

POSITION PAPER ON DEPOLARIZATION OF INTER-PARTY RELATIONS AS A PRECONDITION OF SUBSTANTIVELY DISMANTLING POPULIST “STATE CAPTURE” GOVERNANCE

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In order for North Macedonia to fully and truly implement what are by now seemingly forgotten “Urgent Reform Priorities,” set by the European Commission in 2015, a process of effective political depolarization is a prerequisite. We are basing this claim on the following premise: if Reinhard Priebe’s claim that the essence of the “state capture” of the country lies in the excessive power of the executive branch,¹ one has to institutionally strengthen the legislative branch. Instead of being a mere tool of the executive branch it has to become not only *de jure* but also *de facto* the legislating power in what otherwise only purports to be a parliamentary democracy. Moreover, its oversight of the executive branch should be more than a dead letter. *We argue that in order for this to become a fact, monolithic party reasoning and voting must be overcome by way of effective issue-based cross-party alliances.* The latter is hardly an achievable goal considering the political culture based on uncritical support for one’s political party, absence of intra-party democracy and the existing climate of antagonism or extreme inter-party polarization.

In order to tackle the stated problems and arrive at the possibility of cross-party, issue-based alliances that will hold the executive branch in check, we need both systemic changes as well as changes in political culture. We argue that systemic changes – in the sense of policy change due to legislative change – enable changes in political culture rather than the other way around. Institutional and procedural systems constitute conditions that necessitate changes in behavior. Certainly, it is a two-way street and change in culture through awareness raising activities and *ad hoc* initiatives of individual MP’s can also offer a model of change and act as a stimulus for policy and legislative changes to be not only introduced but also implemented. Such precedents, even though scarce, exist and are therefore encouraging, signaling that change is possible: the cross-party alliances that constitute encouraging prior examples are both related to two major issues of gender equity, amounting to the introduction of “equality of gender” into the Constitution as well as the adoption of a legislative act guaranteeing the minimum nine-month maternity/paternity leave. Both of the stated precedents took place in the noughties. The most recent example is the cross-party support for the *Prespa Agreement* expressed in the Macedonian parliament on October 19th, 2018. In spite of the controversies and second-guessing which took the form of journalistic commentaries and publicly expressed views of NGO’s, experts and political parties, it remains a fact that the parliamentary majority led by Zoran Zaev ensured a sufficient number of votes from the ranks of the opposition MP’s. Therefore, yet another precedent of cross-party cooperation has been set. The downside of this example is that the MP’s have been excluded from their party, namely VMRO-DPMNE.²

Apart from legislative changes that would encourage intra-party democracy and, consequently, greater independence of MP’s, as well as their strengthened links with their respective constituencies, we would like to propose the introduction of political alliances as a method for accomplishing a twofold goal: 1) the depolarization of inter-party relations; 2) the strengthening of parliament’s role as an oversight institution with regard to the executive branch as well as contributing to its becoming a true home of political deliberation and lawmaking.

Recommendations to the political parties and to the international community present in the country and its programs of support and cooperation:

- 1) Introduction of political alliances across party lines which deal with several issues from the categories of social inclusion and environmental protection that can ensure mobilization from different political parties: a) rights of people with disabilities, b) climate emergency, c) innovation and small to medium research-based enterprises economic initiatives.
- 2) Introduction of legislative changes concerning parties that will ensure greater intra-party democracy: a) lessening of bureaucracy and cost for establishing new political parties, and b) the clarification of the principle of “democratic organizing” without breaching the sovereign right of each party to self-organize in a manner of its choosing – a mere definition of the notion “democracy” suffices, without stipulating or insinuating forms of organization and decision making.
- 3) Changes in electoral law that will ensure the participation of smaller political parties without the pressure to join the coalitions formed by the two biggest parties, therefore discouraging the creation of monolithic blocs in the parliament.

¹ Reinhard Priebe’s and Senior Experts’ Group Report on Macedonia, published in September 2017.

² “The MP’s That Voted for Changes in the Constitution are Expelled from the Party,” Said the Leader of VMRO-DPMNE Mickoski” [„Пратениците кои гласаа за уставни измени се исклучени од партијата,“ кажа лидерот на ВМРО-ДПМНЕ Мицкоски], available at <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/pratenitsite-koi-glasaa-za-ustavni-izmeni-se-iskлучeni-od-partijata-kazha-liderot-na-vmro-dpmne-mitskoski/>, accessed on 10 March 2020.