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Culture as a Resource in Nation-Building: The Case of Macedonia

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Abstract

Together with history, culture represents one of the most basic aspects of the fabric of everyday life. It gives us a sense of identity and tells us who we are, where we come from and where we are going. Cultural policy broadly defines the meaning of social practice, and deals with subjectivity and identity, thereby playing a central role in the building of a sense of self. In the era of globalization, culture transcends borders between countries and can play the role of the connective tissue of the "imagined nation". It is used in the voluntary and organic approach to defining the nation. While the organic approach emphasizes the role of culture in highlighting the specificity of the nation, voluntary discourse focuses on the culture's universal value. This paper will analyze how culture is being used as a resource in the construction of the contemporary Macedonian nation.

Keywords: culture, nation, ethnic, civic, multiculturalism



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Introduction

Culture is a very important resource in the formation and building of “nation-states, even for groups that are outside a country's borders. As a resource, it can unite or divide the nation. It is used in the “voluntary” and “organic” approaches to defining the nation. While the organic approach emphasizes the role of culture in highlighting the specificity of the nation, voluntary discourse focuses on the culture's universal value (Wiener, 1981; Barnard, 1983; Chartier, 1991).

In order for it to flourish, national identity must be carefully protected, maintained and enhanced. This may include a celebration of historical figures and important events in the past, as well as the organization of festivals to preserve the traditions and culture of the group (Sontang, 2006). Hence, the “organic” approach to defining the nation uses cultural resources to enhance social cohesion and distinctiveness, as well as to ensure the effective procreation of the nation. If the identity of the group is threatened, then culture can play an exclusionary role in its protection. The problem occurs when there are many different cultural groups in the country. Hence, “promoting” the identity of a group can be perceived by other groups in the country as a threat to their identity. All this can lead to conflict between the different cultural groups.

Most theorists dealing with these issues focus on three methods for managing differences in societies. They are: autonomy, non-territorial autonomy (i.e. division of power or consociation) and multicultural integration. All of these methods include significant elements of minority rights. Many researchers in the field of ethno-cultural conflict advocate for one or more of these three options as a way to successfully manage conflict. However, they all focus on a similar challenge: how to show respect for diversity in culturally diverse societies without at the same time undermining the ties that are needed to bind together citizens of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Slaveski, 2006). Later in the paper we will focus on multiculturalism as a model for the integration of various ethno-cultural groups in a country, paying particular attention to cultural policies in the Republic of Macedonia.

Multiculturalism as a Model for Nation-Building

Liberal democracy requires citizens to possess a fairly high degree of self-abnegation and mutual solidarity. Hence, politicization of ethnic differences is not compatible with these requirements. There are successful examples of stable multi-ethnic countries, like Switzerland, indicating that there is no reason for members of a national minority not to have a high awareness of their ethnicity and at the same time a strong sense of patriotism and obligation towards the wider society. This strong sense of patriotism which the Swiss have makes them in a way, “one nation-state” as well as a federation of nationalities'. However, there are numerous examples of countries where institutionalization of the identities and rights of ethnic minorities have not prevented civil wars (e.g. Lebanon, Yugoslavia). Furthermore, some multi-ethnic countries whose long-term stability was once taken for granted are now increasingly unstable (e.g. Belgium, Spain).

Tchavdar Marinov criticizes multiculturalism as a very difficult way of building civic identity. While emphasizing “cultural community”, he does not offer a formula for mutual belonging equally acceptable to both communities, which, he concludes, would not otherwise have problems with communitarian self-determination. The elements on which belonging should be constructed are mutually exclusive ethnicities. Multiculturalists would probably say, he foresees:

"That is precisely the advantage of multiculturalism: the fact that it is something in between - it is neither radical communitarianism, nor is it classic liberalism and/or republican assimilation, with their disregard for differences."
(Marinov, 2006)

Pierre L. van den Berghe thinks that we should make a distinction between minimal multiculturalism (simple tolerance and legal protection of cultural diversity) and maximal multiculturalism (celebration, encouragement and official support). Furthermore, he argues, multiculturalism can go hand-in-hand with democracy as it is defined in the modern world, but only if certain conditions are met: (1) the state must be de-ethnicized; (2) multiculturalism must be clearly separated from policies aimed at reducing the educational, economic and social inequalities between groups in the country; (3) multiculturalism will probably yield the expected result in peaceful coexistence under the minimalist program, i.e., an official policy that recognizes and protects diversity, but does not celebrate or actively support it. (Pierre L. van Den Berghe, 2002).

Presenting what he describes as "intercultural dialogue" Parekh seeks to avoid the shortcomings of existing multicultural approaches. Parekh bases his explanation on the premise that the celebration of diversity can encourage difference, while the quarantining of diversity can also lead to conflict. So, he proposes the kind of multiculturalism in which everyone respects the laws and values of the nation-state, but different cultural forms remain viable. Such "interculturalism" seems to promote some kind of mutual lending among culturally defined groups: I will take something from you and you will take something from me. Finally, we create something new for both of us, but we still keep enough of what makes us different. This process can also be considered "acculturation" – a more benign form of assimilation, in which members of a community adapt (without coercion) to the culture of the other (Parekh, 2000).

If we look at where the term "multiculturalism" is commonly used, we may easily conclude that the term itself is multi-semantic. It is used in different ways for different purposes. It may be instructive and educational and can be used to explain to the majority, which needs to learn how to coexist in harmony with certain minorities to whom collective rights should be given. Multiculturalism is not a universal solution for resolving ethnic conflicts, (Atanasov, 2012). Many other elements, such as the existence of a political culture, economic interests, the international context and especially the historical tradition can be crucial for the survival of a society with significant minority demands.

Cultural Policy in the Republic of Macedonia from Independence to the Present

From the creation of the Macedonian state within the Yugoslav federation until its dissolution, the main features of the cultural identity of the Macedonian nation were the Slavic origin and language, the dominant Orthodox religion, and the Byzantine culture. The new state was also characterized by its Balkan ethnological attributes as well as by certain oriental influences, plus the vogue for "retro" baroque elements that held sway in the romantic-revival period in the second half of the XIX century. In this period, the emphasis was on the ethnic distinctiveness of folkloric features and the mythologizing of individuals and events in the near and distant past (Bardzhieva- Trajkovska, 2012).

In the early years of Macedonian independence, despite the denial of its identity by some of its neighbors, the cultural heritage of the Republic Macedonia was not directly involved in the process of enhancing the sense of the uniqueness of the Macedonian identity (Atanasov and Simoska, 2013). Overall, in this period, no significant changes occurred in the public discourse on the role of culture as a resource in

nation-building, nor were any new historical museums or memorial complexes built.¹ The first signs of intervention in the legacy appeared in 1999 with the restoration of St. Clement's Church in Plaoshnik. The major changes occurred after the victory of VMRO DPMNE in the 2006 elections and the new ruling party's inauguration of its "program for revival".

Macedonian ethnic identity is perceived as being threatened by those of its neighbors who deny its existence and decline to recognize it. At least not in a manner that ethnic Macedonians would like. Therefore, cultural policy is aimed at strengthening societal cohesion and distinctiveness, primarily of the ethnic Macedonians. For this to be achieved national myths are being created.² Such myths (Schopflin, 2000) were abundantly used at the time of the creation of national states in the Balkans in the XIX century.³ But according to Nade Proeva, today, in the XXI century:

"The myth is neither the best nor most orderly way to defend identity. Rather, it seems to me, it is the easiest for people to grasp and the most suitable from the standpoint of political pragmatics. An additional argument for this thesis is that in the Republic of Macedonia, the narration of the myth itself is misguided."
(Proeva, 2012)

The denial of the ethnic identity of Macedonians (Brown, 1998) by some of the country's neighbors, plus the dispute with Greece over the country's name prompted the promotion of numerous cultural projects, including those being carried out by the current government of the Republic of Macedonia, the goal being to defend or recover the resources and practices that enable the expression and continuation of group identity. It is already clear that what we're seeing here is a well thought-out concept of a change of identity through heritage and archeology, hidden in the new term, "protection and (re) creation" of cultural heritage.

This "organic" design of the right-wing government places the roots of the nation in the ancient past. The project was prepared in secret, without the participation of the wider professional and scientific community. Some experts in this area assessed it as putting archeology on the main stage after more than a century of pairing "Nationalism- Heritage - Identity" (Bardzhieva-Trajkovska, 2012). This project has been criticized from both left and right, as well as the parties of the smaller ethnic groups in the country, with charges that it is ethnocentric. The ruling right-wing party in the coalition government accepted the criticisms of its left-wing Albanian partner and agreed to include in the project figures from Albanian history who contributed to the building of the Macedonian state. Thus, the project in addition to the original "organic" dimension received also a "voluntary" dimension that was intended to reflect the multi-ethnic character of the state. Under current cultural policy, what is happening is "reconstruction of history", or as Ana Pop Stefania notes:

"History is being divided into correct and incorrect - into that which needs to be remembered and that which should be erased. The history of the Yugoslav Federation is coming under attack."
(Ana Pop Stefania, 2012)

1 The exception was the construction of the Memorial Complex, Pelince in 2004 due to the inability to mark the anniversary of ASNOM at the monastery St. Prohor Pchinski.

2 Distinction should be made between myths and memories. Myths are constructed with deliberate manipulation of the facts, while memories of the past are based on real facts.

3 It is interesting that Macedonians are one of the few nations in the Balkans that have created their own state without using populist myths.

New cultural policies are being implemented by introducing traditions typical of the ancient Macedonians, by erecting monuments and by sponsoring public display of historical artifacts, numerous archaeological excavations, etc.. Critics of the project say it has turned the Slavic heritage of the country into a bone of contention, and has thereby rendered questionable the Slavic foundations of national identity.

'Skopje 2014' Project: A Symbol of the New Cultural Policy

The most striking project is "Skopje 2014", which is a symbol of the new cultural policy. The central component of this project consists of a fountain with a bronze statue entitled "Warrior on a Horse".⁴ Set as it is in the center of Slope's main square, this grandiose monument is intended to be the axis around which Macedonia's national identity is built. Accompanying this central figure in the square are numerous other monuments, to Tsar Samuil, Justinian I, Metodi Andonov-Chento, Gotse Delchev, Dame Gruev and others, individuals who, in the opinion of the stakeholders of the project, left their mark on Macedonian history. So, along with the characters from the period of ancient Macedonia, there are figures from the Byzantine period and from medieval and recent history. The idea is to endow the development of the Macedonian nation with continuity, an evolutionary process extending from antiquity to the present day.

Instead of highlighting the element that brings together ethnic Macedonians and other ethnicities in the country, that Alexander the Great was a child of Philip, a Macedonian, and Olympia, an Illyrian⁵ that fact is left out of the narrative. Furthermore, the name of the monument and its appearance (Alexander is depicted as riding his horse with his sword in hand) evokes conquests, murders, enslavement, or the dark side of his reign. Instead, if the intention is to unite all ethnic communities in the country, the cultural and statesman-like dimension of the work of Alexander the Great should be emphasized. Examples include support given by him to the various religions in the country, the rebuilding of ruined temples and the building of new ones, the organizing of cultural events, which led to the mixing of the Macedonian Hellenic culture and the cultures of the conquered Eastern nations, thus creating a new, supra-ethnic culture (conventionally called Hellenistic, because of the language used), to distinguish it from the previous Hellenic (Ancient Greek) culture (Proeva 2012). Besides the Macedonians and Albanians, Vlachs have also developed a mythology in which they claim to be the descendants of Alexander the Great. So, instead of unity, this project leads to new divisions, not only between ethnic Macedonians and other ethnicities in the country but also among Macedonians themselves, because some of them consider the Slavic element to be the dominant one, not the ancient element. To make matters even more absurd, the "myth of Alexander" has led to a direct conflict with the Greeks, on whom depends the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country, a goal that unites all ethnic communities in Macedonia.

Thus defined, the project "Skopje 2014" was criticized by the opposition, by some civic organizations and by public figures. According to Jasna Koteska, the project symbolizes the old-fashioned pride and dignity of the capital of a super state (Koteska, 2011).

"Aided by archeology and the national conservation institutions, the project has not only transformed and recreated the heritage - but has created a false picture of a linear continuity of the heritage / identity, from

4 It is an open secret that the monument represents Alexander the Great on his horse Bucephalus. However, in anticipation of protests from Greece, the name "Warrior on a Horse" was adopted.

5 Albanian historiography has noted that they are descendants of the Illyrians.

prehistory to today. This alleged continuity is "supported" by the construction of new buildings – "markers" - in a non-authentic, borrowed "stylistic expression" which is alien to our heritage – from the monument to Alexander of Macedonia to the Monument to the Fallen Heroes of Macedonia, the new Archaeological Museum, the Archives of Macedonia, the Constitutional Court, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Museum of Macedonia's Struggle for Statehood and the Victims of Communism, plus the changes to the facades of buildings in the downtown core of Skopje."
(Bardzhieva -Trajkovska, 2012).

The criticism was joined by the Albanian coalition partner in government, the Democratic Union for Integration - DUI, which claimed that the project is "ethnocentric." The criticisms bore fruit, and a decision was made to incorporate into the project monuments to some prominent Albanians credited with playing a role in the creation of the Macedonian state (Josip Bageri Nexhat Agolli). Furthermore, by way of compensation, Albanians were given permission to build a square on the left bank of the river Vardar, in Skopje's Old Bazaar, where the focal point will be a monument to "Skanderbeg". Hence, the project "Skopje 2014", initially designed to strengthen the cohesion of the Macedonian ethnic identity, triggered a competition between identities, ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian.⁶ This shows how difficult it is to create a cultural policy in a multicultural society such as Macedonia's. Moreover, the best intentions and ideas, if not well explained and accepted, (in this case, by the opposition and the ethnic Albanian community), may not bring cohesion but instead create division.

Despite its many shortcomings in conception, the project was not bound, by definition, to cause division. But, cultural practices were carried out poorly. Such a narrative did not lead to the creation of a Macedonian multicultural identity that would be multi-layered (Sulejmani, 2012). Instead of unity, this project has led to new divisions, not only between ethnic Macedonians and other ethnicities in the country but also among Macedonians themselves⁷, because for some of them the Slavic element in their heritage outweighs the element from antiquity.

The government's "Renaissance in 100 Steps" program and "Skopje 2014" project which, among other things deals with the strengthening of the uniqueness of the Macedonian people, is, by definition, at loggerheads with the projects of other ethnic communities in the country which aim to preserve the peculiarities of their societies. Hence, to meet the demands of the smaller ethnic communities in the country and avoid conflict, the state is obliged to support their ethnic projects. In the Macedonian case, if Macedonia Square is under construction with all its historic monuments aimed at strengthening the Macedonian ethnic identity, then, as a counterbalance, the state supports the project for construction of Skanderbeg Square, which honors an historical figure dedicated to the struggle of the Albanians for their rights. To make things more absurd, national projects of other countries, such as the celebration of the "100th anniversary of the Albanian state" are being supported. Instead of which, the state should support projects that connect different ethnic communities in society and strengthen its cohesion. Thus, state funds are being used to celebrate differences, leading to disintegration, possible federalization, and the secession of an ethnic community.

6 The initial design of the square in the center of Skopje envisaged construction of an Orthodox church. After the ethnic Albanians requested permission to build a mosque, the creators of the project dropped the idea.

7 According to an opinion poll, 54% of citizens do not support the project while 46% support it (Koteska, 2011).

Criticism of Multiculturalism in Macedonia

Interethnic relations on the ground have gradually improved since the end of the 2001 conflict. However, by and large the social distance between the communities has increased.⁸ Relationships between communities tend not to go beyond the sphere of professional relations, and it is unlikely that the trend towards seclusion and the physical separation of communities will be reversed any time soon. Some of the Ohrid reforms have contributed to multi-ethnicity (such as balanced representation in public sector employment), but others have increased ethnic distance (decentralization and universities where the language of instruction is Albanian, among other things). Now, the biggest source of weakness in the country is the lack of ethnic and economic interaction between communities and between the policies that are based on the role of communities and political clientelism (Atanasov and Cvetanova, 2013). Luckily, Macedonia has never been like Serbia / Kosovo and has its own long history of ethnic tolerance (Petričušić, 2013). The two largest communities may never have lived together, but it is also true that there has not been any great trauma or ethnic hostility (Cvetanova and Naumovska, 2014). Even today, the majority of citizens of all ethnic groups report that their biggest problem is poverty, unemployment and corruption, rather than interethnic relations (Klekovski, 2011).

However, some Albanian politicians play the role of eternal skeptics, from time to time expressing their pessimism about the future of multi-ethnic states in general and the Macedonian version in particular (Xhaferi, 2005). For some Albanian leaders, Macedonian statehood always carries the risk at any level of "multiculturalism" of being too Macedonian and insufficiently Albanian. Albanians fear Macedonian civic nationalism rather than ethnic nationalism. Civic nationalism in a multiethnic state is assimilative, and its promoters are less likely to agree on divisions than are ethnic nationalists of the larger ethnic group. Albanians believe that in the multicultural state it is not possible for all citizens to be made equal under one national name, especially if the name of the state is identical to that of the largest ethnic community (Ramadani, 2004).

"The desire of the international community for Macedonia to become a functionally multiethnic society in the Balkans is not a viable project, because unlike, for example, Canada, Belgium or Switzerland, Macedonia in its name contains the name of the largest ethnic community in the country. This leads to the conclusion that Macedonians would always put more efforts into achieving their ethnic identity than the civic identity of all ethnic communities in the country."

(Adamson and Jović, 2004)

In the Republic of Macedonia, multiculturalism is primarily understood as respect and celebration of diversity. In the "Macedonian Renaissance", the ruling right-wing party uses cultural means - building monuments and museums, increasing the number of national and religious holidays, etc. - to strengthen the ethnic identity of communities, primarily the Macedonian one, which is threatened by the policies of **some of its** neighboring countries. But what is forgotten is that under the Framework Agreement, the Republic of Macedonia is no longer a state of ethnic Macedonians but a multiethnic society. The state finances cultural projects that underscore the uniqueness of the various ethnic groups in the country, while there are very few projects that highlight the closeness and coexistence of different cultures in this area.

⁸ A public opinion survey conducted in 2010 asked people to respond to the question "Do you agree with the view that Macedonians and Albanians do not actually want to live together?". In the respondents' answers there was not much difference between positive and negative responses (53% yes, 47% no). There was also little statistical difference between the views of Macedonians and Albanians (Atanasov, 2010).

It seems that here "intercultural dialogue" is essential. In a way, this is offered in the strategy for inclusive education in the Republic of Macedonia, whereby, for example, it is envisaged that Macedonian is studied by Albanian primary school students from first grade, while ethnic-Macedonian primary school students learn the language of one of the smaller ethnic communities. This is intended to lead to a better understanding of each other's culture and in the course of time the creation of "something in common" that connects us. However, for such a happy ending to happen, all ethnic communities in the country need to be ready to "give" and "take" and the political leadership needs to be prepared to explain that to its ethnic constituency. Currently, that part is missing.

Conclusion

The current cultural policy of the Republic of Macedonia is mainly characterized by an organic (ethnic) approach to creating a nation that approach being combined with voluntaristic elements. When creating cultural policies in a multicultural society, the impact of any given cultural project on the majority community needs to be borne in mind. But an even more important consideration is its impact on the minority communities. Very often, "good intentions" can be misunderstood by other communities, as has been the case with the "Skopje 2014" project. So, instead of integration it can cause disintegration of the society. The cultural policy of the Republic of Macedonia should be created through a multicultural paradigm, not only because the country's heritage has many uses (and users), but because there are many designers. In developing the contemporary Macedonian nation-state, there needs to be a balanced approach in the creation of cultural policy, whereby equal importance will be given to both the organic and voluntary view of culture as a resource in nation-building.

The state should apply a cultural policy based on multiculturalism, of people and events that bring together the different ethnic communities. Someone will say that as a young country, the Republic of Macedonia began writing its history relatively late, while its neighbors created their nation states earlier and stole historical characters and events that Macedonians could celebrate as their own. This is partially true if the intention is to link the continuity of the nation with ancient Macedonia. However, there are characters and events from more recent history that are acceptable to all ethnic communities in the country and which will not cause conflicts with neighbors. The ruling elite stubbornly insists on building the identity of the nation on characters from more remote history. The state should not turn its back on such figures. On the contrary, they are part of the cultural heritage of the Republic of Macedonia and deserve to be nurtured. However, it would be better to put the focus on people who are most deserving for their role in the creation of the Republic of Macedonia as it now known to the world.

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