

Remarks by  
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2016 ended on a positive note here in Skopje. After two false starts earlier in the year, parliamentary elections called in an effort to overcome the political crisis that had gripped the country for two years were finally held and judged to be largely free and fair. The crisis began when the leader of the opposition published transcripts of a large number of illegally recorded phone conversations in which senior government and ruling party officials discussed a variety of allegedly illegal activities. With the assistance of representatives of the international community, the country's four largest political parties reached the so-called Przino agreement in 2015, calling for early elections with special protections to ensure they would be fair, and also the creation of the Special Prosecutor's Office (SPO) to investigate potential illegalities contained in the wiretaps.

I would like to call your attention to two major positives from last December's elections:

1. For perhaps the first time in the country's history a major political party sought to reach out across ethnic lines and succeeded; some tens of thousands of ethnic Albanians voted for the Social Democratic party - SDSM.
2. In addition, turnout was up significantly over the elections of 2014, rising by more than 6%, indicating that the citizenry both cared about the political situation and believed that the elections could have a positive impact.

The elections produced a very close result. The conservative party, VMRO, which had been the senior party in governing coalitions since 2006, won 51 seats, while SDSM won 49. The largest Albanian party, DUI, which had been in coalition with VMRO since 2008, registered a major decline in support, as large numbers of ethnic Albanians voted not only for SDSM, but also for two new forces on the ethnic-Albanian political scene, the Alliance for Albanians and BESA. Nevertheless, DUI's 10 seats would have been enough to re-create the previous coalition with a one-seat majority in the 120-seat parliament.

Following the elections, President Ivanov gave VMRO leader Nikola Gruevski the first mandate to try to form a new governing coalition. VMRO began negotiations with DUI and the two parties reportedly came close to reaching a new coalition agreement. Many in DUI, however, believed that the party's poor showing in the elections was the result of unhappiness among traditional supporters with DUI's long-term partnership with VMRO, which many Albanians had come to see as corrupt and ethnically chauvinistic. In the end, VMRO and DUI were unable to finalize an agreement.

As leader of the second largest party in parliament, Zoran Zaev of SDSM then claimed the right to receive the next mandate from President Ivanov to seek to put together a governing majority. Ivanov refused, however, stating that he believed Zaev was willing to negotiate with the ethnic-Albanian parties on the basis of a policy document Ivanov claimed was drafted in Albania and presented a threat to the country's sovereignty and security. The Albanian parties denied that this document was drafted by outsiders, saying that it represented an agreement among the Albanian parties based on their own platforms and did

not jeopardize the unitary character of the country or refer to any form of federalization or division of the country.

This provoked a tense constitutional crisis. VMRO engaged in a months' long filibuster in parliament to prevent the election of a new Speaker while pro-VMRO groups held daily protest marches in Skopje and other major cities. Although Zaev had the support of DUI and the Alliance for Albanians, giving him a two-seat majority in parliament, the political situation was essentially deadlocked. Throughout the winter, state authorities also carried out a campaign of pressure against some of the country's most prominent civil society organization, including financial inspections that the groups claimed were politically motivated. The campaign was accompanied by harsh, nationalistic rhetoric from VMRO officials and allies against what they called "Sorosoids," who they claimed had been plotting against VMRO. The Special Prosecutor, meanwhile, faced significant resistance from the judiciary and some parts of the Executive, slowing the effort to hold perpetrators accountable for any criminal activity revealed in the wiretaps.

On April 27, MPs from SDSM, DUI, and the Alliance stayed on in the parliament building after the normal close of business and elected DUI's Talat Xhaferi as Speaker, making him the first ethnic Albanian to occupy one of the state's three highest official positions (the others being President and Prime Minister). The election took place just as the daily pro-VMRO protest march was reaching the parliament and a mob of several hundred broke into the building, assaulting leading members of the new coalition and journalists. The police responded in a decisive manner only after a significant delay, eventually rescuing the trapped deputies and clearing the mob from the building. Some VMRO MPs are under investigation for allegedly opening the doors of parliament to allow the protesters in; other VMRO deputies, meanwhile, tried to protect fellow MPs from other parties.

Following the violence, President Ivanov relented and granted Zoran Zaev the mandate to try to form a governing coalition. After the successful conclusion of these negotiations, a government composed of SDSM, DUI and the Alliance for Albanians was finally formed at the end of May.

The new government announced an ambitious series of domestic reforms, with specific goals to be achieved in three, six and nine months, and launched a campaign to improve relations with the country's neighbors. Symbolically, the new Foreign Minister's first foreign visit was to Athens, where he declared a desire to work to improve relations and pave the way for progress towards resolving the dispute with Greece over the country's name. The new government also rapidly finalized and signed an agreement on good neighborly relations with Bulgaria. These domestic and international initiatives are all aimed towards achieving the government's strategic goal of re-opening the country's integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures.

Last month the country held municipal elections. In unprecedented fashion, SDSM and DUI reached an agreement before the first round of elections to support each other's candidates in selected localities, which seems to have bolstered both parties' results. The main story of the first round, however, was VMRO's poor showing in its first elections as an opposition party in more than a decade, as the party received 25% fewer votes than it did last December. SDSM candidates won mayoral elections in Skopje and other large cities with an ethnic Macedonian majority, and also won in a number of smaller, rural municipalities where VMRO had been dominant. While the number of voters supporting DUI increased only slightly from December, with SDSM support and facing multiple competitors, DUI

candidates reached the runoff phase in all four of the largest ethnic-Albanian majority municipalities.

Leading up to the second round, which took place this past Sunday, Prime Minister Zaev actively campaigned not only for SDSM candidates but, in another first, for some DUI candidates as well. Meanwhile, the Alliance and BESA entered into a coalition for the second round in municipalities where one or the other faced off with DUI.

According to preliminary results, in the second round SDSM continued its landslide, with the party's candidates beating those of VMRO in 17 of 19 mayoral runoffs. DUI also won most of the runoffs in which its candidates ran, although the Alliance won in one important municipality.

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights' (ODIHR) election observation mission concluded preliminarily that the first round of elections was held in a competitive environment, with generally unbiased coverage by the media, and was generally well administered. ODIHR did, however, find some credible allegations of vote-buying and pressure on voters.

Following the second round, VMRO leader Gruevski denounced the elections as unfair and said his party would refuse to recognize the results. In its preliminary assessment of the second round, ODIHR stated that the elections were competitive and that "respect for fundamental freedoms contributed towards the conduct of democratic elections," while also noting reports of "isolated cases of misuse of administrative resources and vote-buying."

While the local elections have roiled the political scene, and some suggest that the Alliance may now leave the national governing coalition, it appears that SDSM and DUI will have no problem in finding the votes to maintain a majority in parliament.

Let me turn now to the role of the OSCE, and particularly the OSCE Mission to Skopje over the last year. During the tense days of the winter, the OSCE urged all sides to find a peaceful, constitutional resolution to the crisis, including through high-level visits to Skopje by the Secretary General and a Special Representative of the Austrian Chairmanship. For our part, the Mission closely monitored the situation on the ground, particularly the developing political conflict, the protests and the campaign against CSOs.

With the advent of the new government, the Mission has turned its focus to coordinating with the new authorities on how best we can support the reform process, in line with our mandate and our host country's OSCE commitments. The mandate of the OSCE Mission to Skopje consists of three elements:

1. Support for implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which brought an end to the inter-ethnic conflict of 2001;
2. Advancing constructive inter-ethnic relations; and
3. Monitoring and providing early warning on security-related developments.

As Foreign Minister Dimitrov told the Permanent Council two weeks ago, among the government's top priorities are reforms in the areas of the rule of law, law enforcement, the electoral system, freedom of expression and the media, and the role of parliament, as well as further implementation of the OFA. We have put together our plans for 2018, which remain subject to approval of our budget proposal by the participating States, with these priorities fully in mind.

The Mission will keep its focus on building cohesive inter-ethnic relations, with a particular emphasis on the areas of education and youth. We will continue to support decentralization and public administration reform, with a focus on enhancing institutional capacities at the central and local levels, increasing adherence to democratic governance principles, and further improving the capacity to administer free and fair elections.

The Mission will maintain its early warning capacity through our field presence and mobile teams, which are a unique asset among international actors working in the country.

We will also continue our long-term work in the areas of tolerance and non-discrimination, hate speech and hate crime. The Mission will support the government in its efforts to implement reforms to improve the rule of law and will seek to reinvigorate our cooperation with the Judicial and Prosecutorial Councils, particularly in relation to the system of appointments, evaluation and dismissals in the judiciary. We will also focus on transparency and access to justice. The Mission will continue to monitor high-profile court cases, including those with the potential to inflame inter-ethnic tensions and those raised by the Special Prosecutor.

Historically, a major part of the Mission's work has been, and will continue to be, supporting implementation of democratic policing principles and further strengthening police professionalization, including improving accountability, transparency and policing skills. We will continue to provide support and expertise to address trans-national threats, including violent extremism, organized crime, and issues surrounding illegal migration, such as trafficking in human beings.

We hope to add two new streams of work in the coming year, providing support for the parliament to develop its oversight capacity and accountability mechanisms, and promoting freedom of the media, with a focus on increasing the safety of journalists and improving media literacy.

Later this month, the Mission, which was the first OSCE field operation, will celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We look forward to year 26 as an opportunity, working with our hosts and the OSCE institutions, and in coordination with other international organizations and governments, to support positive change in the country. The tools of the OSCE have demonstrated their effectiveness in assisting the country during the recent crisis, and remain relevant to its democratic development, stability and security, as well as that of the region.