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Inter-ethnic relations in the Republic of Macedonia as a priority or deficiencies in the process of building democratic institutions

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Abstract

After the dissolution of former Yugoslavia and the changes in the economic and political system in Republic of Macedonia, a new democratic system should be established based on equal ethnic and cultural rights, where the human rights and their freedom, as well as the the rights of ethnic groups would be respected. Macedonia presents a society deeply divided between two major communities: Macedonian and Albanian, including ethnic, linguistic, religious and social differences. After the referendum for independence and approval of Constitution in 1991, Macedonia was built as national state, and this has produced significant ethnic problems including our neighbours.

In the year 2001 in the Republic of Macedonia we had an armed conflict which resulted with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Interethnic relations present the pillars of security and stability of the state and this is an assesment of local and international political factors. A pillar of the agreement was the compromise reached for Republic of Macedonia as a unitary state, but with significant elements of decentralization as legal and political instrument providing solutions for inter-ethnic problems. The Ohrid Framework Agreement does not present an ideal solution and does not meet all the requirements of albanians of equality in all segments of life, but it was supposed to present a step forward in advancing the rights of albanians in segments that affect cultural, educational and linguistic interests .

Inter-ethnic relations, disputes with neighbours, functioning of democratic institutions and rule of law, absent political and economical reforms complete the mosaic why Republic of Macedonia is lagging behind in EU integration processes.

Key words: democracy, community, agreement, decentralization, integration.

Introduction

After the dissolution of former Yugoslavia and the changes in the economic and political system in the Republic of Macedonia, a new democratic system should be established based on ethnical and cultural rights, where the human rights and their freedom, as well as the rights of other ethnic groups will be respected. The rights and freedom of citizens should not be seen as a present or a gift from another community which has power over them or as said the famous author Locke: "Humans by nature are free, equal and independent."

In political theory, there are several explanations for ethno-political conflicts, which are sometimes called "internal conflicts". Some authors focus on security issues, in which fear and mistrust between ethnic groups can develop into armed conflict (Posen, 1983).

Others emphasize the role of "domestic factors", such as the economy, the capacity of the state, nationalism, or the immaturity of the democratic process (Brown 1993). Yet others locate the basic reason for the outbreak of conflicts in the exclusion of minorities from accessing the instruments of power (Lijphart, 1984)¹.

After the referendum for independence in September 1991 and the approval of Constitution in November of the same year, Macedonia was formally established as a national state, but with significant domestic, interethnic and neighbor relations. After the collapse of communism in 1989, interethnic relations were not the only challenges faced by the new state, the transformation from one party-system to multi-party, often criminal privatization of state enterprises, ethnic struggles in the neighbourhood, etc.

The development of Macedonian society as a unitary society, according to some even ethnocentric, specifically Macedonian people's aspirations to build a nation-state (the model of European countries and Balkan experience cyclical strikes in internal and external plan)².

Involvement of Albanian political parties in parliament and government has failed to balance the interests of both communities. After independence and democratic pluralist system installation; Albanians remain outside decision flows and their involvement in government institutions, public administration, judiciary, etc, the state acted mainly as a national state of Macedonians.

Inclusion of Albanians in the government was not sufficient, because it had Albanian political party in the government but had not a multiethnic government, the whole governance had to do with involvement of Albanian elite political party in the government.

Building a national state, setting the Macedonian national symbols in the state have been the key answers to the multiple challenges, lack of political will of the Macedonian political parties as well as the Macedonian intellectual elite, listed Macedonia in a group of states that infringed the rights of citizens in particular those belonging to non-majority communities.

Republic of Macedonia continued to build as a society with deep ethnical division among both communities Albanian and Macedonian. Differences³ by language, religion, national identity, position within society and state, highlighted two wills from different positions that characterized the political life of Macedonia in the nineties. Political and security situations have caused the issue of name of the state (with Greece), the Macedonian language and ethnicity (with Bulgaria), ignorance of Macedonian Orthodox Church (with Serbia).

¹ People Centered Analyses: Regional Development Local Governance and the quality of Life, (April 2010), *UNDP and SEEU*

² Atanasov, Petar (2003), *Multiculturalism as a theory, politics and practise*, Evro Balkan Press, pg. 119.

³ Demographic structure of population according to the Census 2002 (data from State statistical institution) Macedonian – 64.18%, Albanian 25.17%, Turkish 3.85%, Roma 2.85%, Serbian 1.78, Bosnian 0.84%, and other 1.04%.

There is a general correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation – the majority of Orthodox believers are ethnic Macedonian, and the majority of Muslim believers are ethnic Albanians and Turks.

Approximately 65% of the population is Macedonian Orthodox, and 32% is Muslim. Other groups include Roman Catholics, members of various Protestant denominations, and Jews.

In the Macedonia of the nineties it was not possible to create a critical measure for a greater and better involvement of Albanians and also the others in public institutions. Macedonian political parties were not available for Albanian demands, but it should be noted that the same dispositions were dominant in the Macedonian intellectual elite. Republic of Macedonia taking into account the internal ethnic composition and the relations concerning its neighbors, according to some authors tried to build a multi ethnic democratic society which will use its multi ethnic composition as an instrument and priority to build a balanced and stable state. But there are thinkers who believe that multi ethnic states have priority that they are a source of conflict and instability of the region and beyond.

All the views and developments of the state so far, the prospect of the state and the multi ethnic society put them on a test for finding better and more functional alternatives.

Macedonian society can be described as simultaneously a multiethnic, multinational, plural and multicultural young democracy. In such societies the risk of ethnic conflicts is especially high if the government neglects or discriminates against minority groups. In 2001 the country experienced an armed conflict between the central government and ethnic Albanian guerrilla fighters. The conflict ended in August 2001 with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA). However, the internal relations between the ethnic Macedonians, ethnic Albanians and other ethnic minorities have remained the most sensitive issue that affects the stability and security of the country, as well as its perspective for integration into the European Union⁴.

Separation of powers and implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement

The Ohrid Framework Agreement has transformed Macedonia from a national state to a state ruling among national state, civic and state bi-national state.

Framework Agreement, signed on August 13, 2001 in Ohrid, Macedonian and Albanian side, under the auspices of international mediators from the EU and U.S., it has defined constitutional obligations, legislative and political measures of security.

Constitutional changes to languages spoken by more than 20% of the population are recognized by a status of official language (this right by demographic composition can only use the Albanian community), applied the double majority system (which consists of a majority of votes Assembly and most of the votes of communities that are not majority) for significant segments of social life (education, culture, heritage, personal documents, etc.), equal representation of public administration at national and local levels, establish decentralization and reforms of local government, etc.

There are authors who think that OFA is no adequate response to the 2001 conflict and that this agreement increases tensions, rather than diminish them. Similarly, others think that the cause of deterioration of interethnic relations is not the MKO, but its implementation. These thoughts always prevail more and more to the majority community, since the majority created the perception of loss of position within the system and ultimately the loss of state.

In formal terms, the reforms aimed to strengthen the civic nature of the state and have refrained from explicit connection with certain ethnic groups. At the same time, set the key elements of the division of power, which the Albanians stand as a community with rights comparable to the Macedonian community. Being a treaty that convinced Macedonian and Albanian 5 parties to stop fighting.

⁴ People Centered Analyses: Regional Development Local Governance and the quality of Life, (April 2010), *UNDP and SEEU*

⁵ Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed by four parliamentary parties, two Macedonian political party VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM and Albanian by PDSH and PPD.

Constitutional and legal changes in accordance with OFA would mean a "power-sharing" within the common state. However, there should be no illusion that its implementation would create a "permanent peace". The roots of nationalism are profound; of course therapy should be deep and longlasting. The model of "power sharing" is defined as practices and institutions that result in broad coalitions of government, which said in general is open to all in society and reconciling self-determination and democracy in relevant ethnic groups in the multiethnic states, principles which are often taught to be in conflict⁶.

Power – Sharing defined as practices and institutions that result in broad-based governing coalitions generally inclusive of all major ethnic groups in society, can reconcile principles of self-determination and democracy in multiethnic states, principles that are often perceived to be at odds. Equitable representation is an important instrument of political and social inclusion of ethnic communities in the society. Bashkëjetesa në mes komuniteteve do të nënkuptonte një shoqëri demokratike, e barabartë për të gjithë, duke garantuar të drejtat individuale dhe kolektive të komuniteteve.

The main issue of concern handled by the Framework Agreement is the low representation of Albanians in public administration. As seen from the records before 2001, the participation of Albanians in the government is not reflected in greater involvement of Albanians in public administration, especially in sensitive areas of public administration, such as police, where the number of Albanians has always been low since the early nineties. For this reason, public administration reform has been essential, in order the Albanian community to strengthen the sense of joint ownership over the state.

In the period before OFA, Albanians are symbolically represented in the public sector, the situation was similar with most other communities especially Turks and Roma. Given the low starting point of Albanians in state and public institutions on national and municipal levels, from year to year has increased the representation of non-majority communities particularly Albanians.

Discrimination has been most visible in the field of education, secondary and university. However, the recognition of Albanian-Language University in Tetovo in 2003 (functioned self-funded by the Albanians and students, outside the legal system since 1994), Albanian-language education has seen progress and it contributes to social and state cohesion of the country.

Decentralization of power has been one of the areas where they can meet the demands of communities and particularly the Albanian community as a community of second largest in the Republic of Macedonia. RM Constitution of 1991 provided no substantive political rights at local level for special non-majority communities. Decentralization of power can reduce tensions. Local autonomy especially in municipalities where communities are in a significant number will increase capacity of community in decision making and create a democratic environment for sustainable development.

From various surveys can be found that politicians at national level are considered to be responsible for worsening inter-ethnic relations by a large proportion of people, as are politicians at the local level and the media by slightly lower proportions.

From this we can conclude that citizens believe the most in local politicians, whom they feel the closest.

OFA is foreseen as a Committee on Interethnic Relations, which has a crucial role in determining the laws that affect inter-ethnic relations and to be voted with double voting. This Committee consists of the same number of Albanian and Macedonian representatives, who have 7 representatives and a representative from the Turkish community, Vlach, Roma, Bosnian and Serbian.

Decision making in this Committee is to double majority, which means that there is no right of veto on the Committee. Committee considers matters related to relations between communities in the

⁶ Timothy D, Sisk " Power –Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts, USIP, 1996.

country and examines the opinions and recommendations to resolve such issues. Assembly is obliged to review the opinions and recommendations submitted and decide for them. This Committee has an important additional competence - in case of dispute for applying of the principle of double majority voting in the Assembly, decision for voting procedure is taken by a majority vote of the Committee. Interethnic Relations Committee had to play a key role in mediating between communities, but by functioning so far it has not had the given significant role considering the obstructions and barriers that have created political parties especially Macedonians. OFA and constitutional and institutional reforms are supported by the Albanian community, which considered that the agreement addresses some of the major disputes that have been with the Macedonian state during the nineties. On the other hand, support to the Macedonian population was significantly lower, given the armed conflict, loss of privileged position in the system and because of the compromises made to the Albanian community with this arrangement. It is questionable how it is possible that a peace deal, such as the MKO, the same is not accepted by all parties involved, the agreement has created preconditions for stability and security to build a multiethnic society and state. Concerning the Macedonian side treats as final discharge of Albanians, while Albanians consider as initial democratic basis to realize full equality within the legal and political system of the country. OFA and constitutional amendments do not create the possibility that non-majority community could decide independently on matters that affect their ethnic interests. Specifically, there are no elements of territorial autonomy, political or cultural communities.

Living in Independent Macedonia

Widespread discrimination which has experienced many Albanians ended in a great extent. In the present day we can not imagine the violent protests and their suppression, as has happened in Gostivar in 1997, the placement of the Albanian flag before the municipal building.

But inter-ethnic relations are very fragile, this was confirmed by recent events in the RM, as was the killing of Albanians by a Macedonian police in Gostivar and murder of five young people in the vicinity of Skopje by unknown perpetrators so far. These recent events showed the importance of inter-ethnic for the stability of the country and the policies of institutions do not function in a multiethnic way that can enhance citizens' mistrust and to take chances with democracy and the state functioning.

There are thinkers who think that OFA can be viewed as a failure, because it has not fundamentally transformed ethnic relations in Macedonia, and because the ethnic issue is still subject to debate and remains the main hub of the existence of the state.

Coalition governments between the Albanian and Macedonian political parties for the period after independence have not realized their mission to relax interethnic relations and stabilize the joint state and society. It is not enough to create a multiethnic coalition if it does not mean the corporate government in all segments of society, treating common issues but also faced with common challenges.

Conclusions

- Long-term efforts of the governmental policies, aimed at reducing the underlying conditions that make interethnic conflicts more likely, conditions such as the high level of unemployment, poverty, inequality and discrimination.

To address the causes of ethnic conflicts, policy-makers, as well as activists

from civil society, should affirm the stabilizing effects of implementing the OFA to create a more tolerant multiethnic society.

- Political parties and leaders are responsible for the atmosphere of tolerance in the society, but the most responsible for the functioning of a multiethnic society is the coalition government and the ruling party of the majority.
- Governmental policies, as well as the NGOs should focus on the improvement of the quality of public and private education, because education is seen by most people as a factor of ethnic cohesion more than any other social institution apart from the family.
- Better overall knowledge of both the Albanian and Macedonian languages in the public administration is needed.
- The constitutional rule, according to which parties that provoke interethnic hatred could be banned, should be made more effective.
- The development and sustainability of civil society, includes NGOs, trade unions and professional organizations, organised on the basis of the cooperation of ethnically mixed organizations, should be supported.

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