



Sonja Stojadinović

Reflection Paper

The path to the European Union for North Macedonia, false promises and unfilled standards

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Introductory words

On 11 December 2016 early parliamentary elections were held in which the government of the conservative Christian Democratic VMRO-DPMNE, in coalition with the Albanian DUI (Democratic Union for Integration), lost to the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). During the electoral campaign and also in the period of mass protests against the VMRO-DPMNE government in 2015 and 2016, now ex-prime minister Zoran Zaev had made many promises. The eleven years of VMRO-DPMNE government saw massive corruption scandals, a decrease of democracy and the rule of law in the state, mass economic emigration and clientelization of state institutions through the employment of party members without appropriate competence, followed by the scandal of mass wiretapping by the secret police and electoral fraud. It should be borne in mind that during the VMRO-DPMNE government, negotiations with Greece over the country's name were completely absent and the expensive project 'Skopje 2014' with its construction of ancient Macedonian history had an adverse effect on these negotiations. The Macedonian state has been given moderately positive progress reports from the European Union Commission without any suggestion of a date for the start of the negotiations. North Macedonia's judiciary system has eroded massively, with corrupt judges appointed by the party. These appointments came from the top, from former prime minister Nikola Gruevski, former chief of the secret police Sasho Mijalkov, and former minister of interior Gordana Jankulovska.

When in 2015 the Social Democrats began publishing conversations secretly wiretapped by the secret police, the public could see that many high-ranking VMRO-DPMNE politicians were involved in criminal activities such as election fraud, the cover-up of the murder of a young boy by a police officer, firing people from their jobs just because they disagreed with the government. In the following months mass protest erupted all over the country, and the Social Democrats led by Zoran Zaev used this wave of dissatisfaction to put pressure on the government to organise early parliamentary elections.

During the protests and the campaign for early parliamentary elections the future prime minister Zoran Zaev made promises regarding reforms needed by Macedonian society and justice for the citizens that suffered from the

quasi-dictatorial rule of VMRO-DPMNE. One of his catchy promises was his vow to display statistics on the Triumph Gate in Skopje of the money stolen by VMRO-DPMNE criminals and politicians and subsequently restored to the state budget. When the controversy with Greece over the name was on the table for discussion and possible resolution, he vowed not to change the name of the country or current form of the Constitution.

The long awaited justice for citizens was often cited, with the promise of punishment for the criminals of the previous government. Other promises frequently repeated by Zaev were his vow to bring Macedonia back on the path of EU and NATO accession, with assurances that Macedonia's future is in the EU.

When it comes to economic and judicial reforms, Zaev has several times declared himself to be a leftist through various promises of progressive economic reforms, for example, raising the minimum wage and more progressive taxation that would increase taxes for the rich. The protection of workers' rights was announced in the form of a new law on labour relations, which, among other things, would increase the average wage. One of his most popular promises involved the magical number of 500 euros net as an average wage. In what follows, we will cite the actual wage levels to provide a clearer picture of the extent to which the Zaev's government has filled its promises. Zaev took the report by Reinhard Priebe, Chair of the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, as a basis for judicial reform. His popular pronouncement was: there will be justice for everyone.

During the electoral campaign, the SDSM came out with a programme and slogan 'A Plan for Life in Macedonia', and its slogan was 'life has come to Macedonia'. However, this 264-page party programme was applied in a very superficial way, with its shining promises becoming dry and general bullet points.

Notification

A detailed analyses of the political changes in North Macedonia since 2017 would require a book. This paper will focus on the most important issues in the period: the promises of economic, judicial institutional reforms, protection of the state and of national identity, and meeting the requirements for EU accession. Our sources are the Programme of the Government 2017-2020, statements of former prime

minister Zaev and analyses of the media and EU reports regarding the path to EU accession. It should be noted that these were turbulent years for the state and so not every political decision and situation can be covered here. Also, due to the international COVID-19 pandemic, the government has postponed the early parliamentary elections from 12 April until further notice.

Economic and social-security reforms

The main economic-policy promise made by the Social Democratic government was an equitable redistribution of wealth through tax and social-system reforms. One of the most popular and often proclaimed measures was a progressive personal income tax. The government plan was to establish tax rates of 10% and 18% in place of the previous rate which was a flat 10%. This measure was very popular within the campaign and the first year of the SDSM government because of the high poverty rate and many citizens who receive no more than the minimum wage of 200 euros. Unfortunately, this progressive taxation was abolished after a year before it was even implemented. The former minister of finance Dragan Tevdovski and a major supporter of this idea, was replaced by prime minister Zaev in June 2019. The new minister has annulled progressive taxation. The replacement of Tevdovski and the canceling of progressive taxation was supported by the Macedonian business community, which clearly shows the influence of capital on the SDSM government.¹

Raising the minimum wage of 12,000 denari (200 euros) was part of the mandate of this government to be reached in the first year. Although this was achieved, the goal of

raising the minimum wage to 16,000 denari (258 euros) by the end of the legislative period was not reached. The reasons it gave for its failure was, first, that it took time to deal with the EU's refusal to set a start date for North Macedonia's accession negotiations and, second, preparations for the early parliamentary elections did not allow it enough time to deal with the minimum wage. At present the minimum wage has reached 14,500 denari (250 euros).

Workers' rights have long been violated in Macedonian society. One of the important measures in the programme was a new law on labour relations providing increased protection for workers' rights and working conditions. It provides for the Public Tax Office to review figures documenting overtime work, obligatory collective agreements in enterprises with more than 20 employees, and the registering of labour unions as legal entities. Additionally, the law restricted to six months the allowable time for limited time contracts, beyond which point the contract must be transformed into a permanent one. This new law remains stalled within the administrative labyrinths of the Ministry of Labour.

The judiciary

In addressing judiciary reform, the SDSM drew its vocabulary from the 2015 expert group report by Reinhard Priebe. This report pointed to the problem of the control of the judi-

ciary by the political party in power – at that time the VMRO-DPMNE. What the Social Democrats promised was the separation of the judiciary from the political party in power and

¹ <https://www.dw.com/mk/заев-го-исчисти-тевдовски-ке-ги-среди-ли-и-финансиите/a-49327249>.

a guarantee of fair trials for citizens. The planned reforms were packaged within the general promise to create an independent and efficient judiciary free of political influence.

The first observation is that an independent judiciary still does not exist, for political parties continue to have a strong presence in the Judicial Council. No judge can be elected into this Council without the support of a political party. Even though a completely new law regarding the Council was enacted in 2019, political influence on its members is not prohibited.² The same system governs election to the Council of Prosecutors. In his campaign for the early parliamentary elections in 2016, now ex-prime minister Zaev promised the establishment of a vetting system for judges and the appointment of new judges. This vetting system is considered absolutely necessary by judicial experts, but it is not the only measure for expunging corruption in the courts.³ In addition, there are other questions regarding implementation. And the criteria and procedures through which the system can be established are not clear (Stojadinovic, 2019).⁴ The vetting system has still not been instituted.⁵

As far as the promise of an efficient judiciary is concerned, one example can suffice: the trial, nicknamed 'Trajectory', against former prime minister Gruevski, in which he was accused of abusing his office in signing an agreement with the Chinese company Sinohydro to build a Kichevo-Ohrid highway. Gruevski was accused of accepting a reward for confirming the agreement. The case against him was dropped because the court has declared that the statute of limitations has run out.⁶

The failure to fight corruption and criminality can be seen in the complete absence of support for the work of the Special Prosecutor's Office. The government has promised it will ensure conditions enabling this office to function. Unfortunately, the Special Prosecutors now are back to work as public prosecutors, while the main Special Prosecutor Katica Janeva⁷ is under investigation for corruption in the 'Reket' scandal.⁸ The Special Prosecutor's Office as a special body for investigating cases uncovered through wiretapping has ceased to exist altogether. The cases that were under the jurisdiction of the Special Prosecutor's Office are now with the State Prosecutor's Office. To protect human rights, the government programme also included amendments to the law governing the police to prevent undue use of force by police units; however, these amendments have not yet been made.

The uncovering of the mass wiretapping of citizens by the previous government has made it necessary to change the law to make it illegal for the police to issue warrants based on such information. The government department for security and counterintelligence has ceased to exist as one of the key institutions responsible for the wiretapping. Now there are two new agencies within the Ministry of Interior: ANB (Agency for National Security) and OTA (Operative Technical Agency). OTA is not housed in the building of the Ministry of Interior in an effort to prevent influence. In addition, there is a special civil commission to oversee the OTA's work, but that commission barely functions.⁹

However, we can note one of the positive things that have been accomplished in recent years: the ratification of the

2 <https://www.pravdiko.mk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Zakon-za-Sudskiot-sovet-na-Republika-Severna-Makedonija-22-05-2019.pdf>.

3 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/ветување-ветинг-во-судството-пред-секои-избори/30278402.html?fbclid=IwAR2p0cNCcdjdvYaHwtbhp55XArZOvM3gUPNHNJhn3FCpL-ay9Gqmq01-WM>.

4 <https://respublica.edu.mk/blog/2019-12-16-09-00-35>.

5 <https://all4fairtrials.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Ветинг-процес-на-судството-во-PCM.pdf?fbclid=IwAR25TDjWV8szzqkUpeV0raO92-UejDD56mutCXnMuVjx0uDca-Mepz8hAdY>.

6 <https://irl.mk/gruevski-kurtuli-za-traektorija-e-se-gonat-ostanatite-obvineti>.

7 Comment: Katica Janeva as former prosecutor in SJO (Special Prosecutor Office) is accused for involvement in racketeering of the businessman Orce Kamchev, one of the accused in case of SJO. In this case is involved now former vice president of the Parliament from SDSM Frosina Remenski which was a huge attack on the governments reputation.

8 <https://irl.mk/obvinenie-za-reket-katitsa-aneva-zela-50-000-evra-boki-i-kicheets-1-5-milion-evra-od-kamchev>.

9 <https://www.pravdiko.mk/shto-sodrzhi-noviot-predlog-zakon-za-sledene-na-komunikatsiite>.

Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). The ratification smoothly passed through Parliament when in the same period there were blockages and protests in Bulgaria and Croatia against ratification of the same Convention.

An important recommendation in the Priebe report was reparations for the damage caused by the law on lustration enacted by the VMRO-DPMNE government. This law was promulgated in 2008 with an aim to 'clean' state institutions of people who collaborated with the secret police in the socialist period. However, the former government used it for political revanchism against opponents, whom they publicly shamed. Although it was rescinded in 2015, the current government has not yet done anything to reverse the decisions based on the law. More than 200 people were declared to be collaborators of the secret police and 300 were lustrated.¹⁰

Another in the long line of unfulfilled promises is the pledge to solve the major criminal and political cases known as 'Monstrum' and 'Divo naselje'. The case of 'Monster' (Монструм) involves the murder of five young men on Easter Sunday 2012 on a lake near Skopje. In the verdict pronounced in 2014 and five Albanians were sentenced to life imprisonment for the crime. However, there are many unexplored angles in the case and, above all, questions from the families of the murdered boys, the principal one being: who ordered the murder? Up to now, the Social Democratic government has made no efforts to solve the enigma.¹¹ Many questions about the 'Divo naselje' incident – the openly planned terrorist attack on the police on the part of Albanian terrorists from Kosovo in May 2015, in which eight police officers were killed – likewise remain unanswered. The verdict has brought eight life sentences for the terrorists who were arrested but did not provide information on the real objective of the terrorist group that

entered the Kumanovo suburb, or whether they were connected to specific Macedonian politicians, whether they were in communication with Macedonia's secret services. Although the SDSM government provided answers to many questions regarding this terrorist attack, the attack remains a mystery to the present day.¹²

Another dark moment in recent Macedonian history is known as 'Bloody Thursday'. On 27 April 2017 followers of the 'For a United Macedonia' movement, clearly organised by the opposition VMRO-DPMNE, violently entered the Macedonian Parliament, interrupting the session whose agenda was choosing the president of the Parliament. The candidate was Talat Xhaferi, a member of DUI, which was in coalition with the Social Democrats. Prime minister Zaev – as well as ministers Shekerinska, Damjan Manchevski and MP Ziyadin Sela – was attacked by the crowd with the clear intention of killing Zaev, which was averted by the police professionals among his personal bodyguard.¹³ The attacked MPs along with Parliament employees were evacuated by the police and military forces. The event has left a deep scar on the Macedonian political scene. If there was a chance for reconciliation between the divided citizenry after the VMRO-DPMNE ruling, the chances are now nil.

The Public Prosecutor's Office has opened an investigation using the video from the security cameras in the Parliament as well as video material from TV stations in order to identify the MPs who opened the doors to the crowd and guided them to the scene of the attack. Overall 6 VMRO-DPMNE MPs, 36 citizens, and one former minister of the interior, Mitko Chavkov, were accused of colluding with the perpetrators, of criminal activities against the state, and participation in violent disorder.¹⁴ With the court's decision in March 2019, the 16 accused were given jail sentences of varying lengths, with the severest one for Chavkov who was given 18 years for terrorist endangerment of the con-

10 http://all4fairtrials.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Pravni-posledici-od-procesot-na-lustracija.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3yLJMcoOpY4zNCOGM0aSq-TeEIKK9Yk3zowwG50Jn5eFNLF_glrRcpX7U.

11 <https://akademik.mk/monstrum-presuda-dozhivotna-kazna-zatvor-za-prvite-trojtsa-obvineti-ostanatite-dobija-od-do-godini-4>.

12 <https://faktor.mk/zoshto-divo-naselje-nema-kraj-i-po-sudskata-razreshnica>.

13 <https://www.dw.com/mk/мирно-пред-собранието-по-црниот-четврток/a-38624278>.

14 <https://www.dw.com/mk/крвавиот-четврток-како-бермудски-триаголник/a-41572975>.

stitutional order and of state security.¹⁵ The other 15 persons, among them 6 VMRO-DPMNE MPs were pardoned based on an amnesty law passed to events occurring on 27 April 2018 and enacted in October 2018.¹⁶

The amnesty was motivated by a deal made between parties. Three of the pardoned MPs later, in October 2018,

voted in favour of amending of the Constitution for the purpose of implementing the Prespa Agreement with Greece. Changing the Constitution requires a two-thirds majority, so the pro-change vote of the VMRO-DPMNE was exchanged for amnesty in the Bloody Thursday sentences.¹⁷

Law on the use of languages

The use of languages by the minorities in North Macedonia has been regulated through implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), which ended the 2001 conflict. The OFA was implemented within the Macedonian Constitution and it also regulates the use of languages of the minorities within the state. It clearly stipulates that a group making up at least 20% of the population can use its language within the state institutions on a regular basis. However, it was the Albanian political parties that insisted on this right for the Albanian population in North Macedonia (Stankovski 2019). The use of minority languages was regulated by the law on the use of languages first adopted in 2008 and amended in 2011. The law allowed the Albanian language to be used in state institutions within the local self government where Albanians make up more than 20% of the population; personal documents can be issued in both languages, Macedonian and Albanian, and Albanian MPs can speak their language in Parliament. The law was justified as being in line with the OFA, which it is.

However, on 7 January 2017 all electorally active Albanian parties (DUI, DPA, BESA and Alliance for Albanians) published a document, the so-called Tirana Political Platform, with seven political demands and sub points which, among other demands, include the demand that Albanian be declared the second official language in North Macedonia after Macedonian.¹⁸ This demand was clearly outside the framework of the OFA, and it sparked inter-ethnic tensions. With this platform the Albanian political parties

sent a message to the Macedonian parties that if they want to form a government coalition with any Albanian party, they have to accept these demands. As is known, the Social Democrats created their coalition with the Albanian DUI by accepting the platform's demands. Before the coalition was established, VMRO-DPMNE had offered a grand Macedonian-only coalition to the SDSM, but SDSM rejected the offer. It is essential that the public knows that nowhere in the OFA is there a requirement that government coalitions have to include an Albanian political party, but these kind of coalitions were encouraged by the representatives of the international community in North Macedonia.

Because of president Ivanov's refusal to sign it, the new law on the use of languages was voted twice, in March 2018 and January 2019. In order for the government to evade full responsibility for the unconstitutional law which was clearly breaking the fifth amendment of the Macedonian Constitution, they sent the whole law, not just some of its articles – as Bujar Osmani (DUI), one of the deputy prime ministers of the government claimed – to the Venice Commission to analyse it. The Commission criticised the legislation, clearly explaining that it went too far in enacting obligations that the state institutions cannot meet: The law demands the use of the Albanian language in court trials, which requires the immense effort of translating all documents into Albanian at great expense. Moreover, all documents of local governments have to be translated into Albanian, creating enormous delays in the function-

15 <https://makfax.com.mk/makedonija/draconski-казни-од-7-до-18-години-затвор-з>.

16 <https://akademik.mk/tekstot-na-zakonot-za-amnestija-za-nastanite-od-27-april-podnesen-vo-sobraniето-na-rm>.

17 <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/80-pratenici-glasaa-za-ustavnite-promeni-pominaa>.

18 <https://fokus.mk/zaednichkata-platforma-na-albanskite-partii>.

ing of the whole judicial system. Additionally, the Venice Commission also noted that the provisions of the law go beyond the European standards defined in particular in the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.¹⁹ However, the deputy prime minister responsible for EU integration, Bujar Osmani rejects any possibility of amending the law. To make matters more complicated, former prime minister Zaev has stated that the law will be amended according to the recommendations of the Venice Commission, but the process has been blocked because of the approaching early parliamentary elections.²⁰

This law has not only gone far beyond the EU standards; it has also created inter-ethnic tensions and an environment in which Macedonians feel like second-class citizens. Unfortunately, this law has not at all contributed to improving the economic conditions of Albanians who are just as affected by poverty as Macedonians are. Once again, the Albanian political parties have used nationalism in their personal and political interests.

EU accession, good neighbour policy, and resolution of the name issue

One of the first steps of the Social Democratic Zaev government was the signing the bilateral agreement with Bulgaria in August 2017. This agreement was signed in both the Macedonian and Bulgarian languages with a subsequent memorandum for cooperation in the areas of communication, transport, and energy. This agreement is seen as a historic opportunity not only for establishing fruitful cooperation between the countries but also for solving the age-old problems between our nations. The agreement provides for a commission of historians from the both countries whose purpose is to resolve the differing views of historical events.²¹ However, less than three years after signing the Agreement, harsh words are coming from the Bulgarian side. Last year the Commission has ceased work because the Bulgarian side insisted on establishing that the Macedonian revolutionary Goce Delchev, one of the key figures in the history of the Macedonian struggle against the Ottoman Empire, was Bulgarian. Also, during the Commission's deliberations, Bulgarian prime minister Boyko Borisov several times impatiently made Bulgaria's support of Macedonia's EU accession conditional on the

outcome of the Commission, forcing it to finish work as soon as possible. To make matters worse, last month Bulgaria's minister of foreign affairs Ekaterina Zaharieva several times openly stated that the Macedonian language is not a language in its own right but a Western Bulgarian dialect. These statements sparked mass public reaction in Macedonia, but unfortunately Macedonia's ministry of foreign affairs offered very meek reactions. Bulgaria is openly denying its fascist past and occupation of Macedonia during the Second World War and this denial is also one of the conditions for Bulgaria's support for Macedonian accession to the EU.²²

These undiplomatic statements have cast a dark shadow on the aims of the bilateral agreement and have put a huge question mark on the EU accession conditions. The fear in Macedonia is that the EU will again close its eyes on the injustices that have been forced on this small country.

The longstanding name dispute with Greece has finally been resolved with the signing of the Prespa Agreement

19 <https://irl.mk/venetsianskata-komisia-nade-zabeleshki-na-izglasaniot-zakon-za-azitsi>.

20 <https://24.mk/details/zaev-zakonot-za-jazici-kje-se-revidira-soglasno-mislenjeto-na-venecijanskata-komisija-1>.

21 <https://akademik.mk/potpishan-dogovorot-za-dobrososedstvo-prijatelstvo-i-sorabotka-megu-makedonija-i-bugarija>.

22 <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/bugarskiot-parlament-usvoi-deklaratsija-za-pregovori-na-eu-so-makedonija-vladata-na-borisov-poddrshkata-ja-uslovi-so-nespomnuvane-makedonski-jazik-i-bugarski-fashistichki-okupator>.

between Republic of Macedonia (now North Macedonia) and Greece in June 2019. This moment was followed by many contradictions within statements made by ex-prime minister Zaev and his Social Democratic Union. The change of the country's name has not been mentioned in the Social Democrats' party programme nor in the government programme. All statements regarding the name issue were generalised within the framework of 'keeping on the path to membership in NATO and the EU'. In an interview with the German weekly Spiegel, Zaev said he does not see the need to amend the Constitution and hopes that the issue will be solved through an international agreement.²³

However, before making decisions that will affect the majority of the country, the Macedonian government is bound by the Constitution to consult citizens via referendum. The referendum regarding the change of the country's name was held on 30 September 2018 with question: 'Are you in favour of EU and NATO membership by accepting the agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and the Hellenic Republic?' The results were devastating for the Social Democratic government because only 36% of registered voters voted and the 50% participation minimum was not reached.²⁴ Also, an anti-referendum initiative called 'I Boycott' was organized. The boycott campaign was driven by the opposition VMRO-DPMNE but was also supported by the only left political party Levica.²⁵ The SDSM government declared the referendum to be consultative and its result not binding for the government in proceeding with the negotiations with Greece.

After the signing of the agreement with Greece and the resolution of the name issue, the agreement became binding and was implemented in the Constitution alongside Zaev's statements contradicting it.²⁶ The public reactions of the opposition and section of the public against this agreement was to the effect that through it Macedonians have lost their national identity – even though the agreement clearly states that Greece is recognizing the Macedonian language and citizens of North Macedonia as Macedonians.

The implementation of this agreement has fueled much discussion and accusations that we will become North Macedonians and not Macedonians and everything will be named 'North Macedonian' in order to erase the existence of the Macedonian nation. To mitigate this dissent among the public and also in international discourse, the Macedonia's ministry of foreign affairs has issued guidelines for international media on how to refer to the country, its citizens, and its language based on the Prespa Agreement.

The directive states that the official name of the country is the Republic of North Macedonia, or in short North Macedonia, and the nationality (citizenship) is Macedonian/citizen of the Republic of North Macedonia.

Regarding state entities, the media is advised to use the terms: the government of the Republic of North Macedonia, the president of North Macedonia, the minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia, etc. The media is also to use terms such as North Macedonia's municipality of Ohrid, the University of St. Cyril and Methodius of North Macedonia, and so on.

The country's foreign ministry says that the official language is the Macedonian language and the country codes are MK and MKD, the same as they were before. The adjective 'Macedonian' is to be used when referring to the 'ethnic and cultural identity of the people, our language, history, culture, heritage, territory and other attributes'.

However, the guideline says that the above terms 'are distinctly different from those used and related to the region of Macedonia in Greece'. The authorities state that proper examples of the use of the word 'Macedonian' would include terms such as 'Macedonian ethnic identity', 'Macedonian language', 'Macedonian people', and 'Macedonian territory'.

The media is also to refer to 'Macedonian culture' and 'Macedonian history', and the government specifies that

23 <https://kapital.mk/zaev-za-shpigel-ime-bez-prevod-e-neprifatlivo-ne-gledam-prichina-imeto-da-go-menuvame-i-vo-ustavot>.

24 <https://akademik.mk/dik-za-referendumot-odlukata-ne-e-usvoena-bidejki-ne-glasale-poveke-od-polovinata-od-vkupniot-broj-gragani-zapishani-vo-izbirachkiot-spisok>.

25 <https://lider.com.mk/makedonija/inicijativata-bojkotiram-so-specijalno-upatstvo-za-dijasporata>.

26 <https://akademik.mk/izglasani-ustavnite-amandmani>.

the adjective ‘North’ should not be used in these contexts. Furthermore, the adjective ‘North’ cannot be used when referring to terms like the ‘Macedonian economy’, ‘Macedonian art’, ‘Macedonian music’, ‘Macedonian agriculture’, ‘Macedonian architecture’.²⁷

Unfortunately, despite the guidelines from the ministry of foreign affairs, there is an enormous lack of control by the ministry and the state regarding the use of the name internally and externally. There were even instances in Macedonian journalism in which journalists referred to the state institutions as ‘North Macedonian’, not ‘Macedonian’, changing citizenship to ‘North Macedonian citizenship’, which does not exist in the agreement. And use of the wrong terms in referring to the state, nationality, and language is occurring in the international media, which makes it complicated for readers to understand the situation.

The signing of the Prespa Agreement was, naturally, welcomed by the international community, with congratulations for resolving the longstanding issue, which was also one of the conditions for initiating EU accession negotia-

tions. The great hopes around a date for the start of negotiations were dashed by the EU in October 2019 during the Summit of the European Council. The absence of a start date and the strong negative opinion of French president Macron were expressed in terms of congratulations to Macedonians for having accomplished a great deal along with the criticism that there is still a need for a substantial reform of the judicial system.²⁸ In reaction ex-prime minister Zaev stated that the government will call for early parliamentary elections if the EU Council does not set a date for negotiations. The early parliamentary elections were supposed to be held on 12 April. Currently, the Macedonian government is headed by the technical minister Oliver Spasovski, formerly a minister of the interior from the Social Democratic Union.

However, the coronavirus pandemic did influence the European Council’s decision on Macedonia and Albania. The European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Oliver Varhelyi, said in March that in June the European Commission will announce the negotiation framework for the start of the negotiations for both countries.²⁹

Conclusion

The Macedonian state and its citizens have a long road in front of them if they want to substantially recover from a decade of VMRO-DPMNE government. This recovery cannot include political behaviour that imitates VMRO’s behaviour, from which the SDSM is not immune. The cases of corruption related to the SDSM government have uncovered political behaviour on the part of a politician who made policy not to improve the life of the country but to acquire personal wealth and political influence. The latest polls from the International Republican Institute (IRI) indicate that the Social Democrats led by Zaev enjoy 17% popularity, while VMRO-DPMNE is just one point behind

them at 16%.³⁰ SDSM could, in fact, capitalise on the coronavirus crisis by delaying the elections, to give it more time to regain public support. But this is possible only if, after the crisis, a majority of the public feels that its government successfully managed the health and economic implications of the pandemic.

However, these three years of Social Democratic government ought to provide a major lesson for citizens and political parties: Do not make shallow and shining promises just to win government power and do not vote for sweet-talking politicians who promise gleaming towers

27 <https://greece.greekreporter.com/2019/02/24/north-macedonia-issues-reference-guidelines-for-international-media>.

28 <https://www.radiomof.mk/istoriska-greshka-liderite-na-eu-po-odlukata-deka-nema-datum-za-pochetok-na-pregovori-so-s-makedonija>.

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and cities. The Macedonian state is very fragile and has long been an experimental territory for different sorts of political and institutional models. An uncertain future provides fertile soil for all forms of political crisis, and now is the last opportunity to bring the Macedonian state onto the path of stability and prosperity. The most EU membership will bring the Macedonian state is some form of guarantee of stability, but basic stability cannot be achieved without the political will and determination of the political parties. The cards of the political future are in Macedonia's hands. We should play them smartly.



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