

Macedonian Reshuffle Dismissed as Stunt

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Ministerial sackings will do little to bolster confidence in much criticised administration.

The Macedonian prime minister's decision to replace four ministers is being seen as an attempt to deflect attention away from his government's poor performance during its first year in office.

But analysts believe that the reshuffle, which was announced by parliament on November 5, is unlikely to hold off criticism of Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski and his allies.

Perhaps sensing that the ministerial changes may not be enough to keep its detractors at bay, officials announced this week that Macedonia was to submit a full application for European Union membership by the end of the year.

However, as many observers doubt Macedonia is ready for such a move, pressure on Crvenkovski's government is unlikely to ease in the coming months.

The premier's critics claim that lack of economic growth, low foreign investments, high unemployment, corruption and crime show that the regime lacks the strength and vision to bring about much-needed reforms, and doubt that the ministerial changes will have a positive impact.

Reflecting the views of a number of analysts, Iso Rusi, editor-in-chief of the Albanian weekly newspaper *Lobi*, said, "This reshuffle is nothing more than an attempt to muddy the waters and buy more time for Crvenkovski," he said, adding that he expected most people in Macedonia to see through the premier's "bluff".

The ruling coalition - consisting of the Social Democrats, SDSM; Liberal Democrats, LDP and the Democratic Union for Integration, DUI - came to power in September 2002 when voters ousted hard-line nationalist VMRO party.

The new moderate government vowed to restore stability, improve the economy, implement the Ohrid peace agreement that ended the 2001 conflict and move Macedonia closer towards integration with the EU.

But one year on, Crvenkovski's team seems to have produced little. The unemployment rate has increased from 32 to 37 per cent and foreign investment is low compared to that of neighbouring transitional countries.

In the reshuffle, the ministers of finance, Petar Gosev, economy, Ilija Filipovski, justice, Ismail Darlishta, and transport, Milaim Ajdini, will be replaced by Nikola Popovski, Stevco Jakimovski, Ixhet Memeti and Agron Buxhaku respectively.

The expected ministerial merry-go round prompted a fierce debate in parliament, with the opposition seizing the chance to rubbish the government's economic and social record.

Nikola Gruevski, leader of the main opposition party VMRO, demanded the resignation of the government, claiming, "Macedonia is in a coma and there are two solutions - shock therapy or vegetation. Crvenkovski chose the second, but we recommend the first.

"If the government was a business firm and ministers were the managers, the shareholders would have fired them by now."

Crvenkovski admitted that his administration had given the impression of indecisiveness and unwillingness to take risks. "It's a fact that we haven't had good results in our fight against unemployment," he said.

"But we have a clear concept of how to move forward. We are making a commitment to raise investments in the next year by 200 million US dollars."

The prime minister's optimism, though, is not widely shared. "There is a general feeling of disappointment, as there were a number of expectations which have not been met," one western diplomat told IWPR.

"The country is moving forward but at a disappointingly slow rate, especially in the economy. We have fooled ourselves with Crvenkovski - he has been a pedestrian politician rather than a visionary."

Crvenkovski's government has fallen behind in the implementation of the Ohrid agreement and failed to pass a number of reforms in the economic sector and the judiciary.

Corruption, which has been a major stumbling block to Macedonia's progress, has also not been tackled effectively.

And a number of proposed decentralisation laws, which had been planned for around the middle of this year, have not yet entered parliament as the coalition partners have failed to agree on what they should entail.

Worries that one ethnic group may dominate another in certain areas once the municipal boundaries have been redrawn in the devolution process appear to be the main sticking point.

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