

The Prespes accord:

The force and responsibility of the trans-national

by Michalis Bartsidis¹

Thanks to the Prespes accord, Greece and FYROM (Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia) finally put a spotlight on the issue of the name of a newly-established country that is part of NATO and the EU, striving for its resolution on a sound basis. This accord became feasible in a very particular and rare historical set of favourable circumstances not only within the two countries but also worldwide, and it is a great achievement for our country, as well as for the Balkans and Europe in general. A plethora of political, cultural and ideological dimensions can be detected and its effects are of vital importance. Its impact can already be seen on the sphere of the current political developments. It evokes issues of memory and the reconstruction of national identities but it also gives prominence to innovative ideological contradictions and the possibility of the reconstruction of the Greek political landscape. We will elaborate on three crucial points of an ongoing discussion that will probably continue for a while. The Macedonian matter has been constituting a problem deeply rooted in a trauma of the Greek society, namely that of the Civil War and of the Macedonian minority. This trauma has been at stake on the level of internal policies, playing a huge role in the formation of various power blocs. As a result, a fetish, nationalist ideology emerges as a phenomenal case worldwide.

The autonomisation of ideology

First of all, how come and Greeks were not aware of the existence of such a minority throughout all these years? This is what I thought when I first heard about its existence in the 80s, even though I realized later that five friends of mine had such an origin. In any case, what we are confronted with here is a *denial* (*Verleugnung*). To put it differently, this is not a case of ignorance of an event or a fact, but rather a case of denial executed by rational discourse. However, in Freudian terms, an absolute denial is an affirmation, a proof of the very existence of what has been denied.

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Why is a minority that has already been decimated by a series of persecutions the cause of all these problems? As T. Kostopoulos points out, contrary to the rest of the “national” technical matters or related to foreign affairs, the Macedonian issue has been one of internal affairs in Greece from the very beginning, a matter of masses and of their political mobilizations, asserting the domination or preservation of political power – not only of the central one but also of various, minor ones on a local or even national level.

However, the implementation of this issue is connected to the forementioned traumatic denial, but it can also refer to the conflict of hegemony, remaining within the realm of the already established explanatory scheme of ideology based on material interests. If that was the case, then a series of rational arguments would suffice for the supporters of the accord to prevail over its opponents. Yet, what has been noticed in many instances is that the wing of (Greek) “Macedonian guards” is insusceptible not only to historical reasoning, but also to arguments supporting international political or geopolitical national interests. These movements go beyond ideology and hegemony, as they turn over the dogmatic beliefs in a fetishistic way rather than based on a correlation of belief and interest. Their pleasure stems from the trauma of loss (of history, of a fixed identity etc), while they are being incapable of dealing with the trauma within themselves or with others. The “Macedonian pleasure” allows for the continuity of discourse, drawing pleasure from itself rather than from the accomplishment of the goal that has been set. Until this point, we have been claiming that the discourse on the Macedonian issue (“Macedonology”) has been a “super-structure” of a hidden cause: the national purification. It gained its autonomisation gradually, breaking away from any “basis”, and it became the centre later on.

We cannot talk about this in classical terms, namely we are not confronted here with an ideology of a nation having the role of integrating people into the state, creating a society of subjects-citizens with rights. We live in a new era of authoritarian inversion and exclusions, where borders and walls are built and the ideal of European integration, the only actually existing “globalization”, is in crisis. A great number of our co-citizens experience a loss of identity for various reasons, being in panic and fear when faced with the idea of the Other and of heterogeneity in general. In such cases, what we notice is an unconditional adhesion to certain values. Rather than being used as a guide to navigate events and certain circumstances, these values become a dogmatic assemblage of beliefs respected in an unconditional or, even fetishistic, way. As in the case of fundamentalism, the others, the ones having different beliefs,

are characterized as “enemies” and “traitors”, embodying the idea of the “enemy”. This is the source of a blind rage, an element that can arise in the surface as a mine of self-destruction.

Respect – “we all have disparate identities”

How do we behave towards that? The key, in such cases, is to maintain a respectful attitude. In such “deadlock” circumstances, experience shows how crucial the principle of respect is, and how useful a respectful attitude can be in contrast with an attitude of firm disagreement. From Kant to Charles Taylor, this notion refers directly to the corporeal sense and beyond that of pure reason. This term is often used in the context of a conservative semantic armoury, yet the sense of respect towards the other and the acknowledgement of his/ her feelings is a necessary condition for the restoration of verbal communication. In order for us to acknowledge the other and his/ her vulnerable side, we first need to acknowledge the vulnerable side in ourselves, otherwise we end up reproducing the pattern of an arrogant attitude of the West towards the rest of the world. You can come into conflict with the one (who is) traumatised on a national level, but you should not underestimate him/ her. You can claim this land to be your country, a very disparate and fragile identification, while maintaining a respectful attitude towards your opponent or neighbour. Taking account this, no-one should be considered an “ultimate enemy” for us. This is the reason why I find the prime minister’s speech, after the conclusion of the Prespes accord, quite pertinent. He claimed characteristically that “some of our fellow citizens may disagree with this accord. I am not afraid of them, but I do respect them”.

This sense of respect does not refer to the fascists and the racists, who use the Macedonian problem as a tool for the dissemination of hatred. In fact, they are the same ones who complain about the lack of respect towards them from the government’s side by the use of “audacious political manners”.

On the contrary, it is our duty to remind ourselves that there is nothing to lose, but rather something to gain: a new identity within ourselves through the co-development of the Balkan countries and the respect of the right to self-determination. We may have our own traumas, but we can take them into account while negotiating on the formation of new identities.

Trans-national: a new politics of memory and responsibility for the future

Something else is also required: the formation of new political coalitions, commonly agreed, in Greece and abroad, not on an inter-national, but, rather, on a trans-national basis.

According to a Marxist view, the state is the one responsible for the formation of a nation. However, when we become part of a larger whole, as for example that of Europe or the world, then we cannot lower what distinguishes us from the others and at the same time unites us. The fight against nationalism does not claim that there is no national identity but rather defends this idea of being “a global citizen”. The current political movements are movements of cosmopolitics rather than cosmopolitanism: The people and the movements are now characterized by historical awareness, as they know that the mankind has always been, and will continue to be, fragmented and conflictual. There is no certainty that the humankind is moving towards a more peaceful, democratic and civilized, according to Western standards, era. However, instead of envisioning an a-priori ideal, we could conceive an ideal as being the result of our own practices, mostly of political actions and resistance.

In this sense, we can refer to the current political movements as “glocal” movements, as the assemblage of notions that shape the political fights on a local level, can be seen, on a global level, as universal values, for example that of dignity, equality and freedom. As a result, we can distance ourselves from the dualism national/ cosmopolitan. We could, instead, approach the notion of identity(-ies) in a more complex and dynamic way. In this sense, it is our duty to think of ourselves as being national citizens in a globalised world.

The anti-imperialist leftists claim that this accord has not been chosen by the government, but it has rather been imposed by the international actor. At this point, we could develop a rather “indirect” and subtle argument. This accord could be an outcome of a series of negotiations between the two countries, favourable towards both sides.

It is well known that Syriza has been sustaining an anti-nationalist trend, at least for the last twenty-five years. This trend may not refer to the majority of the society but it is still present. It can negotiate and use the power of others in order to create new formations of power. In a similar way, in Northern Macedonia there have been objections towards “backdating”, the corruption of Gruevski, defending the Grigorov legacy. There are, of course, others who

represent a minority, yet the number of people participating in their mobilisations is no more than 1000.

The trans-national tendency has been a determining factor in shaping the history of this territory and of the country, moving beyond the era where the very existence of the trauma has been denied. This tendency has emerged as the most patriotic power hitherto, as it *acknowledges and puts a spotlight on the past and our "sins" and consequently assumes liability for the whole history*, it restores the historical continuity while excluding the idealistic talks and the fake news of "Macedonomachia"/ the Macedonian guards.

A new political proposition can attain a new meaning in the context of an identity that characterizes a wider (social) group. The movements are ideologically generative and, on the other hand, such a political party, a government party, needs to enter into a progressive path of cooperation and mutual understanding together with other nations. Concerning the notion of trans-nationality, what prevails is the civil element of democracy over that of nation, a political entity that acknowledges and embraces the otherness. In other words, a new political community, the conception of a "brotherhood of equality and freedom". What stands against it is an exclusive patriotism, namely a nationalist speech based on homogeneity, closing its eyes to difference and policies of hatred "in the name of love" for the homeland.

The "Prespes accord" is a model of a policy followed by the two sides involved. Having acknowledged the opportunity to create new correlations on a trans-national level, it constitutes a rare case of coexistence. Through the joint establishment of a common perspective and of a broader unity, this accord leaves behind an era of autistic, seclusive and exclusive national(ist) hostility. Loving your identity is one thing, turning a blind eye to the identity of the other(s) is quite another.

The notion of trans-nationalism raises a new policy in the Balkans, taking action in and between the countries. Some "short circuits" of understanding. solidarity in the name of the weak ones and of reconciliation invalidate the ethnocratic fences, censorship, policies of hatred, the intolerance to violent attacks and, after all, political terrorism. Let us open *komshi kapidjik*, "little doors between neighbours" (Goran Janev) so that we can communicate with our neighbours. Tsipras and Zaef have opened a new path between neighbours. The scene from an Angelopoulos film, where borders are crossed on the surface of the lake waters, on the signing

of the accord, symbolizes the shaping of a diode and the creation of a network of joint actions, of a public space integrated within a common European perspective.