The Balkan Muslim discourse: Identity among the Muslims of Slavic origin

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Abstract

The Balkan Muslim discourse is determined by many factors that are synthesized within a complex identity system of interdependence. Ethnicity, language, culture, customs, religion, and geographical factors, together with the urban rural character of the communities determine the collective sense of solidarity and building of national affiliations. Of course, this section should also mention the factor of political mobilization, which has been intensified in certain historical periods. The basis of the identities, which originated in the late Ottoman Millet confessional structure is upgraded with the invention of the Western ideologies, primarily the national ideology. But in many of the Balkan countries, which in fact were constituted on basis of the Christian identity, the Muslims of the same language, cultural and ethnical origin, i.e. the Muslims of Slavic origin, were often excluded. Such examples will contribute to the construction of new forms of solidarity, even new national identities and affiliations.

Key words: nation, identity, millet, religion, Slavs, Balkan, *Makedonci muslimani*[i]

The early 20th century in Macedonia is marked by the Ilinden Uprising of 1903 and the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. These events seemed to be just a hint of a bloody second decade, which mainly promoted the conflicts of the so-called concepts of greater nationality of the Balkan states. In search of their own identity, the Balkan nations attempted to define national framework based on the ethnic idea of the nation with a strong language core (Todorova 2001: 240). Thus defined, they enter the fight for the remains of the Ottoman heritage. The euphemisms of this period "*racial hygiene*" and "*final solution*" in the late 20th century become the equivalent term "*ethnic cleansing*" (Dzenkins 2001: 19).

The ethnic changes that occur in the Balkans have been conducted under the auspices of state coercion. For Max Weber the government is the "state through its management structures" and has the power to enforce this constraint. Furthermore, according to Weber, the government represents the possibility that certain people obey the orders that have specific content. In addition to the definition of government offered above, Weber says "government" possesses power and has an impact on a particular group the people (usually territorially connected) who are obedient to it (Weber 1/1976: 37). Nations in Europe were intensively developed after the French Revolution. Their development is accompanied by a parallel process of expansion of the market economy, which as a new economic system, helped the development of institutions of centralized administrative control, among them being the development of the centralized state control system and the state monopoly of "the legitimate usage of force." This provided the institutional channels for dissemination of national culture and the necessary means of coercion in the way of building a nationality. The building of the nationality is a process of cultural revolution through the institutions of education, religion, institutions and symbols of state control, that shape the creation of the national identity, as a new conceptual intellectual framework for interpreting the historical experience (Karakasidou 2002: 20). Nationality in the Balkans during the 20th century was primarily determined on basis of linguistic and religious identity. All national and cultural leaders anticipate the language as the most powerful means of unification. The emerging countries worked on the creation of secularized, centralized and unified school system, which besides the military, is one of the strongest factors of the national identity (Todorova 2001: 259, 260).

The remains of the Ottoman state in the Balkans have been at the center of the interests of the Balkans and the world for long time. In the period 1911-1912 the so-called Balkan union, which included Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro and Greece, was formed. The

climax of this political change comes with the Balkan Wars (1912-1913). This war not only redefined the physical borders in the Balkans, but also altered the internal conditions for definition of collective identities. Until then, the main institutional carrier of the identity was the religious affiliation and organizations, but from the end of the war, the main criterion comes from the national state and its collective identity construction, i.e. the nation. The period of transition of the criteria for establishing these identities lasted for at least ten years. The First World War averted the full integration of the Serbian institutions in the Vardar part of Macedonia, and at their expense in a vacuum period for several years, they were replaced with Bulgarian. The final national consolidation of Serbia, comes with the end of the First World War.

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire led to a significant part of the Muslim population to move to Turkey, where Ataturk's concept of Turkish nation, within the newly established Turkish state, covers the Muslim population that speaks Turkish. With this, Turkey formally forgoes the rights and the obligations towards the peoples of the other former Ottoman territories (Watson 1993: 249). Although the Pan-Islamism was rejected as a basis for a national concept, through exchange of population, which was conducted after the peace of Lausanne with Greece (1923), despite the fact that it was basically defined as secular, Turkey became *de facto* a monolithic Muslim state. In this decade of wars, a significant proportion of the Muslim population lived within the boundaries of the new Christian nation-states. Their position changed the relation of the monopoly of political and administrative authority, which the Muslims enjoyed within the Ottoman Empire. After the destruction of the Empire, the Muslims went through a psychological process, in which the millet system (the relation *Raya-Muslims*) must be replaced by a national system (nation-state). Although the rich citizen layers in the Ottoman Empire were mostly Bekteshi (Sufi Islam) and Jews, while the other Muslims mostly belong to the so called fukara[ii], the contribution to a wider Ottoman society, led to existing the previous Millet identity traits for a long time (Todorovski 2001: 115).

The creation of nations on the basis of language, with exception of the Albanian example, stumbled at the religious aspect of the old division of the Ottoman Empire. Not only was the integration of groups impossible, which, according to the ethnic and linguistic basis differ from the dominant nations in the national state, but it also proved impossible for those groups that have the same linguistic or ethnic basis, such as: "*the Pomacs*" in Bulgaria, "*the Muslims - Slavs*" in Bosnia and Herzegovina, "*the Torbesh*" in Macedonia etc. The Christians in the Balkans begin to understand each other by dint of the language of nationalism, while

their attitude towards Muslims remained in the domain of non-differentiated discourse between the religious communities. On the other hand, because the Balkan Muslims could not adapt to the national code, they were practically excluded from the process of national integration. They retain a fluid consciousness, which has been a representation of millet-mentality in this region for long time, and thus in the Ottoman heritge (Todorova 2001: 260, 261). Their identity is therefore a fluid and a historically rooted work, and the created boundaries and the loyalty tended toward the group often change and move (Karakasidou 2002: 22).

The new boundaries established after 1912 become a major criterion for the definition of collective identities. Ethnicity is promoted as the primary factor of group identification, competitive with the previous religious collective categorization. In this context, Barthes's notion of ethnic group implies a social unit which shows a consistent form of action, understanding and presentation of its collective membership in the group, based on indicative cultural criteria. He marks that for establishment, development and definition of ethnic groups the processes of constitution and maintenance of boundaries are necessary (Karakasidou 2002: 20, 21; Bart 1997: 125-127). The appearance and the survival of these groups becomes questionable in the light of the units, which can be identified by their geographical borders (Bart 1997: 125-127)[iii]. Although it is denied, the idea of military maintenance of the culture of a tribe or nation at the expense of their neighbors, still dominates the scientific view that the geographic and the social isolation provide the cultural diversity. In other words, the existence of ethnic categories is not based on dynamism, contacts and information, but on the process of social exclusion and inclusion, which maintains such categories despite the individual experiences. The differences do not depend on the absence of interaction and the cultural differences could continue to exist despite the inter-ethnic contacts and the dependence of certain groups.

By the hypostasis of the ethnic, religious, or another group criteria or standard of individual behavior, the society can be "compartamentalized"[iv]. When the society is divided into isolated units, the individuals develop bigger sensitivity to group loyalty, and a minimal sense of responsibility outside of their own group. It is interesting to mention that such cases weaken the spiritual and ethnic elements of religion, and there is a strengthening of the political group elements (Mladenovski 2005: 190). Areas with Islamized villages, as specific ethnic territories, are locked in isolation (Limanoski 1993: 228). For example, in the case of "*the Macedonian Muslims*" since the early 20th century, despite the installed secular criteria

of the nation-state, any failure to incorporate into the wider environment is accompanied by increased religious activity of the community. In the context of what has been said previously, some authors look for the reasons for isolation of this group in which Islam, is dominant religious institute. Islam is a religion that fully assimilates the national characteristics of its members. According to Todorovski, "*neither common blood, neither language nor culture can stop a Muslim to show more solidarity with their tribesman than their faith fellows*" (Todorovski 2001: 115). This statement is an expression of the primordial perceptions of the national past, but essentially the national characteristics become partly an expression of the national belonging, even in the last few decades of the Ottoman Empire, and, are primarily driven by the aspirations of the young Christian Balkan nationalisms, but not as internal national policy of the Empire. Within the same context, the example of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) can be considered. According to Obradovič, "The Turk in B&H is named Turk in accordance with his religion, but with his race and language, or type of his ancestors, depends the type of the descendants today ... when real Turks return to their vilayets, Bosnians remain *Bosnians*" "(Bieber 2000: 20, 21).

During the first half of the 20th century, agents and authorities in Serbia established institutions of national influence and control over the newly won territory. The national elite and its local agents conducted assimilation policy towards all the different cultural and ethnic groups falling under their national political sovereignty. The national ideology imposed cultural identity, depriving the family and the local political unit control over the economy and the power to create conventional collective images (Karakasidou 2002: 27). The problem that arises with the status of the group of Muslims who have a "Slavic" native language within the new nation-state of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SCS), in Bulgaria and Greece, is basically a problem of defining their character. It depends on the religious character of the wider community, as well as on the confessions that have a monopoly of political power change. The identity is also affected by the factor that possesses the political power within the religious communities. During the time of the Ottoman Empire, in the settlements populated mainly by Muslims, or those mixed with Christians and Muslims, the political elite and the local leaders were mostly of Muslim faith, and in time of World War I, in the aforementioned countries, they were primarily Christians (Todorovski 2001: 370). The treatment by the then state institutions and the scientific thought is not unique. Of course, we should here point out to the fact that the collective memory of this population could not be easily reconstructed, because the memories of the Ottoman state were still present. This

memory was recomposed in the 1920's, when by the formation of the modern Turkish nation-state, at the expense of the Ottoman religious one, the collective sense of belonging to the Turkish nation spread out.

The new historical conditions imposed the need to redefine the criteria for defining the nature of group belonging among the "*Muslims who spoke Slavic language*" in some parts of the new territories of the Balkan nation-states. In order to define this group we will start with Smith, who makes a clear distinction between **ethnic categories** (groups where the wider collective consciousness is not clearly established, but it is limited to the gender and the kinship) and **ethnic communities** (groups where there is a strong collective and national consciousness, and their attributes are: collective name, myth of common ancestors, common historical memory, common culture, solidarity, common fatherland). In the process of the historical creation, it is the sense of common origin – a myth, which is particularly important (eg. Armenians, Jews, etc.) (Smith 1997: 128-140). If we emphasize the attributing as a decisive feature of ethnic groups, we can deal with two conceptual problems. So, first, when the ethnic group is defined by its attributive and exclusive character, it depends on the maintenance of boundaries, depending on the cultural traits and they change depending on them. And secondly, when for the characteristic of belonging is described in only the socially relevant reasons, not the objective manifested differences. According to these views, the key problem of the scientific researches becomes the **ethnic boundary** that defines the group, and not the cultural material, that it contains. The boundaries, which should be the center of the attention, are certainly the social boundaries, although at the same time it can have a territorial basis. If a particular group maintains its identity, even when its members interact with others, it automatically implies the existence of criteria for determining the affiliation, as well as the ways to manifest the belonging and the exclusion (Bart 1997: 174). Accepting the boundaries of national states, as coexisting with the boundaries of societies and their treatment in primary and most appropriate framework of sociological analysis, becomes common practice among the representatives of the modern orthodox scientific thought. But in reality, the Balkan societies are not as homogeneous and tightly integrated neither in cultural nor in structural terms (Mladenovski 2005: 176).

One of the salient turning points relating to the analysis is in terms of borders and their definition. In the case of the "*Balkan Slav Muslims*" these borders must be understood in terms of two directions: on the one hand is the relationship with the wider surrounding "*Slavic*" world; and on the other hand is the relationship with the fact of the past dominance

of the Muslim. In both cases, these groups are clearly different minority population, which, vis a vis the dominant population, covers more conceptual than geographical area of demarcation. The difference between the two types of conditions is that this population invades the peripheral zone in the "*Slavic*" (Christian) area, which is virtually exclusionary for them, while the Muslim sphere makes the possible acceptability of the assimilations alternative (Fraenkel 1995: 155). If we can say that ethnic dividing lines involve contextuality, contrast and are the subject of negotiations, we cannot say the same about the borders. According to Brunbauer, the last mentioned entities divide the self-defined national groups and they deny any flexibility identity. People must become individuals with a strong identity, which should be independent of the social, cultural, and even geographic context (Brunbauer 2002: 82).

As already mentioned, the difference in faith required exclusion of any facilitation between the Orthodox and Muslims in this group. Besides the endogamy which is characteristic of the Muslim groups of Slavic origin, now more endogamous groups within the old group have been created. For example, in the case of Miyak - Orthodox and the Miyak-Muslims in Macedonia, not only are the mixed marriages with other ethnic groups excluded, but also between different religions within its own group. This builds a relationship of two different units (Palikrusheva 1965: 153). Ethno-geographic isolation creates circumstances to preserve the "Slavic" traditions. They also create endogamy regarding the marriage (the marital relations with the Christians and with the other Muslim ethnic groups are mostly excluded) (Limanoski 1993: 321).

Stereotypes are created by labeling the *Makedonci Muslimani*. For example: "*the turcizated ones were worse than the Turks*" (Todorovski 2000: 225). Also as members of the "*Muslim-millet*" they were perceived as "*Turks*" (Limanoski 1993: 170). The islamized "*Slavs*" built their own stereotypes and categorizations against the Ottoman Turks, calling them by the pejorative, sardonic name "*Torbesh*". There are many examples when "*real Turks*" in Macedonia have been called *Erlii* too (Ibidem, 98). However, within the Osman Empire all Muslims were "*Turks*"[v] in a political sense (Jezernik 2002: 46). But despite this fact, this category of people was, especially outside the cities, in a subordinate role in relation to other Muslims. Due to poverty and poor political influence that they had within the wider Muslim community in the Ottoman state, *the islamized indigenous Slavic groups*, unlike the Albanians, had a very difficult time progressing into the state system of that time (Todorovski 2000: 320). Having a Muslim religion and not making a distinction between nationality and

religion, the *islamized* at the time of the Ottoman Empire, "*were counted among the Turks, and regarded themselves as such*" (Ibidem, 361).

In this section we should mention another factor which produced fundamental differences between Christians and Muslims in the 19th century. It is the attitude towards the so-called *Revolutionary Struggle*, which refers to the national liberation from the Ottoman rule and the formation of national states according to the western pattern. What during the whole nineteenth century united the various Christian intellectuals of the Ottoman Balkans, was that as members of the same faith, they faced with common hostile "*Muslim Turks*" (Shea 2002: 168). The *Muslims of Slavic origin* in the period of the national-liberation movements of the Balkan peoples, from the 19th and the early 20th century, could not be included in them because of the same political-legal and religious differences between the Muslims and the Christian "*Raya*" (Limanoski 1993: 11). In the same period, this population group shows volatility and generally does not join any revolutionary movement, but did not show greater solidarity with the Ottoman authorities either. In terms of access to this struggle, which first arises from the access and the status in the Ottoman state, today we can locate the fundamental differences between the *Bulgarian, Serbian, Greek and Macedonian Christians* and *Muslims* and their relationship to the parent nation-states.

The Greek-speaking Muslims did not fit into the body of the post-independent Helens, but the Orthodox who spoke Albanian played a crucial role, although their relationship with the Greek tradition remained fluid (Karas 2004: 320)[vi]. Also, the Muslim population of Macedonian (Slav) origin follows the Ottoman rule and the Macedonian revolutionary movement acts as against other Muslims (Pandevski 1974: 41). The picture in the early 20th century, is best captured in Brailsford. When describing an islamized local situation, he emphasizes its strong commitment and loyalty towards the Empire and superiority over the Christians: "*For him, the Empire was "our" country and the sense of ownership that was obtained from the caste where he was educated, was what prevailed in all his thoughts*" (Brailsford 2003: 82).

The "*Slavic Muslims*" as an integrated part of the Ottoman Empire, held the rights, privileges and obligations of the members of the majority religion. They acquired the obligation and right to serve in the military, to bear arms, to acquire positions in the state and in the spiritual hierarchy. But on the other hand, they as a Muslim community did not gain any higher level of social development, despite the privileged position that made them very close to their fellow Christians (Todorovski 2001: 401, 402). In addition, the unity of

Christians and Muslims was also based on the fact that they used the same language, that lead back to their common "*Slavic*" origin. Sitnce he word "*Slav*" belongs in the field of philology, the term is primarily tied to the existence of the Slavic languages, as separate entities (Watson 1993: 127).

The imposing of a single national identity of the Balkan nation states, with the exception on Yugoslavia (it is still thought of as Yugoslavia), has become a major goal in their official policy. Since the beginning of their existence, they have tried to indicate their ethnic territories, in order to establish strong ethnic and political boundaries (Brunbauer 2002: 80). As a result of building a theory of victimization and the myth of "Turkish slavery", part of the Christian nation-states, is trying to overcome the Muslim discourse by violent re-Christianization. For example, the Pomaks are considered Bulgarians, but they do not have the proper religion. Therefore throughout the 20th century as late as 1974 the Bulgarian nation-state campaigned to change the Muslim names to Christian names under the guise of so-called "revival". This could be seen as as a response to the Bulgarian historical "forced Islamisation" that was detected as an act of national homogenization by the Bulgarian science (Brunbauer 2002: 96-100).

In the framework of analysis of society and identity in it, only in terms of the national framework it does not offer space for cultural pluralism, which in turn promotes cultural diversity, differences between the different beliefs, ideas and lifestyles of different communities, groups and associations within one society (Mladenovski 2006: 177). Although both Christians and Muslims have in the collective memory awareness of common origin, there is a certain tendency to revise it, based on religious differences. One of the key elements in the national constitution is the language, which is a parameter of the uniting with the Christians (Serbs, Bulgarians, Macedonians) of the same nation, but the religious belonging excludes them from it and integrates them into the wider Muslim community of different ethnicities.

We can find an equivalent to the current situation concerning the confused identity among the Macedonian Muslims in the territory of Macedonia at the end of the Ottoman rule. If the boundaries of this group in terms of the surrounding entities are defined by the religion on one hand and the language, on the other hand, the situation with the Macedonian Slavic Christian population at the end of the existence of the Ottoman Empire is similar. What the Macedonian, the Turkish or the Albanian nations mean for the Macedonian Muslims today, is what, in the early twentieth century, the Greek, the Bulgarian or the Serbian nations meant

for the "*Slavic*" Christian population in Macedonia. In this period, the definitions of nationality proposed by Greek scholars, significantly rely on religion and on the impact of hundreds of years of the Ecumenical Patriarchy on the Christian population in Macedonia. On the other hand, the Bulgarian authors of the national strategy emphasize the language, which was a visible sign on which to base the Bulgarian nationality with religious autonomy from the Ecumenical Patriarchy. From this conflict, together with the political circumstances linked with the Macedonian national self-identification, the Macedonian nation as a separate group was born, which did not belong to the Bulgarian linguistic, nor to the Greek religious scheme. The question is now whether the more or less equivalent situation exists in Bosnia and Herzegovina today led to the creation of a special "Bosnian Muslim" nationality, and similar trends exist in Bulgaria and Macedonia, in terms of differentiation of new ethnic groups of *Macedonian Muslims (Torbeshi) and Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks).*

Conclusion

Mixing the religion and the nationality within the Ottoman Empire, in this category of the population comes from the monopoly that had the *Turks-Ottomans*, as carriers of the religious life and institutions, although they had not yet developed the national phenomenon. For Blagoya Korubin, the current situation clearly separates the religion, which is systematically not connected to the national traits, from the nationality, which is characterized by clearly ethnic-national characteristics, where the primary importance is the language. Each manifestation of faith in a national sense in modern terms is explained by the presence of a particular bit developed under the influence of the factor "*religion*", or by the remnants from the past in the consciousness of people, etc. pseudo national conditions (Korubin 1994: 125). But at the same time it appears to be impossible that the Balkan Christian nation-states adopt the code that even a Muslim can be a member of the nation. This is a condition that lasts and is being maintained in the future.

[i] Because of their complex identity, it is difficult to establish a categorical attribute, or name for the group of Muslims in Republic of Macedonia who speak the Macedonian language. We are using the term *Makedonci muslimani* and in English transcription. In the past Macedonian science used the terms Muslim Macedonians and Islamized Macedonians. Both indicate that the national identity of the group is Macedonian, but in many census, they show different national affiliations such as Albanian, Turkish, pure Muslim, and the newest Torbesh in their self-identification. Also in the Macedonian context using Islamized Macedonians is problematic, because it refers to the "non- legitimate" process of islamization (conversion to Islam from Christianity), which makes them de facto less- Macedonians in the eyes of the majority of Christian Macedonians. The term Torbesh, also has pejorative usage as a symbol of Christian categorization. Furthermore we cannot use Macedonian Muslims because this term refers to all Muslims in Republic of Macedonia, including Albanians, Turks and Roma. Maybe the most appropriate term for English transcription is Macedonian speaking Muslims, but the same one cannot be translated in nominational usage on Macedonian language i.e. *muslimani koi zboruvaat Makedonski*.

[ii] Term used for the poorest Muslims in the Ottoman Empire.

[iii] Differences between the groups and their borders have attracted a lot of attention for centuries, but have never been studied in such a systematic way, as it makes Bart (Bart, 1997).

[iv] Compartamentalize (eng)- to split into separate sections (parts), especially if one thing does not affect the other (Wehmener (ed.) 2000: 245).   In this case though a group that is isolated or marginalized (primarily geographically, but also politically) and does not allow any influences referring to other groups.

[v] The terms "*Turks*" and "*Turkey*" have been perceived as a category that signifies the great Islamic Ottoman Empire and its Muslim population, especially its ruling element, for long time in Europe (Western Europe) (Watson, 1993: 245).

[vi] For example the Crete painter Theotokopoulos has painted in Western style, but many will say that he is Greek, while the janissary Sinan saved the population at the time of Selim II and was never recognized as Greek (Karas, 2004: 315).

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