

Naoum KAYTCHEV

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

naumkb@gmail.com

BEING MACEDONIAN: DIFFERENT TYPES OF ETHNIC IDENTIFICATIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

ABSTRACT The article reviews different forms of ethnic Macedonian (Macedonist) identities in the contemporary Republic of Macedonia. The classic model elaborated in the post-war Yugoslavia – postulating that Macedonians are a separate Slav nationality forged in the medieval period and marked in its genesis by the influence of Sts. Cyril and Methodius and their pupils – after 2006 was substituted by a different paradigm making the nationality a thousand years older and deriving it from ancient *Makedones* and the state of Alexander the Great. The focus of the contribution is on a third little known variety of ethnic Macedonian identity that claims that the distinct Macedonian nation is a comparatively recent phenomenon forged in the years around the Second World War. Such views are spread among two wider groups: firstly, those of the elder Macedonians, contemporaries of 1940s that personally experienced the national transformation at the time, and, secondly, that of the younger educated citizens that respect the imperatives of reason and search for the rational resolution of different societal problems including the nation-related ones. Since the current environment in the Republic of Macedonia strongly discourages the articulation of such viewpoints they have a semi-dissident statute. Nevertheless, some prominent members of the intellectual elite have the courage to disclose their views, most consistent among them being Prof. Denko Maleski, former foreign minister and permanent representative to the UN and the son of the creator of the text of the Macedonian national anthem, as well as the journalist Branko Trichkovski. Both stem from the old left-wing Yugoslav-Macedonian elite. On the other hand, figures from the right-wing political spectre, including the former prime minis-

ter Lyubcho Georgievski, though departing from a different starting point, are coming to similar conclusions on the recent naissance of the Macedonian nation. These identifications are in harmony with the dominating concepts in the European historiography affirmed and developed in the later decades by authors such as Hugh Poulton, Jan Rychlík and Ulf Brunbauer. The contribution limits its scope to the three different types of identifications within the Macedonist framework and does not study the Macedonian Slav identities that remain beyond its range – those of Macedonian Bulgarians and of Macedonian Serbs.

Keys-words: nationalism, ethnic identity, antiquization, national narration, Macedonist model

Main outside interest in the recent national ideological developments in the Republic of Macedonia for obvious reasons has been directed to the major shift in the nationhood construction since 2006. The new politics of “antiquization”, of forging direct links of the current nation with the ancient state of Macedonia, has been scrutinized in academic treatises¹ and in official European Union documents.²

This reformulation of the new Macedonian ethnicity after 2006 has indeed led to multiple consequences. The core of the national narration has been dramatically changed: the myths of origin as well as the myth of the Golden Age of the nation were moved back thousand years to several centuries before Christ, the foremost ancestors now being not the medieval Slavs but the ancient *Makedones*. The ideology was politically instrumentalized contributing to several election victories by the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party and, more importantly, to the strain in the bilateral relations with Greece, exacerbation of the name issue and ultimately to the halt of the country's international affirmation and stabilization via EU and NATO membership.

The conflict between diverging ideologies has exposed to the wider public the different varieties of being Macedonian even within the ethnic Macedonian (Macedonist) paradigm. In this paper we will not discuss the Macedonian Slavic identities that are

¹ J. Lechler, ‘Reading Skopje 2009: A City between Amnesia and Phantasia’ in S. Herold, B. Langer, J. Lechler (eds.), *Reading the City. Urban Space and Memory in Skopje*, Berlin 2010, pp. 43, 49 (*Sonderpublikation des Instituts für Stadt- und Regionalplanung Technische Universität Berlin*); A. Vangeli, ‘Nation-building Ancient Macedonian Style: The Origins and the Effects of the So-called Antiquization in Macedonia’, *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (2011), pp. 13-32, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2010.532775>>.

² “The European Parliament [...] notes with concern the use of historical arguments in the current debate, including the recent phenomenon of so-called ‘antiquisation’, which is liable to increase tensions with neighbours and create new internal divisions”. ‘European Parliament resolution on the 2009 progress report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’, 10 February 2010, at <<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P7-TA-2010-0024&format=XML&language=EN>>, 31 May 2013. Similar vocabulary is used in the EP resolutions on 2010, 2011 and 2013 progress reports of the country.

beyond the Macedonist framework – that of Macedonian Bulgarians and Macedonian Serbs.³ We would focus on yet another type of ethnic Macedonian identity that is rarely analyzed.

The majority of the foreign scholars of Macedonia tend to agree on the beginnings of the Macedonian nationhood seeing it as a product of the developments in 1930s and 1940s. Up to the Second World War the idea of the separate Macedonian nation was espoused only by small isolated circles of intellectuals. The bulk of the Slavic urban population of Vardar Macedonia that was able to articulate an accomplished national consciousness manifested its devotion to the Bulgarian cultural tradition. It was the developments of the Second World War that created the Second Yugoslavia and led to the forging of the new Macedonian nation.⁴

This analytical scheme contrasts with both the traditional and the new official version of the Macedonist national narration. The leading politicians including the prime minister himself are at pains to deny the “antiquization” process claiming that their vision encompasses all different layers of the region’s history. “We are neither ancient nor Slav but just Macedonians”, goes the recurrent identification message from state leaders.⁵ The new national narration is elaborated in detail and propagated to the public by journalists and legitimized by key academic figures. According to this perspective the Slav component is one of the many ingredients (including Ancient *Makedones*, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman inheritance, etc.) that are making up the current nation. The main scholar celebrity personifying the new identity turn was Pasko Kuzman, a leading archaeologist and until recently director of the government department in charge of the cultural heritage. In numerous public appearances he tirelessly elaborated the crucial importance of the antiquity for the current nation. Usually fragmental in his statements, the relatively consistent avowal of his ideas was offered in the text written as part of a heated newspaper debate: “Macedonian identity is composed by all those values and traits that continually followed, complemented and mutually intermingled, forming a specific identity substance. The ethnicities that existed in our contracted space in the form of civilizations were made up by this identity substance matter.

³ The Serbs of the Republic of Macedonia are officially inscribed in the constitution of the country. Two Serbian political parties have their MPs in both government and opposition; a number of other Serbian MPs elected on a mandate from mainstream Macedonian parties. See: Демократска Партија Срба у Македонији, at <<http://www.dpsm.info>>; J. Трифуноски, *Македонизирање Јужне Србије*, Београд 1995. Bulgarian Macedonians are not officially recognized as a group but still influence and contribute to the developments in the country. For a recent perspective of the Bulgarians from Vardar Macedonia see: М. Сърбиновски, *За македонистките работи*, София 2011; X. Капсаров, *Погледи кон минатото*, Скопје 2009; Бугарски културен клуб, at <<http://bkks.org>>.

⁴ H. Poulton, *Who are the Macedonians?*, London 1995, pp. 93–98, 116–121; J. Rychlík, M. Kouba, *Dějiny Makedonie*, Praha 2003, pp. 134–135, 159, 184 (*Dějiny Států*) (Macedonian edition: J. Рихлик, М. Коуба, *Историја на Македонија*, Скопје 2009, pp. 156–157, 186, 241, 250); U. Brunnbauer, ‘Historiography, Myths and the Nation in the Republic of Macedonia’ in idem (ed.), *(Re)Writing History. Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*, Münster 2004, p. 173 (*Studies on South East Europe*, 4).

⁵ ‘Труевски: Во Македонија нема антички и словенски Македонци, има само Македонци!’, *Вечер*, 19 February 2009. Similar statements were made continuously, especially during the election campaign.

Hence this substance matter must have had a nucleus – the most ancient inhabitants that lived here for a very long time, for over eight centuries, and who had as ‘name and surname’ Macedonians, Macedonian, next those that were here for over five centuries, the Romans, who continued with ethnically heterogeneous Byzantium, then Slavs who settled in these Macedonian territories, then the Serbs and the Bulgarians and finally the Turks with their five centuries [...] The ethnically heterogeneous substance matter, recognizable by its cultural-historical specifics possessed and absorbed by us up till today, participates in the creation of the typical Macedonian identity; and that is US, WE, Macedonians. Why we should not be proud of such specific identity composition that has ancient Macedonians as an initial nucleus?”⁶

These ideas were accepted and endorsed further by the key figures symbolizing the old mainstream academic establishment. Thus Todor Chepreganov, a well-known historian and long time director of the Institute of the National History (the main historiographic institution of the country), publically seconded Pasko Kuzman’s thoughts: “The genes of ancient inheritance, Roman inheritance, the inheritance of the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium), the Ottoman inheritance and the inheritance of all that governed over these territories are included in our genetic code. The inheritance of the brothers Cyril and Methodius and their pupils should be positioned in this context. The range of these inheritances is part of the culture-historical inheritance of the Macedonian people.”⁷

This approach is embodied in the governmental architectural project “Skopje 2014” that radically transformed the centre of the capital. It included over a hundred of different monuments recreating the various periods of the past of the region: the nineteenth and twentieth century cultural and political figures of the historical IMRO, of Yugoslav Macedonian or of other provenance are combined with symbolical rulers associated with medieval state traditions of Byzantium (emperor Justinian), Serbia (tsar Stephen Dušan) and Bulgaria (tsars Samuel, Gavril Radomir and Ivan Vladislav). However, the statues dedicated to various periods and cultures, including those devoted to the founders of Slavic Christianity in the Macedonia St. Clement and St. Naum of Ohrid, were overshadowed by the giant monuments of ancient monarchs Alexander the Great and Philip II of Macedon, thus purporting the dominance of ancient *Makedones* as both founders and most glorious representatives of the nation. The project evoked a lot of controversies and criticism, including from the older Yugoslav-Macedonian élites and opposition parties, but it nevertheless received support from the established academic figures as Chepreganov.⁸

The project “Skopje 2014” has engendered numerous scholar perspectives from abroad, some of them analysing the shifts in the construction of the Macedonian na-

⁶ П. Кузман, ‘За идентитетскиот земјотрес во Македонија’, *Утрински весник*, 31 March 2012.

⁷ ‘Историските личности не се пинг-понг топчиња. Интервју со Тодор Чепреганов, директор на Институтот за национална историја’, *Утрински весник*, 19 June 2012.

⁸ Ibid.: “I as historian think that Skopje 2014 is an excellently devised government project that will receive its verification gradually in time.”

tional model⁹, while others overlooked it.¹⁰ However, the majority of academics in the country tended to keep silence regarding the new identity turn. Those few that chose to challenge openly the new paradigm were usually perceived (rightly or wrongly) to be motivated by partisan rather than purely scholar fervour, being too close to the main opposition Social Democratic Union that openly rejects the post-2006 identity model. The critical endeavour of the archaeologist Eleonora Petrova Mitevaska (in cooperation with younger classical philologist Natalia Popovska)¹¹ was explained to the great extent by her nomination from previous social democratic government as country's ambassador to the Council of Europe. In a rare exception, Prof. Dragi Gorgiev, the new director of the Institute of National History in Skopje, cautiously differed from the new paradigm by publicly distancing himself lately from the ideas of direct ethnic connection of the current nation with ancient *Makedones*.¹²

Yet the range of different Macedonian self-identifications does include visions that are compatible with neither the new nor the "old" Macedonist identity models. These views are closer to the above-mentioned foreign research: a number of Macedonian citizens do have a clear idea that their nation was forged in the years during and after the Second World War. This viewpoint is shared by two main groups. The first is the category of older people who were contemporaries of the crucial fifth decade of the twentieth century and experienced the transformation personally. The second type is that of younger educated people who stem from diverse political, social and ethnic backgrounds. Despite their variety they share one important common personal feature – they deeply respect the rule of reason and search for the rational solution of the issues, including that pertaining to the nation. Their attitude is in disagreement with the two dominating and imposed from above versions of what being Macedonian means (to share the inheritance of all historical societies that existed in the greater geographical area, starting with the state and culture of ancient *Makedones* or alternatively to sub-

⁹ R. Dimova, *Ethno-Baroque: Materiality, Aesthetics and Conflict in Modern-Day Macedonia*, Oxford 2013, pp. 115-145.

¹⁰ G. Janev, 'Narrating the Nation, Narrating the City', *Cultural Analysis*, Vol. 10 (2011), pp. 3-21; A. Graan, 'Counterfeiting the Nation? Skopje 2014 and the Politics of Nation Branding in Macedonia', *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2013), pp. 161-179, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2012.01179.x>>. The latter article advances the idea that the project is a form of "nation branding" with primary goal to attract the foreign deterritorialized capital in the country. In our view this approach misses the motives of the movers behind Skopje 2014 – the main aims were clearly internal: to foster nation building, including through endowing the city centre with the imagined necessary elements of a grand national capital. Moreover, the project legitimized the new governing party as opposed to the old pro-Yugoslavian establishment.

¹¹ E. Петрова-Митевска, Н. Поповска, *Античка Македонија: критички приод кон интерпретацијата на историјата и историографијата*, Скопје 2011.

¹² 'Со Бугарите разговараме само за 19 век, со Грците за ништо', интервју со Драги Ѓорѓиев, директор на Институтот за национална историја, *Плусинфо*, 28 October 2013, at <<http://arhiva.plusinfo.mk/mislenje/1070/So-Bugarite-razgovarame-samo-za-19-vek-so-Grcite-za-nishto>>, 12 January 2014. Characteristically, one of Gorgiev's arguments against the new model is that it would not be accepted by the academic world outside of the republic.

scribe to the exclusive Slav national tradition, marked in its genesis by the Sts. Cyril and Methodius and their pupils St. Clement and St. Naum of Ohrid).

Since the existing environment in the Republic of Macedonia strongly discourages public articulation of differing identity notions, such viewpoints acquire a semi-dissident status; they are often conveyed in veiled or disguised form. Nevertheless some rare personalities of the intellectual elite of the country did have the position, courage and opportunity to present lucidly their stance and self-identification of what being Macedonian implies. This viewpoint was expressed most unequivocally by Denko Maleski, former foreign minister and representative to the UN of the country, presently high profile professor in international relations. In a number of articles he presented precisely this vision: "In strict theoretical terms I personally would have no problem to determine myself: I would declare myself as a modernist and I would say that the new Macedonian nation was created in the Second World War by the leaders of the anti-fascist movement – the communists, as a segment of the federal solution of the Yugoslavian national question. I would have no problems that the case is with the nation of Slavonic origin, with Slav language and culture."¹³

This was not only a national and social but also a strict family self-identification: the author's father was the creator of the partisan song *Denes nad Makedonija se ragja* that currently is the national anthem of the Republic of Macedonia. Maleski related in detail how the generation of his parents arrived at the idea of the separate Macedonian ethnic nation: "Exposed to Serbian assimilation but conscious of their separateness the young generation of 'South Serbians' grasped the historical moment of wars and revolutions and proclaimed the birth of the Macedonian nation within the framework of the federation of the Yugoslavian peoples [...] Rejecting his Serbianess, but also the Bulgarianess of the parents, earlier Vladimir Malević, educated in the Serbian secondary school in Bitola and in the Law Faculty in Belgrade, devoted himself to the creation of the Macedonian literary language."¹⁴

As in the case of Maleski, public avowal of such views was most easily carried out and permitted by dignitaries who stem from the privileged left-leaning Macedonian Yugoslavian elite. A similar outlook on the beginnings of the separate Macedonian nation was hinted by Georgi Spasov, another influential intellectual and politician from the left, former ambassador in Sofia.¹⁵ The list of public figures who shared this notion might be expanded with the unlikely new entrant – the veteran journalist Branko Trichkovski, professionally engaged in polemics with Bulgaria during his active service. Sharply and vulgarly criticizing the post-2006 authorities in a series of online texts written in his later semi-retirement period he arrived at accepting many of the tenets of Bulgarian and world historiography. Unlike the majority of other writers emerging from the old Macedonian-Yugoslavian establishment, Trichkovski spoke out the Bulgarian nature of the historical IMRO. According to his stance that organization was

¹³ Д. Малески, 'Порака до ЕУ: достоинство за Македонците', *Утрински весник*, 3 February 2007.

¹⁴ Idem, 'Дилемата на македонското национално единство', *Утрински весник*, 3 March 2007.

¹⁵ Ѓ. Спасов, 'Во потрага по изгубениот идентитет', *Утрински весник*, 12 November 2008.

historically detrimental to the new Macedonian nation; in his view the Macedonian Yugoslavian communists in 1940s committed the crucial mistake to project the roots of the new nation back to the (Bulgarian) IMRO, i.e. they “historically laid the foundations of the new nation in a lie”.¹⁶ He carried out his dry and despairing criticisms up to the present days: “Our nation is an unconsolidated and very problematic category; the elite and the intellectual circles are out of touch with the challenges of our time; they are confirmation of the serious bluffing and falsifying operations in the very construction of the nation [...] Ninety per cent of what we learn and know as national history has some Bulgarian attributes, but this does not prevent us from sketching our main legitimating note on anti-Bulgarian basis.”¹⁷

In this paper we emphasize more the views from the left for two reasons. Firstly, the prominent personalities from the right spectre with analogous notions are far better known: they include the former Prime Minister Ljubcho Georgievski¹⁸ and a number of other public figures some of them still in the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party. Secondly, the starting point from the right is both socially and nationally somewhat different and more complicated; it merits a separate analysis. Yet in general even a greater portion of pro-VMRO oriented citizens shares the notion that up to the interwar period the Macedonian Slavic population evolved largely in the Bulgarian national mould and the new Macedonian nation has been forged as a result of the Second World War developments.

Academics from the Republic of Macedonia in their publications officially did not assent to this view and subscribed to one of the two imposed Macedonist historical models. As a rare open exception, among the historians one should outline the bold position of Stoyan Kiselinovski, who is close to the viewpoint of mid-twentieth century emergence of the Macedonian nation: in his later writings he pointed out the Bulgarian ethnic characteristics of IMRO and other important Macedonian groups up until the Second World War.¹⁹

In the political sphere similar statements were divulged unintentionally even by the leading politicians during the partisan political struggles. Thus on 5 March 2009 electioneering in the faraway south east town of Radovich the candidate Gjorge Ivanov – the current president of the country – declared: “Enough of divisions of the people between Bulgarians and Serbians or now in the moment between Slavs and Ancient [Macedonians]! We all must rally and be together.”²⁰

¹⁶ Б. Тричковски, ‘Вистинското лице на лагата’, *Глобус*, 19 June 2012, at <<http://www.globusmagazin.com.mk/?itemID=97540F3CB4B75F40B493D5E65CF29F7F>>, 25 July 2013. The online texts are printed in the book: idem, *Како бевме систематски уништувани од идиоти: офаманаман*, Скопје 2013.

¹⁷ ‘Ние сме во напредната фаза на исчезнување како нација’, интервју со Бранко Тричковски, *Утрински весник*, 21 July 2013.

¹⁸ Љ. Георгиевски, ‘За националното помирување по втор пат. Кој со кого ќе се помирува?’, *Пулс*, 7–14 July 1995. Reprinted in: idem, *Остварување на вековниот сон*, Скопје 2001, pp. 205–219.

¹⁹ С. Киселиновски, *Историскиот детерминизам и македонскиот јазик (XX век)*, Скопје 2009, pp. 15–16, 45–46.

²⁰ ‘Иванов: да се смени политиката кон соседите’, *Дневник*, 7 March 2009; ‘Иванов: “Доста се поделби на народот”’, *Вечер*, 7 March 2009.

One might expect that if the general environment in the Republic of Macedonia would permit further democratization that would lead to liberated expression of citizens' opinions and self-identifications. If the atmosphere of intolerance, partisanship and dichotomic divisions will fade away that would be beneficial to the maturing and to the real Europeanization of the Macedonian society. That would doubtless bring about freer discussions and expression of citizens' views on issues directly going to the core of the Macedonian nationality. One would suppose that the crucial importance of the Second World War period would be pragmatically outlined not only from outside. In any case, it is easy to predict that the different types of (Slavic) ethnic identifications in Vardar Macedonia will be subject to further evolution and change and would inspire ample forthcoming research and analyses in the field of nationality studies.

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Naoum KAYTCHEV, Assistant-Professor in Modern History of the Balkans in the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria. He has been Consul General of Bulgaria in Bitola, Republic of Macedonia, from 2007 to 2010 as well as in Toronto, Canada from 1999 to 2002. His main research interests are concerned with late modern and contemporary history of Macedonia and with nineteenth century intellectual and social history of Croatia, Serbia and Bulgaria, with main focus on problems of nation-building and nationalism, as well as on history of education and textbook research. His publications include *Македонијо, възжелана: армията, училището и градежът на нацията в Сърбия и България (1878-1912)* [Desired Macedonia: Army, School and Nation-Building in Serbia and Bulgaria, 1878-1912], Sofia, 2003, and edited collective volumes on Miladinov brothers and Grigor Pärlichev.