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AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CONTESTING EXPRESSIONS OF BALKAN  
ETHNIC IDENTITIES: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO  
UNDERSTANDING ETHNIC IDENTITY

**Abstract:** In this paper I explore how political histories of the Greek civil war and nationalist ideologies and policies of contemporary Balkan nation-states (Macedonia and Greece), on the one hand, and the post-socialist transformations in Eastern Europe, on the other hand, create complexities in the process of the construction of ethnic and national identity at the individual level.

I explore these issues by focusing on the Greek political refugees of the Greek civil war (1946-1949) who have mixed Macedonian and Greek origins and live today in Greece. In particular, by focusing on my family history, I wish to examine how historical and political determinants in the Balkan region influence individuals across three family generations to choose a specific ethnic identity when more than one possibility is available to them.

My goals appear ambitious. I intend to achieve them by using what could be called a form of autoethnography, which can be defined as an autobiographical genre of writing and research that connects the personal to the cultural, social and political, and “places the self within a social context” (Reed-Danahay 1997, 9).

I choose autoethnography in order to understand the contingent and context-specific ways in which my personal identity and difference are being constructed. I believe that questions of personal identity can serve to highlight larger insights about past and present mixed Balkan identities affected by the Greek civil war and the unresolved Macedonian issue, which refers to the dispute over the ‘ownership of history’ and the possession of the name Macedonia. Finally, autoethnography has the power to display the complexity of emotions – largely neglected in the discourse of the formation of ethnic identity in the Balkans – and the role of individual agency in the process of identity formation.

**Keywords:** autobiography, anthropology, Balkan ethnic identity, Slavo-Macedonians

## Introduction

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## Autoethnography of my ethnic identity

With regards to my ethnic identity, I always feel awkward when I have to answer the question “where do you come from” or its Greek counterpart that always makes me feel uneasy “What is your origins”?

My answer normally includes the facts in a short version “my mother is Greek, my father is Russian, I was born in the Soviet Union, raised in Yugoslavia, studied in Greece and the UK, worked in Ireland and I live currently in Greece”. A decade ago, during my doctoral studies, which concerned Iranian classical music and involved long-term fieldwork in Iran, I would add wholeheartedly the final phrase: ‘and I aspire to become culturally Persian’. It was a self-conscious choice to espouse a cultural identity according to my personal desire.<sup>1</sup> Today, my final phrase is ‘and I have decided to grow roots in Greece’, a sentence again depicting how political geography and life choices are intertwined with our ethnic and national becoming.

Sometimes, I tend to accentuate a specific ethnic identity depending on the situation, and I may choose between the Greek, the Russian or the Macedonian origins. For instance, during my fieldwork in Iran, in 2003, I would accentuate my Greek identity. As the bilateral relationships between Greece and Iran were very good at that time, this was very helpful during the lengthy bureaucracy processes to acquire the long term visa I needed in order to conduct my research. But also, my relationship with local musicians was always starting in a positive atmosphere when I mentioned my Greek roots, after all, Greece and Iran have common ancient history that contemporary Persian people value.

I can also recall that as a young girl my sense of national identity was also affected by the nationalistic propaganda promoted through the socialist education during the Yugoslav era. I remember writing a passionate poem about the Yugoslavian flag colours, starting with the words *Fatherland Yugoslavia, Tatkovina Yugoslavia*.

My first adult conscious acknowledgment of my ethnic identity happened at the age of 17 at the Macedonian-Greek borders. I embarked on the 3 hours’ late train leaving Skopje, the capital of Macedonia, a bit sick and weak, after an incident of food poisoning. In the train I had a nap and saw a nightmare. I dreamt that I had difficulties to reach the Macedonian-Greek borders, after I managed to get away from several Albanian men who had kidnapped me. When the train arrived at the borders, and the passport controller man asked the people in the train carriage “who has Greek passports?”, I raised my hand with angst. This was the first time I was grateful to own a Greek citizenship (as I wouldn’t experience the difficulties passing the Greek borders if I had my previous Macedonian passport). Apparently, I also felt safe and content to identify myself as Greek. At the borders I realized that one part in me was becoming gradually culturally Greek. Crossing the Macedonian-Greek state borders was both real and symbolic, while ethnic, cultural and national identity was in my mind an integrated whole.

It is not by chance that while crossing state borders I had an anxiety (expressed through a nightmare) and an epiphany about my identity.

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1 See Jusdanis (1995) for ethnicity as a lifestyle choice.

Crossing state borders, always under tumultuous historical and political conditions, is part of our family history. It always signifies or reminds an important moment about who we *have to* choose to become.

Therefore, during my lifetime, I have had shifting attitudes and feelings about my ethnic, cultural and national identity. The feeling of being a stranger and a foreigner is also very prominent, which may be a common feeling among children of divided origins or it may be a family heirloom, transmitted from one generation to another.

My flexible attitude and indecisiveness with regards to defining my ethnic or cultural identity is not a simple personal whim. I can locate in the history of our family, which exemplifies similar behaviour patterns adopted by my parents and grandparents, whose destinies have been written by the events of the first and second World war, by the Greek civil war, by the post-Socialists transformations in Eastern Europe, and the nationalists ideologies and policies of contemporary Balkan nation-states, particularly Northern Macedonia and Greece. I will provide only few examples from my maternal side.

## Migration history and ethnic identity: my matrilineal family

My grandfather came to Greece from Minor Asia at the age of four with his family, during the compulsory exchanges of population between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s. He was a Pontic Greek, a Greek ethnic group from the Black Sea, but he actually didn't speak any Greek, he spoke only Pontic and Turkish like most of refugees of Pontic origins from Turkey.<sup>2</sup> He learned Greek, later in school. He was resettled in Ida, the birthplace of my grandmother, a small village near Edessa and near the Greek-Northern Macedonia borders.

The Greek state, in the process of constructing one national consciousness in its geographical territory applied harsh practices to prohibit the use of Slavic languages in its territory. Thus, resettling Greek *prosfyges* from Minor Asia in the region was one of the practices to overpower the Slavic speaking populations.

My grandmother considered herself to be Macedonian.<sup>3</sup> Her name is Slobodanka, a Macedonian and generally Slavic name meaning 'Free'. However, we all called her Elefteria, the Greek translation of Slobodan-

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<sup>2</sup> Turkish, and not Greek was the common *lingua franca* between resettled Greek refugees from Minor Asia and local Slavo-Macedonians in Northern Greece, many of whom spoke both Turkish and Macedonian (Karakasidou 2002, 131-132).

<sup>3</sup> The term Slavo-Macedonian is a top-down politically correct term in Greece which my grandmother did not use.

ka. She used Macedonian as a language of communication with her birth family. When she married my grandfather, she soon learned Pontic language to communicate with her parents-in-law who did not speak any Greek. Like my grandfather, she also learned Greek in school.

Like many other thousands communists' partisans in ELAS, my grandmother and grandfather fled Greece during the Civil War and settled in Soviet Union, as political refugees. Living among the Greek community in exile in Tashkent, Soviet Union for more than 25 years, my grandfather accentuated more his Greek rather than Pontic identity. Marrying my grandfather and following him in Soviet Union, she chose to follow his Greek ethnic identity, although she never completely gave up her Macedonian identity. It was in Soviet Union that he switched to Greek language in the private domain, whereas Pontic and Turkic languages were dominant while he was living in Greece.

All of their five children, including my mother, adopted a Greek identity according to their patrilineal descent. It's interesting to accentuate that all three male children ignored and rejected their matrilineal descent, while two female children (that is my mother and her twin sister) acknowledged and at times adopted their matrilineal descent.

My grandmother was hurt many times by some of her children who rejected her Macedonian identity. My mother recalls the following incident:

*“We, my brother Mito, my brother Lambos, my self and my mother were in the car. We were heading towards our village Ida, to visit our dead brother and father in the cemetery. When we arrived in the village the radio was playing Macedonian songs. I said oh how lovely these Macedonian songs are. And my brother Lambos jumped in and said “What are you talking about? Macedonian?”. I said to him, ‘Aren’t you ashamed talking like that, your mother is Macedonian’. Then both of them, Mito and Lambos started saying “What Macedonian, Macedonia doesn’t exist, Macedonia is Greek and things like that”. Hearing their words my mother started crying. I told them “shut your mouths up”, as they upset mum. My mother sobbed “My own children they don’t recognize me”.*

My mother's two brothers have difficulties in accepting their matrilineal Macedonian descent and using the terms Macedonia or Macedonian. Instead they use the term Slavs, Slav-speaking, Yugoslavs, Skopians, or at best the term Slavic-Macedonian, adopting thus a largely uninformed and nationalistic Greek attitude towards the so called in Greece “Macedonian issue”, which refers to the dispute over the possession of the name Macedonia.

A feeling of sadness runs through my body because my older uncle, and his descendants therefore, was not emotionally able to accept his matrilineal Macedonian descent and denied his history and his lived experience. After all, according to his own sayings, he is the only one of the five children who remembers that he spoke only Macedonian with his maternal grandparents. Today, though, he retains that the language they spoke in the village was simply called ‘ntopika’ (literary ‘native’). Historical evidences mention that this and other similar terms (such as *endopia*, *palia*, *starski*, *nashki*) were used by the Slavomacedonian people in Greece (Kostopoulos 2000: 43). The term Macedonian (*Makedonika* or *Makedonitika*) though, was also used (ibid).<sup>4</sup>

My mother’s ethnic identity is also negotiable and fluid, both in the way she conceives herself and as she is perceived by others. In Czechoslovakia, the first dwelling place of many children of the political refugees of the Greek civil war, she was raised as bicultural and bi-ethnic, learning both Macedonian and Greek in the kindergarden and primary school. Later, in 1953, she moved to Soviet Union, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to find her parents, like many other thousands of children who were separated for years. And she was raised in the Greek community as a Greek, following a patrilineal heritage as stated before.

It was in the Soviet Union that the Greek ethnic consciousness began to be more accentuated than the Macedonian. Consciousness according to Karakasidou, it depends on the external characteristic such as relationship with other ethnic groups as well as the state and “It develops in response to externally imposed material and ideological conditions” (2002, 26). In my mother’s case, it was the patrilineal descend stronger in defining ethnicity than the matrilineal. Our family was “categorized” by the political refugees from Greece in Uzbekistan, as Greek-Pontic, according to my grandfather’s descent: the matrilineal Macedonian lineage, was sidelined in the private space and sentiment. In school the children would attend Greek classes, whereas only my grandmother, their mother, would continue talking Macedonian with her family and friends.<sup>5</sup>

The repressive measures of the Greek state towards the Slavic dialects in Greece were by no means practiced in Soviet Union, and Slavic Macedonians from Greece could freely practice their language both in the public and private sphere.<sup>6</sup> Keeping the Macedonian language alive,

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4 In addition, the term ‘Macedonian language’ (*Makedoniki glossa*) was officially used by the Greek state in the censuses of 1920 and 1947 (Kostopoulos 2000, 43). During the Metaxa dictatorship (1936-1947), prohibitions against the use of Slavic languages in both the private and the public state were first implemented (Kostopoulos 2000).

5 According to my mother Macedonian language classes were available only at the Technical Secondary School (Rus. *Remeslenoe Uchilishe*) and few students attended it.

6 Slavo-Macedonian participation in the Greek resistance forces of ELAS was strong, and many of the political refugees from Greece in the Soviet Union were of Macedonian origins

my grandmother cherished her Macedonian identity. She was very proud when was buying the newspaper *Pros ti Niki* [Towards Victory]<sup>7</sup> which was, that was published in Greek in Tashkent, but had also some articles written in Macedonian language. She kept few issues from the newspaper, for more than four decades, until her death in 2003 in Greece.

When my family moved to Macedonian Yugoslavia in 1976, my mother identified herself again as Greek. She has experienced two return migrations in two different countries, one in Macedonia and one in Greece. In Macedonia, she refused to embrace her Macedonian ancestry, mainly because local Macedonians considered her to be ‘Egejka’, which at the time was used as a pejorative term, referring to the Greek-Macedonians from Aegean Greece.<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that since we have repatriated to Greece in 1988 she identifies herself as half Greek and half Macedonian, using though in the public sphere the more accepted term Slavo-Macedonian, since there has been for many years a great political intensity with regards to the Macedonian name. At other times, she distances herself from local Greeks, referring to them by “They”, while us are those Greeks who were refugees in Soviet Union and carry the Russian culture.

According to her:

*“I just cannot delete my past, my life in Yugoslavia, in Soviet Union, my mother’s origins, or my family’s history. I am shaped by my experiences living abroad. When I talk with Russians or with Macedonians, I feel I am theirs. These experiences characterize me, and they are visible here in Greece, for example I am not fully literate in Greek and I make mistakes when I speak Greek.”*

As Robert Park (1928) has shown, one of the consequences of migration is to create a situation in which individuals find themselves to experience two diverse cultures, and thus strongly influences identity perception and transition. Therefore, it is through migration, whether motivated by economics, politics or kinship that people tend to re-interpret their ethnic identity, either by assuming new or over-emphasizing existing ethnic identity. In this paper I have shown that members of my family, when migrating, exhibit a variety of responses towards the way they interpret their ethnic identity, they may select from among multiple identities available at a particular time and place, or ignore an identity in favour of another one.

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and spoke Macedonian.

7 Renamed in Neos Dromos [New Way] in 1956.

8 On the status of Egejci, the Macedonians from the Aegean part of Macedonia, see Monova 2009.

It is the work of Fredrik Barth (1969) that has influenced a growing literature in anthropology documenting the shifting, volitional, situational and changeable nature of ethnicity. Barth has shown that ethnic identity is ‘the characteristic of self ascription and ascription by others’ (1969 10-13). In other words, ethnic identity is a result of a dialectical process involving individual’s self-identification and outsiders’ ethnic designations - i.e., what you think your ethnicity is, versus what they think your ethnicity is.

While a situational approach to identity emphasizes the active role of individual in the process of identity formation, ethnic identities are also constructed by powerful external, social, economic, and political processes, which often involve the hegemonic power of the state, as they shape and reshape ethnic categories and definitions.

## Concluding Remarks

As the history of my family exemplifies, the construction of identity among Greek and Macedonian political refugees from Greece who live today in nation states in the Balkans (Greece and Northern Macedonia) is a particularly complex process because it is influenced by hegemonic constructions that have their origins in the countries they were born, in the countries that they ethnically relate, in the countries where they have settled or they have repatriated (Danforth 1995, 200). According to Danforth (1995, 200), “these immigrants bring with them identities constructed in their homeland and face the challenge of reconstructing them in the diaspora” and in the return country as well.

A common feature among the three generation is that these manifold identity transactions across all three generations are the after-effects of migration and ensuing repatriation, which in turn are the aftermath of the Greek civil war.

Another historico-political condition that has influenced identity perception across all three generations is the so-called Macedonian issue and the deteriorating Greek-Northern Macedonian political relationships.<sup>9</sup> Here it is interesting to juxtapose the cases of my mother and her brother Mitos. At some point in their life, they both declined their Macedonian ethnic identity and adopted a Greek identity for different reasons. My mother living in Yugoslav Macedonia, didn’t acknowledge publicly her Macedonian roots, to avoid the identification with the denigrated term ‘Egejci’ (Aegean Macedonians). My uncle on the other hand, living in Greek Macedonia, in Thessaloniki, a city where the wave of Greek nationalism was strongly felt especially after the break-up of the Yugo-

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9 I am referring here to the decades before the Prespes Agreement.

slav federation, and the creation of an independent Macedonian state, could not adopt either a bi-cultural identity in Greece.

In addition, as a political repatriate from Soviet Union he was not embraced in Greece, and he thus strove to establish a solid Greek identity. According to his son,

*“In Soviet Union we felt more Greek than Greeks in Greece did. We were feeling ‘twice Greek’ (dyo fores Ellines). But we have been always treated as foreigners. My fathers’ destiny is chasing me as well. In Soviet Union they called us Greeks; in Greece they call us Russians. In my identity card is written that I am born in Uzbekistan. This has been very upsetting for me especially in the army when people would question my Greek identity. We are unlucky because our parents were on the side of those who left during the civil war. I am so happy than identity of my son writes that Thessaloniki is his birth city.”*

I will now summarize different patterns of identity construction across three family generations, which depends by and large on the generation of immigrants they belong.

The first generation of political refugees who fled Greece during the civil war, that is my grandparents, were dreaming of ‘returning home’. Although their ethnic origins are Macedonian and Pontic, for them Greece remains the country of their origins. However, returning to their roots was again a complex issue, as their repatriation choices were affected by economic and political factors. First, they used my grandmothers’ Macedonian ethnic origins to repatriate in Macedonian Yugoslavia during the 1970s. Their decision to repatriate from Soviet Union to Yugoslavia was strongly influenced by the good bilateral state relationship between the two socialist countries, which ensured social security programs, such as war pension (WWII) and public housing. Their dream to return home though was still alive, and Greece remained in their hearts their homeland. My grandfather’s illness was essential in making him taking the decision to repatriate in his home country, Greece, where he wanted to be buried. Political changes in Greece during the 1980s, and the newly established government of Andreas Papandreou who recognized the members of the WWII National Resistance and allowed the return of thousands of political refugees, facilitated finally my grandparents’ repatriation to Greece, after 40 years of living abroad.

My mother and her brothers and sisters, who were born in Greece and left Greece at a very young age comprise the second generation of Greek civil war political refugees. They were raised and educated in two socialist countries (Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union), and in four different languages (Macedonian, Greek, Czech and Russian).

In Soviet Union they were raised like Greeks, they lived according to the principles and values of the Greek diaspora, and they were imbued with nostalgia for their birth country. Although, only the oldest brother has memories of living in Greece, they all carried the dream of returning 'home'. For most of them, it was not a remembered or lived home, it was an imagined home. Returning to Greece they started a new life in which many times they were treated as strangers.

They have disputing ideas about their ethnic origins, ideas that are crystallized according to their patriarchal upbringing, that made them adopt their patrilineal origins instead of their matrilineal, and generally lived experiences during specific historical times and political doctrines in the Soviet Union and in the Balkan states, Macedonia and Greece.

However, returning to Greece they couldn't avoid but being bilingual and bi-cultural. They carried fond memories of their life in Soviet Union and still abide by the Russian culture, be it language, food, music. And although they say they feel mainly Greek, they still experience cultural distance in Greece. In daily situations they use the designation 'us' and 'them', where 'them' are the local Greeks and 'us' are people who have same life experiences of the civil war and living memories of life in the Soviet Union.

The third generation of the political refugees of the Greek civil war, that is my generation of immigrants, are all born abroad. We were raised with the idea that our return country is Greece, but living in Greece today we don't feel connected to a particular place. We are also bi-lingual, as most of us attended school in Soviet Union. We carry memories of living abroad, as well as lived experiences of being repatriates in a 'return' country that hasn't been always friendly towards us.

We carry the anxiety of our grandparents and parents to return home and to re-establish our Greek identity. We have embodied their memory, pain and sorrow of separation with homeland, their nostalgia for home, their desire to grow roots in their birth country, their political beliefs which are partly responsible for our displacement, migration and repatriation.

Now that we have settled down we only sometimes experience the perception of 'otherness', but we still carry the memory of the stigma (our own and that of our grandparents and parents) of being the 'other'. This perception of 'otherness', well exemplified by Nowicka, is often "a source of internal disharmony, and stimulates continual rumination, continual focus on the problem of self-definition, continual need to negotiate it and articulate it" (Nowicka 2006, 68). We feel the diversity of cultures we carry as both a wealth and a burden.

I begin to understand how my ethnic, national and cultural identities relate to my lived experiences and choices, to the historical trajectories in the Balkan region, and to the collective history of my family going

back at least three generations, history that is full of memories, desires, emotions, ideologies, migrations, displacements and repatriations.

And I just begin to understand how my feeling of estrangement is an intragenerational experience that I also adopt.



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