

Macedonia: Local Elections, 10th September 2000: First Round

The first round of local elections for both mayors and councillors was held in Macedonia on 10th September 2000. The conduct of the 1999 presidential election - especially in Western Macedonia - had been strongly criticized by international observers. Attention was once again focused on this small nation whose fortunes are deeply intertwined with the international community's plans for the future of the Balkans.

BHHRG sent four observers to monitor the 10th September poll. 3 members of the team had monitored previous elections in the country including the 1998 parliamentary poll and the controversial 1999 presidential election as well as the re-runs demanded afterwards by observer groups like the OSCE. Because allegations of malpractice had once again been made about the likely conduct of the poll in the Western - overwhelmingly Albanian-populated - area of the country the two teams concentrated their activities there as well as in the majority Albanian areas in and around Skopje.

Background

It is almost a year since the presidential election was held and Macedonia continues to suffer from many of the problems that prevail in what are termed 'transition economies'. The ruling coalition consisting of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), the Democratic Alternative (DA) and the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) has pursued an IMF/European Union dictated economic policy involving privatization, shutting down uneconomic industries and high taxation - VAT, for example, is levied at 19%. It will come as no surprise to learn that 30% of the population is registered as out of work.

Recently, the leading coalition party has suffered defections. Six VMRO MPs left the party in August and set up the True Macedonian Reform Option party under the rather confusing name of VMRO-VMRO. In what seemed to be an acknowledgment of the government's unpopularity the prime minister Ljubco Georgievski has indicated on several occasions that he would 'call' early parliamentary elections if the coalition lost the local elections by more than 10%. However, it was quickly pointed out that this such a decision could only be made by parliament not by any unilateral action taken by the prime minister.

In other words, the political climate in Macedonia is very volatile. The main opposition party the Social Democrats (SDSM) were pinning their hopes on winning back support lost in 1998 in these local elections. They had joined with three other parties - the Liberal Democratic Party, the Socialist Party and the League for Democracy to form a coalition called 'Za - Zajedno' - perhaps hoping to replicate the success of the Serbian opposition's Zajedno coalition in the local elections held in 1996.

But the opposition in Macedonia does not only have the domestic constituency to think about. The governing coalition is popular with the international community as it has adopted a mollifying position towards neighbouring Kosovo despite evidence that much lawlessness in the form of weapons and drug smuggling is imported from the province. A great deal of internationally donated aid also ends up in Macedonia, particularly in the Western parts of the country. In January three policemen were killed during a shoot-out in the Albanian village of Aračino as they intervened in, what many believed to be, a mafia operation. In recent days there have been more recorded incidents of violence between Macedonian border guards and intruders from Kosovo.

It came as a surprise to many observers when the DPA led by the radical Albanian nationalist, Arben Xhaferi, joined a coalition with the supposedly nationalist VMRO in 1998. While some hailed the decision as an example of constructive political dialogue others saw it as a cynical ploy whereby Mr. Xhaferi would be able to run his part of Macedonia as a

fiefdom, relatively untroubled by the central authorities in Skopje. Meanwhile VMRO would look after its own interests unhindered in the rest of the country. Since then, it is alleged, the DPA has more or less 'taken over' Western Macedonia with Xhaferi appointing all leading officials, including the local police chiefs.

Election rules

In most places voters were handed two ballot papers – one for the local mayor, the other for local councillors although here the voter was asked to choose which party he/she supported. The number of local government representatives would be worked out from this on a proportional basis e.g. 25% for party X translates into that percentage of councillors. However, in large towns like the capital Skopje the voter received 4 ballot papers, 2 for the overall city council and mayor plus 2 others for local mayors and councils.

Perspex ballot boxes were provided for each set of ballot papers. The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) produced a series of voter education posters which were visible in all polling stations on 10th September. No doubt, the message these posters were designed to communicate was accurate: a voter is shown putting two ballot papers into each box at the same time. However, in some parts of Macedonia where multiple voting has been the norm they could have been taken as an invitation to vote more than once.

IFES also ruled that those unable to understand the proceedings should be allowed to seek help from other members of the public, presumably, friends or relatives, rather than polling officials. However, such a regulation can only legitimise fraud particularly in Albanian areas where women are traditionally told (and shown) how to vote by their men-folk, or other men in authority over them.

The voter card introduced for the parliamentary election in 1998 continues to be used. It is obligatory for a voter to produce the card which is stamped by a commission member when he/she has voted. The voter must also produce valid evidence of identification as well. There were serious problems with distribution when the card was introduced in 1998. While many of these have since been cleared many commissions seem to ignore the requirement for formal identification once the card had been produced. Abuse of the voting card is now, perhaps, the major source of fraud at work in Macedonian elections.

Another unsatisfactory element in the process that continues, despite criticism, is the unsatisfactory design of the polling booths. In fact, there are no such things, just three-sided pieces of cardboard frequently barely 10 inches high placed on a table-top. These may meet OSCE and Council of Europe specifications but it is all too easy to see how someone has voted and to influence/intimidate someone while voting.

Western Macedonia

The revenues sent back to Western Macedonia from the large number of Albanians working in Western European countries like Germany and Switzerland have enriched the region for many years. Large houses, for example, line the streets of Tetovo and neighbouring villages. However, the rate of construction seems to have increased tenfold since BHHRG travelled around the area in November 1999. Some villages seem to have been entirely rebuilt – Debresh, for one has seen a vast rash of building: luxurious mansions boast pillars, balustrades and marble pavements. The floors in the local school are also made of marble. The controversial University of Tetovo is now housed in a large new building near the centre of the town – donated by an "anonymous donor". As much of the building material, e.g. factory-made red bricks, is strikingly similar to materials donated to the reconstruction of Kosovo there is a strong suspicion that such materials have been siphoned off from aid conveyors.

The opposition PDP maintains that the benefits of rule by Xhaferi's DPA have not filtered down to the rest of the population, which is all too likely in situations like this. However, expensive, Western cars and new houses are visible in both towns and villages. The Party

for Democratic Prosperity (PDP) supported the opposition's candidate for president, Tito Petkovski, in 1999. However, due to orchestrated acts of intimidation its members played little part in the run-off held on 14th November. The party saw the local elections as an opportunity to assert itself claiming, with some justification, that local issues were of more importance to its supporters than the presidential poll.

BHHRG monitored the second round of the presidential election in Western Macedonia, returning for the run-offs demanded by the authorities which took place on 5th December. As made clear in the Groups 2 reports [BHHRG **Macedonia Presidential Election 1999**] these polls were marked by serious fraud: extensive and widespread multiple voting, ballot stuffing and violence. Local observers for Petkovski were chased away from polling stations and BHHRG observers visited one domestic observer in the hospital at Gostivar where he had been taken after being repeatedly kicked by groups of unidentified youths.

The question in everyone's minds was - would this state of affairs take place again? Although the leading foreign observer mission, the OSCE, had strongly criticized this aspect of the presidential election this had not led to wider condemnation from the international community. One recalls, for example, how the US State Department quickly followed up on OSCE criticism of the 1996 Albanian parliamentary poll with demands for fresh elections. In the case of Macedonia Washington has been noticeably silent.

At the same time, observers have to separate fact from hyperbole—rumours tend to fly in the Balkans and there was no shortage of them as the local elections proceeded on 10th September. The assumption was widespread in Macedonia that, somehow, events in the West of the country would automatically replicate those that took place the previous November. BHHRG's observations found although old habits die hard, the situation was not quite the same.

Election Day

BHHRG observers visited polling stations in Tetovo, Gostivar, Debresh, Žerovljane as well as Želino, Aračino, Sarai and Velika Krusa. They observed the counts in Sarai and Aračino. It was noticeable that, despite the controversial aspects of the poll mentioned above, BHHRG only encountered one OSCE team of observers. Questioned throughout the day, commission members stated that they had received no visits from international monitors. Neither had they any knowledge of the domestic observer teams set up and trained by the US National Democratic Institute (NDI), except in Aračino. Surely, it should have been imperative to position such observers in polling stations in Western Macedonia where most previous controversies had occurred?

BHHRG visited the agricultural training school in Tetovo which housed 7 polling stations. In November 1999 these stations had been the centre of serious fraud and unrest. On this occasion, fewer people were milling around both outside and inside the building; the atmosphere was calmer although one of the Group's observers saw fighting as they left the school even as a Macedonian official _ the head teacher _ was saying that everything there was fine – as it had been in 1999 according to him.

By 11.00 am only circa 15% of people had voted in all 7 stations and there were few people in the voting rooms during the visit. However, as we arrived in No. 1990 a man was obtaining three sets of ballot papers by producing three voting cards. He waited some time in anticipation that the observers would leave although he was finally obliged to cast (one) ballot. Taking the other papers with him he was observed going into a neighbouring room, presumably with the intention of casting them into other ballot boxes away from prying eyes. The use of several voting cards by one person was a major source of fraud in 1999. At Debresh, near Gostivar a man was presenting 2 cards to the commission as the observers walked in. As they left an aggressive man produced 4 voting cards from his back pocket.

In all the polling stations visited election commissions were made up of mixed party members and party observers – at least, that is what we were told. As few of them seemed to

have any identification it was open to them to claim membership/affiliation to any party or candidate without outside observers being in a position to know differently. None of those approached by BHHRG during the day made any complaints unlike 1999 when, even in very difficult circumstances, some observers were outspoken about the irregularities they had observed. There seemed to be many more DPA officials.

A low turn-out was evident during the day. By 18.15 pm at Želino 65% had voted but the commission chairman said he expected an 80% participation by 19.00 when voting ended – presumably in the ensuing three-quarters of an hour. Observers were told regularly that “people were in the fields” and would vote later. In this polling station there had been an 85% turn-out in the presidential election. At Žerovlanje where 55% had voted by 15.45 pm, the chairman said he expected a 95% turn out - the figure for the presidential election.

In Želino examination of the voters’ registers revealed that c.85% of names had been ringed, indicating that these people had voted even though the percentages given to the observers was 55%. One of the Perspex boxes revealed at least 6 ballot papers sitting on the top of the pile, folded and dropped in together. At the count in Aračino out of 1055 registered voters 566 people had voted according to the register but only 474 ballot papers were in the boxes. The suspicion is raised that, had not observers been present extra ballot papers would have been thrown into the box.

On 12th September the PDP announced that it was refusing to take part in the second round of the election due to fraud, intimidation, violence experienced by its supporters including commission members and observers on 10th September. After visiting a polling station in Gostivar at c.16.00 on election day BHHRG looked in at a local PDP office to ask party workers their opinions about the conduct of voting so far that day. A spokesman for the party (who refused to give his name) alleged that some people were going around different polling stations voting at least ten times. He said that PDP observers had left several polling stations and in the village of Debresh (on the outskirts of Gostivar) a PDP commission member had left the polling station - No. 426 - alleging that a DPA member had attempted to stuff 400 votes into the ballot box(es).

BHHRG travelled to that village immediately to investigate the allegation. As we arrived a voter was putting 2 polling cards into his pocket. The chairman of the commission from the DPA confirmed that his colleague from the PDP had left – at 14.20, but he denied the charge of multiple voting. It would certainly take quite a long time to put anything like 400 ballot papers into the boxes. However, there was evidence from this polling station and others of people voting more than once giving basic credence to the allegation. In fact, as the observers left a thick-set man standing outside the polling station pulled out at least 4 voting cards from his pocket.

Things would have been much easier to clarify in Western Macedonia had independent observers of the kind supposedly trained by the NDI been present. Our observers were told by commission members and domestic observers that they belonged to this or that party but we had no means of confirming this. Identity documents should be provided in the future by the Macedonian authorities although it stands to reason that people could use them improperly. The one thing that does stand out is that neither domestic observers nor commission members made any complaints when asked for their views on the conduct of the poll and some of these people claimed to be representatives of the PDP. If they really were from what is, in reality, the opposition Albanian party then they certainly appeared to have colluded in some of the malpractice witnessed on election day.

Results

As this report is written full results for the 10th September poll are still awaited. The original projections by the leading Social Democratic Party (SDSM)-led coalition that it would achieve overall success in the election seems not to have been proved correct and prime minister Georgievski now says, even though there is to be another round of voting, that the coalition government will not resign. (An NDI representative told BHHRG observers on the eve of the local polls that whatever the local election results there would be no early general election!)

So far, according to the Central Election Commission in Skopje:

51 mayors have been elected in the first round of voting: 22 positions were won by the joint opposition plus the mayoralty of Skopje; VMRO and DA – 16; DPA, 11 and PDP – 1. The second round of elections for mayors will take place in Struga, Ohrid, Bitola, Strumica, Gostivar and Kavadarci on 24th September.

A number of complaints are being considered by the CEC.

Turnout: 61%

Conclusions

Indications of fraud

The element of urgency that marked the conduct of the second round of the presidential election in 1999 was absent in the local polls conducted on 10th September. Last year the opposition candidate, Tito Petkovski, was ahead in the first round of voting. The ruling coalition was determined that his rival and the candidate of the ruling party VMRO-DPMNE, Boris Trajkovski, should win the election. To this end, the DPA in Western Macedonia pulled out all the stops by using fraud, intimidation and violence to help produce the necessary turnaround in the overall result.

On 10th September BHHRG observers saw a similar pattern of fraud, but to a much lesser degree. This may be not unconnected with the fact that the turnout that day was low. In many polling stations visited there were no voters in the room while the BHHRG conducted their interviews with officials. Tallies between voter registers and figures provided by electoral commissions indicated that, in some places at least, the figures for people voting will have been inflated.

Apart from the incident at the agricultural college in Tetovo BHHRG neither saw nor heard compelling evidence of violence during the day. Macedonian radio broadcast claims made that guns were being fired in and around a polling station in Sarai, near Skopje. When BHHRG observers arrived they met a noisy scene: a wedding had taken place in the same building as a polling station and the revelries were very loud. In a heightened atmosphere it is always possible that innocent, but noisy, occasions like this give rise (wrongly) to suspicions of violence. However, this does not rule out that the possibility that incidents took place – there is obviously hostility between the two main Albanian parties.

Shortage of observers

It is with regret that the Group's observers encountered only one OSCE monitoring mission – at Aracino. In fact, the atmosphere outside the polling station there was somewhat tense with a large mainly male crowd awaiting the results as night fell which may have led the OSCE to leave the scene just before the count took place. Elsewhere, the situation was that there were no observers, domestic or foreign. The OSCE had pledged over 200 monitors for the local elections but it is hard not to believe that only a fraction of that number were in Macedonia on 10th September.

Women's rights still infringed

One of the most glaring problems in the Albanian areas of Macedonia is the role of women in the election process. BHHRG saw **no** women members of election commissions or women observers. On top of this, Albanian women voters are obviously unable to mark a ballot paper without some male member of their families/clans telling them where to put the cross on the paper. As the international community is so committed to promoting women's rights as well as encouraging their participation in 'civil society' it is surprising that this glaringly obvious

deficiency in Macedonian public life is ignored. It is to be hoped that the 'voting fodder' provided by women in Macedonia will not be a feature of the forthcoming election in Kosovo.