



Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia political briefing:
Political developments in 2020
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Political developments in 2020

Undoubtedly, 2020 will be remembered as an unprecedented year. The coronavirus pandemic, by presenting a triple challenge (to healthcare, to the economy and to society as a whole), which was responded to differently across political contexts, has both tested and reflected on political systems across the world. In the Macedonian context, it exposed many of the pre-existing weaknesses of the country's political institutions and processes.

To illustrate the key developments and how they shifted over the course of 2020, the year can be divided into four distinct periods. The first period extends from the start of the year until the start of the coronavirus pandemic (January until mid-March). The second period (from mid-March until mid-June) is the time-frame during which the most restrictive measures against the pandemic were taken. The third period, which took place from mid-June to mid-September saw the sidelining of the coronavirus pandemic, as the political and public attention shifted on the Parliamentary elections and the formation of a new Government. The period from mid-September until the end of the year was marked by the extended peak of the coronavirus, with the number of infections and deaths spiraling out of control.

Start of the year until start of the pandemic (Jan-March 2020)

The first quarter of 2020 saw the rise of the political temperature in the run up to the early Parliamentary Elections scheduled for April 12th. The regular parliamentary elections had been scheduled for November 2020, but PM Zoran Zaev called for early elections after the European Council failed to start talks with N. Macedonia on joining the EU in October 2019.¹ In line with the Przino Political Agreement,² 100 days ahead of the elections a Technical Government was formed. This meant that opposition ministers and deputies were included in several key posts in order to ensure a fair vote and to remove doubts about political pressures impacting the

¹ Rankin, J. (2019). "EU failure to open membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia condemned", October, 2019, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/18/eu-refusal-to-open-talks-with-albania-and-north-macedonia-condemned-as-historic-mistake>

² The Przino Political Agreement was reached between the main political parties with the mediation of the European Union amid a deep political crisis in 2015

electoral process. Thus, new Ministers and Deputies were appointed from the ranks of the opposition party. Nakje Chulev became a new technical Minister of Interior and Rashela Mizraki became a new technical Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, both from the ranks of the opposition party VMRO-DPMNE.³ These political processes preceded the start of the coronavirus pandemic and meant that in the early stages of the coronavirus the country will be governed by a technical instead of a regular government.

First responses to the spread of the coronavirus (mid-March until mid-June)

The first confirmed case of the coronavirus in the country was registered on February 26th. However, it wasn't until mid-March that the contagion started to cause more serious disruptions. In mid-March, the decision to postpone the early Parliamentary elections was announced. It was preceded by the declaration of the first nationwide state of emergency since the country's independence in 1991. Thereafter, curfews started to be introduced restricting partial or full movement (targeting specific age groups and localities) in the months of March, April and May. On the weekend between 11-12 of April, a 61-hour long curfew was introduced nationwide, in what has been one of the most restrictive measures a Balkan country had imposed to curb the pandemic. In this period, the Islamic and the Orthodox religious institutions demonstrated similar disregard of the recommendations and restrictions imposed by the Government. As a result, they appeared as challengers of the state's authority and its power to enforce its decisions. At the same time, it emerged that the police are not able to equally and fairly enforce the restrictions on movement or the requirement to wear masks. In turn this further elucidated the erosion of social trust in the institutions and in the rule of law in the country. The result was an inadequate and ineffective attempt to control the spread of infections. By June the country found itself in the midst of the second wave of the pandemic, with 100-200 new cases per day. The second wave has been attributed to three causes: 1) the institutional failure to prevent or restrict large gatherings; 2) the overall re-opening of the country in order to organize the parliamentary elections; 3) to the resurgence of cases amongst workers in large factories across the country.

³ "Macedonia has a technical government following PM Zaev's resignation" available at: <https://smart.sdk.mk/vesti/makedonija-dobi-tehnicka-vlada-po-ostavkata-na-premierot-zaev/>

Parliamentary elections distract attention away from coronavirus (mid-June until mid-September)

On June 15th the main political parties agreed that Parliamentary elections would be held on July 15th. In the week when this decision was reached, the number of new infections ranged from 100-200 new cases daily. 3 months earlier, when the decision was reached to postpone the elections, the number of infected people was only 32. This serves to demonstrate how in the 3 months between April and June the institutional response to Covid19 had become detached from the facts on the ground that is the number of new confirmed cases and fatalities. In the months that followed, the attention shifted almost entirely on the parliamentary elections. The coronavirus was largely absent from the political campaigns of the political parties and the attention revolved around issues such as foreign policy, corruption, the rule of law and the economy. It took a month and a half after the elections before a new coalition government was formed. The Government was formed by the coalition of three political parties and 61 MPs: 46 MP seats from the SDSM, 15 from DUI and 1 MP from the DPA. The new coalition government in fact represented a continuation of the coalition government, which had governed the country since 2017, indicating that no major changes were to be expected on the political scene in the following period. What changed however was the balance of power between the coalition partners. In comparison to the Coalition Government from 2017-2020 when DUI had 6 Ministerial offices (10 MP seats), in the 2020-2024 Government DUI leveraged its 15 MP Seats in securing a greater share of top ministerial positions including the Ministries of Finance, Economy and Foreign Affairs. Most significantly, a powerful new position was established for the first time under the title “First Deputy Prime Minister in Charge of Coordination of Political Issues Between Departments”, a position that was taken up by DUI’s Artan Grubi. What is more, the coalition partners agreed that the DUI will appoint an Albanian prime minister 100 days before the next general elections, in what has been a concession to DUI’s pre-election demand for an ethnic Albanian premier.

Autumn Peak of Infections (Mid-September - end of 2020)

In the autumn period the attention shifted back onto the coronavirus pandemic. As the third wave took full swing, a record number of new cases and deaths were reported daily making N. Macedonia one of the worst hit countries regionally as well as globally. The response taken by the authorities ranged from mild at best to ineffective and counterproductive at worst. On the one hand the Government failed to take any decisive actions to combat infections. In

contrast to the second quarter of 2020 when it rushed to impose strict restrictions, now curfews had been lifted entirely and bars and restaurants started to open. The Government's only measure had been to make face-masks compulsory in both opened and in closed spaces. With public spending on healthcare amongst the lowest in Europe, and the healthcare services a victim of structural neglect and mismanagement, it came as no surprise that it proved to be structurally underprepared to deal with the pandemic. As a result, by the end of the year, a total of around 2500 people had died of corona, whilst the total number of infected had reached 85,000 and the total number of cured patients 65,000.⁴ What is more by the end of the year it remained unclear whether and which vaccines had been sourced and how and when they will be administered across the country.

Looking at the trajectory of 2020, we can make several conclusions about the interaction between the coronavirus pandemic and the Macedonian political system. Covid19 confirmed the importance of public services and the importance of good governance. In the Macedonian context it also revealed the destructive legacy of neoliberalism evident in the state's inability to control the pandemic as well as in the gross unpreparedness of the public healthcare to respond to the pandemic. Finally, it demonstrated that in spite of such tragic outcomes, the political establishment is far from acknowledging the destructive path dependency of neoliberalism in the country. Thus, it can be concluded that in N. Macedonia 2020 demonstrated the detachment of the neoliberal state from responsibility, accountability and effectiveness over the political space it governs, which as the Covid19 crisis unraveled resulted in the accentuation of bad governance and the acceleration of societal, economic and human consequences.

⁴ <https://koronavirus.gov.mk/stat>