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AN ESSAY ON HUMAN RIGHTS*

Abstract: The author of this text examines the issues related to human rights, especially the expression of own identity of ethnic Macedonians in Greece, and the non-recognition by the official Greek state administration. The author makes a detailed analysis on the situation with minorities and their rights in other European countries and the neighboring countries of Greece. He focuses upon the awareness of the fact that national states at the Balkans misuse minorities, presenting them as a basic destabilizing factor in the region.

Key words: Ethnic Macedonians, Greece, human rights, European conventions, minority issues

Should we depart from the self-evident truth that the most essential human right is the right to live, we could say that this axiom entails a paradigm of related rights which are acceptable, less acceptable or not acceptable at all, with respect to the facts valid in a society at an economic, religious or cultural level at a certain point of time.

Many times it may be the case that what is legal or ethical for a European or a US national, is both illegal and immoral to a citizen living in Africa or Asia - and vice versa. Or what may be legal and ethical for the affiliate of one religion or the disciple of a certain ideology, may be a violation of both the law and of ethics to another, affiliated to a different religion, or following a different ideology.

Generally speaking, it can be said that citizens establish values and dominate the same, dependant on the stimuli they receive from the evolution of society itself - and from the coherence (inter-dependence) of such factors as faith, economy, education, culture. In some countries it is often the case that human rights are being violated in spite of them being protected through laws and conventions. It also occurs that they are not respected within a society, as its citizens may believe them to be ideal, protected from any violation and deterioration.

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* The article is a part of the book titled "A Human Rights Message", published by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998, which aimed at marking 50 years of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The book contains articles of 25 persons that have experience in the area of human rights, like Dalay Lama, Vaclav Havel, Rigobeta Menchu from Peru, Leila Zana from Turkey, Mary Robinson, Max Van Der Schtul and others. Pavle Voskopulos was invited to participate, with his article titled "AN ESSAY ON HUMAN RIGHTS - The Principle of Non-Discrimination".

Should a person claim that there are citizens in Europe who do not possess these rights, i.e. who do not possess the right to visit the graves of their parents, this would sound bizarre. and yet this happens to be the case in Greece. The Greek state prohibits the re-patriation of Macedonian political refugees who have been exiled or who have escaped from Greece during the Civil War (1945 - 1949), only to be scattered all over Europe and overseas. These people are being held culpable for declaring themselves Macedonians. They have spent more than 50 years of their lives in an imposed exile since the Greek state will not allow their re-patriation, merely on the grounds of their declaring themselves ethnic Macedonians. Citizens of Greece who would like to see their right to a personal Macedonian identity recognised. The Greek state sees this as a reason to impede their re-patriation and their rehabilitation. Another phenomenon occurring in the Hellenic Republic is the trying of citizens at court because they state to be of different ethnic descent than the majority in the country. This applies to both ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Turks. Affiliates of both ethnic groups are being dragged to court without substantiated charges. Such trials are being staged to frighten both their compatriots and other ethnic groups into giving up their national identity. Parallel to this, many Turks and Macedonians who have declared themselves affiliates to another ethnicity than the Greek one, are being slandered and offended by almost all mass media entities, in order to bring about their isolation and economic downfall.

Were somebody to say that towards the new millennium citizens in a European country are being criminally prosecuted (and sentenced to 2 years in prison as a rule) for using their native tongue in writing and in public - parallel to the official language of the state whose citizens they are - it would sound just as incredible. Yet four members of the 'Vinozhito' Organisation encompassing the Macedonian ethnic minority in Greece (including the author of this text) are being prosecuted for exhibiting a bilingual plaque (in Greek and Macedonian) at the entrance to their offices in 1995. The Public Prosecutor has charged them with 'disturbing public order.' In compliance to a policy denying the existence of the Macedonian language. At roughly the same time the Macedonian ethnicity has been prohibited from establishing a cultural association ('the Home of Macedonian Culture'), through which they endeavoured to foster their culture. This was conducive to the filing of charges against Greece at the European Court for Human Rights. It is very often the case that citizens of Macedonian ethnic origin are subjected to a revoking of their Greek citizenship 'in absentio', concordant Article 20 of the Greek Citizenship Act, compliant to a policy of 'refined' and 'silent' ethnical cleansing.

All this indicates a doctrine promoting national 'purity', national homogeneity, as a constitutional segment of the state and as a prerequisite for its development. A view which has been unfortunately nurtured by the state and its agents over decades - a view which has become the creed of the majority in Greek society. Identical and similar views may still be encountered in the Balkans as well.

Maybe it could be said that the violating of minority rights (as those mentioned above) are not that serious issues when people are starving in other parts of the world, when wars are being fought and lives are being wasted. But woe to us if models are being shaped upon considering absolute conditions as famine, armed conflicts or the loss of

human lives as criteria. We are daring enough to say that such a rationale may easily be conducive to a state of apathy, which is always opening the door to fascist and racist ideologies and activities.

Models should be outlined in compliance with positive examples in society and conduct, where individuality and tolerance, the respect for diversity, lead citizens towards peaceful coexistence, progress, friendship and solidarity. The range of irritability towards linguistic, cultural, religious and national idiosyncrasis does determine the progressive or conservative character of a society.

We could of course raise the question whether the non-recognition of ethnic minorities and the violating of their rights embodies a collective violation of human rights or not? Bearing in mind binding agreements, international conventions and treaties, including the General / Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the UN, the answer would have to be: 'yes.' This is where another alarming and serious problem surfaces: the hypocrisy of many governments and countries as regards the respecting of minority rights and human rights. Ergo in spite of signing conventions, agreements and declarations on the protection of these rights - in practice only part of them, or none at all, are being upheld. It could be said that countries do not value principles they effectuated too highly. This legalises procedures or policies which often create tension, whose consequences may even be conducive to armed conflicts. The righteous general premise uttered by governments, politicians and institutions that people have no cause for division - ergo no cause to wage war on each other - loses all its value without being complemented by political implementation. It may even be said that it deteriorates to a farce. The best way to prevent situations such as armed conflicts is to daily and perseveringly work towards peace and cooperation.

Over the past few years, national,religious sentiments and the irritability and inefficiency linked to the handling of human right issues, have been matched by an escalation of nationalism, intolerance or religious fanaticism even in communities where this would never have been expected. A recent example of this sort, located in Europe, is the disintegration of Yugoslavia which led to ethnic cleansing, the disappearance of people, the emerging of refugees, etc. It led to events which Balkan societies have undergone numerous times in this century, as sad as this may be. The escalation of nationalist phenomena in this region is definitely one of the factors conducive to the aforesaid plight. In this context it is nevertheless important to distinguish between national dignity, the right towards a collective identity and nationalism or chauvinism. The latter being the very cause for all mentioned above. What is require is continuous ideological and political activity, in order to obliterate any alleged connection between national and nationalistic ideology.

It is common knowledge that national minorities in the Balkan past have been misused, and that they most likely will be used again, as factors of destabilisation. Concordant to this, particular weight should be ascribed to the issue of border integrity not only at a declaratory level but also through appropriate conduct in case of state institutions and affiliates of ethnic minorities alike. Political activities of both should complement

this by neither numbing the population nor by directly and gradually attempting to alter existing borders through the implementation of their rights which of course should be respected and guaranteed by state authorities. Their conduct should also inspire a sense of trust in all citizens, at the same time constructing relations of coexistence and unity with them.

National minorities should refuse to become the object of international antagonism and interference into the interior matters of the country of residence. Balkan states and the minorities living in them must learn the lessons taught by recent European history in terms of gradual integration coupled by the respecting of minority rights and the transcending of national bias and antagonism.

If the steam engine brought about the industrial revolution towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century thus contributing to the flourishing of national states, then the information technology and communication revolution will aid the creating of a Post-ethnic model of a social structure, which as a society will be dominated by the civic concept in the 21st century. This may herald the end of national states as we know them in Europe and in the Balkans. The opportunities provided (for instance through the Internet and the new modern technology) for people to communicate with each other, to get to know each other, to exchange views and ideas with great facility and speed will be conducive to all of us becoming closer to each other. It will expose us to languages and cultures we would have had difficulties encountering and understanding a few years ago. This will foster tolerance and respect towards diversity even further. Once the level attained at this is high enough, we may analyse phenomena and conditions which in the past have led and may lead again to the violation of elementary human rights with much greater efficiency.

Therefore if we foster and continue to create a culture, this will be based on the fact that we are different, on the fact that we can give and we can take, that we can embrace the positive and discard the negative.

Idiosyncrasis embodies the essential principle of progress, and of the UN General Declaration on Human Rights, 50 years after its effectuation. At the close of the 20th and the dawning of the 21st century there could not be a document more current than this Declaration.