

We Who Don't Exist

(An interview with Pavlos Voskopoulos)

This interview with Pavlos Voskopoulos, political representative of Rainbow, the party of the ethnic Macedonian minority, took place a week after the European elections of 13 June.

Question: What did it mean for Rainbow to take part in these elections? What were your aims and to what extent did you achieve them?

Answer: Right. First of all let me say I'm very glad to be giving you this interview, because I feel I'm talking to someone who's especially aware of minority and democratic issues. Now for your question. Let me start by saying that we thought very hard about whether we ought to take part in these elections, given that the war in Kosovo had been going on for the past two months. The reason wasn't whether we ought to give our opinion on all the issues, but that both at a local and at a national level, minority issues are taboo. A very large segment of public opinion, of the public, is at best uninformed and at worst prejudiced.

We all know about the hypersensitivity to minority issues in Greece: if you talk about minorities in Greece, as far as the Greek nationalists are concerned you're talking about problems that create problems. And when we had a minority problem in Kosovo, oppression of the Albanians, intervention by the international community, the KLA, and given that, anyway, any public action of ours leads to an orgy of mudslinging by the nationalists, we were seriously thinking that we might cause problems if we took part, that we might be regarded as extremists. One very common accusation might have been: 'See what the "Skopjans" are doing? Look at what's happening in the Balkans, look at what's going on in Kosovo, and this lot comes out in Greece to destabilise the situation, et cetera, et cetera.'

We also bore in mind that the mass media shut us out. Ever since 1994, ever since we've been operating as an organisation, we've never once had any real opportunity, not just to present our case, but even to show people we're not monsters.

After due consideration and discussion, we concluded that, as an organisation and as a party, we have to express our opinions in difficult times too, and we decided we would take part in the European elections with a view to persuading people that minorities have something to say and have opinions too.

Our financial situation is far from rosy. We started off by handing out our manifesto in person, calling in at the coffee-houses mainly in northern Greece, of course, in the areas where ethnic Macedonians live. We were very careful, and so we never had any serious problems, apart from some isolated reactions in the form of verbal attacks. 'You're Skopjans, you're out to cause trouble,' that sort of thing. But in most cases, even though we appeared in public, we had the opportunity to talk things over in good faith and get our message across.

Q.: There are groups and parties in Greece, particularly on the left, who sometimes recognise the Macedonians as a distinct segment of the population and refer to them with some sort of qualifier. The Communist Party of Greece calls them 'bilinguals', for instance, and others call them 'Slavonic-speakers' or 'Slavo-Macedonians', and so on and so forth. But most of them are talking about a distinctive linguistic and historical, rather than ethnic, identity. In the end, are the Macedonians just a linguistic minority or are they an ethnic minority too?

A.: A very good question! This whole issue has to do with a lack of information.

Because we too are products of the Greek education system, we're 'test-tube babies', regardless of whether we have a different national consciousness. That's why we can understand and feel in the same way as the average Greek thinks. Unfortunately, the average Greek's under the impression that he's living in an ethnically 'pure' nation. The average citizen either doesn't know or has never even wondered what a nation-state really is, has never considered that there weren't always nation-states, that three hundred years ago the term 'nation' didn't mean anything like what it means today; they never suspect that a nation-state presupposes a certain level of productive relations and organisation of society. The average Greek looks into the mirror and, instead of his actual image, sees himself wearing Pericles' helmet, holding Leonidas' spear, wearing Kolokotronis's fustanella, and in the past few decades he's been astride Alexander the Great's horse.

These prejudices prevent him from being able to see, and consequently to tolerate, the existence in his country of citizens with a different ethnic identity. How they acquired their different national consciousness is a question we could discuss for hours. We respect the right to self-determination. All the Balkan countries have minority populations, the Greeks in southern Albania, for instance, who are Albanian citizens with Greek national consciousness, and in the same way there are people in Greece with a different national consciousness.

The myth of the 'historical continuity of the Greek race' makes people blind to the most obvious things. Why should the Turks in Western Thrace be called 'Moslems' and not Turks, which is what they feel they are? By the same reasoning, shouldn't the Greeks in Albania be called 'Albanian Christians'? This is how identifying the birth of the modern Greek state with ancient Greece and Byzantium forces the people living within the national borders to become Greeks.

Now for whether the Macedonians are a linguistic, historical, or ethnic minority. Well, they're all three. First of all they're a linguistic minority: a brief visit to the Edessa and Florina areas, even to villages around Thessaloniki, is enough to convince you that there are people there who speak a completely different language, Macedonian. That doesn't mean they all have Macedonian consciousness. They may perfectly well have Greek national consciousness or no national consciousness at all. For example, many old men and women, if you ask them 'What's a nation?', won't be able to tell you. National consciousness has to be imprinted on the mind: it's the state that creates national consciousness. If someone grows up in a non-state environment, I'm certain they won't have any national consciousness at all.

Consequently, as regards the 'Slavonic-speaking' Macedonians, the populations that have a distinctive linguistic identity: some of them have Macedonian consciousness, some of them have Greek consciousness (mostly owing to forcible political assimilation by the Greek state, rather than by their own free choice), and some of them are still looking!

Q.: For about a hundred years now, since the start of their [struggle] for national emancipation, the Macedonians have historically associated themselves with the ideals of the left and work with the communist movements in the countries that oppress them as an ethnic group. For instance, the Ilinden rebels, who were fighting to get the beys' land shared out among the peasantry and followed an internationalist strategy; Vlahov and his collaboration with the socialist Federacion and later with Tito's partisans; the Communist Party of Greece and the Democratic Army and their collaboration with NOF and SNOF and so on. Today, however, the Macedonian minority is obviously expecting more immediate, more tangible results from the European Union, rather than from the solidarity of the left and the labour movement in Greece. How did things get to this stage?

A.: First of all, I have to disagree that Rainbow's expecting more from Europe and less from the Greek left. That's not so. Let's take things in order. First of all, we

believe that minority issues are issues that have to be resolved by the whole of society, they're central to political democracy in the country. Even if we're twenty or fifty or two hundred thousand ethnically aware Macedonians, it doesn't mean we've solved the problem of our being tolerated and our rights being recognised and respected by Greek society.

It's a problem that can be resolved only by society as a whole. The Greek left is a part of this society, to be sure. As you've pointed out, in the past there've been splendid examples of ethnic Macedonians, ethnic Greeks, and others too working and fighting under the same flag for the same cause, and when it was necessary they died for the same ideals.

But what we've been seeing in recent decades is that the Greek left, and I'm talking more about the Communist Party of Greece (rather than the extraparlimentary left, which has given us some very good examples of conduct and attitudes to minority issues), is no different from any bourgeois party on ethnic issues. Because the key to whether a party really is democratic, left-wing, truly internationalist, is precisely its position on the ethnic question in Greece. I mean, Papatheamelis says: 'Sir, you're a Skopjan, you don't exist,' and bops you on the head straightaway. The Communist Party says: 'Let's find a solution, yes, I see what you mean, hm, let's find some geographical definition or some other definition,' et cetera, et cetera. I mean, what are they doing? They're undermining you. They're both using different means to the same end. That's why we're frequently forced to turn to European movements, because I think the bourgeois democracies in Europe are a few decades ahead on these issues. Fifty years ago, for instance, the Germans and the French were slaughtering each other over territorial issues. Alsace was in German territory one minute and in French territory the next. Today, the Germans and the French are the mainstays of the European idea, however unsatisfactory that might be for a Greek left-winger.

For us, united Europe is the only choice, because we believe that the views and principles at a European level regarding minority rights are definitely more advanced than they are in Greece. I believe the issues we present will be resolved by the Europeanisation of Greece.

Now, if Greece's passport to this united Europe is the economic standard, reduced inflation, and a level of prosperity commensurate with that of the western countries, the visa in that passport will be the Greek state's behaviour on minority issues and on issues relating to respect for and safeguarding of the other social groups who suffer from discrimination.

For instance, how does Greece treat immigrants? How can it be that an Albanian or any other foreign worker gets half the wages a Greek gets? Why is it allowed? And why should they have no insurance? If they get ill, why shouldn't they be able to go to hospital?

I believe all these issues will be on the way to being resolved through the European institutions. And something else. We work with the Greek left. We took part in the last elections with the OAKKE. You may have all sorts of objections on ideological grounds, but on minority issues the OAKKE sets a shining example. And that's precisely why we worked well together in the elections, on a joint platform. It was an effort on our part to show we want to cooperate. We Macedonians aren't going to be tucked away in our shell, like picturesque Indians, with our own different little language and our dances and our music, for all sorts of researchers to come along to see how we've preserved our folklore and our traditions. No, once and for all, no! Rainbow and the Macedonian minority are going to play their part on the Greek political scene, with the direct aim of securing real democracy in Greece.

Q.: What political initiatives is Rainbow going to take next? Apart from moves by leading cadres is it going to include public campaigns? A rally? Are you going to start publishing Nova Zora again? What else?

A.: Let's start with the fact that almost all the mass media have been cold-shouldering us all these years. I'll give you a typical example. Eleftherotypia published a report

by Takis Diamandis, in which he mentioned some statements made by the Macedonian Foreign Minister, Dimitrov, on a visit to Canada. That was in April 1999, quite recently. The report stated that Dimitrov, addressing Macedonian emigres, gave them the message 'We must fight for a united Macedonia.' We reacted immediately, sending press releases to Eleftherotypia and the other papers, condemning statements like that. We, as Rainbow, condemn Macedonian irredentism. Well, nothing was printed in the papers!

When announcements like that don't get through, you can imagine what happens with issues like the Macedonian language, people being stripped of their citizenship because they're 'not of Greek origin', cases of police oppression and high-handedness . . .

Of course, we've got Nova Zora as our organ, but it hasn't come out for a year, because of objective difficulties. There's finances, but also the fact that we're not like the other parties, we operate more spontaneously with a number of volunteers. Our commitments have been so heavy lately that they can't be handled in an amateurish way; they need a professionalism we haven't got. We're going to bring out Nova Zora again, and we're seriously thinking about starting up a radio station, to give us more direct contact with people and enable us to tell them what we're doing. That's number one. Number two, we intend to move very firmly in the direction of strengthening our relations with the Greek democrats, it's a key issue for us, because Greek nationalism is pushing us into isolation. We'll take part as much as we can in any meeting where we can state our case on issues relating to peace, democracy, and minorities in Greece.

Q.: How do you intend to fight for the Macedonian language to be recognised and included in the education system?

A.: The average Greek needs to realise that difference is a prime cause of progress, at a national or any other level. Can you imagine a member of the Greek minority in Albania not being able to read Seferis and Elytis, not being able to write a poem in his mother tongue? Isn't it good for Albanian society to have contact with the Greek language and culture through the Greek minority there? Wouldn't we protest if they were all forced to read only Albanian poets and writers? Why don't the same standards apply to the Macedonian minority in Greece?

And let me make something clear. We do not want to set up a parallel education system and shut ourselves off in a ghetto. No sir! The Macedonian minority isn't going to make the same mistakes as the KLA, nor the Albanians in Tetovo, who want a parallel education system. In this day and age, when we're quite happy to go off and study in America, for instance, or England, it seems to me that for everybody to demand university education in his or her minority language is a cover, in the Balkans at least, for irredentist tendencies, secessionist tendencies. That's why we believe the Macedonian language should be brought into the Greek education system at elementary and junior level for all those who want to study it.

Q.: Do you intend to wage a special campaign for the abolition of the disgraceful distinction 'not of Greek origin' that's been applied to the thousands of political refugees and to the Macedonian emigres in Australia whom the Greek government won't allow to come back to their villages?

A.: People don't know anything about the Macedonian refugees, either in Greece or in Europe. The pictures we've seen of the Kosovar refugees being chased out of their villages are a repeat of what happened in the Macedonian villages in 1949. There was ethnic cleansing fifty years ago, the effects of which are still being felt today.

As for the Macedonian economic emigres who can't come back, their citizenship's been taken away by the famous article 20. I mean, what's the Greek state doing? In recent years, given the relative democratisation of Greek society, quite a lot of Macedonians have become bold enough to demand their rights, and the state's found another way to make the minority shut up. And this is

how: many of the Macedonian economic emigres in Australia, Canada, and America have left the Greek churches, parishes, and organisations and gone off to join their Macedonian counterparts. Thanks to the narks in the consulates, the Greek state picks out two or three Macedonians from each village, strips them of their citizenship, and declares them *personae non gratae*, so they'll be black sheep in their own societies.

Someone whose been stripped of citizenship can't visit Greece, and what's more isn't even told, they usually find out when they get off the plane in Athens or Thessaloniki, and they're sent back. The news gets round their native villages pretty quickly, and so they become an example to be avoided by all their fellow villagers. So the message from the Greek state is: 'Anyone who joins the Macedonian organisations and not the Greek ones is going to pay for it!' That's what the Greek state's been doing for the past ten years.