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**AEGEAN MACEDONIANS
AND THE BULGARIAN IDENTITY POLITICS**

Based on archival research, this paper is part of a larger study focusing on the migration into Bulgaria of Slav-speaking refugees from the Greek Civil War. The study analyzes the measures taken by the Bulgarian Communist Party and state leadership to homogenize this new Macedonian diaspora. The members of this refugee community are labeled for the most part “Aegean Macedonians”. This designation seems to be the most common self-identification of Slav-speaking political emigrants originating from Greek or Aegean Macedonia¹, who otherwise share diverse national identities – “Macedonians”, “Greeks” or “Bulgarians”. This study offers an analytical approach to the problem of national identity in relation to political activism and refugee experience. It also provides an overview of competing identity politics – those of communist Bulgaria, of the Greek Communist Party and of Tito’s Yugoslavia, and analyzes their function in the construction of the national identity of refugees and their identity as refugees.

Parallel research on Macedonian diaspora communities from Aegean/Greek Macedonia that reside in Australia, Canada and elsewhere, will document the birth of a transnational political activism. Even today, this activism demands recognition of collective minority rights and influences the identity formation of former refugees from Greece in other parts of the world.

In this way, this paper sheds light on the complex development of Macedonian nationalism outside the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, though in a direct or indirect relation with it. The paper is also based on a study completed on Aegean Macedonians residing mostly in the Republic of Macedonia, who were participants in the Third meeting of child-refugees (Florina, 2003). I compare the study to similar narratives of Slav-speaking “Greek political emigrants” residing in Bulgaria. This comparative approach seeks a critical

1 “Aegean Macedonia” is a term used today in the Republic of Macedonia and Bulgaria, whereas in Greece the same region is named simply “Macedonia”.

understanding of refugees' memories and identities capable of deconstructing traditional nationalistic views of national historians and reifying concepts of refugee experience as "traumatic uprooting."²

From Greek Political Emigrants to Bulgarian Citizens: The Aegean Macedonian Refugees in Bulgaria

The withdrawal of the Bulgarian occupation army from central and eastern areas of Greek Macedonia in autumn of 1944 marked for Bulgaria a mass departure of Slav-speakers from an area today encompassing the prefectures of Serres and Drama. Bulgarian and Yugoslav Communist Party and state leadership agreed that, beginning in the summer of 1945, refugees from these areas were to be transferred to Yugoslavia, mostly the Vojvodina and Vardar Macedonia. This process has been studied extensively by Bulgarian historians; they claim 18,000 people were deported (Daskalov 277, 288-298; Mi ev 94-96). However, with the start of the Greek Civil War in 1946, Greek and Slav-speaking refugees came to Bulgaria, and some were relocated to other East European communist states. In the beginning of 1948, resettlement in Yugoslavia was halted, and then completely stopped after the Tito-Stalin conflict that followed later in the same year.

So-called "refugee children" were a special case of refugees, who, since the beginning of 1948, were "evacuated" or "kidnapped" by the Communist Party of Greece (CPG, or KKE in Greek). According to the "Committee for the Assistance to Children" (EVOP), established by the Greek communists in June 1949, there were about 11,000 children transferred to Yugoslavia, 5,000 to Romania, 2,500 to Poland, 3,000 to Czechoslovakia, 2,500 to Hungary, 700 to East Germany and 2,500 to Bulgaria (Kirjazovski 37).

The Greek government's assault against the forces of the Democratic Army of Greece (DAG) on Vitsi/Vičo Mountain in the summer of 1949 marked the final defeat of the communist-led resistance. The remaining divisions of the DAG quit their positions on Grammos Mountain, and, threatened by governmental reprisal, the soldiers fled to Albania and Bulgaria, as Yugoslavia had closed its border. Along with civilians from Northern Greece, the soldiers of the 6th and the 7th division of the Democratic Army of Greece came to Bulgaria. The Third conference of the CPG, held in October 1949, acknowledged the migration of 55,881 people from Greece into the East European communist countries and in the USSR, approximately 20,000 of whom were considered to be (Slavo-) Macedonians.³ Close to 12,000 soldiers of the Democratic Army of Greece

2 Cf. Liisa Malkki's critique of this essentialist perspective in refugee studies (Liisa Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees").

3 Brown accepts the number of 22,822 people (Brown 19).

were transported from Albania and Bulgaria to the Soviet Union, mostly to the Republic of Uzbekistan, while 11,941 refugees settled in Czechoslovakia, 11,475 in Poland, 9,100 in Romania, 7,253 in Hungary and 3,071 in Bulgaria (Kirjazovski 53-55).

According to official Bulgarian estimates, in autumn of 1949, 20,000 refugees crossed the Bulgarian border, of which approximately 4,000 stayed. Following a general meeting of the communist parties in Bucharest in November of 1953, the “popular democracies” of Eastern Europe were to assist with the reunification of the immediate members of refugee families. This huge resettlement of Greek political emigrants affected all the East European communist countries. In 1954-1955, migrations to Bulgaria increased, and affected people previously residing in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary and the USSR. The Bulgarian Red Cross was to host the refugees while the local Party committees together with the municipalities worked to provide them with housing and employment. “Greek” refugees were admitted to the Military Academy in Sofia and to the Bulgarian army. A series of measures were designed to improve the lives of the refugees and especially of their children. Special pensions for “exceptional merit” were granted to communist activists from the Greek resistance movement. Since 1958, refugees have been also granted the right to become members of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) without Bulgarian citizenship.

Upon insistence of the GCP’s leader, Apostolos Grozos, the Bulgarian Party decided to create a “cultural-educative association” for the Greek political emigrants in Bulgaria. The new “Democratic organization for culture and education” (DOME) was expected to have approximately 5,000 members, with a “Macedonian” at the head.⁴

The policy of communist Bulgaria towards the refugees from Greece was, at least initially, not discriminatory: Greek- and Slav-speakers were both registered as Greek political emigrants (*grâcki politemigranti*) and received equal treatment by state authorities. However, certain institutions of communist Bulgaria, in accordance with a national directive, progressively privileged Slav-speakers, frequently named Aegean Macedonians (*egejski makedonci*). Special measures were taken to attain their “ethnic” loyalty. Already in 1950, Bulgarian authorities sought the at least partial return of the refugees from Central and East Greek Macedonia to Bulgaria, who were residing in Yugoslavia. The Secretariat of the Central Committee of the BCP urged the Yugoslav government to allow “political and other refugees, who searched for a protection in Bulgaria because of their national self-identity (*nacionalno samočuvstvie*)”, to return to Bulgaria.⁵ In fact, Sofia’s policy on the “Macedonian question” went clearly in the direction of a reaffirmation of the “Bulgar-

4 CPA (Central Archives of the Bulgarian Communist Party), F. 1, OP. 6, A.E. 4641.

5 CPA, F.1, OP.8, A.E. 1145, L. 1-2.

ian national belonging” of the Slavic population in geographic Macedonia, including the Slav-speaking refugees from the Greek Civil War. When in the autumn of 1956, the Greek political emigrants in Hungary were facing hostile Hungarian anti-communist rebels, the Bulgarian ambassador reportedly declared the readiness of his country to accept all refugees and especially Macedonians willing to be transferred to Bulgaria (Kirjazovski 119, 122).

The so-called “Slavic Committee” (*Slavjanski komitet*) in Sofia took over propaganda efforts on Bulgaria’s socialist hospitality, and started diffusing printed and other materials concerning the history and culture of Bulgaria and Macedonia in the Aegean Macedonian refugee centers in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania. Bulgarian officials likewise promised emigrants accommodation and employment. In 1959, the Slavic Committee’s plan also affected Macedonian soldiers from the DAG living in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Many of these soldiers showed a willingness to change their country of residence. Several former Aegean Macedonian political leaders subsequently settled in Bulgaria. The head of the “Slavo-Macedonian” *Ilinden* organization, Pando Vajnas, was given the opportunity to continue his carrier in the Bulgarian army. Another important Aegean Macedonian activist – Kostas Šaperas – received a scholarship to continue his education in Sofia; he later settled in Bulgaria and adopted Bulgarian citizenship.

The end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s was marked by a decisive turn in Bulgaria’s “Macedonian” policy – it no longer recognized a Macedonian ethnicity as different from Bulgarian. As a result, Sofia developed a policy vis-à-vis the refugees from Greece, which was more targeted at the Slav-speakers and less at “ethnic Greeks”. In 1960, the Bulgarian Communist Party’s Politburo adopted a special resolution “On the resettlement in our country of Macedonians – political emigrants from other socialist countries.”⁶ An accompanying report specified that many Greeks “and especially Macedonians express their spontaneous will to settle in Bulgaria”, and referred as proof to the number of demands addressed to Bulgarian embassies, to the Ministry of Exterior and to the Party’s Central Committee. These requests were justified “by the fact that almost all of them [the “political emigrants of Macedonian origin” - T.M.] have a clear Bulgarian national consciousness and consider Bulgaria their homeland”. According to the Party employees, the Yugoslav “Titoists” (*titovci*) were “lying to them, saying they will offer them better life conditions” in the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Bulgaria thus began to compete with Yugoslavia for the destiny of the Slav-speaking refugees. The Bulgarian authorities granted requests for immigration “mostly to Macedonians” from Poland and, between 1958 and 1960 alone, over 2,300 people were admitted into Bulgaria. The Section for International

6 CPA, F. 1, OP. 6, A.E. 4291.

Relations of the Party's Central Committee expressed its conviction that "the issue" concerning the resettlement of Macedonian refugees, i.e. political emigrants from Greece, was "to be finally resolved in a radical way" so that larger groups can be admitted to the country. Brothers, sisters and cousins of those who were already accommodated in Bulgaria were now also admitted; this ran contrary to the previous policy of "reunification of families", which was restricted to spouses and parents with minors. According to a Bulgarian statistical report, at the end of 1962, the political emigrants from Greece numbered 6,529 people.⁷ The data show clearly that the immigration of refugees into the country intensified especially in the beginning of the 1960s.

The "Regular Commission for Foreign Affairs" of the National Assembly of Bulgaria also suggested that all those emigrants from Aegean Macedonia in the socialist countries who "feel themselves to be Bulgarians" should be have the opportunity to settle in Bulgaria and formal procedures of immigration should be simplified: "It is in the interest of socialism and the national cause of Bulgaria that those Aegean Macedonian emigrants desiring [to settle in Bulgaria - T.M.] should be allowed to establish themselves in Bulgaria instead ... of Skopje."⁸ Similarly, it was recommended that "young Aegeans" should be invited to study, and all the emigrants should be offered the opportunity to vacation in the country. Macedonian students, especially from Poland and Czechoslovakia, were to be invited to Bulgaria for small periods to become acquainted "in an appropriate way" with the "historical, linguistic and national question." In 1961, the Bulgarian government reaffirmed its emphasis on the Aegean Macedonian refugees. It recognized the work of Greek political emigrants in other socialist countries, specifying that this concerned in particular "Macedonians who have immigrated or will immigrate to our country from other socialist countries."⁹ At the same time, the Bulgarian embassy in Belgrade urged the government in Sofia to accept "Aegeans" (egejci) with reportedly "well-conserved Bulgarian identity", who were disappointed by conditions in Tetovo, West Yugoslav Macedonia. The employees insisted that the Bulgarian administration accelerate formal procedures to "save" them from the "anti-Bulgarian propaganda" in Yugoslavia.

In complying, the Bulgarian authorities asserted their special concern for the national commitment of Slav-speaking Greek political emigrants. The "patriotic" education of those who arrived in Bulgaria was entrusted to state institutions dealing with the national policy like the so-called "Union of Macedonian Cultural-Educative Associations" (*Sâjuz na makedonskite kulturno-prosvetni družestva*). Since the beginning of the 1960s, this institution was instrumental in the official nationalist promotion of the Bulgarian perspective on the

7 CPA, F. 1, OP. 33, A.E. 1387.

8 CDA (Central State Archives of Bulgaria), F. 141, OP. 10, A.E. 18, L. 14.

9 CPA, F. 1, OP. 6, A.E. 4406.

“Macedonian question” among Bulgarian citizens originating in Macedonia. Already in 1952, the Union’s chairman Hristo Kalajdziev informed the Macedonian Associations in cities with larger immigrant milieus from Greek Macedonia, including Plovdiv, Pazardžik, Burgas and Stalin (Varna), that “there is a possibility that our compatriots from Aegean Macedonia, who over the last years migrated to the popular democracies, will be allowed to settle here.”¹⁰ In fact, many Union leaders and members came from Greek or Aegean Macedonia and had relatives among the Greek Civil War refugees. Therefore, the Union’s chairman urged activists to invite their relatives to the country. The Macedonian Associations organized cultural programs and meetings (*drugarski srešti*) for Slav-speaking refugees arriving in Bulgaria. In the ideological language of the Union of the Macedonian Associations, the term “Macedonian” was gradually replaced with “Bulgarian” or identified with the latter. At the Union’s Plenum of April 1961, the leader of Sofia’s Macedonian Association maintained that one should distinguish among Greek political emigrants between “Greeks and Bulgarians from Macedonia”. At the same time, the historian (and activist of the Union) Dino Kjosev advocated granting Bulgarian citizenship to “ethnic Bulgarians” among the political emigrants from Greece (as Greek citizens, their membership in the Associations not possible). The Union of Macedonian Cultural-Educative Associations was supposed to create political eligibility requirements, such as “anti-fascist activity”, for the participation of political emigrants in state and Party institutions. The Bulgarian communist state officially recognized involvement in World War II and the Greek Civil War as anti-fascist activity and symbolically identified this involvement with the struggles of the Bulgarian communist partisan movement between 1941 and 1944. The Slavic Committee also provided certificates for anti-fascist activity to Slav-speakers who were eventually listed as “Bulgarians from Aegean Macedonia”. With such certificates an individual could obtain a special state pension for communist combatants just like the *bore ka penzija*, which was granted to Aegean refugees in Yugoslav Macedonia (Monova 185-197). The Slavic Committee and the Union of Macedonian Associations likewise granted scholarships to “Aegean youngsters” (*mladeži egejci*) particularly to support their study at Sofia University.

The fact that Bulgaria’s policy towards the political emigrants residing in other communist countries privileged refugees of Slavic origin provoked tensions between Aegean Macedonians and Greeks.¹¹ In 1961-1962, Greek-speaking emigrants also relied on the possibility to settle in Bulgaria as a first step to their ultimate return to their homeland. Similarly, the Bulgarian-Yugoslav controversy on the “Macedonian question” found an echo in the emigrant centers of East Europe. In 1961, for instance, pro-Yugoslav organizations based in

10 CDA, F. 299, OP. 2, A.E. 3, L. 98.

11 The Bulgarian historian Georgi Daskalov characterizes the wish of “ethnic Greek” refugees to get closer to their country as “narrowly egoistic” (Daskalov 302-303).

Poland protested against resettlement of Aegean refugees to Bulgaria and the diffusion of Bulgarian newspapers and literature in their milieus (Kirjazovski 215-216). From a mainstream Macedonian point of view, migration to Bulgaria was seen as a dangerous trend as long as it actually implied a compromise of Macedonian national identity.

Indeed, the Slav-speaking refugees settling in Bulgaria ultimately had to face the official Bulgarian stance on the “Macedonian question”. As early as February 1950, a “group of Macedonians from Aegean Macedonia living in the town of Petrič” insisted that there should be a political organization of Aegean refugees established in Bulgaria’s Pirin region.¹² The foundation of such an organization was not allowed, however. The Bulgarian Communist Party considered such attempts as “anti-national” and inspired by Tito’s Yugoslavia. Counter-measures were proposed in response to the demands of the Aegean Macedonian emigrants in general and the Petrič group in particular: deportation inside the country, intensification of the political propaganda among the Slav-speaking refugees, appointment of special agents in the Party’s local committees charged with the “correct organization” of the political emigrants from Greece.¹³

Ten years later, newcomers were still not prepared for the new Bulgarian identity politics concerning the “Macedonian question” that, since the late 1950s, denied the existence of a separate Macedonian ethnicity. When youngsters from Aegean Macedonia living in Pleven (Northern Bulgaria) attempted to express their Macedonian national identity, their political activity was suppressed by the local and the central leaders of the Union of Macedonian Associations. In 1963, the Union’s president Kalajdziev wrote to the local association: “Like in many other places, in your city too, those [Greek political emigrants – T.M.] who are of Macedonian origin support with some fanatic perseverance Macedonian nationalism. Hence, they provoke conflict with the Greek leadership and on the basis of this Macedonian nationalism they seek to consolidate all the [Macedonian – T.M.] diaspora in Bulgaria. This contradicts the policy of our Party and the Greek Party”. Therefore, one has to stop “their attempts to make the older refugees from Macedonia in Bulgaria Macedonian nationalists. Those [previous refugees – T.M.] came to Bulgaria with a solid Bulgarian consciousness”. The same letter recommended preventing “every interference of these people in the life of our Association”, while keeping the “door open” if they wanted to attend public meetings of cultural character.¹⁴

12 The demand is to be found in CPA, F. 1, OP. 6, A.E. 765, L. 5. It is dated 15 February 1950 and signed by Georgi Angelov Gocev. The petition was addressed to the Sofia-based Union of Macedonian Cultural-Educative Associations, which then forwarded it to the Central Committee of the Party with the recommendation “to take the needed measures” (CDA, F. 299, OP. 1, A.E. 14, L. 47).

13 In 1949-1950, Bulgarian authorities together with the Greek communist leadership sent “Tito’s agents” from Greece to Bulgarian labor camps, such as Belene (Kirjazovski 252-255).

14 Cf. CDA, F. 299, OP. 4, A.E. 9, L. 48-49.

After their visit to Sofia in December 1967, Greek communist leaders Apostolos Grozos and Dimitris Partsalidis made note of the unsuccessful demands of refugees transferred to Bulgaria from Poland to have a page in Macedonian language in the Greek political refugees' weekly *Lefteria* (Kirjazovski 259). State and Party institutions were forced to confront the challenging ethnic self-identifications of Aegean Macedonian refugees from the Greek Civil War. A clear distinction had to be established between the previous Macedonian migration waves to Bulgaria (from the beginning of the 20th century) and the newcomers: contrary to older pro-Bulgarian refugees, those who came after the Greek Civil War had more "Macedonian" character and needed to be subject to special strategies of national homogenization.

The national "orientation" of the younger generation of refugees – namely, of the students from "the Aegean diaspora" (*egejskata emigracija*) enrolled in Bulgarian universities represented a particular problem. A special resolution of the Secretariat of the BCP's Central Committee charged the Slavic Committee with "the restitution of Bulgarian national consciousness" for "the children of Macedonian Bulgarians from the Aegean diaspora."¹⁵ The directives also pertained to the children of political emigrants residing in other communist countries who regularly spent their holidays in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, as a report of the Slavic Committee from 1970 points out, many Aegean Macedonian youth residing or studying in Bulgaria did not have "a clear national consciousness", i.e. a Bulgarian one.¹⁶ To "purify (*izbistri*) their national consciousness (*nacionalnoto im saznanie*) and give them a good patriotic education", the Slavic Committee proposed measures to be taken together with university deans, institutes for foreign students, Komsomol and Party organizations in higher education institutions. The "patriotic" education of the younger political emigrants included cultural programs, lectures in history, participation in official commemorations, etc.

In the same report, the Party's decision to grant Bulgarian citizenship to and allow settlement "our compatriots of the Aegean Macedonian diaspora (*emigracija*) from the socialist countries" was emphasized by activists in the Slavic Committee. Once again, "repatriation" to Bulgaria was to be accelerated. A discrimination of refugees from the Greek Civil War according to their ethnic belonging was likewise recommended: for national propaganda institutions, such as the Slavic Committee and the Union of Macedonian Associations, Aegean Macedonians were more desirable than "ethnic Greeks". As a result of this policy, at the outset of the 1970s, the number of political emigrants from Greece rose to 7,531 (Daskalov 313). However, due to difficulties in obtaining Bulgarian citizenship or a return of a portion of refugees to Greece, in 1978

15 CDA, F. 141, OP. 8, A.E. 17, L. 68-69.

16 NA-BAN (Scientific Archives – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences), F. 88, OP. 3, A.E. 58, L. 23.

there were only 4,383 people registered as “Greek political emigrants” in Bulgaria, including Greek and Slav-speakers.

In general, immigrant applicants needed only to declare that they had relatives in Bulgaria who could provide housing or to sign a declaration of agreement to live in a village (where accommodation was easier to be found) and work in agriculture. Despite the formal agreement, upon arrival many political emigrants left the villages and sought employment and accommodation in the larger towns and cities. Most of the refugees had previously been industrial workers in the larger cities of Central and East European, such as Budapest, Brno or Wrocław, and were dissatisfied when sent to the countryside. Despite the disappointment of the refugees, the Ministry of Labor and Social Care was often not prepared to provide accommodations in cities, such as Sofia, Varna or Plovdiv. The Slavic Committee was therefore forced to confront the complaints of many refugees. It urged state institutions to take greater care in addressing the needs especially of the Aegean Macedonian “compatriots”.

Following a request by CPG’s leader Grozos, by 1965 formal procedures were already put in place for the repatriation of refugees in Greece, even though requests significantly increased only after 1974 with the fall of the Colonels’ regime. Another large portion of refugees returned to Greece after the Papandreou’s governmental decree of 1982, which grants all political emigrants who are “Greeks by birth” (*Ellines to genos*) the right of return. Following a resolution of the Secretariat of the BCP’s Central Committee in 1984, the cultural organization of the Greek political emigrants in Bulgaria (DOME) ceased to exist. The same resolution also marked the end to the status of political emigrants for people who were born in Greece and settled in Bulgaria after 1944 (Daskalov 464).

In the 1980s, the Slav-speaking refugees remaining in Bulgaria thus lost their last symbolic difference vis-à-vis other Bulgarian citizens – their identity as refugees “expelled” from their “homeland”. Contrary to the Republic of Macedonia and other countries in East Europe, the Aegean Macedonians in Bulgaria were not and are still today not organized in associations or other institutions representing special collective claims, even though a small number retain ties to the Association of Child-Refugees in Skopje and other transnational Macedonian NGOs.¹⁷ Some refugees from the Greek Civil War who consider themselves to be of Bulgarian origin achieved popularity in Bulgarian public life and even actively participated in the historiographic and linguistic debates with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia that began in the late 1960s.¹⁸

17 This is true according to information from the chairman of the Association of Child-Refugees (*Združenie na decata-begalci*) Gjorgji Donevski, and from interviews with former political emigrants residing in Bulgaria.

18 We can refer here, for instance, to the folk-singer Ljubka Rondova and the linguist Blagoj Šklifov, both of whom were born in the Kastoria/Kostur area.

Bulgaria and Yugoslavia also competed with one another over the national allegiance of the Aegean Macedonian emigrants residing in Australia, Canada and the U.S.A.¹⁹ In the 1980s, the Bulgarian Party and state leadership attempted to instrumentalize the existing identity oppositions between Aegean and “Vardarian” or Yugoslav Macedonian emigrants²⁰. In Australia, typical conflicts between the two communities focused on control of churches and church communities founded by the “Aegean majority” of emigrants before World War II and after the Greek Civil War. However, as representatives of the “mother (queen bee)-state” (*država-matica*), the “Vardarians” were engaged in Yugoslav-Macedonian identity politics and therefore maintained a certain symbolic superiority in the quest for leadership. Called “Yugo-“ or “Serbo-Macedonians”, the “Vardarians” were contrasted in Bulgarian identity politics to the Aegean Macedonians. The latter were viewed as a possible counterweight to the alleged “process of Serbization” of Macedonian identity and as promoters of an eventually “pro-Bulgarian” Macedonian character.

In 1987, Bulgarian interest towards the Aegeans intensified and the Slavic Committee attempted to determine the residence of “former groups of refugee children from Aegean Macedonia who were admitted during the Greek Civil War in socialist countries – Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and, already as adults, left for Australia, U.S.A, Canada etc.”²¹ The Bulgarian state saw in the Aegeans the last chance to gain the national allegiance of the Macedonians overseas. However, all these hopes of Bulgarian identity politics failed: soon, the Bulgarian consulate officials in Sydney saw the first demonstration of Australian Macedonians against the “violation” of “human rights” of “ethnic Macedonians” in Bulgaria. These events marked the end of active Bulgarian involvement in Macedonian diaspora matters in North America and Australia.

Negotiating a New Refuge: Family Solidarities and National Identities

BCP Central Committee archives contain a large collection of letters addressed by “Greek political emigrants” residing in East European communist countries and interested in settling in Bulgaria. These applications have not yet been seriously analyzed. According to contemporary Macedonian historians, such as Kirjazovski, these demands result from “Bulgarian propaganda”, from emigrants’ desire to get closer to their homeland or from health related reasons. But for a Bulgarian historian like Daskalov, these letters document an unfailing “Bulgarian patriotism” in the “Macedonian Bulgarians” from Aegean Macedonia.

19 On the political activism and the construction of national identity of Macedonian diaspora in Australia and in North America, see Danforth.

20 Cf. CDA, F. 141, OP. 11, A.E. 161, L. 3-7.

21 CDA, F. 141, OP. 11, A.E. 163, L. 12.

In reality, the letters of Slav-speaking refugees to the Bulgarian state and Party leadership indicate a choice, which was for the most part neither political nor strictly “national”. A decisive aspect went undiscussed by contemporary Macedonian and Bulgarian scholars –, namely the old family solidarities existing between Greek Civil War refugees and previous migration waves from Macedonia to Bulgaria.

In the letters, political emigrants sometimes stressed the geographical proximity of Bulgaria to their place of birth. There are frequent complaints about the insufferable weather conditions in Central Europe. With Slav-speakers, however, there are also additional arguments made for Bulgaria as a temporary or final destination. In general, almost all the Macedonian refugees emphasized that they have family in Sofia or elsewhere in the country. Often, the motivation to reside in Bulgaria is unequivocal – “to join our people (*da si dojdime pri našite luge*)”. Here, “our people” (*našite*) refers to a potentially open collectivity – it could mean next of kin (cousins, uncles, sometimes parents etc.) or “Bulgarians” as a whole. Thus, the letters to the BCP International Relations Bureau reveal the connection between the experience of ethnicity and the family solidarities of Aegean Macedonian refugees.

Almost all of them declared their ethnic background (*narodnost* or *nacionalnost*) as “Macedonian”.²² Some identified themselves in accordance with the Greek communist practice as “Slavo-Macedonian” (*slavjano-makedonec*). Formulas like “refugee from Greek Macedonia with Macedonian nationality [= ethnic origin – *narodnost*] and Greek citizenship” appear frequently, while the standard self-identification is perhaps “Macedonian by nationality, Greek political emigrant”. However, the term “Macedonian” is much broader than what is today the Macedonian national identity and did not exclude alternative identifications such as “Bulgarian” or simply “Slav”.

Aegean Macedonian refugees supported their application for immigration with claims of linguistic proximity between Bulgarian and Macedonian or, in some cases, even the identity of the two languages: “I know the language” (*eziko go znam*). One refugee in Czechoslovakia maintained he had “no relatives or Bulgarians or Macedonians with whom to speak my native tongue”. A former commander of a brigade in the Grammos mountains emphasized his

22 This is the case in at least 90% of the letters from Slav-speakers residing in East Europe. The applicants originate from different areas of Greek Macedonia but mostly from the Kastoria prefecture. The demands show different levels of education and linguistic competence. The overwhelming majority of candidates used various linguist mixtures of their native Aegean dialects, of standard Bulgarian as well as of the recently standardized Macedonian. The letters combine orthographic traits of both Bulgarian and standard Macedonian (they use for instance *J* together with *и* and *ѝ*). In several cases, rudiments of Bulgarian orthography before 1945 (*ъ* at the end of words finishing with consonant) can be found. About 10% of the applications of refugees residing in Eastern Europe are written in almost faultless standard Bulgarian while the same degree of proximity to standard Macedonian is absent.

“Macedonian nationality” in order to be granted the right to join his relatives in Bulgaria, where his children learn “in our mother language – Bulgarian”. A woman, who had lived in Albania, Poland and Hungary, finally decided to ask for refugee status in Bulgaria because “the [Hungarian – T.M.] language is extremely difficult for us and the large number of relatives and friends now in Bulgaria”.

Besides language, the distinction between “Bulgarian” and “Macedonian” is often non-existent on the symbolic level of “blood” and “roots”. Eleftheria Paschou from the Kastoria area states, “our origin is a Bulgarian one – Macedonian”. For some refugees, as ascriptions of ethnic identity, “Bulgarian” and “Macedonian” are subsumed under the more general category of “Slavic”: a “Macedonian from Aegean Macedonia” wanted to settle in “what we call in Macedonia our mother Bulgaria to live with our Slavic people.”²³ Petre Bogdanov from Želevo/Andartiko in the Lerin/Florina area and residing in Poland, states that it is more natural for “Macedonian” than “Greek” political emigrants to live in Bulgaria. In some cases, they defined their ethnicity as “Macedonian-Bulgarian” (*makedonec-bâlgarin*).²⁴ In others, the difference between “Bulgarian” and “Macedonian” is generational: the political emigrant Mihal Kotenovski declared “I am a Macedonian from Aegean Macedonia. My grandparents were of Bulgarian nationality (*nacionalnost*)”. Even the former leader of the Macedonian pro-Yugoslav National-Liberation Front (NOF), German Petrov Damovski, says that his ethnicity and language is “Macedonian”, while identifying himself as one of the “Bulgarians” who participated in the “national-liberation movement” in Macedonia.²⁵ The intermingling of Yugoslav (Macedonian) and Bulgarian politics is perceived perhaps best in the demand of fifteen families from the Kostur/Kastoria area (mostly from the village of Smârdeš/Kristallopigi). In 1956, they expressed a desire to settle in Bulgaria – but more concretely – in “Pirin Macedonia”, “to learn our mother tongue, culture and traditions.”

Of course, we cannot approach these documents as innocent expressions of national identity. Bulgarian identity politics, which – since the end of the 1950s – returned to a Bulgarian “patriotic” stance, no doubt had an influence on the applicants. However, if we are to take these letters seriously and

23 CPA, F. 1, OP. 32, A.E. 622, L. 109. The editor of the Macedonian pages of the Poland-based Greek political emigrants’ newspaper *Dimokratias* Vasil Šamanovski had similar comments – CPA, F. 1, OP. 33, A.E. 469, L. 35. Countries of residence like Poland and Czechoslovakia are obviously not identified as “Slavic”.

24 CPA, F. 1, OP. 51, A.E. 580, L. 16. See also the letters of Alekso Spirov Vasilevski from the village of Graždino, “*Prespa area*”, living in Legnica, Poland (CPA, F. 1, OP. 32, A.E. 622); Vangel Penev from Kumaničevo/Lithia, Kostur/Kastoria area (CPA, F. 1, OP. 32, A.E. 626, L. 7) etc. Georgi Daskalov analyses these examples from a Bulgarian mainstream historiographic point of view (Daskalov 292-295, 300-303, 310-312).

25 CPA, F. 1, OP. 32, A.E. 804 – an account of German Damovski, dated 30 January 1957. Damovski was previously accused in Bulgaria of being a “*Tito’s agent*” and, until 1954, he was imprisoned in the camp of Belene.

not as the products of mere opportunism, we need to see them as a certain stage of ethnicity among Slav-speakers from Northern Greece resulting from the identity politics of Bulgaria, the Greek Communist Party, and Yugoslav Macedonia. The search for better life is hardly an adequate explanation for migration to Bulgaria rather than remaining in countries like Czechoslovakia or Poland, where the majority of refugees were already well established with professional qualification and employment.

On the other hand, one must not overstate the importance of Bulgarian propaganda efforts to attain the allegiance of Aegean Macedonians. The “reunification of the families”, which began in 1953 only concerned parents separated from their minor children and divided spouses. This limitation provoked a bitter response among Greek and Macedonian refugees, who sought to bring other close relatives to Bulgaria. Even if with exceptions, almost from the very start, most such cases were rejected by Party authorities. In the 1950s, even refugees of self-declared “Bulgarian origin” were rejected. Only the reunification of immediate family, i.e. spouses or of parents with dependent children, were to be allowed.²⁶ Due to bureaucratic reasons, sometimes a spouse was permitted entrance to Bulgaria even though the partner was rejected. Parents with advanced illness are frequently refused a “last meeting” with adult children.

Applications are full of historical details about a family’s political involvement (e.g. fathers or brothers serving and dying in the World War II or the Greek Civil War). To support their applications, many refugees offered rich autobiographical accounts of struggle against the “Greek monarch-fascists”, of extradition or years spent in prison. Some family narratives emphasize the historical continuity of revolutionary struggle involving family members: Macedonian revolutionaries in the beginning of the 20th century killed by “Turks”, ELAS partisans during the Italian and German occupation, soldiers from the DAG during the Greek Civil War. Some Macedonian refugees, especially those from the Kostur/Kastoria area, attempted to exploit historical references to noted Bulgarian Communist figures like Dimitâr Blagoev, the founder of the first Bulgarian Marxist party, who – “like them” – originated from this part of Macedonia. Hristo Šmagranov from Dâmbeni/Dendrochori, for instance, launched his request in the following way: “I would like to know

26 Cf. the case of Jani Argirov from Županišta/Ano Lefki, Kostur/Kastoria area (CPA, F. 1, OP. 32, A.E. 622, L. 103) who declared “nationality – Bulgarian” (“*narodnos – Bâlgarin*”). Vasil Korovešov from Smârdeš/Kristallopigi, living in Uzbekistan, also received a negative answer though he declared Bulgaria as his “motherland” – CPA, F. 1, OP. 32, A.E. 623, L. 125-126. See also the case of Mihail Rašev from the village of Zeleniče/Sklithro in Lerin/Florina area, who, in 1944, left his village for Bulgaria, while his wife and daughter were mobilized in the DAG. When he applied, his wife resided in Poland, his daughter in Uzbekistan, while another daughter lived in Romania, and his son – in Yugoslavia (CPA, F. 1, OP. 32, A.E. 503, L. 79).

if a political emigrant, a compatriot of father Blagoev, would be denied refugee status in Bulgaria”. Another refugee is certain that “the glorious Party of Blagoev and Dimitrov” would not reject his claim.

In the majority of letters, the individual life story is inscribed in the larger narrative of national history. By contrast, personal experience has a more direct historical and political meaning. This explains why many refugees describe thoroughly their biographical trajectories. For instance, one “Macedonian” from a village near Drama in contemporary Greece came to Bulgaria at the end of 1944 as a volunteer soldier with the withdrawing Bulgarian army. After the war, he remained in the Pirin Macedonia of Bulgaria. Shortly later, he was transferred with his family to Yugoslavia, where he lived in the Republic of Macedonia. He was mobilized by the DAG and participated in the Greek Civil War. In 1949, he moved to Uzbekistan while his family stayed in Yugoslavia. Finally, he decided to take up residence with his wife in Bulgaria where he had relatives.²⁷

In many cases, applicants explain their preference for country of residence by claiming that “I have my people (*svoi ljude*) in Bulgaria”, whereas in Yugoslavia they had no relatives. In most cases, relatives in Bulgaria had already “prepared living space” (*ni imat prigotveno stajata*) in their homes for their next of kin and agreed to provide other assistance until the refugees could find work (*ke ni spomognat do koga ke fatime rabota*). Often, family solidarity contradicted bureaucratic logic, and residents in East European countries or their relatives in Bulgaria had to provide additional explanations. One woman, for instance, who insisted her nephew be allowed to come from Poland, asserts: “For me, he is not a distant relative, neither am I for him. We have always felt him as an inseparable part of our family”. Such requests were generally discarded by Party authorities. In some letters, idyllic pictures of family life are opposed to the harsh isolation from close relatives: “like the eagle who scatters small chicken, in the same way we fled from the hands of our mother”. Here, exile is experienced not so much as “extrication” from “homeland”, but as an absence of kin.

Even when the ground for choosing Bulgaria was “nation-based”, the decision seems to depend to a large extent of the presence of relatives or possibility of family reunification in this country. The option to settle in Yugoslavia is sometimes explicitly rejected by applicants, while some are seeking to leave Yugoslavia where, after the Tito-Stalin split, they were imprisoned as “Bulgarian agents”. But even individuals with self-declared Bulgarian ethnic identity were ready to move to Yugoslav Macedonia if their family was denied access

27 CPA, F. 1, OP. 32, A.E. 503, L. 69. Slav-speakers from East Greek Macedonia have similar stories: in 1945, people from the Serres-Drama region, who had obtained Bulgarian citizenship during the Second World War, were transferred to Yugoslavia, where they were subsequently mobilized in the DAG.

to Bulgaria.²⁸ Refugees also used the possibility for settlement in Yugoslavia as a leverage to force the acceleration of family reunification in Bulgaria. Hristo Tambovski, for instance, warned that if his parents were not brought to Bulgaria immediately, his entire family would move to Yugoslavia. If migration to the latter was not possible, refugees often opted for Bulgaria due to geographical location and proximity of next of kin in Yugoslav Macedonia.

The personal life stories of Slav-speaking refugees from Greek Civil War involved diverse possibilities and choices that demand further research, which takes into account the complex and often divergent ways in which family solidarity, political involvement and national identity were blended. Instead of essentializing some general “refugee experience”, the biographies of these people should be taken in their multiplicity of possible and real trajectories and not as a result of a “traumatic uprooting” or a detachment from the “natural homeland”. Eventually, the multiple layers of identity manifest in their personal life narratives were gradually lost in the univocal character of homogenized nations – Bulgarian in the case of those who finally settled in communist Bulgaria or Macedonian in the case of the *Egejci* residing in Yugoslav Macedonia as well as in the diaspora milieus overseas.

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28 CPA, F. 1, OP. 32, A.E. 1066 – This is the case of Argir Vâlčev, otherwise expelled from Yugoslavia as “Bulgarian agent”. His family still remained in Skopje.