

## **The Borders as Myths**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to reflect on the myth about the nation which lives behind the borders. Not all the borders have the same meaning. As an Albanian who lives in a neighboring country, Albania was a country that could never be seen, not even on TV. We spoke the same language, we had the same history but I never met an Albanian from behind the borders until Albania opened for the first time in 1991. 50 years time distance had created boundaries between us in terms of culture, mentality, communication, language, believes. As a member of a minority population in the country I was born and have lived in, I am used with boundaries that had been created between 'us' and 'them'. However, in the beginning of the '90s, after the fall of communist system in Albania, we were witnessing the rise of new boundaries among Albanians in the Balkans.*

**Keywords:** border, stereotype, identity, nation, religion

### **Introduction**

This paper examines the human geography of divided nations in the Balkans. I come from a country where boundaries have different meanings and dimensions. In our circumstances, boundaries were the line which alienated one language and one nation, and created stories with a lot of pain and separation. This boundary was seen only from one side, and the land divided by the border remained unseen and untouched. This border continued to be a mystery for many years, the admired land continued to be far, and love for the people across the border was hoisted as a cult and notion of love for the nation.

For years and decades, a mystery was built about everything that could not be seen. This feeling of love, despite all the methods of extinguishing it, persisted from generation to generation holding binoculars to look at the Albanians across the borders; looking at those with whom we had never met to be called 'us'.

### **The Separation of a Nation**

At the Conference of Ambassadors in London 1913, it was decided about an independent and neutral Albanian kingdom with its administrative borders. In this conference it was decided that Kosovo and Western Macedonia, as well as some other parts of Albania would belong to Serbia. The other territories of Albania had to be divided among other neighboring countries, such as Greece and Montenegro. In these circumstances, the majority of Albanians remained outside the administrative borders of Albania, again divided and separated in three countries in the Balkans: Albania, Yugoslavia and Greece. Depending on which country they belonged to, Albanian history created the saddest stories in these parts of the world.

On November 29, 1943 in Jajce, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was founded. It was a federation made up of six socialist republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia and Macedonia. This federation lasted until 1991, when the wars in former Yugoslavia resulted with the foundation of 6 and later of 7 countries in this region. As Albanians were spread over the whole territory of Yugoslavia, the creation of new states separated Albanians into four states within the former Yugoslav republics.

On September 8 with the results from the referendum organized by the Government, Macedonia declared its independence.

It was the only country out of all the other Yugoslav republics which accomplished its independence without a war. In the last census of 2002, the number of Albanians living in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia was 25.2%, with a great majority living in western Macedonia. This country is bordered by Kosovo to the northwest, Albania to the west, Greece to the south, Bulgaria to the east and Serbia to the north. The disputes with Greece about the existence of the country called Macedonia and the Macedonian nation the disputes with Bulgaria about the existence of the Macedonian language, history and identity, the disputes with Serbia about the existence of the Macedonian autonomous church are preconditions for good relations with other neighboring countries. However, prejudices towards the Albanian nation, are still dominant in the relations with Albania and Kosovo, a country predominantly populated by Albanians.

After the Second World War, under the communist system, Albania experienced the goriest form of government which ruled through fear and enslaved the entire population. In that cruel regime, Albania did not protect individual rights to its own population, but on the contrary, it launched a system of violence power. Under this regime, it was illogical to expect that Albania would get engaged in the protection of human rights of the Albanians outside Albania.

The country was totally isolated and from 1948 it closed the borders with Yugoslavia, leaving in this way millions of Albanians under the Slav regime who continued living as minorities in the multiethnic communist countries of former Yugoslavia.

### ***Ethnicity in a Multiethnic and Multicultural Country***

A large number of Albanians continued to live in multiethnic and multicultural states. The meaning of multiculturalism in these countries was not the same and that is why state policies had different approaches to these ethnic groups. The approaches and attitudes toward the Albanian ethnicity in these multiethnic states were almost the same with small specific differences in terms of political conditions.

Multiculturalism relates to societies containing a variety of cultures. As an ordinary phrase, it refers to ideologies or societies that encourage this variety or its standardization; in this sense, Michael Russell (2012, p.2) states that "multiculturalism is a society at no difficulty with the rich tapestry of human life and the desire amongst people to express their own identity in the manner they see fit." According to Thomas L. Harper:

'Such ideologies or policies vary widely, including country to country, ranging from the advocacy of equal respect to the various cultures in a society, to a policy of promoting the maintenance of cultural diversity, to policies in which people of various ethnic and religious groups are addressed by the authorities as defined by the group they belong to.' (2011, p.3)

However, two main different and apparently contradictory strategies have developed through different government policies and strategies. The first focuses on the interaction between different cultures whereas the second centers on diversity and cultural individuality. According to Anne-Marie Mooney Cotter (2011, p.2): 'Cultural isolation can protect the uniqueness of the local culture of a nation or area and also contribute to global cultural diversity. A common aspect of many policies following the second approach is that they avoid presenting any specific ethnic, religious, or cultural community values as central.'

Albanians in Macedonia are a minority with an undefined percentage of population since the government has control over the state institutions including here the State Statistical Office. The 25.5% resulting from the latest 2002 Census was contradictory since it was in disharmony with the number of children at schools, number of citizens in the big cities etc. As such, it was not accepted by the Albanian population. They are represented in the central and local government with their political parties which are strictly separated from the Macedonian parties. Albanians in Macedonia wish to integrate politically; however, participation in national politics is a permanent threat to their national identity. Before and during the election campaign, Albanian and Macedonian nationalism is used as an instrument by the political parties. Nevertheless, the influence of Albanian political parties in the state government is marginalized, creating in this way a gap between national representatives in the government and voters.

From the foundation of the 'new' country in 1991, Macedonia continued to follow the example of the former Yugoslavia in terms of minorities, their treatment and their inclusion in decision-making policies. Albanian representatives are counted as numbers, serving for the improvement of the Macedonian image in the Euro integration processes.

Their formal involvement in the exclusive state policies for the Albanian population alienates them from the Albanian electorate, thus creating boundaries between the elected politicians and the electorate.

### ***The Creation of New Boundaries***

Outside the administrative boundaries of their native state, Albanians were built barriers with all the ethnicities they left with to create the history of a state. It was a case with Macedonia which was building its own country for the first time. The preamble of the Macedonian Constitution, defines the country as a national state of Macedonian people, in which full equality as citizens and permanent co-existence with the Macedonian people is provided for Albanians, Turks, Vlachos, Roma and other nationalities living in the Republic of Macedonia. This was a Constitution designed by majority for majority, increasing the dissatisfaction among all the non-Macedonian ethnic groups especially among the Albanian population as the second largest ethnicity in Macedonia, and legalizing three categories of Macedonian citizens: majority population, more than 20% population and the third category of 'others'.

The newly established state was following the well known model of former Yugoslavia regarding minority rights. Moreover, the use of Albanian language was expelled, as well as the symbols and history of an entire nation. In this way, a nation which saw the boundaries of the mother land only from one side was learning to fight for personal and national survival. Fredrik Barth (1995, p.11), defined ethnic boundaries as "cognitive or mental boundaries situated in the minds of people and are the result of collective efforts of construction and maintenance. Ethnic boundaries differentiate insiders from outsiders--'us' from 'them.'"

In such circumstances, we, for whom the boundary was much more than a borderline between two countries, learned to live in our collective societies where we were distinguished for our collective features building in this way a new border between the individual and the collective.

### ***Loss of Identity***

"Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation." is one of Oscar Wilde's quotations on the identity of people who live inside communities. In this paper, community life is viewed as adapted to the circumstances of minorities living outside the frontiers of the Albanian state.

According to Rick Nauert (2012, 32): "Minority groups often struggle in an effort to maintain individual values while assimilating into the larger group." In the case of the Albanians, with half of the population living across the administrative borders, their cultural and national survival had taken distinctive forms, depending on the majority population in the country with whom they lived.

In the former Yugoslav countries these forms of survival were pretty similar due to the similarities of the majority population; however, it has been reflected with the specifics of the region in the country. So, with the Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), this specifics have been reflected through Islamic religious elements, to which even today is attributed the preservation of nation and national elements. Thus, consciously or unconsciously a new identity is born which in a name of national values is becoming even more dangerous for national survival. For decades Macedonia is becoming a polygon of Islamic NGO's, of investment of Turkey in elementary and high schools as well as in a university in Skopje, of young Albanian boys from the Western parts of Macedonia voluntarily fighting in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. These organizations and schools operate in the parts of Macedonia populated by Albanians and create a new structure of society which is turning to their religion as a defining factor.

In such circumstances it emerges the individuality crisis whereas identity loss is expanded in two areas. The modified forms of assimilation threaten one's intellectual performance, sense of belonging, and self concept which require modified forms and strategies of resistance. There are different approaches to the interpretation of this phenomenon, starting from the local and expanding it into the global aspect. Considering the fact that Macedonia is a country with majority of Macedonian population and others who have always been minorities and been treated as such, the phenomenon of stigmatized identity is permanently present. Shana Levin (2004, p.50) argues that: "The experience of possessing a stigmatized identity is shaped by social interactions with others in the stigmatized group as well as members of the other out groups." However, does social identity affect one's behavior and attitudes? According to Pamela Bretschneider (2006, p.3): "Social identity is a basis for, perceived similarity, trust, social influence, social support".

This new identity is becoming so typical and distinctive that it is hard to believe that one can find any similarities with the Albanians elsewhere, building up in this way new borders among Albanians living in different parts of the world.

### ***New Stereotypes and Authorities***

In many multicultural societies there are created stereotypes typical for each cultural and ethnic group, however, "minority group stereotypes are stronger than majority group stereotypes, both in terms of recognized behavior and qualities as well as perceptions of physical characteristics"(Snyder and Berscheid 1977, p. 3). According to the same source, "both phenomena are explained by the fact that features of majority groups are learned earlier than the features of minority groups. In turn, the features that become associated with the minority group are those that most distinguish it from the majority". (p.4)

Stereotype-inconsistent exemplars are seen as exceptions, as atypical examples of the group and they are either not accepted or excluded from the particular structure. They are never called 'us', but instead they remain being 'she' or 'he'. However, if a person is a typical representative of the group, it is clear that he / she has a real potential to represent an authority because he / she possesses all the values informally determined by this group and very easily adapts to the needs and expectations of the group.

Being divided into many countries in the region, Albanians obtained many characteristics from the cultures they lived with, creating in this way sub-cultural divergences and giving birth to stereotypical Albanians of Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, etc.

In the political context, due to the national structure and configuration of the Albanian society, the pluralistic government of this country was consisted of purely Albanian political parties. Kosovo created a parallel state in opposition to the Serbian authorities whilst Macedonia Albanians were represented in coalition governments. The political behavior and their approaches towards participation in decision-making policies extended the differences among Albanians, creating in this way new borders among them. This is not the only difference among the Albanians in the region. Albanians in Macedonia show a high confessional prejudice and regard Islam as part of their national identity. According to Nelson Wyatt and Peter Rakobowchuk (2013, p. 2) "for many people religion is one of the most important defining characteristics of an identity". In this regard, Harttgen and Opfinger (2012, p. 303) add: "When you have a country with mostly a single religion, people define themselves in terms of a shared religion. But in countries where your neighbors are likely to be of a different religion, religious identity becomes less important, and so people begin to identify themselves in terms of their shared nationality". This quotation best reflects the Albanians' attitudes towards the role of religion vs. ethnicity in multiethnic, multicultural and multi-confessional societies in Kosovo whereas it is in contradiction with the beliefs of the Albanians in Macedonia. "There is a wide spectrum of communities where religious values and clerical interests play a more or less important public role in conditioning and shaping dominant systems of beliefs in society" (Harttgen and Opfinger, 2012, p. 305). The period of 'closed borders' has resulted with the lack of collective self-esteem among Albanians, and rise of fault authorities who shaped our lives and created human geography of divided Albanians in the Balkans.

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