



Weekly Briefing

Macedonia social briefing:
No Post-Crisis Normalization in Sight
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Introduction

The period of protracted political crisis, uncertainty and turbulence that culminated in 2017 were followed by lower levels of indignation and social mobilization in 2018. Nevertheless, thanks to the unpredictable political trajectory and the opening of sensitive issues, Macedonian public debates continued to be significantly heated, meaning that in 2018 Macedonia's (civil) society and in general the public sphere, had still not reached a point of “normalization” in the aftermath of the political crisis. There were two central and at the same time inter-related issues of contention that contributed to the prolongation of the politics of division: the name issue and the Prespa Agreement; and the processes of dealing with the legacy of (and the legal cases from) the era of the rule of VMRO-DPMNE and in particular the clique of Nikola Gruevski. These can be considered the two “big issues” that defined 2018. At the same time, the continued debates on other pressing social issues further contributed to these tendencies. The paper discusses how the two sets of issues affected Macedonia's society in 2018. Overall, whereas the public manifestations of dissatisfaction have been lower in 2018 than in the previous years, the public debates and sentiments may have even become more polarized than in the past.

The Pendulum of Emotions on the “Big Issues”

2018 was a year of “big issues.” First, the government of SDSM and DUI proceeded to solve the dispute with Greece by proceeding to change the name of country to “North Macedonia.” Second, the government and the judiciary had stepped up the legal processes against the former top brass of VMRO-DPMNE, including the former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski himself. At some point, these two issues became fused – as the process of changing the name of the country could not be completed without the support of at least some parts of VMRO-DPMNE. The government then created an opportunity for trade-offs – they would eventually let a number of former VMRO-DPMNE officials walk away free in exchange for their support on the name issue. This was framed as a “reconciliation effort” that aimed to bring the toxic divisions in society to an end. Nevertheless, it had a counter-effect.

The name issue in itself has sharply divided the society in a way that cannot be healed for the time being. The majority of ethnic Macedonians consider the change of the name of the

country to be an act of violence and treason. For them, preserving the constitutional name of the country and abolishing the Prespa Agreement is not only a political imperative, but also an identitarian goal. For a minority of ethnic Macedonians, and especially for the vast majority of ethnic Albanians, however, the change of the constitutional name is a necessary step and sacrifice on the way to membership in NATO and EU. The two camps, for and against the name change (with important nuances and exceptions on both sides), have led an entrenched political battle throughout 2018, which culminated in the period around the referendum in September 2018. Personal relations, friendships and sometimes even family relations have deteriorated as a result of the polarized political rhetoric on the issue. It would not be an exaggeration to say that people from the two camps often times openly manifested intolerance or even hatred towards their opponents.

These developments also led to shift in the public support for political parties. In particular, a number of citizens who opposed the name change, had initially been inclined to support VMRO-DPMNE. However, the fact that VMRO-DPMNE was considered to be hesitant and to perform weakly on the issue, led to major disappointments among the party's constituency. This worked well for a number of emerging smaller populist parties, who openly campaigned against the name change, organized rallies and protests in the capital, and managed to attract some of the disappointed VMRO-DPMNE supporters. The referendum on the Prespa Agreement at the same time saw a new manifestation of online mobilization, as a new alt-right online movement emerged, calling for boycott of the referendum. This online movement managed to have an important impact on the referendum and its outcome, but did not manage to keep the momentum in the aftermath.

The issue of dealing with the legacy of VMRO-DPMNE and processing the myriad of legal cases against its former officials was another contentious issue. A number of citizens – primarily those that had supported SDSM in the elections in 2016 – had done so expecting a complete dismantling and punishing of the VMRO-DPMNE. Nevertheless, the processes of bargaining for the support on the name issue that took full swing in the second half of 2018, and the subsequent pardoning of a number of former VMRO-DPMNE officials accused of corruption and other crimes by the end of 2018, had a disappointing effect among the justice-seeking citizens. This disappointment has been amplified by the belief that the escape of former Prime Minister Gruevski to Hungary that took place in November 2018 had also something to do with the processes of political bargaining. The disappointment was so profound, that there were even a few attempts at public protest against the SDSM-DUI government and rekindling

the social movements from the period 2015-2016 that brought down the VMRO-DPMNE – DUI government; nevertheless, these efforts did not have a significant success.

The Growing Significance of “Other Issues”

In addition to the “big issues,” in 2018 there were a number of other, smaller issues that shaped the public debate. First, the country saw a continued trend of mobilization on issues pertaining to public health, that had already started in 2016 and 2017. Two issues were particularly significant: air pollution, and the quality of public healthcare. Air pollution in 2018 got worse, as Macedonian cities have been among the most polluted in Europe and the world. Some of the movements that emerged in the years before also continued their advocacy and mobilization into 2018. At the same time, the discourse on the air pollution in 2018 also turned against the SDSM-DUI government, as well as the local self-governments (most of which are controlled by SDSM, and some by DUI). There were attempts to organize public protests, that had limited success. At the same time, there were continued public outcries against the deteriorating condition of the public healthcare. Citizens have been active online in raising awareness of crumbling public health institutions, rising costs of healthcare, and have also mobilized in humanitarian actions to crowdfund the medical bills for people that require treatment abroad but cannot afford it. Leaving 2018 and entering 2019, Macedonia saw an epidemics of measles which raised concerns not only about the decaying healthcare system (the failure of providing vaccinations to a large number of children, and the administration of vaccinations that had been past the expiration date), the complete lack of trust of the citizens in the system, and the fertile ground for spread of conspiracy theories and unscientific beliefs (the so called 'antivaxer' movement of parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated against infectious diseases).

2018 also saw continued debates on other social issues, in the first place the difficult socio-economic conditions and the impossibility of the majority of the population to have a decent livelihood. Surveys in 2018 showed that large shares of the population would leave Macedonia if given a chance to do so. The desperation transcends ethnic lines, as people from all ethnic groups and all parts of the country desire to emigrate. This sentiment however has turned out to be most salient among young highly-educated people, which is particularly disconcerting news. In 2018, thus, despite the political change, the overall pessimistic outlook among Macedonian citizens had prevailed and potentially intensified. More even so, the perception of low quality of life among the common people and the image of the average Macedonian citizen as struggling to make ends meet has been often juxtaposed against the

image of the rich corrupt politicians ruling the country. The fact that the SDSM-DUI government has been shaken by a number of corruption scandals, has reinforced the belief that “all elites are the same” and contributed even further in the rise of pessimistic outlook among large swaths of the population.

Conclusion

In sum, the two “big issues” - the name change, and the dealing with the legacy of VMRO-DPMNE have perpetuated the sense of political uncertainty and the political polarization that comes with it. At the same time, the “big issues” contributed to the blurring of the lines of political division. Going into 2018, one could in general identify two camps along political partisan lines. Nevertheless, through the process of political bargaining, the major political parties have disappointed their own supporters, which led to growing discontent among the citizens. No less important were the “other issues” which contributed to further erosion of trust and the diminishing of hope for a change for the better among the majority of the population. In 2018, even though not taking so often to the streets, Macedonian citizens remained indignant, unsatisfied and critical – but they remained bitterly divided and fragmented. In some ways, this has created an ample space for new, populist forces to emerge and captivate the public sentiment. This potential was seen in the light of the September 2018 referendum and the emergence of an online alt-right movement that impacted its outcome. Entering 2019, the prospects for similar developments are ever riper. There is simply too much free-floating anger, dissatisfaction and disappointment that waits to be captured by skilled demagogues.