

## **Macedonian Rivals Claim Poll Victory**

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The ruling coalition and opposition in Macedonia both claim to have triumphed in a controversial municipal ballot.

Macedonia's opposition, led by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, SDSM, has claimed a resounding victory in the September 10 local elections.

"The citizens of Macedonia made another great decision," said SDSM leader Branko Crvenkovski, "and that is the need for early parliamentary elections."

Macedonia's Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski said he would favour a snap general election should his ruling coalition lose by more than 10 per cent on September 10. The next general election is scheduled for 2002.

Crvenkovski said the opposition 'Macedonia Together' group had won 70 per cent of the larger municipalities in the first round, including the capital Skopje.

But official results are not expected before Wednesday and the ruling coalition disputes opposition claims of outright victory.

"There are no grounds for the opposition to be triumphant or for an early election," said Slobodan Casule, spokesman for the Democratic Alternative, DA, a member of the ruling coalition.

According to Casule, the three coalition parties - VMRO-DPMNE, the DA and the Democratic Party of Albanians, DPA - had won 43 per cent with half the votes counted, the opposition 38 per cent. "This election is by no means over," Casule said.

International monitors from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, reported several "major irregularities" in western municipalities during the poll, including blatant ballot-box stuffing, widespread proxy voting, and intimidation.

Macedonian state television was also criticised for giving a disproportionate amount of news coverage - 59 per cent - to government and ruling party activities, compared to 8 per cent to the joint opposition.

All 24 polling stations in Debar municipality had to be closed due to violence, destruction of ballot boxes and threats against election officials, the OSCE said. Four people were injured in shooting incidents.

Western Macedonia is populated by mostly ethnic Albanians, who make up about one third of the republic's 2.1 million population. The Albanian opposition Party for Democratic Prosperity, PDP, said it would reject the results because of the intimidation and harassment used against its supporters.

"The racketeers of the VMRO-DPMNE and the DPA are threatening people to vote for their candidates," said PDP leader Imer Imeri. "The situation in Tetovo is out of control."

Head of the OSCE mission Charles Magee said, "The OSCE simply deplores this kind of violence. It is against everything the OSCE stands for."

One western diplomat, who acted as an observer, said he was "shocked by the open fraud" he witnessed at some polling stations.

The DPA ran separately from the government coalition in the first round of the election and appears to hold a convincing lead over the rival PDP. But the DPA plans to back ruling coalition candidates in the second round, set for September 24.

Spokesman for the opposition Liberal Party Andrej Jernovski said, "As long as this government is in power there will be no fair and democratic elections."

Most of the irregularities cited by the OSCE are a repetition of those noted in last year's presidential ballot, where a massive turnout by DPA voters saw the government candidate Boris Trajkovski safely home. Re-runs were held in several constituencies but the result remained the same.

The OSCE's final report on the local elections is due to be published in a month's time.

The government's apparent slump in popularity stems from discontent over market reforms and the 30 per cent unemployment rate. The republic is still recovering from the strains caused by the influx of over 300,000 Kosovo Albanian refugees last year.

The SDSM played up the nationalist issue during the campaign, complaining the coalition government was neglecting the interests of Macedonians in favour of ethnic Albanians. Meanwhile, the PDP claims of intimidation and threats to withdraw from the second round ballot could increase tension within the Albanian community.

The republic's potentially volatile ethnic mix and position - bordering Greece, Albania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia - make it crucial to Balkan regional stability. Macedonia was the only former Yugoslav republic to gain independence without a war.

The Macedonian local polls set the tone for a season of elections in the Balkans. The second round on September 24 coincides with presidential, parliamentary and local elections in Yugoslavia. United Nations sponsored local elections in Kosovo go ahead on October 28.

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