

Newly Strengthened Albanian Political Power in North Macedonia Will Not Lead to a Greater Albania

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*North Macedonia conducted elections on July 15 that were originally scheduled for April 12 but were postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. On August 18, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) reached a deal to establish a coalition government that gave greater powers to the Albanian minority in North Macedonia. Under this deal, North Macedonia will have their first ever Albanian Prime Minister, although it will not be until the last 100 days of the four-year mandate of the new government headed by **Zoran Zaev**. The fact that the North Macedonian Albanians will have some of the most vital ministries and the position of the First Deputy Prime Minister shows that they now have some of the greatest influence in the country. The Albanians now have some power to try and federalize the country if they wish.*

Zaev, the leader of the SDSM and Prime Minister-designate, is introducing the first ever deputy prime minister, who will be appointed at the suggestion of the DUI. Without Albanian parties, a government could not be formed in North Macedonia as the Albanians account for a massive 20% of the population. By having a huge minority, they can wield great influence in coalition governments, which is exactly why they requested the Ministry of Finance.

The DUI party now controls the largest number of municipalities in North Macedonia where Albanians live and control a good part of government ministries. Effectively, they managed to push through a consensual decision-making system. Consensual democracy, although implies a half-hearted way of decision-making, actually enables Albanians to control the entire state of North Macedonia. Effectively, in these elections, the Albanians are definitely political bosses in Skopje.

The Ministry of Finance controls everything in the country, so the government of Zaev will not be in a situation to fully control all financial and political flows in the country, especially since the first deputy prime minister, who comes from the DUI party, has a signature with the Prime Minister. That is why a rivalry between the SDSM and the DUI will most likely emerge in the first 100 days of the new government.

Although the ruling political milieu remains the same because SDSM and DUI are in power again, they will also have a lot of problems because the majority they have in parliament is very narrow. The situation is not only bad politically, but also socially – the economic situation is catastrophic, and North Macedonia is among the leading countries when it comes to the number of people infected with COVID-19 per capita. The new government has a plethora of problems to deal with including a major economic crisis, increasing poverty, and the COVID-19 pandemic. But it does have a trump card – securing a date for

negotiations with the European Union, a process which will last at least 15 years. But it is unlikely this trump card can outweigh all the problems the country has at the moment. That is why this government is unlikely to survive for a long time, especially since next year there will be local elections for mayors.

The SDSM, under the guise of “Macedonia for all,” managed to abolish almost all parties of minority communities in these elections, namely parties of Serbs, Turks, Vlachs, Romas and Bosniaks. Through the election for the new North Macedonian government, three Albanian foreign ministers in the region will exist – in North Macedonia, Albania and the partially recognized Kosovo. According to a 2010 Gallup Balkan Monitor report, 83% of Albanians in Albania supported the idea of a Greater Albania, with 81% and 53% of Albanians in Kosovo and North Macedonia respectively supporting such an ambition.

Although the overwhelming majority of Albanians want a Greater Albania, it is unlikely to be achieved as North Macedonia does not pose a threat to U.S. dominance in the Balkans, and instead serves American interests in the region, especially since joining NATO in March of this year. The Albanians, who form the majority in western North Macedonia, will likely be pushing for a federalized state or autonomy as a first step towards independence or unification with Albania. However, unlike in Kosovo, the Albanians are unlikely to find western support for this, especially since North Macedonia is now a NATO member and has serious ambitions of joining the European Union.

For this, although the Albanians of North Macedonia have their best opportunity to date to make the next step towards a Greater Albania, it will not be realized as it will not find western support like it did in Kosovo. Nonetheless, even without western support, this will not stop the DUI and other Albanian organizations in the country from attempting to establish a headway for the eventual federalization or independence of western North Macedonia.

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