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Politicization of Everyday Ethnicity and Religion in North Macedonia

The aim of this article is to analyse the dynamics of religion-ethnicity relation in the Republic of North Macedonia. Special emphasis is placed on the current ethno-political tensions between Albanians and Macedonians and the use of religion and religious symbols in this collision, which is reflected both in the political discourse and in the everyday life and relationships, influencing perceptions and collective notions of people about religion and ethnicity. The findings show that the process of maintenance and shift of the ethno-religious boundaries is dynamic, multidirectional and multi-layered. It is influenced by domestic political, social, economic and cultural developments, international factors such as the EU and NATO accession of the country, as well as the spread of radical Islamic ideologies.

Key words: Macedonians, Albanians, Islam, Orthodox Christianity, boundaries

Политизација етничке припадности и религије у свакодневном животу у Северној Македонији

Циљ рада је да анализира динамику односа религије и етничке припадности у Републици Северној Македонији. Посебна пажња се посвећује етно-политичким тензијама између Албанаца и Македонаца и употреби религије и верских симбола у овом контексту, што се одражава како у политичком дискурсу, тако и у свакодневном животу и друштвеним односима, утичући на представе и колективна схватања људи о религији и етничкој припадности. Налази показују да је процес одржања и промене етно-религијских граница динамичан, вишестран и вишеслојан. На њега утичу домаће политичке, друштвене, економске и културне околности, као и међународни чиниоци, попут Европске уније, приступања земље НАТО-у, као и ширења идеологије радикалног ислама.

Кључне речи: Македонци, Албанци, ислам, православно хришћанство, границе

Introduction

Historically, people belonging to different ethnic and/or religious communities have populated the territory of the contemporary Republic of North Macedonia. Often, one and the same population was ethnically “labelled” in various ways.

Furthermore, there was hardly a clear distinction between the different ethnic groups, resulting in boundaries (see Barth 1969) being continually reaffirmed, contested, and negotiated. The picture in this part of the Balkans from ethnic and religious perspective has been extremely variegated and dynamic both, in the past and today. The population has lived in a contact zone, where cultural adoptions have been hardly an exception; an area where the processes of differentiation, consolidation and identification were not completed even at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century (Markov 2010, 301–302). For instance, in the beginning of the 20th century Vasil Künchov, Bulgarian geographer and ethnographer, wrote:

“Next is the town of Tetovo, inhabited by the Turkish majority. Turkish population in this region is exposed to albanization. All the male population is bilingual, and in the case of mixed marriages Arnaut language is often spoken within these families [...] The whole Upper (Goren) Debar is threatened by albanization. Bulgarian–Mohamedan villages, bordering Arnaut villages, are already bilingual. The Torbeši consider it honourable to present themselves as Arnauts”¹ (Künchov 1900, 65, 90 – translation from Bulgarian by the author).

A century later, in her research conducted in the municipality of Center Zhupa (Центар Жупа), near Debar (Дебар), the polish anthropologist Karolina Bielenin-Lenchovska quotes the following passage from an interview:

“What is your nationality? – Turkish. – Do you have any Macedonians or Albanians in your family? – Yes, my mother is Albanian. – Do you speak Albanian? – Yes. – And Turkish? – A bit. – How do you communicate at home? – In Macedonian.” (Bielenin-Lenchovska 2008, 176).

In my field diary in 2009 I wrote:

“My respondent is part of the staff at the Tetovo University of South-eastern Europe. His colleague had introduced him to me as an Albanian. Later, during the conversations I had with him, he claimed not to be an Albanian, but a Turk. He confirmed that he doesn’t speak Albanian well, but he is married to an Albanian woman. He said, his children don’t know Turkish, and speak Albanian. I took the interview in Macedonian.”

These examples clearly show the complexity of the ongoing processes. Furthermore, there are many regional and local dimensions, which can be a subject of particular examinations. What makes a strong impression in the country, however,

¹ In original: “По-нататък иде гр. Тетово съ турско мнозинство. Турското население въ тия мѣста е изложено на поарнаутване. Всичкото мъжко население е двоезично, а при смѣсени бракове арнаутскиятъ езикъ се чува често и вътрѣ въ семействата [...] Цѣлиятъ Горни Дебъръ е заплашенъ отъ поарнаутчане. Българо-мухамеданскитѣ села, които допиратъ до арнаутски села, сж вече двоезични. Торбешитѣ смѣтатъ за гордость да се прѣдставятъ за арнаути.”

is the role and importance that religion and religious symbols have grown to have in interethnic relations nowadays, as well as their political use.

In the beginning of this article I would like to outline series of events, occurred several years ago, events which are very indicative for the topic I intend to discuss further in the text. It started in January 2012, at the time of the carnival in the village of Vevchani (Вевчани).² During the carnival a group of men, Orthodox Macedonians, were dressed up as Muslim women with burqas. They acted out the death of an old Muslim's penis. The phallus was two meters long and laid on a platform. During the procession it was mourned by the women with burqas – the widows of the dead man. Another person was dressed up as a nurse who attempted to revive the lifeless penis and imitated sexual acts with it. In addition, a drunk imam, who carried a bottle of alcohol in the one hand and the Quran in the other, accompanied the procession.³

Soon after the end of the carnival, with photos and videotapes available on the Internet, there was a harsh institutional response by the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia followed. The mufti of Struga demanded an official apology by the Mayor of Vevchani Pero Ilieski and called for his resignation. Since the performance was seen as a mockery with the Quran, the Islamic religion and the Muslim way of life, a “peaceful protest” was organized. It was held in Struga on 27th January (Friday) in the presence of the Mayor of Struga Ramiz Merko, an Albanian political leader himself and a representative of the Albanian party called Democratic Union for Integration. In fact, most of the demonstrators were Albanians. Although the protest had been announced as “peaceful”, slogans as “Vevchani-Down”, “Death to the Giaours” (Turk. 'unbelievers', 'infidels'), “Allah is the greatest”, etc. were shouted.⁴

Later in the evening, the Macedonian flag in front of the Cultural centre “Brothers Miladinovi” in Struga was taken down and burned. That same evening the regular bus transporting passengers from Struga to Vevchani was attacked with stones, when passing through the Albanian-populated village of Veleshta (Велешта), located just a few kilometres from the village of Vevchani. The next morning the Macedonian flag of the municipality building in Struga was also taken down and it was replaced with the Albanian national flag and a green flag with Ar-

² Vevchani is a village, located 14 km north-west of the town of Struga (Струга) and it is populated with Macedonian Orthodox population. However, most of the surrounding villages are inhabited by Muslims – Albanians and Macedonian-speaking Muslims (*Torbeši*). The Carnival of Vevchani is an annual event, which is held to celebrate the New Year according to the Julian calendar. There are several main traditional masks and personages: the groom and the bride, the musicians, the devils and the stupid august. Contemporary masks that usually mock topical national and regional issues in society and politics complement these traditional masks. The carnival get wide media coverage in the country, as well as abroad.

³ The performance can be seen on the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsGwqd5QM8o> (Accessed December 30, 2020).

⁴ “Вевчанци им го дигнаа притисокот на муслиманите”. *Вечер*, 27. 1. 2012, <https://vecer.mk/node/183174> (Accessed December 30, 2020).

abic religious inscriptions. The mayor Ramiz Merko stated that “the wind had blown the flag”. Similar incidents occurred in the next few days: on Saturday, an ambulance in the village of Labunishta (Јабунисhta), known to employ locals from Vevchani, was also attacked with stones; the next day, in the village of Borovec (Боровец), a cross in the courtyard of the local Orthodox church was demolished; on Monday the historic and icon-rich Orthodox parish church St. Nicholas (Свети Никола) in the ethnically mixed village of Labunishta was torched in the middle of the night. Fire-fighters managed to save the most of the church main building, but some adjoining parish buildings were burnt to the ground.⁵

Tensions continued to smoulder, only to flare up again three months later. On 12th April 2012, on the eve of the Easter, the massacre at Smilkovci Lake (Смилковско *езеро*) took place – five Orthodox Macedonian civilians were shot and killed. A police operation called “Monster” (Монструм) was organized. Macedonian police raided 26 properties, arresting 20 people on a variety of charges. The Macedonian Interior Minister Gordana Jankuloska claimed them to be Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists, some of whom had fought in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Among the seized items, there were weapons, ammunitions, as well as religious literature. All arrested were ethnic Albanians. This triggered a new storm of Albanian protests.⁶

Over the past two-three decades, such clashes with salient religious dimensions have become more frequent. Therefore, the aim of the article is to analyse namely the escalation of the religious tensions and the dynamics of religion-ethnicity relations in the contemporary Republic of North Macedonia. Here is the place to stipulate that the nation-building processes in North Macedonia are very complex phenomena. They could be understood in a regional context, considering retrospectively the a-synchronic nation-building among Macedonians and Albanians; the struggles for Macedonian ethnic and national recognition vis-à-vis Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian claims; the Kosovo impact and aspirations for Greater Albania. All these issues are important, but it is not possible to be addressed in this short text. Therefore, I will particularly focus on the following research questions: What is the impact of the ethno-political conflict between Albanians and Macedonians on religious and ethnic communities in the country? What does discourses regarding religion and ethnicity tell us about the interethnic relations? What is the place of radical Islam in these developments?

I start with the assumption that the escalation of the religious tensions has its historical ground and should be placed within the context of the ethno-political

⁵ “Му пречи ли некому мирна мултиетничка Струга?”. *Дојче веле*, 30. 1. 2012, <https://www.dw.com/mk/му-пречи-ли-некому-мирна-мултиетничка-струга/a-15701917> (Accessed December 30, 2020).

⁶ “Радијални исламисти го извршиле масакрот кај Смиљковци”. *Дојче веле*, 1. 5. 2012, <https://www.dw.com/mk/радијални-исламисти-го-извршиле-масакрот-кај-смиљковци/a-15920128> (Accessed December 30, 2020); “Тензични протести без поголеми инциденти во Македонија”. *Дојче веле*, 11. 5. 2012, <https://www.dw.com/mk/тензични-протести-без-поголеми-инциденти-во-македонија/a-15944775> (Accessed December 30, 2020).

conflict between Albanians and Macedonians that has lasted for decades in the country. Religion and religious symbols are intensively used in this confrontation, which is reflected both in the political discourse, and in the everyday life and social relationships, influencing perceptions and collective notions of people about religion and ethnicity. My main argument is that in North Macedonia, paradoxically, ethnic and religious boundaries have been traditionally fluid and porous, but in recent times have become more and more politicized, which I will demonstrate in my fieldwork findings.

The article is based on data from interviews and direct ethnographic observation, collected in the areas of Skopje (Скопје), Tetovo (Тетово), and Struga (Струга). Between 2008 and 2010 I carried out the research for my PhD thesis entitled “Contemporary Labour Migrations of the Albanians from Macedonia”.⁷ Although religion and ethnicity were not in the focus of this research, they were among the topics, which quite often emerged in the conversations with my interlocutors. Moreover, in my endeavour to place the migratory experiences of Albanians in the context of a more general picture of labour mobility and socio-cultural transformative processes in the area, I spoke not only to Albanians, but also to Orthodox Macedonians, Macedonian-speaking Muslims (*Torbeši*)⁸ and Turks. In 2012, immediately after the events described above, my colleague, the historian Dimitar Petrov⁹ and I conducted a ten-day field trip devoted to the topic “Religion, memory and identities in Macedonia” (23rd May – 1st June). Our respondents were, again, of diverse ethnic and religious background.

Most of the interviews were taken in Macedonian – almost all of my interlocutors¹⁰ spoke freely the language. Among the younger generation, there were a

⁷ The thesis was defended successfully at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum (IEFSEM) in Sofia, Bulgaria in July 2011. In 2015 the dissertation was published as a monograph (Markov 2015).

⁸ The mother tongue of *Torbeši* is Macedonian. Nowadays, however, there are several main lines of constructing their self-identity. Some see themselves as the “purest” Macedonians, preserved “the cleanest Macedonian blood and language”. Others believe that they are a separate ethnic group on the base of their Muslim faith. A third small group of people insists on having Turkish identity. And finally, there are also people who declare themselves as Albanians. Sometimes their (self)identification is contextual and relational. A profound examination and analysis could be found in Bielenin-Lenchowska 2008 and Zadrozna 2017. The Turkish point of view is discussed in Dikici 2008, and the Macedonian – in Svetieva 2004.

⁹ At this time, he was still working on his PhD thesis “The Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia – on the Edge of Two Centuries, on the Frontier between Three Countries. Problems of the Political and Social Transformation of the Community – the End of the XX and the Beginning of the 21st Century”. The thesis was defended in October 2017 at the Faculty of History at the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Bulgaria.

¹⁰ All interviewees were men; it proved very difficult to find female interlocutors during such short-lasting fieldwork research stays. This reflected very much the patriarchal context of social environment in rural regions and especially among Muslims, within which young unmarried men and/or strangers, such as myself, are only allowed to male spaces. Moreover, conversations about politics are generally considered a male sphere. Thus, the article happens to presents the male perspective of the studied issues. The female dimensions are intriguing topic of further research.

few people, who had difficulties in speaking in Macedonian. In these cases, I conducted the interviews in Albanian with the help of a local interpreter. Therefore, all interviews cited in this text are translated from Macedonian to English by the author. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. There were a few cases where respondents refused audio-recording, therefore, I took my notes in writing. In addition, I, together with my colleague, benefited from many informal conversations and situations that I sketched in my field diary.

Additionally, I examined and analysed texts and public statements published and disseminated through the mass media; I also took under consideration discourses from internet forums and social networks.

Ethnicization of the religion

After 1991, when Macedonia became an independent republic, the new Constitution declared the state “a nation-state of Macedonian people, in which full equality as citizens and permanent coexistence with the Macedonian people is provided for the Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Roma and other nationalities”, thus replacing the previous “a state of the Macedonian nation and Albanian, and Turkish nationalities”. The Constitution guaranteed the freedom of religion both in the private and public sphere. While no religion was proclaimed “official”, the Orthodox Church – the religious organization the majority belonged to – was explicitly mentioned, unlike other religious “communities” and “groups”, which were defined in general terms (Koinova 2000, 28; Daskalovski 2002, 15–16).

This new definition “granted” the Albanians the same status as the Vlachs and Roma, which they considered unacceptable.¹¹ (Poulton 1995, 182–183; Krasniqi 2011, 200–201). If we refer to official statistics, the Albanians represent a quarter of the total population but they claim to form at least 40%.¹² In some municipalities they are the majority – 70.3% percent in Tetovo; 66.7% in Gostivar; 58.1% in Debar; 56.5% in Struga (Census 2002). Albanian political leaders complained that they and all Albanians they claim to represent feel as “second-class” citizens in the country that they live in (Koinova 2002, 26). Thus, the post-1991 period was experienced by the Albanian population as a time of double “insecurity” – related to their ethnic and religious identity, since both Albanian ethnicity and Islam were considered “incompatible” with the new-established political vision of Macedonian elite for a national Orthodox Macedonian state (Krasniqi 2011, 201). Contrary to

¹¹ The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution gave the Albanians and the Turks the higher status of “nationalities”, while the Roma and Vlachs were considered “ethnic groups”.

¹² The last official census in the country was conducted in 2002. The next census, which started on 1st October 2011, was interrupted on 11th October, four days before its scheduled completion date, when the State Census Commission (SCC) resigned. According to the SCC’s brief press release, the census was suspended due to different field interpretations of the surveying methodology, therefore it could not guarantee reliable data, see: Пописот е стопиран, утре ќе се одлучува што натаму”. *Makfax. News Agency*, 11. 10. 2011, <https://makfax.com.mk/makedonija/269444> (Accessed December 30, 2020).

this, the Albanian politicians considered themselves as equal partners to Macedonian politicians and demanded that the Albanian community in the country should be given a partner-nation (constituent) status. In this context, a struggle over the basic idea behind the concept of the state began between Albanian and Macedonian political elites (Daskalovski 2013, 368–370).

Thus, the 1990s was the time when the religion and ethnic identity were merged into a single cause that needed to be fought for and defended. Thus, the political crisis and ethnic tensions between Macedonians and Albanians intensified, leading to the armed conflict in 2001 (Ragaru 2008, 4–8). The signing of the Ohrid Agreement was an attempt to overcome the crisis.¹³ These developments were not primarily about religion, but the ethnic tensions were strengthened by the religious differences. What is more, in Article 19 of the new post-conflict (and current) Constitution, the Islamic Religious Community is mentioned, beside the Orthodox Church, as one of the country's religious communities (Ustav na Republika Severna Makedonija, amendment VII).

However, ethnic clashes have continued and Albanian and Macedonian populations have remained strongly divided in their public life along ethnic lines. The increased importance of religion in identity formation became more visible namely in the post-1991 period. It could be argued that the intensification of religious sentiments came as a result of political agitation, as much as of sincere religious devotion (Koinova 2002, 48). Precisely at that time, the myth that incorporated the notions of “Muslim conspiracy” and “endangered Orthodoxy” emerged in the public space. It played the role of an integrative force for the Macedonian people in the process of recognition of the new independent state. The regional environment in the early 1990s also provided fertile ground for the rapid development and flourishing of such kind of mythology (Najceska, Simoska & Gaber 1996, 86–88). Politicians in the other former Yugoslav Republics, such as Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, tied together the concepts of “nation” and “religion” and put them into a single nationalist concept. Similarly, in Macedonia the opposition be-

¹³ The Ohrid Framework Agreement (Охридски рамковен договор) was the outcome of weeks of intense negotiations, in which two international mediators (François Léotard for the EU and James Pardew for the USA) took part. It was signed on 13th August 2001 by the leaders of the country's four major political parties – the Prime-Minister Ljubcho Georgievski (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation–Democratic Party of National Unity, VMRO-DPMNE), Branko Crvenkovski (Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia, SDSM), Arben Xhaferi (Democratic Party of the Albanians, DPA) and Ymer Ymeri (Party of Democratic Prosperity, PDP). The agreement proposed a series of constitutional and institutional reforms designed to reduce power asymmetries between Macedonians and Albanians in the field of language, representation in the public sector, the administrative structures and the political process. Measures for decentralization and education improvement were also stipulated. In exchange for these concessions, the agreement reasserted territorial integrity, state unity and sovereignty (Daskalovski 2002, 17–26; Brunnbauer 2002, 4–7; Ragaru 2008, 8–20). The full text of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in English is available at <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/8/100622.pdf> (Accessed December 30, 2020).

tween Christians and Muslims became prolific for political confrontation (Gaber 1997, 106).

The ethno-religious confrontation today has its visual symbolic expression: big Orthodox crosses have been raised alongside every town inhabited by Macedonians, while the Albanians “respond” with rapid renovation and building of new monumental mosques. Often the Albanian national symbols are clearly marked on these religious buildings. In this context, the use of religion and its ethnicization has led to emergence of everyday perceptions, such as: to be Orthodox is equal to be Macedonian, and if you are a Muslim, you are an Albanian. This ethnic determination is even carried on religious sites abroad by Albanian migrants:

“In Italy, where I live, the mosque is not an Albanian one, there is an Arabic mosque. But all Muslims go there. In Italy, in Austria, and wherever you go, in the mosque the nation is not important. Whoever wants to worship, is free to enter and to worship [...]. Only, there is something a little different with us – the Albanians are little more nationalists. We always write on the mosque “Albanian mosque” [...] It's normal to write which country has financed the construction of the mosque, but to write about specific nation – this isn't the custom. However, we, the Albanians, do it” (masculine – henceforth: m, born in 1980 in the town of Kaçanik, lives in the city of Skopje).

This delineates certain distance between the Macedonian Albanians and the Albanians from Albania working in Italy:

“They want their children to speak Italian and not to be a Muslim anymore. They give them Italian names – Macarena or Christian, for example. Such names don't have any connection with our Muslim names.” (m, born in 1964 in the city of Skopje)

Another clear mark of ethnicization and politicization of the religion is connected to the mentioned above murder of five people near Skopje. As it was noted, all arrestees were Albanians and they were incriminated for radical Islam, terrorism, and relations with fundamentalist Islamic organizations from the Middle East. Initially, among the arrested were also a few older people, as well as women who later were dismissed. Just a few weeks after these events, I happened to conduct my field research in Macedonia. My Albanian interlocutors were very irritated about this case. Many times during our conversations, they asked me, “What does exactly ‘radical’ Islam means?” In their opinion, many Albanians are indeed religious and observe the Muslim values and rituals, but this did not mean that such people were radical Islamists. The Quran and religious literature found in the homes of the arrestees should not have been subject of such incrimination. Every Muslim believer owns the Quran, just like every Christian has the Bible at home. In this case, their complaints did not condemn the arrest of the perpetrators, but were rather raised against such public and unproven accusations. All respondents were shocked and horrified that old women were also arrested as “Islamists”. One of them – a history teacher – reacted with irritation when we were speaking on this topic. In his words:

“Islam is only one. There are different schools or sects, but this is not Islam. Islam doesn’t preach killing people, no religion preaches: ‘Go and kill!’ Islam can’t be radical, because Islam is only one”. (m, born in 1965 in the village of Dollogozhda, near the town of Struga)

This illustrates that the situation was perceived as a part of purposeful demonization of the Albanians. Behind such acts, my interlocutors see political motives – aiming at presenting Albanians as followers of Talibans and Al-Qaeda. Thus, they are a threat not only to Macedonia, but also to the whole region of Southeastern Europe. Such rhetoric presents the Macedonians as the victims, who, however, will fight against the terrorists, being a loyal ally of NATO. In this respect, one of my interlocutors, university lecturer, claimed that the time of the incident was deliberately chosen – on the eve of Easter, on the one hand, and on the eve of NATO’s meeting in Chicago,¹⁴ on the other. He regards all slogans about Great Albania in combination with Islamic symbols as inconsistent, explaining that among Albanians there are Muslims, Orthodox and Catholic Christians, so the Quran and Islam cannot unify them. Based on that he expressed an assumption that many rioters were paid and the protests - arranged by external factors that had planned the escalation as a result of a “crowd effect”.

According to another young man, the allegation that Albanians in Macedonia were in relations with radical Islamist groups from Afghanistan or Iraq were exaggerated: “Yes, it’s true that there are many Albanians who went there, but they are just workers and support staff of the various peace-making missions in the Middle East” (m, born in 1986 in the town of Tetovo). He did not rule out the possibility that some of the men could have fallen under the influence of Islamic radicalism, since after returning, they grew a beard, wore different clothes and sometimes their wives started covering their faces. He concluded, however, that the same could also refer Albanian workers returning from Western Europe. My interlocutor also claimed that such cases were rare and are not characteristic of the majority of Albanians.

In Tetovo and especially in Struga one can often hear the statement that the bearded men are in Skopje and people who aim at destabilizing the region finance them, according to my respondents. In fact, one can see such men, as well as women with covered heads and long coats most often in Skopje than in Tetovo and Struga. Sometimes such middle-aged women with kerchiefs are accompanied by their younger daughters, dressed in jeans and shirts.

¹⁴ The Prime Minister of that time Nikola Gruevski sent a letter to the leaders of NATO member-states, asking for the inclusion of the country’s accession application on the agenda of the coming Chicago summit, given that the country had met all the required criteria for NATO membership. Alliance enlargement, however, was not on the agenda – the summit discussed the Arab Spring, Libyan Civil War, as well as the global financial crisis, and transition for NATO forces in Afghanistan, and a missile shield system for Europe to seek routes out – “NATO Summit begins in Chicago”, Ministry of Defence, Republic of North Macedonia, 20. 5. 2012, <http://www.mod.gov.mk/?mainnews=pocnuva-samitot-na-nato-vo-cikago&lang=en> (Accessed December 30, 2020).

Considerable differences exist due to various factors, such as social status and education. As another respondent said:

“In the urban districts people are more educated. Basically, one can’t understand whether someone is a Muslim or a Christian, whether is an Albanian, Turk or Macedonian.” (m, born in 1973 in the town of Tetovo)

This relation between education and radicalism was often noted:

“In rural areas and especially in some more distanced and remote places people have poorer education, which is a precondition for more easy manipulation.” (m, born in 1968 in the city of Skopje)

Such statements clearly indicate that the spread of fundamentalist Islamic ideas in the country should not be underestimated.¹⁵ The topic drew public attention in 2014–2015 with the numerous media publications about the killed Macedonian citizens during their participation as fighters in the ranks of radical Islamist organizations in Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, all of them were ethnic Albanians¹⁶ (Vůlkov 2018, 128–129).

According to researchers in political and security studies, Islamic extremist ideologies in North Macedonia are neither a reaction to secularism and modernism, nor do they defend religion. The absence of these ideological characteristics differentiates them from fundamentalism. Thus, activities of Islamist adherents in North Macedonia could be categorized as potential or marginal fundamentalism (Panovski 2011, 61–62). It seems that for the followers of Islamist ideologies in the country the financial motive is dominant, as most of them originate in poor and low educated social strata (Vůlkov 2018, 130–131). These analyses are supported largely by my fieldwork findings. The existence of such groups relies on foreign funding and external support and from this point of view, it is still a manageable security issue (Öktem 2010, 19; Panovski 2011, 62). The majority of Muslims in North Macedonia prefer traditional Islam, represented by the Hanafi School of jurisprudence; the political elites also support the local forms of Islamic practice. Thus, in the public and political discourse the radical Islamism is seen as a threat to the socio-political positions attained by the Muslims, in particular Albanians, in the country (Öktem 2010, 22; Babić 2014, 396; cf. Merdjanova 2013, 74–75).

At the same time, along with the statements about the deep religiosity, valued as a positive marker of every true Muslim believer, other interlocutors argue that many Albanians in fact are not that religious – in their words, many of them eat pork meat and drink wine. Some of them are atheists and endeavour to differentiate

¹⁵ The establishment of transnational Islamic networks in the Balkans is discussed by Ina Merdjanova (2013, 51–81); for the impact of global Islam, particularly in Albanian context, see Clayer 2001. Peter Mandaville (2014) addresses the broader topic about Islamism and politics in global perspective.

¹⁶ The number of new foreign fighters from North Macedonia has sharply declined since 2016. This is partially a result of a series of measures taken by the national Criminal Code, which criminalized participation in foreign military, paramilitary, or police forces (Deliso 2020, 2).

themselves from the deeply religious ones. In addition, there are many among my Albanian respondents who are tolerant and kindly oriented towards Christianity, especially in the Southwestern part of the country, i.e. the villages, inhabited by Tosk-Albanians in Struga region. Not only mosques, but some old churches as well, have been renovated with help of donations by Albanian workers abroad.

Religion, politics and ethnic boundaries

It should be pointed out that many Albanians among my interlocutors, especially the well-educated ones, know and acknowledge that their ancestors were Orthodox Christians. Sharing about such family members also serves as an additional argument that there are no grounds for mass propagation of Islamism. Such example is a schoolteacher in biology in Struga, who mentioned that his grandfather was an Orthodox-Christian and he also referred to a documentary about the Orthodox past of Tosk Albanians.

However, religion and ethnicity remain in correlation. In the recent years, new tensions can be observed. Some of my interlocutors argue that Macedonians appropriate their cultural heritage. An Albanian respondent from the village of Dobovjani (Добовјани), near Struga explained (the following):

“Have you ever been to the village of Tashmarunishta?¹⁷ On the right side, there is an ancient small monastery. This monastery is ours, it belongs to the village of Dobovjani. However, during the Ottoman times Albanians were converted to Muslims by force. So, previously, Albanians had not been Muslims, but they became such. This is the truth. And this is our church, it was built by us. But they want to say it is theirs.” (m, born in 1974 in the village of Dobovjani, near town of Struga)

The ruins of an early Christian basilica (5th century) are located in the Albanian village of Radolishta nearby¹⁸, in the yard of an Albanian family, who is funded by the National Museum “Dr. Nikola Nezlobinski” in Struga in order to maintain the ruins.

Nowadays, in conversations with the Albanian Muslims one can often hear that in the near past the areas of Ohrid, Struga and Debar were inhabited by numerous Orthodox Albanians, who during the 20th century were assimilated and turned into Macedonians. According to those of my respondents, it is enough to walk through the old town in Ohrid in the late evening to hear old people speaking Alba-

¹⁷ Tashmarunishta (Ташмаруништа) is a village situated 16 km on the north of Struga, inhabited by the Orthodox Christian Macedonians – there are 210 residents according to Census results 2002. The neighbouring village of Dobovjani is inhabited by the Muslim Albanians – 475 residents in 2002.

¹⁸ Radolishta (Радолишта, Alb. *Ladorishti*) is a village located 4 km on the west of Struga, populated by Tosk Muslim Albanians – according to the Census 2002 data 3119 people live in the village, and 3085 of them are Albanians.

nian from behind the yards' fences, although their offspring is fully macedonized and speaks Macedonian. Curious is the case of my middle-aged Orthodox Macedonian respondent from the village of Tashmarunishta:

“People call our kin ‘the Tosks’. We are Orthodox Macedonians, but my grandfather says that we have come from Albania.” (m, born in 1959 in the village of Tashmarunishta, near town of Struga)

The people, who speak Albanian but are Orthodox, were called *Škreti* by both Macedonians and Albanians. However, according to the Macedonian respondents they are ethnic Macedonians who only started using Albanian language in order to escape the plundering raids of Muslim-Albanian gangs; in contrast to Torbeši, who chose to change their faith and convert to Islam. Albanians argue that the *Škreti* are descendants of ethnic Albanians living in the area from time immemorial. They often mention Joseph Bageri – an Orthodox Albanian and a popular figure of the Albanian revival in the late 19th century, born in the village of Nistrovo (Нистрово) in the region of Upper Reka. He was one of the most active persons among the Albanian emigrant circles in Sofia, Bulgaria. Bageri was the man who upon his return to Upper Reka managed to establish the first school in Albanian in the Reka region (Khristakudi 1999).

During the last few years Branko Manojlovski, who originates from the same region of Upper Reka but has been living in the USA since 1968, has become popular with several interviews in Macedonian and Albanian media, where he claims that he is an Orthodox Albanian:

“Orthodox Albanians in Macedonia are a community that is not officially recognized, although they are a reality and the reality around them is a silent issue. Are in a small number, those who declare that they are Albanians, but with the Orthodox religion. Branko Manojlovski is the Albanian Orthodox, a patriot that told the story of his family, the truth of today's Orthodox people, and remission of their roots. The villages of Reka and Gostivar and also settlements in the southeastern part of Macedonia were once populated areas with majority Albanian Orthodox religion. Manojlovski told that after the Serbian occupation since 1913 began the assimilation of Orthodox Albanians and was put pressure on these areas to change their surnames.”¹⁹

Manojlovski is the head of the Association “Joseph Bageri” – a local organization of people from the region of Upper Reka, who held a symposium in June 2011 to honour Joseph Bageri and to raise awareness about their non-inclusion in the Ohrid Agreement. They claim that although the people of Upper Reka self-define as Orthodox Albanians, there are no Albanian-language schools in their area.

¹⁹ “Orthodox Albanians, Assimilated and Forgotten in Macedonia”. *Albeu.com*, 15. 7. 2011, <http://english.albeu.com/albania-news/orthodox-albanians,-assimilated-and-forgotten-in-macedonia/41292> (Accessed December 30, 2020). I kept the spelling in English of the original publication.

They invited the deputy prime minister Ademi²⁰ and asked him to intervene. At the parliamentary elections in 2016, Manojlovski was a candidate for the Democratic Union for Integration and was elected in the Macedonian parliament. Meanwhile, his nephew, the university professor and ex-Yugoslav diplomat Branislav Sinadinovski called for autonomous Albanian Orthodox Church within the region. He announced this during the promotion of his book *Orthodox Albanians in Macedonia*, in the presence of the leader of DUI Ali Ahmeti. The promotion was symbolically held on 28th November 2014, the Albanian National day (Flag day).²¹ At the end of December 2015, the Albanian Orthodox Community was officially registered by the Court of Skopje.²² According to some estimations, such developments received the approval of the leading Albanian political parties in the Republic of North Macedonia and corresponded to the goals and plans of the Albanian political agenda to increase Albanian rights and influence on national and regional level. Existence of a separate Albanian orthodox institution could have particular consequences: future Albanian claims to certain religious (Orthodox) sites and properties would become legal (Vůlkov 2018, 127–128).

On the other hand, Albanians are accused of assimilating Torbeši. In the beginning, I shortly mentioned the complex processes of identification among this population. In the past, they were even associated with the Bulgarian Muslims, based on language, as well as with the Turks on the base of their Muslim faith. In 1970, the state authorities created the “Republican Association for Cultural and Scientific Initiatives of the Macedonian Muslims”. The Association was actively supported by the clergy of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which added a new element to the argument by stating that the non-Albanian Muslims were Islamized Macedonians who had retained their Macedonian language, customs, and traditions (Koinova 2002, 48–49).

The Albanian influence over them has grown during the second half of the 20th century. The prevalent identification of religious affiliation with ethnicity in Macedonia is among the reasons behind the frequent shifts to Albanian identity among Torbeši. During the early 1990s for example, the Albanian Party for Democratic Prosperity has often appealed in its political propaganda to the shared religion of the Muslims in Macedonia. It declared to be the only party capable of protecting the right to education, religious teaching, and development of culture and traditions of Islamic community (Purvanov 1992, 148–149).

²⁰ Abdilaqim Ademi (1969–2018) was a member of the Albanian political party Democratic Union for Integration (DUI). He was Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia, responsible for the implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (July 26, 2008 – July 28, 2011); Minister of Environment and Physical Planning (July 28, 2011 – June 20, 2014; Minister of Education and Science (June 20, 2014 – January 16, 2016).

²¹ “Issue of Albanian Orthodox in FYROM has Caused Ethnic and Religious Debates”. *Independent Balkan News Agency*, 05. 12. 2014, <https://balkan.eu.com/issue-albanian-orthodox-fyrom-caused-ethnic-religious-debates> (Accessed December 30, 2020).

²² “Регистрирана албанска православна црква”. *Локално*, 27. 12. 2015, <https://lokalno.mk/registirana-albanska-pravoslavna-crkva-vo-makedonija> (Accessed December 30, 2020).

However, there is another political aspect, closely related to minority politics and the fight for more political, economic, social and cultural privileges (Koinova 2002, 43). Often political parties promise people jobs and positions in local administration or cultural and other institutions, if they become party members and propagandists. In this respect, the case of the village of Labunishta became famous. In the 1981 Census 90.4% of the total population declared themselves as Macedonians, 4.7% as Albanians and 1.8% as Turks. In the 1994 Census, however, Macedonians were 20.8%, Albanians – 30.5%, and Turks 30.8 %. According to the last 2002 census, in Labuništa lived 72.2% Albanians, 14.8% Turks and only 6.25% Macedonians. Simultaneously, 82% of the population declared Macedonian and 15.5% Albanian as their mother tongue.²³ This census took place in the time of the administrative restructuring after the Ohrid Agreement and during political crisis, as well as significant fight for Albanian or Macedonian supremacy in each Municipality. Slovenian anthropologist Sara Arko noted that Torbeši who chose Albanian affiliation often rationalize this as a factor which make their life easier in spatial aspect (as far as surrounding villages often are Albanian) and in temporal aspect (as far as in the current ethnicization and political division of the society between Macedonians and Albanians is easier to find job, if you declare yourself as Albanian, especially in the western regions of Macedonia predominantly inhabited by Albanians) (Arko 2009, 193–196).

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that religion and ethnicity in the Republic of North Macedonia correlate and are intertwined in many ways. It is visible that everyday life and relationships between Albanians, Macedonians and other smaller communities in the country are influenced by ethno-religious, highly politicized issues. The reasons could be found in the historical development, considering factors on national and regional level, as well as in the dynamics of socio-economic and political context. Albanians as an ethno-confessional minority within a predominantly Orthodox country, on the one hand, and their efforts to gain more rights and greater political influence in the country, on the other, are an essential premise and circumstance for the identities formation in the country.

The findings show that the process of maintenance and shift of the boundaries is dynamic, multidirectional and multi-layered. In addition to that, there are many local peculiarities, which should be taken into account. The continual ethno-political tensions between Albanians and Macedonians, however, are an important

²³ The data are available at MakStat database, State Statistical Office, the Republic of North Macedonia, section “Population of Republic of Macedonia by ethnic affiliation, by settlements, according to the population censuses 1948, 1963, 1961, 1971, 1981, 1991, 1994 and 2002”, http://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/en/MakStat/MakStat_Popisi_PopisNaNaselenie_PopisiNaseleniMesta/Popis_nm_1948_2002_NasPoEtnPrip_ang.px/?rxid=46ee0f64-2992-4b45-a2d9-cb4e5f7ec5ef (Accessed December 30, 2020).

factor, which influences the ongoing processes. In this relation, religion and religious symbols have attained growing significance. Albanians consider all anti-Muslim behaviour as violation of their rights and an effort to humiliate them. For Macedonians, on the other hand, each public act expressing Muslim religiosity is equal to Albanian irredentism (cf. Koinova 2000, 24). The politicization and use of the ethnicity and religion in political clashes add one more nuance to this multi-dimensional picture.

The growing foreign influence in the region of Southeastern Europe, and particularly in Macedonia, after the dissolution of Yugoslavia cannot be ignored, as well. Thus, followers of traditional forms of localized Muslim traditions are introduced to new radical forms of Islam. The extreme nationalist Macedonian circles have tried to use the alleged “Islamic threat” to inculcate fear in the public and to legitimize their anti-Albanian stance via Europe and the USA (Krasniqi 2011, 203–204). The Albanian political leaders, however, are not clerical in their political agenda. They are clearly oriented towards EU membership, and in this respect, they are not interested in tolerating radical Islamism. The emergence of the Orthodox Albanian community in the country and it being supported by an official Albanian political subject (DUI) could also be interpreted in this context.

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