

Slavic Muslims

The forgotten minority of Macedonia

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A mosaic of minorities

Despite having a relatively small population of just over two million,¹ the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia/Republic of Macedonia (Macedonia)² is home to a surprisingly wide variety of ethnic and religious minorities. Apart from the Macedonian majority, and the largest Albanian minority, the country also has sizable communities of Turks, Roma, Vlah and Serbs, among others. Perhaps the largest but least known of these 'other' groups is the Slavic Muslims who largely go unnoticed in the midst of the ethnic, religious, cultural and political machinations of Macedonia. This group does not fit into any of the familiar ethnic or religious 'pigeon-holes'. While the generic term 'Macedonian Muslims' is often used to denote the group, it has proved to be more ad hoc than adequate to describe their true identity. Despite being one of the largest ethnic/religious groups in the country, State institutions refuse to recognise the Slavic Muslims as a separate entity.³ If properly empowered this large community has the potential to dramatically alter and even stabilise the political balance.

All political, cultural and economic development in Macedonia has been stifled by the inter-ethnic rivalry between Albanians and Macedonians. This enmity is largely viewed by the International Community (IC), including the OSCE, as a natural and inseparable consequence of regional events in neighbouring Kosovo, Serbia and Albania. All other communities in Macedonia are largely ignored; seen as irrelevant to national and regional security. The IC has allowed the debate on the country's future to be dominated by the two largest ethnic groups. Solutions to the country's stagnation are sought exclusively from within these two communities (the belligerents in 2001) belying the fact that Macedonia is a multi, and not a bi-ethnic state.⁴ Other ethnic groups, if provided with the opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes, could significantly contribute to the stability and prosperity of the State. The Slavic Muslims, in particular, seem ideally suited to positively influence the future of their country if given an opportunity. This paper will examine the situation of the Slavic Muslims, providing a short overview of their history, the issues affecting their status in the country and their impact, both potential and actual, on the political stability of the State.

Who are the Slavic Muslims?

In different circumstances Slavic Muslims may be identified, or even identify themselves, as: 'Albanian'; 'Macedonian'; 'Macedonian Muslim'; 'Torbeshi'; 'Turk'; 'Gorani'; 'Bosniak' or 'Pomak'. The only unifying factors seem to be religion (Islam) and language (Macedonian).⁵ The vast majority of Slavic Muslims live in villages throughout the North and West of the country; however, there are also many integrated within larger towns.

There is major academic dissent on almost all historical facts relating to the Slavic Muslims. Most analysts at least agree that they are the descendants of Slavs who converted to Islam during the Ottoman era. However, even this apparently obvious explanation is highly contentious.

1 Republic of Macedonia State Statistical Office Census of Population, Households and Dwellings 2002; Skopje, 2002; Page 34; <http://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/knigaXIII.pdf>

2 For the purposes of this article the country will be referred to as 'Macedonia' though the constitutional name is 'Republic of Macedonia', while, due to an ongoing dispute with neighbouring Greece, the UN-recognized name is 'the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia', as stipulated in Security Council Resolution 817 (1993).

3 Official List of the 'Special Government Commission for the Relations with Religious Groups'.

4 In 2001 an Albanian rebel group, the National Liberation Army (UCK) fought a brief civil conflict against the State.

5 In an interview with Canoski, Kamija, Branch Leader of PEI, Struga (17/2/10).

Some claim that the Slavic Muslims are the descendants of Bogomil Gnostic, heretics who fled the oppression of the Bulgarian church in the 10th century.⁶ The adherents to this theory prefer to be identified as 'Torbeshi'.⁷ The popularity of this theory is perhaps due to their need to construct an identity based on a noteworthy history. The revision of history for the reinforcement of identity is a common theme among Macedonia's ethnic groups. The current Government has embarked on a massive building project in Skopje to beautify the city. Numerous monuments, including massive statues of Alexander the Great and his father Philip II, have been erected to glorify the country's past. The controversial 'Skopje 2014' construction project is widely viewed by national and international commentators alike as an ethnic Macedonian attempt to reaffirm national identity.

Others within the community believe that the Slavic Muslims are not Slavs at all but descendants of Persian traders⁸ or of Ottoman soldiers who settled locally when released from service.⁹ Others allege that they are descended from Turkish settlers who adopted the local language and customs but retained their Islamic faith.¹⁰

One of the major difficulties in analysing the history of the Slavic Muslims arises from the lack of reliable historical sources. Most of the literature emanating from the community itself is written by under-qualified individuals with clear political agendas.¹¹ Much of this material has entered the public debate on the community and is quoted extensively as fact, further clouding the already murky truth.¹² It is also interesting to note that the popularity of these theories has increased exponentially in conjunction with the emergence of the Party for European Future (PEF), which seeks to unite and represent the country's Slavic Muslims. PEF has avested interest in championing these romantic versions of the group's history; much like the Macedonian patronage of the Skopje 2014 building project.

Academic works by established scholars are far thinner on the ground. In the 1960s, a Yugoslav Sociologist, Dr Galaba Palikruseva, wrote extensively on the Slavic Muslims living in Macedonia. Throughout the next half century, her dissertation remained the seminal document on the country's Slavic Muslims. The core of her findings state that they are simply Macedonians who converted to Islam for varying reasons during the Ottoman period. Many within the community reject her findings. The Association of Macedonian Muslims established in 1970, however, fully endorses her thesis.

The renowned British historian Mark Mazower, meanwhile, points out that Macedonia lies directly on the main migratory route taken by over one million Slavic Muslims who fled the turmoil surrounding the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in Europe and the emergence of the Slavic Balkan states in its wake in the mid nineteenth and

6 In an interview with Ajradinoski, Sherif, President of Rumelija, a Torbeshi Cultural NGO, (June 2009); in an interview with Bektovic, Dr Dzemil; International Balkan University Professor, (June 2009).

7 The origins of the term 'Torbeshi' is a controversial subject. Some claim it is derived from a type of headscarf worn to signify leadership. Critics claim that the term refers to a bag of goods which was accepted in exchange for conversion to Islam. Others claim the term refers to the Turkish numbers four and five meaning that their mixed religious and ethnic identities place them somewhere between the two. Still others believe the term refers to the fourth and fifth waves of Islam during which many Slavs were converted.

8 In an interview with Canoski, Kamija (24/3/10).

9 In an interview with Sulejmanoski, Adem & Tasim (cousins), Party of European Future Branch leader in Rostusa, and former SDSM MP respectively.

10 In an interview with the President of Plasnica Municipal Council (23/3/10).

11 Such as Aradinovski, Sheriff in Struga; Mersimoski, Selim in Struga, etc.

12 Such as is found at the popular www.pomak.eu

early twentieth centuries.¹³ Mazower insists that many thousands of these migrants never made it to Turkey, instead settling in the wider Macedonia area. This would suggest that many Slavic Muslims in Macedonia are, in fact, the descendants of Balkan Muslim refugees from the last 100-150 years who simply had to alter their dialect to blend into the local population.

How many are there?

Perhaps the single most controversial issue surrounding the Slavic Muslim community is its size. As the group is not recognised as a separate ethnicity, there are no exact figures from the censuses. Estimates vary dramatically between 40,000 and 400,000; the statistics generally depending on the agenda of those who provide them. An excellent example of the statistical irregularities surrounding the community is provided by the huge divergence of figures between the 1991 and 2002 censuses. The 1991 census (officially completed in 1994) indicated that there were over 31,000 self-identified 'Bosniaks' within the territory of Macedonia. However, in 2002 the State Statistical Office Census indicated that there were just 17,000.¹⁴ The obvious conclusion is that these Bosniaks were absorbed into one of the other categories provided for in the census. Dr Dzemil Bektovic, a Professor in Skopje who worked on the 1991 census, insists that like the Bosniaks, there are many thousands of other Slavic Muslims who have been absorbed on paper into other ethnic groups for geopolitical reasons. According to Bektovic, were there to be a Slavic Muslim category in the census, thousands of Macedonians, Albanians, Bosniaks and Turks would declare themselves as such.¹⁵

Any estimation of the numbers is bound to be controversial and contested. Nevertheless, based on figures taken from the 2002 census of municipalities known to be home to Slavic Muslims, there appear to be somewhere in the region of 100,000-120,000 Slavic Muslims in the country.¹⁶ While the number pales in significance to those of the wider Albanian and Macedonian communities, it still ensures that Slavic Muslims are the third largest ethno-religious group in the country.¹⁷

In April 2011 Macedonia attempted to take an eagerly anticipated census which, had it been successful, would have contributed greatly to defining the political landscape of the country. Given the recent history of the region, it is hardly surprising that the census was greeted with great suspicion and the entire exercise was marred in controversy from the outset. The ramifications of a possible discovery of a massive shift in demographics are obvious in the context of the ongoing Albanian-Macedonian power struggle. After a few days of ineffective data collection, and amidst growing inter-ethnic friction, the attempt was abandoned. Rather than facing the demographic realities, the country's leaders opted to retain the status quo. The 2002 figure estimating the Albanian community at 25% is a number that the current crop of Albanian and Macedonian leaders can live with. The IC, including the OSCE Mission to Skopje (OMS), allowed this agreement to pass without significant public criticism.

13 Mazower, Mark; 'Salonica, City of Ghosts, Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430-1950'; Harper Collins, London, 2005; Pages 179; 284-5; 337; 347.

14 Republic of Macedonia State Statistical Office Census of Population, Households and Dwellings 2002; Skopje, 2002; Page 34; <http://www.stat.gov.mk/Publikacii/knigaXIII.pdf>

15 In an interview with Bektovic, Dr Dzemil; International Balkan University Professor, (June 2009).

16 These figures are an estimation based on the available statistics and on the author's research throughout the country.

17 According to the 2002 census there are slightly less than 78,000 Turks and 54,000 Roma in Macedonia.

The census debacle must be viewed as a missed opportunity for several

reasons. First of all, the fact that the State institutions cannot organise as simple and essential a civic exercise as a census, hardly bodes well for their aspirations to join the European Union. Secondly, by agreeing to ignore the demographic realities, the day of reckoning has simply been postponed instead of averted. No lasting political agreements, let alone economic and cultural policies, can be established without knowing the basic figures of the country's population. Finally, while the IC, including the OMS, may have been content that the census did not result in major violence, its failure ensured that no more information was gathered about the country's large minority communities. Evidence would seem to suggest that there are huge numbers of citizens who are neither Albanian nor Macedonian. Far from being irrelevant in the security context, these communities may actually hold the key to sustainable stability in Macedonia.

Given the size of the Slavic Muslim community, and its position between the two largest ethnic communities, it is worth examining the exact nature of the community's religious beliefs which isolate it from the wider Macedonian community but which link it to the Albanian community.

Not one Slavic Islam

The Slavic Muslims are almost exclusively Sunni, though there is a small number of Bektashi Shiites in Kicevo. In recent years Wahabism has taken root within some areas of the community with the apparent backing of Saudi Arabian groups.¹⁸ Wahabii dress, including the full Hijab, has become common in Struga, Plasnica and Debar. Previously, Wahabii made up just a small fraction of the wider Islamic community. As their religious beliefs did not lead to any opposition to the laws of the State the Wahabii received little attention. For the most part they seemed to remain an object of contempt and ridicule within the Islamic community amongst whom a more 'European' interpretation of Islam is well established.

Since 2011, however, this situation has changed dramatically. The Wahabii community has grown at a much faster rate, especially among Slavic Muslims who find themselves culturally isolated from the Albanian community, religiously isolated from the Macedonian community and, most importantly, economically isolated from both. As living conditions deteriorate and prices rise, the Wahabii movement has been attracting followers with the promise of financial assistance. This has become an attractive option for poverty stricken Slavic Muslims whose increasing needs are largely ignored by the Government.

The first example of the Wahabii community exercising its new-found influence came in February 2012 when revellers at the famous Vevcani Carnival festival made international headlines for ridiculing Islam. The Islamic community in neighbouring Struga responded with large protests which further inflamed the situation. The sizable Slavic Muslim Wahabii community in Struga formed a core of the protesters. An Orthodox Church in neighbouring Labunishte, a large Slavic Muslim village with many Wahabii families, was even set alight causing considerable damage. Then, in April 2012, the country was rocked by the murder of five men (four of them teenagers) on the outskirts of the capital. A group of Albanians from Skopje were arrested, suspected of the murders. The Ministry of Interior accused the group of being motivated not by nationalism but by radical Islam. The murders brought Islamic extremism to the forefront of the debate in the country. Suddenly the rapid growth of the Wahabii movement, especially among the country's Slavic Muslims, became an issue of the utmost importance.

¹⁸ As reported in The Sunday Times (Consulted on 28/3/10) http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article7078771.ece

The role of the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM) in combating this rise in extremism has come under scrutiny. Slavic Muslims are nominally members of the ICM, a supposedly pan-ethnic organisation which organises and officially represents all of Macedonia's Muslims. Given the large number of Muslims in the country this is an influential and powerful body. The reclamation of vast amounts of religious properties from the state in the wake of independence has added an extra-economic incentive to control the ICM and the two largest Albanian parties compete heavily for dominance. The vast majority of the country's Slavic Muslims view the ICM as an Albanian dominated political organisation with a reputation sullied by accusations of misuse of power, corruption and even collaborating with the Yugoslav secret police. The ICM has further isolated many Slavic Muslims by its reluctance to instigate services in the Macedonian language. The politically dominated ICM, which is supposed to foster an inclusive spirit of progressive, European Islam has totally overlooked the Slavic Muslim community. The Wahabi community has proven to be far more welcoming, placing Islam ahead of ethnicity and attracting large numbers of disenfranchised Slavic Muslims.

Amidst the continuing poverty and cultural and political exclusion of the Slavic Muslim community, the IC should expect many to turn towards these foreign Islamic elements who have maintained an open door for a community well used to remaining out in the cold. While the Wahabi community does not necessarily present a major security threat to the country – despite Government accusations to the contrary – there can be little doubt that radical Islam is a serious cultural threat to the moderate Islam that has always been the norm in the Balkans.

Slavic Muslims in politics

Instead of contributing to the stability of the country many Slavic Muslims are now actually seen as a threat to the state. This impression is further strengthened by the community's lack of a united political front. While PEF may be the first Slavic Muslim party, they do not enjoy wholesale support within the community. In fact, PEF captured just 1.43% of the vote in the General Elections in June 2008. In the previous government the party leader, Fiat Canovski, was the sole PEF Member of Parliament. Nevertheless, he only once addressed the House, giving a short, contentious speech in 2006 calling for the recognition of the 'Torbeshi' as an official ethnicity. In the 2011 Parliamentary Elections, the party actually ran in coalition with the SDSM,¹⁹ who refuse to recognise Slavic Muslims as a separate ethnic/religious group; the core policy of the PEF platform. There are currently three serving PEF MPs.

In a country with well over 31% unemployment, government jobs are the main political currency.²⁰ PEF has not guaranteed sufficient positions for the Slavic Muslim community who have thus split their allegiance between the other major Albanian and Macedonian parties. The opportunity to provide more money-making opportunities for their followers is almost certainly PEF's motive for entering into a coalition with a party which opposes their most fundamental policies.

Because of their large numbers, every major political party has courted the Slavic Muslim vote. Instead of presenting a united front, each local Slavic Muslim community allows itself to be bribed, often for meagre sums of foodstuffs or the promise of jobs, into voting for the major parties which do not necessarily have their best interests at heart. Essentially they are helping to elect parties which implement ethnically-based policies, often to

19 The Social Democratic Union of Macedonia; the country's second largest e/M Party.

20 IMF Executive Board Concludes 2011 Article IV Consultation with Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Public Information Notice (PIN) No. 12/58; June 8, 2012.

the detriment of the Slavic Muslims who actually voted for them.²¹

Why should we care?

The Slavic Muslims generally enjoy better relations with both Albanian and Macedonian than these communities do with each other. Sharing a common faith and minority status has brought them closer to the Albanian community with whom mixed marriages are no rarity. Meanwhile, their linguistic and ethnic kinship affords them an easier relationship with the Macedonian majority. The fact that Slavic Muslims occupy such a neutral position between the would-be belligerents should be capitalised on by the IC. In a small country dominated by ethnic tension, the Slavic Muslims could potentially play a vital role in establishing a lasting ethnic balance.

For the last twenty years the IC has attempted to referee an inter-ethnic conflict between the Albanian and Macedonian communities. Given that inter-ethnic tension is now widely considered to be at its highest levels since 2001 it must be conceded that this policy has failed.²² The OMS is the OSCE's oldest field operation, originally established fully twenty years ago (1992) and still employing well over 150 full-time staff.²³ While there have been some successes in specific fields (policing, rule of law, administrative and judicial capacity building etc.), the OMS must acknowledge that despite its best efforts, large size and ample time, it has achieved almost no success in easing inter-ethnic tensions. In large part this is due to the fact that the OSCE, along with the rest of the IC, has allowed the entire debate on Macedonia's future to be framed as a straight-up conflict between the two largest ethnic groups. The entire IC, and the OMS in particular, has demonstrated a frustrating lack of initiative and imagination in confronting and ending this inter-ethnic hatred.

The time has come to bring more voices to the table. There are many large minority communities in Macedonia who have simply been ignored when it comes to the debate on security and stability. Of all these minority communities it is the Slavic Muslims who hold the greatest potential for positively affecting the political balance of the country. Sharing religious and ethnic ties with both of the largest communities, the Slavic Muslims provide a ready-made middle ground. Furthermore, their large numbers could help act as a counterweight to the ethnic extremism of both sides. The failure to empower this and other minority communities must be seen as a major oversight by the OMS and relevant OSCE Institutions, including the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM).

Instead of continuing to focus solely on Albanian-Macedonian co-operation, the OMS and relevant OSCE Institutions should promote the concept of a multi-cultural Macedonia, which reflects the demographic realities of the country. In the last three years the HCNM has acted as a kind of fireman in the country; rushing to deal with inter-ethnic emergencies as they arose. The division of schools along ethnic lines and the instigation of compulsory Macedonian language classes for all first graders are two clear examples.²⁴ While the OMS and HCNM's efforts on both counts contributed to easing tensions there is little evidence of a coherent, coordinated

21 The author has monitored three separate elections in Macedonia. The political division among various Slavic Muslim communities is a well known phenomenon. In Struga the community is split between DUI and PEF; in Bogovinje the community regularly supports DPA; in Plasnica the community supports the Democratic Party of Turks; in Mavrovo and Rostuša the community heavily favoured VMRO-DPMNE in the last parliamentary elections etc.

22 High-profile inter-ethnic murders in Gostivar and Butel in 2012 have raised tension to their highest levels since 2001.

23 OSCE Mission to Skopje Overview; <http://www.osce.org/skopje/43341>


24 Both of these issues led to considerable tensions between the Albanian and Macedonian communities in 2010-11.

and long-term OSCE strategy to eliminate the threat of ethnic discord.

The visits of high-profile OSCE representatives, such as the HCNM and the Secretariat's Conflict Prevention Centre, were widely covered by local media. Including highly publicised meetings with minority leaders in the agendas of future visits would empower these communities, give them valuable exposure in local media and foster a new, multi-cultural spirit in the country. As things stand, very few Albanians or Macedonians genuinely believe these minorities have anything to contribute to the debate.

The IC should also pressure the Government to officially recognise those Slavic Muslims who would like to identify themselves as such. Some believe that and empowering such a deeply divided community as simply complicating an already overcrowded ethnic mosaic. Ideally, the listing of specific ethnic groups in legislation would make no more sense than the listing of eye colour. However, in the Balkans, the official naming of communities in legislation is seen as the only guarantee for civil, political and human rights. Specifically named communities feature heavily in high-profile peace treaties such as the Athinasi Proposal, the Dayton Peace Agreement, and the Ohrid Framework Agreement. These treaties have the explicit backing of the IC; it is simply unfair that some communities would have their rights guaranteed by official recognition therein, while others do not.

Macedonia is not simply a battleground between Albanians and Macedonians and the IC needs to stop treating it as such. The country is also home to hundreds of thousands of citizens from neither ethnic group. The last twenty years in the Balkans have tragically shown that turning a blind eye to malcontent and disenfranchised minority groups can lead to disastrous consequences. While Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Albania and even Serbia make massive strides towards European Integration, Macedonia, which arguably had the greater prospects immediately after independence, remains bogged down by inter-ethnic tensions which continue to stunt its progress. The 'bi-partisan' approach favoured by the IC for the last twenty years has failed. It is high time that all ethnic groups are encouraged and empowered to take their rightful place in the policy-making process. Perhaps then the spirit of compromise, so lacking at present, could be fostered by citizens who belong to neither the Albanian nor the Macedonian side.



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