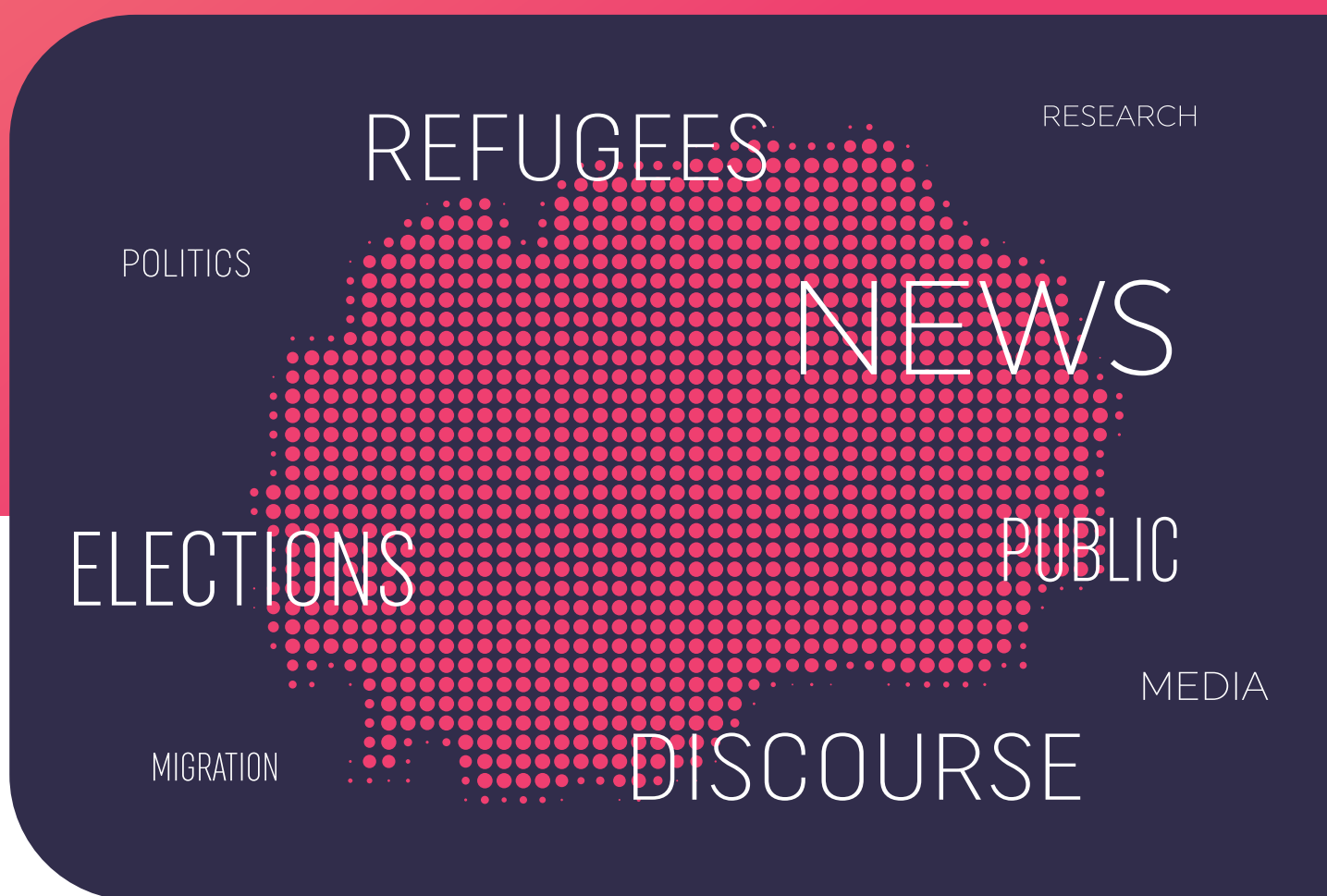


"REFUGEES AND MIGRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BALKAN ROUTE – NORTH MACEDONIA'S DISCOURSE DURING 2020 EARLY GENERAL ELECTIONS"



**REFUGEE LAW AND
MIGRATION CENTER**
AT THE FACULTY OF LAW
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UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency



BACKGROUND

The project aimed at identifying and analyzing the public, political and media discourse in North Macedonia on issues related to refugees and migration flows in the context of the Balkan route prior and in the course of the political campaign for early parliamentary elections in 2020. The EU's non-decision in October 2019 for North Macedonia and Albania has triggered an enormous amount of discontent in the country and the setting convoluted by early spring due to COVID-19 outbreak when elections were postponed. The already grave political situation was additionally triggered by the enhanced refugee and migration flows, spurring the public, political and media discourse with nationalism, xenophobia and hate speech.

Our research group is composed by students, alumni of the Refugee Law Clinic and mentor team from the Iustinianus Primus Law Faculty in Skopje, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University – Skopje.

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STUDY AREA FOCUS GROUPS

- SDSM (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia)
- VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity)
- Ethnic Albanian political bloc (including DUI /Democratic Union for integration, BESA /Besa Movement, DPA / Democratic Party of Albanians, Alliance for Albanians and Alternativa)
- Other political parties and movements
- Mainstream media
- Social media

TIME-FRAME

- Research intro – from October 2019 until early 2020
- March 2020 – until the COVID -19 outbreak (first pre-election period)
- COVID-19 outbreak
- Actual election campaign

KEY POINTS

The October 2019 EU's "non-decision" on North Macedonia to start negotiation talks has initiated an outburst of discontent and set the stage for nationalism, populism and even Euroscepticism. The latter coupled with social media upsurge on EU migration policies and its political duplicity. This stance was present within the media discourse, and marginally within the political discourse. The political crisis deepened so, at the beginning of spring, an early parliamentary elections were scheduled.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the public was more or less aware on the stance of the mainstream political parties on issues related to refugee and migration flows. After the pandemic was declared, the topic was basically neglected since other issues were prioritized.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the elections were cancelled in March for a later date. So by June 2020 the talks between political parties on a new election frame began. The debate on rescheduling the early parliamentary elections was pressed by imminent political crisis after the failure to secure opening of the EU negotiation talks in autumn 2019 but fueled by the grave health concerns because of the pandemic. These developments have created a political setting in which nationalism, xenophobia, interethnic intolerance were duly expected throughout the political campaigning. Furthermore, anti-refugee and anti-migrant rhetoric were also anticipated.

The refugee and migration flows in 2020 were on the rise during the research period, as well as smuggling which in a few cases unfortunately resulted with tragic deaths that were regularly reported by the media and largely consumed by social media users.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

- In general, the public is poorly informed about issues related to refugees and migration.
- As a whole, after the COVID-19 pandemic was announced media have not provided constant and accessible information related to refugees and migration.
- During the rescheduled pre-election campaign, the refugee and migration flows intensified and the state authorities have extended a 30 day - state of crisis along the north and south state border, however, the political discourse was not dominated by the issue.
- The rise of nationalism, xenophobia and hate speech during the research period and the pre-election campaign were mostly motivated by the nationalist rhetoric used daily by the mainstream and marginal political parties in the ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian political bloc but in particular due to the demand announced by DUI regarding a prime minister seat for an ethnic Albanian candidate.
- The main topic of the research – refugee and migration flows, were not systematically debated but vaguely addressed by almost all parties along North Macedonia's political spectrum. The issues were notably absent from the agenda of the smaller and marginal political parties even during the pre-election campaign.
- Social media are also frequently used to promote nationalistic, populist and xenophobic messages and ideas and therefore remain as a focal misinformation tool that overlaps and dominates the public, media and political discourse in North Macedonia.
- The main preliminary conclusion by the research group is that the public, media and political discourse during the study period were dominated by autochthonous issues but the COVID-19 outbreak and the postponing of early parliamentary elections has certainly complicated the arena. This may well explain the absence of feasible treatment of issues related to refugees and migration flows.