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NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHIES AND THE RISE OF ETHNOCRACY IN MACEDONIA AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Abstract

Perpetual political fissures, fractures, ruptures, fragmentation, and conflict in the past three decades marked the region of South East Europe since the collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s reviving the Balkanization metaphor. Local politicians managed to live up to the negative stereotypes held against the Balkan people. The political reality of the Balkan, divided in as many as possible nation-states and statelets and wannabe “Great nation-states”, contributes to slow and inefficient transition to functioning democracies. Consumed by hatred, hostility, mistrust, and suspicion, bilateral and multilateral relations of the Balkan states are far from friendly and cooperative as they could and should be. This results from interrupted domination of nationalism in every Balkan country where nationalist discourse is deeply embedded and normalized in the public sphere. This is particularly present in the historiographical production. In this article I approach history not as a set of events but as object of fierce proprietary battle over the historical symbols. In Macedonia this instrumentalization of history for political purposes became acute during the past decade. The effects of this effort are measured in the recent survey and the article finishes with a commentary of those findings.

Keywords: Nationalism; historiography; ethnocracy; Macedonia; politics of identity; Alexander the Great

INTRODUCTION

Balkan region has become notorious for the rampant nationalism for over three decades now and the new wave of populism is not a promising sign. A glance at recent history of the region can help us understand these developments. The post WWII Balkans reflected the political consensus between the West and the East and remained largely stable and peaceful for almost half a century. The collapse of socialism was followed by a long and painful socio-economic transformation, but most tragically by the violence and wars that decomposed the Yugoslav federation. The violence and the unfair transition sank the region in the mud of corruption, militarisation, insecurity, and fear. The fear of the other, the fear of the neighbours, the fear induced and maintained by the dominant nationalist ideology that keeps Balkan people apart. The nationalist historiographies help this manipulation of political identities possible and allow for emergence of ethnocracies, a particular variant of representative democracy where demos is reduced to ethnos (Janev 2016; 2017). In ethnocracies citizens are reduced to members of separated and expectedly confronted ethnic groups and political parties pose as their representatives.

In this setting, Macedonia was not immune to the nationalist appeal, especially during the decade long rule of VMRO-DPMNE (2006 – 2016) who based their populist appeal on rising the nationalist sentiments among Macedonian citizens of Macedonian ethnic belonging. It could be argued that this assertive nationalism is a result of external pressures, but also as a result of domestic tense inter-ethnic relations. In the shared political setting, Albanian politicians lacked any more progressive vision and only insisted on reinforced nationalist sentiments among Albanians in the country. Effectively, this period should go down in history of Macedonia as an effort to establish ethnocracy. This article examines the effects of a prolonged nationalist campaign led by the government in Republic of Macedonia, composed of Macedonian and Albanian nationalist parties, during this decade in this tiny Balkan country that was famous for its ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity. It is based on a research titled “Political culture, identity, and civic society” conducted in 2017 and early months of 2018. The sample for the door-to-door survey was a representative one consisting of 1600 respondents. The comparisons in the text are based on two previous research on similar topic in 2010 and 2011.²

THE POWER OF NATIONALISM

In the Balkans in general, with Macedonia certainly not being an exception, nationalism is a persistent political force like no other a favourite tool for political manipulation, preferred in particular by populists worldwide. The renewal of nationalist movements after the collapse of the socialism has been a perplexing phenomenon that was simplified with

² The current research was funded by the Foundation Open Society Institute Macedonia. The research in 2010 was funded by the same organization and with very similar topic and structure of the questionnaire, which allows for the comparisons. The title of that research was “Political culture and identities”. In 2011 the Council for Global Cooperation funded the research “The democratic awareness of Macedonian citizens”.

sweeping generalization used to explain away all other causes for social strife and tension that had arisen during the sloppy and unjust transition. The wars that burned down the Yugoslav federation went hand in hand with stereotypical portrayals of the Balkans. The stupendous theories of “frozen conflict”, were eventually given substance by short-sighted manipulative politicians who thrive in midst of contention and quarrels.

However, these processes were not limited to the Balkans as a region. As early as 1994 Ernesto Laclau points to the rise of a dangerous trends in the politics of identity. In the late twentieth century we witnessed the collapse of East European authoritarian regimes and alongside the collapse of one of the most powerful ideological systems, that of communism. This disrupted the dialectical dynamics of the ideological battles that marked post-WWII world. Laclau (1994) was quick to observe that the ensuing fall of universalism that characterised this ideological battle carries the risk of rise of political particularism, bringing to fore the politics of identity. Today, over two decades later, his worst prediction come to be realised in the form of rising populist xenophobic movements in places that were once bastions of modern democracy, France, UK, Netherlands and USA, let alone in less democratically accustomed environments such as Turkey, Russia, Hungary or Poland.

Republic of Macedonia avoided the Yugoslav wars of dissolution but was met with incredible hostility by its southern neighbour. For three decades already, relations between Republic of Macedonia and Greece are heavily burdened by nationalism, as is the case with all the neighbouring countries. With Bulgaria Macedonia still has to resolve the “artificiality” of the existence of separate national identity for the Macedonians, with Serbia the recognition of a separate Macedonian Orthodox Church is still unattainable goal and with Albania and Kosovo, by factoring in the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, the largest minority in the country residentially bordering the two neighbours, the threat of “Great Albania” still overshadows the interethnic relations in the country.

These processes culminated in creation of ethnocracies instead of democracies, where citizens are fashioned in ethnic mould, constraining their capacity for free and critical thinking, incapacitating them to imagine the world outside the nationalistic mould. This particular regime became evident with the materialization of this ideology in the public space with the project “Skopje 2014” and its counterpart the Skenderbeg Square on the other side of the river “on the Albanian side of the town”, as local ethnonationalist politicians would like us to believe. This and other manifestations of powerful imposition of nationalist discourse in the public sphere certainly contributed for heightened nationalist sentiments, but it remains to be seen how widespread they have become.

Macedonia was burdened with these disputes over the national identity since the inception as independent state. The answer to these challenges in the past decade was stirring further controversies with aggressive nationalist propaganda by the ruling party in power for over a decade. The main question was how this reinforced national identity reflected the self-perception of Macedonians, how has these processes influenced the national identity perceptions of Macedonians. At least partly, the answers were provided in a survey conducted in late 2017 and the paper ends with a discussion of these results. In this article before delving into those findings, the politicisation of national historiography in Macedonia is elaborated in the context of regional politics and academic production, not highly immune to the political pressures, stereotypes, and prejudices.

NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHIES

Nationalist ideology that dominates Balkans politics for too long, insists on exclusivist reading of the past. There is no space for any impurities, mixtures, nuances, and diversity. Every national(ist) historiography in the Balkans makes the baseless claim that there is only one nation, since times immemorial, that inhabits that exact piece of land that coincides with the state boundaries, or eventually needs to be corrected at the expense of the neighbours adhering to the now canonical academic writings of Hobsbawm (Ranger and Hobsbawm 1983) and Anderson (1991). As Maria Todorova puts is:

”The predominantly ethical-didactic and religious orientation of historical writing until the eighteenth century was translated into an equally single-minded mission: to shape national consciousness, legitimise the nation-state and thus fulfil an important social function. The fact that Balkan historiographies developed primarily as national historiographies accounts for their relative parochialism and practically no knowledge of the history of the neighbours in the same period. It is, moreover, not a simple ignorance of the history of the neighbouring nations, but a conscious effort to belittle, to ignore, to distort, to deride and even to negate.”(1995: p.73)

Based on this I argue that the denial of Macedonian history, as it is practised by the neighbouring historiographies, is a conscious effort to negate the existence of the Macedonians as separate people with the right to self-determination and autonomous government. This is confirmed by Frusetta, “[I]n the Macedonian case, there are few historical symbols utilized by the Republic of Macedonia that are not disputed by conflicting historical traditions in neighbouring states (2004: 110)”. With the Macedonian national identity at stake, expectedly, there is great emphasis on the asserting of secure and unchallengeable national identity in Macedonia.

The relentless onslaught of the neighbouring nationalistic historiographies provoked development of nationalistic historiography in Macedonia (Troebst, 2003; Brown, 2004; Brunnbauer, 2005). We must note that this critique relates to the period before the nationalist ascended to power. The kind of history preferred by nationalists was some public history, not strictly academic and internationally validated, but rather of a populist kind, promoted via mass media through TV documentaries mostly. During a decade long run in power, radical nationalists were given a chance to distort historical narrative to their liking. Their nationalist infestation of the public space demonstrates their vulgar understanding of waging those proprietary battles for historical symbols. From this intervention in the public space we can understand the nature and the scope of nationalist project. It is clearly premised on the two most important myths that underpin nationalist ideology: the one of historical continuity and the other on myth of national homogeneity. In Macedonia it became known as a process of antiquisation (Vangeli 2011).

In the above section I presented the politicisation of the history of Macedonia to explain the external pressures that feed the Macedonian nationalism. Challenging the pillars of the Macedonian national historical narrative invites the unnecessary reaffirmation of the certainties of the Macedonian nation and fosters nurturing of romantic nationalism even

today. From another perspective and in reaction to the Macedonian nationalism Albanian nationalism seeks equality in the newly independent state.

RECENT RESEARCH OF THE MACEDONIAN IDENTITY ATTITUDES

The influence of a decade of nationalist rampage that Republic of Macedonia suffered under the leadership of VMRO-DPMNE will have long lasting consequences. However, if we are to judge by the results from one recent research it is not as if a really great numbers of citizens have been radicalised. One of the most important findings is that a relatively small portion of the population upholds the nationalist orientation. To provide a better understanding of the proportions of the negative influences of fervent nationalist rhetoric that has been spread top-down we will examine some of the particular findings of the research.

Civic identity

Most of the respondents 53% chose the civic identity as their primary orientation, citizen of Macedonia more precisely (Table 1). For Macedonians, whose ethnonym is shared with the name of the state it is easier to present themselves as supraethnic, while it must not necessarily be the case. But significant number of Albanian citizens are trying to escape the ethnic framing as well. From the total sample only 12% preferred ethnic group belonging, and additional 20% stated that they feel just like a citizen. Albanian part of the sample gives us that only 28,30% feel primarily as members of their ethnic group, while among Macedonians this is choice for a mere 5,60% of those respondents.

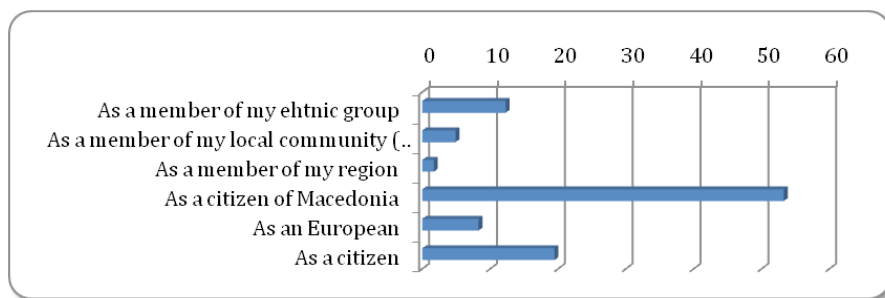


Table 1. *How do you feel (describe yourself)?*

Avoiding the ethnic mould and favouring civic identification instead is interesting from several different aspects. Just being a citizens of Macedonia feel 63,40% of the Macedonian and some 26,50% of the Albanian respondents. Balanced is the choice of European belonging with 8,10% and 9% respectively. There are 17,40% of Macedonian respondents who feel just like citizens and some 26,50% of the Albanians in the survey sample. The

pronounced sensitivity for civic identification and avoidance of the strict ethnic belonging are encouraging indicators.

Separate holidays

The significance of rituals as symbolic meaning practiced in everyday life is immense (Table 2). Certainly, the ethnic prism on this one will light up some of the unanswered aspects from the previous question. For the Macedonians, most important are religious holidays with 60%, of which Easter 31,40%, Christmas with 20,70% and other religious holidays with 7,70%. For them, from the state holidays, most important is Ilinden uprising with 9%, for 3,80% the Independence day, and for 2% 1st of May.

Among Albanians 63,50% chose Bairam as most significant, additional 8% some other religious holiday, while 18% chose The Day of the Albanian Flag 28th of November. Among both groups, most important are the religious holidays, which are different of course, and the other political-historical dates who are also not the same shrinking the opportunity for some integrative role of this ritual aspect of social life of these two communities.

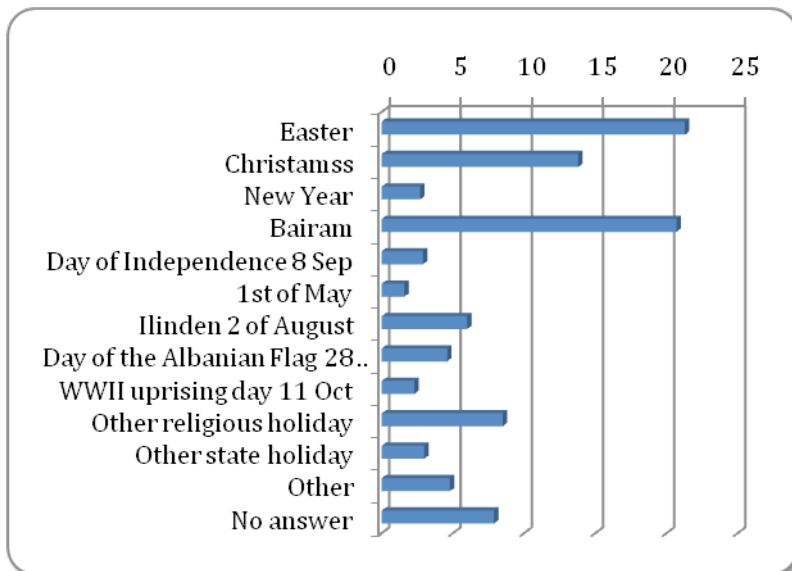


Table 2. Which holiday is most important to you?

Historical narratives and historical figures of importance

We will round the assessment of the identity orientation of the Macedonian citizens by looking at the role of historical narratives that they adhere to (Table 3).

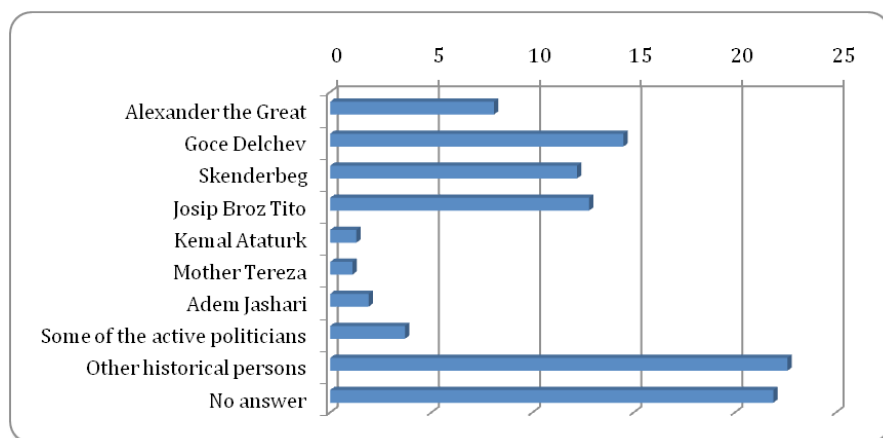


Table 3. *Who is the most important historical figure to you?*

For the largest number of Macedonian citizens with 15% Goce Deltchev is the most important historical figure, followed by Josip Broz Tito with 13%, than 12% opting for Skenderbeg, and than Alexander the Great with 8%. Compared to the previous research there is a falout of favouring great historical figures, with exception for Skenderbeg who rose from 9% in 2010 and 2011. For Alexander opted 9% in 2010 and 13% in 2011. Tito holds well in this “popularity contest” with 14% opting for him in 2010 and 2011. Goce Deltchev was favourite for 21% in 2010 and for 19% in 2011, so he is in slight decline in importance.

The largest category of answers is comprised of a mix of other more international figures of importance like Nikola Tesla, John Lenon etc. This points towards eventual saturation with historical narratives on which the nationalist government insisted for so long. Among Macedonians there are 24,70% who declined to answer this question and 9,50% of Albanians has no favourite historical figure.

This conclusion is confirmed by a glance at the structure of respondents according to age. For the youngest group of respondents 18-25 years only 5,10% chose Alexander, than 7,30% of those 26-30 years, to increase among those in the middle and to fall out of favour among the oldest above 65 years of age. Among the oldest most popular is Tito with 26,90% and this slides down to 6,50% among the youngest group.

Ethnic division of respondents shows that 21,20% of Macedonian respondent chose Goce Delchev, 16,10% Tito and 11,70% Alexander. Among Albanians the rise of popularity of Skenderbeg is obvious with his rise from 36% in 2010 to 49,40% in this research, which is emphasised with his growing popularity among the younger generations.

Alexander the Great

Regarding the popularity of Alexander the Great on which the previous government insisted so much by running TV commercials and erecting a 27 meters high colossal bronze statue of him at the main square and ushering the era of antiquisation to stretch the myth of continuity to his glorious times it is interesting to see that he is failing out of favour (Table 4). He was most important historical figure because he is the predecessor of their nation was highest in 2010 with 27%, than 20% in 2011 and in this research to 15%. He meant nothing for the 11% in 2010, than to 27% in 2011 and to 30% in this survey. Being just another historical figure claimed 52,50% in 2010, then 45% in 2011, and 39% in the current survey.

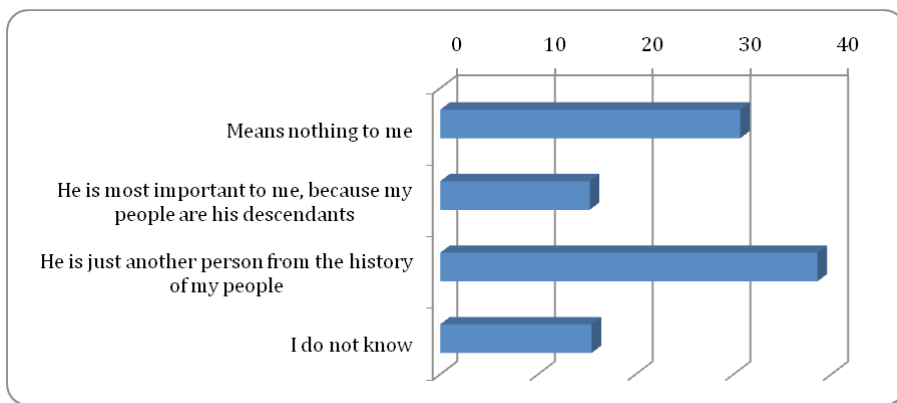


Table 4. *What does Alexander the Great mean to you?*

Certainly, this question must be analysed according to the ethnic composition of the respondents which reveals that 17,70% of Macedonians claim that he means nothing to them, as opposed to 20,90% for whom he is the most important historical figure and 48,80% claiming that he is just another historical figure. Among the Albanian respondents for 56,80% he means nothing, he is most important for 4,10% and he is observed as just another historical figure by 18,50%. Among the youngest group of respondents he means nothing to whooping 41,90%, he is just another historical figure for 32,10% and he is most important to only 11,20%. Ideological orientation and political party sympathies reveal that those on the right are more fascinated by Alexander unlike anyone other.

Historical origins

The last question concerning the identity perceptions and self-perceptions enquires about respondents' understanding of their historical origins (Table 5). This is another question that measures the identity orientation of citizens and probes further into their reception of national myths of continuity.

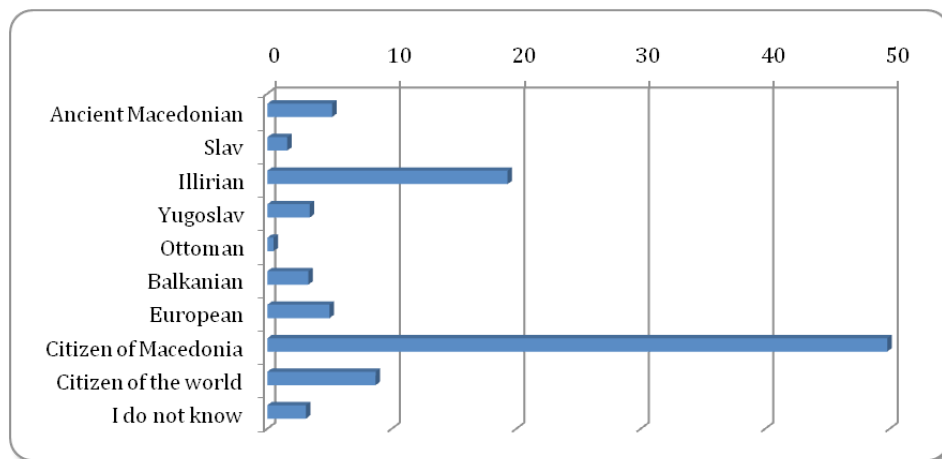


Table 5. *What is your belonging?*

It is encouraging to find that great majority is locating their identity outside narrow ethnic frames and hints towards cosmopolitan, rather than nationalist orientation. Next to the 50% of respondents who stated their belonging as citizens of Macedonia, there are 9% who consider themselves as citizens of the world and 5% who see themselves as Europeans. The great majority of three quarters in the sample in some way positioned themselves beyond ethnic identification, as their vantage point to determine their belonging is shifted to a wider framework. Bellow 5% each, are the two categories of identification with the Balkans and the former Yugoslavia, which we can add to this supraethnic categorization. In total, just one quarter of the respondents located their identity as dependent on the myth of continuity to ancient times.

While the focus so far was on Macedonians, it seems that Albanians are even more prone to the myths of continuity as 19% of the total sample claims to identify as Illyrians. The ethnic breakdown of the sample reveals that 79,40% of Albanian respondents opted for the Illyrian belonging. Only 5% of the total sample claimed to be descendants of ancient Macedonians, or just 7,7% of Macedonian respondents made this claim. In 2010, on a similar question 35% claimed to be descendants of Alexander the Great. This is a tremendous reduction that could indicate several different factors might be in play. Firstly, it might be a result either of saturation with antiquization, or secondly, the reduced propaganda allowed for sobering, or thirdly, quite possible, this reveals an opportunistic attitude of Macedonian citizens who upon realising that the nationalists are losing the power grip got courageous to reject the farfetched claim of Alexandrine blood-line to these days.

Findings from the age groups are even more encouraging with the youngest being least concerned about the origins of their group, with exception among Albanians where the youngest accept tis myth most strongly. Only 2,30% from the age group 18-25 and only 5% from the group 26-30 consider themselves as ancient Macedonians and has the highest

frequency of responses as citizens of the world with 14,40% and 12,40%, respectively. Among Albanians identification with Ilirians is strongest among the youngest with 27,40% in the age group 18-25, 28,20% in the group 26-30, 20,40% among the 31-40 and this drops as the age grows. Combined with the growing popularity of Skenderbeg among the younger groups it is obvious that perhaps the antiquization aiming at Macedonians reinforced the ethnic identification among the Albanians.

CONCLUSION

The politicization of history in the region and unavoidably in Macedonia resulted with heightened nationalist sentiment. The nationalist discourse has become dominant paradigm for organization of the public life of all of the societies in the region. A decade long of unchecked nationalist propaganda was a threatening proposition for Macedonia's tender, if not fragile inter-ethnic relations. However, both assumptions in the above statement are rude generalizations. Macedonian model of inter-ethnic cohabitation has been tested many times over since Macedonia got independence from former Yugoslavia and each time, after every crisis has proven quite resilient. In the findings of the survey, it is obvious that in spite the heavy nationalist pressures, Macedonian citizens are immune to radical nationalist orientation. The most encouraging is the cosmopolitan orientation of the younger generations. At the same time, it is quite disturbing that the Albanian youth succumbed to the historical nationalist narratives. These findings are important for future policy making, for designing of integrative policies on which the future of Macedonia depends.

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