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Political and Parties Development in the Republic of Macedonia

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Last Change of "Concordia" Command

At the end of 2003 officially ceased to exist "Concordia", the EU military mission in Macedonia, which was replaced by the civilian police mission "Proxima". On the occasion spoke Mr. Solana who pointed out that "the main threat for the country's stability is crime, and not the armed conflict anymore, which stresses that the support must be a police one and not military". His estimation was that "the process of stabilization and normalization has reached the point in which the country is in a position to say goodbye to foreign troops". Prime Minister Crvenkovski described Macedonia as a "completely stabilized country in the security sense", whose main priority presently is the economic development and solving social problems.

Former Conflict Consequences

Repeated disarmament campaign summarized its results at the end of 2003 by informing the public that in the frames of the action for illegal weapon's collection citizens gave 7571 pieces of weapons, 100.000 pieces of ammunition, 1257 pieces and 165 kilograms of explosive, 1001 pieces of accompanying weaponry and 497 meters of wick and cables. Paralelly, citizens submitted 4387 requests for weapon's legalization for the weapons that were given to the authorities. Estimations are that these kinds of initiatives need to be repeated for a longer period of time, in order to have a successful disarmament.

One of the still pending issues deriving from the 2001 conflict was the problem concerning the 12 missing ethnic Macedonians and the 6 missing ethnic Albanians. Some unofficial information leaked to the media saying that all are dead, but the Ministry of Interiors at that moment did not have any official position on the matter. Relatives of the twelve missing Macedonians accused Ali Ahmeti and the state, announcing that they are going to raise criminal charges against him. First results of the police investigation were publicized in May, based on the DNA blood analysis of the ethnic Macedonian relatives, confirming that three bodies that have been found so far belong to three of the missing persons. Investigation followed in a newly discovered location where other bodies were found suspected to be the ones that belong to the missing ethnic Albanians. As their relatives have agreed to give blood for a DNA analysis, results are expected after some time.

By the end of April, at an official press conference of the Ministry of Interiors, Ljube Boshkovski (the former Minister of Interiors in the times of the armed conflict in 2001) was put under suspicion for ordering the murder of seven foreigners, -six Pakistanis and one Indian, -an event that took place on March 2nd in the locality Rashtanski Lozja near Skopje. Suspicion is that the killed were lured to come to Skopje, and were taken to the place of murder. It is believed that for this execution were informed the top highest government persons at that time. Intention was the public and foreign representatives to have an impression that this group were mujaheddins who planned to make terrorist attacks over several foreign diplomatic representative offices and over state vital objects.

Together with Boshkovski, criminal charges were put against other four persons who at that time were high ranked at the MOI¹. Since Boshkovski had an immunity as an MP, the Parliament's Committee for Mandate and Immunity issues decided to remove his immunity, in order to be trialed. Sensing the possibility of being arrested, Boshkovski fled to Croatia using his Croatian passport as a protection against his extradition to Macedonia.

Decentralization Process

General Government suggestion for remodeling local boundaries was to territorially divide Macedonia in 71 local communities (including in this number the nine Skopje communities), which meant that some of the current 123 communities shall merge with neighboring ones. That is why some municipalities that are presently independent, but according to the draft are to be connected with other municipalities, announced that they are going to organize referendum on the matter. The Ministry of Local Selfgovernment stated that these reactions were expected, so if during the public debate arguments of these communities are proven to be justified, there was space for correction. However, according to the Law for Local Selfgovernment, referendum results are not obligatory for the final government decision. According to the draft, Skopje was planned to be a separate local unit and not to include the neighboring villages (the largest of which are ethnic Albanian), which means that bilingualism in the capital level was to be avoided. Still, according to the draft it is expected that two or three Skopje communities shall be bilingual. The whole transferring of powers² from central to local level is planned to start from January 2005 after local elections shall be held in autumn this year.

A number of local communities, especially in Western Macedonia showed dissatisfaction of the draft Law for local community boundaries. Although government was trying to avoid ethnic/political connotation of the suggested local communities' boundaries, there were reactions coming from several towns and areas of Macedonia (especially from Kichevo and Struga), where inhabitants announced referendums regarding the future boundaries change. People living in these cities complained that by the new boundaries, plan was to include in the city the surrounding villages that have high concentration of another ethnic group. Estimation is that for example Kichevo and Struga shall have a higher percent of ethnic Albanians (54,52% Albanians and 35,74 Macedonians in Kichevo including villages Oslomej and Zajas in the city and 54,75% Albanians and 34,58% Macedonians in Struga including villages Veleshta, Delgozdi and Labunishta). Other local merging units are Vratnica to Jegunovce (these are villages around Tetovo, creating units with dominant ethnic Macedonian population) and Mavrovi Anovi to Rostushe (in order to respect the rule of having minimum of 5.000 inhabitants per local community)³. There were other optional suggestions as well, like having Aracinovo

¹ Ministry of Interiors

² Local selfgovernment decentralization shall be performed by introducing change in 49 laws referring to Many areas, like: urbanism, rural planning, environment protection, communal activities, water resources managing, roads, lights, green areas, local economic development, sports, recreation, social care, health, education etc.

³ The village Rostushe voted against the government decision to connect the local community with Mavrovi Anovi.

village (ethnic Albanian) included as the tenth Skopje unit, or to be a separate local community. There also were ideas to include Lipkovo in the city of Kumanovo, or to stay as a separate local community, similar like Vevcani in Struga.

In referendums held in Struga and Kichevo mid-January Macedonians turned out (and voted against the new proposed boundaries), but Albanians didn't. The present Struga mayor stated that if the government ignores the referendum results, they shall put a complaint in front of the European Court for Human Rights and shall start collecting 150.000 signatures to organize a state referendum on the matter. Revolted citizens stated that in Struga people have been living in a tolerant interethnic atmosphere and this should remain that way. Among them were Albanians as well, who have their property and businesses in this city and say that do not wish to become victims of the evident political games for ethnic re-drawing of the local maps. By this is expected (according to their statements) that not only Macedonian-Albanian relations shall worsen, but the same shall happen among Albanians themselves.

Meetings were held between the two parties (VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM) to reach a common agreement regarding the local boundaries, but because starting positions were quite distant from each other, no agreement was reached. Opposition leader Nikola Gruevski accused the Prime Minister of trying to partition Macedonia by the suggested territorial division for the new local boundaries. As an answer, Prime Minister Crvenkovski challenged the opposition by stating that "if the opposition parties VMRO-DPMNE and DPA shall be able to make a common suggestion for the new territorial division of the country, we shall directly put it in the text of the law", at the end doubting that anything of this kind is plausible, due to the completely diverse positions these two parties have. VMRO-DPMNE position is that current 123 communities' boundaries should remain as such, seeing in the new government suggestion as a costly experiment signifying the beginning of the country's cantonization, deriving from the latest census results. DPA and other parties of the Albanian block prefer the boundaries that existed during socialist Macedonia and a bit later (until 1996), when local communities were bigger and their number was 34⁴.

EU special representative Alexis Bruhns in his interview for "Utrinski Vesnik"⁵ suggested a collaborative approach between position and opposition parties regarding the local boundaries, since the government clearly sought opposition's suggestions. "EU is ready to pay for local community personnel training, to teach them how to implement the budget, to finance some equipment for the communities, but is necessary to know the exact number of communities and which shall be their territory. When in question the parallel some people make of the decentralization saying that it is the first step towards federalization, Mr. Bruhns completely disagreed, since the Framework Agreement clearly and precisely determines the future parameters, like the character of the state, non-change of borders, denial of the use of force and the last one- decentralization. "One of the

⁴ DPA criticized some of the other territorial division solutions as well (like the connecting of Mavrovi Anovi with Rostushe instead of connecting it to Gostivar; the communities Saraj and Kondovo should be connected to Skopje and the capital should have Albanian as the second official language, etc).

⁵ On December 25 2003

principles is the multiethnic character of the state and all should accept that and work towards that direction"-ha added.

The Association of the Local Selfgovernment Units asked an opinion from the Council of Europe to interpret Article 5 of the European Charter for Local and Regional Authorities, regarding the referendums undertaken by the citizens of particular local units. Presently an official answer is awaited to show whether referendum is only a consultative measure for the citizens towards the government or not. At the same time, Mr. Todor Petrov, a former MP initiated collection of citizen's signatures in order to meet the legal requirement for organizing a nationwide referendum regarding the change of local boundaries. Signatures were due to be collected in the legally determined six months, which finally was not achieved, so this initiative failed.

Decentralization laws (among others, the laws for territorial organization of local selfgovernment, for the City of Skopje and for local units financing) were planned to pass its first Parliament reading in March, while the second and final versions to be introduced two months later, following the Government estimates how justified are the communities' arguments, expressed in form of a referendum. Unfortunately this dynamic was not met, since this whole process was postponed due to the tragic accident of the President of the Republic.

At the beginning of June government coalition partners held meetings in order to come out with a possible common agreement especially regarding the law on local boundaries. The whole package on laws that need to be passed is about 30. Media already speculate that DUI demanded for Chair (Skopje) community to widen to the banks of the river Vardar, by which part of the central city area shall be included in that local unit. At the same time, DUI insists that villages of Aracinovo (Skopje) and Lipkovo (Kumanovo) to be included in the respective cities. Other 10 local communities' referendums are going to be accepted by the government, thus creating 10 new local communities. Kichevo and Struga are still under negotiations.

Some of the impractical and negative consequences of this political marketing are the actual priority given only to the "ethnic" interests (like bilingualism and other formal requirements), on expense of the real needs and interest of the population living in the local communities. In fact is a big question mark to what extent is natural and practical to join typical rural local communities with the gravitating city center where it is obvious that in the long run city interest shall prevail, without allowing real rural development. Sense is that DUI is having a tactic approach to the matter, due to the upcoming local elections in October. Still, often political solutions of this type (without having a sense of the actual needs of citizens) on the long run are proven to be a failure⁶.

EU and NATO Integration Processes

⁶ It is surprising how villages that have had so far the status of independent local communities, due to political interests are ready to give up their independence in decision-making and to be "melted" in the neighboring cities.

In the frames of the future Irish EU presidency, consultations, West Balkans countries were looked upon as well. Concretely, Macedonia received suggestions to proceed and finalize the Framework Agreement implementation. Some of the priorities are the forthcoming laws on decentralization and the just representation of ethnic communities in state administration, which is seen to be a long-term process. As other areas that still need reform are mentioned the judiciary system and the Army, while main government focus must be the economy. Macedonia should also be prepared for determining the final status of Kosovo, which shall be decided in 2005, and to consider resolving the name issue with Greece.

A message has been sent that all countries of the West Balkans have the EU door open for them, after they fulfill the conditions for democratic, political and economic reforms and accepting the EU standards. In this line of thinking, Stability Pact Coordinator Erhard Busek stated that EU is expecting that Macedonia shall submit application for EU, which is seen as a sign that the country is moving forward. His estimation is that the process is not simple, but he sees that move as an interesting challenge. Although EU is fully aware of the differences in the dynamics of economic development in various countries of the region, still priority is given to the level of achieving a social cohesion.

Moving towards the set direction, a large part of the Government's energy during the first half of this year was spent in the diplomatic and other efforts of approaching and meeting the official EU and NATO requirements. In the case of EU efforts were focused in submitting the formal application as a first step⁷, followed by series of processes forwarded by various ministries, each in its own field. Unhappy events, like the death of President Trajkovski, as well as the unavoidable stagnation that occurred due to the early presidential elections, somehow temporarily distracted the Government from this course. However, the Macedonian application was taken under consideration by the EU Ministerial Council and presently are prepared the questions that Macedonian authorities shall have the task to answer. According to the set agenda, questions are to be received this autumn.

Regarding NATO membership, impression is that Macedonia has progressed at a better pace. The Ministry of Defense prepared a new Action plan for speeding up Army reforms, for which modernization are going to be spent 66 million EUR. Steps that are to be taken are: modernization of the equipment and arms, destroying the thirty "T-55" tanks⁸ and appointing a new General Headquarters Commander. The country representatives expect to be at least encouraged during the NATO summit this year for its efforts and the so far progress. However Macedonian authorities are hoping to get a much clearer signal of acceptance of the country into the NATO structures.

One of the things that tackle citizen's interests vs the EU is the issue of visas. Visas among Macedonian citizens are generally perceived as a limiting obstacle, constraining

⁷ VMRO-DPMNE as a party submitted to the Macedonian Assembly a declaration for the country's application for EU membership. The Assembly's committee accepted the declaration, but also accepted the government suggestions for modifying it in a more "non-partisan manner".

⁸ 60 tanks were destroyed in mid-January.

travel and communication. On the other hand, there are some conditions that the country needs to fulfil in order to get a somehow improved treatment like getting new contemporary and more safety protected passport design as well as signing readmission agreements with all EU countries-members. So far, Macedonia has signed only three readmission agreements from the EU countries: Germany, Italy and France.

Legal and Parliamentary Activities

By the end of December 2003 the Assembly finally managed to pass the constitutional amendment by which tapping has been legalized, obtaining 2/3 majority votes support. Change of the Constitution Article 17 was necessary to be harmonized with EU legal system and represents a constitutional and legal frame for criminal persecution. Tapping shall be applied after more detailed provisions shall be adopted determining under which circumstances it can be applied and how.

Anticorruption Commission suggested amendments in the existing Anti-Corruption Law regarding politicians who were appointed at a position to give statements for their financial and property status after they leave the position as well. According to this suggestion, ministers, MPs, judges, public prosecutors, directors of public enterprises, as well as other elected or appointed persons shall be binded to fill the property list graphs both when they accept and when they leave their position⁹.

After the amendments of the Law on Citizenship were voted in Parliament, the then President Trajkovski put a veto, arguing that "it is important by the amendments not to be violated the state sovereign right to consider national interests determined in the Republic's Constitution". This meant that the law shall be turned back to the Assembly for a new debate, although according to Article 75 of the Constitution, if the Assembly voted twice for the law, President shall be obliged to sign it. Main amendment change is the shorter period of stay as a condition for obtaining citizenship, from the so far 15 to 10 years. Political speculations say that if these novelties are to be accepted, Macedonia shall have to issue citizenship to 100.000 persons. However, in practice, the Ministry of Interiors has stated that issued in December 700 citizenships, which were processed earlier, in accordance with the current Citizenship Law. This President's move by some media was estimated as efforts to move closer to VMRO-DPMNE in order to gain favor for the next presidential elections.

At the end of 2003, the 2004 budget was voted late at night, in a scandalous atmosphere. According to opposition, main reason was their revolt for the decision of the parliamentary majority to limit discussion time to five minutes per amendment. Government was justifying this decision as necessary due to the urgent nature of the budget and all accompanying legal acts, while opposition was claiming that main intention was to silence them.

⁹ Other than this initiative, it is interesting to mention that a prominent SDSM member who held a high position at the Ministry of Defense was arrested for corruption (bribery).

Education Issues

Before the end of 2003, the Law for Funding a new State University¹⁰ was withdrawn from the Assembly's procedure. Parties on power made this move in the effort to deblock the Parliament and its operation, since it fell in a no-exit-street due to severe reactions and marathon opposition speeches against this law. Discussions were lead until the early morning hours, while part of the students of the Skopje and Bitola universities protested. VMRO-DPMNE MPs complained that the government's draft is an institutional way for SDSM to fulfill the wishes of the coalition partner, for Ahmeti (DUI) to regain popularity, while according to them the Albanian ethnic group is ghettoicizing itself. Other VMRO MPs discussed that it is better for the state to have one good instead of two doubtful universities in the same city. For purposes of avoiding further confrontations, but also because priority was given to the 2004 budget which was on the Parliament's agenda, the Government temporarily withdrew the draft law.

At the same time statements were made by Mr. Belicanec-the President of the Committee for accreditation of the high education institutions. His opinion was that Tetovo and the Van Der Stohel Universities should be merged, while the whole procedure should be done under current laws and the Constitution. One of the reasons was that the state could not finance two universities in the same city, but on the other hand should reestimate the study programs of the Tetovo University in order to avoid parallelism in the two educational institutions. His position is that recognizing the Tetovo University is out of question. Instead, a new university could be founded, which initially is to be pure ethnic. Knowledge of those who have already got a diploma should be checked, and the current students it is best to be transferred to existing state universities and continue their education, but under strict criteria. He also explained that as an Accreditation Board they are not to be put above the Assembly which can approve the university founding, and the Board's job is to give opinion what should be done in order the university to obtain accreditation, based on satisfying the staff and other needs for high education", having in mind the opportunities for education in the other two state universities.

EU special representative Alexis Bruhns stated that the goal is to establish a state university on Albanian language. Intention is to be scanned various parts of the Tetovo University and to be reconstructed in faculties, having in mind European and Macedonian standards and completely respecting them. "Now there are various influences upon the Tetovo university, which, of course, shall not be acceptable when the government shall start organizing the new state university"- he added. On the other hand, the two Skopje and Bitola Universities at the discussion expressed negative opinions regarding the creation of a third state university, because they were worried about parallelism in the study programs, in the non-existence of an academic nucleus and doubts the quality of diplomas obtained there.

In January, when the same law came on the parliamentary agenda, disputes and conflicts between the VMRO-DPMNE parliamentary group and the parliamentary speaker arose. MPs protested because they were not allowed to discuss more than 10 minutes (each MP)

¹⁰ Meaning to legalize parts of the up to then illegal Tetovo University.

or 15 minutes for the parliamentary groups' coordinators, so the atmosphere became very tensed. VMRO-DPMNE MPs announced that they are going to ask for the Speaker's interpellation, for the way he works and leads parliamentary sessions. Practically, opposition was taking advantage to obstruct the parliamentary work, sticking to procedural matters, thus preventing the discussion to get to the issue on the agenda. VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski asked this law to be taken out of the agenda, since the present draft was not changed at all since the December discussion. Another VMRO-DPMNE MP stated that by the speech limitation the position is just showing its inability to deal with the matter, since they as well do not believe in the Tetovo University as institution. In spite of all these discussions, the Law was finally voted. There were no other obstacles for its implementation, since President Trajkovski after certain political consultations and hesitation, signed the Law. Again, this move brought anger among his VMRO-DPMNE colleagues and generally was seen as his effort to gain popularity among ethnic Albanian voters for the next presidential elections.

Economic Developments

Due to the unrealized requests for salary raise in the field of education, on January 26th started the strike of 350.000 persons working in the education field, including kindergartens, schools and universities. Requests were made regarding the determination of the lowest salary in the education domain and the accurate application of the collective agreement for the level of salaries, which is not respected in the last 10 years. The government replied that due to the lack of funds is unable to meet the requests, other than the request for transportation expenses. Strike lasted for three weeks, in spite of the calls of the government for strike cessation. Both sides were stubbornly keeping their position. Government did not wish to meet with the Education trade-union representatives, claiming that they have started the strike before the actual negotiations ended. On the other hand, Trade-union was complaining that their demands have not been met at all and that the government has played them. This strike resulted the most in poorer education services to the final consumer- the children.

Prime Minister Crvenkovski at the end of 2003, stated that 2004 shall be the year of economy, on basis of which shall be estimated this government's success. In 2003 the government has put an accent to security, overcoming international isolation and interethnic relations improvement, while inflation was 1,2. Crvenkovski announced for next year domestic and foreign investments for at least 200 million USD. Some of the intended projects have already started, like the sale of state owned land, the promotion of the production zone "Bunardzik" and the Turkish investment "Koch Holding" for a big shopping center in the value of 30 million USD.

The government expectations were that in 2004 employment shall be increased by 3%, since largest problem is unemployment for which there are no magical solutions, but long-term plans instead. Meeting this goal, in March started the National action plan for employment increase (part of the CARDS program for 2004 and 2005), which contains at least 10 pilot-projects financed with 2 million EUR by EU (active and preventive measures for the unemployed, promotion of human capital development and more active

approach in entrepreneurship policy). It was announced that some investments are expected, in both the private and public sphere. Inflation shall be no bigger than 2,8%.

Economic growth of 4% was promised by the government, but other, rather gloomy statistics indicate that growth by the end of the year shall move around 2,5%. Another negative trend is the inclination of young educated people to leave the country (brain drain). This is proved by a research conducted this spring, where over 80% of the polled graduated students are thinking in moving abroad, due to the lack of finding employment in Macedonia.

Unpredicted Events Followed by Presidential Elections

At the very day when the Macedonian delegation was heading for Dublin to submit the official application for EU membership (February 26), President Trajkovski's trip to Sarajevo turned out to be fatal. The plane including all the members of his delegation and the crew crashed in the Bosnian mountains, leaving no survivors. Due to that event, the delegation in Dublin returned immediately to Macedonia, without achieving to submit the application.

Other than the general shock that this human tragedy provoked to the general public, it also initiated the constitutionally regulated mechanisms for election of a new president, which were due to finish in 40 days. In the meantime, the presidential function and duties (according to the Constitution) were taken over by the President of the Parliament Mr.Jordanovski. As regulation demanded very tight time frames for election of a new president, the event caused many urgent consultations within competing parties, in order to locate their presidential candidates. The tragedy radically shortened the time parties calculated that they have on their disposal for deciding on the candidates, and since there were no detailed regulations about presidential elections that would occur under urgent circumstances, hastily were adopted several changes in the Law for Presidential elections, limiting the legally determined time frames for submitting candidacy (10 days), as well as the campaigning time frames (10 days), etc. By these changes the number of candidates competing drastically declined (including candidates that would have decided to collect the legally required 10.000 citizen's signatures, unless a candidate would have been supported by at least 30 MPs).

Before the tragic event took place, the two major parties (VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM) still had no crystallized opinions who their competing presidential candidate will be, since all political factors felt that November 2004 as the period determined for Macedonia to have its presidential elections (together with its local elections) is too far. Until February, media were generally guessing which would be the future individuals interested to compete. The list was including the late President Boris Trajkovski, Mr.Sashko Kedev (a cardio-surgeant prominent member of VMRO-DPMNE and an MP), the Liberal Party leader Stojan Andov (in coalition with VMRO-DPMNE), Mr. Nikola Kljusev (the first Prime Minister in 1990 independent Macedonia, member of VMRO-DPMNE), Mr.Tito Petkovski (prominent SDSM member and an MP), Mr.Vasil Tupurkovski (the Democratic Alternative leader and one of the three coalition leaders in

"Third Way"), Mr.Vlado Popovski (counselor to the late President and member of VMRO-DPMNE), Mr.Ljube Boshkoski (former Minister of Interiors and VMRO-DPMNE prominent member) and a couple of prominent businessmen (Mr.Sveto Janevski, Mr.Trifun Kostovski). It was understood that out of all these potential candidates, essential was the gaining of a backup from the two largest parties, since there was no obvious powerful individual which could be able to attract votes due to its personality, if no party support was visible behind him. From its side, SDSM as a big political party clearly stated that on the next presidential elections shall have their own competing candidate. LDP supported this idea, because as their coalition partner was more interested in gaining support for the upcoming local elections targeting several mayor's posts. During that period, ethnic Albanian parties have not come up with their suggestions.

Presidential Elections-Campaign

Due to the vacancy existing in the National Election Committee (its former President was elected for a judge in the Constitutional court), a need was urgently imposed to be elected a new President. As this duty by Constitution is given to the President of the Republic, the replacing Mr.Jordanovski appointed for this position one of the closest former President's collaborators (Counselor for National Security) Mr. Stevo Pendarovski. Again, opposition parties showed discontent for this decision, by complaining that Mr.Pendarovski is not adequate for this position for various reasons, even conditioning their election participation if their demands are not met. This demand was not accepted and at the end, had no influence in the VMRO-DPMNE election participation.

Under the current circumstances, election nomination was an achievable effort only to those candidates who were able to immediately have support of at least 30 MPs or who were able to collect in 10 days the minimum of 10.000 signatures. In total, seven persons announced their will to compete and tried to fulfill the preconditions: Mr.Branko Crvenkovski (the up to then SDSM President and Prime Minister); Mr.Sashko Kedev (see above); Mr.Ljube Boshkovski (see above); Mr.Zidi Dhelili (DPA prominent member and an MP); Mr.Gzim Ostreni (DUI prominent member and an MP); Mr.Sali Ramadani (former MP and DPA member); Mr.Mirko Hristov (a citizen from Strumica) and Mr.Branko Janevski (an SDSM Member). After the termination of the legally determined term, only four candidates achieved in meeting the formal requirements: Branko Crvenkovski, Sasko Kedev, Zidi Dhelili and Gzim Ostreni.

It is important to point out that the final selection of these four names also provoked turbulences in their parties, each case for various reasons. In the SDSM case estimations and negotiations have been made with various potential candidates, out of which it was felt that the most interested one is Mr.Tito Petkovski, who competed on the previous presidential elections. Although he publicly announced that he is ready to test his support by the party as opposed to another candidate, still the Central Party Committee decided to nominate Branko Crvenkovski as a single candidate for the function. However, this move confirmed speculations that there are at least two opposed blocks within the party. Things are a bit more complicated in the case of VMRO-DPMNE, which later resulted in a big

inter-party conflict. Mr.Ljube Boshkovski was hoping to have his party hard-liners support (accompanied by the shadow support of the honorary VMRO-DPMNE party president and former Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski) and win a significant portion of the first round party support. He won his opportunity to compete by collecting 10.000 signatures, but formal legal requirements of continuously living 10 years in the last 15 years in the Republic of Macedonia were not met. The matter went to the courts' instance, but Mr.Boskovski lost the case. On the other hand, the current party leadership with the direct planning of Mr.Gruevski and Mrs.Samoilovska-Cvetanova decided to give the support to a younger non-compromised prominent professional-Mr.Sashko Kedev. DPA has initially collected the signatures requested for Mr.Arben Dhaferi, who intended by his presence to gather again the ethnic Albanian voters around his radical ideas (demanding equality in all society levels through division, and not integration in the state power, conditioning it with the partition of the country). Initially, it was stated that DPA is competing in order to delegitimize DUI's concept and their candidate. But since this candidate did not satisfy the legal precondition of continuously living 10 years in the country, signatures for this candidate never reached the Committee Mandate Verification at first place. Instead, new signatures were urgently collected for Mr.Zidi Dhelili, who got the final verification. On the other hand DUI as a party initially did not consider to run the elections with a candidate nominated by this party. Instead, they were intending to support their government coalition partner candidate. However, provoked by the aggressiveness of DPA's challenge for forces and support measuring, DUI nominated Mr.Gzim Ostreni as their candidate, who also got support by PDP.

Short presidential campaign was lead dynamically, by holding numerous meetings and press conferences where the four competing candidates presented their set of values and priorities. Still, most of them were promoting politics, ideas and critics which were not linked with the constitutionally determined duties and authority of the president (in general, the Macedonian Constitution is not offering large competencies to the president, and by this is listing the country in the group of political systems that have a weak president).

Mr.Branko Crvenkovski¹¹ during his campaign pointed out the following priorities: intensify the rhythm of Macedonian Army reforms in order to meet the preconditions for joining NATO; to strengthen the Macedonian diplomacy above all in human resources, in order to move more speedily and meet the preconditions for EU integration; working on the key duty of improving the interethnic relations in the country and their preservation on a good level (to have Macedonia serving as a successful model and example for the region); to make Macedonia an attractive place for foreign investments, and linked to this to stimulate employment. As a basic value, Mr.Crvenkovski explaining the motives of his candidacy said that he is competing without the intention to offend or humiliate, not to disseminate hatred among people, but to be a President who will unite all citizens.

¹¹ Born in 1962 in Sarajevo, studied informatics technology. Had an early start in politics. His first Prime minister mandate was in 1992, when he became the party leader. Married, two children.

Mr.Sasko Kedev¹² who was promoted by his party as "the new face of Macedonia" is prioritizing the following issues: creation of prosperous, democratic and European oriented state; securing equality of all citizens regardless of religion, party or ethnic affiliation; eliminating corruption and poverty; formation of professional and competent consular-diplomatic network, as an important and responsible state non-partisan representative body; achieving more successful collaboration and coordination of efforts between the President and the Ministry of Exteriors; promoting justice, security and success as general values; active involvement in the principally taken decisions regarding the future of Kosovo (to be stable and democratic), since it directly influences the situation in Macedonia and the region as a whole; working towards meeting the preconditions of more easily obtaining Schengen visas (new passport design; secured borders; signed readmission agreements).

Mr.Gzim Ostreni¹³ seeking the citizen's support stated that if elected he would: transform the Macedonian Army in a small, capable and efficient army, in which shall be equally represented both Albanians and Macedonians; he will be engaged in a complete implementation of the Framework Agreement, in order to have Macedonia as a state of equal citizens; to move Macedonia forward towards regional integrations; to overcome visa limitations; to enable Macedonia to join NATO and EU. He also stressed that the line of thinking should not be directed only to the Albanians, but to all citizens of Macedonia. Although he showed awareness that he is supported by the ethnic Albanian electorate, he expressed hope that based on his program shall win the support of other ethnic communities as well like Macedonians, Turks, Roma etc. Open issues among the ethnic communities (use of symbols and language) should not be decided hastily, but good estimation is needed in order to achieve long-term solutions.

Mr.Zidi Dhelili¹⁴ was trying to promote his preference of an ethnic state, since this kind of states are creating internal cohesion that guarantees long-term stability and endurance. He pointed out that DPA is trying to prove to the internal and external factor that the problem with the Albanians is still open, that the Framework Agreement is not been implemented and that there are conceptual differences with DUI. "We are accused for partition of Macedonia, but the Albanian cause is not for sale"-he stressed. He also added that during these presidential elections has the honor together with the party program to appear with the Albanian flag, in order to defend the identity of the Albanians in Macedonia.

¹² Born in 1962 in Shtip, studied Medical Faculty, followed by an impressive professional career. Currently cardio-surgeant and an MP for VMRO-DPMNE. Married, two children.

¹³ Mr.Ostreni is the most senior competing candidate. He is from Debar and had a career in the military, up to the appointment as Chief of Headquarters for Territorial Defense, and later as Commander of Territorial Defense in Debar. In the meantime get his diploma on sociology. In 1991 became a pensioner. He was an NLA (ONA) volunteer in Kosovo and later became the head of the ONA headquarters in Macedonia. Married, father of two children and grandfather of five.

¹⁴ Mr.Dhelili is from Rechane near Gostivar. He is a textile engineer, worked in the textile industry and was a member of the Gostivar local council. In 2000 was appointed as vice-director of the Agency for underdeveloped regions. In 2001 became an NLA (ONA) member. In 2002 became an MP instead of Mr.Dhaferi who withdrew from the Assembly. Married, father of three children.

Elections- First Round

Central Electoral Committee announced that the total number of voters registered in the Republic of Macedonia is 1.695.103, out of which 934.640 (or 55,27%) voted in the first round. As summarized, results were the following: Branko Crvenkovski-385.300 votes, Sasko Kedev 309.131 votes, Gzim Ostreni 134.048 and Zidi Dhelili 78.269 votes. Invalid voting tickets were 1,64% or 27.827. As can be seen in the table below, Crvenkovski won in the larger cities, while Kedev won in the rural regions and in smaller towns. On the other hand, voter's support for Ostreni prevailed in all regions inhabited by ethnic Albanians, excluding only Tetovo where the support was divided.

City	Dhelili (DPA)	Crvenkovski (SDSM)	Ostreni (DUI)	Kedev (VMRO-DPMNE)
Kisela Voda (Skopje)	3143	35688	5321	27490
Chair (Skopje)	4280	30893	9959	17116
Gazi Baba (Skopje)	2139	14159	4307	14482
Centar (Skopje)	3150	19272	6104	9158
Karposh (Skopje)	6317	20029	9339	10670
Bitola	610	20609	942	20243
Veles	1498	19603	2244	19499
Tetovo	26929	10818	28805	6158
Strumica	33	23223	48	24584
Struga	5176	7315	9057	5364
Prilep	86	21836	104	20985
Ohrid	472	16346	1253	13472
Kumanovo	8622	20456	15946	12092
Kochani	39	10577	77	9936
Kichevo	308	6374	4278	6097
Kavadarci	48	10532	118	9099
Gostivar	12335	9349	29156	4213
Shtip	91	12397	164	12455

Immediately after polling stations were closed DPA supporters gathered in the center of Tetovo loudly and by use of guns celebrating the "election victory". As clearer election results were publicized, their direct opponent (DUI) gave ironic comments about the "non-traditional Albanian celebration of a defeat". DPA vice-president Menduh Thachi accused DUI for large election irregularities. However, due to weak election party performance (especially in the outskirts of Skopje and Kumanovo), Mr.Thachi pushed for resignations of a significant group of DPA prominent members, as well as some local branches leaders.

Elections- Second Round

In general, a large portion of the voters in Macedonia restrained from voting, which fact was later used by various political forces to call on a second round election boycott¹⁵.

¹⁵ Some villages boycotted the elections due to unsolved communal problems (road etc).

Obviously, main problem in organizing the second round of elections was the constitutional provision that requires minimum of 50%+1 voters turnout in order the president election to be legitimate. This precondition opened a new type of campaigning between the two rounds, lead on one hand by the official representatives of the two major parties whose candidates won at the first round (Crvenkovski and Kedev) and their internal party oppositions jointly with center and other opposition parties on the other. From its side, DPA decided not to support the VMRO-DPMNE candidate and to call on a boycott instead. Contrary to this, DUI supported the SDSM candidate. Same boycott idea, but in a more roundabout way was promoted by the Democratic Alternative-Socialist Party-Democratic Union alliance, coupled with public support of some powerful media and individuals. VMRO-DPMNE's election performance was also damaged by the joining of forces of Ljube Boskovski and Ljubco Georgievski who were openly agitating among the party faithful voters to restrain from voting. The party was practically divided between the participating and non-participating in the second round, since some thought that by active participation shall be practically legitimizing Crvenkovski's election.

This political climate and the obvious hesitation of voters initiated a nationwide campaign sponsored by foreign agencies and embassies, domestic NGOs and individuals, to motivate the citizens to vote. Finally, this campaign proved to be fruitful, since the second round showed a turnout of 53,39%. Results showed an increase of voters' turnout in regions predominantly inhabited by Macedonians at the expense of having lower, but still present turnout in areas inhabited mostly by ethnic Albanians. What is interesting is that most of the ethnic Albanian votes were in favor of Branko Crvenkovski. Looking at the total of votes won per candidate Crvenkovski had a clear victory, since the vote's difference between the two candidates was about 220.000. In total, Crvenkovski got 548.583 votes and Kedev 326.951. These results are from the second round of voting, published on April 30th, 2004 in "Utrinski Vesnik". The following table shows the comparative performance of the two candidates per city.

City	Votes for Crvenkovski	Votes for Kedev	Voted in total
Kisela Voda (Skopje)	43735	28695	75180
Chair (Skopje)	38899	16885	58079
Gazi Baba (Skopje)	19187	16211	36675
Centar (Skopje)	30541	10195	42581
Karposh (Skopje)	25709	10622	38206
Bitola	25127	21534	48271
Veles	23901	21160	46385
Tetovo	32265	7923	47868
Strumica	27826	27748	56448
Struga	16489	5487	22777
Prilep	26089	23969	51312
Ohrid	19445	4805	25243
Kumanovo	37308	13495	52899
Kochani	13650	11887	26335
Kichevo	11089	7449	19194
Kavadarci	12282	10328	23064
Gostivar	33031	6354	40698
Shtip	14735	13271	28840

Delchevo	7754	1925	10275
Gevgelija	12556	9938	28841
Negotino	7401	5910	13580
Resen	6034	3349	18198

From their side, VMRO-DPMNE and Mr.Kedev as their candidate doubted the results, arguing that the public is witnessing a major election fraud. This party submitted 120 complaints to the Central Electoral Committee, which refused them, after which they were proceeded to the Supreme Court where very few of them were approved and which influenced the sum result insignificantly. However, the party was still insisting for other measures to be applied, like the results recounting, a measure that was practiced in other states abroad, when were in doubt the general election results. Arguing that this idea has no legal backup, CEC refused the initiative. The opposition boycotted Crvenkovski's inauguration.

ODIHR representative that monitored the election stated that "problems that occurred in the second round were more numerous than the first, and remarks were given for group (family) voting and stuffing ballot boxes. Still, remains the general picture for democratic elections, which were held under unusual circumstances". ODIHR thought that in 92% of the cases voting was marked as good or very good, while for the rest 8% was marked as bad or very bad including the votes counting activity. General conclusion was that the second round generally was in accordance with international standards, although were present serious, but localized irregularities in the polling stations. A domestic NGO in charge for elections monitoring ("Most") followed the same concluding line like ODIHR. The only organization that was somewhat different in its statements than the rest was the Helsinki Committee.

Other than determining who the next Macedonian president shall be, these election results provoked important shifts and changes within the two parties. Branko Crvenkovski who was identified as the most powerful figure in SDSM is practically leaving a vacancy both in the party and in the Government. Prime Minister's position was taken by the up to then Minister of Interiors Hari Kostov, who had his new government voted at the beginning of June. There were no significant personal changes on ministerial level, with the only exception of appointing a new minister in the Ministry of Interiors¹⁶. Balances of appointing party people from the parties in coalition in various positions was kept intact. The only changes announced were limited personal rotations or changes of the second or third layers of appointed persons in various ministries. Although it was expected PDP to stay in government together with DUI (support was given to their candidate) due to their weak placement in various governmental positions, they announced that they are leaving the Government. As for the SDSM party leadership position, from where it is believed that the real political influence is realized, candidates are the few persons from the younger generation that have been positioned around Crvenkovski before he became President of the Republic. The official election of the new party leader is due to happen at the next party congress in November this year.

¹⁶ Appointed was a professional who worked at the Ministry.

Turbulences in VMRO-DPMNE

Mrs.Dosta Dimovska and Mr.Marijan Gjorcev, two prominent figures in the "older" VMRO-DPMNE structures have sought in creating an official "fraction" in the auspices of the party. This initiative resulted from a process that has been going on within the party for quite some time, mainly after the withdrawal of Mr.Ljupco Georgievski as a party leader and his replacement by the younger Nikola Gruevski. Branches of the party have had personal changes due to the new leader's initiative, which created a certain pool of party persons who were dissatisfied with their position and political influence. At the same time, Mrs. Dimovska founded DEAM (Movement for Euro-Atlantic Macedonia) intending to start it in a form of a non-governmental movement and after gaining in strength, to transform it into a political force.

"Opinion exchange" with the current VMRO-DPMNE leader was performed through the media, since Mrs. Dimovska and Mr.Gjorcev held a press conference where both stated that "In the frames of VMRO-DPMNE shall start functioning a political wing or a lobby group whose task shall be enriching internal party democracy, to prevent political tissue tearing apart and to raise the low party rating". They showed dissatisfaction of the present party leadership, due to their "negative, arrogant and improper behavior". They warned that current leadership further damages the party rating, imposing the fact that in time their replacement shall come. The two promoters said that this initiative is supported by part of the VMRO-DPMNE parliamentary group, large number of present mayors, former ministers, members of the former Executive Committee etc. On the other hand, Nikola Gruevski (not fearing any serious danger for the party) replied to the challenge by pointing Gjorcev and Dimovska as the first responsible, since they have been well positioned and influential until 2002, meaning that the low party rating is their achievement.

Some days later, Dimovska and Gjorcev met with Nikola Gruevski to discuss and position themselves on the matter, asking for change in the party Statute for a legally structured party wing to be created, since "they want to help the party and to unite it before the next local and presidential elections, and to contribute in more qualitative work in the Parliament". Other party leadership members argued with the two visitors as well, feeling that VMRO-DPMNE is on an undesired position for changes, since "the moments are dramatic for the state, the church and different pressures are present". Finally, agreement has not been reached, leaving Mr. Gruevski an open field for party navigation.

It was obvious that presidential election results have been used again by the VMRO-DPMNE former political leadership to openly criticize and attack Nikola Gruevski for the defeat. Looking at the election results alone, one could estimate that although KedeV represented a new figure in the Macedonian politics, still he managed to win a significant portion of the citizen's support, which fact deserved credit. Instead, he and his narrowest collaborators have been subdued to open critics for not leading the party properly, including the presidential elections, the previous selection of a presidential candidate etc. However, fact is that Mr.KedeV would have had somewhat better performance, had he been not undermined locally by a couple of prominent persons from the old party top

structure (Ljube Boshkovski and Ljubco Georgievski), which were confusing their faithful party voters with contradictory messages whether to vote or to abstain.

Internal conflict was getting more and more personal tones, after a public appearance of Mr.Gruevski who stated that in the last days before the second election round he was walking as a person who had "a knife in his back" directing this accusation for the failure towards Ljubco Georgievski as the person who assisted it. As a result to this statement, the party Executive Committee and the parliamentary VMRO-DPMNE group denied obedience to Mr.Gruevski, arguing that he aims to impose his personal conflict and opinion to them as well, although they do not agree with it. Some local party committees appeared with a initiative to call on a early party congress in order to change the leader, while other seeked continuation of the Executive Committee in which is to be created a common party position on the key party and political issues. On the other hand, the Central party Committee at its meeting gave support to the current leader, to widen up the number of members of the Executive Committee, (this number increase is a statutory right of the leader). Mr.Gruevski suggested the change of two current EC members and the appointment of six new members who were supporting him. This move caused vigorous reactions among Mr.Georgievski's supporters, who demonstratively left the meeting, while this fraction's followers stated that the internal party democracy is seriously questioned. All this atmosphere was additionally burdened by the presence of armed and violent supporters of Mr.Georgievski, who were supposed to put pressure on Mr.Gruevski to resign. This was not succeeded, but was caused urgent interruption of the meeting. The violent event motivated Mr.Gruevski to state that "in the next days either VMRO-DPMNE shall be taken over by violent people or shall become a truly democratic and European party..".

Couple of days later, the Central Committee appointed the new members of this body. Support for election of the new six members was conditioned in writing by Mr.Georgievski with: the resignation of the party vice-president Ganka Samoilovska Cvetanova; moratorium in including or excluding members of the Executive Committee and calling an early party congress. At the end, if these demands were not met, Mr.Georgievski conditioned his position as the honorary party president. As none of these requests taken under consideration during the Central Committee meeting were satisfied, and due to the public media appearances of the current leader who criticized Mr.Georgievski, the eight members of the Executive Committee resigned. The Secretary General Mr.Donchev commented that resignation is a result of substantial differences of opinion and that current leadership is not taking into account the party base opinions. Row was further continued in all party levels, including youth organizations.

As announced, Mr.Georgievski gave his definite resignation from honorable president of VMRO-DPMNE for "Gruevski to be able to prove to communist journalists and diplomats that he is not an instrument in my hands"-as he said. Georgievski was convinced that the party is leading mistaken policy whose main creator is Gruevski, and regretted that he spent a whole year in preparing a political settling accounts with him, instead of Mr.Crvenkovski. He also stated that from now on he will leave Mr.Gruevski

enough time to dedicate himself to focusing against the real political opponent-Mr.Crvenkovski.

General sense of real motivation, which was not visible during the disturbed party relations, lead to the opinion that Mr.Georgievski by this attitude was trying to regain domination over the party structure and to return to the leading position for a couple of reasons. Above all, he was sensing that older party structures in the local party leadership in many places were changed, thus he was losing real influence. Also, there was a very realistic danger of being called for responsibility or collaboration regarding the deeds made by his very close ex-government and party collaborators.¹⁷

Religious Issues

State Department Report for the freedom of religious rights estimated that in Macedonia there is improvement in the status of religious freedoms. It was said that the Constitution secures religious freedom and the Government in general terms respects this right in practice. Current government moved away from the relations of previous government policy in politicizing religious issues while encouraging interethnic and interreligious reconciliation. Absence of provocative actions and rhetorics helped the process as well.

Besides the general picture, disputes with the Serbian Orthodox Church continued like before. Zoran Vranishkovski, the MOC excluded former bishop founded a new parallel "Synod of the Autonomous Ohrid Archbishopry" and the two newly appointed bishops by the SOC Joakim and Marko joined him. The new "Archbishopry" was founded in Vransikovski's private house, which was as it was said- "turned into a monastery". Macedonian Orthodox Church did not feel the need to comment this event and proclaimed the decision as "null and void" stating that "they do not accept it". Anticipated mediation for the dispute previously accepted by the Russian OC was postponed for other times, since the SOC did not show any kind of willingness to retain and try to discuss.

These events stimulated VMRO-DPMNE to submit in the Parliament a draft-declaration for support of the MOC, where it is stated "the Assembly stands behind the efforts of the MOC for preservation of the autocefalous status and the unity", encouraging the Synod in all its activities in preservation of its integrity, constitutionally guaranteed status and efforts to be recognized under the name Macedonian Orthodox Church. This Declaration was supported as an idea by SDSM and LDP as well, but these two parties suggested an alternated, "civic concept" of the already submitted declaration, because "SDSM has never been against the declaration for MOC support, but it is against mixing the state with church affairs". This intervention was done through the justification that the offered text puts an accent only to the MOC, while it is needed for it to be stressed the role of MOC vs the other religious communities, so the suggested text was as follows: "...starting from the role that religious communities have in the development of the international

¹⁷ Arrest interesting for the Macedonian public, was the arrest of the former Customs general Director Dragan Daravelski that took place in Belgrade. Before he is extradited to the Macedonian authorities, Serbian authorities showed interest in interrogating him about his connections with the Serbian underground.

understanding among representatives of various religions in the state and respecting the internal organization and relations in the religious communities as an autonomous sphere...". In basic terms, the Declaration was stating that "the Assembly supports the autocephalous status and the unity of MOC and affirms the constitutional principle of separation of church and state". DUI as a coalition partner supported this declaration, since the principle of secularity of the state has been maintained.

The then Macedonian Prime Minister Crvenkovski stated that the government is going to use all constitutional and legal possibilities to protect the MOC from the provocative intrusions of the SOC. From his side, the Serbian Minister of Exteriors stated that relations between governments of Serbia and Montenegro and Macedonia shall not be put in question because of the dispute between the two churches. The Serbian Ambassador in Skopje stated that SOC recognizes the autonomy but not the autocephalous status of the MOC, which is seen as a pretty complicated matter and for that expressed wish not to get into further discussion.

On the other hand, Zoran Vraniskovski was arrested and put in jail for 30 days, charged for the criminal deed of "incitement national, racial and religious hatred". Also, he was charged for founding a parallel church synod, by which he incited division and dispute among believers. In addition, he published and disseminated a church calendar in which he was humiliating and slandering MOC and tried to adopt four monasteries which are under the MOC jurisdiction, after winning the monk's support, to include them in his "Ohrid Archbishopry". MOC urgently reacted to this, by discharging the managing monks from these monasteries and appointing new persons. Upset for Vranishkovski's arrest, the SOC Patriarch sent a letter to the late President of the Republic to intervene for his release, but he faced a rather reserved position. Mr. Trajkovski replied to the SOC Patriarch by directing the focus of communication between the two Churches, instead of him being involved.

Public Opinion Polls

According to the January poll of Gallup International only 24% of the Macedonian citizens are entering 2004 with optimism, while 33% think that this year shall be worse than the year before. 40% were afraid that this year Macedonia shall have security problems but also the same percent of respondents think that this year security shall remain in last year's level. Only 18% believed that there shall be economic prosperity this year, 39% expected status quo, and 37% were expecting conditions to worsen. Over half of the polled (57%) thought that the level of unemployment shall raise.

Public opinion polls were correctly predicting the presidential election results. According to the poll conducted by the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research, results were as follow:

Candidate	Percent
Branko Crvenkovski	21,1%
Sashko Kedev	13,2%
Ljube Boshkovski	4,2%
Arben Dhaferi	6,5%

Gzim Ostreni	9,7%
"Third Way" candidate	1,1%
Undecided	31,2%
Shall not vote	13%

Note: The poll was made during the days when nomination was still going on.

At the same poll, citizens were asked on what basis shall they select their preferred candidate. Most citizens favored the candidate's personality (27%), followed by his program (21%), his political experience (17%), his party origin (15%) and other (3%). The future President most of his time (according to the answers) should dedicate to: increasing the country's international reputation (37%), working on the stability and security of the country (24%), improvement of interethnic relations (22%) and work with the political parties towards calming down the tension among them (10%).