



The Macedonian Crisis – A failure of EU conflict management?

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In the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy, there is a chapter devoted to "An Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises". It sets out a 'multi-dimensional' approach through the use of all available policies and instruments aimed at 'conflict prevention, management and resolution'.

The difficulty of transforming such lofty aspirations into reality couldn't be more evident than in the ongoing and deepening crisis in Macedonia – an EU candidate country in the heart of the Western Balkans.

The eruption of violence on April 27th was a tragedy waiting to happen. The Parliament building was stormed by an angry mob, which proceeded to viciously attack several MPs from the main opposition Social Democratic Union for Integration (SDSM) party, injuring many, including the party's leader Zoran Zaev. The attack was preceded by weeks of deep tensions following the early elections that took place in December. It was also the latest in a series of crises and violent incidents that have marked the past years of the government led by the ruling Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) party under its leader and former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, in power since 2006. Under his leadership the government has pursued an ethno-nationalist and populist agenda resulting in one of the worst reform records in the Western Balkan region.

Following the December elections, in which VMRO-DPMNE obtained the most Parliamentary seats (51 as opposed to 49 for the SDSM), Nikola Gruevski attempted to form a new coalition government with its erstwhile partner, the main ethnic Albanian Democratic Union for Integration party (DUI) (which obtained 10 seats). These negotiations broke down at the end of January, however, when Gruevski and his party refused to accept DUI's proposal for the continuation of the mandate of the Special Prosecutor appointed in 2015 under an EU-brokered agreement to investigate the wiretapping scandal that had revealed shocking examples of corruption at the highest levels of government.

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Subsequently, the SDSM succeeded in putting forward a proposed coalition with the ethnic Albanian parties with a sufficient majority of 67 MPs (out of a total of 120) to form a new government. However, President Ivanov, closely aligned to the ruling party and no doubt acting under its instructions, refused (and continues to refuse) to hand over the mandate to the proposed coalition, claiming that to do so would endanger the unity of the country. He was referring in particular to the Platform adopted in January by the ethnic Albanian parties, which set out a number of aspirations for the ethnic Albanian community (which according to the 2002 census represents some 25% of the Macedonian population of 2 million).

The leader of the VMRO-DPMNE, fearful of losing power, claimed that the proposals put forward by the ethnic Albanian parties would result in “federalisation” and eventually the break-up of Macedonia as a unified country, even though such a concept was not part of the proposals and despite the fact that he himself had raised no objections when these proposals were raised in his negotiations with the DUI.

With all the parties concerned having made clear that the preservation of the unity and identity of Macedonia was an objective that united the entire country, it became clear that Gruevski’s strategy was to wave the red flag of inter-ethnic tensions in order to discredit the proposed coalition. In so doing, he called on the citizens to take to the streets to “defend the country”, and accused his political opponents of treason. Many of those who stormed the Parliament on April 27th are known to be friends, supporters and even family members of the ruling party.

Further violence cannot be excluded as the country awaits the response from the President to the formal notification sent to him of the election of the new Speaker. According to the constitution, he has 10 days from the date of notification within which to hand over the mandate to form a government to whichever party or coalition commands a majority in Parliament. The new majority then has 20 days to agree on a new cabinet which is then put to a vote in the Parliament. Mr Gruevski has already announced that his party does not recognise the new Speaker as duly elected. A boycott of Parliament by his party, which would surely exacerbate the tensions, cannot be excluded.

The origins of this most recent crisis can be traced to the revelation in January 2015 of a vast wiretapping operation providing evidence of alleged corruption by government ministers and senior officials from the ruling party. This was followed in early May of that year by an outbreak of violence in the northern city of Kumanovo, which resulted in the death of eight police officers and 12 others, in a security operation that has yet to be properly investigated. A succession of mediation efforts in June 2015 and again in July of 2016, led by Commissioner Johannes Hahn together with a delegation from the European Parliament (composed of the current and previous Rapporteurs for Macedonia plus a member of the EPP, of which the VMRO-DPMNE is a member), resulted in a number of agreements, signed by all four main political parties. They provided inter alia for the appointment of a Special Prosecutor to investigate the wiretapping scandal, electoral reforms to be followed by early elections and the implementation of a list of reforms contained in a report adopted by a senior expert group mandated by the Commission to investigate the wiretapping scandal and related rule of law issues.

Despite these agreements, the ruling party did everything possible to delay implementation of the reforms and to hinder the work of the Special Prosecutor. These delays provoked renewed inter-party tensions. As if this wasn't enough, the President issued in April 2016 a blanket pardon to the 56 senior government and ruling party officials, including the former Prime Minister himself, who had been placed under investigation by the Special Prosecutor. The objective was clear: to deliver a mortal blow to the work of the Special Prosecutor.

Recent experience in Macedonia has shown that the lack of any enforcement mechanism deployed by the EU to ensure a serious follow-up of all the commitments contained in these successive mediated agreements is a major factor in their ineffectiveness. In the same vein, the messages coming from the EU have not always been consistent. At times, the EU has given the impression that its highest priority was stability, particularly during the refugee crisis, and that rule of law issues would eventually sort themselves out. This was particularly the case with Commissioner Hahn's statement following his visit in January 2016, which seemed to prioritise a strong and stable government to better address the flow of refugees coming across the Western Balkans, with Macedonia being a major entry point. This, despite the fact that the country was still in the throes of the political crisis resulting from the wiretapping revelations.

When the President of the Council Donald Tusk visited on April 4th of this year, the main focus of his remarks following his meeting with President Ivanov was the importance of Macedonia's cooperation with migration and border controls. His reference to the political crisis was limited to calling on the President to "find a solution based on democratic principles, decency and common sense". He did not repeat or make any reference to the statement made by HR Federica Mogherini during her visit on March 2nd, when she directly called on President Ivanov to reverse his decision and, even quoting the Constitution, to "entrust the mandate to a candidate belonging to the party which has the majority in the Assembly". This message was fortunately repeated by Hahn during his own visit on March 21st.

All of this has given the impression of a weak and uncoordinated EU conflict-resolution machinery. It has contributed to an increased sense of impunity by the ruling party, which continues to ignore all the recommendations for reforms set out in the successive Commission's country reports, and in the senior expert group report mentioned above. It continues to deploy its vast propaganda machinery abroad using its membership of the EPP to justify its behaviour and legitimacy in the Macedonian political environment.

The stance of the European Peoples Party is also beyond comprehension. It continues to protect a party whose leader and senior officials are under investigation for serious criminal offences. Both the Austrian and Hungarian Foreign Ministers have gone even further, and attended election rallies of the ruling party prior to the December elections. The EPP continues to defend the indefensible, even after the violence of April 27th.

If the EU is really serious about its role in conflict resolution, it needs to back its words with action. A periodic visit by a Commissioner or MEP delegation with no effective follow-up will serve little purpose. The EU should deploy all the instruments it has at its disposal, including a threat of sanctions, if the mediated agreements are not implemented. Failure of the EU to

resolve this ongoing crisis will send the worst possible message to the region where other 'Balkan strongmen' are watching closely.