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Social upheaval in times of neoliberalism

The deep roots of Macedonia's protest wave

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“In a neoliberal universe, where markets are the gauge of value, money becomes, more straightforwardly than ever before, the measure of all things. If hospitals, schools and prisons can be privatised as enterprises for profit, why not political office too?”

Perry Anderson in London Review of Books, 2014, 36:10, pp. 5

Mass protests have vigorously and consistently spread across Macedonia for over ten days now. The spark of citizen revolt was caused by a Presidential blanket amnesty acquitting 56 officials from charges ranging from election rigging, embezzlement of public money and property, to corruption and party capture of state institutions. This act has confirmed that the presidential office is only another one on the list of institutions privatized by an elite of capitalist politicians in service of their interests. As such it represents a manifestation of a specific form of Balkan neoliberalism, born out of a symbiosis interlocking profit and politics, and built on three mutually supportive pillars: privatization of institutions, privatization of the commons, and privatization of the electorate/demos. Rather than an ephemeral crisis caused by a political elite gone rogue, it represents a symptom of the ongoing logic of neoliberalism, which has in fact created the ideological background against which criminal politics have thrived, whilst suffocating the rule of law, democracy, equality and social justice.

by Adela Gjorgjioska

The ongoing protests were sparked only by the latest output of the first of these pillars – the privatization of institutions of law and justice. Beyond reactionary revolt, they have exposed a rising demos, growing too determined to be neatly enclosed within establishment politics. Toppling the corrupt governing coalition is its priority. Achieving that priority, however, must not come at the expense of tackling the deeper preconditions of the current predicament. For this protest movement to truly deserve the label “revolutionary”, it will need to evolve into a more articulated and determined social movement, which does not shy away from addressing the underlying logic of its context-specific type of neoliberalism, and its implications in the privatization of institutions, commons and the electorate. That evolution will require the movement to be inclusive and truly represent the emerging demos. This will also require the articulation of demands which go beyond the liberal framework of anti-corruption and “un-capturing of the state,” and find their expression in the coordinates of equality, democracy and social justice.

Privatizing institutions

Macedonian President Ivanov abolish all judicial cases related to

Protests were sparked by President Ivanov's blanked amnesty to 56 officials under criminal investigation

“Exposure ceases to matter very much, as impunity becomes the rule. Like bankers, leading politicians do not go to prison,” wrote Perry Anderson in an article describing the commonplace interlinking between capital and politics across members states of the EU, as well as the institutions of the Union itself, following the onslaught of neoliberalism in the 1980s. The recent Presidential blanket amnesty is only the last in a chain of events, which have unraveled in Macedonia over the past year, indicating that the country, although not yet a member of the EU, seems to be fully in line with such practices.

A wiretapping scandal unleashed in February 2015 exposed the intricate methods through which public institutions and property have been privatized by the governing coalition between DPMNE and BDI. The ensuing mass protests (May 5-16, 2015) interrupted the freedom for the Governing coalition to enrich themselves without distraction or retribution. Tens of thousands of citizens demanded accountability, resignations by the Government and criminal prosecution. Instead, however, what followed was the "Przino" political agreement, brokered by the EU, and agreed to by VMRO-DPMNE and BDI from the ruling majority, and SDSM and PDSH from the opposition. Its three key provisions were media and election reform and the establishment of a Special Prosecution Office (SPO) tasked with probing high-level crimes as exposed in the wiretaps. The agreement was based on the premise that the same political parties charged with obliterating the rule of law, would now take a constructive role in its reestablishment. Such a role also required the political parties to work counter their own interests: political survival and avoidance of criminal prosecution for key officials and collaborators. Not surprisingly, that assumption proved fallacious as soon as the implementation of the agreement started to pose tangible threats to the governing coalition.

The main threat came from the Special Prosecutor (SPO). As the only judiciary oasis set against a legal system under the private control of VMRO DPMNE and/or BDI, the SPO has already opened several cases and has indicted a dozen people, including former Ministers and city mayors in office. Although the courts have so far rejected collaboration, refusing, for instance, to take suspects into custody, the SPO remains a real threat. Preempting the possibility that an independent judge out of the party line will take on imminent cases indicting top figures high up the VMRO and BDI hierarchy, including former PM Gruevski, the President's amnesty came as a self-defence measure.

The second self-defence measure has been the push for early elections. On the third day of protests the speaker of Parliament announced early elections to take place on June 5th. While early elections would indeed legitimize the existing government through a new victory, they would be far from fair and free. Concerns remain regarding a credible clean-up of the electoral roll, still non-existent media reforms, as well as insufficient measures to separate state and political party activities. Indeed, the SPO has revealed evidence that the electoral roll of voters has long not corresponded to the actual number of voters. Irregularities uncovered include the issue of 35,000 identity cards, and over 60,000 new citizenships approved.

The disruption of democracy extends beyond such irregularities into an elaborate and tightly knit clientelistic eco-system, which the DPMNE/BDI utilize on two levels. Firstly, as a tool for building an illusion of popular legitimacy, and secondly, as an instrument for discarding accountability from below.

The privatization of the commons and the electorate

Macedonia's public debt, rose from 1,55 billion to 4 billion euros (from 23 to 46,6% of GDP) between 2008 to 2014. It is expected to reach 50% by 2017. This public debt has not been used to kickstart economic and social development, but was channeled into the clientelistic support base for DPMNE/BDI. The public debt has funneled a support base, which consists of members of two very distinct classes, with largely incompatible interests.

Feeding off the expropriation of public debt, property, and institutions over the course of the past 10 years, the DPMNE/BDI clientelistic eco-system has financed the emergence of a new capitalist-politician elite. Capitalists, whose profits depend on tight links with government did exist throughout the nineties, but the symbiotic relationship has been brought to a new extreme during the reign of DPMNE and BDI. One source of criminal capital has been the megalomaniac urban restructuring project Skopje 2014, with large amounts of its 600 million euro cost either laundered or used to buy off support. Contractors for such re-developments have also served as campaign donors for the governing coalition. These non-productive investments have been made in a social context of demolished healthcare, education and environment, alongside rising poverty and inequality. Their underlying logic has been a

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familiar neoliberal one – accumulation of public property and money, and its redistribution to a small percentage of close collaborators in exchange for loyalty and support for the party eco-system.

At the other end of the support base, we find a predominantly precarious population. Minimum wage salaries, pensions, subsidies in agriculture and basic social security services have been made conditional on party loyalty. Public debt has also been used to finance salaries for a burgeoning public administration staffed with party servants. The wiretaps revealed conversations confirming how promotions, hirings and lay-offs in public jobs are arranged. In one tape, the former Minister of Interior is heard saying “Everything should be cleaned out [in the Interior Ministry],” by which she meant “cleared of any employees not under direct party control.” The same goes for the BDI. After assuming control over the instrument of employment deriving from the Ohrid agreement of 2001, Ahmeti (the leader of BDI) has been able to assume control over employment of virtually all Albanians in the public administration.

The extent of the clientelistic practice goes so far that the people themselves have internalized the understanding that it is not the state that offers employment in the public sector, or the state which gives agriculture subsidies, but the party that gives it as a reward for loyalty. As party loyalty rather than labour, skills and expertise have come to be rewarded, this has not only created alienation in the workplace, but has also completely twisted the value system in the society.

As political parties have privatized a large section of the electorate the rise of a new type of protester- “the counter-protester” has been made possible. Pulled from the precarious support base, counter-protesters have been exploited as an instrument through which DPMNE has perpetuated the illusion of popular legitimacy. This has been the case also during the current protest wave: threats of layoffs have been used to coerce party servants to attend counter-protests to those organized by protesters demonstrating against the Presidential amnesty.

Such clientelistic practices apparent in the case of Macedonia, are observable also in other countries across the region. They do not simply represent the whims of a bunch of rogue Balkan leaders. The organizing principles which make them possible are in fact entrenched in neoliberal logic. “Save your own skin,” is a phrase reminiscent of a newly established culture anchored in the neoliberal consensus of the 1990's, which in the countries of the capitalist periphery such as Macedonia has meant the diffusion of ignorance and poverty, making anything acceptable in the race to the bottom for individual survival. In a society with ruined economy where the limited viable prospects for individual success stem from an exchange relationship with a corrupt elite, it is understandable where VMRO and BDI have found the fertile ground for building their clientelistic support networks.

“In a cultural context, however, where there is need of some sort of community spirit, nationalism and party affiliation have come to fill in the gaping void in an individualised, society without solidarity.” [\[1\]](#) Nationalism, party affiliation and fears of foreign meddling in the country, have been used as an amalgam to bring these two classes with hugely incompatible interests together: the capitalist politicians which have benefited from the accumulation of public property on the one hand, and on the other hand the working class, which has suffered a deterioration in living standards resulting from its dispossession from public services and social security. That amalgam has been created and secured through the nearly total control of media and impeccable centralized PR campaigns, which have fed the public with propaganda that incriminates every critical voice as an extended arm of elusive foreign services. In all such scenarios, the party has been likened to the state, and any attack on the party as an attack on the country.

It is in this context that one must consider the popular legitimacy which DPMNE/BDI are presenting both internally and externally as the justification for their rule. Indeed, claims such as “the people are on our side” are constantly used as a legitimating factor. Understanding the dynamics behind this practice shatters the illusion of their popular legitimacy, as well as the corresponding image of a democratically-elected government.

Social upheaval and the role of #Protestiram (#iProtest)

Nevertheless, not all of the demos has been “privatized” and tamed under party control. Those omitted from the clientelistic exchange system— the shrinking urban middle classes, employees in the private sector, students— are just some of the social groups from which the current upheaval has drawn. The dissensus which formed around the President’s blanket amnesty united many different groups, political parties and citizens, around a common interest in putting an end to the corrupt regime and the restoration of the rule of law.

The #Protestiram (#iProtest) movement, has served important functions in the current mobilization. It has acted as a common signifier for all those citizens and groups who wish to demonstrate their discontent with the current Government. A post by an anonymous protester, published on the #Protestiram site, best describes this dimension:

“Enough with 25 years of transition, it is about time for the people to come and take what is theirs. #iProtest is not a political party. #iProtest is not an NGO. #iProtest is personal and singular. There is no leaders, no spokespersons. In fact, we are all leaders, everyone’s voice matters.”

The activists behind the online presence of the movement, the facebook and twitter accounts of #Protestiram, have played a crucial role in building up a discourse which remains faithful to the protesting demos one based on inclusion and a joint purpose. On the second day of protests #Protestiram, published a Proclamation for Joint Action, calling on “all the citizens, formal and informal organizations of citizens, including the Student Plenum, the Professors Plenum, the HighSchool Plenum, as well as LD Solidarnost, Ajde, Lenka, Mugra, the trade unions, the urban initiatives, and organizations that were part of the coalition “Citizens of Macedonia”, as well as all others who share the fury, but also the wish for justice and democracy, to join the protests.”

Beyond circulating information about protest meeting points, and documenting the different protests and guerrilla actions #Protestiram has created a new platform freed from the bounds of the structures of establishment politics. This has facilitated the mobilization of citizens and groups who wish to demonstrate their discontent with the current Government, but do not want to identify with or be seen as affiliates of an establishment political party. This applies specifically to the leading opposition party- SDSM, which revealed the wiretap scandal, and is presents itself as the leader of the fight against VMRO-DPMNE. SDSM is associated with the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, which impoverished the population, started privatization of the institutions, the commons and the electorate, and in fact paved the way for the rise of the current coalition. As such it has the power to push away a large section of the population that opposes the current regime but does not see itself represented in SDSM, or any other establishment political party. This is far from saying that SDSM has no mobilizing capacity. Due to its presence on the political scene since the country’s independence, its party network branches across the country, and through closely affiliated liberal NGOs, it still has the power to mobilize notable sections of the population. [2]

Considering this, the protest movement, will be successful to the extent that it remains inclusive of the opposition party SDSM and their NGO collaborators from “liberal civil society” but will not be overtaken by either its structures or its discourse. Channeling the protest movement into merely an instrument for legitimating the negotiating position of SDSM (as was the case last year), would be a missed opportunity both for the continued appeal to a section of the demos, but also for a broader and deeper social movement to be built out of the current protest movement.

For the protest movement to evolve into a new social movement, it will need to be able to articulate a vision of an alternative society, built on two levels: democratic inclusion, and a new discourse on social justice. Inclusion is necessary in order to allow each class and social group to give their own meaning to what is happening and why they are protesting. And it requires new platforms of inclusion and articulation in the form of plenums, open forums, and joint actions, which will aim to build up a new civil society— one which is not based on an authoritarian leaning of the

demos on political elites but rather corresponding to the newly discovered energy on the streets.

Its scope must go beyond the liberal, anti-corruption, uncritical pro-EU narrative, in order to address all three underlying conditions of the current predicament: the privatization of institutions, commons and the electorate. [3]

That requires a social movement, which has the confidence to challenge in discourse and in action the fundamental direction of the transition, the alliance between the state and capitalism and the depletion/privatization of the commons. Only once such questions are asked can the answer be a new social contract, one which rebuilds the country around notions of freedom, justice, equality, knowledge and social justice.

What next for Macedonia? Best, worst and most likely scenarios

The best (and the necessary) scenario

The best scenario would entail the establishment of a transitional (or expert) government, established to ensure that the work of the SPO continues, and that the media and electoral reform are implemented in full. It would also require that the protest movement continues to evolve along the lines described above, and starts to find a political articulation into a third political option distinct from the establishment politics in both its democratic tactics and its political objectives. In the best case scenario we would see that social movement appealing to a broader social base beyond those currently protesting, through appeal to currently neutral voters, and also to those precarious and exploited social groups and individuals whose political power and agency is currently being stifled and privatized by the previously clientelistic system of exchange.

The worst (and the most likely) scenario

In the midst of protests now spread to over 10 cities across the country, as well as also counter-protests, the EU has attempted and failed to organise a new round of negotiations among the four establishment political parties. In response, Euro-parliamentarians have published a note of concern stating that they are now “forced to consider further actions.” It is difficult to envision what those could be, who they would serve, and what their effectiveness would be. Revoking Macedonia's EU candidacy status for instance is not a tangible threat to the corrupt elite and can even benefit them by removing one source of pressure and fueling the narrative of victimization by the West.

Further actions might include blocking politicians' foreign bank accounts, or revealing details of officials' foreign possessions. Additionally, as it is likely that many of the corrupt activities have extended across borders, such as in the case of the Macedonian Telekom, the opening of prosecutions against officials in international courts, which might require the extradition of the politicians, might be a viable threat. Such measures however require determination and resoluteness which have so far been absent in the EU's response.

In recent years, the EU has on more than several occasions failed at playing up to its proclaimed role of advocate and guarantor of democracy, social justice and human rights. For instance some consequences of the interlocking of profit and politics in Macedonia are prevalent in EU's own ranks, testament to which are incriminations implicating the very guarantor of the Przino agreement– the EU Commission for Enlargement. [4]

Additionally, of course, there is the EU's choice of response to recent situations such as the refugee crisis and the

Greek Financial Crisis. Seeing how the EU has chosen to sacrifice democracy in the case of Greece and human rights in the case of the refugee crisis, [5] its own position as a defender of justice, human rights and democracy is compromised.

In this context, it is hardly pessimistic to say that the worst scenarios for Macedonia might in fact be those that are also most likely. The worst and most likely scenario would mean a continuation of the status quo, with some shake ups of the governing elite, for instance, the postponing of elections and the revoking of the President's amnesty under pressure from the International Community. However, cutting the deep roots of Macedonia's predicament requires radical solutions that emerge from questioning the very logic of neoliberalism and address its implications in the privatization of the institutions, the commons and the electorate. Such solutions however are not likely to follow from rigged elections, or rounds of negotiation between EU bureaucrats and corrupt party figures of the establishment. Until the decisions start to be made by the real demos, in correspondence with demands for equality, democracy and justice, Macedonia and Europe will be contexts conducive to injustice, inequality and fascism.

[LeftEast](#)

[1] <http://www.criticatac.ro/lefteast/s...>

[2] Clientelistic tendencies are also significant in the context of SDSM's mobilization, albeit to a lesser extent compared to those of VMRO and DU

[3] In Romania, the popular protests in 2012 were largely neutralised, not lastly by the Together We Save movement, which has inadvertently served to break inter-class solidarity, blocking the processes of organic articulation of social justice demands from below and of local recomposition of the left. In the meantime, the dominant political agenda has translated the popular demand for social justice into the anti-corruption campaign, which preserves unaltered the myth of transition towards good capitalism and professionalised administration. Moreover, the political instrumentalisation of the Colectiv Club fire on the 31st of October 2015, the type of tragedy that could change a whole city, can also depoliticise the emerging historical consciousness

[4] To give just one example, the EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Johannes Hahn, who mediated the Przino Agreement, is according to an investigation by [SCOOP](#), is involved in a scandal related to the world's largest gaming company, Novomatic Ag, based in Austria, is said to be involved in pipelines for money laundering by criminal bosses and drug barons." Hahn, as CEO of Novomatic, has negotiated and bought a building as property of the company Novomatic in cash," according to the an MP in the Austrian parliament. Hahn's previous employer Novomatic bought the casino Flamingo in Gevgelija, southern Macedonia, in 2013

[5] If the EU has bargained with Erdogan in exchange for Turkey's support in stemming the refugee flow into Europe, then such a possibility has also existed in the case of Macedonia. Indeed, the breaking of the Balkan refugee route, has been achieved precisely through the sealing off of the Macedonian southern border with Greece, achieved in accordance with plans prepared by the right wing governments of Hungary and Austria, with Macedonia's right wing government acting as the executor. A leaked document showed that a "closed border" coalition was formed between the Macedonian government and individual member states from Central Europe. In this context it is hardly unlikely that the states from Central Europe might pose an additional obstacle to the EU's already ineffective response in relation to Macedonia