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**THE ATTITUDE OF THE MACEDONIAN ACADEMIC COMMUNITY
TOWARDS THE “TORBESHI”: METHOD OF SOLIDARITY OR SCIENTIFIC
SUBJECTIVITY?**

Abstract: The title is inspired by the article of Lisa M. Tillman Healy, “Friendship as Method” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003), in which she advocates the ethics of friendship in her research. This method is appropriate, especially when dealing with sensitive and intimate research topics, and is based on the principles of interpretivism, feminist research, queer methodologies, activist research, etc., which oppose the myth of value-neutral research (Harding 1991, according to Tillmann-Healy, 2003: 733), the myth of universal truths and other positivistic principles.

In Macedonian society, ethnicity has long been a sensitive and tense topic. The young multi-ethnic society is still very much obsessed with ethnicity in many ways. Here, we will focus on the principles of contestation and defense of ethnic identity, which are still considered critical professional commitments of many Macedonia social sciences and humanities researchers. While different ethnic communities have experienced denials and contestations of their distinctiveness, we promote solidarity as a method instead of passionate expressions of researchers in their scientific argumentation for determining the “true ethnicity” of communities whose members disagree with popular scientific theses about how they should feel. We will illustrate this problem by analyzing the attitude of the Macedonian academic community and the general public towards the Torbeshi.

Keywords: Torbeshi, ethnic identity, methodological nationalism, discrimination.

Introduction

The term “Torbeshi” refers to a part of the local population that speaks Macedonian and has an Islamic religion. Parts of this population have been identified differently throughout history, such as Turks, Albanians, Muslim Macedonians/ Islamized Macedonians. Recently, there has been an initiative to recognize Torbeshi

as a separate ethnic community. There is a consensus among the Macedonian public regarding this issue, as illustrated by the following quote: “TORBESHI ARE MUSLIM MACEDONIANS. PERIOD!” This is also the attitude of a large part of the academic public from Macedonia’s social sciences and humanities. When scientists talk about the “recognition” of the Torbeshi, they manifest the traditional essentialist, positivist, and primordial interpretations of ethnic identity according to which they can comfortably talk about the disintegration of the Macedonian ethno-national entity, dissolution, ethnic construct, etc., in the context of the Torbeshi identity.

In recent years, the negative attitude of the Bulgarian public and a significant part of the Bulgarian scientists regarding the Macedonian ethnic identity has been quite prominent. One of the strongest arguments in this nebulous conflict used by Macedonian scientists is the right to ethnic self-identification, which relies heavily on the feeling of distinctiveness. Thus, scientists are put in a position to defend the ethnic identity of their community, using the right of self-identification as an argument. When they feel the call to talk about a distinct Torbeshi identity, suddenly, this argument is irrelevant, and their efforts are directed towards “scientifically proving” that Torbesh’s identity does not exist. This illustration of the double standards regarding the right of ethnic affiliation by Macedonian science shows that feelings have seriously interfered with scientific arguments. Perhaps promoting solidarity as a method will help us understand how significant and sometimes crucial they are in the scientific treatment of one’s own and other’s ethnic identity.

Interpretations of Islamization: Islamized Macedonians

Islamized Macedonians, Muslim Macedonians, and Torbeshi – these are the most common terms used in Macedonian literature, naming the Macedonian-speaking Muslims. Although there are different interpretations of their origin (see a summary of the various theses in Damjanovski, 2021), science generally agrees that a Slavic population accepted Islam during the rule of the Ottoman Empire. This process in Macedonian literature is branded as *Islamization*, a term that the population it refers to considers problematic. In older literature, Islamization in Macedonia is a dramatic process that started at the beginning of the Ottoman conquests. Emphasis is placed on the violent or coercive dimension of the Islamization process. For example, in older ethnological and folkloristic interpretations of this topic, Islamization is treated as a significant obstacle to the normal development of the “unique culture of the Macedonian people.” It caused drastic ethnic changes, thus breaking the “compact mass” of the Macedonian population, which under constant pressures, attacks, and atrocities of the enslaver, was forced to withdraw and leave the devastated Macedonian settlements (see Vrazhinovski, 1983: 45). The specific position of “Muslim Macedonians” is explained by “Turkish slavery,” which is usually characterized by numerous injustices, repressions and everything that the term “slavery” implies against the Macedonian population: “The five centuries of Turkish slavery over Macedonia, rightly considered a period of the fiercest feudal exploitation, as well as full political and national disenfranchisement (...) a dark period hanging over Macedonia” (Limanoski, 1983: 33).

Religious affiliation, therefore, has a significant place in marking the Macedonian-speaking Muslims. In such circumstances, scientific interpretations often contain extreme qualifications, for example, in the quote that refers to “abandoning the ancestral religion and accepting Mohammedanism” (Konstantinov, 1993: 194). Given the importance of religion, which remains a significant factor in ethnic and national identification in the modern Balkan states, the qualification that they have abandoned their ancestral religion - the organic, original, significant one - means that they have abandoned an essential element of the ethnic essence, they have renounced it to accept Islam. This burden imposed on “Muslim Macedonians” by science, among other factors, does not contribute to the primary mission in this matter (“their return to the Macedonian core”); on the contrary, it risks further distancing. These are just a few illustrations, among many, of how Islamization and the rule of the Ottoman Empire are treated. Such interpretations through education have become very popular and have been shared knowledge by many generations of students from a young age.

On this issue, says Marcin Lubash, a number of researchers in Macedonia feel comfortable making judgments about the identity of Macedonian-speaking Muslims. Some, like Palikrusheva, treat Islam as very important for this population, which makes them a separate ethnic group. Niazi Limanoski, on the other hand, underestimates the role of Islam in identifying them as Macedonians. However, “everyone by the Macedonian national narrative seems to assume that Islam is not part of the Macedonian nation cultural heritage” (Lubash, 2021: 154, 155, footnote 35).

Such interpretations, says Karolina Bielenin-Lenchowska, actually represent a form of symbolic violence that is revealed not only through the terms Islamized Macedonians, Torbeshi, or Poturci but also through the implications for inferiority in their practice of Islam (crypto-Christians). In this way, Muslims are deprived of the power to act according to their will (Bielenin-Lenczowska, 2009: 36).

On the other hand, serious science has opposite interpretations regarding this topic. Even Galaba Palikrusheva, in her doctoral dissertation on “Islamization of the Torbeshi and the formation of the Torbeshi subgroup” written in 1965, says: “We believe that all these findings about the imposition of Islam with fierce calculations and violence are completely unacceptable for the time being because the entire original literature points to Islamization that occurred as a result of, primarily, the economic inequality of the two religions and intensified economic exploitation. The act of accepting Islam itself is carried out voluntarily. This is the case in Bosnia and Albania, as well as in Macedonia” (Palikrusheva, 2016: 150, footnote 38). Dragi Gjorgiev’s research opposes the thesis that Macedonia was Islamized very early and very quickly.

On the contrary, he says that this process in the first two centuries was not dramatic and that until the second half of the 16th century, it did not exist. “Also, for the time being, there is no source confirmation that would imply that the state pursued a meaningful and systematic policy to impose Islam on non-Muslims forcibly” (Gjorgiev, 2017: 76). He also believes that the main reason for Islamization is the economic factor. When it comes to romanticizing Christianity as the original religion of the “Islamized Macedonians,” the following argument is fundamental: “Such conversion from a folk culture and tradition full of beliefs and customs that had the same or similar roots, but which brought privileges

and an easier life, was not so much a matter of belief and conviction in a certain religious dogma, as it was an act of rationality” (Gjorgiev, 2017: 85).

“Disabled” identities: possible causes of fluctuating identity

Niazi Limanoski and others who write in a similar tone about “Muslim Macedonians” put the main emphasis on Islamization, which is why they are also called “Islamized Macedonians.” Seen through this prism, “Muslim Macedonians” are treated as original, former Christians who, at one point in their history, accepted Islam. The ethnic identity of “Muslim Macedonians,” therefore, has a problem caused by Islamization. This is implied by the article “Problems in the ethnic identity of the Islamized Macedonians,” published in *Ethnologist* no. 1 in 1992. Niazi Limanoski writes that ethno-confessional changes among this group of Macedonians have consequences and that these changes stopped the “ethnic development,” so there are obstacles in the “Islamized Macedonians” identity. These qualifications represent the acceptance of Islam at a particular historical moment as a change with exclusively negative features – it creates obstacles in development and consequences. This pluralism still poses a threat and “continues to inhibit the ethnic development of part of the Macedonian people,” stimulating ethnographic changes and “de-ethnicization” of the Macedonian ethnic space. It represents an “alarm for the Macedonian ethnic group,” and in support of this alarm are some subtitles in his article that talk about “Islamization and denationalization” or “Hindered ethnic identity” (Limoski, 1992: 45-57).

Legacy of the Ottoman millet system

The problem with the fluctuating identity of Macedonian-speaking Muslims is often explained as a legacy of the millet system in the Ottoman Empire, according to which religion was the most significant differentiating factor. Even today, in the Balkan context, there is a strong connection between religion and ethnic or national identity (see Poulton, 2000). The millet system divided the large population according to religious affiliation. It caused a significant division, according to which Muslims are a privileged population. All the rest are subject to paying different taxes to the empire because they belong to the category of non-Muslims, i.e., *Raya* (Arko, 2009: 191). Ethnic and linguistic criteria were not a factor in Ottoman society at all (see more in Lubash, 2021: 157-160).

The new Balkan states after the demise of the Ottoman Empire were mainly ethnic states based on the dominant nation. The legacy of the Ottoman millet system can be said to still live on as religion remains an essential differentiating factor (see Poulton, 2000: 52). In circumstances where most Balkan states identify with the Christian religion despite their declarative secularism, the position of Balkan Muslims who speak one of the Slavic languages is somewhat complicated in terms of the “choice of ethnic identity.” For communities that speak Turkish or Albanian, this choice is far more accessible. In contrast, for Muslims who speak Macedonian, the situation turned out to be much more complex, given that language, especially in their case, is treated in science as the most

critical factor in ethnic determination. When language and religious affiliation do not “coincide,” groups among the Macedonian-speaking Muslims identify themselves in different ways: as Turks, Albanians, Muslim Macedonians, and Torbeshi (see Poulton, 2000).

Immediately after the establishment of the Macedonian Republic within Yugoslavia, Galaba Palikrusheva, reviewing the 1953 census, states that in the areas where there is a greater density of Muslim population of Turkish and Albanian ethnicity, for various political reasons, there is constant shifting, i.e. “the number of Muslim Macedonians who declare themselves as Turks is much higher than those who declare themselves Muslim Macedonians” (Palikrusheva, 2016: 62, 66). In Macedonian science, this identification is mainly attributed to the legacy of the Ottoman millet system, according to which equality is made between religious and ethnic affiliation.

The policies of Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia’s policies regarding the collectivization and nationalization of land, women’s emancipation policies, as well as the agreement between the Yugoslav government and the Turkish authorities contributed to the mass emigration of Macedonian-speaking Muslims to Turkey in the 1960s (see Lubash, 2021: 55- 59; Svetieva, 2009, for similar agreements between the Turkish authorities and other Balkan states see Poulton, 2000). Due to the indeterminacy of the Slavic-speaking Muslims within Yugoslavia and due to the propaganda of the great nations for the appropriation of this group, the term Muslims became an ethnic identifier, and in 1981, they were officially recognized as one of the constituent nations of Yugoslavia (Poulton, 2000: 54; Arko, 2009: 192). Despite the precautionary measures of the Communist Party of Macedonia, which stated that Muslims who speak the Macedonian language are Macedonians and do not have a common origin with Muslims in Bosnia, as well as the involvement of some Macedonian scientists in attempts to nationally identify this population (Lubash, 2021: 152, footnote 35), as Sara Arko emphasizes: “‘being a Muslim’ for the Muslims in Planina was a basic identification and they often did not problematize further their national (ethnic) affiliation” (Arko, 2009: 192).

Because parts of this population are identified in different ways, such as Turks, Albanians, Macedonians, and Muslims, in 1979, an intensive propaganda activity began carried out mainly by the organization “Republic’s Community of Cultural and Scientific Manifestations of Muslim Macedonians” under the leadership of the ethnologist Niazi Limanoski. This organization is aimed at the cultural and national revival of the “Muslim Macedonians” or the safe return of the “Islamized” ones to the Macedonian core, i.e., at the discovery or return to the “true Macedonian nationality of the Macedonians with Islamic religion” (Dojchinovski, 1992: 84, 85). Through this process, activists call the state, politics, and science, especially history and ethnology, to account. The scientific texts published in this period concerning “Muslim Macedonians” openly indicate the link between science, politics, and the state, where science provides appropriate interpretations that would help politics integrate this group into the Macedonian population. The tasks of the organization are very indicative of this population’s status in Macedonian society. They

suggest that “Muslim Macedonians” were not emancipated and nationally recognized until that moment, that they should reveal themselves as Macedonians even though they follow Islam, that they were not sufficiently integrated, that they had psychological traumas from the past, had age-old complexes of lesser value, were humiliated and insufficiently involved in the construction of Macedonia (see Dojchinovski, 1992: 86). The views of this organization are reflected in the ethnological and folkloristic texts published in this period, so it can be said that there is a long-term consensus in Macedonian ethnology on this issue that follows this line. In this period, there is a lack of capacity in science to consider the problem of “Muslim Macedonians” as a process. At the expense of this deficiency, advocacy is practiced in an activist and propaganda manner that places scientists in the position of experts for determining “true” ethnicity in situations when some of the members of the specific ethnic community do not agree with their expert assessment (see more in Ashtalkovska Gajtanoska, 2021: 153-181; Lubash, 2021: 151-155; Arko, 2009: 196-198).

Ohrid Framework Agreement

The conflict between Albanian armed groups and Macedonian security forces was resolved with the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001, which was another significant event for the Macedonian-speaking Muslims’ identity determination. The Ohrid Framework Agreement carries “the principle of proportional representation of ethnic communities in all public institutions, and this has become a framework at all levels” (Lubash, 2021: 305). Since the Albanian minority is the most numerous, it certainly has the greatest privileges according to this agreement. Precisely because of this, the criticisms of the Framework Agreement refer to the institutionalization of binationality of the Macedonian state, and in a legal sense, the ethnic divisions in Macedonia have been institutionalized (Lubash, 2021: 307) instead of being overcome. In the 2002 census, the majority of the villagers from a western Macedonian village that Sara Arko researched declared themselves as ethnic Albanians, sparking discussions about the “Albanization of Torbeshi” (Arko, 2009: 193-196). Again, their current changing identification in favor of the Albanian community in Macedonia is treated as a survival strategy in assuming the identity that prospers best in the “market” (see Arko, 2009: 195).

The tradition of fluctuating ethnic identification of Macedonian-speaking Muslims can be explained by what Eriksen calls ethnic anomalies, i.e., communities considered “neither-nor” or “both-and,” depending on the situation or the broader context. Especially in the contemporary Macedonian society, in which ethnicity and political affiliation are prerequisites for the realization of individuals and communities, the “neither-nor” position can be unbearable: “In a social environment when one is expected to have a well-defined ethnic identity, it may be psychologically and socially difficult to ‘bett on two horses’” (Eriksen, 2010: 74, 75). On the other hand, in different contexts, ethnic anomalies can use this position to their advantage.

Torbeshi as a separate ethnic community – public reactions

The policy that was established owing to the Ohrid Framework Agreement implies that individuals must belong to ethnic communities or appropriate political parties to be realized in Macedonian society. Different ethnic communities have their ethnic political parties that should represent their interests (see more in the analysis of politics and cultural diversity in independent Macedonia by Lubash, 2021: 299-356). This atmosphere motivated the emergence of the political party PEI (Party for European Integration) in 2005, which promoted and supported the introduction of Torbeshi as a separate ethnic community in the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia. Until then, people were careful when using Torbeshi, which was considered offensive due to specific popular interpretations of its origin. However, now this term should represent the ethnic group of Macedonian-speaking Muslims. In 2011, the “Torbeshi Declaration” was promoted with the support of the Torbeshi Cultural and Scientific Center - Rumelia and the Party for European Integration. This declaration aims to promote the ethnogenesis of the Torbeshi minority (their different origins compared to the Macedonians and Albanians, with the main emphasis on the Bogomils in Western Macedonia) and to promote the demands this minority puts before the state. The president of the Torbeshi Cultural and Scientific Center - Rumelia, Sherif Ajradinoski, stated that this population is regularly abused by other ethnic communities and by various political parties. Their recognition as a separate ethnic community will result in more of the population declaring itself Torbeshi, “so we will be able to get a bigger share of the state privileges; that is our right.” “There are special quotas for ethnic employment in the Republic of Macedonia; everyone should be fairly represented in the public administration. Although these people are declared as Albanians, Turks, and some Macedonians, they have no place in the public administration. We believe that about 150 thousand inhabitants in Macedonia are Torbeshi. If the public administration is 130 thousand, then seven or eight thousand employees follow. When you go to the public administration, you can count on your fingers how many people from this ethnic group have managed to get a job. Our goal is to prevent emigration, for these people to feel that this country is theirs, and to find their place in the public administration, all structures of the state, and the whole society. Now, they are used for voting and rejected to fill in a number somewhere, after which they are forgotten. Our goal is to no longer be forgotten citizens, to be part of this society, as the most loyal, indigenous people in Macedonia, and we should be part of this society, stay here and exercise our rights” (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 11.1.2011).

The Union of Macedonians with Islamic religion first appeared with reactions and soon after organized a forum on the topic “Macedonians with Islamic religion - between national and religious affiliation .” This forum received much scientific support from the institutions that cover the so-called “national scientific disciplines”: “The forum was organized by the Institute of National History, the Institute of Macedonian Language ‘Krste Misirkov,’ the Institute of Folklore ‘Marko Cepenkov,’ the Institute of Macedonian Literature, the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, the Institute for Old Slavic Culture and the Macedonian Ethnological Society” (Makedonska nacija, 23.2.2011) (see also Arko, 2009: 198-200; Lubash, 2021: 330-336).

These requirements have been strengthened again recently through the current political demands of the Republic of Bulgaria to include the Bulgarian minority in the Preamble of the Republic of North Macedonia Constitution as a condition to continue the European integration of the country. PEI says that the Torbeshi are the third largest minority in Macedonia and that the non-recognition of their uniqueness implies a great injustice towards this population. At the last census in 2021, 4174 people were registered as Torbeshi. Although this number is greater than the one of the Bulgarians, the Torbeshi will not enter the Preamble of the Constitution as a separate ethnic community (Kostov, A1on, 30.5.2023).

Along with the reactions of the associations, there are usually intense responses in the media of various social sciences and humanities profiles that oppose this tendency and warn about the damages and consequences of the Torbeshi recognition as a separate ethnic community. As a summary of the common reactions to this issue, there is a quote from the column of a linguist and expert on cultural heritage protection in the newspaper Nova Makedonija, who states as follows: “Macedonians with a Muslim religion are Macedonians and nothing else! They are an integral and inseparable part of the Macedonian people. They are brothers by blood with Orthodox Macedonians” (Jordanoski, Nova Makedonija, 20.4.2023).

A few famous and recognized Macedonian scientists with high titles in Macedonian academic institutions also shared public backlash. According to these reactions, Torbeshi’s demands are treated as disintegrative processes “aimed at the Macedonian people, turning them from a dominant constituent nation of the Republic of Macedonia into one of the many ethnic communities, which, in the end, will be further subjected to political, economic, financial, media, psychological and other absurd pressures in order to ‘proactively’ convert into something else - something that they are not and have never been.” Attempts at ethnic identification of parts of this population still represent a danger for the Macedonian people. It is exciting that these initiatives are almost regularly attributed to other external influences aimed at harming the Macedonian people. According to the modern notions of ethnicity and nation, they cannot be based on religious affiliation, and this argument, in the end, nevertheless, identifies the Torbeshi as an arbitrary ethnic construct: “Religion must not be turned into a divisive factor (disintegrative factor) of the Macedonian people, on the contrary. (...) It is sad to see how a recognizable part of the Macedonian people is being transformed, arbitrarily, with the help of inappropriate development and other policies, into an ethnic construct” (Kjulavkova, Nova Makedonija, 31.3.2023).

The vocal and passionate scholars who react in this way in public to Torbeshi’s ethnic identification have no sense of what Eriksen is saying: “Although contrasting ethnic classifications and bounded identities may seem tidy on paper (and in native theory, including national statistics!) they are more complicated and knotty in actual societies (...) We should nevertheless keep in mind that ethnic identities are flexible to a highly varying degree. The fact that they are socially constructed does not imply that they are not real and can thus easily be done away with. Money is a social construct too, as is language” (Eriksen, 2010: 77, 78).

Methodological nationalism in continuity

The research of the dominant expressions in ethnology and folkloristics in some of the most representative journals from the second half of the 20th century shows strong ethnocentric tendencies of almost all authors who wrote about Macedonian-speaking Muslims. Their interpretations are based on primordial essentialist approaches, according to which ethnicity is a fixed condition dependent on heredity and blood, both figuratively and literally. Given the positivist orientation of Macedonian science, according to which researchers from these disciplines are convinced that they are dealing with science in the strict sense of the word, they treat scientific conclusions as infallible, evidence-based, and objective. In the circumstances when the feelings of a particular ethnic community do not correspond to the established “scientific” theses about ethnicity, science does not reconsider its approaches, but, remaining consistent with its positions, the scientific activity is gradually and in the end very directly diverted into activist, political, propaganda activity. These activities aim to convince people and communities that their beliefs and feelings about their ethnicity are wrong. This practice of propaganda activities supported (and sometimes even initiated) by science best reflects the treatment of “Muslim Macedonians,” “Islamized Macedonians,” or “Torbeshi.” The terminology used in these propaganda wars to win over the population, and here I do not mean only the extremely problematic terms used by Macedonian propaganda, “Muslim Macedonians” or “Islamized Macedonians.” However, those terms that call for revival, those that subtly or very directly stigmatize this population, which supposedly deviated from the right path, are also a precise illustration of the problem of science about this issue. The ease with which scientists talk about Torbeshi’s confusion, non-integration, complexes, denationalization, self-destruction, renationalization, and the like indicates the severe problem of science about this issue, which it has not managed to reexamine until today (see Ashtalkovska Gajtanoska, 2021: 153- 181).

There is a lasting continuity in science regarding the treatment of this population. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the same tone as the one of the public reactions on the initiative about the separate Torbeshi ethnic community is also found in published scientific works dealing with this issue. Here, we will consider several points from the article “Macedonians of Islamic Religion in the Context of Identity Theories” by academician Katica Kjulavkova, published in the “European Scientific Journal” in 2018. Already in the abstract, it is announced that the point of the article is to confirm that Macedonians with Islamic religion are part of the Macedonian social, cultural, and religious reality and, therefore, they should be recognized as a specific cultural-religious community within the Macedonian national entity. The interesting point that has to do with the paradoxes regarding the treatment of “one’s own” and “other’s” ethnic identity is that this issue is treated as very important in the modern context in which the Macedonian identity itself is problematized and relativized (Kulavkova, 2018: 105). The article illustrates, quite well, the principle according to which research can be distorted by the researcher’s inability to distance her/himself from proximity to the nation while generalizing about the social world and idealizing how it can become more just (Vasilev, 2019: 503).

The arguments in the article say that in the Macedonian context in recent history, the decisive identity factors are mostly language and religion, giving the language a

primary place in this particular case, which becomes synonymous with the Macedonian ethno-cultural identity or “In one word, the Macedonian language had grown into the *territory or home of identity*” (Kulavkova, 2018: 106, footnote 12). Therefore, insisting on a separate Torbeshi ethnic identity loses all sense when they speak Macedonian. Against such convictions, it is helpful to note that even in the time of nationalism, language implies the well-known ideological functions of nurturing collective ties and maintaining political communities. It is a period in which the language entered the nationalization process (see Vasilev, 2019: 517). Therefore, the thesis about language as a “territory or home of identity” in the context of ethnic identity is a feature of methodological nationalism.

In addition to language, culture is the second factor that allows us to make “expert assessments” about the “true” identity of Torbeshi. The article argues that while there are parts of Macedonians who are reserved in terms of civil or national identity, they cannot be like that when it comes to the Macedonian ethno-cultural identity, i.e., its ethnogenesis, language, cultural traditions, customs, collective memories... (Kulavkova, 2018: 108, 109). Again, at this point, it is appropriate to emphasize that identifying culture and ethnicity is a feature of methodological nationalism. Culture can include beliefs, rites, art, ceremonies, language, gossip, stories, and rituals of everyday life (Swidler, 1986: 273, according to Vasilev, 2019: 514), while identity is an aspect of the relationship (Eriksen, 2002: 34, 36, 37, according to Vasilev, 2019: 514). This means that a specific identity exists as long as its bearers distinguish themselves from others and are recognized by others as different. Maintaining this analytical distinction allows us to understand the continuity of ethnic and national identity as a continuity of self-determination and to understand the continuity of culture as a continuity of beliefs and practices because there is nothing that is ethnically and nationally characteristic of a given culture (Vasilev, 2019: 514). The article contains the thesis about the responsibility of “foreign” propaganda to this population, but it cannot refer to the propaganda that originates from one’s backyard. According to the author, “...individual and group/collective self-determination entered the social (and theoretical) scene and transformed from an optimal civil option (the human right to free self-determination and self-identification) to a factor that stimulates the creation of some *imaginary* or *imagined*’ communities” (Kulavkova, 2018: 112). Benedict Anderson’s term, in this case, should be read in its literal meaning because these small, relatively isolated, “imagined” (i.e., fictional) ethno-religious communities that are subject to intense political and economic pressures set out their identity, and are based on unsustainable historical arguments, on biased self-perception and manifest some elements of ethnonationalism as well (Kulavkova, 2018: 113). In order to confirm this thesis, the article directly confronts the myths about the origin of the Torbeshi, i.e., it “scientifically” argues their weaknesses. For example, the names of the ancestors of the Islamicized Macedonians are Slavic; linking Islam with the Bogomils also does not hold, given that the Bogomils are not an autonomous ethnic community but a social movement; there is no written document that the term “Torbeshi” dates back to the 10th century; the Torbeshi language is Macedonian, which also contains old Church Slavonic words (!), and the numerous expressions related to Islamic practice are not enough to differentiate the Torbeshi language; ethnographic research confirms the similarity between the folk customs of Macedonians and Macedonians with Islamic religion. Despite the differences, which according to the author are additional, secondary, and mainly religious, which

have affected the worldview, still religious rituals, the moral code, the modification of the inherited ethnographic symbols of the costumes, houses, customs, etc... verify that they are de facto Macedonians (Kulavkova, 2018: 115, 116, 118). Again, it is essential to contrast these theses with those criticizing methodological nationalism. Vasilev argues why it is wrong to claim that some of today's nations existed as ethnic communities before the era of nationalism. To claim that humans have stable and uniform characteristics is unfair to the fluid and multifaceted nature of social relations. When making choices about how to generalize and analyze these issues, we need to keep in mind that the process will always be imperfect and can always be contested, and therefore, we must not seek unifying concepts that will encompass all complexities of empirical reality (Vasilev, 2019: 517, 518, 519). Emphasizing this general point is essential, especially in circumstances that have the potential to lead us to such interpretations. Thus, we see that researchers' feelings essentially guide these interpretations and are, therefore, an illustration of the exclusively subjective nature of the research. They also illustrate the difficulties in overcoming these subjectivities in the Macedonian academic community that deals with identity issues despite attempts to promote them as scientifically objective. This type of "scientific objectivity" should finally be called into question.

Ethnocentric articles that still rely on outdated assumptions regarding the objective attributes of ethnic identification continue today, producing great confusion regarding the message they should send in terms of inclusive treatment of the different while stigmatizing them. That is why we still see and read how radical "scientific" discrimination against Torbeshi is confidently expressed. "The unspoken premise in the thinking of these scholars who decide on the collective identity of Macedonian-speaking followers of Islam is what Rudometoff calls 'national narratives' that are an integral part of specific nationalist ideologies" (Lubash, 2021: 154, footnote 35).

While talking about the inclusiveness of the "Islamized Macedonians," in fact, their direct exclusion occurs, first through the naming but also other terminology used in the article. The choice of terminology has strong ethno-national connotations, and the heterogeneity of the categories it analyzes is not represented. Instead, people are presented as homogeneous groups (Vasilev, 2019: 519-20). Vasilev, in his article that refers to methodological nationalism, wonders how it is possible for texts that are burdened in this way, shaped by the opinions and beliefs that circulate in the broader public sphere, to pass reviews in prestigious journals and be published, so that nationalism in research passes unnoticed and thus distorts the knowledge of the past (Vasilev, 2019: 500).

Solidarity as a method in the scientific interpretations regarding Torbeshi

Since the formation of the Macedonian state within Yugoslavia, many Macedonian-speaking Muslims have not shared the Macedonian ethnic identity, as suggested by

scientific and popular literature. Already in 1965, Galaba Palikrusheva stated that after the Second World War, the Macedonian-speaking Muslims were characterized by “ethnic undifferentiation,” “ethnic indeterminacy,” and “difficulties in national determination” of this population (Palikrusheva, 2016: 61-66). It is evident that science’s ignoring this long-standing trend is tendentious. Researchers do not have the necessary reflexivity to avoid the overlap with ideology in their research in which methodological nationalism directs their research plans and produces wrong knowledge (Vasilev, 2019: 501). Instead of quoting and paraphrasing over and over the books and articles with established theses about the origin and “real” Macedonian ethnicity of this population (as it is done for example by Sharevski, 2015), it would be productive for a change to listen to their individual life stories, their interpretations and finally their feelings about this topic or as one of Marcin Lubash’s interlocutors says: “...if I feel that we are different why is it still said that we are the same!” (Lubash, 2021: 333).

A young man’s family members traditionally identify as Turks. He identifies as a Turk despite his dilemmas over the question of origin. His grandfather did not want to hear about the identification of “Muslim Macedonians,” even less about “Islamized Macedonians.” During the conflict in 2001, his family was a victim of the Macedonian protesters who, angry at the Albanians, burned and destroyed property because they failed to distinguish between Muslims. This family’s drama further contributed to the resistance towards Macedonian identity. He quite nicely illustrates the status of this population: “So where should we go? I have thought about that (...) and am very affected by it... wherever we live, they do not want us here. If we go to the Macedonian environment, we will be Shiptari for them. For these, we will be Macedonian ‘kauri,’ as they call it. Where should we go? So I always wonder what we should do. Where should we go? We cannot go there... (...) And here we are, somewhat second-rate Turks. Moreover, here we are, something else. Eh! No matter where you go, we do not know which end or road to take. (...) Where are we? What are we? Come on, someone give me... There is no answer to this matter. No answer. If we keep talking about it all day, there is no answer. What are we? We are nothing. I do not know what we are. You are nobody and nothing to everyone.”

To live with such feelings is certainly not easy. This position can justifiably cause this population to be a “potential minority,” as Lubash calls it (Lubash, 2021: 45). He says that among this population, there is a strongly expressed feeling of discrimination in continuity: “If there is one issue on which Muslims, regardless of national self-identification and political sympathies, agree on, it is the feeling of discrimination” (Lubash, 2021: 339).

The Macedonian ethnic community also has long-term experiences with discrimination on various grounds. In the modern and independent Republic of Macedonia, there is a need to prove and highlight the Macedonian identity inside Macedonia and towards the neighbors. Vesna Stankovic Pejanovic says this in her article entitled “The ‘Disputed’ Identity of Macedonia.” She says that Macedonia is still in the process of creating the identity of its independent state and that this process is tied not only to the challenges imposed by sub-national identities in the state (the Albanians in Macedonia) but also to the significant place of Macedonia as a subject in international relations, and the need to prove Macedonian identity to neighboring nations is especially strong

(Stanković Pejanović, 2011: 472). Neighboring nations throughout history disputed various aspects of Macedonian identity: name, church, language, people, etc. In recent years, Macedonians had to go through some dramatic experiences in this sense, starting with the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001, through the final agreement to resolve the Macedonian-Greek name dispute and strategic partnership, signed in 2018 (Prespa agreement), according to which the name of the state was changed in the Republic of North Macedonia; until the Treaty of friendship, good-neighborliness and cooperation between the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of Macedonia signed in 2017. There are still very intense and conflicting discussions in the public, which several Bulgarian politicians and intellectuals imposed regarding the denial of Macedonian ethnic identity, language, problematization of historical narratives, etc. These denials cause frustration among the public and scientists who rightly react to the senseless disputes, which practically limit the state's realization of its European integration. Human rights and the right to self-identification are the most common arguments used by the Macedonian side in these disputes. Unfortunately, these rights are not an argument when discussing someone else's self-identification. Therefore, it is interesting in the context of the topic to see how the same individuals - scientists react when they have to "defend" the Macedonian identity, compared to their reactions regarding the potential Torbeshi identity. Several quotes from the media with the reactions of academician Katica Kjulavkova, who is also very active about the identity disputes between the "Macedonian and Bulgarian sides," illustrate this duality:

"Ethnic affiliation is a matter of personal, collective and sovereign will, consciousness and tradition, and not a consequence of administrative pressures" (Kjulavkova, Vesnik, 20.6.2022).

"Academician Kjulavkova said today that there is no goal that can justify the means, which are contrary to everything provided for in international law, and that means giving up the legitimate right to self-determination and interpretation of one's history" (Djundeveva, 24 Vesti, 8.10.2021).

"We, as Macedonians, have the right to our interpretation of our identity, history, evolution, and factography. We allow a plurality of interpretations, which means that we also appeal to our right to interpret historical facts and cultural heritage" (Miloshevski, Infomaks, 8.12.2021).

"Neither the similarities nor the differences between the languages and cultures of the South Slavic peoples must be a reason for mutual negation, bidding, and political blackmail" (Arsoska, Večer, 24.7.2022).

It turns out that the "passionate research" of these issues expresses the researchers' hurt feelings. Such "group-centrism" of these scientific interpretations is morally problematic (...). In this sense, we should think about those who will feel the consequences of our activities, that our interest can hurt others, and that such a negative impact can sometimes be the goal when we treat others as a threat that needs to be controlled (Vasilev, 2015: 4). In contrast, "solidarity implies that people think and act

with a sense of the interests of others” (Vasilev, 2015: 9). Regardless of the theoretical and methodological positions or perhaps precisely because of them, it is good to always keep in mind the famous saying that states: Do not do to others what you do not want to be done to you! Therefore, governments, social scientists, and philosophers must devote significant attention to understanding and promoting solidarity (Vasilev, 2015: 5).

Conclusion

The treatment of Macedonian-speaking Muslims in the Macedonian academic community is an indication of methodological nationalism when dealing with ethnicity. In this sense, a significant gap is noticeable when Macedonian scholars discuss the ethnic identity they belong to on the one hand and when they discuss other ethnic identities on the other hand. Several researchers still react and write very emotionally regarding the initiatives to recognize a distinct Torbesh identity. Such interpretations follow the principles of methodological nationalism, and they further discriminate against this community instead of studying it. Therefore, rather than following the processes and considering the reasons for the changing identity of this community throughout history, researchers remain dedicated to “proving the real” Macedonian ethnicity, constantly repeating the same established theses from the past on this issue. Instead of treating ethnic identity as a dynamic category, it is treated as innate, essential, and fixed over time. This methodological position allows professionals from the so-called national disciplines to reliably reach the “truth” without problematizing positivist positions that cover many subjective needs of the authors. Thus, when comparing the statements of the same authors put in a position to defend the identity to which they belong and to challenge that of the Torbeshi, it is evident that feelings have been seriously involved in these situations. Because in the Macedonian context, we have a long-term experience with contestation and discrimination on various grounds when it comes to these issues, especially when it comes to the Macedonian ethnic community, it might be easier if we refer to these experiences when we think of contesting and discriminating the other under the cloak of alleged “scientific objectivity.” Solidarity as a method can help to avoid double standards on this issue.

The political climate in the country has been in crisis for a long time due to disputes over various aspects of Macedonian identity (name, church, people, language, etc.). This is followed by the long-term tradition of methodological nationalism as an approach in social sciences and humanities, which in the current critical identity turmoil is reinforced by inertia instead of being problematized. It certainly spills over to all levels of education and creates an almost closed circle of reproducing the same theses. In such protracted crisis circumstances, the budget allocated to scientific research is continuously one of the lowest in Europe, which is also a significant indicator of the opportunities given to researchers to advance and follow trends. Precisely because of these objective circumstances that justify the scientific interpretations that are based on methodological nationalism, solidarity as a method offers the possibility of an easier way out of these traps.

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