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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Atanasov, P., Simoska, E., & Naumovska, B. (2016). Processes of individualization in the presence of strong collective identities. *European Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities*, 5(2), 1-9. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-46831-2>

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## Processes of Individualization in the Presence of Strong Collective Identities

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*Date of submission: March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015*

*Date of acceptance: April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016*

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### Abstract

In the contemporary societies people try to build an individualized approach through life, while the collective identity coercions starts to pale. This ratio consists of many aspects like the intensity of the existing collective identities, the consistency of transmission of the parent's way of living to their children and the individual choices that are available for the young people in the specific social context. In Macedonian society there are some modern processes concerning the development of stronger personal identities of the youth, and their attempts to change the way of living comparing the way their parents did. Having in mind that in Macedonia live citizens that are members of different cultural and ethnic groups the analysis will show even local differences elaborating these phenomena. There are indications that there is some fluctuation towards bigger individualization among youth and the evidence that the young people still lives their parent's collective identities. The target group of the research is the student population, in the study that was done on the sample of 707 respondents, chosen by quotas, from the six universities in the country. The main thesis is that the students are still "overshadowed of the successes" of their parents past social experience, that is strongly connected with the collective nature of their identities. The main research questions are the state of the collective identities, the relation between the parents and the student's collective identification, and the evidence of stronger development of the self-confidence among students.

**Keywords:** collective identity, personal identity, individualization, Republic of Macedonia



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European Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities - EQPAM, Volume 5, No.2 (April 2016), pp. 1-9.

ISSN 2285 – 4916

ISSN-L 2285 – 4916

## Introduction

In the contemporary world we are imagining the process in which the citizen will start releasing himself/herself from more traditional clamps and try to create its personal identity according to his/her convictions and needs. Let us apply this thesis in the Macedonian society, following the current state-of-affairs in the process of transition between the traditional/conservative and more modern/liberal and individualized way of living. The main thesis is that the students are still “overshadowed of the successes” of their parents past social experience, that is strongly connected with the collective nature of their identities. The political model that Macedonia lived through (former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) made an impact on the way of the citizens identified themselves. The model of politics preferred collectivistic identities. Even though for decades the class as a category was dominant factor of mobilization, the ethnicities (becoming national identities) step by step conquered the hearts of the citizens in the republics. As known the Yugoslavia dissolved among the republic borders. Even the religion was covered and not as strong as today, it was digging its way towards stronger collectivistic identity. The main research questions in the paper are the state of the collective identities in Macedonian contemporary society, the relation between the parents and the student’s collective identification, both national and religious, and the evidence of stronger development of the self-confidence among students.

The respondents for the research are chosen<sup>i</sup> from the regular students in the five (six) Macedonian Universities<sup>ii</sup>. The study tried to quantify the identity processes among the student population and their attitude towards collectivistic vis-à-vis the need for more individual identification. The sample was 707 students, chosen by quotas, and the research was done in 2013. They answered the structured questionnaire and the results were administered by the team from the Institute for the Political Social and Legal Research at the university “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” in Skopje.

## Collective Identities: National and Religious

It is complicated to ‘produce’ sociological categories, as well as ideal types, and it is often a very dangerous task, especially when the space to do it is limited. Also, authors more often use a pair of identities as if the two terms are synonymous, such as ethnic/cultural, ethnic/national, ethnicity/nationality, without a clear distinction between the issues. Following some scholars we can analytically divide these phenomena into two broad theoretical categories: ethnic/cultural and national/state identities. (Atanasov, 2004) Authors stressed that the collective identity is playing important role in the construction of the individual’s most personal and most intimate self. It brings individuals into a group, assembles individuals’ loyalties around the values, ideas, and institution of collective creation of social order. In analytical sense, collective identity may refer to tribal, ethnic, religious, national, racial, and other group identities. In pre-modern and modern societies, collective identity always refers to several of them together (Jakelic, 2004). They exist interchangeably depending of the specific society, as Jakelic (2004) elaborates, at the time dominating by one or combination of collective identification. Mostly, existing in relation to dominant ideology, religion or other social circumstances. Personal identities are intertwined with the social structures of certain society, local community or family context.

One can argue, as some do, that ethnic/cultural categories precede national/state identities. Some argue that national/state identities are more recent phenomena, not more than two centuries old. In the existing literature, it is complicated to trace the theoretical background of national/state identities. It is

easier to trace themes in which one can find substantial elaborations on the topic. One possible way is to re-visit the theory through four themes: culture/politics interplay, ethnic/civic dichotomy, subjective/objective characteristics and group/individual agency. Through these themes one can assume the complexity and multidimensionality of the processes that 'bred' national collectivistic identities. Nevertheless, it is complex process and phenomenon. The complexity of the notion of national group identity, which is generally assumed to stem from the local cultural environment, comes through the processes of culture/politics interplay and structure/human agency, finally arriving at nationality categories. Nevertheless, all of those categories stated previously are interrelated, evolving one from another. (Atanasov, 2004)

The collective national identities are more recent "invention". They are connected with the creation of the national state (nation-state) which is result of the processes that evolved after French revolution. People before this period were not interested of their national identity. The world with the fixed boundaries and clearly delineated identities, replaced this older world (Billig, 1995). Mainly the states bred the nations more often than the nation states, whereas in the case of classical nation-states of Western Europe the building of the state created the national identity (Handler, 1988). The state that cannot create some form of national identity for its citizens it seems that will fail in one of its primary tasks, creating distinctive collectively based loyalty and consensus (Smith, 1999). The feeling of national identity secure powerful tool for defining and locating the individual selves, through the prism of collective membership and its specific culture. From all other collective identities that human beings have today the national identity is maybe the most fundamental and most inclusive (Smith, 1991). That is how important is the national identity.

In relation with the national identity in Macedonia one can assume some general trends and processes. The Macedonians as a separate ethnicity have stable identification with the state, including the cultural and the political aspects. As a multicultural society the ethnicity of the smaller communities are politicized and their identity is parallel to the dominant one. Also, the religion as a category is very strong concerning the percentage of believers but does not influence the primary identity of different ethnic groups. (Atanasov, Simoska, 2013) The case of Macedonia in particular, proves that the early life socialization in communist regime could not completely explain the construction of national identity image and the change of identity during the democratic period, because it also includes the multiethnic issue. (Voinea, 2014)

The complexity of the phenomenon of national identity is that can exist on more than one level. This is the conclusion of several authors that researched the national identity in the end of twentieth century. Some claimed that the three concepts, namely, the society, the state and the nation, slowly separate each other. It shows that nationality and citizenship actually belong to different spheres of meaning and activity. Nationality is essentially cultural concept that connects people on the common identity ground, while citizenship is political concept that comes from the relationship of the people towards the state. There is no need that these concepts are interlinked. Because we live more and often in the world of political world above the sovereign state in which is not operational whether the absolutism is of ethnic-national or civic type (McCrone and Kiley, 2000). Being a member of a society just as citizen maybe is the way the individuals can develop more civic values towards more personalized identity.

### **Individualized (Personal) Identity**

Some authors following the assumptions that the identity is not fixed, that hasn't stable position and structure, agree that the identity as other modern phenomena are influenced by change and motion, by relativity of the borders, multiplicity of identities and internal differences, contrary to cohesion, stability,

homogeneity and structure as key concept (Eriksen, 2004). In spite of the planetarium success of the national identity, the modern world faces new challenges. One of them is creation of new identities. All that implies that collective identities in the course of the time suffer changes, even in short periods of time. People acquire different identities at different times and the living becomes more open. The identity maybe is a personal choice that does not depend of wider societal context and structural norms. Perhaps is something new in a way that the individual is sometimes more powerful than structures.

The modern individualized identity, as product of 20 century, evolved between traditional obstacles and new age. Most researchers emphasized that something new has emerged, something modern. Because the individuals were no longer limited in fixed, and culturally given positions, modern subject for the first time are faced with responsibility and released in the process of constructing their identities. As Giddens stressed, we have no choice but to choose what we want to be and how to act. (Giddens, 1994) The spheres of autonomy and control are now open for the individuals. We can choose the nature of our identities by conscious choices (Giddens, 1991). Individuals are free of rigid, prescribed social positions as are the gender roles and must create its own live, creating its biographies (Beck 1994, Beck-Gersheim, 1995). The process is going on without the rigidity of tradition and culture that preciously created relative rigid boarders in the modalities for self-understanding.

Coming from these identity complexities, in this paper we are trying to find whether in the case of Macedonian society there is a continuation of the transmission of parent's collective identity feelings to their children. In the same time we will screen the current self-identification of the students concerning the dominant collective identities and the way the youth is seeing it. Besides, we will make an attempt to figure out is it an option in Macedonian society to expect the younger people to show more inclination towards the individualized way of living vis-à-vis existing collective conscious.

## The Context

Before presenting the results of the survey which is a focal point of this text, few remarks should be made about the general context, with regards to the dominant political values among the young people and the population as a whole. Without a possibility to present data from all researches that have been completed on related topics, the following points (short summaries of the findings) should be regarded as a framework in which personal or collective identities of the young people in Macedonia are built. They are based on data from several projects conducted in the last decade in Macedonia.<sup>iii</sup>

The first factor which has to be in mind is the value matrix of the citizens in general. In the last 10 years it can be described as predominantly authoritarian, with a negative tendency (of becoming more authoritarian) as compared to the period of 15-20 years ago. This includes several dimensions: increased need for an authority of any kind, submissiveness towards authorities, intolerance towards the different ones, fear, disrespect for democratic freedoms and rights, self-censorship... The differences between generations, genders and various social groups are becoming smaller or nonexistent. Such homogeneity can also be treated as a feature of an authoritarian model.

The young people in this context often appear as copies of the older ones in their contemplation of democracy, freedoms, human rights... Even more unfortunately, the group between 18 and 25 years of age frequently exhibits more conservative, intolerant or rigid opinions than all the other age groups.

If one explores the specificities for this age group, the very first thing that becomes obvious is that they are practically torn between their aspired priorities: to find a good (or any) job, or make enough money, and the impossibility of achieving it on basis of individual qualities.

The political system itself, completely functioning on principles of political or party affiliation, deepens this frustration. The “insignificant, powerless” individual and the powerful (in this case political) collectivity are the reality in which young people are internalizing or selecting political values and identities. It is not a surprise, as all mentioned researches confirm that those generations develop an intense need for belonging to a group. Any group, political, ethnic, religious...

We can, also, expect that the globalization process will influence and spread through the global and new media the images of more individualized style of western living. The audience, mostly younger generations, are situated between the need for group belonging and identity and the wish to live as “world” citizen.

### The Research

This research titled as "Real and Virtual Identities" was conducted among student population in their last year of studies. The total number of respondents was 707. (The sample included: 256 males and 451 females; 442 Macedonians and 239 Albanians, 201 rural and 504 urban respondents).

The data gathered with the survey are quite wide, but essential for this paper are the views of the students related to 5 different identities (personal, state, civic, ethnic and religious).

At the beginning, the students were asked which identity is most important for them.

**Table 1** below shows the answers they provided.

**Table 1.** Identities

	Valid Percent
Personal	74 %
State	3 %
Civic	4 %
Ethnic	5 %
Religious	10 %
Without answer	4 %
I don't know what is that	1 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

A statistically relevant difference was shown when this question is cross tabulated with the ethnic background of the respondents. As can be seen in **Table 2**, the personal identity is on the first place according to both ethnic groups, but the situation is different when we look at the data for the collective identities. Among the Macedonian students, the percentages for any of the collective identities are very low, but in the case of Albanians students, the numbers are different: for 26% of them, most important identity is the religious one.

**Table 2.** Identities/Ethnic Variable

	Personal	State	Civic	Ethnic	Religious	No answer	I don't know	Total
Mac.	86%	3%	4%	3%	2%	3%	1%	100%
Alba.	53%	4%	4%	10%	26%	4%	1%	100%
Total	74%	3%	4%	5%	10%	4%	1%	100%

In order to see if there is a difference between generations, the students were asked what they think about their parents' identity. From the aspect of ethnic affiliation, statistically significant difference was shown about this data as well.

**Table 3** shows that Macedonian students with 73% think that most important identity for their parents is the personal one. On the other side, the collective identities are more present among Albanians parents (or that is the perception of their children). Almost 37% of the Albanian respondents think that most important identity for their parents is the religious one, and the personal identity is on the second place.

**Table 3.** "Which identity is most important to your parents?"

	Personal	State	Civic	Ethnic	Religious	No answer	I don't know	Total
Mac.	74%	4%	6%	4%	3%	9%	2%	100%
Alba.	36%	5%	3%	12%	37%	6%	2%	100%
Total	59%	4%	5%	7%	14%	9%	2%	100%
								690
								100%

Regarding every particular identity, the students were asked how much it is important to them. The statement about the importance 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 ranked only the percentages of responses "completely agree", separately for every ethnic group.

**Table 4.** Identities Ranks

Macedonians	Albanians
Personal Identity 90%	Personal Identity 82%
Civic Identity 42%	Religious Identity 66%
State Identity 37%	Ethnic Identity 56%
Ethnic Identity 33%	Civic Identity 33%
Religious Identity 31%	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 parallel to the primary one, the personal identity.

From the general distribution on the answers to the question "What would you like our society to be?", "multicultural" was answer for 39% of the respondents, "bi-ethnic" for 2% , "civic" for 45% and the answer "I don't know" was chosen by 12% of the respondents.

Further analyzing this question, a different proportion of responses can be seen if the two ethnic groups are observed separately. Among Macedonian students, on the first position with 55% is the "civic society", while for the Albanians, the same position is given to the "multicultural society" with 61%. It means

that the Macedonian students prefer state/civic identity, while Albanian students lean to the cultural/religious/ethnic identification.

The last research question is the data about the evidence of stronger development of the self-confidence among students. It is interesting to note that 64% of the respondents answered that they have great confidence in themselves, but only 11% among them have full confidence in other people. We can assume that the self-confidence is on the rise, which is good for the development for the more personal way of living. Nevertheless, the low support for the confidence in other people might suggest that the collectivistic spirit is fading out. This is the point of watershed between the individual and collective identities. Even though the ethnic divide is still present.

Regarding the statement “In Macedonia, there are no conditions for employment and progress in the career according to your abilities”, there are 58% of the students who completely agree with it. However, with the next statement, “In Macedonia, the values as honesty and diligence are respected”, there are only 9% who completely agree (53% of the respondents disagree with it). These data may give an explanation to the answers on the last statement, which is “I will always remain to live here” according to which 41% among the Macedonians and 25% among Albanians chose the answer “disagree”. (Sadly, the researches that followed only 1-2 years later, show an increase of the desire to leave the country up to two thirds)

**Table 5.** *“I will always remain to live here”*

	Completely agree	Partly agree	Do not agree	No answer
<b>Macedonian students</b>	52 11,8%	130 29,5%	179 40,7%	79 18%
<b>Albanian students</b>	70 30,4%	50 21,7%	57 24,8%	53 23%
<b>Total</b>	126 18,1%	184 26,4%	248 35,6%	138 19,8%

The social context is one of the most important factors in the process of developing the identities, knowing that the construction of modern identities is complex and nuanced. The Macedonian social context does not support bigger individualization among youth. In Macedonian society there are some modern processes concerning the development of stronger personal identities of the youth, and their attempts to change the way of living are more oriented towards escaping the country than escaping the parents' collective identities.

## Conclusions

Research has shown that **personal identity** among the student population in Macedonia is very pronounced and becomes an important part of the young people lives. Among young Macedonians, personal identity has strong intensity, while among young Albanians, except personal identity there is strong expression of **religious, and ethnic identity**. We compared the self-perception of students and their parents in terms of collective identities as part of our main thesis. It becomes clear that there are big changes to the personal identity of the Albanians in relation to their parents, for whom the most important



identity is still religious identity. The research showed that there are generational changes in terms of **collective as well as individual identity** that still shows direct connection with parents' collective identity.

In terms of **social context** pervasive feeling of **deep distrust towards other people**, exists though still personal confidence is quite pronounced. But distrust of other people combined with the lack of opportunity of employment and advancement of capacity, and disrespecting the values, such as honesty, sincerity and diligence, contribute more to thinking about leaving the society at the earliest possible opportunity. If there is **no social development** if there is no change that would create greater perspective and a specific lifestyle where individual differences would become evident, the youth will not have an opportunity for bigger **individualization**. The choice of own life trajectory is impeded by socio-economic crisis in which members of the groups are still facing their cultural barriers and "think" **ethnically** or **collectively**, fighting for more resources for their group. Obviously, young people in society live in a context in which collective identities accompanied with socioeconomic crisis not allow more distance from youth creating their own identity as a feature of contemporary democratic societies. If there is no development in the state, the rule of collective identities is more present and will not disappear in a short run, especially on ethnic and religious identity.

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#### Notes

- <sup>i</sup> The research was part of the bigger study concerning the “Identities among student population in Macedonia”, done by the Institute of the Political Social and Legal Research from Skopje.
- <sup>ii</sup> The sample included students from Skopje, Bitola, Tetovo and Shtip state owned universities and two private universities from Skopje and Tetovo.
- <sup>iii</sup> “Political Culture of the Citizens of Macedonia” (2006/8), Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research - ; “Democratic Awareness of the Citizens of Macedonia” (2011), Institute for Social Analysis – Skopje; “Political Culture and Identities” (2012) ISPJR and Open Society Macedonia; “Correspondence of the Youth Policies and the Priorities of Young People” (2015), Institute for Social Analysis and Progress Institute – Skopje