THE EFFECTS OF ETHNIC STEREOTYPES ON INTER ETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Zlatko Stojanov,

zlatkostojanov@ymail.com

Abstract

Ethnic stereotypes in the Republic of North Macedonia between the various ethnic groups create various problems for the state and its people. The various ethnic groups in the nation, especially the dominant Macedonian and Albanian ethnic groups seem to have certain beliefs about each other that hamper progress by creating an environment of mistrust. Both of these groups seem to consider the opposite as an enemy that wants to subjugate them. The various stereotypes seem to reinforce this belief and lead to deteriorating interethnic relations. These stereotypes seem to be created and maintained by ethnic exclusion and interethnic self-segregation

Keywords: *North Macedonia, ethnic stereotypes, self-segregation, inter ethnic relations, ethnic tensions*

1.INTRODUCTION

The Republic of North Macedonia is a landlocked country situated in the Balkan Peninsula. The countries demographics show a multiethnic society, which according to the latest official census from the year 2002 is divided in the following way : Macedonians: 1,297,981 or 64.18%, Albanians: 506,083 or 25,17%, Turks: 77,959 ore 3.85%, Romani: 53,878 or 2.66%, as well as others such as Serbians, Bosniaks, Muslims (self identified as an ethnicity as opposed to just Muslim as a religion), Vlachs, Bulgarians, Greeks and others (Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, Book X, 2002). Macedonian society from the moment the nation gained its independence after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, or some might say even before that, has had problems with the ethnic relations between the different ethnic groups. These problems manifest themselves mainly as hostilities between the ethnic Macedonians and Albanians that have at points spilled into violence, such as the armed conflict of 2001 when a group of ethnic Albanian extremists attempted social and political change by force. In the modern Macedonian nation the two main ethnicities have certain beliefs about each other that to the outside observer might be

rooted in mistrust between the ethnicities, as well as stereotypes that the groups have for each. On top of that we can also add the relative self segregation between the communities that help perpetuate these stereotypes.

2.INITIAL ETHNIC TENSION DURING THE CREATION OF THE INDEPENDENT STATE OF MACEDONIA

Macedonia during the initial stage of its development as an independent nation had problems regarding the interethnic relations. With the democratization process the nation had its first multi-party election on the 11 November 1990. The cornerstone of this process was the Declaration of sovereignty and the referendum decision. In the Declaration it was stated : "With this Declaration we express the sovereignty of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia in accordance with the Constitutional provision of independence and territorial integrity of the Macedonian state, as well as the right of the Macedonian people for self-determination ,including the right to secede"(Marolov, Mitev, 2016, p.71). This statement was seen by many Albanian politicians as a negation of their ethnic identity by forcing the Macedonian identity upon the rest of the nation. The Albanian parties of this time had a more collective political agenda, attempting to secure the collective rights of their ethnic Albanian constituents. They campaigned towards gaining an increased constitutional status for their ethnic group, redefining the nation as a bi-national state, extension of linguistic, cultural and religious rights, affirmation of the Albanian language as a second official language, education in their mother tongue in all levels (including the creation of institutes of higher learning), proportional representation on all political and public sectors and increased local autonomy (Ortakovski, 2001, p.81) Albanian groups in this time not only agitated for these reforms, but also attempted to block the referendum. During the independence referendum there was a boycott attempted by Albanian parties. They organized their own referendum in which a staggering 74% of the 280.000 Albanians that voted in this secondary unofficial referendum, voted to gain increased autonomy. Some feared that this would lead to further secession based of ethnic lines (Marolov, Mitev, 2016, p.82). During this time there was also a claim by Albanian politicians that the Albanian minority was secretly much larger that the estimated 21% and that in reality it was closer to 40% of the total populace (Remenski, 2007, p.181). This claim is most likely political maneuvering based on perceived ethnic solidarity. In these years the desires for collective rights of that nature led to the event of creating parallel institutions for the ethnic Albanians in different aspects of life. From the creation of an Albanian language university in Tetovo in 1994, to anti constitutional activities such as the raising of the Albanian flag in the town halls in Tetovo and Gostivar. These activities while anti constitutional were still perceived as just by the Albanian minority and let to a further increase in ethnic tensions. These tensions culminated in the armed conflict of 2001, in which various Albanian paramilitary groups fought the Macedonian military. The conflict itself was seen differently by the ethnic groups. The ethnic Macedonians saw it as an attack of the state by terrorists that wanted to subjugate the Macedonian people, while the Albanians mostly saw it as a just revolt against an unjust system that denied them their collective ethnic, cultural and linguistic rights.

The end of this conflict came with the Ohrid framework agreement. This text was a compromise between the Macedonian and Albanian political elites, supervised by the international community. The framework stated that there would be five basic principles around which the institution would

be reformed: non-violent conflict resolutions, no territorial solutions to ethnic issues, protection and inclusion of ethnic groups in public life, decentralization of political power and an evolving nature of constitutional powers. This agreement satisfied both sides as it expanded the political and social privileges of the Albanian ethnic community as well as granting more political power to the Albanian political elites, while at the same time preserving the unitary character of the state. The decentralization of municipalities especially was well received by the Albanian populace as this could be seen as de-facto autonomy of majority Albanian populated areas (Koneska, 2014, p.71-73).

The basic principles of this document were designed to calm ethnic tensions as well as to attempt to preserve the unitary character of the state. Macedonia's sovereignty was preserved and the political structure remained as it was, as a unitary republic. The fact that territorial exchange was prohibited was seen as a way to prevent a repeat of the breakup of socialist Yugoslavia. There was an idea among the Macedonian negotiation team that the creation of autonomous territories led to that breakup. The political reality of course was that despite this seeming concession from the Albanians, their "autonomous zones" had de-facto Albanian ruler ship via the fact that Albanians in their majority areas voted for Albanian poitical parties.(Stojanovski S. , Marolov D. , Ananiev J. , 2014, p.314-316). This fact of political life exist to this day, Macedonians and Albanians vote primarily via ethnic lines. The parties seem to have an unwritten agreement to maintain this status quo as both ethnic groups vote for parties that are run by members of their own ethnic group. Both the Albanian and Macedonian parties occasionally push nationalist rhetoric as a way to rejuvenate their support during times of crisis. Since the populace votes in an ethno centric way the parties are incentivized to maintain this form of political leadership. When an election cycle is done the winners of both the Macedonian and Albanian political bloc create a joined government, and this is shown as a form of compromise of power. The Albanian minority has a guarantee that it will not only have power over municipal areas where they are a majority, but they also have a hold on the reins of power. The Macedonians see themselves also in positions of power in areas where they dominate, as well as the holders of the highest positions are reserved for ethnic Macedonians which quells any discontent from Macedonian nationalists.

The different perceptions of the Ohrid framework agreement lead to interethnic conflict. Albanians perceive the overall process as an issue of collective human rights, while the Macedonians see it as a desire for territory, a design for the creation of a "Greater Albania " This is perceived even more strongly after the independence of Kosovo as there is a fear among the Macedonian populace of a creation of the titular "Greater Albania" with the combining of the Republic of Albania, Kosovo, and territories in west Macedonia as well as other lands, such as land with an Albanian minority in Montenegro and Greece (Demjaha, 2017, p.18-19)

3.INTERETHNIC TENSION IN MODERN NORTH MACEDONIA

The modern Macedonian state as a multiethnic society has acquired unique problems due to its structure. Specifically there are tensions between the dominant Macedonian ethnic group and the Albanian group. One of the leading reasons that could explain the ethnic tensions is the fact that there is a phenomenon of ethnic distancing between the two groups. Previously while talking about the affairs of the state in the last decade of the 20 century there was talk about the secessionist

movement of the ethnic Albanians. But this secessionism is a result not only of perceived collective injustices done on the Albanian ethnic group, but also as a result of the desires of both the Albanians and Macedonians to live separately. This separation exists to this day on various fields of life, from the public to the personal. Macedonian society is deeply divided as the two largest groups live separate lives. This physical distancing results in the creation, proliferation and maintenance of various ethnic myths and stereotypes.

In the study "The impact of stereotypes and ethnic distancing in the occurrence of discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes " it is shown that the ethnic groups in Macedonia isolate themselves. When asked "What is the ethnic background of your neighbors with which you have cordial relationships ?", a large percentage of ethnic Macedonians, or 76,3% answered that they only have friends of their own ethnic background, while only 20,5% of the respondent Macedonians answered that they have friends of both their and other ethnic background. This opinion is shared by the ethnic Albanians in which 56,4% answered that they only have friends and neighbors of their own ethnicity, and 34,6% in the other direction (Stojanoski, Poposka, 2016, p.13) These physical divisions are accentuated by cultural division that the ethnicities have for each other. The various stereotypes and ethnic prejudices create a tribalistic form of identity. The groups via this tribalism create distinct categories of "us" vs "them". These categories are used not only for differentiation between the groups but also as a way to neatly place the opposing group in easily recognizable boxes. This is also used on the other minorities by both of these groups and the categories are presented as either tribal allies and friends or enemies that must be seen and interacted with in a very cautious manor. The study "Sociological aspects of ethnic coexistence in the RM" (1995) from prof.dr Mariha Tasheva shown what are the perceptions of the various groups in the nation both for themselves and for the others. Macedonians have a self perception that they are very hospitable, hardworking, good-natured, proud, cheerful, peaceful, friendly and lazy, while the Albanians have a self perception as hardworking, hospitable, brave, cohesive, freedom-loving, honest, practical and prone to smuggling.

Remenski interestingly shows us that there are situations in which both of these groups will self identify more strongly with the positive or negative characteristics. These situations are based on majority-minority status. In municipalities in which Macedonians are a majority they will have a more self deprecating mindset, while it is the reverse in municipalities where they are a minority. This is caused by a sense of cultural and ethnic entrapment in which the minority Macedonian feel under pressure and more importantly under threat of assimilation from the dominant ethnic Albanians, so they band together and become more isolationist and ethno-nationalistic. The Albanians have the same reaction of collective fear and sense of endangerment when they are a minority in their area so they also show collective thinking and ethno-nationalism, while in areas where they are a majority there is the self critical mindset (Remenski, 2007, p.265-266)

The study shows that in regard to the opposite group there are both positive and negative opinions that the groups have for each other. Macedonians see Albanians as primitive, uncultured, rough, unfriendly, aggressive, insidious, criminals, smugglers, that they want to rule over them, but also as proud and communally minded. Albanians see Macedonians as selfish, cowardly, unfriendly, lazy, drunkards, quarrelers, but also as hospitable and cheerful. The majority of these opinions are of a negative type. Macedonians perceive Albanians as a culturally inferior group, that threatens

their identity and survival as an independent nation, or as a dangerous opponent. Albanians see Macedonians as an ethnocentric group that are week in their rule and that can be overcome. These negative perceptions are exacerbated by the unstable political situation in the 90s , as well as the distancing that occurs between the members of the groups. Both Macedonians and Albanians make a conscious decision to self segregate and with this they perpetuate these previously shown opinions about the other (Remenski, 2007, p.268-271). There are many Macedonians today that perceive Albanians as a dangerous threat and vice-versa.

On the issue of ethnic polarization another broader survey done in the Balkan region by the South-East European Social Survey (SEESSP) during 2002-2003 in Macedonia, as well as in Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and Kosovo. This survey shows that on the issues of ethnic reconciliation Macedonia scored better than the other mentioned countries. In the categories of age, religiosity, gender, and education it was shown that even in this post-conflict period tensions were not as high as in postwar Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Serbia. The study shows that while there is a higher degree of inter-ethnic trust in Macedonia, this might be the result of the fact that the conflict did not deteriorate the society in the same level as Bosnia. But there were indicators of inter-ethnic conflict. The Ohrid agreement was seen favorably mostly by the ethnic Albanians, but not the Macedonians. There were also higher levels of ethnic distrust at this time among people in a lower level of formal education (Ringdal, Simkus, Listhaug,2005, p.28-29).

4. PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION BASED ON INTERETHNIC TENSIONS

When the question of ethnic discrimination, hate crimes, or even perceived discrimination enters the fold we are left with a certain problem. Specifically how accurate can perceived discrimination be in a society in which the groups actively try to avoid each other, reduce interethnic communication, and in which ethnic stereotypes run rampant. Several studies linked to this phenomenon of perceived discrimination from 2009, 2013 and 2015 show what the opinions of the various groups are. On the question “How common are the following forms of discrimination in your community – ethnic identity, sex, sexual orientation, age, religious belief, political beliefs and disability”, the respondents of various different ethnic backgrounds have different ideas on what is the main source of discrimination. On the topic of ethnic discrimination as the most common form of discrimination 53,2% of Macedonians think that this is the biggest problem, Vlachs 60%, Romani 66,7%, Albanians 46,2% and Turks 28,6%. However in the 2015 survey Albanians think that ethnic discrimination is the most common form in a staggering 80% (Stojanoski, Poposka, 2016, p.31-23). These perceptions are in line with the previously stated thesis that there is a deterioration of interethnic relationships. It is interesting to note that Macedonians when asked if they themselves were victims of ethnic discrimination answered positively. It shown that in modern Macedonia both of the dominant ethnic groups have a perception of the opposite group as an oppressive force. Albanians especially seem to perceive Macedonians with a high rate of animosity that is increasing over the years.

This perception of discrimination is something woven in the fabric of modern Macedonian society. Briefly after the conflict of 2001 there was a slight improvement in interethnic relations, but as the

years go by this has slowly regressed. Nationalist structures in both the Albanian and Macedonian political blocs seem to stroke these divisions as a way to differ from economic and geopolitical issues. Among the Albanian populace there is a strong political movement that demands increased autonomy and a restructuring of the state by a federal or even confederate model, with the most extreme Albanian nationalist demanding secession and either a creation of an independent Albanian state or the seceded territory to enter the state of Albania. However the Albanian and Macedonian state in 1994 had a geopolitical exchange in which the Albanian state officially declared that it "has never asked and will never ask for any border changes ", while the Macedonian state accepted the Albanian minority as a constitutive nation.

The Macedonian populace have a fear of government takeover by the Albanians, and either territorial loss or reduced power and open discrimination towards the majority. The previously stated perception that the Macedonian majority is discriminated by the Albanian minority is a regular talking point used to stroke nationalist fervor. Both groups seem to distance themselves more and more with the passing of time and this leads to ever increased mistrust and stereotyping.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Modern Macedonian society can be best described as a deeply divided multiethnic nation where the various ethnic groups willingly choose to perpetuate these divisions by self segregating and maintaining ethnic stereotypes about other ethnic groups. There are perceptions that the groups have about each other borne of mistrust and the idea that the other group secretly wants to dominate the others. This paper focused on the two primary ethnic groups in North Macedonia, the Macedonians and Albanians, their opinions about each other, their perceptions and how these perceptions impact their lives. Both the Albanians and Macedonians seem to think that the nation is either controlled by their opposites or that there is a desire for control. Macedonians see themselves as a beleaguered people set upon all sides by enemies that wish to destroy them, and take away their hard earned rights and privileges by denying their hold on their own lands. Albanians see themselves as an oppressed people that must fight for their own collective right of self determination as well as a right to maintain institution of Albanian culture, language and ethnic identity. Both groups seem to have a deeper connection to their ethnic group as the defining part of their self identity then the civic model. In North Macedonia most people primarily identify with their ethnicity and not as citizens of the state. The ethnic Macedonian will see his fellow Albanian citizen as strangers living on his land, and the feeling is mutual. It seems that the future of Macedonian society might be heading for the abyss if no compromise is achieved in this crucial problem. Will the Macedonian state adopt a civil model for all of its ethnic groups, or will ethno nationalist maintain a hold on the identities of everyone?

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