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REGION OF PRESPA AMONG THREE COUNTRIES

Abstract: According to its historical and cultural past and the way of its' reflection toward the future the region of Prespa becomes one of the most interesting regions in Macedonia. Its heritage belongs to three neighbouring countries that cause hardship, but in the same time it opens possibilities.

Key words: Prespa Region, borders, name dispute, cross-border cooperation, cultural tourism.

Introduction

After 1990's and after the fall of the socialist system a lot of political changes happened in South and South East Europe. Several new independent states appeared on the Balkan scene. All of them had their own political, economic or social issues that had to be solved if they wanted to become members of the EU² family. There were also questions about historic and ethnic legacy that some of this countries shared. This processes brought to sight the differences and inequalities that existed between the member states and the countries that were supposed to become EU members. The questions about historic and ethnic legacy are the most sensitive and probably most difficult to be solved, so the expansion of EU brought to the sight many more of this long suppressed questions and border issues as: minorities, language, ethnicity etc.

Although some of these issues are too difficult to be solved by politicians and the well known political means, they are too important for the local population to be left a side. When people in the cross - border region share same natural and cultural wealth that can be put in use of the economic, cultural, tourist or other purposes, and if people from the both sides of the border can see benefit of it, it will be much easier to accomplish and solve some of the “political” issues. This is especially important when this issues influence their economic prosperity, so people try to overcome them, by undertaking some local initiatives.

The main idea of this paper is to show the case of Prespa region which is divided between three neighbouring countries: Republic of Macedonia, Republic of Greece

¹ NU “Institute and museum” – Bitola.

² European Union.

and the Republic of Albania and where some of the political obstacles and political issues were at least partly overcome by involvement and efforts of the civil or NGO³ sector.

Natural and geographic characteristic

Although the natural and geographical characteristics of the region might seem unimportant or irrelevant at first sight, it is of an extreme importance to be mentioned in order to understand the complexity of the region and complexity of its situation.

The region of Prespa is situated in the south-west part of the Balkan and it spreads in an altitude between 800 - 900 meters. It consists of three parts: Lower Prespa, Upper Prespa and Small Prespa. Two highest tectonic lakes in the Balkan: Big Prespa Lake and Small Prespa Lake are located in the centre of the region.

The border shifted in 1912/13 divided the majority Macedonian population in the region of Prespa, together with both lakes, between three neighbouring countries: Serbia, Greece and Albania. This situation remained in force even after the Second World War, or even after the constitution of the common state Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia.

According to this division Upper Prespa and one part of Lower Prespa as well as the biggest part of the Big Prespa Lake are in the political borders of the Republic of Macedonia. The other part of Lower Prespa, one part of the Big Prespa Lake and part of Small Prespa Lake are in the political border of the Republic of Greece while the Small Prespa region and the rest of the Big and Small Prespa Lake are in the political borders of the Republic of Albania.

All together there are four islands in these two lakes. Two of them are located into the Big Prespa Lake and two islands are located into the Small Prespa Lake. The island of Golem Grad, also known as a "Snake Island", located in Big Prespa Lake belongs to Macedonia. Islands of Ahil and Vidrinec in the Small Prespa Lake belong to Greece and the island of Mal Grad in the Big Prespa Lake belongs to Albania.

Lot of unique and endemic species of flora and fauna inhabits the region which adds one more value to it.

Historic context

According to the archaeological findings it can be concluded that this region has a very long, interesting and rich history that goes further back to Neolithic time. Because of its geographic location, good climate, natural wealth etc. during its existence it used to be a battlefield of a different armies and different interests.

All this events had their distinct outcome that influenced population in a different ways, but yet one of the most important and tragic situation started to unwind with the fall of one of the greatest powers in this part of the world, at the end of 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire.

After the defeat of the Turkish armies at the beginning of the 20th century, it comes to the complete reshaping of the political map, at least concerning this part of Europe.

³ Non Government Organizations.

Namely some of the European countries as Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania etc, appeared as ancestors (Мазовер 2003: 5) of the newly “liberated” territories.

Some of these countries especially Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece claimed their rights over the Macedonian territories showing that the population in Macedonia consists of Turks, Bulgarians, Serbs, Greeks, Albanian and Vlachs (Језерник 2002: 36; Трайчевъ 1923:57-58; Кънчов 1970: 426). This situation was a result of the previous “researches” from which derives the number and ethnic origin of the population.

But again we have to emphasize that this data always and without exceptions were determined by the origin of the author or in accordance with the states that needed this type of “researches” and used this type of statistical data.

In this context Jezernik would ironically conclude that according to the statistical data of the neighboring Balkan countries there are no Macedonians in Macedonia, or according to the orders for each of the authors of this data majority population would be consisted of population of the government that ordered the “researches” (Језерник 2002: 37).

Without any pretension to discuss the ethnic origin, identity or the ethnic structure of the population in the region this data simply shows the aspiration of the neighbouring countries or their European protectors over the Macedonian territory and population. However these events preceded the events that happened after the end of the Balkan Wars in 1913. With the Bucharest Treaty in 1913 (Стојчев 2000: 570 - 578, Rossos 1994) Macedonia as well as Prespa region was divided between three countries. The appearance of the border lines has been a result of the aspirations and pretensions of the political and technical appearance of the defining border lines without any logical or even less ethnic basis. Namely in this case it is of a great importance to emphasize that the border lines are not “natural” like it is usually a case when the border follows the natural lines of the mountain hills, rivers or any other natural border. In this case the border is shifted trough the cultivated fields of the local population and it goes trough the lake waters separating “artificially” and “imaginary” the region itself.

Appointing and drawing of the border lines in Prespa doesn’t necessary refer to the historical injustice but in this case, it refers more to the economic and social impact that this action had in the past and whose consequences are still felt today, more than a 100 years later.

Because of this we might say that the way the border lines in Prespa were appointed on one hand was very interesting but on the other hand it was very tragic.

Namely, according to the information of the elderly people⁴ from the region, in the period of the Balkan Wars (1912 - 1913), today’s bordering villages were “visited” by different “commissions” consisted of foreign diplomats. They were going in the village centres where they would gather local children. Then they would throw different metal coins to them in order to see which coins they would chose. Of course depending of the closest bigger town markets, and according to the fact in which of the neighbouring towns or countries (Greece or Albania) the local population use to go to buy or sell goods those types of money children would recognize and pick.

⁴ Fieldwork research, village of Konjsko 2008.

Afterwards, according to the “free” assumption, this “commission” decided where to set the border line, of course without taking any concern of the ethnic and cultural characteristic of the population, nor the economic impact that this action might have.

Unserious, insubstantial and rather inconsiderable way of the whole border shifting process might be seen through some cases. Even though these examples were almost meaningless compared to the final epilogue of the situation, yet the way that the population managed to influence the commission’s decisions and gain some more land for them goes in addition to the previously mentioned facts about the insubstantiality and frivolousness of these decisions.

That was also the case with the appointing of the border line near the village of Dolno Dupeni on the Macedonian - Greek border. The commission consisted of foreign diplomats, after the conversation and “negotiations” with one of the villagers⁵, “decided” to “move” the border line for a few kilometres, providing the villagers the opportunity to use their own fields, which previously were supposed to be adjoined to the political borders of Greece. As a sign of gratitude the main “negotiator” from the village of Dolno Dupeni gave his horse as a gift to the commission members⁶.

With this kind of appointing of the border line whole families remained divided between two countries and the border became an instrument for separation.

For a shorter period of time, during the period between two World Wars, these border lines were still easily penetrable and not yet formal because the population could easily pass the border line by using their personal and family documents or the border permits especially issued only for the population from the border region (Ристески 2006: 30 - 31, Bumci 2004: 17).

But as the political situations inside Albania and Greece changed after 1948-49, the borders were completely closed. From that period they became impenetrable and militarized (Светиева 2006: 15; Ристески 2006: 32). Armies were set on both sides of the borders and any communication of the people across the border was disabled and totally forbidden. Families again remained divided without a chance to see or communicate with each other.

The situation profoundly changed. Population that remained in Albania was suppressed for a long period of time without basic human rights to declare their ethnicity or to use their own language. Personal names and their last names were changed into the new alternated Albanian form (Светиева 2009). Even Macedonian toponyms of the villages and places were changed into Albanian ones.

Events with the so called “Informbirou” negatively reflected on the Macedonians in these bordering regions where they already had some national rights. After 1948 situation had changed and all the Macedonians schools in Albania were closed (Ристески 2006: 33)

⁵ Because of the fact that some of the villagers had previously worked and leaved in USA for several years and they knew and understand English, the conversation among the involved parties (commission members and the villagers) was lead in English. According to that the rest of the population that used to work in USA even though it was not directly involved in the “negotiations” could easily understand and witness for the dialog that it was lead.

⁶ Field research village of Dolno Dupeni 2008, Sonja K. Delevska, VEST godina: 8 Broj: 2404 Sabota 6/21/2008.

Only one small part of Macedonians, those living in Small Prespa, had their basic right to study in their elementary schools learning from Albanian books translated into Macedonian language (Светиева 2009).

Albanian intellectuals with Macedonian ethnic origin explained this situation as a privilege of Small Prespa, because of the fact that important members of the former Communist Party as Koci Dzoze, Pandi Christo and others were Macedonians from Small Prespa and Koci Dzoze after Enver Hodza was the second important man in the state. It is considered as their credit that in the villages of Small Prespa after 1948 remained and continued to work the local teacher Nikola Peroski and to teach the Macedonian children on Macedonian language (Светиева 2009).

New Albanian teachers were brought to the bordering regions where Macedonian population lived. Unfortunately they could not teach the children because they didn't know the Macedonian language and the children spoke only Macedonian. So the authorities decided to educate local teachers who can teach in Albanian through explanations in Macedonian language. That situation has remained almost unchanged till today (Светиева 2009).

Another thing that is very important to be said about this situation is that the Macedonian population leaving in the region of Small Prespa is officially recognized as Macedonian minority (Фетаху 2006: 52-53), but yet the region still functions like a "minority reservation" because as soon as the Macedonian minority resettle or migrate to some other place - city or village in Albania, they would lose every minority right to proclaim themselves as Macedonians.

Situation in Albania started to change after the fall of the regime of the president Enver Hodxa in the beginning of the 90s of the 20th century. A lot of efforts were made but finally the Macedonians regained some of their basic rights. One of the most important things was reopening of the border in the Prespa region in 1992. With the opening of the border a lot of people came to see their families for the first time after many years so at this time the border became the point of bonding. From this point on for many of the people the common past started to change into the common future.

Bad economic situation in Albania influenced economic migrations of one part of its population towards Macedonia. Especially male population started to enter Macedonia and look for work. Macedonians from Small Prespa are wide known as a hard working people so at the beginning they usually worked at the fields. Some of the workers are very skilful builders that still cherish the old building techniques using stones or wood as a main building materials as it was in the past, so most of them started to work as builders renewing the old or building completely new houses.

This free flow of work force was eased because there were no language barriers and the workers from Small Prespa were communicating with the people in Macedonia in their own Macedonian language. Relations between the family members of the population coming from Small Prespa were very strong so the workers helped a lot in the improvement of the economic situation of their families by the remittances that they were fetching or sending during their work in Macedonia.

At the beginning of the 90's of the 20th century the workers coming from Small Prespa were considered as a cheap labour - power, but as the time passed by situation changed to better and new possibilities were opened to this population. Improved economic situation of the people initiated development of bordering region which already

started to change, reshape and create optimism that in the future it will become an economic centre that can use the opportunities and advantages of the closeness of the border.

Common culture, language and tradition, had impact on other aspect of life especially the social life of people from the region. Lot of young women came and got married in Macedonia. Even though this tradition of intermarriages was not new because in the past the marriages between the people from these neighbouring regions or villages were part of their everyday life, the revival of this old tradition had a little bit different appearance in present situation.

In the first place this of course refers to the fact that one part of these marriages was also encouraged⁷ by better economic situation of the population leaving in Macedonia. Not only the life of the individuals changed with the opening of the border but the lives of whole families changed too. Some of the workers and builders from villages in Small Prespa, Albania, that in the past 10 - 15 years were living and working in Macedonia, are now settled in some of the villages in Prespa or other regions in Macedonia and they are bringing all their families with them.

Situation concerning Prespa region in political borders of Greece was little bit different. Due to the similar situation and events that happened after the Second World War in Greece as well as in Albania the names of the places as well as the last names of the Macedonian population were changed.

So instead of the last letters “ski” in the last names of the individuals they would add the letters “os” or “is” (Мазовер 2003: 155), so the names would have a Greek appeal. This way they tried to “cut” every connection that they have with their past and their origins.

Complete closing of all contacts and communications was encompassed by the closure of the border pass Markova Noga in Prespa. Even though this border crossing was not the official one, it surely functioned like one in the past, because people in the region were using it in their mutual everyday communication (Јембо 1996: 213). After the Civil war in Greece in 1946 - 49 the border line with Macedonia in Prespa region was completely closed. Previous communication, economic (developed trade relations etc.) and social (visiting, intermarriages etc.) stopped again. The population living in Prespa region was quite isolated not only from their own families in Macedonia but from the other regions in Greece as well.

Complexity of the situation as well as the closure of the border partly influenced the changes in traditional culture. For decades this region was under populated and military sensitive area, so anyone who wanted to visit Prespa region, had to have a special permission by the Greek authorities⁸

The local population leaved without basic human rights to declare their ethnicity, language and partly restricted freedom of movement. Because all of this, the region was in a very bad economic situation and it was one of the poorest regions in Greece, in spite of all its beauty and natural richness. Then during the 70s of the 20th century, the situation started to gradually change. The region started to be promoted as a tourist destination and started to develop. Especially in the last decade by using some of the European grants and funds, that Greece as one of the oldest member states in EU had a chance and possi-

⁷ Fieldwork research.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Prespa (accessed 13/07/09).

bilities to use, a lot of villages started to be revitalized. Houses and the villages infrastructure were improved and modernized so Prespa became an interesting tourist destination.

Lots of EU funds were used through the NGO sector, other local initiatives and organizations, so there were a lot of implemented projects in the region of Prespa.

Some of these projects were directed toward preservation and protection of natural values⁹ from which we can point out the establishment of the trilateral Prespa Park. Nevertheless there were a lot of projects in domain of development of rural tourism and preservation of cultural heritage that are of a great importance for the development of cultural tourism.

Preservation, revitalization and popularization of some of the old traditional agricultural branches as an important part of the development of cultural and rural tourism were also incorporated in these processes and in some projects.

It is completely understandable that the population in the region shares the same natural as well as cultural values but what matters to them is that they cannot function as one region because of the closed border lines.

Cross-border cooperation

For better understanding of the entire present situation it is necessary to go back in the period of disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1992 when Macedonia gained its independence. Then the supposed “calm” period between the two neighbours that lasted for about 50 years, was over and again the existence of Macedonian population, identity and language came in question. The tension started to grow and the cross - border minority situations became the inflammable issue one more time.

Again the population was burdened and imprisoned by the legacy of the past.

But the European public became aware of this situation especially when Macedonia decided to become a member of the EU family.

The process of expansion of EU burned up the passions of the involving parties and up till today the political obstacles have not been overcome.

Once again it should be emphasized that not only the political aspect of this situation is very important, but for the population more important is its economic and cultural aspect.

No matter how hard we all try, it is not possible to completely avoid the political, because of the fact that the political situation is an important and common part of the everyday life of the people and unfortunately sometimes it is actively used in achieving some negative or positive goals.

However regardless of the frequent national “cooling” or “heating” relations of the two neighbouring countries, for almost two decades there is an initiative by the local authorities to overcome all the political obstacles and to find appropriate solution for this situation that will be in favour of the local population.

The population and some of the local authorities noticed that political obstacles are too difficult to be overcome at once so they decided to work more through the civil sector and local initiative.

⁹ (http://www.ramsar.org/award/key_awards99_interview_prespa.htm (accessed 24/07/09)).

This bottom-up approach was the only solution to initiate joint cooperation and to find the best solution for the common problems.

Ecological or environmental problems that the population in the three neighbouring countries shared, preservation of the endemic species of flora and fauna, preservation of their common cultural and historic heritage as well as finding the best way of how to promote the whole region as an interesting tourist destination were some of the main concerns of the organizations.

These undertaken activities of the NGO's that received the support of the Mayors in the cross border regions in all three countries in the same time made political pressure on the Governments of these neighboring countries.

First and maybe major initiative was the forming of the trans-boundary Prespa Park. Prespa Park, first trans-boundary protected region in the Balkan, was established with the Declaration signed by the Prime Ministers and supported by the three Mayors in the neighbouring parts of Prespa. The Declaration was signed in February 2000, on the occasion of the World Wetlands Day, at the meeting held in Greece¹⁰.

All the Prime Ministers agreed that the conservation and protection of this important ecosystem not only helps the nature but it creates the opportunities for economic development of the region that belongs to all three countries.

Even though this initiative did not truly fulfil the expectation (Gardin 2007: 254-258) neither of the local population nor of the other relevant stakeholders, it might be still important in the process of overcoming political gaps. There were some projects realized in the past period and there are some more to be realized in the future so we are going to see the final results and impact of these cross-border cooperation in the future.

Another important initiative was the establishment of Prespa/Ohrid Euro-region and signing of the Trilateral Protocol in 2004. The main goal of Prespa/Ohrid Euro-region that was established by EWI¹¹ was to promote common interest and work in common good for the people in the border regions (Bumci 1/2004: 15-26).

Although some of the activities overtaken by Prespa Park or Prespa /Ohrid Euro-region overlap they do not oppose to each other.

In this process of changes and overtaken activities it is important to keep in mind the differences that existed between all three countries that influenced cooperation, joint actions and activities in various ways.

Inequalities that existed in individual as well as institutional capacities between all three countries were influenced by different conditions, political and social system, different treatment of minorities and different level of economic development in each of the countries.

The members of EU were aware that economic differences between the member countries and countries that are about to become members of EU can influence the situation in EU. To alleviate and resolve this situation they opened possibilities for improvement of social, economic, cultural or institutional capacities in all of the countries so they can easily adapt to the new European system and economies.

With the intention of the Republic of Macedonia to become a member of EU, in the past period there were open several different EU programs for financing various types

¹⁰ <http://www.medwet.org/prespa/index.html> (accessed 20/07/09).

¹¹ East-West Institute.

of projects as PHARE¹², CARDS¹³ or now IPA¹⁴ funds, as well as programs financed by various other donors. In this case attention will be paid to those that encourage the cross - border cooperation.

One of the initiatives for preparing of the countries for cross-border projects implementation was the European Project CBIB¹⁵. This regional project that begun in 2006 with the envisioned time limit of 18 months had a goal to improve the cooperation among the local communities, cities and companies in the West Balkan countries. The basis for the improvement of the cross-border cooperation were supposed to be set through this undertaken activities for institutional and project capacity building of the beneficiary countries. This project that preceded the IPA¹⁶ implementation cross-border programs with Greece and Albania had a clear goal to help the neighboring countries to improve the present conditions and secure successful and effective use of the IPA as well as other EU funds¹⁷.

In the context of the development of cross-border cooperation there were a lot of implemented projects, especially in the sphere of tourism, in all three neighbouring countries.

Many project financed by GTZ¹⁸ that were implemented in the region played a very important role in connecting the NGO sector in these neighbouring countries. They even initiated establishment of NGO in Macedonia called "Prespanka" with a main purpose to develop rural and cultural tourism, and to cooperate with NGO sectors or individuals in all three countries.

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) helped and financed the project for development of rural tourism in the village of Brajcino in Macedonia. There are some other NGO's in the villages of Ljubojno, Dolno Dupeni etc. that are working in the field of cultural tourism and have some good and notable results and almost all of them had a chance to participate in some of the projects for cross-border cooperation. The existence of these NGOs as well the NGOs in Greece and Albania helped a lot in mutual cooperation.

Several joint projects for promotion of Prespa region as tourist destination and promotion of different tourist products that included all three countries were also implemented.

One of those projects was the project called "The women of Prespa for a better future and Economy" initiated and coordinated by the NGO "CTP"¹⁹ from Greece that except of some minor problems was very well implemented.

¹² Originally created in 1989 as the Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies (PHARE) programme. Among most of the newer EU members since 2000 the countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina) were also beneficiaries of PHARE.

¹³ Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization.

¹⁴ Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance.

¹⁵ "Cross Border Institutional Building".

¹⁶ Launched in 2006 and envisioned to last until 2010.

¹⁷ http://v1.cbib.eu/mk/cbib/sta_je_cbib/index.html accessed 13.02.2012.

¹⁸ Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit.

¹⁹ NGO - Cultural Triangle Prespa.

Political misunderstanding over the name issue of the Republic of Macedonia had reflected during the implementation phase of the project activities during this as well as during other projects implemented by NGO's from both countries. This especially refers to the printed materials and use of the name Republic of Macedonia. Situations were compromisingly resolved by printing the letters FYROM instead of the name Macedonia.

Yet these procedures, that appear to be 'in line with lesser resistance' when it comes to resolving the country name issue, do not diminish the current problem.

Anyway the ideas are great, the people are interested and pleased to cooperate and work with each other, there are no language barriers, but there is still one problem. That problem concerns Macedonian and Greek border passage in Prespa Region and it's opening at the place called Markova Noga on Macedonian side of the border or near Agios Germanos on the Greek side of the border. According to the fact that the existing road infrastructure is very good and it spreads to the border line with Greece, Macedonia is ready to open this border pass, but Greece in contrary is not completely ready to cooperate on this topic and to prepare the border pass from the Greek side of the border. Some of the local authorities and the Mayors in Macedonia and Greece were ready to work together to solve this situation but unfortunately Greek politicians were not ready yet.

Until this situation is completely solved the Prespa region cannot be proclaimed as one region or one tourist destination, because instead of passing from Macedonia to Greece or from Greece to Macedonia from one village to the other that are separated for only several kilometres the tourists will have to pass the Macedonian border near Bitola which is almost 70 km away from Prespa, and then to travel another 70 km to come to Prespa region in Greece. Situation concerning the border with Albania is favourable because the people can cross the border line near the village of Stenje so the tourists as well can freely travel from one country to the other.

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The world trend of development of cultural or rural tourism initiates the people in the region to seek for new and innovative forms of entrepreneurship in the tourism sector, and that way to improve regional situation in these three countries. Development of this forms of tourism can help not only the individuals to gain economic benefit, but it will also help the economic situation of the region and in wider sense it will positively influence economies of Macedonia, Albania and Greece. Development of the regional economy can also stop or reduce the process of migration that will have larger social positive impact in the communities. This is very important, especially for Albania and Macedonia, because they are still in the process of economic and political transition, but we can not exclude Greece because in this time of recession and bad economic situation in the world, development and another innovative approach in some sectors can help a lot to stabilize the global situation.

At the end I would like to point out that we are all aware that the economic benefit and better economic situation of the people in no matter which region we talk about, could at least partly change the general situation. The cross-border cooperation can give rise to the local economy and influence the networking of people in different ways and establish closer relations between all the concerned parties that will work for the benefit

and economic development of the region. By paying the attention to the better developed civil sector, or as we called NGO sector, and better cooperation especially between scientists in every field, we can achieve much more than the politicians can do.

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