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MACEDONIAN ELECTION RULES: CITIZENS VIS-À-VIS POLITICAL PARTIES

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Abstract: *The Macedonian election rules, i.e. the setting of the electoral system, produce a double effect, an effect on the voter, and an effect on the party system. Therefore, each change in the electoral regulations would not only alter the voters' comportment but also impact the political parties. Considering these effects, the paper aimed to compare the attitudes of the citizens and political parties regarding the electoral legislature (both for the parliamentary and local elections); and produce adequate electoral solutions as a corrective for the detected shortcomings of the current regulations. The paper relied on content analysis of theoretical literature and research, empirical qualitative research based on citizens' focus groups from each region in Macedonia, questioned political parties, and additional data analysis. The ultimate findings propose a way to promote the equal value of each vote, proportional regional representation, and MPs' accountability at the parliamentary elections. For the local elections, the proposed solution referred to reducing the election cost, the possibility of political bargaining, and preserving the legitimacy of elected mayors.*

Keywords: *Electoral Regulations; Citizens; Political Parties; Parliamentary Elections; Local Elections*

INTRODUCTION

The electoral system is of exceptional significance for every state since it regulates the way citizens transfer their sovereignty and impacts the political structure within a given state.

The electoral regulation mainly delimited the possibility of voting for different options or voting for a smaller political party. Changes in these terms in the context of the Macedonian society would mean redistribution of forces in the national Assembly, i.e. greater participation of the smaller parties at the expense of the bigger ones. Although the Macedonian state, on numerous occasions, experienced changes in the electoral system directed towards larger inclusion of the citizens in the electoral process, more balanced representation of the ethnic communities, as well as towards reducing the number of lost votes, the evolutive process of finding the adequate electoral system is still open. The 20 year-practice of the proportional model with 6 constituencies, according to which seven voter turnouts have been organized in Macedonia, resulted in citizens' dissatisfaction with the overall political situation. Even though

the citizens' negative attitude concerning the electoral rules dominates and the wish for changes, consonance among the political parties will be lacking regarding the ensuing electoral model. Besides the differences between the citizens and political parties regarding the rules for parliamentary elections, there are differences concerning the local elections, especially related to the election of mayors. In this context, the paper aims to depict and compare the attitudes of the citizens and political parties regarding the electoral rules for parliamentary and local elections, which should result in novel electoral solutions. Such an approach focuses on the citizens' attitudes as sole carriers of sovereignty.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In a broader sense, the electoral system entails a compound of rules and procedures about the entirety of the electoral process, including the electoral right of the citizens, i.e. the entire electoral organization of the system (Karakamisheva 2004). As far as the narrower definition of the electoral system is concerned, it entails the process of transferring the electoral votes into mandates won through legally-regulated techniques and formulae. These rules influence the comportment of the voters and whether they would vote for a person or party.

The electoral systems produce a double effect on the voter and the party system. The latter defines how many political parties gain the status of legislative ones. These effects need to be gauged separately since the number of legislative parties does not derive only from the voters' decisions but from the manner of their transformation into parliamentary seats.

As a significant determinant of the electoral system, the party system represents the solid composition of political parties which compete in the elections. The system is characterized by the number of parties, the issues they advocate, and their similar forces (Bale 2009). The party system cannot be reduced only to the number and size of the political parties. However, it refers also to party interactions as the key element in explaining the position and role of the 'smaller' political parties. The position of the smaller political parties in a certain political system greatly depends upon the electoral model at play (Lijphart 1994).

Among the most important factors of the legal and political circumstances impacting the establishment, development, and entrance of the smaller parties in the representative house are the type of political system, population size, level of economic development of a state, electoral model, and satisfaction of the bigger parties (Horowitz and Browne 2005). Namely, the larger the size of the state's population and the higher its GDP is, the lesser the success of the smaller parties is. In contrast, the success of the smaller parties in the majority electoral systems directly correlates with the failure of the bigger parties. Also, the smaller parties have fewer success prospects than the bigger ones in a presidential system, where the focus is mainly directed toward a limited number of presidential candidates (Gerring 2005).

The proportional model ensures a higher level of representation of the smaller parties than the majority and the mixed ones. However, the electoral dimensions within the proportional model are influential in this sense. The size of the constituency and the level of the electoral threshold can produce effects of a majority system, even though the respective model is proportional (Naumovska 2011).

If the electoral system allows, the support of the smaller parties can be perceived as a 'venting' opportunity for the voters, through which they express their dissatisfaction with the bigger political parties. According to Belanger, mainly the old attitudes the voter had, lead to voting for smaller parties, while the newer attitudes of the voters can lead to voting abstinence (Belanger 2004).

A part of the electoral regulation reflects the way the citizens elect the local representatives in the local government, which is a form of governance in the local communities where the citizens, directly or through representative bodies and other local organs elected by the citizens, make decisions for the local interests and issues (Siljanovska-Davkova and Mitkov 2004). Concerning the local government organization, generally, three models can be identified: a model of a council, which presupposes the concentration of power in a collective body that can assign a mayor; a model of mayor-council, in which the power is divided between the mayor as the main executive and the elected council; and the model council-manager that presupposes assigning a professional city manager (Hague and Harrop 2007).

Despite being a proportional one, the current Macedonian electoral model does not ensure an entirely proportional distribution of the expressed will of the citizens, i.e. the number of the votes gained by the parties does not correspond with the distribution of mandates. Many lost votes and the different number of necessary votes to become a parliamentary representative directly consequences of the electoral system. Certainly, this situation negatively affects the number of political parties in the Assembly, meaning that it negatively affects the presence of the smaller political parties in it. Besides the dilemmas regarding the parliamentary elections, which generally refer to the number of constituencies (and subsequently the height of the electoral threshold), there are dilemmas regarding the number of election rounds for the election of mayors. The following text will elaborate on the citizens' attitudes and political parties respective to these issues with additional analyses to achieve the paper's aim.

DILEMMAS CONCERNING THE ELECTION OF PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATIVES

Proceeding the experience with the majority electoral model (elections 1990 and 1994) and the combined model (elections 1998), the last significant change is made for the elections in 2002, according to which the Macedonian parliamentary elections are organized per the proportional electoral model in 6 constituencies, with 20 parliamentary representatives elected from each constituency. Since the turnout in each constituency is different, this affects the number of necessary votes that should be won to become a member of the parliament. According to the data of the last elections (2020)¹, on average, in order to become a member of the parliament (MP) in the fourth constituency, it was necessary to win approximately 8500 votes (where the turnout is the biggest), while to become an MP from the sixth constituency, it was necessary to win around 6190 votes (where the turnout is the lowest). This situation of the unequal value of each vote represents one of the shortcomings of the current electoral model.

As well, the division of the territory into 6 constituencies does not ensure entirely equal representation of the political parties in the Macedonian Assembly, i.e. even though, on the

¹The basic data is gathered from the official site of the State Electoral Commission (<https://www.sec.mk/>). The calculations throughout the paper are attributed to the authors.

national level, a single political party can win more votes because of the distribution of the votes across constituencies, ultimately, it can win a disproportional number of parliamentary seats (at the last elections, this was the case with the political party Levica). This fact is also accentuated as a downside of the current electoral process.

Besides its direct influence on the number of political parties in the Assembly, this established model also affects the citizens' actions in the voting process.

To the end of overcoming the detected shortcomings, on many occasions, a procedure to change the parliamentary elections legislature has been initiated, which concerns the possible introduction of a single constituency (out of which all 120 parliamentary representatives would be elected) and the conditionally guaranteed mandates for the smaller ethnic communities (under 20%), while regarding the local elections, the requested changes refer to introduction of open lists for council elections and gender parity representation on the lists.

The Attitudes of the Citizens

Considering the citizens' satisfaction with their representatives in the Macedonian Assembly, according to the data of the research noted in acknowledgments: 'Views of citizens and political parties on the change of election rules', both in all constituencies and among all categories of citizens, there is a strong negative attitude and disappointment of the way the parliamentarians perform their function of representation of the citizens' interests. This attitude is argued by the citizens' numerous reasons and examples. Most of them consider that the MPs realize their own personal and party interests and receive excessive rewards for their engagement. They are predominantly loyal to the party leaders and do not realize the pre-election promises.

Box 1: Citizens' Statements (Source: Naumovska *et al.* 2022, 64)

"The least they do is represent the interests of the citizens. That is why I have not watched parliament broadcasts or debate shows for many years now. A complete disappointment in the election of MPs" (man, over the age of 65, Macedonian).

"They represent interests, but their interests, which are to win a 'tender here and a tender there'. Maybe they will do something, but for the citizens, 80-90% of them do not do anything. This is why all citizens are disappointed" (man, 50 to 65 years old, Macedonian).

"Before they become MPs, they visit the inhabited places, they promise everything, they pat you on the shoulder, let us win, then it is easy, once they win, we do not see them anymore. They put down roots there in Skopje; they get travel expenses, they fill their pockets with money, and they are just a voting machine, no matter which party they belong to" (man, 50 to 65 years old, Macedonian).

This is in line with the data from the research of public opinion conducted in 2021, according to which citizens think that the interest of the people is not at all in the focus of the MPs, while the party and personal interests dictate the MPs' actions. More concretely, 76% of the respondents state that the MPs always represent the interest of their political parties, 70% think that MPs represent their interests, and 57% consider that MPs represent someone's

business interest. At the bottom of the scale are the citizens' interests, for which 10% of the polled regard they are always represented by the MPs (Rechica and Jovevska-Gjorgjevik 2021). The same research provides the data that 65% of the respondents think that the MPs are not prepared to make decisions in the name of the citizens, as well as the data of exceptional significance for this paper, that around 60% of the respondents consider that the change of the electoral model for parliamentary elections would lead to a better quality composition of the Assembly.

More precisely, regarding the way MPs are elected, the attitude of the respondents of the research made by Naumovska *et al.* (2022) revolves around the strong stance that changes are necessary. There is general support for the equal value of each vote, leaving greater space for the smaller political parties and introducing a single constituency for the parliamentary elections, which would reduce the number of lost votes.

The respondents familiarized themselves with the possibility of changing the number of constituencies and thought that the bigger parties (VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, and DUI) would not support the change because it is unfavorable.

Box 2: Citizens' Statements (Source: Naumovska *et al.* 2022, 65)

"If votes are lost, why would we vote if our vote is worth nothing" (woman, up to 29 years old, Macedonian).

"They only see the party's interest and not the interest of the country" (man, 50-56 years old, Turk).

"With a single constituency with more participants in the government coalition, I think the Government will be more controlled by the smaller political parties so that the big ones will not have the luxury of doing what they want, in the classic sense of the word" (man, 30-40 years old, Albanian).

The Views of the Political Parties

Considering the views of the political parties regarding the change in the number of constituencies, out of 14 political parties inquired, 9 of them advocate or support the changes of the electoral model in the direction of introducing a single constituency. This group of parties comprises SDSM, LDP, Democratic Alliance, Integra, YOUR party, POEN, DOM, Alliance of Roma in Macedonia, and Democratic Party of the Turks in Macedonia. The accentuated arguments pro this change are the equal value of each vote, distribution of mandates proportional to the votes won, which means a realistic reflection of the citizens' affinities; equal opportunities for all parties; and create opportunities for new political ideologies. SDSM emphasizes that the reforms should be made with a consensus on this issue (Naumovska *et al.* 2022, 54).

The Albanian parties have various preferences. The Movement BESA states that it would be most appropriate if the Macedonian territory were organized into 3 constituencies. For the Alliance of Albanians, the adequate solutions would be 8 constituencies. At the same time, Alternative has not expressed a clear perspective on the matter, i.e. considers that the electoral model should "depict the reality and justice for every ethnic or political community" (Naumovska

et al. 2022, 54). According to DUI, the option for a single constituency is unacceptable because, allegedly, it would diminish the possibility of representing all smaller areas which would mean passing laws that are not in the interest of all. This change would mean diminishing the possibility of establishing and functioning a stable government.

According to the respondent from VMRO-DPMNE, a single constituency with a threshold would be acceptable, meaning the equal value of each vote and a stable Assembly. An alternative would be a majority model with 120 constituencies. Although at the time of conducting this research, the attitude quoted is personal, at the time-point of writing this paper, VMRO-DPMNE as a political party stands behind the concept of introducing a single constituency but conditioning this act with the organization of early parliamentary elections (Naumovska *et al.* 2022, 54).

Even though the party Levica did not participate in the research, this party is pro introducing a single constituency on the entire Macedonian territory. It was an initiator of the Draft Law on Amending the Electoral Code (2021). Although the citizens' attitudes are in line with the views of the political parties regarding the change of the legislature for parliamentary elections, the support of the bigger parties is conditioned (to reach a consensus - SDSM/to organize early elections - VMRO-DPMNE). Additionally, neither party of the Albanian block supports the introduction of a single constituency.

DILEMMAS REGARDING THE ELECTION OF MAYORS

As far as the local government is concerned, the state's territory is divided into 80 municipalities, and the City of Skopje and the election of mayors is realized in two rounds. For a candidate to be elected as a mayor in the first round, he must win at least half of the turnout votes if (cumulatively) a minimum of one-third of the total number of voters have exited the polls. Suppose neither of the candidates has won the necessary majority. In that case, the second round of elections is organized in which only the first two candidates have won the most votes in the first round. At the same time, the elected mayor is considered the one who was winning the majority vote, regardless of the turnout in the second round, i.e. the census is not determined in the latter instance. The dilemma referring to the local elections, which was posed as a question both before the citizens - participants in the research, and the political parties, is: in how many rounds a mayor should be elected, taking into consideration the cost of the elections, the political bargaining and the legitimacy of the future mayors.

The Attitudes of the Citizens

Faced with the information that if the election of mayors is organized in a single round, the elections would cost much less, and the possibility for political bargaining would be diminished, the citizens participating in the focus groups significantly supported the idea of reform towards a single election round for mayors. Many of the respondents accentuate the economic benefit of this endeavor and the harm of the phenomenon of political bargaining between the two rounds.

Box 3: Citizens' Statements (Source: Naumovska *et al.* 2022, 67)

"I think that in many aspects, it is better to go with one election round. From an economic point of view, it would be cheaper, and in terms of quality, nothing will change, and the result will not change at all. There are very small chances that something will change in the second round" (man, 50-65 years old, Turk).

"I favor one round. Whoever is good should be elected on time. Let's go with one round. No bargaining after that round" (man, over the age of 65, Albanian).

The Views of the Political Parties

Regarding the elections of mayors, the dominant stance among the political parties is that this process should continue to be organized in two rounds. With the current principle, 10 out of 14 parties are concordant (LDP, DOM, DS, DUI, BESA, AA, Alternative, DPTM, SRM, and POEN). The prevailing argumentation is based on the importance of the number of individual votes representing a democratic achievement. The larger civil inclusion in the process is far more substantial than the financial cost. The parties also emphasize the legitimacy of the mayors that would be challenged if the elections were organized in a single round (Naumovska *et al.* 2022, 60-61).

According to SDSM, even though the second round provides additional legitimacy to the elected mayors, it is open to a dialogue on this issue.

The remaining three political parties (VMRO-DPMNE, YOUR party, and Integra) support the introduction of a single round of election of mayors, accompanied by the main argumentation that the political bargaining would be avoided in such a way well it would cost less (Naumovska *et al.* 2022, 60-61).

ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS

Additional analysis is made for the election results from the local elections in 2017 and 2021 between the first and the second round. The analysis entails determining the number of municipalities in which the second round of elections have been organized, whose candidates have been first-ranked, to pronounce the changes from the votes won in the two rounds, and which final results are obtained.

At the local elections in 2017, out of 80 municipalities, the second round took place in 35 of them. Regarding the ranking in the first round, in 25 of these municipalities that organized the second round, the candidates who had won the most votes in the first round became mayors. In the remaining 10 municipalities, in 3 of them, the overturn was in favor of the AA, in 1 in favor of BESA, while in 5 municipalities in favor of the governing party SDSM. The party DUI made an overturn only in Struga. In the second round, VMRO-DPMNE won only 2 mayor offices, SDSM - 19 (it did not lose in any municipality where its candidate had been ranked as first and additionally made an overturn in 5 other municipalities), DUI won 8 municipalities, although in the first round it led in 11.

According to the summarized data from the two rounds, the coalition led by SDSM won the local elections with 57 mayors elected, including the City of Skopje. The coalition led by

VMRO-DPMNE won 5 mayors' seats, DUI-10, AA that for the first time competed at the local elections as a separate party, won 3 mayors' seats, BESA, DPA, and DPT each won 1 mayor. In comparison, 3 mayors' seats were won by independent candidates (Pankovski *et al.* 2021). The turnout at these elections was 60% in the first turn and 52% in the second.

At the local elections held in 2021, 43 municipalities and the City of Skopje were voted in the second round. The first-ranked candidates became mayors in 30 municipalities and the City of Skopje. In comparison, overturn was made in 13 municipalities. In 4, the difference between the candidates in the first round had been less than 100 votes (in the municipalities of Demir Hisar, Makedonska Kamenica, Pehchevo, and Chucher Sandevo).

Out of the municipalities in which an overturn took place in the second round in favor of SDSM were only the results of the Municipality of Chucher Sandevo, where the candidate of a group of voters was beaten. In favor of DUI are detected only the results of the Municipality of Kichevo, where the candidate of VMRO-DPMNE was beaten. VMRO DPMNE made an overturn in the municipalities of Demir Hisar, Konche, Lozovo, Makedonska Kamenica, Pehchevo, Kochani, and Resen. At the expense of the well-positioned DUI, the Movement BESA made an overturn in Zhelino and Tetovo. The party GROM candidate made an overturn in the Municipality of Karposh, and the candidate of LDP/DOM in the Municipality of Shuto Orizari.

According to the summarized data, the party VRMO-DPMNE won 42 mayors, SDSM – 16, DUI-11, BESA-2, AA, and Alternative won in 2 municipalities, while DPA, GROM, and LDP/DOM each won 1 mayor. Independent candidates became mayors in the City of Skopje, Kumanovo, and Debrca. The turnout at these elections in the first round was 51.44%, while in the second round, 49.65%. Generally, the diminished turnout was due to the voting in the City of Skopje because out of 10 municipalities in total, second-round elections were held only in 4 (the turnout at a city level is 49,23%, while in the second round (46,49%). In the municipalities where an overturn took place in the second round, a diminished turnout was noted only in the Municipality of Shuto Orizari. The biggest differences referring to the number of votes won in the second round (compared to the first one) by the mayoral candidates are noted in Tetovo (Kasami won additional 11000 votes), in Kumanovo (Dimitrievski won additional 10400 votes), and in Karposh (Jakimovski won additional 8000 votes).

From the elaborated data, it can be extrapolated that the citizens' dominant stance is that the local elections should be realized in a single round, thus diminishing the political bargaining and the cost of the elections, while among the political parties, the prevailing view is that the elections should be held in two rounds, by which the elected mayors gain greater legitimacy. According to the additional analysis results, an overturn occurs in a lesser number of municipalities. In the context of the overall political milieu, it can be presupposed that this results from dissatisfaction with the governance, mostly on the central (national) level.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the detected shortcomings of the current model of parliamentary elections (equal value of each vote, opportunity for voting for a smaller party in circumstances when the vote would not be lost, accountable MPs who would promote the interests of the citizens), as well as a result of the views of the parties (equal value of each vote, distribution of mandates according to the votes won, adequate regional representation), the authors consider that the adequate model with which introduction these downsides can be overcome in Macedonia, is the German electoral model. Due to its proportional dimension, this combined model guarantees equality of each vote, provides the possibility to vote for a smaller party, and adequately distributes the mandates. In contrast, the inclusion of the majority model ensures regional representation and greater accountability of the MPs before the citizens.

Regarding the local elections, to reduce the cost of the elections and the possibility for political bargaining but to preserve the legitimacy of the elected mayors, the authors recommend introducing the system of an additional vote. By this, the voters would have the opportunity to denote another candidate besides voting for their first-choice candidate if their first choice fails to enter the run in the second round.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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Statement of human rights:

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were following the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Statement on the welfare of animals:

This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any authors.

Informed consent:

Not applicable.

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