

Macedonia: Illiberal democracy

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The recent presidential and early parliamentary elections in Macedonia are only one illustration of the country's long-term political condition: illiberal democracy.

Illiberal democracies show some capacity to hold an electoral process, yet they fail to respect essential political and economic freedoms, or the rule of law.

Elections in Macedonia might well be categorised as “efficiently administered” (see [the Statement](#) by the International Election Observation Mission), but there are serious doubts about whether they could be assessed as free and fair. Major concerns arise not only about the campaigning period and election day, but also about the overall political context in which they take place. Besides the interference of the government in the election process, and the fact that many state employees served in the election campaign, as reported by the ‘Civil’ Centre for Freedom, the general tone and recurrent themes of the campaign are alarming. Despite the many grave problems facing the country (such as the staggering unemployment rate: [above 30%](#)), elections in Macedonia have not exactly been a competition of ideas and programmes. Instead, both leaders of the running coalition¹ have frequently used ethnically divisive rhetoric.

Most importantly, *free* elections – as a fundamental element of democracy – allow citizens who enjoy political and economic freedoms and rights the opportunity to express those rights. Otherwise, when citizens are so intrinsically dependent upon and pressurised by the government, as is the case in Macedonia, one cannot speak of the ‘free will of the people’. Furthermore, it was noted by the NGO Civil that there are several thousand ‘phantom’ voters who have no permanent address in the capital, Skopje, and who hold identification cards registered to various addresses in the city. This makes the election register highly problematic and a source of fraud. Even more alarming is the alleged case of corruption of voters for less than 10€ (reported by Civil, which obtained access to video footage of a citizen explicitly confirming the bribe).

Crucially, the organisation of a free electoral process requires respect for freedom of the press. But access to media and biased media coverage is a huge problem in Macedonia. For example, for all the private broadcasters monitored by the International Election Observation

¹ The conservatives VMRO-DPMNE - Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation, the Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity and the Albanian ethnic party, the Democratic Union for Integration, DUI).

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Mission, about 40 hours of paid political advertisements aired were purchased by VMRO-DPMNE and their presidential candidate, whereas only 3½ hours of coverage could be afforded by the opposition Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM). Moreover, there was a lack of independent reporting and the media were largely biased in favour of the ruling formation.

In view of all these troubling aspects of the elections – fraud, abuse of public resources and state institutions, and control over the media – it is difficult to see how the elections could be considered democratic and thus a legitimate transfer of power. However, the question arises as to whether the results of the elections would be different if the electoral process had indeed been genuinely democratic, as the Social Democrats demand, by forming a technocratic government and holding new elections. The straightforward answer would be “probably not”.

Such an answer is not (only) due to the efforts of the opposition. The Social Democrats have been reflective and innovative as a party, by first bringing reform to their own structure and ranks, by opening up their lists to new and younger people who show professionalism, and by bringing alleged cases of severe government corruption to the attention of the public. A significant political move was also their nominee for presidential candidate, Mr. Pendarovski, who went beyond ethnic divides and nationalist rhetoric and made strenuous efforts to gain the support of ethnic Albanians, despite DUI’s boycott and pressure for the minority not to vote. DUI’s boycott was an immature reaction to their failed efforts to agree with their coalition partner VMRO-DPMNE on a ‘consensual’ presidential candidate, which was also the formal reason given to dissolve the Parliament on March 5th and call for early parliamentary elections.

The election results would probably not be significantly different again due to the manner in which power has been exercised in Macedonia since at least 2011, when the media most critical of the government was shut down on the basis of tax evasion accusations (which actually led the Social Democrats to boycott the Parliament and call for the second early parliamentary elections since Macedonia’s independence in 1991). Macedonia’s Constitution stipulates basic political and economic rights and the rule of law as fundamental pillars upon which the country is based (see Art. 1 and Art. 8). However, constitutional liberalism has lost practical meaning in Macedonia if we look at the systematic abuse of power and lack of accountability and transparency. Notable examples are the opposition being forcefully ejected from Parliament during the vote for the budget in December 2012 (see [here](#)) and the mysterious car ‘accident’ of journalist Mr. Mladenov, in July 2013, who was widely regarded as a pioneer of free speech in Macedonia and a fierce critic of the government (see [here](#)). But everyday examples also include, inter alia: the imprisonment of journalists, the selective prosecution of political opponents, police impunity, political pressure and intimidation of the judiciary, mistreatment of detainees and prisoners by police and prison guards, the government’s frequent restriction of workers’ right to strike, and discrimination against the Roma and LGTBI communities (see European Commission’s [Report](#) and the US State Department [Report](#)).

In this context, it is not surprising that the ruling coalition ‘won’ the elections yet again. It remains unclear why the opposition would have consented to early parliamentary elections in the first place. Why participate in an electoral process that is merely a theatrical display of democracy? What is clear, however, is that the European Union and other international actors cannot use (only) the elections as a yardstick of democracy. Another round of elections will not address the real and substantial problem of illiberal democracy in Macedonia. What is needed is a re-think of the instruments and the manner in which major international actors

could and should foster constitutional liberalism in Macedonia. The possibilities for such undertakings exist as long as the 'elected' government claims its commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration. But regardless of the specific form such instruments would take, the message must be vigorous and clear: take freedoms and rights seriously. This approach does not deny that the primary and essential responsibility lies with Macedonians themselves, but it calls for support to establish the state's capacity for the legitimate exercise of power.