



Weekly Briefing

**North Macedonia social briefing:
EU accession process sparks the largest protests since 2016
Gjorgjioska Marija Adela**

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: : Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

EU accession process sparks the largest protests since 2016

Summary

Following several months of labor protests, first by workers in education, then by workers in the public sector, July was marked by mass protests in opposition to the French-Bulgarian proposal for the lifting of the Bulgarian veto on Macedonia's EU accession talks. Opposition to the proposal began to amass at the end of June, starting off with various expressions of criticism and anger by netizens on social media. It took on a more organized form between 2nd-16th of July during the mass protests in Skopje which were attended by over 50,000 protesters each day. Although these were the largest continuous protests in the country since 2016 when the so-called Colorful Revolution took place, this time round there were almost no news reports in Western media. Those news stories that did appear presented a distorted image of the protests in an attempt to maintain the hegemonic narrative on the developments that surrounded them and their root causes.

The mass protests in 2016, which became known as the “Colorful revolution” played an important role in the ascension to power of the current SDSM-DUI Government in 2017. In the 5 years since, the Government has completely lost its popular legitimacy, and it currently remains in power purely on the basis of inter-ethnic party political bargains and support from the Euro-Atlantic political complex. The Government's approval ratings are particularly low amongst the ethnic-Macedonian population, with support for the SDSM crumbling exponentially. A public opinion survey conducted by Ipsos Mori in the period 1-18 July 2022, found that only 9,5% of the population support SDSM, and only 6,2% support DUI.¹ It is in such a context of continuously low and declining approval ratings that the current Government has embarked upon resolving issues of historical national significance, such as the name-issue with Greece and the historical disputes with Bulgaria. At the same time, the continuing role of ethnic-identity politics added further suspicions amongst the public that any such efforts will

¹ An IPSOS survey shows a low rating of the parties, most of the citizens are undecided, published on 06.08.2022, available at

<https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/anketa-na-ipsos-pokazhuva-nizok-rejting-na-partiite-na-jogolem-del-od-gragjanite-neopredeleni/> accessed on 10.08.2022

result in disastrous outcomes with historical repercussions.² These tendencies were brought to their head at the end of June with the announcements of the French proposal on the resolution of Macedonia's accession EU stalemate caused by Bulgaria's veto. Although the content of the French proposal and the Bulgarian protocol that forms an integral part of the full document were kept hidden from the public, translations of the Bulgarian version appeared in the media. Numerous experts, political figures and netizens criticized it, describing it as a "national betrayal" and a "disgrace for the Macedonian diplomacy". A survey conducted by the Institute of Political Investigations from Skopje (IPIS) between 4th-6th of July confirmed that these views were shared by the wider population. 72.8% of the ethnic Macedonians included in the survey answered "no" to the question: "Would you accept the opening of negotiations with the EU at the price of Macedonia agreeing to the so-called French proposal?". Out of the total sample 56% of respondents also said "no", which suggested that the majority of respondents, regardless of ethnicity, were also against it.³ Opposition to the proposal took on a more structured form in the mass protests which went on between the 2nd and 16th in Skopje. Attended by an estimated 50,000 people daily, these were the largest protests in the country since 2016. However, in contrast to the wide coverage that the 2016 "Colorful Revolution" received in Western mainstream media, the July 2022 protest received almost no objective coverage. Those news stories that did appear presented a distorted image of the protests in an attempt to maintain the hegemonic narrative on the developments that surrounded them and their root causes. In such reports, the protests and the protesters were described as "nationalist", in an attempt to delegitimize the very real misgivings with the proposal. Furthermore, such reports failed to include any real analysis or background of the dispute with Bulgaria, and its rootedness in Bulgarian expansionist, negationist and assimilations claims against the Macedonian people, its language, history and identity. As a result they aimed to portray the French proposal as progressive and the protesters as reactionary and regressive, when in fact the opposite is the case. Among else, the French proposal makes Macedonia's progress to the EU conditional on the country's acceptance of Bulgarian historical revisionism, on the revision of its Constitution to make Bulgarians one of the constituent ethnic groups, and a very broadly

² The role of ethnic-identity geopolitics in bringing about the French "compromise" on the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute, published in July 2022, available at <https://china-cee.eu/2022/08/09/north-macedonia-external-relations-briefing-the-role-of-ethnic-identity-geopolitics-in-bringing-about-the-french-compromise-on-the-bulgarian-macedonian-dispute/> accessed on 10.08.2022

³ 72.8 percent of Macedonians are against the French proposal, says an IPIS survey, published on 07.07.2022, available at

<https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/728-otsto-od-makedoncite-se-protiv-francuskiot-predlog-veli-anketa-na-ipis>, accessed on 23.07.2022

construed understanding of “hate speech” to include everyone who dares to express the truth about the history, or present-day form of Bulgarian ethno-nationalism towards Macedonia. Bulgaria’s attempt to use the EU accession process as a vehicle to impose historical revisionism on Macedonia was met with stark disapproval by the Macedonian public. The opposition demonstrated the ongoing symbolic and emotional importance that the anti-fascist legacy still holds in the collective memory of the Macedonian people. Namely, it was at the first plenary session of the Anti-fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM) in 1944, that the Macedonian nation-state was proclaimed, and the Macedonian language was declared as the official language of the Macedonian state. ASNOM thus represents the main foundation of Macedonian statehood. Bulgarian attempts to attack ASNOM are rightly perceived as a hostile attack on Macedonian statehood. These were the causes and the justification of the protests. Contrary to what was reported by the mainstream media, the protests were not organized by a specific political party, although they were indeed supported by two political parties - Levica and VMRO-DPMNE. However, the protests did not only include supporters of these political parties, but also other citizens who opposed the French proposal. The imposition of the asymmetric negotiation process, as well as the endorsement of Bulgarian nationalism by the EU drew massive national resistance, contributing to the weakening of the EU's link with the Macedonian population, resulting in an overall negative effect on the domestic ambience and affinity toward the EU. Such sentiments were further intensified by the EU's high-level diplomatic efforts to endorse the proposal. President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen on the 14th of July, gave a speech in the Macedonian Parliament, trying to convince the MPs to accept the Proposal. In this manner, she placed herself and the EU in direct opposition to the popular will of the Macedonian people. While the session was ongoing, many citizens gathered outside of Parliament to send a clear message to both the EU and their own MPs that the Macedonian people reject the French-Bulgarian offer.

In spite of the overwhelming opposition, the French proposal was passed by Parliament on the 16th of July. Once again, mainstream media presented these news in a celebratory manner, failing to report on the fact that the decision directly contravened with the very democratic principles that the EU claims to represent. These processes will certainly lead to a further deterioration of the already shrinking EU image amongst the Macedonian public. At the same time, it is likely to influence domestic political processes as well as inter-ethnic relations in the country. The political ratings of both SDSM and DUI will continue to dwindle, but the parties will nonetheless attempt to hold onto power

until the end of the Government's political term in 2024. This will however expose one of the biggest contradictions of representative liberal democracy - a Government that is opposed by the vast majority of its population not only continues to cling to power, but it also embarks on resolving matters of national and historical consequence for which it has neither the legitimacy nor the capacity to undertake, in the process leaving irreparable damage as its sole legacy.