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Macedonia's nationalisms

After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, political life in Macedonia takes other political colours, and with pluralism and democracy, different arrangement of political forces. Nationalist politicians however are still prepared to exploit these dangerous sentiments for their own good.

One sunny and beautiful day in Struga this summer, at a time when the tourists and people of Struga, easily and comfortably dressed walked to the beach and back, a group of ten Albanians from different age groups, on their way to some celebration who were noisily passing the bridge over the river Drim. In the rhythms and the sounds of *zurla* and the drums, a young man both thin and tall, was carrying the Albanian flag and was walking ahead of the procession. He acted as mast for the flag that he was holding between his arms spread high above his head. Dressed in costume despite the hot sun, with sweat on his forehead and a flag impeding his view and making his step insecure occasionally, the man wore a grimace of discomfort on his face. But nonetheless he walked proudly. His feelings towards the flag and the music, from which he derived his own dignity were no doubt authentic. If you exchange this man–mast with a man from any other nation, with a different flag and different music, the essence will remain unchanged. The man–mast is a moving paradigm of the most powerful ideology in the Balkans after the fall of communism, nationalism.

Over ten years ago, nationalistic politicians sensed the moment and manipulated the feelings of ordinary people who were scared about their future and imposed their own political monopoly on people's souls and minds. The space for manoeuvre was limited for people who had nothing against their own nation, but disagreed with the nationalism that spread from their countries. Powerless in the face of manipulators with human feelings, they purposelessly tried to obstruct the way of madness, which the nationalists spread with unbelievable ease over the Balkans. The final result was: indescribable human suffering in a series of bloody ethnic wars over the region of the ex–Yugoslav federation. Macedonia disintegrated out of the federation with international recognition and changed the one–party dictatorship into a peaceful pluralism. But the democrats in Macedonia – few of them who with their behaviour in the past had paid some personal price for the freedom we have today – understood with horror that this democratic method with which different interests are presented in order to become state politics can produce nationalism. In addition, because democracy is not a method that only in our nation but also in other countries produces nationalism, the peace in this country depends on the satisfaction of the political and personal needs of the nationalists. So, the political demands that are produced out of this democratic method show us that the stability of the country does not depend on the solving of individual rights,

but on how relations between different nationalisms and their political representatives are solved. The paradox here is that the adaptation amongst different nationalisms today is a part of a democratic process that gives us a chance for a different kind of democracy in Macedonia tomorrow. Of course as it is shown in the framework agreement, it won't be a model for democracy connected to the ethnic homogeneous societies with strong consensual elements. Until when will this domination of nationalists in Macedonia last? Religious slaughters in Western Europe stopped, when people, finally tired of such stupidities, turned their energy to smarter things. The same goes for Macedonia, too. Saturated by the demagogy of the politicians – nationalists, the people who still have responsibility for whom they are voting, one day will have more sense for the arguments of the politician–statesman.

In every society the world over, politicians and statesmen, also have the role of educators. How do they go about this? Confronting the feelings of the ordinary men with the realities of life entails hardly trying to produce politics with permanent adjustment. They, without any reservations, show the "ordinary man" that many other interests and their needs exist in this society to modify their own demands. So the politicians–statesmen are acting like leaders of public opinion, because they are not offering people what they want but something that they will learn to love. The politicians–nationalists on the other hand are not leading public opinion, but are instead waving with promises that they will fulfil in order to satisfy people's desires. They are riding on waves of people's feelings that they produce with their own brand of hypnotic nationalist demagogy. But because their nationalist rhetoric that aims at pleasing the wishes of the moment does not correspond with reality, sooner or later it will come back to them – sometimes in a very brutal manner. Towards the end of the story, the demagogue will end up in oblivion or prison or will stay remembered as a deceiver who has played with the feelings of his people. But such things happen towards the end of the story. Our Macedonian story is still being retold.

Look at the behaviour of Macedonian nationalists. When the federation broke up in 1991, Macedonians had their own state, language, and culture, established with ASNOM in the year 1945. The attempts to throw out a one–party dictatorship, the attempt of the new nationalists to deny the part of the communists as a prolongation of the national–liberation movement of the Macedonians throughout the history did not work because this thesis is not true. So there was no space for the politicians–nationalists to expose themselves. With the peaceful international recognition of Macedonia, the thesis that only through blood we can gain independence turned out to be wrong. Very little space was left for the nationalists to prove that they were ready to die for their fatherland. Only one way was left for the discrimination of political opponents and for their own political affirmation with which they succeeded to become rulers, namely the relations with Albanians. Here, their victory is total, because they persuaded all political powers and non–nationalists to accept that such behaviour is worthwhile in politics. The disintegration of the Slavic federation turned the inter–ethnic relations in Macedonia into disarray and weakened the Slavic factor while strengthening the Albanian one. The lead fighters for Macedonian independence, football teams, money, army, police, should know this fact and had it in front of their eyes. But now that we are independent, only with reforms in the political system that will result in the strengthening of the constitutional position of Albanians, we will maintain loyalty just to keep the peace in our state. Political history teaches us that in these situations you must reduce the chances of inter–ethnic explosions. But if that explosion was to happen, Macedonian

nationalists will stay out work and will remain on the political margins. That is why fighting for their own political life they abuse feelings and fears of the people and with the simple politics of not compromising with other nations they get unbelievable advantages over other Macedonian political opponents. By leaving the political opponents without public support for their (reductive) reforms, they paralyzed completely their politics, and infiltrated them in a dangerous game of nationalistic bidding. The question of who is a greater Macedonian can be found only in the uncompromising attitude towards the demands of the Albanians. But such an extreme behaviour paralyses the ability for compromises of the own nation, while at the same time feeding the extremism of the other nation. If there are laws in politics then this is undoubtedly one of them – one extremism bears another. Because the reservoirs of the people's feelings towards their own nation are deep, in the eyes of the ordinary man the defenders of the nation are always and again right – until the time they lead their own nation into disaster. And so will it be then!

This political behaviour of Macedonians after independence marginalizes whole generations of Albanian politicians with whom we had shared our education, people with whom we could find a mutual understanding easily. Finally, people who speak our language are much better than many Macedonian politicians. The deepening inter-ethnic gap in the past decade symbolically manifested itself through the fact that today Macedonians are forced to negotiate with the Albanian political leader who does not speak their language. Under the pressure of his own nationalism which found strong support in our historical impatience, doubts and fears, the motto among Macedonians in politics was not to rebate. The absence of reforms due to the integration of the Albanian population in the new Macedonian state pulled the carpet from underneath the feet of the Albanians who did not have anything to show in front of their own electorate. They were consulted in government several times about repressive actions against Albanians in parts of Macedonia. These destroyed their reputation, but proved a victory for the radical Albanians. Even among Albanians this process of nationalistic bidding started and is lasting even today. The slogan among Macedonians that we don't have to give Albanians anything because they have everything, was also a slogan among the Albanians: We don't have anything but want to have everything (what Macedonians have).

And so, instead of calm and evaluative processes of mutual adjustment, it came to inter-ethnic polarization and conflicts, throughout which radical nationalisms rule the hearts and minds of Macedonians and Albanians alike. The paradox here is that nationalist ideologues that lead their own people into a clash with other nationalisms are regularly depicted as their saviours too. And people who are scared love them. And yet, you can lie to some people all the time, and sometimes even to all the people, but you cannot lie to everyone constantly. Nationalism in Macedonia is also a kind of a lie. Nationalism in a society as ethically complex as Macedonia is a lie in the sense that by definition it is not in a condition to speak for the other. It speaks only for itself. But such a thing does not have any connection with the reality that creates coexistence or non – existence. The people of Iceland can be as nationalistic as they want – they are surrounded by fish. We on the Balkans cannot afford such luxuries. Geography and ethnic composition must serve as a warning that national exclusion is the most secure recipe for war. That is why tolerance and reason must prevail. The fact is that those who modified their behaviour according to those facts are the real heroes and not those who constantly raise the stakes only to retain their political position. The framework agreement dramatically altered the political system in Macedonia, but some of the radical

Albanians bemoan the fact that these are not their final demands. Sure, they don't want to lose out on the next elections. Of course, it's not the end of the world if another changes one political garnish. Actually, that is the essence of the democracy, namely that no one stays in power for too long. But our politicians are not the type of men who will rather lose elections, than bring upon disaster with their unreasonable work.

Finally, I return to the scene on the bridge on Drim to describe my feelings about the man–mast. I feel both sympathy and pity. I feel sympathy for the man who is in search of his own dignity and I feel pity for his deep feelings which are prone to political manipulations that can devastate his life, his family and all families who will gather for the celebration.

Published 2003–11–17
Original in Macedonian
Translation by Igor Masevski
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