

**National minorities and their rights in the Republic of Macedonia:  
From dissolution of Yugoslavia until today**

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## **I. Introduction**

In this paper I will examine the issue of national minorities in the Republic of Macedonia. Special focus will be dedicated to the Albanian minority because of its specificity and significance for the Macedonian state. It is not far from truth claiming that Macedonia today feel burdened and, to some extent, threatened by national minorities living on its territory due to the complex coexistence experience.

At the beginning, two theoretical approaches are provided for the sake of explanation of coexistence of the dominant and the minority ethnic groups. Further on, the essay follows a chronological overview of the national minorities issue in Macedonia from the time just prior to dissolution of Yugoslavia until today. Bearing in mind its significance, an in depth focus is afterwards given to the Albanian minority question. Following the historical analysis, I will try to explore how this issue is perceived from the other international actors, as well as to assess the impact of the process of europeanization to the general democratization of the country and on the minority rights specifically. In the end I will offer some of my personal views on this issue.

## **II. Theoretical framework on coexistence between dominant ethnic group and minorities**

Hodson, Sekulić and Massey<sup>1</sup> suggest two theories for the explanation of the state of inter-ethnic relations in Yugoslavia just prior to its dissolution. The first one, modernisation theory, sees ethnic identification as „premodern, provincial, traditional and particularistic“. The advocates argue that ethnic's identification structural basis is the village. Its structural support is, however, the persistence of the way of life that reinforces ethnicity as part of a value system favouring the coherence and consensus to the community. Modernisation leads to the cease of the village as a focal point of the social life and the social architecture is shifted to more inclusive cultural, political and economic set up. This theory is in line with the Marxist theory identifying class as superseding ethnic relations.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodson, R., Sekulic, D., Massey, G. (1994). National Tolerance in the Former Yugoslavia. *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 99, Issue 6, pp. 1534-1558

On the other hand, there is so called ethnic-competition theory in which the industrialization, a key factor for modernization theory, foster and even intensify ethnic identification and encourage ethnic intolerance. The explanatory model for this claim is the reactive identity concept according to which ethnical identification and differentiation is encouraged in the occurrences where power and institutional differences persist and the resources are scarced. However, it is argued that even this theory (despite of the scarced resources), provides for more ethnic tolerance in the circumstances of roughly equal number of members of each ethnicum. By the logic of „similar strength tolerance“, the more ethnic groups with disproportionate number of members in the circumstances of economic contraction, the greater intolerance.

### **III. National minorities in Macedonia in the end of the Yugoslav era**

In order to understand national minorities issue in the former Yugoslavia, it should be noted that political arrangement in that state, whose deeper explanation would significantly exceed the limitations of this paper, recognized several terms relevant to understand the national minorities problem. First term was *narod* which meant Slav nations with Yugoslavia as their mother state. It included Slovenes, Croats, Muslims, Serbs, Macedonians and Montenegrins. Term *narodnost* referred to national minorities, namely to Albanians, Hungarians, Turks, Italians and others living in Yugoslavia, but with some other mother state<sup>2</sup>. Term *državljanstvo* meant commitment to the Yugoslav state by the all mentioned before<sup>3</sup>. For the relevance of this paper, and since the Albanian minority in Macedonia is the most prominently featured in this paper, it is valuable to know that out of 1.3 million Albanians in Yugoslavia in the end of 1980s, 21.8% lived in Macedonia<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, 95.5% of all Macedonians of Yugoslavia lived exactly in Macedonia. Ethnical set up of Macedonia encompassed two-thirds of Macedonians and the rest were national minorities<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, it seems that Yugoslav political elites did not want to officially establish Yugoslav *narod* if such conclusion can be drawn from the fact that during the referred census, each declaration by a person of being Yugoslav was labelled with „having no identifiable nationality.“

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The vast majority, i.e. 71% lived in Kosovo.

<sup>5</sup> Statistical data taken from *Statistički Godišnjak Jugoslavije 1987*. It can be found in Hodson, R., Sekulic, D., Massey, G. (1994). National Tolerance in the Former Yugoslavia. *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 99, Issue 6, pp. 1534-1558

After thorough sociological research on national tolerance had been conducted throughout Yugoslavia in the late 1989 and the beginning of 1990, the results confirmed stubborn positive correlation between tolerance and national diversities in the republics, except in the cases of Macedonia and Kosovo, which were two least tolerant republics towards national minorities, eventhough their diversity rate was only slightly below the average. It showed that the results in all republics, on general level, were in line with modernisation theory, except in Macedonia and Kosovo which clearly responded to the ethnic-competition theory with one more interesting finding – the older generation tended to be more tolerant towards national minorities than the younger one. Split into categories, the tolerance rate in Macedonia was more or less in accord with the modernization theory claiming positive correlation of tolerance rate and higher education or, in general, higher socioeconomic status. However, managerial professions were detected to be less tolerant towards national minorities. Furthermore, membership in the Macedonian branch of the Communist party, had no effect on the tolerance rate neither in positive nor in negative way, which „contrasts strongly with official party rhetoric at the federal level and highlights the importance of nationalist sentiments of leaders in republic-level party politics in the period immediately prior to the dissolution of Yugoslavia.“<sup>6</sup> Macedonia generally turned out to be one of the three most intolerant republics (along with Slovenia and Kosovo) with more than 90% of population being from one ethnic group. As a matter of fact, high unemployment rate was significantly related to intolerance, which accords the ethnic-competition theory underlining the fight over scarced resources between the dominant and minor groups.

#### **IV. National minorities in Macedonia in the 1990s**

With the collapse of Communism and communistic Yugoslavia itself, Macedonia managed to become an independent state without war preceding its independence<sup>7</sup>. According to Ortakovski<sup>8</sup>, the Albanian minority kept being the most numerous minority after Macedonian independence. Eventhough they often claimed for themselves as being „second-

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Slovenia and Macedonia which were together with Kosovo the most intolerant parts of Yugoslavia gained its independence without war, while Croatia where the rate of tolerance was significant and Bosnia and Herzegovina as the most tolerant republic in Yugoslavia were severely stricken by war destruction (Hodson, R., Sekulic, D., Massey, G. (1994). National Tolerance in the Former Yugoslavia. *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 99, Issue 6, pp. 1534-1558)

<sup>8</sup> Ortakovski, V. T. (2001). Interethnic Relations and Minorities in the Republic of Macedonia. *South European Politics*. Vol. 2 (No. 1). pp. 24-45

class“ citizens, their political rights were nurtured and they even participated in the executive branch via their members in all Macedonian governments of the decade. Not only 25 Albanians from two political parties but one Roma from the Party of the Romas in Macedonia, and several Serbs, Turks and Vlachs, won seats in the 1998 parliamentary elections. The government coalition, in power since November 1998 was composed by the deputy prime minister, five ministers and five deputy ministers from the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), as well as managerial staff of certain number of public companies being from Albanian corpus. Macedonian and Albanian coexistence was quite well until February 2001 when ethnic Albanian extremists occupied Albanian village Tanuševeci, which radically changed model of interethnic and intercultural relations in Macedonia. This event coincided with the events in Kosovo and southern Serbia.

In order to have a clearer picture, it should be noted that according to the census of 20 June 1994, Macedonian population consisted of 1,94 million inhabitants. Almost 1,3 million were Macedonians (66.6%), 440,000 Albanians (23%), 78,000 Turks (4%), 44,000 Roma (2.2%), 40,000 Serbs (2.1%), and several others nationalities<sup>9</sup>. The Albanians, as the most numerous nationality, settled mostly in the western part of Macedonia (near the border with Albania) and in the northwestern part (towards the border with Kosovo), as well as in Skopje and Kumanovo. Since 1953 their number had multiplied due to significantly higher birth rate comparing to other nationalities.

#### **IV.1. Constitutional framework of the rights of minorities**

The Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia of 1991 stipulates the rights of „nationalities“, aiming to achieve real equality of minorities' civic status and the protection of their ethnic, cultural, religious identity and lasting coexistence. The preamble of the constitution extends the nationalities named in the previous Constitution of the SR of Macedonia of 1974), recognizing Albanians and Turks, Vlachs and Roma as a significant part of the total population, while opening the possibility of recognition for other nationalities that live in the Republic of Macedonia.

Further on, article 8 of the constitution provides for free expression of nationality as one of the fundamental values of the constitutional order. According to article 48,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Macedonian state protects ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of the nationalities which „have the right to freely express, maintain and develop their identity and national characteristics,” “to establish cultural and artistic institutions, scientific and other associations in order to express, maintain and develop their identity,” and “to education in their own language in elementary and secondary schooling, in a way determined by law”<sup>10</sup>.

Besides aforementioned, constitution provides that in the local administrative units where national minority lives in a predominant or a significant number, it should enjoy the right to its own language and letter beside Macedonian language and cyrilic letter. Based on constitutional provisions, the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia established the Council for Interethnic Relations that “considers questions of interethnic relations and gives views and propositions for their resolution“, meaning its active role in interethnic disputes. The council is consisted of the president of the Assembly, of two Macedonian members and of two members of each minority.

#### **IV.2. Political representation of national minorities**

After adoption of the Law on Political Parties in 1996, 15 parties (31% of general partisan architecture) were political parties of the nationalities. Concerning Albanian minority, it was represented by the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), the National Democratic Party (NDP), the Party for Democratic Prosperity of Albanians (PDPA), the Republican Party, and the Albanian Democratic Union–Liberal Party. Along with Albanian parties, there were many parties of Roma, Turks, Serbs, Vlachs and other minorities. Concerning parliamentary operationalization of the minorities' partisan life, Party of the Roma in Macedonia, and several Serbs, Turks and Vlachs won seats in the parliamentary elections in 1998. Fearing a repeat of 1994, when confrontation between the two main Macedonian Albanian parties reduced the total number of Albanian representatives to 19, in 1998 the PDP and DPA agreed to cooperate. Their cooperation was obviously successful, winning a combined total of 25 seats. Generally, the Albanians had been participating in governmental coalitions from 1992 and in November 1998, the DPA got the positions of one deputy prime minister, five ministers, five deputy ministers, and a proportional share in the management of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

public institutions. Ortakovski argues that such multi-national governmental arrangements are essential for the long-term stability of the Macedonian state.

### **IV.3. Participation of minorities in educational system and in media**

Concerning educational system in Macedonia in 1990s, national minorities had right to education in their mother tongue in elementary and high schools. The constitution also opened room for founding private educational institutions in secondary and tertiary education under conditions determined by law.

In elementary schools, tuitions were given in Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, and Serbian. Concerning the biggest national minority, Ortakovski outlines the number of 72,517 students attended instruction in Albanian, with textbooks in Albanian for all subjects in the 1996/97 school year. In general, there is a continuous increase of pupils who receives tuitions in Albanian due to the higher birth rate among Albanian population in Macedonia. However, not only Albanian minority, but also the Turks had enjoyed their „ethnically and language-tailored“ education since the end of the Second World War. Instruction in secondary education also takes place in Albanian and in Turkish. For the sake of further diversifying the secondary educational system, the open competitions for enrolment were launched in order to form classes with tuition in the mother tongue of the students wherever there is an adequate interest<sup>11</sup>. As regards higher education, members of national minorities could have applied under the same conditions at the two country's universities, Skopje and Bitola. Since the academic year 1992/93 minorities had a special quota of + 10% for enrolment (added to the general quota). From the academic year of 1996/97, special quota had been calculated for each minority separately upon its representation in the population.

With respect of the presence of national minorities in media, Ortakovski illustrates that Macedonian Television (MTV) transmits two hours daily in Albanian, one hour daily in Turkish, and 30 minutes of weekly programs in Aromanian, Romany, and Serbian. Furthermore, the program in Albanian on MTV has been in operation since 1967. Apart from state television, there were 250 private TV stations, some of which transmitted programs

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<sup>11</sup> According to Ortakovski, in 1995/96, 8,812 students (11% of the total of 79,907 students) attended high schools in Albanian and 465 students (0.6%) in Turkish. This represents a considerable increase in the number and percentage of students studying in Albanian: from 2,875 (4.0%) in 1991/92; 4,619 (5.9%) in 1992/93; 5,350 (7.4%) in 1993/94 to 7,371 (9.8%) in 1994/95. The number and percentage of students studying in Turkish, after the fluctuations in the previous years, increased twofold.

entirely in the languages of the nationalities. Macedonian radio transmits, in total, fifteen hours of daily programs in the languages of the nationalities (nine and a half hours in Albanian and four and a half hours in Turkish). There were also several newspapers published in minorities' languages - *Flaka e vellazerimit* and *Fakti* in Albanian and *Birlik* in Turkish.

## **V. The Albanian question**

Besides the treatment that Albanian minority enjoys in Macedonia, since the Albanian parties were established in 1990, the primary goal on their political agenda has been to gain far more independence for the Albanian minority and for their collective, rather than individual, rights. The Albanian agenda has been focused on „strengthening of constitutional status for Albanian ethnic group (redefinition of the Macedonian Republic as a bi-national state); the extension of linguistic rights (affirmation of the Albanian language as a second official language); education in the mother tongue at all levels, including university level; proportionate representation of Albanians in all political and public sectors (especially within the security and military forces); and development of greater autonomy for local government.

More specifically, Albanian minority insisted on territorial autonomy of the region of Illyrida in the west of Macedonia in 1992; the formation of parallel authorities for Albanians and some parallel institutions, namely the Albanian-language university in Tetovo in 1994. Macedonian authorities tried to cease its functioning, but after two unsuccessful attempts of closing, it continued to operate; however diplomas issued by the university are nowhere recognized except in Albania. However, maybe the most traumatic experience for Macedonian state was raising of the Albanian flag in front of the town halls in Gostivar and Tetovo in 1997. In that case, Macedonia employed harsh methods in combating this attempt of unloyalty. Police forcibly removed flags and two Albanian town mayors were arrested and sentenced to several years imprisonment. While de-flagging the town halls, in the violent confrontations between the police and ethnic Albanians, three people were killed and more than 200 injured. However, after the coalition comprised also by the Albanian parties came to power in 1998, the Abolition act was passed and two town mayors earlier incarcerated were pardoned along with 1000 more convicts who served their sentences for similar acts.

The Albanian question became even more internationally prominent in February 2001, after 40 days of occupation of the ethnic Albanian village Tanuševei and several more villages on Macedonia's northern border by the extremist Albanian groups. They were



believed to have infiltrated from Kosovo, which was at that time stricken by political turbulences. The town of Tetovo had been facing guerilla riots with machine guns and snipers used by Albanian insurgents. In order to cease the rebellion, Macedonian army launched a military offensive on 28 March 2001, which subsequently forced extremists to retreat to Kosovo.

## **VI. International perception of the Macedonian treatment of national minorities**

Prior to the riots in 2001, Macedonia was regarded by the international community as a unique example of conflict prevention in the Balkans. Indeed, there were many reasons for that – the country seceded from Yugoslavia peacefully and acted constructively during the Kosovo crisis in 1999 when 360,000 Albanian refugees fled Kosovo towards Macedonia. Following the riots in 2001, it seems that international community was aware of the clear picture of the whole situation judging upon the former US Ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke who on 24 March 2001, identified extreme Albanian nationalism as „the biggest threat to the stabilization of the Balkans at the beginning of 2000s“.

When assessing in general Macedonian democratization process from its independence onwards, Koinova<sup>12</sup> argues in her paper that the strong EU involvement with Macedonia after the internal warfare of 2001 had little impact on human and minority rights compared to 1991-2001. In line with her argumentation, repercussions of inter-ethnic conflicts can be a significant explanation factor for the limited progression in minority rights improvement. Further on, she advocates the fact that the specific dynamic of relations in 1990s between local political elites in Macedonia and international actors like the OSCE, the Council of Europe and, marginally, the EU put more emphasis on the security and stability rather than on democratization.

Comparing the influence of europeanization process in Eastern Europe and particularly in Macedonia, one can distinguish its quality and nature. Europeanization, according to some authors, generally means democratization being „the only game in town“. However, in Macedonia in 1990s it was not so because security and stability in the country in

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<sup>12</sup> Koinova, M. (2011). Challenging assumptions of the enlargement literature : the impact of the EU on human and minority rights in Macedonia. *Europe-Asia Studies*. Vol.63 (No.5). pp. 807-832

many cases superseded democratization. Even the conditionality of the eurointegration process is different since it has been pursued in highly polarized and conflicted society with relatively weak institutions.

In 2001, the inter-ethnic conflict was ended by the Ohrid Framework Agreement admitting Albanian minority certain rights, especially concerning the use of Albanian language in the municipalities where live more than 20% of Albanians. According to Koinova, certain parts of the Agreement were more vividly operationalized with the only purpose to obtain EU candidate membership status in 2005. Despite of that, general reforms that would enable more progress of national minorities stalled. The only minority group that benefitted more significantly was the Albanian minority participating in the coalition arrangements. As Koinova concludes, the quality of democracy in Macedonia at present could be viewed as becoming more majoritarian within the minority groups, rather than more liberal as required for EU integration.

Political conditions in Macedonia in 2015 showed still polarized society with very limited reforms capacity. Political life is dominated by wiretapped recordings between the government ministers containing elements of abuse of official power, use of state resources for party purposes and pressure on the judiciary and media<sup>13</sup>. The last five years have been characterized with backsliding in many areas, especially political rights, such as freedom of expression. As stated by Kacarska in her article in March 2015, these events have largely coincided with the blockade of Macedonia's further EU integration prompted by the dispute with Greece over the country's constitutional name. As a result of this dispute, Macedonia has had six futile consecutive recommendations for starting the accession negotiations with the EU.

The deadlock on the EU integration resulted in internal frustration. Although the trust for the EU project has been constantly declining among the public, still the majority remained supportive of the EU membership. The reason for that, according to Kacarska, can be explained by the fact that EU integration has been a shared goal and a binding tissue of the two otherwise largely divided communities in the country, i.e. the ethnic Macedonian and Albanian.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/simonida-kacarska/and-where-do-we-go-from-here-macedonia-and-eu> (accessed on March 24, 2016)

## VII. Conclusions

Macedonian state is to certain extent a special case when it comes to status of national minorities. Firstly, the dominant pattern which characterizes Macedonian society, i.e. the coexistence of the dominant ethnic-Macedonians and other minorities, especially ethnic-Albanians, is inter-ethnic competition. Unlike the modernization theory which links the process of progression and development of the society with increase in tolerance, the dominant model in Macedonia during the Yugoslav era was inter-ethnic competition which features in attempts of better positioning of one ethnic group in comparison to the other(s) in fighting for scarce resources. However, the concept of special and favoured treatment on the basis of nationality was not „welcome“ and the inclination and demand of specific ethnic groups for imposing their „question“ remained in underground sphere in Macedonia.

Along with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Macedonia adopted favourable system for its national minorities, guaranteeing their rights by the constitution and exercising it in everyday life. Minorities were fairly represented in the educational system, media, public administration etc. Such system broke in 2001 when the Albanians as the largest national minority in Macedonia, tried to secure for themselves the special position in the Macedonian society. It once again proved ethnic-competition theory as the dominant one in Macedonia, but this time openly and aggressively.

Eventhough the Macedonian society had been facing the increased need of balancing and „finding the right measure“ for successful coexistence between the ethnic-Macedonians and the ethnic-Albanians during the whole 1990s, the 2001-events showed the outburst of inloyalty by the part of Macedonian population towards the state. The Albanian rebellion was militarily neutralized but the subsequent pardoning of its „authors“ proved once again the strenght and the influence of the Albanian minority. The perpetrators and the protagonists of the rebellion were released from prison when Albanian representatives featured significant functions in the coalition government.

Generally, some authors like Koinova (2011) claim that the process of democratization in Macedonia has been shadowed by the process of keeping order and stability of the country and that impact of the EU integration process has been insignificant. First of all, I believe that

this indeed is a plausible remark. However, I firmly stand at the position that one should contextualize the facts rather than adopting an autistic approach.

My strong belief is that Macedonia is the victim of a broader historical and political circumstances. At the beginning of its independence it faced internal challenges with settling the arrangements with its national minorities, especially the Albanian one participating with one quarter in the whole Macedonian population. The main foreign policy challenge is the well-known dispute with Greece over Macedonian constitutional name. In translation, the latter means challenging one important part of the country's identity. Having in mind that the element of the identity, name „Macedonia“, is stubbornly misused in every single occasion to block the country's progress (which I personally witnessed as a diplomat), it feeds national frustration and belief that there is no sense to invest efforts even in internal reforms because it will not be rewarded (neither internally nor in the foreign politics arena). The vicious circle with Greece over its name is from my point of view one that Macedonia can not break without foreign help. In that context, very illustrative is Parekh's remark that „every society has a historically inherited cultural structure which informs its conduct of public life, and resists modifications beyond a certain point without losing its coherence and causing widespread disorientation, anxiety and even resistance“<sup>14</sup>. Especially traumatic experience for the Macedonian „national ego“ was complete failure at the Bucharest NATO Summit of 2008 where Greece was the only member state to oppose Macedonian accession to the NATO. At the same summit, only Croatia and Albania were welcome to NATO membership, notwithstanding the fact that Macedonia had met all standards as well. Furthermore, Macedonia failed to start EU accession negotiations for the same reason, even though the European Commission issued six positive recommendations.

To get back to the main point of my position, Macedonia has been experiencing failures and difficulties for the last quarter of century, which have certainly exhausted significant amount of propulsive and enthusiastic reform capacity. When all circumstances that have led to that situation are collected and analyzed, I would dare to claim that Macedonian failure in democratization is to high extent the failure of international politics

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<sup>14</sup> In Atanasov, P. (2004). Macedonia between nationalism(s) and multiculturalism: The Framework Agreement and its Multicultural Conjectures. *Institute for sociological, political and juridical research*

and above all the result of hypocrisy of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the European Union and its member states<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Even in the present migration crisis, Macedonia played remarkably constructive and EU-aligned role at the Western Balkans migratory route, unlike Greece in many aspects. One should bear in mind that Macedonia is an economically weak country through which more than 600,000 migrants have passed. Eventhough certain amount of EU help has been allocated for Macedonia, only minor part for the basic humanitarian needs has been remitted so far. Just for illustration, the EU will soon enable allocation for Greece of 700 mil. EUR for addressing the humanitarian crisis on its territory.