

PROJECT ON ETHNIC RELATIONS

The Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) was founded in 1991 in anticipation of the serious interethnic conflicts that were to erupt following the collapse of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. PER conducts programs of high-level intervention and dialogue and serves as a neutral mediator in several major disputes in the region. PER also conducts programs of training, education, and research at international, national, and community levels.

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R e p o r t

DEC. 13-14, 2003



MAVROVO, MACEDONIA

MACEDONIA'S INTERETHNIC
COALITION: THE FIRST YEAR

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PREFACE

When, at the request of members of the Macedonian government, the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) agreed more than a year ago to host a roundtable meeting for representatives of the country's coalition [the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)] and opposition parties, we scarcely anticipated the demand for this type of forum. Indeed, what started as a single meeting (held in Mavrovo, Macedonia on May 10-11, 2003) has since become the "Mavrovo Process."

Launched by PER in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Swiss Embassy in Macedonia, the Process is designed to facilitate communication not only between members of the government and the opposition, but also within the coalition itself. These discussions, which are not for public attribution, provide participants a rare opportunity to offer their vision for Macedonia's future and to candidly assess the government's performance in implementing the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement—an internationally brokered truce that is credited with ending the country's bloody albeit brief ethnic conflict.

The participants at the May roundtable agreed that all parties should reconvene under PER auspices roughly once every six months, whereas members of the coalition should meet every three months. Two meetings have since taken place. The first, a discussion among the coalition parties, occurred in September; the second meeting, held in December, featured participants from the senior-most levels of the Macedonian government and opposition as well as representatives of the international community. While themes from the September discussion are referenced herein, it is the latter meeting which forms the basis for this report.



From left to right: Hari Kostov, Alexis Brouhns, and Vlado Buckovski.



From left to right: Agron Buxhaku, Musa Xhaferi; In the background, Nezdet Mustafa.

As in May, the December meeting took place in the wake of and amidst several important developments in Macedonian politics. On December 1, the results of the country's census—the first since 1994—were released, confirming that ethnic Albanians make up just over 25 percent of the population—a statistic of particular relevance for Macedonia's interethnic relations and its public policy as a whole. The financing and legalization of the Albanian-language Tetovo University was the subject of lengthy debate at the Macedonian Parliament the evening of December 12, also the opening dinner of the Mavrovo meeting, where participants received regular updates on their cell phones. Indeed, while the parliamentary debate failed to reach a definitive conclusion, highlights of the main arguments were rehashed among participants during the weekend discussions. Finally, with only a few weeks remaining in the parliamentary session, participants were eager to discuss the merits and implications of the proposed laws on fiscal decentralization and the territorial division of municipalities.

Macedonia's government faces a unique double burden. Its members are forced to reckon not only with the day-to-day obligations of governance, but also the inherent difficulties of maintaining a constructive dialogue on interethnic relations. While PER is pleased to be able to offer a neutral space within which the latter can be carried out, it hopes, through this initiative, to establish a tradition whereby future competitors can meet without need for external mediation.

PER is especially grateful to the Swiss Embassy in Macedonia and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs—in particular, Federal Councilor Micheline Calmy-Rey, Ambassador Stephan Nellen, Didier Chassot, Roland Salvisberg, Matthias Siegfried, Natascha Zupan, and Mimoza Angelovska—for their cooperation and ongoing partnership in this endeavor. PER also wishes to thank U.S. Ambassador Lawrence Butler and Deputy Chief of Mission Eleanor Nagy for their friendship and assistance.

Alex N. Grigor'ev, PER Program Officer, was responsible for organizing the meeting on the PER side and took part in the conference discussions. Barbara Feinstein, PER Associate, who was also a conference participant, is the author of this report, which was edited by PER staff. Except as otherwise noted, participants' statements are without attribution, following PER's practice of encouraging frank and open discussion.

The participants have not had the opportunity to review the text of this report, for which PER assumes full responsibility.

Allen H. Kassof, *President*
Livia B. Plaks, *Executive Director*

Princeton, New Jersey
February 2004



From left to right: Ilinka Mitreva and Xhevat Ademi.



Sasko Kedev



Radmila Sekerinska

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

For the sake of simplicity, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is referred to as “Macedonia.” Except as otherwise noted, the term “Albanian” is used to refer to ethnic Albanians living in Macedonia.



From left to right: Aleksandar Gestakovski, Lindita Shakiri-Atanasova, Arben Xhaferi, Menduh Thaci, and Stojan Andov.

INTRODUCTION

PER’s roundtable meeting, “Macedonia’s Interethnic Coalition: The First Year,” was held in Mavrovo, Macedonia on December 13-14, 2003. Attended by some of the country’s most senior politicians, both in the government and opposition, as well as members of the international community, including the Swiss Ambassador, United States Ambassador, EU Special Representative, Head of the EU Delegation to Macedonia, and representatives of the Council of Europe, the meeting was divided into three sessions. The morning session of the first day was for coalition members only, whereas the remainder of that afternoon, as well as the following morning, were devoted to debate and discussion among all the parliamentary parties. Representatives of the international community took part in all sessions.

For members of the governing coalition, the agenda revolved around the following questions:

- How does the coalition evaluate its own performance after its first year? Is it improving?
- What specific steps have been taken since the September meeting in Mavrovo to improve communication among the coalition partners and between the government and the public? What further steps are required?
- Where do the coalition partners stand on the issue of decentralization? Are they developing a joint platform? Will the public and the opposition support it? What problems do they anticipate and how can they tackle these problems?
- What is the political impact of the just released census? What effect, if any, will the new figures have on the decentralization process?

The introduction of the opposition encouraged a broader debate among all parties. The remainder of the meeting centered on the following key points:

- Can a consensus be maintained among all parties concerning the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement? Are there any differences between the opposition and the coalition on this matter? How does the opposition evaluate the performance of the coalition?
- How can opposition and coalition parties develop a sustained consensus on the steps toward European integration? Are they communicating effectively about this common interest?
- Can there be a consensus between opposition and coalition parties on the details of decentralization? Is there a need to create a consultative mechanism with all interests represented on the specific issue of decentralization?

- How can politicians from the coalition and the opposition broaden support among the public for interethnic amity?

Needless to say, the participants had varying responses to each of the questions above, based largely on their political, and frequently, their ethnic affiliation. What follows is a characterization of their exchanges.

PART ONE: ROUNDTABLE OF THE COALITION GOVERNMENT

ASSESSING THE COALITION'S PERFORMANCE

Members of the government gave themselves mostly high marks for their performance over the past year, singling out achievements in both the implementation of the Framework Agreement and Macedonia's preparation for Euro-Atlantic integration, while conceding more uneven results on achieving equitable representation and enhancing the country's macroeconomic performance.

Optimism on Euro-Atlantic Integration

Coalition members were optimistic about Macedonia's prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration, particularly its potential membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Participants voiced their belief that, due to "reforms that have been undertaken in the army" as well as a "new set of preparations" designed to get underway shortly, Macedonia expects to "receive an invitation" to join the Alliance during a summit in Istanbul scheduled for June 2004. There is a wide "degree of cohesion among coalition partners" vis-à-vis Euro-Atlantic integration, maintained one participant, adding that interethnic accord on this issue may be greater than on any other.

Still, the coalition needs to do a better job of "publicizing its achievements" to a "world audience," argued another participant, underscoring that Macedonia's accession to both the European Union (EU) and NATO is conditional upon its full implementation of the Framework Agreement. "I believe we have greatly strengthened our public relations" domestically, she argued, but more should be done in the "external sphere."

Progress on Implementation of the Framework Agreement

The government has made important strides in implementing key elements of the Framework Agreement, participants from the coalition noted, adding that for those issues where deadlines were set, such as the laws on amnesty and equitable representation in certain sectors, "those deadlines have been met," while for the remaining issues, significant progress has been made.

Over the past two years, Macedonia has made changes equivalent to what would happen in 20 years in most other states.

"Over the past two years," said one participant, Macedonia has made changes equivalent to "what would happen in 20 years in most other states." Yet, while all parties to the Framework Agreement can take credit for certain aspects of its implementation, this government, argued another coalition member, has "done more" in its 13 months in office than any other during the same amount of time.

Indeed, coalition participants were quick to point out their achievements relating to the implementation of the 2001 Agreement. The present government moved "rather quickly" to address "the first package of [Framework Agreement-related] laws not connected to decentralization," said one member of the coalition, noting that these were passed in the "first eight months" of the government's tenure.

As for decentralization, he added, "we moved in the first phase with laws on education and culture" while "respecting completely the letter of the law on local self-government." These laws, he stressed, have already "passed the first phase of parliamentary procedure" and were crafted with "a high degree of cohesion within the coalition." Anticipating a heated political debate in the weeks ahead, coalition members nevertheless predicted that all laws relating to decentralization would be passed by the end of the parliamentary session.

That said, participants warned of difficult battles once the territorial division has been completed. "There will be dissatisfaction in Macedonia," argued one participant, "not only along ethnic lines, but among municipalities that...will cease to exist...[or] have altered boundaries" under the government plan. The coalition alone, she said, will "have to defend this solution."

Census Has Little Impact

Thankfully, noted participants, little of the government's plan on territorial division is likely to change as a result of the recently issued census. As a whole, commented members of the coalition, the census failed to provoke the strong reaction that many had feared. Indeed, while "some political parties attacked the results," noted one coalition member, they struggled to find fault with "the process of census-taking" which met the approval of international monitors. Attacking the process also made little sense politically, she explained, since "the census is one of the obligations that [both] the current *and* previous government took part in."

Equal Representation Still at Issue

On the issue of proportional representation, a remaining key element of the Framework Agreement, the coalition gave itself a mixed rating. The problem is "not one of political will," asserted an ethnic Macedonian member of the coalition, but rather an issue of "techniques," particularly those relating to the legal regulation of civil servants.

Participants noted the dearth of qualified Albanian personnel available to fill government positions. "We lack a sufficient number of Albanians with higher education," asserted an ethnic Albanian member of the coalition. "This right has not been given to us." As such, he continued, ethnic Albanians have been deprived of the opportunity to build up a corps of highly educated civil servants to work in the government. "Institutions blame us for not having enough staff," he maintained. "It's important that we not be blamed."

Still, some members of the coalition lamented what they perceived to be their Albanian counterparts' fixation on this issue at the expense of all others. "From our perspective," offered an ethnic Macedonian member of the coalition, "it's irritating to us, because we have the sense that this is the only problem that we should focus on, apart from all other strategic issues." Moreover, added another participant, the government should be careful not to "wear down our institutions" by insisting on hiring personnel who lack the most basic educational requirements.

Macroeconomic Stagnation

While there are "structural reasons" for the government's inability to combat "unemployment and poverty," stated one coalition member, there are also "subjective reasons" for Macedonia's economic stagnation, he added, pointing to the country's bloated public sector and an alarm-

ing trend toward nepotism and "unacceptable opportunism" in the appointment of public personnel.

By nearly quadrupling the number of public employees between 1998 and 2002, this participant argued that the previous government "completely distorted the budget, where the highest item is wages for the public administration." Not only has this "narrowed the space for capital investment," he alleged, it has severely constrained "the development sector of the budget," an issue of critical importance "to any small country." This unfortunate trend, he argued, is further compounded by a tendency among bureaucrats to "behave as politicians rather than as managers" in making hiring decisions that weigh down rather than "optimize the public sector."

Going forward, he said, the country must redouble its efforts to deal with Macedonia's "greatest problem"—creating "a better climate for foreign and domestic investment." The creation of such a climate is indeed critical, added another coalition member, noting that it cannot be separated from the country's political climate. "If we had security [in Macedonia]," he argued, "we would have direct foreign investment." Even "Albanians originally from Macedonia" are nervous to invest, he said, "not to speak of other foreigners." How can Macedonia expect to draw foreign investment when "someone from here won't even invest himself?"

SDSM'S FALL IN THE RATINGS: DUI'S GAIN OR COALITION'S LOSS?

Much of Saturday morning's discussion focused on the results of a recent public opinion poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in which ratings for both major ethnic Macedonian parties (SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE) decreased while the rating for DUI, the major Albanian coalition party, rose. Conducted in Macedonia between November 15 and 20, 2003, the poll concluded that if elections were held today, 17 percent of respondents would vote for SDSM, 9 percent for VMRO-DPMNE, 8 percent for DUI, 2 percent for DPA, and 1 percent, respectively, for LDP, PDP and DA.

Among ethnic Albanian respondents, 37 percent would vote for DUI, 11 percent for DPA; and 5 percent for PDP. According to the poll, 92 percent of respondents support Macedonia's membership in the EU, while 76 percent support NATO integration.

(In comparison to a similar poll conducted by IRI on September 3-9, 2003, SDSM experienced a slight fall in their rating—from 20 percent to 17 percent, while VMRO-DPMNE's rating fell from 10 percent to 9 percent. DUI increased its standing from 5 percent to 8 percent, whereas DPA dropped from 4 percent to 2 percent overall. Among ethnic Albanians, DUI saw a marked increase in popularity from 23 percent in September to 37 percent in November. Conversely, DPA's support fell from 20 percent in September to 11 percent in November.)

SDSM's fall was "expected," according to a participant from that party, above all, because of the country's "bad economic conditions." It is important to note, however, that all the big parties took a fall, she added, including those in the opposition, which campaigned "hard against the coalition parties' policy on the Framework Agreement." That shows, she said, that the opposition's "negative rhetoric"

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failed to resonate with the general public. Further, on the critical question of "which party [voters] expect to help provide a solution to the country's economic problems," noted this participant, SDSM ranked highest among all parties. "People are dissatisfied; they expect more," she argued, but "they still think that the things that they need...they will get from *this* government."

"We should note," she added, "that the government *as a whole* enjoyed greater support [in this survey] than the previous one" due undoubtedly to DUI's boost in the ratings. "We are pleased that our coalition partner has improved its political standing," she said, even if this has "come at the expense of our own party's rating."

Still, she warned, the coalition must not be complacent. With election season approaching, the government must "show positive results in the economic sector" or face another fall in the ratings. Such a fall is virtually inevitable, argued another representative of SDSM, adding that a number of controversial issues such as the funding of Tetovo University, the release of census figures, and the debate around the citizenship law had not even surfaced at the time that the survey was conducted. Consequently, SDSM could "go even 3 to 4 percent lower" in a future survey, he argued, since there are not any "new measures to improve the rating."

Commenting on DUI's increased rating, one member of that party sought to reassure his ethnic Macedonian colleagues that DUI's rise should not be viewed as a result of any "errors" or "concessions that our coalition partners made in [DUI's] interest." DUI has a vested interest in SDSM's rating, he added. "Our political survival is jointly conditioned; if their authority falls, we will be without a partner."

Members of DUI attributed their party's rise in the polls to strategic efforts undertaken by Party President Ali Ahmeti to increase DUI's "direct communication with citizens and its membership." Ahmeti's meetings over the past two months with people in Macedonia and abroad have, in the words of one participant, led to a "direct conversation between the citizens and the leader of DUI," allowing the party to satiate the Albanian public's "need for information" and counteract the effects of a "largely hostile" media.

THE NEED FOR ENHANCED COMMUNICATION

Reinforcing a conclusion arrived at during the September meeting, coalition participants agreed that they need to do better in communicating not only with members of the public but also amongst themselves. Despite widespread agreement in September that reforms were needed in this arena, participants conceded that "no significant progress" had been made over the past three months. Indeed, asserted one government official, there is still little "coordination of spokespersons" of different ministries in the government and "insufficient attention is being paid by ministries in communicating with the public."

The present coalition could certainly be branded as an "unnatural" one, conceded an international participant, but can it rise above its differences to govern effectively? Is third-party mediation still needed?

"All people, especially in the Balkans, are afraid of the unknown," answered one participant. "We don't know each other well enough and so we have a problem of communication."

"Why do we need you?" asked one government official. Because "we have developed a culture of addiction"—an addiction to "both the political and military presence of the international community." When "quick resolution is needed," she argued, "we fall back on this reflex," seeking to "alleviate [these problems] by means of mediation." The international community's assistance is "welcome" added another par-

participant, but the government should strive to “reach a level of maturity so that we can deal with these problems ourselves.”

Linked to this addiction, argued another participant, is “the dependency of political parties on [their] elites or leaders.” Too many issues that could be handled “by rank and file leaders” are deferred to the party leadership to consider in “big negotiations”—a process, she maintained, that is “overburdening the discussions between presidents of the parties.”

The government is already “mature enough,” argued another member of the coalition, having “succeeded in less than a year-and-a-half to return political stability to Macedonia and

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gain support in the polls” by implementing the Framework Agreement. Indeed, continued one official, the government should be “proud” of the “significant progress” it has made in this regard. Citing recent negotiations, she noted that “the deal on Tetovo University was done entirely between SDSM and DUI” while the final agreement on

decentralization was the product of “discussions between SDSM, DUI and LDP.”

“Sometimes it’s not a question of maturity,” noted an international participant, but “a question of tools.” The Swiss Government, he said, is currently discussing the provision of “an executive training program” for the entire government that, among other things, would help to “improve communication.” Noting that “we are constantly training people in our own countries,” he said to the participants: “You are mature enough. This is not the question.”

CONFRONTING INTERETHNIC RELATIONS

The government has “a peculiar double burden,” commented a U.S. participant. Not only must it deal with the day-to-day obligations of governance, it also “happens to be one of the only locations where there’s a constructive dialogue about interethnic relations.” How well, he asked, is the government doing in this regard?

“The gap between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians has not been bridged,” argued one participant, adding that the “unnatural coalition between SDSM and DUI” has not “bridged the gap in the general population.” The country’s economic situation may be critical to its future, he reasoned, but “interethnic relations will lead Macedonia toward its end.”

The Framework Agreement should be considered “as something that brings all communities closer together,” maintained one participant; its implementation, he argued, is in “the interest of all the citizens of Macedonia.”

DUI has made important and “courageous” concessions to advance the interests of its ethnic Macedonian partner, asserted one participant. “We said that the state symbols of Macedonia are the same symbols of the Albanian community,” he noted. “The name Republic of Macedonia is the name of our country and we stood for the right of the Republic of Macedonia to have this name.” These statements have been made “from the highest to the lowest levels” of DUI in an effort to “alleviate the position of our political partner.”

Is the coalition for Macedonia functioning? asked a representative of the Romani community. My answer is yes, it is functioning, but only with the Albanian faction. All other communities, including the Roma, are being put in isolation.

“Is the coalition for Macedonia functioning?” asked a representative of the Romani community. “My answer is yes, it is functioning, but only with the Albanian faction.” “All other communities,” including the Roma, “are being put in isolation,” argued this participant, adding that the Framework Agreement should “be a model for all ethnic communities.” The Roma, he said, are “not asking for gifts,” but rather for their “rightful place in this state.”

Echoing this speaker’s comment, a European representative reminded participants that together with the implementation of the Framework Agreement, Macedonia’s “respect of minority rights” and especially its treatment of the Roma, will be a major factor in its candidacy for membership in the European Union. “A genuine multiethnic country is the target,” he asserted. On this point another participant noted that the Project on Ethnic Relations has “taken on the responsibility” of

helping Macedonia in 2004 to “meet its obligations to the Romani community under EU Accession,” building upon similar successful efforts the organization has facilitated elsewhere.

PART TWO: INCLUSION OF ALL THE PARLIAMENTARY PARTIES

ASSESSMENT OF THE COALITION'S PERFORMANCE

Opposition Views

The introduction of the ethnic Albanian and Macedonian opposition served to both broaden the debate and bring into sharper relief the differences separating the parties. Chief among these differences were: 1) the opposition's assessment of the coalition's performance, particularly on the issues of equitable representation and decentralization; and 2) the legalization of Tetovo University.

EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION

For ethnic Albanian parties in the opposition, clearly, the government's greatest disappointment has been its failure to not only recruit more Albanians to serve in the public sector, but also to include them in key decision-making processes, a point that was echoed to a certain degree even by ethnic Albanian members of the coalition government.

The right of equitable representation for Albanians “has been reduced to the police forces level,” asserted one member of the ethnic Albanian opposition. There has been “no significant movement in this direction” in “any other structures,” he said. Indeed, added his colleague, the coalition's progress on equitable representation has been “negligible,” particularly in comparison to that of its predecessor. Over the course of seven months, said this participant, the previous government “managed to increase the number of Albanians [in public administration] by 300 percent.” While he conceded that “the Albanian party in power has won [for itself] significant positions of power,” he insisted that it “does not have more than what DPA had several years ago.”

Dismissing this participant's argument, an ethnic Macedonian member of the coalition asserted that “it's not possible to increase something by 300 percent” except of course, if “before there was one and now there are three.” The simple fact, he asserted, is that “in the past twelve months, the percentage of Albanians in public administration *has* increased.” Responding to this claim, the earlier speaker demanded evidence. “You should always [back up such claims] with a list—with numbers of equitable representation,” he charged.

In place of such a list, one ethnic Albanian member of the coalition offered several examples designed “to provide a general picture” of the government's achievements with regard to equitable representation. “In my village,” he said, for “more than one hundred years, no head of police or policeman was Albanian.” The situation is slowly changing, he asserted, as now, both “the commander and police are locals.” A similar trend, he noted, is taking hold in the Macedonian Army.

Achieving rightful representation is difficult, he argued, because “Albanians were discriminated against in all areas.” Moreover, he added, there are important logistical barriers that must first be overcome. For example, in places like the hospital in Tetovo, still only 30 percent of the doctors are Albanians, despite “the wishes of all the coalition.” The fact is, he said, “we can't create cardiologists overnight.”

Still others took issue with what they perceived to be a systematic exclusion of ethnic Albanian officials in key decision-making processes. Citing government statements in the wake of controversial police actions in the Macedonian town of Brest and elsewhere, one member of the ethnic Albanian opposition alleged that members of the “Albanian party in power” are evidently being kept out of the loop on critical security issues. It is clear, he asserted, that in Macedonia, “the police and army function in service of only one ethnicity.”

While ethnic Albanian members of the coalition may have disputed this assessment, they nevertheless argued for increased Albanian participation in other sectors, for example in the preparation of the budget and negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Ethnic Albanians “shouldn't be excluded from discussions relating to economic and budgetary issues, finance and foreign investment,” said one ethnic Albanian member of the coalition.

DECENTRALIZATION

Another key issue for members of the opposition was decentralization. Recognized by all as a crucial issue for Macedonia's future, decentralization, or the devolution of various capacities from the central government to local municipalities, figured prominently in the weekend's discussions. Said one member of the coalition: "Local self-government is of core importance for the development and participation of the citizens in

Local self-government is of core importance for the development and participation of the citizens in democratic processes as well as the enhancement and further development of cooperation among ethnic communities.

democratic processes as well as the enhancement and further development of cooperation among ethnic communities."

Claiming significant progress on the issue, members of the coalition showcased their achievements on decentralization, highlighting the government's passage of several key laws and noting that the remaining laws would be taken up by year's end. "Our ambition by the end of

next year," said one participant from the coalition, is "to finalize the process of decentralization." On January 1, 2005, he continued, "the local self-government should function completely. On January 1, 2005, we will have normal communication between the central government and the municipalities."

The government's obligations vis-à-vis decentralization should not be conflated with those related to the territorial division of municipalities, argued an ethnic Macedonian member of the opposition. It is critical, she stated, that these processes occur independently of one another. Under a plan developed by the coalition, the country would be divided into 71 self-governing municipalities, a marked decrease from its current 123.

Decrying the opposition's intent to separate territorial division from decentralization, one coalition member called this stance "a flawed reading of the Framework Agreement." This agreement, she asserted, was clear in calling for territorial division "immediately after the results of the census" are published. Now that the census has been released, the government's "obligation" under the Agreement is to proceed accordingly with territorial division.

Opposition Complains of Delays, Exclusion

Both the ethnic Macedonian and Albanian opposition parties voiced their dissatisfaction at the coalition government's failure to include them in key discussions on decentralization and territorial division. Said one member of the ethnic Albanian opposition: "We, as signatories of the Framework Agreement, have not been consulted in the preparation of the text of this agreement...or about ways the territorial division will be carried out. That's why we, as a political party will refuse...to give our blessing to the laws that are being proposed."

Ethnic Macedonian members of the opposition repeatedly cry of exclusion from these discussions, charged a member of the coalition, even when such accusations are unfounded. This participant took ethnic Macedonian members of the opposition to task for playing politics with this important issue, accusing them of deliberately "frightening the citizens about the process of decentralization." Participants from this group rejected these accusations, insisting that, as a political party, it is their "legitimate right" to "indicate [to the public] that we have different views and positions."

Certain members of the opposition also accused the government of employing delay tactics in order to "avoid decentralization" and distort the overall process. "We're seeing a replacement of what we agreed to in Ohrid," charged a member of the Albanian opposition. Singling out the coalition's ethnic Macedonian members, he said they were employing "the strategy of Pepsi-Cola": "people are offering Coca-Cola, but they're actually selling Pepsi."

The draft laws on decentralization "would have been completed in May," responded one member of the coalition government, were it not for concerns raised by the International Monetary Fund regarding potential "distortions caused by fiscal decentralization." These comments were only received by the government in late September, he noted.

In the eyes of one European participant, the final product was well worth the wait. The law on fiscal decentralization was "the result of a long discussion," he said, between members of the government and "international experts from the Council of Europe, the IMF, and the European Union." A particularly important feature of the new law, he stated, is that there is "a mechanism guaranteeing the transparency and automaticity in the transfer of money." Consequently, he added, "there will be no political decisions with regard to the transfer of resources."

LEGALIZING TETOVO UNIVERSITY

Much of the weekend's discussion centered on the legalization and public financing of Tetovo University, an Albanian-language institute of higher learning deemed illegal by the Macedonian government upon its opening in 1995 and forced underground ever since. A thorny issue for nearly a decade, in July 2003, members of the present coalition government concluded an agreement to secure state financing and recognize Tetovo University as the state's third public university. The issue was put before the parliament on the eve of the Mavrovo meeting, triggering a lengthy debate that extended into early Saturday morning without any resolution. (The parliament approved the measure in 2004.)

In addition to considering the merits of recognition, legislators also discussed a series of troubling developments at the University, including the rector's illegal seizure in October 2003 of a local tobacco company (*Tetovo Tabak*) whose premises were soon adapted for university use.

Lack of Transparency

Referring to the *Tetovo Tabak* incident, one member of the ethnic Macedonian opposition argued that promoting the legalization of Tetovo University would "send a signal that we don't support the rule of law... The message is that we support an illegal project." Even supporters of the university's legalization argued that the process must be made more transparent. "Journalists ask us what's going on in Tetovo," said an ethnic Macedonian coalition member, but "we don't have the correct information." This lack of transparency not only creates "distrust" among coalition partners, continued this official, it also "leaves [the government] without the ability to respond." Indeed, conceded another member of the coalition, regardless of "how much good will you have," the present circumstances make it "hard to defend [legalization] without closing one eye."

Responding to these criticisms, an ethnic Albanian member of the coalition countered that the institution's quasi-legal activities make it ever more critical that its status be regularized. "The more we postpone the solution to this problem," he maintained, "the more abuses we'll have" in the future.

Accreditation Issues

"Every citizen of the Republic of Macedonia should receive a quality education," stated one ethnic Macedonian member of the opposition, "especially those in ethnic communities." Tetovo University lacks the necessary educational credentials, he argued, and as such, its legalization would represent "a serious step backwards, especially for the Albanian community."

"Over 90 percent of the staff is suboptimal," continued this participant, adding that many of the professors received their advanced degrees from Tetovo University, and as such, they "don't even have officially recognized diplomas." Moreover, he added, the "plans and programs laid out in the curricula" are far inferior to those offered Albanian students at the nearby Southeast European University (SEEU). If the government's goal is to enhance the quality of higher education, he reasoned, then "more funds should be transferred" to the recently opened SEEU.

"To say that standards are too low is... a bit disingenuous," charged one member of the coalition, arguing that the same political party that now talks about "standards," has, on principle, historically opposed "education in the Albanian language."

"We have no alternative," argued another member of the coalition. Promoting education for all Macedonia's citizens is "in our national interest," he added. Referencing comments by the opposition that sanctioning the legalization of Tetovo University would be tantamount to "national treachery," one coalition member asked: "If educating Albanians is," as the opposition maintains, "an act of national treachery," then "what is the national interest?" "Is it in our national interest to prevent Albanians from being educated?" he continued. On the contrary, posited another coalition member; "we all agree that without an educated populace" Macedonia cannot progress.

While the international community has generally been supportive of the recognition and financing of Tetovo University, one European participant was quick to point out that Macedonians "shouldn't confuse legalization with the accreditation process." Indeed, to be accredited, he

If educating Albanians is an act of national treachery, then what is the national interest? Is it in our national interest to prevent Albanians from being educated?

noted, the University will “have to meet European standards, including the full respect for academic freedom.” Moreover, added this participant, Tetovo University will have to resolve its issue of legal ownership and work toward a “synergy with SEEU.”

“De-politicizing Education”

“Why is this university being established?” asked an ethnic Macedonian member of the opposition. “This is being done to increase the rating of certain political parties,” he said. “We’re taking a stand for the de-politicization of education,” declared this participant, speaking on behalf of his political party.

“The government had the political will and courage” to confront this problem, countered a member of the coalition. Recognizing the sensitivity of this issue as well as its “impact on the development of Macedonia,” he added, members of the coalition have worked to resolve it from both an “educational and a political aspect.” Like every law, he said, this was “preceded by a political agreement between the parties.” Indeed, underscored another coalition member, the opposition acts as though “politics is a bad word...I don’t think it’s...valid...to be against [legalization of the University] simply because it’s [based on] a political agreement.”

Legalization: Consistent with the Framework Agreement?

Calling the formation of a state university in Tetovo “one of the abuses of the principles of the Framework Agreement,” opponents of legalization argued that the government’s obligations in the area of higher education were already satisfied with the creation of SEEU. Under Article 6.2 of the Framework Agreement, the parties are to “invite the international community to provide assistance for the implementation of the Framework Agreement in the area of higher education”—a requirement that some argue was met with the opening in November 2001 of SEEU.

“When projects are proposed which [purport to] solve ethnic issues, and are not within the Framework Agreement,” argued a member of the opposition, “the government should consult and weigh carefully the explanations given in the Agreement” on that issue.

Indeed, members of the coalition were ready to concede that the legalization of Tetovo University, while consistent with the underlying goals of the Framework Agreement, is not in fact called for in that Agreement.

Instead, argued one coalition member, the issue boils down to one of “coexistence” and justice. There is a national tendency, argued this participant, to “draw ethnic maps.” Macedonians ask themselves why they “should have to finance Tetovo University”—the presumption being that only Albanians will be educated there. “Why are there such barriers in relation to education?” she asked. “Let us give a chance to everyone to educate themselves and learn the history of ‘the other.’”

AFTERWORD

While the status of Tetovo University loomed large over the weekend’s discussions, the public’s attention to this issue would soon be eclipsed by that devoted to the impact of the parliament’s passage of the remaining laws on decentralization. As expected, and in the face of strong opposition, later in December, the majority in parliament adopted the laws on fiscal decentralization and territorial division, triggering a wave of protests from many municipalities whose independent existence is threatened by this new law. Unless managed well, this topic has the capacity to once again cause the country’s already fragile interethnic relations to flare up. As with many other issues, cooperation both within the government and between members of the coalition and opposition will prove critical. PER hopes to facilitate a constructive discussion among all parties on how they can resolve their mutual differences at its next meeting.

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