



Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia Social briefing:
Macedonia's society in 2018**
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Macedonia's Society in 2018

Taking in account some of the trends that developed in 2017, this report discusses three important developments in Macedonia's society to be expected in 2018: the continued transformation of ethnic Macedonian nationalism, the decline and potential rebirth of civil society and in particular of critical and progressive activism, and the emergence of environmental activism.

New type of ethnic Macedonian nationalism?

2017 was a year of a changing nature of inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia. On one hand, there have been a number of potential triggers for stirring sentiments on both the Macedonian and Albanian side. DUI and the other Albanian parties took the opportunity after the 2016 elections to put forth an ethnic identity politics agenda as a precondition for the formation of a new government with either VMRO-DPMNE or SDSM. A number of ethnic Macedonian nationalists took to the streets to protest the demands of ethnic Albanians; they found support in the faltering leadership of VMRO-DPMNE. The nationalists stormed the Parliament on April 27; later in 2017 many of them were arrested on charges of terrorism and endangering the constitutional order. At the same time, once a new government was formed, DUI has pushed with the advancement of the ethnic identity agenda, causing further resentment among ethnic Macedonians. This trend will continue in 2018. However, DUI will still not manage to satisfy the ethnic Albanian population; among ethnic Albanians, DUI had lost its face in the period 2008-2016 as a partner of VMRO-DPMNE. However, in response, a more pronounced version of Albanian ethnic nationalism has emerged on the ground. This nationalist discourse is channeled by the Alliance for Albanians led by Zijadin Sela, who argues for greater decentralization, which many suspect may be a prequel for federalization of Macedonia. This discourse will perhaps continue to rise in 2018.

On top of these developments, in late 2017, the name issue between Macedonia and Greece was brought back to the mainstream. Inevitably, it has

amplified ethno-nationalist discourses and divisions. Entering 2018, roughly 30% of ethnic Macedonians and 95% of ethnic Albanians are willing to accept a compromise on the name issue, while more than 40% of ethnic Macedonians oppose a name change. This roughly portrays the new reality of ethnic relations in the country: both an inter-ethnic gap between Macedonians and Albanians, but also intra-ethnic gap among Macedonians themselves.

The majority of ethnic Macedonians are entering 2018 disgruntled by the recent developments. Moreover, with the miserable decline of VMRO-DPMNE and the numerous concessions the party's leadership has done in the past, in 2018 they lack a political voice and representation. In other words, with the decline of VMRO-DPMNE, a vast open space is emerging on the right wing of the political spectrum - much of the (former) constituency of VMRO-DPMNE – comprised of conservatives and ethnic Macedonian nationalists is up for grab. Given the resurgence of old and emergence of new right wing forces everywhere in the Balkan region and in Europe, it is therefore not unthinkable that the improperly solved Macedonian crisis, the ethnic identity politics and the name issue in 2018 would give a birth to a new ethnic Macedonian populist force, which will then have complex consequences in terms of the future development of the political landscape of the country.

For one, the emerging ethnic Macedonian nationalist discourse in 2018 is different than before. A strong VMRO-DPMNE was able to restrain, control and direct ethnic Macedonian nationalism. With a skillful and often times manipulative propaganda, Gruevski was able to fine-tune the ethnic Macedonian sentiments according to the needs of the current situation. In 2018, the ethnic Macedonian discourse is developing bottom-up, independently of the centers of power, and it can grow in different directions.

What happens with the civil society?

One of the silver linings of the political crisis in Macedonia has been the emergence of a strong and active civil society, which has had a function of not

only providing oversight of political and in general, public affairs. The emergence of a number of formal and non-formal civil society organizations facilitated the expression of an ever-growing number of concerned and critical (albeit often inadequately articulated) voices in the public sphere. Without the process of weaponizing the civil society, a government changed would not have been possible in the country.

Entering 2018, however, the once vocal civil society is merely a shadow of its own recent self. The political criticism is not as nearly as pronounced as in the past 2 years, and the potential to mobilize has vanished. One major reason for this is that a significant part of the civil society elite has become part of the governing structures of SDSM. More even so, often times the former self-proclaimed fighters against the corruption have now themselves been caught red-handed in corrupt practices; often, they are now tasked with the public defense of policies and motions issued by SDSM that maintain the continuity with VMRO-DPMNE.

Yet, by 2018, not all of the former civil society resistance against VMRO-DPMNE has been coopted by SDSM, and not all former critics of VMRO-DPMNE now pay lip service to the new government. Those who remained outside of the nexus of power, for instance, remain to be some of the most critical voices in the public debate. They preserve the idea of an authentic, progressive, non-nationalist political discourse that maintains the edge of social activism that propelled Macedonia forward, and help in transcending the staleness of social and political thought that has been the byproduct of the enduring bipartisan hegemony of SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE, as well as the permanent fixture of all governments, the dominant Albanian party DUI. In this sense, the portion of progressive voices that protested VMRO-DPMNE but remained outside of the SDSM structures currently have an ample potential for social intervention in their hands, with a possibility to shape the public discourse in 2018.

By the end of 2017, it seemed that SDSM was going to become a new dominant ruling party simply because now VMRO-DPMNE is delegitimized, and no sufficient alternative or critical civil society exists anymore. Should the anti-VMRO but non-SDSM forces manage to regroup and return to the mainstream of the public debates, however, Macedonia will have the chance to see substantial changes of its socio-political landscape.

Emergence of political environmentalism

In 2017, Macedonia's environmental degradation reached a peak level, with pollution becoming a major concern for the broader public. This has created a new venue of social mobilization and political contention, and has affected the social mapping of Macedonia's society, where green activists and voices concerned about the environment now occupy a more prominent position. This trend will continue and perhaps increase in 2018. Moreover, in 2018, there are several environment-related issues that are likely to affect the public debate on the national level, while giving way for green activism on the local level.

The most burning issue in terms of the struggle for the environment concerns the construction of foreign-owned gold mines in the Southeast region of the country. The three mines, Kazandol, Ilovic and Borov Dol, dubbed "mines of the evil" occupy a large territory near the cities of Gevgelija, Valandovo and Strumica, that has been leased to foreign companies under unclear conditions, and possibly through illicit practices. While the VMRO-DPMNE government has argued that these mines will bring jobs and prosperity to the region, aside from the mistrust in their economic logic, the major concern for local residents has been the expected major environmental impact. The mines are projected to greatly affect the public health, as well as the agriculture in the region (this is one of the most importance regions for Macedonia's agriculture, and agriculture is one of the most important economic activities in the region). In 2016 and 2017 a major grassroots mobilization resulted in referendums, some of which succeeded while others not. The activists reported political threats and pressures by the VMRO-DPMNE government. Therefore,

the leader of SDSM and since mid-2017 Prime Minister, Mr. Zaev, promised that the SDSM government will prevent the construction of the mines. However, entering 2018, representatives of the government have backtracked arguing that there is no legal pathway to preventing the construction of the mines or that a potential action can cause great financial damage due to the conditions of the contracts. At the same time, reports from the ground have provided evidence that the mines are already under construction. This has led to a new wave of mobilization, which will continue into 2018. The question, is however, will the activism transcend the local boundaries of Macedonia's Southeast, and manage to mobilize people in other areas and bring together various environmental groups.

Aside from the so called mines of evil, Macedonia enters 2018 with numerous other environmental issues. The pollution in the capital Skopje, as well as in other cities, has reached disastrous levels and is now one of the major news stories even among government media. The citizens demand political responsibility. While in 2017, most of the dissatisfaction was expressed through online media, and there were only a few protests and mobilizations on the ground, in 2018 there is a good chance that the environmental activism will transcend the online debates.

Finally, one particular issue has been the status of the Lake Ohrid. Lake Ohrid is considered a national "pearl" and is one of the only 28 UNESCO Cultural and Natural World Heritage Sites that exist in the world today (most places are either Natural or Cultural Sites, but only 28 are both Natural and Cultural sites at the same time); however, it is also the center of Macedonia's tourism industry. As such, in recent years it has attracted interests for a number of development and construction projects. This, in combination with bad governance, has worsened the environmental conditions. Locals have complained, while UNESCO has been considering downgrading the status of Ohrid. This has led to the emergence of an environmental movement that has

demanded a better care for Ohrid, and this movement will certainly play a role in 2018.