Municipal Decisions on the Border of Collapse: Macedonian Decentralisation and the Challenges of Post-Ohrid Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the factors leading to the recent call for a referendum against the new municipal boundaries in Macedonia to highlight some of the main challenges to the stabilisation of interethnic relations in the country after the signing of the Ohrid Agreement. It argues that the democratic deficiencies which marked the first 10 years of transition are still capable of producing ethnic tensions, thus putting the country’s stability at risk. This analysis reveals that the international community—largely responsible for overcoming Macedonia’s security crisis of 2001—still acts as a security provider, indispensably intervening in domestic affairs to counter new threats to interethnic coexistence. I argue that stability in Macedonia can only be sustainable after the democratic deficits of the system are addressed, and suggest that a positive step in this direction would be for the international community to reconsider its approach to the political situation by changing its current practice of putting pressure on the government to blindly implementation the Ohrid Agreement and by providing aid towards the arduous process of democratisation.

Introduction

The armed conflict that engulfed different parts of Macedonia in 2001 dismantled irreversibly the myth that the country was an “oasis of peace in the Balkans.” Although the role of the National Liberation Army (NLA) never became entirely clear, and labels such as “terrorist” and “freedom fighter” competed with equal success in defining the NLA soldiers, one claim is far less disputable—the conflict put forward legitimate and long ignored Albanian demands which urgently needed to be addressed.

The Ohrid Framework Agreement signed on August 13, 2001 between the two largest Macedonian and Albanian parties—the Social Democratic Party of Macedonia (SDSM), Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO-DPMNE), Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP) and
Democratic Party of the Albanians (DPA)—sought to address Albanian demands through constitutional amendments. The constitutional changes aimed at the elimination of any presumed “ownership” of the state by ethnic Macedonians, advanced Albanian to the status of an official language, empowered the Albanian community through the provisions of minority veto rights in several key areas, countered Albanian under-representation in the public sphere and provided for the devolution of central government power through several legislative changes.

These major principles of the agreement aimed to put an end to the armed conflict in 2001 and to “secure the future of Macedonia's democracy” (Ohrid Agreement 2001). Three years after the agreement was signed, however, it became clear even to the most enthusiastic advocates of the accord that the Ohrid strategy was far more successful in meeting the former objective than in achieving the latter.

In support of this observation, this article will discuss the recent instability in Macedonia that resulted from the problematic implementation of the Ohrid Agreement in regard to the evolution of decentralised government. It will argue that several democratic deficits that marked the political regime before the eruption of violence in 2001 (and which were, in fact, largely responsible for the deterioration of interethnic relations) are still capable of holding Macedonian democracy hostage to ethno-nationalist mobilisation, thereby putting the stability of the country in question. As during the security crisis of 2001, the international community’s intervention in 2004 was crucial for overcoming the threats to stability. This paper will argue that security in Macedonia would become more sustainable if the democratic deficiencies that give roots to ethnic tension were addressed. In particular, the events preceding the call for a referendum against the new Law on Territorial Divisions illustrate the need for redefining the political decision-making process to involve all stakeholders, citizens, and civic organisations. This would remove the ethnic lens through which political problems are viewed, thereby decreasing the chances of mobilisation along ethnic lines and increasing the chances for the Framework Agreement to endure. The Agreement by itself, after all, is not a sufficient guarantee of “the future of Macedonian democracy.”

The “Difficult Task” of Drawing a Map

Since independence, a key feature of the Macedonian democratic system is the existence of a multiethnic coalition. While this type of coalition, in which the political leaders of the main ethnic groups cooperate to govern the country, may prevent the kind of democratic breakdown that results from minority exclusion in a deeply divided society, it is, nevertheless, criticised as particularly damaging to the quality of democracy. Whereas in other democracies political coalitions are formed and assessed on the basis of their policies, platforms, and performance in economic and social terms, the raison d'être of the multiethnic coalition is the achievement of the “difficult task” (Lijphart 1977: 49) of interethnic compromise.

A “structured elite predominance” (Lijphart 1977: 49) is necessary for the functioning of multiethnic coalitions, and in order to achieve this
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“difficult task” the political elites are given a high level of trust on behalf of their electorate and considerable space for manoeuvring, beyond the reach of public scrutiny. The citizens occupy a “passive and deferential role” (Lijphart 1977: 49), sacrificing their right to participate in the decision-making process and undermining a basic principle of democratic regimes.

These shortcomings inherent to rule by multiethnic coalition were not foreign to the Macedonian political regime prior to the Ohrid Agreement. The non-transparent and elitist modes of decision-making were regular feature of the Macedonian political parties in power during the first ten years of transition. As one scholar points out, in Macedonia political ideas were provided excuses for and “defended” rather than “presented” in the public space (Trajanovski 2004: 80). Other scholars have pointed out that decisions and compromises regarding interethnic relations were in fact dependent on the “backroom deals” (Hislope 2003: 8; see also Hislope 2001) of the coalition partners, which distributed state resources between themselves.

The Framework Agreement itself was poorly explained to the public at large,5 and the portrayal of its implementation as a “difficult task” of interethnic accommodation reinforced the already existent political practice of deal-making away from public scrutiny. Discussions of the Law on Territorial Divisions were placed within this impenetrable area, where the ruling elites were to make decisions by themselves regarding measures which, ironically, were meant to “encourage the participation of citizens in democratic life” (Ohrid Framework Agreement).

Dialogue on the rearrangement of Macedonia’s 123 units of local self-government began at the mountain resort in Mavrovo between the coalition partners SDSM and DUI. No experts on decentralisation, public administrators or citizens were invited to take part in the talks (Trajkovska 2004: 3), and even members of the SDSM presidency were excluded (Kramarska 2004b: 3). After the first meeting, it became evident that the discussion on redrawing territorial boundaries would remain behind closed doors.

The international community, which played a major role in negotiating the Ohrid Agreement, closely observed the progress of the decentralisation debate. However, instead of pressing for transparency and a more inclusive discussion on the Law on Territorial Division, it legitimised the bargaining practices of elite party politics by pushing for a faster solution. The EU representative in Macedonia, Sheena Thompson, stated that she was constantly in contact with the coalition partners and gave advice if necessary, but “it’s all in the hands of the ruling elite.” When asked to address the exclusive and non-transparent nature of the discussion, the EU representative responded that “these (the coalition partners) are the chosen representatives on the behalf of the citizens” (Grncharska 2004: 2).

When the political parties announced that they had reached a compromise on the new territorial boundaries, ethnic Macedonian public opinion expressed outrage at the undemocratic process of the negotiation. Local non-governmental organisations were quick to react to the narrowness of the debates and the authoritarian manner in which the decision on the decentralisation process was taken. The Macedonian Helsinki Committee reminded the government that since decentralisation aims to satisfy citizen’s
needs and interests, it “should begin and end with the active participation of citizens through their common will.” In this sense, (i) changes are being made of something as important as the borders of the municipality, its size, structure and ethnic composition, without the immediate participation of the inhabitants of the municipality which is undergoing change, than the enjoyment of this right is directly put to risk and Article 4 section 6 of the European Charter on Local Self-Government (Local authorities shall be consulted, insofar as possible, in due time and in an appropriate way in the planning and decision-making processes for all matters which concern them directly) is violated, as well as Article 5 (Changes in local authority boundaries shall not be made without prior consultation of the local communities concerned). (Helsinki Committee 2004a)

A similar message came from a group of civic NGOs, which also displayed concern with the autocratic manner of decision-making regarding the decentralisation process. The organisations declared that the process which resulted in the proposal for territorial organisation of the local governments in the Republic was non-transparent, disregarding the principles of all stakeholders, public involvement, openness, and sincerity towards the citizens, which are all necessary while generating such crucial changes. (Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation et al 2004)

The exclusive discussion on the rearrangement of municipal boundaries made it clear that elite party-bargaining was still a feature of Macedonian democracy. It suggested that transparency and accountability were foreign to political discussion on the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, which would take place beyond the reach and without the participation of citizens, experts and civil society.

The undemocratic manner in which the new municipal borders were negotiated was central to, but not the sole reason for the “disappointment of Macedonian public opinion” (Rizaov 2004: 1). Another major reason for the overall indignation was the way in which the new municipal boundaries were to be drawn: the issue was ethnified, and this led to the proposal for new, inefficient units of local self-government.

Border Distortions through an Ethnic Lens

Authors have noted that the “institutionalisation of ethnicity,” tends to “transpose most political disputes into ethnic ones” (Bieber 2002: 15). In Macedonia, where the political sphere was divided along ethnic lines, the application of an ethnic character to political debates has been a clear strategy to earn public support at the time of elections. Some authors argue that aspects of the Ohrid Agreement even “further strengthened this tendency” (Vankovska 2002: 245). This is, however, difficult to measure in relative terms. It is easier to demonstrate that some parts of the accord’s implementation, which may not focus on ethnic issues per se, are often distorted as such by the political elites.

The approach to decentralisation proved to be an example of this tendency and revealed that the ethnification of the problem compromised the effectiveness of the solution. In order to be able to evaluate the debates and final version of the Law on Territorial Divisions presented by the
Macedonian ruling parties, we first need to consider the importance of the devolution of power within a multiethnic context.

The devolution of power is generally perceived as positive step towards improving interethnic relations. Because it places institutional limitations on “unbridled central authority,” decentralisation has been promoted as a confidence-building measure, especially relevant to “politically marginalised groups (who) have vivid memories of excessive state penetration” (Lake and Rothchild 1998: 211). The devolution of power is also seen as a means to regionalise and dissolve conflict, because it allows for interethnic issues to be resolved at a lower political level and prevents concrete and minor topics from increasing the level of overall ethnic tensions (McGarry and O’Leary 1993: 31). Finally, the devolution of power is perceived as a method for enhancing the participation of minorities in public life and as a way to maintain and develop the identity and culture of national minorities (Myntti 2001: 40).

Decentralisation, then, could be seen as an important step to improve interethnic relations. However, while it can be an instrument for increasing the influence of minorities in political life, decentralisation is not an ethnic issue in the sense that it is supposed to empower minorities through realigning units of local self-government along ethnic lines. The Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities state that the arrangements for establishing territorial units of local self-governance should “in no case include any ethnic criteria” (Myntti 2001: 41). While perhaps ethnic criteria could not be ignored completely in determining units of self-government in order to ensure that minorities are not marginalised, it is important to keep in mind that many other factors need to be taken into account to ensure that decentralisation results in efficient, sustainable units of local self-government. The functioning autonomy of the unit of local self-government allows for the effective involvement of citizens in the conduct of public affairs, empowering minorities and making their cultural and economic development possible.

In this spirit, the Ohrid Agreement proclaims decentralisation as “essential for encouraging the participation of citizens in democratic life, and for promoting respect for the identity of communities” (Ohrid Framework Agreement). In order to ensure viable units of local self-government, the principle of decentralisation was supported by the Law on Local Self-Government, the Law on Financing of the Local Self-Government and the Law on Territorial Organisation of the Local Self-Government. The Law on Local Self-Government aimed to move local self-government responsibilities beyond the traditional communal aspects (public works, streetlights, fire department, etc.) to include the wider competencies of education, culture, health, and the environment. The Law on Local Finance, then, was supposed to provide for the financing needed to fulfil these new functions through fiscal decentralisation and redistribution schemes. The role of the Law on Territorial Divisions needs to be considered in this context: its objective should have been to regulate the size and configuration of the municipalities to ensure their capacity to fulfil their new functions.
According to the Ohrid Agreement, the strategy for decentralisation was meant to rest upon economic, geographic, infrastructure and sustainable development criteria. These criteria, however, were overshadowed by ethnic considerations. Contrary to the complex logic of a decentralisation process, from the first round of debates the political parties perceived and portrayed the readjustment of units of local self-government as a solely ethnic issue and essential to the fulfilment of the Agreement. The debates on the redrawing of municipal boundaries focused on whether Skopje, Kičevo and Struga would be enlarged to include the predominantly Albanian villages around them, and whether the Municipalities of Saraj and Kondovo would be attached to Skopje. In such case, the 20% Albanian population threshold would be reached, thereby advancing the status of Albanian to an official language in accordance with the Ohrid Agreement.

The decision to enlarge Skopje and Struga ran contrary to experts’ advice on municipal organisation, which claimed that attaching villages to already big cities suffocates the development of the village. The plan of the Municipality of Kičevo, which in 2008 was to be enlarged to include the surrounding Albanian villages was also impractical according to decentralisation experts, who stressed the complication that would arise from adding 30,000 people to a city with the same amount of inhabitants. Expert opinion has also pointed out that seven municipalities in Macedonia have become so large that it becomes difficult to organise the gathering of the signatures of the 10% of the population needed to advance an issue to the municipal council (Helsinki Committee 2004a). This, in turn, compromises the ability of citizens to participate actively in the decision-making process and also decreases the likelihood that issues will be resolved at the local level.

In other cases where ethnicity seems to be the sole factor influencing the decision on municipal boundaries, there has been a failure to meet the criteria of the municipal unit set by the Law on Decentralisation itself. In 13 such cases, the condition that a municipality should have more than 5000 inhabitants in order to secure sufficient economic, financial, and human resources to fulfil its new competencies has been clearly overlooked. Finally, other objections were raised to the removal of municipal status from some already-existing municipalities, which regardless of their ability to function as such, lost their autonomy in order to alter the ethnic composition of other administrative units (Helsinki Committee 2004a).

The debates and proposal on the Law on Territorial Divisions revealed that the governing political parties were still prone to apply an ethnic lens to non-ethnic issues, thereby compromising the efficiency of the outcome. The discussion so far suggests that Macedonian citizens had serious reasons to be dissatisfied with both the process and results of the decentralisation plan. The protests and the referendum which recently shook up the country and put Macedonian stability under question, however, need to be analysed in light of the role of the major opposition parties in the process.

A New Chapter on “Traitors” and “Saviours”: Ethno-Nationalist Mobilisation and the Role of Opposition
Inefficiency is only one problem that arises from the ethnic distortion of a political agenda. One Macedonian university professor eloquently summarises that when issues are perceived through an ethnic lens, “the search for enemies begins, conspiracies are uncovered, and the population is manipulated through appeals to collective emotions” (Ivanov 2001: 76).

Ethnic conspiracies have a long tradition on the Macedonian political scene, where the condemnations that the ruling party is “selling out” or “dividing the country” have often been used by Macedonian and Albanian opposition to mobilise the electorate. Using such accusations, VMRO-DPMNE has portrayed itself as the “true defender of the nation” (Vankovska 2003: 34), out to protect the people from the betrayal of the Macedonian ruling party which bows down to Albanian demands. The decentralisation process, then, provided another opportunity for the opposition party to haul out this rhetoric and attempt to reverse, through manipulation and mobilisation, the party’s extremely low level of public support before the 2005 local elections.

When discussions on decentralisation started, Dnevnik—a newspaper associated with VMRO-DPMNE—carried the alarming headline that “The Government is Secretly Dividing Macedonia” (Trajkovska 2004: 3). After the proposal on decentralisation came to light, the daily announced on its cover page that Skopje and Struga had been sacrificed while Kičevo was “saved temporarily” (Popovska and Trajkovska 2004: 1). In the following edition, Dnevnik headlines claimed that “Branko is Hiding, Hari is Washing his Hands,” referring to the presentation of the municipal boundaries plan by Prime Minister Hari Kostov and President Branko Crvenkovski. Another title of the same dramatic cover page read that “Crvenkovski, Kostov, Penov and Geshtakovski will Hang in Struga” trumpeting the dissatisfaction of the Struga Crisis Unit which decided to hang upon the names of these politicians the label of traitor (Popovska 2004:1).

Public reactions to the new municipal map of Macedonia were also selectively assembled by the Dnevnik editors. Only strong signs of disapproval held the attention of the Macedonian daily. “Atrocity!” was the statement of the Macedonian Academy of Science and Arts (MANU), known for its controversial positions,10 and it made it onto the cover page (Dnevnik 2004a: 1). Below this exclamation, another tormented reaction—that of the Kriste Misirkov Institute—claimed that the “Macedonian Language is in Official Abuse” and that the mother tongue is “threatened in its own homeland” (Dnevnik 2004b:1).

Needless to say, the reactions of VMRO politicians were even less restrained than the commentaries of the media and other institutions. The leader of the opposition party Nikola Gruevski proclaimed that with the contract on new municipal divisions “SDSM committed the biggest betrayal of the nation” (Dnevnik. 2004c: 3). According to the party leader, the decentralisation plan aimed to produce ethnic enclaves, from which ethnic Macedonians will be displaced and undermining the multiethnic concept of the state. VMRO-DPMNE once again donned the cloak of “preserver of the nation” and claimed that it has a “historical responsibility and duty to stand against the betrayal” (Dnevnik 2004c: 3).
VMRO-DPMNE succeeded in organising a series of protests, the largest of which took place on 27 July 2004 in Skopje, where around 20,000 people gathered to oppose the proposal on territorial adjustments. While the protest remained peaceful, radical nationalist rhetoric was present throughout the event. VMRO leaders did not miss the opportunity to mention the betrayal of national interests and claimed the ruling parties were “selling” and “tearing apart” Macedonia. It was at this event that the opposition parties advanced the idea to call for a referendum to take a stand against the Law on Territorial Organisation and opt for the municipalities to remain within present boundaries (Dnevnik. 2004d: 1).

While the holding of referendum is a basic democratic principle, it has dangerous implications for the stability of an ethnically divided society. This type of direct democracy is easily transformed into a tyranny of the majority, whereas the minority is permanently outvoted and a situation can emerge where their rights are revoked or otherwise violated. It is not surprising, then, that the call for a referendum in Macedonia produced an immediate reaction by Albanian parties. Here again opposition parties were not disinclined from using radicalism to gain the support of the Albanian electorate, at the expense of aggravating the situation by further increasing the prospects of instability.

As the 150,000 signatures necessary to call a referendum were easily collected by the Macedonian opposition parties, the Albanian opposition PDP and DPA responded with a frightful interpretation of the events and radical proposals for reaction. PDP leaders said outright that they saw an eventual success of the referendum as putting an “end to the state” and provoking a parallel referendum similar to the one of 1992, which sought for the establishment of “Ilirida” (Georgievski 2004). DPA leader Arben Xhaferi, another politician who has been “all too willing to play on the anxieties and animosities” (International Crisis Group 2003: 1) stated that if the referendum succeeded, new negations on Macedonia’s status should be expected, possibly leading to it becoming a “soft” protectorate (Cvetanovski 2004).

The Choice between “Past and Future”: the Intervention of the International Community

Fortunately, the warnings of the Albanian opposition regarding Macedonia’s status did not translate into action. Paradoxically, however, the factors that defused the security crisis due to the failure of the referendum also compromised the state’s democratic capacity.

The international community has played a crucial role in Macedonia’s conflict resolution from the start of the negotiations in 2001. Special representatives of the EU and US (François Léotard and James Pardew respectively) acted as “facilitators” in the talks between the two Albanian and two Macedonian party signatories of the Ohrid Agreement. In fact, international reports claim that the Ohrid Agreement came as a result of “a lot of filibustering and a mounting international pressure” (Human Rights Watch 2002). A frequently cited example of this was the delay by the EU of the international donors’ conference in October 2001 on the grounds that Macedonia was dragging its feet with adopting laws that were part of the
agreement. Three years later, the “sticks and carrots” strategy of the international community was again applied to deal with the lurking instability surrounding the decentralization issue.

The EU used the coercive approach by emphasizing the link between Macedonia’s EU accession and the implementation of the agreement. EU Special Representative Michael Sahlin made it clear that the referendum was a step back from the implementation of the accord, and therefore “a step away from EU membership” (Sahlin 2004). When these claims were countered by VMRO-DPMNE leader Nikola Gruevski, who stated that the holding of referenda was a right of the citizens to express their will freely (Gruevski 2004), EU representatives clarified that the EU does not challenge the right of Macedonians to vote in the referendum, but declared that the dilemma before the citizens was one of integration or isolation. In the first scenario, Macedonia would soon become a part of the EU family, while in the latter the country would fall back in the isolated “black hole” alongside with Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia and Montenegro (Duvnjak 2004). “That is why we expect Macedonian citizens to respond to the referendum in a responsible manner,” was the message coming from Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot, whose country currently holds the EU’s rotating presidency (Jovanovska 2004).

The “responsive manner” was more clearly defined by the government as one of abstention from voting. Using the backing of the EU and borrowing its rhetoric on the choice between the past and present, integration vs. isolation, the government proclaimed that the referendum question was “not worth an answer” and pressured citizens not to vote in the referendum.

The US reaction to the referendum was similar to the EU’s. A senior US diplomat warned that the rejection of Macedonia’s new territorial arrangements would “run counter to the word and spirit of the Framework Agreement” (Southeast European Times 2004a). US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman was more dramatic, stating that the upcoming referendum was a “choice between the past and the future” (Southeast European Times 2004b). The US then chose the “carrots” approach to intervention and held out the possibility of $9.5m for the support and realisation of Macedonia’s decentralisation programme (Southeast European Times 2004b).

Perhaps the biggest influence on voter behaviour was the decision of the United States to recognise Macedonia by its constitutional name—the Republic of Macedonia. This was a grand achievement for the country, which since 1991 has been in a struggle with Greece over the name Macedonia. Greece has claimed the exclusive historical right to the name, which resulted in the recognition of the state in the United Nations under its current official name “the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.”

The recognition of the constitutional name by one of the most influential members of the UN was interpreted as a sign that other states will follow the US example and was met with euphoria by the Macedonian citizenry. The Bush administration explained the recognition as a move towards the “stabilisation” of the country (Georgievski 2004) and rightfully
predicted that it would decrease significantly the chances of success of the referendum.

The signals of the international community were directly responsible for the drastic fall in the enthusiasm of the ethnic Macedonians towards the referendum. The rapid and successful gathering of the 150,000 signatures necessary to call a referendum and the mass protests of tens of thousands of ethnic Macedonian against the new law did not transform into mass voter participation in the day of referendum. On the 7th of November only 436,202 citizens went out to vote, of which 409,886 voted against the new municipal boundaries, and 21,471 voted in favour. This number was not enough to reach the 50+1 % majority of the 1,709,536 citizens necessary to declare the referendum valid.

The EU and US praised the “wisdom” (Utrinski Vesnik 2004) of the Macedonian citizenry which put the state back on the track of stabilisation. This stability, however, remains evidently dependent on the shoulder of the international community, which in turn undermines the country’s democratic capacity.

The Calm after the Storm: Implications of the Decentralisation Process for the Prospects of Stability

The events surrounding the decentralisation process that culminated in the call for a referendum passed through Macedonia like “a summer storm…with much lightning and thunder but little rain” (Andovksi 2004). The euphoria surrounding the passing of the storm, however, should not overshadow the implications left by the events on the prospects for the country’s stability. While the outcome of the referendum certainly revealed that the “rationality” of the citizens did have a positive and decisive say in the unfolding of events and the de-escalation of another security crisis, the effects of this episode need to be considered in order to assess the prospects of the future stability of the country.

A more sustainable stability, allowing Macedonia to disentangle itself from its dependence on the international community, is not likely to be achieved until the political leaders directly confront some serious democratic deficiencies. Perhaps the clearest and most alarming deficit to be considered after the experience with the Law on Territorial Divisions is the role played by the institution of public debate and the government-citizen relationship as a whole.

The exclusive, non-transparent manner in which the debates on the decentralisation process were carried out revealed the dangers of elite party bargaining. Here, it is worth noting the paradox of democratic participation in divided society—while the complete exclusion of citizens by elite party bargaining is not a viable mechanism, at the same time mass participation and direct democracy through referendum is potentially destabilising. The only place for democratic participation lies in between these two extremes, where the institution of public debate is restored to its place and the inclusion of a wide spectrum of actors (civic organisations, experts, citizens, major stakeholders and political parties) becomes a characteristic of the decision-making process.
The broadening of the decision-making process could take many forms, and it is not within the scope of this article to discuss them in detail. Expert group sessions where civil society actors submit opinions and reports on proposals by intergovernmental bodies; moderated, publicly accessible debates for both citizens and politicians; postal consultation and surveys; and deliberative opinion polls are just some of the methods that could be used to bridge the gap between government and public opinion. As these are some of the experiments in participatory democracy carried out in the US and the EU on both national and supranational levels, the international community could offer valuable expertise to support Macedonian efforts to increase participation in decision-making.

While it is true that broadening participation and seeking a consensus on important political decisions would make the “difficult task” of achieving interethnic compromises even more difficult, such an approach would make possible the removal of the ethnic lens through which political issues are viewed. If a wide spectrum of interests is taken into account, ethnic aspects are balanced against other considerations, thereby increasing the chance for efficient solutions to emerge. Finally, the broad discussion of major political issues, coming from an objective, de-ethnified analysis of societal matters makes mobilisation along ethnic lines more difficult and protects the implementation of policies from the old rhetoric of “traitors” and “saviours”.

If these lessons from the decentralisation process are considered, it becomes evident that “the real test for political leaders is post-referendum Macedonia” (Bocevski 2004). The passing of the referendum, just like the signing of the Ohrid Agreement, is not in itself a guarantee for Macedonia’s stability. And if the EU and US want to diminish their role as security providers, they should address aid towards the country’s slow and arduous democratisation process. As the drafting of the Law on Territorial Divisions revealed, fast solutions are not always the most efficient and sustainable, nor is the insistence on expedient implementation of the Framework Agreement the best strategy for securing peaceful interethnic co-existence.

**Endnotes**

1. The expression was first used by former Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov, but became widely used by the international community and the media.
2. The feeling of dissatisfaction with the symbolic Macedonian ownership of the state, stipulated by the constitution, was expressed when the Assembly voted to ratify the new constitution - the two Albanian parties (Party for Democratic Prosperity and the People’s Democratic Party) did not give their votes for the approval of the constitution. Moreover, Albanians largely boycotted the referendum on Macedonian independence.
3. These include the areas of culture, use of language, education, personal documentation, the use of symbols, the laws on local finance, local elections, the boundaries of municipalities and the city of Skopje, as well as the law on local-self government.
4. In deeply divided societies, ethnic allegiances most often transform into party loyalties, thereby putting the minority party at risk of permanent exclusion of
power and leading to a derogation of the rights of the minority group. See Horowitz 1985.

5 According to a survey carried out by the Association for Democratic Initiatives, 67% of the interviewees stressed the need for the clarification of the Framework Agreement regulations.

6 Ratified by Macedonia in 1997.

7 This term is used to denote “the representation of ethnic groups as ethnic groups in state institutions, including the legislature, executive, judiciary and public administration” (Bieber 2002: 2).

8 This is different from cantonisation. Authors writing on ethnic conflict regulation claim that “Cantonisation must be distinguished from mere administrative decentralisation… as it is based on the recognition of ethnic difference and allows for asymmetrical relations between different cantons and the central government” (Myntti 2001: 31).

9 See opinions of experts on decentralisation cited in Changova 2004: 2.

10 There have been many claims that the Academy came up with a proposal to partition Macedonia along ethnic lines during the crisis of 2001.

11 This was the slogan of a mass billboard campaign in Macedonia.

References


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Georgievski, Boris. 2004a. “‘Ilirida’ ke se Aktivira Dokolku Uspee Referendumot?!”, Utrinski Vesnik, 19 August.


