
MACEDONIA'S SOCIAL DEMOCRAT LEADER SAYS EXPECTS TO FORM GOVERNMENT IN MARCH

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The leader of Macedonia's Social Democrats said on Thursday he expected to be able to form a new government in March, ending a two-year political crisis in the wake of a wiretapping scandal that brought down the previous administration.

Zoran Zaev said he had secured the support of ethnic Albanian parties and expected to complete talks on forming a government in early March.

The conservative VMRO-DPMNE party at the centre of the scandal had tried but failed to form a coalition after winning a December election but falling short of a majority in the 120 seat parliament.

"Now we have to agree on the distribution of ministries and the future government reform platform," Zaev told reporters while on a trip to Sarajevo.

"I am very optimistic that in the first half of March Macedonia will have a government led by Social Democrats."

The Balkan nation's two-year political crisis was triggered by a surveillance scandal that forced veteran VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski to resign a year ago.

The crisis was the worst since Western diplomacy helped drag the country of 2.1 million people back from the brink of civil war during an ethnic Albanian insurgency in 2001, promising it a path to membership of the European Union and of NATO.

VMRO-DPMNE won 51 seats to the Social Democrats' 49 in December's poll.

Macedonia's ethnic Albanian parties had made their support for any potential coalition conditional on the passage of a law backing broader use of their language in the country.

The Democratic Union of Integration, the biggest ethnic Albanian party in parliament, said on Wednesday it had agreed with the Social Democrats on such a law but did not give details and suggested agreements were needed in other policy areas.

Albanian is currently an official language only in municipalities where Albanians account for more than 20 percent of the population.

"Its true that yesterday we overcame an important hurdle. But there are still other issues that

have to be agreed if we are to decide to govern together in the next period," DUI spokesman Bujar Osmani told reporters.

"We have to align our party platforms for the entire mandate."

The other two ethnic Albanian parties, Besa and Alliance for Albanians, which together have eight seats in the parliament, have already said they will support Zaev to form a government.

(Reporting by Daria Sito-Sucic; Additional reporting by Kole Casule in SKOPJE; Writing by Ivana Sekularac; Editing by Catherine Evans)

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