



ddlgn

SDC Network

Democratisation, Decentralisation  
and Local Governance

LEARNING PROJECT

Actors of local democracy – opening up the perspective

WITH WHOM AND HOW TO ENGAGE MORE IN LOCAL DEMOCRACY  
PRACTICAL RESEARCH

## Case study 1: Insights on religious and other informal authorities in Macedonia

Skopje/Bern, December 2014-January 2015

### **SUMMARY**

This work explores the role of religious authorities and other actors performing informal roles in governance processes in Macedonia. The report draws on findings emerging from qualitative data collected in December 2014 in four Macedonian municipalities, namely Arachinovo, Chucher-Sandevno, Debar and Strumica. The case study is embedded in a larger DDLGN learning project entitled “Actors of local democracy – opening up the perspective”. The analysis focuses in particular on the role of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Religious Community, but also considers the connecting or mediating role played by other actors.

### **Key findings**

In the Macedonian context, **trust state in institutions is limited** and many people rely on their social capital and existing networks as intermediaries regarding public issues. Religious authorities emphasised that trustworthiness within their community is an essential asset (“the most important skill of a religious authority is creating trust”).

We found that religious authorities play a **variety of roles in governance processes**, including representation, leadership, conflict mediation, legitimisation and mobilisation. In a context of significant information scarcity, the role of **information broker** is a particularly important one.

Religious authorities are only **one of several institutions playing an intermediary role**. Other important intermediaries include educated people in a “helping profession” (doctors, principals, teachers), elders, known “fixers”, successful business people and a “person whose word goes” (in Albanian, *atij/asaj që i ec fjala*), a trusted person with a good public image.

**Legitimacy** is an important consideration: many people, especially in rural areas listen to and respect the opinion of religious authorities (“imams and priests do not control the minds of people but they have influence”). We noted cases of political parties and state institutions “buying-in” legitimacy from religious and other authorities. However, several municipal representatives and NGO workers **questioned the legitimacy** of religious and other informal actors being involved in governance processes.

Particularly in a highly divided society, staff of implementing organisations, **may not have good contacts or be informed** about how religious authorities work in other communities. While more local NGOs may have tacit knowledge about informal actors, it is a topic that is rarely addressed explicitly in project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Local governance processes are affected by the particular **power and political dynamics within a specific local context as well as relationships at different scales**. Most governance actors (including religious authorities) are parts of “bigger” institutions, such as political parties or religious institutions that operate at other scales than the local.

Informal authorities such as religious authorities may be **restrainers or drivers of change independently of institutions**. The case study shows that it largely depends on leadership and may change depending on the local context, issue and time.

### **Implications and recommendations**

The case study shows that local governance, particularly in a context of political transition, is not limited to state institutions. A **plurality of different actors is engaged in producing governance**. In that regard, in order to effectively influence governance through programmes/projects it is important to **take into account the whole range of actors and their multiple roles**.

While religious authorities may seem “unusual” partners from the point of view of development organisations, we found that in some contexts they play a **key and very “usual” role in strategies for accessing public information and services**. The question thus is to analyse their specific roles in a given locality and to assess whether they are drivers or restrainers of social change in given public policy areas.

To inform these reflections, **local context analyses are essential**. When dealing with local democratic governance, this case study illustrates that in terms of informal actors municipal contexts differ even in a small country such as Macedonia. These local contexts should also be placed within the **frame of a more systemic analysis that looks at relationships of power and influence at different scales**. This implies specific analyses (e.g. political economy and power analysis) that should be oriented towards retention of knowledge within, for example, national implementers, think tanks and research institutes.

Findings suggest that SDC should **not directly engage** religious authorities on a programme basis or in a programme management scheme. We recommend proceeding with **caution**, considering potential risk both to SDC/implementing partners as well as to the informal authorities themselves (who may derive some of their legitimacy from independence).

However, based on shared local problems and issue-based programming, entry points can be identified for which **associating informal authorities** such as religious authorities may be valuable and realistic. The aim of bringing such types of authorities on board (i.e.

invitation to consultation meetings, sharing information) – would be **increasing the potential for them to be a driver**, and/or **reducing chances they will be a restrainer**. This calls for **dynamic and differentiated analysis** and could be one way to take into account the fact that a plurality of different actors is involved in producing local governance.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This case study research was conducted within the frame of the DDLGN learning project entitled “Actors of local democracy – opening up the perspective”. The question of working more politically on local democracy, and with a wider range of actors, had been raised through the DDLGN in several contexts and the important role of “unusual” intermediaries was suggested in earlier learning projects. Based on this significant demand from its members, DDLGN initiated a learning project in 2014.<sup>1</sup>

On the basis of a questionnaire and a series of follow-up interviews, the learning project mapped SDC’s existing experience with a series of “unusual actors”, identified actors Swiss Cooperation Offices (SCOs) think SDC should work with more, and highlighted a number of issues requiring further reflection.<sup>2</sup> Several clusters of actors were identified, including:

- Traditional and religious authorities – non state institutions that often have considerable authority and informally influence democratic governance processes<sup>3</sup>
- Legislative branches of government at different levels (parliaments, local councils)
- Youth, young political activists, youth wings of political parties, student unions
- “Not-like minded” actors, who may block or work counter to pro-democracy initiatives, such as certain armed groups or business interests
- More constituency-based, even if not registered, civil society organisations

The information collected in the mapping exercise showed the importance of several types of actors with “invisible” or “informal” power.<sup>4</sup> By this we understand actors or spaces that are part of the (local) political context but are not imbued with formal legal local government authority. Our findings suggest that there is a wish among DDLGN members to understand better both the spaces and processes through which “informal authority” is claimed, negotiated and reinforced and what role these authorities play in local democracy and governance processes.

In a second step, a series of case studies are being conducted in order to deepen the reflection in a more contextualized way. The case studies aim to a) analyse both the constitution of traditional and informal authority, its legitimation, and how this kind of authority is influenced by and influences on-going processes of democratization and b) identify interventions SDC could support in order to strengthen the accountability and inclusivity of these authorities and associated governance spaces and processes. Overall, the case studies seek to provide answers to the following questions:

- What is the role of thus far less targeted actors with regard to local democratic governance and in particular with regard to citizen participation, social accountability and social inclusion?
- What is the role of these actors in influencing public policies that enables – or hampers – local democracy?

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<sup>1</sup> Please also refer to DDLGN (2014) *Learning Project on engaging with “thus far less targeted” actors in local democracy: Concept Note*. The learning project is implemented for SDC’s DDLGN through a partnership between HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, swisspeace and the Institute of Development Studies. This report is authored by Lukas Krienbühl and Sarah Byrne, with inputs from Ana Blazeva, Besim Nebiu, Didier Péclard, Jens Engeli and Anu Joshi.

<sup>2</sup> Please refer to DDLGN (2014) *Learning Project on engaging with “thus far less targeted” actors in local democracy: Actor Mapping: Synthesis & Analysis*.

<sup>3</sup> The exact nature of these institutions varies considerably from context to context.

<sup>4</sup> Our understanding of different kinds of power and the spaces through which they operate is informed by the “power cube”, see <http://www.powercube.net/>

Three countries were selected for case study research, based on a) their interest in knowing more about the way traditional or informal authority influences governance and b) geographical distribution. In all three cases, notions of “tradition” constitute important political capital, though this is mobilised in different ways. The case studies conducted and planned are:

- Macedonia. December 2015. Focus on religious authorities in informal governance.
- Tanzania. February 2015. Focus on traditional authorities in informal governance.
- Mongolia. March 2015. Focus on homeland associations in informal governance.
- Fourth case study to be confirmed and conducted in summer/fall 2015.

The present report summarises the findings from the first case study in Macedonia – conducted jointly by HELVETAS, swisspeace and IDS – and some preliminary reflections on implications for DDLGN.

In Macedonia, the chosen focus was “religious and informal authorities” that mediate local democratic governance processes. This is based on the assessment of the SCO in Macedonia that such authorities potentially play a key – yet often overlooked – role. The information in this report is based on exploratory and empirical research conducted by the learning project team, together with the support of two Macedonian researchers, as well as secondary literature. The analysis also builds on a previous DDLGN case study on Macedonia within an earlier learning project on civil society participation and accountability<sup>5</sup>, the decentralisation assessment using political economy analysis conducted by IDS in 2012<sup>6</sup> and recent research on the role of semi-informal *mesni zajednici/ bashkësia lokale* (local communities).<sup>7</sup>

This research starts from the assumption that a plurality of different actors is involved in producing local governance. In that regard, our findings suggest that in order to influence governance through programmes one has to take into account the whole range of actors, including “unusual” informal or religious authorities. The roles of informal and formal actors may overlap and it is not always easy to disentangle roles or relationships. Interactions between state and informal actors are an everyday part of democratic governance processes in many contexts. The question therefore is to analyse the specific roles of such unusual actors in a given local context and to assess whether they are drivers or restrainers of social change in given public policy areas.

## 2 INFORMALITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS<sup>8</sup>

In many parts of the world local democratic governance functions – service delivery, dispute resolution, representation and electoral politics – are influenced or mediated by local informal institutions that operate wholly or partly outside the formal structures of the state. In some places, they may even substitute the state by providing services that the state is not providing or is providing ineffectively.<sup>9</sup> Informalities also imply that citizens often need the relevant connections to access (certain) public services as well as employment in the public sector.<sup>10</sup> Informality may be closely related with clientelism (personal aspects) and corruption

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<sup>5</sup> Arefaine, M. and I Mehmeti. 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Mohmand, S. and A. Acosta. 2012.

<sup>7</sup> *Mesni zajednici/ bashkësia lokale* are semi-formal neighbourhood governance bodies originating in the socialist Yugoslav times. See Mohmand, S. and S. Misić Mihajlović. 2014; as well as Misić Mihajlović, S. 2014.

<sup>8</sup> This brief introduction is based on a literature review conducted by IDS.

<sup>9</sup> Mohmand, S. 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Koutkova, K. 2013.

(material aspects), both of which relate to the lack of responsiveness and accountability of political decision-making and are widespread in the Western Balkans. In post-socialist countries, informality is sometimes cited as a coping mechanism developed to deal with a scarcity of resources under communism, though closer inspection tends to show such practices also pre-dating the socialist period. Informality can also be understood as a phenomenon bridging the gap between the mismatch in the speed of institutional political reforms and socio-economic transformation, which might lead to mistrust of state institutions by citizens.

Research in other Western Balkan countries shows that citizens in the region see informal rules and institutions as rather unacceptable, but still turn to them given the inefficiency of formal institutions.<sup>11</sup> While some informal institutions can coexist with formal institutions and contribute to democratic consolidation, practices by informal and state actors such as corruption can seriously subvert the processes of democratic consolidation.<sup>12</sup> Informal relations may be functional in the place of formal institutions in the sense that they complement them or that they compensate weak institutions. However, informal structures are also attractive to political elites because they are more flexible than formal ones and can change and adapt more rapidly.<sup>13</sup> Informal authorities therefore have a range of functions relevant for governance processes, functions that may enable certain social inclusion but that also marginalise some citizens and communities.

By informal actors this research defines actors that are not state institutions or formally registered NGOs but play an often less visible role in the local democratic governance arena. Religious authorities, for example, even though recognised as institutions are often overlooked as player and power-holder in local governance processes. For this reason, we analyse religious authorities as “informal” governance actors. This research also looks into informal communication practices and spaces in governance, meaning that they do not follow the formal institutional-administrative procedures. Other layers of informality such as corruption and criminal activities are beyond the scope of this study.

### **3 SETTING THE STAGE**

#### **3.1 Socio-political context in Macedonia**

Macedonia’s socio-political context represents a transition from socialism towards democratic pluralism that has not yet been achieved and that has created social insecurity. The transition process was also punctuated by a brief armed civil conflict in 2001, which put issues of inter-ethnic relations between Macedonian and the Albanian-speaking communities, amongst others, on the agenda<sup>14</sup>. The post-conflict settlement, agreed on in the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA), emphasised democratic decentralisation and inter-ethnic power sharing. Recent trends, however, show autocratic and centralising tendencies on the part of the government. While still prevalent today, informality as a practice has roots in strategies for dealing with governance structures going back to Yugoslav and even the Ottoman times.

Macedonia has recently been characterised by a number of trends. First of all, European integration and NATO membership processes are important driving forces, although a

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<sup>11</sup> UNDOC, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Marcic, S. 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Gallina, N. 2011.

<sup>14</sup> See International Crisis Group. 2001.

number of interviewees doubted the interest of the current government in EU accession.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the last years have been marked by nationalistic and increasingly authoritarian policies of the central government.<sup>16</sup> These have focussed on (ethnic) Macedonian nation-building, coupled with a centralising trend in decision-making. This appears to counter the efforts at political decentralisation implemented since 2001, which were promoted by the government and donors as a response to inter-community tensions. Administrative and especially fiscal decentralisation efforts have been limited. A large number of municipalities work individually, lacking coordination between themselves and the other regional and national governance levels. Public service delivery is often lacking in efficiency.<sup>17</sup> The participation of citizens in local governance is in general relatively low in Macedonia, with municipalities somewhat distant from citizens.

The contested 2013 and 2014 elections consolidated the power of the leading VMRO-DPMNE party of Prime Minister Gruevski relying on his constituency within the Macedonian-speaking majority as well as the allied Albanian-speaking party Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). These two parties share power at the national level as foreseen in the OFA and mainly compete with other parties within their ethnic constituency.<sup>18</sup> The main opposition party (SDSM) is rather weak and only holds power in three municipalities. This situation implies a high degree of dependency of municipalities on the central level with allegedly widespread corruption and clientelistic relationships.

Switzerland is currently one of the largest bilateral donors remaining in Macedonia, while most cooperation funds come from the European Union. The Swiss cooperation strategy focuses on the rule of law and democracy, alongside the domains of water and environment as well as economic development<sup>19</sup>. Under the domain rule of law and democracy, Switzerland seeks in particular to increase the accountability and transparency of local government and administrations in order for them to provide efficient services to citizens.

### **3.2 Religious and informal authorities in Macedonia**

In Macedonia informal authorities do not replace the state, but rather coexist with the state with specific intermediary functions. In our research, we found that relationships between citizens and local governance institutions are at least partly mediated by a range of locally anchored informal actors. Religious authorities emerged from our findings as intermediary actors that can be both drivers and restrainers (of local democracy, social inclusion, inter-ethnic dialogue, etc) and that perform various roles in local governance. While religious authorities are not themselves informal actors, we use the lens of informality to analyse their often overlooked role and potential contribution in local governance. By and large, the ethnic divisions between Albanian-speaking mainly Muslim communities and Macedonian-speaking mainly Orthodox communities also run along religious identities. Some political parties, which are also ethnically defined, use religious symbols and traditions in their political discourses. In this section we briefly describe the main actor groups we analysed including the Orthodox Church and Islamic communities as well as other informal authorities such as social movements and *mesni zajednici/ bashkësia lokale*.

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<sup>15</sup> See EU progress report. 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Some analysts suggest that this is part of a broader regional trend. See, for example, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lse/2015/01/28/bieber-attacks-on-media-are-part-of-a-regional-pattern-of-authoritarian-temptation/>

<sup>17</sup> See Mohmand, S. and A. Acosta. 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Daskalovski. 2014.

<sup>19</sup> SDC. 2012.

### 3.2.1 The Orthodox Church

The Orthodox Church is perceived as being close to the VMRO-DPMNE led government, which uses religious traditions in its nationalistic rhetoric focusing on a Macedonian-Slav national identity to mobilise the electorate. Many interviewees confirmed that the ruling party, businesses and the Orthodox Church are closely interlinked. For example, public land has been provided to build new privately-funded churches.<sup>20</sup> Since its split from the Serbian Orthodox Church in the 1960s under the Yugoslav communist regime, the relationships of the Macedonian Orthodox Church with the Macedonian Republic has been close. One interviewee belonging to the clergy stated that the politicians currently in power are misusing the triangle between nation, tradition and faith to strengthen their political position. When activists opposed the government's plan to build a Church on the main square of Skopje in 2008, counter-protests were led by Church representatives but independent news reports suggested that VMRO-DPMNE was behind most of the protestors. At the time, one Bishop intervened and publically condemned violent counter-protestors on Facebook calling them unorthodox, which led to strong debates within the Church.

The Orthodox Church is mainly seen as a restrainer of change. Yet, some Orthodox religious authorities seem to have an intermediary role when it comes to local governance processes, at least in some municipalities. For example, they refer citizens to the relevant institutions or send a messages in support of people to a public institution. One high Church representative explained that the Church should not only perform spiritual tasks, but also engage in the community and express its opinion on specific matters (reproductive health, education etc...) without entering all secular debates. He confirmed that the Church like other actors is formally consulted on various laws and takes part in various consultation committees at the national level. At the local level, informal regular meetings with mayors take place in many municipalities and hence represent an "invited space". However, the Church, based on its religious foundation, generally defends conservative opinions. Its stronger engagement in recent times has been heavily criticised by civil society organisations and opposition parties as a threat to the secularity of the state.

### 3.2.2 Islamic communities

Muslims in Macedonia have diverse identities, belonging to five different ethnic groups and adhering to different beliefs and practices within Islam.<sup>21</sup> However, the majority of Muslims in Macedonia are Albanian and adhere to the *Hanafiyya* school of Sunni Islam. The Islamic Religious Community (IRC) of the Republic of Macedonia (a Sunni institution) is the officially registered authority of Muslims in Macedonia and is recognised in the constitution. However, other smaller groups maintain independent organisations. At the local level, key institutions include mosques, as well as religious schools (madrassas). Mosques each elect a mosque council, appoint an imam responsible for spiritual leadership, and are affiliated to one of the 13 muftiates in the country.

As interviewees pointed out, Islam has a long-standing tradition in Macedonia and its institutions, such as the muftiate, pre-date those of the current state. However, both interviewees and the literature we reviewed, attest to a growing importance of religion in general, and Islam in particular, in public life.<sup>22</sup> This is related both to national dynamics of

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<sup>20</sup> Inbox7. 2014.

<sup>21</sup> The 2002 census indicates that 1/3 of citizens of Macedonia identify themselves as Muslims. Census figures are contested by the Albanian community in Macedonia.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Blumi and Krasniqi 2014, Iseni 2007.

democratisation and ethnicised political conflict as well as international dynamics related to the role and status of Islam.

Islam has been politicised in the contested nation-building context of Macedonia both by the state and by the Albanian community, though in different ways.<sup>23</sup> Islamic religious symbols and discourses serve as “proxies” in claims for control of territory and institutions, both among Muslims and in response to claims made by other communities/institutions. The Islamic Religious Community has become an arena of contestation between different interest groups, including religious sects (contestation over the role of Salafism) and political parties (competition between the two main Albanian parties), which have at times led to serious crises.<sup>24</sup> The Islamic Religious Community is also involved in an on-going dispute with the government of Macedonia over compensation or return of nationalised assets including land and buildings. Mosques play a role in social mobilisation, with recent protests emerging from Skopje’s main mosque following Friday prayers.

The Islamic religious authorities we spoke to expressed that they understand their role as going beyond the walls of the mosque. In terms of their relationship to political parties, we heard different views. These included suggestions that Islamic authorities only get involved in party politics at the time of elections, and then only in an in-between the lines manner, that the IRC is linked to one of the Albanian political parties, or that the Islamic authorities would not support any political party because none of them is fighting for a return of their property.

### 3.2.3 Other informal authorities

In the past, limited social mobilisation has taken place, some of the more successful regarding environmental issues, such as air and soil pollution in Veles. In the region of Debar, a significant social mobilisation is on-going in protest of government plans to divert the Radika river by building a dam in what is now a protected area.<sup>25</sup> Since November 2014 proposed reforms in the higher education system have triggered protests across university towns and in particular in Skopje. This mobilisation is linked to resistance against the authoritarian turn of the government and the lack of perspectives due to high youth unemployment and a job market controlled by political parties. Other issues where significant civic mobilisation has happened include peace marches in 2012 in response to an outburst of ethnic violence, protests for justice in the case of a young boy murdered by police, protests against the rise in cost of energy, and protests against building a new church in the main square of Skopje. Moreover, there have been several cases of mobilisation along ethnic lines, for example in summer 2014 of Albanian-speaking youth against court verdicts regarding a murder case.<sup>26</sup> Mobilisation in the urban setting is strongly influenced by social media. The central government appears to be using the media they control or administrative procedures<sup>27</sup> to co-opt or restrain NGOs as well as businesses.

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<sup>23</sup> There was no consensus between our different sources on the linkages between Islam and the Albanian political parties, for example on the extent to which the political parties emphasize a Muslim identity. Further research would be need on this topic. Although a majority are Muslim, Albanians in Macedonia also belong to Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant faiths.

<sup>24</sup> One example is the conflict between the imam of Isa Beg mosque in Skopje and the Macedonian Islamic Religious Community, with the latter accusing the former of spreading radical Islam.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, <http://www.nzz.ch/international/europa/das-letzte-refugium-des-balkan-luchses-1.18420829> and <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/feb/20/balkan-dam-boom-threatens-europes-last-wild-waterways>

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, <http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2014/07/04/world/europe/ap-eu-macedonia-court-protest.html>

<sup>27</sup> Attempts to organise referendums remain stuck in cumbersome administrative processes regarding the construction of a Church on the main square in Skopje in 2009 for example (see Troshanovski, M. and M. Popovic. 2011).

Regarding the role of *mesni zajednici / bashkësia lokale*, their role in local governance appears to be very limited in Macedonia compared to other countries in the region<sup>28</sup>. Evidence gathered during interviews confirmed that even if MZ are based on the Law of Local Self-Government in Macedonia, they do not have a legal entity (e.g. no bank account) and have no independence but rather exist as sort of appendix of municipalities. Evidence suggests that MZ are not functional or only very selectively in the municipalities covered. In addition to the weak legal status of MZ, interviewees suggested other reasons for MZs' relatively limited role. On the one hand, it was suggested that MZ are not needed in small municipalities, where it is easy for everyone to access the municipality itself. On the other hand, it was suggested that municipalities want to retain decision-making power themselves. A more in-depth analysis would be needed to understand better the (non) functioning of this institution in a wider set of contexts.

#### 4 METHODOLOGY

This case study is based on interactions with some 60 persons, in the form of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and informal exchanges.<sup>29</sup> Over ten days in December 2014, a five-person research team spoke with religious leaders, local councillors, *mesni zajednici/ bashkësia lokale* representatives, NGOs, municipal officials, members of grassroots initiatives, journalists and citizens. The research was inductive and exploratory in nature, following a series of guiding questions that had been agreed with the SCO in Macedonia.

The focus was put on four municipalities chosen for specific characteristics by the SCO and the research team namely:

- Debar: mixed municipality along the Albanian border with an Albanian-speaking majority
- Strumica: municipality governed by the main opposition party with a Macedonian-speaking majority and a Turkish minority
- Arachinovo: periurban Albanian-speaking municipality in the vicinity of Skopje
- Chucher-Sandevo: periurban municipality governed by an independent mayor with mixed population (Macedonian, Serbian and Albanian-speaking communities) in the hills surrounding Skopje

Our findings build on these four empirical settings. The case study also shows that one cannot make generalizations about how informal authorities operate across localities even within a small country. By focussing on a small number of localities, our strategy was to try to understand the role of religious and informal authorities in a contextualised and situated way. That being said, having triangulated our findings both with key informants in Skopje and Bern and secondary literature, we think our findings are relevant inputs for a more general reflection.

Due to the limited duration of our “fieldwork”, access to interviewees was enabled through existing networks of the Macedonian members of the research team. For example, most of our interviews in Debar were facilitated by a local NGO. Through these contacts we were able to access a wide range of potential interviewees within a limited timeframe. In general, we used the “snowball” method, at the end of each interview asking for recommendations of other people we should speak to.

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<sup>28</sup> Mohmand, S. and S. Misić Mihajlović. 2014.

<sup>29</sup> The list of interviewees will not be published, because the data has been anonymized due to the delicate nature of some of the information shared.

Furthermore, our research could not expand into topics of corruption and organised crime. While we consider these very relevant issues when analysing governance in Macedonia, the duration of data collection in Macedonia and the sensitivity of the topic informed our focussing on the informalities related to religious and other authorities.

On the topic of informalities, the research team would also like to acknowledge that access to most interviewees was enabled through “informal capital”. This means that organising interviews boiled down to knowing someone who knows the potential interview partner, getting a phone number and calling based on the personal reference. This informal and mainly oral communication already gives hints in regard to the role informal authorities play when it comes to governance processes. It was usually not possible to show up unannounced or without a contact, which also hints at the low level of trust in institutions. This way of working has also been confirmed by journalists who said that personal contacts are central to gathering information, while institutional mechanisms are less important.

Most interactions were conducted in Albanian or Macedonian languages and were translated into English either during the exchange itself or afterwards. Most interactions were conducted in a group of two researchers, of mixed genders and nationalities. We took notes either during or after the interviews, and these were later jointly analysed looking for key themes and patterns. In some cases where we felt that trustful relations had been established with our interview partners, we sketched stakeholder maps as an alternative entry point to understanding relationships in the governance arena.

## 5 KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE CASE STUDY

The key insights rely on data from the four municipalities covered as presented in chapter 7. In order to provide a rapid overview, we have summarised it in the following table.

*Table 1: Characteristics of four municipalities covered*

Municipality	Size, location	Composition	Key characteristics	Informal actors
Arachinovo	Rural/ periurban close to Skopje  Approximately 15-16,000 people, though figures both outdated and contested	Predominantly Albanian	Significant destruction of infrastructure and livelihood assets during the war  Very high unemployment	Religious authorities prominent, otherwise seemingly little civic engagement
Chucher-Sandevo	Periurban close to Skopje; several villages in rural and mountainous setting. < 10,000 people.	Macedonian-speaking plurality with large Serbian and Albanian minorities; latter lives in separate villages	Governed by independent mayor, very limited interactions between Macedonian/Serbian communities and the Albanian-speaking community	Informality in governance associated with spaces such as main street, shop, bus. Association of veterans.  Orthodox priests (with no influence); no access to Albanian community

Debar	Located in the far west of Macedonia, at the border with Albania  Approximately 20,000 people, though figures both outdated and contested	Albanian majority in both the town of Debar and the municipality. Macedonians, Muslim Macedonians, Turks, Roma and other communities also live there	Long history of good inter-ethnic relations  The former mufti is the currently the mayor (DUI)  Significant out-migration	A wide range of formal/ informal civil society, incl. a civic movement opposing the planned diversion of the Radika river  Good relations between different religious leaders
Strumica	City and surrounding villages in south-eastern Macedonia; 50,000 people	Predominantly Slav-Macedonian, Turkish Muslim minority	Opposition stronghold, economically successful	Orthodox Bishop, Imams of Turkish community, strong business community; relatively free local media

### 5.1 Who are informal authorities; how might we identify them?

In order to try to get a well-rounded picture of the different intermediaries who mobilise, influence and connect people around local governance issues, we asked our informants through which kinds of persons we might try to reach out if we were new in a locality and wanted to organise something. We also asked who citizens would contact besides the municipal institutions regarding public issues. The following are some of the responses provided:

- Religious authorities – “imams and priests do not control the minds of people but they have influence”
- Doctors, school principals, teachers, (educated people in a “helping profession”)
- Village elders (association of veterans)
- Friends of the mayor (people close to power, “fixers”)
- “A person whose word goes” (in Albanian, *Atij/asaj që i ec fjala*), a trusted person with a good public image
- Other potentially influential people, e.g. successful business people

As different informants indicated, in Macedonia many people only trust state institutions to a limited extent. This is why the role of intermediaries is potentially important to build trust with the community. Significantly, the listed actors all use their power in both visible and hidden (and even, to a certain extent) invisible ways. Religious authorities, elders, doctors and teachers are effective intermediaries because they interact with different kinds of people on an everyday basis. Thus, they have a good network, an understanding of who is who and of the different issues people in the community face. As an imam explained to us, regular contact with people creates feelings of trust. Spatially as well, places where different kinds of people meet such as the hair salon, the mosque, the bus or the town square/main street were identified as connecting points. Other influential persons can be identified by going to local festivals, as all important formal and informal leaders attend these events.

The Albanian term “a person whose word goes” refers to people who have a good public image, who are engaged for the community (not for money or party politics). Thus, as an interviewee pointed out: “we are talking about institutions but the most important factor is the character of the person!” Interviewees indicated that it is a good strategy to get such “people whose word goes” involved in public initiatives. Across the board, leadership, power

structures and the individual stance of intermediary actors on specific issues are the factors that enable them to play various mediating role in local governance.

## **5.2 Informal authorities perform a range of governance functions**

Our analysis confirms what was already suggested by the mapping exercise: different kinds of actors can play different roles at different times. The actual role played at any one particular time is dependent on a number of factors including personality, power relations, interest etc. Using the analytical frame proposed by Piper and Von Lieres, we note that the informal authorities we examined may at different times work as “diplomat”, “educator” and/or “captor”.<sup>30</sup> However, in a context of significant information scarcity, we observe that information broker is a role common to the different informal authorities we analysed.

On the basis of our research, we identify several different roles played by informal authorities in local governance (above and beyond such roles as, for example, providing spiritual guidance). They are summarised in the table below.

*Table 2: Roles of informal authorities*

<b>Roles</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Information broker	Intermediary communication point in information flow; pass along messages; feedback provider towards citizens and municipality	Calling the municipality on behalf of a group of citizens Sharing information from the municipality in the community
Representation	Representing and participate in advisory councils and meetings on behalf of the community	The Hodja representing the Turkish community in a domestic violence advisory committee in the municipality Participating in official city festivities
Leadership	Elected leaders of a membership based organisation	Muftis and mosque councils are elected by the members of the mosque with responsibility for organisational leadership
Conflict mediation	Mediate local conflict within the community; finding common ground	Imams/ muftis resolve issues of interpersonal relations or conflicts between families

<sup>30</sup> Piper and von Lieres. 2014.

Legitimising participation, mobilisation or state institutions	By publicly stating support, legitimising citizens' participation; compatibility of engagement with religious dogma	Along with other notables, the main religious authorities in Debar (mufti, Orthodox priest) signed a petition against the diversion of the Radika river.  At the same time, they may be co-opted by political parties that seek their support.
Mobilizing citizens	Raising awareness among community and motivating citizens to act/participate	The Hodja mobilizing Turkish women to take part in activities to prevent and raise awareness about domestic violence
Providing state-like services	Provide services that the local government is usually providing	No concrete example in our sample of cases, but this represents a potential role in other contexts.

### **5.3 The question of legitimacy of informal authorities**

One essential question when reflecting on informal authorities is about their credibility and acceptance as intermediary actors between citizens and local government. Religious authorities emphasised that trustworthiness within their community is an essential task and asset (as one informant expressed it: “the most important skill of a religious authority is creating trust”). It is important to note that several municipal representatives and NGO workers questioned the legitimacy of religious actors being involved in governance processes, pointing to the separation of church and state. At the same time, in most cases some degree of informality was recognised as part of local governance. In general, it seems that the legitimacy of informal and religious actors tends to depend on individuals and how they carry out their spiritual and secular engagements, rather than the institution itself.

In both Debar (former Mufti being elected as mayor, President of the Association of Former Political Prisoners becoming Head of the Municipal Council) and Strumica (Turkish women leader becoming municipal employee), political parties and the municipal administration have “brought in” legitimacy from other legitimate authorities in specific communities. In Debar, the former mayor had been discredited by corruption allegations, and a clear strategy to choose more reputable candidates seems to have been in operation. However, the legitimacy of the mayor’s shift from religious authority to secular (municipal) authority was not without contestation.

Environmental protection seems to be one of the public policy domains that allow religious authorities to claim legitimate and largely uncontested engagement which is compatible with their religious role and dogma. Indeed, the religious background and discourses informing the public positions of religious institutions of different denominations tend to be politically conservative in many governance areas. Although individual authorities might take different stances, health (e.g. reproductive), education or social welfare (e.g. services for drug addicts)

are public issues on which religious authorities are unlikely to be drivers of progressive social change. Their involvement in those areas may even be perceived as problematic in regard to the secular nature of local governance. Only in isolated cases and based on individual initiatives can religious authorities become drivers and mobilizers in those public domains.

Although some interreligious dialogue is taking place in municipalities, exchange remains limited. Debar, with its longstanding tradition of interreligious dialogue, seems to be an exceptional case in this respect. In general, we found only limited evidence for the role of religious authorities in dealing with intercommunity relations. When protests and interethnic riots broke out in 2011 about planned constructions on the Kale fortress in Skopje, both the Orthodox Church and Muslim leaders jointly condemned violence in the media and called for stopping construction work. However, very few such joint initiatives were mentioned during the interviews. Moreover, several interviewees stated that the existing interreligious dialogue is very general (e.g. agreement on a joint anti-abortion position) but does not tackle the intercommunity issues in the society. As one Orthodox priest put it, in order to contribute to solving intercommunity problems in such a tense political environment, religious authorities first need to be well-accepted, trusted and legitimate within their own communities.

#### **5.4 Informal authorities as restrainers or drivers of change**

Informal authorities may be restrainers or drivers of change independently of institutions: It largely depends on leadership and may change over local context, issue and time. The role of restrainer or driver in regard to local governance is complex, because the overall assessment of an institution may or may not correspond to the reality on the municipal level. Although usually perceived as restrainers of change, religious authorities, both Orthodox and Muslim, may be drivers based on individual characteristics (leadership) but also depending on the governance issue at stake. The Orthodox Church of Macedonia is considered as closely associated with the ruling party and corrupt businesses; nonetheless, as the case study shows, some priests gain enough local legitimacy to mobilize communities around specific public issues. Moreover, the norms and power relationships perpetuated by religious authorities should be carefully assessed since they might be incompatible with secular democratic processes or certain governance issues. Informal intermediary roles may also be based on corruption and clientelistic networks as negative externalities, which should not be trivialised.

Religious authorities are quite aware of the importance of perception. For example, a mufti explained to use that they do not actively support political parties because they do not want people to think they have hidden interests. Other informants emphasized that in the Islamic community religious authorities' support for political parties was generally something to be read in between the lines and not explicitly articulated. This calls for a detailed analysis.

The question therefore is what positive or negative role are informal authorities playing regarding which governance issue? What impact does that role have on the functioning of the state at local level?

#### **5.5 Awareness and knowledge about informal processes by implementers**

National, Skopje-based NGOs, the “usual” SDC implementers, appear to have limited knowledge when it comes to specific roles of informal and religious authorities in governance processes in specific municipalities and on specific local public issues. NGOs based and working in the same municipality have better insights but still do not necessarily show a high degree of awareness regarding the roles of informal actors such as religious authorities. In

particular, knowledge about power structures and informal authorities in other communities of the municipality (than the one that they belong to) seems to be lacking. This is one strong argument for diversity in NGO staffing.

Directly and indirectly implementing NGOs mainly work on the supply side (with the municipality) and the demand side (with citizens) of governance with limited reflection or proactive engagement with “unusual” intermediary actors. The engagement tends to be ad-hoc and rather limited in scope, for example, inviting religious authorities to attend the inauguration of public infrastructure supported by an NGO.

We found only limited evidence of a more strategic interaction with informal authorities such as religious leaders. As an imam suggested to us: “Maybe sometime you will take into consideration the voices of those who are not heard”.

## **5.6 Little evidence of grassroots mobilisation**

Social mobilisation around public issues has been limited in Macedonia in recent times. Evidence from the case study confirms this assessment. Only in regard to environmental issues (pollution, river diversion) has there been large mobilization, with the notable exception of recent student protests against reforms of higher education.

During interviews, the recent mobilisation and protests along ethnic lines especially of the Albanian-speaking community (regarding new buildings on the Kale fortress in Skopje or the conviction in summer 2014 of six Albanian Macedonians for charges of ethnically motivated murders and terrorism) were surprisingly almost never mentioned. Our informants indicated the important role of mosques in catalysing social movements, with protests often starting after Friday prayers. But when asked which kinds of issues people mobilise around, the emphasis was placed on issues of local infrastructure and environment.

The case study also showed strong activism on social media. When we asked how one could find out about (emergent) social movements in Macedonia, we were advised to just search Facebook for “civil movement + Macedonia”. Even though the educated population in urban centres use it a lot, rural and more remote communities, as well as elderly people, seem not (yet) used to this type of communication. In these cases, the role of religious authorities as information broker appears all the more important.<sup>31</sup>

## **6 IMPLICATIONS FOR DDLGN**

### **6.1 The state is not the only producer of governance at local level**

In a transitional phase such as from socialism towards a more democratic form of governance with the occurrence of a limited yet armed conflict, institutions are often not consolidated. The institutional model of governance (i.e. one that focuses only on formal institutions and their relationships) therefore has its limits because it does not account for the great deal of informality and other informal but often legitimate actors performing specific governance roles at the local level. The case study findings suggest that the plurality of actors should be at the heart of reflections around local governance, given that governance is also produced at the informal margins of the state. Asking the question about how to engage with unusual actors is the next step.

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<sup>31</sup> Religious authorities themselves also make use of social media. For example, sermons by one of the imams we met are available on Youtube and pictures of the different religious leaders meeting the US Ambassador (together) when he visited Debar are posted on Facebook.

## **6.2 Municipal context matters**

To inform reflections, local context analyses are essential. The sample of cases illustrates that every municipality is different in terms of informal intermediary actors, even in a small country such as Macedonia. Given that informal and in particular religious authorities overall appear rather as restrainers of change in the Macedonian context, the analysis of realities in each municipality is a prerequisite for identifying the informal intermediary drivers on specific governance issues.

However, this focus on specific local contexts does not mean that analysis should only look at them in an isolated way. It is important to understand relationships at different levels. Most governance actors are parts of “bigger” institutions, such as political parties or religious institutions, that operate at other scales and both influence and are influenced by the actions and authority of these institutions. For example, a particular religious leader may be influential at a local context in terms of local governance, but also at a national level within their religious institution. Or intra-party dynamics can affect politicians’ strategies in local arenas. Influence can also be felt at an international scale, for example the influence of members of the diaspora. In other words, by zooming in on specific municipalities, we should not lose sight of their inter-connectedness to other levels and spaces of governance. Insights about dynamics at the municipal level should eventually be linked to the wider context, in particular to complementary studies and analysis on higher levels to better understand the implications and linkages of informal actor within the political system.

This finding implies:

- a) Using analytical tools, in particular power analysis and political economy analysis (at least a lean version) to reveal the relevant informal and formal power structures and actors in specific municipalities, but not to claim that knowledge gained is necessarily valid in other municipalities
- b) Linking that analysis to the other levels of governance and power
- c) Relying on in-country research institutes and think tanks to retain knowledge while systematically building on tacit knowledge within implementing organizations.

DDLGN should continue its reflections about approaches and the integration of existing methodologies – adapted and broken down to the local context – in order to account for political realities at the local level and make them accessible for implementing partners.

## **6.3 About engaging informal and religious authorities**

Our analysis suggests that SDC should not try to directly engage religious authorities on a programme basis or in a programme management scheme, because the programme logic is not well adapted to the relational process involved in working with informal and religious authorities. Moreover, in Macedonia religious institutions, in particular the Orthodox Church, are rather perceived as restrainers of change because of their closeness to the ruling party and their politically conservative position on several public issues.

Based on thorough understanding of the municipal context, governance and issue-based programming should however consider informal authorities such as individual religious leaders as intermediary actors to be considered in the implementation phase of programmes if they have been identified as drivers of change regarding the issue(s) at stake. This engagement is particularly relevant if such intermediary actors could also turn into restrainers if not associated. Furthermore, their linkages from the local up to national level needs special attention to better understand their powers and agendas in governance, differentiating

between actors whose influence remains local and the ones whose networks reach out to national structures of power. Positive experiences with informal authorities acting as drivers may also inspire actors who might be more restraining.

This implication is in line with recommendations from recent work by ODI, which suggests that instead of picking partners according to “cookie cutter categories” that may not reveal much about real incentives at play, rather focus on what process is needed to create change on local and/or even up to national level. And, on the basis of the defined process and “game changing characteristics” required, select organisations or individuals to be involved.<sup>32</sup>

Thus we suggest that such associating engagement is reasonable and feasible, if:

- a) Implementers are more aware of the roles of informal and religious leaders in the specific municipal as well as wider contexts. A reflection on how this is best done is needed
- b) Some communication channels have been established and relationships are fostered with informal authorities (visit, inform, invite)
- c) The intermediary roles of informal authorities correspond to the project reality (role as mobiliser, legitimiser, information broker etc...) and impact directly democratic governance
- d) Power structures are analysed and understood on the horizontal (local) but also vertical (link to other levels) axis (including risk awareness of involving informal authorities)

It is important to note that involving informal authorities (e.g. religious as well as unregistered civil society) may also make them vulnerable. Becoming more engaged with political and or developmental activities opens them up to the risk of being instrumentalised by different actors, including in exclusionary identity politics. For religious authorities, this engagement might entail stepping outside of their formal religious/spiritual functions. For unregistered civil society, engagement could imperil their independence. As a member of an un-registered civil society movement told us: “everyone who is part of the system can be controlled”. In both of these cases, their claim to legitimacy rests to a certain extent on them staying outside of everyday political party activities and electoralist play. A more prominent role in local governance processes would bring these actors closer to these activities than they may wish to be.

Therefore involvement should be voluntary and be compatible with both SDC rules and principles and those of the concerned religious institutions. Additionally, SDC should be aware of its own positioning and thus outside perception by different partners and actors (being associated with engaging e.g. religious authorities).

#### **6.4 Shared local problems as entry points**

As one interviewee (an MZ leader) explained: “normal people are connectors. When they have things to do together normal people are not dividers.” We suggest that shared local problems may be entry points (even beyond social and political cleavages). These include, for example, local public infrastructure or environmental issues. This implies that issue-based programming can rely on different approaches and not only focus on an institutional approach. This would allow taking into account more informal, but relevant actors of governance processes. In countries with unstable institutions and where institutions are not fully trusted by citizens, the institutional model of governance has limited and unpredictable impact because it does not account for the great deal of informality.

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<sup>32</sup> Tembo and Chapman. 2014.

There seems to be an overall lack of information about governance and service delivery processes in the municipalities. This might be related to the complicated administrative processes, but also due to the lack of available information. This may enable to work *within the existing governance system* (from local up to the national level), which was stressed as important point both by people associated with religious institutions and religious leaders themselves. Information and community communication might be an entry points for reaching out and associating with informal authorities in local governance.

While we have provided initial recommendations in this report, this case study should not be seen as the end product of the learning project. Rather, it aims to be an evidence-based contribution to ongoing and future reflections within the DDLGN (and the Swiss Cooperation Office in Macedonia).

## 7 FINDINGS FROM FOUR MUNICIPALITIES

### 7.1 Arachinovo

#### 7.1.1 Key features

Arachinovo is a mostly rural municipality located on the edges of Skopje city. According to our interviewees it is one of the poorest municipalities in Macedonia, with over 80% unemployment. The municipality has some 15-16,000 inhabitants settled mainly in four villages.<sup>33</sup> There is also significant out-migration both seasonally and for longer periods, due to the high rate of unemployment.<sup>34</sup> Almost all of the residents of Arachinovo are Albanian.

Our interviewees in Arachinovo emphasised the difficulties faced due to lack of basic infrastructure (water supply, sewage, solid waste management) and services, such as public security or transportation. With regards to sewage, the municipality has developed a project for a primary network, and the villagers would build the secondary network themselves. However the scale of the investment that the primary network would require is beyond the capacities of the municipal budget (approximately 160,000 euros) and thus outside support is sought.<sup>35</sup>

The municipality was characterised as somewhat “unsettled” in the sense that many of its inhabitants had settled there relatively recently after having moved “down” from more remote mountainous areas. Arachinovo was the site of heavy fighting during the 2001 civil conflict. Signs of battle are still visible on some older buildings. Our informants suggested that the socio-economic effects of the war, and in particular the fighting that took place in Arachinovo, can still be felt. For example, some families lost much of their livestock and other livelihood assets, significantly setting them back.

For this reason and for reported connections to organised crime, our interviewees suggested that the municipality is “marked” by the central government and media. Interviewees suggested that Arachinovo is a “deprived” place and is specifically discriminated against in government policy (such as the attribution of special economic zone status) and practice (e.g. staffing the police post). Our interviewees claimed that there are imbalances in un/employment and business investment along ethnic lines in the country in general, and

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<sup>33</sup> Municipal officials cautioned that these figures are only estimates as there has been no census since 2002. At that time the population had been reported as 10,000.

<sup>34</sup> Apparently there are many people from Arachinovo living in Switzerland. There is a grocery store on the main street of Arachinovo village called Migros.

<sup>35</sup> See <http://www.haracina.gov.mk/?p=213>

between Arachinovo and neighbouring municipalities. This imbalance was cited as a source of tension and conflict risk.

The mayor of Arachinovo was elected in 2013, after having served three terms as a municipal councillor. His profession is teacher, and he was formerly the principal of the elementary school in Arachinovo. Three political parties are represented in the fifteen member municipal council. Like in Chucher-Sandev, our interviewees confirmed that the councillors usually vote in the same way, despite belonging to different political parties because they all want to find solutions to the many very practical problems of the municipality and its citizens.

### 7.1.2 Role of religious authorities

Our findings suggest that religious authorities (Islamic religious communities) play an important role in public/social life in Arachinovo, including in issues of local governance. In contrast to the deplorable state of public infrastructure, there are seven mosques in Arachinovo municipality and an eighth is currently under construction. These mosques were all damaged during the war and have been rebuilt through the private initiatives (financial support and labour) of citizens.<sup>36</sup> When questioned about the different scale of civic engagement/investment in religious infrastructure compared to public infrastructure, one of our interviewees suggested that citizens feel a different sense of duty or obligation to religious institutions compared to public/state institutions (at least in the specific Islamic context under analysis here). This observation suggests that a rights and duties-based analysis is useful in understanding the relationship between citizens-state-religious institutions. According to our interviewees, people in Arachinovo are generally quite religious and some (those who can) even take a day off of work on Fridays.

Cooperation between the municipality and religious authorities is reported to be good in Arachinovo. Our interviewees confirmed that Friday prayers are an important gathering point. When the municipal administration needs to engage the population they bring the imams and mosque councils on board. The municipal administration also proactively request the imams to use the Friday prayers to transmit information that the municipal administration would like to communicate to citizens. The imams first have a meeting with the mayor to understand the details of the issue, including technical aspects, and then serve as a link to create a good cooperation between the municipality and citizens. While the municipal administration also organises direct meeting with citizens, they assessed that they go through the mosques more often. This role is also recognised by citizens: our interviewees suggested that they consider the mosque to be a place where one can go to be informed and educated about different issues. Interestingly, it seems that coordination among the different imams serving in Arachinovo is relatively informal and takes places when they meet during the performance of different religious rites like weddings and funerals.

In addition to the communication role, and their spiritual role, religious authorities seem to be very much involved in mediation and conflict transformation within the community. We saw this also in Debar (see section 7.3), but in Arachinovo this role seems to be even more prominent due to the security vacuum (no police are posted to the police station at the entrance to the village). Our interviewees suggested that the role of religious authorities has increased in this context: they have to mediate and resolve conflicts, because “institutionally speaking, no one else is dealing with the situation”. According to the imam we spoke to

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<sup>36</sup> Our informants confirmed that the funding had mostly come from local sources.

Arachinovo, the main goal of a mediation process is building trust. They start from a theological basis, sharing Koranic verse and explaining the logic and sense of it to both parties. The mediator does not take sides, but tries to find a common ground.

In general, the imam suggested that religious authorities should stay away from politics because otherwise they risk to get “infected” by it. Religious authorities are influential people and should be attentive to how this influence is used, he suggested. The job of an imam is not to spread political influence but to find common ground between people. Islamic scholars have reflected on the question of the relationship between religion and politics - this is not a new question – and there is a scholarly basis that serves as guidance in finding a balance on these issues. The borderline between “public service” and politics is, like in many contexts, a construction site.

### 7.1.3 Other kinds of actors

Different allusions were made to the role various criminal organisations in Arachinovo (mostly by interviewees in Skopje) but this is not a topic we pursued in our short research. We did, however, inquire about the role of *mesni zajednici/ bashkësia lokale* in Arachinovo. Our interviewees confirmed that they exist formally but are not active. The reason given for this was a very practical one: in a municipality as small as this one people can easily take their concerns directly to the municipal administration. In other words: “why go to two doors instead of one?” The only cited example of the role of *mesni zajednici/ bashkësia lokale* is in certain legal processes where the MZ have a legally mandated role. There is apparently one NGO in Arachinovo but it is not active. The municipal administration/council stated that they do not have any cooperation with foreign organisations/development partners, though they are very much interested in this and are actively pursuing opportunities. For the NGOs we met in Skopje, Arachinovo seems to be a total black box. Though being on the periphery of Skopje, a short drive from the centre of the city, the municipality seems to be very much “off the map”.

## 7.2 Chucher-Sandevo

### 7.2.1 Key features

The municipality of Chucher-Sandevo covers several villages on the hill range above Skopje with the main settlement being Mirkovsti and Kucheviste. Although the municipal centre is the former, due to the lack of appropriate buildings, the municipal administration is located in the cultural centre of the later. The municipality has less than 10,000 inhabitants<sup>37</sup>. Roughly half of the population are ethnic Macedonians, with large Serbian-speaking (30%) and Albanian-speaking (23%) minorities. All three groups are represented in the local council. While the Macedonian and Serbian-speaking communities live in mixed villages, the Albanian-speaking population mainly lives in the more mountainous, very remote areas close to the borders of Kosovo. The municipality is governed by an independent mayor who is also a successful businessman. It is unclear if he has a close relationship with the ruling party VMRO-DPMNE. Interviewees confirmed that except during election times, political confrontation is not paralysing the local council, because all face the same problems and have similar priorities at the municipal level.

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<sup>37</sup> Latest census 2002: State Statistical Office. 2005.

### 7.2.2 Informal authorities in Chucher-Sandevó

In the periurban, but rural setting of Chucher-Sandevó, many citizens appear to be quite religious and follow religious traditions such as celebrating “slava” for the family saints. Yet, all interviewees confirmed that at least in the Macedonian and Serbian-speaking communities, the local priests have a bad reputation and would not perform any intermediary function between citizens and the local government. The lack of trust in the local priests implies that they do not seem to have any influence on governance processes and are not actively involved in advisory boards or commissions in Chucher-Sandevó. Only one priest takes part in some *mesni zajednici/ bashkësia lokale* meetings as citizen, not taking position as religious representative.

When talking about informal authorities, both a local councillor, several municipal employees and citizens asserted that beyond the formal administrative way which is used by citizens, involvement and requests from citizens to the municipality (including the administration, the local council and the mayor) are often communicated in the “open public space”, namely the main street between the municipality offices and the local shop or in the bus to/from Skopje, when citizens address councillors or municipal employees. The municipality also uses those channels by publishing announcements in the local shop, so that the information is spread in the communities. In particular a group of retired men who often spend time in front of the local shop seem to take on the role of spreading municipal information in their larger families. As one informant explained, they are formally organized in a “veteran partisans’ association” although many of them did not fight during the Yugoslav liberation war (during WW2) but still relate to that association. This informal public space appears nonetheless as restricted to people how can afford to travel to or work in Skopje (bus), but also to citizens who spend time in that public space (in front of the shop in the main village) and have the necessary personal relationships. One female municipal employee stated that mostly men engage her in such informal communication.

Although the municipal office is quite accessible and some efforts have been put into formal consultation processes, one leading municipal employee complained that citizens do not want to engage, but would just approach him in the street or call him when they have a problem or a specific request. *Mesni zajednici/ bashkësia lokale* are used to a limited extent in the municipality and only function when the issue to be discussed really affects the lives of citizens. The municipality informs citizens about MZ meetings by posting date and venue in front of the local shop of the main village. Women but also people not concerned by a given issue would not participate, as one interviewee put it. Some consultations take place between the presidents of MZs and the local council. Nonetheless, interviewees repeatedly acknowledged that when it comes to local governance informal communication channels are prevalent and most efficient “because people know each other”.

### 7.2.3 Citizen engagement

A young citizen explained that youth does not participate in public life in Chucher-Sandevó, except in some cultural or sports activities. According to her, they engage in governance processes only by joining political parties to get jobs. One local councillor wanting to engage youth on a voluntary basis in the development of basic tourism activities (signposts, website, map) in the municipality, only got the answer “how much do you pay?”. Nonetheless, several interviewees were more optimistic that the young generation is open and willing to engage in formalised participation mechanisms in the municipality.

There are almost no active local NGO in Chucher-Sandevò, except a local cultural NGO called “Vuk Karadzic”. Some external NGOs have tried to launch activities in the municipality, including on women participation and entrepreneurship. However, the proposed grant scheme was a huge failure because the NGO had no network in the municipality, was not able to mobilise any woman or intermediary actor to access the target group. This might also be due to the fact, that Chucher-Sandevò although only 20 minutes away from Skopje seems to be a “black box” for most of the bigger national implementing NGOs. It was challenging to set-up contacts in the first place and the research team had to show up without confirmation of a formal meeting.

#### 7.2.4 Interethnic relations

Although the municipality is home to different ethnic communities, the Albanian villages are only loosely integrated into the municipality. Almost all Macedonian and Serbian-speaking interviewees confirmed that they do only have very limited contacts with Albanian-speaking people. One councillor when talking about schools explained that there are two in the municipality, and after some time corrected himself saying that there are in fact the two schools mentioned plus one for Albanian-speaking children. The communities therefore have parallel, geographically separated lives within the municipality. The informal governance spaces rather seem to exclude the Albanian-speaking minority. Open tensions or grievances are not apparent, but this might also be due to the fact that the communities hardly interact and that the research team was not able to conduct interviews with any representative of the Albanian-speaking community of Chucher-Sandevò. Only one interviewee mentioned a case some time ago when Church land was sold to an Albanian businessman: citizens opposed that move and filed a complaint. The deal had to be cancelled.

### 7.3 Debar

#### 7.3.1 Key features

Debar/Dibër is a municipality in the far west of Macedonia, on the border with Albania. The population is majority Albanian, both in the town of Debar and in the municipality overall. Other communities living in the municipality include Macedonian Muslims, Macedonians and Roma. The municipality has a population of about 20,000 people, but census figures are contested and there is significant migration (both seasonal and more permanent). Though it is now peripheral to both countries, Debar used to be an important centre among Albanians and was known for having a highly educated population and significant cultural capital. At present road connections to Skopje are relatively poor, according to our interviewees, whereas a road from Albania has been under construction for some time.

Like in Arachinovo (though perhaps not to that extent), unemployment is very high in Debar. A key employer is the “Knauf” factory, a business which is very much valued in Debar.<sup>38</sup> The scarcity of jobs leads to two processes that tend to divide people. The first is significant out-migration of Albanian residents of Debar. A key destination is Brooklyn, where, according to our interviews, people from Debar find employment in the construction (roofing) and hospitality industries (hotel doormen). One interviewee suggested there are at least half as many people from Debar living in the United States as in Debar itself (more when migrants in European countries are included).

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<sup>38</sup> A sign with the Knauf logo is hanging in the entrance hall of the muftiate.

The second issue (which is a more general case in the country, and indeed, the region) is that accessing jobs requires political party contacts. Consequently, jobs emerge as a key patronage resource for political parties that can control them. In the case of Debar, even though it is ruled by the Albanian party currently in the government coalition, our interviewees suggested that (public sector) jobs are allocated by the ruling (Macedonian) party VMRO-DPMNE. Several examples were cited, including recent hirings at a local hydropower plant. This seems to take on an ethnic dimension as well as a partisan one because, our interviewees suggested, employment opportunities are significantly being allocated to a minority community in Debar (who, it is claimed, support the ruling party). Like in Arachinovo, this perceived ethnicisation of the distribution of public resources is a significant source of tension. A further reflection (alluded to in other parts of this report) is the politicisation of religious institutions, in this case the Orthodox Church, and the role of partisan relations in career advancement within that institution.

Debar's mayor was elected in 2013, on the ticket of the DUI party. This is his first term in local government, having previously been the Mufti for many years. Likewise, the Chair of the Municipal Council is from the same party and also serving his first term. He is also the President of the Association of Former Political Prisoners of Debar, and is vice-President of the Association at a national level. This appears to be an interesting example of political parties attracting local leaders with significant authority, respect and legitimacy to enter the fray of local government. In both cases, as a former religious leader and a former political prisoner, these two gentlemen were perceived to be principled leaders with integrity and to have a somewhat different profile than career politicians. The shift in function from religious authority to local government authority on the part of the mayor was not without contestation in Debar.

### 7.3.2 Role of religious authorities

Debar is well known in Macedonia for particularly good inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations (and indeed was cited as an exception in this respect). This an historical legacy and was explained as a tradition that people keep up out of respect to their ancestors. Our interviewees listed several historical precedents of people from different communities in this locality protecting their neighbours in times of conflict. The fact that while both religious communities are present in Debar one is clearly in a majority position affects potential for competition/conflict. A local Roma leader also pointed out that communities live in an integrated way in Debar so there are ample opportunities to interact around issues such as schools, streets, etc. A further influential factor appears to be good personal relations between the former long-time Mufti (currently the mayor) and the Orthodox priest responsible for the large parish that includes Debar. The latter is someone who speaks out even on a national scale and not only on behalf of members of his own Church.

A religious authority we spoke to in Debar suggested that, aside from the spiritual realm, religious authorities should be engaged in "real life" social issues, such as poverty, unemployment, social protection, humanitarian issues and housing/shelter. In this respect, and even in terms of spiritual guidance, they should work for the general community interest, not only for their "flock". This religious authority suggested that the community itself is mixed and dynamics are intertwined, which implies taking a more holistic view and taking responsibility to provide support to anyone who asks. It should be noted that this particular interviewee's commitment to social justice issues appears to be on the greater end of the spectrum of opinions we heard. However, he also noted that there is not much that religious

authorities can actually do on these issues and that the main voice in society is from political parties.

The leaders of the different religious communities in Debar attend each others' religious festivals – i.e. the Islamic religious authorities attend mass on Christmas and Easter. The leaders of both religious communities believe that by doing so they set an example of interaction and joint celebration (beyond just parallel co-existence as seems to be the more general case). In setting this example, the religious authorities are strategic in their use of the media, ensuring that they will be reported/photographed together. The local media also in general take a position of promoting tolerance, it was suggested.

Like in Arachinovo, religious authorities play an information sharing role and are also engaged, particularly in the case of Islamic authorities, in conflict mediation within the community. Like in Arachinovo this was expressed as a role in dealing with things that no other institution deals with: issues of interpersonal relations that state institutions are not able or called to address. An Islamic religious authority in Debar informed us that when people quarrel, religious authorities are always able to stand in the middle and resolve the situation. Religious authorities told us that they have not tended to work directly on development projects, having a more consultative role. They also get involved in public events, such as campaigns against domestic violence. They are aware that when they show up, people will take an initiative more seriously.

### 7.3.3 Other authorities

Like in the other localities we visited, MZs are not perceived to be particularly active in Debar. The MZ leader we met explained the limited status of the institution in Macedonia, as we outlined earlier. NGOs, however, seem to be very active in Debar and implement a variety of different kinds of projects on behalf of international donors. Several of them have benefitted from civil society support made available through Swiss cooperation. In some cases, these organisations represent specific interests, such as Mesecina, which represents/works with the Roma community in Debar. The relatively vibrant space of civil society in Debar also includes organisations like a pensioners association, chamber of commerce, a dairy producers association, groups of people with disabilities, etc. Other organisations have a more general focus on community development or environmental issues more generally.

In addition to these organised groups, there is a more general social movement active in Debar. It is related to an ongoing contestation over the government's plan to divert the Radika river. This would divert the water away from Debar (it is being used for agriculture), as well as the causing environmental damage (the plan is to build a dam in what is currently a protected area). This protest is well connected to environmental groups in Skopje. They have also taken the protests across the border to Tirana, as the water currently flows into Albania and it is suggested that diverting it would contravene international agreements.

Most of the NGOs we spoke to in Debar were involved in one way or another with this movement. As were the religious authorities, who have signed various petitions and have attended different events. The engagement of religious authorities in this issue was couched in terms of general support to community interests and protection of life/nature. The Radika river movement puts the mayor in a difficult position because the diversion of the river is being promoted by a government in which his party is a coalition partner. It is also perceived to have an ethnic dimension, taking water away from Albanian areas and diverting it for the benefit of Macedonian areas.

In the context of the Radika river movement we also identified a non-registered civil society organisation. This is a small group (mostly women) who are interested in developing an independent civic movement that is not associated to political parties and registered NGOs (though the members were associated with NGOs previously). The members of this group say that the political leaders and NGOs are part of “the system” and thus cannot act independently in the interests of the local population.

## **7.4 Strumica**

### **7.4.1 Key features**

The municipality of Strumica is situated in the south-eastern corner of the country close to the border to both Bulgaria and Greece. It is a regional agricultural and economic centre, which has performed comparatively well in economic terms. The municipality is a stronghold of the opposition leader Zoran Zaev, who is also mayor of the city and president of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM). It is only one among three municipalities in Macedonia that is controlled by the main opposition party SDSM. It is important to note that due to this fact, the media reports about Strumica are quite different at the local level where access to information is still relatively free and the national level where only stories which are positive for the national government are published by media outlets. Local information gathering proves to be even more important.

The municipality has more than 50,000 inhabitants in the city and surrounding villages with a large Macedonian-speaking Orthodox majority. The Macedonian Turks, which are predominantly Muslims, are the biggest minority with about 7%<sup>39</sup>, living mainly in poor neighbourhoods of the city and in villages. Many Macedonian interviewees stated that the “Turks” are in fact “Roma and Gipsies” and only declare themselves as Turks in order to get out of the stigmatisation trap. When interviewed, the people from this community insisted on the fact that they speak Turkish as main language including in their families and defined themselves as Turkish-Macedonian community. Interviews in Strumica therefore focused both on the Macedonian majority and the Turkish minority.

### **7.4.2 Local knowledge about informal authorities**

In general, the impression generated during the interviews is that the “usual” indirect implementers and beneficiaries including local NGOs and the municipality have only limited knowledge about informal local power structures and the role of informal authorities especially in other communities. Only few have thought about proactively engaging religious authorities for example. They mainly rely on work with the municipality and citizens in the communities they have access to. A number of informants argued that they have used known local personalities from sports and culture to mobilise citizens, because citizens engage more easily in activities in which famous people are participating. It is also important to note that although mentioned when talking about “informal authorities” in Strumica, illegal business practices and corruption is not the focus of this analysis.

### **7.4.3 Role of Orthodox authorities in Strumica**

Given that the ruling party at the national level VMRO-DPMNE has strong links with the Orthodox Church, it is particularly interesting to see what role the Orthodox Church plays in a municipality governed by the opposition party SDSM. According to many interviewees, the

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<sup>39</sup> State Statistical Office. 2005.

representatives of the Orthodox Church neither mediate the relationship between the citizens and the local authorities in Strumica, nor are they visible publically, for example in the media. In the urban Macedonian communities of the municipality, especially among youth, the Church only seems to have a limited influence while at the same time other interviewees asserted that some religious personalities in particular the Bishop (Metropolitan Nahum) are influencing political processes but without giving clear explanations. One informant, who is in charge of a social service provision project based on monastery land but not related to the clergy, stressed that the Bishop was very helpful in establishing contacts with the municipality, in reaching a formal agreement with the local government and in mobilizing businesses to perpetuate self-sustainability of the project. Moreover, the Church helped to raise awareness about needs of drug addicts and to make the project accepted in the neighbourhood. Because of that support, he could establish his social NGO with some services later transferred into the local public health system. Despite this pivotal role, the Orthodox Church has not tried to influence the project because monks have internal codes forbidding them to get involved (e.g. in project boards or committees) and the clergy did not want to take influence on activities. The interviewee also stressed that even though using these relationships was important, it is even more to be transparent about it and to work in collaboration with the public system.

One high Church cleric confirmed that in particular in smaller places, people use Church representatives to communicate with mayor or school principals, because people going to church easily ask priests for help regarding governmental institutions at local level. Even when living abroad, Macedonian citizens may ask priests for help regarding visa procedures for example.

During the festivities of the city of Strumica, which has been set on the day of the city saints ten years ago due to new transitional narratives breaking with older Yugoslav socialist traditions, the various religious authorities (including Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic and Protestant) as well as political authorities (including officials and representatives of the different political parties) gather for the main Orthodox service led by the Archbishop Stefan of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church therefore clearly has convening power, especially because the religious leaders of the different faiths meet for an interreligious gathering after the service. Moreover, the municipal council held a special meeting on that day in the presence of important citizens but also religious authorities. One interviewee asserted that the Bishop himself was able to convince the mayor to change the dates of the famous carnival of Strumica in order to better fit the religious calendar. However, in comparison to other municipalities, the plan to build a huge new church was only partly implemented due to the lack of funding. This might be evidence that relationships of the Church with the municipality and businesses might not be as strong as in other places in Macedonia, where a lot of private-funded chapels and churches have been built in recent years. In Strumica, a few years ago, the municipality put a separate payment slip for donations to build the church along the water and electricity bill. At the same time several interviewees confirmed that the different actors including NGOs, political parties, media, public institutions and religious authorities are collaborating in Strumica in a fairly constructive manner except during election campaigns when political conflict lines open and affect public life.

#### 7.4.4 Role of Hodjas in Turkish community

In areas such as public policies against domestic violence, the municipality and NGOs are working together but have experienced difficulties to access women in certain communities.

Yet, in the transitional society of Macedonia domestic violence has been on the rise and is a serious problem. One women's rights NGO stressed that without the participation of a local Hodja (religious leader of Muslim Turkish community), they would never have been able to work with the women of the Turkish communities. The access of certain women to public services and the impact of awareness raising campaigns related to domestic violence were hence strongly facilitated by a religious authority. On that public issue, the Turkish religious leaders of Strumica acted as drivers of change by mobilizing women of their community.

During the focus group discussion at the municipality, one participant explained how the municipality is consulting different stakeholders regarding policy revision. He stressed the participative nature of processes, inspired by the Community Forums (SDC funded project). He mentioned various advisory councils but also the lack of interest and time of stakeholders (associations, businesses, trade union and youth council) to participate. Only when explicitly asked, did he mention the participation of religious authorities in some advisory councils. The municipality tries to increasingly engage with citizens through a communications department, which citizens can call or visit to get help to fill in forms for example. They also realised that people from the Turkish community were very reluctant to come to the municipality because of lacking information but also inadequate Macedonian language skills. For that reason, the municipality employed a female community leader from an influential Turkish family. She herself confirmed that especially women in her community listen to her, but also that citizens from the Turkish communities now more easily come to the municipality to ask for services, because they know that they can speak in Turkish and that this employee may help them out with filling in forms. At the same time, she also stressed that for her community, the Hodja was a central information point and intermediary between her as municipal employee and the broader community. She would inform the Hodja of her neighbourhood about current issues, get his advice and then act on various levels. This municipal link is particularly important for the community, since the Turkish community in Strumica has no elected representative in the local council since 2013. Several interviewees stressed that political parties do not have a strong influence in the Turkish neighbourhoods.

During interviews, two Hodjas in Strumica explained that they have to show loyalty to the Macedonian state and to work within the system. They are involved in governance processes including about health issues, education or domestic violence if invited to do so. For example, regarding education, pupils attend school in Turkish language up until the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and then have to change to classes taught in Macedonian which implies great difficulties and often leads to school dropouts. When Turkish pupils attend primary education in Macedonian schools, they are taught in Macedonian but in segregated classes. The low level of education, several informants explained, implies that many in the Turkish community are working as unskilled labourers in agriculture or as cleaners. The Hodjas have therefore been involved in discussions with the municipality and the school principal, in order to discuss the introduction of some classes in Macedonian in the first schooling years too.

At the same time, the Hodjas also defined their role in terms of awareness raising on public issues within their communities. One example mentioned was the sensitisation of parents about the importance to send children to school rather than take them out for fieldwork every spring. Moreover, several interviewees stressed that the Turkish community lack information about local governance and socio-political processes partly due to the fact that there is no local radio programme, news portal or newspaper in Turkish language.

The Hodjas confirmed that people often come to him regarding access to public services. When citizens need specific public services, they use the official governance channels and

go to the municipality, but many also come to the Hodja and ask him for help: for example to call public institutions or to get financial support for expensive medical treatment. However, one Hodja also acknowledged that “sometimes his voice is not enough to be heard by public institutions”. Even though participation in public commissions and advisory councils is forbidden by Islam, the Hodjas participate, if invited by institutions to do so, because they see it as contribution to improve the situation of their community. The religious hierarchy tolerates that, because they know how poor Turkish communities are, according to the interviewee. While clearly playing a strong intermediary role in local governance processes, informants stressed that they lack information about municipal services, the cumbersome administrative procedures and citizens’ rights. “I do not feel informed well-enough to help my people”, one Hodja stated. Beyond the rather inefficient governance system, this also shows a general lack of knowledge of rights holders. Regarding the Turkish community in Strumica, as mentioned, there is no single broadcast programme or information page in Turkish language by any of the local media outlets. This contributes to difficult information diffusion to rather poor and marginalised minorities such as the Macedonian Turks in Strumica.

## 8 ANNEXES

- Acronyms
- Map
- Bibliography
- List of categories of respondents

### Acronyms

DDLGN: SDC's Democratisation, Decentralisation and Local Governance Network

EU: European Union

DUI: Democratic Union for Integration

MZ: mesni zajednici / bashkësia lokale

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

OFA: Ohrid Framework Agreement

SDC: Swiss Development Cooperation Agency

SDSM: Social Democratic Union of Macedonia

VMRO-DPMNE: Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity

### Map



Map of Macedonia with covered municipalities encircled in red. Copyright: FDFA

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### **List of categories of respondents**

- Religious authorities at different levels from the Orthodox Church, Albanian Muslim community and Turkish Muslim community
- Media representatives/journalists
- NGO representatives (national and local NGOs)
- Representatives of non-registered civic movements
- Municipal staff
- Municipal councillors
- Mayors
- *Mesni zajednici/ bashkësia lokale* representatives
- Academics
- Swiss embassy staff and implementing partners
- International experts
- Citizens, youth