

MACEDONIA

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I. GENERAL INFORMATION

Political system The Republic of Macedonia has a semi-presidential system with a president directly elected by and accountable to the electorate, and a prime minister elected by and accountable to the country's parliament. The president represents the country, and is commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Furthermore, the president nominates the candidate for prime minister to be elected by parliament. The president has certain powers within foreign affairs, appointing and dismissing by decree ambassadors and other diplomatic representatives of Macedonia abroad. In the area of the judiciary, the president proposes two judges to sit on the Constitutional Court and two members of the Judicial Council, who are elected by parliament. The president of the republic addresses the assembly on issues within their sphere of power at least once a year. The president can also postpone the adoption of laws approved by parliament by choosing not to sign them. However, if parliament adopts a law for a second time, the president is no longer in a position to postpone the law and must sign it.

The government determines the policy of carrying out the laws and other regulations of the Assembly, is responsible for their execution and has practical control over state policy. While it appoints outright the chiefs of consular offices, the government needs the president's approval for the appointment of ambassadors and representatives abroad. This requirement of presidential approval leads to the need for cooperation in the field of foreign affairs.

The government is elected by parliament by absolute majority, and the government or any minister can be dismissed by the same majority. Parliament can initiate a procedure for reassessing the president's authority, while the final decision over the termination of the president's mandate is adopted by the Constitutional Court by a two-thirds majority.

Constitution The current constitution was introduced in 1991, with some amendments in 2001 and 2004. The constitution established the "fundamental values of the constitutional order of the Republic of Macedonia" (art. 8):

- the basic freedoms and rights of the individual and citizen, recognized in international law and set down in the constitution;
- the free expression of national identity;
- the rule of law;
- the division of state powers into legislative, executive and judicial;
- political pluralism and free, direct and democratic elections;
- the legal protection of property;
- freedom of the market and entrepreneurship;
- humanism, social justice and solidarity;
- local self-government;
- proper urban and rural planning to promote a congenial human environment, as well as ecological protection and development; and
- respect for the generally accepted norms of international law.

Furthermore, chapter 2 of the constitution is named "Basic freedoms and rights of the individual and citizen", where the following freedoms and rights are guaranteed:

- equality regardless of sex, race, colour of skin, national and social origin, political and religious beliefs, property and social status (art. 9);
- the right of life and the prohibition of the death penalty (art. 10);
- the right of physical and moral dignity, and the prohibition of torture and forced labour (art. 11);
- the right to freedom (art. 12);
- rights during detention (art. 12);
- the presumption of innocence (art. 13);
- the prohibition of punishment for an offence which had not been declared an offence punishable by law, or by other acts, prior to its being committed, and for which no punishment had been prescribed; and that no person may be tried in a court of law for an offence for which they have already been tried and for which a legally valid court verdict has already been brought (art. 14);
- freedom of thought and public expression of thought (art. 16);
- freedom and confidentiality of correspondence and other forms of communication (art. 17);
- security and confidentiality of personal information (art. 18);
- freedom of religious confession (art. 19);
- freedom of association (art. 20);
- the right to assemble and expression of public protest (art. 21);
- the right to vote (art. 22);
- the right to be elected into office (art. 23);
- the right to petition state and other public bodies and to receive an answer (art. 24);
- the protection of privacy, dignity and repute (art. 25);
- the inviolability of the home (art. 26);
- the right of free movement and choice of residence (art. 27);
- the right and duty of the defence of the country (art. 28);
- the right of asylum of foreign and stateless persons (art. 29);
- the right to ownership of property and the right of inheritance (art. 30);
- the right to work, free choice of employment, remuneration, protection at work, and material assistance during unemployment (art. 32);
- the right to social security (art. 34), particularly for war veterans (art. 36);
- the right to establish trade unions (art. 37);
- the right to strike (art. 38);
- the right to healthcare (art. 39);
- the prohibition of employment of persons under the age of 15, and special requirements for the employment of minors (art. 42);
- the right to a healthy environment (art. 43);
- the right to education (art. 44);
- the autonomy of universities (art. 46);
- freedom of scholarly, artistic and other forms of creative work (art. 47);
- freedom of expression of national identities and the protection of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identities of these nationalities (art. 48);
- the right to court protection of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the constitution (art. 50).

Generally, all rights and freedoms are established in practice, and there have been no major incidents around the violation of these fundamental values. The protection of basic rights is regularly observed in the reports of international organizations dealing with this matter, though occasional cases of violations are noted. The Constitutional Court and its ombudsman are responsible for the protection of the basic human rights of individuals and citizens.

The constitution does not assign special functions to political parties. The establishment and functioning of political parties are dealt with by the law on political parties (which entered into force in August 1994). The only constitutional provision related to this matter is individuals' freedom of association (art. 20).

State of democracy The state of liberal democracy can be described as good, with certain areas that could be improved. Free and democratic elections contribute to this impression, along with the greater role for civil society organizations. State institutions are functioning properly, with a clear division of the legislative, executive and judiciary.

In the past five years there have been improvements in some areas. Some past instances where elections had been held with minor irregularities¹ have been overcome, while difficulties with respect to political dialogue have ceased to exist. Parties are more aware of the need for mutual cooperation and are moderate in their political battles. The main reasons behind the changes in these areas were the delay in the reforms that occurred, as well as an understanding of the need for a more efficient political system. All political parties contributed to the progress achieved in this area, with the goal of integration into the European Union (EU) as an additional incentive.

Separation of powers Macedonia's executive branch is divided between the government and the president. The legislative branch is represented by parliament (Assembly), which has one chamber consisting of 120 members elected directly by the electorate every four years. The country is a unitary state. The judiciary includes 27 courts, 4 courts of appeal and the Supreme Court. There is also the Administrative Court and the Constitutional Court.

The executive branch represents the major influence on state decisions and makes the most important decisions. The legislature is often regarded as an institution which merely confirms government proposals, in spite of the more active role that parliamentary powers afford. This is even more evident in cases where the governing coalition is highly stable (with an absolute majority of seats in parliament), which limits parliament's ability to act differently from the government.

The judiciary has undergone several reforms to increase its efficiency and independence, reaching an advanced phase where parliament and the government cannot influence judicial decisions. Judges are elected and dismissed by the Judicial Council, a body where the majority of the members are judges elected through the votes of each judge in the country through a secret ballot.

National assembly The Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia has the following powers:

- to adopt and change the constitution;
- to adopt laws and give authentic interpretation of these laws;
- to determine public taxes and fees;
- to adopt the budget and the country's balance of payments;
- to adopts the country's spatial plan;
- to ratify international agreements;
- to make decisions on the country's response to potential conflict;
- to make decisions concerning any changes to the country's borders;
- to make decisions on association with and disassociation from any form of union or community with other states;
- to issue notice of a referendum;
- to make decisions concerning the country's reserves;
- to set up councils;
- to elect the government of the Republic of Macedonia;
- to elect judges to the Constitutional Court;
- to carry out elections and discharge judges;
- to select, appoint and dismiss other holders of public and other office determined by the constitution and law;
- to carry out political monitoring and supervision of the government and other holders of public office responsible to the Assembly;
- to proclaim amnesties;
- to perform other activities determined by the constitution.

In carrying out the duties within its sphere of power, the Assembly adopts decisions, declarations, resolutions, recommendations and conclusions.

While parliament represents the centre of the political system, it has at times been considered marginal when compared to the government. Though its independence is clear and changes in the procedural rules adopted over the last few years have improved its efficiency – which was the main problem in the past – there has been no case in history where a government proposal has been rejected by parliament.

Parliamentary elections are held every four years in six districts, each having approximately the same number of voters (290–300,000). There are 120 members of parliament (MPs) in total – 20 from each electoral district, nominated according to the model of proportional representation. Each party nominates a list of 20 candidates in each of the 6 districts, with voters giving their votes for the list in their district. Election results are calculated by the d'Hondt method in every district separately. At the end of this process, each party forms its parliamentary group from its elected candidates in each of the six districts.²

Table 1 | DISTRIBUTION OF PARLIAMENTARY SEATS⁽¹⁾

Party	Latest election (2008)	Present status	Prior to latest election (2006)
Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) ⁽²⁾ ⁽³⁾	53	PP, PPM/GS	41
Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)	18	O	21
Democratic Union for Integration (DUI)	18	GJ	13
Democratic Party of the Albanians (PDSH)	5 ⁽⁴⁾	O	11
Liberal-Democratic Party	4	O	5
New Democracy	5	O	0
New Social-Democratic Party	3	O	5
Socialist Party of Macedonia	3	GJ, P/supp.	3
Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (DOM)	1	GJ, P/supp.	1
Democratic Union	1	GJ, P/supp.	1
VMRO-Macedonian	1	GJ, P/supp.	0
Democratic Party of the Serbs in Macedonia	1	GJ, P/supp.	1
Democratic Party of the Turks	1	GJ, P/supp.	2
Union of Roma in Macedonia (SRM)	1	GJ, P/supp.	0
Party for Democratic Action (SDA)	1	GJ, P/supp.	0
Liberal Party of Macedonia	1	O	2

Continuation of Table 1

Party	Latest election (2008)	Present status	Prior to latest election (2006)
New Alternative	1	O	1
Party for European Future (PEI)	1	O	1
VMRO-People's Party	0	NR	3
Democratic Forces of Roma	0	NR	1
Party for Democratic Prosperity	0	NR	3
United party for Emancipation	0	NR	1
Party of Free Democrats	0	NR	1
Independent	1		3

⁽¹⁾ Of a total 120 seats.

⁽²⁾ According to its statute, the name of the party is VMRO-DPMNE (VMRO-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity), which is also the name used in all ballot papers.

⁽³⁾ It should be noted that the coalition "For a better Macedonia", led by VMRO-DPMNE, was formed before the 2006 elections, and its joint result amounted to 45 MPs in 2006 and 63 out of 120 MPs in 2008, constituting an absolute majority in parliament.

⁽⁴⁾ After the 2008 elections the PDSH had 11 seats, but only few months later 5 MPs left the group and formed a new group, "New Democracy" (accounted for further down in Table 1), while 1 became independent.

Abbreviations: PP = party of the president | PPM/GS = party of the prime minister and senior partner of a coalition government | P/supp. = party that supports the president | GJ = party is junior partner in the government | O = party is in opposition | NR = no parliamentary representation.

Source: Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia, <http://www.sobranie.mk/en/default-en.asp?ItemID=76110AB460166C478FF9FA07534F58B7> (last accessed on 01/06/09).

II. PARTIES AND THE PARTY SYSTEM

II.1 Party System

Legal regulation Political parties have been permitted in Macedonia since 1990. Prior to 1990, there was only one political force, the Union of Communists of Macedonia.

There is a law on political parties, adopted in 1994, where the conditions and procedure for the establishment of parties is determined. The law on political parties requires minimum of 1,000 members in order for a party to be established and participate in elections. The electoral threshold to reach parliamentary seats is 5 per cent in any electoral district. Parties can participate in all or only some of the districts.

In the past, the elections were held according to the majority model, where the country was comprised of 120 electoral units with citizens electing either party or independent candidates. Under such a system it was easier for independent candidates and smaller parties to obtain seats in parliament. In 1998 a combined model was introduced, where 85 MPs were elected according to the majority model (that is, in 85 units) and 35 MPs according to the proportional model, with the country constituting one electoral district overall. Since 2002 the current model has been accepted as the most appropriate one. Smaller parties can only enter parliament in coalition with bigger ones, and it has become practically impossible for independent candidates to win a seat.

Sources of income for political parties include membership fees, donations, loans and gifts. Every political party has to submit an annual financial report and is subject to the control of the country's financial authorities in the shape of the Ministry of Finance, the State Audit Office and the Public Revenue Office. Furthermore, parties participating in elections are required to set up a separate bank account for their electoral campaign, with all donations for their campaign directed to that account. At the end of the elections, parties have to submit a financial report for the donations and transactions made during their campaign.

Party financing

Parties cannot be financed by foreign governments, foreign organizations or international institutions, nor from state bodies (except those determined by the state budget) or state-owned companies. Individual donations cannot exceed the amount of 100 average monthly salaries (following the rate for the month preceding the donation), or 200 average monthly salaries during election campaigns.

The state budget includes a specific amount for each of the parties, which is distributed in the following manner: 70 per cent among the parties that have elected representatives in parliament (on a proportional basis), with the remaining 30 per cent equally distributed among all political parties (parliamentary and non-parliamentary) that won at least 1 per cent of the votes in the last parliamentary elections (art. 10 of the Law on the Financing of Political Parties, which came into force in October 1994).

There are six Macedonian parties considered to be the country's main political players: the Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE); the Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM); the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI); the Democratic Party of the Albanians (PDSH); the Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP); the Socialist Party of Macedonia (SPM).

Relevant parties

The VMRO-DPMNE and the SDSM have been the two major political parties since the introduction of party pluralism in the 1990s, with one of them the major party within the government over the past 19 years. There are two major political parties of the Albanian minority, the DUI and the PDSH, with one of them the junior government coalition partner during recent years (both of them have won seats in the last three parliamentary elections). Other relevant parties that have won seats in at least two subsequent parliamentary periods are the LDP, which has been a partner in the government coalitions led by the SDSM, and the SPM, a partner in the governments led by the VMRO-DPMNE over the last three years. There are other political parties representing other minority groups (such as the Serbs, the Roma and the Vlachs), but as they usually achieve only a single elected member of parliament, they should not be considered as relevant nationwide.

The number of political parties has remained unchanged over the past five years with very few new parties being established, with very few winning seats in the Assembly during parliamentary elections. Following a loss at the parliamentary elections, it is common for the losing party to experience a period of crisis, frequently culminating in calls for the leadership to resign. If the leadership (primarily the leader) does not resign, a new party with the same ideology and/or name is established. Each of these newly established parties has had limited success however, and on some occasions they have re-merged with their original party.

For example, there were a few parties established in the past that originated from factions within the VMRO-DPMNE. In the early 1990s there was a party named the VMRO-Democratic Party, which never won a single parliamentary seat. In 2001 the VMRO-Vistinska (VMRO-True) was established, but it re-merged with the VMRO-DPMNE again in 2006. In 2004 the VMRO-People's Party was formed, with 6 MPs elected in 2006. Despite this however, most of the party's leaders had returned to the VMRO-DPMNE by 2008, and the newly established party did not even participate in the elections of that year.

Similar situations have occurred on the left. The following parties have been established from factions within the SDSM: the New Social Democratic Party (NSDP); the Party of Free Democrats (PSD); and the Social-Democratic Union (SDU). Only the NSDP won parliamentary seats (7 in 2006), and

it joined the coalition of the VMRO-DPMNE, but participated in the 2008 elections with the SDSM. In the early 1990s there were numerous political parties seeking to establish themselves within the new pluralist system. After a few years, the number of parties decreased significantly. Today there are around 50 registered political parties, with many active only during the elections. One reason for this decrease is that since the mid 1990s parties are required in order to get formal approval by the Court Register of Political Parties to have at least 1,000 members (formerly 500).

During the last 20 years two political forces have remained stable, the VMRO-DPMNE on the centre-right and the SDSM on the left. Despite both suffering internal efforts at party destabilization, each party has retained its structure and cohesion. There are no visible signs that this situation will change in the near future.

Party families The ideology of the party has not always been clear in the early life of Macedonian political pluralism. The former Union of Communists has transformed itself into a social-democratic party, following similar developments in Central and Eastern Europe. The centre-right space has been filled by the VMRO-DPMNE, which has defined its ideology according to conservative and Christian-democratic principles in relation to the economy, the Christian view of man and family values. Other parties have been declaring their ideology only in their names, while in reality they have been in coalition with both the left and the right.

Table 2 | IDEOLOGICAL COMPOSITION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM

	Name and founding year	Present situation	Situation prior to present
Conservative/ Christian-democrats	Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), 1990	PP, PPM/GS	PPM/GS
Labour party	Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), 1991 (successor of the Union of Communists of Macedonia, founded in 1943)	O	PP, O
	Socialist Party of Macedonia, 1990 (successor of the Socialist Union of the Working People of Macedonia, founded in 1945)	GJ, P/supp.	GJ
Liberal	Liberal Party of Macedonia (LPM), 1990	O	GJ
	Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP), 1997	O	O, P/supp.
Green/environmental	Democratic Renewal of Macedonia (DOM), 2005	GJ, P/supp.	GJ
Parties with dominant minority membership and supporters	Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), 2002	GJ, P/supp.	O
	Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), 1994	O	GJ
	Democratic Party of Turks (TDP), 1990	GJ, P/supp.	O
	Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia (DPSM), 1992	GJ, P/supp.	O
	Union of Roma in Macedonia (SRM), 1994	GJ, P/supp.	GJ ⁽¹⁾
	Party for Democratic Action (SDA), 1995	GJ, P/supp.	GJ ⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ Although both parties did not win parliamentary seats in the 2006 elections (see Table 1), representatives of both participated in government at the lower executive level as state secretaries, heads of governmental agencies and other functions.

Abbreviations: PP = party of the president | PPM/GS = party of the prime minister and senior partner of a coalition government | P/supp. = parties that support the president | GJ = party is junior partner in the government | O = party is in opposition.

Parties are primarily the result of programmatic competition between themselves, as well as the result of people running for office. The democratization of the country was a process parallel to that of Macedonia's independence from the Yugoslav federation. Therefore, some parties were established to promote independence, which was the first crucial issue for distinction between the many new parties. Among them, the centre-right VMRO-DPMNE formed its ideology around Christian-democratic and conservative values, opposed to the reformed communists constituting the SDSM.

Origins of parties

However, ideology is not the only reason for creating a political party. In some cases, prominent individuals from the business and media sectors establish their parties to gain influence in society. Equally, individuals who have lost a position of prominence within a party try to re-establish themselves by creating their own new parties. In both cases the outcome is not what was desired by the individuals concerned, with these small parties failing to gain significant influence within the political landscape.

Furthermore, some parties are built on an ethnic basis. As a multiethnic society, every ethnic group within Macedonia has established a political party with the aim of promoting its ethnic and cultural heritage. There have been attempts to form multiethnic parties, and they have had relative success. Furthermore, during the last presidential elections voters gave support to candidates from ethnic origins other than their own, which is a sign that parties with a multiethnic structure can exist in the future.

Parties are important for the political integration of voters, as well as for the development of policies. Voters have come to identify particular policies with particular political parties, such as the economy, agriculture and foreign policy. Formulating policies based on the views of the voters has become very common over the last years, with parties becoming more aware of the needs of the country's citizens and hesitating from clear, opportunistic moves.

General significance of parties

Indeed, the sharp division of different parties' views at times polarizes voters and society as a whole, a situation that can become alarming if political leaders do not soften the dialogue. Parties represent the most crucial element in the political system, with their leaders having the most important role.

People choose how to vote according to a party's manifesto, candidates and position on important issues. In different periods voters have paid attention to the parties' standing on different issues, such as the independence of the country, privatization, inter-ethnic relations and relations with Macedonia's neighbours. Over the last 20 years certain issues have always been particularly important for voters however, such as unemployment and Euro-Atlantic integration. Actual steps taken by governing parties have been well-received, and in most of cases citizens have valued the performance of the government over that of the opposition. It can be concluded that the choice of the people is more characterised by being "for" or "against" the government than by their support for a particular political party.

Voter-party relations

Relations between parties and voters are relatively stable. There are clear supporting groups for the two main political movements, although both of the main parties try to address the same target groups, namely industrial workers, farmers, the retired and students. One of the most important factors is the experiences of individual political leaders and voters' perception of them. Personality plays a very important role in determining voters' decisions. Politicians are valued according to their personal experiences and the impact they have had on the lives of the country's citizens. For example, the current prime minister and leader of the VMRO-DPMNE is generally regarded as an honest politician and successful past minister of finance, as well as a figure who genuinely cares about the wellbeing of the country's people and who has kept his distance from negative political developments such as suspicious privatization and financial scandal. This perception has contributed significantly to the high level of support enjoyed by his party over the past few years.

Relations between parties and voters have become more stable in the past five years, with the centre-right movement developing as the country's dominant political force, integrating different target groups and many small political parties. While it has suffered severe political defeats in recent years, the left for its part has also maintained stable relations with its voters. Given that no new political party has managed to achieve significant success or influence, this stability has effectively precluded the emergence of new parties, something compounded by the absence of inspirational new political figures.

II.2 Individual Parties

Party membership With parties running as part of coalitions, it is not possible to identify the number of votes for each individual party. Likewise, parties do not offer official membership statistics, only approximate numbers. For example, both of the main parties claim to have between 100,000 and 150,000 members. Given these uncertainties it is only possible to suggest general trends.

Table 3 | TRENDS IN MEMBERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Party	Rising	Falling	Constant
VMRO-DPMNE	■		
Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)		■	
Democratic Union of Integration (DUI)		■	
Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA)	■		
Liberal-Democratic Party		■	
Socialist Party of Macedonia		■	

Source: Estimations of the author on the basis of statements of party officials and of unofficial party information.

Some parties only focus on a single ethnic group (such as the DUI and the DPA, which dedicate their programmes mainly to the promotion of the interests of the Albanian minority, and campaign only in areas inhabited by ethnic Albanians, along with the parties of the Roma, Serbs, Vlachs and other minority parties), while others direct their messages to all social groups. There are cases where a political party is formed to protect the interests of a particular social group (for example, the Party of Pensioners and the Agricultural Party), but their role is fairly marginal within national politics.

There is no clear, permanent link between parties and social groups, and each party's support is the result of its popularity across all groups. However, there are some signs of closer relations of the centre-right VMRO-DPMNE to agricultural workers, while the SDSM has closer relations to the elderly and the retired, due to the communist past of the party. Support is shifting due to changes in areas such as the economic sector, unemployment, the fight against organized crime and progress in Euro-Atlantic integration.

Exceptions to this are the parties of minority groups, which have clear links to their own ethnic groups, for whom their standing on issues related to the economy or other social areas does not play a significant role.

All parties have statutes which regulate internal party affairs. They are known and understood by all party members, and most of them have their statutes published on their webpages. The statutes are adopted by democratic procedures by the highest party bodies (congress, central committee, etc.).

Party organization

The most important provisions of the statutes usually outline the rules governing the election of local and national leaderships, and the procedures are similar in all parties. The statutes are part of the requirement for the court registration of the parties, and they have rarely been disputed or misinterpreted.

Statutes can play a significant role in internal party developments, especially in situations involving attempts to change a leadership. On some occasions in the past it has been noted that respecting party rules has contributed to maintaining the stability of a party and preventing its dissolution.

Parties have local branches within the country's municipalities, and within these municipalities in parts of the cities, villages and local neighbourhoods. The majority of these branches are consistently active, but become especially so during campaigns. The structure of each region is also a strong contributory factor in the level of activity of the party: most party branches in the capital are permanently active, while in more remote areas they become involved only during campaigns. Furthermore, in parts of the country where the bulk of the population is from one ethnic group, ethnic-based parties are often the only active groups in the area. Local branches play a significant role in coordinating policies and staff for local institutions of self-governance, where the central party leadership has limited influence.

All parties have associated organizations – youth unions, women's unions, veterans' unions. Their influence is visible in parties' programmes and in their activities in related areas, especially when in government.

For example, the Youth Union of VMRO-DPMNE initiated the Ministry of Youth and Sports in the parliamentary elections campaign of 1998, with the ministry (which was later transformed into an agency) formally established in 1999. The women's unions of the main political parties, supported by the NGO (non-governmental organization) sector, have initiated a change in the law on the election of members of the assembly in order to achieve a greater representation of women. This change was introduced in 2002, and since then each party's list of candidates has had to include at least 30 per cent from each gender.

In all parties, the youth organizations are seen as a source of future decision-makers, as well as of labour during the campaigns. Women's unions contribute to policy formulation in areas such as gender equality, family values, and abortion.

Some parties are closely related to collective civil society organizations. The Christian-democratic VMRO-DPMNE has close ties to the Macedonian orthodox church, while the SDSM is occasionally linked with particular trade unions.

Societal entrenchment

Ties with the church are visible in certain positions of the currently governing VMRO-DPMNE, which has promoted the choice of religious education in public schools and state budget donations for the building of churches (and also mosques).

Though the SDSM is linked with the Association of Trade Unions of Macedonia this linkage has lost strength because of the existence of different trade union organizations. On the other hand the Association of Trade Unions of Macedonia openly supported the SDSM during the 2002 parliamentary elections, and the activities of this association are often seen as contributing to the political activities of the SDSM.

Internal decision-making The party leader dominates decision-making within all political parties, a situation which has never changed significantly. Rarely have the decisions of a leader been publicly criticized by other party figures or bodies, and there is a clear, homogenous support for party leaders. An exception to this would be the leader of the SDSM, who stepped down from the party in order to fulfil a five-year mandate as president of the country, leaving three other individuals to chair the party. However, he was commonly held to remain the main power behind the scenes, something which was effectively confirmed by his return as party president following the completion of his mandate as president of the country.

As regards the nomination of candidates, parties usually rely on the proposals of local branches. The procedure finishes with the formal approval of the highest body of the party, the central committee or central board, a nationwide body where all party branches are represented. Certain parties (the VMRO-DPMNE, for example) publish open calls for self-nomination, enabling individuals to submit their own applications. The entire process is carried out within the parties with very a low level of transparency around decisions and with little information made available for the public. Once decisions have been made, conventions are held, but they are usually purely a promotional rather than a decisive event.

Internal relationships within all of the parties are dominantly hierarchical. Party leaders enjoy huge support from the membership, and rarely has a party leader been removed involuntarily. Party leaders and party executives decide on the most important issues, which are formally confirmed by internal representative bodies, the central committees or central boards, where local branches are represented.

Stability of party ideology/programmes While parties' names indicate their political leanings, their names do not always reflect their real ideology. It was, for example, the social-democrats and socialists who promoted privatization, while the right-wing parties promoted subsidies in agriculture and increased salaries for state employees.

Many parties changed their names in the early 1990s when they were being formed, but since then they have remained relatively stable. The former Union of Communists of Macedonia (SKM) changed its name to the Union of Communists of Macedonia – Party for Democratic Change (SKM-PDP), and later to the Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM).

The VMRO-DPMNE was founded on the basis of the historic Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), and was established in 1990 as the VMRO-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE). The abbreviation VMRO is used as a word itself, without explaining the full meaning, since the term is deeply rooted in every citizen's senses. According to its statutes, the abbreviation VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization) "expresses the tradition of the Macedonian people, on which the programme aims and goals of the party are founded, as an ideological-political struggle". This party if often referred to simply as the VMRO. A few other parties were established with names that included the term VMRO, but most of them ceased to exist after one electoral cycle. The VMRO-DPMNE remained the only legitimate structure to use the term VMRO.

Many smaller parties are referred to as parties of their leaders, and the public's identification is with the name of the leader rather than the name of the party.

Party programmes play significant role, especially in the last years. The governing party, the VMRO-DPMNE, has a detailed programme which is continuously followed, and this, indeed, is its biggest advantage over other parties. Party committees and working groups usually convene a few weeks before the start of an election campaign to formulate their programme, which also includes detailed deadlines for the implementation of stated goals. Other parties usually use similar documents, but which are often much shorter and less concrete. The opinions of external experts and the experiences of like-minded parties are also taken into account while preparing party programmes.

Parties use professional agencies for their communications and advertising, areas where most of their budgets are spent during election campaigns. Newspaper and television advertisements dominate during campaigns, but direct communication with voters through local gatherings, flyer distribution and door-to-door campaigning also plays a role. Furthermore, parties use agencies for political communication training for their officials. The freedom of parties to communicate with their potential voters and members is not restricted significantly.

Communication

MPs are generally members of a particular party, and they are largely considered to be an "arm of the party". The constitution stipulates that each MP should vote according to their own views, but rarely has a parliamentary group associated with a particular party voted against that party's position.

Relationship between party and parliamentary groups

MPs possess a degree of independence however; they have the possibility to leave the party or move into another parliamentary group, which indeed has been the case for some MPs. These transfers have had an impact on the influence of the party in parliament, but have never contributed to an important political change (for example, a change of the government). The VMRO-DPMNE has experienced a past attempt to remove its democratically elected leader, and the majority of the members of the parliamentary group of this party took their decisions independently at this time. However, this case is the only one in recent history where MPs have taken a position different from official party policy.

III. GENERAL ASSESSMENT

Parties in Macedonia generally fulfil their functions. They have integrated voters in a relatively stable manner over the last few years. Party programmes tend to become central to political life, as demonstrated by the success of the governing party in the last three years, whose programmes played a crucial part in the victories of the last four electoral cycles (presidential, local and two parliamentary). The selection of candidates for public office could be further improved by the greater engagement of non-partisan individuals in state administration. People's participation in elections is satisfactory and shows citizens' awareness of their role in decision-making around their future.

The state of party democracy can be enhanced. Parties have developed firm organizational structures and a large number of members, although precise official statistics are not open to the public. Local branches remain important for the parties, but do not enjoy much in the way of independence from central leadership.

Relations with civil society do exist, but very often NGOs, trade unions and other organizations are exploited for party purposes, which is the result of the lack of independent funding for civil society structures.

Since 1990 political parties have demonstrated their durability, developing stable voting bodies. While there have been mergers and the dissolution of particular parties, these has not played decisive role in the experiences of the two main political parties.

Major political parties are active outside of election time, though elections in any case occur fairly regularly every one to two years. Parties' ideologies are yet to be completely defined; parties need to overcome certain ideological inconsistencies, which are the result of the level of maturity of the political system as a whole.

Parties gradually become aware of their performance and responsibilities while in opposition, and political dialogue has consistently improved over the last few years. While the perception of political parties can still improve, changes in leadership and a generally moderate political style have contribute to enhance the bigger picture.

The role of the leader may be considered as the major obstacle to the institutionalization of party democracy. The internal party democracy deficit remains an area requiring greater effort on the part of parties and their leaders if the full democratization of the parties is to be achieved. A positive aspect is that the last set of electoral results prompted the resignation of the leaders of defeated parties, but there remains much in the way of room for improvement.

- 1] For example, in 2008 irregularities were noted in around 1 per cent of polling stations, according to the information of the State Election Committee, statement of the spokesperson of the government of Macedonia, <http://www.a1.com.mk/vesti/default.aspx?VestID=93662> (last accessed on 01/06/09).
- 2] For example, if party A has won 10 out of its 20 nominated candidates in district 1, 10 in district 2, 8 in district 3, 8 in district 4, 5 in district 5 and 5 in district 6, then its parliamentary group will consist of 46 MPs.

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