

Social democracy in a transitional society- the quest for social democracy on the margins of globalization (the case of R. Macedonia)



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Abstract

This article analyses the societal and political context in Macedonia and the challenges of implementing social democratic policies in the country. Although the author uses the paradigm of “transitional societies”, the scope of the paradigm “transitional society” is understood much more broadly in this paper than in its usual application to societies in transition from administrative socialism to market-oriented liberal democracy. The main conclusion of this inquiry is that Macedonian society is a transitional society with elements remaining from the four main socio-political orders of the past two centuries.

The context in which Macedonian social democrats operate brings us back to a partially forgotten task of social democracy—the task of radical political and social modernization of society and the social emancipation of its citizens. In such a context, the social-democratic project in Macedonia cannot be implemented as a political implant from developed societies. The political agenda of the Macedonian social democrats should consist of policies that will mitigate—if not eliminate—the outcomes of a social order that has a predominantly negative impact on the process of developing a stable environment for a society shaped by the values of social democracy. Such changes in the political agenda are not, however, a negation of the universality of values and general tasks of social democracy. The three main values of global social democracy—i.e., freedom, justice and solidarity—should be made into a political “catechesis” for Macedonian social democrats, establishing an overall objective to build a free, just and democratic society of solidarity.

Key words: social-democracy, Macedonia, political culture, social context, policy alternatives

The state of affairs in Macedonian politics

A social researcher or a social scientist in Macedonia does not need to conduct deep research to reach the conclusion that Macedonian society is experiencing a democratic recession. Only a brief analysis of the events over recent years is sufficient to identify clear signs that a country once considered to be “the leader in European integration” in South-Eastern Europe is now struggling to fulfil the basic criteria necessary to declare itself a pluralistic democracy. Although the country has succeeded in preserving its status as a candidate country for full membership in the European Union, and although the Commission has continued to recommend the start of accession talks, the Progress Report issued every year by the European Commission gives a completely different perspective on the state of affairs. Although the Progress Reports should not be treated as Holy Writ, still they present a pretty accurate overall picture of the state of a country that is seeking to join the society of EU democracies. In its Progress Report for 2013 regarding the country’s fulfilment of political criteria for accession, for example, the Commission states that “the year was marked by a political crisis following events in parliament in December 2012” (European Commission 2013:5)—a crisis which began with the “forcible removal of a large number of opposition MPs and journalists from parliament’s plenary hall on 24 December, during the adoption of the 2013 budget under controversial circumstances.”(European Commission 2013:6). These extracts alone would lead an independent observer to conclude that the democratic process in the country is threatened in its essence and that there can be hardly any debate on the ‘minor policy issues’ corresponding to the ideological lines of division between European conservatives and social democrats.

However, this is not the only controversy in Macedonian society. With an official unemployment rate of up to 29% of the total work force according to the official state statistics (State Statistical Office 2013b) and an even higher rate of youth unemployment, a poverty rate of over 30% (State Statistical Office 2013a), and an emigration rate of between 21 and 26% (Bornarova and Janeska 2012: 5-6), due to primarily to poverty and poor living conditions, the country has a constant political winner in the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party and a popular leader in Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. The ruling party and its leader have won every general election between 2006 and 2013, and according to some recent opinion polls they still enjoy a

high rate of popularity among the electorate. During their governance, the country has lost the only advantage it had in comparison with its neighbours at the time when the country was awarded EU candidate status in 2005, and that advantage was the EU's assessment that the country was a decent and stable democracy with functioning institutions and ongoing political dialogue between different actors in the political system without major violations of human rights. During the past years of conservative rule, Macedonia has faced boycotts of Parliament by opposition parties, dubious criminal investigations and trials against government opponents, numerous political attacks on critical civil society organizations and members of marginalized groups, including the discrediting of the LGBTI population by media and journalists close to the governing elite, as well as a significant deterioration in freedom of expression, especially evident in the working conditions of the few remaining media professionals and journalists who are not under the direct or indirect control of the governing structure.

The rule of the governing party is characterised by a mixture of almost primordial conservatism in its understanding of basic social values, policies that exacerbate social exclusion of differences and promote nationalism, and state interventionism in the economy that has created a network of dependency and clientelism. Strong pressure is exerted on businesses in “stick and carrot” fashion, public procurements are subject to corruption, and vulnerable social groups are reduced to dependency through misuse of social welfare funds. The current situation poses the greatest challenge for social democracy in Macedonia since independence in 1991. The future prospects of the social democrats, indeed their very survival, will depend on their success in developing alternative policies and strategies.

Political culture in Macedonia

Despite the many negative political developments in Macedonia, daily reality is characterised by relatively mild reactions from different groups and almost no protests on the part of the citizens. Hardly any cases of opposition to Government policies can be reported from among the country's business associations and the trade unions. The situation in the civil sector

is not significantly different: although some civil organizations and civil activists have tried to focus public attention on several controversial issues, the reaction of the citizens has remained very mild and modest. Recent protests against the financially and politically controversial project to rebuild the centre of the capital, symbolically named as ‘Skopje 2014’ for example, although enthusiastically organized by a group of architecture students and civil activists, failed to motivate a large number of citizens to join the protesters. Quite the contrary: a larger group of counter-protesters, supported by several journalists, gathered on the main Skopje square trying to block the protests and even physically attacked those who were protesting. Another case of mild reaction happened when a group of civil activists protested against the destruction of the park in the city centre of Skopje to make way for a planned administrative building. Although the public reaction was intense, the civil activists remained almost alone in their protest; even the citizens of the city centre who were most affected by the destruction of the park did not join the protest. On the other hand, the reaction of the police was decisive in breaking up the protests and enforcing the decision to start with the construction work.

Both of the abovementioned examples clearly show the fragility of democracy in Macedonian society and both are consequences of the unfinished process of transition. The transition of the former eastern and central European socialist societies was typically associated with the formal introduction of pluralistic representative democracy and efforts to build a market economy, usually resulting in mass privatization of public goods. However, the governments of the “countries in transition”, in their race to meet the criteria set by international institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the European Union, failed to appreciate that the only way to achieve a vibrant and functional democracy is to invest in the transformation of political culture. Given the specific historical context of Macedonia, the scope of use of the paradigm “transitional society” should not be limited to the legal transformation of the formerly one-party socialist system into a multiparty parliamentary democracy and the broad privatization of public-owned companies intended as a basis for building a market economy.

According to a recent survey (Markovikj et al. 2012), political culture in Macedonia can be described as a mixture of internally opposing elements, some of them even hostile to the values of democracy. Twenty-eight per cent of the respondents to the survey said they preferred a strong leader and 25.2 % of them preferred “technocratic rule” as a means of resolving social

problems, compared to 42.4 % who said they preferred democratic means. To another question about the ideal qualities of a political leader, the numbers are even more persuasive 20.6% of the respondents said they preferred strong will, while 50.3% said they preferred knowledge and expertise, compared to only 27.4% of the respondents who said they preferred debates and consultation. Finally, more than one third of the respondents (35.2%) agreed with the view that the military should take over the running of the state in extreme situations (Markovikj et al. 2012: 9-10). Despite the stronger preferences expressed for “technocrats” and “expertise and knowledge” compared to a “strong leader” with a “strong will”, the numbers should not mislead one to conclude that these preferences for experts are the result of an existing “knowledge-based” society. In the Macedonian context, the notion of “technocratic rule” based on “expertise” should be understood as a modernized concept of a strong leader and strong will. Even if we disagree with the previous claim, the fact that most of the respondents preferred to abstain from the democratic participatory decision-making process in favour of strong leaders or technocrats shows the low level of belief in democracy on the part of the citizens. The following results from the survey show this tendency even more clearly: thus, 59.4% of the respondents answered that they had never signed a petition; 67.1% had never attended a demonstration; 79.8% had never participated in a strike; 79.2% had never filed a complaint against a public institution; and 30.1% had never attended a public gathering (Markovikj et al. 2012: 22-23). The culture of abstention from decision-making and people’s distrust in their own ability to shape their own destiny fits with the concept of societal paternalism which is a predominant characteristic of pre-modernity. Finally, the strong support expressed for military involvement in the political process in extreme situations supports the claim that the citizens tend to believe that governance is a “remote business” and that governing structures do not necessarily require the consent of those over whom they rule.

The economic and social characteristics of Macedonian society

In order to understand Macedonian societal development and the prospects for Macedonian social democracy, the economic and social characteristics of Macedonian society

and its transition over the last twenty years must be taken into consideration. Since this analysis is not an economic inquiry, the key facts will only be summarized here for the purpose of presenting a general picture relevant to this political analysis.

As already stated, one of the worst problems of the Macedonian economy is the high rate of unemployment, especially among the young population. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2012, Macedonia has one of the highest levels of youth unemployment in the world, at over 50% in 2010 (International Labour Organization 2012). Such unemployment has created a situation in which more than 30% of the population lives below the poverty line, unable even to satisfy the basic needs for a decent life. The high level of unemployment is mainly a result of the transformation of the economy through the process of so-called “privatization” that started in 1989/1990 but intensified after 1993. The robust and forced privatization of the formerly state-owned— or to be more precise, “commonly” owned— companies resulted in a significant decrease of economic activity, bankruptcies often stimulated by managers in order to decrease the real economic value of company assets, left many workers jobless without realistic prospects of finding other employment. The unemployment rate, already significantly high at the beginning of the privatization in 1993, shot up in the following years (Trading Economics 2013). At the end of the period of social-democratic rule in 1998, the inequality rate or GINI index had risen to 28.1 (World Bank 2013). The first and most shocking wave of privatization happened during the first period of social-democratic rule in the years 1992–1998. The poor management of the process, allegations of corruption, and the growth of inequality created an image of the social-democrats significantly different than the one that should be expected of a centre-left party. The party was considered a “nest of elitists”, a party of the nouveaux-riche owners of formerly nationalised companies, and, above all, a party that has no social programme and is neglectful of the poor and all those most severely affected by privatization. The period 1998–2002, which saw the first conservative regime in Macedonia and which began with high expectations for a change in the country’s economic situation, resulted in a very modest decrease of the unemployment rate (Trading Economics 2013) and a significant growth of inequality, reaching 39 points on the GINI index (World Bank 2013), although there were positive signs of more vibrant economic activity and modest economic growth. However, this first period of rule by the conservatives was marked by many allegations of suspected

corruption, as well as the negative effects of the armed conflict in the spring of 2001 that left the economy in recession and resulted in severe losses for the conservatives at the general elections in 2002 and a victory for the social-democrats. The second and last period of social-democratic rule in Macedonia to date did not significantly change the socio-economic situation. Success in the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and in securing the peace was followed by an intensified and successful process of European- and Euro-Atlantic integration of the country, but was not accompanied by much-needed socio-economic change. GDP real growth rates were modest (except in 2005), not exceeding 2–3%. The unemployment rate continued to grow, reaching a peak of 37.3 % in January 2006 (Trading Economics 2013), and was followed by a slow but continuous rise in inequality, with the GINI index reaching 42.8 % in 2006. These failures in economic achievement resulted in election defeat for the social-democrats and the start of the current rule of the conservative VMRO-DPMNE party in 2006.

The focus point of the conservatives' election programme and the main promise made to the electorate was economic recovery through the implementation of the party's election programme symbolically named "Rebirth in 100 Steps". The first two years of the rule of the conservatives were marked by significant growth in annual GDP, reaching over 5%. However, this growth slowed down and the country even ended in minus growth in the second year of the global economic crisis of 2009–2010. The country's growth since 2011 has again been positive, though at very modest rates (Index Mundi 2013). According to some analysis, this growth is the result of the massive public spending that began at the very beginning of conservative rule. The public costs and the annual budget have increased almost every year and in every area of the economy. On the one hand, the Government has tried to show "ideological consistency", preaching that the real goal of its policies is to achieve a "small state", meaning a more efficient administration and less state involvement in the economy. On the other hand, every next step of the government has led in a different direction.

From the very beginning, the Government initiated three different socio-economic processes, and these have continued more or less consistently until to the present time. The first process consists of massive social subsidies that can be described as an old-fashioned socialist type of economic stimulation. Most of the subsidies go to agriculture in stimulating production of almost all agricultural products. But these stimulations are also part of a socio-economic

politics that targets every group in society, building a paternalistic relationship between the state and the citizens. Numerous measures have been introduced in order to provide subsidies for every group. In education, the Government has purchased a computer for every schoolchild in the country and given vouchers for computers to every student. In the area of sport, the Government has started to build sports playgrounds in every single town and sizeable village. Pensioners in Skopje have been granted free-of-charge public transport on certain days of the week, while selected pensioners are eligible to take part in a lottery-based system to stay free-of-charge in thermal spas. Social transfers for different vulnerable social groups have been increased. And in accordance with its promotion of conservative family values, the Government has introduced new subsidies for families with three or more children. The most important measure of all, however, has been the Government's policy of employment in public administration. Although there are no official figures available for the number of civil servants in Macedonia, according to some unofficial estimations the number has almost doubled in recent years to over 120,000 employees, all of whom directly or indirectly receive their salaries from the state. The climax of this policy, which was denied at the beginning of the rule of the current Government, was the recent employment of 1,600 people in the state-owned forestry company *Makedonski Shumi*. These employments were awarded in October 2013 through a lottery transmitted as a show on the public broadcasting service, Macedonian Television (Lokalno 2013). The Government tried to deny that the selection was lottery-based (24 Vesti 2013), but the whole process, as well as the public's reaction to this method of selection, gave the completely opposite impression.

The second process initiated by the Government to improve the socio-economic situation has been that of investment in the construction sector. However, this investment has not been made for the purpose of infrastructural improvement—a measure that might have been expected to boost economic growth—but for re-building the centre of Skopje, mainly with buildings for the public administration, together with numerous monuments and statues in a baroque, neo-classical and eclectic style. Project Skopje 2014 is almost completely financed by public funds. The cost of the project is officially claimed by the Government to be 207 million euros (Radio Free Europe 2013), though unofficial estimates suggest the cost is closer to 500 million euros. The whole project has only minor economic benefits, merely boosting the economic activity of

construction companies that for a short period of time. What is most important about this project is the quantity of public funds spent on public procurements based on *inter-partes* negotiations over prices without public tenders, as well as the so-called ‘unexpected costs’ that have multiplied the initially declared price of certain buildings, all of which has led to the misallocation of public finances on a project that neither has any effect on the difficult social situation in the country nor brings any added value to the economy. Last but not less important is the way in which decisions concerning the project were reached and the way the project was implemented. The whole process involved only very minor participation on the part of the civil sector, professional organizations of architects and city planners, and the general public. Decision-making was conducted amongst a closed circle of powerful politicians, with local communities serving only as a decoration that had merely to give their administrative approval to projects already decided upon and to implement them without delay. This kind of urbanization, also witnessed in recent years in Turkey’s megalopolis of Istanbul, can fairly be termed “violent urbanization”.

The third process that started in 2006—and the most important one from the perspective of the present day—has been a redistribution of wealth. The declared redistribution or “revision of unjust privatization” did not end in the provision of compensation for the affected population but in the creation of a new elite—a new oligarchy that has to some extent replaced the older structure created in the process of privatization. This process can be called a “second transition” that has redistributed wealth among the elites instead of correcting and compensating the victims of the first transition of the 1990s. As evidence for this claim, although unemployment has fallen to less than 30% (28.8 %) (Trading Economics 2013), mainly due to increased employment in the public sector, inequality has continued to grow, reaching 43.6 GINI index points in 2010 and placing Macedonia amongst the countries characterised by significant inequality (World Bank 2013). Furthermore, it is interesting to analyze the figures regarding the share of the income between the richest 20 % of the population and the rest of the population. According to the most recent analysis, the wealthiest 20% of the population enjoyed 37% of the country’s total income in 1998 when the first social-democratic rule ended. In 2010, after the conservatives had been in power for four years since 2006, the richest 20% had almost the same share of total income as the remaining 80% of the population (Tevdovski 2013: 7). These figures clearly show that the

power of the so-called “transitional elites” has not diminished; on the contrary, the rich elites are more powerful than ever. What has occurred has been a partial redistribution of wealth and power among the elites. Although the conservative Government claims it is sensitive to workers’ rights, the data proves otherwise. The regulation of the labour market has become more liberal: according to the database of the Economic Freedom of the World in 2012, the index of the regulation of the market (whereby 1 denotes the most regulated labour market and 10 the least regulated) grew from 5.9 in 2005 to 7.8 in 2010 (Tevdovski 2013:13). The same conclusion was reached in the analysis “The Depreciation of Labour”, which found that the depreciation of workers’ rights has continued in the years of conservative rule since 2006 (Saveski et al. 2010: 23).

In conclusion, the economic and social policies implemented over the past several years can be described as a combination of early modern capitalism, with elements of neo-liberalism and social paternalism similar to the understanding of the social state in the years of Yugoslav administrative socialism before 1989/1990.

Is there any prospect of a genuine social-democratic alternative in Macedonia?

The foregoing analysis of the current state of affairs in Macedonian politics, the country’s political culture, and the economic and social characteristics of Macedonian society, all bring us back to the initial hypothesis that the scope of use of the paradigm “transitional society”, when analysing the case of Macedonia, should by no means be limited to the legal transformation of the formerly one-party socialist system into a multiparty parliamentary democracy and the broad privatization of publicly owned companies as a basis for building a market economy.

Macedonian society is characterized by patriarchalism in upbringing, education and lifestyle, as well as pervasive social paternalism and clientelism, which are clear signs of unfinished pre-modernity. The dominant characteristics of “doing business” and of economic activity in the country are those of early-style capitalism, or so called “wild capitalism”, accompanied by unfair and unjust distribution of income, wide-ranging abuses of workers’ rights, violent urbanization, and limited justice for the economically powerful members of the

population—all of which place the society in a phase of early modernity. The social state is understood as a clientelistic network of “favours” with a culture of “duty to return the favour” instead of a concept of a general welfare state as a right and not a mercy. This is accompanied by dependence on the part of entrepreneurs upon the powerful political elites, reminiscent of the “administrative socialism” of the second half of the 20th century. The “transition” of the society towards the globalized type of so-called post-modern societies therefore faces many more obstacles than other societies in Central and Eastern Europe which achieved modernity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and were thus in transition from ‘only’ 45 years of Soviet rule. Macedonian society is in a state of parallel transition from several different types of societal structure. This situation places Macedonian society on the margins of globalization, expected to be affected much more by the aftermath of globalization than by the first wave of this process, with all its advantages and disadvantages as seen in the developed societies of the West. Thus Macedonia is much more vulnerable to “third world” negative impacts of globalisation, such as trans-boundary crime, the uncontrolled flow of legally suspicious capital, money laundering and the emergence of a “tax haven” economy.

The main task of social democracy is the quest for policy alternatives to achieve the general goal of building a “good society”. A good society is a society of liberal political values in a state subject to the rule of law and free from fear—free from fear of threats to individual life and liberty but also freedom from fear of poverty. A good society is a society of general inter-generational and trans-generational solidarity—solidarity that has its roots in a common sense of society and not merely as part of individual mercy. In this sense, the three main values of global social-democracy—freedom, justice and solidarity—should be transformed into a political “catechesis” for Macedonian social-democrats, establishing the overall objective of building a free, just and democratic society of solidarity.

The social-democratic project in Macedonia cannot be implemented merely as a political implant from developed societies in which the processes of modernization and emancipation, although facing the same challenges of past epochs, developed more gradually, though not always peacefully. The short- and medium-term political agenda of Macedonian social-democrats should consist of policies that will in the long term serve to mitigate, if not eliminate,

the outcomes of a social order that has had a predominantly negative impact on the process of developing a stable environment for a society shaped by the values of social-democracy.

The project of modernization and emancipation of the Macedonian social democrats should focus on three main tasks, turned into a set of policies. The first task is to focus on projects that will change the political culture and bring emancipation for the citizens and a general liberalization of societal values. The most important target group is that of the youth, and the most appropriate sector to target is education. Reforms in the educational sector should not be limited only to schools but also include kindergartens where the process of socialization first begins. Reform should seek to develop education in a rather different direction than has been followed over the past two decades. Education should be understood as a process of upbringing and of enabling critical thinking, and mostly as a process of socialization whereby children are expected to integrate in a new common sense based on values of freedom, solidarity, and—especially in Macedonia—inter-cultural and inter-ethnic understanding and communication. And this should be established not merely as a cover or a new narrative but much more as a way of life rooted in society. Education and upbringing cannot be left only to families and schools that emphasize only formal education ending with a formal diploma. The active role of the state is essential since every decision about educational policies, as well as other societal policies, is political in nature.

The second task is to focus on policies for reducing inequality. For this reason, any policies that stimulate a rise in GDP and employment will still not have any significant effect if they do not result in higher salaries, a decline in poverty and a fairer redistribution of income—all of which can be achieved, among other things, by a changed model of taxation. Changing the taxation model does not mean only introducing progressive taxation but also reforming other taxes like value added tax. A special target group should be youth, with policies to combat youth unemployment and social dependency on parents and the older generation. If the current situation does not change soon, Macedonia will face even greater levels of youth migration, which is a bad prospect for the economy but also politically negative for the left alternative, since the older generation tends to be more conservative. A second special target group should be the victims of transition, who should finally be compensated and secured a decent life. Most of

these people are already reaching the working-age limit and cannot be expected to become includes in the economy.

The third task is to re-focus on the European integration of the country. The social democrats were mostly successful in this field in the past and this was recognised even by their opponent as their strongest advantage. The propaganda that has spread euro-skepticism and anti-western feelings in the population can be understood in part as a tactical manoeuvre supported by the conservatives to undermine the advantage of the social democrats. The social democrats should thus continue the process of integration, which will inevitably further support the previously mentioned tasks even before formal accession to the European Union.

Finally, the social-democratic project in Macedonia will have less chances of success if it is not also shaped by the active involvement of progressive intellectuals, which brings us to the true notion of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it."

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