

Macedonia: Some Considerations on Identities and Conflicts

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The strengthening of ethnic identities throughout Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism has been widely perceived as a nationalist „regression“ in terms of modernisation. Sometimes nationalism has had positive effects like in Slovenia, Estonia or Poland. However, often it turned into ethnic politics with destructive consequences like in Armenia, Georgia or Moldova. One commonly given reason is that collectivist nationalism replaced collectivist communist ideology. This is of course very simplistic. Recent publications clearly distinguish between „objective“ reasons for nationalism and „subjective“.¹ The former comprises for instance socio-economic features.² The latter is about national identity. Research often stresses only one face of nationalism. It would be more appropriate to see the interplay of both factors. Nevertheless, the subjective reasons are often disregarded and dismissed as „primordial“. It is exactly by drawing on these subjective reasons, on identity, that nationalism strongly and effectively mobilises people after the change of political regime. This is astonishing since ethnic identity is commonly seen as a highly artificial characteristic. The issue can be very well exemplified by the case of Macedonian identity. In the following considerations I will show how Macedonian identity has been constructed in a brief period of time with a very fragile ethnic foundation. After a short introduction into the developments since Macedonia gained its independence I will explore the roots of Macedonian national identity, the efforts to consolidate them in the 19th and 20th centuries and the problems which arose after independence and persist until now. In the light of these reflections I will conclude with some remarks on the Ohrid Agreement.

Macedonian independence in 1991 has been the big exception in the dissolution process of Yugoslavia: It was the only republic that managed to secede peacefully. There were not even minor clashes between the National Yugoslav Army and the Territorial Defence Forces like in Slovenia. The major reason for this phenomenon is the minor importance Milošević gave to the Republic due to the small Serbian minority. Moreover, there was a certain kind of alliance between the Macedonian and the Serbian elites since the former developed under Serbian dominance after World War II. After ten years of seemingly peaceful independence, the armed conflict between Albanian rebels and Macedonian security forces in 2001 surprised many political observers. Some even described the Macedonian case of interethnic relations as a success story.³ In fact, the worsening relationship between Slavic Macedonians (64.2 % of the population according to the census of 2002) and Albanians (25.1 %) in the country has been anticipated by a long record of hidden interethnic economic, political and cultural tensions⁴. In view of the experiences of Bosnia and Kosovo, the international community tried not to

repeat the errors of the past and quickly intervened.⁵ With the direct involvement of the EU, the Framework Agreement of Ohrid was signed and the conflict – at least for the time being – settled. However, the recent clashes between Macedonian security forces and Albanian rebels underline that the Agreement has not been able to solve the underlying problems in Macedonian society and state.

The fragility of the Macedonian state and its lack of legitimacy have several reasons comprising internal and external factors. The latter are relatively easy to identify. They included disputes with Greece about the name and the state symbols; the economic decline in Serbia⁶ together with the tensions between the two national churches; issues concerning the common history with Bulgaria, and the Albanian issue in Kosovo as well as in Macedonia itself. The armed conflict in Kosovo definitely contributed to the escalation of interethnic clashes in Macedonia. The internal factors are more difficult to spot. At a first glance, two characteristics of the domestic situation are especially relevant. On the one hand, this is the rapid and severe deterioration of the economy during the 90s, with the GDP at 78,5 % of the 1989 level and an unemployment rate of 42,0 %.⁷ On the other hand, a specific factor adding to the instability of Macedonian society is the complexity of interethnic relations in the country, especially between Slav Macedonians and Albanians. Both factors are linked, since ethnic segregation is usually interwoven with economic segregation.⁸ Due to cultural traditions and political constellations, ethnic identities and interethnic relations have a special relevance in Macedonia.

The linguistic curiosity of the Italian word *macedonia* and the French *macédonie* denoting not only the country and geographical area but also a mixed fruit-salad underlines that the region is known for its very heterogeneous ethnic composition.⁹ Of course, ethnic diversity makes it hard for a young state to develop a sense of nationality: *ethnos* and *demos* fall apart and a so-called stateness problem arises.¹⁰ This is the reason why an ethnic definition of „Macedonian“ is somehow tricky. In a stricter ethnic sense, the Macedonians are a South-Slavic people living in a region comprising the southern part of former Yugoslavia, Northern Greece, Western Bulgaria and even parts of Albania. The transition from Macedonian *ethnicity* to Macedonian *nationality*, i.e. the politicisation, mobilisation, and territorialisation¹¹ of the Macedonian community, first took place at the end of the XIXth century and was revitalised with the establishment of the Macedonian People's Republic and of course with the foundation of an independent state in 1991.

It can be said that the Macedonian nationality, its symbols and myths, its origins and, in short: its legitimacy, have always been heavily contested. By the Serbs who

considered the Macedonians as „South-Serbs“, by the Bulgarians who considered them Bulgarians, and by the Greeks who claim the „copyright“ on the term „Macedonia“ and on its cultural heritage. It has therefore always been a major task of Macedonian elites and of all Macedonian governments to create or invent something like a national tradition and mythology in order to underpin their claim for a place among other nations.¹² Actually, there has been no independent Macedonian State since Philip II. and Alexander the Great, and to which extent this state really was a „Macedonian“ state is highly disputed. Certainly, it was not the beginning of the present-day Macedonian national identity, since the Slavs settled in the region in the sixth century AD. Later most of them considered themselves Bulgarians and continued to do so for a long time.¹³

The first manifestation of Macedonian identity – if it is possible to mention a clear date at all – took place in 1893 when the „Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation“ (VMRO) was founded in Thessalonica.¹⁴ Among their goals was the establishment of an independent Macedonian state.¹⁵ In 1903, VMRO led an uprising against the Turkish troops in Macedonia – with Russian consent as well as under Bulgarian pressure and with its support. This „Ilinden Uprising“ – in which also some Albanians took part – became very important in Macedonian national history, notwithstanding the fact that the Turks rapidly suppressed it.

This historical episode became so important that the establishment of the People's Republic within the Yugoslav Federation in 1944 was considered as the „Second Ilinden“. Nevertheless, the creation of a Macedonian nationality had also political reasons: the Communist party of Yugoslavia could justify its control over Vardar Macedonia in this way¹⁶, especially in opposition to Bulgaria¹⁷. Hence, any sense of adherence to the Bulgarian nation had to be eliminated, and since Serbianisation had failed before, the strengthening of a separate Macedonian identity was the only alternative option. Strong efforts were undertaken to achieve this goal. Among these was the first establishment (or at least: official recognition) of a standard Macedonian literary language based on the dialect of the Bitola-Veles region. Around the same period, civil war broke out in Greece with many Slavic speaking Greeks, i.e. Macedonians, supporting the communists and experiencing Greek suppression, thus strengthening their Macedonian and Slavic identity.¹⁸

The Macedonian Independence in 1991, the „Third Ilinden“, requested again a strengthening of national identity because of several reasons. Obviously, the death of Yugoslavia left a gap in terms of identity since the Macedonian national identity was closely linked to that of the socialist federal state. Frustration about dire economic conditions deepened by the international embargo imposed on Serbia was widespread. Both could be ideologically alleviated by nationalism. More important, however, were

the internal and external pressures. Externally, Greece in particular questioned the existence of the young state, blocking EU-decisions in favour of Macedonia, placing an embargo on the country and especially denying it the right to call itself „Macedonia“¹⁹, to use its flag and to refer to Alexander the Great. Indeed, Macedonia adopted the same name as the northern Greek region (*Macedonia-Thrace*) and Greece seemed to fear territorial claims. Also, Macedonia used the sixteen-ray „Sun“ or „Star of Vergina“. It is said to originate from the grave of Philip II. found in Thessalonica – whether this symbol is royal or national or ethnic, even whether the tomb was that of Philip, is again disputed. Nevertheless, Greece fiercely objected the Star when it became the official Macedonian state symbol in 1992: being found on Greek soil it was supposed to underscore Macedonian territorial claims. However, also Albanians in Macedonia did not feel represented by the flag, since they regarded it more as an ethnic than a national symbol. Only in 1995 Macedonia adopted a new flag stylising the old one.

Similarly, Greece did not accept that Macedonia claimed continuity with ancient Macedonians and especially with Alexander the Great or „Alexander the Macedonian“. For Greece, ancient Macedonians were Greeks and serious Macedonian historians will not doubt that they were not Slavs, because – as mentioned above – the first Slavic settlements are much younger. But they would say that they were not Greeks either. Indeed, some sources suggest that ancient Greeks considered the Macedonians a distinct people.²⁰

Internally, Macedonian identity came under pressure mostly from the Albanian minority which has a stronger ethnic identity. The Albanian claim for more rights and for an equivalent role in the state threatened Macedonian identity on the one hand, insofar as Macedonians feared that Albanians might take away the state from them: not only legally but also demographically, since Albanian fertility was and is much higher. This fear was additionally fostered by the idea of a „Greater Albania“, comprising Macedonia, Albania, and Kosovo.²¹ On the other hand, it is exactly this perceived threat that fosters Macedonian solidarity and identity. After the international intervention there in 1999, also Albanians in Macedonia started an armed struggle since it seemed that violence might – as in Kosovo – „pay off“. This was the strongest challenge for the Macedonian state so far. The Ohrid Agreement in 2001 apparently pacified the country but did not solve the underlying problems.

The resulting picture is somewhat bleak. A very young Macedonian national identity may exist. As the Macedonian state itself, it seems very fragile. Obviously the processes of nation and state building are both extremely under pressure in Macedonia. The establishment of a Macedonian civic identity based on citizenship rather than on ethnicity therefore seems very difficult to achieve. The Albanian ethnic identity is strong, contributing to an ethnic

polarisation. Power-sharing as the political strategy behind the Framework Agreement perpetuates this polarisation and thus the division of politics along ethnic lines, undermining the legitimacy of the state.²² Also, the Agreement receives completely different assessments according to the ethnic affiliation of the respondent.²³ So, even if properly implemented, it does not seem to offer a viable solution, especially as long as the economic and social problems persist.

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¹ Krastev, Ivan and Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina (2004) *Nationalism after Communism: Lessons Learned*. New York, Budapest: CPS Books, CEU Press.

² See for instance Hensell, Stephan (2003) „Typisch Balkan? Patronagenetzwerke, ethnische Zugehörigkeit und Gewaltdynamik in Mazedonien“, in *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 4: 131–145.

³ Troebst, Stefan (2002) „Die Republik Makedonien – Eine balkanische Erfolgsstory“, 341–359 in Schorkowitz, Dittmar (ed.): *Transition – Erosion – Reaktion. Zehn Jahre Transformation in Osteuropa*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

⁴ Petkovska-Hristova, Lidija (2004) „Multiculturalism as Political Model: The Case of Macedonia“, 97–116 in Genov, Nikolai (Ed.): *Ethnic Relations in Southeastern Europe*. Berlin and Sofia: Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

⁵ Vankovska, Biljana (2002) *International Mediation of the Macedonian Conflict: Capabilities and Limitations*. Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation.

⁶ Reinforced by the trade-embargo.

⁷ Figures for 2002 according to United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (2003) *Economic Survey for Europe*. Geneva: UNECE.

⁸ See also European Stability Initiative (2002) *The Other Macedonian Conflict*. Berlin: ESI.

⁹ Besides Macedonian Slavs and Albanians also Greeks, Turks, Bulgarians, Vlachs and Roma live in the region.

¹⁰ Linz, Juan and Stepan, Alfred (1996) *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹¹ See also Smith, Anthony (1986) *The Ethnic Origin of Nations*. Oxford, New York: Basil Blackwell.

¹² Compare Pettifer, James (1999) *The New Macedonian Question*. Houndsmill: MacMillan. The efforts to establish a national language, literature, and history are to be seen in this light.

¹³ In the tenth century Tsar Simeon's Bulgaria controlled almost all of Macedonia except the Aegean Coast.

¹⁴ Though commonly the „Macedonian Question“ arose in 1870 when Russia pressed Ottoman Turkey to allow a separate Bulgarian Church or Exarchate (contested by the Greek and Serbian Church) which subsequently increased its influence across Macedonia, albeit Bulgaria quickly lost its territories gained according to the treaty of San Stefano in 1878.

¹⁵ Another wing was much closer connected to Bulgaria just aiming at autonomy within an enlarged Bulgarian state.

¹⁶ See also Palmer, Stephen and King, Robert (1971) *Yugoslav Communism and the Macedonian Question*. Hamden: Archon Books.

¹⁷ Between 1946 and 1958 Bulgaria recognized the Macedonian nation, while afterwards returning to a more nationalist stance. See Danforth, Loring (1995)

The Macedonian Conflict: Ethnic Nationalism in a Transactional World. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

¹⁸ Certainly the suppression of Slavic manifestations in Northern Greece or Southern Macedonia is much older and Greeks tried a hellenisation of the region long before.

¹⁹ Later Macedonia had to change its official name to „Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia“.

²⁰ As exemplified by Demosthenes who spoke about the „barbaric“ Macedonian people. Only later they were accepted as „Northern Greeks“. Compare Borza, Eugene (1990) *In the Shadow of Olympus: The Emergence of Macedon*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²¹ According to a recent ICG study, this idea lacks any practicability and interest among most Albanians; see International Crisis Group (2004) *Pan-Albanianism: How Big a Threat to Balkan Stability?* Tirana, Brussels: ICG.

²² See also Riedel, Sabine (2003) „Politisierung von Ethnizität in Transformationsgesellschaften. Das Beispiel Südosteuropa“, in *WeltTrends* 38: 61–73.

²³ Only 38% of the Macedonians support the Ohrid agreement in contrast to 91.6% of the Albanians. See UNDP (2003) *Macedonia – Early Warning Report*. Skopje: UNDP.

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