PERCEPTION OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES IN A MULTICULTURAL AREA: THE CASE OF TETOVO

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Abstract: Republic of Macedonia is a specific social milieu, culturally very diverse, with two more strong political and cultural elements, Macedonian and Albanian, with very ethnocentric and basically nationalistic perception of identities (Agelopoulos, 1995: 249). Tetovo is one of the Macedonia’s biggest cities, reflection of the whole countries reality, multicultural area, with the great number of the young population, since there are two universities (SEEU and SUT), and the same problems with the otherness perception, living in two different lebenswelts, with little communication (Pajaziti et.al., 2015), ethnically homogenous microenvironments based on the perspective of minority or majority.

This paper deals with self-perception and identity perception of adult young Tetovars, based on a research done in Tetovo, a focus group with 11 young participants (respondents), 7 males and 4 females from 21 – 27 years old and a case study with a young Macedonian female. The research is done in the second half of 2015 within a RRPP project, using survey, focus group and case study. This paper discuss only focus group and case study results. The researcher was interested to understand how identity perception effect ingroup-outgroup boundaries and inter-group relations. Qualitative results show that Albanians in Tetovo expressed very complex social identity, strong identification with religious group and ethnicity.

Keywords: identity, Tetovo, young adults, religion, ethnicity, perceptions, SIC, SII

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1. INTRODUCTION: MACEDONIAN CULTURAL CONTEXT

Macedonia is historically known as ‘Catena Mundi’ (The Clasp of the World) due to its favorable geographical position as a crossroad place of the important roads. (Muhiq, 2007: 4) Macedonia is a “civilization corridor” where West and East, Christianity and Islam are being brought together, exemplified by the many mosques and churches throughout the country. The cultural mosaic is described also as a “deep diversity”, it is a natural condition. If we have a look at the statistic data, we shall notice that diverse ethnic and religious belongings can be found there, which in turn create a heterogeneous situation. In this multicultural or heterogeneous context, Macedonians are major ethnic group, followed by Albanians, Orthodox Christianity is dominant religion and the second is Islam. (Pratto et. al., 2017)

As Atanasov (2012) states “Instead of loosing the importance, the ethnic dimensions in Macedonian society are just getting stronger on both sides, Macedonian and Albanian.”. Namely, the author points out that the country is closer to ethnic democracy than to multicultural model.

The city of Tetovo from demographic terms is a multi-ethnic environment with approximately 86,580 citizens. According to the last census (2002) ethnic Albanians consist in 70, 3%, Macedonians 23, 1%, Turks 2,1% and Roma 2,7% and others, and according to religious affiliation, over 80% of the Muslim faith and others, Christian Orthodox... (Герасимовски, 2002: 185)

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a research done in Tetovo, in July 2015, a focus group with 11 young participants (respondents), 7 males and 4 females from 21 – 27 yrs old. All of the participants identified themselves as ethnic Albanians and Muslims. Some of them were students/ex students coming from different fields of study; two of them employed in the private sector, two had their own small businesses (self-employed) and 2 others were unemployed.
The group was gathered at the conference room of the Faculty of Public Administration and Political Sciences of South East European University. The setting allowed for privacy, and in the mean time, the sitting format – round table – allowed them to see each other directly and be more vivid in their discussions. Participants provided information in two ways: written responses and moreover, group discussions.

The discussion was designed to gather information from the group in regard to the following outcomes:
1. To understand their own identity, the ethnic and religious one and which one feels the most
2. To understand the coexistence with other communities, as a need or as a matter of choice
3. To understand what impact their identity perception on their daily life and constructing the future
4. To understand the importance of recognizing and embracing their fate as citizens of the same country, or looking at each-other as exclusive examples on their respective lives
5. To understand until where a relationship between “other” and “us” can go, depending on ethnic identity, religious identity, language etc.
7. To understand what society does (milieu’s role) – building bridges or dividing people – if rare cases of coexistence are showed up (mixed marriages or religious converts).

In additional, a case study (an interview) with a Macedonian ethnic respondent representing the minority in Tetovo (a girl, in her early twenties) was conducted. Through a very natural environment created by the moderators, the young group showed a type of social identity, mostly based on ethnicity and religion, and a more flexible perception on citizenship.

3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: FINDINGS ANALYSIS

The research findings confirmed once again that the Balkan’s mindset is still strong and active among young Albanians in relation to perception and social inclusiveness, where ethnicity and religion still are very high ranked in the social identityu scale. Albanians in Tetovo tend to keep tight to their identity even though the perception of the identity changes accordingly to the geographical background or ethnicity of interaction with other people. When asked about identity, they loudly confirm their “Albanian” and “Muslim” identity, as the core element of their identity, inherited by their ancestors. Living every day in the mixed society of Macedonia, they do feel proud of emphasizing their identity dimensions. They relate themselves and their identity, with places, dates, or events. For example, they feel more Albanian on November 28th (The Independence day of Albania), when they visit any historical site like Vlora (where Albanians raised the Flag of Independence), when the national football representation is playing soccer in some other country, when they hear about heroes or celebrities like Skanderbeg, Mother Teresa, Adem Jashari, Rita Ora, etc.

This perception is kept even abroad. Albanians tend to introduce themselves by the Albanian identity than the country they come from (the citizenship). Instead of saying “I’m from Macedonia” they tend to emphasize they are Albanians, and feel more related to Albania as their homeland. They insist to keep this strong feeling even when they go to Albania (trips, vacations etc).

As mentioned above, participants showed a strong social identity, as Albanians and relating it 100% with being Muslims. Compare to Albanians of Albania and Kosovo, the Macedonia’s Albanian community identifies itself with two un-separately elements, religion (Islam) and ethnic (albanianism) as a reflection of civic religion (Pajaziti 2013).

Endogamy is a type of marriage that Tetovo’s Albanians tend to embrace. If an Albanian ethnic marries with a Macedonian woman, then the bride is considered as “us”, no matter of the identity or religion she actually is. This is considered as a “conquest”, taking in consideration the tradition that from now on, the woman is going to act (live the life) according Albanian traditions and customs or by converting in her husband religion – Islam.

But if an Albanian man is changing either the ethnical identity or the religious one, Albanians consider it as “a pure act of treason” (male 21 yrs old, student). This attitude is very strong, no matter of benefits like papers (a citizenship for living in one of the developed countries like Germany, Switzerland), money etc. “I’m very stable and stoic to my religion.” – one of the participants said, trying to not mix up the religion with marriage. The general perception about mixed marriages is out of question to Albanians. When asked to comment an Albanian writer quote who said that “if Albanians in Macedonia wants to coexist in the future, they must join their bed with Macedonians”, participants strongly condemned it.

355 Albaniansims is referreing to the albanian etnocentrisms, as a feeling of belongingness.
Much more readiness is gained when it comes to situations when the other person (even though considered “not us” by the ethnic identity) conveys the same religion. In this category, it is obvious that religious element determines the companionship with Muslim based ethnic identities, like being Turk, Bosniak or Macedonian Muslims (torbesh) and a gap with non Muslim communities (in local and global perspective). The inter-ethnic marriages are approved from them, if the two sides share the same belief (i.e. Islam): (“If Amir, yes... maybe... his name seems to be like an Albanian one... and moreover we have common elements, common things... If any Dragan or Vlado, no!”. – a participant says. Strong refusal when in situations if an Orthodox woman (even Albanian) from Albania marries a Serbian or a Macedonian man... To the participants, the bride is definitely not from “us”. Except of religion and ethnicity, another strong indicator of the marriage is the language too. “As some of the participants emphasized, if she (the bride) refuses to learn my language... I’ll look for other alternatives”.

All the respondents expressed a high refusal of identity conversion, both religious and ethnic, but they feel more open on changeability of nationality or citizenship. As it is shown so far, participants reflected enhanced social identity complexity, by in-group and out-group belongings. Participants stood after the “we” form, only in two cases, if Albanians and if Muslims. The strong ethnic identity was mostly referred to sentences like: “We are... Albanians, patriotic ones, people of word (Besa)356, people of faith (religion), people of a strong belief, humanists, hardworking persons etc.” When elaborating these feelings and qualities, participants said that Albanians do have inherited these values from ancestors and that Albanians have always been peaceful people and never looked for war or trouble in the region. By defining these characteristics, participants strongly defend the positiveness and including things like pride, peace, culture, history, faith etc.

In this category they tend to approach other communities if they share the same belief, religion. Based on Islam values, participants related themselves immediately to peaceful people, people of faith and strong belief, humanists and people who watch their own businesses.

When asked directly what’s representing “them” (the out-group), participants immediately took hard stance, defining the other major community in Macedonia, Macedonians. By completing the sentence: “They are... Macedonians, orthodox”, participants continued to elaborate these characteristics for Macedonians, as people which cannot be trusted easily. Participants defined Macedonians as Slaves, and always “ready for troubles”.

Being a member of minority vs majority social group, is reflected from the feeling to the real daily life. After gathering different opinions and data for the quantitative survey and the focus group discussions, Tetovo team had a discussion with a participant with high complex social identity, young female ethnic Macedonian. In first glance she looked openminded, reflecting a cosmopolitan approach: “I’d like to speak all languages of the world. The more languages you know, the more you matter to other people and the world”. From different point of view her identity still seemed to be “in accordance” with the Balkan’s mindset (closed to other ethnic marriages – and highly affected by the social circumstances). Even though, according to her “it is the love itself that need to be heard” as she said first, still the consent from the family is more than necessary. She didn’t totally exclude the family and the society: “I’d analyze things first, listen to my family and friends, and then taking a decision, which certainly would be ‘No’”. The respondent expressed high degree of coexistence feelings, thinking and acting positively toward other ethnic and religious groups (her best friend is an Albanian girl). “My very best friend is a Muslim girl, an Albanian one. And even the milk my family buys is coming from and Albanian merchandiser. Trust is not a question.”

Regarding religion, she was a very open minded respondent too. But when directly asked what the Big Cross and Mosque Minarets mean to her: “Nothing at all, but I’d like to add something here: These religious elements have to be treated equally. God offered this land to allow to live all of us. And a message to all the politicians, policymakers etc.: Do not divide people on ethnic basis, because issue it’s not about a community, but about the entire country”.

CONCLUSIONS

Identity refers to “social categories and to the sources of an individual’s self-respect or dignity.” (Fearon, 1999: 2) Ethnic identity is a measurement of the feeling of belonging to a particular ethnic group or community. “A religious commitment is often at the core of an individual’s sense of identity. Social scientific studies of religion have shown the variety of ways in which religions powerfully serve the identity impulse.” (Minkler & Cosgel, 2004: 5) This is a research on perception of different reflections of identity at young population of Tetovo. Findings of this

356 Besa is refered to the word keeping among albanians, if the word is literally given and kept as a promis and as an word of honor.
research are important for generating more inclusive policies by the state institutions that serve for building a multicultural, more tolerant and stable society.

Some of the most conclusions from this research are as follow:
- The participants tend to a high complex social identity.
- Albanian Tetovars have strong ethnic identity feelings.
- Albanianism as ideology is vivid among young Tetovars.
- Respondents expressed high degree of religiosity.
- Family approach still is determinant for the interethnic relations.
- For the focus group participants “the other” is the major community in Macedonia, i.e. ethnic Macedonians.
- Students seem closed to ethnically mixed marriages.
- Traditional neighborhoods are very positive example of peaceful coexistence.
- Customs and religious holidays have positive influence on dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

REFERENCES