

**Pavkovic Elizabeta (Skopje, Macedonia)**

## **ETHNIC AND NATIONAL IDENTITY AS A MATTER OF CHOICE**

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to demonstrate through elements of the biographical method the development of fluctuating ethnic identity at personal level, following the example of the descendants of the refugees from Aegean Macedonia, who migrated to the Republic of Macedonia and who live there.

Key words: ethnic identity, emotion, refugees, Macedonians, Aegean Macedonians.

### I

Ethnic identity is a complex ethnic category. It is a feature deeply rooted into the very essence of human personality, an emotion which emerges as the result of the interaction of internal and external variables which act in a specific social situation (Erikson, 1968:22).

Such cultural categories as language, religion, common origin, and customs are considered objective indicators of any specific affiliation (Vlahović, 1982:104-105; Petrović, 1988:7). Should a situation emerge due to different reasons of choice among several cultural variants from these key categories of ethnicity, cultural polyvalence can affect the change of ethnic identity.

Personal emotions of the individual in regards to his or her ethnic affiliation are considered subjective indicators. In analyses at subjective level, the focus is on the ethnic identity as a process of self-identification and identification by others. Self-identification depends equally upon the individual and upon the group he or she belongs to. It can go much deeper, so the individual has a feeling of a double, triple identity developed on ethnic basis (tribal, ethnic-group, national), and at the same time all three mark the ethnic identity of the individual without opposing one another (Petrovic, 1988:8); (Svetieva, 2000:26). This happens on vertical level, when national identity comprises regional and local identities (Macedonian, Mijak, a person from Reka, a person from Galicnik, etc.). But, what happens when the person has a double, a triple ethnic identity at horizontal level, opposing each other?

How is this multiple ethnic identity created? How does the individual handle it? Does it change in time and space?

In order to find the answers to these questions a research was carried out in which descendants of refugees from Aegean Macedonia now living in Skopje were interviewed. They come from mixed marriages, with one of the parents being a Macedonian from Aegean Macedonia, and the other parent coming from the countries where the refugees had been taken (Poland, Romania, USSR, Czechoslovakia), or other countries. All interviewees were born in their respective countries, and they had spent their childhood there, some of them even part of their youth. Out of the multiple factors that affect the process of creation of multilayer ethnic identity, the following were considered during the research: descending from an ethnically mixed marriage; the role of the immediate family and the relations within the extended family; migrations (the first one - forced, mass migration, as a consequence of a military conflict, which one of their parents went through, and the second one - migration of the family by their own free will, which the interviewees were also part of); the

influence of the cultural environment of lifestyle and the degree of adaptability of the individual; contacts with the country of origin; language, etc.

All these factors, as well as other factors of different intensity in specific periods of the individual's life, play a role in the creation of the individual feeling of ethnic affiliation. Some of them act independently, and others are intertwined, therefore it is occasionally hard to establish the degree of their individual influence.

As far as the ethnic affiliation of these people is concerned, there is a difference among these people between their official (formal) declaration and their intimate feeling, as a result of a number of cultural influences. This is a complex emotion and it has changed in the course of their lives, and to a lesser extent even to this date, depending on their conditions and their cultural environment.

## II

Excerpts from the biographical stories of several interviewees<sup>1</sup> will be presented against several key parametres for the purpose of presenting the considerations, experiences and the individual feelings of ethnic affiliation: **1. Descended from ethnically mixed marriages; 2. The role of the parents and of the extended family; 3. Migrations; 4. Language (speech, dialects); 5. Influence of the cultural environment; 6. Opinions about Macedonians; 7. Formal and intrinsic personal ethnic and national identity and 8. Complex identity - a shortcoming or an advantage.**

### 1. Descended from ethnically mixed marriages:

**L.** (42), born in Ukraine (USSR). Ukrainian mother, father from Kostursko (Aegean Macedonia, Greece);

**K.** (39), born in Poland. Mother from Shlezia (Poland), father from Lerinsko (Aegean Macedonia, Greece)

**D.** (38), born in Uzbekistan (USSR). Ukrainian mother, Macedonian father from Kostursko (Aegean Macedonia, Greece);

**R.** (44), born in Romania. Hungarian mother, father from Lerinsko (Aegean Macedonia, Greece).

### 2. The role of the parents and of the extended family

**L.** ...The family only has a major influence in the early years of human life. However, the family acts in a single context, in a single social context... The extended families on my mother's side and on my father's sides are mixed. To us this comes as something completely natural. My father's brother was married to an Albanian woman... My aunts, his /my father's/ sisters, one /is married to/ a 100% Greek, the other one's husband is half Macedonian half Greek. On my mother's side, there are Ukrainians, and Russians, and Jewish, and Germans, Kazasi. And we all get along very well. No one seems to mind this.

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewees are listed by their initials because of their decision to remain anonymous.

**K.** ...I don't remember this, my mother told me this, that when I was a very young child, I insisted that I was registered as Polish in the census. The man said that here it is according to where your father is from, and I replied: "Nothing father! It is the mother who breastfeeds the baby and carries it in her womb, so I am going to be Polish!"

De facto, it is the mother who... there is no question that a child needs both parents, but one part of you, you are your mother's. You are physically part of your mother. Wherever your mother is from, that's where you are from, too.

My parents, especially my mother, she was "geographically" open, so to speak... We had no barriers at home. We never said things like: "Oh, they are black, or they are white..."

Speaking about my father, he is a man who... I am going to say like Amdi Bajram - he is for his family 120%. It is exactly because of what he's been through that he appreciates the family so much and does everything for this family. His home is his entire world. Relatives on his side also have deepest respect for the family and they are really family-oriented. They stick together. The relations among the relatives are very, very, very highly respected. Which is not the case in Poland.

### 3. Migrations

**R.** Well, it's difficult to be brief, but let me try... 1948 in Greece, with the civil war, my grandfather was in the war, he fought there on the communists' side. My grandmother was deported with the children to Al... I mean, they fled to Albania, when they started bombing the villages and when they started the ethnic cleansing. From Albania, they took a ship to Poland. And then, in Poland, they were further dispersed. My grandmother with the three children, they were sent to Romania. Seven or eight years, or later, perhaps even nine years, my grandparents were somehow reunited through the Swiss Red Cross, because my grandfather had been wounded, he was lying in hospital, in Albania. Somehow they were reunited and they sent my grandfather to Romania. And then there they started a life. The children grew up. My father went to the university, to study arts. There he met my mother who had come from Hungary to study there... And we came here in 1972. Other than that, they were always, I remember... there was continuous expectation to go back to Macedonia. Because, if /you can't go/ to Greece, then - to Macedonia.

**K.** In 1948, during the civil war in Greece, he was 12 years old. He was taken by the Red Cross, displaced, taken away, allegedly so that children were spared the horrors of war, and he had spent his life in orphanages. The first seven years he didn't even know whether his parents were alive, or whether his parents knew that he was alive... He is burdened by terrible complexes from this period in his life. To grow up in orphanages, not to have enough to eat, to have no shoes, to have no books, to have no allowance, to have nothing. Everybody is celebrating Christmas, and you are in an orphanage - all by yourself! ... He had spent the crucial years in the development of this personality in Poland and it has definitely left a mark on him.

--- Then they moved with my mother to Skopje, in Yugoslavia, with the idea that they would be closer to his birth place.

#### 4. Language (speech, dialect)

**L.** I understand Ukrainian, but I can neither speak nor write in Ukrainian. I learned my father's language when I got here, I didn't know it before that. We used a third language in our family (Russian). Neither /my/ father's, nor /my/ mother's.

**D.** We didn't speak Macedonian in the house, I didn't know a word! We communicated in Russian. I learned Macedonian when we came here. I still don't speak any Ukrainian. When they ask me which my mother tongue is, I tell them - they both are! Macedonian and Russian. That's how they feel, that's how I use them. I learned Greek in Tashkent. I am good at Greek now, no problem, I can handle it. Sometimes now I have regrets, because I could have spoken both, perfect Ukrainian and perfect Greek.

**R.** I talked to my mother in Hungarian, because she didn't speak any Macedonian. To my grandparents I talked in Macedonian. Actually, I never talked to my parents a lot, because I spent most of the time at my grandparents', because /my parents/ were studying /at the university/ and... So, I spent most of my time with my grandparents, and we talked among ourselves in Macedonian, but in this Aegean Macedonian. There also was Greek. So I spoke Greek too. And Romanian, of course, in school and with my friends. There were some endeavours for to go to a Greek school. There were /Greek schools/ in Romania back then, but my grandfather didn't let me go there. Thank God! (laughing) For political reasons. Otherwise the propaganda in Greece was very strong back then, and all the Macedonians in Romania were referred to as Greeks.

**K.** ...Polish is my mother tongue. I speak Polish as well as Macedonian; it's just that when I go to Poland, they can tell that I live abroad, because the language I use is way too proper. I don't have the dialect which is peculiar to any different part of Poland. I don't have it in me, because I have been refreshing it /my Polish/ from books, from movies. Ever since I was a child, all the books that we had to read for school, in elementary and in secondary school, and even later on, fiction books, all of these I've read in Polish, because my mother's best friend has a bookshop and she kept sending us the latest books. They were still not printed here, but they already had them in Poland. I know a lot about Poland, about the history, the customs, the way of life through foreign books as well, the ones that were translated, and also from Polish writers.

#### 5. Influence of the cultural environment

**L.** ... Considering the number of years that I spent there, it's like something was... as if it was implanted in my own micro-chip, so to say. In other words, I learned this stuff about Ukraine subconsciously, while I learned about Macedonian ethnic features quite consciously, when I was all grown up. Perhaps I feel closer to the Ukrainian ones.

Generally speaking, I think that the environment has the crucial influence. Luckily for me, I lived in a multiethnic country, vast country, where there were more than a hundred nationalities... and in the family, in school and in our everyday life, we were brought up based on stories from all these people. We were, more or less, in touch

with representatives of completely different worlds... I believe that it is the environment that has the major impact on a person. Nevertheless, the person becomes aware of this a little later, after he or she has matured, and is fully developed as a person, when he or she can think for themselves, when they can make a choice and take a decision. I still remain in this family, and I am still aware that one is Macedonian and the other is a Ukrainian and, in spite of everything, under the influence, perhaps, of this environment, I feel - Russian. In other words, this is the feeling that has grown on me.

**D.** ... The environment and the personal feeling that is being developed in this environment have the major influence.

**R.** The environment, the community that you live in, has the major influence. I wonder... had I lived permanently, up until now, all my life, say, in Romania, perhaps that's what I would still have called myself, a Romanian, and I would have said: My father is from Macedonia, my mother is Hungarian, but I am Romanian."

**K.**... I was raised in Yugoslavia. To me it was everything! I am terribly Yugo-nostalgic! I am not a robot to be turned on and off. I can not just push a button and say: "The end! It's over. No more. It's all gone!"

... The fact that I live here probably has its influence, this is where I grew up.

I grew up in an Albanian community. My best friend in elementary school was an Albanian girl. My best friend in high-school was an Albanian girl. We used to go to each other's homes... I'd eat at their place, they'd come over to my place... as far as I know, my Macedonian girlfriends didn't socialize with them. I also invited the Gipsy children to my birthday party every year. I would go to their homes. I knew where each and every one of them lived; I ate together with them... I think that this is so because of the way I was raised.

## **6. Opinions about Macedonians**

**L.** They are very hospitable, generous, warm. When they work - they work, when they relax - they relax, that's what I like here. I like the way they decorate their homes, the domestic ambiance, especially when the folk style is favoured, personally I love it. Here this can be found far more frequently than in the former Soviet Union, and more specifically in the Ukraine. Also, what I like here is that all these years (...) the church has never been separate from the state. The church has always been available to the people, not that the state encouraged the people to go to church, but it never actually prevented them from going. Perhaps the communists kept some distance /from the church/..... This was not the case in the Soviet Union. I like the way it's done here. I was baptised here, at age 33. The general feature that I find deeply disturbing is envy. People don't know how to be happy for the success of those close to them. I think that this is the root of all the problems of the Macedonians. It is typical of a "petty mind". Rotten right here, although there are so many capable people around. A friend of mine says: "In Macedonia, with just a handful of people, and so many have been sprinkled with stardust". Alas, the others won't let them! Lack of respect for authority, lack of discipline in the family then reflects on the entire society. Authority doesn't exist among us, Macedonians! Hypocrites - it is an extension of envy. It is kind of logical. Rather obstinacy - I mean, they would not even listen when you are trying to explain something, about how something is being done in other countries "I don't give a toss! That's not correct! I don't want to hear about it! All of you coming from other countries are such smarty-pants!" When I

communicate with people who've been abroad, they are so open-minded to new things, new knowledge, and it is not strange to them, it's not alien. They welcome /new stuff/, they try it at least once. They say: "I'll give it a try! If it works for me, then I will apply it in my life, and if it doesn't - then it's no harm done!" While the people, I mean the majority of the Macedonians, who've never been anywhere (I am not talking about summer holidays in Greece or in Montenegro), who've never lived abroad, whether studying, or on business, or perhaps if destiny tossed them somewhere abroad, they discard anything that is not Macedonian! To deny someone else's values - that's wrong!

**D.** They are proud. And courageous, this was definitely caused by displacing. Clearly they are both courageous and persevering. I can tell by looking at my father, he is very diligent and hard-working, very much. Rumour has it that they are very stingy... - the Egejci /Aegean Macedonians/. Here too my /parents/ are a match, because the Ukrainians are considered "stingy" as well. Family life is highly praised. They are very devoted to their families. There is no such family devotion in Ukraine or in Russia.

**R.** Hospitable, warm, friendly. Fearful. Devoted to their families. A lot!

**K.** Very frank people, warm, affectionate. Highly devoted to their families. ... What affects me is that the Macedonians, the Macedonians here, they don't feel like that about their own country! Because, I say: if someone did this to me in Poland, I'd really get up and go there, and jump and yell and protest and do whatever I possibly can! And I can fight for the Macedonian issues just as much, and I get into fierce discussions about the name in Greece whenever they get on my nerves!

Macedonians from Aegean Macedonia ... we are talking about two groups here ... three groups of people from Aegean Macedonia:

- the ones who remained there, that we've been in touch with, we visit them, we visit each other. They are... it's like they were Greek, only they are not Greek! Yes, really. Because you can tell them apart, by their faces, by their features, by their folk costumes, and by their customs. And /are they/ Macedonians? I don't know how much they are Macedonians, because they live in another country, they adjust to the local laws, to the local conditions.

- another group of Egejci /Aegean Macedonians/ who moved from there to Yugoslavia and remained here. They were middle-aged. Most of them were communists. They were persecuted, so they ran away;

- and then this third group, these "children refugees", all of whom grew up in different countries and they bring their own different habits.

### **7. Formal and Intrinsic Personal Ethnic and National Identity**

**L.** ... I declare myself Macedonian in each census, but this I am doing more ... how shall I put it, because... because of the political climate in the country. I just wish that there is yet another one of us! For as long as I live here! This, however, doesn't mean that, if I lived in another distant country, I don't know if I would be declaring myself Macedonian?! I honestly don't know! When you have only two things to choose from, it is a terribly difficult choice to make for anyone. No matter what they say. It's easier when there are several combinations, several options available. I think that it's easier for me, compared to all those who don't have the third option, the third possibility.

**D.** ...But then, when I'd enroll in school or in official documents, when you have to state who you are, what you are, I was confused - shall I declare myself Russian? And my father /would say/: "What do you mean, you're Russian? It's Republic of Russia, you live in the Soviet Union. What are you going write there?" I'd start blinking and blinking, and then say - "/I'm/ Greek!" "What do you mean, Greek?!" I know my father was born in Greece. What did I know back then about being Macedonian or being Greek! We lived in a community of refugees from Greece. And I thought everyone there was Greek. It was my Manhattan, you understand. I couldn't care less about who and what all those people living outside were, I just lived my life with these Greeks here. So, back there I was Greek. On the other hand, these same Greeks had Russian and Ukrainian brides. And even among them I'd seen, in different groups, you could tell that there was a difference, but I was not paying attention back then. Now it's all coming back to me... It was really fun, guests would come over - and Ukrainian meals would be cooked. And then there would be Greeks, and Macedonians, and Ukrainians, and Russians, all gathered together, kind of a mixed group and now - they are cooking Ukrainian dishes. And then, someone would bring in some Russian food, then a little Greek, a little Macedonian, and how can you expect it not to get loud?!? This is very interesting, that I have never fully understood it..., I am referring to some early years here, I hadn't fully understood who I really was and how I should declare myself... And yes, then I asked /who I was/. And then we sat down and I was told that "Mom is Ukrainian, dad is Macedonian. Now, according to the rule, you'd have to declare yourself according to who your father is. But, it's your choice!" I was completely free to choose. Well, I did ask who I was, and I really did write - Macedonian. Since then... they had explained it all to me at a certain age, when a person can understand more... I declare myself Macedonian, because I can't list both nationalities, for administrative purposes. But if I could, I'd list them both.

**K.** ... I frequently declare myself Polish, and I am not doing it in order to get the attention, the two names that I hold are getting enough attention (the first one is Macedonian, the second is Polish), but that's what comes to me first. It comes to me first, without thinking... In Macedonia frequently I write that too - Macedonian with dual citizenship, Polish. In Greece, following their suggestions, I am only Polish. We asked for advice, because I told them that I could come over and get married with both Macedonian and Polish papers. They told me to only come with my Polish papers, and that I shouldn't even say a word about my dual citizenship, that it might give me hard time. Unfortunately.

**L.** When I go there I feel more like a Macedonian, and it feels good, I must admit, that I am a foreigner... It is simply my deep, personal feeling, and it's important to me. Even though my mother is a 100% Ukrainian, and my father is a 100% Macedonian, I actually feel Russian. Because I first learned how to speak in Russian, Russian is the language in which I think, the language of mathematic operations in my head, it is the language of my dreams. When I go to sleep and when I have dreams, I speak Russian. This means that it is my mother tongue. It's probably not even so much about the Russian culture; it's probably more about the Russian spirit, the Russian soul. The Russian segment inside me is most developed. It just developed in me, on its own. And I realised this many years later, a dozen years after we had moved here. I am fully aware of it... I realised that I actually feel like a Russian.

... Personally, I feel, say, 50% Russian. The remaining 50% are literally distributed: I am 25% Macedonian and 25% Ukrainian. I am just telling you generally how I feel,

there are situations in which it feels much better to be Ukrainian. And there are situations in which I very much... I feel Macedonian 99%. For example, for a couple of days, when Ruslana gave her concert, I admit, I went to her concert and I felt so much more Ukrainian, I said to myself (softly): "Here come our folks!!" But then later on, when they asked me to help with translation, I kept the Macedonian side. They /Ruslana and band/ will leave, but I remain here, these are my people, these people around me. When I am in Greece, with my relatives and their Greek friends, we discuss all kinds of topics, sometimes we fight trying to prove a point... In these moments I am a 100% Macedonian!

In other countries, where I have stayed only very briefly, mostly just transiting, I literally feel like "a citizen of the world". I know this for sure! I literally feel cosmopolitan. I am a cosmopolitan here too, but here not a 100%, because of the impact of other factors which are rather significant. That's exactly how I felt in the first years after I got here. When I got here, the first ten or so years I still didn't know who I was and what I was. Only after 10 years of living here did I finally realise that I felt Russian... These years were, unfortunately, filled with much more important, more essential, more vital issues, which left me but little space for thinking of anything else. It was a matter of physical sustaining. It was survival. So I had neither the time, nor the opportunity to think, even if I'd wanted to. This, however, does not mean that there weren't any factors over these years that influenced my final decision about who I really am. They made their indirect impact on me, and thus helped me decide later on.

The fact that I feel Russian is indeed the result of a long-time indecision in choosing between the two options. Lack of arguments for either of these options, more or less, is perhaps why I chose the third option?!

There is also something else, it's feeling homesick after the opportunity to develop into a cosmopolitan. Because I come from a country which was the largest multi-ethnic country in the world and we came back to a country which was a federation with most of the different ethnic representatives. Speaking of which, I remember something that happened... at a big event, where I was working as an interpreter, we became very close with the Georgian delegation. One of them says to me: "You know what? Come to think of it, I feel really sorry that the Soviet Union fell apart! Even though we seemingly got our independence or what not. Our opportunities for communication and development and everything have been cut down." Then I said to him: "Please don't start on that! Because, if it hurts you once, me it hurts twice. You have one wound in your heart, I have two! Because once I used to know this country, too. This country fell apart as well. I am telling you - don't make my pain even worse! I had friends and buddies throughout Yugoslavia. Don't touch me there, because I'll kill you, now!" Well, this is perhaps a crisis. It is at moments like this that I am really very sorry /for what had happened/!

**D.** ... First these things came from ignorance and age. When you are a child and you don't know better, and now - no, now I feel both one way and the other. And I feel great when I get a chance to see ... I keep in touch a lot with people from over there, from Russia, ... I've noticed that, when I talk to them, I feel Russian, or Ukrainian, because I've been in touch with Ukrainians too, and at the same time I also feel Macedonian... They all say to me: -You are "one of us"! -Well, ok then, I'll be "one of us", so what?! ... Not in the sense that I don't belong anywhere, I know exactly where I belong, I am Macedonian. But this Ukrainian streak, so to say ... it's not really

just a streak, it's a good 50%. It's 50% Ukrainian, and 50% Macedonian. It's not bothering me at all... I feel them both like mine, literally, that's who I am! ...Now, considering the fact that I had lived in Russia a long time ago, and that the first half of the first 16 years in my life I didn't have a clue, until I went to school, about "who and what I am", I've lived here longer, and I've experienced other stuff here as I was growing up, especially with the war that is now over, you can call it a war. So now it would be natural for me to say that I feel more like a Macedonian.

**R.** When I was still a very young child I felt Romanian. And I remember my father scolding me when I was a kid: "What do you mean, Romanian?! You have nothing Romanian!" "How can I have nothing Romanian when I was born here?!"

This is very important. Can the place where a person was born determine his or her identity, or is identity the culture which ...is the source of education throughout human life. Although, my mother used to say: "So what if we live in Romania, we are actually living in the Hungarian part here. Therefore - you are actually Hungarian!" And my father /would say/: -No! /He is/ Macedonian!" And so on. And in order to clear the situation, I'd say - Romanian. They ask me: "Why?" "Because I was born here /in Romania/ and this is where I am going to school! I've never known anything different." However, in time, when we moved here, I started... I started to understand that it doesn't matter where someone was born or where they are living, and what they are... what kind of an identity they would develop... although that's one way to do it. It becomes absolutely clear that identity is ... it is a cultural category and that actually every person can decide for themselves what they are going to be in life. You can call yourself French and be French, no matter whether you've got someone or something /French/. But the feeling of ethnical affiliation, it's something that is developed... it is being passed on, culture is passed on from generation to generation, out of the circumstances under which you live, and... that's it. And you come to the conclusion that you belong to a specific culture.

...I feel Macedonian, more than anything. ... Even though I feel some 20-30%, say, Hungarian... so it would be about 70:30. "Citizen of the world?" If this is what we are talking about, then there is not even an "M" of a Macedonian, nor Hungarian, because I feel like that /a citizen of the world/ a hundred percent! I mean, literally, because of this mix and because I have lived in all these countries and because I communicate /with different people/ and because I still keep traveling a lot. I really feel comfortable about being abroad, wherever I go, and I feel just like home. Sometimes it is even more difficult at home, I mean, there I have more everyday problems... It can't be compared, because as much as anybody can be a "citizen of the world", this person still belongs to a certain people and that's what is driving him. So, it remains 30:70, plus the 100% for the rest (laughing). So, it must come up to 200%...

**K...** Judging by my mindset, I look more like this... so to say "northern" mentality than the "southern" one. I am more inclined to say that I am Polish, when I think about it. The next thing that comes to mind to say is that I am Yugoslav ... OK, now I can no longer call myself Yugoslav, because it no longer exists. It's just fiction. Something that once was. I am not the kind of person who dwells on the past. Now I find myself in a situation where I say that I am Macedonian. Actually I was not born in Macedonia. Actually, my father was not recognised as a Macedonian: the records here read that he was born in Greece. In Greece they don't consider him anything! So now... can I say that I feel Macedonian - because my father was a refugee ... because he too has a mixed identity... I don't know... I should say 50:50, but it's exactly

because of... the fact that my father has no... there is no single place /where he comes from/ which is not helping ...??

Perhaps 60 by 40? ... I can't decide. I am positive that I am 50% Polish! And that I was born in Poland, and that my mother was Polish... De facto, genetically I am also German, but that is something that I can't relate to! I don't feel a thing about that, really! I don't speak the language, and I don't even want to learn it! I have respect for my ancestors, but personally I don't feel one bit German. My mother did, she spoke the language. Not me - I was not raised in this spirit. As for the rest... Macedonian...? Even in Macedonia, my father is an - Egeec /Aegean Macedonian/! They don't even call him Macedonian, they call him "Egeec"! The local milieu here has driven us away from others. When I was in high school, they called me "the Egejka" /Aegean Macedonian girl/. Or - "the Polish /girl/". I was never - Macedonian, I was never - Yugoslav. So, in a way, your community considers you different, too. As much as I would like to say: "I am a Macedonian" - what good would that do when I've been hearing for 39 years that I am an Egejka! Not that I mind being an Egejka, it's just that it is - no man's land!

Occasionally I catch myself... having these confusing emotions, meaning that I have strong patriotic feelings for Macedonia.

### **8. Complex identity - a shortcoming or an advantage.**

**L.** An advantage!... I consider it a tremendous advantage. You get to know different cultures, different languages, and different customs. Now, this is something that helps a person develop their spirit and their soul.

Now, with these non-government organisations, I literally have friends all over the world, many people from different countries. I hope that the people here will in time overcome this issue and that they will feel exactly like that. It doesn't matter at all where you come from, what matters is the kind of a person that you are!

**D.** Yes, an advantage, definitely!

**R.** When I was young, it felt awkward. Up until I was 20. Now I consider it an advantage. Yes. And it feels good; it has for twenty, thirty years now. Really... I am really happy!

I think that people coming from mixed marriages show higher tolerance for different ethnicities. They definitely... are more open-minded. Because they are exposed to two cultures simultaneously. Three /cultures/. This way they can much more easily assess things, unlike people who were... born in a small place and have spent all their lives there... not going anywhere, not doing anything. Then you are much more susceptible to manipulation. But if you have a wider knowledge of things... So right now, I really consider myself a Balkan person too, for instance, because I've got a little of everything. That's it.

**K.** ...It feels a little as if... I have no roots. Having been displaced from one place to another, coming from different grandparents... There are times when I think to myself: "**Dear Lord, where do I belong?**" Everyone is saying: "In my village... Back home...." I don't have "back home". Because I've been moving back and forth all my life. Even where I am living now, it's still not "home". We are again thinking about... my husband is looking for another job. Maybe that's what my whole life is

going to be about. I don't know. There are times when it is very hard for me that I don't have a single origin, but I am a number of pieces put together! But in reality, it makes my everyday life 99% easier. I'm doing great! I can adjust to any environment, I can fit in. ... I have dual citizenship and I am lucky to be able to make the most of it. To me, ever since we became an independent and sovereign country, to me these borders have never been closed. I consider this my privilege and I have never experienced what my generation has been through, as well as all those people who can not leave the country. On departure from Macedonia I use my Macedonian passport, and I use my Polish passport upon entering any other country. And it's worked like this ever since we became Macedonia. Before that I used to have a Yugoslav passport and it was great for me!

I am not a bigot. I have many friends coming from different races from around the world. We write to each other, we think of each other.

Ok, sometimes I do get this feeling of... For example, everyone knows who they are and where they come from, and me, by the time I tell someone who I am and where I am from... the person is long gone!!

### III

The original accounts that come from these interviewees' life stories reflect the delicate, ultimately personal background against which the contours of each individual's personal as well as ethnic identity are shaped.

Some of the people who were asked to participate refused to talk about their own ethnic identities, making it clear that they didn't want their emotions to be "picked at", or fearing that they might be compromised, given their "unstable" identity. Judging by the responses of those who decided to share their thoughts and to reveal some of their feelings about their own ethnicities, a conclusion may be drawn that the early awareness of one's ethnicity comes in their early school years. Once in school, they start to acquire institutionalised knowledge of the specific society, so that it is easy for the young person to identify their nationality with the country he or she was born in and lives in, i.e. the country whose educational system shapes this person up. Until then, the child's family is a unique and a homogenous entity, and parents are simply "mom and dad". The moment the child is faced with its parents' different nationalities opens up the dilemma - what is the child itself? The child's decision is easier if either of the parents come from the country they all live in, but when both parents are foreigners in the country, the child might consider the third possibility a good option, which is to be considered a citizen of the country they live in. Such a choice of the child is making even more sense because up to this point in life, he or she knows nothing or very little about his or her parents' homeland, has a poor knowledge of their language, or none at all, etc.

The impact of the cultural environment is particularly strong during adolescence. A young person takes part in various regular and extracurricular school activities, their circle of influence is constantly expanding, they try to integrate in the community and be in no way different from their peers or their environment. Life's challenges and work leave parents with but little time to introduce their children to the features of the

ethnicity they come from. Their children formally declare themselves as Macedonians, but that's not how they really feel. Nevertheless, parents manage to teach them to work, to bring out patriotic feelings and high ethical values in their children, which is evident in each person participating in the research.

Refugees' children come to Macedonia for the first time when their families move here, and it is then that they get to know Macedonian marrow and culture, learn the language. This is a particularly tough time in their lives, because they have to adjust to the new cultural environment and adapt to a different way of life. They have to learn how to actually be that what they declare themselves, and this leads to "breaking the identity". For almost each and every one of them, this period takes about a decade and is followed by emotional and mental turmoil, while they constantly re-evaluate who they really are and what they really are. Depending on their age, their degree of adaptability, their parents' influence and circumstance, after this "struggle" with their multiple ethnic identities, they "figure it all out". Any dilemmas, questions and confusion that they might be experiencing are replaced by a feeling of relief and they accept themselves for who they are. There is a distinctive difference between the male and the female interviewees with regard to their ethnic affiliation. For the male interviewees predominant is the feeling of belonging to their fathers' ethnicity (in this case, Macedonian), while the female interviewees consider themselves predominantly representatives of either their mothers' ethnicity, or of the country they were born in (Poland, Russia, Czechoslovakia). Interestingly enough, this difference is also found in the same family, between male and female siblings (L. and D.).

All interviewees point out that one of their identities always takes precedence over the other ones, depending on environment and circumstances. Frequently they consciously emphasise one of these identities, whether to use them in a specific situation, or to avoid unpleasantness or simply in order to feel different from other people. Features belonging to each of "their" ethnicities they accept as their own, and they stay apart from features that they consider negative, now feeling as "of the other ones". They consider their own fluctuating ethnicity as an advantage and they use it. They consider themselves open-minded people who carry multiple cultures, tolerant towards different ethnicities, citizens of the world.

These empirical results that were obtained through one of the biographical methods are an attempt to display the structure of the ethnic identity as an ongoing, lifetime process. These results offer an account of the conditions and factors influencing the creation of ethnic identity; they also demonstrate the moments of identity chaos, as well as the various periods in human life when these processes occur.

The processes of construction and deconstruction of ethnic identities are a dynamic (mobile, changeable) category and it is precisely the factors causing change, most of them out of the control of the bearers of these identities that should be considered in their research. And, the people themselves should decide whether they should pick a single identity, or whether they should balance between a few.

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