

Under current circumstances, none of the political parties has the potential to win an absolute majority of the vote in the next parliament so that it will be critical to find coalition partners with whom to govern. Here, SDSM can work much better with the ethnic Albanian parties and has experience in negotiating a governing coalition. If VMRO-DPMNE wants to govern, the party will need to negotiate fairly with the ethnic Albanian parties. Otherwise, it will have to remain in opposition.

Given that no political party is in a position to dominate the political scene in the way that SDSM has for the past six years, coalition-building is the order of the day. The 1996 local elections demonstrated that the opposition parties fared better in coalitions than alone. These electoral coalitions, however, have no moorings to the traditional left, right or centre. The electorate, in return, has very tenuous loyalties to the parties. Opinion polls indicate that the recorded electoral support of a party changes constantly and there is always a high number of "undecided" voters. Constant internal struggles within party leaderships also contribute to shifting party loyalties.

Increasing voter discontent has led to certain cosmetic changes in party leaderships, but fresh faces have failed to enter the political scene. Party structures are generally stagnant and remain dominated by former communists. Political expediency is the only thing the coalition partners have in common. Rather than pushing tired party leaders off the stage, the size of the stage has been expanded. Sixteen parties or coalitions registered to contest the elections as well as one group of independents. The long-term future of these new coalitions is difficult to predict, however, because of the instability of the organisations and their fragile support among the electorate.

#### **A. VMRO-DPMNE and DA: Union for Changes**

The biggest surprise of the election coalitions has been the alliance of VMRO-DPMNE and DA. The two parties are not ideologically close, but the political ambitions of the two leaders have helped bridge the gap. VMRO-DPMNE can rely on the support of a significant section of the Macedonian electorate, while DA leader Vasil Tupurkovski is popular with the international community. Tupurkovski explained his reasons for forming the coalition as the oppositional character of DA, the electoral system, which contains incentives for coalition-building, and a popular desire for change. Opinion polls consistently rank Tupurkovski as the most admired politician in the country and he is especially popular among intellectuals and educated Macedonians. The coalition promises to bring economic growth, improve education and fight against crime. It alleges that the government has stolen more than 600 million DM through privatisation and promises to put the perpetrators on trial.