



# Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia Social briefing:**  
**Macedonia's Upcoming Referendum: Social Context**  
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## **Macedonia's Upcoming Referendum: Social Context**

The socio-political context in which the Referendum on the Prespa Agreement will take place is one of constant uncertainty, intense political pressure, and deep and irreversible political polarization. In spite of ethnic and religious cleavages resembling major lines of division in Macedonia since its independence, today the most complex, deepest is the division based on political ideology and political partisanship among ethnic Macedonians. This division was amplified by the policies of the VMRO-DPMNE-led government 2006-2017, and has informed the political strategy of the former opposition and now ruling strategy of SDSM, centered on political performances and protest politics, even when in power. Paradoxically, this has kept the polarization alive. Ever since the onset of the political crisis in 2015 (with some elements being present in 2014), continuing into its first years in power (2017-2018), SDSM has maintained the extra-institutional mobilization, and consistently called on Macedonian citizens to seize on the historical moment and take their country's destiny in their own hands on occasions ranging from mass protests, elections and now the referendum on the Prespa Agreement. VMRO-DPMNE has attempted to mimic this strategy, but after its attempted social movement performance ended up in violence on April 27, 2017 and lost legitimacy, and after the subsequent weakening of the party as many of its former officials are now accused of corruption, the movement politics remains one-sided, with clear dominance of SDSM.

The political atmosphere of constant mobilization now led by SDSM, however, is taking toll on the society. In the last decade, they have been divided and re-divided in groups of patriots and traitors, oppressors and liberators, visionaries and primitives, and those who have the moral right to speak up, and those who have the moral obligation to keep silent. This divisions have been particularly salient and have played an important role in shaping socio-political

realities. They have been especially visible in periods of elections and public mobilization campaigns. The upcoming referendum on the Prespa Agreement by which Macedonia obliges to change its constitutional name in exchange for Greece's support in Macedonia's EU and NATO accession, in addition to becoming the hottest political topic in the country, is also a peak of the process of social polarization. While the question how citizens will vote matters for the political outcomes of the referendum, the question how their positions are being shaped helps in understanding the state of Macedonia's society ahead of the referendum.

### **Psychological distress**

The upcoming referendum is a formidable challenge for Macedonian citizens, and in particular for ethnic Macedonians, many of who feel particularly concerned about the prospective renaming of the country. While the government and the international community have promised that the trade off for the renaming of the country will be a prosperous future, for now, on the social level, it is almost certain that the referendum vote, regardless of the outcome, will amplify the existing trends related to the uncertainty, pressure and polarization in society. In fact, the public campaigns and debates in the period leading up to the referendum have been accompanied with nasty rhetoric and fatalistic discourse on both sides. There are several important caveats to this.

First, the name issue and all sorts of complications associated with it, which have been an intrinsic part of Macedonia's politics and foreign policy since the proclamation of its independence, have also had a number of psychological ramifications and affected the well-being of Macedonia's citizens in various ways. For one, the name issue has directly affected a number of Macedonian citizens, and in particular ethnic Macedonians (the largest ethnic group in the country) on the grounds of personal identity and sense of belonging – as one of the core arguments in Greece has been that a Macedonian nation does not exist, and that Macedonia is Greece. If one analyzes the language used by ethnic

Macedonians to address the predicament of the name issue, it is easy to see that many have used terms that denote sense of injustice, but also deep feelings of existential pain, feeling threatened, humiliated and abused by Greece, and often times betrayed and abandoned by their own government. Some ethnic Macedonians originate from the Greek Province of Macedonia, and have thus been exposed to harsh treatment and persecution, which has been a source of collective trauma, which is constitutive part of their discourse on the name issue and the referendum itself.

Second, the name issue has had a particular psychological effect because of its duration, but also because of its irrationality and the fact that no similar dispute is known in the study of world politics. Taking into account its material consequences, such as the embargo in 1995 imposed by Greece, and the obstruction of Macedonia's EU and NATO accession in the 2000s, for a number of Macedonian citizens the name issue has equaled a denial of a better future. The identitarian policy of the Macedonian government of VMRO-DPMNE (2006-2017) that worked towards antagonizing Greece by empowering narratives of ancient Macedonian continuity, and in particular the construction of the project Skopje 2014 has left many also feeling violated by their former government. As a consequence, many have become fed up with having to endure the consequences of the name issue, and have become desperate to solve it, regardless of the costs and unfairness of the situation. They still hold the grudge against the former government and for them the referendum is one of the acts in moving on from the Gruevski era. For them, the biggest threat is a failure of the referendum and potential failure of the Prespa Agreement.

Third, as suggested in the introduction, the referendum itself happens in a string of events in the last years that have created an immense psychological tension in Macedonia's society. The final years of the rule of VMRO-DPMNE were marked by a number of transgressions, while in the quest to come to power, SDSM has relied on instrumentalizing public anger. The political crisis which was slowly fermenting from 2014 onwards, has been accompanied by protracted

informational warfare between VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, which has deepened political polarization and entrenchment of the different camps. They are now engaged in a politics-as-war rhetoric, even if their elites seem to cooperate in the backstage. Yet, as a result of the zero-sum public discourse, in Macedonia today, it is impossible to have a debate that would include people with various opinions on any important topic. Attempts at debating descend into mayhem – this is especially the case for debates on a topic of such magnitude such as the name issue and the upcoming referendum. The only way to victory is the total annihilation of the opponents.

Fourth, the referendum happens against a backdrop of so far unseen pressure to vote, and vote in favor of the Prespa Agreement. This pressure is exercised not only by the Government (as Prime Minister Zaev has argued, those who will not vote in the referendum will be considered enemies of the state), but also in an overt manner by a number of international diplomats who have descended upon Skopje or addressed the Macedonian public from afar, that included the German Chancellor Merkel and the US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis. The French Ambassador told the Macedonian public: “Your options are North Macedonia or North Korea.” For some citizens, who have internalized Macedonia's weak international position, such an attitude by the international community is nevertheless welcome, since they see it as sign that someone in the world finally cares about Macedonia – regardless of the message sent. However, the framing of the referendum as a make-or-break moment with no Plan B and the external push, while attempted at helping the Government to mobilize a number of supporters who will vote in favor, has been also bound to create a sense of overwhelming pressure, and lack of agency among a number of Macedonian citizens, with the abstaining from voting or boycotting of the referendum becoming an attractive option for many.

Fifth, there is a number of uncertainties when it comes to the referendum, which have been discussed in previous papers. However, the key political actors, and especially the campaign to vote in favor of the Prespa Agreement led by the

Government have redirected the public debate towards an emotional, simplistic discourse. Priority has been given to grand statements, embellishments and promises for the future, with thorough analytical takes being of secondary importance. A more critical discourse has emerged among the opponents of the Prespa Agreement, however even in the camp “Against” or rather the movement to boycott the referendum, analytical takes have given way to nationalist rhetoric. This has in a way become a never-ending feedback loop, as the already emotional Macedonian citizens did not have much opportunities to read calming, explanatory texts – but have been in fact bombarded with emotional, biased, propagandist material. The majority of the citizens, overwhelmed by the campaigns and the omnipresence of the topic of the referendum, will ultimately make their decision based on their feelings. Some of them will vote, and majority of them will vote in favor; others will not vote.

### **Weaponizing the (non)vote**

As argued previously, the main goal for the referendum to succeed at this is for it to reach the minimum threshold of 50% voter turnout (that means roughly 900.000 voters have to show up on the day of the referendum). This threshold is based on an outdated census – it is believed that today Macedonia has lower population and lower number of voters, which in turn makes the threshold of 900.000 even more distant. This has made the referendum not a contest between the camps in favor of and against the Prespa Agreement, but rather the camp that will vote (and will vote predominantly in favor), and the camp that will not vote at the referendum.

The reasons why people will vote in favor of the referendum are a combination of their political loyalty to SDSM and DUI, their belief that a successful referendum will help close the name issue forever, and accelerate Macedonia's NATO and EU membership bids. NATO and EU memberships are imagined as panacea for Macedonia's problems, regardless of the ongoing tensions and crises. For a number of Macedonian citizens, and in particular a

number of the middle class that leads a generally comfortable lifestyle, nevertheless, the referendum is a chance to affirm their identity as part of the West.

Opposed to them are those who are bracing to boycott the upcoming referendum. This assemblage of groups and individuals is much more varied and driven by various motivations; and has expressed their call for boycott using various terms. Most visible has been an emerging alt-right movement using the social media hashtag #Bojkotiram (meaning “I boycott”), which has managed to build a significant following. These people are ethnic Macedonian nationalists, who are strongly opposed to any name deal that involves change in the Constitution, are in general supportive of EU and NATO, and seem to hold the US president Donald Trump in high regard. Interestingly enough, not all of those who boycott are associated with VMRO-DPMNE, and not all of VMRO-DPMNE members will boycott the referendum (a growing number say they will vote “Against”). Recent analyses have shown that only a few alt-right Twitter profiles have managed to generate much of the content associated with #Bojkotiram, and made it go viral. In addition to them, there are growing reports on alleged pro-Russian elements in Macedonia's society, who support the boycott – although even the government has admitted that there is no tangible evidence of Russian interference.

However, there have been also a number of progressive and left wing voices, for which the boycott has allowed to deploy a critique of NATO, express criticism towards the SDSM government, and develop a non-nationalist position on self-determination on the question of the name. Some of them have used the hashtag #Bojkotiram, while others have opted for alternative expressions: non-vote, abstaining from vote, or “staying at home on the day of the referendum.”

While this is a simplistic portrayal of the two camps, there seems to have been an interesting development in the logic of the (non)voting. First, unlike the conventional understanding of democracy where by a vote means desire for change, while non-vote lack of desire for change, in the case of Macedonia's

referendum there seems to be a reversal of the situation: very often, voters who will vote in favor of the Referendum do not want to disturb ongoing socio-political trends and will vote to affirm Macedonia's trajectory of the past 25 years, that is the strategic orientation towards EU and NATO; whereas the non-vote, traditionally conceptualized as a passive, non-political position, currently, thanks to its disproportionate discursive impact, can be also seen as a form of a protest vote and readiness to change paths. The gulf between these two groups is widening on a daily basis.