




Weekly Briefing

North Macedonia social briefing:
Pope Francis in Skopje
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Pope Francis in Skopje

Introduction

On May 7, 2019, Pope Francis visited Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia (hereinafter Macedonia). The visit to Skopje was part of the Pope's Balkan tour – before heading to Macedonia, the Pontifex spent few days in neighboring Bulgaria. The visit by Pope Francis was the first visit of the head of the Catholic Church to Macedonia in its modern history, and as such was treated as an event of utmost historical and political importance that dominated the news cycle in the country in the days before and after the visit, and was the most popular topic on Macedonian social media, while also attracting attention in the regional and global media. In this paper we discuss the visit of the Pope itself, its interpretations and the debates it inspired on topics from high politics to various governance issues to mundane everyday themes.

The Pope in Skopje

The visit of Pope Francis to Skopje was announced well in advance, and was highly anticipated by the elites and the citizens of the country alike. The visit was advertised in the media, and announced via large billboards placed on various locations around the city. A special website www.papa.mk was established, which provided detailed information about the itinerary of the Pope and all other necessary information to the visitors and the public. Prior to the visit, the government of Macedonia liaised with officials from the Vatican City State, coordinating on a number of issues regarding the logistics, as well as the Pope's security while in the country.

Anticipating the arrival of the Pontifex, Macedonian authorities undertook significant measures to ensure that the high standards of the protocol set by Vatican will be met. The day of the visit, May 7 was declared a public holiday, meaning that state institutions and a number of businesses did not work (furthermore, May 7 was a Tuesday, so a number of people opted to also take May 6 off, and go for an extended weekend holiday). A special plan to restrict traffic in Skopje was adopted for the days leading to the visit of the Pope, and during the visit itself. Of special significance was the successful removal of thousands of vehicles parked on the streets in downtown Skopje – an endeavor that was warmly greeted by the locals, since Skopje had historically faced the challenge of having too few parking spots, which in turn has led to a

chaotic urban landscape with parked cars occupying, the streets, the pavements and other public spaces. Similarly, Skopje's otherwise extremely filthy main boulevards and other the areas on the itinerary of the Pope were cleaned up in the course of just few days. As Skopje is known for its lack of environmental and hygienic standards, this was another measure that citizens warmly embraced – some of them had taken to social media to ironically ask the Pope to come back soon so the City authorities would clean up the streets once again. Nevertheless, there were less popular measures as well – for example, as part of the security protocol of the Pope, all hospitals in Skopje were optimized to be able to handle various kinds of emergencies, making their daily operations that had been already hampered by lack of resources and staff even more difficult.

Pope Francis' visit took place in the days after the second round of the Parliamentary elections. As an extraordinary event that transcended daily politics, it helped in defusing the tensions that the elections brought to the public debate, and redirecting the attention of the media and the citizens towards away from the everyday problems. Yet, the visit by the Pope could not be fully seen in isolation from the general developments in the country. Pope Francis was invited and primarily hosted by the outgoing President Gjorge Ivanov, during his last days in office. Ivanov and Pope Francis had met on several occasions before – Ivanov had prioritized good relations with Vatican, and his alleged personal rapport with the Pontifex was believed to be an important factor for the decision of the Pope to come to Skopje while Ivanov was still in office. The Pope however also briefly met Prime Minister Zoran Zaev and the president-elect Stevo Pendarovski. As we will see below, there were some minor political frictions caused by the divergent political agendas of Ivanov and the government.

Nevertheless, most of the Pope's itinerary in Macedonia was devoid of politics. The Pope visited the Catholic Cathedral in Skopje, met young people, and met with representatives of the clergy from the Orthodox Church. The Pope also visited the Memorial House of Mother Theresa in downtown Skopje. Most significantly, the Pontifex led a holy mass at the central square in the city, which was said to have attracted visitors from the country and beyond – including some coming from faraway places such as Latin America. The Pope then toured downtown Skopje in his armored vehicle, greeting the public. The impression from these activities was that Macedonian authorities may have went overboard with the security measures and restrictions of visitors, as the number of people that managed to get into the restricted areas to greet the Pope still seemed significantly smaller than anticipated.

The Meaning of the Visit of the Pope for Macedonia

In general terms, the visit to Macedonia seems to fit Pope's Francis profile and his inclination to visit parts of the global periphery /semi-periphery, and places that serve as intersections of various cultures. The Pope thus talked of Macedonia's as a bridge between the East and the West, and a country with an extraordinary history of multiculturalism. At the same time, Pope Francis' visit to Skopje happened against the backdrop 25 years bilateral ties between Macedonia and Vatican, but this was not the only symbolic element of the event. Macedonia has an insignificant number of Catholics (just about 0.5% of the total population); however, it is a country that is considered to be of particular importance in the historical advance in Christianity in Europe.

For instance, Macedonian Christians proudly refer to the fact that St. Paul the Apostle had traveled to Macedonia to spread the Christian faith in the first century AD, and that people living in Macedonia were among the earliest adopters of Christianity outside the Middle East (often times, Macedonia is referred to as the gate of Christianity to Europe). Furthermore, as part of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, Macedonia was a home of the development of Slavic literacy, which was intertwined with the advance of Christian culture in Central and Eastern Europe. Of particular significance is the legacy of the brothers Ss Cyril and Methodius who have codified the Ancient Slavic language and introduced it in the service of the churches on the territory spanning from the Balkans to Moravia (today's Czech Republic). Aside from the ancient and middle ages history, Macedonia has some significance for modern day Christianity as well. St. Mother Theresa, usually associated with India, was born and raised in Skopje as Agnes Gonxa Bojaxhiu, of Vlach-Albanian origin, and is also one of the figures that features prominently in the new national imaginaries in Macedonia. All of these points were addressed by Pope Francis during his speeches in Macedonia.

In practice, the historic elements matter not only for the development of the Christian identity of ethnic Macedonians and the national identity of Macedonian citizens in general, but also give Macedonia a particular significance and visibility in the Christian world. Besides the acknowledgment of the historic importance of Macedonia for Christianity, the positive relations with Vatican also help in legitimizing the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which still struggles for full recognition in the Orthodox commonwealth (Orthodox Churches in Europe often function within national borders and perform pseudo-political functions). Historically, Macedonian revolutionaries and statesmen have often relied on the recognition and support from Vatican. Finally, Vatican is perceived as a powerful international actor, and thus good

relations with the Holy See are considered in general important for the international standing of the country.

The acknowledgment of the historical importance of Macedonia by Pope Francis occurred at a time when the mainstream narratives in society happen to be completely ahistorical and even anti-historical, as the politics of good neighborly relations – having its milestones in the Agreements with Bulgaria and Greece – has made the current government wary of making any claims on Macedonia's history before 1944. Some of the Christian narratives are heavily contested – e.g. the narrative of St. Paul's trips to Macedonia are claimed to be part of the Greek history; whereas Ss Cyril and Methodius are claimed to be part of the Bulgarian history, and are subject to the work of the cross-border committees that negotiate the historical facts and terms.

What made the visit of the Pope even more outstanding in this context, was the fact that the major local actor was the outgoing President Ivanov, who has been the sole political actor that vocally opposed the position of the Government on issues of history and identity, arguing that the Prespa Agreement and the recent renaming of the country was unfair, unlawful and treacherous. In his speech while hosting the Pope, Ivanov had voiced his perspective for one last time (as in the days after, he retired from the Presidency). Similarly to his speech at the United Nations General Assembly ahead of the September 2018 referendum in the country, President Ivanov used another major international event to oppose the renaming of the country. This move by Ivanov was criticized by the Government and its supporters, but was greeted by their opponents; the Pope himself, understandably did not engage with the issue.

Nevertheless, the voice of Ivanov did not manage to change the general narrative about the visit of the Pope. The event was in general framed as part of the new success story of Macedonia in the aftermath of the Prespa Agreement, with the renaming of the country being an important catalyst in the process. Leading international media reported on the Pope's visit, reinforcing this narrative. In one of the most widely circulated stories on the topic, the New York Times argued that after the Prespa Agreement, now the visit of the Pope adds visibility to the newly renamed country.