

HOW WAS THE 2015 BUDGET ADOPTED?

A LOOK TOWARDS THE DEBATE IN THE MACEDONIAN PARLIAMENT

Policy brief

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INTRODUCTION

The Budget of the Republic of Macedonia is the most important act deliberated by the Parliament annually. It lays down the priorities for social development, strengthening of the institutions, education, healthcare, etc. This exact function of the Budget with which priorities are set, i.e. some areas or institutions are earmarked more funds than others, makes it a tremendously political act.

Thus, in the system of separation of powers, the role of the Parliament is to review the draft-Budget submitted by the Government and to align it with the public interest by amending it. Consequently, it is important to see how the members of Parliament are debating the Budget and to what extent they are using the opportunities envisaged by the Rules of Procedures in an effort to play the part.

This analysis makes the adoption of the 2015 Budget, which was debated in the Parliament in September and October 2014, its case study. The analysis relies on a research conducted by the Skopje-based Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis”, which monitored the parliament debate as part of the Parliament Watch project.¹ The analysis covers four segments. It starts off by presenting the structure of speeches related

to the debate over the Budget, and continues by analyzing the degree of elaboration and preparedness in order one’s opinion to be changed as a result of a better argument. The analysis is concluded with an overview of the use of time allowed at a debate according to the Rules of Procedures.

A BRIEF NOTE ON THE POLITICAL CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Since the start of the 2014-2018 parliamentary term, the deputies elected from the SDSM-led² coalition are boycotting the Parliament citing suspicions of election irregularities. Of those mandates, three female MPs took up seats in Parliament, who together with seven DPA³ deputies make up a total of 10 opposition seats in the legislative body. However, during the period covering the adoption of the 2015 Budget, the work of the Parliament was additionally boycotted by DPA MPs. This means that a total of three opposition MPs participated in the procedure of enacting the Budget of the Republic of Macedonia while the parliamentary majority was consisted of 82 MPs.

In terms of methodology, the monitoring does not include a debate of the Committee on Legal Affairs and the Committee on Culture involving the 2015

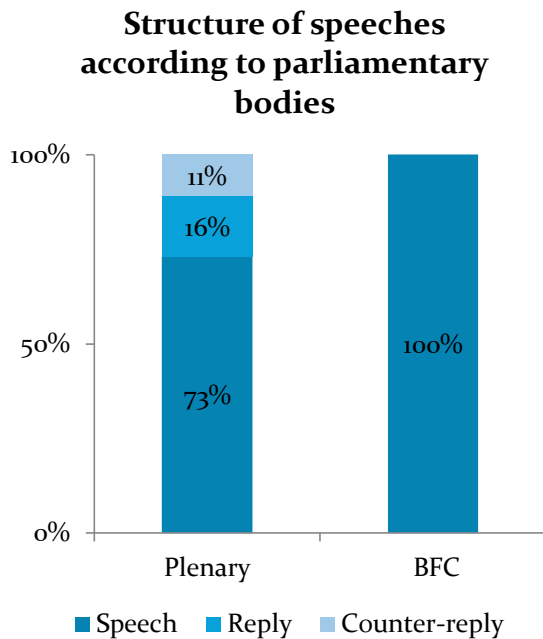
¹ For more information on the project visit <http://idscs.org.mk/mk/tekovni-proekti/sobraniето-pod-lupa>

² Social Democratic Union of Macedonia
³ Democratic Party of Albanians

draft-Budget. Hence, the results should be viewed only as indicative. This especially refers to the final section which analyses the duration of the debate.

STRUCTURE OF SPEECHES

The instrument monitoring the debate in Parliament registered a total of 82 individual speeches by MPs in two bodies of the legislative assembly.⁴ Of those, 82% were individual speeches, 11% were replies and 7% counter-replies. Of those, 32% were speeches delivered at the Financing and Budget Committee (FBC) with the rest being made at a plenary session.



As shown in the figure, the debate at the plenary session was reduced to a total of 27% of speeches as there was no interaction between the MPs at the committee session. This suggests that a debate over the 2015 Budget was lacking, i.e. – taking the importance of the document into consideration – was reduced to a minimum. The fact that a debate was absent in the

⁴ Plenary debate and a debate in the Budget and Financing Committee

committee hearing raises concern, because the idea behind the entire procedure is to draw the main conclusions as part of this body, which will be later debated by the MPs.

Of the total number of statements regarding the 2015 draft-Budget, 76% were made by representatives of VMRO-DPMNE,⁵ 7% by SP⁶ representatives, 6% by the LDP⁷ MP and the independent MPs each, 4% by DUI⁸ and 1% by DS.⁹ This, at least in view of the number of speeches, reveals certain disproportions in terms of how much attention was paid on the Budget debate by each of the parties.

On that account, with 24% of representatives present in Parliament, given its 4% of the total number of speeches, DUI's participation in the Parliament debate was insignificant in comparison to SP and DS representatives since they are part of the parliamentary majority. On the other hand, with a total of 12% of speeches, and a 4% representation in the legislative body, the opposition participated in the debate significantly more.

DEGREE OF ELABORATION

In addition to the number of speeches and their structure, it is also necessary to see to what extent arguments were used in the debate. The monitoring of the debate showed that two or more arguments were used in 77% of the speeches, one argument in 5% of speeches with no arguments registered in 11% and lack of full argumentation in 7%.

An argument-based debate in Parliament is a prerequisite to protect the public interest. The use of arguments on one hand creates an environment in which opposing sides in Parliament debate by using

⁵ VMRO-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity

⁶ Socialist Party

⁷ Liberal-Democratic Party

⁸ Democratic Union for Integration

⁹ Democratic Union

evidence. This environment strengthens the evidence-based policy being the foundation for good governance and protection against arbitrary adoption of laws. On the other hand, an argument-based debate can enhance the Parliament's position in relation to the Government – the role of the legislative assembly is to check and scrutinize documents submitted as bills. In the check and balances system, as a method of the separation of powers that ensures free and democratic governance, this exact role of the Parliament is key – constant scrutiny of what the Government is doing and proposing. If this manner of work of the Parliament is vital for every bill or adoption of a report filed by government institutions to the Parliament, then this concept is also of great significance for the most important annual document, the Budget, being the foundation for the functioning and development of institutions and the society.

decrease is seen in replies and counter-replies. This decrease is understandable. However, if a conservative assessment is made, 7% of the total number of speeches were individual containing not a single argument. If a projection was made on the total expenditures foreseen in the Budget, it would mean that no speech had been made using an argument for roughly EUR 206 million (7% of the Budget).

Comparing the number of arguments, 79% of the speeches of deputies of the parliamentary majority included two or more arguments. This was also the case in 60% of the speeches made by opposition legislators.

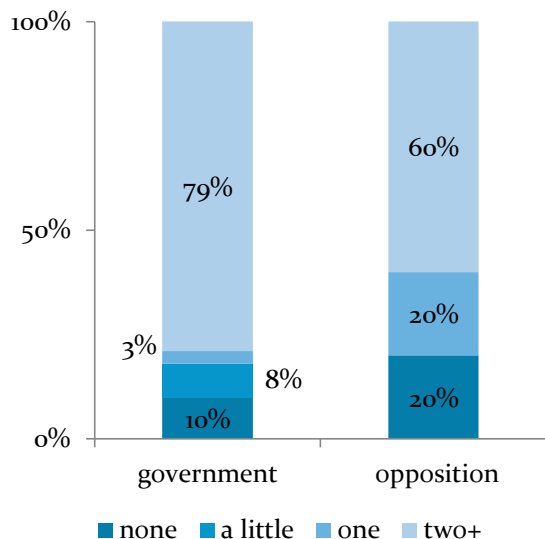
THE POWER OF A BETTER ARGUMENT

A growing debate in Parliament leaves the interlocutors more open to accepting the validity of someone else's arguments and, more importantly, to adjusting their position if the interlocutor presents stronger arguments. A lack of this kind of openness means that a debate in the legislative body is turned into a dialogue of the deaf, where party views are represented unilaterally.

A monitoring of the debate over the 2015 Budget reveals that 79% of the speeches did not include references to arguments that had been presented previously. An acceptance of arguments was detected in 2% of the speeches without changing one's position whereas neither acceptance nor change was registered in 18% of the cases.

In the committee debate, where it is assumed that arguments involving the adoption of the Budget should be examined the most, the monitoring registered that no reference was made to arguments presented by the other side. As a result, the debate was reduced to a 'deaf' discussion in which only arguments were presented without allowing a discussion to be developed in which speeches

Number of used arguments in relation to gov't/opposition



Consequently, this begs the question – how many speeches can be made that contain not a single argument. Results show that the scope of arguments drops with different types of speeches. 81% of individual speeches contained two or more arguments and a

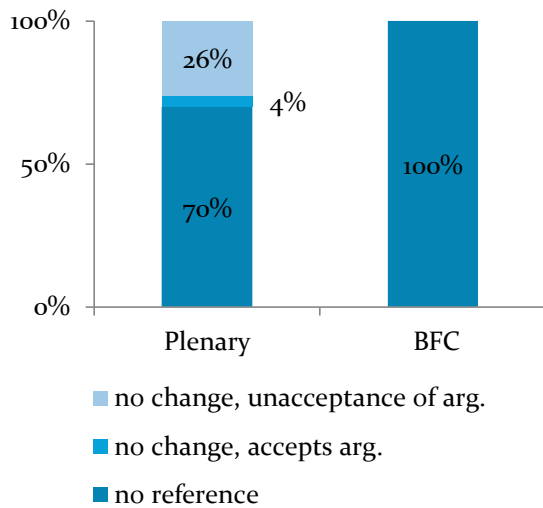
will add to what the interlocutors are saying. At the same time, in the plenary debate as high as 70% of the speeches contained no reference to a previous argument. Arguments were recognized in 4% of the speeches but without changing the position of the MP. In the remaining speeches (26%) there was neither change nor acceptance of the

responses.

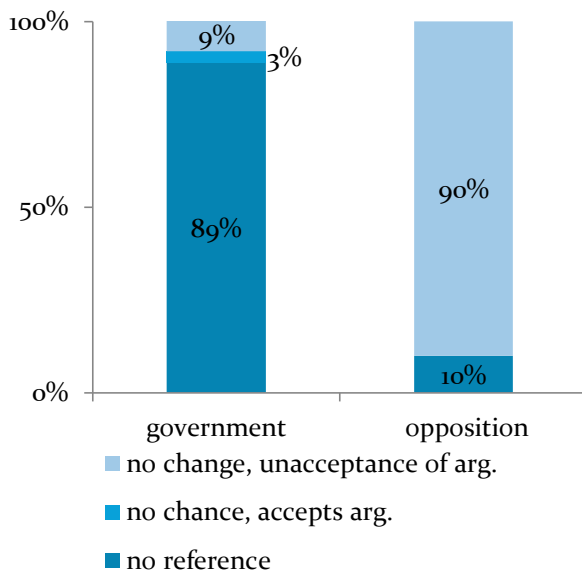
The approach of the interlocutors is also different depending on whether they are representatives of the parliamentary majority or the opposition. 10% of the speeches made by opposition deputies offered no reference to a previous argument whereas this practice was detected in 89% of the speeches by ruling MPs.

The results show a high-level absence of interaction in the debate over the 2015 Budget. The discussion was reduced to parallel talks that never come close to changing a position of the interlocutors.

Power of better argument according to parliamentary body



Power of better argument in relation to gov't/opposition



TIME SPENT DISCUSSING THE BUDGET

Being one of the most important annual acts that affect the society, the time spent by the MPs to debate the Budget is an indicator of the significance attributed to it. The Budget lays the financial foundation in order policies to be implemented in a given year. The allocation of funds for a certain field is the essence of a policy as a space through which limited resources are distributed. Hence, the Parliament as a legislative body plays an important role. By representing the public interest, it should be capable of thoroughly debating the government's plans for the coming year, reviewing and examining them. Despite having the capacity to debate the government's budgetary plans, it is also crucial the MPs to dedicate enough time on, to put it simply, every Denar of the taxpayers intended to be spent by the executive body.

Since the monitoring does not include two committee debates on the draft-Budget, the following data refer only to the plenary debate.

The monitoring of the debate over the 2015 Budget showed that a total of 578 minutes of discussion were spent on 56 speeches in the plenary session for which

there are records on their duration. The shortest speech was less than a minute long, while the longest one was 20 minutes. On average, the deputies spoke 10 minutes, which is by 10 minutes less than the maximum duration approved in accordance with the Parliament's Rules of Procedures.¹⁰ This means that the MPs, on average, spent 50% of the time allowed to debate the Budget, being the most important act enacted by the Parliament on regular basis. The debate saw the participation of 43 out of 85 MPs that at the time didn't boycott the legislative body, i.e. 51% of those that were present.

In accordance with the Rule of Procedures, every MP has a total of 30 minutes to deliver a speech at the plenary session.¹² The overall time at the plenary session, occupied by 85 MPs that were active at the time, means that 7 minutes were spent on average. With a duration of 22 minutes, an MP representing LDP spent the most time debating the budget. With a total recorded duration compared to the number of deputies being two minutes, DUI representatives spent little time debating the budget.

With speech duration of 23% per mandate, not even a quarter of the time envisaged by the Rules of Procedures was used in Parliament. Having in mind the significance of the Budget for the political life and social development, it seems the Parliament has failed to fulfill its function to review the draft-Budget, thus also failing to play its role in the system of separation of powers through 'check and balances'.

¹⁰ Articles 180a and 180b in the Rules of Procedures

¹¹ This calculation ignores the differences as stipulated by the Rules of Procedures between a coordinator of a parliamentary groups and an ordinary MP according to the guaranteed time (20 min)

¹² Article 180b: 20 min for general hearing and 10 min for debates on amendments

Duration and time spent at plenary session				
	No. of MPs	duration (min.)	time per seat	% of usage
c. VMRO-DPMNE and GROM	62	489	8	26%
independent	2	26	13	44%
DUI	20	41	2	7%
LDP	1	22	22	74%
Total	85	578	7	23%

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Amid a Parliament boycott by 38 MPs, out of 123, the main issue that is being raised is the flexibility of the Rules of Procedures of the Parliament that needs to be in line with public interest. Due to the boycott by SDSM and DPA representatives, the time singled out for the opposition - acting as a corrective factor of the government's actions - was limited according to the number of representatives that took up their seats. However, it is in the public interest for opposition views to be voiced in Parliament to the same extent the opposition was supported in elections, notwithstanding whether the Parliament is boycotted by a portion of its legislators. In times when the will of opposition voters could not be represented through a Parliament voting, public interest would be partially met if attending opposition MPs got more time to hold a speech. Hence, it is inadequate the duration to be determined per seat according to the Rules of Procedures, instead it should be defined according to the distribution of election votes between the parliamentary majority and the opposition.

Recommendation: The way in which speech duration is set in the Rules of Procedures has to be flexible and based more on the list of votes won in election, rather than being closely tied to MPs. This will make the Rules of Procedures more resistant to

boycotts in the future, because it will make up for the time of the parliamentary opposition taken away as a result of boycott. Beyond the discussion over boycott, it can be also beneficial because by fixing duration in this manner, the time not used by less active MPs will be awarded to those who are more active.

Conclusion: However, even if all 85 MPs use their 30 minutes in the plenary session, this means 43 hours of debate. Taking into consideration the workday last eight hours, they would use up the five days determined for debate in line with the Rules of Procedures.¹³ Theoretically, it means that the remaining 38 MPs would have no time to speak.

Recommendation: The Rules of Procedures should be amended in the section where a maximum number of days for debate is foreseen. At the same time, it needs to be debated on whether 30 minutes are sufficient for MPs to be able to voice their views regarding the draft-Budget and thus fulfill their duty as representatives of the citizens.

Conclusion: "Dialogue of the deaf" is a serious issue in the Parliament debate. The speeches of the MPs usually include no reference to previous arguments and there is not a single case in which deputies have changed their position due to a strong argument presented by the other side. This body should play the role of a forum where the majority and the opposition meet and share ideas, arguments, criticism and recommendations. Accordingly, the political process of this kind of exchange should result in certain adjustment.

Recommendation: The MPs should play a more responsible role and create a debate based on arguments and mutual adjustment. The role of MPs should not be reduced to being uncritical representatives of

their own party, they should partake in a debate with the other side while monitoring and scrutinizing the draft-Budget.

¹³ Workdays at sessions can last longer, but 8 hours are considered the basis for the illustration