

## MACEDONIA PRE-ELECTION REPORT

*Citizens of Macedonia go to the polls this coming Sunday, June 1, to vote for a new parliament. The snap elections come on the heels of Macedonia's inability to secure an invitation to join NATO at April's Bucharest summit following objections by Greece regarding the country's constitutional name. The conduct of the elections—the extent to which they are judged as democratic—will have much to say about Macedonia's continued prospects for Euroatlantic integration. Below, NDI's Skopje-based staff preview this weekend's vote, which is to determine who will govern the country for the next four years.*

Macedonia's bid to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) at its April 2008 Bucharest summit failed as Greece vetoed an invitation due to its unresolved dispute with Macedonia over the latter's constitutional name. The disappointing outcome, coupled with months of government-opposition acrimony that has slowed Macedonia's advancement toward membership in the European Union, prompted the opposition ethnic Albanian party, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), to put forward a motion for early elections. The center-right government of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (VMRO-DPMNE) supported the motion (although its junior coalition partner and rival to DUI, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) initially resisted the move). The leading opposition party, the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM), opposed the decision, arguing that new elections would delay action on solving the name dispute with Greece and gaining NATO membership. The elections come roughly half-way into the government's four-year mandate.



Macedonia's political leaders sign a code of conduct drafted by NDI that commits their parties to abide by democratic election practices. Pictured from left are Menduh Thaci (Democratic Party of Albanians-DPA), Radmila Sekerinska (Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia-SDSM); NDI/Macedonia Director Chris Henshaw; Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski (VMRO-DPMNE) and Ali Ahmeti, Democratic Union for Integration-DUI).

Since the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001 ended an inter-ethnic conflict, Macedonia has made substantial progress in building political stability based on constitutional and legal changes that enfranchise the country's sizable ethnic Albanian population. There has been related progress in the conduct of elections in accordance with international standards. But challenges remain. The last parliamentary elections in July 2006 were characterized as largely free and fair by international observers, although pre-election violence and procedural errors did occur. Thus

far this election cycle has also seen episodes of violence and intimidation. The conduct of these elections will be scrutinized insofar as Macedonia's advancement toward the EU is concerned.

### ***Constitutional Name Dispute and the Economy Top Voter Concerns***

While all parties declare EU and NATO membership as top priorities, the campaigns are also trying to address voter concerns about economic prospects. Regional security is another issue of importance following next-door Kosovo's independence declaration in February.



Supporters at a political rally in Tetovo study leaflets explaining the code of conduct that their party leader has signed. The code is informing activists about democratic election standards.

Prime Minister Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE leads a center-right electoral coalition of 19 parties – "For A Better Macedonia" – and campaigns on the theme of "Macedonia Knows! The Renaissance Continues" for the 120 parliamentary mandates in the National Assembly. VRMO-DPMNE blames the SDSM for the slow progress in passing reform legislation. Gruevski is also reminding citizens that the country's constitutional name was changed in 1993 by the then-ruling SDSM when it agreed to accept the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) as the official name under which Macedonia was admitted to the United Nations. This was done at the behest of Greece, which also claims Macedonia as the historical name of its northern territory. The Prime Minister promises voters to subject any alteration of the country's constitutional name to referendum following a diplomatic agreement with Athens. The coalition's platform emphasizes reduced corporate tax burdens to stimulate sluggish economic growth and attract foreign investment.

SDSM, led by Radmila Sekerinska, heads an eight-party coalition campaigning under the theme of "A Sun for European Macedonia," promising voters rapid EU and NATO accession and attacking the government on its economic performance over the last year. Sekerinska seeks to hold Gruevski responsible for the DPA boycott of government in March, which resulted from a failure to compromise on the use of the Albanian language in parliament by committee chairs and the pension status of former ethnic Albanian combatants in the 2001 conflict. SDSM is drawing on government-opposition paralysis and rising inflation to make the case that it can govern more effectively than VMRO-DPMNE. Sekerinska is vowing to obtain a start date from Brussels for official EU accession talks within six months.

VMRO-DPMNE or SDSM could form a government without a major Albanian coalition partner, DPA or DUI. However, political custom in Macedonia holds that an Albanian party is part of the governing coalition. According to the 2002 census, ethnic Albanians constitute about one-fourth of the country's population. The DPA leads a three-party coalition and campaigns on its ability to deliver government resources to Albanian communities during its time in government. DPA is also campaigning on fulfilling its promises to bring foreign investment and reform to the health system. Its campaign slogan, *Jungjatjeta*, is a traditional greeting invoking longevity. For

its part, DUI (“You are victorious with us”) is campaigning on its stated ability to resolve the use of Albanian in state institutions and on gaining Macedonia’s diplomatic recognition of Kosovo. DUI has laid out an economic plan for a high-tech ‘green’ corridor between Skopje and the city of Tetovo some 40 kilometers away. The party is advocating for greater ethnic-Albanian representation in the government.

### ***Polls Show Lead for Center-Right***

A poll released by Macedonia’s Institute for Democracy on May 26<sup>th</sup> showed that more than 20 percent of likely voters are undecided about how they will vote on June 1. The VMRO-DPMNE coalition leads with 31.3 percent. The SDSM coalition stands at 11.2 percent. DUI has seen its ratings drop marginally to 9.1 percent. DPA stands at 5.6 percent. Prime Minister Gruevski is seen as the country’s most trustworthy politician. DUI’s Ali Ahmeti has seen his ratings slip two points to 9.1 percent. DPA’s Menduh Thaci remains steady at 4.5 percent.

VMRO-DPMNE’s high standing in the polls is leading observers to speculate as to whether or not the party will have a sufficiently comfortable parliamentary majority to overcome opposition objections to legislative content and procedure. Parliamentary rules of procedure are due to be revised and will require cross-party consent, as will language-use legislation.

The decision of which Albanian party becomes part of the governing coalition will have important implications for parliament’s upcoming agenda. DUI and DPA both claim they should be part of the government. DUI claims the party with the most votes should be in government. The DPA, however, expects to remain in the government should VMRO-DPMNE prevail. Neither VMRO-DPMNE nor the SDSM has publicly declared its preferred coalition partners.

### ***“We Can And We Must!”***

Similar to the parliamentary elections in 2006, the 2008 campaign has been marked by several violent clashes--mainly in the western part of the country. The Citizens’ Association MOST, which is Macedonia’s leading nonpartisan election observation group, has reported instances of voter intimidation, shootings and vandalism targeting party headquarters, as well as the illegal use of municipal facilities, official vehicles, and human resources, including children, for campaign purposes. Mr. Ahmeti claims that an attempt on his life was made when gunshots were fired at his vehicle and other vehicles – which were empty at the time – during a campaign visit to a village near Tetovo.

In a joint statement on May 16, EU Ambassador Erwan Fouere and U.S. Ambassador Gillian Milovanovic expressed concerns over the violence and warned that it could jeopardize Macedonia’s Euroatlantic aspirations.

In 2006, NDI had organized a Code of Conduct for Free and Fair Elections under the banner of *It Must Be Fair*. The code was signed in a televised public signing ceremony by all the leaders of all major political parties and publicized in a large-scale and nation-wide media campaign. According to international and domestic analysts, the Code of Conduct and its wide publication helped to quell campaign violence by holding the parties accountable and reminding them to call

activists to order. As problems arose, the Code of Conduct provided an important reference point in dealing with incidents and contributed to ensuring that the 2006 ballot was qualified as largely meeting international standards.

Concerning this election cycle, on May 8, 36 party leaders signed NDI's Code in a public ceremony in the National Assembly, covered by the country's major television networks. With the support of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the British, Dutch, and Swiss governments, NDI is implementing a large-scale media campaign publicizing the Code under the motto "We Can And We Must!" (<http://kirilica.com.mk/vest.asp?id=6044>). Based on the successful strategy in 2006, the campaign includes large-format advertisements of the Code in all major Macedonian and Albanian language newspapers, some 60 strategically placed billboards across the country, 720,000 leaflets and newspaper inserts, as well as several thousand television and radio announcements.



A party activist in Kumanovo displays her party's program along with copies of the "We Can And We Must" code of conduct.

In cooperation with MOST and the Macedonian Women's Lobby, NDI has organized a country-wide grassroots campaign to raise awareness for the Code among local party branches and leaders, deploying its staff to facilitate discussions on the Code among local party leaders and the public in town hall meetings, at party rallies, and other local community events.

After the tumultuous beginnings of the electoral campaign, NDI is using the Code to serve as a valuable tool for the public to hold political parties accountable to their pledge of campaigning democratically and ethically

throughout the election campaign period and on election day. Macedonia's ability to conduct peaceful and fair elections will be decisive for its Euroatlantic integration prospects and for its democratic transition.

As elsewhere in the western Balkans, Macedonia's democratic transition will of course continue after the elections, when attention will turn back to parliament, and specifically on the ability of political parties to find consensus on reform legislation and parliamentary rules of procedure to stave off legislative paralysis. At an institutional level parliament will aim to improve its institutional outreach to the public. Members of parliament will seek to increase constituent contact. Civil society groups representing a variety of issues will want direct participation in the legislative process. These efforts, if successful, will build political stability in Macedonia over the long-term, and enable the country to join the Euroatlantic community of democracies.