

PROJECT ON ETHNIC RELATIONS

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R e p o r t

JUNE 18-19, 2004



MAVROVO, MACEDONIA

**MACEDONIA'S INTERETHNIC
COALITION: SOLIDIFYING GAINS**

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PREFACE

In May 2003, the Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) and the Swiss Embassy in Macedonia launched the first roundtable in a series that would come to be known as “the Mavrovo Process.” That meeting, held at Lake Mavrovo, brought together members of Macedonia’s new interethnic governing coalition and opposition parties, and provided them with a neutral space to discuss their visions for the future and to assess the progress the government had made on implementing the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), the internationally brokered truce credited with ending the brief armed conflict in 2001.

The discussions met a need in Macedonia for open and frank communication within the governing coalition and between the government and the opposition. PER and the Swiss Embassy in Macedonia have now held three roundtables bringing together both the government and the opposition and three meetings for coalition partners only. This report is on the roundtable held in Mavrovo, in June 2004, which included both ruling and opposition parties.

The meeting took place at a critical moment in Macedonia’s post-Ohrid development. The major topic of concern was decentralization, and especially the proposed law on new territorial divisions. The roundtable became the venue for intense discussions between ethnic Albanian and Macedonian members of the governing coalition over decentralization.

Although the Mavrovo participants did not reach a compromise at the meeting, it provided them with a timely forum to clarify their positions



From left to right: Musa Xhaferi, Stephan Nellen, Allen Kassof, Hari Kostov, Ilinka Mitreva, Radmila Sekerinska, and Agron Buxhaku.

and to continue negotiations afterwards. Indeed, Hari Kostov, the Macedonian prime minister, used the occasion of the roundtable to meet with senior coalition party officials to begin ironing out their disagreements over the decentralization measures. (The second part of the meeting considered disagreements between the government and the opposition.)

As events since the June discussions made clear, implementation of the OFA is still fraught with difficulty. In late July 2004, protests by ethnic Macedonians against the government's redistricting plans turned violent in Struga, and days later thousands of protesters marched in Skopje against redistricting. Opponents of the decentralization measures successfully petitioned to hold a referendum on the issue, which was scheduled for November 2004.

This report documents the arguments and counterarguments advanced by Macedonia's political leaders just as their disagreements over decentralization were emerging. It also reflects other current issues, such as the concerns of smaller ethnic minorities in Macedonia (Turks, Bosnjaks, Serbs, and Roma), and discussions on how to minimize irregularities in the upcoming local elections.

PER is grateful to the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs for its support of this initiative and to the Swiss Embassy in Macedonia, especially to Stephan Nellen, the then Swiss Ambassador, and to Matthias Siegfried, the Adviser for Peace Building. We also thank U.S. Ambassador Lawrence Butler and former Deputy Chief of Mission Eleanor Nagy for their much valued assistance.

Alex N. Grigor'ev, PER Senior Program Officer, was responsible for organizing the meeting and was a participant as well. Ilia Iliev, a PER associate, 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 Plaks, *Executive Director*
Princeton, New Jersey
September 2004

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 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.



Ermira Mehmeti and Musa Xhaferi face the press during the roundtable.



From left to right: Radmila Sekerinska, Hari Kostov, Ilinka Mitreva, Aziz Pollozhani, Musa Xhaferi, Agron Buxhaku, Teuta Arifi, and Roza Topuzovska-Karevska.

INTRODUCTION

The first day of this two-day meeting was attended by representatives of the parties making up the governing coalition: the Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM), the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the Democratic League of Bosnjaks in Macedonia, the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia, the Democratic Party of Turks in Macedonia, and the United Party of the Roma in Macedonia. They were joined on the second day by their colleagues from the opposition parties, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), and the Liberal Party (LP).

The roundtable began with a discussion of what has been achieved by the interethnic governing coalition, and the impact of their accomplishments on the country.

The international participants praised Macedonia, which, they said, had become an example for the region in improving interethnic relations. Indeed, they noted, recently some leaders from Kosovo have been examining the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) as one model of what could be accomplished with self-restraint and political will.

In their turn, the participants from Macedonia stressed the benefits that they derive from the Mavrovo meetings in clarifying the positions of the respective political partners, anticipating future problems and solutions, and in providing guidelines on how to communicate with the media and the public.

The participants agreed that the most urgent current topic is decentralization. While decentralization was on the agenda of each of the previous meetings, said one participant, we managed to avoid sufficient discussion of it. This time, even though decentralization is not the main topic on the agenda, it is where we now need to focus our attention.

PART I: Roundtable of the Coalition Government

Initial Positions and Major Disagreements

A member of the government presented the position of SDSM. He emphasized that decentralization is a major concern of the OFA and is one of the key topics together with the question of language usage. For this coalition government, the twin topics of decentralization and language usage present the most serious challenges. As well as striving for effective communication within the coalition and between the coalition and the international community, the government must not forget about communicating with citizens.

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The main goal of the reforms is, after all, to improve their quality of life, this participant said. Because voters are concerned about the issues of decentralization and language, politicians from all parties are subjected to heavy pressure and constant scrutiny, making compromise even more difficult.

Despite all these difficulties, SDSM would not like to over dramatize the current debates, said the speaker. Even if the coalition partners do not reach an agreement now, they can always proceed on the results of previous negotiations that had already been accepted by all the partners. There is a basic consensus at the core of the current coalition. Of course, issues can be reopened and details added or modified, but if the partners reach a point where the differences are irreducible, then they can always fall back on the previous agreements, this participant said.

The most serious differences concern the bilingualism of Skopje, continued this SDSM speaker. The agreements reached earlier specified that the capital city should preserve its current status, but DUI has now insisted on reopening the issue. The ethnic Macedonian part of the coalition is ready to discuss this and had already taken the necessary steps for providing opportunities for the ethnic Albanians living in the city to use their language in communicating with the state institutions located in the capital.

A participant from DUI, however, noted that the ethnic Albanian partners fear that this decision might be challenged and revoked by the Constitutional Court, because the number of ethnic Albanians living in the city falls under the 20 percent threshold. That is why DUI suggested that the boundaries of the city of Skopje be expanded to include a number of neighboring municipalities inhabited mainly by ethnic Albanians. This way, the number of ethnic Albanian inhabitants in Skopje would exceed the 20 percent threshold. Such an arrangement would automatically introduce bilingualism in the city, would make any special measures unnecessary, and could not be subject to challenge at the Constitutional Court.

An ethnic Macedonian member of the coalition said that the position and the worries of his ethnic Albanian partners were understandable. However, they need to be reminded that the OFA was reached as an outcome of a series of small and big compromises, and that each party had tried to find the best balance between the interests, concerns and fears of the Macedonian and Albanian communities in the country. The rules concerning Skopje were agreed upon as part of a major compromise, this participant said. Struga and Kichevo were also parts of that package. By the end of the negotiations, all the parties had agreed that the best solution would be to change the boundaries of Struga and Kichevo, while leaving the capital intact. Before this bargain was made, all three municipalities were predominantly ethnic Macedonian. Afterwards, the municipal boundaries of Struga and Kichevo were modified and the municipalities became predominantly ethnic Albanian. In this way, the ethnic Macedonian parties recognized the legitimacy of the interests, fears and concerns of their Albanian counterparts and made a serious concession, while the Albanians demonstrated an understanding of the position of the Macedonians and agreed to preserve the status of Skopje unmodified. This compromise certainly helped the Macedonian politicians explain to citizens that the deal benefits all the parties concerned, emphasized this participant. Now the deal is being challenged, and SDSM and LDP will certainly have serious difficulties trying to persuade the majority of Macedonian citizens that the interests of both ethnic communities are fairly represented. This is why SDSM and LP are not inclined to accept the proposal of their ethnic Albanian colleagues to reopen the negotiations—unless the issue of Skopje is linked to re-opening and perhaps revising the previous agreements concerning Struga and Kichevo.

The differences are serious, said ethnic Macedonian participants, and they did not expect a formal compromise to be reached at the current Mavrovo meeting. However, they hope that some common ground for a future agreement could be traced out. The coalition partners had proven their ability to meet even more difficult challenges, one speaker said, and to find solutions even without the help and advice—however much needed and appreciated—of international institutions and organizations.

A representative of a European institution intervened to offer a different perspective. He cited the broader context in which the negotiations are taking place and the role of international institutions. According to him, the law on decentralization should close the legislative package related to the OFA. The law should have been passed before the presentation of the country's application for membership in the European Union, but it was not. The application was nevertheless accepted, "on credit." Brussels decided that the country deserved a chance, but this chance should not be missed by delaying the legislative package. Otherwise what has been given on credit could be taken away, this participant said.

A representative of DUI followed with an account of the Albanian position. After listing the concessions made by the Albanian parties during the negotiations in Ohrid, he argued that the main aim of both partners was to elaborate a model for regulating interethnic relations—a working model that should provide a general orientation for the settlement of all the specific issues and problems that might arise. The leadership of DUI thinks that Skopje should provide an example of how this model looks and works. The city should fall into a category of its own, and be treated separately from the other municipalities. However, since this arrangement might be challenged at the Constitutional Court unless the boundaries of the city of Skopje are modified so as to increase beyond 20 percent the proportion of the ethnic Albanians population. This step, he said, would help us to settle all the legal points of the agreement that we already had that the Albanian language could be used in Macedonia's capital city.

Motives Behind the Disagreements: Unanswered Questions

An international participant suggested that the positions of both sides might become clearer if the ethnic Albanian leadership were to explain in specific terms what in the everyday life of the Albanian residents of

Skopje would change if the new linguistic status were to be approved. He also asked the DUI participants if they had considered the political consequences for their Macedonian coalition partners should they accept the Albanian proposal. A DUI representative refused to speculate about the motivation of his Macedonian counterparts, but reiterated the position of his party. The way that interethnic relations are regulated in the capital should become a model for the whole country, he said.

Another DUI participant offered a new line of argument. Each Macedonian citizen has the right to communicate with the central authorities in his own language, he said. This is an issue already agreed upon by the coalition partners. Communication with the central authorities takes place in the capital, but the Constitution lacks specific provisions regarding the capital city. That is why a new constitutional category should be created, which should become a basis to build future legal norms. This constitutional category should deal specifically with the city of Skopje, he said. A colleague of his suggested that the question concerning political consequences should be addressed to the ethnic Macedonian, not the ethnic Albanian participants.

However, the Macedonian participants disagreed, and insisted that the question about motivation and outcomes is important and relevant, and that it would be useful for all the parties concerned if the Albanians were indeed to consider the political consequences for their ethnic Macedonian partners. But a DUI speaker said that he would not speculate on this question and that it would be better if the ethnic Macedonian participants were to weigh their motivations in this matter. We should be completely sincere and honest with each other, he said, so let them speak openly.

Linguistic Rights and Skopje's "Special Status"

An ethnic Macedonian participant objected to the claim that a bilingual status for Skopje is a logical outcome of the OFA. Currently we are experiencing the most serious crisis ever faced by this government, he said. The problem is that our partners are reopening a question we considered closed and resolved after the end of the negotiations in Ohrid. Yes, the OFA stipulates that the rights of the Albanians will be guaranteed at the national level. The law on local self-government was intended to guarantee their rights at the local level and to make ample provisions in that respect. Now DUI wants to reopen a chapter that was already

closed. They have probably fallen into a trap prepared by their colleagues from the opposition DPA, who keep pushing them toward a more radical approach that might jeopardize the coalition. This is an extremely dangerous trap, he said.

Another ethnic Macedonian participant reminded participants of the basic agreements already reached by the partners. We all agreed, he said, that the linguistic rights of the ethnic minorities will be protected by guaranteeing their right to use their native language in communication with the local authorities in municipalities where they represent more than 20 percent of the population. Initially the measure was intended to protect the rights of the Albanian minority, but it will also protect the ethnic Macedonians in communities where they are not a predominant population, for example in Struga and Kichevo, following the modification of their municipal boundaries.

As far as Skopje is concerned, he said, a clear distinction should be made between a language of communication with the municipal institutions and an official language. The capital city does present a special case, because several levels overlap there. There might be negotiations about the municipal level, but the Constitution has very clear provisions regarding the national level. According to the Constitution, the official language of the country is Macedonian, and the official alphabet is Cyrillic.

Regarding the use of the Albanian language at a municipal level in Skopje, the general rule states that when an ethnic minority represents more than 20 percent of the inhabitants, their language is automatically recognized by the local institutions. Currently ethnic Albanians make up less than 20 percent in Skopje—they were 15.3 percent according to the most recent census, and 13.5 percent according to the previous census, said this participant. However, the city council is authorized to decide about the use of languages spoken by less than 20 percent of the inhabitants, and could take the necessary steps regarding the functioning of local institutions. The situation with national institutions is quite different, because the Constitution is quite explicit in that respect. A modification of the boundaries of the city of Skopje would not make any difference, because Macedonian would remain the official language.

A colleague of his from SDSM reminded participants that there is a common understanding among the coalition partners that what is valid for the national level is also valid for the local level. So far, all the coalition parties have been supporting that approach.

An ethnic Albanian participant suggested a different approach. The legal problems should not be over-dramatized, he argued. Yes, there are specific provisions in the Constitution and in the legislation regarding the use of the language at national and local levels, but not all the articles are fully implemented, and there are many issues that remain beyond the scrutiny of the legislators. So the law and the Constitution provide enough space for maneuvering, he argued. The more important problem currently is that the country needs more symbols that would demonstrate the mixture, the intertwining between different ethnic groups to emphasize the unity of the country. Skopje, the national capital, should become such a symbol. It will have an enormous impact on the ethnic Albanian citizens. It will reinforce their loyalty and will strengthen their motivation to participate in the political process.

Will the Ohrid Agreement Be Jeopardized?

An ethnic Macedonian participant explained again why his party is so frustrated by the request of DUI. The OFA was reached after four months of an indecisive war, he said. In Croatia, the peace process started after five years of war, when one of the sides emerged as a clear winner and was able to dictate the terms of the treaty. Macedonia did not fall into a long term war, so neither side emerged as a clear winner. Instead, a political solution was sought, which was finalized

after another four months of negotiations and became known as the Ohrid Framework Agreement. This was the only alternative to a continued war.

The credibility of the Ohrid process would be jeopardized if we start questioning compromises already achieved and reopening deals already concluded.

Now the Framework Agreement has been challenged at several points, continued the Macedonian participant. First, it was challenged by VMRO-DPMNE, which left

the parliamentary session when the amendments to the Constitution were voted on. This might have been a tactical decision, but the end result is that the opposition voiced their objections to the implementation of the agreement (to which they themselves were a party). It is understandable for the opposition to raise objections, this participant continued, but now it seems that the agreements are also being challenged by our coalition partners, and this is really dangerous. All politicians in

Macedonia should understand the alternatives to the OFA, and we should stick to it regardless of our likes and dislikes.

The credibility of the Ohrid process would be jeopardized, the participant went on, if we start questioning compromises already achieved and reopening deals already concluded. Then, the citizens might wonder whether the deals were really final, or if they were just steps toward new future compromises when new demands are made again and again. Moreover, the OFA represents an outcome of a long process of negotiations, when each party conceded one point to gain another. That is why no issue should be reopened independently—all of them represent integral parts of the Ohrid Agreement. Bilingualism for Skopje was already negotiated and the deal completed.

Bilingualism for Skopje certainly was discussed in Ohrid, agreed an ethnic Albanian colleague. And the fact that the process of implementing the agreements is so advanced is certainly one of the major achievements of the current government. However, he argued, the coalition partners should start looking ahead and thinking about how the country should look in five to ten years. When the process of implementing the OFA ends, politicians in Macedonia will have to adopt a new framework, this time provided by the accession to the EU. Then, a European agenda will succeed Ohrid. Skopje should become the symbol of this future Macedonia. It is the country's most important center of administration, diplomacy, business, culture, and education, and the Albanian language should be used there. Otherwise, ethnic Albanians might consider the institutions located there as foreign and hostile. When discussing the linguistic status of the capital, DUI is looking ahead to the future of Macedonia, beyond the OFA.

The speaker offered also a different interpretation of the process of negotiating and implementing the OFA. The parties present there did not try to win at the expense of the others, but to find a good and stable solution that would profit all the citizens, a solution without winners or losers. Such solutions represent best the spirit of the current coalition, he said, and DUI wants the capital to reflect the spirit of the coalition government.

Skopje is the capital of Macedonia, which means that it is the capital of all the citizens, added a colleague of his. We should forget for a moment about the rules that govern the linguistic status of municipalities, because Skopje is not a mere municipality. Being a member of parliament, he

said, I am allowed to speak in my language in the parliament, so why should other institutions not follow that example?

Can the Discussion on the Status of Skopje Be Postponed?

An ethnic Macedonian participant commented that the coalition partners certainly should think about the future, but the issue currently at stake is the final phase of the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement. He wondered why the Albanian partners suddenly decided to introduce the topic of Skopje, and why precisely in the context of decentralization. The issue of decentralization had been debated in the parliament, he said. The coalition partners sent clear messages to the media, the parliamentarians moved on to the topic of fiscal decentralization, and then suddenly DUI raised the question about the linguistic status of Skopje. It will be of great help to the ethnic Macedonian members of the coalition, he said, if DUI would explain to us the reasons for this unexpected change.

A colleague of his pointed to another inconsistency in DUI's politics regarding Skopje. Two visions of Skopje were discussed at an earlier stage, he said. The first option was integrative, and it was based on a strong municipal authority that would have real control over the whole territory of the capital, with all the minorities living there. This option would have enhanced the communication between the ethnic groups and their everyday interactions. Instead, DUI insisted on delegating more powers to the small sub-municipalities and weakening the municipal authorities; simultaneously, virtually mono-ethnic sub-municipalities were created, transforming the capital into a kind of loose confederation of ethnically divided units. The Macedonian coalition partners reluctantly agreed to follow the path suggested by DUI, so why now do the Albanian partners shift again and start speaking of an integrative vision?

Bilingualism for Skopje is not a new issue, explained an ethnic Albanian participant. It was raised several times, and the arguments in support of the use of the Albanian language are quite standard, typically adopted by any ethnic minority. First, Skopje is a multiethnic city, at a crossroad of several traditions and cultures, and this objective situation should be recognized and legalized. A law on language would be one of the most vivid expressions of the real multiculturalism of the city. Second, parallel use of more than one language would enhance ethnic cohesion because several ethnic groups would recognize the institutions based in the city

as their own. Third, it would correspond to the real needs of Albanian citizens, who will be able to follow the political processes and the work of the government. The issue at stake is the ownership of the city, and to a certain degree, of the country. Neither belongs to a single ethnic group, and this fact should be reflected in the legislation.

The Macedonian partners in the coalition are open to discussing both the questions of ownership of the city and the state, and the use of Albanian as an official language, objected a parliamentarian from SDSM. What they find difficult to accept is the fact that their Albanian colleagues refuse to honor a deal already concluded. There was a long process of negotiations, a final agreement was reached in which each point was meticulously checked and verified, and there was a common understanding that these documents might be used as a foundation for further construction. Now this presumption is being challenged. How can we discuss any future agreements, he asked, if we are not sure that they would be honored? Ethnic Macedonian citizens face the same problem. The politicians from SDSM and LDP were able to explain to them that a deal was reached in which their interests were preserved. Now the leadership of SDSM and LDP will have to face unpleasant questions, and may lose credibility. The voters may start looking for other options and the parties could lose their positions in the parliament. Such a development would hardly profit DUI.

The DUI faces a similar problem, answered an Albanian participant. We have to persuade our ethnic Albanian voters that the deal is good for both parties. We cannot accept the local elections as an excuse, added another, since all of us know that the opposition is in a really deplorable state.

Should the Issue of Skopje Be Debated Together with Struga and Kichevo?

A participant from SDSM said that the coalition partners had not followed a single logic when reshaping the map of the Macedonian municipalities. A variety of factors were taken into consideration instead—economic, historical, those connected to transportation and communications, etc. Expert reports were commissioned. One argument was a political one, namely, the coalition partners tried to avoid creating ethnically homogeneous municipalities. Instead, they tried to create opportunities for usage of as many minority languages as possible, by adding to already

existing municipalities new settlements with various minority populations. The situation with the issue of the city of Skopje is similar to that in Struga and Kichevo, because in these three cases political reasons prevailed, this participant argued. Besides these structural similarities, there is also the logic of the negotiations. Skopje, Struga and Kichevo were discussed in the same package, with a clear understanding that each party would make concessions.

Actually, this participant continued, the voters have the same understanding, and SDSM and LDP were able to explain to them that the ethnic balance in the new municipalities of Struga and Kichevo was being changed in order to get a better deal for Skopje. They will not be able to persuade the voters that their interests were served, however, if the agreement on Skopje is revoked, argued this SDSM speaker. The whole implementation of the OFA would be jeopardized. It will be in DUI's interest as well if its coalition partners are able to retain the confidence of their constituents. There are mayors from the Macedonian opposition parties who refuse to implement the new decentralization legislation but this could be changed if they could be replaced by SDSM/LDP candidates in the next local elections.

Another SDSM participant elaborated: according to him, the Macedonian coalition partners do not object to future discussions about or changes in the linguistic status of the capital. However, they prefer to stick to the agreements already concluded and to complete this stage of the implementation of the OFA as already negotiated. Then they would consider a new round of talks focusing on the status of the capital. Several options are open, for example, the new law on languages. The OFA does not mention such a law, but the coalition agreed to introduce it upon the insistence of the ethnic Albanian partners. The law was not prepared in time, but the ethnic Macedonian partners have nothing to do with this delay; indeed, the law was to be prepared by DUI ministers. Perhaps the new law could also take up the linguistic status of Skopje. Another alternative is that the city council has the authority to decide upon the use of languages in the city, so there would be no need to solve this question by tying it to decentralization.

Is There a Coalition Crisis?

Summarizing the discussions, one of the international participants concluded that there does seem to be a crisis between the coalition partners.

The position of the SDSM and LDP is that the partners had already reached a deal, and compromising it would bring many potential dangers. The position of DUI is that the Albanians have not achieved the status to which they believe they are entitled and in which the language issue is key because of the many symbolic and practical dimensions involved. A possible solution would be to turn from the purely legal aspects and the OFA and to think about a broader picture. The reality is that Skopje is a multiethnic city and that the coalition partners agree on that fact. Could not citizens be persuaded that the linguistic status of Skopje should be resolved in the broader context of promoting a multiethnic society that recognizes and affirms the multicultural character of the capital city?

Another international participant indicated that three main points of disagreement emerged after the discussions. First was the issue of confidence. It had been very difficult to build up a capital of trust between the partners, he said, and now it is threatened because a deal apparently already concluded is being challenged. Second, there may have been a genuine misunderstanding between the partners, with each side reading the agreements in different ways. Both sides should be very careful with definitions in the future, he said. Third is the issue of ownership: each side holds a different view of the ownership of the city and of the country: is it a country with one principal nationality plus large ethnic minorities whose rights are protected and guaranteed, or is it a multiethnic country belonging to several ethnic groups? These different interpretations, he said, are reflected as well in the debates about the capital.

Is it a country with one principal nationality plus large ethnic minorities whose rights are protected and guaranteed, or is it a multiethnic country belonging to several ethnic groups?

PART II: Roundtable of the Parliamentary Parties

Two-Level Structure: A New Proposal from the Opposition

The debate on decentralization during the second day of the meeting, now with the opposition parties also in attendance, began with a reference to past agreements and their definitions. The opposition parties signed

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the OFA and are firmly resolved to stick to it, their representatives said. What they do not agree with is how it is being implemented. It is the duty of the opposition to monitor the policy of the government, to draw public attention to its flaws, and to offer better solutions. The government often tends to present any disagreement as a rejection of

the Ohrid process, and that is not true. A disagreement with the policy of the government is not the equivalent of a rejection of the OFA, insisted participants from the opposition parties. They also complained that their parliamentarians still have received neither the draft law on territorial organization, which is supposed to be passed in the parliament soon, nor the documents explaining the criteria the government is using in drawing the new boundaries, nor its motives and arguments.

But the opposition has indeed been consulted on the main package of legislation on decentralization, objected a member of the government. Only the law on territorial organization and the law on Skopje are still missing, and the coalition parties have not reached a consensus on them, and that is why they cannot present a set of proposals and documents to the opposition. Besides the legislation proper, the government is considering which assets and human resources should be transferred from central to local government, how to prepare for inter-municipal cooperation, and so on. Practically all institutions will be affected, starting with sport and culture, and finishing with finances, the taxation system, social services and the entire public sector. Macedonia will not be the same state after the end of the decentralization process, and there is much to be done besides the legislation itself.

As an illustration of the efforts of the opposition to criticize and improve the policy of the government, an opposition participant offered a detailed analysis of the decentralization process. There is a structural problem, he argued, related to the demographic balance in the towns and the countryside. In several regions, the ethnic Macedonians are a majority in the urban centers, while the ethnic Albanians dominate in the surrounding rural areas. When a municipality is formed, the fact that the main town is also the center of the administrative unit creates some tension. The rural Albanian population has quite legitimate expectations that they should be able to influence the decisions of the municipal administration and to be represented in it. At the same time, the administration of the main town of a municipality and that of the municipality itself coincide, which means that we might have an ethnic Albanian mayor and his administration settled in a predominantly ethnic Macedonian town, he said. The urban dwellers have a similarly legitimate claim to be represented in the administration of their own settlement, and might react in a hostile way to an administration that does not seem to represent them. The arrangement, suggested by the governing coalition, does nothing to prevent these potential conflicts, said this speaker. Actually, it creates structural possibilities for future conflicts between rural and urban populations of different ethnic origin. The position of Skopje, which is both an urban center with a predominantly ethnic Macedonian population, and the capital of a multiethnic country, is much the same. A possible solution would be to create a two-level structure of the local administration, separating administrations of urban centers from those of municipalities. The towns would have their own elected mayors with their administrations, while the main municipal institutions might be located in the same town as well. The proposal of the main opposition party is to modify the Constitution in order to introduce one more level of local self-government, which would solve the potential conflicts. The first level will represent the interests of the small local communities, while the second level will take into account the ethnic composition of an entire municipality.

The proposal provoked a mixed reaction among the representatives of the government. All of them welcomed the constructive spirit of the discussion. One of the leaders of DUI attributed it to the transformation of the main opposition party following the recent change in its leadership. A member of the government accepted most of the criticisms of the

proposal as well as the solution offered, and developed it further. Twelve towns could be designed as centers of large territorial units, he said, where the second level of the local government could reside. The law on Skopje could be expanded to include twelve such towns. All these modifications would certainly take time, but if the VMRO-DPMNE is willing to participate in the process, then the possibility certainly deserves to be explored. Everybody would gain if a consensus on the decentralization process were to be achieved among all the major political parties, and if the structural conflicts indicated by the previous speaker were solved. Another participant suggested that nineteen towns might correspond better to the needs of the country than twelve.

Most other members of the governing coalition, however, were less willing to support the proposal. The situation in Skopje is quite different from that of any other town in the country, argued one of them. The capital could be separated from the surrounding area as a different unit, autonomous and having a logic of its own. No other town has such a degree of social and economic self-sufficiency. The process of decentralization should not be confused with the process of de-concentration, indicated a colleague of his. Creating a multi-level structure would mean de-concentration. The proposal means that we would have to start again from square one, argued a member of the government. All the deadlines indicated by the OFA would be missed. The proposal would have been welcome some two years ago, but it is too late now. And, finally, while consensus among all the political parties certainly is an objective in itself, there is little chance that it can be achieved as far as decentralization is concerned. The government will consult the opposition, but it will not abdicate its responsibilities and will press ahead with the process, even without a consensus.

Divisions Remain

Then discussion turned to the issues of Skopje, Struga, and Kichevo. Participants from the opposition insisted again that the government should present their motives and arguments, be they ethnic, economic, social, cultural, or geographical, explaining how and why the boundaries of the new municipalities were drawn. They also claimed that the way that the municipalities of Struga and Kichevo were constituted could not be explained by any reasonable criteria. Colleagues from the governing coalition replied that a variety of criteria were at work, and they had different weights depending on the specific circumstances. Regarding

Skopje, the participants from DUI repeated their position that the process of decentralization will not end till the status of Skopje is resolved. The capital is a case of its own, they said. It is not a mere municipality; it is a symbol of the way the country should look, a symbol of a multiethnic society.

Several participants took part in this discussion, using similar arguments. A member of DUI indicated that the positions are far from getting closer. We do not have real negotiations now, he said. When you go to the market and ask the price of something, the seller asks for 200 denars. Then you have a choice—if you offer 150 denars, the real bargaining can begin. But if you offer 10 denars, there is no way to go ahead. Currently we have the latter situation, where one party keeps asking 200 and the other offers 10.

At this stage, several participants indicated that the positions of both parties remain far apart and that no rapprochement is emerging. One of the participants proposed that a solution might be suggested by the international mediators. He recalled that the OFA indicates that disputes between the negotiating parties might be solved with the mediation of the international community. So there is an institutional framework justifying their intervention, he said. His suggestion was not, however, backed by other participants. One of the international participants explained that, in his estimation, one of the most impressive achievements of the coalition partners is that they have been able to discuss and find solutions on their own, without external help. A colleague of his was more direct: looking for a solution suggested by an outsider would be a step back to square one, he said, a return to the time of open hostility and lack of dialogue. An ethnic Macedonian participant closed the exchange by indicating that the international presence has a disciplining effect on the discussion, and the result could be seen in the ways the arguments are presented and the efforts to find a solution.

One of the most impressive achievements of the coalition partners is that they have been able to discuss and find solutions on their own, without external help.

Local Elections: Minimizing Irregularities

Another major topic covered by the roundtable was the upcoming local elections. Participants from the governing coalition and the opposition

outlined the main problems reported by the state election commission and suggested some solutions.

The best way to improve the election process and to minimize irregularities, started one participant, would be the professionalization of the election commission. The current practice is to appoint some 10, 15, or 22 people who supervise elections, and then to drop them afterwards. New people are then appointed for the next elections; meanwhile, the members of the commission have other preoccupations between the elections. He proposed creating a permanent commission that would serve as the core of a future electoral administration specifically devoted to overseeing elections. The 3,000 voting jurisdictions require some 15,000 people to supervise elections, so it would be unrealistic to expect all personnel to be professionals, and of course far too expensive. So full professionalization is not possible, but a modest permanent staff of some 10 people could become the nucleus of a more professional administration. One of its main tasks would be the permanent training of the 15,000 people working at the polls. It is worth considering the possibility of recruiting these temporary workers from among the staffs of state institutions. A better trained, relatively permanent, election administration would help to minimize the present irregularities.

Such irregularities certainly exist, he continued. The OSCE monitors noted them in some 20 percent of voting places, and 25 percent of the electoral boards had problems with implementing the election laws. The most widespread violations were connected to family voting and voting by proxy. These did not always arise from bad intentions; quite often citizens are unfamiliar with official procedures. That is why training, both for administration and voters, is a very important tool for improving the quality of the elections, he concluded.

What the State Election Commission Can Do

An Albanian participant objected that the election irregularities cannot be attributed exclusively to the lack of training and technical skills. Quite often they are related to deliberate cheating, especially in the predominantly ethnic Albanian regions of the country. There are some cases of family voting and proxy voting there. These were relatively minor. But some polling stations were hijacked by armed men, he said, who took control of the election process—one person was allowed to cast 500 ballots. The irregularities were so overwhelming that the Albanian community was

on the verge of armed conflict. The rest of the country could also be in danger, because many citizens could lose confidence in the very process of voting and representative democracy and start looking to other forms of representation.

A member of the state election commission pointed out that there were fewer complaints than rumors suggested, and that the commission cannot intervene in the absence of a formal complaint. On the other hand, there were indeed a significant number of complaints. According to the law, the election commission is supposed to present an answer to all complaints within 48 hours. 140 formal complaints were received after the last elections, which makes an average of 15 minutes for each specific complaint to be processed. It is hardly possible to work at such speed, and this brings us back to the point about the lack of administrative capacity, he said.

Another participant wondered whether some irregularities sometimes were not so obvious as to make the commission act without a formal request. For example, if a candidate gets less than one percent of votes in a whole region but 95 percent at just one polling station, this ought to arouse the curiosity of the state commission. So should the fact that, at one polling station, some 600 citizens were reported to have voted in the course of one hour, a rate of one person each six seconds. In one constituency, the DUI got only 600 votes in the first round but some 1,200 in the second—after one of its field commanders and his armed men took positions around the polling station. If the commission were really willing to act, it could easily find formal grounds. Additionally, the polling stations where the opposition “was allowed” to get only 0.5% of the overall vote deserve some additional inquiry.

Ethnic Macedonian participants noted that the irregularities were not restricted to the Albanian areas. For example, there were serious indications that the first round of the presidential elections in 1994 was not completely fair; and the results were officially announced only 40 days afterwards. The election process in 1999 was also rather controversial. However, some conclusions can be drawn already from past experience. It seems that the members of the Supreme Court, who are elected for life, are less inclined to bend to political pressure, are more resistant to all sorts of influence, and are more independent. That is why it might be a good idea, suggested this participant, to increase the number of Supreme Court judges on the State Election Commission. Another suggestion came from an ethnic Albanian colleague: the failure to report irregularities should become a crime,

punishable under the election law, he said. The members of the local election commissions currently choose between their duty and their fear of armed criminals and the ruling party, so let them fear the law, too. Another ethnic Albanian participant pointed out that not only the ruling party uses paramilitary groups for intimidating the voters. All the political parties, both in government and in opposition, both ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian, have privileged relations with different gangs and criminal groups. This is a sad truth, but it should be recognized; DUI certainly does not have a monopoly over such problematic associations.

It would be too much to expect from human nature for all the parties to always resist temptations to cheat, observed an international participant, but this does not mean that nothing should be done. Otherwise the citizens may begin to question the political process itself.

According to one ethnic Macedonian participant from the opposition, citizens are already beginning to lose interest in elections. A very bad message was sent when all the complaints after the first round of the parliamentary elections were discarded by the commission. Many citizens concluded that their votes do not actually matter. It will take a lot of time and effort to regain their confidence, he concluded.

The Other Minorities: A Missing Discussion

At several points during the discussion, representatives of the Turk, Bosnjak, Serb, and Romani minorities tried to draw the attention of the participants to their problems. They claimed that the new geographical divisions failed to take into account the interests of the non-Macedonian and non-Albanian communities and that the new boundaries tend to leave the other minorities below the 20 percent

Sooner or later the European Commission will start taking into consideration how the small ethnic minorities are treated, how they are represented politically, and whether they share in governing.

threshold. Their claims for more attention to the problems of the other ethnic groups were supported by international participants.

We should not mistake bilingualism with true multiculturalism, one of them said. He pointed out that several speakers used the concept of multiculturalism in arguing for the introduction of Albanian as the

second official language in Skopje. But this is not the same as using the languages of all the communities on an equal basis. The arguments in support of bilingualism and multiculturalism also differ. The Albanians support their claims with arguments based on political realities, numbers, and the balance of power, but many international treaties and standards argue instead for true multiculturalism. The OFA is based on the first kind of argument, but Macedonia soon will have to operate in a new framework—the European Union and the Copenhagen criteria. Sooner or later the European Commission will start taking into consideration how the small ethnic minorities are treated, how they are represented politically, and whether they share in governing, he said.

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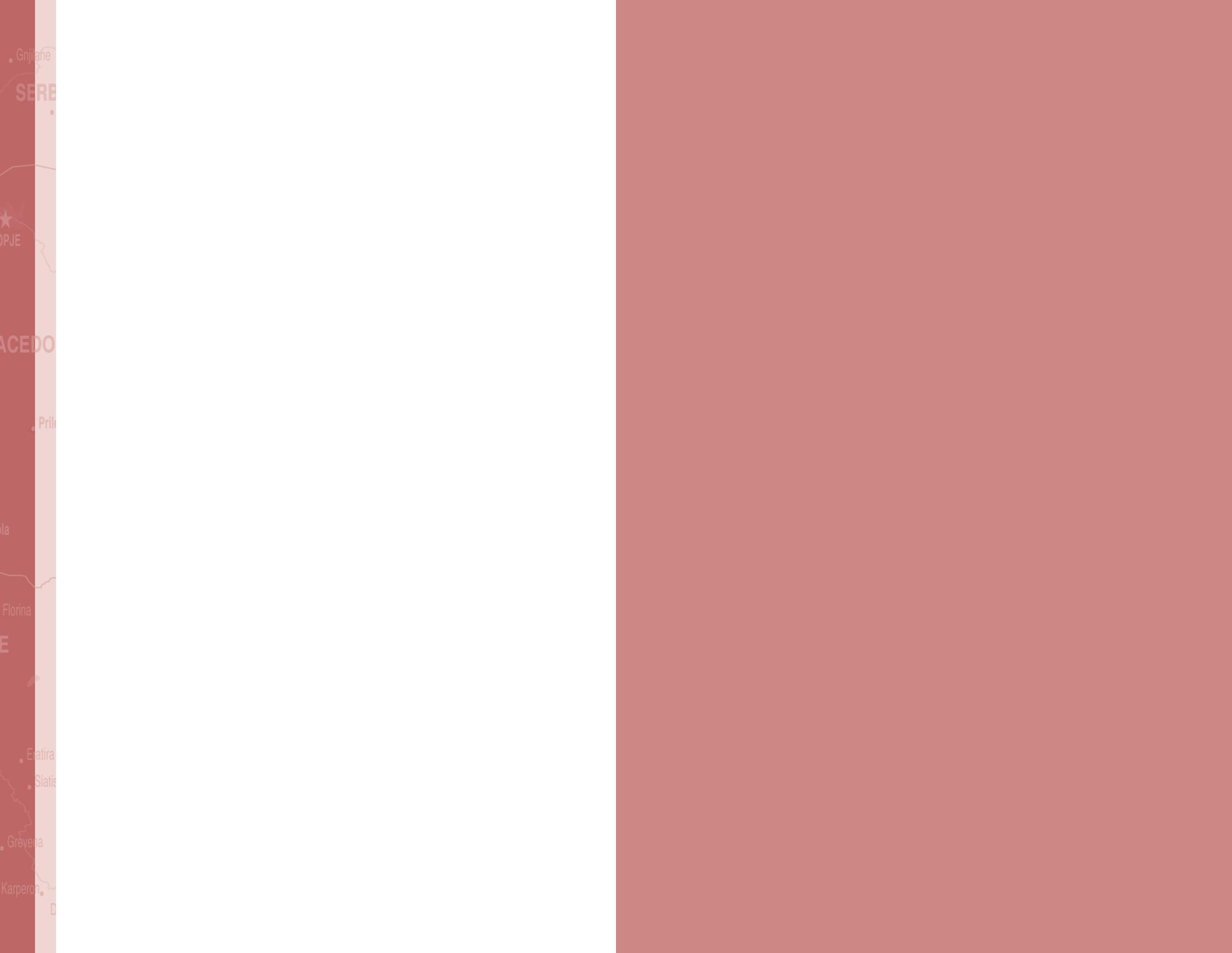
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