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POLICY BRIEF

Improving the information position of the Albanian, Kosovar and North Macedonian Parliaments

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By the Centre for European Security Studies
(ed. Jos Boonstra)

Introduction

Nowadays, the amount of information available through just a few swipes on one's phone is mind boggling. But getting up-to-date information on the implementation of a specific policy remains as difficult now as it was before. Having more information does not always mean being better informed. For busy Members of Parliament (MPs), it can be difficult to choose what information sources to use while going about the business of representation, law-making and government oversight. When deciding what to read, MPs will wonder: What can you tell me that I do not already know? Hence, the importance of providing MPs with timely, concise, and fact-based information that is directly applicable to their work.

Besides the essential information provided by the government, there are many other sources of information for MPs. First, MPs can be informed on specific topics by independent agencies, ranging from an ombudsperson to an education board, or from the audit office to the healthcare inspection service. Second, parliaments

Key points:

- Alike in most countries, the Albanian, Kosovar, and North Macedonian parliaments are affected by an information paradox: MPs are overloaded with information, yet there is a shortage of specific information on which to base their work.
- At a time when it is becoming more difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction, parliaments increasingly need an in-house base of knowledge on which to rely to perform their work of oversight and law-making.
- Given that the role of civil society is principal to public oversight in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, their cooperation with parliament needs to be further embedded into parliamentary oversight.

have their own sources of information, such as parliamentary research departments, institutional parliamentary staff or personal assistants who provide background research and analysis. Third, parliamentarians can be informed through their political parties, some of which have research units. Fourth, universities are the main source of scientific and evidence-based information. Fifth, there are NGOs, think tanks, human rights activists and so on, all of which deliver information and policy advice, either upon request or through active advocacy campaigns. Sixth, there is the media, ranging from top quality investigative journalism in renowned newspapers to uninformed opinions on social media. Lastly, and in many cases the most valuable source of information, there are the in-person contacts among elected representatives and citizens, where the latter can share concerns and explain their problems. Each elected representative chooses his/her own path through this information landscape. That path often determines the quality of oversight; a well-informed parliamentarian can urge a government to do better or change its ways, while a weakly-informed or uninterested MP will only fulfil a voting duty for his/her party in approving or rejecting a government policy.

Some of the problems that affect the information position of parliament are of a general nature and are common to most legislatures nowadays; others are a bit more specific to the Western Balkans. In the case of the former, the most notable challenge for MPs is how to distinguish between fact and fiction. When populist parties that actively spread disinformation are represented in parliament, matters get even more complicated. Another problem concerning the information position of parliament is that most politicians tend to be reactive to events that demand attention because of the constant newsfeed, instead of shaping events themselves. There is little time for in-depth assessments of draft laws or to build up a file in a committee on specific policies. Because political parties often do not diversify the professional profiles of candidates, parliamentary committees lack specific expertise.

About DECOS

The 'Developing Capacity, Cooperation and Culture in Overseeing the Security Sectors of Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia' project (2019-22) seeks to empower democratic institutions and actors in their function of democratic oversight of security. It does so by increasing capacities, enhancing cooperation, and fostering a culture of oversight of the security sectors of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. DECOS consists of a capacity building and a research component that are directed at democratic oversight actors – parliaments, independent institutions, and advisory bodies; and civil society organisations – in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, most DECOS research, training and coaching activities are currently taking place online through interactive regional working groups that include lectures, training sessions and opportunities for debate and exchange of views and experiences.

The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) collaborates in DECOS with the Albanian Institute for Political Studies (IPS), the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) from Albania, the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED), and the Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' Skopje (IDSCS) from North Macedonia. DECOS is funded by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

For instance, there are not many MPs who know their way around the issue of information technology. Lastly, there is often little willingness to substantially invest in parliaments' in-house research capacity. Because there is so much information out there, not many budget holders recognise the weak information position of parliaments and how this affects the quality of democratic oversight.

Because Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia are young democracies with developing cultures of oversight and weak institutional set-ups, the information position of their parliaments is affected by additional challenges. First, there are the negative impacts of clientelism, whereby positions in and outside parliament do not always go to the most qualified people. Second, opposition MPs are at a disadvantage in obtaining information from the executive compared to coalition MPs. Because information is so politicised, an impartial in-house research capacity is indispensable in Western Balkan countries. Third, there is still little appetite among parliamentarians to critically scrutinise executive policy: majority MPs rarely look critically at government, while opposition MPs are primarily interested in discrediting the government instead of assessing policy on its merits.

This policy brief discusses the information position of the parliaments of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Because of the large number of information sources available to parliaments, this policy brief focuses on the two that we believe to be essential. First, we discuss the in-house research capacity that is being developed or expanded in all three countries. Second, we investigate civil society, given their active role in democratic oversight in all three countries.

This brief is the outcome of a collaborative effort among a group of civil servants and civil society actors from Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia within the framework of the DECOS project. This ad hoc working group, moderated by CESS Director Merijn Hartog, convened online several times between February and April 2021. Through a series of debates, written contributions and national break-out group exercises, the following working group participants offered their views on the information position of the parliaments in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia: Zare Aliu, Zlatko Atanasov, Hana Bajraktari, Juliana Bilbilaj, Arlinda Dini, Gasper Gjeluçi, Merijn Hartog, Aleksandra Jovevska Gjorgjevikj, Çeljeta Pashaj, Lulzim Peci, Alfonc Rakaj, Naim Rashiti, Vlora Rechica, Aleksandar Stojanovski, and Quendresa Sulejmani. The paper also draws on information included in presentations delivered during the meetings by Gerald Knaus, Suzanne Nollen, and Bauke Snoep. The editor is grateful to all contributors, and especially to Denitsa Nikolova, CESS programme assistant, for her background research. The editor also thanks Alban Dafa and Suzanne Nollen for a review of a draft version of the paper.

Developing parliaments' in-house information capacity

Over the past few years, many parliaments in Europe have been developing, expanding, or fine-tuning their in-house research capacity. Clearly, it is necessary to have an information base that can be separated from the vast amount of externally delivered information. Such a base is essential for parliament when performing its duties of law-making and oversight.

Every country's parliament has its own set-up. Some have specific departments for research and analysis. Others combine research with the functions of a library, archive, and legal documentation centre. In rare cases, such departments also incorporate the functions of communication (press office, etc.). Research capacity can also be linked to an internal parliamentary training unit that prepares incoming MPs and staff for their duties. Because the turnaround of staff is usually rather low in these areas, such units tend to be well-equipped to guide newcomers on the ins and outs of parliamentary work. In some cases, there is also a link with educational services, which organise visits of schoolchildren to parliament. Many parliaments also include a budget analysis unit.

Parliaments' in-house capacity can serve a double function: it can act as a 'knowledge bank' and as a 'knowledge broker'. First, in-house research departments account for a large part of parliaments' institutional memory: they can be a 'knowledge bank' where MPs go with information requests; where researchers deliver tailored analysis to different committees; and where staff and experts initiate their own research on what they believe parliament should be aware of. Often, there is a distinction between legally-oriented analysis focused on guiding the legislature's law-making process, and other research based on different behavioural sciences such as sociology, economics, and international relations. Second, in-house research departments can gather and filter external information. They can be a 'knowledge broker' that works with independent advisory bodies or with think tanks and other civil society actors. It is crucial for research departments to be regarded as impartial by all members of parliament. As such, in-house research departments are careful about joint research and what they publish.

In **Albania**, the parliament has a Research and Library Service (RLS) that is part of the Information and Documentation Service. The Archival Department is placed directly under the Secretary-General. The RLS currently employs six researchers, two library assistants and a director. Research is carried out both at the request of individual MPs and by initiative of the Service itself. Researchers focus on different areas so as to provide a broad range of expertise to the different parliamentary committees. The RLS is an active member of the Regional Parliamentary Research Network, facilitated by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and is part of the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD).

The quality of research has improved significantly over the past few years, which, in turn, has led to increasing requests by MPs. However, papers are mainly geared towards the law-making process. There is room for improvement in the RLS when it comes to assisting MPs in exercising their oversight functions. Parliament should invest in hiring more researchers with diversified profiles, and in training and mentorships for research staff so that they can better assist MPs on oversight hearings with members of the government. The legislature is in the process of establishing a parliamentary institute, which will encompass a larger research service composed of eight researchers, divided over three research sectors, including budget and financial analyses; good governance, democracy, and society; and general analyses. The institute will also host the Library and Publication Service and be responsible for civic education by the parliament.

The parliament of **Kosovo** includes a Directorate for Research, Library and Archive (DRLA) that was created in 2012. The DRLA is composed of four units: a research unit; a budget and financial unit; a library unit; and an archives unit. Currently, the research unit incorporates five researchers (three lawyers, a political scientist, and an economist), but will soon be expanded with three additional staff members. The library and archives units have two staff members each, and the budget and financial unit includes three financial analysts. The DRLA produces reports, comparative analyses, memoranda, and background information. It does so upon request or at its own initiative. The research emphasis lies on providing legislative insight to parliamentary committees and individual MPs. The DRLA also drafts a comprehensive report on each legislative term.

Because **Kosovo** went through six elections in 13 years, parliament lacks a working rhythm and a mid-term agenda. On the one hand, (new) parliamentarians are often not fully aware of what the DRLA can deliver. On the other hand, the Directorate becomes overwhelmed if there are too many requests all of a sudden. From 2015 to 2020, the 'Support to Parliamentary Research Activity in Kosovo' project, funded by USAID and implemented by the Kosovo Democratic Institute, sought to fill the hiatus in research, including by collaborating with civil society experts. Next to the DRLA and external projects, personal political assistants also have an important role to play in making sure MPs are well-informed to perform their oversight functions. Here, however, shortcomings remain, as political staff often lack experience. Meanwhile, political parties do not use the compulsory 10 per cent of their state funding to support their MPs.

In **North Macedonia**, the Parliamentary Institute (PI) is a separate organisational unit within parliament. The PI was established a decade ago with the support of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) with a view to provide timely, impartial, objective, and accessible research and analysis. The PI follows a hybrid model that integrates best practices from the Czech and Slovak parliamentary research units. The PI includes a Sector for General Analysis, Research and European Integration (14 staff members, including the head of the PI); and a Sector for Education and Communication, Library, and Legislative Archives (14 staff). Currently, 7 positions are vacant (some of these due to an organisational increase), meaning that the PI is operating with a 25 per cent staff shortage. PI employees have the status of administrative servants and their recruitment is based on merit. In addition to research and analysis, the PI also offers educational services for its users: MPs, parliamentary staff, external associates, assistants, and the public. Next to the PI, there is a separate, project-based Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO), supported by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, and which has 4 employees who provide MPs with financial analyses.

About 20 per cent of North Macedonia's MPs turn to the PI in preparation of a debate or concerning other parliamentary matters. This is a rather low percentage which could be boosted by further increasing the quality of the PI's work and its familiarity among elected representatives. Because parliament lacks an internal mid-term calendar that MPs could use to plan, many do not ask the PI for input, while others turn to it at the very last minute.

Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia have all recently developed functioning in-house research capacities in their legislatures. However, overall, such capacity is modest, and awareness and use of these departments among MPs is rather low. In all three cases, in-house research departments and personnel have the potential to improve oversight and law-making, given their instrumental role in preserving parliaments' institutional memory and in the development of a fact-based culture of democratic oversight.

Working with civil society

Civil society expertise plays an important role in the democratic governance of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Parliaments are important recipients of civil society expertise and research; some of it is requested, while other input is actively advocated by NGOs and think tanks. Cooperation between civil society and parliament seldomly runs smoothly, and institutional set-ups for such cooperation are often not effective or sustainable. Meanwhile, alike in many countries, it is questionable if the overall expertise of civil society is of high enough quality to meet its task of delivering analysis to parliaments.

Most think tank research is supported by external donors that work through project funding. Whereas think tanks do have some room to manoeuvre when deciding what study they will take up, the broader subject areas, timelines and products are decided through earlier agreements with the donor. This means that, in most cases, external donors have a lot of (often non-intended) influence on what broader issues the Albanian Parliament or the Macedonian Government needs to hear from their own civil societies. Often, there is a disparity between the well-intended support for research by donors and the actual need in policy oversight by parliaments.

In **Albania**, there is some cooperation between parliament and civil society. Parliament produces an annual report on cooperation with public organisations (the last one was published in 2019). NGOs and think tanks are sometimes invited to give their views on draft laws during the drafting phase (normally written contributions) and during the hearing phase in the relevant committee. However, there is little time to prepare as announcements and invitations are often short notice. As a result, think tankers often feel that they are rushed into giving their expert views, while parliamentary staff are often disappointed with the low quality of the input that they receive. Recently, the Albanian Parliament opened a platform to give civil society the opportunity to comment on draft laws. MPs occasionally make use of reports that are produced by civil society when addressing the government and use civil society arguments to question policies.

In **Kosovo**, think tanks play an important role in delivering information and analysis to parliament, also because there are few universities in Kosovo that produce easily accessible analyses. Most of the material produced by Kosovo's civil society is available in Albanian, Serbian, and English, and is often actively promoted via roundtables and conferences. The high turnover of legislatures over the last decade has made it difficult to deepen parliamentary-civil society cooperation. Nonetheless, in 2015 several NGOs, parliament, and NDI initiated the Forum for Parliamentary Transparency to foster cooperation between parliament and civil society.

A new 2021-25 action plan was agreed and is now being implemented. But there are more mechanisms such as the Strategy for Communication and Information, the Declaration on Partnership with Civil Society, and the Platform for E-participation, among others. The majority of these have been developed at the initiative of civil society or donors, while parliament is seen as the recipient responding to the offer of help.

In **North Macedonia**, policy-oriented civil society is sometimes perceived as being close to the current government coalition as it had taken a critical stance towards the previous government; fortunately, NGOs also critically scrutinise current executive dealings. Whereas NGOs and think tanks are ready to share their expertise with all elected representatives, opposition and ruling party MPs alike make little use of this offer. Meanwhile, civil society actors closely cooperate with the Parliamentary Institute. They often work together, for instance on projects where both parties conclude a memorandum of understanding. Cooperation works well as the PI is well-equipped to deliver background information and analyses, while civil society complements with conclusions and policy suggestions. As is the case in Albania and Kosovo, NGOs and think tanks outside of Skopje have a hard time getting involved in the information flow to parliament.

Options for improving the information position of parliament

This DECOS regional working group proposes several ways to boost the information position of the parliaments of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia in the areas of in-house parliamentary research capacity and civil society input. Whereas we have sought to develop recommendations that apply to all three countries, some of the suggestions are more country specific. The below recommendations are primarily aimed at the parliaments of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, but we hope that local civil society organisations, and especially international donors that actively support parliaments and civil societies, also take note.

In general:

1. Since a stronger information position of parliament leads to better quality law-making and oversight, this function needs to be backed up by sufficient resources, meaning professional staff and funding. Legislatures that skimp on gathering and processing information and research will lack a sound base for their work and become more vulnerable to misinformation.
2. Not every legislature has a clear calendar of plenary debates, commission meetings and other gatherings. If MPs had a better indication of what is coming up, they would have more time and opportunity to request input from parliaments' research departments or other sources. Also, it would give in-house research departments or civil society organisations more time to deliver the requested information and hence increase its quality.

Parliamentary in-house capacity:

3. Parliaments could introduce an annual 'knowledge agenda' with specific goals and topics for each standing committee. Such an agenda would help shape committee meetings and better identify the desired input from research departments. It would give the latter more clarity concerning planning and workload. It would also be an opportunity to structurally address important issues that are likely to determine the legislature's work, such as information technology or EU accession negotiations. A draft knowledge agenda by parliament could be discussed with a group of NGOs, think tanks, and universities.
4. Pay (more) attention to the role of 'knowledge broker' in establishing close ties with the national statistics office and other national research facilities such as a scientific board, audit office or ombudsperson that can help with delivering basic data and information in specific fields. If staff capacity allows, assign experts as liaisons to different external institutions that can deliver expertise and knowledge. Ties with these (independent) agencies could also help research departments in fact-checking their output.
5. Where funding and capacity allow, increase the role of research departments in training political staff who assist political groups and individual MPs. These staff members often have little experience in research, while they are the first and primary source of information for elected representatives.
6. Seek to exchange experiences with neighbouring countries that are going through a similar process of building in-house research capacity. There does not necessarily need to be a difference between EU member states and other aspirant countries, as most democracies are either establishing, reforming, or expanding their parliaments' in-house research capacity.

Civil society-parliament cooperation:

7. Assure that research departments have a budget to commission studies from civil society actors. This would boost the delivery of timely input by civil society and make parliament and civil society actors less dependent on external donors. Along the same lines, it would be helpful if donors who are interested in supporting external research for parliament provided more flexible funding, without indicating topics and exact timeframes.
8. Develop a database of civil society organisations that can be utilised to identify expertise. Make sure such a database is public and constantly updated. Whereas such a database could help to quickly identify candidates for parliamentary research and information requests, it should not be used to exclude experts and NGOs that are not (yet) in the database. Such a database could also help to increasingly include expertise from provincial towns and regions, instead of always going to the main think tanks in the capital.

9. Investigate if civil society experts can be on short-term secondments to parliamentary research departments. In such a system or project, researchers work on a specific research project and/or provide expertise to a parliamentary committee. Selection could take place using the above-mentioned database. Secondments should remain short-term and on an individual basis so as to avoid weakening civil society organisations' independence and parliamentary research departments' impartiality. Maybe there are donors interested in supporting such a 'research fellowship' which could help strengthen parliamentary-civil society cooperation.
10. As a parliament, constantly review your modus operandi of working with civil society. Do not seek to institutionalise cooperation with NGOs and think tanks, but to innovate it. Make use of different formats to include civil society views – organise policy labs where external experts, MPs and possibly civil servants can debate a specific issue; invite legal scholars to assess draft laws under scrutiny; have NGOs help organise a trip of MPs to a specific region or area; and so on.

'Greater involvement of the public and experts in the work of the Assembly will contribute to better informed decision-making in the Assembly and will mitigate the risk of misinformation', concluded experts in one of the DECOS working group meetings. Indeed, this must be an effort by all, for all. Civil society and in-house research capacity are two of the primary ways in which a parliament informs itself, but overall, it is a balancing act where different methods and means continuously change. Ideally, in a healthy culture of well-informed democratic oversight.



CESS

The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) is an independent institute for research and training, based in Groningen, the Netherlands. CESS seeks to advance security, development, democracy and human rights by helping governments and civil society face their respective challenges. CESS is an international, multidisciplinary and inclusive institute. Its work is part of the European quest for stability and prosperity, both within and outside Europe. CESS encourages informed debate, empowers individuals, fosters mutual understanding on matters of governance, and promotes democratic structures and processes.



DECOS

The DECOS project seeks to empower democratic institutions and civil society actors in their function of oversight of security. It does so by increasing capacities, enhancing cooperation, and fostering a culture of oversight of the security sectors of Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

In the DECOS project CESS works with:

- The Albanian Institute for Political Studies
- The Institute for Democracy and Mediation, Albania
- The Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development
- The Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis', North Macedonia



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