

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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Individuals and institutions wishing to receive PER publications should write to:

**PROJECT ON
ETHNIC
RELATIONS**



**15 Chambers Street
Princeton, New Jersey 08542-3707, USA
Telephone: (609) 683-5666
Fax: (609) 683-5888
E-mail: per@per-usa.org
Web Site: www.per-usa.org**

R e p o r t

DEC. 13-14, 2005



MAVROVO, MACEDONIA

MACEDONIA: AGENDA 2006

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PREFACE

In the three years that the Project on Ethnic Relations and the Swiss Embassy in Macedonia have been organizing informal discussions among Macedonia's political parties in Mavrovo, a mountain resort in Western Macedonia, the "Mavrovo Process" has become a unique institution in the country. These roundtables, which typically include a day of talks exclusively among governing coalition parties, followed by a second session for all the parliamentary parties, provide the Macedonian political elite with the only venue apart from the parliament where all political parties can meet and discuss the most pressing issues and concerns of the day. Perhaps more important, the fact that the Mavrovo talks are informal and off-the-record, and located far from the daily distractions of political life in Skopje, allows participants to engage in dialogue that is substantive, and truly aimed at solving problems. Begun in 2003 as a way to improve communication over the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the Mavrovo Process has since evolved to cover a range of other national priorities. The December 2005 Mavrovo roundtable focused largely on Macedonia's European Union candidacy, and the upcoming 2006 parliamentary elections.

The timing of this Mavrovo roundtable, as more than one participant noted, was auspicious: on the eve of the first day the Macedonian news was dominated by the report that, during the EU's Council of Ministers meeting, the French foreign minister questioned whether the Union was ready to move ahead with a new wave of enlargement by extending EU candidacy status to Macedonia. Coming on the heels of a November Euro-



From left to right: Radmila Sekerinska, Thomas Fuglister, Allen Kassof, Livia Plaks, and Musa Xhaferri.

pean Commission recommendation that Macedonia be made an EU candidate, the potential for a delay was an unexpected and troubling development for Macedonia's political leaders. The governing coalition, which had invested much political capital in achieving the reforms required by the Union, was especially concerned over the potential damage a delay would cause, not only to their electoral fortunes, but also to the pace of the country's progress toward eventual European integration.

The members of the European Union ultimately voted to accept Macedonia as an EU candidate. (This took place after the participants left Mavrovo.) The discussions documented in this report, however, should be of interest not only to observers of the Macedonian political scene, but also to those concerned with the European project. As Macedonia continues to struggle—and succeeds—in holding together a society still under great pressure from forces of ethnic rivalry, nationalism, and economic stagnation, its hopes for European integration are seen by many as a test of reality of the “European perspective” for the Western Balkans, which was proclaimed at the Thessaloniki Summit of 2003. The participants in the December Mavrovo roundtable were well aware of the stakes of EU accession for their own country, and also, with a settlement for neighboring Kosovo on the horizon, of how the Macedonian example has the potential to impact the entire region. This report records their concerns related to a possible EU disappointment, as well as other pressing issues as the ruling and opposition parties looked toward the country's first parliamentary elections since 2002.

We would like to thank deputy prime ministers Radmila Sekerinska and Musa Xhaferri for their commitment to the Mavrovo Process, and for their always helpful suggestions in organizing the roundtables.

PER also expresses its sincere gratitude to the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs for its support of the Mavrovo Process, as well as to the Swiss Embassy in Macedonia. We particularly thank the Swiss Ambassador, Thomas Füglistner, for his personal involvement in and commitment to this initiative, along with Armin Rieser, Albert Hani, Mimoza Angelovska, and other Embassy staff for their indispensable help in organizing the Mavrovo sessions.

Alex N. Grigor'ev, PER's director for the Western Balkans, was responsible for planning and organizing the Mavrovo roundtable, which was chaired by PER's President Emeritus and Senior Adviser Allen H.

Kassof, and opened by Ambassador Thomas Füglistner and PER President Livia Plaks. PER Program Officer Alan Moseley is the author of this report.

In order to encourage frank and open dialogue, it is PER's practice to publish remarks by participants without attribution. This report has not been reviewed by participants, and PER assumes full responsibility for its contents.

Livia B. Plaks, *President*

Princeton, New Jersey

February 2006

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In this report, the spelling of the name “Kosovo” is used (rather than “Kosova,” the spelling preferred by Albanians, or “Kosovo and Metohija” or “Kosmet” preferred by Serbs) because that is the spelling most commonly used in the English-speaking world. For the same reason “Pristina” is favored over “Prishtina,” etc. Except as otherwise noted, the term “Albanian” is used to refer to ethnic Albanians living in Macedonia.



From left to right: Iljaz Halimi and Basri Haliti.



From left to right: Abdyladi Vejseli and Vesna Janevska.

INTRODUCTION

The December 2005 Mavrovo roundtable came at a historic moment for Macedonia. Having received a positive evaluation on Macedonia from the European Commission in November, the EU’s Council of Ministers was set to grant the country EU candidate status—a major milestone for a state still dealing with the consequences of a violent ethnic conflict in 2001. However, on December 12, the day before the beginning of the Mavrovo talks, the news from Brussels was that the Council, troubled by such setbacks as the recent French and Dutch popular rejection of a new European constitution and the continuing stalemate in budget negotiations, might vote to delay a decision on Macedonia’s candidacy until the next EU Presidency. This potential uncertainty over the country’s EU prospects sent shockwaves through Macedonia’s political scene.

While the potential for a delay in Macedonia’s EU candidacy dominated much of the discussion at Mavrovo, other questions, such as the upcoming 2006 parliamentary elections and the implementation of certain reforms related to the Ohrid Framework Agreement, were also significant topics of discussion. Even these issues were seen by many participants as highly connected to the developments in Brussels, however, and Macedonia’s EU candidacy returned time and again in the discussions as the dominant outside factor shaping the country’s immediate future.

This Mavrovo roundtable, the sixth since the series began in 2003, was characterized by a high degree of consensus. No participant disputed that European integration should be one of the state’s top priorities; to the contrary, some opposition leaders claimed that their parties, rather than the current government, should in fact be credited with paving the way to the country’s expected EU candidacy. The question of election irregularities was also an important agenda item on which there was broad agreement, with many participants supporting tougher penalties for violators, as well as reforms to the election law and the makeup of the election commission to improve the quality of the campaigns and the voting process itself.

Interethnic issues, which had dominated previous Mavrovo roundtables, were less prominent during the December talks. During the discussion among the coalition parties, leaders of an ethnic Macedonian party, concerned by their party’s low ratings in recent polls, argued that their ethnic Albanian coalition partner should make more of an effort to

establish itself as a “civic party,” and change the perception that it is interested only in “ethnic issues.” Citing the recent example of a large Albanian flag that was displayed in Skopje, apparently in violation of the law that such “ethnic” symbols be accompanied by the state flag of Macedonia, one participant said such “mistakes” must be prevented in the future, because “when mistakes are made, the consequences are shared, and not felt by one party only.”

For their part, Albanian coalition party leaders did not reject these suggestions, but assured others at the roundtable that their constituents were more “pragmatic,” and “interested in their well being and not only in nationalistic folklore.” Indeed, the slow pace of economic development in Macedonia was a serious concern of governing parties across ethnic lines, and was seen by opposition parties as a major vulnerability of the current government.

Though agreeing that Macedonia should strive toward EU integration, and that conduct of the elections should be improved in 2006, opposition leaders voiced strong criticism of the government on several points. Among these were recent judicial reforms, which some argued would lead to greater politicization of the judiciary (to the benefit of the current ruling parties), and the government’s failure to pass a new law on languages putting Albanian on an equal footing with Macedonian. A leader of an ethnic Albanian coalition party said the latter would be achieved in the next few months, though this was met with skepticism by his colleagues in the opposition.

Despite the persistence of such “ethnic” questions, the dialogue at Mavrovo was remarkable for what it revealed about the political divisions in Macedonia today. It is clear that at the end of 2005, more than at any other time in the past, the most salient lines of competition in Macedonia are not ethnic, but political, between the government and the opposition, and among political parties with different aspirations and priorities for their country. This is no small achievement. While the upcoming parliamentary elections were a source of concern for some—a U.S. participant predicted that “unfortunately, one party will take the nationalistic route,” and an opposition leader agreed—the changed tone at the Mavrovo talks lends credence to the European Commission’s finding that Macedonia is indeed ready for the next stage of its post-socialist history, as another opposition leader put it, the stage of European “reunification.” The news that Macedonia had been accepted

as an EU candidate, announced several days after the Mavrovo roundtable (albeit without a date for starting accession negotiations), was a welcome signal that the “European perspective” for the Western Balkans is not out of reach. For Macedonia, however, beginning its career as an EU candidate, many new challenges lie ahead. In the coming year PER and the Swiss Embassy in Macedonia will continue to support the Mavrovo Process as a forum where all Macedonia’s political leaders can confront these challenges, air their differences, and work toward solutions that will make contentious ethnic politics truly a thing of the past.

PART I: ROUNDTABLE OF THE GOVERNING COALITION PARTIES

Macedonia’s EU Candidacy

The most urgent topic of the day was Macedonia’s prospects for receiving EU candidacy status. The official recognition of Macedonia as an EU candidate, which was widely expected to be announced during the EU’s Council of Ministers meeting that began the day before the Mavrovo sessions, was cast into doubt after the French foreign minister questioned whether the time is right for the EU to launch a new wave of enlargement. The possibility that the country’s progress toward accession would be significantly delayed was of particular concern to members of the coalition government, which had invested a great deal in implementing the often painful reforms required by the Union.

The discussion of Macedonia’s EU candidacy was led by a senior member of the government. This official began by saying that the news that a decision on Macedonia’s EU candidacy might be delayed “was not too big of a surprise,” and that for several days the government had received reports that “what we had believed to be resolved was again being put under question by an influential member” of the EU.

The speaker made several points related to this development. First, referring to the European Commission’s report recommending that Macedonia be granted EU candidacy status, this participant pointed out that “since November 9, we cannot discuss whether Macedonia deserves to be a candidate. An objective analysis says ‘yes.’” “From now on, we cannot say that it is all up to us.” The future of Macedonia’s European integration now depends on the internal conditions of the Union, its

“absorption capacity,” the problems of the EU budget, and the internal problems of the current members, stated this participant. However, the official added that “I cannot believe these problems are sufficient to put into question the membership of a state of two million people....If we became a member, no other members would notice.”

The speaker described several negative consequences of a postponement of the decision on Macedonia's candidacy. First, delaying a decision on Macedonia “would be a blow to the credibility of the Commission itself.” The official pointed out that 2006 will be the year when the status of Kosovo is determined, and said that “a wise policy” on the part of the EU “would be to minimize potential problems” and not to “open new unknowns.” “We need to bring certain problems to a close in the Balkans, and candidate status would have resolved many of these,” argued the official. If Macedonia succeeds in its bid for EU membership, this would have a “sobering” effect on “many political

A postponement would decrease the strength, the credibility and the ‘soft power’ of the EU in the Balkans.

circles in Macedonia,” who would then admit that “yes, we made compromises in Macedonia that were hard, but in the end, somebody validated these compromises.”

If the EU postpones a decision on Macedonia, this line of reasoning will no longer be valid. A postponement, concluded the speaker,

“would decrease the strength, the credibility and the ‘soft power’ of the EU in the Balkans. This is the moment when the EU needs this the least.”

This coalition leader also discussed the negative impact of a postponement on the pace of reforms in Macedonia: “If we have to face a delay, we cannot expect that the speed of reforms will be the same.” Implementing the reforms “was not a natural process for us,” and “we sacrificed some other topics and priorities to achieve this one.” Delaying Macedonia's candidacy status, said the participant, would allow some in the country to criticize reforms “since candidacy is not available,” and then “we start questioning our policies and we lose a lot of time.” For example, the official pointed out that negotiations about new election legislation in Macedonia “are taking place in a very positive atmosphere because everyone knows that much depends on this.”

Finally, this participant noted that the coalition “has claimed for three years that the road to Brussels is via Ohrid,” and that “our success in the EU depends exclusively on our success as a government,” and particularly on the decentralization reforms. “We did not transfer any of our problems to the EU, or turn to them as an alibi for any of our policies.” While some other states that eventually became EU candidates complained that the Union was not open to them or did not appreciate their work, “we did not hear this from our government, and I believe this was the right policy.”

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This participant's analysis was widely supported by the other members of the coalition at the roundtable. A senior ethnic Albanian leader also pointed to the other open issues in the neighborhood that would be affected by a delay or denial of Macedonia's EU candidacy. “We have to create the perception that there is a chance for the Western Balkans and for Macedonia” to join the EU, he said. “Considering the potential problems in Kosovo and Montenegro, then the price of denying Macedonia membership is too high,” he added. To be clear, he said, “I am not saying Macedonia should be given a favor, because we deserve this.” This participant, however, cautioned against focusing too much on the EU question, and overestimating the importance of the possible postponement of candidacy: “We should not expect that if we were granted candidacy status our salaries would immediately be higher or we would have better schools or universities,” he said.

A member of a small ethnic minority party also addressed the question of how a delay in Macedonia's candidacy would affect the pace of reforms. If there is a postponement, he said, “the government will be de-motivated, and the populace will be de-motivated,” which, he suggested, would complicate the reform process.

A senior representative of another coalition party took a slightly different view, asserting that “we did everything we could, but our influence is limited, and we should not dwell on it.” He mentioned the decision taken by NATO earlier in the year to postpone Macedonia's membership in the alliance. “We accepted this in an appropriate manner: we continued with necessary reforms, and we will continue doing so.” He added that

the government even “developed the appropriate rhetoric” for this setback, which was that “it is perhaps even better for us to become more prepared, so that when we do join we are ready.” “It is a fact,” he said, “that some other new NATO members slowed down their reforms once they were admitted.”

However, this participant also noted the political fallout of a delay in candidacy status for the coalition government. “This will be negative for the coalition,” he said, “and will potentially damage it.” Other participants agreed with this assessment. A second member of the government elaborated: “I don’t think that EU candidacy is a guarantee for the coalition to win” in the upcoming elections, she said, “but without it, our position and credibility will be threatened....If we do not get candidacy, then it will be very difficult for our coalition to ask for a new mandate.”

Another participant from a small ethnic party observed that public opinion polls suggest the governing coalition is losing ground, “not,” he said, “because they govern poorly but because of the costs of reform.” He went on, “if we look at new EU members, we see that the parties that brought them to the EU have lost in the following elections.” A U.S. participant added that, if it is denied candidacy, Macedonia would represent a unique case of being punished by voters for implementing difficult reforms while failing to gain the EU candidacy that mandated those reforms. “But it is a new EU today,” he concluded, “and Macedonia seems to be collateral damage to what is going on in the EU.”

A representative of the EU took the floor to clarify the question of Macedonia’s candidacy and the negotiations currently taking place in Brussels. He emphasized that the hesitation over granting Macedonia candidate status was not caused by doubts over the country’s readiness. Referring to the discussion during the EU Council of Ministers meeting the previous day, he said that “No one who intervened spoke against Macedonia itself—no one said Macedonia is not ready for candidate status.” Rather, he explained that the debate had to do with the internal issues of the EU, and the attitude among many citizens of current EU member states to further enlargement. Some in Brussels argued that if the EU cannot reach agreement on its budget and constitution, then perhaps it is too early to talk about future enlargement, he said. He added that in his view, and in that of many members, this is a “shortsighted approach,” but that these concerns are real and cannot be ignored.

Finally, he elaborated on the position of the French Foreign Minister, who had questioned whether it is the right time to begin a new wave of enlargement. The foreign minister, he said, “was responding to public opinion.” “There was a need to prepare the public,” for enlargement, he continued, “but governments did not and now we are suffering the consequences.” Though the fifteen-member EU was scared of the first wave of enlargement, he noted, “doomsday scenarios did not happen.” He recommended that Macedonians “pay a lot of attention to building the image of the country abroad,” and added that “EU countries as a whole do favor the inclusion of the Balkans—this region matters for the consumer in the EU, as many of them come here on holidays....For this reason I’m still optimistic.”

A U.S. participant also expressed optimism regarding Macedonia’s future EU prospects. “There seems to be a general consensus within the European Union that the countries of the Western Balkans belong in the EU,” she said. Further, given the many “sensitive discussions” currently going on in the neighborhood, she argued, West European countries will certainly take into consideration the possible wider impact of a negative decision on Macedonia. “As they consider a solution for Kosovo,” she said, “they will have to keep in mind Kosovo’s neighbors as well.”

Preparing for Elections

In addition to the concern participants expressed over how a delay in EU candidacy would affect the ruling coalition’s electoral fortunes, the discussion also focused on several other issues related to the 2006 parliamentary elections. Considering the disappointing poll numbers for some coalition parties, several participants mentioned the difficult economic situation that many Macedonian citizens face, and observed that this issue would surely be used by opposition parties in their campaigns. While a few speakers argued that Macedonia’s economic progress has in fact been very strong, with, according to one, GDP growth of 5.1% in the past year, others said that “people have not experienced the economic progress.” “We will have serious problems trying to convince the people” that there has indeed been economic progress, said a participant from a small ethnic party.

Another participant from a senior coalition party brought up the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) in this context, stating that “though it is

easy to say that we are losing our position because of the Ohrid Agreement, I don't believe this." A number of important reforms called for in the OFA were implemented without a significant impact on the party's ratings, she said, such as the law on citizenship, Tetovo University, and decentralization. Dissatisfaction related to the OFA, she argued, is "latent" and "quiet," and it becomes dangerous only when other issues are "attached to it," such as the economic situation, corruption, or government inefficiency. Now, she said, the ruling parties must find new arguments to appeal to voters, since "if we stand before the public and say that we brought stability back to Macedonia, and that Macedonia is a different state than it was four years ago, we would be completely right...but this argument would not be worth anything." Asserting that the current government should be reelected only because it kept the peace in Macedonia, she went on, is insufficient. The attitude of the public to this argument, as it was during last year's presidential elections, will be, "Are we supposed to be satisfied only because we had peace?" and the government would be seen to be "offering too little." This argument, along with NATO and the EU, has been used in the local and presidential elections and the referendum, and now "we have very few new arguments," she stated.

Given that the ethnic Macedonian coalition parties are, according to current polls, in "a fragile position," the chair of the roundtable asked representatives of these parties what their coalition partners from ethnic Albanian parties could do to help them in the next election. "I'm not saying they would do it, but if you had a wish list, to keep you in power, what would it be?" he asked.

In response, a senior representative of a coalition party brought up the question of "ethnic issues," and how they are presented to the public: "We should be careful to try to package ethnic issues as common issues, and include them in the EU agenda as well." "I'll be specific," he went on, "Ali Ahmeti [the president of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI)] appeared in four or five events that have only an ethnic dimension. This is okay, but it would be good if the leader of DUI, or the minister of transport, opened a road somewhere, or if the minister of economy did something good for all citizens....Otherwise the perception is that DUI is working only on ethnic issues." He added, "We know this is not true, but we need to change perceptions." Establishing itself as a party "with some civic interest" would help the Macedonian coalition parties,

he said, and would help the image of DUI as well. "Questions that are ethnic in character must be better packaged and presented as serving the general interest," he concluded.

Another participant agreed with this assessment, and mentioned the recent incident of a large Albanian flag that was displayed without a Macedonian flag next to it in Skopje during a celebration of the Albanian national flag day. [*The question of displaying ethnic flags and symbols was addressed in the recently adopted Law on National Symbols, which ruled that flags of ethnic communities must be displayed together with the state flag of the Republic of Macedonia.*] "We cannot make mistakes" such as this, the speaker said. Though the government "reacted in the right way," "the triumph in the Albanian community is not helping our image."

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The first speaker picked up this theme. "When Albanians say the flag issue was a technical error, I have no reason not to believe it is not true, but 90% of the population doesn't believe this." He suggested that a body should be institutionalized within the government to "work on coordinating the presentation of results, and the work of ministers, in order to avoid conflict situations." Better coordination is needed, he argued, because "when mistakes are made, the consequences are shared, and not felt by one party only."

The reaction to these comments from representatives of ethnic minority parties was mixed. One leader of a small ethnic party said "we cannot expect one member of the coalition to give up its ethnic demands in an election year." A representative of an ethnic Albanian party argued that "the tasks of the electoral program of DUI stem from the OFA," and that these were "national questions" that "were not important only to the Albanians, but also to all the ethnic communities in Macedonia." "In the past four years," he went on, "DUI has acted in accordance with the Framework Agreement....We believe we have successfully performed our duty, without causing damage to our coalition partners."

This participant turned the issue of celebrating ethnic holidays back to the ethnic Macedonian majority. "When Albanians have a holiday, the

president goes to a mosque and congratulates them—this is normal. But he should also do this on the flag day—this would indicate that this is a normal thing, too.” “Expressing the rights of citizens should be something very natural,” he said, “not as something that was won and that might be taken away again.” However, he acknowledged that “Albanians do not need to make a 20 meter long flag,” and agreed that “we need to calm down this euphoria.”

Another ethnic Albanian political leader struck a somewhat different note. “I believe our constituents are pragmatic,” he said. “We will not get a lot of votes by saying to our electorate that Tetovo University has become a state institution —this has already been forgotten.” Rather, he argued that concrete improvements are more important. Instead of appealing to voters with “triumphant ethnic symbols,” he said, “if we build better schools and infrastructure, we will get more votes.” “If we do this then our people will never even ask us if we have a 20 meter long flag,” he asserted. However, he added that the government’s ability to offer such improvements remains problematic. “How much capacity do we have to offer investments in certain regions?” he asked.

This participant ended his remarks by speaking in favor of building a “joint strategy” for elections with his party’s coalition partners. “There is space” for a joint strategy, he said, “and the citizens will not punish us for this.” “Now citizens are interested in their well being and not only in nationalistic folklore.”

Several participants brought up the issue of the conduct of the elections, and the need to reduce the number of voting irregularities. One pointed

out that the 2006 elections will consist of only one round, and asserted that “this is always of a higher quality than the two-tiered system.” This participant also said that by the end of February 2006, changes to the election law will be completed, and that this will also help. Finally, she argued that “the

government will need to communicate very clearly to the public that irregularities will be punished, and that people will go to prison.” “There needs to be a more serious campaign for this.”

Now citizens are interested in their well being and not only in nationalistic folklore.

A representative of the European Union concurred, and reminded participants that according to the calendar, the elections will come just before the next European Commission progress report on Macedonia. “The entire EU will be focusing on this issue very clearly,” he stated: “it will be a key test of the country’s progress.”

Intra-Coalition Relations

The chair of the discussion questioned participants on the state inter-party cooperation within the governing coalition. Though allowing that there was still much room for improvement, representatives of the largest ethnic Albanian and Macedonian parties gave such relations “a passing score.” Participants from smaller ethnic parties, however, expressed strong concern about their ability to influence government policy and get a fair hearing. One said that there is still “a lack of communication between bigger and smaller political parties.” As an example of one concern of small parties that larger parties are not moving to address, he discussed the law on financing of political parties. Though this law has been passed, the state funding that it calls for has not been delivered, he asserted.

Another representative of a small ethnic party returned to the issue of the upcoming elections in the context of intra-coalition relations. “What did the leaders of the coalition do to satisfy the demands of small ethnic parties?” he asked. “How are we going to present ourselves, to what extent were our demands met?” He argued that “we were completely excluded from the principle of equitable representation,” and also spoke in favor of developing “special norms and criteria” to provide for the greater participation of minorities in public life. “The electoral system needs to be arranged in a certain way” to give greater representation to minorities in decision-making bodies, he stated. He cited Croatia, Slovenia, and Kosovo as places where minorities have guaranteed parliamentary representation.

An ethnic Albanian participant downplayed the urgency of this issue. “There is always a need for more democracy,” he said, “but Macedonia after 2001 looks much different than before.” He asserted that “the laws on equitable representation are being implemented,” and that “there have been real improvements....It is not only about Albanians, but other groups as well.” He acknowledged that “the composition of the parliament

does not reflect the national distribution” of ethnic groups, but said “we can talk about this, but we cannot say there has been no progress.”

The first speaker pressed his point, however, pointing out that “the Turkish minority does not have enough votes for even one member of parliament.” [*The Democratic Party of Turks holds two parliamentary seats through its participation in the Together for Macedonia coalition.*] He went on, “this can be solved either by having the whole territory of Macedonia one electoral unit, or by guaranteeing slots for minorities.” “We will try to find solutions with our political partners,” he concluded.

PART II: INCLUSION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY PARTIES

EU Prospects, Revisited

During the second day of the Mavrovo talks, which were attended by representatives of both governing and opposition parties, the discussion returned to the question of Macedonia’s European Union candidacy. After repeating the essence of his remarks from the previous day, in which he emphasized that the potential delay in granting Macedonia EU candidacy status is a product of internal debates over the direction of the Union, and not a reflection on Macedonia’s readiness for candidacy, a senior EU representative added that “political consensus” is essential for the country’s continued progress. Drawing a parallel to the situation of Ireland, he said “Ireland is also a small country, which was divided, went through a peace process and reconciliation, and was very poor when it joined....Now it is one of the fastest growing members of the EU.” “Why?” he asked, “because of political consensus around important issues like investing in education....This political consensus is essential.”

There was broad agreement among participants from both coalition and opposition parties that Macedonia should strive toward EU membership. In the words of one opposition leader, “EU membership has been the common goal of Macedonia since independence—the only one that was a unifying idea for all governments and parties....The road is cast in stone, and there can be no deviation from it.”

However, many representatives of opposition parties still found room to criticize the government for its handling of the EU accession process. As

one put it, “the opposition has supported many reforms of the government, but still we are not satisfied.” Another went further, asserting that “the reason for the delay in [EU] candidacy is not within the EU but within the current government,” and that “the things this government does do not correspond to EU requirements.”

A leader of a different opposition party highlighted the role of former President Boris Trajkovski who, he said, “paved the way for the decision that we are now proud of, both as a party and as a state.” “He enabled the Framework Agreement,” he stated, and “it would be unjust and impolite for no one to mention this.”

EU membership has been the common goal of Macedonia since independence—the only one that was a unifying idea for all governments and parties.

Another governing coalition leader expressed her satisfaction that “many members of the opposition support our EU integration both in words and in acts,” but also said that “unfortunately, some opposition parties do so only declaratorily.” “I hope that in the future there will be a constructive opposition, and that the DPA [Democratic Party of Albanians] will be constructive by returning to parliament,” she concluded.

A representative of a coalition party also referred to the ongoing boycott of parliament by the DPA. “There is a group that says it is pro-Europe but does not participate in parliament when there are votes that are important for our EU integration,” he said. Addressing other opposition leaders at the roundtable, he stated that “there is a need to clarify the positions,” on EU integration, “since in these decisive moments the position of a party that used to be in power is important for the people” to know.

Questions on Reforms

Representatives of opposition parties focused on two main issues in their criticism of the government’s policies—judicial reform, and the law on languages. A leader of an ethnic Albanian opposition party charged that Macedonia’s judicial reforms, which, he noted, were welcomed by the international community, will in fact lead to the “party-ization of the judiciary,” and not its independence and autonomy. The large majority of members of the governmental council that will appoint judges are

themselves appointed by or affiliated with the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), he stated, leaving only three out of fifteen council members to be chosen by the parliament. “When we have such a method, it is clear that we will have even greater politicization of the judicial body,” he argued. Instead, he asserted that all members of the judicial council should be elected by the parliament, “so that nobody can be elected without opposition votes.” In this way, he said, council members would be “acceptable to both sides.”

All members of the judicial council should be elected by the parliament.

A leader of a governing coalition party strongly rejected this argument. To the contrary, he said that the selection of judges by the parliament would lead to “the direct politicization of core bodies” of the judiciary, and that the idea behind the judicial reform was “that the legislative and executive would have as little role as possible” in selecting judges. However, he added that “in the future, there will be room for strengthening these reforms” through additional laws.

Another issue that received criticism from opposition leaders was the legal status of the Albanian language. A leader of an ethnic Albanian opposition party asserted that the absence of a new law on languages demonstrates that the Ohrid Framework Agreement is not being implemented. Albanian should be the state’s second official language, he said. However, “in parliament it can be used orally but not in written form.” Similarly, he said “the law on traffic safety provides for the use of Albanian on road signs, but it is not enforced.”

A leader of an ethnic Albanian coalition party responded. “It is true that the legislative part of the OFA has been completed, except for the complex issue of the use of Albanian,” he stated. However, he continued, “this is the easiest issue in my opinion, and in that of the government.” In the next few months, he told participants, the government will determine “the most practical solution” to the issue of the Albanian language. It is important, he added, that the opposition be involved as well, and that a consensus is reached on legislation that is also in accordance with the standards of the EU.

Another ethnic Albanian opposition leader took issue with these state-

ments, arguing that “it seems there is no coordination between the prime minister and members of his government.” The prime minister, he asserted, has said that the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement is complete, while one of his deputy prime ministers claims that it is not, since the law on languages has not yet been passed. While the previous speaker has told us it will take time to develop the best possible legislation, he went on, “a law on languages has been ready since 1997,” and was introduced in parliament in 2001. Despite the assurances of the government, he claimed, “no parliament has adopted such a law in the last six months before elections.” “Do not believe that the law will be adopted regardless of what the prime minister says.”

Election Concerns

Several issues related to the upcoming parliamentary elections were raised during the session with all the parliamentary parties. First, a number of participants spoke of the potential for unfair, “rigged” elections, and the need to take strong measures to prevent this. One opposition leader outlined a proposal that he described as a “new social contract before elections,” which should be signed by all political parties, church leaders, representatives of ethnic groups, members of the judiciary, and so on. This “contract” must include an official preamble that obligates all signatories to “take on the moral responsibility to be fair,” and it must be signed in an official ceremony attended by the president as well as foreign ambassadors, he stated. In addition, the parliament should adopt a law under which “any obstruction or violence during elections will be punished by 30 years in prison.” Finally, he said that 30 percent of all funds spent on election campaigns should be dedicated to encouraging voter participation. He added that his party will be publishing this proposal in the near future.

Following much condemnation of the electoral irregularities witnessed in Macedonia, and suggestions from party leaders that their political opponents are largely the ones responsible, a member of the government urged a more balanced view. Listening to this discussion, he said, “you might have the impression that you are listening to political parties from Luxembourg or England.” “We have all participated in elections and gotten our hands dirty somehow,” he acknowledged, “but the 2002 elections were better than those in 1998, and in 2004 they were better

than in 2002, 2005 was better than 2004.” “What I’m saying is that we’re getting better....We should not create an atmosphere of mistrust and a lack of confidence.” He concluded, however, by saying “we need better monitoring from abroad, to identify those gangsters causing problems, and put them in prison.”

Partially in response to these remarks, a representative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reminded the participants that “the limits of the OSCE are clearly monitoring, which excludes the possibility of supervision and control.” “We are not the police,” he said, “and we cannot replace the election bodies that are in charge of organization elections....We can only report.”

Another area of concern in connection with the upcoming elections was the risk that highly competitive campaigns would create greater political polarization in the country. One representative of an opposition party predicted that “we will have political competition between militant cores

of parties,” which will lead to “a very fractured parliament.” “Large parties will lose votes to militant parties,” he continued, “and no large parties will be able to dominate as a pillar within the coalition.” This will create the need for “grand coalitions,” he said, and there will be a

We will have political competition between militant cores of parties.

very “negative environment” in the parliament. As one remedy for this situation he proposed reforms to the election law, to establish a “threshold that would give smaller parties access to the parliament.”

A U.S. participant offered his assessment of how the upcoming elections will likely unfold. He began by saying “I am more optimistic about the day after the election than I am about the day before or the day of.” After the election, he explained, “you will have a coalition that has experience governing....Despite what they do before elections, after they tend to govern in a responsible way.”

He was more pessimistic about the day before elections: before elections, he said, “one party will take the nationalistic route, and will run against the EU, and against NATO.” He added, “I hope not, but I assure you someone will be tempted to do that...so the drama might be great.”

As for the day of the elections, he predicted that there would be struggles “mostly among the ethnic Albanian parties.”

Returning to his first statement, however, he repeated, addressing the leading opposition and the coalition parties, “even if you switch places, I don’t think it will make much difference.”

An opposition leader agreed with part of this prediction: “I agree that somebody will use nationalistic rhetoric in the elections.” “I agree that we don’t know who it will be,” he said, “but it will happen.”



Radmila Sekerinska



Jovan Manasijevski



Nikola Kurkchiev takes questions from the press during the roundtable.



From left to right: Ivan Stoiljkovic, Gezim Ostreni, Erwan Fouere, and Michael Einik.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

(English alphabetical order)

Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia

Ivan Stoiljkovic, President

Democratic Party of Turks in Macedonia

Kenan Hasipi, President

Democratic Party of Albanians

Iljaz Halimi, Vice President

Imer Selmani, Vice President

Democratic Union for Integration

Agron Buxhaku, Vice President

Gezim Ostreni, Vice President, Parliament of Macedonia

Rizvan Sulejmani, Minister for Local Self-Government of Macedonia

Musa Xhaferri, Deputy Prime Minister of Macedonia

Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity

Ljubisa Georgievski, Member of the Executive Board

Alexandar Nikolski, Member of the Executive Board

Trajko Veljanoski, Member of the Executive Board, Special Legal Advisor to the President of the Party

Vlatko Cingoski, Member of the Executive Board

Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-People's Party

Slobodan Casule, Member, Parliament of Macedonia

Vesna Janevska, President

Spiro Ristovski, President, Youth Force

Liberal Party

Ristana Lalcevska, Member, Parliament of Macedonia

Liberal Democratic Party

Stevco Jakimovski, Minister of Labor and Social Policy of Macedonia

Jovan Manasijevski, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense of Macedonia

Roza Topuzovka-Karevska, Secretary General

National Democratic Party

Basri Haliti, President

Party for Democratic Prosperity

Ismet Ramadani, Member, Parliament of Macedonia
Abdyladi Vejseli, President

Social Democratic Union of Macedonia

Nikola Kurkchiev, Secretary General
Radmila Sekerinska, Deputy Prime Minister of Macedonia

United Party of the Roma of Macedonia

Erduan Iseni, Mayor, Municipality of Suto Orizari

European Union

Erwan Fouere, Ambassador; Special Representative in Macedonia;
Head, Delegation to Macedonia, European Commission
Jesper Thomsen, Senior Adviser to the Special Representative in Macedonia

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Sebastian Dworack, Political Adviser, Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje

Project on Ethnic Relations

Michael Einik, Executive Director, Center for Eastern, Central,
and Southeastern Europe
Allen Kassof, President Emeritus and Senior Adviser
Alan Moseley, Program Officer
Livia Plaks, President

Swiss Confederation

Mimoza Angelovska, Assistant to the Ambassador, Embassy in Macedonia
Thomas Füglistner, Ambassador to Macedonia
Albert Hani, Collaborator, Embassy in Macedonia
Armin Rieser, Regional Peace Building Adviser, Embassy in Macedonia
Roland Salvisberg, Programme Officer for Southeastern Europe, Political Affairs
Division IV (Human Security), Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

United States of America

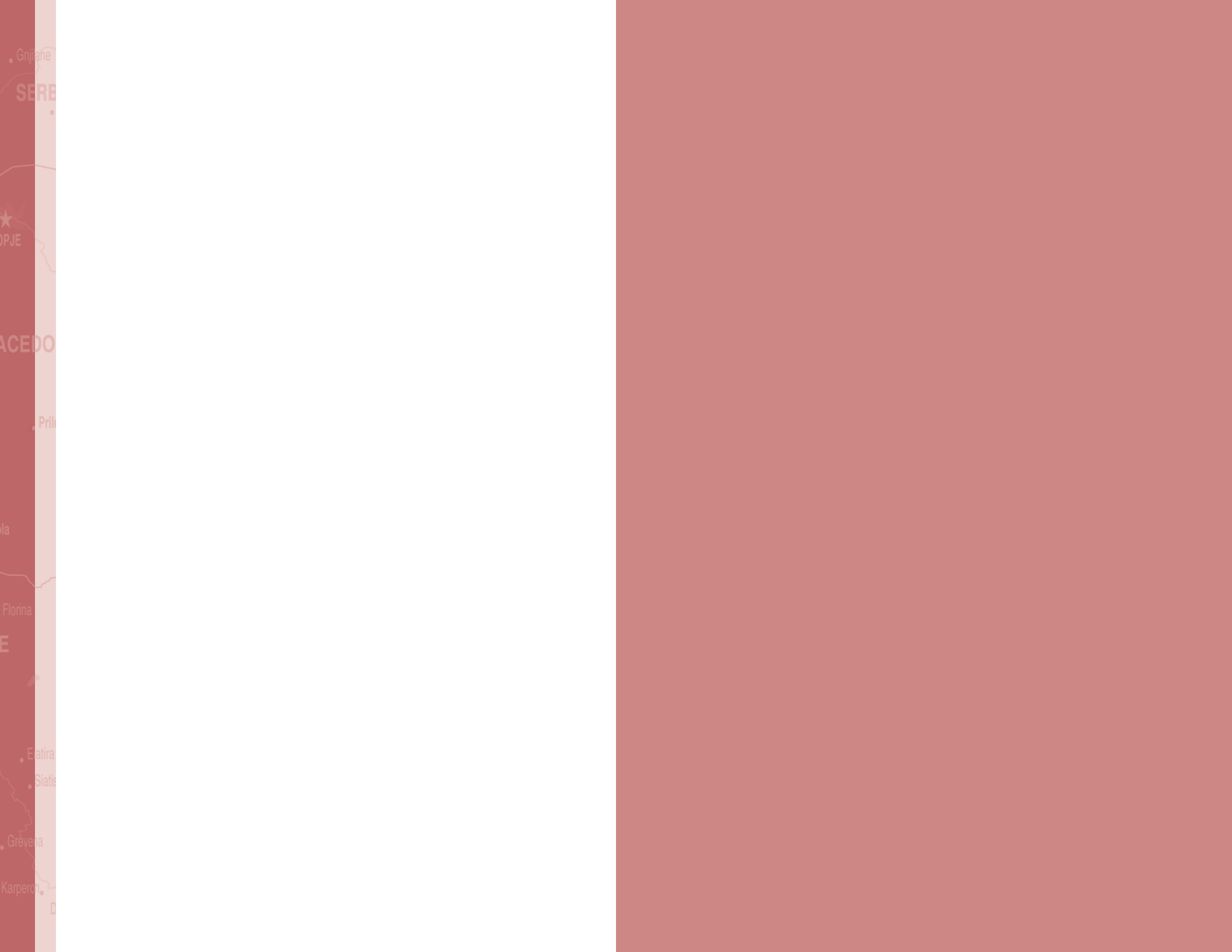
Gillian Milovanovic, Ambassador to Macedonia
Paul Wohlers, Deputy Chief of Mission, Embassy in Macedonia

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