



Denko Maleski

Macedonia's road to freedom

The renowned Macedonian intellectual Denko Maleski recently received an award from the Borjan Tanevski Foundation in recognition of his political journalism. In the following, a transcript of his acceptance speech, Maleski talks about the forces hindering a multi-ethnic democracy in Macedonia, and about the plight of the Roma, who in Macedonia face severe disadvantage.

This award represented a cause of joy for me; however, it also got me thinking. I was happy because this is the first time that my political texts have received public recognition. It got me thinking because, ever since I can remember, it has been the state that has awarded this recognition. Obviously, times have changed. It seems that the collapse of the ideological monopoly on political thought in Macedonia has brought about the fall of the state's monopoly on presenting awards. Namely, the existence of some virtuous people, ready to point selflessly a finger at my texts, was sufficient for me to receive my first public recognition. I thank them with all my heart.

Human society has been in the centre of my interest ever since my high-school days. Walter Lipman's political essays in *Newsweek*, for example, attracted my attention more than texts about machines. The contemplation of injustice in this world or the search for the truth and lies in politics were my favourite intellectual challenge. It goes without saying that it took many years before I reached the universal truths about politics. One of them is that we, as humans, are torn between the desire to belong somewhere and the need to have our own identity. If we choose to belong, we risk moral corruption while adjusting our own ideals to the needs of the group. And, if we reject its values, when they are in conflict with our conscience, we risk rejection from the group itself. The choice is ours. The group gives security — and gives out awards too! — but by belonging to it, we risk being infected with intellectual dishonesty, because politics always points out the errors on the "other side". However, standing alone is difficult, and if you feel obligated to the people to oppose power with truth, you risk being ostracized. Naturally, it does not involve banishment from the town, as in Ancient Greece, but merely exclusion from political entertainment. Let's not forget the old wisdom about priests, which says that they only take their monastic vows because of the good wine in the monasteries' cellars. The same goes for people entering politics.

I have always considered those who feel morally responsibility for their behaviour and the behaviour of society as a whole to be ideal. They are the strange people who have dedicated their lives to the search for the common rather than personal good. It is the conscience of these distinguished individuals that in crucial moments has often been the final resistance against yet another episode in the series of human tragedies. What kind of tragedy am I

referring to? Those tragedies that occur as the result of the fear, ignorance, and madness of the masses, but which are prevented by the conscience of these virtuous people. Every healthy society needs people capable of looking beyond the moment and of showing the way out of an atmosphere polluted by the intrigues and machinations of spite and petty-mindedness. The more we have of such people, the better for society itself. People who serve the truth, and not the group or public opinion, are pioneers, warning society about the threats to our freedom. While the group is characterized by listlessness and inertia, the individual is capable of changing his or her opinion in the light of new facts, and of warning society about new threats.

The absence of such people in Macedonian society, and the attempt to run the state with the help of the exalted public opinion, brought about the collapse in democracy in 2001, ten years after the declaration of independence. During this time, there was no process of intellectual deliberation that would have brought about the reconciliation of conflicting interests. Seen from today's perspective, it is perfectly clear that in the years following independence, inter-ethnic relations, instead of being controlled, controlled us. Timely and serious reforms furthering multi-ethnic democracy might have stopped nationalism penetrating the Macedonian political scene. No small amount of guilt for this situation lies with the intellectuals, those driven by the "life is short" creed, whose philosophy is about saving their own skin, and, if possible, in profiting from the chaos.

The lack of cosmopolitan, free-minded intelligence, dedicated to the common good, represents an enormous handicap for Macedonia. Our greatest impediment on the way to freedom is the spirit of extreme nationalism that, at the end of the 1980s, took over the minds and souls of the Balkan people completely. During that period, the historically familiar atmosphere of exaltation regarding the nation was created; an exaltation demanding the complete submission of the individual. Reasonable people knew that a multi-ethnic society organized on the principles of national exclusivity simply could not exist. What reasonable people found offensive was the claim that the nation could only think or act with one heart and mind. Unfortunately, these were extremely few in number. During those years, all political life was conducted in an atmosphere of exaltation and exaggeration. Nobody had heard the moderate words of a young man from South Africa, uttered during the darkest times of racism and apartheid in his country: "I don't want to exaggerate my descriptions of our situation, because it might lead me in the wrong direction." Note that these are the words of a human being who has the full right to exaggerate, but whose common sense does not allow him to do so. We, in the Balkans, could not be moderate. With our extreme words, we banished all sense, political dialogue, tolerance, and reconciliation, and chose violence instead.

This is the light in which we presented ourselves to a European people who, after the experiences of two World Wars, and especially of the Holocaust, had developed a great disgust towards extreme nationalism and violence. Still, civilized Europeans know that nobody is perfect. They know from their own experience what one human being can do to another, and one nation to another. In our present behaviour, they recognize their own past. How, then, are we so different from them today? Because we lack their earnest and strong will to keep the spirit of extreme nationalism tightly bottled, to solve problems peacefully, and to defend the dignity of the individual. What little political will we have left is constantly exposed to attacks by a bunch of charlatans and nationalists firmly nested in politics, the media, and the universities.

Unfortunately, this is the dominant force in the Macedonian intellectual sphere. It is their misfortune that Europe is uniting itself on different principles than theirs. And it is our good fortune that the Europeans are allies of the moderate forces at work on the integration of multi-ethnic Macedonian society. Left alone, the latter would not stand a chance to succeed today. However, the chances of changing the intellectual climate in Macedonia towards dialogue and tolerance between people and nations are good. We must be aware that this cannot come from the outside. The intellectual climate of Macedonia has its source in our heads.

In that new spiritual climate, Macedonia must unite all its ethnic communities in defence of the unity of the country, understood as a community of human entities. What principle would unite people with such different languages, cultures, and religions? It is that of personal and national dignity. Only people with dignity can respect the dignity of others. Our way to freedom could lead through Shutka (a colony of Roma in Skopje); nowhere is human dignity threatened more than here. Rumour has it that twenty people died of cold there recently. The other day, together with Mirjana, I visited the local school. We saw hungry and poorly dressed children who go without school lunch because their parents cannot provide the 250 denars a month it costs. What has democracy brought the Roma? Freedom of speech? Well, it is also a freedom for us intellectuals to raise our voices in their name, and to say that they need freedom from poverty too! They have suffered much too long, these people living on the margins of society. The most discriminated against minority in Europe was also the victim of the Holocaust: as well as the six million Jews, half a million Roma were burned in the Nazi crematoriums. I wonder why we keep forgetting that when we commemorate the Holocaust? Yes, let's go to Auschwitz, but let's go to Shutka and pay our respects there too.

There, in Shutka, many children do not have the happy childhood that Borjan had, who grew up surrounded by love, in a family of virtuous and hard-working parents. The contemplation of injustice in the world, about the truth and lies in politics, was his mission too. In his seminar paper dedicated to ethnic relations in Macedonia, I see quotations from some of my essays published in *New Balkan Politics*. Is it possible that I have influenced him, just as Walter Lipman has influenced me? Perhaps. Thinking with an open mind and having understanding for others, the approach present throughout his text, sounds so familiar to me! So, in the name of Borjan's happy childhood, I donate this award from the foundation that bears his name to the children of the Braka Ramiz and Hamid School in Shutka.

Published 2005–10–11
Original in Macedonian
Translation by Kristina Krkacovska
Contribution by Roots
First published in *Roots* 15 (2005)
© Denko Maleski/Roots
© Eurozine