings showing that the ruling party had been illegally spying on legions of politicians, journalists, and other influential citizens. The recordings, whose authenticity was eventually backed by an EU investigation, laid bare the degree of state capture that then-Premier Nikola Gruevski and his party, known as VMRO-DPMNE, had achieved since being elected in 2006.<sup>1</sup> The recordings revealed their authoritarian ambitions to control the judiciary, the media, and other institutions.

As if this were not bad enough, Gruevski and his camp reacted to the deepening crisis by flirting with a pivot toward Russia and playing on Macedonia's key internal division, which runs between the ethnic-Macedonian majority and the sizeable ethnic-Albanian minority. Full-scale collapse was averted, but not by much. The country suffered two years of instability, punctuated by ethnic violence, before Zaev became premier at the end of May 2017.

Given this eruption—and the longstanding, still-persisting strains that gave rise to it—what are Macedonia's prospects for realizing the linked goals of further European integration and greater democratic stability? Does the country have a path forward, and are Zaev and his Social Democrats the leaders who can find the way?

Over the last quarter-century, Macedonia's political life has revolved around two basic questions: Who are the Macedonians, and to whom

does Macedonia belong? Both within and beyond the country's borders, these questions are deeply contested. Since Macedonia's 1991 declaration of independence from Yugoslavia, successive ruling elites have been preoccupied with fending off internal challenges from ethnic Albanians and external challenges from neighboring countries that dispute various aspects of Macedonia's legitimacy. The two challenges are intrinsically linked and reinforce each other.

Macedonian is a South Slavic language and ethnic Macedonians overwhelmingly identify as Orthodox Christians. Ethnic Albanians, by contrast, speak a non-Slavic tongue and for the most part identify as Sunni Muslims. These differences of language and religion define clearly delineated groups; intermarriage is rare, and most Albanians live in the west and northwest, along Macedonia's borders with Albania and Kosovo. While the exact figures are contested, the 2002 census indicates that ethnic Albanians comprise 25 percent of Macedonia's population and that ethnic Macedonians make up about two-thirds (64 percent). Turks, Serbs, Roma, and members of other minorities account for the remaining 11 percent. There was an attempt to carry out a new census in 2011, but it collapsed amid interethnic rancor. A fresh effort to count Macedonia's people is planned for 2019.

In order to grasp the ethnic conflict in Macedonia, it is helpful to look back to the way in which Josip Broz Tito ruled socialist Yugoslavia in the decades after World War II. Tito counted Macedonians as one of the six constitutive "nations" (or *narodi*) of the Yugoslav Federation, and considered them entitled on that account to their own republic. Albanians and other non-Slavic groups (ethnic Hungarians, for example) he categorized as "nationalities" (*narodnosti*) who did not enjoy any right to their own republics within Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, under Tito ethnic Albanians and Turks did rank officially as constitutive nationalities of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia (SRM).

After independence, however, the hierarchical ordering of ethnic Macedonians as the titular nation of Macedonia, with ethnic Albanians as merely a nationality within it, became a defining concept. To many ethnic Macedonians, the new sovereign state was a long-held dream come true. It was the only land that Macedonians could claim as their own, they argued, while a country called Albania already existed. Macedonia, they said, was *of* and *for* ethnic Macedonians—the ethnic Albanians' demand that they too receive constitutive status within the constitution was inadmissible.

The Albanian community, feeling that the Yugoslav communist regime had oppressed and discriminated against it for decades, saw the democratic transition as a chance to rewrite the social contract and create a binational state with possible federal or autonomy arrangements for Albanians. A significant minority of ethnic Albanians favored secession. To this day, Albanians reject being called

an ethnic minority and insist that they are a state-forming nation in Macedonia.

### **An Ethnic Collision Course**

These fundamentally incompatible visions have set the two ethnic groups on a collision course. The dominant parties at the time of independence catered to ethnic Macedonians and were unprepared to deal with the Albanian challenge. The fledgling country had no experience with liberal democracy; elites equated democracy with majority rule and paid little heed to minority rights. To ethnic-Macedonian parties and the successive governments that they dominated, Albanian demands seemed to threaten the national project gravely enough to justify violent suppression.

There was bitter irony in this. Macedonia had been lucky. It had slipped out of Yugoslavia peacefully, avoiding the warfare that consumed wide swaths of the Balkans in the 1990s. Yet the ethnic Albanians boycotted the 8 September 1991 independence referendum, offering a portent of trouble to come. Even before East German citizens tore down the Berlin Wall in November 1989, Macedonia's ruling communist elites had turned toward nationalism, amending the SRM's constitution to strip the ethnic Turks and Albanians of constituent-nationality status. The 1991 Constitution solidified this change, defining the newly independent country as "the national state of the Macedonian people." By "Macedonian people" was meant "ethnic Macedonians." The new entity was to be the nation-state of ethnic Macedonians, with no acknowledgment of the Albanian minority's political aspirations.

The new basic law laid the groundwork for illiberal measures. In 1992, legislation granted automatic citizenship to all ethnic Macedonians regardless of whether they resided in the country, but instituted a fifteen-year residency requirement for all those who were not ethnic Macedonians.<sup>2</sup> The law was clearly intended to disenfranchise ethnic Albanians who had recently moved to Macedonia from other parts of Yugoslavia, such as Kosovo.<sup>3</sup>

The use of the Albanian language in higher education was outlawed, and the display of foreign flags sharply limited (a measure aimed at stopping people from flying the flag of Albania). Since Serbian strongman Slobodan Milošević had revoked Kosovo's autonomy in 1989 and closed the Albanian-run University of Priština, a cultural center for Albanians from all over Yugoslavia, ethnic Albanians from Macedonia found themselves cut off from the possibility of pursuing higher education in their native language. In 1995, efforts to open an Albanian-language university in Macedonia were met by a police crackdown.<sup>4</sup> Clashes over flags and languages continued throughout the 1990s.

Economic hardship made everything worse. Macedonia emerged as

the poorest of the six former Yugoslav republics. The task of switching from central planning to markets was monumental. Rounds of UN sanctions imposed on Serbia and Montenegro in response to Milošević's expansionism had a grave effect on their trading partner Macedonia as well. So did the economic blockade that Greece imposed on Macedonia in 1994 and 1995 in order to underline Greek opposition to the country's name and symbols. According to former Macedonian president Kiro Gligorov, all these moves cost Macedonia 60 percent of its trade.<sup>5</sup> By 1994, its economy was a third of what it had been in 1990.<sup>6</sup> With the private economy still in parlous condition, public-sector employment continued to play an outsized economic role. Here too, Albanians suffered from severe underrepresentation and discrimination, heightening their feelings of resentment.<sup>7</sup>

Although Albanian parties have been part of governing coalitions in Macedonia's unicameral parliament since independence, until 2001 their agenda got little attention. Grievances concerning higher education, the use of the Albanian language and symbols, and discrimination went mostly unaddressed.<sup>8</sup> The hinge event came in February of that year—the outbreak of an armed insurgency spearheaded by an ethnic-Albanian group that called itself the National Liberation Army (NLA).

This guerrilla force, led by an ethnic-Albanian native of Macedonia named Ali Ahmeti, drew most of its support and recruits from among local ethnic Albanians, though its ranks also contained battle-hardened ethnic-Albanian fighters from neighboring Kosovo. Fighting there had begun in February 1998 and ended in June 1999 with the U.S.-led NATO intervention against Serbia, which NATO leaders including U.S. president Bill Clinton had accused of committing ethnic cleansing and genocide while fighting to keep control of Kosovo (a territory whose population is heavily Albanian but where there is a Serb minority). Arms and people flowed across Macedonia's porous borders from Kosovo and elsewhere. The NLA waged its campaign against Macedonian security forces for six months, until an internationally brokered August 2001 peace deal ended the fighting.

Although some of the NLA's early communiqués seemed to imply that it was seeking ethnic-Albanian secession, the ambiguity soon fell away as it became clear that the insurgency's goal was to advance the rights of Albanians within Macedonia. As one NLA commander told *Newsweek*:

We want Albanians to be considered as equals to the Macedonians. We would like to see Albanian recognized as an official language, [to have] the right to higher education in our native tongue, [to see] changes to the Constitution that would guarantee equal status and treatment and a new census observed by international institutions to guarantee the legitimacy of the numbers.<sup>9</sup>

The VMRO-DPMNE–led ruling coalition included an Albanian party when the insurgency broke out, and Albanian leaders in Macedonia disagreed vigorously among themselves about how best to pursue group rights. But the NLA was essentially fighting for what ethnic-Albanian politicians had been calling for since independence, and the NLA demands outlined above began to command consensus support among ethnic Albanians.

After at first repudiating the NLA, the United States and the European Union led a concerted and forceful diplomatic push to bring democratically elected officials from each of Macedonia’s two main ethnic groups to the bargaining table. Washington and Brussels supported the territorial integrity of Macedonia and condemned the NLA’s resort to violence, but at the same time contended that ethnic-Albanian grievances were legitimate and should be addressed. The NLA was not formally part of the peace talks, but its leaders were consulted informally the whole time and eventually agreed to disarm under NATO supervision, bringing combat to an end.

The Ohrid Framework Agreement, signed on 13 August 2001 in a city by a lake that forms part of the border between Macedonia and Albania, accepted most ethnic-Albanian demands and initiated constitutional changes meant to guarantee Albanians as a group certain rights. The Agreement, endorsed by all major parties, required that state-funded university education be made available “in languages spoken by at least 20 percent of the population of Macedonia.” It also guaranteed the “right [of minority communities] freely to express, foster and develop their identity and community attributes, and to use their community symbols”; the equitable representation of various ethnic groups in public administration and the police; and decentralization of power to the municipal level, giving more control to Albanians in places where they were the majority.<sup>10</sup> Implicitly guaranteeing implementation were the EU, NATO, the United States, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Fortunately for Macedonia and its multiethnic future, the half-year civil war had lacked the viciousness and massive bloodshed seen in earlier Balkan conflagrations—the six months of fighting had killed between 150 and 250 people. After the Ohrid accord, Ali Ahmeti formed a political party (the Democratic Union for Integration or DUI) that has been in government almost continuously since the first postconflict elections took place in 2002.

While few would deny that the position of Albanians has improved significantly since 2001, the implementation of the Agreement has been patchy. At the time of this writing in February 2018, the most controversial bill before parliament is a language measure aimed at enhancing the use of Albanian throughout the country. In his annual address to parliament on 26 December 2017, President Gjorge Ivanov (a member

of VMRO-DPMNE) called the proposed new law a threat to the unitary character of the state. Parliament passed the law nonetheless, but on 16 January 2018, Ivanov vetoed it. At the time of this writing, parliament is trying to pass the law on a second vote, but VMRO-DPMNE disputes the constitutionality of the law and its MPs have introduced thirty-six thousand amendments designed to stall the vote.

### Challenges to National Identity

While ethnic Albanians have been raising questions internally about whether Macedonia should have a monoethnic identity, neighboring states have been disputing Macedonia's claim to have any distinct national identity at all. The challenges are cultural, linguistic, and even religious. Bulgaria has asserted that Macedonian is not a distinct language, but only a dialect of Bulgarian, and has disputed the existence of the Macedonian nation altogether. Serbia has refused to recognize the Macedonian Orthodox Church as independent of the Serbian Orthodox Church. And most consequentially, Greece has vigorously challenged Macedonia's name and its claim to the cultural heritage of Alexander the Great and the ancient Kingdom of Macedonia.

When newly independent Macedonia put the Vergina Sun—an ancient Macedonian symbol—on its new flag, Greece vehemently disputed the move and even the country's right to its name. Northern Greece contains a province that is also called Macedonia. Greek officials argue, in effect, that the name is already "taken" and that using it is tantamount to asserting a claim of sovereignty over Greek territory. Under a 1993 compromise, the new country agreed to be known internationally for a time as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), the name under which it was officially admitted to the UN. Following Greece's crippling 19-month trade embargo in 1994–95, Macedonia also changed its flag from one featuring the ancient Vergina Sun, which has sixteen rays, to the current flag bearing a sun with eight rays. This concession to Greece's claim that the Vergina Sun is a Greek symbol could not resolve the name dispute, however. It remains alive, and since EU and NATO member Greece has veto power over Macedonia's efforts to join both those organizations, it continues to be a serious problem.

Whatever the merits of the competing historical narratives, there can be no doubt that these external identity challenges—especially the one from Greece—have profoundly affected Macedonia's postcommunist political trajectory. They have not only thwarted the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, but have intensified its internal ethnic tensions as well.

The more Macedonia's neighbors question its identity, the more ethnic-Macedonian elites seem determined to build a state that puts ethnic-

Macedonian identity at the center and excludes all other groups from the official narrative. Gruevski and his right-of-center party typified this during their decade in power. Perhaps their most audacious (and certainly most expensive) move was the highly controversial Skopje 2014 project, a massive construction effort designed to fill the capital city with new or renovated bridges, buildings, monuments, and public spaces suggesting a direct link between modern and ancient Macedonia. Begun shortly after Greece vetoed Macedonia's bid for NATO membership at the 2008 Bucharest summit, Skopje 2014 has so far cost more than US\$700 million.<sup>11</sup> Gruevski sold the building spree partly as a way to promote tourism, but what some call the "antiquization" of Skopje with statues and neoclassical or baroque architecture also underlines the idea that the essence of Macedonian statehood is the heritage (real or supposed) of a single ethnic group.

As former Gruevski advisor Sam Vaknin put it in 2009, "Antiquisation has a double goal, which is to marginalise the Albanians and create an identity that will not allow Albanians to become Macedonians."<sup>12</sup> Among the cornerstones of Skopje 2014 is the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, which contains no mention of the ethnic Albanians.<sup>13</sup> Albanian parties responded by building their own monuments in places they control. This constructivist identity project divided public opinion, including among ethnic Macedonians.<sup>14</sup> It also caused consternation among the Greeks and, to a lesser extent, the Bulgarians. Both countries accused Gruevski's government of historical theft and identity misappropriation.

The degree to which Macedonia has been consumed by identity politics over the last twenty-five years should not cause us to forget that there, as elsewhere, political contention also has much to do with the struggle to control more tangible resources. The ruling parties and those close to them have profited greatly from their power over public-sector jobs, state funds, public lands, and business permits—the rest not so much. Elites, whether Macedonian or Albanian, cannot seem to deliver good governance, quality health care, and better living standards, but they are good at promoting symbols and "narratives." Perhaps it should come as no surprise to note the degree to which these, rather than substantive economic and social outcomes, have been made the focus of political attention.

Meanwhile, many citizens, and especially younger ones, have been emigrating. According to a recent government report, a staggering "85 percent of final-year university students have said that they see their future out of the country."<sup>15</sup> Other figures confirm this. An IMF report notes that emigration from Eastern Europe has been most pronounced in the Balkan countries. As a group, Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia saw almost 17 percent of their 1990 population leave by 2012.<sup>16</sup> The report further finds a very strong correlation

between the quality of governance and emigration of better-educated people, with more corrupt countries seeing a larger exodus.<sup>17</sup>

## EU and NATO Membership

Outbreaks of feared or actual instability in Macedonia have spurred international involvement and even intervention. The first such move came in December 1992, when the UN sent an armed border-monitoring mission to make sure that fighting in other former Yugoslav republics would not spill over into Macedonia. Since then, the EU, NATO, and the United States have played an outsized role in the domestic politics of Macedonia, which has long proclaimed EU and NATO membership as a key goal. In 2001, it became the first country in the Western Balkans to sign an EU stabilization and association agreement, the first step in the accession process and a reward for settling that year's armed conflict. Macedonia became a candidate for EU membership in 2005, at about the same time as Croatia. Since then, however, Macedonia has made virtually no progress toward EU accession, while Croatia became the Union's twenty-eighth full-fledged member in July 2013.

The main obstacle has been opposition from Athens, sparked by the name dispute. Although Greece's actions have been widely questioned, including by the International Court of Justice, EU member states have proven apathetic in the face of Greek resolve to keep Macedonia out. Despite having little or no leverage in the name dispute, Gruevski took the provocative step of renaming the Skopje airport after Alexander the Great in 2008.<sup>18</sup> Three years later, Gruevski placed a huge mounted statue of the ancient conqueror (his identity poorly concealed by the sculpture's official moniker of "Equestrian Hero") in the capital's main square.<sup>19</sup>

The Gruevski government's reluctance to compromise with Greece should be seen in light of the premier's strong authoritarian hold on the country during his decade in power. Corrupt leaders have little to gain by striving earnestly for EU accession. The lengthy and exacting process that is required can only expose them to more scrutiny and pressure from Brussels and its agents. Gruevski's party paid lip service to joining the EU while imposing near-total control over the courts and media and using patronage as well as fear and intimidation to manipulate the electoral process.<sup>20</sup> Critical media outlets were shut down, opposition lawmakers were violently expelled from parliament in 2012, and corruption thrived (with a big boost from the plethora of murky public-procurement contracts associated with the Skopje 2014 project).<sup>21</sup> According to the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, Macedonia in 2017 ranked 111<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries on press freedom. In 2005, the last year before the VMRO-DPMNE came to power, Macedonia had ranked 43<sup>rd</sup> out of 167 countries rated.<sup>22</sup>

For its part, the EU proved all too willing for stability's sake to cover

its eyes with regard to the authoritarian turn in Macedonia (among other places in the Balkans).<sup>23</sup> When it came to criticizing the Gruevski government, such key instruments of influence as the annual EU reports on progress toward accession were remarkably subdued. In 2015, moreover, Macedonia's closure of its border with Greece played a crucial role in stopping the flow of Syrian refugees into Europe via the Balkan route. As a reward, Gruevski received diplomatic cover from West European leaders.<sup>24</sup> Sebastian Kurz, who was then Austria's foreign minister and is now its chancellor, even appeared at a VMRO-DPMNE rally just before the December 2016 election to give a speech endorsing the party.

Of course, it is hardly the EU's responsibility to straighten out the domestic affairs of Macedonia. In fact, the international community's prolonged and heavy-handed involvement has created a political culture of dependency that has made Macedonia into something resembling a permanent quasi-protectorate. Yet there can be no denying that the EU is a highly influential actor, given that three-fourths of Macedonia's citizens want to join it. When the EU has acted, it has not always done so with great regard for democratic principle. Too often, it has provided cover for authoritarian leaders, trading long-term political progress for short-term stability. Gruevski knew well the EU's fear of strife and turmoil in its backyard. The fragile peace provided by his coalition with Ahmeti's DUI was enough to win the EU's support. Brussels downplayed or ignored clear signs of democratic erosion.

### **Power Struggle**

The wiretapping scandal that erupted in February 2015 changed all this, and at times seemed as if it might lead to a civil war. Threatened by the revelations, the ruling party brought what amounted to treason charges against Zaev. The next two years were a whirlwind of political intrigue and high-stakes maneuvering.

Soon after the scandal broke out, Zaev worked with civil society to organize protests, which the Gruevski government answered with counterprotests. As the crisis deepened, Brussels scrambled to respond. Working closely with the U.S. Embassy in Skopje, the EU mediated among the leaders of the four largest parties to craft a June 2015 deal under which the parties agreed to hold elections by the end of April 2016.<sup>25</sup> (After two postponements, that balloting at last went forward on 12 December 2016.) In September 2015, after much diplomatic pressure, Macedonia named a little-known district attorney from the southeastern corner of the country as a special prosecutor to look into potential crimes revealed by the wiretaps. Katica Janeva and her staff had until June 2017 to bring charges. They did so in twenty cases involving dozens of high-ranking ruling-party officials, including Gruevski himself.

As of this writing, the only convictions had come in November 2017,

when Goran Grujevski, a former intelligence chief, and six of his collaborators were found guilty of forging documents and destroying evidence regarding the wiretaps. Grujevski and another convicted former official escaped to Greece, but Greek authorities took them into custody and they are awaiting extradition. More than a hundred other cases are still in the works.

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Prime Minister Gruevski reacted to the wiretapping scandal by seeking to ethnicize the political crisis and to stoke nationalism among his supporters. On 9 May 2015 in Kumanovo, a city within an hour's drive of Skopje, a densely populated neighborhood became the scene of a gun battle between police and about forty well-armed ethnic Albanians. The shooting left eighteen dead (eight of them police officers) and wounded scores more. The circumstances are still murky, but

suspicions abound that the conflict may have been orchestrated by the country's security services in order to exacerbate the interethnic conflict and divert attention from the wiretapping scandal.

Despite fears that the incident would give rise to more violence, a surprising interethnic solidarity began to appear in its wake. On May 17, barely a week after the firefight, youthful protesters in the capital were waving conjoined Macedonian and Albanian flags.<sup>26</sup> In such a deeply divided society, the sight was extraordinary. The young people were taking part side-by-side in what may have been the largest protest in the country's history (estimates of the crowd size put it at about a hundred-thousand people). They had gathered to demand that the Gruevski government step down.

Finding himself increasingly isolated from the West, Gruevski flirted with a pivot toward Russia, which had involved itself in the crisis as a strong supporter of the embattled government. Moscow repeatedly accused the West of meddling in Macedonia's internal affairs and trying to stage another "color revolution" within the Kremlin's sphere of influence. Attendees at the ruling party's rallies began waving Russian flags and carrying pictures of Vladimir Putin. As Dimitar Bechev has noted, Russia's return to the Balkans has been less a matter of determined strategy than of opportunism; it seeks to play spoiler by capitalizing on any tensions that happen to arise between local elites and the West.<sup>27</sup> Facing pressure from Western diplomats and Macedonia's staunchly pro-Western populace, Gruevski stopped talking up a Moscow pivot and reaffirmed his party's Euro-Atlantic orientation.

While it is unsurprising to see an embattled postcommunist authoritarian mulling a turn toward Moscow, the truth is that in the Balkans, ties to Russia are looser, more transactional, and often more fleeting than many observers assume. If the EU is worried about Russian bids for influence in this part of Europe, then Brussels should focus on taking a principled stance against authoritarianism *before* it has a chance to entrench itself. Otherwise, the EU risks waking up one day to find in its midst more illiberal and authoritarian governments like those of Hungary and Poland.

As the December 2016 election approached, Zaev and his Social Democrats ran a unifying campaign centered on a novel civic conception of Macedonian nationhood. This idea lay behind their pithy slogan “Life for everyone.” The party recruited several prominent ethnic Albanians and put together multiethnic party lists, leading to the historic election of two ethnic-Albanian MPs for SDSM. The Social Democrats selected a third Albanian MP to sit in parliament after another one of their MPs was elected to a mayoralty and had to vacate his seat.

Elections to the 120-seat parliament ended in a virtual draw: The VMRO-DPMNE won 51 seats, while the SDSM took 49. These totals represented a loss of 10 seats by the former and a gain of 15 by the latter since the last balloting in April 2014. Among the ethnic-Albanian parties, DUI saw its seat total halved, going from 19 to 10 seats after failing to stand up to VMRO-DPMNE’s ethnonationalism and because it seemed to many voters to have been in league with that party’s plundering of state resources. Two new ethnic-Albanian parties, the Besa Movement and the Alliance for Albanians (AA), received 5 and 3 seats respectively. The Democratic Party for Albanians, a dominant party in the 1990s, won a mere pair of seats in 2016, its worst showing ever.

Having won the most seats, the VMRO-DPMNE had the first go at forming a governing coalition. It had become so toxic to ethnic Albanians, however, that it could find no partners among their parties. Despite rumors of significant concessions and massive payoffs, even the DUI turned it down after briefly toying with the idea. The Social Democrats, after drawn-out bargaining, signed up the DUI and the AA, resulting in a coalition holding 62 seats—a razor-thin majority but enough to form a government. The normal next step should have been the formality of receiving a mandate from the president, acting as head of state, but President Ivanov refused to carry out his constitutional duty. Instead, he claimed that the concessions regarding language use and other issues that the SDSM had made to the ethnic-Albanian parties during coalition talks threatened national unity, and so refused to invite Zaev to form a government.

Intense pressure from Brussels and Washington plus assurances from SDSM induced Ivanov to back down, but his party was still not ready to accept the new government. On 27 April 2017, as the new parliamentary majority was about to elect an ethnic Albanian as speaker, about two-

hundred VMRO-DPMNE henchmen, some of them masked, stormed the parliament chamber and physically assailed MPs. The wounded included Zaev, whose face streamed with blood from a forehead wound. Zijadin Sela, the head of the AA, was beaten and dragged across the floor; he had to receive treatment for brain injuries.<sup>28</sup> The police needed stun grenades to clear the building. There is video evidence of MPs from the former ruling party opening the doors and guiding the mob to where Zaev and others were holding a press conference.<sup>29</sup> In November, former interior minister and public-safety chief Mitko Cavkov and three VMRO-DPMNE legislators were among dozens placed under arrest or investigation in connection with the riot.<sup>30</sup>

Despite this violent attempt to disrupt the democratic process, the new SDSM government received swift EU and U.S. recognition, bolstering its legitimacy and leading the VMRO-DPMNE to acknowledge, however grudgingly, its new status as the opposition. The 2017 local elections dealt it another huge blow, as voters took away 51 of the 56 municipal governments that it had once controlled. The SDSM, meanwhile, went from 4 to 57 mayoralties. In December 2017, Gruevski stepped down as VMRO-DPMNE party leader, but only to make way for a close associate, Hristijan Mickoski.

### **A New Beginning?**

How will Macedonia's politics evolve from here? There is reason for cautious optimism that the country may finally be on the right path. Officials in Brussels are exuberant about Zaev, who says all the right things concerning democracy, interethnic relations, the rule of law, and his country's need to join the West. Meanwhile, buoyed by positive developments in Macedonia, the EU has signaled a willingness to recommit to the accession process of the Western Balkans. Partly to appease the EU, the new government seems intent on embarking on much-needed reforms in the judiciary, media, public administration, and secret service. Macedonia is a success story that the EU needs to sustain.

Before any progress can be made in joining the EU and NATO, however, the name issue with Greece will need to be resolved. Fortunately, Zaev's center-left government seems genuinely interested in doing so. With a willing partner in Greek premier Alexis Tsipras, who heads the left-wing Syriza party, the chances are as good as they have ever been. Making the name issue go away would give a major boost to Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, but settling such an emotionally charged matter will be a challenge. Tsipras's government faces elections in 2019, and the Independent Greeks, the junior partners in his coalition, say that they will reject any name containing the word Macedonia or its variants. On the Macedonian side, meanwhile, feelings about the name continue to run high among ethnic Macedonians, and the VMRO-DPMNE is almost

certain to paint any compromise as a betrayal of the country's national identity.

Zaev's sharp break with interethnic divisiveness, including some of his own party's past practices, is refreshing and welcome. Yet there are strong structural reasons to believe that the interethnic honeymoon in Macedonia will not last. The Albanian parties are all strictly ethnic in their orientation, and they frame policy issues as a zero-sum game between the two ethnic groups. The electoral inroads that Zaev has made among ethnic Albanians threaten these parties, who can naturally be expected to do what they can to drive wedges between SDSM and Albanian voters. They are likely to succeed, since Zaev's need to maintain his own ethnic-Macedonian base limits his room to maneuver. And while it is not yet clear precisely what course VMRO-DPMNE's new leadership will take with regard to Albanian and Greek relations, that party's obstruction of the new law on languages and its history of appealing to hardcore ethnic-Macedonian nationalism does not inspire confidence.

Zaev's coalition has already run into trouble. In December 2017, the AA quit the government over disagreements about cabinet posts, thereby taking away the government's slender parliamentary majority. This has left Macedonia with a minority government, forcing Zaev to rely on ad hoc support from ethnic-Albanian opposition parties, leading to instability. To make matters worse, the VMRO-DPMNE is boycotting parliament to protest the imprisonment of its members who face charges stemming from last April's riot. Chances are high that a fresh general election will interrupt the current parliament's four-year mandate.

Whatever happens next, the new government must deal with an impoverished and deeply disillusioned polity that has lost all trust in political institutions. The task of creating economic opportunities, stemming emigration, and building basic trust in the democratic system will be daunting.

Macedonia's best way forward will be to undertake an earnest attempt to establish democracy, fight corruption, and address the internal and external challenges to its national legitimacy. Zaev has proven a bold leader so far and seems intent on solving the open interethnic questions, as seen through his party's support for the new law on languages as well as his positive moves to cool down the name conflict with Greece.

Establishing democracy and the rule of law will be more difficult tasks because they imply more fundamental societal transformations. The EU can help in this regard. As its newly unveiled strategy for the Western Balkans bluntly states, "Today, the countries [of the region] show clear elements of state capture, including links with organised crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration."<sup>31</sup> This frankness is encouraging, but the EU will have to follow up by naming specific leaders who engage in corruption and rewarding those who truly pursue reforms. If Zaev manages to reform the country as he

has vowed to do, Macedonia's new prime minister could become the EU's new poster child.

## NOTES

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1. The acronym stands for Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

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