

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE PROCESS OF (RE) BUILDING MACEDONIAN SOCIETY

IRINA SIMONOVSKA-SPIRKOVSKA\*

**Abstract.** *The impact of cultural societies' pluralism (as in the case of Macedonia) and, more important, the influence of the identity of communities on the general societal performance is great. It will not and should not be solely influenced by them, because getting into a sphere of exclusivity is in danger of inclination towards ethnic society as the ultimate sign, and it leads to the destabilization of society. The same happens in the opposite case of negation of ethnic and national emphasis, leading to negative putting on pedestal of the ethnic identity of the Albanian population and finally to the crisis / conflict in 2001. The sense of "belonging to" a certain ethnicity and cultural group as a means of identification must not prevail the principles of modern civil society. Thus, the ethno — cultural identity of minority groups must be placed in a different context which has a major impact on the necessary loyalty of minorities not only towards to the majority, but to the society as well, and through them, towards the broader environment, further leading to Europe, the European Union and the wider global environment. That inclusiveness of society in a culturally plural context provides the confidence and loyalty of minorities and sometimes goes beyond the narrow ethno — cultural frameworks.*

**Keywords:** *Macedonia, cultural diversity, cultural pluralism, ethno — cultural identity, European Union.*

#### *Introduction*

The cultural or social integration as a complex concept is an extremely important process which has the unifying impulse at its core. Although its immanent cohesive attribute remains undisputable, however, in relation to the aforementioned, attention there should necessarily be called to the positive embodiment in a normative framework. Of course, this process, as well as all other social processes are very complex and always cover a long historical period. In most cases, they are compounded with the ongoing problems that inevitably affect

---

\* Secretary General of the NGO "European Movement-Macedonia" in 2008; employee of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Macedonia-Europe Division; irinasimionovska99@gmail.com.

societies and many social, ethnic groups, more specifically, where there may be varying degrees of acceptance of joint actions and alleviating the difference in achieving common goals.

In the years after the independence of the Republic of Macedonia, no matter how good it looked in official documents, the true social cohesion was not satisfactory, especially when it came to the two most numerous nationalities, Macedonian and Albanian.

Out of the aforementioned premise, numerous sub-questions could be raised: to what extent the Macedonian society was really integrated; was it, if possible, a non — integration, fault of the majority Macedonian population and their official policy, or, the Albanian factor too bears some of the responsibility; were other minority groups strong enough to launch an independent real ethnic and political mobilization, or, their treatment was only a “side-effect” of governance the Albanian community. The commitment of the Macedonian cultural and political element — for the plural policy project to succeed “despite everything”, in the broad political and general social area, still remains undisputable, as such. Unfortunately, failed to relieve the social tensions and more importantly, ethnic tensions that were often elevated to the level of potential threat, especially at the crucial point — the year of 2001.

Despite the good intentions in declarative commitments, despite opened opportunities for social integration of the diversities (standing on a higher level than narrow the respect for the rights of different ethnic groups and their cultural identity), despite the official policy of coexistence of the state (an ideological term that was not sufficiently explained as it was supposed to mark the peaceful coexistence), and despite repeated opportunities for integration (the absence of open and violent conflict, as well as respect for equality and diversity) reality reflected different realities.

### *Cultural Premises of the Macedonian Society (From Independence until the 2001 Conflict)*

The socio-demographic characteristics of the society were reflected primarily by the formation of ethnical political parties (as stated above), through the intensification of the processes of formation of ethnically closed villages and settlements in the cities, forming companies based on ethnic ownership, ethnic organizations and nongovernmental organizations, etc.

This was the path of the post-independence Macedonian society, creating two parallel worlds that (co)exist, formed of “exclusive” groups and individuals. Macedonian society became a divided society. In this sense, the social model of integration of the Macedonian society can emphasize several assumptions in the process of interaction between ethnic groups, primarily in relations between the Macedonian and Albanian ethnic group.

After 10 years of independent functioning, sufficient critical mass and qualitative preconditions for greater integration of the Albanian ethnic minority (or community in society) were not achieved. Moreover, there were some positive

elements in the processes of structural integration, but the process of cultural integration lacked, and even less has been achieved in the processes of acceptance and common interests. In these processes of interaction, more elements of opposition and tension were present, rather than elements of communality and social cohesion.

Hence, the Macedonian society followed the path of disintegration, rather than social integration, where the main ethnic prerequisite, followed by strict isolation and socio-political pluralism, when many social issues had not been resolved (as in the case of very long period of transition and economic crisis).

The above lead to reinforced destructive pressures, as well as to escalation of the struggle for redistribution of power in society. These had strengthening influence on the degree of conflict to the climax level (which happened in 2001, and the consequences are visible till present days). Instead of creating a favorable climate conditions (among these could be mentioned the establishment of competitive environment and of a broad — enough field in which the communities take part willingly); instead of implementing the strength of constitutional provisions that were paying attention to the civil society and its central and most important part — the people and their well — being; instead of enabling the citizen to take equal part in the economic system and its inputs (which would have made negligible the feature of ethnicity), occurred twisted politics of equality.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect emerged at almost every level of the relatively brief historical development of the independent Macedonian society: the effort of building a cultural-pluralistic society had an inverse influence by the strengthening of the common civic identity. Putting the accent on “*cultural community*” did not offer a formula for a common belonging, equally acceptable to all communities that otherwise do not have problems with communitarian self — definition. The elements with which this belonging should be constructed were (and maybe still are) that mutually exclude ethnicities. The supporters of multiculturalism in its classical meaning defend this thesis as an advantage, that it doesn’t represent radical communitarians nor is blind to the differences of classical liberalism and/or republican assimilations.<sup>2</sup>

The mentioned policy of inequality and division of — Macedonian social sphere (at the time, in which regional events were not without minor importance), puts light to the factor of influence of the ethnic division of the population into the political, economic, and finally, the common “ordinary” sphere of life, which is in a way quite contrary to previous traditions and practices of common history and struggle for common goals, resulting in a detached way of dealing with things, such as the languages which are quite different, different religious practices and so on. Thus, instead of bringing together these two ethnic

<sup>1</sup> See, Atanasov, Petar, *Multiculturalism as Theory, Policy and Practice*, Evro Balkan Press, Skopje, 2003, pp. 119-121.

<sup>2</sup> Marinov, Tchavdar, *The Multiculturalism in the Balkans: Is it necessary? The Use of the Term in the Context of the Balkans*, Article in the Journal of Politics, Gender and Culture, Vol. 5/no.2, Institute Euro-Balkan, 2006, Skopje.

groups, they diverged constantly, while building an extremely degrading and stereotypical image of the other. The communications between these ethnic groups were reduced to formal presidential addresses and contacts of an economic nature. The institutional, administrative, and normal everyday communication was skillfully avoided.

In the Macedonian society, the separation factor of ethnic groups (as in many other democracies where Muslims organize their relations according to the strict rules of Islam) is enhanced due to the existence and respect of different values, which, regarding the Muslim population, historically, had not changed too much. While in Europe, especially Western Europe, the universal democratic values and equality of all people (especially between genders) are accepted and practiced for several centuries, in some societies (among which the Macedonian one) the traditional family concept is quite different, a fact is particularly noticeable in the unequal and (somewhat) discriminative treatment towards women, i.e., the existence and practice of family rights and their participation in social and political life; their education takes much less time than the education of the boys, they are being less employed, and their predetermined future is to marry very young.

The separation factor was negligible in the early nineties, when the ethnic background almost didn't matter, but that image has changed radically in the late nineties, when the concerns about belonging to another ethnic group were growing and beginning to occur in almost all segments of society. The religious affiliation, which in the traditional spirit of multicultural and multi confessional living in Macedonia had never previously represented the cause of intolerance among different groups, had become a divisive factor. This way of thinking was prompted by various political parties, but also by imported ideologies. All this, in that period, resulted in the closure within the respective groups and their appropriate attitudes, as opposed to others. During this period, ethnocentrism was most expressed among Albanians (60%) and Macedonians (50%), while other minorities were not subject to such views. As a result of such attitudes ethnic and religious prejudices were exacerbated and became an essential prerequisite for the creation of inter — ethnic tensions.

In the period from 1990 to 2000, viewed year after year, the trend in the field of ethnic relations was obvious going worse, showing dramatic changes in intensity. If the total research is presented in chronological summary, it would look like this<sup>3</sup>: in 1990/1, the main outline in this respect is the presence of prejudice, for mutual perception of ethnic groups as different. The key category in this period is the ethnic (and religious) distance. In this sense, Macedonian society is governed toward a higher degree of integration, citizens have equal status and privileges, the majority isn't threatened by the minorities; citizens have equal economic opportunities, groups (especially ethnic) were not considered as categories, but the individual<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Cvetanova, Ganka, *Cultural Differences and Social Integration (Macedonia Before and After the Framework Agreement)*, Institute for Economic Strategies and International Relations Ohrid, Skopje, 2007, pp. 106-107.

<sup>4</sup> Atanasov, Petar, p. 141.

In 1992/3, the principal issues that dominated the consciousness of citizens were related to the loyalty of state institutions in the system etc. Notable are the mutual accusations and evaluations of ethnic groups in this aspect.

In 1994-1996, among the citizens there is a dominant sense of threat from each other, as well as willingness to start open (even armed) conflicts.

In 2000, given the deteriorating situation and intolerance, all questions related to the security and internal stability of the state.

As already stated, the field of public relations had also faced a large degree of distrust, with communication being primarily a subject of coordination within each group, thus expressing the common views of the same, then spoken out, often non — coinciding with the respective positions of the other group. This was, quite expectedly, accompanied with frequent discontent, especially when needed to express the position of minorities, or their “fair” or “unfair” treatment in the implementation of their collective rights.

In this respect, the Albanian community has developed a particularly strong sense of belonging and especially high degree of cohesion. Albanians, primarily because of the location of their dwellings (with high percent in rural areas and due to the relative “isolation”), are less susceptible to influences and more prone to traditional and patriarchal way of life, strictly observe the hierarchical organization of their community and are likely to show deference to leaders. Thus, the “assimilation” is more than absent on the social stage. The communication between two groups, as stated, was not satisfactory, and when it occurred, it was usually formal and involuntary, that further contributed to tensions, instead of relaxing them, creating new misperceptions for the “others”. Some surveys even show that, in mixed towns, Macedonians were very reserved when it comes to open communication, because they feel endangerment, while the same feeling among Albanians is not expressed, so they respectively are more opened to communication, even when in a close minority; conversely, where Macedonians were in a dominant majority, they were more willing to carry on an open communication with the ethnic communities, because it reinforced their sense of security and lack of fear of rejection and hostility. Certainly, the linguistic issue is once again an important issue. Ethnic Macedonians do not speak Albanian, and more importantly, they strongly resist learning it. A majority of Albanians, of course, speaks the Macedonian language, but many of them, especially in closed rural areas, do not speak or want to learn it. Therefore, one of the central issues for the new reorganization of Macedonia’s society after the conflict since 2011 was precisely the question of language and its use.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The situation in mixed schools can be particularly tense. Students, while using the same facilities and studying the same curricula, have no formal points of interaction. Ordinary schoolyard fights often acquire an ethnic cast when they occur between children of different groups. Serious problems are more likely at the high school level than in primary schools. In the first three months of 1999, there were fourteen reported clashes between ethnic Albanian and ethnic Macedonian high school students, none of whom had a previous police record. There were even signs that some of the clashes were supported by teachers. In 1996, 34% of adolescents reported that it would be difficult to be friends with someone who was not of their group. Ten years earlier, fewer than 4% had given that answer. Source: Assessment of Ethnic Relations in Macedonia, USAID/Macedonia, December 2000, pp. 4-5.

As stated above, the post-Yugoslavian war of the early nineties, further emphasized the effect of separation of the ethnic groups, but more importantly, of religious groups, where one of the primary meanings reflected the need to belong in one of the groups, which in its turn, reflected the need for protection within their own “circle” of people and put all the blame on the “other” group, implying a production of relatively high degree of ethnocentrism, nationalism and prejudices. The changes and consequences that the economic sphere has produced — is comprised in nothing else, but in a quickly enrichment for one social strata, leaving the other social strata with feelings of uncertainty, aided by the (in)ability of the respective governments to find a transitional political option for the management of structural inequalities and tectonic shifts in the social sphere, which proved so critical for the loosening of potential danger for intercultural tensions that almost always follow the structural inequality and the turmoil of the ethnic field.

### *Cultural Diversity in Macedonia After 2001*

The question of cultural diversity in Macedonia (and the various mechanisms for that achievement), pose the question whether the population and political elites seek to achieve consensus, and if the answer is affirmative, what is its nature?

Experience shows that the loyalty of the Macedonian citizens to society, state institutions and the system shouldn't be built on cultural — different colored base, or on the basis of certain ethnicity but it is best to remain focused on mechanisms for organizing the plurality that can be called “macro-loyalty”. The latter would represent one of the essential features of the ability to organize the culturally plural societies, and its primary goal would primarily be a creation of stable climate in which the “loyalties” of other ethnic communities could be expressed smoothly, or to organize a plurality of loyalties directed to preserve their specifics, but also to allow individuals to move freely between many “other” loyalties.<sup>6</sup>

The issue of minority rights and their protection is closely related to the principle of non-discrimination. Whether it will become a principle of positive discrimination is another matter. Citizens of the Republic of Macedonia are equal in their freedoms and rights, regardless of gender, race, color, national or social origin, political or religious beliefs, property and social status. They are equal before the Constitution and laws. Article 9 of the Constitution expressly forbids any discrimination based on national origin.

One of the most important points, when discussing the period of the independence of Macedonia, of course, is the question of its attitude towards the issue of cultural pluralism, and in this sense, the attitudes towards minorities and cultural communities. That relationship can be presented in the most representative manner, by analysis of treatment towards the largest minority community in Macedonia — the Albanian one. First, the issue of cultural pluralism, which was

<sup>6</sup> Frchkoski, Ljubomir D., *Republic of Macedonia: A Stable Model of Interethnic Relations?*, Article in the Yearbook of the Faculty of Law, University of St. Kiril and Metodij, Edition 39, 1999-2001, p. 275.



treated twice (first time in 1991, the second time in 2001), received positive reviews by the Commission of Robert Badenter, which is a rare recognition, perhaps the only one on the methods and procedures of implementing the legal standards for human rights in the constitutions of the new democracies in Europe. The second aspect is the creation of a multicultural society which is reflected in the institutions of the political system, with high degree of tolerance towards cultural diversity of the levels of minority protection in European countries. This created a policy of inclusiveness in the institutions of the system, not only of the Albanians, but also of other minorities, which once was a true rarity in the Balkans, still inspired by different policies, as “nation building”, or the famous, “melting pot” thus neutralizing possible secessionist plans, as well as the “conspiracy” for establishing the “Great Albanian state”. It was a significant contribution to decomposition of this “great state” idea and a significant contribution to the final pacification of the region.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the perspectives (towards which the society strives), one of the most important issues was and would be the preservation of the unitary character of the state. Macedonia is probably the only country in the Balkans and the region which advocates cultural pluralism in a unitary form. This excludes any striving for federalization of the same.

The historical review showed that any territorial aspiration in this direction leads to forceful displacements of population, ethnic cleansing, in some cases even to genocide. In this domain, one of the main neutralizing roles is played by civil society, as an active manager in the cultural “market”. Second important factor in this regard, besides the civil society, would be stable and effective institutional system, which in its operating mechanism inevitably involves different ethnicities, but is ethnically neutral in implementing the law. Namely, a strong investment in an uncorrupted administration is also an important contribution to the performance of others “accessory”, and “assisting” policies, thus enhancing the effects of their results. Only an effective state in this regard will be strong enough to resist the nationalist pressures and to serve the citizenry, because, no matter how important the concept of civil society is, it still cannot replace the role of the state, but can complement it. The third factor refers to material or normative representation and protection of the categories relating to cultural plurality, where, unlike Western countries, these are raised to the highest degree. In this sense, the politics of cultural diversity substantially differs from the majority policy (or national policy) and supports the concept of individual civil rights. One of the advantages is that Macedonia has always had the ability to accept advice and help from the international organizations. Closure into self — sufficiency and isolation can be very harmful. Macedonia, since the beginning of conflict was open to all types of expertise and “soft arbitration”. Discussion on all matters concerning human and minority rights took trilateral form, government — minorities — foreign experts and institutions. It enhances the operative forces of

---

<sup>7</sup> Frchkoski, Ljubomir D., *Gaining Independence of the Republic of Macedonia*, Article in the Bulletin of the Scientific Gathering for the 60 years Jubilee of ASNOM (15-16 December 2004, Skopje, Macedonia), Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Skopje, 2005, p. 141.

the government in ethnic relations and promotes the results to the international community. Thus, the state succeeded to show that it is possible to achieve what was previously identified as such only in the books and scholar circles, but also to leave sufficient capacity to face ongoing challenges that are still waiting, (unfortunately) in joining Euro-Atlantic integration, as: further promotion of democracy and more specifically, promotion of individual and minority rights protection; constant improvement and reform of political, legal and economic system and their approximation to European standards.

\*

With regard to the Macedonian question, the existence of cultural diversity in society and its role in terms of social cohesion can be of vital importance for the stability and survival of a community or state. As stated earlier, depending on the treatment they receive from the wider organized community, they can become a constructive element, or a highly destructive one.

The cultural differences however are not the only or the most important factor of influence in the process of social integration. One could say that an equally important role is played by other factors, such as the general social, economic and political frame, or history (on the basis of which a given community reaches the level of integrity and readiness for integration), preparedness for implementation of aforementioned goals through the operation of the rule of law and law compliance and readiness to preserve the values and fundamental human rights, etc. In their turn, the specificities that every state and society possesses, from a cultural and historical perspective, are also determinants of its development, in that sense, defining their internal relationships, but also putting it in a broader international constellation, thus having influence on the perception and definition of a state and society as tolerant and developed (or undeveloped and intolerant), reaching out to the broader effective performance in international social, political and economic flows and processes.

#### SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Assessment of Ethnic Relations in Macedonia, USAID/Macedonia, December 2000;  
 Atanasov, Petar, Atanasov, Petar, *Multiculturalism as Theory, Policy and Practice*, Evro Balkan Press, Skopje, 2003;  
 Marinov, Tchavdar, *The Multiculturalism in the Balkans: Is it necessary? The Use of the Term in the Context of the Balkans*, Article in the Journal of Politics, Gender and Culture, Vol. 5/no. 2, Institute Euro-Balkan, 2006, Skopje;  
 Cvetanova, Ganka, *Cultural Differences and Social Integration (Macedonia Before and After the Framework Agreement)*, Institute for Economic Strategies and International Relations Ohrid, Skopje, 2007;  
 Frchkoski, Ljubomir D., *Republic of Macedonia: A Stable Model of Interethnic Relations?* Article in the Yearbook of the Faculty of Law, University of St. Kiril and Metodij, Edition 39, 1999-2001;  
 Frchkoski, Ljubomir D., *Gaining Independence of the Republic of Macedonia*, Article in the Bulletin of the Scientific Gathering for the 60 years Jubilee of ASNOM (15-16 December 2004, Skopje, Macedonia), Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Skopje, 2005.