

Macedonian Elections 2006:

Ohrid Accords Survive

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July 2006

**Defence Academy of the United Kingdom**

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## **Key Points**

- \* The 2006 July Macedonian Assembly poll was an important verdict on the post-Ohrid Accords period in Macedonia.
- \* The poll, while having some weaknesses, was not marred by serious violence and so is unlikely to negate Macedonian European Union and NATO ambitions.
- \* The progress on implementing the Ohrid Accords has been a positive sign, although more remains to be done in some institutions.
- \* The economy is a cause for serious medium and long term concern.

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## Introduction

The Macedonian National Assembly poll in July 2006 was the first major electoral test of the government that emerged from the Ohrid Accords reform period. The Accords were signed in August 2001 and ended the small war in Macedonia of Spring-Summer 2001. The post-Ohrid coalition comprising the Slav-Macedonian Social Democrats (SD) and the Party of Democratic Unity (BDI) from the 25% ethnic Albanian minority stood down, and faced the electorate in a poll held on July 5<sup>th</sup>.

The election was important for two main reasons, first to give the international community a chance to assess how Macedonian electoral capacity had developed, in the light of the decision taken by the European Union in the last year to allow Macedonia to join the list of EU candidate members, although no date has yet been set for talks to begin on this issue.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, a fair and respected poll would indicate that Macedonia was achieving greater political maturity and stability, an important background consideration in the imminent decision on the political status of neighbouring Kosova. The prospect of major instability in Skopje could, if sufficiently serious, be used as an argument to delay that decision.

The campaign was marred by some violence, particularly in the initial stages, with various shootings, almost all within the Albanian minority community. Matters improved as polling day approached, and the poll itself was generally free of serious violence or difficulties associated with electoral manipulation. Local commentators have agreed that the poll result is a fair reflection of the state of opinion in the country. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Skopje Spillover Mission Head, Ambassador Carlos Pais, had issued a strong warning stating that ‘the time to organise elections according to international standards is now, in order not to endanger your country’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations’, an appeal which seemed to have some effect on the general atmosphere.<sup>2</sup> The semi-official government news agency MAKFAX commented that ‘the biggest fears of the international community- violence, massive incidents and the use of firearms – did not come true.’<sup>3</sup> In February 2006, the OSCE had produced a long report detailing proposed improvements in election procedure in Macedonia, and this aspect of the poll seems to have been quite noticeably successful, compared to the regular allegations of all-pervasive impersonation, ballot theft and ballot stuffing that have occurred in previous Macedonian elections.<sup>4</sup> In the *realpolitik* Balkan world, the reasonable (if far from brilliant) conduct of the election is a setback for Serbian hopes of delaying a Kosovo settlement. There was widespread coverage of the initial violence in the Belgrade press, and in foreign newspapers using Belgrade-based newsfeeds.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Post-Ohrid Background and the Economy**

The great majority of the provisions of the August 2001 Ohrid agreements have now been put into Macedonian law. This has resulted in a substantial degree of approval from the international community for the post-2001 government, and was a major factor in US recognition of the country under its preferred name of 'Republic of Macedonia' in 2005.<sup>6</sup> The European Union has not followed this lead, even countries like the United Kingdom with its close foreign policy relationship with the US, mainly because the name dispute with Greece is still open and as an EU member Greece has an effective right of veto over the EU position.

The legal reforms have not always been followed by change on the ground in many institutions, and in social and civil society life. The Slav-Macedonians remain massively over-represented in most areas of state employment, in part due to history, inertia and the greater proclivity for ethnic minorities to operate in the private sector. The main ethnic communities live largely separate lives outside the workplace, and this tendency is particularly pronounced in the capital, Skopje, in which south of the River Vardar is almost monoethnic Slav, whereas north of the river, the Bitpazar district and many new suburbs are equally exclusively Albanian and Moslem.

In the key area of military reform, for instance, although great progress has been made in professionalising the army and ending the conscription system, the overwhelming majority of senior posts are held by ethnic Slavs, and there are few Albanians or members of other ethnic minorities in senior positions. Foreign policy has been closely aligned with the US, with the Macedonian armed forces contributing a small number of soldiers to US-led coalitions, but again, virtually all the soldiers involved have been from the majority community. Macedonia has hopes of an invitation to join NATO in 2008.<sup>7</sup>

In the police and some other institutions, there is a better picture, with improving statistics on the number of ethnic minorities employed, but various forms of nepotism and patronage dominate the state employment scene, with the background of an economic environment where the official unemployment figure is about 38%, a marked deterioration in the last two years. A family member with a state job is often all that stands between that family and serious poverty.

In education, particularly higher education, a key area for conflicts in the 1990s, the ethnic Albanians have achieved virtually all their traditional objectives, with the opening in 2005 of the Albanian-language Tetovo University, the equal status of Albanian in the internationally funded university just south of Tetovo, and legal (if not much practical recognition) for the language in Skopje University itself.

Yet, undermining this progress in the superstructure, economic erosion continues. Local production in sectors such as textiles has been hard hit by imports from China, and business in general, as in many 'second world' countries, is being stifled by consistently high oil and other energy prices. Cheap imports of meat and other agricultural commodities, mostly from the EU and Turkey, have undermined local farm production. Given the patterns of seasonal work, under-employment in much of the agricultural sector and emigration patterns, it is likely that the real unemployment rate is about half the working population. This is, of course, ameliorated in practice, as in all Balkan countries, by *émigré* remittance income, work in the legal but 'grey' economies and the criminal and semi-criminal worlds.

Macedonia is evaluated as one of the most corrupt countries in eastern Europe by organisations like Transparency International, and the progress in the legal framework and political and military reform has been accompanied by a marked economic deterioration that shows no signs of slowing and may well increase if EU-required reforms are put into practice in the next period. It is widely believed that many financial institutions and foreign-owned banks are only solvent because of the amount of cash passing through them connected with money laundering, tax evasion in Greece, Russia and Bulgaria and other dubious activities. Most of the background reasons for the election to be called at this exact moment were connected with intense local pressure on the Boskovski-led coalition over economic issues, and the need for an effective government that would tackle difficult issues.

## The Poll

The results indicate a swing of support away from both governing parties, particularly on the Slav side of the political spectrum, with a massive decline in mainstream support for the Social Democrats and a victory for the VMRO coalition.<sup>8</sup> The turnout figure was not very good, only just over 50%, which is significant as the poll was held at a time of year when many *émigrés* from Australia and Canada vacation at home, and ethnic Albanian *gastarbeiters* are often also on holiday. The international authorities had many reservations about aspects of the poll, despite the relative freedom from the most melodramatic conflict scenarios put forward by pundits in the run-up to the vote.<sup>9</sup> Ambassador Carlos Pais said on 12 July that there were ‘numerous incidents of election-related crimes, both during the campaign and on election day itself,’ and he called for offenders to be prosecuted. Many citizens are very cynical about politics and the political elite in Skopje, and the Boskovski-coalition clearly suffered from substantial abstention among its supporters.<sup>10</sup> In the Albanian community Ali Ahmeti’s BDI held onto first place after a strong challenge from the older PDA party of Arben Xhaferi and Menduh Thaci. Xhaferi’s party had very favourable and extensive media coverage during the campaign in the government-influenced media but it did not make much difference to the results. There are a number of additional or rerun votes being held on 15 July, but they are not expected to affect the overall situation very much. Final results are due about 28<sup>th</sup> July.<sup>11</sup> The pattern of seats in the 120 member Assembly is currently expected to be as follows:

VMRO-DPMNE	44
Social-Democrats	32
BDI	18
DPA	11
NDSP	7
VMRO NP	6
DOM	1
PEI	1

Approximate voting percentages on the Slav side are 32.5% for VMRO, 23.3% for the Social Democrats; on the Albanian minority side, 12% and 8%.

## The New Government

It is clear that the new government will comprise a coalition based on the VMRO-DPMNE majority in the Slav community, and the European Union and some US interests have made it clear that they would prefer a government with Arben Xhaferi’s DPA party as the ethnic Albanian coalition partner with VMRO rather than

Ali Ahmeti's BDI.<sup>12</sup> This seems to be arithmetically possible, and is also based on tradition, with Xhaferi having worked with VMRO in government in the 1998-2000 period, although the practical majority in the Assembly will be small, and given the fissiparous nature of Skopje parties and lack of voting discipline, it may be difficult to pass controversial legislation. A significant degree of political fragmentation and voting on the basis of personality is shown by the relatively high votes for minor parties, several of which exist as a result of splits and feuds within VMRO-DPMNE in the past. It will be difficult to find a framework to satisfy these significant minor groups, which are likely to be somewhat 'loose cannons' in the new Assembly.

The emphasis on excluding Ahmeti from government is being put forward in the name of 'moderation', with some Europeans seeing the preponderance of Ahmeti as belonging to a wartime and immediate post-wartime situation that could and should be restricted. The problem with this perspective is that it sees ethnic Albanian politics, particularly in Tetovo, in a schematic way, and neglects the fact that Xhaferi's party also contains several senior ex-NLA commanders and people who made their name in the 2001 conflict. The deputy leader of the PDA remains the often-controversial Menduh Thaci. Such a coalition will also exclude from power the Albanian party with the greatest stake in the post-Ohrid reforms and the politician, Ali Ahmeti, who has the most obvious capacity to control the paramilitary-activity inclined constituency that still exists widely in the Albanian communities in the west of the country.

The new Prime Minister from VMRO will almost certainly be ex-boxer Nikola Gruevski, a youngish man without associations with the old neo-communist elite encouraged in the Gligorov era.

### **Some Regional and Cultural factors, and Religion**

The continuing decline of the Social Democrats, the party of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav eras President Kiro Gligorov indicates the continuing weakening hold of the 'Yugoslav' political tradition in the southern Balkans.<sup>13</sup> As with the Montenegrin independence referendum, and imminent independence for Kosova, links with Belgrade are now generally seen as much more a liability than a benefit by electorates.

The election result in general is satisfactory to Bulgaria, which with its more advanced EU membership agenda has considerable influence in eastern Macedonia, and has traditional links with the VMRO side of the Slav-Macedonian political spectrum, dating back to the joint Macedonian-Bulgarian origins of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation in northern Greece in the late Ottoman period.<sup>14</sup> Relations between the Macedonian, Serbian and Bulgarian Orthodox churches remain difficult and currently a leading cleric, Archbishop Jovan, is in gaol.<sup>15</sup> After the period of increased contacts between the Greek and Macedonian churches in the 1990s, with quiet and usually unpublicised visits of Macedonian clerics to Mount Athos, contact seems to have diminished recently. The Macedonian Church in important diaspora centres like Australia remains rent by frequent and deep schisms.

In the Islamic regions of western Macedonia, missionary activity is increasing, usually based on Sunni attempts to 'recover' mosques from Bektashi or other management and doctrine, and this is linked, in some of the Albanian communities, with increasing pressure on people to recognise the specifically Turkish element in their cultural identity.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

The poll in general has not proved to be the serious setback to Macedonian European ambitions that it could have been if the violence and score settling of the early days had continued until 5 July. The ethnic Albanians have the political and underground paramilitary capacity to destabilise the state at any time, but it is currently not in their interests to do so, and this fact will govern their behaviour irrespective of which party joins the VMRO coalition. On the other hand, the general atmosphere and conduct of the poll, and the endemic economic crisis, would indicate that Macedonia has some considerable way to go before achieving the standards required for EU talks to open, let alone full membership.

The decision on candidacy last year was more or less forced through the EU by Britain and Germany within a process of wider deals and trade-offs on different issues. It was not supported until the last minute by France, and could still be subject to blocking or veto by a major member. On any objective evaluation, the issues of corruption, political instability in the ethnic Albanian minority, the persistence of organised crime and perhaps most serious of all, the probable incapacity of the Macedonian state to deal with the EU legal/legislative *acquis* present formidable obstacles to further rapid progress. On the other hand, the very fragility and strategic importance of the little state mean that all kinds of normal rules and procedures can be bent in order to try to preserve stability, and there is a small but quite influential lobby within the US and Bush administration on Macedonia.<sup>17</sup> This dialectic is likely to be the dominant political motif in the immediate future.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The EU is going to review the situation on talks in October 2006

<sup>2</sup> OSCE Press release 1 June 2006, OSCE Media Office, Skopje

<sup>3</sup> MAKFAX, Skopje, 5 July 2006

<sup>4</sup> Most of the acute conflicts have been on the Albanian side. For a view from Xhaferi's PDA party of the problems it alleges it faced in the 2005 local elections, see 'Dhunimi i votes se lire ne zgjedhjet lokale - Libri Bardhe me Ngolla te Zeza', [www.gurra-pdsh.org](http://www.gurra-pdsh.org), also booklet of same name, PDA, Tetova, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, *The Independent*, London 'Macedonian Elections Tainted by Civil Unrest', 5 July 2006

<sup>6</sup> See James Pettifer "Macedonia – Recognition, Referendum, Resignation." CSRC 04/39. December 2004

<sup>7</sup> It is very unclear whether at the moment the economy with its many problems would be capable of supporting the level of defence expenditure required for NATO membership. A recent decision on Israeli-assisted helicopter modernisation would indicate that some military aid may be coming from non-NATO countries - cf 'Macedonia: Helicopters Bound for Althea Mission fitted with Sophisticated System', 'Utrinski Vesnik, 5 July 2006, quoted BBC Monitoring, 14 July 2006

<sup>8</sup> In the last substantial test of post-Ohrid public opinion, the Presidential election of 2004, the Social Democratic candidate Branko Crvenkovski polled 60.6 %, against 39.4 % for the VMRO candidate. In terms of the stable state of opinion on the ethnic Albanian side of the political spectrum, it is noticeable that the votes for the ethnic Albanian candidates eliminated in the 2004 poll after the first round of voting roughly mirror the poll results in July 2006, i.e. the BDI candidate polled about 12%, the PDSH candidate about 8%.

<sup>9</sup> OSCE Press release, 12 July, [www.osce.org/skopje](http://www.osce.org/skopje)

<sup>10</sup> The election supervision authority reported that there were about 77,000 more registered voters for the 2006 poll than previously, which in all probability indicates a successful registration campaign among the Slav-Macedonian diaspora, many of whom are VMRO adherents. The poll data also indicate that alienation from the political process remains high in the Albanian minority community.

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<sup>11</sup> The voting at the parliamentary elections 2006 will be repeated Wednesday in 29 polling stations, with more than 27,036 registered voters. The voting will be repeated in 20 polling in the sixth election district, six in the first election district, and three in the fifth district.

<sup>12</sup> Ahmeti is also now allied with the small PDP party, which really only has any influence in parts of Tetovo and Gostivar.

<sup>13</sup> It is significant that with the closure of 'Macedonian Times' magazine, there is now no English-language journal easily available in Skopje for the diplomat or visitor which articulates the political tradition based on ASNOM, the Partisans and the Titoist version of the Macedonian identity after state formation in 1944-1945.

<sup>14</sup> See 'The New Macedonian Question', ed. James Pettifer, Macmillan/Palgrave, London and New York, 1998

<sup>15</sup> See 'South Slav Journal', Spring-Summer 2006 issue, London.

<sup>16</sup> The key institution subject to this pressure in the Tetovo Islamic institutions is the Tekke of Harabati. For an account of the history, see 'Teqeja Harabati e Tetoves dhe roli i saj historik e kulturor ne te Kaluaren' by Ali Vishko, pub. Komune e Tetoves, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> The Christian Right in the US generally like Macedonia, seeing it as a 'Christian' state that has emerged from communism, on the borders of a large 'Islamic' country, Turkey.



## **Want to Know More ...?**

See:

James Pettifer “Macedonia – Recognition, Referendum, Resignation.” CSRC 04/39. December 2004 <http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

Institute of War & Peace Reporting, ‘*The 2001 Conflict in FYROM – Reflections*’, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Balkans Series, 04/15, June 2004, <http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

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ISBN 1-905058-80-2



**Published By:**

**Defence Academy of the  
United Kingdom**

**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

Defence Academy of the UK

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SN6 8TS

England

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**ISBN 1-905058-80-2**