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On the Findings of One More Population "Census" in the Republic of Macedonia

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An idealist is the one to become a cynic. This is a thought that best illustrates the psychological transformation of those in Macedonia who considered the recent referendum on the Law on territorial organization a means of direct and participative democracy. Many people that supported the referendum were realistic enough to know that its success would almost be a miracle (due to the very high double constitutional census and pressure put on the citizens which has never seen before). Nevertheless, they experienced the final outcome of only a 26% turnout, a result on the verge of shame.

This "strange group" that supported the referendum initiative was unjustifiably named a political opposition. It did not suit certain people to admit two important facts: first of all, for the first time since 1991, this initiative was supported by independent intellectuals, prominent university professors, members of civil society; secondly, the depth of the legitimacy crisis in the country did not give anyone, not even the political opposition, the right to consider the referendum movement "its own" success. Soon after the parliamentary elections in 2002, the rating of the winning party began to drop dramatically, while at the same time, the leading oppositional party (VMRO-DPMNE) was faced with an internal division (and, recently, with a definite division). All recent opinion polls have shown disastrous results: the political rating of leading politicians did not exceed a two digit barrier, more than half the respondents do not believe politicians and institutions, and more than 70% think that state institutions are corrupt. Since the recent presidential elections barely succeeded (due to a very poor turnout), and there were suspicions that there had been irregularities in the sense of "helping" pass the critical limit of 50% + 1 voter, few believed the initiative for collecting 150,000 signatures would succeed, the amount needed to call for a referendum.

The initiative for the referendum began back in February 2004, and was proposed by the World Macedonian Congress (SMK) – an organization that lives off of donations from the Macedonian Diaspora, that uses nationalistic rhetoric and sentiments of immigrants, but does not have any political distinction in Macedonia. When the political crisis and public dissatisfaction over negotiations on territorial division of the country escalated, SMK had not collected more than 40,000 signatures in five months. Then this took a turn and when famous public figures and intellectuals became involved, a process was initiated that could not be stopped – the referendum was considered the last means for hearing the voice of the citizens', especially after the Parliament voted in favour of the Law, not even taking the dissatisfaction within society into consideration. The arrogance and conviction in thinking that the citizens would not react came back at the government like a boomerang. Actually, according to analysts, the ruling coalition was the best "ally" to SMK and its behaviour contributed most to mobilizing the citizens in the last few weeks before the constitutional deadline for collecting signatures.

Faced with such a civil initiative, or better said – opposition, the government took two steps: first, it imposed ethnic discourse and in this way, anyone who supported the referendum was already pronounced a nationalist; second, state authorities with the president at the top took an international "offensive", complaining to the international community that its nation was nationalistically oriented and if the referendum succeeded, this would put peace, the Ohrid agreement, and Euro-Atlantic integration at risk. The Albanian coalition partner could watch the course of events with satisfaction and peacefully, while the Macedonian partner "ran his race for him". Interestingly, accusations regarding ethno-nationalism were exchanged only by Macedonian political parties. The international community was alarmed at the mention of the Ohrid Agreement and ethnic arguments, so that it also actively joined the anti-campaign, using rhetoric of fear and rhetoric of promises. More importantly, the international community joined the group that it condemned, an otherwise legitimate constitutional mechanism (referendum) condemned as an expression of ethno-nationalism, changing the focus of the entire campaign from the political to the security aspect of the situation.

In such a dramatized atmosphere, civil argumentation was intentionally overshadowed that pointed out the poor solution of the Law, being that it was not founded on European standards but rather an ethno-political *deal* and election geometry. For this reason, post-referendum disappointment that bordered with depression was greatest amongst those that believed in the strength of the civil option. To make the irony greater, the Macedonian and foreign elite and media pronounced all 420 thousand voters that supported the referendum nationalists and "conservative forces"... When the results of the referendum were announced, Macedonia was supposed to once again become the little wonder of the Balkans! Agreeing with this interpretation of the referendum results would mean that Macedonia succeeded in recovering from ethno-nationalism literally overnight. In other words, by labelling any individual who voted at the referendum a "nationalist", and even more so, labelling those who showed their support of it (420 thousand people), resembled a special population census. Therefore, Macedonian citizens were not aware that on November 7, 2004, they were recounted: on one side were the nationalists (everyone from the Macedonian ethnic community) while on the other was a fascinating number of "enlightened non-nationalists" from all ethnic groups. (Honestly, it should be admitted that no one even considered members of other ethnic groups to be relevant in the alleged battle of Macedonian and Albanian nationalism). Like it or not, a shocking majority did not vote (more than one million two hundred thousand citizens), and this is the true picture of the situation. Gallup's opinion polls fell through, that had showed that more than 90% of the Macedonians, around 10% of the Albanians and around 50% of the rest of the citizens did not agree with the Law. It is legitimate to ask, why did the people change their minds on the eve of the referendum? If 850 thousand people had voted (which is the constitutional census for a successful referendum), would half the electorate then have deserved the epithet of "nationalists"?

In this (alleged) "non-nationalist" group that did not vote, the Albanian community prevailed with an unbelievable and crystal clean 0% turnout!!! This is a great "achievement" in the history of the country, but also a result for the Guinness Book of World Records. It is difficult to believe that other countries, especially the western democracies that Macedonia is striving to be, could praise such unanimity of the citizens and alleged support of the Law which had appeared to be so controversial. This questions the accuracy of all findings of democratic theories by which democracy is actually a negation of monolithicity and one-mindedness. However, on February 7, in Macedonia, democracy won through abstinence, or conversely, it appears as if ethno-nationalism was won by not participating in the political process. Actually, Macedonia proved that Bernard Shaw was very right saying that democracy is a mechanism that ensures that we aren't managed better than we deserve to be. In Macedonia it has been actually proven that the suspension of democracy, i.e. "voluntary" rejection of the chance to take advantage of one's suffrage rights, is a true solution to all the problems that have piled up. Of course, no one dares to publicly state that there was another "remedy": citizens were scared into believing that voting would either cause violence or they would lose their jobs/social welfare, and this was all decorated by the American "carrot" that was served at the last minute, through the USA's unilateral decision to use the constitutional name of the country in bilateral relations.

At first glance, post-referendum Macedonia truly looked different, if one were to believe the euphoria within domestic and foreign political circles. Listening and looking at Macedonian politicians with their noses stuck in the air, left the impression that the UNDP findings on the deep political legitimacy crisis had

never been correct and never really existed; as political legitimacy can only be disputed and threatened when citizens – are – citizens, and when they loudly and clearly voice their dissatisfaction over the way someone is making decisions in their names. Or, conversely, is there a better way to confirm and strengthen the legitimacy of the government than voting at a referendum in support of the government's proposals? When the Macedonian citizens quieted down and stayed at home (as advised by those in power, but also by western politicians who would never do the same to their citizens in the case of a national referendum), and while they watched Spanish and Mexican soap operas – everything fell into place: the government quickly revived its legitimacy, and self-confidence and arrogance, the international position and reputation of the country had improved, and the president hurried to reaffirm not only the Ohrid Agreement but to promote himself into another Trajkovski. Citizens, apparently, were able to once again drift back into their apathy and quietly live their lives, however they may be. Only this time burdened by feelings of shame...

However, only a week after the referendum, there was an unexpected turn of events: the Macedonian Prime Minister Hari Kostov, who for months had claimed he would resign if the referendum succeeded, almost shocked the public when he submitted his resignation in spite of the fact that things had turned out as he had wished. His explanation shook up the entire nouveau political ideal: he accused the Albanian coalition partner for corruption, nepotism, and understanding the Ohrid peace process as a means of employing of people such as Alia Ahmetlia, leader of the Albanian Democratic Union for Integration, to the detriment of the priorities set according to the Euro-Atlantic integration agenda. Such an act of resignation by a prime minister of a country will probably be recorded in the annals of those interested in transitology: the prime minister publicly acknowledged (though with inexcusable delay) everything that supporters of the referendum had been saying for months! The coalition immediately disqualified the statements of the prime minister and in turn, the opinion of the ordinary citizens, and he was all of a sudden pronounced a "private entity"! Although the desire for power and international "glue" will hold the coalition together for some time longer, the reasons for Kostov's resignation will be remembered: that the government was not making constitutional decisions rather the ethno-political elite was making agreements, based upon corruption, nepotism, blackmail and even more importantly, addressing ethnic interests of the Albanian political elite, even to the detriment of the priorities imposed by the economy or euro-Atlantic integration of the country. All the same, the coalition continues in this way with the uncompromising support of the international community, Albanian circles build monuments and memorials of Balists from World War II, while in a village Kondovo near Skopje (actually, according to the new law, Kondovo is Skopje) armed and uniformed people who call themselves the "people's police" move about freely. Macedonia *must* be a success story, even if it resembles the beginning of 2001... Actually, the question is how much have things changed in the last three and a half years?

In 2001, when "some nationalists and terrorists there" appeared, the former NATO Secretary General George Robertson ecstatically stated that those were people who instead of ballots and democracy preferred bullets (*thugs and killers who prefer bullets to ballots*). The terrorists, however, soon became "fighters for human rights", and then, politicians. Their thesis was that they had to undertake military action in order to stimulate the process of democratization and better protect the rights of minorities, so this is how violence became "the catalyst of democratic political process". They became politicians and reputable members of the government, but it appears that *ballots* were not so close to their hearts or at least not in all situations where one should vote. In other words, they maintained the right to arbitrarily decide when ballots were preferred and democratic, and when they weren't. What is more important is that they (few, elite) literally were making decisions in the name of the entire ethnic community that blindly followed them. How could they possibly not make these decisions when it was they who fought in 2001, while the rest of the Albanian citizens mostly stayed at home and did not fight with their "Slovene oppressors"?

Macedonia went through a very difficult time in 2001. The ethnic Macedonian community painfully and uneasily faced the truth on the lies that they lived with. First the painful realization that the country was never an oasis of peace and that the act of forming an independent Macedonian state did not make everyone equally happy. Even those who never considered themselves nationalists had to publicly admit that praising multiethnic democracy in such a way were empty words far from reality. Many regretted that the attempt to prevent violence by building stronger foundations of society did not succeed, which would in turn more easily resist some "newcomers" from Switzerland, Kosovo, etc... who intensified democracy by arms. Despite this, Macedonia remained a synonym for a "conflict with the least casualties" and "the most staged conflict" within the former Yugoslavia, except Slovenia. Half the Macedonian special police then took sick leave. Wives hid their husbands during the mobilization until they heard that the state would pay compensation (most of these reservists did not have jobs nor did they have a way to feed their families, as this same state did not enable a way for them to respectfully make a living; but, when their "homeland" called for them to defend them and paid them for it – they all then signed up). Nevertheless, citizens remained non-militant and did not pick fights with their Albanian neighbours, similarly to the majority of Albanians in Struga, Gostivar, Skopje, or Kumanovo that did not take to arms. Many Macedonians, though, felt defeated in something that could hardly be called war or a multi-ethnic conflict; but there was still humanness, tolerance and a basis to gradually overcome the situation by continuing to live as neighbours.

Today, however, many are becoming cynics, and openly say: this same peace-loving nation was scared – of voting! It was scared of democracy, and did not vote, not even to at least extend their support to the new law, even if they considered it so close to their hearts. Those who did vote were publicly counted and denounced, even those who were in favour of the referendum (but did not advocate it). It appears there won't be amnesty for them as there was for those who accepted arms in 2001. The entire fragile pyramid of power and preserving (even temporarily) peace could be threatened by the appearance of the Citizen and revitalization of civil democracy. The system based upon an inconsistent model of the consociational democracy does not fulfil conditions for successfully functioning, as suggested by Liphard. In this way, any reference to liberal democracy based upon citizens and to the relations of citizen-power, directly violates the model of relations between the ethnic tribes and their leaders. Definitely, on November 7, 2004, many realized that they belonged to a minority – citizens who do not wish to be encamped in ethnic lairs that are not protected by any constitutional guarantees.

At first glance, it can be concluded that insisting on civil democracy in Macedonia is not only a Don Quixote's act, but also a dangerous one. Some people believe that the failed referendum saved Macedonia from a new conflict, and that those who supported the referendum, as a matter principle and democracy, had more luck than brains. Although it may sound cynical, there is some truth in this standpoint. Allying on citizens and democracy in society whose peace (truce) is based upon agreement (rage?) of the elite, and often on threats, (that are backed up by the threat of violence), is the same as calling for a revolution, change of constitutional order and state coup!! Now, when the referendum failed, the real and true danger of dramatically changing anything disappeared, because without citizens there can be no changes. Good old actors are still dominant on the scene (in the limelight or in the shadow): politicians, ethnic leaders and military structures. Just as unexpected as the Prime Minister Kostov's resignation after the referendum failed was the appearance of the flaunting armed KLA formations when there was no longer a "threat" of a referendum. The existence of political stability, democracy and peace in Macedonia is not something that can be easily diagnosed – this is something that, depending on its needs, can be created or become relative issues. That is why Macedonia is still the hostage of a strange seesaw on which peace and democracy are interchanged, and peace and democracy remain as illusory as phantom organs.

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