

The Causes of a War: Ethnic Conflict in Macedonia

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Abstract:

"We still do not know what happened in 2001 in Macedonia" is a chorus repeated in Macedonia with unbearable lightness by politicians and intellectuals, which, after all are expected to know. In the mean time, really not knowing what happened in 2001, a new generation of school kids and students, with a feeling of lost dignity, protest in the streets of Macedonian cities. The feeling will not disappear until they learn the truth. This analysis is yet another attempt of mine in that direction.

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The political literature that in this last decade studies the experience of the twenty-two states that emerged after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, come to useful general conclusions. One of them is that the choice of an inadequate strategy of building a state and building a nation in conditions of democracy can position the whole society on wrong tracks. Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, long-time researchers of democracies in the world, create a useful scheme for the relations between the state, the nation (or nations) and democracy. The choice of strategy of building a state and building a nation in conditions of democracy, they conclude, depends on the specific situation of the state. The situation itself depends on the degree of presence of other nations besides the titular nation on the territory of the state. Thus, the first situation: if there is no other nation it is easy to consolidate the democratic nation-state, with a decision-making system based on the majority principle. Second situation: if on the territory of the state, besides the titular nation there is another nation, it is possible to create a democratic nation-state if the other nation is not nationally awakened. Third situation: if the other nation is nationally awakened that creates conflicts, making democracy difficult, although not impossible. Democratic consolidation is possible only if the political system is carefully planned, and the state moves towards a multinational state. Fourth situation: when besides the titular nation there is another nation which is militant, it generates so much conflict or repression, that democratic consolidation is highly improbable. Namely, this state will be under strong pressure for territorial division, especially if a territorial demarcation between the ethnic groups is possible. If a clearly demarcated territorial base exists, peaceful secession is possible with de-

mocracy in both new states. If there is no territorial base for ethnic division, “velvet divorce” is impossible, and if militancy persists democracy cannot be consolidated.¹

The situation in which Macedonia was in 1991, is situation number three. Still, the constitution of 1991 chose situation number one, putting Macedonia on the wrong track of democratic transition. We can find many justifications why we opted for the majoritarian system of the civil democracy: starting from fear for our survival, to the raging nationalisms that tore apart the Yugoslav Federation along ethnic lines. But, by choosing the wrong strategy, not only did we not forward democracy in Macedonia, but ten years later we ended up a step lower in the mentioned list of situations– with a militant Albanian nation, with a military conflict and with demands for division along ethnic lines. Namely, in 1991 we decided on a strategy, which is typical for a state where there is no other nation but the titular. In accordance to this logic– we Macedonians voted on the Constitution by ourselves. In that way our political leaders sent the message that Macedonia belongs to ethnic Macedonians, since every state should tend to become a nation-state, and every nation should become a state. In the past, it was possible to proclaim this policy and to achieve it in practice. In the nineteenth century, the French state, for example, led by the idea of the Jacobins “nation unie et indivisible”, through coordinated policies in the spheres of education, public service and army, systematically eliminated the multilingualism and the multiculturalism in the country. Today at the beginning of the twenty first century in Europe, such politics is condemned to failure.

In the decade after the proclamation of the Constitution we received confirmation of yet another scientific theses in politics – that in conditions of freedom, a just solution of the relation “polis-demos” or “state-people” should precede the shaping of the democratic institutions. Since a democratic state is possible only if as a state has the legality of all its composing elements. In the case of Macedonia, in order to pass the Constitution, an exquisitely difficult task had to be fulfilled – the construction of a rightful relation between the state and its nations! In order to do that, an agreement between the “demoi” was essential, which however, was not reached in 1991. This deficiency could not be surpassed with “democracy”, because, as Robert Dahl, another authority in democracy studies, warns: “the criteria of the democratic process presupposes the rightfulness of the unit itself... since it can not be made rightful simply by democratic procedures”.² We, Macedonians knew what a just state is and we translated this concept into a Constitutional text, which we voted for ourselves. Briefly: a nation-state of the Macedonian people, with rights for minorities. However, the troubles of the democratic life, the troubles of a free life for everybody, not just for us, are reflected in the necessity to ask others as well. We did not do that. And when the domination of the Macedonians in Parliament blocked the process of the articulation of the interests of the Albanians into state policy, the situation spilled over on the streets. The Constitutional system, which did not have protection mechanisms for minorities, so that politics can absorb their requests and translate them into state policy, found itself in the role of crisis generator. In such conditions, nationalism, not democracy, became “the only game in town”

¹ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe, Baltimore and London, 1996, p.36

² Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, New Haven, 1989, p.207

with anger and mutual intolerance growing day by day. Macedonia was on the road that led to ethnic conflict. It was only a matter of time when Macedonian nationalism would be challenged by Albanian nationalism in the form of a confrontation between the two ethnic communities. That happened ten years after the passing of the Constitution.

In 2001 under international pressure and with the help of NATO, the military conflict was stopped, and Macedonia was forced to leave the political strategy of 1991, which did not endure the test of time. The Ohrid Agreement positioned the Macedonian state on a different track. We found ourselves in the situation three of Linz and Stepan, which states that: when the other nation is awakened it creates conflicts, making democracy difficult, although still possible; democratic consolidation is possible only if the political system is carefully planned, and the state moves towards a multinational state. Consensual democracy lays in the foundation of the new strategy, in the shape of a combination of political liberalism, based on the individual rights and the collective rights of the nations. If Macedonian politics quickly builds a new consensual style, which will deal successfully with the necessity of a delicate act of ethnic balancing on all political decision-making levels, Macedonia could start the road of democratic consolidation. If this fails, requests for territorial division in the shape of federalization or division of the state will become louder. The problem in Macedonia today is that there is no political movement, which would unconditionally discard the old and would identify with the new democratic strategy. That is logical. Ten years of domination of nationalism makes the new democratic strategy unpopular with the Macedonian people, and there is no politician in the world that would like to be unpopular. In addition to this, the new democratic strategy was imposed from outside and is not a result of our awareness and will. Thus, even those Macedonian politicians who support the Ohrid Agreement, do not experience it as a new page in the democratic history of the state, but as an extorted statistical operation, which has to be completed fully. But such behavior cannot pass without consequences. Namely, the absence of a vision among politicians and intellectuals of a new democratic Macedonia burdens the transition process, and makes democratic consolidation entirely uncertain. In the mean time, not understanding what happened to us in 2001, the young generation could start working against its future.

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