

Nationalists storm Macedonia's parliament

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The political crisis in Macedonia, which has been raging for months, intensified after some 100 partly masked nationalists, followers of long-time Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, stormed the parliament building in the capital, Skopje.

The demonstrators waved Macedonian flags and sang the national anthem. They attacked members of the Social Democratic Party and the parties representing the country's Albanian minority. According to media reports, around 100 people were injured. Zoran Zaev, the designated Social Democratic head of government, suffered an injury to the head.

Although there has been a series of violent conflicts and assaults in recent months, there were only a handful of police in and around the parliament building. Police were able to establish some sort of control only after several hours, while some 3,000 demonstrators gathered in front of the parliament shouting nationalist and racist slogans. The police refrained from intervening.

It must be assumed that the security forces had been informed in advance about the action. Gruevski has considerable support in the security apparatus.

The occasion for the attack was the election of a new president of the parliament. The Social Democrats (SDSM) and the party of the Albanian minority had elected Albanian Talat Xhaferi with 61 out of a total of 120 votes, although the acting president had already declared the meeting closed. Gruevski's party, the VMRO, described this as a coup.

The storming of parliament, in a country wracked by poverty and with just over two million inhabitants, threatens to turn into all-out civil war. President Gjorge Ivanov, who has close links to the VMRO, refused to give the Social Democratic opposition a mandate to form a government following parliamentary elections in December 2016, despite the fact that the SDSM together with Albanian parliamentarians has a majority.

Ivanov accuses the opposition of "undermining Macedonia's sovereignty."

The VMRO won the election on December 11, 2016 with 39 percent of the vote, just ahead of the Social Democrats. But it has since been unable to form a government coalition. The SDSM, led by Zoran Zaev, formed an alliance with the representatives of ethnic Albanians, who account for 20-25 per cent of the population. Since then, the Gruevski camp has been trying to paralyse the work of the parliament with filibusters and other procedural tricks. More recently, the tactics have taken violent forms, with the clear intent of seizing power.

President Ivanov, who has himself played a vile role in the right-wing protests, hypocritically called for peaceful protest in a TV speech. Last Friday, he invited the various party leaders to discuss the situation in his office.

The political strife in Macedonia has been going on for more than ten years, but has recently intensified considerably. In 2006, the VMRO won the parliamentary election and formed a government with the parties of the Albanian minority. After 2008, the government collapsed when the VMRO refused to recognize Kosovo as an independent state.

The early parliamentary election of 2008 was overshadowed by protests and violent outbreaks involving deaths and injuries. After a long political crisis, Gruevski was finally confirmed in 2011 as head of government.

According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Gruevski is regarded as a "corrupt power-broker, who regards politics as an opportunity for personal enrichment" and employs authoritarian methods. The VMRO has roots in fascist traditions. It is a successor to the Inner Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, which was founded in 1919 as a nationalist movement and has always maintained a paramilitary wing.

At the same time, Gruevski has the backing of the European Union and European powers because, according to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, he was useful at the height of the refugee crisis “as a bulwark against migration flows.” In 2015, when tens of thousands of refugees attempted to navigate the Balkan route to Western Europe, Macedonia reinforced its border with Greece, set up frontier fences and used tear gas to repulse refugees, including women and children.

The country has been transformed into a powder keg by the rampant corruption of the ruling elite, which earns part of its wealth through smuggling operations, and the bitter poverty of the population. Macedonia has no significant independent economy, and effective unemployment is around 45 percent. The status of candidate for accession to the EU, agreed in 2005, has served only to intensify the social and economic crisis as Macedonia struggles to fulfill the conditions for EU membership.

Both the VMRO and the Social Democrats seek to direct these tensions along ethnic and nationalist channels. Following the break-up of Yugoslavia, to which Macedonia belonged, the country was embroiled in the Kosovo war. In 2001, armed conflicts occurred in the northwest of Macedonia after the Albanian militia occupied some villages and fought with the police and the army.

Now the VMRO is once again playing the Albanian card. President Ivanov refused to appoint the Social Democrat Zaev as premier because he and his coalition partners agreed to strengthen the rights of Albanians in the country. Albanian is due to become the second official language.

The great powers are also stirring up conflicts in the country, although they try to stay in the background. For example, Dušan Relji?, the head of the Brussels office of the official German Institute for International and Security Affairs, complained about the role of the United States in the region. He told the *Austrian Standard*: “The Americans have always had the say, not the Europeans. The fact that the Albanians turned away from Gruevski and toward the Social Democrats a year-and-a-half ago can be traced back to direct interference from Washington.”

“The whole region still sees America as its most important security policy partner, especially the

Albanians,” Relji? continued, a situation that obviously does not suit Brussels and Berlin. He described talk about the growing influence of Russia in the region as “nonsense.”

For his part, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel condemned the attack carried out by Gruevski supporters on the parliament. “There must now finally be a government. There were democratic elections,” Gabriel said on Friday on the fringes of an EU meeting in Malta. “It is absolutely unacceptable when the former ruling party allows its supporters to attack the parliament and assault MPs.”

The crisis in Macedonia could quickly spread across the entire region. Ethnic conflicts, social misery and ruthless, reactionary elites dominate all of the states of the former Yugoslavia. The danger of war in the region looms ever closer.

In March, the British *Economist* magazine wrote: “In normal times, the world tends to ignore Macedonia and its 2 million people, a quarter of them ethnic Albanian. But the world is not ignoring Macedonia now. Western politicians are rushing to Skopje, Russia is issuing warnings, and Serbian newspapers proclaim that war is coming. Geopolitical relevance is returning to the Balkans...”



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