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COVID-19 AND THE MACEDONIAN ELECTIONS 2020/2021: A STORY OF DOUBLE STANDARDS

Abstract

The paper aims to disclose the (de)securitization of Covid-19 during the two Macedonian electoral processes (i.e. the 2020 parliamentary and 2021 local elections) in accordance with the ruling elites' liking. The basic premise is that the pandemic has catalyzed the underlying processes of political alienation and authoritarian tendencies that had been present even before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The safety rules and regulations during the pandemic have been repeatedly re-modeled and manipulated in accordance with both economic and political gain's 'logic' rather than led by medical reasons and health protection requirements. The Macedonian politics of power-sharing is a case in focus, and it offers convincing arguments that political, ethnic, and religious elites have used the pandemic for their own interest and holding to power at any cost.

Keywords: elections, democracy, Covid-19, (de)securitization, political elites

INTRODUCTION

Two years after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is enough empirical material to come to some conclusions about electoral democracy in a time of (health) crisis. This paper focuses on the two electoral events and how the Macedonian political elites used the health

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security arguments in their (pre)electoral activities and performances – i.e. the 2020 parliamentary elections and 2021 local elections.

At a glance, it appears as if there have been two different phases of electoral democracy that differ hugely if seen through the prism of (de)securitization of the pandemic by the political parties. In short, the electoral ‘logic’ in time of health crisis has shifted from calls for elections postponement due to the alleged life-threatening health risks (in spring 2020) to calls for speedy elections (in late 2021 and early 2022). This attitude is particularly visible with the political opposition. On the other hand, the ruling coalition has been insisting on its allegedly successful managing of the pandemic and providing a safe environment for the voters during the electoral process, while dismissing the calls for early elections because of the general crisis in the country that requires a stable government rather than going to the ballot boxes soon.

The paper proceeds in four parts. In the first, we deal with the theoretical framework of analysis that practically combines political and security considerations of the elections in times of crisis. The focal point is on the concept of securitization and desecuritization, which is then applied to the Covid-19 environment and its political ramification. The second part of the article sets the nexus of elections and (de)securitization of the pandemic in the Macedonian political context. The following two sections deal with the specificities of each electoral cycle of 2020 and 2021, respectively. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of this analysis for the way we think about the performative effects of security representations and the conditions in which exceptional practices become possible during the election process.

(DE)SECURITIZATION OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

The concept of securitization, a staple of the Copenhagen school of security studies, postulates that security is a speech act. In other words, security is not necessarily an objective condition. Also, it does not have a positive or negative value *per se*. Any issue that can successfully be enunciated as an existential threat to something (a referent object) by securitizing agents (elites and/or those in a position to make their voices heard) may be removed from the political realm and defined as a security issue, thereby helping reproduce the hierarchical conditions and measures that characterize security practices. Once something is securitized, then normal/political mindset and actions are replaced by security concerns and extraordinary protection measures can be imposed. Barry Buzan, Ole

Waever, and Jaap de Wilde (1998, 23-24) argue that “security is the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue (...) as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure. [...] Something is designated as an international security issue because it can be argued that this issue is more important than other issues and should take absolute priority [...] that the issue is presented as an existential threat”. *Vice versa*, ‘de-securitization’ means that an issue is not, or no longer, seen/conceptualized in terms of security; instead, security simply becomes an irrelevant concern (although it may indeed *still* represent an existential threat). The de-securitization process implies ‘less security, more politics!’ (Buzan *et al.* 1998, 45). Or policies, one could add to this. It may also imply a total disregard of a (possibly) real threat for different reasons. During the pandemic, de-securitization has led to an extreme situation where other burning issues (such as, for instance, the migrant crisis, famine, or curable diseases) vanish from the radar screens as if they were not important or even never existed.

Indeed, while COVID-19 has been securitized very quickly, there is an ongoing political struggle over the right narrative of COVID-19 and the responses it has elicited, notably around the question: security for whom? (Sears 2020). Attempts to frame the pandemic as a threat common to humanity have proved a losing battle as national security has overshadowed the humanist approach. The well-being of one’s own population/State is *the* dominant referent object of (health) security. Both securitizing and de-securitizing processes are largely in the hands of national elites. No wonder political leaders (Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron, Xi Jinping, Giuseppe Conte and even then Macedonian caretaker Prime Minister Oliver Spasovski, to mention just a few) used war-like rhetoric against the invisible enemy. Conversely, authoritarian leaders, such as Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro or Belarus’ Alexander Lukashenko, have dismissed the threat and ignored the pandemic, i.e. they have de-securitized the threat, in a most extreme case (Turkmenistan), even banished the word from their vocabulary.

The tension between securitizing and de-securitizing agents has only added to the general confusion: the former usually yield to exaggeration, while the latter downplay the risks. Interestingly, States (supported by mainstream media, experts, and other influential groups in each society) could be seen on both sides of the fence. At the peak of the crisis, the public policy measures included not only recommendations on social distancing, hygiene, closing down schools and other public and business activities, but also lockdown, curfew, and data tracking

applications – some of which implied certain limitations or even violations of basic human rights and freedoms. As soon as the costs of lockdown proved unbearable for business interests and the economy in general, public authorities started to reverse course. They did so in manners (dubbed “gaslighting”, after a theatre play of the same name, and to the same effect) that gave citizens a sense of being manipulated into doubting their own sanity. Theoretically, a securitization dilemma appears when securitizing one issue in one sector negatively impacts another sector, which creates a dilemma for the securitizers as to whether they should securitize the issue or not. Although not fully developed as a theoretical concept, “gaslighting” refers to a process whereby the securitizer figures out that the costs of securitization measures are too high, so that a turnaround recommends itself through mere psychological propaganda and PR manipulation. This implies that the public is to be blamed if it wrongly understood the threat as an existential one while it was not the case (i.e. there was no reason for securitization in the first place, and even if there was – now it’s over and should be forgotten).

The scholarly debate over COVID-19, which has become a central part of the political process of securitization/de-securitization, is contested and removed from the ‘normal health public policy’ domain. Instead it is made an intrinsic part of security policy, or later used as a persuasion ploy at the end of the lockdown period. Julio Vincent Gambuto (2020) anticipated the shift from securitization to de-securitization and *vice versa*. In an article published in mid-April 2020, which went viral within hours, he warned readers to “prepare for the ultimate gaslighting, arguing that [...] pretty soon, as the country begins to figure out how we ‘open back up’ and move forward, very powerful forces will try to convince us all to get back to normal. (That never happened. What are you talking about?). Billions of dollars will be spent on advertising, messaging, and television and media content to make you feel comfortable again.”

It did not take long after the official proclamation of the pandemic by WHO for the governments to raise the health risks to the level of existential threat. Dealing with it demanded not only swift responses and a sense of urgency but also some extraordinary measures to be undertaken by the political and health authorities. Several studies offer insight in how the process has been unfolding in various countries (Vankovska 2020a; Molnár et al 2020; Nunes 2020; Kirk and McDonald 2021). Covid-19 helped State triumphantly return to the scene through biopolitics, or better biopolitics understood as governmentality (Foucault 2003). Giorgio Agamben (Foucault *et al.* 2020) scandalized many by warning against

the manifest tendency to use a state of exception as a normal paradigm for the government.

At the same time, political elites hide their incompetence and ineptness behind the authority of the ‘white coats’ of medical and paramedical staff or special crisis HQs. The pandemic has not only concealed the deeper causes of the ongoing crisis of capitalism, but it has also suspended any critical (and radical – grassroots) rethinking of reality in the name of humanitarian and ethical ideals. At the same time, the pandemic serves as an excuse for anything that does not/did not go well in the way the State functions. War-like rhetoric has proven convenient for boosting one’s political legitimacy and for imposing mass control more easily but also for personalization of power, which also impacts the internal politics and electoral process. The securitization campaign run by the government, especially when the fear was in the raise, contributed to enhancing popular support of the political leadership in general. Thus, the issue of the pandemic has been used for internal political purposes as well.

THE MACEDONIAN COUNTRY BACKGROUND AT THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

According to the Copenhagen school’s sectorial approach, there are five interlinked sectors of security: military, political, economic, societal, and environmental one. The idea is that insecurity from one sector may spill over into another, and at the end to create a vicious circle, which is hard to break out. At first sight, it seems that the health care does not fit in any of them – yet, the deeper inspection shows that the population’s health is essential and dependent on the state of affairs in all of them. For instance, more investment into military sector, leads to insufficient funds for health care and other public services; dissatisfaction with the public policies and services leads to political instability; the political instability may influence the political leaders to distract the public opinion and discover an ‘enemy’ into the Other (other ethnic or religious group); a state in political and economic disarray does not care about the environment, which creates a backlash for all the other sectors. However, Wenham (2019) argues that health and security have been increasingly interrelated through narratives that are now embedded in the health security discourse. Floyd (2019) goes further by introducing Just Securitization Theory in the context of which she argues that issues such as the pandemics not only justify securitizations, but necessitate them (Floyd 2021). Due to the focus on the elections, we would not go

further into the debate that has bourgeoned in the recent years. The key point is that securitization of the Covid-19 pandemic does not prove its superiority over the so-called normal politics (and health policy, in this very case). Regardless the seriousness of the disease (this one or any other in the future), it is the politics that is expected to provide a solid and efficient system of health protection instead of commodifying and privatizing somethings that serves the entire society.

The theoretical framework of (de)securitization is quite useful in elaborating the recent Macedonian history, which has seen military clash, perpetual political instability, ethnic divisions, economic stagnation and environmental degradation. Interestingly, the moment the country's leadership thought it had achieved absolute (military) security by joining NATO in March 2020, which was expected to increase the wellbeing – another non-military threat became imminent. The pandemic in a way showed how overrated was everything that had been done for the sake of military security.

Since 2020, the governments in most of the countries in the world have had to confront the dilemma of how to reconcile the democratic governance principles (or at least their governing position) with the imperative of providing mass health protection during the pandemic. The elections are seen as a hallmark of democracy but in many cases (such as the Macedonian one) where substantive democracy is missing, it is the elections that create a mirage of vivid political life. Certain studies have argued that electoral democracies have better health than other nations (Patterson and Veenstra 2016). Yet the Covid-19 pandemic has dispelled such beliefs in many developed countries. Neoliberalism has shown all its deficiencies with regard to the collective good and social services, which had already been commercialized. During the first wave of the pandemic, many states opted for a postponement of the already scheduled elections (or referenda) (IDEA 2020). Seen through a scholarly prism, one could argue that there has been sparse academic literature on election postponement (James and Alihodzic 2020).

The Covid-19 outbreak in early March 2020 found the Macedonian state in a specific political situation: the protracted political crisis had called for snap parliamentary elections as soon as possible in the fall of 2019. In accordance with the legislative adopted during the so-called Colored Revolution of 2016, the parliament had already been dissolved. The caretaker government had a limited mandate – only to organize the elections. The only institution in full capacity was the President of the Republic who had been sitting in office for less than a year.

The roots of the political deadlock should be tracked back to 2018/2019 when the country changed its constitutional name for the sake of NATO and EU membership. The so-called Prespa process (i.e. the adoption of the name change agreement and controversial constitutional revision) shook Macedonian society seriously. The intra – and inter-ethnic divisions as well as the worrisome political polarization deepened utterly. The name change was a gamble for the then prime minister Zoran Zaev, who publicly admitted that he played “all in” – hoping that the political risks and sacrifice would pay off (Vankovska 2020b). The road to NATO (military security provider) looked straight and clear, but the conclusions of the October summit of the EU (i.e. expected social wellbeing) left PM Zaev high and dry. Instead of opening the association talks with Albania and N. Macedonia, President Macron proposed a new methodology, thus giving a cold shoulder to the leadership of the two candidate countries. Having been a darling of the West and going against the people’s will in his country¹, Zaev seemed to be cornered and decided to offer his resignation and call for early elections.

Actually, snap elections had been in cards in either case: if newly renamed Macedonia had been given a green light to start the accession talks, the ruling coalition would have taken advantage of the elections; in the opposite case – the threat of possible government’s resignation was expected to make Brussels and Washington more responsive to the cries from Skopje (as the political opposition was portrayed as a cause for the ‘captive state’ replaced during the colored revolution in 2016/2017). No wonder the electoral campaign had been underway even before the summit of the European Council. It seemed that the country was looking forward to going on elections – the first one after signing the Prespa Agreement and the constitutional name change that proved highly divisive and legally dubious.

1 The Macedonian government called a referendum with respect to the name change (Prespa agreement). It was held on 30 September 2018. Despite a vigorous PRO campaign, the vast majority of the citizens decided not to vote, or rather to boycott it. The results of the referendum were disastrous for the Government: only 36 percent of the voters cared to cast a vote. The constitutional requirement (50+1 %) was not met, and the State Electoral Commission stated that the referendum failed. It is also important to stress that the Macedonian constitution does not recognize a non-binding referendum, while the Law on Referendum stipulates that a consultative referendum over an international agreement is possible but prior to its signing. In this case, the Government signed the agreement with Greece in secrecy, and only afterward asked the electorate for a non-binding opinion. In sum, the referendum was just a show. In spite of the popular vote, the government embarked on the constitutional revision, a process marred with a vast number of irregularities for the sake of gaining a 2/3 majority vote in the Parliament.

Instead, just like the entire world, the country had to deal with the unexpected pandemic in the worst possible political moment. The internal tensions were running high, and the Western allies did not even try to make PM Zaev reconsider his decision. He believed he had been too useful and precious, with the opposition portrayed as a political threat that would lead to a revision of the Prespa agreement. However, it did not take long for everyone to become too preoccupied with the pandemic-related issues, and with one's own national interests. Ever since EU and NATO *de facto* disappointed many of its candidate countries, especially in the so-called Western Balkans due to the obvious lack of solidarity.

Once the ruling coalition between the Social Democrats (SDSM) and the Albanian leading party DUI (Democratic Union for Integration) realized that it should deal with the challenge of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by themselves, the focus was on taking measures to address a major health emergency. At the same time, they had to continue preparing for the elections whenever scheduled. The country had already been in a very difficult position: over-indebted and with a health system in disarray. The fact is that the governments had always been more confident that NATO and EU membership would automatically change things for the better, but the country had been shaken by corruption scandals and failed internal reforms.

THE FIRST PANDEMIC ELECTIONS: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2020

The electoral rules imposed by the so-called Pržino agreement (i.e. the agreement sponsored by the EU to overcome the political crisis during the Colorful Revolution) and the subsequent changes of the legislation would not allow snap elections before a caretaker government took office (European Commission 2015).² Thus Zaev's resignation was followed by the formation of the transition government (3 January 2020) and dissolution of the Parliament in mid-February 2020. The election date was originally set for 12 April 2020. The ruling coalition had an intention to confirm its legitimacy after the painful Prespa moment at a time when the country would get the first visible gain – i.e. the full membership in

2 Eventually, the Pržino Agreement was implemented through the change of the Law on the Government through amendments that stipulated that 100 days ahead of the new elections there will be a technical or transitional Government. It would include the representatives of the opposition in a few key ministries. The provisions from 2016 are still in force as there is no parliamentary consensus (2/3 majority vote) for abandoning these "crisis-related" provisions, which implies deep distrust among the political parties.

NATO – in March 2020. The country’s formal membership took place in an atmosphere that was hardly celebratory amidst Covid-19 induced fears and tight lockdowns.

The power vacuum created with the dissolution of the Parliament was immediately fulfilled by the executive rule under the state of emergency. Following the all-party consent, the state of emergency was declared, and the elections postponed.³ The interlude was an additional test for Macedonian democracy and human rights understanding. The pandemic also shifted the political mood and the citizens’ priorities: hence, the elections were not so much about the grand national/identity issues that had troubled the country in the pre-pandemic period and turned to human security issues (such as people’s health and security).

One could say that the ruling coalition benefited from the pandemic in several ways: first, the ultimate concern of the citizens was the life protection from what was seen as a terrifying infectious disease – and everything else withered away; second, despite the strict lockdowns and violations of human rights, the then minister of health (a professor and medical doctor, Venko Filipče) became the most popular and trustful politician;⁴ third, the disciplinary power and biopolitics helped the ruling elite strengthen its rather weak position due to the autocratic political culture among the citizens (Sahin and Tsonev 2020, 18);⁵ fourth, the Covid-19 pandemic displayed the game of (ethnic and religious) double standards in a consociational democracy – the strict rules that applied to one part of the population were overtly disrespected by the other (mostly visible during Ramadan posts) with no legal responsibility whatsoever (Božinovski and Nikolovski 2021), and fifth, the state of emergency put at test not only constitutional principles of separation of power but also the human rights protection, non-discrimination and accountability of the executive.

3 The opposition leader Mickovski called the President of the Republic to immediately declare a state of emergency because the “situation was alarming”. At that point, there were only 35 Covid-related deaths (Netpress 2020).

4 According to some media reports, the health minister got public support of fantastic 80 percent of the public opinion. See: Trpkovski G. 2020 „Koronata i prinudnoto zreenje na političkata klasa“, *Prizma*, 16 September, available at <https://prizma.mk/koronata-i-prinudnoto-zreene-na-politichkata-klasa/> (accessed on 26 March 2022).

5 The “V-Dem Institute” from Götheborg listed Macedonia among the 48 countries at the highest risk of sliding into authoritarianism thanks to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. See: Lührmann A. et al 2020, “Pandemic Backsliding: Does Covid-19 Put Democracy at Risk?” Policy Brief No. #23, V-Dem Institute: Gothenburg, available at https://www.vdem.net/media/filer_public/52/eb/52eb913a-b1ad-4e55-9b4b-3710ff70d1bf/pb_23.pdf, accessed on 25 March 2022.

As already said, the only institution with full political and legal capacity at the time was the President of the Republic. He was the only one who could and did declare (for the first time in the history of independent Macedonia) a state of emergency. The Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences issued a report on the legal aspects of the state of emergency, which detected many deficiencies in the constitutional arrangement (MANU 2020).⁶ The Law Faculty's staff also had much to say about the constitutional and legal deficiencies in regulating the state of emergency (Praven fakultet 2020), but also concerning the violations of the Electoral Law during the respected period (Karakamiševa-Jovanovska 2020). Although constitutionally limited to a period of maximum of 30 days, through an arbitrary extension the state of emergency lasted from 18 March up to 22 June 2020. Formally, the pandemic fitted well into Article 125, referring to "epidemics" *inter alia*.⁷ The real reason however was not so much in the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic but rather in the fact that there was no other possibility to postpone the elections but also to give the government free reign in various spheres. During this period, the Government issued 250 decrees with the force of law (Ministerstvo za pravda 2021). Very few of them had direct relevance for the *raison d'être* of the state of emergency – i.e. coping with the pandemic.

One of the first decrees of the caretaker government, therefore, referred to the already launched electoral process. It determined that the electoral activities would be suspended during the state of emergency, while the State Electoral Commission's term in office was extended for six months (Vlada 2020). The declaration of the state of emergency displayed not only the lacuna in the constitutional arrangements but also the weakness of the institutions (particularly the ones that are entitled in the field of crisis management) as well as the real threats to human rights protection. Against the opinions of some constitutional and legal

6 The MANU's team took a stand that the Parliament could have and should have been 'revived' despite the legal dissolution adopted under Article 63 of the Constitution. The Constitutional court did not overrule this act, while the legal experts remained with opposite positions concerning the issue.

7 Article 125 of the Macedonian Constitution reads: "A state of emergency exists when major natural disasters or epidemics take place. A state of emergency on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia or on part thereof is determined by the Assembly on a proposal by the President of the Republic, the Government or by at least 30 Representatives. The decision to establish the existence of a state of emergency is made by a two-thirds majority vote of the total number of Representatives and can remain in force for a maximum of 30 days. If the Assembly cannot meet, the decision to establish the existence of a state of emergency is made by the President of the Republic, who submits it to the Assembly for confirmation as soon as it can meet."

experts who argued the opposite, the President of the Republic extended the state of emergency on three more occasions consecutively.⁸ The end of the pandemic was nowhere in sight, so he publicly admitted that the extension of the state of emergency was not due to health concerns (as the Constitution requires) but because of economic and financial needs (getting loans and credits to secure state's functioning). The pandemic affected the citizens' well-being and the economy harshly. The government, ruling by decrees, *de facto* got an extra opportunity to present itself as the ultimate guardian of the people's needs. According to the opposition the social packages bore effectively elements of pre-electoral corruption.

Concerning the new date of the elections, the government and the opposition took different stands. While the ruling elites insisted on elections sooner rather than later, the opposition was resolute that health conditions were not appropriate and insisted on further postponement. Thus the main opposition party (VMRO-DPMNE) had also been playing the Covid-19 card in the pre-election period in an attempt to emphasize the voters' safety as the ultimate priority, accusing the government of power-greediness and risking the lives for the sake of their political benefit. VMRO-DPMNE's leader, Mickoski threatened that the opposition would not participate in elections if they were set before July 15. In his view, that was the earliest acceptable date, so that the country could prepare for the polls amid an allegedly "rampant COVID-19 outbreak". In reality, however, the Covid-19 related data showed a rather acceptable situation. From today's perspective, it is quite clear that the situation in summer 2020 was far brighter than the one in fall 2021 or today.

The election results were tight as expected, thus there was no big surprise in the tight margin of votes for the ruling and opposition parties. Yet the governing position was of great advantage in the time of the pandemic. The state elites presented themselves as saviours and could manipulate the various social packages for support of the vulnerable groups. What used to be a big problem of pre-electoral corruption of the electorate, now got a new dimension of 'acceptable and necessary' care for the disadvantaged citizens. In the pre-election period, the government played the card of allegedly great success in dealing with the health crisis and even claimed that it achieved a 'victory' over the pandemic. The ruling parties faced accusations of prematurely scrapping Covid-19 movement restrictions to legitimize their push for early elections, whether the health situation in the country warrants the move or not. The elections

8 The last extension was for only eight days to fit with the timetable of electoral activities, which were set in order for the elections to be held on 15 July 2020.

were again presented as normal and safe events. The turnout was 52,02 (i.e. down roughly 15 percentage points) – the citizens did not feel really motivated to risk their lives (as it was perceived at the moment) for the sake of a new government made of the old and well-known (and disrespected) elites. The results coincided with the prognosis in the public opinion polls (MCMS 2020).

The ruling coalition of SDSM and a few Albanian political parties managed to preserve the majority in the parliament but with huge difficulties. The constitutive session of the new government was marred by a scandal that later on became a normal phenomenon: a Covid-positive MP was allowed in the parliament building to vote from a separate cabin. That precedent was followed by a few more cases of MPs in protective suits, both from the ruling coalition and the opposition. What was at first named ‘bioterrorism’ eventually has become a regular behavior under the parliament’s Covid protocols. The politically necessary move to enable the parliament’s work and the existence of the weak government only showed how privileged the politicians are in a time of crisis.

The entire political management of the pandemic especially in its early months shows governance without any scientifically or medically solid ground and logic because the public was bewildered between oscillating good and terrifying news and measures. The Covid-19 pandemic (as anything else in today’s world) was securitized or de-securitized in accordance with pure political (party) calculations as well as economic concerns. Depending on the political conjuncture, the Covid-19 nightmare was either coming to its end or on the contrary – the political elites used fearmongering to preserve the submissive position of the exhausted and impoverished citizens.

THE SECOND PANDEMIC ELECTIONS: THE 2021 LOCAL ELECTIONS

Almost 15 months after the parliamentary elections, the country was set to go on local elections. A brief prelude to these elections was an episode related to mayoral elections in the city of Štip and the municipality of Plasnica in December 2020 (for a mandate of less than a year). Namely, the existing majors became MPs during the parliamentary elections, on the side of the ruling SDSM. The opposition (VMRO-DPMNE and the other smaller parties) decided to boycott them using the securitization discourse of the Covid-19 risks: “The elections will be neither fair nor democratic, let alone safe. And one human life lost due to this complex operation, will be a sufficient reason not to enter

into a dangerous adventure.” (Republika 2020). Indeed Štip was one of the cities most affected by the Covid-19 crisis, and with the largest number of infections in the eastern part of the country. The turnout was so low that the threshold of 33 percent was hardly met. According to the opposition and some media reports, the elections were marred by irregularities and bribery, but the sharpest criticism concerned the disrespect for the Covid-19 protocols, especially during the celebratory post-electoral events.

The country’s local elections were constitutionally and legally fixed for the fall of 2021. Thus there was not much maneuvering space for scheduling the poll’s date, especially as the President of the Republic and the Government excluded any possibility of declaring a state of emergency. At a glance, the political parties and the voters seemed to have got familiar with the ‘new normal’ and the pandemic ill records (i.e. the extremely high death toll) did not affect the regular political processes, including the campaign and the election act.

The government used the prelude of the local elections for pushing one more (political and ethnic) goal: the census was to be carried out in September 2021, after two decades of suspension. At the moment the results are still not publicly declared but it is a fact that many citizens boycotted the operation using the Covid-19 risks and allegedly not suitable protocols as an excuse. The reasons should be sought in the political and ethnic deal between the ruling Macedonian and Albanian parties, i.e. in the ‘logic’ of power-sharing governance in what is becoming a bi-national state. However, the Covid-related security discourse was again amply used by the opposition. The media reported that “the census took Macedonia one step closer to the top for the highest mortality from Covid-19” (TV Telma 2021). Although the pandemic consequences were highly detrimental, one could hardly make a correlation between the census implementation (and for the same reason, the elections) and the death toll, especially bearing in mind the poor response of the overall state and health system. Several highly esteemed professors of medicine have been talking in vain about all the deficiencies of the Covid-19 response, such as the lack of competent medical staff, equipment, and unified treatment protocols at the primary medical level.

Having sensed that the political mood is swinging in its favor, the opposition (highly critical regarding the census and all other government policies) was looking forward to going out on elections. The party that used to be so concerned about the health protocols and safety of the voters this time insisted on an introduction of a technical novelty: biometric fingerprint readers were introduced to secure the regularity of the election

process. The unprepared electoral administration and the technical difficulties caused long delays in the electoral places, where people were waiting in line to cast their votes. Weeks ahead of the elections, the government also decided to relax the restriction measures, especially in terms of public gatherings both outdoors and indoors. The media reported that the battle against Covid-19 took a back seat for the sake of the ongoing power battle. In short, desecuritization reigned over the fears and risks.

The opposition achieved a landslide victory in the local elections that were hardly focused on matters of local significance. Covid-19 was (just) one of the key issues of the debate. Not only the country has got on the top list of states with the highest death-toll, but also other consequences of the badly managed crises took their political toll. The lack of any political or moral responsibility, even for a fire of a modular hospital in Tetovo that left 14 victims, was probably the last drop in the already full glass. Even the analysts close to the ruling party came to the conclusion that the highest Covid-19 mortality rate in Europe, corruption scandals involving high-ranking government officials, the fire in the modular hospital and the consequent refusal by Zaev to accept the resignation of health minister Filipče, make the top of the list of such factors that created a cumulative effect that came to its downpour in the form of the dramatically decreased support for SDSM in the local elections. Eventually, Zaev's successor has inherited a 'perfect storm' of national and local problems, where it is almost impossible to detect what is a cause and what is a consequence of the bad governance encompassed by the ongoing health crisis.

Prime Minister Zaev invested all his political capital in the local elections. In a gambler's manner, he again tried to motivate the electorate to give him (his party) unreserved support by offering his resignation if he loses the elections in the capital city of Skopje. At the end of the election's day he publicly announced his resignation as prime minister as well as a leader of the Social Democrats. New PM Kovačevski is a total anonymous to the Macedonian public and it is hard to say what to expect from his government, but if the early days in office indicate anything it is that his policy would be a follow-up of Zaev's in his focus on external problems (i.e. the identity dispute with Bulgaria as an obstacle in EU integration) rather than on the accumulated internal ones, including the ravaging Omicron wave. As already mentioned, the prognosis is that he may be enforced to go on early elections, as the government is hardly sticking together.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: PANDEMIC BETWEEN SECURITIZATION AND NORMALIZATION

The period of two years is too short to make any definite conclusions regarding the electoral democracy under pandemic. Pandemocracy in N. Macedonia, as in many other countries, posed an exceptional challenge to the political elites and the citizens. The analysis of the two electoral processes (in 2020 and 2021) shows that no matter how dramatic the impact of Covid-19 on the Macedonian society and polity was/is, the pandemic only exposed the already existing fractures and incapacities of the state institutions and the regulations. The elections have not changed anything, and it seems that the Covid-19 pandemic has been used as a trump card whenever it was possible and for benefit of the party elites. Their policies did not change, as the rampant corruption goes on in all spheres including the health sector. The party and ethnic divisions grow deeper and no elections under no circumstances may heal these ruptures.

The issue of holding elections has gone through a process of ‘normalization’, i.e. living with the enemy/security threat (Covid-19) in the long run. In early 2022 the country few talk about Covid-19, despite the extremely high death-toll and failure of the entire health system. At the time being, the Republic of N. Macedonia copes with three simultaneous ‘crisis situations’ (i.e. states of exception) vis-à-vis migrant crisis, health crisis and energy crisis.⁹ These formally declared “state of crisis” create the societal and political environment in which the political actors engage in an effort to stay or get into power. The gradual acceptance of the Covid-19 risks pushes away the existential threats to human lives (in case this pandemic worsens, or another life-threatening disease appears), which means this type of security menace has been desecuritized. There are almost no lessons learned, which is visible from the unchanged public health policies. Now the attention has switched to regular political games – and to the looming war in Ukraine.

One would expect an extraordinary event like the pandemic to make conditions for overcoming the differences in the society and the political arena for the sake of the common good, but instead, the pandemic has been a time for a sort of ‘war profiteering’ for the sake of business interests, deeper privatization and political gains. Some experts argue that the pandemic calls not for great leaders but for organization, protocols and strategies, collective management – it is all that a weak state as the Macedonian one is unable to provide. The constant political battles and

⁹ At the time of writing the article, the country also faces a security crisis induced by the Russian-Ukrainian war.

electoral victories do not bring any improvement in the lives of ordinary citizens and eventually may prove Pyric if the population suffers from other existential threats.

Apparently, the elites have adjusted to the pandemic, while the electoral democracy becomes again a ‘business as usual’ – with no concerns about the price paid by human lives and insecurities due to the bad public policies. Some authors argue that securitization, with its added sense of urgency, is not the ideal context to create and alter security politics in any sector. While it may hold some truth, yet the opposite process of desecuritization (especially when the risks have diminished) should create an atmosphere conducive for seeking better policies and protocols in case the threat (of the pandemic) gets back. The theory of securitization and desecuritization does not apply only to socially constructed threats; on the contrary! The covid-19 pandemic has been a real threat with huge loss of human lives, but the securitizing agents (the government elites, the opposition, the media, etc.) have been playing both ways, by securitizing or desecuritizing the disease in accordance with their current needs in the power game. (De)securitization has no value per se, and the real effects depend on how the securitizing agents manage the real (or imagine) threats. This paper demonstrates that the electoral victory could be a very powerful motive to use this process for the sake of one’s own political gain.

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