

# “Don't tell me that I don't exist”: The construction and practice of Macedonian national identity

Karolis Dambrauskas

*Institute of Sociology at the Lithuanian Centre for Social Sciences*

Emilia Baradziej

*Independent researcher*

## Abstract

This article discusses the ways national identity is constructed and practiced in North Macedonia. Based on data collected in 2015 during fieldwork in the Macedonian city of Bitola, and, especially, in the village of Trnovo and the city of Ohrid, the article explains how various notions of *Macedonianness* are constructed and politicized. To do this, several analytical prisms characteristic to the field of nationalism studies are used. The Macedonians' need for having their constructed identity recognized has its roots in Macedonia's turbulent national and international political environment. Even so, the evidence collected in the interviews with local informants will highlight how Macedonianness is often practiced by marking the rejection of other national identifications. In particular, the article demonstrates how the idea of antique national roots marks an attempt to re-use available historical materials on two different levels: to boost national pride and to legitimize political claims made by some Macedonian politicians.

**Key-words:** Macedonia, identity, national identity, nationalism, Balkan conflicts.

In territorial terms ‘Macedonia’ could mean several things: a geographical region of the Balkan Peninsula, a region of socialist Yugoslavia, a land in northern Greece and south-western Bulgaria, an ancient country north of Greece, a part of Greece, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Republic of Macedonia (Majewski 2013, 11). Moreover, ‘Macedonian’ can also refer to regional identity in Bulgaria (Pyrenean Macedonia) or Greece (Aegean Macedonia). North Macedonia as a state gained independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. From the beginning, the country has faced numerous problems: economically, it had ceased to be part of a large Yugoslav economy; politically, it has started building a new political system; and, in social terms, there have been identity

questions that arose. In 2019 the country changed its name from the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia. Therefore, in this article we will use the shorter name North Macedonia or Macedonia.

Pressure exerted by neighboring countries claiming their rights to North Macedonia resulted in the need for a defined Macedonian identity. Bulgaria, despite recognizing the independence of Macedonia, did not recognize the cultural separateness of the country: for example, the Macedonian language was treated as a dialect of Bulgarian.<sup>2</sup> Serbia was the only former Yugoslav country that did not recognize the independence of Macedonia. In 1992, Slobodan Milosevic even offered the Greek authorities to carry out an armed attack on Macedonia (Majewski 2013). Finally, in 1996 Serbia recognized the state's independence. However, the Serbian Orthodox Church still does not recognize the existence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, founded in 1958. In 2001 an armed conflict with the Albanian minority living in Macedonia started. It was brought to an end by signing the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which guaranteed Albanians,<sup>3</sup> as a national minority, bilingualism in municipalities with a minimum 20% share of the Albanian minority in the population, an Albanian public university, and places in public institutions and offices (Bielenin-Lenczowska 2009).

Internationally, the most well-known issue that North Macedonia had with one of its neighbors is the Macedonian-Greek conflict, which is connected to the Greek state's negation of the Macedonian national minority in Greece's region of Aegean Macedonia. The region is home to a sizable group of Slavic speaking minorities, of whom a huge number are ethnic Macedonians. However, they are not recognized by the Greek authorities. At the same time, Greece accuses Macedonia of unjustly identifying with Greece's cultural heritage and history. Greece had been insisting that Macedonia change its national flag and state's name. Due to Greek claims on the international stage, Macedonia used to be called the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM<sup>4</sup>). The Macedonian passport was not recognized on the Macedonian-Greek border and Greece blocked Macedonia's efforts to join the European Union. The process of re-naming the country divided society into those who agreed with it and those who were against it. The referendum on changing Macedonia's name was massively boycotted, and there were protests organized by the opposition. However, the two countries found a compromise, and Macedonia's parliament approved changing the country's name.

Conflicts with neighbors often lead to an intensive development of nationalism based on the conscious waving of flags and frequent display of national symbols. It may take exaggerated forms and it is based on the explicit sense of "blood ties" (Billig 2008, 100-102). However, Macedonian nationalism is not something recent. The plans to create a Great Greece, a Great Serbia, a Great Bulgaria, a Great Albania or a Great Romania have always included incorporating Macedonian lands. At the turn of the century, the so-called 'Macedonian issue' meant that Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia wanted to gain control of these areas to limit the rule of the Ottoman Empire on the Balkan Peninsula. Moreover, until the 1940s, a large part of the population living in Macedonia did not adopt the concept of nationality itself, because of the historical circumstances, as people identified as Bulgarians, Greeks or Serbs depending on the influence of these countries in a given Macedonian region (Falski, 2015). Religion and one's

native town or village played a more important role in self-identification before 1942, when the Yugoslav communists decided to create a separate national state within the Federation. From this point on, historians start talking about the emergence of Macedonian nationalism.

There are currently two main endogenous ways of defining the origin of Macedonians, which are widely discussed. The first is related to their Slavic identity (popular especially in the time of Yugoslavia); the other assumes that they come from ancient Macedonia, and that their ancestor was Alexander the Great (which is part of the so-called 'antiquization process'). However, the state's Constitution says nothing about the nation's origins from the times of antiquity.

As mentioned, the society and culture of those who lived within the borders of what is today North Macedonia have undergone changes in every sphere of everyday life. These identity paradigms and struggles, as Piotr Majewski notes, are associated with the transformation of Macedonian society, or the transition between different ways of ordering relationships in social structures, which tries to go beyond the socialist order to become a society of late modernity, based on the principles of the neoliberal system (Majewski 2013, 14).

It is also worth paying attention to the demographics of the country. A census carried out in 2002 showed that the total population of Macedonia was 2,067,471.<sup>5</sup> Of this number, 64.2% of the population were Macedonians, and 25.2% were Albanians, with the rest belonging to various minorities, among them Turks, Serbs, Roma, and Bulgarians. These are only indicative figures. In 2011, an attempt was made to conduct another census, which was supposed to include all those who had permanent or temporary residence in Macedonia. However, there were too many suspicions of tampering with the census, and it was suspended four days before it was completed.

Due to the weak economic situation, and 24% unemployment in the second trimester of 2016,<sup>6</sup> a large proportion of Macedonians decided to emigrate. With Macedonian citizenship, they can travel for a maximum of 90 days in six months within the EU, after which they must return to the country or apply for a work visa, which is a condition for an employment contract. Most emigrants decide to obtain a Bulgarian passport, as Bulgaria is an EU member state. This suited both sides – the EU borders opened for Macedonians, and Bulgarians were able to boast of the number of 'Bulgarians' in Macedonia, thus adding substance to their claim that Macedonians and Bulgarians constitute one nation living in two countries.

Macedonian authorities created a narrative which would provide Macedonians with national subjectivity expressed through a legitimate history of the country. This history emphasizes the nation's bravery for freedom and independence. By creating given values, principles, symbols and figures of memory, the authorities strive to ensure continuity with the past. This is important if we keep in mind the lack of Macedonia's own history: its religion used to be determined by foreign forces, which led to a situation where the newly emerged, independent state lacked its own ethnocentric historiography. The dissemination of beliefs, values and conventional ways of behavior serves to strengthen the sense of community (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2008, 10).

To maintain their power and position in the social hierarchy, modern elites must develop a way of governing and influencing the nation that will follow the patterns produced by popular

culture, as it relates to the space of everyday identity restoration. Tim Edensor noticed that traditional cultural forms associated with the nation are being supplemented and even changed by images and behaviors taken from popular culture. According to him, the strength of “tradition-bound ceremonies and other cultural components [...] is now largely sustained by their (re)distribution through popular culture, where they mingle with innumerable other iconic cultural elements which signify the nation in multiple and contested ways” (Edensor 2002, 12).

### **Observing Macedonian identity**

This inquiry is based on data collected in Summer 2015, through interviews with residents of the cities of Bitola and Ohrid, and the village of Trnovo, near Bitola. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in Macedonian, English or Russian. When visiting Trnovo we had an opportunity to attend a few Macedonian national celebrations –Ilinden Day (2 August), and the World Macedonians Meeting.

We start our analysis at the World Macedonians Meeting, which was held in the Trnovo. The event was organized by the House of Immigrants of Macedonia, the Association of Macedonians from Aegean Macedonia in Bitola, the World Macedonian Congress and the Association of Macedonians and Children Refugees from Aegean Macedonia “Makedon”. A large number of citizens, expatriates and guests gathered in the churchyard. There were also representatives of the local and central government, the mayor of Bitola, a government delegation and some members of the Macedonian Parliament. The meeting's motto was “Human rights for all and against all discrimination and assimilation”.

There we had an opportunity to listen to a few welcoming speeches given by several public figures. Some of their speeches sounded more like a brief introductory lecture to Macedonian history. Speakers reminded the audience of the turbulent history of the Macedonian state starting from Philip II and ending in recent times. The main message was that Macedonia has a rich and unique history marked by national efforts, sometimes successful and sometimes less so, to establish an independent and sovereign Macedonian state. One of the speakers, for example, declared:

History about this region reminds me that we celebrate, remember Ilinden in 338 BC when Macedonian King Philip II of Macedon won the Battle of Chaeronea, and do you know why? Because everyone was together and united by the goal which they had. What does Ilinden mean for every Macedonian? Every Macedonian was united for a unique, sovereign and independent country and everyone participated in 1903 in the battle, which we learn about now from every school book. And the third Ilinden in 1944, when young people also connected by a common idea, participated in the battle for the unique, sovereign and independent Republic of Macedonia.

Officially ‘Ilinden’, or ‘Saint Elijah's Day’ in English, is a national celebration also called ‘Day of the Republic’, which is celebrated on the 2nd of August each year in the Republic of North Macedonia. It is a Macedonian national holiday and an Orthodox holiday. Thus, besides

the Battle of Kruševo in 1903, and the Anti-fascist uprising of 1944, which happened during Ilinden Day, the speaker mentioned and sought to link Ilinden with another day – the Battle of Chaeronea in 338 BCE. The efforts to establish a link between Ilinden and the Battle of Chaeronea is not something new. In 2005 the Macedonian Academy of Science and Arts released an anthology commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of Ilinden, which read:

Ilinden is also 2 August 338 BC, with the battle at Chaeronea, which stands as the Macedonians' victory over the Greeks, yet which is excluded from our Macedonian collective memory [...]. Ilinden of 1903 means a reaffirmation, a reminder of the mythical past of a nation and its roots [...]. [Ilinden is] the victory at Chaeronea, [...] continuity with Justinian Prima all up until today, with ASNOM and the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia of the year 1991, with which an independent Macedonian state was constructed, yet, sadly, only on part of its Macedonian territory (Šarić, Gammelgaard, and Rå Hauge 2011).

Therefore, we were able to observe in official speeches explicit attempts to link modern Macedonia with antiquity. As mentioned previously, contemporary relations between Greece and North Macedonia have been tense. The Battle of Chaeronea marks the Macedonian win over the Greeks in ancient times, which in turn led to Macedonian hegemony in the region. Thus, the mention of the Battle of Chaeronea could be seen as a part of Macedonian contemporary efforts to establish a state in the eyes of the Greeks. Such assumptions could be supported by statements like “We are united to defend the name of our country and identity of our nation” expressed by one of the official speakers during the St. Ilinden's celebration.

However, Macedonia's antique history probably came up because of the state's turbulent and politically uneasy times. As was mentioned, Ilinden Day coincided with the 44th World Macedonians Meeting. Therefore, the audience was told that Ilinden Day is not simply an occasion for Macedonians from all over the world to reunite. Ilinden Day, it was argued, is an occasion to remember heroes who died fighting for the preservation of a unique cultural community. Such rhetoric reinforced claims against neighboring states. During the day of national reunification (the 44th World Macedonian meeting took place during the event) the request for recognition of Macedonian nationality all over the world was made. Participants were reminded that “questions about Macedonians in Aegean Greece are still open” and that “we’re still fighting for their rights there. We want our citizens to have equal rights as others in other countries, especially in neighboring countries, in Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Serbia and others. [...] The question will be closed when Aegean Macedonians get back their rights and property as well as the freedom and possibility to learn their mother tongue in schools”, as a speaker at the event in Trnovo said.

Officials stated that the task of the Republic of Macedonia is to take care of each and every one of the 500,000 members of the Macedonian diaspora<sup>7</sup> that is scattered in 120 countries, and emphasized the state's strength stemming from its diaspora. Local right-wing politicians spoke in the name of all ‘Macedonian brothers and sisters’, irrespective of the time and place they lived. They referred to all of the following as Macedonians: Philip II of Macedon, who

knew nothing about such Christian saints as St. Ilinden, participants of the 1903 Ilinden Uprising against the Ottomans (not against the Greeks!), those who fled the region after the Greek Civil War,<sup>8</sup> and those Macedonians who today live in Macedonia or abroad. The speakers spoke of all of them as one imagined Macedonian community living, in what Benedict Anderson called homogeneous time (Anderson 1991).

### **On the idiosyncratic notion of Macedonianness**

This confluence of historical and contemporary Macedonianness in the eyes of some Macedonians today is not particularly surprising but it does raise certain issues. As-formulated by Thomas Hylland Eriksen “[t]he fact that the nationalists claim the Vikings were Norwegians does not mean that the nationalists are Vikings” (Eriksen 2001, 276). Thus, the fact that Macedonian nationalists claim that Philip II and Alexander the Great were Macedonians does not make these nationalists just like Philip II, Alexander and their Macedonian troops who in 338 BCE defeated Greek city states. Moreover, it is important that the event had multiple purposes: first, Ilinden Day, as it is suggested by the name, started as a religious celebration. Second, it is a day to celebrate the Kruševo uprising against the Ottomans in 1903. At the same time, it is the Republic's day and at the time of our stay it coincided with the 44th World Macedonians Meeting and the 35th meeting of the Border Macedonians from the Aegean part of Macedonia. Thus, we can see how the celebration of Ilinden Day was re-appropriated by the state's politicians. This re-appropriation is carried out through a double process of forgetting in order to remember, as noted by Anderson in his assessment of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French historian Jules Michelet:

Michelet not only claimed to speak on behalf of large numbers of anonymous dead people, but insisted, with poignant authority, that he could say what they ‘really’ meant and ‘really’ wanted, since they themselves ‘did not understand’. From then on, the silence of the dead was no obstacle to the exhumation of their deepest desires (Anderson 2006, 202).

Local politicians who gave speeches in Trnovo dealt with the silence of the dead and with the history of Philip II in a similar way.

However, as argued by Ernest Gellner, “some nations have navels, some achieve navels, some have navels thrust upon them. Those possessed of genuine ones are probably in a minority, but it matters little. It is the need for navels engendered by modernity that matters” (Gellner 1997, 101). In the case of Macedonia, it is not that important who Alexander the Great was, but what really matters is the need to have him. If not Alexander, then someone else suitable would be needed for a nation's narrative. Let us illustrate this urge to have a connection with antiquity with a few examples.

The first example is the project Skopje 2014, financed by the Macedonian right-wing government of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski. The project could be seen as a part of the government's ‘antiquization’ policy. Its main aim is the reconstruction of museums and

government buildings, and building monuments of historical figures from the region of Macedonia. The policy of antiquization is implemented not only in the capital city of Skopje, but also in smaller towns like Bitola. The main square of the town is decorated with the monument to King Philip II as well as with archaic Macedonian symbols (such as the sun). Thus, we can say that antiquization is a national project, executed by a right-wing government, with an aim to establish an official self-representation of its ancient roots.

Another example of state sponsored national narrative occurred during our field research. When our bus entered the Republic of Macedonia, some of us received an SMS with the following text: “TouristInfo: Welcome to Macedonia, the cradle of civilization. During your stay we strongly recommend that you visit the Museum of Macedonian Struggle and the Memorial House of Mother Teresa in Skopje, the Memorial Centre of Toshe Proeski in Krusevo, the Museum of Water in Ohrid and the Ancient Observatory in Kokino.” Thus, if the target group of the project Skopje 2014 was mostly Macedonians, this time the state clearly tried to prove its ancient roots to the outside world. The message, written in English, welcomed us in a country, which we were told was not just another part of the Balkan region but was “the cradle of civilization”.

Indeed, this discourse of antique Macedonia seemed pervasive. During our stay, while the Ilinden Day celebration was taking place, we encountered a Macedonian-born linguist currently living and studying in the Czech Republic, who at the time of the event was selling a self-published book about the roots of Macedonian language. She explained that words such as 'Cambridge', 'Leipzig', 'Nile', 'Ravenna', 'sine', 'civilization' and even 'evidence' are of Macedonian origin. Such theories, however dubious, seemed to need constant protection. As we heard one official saying during Ilinden Day: ‘The contemporary generation lives in complexity, complicated and hard political times, which create the future and that’s why what is most important lies in historical memory. But let me say, Ilinden for every Macedonian, wherever they are – here and all over the world – is not only a holiday of revolution, not only what is sadness in our history, but Ilinden is a holiday of unique ideas for every Macedonian.’ Thus, this bricolage, along lines elaborated by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962), of national roots from antiquity attempts to re-use available historical materials in order to respond to contemporary challenges.

In the remaining part of this article, we take a closer look at celebrations we attended and how Macedonians that we met during our fieldwork treat national holidays, including what they think nationalism is.

### **The imagined community and its needs**

Several events were held in the country during our stay, to celebrate Ilinden Day, which lasted a couple of days. In Bitola we were present at a concert dedicated to this day. The concert took place at the ancient site of Heraclea Lyncestis, which are the ruins of an ancient Greek city founded by Philip II and are located south of the present-day town of Bitola, North Macedonia. We were present at the celebration for Ilinden Day held in Trnovo. This celebration could be characterized as a representation of group identity. The significance of the afore-

mentioned Ilinden Day is marked by having several festivals in different parts of Macedonia. Free transportation from Bitola, Skopje, Veles and other big towns were organized to bring people to the national celebration in Trnovo, where our main observations were made.

The festivities also had a clear economic aspect. Besides food and drinks, right at the entrance there were little tables selling clothes, expired banknotes from the times of the former Yugoslavia, religious icons, toys for children, handmade needle-worked clothes, traditional musical instruments, tablecloths, and other souvenirs decorated with Macedonian symbols such as the national flag, maps of 'Greater Macedonia' and portraits of Alexander the Great. The celebration was held in the village churchyard, meaning that religion is closely intertwined with the national feast. For instance, at the church some Macedonian flags were put inside. Priests of high rank participated in the national celebration. If the church is perceived as a community, then the celebration can be interpreted as an act to preserve the local (national) community. Here we can remember that nationalism is often seen as a secular religion (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), and Anderson has argued that nationalism should be thought of not as a political ideology but rather as a large cultural system that is rooted in religion, i.e., nationalism deals with ideas of fatality and continuity, using a sacred language within imagined communities of believers (Anderson 1991, 5).

Consider the official description of Bit Fest, a cultural festival held in summer in the city of Bitola, which we observed during our stay there: "the Festival has become a pillar for spiritual connection of Macedonians around the world and a mirror of multiculturalism in the Republic of Macedonia". However, according to our interviewees, this community was nominally welcoming to others. None of the events that we were able to observe in Bitola or in Trnovo seemed multicultural to us. However, it does not mean organizers did not perceive them as multicultural. The impression was that 'multicultural Macedonia' meant different kinds and versions of Macedonianess. For example, during the Ilinden Day celebration we met a folk band, the members of which told us they were Bulgarians. However, we soon found out that the band was invited as a Macedonian band from Bulgaria (the band was from so-called Pirin or Bulgarian Macedonia). Besides them, there were many Macedonians in Bitola and also in Trnovo, who came back to Macedonia from abroad or for their summer vacations.

On the other hand, the issues of being recognized did not take long to manifest. During our research we met a Macedonian woman living in England who told us that 'what personally bothers me as a Macedonian is when someone, like the Greeks, tries to tell me that I don't exist'. Few hour-long conversations with her helped us to understand the importance of national identity on a personal level, and how strongly individuals may feel about their culture. However, strong feelings about their own culture relate to strong feelings about others. What stood out when we started analyzing the data was her extreme claims of difference, and the demonization of 'the other' in relation to North Macedonia's neighbors. Starting with Albanians, who, she stated, are '...the biggest terrorists. The biggest drug dealers. The prostitution. The illegal harvesting of organs. Everything happens there.' Her fear was related to what she perceived as the Greeks' aim to eradicate the Macedonian nation. This fear prompted her to claim that Bulgarians are 'basically assassins,' while 'Greeks, as a nation are lazy crooks who don't pay their taxes.' This fear of eradication sounded interesting, for there are no historical sources which could allow to argue that either Greeks or Bulgarians have ever



attempted to carry out Macedonian genocide. However, it seemed as if the woman equated physical eradication with the eradication of Macedonian name/identity.

One possible explanation of our interviewees' negative stance towards other countries and nations is fear of the instability of the new state. The group identities are better noticed in contrast to non-members of the group. Therefore, these sweeping generalizations of others could be seen as a way of creating one's own homogeneous, distinct identity, which we observed mostly as being positive. For example, in the opinion of some of our interlocutors, Macedonians are smiling, hardworking, and have a rich culture. Moreover, in an interview with the abovementioned Macedonian woman, we recognized that the key element which created her national identity was history: 'without history you cannot have a nation or a future.' This history is first and foremost the history of the Balkans. National quarrels over symbolic boundaries in the region create an abstract view of where one culture ends and where the next begins. She highlighted the cultural differences between the various Balkan countries. She claimed that it lies in the folk costumes, the unique rhythms of the music. In her account, Macedonians are, above all, from the Balkans, and not 'from Europe.' Thus, she suggested that Macedonia and the Balkans are not the same as Europe, that it is something different. This can be interpreted as a case of self-discrimination, originating from one's belief that Macedonians are worse than 'Europe', on economic and social aspects (Thiessen 2007).

Our interviewee also emphasized how important it is to her to have roots and to know where she comes from. Having in mind that she is a migrant, one could probably suspect that the need for recognition becomes stronger living abroad. Being a foreigner makes it harder to earn social capital, especially if you come from a country that is not well known and if people are ignorant of it. It is probably because of this that our female interviewee emphasized the role of national marketing. When asked why she thought other countries does not recognize Macedonia as a unique culture and a country, she wondered how can it be that Greece, which has Muslim neighbors and was under the Ottoman empire, claims to be purely Greek, with no national minorities and no Ottoman heritage. 'I want people to know the unbiased truth, not the stories the Greeks will tell, not the stories the Serbians will tell, not the stories Bulgarians will tell, not the stories the Albanians will tell.' The topic of national marketing reappears when we remember the welcome to visitors of North Macedonia when we entered the country. Thus, this need for the outside world to recognize who one is important both on a state level and on a personal level. We could probably say that Macedonian identity feels under-recognized and that this feeling possibly provides fertile soil for various political entrepreneurs to politicize even the most idiosyncratic notions of Macedonianness.

To sum up, convictions about one's identity should be taken seriously, because "the discourse of recognition has become familiar to us, on two levels: first, in the intimate sphere, where we understand the formation of identity and the self as taking place in a continuing dialogue and struggle with significant others. And then in the public sphere, where a politics of equal recognition has come to play a bigger and bigger role" (Taylor 1994, 37). This urge for recognition is caused by North Macedonia's shaky and turbulent political environment. Macedonia was always at crossroads. No one ever treated it as a sovereign political body, but always as their own property. Therefore, perhaps there is an urge to abandon this liminal zone

by becoming sovereign or, in other words, becoming able to rule itself by identifying or calling oneself accordingly to one's own will.

However, not everything is in the hands of Macedonians. On the way to Ohrid we spoke to a local taxi driver who, similarly to the aforementioned woman, told us that he is irritated, because in the world's opinion, Macedonia does not exist. When someone says abroad that they are from Macedonia, everyone says 'oh, so you are Greek'. The driver told us that Macedonia's relations with Bulgaria are even more complicated than those with Greece. Bulgaria makes it easy to gain a Bulgarian passport if Macedonians admit that they are from Bulgaria. There are many Macedonians applying for Bulgarian citizenship, especially because of the EU. According to the interviewee, the Bulgarian state issues the passports and then it can say, 'well, how can you claim that the Macedonian language and culture exists, if there is a huge percentage of Bulgarians in your country. We're one nation in two countries'.

We observed that national identity is also marked by confrontation with the state. The taxi driver who took us to Ohrid described the tension between the state and the people. As he explained to us, Macedonian politicians often say that people in the country are united, while people say that the country is not, meaning that the state does not care about the people. The taxi driver told us that

Nowadays there are huge protests against the state, but there are two groups of protesters: one against and one for. The problem is that people are not together, united to 'fight' for a better life in Macedonia. They are divided in political parties. They are going out on streets because leaders of parties said to do so. When anti-government protests were organized in Skopje, VMRO [*Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација*, Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization: at the time, Macedonia's leading political party] blocked roads to Skopje and gave more money for buses just to not take protesters to demonstration. The protests were organized on Saturday – a day off, but the state made this day obligatory to work.

We were also told that if you want to work in official institutions, you need to be a part of the ruling party, i.e., using membership cards as a control mechanism. If one refuses then he or she can find jobs only in private businesses such as boutiques, pubs, restaurants, or as a taxi driver. This makes the issue of recognition of Macedonian identity dramatic, for people may need to choose between a better life and loyalty to one of the several competing political forces in the country. To conclude, Macedonian identity seems to be marked by a political cleavage, in terms of supporters or opponents, for and against the dominant political force in Macedonia.

These cleavages are well documented in scholarly literature. During the Yugoslav period (early 1970) through the state intervention striving to reimagine Ilinden as a symbolic epicenter of Macedonian nationhood, the legacy of Ilinden was developed in a sacred national place (Brown 2000, 2003; Majewski 2015). However, as argued by Naum Trajanovski (2020), during the immediate post-Yugoslav decade, the national canon of Three Ilindens was coined. This canon was instrumental in reconstructing the Macedonian mnemonic landscape. There were three major periods of the reconstruction, according to Trajanovski. The first period, from 2001 to 2006, was marked by a reconciliatory narrative strategy as a major political effort to heal

post-conflict Macedonian society. The strategy was built upon the idea of national unity, which would find an expression in a supra-party platform for commemorating Ilinden. Moreover, some of the ideals of Ilinden uprising were interpreted through the lens of European culture, thus making the celebration instrumental in terms of the country's efforts to move closer to Europe. During the second phase, from 2007 to 2014, the Ilinden commemorative narrative shifted to exclusive, party-centered interpretations. Both, the right and the left, major political camps were trying to establish the frames of the origin of Macedonian statehood. According to Trajanovski, "The partisan Ilinden interpretations have both instigated and denoted the Macedonian *Kulturkampf*, a peculiar process," (Trajanovski 2020, 40) which Trajanovski, following historian Balázs Trencsényi, argues includes the "struggle for the past aiming at creating an ideological hegemony by stressing the fundamental incompatibility of visions" (Trencsényi 2014, 138 cited in Trajanovski 2020, 40) The last period, from 2015 onwards was marked by creation of "politically active mnemonic communities [...] with the polyphony of mnemonic claims over Ilinden and the Republic Day commemorations" (Trajanovski 2020, 43). Therefore, although our fieldwork in Trnovo took place at the beginning of the third period, it is nevertheless possible that ordinary citizens still heard echoes of war drums being beaten by the state's two warring political camps.

## **Conclusions**

During our fieldwork we observed explicit attempts made by politicians to link modern Macedonia with antiquity, or to forge "a national navel", as described by Gellner, and thereby to construct a certain notion of Macedonianness. The discourse of Antique Macedonia was used to legitimize and reinforce claims against neighboring states, e.g., Greece, and, at the same time, to make appeals towards Macedonians that live outside of the country's borders. The politicians tried to appropriate different notions of Ilinden (religious celebration and a commemoration the Kruševo uprising) and merge it with the diaspora policy (the celebration of the Republic's day took place along the meetings of Macedonian diaspora). This re-appropriation was carried through voluntaristic memory politics, exemplified by the attempts of Macedonia's antiquization through such projects as Skopje 2014, touristic campaigns that promote Macedonia as 'the cradle of civilization' or individual efforts to trace the footprints of Macedonian language left in other languages. These attempts to construct national roots from various parts of antiquity were a response to various contemporary challenges faced by Macedonian state and society (e.g., complicated relations with the state neighbors, turbulent history and tense socioeconomic situation in the country).

Furthermore, we looked into the Macedonian imagined community that politicians (re)construct and tried to understand what issues its members face. We presented the ways national group representations are carried out in official events as well as the people self-representations in terms of national identity. The most opaque issues we encountered were those of recognition. The people we met during our fieldwork were frustrated by the fact that in the eyes of other societies and states Macedonia is not recognized as an entity with its own identity. They wanted to regain control of their own lives. One way of doing this was to have

a capacity to name oneself accordingly to his/her own will and not to be named by the others. Therefore, often national identity was practiced through marking who one is not. History and one's roots appeared to be an important component of our interviewee's national identity. Yet, it also appears that Macedonian identity is marked by a political cleavage, with different political camps manipulating history and trying to establish their own framework for interpreting the countries past, thereby laying groundwork for their future political and cultural hegemony.

### **Notes**

---

<sup>1</sup> This article and the research behind it would not have been possible without the contribution of two colleagues, Hannah Bevan Woolley and Mariam Hovhannissian, who took part in the fieldwork and helped to write parts of the presentation given at the Konitsa Summer School in 2015. We would also like to express our gratitude to professors Ioannis Manos (Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies at the University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki) and Iliana Jakimovska (Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, University St. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje) for their remarks and suggestions concerning the early versions of the manuscript, and our friend Naum Trajanovski (PhD candidate at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences) for helping to put our research in the context of the latest scholarship on memory politics in North Macedonia.

<sup>2</sup> There have been some efforts made to improve Macedonian-Bulgarian understanding. A joint Commission was established to discuss sensitive issues regarding the identity of certain historical figures (if they were Macedonian or Bulgarian), historical dates and events. Prof. Ljupco Risteski was a member of it (Marusic, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> The Ohrid Framework Agreement initiated a reform of political and cultural rights of the minorities, followed by a change of the constitution. It should be mentioned that this change refers to all minorities, not only the Macedonian one.

<sup>4</sup> In 1995, Greece and Macedonia announced they were committed to start negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations on the name issue. From that moment, the reference "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" (FYROM) was used by multiple international organizations and states.

<sup>5</sup> Census of population, households, and dwellings in the Republic of Macedonia for 2002, <http://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/knigaXIII.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Results of the Labor Force Survey. See the webpage <http://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSooopstenie>

<sup>7</sup> In 1964 the Macedonian diaspora included 580,000 people (Topolinjska 1998).

<sup>8</sup> One of the results of Greek Civil War was the exodus of Slav-Macedonians from Greece in 1945-1949.

## References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Bielenin-Lenczowska, Karolina, ed. 2009. *Sąsiedztwo w obliczu konfliktu. Relacje społeczne i etniczne w zachodniej Macedonii* [Neighborhood in the face of conflict. Social and ethnic relations in Western Macedonia]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG.
- Billig, Michael. 1995. *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Brown, Keith. 2000. "A Rising to Count On: Ilinden Between Politics and History in Post-Yugoslav Macedonia." In *The Macedonian Question. Culture, Historiography, Politics*, edited by Victor Roudometof, 143-172. New York: Columbia UP.
- Brown, Keith. 2003. *The Past in Question. Modern Macedonia and the Uncertainties of Nation*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Edensor, Tim. 2002. *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. Oxford, New York: Berg.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2001. *Small Places, Large Issues. An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.
- Falski, Maciej. 2015. Review of *Tożsamość narodowa w społeczeństwie multietnicznym Macedonii* [National Identity in the Multi-Ethnic Society of Macedonia], edited by Maciej Kawka and Irena Stawowy-Kawka. Warsaw: Colloquia Humanistica.
- Gellner, Ernest. 1997. *Nationalism*. New York: New York UP.
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. eds. 2012. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Jezernik, Božidar. 2013. *Wild Europe. The Balkans in the Gaze of Western Travellers*. London: Saqi.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1962. *La pensée sauvage*. Paris: Plon.
- Majewski, Piotr. 2013. *(Re)konstrukcje narodu. Odwieczna Macedonia powstaje w XXI wieku* [(Re)constructions of the nation. Eternal Macedonia is Emerging in the 21st Century]. Gdańsk: Katedra Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Majewski, Piotr. 2015. "Kruševo. Pomiędzy Świętym Miastem Macedońskiego Nacjonalizmu a Pierwszym 'Ethnomiastem' w Europie" [Kruševo: between the sacred town of Macedonian nationalism and the first 'ethno-town' in Europe]. *Lud* 99: 161-184.
- Marusic, Sinisa Jakov. 2019. "'Unacceptable' Demands of North Macedonia." Accessed April 29, 2021. [www.balkaninsight.com/2019/10/11/intellectuals-condemn-bulgarias-unacceptable-demands-of-north-macedonia/](http://www.balkaninsight.com/2019/10/11/intellectuals-condemn-bulgarias-unacceptable-demands-of-north-macedonia/)
- Šarić, Ljiljana, Karen Gammelgaard, and Kjetilrå Hauge, eds. 2012. *Transforming National Holidays. Identity Discourse in the West and South Slavic Countries, 1985-2010*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition*, edited by Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Thiessen, Ilká. 2007. *Waiting for Macedonia. Identity in a Changing World*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

- Topolinjska, Zuzanna. 1998. "In Place of a Foreword. Facts about the Republic of Macedonia and the Macedonian Language." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 131: 1-11.
- Trajanovski, Naum. 2020. "The Three Memory Regimes of Ilinden Commemorations (2001-2018). A Prolegomenon to the Study of the Official Memory in North Macedonia." *Southeastern Europe* 44, no. 1: 1-26.