Institute for Regional and International Studies

THE PROCESS OF DECENTRALIZATION IN MACEDONIA:

PROSPECTS FOR ETHNIC CONFLICT MITIGATION, ENHANCED REPRESENTATION, INSTITUTIONAL EFFICIENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

WITH THE SUPPORT OF

THE REGIONAL NETWORKING PROJECT OF

FREEDOM HOUSE–EUROPE

FUNDING PROVIDED BY

THE UNITED STATES AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

SOFIA - SKOPJE

2006

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The process of decentralization in the Republic of Macedonia is being carried out as one of the major provisions of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), adopted in 2001, to provide political and institutional solutions to the ethnic conflict in the country. After 2001, the Macedonian Parliament developed and adopted a set of constitutional amendments and laws on decentralization starting the process effectively in 2005, preceded by a new territorial division of the country. Currently, the new administrative and political reality coexists with the challenges of reforms and the hopes for a European future.

The report developed by the Institute for Regional and International Studies - Bulgaria, Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" Skopje - Macedonia, and Freedom House – Europe, brings together empirical data and analytical assessment of the process of decentralization in Macedonia, and forwards policy recommendations to specific sectors of the target audience.

The research within the project identified a number of concerns regarding the decentralization process:

▪ The decentralization process since its very onset has been met with suspicion or outright hostility mainly because the political decisions and related legislative acts have been adopted without prior consultations with the public. The general public thus perceived these reforms very much in terms of secret political bargaining that collided with the public interest.

▪ As the cleavages in Macedonia run along political (left-right) as well as ethnic (ethnic Macedonian - ethnic Albanian) lines, the legitimacy of the decentralization has been undermined across these divides.

▪ Ethnic Macedonians fear that the ethnic Albanian dominated municipalities will eventually unite in one form or another, leading to federalization of the state – equated with secession and collapse of the state.

▪ The appointments of civil servants are very much along ethnic and political lines. This, along with the inequality of representation, is an obvious invitation to nepotism rather than professional competency.

With all the critical notes on decentralization, however, the Macedonian citizens have positive expectations from the decentralization process:

Macedonians in general demonstrate a positive attitude towards decentralization and the rationale behind it. A majority of respondents on local level (39,2%) say that decentralization is aimed at more successful local governance. Second comes the necessity to meet the requirements for EU membership – 28,4%, and then the need to fulfill the Ohrid Framework Agreement.

Points of departure for designing recommendations:

Analysis of the legal base of the decentralization process demonstrates that it corresponds to the European best practices. The major flaws in decentralization then will stem from inconsistent implementation, where good governance principles give way to: 1) partisan attitudes; 2) ethnic preferences; 3) corrupt behavior – or their combination in most cases leading to: a) poor delivery to the citizens; b) failure of reform; c) low legitimacy of the democratic governance process.

A success in the process of buttressing institutions locally may be further made possible through mobilizing public and political actors along non–ethnic lines, thereby allowing the functioning of local institutions as geared towards service and benefit delivery rather than strengthening of their respective, exclusive political standing.

Another assumption of this report is that local politics could be the breeding ground of a new type of politicians, being closer to the people, and therefore more responsive and more accountable to their constituencies. They would come to power in legitimate, bottom-up manner.

Recommendations to improve the process of decentralization include:

▪ Define precisely the usage of "Badinter" majority on local level. The full implementation of the double majority voting on local level is necessary to ensure representation and guarantee the rights of the minorities, including cases, when the majority on national level is a minority on local level. Special care should be made to balance ethnic representation with relevant professional competencies.

▪ Prepare and launch information campaign. Previous attempts did not seem successful. The shortage of knowledge on decentralization is a major handicap of the reform. Furthermore, the non-transparent way of decision-making is badly hurting the legitimacy of decentralization.

▪ Institutionalize consultation mechanisms with the broader civil society, especially local civil organizations. Establish civil society as the major ground for inter-ethnic understanding and involvement of citizens in the local decision-making process.

▪ Establish public-private partnerships with local governments to help funding, training, budget allocation, and the protection of local community rights vis-à-vis the central government.

▪ Assist local authorities with recruitment and training of staff – a key moment as new functions will place unprecedented burden on the local administrative and political elites.

▪ Assert on every occasion the European perspective of the country as this is a main source of mobilization across ethnic and political lines.

▪ The EU and other international actors should continue stimulating municipal and cross-border regional cooperation through both political and financial support mechanisms which encourage regional interaction.

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Sofia - Skopje 2006

THE INSTITUTE FOR REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES based in Sofia, Bulgaria, is an independent, non-partisan and non-profit think tank. IRIS is dedicated to developing strategies for democratic policy making. The mission of the Institute is to establish a link between academia and policy-making and to stimulate democratic development by generating policy analyses and recommendations. IRIS has established a high profile in Bulgaria, Southeastern Europe and the Black Sea area. IRIS' two programs – International Security and Democratization and Civil Society Development: Research and Training - continuously strive to bring IRIS' mission goals to fruition. In addition to its two operating programs, since 2003 IRIS has launched a new type of international activity through the project ''Partners in Peace-building in the Balkans'' in cooperation with the University of Maryland, College Park.

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THE INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY "SOCIETAS CIVILIS" SKOPJE (IDSCS) is a non-governmental, non-partisan, non-profitable and secular organization. It was established in 1999 as Institute for Democracy, Solidarity and Civil Society. Its goal is to work on the improvement of the democratic processes in Macedonia and on the development of the political culture of the citizens, mostly through implementation of scientific and research projects, through organizing lectures, debates and conferences as well as through its publishing work. At the beginning of 2006 the organization was rebranded in its actual name.

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