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## MACEDONIA OPPOSITION DEMANDS AMNESTY FOR PARLIAMENT VIOLENCE

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While the government and the ruling majority has called for unity and forgiveness in Macedonia's politically-divided society, the opposition has called for an outright amnesty for the people who were involved in last year's storming of the parliament building.

Parliament speaker Talat Xhaferi will lead a new parliamentary commission tasked with finding ways to achieve national reconciliation after a long-running political crisis caused deep divisions.

The establishment of the commission was one of the conditions for some opposition MPs to vote for constitutional changes that enable the implementation of Macedonia's historic name agreement with Greece.

Although the plan is to invite the heads of all parliamentary groups to take part in the commission, the main opposition VMRO DPMNE party, whose MPs and sympathisers are now standing trial for the parliament rampage, have rebuffed the invitation.

VMRO DPMNE spokesperson Naum Stoilkovski said on Wednesday that his party won't participate in the commission which would provide selective justice only for those [VMRO DPMNE MPs] who [last Friday] participated in the voting for the constitutional changes.

The opposition party immediately expelled the dissident MPs from its ranks.

VMRO DPMNE said that it will submit its own draft law for an amnesty of all the 33 people who are on trial for terrorist endangerment of the constitutional order in relation to the parliament rampage.

The establishment of the parliament reconciliation committee, which will have some 30 days to come up with an initial direction for future action, was demanded by the eight opposition MPs who last Friday rebuffed their party's instructions and provided key support for the start of the government-proposed implementation of the name agreement.

Four out of these eight MPs are currently on trial - three for their involvement in the parliament rampage and one in another corruption case.

Prime Minister Zoran Zaev who accepted the formation of the reconciliation commission, chose his words carefully over the VMRO DPMNE initiative to offer an amnesty.

The chance for reconciliation does not mean interfering in the judiciary, Zaev responded to the

VMRO DPMNE. By demanding an amnesty we must not ruin the rule of law, he added.

Noting that Macedonia's judicial reforms and its rule of law are under the watchful eye of the European Union, Zaev said that we have yet to find the steps, methods and the way to national reconciliation without jeopardising core values of justice.

The sharp political divide in Macedonia culminated in April 2017 when supporters of the former VMRO DPMNE-led government stormed the parliament, injuring some 100 people, including MPs, in an attempt to prevent Zaev's new Social Democrat-led majority electing a new parliament speaker and paving the way for the formation of a new government.

Besa Arifi, a legal sciences professor at the South Eastern European University in Tetovo, said the ongoing parliament initiative for reconciliation can contribute for the greater good in the society.

But Arifi warned that reconciliation should not be confused with the legal terms of amnesty and pardon, which she thinks are not going to help Macedonia to improve the rule of law.

Reconciliation, amnesty or pardon?

The work of the reconciliation commission will run in parallel with the next two phases of the adoption of the constitutional changes which should require two more rounds of voting in parliament before it sees the country's name changed to the Republic of North Macedonia, as envisaged by the name agreement.

Amid ongoing uncertainty and speculation regarding what the exact goal of the parliament commission would be, Saso Ordanoski, a seasoned journalist and editor at Macedonia's 1 TV, outlined one possible scenario in a column for Civil Media on Thursday.

This would first include reaching a verdict in the parliament rampage case, which according to estimates will take a few more months.

Then, as a result of the wider political consensus on national reconciliation, the newly-elected president [Macedonia will hold presidential elections next spring], might start a procedure for the pardoning of the convicted, Ordanoski wrote.

But this would apply only to those who cooperated with the authorities during the trial in revealing the greater picture about the violence in parliament that could provide information about the possible masterminds behind the attack.

This way, the legal integrity of Macedonia would be preserved and the initiative for forgiveness and reconciliation would assume a civilised political framework which would not derail the country from its EU-sought judicial reforms and improvement of the rule of law, Ordanoski concluded.

<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-opposition-challenges-reconciliation-effort-10-25-2018>

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