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## **THE STUDENTS' ETHNIC IDENTITY DILEMMAS**

### **Abstract**

It seems that in the modern European societies some of the collective identities start to transform themselves. One of the basic cultural collective identity, the ethnicity, as an action oriented identity, looks as it is not very important in the presence of European people. In the Macedonian society, also, there are some modern processes concerning the development of stronger personal identities of the youth, that try to change the way of living. Nevertheless, past research showed that in Macedonia the ethnic identities matter a lot as part of the cultural, political and social living. Namely, the ethnic identities interfere with the quality of life, depending on the fact whether you are part of the Macedonian majority, or member of the smaller ethnic groups, the Albanians, the Turks, the Roma, the Vlachs, the Serbs and the

Bosnians. This paper will research the intensity of the ethnic identities among the university students from different national groups through their ethnic distance towards other groups. **We will argue that the strong presence of ethnic self-perceptions could be an obstacle for bigger social integration.**

**Key words:** ethnic identity, ethnic distance, social integration, civic values, student population

## INTRODUCTION

How did the ethnic paradigm make a comeback in the independent and modern Macedonian state? In the post-1989 period, the class as a category in the Macedonian society was in a big part replaced with ethnicity, while the ethnic and cultural differences became main factors of mobilization. The politics of recognition of identities in the new 1991 Constitution did not contribute for development of an integrated society. Some elements of socio-cultural variant of multiculturalism, practiced until 2000s, with the Ohrid Agreement were more and more transformed in the model of division of power among different ethnic groups, through balancing of the individual and the group rights as consequence of ethnicization of all spheres in the society. (Atanasov, 2003) People need to belong to some 'extended family', even though it is an imagined one – the nation, the ethnic group. If the state does not provide the glue, some groups are able to provide it themselves, to efficiently mobilize and fight for it. The ethnicity proved as the most powerful glue due to the recent 'historical' evidences (Atanasov, 2004a). Ethnicization of the social system in Macedonia was being promoted at large. Ethnic media, businesses, non-governmental organizations, 'ethnic' historical rights and isolated social systems with the two biggest ethnic groups - Macedonians and Albanians, were being promoted. In Macedonia since 1991 the prejudices were developing from social and cultural (inherited from socialist time) into a rigid politically (and ethnically) colored intolerance. The citizenship as identity was losing importance compared to religious belonging. (Simoska, 2001) That is how the ethnically divided society was missing the point, concerning the bare necessity of social integration as a way for better quality of life and social cohesion. Additionally, the values that are important to interethnic tolerance are almost missing from the educational process. From the research done by Institute for Sociological Political and Juridical Research from Skopje, in Macedonian society, among younger population, there is a clear domination of the political mythology that directly leads to ethnocentrism. (Simoska, 2001a)

This paper will try to research the current intensity of the ethnic identities among the university students from different national groups, after the two decades of living in the ethnically divided society. The main research question is that the strong presence of the ethnic identities might be the obstacle for bigger social integration. The main research topic is the student's ethnic distance towards other groups. This research was conducted among student population in their last year of studies. The total number of respondents was 707, including 256 male and 451 female, 442 Macedonian and 239 Albanian respondents. There will be plenty of data that were used to prove the stated thesis and other research questions.

## THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Some authors, like Anthony Smith, perceived many nations as originated in pre-existing ethnic groups. 'The appeal of the national identity they involve is, then, derived in large part from that of those ethnic identities' (Gilbert, 2000). Smith 'offered fresh and illuminating insights into pre-modern forms of collective cultural identity such as those embodied in ethnies' (Guibernau, 2004). Guibernau points out that Smith explores the origin of nations and national identity and finds them in ethnic identity as a pre-modern form of collective cultural identity. In his *Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Smith usefully presents an overview of six constituent elements or 'dimensions' of the ethnie as he sees it: a collective name, a common myth of descent, a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity. The most important criterion of ethnic identity, according to Smith, is the sense of solidarity, but the common myth of descent also plays an important role (Smith, 1999). And finally, Eriksen, following Smith, points that 'seeing oneself as culturally distinctive, collectively and individually, from other groups, and acting accordingly, is crucial for ethnic identification to endure' (Eriksen, 2004). Ethnicity is elaborated in wider context in many analyses and textbooks that date in late 1990s. (Atanasov, 2004)

Other scholars have different accounts. Joireman shows that the formation of ethnic identity consists of ascribed traits plus social inputs. The ascribed traits are appearance, place of birth, language, and the social inputs are ancestral myths, subjective beliefs, political power of the group, economics, religion and language. 'Our ethnic identities can shift over time as the context we are in changes. They can also change in relation to varying economic and political incentives and as the context an individual is in alters' (Joireman, 2003). In ethnic nationalisms, 'national identity is often perceived as a reflection or awareness of possession of "primordial" or inherited characteristics, components of "ethnicity", such as language, customs, territorial affiliation, and physical type' (Greenfeld, 1992). All told, 'when people think about "identity" they have in mind things like language, ethnicity, religion, symbols (e.g., myths, historical monuments, and anthems)' (Constantin, Rautz, 2003).

Concerning the social integration models, basically there are two types of models. It seems to originate from the two opposing social philosophies, expressed in the differences between the social models of equilibrium and the conflicting models of a society (Kuper, 1997). The model of equilibrium ties democracy to pluralism. Political structure of a society in the model of equilibrium is plural itself. The designing of the system of constitutional balance was ment to acheive a division of power between legislative and executive, administrative and judicial. This guarantees pluralism in the structure of power and provides a basis for a

system of balance, while the dispersion of power contributes to political pluralism. Integration in its part is influenced by a system of transmitted loyalties and multiple affiliations. The multiple affiliations are not enough by themselves for a plural society. Ethnic associations can be highly inclusive, or can inspire social divisions, divided loyalties and obedience towards authoritarian control. That is why it insists on the multiple affiliations as an additional condition for pluralism. The attachment to common values is certainly a basis for integration and the consensual form is the model of equilibrium. The conflict model of the plural society originates from Furnival. The social basis is a mixture of people who live side by side, but separated, within the same political unit. They mix but do not connect. Each group clings to its religion, culture and language, its ideals and customs. They only meet on the market, for buying and selling. The economic symbiosis and the cultural differences, as well as the social divisions are characteristics of the social basis of the plural society. Furnival stresses the domination of disagreement and the absence of common will for a better integration (Kuper, 1997).

This analysis can provide us with few conclusions. An integrated society or a society of equilibrium is the one in which integration happens through social pluralism and transmitted loyalties. It is the one in which communication is determined by economy, in which there are consensual and common values. Contrary to that, the society is on conflict if the integration is hardly achieved, because of the domination of the cultural pluralism and ethnic loyalties. The communication in this case is mainly through cultural differences as main determinant. There is no disagreement and no common values, while the society sustains through rules. Those are the main elements of the social model of equilibrium and the conflict social model, where individual identification prevails in the first one, and group identity (ethnic) in the second one.

The data which follow will be used to position Macedonian society with regards to the above definitions of ethnic identity and models of social integration. As it was postulated, this paper focuses on the existence of the ethnic distance among student population towards other ethnic groups. The ethnic distance was measured with Bogardus scaling technique. The scale attempts to measure respondents' degree of warmth, intimacy, indifference, or hostility to particular social relationships, by having them indicate agreement or disagreement with a series of statements about ethnic groups in this particular case. In the research there was a 7 level scale of distance (the first level was "to get married" and the last one "I don't want any kind of contact"). Also, the ethnic distance was measured from the aspects of Macedonians and Albanians towards other ethnic groups. The data regard four groups: Macedonians (as the majority), Albanians (as biggest minority group), and Turks and Serbs as control groups.

## THE RESEARCH DATA

Table 1 shows the percent of the given answers from the perspective of the Macedonian students. As can be seen from the data presented in the first level (“to get married”), there are only 3.2% of Macedonians who do not exhibit any ethnic distance towards Albanians and Turks, while this percent is 11.6% towards the Serbs. A very low level of ethnic distance was measured with relation to the response “to be a close friend”, so, this percent towards Albanian is 19.2%. It is higher towards Turks - 27.5% and almost half of the Macedonians students chose this level of distance towards Serbs. Regarding the option “to live in the same neighborhood”, percentages are higher towards Turks and Serbs than towards Albanians. As can be seen from the level “I don’t want any kind of contact” from the perspective of Macedonians students, the ethnic distance is highest towards Albanians and is 37%.

**Table 1** *Ethnic distance – Macedonian students*

	<b>Mac.</b>	<b>Alb.</b>	<b>Turks</b>	<b>Serbs</b>
<b>1. To get married</b>	89,3%	3,2%	3,2%	11,6%
<b>2. To be a close friend</b>	7,4%	19,2%	27,5%	51,2%
<b>3. To live in the same neighborhood</b>	0,7%	5,8%	18,7%	15,2%
<b>4. To work/learn in the same organization</b>	0,7%	10,2%	13,4%	7%
<b>5. To be an acquaintance</b>	1,2%	18%	19,7%	7%
<b>6. To live in the same town</b>	0,7%	6,6%	8,3%	5,6%
<b>7. I don’t want any kind of contact</b>	0%	37,1%	9,2%	2,4%

Graph 1 shows the average values for the same data. The graph indicates that the ethnic distance from the perspective of Macedonian students is highest towards Albanians (with average value 4.89) and lowest towards Serbs (2.73). The average value towards Turks is 3.81.

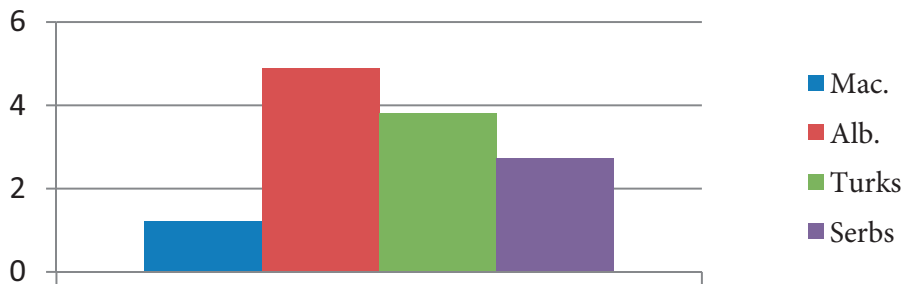
**Graph 1** – Average values (Macedonian students)

Table 2 presents the Albanian student's perspective to the same question. As can be seen from the data presented in the first level "to get married" only 2% of Albanians don't file any ethnic distance towards Macedonians, and this percent is 0.5 towards Serbs, and 7.8% towards Turks. A very low level of ethnic distance was measured with relation to the response "to be a close friend", so, this percent towards Macedonians is 15.7%, it is higher towards Turks - 39.2% and only 3.1% towards Serbs. Regarding the option "to live in the same neighborhood" percentages are higher towards Turks and Macedonians than towards Serbs. As can be seen from the level "I don't want any kind of contact", from the perspective of Albanians students, the ethnic distance is highest towards Serbs and is 33.6%.

**Table 2** Ethnic distance – Albanian students

	Mac.	Alb.	Turks	Serbs
<b>1. To get married</b>	2%	78%	7,8%	0,5%
<b>2. To be a close friend</b>	15,7%	12,4%	39,2%	3,1%
<b>3. To live in the same neighborhood</b>	21,6%	1,4%	17,6%	3,6%
<b>4. To work/learn in the same organization</b>	20,6%	2,4%	11,3%	6,6%
<b>5. To be an acquaintance</b>	10,3%	4,3%	7,8%	13,8%
<b>6. To live in the same town</b>	15,2%	1%	10,8%	5,6%
<b>7. I don't want any kind of contact</b>	14,7%	0,5%	5,4%	66,8%

From graph 2 with average values, it is obvious that the ethnic distance is highest towards Serbs (with average value 6.14) and lowest towards Turks (3.26). The average value towards Macedonians is 4.26.

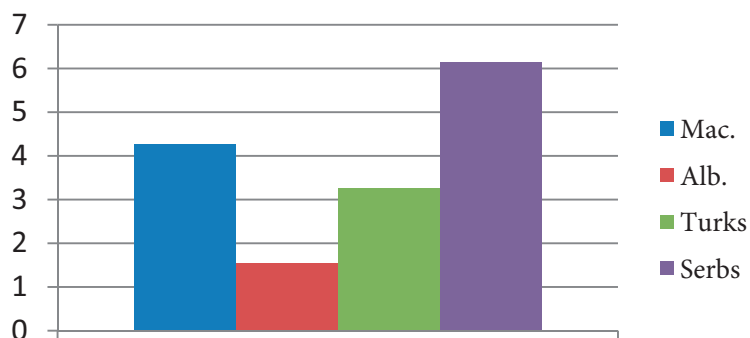
**Graph 2** – Average values (Albanian students)

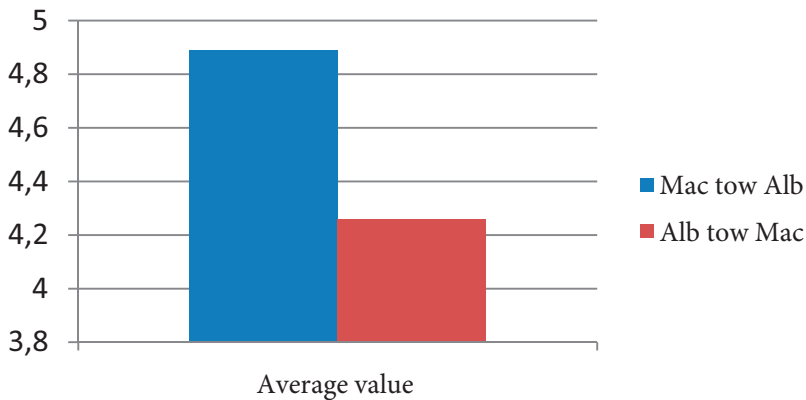
Table 3 shows the attitudes of the Macedonians and the Albanians towards each other. There is a statistically significant difference between the two represented groups of responses, so, as can be seen from the table, difference exists in the levels of ethnic distance which are more related to the space (space of living, space of working). There is not a big difference in the first two levels of distance. The data from the last row shows the highest level of existence of the ethnic distance among Macedonians towards Albanians (this was chosen level for 37% of them).

**Table 3** Ethnic distance

	Mac. towards Alb.	Alb. towards Mac.
<b>1. To get married</b>	3.2%	2%
<b>2. To be a close friend</b>	19.2%	15.7%
<b>3. To live in the same neighborhood</b>	5.8%	21.6%
<b>4. To work/learn in the same organization</b>	10.2%	20.6%
<b>5. To be an acquaintance</b>	18%	10.3%
<b>6. To live in the same town</b>	6.6%	15.2%
<b>7. I don't want any kind of contact</b>	37.1%	14.7%

The presented average value (graph 3) indicates that the number is higher in the first case, which shows existence of higher ethnic distance among Macedonians toward Albanians (the average value is 4.89), than among Albanians towards Macedonians (the average value in this case is 4.26).



**Graph 3** – Average values

From the t-test between those values, we have observed the existence of a statistically significant difference, but also the existence of a greater difference within the same group than between the two groups. **Thus, from the results of the t-test, we cannot say that the ethnicity per se is a key factor that has influence over the ethnic distance.**

The statement about the importance of elements of identity was measured on a three degree scale (completely agree, partly agree, disagree). In order to have better overview of the students' answers about the importance of those identities, we show only the percentages of responses "completely agree", separately for every ethnic group.

**Table 6** Identities ranks

	Macedonians		Albanians
1	Personal Identity 90%	1	Personal Identity 82%
2	Civic Identity 42%	2	Religious Identity 66%
3	State Identity 37%	3	Ethnic Identity 56%
4	Ethnic Identity 33%	4	Civic Identity 33%
5	Religious Identity 31%	5	State Identity 25%

As can be seen from the results, personal identity is most important among the students from both ethnic groups. But when we look at the rank of the collective identities we can see the differences. Civic and state are the most important secondary identities among Macedonian students, while among the Albanians, it is the religious and the ethnic identity.

The frequencies of the question “What kind of society would you like ours to be?” with the ethnic variable showed statistically significant differences. Table 6 shows that “multicultural” were response of 61.2% among Albanians and 27.4% among Macedonians. For “civic society” the percentages are 54.5% among Macedonians and 30.4% among Albanians.

**Table 7-** *What kind of society would you like ours to be?*

	Total	Macedonians	Albanians
Multicultural	39%	27.4%	61.2%
Bi ethnic	2.4%	1.8%	3%
Civic	45.1%	54.5%	30.4%
I don't know	12.2%	16.3%	5.5%

## CONCLUSIONS

The ethnic division is still very present among members of different communities in the country, within all populations including students. Most pronounced is the ethnic divide between Macedonians and Albanians, but there are also negative attitudes towards other smaller groups by members of larger communities. Macedonian society is perceived mainly as a civic one, but still interference is done by the cultural differences that have their own political influence. Those “ethnic nodes” can be identified through the social (ethnic) distance and the presence of negative stereotypes about the other group. Here divisions and relationships are pronounced. The highest ethnic distance exhibited by Macedonians regards the Albanians and is described as “do not want any contact”. The same answer, however, is given by both groups with regards to Roma. Ethnic distance of young Macedonians is lowest towards Serbs. The highest ethnic distance by Albanian students is towards the Serbs but also towards the Vlachs and Roma. The lowest is the distance in relation to the Turks.

It is a perfectly legitimate question, how much of ethnicity can actually be pronounced and articulated without disturbing the cohesion of the society. Data display big gaps and bad feelings between some ethnic communities. Negative context and present elements of strong ethnic distance speaks more towards model of ethnic confrontation than model of equilibrium. Civic elements like identities and values can contribute in the process of building new values that will bred signs of social integration. We proved existence of strong ethnic identification, high social

distance among ethnic communities and weak cross ethnic elements which could enable social integration. Ethnicity is not solely responsible for the ethnic divisions. There are deeper seated reasons interconnected with ethnicity that interfere in the current social fabric. Overcoming the situation where ethnic gaps hinder the social integration, is a condition without which the Republic of Macedonia will not be able to produce a more civic society, greater development and progress, both as a country and as a society. In order to achieve this aim, the citizens of the Macedonian society will have to find more common civic goals and values. Current situation is not promising. As long as we are hiding behind ethnic identity we cannot build a society together.

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