



Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia Social briefing:
Macedonia's society in 2017**

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Summary

Macedonia's social dynamics in 2017 was characterized by four major developments: new dynamics of ethnic nationalism whereby the growing presence of ethnic discourse among the political elites was not accompanied by similar process among the population; a process of creation and overcoming of double standards on issues of (anti)corruption; an emergence of new environmental and animal rights discourse and civic mobilization; and a worrying trend of xenophobia that paradoxically coincides with an ever-growing desire of Macedonian citizens to move abroad.

New dynamics of ethnic nationalism

In its recent history, Macedonia has undergone frequent episodes of so called political ethnic tensions, which echo the ethnicized military conflict of 2001. Ever since, in order to guarantee that the interests of ethnic Albanians will be represented at the highest level, a new convention has emerged, stipulating that there cannot be a government without the participation of an ethnic Albanian political party in the ruling coalition. In practice, the ruling Albanian party has been the ethnic Albanian party that emerged from the high ranks of the guerrilla fighters in 2001, DUI (with the exception of the period 2006-2008), as a coalition partner of both SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE when they are in power, respectively. With the 2016 elections, DUI became seen as a partner in the misdeeds of VMRO-DPMNE, hence, its support among among ethnic Albanians has dropped, while new smaller ethnic Albanian parties emerged, and some Albanians voted for SDSM as well.

Nevertheless, after the 2016 elections, none of the two predominantly ethnic Macedonian parties (Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE and Zaev's SDSM) were able to form a government alone. They needed the backing of DUI and some of the newly formed Albanian parties to form a coalition government. This moment was used by Albanian political leaders to come together, and formulate

a list of ethnic demands, for which they had a better bargain with SDSM than with VMRO-DPMNE, which eventually led to forming a new government, but also an emerging anti-Albanian discourse and protests among VMRO-DPMNE supporters. Under the new government of SDSM, further advancement of the trend and reshaping the mainstream discourse on national identity commenced, with ever-greater promotion of ethnic Albanian symbols and language.

However, while elite politics has greatly focused on ethnic identity issues, the majority of the population has remained distanced from the process. Ethnic Albanians have remained still skeptical of DUI, and ethnic Macedonians have only seldom demonstrated anti-Albanian sentiments. The VMRO-DPMNE-led protests only used the ethnic discourse, while in reality they resembled an attempt to increase the party's leverage in society – and failed at it. The majority of the population of the two largest ethnic communities still has shared demands for improved livelihood and tackling of grand corruption. Representatives of both sides demonstrate strong awareness that most of the transformation happening are a consequence of elite bargaining and a distraction of the most burning issues. However, it is important to note that there are other, smaller ethnic communities in Macedonia, who have voiced their concerns about the emergent bi-national (Macedonian-Albanian) framework of the new Macedonian society that obscures the true, plural, multicultural character of the society. Nevertheless, for the average Macedonian citizen – be it ethnic Macedonian, Albanian or a member of one of the other smaller communities – in 2017, ethnic issues were far from the top of the agenda.

Anti-corruption, moralistic politics and (overcoming the) zero-sum thinking

Macedonian politics is a black-and-white game, whereby there are always “good guys” and “bad guys” - with the role changing over time. This is owing to the social discourse on anticorruption and the ubiquitous moral judgment. Public perception and rumors of grand corruption have always been a central element

to Macedonian political culture. However, while many past governments were proven to corrupt and many former public officers have been imprisoned on charges for corruption (including the current Prime Minister Zoran Zaev in 2008, who had been pardoned by the former President Crvenkovski), the ideology of anti-corruption had reached peak levels among the opposition forces during the last years of the Gruevski government. The leaked intercepted communications revealed an irresponsible governance style and in fact, evidence of grand corruption of all sorts. With the joint efforts of the West, then, a Special Prosecutor's Office was established, tasked with a particular mission to investigate all instances of potential corruption revealed by the leaked materials. With the change of government, now the SPO has strong support from the executive branch. By fall 2017, several high-profile cases under the SPO have advanced, which also involve the former prime-minister Gruevski and his closest affiliates and former ministers.

Yet, as an ideology, anti-corruption has substantially transformed Macedonian politics and society. The effects have been mixed. For one, now the majority of political actors stresses the importance of responsible governance and is invested in discussing how public resources are being spent and how power is being exercised. However, in many instances, it has developed a discourse that personalized the responsibility (meaning the targets have been only individuals, and not the general principles and patterns of behavior), while not taking in account the structural conditions that allow for such practices to emerge. In that sense, the society has developed a discourse of attacking particular actors for corruption, while exculpating others. The culmination of this mentality was reflected in the development of the social discourse on the coalition SDSM-DUI in 2017. DUI was a coalition partner of VMRO-DPMNE for 9 out of the 11 years it was in power, and it was implicated in many wrongdoings, and often blamed publicly for it by SDSM and their supporters. However, once DUI decided to switch sides, the responsibility for corruption was now transferred solely to VMRO-DPMNE, and this was reflected in the

rapid shift in the popular attitudes that lead to complete defeat of the formerly ruling party. At the same time, VMRO-DPMNE has blamed SDSM for wrongdoings themselves, again not taking in account their own responsibility for the very same wrongdoings.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that exceptions exist; 2017 was also a year when parts of the society (in particular social activists) who took active part in the protests against VMRO-DPMNE and therefore directly helped SDSM to gain power, overcome the zero-sum thinking on (anti)corruption, and have started confronting SDSM and DUI. While they remain to act as isolated, unorganized voices, their emergence has been perhaps one of the most important developments in the last few years. Should they maintain their tenacity, and start to become politically organized, they can become an important social, and even political actor, that can transform the public debate as a whole.

Macedonia's paradox: dislike of foreigners, desire to move abroad

Macedonians overwhelmingly share traditional social values: they are family oriented, patriarchal, religious, and parochial. To this one can add that they are xenophobic as well. In 2017, a global survey by Gallup on the sentiments towards migrants and refugees has ranked Macedonia 128th out of 128 countries in the world (last) in terms of acceptance of refugees and foreigners. Macedonian citizens do not like to have foreign neighbors, they do not have foreign friends and do not want to mix with foreigners. This sentiment has systemic roots, but it has been also related to the experience of Macedonia during the refugee crisis of 2015 as the country occupied a central position on the Balkan route, as well as with the negative sentiments towards refugees and migrants that are present across all of CEE. Moreover, in the recent months there have been rumors that Macedonia may be a destination for deportation of refugees from the EU, and that the government will construct refugee settlements. As a consequence, the refugee issue is heavily politicized and is becoming pronounced in the public debate, as VMRO-DPMNE uses the

xenophobic sentiments of the population to gain support by pushing an anti-refugee agenda, whereas SDSM's government has tried to tacitly oppose the xenophobic sentiments while at the same time ensuring the population that the rumors for refugees being settled in Macedonia are not true.

The dislike of foreigners exhibited by Macedonians is at the same time accompanied by the desire of Macedonians to move abroad. While the country did not have any census since 2002, there are estimations that tens, if not hundreds of thousands people have left the country. In public opinion polls, the desire to move abroad is consistently registered at a very high level, which is highest among the youth. In addition to economic reasons, in the last few years Macedonians also cite political, as well as environmental reasons as main motives to move abroad.

Emergence of environmental and animal rights mobilization

As argued in one of the previous reports, Macedonia is one of the most polluted countries in the world, with Skopje often topping the world charts in air pollution. This has led to the emergence of environmental mobilization in the last few years, which peaked in 2017. The question of the pollution dominated local elections in 2017, and the news cycle in the late fall and winter. Citizens have taken to the online media, but also organized protests and networks of knowledge sharing and solidarity (in terms of supply of masks, air purifiers, and general advice on coping with the copious amounts of pollution). Importantly, while criticizing heavily the officials of VMRO-DPMNE who held the majority of local government offices prior to the local elections, citizens have maintained their watchful attitude even after the local elections (which SDSM won by a sweeping majority). Importantly, by focusing on the questions of environment and pollution, Macedonian citizens also have started to take interest in the economic practices and the general development model that created the conditions for the environmental degradation to happen. Mobilization against the so called “mines of death” in Southeastern Macedonia took place, and in

Skopje the debates on pollution led to deepening the debates on urban development, regulations and enforcing of standards.

At the same time, 2017 saw an emergence of a strong animal rights movement. A particular turning point occurred in late 2017, when as a revenge for a dog bite by a dog trained for fighting (which is illegal in Macedonia), a group of individuals commenced on a process of brutal process of extermination of stray and domestic dogs and cats on the streets of Skopje. Dozens of dogs and cats were killed in the course of a week – a great number of them by poisoning. This prompted a wide societal mobilization, not only of animal rights activists, but also by other actors. Ever since, prevention of anti-animal cruelty and dog fights has become a mainstream political issue, although espoused predominantly by the urban middle class of Skopje.