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## **CULTURAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES IN MACEDONIA**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper concentrates on the development of the model of political culture of the citizens of Macedonia, during the so called transitional period, with a special focus to the issue of ethnic identities and identities in general, as they were determined by the changes of the general value matrix. Data from the latest research done on political culture and identities (June – September, 2010) will be presented and compared to some previous researches. The focus is on the questions: is Macedonian society really multicultural, and if it is, is that a burden or a contribution to its members? The paper analyses the ethnic environment, the ethnic distance and the perception of self-identities of the citizens.

***Key words:*** Political culture, Identities

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## INTRODUCTION

Is Macedonian society authoritarian? If it is, is it a residue of the former system or are there other factors reproducing it? Which model of political culture is dominant? Those are the key questions that have been challenging all analysts working on the case of the political culture of Macedonia.

Within the country, those have been one of the most exploited topics in the last two decades, not only in the political rhetoric and the media, but in the everyday conversations of the citizens as well. The political marketing, especially in election years, is flooded with topics related to this issue, since it is still a rather popular choice for logos and strategies of political campaigns. However, in order to get a clearer picture, all the mentioned issues have to be looked at chronologically.

When political changes in the former socialist states in Europe started, the political rhetoric produced the term “countries in transition”. Those states (especially former Yugoslav) used this phrase to define themselves, recognizing the political transition as a process of advancement, improvement, progress... With regards to the political culture it was meant to imply transformation of an authoritarian into a participative model, in a sense as Almond and Verba described it in their well known typology (Almond G., Verba S. 1989). Reflecting on the issue of ethnic identities it was expected that narrow ethnic boundaries would be abandoned in favor of some more common values; transforming historical burdens and nationalistic mythologies into a broader, future oriented view.

Exceptions are of course more interesting to analyze. Macedonia is unfortunately one of the most interesting examples in this regard. Radical changes in the matrix of the political culture have taken place in the country during the past two decades. However, they were not following the expected direction of advancement, but moving forward and backward in a rather chaotic manner.

In the pages to follow, some research data which illustrate this, will be presented. They are based mainly on a project “Political Culture and Identities”, conducted by the Institute for Sociological, Political and Legal Research, but comparison shall be made with other researches undertaken in the last 20 years, after the Macedonian independence.

The purpose of this paper is to present some indicators related to the development of the model of political culture of the citizens of Macedonia, during the so called transitional period, with a special focus to the issue of ethnic identities and identities in general, as they were determined by the changes of the general value matrix.

## PRESENT VALUES AND IDENTITIES

It is impossible for this occasion to present all results from the previously quoted researches, so a summary will be made in order to illustrate this particular topic. The project which was defined as a basis for this analysis<sup>1</sup>, was conducted in 2010. It included a face to face survey on a representative sample of 1600 respondents, 6 focus groups (with different ethnic groups) and 20 in-depth interviews.

The following indicators were used in the research.

- Indicators for authoritarian values
- Acceptance of the economic changes (socialism versus capitalism in the perceptions of the population)
- Perception of democracy
- Ethnic and religious distance
- Identities

This essay shall concentrate on the inter-dependence of authoritarian values, ethnocentrism and identities.

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Authoritarianism in this context will not be analyzed only as a key obstacle towards democracy and a participative political culture, but as a factor which directly influences ethnocentrism and through it – the perception (or rather – the creation) of identities.

The widest framework and a general, introductory question used in the research was: Do the citizens have anybody they see as an “authority” and do they need one at all?

According to the responses, it appears that only around one quarter of the population in 2010 does not have such a need. It is interesting that the number of people who declared that they do not need any authority is somewhat smaller than 10 years ago.

However, the ones that do recognize some authority, identify it mainly within their own ethnic or religious boundaries.

If we look at the average numbers for the whole population, data show that on the top of the list of authorities is “God, or Allah” with 42% respondents who chose this option. This is the case within every ethnic group included in the survey.

However, it is more interesting to look at all of the answers with regards to the ethnicity of the respondents. In this respect, one third of the ethnic Macedonians

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1) The project “Political Culture and Identities” was financed by the Open Society Institute – Macedonia, while the research activities were covered by the team from the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research, at the University Sts Cyril and Methodius – Skopje.

had chosen God as their prime authority, while the second one on the list with 20% is the President or the Prime minister (who are both ethnic Macedonians).

Albanians, Turks and Roma chose Allah in a higher number (almost two times more than the Macedonians), but very few of their answers (with exception of Roma) were related to politicians, as can be seen on the following table:

**Table 1.** Question: “Who is highest authority for you?”

	Ethnic background			
	Macedonian	Albanian	Turkish	Roma
President, prime minister	24,1%	3,3%	7,3%	47,8%
Minister responsible for my professional field	2,5%	1,8%		
My boss	8,4%	2,1%	2,4%	
Professors from my University (for students)	2,1%	8,5%		
Leader of my political party	3,7%	6,7%		2,2%
Head of my religious community	0,7%	1,5%	2,4%	2,2%
God, Allah	30,9%	63,8%	76,8%	43,5%
I don't believe in authorities	27,6%	12,3%	11,0%	4,3%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Further in this direction, all ethnic groups agreed (around 70%) that it would be good if “the state was run by only one person who would have authority”. Consequent to the previous answers, they all imagine him/her to belong to their ethnic group. In the discussion on the focus groups, when they were asked why should this person be from their ethnic group, the most common answer was that “only the people from their ethnic group understand the problems of all ethnicities”.

Desiring a concentration of power in such a high percent is obviously an indicator showing that the political diversity and distribution of power are perceived as a practical difficulty (This was confirmed in the conducted interviews).

Additionally, in all discussions, the mistrust towards politicians (or authorities in general) who belong to another ethnic group was evident. The following table gives a small, but indicative illustration of the above:

**Table 2.** *Question: “Ministers in the Government who are Albanians care only about their ethnic group”*

	Ethnic background					total
	Macedonian	Albanian	Turkish	Roma	other	
Agree	80,0%	14,1%	61,0%	89,1%	75,7%	63,2%
Dissagree	20,0%	85,9%	39,0%	10,9%	24,3%	36,8%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

If this question was repeated by referring to the Ministers who are ethnic Macedonians, Turks etc., the answers would probably be distributed in a similar pattern.

The distance (or mistrust) is obviously an obstacle hard to overcome, despite all confidence building strategies applied in the country in the past years. Even if we have in mind the fact that all Macedonian Governments included ministers from different ethnic groups, for quite a long period, it is obvious that the citizens still prefer to identify their interests mainly through the ethnic background of their representatives.

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Very surprising, but related and consequent to the previous question is the data according to which almost half of all ethnic groups perceive “too much democracy as **harmful**”. This has never been the case in the past 15 years. Authoritarians and people who feared democracy appeared in much smaller numbers, not only ten years ago, but even in the time of the former socialist political system.<sup>2</sup>

Among else, this means that the citizens do not enjoy the contributions of democracy enough. According to the discussions on this subject on the focus groups, the participants often expressed a feeling that their rights were more broken today than before. Mainly they referred to their ethnic rights. It is interesting that the participants, especially the younger ones, explain this situation with an extreme simplification. Summarized it would look like the following: “Democracy means respect of diversity. Diversity leads to doing what you want, which disables the system to function”. Trying to find a way out of this situation, those respondents (around half of them) believe that:

- Obedience is very important (51%)
- Discipline, order are most important (49)
- Sanctioning is the only way to establish order 46%
- Severe sanctions are necessary (including beating of the police, death penalty, etc.) around 30%

2) Project: “Ideology in the Macedonian Society”, Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical research, Skopje 1986

- Even censorship is sometimes necessary 39% (“because people do not make difference between right and wrong”)

It may not be a majority, but it is not insignificant that more than one third of the population **shows all** elements of the well-known Adorno’s tested indicators about the authoritarian submissiveness, aggressiveness, and conventionalism.

Compared to previous researches, it appears that those numbers have not changed drastically. The problem is that the changes have obviously gone in the opposite direction. Instead of improvement, we can speak of a certain deterioration. Compared to ten years ago there is less democratic culture, less participation than before; in one word – there is a process quite opposite to advancement going on in the Macedonian society.

Furthermore, the social groups related to those characteristics have changed also. Ten years ago, such answers were typical for the older, less educated, middle class respondents. Today, such answers were given in a greater percentage by younger, more educated, urban citizens. The difference with respect to the ethnic background is evidently narrowing, on the account of some social characteristics, like social status and education.

Related to this context, it should be pointed that even the ideological identity expressed by the respondents does not match the values declared. If asked how they would define themselves, within all ethnic groups appear four almost equal parts: left, right, center and the ones who do not know. Their attitudes however, do not correspond to the chosen political ideology. (Even the outcome of the elections shows that those people vote for different political parties). It shows that they may be randomly picking an ideological identity, rather than really having one.

Evidently, around half of all ethnic groups believe that the system, the institutions are not functioning in favor of their expectations. They relate it to the political parties and politicians which is perhaps why they reach for religious authorities in such high numbers. But it also makes them vulnerable and easy to manipulate with. Having in mind that both major religious communities in Macedonia – the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Islamic community are almost functioning like political institutions, the danger of abuse is even greater.

## IDENTITIES

With regards to those previous questions, the widest gap did not appear between the ethnic groups. They think and experience changes almost in a similar pattern. However, when we reach the question about their perception of identity, as they would declare it, the ethnic differences become evident.

One of the regularly asked questions in many surveys was how do the citizens define themselves (perceive their identity). The following table shows their answers in the past 20 years.

**Table 3**

	1991	1996	2001	2008	2010
European citizen	4%	27%	9%	6%	5%
Balkan citizen	3%	4%	10%	3%	2%
Macedonian citizen	14%	36%	51%	60%	53%
Member of my ethnic group	59%	12%	17%	14%	20%
Resident of my region	3%	3%	4%	2%	0%
Resident of my local community	6%	7%	8%	3%	1%
Just a citizen	3%	11%	0%	9%	18%
Did not respond	8%	0%	1%	3%	0%

The table confirms that the previously presented changes in the political culture do, before all, reflect on their perception of identity and self-definition.

Great differences appear among various groups. The next table shows how the citizens define themselves today, seen from the aspect of their ethnicity:

**Table 4.** *Question: “How would you identify yourself? (2010)”*

How would you identify yourself?	Macedonians	Albanians	Turks	Roma
European citizen	4%	8%	5%	0%
Balkan citizen	1%	0,5%	0,5%	0%
Macedonian citizen	67%	13%	42%	78%
Member of my ethnic group	7%	52%	38%	4%
Resident of my region	1%	6%	0%	0%
Resident of my local community	2%	2%	1%	0%
Just a citizen	18%	17%	15%	17%
Did not respond	0%	0%	0%	0%

Looking at the biggest differences seen on the table, the one that distinguishes mostly is the Albanian group, such as has been the case in all the past years. To the Albanians, being a member of the ethnic group is far more important than belonging to a nation, indicating once more a rather permanent closing within ethnic borders.

On the other hand, Macedonians obviously experience Macedonia as “their” nation, rarely choosing to identify as “members of their ethnic group”.

However, all groups show a type of “local-level” character of their identity. There is obviously no common feeling of belonging to a nation, and definitely nothing wider than the nation.

In the same direction are the data regarding the acceptance of some symbols, which further illustrate the above table. For example:

- Preferred or “most favorite” holidays for all ethnic communities are the religious ones (each community placing their own on the top of the list). Exceptions exist among people who practice religion which is different than the one of the majority in their ethnic group (like Macedonian Muslims, Albanian Catholics, Roma Jehovah witnesses etc.)
- Even the national flag is not equally recognized and important for everybody. For example, 88% of the ethnic Macedonians define the present national flag as most important to them ( the rest prefer an old national flag, resembling Alexander the Great’s symbol). However, only 4% of the Albanians accept the national flag. The rest of them (over 80%) prefer the flag of Albania. The other ethnic groups resemble the answers given by Macedonians.
- All ethnic groups have their own most important historical heroes, who are related to their ethnicity only. Very few of the names pointed, can be described as historical heroes who have importance for more than one ethnic group, as can be seen from the following table (The question in the survey was open, without given optional answers)

**Table 5.** Question: “Which historical hero is most important to you?”

	Ethnic background				
	Macedonian	Albanian	Turkish	Roma	Other
Aleksander the Great	12,8%	0,5%		10,9%	18,9%
Josip Broz - Tito	17,9%	1,8%	11,0%	13,0%	37,8%
Goce Delcev (Macedonian hero)	32,1%	0,3%	1,2%	2,2%	10,8%
Skender Beg (Albanian hero)	0,1%	36,4%	3,7%	2,2%	
Kemal Ataturk	0,2%		26,8%		
Other Macedonian heroes	12,8%	0,5%	2,4%		8,1%
Other Albanian heroes	0,1%	34,1%	3,7%	37,0%	
Present politicians	0,6%	2,3%	2,4%		
Other European historical heroes	8,5%	10,3%	3,7%	4,3%	10,8%
Nobody	15,0%	13,8%	45,1%	30,4%	13,5%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%



Obviously, there is not much in common for the different ethnic groups. It especially concerns the younger generations, who go in separate schools (from kindergarten to university), learn from different textbooks, cheer ethnic sports clubs, attend their own coffee shops and restaurants, and become members of ethnic political parties.

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Regarding historical legacies and symbols, a real confusion was created in Macedonia by the latest “introduction” of Alexander the Great as “very important for the history of the country”. Remembering the past, we can say that this hero was absolutely irrelevant to the citizens, until the beginning of the dispute with Greece which included the question “who has the right to claim his legacy?”. At this point, the political conflict between the two countries should not be elaborated further, since it is an entirely different and very complex topic. However, few remarks should be made, due to their direct impact on the values and behavior of the citizens.

This process of reviving the ancient legacy related to the period of Alexander the Great started more intensively in Macedonia in the last 6 years. It was introduced and is carried out by political institutions, so it has a rather “official” manner. The promotion of the importance of “being an inheritor of Alexander the Great” produced irrational, almost humorous disputes about how much are the Macedonians of Slav origin and how much are they Ancient Macedonians? Cities became flooded with monuments and symbols of ancient history. Macedonian population divided again, based on the understanding of their historical genesis.

To illustrate this, we can use the results from this last survey which is analyzed. According to data, 27% of the population thinks that Alexander the Great “is most important, because we originate from him”; 52% said that he is just one of the many historical figures and 11% say that he means absolutely nothing to them. People that support the idea about ancient Macedonian heritage are mainly ethnic Macedonian, urban population.

However, when Alexander the Great is compared to other heroes who have importance to the citizens, it is obvious that he really is “just one of them”, for the big majority, as it was illustrated in the previous table 5. It could be an indicator that this hero was indeed introduced in a rather artificial way.

The differences among the ethnic groups related to this question are big, as it can be expected.

The following table shows the responses seen from the aspect of the ethnic background of the population.

**Table 6.** Question: “What does Alexander the Great mean to you?”

	Ethnic background					total
	Macedonian	Albanian	Turkish	Roma	other	
He means nothing	10,8%	55,4%	43,9%	8,7%	27,0%	23,7%
important, we originate from him	26,8%	4,1%	4,9%	32,6%	16,2%	20,1%
He is just one of many heroes for my people	52,5%	17,9%	30,5%	19,6%	37,8%	41,7%
I do not know	9,8%	22,6%	20,7%	39,1%	18,9%	14,5%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Why was this new mythology introduced, will be a question for many future analyses. At the moment, the surveyed citizens explain it in the following manner:

**Table 7.** Question: “Why was the myth about Alexander the Great introduced as a very important one?”

	Ethnic background				
	Macedonian	Albanian	Turkish	Roma	other
It is a deliberate creation of confusion in the identity of the Macedonians	20,8%	21,3%	18,3%	21,7%	24,3%
It is attempt to make Greece angry and not to solve the name dispute	19,2%	44,1%	36,6%	21,7%	27,0%
It is finally an affirmation of the real history of Macedonia	40,2%	2,3%	19,5%	19,6%	18,9%
Do not know	19,8%	32,3%	25,6%	37,0%	29,7%
Total	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Without elaborating further as to who actually needed such a confusion in the identities, for this purpose it should be pointed only that an additional factor of division within the Macedonian group, and between the ethnic groups was obviously created. It will without doubt reflect on the ethnic distance and ethnocentrism in a negative way in many years to come. It strengthens the need for an authority, especially if the one can be given an ethnic dimension.

## CONCLUDING POINTS

The previously presented data certainly illustrate the main topics and questions which motivated this paper. Before all, they confirm that

- The political culture in Macedonia is not advancing from an authoritarian towards a participative model as it was expected.
- There is a presence of authoritarian values among a significant part of the population which provides the dominant color of the picture.
- It would be too simplified to say that those values originate and are related only to the former political system.
- The type of political culture which is dominant (and is stimulated) strengthens the ethnocentrism, especially when identities are concerned.

Tendencies towards ethnocentrism in the Macedonian society (but not only there), constantly feed on authoritarian matrixes. The need for “authority”, obedience, loyalty etc., has always been used as a “necessity” in building cohesion of the groups, especially ethnic ones. It was done regardless the danger that the rigidity towards “the other” can easily be transformed into exclusion of “anything different”. This true *circulus vitiosus* suffocates all diversities: political, ethnic, cultural... It simply ignores a very high priority. As Kymlicka points: ‘minority rights should not allow one group to dominate other groups and they should not enable a group to oppress its own members’ (Kymlicka, 1995).

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