

PUBLIC NARRATIVES AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS REFUGEES AND OTHER MIGRANTS: A CASE STUDY OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

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I. Introduction

Migration is as old as human existence itself, and is seen as one of the biggest moving forces of human development and progress.¹ Throughout history, people have always migrated, as individuals, either in larger or smaller groups, to escape various conflicts and wars, hunger and poverty, religious or political repression and intolerance, or simply to find new economic opportunities and even to trade and travel to new places.² Around the world, migration patterns fluctuate due to these changing conditions.

Planned or forced, migration drastically affects not only migrants, but also the countries where migrants permanently or temporarily settle, changing numerous social characteristics such as labor markets and labor prices, demographics, and even crime. This is primarily a result of the fact that migrants are often ethnically, culturally, and even religiously different from the domestic population, and also differ among themselves. The recent migrant crisis in Europe has brought to light the conflicts that exist between accepting refugees and dealing with such serious issues as economic stability, cultural integration and national security.

¹ Stanojoska, Shushak, 2.

² Anitha, Pearson.

The Balkan Peninsula has been a crossroads of migration movements of refugees and migrants for centuries.³ North Macedonia, located in the heart of the Balkans, is strategically placed to be a frequent migration crossing point. Since its independence, it has become the destination of refugees from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s fleeing conflict or persecution. The Kosovo conflict has brought many changes to the country, and the ongoing migration flows from 2015 to the present, continue to bring serious challenges along with continuous international pressure for North Macedonia to deal with all migrant problems, while balancing humanitarian obligations with security concerns.

The dynamics of migrations in Northern Macedonia over the years, but also all historically unfulfilled promises in each subsequent migration wave, have intensified the concerns of Macedonian citizens related to their security, national identity, and economic stability and have created a negative climate and poor public perception of refugees and migrants. Through data elaboration and discussion, this paper will show how these migration narratives are constructed in North Macedonia and which factors predominantly generate acceptance or resistance. By analyzing the role of political discourse, social networks, as well as the historical context itself, the study aims to determine the situation in order to make recommendations for fostering more inclusive attitudes towards migrants and refugees in the future.

II. Migration Waves and its Implications in Post-Independence North Macedonia

As a country located in the heart of the Balkan Peninsula, the Republic of North Macedonia has historically been a crossroads of numerous migration movements, whether driven by war, economic reasons, or political instability.

³ Samardic, Djordjevic, 7.

Immigration flows in the Republic of North Macedonia since its independence in 1991 can be divided into several distinct periods, each triggered by different regional and global events. These periods reflect changing political, economic, military and social circumstances both within the country and in the wider Balkans, Europe and the world, but as we will analyze later, they are an important reason for the changing perceptions towards migrants.

The Bosnian Crisis (1992–1995)

Often labeled as the deadliest crisis in Europe since World War II, the Yugoslav Wars were a series of ethnic conflicts that facilitated the breakup of the Soviet-style Yugoslav federation created in 1946. During one of these conflicts, the Bosnian War (1992–1995), around two million people were forced to leave their homes, and more than one million people left Bosnia and Herzegovina altogether.⁴ Bosnia, as the most affected country, became home to more than 70% of all refugees and internally displaced persons from the former Yugoslavia.

The largest part of these migration flows moved towards Serbia and Croatia. According to UNHCR data, the number of Bosnian refugees in Croatia reached its maximum in 1993 with 287,000 persons, and in Serbia, it was in 1992 with 349,000 displaced persons.⁵

The Republic of Macedonia was also among the first countries to accept the wave of refugees fleeing these wars, taking in around 35,000 refugees. The refugees were housed in seven shelters and in households. They were cared for by authorized institutions in Macedonia until 1997, when, following the stabilization of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they returned to their homes.⁶

⁴ Franz, 4.

⁵ Bonifazi, 16.

⁶ Biljana Apostolovska Toshevskaa et al., 63.

The Kosovo Crisis (1999)

The Kosovo War was also a military conflict with intricate and longstanding roots, involving ethnic tensions as well as political maneuvers by major powers. The conflict was between the troops of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) holding power over Kosovo prior to the war, and the separatist group referred to as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The conflict was concluded when NATO troops intervened by initiating air strikes in March 1999, leading to the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces from Kosovo.⁷

This situation again led to a phase of mass emigration. Between March and June 1999, an estimated 850,000 Kosovo refugees fled to neighboring countries, threatening wider regional instability. Some 200,000 people were internally displaced or left homeless inside Kosovo itself. The majority of refugees remained in Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, while approximately 90,000 of them – by total – moved to over 25 countries around the world through legal arrangements.⁸

As a result of the Kosovo crisis, in the spring of 1999, the Republic of Macedonia experienced a massive influx of migrants, mainly ethnic Albanians, seeking international protection. According to UNHCR and the Red Cross, the number of migrants who entered the Republic of Macedonia is estimated at around 360,000 people. Around 170,000 people were accommodated with host families, while the rest were accommodated in one of the 11 refugee camps.⁹ Albania, hosting around 435,000 refugees on its territory, was the only one that faced similar burden to Macedonia's in this crisis.¹⁰

It is estimated that this wave, an influx of refugees into the Republic of Macedonia, expressed as a percentage, amounts to almost 18 per-

⁷ Quackenbush, 202.

⁸ Gollopeni, 296.

⁹ (MCIC) Macedonian Center for International Cooperation, *"Annual report '99"*, (1999): 10.

¹⁰ Bonifazi, 16.

cent out of the total population. According to some analysts, the massive influx of refugees at some point even changed the demographic structure of the population in the country. Even developed countries would have struggled with such a burden, not knowing how to avoid it.¹¹ Humanitarian aid arrived much slower than the military troops, while the Macedonian state and Army were facing bankruptcy. Refugees spent huge amounts of the country's funds; plus, the Yugoslav market (including Kosovo) was closed for the Macedonian companies. Economic indicators noted the fast-moving downward trends – the Macedonian economy was facing a complete collapse.¹²

Out of all misfortunes, the biggest problem caused by this refugee crisis was the deterioration of the already tense relations in Macedonia between the country's ethnic Macedonian majority and the significant ethnic Albanian minority.¹³ This tension would escalate in 2001, when the NLA (National Liberation Army),¹⁴ whose members were also former members of the paramilitaries who participated in the conflict in Kosovo, started a war conflict in the Republic of Macedonia with the aim of 'fighting for human rights of the Albanians in Macedonia and constitutional reforms.'¹⁵

Resulting in more than 200 casualties, approximately 90 civilian victims, and 170,000 internally displaced persons and refugees, the sev-

¹¹ Vankovska, 84.

¹² Nenovski, Smilkovski, 419.

¹³ At the end of 1999, Macedonia hosted about 17,000 refugees, including about 10,000 ethnic Albanians from Kosovo, 4,000 Roma from Kosovo, 3,000 ethnic Albanians from southern Serbia, and 400 refugees from Bosnia. (United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, *U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey 2000 – Macedonia*, (2000)). Over the past years, the number of Kosovo refugees in the Republic of North Macedonia has significantly decreased. According to official statistics, by the end of 2023, the number of Kosovo refugees remaining in the country had been reduced to 302 individuals. See: Kostadinovska, 23.

¹⁴ NLA, in English; ONA, in Macedonian; and UCK, in Albanian.

¹⁵ Zhidas Daskalovski, "The Right to Rebel: the National Liberation Army and the 'Macedonian Crisis' of 2001", *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, Vol.3 No.2., (2003): 52

en months of hostilities brought the state to the verge of a full-fledged civil war. The armed exchanges were eventually settled with the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) on 13 August 2001.¹⁶ Brokered by foreign diplomats and signed by representatives of the largest political parties in the state, this agreement gave greater rights and autonomy to ethnic Albanians, ensured the disarmament of rebel forces, and helped achieve at least formal peace in the region.

The European Refugee Crisis and The Balkan Route (2015)

The European Migrant Crisis, also known as the Refugee Crisis, refers to the mass influx of refugees and migrants into Europe, particularly from 2015 onwards, when over a million refugees and migrants arrived in Europe from the Middle East, South Asia, East and West Africa to escape conflict, violence, economic upheaval, lack of opportunities and increasing negative effects of climate change.¹⁷

Migrants and refugees try to reach Europe mainly via two main migratory routes: 'Central Mediterranean Route' and the 'Eastern Mediterranean Route.' During the summer 2015, all eyes turned to the Western Balkans route, as the main track shifted from the dangerous Mediterranean crossing from Libya to Italy, towards the east, from Turkey to Greece, through the Balkans to Central Europe. This route was mainly used by Syrians and Afghanis, and comparably smaller were the applicants from Iraq.¹⁸

North Macedonia has played a significant role in the Balkan Route. The geographical location, situated between Greece and Serbia, rendered it a crucial segment of the transit route for approximately 800,000 to 1,000,000 individuals.¹⁹ At the peak of the crisis, 13,000 people en-

¹⁶ Trajanovski, Georgieva, 15.

¹⁷ (UNICEF) United Nations Children's Fund, *"Refugee and migrant crisis in Europe – Consolidated Emergency Report 2018"*, (2018): 7.

¹⁸ Wagner, 2.

¹⁹ Ilievski, Bozhinovski, Popchev, 61.

tered the country per day.²⁰ Registration, recording and control of refugees has become almost impossible. The predominant demographic among migrants was male, with a lesser representation of women, alongside both accompanied and unaccompanied children. This refugee crisis was very different from those remembered in the 1990s. This time, a great many people came from completely different corners of the world to a completely unknown territory.²¹ In terms of nationality, the largest group consisted of Syrian citizens, followed by individuals from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine, Somalia, Bangladesh, Congo, Iran, Nigeria, Cameroon, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan – although these latter nationalities were represented in smaller numbers.²²

Macedonia's approach to refugees varied according to the policies of the major players who were points of destination; however, since March 2016, the Balkan route has been effectively closed to people who lack legal entry documents, leaving thousands of people stranded along the route, and push-backs, or the informal returning of refugees by the state from their territory to another country, has become more common practice.²³

This may have emerged as a result of the lack of a functional system for dealing with the migrant crisis; as a result, the countries focused on reassessing their hospitality and reacting in the direction of protecting national interests. It is evident that the countries of the Western Balkans were caught off guard and unprepared to deal with the wave of migrants and refugees on their own, but the refugee crisis also brought to the surface the EU's unpreparedness to deal with such challenges and the lack of leadership capacity in coordinating and managing current problems. The crisis also showed the EU's cynical and unprincipled

²⁰ Natasa Jancic, "There are fears of a new wave", MRT, (2017), <https://mrt.com.mk/node/39404>

²¹ Zendeli, Shabani, 1.

²² Mitko Chavkov, "The reasons for declaring a state of crisis continue to exist", Ministry of Interior Affairs, (2015), <https://mvr.gov.mk/vest/392>

²³ Eleni Takou, et al., 19.

attitude towards the countries of the Western Balkans, especially since they were required to build reception camps and receive migrants and refugees while some EU countries were reluctant to receive refugees and others were waiting for the selection of refugees that was taking place at the southern borders.²⁴ Moreover, they didn't make a difference between the humanitarian and the security aspect of the crisis. Everybody was preoccupied with the humanitarian flow of the crisis. Republic of Macedonia supported this aspect and provided the opportunity to the humanitarian organizations to give the necessary assistance to the migrants and refugees. However, in September 2015, we witnessed numerous anomalies. Most of the refugees and migrants were 18 to 30-year-old men. Part of the migrants coming from Greece had burns and wounds on their right arm, and a dozen of persons had IDs with the same identity, and most of the Frontex documents showed that the people had been born on January 1 or May 5.²⁵

Contemporary Trends

Despite the closure of the Balkan route, irregular movements along the route continued, undoubtedly with less intensity, but the smuggling networks adapted to the new situation and adjusted the routes of movement. The Republic of North Macedonia has remained one of the central points for transit through the Balkan route to the final desired destinations all these years. The state of emergency on part of the territory of the Republic of Macedonia declared on 19 August 2015 is still in force. In accordance with it, two temporary transit centers were established in the immediate vicinity of the southern and northern borders and they are still in operation. Perceiving the Republic of Macedonia as a country of transit, and not a final destina-

²⁴ According to the 17-point Action plan for cooperation in dealing with the wave of refugees and migrants passing through the Balkans which was adopted after a meeting in Brussels on 25 October 2015.

²⁵ Ivanov, 13.

tion; the average time of detention of refugees in the transit center is several days.²⁶

If we talk about numbers, according to the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia, the number of people whose attempt to illegally enter the Republic of North Macedonia has been prevented is around 20,000 people annually, and the number of people caught and returned to one of the neighboring countries is higher, ranging from 11,332 in 2023, to a maximum of 29,706 in 2020.²⁷

In February 2022, the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine created new displacement crisis. In the early days of the war, more than 200,000 refugees per day sought safety across borders, initially in countries neighbouring Ukraine. At the end of 2022, 11.6 million Ukrainians remained displaced, including 5.9 million within their country, and 5.7 million in neighbouring countries and beyond.²⁸

From 24 February to 15 August 2022, it is estimated that around 182,000 Ukrainians entered the Western Balkans (WB), and nearly 16,000 Ukrainians entered North Macedonia, of whom nearly 13,000 left the country. Most of the ones who stayed in North Macedonia, reside in Skopje, staying with friends or relatives or renting houses/apartments.²⁹ According to UNHCR, by September 2023, 67.151 Ukrainians have arrived in North Macedonia; while many left shortly afterwards, the number of refugees from Ukraine residing in North Macedonia reached 19,187 in 2024.³⁰

According to reports and statistics received by UNHCR from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, currently, around 1071 persons from Ukraine

²⁶ Kostadinovska, 4.

²⁷ Ibidem, 7.

²⁸ (UNHCR) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *"Global trends forced displacement in 2022"*, (2023): 8.

²⁹ (IOM) The International Organization for Migration, *"Ukraine response 2022- Rapid impact assessment refugees from Ukraine – North Macedonia"*, (2022): 1.

³⁰ (UNHCR) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Refugee Data Finder*, (2024).

reside in the Republic of North Macedonia and have a regulated status on various grounds. The largest group so far includes 685 persons who have temporary residence on humanitarian grounds in accordance with the Law on Foreigners. This status provides the right to reside in the country, but the persons do not have access to other rights. This is followed by a group that includes 351 persons who have regulated their residence on various grounds such as marriage, work, etc.³¹

On 08 August 2023, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia activated temporary protection for persons from Ukraine for a period of one year and on 30 July 2024 extended its validity for another year, i.e., until 09 August 2025.³² Currently, a total of 35 persons have been granted temporary protection in the country.³³

III. Macedonian Citizens' Attitudes towards Migrants

Macedonia has historically been a crossroads of nations, civilizations, information, languages, and religions, and Macedonians have also been known for their ability to accept and integrate diversity for centuries. However, a historical struggle for recognition of the state, as well as serious challenges after its independence, with an emphasis on current sensitivities about national identity and continuing internal ethnic dynamics, contributed to Macedonia appearing on the Gallup International list as a country with one of the lowest indexes for acceptance of migrants.³⁴

The fears of Macedonians, as reflected in the opinions shared on social media, generally focus on the following four main issues:

³¹ The data was obtained in response to a public information request submitted to UNHCR Skopje.

³² The Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 161 (5 August 2024).

³³ The data was obtained in response to a public information request submitted to UNHCR Skopje.

³⁴ Martinovski et al., 12.

Economic reasons

Many people on social networks express concern that migrants could create additional pressure on the already difficult economic situation that has prevailed in our country and region for years. According to the World Population Review, the countries of the Western Balkans are on the list of the ten poorest countries in Europe. With 5,888 USD per capita, North Macedonia is ranked 6th, with about 450,000 of the population of North Macedonia (21.5%) suffering from some form of poverty.³⁵ A few years ago, more precisely in 2019, around 56,000 people in the RSM were living in extreme poverty, with less than one dollar per day, and the results show that in 2022, the number increased dramatically, by 24%.³⁶ This situation is one of the main reasons why 600,000 citizens emigrated from the country.

Under these circumstances, the rhetoric on social media sounds like the following:

"We can barely survive in this poor country, and they expect us to take in refugees? Do they even know how many people here can't afford even a loaf of bread?"³⁷

"We don't have a war, but there is more poverty than in Ukraine, tell the people just this year how many homeless people you have in this country"³⁸

"Our poverty is on the rise, and we will still import.. Is there a captain on the ship?"³⁹

³⁵ Tuna, Simonovska, Petrovska, 52.

³⁶ Jovanovic, 13, 15.

³⁷ The comments are available on the post from the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=378531710485759&rdid=YF9LgEsL6ezyTYeh>

³⁸ The comments are available on the post from the following link: https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=5914552275227982&id=111709452178989&rid=tFRKXAww6rw5TFiQ#

³⁹ The comments are available on the post from the following link: https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=5914552275227982&id=111709452178989&rid=tFRKXAww6rw5TFiQ#

“When they realize where they’ve ended up, when they start running in panic – who will be able to stop them?”⁴⁰

“Macedonians collect food in containers, Afghans in hotels, Ukrainians to be cared for with food... heavy clouds hang over sad Macedonia.”⁴¹

Ethnic (demographic) changes

During the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, Macedonia’s demographic composition shifted notably, particularly regarding its ethnic aspects. These changes are the result of both natural population growth and the political and migration trends that have occurred in the country. According to data from previous censuses, the number of Albanians has grown constantly since 1953, in comparison with the other inhabitants of Macedonia. They comprised 13% in 1961, 17% in 1971, 19.7% in 1981, and 21% in 1991.⁴² Albanians accounted for 25% of the total population of North Macedonia in 2002; according to the 2021 census, of the total population, 54.21% declared themselves as Macedonians, 29.52% as Albanians, and a small percentage as Turks, Roma, Serbs, Bosnians, and Vlachs.⁴³

Macedonians frequently link this shift in ethnic composition to the policies implemented by the state in recent years, along with the refugees and migrants received from the region. This may be a valid explanation for the noticeable level of xenophobia and islamophobia

⁴⁰ The comments are available on the post from the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/RSEMK/posts/pfbid0GfKXV8HkCZnVR8ZeiCS5tZ52YdgwwPeiAVyMrYpA2GjIMgZw25zfEBSTQ2w4BdDeAl>

⁴¹ The comments are available on the post from the following link: https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=5668032066576620&id=401640679882478&_did=aQ01sxYMleXvwrlu#

⁴² Ortakovski, 26.

⁴³ State Statistical Office in Republic of North Macedonia, “Population, households, and housing units census in the Republic of North Macedonia 2021 – first dataset”, (2022)

towards refugees and migrants who have passed through or are currently passing through RNM on social networks.

This is how separate narratives on social media sound:

"Why don't they take them to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, aren't they rich countries and plus Muslim, they can't help them??? So, someone is deliberately taking them to Europe, so that they can Islamize and destroy Europe on a demographic, financial, cultural and religious level!"⁴⁴

"What if someone told us that this would change the demographic structure? Our people are going abroad to live, and other nationalities are continuously settling in our country."⁴⁵

"What do I know? We received 300,000 refugees from Kosovo, took them in, opened camps for them, cared for them, and kept them safe.. we know what happened to us. Now, we must not allow other refugees to just pass through Macedonia. No, we must not allow it!"⁴⁶

"I remember well when there was a conflict in Kosovo in 1999, and Macedonia received Albanian refugees in the Stenkovec refugee camp. Now, they are tearing down the flag of the same country that provided them with shelter and humanity."⁴⁷

"Let's take in another 360,000, so that like those ten years ago, they too can return to us with guns in their hands and Islamize our country."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ The comments are available on the post from the following link: https://www.facebook.com/stop.za.migrantskite.kampovi.vo.mk/photos/a.372918163639088/543-590203238549/?type=3&rdid=wudUPwwGaCtw9XUk&share_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fshare%2F18E9FLFxXY%2F#

⁴⁵ Post available at: <https://www.facebook.com/1788325667/posts/10212313429-429376/?rdid=rRNerinp4puqM5k0#>

⁴⁶ Post available at: https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=247139558951113&id=100009652126038&rdid=3mgBf5mzTyU1wpYW#

⁴⁷ Post available at: https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10234053462015482&id=1154644523&rdid=nyFHjcWNeaO3bpGH#

⁴⁸ The comments are available on the post from the following link: <https://www.>

The comments may not be great, but the rhetoric is completely different when it comes to Ukrainian refugees. While they are still considered undesirable for economic reasons, invitations to accommodate them in private homes were circulating on social networks as they are seen as a "Fraternal Slavic Orthodox people." This unequal treatment was also criticized in comments such as this one: "That's all well and good, but why, when there were refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and other Muslim countries, did no one show kindness towards them? They are people too, and yet you called them terrorists."⁴⁹

Security issues

Migrants in many countries, are often perceived with prejudice and fear, and are linked to crime and terrorism.

Throughout the refugee crisis, as migrants from Muslim countries gravitated towards Europe, there was a fear that the refugee waves were a Trojan horse through which Muslims would carry out an organized invasion of Europe. This rhetoric was intensified by reports that young, unmarried, unaccompanied males were dominant at the borders, and the situation culminated when the person responsible for the November 18 terrorist attack in Paris was identified as someone who had reached Europe via the Balkan route.⁵⁰

In addition, many countries have raised concerns about rising crime rates, particularly violent crimes, due to the presence of migrants. For example, in 2023, according to data from the German Interior Ministry, Germany saw a total of 3,175,282 solved criminal cases, with 2,017,552 suspects investigated. Non-Germans accounted for 34.4 percent of all offenses, excluding immigration violations, which is a notable increase

[facebook.com/search/top/?q=360.000%20%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%86%D0%B8](https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=360.000%20%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%86%D0%B8)

⁴⁹ The comments are available on the post from the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1118510168963094>

⁵⁰ Etemi, Dalipi, Muaremoska, 237, 238.

from the previous year.⁵¹ It is data like this that can fan the flames of fear and mistrust towards migrant populations.

Such narratives, fueled by the fresh wounds left by the 2001 conflict in the collective memory of the Macedonian people, have led to social networks being once again filled with comments labeling migrants as “something we don’t need in our country”.

Below are some of them:

“As if we don’t already have enough problems of our own – now we need the Taliban to blow us up in some shopping mall!”⁵²

“Do we need them? Are we going to import terrorists again!!! What are they looking for in Macedonia??? Let them catch a plane and make their way to Europe!”⁵³

“You will feel it later, there are many of them in Europe, they attack the elderly, rape young girls, steal, they are raised “beyond the law,” the female gender is exposed to danger, think before you accept them...”⁵⁴

“You offer us everything wrapped in a wafer, like everything else – refugees, it’s sad, we have to accept them, it’s inhumane to chase them away, etc. Women, children, old people in pictures and videos, and the truth is that they are young, militarily capable men...”⁵⁵

“We have plenty of them in our country, we don’t need that kind.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ Natasha Mellersh, N., *“Behind the statistics: Crime, migration and labor shortages in Germany”*, InfoMigrant, (2024), <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/60311/behind-the-statistics-crime-migration-and-labor-shortages-in-germany>

⁵² Marija Tumanovska, “The Macedonians are “loud” about the arrival of the Afghans”, Radio Free Europe, (2021), <https://shorturl.at/eHWN7>

⁵³ The comments are available on the post from the following link: https://www.facebook.com/stop.za.migrantskite.kampovi.vo.mk/photos/a.372918163639088/543590203238549/?type=3&rid=wudUPwwGaCtw9XUk&share_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fshare%2F18E9FLFxXY%2F#

⁵⁴ The comments are available on the post from the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/100028975346241/posts/10158653138298353/?rid=m0mDJqZbTyihqba0>

⁵⁵ The comments are available on the post from the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/RSEMK/posts/pfbid0GfKXV8HkCZnVR8ZeiCS5tZ52YdgwwPeiAVyMrYpA2GjMgZw25zfEBSTQ2w4BdDeAl>

⁵⁶ The comments are available on the post from the following link: <https://www.>

Apart from the above, there are also comments that promote extreme hate speech, as well as discriminatory and humiliating practices. For Muslim refugees, there are comments such as: "Where is Hitler, to welcome them with dignity?"⁵⁷, "They're just for soap"⁵⁸ or "Fire to burn them. Europe is for Christians."⁵⁹ And when it comes to Ukrainian refugees there are comments like "I will only feed them with Russian salad"⁶⁰ or "If there are Ukrainian women, I would take two, only on the condition that they walk around the house naked. To see some benefit at least."⁶¹

Frustrations from the international community and politicians

The non-acceptance of refugees in North Macedonia is also due to frustrations towards the international community, which continuously demands from the country, in times of deep crises, to act as economically developed countries, while remaining silent in situations in which the progress of Northern Macedonia is met with vetoes and conditions from several sides.

[facebook.com/stop.za.migrantskite.kampovi.vo.mk/photos/a.37291816363-9088/381796572751247/?type=3&rdid=IT7DROxaXkL9CzsM&share_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fshare%2F19jmLq5pW5%2F#](https://www.facebook.com/stop.za.migrantskite.kampovi.vo.mk/photos/a.37291816363-9088/381796572751247/?type=3&rdid=IT7DROxaXkL9CzsM&share_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fshare%2F19jmLq5pW5%2F#)

⁵⁷ The comments are available on the post from the following link: https://www.facebook.com/stop.za.migrantskite.kampovi.vo.mk/photos/a.372918163639088/543590203238549/?type=3&rdid=wudUPwwGaCtw9XUk&share_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fshare%2F18E9FLFxXY%2F#

⁵⁸ The comments are available on the post from the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=206773004022454&rdid=OGc9pzY3rm8SNFJf>

⁵⁹ The comments are available on the post from the following link: https://www.facebook.com/stop.za.migrantskite.kampovi.vo.mk/photos/a.372918163639088/543590203238549/?type=3&rdid=wudUPwwGaCtw9XUk&share_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fshare%2F18E9FLFxXY%2F#

⁶⁰ The comments are available on the post from the following link: https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10165601266915212&id=114648395211&rid=aBB6INIPkZJcou7t#

⁶¹ Ibid

In addition, there is a deep outrage directed at Macedonian politicians, who are often perceived as supporters of foreign interests, and not as carriers of an independent policy that will reflect the needs and interests of the Macedonian people. This creates a feeling of powerlessness and disappointment among citizens, who feel like they are victims of global political dynamics, and migrants and anger towards them is perhaps only a by-product of all those processes.

Below are some of those comments:

"They'll do whatever it takes to stay in their post. This is no longer normal."⁶²

"I am afraid that Macedonia will remain short-sleeved again this time and will not see a coin from the Americans, as with the Kosovo crisis, and for the refugees...as all the Kosovars have not left, the Afghans will not leave either."

"Wouldn't it be 190? How did we end up taking in 450 refugees now? Take it easy... are we going to reach 4,000?!"⁶³

"The EU has recommended that its member states take in 500 citizens from Afghanistan (translators, collaborators, and their family members). Croatia, as a member state, will accept 20 people. North Macedonia, as a candidate country – much poorer than Croatia, not to mention the rest of the EU – will take in 450 refugees?! Who are you trying to fool – the people, or yourselves?"⁶⁴

"That's what they told you from 'the Fortress' (U.S. Embassy), and you will just listen!"⁶⁵

⁶² The comments are available on the post from the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/RSEMK/posts/pfbid0GfKXV8HkCZnVR8ZeiCS5tZ52YdgwwPeiAVyMrYpA2GjMgZw25zfEBSTQ2w4BdDeAl>

⁶³ The comments are available on the post from the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/100028975346241/posts/10158653138298353/?rid=m0mDJqZbTyihqba0>

⁶⁴ The comments are available on the post from the following link: https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10161070720269115&id=215687669114&rid=yxL3X2ahYWxRPGC4#

⁶⁵ The comments are available on the post from the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=378531710485759&rid=YF9LgEsL6ezyTYeh>

IV. Conclusion

For long historical periods of human and societal development, migration was considered a phenomenon that was desirable, natural, sometimes even inevitable for the realization of ideas such as globalization and the so-called “borderless world.” These were concepts that were supposed to be the triggers of economic development and facilitate the free movement of goods, services and people. However, the new winds of civilizational development have significantly shifted the discourse, moving migration into phenomena that are not perceived as an opportunity, but on the contrary, are a threat to national security, public safety, cultural identity or economic stability. This transformation in perception has caused profound challenges in contemporary societies, revealing the growing tension between the ideals of openness and the impulse towards protectionism and exclusion, and these processes as such have not bypassed the Republic of North Macedonia.

In the paper, the analysis of migration processes after independence clearly indicated that the topic is not new for Macedonian society, but that the contemporary attitude towards migrants is shaped by new, complex factors such as political, economic, and even media influences. The analysis of comments on social networks indicated the dominant negative discourse towards refugees, an attitude based on fears of additional economic burden, fear of ethnic and demographic changes, and even fear of renewed destabilization of the state through migration policies. Particularly worrying is the perception that both domestic and international actors do not act in the interests of citizens when it comes to these issues, which further fuels distrust and resistance.

The results of this survey, while worrying, are not surprising. Macedonian citizens often perceive themselves as “second-class” citizens – marginalized and undervalued, both domestically and internationally. They feel like the people who have made significant sacrifices over the years for goals such as NATO and EU membership, but have received

nothing more in return than empty promises, pressures, and symbolic recognition. In this context, refugees and migrants easily become symbols of all social problems, and are rarely considered as individuals with specific human destinies.

The narratives will change as individuals' trust in the concept of change shifts. And change needs to come, first and foremost, from the top – from policymakers at the international and national levels, who will demonstrate that words carry weight and responsibility. Then, through changing public discourse, quality media reporting, and systematic investment in quality education, a different social climate can be built – one in which fear is replaced by understanding, and resistance by cooperation.

We are convinced that taking a joint effort and cooperation at all levels of society will change perceptions towards migrants and contribute to inclusive and cohesive societies shaped by trust, mutual understanding, and respect for diversity.

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