

WHY ETHNICITY MATTERS – THE CASE OF MACEDONIA

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In brief, the argument put forward here is that struggle for social and political status based on ethnicity is what draws back and hampers sustainable development of Macedonia. First of all, it should be emphasized that ethnicity happens to be the basis and not the reason for the crisis in Macedonia. Secondly, there is overwhelming confusion of three basic terms: **ethnicity**, **nationality** and **citizenship**. It is mainly due to this fact that Macedonian society is rather ethnically divided than civic one. As far as social cohesion is concerned, if it exists at all, it is based on ethnic affiliation, ethnic group rights and not on the respect for civil and citizens' rights.

The groundwork of the paper is based on the assumption that ethnicity matters in Macedonia because of the following reasons:

- **Ethnicity is seen as a means for sustaining one's identity**
- **Ethnicity applied as structural criterion leads to dividing social and economic life**
- **Two societies in one unitarian state is a serious premise for conflict**

Ethnicity as a means for sustaining one's identity

For the last decade the term “ethnicity” has been the clue that bounded the disintegration processes we witnessed in the former Yugoslav federation. Ethnicity turned out to be the basic characteristic for division, separation, segregation, and secession. One of the major sources of troubles that Balkans faced in the 90s was that priority had been given to self-determination and differentiation on the basis of ethnicity. Thus Balkan societies where ethnic homogeneity has never existed and that are mingled with different ethnic groups became tensed and antagonistic.

One of the segments of country's integrity is the national identity. In advanced democratic societies national identity has overall strength. In post-communist bloc however ethnic divisions are absolutely central to the problem of organizing a working political system.

The disintegration of former Yugoslavia demolished the Yugoslav national identity that has flourished for the last several decades when national identity has been prior to ethnicity. The secessionist trends however faced a very bitter and tough challenge of transforming the Yugoslav national identity into national identities of new independent republics. Those republics that were more ethnically homogeneous and fond of conducting nationalist policies (Slovenia and Croatia) succeeded in promoting their national identities.

On the contrary, in other constituent parts of former Yugoslavia, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia, the ethnic composition of the population hampered the promotion of general national identity. Instead, the ethnic

affiliation is what really matters. What is more, ethnic groups consider each other as jeopardy to their own existence.

The case of Macedonia is merely the same. The key issue is that the national identity coincides only with the ethnicity of the majority of the population. The remainder part prefers to stick to its ethnic affiliation rather than acknowledge the national identity of the country as its own identity. Here comes the question of the citizen's status. Promoting the civil character of the state and reducing the importance of ethnicity is the only adequate strategy for sustaining Macedonia's integrity.

Further more, the ethnicity was set as fundament of politics and policy-making in all the constituent parts of former Yugoslavia. Given the heterogeneous, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic environment in Yugoslavia and in the region as a whole where the forms of social participation are underdeveloped, ethnicity quite easily turns to hostility. It is due to this fact that the representatives of one ethnic group consider themselves being in a more unfavorable position, deprived of chances for realization, than the representatives of another ethnic group, which in most cases is a majority in the respective country.

Ethnicity applied as structural criterion leads to dividing social and economic life

What happened in Macedonia, besides other aspects, could be viewed also as a result of **ethnical subdivision**. No one can expect peace unless the grounds for civil society are established. These ground prerequisites should raise general public awareness for the respect of human and civil rights as a priority and that a

society can not stand integrated while differences are being deliberately fostered. Thus ethnicity radicalizes and as we witnessed in former Yugoslavia turns to hostility.

The ethnicity factor in Macedonia interferes in political system of the country and structures social and economic life in two separate dimensions – Macedonian and Albanian. Because of this division Macedonia is being considered as an example of a weak state where political system and institutions are kept going but they are not kept working efficiently. The ethnic Albanian grievances stem from their limited access to state institutions, living parallel and separate social and public life with ethnic Macedonians. The last, but not least, is that both ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians are misrepresented. They do not trust sufficiently the political elite of the country. Local self-government is underdeveloped with very limited powers. So, political system of the country fails to link the two major ethnic groups. But it fails to incorporate the other ethnic minorities either.

Besides that, ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians live in two different economic spaces. They stick to their own space thus maintaining it. For example, Macedonians rarely visit Albanian shops, cafeterias, neighborhoods, etc. The vice versa is also true. Thus communication channels between two groups are being totally exhausted and outdated.

Another very important aspect of ethnic subdivision is that ethnicity interrelates with organized crime corporate interests, their representation and protection. Albanians are more or less associated with shadow economic activities (mainly illegal trade in drugs, arms and people). Just for the record, during the recent

operation of Macedonian armed forces for regaining control of Aracinovo 27 illegal drug laboratories were revealed.

Ethnic Macedonians usually accuse ethnic Albanians of evading paying taxes, bills for electricity and water supply. In the course of past years it became general practice in Macedonia areas populated mainly by Albanians to stay out of reach of any government control. This trend has further widened the gap between the two ethnic groups and facilitated the escalation of the crisis.

Two societies in a unitarian state is a serious premise for conflict

Resuming the previously mentioned considerations about the parallel life in Macedonia, I would proceed that such splitting of society is inappropriate for a unitarian state such as Macedonia by its Constitution is. Furthermore, there will be inevitable collision of the two ethnic groups given the prospects for greater impoverishment of the country. Unless a higher level of integration between the two ethnic groups is achieved by means of education, civic action and wider representation, the future of Macedonia as unitarian state is uncertain. Another more plausible option is regionalisation of Macedonia and strengthening the local self-government authorities. It is along with the proposal of the French constitutional expert Robert Badinter to promote local democracy instead of the consensual democracy proposed by Arben Xhaferi. This will also presuppose amendments to the Constitution but, ultimately, will keep the state as a whole.

Another change is expected to occur in terms of the political system, which has been based on the model 1+1 vs. 1+1. This model exemplifies that in Macedonia for the last ten years one ethnic Macedonian party has been in coalition with one

ethnic Albanian party (VMRO-DPMNE + DPA vs. SDSM + PDP). This political formula has been discredited and the ethnic coexistence in Macedonia is challenged by replacing the legal political process with armed activities. Once turned to hostilities ethnicity factor gains priority and determines the attitudes and behavior of both sides. Unfortunately, it is a one-way street because once became hostile ethnicity factors could hardly be reconciled and accorded. The time limit for such measures is critical and Macedonia happens to run out of it.

CONCLUSION

Against the background of the arguments mentioned above, it is evident that disturbances in Macedonia destabilize the political system of the country, sever relations both between the two ethnic groups and between each ethnic group and the political elite representing it. Why ethnicity in Macedonia matters? Because mismanaging it, in the manner it is done at the moment, will inevitably deteriorate the entire environment in the region. Doubtlessly, what we witnessed in Macedonia was the Act 2 of the Kosovo issue and the inefficiency of the international efforts to cope with it. The Macedonian crisis is attempt for postponing and even aggravating the settlement of the Kosovo status. This is foreseen to happen in at least two ways: by questioning the very integrity of Macedonia as unitarian state and by establishing a wider gray security zone that will further on withdraw the region from Europe.