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THE OHRID FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT: A STRATEGIC TOOL FOR ELECTORAL PARTY COMPETITION IN MACEDONIA

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Abstract

The myth that the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) can be the 'cure' for fragile heterogeneous societies has been debunked shortly before its 10th anniversary. The general research question of this article is how political parties in Macedonia assess the role of the OFA in building functioning multiethnic society, while the specific puzzle is what accounts for the radicalism of the nationalistic rhetoric of the political parties in Macedonia? We argue that the assessment of the successfulness of the OFA implementation would depend on the parties' position of power and the type of ethnic community (majority, majority minority or non-majority minority). We find the bad economic situation and the exclusion from government to be the most perceived radicalizers of nationalistic party rhetoric in Macedonia. This case study uses qualitative analyses of thirty semi-structured interviews with high representatives of 26 most important political parties in Macedonia.

Key words: Ohrid Framework Agreement; nationalism; minorities; ethnic parties; party competition

INTRODUCTION

Only ten years after being called 'Oasis of Peace' (Cekik 2014, 227), distinguished for its post Yugoslav 'preventive diplomacy', independent Macedonia was faced with armed insurgence by the Albanian ethnic community. On 12 August 2001 the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) was signed by the two biggest Macedonian parties VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, and the two biggest parties representing the ethnic Albanians of Macedonia at the time, DPA and PDP, in the presence of the international community. While OFA's immediate purpose was to put an end to the eight month armed conflict between the Albanian National Liberation Army and the Macedonia's Defense Forces, its long term perspective was to establish a general framework for integration of the national minorities and to provide legislative bases for functional multicultural cohabitation.

During OFA's tenth anniversary Conference at the South Eastern European University, Livia Plaks[1] (2011, 47-48), said: "[…] OFA was and remains a trend setting document regarding minority rights and interethnic relations in South-Eastern Europe. Certainly there are lessons to be learned from OFA, […] lessons that could improve co-existence in this part of the world. At the end of the day, the OFA did address the issues at the core of the conflict and ended up creating a functioning state." The International Community have been constantly underlining how important it is for Macedonia to embrace the 'OFA's spirit' (EU Commission Progress Reports 2006-2014). Yet, the myth that OFA is the 'cure' for the ethnic conflicts, has been debunked shortly before its 10th Anniversary.

In June 2009, Menduh Tachi, the leader of the biggest ethnic-Albanian opposition party DPA, in an interview for Radio Free Europe (2009) proclaimed the OFA as "dead". He argued that a new Macedonian Constitution was needed, otherwise, the Macedonian Albanians would have been forced to seek for a new state for themselves. The "New Agreement" platform (DPA web, 2009) proposes several changes to the current inter-ethnic settlements such as: new fully consensual decision making, real decentralization instead of de-concentration of power, proportional distribution of the state's budget, new territorial organization with ethnic, cultural and economic infrastructural aspect, official use of Albanian Language at national level, one of the three positions of the State to be Albanian, controlled fair representation of all ethnic groups in public institutions etc. The party program of RDK (another party from the Albanian bloc) as well proposes several changes to the OFA such as: fiscal federalization, consensual democracy, wide decentralization of government etc. (RDK 2011, 2014).

Consequently, the general puzzle of this research is how political parties in Macedonia assess the role of the OFA in building functioning multiethnic society. Is the OFA's implementation a real drive for promotion of sustainable multicultural cohabitation, or it is just a party electoral tool? The more narrow research question arising from the very implementation of this peace accord is: what accounts for the radicalism of the nationalistic rhetoric of the political parties in Macedonia?

This qualitative case study on Macedonia relies on thirty in depth interviews, conducted in the period of October-November 2014, with high representatives from 26 most important political parties in Macedonia, including representatives from all national minority parties.

We argue that the implementation of the OFA is perceived as successful by the current governmental coalition, while the rest of the parties oppose it. While the opposition parties from the Albanian bloc propose new agreements, and changes to the OFA, the rest of the opposition parties point out at the partization of the OFA's implementation as the reason for bad results. Parties in general see worsened inter-ethnic trust at individual level due to the OFA's implementation, partly because the government coalitions use OFA to manipulate the economically fragile electorate, and partly because some policies deriving from the OFA have produced parallel worlds where so far ethnic communities peacefully co-exist, but they do not cohabitate. We expect that the bad economic situation and the exclusion from government are the most important drivers for radical parties' rhetoric. We argue that the issue of decentralization is still not resolved, and that ethnic communities do not stand on the same grounds regarding the ethnic nature of the territorial decentralization.

[1] Livia Plaks was the President of the Project on Ethnic Relations in 2011

In the first section of this article we shortly introduce the reader with the theoretical framework and we build the hypotheses. The second section elaborates the methodology, the case selection and the data gathering process. The third part presents the main findings of the research and the final section offers our conclusions.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

In spite of the fact that the *essentialism* seems untenable nowadays, the empirical Large N research implicitly still relies on it. Thus, ethnic groups are considered to be naturally given, permanent, and easily merged into a collective action; once a group has 'awakened' to its identity and a conflict among ethnic groups emerges, it will inevitably recur throughout history (Rabuska and Shepsle 1972). Yet, the demystification of the "architectonic illusion of the realism of the group" (Brubaker 1998, 2006) allows us to see ethnic minorities as vote-maximizers and office-seekers, instead of a zero-sum political actors (Keating 2011). The social *constructivist theories* postulate that there are no groups to start with, and that there are no essential categories that define the nature of an ethnic kind; groups are rather socially constructed, by historical external processes, or by the ambitious elites, who create a sense of threat by 'others' to the conjured new identities they want to take power on (Chandra 2012, Janne 2007, 2-10).

National minorities in divided societies can strive for power-sharing (Lijphart 1977, 1984, 2002; Norris 2002, 2008) or they could decide to go for outbidding alternatives (Horowitz 1995). They can compete with other ethnic groups, just as they can decide to do so with its competitor parties representing the very same ethnic group. Moreover, as the novel theory on the competition beyond the segmented market suggest, ethnic groups can decide to attract electorate beyond its own ethnic group (Zuber 2012).

The third approach, the so called "naturalized constructionism" can explain why multinational states can be expected to remain somewhat special in the long run, since cognitively-predisposed shared ethnic perceptions ease the formation of collective interests and collective action. Ethnic elites representing the minority may in long run redefine the social categories they include/exclude through their appeals, since the content of the ethnic categories is not essentially fixed (Zuber 2013, 202-3). And while the constructionist approach overestimates the ethnic entrepreneurs' capacity to strategically manipulate the flexibly constructed identity, the naturalized constructionism operates at the intersection of culture and cognition, and accounts for the fact that, 'independent of the specific content of ethnic categories in a specific socio-historical and institutional context, people tend to naturalize ethnic rather than other categories.' In line with it, Birnir (2007) argues that utility (cost-benefit calculation) in voting determines ethnic political behavior, and empirically demonstrates that where ethnicity is part of electoral competition, party systems stabilizes more quickly than in circumstances where parties make no appeal to ethnic categories.

Resting on this third approach we test where do Macedonian political parties (the unit of analysis) stand regarding already established theories on post Peace Agreement parties narratives and what are the sources for radicalization of their nationalistic rhetoric. Marc Ross (1993, 12) argues that the competitive interests rooted in social structure as well as psycho-cultural dispositions are essential to understand the consequences of conflicts. To be able to explain the case of the post OFA different narratives among the two biggest

Albanian parties, Talevski (2011) takes on Ross' argument that violent conflicts leave cognitive dispositions and interpretations as imprints, and that in absence of a common understanding about the past conflict there are competing political narratives on the meaning of the past conflict and the social norms that derive from it. His main argument is that the two biggest ethnic Albanian parties in Macedonia, DUI and DPA, understood differently the motifs and the outcome of the conflict in 2001, thus the post OFA narratives took different trends, resulting with violence in 2011. The rest of this analysis lays on the "cost-benefits" drivers for choosing different electoral strategies: inter-ethnic outbidding, intra-ethnic competition, or "competition beyond segmented market". Three general factors are being questioned: the inclusion in government, the economic conditions of the country in general or the regional economic disparities, and finally the decentralization process with the territorial organization in favor of ethnic groups' self-determination.

Bocshler and Sozik (2013 a, b) show that government inclusion, as the most important element of power sharing arguments, can destroy the political unity of the ethnic minorities and contribute to their radicalization. Birnir (2007) proves that the longer the ethnic minority group has been out of cabinet, the higher the level of violence. Tronconi and Elias (2011), as well, find lower secessionist rhetoric when autonomous parties are included in government. This might occur due several reasons such as: their ambitions to appeal to larger electorate (as office seekers); the coalition bargaining settlements which might push them to adopt a moderate ideology; and eventually, the public policy benefits that parties have in government could motivate ethnic parties to offer a wider electoral issue platform and to moderate the positions regarding the territorial issue (Sorens 2012).

The relative deprivation (or grievance) theories hold that groups suffering economic discrimination or income disparities will mobilize around collective demands for redress in future. Muller-Rommel (1994) initially assumed that the potential for a center-periphery conflict rises in a period when national resources become scarcer. Sorens (2012), on the other hand, has empirically proven that national minorities seek far-reaching self-government or independence only when there are significant economic and political benefits to such a status.

The level of decentralization as a factor of ethnic parties' radicalization or conflict driver is still arguable topic. Montabes et.al. (2004) argue that decentralization decreases radicalization of the ethnic minorities' ideologies, due to the possibility for better representation of these parties at multilevel politics, in those countries with higher level of decentralization (where they are more likely to turn towards mainstream issues at regional level, where they have a viable opportunity to participate in regional governments). Branciati (2009), on the other hand, suggests that while political decentralization may reduce ethnic conflict and secessionism directly, it increases ethnic conflict and secessionism indirectly by increasing the strength of regional parties in the countries. These negative effects, however, operate through regional (ethnic minority) parties who can influence policies.

We argue that parties' positions towards OFA shall differ according to their position (in or out of government), and the type of the ethnic group (majority, majority-minority or non-majority minority). We expect parties to see exclusion from government as a radicalizer of the nationalistic rhetoric, and the bad economic situation and the low level of decentralization of the country as radicalizers of their nationalistic or self-deterministic rhetoric.

CASE SELECTION, METHOD OF ANALYSES AND DATA

The core of this qualitative analysis has been based on thirty in depth interviews conducted with high representatives from 26 different political parties. The criteria for selection of the interviewees are twofold. Firstly, the selection criteria for the political parties were based on a simple rule of "the more the better", which implies possible inclusion of all existing parties in Macedonia. Aside from the nine "Macedonian" parties (parties that are mostly supported by ethnic-Macedonians), five Albanian, three Turkish, three Bosniak, two Vlach, two Roma, two Serbian and one Torbeshi parties are being included (see: Table 1).

Table 1: List of interviewees' names, party affiliation and ethnic belonging

Ethnic group	Name of interviewee	Political Party
Macedonian	Ana Laškoska, Aleksandar Nikolovski	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation- Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, VMRO DPMNE
	Vladanka Avirovik	Socialistic Party in Macedonia, SPM
	Toni Ristov	Democratic Renewal of Macedonia, DOM
	Oliver Stanoeski	Civil Option for Macedonia GROM
	Lidija Dimova	Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia, SDSM
	Nano Ruzin	Liberal Democratic Party, LDP
	Ivon Veličkoski	Liberal Party of Macedonia, LPM
	Miki Milkovski	New Social-democratic Party, NSDP
	Ljubčo Gjeorgjievski	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation- PP, VMRO NP
Albanian	Talat Dzaferi, Atulla Kasumi	Democratic Union for Integration, DUI
	Gzment Aliu, Mitasin Bekiri, Agron Bekiri	Democratic Party of the Albanians in Macedonia, DPA
	Muhamed Halili	Party for Democratic Prosperity, PDP
	Jasin Demiri	NationalDemocratic Revival, NDR
	Afrim Gaši	Movement BESA, BESA
Turkish	Furkan Çako	Democratic Party of Turks in Macedonia, DTP
	Enes Ibrahim	Party for Movement of Turks in Macedonia, PMTM
	Vejsel Saraç	Movement for Turkish National Unity, MTNU
Vlachs	Niko Babunski	Democratic Party of Vlachs in Macedonia, DPVM
	Gjoko Gjorgjiev	Party of Vlachs in Macedonia, PVM
Roma	Ibrahim Ibrahimi	Union of Roma in Macedonia, URM
	Samka Ibraimoski	Party for Full Emancipation of Roma, PFER
Bosnian	Avdija Pepič	Party for Democratic Action in Macedonia, PDAM
	Rafet Muminovik	Bosnian Democratic League in Macedonia, BDLM
	Safet Biševac	Bosniak League in Macedonia, BLM
Serbian	Dragiša Miletič	Radical Party of Serbs in Macedonia, RPSM
Torbesh	Faruk Feratoski	Party for European Future, PEF

Secondly, given that the questions of the interview address the interethnic relations in Macedonia, the main criteria for selection of the interviewee coming from a single party was that the respondent is among the highest party representatives, and she/he is in depth informed about the party's official standing points with regards the field of analysis. The final decision of the interviewees was made upon an agreement among the authors and the parties. Among the high rank party representatives there are Party Leaders, Members of Parliament, Ministers, Former Ambassadors, and a former Prime Minister of Macedonia.

The interviews were semi-structured, and have been conducted on a voluntary base in the months of October and November 2014. The main findings have been driven from the two general research puzzles: "The post OFA narratives and the interethnic cohabitation in Macedonia" and the "The causes for the radicalization of parties' nationalistic rhetoric in Macedonia". The questions arising from the first topic are: "Is the OFA dead? Is there inter-ethnic cohabitation in Macedonia today? Do you see a potential for future conflict, and if so what would it be motivated by?" The interview leading questions addressing the second topic are: "What is a bigger influence for your party's electoral positions, certain ethnic group's particular issues, or general issues tackled also by the mainstream (other) parties? Would you say that parties in Macedonia use more radical nationalistic rhetoric when in government or when in opposition? Do you see the economic situation of the country (or a particular region) and the level of decentralization as factor of radicalization of the nationalistic rhetoric by the parties?"

What makes Macedonia an interesting case study for this type of analysis is the threefold inter-ethnic constellation; the first one among the majority Macedonian party and the rest of the non-majority ethnic communities, then the relations between the Macedonian and the Albanian community, and finally the relations between the Albanian community and the non-majority minorities.

There is an important difference regarding parties' positions towards a Peaceful Agreement between post OFA Macedonia and post Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). In BiH, the peace was founded at the complex federal state system combined with power sharing at federal level. A decade after the agreement was signed it has been disputed by parties signatories. Firstly, six Croatian Parties signed the Kreshevo Declaration of 2007 which stipulates a revision of the Dayton Agreement in favor of a new territorial entity for the Croatian people. Then, the Serbian parties reacted through their electoral programs, and explicitly opposed any revision of Dayton that will damage the sovereignty of Republika Srpska or will permit delegation of powers from the Republic to the Federation. However, both reactions were addressed towards the Muslim community who is the majority of the three constitutive peoples.

In the Macedonian case, the different narratives for the post OFA can be clustered in three groups. Firstly, there was a different reaction from the ethnic Macedonian parties to the very OFA, the post OFA decentralization process and the territorial organization. While shortly after OFA was signed the parties in opposition were the ones against it and the parties in government were defending the new territorial organization, the 2006 government change brought certain peace regarding the issue. The OFA has been promoted as factor of stability and peace by the new government coalition (VMRO DPMNE and DUI) as well, and the opposition parties did not changed their position towards the significance of the very agreement. Secondly, there is the Albanian community of Macedonia that has not been united towards the OFA's role in building functional multicultural society. The Macedonian case is much more similar to the Irish one where the Irish parties had diverse

stands regarding the Good Friday Agreement. The Albanian intra-group electoral competition has reached high levels of harsh nationalistic rhetoric and even violence in 2011 (Taleski, 2011). And thirdly, there are the small ethnic communities whose reaction to the OFA, although generally positive, got increasingly prone to criticism in time. The parties from the smaller communities complain that the way OFA is being implemented meant discrimination towards the non-majority minorities.

FINDINGS

Inter-ethnic coexistence without cohabitation

The findings of this analysis do not contradict Ross' and Talevski's arguments that parties' post Peaceful Agreement narratives might differ within the same ethnic group. Nevertheless, in spite of the open nature of the question addressing the assessment of the OFA's general role in building functional multiethnic society, the interviewees completely neglected the part of the initiation of the conflict of 2001 itself, instead they put the accent on the very OFA's implementation.

There is no unanimity when responding to the question "Is the Ohrid Framework Agreement dead?" There are, nonetheless, several clear patterns that can explain how the political parties have perceived the role of the OFA so far, and the need for new agreement that shall arrange the inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia. The interviewees representing the Albanian party bloc currently in opposition (DPA, RDK, PDP and BESA) have agreed that the OFA is 'a dead agreement'. For DPA new constitutional changes are needed for better representation of the Albanian ethnic community in the public sector. Moreover, better implementation of the measures from the existing OFA is necessary, and some changes in the budgetary distribution (decentralization) in favor of the municipalities where the Albanians are territorially concentrated are fundamental.

The rest of the opposition Albanian parties (which assessed the OFA as non-functional) claim that the political elite in power (referring to the VMRO DPMNE-DUI coalition) is manipulating with the way OFA is being implemented. This clientelistic and partisan way of implementing the OFA in terms of fair representation of the non-majority communities in Macedonia they deem is harmful for both the majority and the minority ethnic groups in Macedonia. Their general opinion is that OFA has not been implemented as it has been initially intended, and the Albanians are still underrepresented in public institutions. They see an urgent need for new functional political criteria that will draft the way in which the intentions for integration of the Albanians in the Macedonian society can be put in practice. Thus, it is important for them that the Macedonian majority shows higher level of trust towards the Albanians in the country and allows ethnic Albanians to hold Ministerial positions of 'a higher rank', such as the position of Minister of Interior. In addition, the Albanian bloc opposition parties consider that the Albanian language shall be official language on the whole territory of Macedonia, and Macedonians and Albanians shall share the idea that knowing both languages can make the multicultural cohabitation feasible. On the contrary to the opposition parties, the respondents representing the current Albanian party in government (DUI) claim that OFA is not dead. They both have accentuated that a Peace Agreement that has aimed to end an armed conflict shall never be underestimated and considered to be "dead". Thus, the DUI appreciates OFA for its success

in bringing peace and stability in Macedonia, and for changing the Constitution in favor of the Albanian community and the other ethnic minorities in Macedonia. DUI claim that OFA, as part of the Constitution, is a process that needs to enter deeply into the second stage of its implementation, which means bringing the rules into practice, the law into function within the institutions of the system. Both respondents coming from the governing Macedonian party VMRO-DPMNE share the same opinion with their coalition partners (DUI) that the OFA is almost implemented, and that as part of the Constitution, it is already a successful story.

The rest of the (Macedonian) parties from the governing coalition (SPM, GROM, and DOM) agree on the fact that the OFA has been implemented in terms of legislation, but they also add that its implementation could be analyzed from several other perspectives as well. For instance, the presence and the influence of the 'external forces' i.e., the International Community at the time of drafting and signing of the OFA according to Stanoeski, (GROM) is concerning. "Just like the Dayton Agreement in Bosnia and Herzegovina had shown, nothing good can be expected from externally enforced peaceful solution. This fact puts a black spot on the willingness of the parties who have signed the agreement to work on its further implementation." (Stanoevski, 2014).

In general, the opposition parties from the Macedonian bloc (SDSM, LDP, LPM, NSDP, and IMRO NP), are not against the OFA, but they oppose the way it is being implemented. That is to say, while the VMRO DPMNE claims OFA has been so far well implemented, the opposition Macedonian parties claim OFA's implementation has 'lost track' in the process. This implies that the parties in government abuse the OFA by using it as an 'employment tool' instead of passing to the second stage of the Constitution changes – implementation of its premises in the everyday life. This is where most of the Macedonian bloc parties irrespective of their position (in power or in opposition) (except VMRO DPMNE) find a common ground.

The OFA should have been a tool for providing procedures under which all ethnic communities in Macedonia were supposed to cohabitate. As Velickovski (LPM) stressed: "it is important that we create a political nation instead of an ethnically divided society". The OFA, instead, has been used as an employment mechanism in the public administration. The government's supporters have been privileged to take part of the expensive and inefficient public administration which is being used, eventually, as "voting machinery" for the parties in power.

Finally, the respondents coming from the non-majority minorities (Roma, Serbs, Vlahs, Turks and Torbeshi) did not assess OFA as dead, but they, nevertheless, see a necessity for more regulation when it comes to the fair and equal representation of all ethnic communities in Macedonia. This comes from the fact that the OFA speaks in favor of the communities which make more than 20 per cent in a given territorial unit. The main critique from the non-majority minorities was that the OFA nature is to serve only the Albanian community. In addition several representatives of the smaller ethnic communities point out that the OFA harms the identity of the other ethnicities that share the same religion (the Islam) with the Albanians. Namely, some representatives from the Turkish, Bosniak, or Torbeshi parties claimed that OFA has purportedly been used to persuade many citizens belonging to those smaller minorities to declare themselves as Albanians in order to get job position guaranteed under the OFA's affirmative measures. In fact the Torbrshi representative points out that this community, together with the Montenegrins and the Croats living in Macedonia should be constitutionally recognized as constituent peoples as

well. They see this recognition as an opportunity for them to defend themselves from the assimilation intimidation by the majority-minority (the Albanians).

The functionality of the OFA is inseparably connected to the functionality of the multicultural cohabitation in the Macedonian society. In fact the OFA should have been the cause of the improved inter-ethnic cohabitation in Macedonia. We have found clear correlation between the more positive perceptions of the cohabitation in Macedonia and the representatives from the parties in the current governmental coalition (VMRO DPMNE, DUI and the smaller parties). When the representatives coming from parties currently in government express their positive opinion regarding the cohabitation in Macedonia they refer to the constitutional and the institutional changes that have been made with the OFA, with the purpose of improving the inter-ethnic relations.

The ethnic Macedonian opposition parties see some sort of inter-ethnic coexistence but no cohabitation. The direction in which the OFA has been implemented is one of the reasons for this perception. As mentioned before, the Macedonian bloc parties see the OFA as a measure of quantification instead of a measure of qualification of the inter-ethnic relations (Ruzin, LDP). Their negative references go to the 'party-membership employment criteria' practiced by the two government coalition parties in the past nine years (VMRO DPMNE and DUI), which have been a burden on the budget and have been harming the quality of the public administration. In addition, the practice of the so called 'soft-power sharing'[2] and the current electoral system of Macedonia have been pointed as negative face of the cohabitation system. The parties in government from both ethnic groups are almost never present on commemoration of dates, historic people, or symbols from importance to the other ethnic community, because they have divided their role of governors, each governs 'their' ethnic community only. This had led to the creation of two parallel worlds where ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians live next to each other, instead of living together (especially visible after the new territorial organization of Macedonia in 2004 and the beginning of the decentralization process).

The war/conflict memories are still present in both communities, and parties in government find it difficult to find solution for the 'war veterans' from both ethnicities due to the vulnerable nature of the conflict, point out some Albanian interviewees. As regarding the post OFA's 'multicultural' policies, the creation of separate school shifts for the ethnic Albanians and Macedonians in certain municipalities, the language laws etc. have been assessed to widen the already existing cultural and linguistic gap between the communities. Albanian children know the Macedonian language less and less, and the Macedonian children are not obliged to study Albanian, so the communication is scarce. This too leads towards building parallel ethnic worlds instead of inter-ethnic cohabitation. The Albanian representatives in general see positive impact of the OFA on the cohabitation within the institutions of the Republic of Macedonia, but they do not see improvement of the cohabitation at individual level. They claim that people do not trust each other and the ethnic stereotypes and prejudices are deepening; the political parties are responsible for the worsened inter-ethnic trust with time, they claim. Finally, all party representatives of the smaller ethnic groups in the government coalition at the moment see cohabitation in Macedonia, whereas the party representatives of the smaller ethnic groups in opposition do

[2] Here they refer to the gentlemen agreement of inclusion of the most successful Albanian party in government, plus the veto power that the "Badinter Principle" gives to the Albanian parties in terms of voting laws that directly tackle the inter-ethnic relations.

not see a good level of cohabitation. However, when they claim that there is no cohabitation all of them referred to the Albanian-Macedonian inter-ethnic relations, not to the relations among the smaller ethnic communities in Macedonia. Some even point out that the smaller communities have internal cooperation among themselves and they help each other when needed.

In spite of the general positive perceptions of the OFA's role in peace building, there is a significant number of interviewees (almost three fourths of them) that see some conflict potential in Macedonia in the future. The narrative regarding the future inter-ethnic conflict, nonetheless, has been very vague. The interviewees avoid entering the topic of conflict and violence in spite of their carefully selected wording that implies none of them would be surprised if another conflict occurs. Respondents do not always explain the conflict possibility as an armed conflict, such was the one of 2001, but they see a potential threat in the Albanian-Macedonian inter-ethnic relations what so ever. When addressing this issue, most of the respondents accentuated the fragile inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia through the example of the July 2014 violent protest by the Albanian community motivated by the verdict of the case 'Monstrum'.[3] Moreover, the incident with the Albanian Flag Drone during the Euro 2016 qualifier football match between Albania and Serbia in Belgrade's Partizan Stadium, provoking violent reaction and abandoning of the match (BBC, 2014) has happened in the month of October, when most of the interviews for this article were taken. This incident as well was pointed out as a reminder of the fragile regional inter-ethnic constellations. However, majority of the respondents stressed that violent conflicts shall stay behind, the time for such conflict solutions has passed, and that it is time for consolidation of the Balkan democracies and integration into the European Union. Such integration would require peaceful solutions for ethnic issues, most of them agree. Some interviewees worry that the economic and social inequality would be much stronger engine for such eventual conflict, while there have been also several references to the ongoing political crisis, the boycott of the opposition to participate in the work of the National Assembly, and the low level of political dialogue within the country as potential conflict source. The instability that might come from the 'bombs' coming from the opposition as accusations for illegal wiretapping, corruption insinuations and abuse of power from the government, has been pointed out as a serious new threat to the security and stability of Macedonia.

The Albanians in opposition nevertheless see a potential for conflict due to the lack of rule of law, the very challenging task of the government to maintain functioning institutions and to fight the corruption.

The smaller communities are united in their perceptions that the potential for inter-ethnic conflict comes only from the 'Albanian factor'. They also see the nationalistic rhetoric used by the main Macedonian party in government (VMRO DPMNE) as a serious potential for conflict in the future. VMRO DPMNE, whatsoever, perceives less probability for ethnic conflict. Both its representatives believed that the region is now stabilized and that there is no potential for new fire.

[3] In July 2014 the NGO called Wake Up condemned the court's verdicts on Tuesday, insisting that the convictions of the six ethnic Albanians were politically motivated and had left the real perpetrators of the gruesome murders in 2012 unpunished. (Balkan Insight, 2014).

Radicalization of the nationalistic rhetoric as party competition game

While there are three existing party blocs in the Macedonian electoral race at national level, Macedonian bloc, ethnic Albanian bloc and smaller ethnic minorities' parties, we lay our arguments on the naturalized constructionist approach and believe that although there is a strong intra-ethnic outbidding in Macedonia, the ethnicity is still one of the best predictors of the votes distribution in Macedonia.

The parties from the Macedonian bloc in general claim they appeal to all ethnic groups and have supporters form all ethnic groups in Macedonia. Nevertheless, the appeal to wider ethnic popular support has been limited. The Albanian parties, on the other hand, claim they appeal firstly to the Albanian community (except RDK and BESA who claimed they address the real Macedonian problems). Finally, the smaller communities (Roma, Turkish, Bosniak, Serbian, Vlach, Torbeshi) claim that they directly appeal to their communities, and that they try to influence their bigger coalition partners' party programs in favor of protection of their ethnic group's interests.

The parties representing the smaller ethnic communities usually contest national election in joint pre-electoral coalitions with the biggest Macedonian Parties. Their vote share is thus difficult to be measured for all the elections. Nonetheless, the Albanian community has demonstrated a stable support for the parties from the ethnic Albanian bloc. The lowest joint vote share for the Albanian parties was measured at the 1994 elections (11.78%) and the highest ethnic Albanian vote share was seen in 2006 (23.5). The average vote share for the Albanian parties, thus, was 20% if included the outlier of 1994, and 21.4% if we take out the outlier year. This percentage is very close to the percentage of the ethnic Albanian community of Macedonia (25.17%), which implies that more or less 4% of the ethnic Albanians vote for some other parties, or abstain from national elections.

While only one third of the ethnic Macedonian respondents were willing to discuss the party competition strategies, they all agreed that the party competition in Macedonia is mainly intra-ethnic group driven. Ethnic groups compete within rather than across groups. In line with the theory (Bocshler and Sozik 2013 a, b; Sorens 2012; Tronconi and Elias 2011; Birnir 2007) almost two thirds from the respondents claim parties in opposition are usually more radical. Their party platforms and the answers to the first questions regarding OFA indeed go in line with this argument. Namely, the opposition parties coming from the Albanian bloc have brought new ideas towards greater self-determination of its community (introduced in the beginning of the Findings section).

Nevertheless, there have been several references to the rhetoric used by the current coalition government VMRO DPMNE – DUI during the last 2014 elections which was criticized by the public and the opposition parties for being too nationalistic. Some claimed that radicalization depends on individual political interests of the party leader rather than an ideological determination. This argument is in line with the previous claims that parties in government use more nationalistic rhetoric. Namely, while DUI's party manifesto remains less radical compared to the opposition parties in terms of self-determination, the leader Ahmeti used nationalistic rhetoric during campaigning. At the social media he directly invites for blood, and radicalization of the nationalistic ideals of the Albanians in Macedonia. He has called for mass campaign meeting by using his own picture dating from the 2001 conflict where he appears with a Kalashnikov (Ahmeti, 2013).

Gruevski as well has been using divisive and nationalistic speeches to promote higher popular support among the ethnic Macedonians living in ethnically concentrated Albanian municipalities (Gruevski, 2013). Nonetheless, VMRO DPMNE's electoral platforms do not speak against the OFA. While VMRO-DPMNE avoided commenting this part of the questioner, DUI claimed the opposition was the more radical one, and the representatives argued that in this era of parliamentary democracy nationalistic rhetoric from the kind of DPA (referring to the DPA's New Agreement proposal) cannot be justified.

The representative from the Vlach party claims that there is no other way for the government to stay in power but using nationalistic rhetoric. That is the only reasonable explanation why they both (VMRO-DPMNU and DUI) stayed in power for such a long time (Babunski, DPVM). Be that as it may, the majority of the respondents and the very after OFA narratives by the opposition parties confirm the theory in favor of the positive relationship between opposition status and radical self-determination claims by the ethnic parties. There is one other important argument regarding the radical stances on nationalism. The party radicalization depends on the type of ethnic minority (majority vs. non-majority minority). This means that Albanians are prone to radicalization because of their size and real influence in the government (as Szocik and Boschsler (2013 b) argued). The more salient the ethnic group is, the better perspectives for representation it has, thus the radicalization naturally will come out of the size of the group.

Finally, we come to the economic factor and the decentralization as radicalizers of parties' nationalistic rhetoric. With a certain kind of unanimity, the respondents claim that the bad economic situation in Macedonia will not help the process of inter-ethnic conflict reconciliation. All but three respondents think that the essential inter-ethnic conflict motivator was and it will always be the bad economy. The findings support Muller-Romell's (1994) thesis that when economic resources are scarce there is a possibility for nationalism and claims for greater self-determination from the "oppressed" regional community. Most of the respondents claim that people get more politicized in economically underdeveloped environment and they become an easier target for manipulation by the parties; thus, it can be expected that radicalization of the demands by the political parties is most probable in times of economic crisis.

Nonetheless, if we take aside the initial conflict of 2001 which has been motivated by the lack of rights for the Albanian community and from the historically suppressed economy of the regions where they are concentrated, the OFA includes a new aspect of the economic factor in the competition game. Namely, the respondents from the opposition parties emphasize that the party manipulation feasibility derives from the "partization employment practices" which parties in government (representing both the ethnic minorities and the majority) use to manipulate its electorate. Bishevac (BLM) argues that "the numerous employed persons in the public administration that have no real job positions, but still receive salaries under the OFA protection, deepen the gap of mistrust between the ethnic communities because the economic situation in Macedonia is very fragile." Most of the Albanian-minority parties representatives consider the unequal budget distribution among the regions as a problem that can potentially arise as a 'challenge for the country'. Gashi (BESA) said that the Albanians in Macedonia were more concerned about the economic situation than the ethnic cultural issues, in spite of the unresolved issues with the use of the Albanian language as official language in Macedonia, and the still ongoing issue with the use of the flags. The non-majority minorities' (Roma, Vlach, Serb, and

Turkish) see potential for radicalization only from the side of the Albanian parties. In addition, most of the respondents have accentuated their serious concerns regarding the high level of emigration from Macedonia in the past decade.

The distribution of the budget and the regional policies are closely connected to the decentralization. While the Macedonian bloc of parties supports the theory that the decentralization with ethnic aspect in general leads to parallel worlds and higher potential for future radicalization of the self-determination potential (Branciati, 2009), the Albanian bloc claims the opposite, the lack of decentralization is what triggers radicalization, and the good decentralization opens space for fair representation of the ethnic minorities and thus decreases the possibility for radicalization (Montabes et.al. 2004).

The Macedonian parties in general assess the decentralization as a good process for country's democratization, with a remark on the unequal implementation practice so far in certain rural areas. Nevertheless, their support goes in general to the idea of de-concentration of power and regionalization in terms of equal distribution of finances to the periphery from the center. But, when it comes to the ethnic component of the issue of decentralization the perceptions are divided. The fear of the decentralization comes from the real practice regarding the implementation of the decentralization where the ethnic-decentralization has had a boomerang effect on the Macedonian population. The economic, political, social and security challenges pointed out by Talevski (2005) remain present even a decade and a half after the decentralization reform. The power that the Municipal Mayors obtain continues to be harmful for the decentralization itself, especially in the municipalities with territorially concentrated Albanian community. Namely, several representatives mentioned the negative examples of the western Macedonia's towns of Struga and Kichevo. In these municipalities, the ethnically based decentralization solution 'have forced' the Macedonian population to leave those municipalities because of the ethno-centric politics lead by the Mayors of these municipalities populated with majority of Albanians.

The "gerrymandering" of the municipalities in ethnic terms after the OFA has been generally assessed as harmful because it has created bases on which the central power is divided between the coalition partners from the two blocs (Macedonian and Albanian). VMRO DPMNE as well considers that the mayors have much more powerful positions in the local-governing bodies compared to the councils, which shall be reconsidered in favor of de-personification of politics. According to Dimova (SDUM) 'the decentralization, as a peace-keeping instrument only produces two parallel worlds which obstructs the idea of ethnic cohabitation. The decentralization as a democratization process needs other instruments than the ethnically concentrated territories with self-governing powers'. Some respondents see the decentralization as a feasible threat to the unitary state. Stanoeski (GROM) supports the hypothesis that centralization prevents such kind of separatist initiatives by obtaining more influential centers of power which can control those movements.

On the other hand, we could see that there is not much variety among the Albanian representatives regarding the decentralization question. In general the Albanian bloc parties do not consider that the decentralization would provoke radical/separatist rhetoric. The eventual decentralization process would imply a decentralized multi-cultural approach in decision making, which involves wide ethnic consensus voting at local level as well. DUI sees no possibility for radicalization of the minority ethnic appeals due to the 'weak power

of the local self-government units and the fact that there is no local police. Moreover, several Albanian interviewees accentuated the possibility for radicalization if the decentralization lacks implementation. Nevertheless, they perceive no real separatist intention within the Albanian community in general.

Be that as it may, the opposition parties representing the Albanian block assess the current decentralization process in Macedonia at a very low level, and they deem urgent necessity for its real implementation. DUI, on the other hand, claims that the decentralization process is a very important process of the OFA, as it serves people to get closer to the government. The three most important laws from the decentralization reform where the Local self-government Law, the Law on self-financing of the units of local self-government and the Law on territorial organization. Unfortunately, according to Kasumi (DUI) "the public debate had been mostly focused on the latest one. The very debate over the decentralization in Macedonia has been political instead of practical and useful." He also considers the centre-periphery struggle only as a struggle for financial self-governance. According to Kasumi "the central government is not yet ready to give up the powers in favor of the local communities, and this is harmful for the very process of decentralization." The majority of the smaller minorities' parties usually see the decentralization process as a good intentioned but as "it has got wrong somewhere on the way of its implementation." (Ibraimovski PFER). The general perception of the smaller communities is that they have become minority under the minority, which indicates a big problem in how OFA has been tailored. They do not see current separatist movements in Macedonia (nor secessionist rhetoric), but the decentralization on ethnic bases has been assessed as harmful to the non-majority minorities.

CONCLUSION

Although there has been a diversification of narratives, (among ethnic groups, and among different parties representing the same ethnic group), the implementation of the OFA has been generally assessed as not successful. The non-majority ethnic communities still claim cultural, economic, institutional, and political discrimination exists in Macedonia, while the majority community in general claims the OFA instead of creating a functioning multiethnic cohabitation it have deepened the inter-ethnic gap. It has created two parallel ethnic worlds and fragile peaceful co-existence instead of functional cohabitation.

The opposition parties from the Macedonian bloc and the smaller communities in general see potential for future conflicts and instability that could be triggered by ethnic or political reasons. They locate the problem in the failure of implementing the OFA, i.e. OFA fails to bring good results because it has been used for narrow party interests rather than implemented rightfully by the governing coalition (since 2006). And, while Macedonian and smaller communities do not see the stipulations of the OFA as the problem, rather they point out towards the political abuse in the course of its implementation, the Albanian opposition parties see the OFA as 'a dead agreement', consequently propose changes. Some changes lean towards stronger power sharing, wider and more functional decentralization, greater cultural autonomy etc.

The inter-ethnic cohabitation on the other hand has been criticized from almost every interviewee. The criticism however comes from two different levels of perceptions for the cohabitation. Those parties in government put the accent on the good institutional

changes that OFA has provided and that serve the 'cohabitation project', while those in opposition claim that in spite of the higher representation of the minorities in public institutions, there is still evidence of mistrust and intolerance between ethnic groups at individual level.

There is a general agreement among the interviewees that the "electoral game" in Macedonia is mostly intra-ethnically driven, i.e. parties compete at intra-ethnic level rather than inter-ethnic outbidding. The exclusion from government has been proven to be a strong nationalistic radicalizer.

While the general opinion is that Macedonia's bad economic situation is a driver for parties' electoral nationalistic rhetoric, the OFA has been pointed out to be the main tool government coalition uses in the play of the nationalistic card. Namely, the practice of employment in the public administration, in the name of fair representation of ethnic communities, has opened the doors for manipulation of the poor electorate.

The issue of decentralization is still a topic debated across ethnic groups. While the majority claims no good has come to the multiethnic cohabitation from the post OFA decentralization, and from several policies regarding cultural autonomy of ethnic minorities, the Albanian parties claim that the lack of implementation of the decentralization can be a factor of radicalization of the inter-ethnic instability, rather than its good implementation. The smaller communities take closer stances to the majority ethnic Macedonian community and claim their position has been harmed with the territorial divisions. They feel they are much more prone to some kind of cultural assimilated after OFA was signed than before.

It would be too simplistic to argue that we have direct confirmation from the political parties that the OFA is a non-functional agreement. However, we have a clear understanding of the harm that some aspects of its implementation have done to the inter-ethnic cohabitation project so far. While the fair representation of the ethnic communities stipulated by the OFA is generally well accepted by the parties under analysis, they largely oppose the narrow party perspective of this policy by the governing coalition. The vast majority of the parties assessed the enlargement of the public administration in number rather than in quality as damaging for the country's democracy, the political dialogue, and the intra and inter-ethnic relations.

In conclusion, transparent implementation of the OFA, fight against the corruption and the abuse of OFA for party gains, carefully designed regional policies, economic stability and balanced decentralization of budget are needed for the improvement of the stalling inter-ethnic cohabitation in Macedonia.

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