The Macedonian Community in Greece

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I Historical Data

Internationally the term Macedonian is used to refer to the Slav speaking populations of Greek Macedonia. Within Greece the equivalent term *Makedhones* has multiple meanings referring both to a regional Greek identity and a distinctively non-Greek identity. Understanding the case of Macedonians requires overcoming an essentialist conceptualization of identities that argues ethnicity is based on certain characteristics such as language, cultural patterns and modes of production. Instead of focusing on the cultural content of identities, it is more important to examine the boundary that historically produces ethnicity.

Macedonians in Greece have had widely divergent political interests and feelings of belonging. They are united only by a mark of otherness placed on them by an ambivalent Greek society inside of which they experience different modes of accommodation. Although the majority of Macedonians in Greece identify themselves as Greek nationals a number of them declare themselves as belonging to a (Macedonian) minority. This is the result of developments that have occurred during the last two centuries. Prior to the mid-eighteenth century in the Balkans, the concept of nationality had not been fully articulated as a criterion for the establishment of political union. Macedonia was inhabited mainly by Slav speakers, Greek speakers, Vlachs, Jews and Muslims. Since religion was the main determinant of identity, people in the Ottoman empire were divided according to their faith. All the Orthodox Christians inside the empire, irrespective of their culture, constituted the so-called rum *Millet*. This situation produced an amalgamation of linguistic, socio-economic, cultural and religious domains and led to unique forms of syncretism.

The development of Balkan nationalisms during the eighteenth century imposed new boundaries: people had to choose a nationality. Under the influence of nationalism the rum *Millet* was divided among supporters of the national Bulgarian Christian Orthodox church whose exarchate was established in 1849, and pro-Greek supporters of the ecumenical patriarchate. In Macedonia, people who shared the same culture very often identified with different nations. Some Macedonians identified with the Greeks while others identified with the Bulgarian Exarchate and/or the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (*Vnatresna Makedonska Revolucionerna Organizacija/*

VMRO), which was founded in 1893. Decisions as to which particular national group an individual should adhere were relatively independent of cultural affiliations but were contingent on the needs and fears of those who were taking the decision. It was a political decision within the socio-political context of aggressive nationalisms. Because of these peculiarities of identification members of the same family could belong to different nations. In addition, very often individuals and families who defined themselves as members of one nation could turn into supporters of another nation.

Present-day state borders were established following World War One. Inter-war Greek governments attempted to homogenize the population. The inability of policy-makers to comprehend the dynamic national identification process led to the problematic practice of imposing cultural nationalisms over local populations. As a result, they silenced local practices and sponsored assimilation, excluding those

Macedonian cultural idioms that did not conform with the national homogenizing process.

During the Axis occupation of Greece between 1941 and 1945 Macedonian communities were divided in terms of their support for various of the resistant groups. During the Greek Civil War (1946-49) Macedonians were further divided: some fought with the leftist forces while others joined the monarchist National Army. The defeated forces of the left, Macedonians included, were forced into exile in various communist countries. In the 1950s and 1960s the Macedonian population in Greece further fell when large numbers emigrated to North America, Australia and northern Europe. This emigration was prompted by political pressures on the part of some state officials, as well as being a consequence of underdevelopment in rural Greece.

II Ethnic Relations

The current population of Greek Macedonia numbers over two million. The north-western regions are inhabited by an indeterminate number of Macedonian/bilingual speakers. The Greek government does not recognize the existence of a Macedonian minority, does not accept the use of Macedonian in official discourses and non-Macedonians occasionally articulate prejudice against Macedonians. However, there are no legal prohibitions on the expression of Macedonian culture or on the use of Macedonian in informal public situations. According to estimates published in the 2001 Department of State Reports, the number of Macedonian speakers in Greece is 'from under 10,000 to 50,000 or more'. Cowan (2000) points out that the majority of Macedonian speakers 'have found a way to be not ''either/or'' Greek-Macedonian, but rather ''both/and'' nationally Greek and culturally Macedonian'. As a result, they work, live, interact and inter-marry with other Greeks. Some of them identify themselves as belonging to a distinct ethnic group and assert their right to

Macedonian minority status. Danforth (1995) argues that the self-identified national Macedonians in Greece number about 10,000 persons.

III Basis and Strength of Group Identification

During the 1990s internal and external factors (local underdevelopment, diaspora influence, the human rights discourse) led to the development of the Macedonian minority movement, which in 1994 culminated in the formation of a party named Rainbow. This organization calls for recognition of a Macedonian minority in Greece and the establishment of specific minority rights. In the 1994 European Parliament elections Rainbow received 7263 votes (0.1 per cent nationwide). In the 1996 national elections the party co-operated with a communist party and received 3485 votes (0.05 per cent nationwide). Finally, in the 1999 European Parliament elections Rainbow received 4951 votes (0.1 per cent nationwide) and decided to end up its participation in national and European elections (see Table 9). Most Rainbow supporters are from villages of the Florina region.

Table 9 Rainbow Party electoral performance, 1994-1999

Elections	Votes	Nationwide percentage
1994 European Parliament elections	7263	0.1
1996 National Parliament elections	3485	0.05
1999 European Parliament elections	4951	0.1

The appearance of Rainbow brought a response at both the national and local level, especially during the 1991-94 dispute between Athens and Skopje. At the local level, Rainbow activists have attempted to narrow and fix the meanings of certain cultural forms in such a way that they may underwrite and authenticate a particular minority identity. Identity politics in this region relies upon international and national developments. Given that the Macedonians of Greek Macedonia have a long history of multiple identities, future developments mainly depend on the ability of the Greek state to secure the existence of a civic multicultural society.

Suggested Reading

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