The Challenges Faced by Three Minority Communities in Albania, Greece and Macedonia

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Abstract. This paper maps the realities faced by ethnic and linguistic minorities in Albania, Greece and Macedonia by concentrating on three minority communities, one in each country. The three groups in the focus are the Macedonians of the Albanian part of the Prespa region, the Orthodox Slavic minority of Northern Greece, and the Muslims of Southeastern Macedonia. The study is based on a sociolinguistic study conducted in June 2015 in the tri-border area around the Lakes Ohrid and Prespa. Among the 53 informants interviewed, there were speakers of Albanian, Aromanian, Greek, Macedonian, Romani and Turkish. A key finding is that all the three communities suffer from either total or partial lack of recognition. In addition, it is argued that the often-reported historical multilingualism in the area is still observable, but limited only to the speakers of minority languages, contributing to the legitimation crisis of the mono-ethnic nationalisms. It is further observed that the transmission of the minority languages is often interrupted by mixed marriages with a speaker of the majority language, and while the informants did not consider the attitudes of the majority language speakers necessarily hostile, they often expressed their wish that the minority languages would be given a more central role in education.

Keywords: Macedonia, Greece, Albania, Slavs, multilingualism, linguistic area, minorities

1. Introduction

The tri-border area among Albania, Greece, and Macedonia in the Central Balkans has been historically characterized by widespread, mutual mulitilingualism across the various linguistic groups. This multilingualism has given rise to a linguistic contact phenomenon called Balkan sprachbund, whereby the Balkan languages are characterised by numerous converging linguistic phenomena (see, e.g. Friedman, 2012: 115-124). This article concentrates on one minority community in each country, seeks to identify and to compare the challenges that the speakers of minority languages face in the three countries. The study is based on interview material collected during field work around the Lakes Ohrid and Prespa in June 2015 in the three countries.[1]

The Central Balkans was the last part of Southeast Europe to be divided by state borders. This division, taking place in the early twentieth century after the final collapse of the Ottoman empire, meant that the members of various ethnic, religious and linguistic communities of the region became citizens of newly forged nation states, with only one ethnic group occupying an entitled majority status. In the Republic of Macedonia, which gained independence only in the early 90s, the Slavic Macedonians occupied a dominant position already in the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, a constituent country of the former Yugoslavia.

This study concentrates on three communities, the Macedonians of the Prespa region in Albania, the contested group of Macedonians or *Dopii* in Greece, and the Muslims of Southern Macedonia. The

[1] The data was collected during a field expedition of the Helsinki Areal and Language Studies (HALS) initiative of the University of Helsinki. In addition to the informants, I would like to extend my warmest thanks to the other researchers taking part in the field excursion and data collection: Borče Arsov, Dušica Božović, Andrei Călin Dumitrescu, Pavel Falaleev, Paula Hämeen-Anttila, Jani Korhonen, Antti Olavi Laine, Jouko Lindstedt, Maxim Makartsev, Motoki Nomachi, Milica Petruševska, Justyna Pierżyńska, Kukka Pitkänen, Heini Puurunen, Elizabeta Ralpovska, Janne Saarikivi, Ksenia Shagal, Ljudmil Spasov, Johanna Virkkula and Chingduang Yurayong.

common nominator between these groups is that in their everyday interactions, in contrast with the members of the majority group in the country, the members of these minorities typically use more than one local language. The article is organised in the following way: In the next section data is presented. The subsequent three sections are each dedicated to one of the communities, followed by discussion together with concluding remarks.

2. Data

The data for this study consist mostly of answers to a questionnaire, filled out as a part of semi-structured interviews, conducted in June 2015 in several communities in the tri-border region among Albania, Greece, and Macedonia. The data collection targeted speakers of more than one of the local languages, and the questionnaires were filled by the interviewer – with the exception of a handful of questionnaires that were filled out by the informants themselves with the guidance of the interviewer. During the interviews of a total of 129 informants, 58 questionnaires were filled. The analyses in this article are based on 53 completed questionnaires, five questionnaires being left out of the analysis because of missing data.

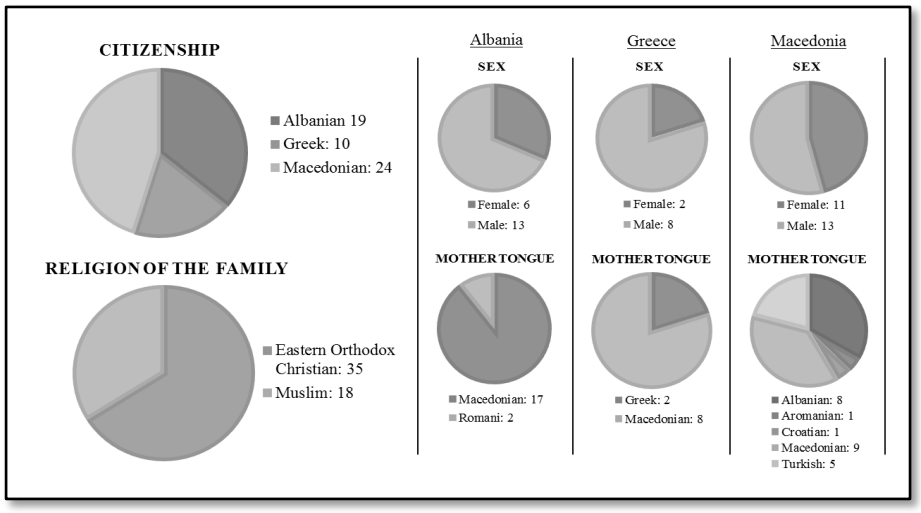
The background data collected for the informants included their age, sex, religion, nationality, residential history and family ties. The questionnaire targeted the situational choice of language in the everyday life of the informants. Also, open-ended questions were used to map the informants hopes and wishes regarding the status of their mothertongue in the society, especially in education, as well as outside attitudes towards their ethnic or linguistic group and community relations in general. The questionnaires were translated into Albanian, Greek, Macedonian and Turkish, and the interviews were mostly conducted in one of these languages, and in a few occasions, also in English. The language of the questionnaire and the language of the interview were not necessarily the same, depending on the wishes of the interviewee.

THE LOCATIONS IN WHICH THE INTERVIEWS WERE CONDUCTED

The informants were sampled purposively: they were recruited through pre-established contacts by our team members, and locations for interviews, not familiar to us, were chosen on the basis of earlier reports on multilingual speakers in the area. Also, in more than one occasion, new informants were found through referrals by previous informants.

While one of the key goals of the survey was to find speakers of minority languages, there was a fear that if the informants were given *a priori* minority labels, we may have missed individuals who do not consider themselves members of a linguistic minority, but who can still provide an important insight into the minority groups, whose self-identified members could tell only a part of the story. As hypothesised, multilingualism functioned as a very good proxy for reaching members of linguistic minorities or people with a minority language as a heritage language. In addition, this definition allowed us to reach members of contested or other than linguistic minorities.

OVERVIEW OF INFORMANTS' BACKGROUND DATA[2]



[2] If the informant reported multiple *citizenships*, the citizenship shown in the chart represents the citizenship of the current country of residence. Twelve of the informants reported having a dual citizenship, eleven of whom had a dual Albanian-Macedonian citizenship, all coming from the same community of Macedonians, living in the Albanian part of the Prespa region. The choice of term *mother tongue* was practical: while ambiguous and often avoided in linguistic literature, it has a rather uniform everyday interpretation in translations into the languages of the questionnaire (Alb. *gjuhë amëtare*, Gr. *mitrikí glóssa*, Mac. *majčin jazik*, Tr. *anadil*) as the language of childhood that is learnt at home and that one is most fluent in. Although given the chance to explain their choices, all informants gave only one mother tongue. The number of informants in regard to their *year of birth* by decades was the following: 1930: 1, 1940: 5, 1950: 14, 1960: 11, 1970: 10, 1980: 6, 1990: 5.

Due to the nature of the sampling and the number of informants, divided into three countries, no real statistical inferences can be drawn. The independent variables – mother tongue, religion, ethnic self-identification, amongst others – pattern producing several unique combinations in the material. This is to say that, for example, while declaring Albanian as one's mother tongue in Macedonia overwhelmingly coincides with the person identifying as Muslim and Albanian as well, identifying oneself as a native speaker of Macedonian may still mean that the person is Muslim or identifies as Aromanian. Yet, what the sample used in this research allows us is to discover potential tendencies and recurring topics and contrast them with previous literature, and, in case of unexpected answers, to see whether these can be understood by contextualising them, for instance, by looking at the background data of the informant.

3. The Macedonians of the Prespa region in Albania

The current official status of linguistic and ethnic minorities in Albania has its roots in the policies adopted in Socialist Albania. The regime, characterised by paranoia and isolation in regard to the neighbouring countries, recognised the existence of ethnic and linguistic minorities within the country, yet only part of minority communities received an official status and were granted, for instance, the right to receive education in their mother tongue. The Macedonians of Albania traditionally live in settlements around the Prespa Lakes and the city of Korça, including other areas bordering the Republic of Macedonia. During the socialist era, minority rights were granted only to the agrarian communities in and around the village of Pustec, on the shore of Lake Prespa, where the local population received part of their primary education in Macedonian. The number of Macedonians is highly contested: in the most recent census in 2011, only the inhabitants of the Pustec municipality had the choice of identifying themselves as Macedonians, denying the residents of such larger centres as the city of Korça this possibility.[3]

[3] For more details on the problems regarding the census, see Korhonen, Makartsev, Petruševska & Spasov, 2016: 13–49, 15–16.

Thirteen interviews with a questionnaire were conducted in the village of Pustec with informants who all identified Macedonian language as their mother tongue and Macedonian as their ethnic identity, and who all were Eastern Orthodox Christians. Interestingly, all males interviewed, eight in total, had a dual Albanian-Macedonian citizenship, while the five women had only Albanian.[4] Also, the men interviewed had a more diverse residential history, some of them had also lived in the Republic of Macedonia, whereas the women interviewed had lived their entire lives only in the municipality. All of the interviewees had attended Macedonian language primary education, which for most informants continued exclusively in the Albanian language after the 4th grade. All interviewees used both Albanian and Macedonian in their daily interactions, however, the use of Albanian was limited only to encounters with Albanians, for instance, in the city of Korça. Only one of the interviewees, resident of Korça, reported occasionally also using Albanian with his own children, whereas all other informants with children told that they use exclusively Macedonian in their homes.

The community in Pustec appears linguistically and ethnically very homogenous, several informants mentioned also an Albanian medical doctor who practices in Pustec, but has learnt to speak Macedonian. Despite being all born in the Macedonian minority "enclave", recognised by the Albanian state, not all informants were permanent residents of the area anymore. The three informants from other parts of South-eastern Albania, interviewed during their visit to Pustec, all deplored the fact that Macedonian is not taught in schools outside the region, and some of them expressed also their wish that other services, such as medical care, should be available in Macedonian. While some informants were fine with Albanian being the language used in most private and public institutions in the country, all agreed

[4] The willingness of the Republic of Macedonia to grant citizenship to Macedonians outside its borders has been recently connected to allegations of election fraud: the mayor of the Pustec municipality, Edmond Temelko, was briefly detained for hearing and subsequently released in February 2016 (Siniša-Jakov Marušić, *BalkanInsight*, 2016). The allegations of transporting the residents of Pustec and to register them as voters with addresses in Macedonia are connected to the larger political scandal in the Republic of Macedonia involving leaked recordings that are said to indicate the ruling VMRO-DPMNE party for various crimes.

upon the need to have Macedonian language as a school subject in primary education for the members of the Macedonian minority.[5]

Among the informants from Albania, there were also three other persons who identified themselves as Macedonians, two of whom had been born in Korça. Yet the parents of these two informants came from the Prespa region. Not surprisingly, these informants, born outside the region, expressed similar worries and wishes as the informants interviewed in Pustec. While all informants described the relationship among the different ethnic groups in their places of residence in positive or neutral terms, many of them expressed severe concern regarding the future of the Macedonian minority in Albania.[6] Assimilative policies and indifference towards linguistic human rights were mentioned, but also the mixed marriages between the Macedonians and Albanians, which seem to lead to the adoption of Albanian as the language of the family. This effect of the mixed marriages finds support also in the reports by two informants, describing the language use in their extended families (see also the next section).

4. Greece: *Dopii*, Macedonians or Greek?

The situation regarding ethnic and linguistic minorities in Greece is extremely complicated, going back to radical changes in the ethnic and linguistic composition of Northern Greece during the 20th century. The Slavic speaking, Eastern Orthodox population of Northern Greece was affected first by the population exchange between Greece and Turkey, a series of mass deportations finalised in

[5] For more details on the education in the Prespa region, see Steinke & Ylli, 2007.

[6] However, many informants mentioned a pejorative term, *shul*, an exonym used by Albanians in reference to the Macedonians from the Prespa region. In personal communication, Maxim Makartsev reported to have encountered the term in Southern Albania, with various etymologies proposed by the informants. For instance, it has been said that the term comes from the Albanian expression, *shul gardhi* "latch of a fence gate", meaning somebody dumb and slow in the uptake, or, that it would derive from the name of one of the Slavic speaking villages in the Prespa region, Shulin (previously known as Diellas).

1923 and approved by the then international community. The Orthodox Christian refugees and deportees from Asia Minor were settled mostly in Northern Greece, but being linguistically and ethnically a heterogeneous group, massive Hellenisation campaigns were launched by the Greek state. These campaignes were directed at the at the local Slavic population as well (Karakasidou 1997: 187). The Greek Civil War between 1946 and 1948 drove a large proportion of the Orthodox Slavic speakers into exile. In 1982, the people exiled during the war were given permission to return, yet those "not Greek by origin", were denied this chance, despite their ancestry in the region dating back to the first millennium (see Batsiotis, 2001: 146).

The identity of the Orthodox Slavic speakers in Northern Greece has been, often literally, a battlefield, being at stake also during the dispute over the so-called Question of Macedonia in the early 20th century between Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia, all laying claims to the Slavic speakers of the region. Bulgarian demands for the region were largely unsuccessful, while Serbia took control of the northern part of the region, also known as Vardar Macedonia, and Greece obtained the Aegean part. This outcome was reflected also in the way the Slavic speakers identified themselves ethnically and linguistically. The ethnonym Bulgarian was used to some extent, crucially still towards the end of the 19th century at a time when gradually such labels, connected to a particular modern nation, started to gain relevance as means of self-identification in the European part of the Ottoman empire. From the early 20th century on also the term Macedonian (*makedonski*) started to appear as an endonym for the language, a half-century before the establishment the Socialist Republic of Macedonia and the codification of the Macedonian standard language (Friedman, 2008: 387). Yet some Slavic speakers embraced also the dominant, Greek ethnic identity, many of whom, no doubt, because of the assimilative efforts outlined earlier.

The Greek state is still reluctant to acknowledge the fact that there are ethnic and linguistic minorities within its borders, and when it does, the recognition happens along religious lines of division (see Korhonen et al., 2016: 30-32). Aggravated by the naming dispute between the Greek state and the Republic of Macedonia, self-identification as Macedonian or a speaker of the Macedonian

language continues to be very problematic in Greece. A significant issue regarding the name of the Orthodox Slavic population is the fact that many with Slavic ancestry or even with command of the local Slavic dialects do not accept the Macedonian label, but either identify themselves as Greeks or *Dopii* "locals", a term sometimes used to denote the Slavic speakers, often as a subcategory of being Greek. In her thorough account, Jane K. Cowan (2001) explores the question of the identity of the Slavic speakers of Greece, criticising the ambitions of some activists of what she regards as an attempt to impose the Macedonian identity also on those who are not willing to accept it. Yet Cowan concludes that the only tenable position is to support the demands for the recognition of a Macedonian minority (Cowan, 2001: 171).[7]

In the survey conducted in June 2015, ten Greek citizens were interviewed with the help of the questionnaire, all with Slavic speakers in their family and knowledge of Slavic. The interviews were conducted in Kastoria and Florina, with the exception of one interview, conducted in Bitola, Macedonia, during the informant's visit there. In comparison to the Prespan community of Macedonians, the use of the minority language is much more limited. In Greece, there is neither education nor public services available in the minority languages. Also, of the nine informants with children living in Greece, all spoke mostly, or in some cases, exclusively Greek with them.

A generational decline in the use of the minority language can be seen as well: Of the informants' parents, eight used exclusively Slavic between themselves, whereas the parents of only five of the informants spoke it exclusively with them during their childhood.

[7] Cowan (2001: 166) also acknowledges that the Macedonian standard language is the best candidate for a written norm, if one does not wish to pertain only to oral expression. Yet what strikes as odd is Cowan's considerable sensitivity regarding the worries, typically expressed by the Greek authorities. After accounting for the physical torture that was used during the inter-war period against those who were caught speaking Slavic and acknowledging that identifying as a Macedonian speaker still carries significant risks, she expresses her worries that the official recognition of the Macedonian-speaking minority may lead to the forced imposition of an identity on unwilling people. To my knowledge, there are no reports of such attempts.

One speaker who regards himself as Greek told that he does not even wish his children to learn the language, yet all others had a positive attitude towards teaching the language to the children, some expressing the wish of it becoming part of the school curricula. Also in Greece, mixed marriages seem to contribute to monolingualism: three of the informants had spouses that spoke only Greek, and these informants used exclusively Greek also with their children. Similar results are observed among the speakers of Aromanian in Greece: mixed marriages between minority and majority language speakers is a factor contributing to majority language monolingualism within the family, although this is not always the case (Dumitrescu, 2016: 112-113).

Of the informants who were citizens of Greece, eight declared themselves as Macedonians, whereas two of them identified themselves as Greek. It is noteworthy that the Greek-identifying informants had least contact with their ancestral language: it was limited mostly to communication with their parents, who, in both cases, spoke Greek rather than Slavic as their mother tongue according to the informants. Cowan (2001: 168) warns researchers of what she calls *Florinocentrism*, that is, an illusion that the Macedonian identity is more common in Greece than what it actually is on the basis of observations in Florina and in its vicinity. While Cowan, perhaps justifiably, links this to the Macedonian activism, stronger in the area, only one informant mentioned having made a choice to use the Macedonian language more, and that this was encouraged by the onset of cultural activism in the mid-80s. For the other Macedonian informants, born between 1937 and 1969, this has merely meant that, while the use of Macedonian has decreased within the family, it has been compensated through the availability of Macedonian language media and the local cultural activities.

All the informants were deeply integrated into the Greek society and completely bilingual, or in several cases, reported Greek as their preferred language in many situations. In addition, they overwhelmingly reported having good relations with the other ethnic groups, yet deploring the opposition of the society to their minority language and, as a consequence, a total lack of support for theaching their children the language, for instance through the educational system. Three of the informants, identifying themselves as

Macedonians and speakers of the Macedonian language, explicitly told that they did not know Cyrillic alphabet and could not read or write Macedonian standard language, yet, all the eight informants identifying themselves as Macedonians reported of following television and radio broadcasts in Macedonian.

It is evident that the cultural activism has contributed to the acceptance of the Macedonian identity by the Slavic speakers in Greece. Yet on the basis of the predominant place that the Greek language and culture occupies in the lives of also those informants identifying themselves as Macedonians, one could further ask, if the Macedonian identity is really felt as a separate national identity or merely a continuation of the culturally salient phenomenon of identifying oneself as part of the *Dopii*, but at the same time as Greek. From the point of view of language, it could be said that a certain point of no return has been passed already several decades ago: many people with some knowledge of Slavic could be characterised as heritage speakers (for a definition of the concept, see Polinsky & Kagan) rather than bilinguals. This is, however, not to say that measures of promoting literacy and culture in Macedonian should be any less needed or that seeking the recognition of the Macedonian-speaking minority would be any less justified. On the contrary, the violent past of oppression in mind, allowing such measures and abandoning the false narrative of ethnically and linguistically homogenous Northern Greece would be regarded as an act of reconciliation, also *vis-à-vis* the Republic of Macedonia.

5. The Muslims of Southwestern Macedonia

As part of the field study, 18 Muslims, half of them women, half men, were interviewed in two areas in the Republic of Macedonia, Struga and Resen, all with the common nominator of speaking more than one local languages. The informants identified themselves either as Albanian, Egyptian, Turkish, Roma, Torbeš / Macedonian Muslim, or a mixture thereof. Thus, the survey managed to reach all traditional Muslim groups of the country, leaving out only a group of Megleno-Romanian Muslims in the province of Gevgelija. The focus of this

section is on the Muslim communities in the Southwestern Macedonia, especially in the Prespa region, Resen as its centre, and the group of Macedonian Muslims or Torbeši. I seek to illuminate their everyday language use and views and wishes and regarding the status of minorities in Macedonia.

In Macedonia, the ethnic majority position is held by the Eastern Orthodox, Slavic speaking Macedonians. While in Albania and Greece the ethnic and linguistic minorities are fairly invisible and they lack recognition or their number is downplayed by the state, in Macedonia, several minorities are recognised by the constitution, granting them, for instance, some linguistic rights. The last census, conducted in 2002, established that one fourth of the population was Albanian who are predominantly Muslim (Korhonen et al, 2016: 32-33). Yet the proportion of Muslims in Macedonia is one third of the total population according to the census, meaning that there are more than 100.000 other than Albanian Muslims in the Republic of Macedonia. The constitutional status of the Macedonian minorities was reached only after the tensions between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority had culminated into an armed conflict in the North-western part of the country in 2001. The conflict ended by the signing of the Ohrid Agreement, whose implementation included significant changes to the legislation regarding the status of minorities (see Petrushevska, 2014).

Three of the informants declared Macedonian as their mother tongue, yet all informants were fluent in Macedonian and had attended Macedonian language education, either Macedonian as the language of instruction or Macedonian as a second language. Historically, the multilingualism in Macedonia and more generally in the Balkans has been described, for instance, as intense, intimate and sustained (Friedman & Joseph, 2014: 16). Further, especially in the context of the Balkan language contact phenomenon, the Balkan sprachbund, it has been proposed that their existed a prestige scale, where a language regarded less prestigious, mainly due to the social position occupied by its speakers, and thus lower on that scale would mean that its speakers know more languages than those speaking a language higher on the scale (Lindstedt, 2000: 242-243). Such scale can be proposed also in the case of Macedonia, where Macedonian as

the majority language would occupy the highest status, followed by the co-official Albanian. The lower positions would be occupied by other minority languages, Romani found on the lowest position due to the general social stigma attached to the ethnic group.

If accepted, the prestige scale seems to coincide well with the observations in the material, although the sample is arguably too small for definite conclusions. One Muslim Romani speaker was interviewed, and the informant reported using Albanian, Macedonian, Romani and Turkish in his daily interactions, the largest number of local languages among the total of 53 interviewees. Four out of the total of six informants with fully or partly Turkish family background used in addition to Turkish both Albanian and Macedonian daily, yet also four out of eight informants with Albanian or mixed Albanian-Macedonian Muslim background also reported of using Turkish in addition to Albanian and Macedonian. Of the two informants whose both parents were Macedonian Muslims, one used also Albanian, Macedonian and Turkish, while the other Macedonian, and only occasionally Albanian. One of the reasons for the prominent place occupied by Turkish is that many of the interviewees were residents of the town of Resen with a significantly larger Turkish than Albanian population. Nevertheless, one informant told that she had learnt Turkish in the city of Ohrid.

In the Balkans which is popularly, yet often exaggeratedly, viewed as plagued by ethnic and religious tensions, the Prespa region, the town of Resen as its centre, seems to form an exceptionally peaceful, tolerant and linguistically relatively egalitarian exception. The only ethnically Macedonian, Eastern Orthodox speaker interviewed in the study who was fluent in more than one Albanian was a resident of Resen. Anastasia Makarova (2016: 115-130) observed in her study on the villages of Krani and Arvati in the Prespa region that there were several Orthodox Macedonians who were fluent in Albanian, a situation which is unique to the whole country. The Muslim residents of the Prespa region interviewed in this study confirmed the general observation. They evaluated the inter-ethnic relations consequently in more positive terms in comparison to other interviewees, often contrasting the region with other parts of the country where there are more problems. Also, most of the informants reported having friends

from all the ethnic and religious groups, and expressed pride for the harmonious situation in their region. It could be argued, though, that the Albanians of the region are somewhat distanced from the general Macedonian-Albanian tensions also because unlike the other parts of the country, the variety of Albanian spoken in the Prespa region belongs to the Tosk dialects of Albanian, not to Geg. Yet this could not be verified on the basis of the interviews.

Among the multilingual Muslim informants there were two who identified as Macedonian Muslims or Torbeši and were residents of the town of Struga with their families coming from the villages north of the city. In addition, a group of Macedonian Muslims with their background also in the same region was interviewed during the field excursion in the city of Ohrid, yet no questionnaires were filled during that interview. Also, two other informants had a Macedonian Muslim mother, one of them considering herself as Albanian, in accordance to his father's ethnic group, and the other as Macedonian, although listed as Turkish in the official records like her father. There is a possibility that these cases are indicative of the dominance of the larger ethnic groups in mixed marriages, also suggested by the informants during the group interview.

Both the names of the group and the group itself is contested in Macedonia, with no reliable statistics on their number. The lack of statistics is because the Macedonian Muslims are not considered officially as a minority, unlike in the former Yugoslavia where there was a possibility to declare oneself as Muslim, one of the constitutive nations of the then state. The opposition to the separate status of the Macedonian Muslims is likely to be connected to fears that granting a minority status to this group would undermine the entitled status of Macedonians, generally associated with the Eastern Orthodox faith.[8] The problems regarding naming the group are complicated: in the group interview, the informants explicitly told that the proper term for the group is Torbeši, and the term Macedonian Muslims (Mac. *Makedonci-muslimani*) should not be used, and that it is

[8] One of the reasons why a new census has not been conducted yet, although desperately overdue, may be connected to similar fears: The reported higher overall fertility rate of the Albanian population may mean that the proportional size of the Macedonian population has most likely reduced from 2002.

precisely under this name, Torbeši, that the interviewees seek recognition for their group. For them, the term Macedonian Muslims represents an attempt to reduce the group into a sub-category of the Macedonians. Yet one of our two other informants regarded the term Torbeši as pejorative, which is also how some members of the Macedonian majority view it, yet the other informant explicitly told that there is nothing offensive about the name.

The concerns expressed by the members of the Muslim communities in Macedonia were often related to the majority Macedonians, but not uniform. Some informants deplored the reluctance of the Macedonians to learn any of the minority languages, also, among the members of the smaller linguistic minorities, the dominance of Macedonian was seen as a threat to their language, yet one Albanian informant told also that her children were not either particularly interested in learning Macedonian. Almost all informants emphasised the importance of teaching the minority language speakers their mother tongue: while some of the native Turkish speakers had received part of their basic education in Turkish, there are very few educational resources available in Romani, and the same is true also for the predominantly Orthodox Aromanians of the region. According to the the Torbeši informants, a concrete consequence of bunching them as Macedonians was that their children could go through the whole education system without hearing a word about the existence of their community.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Victor Friedman (2012: 163) notes that the proverb "languages are wealth", and different variations thereof, is ubiqutous in the Balkans. Also in this study the informants expressed this idea through several paraphrasings, showing that despite the prevalent ideals of ethno-centric nationalism, something of the traditionally multilingual past is still retained. One of the most obvious changes to the historical situation is that the dominant ethno-linguistic groups in all three countries are typically monolingual; when there is multilingualism regarding the local languages, the multilingual speakers are typically

members of a minority, hence concentrating on multilingual speakers was also a good way of finding members of various minorities.

Despite the radical differences regarding the status of ethnic and linguistic minorities in the three countries, one of the most commonly expressed wishes among all informants was the better recognition of the minority groups and their languages in basic education. While learning the majority language rarely posed any problems, its resources being available in abundance, acknowledging and utilising the potential of minority languages in education could also help reconciling differences both between the different communities but across the borders as well (see Wahlström, 2016).

Many minority issues in these countries remain unsettled, most notably the status of the Macedonian or Orthodox Slavic minority in Greece. This has left the members of various minorities in the position of hostages in a battle, fought by politicians in the respective countries. Indeed, the informants reported typically much friendlier inter-ethnic relations in their own communities than what could be imagined on the basis of the larger disputes where their status is at stake. This shows also the particular risk of politicising the identity discourse by reducing it as part of the fights among the ruling political elites – from which the very citizens of all three countries often wish to distance themselves. For example, a key issue for understanding the Greek position is the underlying fear that the recognition of the Macedonian minority may eventually lead for demands for the return of the people exiled during the civil war, or, since 60 years have passed since, rather their confiscated property. These fears find confirmation in the words of leading politicians of the Republic of Macedonia for whom supporting these demands is a guaranteed way to win popularity among their voters.

A situation somewhat parallel to that of the Macedonians in Greece is found in Kosovo. The resistance to the independence of Kosovo within the Republic of Serbia disencourages the politicians from finding a lasting solution, since any concessions may be unpopular among their voters, most of whom have never set their foot on Kosovo. Yet one could argue that the group suffering the most are in fact the very Serbs of Kosovo, who continue to be confined to enclaves and are thus prevented from becoming part of the actual

surrounding society, independent of the alms from Belgrade. In Greece, solving the question of the name of the Republic of Macedonia could bring solution also to the minority question by removing the biggest disagreement between the two countries and thus alleviating the tensions. Yet as long as there is no foreseeable solution to the naming dispute, these issues can be used by politicians for scoring free points on both sides, in Macedonia for instance by supporting the demands of the children of the exiled and in Greece by acting tough against the Macedonian minority.

The 2010s has seen an unexpected rise in populist political agendas throughout Europe and elsewhere, based on claims that the majority population of the country has become somehow marginalised by minorities or their liberal supporters. The logical shortcomings of this train of thought are obvious, the true marginalisation happening perhaps rather in the economy and in the distribution of wealth – although not by the minorities or their supporters. This debate, present also in the Balkans in different forms, should not blur the fact that the majority always possesses better means to improve the status of the minorities than the minorities themselves. For instance, the monolingualism of the majority forms a barrier between the minorities and the majorities, unknown to the region only hundred years ago. While this may not be a problem in the sense of communication, in countries like Macedonia it is very difficult to legitimise the dominance of one ethno-linguistic group in the eyes of a minority, still almost half the size of the majority, if the majority shows no interest in meeting them halfway, for instance by learning at least the basics of the language of their neighbours and colleagues (see Xhaferri, 2014).

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