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TORBEŠKI (POMAČKI) IDENTITET I NJEGOVI IZAZOVI U MAKEDONIJI

**TORBEŠI / MACEDONIAN MUSLIM (POMAK) IDENTITY AND
THEIR CHALLENGES IN MACEDONI**

Abstract

The aim of this discussion is to partially shed light on the challenges and problems encountered by the Torbeši (Pomak) identity in the Balkans from the creation of the nation state until today. It is an ethnic identity inhabited in Macedonia, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece and Kosovo. They speak of the Torbeši, the Pomaks and the Gorani, as three branches of one identity, the substrate of which, according to Macedonian and Bulgarian researchers, is linked to the worship of God. As it is mostly inhabited in Macedonia and Bulgaria, all researchers believe that it is a sub-Macedonian or sub-Bulgarian ethnicity, motivated by nationalist and ethnocentric prejudices that led, and still lead today, to its stratification, which has different effects on its self-identification. Its stratification is also present in the multi-party arrangement of political life in Macedonia under the influence of political parties and their national agenda due to statistical data or quotas on which the integration into state institutions depends. This is a population that is not in the preamble of the Constitution of Macedonia, although it is after Albanians and Macedonians in terms of numbers, unlike, for example, Turks, Roma, Serbs, Bosniaks and Vlachs, whose number is significantly smaller. This position greatly contributes to their declaration as Albanians, Macedonians and Turks, depending on the environment in which they live. However, one part of the last census declared itself Torbeši. Despite these Torbeši affiliations, due to political and economic reasons, they are still Torbeši in their self-awareness and in the consciousness of those with whom they equate, because they recognize them as such throughout the time they share a common living space.

Key words: *Torbeši, Pomaks, Gorani, identity, self-identification, ethnicity, religion, state, nation, Macedonia, Bulgaria*

TORBEŠI / MACEDONIAN MUSLIM (POMAK) IDENTITY AND THEIR CHALLENGES IN MACEDONIA

Introduction

The issue of Torbeši (Pomaks) and their self-identification and the problems they encounter has not even been touched upon in ethnological, historical, cultural and political discussions in Macedonia, while the bibliography on Pomaks in Bulgaria before and after communism - despite ethnocentric approaches - is truly enviable. Discussions about this problem in Macedonia for the last thirty years refer to the statistical data of some Western researchers who deal with identity issues in Southeastern Europe after the breakup of the second Yugoslavia. Their efforts are not devoid of a missionary agenda, they are aimed at ways of integrating Muslim communities into the wider European space and are usually based on visits to the villages where the Torbeši people live while recording some of their customs. When it comes to Macedonian authors, they have been no analyses after the death of Niazija Limanovski and his project on the de-ethnicization of this population. His research related only to some folklore content.^{▼¹}

In this paper, we will focus on the analysis of several facts that are of fundamental importance for illuminating the problem of identity, especially referring to an overview of the facts regarding the problems and challenges encountered by this ethnic construct, which cannot be considered independently of the Pomaks in Bulgaria and the Gorani in Kosovo and Albania, because it is about their same ethnic substrate - godliness. Despite the great trials and challenges in history, this ethnicity still lives with the same problems and challenges, the solution of which is not on the horizon. Therefore, in the paper we will focus on the specificity of this ethnic identity, looking at the process of its stratification and fragmentation in the post-Ottoman period in the Balkans, in the communist system and in the period of transition and multi-party organization of Macedonian society. In addition to the adaptation of this identity to other affiliations, coercive and political means, and contemporary challenges manifested in

^{▼¹} See: Лимановски, Нијазија. *Исламската религија и исламираните Македонци*. Скопје: Македонска книга; 1989.

migration processes, this identity has maintained its continuity, aware of the truth about itself, facing the present in the period of globalization and migration conditions; the same problems faced by other ethnicities in the Balkans.

Ethnic identity still preserved

The very social construction of the Torbeši population in Macedonia tells us about an identity that has deep roots. This identity is equally followed by permanence and fluidity – characteristics that can be applied to all identities in the Balkans. As an ethno-religious group, it was present before the very idea of Macedonia as a state was born, even before the emergence of the Macedonian national idea at the beginning of the 20th century. All researchers who deal with this ethnicity, mostly its linguistic and ethnic peculiarities, rather than historical ones, agree that it is a Bogomil substratum. However, they do not agree when it comes to its self-identification with the already inherited concept within the framework of the national state, created by the departure of the Ottomans from the Balkan territories.

The characteristics of this identity bear witness to an ethnic concept that cannot be ignored in today's discussions about communities and their identity in the Balkans.

Despite the pronounced fluidity of this identity, its current uncertain situation and the consequences that emerge from it still have not destroyed the self-awareness of its members, regardless of the forms and challenges they have gone through in different historical stages. One can speak more about the adaptation of Torbeši to different affiliations than about their radical split from what they actually are and the way in which, as such, they are present and known throughout the history of the Balkans. Nevertheless, we would not be wrong if we asserted that they, like many others, know very well what they are not, because there is no community that is not aware of what it is not. This fact, experience tells us, returns the community to the consciousness of what it really is. And there is no force that can convince a man of what he is not in his inner life.

Individual identity through family, neighbors, environment and other factors gradually grows into group identity.

Among the Torbeši in Macedonia, we encounter common customs and religious practices as well as others. This identity is characterized by the dialect it speaks, the customs it maintains, the rituals it performs, the folklore it celebrates, special costumes, oral tradition, and household - elements that are considered the basis of ethnic identity.^{▼2} Among them are present Islamic authorities and Islamic practices

^{▼2} Academician and painter Nazif Dokle, a Goranian from Albania, wrote an extensive study entitled *Bogumilizam i etnogeneza Torbeša Kukske Gore* (*Bogumilism and Ethnogenesis of Torbeš Kukska Gora*). Prizren: Alem; 2011, in which he cites a large number of Bulgarian, Macedonian and Bosnian authors who research this problem. In the book, he also included a special chapter on the characteristics of the language used by Goranians, which they call *Našin* (*Naški/Nash/our*).

The Balkan experience shows that the ethnic identity of Torbeši (Pomak) in historical periods is a seemingly changing category. However, in its inner sphere, there remains one grain of truth that sticks out, which is forgotten, but not radically separated from it. The problem becomes more complicated when this ethnicity faces the state with an idea that will mark Balkan history in the 18th and 19th centuries. With the emergence of national consciousness, national and state identities, their sub-identities also appear. Therefore, the history of the Balkans in the last two centuries has witnessed the emergence of many national states, precisely as a result of the self-awareness of ethnic groups that preserved their importance within the Ottoman state. This period bears witness to so many ethnicities that can rarely be found in such a small area. This, without a doubt, is due to the position they had within the Ottoman Empire, whose historical self-continuity, unlike many others, gave them the opportunity to survive with their religious values and ethnic identities.



ILLUSTRATION - Torbeshi (Torbeši) have kept some of the traditional forms to this day - Islamic practice, rituals, folklore, costumes...)
 ILUSTRACIJA - Torbeši su do danas zadržali i dio tradicionalnih formi - islamsku praksu, rituale, folklor, nošnju... (Arhiv Akšamija)

In one such buffer zone, after the departure of the Ottomans from the Balkans, there were three branches of one identity: the Torbeši, the Pomaks and the Gorani. They do not tie their identity to the created states for various reasons, mostly religious, on the one hand, and because of the feeling that they still represent something special, different from others in their environment, on the other. This position reinforces the self-awareness of this ethnic group: Torbeši, Pomak and Gorani would largely be unaware

of themselves if they did not notice that others around them were different from them, preserving their differences throughout the reign of the Ottoman Empire until today.

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As the Balkan ethnicities are mixed with each other, the problem of which is bigger than which - numerically, and which is older than which - historically, is immediately reduced. The aim of this is to justify the dominance of the existence of some that should dominate the existence of others - a thesis that rests on the idea of pure identity. However, ethnicities were only pure when they came to the Balkans. Later, they were subject to changes, assimilation, integration, which often led to other belonging,^{▼3} but not to an essential break from their own substrate due to their complete equality within the Ottoman Empire. Today we face a different situation regarding the preservation of the identity of the Balkan man, especially in the global world where he is forced, due to economic reasons, to leave his place of residence and seek better living conditions and, consequently, to belong to other identities. In a situation like this, ethnic identity proves that it is something real, and what is conditioned by socio-historical circumstances are only modes or reformulations of that identity, so it is not about facts that are not given once and for all. However, here we are not talking about individual identity, which is something completely different, but we are talking about an identity that goes through several stages: individual, family, ethnic, state and supranational identity. Today, there is talk on a global level, for example, about European identity, although - if you look a little deeper - in essence it does not exist, but what is characterized by European identity is that which is being sought.^{▼4} More is said about the European cultural identity and its roots and how to construct a general European concept. When searching for an identity space, a supranational space, then something that does not exist is being sought. Or being a European would mean, as one thinks, belonging to another identity, not the one that one carries with oneself, but still is a fundamental difference: one identity comes from the inside, and the other from the outside, and the latter needs to be internalized only later. What is referred to as European identity is something that is general, in which multiple identities should participate. Bearing in mind that national identities in Europe are essentially demarcated from each other, where there can be no transition

▼3 Tesar, Filip. "U potrazi za identitetom". ALEM, 2004;VI:132-134.

▼4 See: Vrcan, Srđan. "Europski identitet – neke ključne dileme" (*European identity - some key dilemmas*). *Revija za sociologiju* (*Review of sociology*). 2005; XXXVI(1-2):8. p..

from one identity to another, then in this case they would not be national identities; it is debatable how they will identify with one general identity, such as the imagined European identity. Although someone declares himself a European, he is nevertheless aware that this is preceded by something that is substantially related to him, something that he carries with him, and which must not be drowned in something that is general, so much so that he forgets about himself. The realization of a concept that would rely on cultural facts, non-European, in the geographical sense, which actually establish that cultural identity, bearing in mind several religious traditions, and not just one, is still at a distance. What Derrida calls "open cultural space"^{▼5} it is in contrast to the European discourse which believes that Europe should be covered with a supracultural identity space that cannot in any way be deprived of a religious space, reducing that space to Christianity only.



ILLUSTRATION ~ Part of Torbeš's identity implies the concept of accepting identity as something that is given, stable and unchanging in socio-historical horizons, whereby he relies on himself.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Dio identiteta Torbeša podrazumijeva koncepciju prihvatanja identiteta kao nečega što je dato, postojano i nepromjenljivo u društveno-povijesnim horizontima, pri čemu se on naslanja na sebe samoga. (Arhiv Akšamija)

Hence, in relation to ethnic identity, whether it is stable or modifying, whether it comes from outside or inside, in the literature we encounter two positions: essentialist (to a lesser extent) and instrumentalist.

^{▼5} *Ibid.*

The first conception implies that a part of a certain population accepts identity as something given, permanent, unchanging in socio-historical horizons, whereby it rests on itself. With this in mind, some speak of identity as a "state of mind". Another conception holds that identity is a becoming fact, that it changes and acquires different modes and affiliations.^{▼6} Or, it is about a possible and not a once-for-all formation or, as Anderson claims, an "imagined community" that does not necessarily imply that it is based on "objective facts that could reach back to the primordial past."^{▼7}



ILLUSTRATION ~ The very fact that this ethnic construct existed within the framework of the Ottoman Empire and in the later stages in which it encountered great temptations and challenges tells us about a significant identity, which cannot be neglected in ethnic, identity, religious and political debates - Traditional wedding clothes from Selo Boroec and Oktisi.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Sama činjenica da je ovaj etnički konstrukt opstojao u okvirima Osmanskog carstva i u docnijim etapama u kojima nailazi na velika iskušenja i izazove govori nam o značajnom identitetu, koji se ne može prenebregnuti u etničkim, identitetskim, religijskim i političkim raspravama - Tradicionalna svadbena odjeća iz Sela Boroec i Oktisi. (Arhiv Akšamija)

The case of Torbeši identity in Macedonia illustrates exactly this second concept, it had several historical trials of belonging, but still preserved its consciousness, always finding itself in the gap of

^{▼6} See: Eminov, Ali. "Social Construction of Identities: Pomaks in Bulgaria", JEMIE 6. European Centre for Minority Issues; 2007. p. 1.

^{▼7} Ibid.

painful integration or belonging to another, either forced or voluntary, because Torbeši were always the other in Bulgaria and Macedonia. However, thanks to this awareness of otherness and marginalization, they managed to preserve their self-awareness. They have always been in a process of stratification and fragmentation, which continues to this day. The very fact that this ethnic construct existed within the framework of the Ottoman Empire and in the later stages in which it encountered great trials and challenges tells us about a significant identity, which cannot be neglected in ethnic, identity, religious and political debates. The same can be said about the Torbeši people as is said about the Pomaks in Bulgaria, that it is about an identity that is "vulnerable".^{▼8} However, the phrase "vulnerable identity" is not appropriate when it comes to individual and ethnic identity. The phrase can only be applied when it comes to national and state identity, because ethnic identity is older than national and state identity. No one has a vulnerable identity, no one can say that they are not who they are. There is no connecting point between what is and what is not. And the awareness of the ethnic affiliation of the Torbeši and their difference is already present, interiorized and current, regardless of whether the modification of identity due to certain reasons in the given socio-historical circumstances is accepted along with it.

An overview of the fragmentation of the Torbeši (Pomak) identity

the problem of Torbeši (Pomak) identity has been discussed mostly from the political aspect that influenced its fragmentation, which fortunately was not carried out to the end. Experience has shown that this fragmentation did not lead to a complete split of this identity. In order to separate from something, it implies that there is something from which it can be separated, and that is, in the concrete case, from the grain that a person carries in his deepest truth, because the truth for a person is as much as it exists in him and because of that the claim arises that one cannot break away or escape from it, even if it was about the ethnic component of man that he perceives as his truth.

In Bulgaria and Macedonia, politics was the factor that dictated the scientific and educational discourse regarding the identity issue of Torbeši and Pomak, that they are considered Bulgarians and Macedonians, and in Kosovo until its independence - Serbs. This is joined by media propaganda whose goal was to support political action on this issue, and because of this, a great deal of confusion, harassment and fueling of the discriminatory actions faced by this identity throughout the 20th century is introduced. The traces of these efforts have not completely disappeared even today. In all this operation, Konstantinov

^{▼8} Konstantinov, Yulijan. "Strategies for sustainig identity: the case of the Bulgarian Pomaks". In: Huge Poulton and Suha Taji-Farouki, ur. *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, New York: NYU Press; 1997. p. 33.

argues, academies and scientific institutions declare themselves monopolies or guardians of the truth about the identity of the other.^{▼9} It is a superfluous question to talk about the identity of another, because identity, by its very nature, talks about itself. If he pointed to something other than himself, then he would not be an identity. It is legitimate to let and allow every man to speak about his identity. Any extraneous aspect about identity does not target the essence of identity. Or, those academies and scientific institutions are tasked with "documenting" a previously known outcome, motivated by political reasons, tendencies and interests, and, instead of discovering a present reality or identity, such as that of the Torbeši (or Pomaks), they consciously neglect and ignore that fact, while leading to the opening of many questions that complicate several aspects of the approach to that ethnicity.

These challenges date back to the post-Ottoman period in all Balkan nation-states. It all boils down to how to fit this population into a certain ethnic body, without taking into account the problems and challenges it is faced with, the fate of these people, their collective memory, perception, experience, hopes and perspectives.

The one-party system in Bulgaria and Macedonia has always denied the ethnic consciousness of this population with repressive measures, and today with political measures. In Bulgaria, on several occasions - from the Balkan wars to the communist system - the names of these people were changed by coercive means, while in Macedonia, after the Second World War, there was a process of emigration of this population to Turkey, and from the 70s to the 90s years of the last century, assimilation was approached through educational institutions and the formation of official organizations whose goal is to carry out the de-ethnicization of the ethnic concept of the Torbeši population that has been present for centuries.

It is interesting that this population faces the same problems in all the Balkan countries where it is inhabited (Bulgaria, Macedonia, Greece), excluding Kosovo, whose government does not show assimilationist intentions, leaving the identity issue to the self-identification of the Gorani, some of whom declare themselves Turks, some Bosniaks, and there are those who are considered Gorani, certainly, driven by existential needs, and as such they are integrated into Kosovo society and its institutions with a guaranteed right to political representation in parliament and the concessions that result from that. This is due, without a doubt, to Ahtisaari's plan to regulate political life in Kosovo. However, there is also an awareness of the ethnic identity of the Torbeši, which is linked to the Bogomil substratum, to which the ethnic continuity of a large percentage of the population in Bosnia is linked.

Pragmatic or, more precisely, political reasons regarding identity are also present in Macedonia. Even today, these reasons lead to the fragmentation or stratification of this identity, so some declare themselves Macedonians, others as Turks, some as Albanians, and a large number as Torbeši. We encounter the same situation with the Pomaks in Bulgaria, some of whom declare themselves Bulgarians, others as Turks, and still

^{▼9} Konstantinov. *Ibid.* p. 35-36.

others as Pomaks. Their position is different in Greece, where they live in small numbers, and the state treats them as Muslims, because their ethnicity is not recognized. In Albania, however, we meet a certain number of Macedonians who claim to be Macedonians, unlike the Bulgarians, who claim that they are a Bulgarian minority, while the government leaves them to declare themselves as they desire.

The political aspect that dominates this discourse is centered on statistical needs in these countries. We are still talking about the present burdened concept of the national state, which implies one people, one language and one religion.

Namely, with the departure of the Ottomans from these areas of the Balkans, Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece, where nationalism gained great momentum, there was great effort extended to include the former areas with the intention of drawing a demarcation line based on the demographic and linguistic boundaries of the population in order to get as much territory as possible. In order to emphasize their national reality, scientific research went deep into the search for roots, into the distant past, in order not to create a perception that the past simply represents the future - a conception that still shakes the relations of these countries, in which nationalisms of different types are simmering and where began "the production of history that the Balkans alone cannot absorb" (Churchill).

The ethnic minorities who remained to live in these countries were exposed to various pressures, while their ethnic consciousness and belonging were denied. Bearing in mind the identity issue, nationalists, in the past and still today, believe that if the state is not characterized as a national state, ethnic groups with a different linguistic and ethnic matrix can reasonably lead to its disintegration, and this represents a threat, in their opinion, when minorities have their home country next door. However, the Torbeši (Pomaks) are exempt from this context, because they do not have a home country that would take care of their political organization and the maintenance of their ethnic identity. Their eyes were always fixed on Turkey, its help and guarantor of their survival. Even in the country where they live, they have a specific status, different from the others, based on the fact of their otherness, to be united with the other, without being identical with them, so the following phrases are in use: "Bulgarian Mohammedans", "Islamized Macedonians", "Macedonians with the Islamic religion" or "Serbian Muslims" and "Greek Muslims". What can we conclude based on these phrases? These characterizations themselves speak of the complexity of this issue. As everyone thinks they are right, the problem posed like this proves that everyone is definitely wrong. There can only be one right and all others are wrong. However, it is not like that because none of them presented any evidence that he is right so that others could believe him, because they all approach this problem from the outside, considering the fact that they all exclude the self-identification of this ethnic group. The simple question is: Whom to believe, whose claim to accept? The syntagms themselves reveal their groundlessness: they are descriptions, not definitions of identity, they do not rely on the experience of the members of that identity, on the way they observe themselves, on their perceptions or self-identification. When we talk about Serbian, Greek, Bulgarian and Macedonian Muslims, we do not mean state affiliation, but ethnic affiliation, which is something

completely different, then we are talking about de-ethnicization, that these people, by accepting Islam en masse, broke away from their ethnic and religious matrix and that the nation-state has the task of resolving the ethnicity of these people. Here are a few more contradictions. Serbian historians before the Second World War call them "Serbian Muslims", while Serbian missionary priests in the same period in their travelogues, referring to statistical and geographical data, call them "Bulgarian Mohammedans". The first even going so far as to claim that they speak the Serbian language, and Serbian priests advocate the position that they speak the Bulgarian language. Bulgarians call them "Bulgarian Mohammedans", and Macedonians once call them "Macedonian Muslims", another time "Macedonians of the Islamic religion", and the third time "Islamized Macedonians". It would be much simpler to call them either "Macedonians" or "Bulgarians", although this is fundamentally unsustainable. The latter qualifications contain two elements: religious and national, as two isolated facts, one of which is primary and the other secondary and, consequently, it refers to something that is nevertheless substantially different, indicating otherness, not identity itself, a fence or dividing line is set up that definitely cannot be crossed. You are Macedonian or Bulgarian, but...



ILLUSTRATION ~ In the area of today's North Macedonia,, between the two world wars, the Torbesi were considered *Serbian Muslims*, so they began to change their surnames, which since then ended in *-ić*. In the second Yugoslavia, in the area of Macedonia, surnames ending in *-ić* in the 1950s were changed to surnames ending in *-ski*.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Torbeši su na području današnje Sjeverne Makedonije, između dva svjetska rata smatrani *srpskim muslimanima*, pa se pristupilo mijenjanju prezimena, koja su od tada završavala na *-ić*. U drugoj Jugoslaviji, na prostoru Makedonije, prezimena koja su završavala na *-ić* pedesetih godina promijenjena su u prezimena sa završetkom na *-ski*. (Arhiv Akšamija)

In order for these facts to become clearer to us, we must look back at the historical retrospective that led to the fragmentation and stratification of this identity as we know it today.

The political attitude of all newly created states in the Balkans towards this population is unified. The official policy of the Serbs, Bulgarians and Macedonians testifies that this is a problem that needs to be solved by repressive means in the pre-communist, communist and post-communist period. In the pre-communist system, from the Balkan Wars to World War II, this population shared a fate with other Muslims in the Balkans. However, the strictness of the communist system in Bulgaria and Macedonia towards this population was not at the same level. The Torbeši in Macedonia were not exposed to political pressure to the extent that the Pomaks were in Bulgaria and Greece. In all periods in Bulgaria after the Balkan wars, the Christianization of this population was started, despite the fact that after the Second World War, the Politburo of the Communist Party was in power there, where the atheistic idea dominated. The violent name change happened for the first time in 1912, the second time in 1942, the third time in 1962 and the last time in 1972–1974. years.▼¹⁰ In all these periods, the Pomaks were considered Bulgarians or "an inseparable part of the Bulgarian nation". Namely, the nationalists justified their action by the fact that the Pomaks preserved the Bulgarian language in a purer form or substance than the Bulgarians themselves, and that they speak "a dialect that is closest to that of Cyril and Methodius".

This, according to them, is the reason why they should change their names, and replace Islamic practices with other, communist, socialist habits. They did not want to listen to the ideas and views of the Pomaks themselves about their identity in any way. In order to preserve their religious identity, the Pomaks began to declare themselves as Turks, and a large number of them migrated to Turkey. The Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and Arts was in charge of "documenting" this fact of assimilation. The resistance to the Movement was really great and because of that there were killings, imprisonment and emigration to Turkey. Such a perception was created that pushed these people to seek an alternative identity. Because of this, the number of Pomaks in Bulgaria steadily decreased. As they could not declare themselves as Pomaks in the censuses, because there was no provision for such a census column, the greater part of this population declared themselves as Turks. According to data from 1992, the number of Pomaks fell to 220,000. The data was published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and based on the data it received from municipal officials who had direct insight into the number of inhabitants, at least as claimed in the reports.▼¹¹ This number is significantly lower than the number brought by Ireček, due to emigration to Turkey. He brings information that in 1876 there were 500,000 Pomaks in the Bulgarian lands.▼¹² In the

▼¹⁰ See: Todorova, Maria. "Identity (trans)formation among Pomaks in Bulgaria". In: Beverly Crawford and Ronnie D. Lipschutz, ed. *The Myth of 'Ethnic Conflict': Politics, Economics and 'Cultural' Violence*. University of California International and Area Studies Digital Collection; 1998. p. 476; Yulian Konstantinov. "An Account of Pomak Conversions (1912-1990)". In: Gerhard Seewann, ed. *Minderheitenfragen in Südosteuropa*. München: Südost-Institut, R. Oldenburg Verlag; 1992.

▼¹¹ Konstantinov, *Op. cit.* 33.

▼¹² Иречек, Константин. *История на Българите*. София: 1978. p. 151.

1926 census, 14.41 percent of Muslims lived in Bulgaria out of the total Bulgarian-speaking population. In all these turbulences, it is not difficult to conclude that religious consciousness was the factor around which spears broke and which has maintained its substantial position to this day.

The emigration of the Muslim population to Turkey took place during the 20th century, and stopped sometime in the 1970s. A feeling of "winners" and "losers" was created. Intolerance and barbarism gained momentum in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia. That atmosphere was most clearly described by a military reporter from Russia, L. Trotsky: "The Christian allies in this war showed themselves to be barbarians and savages towards the Turks." The proclaimed ideals with which they went to war immediately turned into ordinary robbery and banditry, into massacres of the "crescent people" in the interest of the "culture" of the cross. ▼¹³

Torbeši were considered Serbian Muslims in the territory of today's Macedonia between the two world wars, so they began to change their surnames, which since then ended in *-ić*. The same policy continued in the second Yugoslavia. The part that remained in Serbia was considered Serbian Muslims, and in Macedonia from the 1950s to the 1970s, Torbeši were left to themselves, to deal with their economic problems as they knew how, but psychological pressures were not absent. Those surnames that ended in *-ić* in the fifties were changed to surnames ending in *-ski*. Aneta Svetieva presents extraordinary data about the psychological atmosphere that was created in that period when this population began to emigrate to Turkey. In addition to the political circumstances that influenced the emigration of Muslims living in Southern Serbia to Turkey, about which a lot has been written, here we will mention several facts that are the result of the agreement on the exchange of population between the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. These agreements also resulted in many psychological pressures on the Muslim population in Macedonia between 1950 and 1970, which our muhajirs in Turkey still bear witness to today. Svetieva outlines several factors that led to the emigration of our people, called *Našinci*, as they are still called today. It is, above all, the general atmosphere created in Macedonia as a "transit center", directed from Belgrade, which intended to get rid of a large number of Muslims in Sandžak, Kosovo and Southern Serbia. ▼¹⁴ – areas that were considered to have a strategic position for Serbia. This led to certain pressures on the Turkish and Albanian population, and the Torbeši themselves called themselves Turks because of their religious affiliation. In mixed environments, the Christian population cast an eye on the properties of the Muslim population and looked for a way to reach them, under the most favorable conditions, so in some areas they were secretly encouraged to move out. The Turks and Torbeši, since they were left to their own devices, were also forced to leave for economic reasons because they were not included in the state institutions. Fights between Muslim and Christian children

▼¹³ Bandžović, Safet. "Muslimani u Makedoniji i Prvi balkanski rat". *Znakovi vremena*. Jesen-zima 2001/2002(IV-V);13/14:206-221.

▼¹⁴ Светиева, Анета. "За преселбите на балканските муслимани и за нашинците – Торбеши, Помаци и други (Турци) во Турција". *ЕтноАхтропозум: Списание на Институтот за антропологија и етнологија*. 2009(6):45.

in some villages and towns created a sense of insecurity. Houses and land were sold for less than their value because no more than what was intended could be brought across the border. The removal of the burqa or veil by legal measures added to the already difficult situation.

The number of *Našinci* (the name for Torbeši) in Turkey is great. Most of them live in Izmir, Manica, Istanbul and other cities. To this day, they are still considered Torbeši, they speak the "*Našin*" (*Nash*) language at home and still keep some wedding and folklore items from their native region. They are especially prominent as builders, especially the Torbeši from the valley of Radika and Drimkol. Goranis are known for their cuisine in Ankara and Istanbul.



ILLUSTRATION ~ During the 20th century, intolerance and barbarism gained momentum in Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia, so Torbesi, as well as other Muslim populations from those countries, migrated to Turkey.

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Tokom 20. stoljeća netolerancija i barbarizam uzeli su veliki zamah u Bugarskoj, Makedoniji i Srbiji, tako da su Torbeši, kao i drugo muslimansko stanovništvo iz tih zemalja migrirali za Tursku.

In order to win over this population in Macedonia, in the 1970s, by order of the Communist Party of Macedonia, an organization called "Cultural-Scientific Manifestations of Macedonian Muslims" was formed, led by Nijazija Limanovski. Under the auspices of this organization, several cultural manifestations were held in the villages and several symposia were organized with the aim of documenting the preconceived

agenda. First, the phrases "Macedonian Muslims" and "Islamized Macedonians" were coined, and then research was started, which mainly referred to certain folklore contents of this population, with a special emphasis on their "Christian" aspect. Similarities were sought between the customs observed by Muslims and Christians.▼¹⁵ However, a deeper analysis of the content of those customs reveals that it is not about any Christian aspect, but about a pagan one, which other ethnicities also adhered to: Turks, Albanians, Vlachs, Mijaks and others. In these folklore contents, no demarcation line can be drawn between pagan, pre-Christian and Christian, historical and prehistoric. What is called folk religion is a characteristic of all ethnic groups, not only in the Balkans but also in the wider region.

It should be emphasized that the mentioned cultural and scientific manifestations did not bear any fruit and were not well received by the population. The very phrases "Islamized Macedonians" or "Macedonian Muslims" or "Macedonians of the Islamic religion", depending on the context, initiated that it was de-ethnicization carried out, as they claim, by the Ottomans and that these people should return to their roots. This was the first blow that started the split of this population in recent times. Due to the identification of the nation with the religion, a large number of this population began to identify themselves as Turks, and a smaller part as Albanians.

Following the example of Bulgaria, the ideological concept has already become a mantra in Macedonia at those symposia and in articles in the press *нераскинлив дел од Македонскиот народ* ('an inseparable part of the Macedonian people'), and in Bulgaria "an inseparable part of the Bulgarian people". The conclusion is quite clear: if it is an inseparable part of both nations, then whose part is it more precisely an inseparable part?! The methods that were used for this kind of qualification in ethnological, ethnographic and dialectological research testify to a unified and ethnocentric competition, which complicates the problem because it goes into religious feelings and identity issues.

The following should be added to this: the formation of the "Scientific and Cultural Manifestations of Macedonian Muslims", whose goal was to characterize this population as a sub-Macedonian identity, both in terms of motives and goals, can be compared to a similar formation in Bulgaria between the two world wars. It is about the association "Rodina" ('homeland'). The forced change of the names of Pomaks and Turks in Bulgaria after the First World War caused great reactions among the population and the international factor, whose criticisms came from all sides. Thus, in 1937, the Bulgarian ethnographer Peter Marinov formed "Rodina" in order to influence the religious and national consciousness of the Pomaks through educational activities. Several intellectuals from this population were included in this organization, who were offered some educational and economic privileges, and were encouraged to

▼¹⁵ See: Лиманоски, Нијазија. *Исламизацијата и етничките промени во Македонија*. Скопје: Култура; 1993; Тодоровски, Глигор. "Верскиот фактор како основна детерминанта во определувањето на националноста кај исламизираниите Македонци". *Историја, фолклор и етнологија на исламизираниите Македонци*, Скопје: Институт за национална историја; 1987.

propagate Bulgarian national consciousness among the Pomaks through educational, educational and propaganda forms of activity. After World War II, this organization was characterized as fascist.

It is not difficult to assume that the inspiration of the "Scientific and Cultural Manifestations of Macedonian Muslims" - which was initiated by some Macedonian academics who support this organization - was drawn from "Rodina", because it is really about the same motives and patterns of action.

Stratification of the Torbeši identity in a multi-party system

Instead of the stratification of this ethnic population decreasing after the introduction of a multi-party political system in the states created by the fall of the second Yugoslavia, it gained more momentum. As there are no more state pressures, now political parties appear on the scene and, using the positions of this population that was not integrated into social institutions, try to attract these people to their political and ethnic campus. Pragmatic reasons, such as employment in institutions by national key, greatly influenced the stratification, because it is a population that does not figure as a separate ethnic group in the preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia. Political parties of Macedonians, Albanians and Turks provided the possibility, and still do, for a certain part of this population to get a job in state institutions. For this reason, some started to promote the Macedonian, Albanian and Turkish ethnic agenda in order to get more population and, based on that, bigger state concessions. However, a significant part of this population has retained – in the ethnic sense – its Torbeši paradigm.

In a situation like this, the dual side of the identity issue came to the fore: individual and national affiliation, between which the party factor got in the way, allowing some to declare themselves different from what they are, motivated by economic reasons. This was caused by the influence of political parties, be it Macedonian, Albanian or Turkish influence. Their goal is to find a way to attract a larger percentage of the population where numbers or quotas contribute to the power of governance and all that comes from it. This is the result of the fact that the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia does not allow this population - despite its ethnic uniqueness - to be a constitutional category, even though it is behind Macedonians and Albanians in terms of numbers. More than 70,000 of this population are mentioned at the symposiums organized by the "Cultural-Scientific Manifestations of Macedonian Muslims" in the 1980s, and today the number is, without a doubt, higher if those who work in Western European countries are also taken into account. Even in the most recent initiatives to change the Constitution, Torbeši cannot manage to enter the preamble of the Constitution, and the Jews, whose only seventy families live in Macedonia, or the Croats and Montenegrins, who together do not exceed the number of two thousand inhabitants, are already mentioned. The recently held population census showed that about six thousand inhabitants declared themselves as Torbeši, and that was those who were present

at the moment. If it is judged by the number of votes of this population in the elections, on the basis of which one can assume their number in general, there are over ten thousand voters in the municipality of Mavrovo and Rostuša alone. In Labunište and its surroundings, the number reaches fifteen thousand voters. Center Župa, near Debra, has more than seven thousand voters, then Plasnica, near Kičevo, has about four and a half thousand voters. A significant part of this population lives in Skopje and its surroundings, in Prilep, Kičevo, Debra, Ohrid, Tetovo, Gostivar, Štip and other cities. If we add to these numbers the Goranis, of whom about five hundred families live in Skopje alone, and there are Goranis in all the cities of Macedonia, known for their pastry shops, bakeries and kebab shops, then the total number of Torbeši in Macedonia could reach the number of one hundred thousand inhabitants, including those who work in Western European countries and who left the country in the last twenty years.

The problem of the political representation of the Torbeši in Macedonia, as things stand, can only be solved by some external factor, such as Ahtisaari, who organized political life in Kosovo, because no political elite in Macedonia is comfortable with solving the status of the Torbeši in Macedonia as a separate political subject and no one in Parliament considers it to be a problem.

Discriminatory practices are especially evident during elections, when various means are used to win over these people, who, due to their numbers, could have a strategic position in some constituencies: more members of parliament or mayors in mixed cities. Here I will mention the example of Struga and Kičevo, where a Macedonian and an Albanian participate in the mayoral elections. Only the one who will be voted for by the people of the Torbeši (who declare themselves to be Albanians, Turks and Torbeši) will be elected mayor. As the religious factor plays a significant role, the Torbeši always vote for an Albanian. However, when Torbeši, Fijat Canoski, ran in Struga, Macedonians voted for an Albanian, because the Macedonian and Albanian parties that were in the coalition agreed to this outcome. And if a Macedonian came to the polls, the Albanians would vote for him, because both communities share political power. As a result of one such agreement, due to the preponderance of the Albanian population over the Macedonian population, the municipality of Labuništa, which has more than fifteen thousand inhabitants, was abolished and was annexed to Struga.

In a multi-ethnic society, such as the Macedonian, political action has negative consequences for this population, which is instrumentalized and does not contribute to solving issues related to civil rights, such as the right to political representation and ethnic self-identification and, based on that, to appropriate participation in the state structures, when referring to numbers and quotas. Therefore, even in the period of transition, no mechanisms were found to involve this population in integrative processes, as it is, like others who did so, thanks to political institutions. The transition not only did not bring any results, but it further strengthened the tendencies whose intention is to further stratify the Torbeši. A significant part of this population opts for the national parties of Macedonians (less), Albanians and Turks because that is the only way they could get a job in state structures. This had the consequence - because it is about existential

issues - that a large number of this population is declared in the censuses in accordance with the goals of the national political parties. Another fact contributes to this: it is a population that is non-national, and it decides nationally only during the census and elections, opting for several options or affiliations depending on social circumstances and dominant national aspirations.

Entangled in all these ethnocentric political currents, the population of the Torbeši continues to face great challenges and dilemmas, searching, sometimes, for roots even where there are none. However, it should also be mentioned that even in Pomak and Torbeši, we do not encounter any effort that would testify to their cohesiveness, and this is due to the fact that they are scattered, as enclaves they are not compact units, and they are surrounded by other ethnicities. Most of them are settled on the border between Albania and Macedonia, Kosovo and Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania. It is difficult to launch an initiative to define an ethnic identity that would have social consequences, even if it was formally a broad shift and consensus. Their religious identity is especially emphasized and, since they cannot declare themselves for who they are, they always favor those ethnic groups that are Muslim. Here we should mention the fact that in the SFRY they always declared themselves Muslims on the censuses, just like Bosniaks did, of course, due to certain circumstances.

Here I will refer to another fact regarding belonging to other identities. Regardless of how they declare themselves, the Torbeši always remain what they are in the minds of those they agree with or identify with nationally (not ethnically). Among Macedonians, Albanians and Turks, this identification is only a semblance, especially at election time, because each community is occupied with its own problems and does not care about the problems of others, especially when it comes to integration into state structures, such as employment, which has the greatest influence to the national identification of these people. Here, a fence is immediately erected that cannot be removed in any way. Subconsciously, the Macedonians consider them different because they are Muslims, the Albanians think they are Torbeši because they do not speak the Albanian language, and the Turks, who do not manage any municipality due to their fragmentation, treat them not as real Turks, but as their own sub-ethnic group. In such cases, the answer is: you are Torbeši after all. Even when they speak Albanian or Turkish, they do not miss their Torbeši qualification. It is, indeed, a big problem of the people here and a deep inherited perception that cannot be overcome. As the political agenda is judgmental in relation to this population, then in multi-ethnic environments, such as the Macedonian one, each ethnic group is preoccupied with its own problems and shows no interest in dealing with the problems of the other. How difficult is the feeling when someone has to justify to someone who he is and what he is by nationality. To claim to a Macedonian that you are a Macedonian, but inside you feel that you are Torbeši, or to tell an Albanian that you are an Albanian, but you know that you are not, is really a big problem, because even those with whom you identify know that you are not what you present yourself to be because of linguistic and religious affiliations. The misery and contempt is even greater when some, due to economic and political reasons, consider themselves greater Albanians and Macedonians than these. Sometimes, thanks to such a relationship, that part of the Torbeši who moved out for economic reasons and who are not integrated into social institutions as much as they should be according

to the quota that does not exist for them, return to themselves and declare themselves Torbeši. This was first shown at the last census, regardless of the fact that this name also has a pejorative meaning in the minds of those with whom they share their living space. However, the genesis of the term torbeš has not been fully proven to this day. Several meanings are in use, which we cannot discuss here due to lack of space.

Our experience shows - with almost all identities, including the Torbeši identity - that the instrumentalist conception of identity testifies to its reality. Social status, better living conditions, economic concessions, employment, etc. in Western European countries where identities from the Balkans live, they lead people to seek alternative identities or affiliations.



ILLUSTRATION - *'Torbeš Charter' - National Awakening*. In Struga, in January 2011, it was highlighted the fact that the population of Torbes in Macedonia with its ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural characteristics deserves a special and equal status..

ILUSTRACIJA - *'Torbeška povelja' - Nacionalno buđenje*. U Strugi, januara 2011. godine, istaknuta je činjenica da torbeška populacija u Makedoniji sa svojim etničkim, religioznim, jezičkim i kulturnim karakteristikama zaslužuje poseban i ravnopravan status.

Belonging to another identity in multi-ethnic environments, such as ours, can contribute little to solving existential issues, because everything is based on the foundation of the national.

Social and political life shows that it will take a long time for the civil option to function, if it is even possible in such an environment.

Here we cannot ignore one more fact. The Torbeši never had an inner need to define themselves nationally in the way that national consciousness washed over other Balkan identities. The reason for this is the delineation of state borders in the Balkans, when the Torbeši remained, as everyone around them claims,

"others", subject to various ethnic and religious pressures. This situation of the Torbeši and Pomaks started a different discussion in Bulgaria after 1992. Questions posed by Konstantinov,^{▼16} whose approach is different from the previous ones, about the Pomaks in Bulgaria are identical to the questions that can be asked about the Torbeši in Macedonia. Who are the Torbeši? Did they voluntarily or forcibly accept Islam? Are they an indigenous or settled population? What language do they speak?

There is no doubt that these questions are generating great discussions. However, even if we consider these issues incidentally, we will see that this approach, even in democratic processes in Bulgaria that are considered European, involves pre-defined patterns of thinking that cannot lead to substantial insights, because none of these issues target the center of the discussion. One answer would be why questions are asked about them. In asking these questions, one notices the problem itself, which cannot be separated from the problems of other ethnicities. Why is there even a need to answer these questions when they already have an identity, given and present? Aren't the current civil rights issues more important than those issues? We are far from thinking that these questions should not be investigated, but that is not the most important issue. These questions themselves, as we will argue, already predetermine the answer and do not take into account what is preconditioned (in Gadamer's sense of understanding the syntagm) – the truth about them as they experience it, and not as others want to experience it. Hence, these issues cannot be viewed separately from issues, for example, related to the acceptance of Islam by other ethnic communities in the Balkans (Albanians, Bosniaks, Roma, Serbs, Romanians, Hungarians and others) or to the acceptance of Christianity, for example, by Bulgarians, Macedonians, Greeks, Serbs. If the aforementioned peoples are said to be autochthonous, the same can be said for this population, because there is no accurate data on when this ethnic construct was created. If it is said of all nations that they settled in the Balkans, the same can be said of this identity. If all these peoples have their own special language, the Torbeši and Pomaks, due to their isolation, speak their own dialect, which is more important for ethnic identity than the language of the state, so the Bulgarians claim, for example, that the Pomaks speak the original Bulgarian language, while the Macedonians advocate the position that the people of Torbeši speak the rich Macedonian language. The consequence of this attitude leads to a direct question about whose language do they really speak?

Here, it is much more important to ask certain questions concerning the civic aspect of approaching problems, which is so clearly referred to in public discourse, especially in the Balkans, where identity issues and frictions are simmering. In addition to Konstantinov's good intentions, we will also add a fact that should not be overlooked, which is a conscious effort to deny these people from exercising their civil rights. It is not necessary for others to define their identity for the sake of some interests, but to solve this problem and - when one is about to talk about their identity - more attention should be focused on their existential problems and challenges that this identity is still facing today.

▼16 Konstantinov. *Op. cit.* p. 33.

Doesn't the very fact that one identity appeared, even if it was "vulnerable", as Konstantinov claims, speak of something real and specific only for him, which is different from others. Just as other ethnicities in the Balkans arose, so did this one, the problems that follow other communities follow this community as well, identity issues that are a great temptation are generally valid for this community as well, the migration problem that affected others concerns this ethnicity as well...

If the right to self-identification is respected, then the debate on this problem should start from the present or from the facticity of this identity, and not first from the historical assumptions that often appear as alternative theses about the belonging of this identity to those who have political power in Macedonia. Regardless of how they declare themselves, they are always the *other* in the minds of those with whom they identify. However, this otherness often results in a significant part of them being taken for what they are.

Ali Eminov joins the debate about the Pomaks in Bulgaria, which can equally apply to Macedonia - because it is about one identity - who approaches this problem in the context of civil rights and freedom and concerns the issue of ethnicity. After the return of Muslim names to the Pomaks, after the fall of communism, it was expected, Eminov claims, that attention be paid to the special status of the Pomaks in the state. Instead, there is an even greater complication of the problem, when there are requests for the appropriation of this identity in which more factors are involved. On the one hand, ultra-nationalists, and on the other hand, political parties with an emphasized national agenda, official and unofficial civil organizations, external Muslim and Christian missionaries and some humanitarian foundations, who have created a very confused situation in which the individual identity of the members of this community can hardly grow into a specially organized ethnic and political community. ▼¹⁷

Therefore, in Bulgaria, as in our country, the idea of some sort of Pomak (ethnic) subject is difficult to get through, because it does not suit any community in their environment. Here we will mention one glaring example that speaks of this relationship. Namely, in 2006, on the initiative of Fijat Canoski from Struga, the Party for the European Future (PEF) was formed, which in its program aimed to gather the Torbeši population and fight for the introduction of this population in the preamble of the Constitution, to rise to the level of ethnic and political subject, so that these people could also participate in government at multiple levels. In the parliamentary elections, more than 15,000 voters voted in all constituencies and one deputy was elected from the fifth constituency, in which the Torbeši are the most represented, while no other ethnic community, except Macedonians and Albanians, managed to get a single deputy. When the question about the Torbeši was raised in the parliament, it was met with great resistance from all parties in order: Macedonian, Albanian and Turkish. The reason is the following: it does not suit anyone because of statistical data, because of the census, which is also a condition for participation in state institutions.

▼¹⁷ Eminov. *Op. cit.* p. 18.

These elections showed that individual identity still has significant consequences regarding the maintenance of the ethnic substrate of this population. None of the smaller ethnic communities in Macedonia that are constitutional categories (Bosniaks, Vlachs, Turks, Roma and Serbs) can fight for any position in parliament, unless they are in a coalition with one of the Macedonian or Albanian parties.

If the right to self-identification is applied, then the debate about this identity should first start from the present, from the factual situation, and not from historical assumptions or sources that are different and opposed, motivated by ethnocentric insights and directed by nationalist projects. The problem is complicated by the lack of sufficiently reasonable historical evidence that would shed light on the exact time and causes of the origin of this ethnic group. Everything that has been offered so far is reduced to linguistic and folklore personalities and some analogies characteristic of those with whom they share a common living space.

We will not be wrong if we assert that national identities in Macedonia, and even more widely (so not only in Torbeši), are weakening from the inside, and not only from the outside, and the migration challenge and an instrumentalist approach to the problem of identity contribute to this, especially in periods when societies fall into an economic crisis. The crisis leads to the fact that migration for the Balkan people, even on a broader level, becomes "man's existential condition" (Amin Maalouf). In addition to the Torbeši, Albanians also face the same identity problems, especially those who migrated to the USA and European countries. Identity problems are definitely in the background. It is enough just to walk in the summer in Debra and hear how young people on the streets speak English just as in the villages in the valley of Radika and Župa, near Debra, they speak Italian or German rather than their own language. Economic reasons, therefore, also have consequences on identity. Here we will mention one example that is similar to the example of the Torbeši. A significant part of Macedonians, suppressed by difficult economic conditions, declare themselves Bulgarians because of their special status in European countries, because Bulgaria is in the European Union, so they take Bulgarian passports and, in the process, declare themselves Bulgarians, because if they do not do that, they cannot acquire citizenship. It is even worse when some political elites of certain parties do it, who are not forced to do so for economic reasons.

What happened to the identity of the Torbeši today is equally happening to the identities of others with whom they share their living space. Therefore, it is not a local problem, but rather a complex issue in general. The problem is how to preserve ethnic and religious identity in today's globalizing world? Hence, it can be comfortably asserted that the fluidity of identity is permanent, so to speak. The identity of all communities in the Balkans is forced to accept other affiliations in European countries in addition to the ones they carry with them. Or: what kind of ethnic identity can we talk about, for example, in the USA or in today's Turkey, where most of our people are located? Or, in due time, what kind of ethnic identity can we talk about in the European Union, towards which the entire population of the Balkans is directed? There is already a lot of talk about a European identity made up of many ethnicities and, if we take into account the fact that the European Union was formed with the aim of organizing the states in it according to the example of the USA, then the problem of

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▼¹⁸ Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago; 1982.

the possible disappearance of all ethnicities will be prevented. Every type of identity (cultural, ethnic, political, religious) in today's globalizing world faces great challenges. Contemporary rapid development and changes are essentially anti-essentialist, changes happen for the sake of changes, without essence, which leads to the conclusion that every identity is "vulnerable". However, what can remain is individual identity until such time as self-awareness follows as a deposit or intermediary between tradition and things to come. If there is no such self-awareness, as Fazlur Rahman claims, then any value is in danger, including, of course, religious value. ▼¹⁸

Conclusion

all the stages and trials that the Torbeši identity went through in the past and the problems it faces in the present are not even close to being logically presented. This ethno-religious group is still dealing with problems that some other groups have already resolved, such as the right to self-identification and political representation devoid of external influences with a political and national agenda. Regardless of how the Torbeši declare themselves (as Macedonians, Albanians and Turks), there is still that grain of truth about themselves that has existed since they were known, before the idea of a Macedonian state was born, because it is about an ethnic construct whose history goes back to the period to which other ethnicities in the Balkans go, and even earlier than some of them.

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