



Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia social briefing:
Macedonian Society in 2019
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Macedonian Society in 2019

Introduction

In 2019, the Republic of North Macedonia (hereinafter Macedonia) faced a number of political, economic and diplomatic challenges which shaped the social dynamics and the public debates in the country. However, society itself had only limited impact on the shaping of politics, economy or foreign relations. Compared to the earlier years of the political crisis, Macedonia's society seems to have lost some of its vibrancy (e.g. people are less active, less outspoken, less optimistic, less engaged with each other and with the big social themes), but retained the principles of division and polarization (primarily along ethnic and political partisanship lines, with some seeds of class consciousness being planted as well). With that framework in mind, below we discuss the key – rather dark – themes in the Macedonian society and public debates in 2019, and the major offsetting forces and sources of optimism and pride.

Key Themes

The change of the name of the country reinforced a lot of ethnic nationalist sentiments and resentment, which was additionally fueled by the adoption of the new law on official languages which established Albanian as a second official language on the territory of the country. A number of ethnic Macedonians felt victimized by the ongoing developments, unrepresented by the political establishment, and deceived by the domestic and international political, intellectual and media elites. A number of minor actors – in the form of grassroots organizations, online initiatives and semi-formal associations attempted to capture the momentum and offer a narrative under which ethnic Macedonians can rally. They had limited success. Yet, even though unchallenged, ethnic Macedonian nationalism hovers around the country, waiting for its moment to mobilize and organize.

Ethnic nationalism remained to be an important social force that mobilized ethnic Albanians as well. The pluralization of the ethnic Albanian political block contributed to this process, as in the competition for votes, various ethnic Albanian political parties now vie for the title of being the purest and most efficient representative of Albanian ethno-national interests, which in turn ignites the fires of ethnic nationalism among the masses. With the dominance of the two major ethnicities in the country, in 2019 other ethnic groups remained

further on the sidelines. The challenges for ethnic communities vulnerable to racial discrimination, in particular the Roma, which face the gravest socio-economic issues, were far from the mainstream debates in 2019.

In 2019, Macedonia was plagued by the further deteriorating public healthcare system, and the declining social awareness about public health issues. Macedonia saw a large-scale measles outbreak that lasted for several months. The capacity of the system was particularly affected by the continued brain drain and the outflow of medical workers, which the government hoped to offset by increasing the salaries of doctors and nurses (the effects of these measures on brain drain remain to be seen). Private healthcare businesses have successfully capitalized on the decline of the public healthcare system and have established themselves as superior form of healthcare – while at the same time coming at a great cost, and making decent healthcare a privilege of the wealthier ones. The political connections of private healthcare magnates helped in even diverting public funding from the public to the private healthcare system (e.g. through public-private partnerships). In parallel to the decline of the healthcare system, the public discourse in the country saw the further rise of anti-scientific conspiracy theories, including the emergence of a vocal antivax movement (which has directly correlated with the measles outbreak).

Air pollution and environmental concerns continued to be major issues in Macedonia in 2019. Skopje and other cities in the country climbed the ladder of most polluted cities in the world (at times topping it) both in the beginning and the end of the year, coinciding with the heating season (suggesting that the lack of an adequate central heating system is a major contributor to the pollution), although pollution levels were relatively high throughout the whole year (suggesting that other factors matter too – including waste trade, and the landfills and waste management businesses – which are of questionable legal and ethical character). Citizens have consistently expressed dissatisfaction with the situation and tried to mobilize; there have been several fallouts between environmental activists and the policymakers as the former blamed the latter as not doing enough to mitigate the effects of and tackle the causes for the pollution in the country. Air pollution remains to be one of the most salient problems for all Macedonian citizens – irrespective of the various cleavages – and is likely to become an issue around which greater social and political mobilization may occur in the future. In 2019, Macedonia saw a new wave of environmental activism, including a surge in youth activism under the banner of the global Fridays for Future initiative. Moreover, aside from air pollution, land and water pollution were also raised as issues, and have remained greatly unsolved heading into the new year. Furthermore, in 2019, as everywhere in the world, the number and the

destructive impact of wildfires in Macedonia was on the rise, contributing to the increase of pollution, deforestation and loss of wildlife. The wildfires attracted a lot of public attention, but did not lead to substantial policy response or reform.

Macedonia in 2019 still saw relatively high level of socio-economic inequality and numerous manifestations of social injustice, although the government undertook some significant steps towards improving the situation, such as the increase in social aid and the increase in the minimum wage. Yet, despite these social policies, attempts at expression of dissatisfaction persisted, as the labor movement was active in demanding worker's rights (in particular in the textile industry, as well as among cultural workers). Civil society activism was visible in the year that passed as well. Significantly, in 2019 Macedonia held its first Pride Parade for advancing the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, queer and other non-heterosexual people although sexuality-based discrimination and harassment persisted (including a notable inflammatory statement made by former Prime Minister Zaev). Macedonia saw continued feminist activism as well, including more local spinoffs of the global movement against sexual harassment. Citizens protested against the system of expropriation. There were many more online petitions, initiatives and interventions. The impunity of high-level officials implicated in grand corruption cases was one of the main triggers of dissatisfaction. However, the vibrancy of the civil society is still far from the peak of the protest movements in the period 2015-2016.

The media field in the country remained turbulent and tense. A major shock was caused by the “Racket” affair and the revelations that a number of high-profile figures including the Chief Special Prosecutor as well as Bojan Jovanovski (a.k.a Boki 13) were involved in an extortion scheme. The revelations were originally made by Branko Geroski, a veteran journalist, who published a series of spectacular op-eds using pseudonyms, which unleashed a war between various media and political factions. Jovanovski had headed the newly founded 1TV, which quickly got established as a leading television in the country, recruiting some of the best known and most experienced Macedonian journalists. Jovanovski has often displayed his close contacts with the top brass of SDSM and the government, which quickly made 1TV the most influential medium in the country. With his downfall, 1TV stopped operations (the outlet had complicated ownership relations and found itself in the middle of the “Racket” affair).

While the “Racket” affair was the pinnacle of the media wars, even outside it throughout 2019 media operated in a generally polarized landscape, very much divided along political partisanship lines. The end result was the creation of different information bubbles and disparate

(and sometimes even conflicting interpretations of reality). Furthermore, blames about disinformation, misinformation and spreading of “fake news” intensified during 2019 – a discourse which transcended the local context and often referred to foreign malign influence (often associated with Russia or China, following the frames proliferated in the American and European political and media context).

Ever more toxic tendencies were visible on Macedonian social media, which have turned into a terrain for political warfare and have been dominated by militant political partisan discourse, libeling, and cyber bullying.

Offsetting Forces: International Promotion and National Pride

One major offsetting force in times of gradual social fragmentation and decay is cultural production; sometimes music, books, or motion pictures can exert a major positive influence on society. In 2019, one such cultural product was Honeyland, a full feature documentary that tells the story of the last wild bee keeper in the world – Atidze Muratova from Bekirlija, an abandoned village not far from Skopje. The movie shows how while living in absolute destitution, Atidze manages to maintain a harmonious relationship with nature – only to be spoiled by the arrival of intruders who along with themselves bring the ills of the capitalist society – economic insecurity and the desperate need for profit. The movie has become a global hit, winning a number of prestigious awards around the world, and receiving positive reviews from influential critics. Telling a beautiful and sad story that addresses some of the most burning questions of today – including ones about the human attitude towards environment, sustainability, social justice, gender and ethnicity – Honeyland captivated both the Macedonian and the global public. The international success of the movie sparked a lot of joy and optimism in the country, and made Macedonian citizens proud of their country.

Another significant offsetting force was the success of the handball team Vardar from Skopje, which amid financial adversity managed to win its second European championship in three years. However, the success of Vardar – which sparked a lot of joy among Macedonian citizens – was overshadowed by the nationalist overtones of the celebrations in the country.