

ETHNIFICATION OF THE MACEDONIAN “MULTICULTURAL MODEL”

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Abstract

It is customary that any political issue or change in the **Macedonian society** greatly affects the ethnic balance in the state. In 2024, presidential and parliamentary elections were held in North Macedonia, after which there was a complete change of the government. As the social context is always in the process of changing and a few months after the 2024 elections, we can re-evaluate the political events and compare the views and arguments of the politics regarding the **ethnic** versus the **civic** as a concepts. All of these considering that North Macedonia is still a multicultural society that is in a search for higher level of integration. The main goal in this paper is to elaborate where the situation is leaning and shed more lights into the **ethnic/civic divide** in public debates. The “Ohrid process” paved the way to unitary future of the state but opened the window for ethnification of the politics and strengthening of the ethnic concept. Over the past 20 years, the importance of ethnicity and the power of ethnic elites has continuously

grown, by particularly strengthening ethnic identity among Albanians. In North Macedonia the economy is weak, democratic processes are with the snail speed, yet, for the ethnic themes, the debate is always fast and explosive and with a lot of emotions. As we have argued this is the result of the process of **ethnification of politics**.

Keywords: Macedonian society, ethnic/civic divide, ethnification of politics

Introduction¹

Speaking about the existing multicultural models, it is difficult to compare or to replicate any solutions across different social contexts and geography. There are no two similar countries, according to the population, and every multicultural society should find its own way. Many nations and states are proud of their projected national identities. Some nations do not even recognize ethnic minorities due to their national strategy. With the multicultural theory and experience in the last 3-4 decades, multiculturalism is not a very popular idea because competes with and confronts nation-state. In the same time, there are many examples of destabilizing social cohesion through ethnification of politics. It is difficult to copy elements from different models of integration. The solution for these societies are through policies and regulations that do not enhance segregation of the society and decrease the possibilities of ethnic conflict.

In the 1990s a serious attempt was made to create a theory, the theory of multiculturalism. This theory was advocated by several western liberal authors, among them Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer, but also Will Kymlicka, Biku Parek and many others, authors who wrote about western societies, Netherlands, Canada and Australia, mainly immigrant countries. They advocated for more rights for distinguished cultural groups within their own societies. These rights covered topics such as identity, recognition, language, cultural rights, education, immigrant issues as well as issues related to traditional multicultural societies. This theory aimed to find more space in liberal society for diverse and disadvantaged cultural groups,

¹ This paper is part of the project of the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research named "Analysis of the parliamentary and presidential elections 2024." In the framework of the project were prepared several analyses, concerning different issues and themes, as well as the multicultural and identity questions related to the elections of 2024.

although the boundary between culture and politics has always been the subject of fierce political and academic debates. One of the efficient attempt to reconcile universal rights and collective diversities is made in the theory of consociational democracy of Aren Lijphart (Lijphart 1977). It was a model to introduce political mechanisms to resolve burning issues related to the identity of cultural groups and their participation in the political model of the state. It seems that the basic category of defining identity and diversity and their implication in politics is the category of nationality, which in the West is understood as citizenship, as a universal category, while in the East it is understood as ethnicity, specific identity to big groups defined by common language, similar cultural trays and historical heritage. The main goal was to reach solutions that will prevent or resolve ethnic conflict, where the conflict has either started or there are indications that one will occur in another unstable and multicultural country in the Balkans, in Africa or even in an Asia.

Unlike different parts of former Yugoslavia, where in the 1990s the bloody ethnic conflict lasted for couple of years, the Republic of Macedonia in 2001 went through ethnic conflict with a small number of casualties. While in Bosnia through the Dayton Agreement, the International community installed a state with three constitutional and separate ethnic groups, in Macedonia, on the contrary, through the Ohrid Framework Agreement they tried to stop the ethnic interference in the political model concerning the Government. The local governments gained more ethnic concessions, but with intention to strengthen the democratic processes with the hope that the ethnification of politics will eventually lose its importance. Hence, North Macedonia nowadays enjoys more balance and calm relations due to the lack of strong Macedonian nationalism (Atanasov 2017). The Ohrid Framework Agreement paved the way for more multiculturally balanced politics, but also enhanced rights concerning cultural differences and needs. The moment considering strengthening the political power on the side of

Albanians is proved to be of high importance. The constitutional changes and numerous laws that gave more rights to the Albanians concerning language rights, identity of the communities, the mechanisms for constitutional protection, and equitable participation in the institutions of the system are elements of integrative strategy and policies. For sure, more cross-ethnic communication is needed, and respecting of the rule of law and the protection of the rights of all other ethnic communities (besides Macedonians and Albanians, there are 10% minorities of other ethnicities – Turks, Serbs, Roma, Vlachs, Bosniacs). The Ohrid Agreement was the document that resolved the security crisis in 2001 and laid the foundations of today's Macedonia even though this social transformation did not go easily and without problems. The Democratic Union for Integration² (DUI) as a political party was in a position to increase the ethnic rights of Albanians, sometimes beyond the constitutionally defined provisions. The ethnic issues debates are always flammable, especially during the election campaigns.

In 2024, presidential and parliamentary elections were held in North Macedonia, after which there was a complete change of the government.³ After eight years of SDSM (left wing party) ruling, VMRO-DPMNE (right wing party) came to power, while among the Albanians, after 20 years, the main party in the government changed, DUI was replaced by the VREDI coalition, made up of several Albanian political parties. DUI as a political party was part of the government and influential from 2002 to 2024. Also, there was a change in the presidential cabinet, the candidate supported by VMRO-DPMNE convincingly defeated the current president as candidate supported by SDSM. We have to add, that every small political issue or change in the

² The Democratic Union for Integration was a political party transformed from Albanian paramilitary that took part in the conflict in 2001 against the state security forces. Their leader Ali Ahmeti is the first and the only president between 2002-2024.

³ Parliamentary elections were held on May 8, 2024 together with the second round of the Presidential elections.

Macedonian society greatly affects the ethnic balance in the state. As the social context is always in the process of changing and a few months after the 2024 elections, we can re-evaluate the political events and compare the views and arguments of the politics regarding the ethnic versus the civic as a concepts. All of these considering that North Macedonia is a multicultural society with the model of building a cohesive society that is in a search for higher level of integration.

Macedonian society between the Ethnic and the Civic

What changes did the Ohrid Agreement bring? The framework agreement contained four basic ideas – cessation of violence, decentralization of government, rebalancing of the political model and cultural issues. In some cases it simply mirrored existing European standards on these issues, in other cases it went further. The sections on “non-discrimination and fair representation” and “special parliamentary procedures” are probably the most important parts of the document. The so-called “Badinter majority” of representatives who belong to communities that are not part of the majority in Macedonia was also introduced, especially for cultural rights, the use of language, education, personal documents, and the use of symbols, and issues related to decentralization. The Ohrid Agreement was the basis for a model of society that would force political integration, but with elements of both liberal and corporate pluralism (Atanasov 2004). Unfortunately, the political elites, even after two decades of this important agreement for the state, do not pay enough attention to the social integration in many aspects important for social interaction, and about the “unitary” character of state. The sociological theory has been generally clear on this problem.

One of the basic sociological dichotomy concerning belonging to the nation is the perception of the ethnic vis-à-vis the civic understanding of the identity and the society as a part of the state. Most frequent question is always: to whom the state belong, considering the ethnic/civic dichotomy? “The ideal articulation of ‘nation’ as a form of cultural community and the ‘state’ as a territorial, political unit is now widely accepted and often taken as unproblematic” (Biswas 2002). Research on this question has led to a widely accepted distinction between two types of nationalism, ethnic and civic, and two types of nations, cultural and political. Let us consider some other elaborations of the ethnic/civic dichotomy. “The myth of the *ethnic* nation suggests that you have no choice at all in the making of your national identity: you are your cultural inheritance and nothing else. The myth of the *civic* nation, in contrast, suggests that your national identity is nothing but your choice...” (Yack 1996). It seems that ethnic identity is unchosen – not even a possible subject of choice. “It is this, crucially, which distinguishes ethnic from civic nationalism; for on the latter, national identity is presumed either to have been chosen or at least to be what it would be rational to choose” (Gilbert 2000). Brown referred to these two bases of national identity as “Cultural (or ethno-cultural) Nationalism and Civic Nationalism. Ethno-cultural nationalism depicts the nation as a community of (ethno) cultural sameness, while civic nationalism depicts the nation as a community of equal citizens” (Brown 2002). Some argue that the differences between them are essentially historical and geographical. “The enlightenment and western liberal tradition promoted a certain conception of nation identity as citizenship...” (Heathorn 2000). Another type is evolving in the post-Communist states. “Nicknamed ‘ethnic democracy’ ... it takes the ethnic nation, rather than the citizenry, as the cornerstone of the state” (Smooha 2002). What does play a part, and especially in determining whether a particular nationalism will be defined as civic or as ethnic, is the perception

of a nation's status relative to other nations, whether it is perceived as a part of the West or not. Greenfeld argues that such perception is dependent on the traditional, prenational beliefs in the society in question (Greenfeld 1992). Theoretical arguments, very often, link ethnic nationalism and cultural nations to an objective definition of the nation, while civic nationalism and political nations are linked to a subjective definition.⁴

After this short analysis about ethnic and civic, we can broaden the horizon with comparison of nationalism and multiculturalism. Nationalism is older and stronger than multiculturalism as an ideology and practice. Nationalism has produced the nation in a long process that bred many nations on European continent. Nationalism is a standpoint for reference in a way to which nation you belong, but when nationalisms compete in the same society (state) than the multiculturalism is in conflict with the national state. Can we in this way see Macedonia as a society in which Macedonian nationalism competes with other nationalisms, or, more practically, how powerful are different cultural groups seeking for more recognition and resources interfering the Macedonian "national status quo" (Atanasov 2004). The only nationalism that can compete with the Macedonian one and did receive recognition and partially resource redistribution (on the municipality level) through the constitutional changes, is the Albanian one. Respectively, the public debates after the Ohrid Agreement are more concerned with the "bicultural" arguments, pros and cons, than with multicultural perspectives. It is evident that the biggest ethnic groups in Macedonia (Macedonians and Albanians) do not celebrate the multiculturalism but their own cultural group

⁴ This analysis of the ethnic versus civic category or concept is taken from the paper wrote by the author in 2004, and published under title "Macedonian National Identity: Quantitative Differences Between Unitary and Subaltern National Myths and Narratives" (Discussion Paper 32 – South East Europe Series). London, UK: Centre for the Study of Global Governance – London School of Economics.

politics. The multicultural “arguments” in this case are used more as an excuse in pursue of their own political (ethnic) goals.

The problem is that, comparing the numbers, the Macedonians will have difficulties to hold its “multicultural model” socially cohesive and with strength to succeed, while the Albanians will, furthermore, insist on restructuring the “model” that privilege the Macedonian symbols of the society. Even though it is difficult to imagine that the Albanians will have in near future their own (sub)national anthem or football team as a federal part of Macedonia, it is more difficult to imagine Albanians standing proudly while Macedonian national anthem proceed, the flag as well. In this way, the highest argument against the Macedonian “national enterprise” from the Albanian side is that in the multicultural states all citizens cannot identify under one name as nation, if the name of the state is the same with the name of the dominant national group. In the Macedonian case putting everyone under the name Macedonia, according to many Albanians, assumes assimilationist connotations. It is not easy to give up the monopoly of the national cultural matrix (and political power), as well as resources, in order to meet the Albanian demands for equal public status for their language and equitable and fair representation in the state institutions.⁵ Every society, argues Parekh, has a historically inherited cultural structure which informs its conduct of public life, and resists modifications beyond a certain point without losing its coherence and causing widespread disorientation, anxiety and even resistance (Parekh 2000). Macedonians still perceive Macedonia as their “natural” state, and involuntarily make more “space(s)” for the Albanians.

⁵ According to the census in 2022 the ethnic proportions of the population is following: Macedonians 58.44 %, Albanians 24.30 %, the rest consists of Turks (3.86%), Roma (2.53%), Serbs (1.30%), Bosniaks (0.87%), Vlachs (0.47%) and others.

Contextually, this “battle” between ethnic and civic last since the beginning of the independence of the state. Political culture research conducted in 2012 (Simoska 2012), on representative sample for the country of 1200 respondents, pointed that the citizens in Macedonian society perceived the ethnic diversity as a richness, yet, in relations to living together, Macedonians and Albanians agreed that actually they do not want to live together. In relation to identity in Macedonian society there were two constants. First one is that the Macedonians, but also Turks and Roma, feel exclusively as a “citizens of Macedonia”. Contrary to this, in the last two decades the number of Albanians that feel only as a members of their own “ethnic community” continuously rise. The new thing is that this feeling is rising among Turkish community too. The ethnic revival as an identity among Albanians is related with the events that followed the independence of the country, and also due to bigger political exponents in the politics of Albanians in Macedonia.

A study done in 2011 (Hristova 2013) focused on the issue of perception of the ethnic and civic identity on the student population (with a sample of 451 students at the state universities). The research have set off from the assumption that it was possible for these two identities (ethnic and civic) to be mutually exclusive, but also compatible. The research team have envisaged four categories that express this relation of ethnic versus national identity, so that in the first case they are completely separate, in two categories these identities are nested in each other, and in the fourth category they merge (there is no difference between ethnic and national identity). A large majority of ethnic Macedonians (77.1%) chose the categories in which the civic component is dominant. The ethnic Albanians chose these categories in a much smaller percentage (32.3%), and their preferred categories are the nested identities in which the ethnic background is dominant (46.6%). They reached conclusion that the respondents (above

all, the ethnic Albanians) perceive the cohesiveness and solidarity on ethnic level, and not national level.

It is evident that the ethnic is strong category and for a longer period of time dominates in the public and obvious if you follow the elections and government policies in last 20 years. The Ohrid process paved the way to unitary future of the state but opened the window for ethnification of the politics and strengthening of the ethnic. That would be argued when we later quote some of the recent statements considering the current state-of-affairs, shortly after the parliamentary elections of 2024. That is the main goal in this paper, to elaborate where the situation is leaning and shed more lights into the ethnic/civic divide in public debates.

Ethnicization of politics

In the political space in the Republic of North Macedonia after the elections in December 2016, during the negotiations for the new government, political declaration was promoted in the public. It was presented as a document signed by members of Parliament from the Albanian political parties (20 MPs) and it became known as the “Platform from Tirana”. This document and in its appearance brought public tensions. The parts of the document that asked for a public debate were understood by the Macedonians as “ethnic demands”. Thus, 15 years after the Ohrid Agreement, thanks to the Tirana Platform, the main political problems again become the ethnic issues and the arguments were debated about which model is the most suitable for the “final reconciliation” of ethnic communities.

The document, which is spread over several pages, is dominated by three groups of questions or demands (Atanasov 2017). Albanian MPs through this document (under the leadership of DUI), in addition to several conventional introductory sentences, claimed a higher political status in the,

as well as a debate on the redesign of state symbols. More resources and differentiation were required in a way that will strengthen ethnicity, and there is also a request for a greater share in the national narrative of Macedonia. So this is another sign of the demand for ethnification of politics. The first group of questions refer to the demands for a higher political status of the Albanians within the state of the Republic of Macedonia. In particular, language federalization is required, first of all, in the area of language policies and the use of the Albanian language. Second, debate on redesigning state symbols is also demanded. The attitude of strengthening the ethnic was clearly exposed. Many times the leaders of the ethnic communities try to freeze the ethnic differences just to prolong their political prominence and expiration date. The second group of questions is related to the requirements for designing parallel institutions that would have specific competences within the policies of redistribution of resources. And this group of questions refers to concessions related to greater ethnic control over the socio-political processes. The establishment of a Ministry of Political System and Relations between Communities was required, a body that would be responsible for the rights of the communities, but also required to have competence in supporting greater economic and social development of underdeveloped areas. The establishment of a central institution for the implementation of the law on the use of the languages of the communities was required, as well as a permanent body, a "Round table", with a rotating presidency of the Albanians for issues of an "Ethnic" nature. The third group of questions were related to the requirements for the historical role and redefine the role of Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia as a political entity. The demands for the involvement of the Albanians in the resolution of the "state" issues, such as the negotiations on the differences over the name issue with the Greece, for the involvement of the Albanians in the communication and the building of policies with the neighboring states, such as Bulgaria, Albania and

Kosovo, were requirements at the level of a relationship between a federal entity and a federation.

Thus, the further internal divisions of a society will only weaken the chances of building a political nation whose sole task is to provide a better life for its citizens – regardless of belonging to different cultural, ethnic, religious or any other identities. The only way to “strengthen” the state status of the Albanians should be by overcoming the “ethnic knots” (Atanasov 2017), through an open dialogue and the choice of policies that unite and not divide, but also by creating more space for the issues important to the Albanians and the recognition and respect to all “non-majority citizens”. This requires vision and courage, because the ethnic tensions in the Balkans from 20 years ago are a good example of how, under certain conditions, they easily transform into ethnic conflict. In summary, the multi-ethnic dilemmas will probably continue to plague society and its citizens and will not disappear from our political scene anytime soon. The events from time to time shows that the water under the political institutions and state structures in Macedonian society is not calm.

Many questions should be asked. Do we accept or are we ready to accept the multi-ethnic reality in which we live? What lies in the essence of the demands of ethnic communities and in the essence of ethnic conflicts? Does the need for identity recognition end only with well-structured and formulated legal provisions and institutional designs, or is a different and broader social integration required? Political science and the science of multiculturalism and the division of power (power-sharing) have been trying for more than a century to propose the best models and to give the most adequate explanation of the processes and challenges faced by multi-ethnic societies. Due to its complexity and various aspects, the hitherto unchallenged ideal of liberalism stands up to the challenge of how to answer

these questions. Is it necessary for the public sphere and institutions to remain impersonal and neutral in relation to our different identities and to treat all citizens as equals, or is it necessary to protect the rights of individuals as members of specific cultural groups through their public recognition? Although the new constitutional order, inspired by the solutions in the Ohrid Framework Agreement, as well as the extensive written (legal and scientific) material on this topic, produced after 2001, provide a good basis for inter-ethnic tolerance and understanding, recent incidents between groups of young people from different ethnicities affiliation, unfortunately, makes this issue more than current and interesting for debate (Misev 2013). The search for new ways, models for integration, different concepts of educational policy in ethnically divided societies, territorial and non-territorial demands for autonomy, states Misev, should help in the movement towards a transitional democracy in a multi-ethnic society such as ours.

Ethnopolitical mobilization represents political organization of ethnic groups in order to rearrange the established social relationships or some of their segments, in the interest of the group, whereby efforts are made to change the general rules according to which people live or, on the other hand, some segment of them. Those changes may include, or integrating, and excluding, or disintegrating (Minoski 2013). Specific characteristic of our model is the policy of “final internal separation”. This is the way of creation of ethnic spaces and parallel life – ethnic municipalities, exclusive languages of education, etc. Most of the “multicultural” privileges are shared only by one ethnic community – the Albanians. The multicultural discourse of the Macedonian and Albanian leaders is just a cover for their “ethnic dreams”, the fulfilment of the national state of Macedonians or subnational state for Albanians. Other communities than Macedonian and Albanian are absent from this “ethnic” competition. The new achievement by the Albanians is the control of the municipalities where they have significant majority. And on the

municipality level the ethnic “battle” continues. In the context of ethnic identity the model where the ethnic category dominates, sometimes turn into an opposite of the democratic politics, into the ethnic politics.

Ethnic democracy is a democratic political system that combines the extension of civil and political rights to permanent residents who wish to be citizens with the bestowal of a favored status on the majority group. This is democracy that contains the non-democratic institutionalization of dominance of one ethnic group. The founding rule of this regime is an inherent contradiction between two principles – civil and political rights for all and structural subordination of the minority to the majority. The “democratic principle” provides equality between all citizens and the members of society, while the “ethnic principle” establishes explicit ethnic inequality, preference and dominance” (Smootha 2002). This kind of system generates ethnic tensions and conflicts. It imposes ethnic rules in the politics against the other ethnic group. Typical example of this is the demand of Albanians for ethnically based government budget. Also, on many occasions Albanians insists on proportional ethnic participation in the state institutions, which is mentioned but not defined in the Framework agreement (equitable participation). The “citizens” and ethnic groups will continue to compete with the ethnic arsenal. The era of powerful ethnicity as mobilizing factor continues. The ethnic democracy is just another product of this paradigm (Atanasov 2012).

The study of the team of the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research⁶ for social integration in North Macedonia claim that the Macedonian model after Ohrid Agreement and constitutional amendments is functional, but it cannot solve the difficult issues and problems. The benefits

⁶ <https://isppi.ukim.edu.mk/izdavastvo/istrazuvacki-studii/can-volatile-societies-support-stable-states>

from it are only for the ethnic elites. According to this, integration processes have been turned into a segregation and segmentary issue. The key moment is the problem of differences (language, religion), and “ethnic knots” make it difficult for some segments of society to integrate in the mainstream. The multicultural model is ideally intended to make everyone equal. In the case of Macedonia, power-sharing relations between ethnicities (Macedonians and Albanians) define the dominant political and social order. In this way, the multicultural model leans toward “ethnic democracy” rather than “multicultural democracy”⁷. On the sociocultural level, the most prominent are the ethnic differences and divisions in society, which have a great impact on the life and relationships between the communities. Over the past 20 years, the importance of ethnicity and the power of ethnic elites has continuously grown, by strengthening ethnic identity among Albanians. Macedonians are prone to feel that their identity is rather a symbiosis of ethnic/cultural and national/state identification. It is up to Macedonian political elites to find a space and inclusive approach for the “others” to be incorporated into their common society.

⁷ The term “multicultural democracy” was coined by Pierre van der Berghe in 2002 in one of his known works named as “Multicultural democracy: can it work?”, published in *Nations and Nationalism* 8(4): 433-449.

Ethnification⁸ of the Macedonian political reality

One of the published analysis “Ethnic polarization in the media and public communication during election processes”⁹, for the election period of 2024 done by the Institute for Media and Analytics showed interesting findings. It claim that the polarization has been repeatedly highlighted as one of the biggest problems in the country. The report in 2024 detected a deepening of political and ethnic polarization, through the use of harmful propaganda narratives, which not only inflame ethno-nationalist passions, but also encourage discrimination and hatred on ethnic, national and political grounds. There are several characteristic examples of ethnocentric narratives, which were part of public and media communication before, during the campaign and after the holding of the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024, and which contributed to the deepening of ethnic polarization in the country, according the analysis of Zharko Trajanoski. OSCE/ODIHR publicly indicated that during the campaign it observed “cases of discriminatory rhetoric, including the use of nationalist slogans, as well as some cases in which the actions of political parties were mixed with those of ethnic communities”. In the part of the analysis signed by Sefer Tahiri “Inter-ethnic relations in public communication during elections: The dominance of ethnocentric discourse continues”, the university professor emphasizes that “the 34-year history of political pluralism in North Macedonia proves that inter-ethnic relations, especially those between Macedonians and Albanians were (abused) by the political parties in the parliamentary, presidential and even local elections”. In this context,

⁸ The process of ethnic origin, customs, symbols, etc. becoming more important; in the “state-level party system, ethnification is strongly correlated with economic inequality between groups”. Also, the word ethnification is taken as used in the analysis of [John D. Huber](#) and [Pavithra Suryanarayan](#) “Ethnic Inequality and the Ethnification of the Political Parties”, evidence from India.

⁹ <https://civilmedia.mk/analiza-na-ima-polarizatsija-po-etnichka-osnova-diskriminatorska-retorika-natprevaruvachki-natsionalizam-na-dvojnite-izbori-vo-2024-godina/>

Tahiri points out, the media-political discourse has often been a “discourse of diversity”. The “paradigm of diversity”, more precisely the ethnocentric discourse, followed the political debate, but also the media content, regardless of whether it took place in the Macedonian or Albanian language. He says that “as a pillar of political stability and security, inter-ethnic relations are the ‘key’, especially for right-wing parties, to win as many votes as possible during elections. In that direction, part of the media was often an extended hand, that is, they affirmed, but also encouraged the ethnocentric narratives that were produced in the party laboratories”.

The conclusion may be that the ethnic as a tool and strategy is pretty much used and misused in the elections for longer period of time. During the elections the political atmosphere abound with the vocabulary us against them. The Albanian political parties are often very loud competing who will better represent the Albanians in North Macedonia. And the tensions goes down after the elections because in Macedonian society two decades after the conflict and the Ohrid agreement, the situation is pretty much in balance, concerning the ethnic questions. Maybe the new element is that the former guerilla transformed in political party (DUI) first time after the 2002 will not be in the Government. And this makes the political battle entering the new phase for the Government. Nevertheless, the new Government has four years ahead and the ethnic versus the civic will be surely part of its political agenda.

Let us begin with the short analysis of the main electoral promises of the Albanian political parties during the parliamentary elections in 2024. DUI (Democratic Union of Integration) after 20 years in Government had few and very general and “politically correct” promises about the political system and i.e. ethnic issues. Some of them are of strategic interests for the state (NATO and EU), and some for more “power sharing” mechanisms considering the

ethnification of the democratic decisions and promoting “consensual” President of the State:

- Constitutional amendments in 2024.
- Over 2% percent of GDP from the defense budget according to NATO’s decision.
- Equalization of views on security and foreign policy in accordance with the EU.
- Consensual democracy in making decisions on important issues.
- Consensual President of the State elected in Assembly with 2/3 of the votes and plus voting with “Badenter”.¹⁰

The political coalition of the Albanian political parties named “VLEN¹¹”, entering the electoral process as opposition wanted to attract more votes promoting stronger ethnic mechanisms and agenda, among others, new modern and democratic Constitution as a state of two majorities, and the rights for minorities, higher status of Albanian language, accepting the Albanian national holidays as state events, full recognition of the Albanian (state) national symbols, and establishing a National council of the diaspora together with Kosovo and Albania:

- A new, more democratic and modern constitution, which will redefine the country as an equal state of two majority communities and will guarantee full rights for the minority communities as well.
- Equal participation of Albanians in the population census process.
- The Albanian language should be the state language in all of North Macedonia, completely equal to the Macedonian language.

¹⁰ From the election platform of Democratic Union for Integration: <https://bdi.mk/category/dokumente/>

¹¹ From June 2024 part of the Government.

- An end to the problems caused by the so-called “passivation” of addresses, regardless of how long, in which country they live or are homeless.
- Albanian national holidays will also be fully recognized.
- The use of the Albanian national anthem, coat of arms and flag in schools and institutions should enjoy equal legal rights with those of Macedonians.
- Reducing the number of municipalities and increasing their powers.
- Creation of the National Council of the Albanian Diaspora. The council will be established in cooperation with Kosovo and Albania.¹²

The elections were as we have witnessed full of ethnic statements, who is bigger patriot on both campuses, Macedonian and Albanian, and the protecting the state from the opponents, etc. The polarization was obvious and the elections were very competitive with new promises and hopes, expectations as well. The elections were done and the coalition was formed between the pro-national VMRO-DPMNE and the Albanian opposition VLEN. The election agenda of DUI was mainly connected, if we consider the Tirana Platform, with the higher political status of Albanians in North Macedonia. But, the election agenda of VLEN, was connected with the redesigning of the role of Albanians in the State, basically asking for redefining the state as consisting of two equal majorities. The political status of Albanians in Macedonia through strengthening the Albanian national symbols and a creation of regional parallel institution (National Council of the Albanian diaspora) in cooperation with Kosovo and Albania, were like “ethnic”

¹² From the election platform of VLEN coalition: <https://www.ifes.org/tools-resources/election-snapshots/elections-north-macedonia-2024-parliamentary-elections>

promises. Promises that were not much discussed and debated during the campaign and afterwards.

Still, three months after the elections (September 2024), the Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski spoke in public, asking all political parties to join the Government in the new course of the politics, and starting a process of major social change. His agenda consisted of ten principles. “Today, I am announcing ten principles around which we had to create unity and cohesion of all factors and social actors, not only the government, or several parties from the opposition. But to everyone, the universities, trade unions, businessmen and chambers, farmers, Macedonian Academy of Arts and Science, professors, doctors, to all social drivers”, said the President of the Government Hristijan Mickoski in his speech on the occasion of the commemoration of September 8 – Independence Day.¹³ Among the ten principles, the two are very much connected to our analysis, the third and the tenth. Firstly, in the Third principle he stresses the importance of decreasing the influence of the ethnic concept:

“Thirdly, we must distance ourselves from **ethnic** conflicts and isolate the elements that create **inter-ethnic** disunity. We must put a moratorium on **ethnically** produced topics driven by the lucrative interest of **individuals**. There must be an end to the list, the long list of wishes for **ethnic rights**, behind which nothing really stands, but the personal interest of those who produce them, at the expense of the **collective**. How absent it sounds when someone asks for a second house in the parliament, and there is no drinking water in Lipkovo and Tetovsko. I want solutions for the **personal** problems of the people and not solutions for the personal interests of the small groups of politicians who abuse the **collective** suffering of the people” – adding that the standard of all citizens must be improved, and this should be the main focus of the Government.

¹³ <https://vlada.mk/node/36978>

The “we do not speak about it” thesis was widely disapproved during the last decades. The identity politics one may say that won in this debate. But how far should this politics go it is up to the specific state and society. In Macedonian case, the ethnic groups are already in the Constitution and the Laws (constitutionally labeled as “communities”). The state is still unitary and this political model will have to be developed and supported. “How to do it” is a main task of the new politics that was announced. In that direction, probably, the tenth principle communicate the civic concept philosophy through the categories as common patriotism, belief and struggle:

“Tenth, we must distinguish and believe in ideological battles. Ours, mine is the **common patriotism**, which should unite us. It is nothing but a **common belief** and **common struggle** for the future in the country. It should unite us all, Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Serbs, Bosniaks and everyone else under the Macedonian sun. Let’s not rejoice in small sparks, but together for big victories and big steps forward. Too much has been missed and a lot needs to be done.”

Prime Minister Mickoski asked for unity and cohesion and told all leaders to unite towards this unifying platform. This would mean that the government policy will change considering the ethnic concessions and benefits on the side of Albanians. It is difficult to distinguish between political vocabulary and legal provisions. A lot can be done, but also should be designed and vote together, among many political parties. Some of them have political platforms that consists of exclusively demands for benefits of ethnic Albanians.

Let us consider what one of the main political figure in opposition publicly stated after the elections. Namely, Zijadin Sela¹⁴, proposed publicly “to unite all Albanian parties, regardless of whether they are in power or

¹⁴ An Albanian politician from Alliance for Albanians and long time in the politics, now holding a MP position and in the role of opposition together with DUI.

opposition, in order to prevent the implementation of malicious plans towards Albanians and other communities”. He assesses that there are many prejudices from the Macedonian political factor towards the Albanians:

“We are in a time when we need to think very carefully about what will be the behavior, the positioning, not of the Alliance for Albanians, of DUI, Besa, DPA or I don't know who, the Democratic Movement or whatever it is called, not in relation to VMRO, but in relation to the Macedonian politics. Here we need to find a common language to prevent in the future from implementing plans that are not benevolent towards the Albanians, but also towards other communities”, said the president of Alliance for Albanians, Ziyadin Sela.

This is indicative, because comes from the Albanian politician that is in opposition. Among other things, Sela commented on the last statement of Arben Taravari (Albanian politician that is in the Government), who said that the hiring will not be done on ethnic basis and that they tend to do the hiring by referring to fair representation and meritocracy. Sela said about this that it is a scandal, adding that the Albanian parties in power are removing Albanians from their jobs, with the reasoning that they do not have a budget, and the next day they are replacing them with Macedonians in those jobs.

“I hear this language of politicians from Macedonian politicians every time they wanted to oppose the realization of fair and adequate representation, while what Albanian politicians say is a scandal, because they forgot where they would find a place at the University Clinic if they did not state that they are from Albania ethnicity, he would not be a university professor if the initial basis for employment was not based on the right to adequate representation” – said Sela.¹⁵

To be right on the spot, main political parties in Albanian block are trying to hold and strengthening the ethnic category that was initiated as a

¹⁵ <https://mk.tv21.tv/sela-so-apel-za-obedinuvane-na-albanskite-partii-da-se-sprechi-realiziraneto-na-nedobronamernite-planovi-kon-albantsite/>

constitutional provision in the fields of employment, education, etc. (Ohrid Agreement). The fair and adequate representation in the institution overcame the discrimination towards the Albanians regarding employment in central institutions. Still, the decentralization process allowed Albanians full enjoyment of the rights on local level considering identity, employment, education, culture, etc. Thus, despite the ethnic provisions, the state and the society need the social integration processes in the way that the people should still feel the state as one and the society as indivisible. Contrary to this, the last 20 years we have seen the processes of segregation that were stimulated by ethnic political elite, in education most evidently.

As we have seen, one of the current event after the elections is the debate referring to the numbers and percentage of employment in the state institutions of different ethnic communities, where some claim that the number of employed Macedonians is increasing, while the number of employed Albanians is decreasing. The tool, called the “balancer”, has been criticized for its misuse, where individuals “change” their ethnicity to gain employment advantages. According to the Ministry of administration in the previous calculations, the problem was that the number of non-resident population was also taken into account, and so the Albanians were in advantage, who were counted at 29.54% (Census result for resident and non-resident population). Now, in the next period, there will be a correction of the percentages, where the number of Macedonians will increase, and the number of employed Albanians will decrease. More precisely, the correction would look like this: Macedonians from 54.21% to 58.44%, Albanians from 29.52% to 24.30%, Turks from 3.98% to 3.86%, Roma from 2.34% to 2.53%, Serbs from 1.18% to 1.30%, Bosniaks from 0.87% to 0.87% and Vlachs from 0.44% to 0.47%.¹⁶ The absurd situation is that in the last period this tool has

¹⁶ <https://lider.mk/kompetentnost-a-kje-bide-edinstven-kriterium-za-vrabotuvanje-namesto-kontroverzen-balanser-javnata-administracija-kje-se-vrabotuva-so-merit-sistem/>

been criticized for its abuse, where individuals gave different statements of their ethnicity to gain employment opportunities.

It was stated that the Government has an agreement for the adoption of the Law on Fair Representation. This was announced by the first vice-prime minister, Izet Mejiti, who said that the “balancer” has not been functioning in the recent years, due to the false declaration of ethnicity. Whereas, with the Law on Fair Representation, employment will be based on qualifications:

“To be honest, in the first years (*the balancer*) it contributed to this and improved the image of ethnicity in the public and state administration, but in the last years it was not effective, it had the opposite effect because there were many cases, which although the balancer says that an Albanian must be employed, Turkish or Macedonian, people made false statements in order to get a job. We have a political agreement for this to be regulated by the Law on Fair and Qualitative Representation. This means that if the Macedonians must be employed, yes, they will be hired, but the most qualified, if the Albanians must be employed, yes, but the most qualified, the most educated, the most prepared will serve the citizens better for their needs, tomorrow and the day after that”, said Izet Mejiti.¹⁷

After this statement, the Albanian party in opposition (DUI) reacted with ethnic passion and emotions, defending the Albanian cause in Macedonia:

“Instead of building policies that serve the national interests of Albanians, these parties become tools of the forces that aim to damage our interests. This is not an attack on only one party or one leader, but an attempt to destroy the dignity and national aspirations of Albanians, claim DUI in their press release. DUI remains firmly committed to protecting the interests of Albanians and all citizens with transparency and dignity. We will not allow these low maneuvers to stop us on our way to fulfilling the aspirations of Albanians for equality and fair

¹⁷ <https://alsat.mk/mk/medhiti-vo-vladata-postoi-dogovor-za-zakonot-za-pravichna-zastapenost-koj-ke-go-zameni-nefunktsionalniot-balanser/>

representation. We call on all Albanian citizens to continue to remain united and vigilant against these attempts to divide us and manipulate public opinion.”¹⁸

In the press release there are also words like Albanian cause, dignity, Albanian people, the will and aspirations. So, in North Macedonia there is nothing new speaking about ethnicization of politics. We assume that the better word to describe it is ethnification of politics. This ethnification might be as showed in the analysis in the Indian case. In majoritarian systems, maybe ethnic identity is most salient to electoral behavior when there are high levels of inequality between ethnic groups. This argument is proved in the Indian states and find that state-level party system ethnification is strongly correlated with economic inequality between groups. When income differences between groups increase, the groups tend to support different parties. The analysis reveals a strong class component to ethnic politics in India, underscoring the possibility that what scholars often view as identity politics can have an element of class politics in disguise (Sunyanarayan 2016). Maybe for the same reasons in Macedonian case we see the continuation of the epic battle between the Ethnic and the Civic and with the chances of increasing on both sides, following the physical process of action – reaction. From today’s perspective the Ethnic is still strong as a category of identity and it is very much involved in the public. Whether the civic will find more space for advancement depends of many factors, among others, the increasing of economic standard of the population, elimination of inequalities between communities, better education opportunities and the more choices for career of young people that will together nurture the common feeling of belonging to the state.

¹⁸ <https://fokus.mk/dui-albantsite-nema-da-bidat-alatka-na-stsenarijata-na-drugite/>

Conclusion

In the last decades no evidence proved that the multicultural model is sustainable. The only sustainable multicultural political models are federations/confederations, where ethnic communities/groups mind their own business, in a more multinational manner – Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, etc. The Macedonian multicultural model is functional but cannot resolve “historical” issues. On this account the processes of integration are turned into segregational issues. In the case of North Macedonia the power sharing relations between ethnicities define the mainstream political and social order. In this way the multicultural model lean towards ethnic instead of multicultural democracy, speaking conceptually. For multicultural model what is needed is comfortable majority with the necessary higher level of political culture. In countries of transition such preconditions are absent (Atanasov 2012). The question is raised whether glorification of only the ethnic differences is not the beginning of the end of multiculturalism in a way that was recognize it in theory.

Instead of losing the importance, the ethnic dimension in Macedonian society is just getting stronger on both sides, Macedonian and Albanian. “In the Republic of Macedonia, we should invest in togetherness, not in diversity. It is necessary to invest in democratic values, not in ethno-cultural differences. The public sphere should be understood as an arena in which cooperation for a better life will take place and that it is necessary to build social ties based on common interests. We need a model that will satisfy the majority of citizens, not just the political elites. Even less only the ethnic leaders” (Atanasov 2021). There are two possible lines of development of the Macedonian political model that depend on the internal conditions in the country, but also connected with the regional political

context. The first line is the increase and strengthening of the political majority in the country. This majority need not to be or is not necessarily uninational. It could be “one society for all”. The second line is similar to the Belgian model of a federal state, but with strict ethnic boundaries and complete separation between the two ethnic sections. Of course, in both the first and the second case, it is assumed that the membership of North Macedonia in NATO is a great investment for the stability of the country in the future. In that way, even the prospect of joining the EU is an important factor in containing potential inter-ethnic conflict.

Macedonia is still vulnerable considering the ethnic balance. As it was the main thesis of the study of the team from the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research, published under the title *Can Volatile Societies Support Stable States?*¹⁹ The study analyze that the situation in Bosnia is difficult, and that they would like to have the current Macedonian circumstances. With strengthening of Albanian ethnicity and ethnification of politics in North Macedonia we can get closer to the Bosnian model, which do not properly function. The Bosnian dysfunctional model should be avoided. Additionally, the Greek obstacles with the name issue and now the Bulgarian vetoes considering the EU process are triggers that can bred bigger dissatisfaction with the blockade of the accession either from Macedonian or Albanian side.

In the last couple of months, the parliamentary election campaign showed more ethnic ideas from Albanian political parties for the prosperity of Albanians in Macedonian society and regionally as we have showed in this paper. Unfortunately, rarely the prosperity of the citizens generally is seen through addressing the corruption and crime and efficient rule of law – as

¹⁹ <https://isppi.ukim.edu.mk/izdavastvo/istravacki-studii/can-volatile-societies-support-stable-states>

weak elements of Macedonian democratic present, instead of asking for more ethnic concessions. Concerning the modern political competition, in North Macedonia maybe the multi-ethnic political parties (at least two of them and ideologically profiled) or stable Macedonian-Albanian political coalitions (at least two of them, too) can take us out of these issues, without ethnic patriotism and populism needed. In that situation I guess the Macedonians would not have problems with an Albanian “President” or any other political position. In North Macedonia the economy is weak²⁰, democratic processes are with the snail speed, yet, for the ethnic themes, the debate is always fast and explosive and with a lot of emotions. This is the result of the process of ethnification of politics, as we have argued. But there are less and less voters because the processes of emigration are intensive and the number of emigrated Macedonians and Albanians are rising, especially on the road to EU. With one goal, to provide better standard for their families and to secure higher chances for success for their children. It seems that the national flags and national songs are appreciated but moved to the second list of priorities. They have them plenty on Internet whenever they feel nostalgic, if they have spare time after the shopping sessions and spending their incomes provided by Germany, Austria, Italy, Sweden, Netherlands, etc.

²⁰ <https://mkd.mk/podednakov-e-procentot-na-nevraboteni-makedonci-i-albanci/>

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