

## **Presidential Campaign Threatens Macedonia With Paralysis**

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Crvenkovski's victory likely to lead to months of horsetrading and squabbling over posts.

Fears are growing in Macedonia that if Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski wins the presidential election in mid-April, the result will be months of political squabbling as candidates jostle for the premier's vacant post and vital reforms are put on hold.

Crvenkovski officially joined the race for the presidency on March 22, to fill the post following the untimely death of President Trajkovski, who was killed in a plane crash in Bosnia on February 26.

Analysts say that Crvenkovski, faced with weak opponents, has a good chance of winning the upcoming ballot but warn his victory will lead to legislative paralysis and months of political squabbling to elect a new prime minister, government and president of his ruling Social Democrats, SDSM.

Crvenkovski, an engineer by profession, has been prime minister since 2002, though he held the post before from 1992 to 1998. He has headed the SDSM since the former League of Communists changed into a centre-left party in 1991.

In the months prior to his candidacy, Crvenkovski had brushed aside any suggestion that he might go for the presidency, saying he was committed to fulfilling his party's election pledges in government.

Western diplomats speak openly of fears that the disruption of the presidency and the competition for the premier's position will delay the passage of decentralisation laws that need to be adopted before local elections in the autumn.

The laws are an essential component of the internationally-backed Ohrid peace deal that ended an armed insurrection by Albanians in the country in 2001.

"The process of reform cannot afford to be suspended because of the elections campaign," Sheena Thomson, spokeswoman for the European Union office in Skopje, told IWPR, "but given the unfortunate timing, the elections are likely to have an impact.

"Complete suspension is not an option. The momentum needs to be maintained because the implementation of the Ohrid peace deal is the only way to EU integration."

Analysts echoed fears over the implications of a Crvenkovski victory, saying even if he was elected on schedule in early May, a months-long power struggle will ensue over the posts of prime ministers and SDSM party leader.

"Both the government and SDSM will be left without president, " said an analyst. "That means the entire government will resign and the party will have to choose a leader.

"We are talking about months of political bickering before a new premier is designated and a new

government is voted in parliament. In the meantime, parliament will be blocked and unable to proceed with key issues, such as decentralisation.”

Tito Petkovski, an SDSM deputy in parliament, told IWPR that concern was justified over whether parliament will adopt the decentralisation package as planned before the annual summer recess.

“Parliament will not work during the elections, while after the president is elected it will be paralyzed because there will be no government,” he said.

“It might be July before the government is up and running. But traditionally, in August, the parliament does not work.”

“This will be a year wasted on elections, ” a senior western diplomat agreed. “The government is continuously wasting time on things that are irrelevant.”

Six government ministers, including the ministers of defence, finance and foreign affairs, have announced they are in charge of his campaign, while Radmila Sekerinska, vice-premier in charge of European integration, has been appointed campaign spokeswoman.

Although the state Anti-Corruption Commission has recommended that the ministers also freeze their posts during the campaign, they have all refused, saying they can do two jobs simultaneously.

Even members of the SDSM have expressed frustration. “Not only are we entering an election season that will last by the end of the year but nearly half of the government is working on the premier's election campaign,” one party official complained. “That means many important activities, as well as reforms, are halted.”

The opposition called Crvenkovski to freeze his current post as premier so regular government activities do not influence the campaign. Crvenkovski has said he will not preside over government sessions during the campaign.

Crvenkovski`s bid for the presidency, a largely ceremonial role, has sparked controversy over whether the decision marks a strategic retreat. Critics say it is linked to his government`s failure to improve the impoverished economy and proceed with much-needed reforms.

“The presidency should not serve as a retreat for failed politicians,” Vlatko Gjorcev, spokesman for the nationalist opposition VMRO, told IWPR. “Whenever Crvenkovski was in power in the last 12 years, economic indicators were always falling.”

Crvenkovski insists – unsurprisingly – that his motives for changing position are less cynical. “The president is the keeper of the general course and Macedonia simply cannot take risks at these elections,” he told a party convention last week.

“The efforts of the government and parliament will have been in vain if the state loses its general direction. I accepted this nomination because I believe my experience can help preserve and speed up of that general course.”

Few doubt he will carry off the victor's prize. His main opponent, Sasko Kedev, the VMRO candidate, is a little-known heart surgeon whose modest political career only started in 2002, when he was elected as a deputy in parliament.

Two other candidates are ethnic Albanians, standing mainly to test their respective strengths within the large Albanian minority.

No one is expected to win in the first round, as that requires taking 50 per cent of the total electorate. Instead, it is expected that Crvenkovski and Kedev will go through to second round on April 28, at which point Albanian voters will probably shift their support to one of the Macedonian candidates.

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