

Reforming Macedonian political system

Saturday 6 April 2019, by [SADIKU Artan](#) (Date first published: 26 March 2019).

In the last elections (2016) in Macedonia, voters for the first time voted outside ethnically defined boundaries. After a long domination of the main right-wing party, Social Democratic Union of Macedonia again took power amid great expectations of its' voters. It started a process which aims to redirect the focus of parliamentary politics from ethnic issues to the social and economic ones. The success of this process would depend precisely on the role of governing Social Democrats, faced with serious obstacles on that path. The first one is the nature of the Macedonian parliamentary system that is based on strict ethnic lines. Besides that, structural constraints on ruling party's economic policies are strongly felt as well, especially since the government is unambiguously determined to continue country's path towards joining NATO and European Union

The post-Yugoslav republics were built on the basis of ethnonationalism, and that fact still influence every day challenges which often do not relate to ethnic issues. The prevalence of ethnicity in the formal politics of many of the post-Yugoslav republics is not linked to the present recurrence of ethnonationalism in Europe, but it represents a continuity of a model established in the 1990s. Embarking on such a path of building new societies was the consequence of the ideological bankruptcy of the Yugoslav elites who had nothing else to offer beyond ethno-nationalist narratives in order to cover the absolute failure of the new neoliberal economic model which was inaugurated with the promises of a better life.

Macedonia had been celebrated as the "oasis of peace" because it left the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia without any major internal disturbances like the one that accompanied dissolution of the rest of the country. But the constitution of 1991, adopted in the spirit of dominant ethno-nationalist doctrine, had inscribed within itself a crisis to come. After a decade of living the fears of wars in its neighbourhood, the inevitable crisis came to Macedonia in the year 2001.

The Ohrid Framework Agreement that sealed the ethnic clashes in the country was one of ethnic power-sharing which at that time seemed to reflect a democratic character, one of inclusion and integration. Because the crisis came as a result of ethnic discrimination, the inclusion and integration were supposed to follow strict ethnic lines. Ten years after the Agreement, the formal Macedonian politics was dominated by ethnocentric political parties, which competed on virtually parallel political spaces, that of the Macedonian and the Albanian ethnic community in Macedonia.

It was only in 2011 when a visible social movement started to take shape around the scandal of the murder of Martin Neshkovski by the state security apparatus, that the new political and social issues, not connected with inter-ethnic relations, started to be questioned in Macedonian society. All the way to 2015 there were dozens of massive social mobilizations that crossed the ethnic lines and put forward common political demands from education to healthcare, workers rights and social security. It was the first time in the recent history of the country that significant social movements were organized beyond ethnic lines.

This new social reshaping was picked up by the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)

which in the election campaign in 2016 addressed demands raised during the social protests. With the help of the Albanian ethnic votes, SDSM managed to come close to the ruling Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) and finally formed the government in coalition with the ethnic Albanian party – Democratic Union for Integration (DUI).

The new government was one that had to bring a new era in the Macedonian politics and society depleted socially, economically and culturally by the more than a decade of Gruevski's repressive rule. The challenges in front of the new government related mostly to the issues of the reform of the judiciary, rule of law, media freedom and democracy. These were also set up as the main criteria for the countries progress towards the integration with the European Union.

But, in the course of performing reform policies, the prime minister started facing troubles due to the share of power with the coalition partner which in this case in the Albanian political party that was governing with VMRO-DPMNE in the previous decade. DUI is not interested in reform program that would advance an economic, social and cultural position of Albanians. Their political agenda is not one of reforms, but of bargaining for more ethnic interests which they would translate into ethnic votes for the next elections. In this run, the DUI constantly pushes further the ethnic demands towards a terrain which will put the Prime Minister Zaev in an uncomfortable position with his predominantly Macedonian ethnic electorate and thus generate a resistance from his side, a move which they could use to withdraw the Albanian votes back into their own ethnic political campus.

Erasing of ethnic parties

Although the ethnic issues are fortunately not the predominant ones in the parliamentary Macedonian politics these days, the ethnic format of the coalition and the dominant political parties is a cause for the setback in many of the reformatory undertakings of the new government. Reforms in the economic sense remain quite embedded in the same neoliberal doctrine run by Gruevski, but still, they brought forth significant improvements in the field of freedom of expression, culture and formal democracy. A major intervention is needed in the procedure that determines the formation of the government. Namely, the traditional model of ethnically determined ruling coalitions must be transgressed in order to have fully functional and homogenous state structures for the purposes of implementing new policies.

The traditional criticism that the erasing of ethnic parties will bring forth a new model of domination of the ethnic Macedonian issues over the Albanian ones is not legitimate anymore given the new context in which the social-democrats have been voted by many Albanians and have included Albanians in their electoral lists. The challenge remains, however, to take this process further, that is, to completely reform the social-democratic party into a fully open and representative political party of all the citizens of Macedonia irrespective of their ethnic background. The current interventions in the party structures of the SDSM remain quite cosmetic and thus limit its scope of the appeal to the Albanian voters in the next elections.

A political analysis of the mode of functioning of the government does provide for advantages even for the concerned Albanian electorate in Macedonia, which remains afraid of losing its voice in a government without a distinct ethnic Albanian political party. Given the fact that the Albanian political party in the government coalition is always the smaller party, its political interests are always corrupted by the larger governing party. The failures in the realization of these interests, no matter if they come as a result of the governing modality, often come to generate ethnic tensions in the country.

On the other hand, a political party that counts on the votes of the Albanians in Macedonia and has

incorporated within its structures a significant number of representatives of this community would come to principled political positions on ethnic issues through internal discussions. Once decided, these positions would become government policies of the ruling party, evading any possibility for blackmailing and trade-offs with other issues. In such a move, ethnic issues would not become irrelevant to the Macedonian politics, but there would be established a new pattern of politics that involves all the ethnic communities in dealing with, not just ethnic, but also all other important political causes.

Currently, there are six Albanian political parties in the parliament which all compete in their nationalistic appeal in order to gain prominence against each other. Such a political setting disadvantages Albanians in Macedonia in their non-ethnic needs as citizens, because certain domains of policy become occupied by Albanian parties that forge particular ethnic projects that obstruct the general progress. A non-ethnic political re-configuration should be forced through by the social-democrats who are the only party in the country that have a potential for transforming political discourse

in the country in a non-ethnocentric. The only political space, given the maintenance of the neoliberal economic policies, in which a significant change is possible is the internal ethnic re-configuration of political lines in the country. Even though it does not seem like a political priority of the social-democrats at the moment, ethnic divisions of the political scene in Macedonia in the future will pose itself as the main challenge to deal with. If the reshaping of the party-political model in Macedonia fails, the whole progress made in the country in the last two years will revert back to already seen ethnic tensions, a context in which VMRO-DPMNE can score well and thus damage the credibility and support of the current government. Knowing the stubbornness of the Albanian parties in exploiting every policy issue to their ethnic doctrine, the conditions for the reshaping of the politics in Macedonia are tough to tackle, but if done with success, they will deeply transform a society that has been plagued in all aspects by the dominance of the formal political status quo.

Given the new rise of nationalist politics all around Europe, the Macedonian political development can provide both a lesson and a motivation for rethinking resistance to this trends. Ethnically based policies can be defeated only through the articulation of socio-economic interests of people. Although not yet a concrete policy, the socio-economic unifying argument is a distinctive feature of the political discourse of the social-democrats in Macedonia, but it will hardly work in social and political terms without a real change in the life of the majority of the people in the country - regardless of their ethnic affiliation.

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P.S.

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Support the ESSF Asia Permanent Solidarity Fund - Even “small” donations help!

Here we are with our annual appeal for the ESSF solidarity fund. We’ve already used almost all of our resources for 2019, and we need to prepare for 2020.

Over the last 12 years, ESSF has built unique solidarity relations in Asia. The calamitous situation in many countries is going to get worse. On October 29th, *Nature Communications* reported on a new study suggesting that the rise in sea levels will claim three times more victims than previously thought; mostly in eastern Asia. [1].

In the face of the increasingly urgent needs, **we are determined to increase the number of our donors, recognising that no donation is too small**. The number of donors is politically important. Each new donor is a confirmation of our solidarity with those facing disasters, a welcome encouragement. And taken together, “small” donations have enabled us to provide significant support to grassroots initiatives.

If you can contribute large sums, all the better! But do not give up the solidarity fund because you would judge the amount of your contribution too insignificant. Our minimum solidarity commitment is €500 – that’s only 10 donations of €50. A basic standard bank transfer to our partners amounts to €1,000 – that’s only 10 donations of €100.

ESSF works on a completely volunteer basis. **It means that 100% of the donations received are actually transferred to our partners abroad.** The costs related to these transfers are mostly bank charges and reduced to a minimum (less than 5%).

Each year brings new ad hoc solidarity campaigns in response to urgent developments. But we also have ongoing engagements in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and the Philippines. ESSF doesn't 'export' know-how, we don't manage our own projects. Instead, we support our movement partners in their response to local humanitarian, social and democratic crises. They take the lead in defining the needs, and the strategy to be followed. Our partners include the MiHands coalition of civil society groups in Mindanao, southern Philippines, the Free Women movement in Indonesia, the BKF-BKS peasant movements in Bangladesh and a network of popular movements in Pakistan.

These partners are facing increasingly difficult conditions, ranging from martial law in Mindanao to the violence of labour and social relations in Bangladesh, growing threat of Islamist aggression against progressives in Indonesia (particularly women and LGBT+ activists), and attacks from fundamentalists and from the secret services in Pakistan...

The conditions under which our partners act are increasingly difficult: martial law in Mindanao, extreme violence in social relations in Bangladesh, the rise of aggressive Islamism in Indonesia (particularly targeting women and LGBT +), crossfire Special Services and Fundamentalists in Pakistan ... So we need to fully consider the issue of the security of our partners.

Alongside the authoritarian radicalisation of local regimes, our partners suffer from the local impact of the USA-China conflict, as well as the complex ecological crisis, of which global warming is only one aspect. All this increases social conflicts particularly between peasants and big landowners.

We ask you to join us by making a donation - small or large - one-off or regular to the ESSF Permanent Solidarity Fund.

We warmly thank all those who are renewing their donations, as well as all those joining us for the first time!

Pierre Rousset and Adam Novak
ESSF

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We keep you regularly informed via our website of the situation and use of the solidarity fund.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-019-12808-z>