

MACEDONIA: A VIEW ON THE INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS

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One of the processes by which the present decade shall undoubtedly be remembered is the ethnic conflicts or wars that took place, most of which originated in the countries experiencing the so called 'period of transition'. Among them, unavoidably, are the conflicts which happened in and between the countries which were established after the disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation. In spite of the fact that their causes were much wider and deeper, it is evident that ethnic issues were used as a main instrument for the creation of new strategies or the practising of the old ones.

Within this context, the Republic of Macedonia has so far successfully resisted falling into the trap of such doctrines in spite of the 'suitable' internal situation and the intensive influence of external factors. The internal milieu referred to concerns the specific character of its multi-ethnic and multi-confessional composition. Macedonia is a country where minorities represent one-third of the population and where the citizens have different religious affiliations, even within the same ethnic group. It is to be expected in such environments that a certain amount of social and cultural prejudice will exist and Macedonia is no exception. Those negative feelings were especially intensified in the first years of multi-party elections and following the establishment of independence. This intensification occurred mostly because ethnicity and religion were used for political ends by all sides, though the strong propaganda and various forms of external pressure to which the country has been exposed from neighbouring countries was also significant. However, the success of the policy was in keeping those feelings only up to the level of a certain national romanticism, no matter how 'loud' it may have appeared at some moments. Thus, with the exception of a few incidents, the country managed not to become a typical 'conflict area' in the militant meaning of the word.

Speaking of the Macedonian ethnic environment in the broadest sense, there are two significant questions to be pointed out. The first one regards the way in which different ethnicities see themselves within the state and in relation to other ethnic collectivities, while the second one concerns the development or the trends of the inter-ethnic relations. Rather than concentrate on a theoretical analysis, we can in this paper approach these questions by presenting some of the data collected in several pieces of research into ethnic issues in recent years. This will provide an interesting illustration of the web of relations that exist among the citizens of different ethnic and religious backgrounds of the Republic of Macedonia. All research was conducted by the Centre for Ethnic Relations at the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research in Skopje.¹

One of the characteristics of Macedonia is the rather complex web of inter-ethnic relations, not only due to the significant number of minority groups, but also because they differ greatly according to their size. On one side, the Albanian group represents around 23 per cent of the population, compared with groups such as the Turks, Vlachs, Roma, etc., which do not exceed five per cent each. Although the legislation draws no distinction between minority groups, in everyday life members of the large minority group can in fact more easily practice their rights (education, participation in the political institutions etc.). We can find confirmation of this if we look at the character of the demands made by different minorities. It becomes obvious that the Albanian group has mostly been concerned about the increase of the rights which exceed the limits of the legal system, while the small minority groups have complained mainly about the application of the laws in practice.

An imbalance such as this can cause the deterioration of the situation in two ways. First, it turns almost all attention to one minority only, creating the possibility that the other minorities will be to some extent neglected. Second, it creates an additional web of intolerance which is not limited to the majority-minority scheme, but concerns the relations among the different minorities themselves.

As a logical consequence, it can be expected that the attitudes of such groups would differ with regards to their position, which is the exact picture exhibited through the results of the mentioned research. Data can be selected from the large amount collected in order to illustrate this subject with a particular accent on three issues: prejudices and stereotypes, attitudes towards the state and political institutions, and some features of the political culture.

The different experiences of the minorities and the majority, is one of the elements which is most directly reflected in their attitude towards the state and its institutions. One of the crucial questions in this regard may be the one of 'loyalty'—not as some form of obedience, but as a category indicating the degree in which the citizens experience the state as their own. A very significant year for observation of this issue would be the one chosen for the mentioned research, 1993. In that year, the new constitution was adopted, which made the profile of the state more 'visible'; new legislation was progressing and the direction of the functioning of the institutions was recognizable, greatly influencing the attitudes of the citizens.

For the creation of an attitude of loyalty, one of the essential factors is one's self-perception as a citizen. According to the research on this issue conducted in that particular year, one of the most interesting findings was that in a country with legislation which applies equal standards to all citizens (therefore to all minorities), the differences in the attitudes between the minority groups were surprisingly big. To give a more specific example, according to the data, 42 per cent of the Albanians and the Serbs declared that they felt themselves to be second class citizens because of their ethnic background; 35 per cent of the Roma had the same feeling, while, contrary to this, over 90 per cent of the Turks and the Vlachs regarded themselves as equal citizens. Consequently, 87 per cent of Albanians felt discriminated against, 50 per cent of the Roma and the Serbs had that feeling, while discrimination was felt by less than 10 per cent of the Turks and the Vlachs.

Those attitudes directly correlate with an evaluation of the country's legislation and policy. Asked about the legislation regarding minority rights (use of language, transcription of personal documents, education, etc.) the groups differed in their answers as well. If we summarize them, it appears that around two-thirds of the Macedonian population was not quite happy with the laws because they felt they were losing their position as a nation. Over 80 per cent of the Albanians disapproved of them because they felt they were not gaining enough rights as a minority. Half of the Roma and the Serbs were discontented as well, while over 80 per cent of the Turks and the Vlachs found the legal solutions as 'suitable'.

Regarding the political institutions, a summary of attitudes give the following picture:

- the Macedonians mostly trusted the president of the republic (over 80 per cent), less trusted the government (45 per cent) and few trusted the parliament (around 20 per cent). Eighty per cent found the army to be protective enough and would serve in it in peace as well as join it if peace was endangered and defence of the country became necessary;
- seventy-six per cent of the Albanians believed in the policy of the president and 46 per cent in the government. All other institutions were evaluated negatively by more than two-thirds of the population, especially the army and the police;
- the Turks and the Vlachs were very supportive about all institutions (over 80 per cent) except the parliament which was evaluated negatively by the same percentage. It must be pointed out that the Turkish population had the highest positive attitude towards the army and especially towards defence of the country in general (over 90 per cent);
- the Roma population exhibited very positive attitudes generally (over 90 per cent on all issues), while contrary to that, the Serbs had highly negative feelings about practically everything related to the state.

A few years later, due to some objective factors, the discontent among all groups had grown (by 10-20 per cent), but the proportions among the different ethnic groups remained the same, indicating to some extent a constant degree of integration of each of them in the society.

Apart from policy and legislation, one of the main reasons for these attitudes can be related to specific inter-relationships among the population, which brings us to the question of the prejudices in the broadest sense. Although it is well known that there is no multi-ethnic society where stereotypes do not exist, they do not necessarily have to be dangerous if they remain only within the cultural matrix. However, they also present a very convenient source for inter-ethnic tensions, depending on the way they are instrumentalized. In the former, 'pre-transitional' system, prejudices were also a component of Macedonian society, although most of them were of a social and cultural nature, originating from the differences in ways of life, the customs or the habits that existed between various groups. Around the first year of the country's independence, it was possible to recognise a slow but certain transformation of the social and cultural prejudices into specific political attitudes. In terms of research data, in the 1980s only around 10 per cent of people regarded ethnicity as an important issue, while in 1991, the proportion was quite the opposite among all ethnic groups. In a short period, people began to think about the ethnic and the religious background of their friends, associates and neighbours, to question the mixed marriages, or (briefly) to experience other ethnicities as 'something else'. Such a way of thinking was encouraged by various political parties or imported ideologies. All of it resulted in a closing of the ethnic collectivities towards each other. This ethno-centrism was in this period most evident among the Albanians (around 60 per cent) and Macedonians (50 per cent), while the other minorities were neither the subject or object of such attitudes.

Only two years later, according to similar research, there was already a well developed web of prejudices with various combinations. The Macedonians exhibited most prejudices against the Albanians and, to a lower degree, towards the Romas; the Albanians were prejudiced mostly against Macedonians and Serbs; Turks and Roma were significantly open towards the other groups, with a smaller percentage (20 per cent) of negative attitudes towards the Albanians; the Serbs mainly disliked everybody who was not Orthodox.

However, those prejudices were still mostly related to 'differences in everyday life'. According to some tests applied within the research, more than 70 per cent of the total population did not exhibit an 'emotional' hatred or any form of aggressiveness towards the other ethnicities, which confirmed that in this period, we could mainly speak about a 'distance', something that still 'floated on the surface'. There were only smaller groups among the Macedonians and the Albanians (10-15 per cent) who openly exhibited extreme negative attitudes (people who were ready to 'start even a war for the interests of their nation', or who believed that the only solution to the ethnic problems was by 'applying force').

A most interesting phenomenon during this period, was the change of attitudes among young people. In the beginning they were the most open group, unburdened with prejudices (according to the research, over 90 per cent of this population deserved to be classified as 'tolerant'). In a few years, the value matrix had suffered drastic changes in the direction. Besides that, the age of politicised generations was going down towards the lower limits, meaning that by 1996, even the children of elementary school leaving-age began to exhibit very clear opinions about various aspects of political life. Attention should be concentrated particularly on this age group, basically for two reasons: first, this phenomenon, among others, is a very strong indicator that adults' political attitudes have radicalised greatly and that socialisation within the family, media or other informal groups is becoming a more influential factor than the educational system. Second, the political culture of those generations is the basis for future development of inter-ethnic relations in the country.

The available data from 1996 are quite illustrative of this issue, showing how the web of stereotypes and prejudices outlines the basic features of inter-ethnic relations.

In order to investigate what each ethnic group thinks of itself and of the others, a technique was used in which two lists were presented to the polled young people: a list of 25 characteristics (positive and negative) and a list of different nationalities. They had to relate each nationality to the characteristic they think suits it best. The results were the following:

- the Macedonians considered themselves as hard-working, peaceful and honest people. To the Albanians, the Macedonians were hard-working but dishonest. The Turks saw the Macedonians as hard-working, peaceful and cultured;
- the Albanians saw themselves as diligent, honest and educated, while to the Turks they were a militant nation. The Macedonians considered the Albanians primitive and backward;
- the Turks regarded themselves as hard-working, cultured and educated. To the Albanians, the Turks were hard-working and peaceful and the Macedonians saw the Turks as great 'warriors'.

There was an interesting similarity in opinions between the Macedonians, Albanians and Turks when they evaluated the Serbs, the Vlachs and the Roma. All three groups considered the Serbs aggressive and militant, the Roma as poor and lazy and the Vlachs as stingy and clever.

The fact that the answers grouped around a few choices and that they did not differ by any other factors (sex, social status, etc.) except ethnic background, indicates that we can even speak about group stereotypes. The stereotypes of course become a danger only if they develop into a specific intolerance or aggression towards others. This leads to the question about the degree in which the ethnicities close within themselves, as a first phase. It is difficult to explore this problem through interviews or polls due to its complexity, yet some results are quite illustrative.

When young people were asked about some basic principles and values, their level of declared tolerance was very high. For example, over 90 per cent of them accepted the principles of equality and coexistence with minorities on terms of equal rights, etc. However, when those general values or the 'should be' issues were transformed into real, everyday examples, the situation changed. For illustration, the same population, in the same sample and research exhibited the following: the statement that 'one should always be cautious in relation to other nations (people)' was accepted by two-thirds of the population; and 'one should be loyal only to one's own people' was accepted by 76 per cent; and, further, the attitude that 'one should always give an advantage to one's own people' was accepted by 67 per cent, regardless of the ethnic background of those polled. (In comparison with research in 1987/88, the positive responses on those questions doubled.)

An even more specific example about the limits determined by ethnicity was the attitude towards mixed marriages. While 10 years ago ethnically 'clean' marriages were desirable for less than one-third of the young people, in 1996 the percentage was two times higher, with evident differences between the different groups. Homogenous marriages were preferred by 38 per cent of the Macedonians, 50 per cent of the Turks and 79 per cent of the Albanians.

The choice of friends or associates had never before been related to their ethnic background, but last year's data indicated that over one-quarter of the young people would be friendly only to members of their own ethnic group. Thirty-four per cent also claimed that it was 'difficult to be friendly with people who do not belong to their people' (10 years ago this response was given by less than 4 per cent).

Undoubtedly, barriers of this kind do not have to lead to practical hostility, just as mixed marriages and friendships in some other countries were no guarantee of the prevention of radical conflicts or wars. Nevertheless, if compared with previous years, they indicate a deepening of the ethnic distance between different groups.

Although it is impossible to present all the data in this direction, even those few indicators show that, at this moment, we can speak with certainty about the creation of some parallel worlds whose boundaries are determined by rather closed ethnic groups. In such an environment, it is not surprising that two-thirds of those polled experienced their ethnicity as 'much different to the others', a percentage which went the other way 10 years ago.

Concerning the differences that appear with regards to the nationality of the polled, their scope was 10-20 per cent between different groups. If we summarise them, it appears that the most

closed and ethnocentric group was the Albanian and the most open and positive the Turkish, while the Macedonians held close to the average.

The next step towards intensifying inter-ethnic tensions happens when the stereotypes and the prejudices are transformed into negative emotions, hatred or aggressiveness, which are equally dangerous even if they remain latent. Without an aim to measure this through a poll, there was one question which partially indicated this direction. In the research it was formulated as 'which nationality do you hate most of all?', with an alternative of either naming it or declaring 'I don't hate any of them'. When this question was included 10 years ago, there were rather strong reactions to it by young people, even comments that the question was rude. Consequently, the percentage of those who claimed they did not hate anybody was over 85 per cent. In the last research (1996), there were no reactions and the percentage of the ones 'unburdened with hate' fell to 45 per cent of the total, 30 per cent of the Albanians, 48 per cent of the Macedonians and 55 per cent of the Turks. The other side of the answers showed that the Macedonians mostly hated the Albanians, the Albanians mostly hated the Macedonians and the Serbs while the Turks mainly hated the Serbs. The Vlachs and the Roma were barely mentioned.

It is evident that the structures of this complex resemble the stereotypes, indicating that they are clear features of the political culture although we speak of generations who are yet in the process of creating it.

The last indicator which is most radical in character, relates to a possible development of these trends. It concerns the question whether the young population fears a conflict at all. Unfortunately, in spite of highly positive responses towards peace as a desired value, 49 per cent of those polled claimed that 'they are ready to even start a war if it serves the interests of their people'. For comparison, this number in 1987 was only eight per cent.

There is no doubt that the presented (even all the available) data would not be sufficient for an elaboration of the inter-ethnic 'picture' in Macedonia. Neither are they completely adequate for a certain prognosis. The complexity of this problem includes factors with a strong influence, such as the economic crisis, interference from neighbouring countries and the distribution of internal political forces, etc. There is one element nevertheless, which can be employed in conclusion. The changes in the value system of the population in the part of inter-ethnic relations happened very quickly. They can not be considered as an authentic Macedonian phenomenon or something which 'has always been', because this country does not have a bad collective memory of any kind of conflicts based on either ethnicity or religion. The tensions experienced in the past 6-7 years most certainly derived greatly from outside 'help'. The impact of those external factors often varies and changes regardless of the will of the citizens. To this extent it is difficult to make a certain prognosis about whether the country will remain as the one peaceful zone in the region or whether it will turn into a 'bomb ready to explode'. Macedonia has never been an isolated problem, but an issue which exceeds its borders, even the borders of the Balkans.

1 We refer to the projects: "The Ethnic and the Religious Distance between the Population in Macedonia" conducted first in 1987/8 and repeated in 1991/1992; "The Loyalty of the Citizens towards the State" (1993/1994) and "Factor of Inter-ethnic Tensions in the Process of Education" (1996).
