

Macedonia: Nationalist Crisis Keeps Government Buoyant

Author: [Tamara Causidis](#)

Plagued by divisions, nationalists are far from offering a serious challenge to the ruling Social Democrats.

Macedonia's right-wing opposition VMRO DPMNE went through another reshuffle last weekend, offering fresh signs of the turmoil that has been dogging the party and preventing it from challenging the ruling Social Democrats, SDSM.

The shake-up, targeting opponents of the party leader, Nikola Gruevski, was the third such personnel change since Gruevski took over in 2003.

At the same time, Gruevski said the party would merge with four smaller offshoots that emerged over the past few years as result of splits in VMRO DPMNE.

"Despite the divisions we have seen until now, we are now uniting, which shows VMRO DPMNE will win the upcoming parliamentary elections," Gruevski announced confidently on May 31.

Analysts warn that such victory talk is premature. Moves to absorb smaller parties may be a healthy sign, they say, but the old standard-bearer of the nationalist right remains divided and locked into an outdated agenda.

"Since Macedonia's independence the opposition has never been weaker," lamented Dosta Dimovska, a founder of VMRO DPMNE and former party vice-president. "That enables SDSM to continue as the main political factor in the country."

The parties Gruevski referred to are marginal groups. Set up mainly by former VMRO DPMNE members that were sacked or left, they all kept the VMRO prefix in their names. None has won enough votes to enter parliament.

Analysts see Gruevski's latest move as an attempt to overcome the crisis shaking VMRO DPMNE and show it can again become the biggest opposition party.

"Gruevski's attempt to unite with these smaller parties derives from his need to portray his party as the only legitimate VMRO," said Gjorgji Ivanov, politics professor at Skopje University.

The trouble started in VMRO DPMNE shortly after Gruevski became party leader. He soon clashed with his powerful predecessor, Ljupco Georgievski, over who should stand as candidate in the 2004 presidential elections.

After Georgievski's leadership coup against Gruevski failed, he and other expelled VMRO DPMNE members founded a new rival, VMRO Narodna.

The new party cost Gruevski many parliamentary deputies in December 2004 after the passage of a new law allowing deputies to switch parties.

More than a dozen of Gruevski's deputies left to join VMRO Narodna, transforming it into the biggest opposition party in parliament.

But the new, rival VMRO failed to keep its momentum. In its local election debut in March, it won only three mayoral seats, whereas VMRO DPMNE took 21.

While VMRO Narodna's bid to take over the role of main opposition party had foundered, analysts warn that while the opposition remains focused on its internal problems, the government has little cause for worry.

"The government is aware it is not in danger, because the opposition is weak, divided, and has no power to monitor the government's actions," Gjorgji Ivanov told IWPR.

The latest opinion polls conducted by the International Republican Institute bear this out.

They put support for Gruevski's party on 16 per cent, behind the ruling SDSM, on 18 per cent. VMRO Narodna trailed in the rear on 4 per cent.

Antonio Milosevski, a VMRO DPMNE official, says the SDSM remains in the lead purely as a result of the splits on the right. "The key factor is that SDSM is intact, unlike the divided opposition parties," said Milosovski.

Branko Trickovski, editor of the daily paper, Utrinski Vesnik, agreed. "After two years of rule by their opponents, a successful and efficient opposition should be getting much better ratings," he told IWPR.

Trickovski said Gruevski had also failed to distance VMRO DPMNE from the discredited political platform of his rival and predecessor, Georgievski.

"No attempt to end the crisis in VMRO DPMNE can succeed unless the party modernises," he added. "It has yet to reform itself and abandon its ethnic populist ideology."

He concluded, "It has left the government holding the initiative on all the options facing Macedonia, such as the Ohrid peace deal, decentralisation and integration into EU and NATO."

Vlado Popovski, law professor at Skopje University, also says the opposition has not yet found the right formula to communicate with the electorate. He, too, fears they remain hostage to ethnic, instead of economic, issues.

"Instead of attacking the government for betraying the national interest, the opposition should present a programme that shows they are seriously engaged in overcoming the country's social and economic crisis," he said.

These were the issues that the electorate was really interested in, added Popovski.

In the meantime, the Social Democrats dismissed Gruevski's latest move as a publicity stunt.

Boris Kondarko, a party spokesman, said the reunion of VMRO DPMNE with its offshoots was a farce. "Gruevski is trying to conceal the deep divisions in his party and his inability to resolve the situation from the public," he told IWPR.

"This attempt to unite with parties that have no real political power won't change anything."

Tamara Causidis is IWPR/BIRN assistant editor and Zoran Fidanoski is a journalist with Sitel TV.

Location: Macedonia

Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable Training

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/macedonia-nationalist-crisis-keeps-government>