



Diverse and Decentral
How Can North Macedonia Be a Role Model for Syria?
Skopje – September 25 to 30, 2022

Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien
European Center for Kurdish Studies



Disclaimer: The principles in this paper reflect the discussions of the workshop. This does, however, not mean that all participants agree on all points of this document.

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Project: Power Sharing for a United Syria
Emser Straße 26
Berlin 12051
Germany

mail@kurdologie.de
+49 30 67 96 85 27

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Insights to Remember

1. The comprehensive inclusion of all groups into the state and its institutions prevents ethno-cultural tensions from escalating. The conflict of 2001 would possibly not have resulted in violence if the Macedonian majority would have abstained from a Macedonian majority state building project.
2. The inclusion is insufficient when it only profits the elites of the non-majoritarian communities.
3. National symbols are emotionally important. It is vital to allow the expression of diverse and multiple identities and to give room for different symbols, heroes and cultures. All identities must be understood as equal. Different national symbols, such as flags, can coexist and not threaten but strengthen cohesion. Symbols and emotions should not stand in the way of solutions, there should be a concentration on main political issues such as economic development.
4. Marginalized groups tend to turn to foreign powers for support. However, foreign influence can also be beneficial. The intervention of the USA and the EU in 2011 and beyond has been perceived as helpful by many North Macedonians.
5. It is important to bring communities together and to develop shared and common understandings of the state and its history. It needs social and cultural programs to develop a common national vision, offers for cohesion are important. Imposing unified and exclusive identities can have counter-productive effects.

When Macedonia gained independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, the young state initially defined itself as a Macedonian nation-state. The country was centrally organised and recognised only Macedonian as its official language.

For the people who did not belong to the majority nation - especially for the Albanian community - this meant a loss of rights: The former Yugoslavia was legally and factually decentralised to a certain extent, and Albanian was a language that could be studied in Pristina, for example. Since the rights of the Albanian population were not recognised in Macedonia's first constitution, most Albanian parties boycotted the independence referendum, although they favoured independence in principle.

Albanian parties have been involved in coalition governments from the beginning. The principle of the cross-ethnic coalition is considered an unwritten principle crucial for the country's cohesion. However, while the principle succeeded in integrating Albanian elites into the governance of the state, the rest of the Albanian population (and members of other small groups) faced multiple disadvantages in many areas of the state and society. In particular, non-Macedonians were hardly represented in the administration and the security apparatus. Non-Macedonians were also effectively excluded from other institutions.

6. All citizens need to enjoy the same human and civil rights, however, members of certain groups need specific additional rights.
7. There are no perfect solutions to ethno-cultural conflicts. Pragmatism and flexibility are key, both during the negotiation and implementation phase. The perfect should not be the enemy of the good.
8. The recognition of Albanian as a co-official language has been crucial for the post-Ohrid peace arrangement. If Syria would recognise Kurdish as a co-official language, the risk of linguistic segregation (concerning many North Macedonians) would not exist. Arabic as a language of inter-group communication is not contested in Syria.
9. Children need to be integrated across communities. Minority rights are important, but one shall not underestimate the unifying element of a shared language.
10. Education is the key element for integration for all communities.

The situation led to a conflict in 2001, which - before it could escalate - was settled through negotiation with international support. The negotiations resulted in the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which laid down 15 principles. Among the most important was the abandonment of the armed pursuit of interests and, in return: recognition of Albanian as a co-official language (especially admission of Albanian as a language of instruction at universities), special voting rules on essential bills in parliament (Badinter Principle), minority rights and use of symbols, and decentralisation.

Strengthening the cultural and primarily linguistic rights of the non-Macedonian community has made an important contribution to peace in Macedonia. At the same time, the right to education in the mother tongue has also led to certain segregation in education. Currently, the majority of Macedonian and Albanian schools are run separately. While most Albanian citizens also learn Macedonian, the reverse is different. For example, at the South East University in Tetovo, teaching is in three languages (Macedonian, Albanian and English), and all students are required to study the other national language for at least one year. However, the university is an exception in the educational landscape.

11. A majoritarian democracy constitutes a threat to non-majoritarian groups as they risk ending up permanent losers and risk disengaging from the state. Counter-majoritarian mechanisms incentivizing consensus democracy and compromise are, therefore crucial for the cohesion of the state. The Badinter Principle constitutes such a mechanism: it guarantees that the agreement of non-majoritarian groups is necessary for decisions affecting their interests (such as language rights, cultural rights, decentralisation, and the appointment of judges). Other mechanisms are bicameralism and qualified majorities.
12. As a rule, the majority group prefer centralised solutions, non-majoritarian groups tend to have a stronger interest in decentralisation as it allows them to profit from local self-governance. The implementation of vertical power-sharing is a challenge and the transition must be planned carefully.
13. Decentralisation is a complex issue and should therefore be treated in detail in the constitution. In North Macedonia, the constitution is too vague when it comes to power sharing. The centre is not sufficiently constrained.
14. Decentralisation must improve public services and development and people's life. It also must be enforceable.
15. Fiscal decentralisation is important: the centre always strives to accumulate power – if power doesn't mean money, it is easier to control these ambitions.

The Badinter principle has taken up and weakened the Albanian demand for a 2-chamber parliament. On important issues, namely when cultural and linguistic rights and decentralisation are concerned, there are two votes in parliament: On the one hand, the majority of the members of parliament must agree, on the other hand, the majority of the non-Macedonian members of parliament.

The party landscape is still largely organised along ethnic lines. However, in recent times there have also been successful efforts to gain votes from the other language group.

Decentralisation is regulated only in broad terms in the Ohrid Framework Convention and the Constitution. It is implemented by law. The first step was a territorial reorganisation of the country. The number of municipalities was reduced from over 120 to 84 (these are grouped into six regions). Because ethnic criteria also played a role in the reorganisation of the municipalities (guarantee of municipalities with an Albanian majority), the new borders were partly controversial.

Currently, decentralisation is in its second implementation phase. However, many areas are still largely centralised; this is especially true for the education sector, where the local level is currently only responsible for executing national education programmes.

16. Decision makers shouldn't be afraid to give real power to local governments, and international actors should have the right to support them directly.
17. The presence of ethnic, religious or regional parties is a symptom of a divided society. Their prohibition is not justified from human rights and democratic perspective and does not help to overcome such a divide but has the potential of deepening it. While the aim of preventing the ethnicization of politics is undisputed, party bans are, therefore not the aim to reach this goal. A political party law must ensure that all political parties have democratic structures.
18. It is important to enforce the constitution by a constitutional court which operates as a neutral mediator and includes all the groups. The role of the constitutional court should be to enforce all human rights and freedoms and to solve disputes between the central and local governments. Its competencies are crucial to protect the rights and freedoms of individuals and to control the executive. Moreover, it is essential how to appoint the judges.
19. In a society characterised by inequality, quotas are vital to represent ethnic and gender diversity. Their design must combine the need for inclusion and qualification requirements.
20. When politics are dominantly about economic development, social welfare and sustainability, ethno-cultural governance can be considered a success.

The municipalities are primarily responsible for local services. They have their own sources of funding. These mainly include property taxes and fees for local services. The rest of the costs are covered by transfers from the centre (as compensation for implementing educational and social tasks).

Although the Ohrid Framework Agreement came about with strong international participation, it was initially unpopular with the Macedonian majority population but is now largely uncontested. Ethnic issues are still of great importance, to be sure, and the coexistence of the various groups is fraught with tension. However, the main concerns of most Macedonians are social and economic development and preventing emigration.

21. Transitional periods must be planned, time limits and clear responsibilities are needed.

22. Civil society is a crucial, often neglected actor not only in conflict settings. Politicians sometimes stand in the way of peace and the implementation of peace agreements.

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