

A NATIONAL AWAKENING: NATIONALISM, IDENTITY, AND
ETHNIC CONFLICT IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

SCOTT NICHOLAS ROMANIUK

“I am a Macedonian,
I have a Macedonian’s consciousness,
and so I have my own Macedonian view
of the past, present, and future of my country
and of all the South Slavs [...]”

Krste Petkov Misirkov

Introduction: Elements of Contention

We live in a time of constant and perpetual change. Synchronization and integration throughout our historical narrative is everywhere evident, and the region of South Eastern Europe presents no exception. One need not look beyond what has been historically dubbed, the “Balkan” region of Europe to find a corpus of social, cultural, political, intellectual, and military exchange. The experience of the Macedonian people, including their culture, ideology, and ethno-nationalist conscious presents a vivid and indelible product of debate and consultancy on undeniably poignant fronts.

Though essentially seen as a *terra incognita*, Macedonia is an age-old representation of the diversity that lies at the heart of the Balkan Peninsula. So important is this tiny corridor of South Eastern Europe, that every power that has ever sought to control the Balkans has realized the need to hold power over this section of land. For those who sought control of the region ultimately knew that the domination of Macedonia meant domination over the critical corridor route from East Central Europe to the Mediterranean. In more than a single sense, Macedonia was a crossroads.

In the modern period, it may be said that Macedonians exemplify fear for preserving their nation as a nation-state. Macedonians consider the territory that they are currently settled in as their home – a territory synonymous with everything that has come to be known as relating to Macedonism. However, Macedonia is not alone. There are pernicious elements that inhabit the same region, and pose a distinct threat to both Macedonian nationalism as well as what Macedonians conceive of as their homeland. To Macedonians, they are ‘insiders’ in every conventional sense. To others, Macedonians, and everything Macedonian are regarded as either ‘outsider’ or ‘outsider’ elements. Since identity contributes considerably to the legitimization of one’s homeland – the recognition of ‘insiders’ as well as ‘outsiders’ – the conception of identity in a variety of forms should be seen as a central player in historical narrative of Macedonians and the Macedonian nation.

Within the framework of ‘identity’ and ‘homeland’, Macedonians were able to raise their political status in the territory they inhabited and subsequently increase their cultural concessions. This explores some the awakening of ethnic Macedonian nationalism. It sheds light on the national and multicultural paradigm by probing some of the issues within the historical process of Macedonian national consciousness, and to the greater dialogue of the various elements of that process.

In spite of using these conceptions as mechanisms with which to legitimize, and augment their political and cultural status, our understanding of the ‘homeland’, and ‘identity’ begins to fade when we try to understand how ‘identity’ is applied in a larger context. In his work, Victor Roudometof explains the concept of national identity as:

[...] the outcome of conflicting claims that are generated by more or less selective reference to, and interpretations of, written and oral historical narratives, a process that establishes collective beliefs in the legitimacy of claims to a territorial “fatherland.” Prevalent among the south eastern European societies, this form of national identity stands in sharp contrast to Western European and U.S. model of national identity, which emphasizes the importance of citizenship rights and the territorial nature of the state.¹

The most critical point to keep in mind in this regard is this: elements that bring peoples together – shared history, experiences, social, cultural, and political traits – begin to dissipate the greater the distance between the individual and their perceived homeland. Every society, argues Parekh, has a historically inherited cultural structure which informs its conduct of various facets of life, including cultural, social, and political. This cultural structure may be identified in Macedonian communities and in the Macedonian state as well. This structure, states Parekh, resists modifications beyond a certain point without losing its coherence and causing widespread disorientation, anxiety and even resistance.² Macedonians still perceive Macedonia as their ‘natural’ state, and involuntarily accommodate other ethno-nationalist groups in the region.

A National Awakening

Even as far back as 350 B.C., Macedonia may be viewed as having been a single nation. Although over the years, decades, and centuries, this tiny nation expanded and contracted, it remained a single nation for over two-thousand years. For much of their history, Macedonians appear to have remained on the sidelines of Europe’s social, cultural, and intellectual fields. 350 B.C. represents the height of Macedonia’s territorial expansion. This enlargement was a direct

¹ Victor Roudometof, *Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: Greece, Bulgaria and the Macedonian Question*, Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 2002, p. 16.

² Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 263.

product of the many military campaigns that were undertaken by Philip II (359-336 B.C.). At the apex of its expansion, the Kingdom of Macedonia stretched from the mountainous peaks of the Balkan Peninsula, to the steppes of Asia, and as far as the sands of Africa. It was one of the most astonishing expressions of military and political influence and expansion in European history.³

The first instance, in which Macedonia experienced partition, was during the period 1912-1913. In spite of this historical anchoring, it can be said that ethnic-Macedonians experienced a significant national awakening in the modern period, specifically during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. If antiquity serves as the soil in which Balkan roots form, then the first shoot that facilitated the flourishing of modern Balkan countries appeared in the 19th century. As a result, the 19th century should be considered the most important period in Macedonian history.

Although the late 19th century as well as the early 20th century are hallmarks of the national awakening of Macedonians, many have argued that Macedonian nationalism flourished much earlier. These periods represent a time when considerable expressions of ethnic-nationalism were made by groups of intellectuals in areas of South Eastern Europe. Prior to the 20th century, much of the Slavic-speaking peoples inhabiting the region were simply regarded as Bulgarians, however, scholars and historians have asserted, those living in the region of Macedonia were Serbian as well as Bulgarian. Consequently, the term “Bulgarian” has been criticized as a blanket-term used in all too distributive a manner.

With the Ottoman Empire deteriorating around it in the 19th century, Macedonia was seen by many neighbouring nation-states as an area, not only of great interest, but of extensive opportunity. The breakdown of central authority in the Ottoman Empire made impossible the ebbing of tension that vexed the region. Of the rising tension over the territory directly concerning Macedonia, Evangelos Kofos argues that the “respective national ideologies of these newly-independent countries, in the form of accurate or arbitrary historical, ethnological and political claims, began to converge on the heterogeneous province with laudable consequence.” Their convergence fuelled a nefarious tension that eventually served as a critical impasse for consensus when it came time to redraw the borders of what Kofos refers to as “that microcosm of Balkan complexity.”⁴

³ <http://www.intersticeconsulting.com/documents/FYROM.pdf>. Demetrius Andreas Floudas, “Pardon? A Conflict for a Name? FYROM’s Dispute with Greece Revisited.”

⁴ Evangelos Kofos, “National Heritage and National Identity in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Macedonia”, in Martin Blinkhorn and Thanos Veremis eds., *Modern Greece: Nationalism and Nationality*, Athens, ELIAMEP, 1990, p. 104.

Though many elements contribute to the difficulty in understanding ethnicity, identity, and cultural compositions in South Eastern Europe, a few will be addressed in the following section. First, it is critical to note that the Balkans represents one of the most ethnically, linguistically, and religiously problematic regions of the world.⁵ Second, understanding Macedonians as a people presents a battle inasmuch as the delineation of historical periods ultimately plays a considerable role in the overall perception of Macedonism. As a consequent to the difficulty in mapping-out the many histories of the region, an ongoing debate has centred on the question: who are the Macedonians? It is not the intention of this paper to claim that Macedonians did not exist beyond the historical time periods either presented or discussed. However, it is the aim of this paper to demonstrate that the existence of a Macedonian national consciousness did develop during a specific period in European history.

Macedonia at the Vertex

As is the case with Macedonian history, the country and its people once again find themselves standing at crossroads. One of the most controversial aspects of the subject matter, in the contemporary periods, centres on the formal designation given to this territory, and how it should be recognized internationally. This controversy ultimately related to the aforementioned question regarding Macedonian identity. Regarding the controversy surrounding this divide, Demetrius Andrea Floudas states:

The entanglement between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (F.Y.R.O.M.), over the issue of the recognition of the latter and the name under which this recognition would take place, has served as a potent reminder of the considerable influence that nationalistic divides have always exerted in the Balkan region. For Greece, this dispute animated passions and stimulated a nationalist fervor that had been unseen for decades and, remaining a not fully resolved issue, it may contain a number of elements that could serve as a focus of regional conflict in the future. For the fledgling F.Y.R.O.M., the entanglement constituted a matter of paramount importance not merely in defining its external policy but it was also perceived as a matter influencing both its existence as a nation and its future status in South Eastern Europe.⁶

While the current debate about the name of Macedonia is largely between F.Y.R.O.M. and Greece, the name 'Macedonia' refers to the historical region claimed by the Macedonian Slavs as their ancestral homeland. This includes

⁵ Hugh Poulton, *Who are the Macedonians?*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, MS, Indianapolis University Press, 1995, p. 4.

⁶ <http://www.intersticeconsulting.com/documents/FYROM.pdf>. Floudas, Pardon? A Conflict for a Name? FYROM's Dispute with Greece Revisited.

F.Y.R.O.M. (Vardar Macedonia), most of the Greek province of Macedonia (Aegean Macedonia), as well as the Bulgarian province of Blagoevgrad (Pirin, Macedonia). As a result of the geographic nature of the region, which is largely mountainous, communities have shown a tendency to become compartmentalized rather than unified.⁷

The Slavomacedonians that are present today are largely the product of a movement of tribes that took place during the late 6th century A.D., which resulted in many tribes from other regions joining. These movements, or invasions as they are often-times referred to as, continued for another nine centuries following the rule of Philip and Alexander the Great. The result was a blending of many different Slavonic peoples, which reinforced the ethno-cultural diversity of the Balkan Peninsula. Among these people were Greeks as well as Albanians. They too joined with other Slavonic peoples that moved throughout the region over hundreds of years.⁸

Over time, other ethnic groups settled in the region to create a truly multicultural mosaic. Under the Ottoman Empire, the three contenders for the region, Serbs, Greeks, and Bulgarians belonged to different political units from Macedonia, and gained their independence first. With Serbian, Greek, and Bulgarian autonomy having been established during the mid- to late-19th century, Macedonia was forced to exert their nationalistic expressions against that of three dominant forces in the region.

The establishment of Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria meant that significantly less leverage lie in the hand of the Macedonians who also desired the establishment of their own homeland. As all three aforementioned actors had a head-start to the formation of their respective territories and power, they were able to pursue policies of expansion that ran headlong into Macedonian aspirations of their own independent territory.

The friction at this point in history for all four peoples, and their respective nations, and nation-states is an indication that Macedonian nationalist consciousness was quite perfervid at this time. These claims would carry further credibility if the local Slavic populations felt deep reciprocal allegiances. However, this was not the case as “Macedonians do not seem to have felt a need for even proto-national identity until it was demanded of them by their neighbours after the treaties of San Stefano and Berlin opened ‘the Macedonian question’ in 1878.”⁹

By 1800, the Ottoman Empire still represented a magnificent force, but it was an empire that has been in continuous decline for centuries. The

⁷ Poulton, *Who are the Macedonians?*, p. 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹ Peter F. Sugar, *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth-Century*, Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 1995, p. 369.

Ottoman's occupation of Macedonia didn't last very long into the 20th century. By 1913, Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria all had a hand in the control of Macedonia. Prior to this period, the name Macedonia was not used by the Ottomans, but instead the territory was divided into provinces. Because Macedonian nationalism developed with the aid of external institutions, its growth was slow in comparison to that of other nationalist movements recorded throughout Europe. Andrew Rossos presents a compelling rationale for Macedonia's national awakening having failed to develop at the same rate as that of others in Europe:

The first, or Slav phase in the Macedonian awakening began in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. And by the 1860s, there was clear evidence of the formation of a distinct Macedonian consciousness and identity, of Macedonian nationalism. [...] Unlike other nationalisms in the Balkans or in central and eastern Europe more generally, Macedonian nationalism developed without the aid of legal, political, church, educational, or cultural institutions. Macedonian movements not only lacked any legal infrastructure, they also lacked the international sympathy, cultural aid, and, most important, benefits of open and direct diplomatic and military support accorded other Balkan nationalisms. Indeed, the nascent Macedonian nationalism, illegal at home in the theocratic Ottoman empire, and illegitimate internationally, waged a precarious struggle for survival against overwhelming odds: in appearance against the Ottoman empire, but in fact against the three expansionist Balkan states and their respective patrons among the great powers.¹⁰

As other nationalisms surfaced in the region, the name Macedonia continued to gain notoriety by the latter half of the 19th century.¹¹ According to Rossos, "The development of Macedonian nationalism under Ottoman rule stood at its pinnacle of power with the ill-fated Ilinden Uprising (2 August, St. Elias's Day) of 1903."¹² Ultimately, Serbs, Greeks, and Bulgarians aspired to control the region in varying degrees, however, none of these powers ever considered sharing the region with a fourth nascent nationalism, or the peoples behind it.

'Insiders' and 'Outsiders'

National identity uses as its foundation something other than *just* cultural background and ethnicity. As a result, we should ascribe a limited, but not necessarily a low, value to many such theories as the language-trigger theory in explaining the development of Macedonian nationalism and identity.

¹⁰ Andrew Rossos, *Macedonia and the Macedonians: A History*, Stanford, CA, Hoover Institution Press, 2008, p. 61.

¹¹ Roudometof, *Collective Memory*, p. 90.

¹² Rossos, *Macedonia and the Macedonians*, p. 61.

A lesser degree of value should be placed on the concept of the nation-state as a modern construct. Nations are not modern phenomena. Giorgos Agelopoulos contends that we must accept that there will always exist the issue of “[...] the relationship between a nation and pre-existing social entities [...]” In terms of the ethnic-nation continuum, Agelopoulos argues that the rejection of the ethnic-national continuum in the case of the Balkans retains considerable political implications in the present period as well as the future. It is argued that the most common confusion of the region lies in the cultural, ethnic identity, and national identification domains. Ethnocentrism and nationalistic historical misapprehensions of identity is perhaps the most dominant force in Balkan people’s presupposition in defining themselves.¹³

Since the argument can be made that the concept of Macedonian nationalist consciousness surfaced relatively late, and in a region that was experiencing rapid change – including the dissolution of a long-standing authority – it should be understood that it was necessary for Macedonians to remain flexible in their nationalistic sentiments. The vast majority of ethnic Macedonians opted for the adoption of a Macedonian identity, and that identity, as demonstrated previously, began to crystallize with the awakening of Slavic national sentiments in Macedonia during the early 19th century.¹⁴ Given the late rise in Macedonian national awakening, other nationalist sentiments were used as a crutch, until Macedonians could solidify their own nationalist ideology. Therefore, the rise of competing nationalist movements both hindered and facilitated the rise of Macedonian national consciousness. The measures undertaken by Macedonians during their push for national development are explained accordingly:

During the long struggle for Macedonia, some ethnic Macedonians adopted or had to adopt the national identity of one of the competing nations. This was not unusual or peculiar to Macedonians in the age of nationalism. Members of other dominated or oppressed ethnicities went through similar experiences, especially in the many regions in central and Eastern Europe where the dominant nation or nations denied the existence of a people or peoples.¹⁵

Ultimately, three major elements set the stage for Macedonians to push for the idea of a Macedonian nation: those of (i) regional and territorial insecurity; (ii) the slow decline of the Ottoman Empire; and (iii) the intervention of neighbouring states in Macedonian affairs. Consequently,

¹³ Giorgia Ageopoulos, “Perceptions, Construction and Definition of Greek National Identity in Late Nineteenth-Early Twentieth Century Macedonia,” in *Balkan Studies*, 36 (1995), no. 2, p. 249.

¹⁴ Rossos, *Macedonia and the Macedonians*, p. 284.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

conditions that fuelled the evolution of the Macedonian nation may be seen as tripartite in nature.

Until 1913 much of the Slavic peoples living throughout all of Macedonia identified with Bulgaria, although Macedonia was a single geographic region prior to 1912-1913. Upon annexation of this geographic locale, Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria undertook various campaigns of ethnic-cleansing that is expelling or forcibly assimilating the indigenous ethnic Macedonian population. In spite of the assimilations and forced movements that ensued in these territories, the term 'Macedonian' should be considered delusory, and even more ambiguous. This ambiguity therefore drives the impression that efforts to ethnically homogenize Macedonian peoples in Pirin Macedonia retained a distinctly Macedonian identity. The annexation and integration of Macedonian territory are explained in the following terms:

In 1913, Greece acquired Aegean Macedonia, at about 34,000 square kilometers the largest piece of Macedonian territory. Bulgaria took the smallest part, Pirin Macedonia, with about 6,778 square kilometers. Albania, a state that the great powers created in 1912, received the relatively small areas of Mala Prespa and Golo Brdo. Albania, Bulgaria, and Greece have completely absorbed their portions, not recognizing them even as distinctive, let alone autonomous.¹⁶

Macedonians in other parts of former Macedonian territory, which was eventually amalgamated into adjacent nations, have also demonstrated distinct identities, and claims to a Macedonian national-identity. Other claims in the surrounding region leverage the argument that Pirin Macedonians retained their own distinct identity, and continued to support the claim of a Macedonian national consciousness, in spite of the fact that they found themselves living beyond their own borders. These examples weaken the argument that Macedonian nationalism did not pose a threat to other national movements in the region.

The turn of the century witnessed a great deal of Slavs fleeing to other regions. As they were permitted to do so by a number of factors, they made their way from what is currently F.Y.R.O.M. and Aegean Macedonia eastward to Bulgaria. In Bulgaria, those who would have otherwise faced severe oppression, including assimilation, ultimately re-defined their 'homeland' for themselves, and resided permanently in Bulgaria. Thus, the Macedonian national consciousness, was not only a development synonymous with the 19th century, it was a highly-versatile and adaptive construct. The flexibility of the ideology ultimately served self-preservation.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

Conclusion: The Nationalist Challenge

The debate over how the Macedonian national consciousness formed is by no means complete, and should serve as a continual item of discord among scholars and historians alike for some time. One certain and incontrovertible fact is that a Macedonian nation does exist, and always has. To deny the existence of the Macedonian national consciousness is to dismiss the existence of the Macedonian nation. Therefore they are two incontestable verities linked together like a trefoil knot. The Macedonian 'question' is kept alive by those, including state actors, who deny the existence of their national identity and consciousness. The denial of Macedonian identity, nation, and minorities, by Bulgarian, Greek, and Serbian politicians and clergy have contributed to the ongoing Macedonian 'problem'.¹⁷

In nearly every sense, Macedonia may be seen as a long-standing experiment in national identity development. For the past century and a half, Macedonians may also be seen as having lacked a legitimate power-structure that recognizes their national and ideological claims as a unified people living within a nation-state. The fear associated with their evident sense of national insecurity, is heightened still by the multi-ethnic composition of Macedonia as well as the surfeit of nationalist forces and ethnic compositions that surround the state.

The fragility of the security order in the region, as well as ancient animosities amongst neighbours, makes apparent the need for Macedonians to search their historical past as a means of anchoring their current and future identity and place on the map. Since Macedonians and Slavs alike have shared a great deal of cultural ground, Macedonians were given even greater reason to establish themselves and their nationalist roots in the region of South Eastern Europe, and contribute to the cultural mosaic that is everywhere in the Balkans evident.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 285.