



UNRAVELING THE POLITICAL CRISIS IN MACEDONIA: TOWARD RESOLUTION OR CALM BEFORE THE STORM?

BALKANS IN EUROPE POLICY ADVISORY GROUP
(BIEPAG)
POLICY BRIEF

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Unraveling the Political Crisis in Macedonia: Toward Resolution or Calm Before the Storm?¹

In a period of less than two weeks, between the 5th and 18th of May 2015, Macedonia suffered violent protests, a weekend-“war,” resignations from the government, and continued social mobilization for and against the government, which resulted in two big rallies and the setting up of two separate tent camps in the center of Skopje, one against the government and another in its support. Negotiations between the political leaders, facilitated by international actors, brought momentary political stability; however, the question remains whether negotiations will resolve the political crisis in a deeply divided and polarized society or whether they will just be the calm before the storm. The all-day talks on 2 June 2015, mediated by EU Commissioner Hahn, appear to have yielded a tentative first step in resolving the crisis. Now, it is important to build on this momentum and to avoid a return to “normality” without change.

While violent protests on May 5 made international news, it was the weekend-“war” on May 9th and 10th that was breaking news. In the brief conflict in Kumanovo, located close to the border on the Preshevo Valley in Serbia, eight police officers were killed and more than 30 were injured. On the other side, 10 belligerents were killed and some 20 surrendered and were arrested and charged with terrorism. The weekend-“war” raised fears that inter-ethnic violence would return, after an inter-ethnic conflict was contained and peacefully resolved in 2001. It also showed that if the political crisis spills over into inter-ethnic relations, then it will jeopardize the country’s stability and have possible negative consequences for the wider region.

Why have another inter-ethnic conflict?

According to the Prime Minister, the Macedonian security forces clashed with and destroyed one of the most dangerous terrorist groups in the Western Balkans, whose fighters, mainly from Kosovo and some from Macedonia, fought in Kosovo, Macedonia and Syria. Their aim was, allegedly, to attack several police stations, target civilians and destabilize the

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country. While it is clear that the same group raided the police border post in Goshince, between Macedonia and Kosovo, in April, it is unclear why it came to Macedonia, what its motives were, what it sought to achieve and how its members placed themselves and their weapons in a very densely populated neighborhood in Kumanovo.

In Macedonia, many see the weekend-“war” as a deliberately staged event linked to the political crisis. The two opposing narratives agree that the armed group members were mercenaries. According to pro-government media and pundits, they were paid by the opposition and its international supporters (e.g. Soros Foundation) in order to provoke a civil war and topple the government. Opposition and anti-government media, on the other hand, suggest that it was Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and Ali Ahmeti, the leader of the Albanian junior coalition partner DUI, who staged the conflict as a distraction from the wiretapped materials scandal and the growing protest movements. A corroboration of the latter version, some media in Kosovo reported that, prior to the incident, there were contacts and discussions between members of the armed groups and intelligence members from Macedonia.

However, one should also take into account the Albanians’ growing frustrations with the DUI. The party that emerged from the 2001 UÇK in Macedonia did not control all parts of the former armed groups, which operated in Kosovo, south Serbia (Preshevo Valley) and Macedonia between 1999 and 2001. In 2015, the government building was shelled twice, for which a new phantom UÇK claimed responsibility. Also, a hand grenade was thrown at the DUI’s headquarters a few weeks before the incident in Kumanovo. In February 2015, former members of the NLA protested in front of the DUI’s headquarters, claiming that they were not socially reintegrated and lacked jobs. Musa Xhaferi, deputy prime minister in charge of the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, promised to provide public employment for them. He delivered 150 public administration positions, mainly for former NLA fighters, albeit, only after the incident in Kumanovo.

After the weekend-“war,” inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia were shaken, but not stirred. There was a strong cross-ethnic public reaction against the violence. Both Macedonians and Albanians in Kumanovo denounced the

violence. Alsat-M TV led very balanced and bi-lingual coverage, thus contributing to the strengthening of inter-ethnic understanding and tolerance. Even though the majority of the killed police officers were from northwestern Macedonia, another multi-ethnic region, there have been no acts of retaliation or other incidents that would incite inter-ethnic violence.

The precarious inter-ethnic relations depend on the resolution of the political crisis. There seems to be a genuine multi-ethnic solidarity and resentment toward the government, which is seen as the main threat to inter-ethnic stability. Ironically, many international officials have looked the other way in regard to the deficiencies of Gruevski and Ahmeti’s governance. The argument was that they deliver stability and good inter-ethnic relations. Now, it appears that this assumption was misled. Dissatisfaction with a corrupt and authoritarian regime fuels political grievances, which can either stir up inter-ethnic relations or worsen them to deflect from the political crisis. It goes to show that a strongman rule does not deliver democracy and that its stability is hollow. Key international actors appear to be gradually becoming aware of this fact, and they are now taking a stronger stand to support democracy, and with that restore stability.

Toward crisis resolution

The West read the weekend-“war” as an isolated incident and as ephemeral concerning the political crisis, which is the main cause of the instability. For example, EU Commissioner Hahn noted that events in Kumanovo should not be a distraction from finding a solution to the crisis. After the fighting, the ambassadors of key western countries (e.g. United States, Britain, Germany, Italy, France and the EU ambassador) had meetings with the key party leaders Gruevski, Ahmeti and Zoran Zaev, the head of the opposition Social Democrats (SDSM). Their message to Gruevski was that political accountability and adequate legal actions are needed to resolve the political crisis.

As a result of that, on May 12, the ministers of Interior and of Transport and Communication, along with Sasho Mijalkov, the head of civilian intelligence and the Prime Minister’s cousin, submitted their resignations.

Gruevski was quick to replace them with new party loyalists, even though the new Minister of Interior and the head of civilian intelligence are career professionals from the Ministry of Interior. The former ministers and Sasho Mijalkov retained high party positions in the VMRO-DPMNE.

The ambassador's message to the DUI was to take a stand in support of institution-building and an impartial investigation. The message to Zaev was for the opposition to return to the parliament. However, the DUI remained a silent junior coalition partner and the SDSM continued with the "bombs" and supported a citizen's rally against the government on May 17. Students, civil society activists, journalist and Zaev continue to demand Gruevski's resignation. As a follow-up, opposition activists and civil activists set up a tent camp in front of the government building, and the participants announced that they would remain there until Gruevski resigns.

The next day, the VMRO-DPMNE organized a large counter-rally in support of the government. Representatives of the "Citizens' Movement to Defend Macedonia," coalition partners and Gruevski blamed the opposition for being puppets of foreign forces that want to destabilize Macedonia. Gruevski asserted that they will remain strong and overcome this challenge. As a follow-up, the ruling party and its supporters set up a tent camp in front of the parliament and announced that they will stay there to protect the electoral results and to defend democracy.

Russia strongly supports the government and its version of reality, starting with the release of the first opposition "bombs" and continuing all the way through the incident in Kumanovo. According to Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, the West is orchestrating a "colored" revolution in Macedonia to prevent the implementation of the Turkish stream pipeline project. In his opinion, the destabilization of Macedonia could lead to a division of the country between Bulgaria and Albania or toward greater internal federalization. Notwithstanding that Bulgaria and Albania denounced such accusations and that other countries condemned the irresponsible messages, Russia's propaganda is amply used to support the VMRO-DPMNE's narrative. For example, Gruevski maintains that EU and NATO integrations remain strategic priorities; however, this clashes with his party position that foreign security services are using the opposition and

various other instruments (e.g. wiretapped materials, security breaches and social movements) to topple the government.

The EU and the U.S. have initiated negotiations between the political leaders, but with a changing dynamic and format. There were two meetings in Skopje between the leaders of the four big parties (VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, DUI and DPA) facilitated by the U.S. and EU ambassadors; in between those meetings, Nikola Gruevski and Zoran Zaev had a meeting in Strasbourg facilitated by European Commissioner Johannes Hahn and members of the European Parliament — Ivo Vajgl, Richard Howitt and Eduard Kukan — who had been mediating at the behest of the EU since March 2015. The first tangible agreement arose on June 2, after Commissioner Hahn mediated between Gruevski, Zaev, Ahmeti and the leader of the opposition Albanian party DPA, Menduh Thaçi, for nearly 9 hours.

What are the possible outcomes?

The content of the "bombs" showed that the VMRO-DPMNE has completely captured the state and that it controls the public administration, judiciary, media, and large parts of the economy and civil society. This is one of the reasons why it is in Gruevski's interest for the negotiations to be extended. Also, because the government controls the mainstream media in Macedonia and has a strong PR machine, Gruevski would like to induce propaganda battles and avoid discussion on accountability for the wiretapping and for the content thereof.

On the other hand, the SDSM has continued with new "bombs," and there is a greater convergence of the opposition with anti-government social movements. However, as negotiations put the political actors in the spotlight, civil society actors are pushed into the shade. While elite political bargaining could be beneficial to finding a quick solution for the political crisis, a process of durable societal change needs to be more inclusive and be supported by a variety of stakeholders. The political process has wider social implications. It is very likely that social mobilization (pro- and anti-government) will continue and that political polarization will deepen. On both sides, the tents are there to stay and there can be new rallies or other

forms of public manifestations (pro- and anti-government). Gruevski and Zaev will use, or at least read, such activities to strengthen their positions during the negotiations.

An escalation of the situation, and violence, does not seem likely as long as the negotiating process is on-going and promises results. However, inter-ethnic relations are fragile. On the one hand, if the political crisis deepens, then radicals will be empowered. The pro-government propaganda expounds Macedonian nationalist sentiments with a Christian Orthodox overtone, which feeds the opposing Albanian nationalist sentiments with a Muslim overtone. On the other hand, the political crisis increased inter-ethnic cohesion and solidarity. Many Albanians support the anti-government protests and are camping in front of the government. It remains to be seen whether the high multi-ethnic potential will translate into political support.

It is very likely that Russia will continue to support the government and contribute to its propaganda narrative. Whatever works to distract attention from Ukraine and harm Western interests in the Balkans is beneficial for Russia. On the other hand, Western international actors seem more aware and engaged, as was exemplified by the concerted actions of the ambassadors in Skopje. The EU is more alert and willing to take an initiative; however, it falls short of implementing a cohesive policy.

One can outline three scenarios of how things can evolve. In a negative and not very likely scenario, Gruevski would opt for an Erdoğan-style “Gezi Park” approach. This means that the police, using brute force and violence, would dismantle the opposition camp. Even though this option is not fully off the table, the resignations of Gordana Jankulovska and Sasho Mijalkov, the most faithful loyalists of Gruevski in charge of the security apparatus, make it less likely. Also, such a scenario would come with a very high cost for the already damaged international credibility of Gruevski, and it could even instigate stronger protests.

In a positive, and also not very likely scenario, the negotiations would end with a political agreement in the next couple of weeks. The agreement would entail the formation of a new government (one option is an expert care-taker government and the other a political grand coalition govern-

ment), the opposition would return to parliament, and there would be an objective and impartial investigation and an institutional resolution of the wiretapping scandal (who did the wiretapping and what was the content) and the Kumanovo incident. The realization of this scenario depends on whether or not the political leaders have the will to come to an agreement and how soon, and whether or not Western international actors have the interest and leverage to expedite the process.

Realistically, bearing in mind that the will of the political actors to find a solution is rather low, as is the interest and leverage of the West, one should expect that the negotiations will be prolonged over the summer period. The June 2 agreement might signal some new dynamism, but considering that many details are unresolved, it remains possible that Gruevski will use the time to diffuse the anti-government resentment. Zaev will continue with the “bombs” to sustain the pressure and anti-government mobilization. Also, the DUI will remain in government and attract more negative reactions from the Albanian community. A prolonged status-quo risks leading to a demobilizing of public discontent, and may result in maintaining the current regime. While this might bring about short- or even medium-term stability, it carries several risks. Many Albanians might feel increasingly alienated, opting for radical options. The success of the regime would also send a chilling signal to the region and be a likely prelude to further protests and unrest in the future.

There are a couple of possible game changers. On the one hand, a regime change could be expedited if some political parties would stop colluding with the government and join the opposition. The DUI is the prime candidate, but the DPA can also make a difference, and so can some of the smaller parties in Gruevski’s coalition. On the other hand, a stronger reaction from the EU and more decisive involvement can make a big difference. However, the EU seems uncertain of what is the right approach. The increased involvement of Commissioner Hahn appears to have yielded some results on June 2. The agreement between the main parties to hold early elections in April 2016 is the first tentative step towards resolving the crisis. It also highlighted that earlier efforts of low-key mediation by three MEPs were insufficient in delivering any breakthrough. However, it is far too early to consider the crisis resolved. Many details must be ironed out, and there

is little reason to believe that Gruevski and his inner circle are willing to consider a transparent process to investigate the claims against him and to provide for a completely free and fair electoral process.

Democracy in Macedonia can be restored with sound political management; it does not have to come through a revolution. However, it is necessary to first change the government that abuses power and then to restore fundamental rights and values, to reform institutions, and to initiate political and social reconciliation. The EU should not lose its opportunity to support democracy in Macedonia and to increase its enlargement and foreign policy instruments. More than a few countries in the EU's neighborhood have similar needs, and it is in line with the EU's strategic priorities to act.

Therefore, we recommend:

To the EU:

1. To name a high-level mediator to resolve the crisis in the country. The involvement of Commissioner Hahn has produced initial results, but it will be crucial to have a high-level senior mediator, who will remain engaged in Macedonia over the next 10 months running up to the elections. Such a mediator will need to have political weight and to report directly to both commissioner Hahn and Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.
2. To set clear goals for the negotiations between the political actors, including:
 - A full independent investigation of allegations by an internationally monitored process;
 - an expert government without the participation of the leadership of both parties, and inclusion of non-party experts, so that a constructive environment may exist for elections and the investigation;

- a process that will ensure fair elections, provide for independent and international supervision of the electoral process, including controls of electoral records; and
 - a reform agenda that will promote a more transparent government.
3. To fully involve civil society in the process. As the political crisis in Macedonia is not primarily a conflict between the government and the opposition, it is essential that civil society (both NGOs and social movements) are consulted and regularly informed. A lasting political solution requires a broader social base than just political parties. In particular, as many Macedonians and Albanians are alienated from political parties, a broad, more inclusive process is necessary to not just conclude the current crisis, but also to set in place broader, structural reforms.
 4. To coordinate with other international actors, including the OSCE (e.g. High Commissioner for National Minorities, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media), to ensure that different international actors are staying on message and jointly supervising different aspects of any interim political agreement. In particular, the electoral process should be monitored by a joint OSCE-EU mission, which includes overseeing the updating of the voter registry, ensuring freedom of the media, and other measures to ensure fair elections.
 5. To acknowledge that any solution to the crisis in Macedonia requires a concerted effort of the EU to resolve the name dispute with Greece, so as to be able to provide a plausible process for reform and EU integration, and for the EU and its member states to take a lead in resolving the dispute.

To the European People's Party (EPP):

1. The EPP should send a clear message to its partner, the VMRO-DPMNE, that it has to allow for an independent investigation and a temporary expert government.

To the Party of European Socialists (PES):

1. The PES should send a clear message to its partner, the SDSM, that a resolution of the crisis has to include broad social movements, both organized and informal; it should return to parliament and provide all materials from wiretapping to an independent investigation.

About the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group

The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a co-operation initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) with the aim to promote the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is composed by prominent policy researchers from the Western Balkans and wider Europe that have established themselves for their knowledge and understanding of the Western Balkans and the processes that shape the region. Current members of the BiEPAG are: Florian Bieber, Dimitar Bechev, Milica Delević, Dane Taleski, Dejan Jović, Marko Kmezić, Leon Malazogu, Corina Stratulat, Marika Djolai, Jovana Marović, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Natasha Wunsch, Theresia Töglhofer, Mirna Vlašić Feketija, Milan Nič and Vedran Džihic.

About the European Fund for the Balkans

The European Fund for the Balkans is a multi-year joint initiative of European Foundations including the Robert Bosch Stiftung, the King Baudouin Foundation, the Compagnia di San Paolo and the ERSTE Foundation. It is designed to undertake and support initiatives aimed at bringing the Western Balkans closer to the European Union through grant-giving and operational programmes. The Fund's objectives are: to encourage broader and stronger commitment to the European integration of the Western Balkan countries and societies; to strengthen the efforts undertaken by a range of stakeholders in this process also with a view to developing effective policies and practices in the region and in the EU; and to support the process of member state building as envisaged by the International Commission on the Balkans, in particular by building constituencies in the societies of Southeast Europe who will be offered an opportunity to experience and learn about Europe.

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About the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz

The Centre for Southeast European Studies was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, established with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. Since its establishment, the centre also aimed to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and the public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists working at the Centre has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through numerous articles, monographs and other publications. In addition, the centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.

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