

## **THE REPUBLIC OF (NORTH) MACEDONIA – THE LAST DECADE**

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### **Abstract**

Processes of political changes escalated in the Republic of (North) Macedonia in recent years – the second decade of the 21st century, and especially after 2015. With the help of the external factor and as a result of the internal political events during those years, the situation in the RNM is characterised with three key changes: of the power, name and Constitution of the state. The ten years during which the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (IMRO-DPMNU) and Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski were in power (2006–2016) generated tension among some of the leading political parties, notably the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDUM). They accused him of corruption and of stopping the processes of NATO and EU accession. A real opportunity for change of the rule in the RNM was created with the Pržino Agreement (2015) and with the active assistance of the EU representatives. Prime Minister Gruevski's firm stand against the change of the country's name under pressure and on its evaluation with a view to NATO and EU accession was not well received in the Western world. On its part, precisely SDUM was the party whose president Zoran Zaev openly and clearly supported the name change. That was a painful issue for a large part of the population of the RNM, but real conditions for a change of the name existed on account of the country's ethnic composition. The Albanian community took a firm stand in support of the new name. They skilfully used the signing of the Prespa Agreement between the RNM and Greece in 2018 to expand their rights and to make the Albanian language official over the entire territory of the country. Improved relations with the neighbours were an important prerequisite for NATO accession and for the start of the EU negotiations. In this connection, the agreement with Greece was preceded by an agreement between the RNM and Bulgaria. A serious challenge before the stabilisation and the process of EU integration of the RNM is perceived not only in the internal influence expressed with weak political elites, enormous economic problems, constant tension in the inter-ethnic relations, failure to cope with the corruption and the existing political revenge seeking, but also in the external influence, complying with the implementation of the agreements with the neighbours.

*Keywords:* Republic of Macedonia, Republic of North Macedonia, NATO, EU, Macedonians, Albanians.

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### **I. Introduction**

On the verge of the new century, the state clashed with numerous domestic political problems and escalation of the inter-ethnic conflicts. The danger of the escalation and spreading of the ethnic conflict and its transformation into civil war was successfully averted with the help of the international community (Stamova 2015a, 221–254). From a foreign policy perspective, during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the country had candidate status for EU membership and the doors of NATO were open for it. However, the main problem before its successful integration consisted in finding a solution to the issue of the country's name in its dispute with Greece.

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## II. Republic of Macedonia – The Second Decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

In spite of the serious efforts of the Republic of Macedonia, the EU did not set a date for the start of the accession negotiation in the beginning of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On its part, NATO was ready for rapid accession of the Balkan state, but only after the dispute on its name had been resolved. That position was clearly outlined at the NATO Summit in Bucharest in 2008, when Albania and Croatia received invitations to join the Alliance, but Macedonia did not. The country thus remained with totally blocked dialogue with NATO and the EU on account of the demands of Greece concerning the name and the implementation of the good-neighbourhood policy. That in turn created a security threat and resulted in escalation of the inter-ethnic tension. The country's growing destabilisation was strongly influenced by the deepening crisis in the domestic policy sphere in the autumn of 2012, provoked by the so-called "budget crisis."

It was connected with difficulties for adopting the new budget after it was blocked in the Assembly by the opposition. The political crisis continued in 2013, with the active help of the opposition, notably the left-wing SDUM that blocked on numerous occasions the Assembly's work on various issues. These processes intensified in 2014 after a series of elections in the country: five presidential and eight parliamentary, three of which pre-term.

President Gjorge Ivanov was elected for his second term in office, and the parliamentary elections were again won by the right-wing IMRO-DPMNU, also known as VMRO-DPMNE. According to SDUM, the elections were rigged and it refused to participate in the Assembly's work, insisting on the election of a caretaker government. In this connection, the opposition in the country declared a "hot political autumn" for yet another year, characterised by the addressing of important issues and problems facing the country, e.g., the absence of political dialogue, the dispute on the name, the NATO Summit in Cardiff after yet another failure of the country to join NATO at the Chicago Summit in 2012, the eagerly awaited annual report of the European Commission, economic issues like debt, fragile international relations, etc. (Stojanchova 2014)

The situation in the country was particularly dynamic in 2015, because then and in the subsequent 2016 the tendencies for change of power in the Republic of Macedonia became more and more visible. The process aimed at the change of governance was activated as a result of the internal political events in the state, as well as with the help of external structures, notably various nongovernmental organisations financed by centres abroad (Stamova 2019b, 197–222). It was characterised by three principal and significant changes: of power in the country, of its name that became Republic of North Macedonia (RNM), as well as of its Constitution. All that happened under great pressure for "successful" referendum, as well as with pressure exercised upon the MPs in the Assembly to vote in favour of those changes. The ethnic Albanian citizens were more comfortable with that process and accepted much more easily the changes, unlike the Macedonian community that rejected above all the new name of their state, although it was an important condition for NATO and EU accession.

Similarly, the IMRO-DPMNU that ruled the country until 2016, led by Nikola Gruevski, was resolutely against the change of the name of the state under external pressure. Naturally, that was not received well by the EU and NATO. Those who were in favour of the changed name and of the Prespa Agreement with Greece (<https://vmacedonia.com/politics/macedonia-greece->

[agreement.html](#)) were above all the representatives of the Albanian community. At the same time, a division was noticed on this issue among the Macedonians. This was used for extending the rights of the Albanians and that led to the possibility of adopting Albanian as official language over the entire territory of the state, not only in the areas where the Albanians are the majority.

### **III. The change in power in Republic of Macedonia**

The change in power took place in May 2017 with a SDUM government – the Macedonian party that failed to win a majority and ruled in coalition with representatives from the Albanian political spectrum. However, that did not lead to changes in the country's economic and social life.

The new government was shaken by permanent and numerous scandals. Prime Minister Zoran Zaev was sentenced and subsequently pardoned by two presidents: Branko Crvenkovski and Gjorge Ivanov. Zaev, who ruled the country with a very slim majority in Parliament, actually did not make any substantial changes, especially in the judiciary system, which is defined as being corrupt. Indeed, his involvement in corruption schemes was never proven, but suspicions remained. On the other hand, the promised NATO accession actually came true, but that was a small success because there was a clear position on the issues presented above already in 2008.

SDUM was the party whose president Zoran Zaev openly defended the change in the name in response to the demands of Greece. His position that “we need to bend our back in that respect” was acceptable to most EU Member States which supported his coming to power. In this context, at the height of the political crisis in the country, the West initiated the signing of the Pržino Agreement on 2 June 2015. IMRO-DPMNU had doubts that this led to various manipulations with the voter registers, while the postponement and the rescheduling of the dates of the elections created an atmosphere for victory of SDUM and of the leading Albanian party Democratic Union for Integration (DUI).

The Republic of North Macedonia is a divided state, both in ethnic and in political terms, between the two principal communities. This is particularly visible among the Macedonian parties and was manifested more clearly after IMRO-DPMNU was deposed. It won a majority of seats at the parliamentary elections in 2016, but was denied the right to form a government because the Albanian bloc, most probably on recommendation and under pressure from abroad, rejected the option of entering in a coalition with it. Moreover, in spite of the existence of a prior agreement for the formation of a government with the winners on both sides (Macedonian and Albanian).

The DUI party of Ali Ahmeti, which disregarded that principle in 2016, came out with a statement and “excuse” that “conditions were different” at that time. On the Macedonian side, SDUM was leader in the coalition of parties that formed a government headed by its leader Zoran Zaev. The Special Prosecution that had to fight corruption and the criminal activities of the IMRO-DPMNU, headed by a public prosecutor dependent on SDUM, was very hastily formed (Stamova 2019b, 200–201). Charges were brought against the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and he received a prison sentence in the “Tank” case for having purchased a

vehicle for the needs of his government not with a transparent procedure, but in a package deal for supplying police vehicles. He left the country due to the public threats of physical liquidation and found refuge in Hungary. It remains unclear how and with what support he managed to flee abroad where he was offered political protection.

It came out that the Special Prosecution and its head Katica Janeva, as well as some other prosecutors, were involved in public scandals. She created a huge administration, and being surrounded by relatives and friends, she aroused suspicions of links with certain criminal structures associated with the racketeering of famous Macedonian businessmen.

There were suspicions that they had connections with persons in the government, as well as personally with Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, which had a partial impact on the outcome of the new elections. Zoran Zaev's government was shaken by other scandals as well, connected with suspicions of corruption (companies close to the ruling circles receiving financial bonuses from various funds), and it was unable to withstand the pressure for early parliamentary elections.

It should be pointed out that the two rounds of the regular presidential elections in the country were held during Zoran Zaev's first government, on 21 April and 5 May 2019. Almost all similar elections, irrespective of the programme proposed, were won by the party that had majority of seats in the Assembly. In that case, too, the candidate Stevo Pendarovski proposed by SDUM and the ruling coalition defeated the IMRO-DPMNU candidate Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova. That was also in confirmation of the unwritten rule that the candidate that had attracted the majority vote of the Albanian ethnos was in an advantageous position.

The rising tension in the political atmosphere in the RNM at the end of 2019 led to new early elections. Following the provisions of the Pržino Agreement, a caretaker government headed by the former interior minister on the SDUM ballot paper Oliver Spasovski was elected on 3 January 2020. It had to discharge its functions until the early parliamentary elections, which were originally scheduled on 12 April. On 17 March, the leaders of the political parties in the country met with President Stevo Pendarovski and a decision was reached to postpone the elections on account of the spread of the COVID-19 infection in the RNM.

The early parliamentary elections were held on 15 July 2020 and they brought an interesting development on the political scene of the Republic of North Macedonia. Their outcome was surprising for almost all political parties. The two biggest parties that were in the preceding government, i.e., the Macedonian SDUM and the Albanian DUI, accused each other of corruption and inability to govern the state even during the pre-election campaign. In this connection, the two parties did not expect that they would be together in the government again. SDUM hoped to win more than 61 seats in the 120-member parliament, thus securing parliamentary majority.

Therefore, the social democratic alliance also formed a pre-election coalition with one of the smaller Albanian parties: the BESA Movement headed by Bilal Kasami. The victory of the earlier ruling party SDUM was thus secured with the support of the Albanian voices from the coalition partner BESA.

That could also be assessed as a mistake of the ruling Macedonian party because that coalition failed to get sufficient votes from the Albanians as most of them went to the other Albanian political parties: to DUI and to the coalition of the Alliance of Albanians of Ziadin Sela with the BESA wing that broke away from it: the Alternative of Afrim Gashi. That fact shows that the

Albanian parties are united on a national principle and are not very interested in coalitions with Macedonian parties.

It so happened that the Albanian parties received the highest number of votes in all elections so far and they legitimately acquired a higher self-confidence. It is essential to add to this the fact that SDUM headed by Zoran Zaev continued to be the object of doubts about corruption, because it encouraged the intervention of the government structures in the activities of the Special Prosecution, as well as other illegal practices. It can be stated that SDUM had a rather self-confident behaviour towards the population both in earlier and in this election. That was punished by a part of the voters and the party received less votes than expected. The wrong communication with the electorate continued after the elections as well.

The biggest opposition party IMRO-DPMNU failed to achieve stabilisation after its president Nikola Gruevski left. There were high expectations that the new leadership would distance itself from the old one. However, this did not happen on account of the authority of the former prime minister Nikola Gruevski, on the one hand, and also due to the fact that the law-enforcement bodies could not find irrefutable evidence of state corruption under his rule. Another reason is that the new leadership of IMRO-DPMNU failed to express its clear view on the agreements for the change in the country's name and on the cooperation with Greece and Bulgaria.

Its voters thus did not get the expected clear message and were not motivated to vote in the elections. There also existed certain disagreements in the leadership of the party, as well as open attempts by its eminent members suspected of corruption and facing charges to cooperate secretly with the rival SDUM.

In this connection, it should be noted that after the elections on 15 July 2020 talks started about the creation of the movement called Change in the IMRO-DPMNU. Here it is also necessary to note the role of Nikola Dimitrov, foreign minister in Zoran Zaev's first government, who came from the IMRO-DPMNU ranks, who was chief negotiator on the country's name in Washington in the recent past. He was one of the individuals with inconsistent behaviour in the country's political life and in the life of the parties.

In such a political atmosphere the leading Albanian DUI raised the issue that the time had come for an Albanian prime minister, and transformed that into a fundamental slogan for political actions (Ahmeti 2020) that brought 15 seats for DUI and turned it into a factor that cannot be ignored. It is difficult to assume whether the party believed in the slogan for Albanian prime minister, but it attracted votes in its support and it won five seats more than in the previous elections.

DUI consolidated its position also due to the fact that the two biggest Macedonian parties made many mistakes in their governance and thus mindsets were generated that the time had come for the Albanian bloc to come out more and more openly on the internal political scene. The number of seats won by DUI gave the party the necessary boldness to present impossible conditions for the formation of the future government. However, they proved to be acceptable to the SDUM leader Zoran Zaev whose aim was to form any government whatsoever with his mandate.

There were doubts that the elections had been rigged because they were held under conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The time for voting was extended by two days. There was no control and uncontrolled filling of the ballot boxes was possible for a certain period of time. That was complemented by the incredible voter turnout in some western municipalities during

the last hours of the voting day. The big number of invalid ballot papers also evokes suspicion. For example, many of the voters, especially the IMRO-DPMNU supporters, did not accept the name “North Macedonia” and therefore they crossed it out and added “Republic of Macedonia.” The State Electoral Commission qualified those ballot papers as invalid and in that way the IMRO-DPMNU lost several MPs ([https://www.sec.mk/parlamentarni-izbori-2020/?\\_thumbnail\\_id=6946#](https://www.sec.mk/parlamentarni-izbori-2020/?_thumbnail_id=6946#)).

The elections in that state in recent years was characterised by the leading position of the two principal parties in the Macedonian political spectrum: SDUM and IMRO-DPMNU, and one party in the Albanian spectrum: DUI, to which it is necessary to add smaller political parties. (Stamova 2012c, 244–267; Stamova 2015a, 221–254) The emergence and consolidation of other political entities that entered the Assembly was visible, albeit modestly, notably: the Macedonian Left of Dimitar Apasiev and the Albanian BESA, Alliance of Albanians and Alternative.

It should be noted that it would not be possible to talk about stabilisation of the Republic of North Macedonia after the elections as well, which is the result of the aggregate of internal and external influences. The internal influences are due above all to the weak political elites and the economic problems, and the external ones – above all to Greece, and to Bulgaria as well. Sofia repeatedly warned of blocking of the country’s EU integration process due to failure to fulfil the bilateral agreement and to the difficulties in the functioning of the joint multidisciplinary expert commission on historical and educational matters. Hence the framework of the negotiations with the EU is influenced by the position of Bulgaria and Greece that monitored strictly the implementation of the two agreements.

Special attention needs to be devoted during the forming of the coalition government in North Macedonia in 2020 to the behaviour of DUI headed by Ali Ahmeti. Not much time has elapsed since 2016 when that same party disregarded the principle that it had firmly supported, namely that a coalition for forming a government is to be made only with the victorious party from the Macedonian political bloc.

DUI refused then to form a government with IMRO-DPMNU that had won two seats more than its opponent SDUM. However, in 2020 it “adhered” to its principle to form a coalition government with the victorious SDUM: again with two MPs more. The new government became a fact although during the election fight and canvassing SDUM hurled political accusations and insults both against Ali Ahmeti and against his DUI party as corrupt and mafia-like.

The realities thus outlined raise the issue whether all these decisions had not been prompted by the external factor as well, which was particularly active in recent years: the US Embassy in Skopje and Washington’s policy in whose priorities the Albanians remain a strategic partner in the Balkans.

In this connection, special attention should also be devoted to the circumstance that less than one day after President Stevo Pendarovski handed on 13 August 2020 the mandate to the SDUM leader Zoran Zaev to form the new government, the US Ambassador to Skopje Kate Marie Byrnes congratulated him. This clearly shows that the USA hoped to have precisely Zoran Zaev as their ally to continue working for the Euro-Atlantic integration of the latest – 30<sup>th</sup> – NATO member: North Macedonia. Congratulations are usually sent after a prime minister is elected, not at the time of receiving the mandate. That act was also encouragement for Macedonian President Stevo Pendarovski who – under the Constitution – needs to possess evidence that there is

parliamentary majority, as was the case in 2016. A precedent was created then, which showed clearly that the international factor is interested in the government being formed by the same coalition partners and not giving a chance to IMRO-DPMNU and its coalition partners to rule.

In this context it is necessary to note that the Republic of North Macedonia does not play an important role in the Balkans. Much stronger and more stable states view it as a factor for destabilisation, especially on account of the actions of the Albanians and the permanent fears that inter-ethnic tension could flare again.

In this connection, it can be said that a factor contributing to that tension is that during the first term in office of Zoran Zaev's government in coalition with DUI proclaimed Albanian as official language in the country. That was adopted by the Assembly on 14 March 2018 and was promulgated in the *Official Gazette* in the beginning of 2019 (<https://al.on.mk/macedonia/sluzhben-vesnik-gi-objavi-zakonite-za-upotreba-na-jazicite-i-za-ratifikacija-na-dogovorot-od-prespa/>).

However, that naturally evoked discontent among the Macedonian population, as well as among the other ethnic groups in the state. The illogical circumstance consisted in the fact that the Albanian minority, estimated possibly at less than 25 % of the population, enjoyed equal rights as the majority. However, it was precisely the Albanians who refused in recent years the organising of population census, or presented many conditions in that connection.

In summary, it can be stressed that the elections on 15 July 2020 demonstrated the existence of tension in the inter-ethnic relations as well. The negotiations for the formation of a new parliamentary majority and of a new government clearly show that the ambitions of the Albanian elites grow. Highlighting the idea of Albanian prime minister, albeit difficult to achieve at this stage, is not an issue to be underestimated. The Albanian politicians wish to demonstrate in this way that the Albanian community is mature and ready to assume mandatorily its responsibility, as well as to be involved with the most important state functions. That idea probably conceals a certain lack of trust in the Macedonian politicians, i.e., in the prime ministers originating from the Macedonian bloc.

The idea of an Albanian prime minister, defended by the leading DUI, can be perceived as an All-Balkan idea, and that party used it with a view to the contacts that it maintained with the leadership in Tirana (Bobev 2019a, 83–86). The permanent nature of their demands for the unification of all Albanians in one state, which is gaining momentum at least from a cultural and economic perspective, should not be forgotten either.

The Albanians, both in the Republic of North Macedonia and in the other parts of the Balkans, are aware of the difficulties along the road to their EU accession, hence they activate other political options as well. Therefore, even after they received the sectors in Zoran Zaev's new government that they wished to have (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Albanian First Deputy Prime Minister), they continued to insist on Albanian Prime Minister.

The latter decision will probably lack great political significance, but will have a major psychological influence among the Albanians. It is assumed as crossing of the political Rubicon in the country's governance with respect to the attitude to the Albanians and their attitude.

The following factors indisputably need to be noted in assessing the major foreign and internal political events with the strongest regional significance in North Macedonia:

First, the on-going deterioration of the economic situation that may cause destabilisation, and in the worst case scenario – loss of statehood and disintegration of the state.

The second event is connected with the international relations and the hidden lack of trust on the part of the Albanian community, and vice versa. Due to it, just a minor political or economic problem may cause tension and escalation on an ethnic basis.

Due to the domestic political situation, North Macedonia supports in principle the independence of Kosovo (Bobev 2015b, 185–220; Boyadjieva 2020, 186–196) and recognises it as international entity. That was not received well by neighbouring Serbia and it exerted pressure on Skopje in different ways. It is assessed as potential focus of destabilisation both for the country and for relations throughout the Balkans.

It is perfectly clear that the priorities of North Macedonia varied over the years. The principal priorities among them are connected with the security of the state and the Euro-Atlantic integration, and the latest elections did not disturb them substantially.

Cooperation with the West and the future integration in the structures of NATO and the EU are set as a foreign policy priority ever since the onset of Macedonia's independence (Stamova 2012c, 244–267). The majority of the citizens also insist on that and there is no alternative on that issue. However, the issue of the change of the name under external pressure creates pretexts for discontent.

A large part of the population believes that this is not a democratic practice. The question asked at the referendum on 30 September 2018 was also insufficiently clearly formulated. It did not emphasise specifically the change in the name, the accent being on the country's accession to NATO and the EU.

In spite of the intensive canvassing for massive turnout at the referendum, the number of voters necessary for the referendum to be considered successful did not participate in it. According to the official report of the State Electoral Commission, the decision was not adopted because more than half of the electorate did not vote (Sluzben vesnik 2018, 12). However, irrespective of that decision, the government interpreted in its own way the referendum as successful.

When the new Constitution with the changed name was adopted, it was difficult to secure qualified majority of two-thirds of the MPs. That was achieved by using pressure and promises for posts, or by lifting criminal charges and criminal liability against some MPs from the opposition. This resulted in the formation of a new parliamentary group: the “independent” IMRO-DPMNU with 8 MPs, some of whom had never been members of that party. The imposition of such an approach was met with discontent by Macedonian society. However, one of the reasons for the imposed change of name was that the country would mandatorily receive a date for its EU accession negotiation after that act. That prompted the rulers to proclaim widely that they had attained a lot along the path to NATO and the EU.

That proved to be not quite true, although the latest EC reports tended to be more positive on the whole (<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-north-macedonia-report.pdf>). However, even according to them, the problems in the judiciary remained unresolved, and many corruption charges against it emerged. These charges were also connected with the fact that Prime Minister Zoran Zaev intervened personally in some court rulings. IMRO-DPMNU accused him of many other undemocratic practices as well. It should be noted that the opposition party also actually received negative heritage after N. Gruevski fled abroad. SDUM,

on its part, popularised the story that the former leader Nikola Gruevski was still the leader of the party, not his successor Hristijan Mickoski.

Finally, it may be concluded that after the accession of North Macedonia to NATO on 27 March 2020, its EU accession became the leading national priority of all political factors in the country. A strong impetus and hope in this respect came from the political consent of the ministers on European affairs to start accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia on 24 March 2020. Two days later, the conclusions on the enlargement and on the process of stabilisation and association were officially adopted, and on 26 March they were approved by the members of the European Council (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/bg/policies/enlargement/republic-north-macedonia/>).

The issue of improving relations with neighbouring countries was raised as an important condition and requirement for starting the negotiations. In this connection, Zoran Zaev's government accelerated the signing of the agreements on good-neighbourly relations with Bulgaria and Greece.

On the other hand, the political and the economic situation in North Macedonia at the end of 2020 was also influenced by the COVID-19 crisis. Attempting to save the economy, the government took loans and the foreign debt reached 60% of the GDP. The rulers made additional efforts to cope with the deficit and to solve social problems with the financing received in the form of credits from the IMF and the World Bank.

Part of the money received was also spent on the series of early and regular elections. However, in spite of the big promises of the victorious SDUM and coalition, it did not lead quickly to significant changes in a positive direction. That gave grounds to the opposition around the nationalist IMRO-DPMNU with right-wing orientation to work consistently for destabilisation of the SDUM rule, benefiting from the mistakes in the country's governance and from the accusations of failure to cope with the corruption and law enforcement.

At the end of the second decade it was indeed difficult to speak about sustainable democratisation in North Macedonia, because all major media were subjected to growing control by the authorities (Zlatev 2020). The public was given the information that the government is making big efforts and is scoring successes in coping with the pandemic, but that actually was meant to hide the real situation. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, it is still early to predict its economic and – above all – the political consequences.

More likely, the pandemic dynamics can be assessed as a long-term process with still unpredictable development and multidirectional influences: in the economy, in politics and in the social and ethnic relations.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, it may be concluded that it is difficult to achieve reconciliation on the Macedonian political scene, dissatisfaction and revenge-seeking are present and even growing, and no real reforms can be expected from the fragile parliamentary majority, although the government announced such reforms practically every day.

There is also a conviction in a part of Macedonian society that discredited and above all corrupt individuals have leading positions in the governance of the state, who most probably will not remain at those positions for a long time. In this way, the new SDUM government inevitably ran

into the old problems from the very beginning of its rule, and together with the Albanian DUI the ruling coalition faces serious challenges. In this connection, the conflicts and the political instability in the country will inevitably continue to be part of its everyday life.

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