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Election Analysis

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# Elections in Macedonia: Intensification of Nationalist and Authoritarian Tendencies

Branimir Staletović\*

## Introduction - context

After several failures to schedule early elections in Macedonia, the parties of government and the opposition finally set a date for December 2016. All political actors, in their own way, perceived the elections as an opportunity to overcome the severe political crisis that had begun at the beginning of 2015, when the government was accused of wiretapping over 20,000 citizens, among them journalists, opposition politicians, and state and government officials.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the government led by national-conservatives VMRO-DPMNE<sup>2</sup> is accused of dismantling democratic institutions throughout the last decade. Leading international institutions, scholars and think-thanks have classified Macedonia within category of “partly-free” regimes, thus indicating a reversal in post-socialist democratisation process.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of 2014 and beginning of 2015, several government policies provoked the outrage of various social groups.<sup>4</sup> The protests soon intensified as Zoran Zaev, the leader of the main opposition party, the Social Democrats (SDSM), began releasing wiretapped materials revealing mass surveillance, corruption and abuse of power by the government and the prime-minister and president of VMRO-DPMNE Nikola Gruevski. The culmination of this wave of rallies and the resulting political crisis was the State President’s decision to pardon the politicians facing criminal charges<sup>5</sup> - an act that ignited mass demonstrations in Skopje and other major cities in the period between April and July 2016, coming to be known as the “Colorful Revolution.”<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that, unlike in the past, when interethnic politics largely shaped the political processes and

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<sup>1</sup> Marusic, Jakov Sinisa. 2015. Macedonia PM Accused of Large-Scale Wire-Tapping. *Balkan Insight*, 09. February 2015 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

<sup>3</sup> Bieber, Florian. 2014. Die Autoritäre Versuchung auf dem Balkan. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 14. March 2014; Džihčić, Vedran and Nicolas Hayos. 2016. Questioning Democracy and Liberalism in the Eastern Part of Europe. *Religion and Society in East and West* 9/10(44), 4-8; Taleski, Dane / Tevdovski, Dragan / Panov, Trajche and Viktor Dimovski. 2016. Maintaining a Hybrid Regime: The Case of Macedonia. *Religion and Society in East and West* 9/10 (44), 32-32.

<sup>4</sup> Staletović, Branimir. 2015. A Reflection on the Emerging Politics of Resistance in Macedonia. *Balkans in Europe Policy Blog*, 23. February 2015 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Marusic, Jakov Sinisa. 2016. Macedonia President Pardons Politicians Facing Charges. *Balkan Insight*, 12. April 2016 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Petrevska, Anastasija. 2016. Arrests Add Fuel to Anti-Impunity Protesters’ Fire in Macedonia. *Global Voices*, 27. April 2016 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

crisis in the country, this time we have been facing a political crisis that goes beyond the lines of ethnicity.<sup>7</sup>

The authoritarian turn in the country caused a further stalemate in the EU integration process, and the report by Priebe pointed to systemic problems, such as restriction of media freedom, a lack of regard for the rule of law and fundamental rights in the country.<sup>8</sup> To overcome the crisis, the leaders of the major parties, in accordance with international assistance, signed the so-called Pržino Agreement on 2 June 2015, which, among other things, envisaged the reform of the government by appointing two ministers from SDSM, establishing a special prosecutor office (SPO) to deal with the wiretapped materials, as well as government's resignation three months before the elections.

In the meantime, the special prosecutors opened several investigations against highly-ranked incumbents, among them Gruevski himself. The government officials have been charged with different illegal activities, from influencing the elections through organising the wiretapped investigation to extensive corruptive practices. All charges have been vigorously repudiated by the government and party they represent, who regard the special prosecutor as a political institution serving SDSM and "Soros' NGO's" in the country.

The results of the elections spawned some new processes and narratives. Although DPMNE ended up as a winner, the party lost substantially more seats than in the elections held in 2014. Surprisingly, for the first time at the parliamentary elections we have witnessed substantial cross-ethnic voting in favour of SDSM. Like DPMNE, their junior partner in the government the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) had to face significant losses, while the recently formed BESA movement managed to make itself as the second Albanian party in the parliament.

As much as the elections themselves were a surprise, two post-election processes brought even more tensions to society. First, a phenomenon that is not new, but this time loudly promoted - the project of "de-Sorosisation" (*desorosoizacija*) of the country announced by Gruevski himself and later followed by other party members and media close to DPMNE; and second, the designing of the so called "Albanian Declaration,"<sup>9</sup> after which discourse and attention have shifted from the question of restoring and improving the rule of law and democratic institutions towards national issues. In this paper, besides reflecting on the electoral results, I look at the questions of what has caused the drafting of the recently designed platform by the Albanian parties and why Gruevski's "anti-Soros" campaign has recently picked up pace.

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<sup>7</sup> Moreover, at the protests, especially during the student protest in 2015, it was common to see Albanian and Macedonian flags.

<sup>8</sup> See more [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> Known also as "Albanian Platform."

### **Electoral campaign and election results**

The Macedonian electoral system relies on a closed-list proportional model, according to which 120 deputies are elected in six electoral districts, with one additional district reserved for the diaspora. The elections initially scheduled for April 2016 were postponed due to the irregularities in the Voters Register, where many “phantom” voters have been identified.<sup>10</sup> After improving and “cleaning” the Voters Register, a new date was set for 11 December 2016.

Despite the initial calls for creating a wider coalition, which would more effectively challenge Gruevski’s government, the traditional right and left block decided to go separately. Moreover, within the right spectrum, two coalitions have been established that counted on splitting the right-leaning votes and thus weakening VMRO-DPMNE’s base.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the newly formed leftist party *Levica*, whose members actively participated in the protests, has positioned itself as an antipode to both VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM.

Both VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM saw the December elections as a turning point for the country. While the national-conservatives were seeking support from the electorate for acquiring an absolute majority in the parliament in order to have full control of and within the government, the social-democrats were hoping for a regime change that would “restore the democratic process and institutions.” On the other hand, DUI was less explicit concerning the further coalition with Gruevski’s government. Other Albanian parties rejected any future coalition possibility with Gruevski. Particularly outspoken in this regard was a recently formed party, BESA.

During the electoral campaign, VMRO-DPMNE’s rhetoric was shaped by nationalist and populist language, centred on the persistent condemnation of SDSM’s and Zaev’s commitment for wider institutionalisation of the Albanian language. In its party program, SDSM advocated the concept of “one society” (*edno opshestvo*) aiming at building a civil Macedonia, free from ethnic segregation. Zaev has expressed readiness to extend the institutional usage of Albanian language, stating that instead of segregating the country “we have to build one state with one society.”<sup>12</sup>

This ideological positioning has been construed by VMRO-DPMNE as an attempt to “federalise” and carve up the state. Throughout the electoral campaign Gruevski used nationalist rhetoric, resting largely on the language of fear in terms of the redefinition and division of the state by “foreign and domestic enemies.” This rhetoric was often pushed to extremes, as Gruevski was alluding to the possibility of a violent conflict. As for why and how this would happen, Gruevski was less clear. Nonetheless, a fear-based nationalism,

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<sup>10</sup> See Civil. 2017. Elections 2016. Final Report of the Long-Term Monitoring of the Political Process and Early Parliamentary Elections in the Republic Of Macedonia, 2016. Skopje: Civil Center for Freedom.

<sup>11</sup> Tumanovska, Marijana. 2016. *Desnata opozicija vo lov na nezadovolnite od VMRO-DPMNE*. *Slobodna Evropa*, 25. October 2016 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

<sup>12</sup> N.N. 2015. *Zaev: Etnickite Zaednici vo Makedonija da Ucat Zaednicki*. *24 Vesti*, 23. May 2015 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

often pacified through populist discourse, dominated the ruling party's campaign.

On the other hand, DUI, as mentioned above, was less explicit about the direction in which the country should go. While one fraction in the party opposed any coalition with Gruevski, the party leader Ali Ahmeti was silent and careful about party's future engagement. Euro-Atlantic integrations were at the top of the agenda and here was endorsement for the prolongation of the special prosecutor's work. Similarly, the Albanian parties also employed a "western-centred" language. The BESA movement was in the best position to achieve success as the party leaders emerged as "new faces", unencumbered by a shady political past. Their campaign was heavily shaped by distancing themselves from VMRO-DPMNE - something that DUI failed to do - and blaming DUI for "forgetting" Albanians and corruptive practices. Technocratic in their appearance and discourse, BESA combined this with a strong ethno-centric rhetoric as well. Distancing themselves from VMRO-DPMNE and DUI while building on an ethnic narrative seemed to work well, as the party managed to attract a large number of disappointed citizens.

As noted above, the VMRO-DPMNE and others won the biggest share of the votes (38.14%), followed by SDSM and others (36.66%) DUI (7.28%), BESA (4.86%) Coalition Alliance for Albanians (2.95%) and Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA, 2.60%). However, translated into seats, VMRO-DPMNE suffered a loss of 10 seats, while SDSM gained 14 more than in the previous elections. DUI dropped nine seats, and BESA came to 5, the Alliance for Albanians 3 and DPA 2. The two moderate right-oriented coalitions failed to gain parliamentary seats. Similarly, Levica won 1.02% of the vote, which was not enough to enter parliament. The results revealed a bigger turnout than in previous elections, reaching 68%. The difference between DPMNE and SDSM came down to 2 seats, implying that both parties were in a position to form a government.

The question that I will try to answer below is that of what accounted for the electoral results and the increased support for SDSM this time?

The election showed that despite the crisis VMRO-DPMNE could count on their core voters. Surprisingly or not, the party dropped "only" 30,000 votes. In the context of a severe crisis and the revelation of illicit activities, this can be considered a good result. Yet the puzzle does not lie in VMRO's base but rather in the fact that at these elections a large portion of undecided voters swung in favour of SDSM. Together with the votes from citizens identifying themselves as Albanians, support for the social-democrats rose significantly.<sup>13</sup> Why did it turn out this way?

Firstly, as noted, a large number of undecided voters supported the social-democrats. Such an outcome is owed largely to the leaked taped materials which, to a certain extent, have discredited DPMNE's government. The investigations against the authorities by the charismatic and uncompromised

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<sup>13</sup> The numbers of "Albanian votes" vary between 40,000 and 50,000 votes, while the media close to the government insist on 70,000 votes.

special prosecutors have further disclosed the organised wrongdoings of Gruevski's government.

Secondly, a large number of Albanians voted for SDSM. This was not the case before. Many felt dissatisfied with the governing elites, and other "ethnic" options, while SDSM's liberal centre-left positioning seemed more plausible at this time. This, accompanied by the discourse of "one society" and the announcement of wider institutionalisation of Albanian language, turned out to work well for the party. Adopting and practicing a civil narrative - in the current social setting and political crisis - the party managed to widen its voting base.

Furthermore, in the last couple of years we witnessed the emergence of different social movements that, be it by taking to the streets or through social network activism, have consistently challenged the government. This helped in terms of creating and deepening the networks against Gruevski, but also in spreading the message of a "corrupted regime," thus discrediting Gruevski and his party. The protesters were persistent in portraying the ruling party as a criminal organisation. Such willingness to rally did not exist before, at least not in terms of consistent and organised street activism and movements.<sup>14</sup> Some participants of the protests took part in SDSM's electoral list.

Last but not least, the hostile discourse towards "foreign and domestic enemies," accompanied by the anti-Albanian narrative brought Gruevski into a position of a self-isolation.<sup>15</sup> An overtly ethno-nationalist appearance, often masked by a softer populist rhetoric addressing the "people", has in fact predominantly national substance as the party appeals exclusively to the "Macedonian people," targeting, moreover, primarily nationalist-oriented citizens. In so doing, the party could not attract any new votes, but rather ensured a drop of 30,000 in comparison to the elections held in 2014, and to a certain extent provoked the spillage of "Albanian votes" to SDSM. Distancing himself from the liberal spectrum and the EU reports only added to the authoritarian image that Gruevski has created in the society over recent years.

That being said, it should be noted that despite their success, and seeing themselves on the left side of the spectrum, the social-democrats have failed to profile themselves as a true leftist party over the years. At the newest elections, SDSM did not manage to extensively reach different "social classes," that is, to embrace an ideology attractive primarily to the working strata, but also to the (lower) "middle class." Moreover, during the period of ruling, not only did SDSM fail to establish extensive social policies and credible democratic institutions, but the party is also blamed for shady privatisation processes and corruptive practices alike. This perception of the party in society, coupled with the failure to make a real turn to the left during the crisis, has potentially constrained the possibility to penetrate widely in the society. This was in any case limited due to the clientelistic and paternalistic networks that prevent alternative political options. Instead, the party managed to compensate

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<sup>14</sup> Staletović, *A Reflection on the Emerging Political of Resistance*.

<sup>15</sup> This argument has been brought by Dane Taleski as well, see Telmatv. 2017. *Toptema*. Youtube, 16. February 2017 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

by the introduction of the civil narrative and calls for “one society” in the context of a lasting political crisis from which the social-democrats yet managed to benefit.

When it comes to the outcome in the so called “Albanian block”, DUI stands not only as a major loser in the block, but also generally at the elections. The party lost 40% of their parliamentary seats,<sup>16</sup> which can be explained by its reluctance to firmly distance itself from VMRO-DPMNE and its anti-Albanian narrative, but also by its failure in delivering the promised reforms, especially in the western part of the country. Indeed, the vice-presidency of the party opposed a coalition with VMRO-DPMNE, but this was not promoted as an uncompromised party position. The willingness to engage in (failed) post-election negotiation processes with DPMNE demonstrates this stance. On the other hand, BESA did exactly the opposite. It rejected any coalition with Gruevski, while being resolute about putting DUI and DPMNE in the same basket in the pre-election campaign. From the position of an anti-government party, coupled with the image they have been conveying as a new ethnic Albanian political group, the party utilised the political context to set the terrain for electoral success.

The negotiations for the new government are still ongoing and thus are not part of my analysis. In what follows, I reflect on two events that shaped the public and political debates after the elections: Gruevski’s declaration of “de-sorosisation” of the country, and the so called “Albanian declaration/platform”, seeking wider institutional acknowledgement of the unique character of Albanianess.

#### **“De-sorosisation” - causes and motivations**

Faced with a significant loss of seats and possible re-voting in few municipalities, Gruevski gave an outspoken speech announcing the abandonment of the form of negotiations with foreign embassies.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the former prime-minister has announced the project of “de-sorosisation of Macedonia and the strengthening of an independent civil sector,” adding, however, that DPMNE remains a pro-western party. While the anti-Soros narrative is nothing new in the country, and beyond as well,<sup>18</sup> it is Gruevski’s proclamation in which the state’s legal intervention against “Soros’ NGO’s” has been clearly announced.

To explain this move better, I place it in its political context in Europe and beyond. I offer three central explanations that I categorise as international, domestic and ideological effects, which, however, do not exclude other possible causes and motivations.

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<sup>16</sup> This is the worst result for DUI in parliamentary elections since its establishment in 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Marusic, Sinisa Jakov. 2017. [New Stop Soros Movement Unveiled in Macedonia](#). *Balkan Insight*, 18. January 2017 (accessed: 04. March 2017); N.N. 2017. [Gruevski go Objavi Proglasot na VMRO-DPMNE](#). *Mkd News*, 17. December 2016 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

<sup>18</sup> A similar anti-Soros campaign is undergoing in Hungary. Putin has also adopted very hostile stance against liberal NGOs in Russia.

Firstly, as widely acknowledged, the presidency of Donald Trump has been exerting a spillover effect in terms of encouraging illiberal tendencies across the globe.<sup>19</sup> His stance against liberal ideology and policies, media and NGOs has found its counterpart in a number of European states, parties and movements. Although Gruevski's government has embarked on a semi-authoritarian course since DPMNE cemented its power at the elections in 2008, only recently has the radicalisation of authoritarian practices been proclaimed. In one of the so-called "mega-interviews" Gruevski gave for *Republika* after the elections, the leader of the party clearly and explicitly shows admiration for Trump, stating that he reads his books and supports the energy, persistence and resoluteness that Trump displays. In the interview, Gruevski reflects above all on alleged "Soros' journalists, intellectuals, media owners," and their attempt to carve up Macedonia and the ways in which the state should deal with it.

Secondly, "de-sorosisation" has been considered a deliberate move in turning attention from the pressing social issues towards alleged plotting against Macedonia, as well as to obtain legitimacy for the current leadership within the ruling party. In so doing, the leadership seeks to relocate the perception of guilt from the party on the local and international liberal camps. Apart from the attempt to draw attention away from the crisis, Saso Ordanovski notes that the ongoing anti-Albanian and anti-western discourse has a function in securing more support for the party leaders by eliminating the possibilities for reforms by moderate members.<sup>20</sup> By intensifying the nationalist and illiberal discourse, Gruevski tries to expand his call for legitimacy in the party, which might face serious reforms after a possible takeover of power by the social-democrats.

Lastly, I suggest that with the anti-Soros discourse Gruevski attempts to send a message through the back door to both the international (EU) and domestic liberal circles and thus position himself and the party ideologically within the pro-Orban and pro-Putin style leadership.<sup>21</sup> Despite the fact that DPMNE insists normatively on pro-western allegiance, the anti-Soros campaign mirrors Orban's crackdown on NGOs financed by Open Society Foundation as well as the perspectives over the foundation's social and political engagement.<sup>22</sup> A recent visit to Budapest and the promoted political and economic harmonisation between Orban and Gruevski has set the party firmly in the larger semi-authoritarian spectrum.

That being said, I suggest that the "de-Sorosisation" campaign, together with the recently intensified anti-Albanianism, have turned into VMRO-DPMNE's central operative narratives in pre/post-election Macedonia.<sup>23</sup> Instead of

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<sup>19</sup> For the effect of Trump in the Balkans see Bieber, Florian. 2017. *Trump and the Balkan Princes*. *LSE*, 6. February 2017 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Ordanovski, Sasho. 2017. *Operacija: "Faktoriziranje."* *Sloboden Pechat*, 25. February 2017 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Since the crisis occurred, Moscow is openly endorsing DPMNE and Gruevski, see B.G. 2017. *Moskva ne se otkazuje od Gruevski, SAD razocarani od Ivanov*. *DW*, 02. March 2017 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Zalan, Eszter. 2017. *Soros-linked NGO's Defy Orban Purge*. *EU Observer*, 12. January 2017 (accessed: 04. March 2017).

<sup>23</sup> For a distinction between normative and operative ideology see Malešević, Siniša. 2002. *Ideology, Legitimacy and the New State: Yugoslavia, Serbia and Croatia*. Routledge; also Malešević, Siniša.



depicting and delegitimising political opponents as *komunjari* (a pejorative for communists), the discourse has shifted towards portraying them as part of a larger conspiracy threatening to split up Macedonia. This ruling strategy is being adjusted to the pressing political context, but also has a function to legitimise possible calls for mobilisation if the party faces losing the power to the social-democrats. The recent address by Gruevski to the “people,” in which he called on them to take their destiny in their hands and “defend the country” from those who seek to carve it up, above all, is intended to prevent a likely coalition between SDSM and the Albanian parties.

### **The emergence of the “Albanian Declaration”**

Alongside the anti-Soros campaign, we have witnessed the introduction of the Albanian declaration in the post-election context. The joint declaration signed by DUI, BESA and the Movement for Reform - Democratic Party of Albanians included, among others, full compliance with the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), equal language rights, economic equality and a resolution on the genocide of Albanians in Macedonia in the period 1912-1956. In this section, I will reflect on what I see as the central causes behind the adoption of the declaration by offering a structural and instrumental/political argument. From a broader sociological and structural angle, I suggest that the demands included in the platform are products of what Weber called monopolistic [social] closure and the feeling that a “group” is discriminated against - symbolically, socially and economically.<sup>24</sup> Another more instrumental explanation takes into account DUI’s attempt to re-establish itself as a leading political factor among the Albanian parties and citizens.

To understand comprehensively the rationale behind the declaration, it is essential to reflect on the processes through which cultural differences have been instrumentalised in the course of more than two decades. Since gaining independence, Macedonian and Albanian identity politics have developed a unique and essentially different expression of political belonging. Many Albanians feel alienated from the state, which they perceive as serving the needs of the dominant Macedonian population. After the violent conflict in 2001, the OFA was adopted, guaranteeing more cultural and economic rights to Albanians. However, the agreement has not been implemented accordingly. In the meantime, we have been witnessing the unprecedented symbolic expression of group dominance through the massive urban project “Skopje 2014” and the so called “antiquisation campaign.” Both processes are mono-ethnic undertakings carried out in a multi-ethnic environment. Both tend to promote what the ruling and (some) cultural elites perceive to be an ancient old Macedonian culture and history. As such, they seek to symbolically downgrade the status of Albanians in the country,<sup>25</sup> thus illustrating state and ruling

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2006. *Identity as Ideology: Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (in particularly pages 69-80).

<sup>24</sup> Weber made a distinction between “open and closed social relationships,” in Weber, Max. *Economy and Society*. Berkeley. University of California Press, 43, [on “ethnic groups” as status groups] 385-98.

<sup>25</sup> Vangeli, Anastas. Nation-building Ancient Macedonian Style: the Origins and the Effects of the so-called Antiquization in Macedonia. *Nationalities Papers* 39(1), 13-32, 24; on “antiquization” and

party reluctance to adopt an all-inclusive policy and promote in Weber's language "open social relationships."<sup>26</sup> Coupled with the political, social and urban segregation of the Albanian and Macedonian "communities," the state, or more precisely the ruling party VMRO-DPMNE, has failed to accommodate the various needs of the Albanian community while in power, but rather worked on their marginalisation. The declaration, if not a direct response to "Skopje 2014," represents an outcome of the lasting monopolisation of the symbolic, material and social resources by the dominant "group."

Yet the puzzling question lies in the timing of the declaration: more precisely, why did the Albanian parties' declaration come about only after the elections? I consider the central explanation to lie in DUI's attempt to rebrand the party after the electoral failure and the rise of BESA, which aspires to become the leading Albanian party in Macedonia.<sup>27</sup> This was even more urgent due to the upcoming local elections. As noted before, during and after the electoral campaign DUI was confronted with rising discontentment in the population and the accusation that the party works in favour of Gruevski, rather than for Albanians. Precisely this language has been employed by the BESA movement. The post-electoral result indicates that this was presumably one of the last chances for DUI to re-profile itself as the key Albanian party. This was done by resting on national-group demands. Yet the answer does not lie in the content of the declaration so much as in the very act of DUI to step up as the initiator of the declaration, which can be interpreted as an endeavour to restore the party's lost credibility. BESA's refusal to sit at the same table with DUI in the post-electoral negotiations indicates this tension and the latent conflict over the primacy within the "Albanian block." Apart from this, the party had to react swiftly due to the upcoming local elections. Had Ahmeti failed to do so, he would have risked even greater loss, which could potentially signal comprehensive reforms in the party.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

The elections in Macedonia have changed the political landscape in the country. Although VMRO-DPMNE came out as a winner in the elections, the party lost a significant number of seats in the parliament. The very complex (and still ongoing) negotiation process for forming the new government is a telling example of how severe the crisis is. It remains to be seen how the state and political groups will deal with the rising hostile nationalist language and actions practiced by VMRO-DPMNE and its supporters, which risk provoking an even deeper crisis. While the crisis so far has had political and systemic dimensions, it might cause inter-ethnic tensions if the hostile rhetoric continues.

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<sup>26</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 43-44.

<sup>27</sup> According to the newest polls by Telma BESA and DUI stand very close. BESA (3.5%), DUI(3.3%), see [here](#).

<sup>28</sup> Some speculate that the declaration represents a deliberate move by DUI to prolong the negotiation processes, as a part of a larger deal between DUI and VMRO-DPMNE.

In this paper, I reflected on the electoral results as well as on the discourses and processes that emerged afterwards. I emphasized the dominance of the exclusive and fear-based nationalism in VMRO-DPMNE's campaign. Although Gruevski's regime is often defined as a populist one, I suggest that his populism works primarily in the logic of nationalism, which is being used as a mobilisation strategy in the current political context.<sup>29</sup> The "people" in his speeches are exclusively "Macedonian people," more precisely those nationalist-oriented voters. The electoral campaign and post-electoral tensions are good examples of how populist rhetoric tends to cover up nationalist tendencies. The national-authoritarian narrative largely shapes VMRO-DPMNE's ideological profile - at least this was the case during the crisis and especially in the last couple of months.

This, however, has constrained the field of gaining new votes, and contributed partially to SDSM's success, which is also owed to substantial "cross-ethnic" voting. The poor electoral results by both DUI and VMRO-DPMNE resulted in intensifying illiberal and nationalist demands. Both the anti-Soros campaign and Albanian declarations are outcomes of the pressing and changing political context, which threaten to heavily affect the leadership and the parties themselves. Both are designed, more or less, to secure the dominant power-structures in the country.

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<sup>29</sup> For another view, see Petkovski, Ljupcho. 2016. Authoritarian Populism and Hegemony: Constructing 'the People' in Macedonia's Illiberal Discourse. *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 3(2), 44-66.

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