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**POLITICAL
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**SUSPENSION OF DEMOCRACY
IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA**

| Dane Taleski

Political Analysis

SUSPENSION OF DEMOCRACY IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

Dane Taleski¹

On December 24, 2012 the police threw out oppositional Members of Parliament from the plenary session. Prior to that the police threw out journalists and representatives of media, preventing them to follow the developments in the plenary. Several of the MPs were injured, including one young pregnant MP, two female MPs were hospitalized, while two others collapsed and needed medical assistance. After the oppositional MPs were thrown out, the ruling majority adopted the budget for 2013. The session, including all discussions, lasted for only 6 minutes.

In front of the Parliament, oppositional organized protest scuffled with government organized counter protests. Police separated the two groups. When news broke out that oppositional MPs are forcefully and violently thrown out of Parliament, the oppositional supporters breached the police blockades and tried to enter the Parliament. They were prevented by special police units using brutal force and beaten up.

The oppositional MPs left the Parliament to join their supporters in front of Parliament. "Parliament is no more" said Igor Ivanovski, Coordinator of the oppositional party group, addressing the crowd. "Nikola Gruevski decided Macedonia to have its Slobodan Milosevic. Journalists, MPs and the people were beaten" said Branko Crvenkovski, leader of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), calling for civil disobedience.

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How it came to this?

In December 2010 the government made an arrangement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a credit line of 480 million euros in total. The funds were to be used for servicing the budget deficit and retaining fiscal stability in case of unforeseen shocks, such as external shocks. In April 2011 early elections were called and in May the government redrew 220 million euros from the credit line, citing the early elections as the main reason. However the spending during the electoral period was unclear and IMF declined to allow further withdrawals.

Republic of Macedonia held early elections in July 2011. The election day was peaceful, however the campaign was marked with voter intimidation and pressures of the public administration. VMRO-DPMNE won around 440,000 votes, while the oppositional SDSM received 370,000 votes. The ruling party got 53 mandates out of 123, a decrease from the absolute majority they had previously. SDSM received 42 mandates, an increase from the 27 mandates they had previously. The Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) retained the biggest number of seats among the Albanian parties, while the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) remained in opposition. Raising concerns over the fairness of the electoral process the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission issued a report recommending series of changes in the electoral legislation.

The governing coalition between VMRO-DPMNE and DUI was preserved. However the practicing of power became more rigid and authoritarian. Following the elections the government closed the biggest independent TV station "A1" and three other daily newspapers in the same ownership structure. The owner and managers of the media were charged with financial embezzlement and tax evasion. They were detained over a year, and then sentenced to total of over 100 years in prison. While they are serving this sentence the appeal process is ongoing.

The day after the elections, Ljube Boskovski, a leader of a smaller right oriented political party, was arrested on charges of corruption and illegal financing of his campaign. In his campaign he made strong accusation of corruption toward the government. He was sentenced to eight years in prison. For the EU Commission this case raises concerns for selective justice, as it is stated in the Progress Report for Macedonia for 2011. In the US State Department Report this case is put forward as example of political imprisonment.

The democratization process seriously deteriorated in several areas, namely public administration reforms, freedom of media, judiciary and rule of law. Strong political control of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE could be seen in all of these areas. Also the ruling party continued to pursue nationalistic and populist policies. The embodiment of their nationalistic policies is the "Skopje 2014" project. The project's idea is to re-engineer the Macedonian ethnic identity and the identity of the state to be more in line with the history of ancient Macedonia. This approach, also known as "policies for antiquization", includes erecting gigantic 30 meters high monuments to Alexander the Great, and his father Filip, in the center of Skopje, the capital city, along with building new buildings in baroque style or changing the facades of the existing ones to baroque style. The total cost of the public spending is unknown. Some speculations are that the costs are between 300 and 400 million euros, while others are even higher.

The “Skopje 2014” project causes internal and external problems. Internally it creates inter-ethnic tensions, as the majority of Albanian population sees it as offensive and not related to their culture. They feel alienated and frustrated. Albanians also make demands for more of 'their' monuments, which creates inter-ethnic tensions and sporadic incidents. Externally the neighbors also react negatively to the “Skopje 2014” project. Primary this is Greece, due to the outstanding name dispute, but this is also the case with Bulgaria.

Inter-ethnic relations further deteriorated when Fatmir Besimi, the Minister of Defense from DUI, in September 2011 paid homage in front a monument in Slupcane dedicated to fallen Albanian combatants from the conflict in 2001. He was accompanied by couple of members of his staff wearing official army uniforms which draw sharp criticism from the ethnic Macedonians. To show a strong stand against the 'Albanian' provocations, the ruling VMRO-DPMNE submitted a draft law in Parliament for the rights of the Macedonian members of police and army in the conflict in 2001. In the law the Albanians were labeled as terrorist. DUI, the junior coalition partner, submitted 15,000 amendments to that law in order to block it. Talat Xhaferi, the coordinator of DUI parliamentary group, filibustered the committee proceedings (including reading poetry, books and remaining silent) for couple of weeks. The process came in a deadlock and the work of the relevant parliamentary committee was blocked by the coalition partners.

The policies and acts of government do not seem to reasonable and logical, however they serve the nationalistic and populist governance style of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. Authoritarian practices are used to silence critical voices. It seemed that the Prime Minister is more inclined to preserve his politics of a strong-man rule, than to make compromises and to be dedicated to democratic reforms. Furthermore, the government increased its control over civil society actors, such as the unions, organizations of farmers, and various others NGOs. The media are flooded with government sponsored campaigns. The public spending for the media buying is unknown. What is known is that the government is among the top advertisers in the country. Some of the campaigns are promoting the policies of the government, however other are used to attack and satanize the opposition. On each and every occasion of social protest and revolt, the government organized counter protests targeting SDSM the main oppositional party. Throughout 2011 counter protests were organized in front of the main party headquarters in Skopje, and in front of local branches in various cities.

Trying to influence Gruevski's politics and keep Macedonia on the tracks of democratic reforms and Euro-Atlantic integration, the international community took a softer approach. The EU opened a High Level Accession Dialogue (HLAD) with the government in order to push for reforms and to speed up the integration process. Negotiations resulted in a road map outlining the necessary changes that needed to be done regarding public administration, freedom of media, judiciary and rule of law and changes to the electoral legislation following the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations. However the results were not delivered. Employment in public administration is reserved only to cadres of the ruling party. To be a member of the ruling party is an informal employment criteria. The judiciary is politicized and under control of the ruling party. Most of the mainstream media are pro-government, owned by businessmen that are either close to the ruling party or have their own parties that are in the ruling majority. In 2011 the Macedonian Parliament enacted only nine percent of the legislation connected

to the EU integration process. Nevertheless, the EU Commission for the fourth time issued a recommendation to the EU Council to open accession talks with the Republic of Macedonia. The Council failed to find an unanimous decision, mostly due to objections of Greece to the unresolved name dispute, but also because of Bulgaria's objections to the development of good neighborly relations.

The socio-economic situation in Macedonia continues to deteriorate. The government in 2011 forecast a growth of 4.5 percent for 2012, however the country is on a brink of recession. Even if the growth for 2012 is positive it is likely to be little above 0 percent. The second and third quartile in 2012 had negative growth, while the third had positive growth rate of 0.2 percent. The industrial production suffers negative growth for 14 months in a row, with an average drop of 7-8 percent. The unemployment rate remains above 30 percent. The poverty rate is also above 30 percent and increasing. The poverty rate is not only widening, but it is also deepening. The poor and socially marginalized are the ones that suffer the most.

The budget deficit is expected to be around 3.5-3.7 percent in 2012, however the public debt is climbing. The government holds that the public debt is around 35 percent of GDP, but does not disclose official data. Petar Gosev, the former Governor of the National Bank of Macedonia, estimates that it is more likely that the public debt is around 45 percent. His argument is that many of the public institutions have a standing debt toward domestic companies. The IMF estimates are that the public debt is around 40 percent. The situation is unclear since the Ministry of Finance stopped issuing information on the state of the public debt. What is known is that the debt of the central government increased for over 1 billion euros from 2008 to October 2012. The public health and pension funds also run outstanding debts, in between 30 and 40 percent, that are mainly financed from the state budget.

The government is becoming more addicted to raising new loans, either on international capital markets or from the domestic banks. In the first 10 months of 2012 the government increased its central debt for 55 percent, mainly taking loans from domestic banks. In example, to service running budgetary needs the government loans on average 30-40 million euros from the domestic banks per month. Because of that there is a lack of capital for the private sector. This causes impediments for the development of the country. The inability of the government to service the debt toward domestic companies and to make timely tax returns additionally burdens the liquidity of the private sector. Through out 2011, the government claimed that the debt toward domestic companies is marginal. However when Prime Minister Gruevski addressed the business community he stated that the government will secure a loan of 135 million in 2013 to repay the debt toward them and to repay taxes. So far most of the loans, international or domestic, were used to pay salaries for the growing public administration and for investments in the "Skopje 2014" project.

The negative developments have not caused greater social revolt or protests due to a growing culture of fear. Intimidation and various pressures are exercised regularly. In example if a owner of a private business is publicly criticizing the policies of the government, inspections are sent to his company and he gets fines. Public administration employees that disagree with the politics of the government get demoted and fined, if they are not fired. Opinion makers and analyst that dare to oppose the

government are publicly defamed. In example the ruling majority enacted a law on lustration which covers the period from 1945 to 2006, the year when they came to power. The Constitutional Court rejected the law, however the ruling majority force it again through Parliament. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe considers the law a tool for clamping down the political opposition. The Committee for Verifying the Facts, the official body that implements the law on lustration, labeled individuals as collaborators with the communist regime on basis of voting, and in absence of material evidence (in example a written statement of consent to collaborate with the communist regime). This was the case of Vladimir Milchin, Executive Director of the Open Society Institute in Macedonia, and a vocal critic of the government's policies. He was proclaimed a collaborator with the communist regime with majority vote in the lustration committee, in absence of material evidence.

Under such circumstances, when the government is authoritarian, suppressing criticism, shows determination and willingness to implement any policy regardless of other stakeholders, disregarding the check and balances of the system and is not accountable to anyone, it is not strange that the culture of fear immobilizes the people. The political opposition needed a certain period after the elections in 2011 to consolidate. SDSM, a moderate center left party, is the biggest oppositional party and the main political alternative. After the elections, the party held a congress where the acting leadership received a vote of confidence. The congress also supported the continuation of the existing policy program oriented toward social and economic issues. The congress concluded that SDSM must work closer with the citizens and make efforts to consolidate the opposition.

On basis of that SDSM took several steps. The party leadership approached other oppositional parties, and succeeded in forming a unified oppositional block "Alliance for the Future". All oppositional parties bigger and smaller from the left, center and right, are part of this block. SDSM leadership took one step further and tried to reach a pre-electoral agreement with DPA, the main Albanian oppositional party. This was the first step ever made for a pre-electoral cooperation between parties that represent Macedonians and Albanians. Initially the agreement was reached, but later DPA sent mixed messages whether they remain dedicated to the agreement.

The party leadership in the spring of 2012 initiated a process of candidate selection for Mayors in the upcoming local elections in March 2013. The early start of candidate selection was a clear signal for the importance of the local elections. The promotion of the candidates was accompanied with a "Working summer" project, additional activities on local level. Members of the party leadership and members of parliament had a two day visit in each municipality before the promotion of the candidates. During the visit they had meetings with the citizens, various stakeholders, social and interest groups. The idea for this meetings was to present the program and policies of SDSM, and to get input and feedback for new policy proposals. This was done in over 30 bigger municipalities until October 2012. The process finished with a big rally in Skopje. According to SDSM around 70,000 people attended the rally.

The next step of SDSM was to launch a door-to-door campaign titled "Open your doors for the future". There were several reasons for this campaign. Due to the pro-government control and bias of the mainstream media, SDSM needed alternative channels of communication for their message to reach

the people. Additionally, it was a well suited instrument for presentation of their candidates for Mayors. And it was another way to get input from the people on the local problems and policy priorities on the local level.

The input that SDSM received from the people during the “Working summer” project was channeled in policy proposals. Beside that throughout 2012 SDSM submitted 42 policy proposals to the government and parliament. The bulk of the policy proposals were aimed toward improving the social conditions and economic development. However all policy proposals were disregarded by the government, or rejected in parliament by the ruling majority. The government continued to implement only its own policies without making any compromises with the opposition or other stakeholders. Despite that SDSM continued to be a constructive opposition, giving support to the Euro-Atlantic integration processes and supporting democratic reforms.

SDSM used the local inputs from the door-to-door campaign to create around 500 amendments to the budget for 2013. SDSM wanted to present the interest of the people, and to show that it gives high importance to the local needs. Furthermore, SDSM objected government's policy to raise new loans from the World Bank. Namely, the government wanted to loan 30 million euros in December 2012, and additional 220 million in the spring of 2013. SDSM saw the spiral of debt accumulation very negative, especially when having in mind all of the developments in Greece. SDSM view was that the spiral of debt accumulation is pushing Macedonia toward a “Greek scenario”. The spending of the new loan just before the local elections was also questionable. SDSM saw this as repetition of events before the parliamentary elections in 2011 when the government used a foreign loan to influence the voters.

As alternative, SDSM presented the government with a financial plan which included cuts and savings of 204,8 million euros in the projected budget for 2013. Most of the cuts and savings were from unproductive costs and spending, such as the costly campaigns paid with public money, the new monuments and buildings for the “Skopje 2014” project. Instead of these costs SDSM suggested more spending in capital investments and social needs. The government showed no will to take the amendments seriously, not to take new loans and it flat out rejected the saving plan of SDSM. This was the start of the climax in the escalating political situation.

Political heat in December 2012

The procedure for adopting the budget is more or less as in any other democratic country. The budget is sent to Parliament where it is reviewed by the Budget and Finance Committee. The budget, as any other legal act, is also checked by the Legal Committee to be sure that it is compliance with the Constitution and other existing legal acts. After the committee procedure is finished the budget is sent back to government for changes. Then it goes again in Parliament for discussion and voting in a plenary session. The budget is adopted if it gets support of the absolute majority of the MPs.

The practice in the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia is that the opposition chairs the Budget and Finance Committee. The opposition submitted around 1,200 amendments to the budget. SDSM

submitted over 500 of these, while the rest were submitted by two Albanian parties, DPA and NDP. The opposition also strongly objected raising new loans from the World Bank. VMRO-DPMNE saw the amendments as an effort of the opposition to block the budget and consider the new loans necessary for their policies. The discussions in the Budget and Finance Committee were long and heated. Until December 20, 2012 over 170 amendments were discussed and all were rejected by the government.

In the same time the government started a negative campaign against the opposition, mainly SDSM. The main argument was that if the budget is not enacted then a state collapse will follow since there would be no money for salaries, pensions, social welfare etc. This argument is false, since there are rules in such cases for temporary financing. These rules were enacted in 2003 and 2004, where in a similar situation VMRO-DPMNE objected to the budget. Then the budget was not adopted in December, but in March and April of the following year. However this fact did not prevent the government to sponsor negative campaign ads in the mainstream media. Government organized protest were staged in front of SDSM headquarters, on the central and local level. The protesters came from various social groups (i.e. pensioners, farmers, even artists) demanding from the opposition not to block the budget, because they would be left without money.

The opposition did not seem rattled by the government's sponsored reactions. They were expected as similar reactions were seen through 2012. The Central Board of SDSM had a meeting where the party took a tough stand. The conclusion of the Central Board, the highest body between two Congresses, was that SDSM remains on defending its budget amendments and objecting to new loans, which were seen as a sure path toward a "Greek scenario". The Central Board also concluded that the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations for changes of the electoral legislation need to be adopted, otherwise the party will boycott the upcoming local elections.

Seeing that the opposition keeps to its demands, and not willing to compromise, the government tried to bypass the work of the Budget and Finance Committee. The ruling VMRO-DPMNE chairs the Legal Committee. In this committee they tried to open discussions on the amendments, so they would be cleared as fast as possible. MPs from the opposition fiercely objected to that and prevent it from happening. The work of the Budget and Finance Committee was also in a deadlock. By December 20 it looked like the budget will not be adopted on time and that the country will function under the temporary finance rules. However Zoran Stravrevski, the Minister of Finance, was confident that the budget will be adopted on time, saying that the government is ready to do whatever it takes to keep the country stable.

During the budget discussions, on December 21 the government borrowed a total of 100,7 million euro from domestic banks. The borrowing was not publicly announced, but was not done in secrecy. This was in breach with the standing rules and practice. The opposition publicly announced the borrowing. SDSM also read the secret borrowing as a clear sign that the state is on the brink of bankruptcy and the government is totally unaccountable. The secret borrowing gave credibility to the arguments of the opposition and made the oppositional MPs more resolute in their demands.

In turn the government did not back down, but took even more drastic measures. Even though the opposition wanted to work over the weekend to discuss and pass as many amendments as possible,

on Saturday, December 22, the doors of the Budget and Finance Committee were locked. News broke out that the MPs from the majority, that are members of the Budget and Finance Committee, signed and submitted a report that the discussion is finished and that all amendments were cleared. This blatant forgery opened the way for the draft budget to be sent back to government. The government had a emergency session on Sunday, December 23. On this session they adopted the draft budget, and send it back to Parliament to be voted in plenary on Monday, December 24. After this actions it was clear that the government is willing to do whatever it is necessary to forcefully push the budget through.

The oppositional MPs stayed overnight in Parliament, preparing to object the forceful actions of the government and ruling majority. The opposition had a small rally in front of the Parliament on Sunday evening. They announced that the next day they will be in front of the Parliament giving their support to the oppositional MPs.

On Monday, December 24, opposition organized protest was met with government organized contra protest. Throughout the day the police stopped and prevent vehicles and buses full with oppositional supporter to come to Skopje and join the opposition. On the other hand supporters of the government and ruling VMRO-DPMNE were allowed to move freely and join the contra protests. The police stood between the protesters and contra protesters in front of Parliament. However the two groups scuffled throwing eggs, apples, potatoes and even stones at each other. Several people received minor injuries. The tensions and provocations were mounting in Parliament and in front of it.

In the same time the government organized contra protests in front of the central headquarters of the oppositional SDSM. The police did not adequately secure the contra protests in front of SDSM main building. Protesters tried to storm in the building throwing stones and glass bottles at the building. However they were met with resistance from oppositional supporters and private security that was in the building.

Despite the tensions and irregularities, Trajko Veljanovski, the President of the Parliament, decided to start the plenary session so that the budget could be voted on. The oppositional MPs were prevented to enter the plenary hall, however they broke the blockade and got in. The oppositional MPs were not given electronic cards to register their presence. The lack of this technical detail effectively meant that oppositional MPs could not take part in the work of the plenary; they could not discuss or vote. They prevented the Mr. Veljanovski to continue charring the plenary. The security guards took out Mr. Veljanovski, as the oppositional MPs made a blockade in front of his seat and the speaker's podium. In turn the government reaction was even more forceful.

First, the parliamentary security guards accompanied by personnel from the special police units, forcefully ejected the journalist from following the developments in the plenary session. Second, the oppositional MPs were forcefully and brutally ejected out of the plenary. These actions were done in the presence of Gordana Jankulovska, the Minister of Interior, and Zoran Stavrevski, Minister of Finance. Mr. Stavrevski was shot with with a camera giving instructions to the police, to take out the MPs out as quickly as possible. Once the ejection of journalist and oppositional MPs was finished the session continued and the budget was voted. The ruling majority cheered and clapped with joy once

the process was finished.

The oppositional protesters outside of Parliament were more or less aware of the developments inside. Around noon news broke out that two female MPs from the opposition were injured and hospitalized. An ambulance car came in Parliament and took them out. When the news came that journalist and oppositional MPs were forcefully ejected from Parliament, the protesters led by Branko Crvenkovski, the leader of SDSM, breached the police blockade. Their argument for doing this is that they wanted to enter Parliament in order to support their MPs, and to prevent the breach of democracy and Constitutional order in Macedonia. However they were stopped by special police units; that used brutal force and beat up the protesters. Eventually, the oppositional protesters were pushed back, and some of them were arrested. Later oppositional MPs were joined the protesters. The standoff with the police lasted for about an hour after which the protest was ended peacefully.

Mr. Crvenkovski addressed the crowd, stating that democracy is dead in Macedonia and calling for civil disobedience. He also urged the protesters to go home peacefully, saying that the battle for democracy and restoring constitutionality is just beginning. From the next day, the opposition started with blockades of streets in all cities around the country from 6:00 to 6:30 pm. On Saturday, December 29 the opposition organized a protest in front of the central office of VMRO-DPMNE. Some 15,000 people from all around the country showed up for the protests. The opposition sent out a message that an authoritarian regime is in full swing in Macedonia, and that party/police structures rule the country.

Nikola Gruevski, the Prime Minister of Macedonia and leader of VMRO-DPMNE, made a public statement after the events. In his views, it was the people that objected the actions of Mr. Crvenkovski. He claims that Mr. Crvekovski, and his followers, were planning to forcefully take control of the country and overthrow the government. In his view the police and institutions prevented a coup d'etat. His argument is that the Republic of Macedonia is hostage of the vanity of Mr. Crvenkovski and his ambition to come back to power. In his view the forceful ejection of oppositional MPs was a necessity for the stability of the country, while he said that he is sad that journalist were kicked out. Beside the verbal attacks on the opposition, the government or any other state institution, have not taken actions to clear out the events, to identify the wrongdoings and to punish the responsible individuals.

2013: A year to make or brake democracy in Macedonia

The ramifications of the December events in Macedonia are likely to be great and long lasting. The trust between the government and opposition is lost. Under the given circumstances there is no dialogue on elite level. The polarization between the government and opposition is likely to continue. The country is in for serious political and institutional crisis. If it is not manage properly, the political situation might escalate to the detriment of all citizens in the country. The oppositional MPs are out of Parliament and it is quite unlikely that they will return soon, especially if there are no significant political changes. Their mandates were not only muted, but they were forcefully ejected from the plenary session.

The government intentionally breached the Constitution, the Law on Parliament and the Rules of Procedure. The budget was enacted in an illegal procedure. It was voted only by selected MPs in absence of the media. The first actions of the government show that they are in denial. The government behaves as everything is normal. On Thursday, December 27, the Parliament held a regular session dedicated to questions from the MPs. The journalists that were present reminded the government that things are not normal. The journalist booed the ruling majority and government representatives and went out in sign of revolt.

Having in mind the previous acts of government and Mr. Gruevski's authoritarian and populist style of governance, it is unlikely that they will make any compromises in the short run. The government is not willing even to adopt fully the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, or for that matter to take in account the recommendations from the COE Venice Commission on the Law for Lustration. The ruling VMRO-DPMNE maintains that they won the majority, and therefore they have a full mandate to do things in their way. Their argument is that they represent and act in the will of the people and for the benefit of the country, in the same time when they are violating the Constitution and democratic rules and procedures.

It is unclear whether the government will continue with repressive actions in the future. For the time being they have sufficient resources at their disposal, from the illegal budget and new World Bank loans, to continue their clientelistic practices. It is quite likely that they will try to restore their support in that way. They also have upper hand in the mainstream media. Therefore it is quite likely that they will reinforce the media campaigns that justify their actions and that are against the opposition. Having strong influence over the media and public funds to buy support, may be a deterrent for the future use of repression. However consolidating their power position can also be a motivation to continue with acts of repression (i.e. arrests of oppositional leaders or activists) for further devastation of the opposition.

The first actions of the opposition show that they are resolute to continue the protests. The opposition is staging every day protests in all of the cities. The end result is likely to be greater mobilization and increase of support. The opposition is not unlikely to step back any time soon. The opposition feels that it has been constructive long enough, that it was use against them, to the detriment of the citizens and the interests of the country. Being blocked in the mainstream media is another incentive for the opposition to continue their direct communication with the citizens. The direct communication with the people, coupled with sending message in the social media, the opposition is trying to compensate for their lack of appearance in the mainstream media.

Furthermore, the opposition strongly feels that their demands are legitimate and justified. Their political demands are to restore democracy, constitutionality and rule of law in the country. A full investigation of all unlawful doings is highly needed to determine the breaches of Constitution, Law on Parliament and Parliamentary Rules of Procedure. The ones that are responsible also need to be punish accordingly. The opposition, also, does not trust the government to organize democratic, free and fair elections. They demand that the government resigns and then a technical government or a wide coalition government to be made that will organize democratic, free and fair elections.

Alternatively, if there is no new government, SDSM demands that the international community should organize the next elections in Macedonia.

The opposition is not likely to resort to violent means. Their aim is to increase their support and they want to appeal to all that want to oppose the increase of authoritarianism in Macedonia. Various political actors, from left and right, are part of the oppositional efforts. The opposition will try to further widen their support, mobilize international and domestic support, and push the government to take the appropriate steps to end the crisis. Their impediments in confronting the government are lack of finances, mainstream media boycott and usage of police against them. The greatest impediment, however, is the culture of fear that became rooted in Macedonia. Therefore the main task of the opposition is to empower the people and to mobilize their support for the restoration of democracy and constitutionality in the country.

The economic and social outlook for 2013 is also not very positive. The growth rate is likely to be modest, most optimistically between 2 and 3 percent. The high rates of poverty and unemployment are likely to persist. If there are no changes in the economic policy, then the public debt and the central debt of the government is likely to climb even further. The government needs to cut all unproductive expenditures, such media campaigns and monuments, for the benefit of social needs and capital investments. However it is unlikely that they will do so. The deteriorating socio-economic situation may play to the benefit of the opposition, if the social revolt escalates. However the socio-economic deterioration can also play to the benefit of the government. They can buy the support and social peace cheaper, if people are willing to accept their clientelistic practices.

The Albanian parties so far are quiet. Some oppose the actions of the government, while others stay aside and behave as they are not part of the political developments. The two MPs of NDP, the smallest Albanian party in opposition, left Parliament. NDP calls for a technical government to be formed as a way out from the crisis. DPA remains in Parliament, while DUI remains as the junior coalition partner. DUI calls for de-escalation of tensions and restoration of peaceful democratic actions. However public opinion polls show that 90 to 95 percent of the Albanian electorate have negative opinion of Nikola Gruevski, the Prime Minister. This is a reaction to his nationalistic stands and policies. Several Albanian intellectuals and journalist condemned the actions of DUI and DPA. They think that their behavior is legitimizing the authoritarian practices of Mr. Gruevski. DUI and DPA are likely to be put under pressure by their electorate to change their stands toward Nikola Gruevski. Furthermore, respect for democracy and human rights, in specific minority rights, have been high on the agenda of the Albanian political elite. In such a situation if they do not continue pushing for restoration of democracy, they are likely to lose credibility in the eyes of their compatriots. In turn this presents a chance for the Albanian political factor in Macedonia to show itself as a pillar of democracy in the country. If they do so, then they will show themselves as a factor of integration, willing to bridge the ethnic divide and support the democratic development. This would help erase the stereotype that Albanians are factor of desintegration and that their demands and political actions promote instability in the country.

The first reactions of the international representatives in Macedonia toward the political actors are to keep calm and to carry on. They demand from both government and opposition to decrease the

tensions and to restore the political dialogue. They are also disappointed with the lack of respect for democracy and disturbed from the political violence. However for the time being they have a somewhat balanced approach. They are not willing to condemn strongly the actions of the government, nor to show stronger support for the opposition. The future actions of the international community is likely to be slow and inert. Trying to help Macedonia move forward in the Euro-Atlantic integration, the international community overlooked some of the flaws of the current government, including degradation of democracy. Now when the cat is out of the bag, they are not likely to radically change their position soon. It is likely that they will try mediate between the government and opposition. They are likely to try to bring the two sides together and restore political dialogue. In the short time period these efforts are more likely to be back door attempts, rather than visible efforts.

It is not likely that the political and institutional crisis in Macedonia will be solved soon if there is no stronger involvement of the international community. The divide and distrust between the government and opposition is too wide at the moment for them to find a solution on their own. The Albanian political parties can play a positive role and they need to be included early in finding a solution out of the crisis.

Local elections in March 2013 can be a point of restoring democracy in Macedonia. But local elections can also be point from where Macedonia departs from the West and follows more the path of Russia or Belarus. If the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations for changes of the electoral legislation are put in force, and if there is a credible government (i.e. technical or wide coalition government) that will organize the elections or if the international community organizes democratic, free and fair elections, then tensions will de-escalate and the crisis will be overcome. However if the current government organizes the elections on their own, in the manner of the previous elections, with intimidation of voters, pressures on public administration and buying of votes, than the opposition will boycott the elections. In such an event the tensions between the government and the opposition is likely to escalate, while the political and institutional crisis will become deeper. The local elections may be coupled with another early parliamentary elections which will only raise the stakes in the current situation.

One can forecast three scenarios how the situation in Macedonia will develop in 2013. In an optimistic scenario the government will become more reasonable, implement the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, and call for a wide coalition government that will organize the elections. This will restore democracy and institutional order in the country. Tensions will decrease and dialogue will be restored.

In a pessimistic scenario, the government will continue on its own, exercising the entrenched strong-man rule of Nikola Gruevski, campaigning against the opposition and organizing the elections under its own rules and terms. This will escalate the tensions with the opposition, and could lead to more acts of violence. The political and institutional crisis will deepen. Democracy will continue to deteriorate and the country will move backwards.

In a realistic scenario, the institutional and political crisis will continue for the time being. The polarization between the government and opposition will increase, however tensions are not likely to

escalate. The government and opposition will refrain from acts of political violence. The government will continue with clientelistic practices and media campaigns. The opposition will continue with protests trying to mobilize support against the government. If there is stronger involvement of the international community and positive engagement of the Albanian political factors, then minimum conditions could be created for democratic, free and fair elections. Democratic, free and fair elections would decrease the tensions and would be an end point for the crisis. However if there is lack of involvement from the international community and no reaction from the Albanian political parties, then democracy in Macedonia will further deteriorate. Macedonia will look more like Belarus, than like an EU candidate country.

Further information on the political situation in the Republic of Macedonia

News links:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/24/us-macedonia-protest-idUSBRE8BN0EX20121224>

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/tensions-rise-as-macedonian-parties-confront-over-budget>

Video links of journalist and oppositional MPs forcefully ejected out of Parliament:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfMKIhzVvpk>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0j59czN_tKI

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkDyXOT-6VU>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkDyXOT-6VU&list=UUSj5OsDyVsD6si3UdhQCQNw&index=2>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0j59czN_tKI

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRkiSLQBarE>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkiGjFb27mE>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXFJSqUCCg>

<http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-901256>