



Weekly Briefing

Macedonia Social briefing:

Macedonia Society

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The Kajmakchalan Tragedy and Its Ramifications

In February 2018, two experienced and well-known Macedonian mountain climbers – Kalina Veleska, in her late 20s, and Aleksandar Minovski, in his early 30s, lost their lives during what was supposed to be a routine hike on the peak Kajmakchalan on the mount of Nidze, on the border with Greece. The case hit all Macedonian traditional media outlets as well as the social media, and as the details surrounding the event became known, it rapidly escalated into a devastating full-blown national tragedy. For more than two weeks since the event, there is no shortage of news, public debates and interventions not only by the families of the two deceased persons, but also other climbers, as well as civic associations and regulatory bodies. Since the deaths of the two climbers had such a strong impact on Macedonia's public debates, in this report we reflect on the various aspects and ramifications of the event.

Mountain climbing in Macedonia

Macedonia is a landlocked and predominantly mountainous country. However, mountains are not only part of the geography, but also part of the Macedonian culture. In the recent years, there has been a surge in mountain climbing, both as a professional and a leisure activity. For Macedonians, mountains are escape from the polluted cities and the stress of everyday life. Mountain climbing is also one way Macedonian people can be proud of their country, as Macedonian mountains are one of the trademarks of the country. In this sense, mountain climbing has become also a form of economic activity, with a growing number of foreign tourists coming on hiking and climbing trips in Macedonia; at the same time, the nascent Macedonian middle class has also demonstrated interest in organized climbing. As a result, today mountain climbing is one of the most popular activities in the country – and for many is not only a way to spend their pastime or a way of keeping a good physical shape, but rather a true passion and lifestyle.

At the same time, mountain climbing would have not become that popular if not for the promotional activities of the most passionate Macedonian climbers. One of the most well-known climbers was the deceased Veleska, who was a popular blogger, writing a diary of her trips to the mountains. She was also a co-founder of a popular challenge called “12 peaks” – which includes trips to 12 of the highest and most scening peaks in Macedonia throughout the year. Hence, her tragic death was a shock to the public, as she was widely known and associated with one of the favorite activities of Macedonians. The deceased Minovski was also a famous climber, who had international successes – as he had climbed not only Macedonia’s mountains, but also Mont Blanc, the highest peak in Europe.

How did the public find out about the accident?

The news about the Kajmakchalan accident broke out in the evening of Saturday, February 10. In the beginning, the media reported that two climbers were missing on the Mountain Nidze. The situation was more complicated because it was believed that the climbers were on the Greek side of the mountain. Almost immediately, the media revealed the identity of the climbers, which also raised ethical concerns about the feelings of the families. Soon it was reported that the climbers are dead. No details of the accident were revealed.

Soon the accident became the #1 news story in the country, dominating the news cycles. The Prime Minister Zoran Zaev made a statement to the media and expressed his condolences. Other politicians and public personae also went to the media to make a statement. The media were publishing new details and rumors about the accident on an hourly basis. Social media were also dominated by the sad news. The reporting gained new impetus once photos and videos from the mountains became available. Videos of the harsh weather conditions, but also rather shocking videos of the retrieving of the dead bodies of the climbers made the rounds on all media outlets. The media started reposting stories from Veleska’s blog. As the lack of details about the accident opened numerous

discussions, the media gave space to various actors and arguments: those who blamed the climbers for separating from their group, those who blamed the organizer of the trip, and those who blamed the mountain rescue services, and so on. Most of the coverage was emotional and sensationalistic; making the story the top news of the week. On top of that, there was another accident on another mountain during the same weekend – a group of foreign climbers got lost on Popova Shapka (in Western Macedonia), but fortunately they were rescued.

The accident thus revealed the ugly side of the Macedonian public sphere: without much understanding for the families of the deceased, and before obtaining the official information, traditional media and social media exploited the tragedy of Kajmakchalan on mount Nidze. A particular scandal occurred when the media also reported on the hate speech towards the deceased Veleska – partially rooted in male chauvinism and gender-based discrimination, but at the same time rooted in political divisions. As Veleska was an activist in the protests against the Gruevski government, sympathizers of VMRO-DPMNE made hateful and insensitive comments on social media, adding further fire to the case.

What happened on Kajmakchalan?

The accident occurred in what are still not fully clear circumstances. A large group of climbers embarked on a weekend trip on the mountain Nidze. Among the several activities they planned to do was climbing the Kajmakchalan peak. However, there was a sudden snowstorm on the mountain; hence only a small group of climbers (including the two deceased) continued towards the peak defying the suggestions of the locals, while the rest returned. After few days of investigating, we now know that the group (including the two deceased) in fact reached the peak. There is still no sufficient explanation how the two deceased (both of them very experienced climbers) got lost on the way back. However, even after getting lost, for some time they managed to maintain contact via phone with the rest of the group – only until it got dark and the weather conditions became worse.

We now also know that there was a belated report by the group to the local authorities in Greece and Macedonia; and a belated response from both sides. Eventually, the Greek rescue service reached the two climbers in the evening (and at least one of them was alive), but failed to pull them out from the snow. The rescue team had to go back, and return to the site only the next day – to retrieve the bodies of both of the climbers, who froze to death.

Whose responsibility?

The major debate in Macedonia for weeks after the accident was who should take responsibility for the outcome. The immediate blame was put on the organizer of the trip for not respecting the regulations and the common sense, and for putting profits before safety. It turned out that the organizers even though charged fees for participants in the trip; they did everything to distance themselves from taking any responsibility for any health issues that may occur. At the same time, they brought many of the participants unprepared and untrained for the harsh conditions on the top, without having proper equipment. This touched upon a deeper debate on societal values and practices, and the culture of putting profits before people – not isolated to the mountain climbing industry per se.

Furthermore, there was the question of having appropriate regulations that apply to mountain climbing, but also of having the proper mechanisms of their implementation and oversight. The institutions of the system who have neglected this area were blamed as well; so was the national association for mountain climbing. A particular reason for the outrage was owing to the fact that in the rush to make profits, the institutions issue certificates for mountain guides to people who are not qualified; at the same time, they do not even bother to uphold any standards or respect the rules that require much stricter approach to mountain climbing than the one demonstrated by majority of climbers and climbing organizations. The institutions and the National Climbers' Association were particularly criticized for the handling of the particular case – both on the

mountain, and in the aftermath (notably, there was a significant delay in the period following the accident until the first statements made by the relevant parties, including the issuing of the official report). Again, this was not something that in the discourse was left confined to the realm of mountain climbing – but was seen as something that has to do with deeper deficiencies of the society as a whole in Macedonia.

Finally, the accident indirectly opened the question of the capacity of the rescue services, but also about the (lack of) coordination between the Macedonian and the Greek institutions. Should they had better communication and coordination the accident would have been averted. This question of course is extendable much beyond the particular case and the particular sector of cooperation (mountain climbing), as Macedonia and Greece have so far lacked joint operations and actions – and this time, this cost human lives.

Conclusion

All in all, the Kajmakchalan tragedy was a deeply disturbing event that had shaken up Macedonia's public debate and affected the society as a whole. However, aside from the trauma of losing two bright young people, for the Macedonian public debate, this was a revelation of a rather negative condition on the level of society. It exposed the pathological nature of the public debate which sensationalized the case, while pointing to the burning issue of empathy (and lack thereof), but also the issue of regulations and their enforcement.