

## Macedonia and Its OSCE Mission 2006-2008: Trouble Making the Grade<sup>1</sup>

### *Forming the 2006 Government: New Faces, New Style?*

When Macedonia's prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, and his ruling VMRO-DPMNE<sup>2</sup> party sought to renew their popular mandate on 1 June 2008 in an early election, they were able to look back on just under two years of an administration full of highs and lows.

In the summer of 2006, Gruevski's party had convincingly won the parliamentary elections in a coalition with several smaller centre-right parties, relegating then serving prime minister, Vlado Bučkovski, and his Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) party to opposition. This was just the second electoral success that the VMRO-DPMNE had achieved in Macedonia's 17 years of independence.

The new government contained a large number of new, young politicians, whose profiles had previously been low or who had been recruited from positions abroad.<sup>3</sup> The average age of ministers lay around the mid-thirties.<sup>4</sup>

Despite initial criticism of the government's alleged lack of experience, Gruevski remained true to the direction of his campaign, which had promised not only a new politics, but also fresh faces to help him implement his electoral programme for "rebirth in one hundred steps". This was evident not only in the selection of ministers from the VMRO-DPMNE, most of whom came from among his inner circle, but also in the decision on ministers from the coalition partners, all of whom had to be approved by the new prime minister. This already demonstrated Gruevski's future style of government, which was to be characterized by the concentration of power at the highest level and the reservation of ultimate decision-making authority for Gruevski alone, who was therefore very much the dominant force within the coalition. He also reached an agreement with his coalition partners, the New Social Demo-

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1 The current contribution reflects the personal views of the author and not those of the OSCE, the government of any participating State, or the OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje.

2 Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

3 Before being called to join the government, deputy prime ministers Gabriela Konevska and Zoran Stavrevski had held positions at the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and the World Bank. Vele Samak, Gligor Tasković, and Ivo Ivanovski, ministers without portfolio whose responsibilities include attracting foreign investment, had previously worked for multinational companies.

4 At 36 years of age, the prime minister was average for the government.

cratic Party (NSDP) and the Democratic Party of the Albanians (DPA),<sup>5</sup> as well as with a number of smaller parties, to make the VMRO-DPMNE manifesto the basis of the programme of government. This left the other partners little chance of implementing their own programmes, to the extent that they had any. There was a shared expectation that the programme, heavily focused on economic issues, would also solve the country's other problems. This went so far that even the DPA agreed to a moratorium on the discussion of ethnic issues and legislative change based on the Ohrid Agreement for the first six months of government, thereby distancing itself from its key goals as a party, which were entirely concerned with ethnic Albanian issues. This was motivated by the desire to participate in the government at all costs, and the threat of political extinction that the DPA faced were the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) to join the government.

The first decisions taken by the cabinet demonstrated a continuity of political direction: Taxes on agricultural products were reduced, which was intended as a sign of support for the dominant agriculture sector of the Macedonian economy. In early 2007, the government agreed to gradually introduce a flat income tax of ten per cent. Public sector wages were also raised, in order to increase the spending power of state employees.<sup>6</sup>

In December 2006, when the new government had been in power for one hundred days, a cabinet session was shown live on prime time television in which each minister reported their department's success to the people and to the prime minister. On closer examination, however, this slickly organized media spectacle is revealed to have contained little of substance, being rather an attempt to have the largest possible effect on public opinion. This attitude has continued to be evident in virtually all the decisions made by the prime minister and his cabinet, and foreign public-relations consultants have been engaged to provide ministers with professional advice. In no time at all, this succeeded in driving the popularity of the prime minister and his government to unprecedented heights, leading to a change of mood among the populace and a general feeling of a new beginning.<sup>7</sup> The professional marketing of even the least significant decisions made by the government or the prime minister lent the leadership the appearance of having opened a new chapter in

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5 The NSDP had split from the SDSM in 2005. It is led by the co-founder of the SDSM, Tito Petkovski. The DPA had been a coalition partner of the VMRO-DPMNE from 1998 to 2002. In the 2006 elections, it had lost the election among ethnic Albanian voters to the DUI, but was chosen as a coalition partner on the basis of its greater ideological compatibility. The DUI protested against this by boycotting the parliament and taking to the barricades, believing that because it had won a majority of the Albanian vote, it was the legitimate coalition partner. However, coalition negotiations between the DUI and the VMRO-DPMNE collapsed after a few meetings, as arguably neither side was seriously interested in co-operation.

6 Macedonia has around 120,000 public-sector employees.

7 Cf. the *UNDP Early Warning Report Macedonia*, published in December 2006.

the eventful history of the country, which would very soon lead to undreamt-of success.<sup>8</sup>

### *Albanian Power Struggles and the Badinter Majority*

For the ethnic Albanian partner in the coalition, the DPA, which had suffered politically and financially during its four years in opposition, government above all represented an opportunity to consolidate its position. This led, in the first few months of the government, to a bitter struggle between the DPA and the DUI for predominance in the Albanian camp. As is usual when power changes hands in Macedonia, public-sector employees and individuals in key positions that were loyal to the DUI were quickly replaced by members of the DPA.<sup>9</sup> One of the clearest examples of this process concerned the rector of the State University of Tetovo, which had only been legalized in 2004. Known to be a DUI sympathizer, he was summarily removed from office by the education minister on charges of corruption and mismanagement.<sup>10</sup> As well as the Albanian parties' "jewel in the crown", the University of Tetovo, the policy of replacing key personnel affected above all high-ranking members of the police – a not inconsiderable means of ensuring predominance in all areas of life. The replacements, although they were officially justified in terms of lack of qualifications or mismanagement, were in reality made for tactical reasons: to strengthen and consolidate the position of the DPA relative to the DUI.

This policy was also intended to achieve another goal: The DPA's concern was to increase the size of its smaller parliamentary group by attracting disaffected former DUI representatives. This would not only deprive the DUI of its main argument in favour of participation in government – its claim that it represented the majority of the ethnic Albanian population – it also had practical consequences for the governing coalition's attempts to secure a majority among members of parliament representing minorities. The coalition lacked the double "Badinter majority", as the bulk of the minority representatives belonged to the opposition.<sup>11</sup>

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8 The concentration largely on VMRO-DPMNE topics in the government programme meant that it was mainly the senior party in the coalition and its leader, Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, that benefited from the increasingly favourable views of the electorate.

9 This process also applies, in a slightly weakened form, to the VMRO-DPMNE and the NSDP, which replaced staff members who were loyal to the SDSM with their own party members in many instances. This can be explained by the complex interconnectedness of all areas of public life and party political interests.

10 Although this was against the law and the statutes that guarantee the autonomy of universities, and although the DUI was up in arms about the decision, the DUI ultimately had to back down, partly because the evidence brought against the rector was overwhelming.

11 The double majority, also known as the Badinter majority, is a constitutional provision that requires not just the votes of the majority of parliamentarians to be taken into account, but also those of the majority of representatives belonging to ethnic minorities. It was introduced following the conflict in 2001 and applies to all decisions relating to ethnic

Even though the coalition had agreed – perhaps for the very reasons just outlined – to table only legislation relating to economic matters during the first six months and to postpone all ethnic issues for the time being, the Badinter majority would need to be secured some time or another.

Despite attempts aimed at “winning over” DUI parliamentarians – who vociferously complained of attempts at intimidation or bribery – the DPA was unsuccessful in attracting any further members of parliament to its side. This is where the DUI’s junior partner, the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP),<sup>12</sup> came in. Before the election, it had drawn up a joint list of candidates with the DUI, and was represented by three members in parliament. The DPA set to work here, too, offering the PDP an immediate role in the government – a genuinely tempting offer, considering that the PDP had only entered into its alliance with the DUI before the election on the expectation that the latter would be certain to have a part in the ruling coalition. After considerable toing and froing, the PDP leadership decided to join the governing coalition and the party’s chairman announced the change of sides in June 2007. However, two of the PDP’s three members of parliament went against their party’s leadership and remained with the DUI. This led to the unique situation of one party being simultaneously a member of both the government and the opposition.

Under continued pressure from the DPA, the DUI decided to boycott parliament once again in early 2007. It had chosen a convenient time to do this, as parliament was due to vote on a number of important reforms within the process of overhauling the judiciary – a key prerequisite for Macedonia’s integration with the EU. A vital aspect of this reform package, the reappointment of the State Judicial Council, which should be responsible for protecting the independence of the judiciary as well as for appointing and dismissing judges, needed a Badinter majority to approve a candidate list consisting of suggestions made by the president and by the governing coalition. Feeling that its views were not being taken seriously enough, the DUI withdrew its members from the parliament, thereby blocking the vote.

Given the importance of these reforms for Macedonia’s integration in the Euro-Atlantic community, which can only be achieved on the basis of the largest possible consensus among the political elite, locally based representatives of the international community intervened and offered their services as mediators.<sup>13</sup>

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minority issues. It is named after the French jurist and politician Robert Badinter, who introduced the concept of the double majority, and who, alongside the former German president Roman Herzog, played a major role in framing the Macedonian constitution.

12 The PDP is the oldest ethnic Albanian party in Macedonia.

13 Since the 2001 conflict and the subsequent signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the EU and the USA, who co-signed the agreement, have been seen as guarantors of the treaty and have participated in its implementation as mediators on several occasions. Because the EU and NATO have made the implementation of Ohrid a precondition for membership of those organizations, they have once more been involved in mediating activities in this case.

Even though the precarious situation had largely been created by the DUI, their boycott of the parliament was taken as an opportunity to bring the leaders of all the major parties together to find a common way to approach the most important reforms. In the subsequent meetings between the VMRO-DPMNE and the DPA, on the government side, and the SDSM and the DUI, on the side of the opposition, it soon became clear that the need to negotiate was greatest on the part of the DUI, which wanted to use the situation to once again support its claim that it should participate in the government by stressing its ability to block proceedings. However, with the sides remaining deadlocked over this question, the government and the DUI agreed to hold a dialogue on a number of issues that the DUI named as preconditions for supporting the reform legislation in parliament. These included the use of the Albanian language throughout the entire territory of Macedonia, reparations for former National Liberation Army (UÇK/NLA) veterans, and the way the government should be formed in the future, which, according to the DUI, should require a Badinter majority. This last demand was vehemently rejected by the VMRO-DPMNE, which had been nominated by its coalition partners to lead negotiations with the DUI, but working groups were formed to deal with the first two topics. By the end of May, under EU and the US mediation, all sides agreed to steps that could contribute to a solution to the language issue and the payment of reparations to all the victims of the 2001 conflict.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, the DUI decided to return to the parliament after a four-month absence, and to give its formal support to the reform legislation. The DPA, by contrast, threatened to withdraw from the government if these topics were to continue to be discussed with parties outside the governing coalition, and claimed that it was the only party with the right to take part in discussions regarding the language and reparations issues. However, it was thereafter unable to come up with any noteworthy proposals. Nor did the discussions between the VMRO-DPMNE and the DUI make any meaningful headway.

Nonetheless, the DUI's actions had led to two achievements: First, it had shown that, despite being in opposition, it was capable of blocking important parliamentary decisions, and second, it had embarrassed its main competitor, the DPA, in the eyes of the public by taking over the topic that the latter had made its main priority for its work in government, which showed up the weakness of the ethnic Albanian coalition partner. This debacle was one of the factors in the collapse of the coalition in February 2008, and the subsequent dissolution of the parliament.

Nonetheless, the DPA continued to work to damage the DUI's image, accusing it publicly of being responsible for incidents in which several

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14 The DPA did not participate, even though the negotiations dealt with key themes upon which it had often campaigned. Within the party, there was speculation that the talks would collapse sooner or later anyway, which would then give the DPA its chance.

people died.<sup>15</sup> Although there was some evidence of the involvement of criminals with DUI connections, this could not be proved beyond doubt in the inquiries that followed. An exchange of fire in the mountains north of Skopje between security forces and an Albanian gang known throughout the country, in which a police commander and two gang members were killed, and the still unexplained explosion of two grenades near the government building in Skopje in early summer 2007 not only caused concern within Macedonia, but brought about a rare bout of international press interest in the country, which saw Macedonia's general stability and its fitness to join the EU and NATO rather hastily called into question.

The appearance of an armed group near the border to Kosovo in the summer of 2007 was a cause for concern for many in Macedonia, especially because at first it was unclear who this group was and what it had to do with the armed groups that were turning up in Kosovo at the same time. This occurrence, in the village of Tanusevci, to the north of Skopje, not only awakened for many people traumatic memories of the 2001 crisis,<sup>16</sup> but also placed the forthcoming decision on the future legal status of the neighbouring province on the agenda – with all the negative consequences for Macedonia that had previously been suppressed. Even if it soon became clear that the group belonged to a former UÇK/NLA commander and member of parliament who had taken up fortified positions in his home village when it appeared that the Macedonian authorities were about to arrest him, and thus had nothing to do with the Kosovo question, the unpleasant feeling remained that trouble could be expected from the north once again.

### *The Collapse of the SDSM*

In the autumn of 2006, the main opposition party, SDSM, which had been part of the government only a few months previously, began a months-long process of self-destructive infighting, which had a disastrous effect on its position in the polls. The party that had previously dominated Macedonian politics, that had governed the country with only one interruption since inde-

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15 In making this accusation stick, it was helpful that many DUI supporters and officials had previously been armed guerrillas and had pasts that were sometimes shady. The reference by a high-ranking DUI member to the fact that many of his party's members had been armed fighters, who, if their demands were not met, could be reactivated at any time, helped to associate the party with armed bands rather than constructive politics in many people's minds.

16 Tanusevci, which lies on the border of Kosovo, was where the Albanian guerrilla group UÇK/NLA first came to prominence, after being filmed by a Macedonian TV crew. This is the reason why, for many Macedonians, the village is synonymous with the start of the 2001 crisis.

pendence and had provided two of its three presidents was in danger of sinking into political insignificance.<sup>17</sup>

A change of party leadership following the elections was unable to reverse this trend. On the contrary, the SDSM has been locked in an internal power struggle since its extraordinary party conference in October 2006, during which the incumbent leader, Vlado Bučkovski, was replaced by his deputy, Radmila Šekerinska, in a run-off election. This damaged not only the internal unity of the party, but also its ability to function as the main opposition party in the Macedonian parliament. A decline in popularity was thus a logical consequence. However, this only led to further factional battles among a party leadership that had been so far spoiled in terms of power. Šekerinska, until 2006 the highly praised deputy prime minister for European integration, only scraped through against the challenge of her rival, Bučkovski. In doing so, she received active support from her long-time mentor, Branko Crvenkovski, with, however, only limited success. He did, however, attempt to make up for the weaknesses of the SDSM, which he had led from its foundation until his election as president in 2004, by opposing Prime Minister Gruevski. Crvenkovski, who as president should have remained above party politics, soon appeared to many to be the true leader of the opposition. Gruevski, who had not recognized Crvenkovski's election in 2004, was happy to give as good as he got, and, as a consequence, the two sides became ensnared in ever new disputes and personal attacks, which many in Skopje considered were inappropriate for the holders of such offices. At the same time, Crvenkovski was said to have worked feverishly behind the scenes to restore the internal unity of the SDSM.<sup>18</sup>

Although the increasingly polarized wings of the SDSM agreed to cooperate for the time being, rumours obstinately persisted in political circles in Skopje that Bučkovski and his followers in the party were preparing to establish a new party and hence to put a further nail in the coffin of what had been Macedonia's strongest political force. The party leadership reacted to these reports by reshaping the party structure in the hope that this would counter the influence of the internal opposition.

The suspension of Bučkovski's parliamentary immunity in the course of a legal investigation into a 2003 case of misappropriation of state funds in the defence ministry, which Bučkovski had headed at the time, brought the various factions of the SDSM closer together. The impending threat of legal action against former SDSM ministers by Macedonian legal authorities for al-

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17 Representative surveys by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the Macedonian Brima/Gallup polling agency had the SDSM receiving at times as little as one quarter of the support of the VMRO-DPMNE. Cf. also *UNDP Early Warning Reports Macedonia* from December 2006 and June 2007.

18 His announcement that he would refrain from seeking a second term in the 2009 presidential elections and would instead again run for SDSM leader shows that he never gave up meddling with the party's activities. At the same time, the depth of the SDSM's internal crisis is demonstrated by the fact that it took the return to office of its long-time and most successful leader to overcome it.

leged offences and the removal of their parliamentary immunity caused the SDSM to close ranks in order to defend itself against further investigations, which it considered to be politically motivated acts of revenge instigated by the VMRO-DPMNE and the NSDP. Although Bučkovski was unable to stop his immunity from being suspended even with the aid of his party colleagues, he rejoined the party hierarchy and publicly declared all deliberations about founding a new party to be over. Even if he were to be convicted of a criminal offence by a court and a penalty became unavoidable, the former prime minister did not want to burn his bridges with his party, which was still widely considered to be well connected. However, a small number of his former comrades did not heed his call and, in the autumn of 2007, joined together to establish the Party of Free Democrats, in the early stages of whose founding Bučkovski had allegedly been involved. As this party is said to enjoy little influence, however, a significant split in the SDSM was averted for the time being. Nonetheless, the party was unable to improve its worst-ever poll figures.

#### *The Work of the OSCE Mission: Focus Remains on Democratic Governance*

During the period covered by this contribution, the OSCE Mission remained true to the existing strategy of providing targeted support to the national authorities for the establishment and reform of democratic institutions according to international standards of good governance. Accordingly, the Mission's work prioritized the provision of support for the rule of law and police reform. This went hand-in-hand with further confidence-building measures in the former crisis areas in the north-west and west of the country, and the continuation of support for the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, particularly with respect to decentralization.

The latter entered its second phase in the summer of 2007. This involved financial control for the responsibilities that had been handed over in the previous year passing from the central government to local authorities. The OSCE Mission provided a range of training measures to all 84 local authorities to help them prepare to run a tight budgetary and financial policy. The Mission also continued to work for the improvement of interethnic relations and the participation of minorities in decision-making processes at a local level by supporting the establishment of "Committees for Inter-Community Relations" (CICRs). This required the working methods and responsibilities of these committees to be entered into local government statutes – a project that has also raised interest abroad and which was presented by representatives of the Mission and local politicians at an OSCE regional conference.

The concept of community policing, which has been practised and further developed in Macedonia over the years, has also set an example that has

been adopted and applied throughout the region, as well as in OSCE participating States in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Mission's work here is to support not just the ongoing development of the concept, but also the process of exchange with other countries, which has included training units run by OSCE police experts and the Macedonian police.

A regional conference and a number of training events were held in order to integrate the recommendations on policing in multiethnic societies made by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities into the day-to-day work of the police in Macedonia. In this context, the Mission provided senior police officers with cultural-awareness training in dealing with members of national and ethnic minorities. There had previously been a number of cases of assault committed by police, particularly on members of the Roma community. The training provided by the OSCE Mission aimed to help ensure that no more such incidents occur.

In the area of judicial reform, the Mission supported the Macedonian authorities in implementing the national strategy for reform of the judiciary. A key aspect of this was the creation of the national Judicial Academy for the training of judges, which opened in the autumn of 2007. The OSCE Mission supported the academy not only in getting teaching activities off the ground but also in developing curricula. In the future, international standards are to be used to prepare prospective judges to perform their duties. The academy is therefore a milestone in the implementation of Macedonia's judicial reform strategy and should ensure that the legal system is not only more professional but also more independent of political influence in the future.

Another key activity in the area of training was the preparation of judges and prosecutors for potential war-crime trials arising from the 2001 crisis. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) had started to investigate five cases that emerged from the events of that year. Four of them concern former members of the UÇK/NLA and their alleged acts, which were explicitly excluded from the 2001 amnesty law. The fifth case concerned the former interior minister Ljube Boškoski, and a high-ranking police officer. While the ICTY started proceedings against Boškoski in 2007 – which resulted in the acquittal of the former minister in July 2008 due to lack of evidence – the other four cases were prepared for return to the national courts.<sup>19</sup> However, the precondition for this was that the national courts were in a position to carry out complex war-crime trials in line with international standards. The OSCE Mission was therefore involved, alongside the ICTY, in training judges in international humanitarian law, to prepare them for the cases that may soon come before them. Besides the legal aspects, the return of cases and their potential hearing in the national courts provoked strong opposition among former UÇK/NLA fighters. In their view, the passing of the amnesty law had placed limits on the prosecution of acts

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19 With its mandate due to end soon, the ICTY cannot bring all cases to trial. It has therefore introduced this practice for less prominent cases.

committed during the conflict that they considered to be applicable to these four cases. Furthermore, they doubted the neutrality and capabilities of the Macedonian courts, which they accused of ethnic bias, revanchism, and being in thrall to party-political interests. Although the adoption of the national strategy for judicial reform acknowledged that there was a need for renewal and additional training of judges and prosecutors, the allegations made by the former UÇK/NLA fighters were still motivated above all by their personal desire to avoid trial. However, because at least two of the four cases concerned high-ranking DUI members – former ministers and members of parliament – the discussion of the best moment to hand them over to the Macedonian courts did not exactly contribute to improving the generally difficult political situation. Against this background, the OSCE restricted its activities to the provision of training and declared – in consultation with national and international partners – that it was willing to observe any cases that did come to court to ensure that international standards were upheld. This role was formalized in the law on co-operation between the Macedonian authorities and the ICTY. After several postponements, responsibility for the further pursuit of the cases was handed over by the ICTY to the Macedonian prosecution service in early 2008. The investigations have continued, but without causing any further furor.

The OSCE Mission also pushed for the further adaptation of Macedonia's election law in line with international standards, and worked together with representatives of the relevant ministries and civil society to develop a catalogue of amendments aimed at remedying the shortfalls criticized by the ODIHR election observation mission in 2006.<sup>20</sup> The central aspects here were prosecuting those who interfere with the electoral process, strengthening the powers of the state election commission, and creating legal guidelines for transparent campaign financing.

The ability of the media to report the news in an unhindered and objective fashion was a further focus of the OSCE Mission's work. Support was provided for the restructuring and modernization of Macedonia's public radio and television organization (MRT), which aided it in becoming more competitive with private broadcasters. MRT is the only broadcaster that provides programmes in all the languages spoken by Macedonia's ethnic communities. Furthermore, all the other major television companies have the reputation of enjoying close links with political parties and allowing this to influence their reporting. The OSCE also gave active support to MRT in establishing a dedicated parliamentary channel, which is intended to broadcast sessions of the parliament and its committees live to every household. This effort to encour-

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20 The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the OSCE observes elections on invitation of the participating State concerned according to a standardized methodology and examines compliance with international standards for democratic elections. After every observed election, ODIHR makes recommendations on how the election process may be improved.

age transparent political decision-making processes illustrates the principle of democratic governance particularly well.

By closing the field office in Kumanovo in the north-east of the country, the OSCE Mission continued in its transformation from an organization whose task was to carry out observation in the field of the consequences of the 2001 conflict, alleviating them by means of confidence-building measures, into a partner whose job is to provide systematic support for the country's reform efforts. Even if some observers considered that the withdrawal was premature on the basis that it was impossible to predict the long-term effects of Kosovo's declaration of independence on Macedonia, it was at least an expression of the international community's recognition of the improved security situation in the country.<sup>21</sup> With its new priorities, the Mission can contribute to the country's progress more effectively and with fewer staff. It is also more suited to Macedonia's interests.

*The Second Year of Gruevski's Government: Bitter Setbacks on the Way to the EU and NATO*

In June 2007, one of the region's foremost Albanian politicians left the stage. Arben Xhaferi, the leader of the DPA since its founding in 1997 and one of the key negotiating partners and signatories of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, handed over the leadership of the party to his deputy, Menduh Thaçi. Xhaferi had been a major player in ethnic Albanian affairs in Macedonia and Kosovo for over a decade, earning an excellent reputation in the region and beyond. However, his sometimes radical views on the future of Macedonia as a multiethnic state also drew criticism. In recent years, his poor health had made it increasingly likely that he would stand down from the leadership of the DPA. Now that his party once more had a secure grip on the reins of power as part of the governing coalition, he could make the change officially. In any case, ever since the DPA had joined the coalition, Thaçi had been controlling the affairs of the party with a heavy hand. Now he promised to continue Xhaferi's policies and to continue to act as a reliable partner to ensure the success of the government.<sup>22</sup>

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21 Since the 2001 crisis, Macedonia's internal stability has continually improved and the presence of international observers has been reduced bit by bit. As a result of developments elsewhere in the region, the decision was made not to pull all OSCE observers out of the field. The OSCE field office in Tetovo is to remain open, initially until the end of 2008.

22 The change of party leadership was the result of an internal power struggle in which Menduh Thaçi had had to contend with the second strong man within the DPA, Bardhyl Mahmuti, for the succession. The latter – formerly Kosovo's "foreign minister" and an official of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) – had joined the DPA before the 2006 elections and, thanks to his good relations with the Albanian community in the region, had helped the party to recover its strength and attract new members and high-profile supporters. Mahmuti's attempts to strengthen his position within the DPA and to further his

During this period, the work of the government continued to be hampered by the lack of a Badinter majority in the parliament. A second attempt to appoint the State Judicial Council in summer 2007 also failed because, despite the arrangement made in May, the DUI was not willing to give the government assurances that it would support whichever candidates were nominated. This appeared to be an impasse, which led the government to seek the support of the five members of parliament belonging to the smaller ethnic minority parties (Turks, Roma, Serbs, and Bosniaks), who were also part of the opposition. These five had already agreed on a list of demands, including the creation of reserved parliamentary seats for the smaller minorities, the establishment of a ministry for minority issues, and the adoption of a law on ethnic minority affairs. After initial hesitation, the government accepted these demands, and negotiations began on how the various conditions could be put into practice. In the face of the impending publication of the report on Macedonia's progress in implementing the EU *acquis communautaire* in November 2007, the minority members of parliament declared they were ready to support the government in passing all the reform laws that required a Badinter majority, though the conditions imposed in return for this support remained unfulfilled. Although a number of key laws relevant to EU integration were passed at the last minute, and despite the government's positive economic record, Macedonia's political tensions meant that the European Commission was unwilling to recommend to the Council of Ministers that accession negotiations be started in 2008, as the government had hoped. While the Commission praised Macedonia's progress in economic affairs, it was critical of the political situation, which continued to be tense, and the poor state of relations between government and opposition, which had led to the postponement of key reforms or had blocked them entirely. After the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2001 and the granting of candidate status in 2005, this development was a major setback to Macedonian efforts towards Euro-Atlantic integration. Exhibiting just the same sort of behaviour they had been criticized for, the government and the opposition blamed each other heavily for this turn of events.

While many were disappointed by the Commission's decision, it did not have much of an effect on the popularity of the government, which gave the impression of continuing to work to ensure economic prosperity that would solve all political questions sooner or later. However, an advertising campaign costing millions of euros that encouraged foreign investors to "Invest in Macedonia" met with a poor response among the international business community. Partially responsible for this were the negative stories in the international media that had their roots in the tense relations between the parties. Nevertheless, there was one area in which the government could demon-

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political goals were very effectively thwarted by Menduh Thaçi. Bardhyl Mahmuti left the DPA and founded his own party, the Albanian Democratic Union, in September 2007.

strate concrete progress: Macedonia has improved more than 20 places in Transparency International's corruption index.<sup>23</sup>

Within the coalition, relations between the VMRO-DPMNE and its coalition partners, the NSDP and the DPA, continued to deteriorate. Up to this point, the two junior partners had been suppressing their own policy preferences in favour of those of the VMRO-DPMNE, partly because of the upcoming assessment by the EU and NATO. In the case of the EU, however, this strategy did not have the desired effect. Moreover, the VMRO-DPMNE had negotiated key political questions with partners outside the coalition. While this was a course born of the necessity of seeing certain key reforms made into law, it did not exactly improve the mood within the coalition. Although the NSDP and the DPA now began to increasingly stress their own key concerns – reform of pensions and social security, in the case of the NSDP; the legal rights of Albanians, on the part of the DPA – they remained within the government, even if the DPA threatened on several occasions to leave.<sup>24</sup>

Once again, it was only the VMRO-DPMNE that benefited from the government's ongoing popularity, while its coalition partners lost support. The DPA's losses were particularly heavy, and it began increasingly to lose ground to its main competitor, the DUI, something it tried to compensate for by making ever more radical demands. In this way, the DPA increasingly became a burden for the coalition.

Within the VMRO-DPMNE, there was thus increasing talk of calling early elections, which the party, thanks to its unbroken popularity, was considered to have a good chance of winning with a large majority, thus making it independent of the interests of other parties.

#### *2008: Macedonia at the Crossroads*

While the thought of Kosovo's separation from Serbia had caused many Macedonians concern at the negative repercussions it might have for their country, the unilateral declaration of independence, when it actually arrived on 17 February 2008, had no immediate effects on Macedonia. Calls by ethnic Albanians for Macedonia to immediately recognize the new state were not

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23 Cf. *Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Indexes 2006 and 2007*.

24 The vote of no confidence initiated by the opposition in June 2007, however, made the extent of the deteriorating climate within the governing coalition obvious. Before the parliamentary vote, there was much speculation on the voting intentions of the two minor coalition partners, who were said to support the motion and thus the fall of the government. However, while some within the NSDP and the DPA had certainly wanted to express their dissatisfaction by taking such a step, in the end, the decision was taken to remain loyal and so to reject the opposition's motion. At this point it was finally clear that the differences within Gruevski's government would increasingly threaten to break the coalition.

heeded, however, owing to the disunity in the EU and concern that doing so would spoil relations with Serbia.<sup>25</sup>

Shortly before the NATO summit held in Bucharest in April 2008, at which Macedonia, together with Croatia and Albania, expected to be granted membership of the alliance, there was a desire to avoid making any hasty or one-sided decisions that could have damaged Macedonia's regional relations.<sup>26</sup>

Another long unresolved dispute became an urgent problem once again in relation to Macedonia's prospective membership of NATO: the conflict with Greece over the name "Macedonia". Although the 1996 interim agreement specified that, in return for Skopje's adoption of the name "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" in international contexts, Greece would not interfere in its attempts to join international organizations, the Hellenic Republic suddenly insisted that the name issue needed to be cleared up before Macedonia could be admitted to NATO. Failing this, Greece threatened to vote against Macedonian membership at the next NATO summit. Negotiations between Athens and Skopje were hurriedly set up and began at the start of 2008 under UN mediation. In fact, the Greek demands met with little approval abroad, and wide sections of the European media even described them as bizarre, especially since they were made at a time that was inconvenient for the entire region. Nonetheless, the name controversy is a highly emotive issue for both sides, and, in Macedonia's case, is at the heart of a national identity that is called into question by most of the country's neighbours. Consequently, in responding to the many suggestions made by Matthew Niemitz, the UN special envoy, both parties displayed such inflexibility that it was not possible to reach an agreement by the time of the summit.

Even though Macedonia's application to become a NATO member was accepted by all the alliance's other 25 members, and the USA and key European states spoke up in favour of Macedonia's application on several occasions, Greece applied its veto as promised, blocking its northern neighbour's attempt to join the transatlantic alliance. This was not only based on the rather dubious allegation that Macedonia laid claim to the Greek territory of the same name but was also a clear breach of the 1996 interim accord.<sup>27</sup>

The Greek refusal to compromise shocked politicians in Skopje and the Macedonian population as a whole. In protest, the Macedonian delegation

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25 The actual recognition of Kosovo's independence by Macedonia and Montenegro in October 2008 caused the usual negative reactions from Belgrade, but did not lead to severe consequences in inter-state relations.

26 In Skopje, it was also noted that before Kosovo could be recognized, it was necessary to demarcate its border with Macedonia to the satisfaction of both parties. The proposals made in the Ahtisaari plan were taken as the basis for all further steps in this regard.

27 The oft-repeated argument that Macedonia has territorial claims on the northern Greek province and should therefore change its name is unlikely to be true in view of Skopje's limited military means alone. In any case, were Macedonia to become a member of NATO, it would have to give up any territorial claims it possessed.

withdrew early from the NATO summit. Not even the promise of immediate accession to the alliance as soon as the name issue was sorted out could be of any comfort.

Shortly before the summit, the DPA had once more threatened to withdraw from the government if Kosovo's independence was not immediately recognized and the issues of reparations for the victims of the 2001 conflict and the official use of the Albanian language were not resolved.

The combination of foreign-policy setbacks and the power struggle within the coalition led Prime Minister Gruevski to now openly seek an early election. On 11 April 2008, after a heated debate, the parliament agreed for the first time in the history of the country to dissolve before its allotted term was up. The governing coalition justified this step in terms of the need for a broad and stable new majority to deal with emerging problems. The opposition pointed out that early elections would only delay the start of negotiations with Greece and further efforts to ensure Macedonia's rapid entry to the EU. Consequently, the SDSM left the plenary session of parliament before the vote, while the ethnic Albanian DUI voted for dissolution in the knowledge that it continued to lead the DPA in the polls. The latter had not even been able to make up this deficit despite heavily stressing ethnic Albanian issues in the previous months. Following the parliamentary vote, the speaker of the Parliament, Ljubisa Georgievski, set the new elections for 1 June 2008.

Despite election legislation and administration reforms and assurances from all parties, the 2008 parliamentary elections can be counted among the worst ever conducted in Macedonia. An election campaign marred by many acts of violence had shown already that in both camps the only thing that really mattered was the struggle for supremacy. Among Macedonians, this struggle has taken more subtle forms, while in Albanian circles the means used to intimidate the populace have also included brutality and violence. These activities were of course to the detriment of the country's best interests, as all efforts went into fulfilling clan and party interests. Subsequently, election day saw a high number of violent incidents and violations against election proceedings, even leaving one activist of the opposition DUI dead after a shoot-out with security forces. The OSCE-ODIHR Election Observation Mission noted with regret that "expectations of progress were not realized because of a failure to prevent violent acts in ethnic Albanian areas and the limited and selective enforcement of laws. Organized efforts to violently disrupt the process early on election day made it impossible for voters in many places to freely express their will."<sup>28</sup> Three reruns involving up to ten

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28 OSCE/ODIHR/OSCE Parliamentary Assembly/Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (eds), International Election Observation Mission, Early Parliamentary Elections, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 1 June 2008, *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, Skopje, 2 June 2008, page 1, at: [http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2008/06/31445\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2008/06/31445_en.pdf).

per cent of the country's polling stations were required to determine the final results.

The ruling VMRO-DPMNE achieved the expected landslide victory, winning an absolute majority of 63 of the 120 seats in parliament. Confronted with the worst result ever, opposition leader Radmila Šekerinska stepped down from her position, acknowledging political responsibility for the painful defeat.

Just as in 2006, Prime Minister Gruevski presented his new government to parliament extremely quickly – only six weeks after polling day. In contrast to 2006, this time the ethnic Albanian party that had expanded its supremacy at the elections, the DUI, was part of the government. Both sides claimed they had learned from the past and wanted to replace past confrontations with constructive co-operation for the sake of the country's stability and reform processes. While the first part appears true, the real reason for this deal between two parties that had previously opposed each other fiercely seems to be a partnership of convenience and a mutual guarantee to enjoy the advantages of political rule for the next four years.

In fact, the DUI was quick to reverse all replacements of its personnel by the DPA within the public administration and re-establish its power in the ethnic Albanian camp. Of course, political goals were also part of the coalition deal. While the DUI accepted the VMRO-DPMNE's economic platform, the Macedonian side agreed to implement the issues both sides had already discussed in 2007: the official use of the Albanian language and reparations for former UÇK/NLA veterans. By 26 July 2008, the parliament approved Prime Minister Gruevski's new cabinet by a two-thirds majority of its 81 members of parliament.<sup>29</sup>

### *Conclusions*

While the elections brought the desired result for Prime Minister Gruevski – a stable majority in parliament that will guarantee unhampered rule for the coming four years – the manner in which the polls were conducted overshadow his victory. In its 2008 Progress Report, the European Commission stated that it regarded the conduct of the election as the main proof that Macedonia was still lacking the capacity to achieve the political criteria of the EU *acquis communautaire*. As a result of this, it was recommended that accession negotiations not be started in 2009.<sup>30</sup>

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29 Alongside the new ethnic Albanian coalition partner, the majority of members of parliament belonging to the smaller ethnic communities (Turks, Roma, Serbs, Bosniaks, Vlachs) are also part of the ruling coalition this time. This has, as mentioned above, had a significant impact on the government's ability to pass reform legislation requiring the so-called Badinter majority.

30 Cf. Commission of the European Communities, *The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2006 Progress Report*, Brussels, 10 November 2008.

Macedonia finds itself at a crossroads: Following the setbacks in its attempts to join the EU and NATO, the country is in danger of veering off its chosen path. The Greek veto and the emotional reaction among the ethnic Macedonian population demonstrated that the country is facing major challenges and needs to solve some old problems that it has long ignored before it can take the next step to hopefully secure a better future. The name dispute and the associated crisis of Macedonian identity currently appear to be the main obstacles to further progress. Neither Macedonia nor its neighbour Greece can afford to leave this issue unresolved for much longer if they wish to avoid putting regional stability at risk.<sup>31</sup>

Euro-Atlantic integration has so far been the only topic that has united all sections of Macedonia's population irrespective of ethnic background. It has been capable of making all sides suppress their differences of opinion and interest, at least ostensibly. The prospect of EU and NATO membership has therefore made a major contribution to the domestic stability of the country, and to interethnic reconciliation. Now that Euro-Atlantic integration appears to be on hold, Macedonia is running the risk of more divisive factors again playing a larger role. The EU and NATO, and above all Greece – a member of both – need to be aware of the possible consequences of their actions, and to use all their resources to ensure that there is no return in the Balkans to the “bad old days”. Growing nationalism and a tendency towards political isolationism in the aftermath of the Greek veto bring back bad memories and could gain prevalence should Macedonia's prospects of Euro-Atlantic integration fade.

The holders of power in Athens and Skopje should cease to provoke each other and to adopt postures of stubborn defiance in order to gain a cheap boost in popularity and satisfy personal or party vanity. The Macedonian leadership should realize the responsibility it holds for the fate of the country, especially after receiving such a clear mandate, and needs to continue unflinchingly down the path already set out on towards Brussels. Partners such as the OSCE can only offer their sincere assistance to help Skopje make the grade. Successfully coping with the challenges ahead, however, is the duty of the holders of political responsibility.

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31 As well as withdrawing one of its representatives for the negotiations on the name issue, Macedonia brought charges against Greece at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in November 2008 based on the violation of the interim accord in connection with the Greek veto of Macedonia's NATO accession. The matter of enforcement notwithstanding, it remains questionable whether a ruling of the court is suitable to contribute to a sustainable solution of the name issue.