



# Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia Social briefing:  
“Secret Ingredient” and  
the potentially bright future of Macedonia’s film industry**

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## **“Secret Ingredient” and the potentially bright future of Macedonia’s film industry**

### **Introduction**

One of the few positive stories in Macedonia in 2018 has been the release of the movie “Secret Ingredient” (*Iscehitel* in Macedonian, which literally means *The Healer*). The movie gained unprecedented international success, and captivated the Macedonian audience. Its emergence is considered one of the brightest moments of Macedonia’s cultural production; in the public discourse it is often dubbed a sign of better future to come. This report reviews the context of Macedonia’s cinematography in which “Secret Ingredient” emerged, and discusses the domestic and international reception of the movie.

### **Macedonia’s film industry**

Macedonia’s cinematography has a rich history. The Manaki brothers, who lived and worked in Bitola at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are said to be the first moviemakers in the Balkan region. Macedonia had a solid film production in the period of Yugoslavia; in general, Yugoslav cinema was developed, known internationally, and critically acclaimed, with Yugoslav movies winning awards at international film festivals, and having a global audience – in the West, but also in the East, and even in China (such as the movie “Walter Defends Sarajevo”). The Macedonian movies made during the Yugoslav period are still considered to be of superior quality compared to most of the movies made after the independence.

Today, Macedonia’s movie industry is small and there are only a few Macedonian movies that have historically enjoyed international success. Of them, the most famous one is Milcho Manchevski’s “Before the Rain,” a movie released in 1994, at the time of the wars that followed the breakup of Yugoslavia. Reflecting the political atmosphere of the era, “Before the Rain” depicted the

traumatic reality of the war-torn Balkans. It was nominated for Academy Award (Oscar), and was critically acclaimed around the world. Today, its international success remains the standard according to which Macedonian movies are measured – and so far, none of them had managed to come close to “Before the Rain.” A notable detail that perhaps separates the work of Manchevski from other Macedonian movie makers is the fact that he is based in New York, and therefore is embedded in the mainstream of the global cultural currents, while his colleagues in Macedonia had not enjoyed such privilege.

The majority of Macedonian movies from the period of independence are often generalized and criticized as following a template in terms of the content that revolves around traumatic, often dark, historic episodes, trying to convey political messages in an overt and pretentious way. The economic hardship of Macedonia and its small size have additionally driven much of the movie-making professionals out of the country, while also contributing to the lack of financial support for movies, and leaving the movie industry in perils. Movie critics and cultural workers have in general discussed a process of overall tendency of decay of the Macedonian film.

As everything else, the movie industry in Macedonia has been also a subject of political polarization in the public debates. In the last decade, the negative trends in the movie industry were also partially ascribed to the general developments in Macedonia under the rule of VMRO-DPMNE, as the ruling elite managed a tight grip over the culture, and redirected many of the resources for the culture towards projects that served the publicity campaigns to legitimate its rule; while also providing economic support for a number of its cronies (or rather, using the funds to “buy” the loyalty of cultural workers, including movie makers and actors).

The most important such project was a movie about Alexander the Great, funded by the Macedonian government with about 1 million USD. The movie, rumored to be a personally important to Gruevski, aimed to serve the nation rebuilding / rebranding process known as “antiquization” – creating a new

narrative of Macedonia inspired by the myths of the glory of Ancient Macedonia, and the blood relation between contemporary (ethnic) Macedonians and ancient Macedonians – a process that has greatly antagonized Greece. However, after the change of government, the national Film Agency has decided to stop the cooperation and terminate the contract with the producers of the movie about Alexander the Great. Officially, the reason for this is the lack of due diligence in the financial work of the producers. But, unofficially, there are claims that this is related primarily to the renewed efforts to solve the Greco-Macedonian name dispute; and that in general, the movie about Alexander the Great was considered to be a project driven by, in interest of, and instrumentalized by only VMRO-DPMNE.

Nevertheless, there have been notable exceptions to the general tendency. Macedonia is believed to have a talented young generation of movie makers, who are waiting for their opportunity (and funding) to shoot feature films. In 2015, the movie “Three Days in September” by Darijan Pejovski was released, as his feature film debut. “Three Days in September” is a psychological thriller that was considered as a movie that raises the standards of Macedonia’s movie industry. In 2016, one movie that attracted the attention of the domestic and international audience was the movie “Amok” (in Macedonian *Dzgan*) directed by Vardan Tozija. The theme of the film is the cruel upbringing and the struggle of orphans, as one unfortunate shy boy turns into a leader of a violent gang. The movie was interpreted as conveying a strong, if somewhat disturbing, social commentary. The two movies are considered first in the generation of new movies that will redeem Macedonia’s cinematography.

### **The immense success of the “Secret Ingredient”**

Third in line of the new generation of Macedonian movies, is “Secret Ingredient,” a movie by the young Macedonian director Gjorche Stavrevski, his feature film debut, released in 2017. The movie is considered to be part of the tradition of black comedies in the Balkans (one of the most popular genres of

Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav movies). The plot revolves around the story of a struggling working class family, and the attempt of the son to help his sick father alleviate his cancer pains with a cake made with marijuana. The movie thus provides a powerful social commentary that addresses not only the globally relevant debates on medicinal use of marijuana and its legalization, but rather the decaying healthcare and the hardships of everyday life in post-socialist Macedonia. Additionally, the main character in the movie works as a train mechanic, and through him the movie depicts the uncomfortable truth of the decay of public infrastructure and the public goods during the transition. However, “Secret Ingredient” is also considered a movie with a humanistic and optimistic message. The Macedonian name of the movie, “The Healer” has been also discussed as having a particular value, as many critics noted that the movie has the potential to heal the Macedonian spirit after the political crisis.

The movie is also significant because it is produced in cooperation with a Greek company. As such it resembles a positive example of cooperation between Macedonians and Greeks, and may encourage the rapprochement between the two societies that have been rather divided as a result of the name dispute. The movie premiered in November 2017 at the Balkan Survey Section of the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in Greece, where it notably won the award for the best film of the audience by a large margin, despite the political sensitivity of Greece-Macedonia relations.

Aside from the political and social context, and the catchy plot, however, critics note that “Secret Ingredient” has a particular artistic value, such as great camera, music and a good flow.

The movie in Macedonia premiered at the festival Cinedays in Macedonia, in front of a sold out audience that as the media reported remained seated and applauding throughout the rolling of the credits – something that is quite exceptional in Macedonian cinemas. Very soon after, the movie started noting international acclaim. It was aired on HBO, one of the largest global cable TV networks. In addition to the award in Tesseloniki, in the first four months since

its release it won the following awards: Best Film Award at the Aubagne International Film Festival, France; the Jeffrey C. Barbakow Award for Best International Feature Film at the International Film Festival in Santa Barbara, California; the Special Mention Award at the Francofilm Festival in Rome, Italy; the First Prize at the Bergamo Film Meeting, Italy; Special Mention Award at the International Film Festival in Sofia; the Special Jury Award for Best Screenplay at the Mediterranean Film Festival in Brussels; and was screened at the prestigious Black Nights Film Festival in Tallinn, where it has three showings, and at the Goa Film Festival in India (the largest one in the country) among others. The list of accolades may as well increase over time.

“Secret Ingredient” was also positively reviewed in some of the leading global film magazines, such as Hollywood Reporter, which gave the movie an excellent review, and Variety, which argued that the success of “Secret Ingredient” may have a general positive impact on Macedonia’s film industry.

### **Conclusion**

In 2018, as “Secret Ingredient” is noting unprecedented international acclaim, the Macedonian public has a reason to be proud. The movie, which tells an authentic sad Macedonian story in a funny way, grasps the struggle and challenges for the Macedonian society, but at the same time relates to a rather global discussion regarding the use of marijuana for healing purposes, gives a good reason for Macedonia to be mentioned in world media. At the same time, the fact that it is following two other feature film debuts of young Macedonian directors that have had a good reception, the movie may indeed be a part of a new wave, or new era of success of the Macedonian cinematography. While Macedonia’s main predicaments stem from the economic underdevelopment and political uncertainties, channeling the plight of the citizens into powerful pieces of art is not only a coping mechanism, but rather a way to inspire a change in thinking and social discourse.