

Macedonia Parliamentary Election 2002



Banners at a small, anti-NATO protest in Skopje

Recent elections bring a change of the guard to troubled Macedonia.

Background

The parliamentary election held in Macedonia on 15th September, 2002 was the first nationwide poll taken since violence broke out in the republic in 2001. The election was not only an opportunity for Macedonians to vote on domestic issues, like jobs and the economy, it was also a mandate on the Ohrid Agreement signed on 13th August, 2001 which was intended to bring fighting between ethnic Albanian rebels and the Macedonian security forces to an end. The international community's hope was that the election would represent a rejection of violence and prove that the Agreement presented the best way forward for future inter-ethnic harmony.

During the past year, Macedonia has remained a troubled land. A small NATO-led operation 'Amber Fox' has been in place to monitor the peace. But, although fighting has formally stopped and the ethnic Albanian NLA disbanded, there are always rumours of another insurgency, possibly conducted by some new guerrilla-type formation. On 5th August, the Interior Ministry announced the appearance of a new paramilitary organization – the Army of the Republic of Ilirida. Although ethnically-mixed police forces have been set up, they have yet to have much impact, particularly in Albanian-majority villages – isolated acts of violence still occur.

Meanwhile, on the political front the international community threw its support behind a change of government in Skopje, favouring the coalition Together for Macedonia, *za Makedonija*, whose major component is the Social Democratic Party (SDSM). On the Albanian side they turned to Ali Ahmeti's new party, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). The governing Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO) was branded as 'nationalist' and their coalition partners, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) fingered for corruption. The international community's love affair with Mr. Ahmeti was evident – they seem to favour him above all the others.

In order to buttress support for a new government, the West has funded numerous NGOs, particularly in the capital, Skopje. One leading organization, the International Crisis Group, with close ties to the Western political establishment published a damning report highlighting corruption in Macedonia on 14th August, 2002 - one day before campaigning started for the September election. The report's culprits were VMRO and its allies in the DPA. Only one paragraph in it deals with corruption allegations made during the SDSM's period in office, even though many Macedonians have told BHRG that they regard both the major Macedonian parties as tainted by corruption during their periods in office. The author of the report, Edward Joseph, has had a long career in the Balkans since 1992.

Of course, much that is written about Macedonia is for foreign consumption – few people will have struggled through the 52 page ICG report. But, the involvement of the West at all levels of Macedonian society from the military to so-called 'civil society' only adds credence to the beliefs of those who say that the country's recent troubles have been fomented by outsiders. Even if all the suspicions of Western promotion of the violence that erupted last year remain unproved, the bottom line is clear and incontrovertible: that 40,000 heavily-armed Western troops based in neighbouring Kosovo could have shut down the rebel army of the NLA in a few hours had they chosen to do so.

Introduction

BHHRG representatives have visited Macedonia twice in the past year, both during the period of hostilities and again, in February 2002, when a shaky peace was in force. The Group's monitors have also observed elections in the republic in 1998, 1999 and 2000. They have watched Macedonia's reputation plunge from its original status as a paragon of inter-ethnic harmony to one akin to other regions in the Balkans where corruption is rife and minorities are discriminated against. This sudden turn-around which took place shortly after the fall of the Milosevic regime in Serbia has always seemed bizarre and inexplicable if viewed in purely local terms.



Graffiti outside a polling station in the heavily - Albanian populated village of Saraj near Skopje

Introduction

Coalition governments have ruled Macedonia since independence in 1991. The outgoing government in Macedonia is a coalition of a right-wing Macedonian party together with a hard-line Albanian party - the VMRO-DPMNE and the Albanian DPA. However, although VMRO is acknowledged to be a nationalistic formation it accepted the Ohrid Agreement which gave the Albanian minority more rights. And, although the Macedonian security forces gained a reputation for (selected) acts of brutality during the 2001 uprising - the Interior Minister, Ljube Boskovski, and his paramilitary formations have been singled out for harsh criticism - many more Macedonians have been displaced by the fighting than ethnic Albanians. In fact, all mainstream Macedonian parties have bowed to pressure from the international community despite widespread unease in the majority Macedonian population as a whole.

Why then should the international community prefer one party rather than another in Macedonia? All of them have been compliant, seemingly unable to escape from the bullying demands of their more powerful masters. It still seems that people are prepared to put their faith in a change of government even though its room for manoeuvre will be very slight.

Election Facts:

The Macedonian parliament has 120 seats.

30 parties and 8 coalitions contested the election. There were 3,300 candidates.

MAIN PARTIES AND COALITIONS

Coalitions

Together for Macedonia coalition - strongest opposition coalition, consisting of the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM), the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the Democratic League of Bosniaks, the United Party of Roma, the Democratic Alliance of Vlachs and several other minor parties.

VMRO-DPMNE [Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity] - LP coalition - ruling coalition consisting of VMRO-DPMNE and the Liberal Party.

Main Parties

Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM)

Founded in 1991. Leader: Branko Crvenkovski. Strongest opposition party of centre-left orientation, former president Kiro Gligorov's party which held power in 1995-1998.

VMRO-DPMNE

Founded in 1991. Leader: Ljubco Georgievski. Ruling party of centre-right orientation, but policies have some rigid leftist elements; has been in power since 1998.

Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)

Founded in 1997 as a merger of Democratic Party and Liberal Party; the LDP in its present form was set up after a split with LP in 2000. Leader: Risto Penov. Moderate, party of the centre.

Liberal Party (LP)

Founded in 1990 as the Alliance of Reform Forces of Macedonia, adopted the name of Liberal Party in 1993, split from merger with LDP in 2000. Leader: Stojan Andov. Junior ruling coalition partner. Self-declared centre party.

Democratic Alternative (DA)

Leader: Vasil Tupurkovski, entered government as junior coalition partner after elections in 1998, but later left

Democratic Centre (DC)

Leader: Radomir Karangeleski. Splinter party from the DA.

Socialist Party of Macedonia (SPM)

Founded in 1990. Leader: Ljubisav Ivanov. Party of left orientation, former SDSM coalition partner

Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP, PPD in Albanian)

Leader: Abdurrahman Haliti. First Albanian party in Macedonia. Former SDSM coalition partner.

Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA, PDSH in Albanian)

Leader: Arben Xhaferri. Largest ethnic Albanian party. VMRO-DPMNE's coalition partner in 1998 elections.

Democratic Union for Integration (DUI, BDI in Albanian)

Leader: Ali Ahmeti. Established after the recent conflict in Macedonia. Ahmeti is the former leader of the ethnic Albanian rebel group - the National Liberation Army (ONA, UCK in Albanian)

National Democratic Party (NDP, PDK in Albanian)

Leader: Kastriot Haxhirexha

Other parties:

New Democracy (ND), leader: Cedo Petrov.

VMRO-True Macedonian Reform Option, leader: Boris Stojmenov. Splinter party from the VMRO-DPMNE.

Democratic Party of Macedonia, leader: Tomislav Stojanovski-Bombaj

Democratic Alliance, leader: Pavle Trajanov

Democratic League of Bosniaks, leader: Rafet Muminovic

United Party of Roma, leader: Nedzet Mustafa

Democratic League of Turks

Democratic Alliance of Vlachs

The Campaign

One of the final planks of the Ohrid Agreement was change to the election system in Macedonia which was previously a mixture of proportional representation and first-past-the-post. The changes were finally approved by parliament on 18th June 2002. The new election law introduces a fully proportional voting system with the country divided into 6 constituencies. The threshold for a party's entrance into parliament has been reduced from 5% to 3%.

This change played a critical role in the election as turnout became crucial – if the Albanians turned out to vote in large numbers (as they usually do) their parties could, conceivably, get the largest share of the overall vote. Whereas BHHRG had encountered widespread voter apathy among Macedonians in the Spring, by the time of the election people realised that if they didn't vote the possibility of a parliament dominated by the Albanian parties was not impossible. Mr. Ahmeti himself has said that he wants the DUI to become the biggest party in Macedonia. This fear rather than any widespread enthusiasm for any particular party drove the population into the polling stations on 15th September.

Opinion polls had consistently put the Za Makedonija coalition in the lead. This is presumably due to the ongoing economic problems in the country which are inevitably blamed on the

outgoing government. However, it is also the case that the international community has favoured the SDSM since last year when the party was the first to rush forward and demand complete cooperation with them over Albanian demands. On 27th July 2001, SDSM leader, Branko Crvenkovski said it all: "waging war with the whole world will not save Macedonia ...our priority will be gaining international support".

Since elections were called, the West has played a crucial role in steering the conduct of both the election campaign and the poll. Large numbers of Western-funded NGOs have sprung up in the last year and organizations like the US National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) were present in Macedonia on several occasions to monitor and train election monitors. It was also reported, for example, that 24,000 anti-government newspapers were distributed free in Macedonian villages in the pre-election period. [[How to Take Down a Government](#)] [Chris Deliso, Antiwar.com 26.8.02](#)

The OSCE has a permanent presence in the country under the terms of the Ohrid Agreement as do the EU and NATO – all have provided personnel to monitor the poll. In other words, much funding has been forthcoming, ostensibly to help the Macedonians prepare for the election. Inevitably some of it - if only unintentionally - will have helped mould opinion along the way.

BHHRG's observers were amazed by the lavishness of the election campaign at street level. A rich country like Sweden with 9 m. voters had a modest campaign before its election - also held on 15th September - compared with poverty-stricken Macedonia (pop. 2.2 m.) where large, glossy posters were plastered around the country's towns and villages. Even smaller parties seem to have benefited from the crock of gold. On the final night of campaigning (13th September) BHHRG attended the za Makedonija's final election rally in Skopje. Large numbers of people had obviously been brought in from the provinces to attend the event. However, as BHHRG mingled with the crowd it was apparent that many of them were either children or teenagers in the 14-18 age group. In other words, people without the right to vote. There was a large crowd, but it was generally agreed that fewer people had been present than at the previous night's VMRO rally. Certainly television pictures seemed to suggest that was the case. VMRO's critics claimed that as the party of power, it was able to get the crowds out onto the street. However, a large number of buses had also been hired to bring opposition party supporters to town. These buses were seen driving down the motorway towards Skopje again on the night of 16th September bringing supporters to the Za Makedonija victory celebration.

In the days preceding the campaign BHHRG learned that VMRO had distributed large numbers of flyers (many were still lying about in the street) warning the public of the SDSM's ties with Albanian extremists. Others portrayed Branko Crvenkovski slumped on a chair during a party rally – the worse for wear from drink, according to VMRO propaganda. Generally speaking, the party's rhetoric had hardened as defeat appeared likely. While it is probably true to say that most Macedonians were sceptical about their political parties, VMRO will have picked up some support at the last moment as suspicion mounted that, despite its denials, the SDSM was about to cohabit with terrorists.



Polling station No. 1990 warns voters to leave their guns at home

Election Observation

The OSCE had promised to field 900 international monitors. In fact, they claimed that over 1000 were there on the day. Foreign observers, included groups from bodies like the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe as well as the aforementioned NDI and IRI. Added to which, locally-based personnel with NATO, the EU and Western embassies provided observers. On top of this, the US-based IFES provided voter education while 3,799 or so domestic observers had been trained and given financial support by the NDI, USAID and Britain's Westminster Foundation under the name *Most* (bridge), a member of which was present in all the polling stations visited by BHHRG. As well as foreigners, there were always at least 6 (sometimes more) party and candidate observers in the polling stations. This must be one of the most heavily-monitored elections in the international community's history. The Macedonian authorities had also received logistical help from European countries, including the ballot boxes which were donated by Denmark.

Various changes had been made to the election procedure. A previous system whereby every voter had to present a polling card which was stamped by the election commission has been abolished. This was a sensible decision as the cards had tended to cause hold-ups in the past as well as providing an opportunity for fraud e.g. people would vote on repeated occasions with several cards in different polling stations. A system of spraying invisible ink on the voters' fingers was also used to prevent multiple voting. When a prospective voter arrived in the polling station a light was beamed on his/her finger to ascertain that no traces of ink were present.



Early Voting
Election workers attempt to sort through clumsy files of pink envelopes

However, the picture was not very rosy on the 12th September when early voting took place in IDP centres around the country. BHHRG's monitors visited the Hotel Crystal in Kumanovo where c.1713 people were registered to vote, although refugees said that 1773 people should have been included. A different system had been put in place for this day. Not only was there an electoral register but voters' details were also filed away in pink envelopes according to the village they had been forced to leave. When a prospective voter presented him/herself not only did he have to sign the register he also had to be located in the box of pink envelopes which was not ordered alphabetically. By 11.30 only 47 people had voted and there was total chaos in the polling station. Local refugees made several (unsuccessful) attempts to have the voting stopped.

3 EU monitors were present while this was going on but, at lunchtime they left. By now, matters in this polling station were threatening to become seriously unpleasant. The voting room had filled up with Albanians, including large numbers of Albanian women observing from the side-lines. The situation was prima facie irregular: most of the country's IDPs are Macedonians yet by now most of the voters in this polling station were Albanians. As these people swarmed around the election commission, BHHRG filmed 2 men with several passports handing them out to 'voters'.

Two members of the Central Election Commission in Skopje had been called in. They both told BHHRG that the problems had been caused by a VMRO official attempting to influence the voting. This 'rumour' had been spread around earlier, although no evidence was presented by anyone. It seemed an interesting comment on the objectivity of the Macedonian election authorities (at least, of these representatives) that such rumours were being peddled to the local press and international observers before any proper enquiry had taken place.

As local Macedonians were attempting again to have the proceedings stopped, BHHRG's monitors - who had already made 3 visits to the Hotel Crystal - left the polling station. By now, several men of a threatening mafia appearance had appeared and violence could not be ruled out. Although two police officers had been in the building during the day they had done nothing to restore order apart from making a couple of desultory visits to the voting room.

The combination of various checks and balances as well as the omnipresence of election monitors meant that polling on election day itself was much more orderly than it had been in the past (in BHHRG's experience). The Group's monitors saw no examples of multiple voting on 15th September and the queues and chaos that had previously marred Macedonian elections (particularly in the Albanian areas of the country) were absent.

However, there were some problems, for example, in several polling stations people had

been left off the voting register – in some places this added up to c.10%. of voters. Unlike most countries in the former Communist bloc, the register of voters in Macedonia is not displayed in the polling station itself, or anywhere publicly, for that matter. Copies are kept by the local municipalities and although the authorities (and the international monitors) urged people to check whether or not they were included before the cut-off date on 3rd August, this presented an added hurdle, particularly for the elderly.

Some allegations of violence were made in the post-election period and over 50 complaints were lodged with the state election commission. However, on the surface, at least, polling arrangements were vastly improved on past performance. One still has to ask whether a vast international input including nearly 5000 election monitors will always be necessary for Macedonian elections to be deemed satisfactory

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Albanian parties and voters

[Wolf in sheep's clothing? Ali Ahmeti's election poster](#)

Until 2002 the Albanian community in Macedonia had, in the main, supported two political parties, the Democratic party of Albanians (DPA) led by Arben Xhaferi and the Party of Democratic Prosperity (PDP) now under Abdurrahman Haliti. The PDP had previously been the coalition partner of the SDSM, while the DPA had joined the recent VMRO-led government. A smaller National Democratic Party, the NDA tended to have local support among the Albanian community.

As BHHRG has pointed out on many occasions, the various rights and privileges accorded to ethnic minorities in the Macedonian constitution used to be hailed as exemplary – since independence an Albanian party has always been part of the government. Language rights,

including an Albanian-language media, have always been in place. For the past 10 years only isolated incidents of Albanian violence have taken place – on the whole, the two communities lived harmoniously together. A statement that Skopje is a segregated city and that Macedonians fear to cross the River Vardar into the Albanian quarter is patent nonsense. (see: William Kole, AP, 17.9.02)

Why, then did fighting broke out in 2001 making Ali Ahmeti the leader of the ethnic Albanian army, the NLA, into a local hero? Demands for human rights are certainly not the answer. BHHRG also doubts that many Macedonian Albanians really want a Greater Albania with its headquarters in Tirana. Whoever instigated the rebellion, it was to be particularly beneficial to local elements in the border areas with Kosovo as it further marginalized the central government in Skopje and enabled their criminal activities to proceed unchecked. Who knows how many ordinary Albanians really support this project? These are close-knit communities with a tradition of supporting their leaders 100%. A heavy turn-out in an election means input into the selection of a raft of local office holders and the patronage that comes with such power.

The favoured leader for Macedonia's Albanians is now Ali Ahmeti. As the year turned, the soldier had taken off his fatigues, put on a smart suit and presented himself as a man of peace. Despite the fact that the NLA remained on the US State Department's list of terrorist organizations, it became clear that Ahmeti was the West's favoured partner in Macedonia's Albanian community. He was fêted far and wide – BHHRG heard a German diplomat at Sarajevo airport in June, 2002 giving his "regrets" for having to miss a party hosted by Ahmeti. Western journalists couldn't resist his charms. In November 2001, British journalist, Timothy Garton Ash noted approvingly that Ahmeti offered him "a very good whisky – a 15-year-old Bowmore from the Scottish island of Islay" when he visited his mountain fastness. ["The Good Terrorist?" by Timothy Garton Ash, *The Guardian*, 10/11/01]

As a new man of peace, Mr. Ahmeti tried to encourage the different Albanian political formations to form one electoral bloc. But, his umbrella Council was short-lived and the older-established parties decided they wanted to keep things as they were. So, Mr. Ahmeti formed his own party, the Democratic Union for Integration, which was launched on 5th June 2001. Despite Ahmeti's stated policy of support for an integrated Macedonian state and claims that the DUI would be open to all ethnic groups he stood "under a large red and black Albanian flag" at the party's launch while "the Albanian national anthem played".

DUI quickly topped the polls among Albanian voters although nothing very much was known about the party's policies. Its late registration also meant that it was too late to have representation on local election commissions although DUI had a lot of posters in Albanian-populated areas of the country and party observers in the polling stations.

BHHRG visited DUI's party headquarters in Skopje on election day to see whether the party had any problems with the voting. Although DUI is situated in a substantial villa in the centre of town there is no sign whatsoever of any political activity in the building. When asked about the party's programme spokesman Ernad Fezulahu said the main aim was "equality" for Albanians. There was no written manifesto available to take the matter any further. The Group's monitors also visited Mr. Ahmeti's main headquarters outside Tetovo in the village of Mala Resica on 16th September. Again, there was an *ersatz* quality about the operation with electricity cables and telephone wires hanging messily outside the building as young men in black patrolled the area.

BHHRG had been told that there was much rivalry between Mr. Ahmeti and the older-established parties, in particular the DPA of Arben Xhaferi. It seems that many of DUI's foot soldiers are drawn from the ranks of the PDP and the party's vote dropped accordingly when the final results were announced. However, if tensions do exist, the DPA was not giving it away. A spokesman at Mr. Xhaferi's headquarters in Tetovo told BHHRG that the DPA would be the loyal opposition if DUI became the largest Albanian party and that they were only interested in pursuing "European values" – the party's banner features the US, NATO and EU flags.

Tetovo itself is now an overwhelmingly Albanian town as many Macedonians fled during and after the fighting. BHHRG met a small, dispirited group of Macedonians in the back streets in what was the old Macedonian district. The Group also visited Tetovo University and talked to students and postgraduates about the election and the future of that institution which has been threatened with closure since the opening of the South East European University in November 2001.

Several of the older students told BHHRG that they were now hopeful that the university would survive and based their hopes partly on the likely disappearance from the scene of Dr. Fadil Sulejmani the rector who had been widely criticized for his brand of extreme Albanian nationalism. Dr. Sulejmani had criticized both Xhaferi and Ahmeti when BHHRG interviewed him earlier in the year. The students supported the DUI because they claimed it was the only party to favour "equality" with the Macedonian population. They also said that many local functionaries associated with the DPA would be "removed" in the near future.

Some Macedonians wonder whether real equality would appeal to the Albanians. It is widely acknowledged that Albanian communities do not pay local taxes, or charges for services like electricity and water. The Group was told that when local officials have tried to collect such dues in Albanian populated areas, like the village of Aracinovo near Skopje, they are seen off with guns. No one who visits the Albanian areas can fail to notice the lavishness of the buildings as well as the number of BMWs and Mercedes driven by the locals. It is also noticeable that in the villages that suffered most in the fighting in 2001, like Matejce near Kumanovo, Macedonian houses were shelled and bombed by their own security forces while large Albanian compounds remained untouched.

While Macedonians are inevitably resentful about this state of affairs they say they only want peace. Although they are blamed for "nationalism" by the international community, Ljube Boskovski is a particular hate figure for, allegedly, organizing para-military formations with names like "Lions" and "Wolves", ordinary Macedonians have nothing to show for it.

Results

Turnout: 70%

Za Makedonija Coalition – 60; VMRO-DPMNE and Liberal Party - 33; DUI - 16; DPA – 7; PDP – 2; NDP and Socialist party, one each.

BHHRG visited the Socialist Party headquarters soon after voting ended on 15th. Victory had obviously been long anticipated as a posse of journalists and TV reporters were already in position with their cameras trained on a stage prepared for the winners to give their first press conferences. A beer tent was in place in the garden and music was playing. As the results became clear later in the evening, gun fire filled the air. Television pictures from Mr. Ahmeti's headquarters in Mala Resica also showed gun-toting body guards directing operations outside. Earlier as the polls closed, there was no media presence of any kind at VMRO headquarters.

By early morning on the 16th September, Ljubco Georgievski conceded defeat. At this stage it looked as though the SDSM-led coalition would have an overall majority in the parliament with 67 seats. However, since then, that figure has been reduced to 60 – just short of an overall majority and (conveniently, some have pointed out) eliminating all talk of Za Makedonija of governing alone. Anyway, the Ohrid Agreement commits the winners to cooperate with an Albanian political party. With 16 seats it will be difficult to exclude DUI completely.

The question remains as to whether Mr. Ahmeti himself will be a member of the future government. SDSM officials were quick to say that they would not cooperate with "terrorists" and it is near-impossible for Ahmeti to even visit Skopje at the moment as there is a warrant out for his arrest. Since the election, Mr. Ahmeti himself has said that he doesn't want a position in the new government.

However, it will be interesting to see whether this coyness holds. Albanian voters told BHHRG that they want the amnesty agreement for Albanian fighters to be extended to all participants in the uprising. It is not impossible that a new round of violence could erupt to make this happen – the Macedonian authorities have always given in in the past. Originally, the DUI demanded the justice and interior ministry portfolios but seem to have abandoned that idea for now. Suggestions have been made that the SDSM will go into coalition with their old partner, the PDP, who only have 2 seats in the new parliament. Then, the DUI itself will join up with the PDP and enter the government, almost by stealth.

VMRO complains of fraud and bias

The OSCE was quick to hail the elections as the cleanest ever. However, the opposition have since made allegations of fraud and complained about bias in the state election commission.

The fraud allegations were made by Interior Minister Boskovski who obtained a warrant to search the 11 October printing company's office in Prilip on the grounds that 488,000 ballot papers had been illegally destroyed on the premises. Allegations were also made that the Kometal Trade and Graphics Centre in Skopje was involved in the fraud. This factory is owned by Macedonian businessman and philanthropist, Trifun Kostovski a leading candidate on the SDSM list. Rumours have persisted that Kostovski could be the country's next PM – he is certainly popular in Macedonia due to his philanthropy and support for the women's volley ball team. He has denied any involvement in the printing of ballot papers and it is unlikely in the present climate that Boskovski's allegations will get very far. Whatever the truth, tampering with nearly half a million ballot papers seems a somewhat exaggerated charge in a country with only 1.6 m. voters.

As for the state election commission, VMRO claims bias in that the body's head – Mirjana Lazarova-Trajkovska has always voted for the opposition when disputes arose in the commission. However, the party has admitted that it changed the rules allowing the Macedonian president to appoint the head of the commission and must bear some responsibility for the outcome. As it happens Ms. Trajkovska (apparently no relation) worked with Boris Trajkovski during his time at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is "close" to the president. She has also received fulsome support from the international community. After her independence was impugned, the heads of the OSCE mission, Craig Jeness, and the OSCE/ODIHR, Julian Peal Yates rallied to her defence.

In fact, the representatives of the international community have also put out a joint statement underlining their support for the work of the Macedonian state election commission. It reads

Joint Statement by the EU Special Representative Alain Le Roy, Ambassador Ioannis Economou representing the EU Presidency, the United States Ambassador Lawrence Butler, OSCE Mission Ambassador Craig Jenness, NATO Ambassador Nicolaas Biegman and Charge d'Affairs of the European Commission Delegation Vassilis Maragos

"We welcome the announcement of the final results by the State Election Commission, within the deadline set by the law.

We reiterate our full support for the work of the State Election Commission. We recall the conclusion of the International Election Observation Mission stating that election commissions conducted their work in a neutral and professional manner and that the State Election Commission in particular operated transparently.

We therefore consider recent criticisms to be baseless.

The Commission has been subject to undue political pressure and unnecessary disruptions of

its work. We call on all concerned parties to submit any possible complaints to the appropriate bodies in accordance with the law, accept the results and participate in the smooth transfer of power, pledged by senior leaders on Sunday night.

Until now, the election process has been of a very high standard, which we hope will be maintained. We therefore expect the State Election Commission to be able to conclude its work without any further political interference."

As Macedonia is (still) supposed to be an independent country one might think that any disputes between its state election commission and certain political parties were the concern of the local authorities. It is unlikely that Mr. Butler would have welcomed recommendations from Mr. Georgievski et al. on how to conduct the counting of the votes in Florida during the 2000 election.

Conclusion

The conduct of the 2002 parliamentary election in Macedonia was an improvement on previous polls. BHHRG's observers were shocked by the level of fraud that they observed in both the 1999 presidential and 2000 local elections in the country, although they do not recall the OSCE making any serious criticism of these polls at the time. However, the chaotic situation that prevailed during early voting on 14th September should act as a warning that Macedonia could easily revert to its former habits and that ethnic tension is never far from the surface.

This inevitably leads to the question on many people's lips of whether fighting between Albanian guerrillas and Macedonian security forces could resume. At the moment, it looks unlikely. But BHHRG's observers were left in no doubt by the Albanians they talked to over the election weekend that they wanted more than Ohrid had delivered. It is all too likely that they would take to hills with their guns again if their demands are not met. The conduct of a new census proposed for November 2002 could be the crucible of further unrest.

It is also possible that violence might be 'triggered' by the various international players in the Balkans so as to increase the need for more intervention and a further diminution of Macedonia's sovereignty is all too possible.

For the moment, Macedonia's Social Democrats can enjoy their time in the sun – they were the pariahs of yesteryear, humiliated when outside intervention in the 1999 presidential campaign robbed their candidate, Tito Petkovski of victory. No doubt, they will be pushed aside in a few years time like VMRO. It is very revealing that Western journalists always qualify VMRO with the epithet 'nationalist' while the SDSM are 'former-Communists'. However, Ali Ahmeti is *sans puer et reproche* variously described in the Western media as: "untainted by corruption" ... "conciliatory" ... "moderate" .. " a reliable partner".

The legitimacy of the international community's interference in the affairs of sovereign states is again the issue. So, too, are the kinds of people used to further their aims. As the US Attorney-General, John Ashcroft rings his hands over rising drug addiction in American cities does he ever stop to think that his government's policies in the Balkans, for example, are accelerating the problem? Unlikely. But, the time is fast approaching when countries like Macedonia might as well hand their affairs over to their foreign occupiers rather than pretend to have any independent say in their own governance.