

# Abandoning ethnicity-centered discourse in the government political rhetoric and in institutional policy making

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## Background

Since its independence in 1991 and the undertaking of the national/state building process, the general line of policy making in the country has followed the logic of antagonism of ethnic policy interests and aspirations. As a result, instead of building a common national political vision for the country, these policies introduced tension between the national and the ethnic politics and effectively codified the ethnic composition of the country as its primary political structuring. With a multiethnic society under its rule, the law of the government has consistently failed to incorporate an inclusive approach, opting instead for compromise, often segregationist solutions with aggravating consequences for the social context. The politically established rule of forming government coalitions of the two major winning parties from the non-formal Macedonian and Albanian political block respectively, has consistently effectuated a dual mode of governing Macedonia's multiethnic society.

The history of the relations between the two major ethnic groups in Macedonia is marked by a two decades long antagonism beginning at the time when the country gained its independence in 1991 as a result of the breakup of Yugoslavia and an approving independence referendum (which was boycotted by the Albanian minority).<sup>1</sup> Macedonia emerged as an independent country intact by the ethnic wars that spread through other federal republics. The main lines of confrontation were build over the political model of the country, the constitution and the very identification of Macedonia's nation. Albanians continuously advocated other solutions ranging from demands for more ethnic rights, bi-national ethnocentric state to an autonomy and secession for the western part of the country (where Albanians are mostly concentrated).<sup>2</sup> While on the other side, Macedonians claimed that the nation should be equated with the ethnic majority of the country. It is important to note that the "civil" (non-ethnic) of the nation, proposed by the authors of the Constitution (adopted in November 1991) in the initial phase of its drafting, was rejected by the Macedonian majority in the Parliament whereas it remained acceptable as an alternative to the binational state advocated by the Albanian representatives in the Parliament.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of increasing Macedonian-Albanian interethnic tensions, in March 2001 several Albanian rebel groups started attacking Macedonian security forces.<sup>4</sup> In a matter of weeks, an organized rebel structure calling itself UCK (NLA - National Liberation Army, which after the conflict transformed into a leading Albanian political party called Democratic Union for Integration - DUI) came out with demands for more rights for Albanians in Macedonia. In August 2001, the main Macedonian and Albanian political leaders of the country reached the Ohrid Framework Agreement which brought the armed conflict to an end and envisaged a process of improving the rights of the Albanian population, including higher education in Albanian language, proper representation and employment in the state institutions, legal mechanisms for protection against majoritarianism and a set of other improvements.<sup>5</sup>

Already traditional in Macedonian politics, the way of division of sectors and ministries between coalition partners resembles a process of negotiating ethnic interests, which in return is perceived by two major ethnic communities in the country as a gain or a loss in the political battle. While for decades the three ministries (defense, foreign affairs and interior affairs) were non-negotiable for the Macedonian political parties, the appointing of a former UCK combatant, and at the time of appointment a MP from the DUI as the Minister of defense sparked ethnic tension, incidents and street clashes between Albanian and Macedonian groups.<sup>6</sup> This is a direct consequence of the perception of the negotiations of coalition parties as process of ethnic battle which results in a gain or a loss for a certain ethnic group.

The current government coalition of VMRO-DPMNE and DUI, in power since 2006, has displayed, more than any other government before, a continuous practice of parallelism between the two major coalition partners within the frames of the government itself and in relation to government decisions and policies. This practice makes the government the very source of ethnic tensions, which when transferred into different layers of the society generate and re-produce segregation, parallelism and tensions which often degenerate in street fights and clashes,<sup>7</sup> thus codifying clear lines of division within the cities and regions.

Perhaps the most blatant examples in which the two governing parties openly and systematically communicated their ethnocentric rhetoric to their constituency were the adoption of the new 'controversial' Encyclopedia of Macedonia with a personal involvement in its promotion of the Prime minister;<sup>8</sup> the proposal for the 'Law for defenders from 2001 conflict' and the parliamentary blockade by DUI<sup>9</sup> which reinstated the 2001 conflict rhetoric in the mainstream politics; the clashes around the proposed *Strategy for integrated education* which faced heavy criticism and boycott; undertaking of the 'controversial' project of Skopje 2014<sup>10</sup> and parallelism to it with the Skanderbeg square; separate celebrations of the independence of Macedonia organized by the government but with the involvement of VMRO-DPMNE and the parallel celebration of the independence of Albania led by DUI; and many other larger or smaller case of mutual confrontation of which the last example of harsh ethno-nationalist rhetorics employed by both governing coalition parties during the 2013 local election in the country, especially in the cities of Kicevo and Struga.<sup>11</sup>

### Consequences of ongoing ethnicity-centered model of policy making

The consequences of the dual ethnic mode of government and policy making model results in a range of societal consequences with devastating effects both on the political and social level:

- Internal government confrontations which do not resemble dialogue or political debate but rather expose alienated positions generate *institutional inefficiency* inside the government and result in *lack of unified capacities* in the state executive institutions. It is also often a case that a ministry which is ruled by the respective minister of one of the two major coalition parties prioritizes regions or issues that are related to his own ethnicity and ethnic party;
- The confrontation that takes places in the government is often spilled into other state institutions thus *undermining the work of the parliament and local self-government units*. Often, as in the case with the 'Law for defenders from 2001 conflict,' the parliament becomes the arena of performing the ethnic clashes that originate from the government. At the local level, the *municipalities are used as a tool for revenge* on the ethnic group that is a minority within the municipal borders. The use of the double majority principle (a majority vote of the minority ethnic groups is needed to adopt crucial laws and decisions in central and local level) in decision making that is used in the parliament is not respected in the decision-making in municipal councils, a practice which reinforces the ethnic clashes even at local level. This practice gives priority to issues such as renaming schools and streets rather than solving local infrastructural, environmental, economic, healthcare and education problems of citizens;
- As a result of the division in the highest levels of the decision making processes in the country, *segregation becomes the model* for addressing social problems that contain traces of interethnic tension, thus segregation becomes a widespread societal model. One of the many examples is the segregation in education. While several incidents have occurred during the years in ethnically mixed schools, the governments solution has been a *complete segregation* among Macedonian and Albanian students, resulting either in separated shifts or separated school buildings;
- Tensions that are constantly kept high through the ethnic confrontations in the government, establish *ethno-nationalism as the main political milieu* around which all the socio-political processes are organized and mobilized. While on the other hand, the socio-economic record of Macedonia is highly frustrating. Having the highest unemployment in the region and in Europe, with highest economic inequality in whole of Europe and ex-USSR countries<sup>12</sup> and with worsening social protection services, the ethno-nationalist mainstream political discourse only contributes to the *worsening of the socio-economic situation* in the country by covering up the everyday problems of the majority of the citizens of the country.

### Policy recommendations

1. Given the fact that the political stakes are high at the central level of government, there is a low probability that any immediate intervention is possible at this moment. That is why, for the moment, it seems viable to start mobilizing pressure at the local level where the issues at matter are of a lower instance and of direct interest to citizens. Therefore, the *mobilization beyond ethnic division* of local initiatives that organize themselves around local interest issues related to infrastructure, environment healthcare and similar matters of local importance can provide good practices and effective examples of demand driven policy making that escapes the logic of ethnic determination of policy making. This is to be achieved through encouraging grassroots mobilization beyond ethnic divide of different community actors and CSOs.

One such positive case was the citizen's mobilization in Tetovo in the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010 in protest of the waste dump site that was piling in the city due to financial manipulations of the Tetovo mayor and which resulted in a success story of civic activism and involvement. In this regard it is important to mention that Tetovo was one of the central regions of the 2001 conflict in the country suffering the most of the consequences in terms of ethnic division. Importantly, the CSOs that work on the issues related to disabled persons are genuinely active beyond ethnic determination and this is a well established practice that can serve as catalyst for the new type of social mobilization.

Similar initiatives involving local CSOs and other formal and non-formal groups of citizens can establish at a local level a practice of mobilization and political involvement beyond ethnic division (on issues of gender, infrastructure, environment, etc.) that can later influence the general political context in the country as well as act as community groups in local elections in support of one or another candidate for mayors that will *break away with the practice of automatic ethnically determined voter preference*.

2. Witnessing that the media and other community actors, by way of engaging in the political ethno-centric debate promoted by the political parties which remain mono-ethnic in their composition, only serve to further root the ethno-nationalist discourse in the society, there is an urgent need to establishing wide coalitions of these actors in order to *oppose the mainstreaming of that discourse in the public and the media*. Asking new questions in new terms and within new frames of reasoning will trigger new type of public debates which will necessarily render certain (faux) priorities obsolete and bring to the front the underlying, suppressed questions which communicate more directly with the everyday realities rather than the grand national meta-narratives.



Thus one of the immediate interventions that is proposed is the demand and boycotting of any rhetoric that protracts the 2001 conflict arguments made by political representatives in relation to current socio-political context. The return to such arguments brings the whole societal structures back to conflicting positions and *reproduces myths and symbolism into policy making processes*. CSOs and media have a long standing partnership and common support experience that can be used in order to demand and publicly advocate for different political priorities in the country.

The practice of the segregated media (there are media either in Macedonian or Albanian language, with very few vanishing exceptions as the Alsat-M television) has been one of aggravating aspects of ethnic divisions in the country. By aiming to boost their (ethnic) viewer ratings by way of exposing 'exclusive' news on hot ethnic issues and incidents, the media have degenerated into dangerous ethno-propagandist tools. The resulting situation is that the Macedonian media usually report cases of violence, hate speech and crimes aimed at citizens of Macedonian ethnicity while completely ignoring those that happen in the other direction. Albanian media on the other side does exactly the same favor for the Albanian 'victims', thus a highly dangerous ethno-victimizing rhetoric is widely promulgated through mainstream media, which increases the intolerance, antagonism and ethnic hatred in the country.

One of the ways to address this dangerous and persisting phenomenon is through the enacting of stricter regulations and penalties for the media and punishments for news editors that allow for ethno-centric and ultranationalist content in their programs by the Broadcasting Council of the Republic of Macedonia.

Another model of breaching the gap of information that the two ethnic communities receive is through common collaborative news projects of the media in Macedonian and Albanian language. One such good example is the 'Media City Desk' project established in 2001 in Tetovo, which was a collaborative project of local media and which involved the setting up of a daily common news bulletin, out of which the media involved committed (through various incentives) to take certain amount of information and deliver it to their viewers through daily programs.

3. Advocating for *social justice and focusing on socio-economic situation* in the country cuts through the lines of ethnic division and reveals the socio-economic commonalities that concern the citizens. A substantive policy focus on the socio-economic policies that the government pursues which have not addressed properly the needs of the majority of unemployed, socially marginalized and labor disadvantaged population, will provide a strong policy basis for social mobilization around such issues that have been marginalized from the mainstream discourse and public debate. A strong public criticism and public pressure on the government and state institutions on socio-economic policies will put the emphasis on the *government as a unitary structure* and thus prevent the praxis of transferring of criticism from one to another coalition party. A comprehensive analysis and revision of laws and regulations related to concrete social policies such as those on social security, healthcare, labor rights, taxation and employment can serve as a socio-political strategy for mobilization lead by CSOs, activists and grassroots organizations establishing wide societal platforms and advocacy coalitions.

One such socio-economic mobilization model was the AMAN movement that was initiated by informal groups of citizens who protested for months and lead a wide spread national campaign against the drastic increase in electricity prices.<sup>13</sup> It was a genuine beyond-ethnicity movement with a strong socio-economic rhetoric and thus it managed to mobilize thousands of people irrelevant of their ethnic belonging, which proves that the above recommendation on focusing on social and economic issues is an effective tool to counter ethnocentrism in the country.

### Long term aims

The strategy of intervention in the governing order of discourse that conditions social structuring should be upgraded and advocated for both in the national and local level by community actors. The very logic upon which the current dual model relies shall be challenged by confronting it with a discourse which goes beyond the classical categories with which it operates: e.g., one will tackle the issue of social justice beyond the logic of ethnic divide, nonetheless remaining sensitive to ethnic specificities. Thus operating on the line of ethnic sensitivity and social commonalities, the process of mobilization around that strategy can result in common social and political initiatives that should release the ethnic tension within the policy making processes. A reformation of current political formations or establishing of new coalitions and structures that bridge common social interests beyond ethnic division of citizens can open the way to a more social oriented political model and a demand driven policy making.

The establishing and mobilizing of common political initiatives is one of the main challenges of the future of Macedonia's society. But, the widespread segregation in the private and public life in the country, the systematic political, educational and cultural parallelism and the weak mobilization of the civil society, render such attempts unrealistic in the near future. There have been minor attempts in different ways in the political past of the country to go forward with a unifying discourse by different parties, but under the strong pressure of the ethnocentric climate in the society, they have always fallen short of bringing forth any substantial politics and have withdrawn to the traditional ethno-political lines of separation.

Therefore a strong focus is required to counter the multiplying effects of divisions and segregations and an intensified social and civic mobilization beyond ethnic divides around social and economic issues in order to put at work a wider social civic movement that will identify politically with the commons in the country. It is only after the fulfillment of such pre-conditions and as a result of a dynamics of such a wide social movement that a political formation(s) that can bridge the ethnic gap can successfully emerge and remain sustainable within the societal and political life in the country.





### Concrete immediate steps to be undertaken by CSOs and other societal actors

The Institute of social sciences and humanities - Skopje intends to organize a public forum of representatives of CSO's and international donor organizations in order to debate and adopt an *strategic plan of action* related to the policy recommendations proposed below:

- Initiation of trainings and capacity building for CSOs on civic mobilization at grass-root level regarding problems shared by diverse ethnicities and toward solidarization around specific socio-economic and political goals beyond the ethnic divide by way of insisting on commonalities albeit respecting specificities. The main policy issues around which these attempts should build on are: employment policies of the government and minimum income regulations, social assistance and protection policies, economic incentives for particular regions and poverty reduction policies
- Devising local strategies for advocacy regarding socio-economic issues and promotion of new ideas on policy processes at local level targeting the multi-ethnic society as a whole rather than separate ethnic communities;
- Establishing country-wide coalitions between CSOs and media representatives in order to promote a new socio-economic demand-driven policy making practice in the country;
- Awareness raising campaign implemented by CSOs and media representatives toward overcoming of the rhetoric produced by the armed conflict in 2001, and creating a civil public discourse insisting on social inclusion based on gender, economic and social status, ;
- Enacting proper and effective regulation to address the spreading of ethnocentric rhetoric and ultranationalist tendencies in the media;
- Implementation of policy analysis and policy research on social inclusion and social justice policies in the country and producing comprehensive policy documents and strategies that address socio-economic issues in the country advocating solidarity regarding specific issues (social assistance, unemployment, poverty, disabilities, gender equality, etc.) by way of building inter-ethnic alliances sensitive to ethnic specificities while yet again insisting on commonalities.

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