

MACEDONIA'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

October 18 and November 1, 1998

**A Report Prepared by the Staff of the Commission on Security and
Cooperation in Europe**

SUMMARY

When, on October 18, the citizens of Macedonia voted for a new parliament, they not only had choices between extremes but also among several moderate candidates. The more open environment reflected growing political maturity in a country beset by instability—both internal and external—since becoming an independent state in 1991.

Approximately 1,200 people representing political parties, electoral coalitions and independent candidates competed for the 120 seats in the Macedonian Assembly. Eighty-five of those seats were contested on a majority basis in districts, while the remaining 35 seats were determined by proportional voting for party, coalition and independent lists across the country. The mixed system represents an agreement between the ruling and opposition parties to abandon a solely majority-based system viewed as favoring those in power. The newly established electoral districts were more consistent demographically, although ethnic Albanians continued to allege that they were still left somewhat under-represented.

The ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), the successor to the former League of Communists, ran essentially on its own in the elections. The main challenge to the SDSM came from an unlikely coalition of the nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), named after the 19th century extremist Macedonian liberation group, and the newly formed and politically liberal Democratic Alliance (DA). A secondary challenger was the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the product of a recent merger of two moderate political parties. The election picture was complicated by the continued existence of a practically separate polity in Macedonia, the Albanian community which constitutes at least 23 percent of the country's population and has its own political parties. For these elections, however, moderates in the Macedonian Government formed a coalition with more nationalistic Albanian parties.

The campaign environment was open and competitive, with fewer government controls on access to information than before. In addition, election administration was more transparent, with opposition parties able to participate more fully. Given the close results of the first round, campaigning in districts with second-round voting was notably more negative and tense. In addition, there were some problems with the timely release of results, raising suspicions about the ruling parties willingness to fully respect the outcome. Problems like family- or group-voting were evident, but there were few signs of intentional manipulation during the voting. In the second round, however, there were some reports of party representatives checking voter registration cards outside polling stations, as well as more ominous proxy voting practices.

The VMRO-DPMNE/DA coalition emerged victorious, and the ruling SDSM conceded defeat. President Kiro Gligorov, whose office will be contested in 1999, selected VMRO-DPMNE head Ljupco Georgievski to form a new government. Georgievski has continued the SDSM's practice of inviting Albanian parties to join the government, despite not needing these

parties to form a government. Neither a calm change of government nor an effort to be inclusive are characteristic of politics in former Yugoslav republics, and these signs of political stability will hopefully enable Macedonia to steer clear of ethnic conflict on its own territory at a time when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is deploying an extraction force to assist unarmed civilian monitors in conflict-ridden Kosovo to the north.

BACKGROUND

The Republic of Macedonia lies in the south-central region of the Balkan peninsula, bordered by Bulgaria, Greece, Albania and the new Yugoslav federation, specifically Kosovo and Serbia proper. The republic lies within the geographic and historic region known also as Macedonia. This region was at the center of Balkan wars as the Ottoman Empire retreated from Europe at the beginning of the 20th century and was divided between Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria.¹ Serbia's holding was incorporated into the Yugoslav state first established in 1918, and was given the status of a republic in communist Yugoslavia following World War II. During this period, Macedonia benefitted greatly from the official recognition of the Macedonian people as a distinct people, or "nation", as well as from the enormous economic support received through Yugoslavia's federal authorities. As a result, Macedonians, like Bosniacs, became the leading supporters of a genuine Yugoslav federation, and representatives of Macedonia, along with those of Bosnia-Herzegovina, made the last attempts to maintain such a federation in early 1991.²

When Yugoslavia did violently disintegrate in the second half of 1991, Macedonia chose to assert its own independence rather than remain in a truncated Yugoslav state likely to be dominated by Serbia without the counterbalancing influences of Croatia and Slovenia. There was little political transformation beforehand, as the republic's first multi-party elections were held in November 1990, and left the ruling League of Communists—renamed the Social Democratic Union (SDSM)—in power, although the nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO) won the most seats.³ However, the introduction of multi-party politics and a greater ability to express independent views brought with it growing ethnic tensions. Approximately 23 percent of Macedonia's population is ethnically Albanian, although Albanian leaders assert their share to be between 30 and 40 percent. While the situation for this population had not been as oppressive as for their brethren in Kosovo, it had been difficult at times during the communist period, and there was now the new phenomenon of Macedonian nationalism. Moreover, separation from the remainder of Yugoslavia threatened the strong links Macedonian Albanians had with Kosovo, where many had their origins, education, family or friends. In addition to the Albanian population, 4 percent of the population is ethnically Turk, 2 percent Roma and 2 percent Serb. There are also smaller groups, including Vlachs, "Egyptians" and Muslim Slavs (Torbeshi).

While internal problems loomed large, in reality the greatest threats to the new Macedonian state were external. First, the rise of nationalism throughout the region aroused intense emotions over the so-called "Macedonian Question". While neither Bulgaria nor Greece made any territorial claims on the republic, both viewed its very existence as a threat to their own stability. Bulgaria recognized the state but not the existence of a distinct Macedonian people, for fear that this would give credibility to the growing number of individuals within Bulgaria claiming Macedonian ethnicity. Greece additionally felt vulnerable on this point, having denied the existence of a largely assimilated ethnic Macedonian population within its borders, but memories of the Greek civil war of 1947 and the larger role which heritage plays in Greek society prompted the Greek Government to impose a trade blockade and block European Union recognition of the fledgling state until the word "Macedonia"—which Greece claimed exclusively for its own region—was deleted from its name and until changes were made to Macedonia's flag and constitution, which were perceived as supporting territorial claims on

Greece. This imbroglio effectively isolated Macedonia internationally until 1995, when an interim agreement brokered by the United States produced compromises which allowed for Greece and Macedonia to establish formal relations. Among the changes was the temporary acceptance of "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" as the country's name.

The remaining two neighbors similarly created problems for Macedonia. Serbia posed the greater threat, hinting that it might claim the former Yugoslav republic as Serbia's holding earlier in the century and pointing to medieval Serb roots in the region. With Serbian nationalism already being expressed violently in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the threat to Macedonia was viewed by the international community as very real, and a mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and a U.N. peacekeeping contingent with American participation were deployed in 1992 and 1993 respectively.⁴ Tensions at the northern border were exacerbated by the break-up of the Yugoslav economy, which had tied Macedonia very closely to Serbia, and the enforcement of a trade blockade on Serbia. Both the economic breakdown and the trade blockade had severe economic consequences. Albania, the remaining neighbor, at first established relations with Macedonia and sought to develop ties, but Macedonia's vulnerability in 1993 and 1994 made direct support for separatists among the Macedonian Albanian population irresistible.

The conclusion of the Bosnian conflict and the establishment of relations with Greece brought needed stability to Macedonia. In 1997, however, civil anarchy erupted in Albania, posing a new threat to Macedonia: arms smuggling. The cause of the violence was the collapse of pyramid banking schemes, and Macedonia had some problems with such schemes at about the same time. Then, in 1998, outright conflict broke out in Kosovo, as Albanians frustrated by continuing repression despite passive resistance opted to fight with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) against Serbian security and Yugoslav military forces. As a result, both the OSCE and UNPREDEP have maintained their presence in the country.

However, this period has seen internal problems become more threatening to stability than difficult neighbors. Tensions rose particularly strongly as Macedonian authorities and Albanian activists squared off on the issue of establishing an Albanian-language university in the northwest city of Tetovo, as well as over the right to fly the Albanian flag. Representatives of the Albanian community provoked confrontations on specific occasions, but the authorities, perhaps hoping to demonstrate that Macedonia was no longer in such need of this community's cooperation, responded relatively harshly in such cases even while it sought compromises on the general issues.

Meanwhile, greater stability brought rising expectations of improvements in the standard of living, but the ruling coalition, led by the SDSM, was mired in corruption and felt, based on the strong international support it received, that the party was viewed as Macedonia's only real alternative. In addition, its leadership was dominated by leaders from the communist era, who seemed reasonable but had no real inclination for genuine democratic change. Thus, both political and economic reform lagged. The regularly scheduled 1994 elections repeated some of the problems of those held in 1990, namely inaccurate voter registration lists, electoral districts which left some citizens especially Albanians under-represented in parliament, and limits on independent media. While the problems were not so severe that the general will of the people could not be reflected, the leading branch of the nationalist VMRO opted to boycott the second round of the elections, thereby removing itself from the parliament altogether. To its credit, the SDSM held the country together through some very difficult times, including by seeking Albanian participation in government. In addition, local elections in 1996 were better organized. Still, as the Macedonian Assembly's mandate expired in 1998, prompting new elections, the country was clearly moving toward a stronger transition.

CONTESTED SEATS

Contested in the 1998 elections were 120 seats in the unicameral Macedonian Assembly. The President holds a five-year term, so an election for that office, last held in 1994, has not been scheduled.

Eighty-five of the Assembly seats were contested on a majority basis, with new electoral districts established which, while still not as equal in population as they could be, were an improvement over the previous districts. The average size of the district was set at 18,000, with actual size being within 10 percent of that average. Albanians continued to argue that the districts in which they dominated tended to be more populated districts, and clearly some districts were drawn along ethnic lines. To win one of these seats, a candidate had to receive at least one-third of the total number of voters registered in that district. If he or she did not, the two leading candidates would face each other in a second round two weeks later, on November 1.

The remaining 35 seats were contested on a proportional basis, with political parties and coalitions submitting lists on which delegates to the Assembly would be chosen in accordance with the share of the vote received. To be eligible to receive one seat, however, a party or coalition had to receive at least 5 percent of the total vote. The proportional race was the result of negotiations between the ruling and opposition parties. Those in the opposition were dissatisfied with the old, majority-based system, which they felt perpetuated the rule of those in power. In 1998, there was considerable debate over what percentage of the seats would become proportional in a mixed system, and the current configuration was the result of compromise. Some of the smaller political parties felt that the 5 percent threshold for representation was too high.

THE CONTENDERS

Approximately 1,200 people competed for the 120 parliamentary seats. For the proportional race, 17 lists were submitted by 24 political parties some jointly and one list by an independent group. Each list could contain as many as 35 candidates. Twenty-nine political parties and coalitions as well as eight independent candidates competed in the majority races, some in all districts and others in only one.

The 1998 elections revealed a growing maturity in Macedonian politics. Political parties were able to reflect Macedonia's political spectrum and to offer viable alternatives even within the confines of particular ideological outlooks. This fact was evident in a significant drop in the number of independent candidates, which stood at 295 in 1994 and was only eight in 1998.

The ruling Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) of Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski, the successor to the former League of Communists, ran on its own in the elections. It cooperated in some districts with its governing partner, the Socialist Party of Macedonia. The Socialists, however, formed an unlikely coalition with ethnically based political parties representing Turks, Roma, Serbs and Bosniacs in order to improve their chances of meeting the 5 percent threshold for proportional seating.⁵ The SDSM remains relatively popular, having ruled the country since 1990 (and beforehand as the League of Communists) and brought it through the difficult first years of independence. Its challenge for 1998, however, was to overcome its responsibility for a continued lag in economic growth.

The main challenge to the SDSM came from an unlikely coalition of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian Unity (VMRO-DPMNE)⁶, named after the 19th century extremist Macedonian liberation group and led by a young

nationalist named Ljupco Georgievski, and a newly formed Democratic Alliance (DA) of the politically liberal former communist-era official, Vasil Tupurkovski. VMRO-DPMNE, having failed to form a government after winning the most seats in 1990 and losing all parliamentary representation after boycotting the 1994 elections, had lost credibility and seemed ready to collapse. While its nationalist rhetoric gained some popularity during the early days of independence, especially in response to the nationalist threats surrounding Macedonia, by and large Macedonian nationalism never had become particularly virulent or aggressive as a social force, the only exception being opposition to government compromises regarding Albanian-language education in 1996. As a result, VMRO-DPMNE abandoned its nationalist stance, at least on the surface, and joined the DA in focusing on Macedonia's severe economic problems. Tupurkovski, who had served as Macedonia's representative on the joint Yugoslav presidency at the time of the break-up in 1991, dominated the DA. Since that time, he had become a political outsider as other party members took key positions. He had used the time to gain credibility internationally, so that he could present himself as a statesman, while awaiting for those in power to lose their popularity at home. Tupurkovski intentionally developed his party to be multi-ethnic in character.

A secondary challenger was the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), itself a combination of two political parties. The Liberal Party was formed earlier by Stojan Andov from the remains of the pan-Yugoslav "Alliance of Reformed Forces" which Yugoslavia's last Prime Minister, Ante Markovic, had formed in an electoral attempt to maintain the old federation. The Liberal Party had been in the 1994 electoral coalition with the SDSM and the Socialist Party, and Stojan Andov chaired the Assembly. Differences in 1996, however, caused the Liberal Party to leave governing coalition. It then joined with the Democratic Party of Macedonia's last communist-era Prime Minister, Petar Goshev, another leading figure that had been shunted aside since 1990. While Goshev's political views differed greatly with that of Georgievski, in 1994 the Democratic Party had joined VMRO-DPMNE in boycotting the second round of parliamentary elections.

The ethnic Albanian community in Macedonia represents almost a completely separate polity in the country, with only a small percentage willing to consider anything other than an ethnically based party to represent the interests of community members. Within this polity, of course, there is division between moderates and radicals, leading to the formation of separate Albanian parties. Aburahman Aliti's Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP) is the oldest of these parties and has had representation in the Macedonian Government. For these elections, though, the PDP joined forces with the more nationalistic Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) led by Arben Xhaferi, which consists of Party for Democratic Prosperity for Albanians (PDPA) and the People's Democratic Party (NDP). The coalition was formed hastily based on common goals and the sobering effect of the conflict in neighboring Kosovo, despite continuing differences regarding whether the Albanian community should seek policies permitting its full integration into larger Macedonian society or whether it should seek autonomy for the community, with its own parallel institutions.

There were a variety of other political parties competing in the elections, including two additional splinters of the original VMRO party, other Macedonian nationalist parties, a variety of neo-communist parties, a pensioners' party and some insignificant moderate political parties.

THE CAMPAIGN

The election campaign officially began on September 8 and ended 24 hours prior to election day. Generally speaking, the campaign environment was open and competitive, with fewer government controls on the media than before. There were requirements for the state-run broadcast media to maintain objectivity, although those in power did receive the benefit of

additional coverage of their official acts. There are, moreover, a growing number of independent media outlets in Macedonia, permitting citizens to gain access to alternative points of view.

Rallies and other meetings organized by political parties were permitted and usually well attended, indicating little attempt to intimidate supporters. Financial requirements, including spending limits based on the number of registered voters, were also put into place as a means of avoiding abuse of funds.

Much of the campaign centered on economic issues, including resolution of unemployment problems and privatization. Within the Albanian community, there were additional concerns, such as Albanian-language education and specifically the formation of an officially recognized university, and recognition of Albanian as an official language in Macedonia. While fighting in Kosovo was a well-known concern, it did not seem to play a significant role as a campaign issue, even though there were concerns regarding the Macedonian response.

THE ELECTIONS

On election day—October 18—polling stations opened at 7:00 a.m. and closed at 7:00 p.m. There were 2,973 polling stations established for the elections and supervised by 85 district election commissions and, ultimately, by the state election commission. While the officers of the state commission were selected from the judges of the Macedonian Supreme Court and all district commission and polling committee officers were appointed by their supervising commission. Opposition parties which achieved at least 5 percent of the vote in the last Macedonian elections were permitted to have representation on the commissions and boards at all levels, which gave additional transparency to the proceedings. In addition, party observers were permitted at all levels, along with foreign observation under the auspices of the OSCE and civic observation by certain Macedonian non-governmental organizations.

For the most part, the polling stations opened on time, and the balloting continued smoothly throughout the day. No significant problems were encountered during the counting of ballots thereafter. For each voter, there were two ballots, each clearly marked and easy to understand. There were instances of family- and group-voting, but they did not indicate an intentional act to influence a voter's decision.

Of a population of just under 2 million people, 1.572 million Macedonian citizens were registered to vote. Some opposition parties maintained that this number represented too high a percentage of the total population and too significant an increase—120,000 people—from the 1996 registration lists. The authorities responsible for voter registration responded that the increase reflected corrections to the previous lists and, whether higher than expected or not, were accurate. There were some problems with the registration lists on election day, but they were relatively minor.

To deter election fraud, opposition parties had insisted on the use of voter identification cards, which voters were required to present, in addition to another acceptable form of identification at polling stations, in order to vote. Ironically, the cards were later viewed as a potential for fraud, as cards were distributed in an ad hoc manner and there was concern that not every eligible voter would get his or her card. Another concern for potential fraud was voting one day early via a mobile ballot box by people who were ill or disabled, although the number of individuals affected was generally insignificant. Voters in the military cast their ballots at their respective bases, which were generally not open to observation.

Given the close results of the first round, campaigning in districts with second-round voting was notably more negative and tense. In addition, there were some problems with the release

of results on the district races, raising suspicions about the ruling parties' willingness to fully respect the outcome. Beyond the typical family- or group- voting, which is viewed as incorrect but generally harmless, there were some reports of more ominous proxy voting just south of Skopje, as well as party representatives checking voter registration cards outside a polling station in Kocani.

RESULTS

The final results gave 59 seats to the VMRO-DPMNE/DA coalition. Included in these seats were 15 of the 35 seats accorded proportionally. The ruling SDSM conceded defeat after winning only 29 seats in the new Assembly, 10 of which were accorded proportionally. The Albanian coalition won 25 seats, eight of them in the proportional vote; the Liberal Democratic Party four seats, two in the proportional vote; the Socialist Party won two seats in district voting; and the Alliance of Roma from Macedonia won one seat in district voting.

CONCLUSION

The 1998 elections in Macedonia were one of the few times in the post-communist era that government changed hands normally and peacefully in a former Yugoslav republic. This reflects growing political stability in Macedonia at a time when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has asked the country to permit deployment of a NATO extraction force to assist unarmed civilian monitors being deployed in conflict-ridden Kosovo to the north. President Kiro Gligorov, whose office will be contested in 1999, selected VMRO-DPMNE head Ljupco Georgievski to form a new government. His party will hold 14 ministerial posts, while its coalition partner, the Democratic Alternative, will hold eight. Demonstrating the absence of nationalist rhetoric reflected a genuine change of course, Georgievski has continued SDSM's practice of inviting Albanian parties to join the government with five additional ministerial posts despite not needing these parties to form a government. With these developments, Macedonia will hopefully be able to steer clear of ethnic conflict on its own territory and instead proceed in building democratic institutions and a market economy.

¹ Greece took the largest portion, and Bulgaria, after attempting in the Second Balkan War to take all of Macedonia, received the smallest. A decade before, Macedonians attempted to liberate themselves from the Ottomans during the Illinden uprising and the declaration of the Krushevo Republic, but the attempt was brutally crushed.

² Macedonian support for Tito's Yugoslavia was, in large part, based on the substantial but relative improvements which reformed communist rule brought. Those Macedonians who expressed nationalist points of view or challenged communist control, however, were treated as harshly as those emanating from the other peoples of the former Yugoslavia.

³ Despite its strong representation, VMRO was unable to form a governing coalition.

⁴ At the time of deployment, the OSCE was a "Conference", not an "Organization", hence the use of the initials "CSCE" until 1995. The original U.N. deployment was part of the Protection Force (UNPROFOR) which was also deployed in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina but was later divided, with the Macedonian mission called the U.N. Preventive Deployment (UNPREDEP), the first actual preventive deployment of U.N. peacekeeping forces.

⁵ These ethnically based parties were: the Party for the Complete Emancipation of the Roma, the Democratic Party of Turks, the Democratic Progressive Party of the Roma, the Party for

Democratic Action, and the Democratic Party of the Serbs in Macedonia.

⁶ In 1990, the name of the party was simply VMRO, but subsequent feuding between party leaders led to the formation of several political parties with the same name to which additional words were added. VMRO-DPMNE was the largest of the factions to form a new party.