



Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia social briefing:
Macedonian Society in 2020**
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Macedonian Society in 2020

Introduction

For the Republic of North Macedonia (hereinafter Macedonia) 2020 is a year of another early elections, which will be the central political event with significant social ramifications. The stakes are even higher as the country is embroiled in yet another grand corruption scandal, which perpetuates the sense of crisis, thereby setting the tone and overall mood in the society. 2020 will be also a year of mediocre economic performance, and further tensions between the pro-welfare and the pro-business wings of the government, which will reflect not only on the economic policy making and the actual developments in the economy, but also on the well-being and expectations of the ordinary people. Moreover, 2020 will be likely another eventful year in terms of the external relations of the country, and some say even a watershed year in terms of the country's "double integration" in EU and NATO, which will have also an important impact on core public debates regarding the identity and long-term vision for the country. Aside from these big processes, there will be several other ongoing challenges that will shape the social perceptions and public debates in the country. By responding to these challenges, Macedonian society will inevitably undergo a process of transformation – even if a small one. Therefore, below we discuss both the challenges and the potential responses by Macedonian society in the year to come.

Mounting Challenges to the Society

As a result of the protracted political crises 2015-2017, Macedonian society has become highly polarized, and the tendency of further polarization will persist and be amplified in 2020, primarily due to the early parliamentary elections and the unhealed wounds from the previous years. Polarization along partisanship lines, in this sense, will further resemble a form of an entrenched war by other means. Political party belonging will remain the dominant cleavage in society, the dominant form of vision and division, and the key determinant of social contradictions – not even ethnicity or class can come close to it. Media, civil society organizations and other public opinion shapers will also reinforce the divisions. The “Racket” affair, which has implicated media and journalists will intensify this process. Due to the extension of the political polarization in the media sphere, there will be constant confrontation, but also the fortification of the distinct information bubbles and political echo chambers, with

the end goal being the escalation of divisions to the point of irreconcilability. Along with the sustained political entrenchment, social trust and trust in the system will be further eroded. However, regardless of the extent of the inter-party divisions, even greater distinction in the Macedonian society will be the one between political party warriors on one side, and the ever increasing number of disillusioned, cynical and politically unrepresented voices on the other. In 2020, the latter will be the majority – however, they will likely remain passive bearers of the consequences caused by the action of the former group.

Nationalism and divisions along ethnic lines – often instrumentalized by political parties – will continue to be a major issue. A number of ethnic Macedonians will further feel victimized by the outcomes of the process of renaming of the country and by the advancement of ethnic Albanian identity politics, while ethnic Albanians – not least because of the backlash – will still feel discriminated against, under-represented and marginalized. Aside from yet again dealing with the Macedonian-Albanian inter-ethnic relations and their discontents, Macedonia in 2020 will also see the challenge of the potential rise of a new nationalist and xenophobic sentiments that will not stem from the existing ethnic narratives, but will rather be a response to a changing national and international landscape, in particular the potential arrival of new migrants / refugees in the country.

As all eyes will be on the potential start of the accession talks with EU, the decisions made in Brussels will be another major determinant of the public mood in 2020. Advancement in Macedonia's EU accession may mean stabilization and at least temporary diffusion of tension, while further delays and rejections may lead to a rise of Euroskeptic attitudes, and in general feed into the feeling of instability and uncertainty.

Aside from politics and foreign policy, the economy will also have multifaceted societal consequences. One of the areas where the government had made some progress was the promotion of redistributive policies, as the increase of social aid and the minimum wage have at least marginally improved the livelihood for many. On the other hand, uncertainty over the economic future of the country prevails. The regulatory frameworks have been undergoing rapid and dramatic shifts (e.g. the government first introduced but then froze the progressive taxation model), which also creates sense of uneasiness among the general population and the economic actors as well.

Brain drain will continue to be a major problem for the Macedonian society in the year to come. While it is often analyzed from an economic standpoint, brain drain has a number of societal consequences. The large scale emigration tears the social fabric - it strains families, but

also perpetuates a pessimistic attitude towards the future of the country (e.g. emigration is seen as escape/evacuation from misery). As those who leave the country tend to be highly skilled, their departure also depletes knowledge (both as economic resource and public good) and curbs the capacity of the society to innovate.

Macedonian society will also face the daunting challenges posed by unsustainable development. The struggle with air pollution will continue and intensify. Enduring pollution will take a toll not merely on the quality of life, but also on public health. It will be a major push factor, motivating even more people to leave the country as well. A similar effect will have the further decay of public services, in particular, the deterioration of the public healthcare system. While the under-funded, under-staffed, and over-burdened public healthcare – which also faced the advance of a predatory private healthcare – will pose challenges on a daily basis for the Macedonian citizens, and will also increase the public health risks. In the past years, Macedonia saw epidemics of measles and increase in the flu cases, and an increasing number of patients opting to pursue crowdfund for a treatment abroad.

Potential Responses by Society

Faced with such challenging conditions as listed above, one can discern several potential trajectories of thinking, action and mobilization for Macedonia's society in 2020. The identification of various trajectories does not necessarily imply that the Macedonian society is at a crossroads, out of which it will have to choose one path or the other. They are simply considered here as analytical tools that can help us understand which are the options for action or adaptation of the Macedonian citizens at the current historical juncture. Often, what are here described as different trajectories of thinking and action, in reality will unfold in parallel, sometimes compete with each other, and perhaps follow each other in an uneven trajectory.

One trajectory consists of sustained apathy and cynicism, pessimistic thinking and giving up on the idea that citizens can contribute to a meaningful societal change for the better. This is a trajectory in which society is silent and passive onlooker. In practice, this would translate into a low voter turnout, lack of political participation of any sort, lack of entrepreneurial initiative, and is likely to generate new or perpetuate existing desires to leave the country. Elements of this type of attitudes and behavior have been seen in the country in the past three decades, and in this sense do not resemble any novelty for the Macedonian society, but rather a reinforced status quo. This type of attitude and behavior is difficult to confront and turn around, as this mood basically inspires “exit” strategies, promotes inactivity, passivity and

shapes the general public as an audience rather than participant, and a bearer of consequences rather than a pro-active social force that can shape social trajectories.

Another potential trajectory that would perpetuate the status quo is the one of further polarization and fragmentation. Faced with insurmountable challenges, various social groups will turn even more against each other. Social media will be a battlefield. Protests and counter-protests are a possible scenario. In this sense, the trajectory of polarization foresees an active public that takes action, but this action is not forward or outward looking, and does not promote any particular new vision; it is rather inspired by strong emotions and impulses, and in particular by resentment.

A possible breakthrough may come in the form of the third potential trajectory, which is the one of the emergence of new synergistic forces that by cooperating together may inspire greater mobilization and inspire meaningful social change, which in turn may affect political, economic and foreign policy decisions. Of course, this is the least probable trajectory, as it essentially implies a reversal of the current course of action in the whole country. However, a breakthrough is not a completely unlikely scenario. First, with the entrenchment of political parties and the growing division between party warriors (of all sides) and those that are dissatisfied with the existing socio-political and economic situation, there is a huge “leadership” vacuum waiting to be filled – even more so because after a prolonged crisis, a step in the right direction is way overdue. Second, even though the situation has dramatically changed in the past years, the memories from the mass movements 2015-2017 still remain fresh, and so does the bitter taste of the “unfinished business” of bringing about a society-driven, bottom-up meaningful change. It remains to be seen whether this will materialize in 2020.