

Bilingualism and double ethnic identity

The case of Macedonarmân people

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Although a successful collective identity is sometimes not sufficient for a successful language maintenance, always when we refer to the possibility of double or multiple ethnic identity, a collective identity and its dimension could be a main condition for a stable and sustainable double or multiple ethnic identity, it depends, of course, on the strength of the particular ethnic identity.

Concerning this point of view, in the next short analysis, I would like to refer to the Macedonarmân people we ourselves belong to.

The Macedonarmâns, with their own name “Armân” or “Makedonarmân”, known also as Macedo-Vlachs, Helino-Vlachs, Aromanian-Vlachs, are one of the oldest European peoples with deepest roots in the Antique Macedonia. This people, on whose origins there is some disagreement among specialists, has been living in the Balkans for more than two thousand years.

In many aspects the Macedonarmân people (living much more than one million in Balkan countries) is a special „European“ problem in the field of minority issues. They are endangered by extinction, their political and judicial status differs from one state to the other. The traditional Macedonarmân life style was completely disrupted at the beginning of the last century by the political and social changes in the Balkans. When their territory (Macedonia) was divided up among four different sites (Greece, Albania, Bulgaria and Serbia) and the borders were made permanent, after the Second Balkan War (1913), the different Macedonarmân communities found themselves unable to conduct their traditional exchanges. More often than not, their herds and lands were sold, and many Macedonarmâns left their traditional mountainsides to settle in the towns and thus merge with the masses. As a result, the Macedonarmân language and culture, which had survived for more than 2000 years in the Balkan mountains, are today threatened with extinction.

In spite of it all, by their nature, the Macedonarmâns have always had a social disposition and have played as a link between the people among which they have lived, thus contributing to the formation and development of the Balkan national states. This fact has conferred them, due to the good neighbourly relations with the peoples alongside which they have lived and are still living, the highest expression of multiple ethnic identity, a good reason to consider them a very exceptional, indeed unique historical, linguistic and cultural phenomenon, a good reason to be called sometimes “the chameleons of Balkans”.

This double or sometimes multiple identity of the Macedonarmâns, their “chameleonic” flexibility, reported to different groups, i.e. in the case of most powerful Macedonarmâns elites who preferred to be engaged in other national movements, led to a quasi assimilation, melt with Greek, Christian-Albanian, Serbian, Bulgarian or Romanian identity.

Nevertheless, even this “chameleonic” flexibility, made them, on the other hand, one of the most multilingual ethnic groups in Southeastern Europe and, implicit, an economically and politically very strong one.

The maintenance of a double or multiple identity requires extra efforts from the members of the group in order to avoid an absorption by other groups. A double or multiple identity could be formed on the same dimension – in this case such identities tend to be unstable and lead to assimilation, or on different dimensions – in this case such identities are cognitively and therefore more stable.

The double identity of most Macedonarmâns is formed on different dimensions, therefore is still stable, a regularity which was very useful in their language maintenance. This formed double identity on different dimensions, led to its higher vitality and in turn enhanced the language maintenance.

The development of a specifically Macedonarmân identity can be even seen in the early Macedonarmân diaspora, with its characteristics of a typical national movement for the 19th century. The form of different identities among the Macedonarmân people was strongly influenced by the cultural and mental proximity to the Greeks on the one hand and by the proximity of their language to the Romanians on the other hand, a dilemma which led, at the beginning of the 20th century, to the division within the Macedonarmân communities into Romanian-Macedonarmâns and Greek-Macedonarmâns. This influence by the both states, Greece and Romania, will last for years and also continues nowadays.

Although the Macedonarmâns had the possibility to develop their own nation, due to the geographical dispersion and ethnic intermixing, these national aspirations became very difficult.

The Macedonarmân identity, survived much more in the south-slavic area (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Bulgaria) and also Albania, where Macedonarmân communities could be considered a very coherent people, but their absorption by the majority in Greece could not be stopped, most of them adopted the language of the majority and renounced their own language, not quite losing their other identity, the Macedonarmân one.

The Revolutions of 1989, also known as the Fall of Communism, brought a “new wind of changes” also within the Macedonarmân communities in the Balkan countries and began the modern history of the Macedonarmâns with the attempts to improve the Macedonarmân identity, language and culture, undertaken for years before by those Macedonarmâns of the diaspora in Germany, France, United States, Canada and Australia.

Taking into account the critical situation of the Macedonarmân language and culture, which have been present in the Balkans for over 2000 years, but face today a serious risk of extinction, the Council of Europe adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly on 24 June 1997 the Recommendation 1333 on Armân / Macedonarmân Language and Culture. In order to prevent such a cultural loss for Europe, the Council of Europe encourages the Balkan states where the Macedonarmân people live, to support their language in the fields of education, religion and the media. The main aim of the Macedonarmân Communities in the Balkan states is to preserve and develop the Macedonarmân language, traditions and the entire spiritual and cultural macedonarmân specific.

Even demarches concerning the application of the Recommendation 1333/1997 have unfortunately failed because in accordance with national legislation the Macedonarmâns can not enjoy the specific rights of the persons belonging to ethnic groups as they are not de jure recognised as a national minority or as a constitutive people, except their recognition in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

The most important thing that the Macedonarmân minority claims is the right to its existence. This minority is at risk of genocide or “ethnic cleansing”, that is a historical contemporary evidence. The existence of an ethnic, religious or linguistic minority does not depend on a decision by that State. The existence of a minority must be established by objective criteria. The most objective criteria is the right of minority to self-identification. A minority is a minority when this could be seen. The existence of a minority is “a matter of fact, not a matter of law” said the International Court of Justice in the interwar period.

The major lacuna in the international law that could be identified is that, there is no international mechanism that can reverse a state's refusal to recognise the existence of a minority group. The recognition and protection of national minorities is essential to stability, democratic security and peace in Europe. A pluralist democratic society should respect the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of each person belonging to a national

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minority, should also create appropriate conditions enabling them to express, preserve and develop this identity.

The creation of a climate of tolerance and dialogue is necessary to enable cultural diversity to be a source and a factor, not of division, but of enrichment for each society. The cultural diversity and a strong particular ethnic identity could be the main condition for a stable double or multiple ethnic identity, essential for a democratic security in Europe.