

Macedonia in Crisis

Saturday 10 March 2018, by [GJORGJIOSKA Adela](#), [VANGELI Anastas](#) (Date first published: 23 February 2017).

Macedonia shows that without radical politics, political crisis is the new status quo.

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In a recent interview for an Albanian TV station, US Congressman Dana Rohrabacher casually argued that Macedonia “is not a country” and should be divided up between Kosovo, Albania, and Bulgaria [1].

Coming from the chair of the US House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia and Emerging Threats, this is more than a vulgar display of condescending colonialism, it is a convenient instrument for shifting the focus onto the familiar stereotype of the Balkans as the crucible for ethnic intolerance and violence, obscuring the consequences of neoliberal hegemony in the region. Even more disconcerting than the fact that the statement is made by a congressman who was shortlisted for Trump’s secretary of state, is the fact that it comes at a time when Macedonia finds itself at the peak of the greatest crisis in its otherwise turbulent twenty-five years of existence.

December’s fourth snap elections in a row failed to break a two-year political deadlock. Two months on, a government is yet to be formed. The ruling VMRO-DPMNE (Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity) and the main opposition party SDSM (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia) came close to a tie, winning fifty-one to forty-nine seats respectively, while sixty-one are needed to form a government.

The key to forming a government is in the hands of four ethnic Albanian parties — DUI, DPA, BESA and Alliance for Albanians — which jointly took the remaining twenty seats. They have made their support for one of the two Macedonian parties conditional on the acceptance of a so-called “Albanian Platform” consisting of primarily ethnic demands, such as Albanian becoming an official national language.

Ethnic tensions in the country have been sanitized with the adoption of the Ohrid Framework Agreement following a brief violent conflict in 2001. DUI (Democratic Union for Integration [2]), the party formed from the ranks of Albanian guerilla fighters from the conflict has since 2008 been a coalition partner of VMRO-DPMNE, the ethnic Macedonian nationalist party in power since 2006.

Framing the demands as ethnic identity politics (long encouraged by European and American supervisors in the country), allows DUI in particular to self-proclaim as a spokesperson of ethnic Albanians despite the fact that the majority of Albanians are anti-DUI, and to absolve itself from its participation in the criminal activities accrued over eight years in government, as an accomplice to VMRO-DPMNE.

The Albanian Platform serves to shift the heated political debate and the lines of division in Macedonia from the domain of accountability for criminal political and social injustice to the domain of ethnic identity politics. As the root of the crisis is far from ethnic, succumbing to ethnic demands and concessions only serves to distract from the real issues which are about accountability for past transgressions, and the neoliberal backdrop where criminal politics thrives.

Down the Rabbit Hole

In 2015, one of the most outrageous corruption scandals [3] in modern political history exposed how the governing right-wing populist DPMNE had managed to become one of Europe's wealthiest political parties in one of the smallest and poorest countries on the continent. A wiretapping scandal unveiled that the party abused its position in government to run an illegal phone-tapping program, placing twenty thousand people, including government officials, under surveillance.

This soon proved to be only the tip of the iceberg. The wiretap transcripts implicating both DPMNE, DUI, and their partners from all layers of society uncovered siphoning of public money and property into private hands, collusion with some media outlets and purge of others, political prosecution, electoral fraud, buying votes — and some plots reserved for crime fiction, such as the cover-up a murder committed by the former prime minister's bodyguards.

It was the wiretaps of the murder cover-up plot which rekindled a grassroots anti-police-brutality movement in 2011 and set a mass protest ablaze in May and June 2015. The second wave in 2016 was sparked when the president preemptively decided to pardon any official implicated in criminal cases revealed by the wiretaps.

The turnout of anti-government protests (although highest in the country's history) was far from proportionate to the magnitude of criminal revelations; significant parts of the population remained indifferent to the political drama.

One immediate reason is that the tapes did not come from independent whistleblowers, but from the press center of the SDSM. The leaders of the party carefully selected and curated some of the leaks, publishing them in a number of "press-installments" titled "the bombs." Although they exposed criminal activities perpetrated by DPMNE and DUI, at the end of the day, the way in which SDSM managed the revelations turned it into a cross-party battle between SDSM and DPMNE. In consequence, many people cautiously steered away from inter-party struggle for power, which severely reduced impact of "the bombs" and the mass protests.

The second reason is that a vast number of citizens are entangled within the corrupt networks. With a ruined economy that offers limited prospects for individual success, Macedonia has become a fertile ground for DPMNE and DUI to build new patronage networks and take over previously existing ones. The population trades political power for minimum-wage salaries, pensions, agricultural subsidies, basic social security, and jobs in a burgeoning public administration, but also access to health care and any other public service. All such benefits depend on party loyalty, which is monitored through elaborate systems of party control.

A large part of the population does not want to buy into the VMRO-SDSM division and choose sides. And with good reason. VMRO did not invent the state capture, but merely upgraded the already rampant transformation of post-Yugoslav Macedonia, rooted in the neoliberal policies of the 1990s.

Back then, under the rule of the SDSM and the patronage of the IMF and the World Bank, the state transferred factories and public companies to private ownership, consolidating much of the public

wealth in the hands of a very small capitalist class, creating the politics-business fusion and, planting the seeds for the country's current inequality. The governments of VMRO-DPMNE (1998-2002) and SDSM again (2002-2006) had continued these trends.

That being said, the symbiosis of profit and politics under neoliberal transformation has peaked under VMRO-DPMNE/DUI in the last decade. As a result, today Macedonia is the country with highest inequality in Europe. Poverty runs rampant, as 9.1 percent of Macedonians live on less than two dollars per day, unemployment has skyrocketed to over 25 percent, and a total of 600,000 citizens (more than a quarter of the population) have emigrated in just over a decade and a half.

The State and the Nation

While such plunging of the commons under neoliberalism can be compared to similar processes elsewhere, what adds another aspect to the case of Macedonia is the problematic international recognition of the state, unresolved neighborhood issues, its internal ethnic tensions, and the identity politics held by both nationalists and liberals.

Macedonia still has an open "name dispute" with Greece, which has problematized and delayed the country's independence in the 1990s, resulted in an unlawful economic embargo that decimated the already vulnerable economy, and sabotages its efforts on the international stage.

Bulgaria problematizes the notion of "ethnic Macedonians," while, at the same time, an undisclosed number of ethnic Macedonians (estimated 100,000, or 5 percent of Macedonia's population) have already obtained Bulgarian passports — a gateway for accessing the EU market closed off for non-EU citizens such as the Macedonians — which makes them dual Macedonian and Bulgarian citizens.

Internally, the on-and-off tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, and episodes such as the 2015 violent clash in Kumanovo, which claimed the lives of eight Macedonian policemen and ten of the militants, are a sad reminder that the wounds of 2001 can be easily reopened.

Add to these statements such as Rochrabacher's or other foreign political figures who feel compelled to intervene in the Balkans, and it becomes easy to understand how an ethnic Macedonian nationalist may feel endangered and insecure.

Moreover, among ethnic Macedonians, liberals have traditionally pursued a relaxed, post-national approach to domestic and foreign affairs, have favored multiculturalism and affirmative action, and dismissed the regional discourse on unsettled borders as a residue of times long forgotten.

This has left DPMNE an ample maneuvering space to shape the discourse on all national and international matters. Running a narrative of foreign conspiracy and domestic treason, coupled with the promotion of a new national mythology of the ancient (ethnic) Macedonian greatness, has shielded DPMNE's popular legitimacy. The near total control of the media [\[4\]](#) has enabled it to portray itself as the spokesperson of ethnic Macedonians and every critical voice as an enemy of the state, or a "traitor." Skillful propaganda has made the party synonymous with the state so that any attack on the party becomes an attack on the nation itself. Accusations of criminal activity have been discredited as foreign plots for dismembering the state.

While DPMNE has frequently instrumentalized anti-imperialist rhetoric to shield support, this is not more than a propaganda strategy. In reality, all Macedonian political parties have demonstrated uncritical support but also servility to external pressures — both to the European Union, but especially to the United States. Without discussion, or opposition in parliament, Macedonia sent

troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. It has been an accomplice in CIA crimes such as the case of the extraordinary rendition of Kalid el-Masri [5].

Moreover, DPMNE has vulgarly courted transnational capital. As a customer of foreign finance, Macedonia's public debt rose from €1.55 billion to €4 billion (from 23 to 46.6 percent of GDP) between 2008 to 2014 and is expected to reach 50 percent by 2017; it has been used for private criminal instead of public gains. As an agent of international capitalism, DPMNE has been advancing its flagship policy of attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) by introducing numerous tax and labor reforms.

Sweatshops have turned the country into a haven for foreign investors and a hell for workers, with profits bypassing the country and ending up overseas. According to party insiders, they would not even mind turning Macedonia into a tax haven or some other kind of "free zone." Today in addition to financial interest/political alliances, it also fits well in the European anti-refugee alliance, and manages to get support from European right-wingers that is critical for its survival regardless of its implication in scandalous crimes.

The Protests

The "international community" and the mainstream political parties, rather than the Macedonian public, set the tone and agenda of the political process in the country. Although exposed for corruption and facing mass protests, for some time DPMNE remained unfettered. Only once it was exposed to the external pressure of foreign governments it quickly adjusted its behavior and became "cooperative," while still retaining the anti-foreign rhetoric at home.

Acting as facilitators, the EU and US diplomats convened the political parties at a negotiating table, far from the eyes of the public. Eventually, the parties reached the so-called Pržino Agreement [6], centered on three key provisions: opening the media, electoral code reforms, and establishing a Special Prosecution Office (SPO) to investigate the crimes exposed in the wiretaps.

The latter seems to be central to the process ever since. The SPO has so far opened several cases [7] and indicted a dozen people, including former ministers as well as the former prime minister Nikola Gruevski. However, SPO works outside the existing legal system, which has by and large remained under DPMNE's private control. Regular public prosecutors and courts do not cooperate, largely paralyzing it. Moreover, the SPO is a temporary institution: unless the parliament decides to extend it, its mandate expires in April 2017, allowing everyone implicated to walk away free.

The work of SPO has been cheered by the anti-DPMNE population, with the special prosecutors becoming heroes of the pro-oppositional forces overnight. However, the discursive effect of the SPO is a rather questionable one, as it pushes a Western-backed anticorruption agenda that completely overlooks the root causes of the problem and the need for a radical solution. In Macedonia, the causes of economic and political crisis have been ascribed to a corrupt political elite gone rogue. What is obscured from view is the neoliberal ideological hegemony coupled with direct Western interventionism which has not only created the background for criminal politics in the country, but has also failed to place it under control when it did rise.

It is in particular the dominant role of neoliberalism and the suffocation of the nascent left-wing groups in society that has also contributed to this discourse. In the post-Yugoslav era, a complex web of Western governments and NGOs, through the propagation of liberal ideology and the top-down construction of a donor-driven civil society, instilled a set of values among the highly educated, cosmopolitan urban circles with progressive leanings.

The ideology that they have produced has relied uncritically on the ideal of “Europeanization” (exhibiting a fair share of internalized orientalism), placing the focus of domestic troubles on the domestic incompetent barbaric nationalist and gullible masses who support them, failing to acknowledge and criticize the barbarism of the neoliberal blueprint itself and its extension across the aisle in most of the mainstream political parties.

The nascent left-wing forces who were active in the protests missed the opportunity to push the discourse away from anticorruption and internalized orientalism and towards anticapitalism, highlighting social justice rather than calling for the fall of one powerful clique and replacing it with another. This was due to their inexperience, timidity, but also perhaps naivety of how politics on the ground really works. Close links between SDSM and civil society led to instrumentalization of the protests to bolster SDSM’s oppositional power and negotiating position, as well as its legitimacy in the eyes of the European Union and the United States.

While SDSM eventually did gain from the crisis, the instrumentalization of the process also backfired as it limited the appeal of the movement to those outside the SDSM base and those that could be mobilized around a genuine left-wing platform. The shrinking urban middle classes, private-sector employees, and students participated, but the working class, the unemployed, and those citizens under the clientelistic system of DPMNE-DUI largely stayed away.

The image of anti-government protests attended by urbanites in fancy outfits with catchy slogans and puns, nicely photoshopped and professionally printed can be contrasted with the image of poor DPMNE supporters who would fight over dry sandwiches that the party used to allure them to occasional counter-protests and rallies. Often, liberals expressed contempt and made fun of them, calling them “the sandwich eaters,” further manifesting the lack of awareness of the economic basis for both clientelism and nationalism.

The Nascent Left

While there are different scenarios for the formation of a new government, none of them would hasten the radical turn required to move the state and its population away from criminal politics and social injustice. A new DPMNE government would confirm the party’s immunity to huge popular discontent. It might also set off greater authoritarianism.

An SDSM-led government may be only temporarily preferable, as it is unlikely to be able reverse the toxic forces set in motion by DPMNE. Like most European social-democratic parties, SDSM is socialist in name only, often opposing a broader vision of redistribution. Being the main force of neoliberalism throughout the “transition,” it has also been involved in numerous corruption and organized criminal scandals. While in opposition, SDSM has centered its platform on freeing the country from DPMNE’s criminal rule (while often cooperating with it), and relied on the liberal civil society as a proxy to cover up its own lack of ideology. Its uncritical pursuit of EU and NATO membership as a panacea for the country’s deeply entrenched socioeconomic problems is less and less appealing in the era of Brexit and Trump.

The rehabilitation of DUI by SDSM, and moreover, accepting the restoration of ethnic identity politics instead of social justice and criminal accountability as the basis for a new social setup, is likely to pave the way for nationalist fears and tensions, which can be easily instrumentalized by criminal elites as a useful distraction, leading to a fall back on identitarian trenches evoking the same rhetoric as the one that resulted with an armed conflict in 2001.

Lifting the country out of this economic and political crisis requires a radical socialist vision, one

that can address how neoliberalism interlocks profit and politics, circumscribing meaningful democracy. The recent protest waves highlighted the obstacles that stand in the Left's way, particularly the reactionary influence of liberal civil society, and the crossfire in which the Left finds itself.

The newly formed left-wing party Levica can offer limited hope. Founded by longtime activists and built from the base of different grassroots social movements, it represents the first truly left party in the country's twenty-five years of independence. Running its first electoral campaign on less than €4,000; it failed to obtain the necessary votes to get an MP seat in December's elections. The future success of Levica and the broader left will depend on using resources and networks imaginatively and building alliances between different political organizations, activist groups, and media. But also on reclaiming anticolonial and anti-imperialist narratives — which the DPMNE currently controls — without falling into the trap of nationalism.

The Left must also look beyond everyday politics and address other deep concerns. Environmental degradation is mounting. The country's air pollution ranks among the worst in the world, and the state has proven itself incompetent at dealing with disasters.

A debt crisis is also looming. As in Greece's case, the Left will have to make a strong argument for canceling the loans incurred since the 1990s. In terms of its economic agenda, it must aim not only to redistribute resources but also to increase wealth altogether, and find ways to upgrade Macedonia's position in the regional and global economy. It must also be aware that with no strong European left to act as an ally, this will be an uphill battle.

The sad case of Macedonia's predicament offers lessons on several fronts. Liberal democracy cannot be maintained in neoliberalism. Ethnic identity politics and liberal multiculturalism cannot be feasible when there are actual statehood issues. The reliance on external supervision leaves you with perverted elite politics whereby the public is just an audience. And of all the lessons Macedonia has to offer to the world, it is that in the absence of radical politics, the state of deep crisis is the new status quo.

Adela Gjorgjioska, Anastas Vangeli

P.S.

* Jacobin. 02.23.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/macedonia-corruption-ethnic-politics-levica-protests/>

* ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adela Gjorgjioska is a doctoral researcher at the SoReCom joint PhD in social representations and communications at Sapienza University in Rome, and a member of the editorial board of LeftEast.

Anastas Vangeli is a doctoral researcher at the Graduate School for Social Research at the Polish Academy of Sciences and a Claussen-Simon PhD fellow at the Trajectories of Change Program at the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius.

Footnotes

[1] <https://rohrbacher.house.gov>

[2] <http://bdi.mk/en/index.php>

[3] <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/listeningpost/2015/05/macedonia-wiretapping-scandal-150517124924027.html>

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news_corner/news/news-files/20150619_recommendations_of_the_senior_experts_group.pdf

[5] https://www.ecchr.eu/en/our_work/international-crimes-and-accountability/u-s-accountability/el-masri-case.html

[6] https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news_corner/news/news-files/20150619_agreement.pdf

[7] <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-special-prosecution-on-right-track--03-18-2016>