

About-turn for Macedonian Politicians

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Political policies have turned upside down amid efforts to bring peace to the country.

Macedonia's latest government shake-up has left hardliners and moderates swapping positions on the country's ethnic Albanian minority.

The curious switch came in the course of a bitter debate on an internationally-sponsored peace agreement to settle the armed conflict that raged through the country for much of this year.

Until recently Prime Minister Ljupco Georgievski, the parliamentary speaker Stojan Andov and the chief of police Ljube Boskovski sought to obstruct many provisions of the agreement which was designed to improve Albanian rights over a wide field. Now the three appear to have made something of a U-turn.

The transformation was triggered by a walkout from the government coalition on November 21 by the moderate Socialist Democratic Union of Macedonia, SDSM. Its leader, Branko Crvenkovski, said his party was no longer needed in the ruling coalition because stability had been achieved.

Political commentators suspected Crvenkovski wanted to give himself more time to campaign for a general election expected next April.

Georgievski begged the SDMS to stay in his cabinet. Its continued presence would have enabled him to play the role of the "Macedonian patriot" and "protector of the national interests" in the run-up to the election.

When the SDSM refused to play his game and went into opposition, Georgievski was forced to put together yet another cabinet with some of the smaller parliamentary parties. But this depended significantly on the support of two Albanian parties, which have 25 out of 120 seats in parliament.

The Skopje-based Albanian language newspaper Fakti reported that the leader of the Democratic Party of the Albanians, Arben Xhaferi, made Georgievski accept a number of demands as a condition for joining the government. Among these was the right to speak Albanian in parliament, a hard pill for Georgievski to swallow.

In the new ruling coalition, Georgievski's party, the right-wing Interior Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, VMRO-DPMNE, has been forced to moderate its tone.

Boskovski, who only three weeks ago was a distinct anti-Albanian populist and militarist, said recently in an interview with Reuters he wanted reconciliation between the two major ethnic groups.

He blamed the media for inciting discord between them. "Multi-ethnic relations in Macedonia are not as bad as the media claim," Boskovski said. "The Macedonians and Albanians have always lived together in this area and they will continue to do so".

At the same time as the VMRO-DPMNE was appearing more moderate, the SDMS began to adopt its formerly nationalist stance, hoping to attract support from disgruntled Macedonian right-wingers.

During a debate on new local government legislation, a requirement of the Macedonian peace agreement, party deputy and former presidential candidate, Tito Petkovski said, "The draft law offers solutions that threaten Macedonia. We must not pass this law in a hurry regardless of any blackmail by the international community."

Adoption of this legislation was also a condition laid down at a conference of international donors as the price for refunding Macedonian losses during the recent conflict. Alain Le Roy, representative of the European Union in Skopje, stated on December 4 that the EU would provide 173 million US dollars - exactly the sum finance minister Nikola Gruevski said he had drawn from the central bank to cover war expenditure.

The matter will be considered at the next donors' conference on December 20.

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