

Authoritarian Past, Dystopian Present:
The Struggle of Identity in Conflicted "North" Macedonia

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Abstract

This thesis in Anthropology researches the identity of Macedonians in the wake of a controversial name change to solve a long standing dispute with Greece. The dispute is based on rivalring historical narratives and the legacy of antique king and conqueror Alexander the Great of ancient Macedon, a region currently shared by Greece and the newly renamed republic of North Macedonia, who both claim descendance from Alexander's Macedon. The current government pushed through the name change despite a failed referendum in order to pursue EU and NATO membership previously blocked by Greece. This thesis explores the identity of Macedonians I would meet during a two week long fieldwork I conducted in April-May 2019. I contextualize Macedonian identity in the setting of the Balkan region and use primarily constructivist theories on nation to investigate the conflicting identities in the post-Yugoslav republic. This thesis looks at what people I met in unofficial circumstances feel about their identity as "north" Macedonians and their view of their country.

Keywords: *Social Anthropology; North Macedonia; Identity; Nation & Nationalism*

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Preface

In the summer of 2018 I went backpacking in eastern Europe and I ended up spending nine days in Macedonia. Particularly two things happened in Macedonia which inspired me to do my thesis and fieldwork about the country. I trailed north to a small village called Mavrovo, the reason, a wedding festival would take place in nearby Galicnik. From Mavrovo to Galicnik there was no public transport and the road was around 15km long, prompting me to hitchhike the distance a total of four times. During my car rides I got to meet many friendly and generous people, I remember having talks over a wide variety of topics including my studies in anthropology. I was also invited to spend time with a Macedonian family, which had their ancestral home in the village. Unfortunately I only picked up a limited number of contact information during this trip, but the ones I got would be the basis for my decision to go to Macedonia and commit fieldwork there.

The second thing that occurred was a guided tour I took in Skopje, the guide (tour guide A), being of Greek and Aromanian heritage proclaimed himself objective and neutral in the historical conflict between Greece and Macedonia, almost to my disappointment as I had hoped to hear a Macedonian point of view. However his initial claims of neutrality and objectivity were erroneous and during the tour he bolstered quite a number of dubious, incorrect and strongly patriotic claims, aiming at a sense of Macedonian primacy going as far as claiming Macedonia is mentioned in Genesis (it's not, I immediately checked it up) and one of only three nations mentioned by its current name in the Bible. He used many other dubious claims to assert Macedonia's role as an early civilization and made claims to Alexander the Great being an ethnic Macedonian in the modern sense.

An avid historian since the age of ten, Greek history, including the history of the Hellenic kingdom of ancient Macedon is a favorite among many history nerds, myself included. A later Greek-speaking state, the Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine) has cult status among many history enthusiasts. Given the great fandom for anything Greek, the small Slavic speaking republic of Macedonia just north of the Greek region of Macedonia easily became thought of as a pretentious little country with a megalomaniacal complex.

Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of my thesis is to gain a wider understanding on how modern Slavic speaking Macedonians view their history and how they identify with it, using the recent name change as an entry point to further explore the topic. I was interested to find out: How important Alexander the Great and ancient history is to contemporary Macedonians? How does Macedonians position themselves in a historical context,? How do Macedonians view themselves as a people and how do they react to the name change in regards to their ethnic identity? An underlying question here can be condensed to “are Macedonians typically nationalists?”. Now this question can appear related to previous questions, but are fundamentally it's own question. It's fully possible to believe oneself to be descended from Alexander the Great or anyone else without being a nationalist, likewise is it possible to be a nationalist without believing in the common creation myths.

Topic

In 2018 the Republic of Macedonia reached an agreement with Greece to change it's name to the Republic of North Macedonia, in an attempt to solve a conflict with Greece that lasted since the country's independence following the Yugoslav break up in the 1990's.

The background of the conflict between Greece and Macedonia is based on rivalring claims to historical identities. In the year 336 BC Alexander the Great of the Arpead dynasty became king of ancient Macedon, which earlier under the reign of his father, Philip II, had conquered much of ancient Greece. Macedon back in those days had primarily been centered in modern day Greek Macedonia. At his death in 323 BC Alexander, had defeated and completely conquered the thereto largest empire the world ever seen, the Achamenid Persian empire. Alexander's conquests would spread Greek culture across the Mediterraneanrranean and near east all the way to India. His legacy is that of being one of the greatest conquerors and military commanders of all time and his influence in the culture of the world is vast. It is in part the legacy of Alexander that the name conflict is about, as a Greek friend of mine put it "they're stealing our history". It's about the legacy of being descendant of one of the most influential empires the world ever seen, and right now neither Macedonia nor Greece can claim any contemporary greatness or influence. Secondly it's also a question of territory. Northern Greece is also known as Macedonia, and extreme Macedonian nationalists lays claim to what they call Aegean Macedonia (URL 1). The reason why Macedonia

agreed to the name change, and since early 2019 is officially known as the Republic of North Macedonia is to get Greece to stop vetoing any attempt by Macedonia to join EU and NATO (URL 2). The name change was made available after the social democratic party came to power. They held a referendum officially boycotted by the opposition who wanted the referendum to fail due to lack of participation (50% participation is required for the referendum to be valid). The 'Yes' vote won a landslide victory but with a voter turnout of about 35% which should have nullified the referendum, nevertheless the Social Democratic Party pressed through the name change (URL 3). This gave me an interest in pursuing further knowledge about what notion people in Macedonia would have about their history.

Disposition

After outlaying the purpose and topic in chapter 1, I delve deeper into the topic in chapter 2 'The Regional Setting', doing so in a very personal way to share the understanding and ideas I held before doing this fieldwork. Chapter 3 outlines the theory used, dividing it into sub-chapters based on the different theoretical thoughts in the study of nation (primordialism vs. constructivists) and a sub-chapter on specifically discussing nationalism. This is also the chapter there I deal with previous research. Chapter 4 explain the method I used to gather data i.e. describing how I conducted my fieldwork. Chapter 5 covers the data I gathered throughout my fieldwork. This is divided into 7 sub-chapters outlining different topics I came across and placed in an order to tell the narrative as I've come to understand and see it. Following that I further my analysis in chapter 6 titled "An Imagined Macedonia". Finally I move to Further Research in chapter 7 explaining what I would like to study more if I am to continue doing research in Macedonia as well as discussing what I think would be the possible benefits of the research I have done and could consider doing if applied.

The Regional Setting

My inspiration to investigate this topic is my interest in nationalism, especially how nationalism uses history to legitimize it's ideology. Being an avid history buff, traveler and partaker of internet forum where history is discussed, I frequently came into contact with people who would express strongly held beliefs, either wholly rejected or considered dubious by historical scholarship. In particular Balkan has gotten a reputation for being a hotbed for nationalist ideology (Karpas

1997:331).

Admittedly before doing this fieldwork I was colored by the opinions I formed over the years based on my encounter to a handful of Balkan nationalists, in real life, but especially over the internet as well as a general impression that the education system of the Balkans willfully manipulate people to believe these ideologies from when I several time met Balkan historians who unabashedly talked about antique history with certainty that doesn't exist in historical scholarship.

To look at a conversation I was engaged in on an internet forum with a Serbian (the topic of the thread is the Bosnian church)

Serbian: After the break up of Yugoslavia, there are, shall we say, a lot of revisionist currents. One of those currents comes from Bosnia where some of their intellectuals are trying to go back through history and create new (fantasy) narratives, in order to provide "origin stories" for the 20th century political constructions. So for example the current mainstream history in Bosnia doesn't recognize that modern day Bosniaks used to be Orthodox and Catholic Serbs/Croats, because that doesn't go very well with the modern narrative and it's rather inconvenient (or whatever else the reason may be), but instead they dig up this whole Bosnian church and from it create this whole fantasy history about how prior to Ottoman invasion in Bosnia there was a whole other (lost) tribe called "Good Bosnians" (or "Dobri Bosnjani") and that tribe (who nobody mentions anywhere) are the ancestors of modern Bosniaks; from time to time because of political stuff from present day and various interests to support this political stuff, these, shall we say, alternative views on history end up being in all kinds of encyclopedie, and unless you're a native knowing exactly what you're looking at, it's easy to miss this kind of machinations. Another example of that is the tendency among Albanians to claim that they are ancient Illyrians or FYROMIANS that they are directly related to Alexander.

Me: According to you, where do Albanians come from then? I'm not necessarily disagree with you, my take on Albanian origins is agnostic, the "Albanian" ethnos formed sometime after the fall of the western Roman Empire, but with origins in some paleo-Balkan community, either Illyrians, Thracians or Dacians or a mixture of some of those groups.

Of course it's precarious to attribute historical tribes to modern people, and there definitely haven't existed a continuous Illyrian identity from antiquity till today and modern day identification among Albanians with Illyrians is something like a 18-19th century construct. The fact that ancient Illyrians never were a "nation" but a name for many tribes to the north of Greece who may or may

not have had a coherent cultural identity.

So what I'm wondering why you so vehemently refute Albanian-Illyrian connection? Is it in the sense that there is no cultural continuity so even if Albanian language descend from Illyrian, it doesn't mean they're the same (for example calling modern day German "Teutons" is only a neologism) or is it in the sense that you consider Albanians to have a distinctively different origin from either other paleo-Balkan peoples or possibly even something completely else.

Because for me I don't refute nor agree to any given theory of Albanians ancient origins.

Serbian: Apart from the Greeks, all of the modern nations (or their ancestors) came to the Balkans between 5th and like 12th century. These lands were not empty, there were people living there, themselves being a mix of all sorts of Roman time stuff. These people were not wiped out, they were assimilated in the newly arrived populations... I could claim to be Illyrian too, you know. Which would have as much credibility (and relevance) as Macedonians being related to Alexander.

These things - claiming to be related to historical stuff (further back in history, the better) are popular in the Balkans, because nationalists think that if they can make a link to some historical people they can justify territorial pretensions / conquest in modern day. That's literally it.

Im definitely not a historian, so as far as i know (i think from school?) the first time Albanians came to the Balkans was under this guy https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Maniakes in some kind of Byzantine civil war as mercenary soldiers, and their ancient homeland should be somewhere in the Caucasus near Armenia. (URL 4)

The conversation continued for a few posts, and despite me providing sources and citing evidence for an Albanian paleo-Balkan origin, he refused to change his opinion, despite providing no evidence to his point, even when he managed to find a source discussing this George Maniakes, in the end agreed with and put forward the same evidence I had. In contrast, Albanians will typically talk about the possibility of Illyrian ancestry like it's fact and no controversy on the topic whatsoever, for example I met a Kosovo Albanian whose father is a historian and he would explain Illyrian-Albanian continuity theory like it was a simple fact.

Note how the person in above conversation proclaims that Balkanites are typically engaging in pseudo-history to glorify their own nation, but that he himself sees beyond that and then vehemently refuses to accept the academic consensus regarding Albanian paleo-Balkan origin as this would

acknowledge their primogeniture to the land as original inhabitants, instead opting to see all Balkanites as mixed but conveniently placing Albanians as even later newcomers than slavs. Also note the slur reference to modern Macedonians as FYROManians, using the former internationally recognized name Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

If one spend anytime reading about Macedonia on forums like Quora, one gets the sense that all Macedonians believe in what I will call "Alexander nationalism" i.e. the belief that modern Macedonians are direct descendent of Alexander the great's Macedonians and have the right to his legacy. A youtube video on a channel called "Mr History" says: "If you ever met a Macedonian, someone from the country just above Greece, they probably won't hesitate a split second in insisting that Alexander was Macedonian" (URL 5). There is also not a lack of Macedonian nationalists on the internet, as attested in the aptly named 'Macedonian Truth Forum' (URL 6) which espouses strong nationalist and anti-Greek sentiments.

Theory

Previous Research

The general themes of my topic, understanding people's identity and perspective is a core aspect of anthropology, and many books and article has been written on the topic, both in general theory and specific case studies. Nationalism studies is on it's own a whole discipline of academia. Within the field of anthropology there has been major studies done by Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawn and many others who have promoted a constructivist theory, while scholars like Adrian Hastings and Pierre van den Berghe espouses a primordialist view on nationalism (Özkırımlı 2010).

On the topic of Macedonian identity and history, I'm very familiar with what can be seen as a more public or non-academic discourse on Macedonian identity. Yet when doing my fieldwork and listening to people's various narratives I choose not to fact check because the point of my study is not to see if there were actual ethnic cleansing of Macedonians after the Balkan wars. My purpose is how Macedonians view themselves and their history.

Additionally I'm conducting my fieldwork very soon after the name change came in place, and while the conflict goes back in time, I'm looking at it through the lens of a very recent development. There are massive conflicts in Macedonia about the national and ethnic identity of the people. In the

wake of the referendum Ognan Vangelov wrote the article “ The Primordialisation of Ethnic Nationalism in Macedonia” (Vangelov 2019) detailing the development of Macedonian national identity and the so called antiquisation promoted by previous conservative government. It is an interesting article, close to the narrative I come to understand before undertaking my fieldwork, but difficult to use as, while aiming to be a factual description of the history of a discourse on Macedonian identity. It would most likely be refuted by Macedonian nationalists as fake and as an attack on their identity. But it does detail the conflict within Macedonia about ethnic identity which is largely ignored in the international 'internet' discourse.

Further work done on Macedonian identity includes Nevena Nacheva's "Transforming identities in Europe: Bulgaria and Macedonia between nationalism and Europeanization" (Nancheva 2012) which is a poststructuralist discourse analysis of the development of identity and its narrative discourse in the two former socialist states of Macedonia and Bulgaria, both in regards to each other and to the process of integration in the post-socialist Europe. Nancheva lays out a chronology for identity discourse and issues in Macedonia from independence.

There has been written a lot of records in Serbian, which are inaccessible to me. I did read the English abstract of a few such as V Stankovic-Pejnovic article “„Contested identity“ of Macedonia: Identity of Difference” (Stankovic-Pejnovic 2010) on how Macedonian national identity has been contested by its neighbors and that this external pressure contributes to the resurgence of nationalism and primordialism in the country, something I will also argue in my text. Both Vangelov and Stankovic-Penovic outlines that there is increased tension among Macedonians as to their own identity, something I also noticed in my field work and will discuss at some length.

Another dissertation I couldn't read more than the abstract of, Amanda Greber's "Proper Language, Proper Citizen Standard Linguistic Practice and Identity in Macedonian Primary Education" (Greber 2013) is about how language and culture is taught in Macedonian schools to forge Macedonian identities and how the discourse has changed throughout the 20th century (scope of the dissertation is 1945-2000).

Primordialist Theories

Nation as a word is typically used ambiguously, sometimes it means ethnicity, sometimes it means a state, sometimes both in one. In the main part of the theory section I will explain the theories concerning what a nation is, in primarily the ethnic sense, and why it exist, while noting there is an

intrinsic link between nation as an ethnicity and nation as a state. It is difficult to argue against the existence of nation, although there are quite different ways to argue what nations actually are, how they came to be and also if they should be or not, making for quite distinct theories. Whether we like nations or not, they do exist. From nation as a concept springs the ideology of nationalism, which will be dealt with after distinguishing the main theories in the studies of nation.

When studying nations and nationalism, there are two main theoretical perspectives: the first one is the primordialist or essentialist perspective which is typically held by nationalists themselves. Primordialism is an umbrella term for different theories on nations that holds in common that nations are something natural to humanity and are thus inherently justified to exist (Özkırmı 2010:49). Nations often take on esoteric overtones, suggesting that some people belong together as they constitute a 'culture' or 'nation' due to inherited identities (Özkırmı 2010:55) believing that the nation has a unique history and identity (Özkırmı 2010:51). A more scientific perspective is the sociobiological suggesting that nation is genetic, inherited kinship and maintained through endogamy (Özkırmı 2010:53). Overall primordialists see nation as an ancient concept, maintaining that nations typically stretches back if not to time immemorial, at least for centuries (Özkırmı 2010:58). Primordialists thus believe in a strong link between ethnicity and nation/state, and typically nationalists believe that a state and a people are made for each other (Gellner 2007:6). There are further sub-branches of primordialism worthy to note which are clearly distinguished from more essentialistic branches, at least in part doing away with the mystical essence of nations but maintain that nations in themselves are natural (Özkırmı 2010:51). Perennialists and the more modern ethnosymbolist approach will look at historical records to argue for an existence of the ideology of nations before the otherwise assumed birth of nationalism in the 18th and 19th century (Özkırmı 2010:67-69). Anthony D. Smith in the ethnosymbolist tradition does see lineages of ethnicities, forming and disbanding and eventually leading up to modern nations. They do not carry the primordialist essence, but rather are formed as human groups merge or split from each other eventually leading to the coalescence of distinct ethnicities and eventually nations which when formed are stable and continuous (Özkırmı 2010:150). Ethnosymbolists emphasize myths, symbols, memories and traditions in the formation of distinct ethnicities (Özkırmı 2010:143).

As my paper will not delve into the history of Macedonia factually, I am not trying to analyze the lineage of Macedonian identity, but rather look at the current notion of Macedonian as per my research. I am looking at these sort of theories to have as a background when understanding how people think about history. For example I did talk to people who would espouse a primordialist

essence but my analysis of their views are mostly constructivist and postmodern. primordialism is also needed to understand the rhetoric of nationalism (see own sub-chapter). I also want to emphasize some key words of the less essentialistic theories, such as common myths and historical memories as relevant for my own analysis (Özkırımlı 2010:148).

Constructivist Theories

The opposite of Primordialism is constructivist, or modernist theory. The criticism against primordialists and nation and nationalism constitutes that the primordialist perspective presents a static, inherited and unchangeable essence in humans tying them to their nation forever, generation after generation (Özkırımlı 2010:60). A belief which in its most extreme is easily dismissed by a rational historian by seeing the more recent origin of some of the most influential nation states such as England or France, or the disappearance of ancient high civilizations such as Sumer and Akkad. The general migration of people assimilating in new countries adapting new identities, sometimes new nation made out from migration like USA (arguably all nations are made from migration as humanity originates in Africa). The nationalist will typically adhere to a selective interpretation of history to justify their doctrine¹.

The constructivist perspective holds that nations are to their nature constructed in the past 2-3 centuries and are the result of distinct societal development trends, such as economic, political and social developments in the wake of capitalism, industrialization, secularisation and the centralized bureaucratic state (Özkırımlı 2010:72). They argue that nations is political and social constructions with nothing inherent in them (Özkırımlı 2010:89). Major works are typically based around the idea of explaining what nation is, as the title of Benedict Anderson's book suggest: "Imagined Communities". Both Anderson and Ernest Gellner, influential scholars of nation, show great concern for both the practical problems nations and nationalism causes (like wars and persecution) and the difficulties of pinpointing nations, or fully understanding what nations are (Anderson 1991:5), Gellner 2007:4). Both authors use similar tropes when explaining the lineage of nations, showing on one hand how arbitrary and artificial it is, but at the same time acknowledging its potential for power and real meaning for members of the nation. In the end, Gellner after several chapters attempt to explain what a nation is (hitherto he only explains what nationalism is as a political principle). He concludes that any definition suffers serious problems but consider two key words in determining nation; namely will and culture. Will is the internal and mutual identification.

¹ My assesment

Person A feel like a national, they are recognized by B, another self-identifying national as member of the same nation and A recognizes B as such. They share a general mutual recognition of who belongs to the nation and who doesn't (Gellner 2007:52-53) (by it's nature, any nation is limited in it's scope). Culture is a tricky one. In theory the concept of culture would need to be explained on it's own before we continue, but I will rely on generalizations and the readers pre-existing ideas of culture. By it's very nature of what human behavior and what humans can invent there is similarities between all human cultures. Cultures far away from each other are typically easy to distinguish, but cultures in close proximity to each other can be more difficult. Sometimes there are apparent "clear boundaries" either in language or religion setting two groups apart (such as Muslim Albanians and neighboring orthodox slavs). But any two groups in close proximity and shared history will eventually come to assimilate to some degree. Eventually, the distinction of groups and what features are considered important in maintaining boundaries to other groups are different from case to case and highly subjective (Barth 1969:14). Fredrik Barth who edited an influential anthology on ethnic boundaries in 1969 argued that ethnic differentiation exists not because lack of contact but rather that contact is essential in forming distinct ethnic groups due to the boundaries they maintain between each other through cultural symbols and expressed identity, though it frequently is obvious signbearing traits like language or clothing that will be used to distinguish ethnic groups (Barth 1969:9-10). Loosely translated, it means that Swedes, Norwegians and Danes maintain distinct identities because they can be contrasted to each other. Note though that anyone can change their clothes and start speaking a new language, to actually be considered a member of an ethnic group or nation it is needed to be identified as such, that is how someone becomes member of a nation (Barth 1969:15). It is the distinction between units, the delineation that makes cultural and ethnic units (nations) persistent and thus possible to study in history as a continuity.

Looking at the Scandinavian countries, we share both religion, mutually intelligible languages and large part of our culture with each other, yet we are three clearly defined countries, going back centuries to the end of the viking age then previous tribal societies were merged at random into the three modern kingdoms. There seem to be only will separating us three nations from being one and then the question is, why do we want to be separate? Our chance-based development as three different kingdoms, despite attempts at uniting us since the middle ages and the fact that Norway were ruled by Sweden or Denmark from late middle ages till 1905, the notion of three different nations have persisted, with a common acknowledgement that we are related but different people. Though applying Gellner and Anderson, the reason why Norway still ended up as a distinct nation might not have much to do with the medieval kingdom. Both Gellner and Anderson situates

nationalism as a product of industrialization, Gellner making an argument on primitive culture becoming high culture (so called garden cultures) and thus imposing homogeneity as a need for the modern state apparatus (Gellner 2007:49) and Anderson explaining how print-capitalism becomes the catalyst turning early modern agrarian feudal societies into nation states by a standardized language and education (Anderson 1991:38-45). Thus the reason why Norway survived as a nation has nothing to do with any inherited norwegianness, but rather came as a result of how the country developed during the industrial revolution and maintained its boundaries to the other Scandinavian nations. Gellner argues that nation can only come into existence then the political situation allows for it as a high culture is needed for the imposition of the cultural homogenization needed to create a nation (Gellner 2007:54).

Like Gellner's will, the title of Anderson's book insinuates that nations are largely kept together by a will or as an imagined community. Anderson points out that in any given nation, no one can know everyone so the nation is an imagined community between people who will never know each other. I feel the need to point out that despite putting Gellner and Anderson next to each other and comparing their work to the level there they might look almost identical, there are differences in their theoretical perspective, but for the sake of this paper I'm selecting what's usable for me.

Furthermore there are two specialized theories that could be placed in the constructivist tradition, which I will use.

Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen claims that the notion of group identity is of two kinds, we-as-subject (we) and we-as-object (us). This grammatical feature indicates that when we are a subject, there is a common identity created from a shared task, while being us, the object, positions the group to another group and this other group poses a contrast and often some sort of conflict for the 'us' (Hylland Eriksen 1995:427).

Finally I will in part use a postmodernist theory. Alan Hanson in his essay "The Making of the Maori: Culture Invention and its Logic". Hanson can be considered a perspective on constructivist theory, making claims to the invented nature of culture to serve contemporary purposes. Hanson discusses how traditions invented by westerners have now become real by being incorporated in Maori culture and are now seen by the Maoris as authentic parts of their culture and heritage to be passed down the generations (Hanson 1989:897). Hanson's point is not to discredit modern Maori culture as inauthentic, but rather understand how culture is made and becomes authentic. It is not the origin or age of culture/tradition, but rather the held belief that makes something authentic and argues that the job of the anthropologist is not to prove what's authentic or not but rather understand

how something is or has become authentic (Hanson 1989:898). Hanson also makes a point that culture also does not happen as an isolated phenomena, but the fact that westerners had a hand in inventing these traditions are actually natural as outsiders are active producers of culture (Hanson 1989:899).

There also exists several more constructivist perspectives on nationalism, especially Marxist based instrumentalist theories which inherently are negative to nation and nationalism and sees it as a tool of the elite to exert control and gain power and prestige (Özkırmı 2010:72,84). I will not look into these perspectives as my field work are primarily related to understanding how the people I talked to understand their Macedonian identity and I'm using a theoretical framework useful to the data I gathered. Albeit there is potential in using Marxist and instrumentativ theories, something I will briefly discuss in context later on.

Nationalism

While we have established to some extent what a nation might be in a satisfactory way, we need to look briefly at nationalism. Nationalism is at it's core the ideology that springs from the idea that nation – ethnicity and nation – state should be the same (Gellner 2007:1). While there is some room for variation, it can't be too significant. Thus, nationalism is a political ideology for how the world should be ordained. Umut Özkırmı makes three propositions to the claims of nationalist ideology. First it claims identity, it claims that a group of people is distinct and separate from others. Secondly it claims to have a history, used to legitimate it's present goals and action and thirdly it claims territory, land it controls or believes it should control² (Özkırmı 2010:209). Özkırmı argues that nationalism is a discourse or a way of seeing the world. In making this statement we need to understand 'discourse' in a foucauldian sense i.e. as socially held perceptions that are real to the perceivers (Özkırmı 2010:208). Nationalism discourse tends to become naturalized in people's mind and become factually true and taken for granted, rather than seen as something constructed (Özkırmı 2010:211).

Looking at Özkırmı's definition nationalism at a glance it does not necessarily become something malignant as is often thought of in the modern discourse. It should be understood that the nationalism that caused Nazism and other violent ideologies is on the extreme of an ideological spectrum (Özkırmı 2010:4). Özkırmı also notes that there is currently some level of trying to

2 Note that there are 'nations' like Kurdistan which do not posses independent nation states.

separate “evil and irrational nationalism” of other's from the benign patriotism of the self (ibid.). Nationalism typically holds the ingredients to become ethnocentric, xenophobic and chauvinistic. Anthony Smith argues that nationalism, once the nation has come into existence is the ideology of achieving the nations goal. The main ones being autonomy, unity and identity (Özkırıklı 2010:154). It is the 'goal of the nation' which risks becoming a goal of ethnic homogeneity, expansionism and superiority over other. According to Hannah Arendt, chauvinism is latent in nationalism as when the national mission takes on a mystic or divine purpose (primordialistic). The idea that a nation is 'chosen' by whatever reason (Arendt 1945:458). In the end extreme chauvinism is a degraded love for oneself as a superior being. By ones nation being superior than other oneself becomes superior over other people (Arendt 1945:459).

It should be understood that nationalism at it's core, is an emotional ideology. It caters to people's sense of identity, it gives them community and kinship justified by some mythological or esoteric principle (Özkırıklı 2010:66). Whether it's the extreme narcissistic self-love of Nazis or the nationalism justifying Catalan or Scottish independence movements.

Method

Conducting Fieldwork

Before booking my flight tickets to Macedonia I had a talk with my supervisor and also talked to my contacts in the country to have a set up before leaving.

This was my first fieldwork, while I traveled a lot and often engaged in activities akin to fieldwork due to my own interest for learning, including in Macedonia, I came to rely heavily on my accustomed way of traveling and meeting contacts, which might be unconventional by anthropologist standards. Most of the time in Macedonia I simply hung around, used a lot of couch surfing and also to a limited extent tinder. I did sign up for other social apps but ended up deleting them because my progress were efficient enough as it were using my typical methods. I also found an interest in specifically finding people at random instead of for example contacting people via Macedonia truth forum who I already knew had a political bias. I would get in touch with people over social media and arrange casual meetings around Skopje, often going out to bars, restaurants or similar or just taking strolls around town. In most cases I would explain my purpose to being in Macedonia as a natural result of them asking me why I was here and I explained I was working on a

thesis in anthropology about the name change and doing research in the country. Typically people would be surprised at my choice of topic, but also positive. As one person said: “Good someone is writing about it.” As my style of fieldwork were very similar to my style of backpacking. Most of my information gathered were told at cafes or promenades through Skopje. Conversations were never one-sided but instead a continuous dialogue were we talked about a lot of different things. People generally showed great interest in me and Sweden so I typically ended up discussing Swedish society during my meetings. While making sure not to sound superior, I never got the sense people felt any jealousy or in any way disapproved of comparing the faulting economy of Macedonia with the western wealth fare state of Sweden. I found most of my informants very easy to talk to, including being open about sensitive topics. People were often willing to talk about the political and economic situation in the country and people I met had, in my opinion, a high awareness about issues facing the country. The topic itself seems very prevalent on the mind of the people, something I will detail throughout this thesis.

During my meeting with Macedonians I engaged in dialogue not interviews. I would be having relaxed conversation getting to know people and engage in conversations about the country, it's history and people. My intention when starting the fieldwork were to add as little as possible myself to conversations on history, but I ended up changing this both due to the casual style of meetings, the general openness on topics I thought would be much more sensitive and people's curiosity about my thoughts and opinions. I found myself able to be more up front with my own perspectives and opinions in most of the conversations, which I hadn't expected. I would let the discussions flow relatively freely while maintaining my goal in my mind. I didn't take notes during my meet ups and instead wrote down my impressions and what had been said afterwards.

Representation

It is difficult to assert how representative my field has been for Macedonia in general. Through my method of meeting my field would constitute people living in Skopje, capable of speaking English and with a general interest to meet foreigner. My previous contacts and some chance encounters would broaden my field. In general the age span was quite diverse ranging from early twenties to several men in 40's-50's but in terms of gender I only met three women who I used as informants.

It is worth noting though that the majority of people I spoke to did not subscribe to the ideology that internet forums makes one believe. Though one person I talked to, who didn't care for Alexander

nationalism said that typically less educated people in rural areas would believe in that sort of things. Still that is not something to take for granted. I met people who wasn't educated and yet had no interest in Alexander nationalism or the name. My first night in Macedonia I had been to a club, the taxi driver taking us home got asked by my drunk (german) friend who a woman on display at billboards were. In fact she was the conservative candidate for president. The taxi driver said: "She wants to be president, but we don't want her," and made a point of calling the nation "North Macedonia" indicating that everything he cared for was better standards of living, not distant history or what the nation is called.

Ethical Consideration

A concern for me during my time were the ethical consideration, as much of my fieldwork were done "on speed" meeting people, sometimes only for an hour or less, having social conversation rather than regulated interviews I found it sometimes hard to strictly position myself or make clear my reason for being there. In not every case did I manage to explain my purpose for being there. I am using pseudonyms for every person in the text and are taking some precaution to not reveal their real identity.

The fact that people were so open to political and ideological topics made it easier for me to engage in dialogue there I could drive the discussions to give me more information without having to fear stepping on someone's toes. Only once did I get rebutted during my fieldwork for accidentally saying 'Greek artifacts'. Once or twice I had to consciously subdue my own thoughts and pretend to not disagree to keep my informant talking about the topic.

I did meet around 15 people in Macedonia who I would talk to about the topic of my thesis. Due to ethical consideration at least one person has been crossed out of my data material, but the fact that I met them still influences the overall assesment of the country.

Fieldwork

The General Mood

For this section I will describe what in my research can be seen as universal ideas about Macedonia

to the degree I don't feel I need to put them in the context of a specific informer but rather just chart them down as generic opinions in Skopje.

Macedonians in general proved to be very open and not particularly sensitive about the topic of their country, it's politics, it's economy and history. I would go as far as to describe Macedonia as a dystopia - a state where people lost complete hope in the economy, social and political system. Average salaries are low (about 300€ per month), police, judicial system and healthcare are inefficient, corruption is rampant and several people I talked to declared they didn't bother voting in elections because of a lack of belief in the system. The 'democratic' way of change by voting is abandoned by a significant part of the nation as useless. The second round of the Presidential election occurred when I was there had slightly less than 50% voter turnout. Improvement seems impossible and the result is a loss of hope and a steady stream of migration out of the country. While the last official census had 1.8 million inhabitants, people I talked to suggested a current population of around 1.5 million as a result of emigration from the country. Yet most people I talked to would offer a certain sense of pride in their own people, often emphasizing that Macedonians are good people. To some extent there is a sense of Macedonia being screwed over by its history and the rest of the world. There are suspicions of foreign meddling and a feeling of being left out by the rest of the world. The country used to be part of a socialist dictatorship, and it has only been getting worse since independence creating a wholly dystopic view on society.

Alexander Nationalism

Skopje, the capital of Macedonia is a surreal city. It is, according to my informants, the only growing city in Macedonia, sucking up the population from the countryside. Out of 1.5 million inhabitants, a million lives in Skopje³. The city offers a large mix of urban areas, notably parts of the city are down-trodden, but the closer to city center one comes the fancier yet stranger the city becomes. As you walk up Macedonia street you might notice statues with a certain familiarity, there is a large bronze bull, and a Chelsea Girl statue. When you approach Macedonia square you might notice a statue of Tsar Samuel on your right (a Bulgarian Tsar who had his capital in Ohrid, modern day Macedonia), but the view is occupied by the giant statue, warrior on horse, as he is officially named, but everyone knows it's Alexander the Great who sits atop. The tallest statue of Alexander the Great in the world, I'm told, but now they are building a taller in Thessaloniki. Along the river

³ A number suggested by my informants, while it's highly improbable, in this chapter I use the numbers given by my informants in Skopje as they represent their experienced reality

Vardar, a statue of byzantine Emperor Justinian, it would take some time before I gave his presence in the city any thought. Several bridges crosses the Vardar river, the oldest, simply known as the stone bridge is the main one and originates in Ottoman times. Further downriver are two bridges, the Bridge of Civilization in Macedonia and Art Bridge. While stone bridge has something pleasant in it's spartan style the two other bridges features rows of statues. When in the location of the bridges, one also get views over several important buildings, museum of and some government buildings whose function I don't remember. These buildings are made in a sort of antique style with what is reminiscent of ancient Greek pillars. On their roofs; more statues. Walking across Stone bridge there are several monuments, which has less controversial ties to Macedonia. Karposh, Macedonian independence fighters, and the two duos of S:t Cyril and Methodius and S:t Clemens and Naum, early missionaries among the slavs and creators of the Slavic alphabets. But the view across river Vardar is dominated by a much larger statue: A standing man raising his fist to the sky, for this statue the Macedonians have not had to change the name, this is Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the great. On the way towards the Philip statue are a large fountain with statues of a woman starting with her pregnant and then shows her with her young son. Arriving closer to the Philip statue the same woman and boy are seated next to another statue of Philip, I smirk at this image of family idyll between Philip, Olympia and boy Alexander, knowing that little love were held between them.

I could go on to name statues and triumph arcs across the city. There is some truly strange feeling to the megalomania in a country there citizens given up hope on democracy and the country, but the government spends unfathomable amounts on statues and glamour. Even my tour guide, the one who believed Alexander the Great were factually Macedonian in the modern ethnicity, complained about the unnecessary the sheer amount of statues were. The antiquisation of Skopje was a project initiated by previous conservative government under the slogan Skopje 2014, by 2017 the projects were still not done, the budget blown out astronomically and the new social democratic government decided to put a halt on it.

On my second day in Skopje I went out to catch up with one of my contacts from last year. We had met in connection to the Galicnik Svadba last year and I mailed him before going to Macedonia about my purpose and asked to learn his thoughts on the topic of Macedonian name change, to which he had responded that he would give his piece of mind on this absurd name change. Catching up with Andrej, we sat first and talked about life in general. I never learnt Andrej's exact age, but

roughly around 50 and he works for an international company. Andrej asks me a lot about Sweden, my plans in Macedonia and so on, before we turned into the subject of the name change. The ensuing talk lasted for over one hour and has been structured in section based on topics to make it easier to get a perspective on:

Section 1

One of the first things Andrej said was "they're trying to erase us as people". He explained to me that Macedonia is a country surrounded by neighbors who hates it. I know a lot of the history of the region so I could bring up some topics like the Balkan wars which Andrej then could fill me in on his knowledge and opinions. In the Balkan wars (1912-1913), Macedonia, which were then still part of the Ottoman empire had been fought over by Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece. He made points of how during the wars brothers fought against brothers as people were forcibly drafted into the armies that moved through the countryside.

Particularly Greece had after taking parts of Macedonia (modern Greek Macedonia) committed ethnic cleansing of Macedonians (I used the word ethnic cleansing to help him explain). Instead Macedonia were settled with Anatolian Greeks surviving the Turkish genocide. Still today the Slavic people in Greece are not recognized as Macedonians and are oppressed (Andrej specifically detailed how Macedonians were tortured by Greek police with nettles put to their faces). He said Macedonians were forced out of their homes which were literally taken over by Anatolian Greeks. The oppression had continued and he explained how, during WW2 most of Macedonia had been occupied by Bulgaria and during that time campaigns of forced assimilation had taken place. He talked about the current conflict Macedonia-Greece, he explained to me the history of the Macedonian flag. Originally on independence Macedonia had adapted a flag based on an ancient Macedonian symbol but Greece had forced them from stepping down on using it by implementing an embargo on Macedonia in 1995.

He came to say that "Greeks made our country North Macedonia, that most mean we are North Macedonians, they are trying to erase us as a people." Something he had repeated a few times. He said every generation of Macedonians have their war and when I tried to argue that the new generation of Macedonians would not need to have a war Andrej responded that the conflict of identity there theirs. He however said that he would have been okay with North Macedonia, if Greek Macedonia was South Macedonia, that would make sense as to a shared region. He made a point of how EU had hailed the Macedonian election which had 36% turn out as a democratic

success, but rejected the Catalan independence referendum as illegal, despite higher voter turnout.

Section 2

We then started talking about Yugoslavia, which Macedonia came to be part of after WW2. Andrej was in general positive to Yugoslavia, and saw it as a 'real country', comparable to Sweden and said Tito built a good country, which were like Sweden. But after his death nationalism rose which caused the collapse of Yugoslavia into six weak and poor countries, there Croatia and Slovenia has turned towards the catholic world and EU, Serbia has ties to Russia. He wasn't really clear about Macedonia but believed they needed a big brother country which could protect them. Despite praise of the country Tito built, he had several critical things about Tito to say. He claimed Tito murdered thousand of Macedonians officers to prevent them from intervening in the Greek civil war with the intention of reconquering Greek controlled parts of Macedonia. The explanation to why Tito did this was because he wanted to focus on Trieste. When I made a sort of acknowledgment to Tito being Croatian to explain this, he replied that Tito wasn't actually Croatian but he was Austrian of sorts. I tried to get some specifics but could only settle with unspecified "Austro-Hungarian" (once again I who used this word and he agreed on it) who spoke perfect German.

Section 3

I then started asking questions about Alexander the Great, in a context of how the naming dispute was not only about the land which were conflicted, but also the legacy of Alexander. He asked me how much I wanted to dig into the topic and I responded I wanted to learn as much as he wanted to tell me. He then stated this was his opinion and he might be wrong (a statement he remade twice). He said Alexander and Philip were seen by the ancient Greeks/elenes as barbarian and that Alexander conquered them and built a great empire. He said Macedonians have a rich tradition of folk songs and folklore about Macedonia and Alexander the Great, which the Greeks don't have. He claimed slavs originated in the Balkans and made claims of ancient high civilization in the Balkans, Including that Troy was located in Bosnia (he mentioned a geographic description in the Iliad to only match a river in Bosnia). He said Dubrovnik (in Croatia) was originally named new Troy. He continued to make statements on the general importance of the Adriatic region in the world (such that the stones used to build the White House are from Croatia). He claimed the Cyrillic alphabet is directly derived from Phoenician (and not designed from the Greek in the 500's) and that there are

Cyrillic writings scattered in temples and places across the region (I interpret this to be somewhat the region of Alexander's empire).

Section 4

At this point the conversation starts spinning in multiple direction and cover many aspects of history, but with Macedonia/Yugoslavia/Balkan being the link. Andrej presented a picture of Balkan and the Mediterranean region as the center of the world and civilization. He said there were a people in Afghanistan/Pakistan descended from Alexanders soldiers whose language sound like Macedonian⁴. He made claims that modern Greeks were closer to Africans/Semites (I am unclear about the exact meaning) than to ancient Greeks. He stated that Macedonians are fairer and more blue-eyed, i.e. more aryan than Greeks and then explaining his own darker complexion and swarthy look by stating that people mix and a lot of people come to the Balkans.

He continued making claims akin to ancient cosmonaut theories that I will not discuss here due to being mostly irrelevant for my topic but he did make claims to an arcaeological site in Macedonia (Kokino) as an ancient observatory and comparing it to Stone Henge.

One other interesting theory he explained to me happened in a sort of indirect way when he said that Macedonian capital had been moved to Constantinople, becoming the center of the second Macedonian empire. I then asked if he by this meant what is commonly referred to as the Byzantine empire, which he concurred. Then he asked me if I knew where the law modern law is based on comes from, I couldn't answer so he said it was the Justinian law made by the Macedonian[/Byzantine] emperor Justinian, who was born in Macedonia and whose real name was Petrusz. Later on when I walked by the Justinian statue I realized it's potential reason to being there.

At one point I started suggest that we don't know everything in history because there is a lack of sources, he then, after a protracted argument about writing being what separates man from animal, claimed that there are sources, we write down our history and someone knows. When I asked who he shrugged and said someone and something about digging in archives. As an example he took the fact that Columbus in the strict sense didn't discover America, he was just the first to exploit it, something I agreed to in more general terms whereupon he said that's not written in books. I

⁴ I filled in that this is probably the Nuristani or Burushu/Hunza people and he recognized the less common 'Hunza' endonym

retorted, that I had read it in books, it's just common schoolbooks or similar that says Columbus discovered America. He seemed to have further thoughts to why Columbus went there but didn't delve on the topic. Instead we had a short conversation about the Etruscan civilization, how it was from the Etruscan the romans gotten their civilization and about Albanian claims to be Etruscan based on comparing modern Italian Tuscany to the Tosk dialect of Albanian (claims I also seen on nationalist Albanian forums).

Andrej and Tour Guide A would by far constitute the most nationalist people I met during my trip, espousing a primordialist view on continuity with an ancient nation. In Andrej's mind, Macedonia and the Balkans are centers of civilization going back beyond recorded history, tour guide A is slightly more modest and suggest that the finding of the grave of a Paeoninian (antique people in modern Macedonia) priestess proves the presence of at least 2600 years of continuous civilization in Macedonia based on interpretation of the artifacts she was buried with. Likewise a tour to the Archeological museum portrays a jumble of artifacts from different eras and different people, no concern that Paeoninians and ancient Macedonians are different people, Hellenic era artifacts are displayed as Macedonian without any question of what Macedonian mean. It is in all a mystical, nationalist view on the past of Macedonia. Tour guide A has by his own words, not a drop of Macedonian blood in him, but still it is his history, heritage and dignity they're selling out when changing their name to North Macedonia for the chance to join the EU. Andrej has to excuse his swarthy looks by claiming Macedonians have mixed with foreign migrants (but at least not as mixed as the Greeks). With this start to my field work in Macedonia (I would also take a second tour with field guide A later on) I believed this would be the norm I would encounter in my subsequent meetings.

A Fake Nation...

On my first day in Skopje I was heading to city center when an old man on a bike asked me if I speak English and where I am from, he kept biking next to me and we chat and keep together for about an hour without destination. Without me even asking for it, he basically told me his life story, in disjointed sequences, while expressing a strong hate to Macedonia. The man was born in 1948 in Vojvodina (part of Serbia which had been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire) and his family moved to Macedonia. When the Yugoslav civil wars broke out he fled to Belgium where he lived until retirement.

While he lived in Macedonia most of his life he made his disdain for Macedonia and Macedonians very clear. One of the first things he asked me was: “What are you doing in Stinkdonia”. He kept making that slur and other slurs like hunddonia, gypsydonia etc. He talked about how ugly and grotesque he found Skopje and how all Macedonians are thieves and 'betrater'⁵.

It was very difficult for me to ask questions as he kept ranting and often ignored what I specifically asked, but I managed to get him to talk about some things I'm interested to learn about. On the topic of the name change, which I tried to ease in as talking point about how a potential EU membership could be an improvement to Macedonia's poor economy and rampant corruption he was very discarding, he didn't care the slightest about the name, thought the whole country was fake and that the history of Macedonia (with all the statues) were made up in the past 15 years.

Ethnic Macedonians elucidated various reactions to the statues adorning Skopje. Dusan, middle-aged government employee, one of the more patriotic persons I met during my time in Skopje expressed that he liked them, and saw them and the Skopje 2014 project as the first time Macedonian politicians had done anything, i.e. being less corrupt than other governments. On the other hand, Stefan, architect around my age, expressed that the statues of Skopje were fake and a disgrace. He was very interested in politics and asked me to explain my views, and seemed to agree a lot with my leftist position on many issues. When I asked him about his views and opinions he often answered dismissively, but on certain topics made many strong remarks. Not only were the statues fake, but he didn't care to vote in the election, had no care for whether he was Macedonian or North Macedonian and instead declared himself a 'citizen of the world'.

This is by far not the first time I encounter the idea that Macedonia is a fake nation. It is a common theme among it's neighbors, Greeks see them as fake Macedonians and history thieves, Bulgarians have a tendency to view them as misguided Bulgarians (Vangelov 2019:202). As I wish not to delve into a conversation on Macedonian history, it should be understood that these attacks against Macedonia's authenticity as a nation is attacked by a primordialist belief that doesn't believe Macedonia to have a history before the modern era (unlike other Balkan nations that had historical kingdoms). A nationalist belief that certain nations perennially exists is what nationalists wants to espouse, going back time immemorial while their adversaries are faked and denied their history or the right of being a nation (remember the Serbian who agrees that slavs are migrants to the Balkans but Albanians came even later). In that sense Andrej is right to feel that his people are under threat of extinction as we will see in the next sub-chapter.

5 Dutch word he couldn't find translation for, probably cognate with Swedish 'bedrögare' i.e. Con man

...Under Threat

One of my first contacts in Macedonia were an ethnic Albanian of the Albanian minority. Leke is university educated and versed in topics such as history, contemporary politics and international relations. It was apparent he did not care for the glamour that the Macedonian capital is trying to build, he frowned upon the many statues and called them fake. Still he shared sentiments with Andrej. Essentially he told me about how Macedonia was hated by its neighbors, who tried to break the country and don't recognize them as a people.

The result of being under threat and the disastrous economy of the country is driven to its edge by Mihail, a man I met in a bar together with his cousin (who had been my initial contact). None of my informants managed to paint as bleak a picture of the country as Mihail did. A man I estimate to be in his 30's, unmarried and working in a grocery store, there is little chance for change in his life, likely contributing to his gloomy worldview. Though he is still a person with a noticeable intellect, interested in politics and foreign relations as well as cinema and besides topics of Macedonia and Sweden, we talked a lot about films. He made claims about how most Macedonian women either marry westerners or rich men, if you're poor or middle class you can't get a wife. According to him the official statistics are that 70% of the population of Skopje is male. Mihail described a country that keeps getting worse. The name change was meaningless as Macedonia will nevertheless not be able to join the EU, insinuation foreign powers (he didn't make any clarifications to who or why) manipulated the crisis in Macedonia. He believed Macedonia within the next decades would utterly collapse, western Macedonia with its Albanian population, would democratically secede to join Albania, while the rest of Macedonia would have no choice but to accede to Bulgaria (which would mean Macedonia would become part of the EU). In the end he believes the whole world might end soon.

A sense of foreign meddling, of being bullied by the EU and neighboring countries were common among my Macedonian informants. While many expressed preference towards joining EU and/or NATO there existed a sense of hopelessness even in that regard with people somberly concluding that Macedonia, despite the name change wouldn't be allowed to join EU in 20 years due to financial and political reasons, with more optimistic persons suggesting 5-10 years before possibly joining the union. As several people expressed, they changed their name for nothing. As tour guide A puts it, "they're selling our history, our heritage and our dignity. And if EU doesn't want us? Why should we try so hard? If you're not welcome in someones house you don't push yourself in."

I have not conducted any field work in Greece, but have gotten the chance to speak to a couple of Greek Macedonians during the time I've been working on this paper. When I joined a walking tour (held by tour guide B) in Skopje, four Greeks showed up. The guide did many jokes about the Greeks and often apologized after having made them, but the Greeks insisted on not caring and were very outspokenly anti-nationalistic, despite coming from Greek Macedonia (with two of them being of Anatolian (Pontic) heritage), they openly said they didn't care about Alexander the great, or history, it wasn't important to them if it wasn't recent enough to have a bearing on them. I had a conversation with them about the reactions in Greece. The most outspoken Greek went into an angry rant about how Greece essentially bullies Macedonia just because they can. Because it makes them feel powerful forcing a small country into changing its flag, changing its name etc. They could talk about topics such as the expulsion of Slavic Macedonians from their home in modern Greece after the Balkan war etc but also pointed to themselves being an exception among Greeks who are not nationalists.

A Mixed Nation

I'm out walking in city park with Ilina, upper twenties, university education and working for an international company. We are talking about history, she is very interested in Greek history and says herself that she knows more about other countries history than her own. I tell her that during my time in Macedonia I been told two different narratives to the history of the Macedonian people; she ask me: "which are they?". "Well, first we have the idea that Macedonians are direct descendents and carriers of the legacy of ancient Macedon and Alexander the great." She finds the idea hilarious and when I tell her about Andrej claiming the Byzantine Empire to be a "Second Macedonian Empire" and that Alexander the Great would have spoken Slavic she laughs, she says that Slavic came to the Balkans in the 500's (and in general several others I spoke to said the same). I then tell her the second perspective, namely that modern Macedonians are a mix of Slavic immigrants and ancient Macedonians, to which she states are her beliefs as well and adds that there's been turks and many other people coming to the region and mixing.

Earlier the same day I had gone on a walking tour there the guide (tour guide B) had held the same general opinion. Modern Macedonians were a mix of slavs and ancient Macedonian (he also laughed at the idea of slavs living in the Balkans in antiquity when asked). He maintained that Alexander (and with him ancient Macedonians) were not Greeks (giving a couple of reasons for

that) but acknowledged ancient Macedon were heavily influenced by Greece and Greek culture (such as Alexander being taught by a Greek philosopher).

He made jokes about how the Greece-Macedonia conflict is only political and normal people don't care and they're just the same. The Greeks who participated in the tour disagreed and he himself made later statements suggesting otherwise, such as when in Greece saying he is from Skopje and not Macedonia, otherwise his beer might taste funny. He did many points about Balkan being a sort of culture zone, heavily influenced by the turks as well as talking a lot about how everyone is nationalist. For example every country will say Serbian coffee, Greek coffee, while in reality it's actually Turkish coffee.

Good People, Bad Culture

One question that should be considered, although I don't intend to give an absolute truth answer: Are Macedonians nationalists? To gain further understanding I will paint a picture of how Macedonians, reflected upon themselves. As I said the Macedonians I talked to were very open, and often espoused a high level of self-awareness to the issues of the country. The first Macedonian I met said Skopje was very safe, but I should be weary not to get scammed and generally be careful for theft a warning I was told a few times. Later on in many of my conversation when we discussed Macedonian politics and economy, people were unanimous on how terrible those aspects were. When not talking about rampant corruption, disastrous economy and insufficient social services, people would often proclaim that Macedonians are good people. With my hosts on a short trip in western Macedonia, Markus and Elsa whom I met last year in Galicnik Svadba, we talked about Macedonian respectively Swedish culture, based on the stereotypes of Swedish culture they were familiar with and my additional comments on Swedishness compared to Macedonians, my hosts declared that they prefer Macedonian culture. The context to understand is that the differences between Swedish and Macedonian culture is, as they said, Swedish culture is more cold. In Macedonia everyone knows everyone, everyone are friends and family matters; while Sweden is a much more individualistic country, less sense of community and family. Macedonia has "good people and good food" was a sentiment echoed by many of the people I came to talk to. Once I started digging deeper, beyond the surface a more varied picture started emerging. While in Western Macedonia, my hosts drove me to the source of river Vardar, a river so polluted in Skopje that it's not safe to swim in (which it was a few decades ago). In the source I noticed quite a lot of trash and commented on it. As a response my hosts started complaining about Macedonians being "low

culture” and ”having no culture”. We drove back to the village and went to a school to vote, and when I and Markus⁶ were waiting for Elsa to vote, he called my attention to a big garbage bin. ”You see” he said, ”this is for electronic waste”, the bin was full with chocolate wrappers, soda cans and everything else a school kid could imagine throwing out.

On our way to Markus parents, we drive by a field in their neighborhood. It’s littered with trash so I say ”someone should arrange a community event to pick this up and clean”, ”we already did” they respond and laugh. In general this double edged attitude to Macedonians seemed quite widespread, many Macedonians said Macedonians were lazy (others took offense when I said I had been told this). Macedonians are good people, BUT they are not ambitious, don’t want to improve, or they leave the country, something the stayers could express frustration and disappointment over.

Are Macedonians Nationalists?

When we arrived at Markus parents’ house we sat outside talking and for a second time came to talk about history and the question of Macedonian identity. Already at the source of Vardar, had we talked a bit about the topic of Alexander the Great, they declared that they did not care about him, stating ”Who knows what Alexander was”. Still they had consciously boycotted the name change referendum and considered the name change itself as illegal. To quote what Elsa wrote to me on facebook after I contacted her before coming and explaining my research and purpose: ”We didn’t agree, but who asked us?”.

During our conversation Elsa and Markus declared that Macedonians were the least nationalist in the Balkans. I can not give an answer to whether it's true or not but can indulge in some personal reflection based on my experiences. For other Balkan countries I can typically infer a sense of nationalism targeting each other and a desire to mark oneself as distinct; as is the goal of nationalism. The Balkans would be the poster child of the theories of Barth, that ethnic groups exist due to the boundaries they maintain between each other⁷. Previously mentioned case of the Bosnian church is one good example. In general in my trips in Albania, Kosovo and Romania, there where in the interaction with people a general acceptance of the notion that those people are descendent from a specific paleo-Balkan people as uncontroversial (in Kosovo I did meet an archeology student exempt from that rule). During my time in Bulgaria I was told the same narrative on Bulgarian history by three different tour guides in three different cities, all narrating Bulgarian history with

⁶ Markus declined to vote in the ongoing second round of the presidential elections

⁷ According to linguists, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin are all different standardizations of the same language, academically known as Serbo-croatian, yet the different groups are defined as different enough for brutal ethnic wars to occur after 70 years of being the same country

some illogical twists, and in contrast to the Macedonians who don't mind acknowledging Turkish influence and mix with their culture, I remember pointing out to a Bulgarian tour guide that the old Bolgars were in fact, a Turkic speaking people, they replied in an annoyed way saying they prefer to call them proto-Bulgarians.⁸ By comparison, I have felt a much more casual nationalism even from 'uninterested people' in other countries than I did in Macedonia. So to my own surprise I'm under the impression that Marcus and Elsa were right. The national identity of Macedonians comes in the forms of the understanding of being one people, distinct from their neighbors, with a territory/state. History, which is one of the cornerstones in nationalist and primordialistic thoughts seems to me to have an almost purposeful disinterest from many of the people I spoke to. They maintain certain ideas of xenophobia to their neighbors, but in the Balkans that is so everyday there there's been real ethnic tension for decades. They are xenophobic because the conflicts are real. The cases of Andrej and the people at Macedonia Truth Forum exhibiting a strong chauvinism, trying to dig up ancient histories to prove or create a national glory, for their own benefits, might be an ideological fringe. In related perspectives, I was told some interesting opinions by the Macedonians I met. Dusan (mentioned above) said the problem with Balkans were the lack of respect for each others beliefs. While he himself maintained a patriotic position in Macedonian history, he said Greeks and Macedonians should be allowed to believe whatever they want to believe without disrespecting each other. Tour guide B said that Alexander wasn't Greek, but were heavily influenced by Greek culture, and as modern Macedonians are a mix of slavs and ancient Macedonians, really both people had a right to Alexander's legacy and should share it.

One of my last nights I had drinks and dinner with two women. Like customary we talk about our countries, our cultures and also political values and ideologies. One of the women, Nadja, declares herself an antifeminist and makes jokes about Sweden for it's reputation in feminism and tolerant immigration policies. But when we talk about Macedonia she and her friend are very discarding "who would want to stay here?", they say. I tell them about the typical notion of Sweden as a more individualistic country, more privacy and Nadja declares "can I move there?". She and her friend expresses frustration about the forced community they feel they have in Macedonia, they would prefer to live alone in a forest. They have no patriotism for Macedonia whatsoever, and they are the only ones who told me the following: The first government of Macedonia after the declaration of independence officially stated they were not descendants of Alexander the Great, they just used the

⁸ The narrative told by Bulgarians hold that ancient Thrace/Bulgaria were a beacon of Ancient, Greek and Roman civilization, whereupon they make a temporal skip to the middle ages there Bulgarians are fighting for their freedom against oppressive Byzantines. Ignoring the facts that old Bolgars were Turkic speaking nomads, the Bulgarian language is slavic and the Byzantine Empire is the Greek-speaking continuation of the Roman Empire

name out of geographical conventions. It was a later conservative government that had started policies of historical revisionism and created official "Alexander Nationalism". What is interesting to note with Nadja, is how she espoused typical conservative ideas, anti-feminism, xenophobia, yet had no sense of patriotism or nationalism whatsoever, otherwise often associated with conservative ideologies. Nadja is also one of the few people I talk to who's narrative clearly hints to an instrumentalist approach to the question i.e. the idea that nationalism is created by the elite to stay in power. In a country where politicians are corrupt and not able to solve societal problems, building statues and creating myths about a grand past is a helpful tool to maintain control over the masses⁹. The slogan used by the conservative candidate in the presidential election was "Pravda Makedonski"/Truth Macedonia (my translation). The conservative candidate had run on rejecting the name change and getting the old name back (URL 7). However interesting it would be to continue down this track, it's not the purpose of this thesis and would require different data.

An Imagined Macedonia

It is difficult to, nor my purpose, to discern when Macedonian identity came into being. Is it 2600 years old as suggested by tour guide A? 27 years old as insinuated by anti-Macedonian Greeks? One point of particular interest I can, to some extent tie my research around is 1903, when the first written Macedonian appeared. Then Macedonia were still part of the Ottoman Empire, in 1912 they would be conquered by Serbia, which would form Yugoslavia, be occupied by Bulgaria in WW2, returning to Yugoslavia after the war and proclaiming independence in 1991 as the republic of Macedonia during the break up of Yugoslavia. When it started to happen, I can not tell, but somewhere before or after 1903, Slavic speaking people would start identifying as a particular ethnic group, separate from Serbians and Bulgarians. Here is the simple will that Gellner (Gellner 2007) talks about, the imagined community of Anderson (Anderson 1991). Why it has happened, and when it happened, does in my opinion not really matter as to the question if Macedonia is a real nation or not. In terms of language and culture the nation does not differ much from its neighbors. Macedonians are, like Serbs and Bulgarians orthodox Christians, and their languages are mutually intelligible. When Tour guide B was waiting for his group to gather, a man came up to him saying something in Slavic, the guide responds: "Oh, you speak Macedonian? No wait, that's Serbian!"

It seems to me that Macedonian identity, in general, is not very strong. The constant drain of people leaving the country, the disbelief in its government and future is not particularly encouraging.

⁹ Supposedly, building statues is also a way of funneling money, as some claimed

Several people I spoke to care not to identify themselves as Macedonian more than being part of the country. Yet the Macedonians exhibit stark markers of a common national identity, broader than just the notion of sharing a political unit and language. Taking Gellner's 'will' to be a nation (Gellner 2007) and combining it with the 'we-as-object' of Hylland Eriksen (Hylland Eriksen 1995) Macedonians does more firmly stand out as a group of their own, as they are united in facing the external pressure and threat both of their neighbors, and their own internal minorities. Macedonia has between a quarter and a third of its population being ethnic Albanians i.e. members of a foreign nation with its own nation state(s) to the west and north of Macedonia. While there is a lot of ideological conflict with Greece, Macedonians are travelling to Greece in large numbers. I was jokingly told that during high season half of Macedonia is in Greece, while the number is most likely exaggerated for purpose of comic effect, it's still holds a simple truth in it. Macedonians might avoid saying they're Macedonians when in Greece, but they go there in large numbers. On the other reaches lay Albania, Kosovo and Bulgaria. The two first which clearly evoked some fears among Macedonians, who expressed concerns over the idea of visiting either of those two countries. In regards to the Albanian minority, it was quite clear that the two groups, while having achieved peaceful cohabitation in the past decades (a brief civil war took place in 2001 when militant Albanian groups took to arms), the groups maintain a relationship of unenthusiastic cohabitation. Socialisation and especially intermarriages between the two groups are uncommon. Typically the Macedonians would show clear signs of distaste to Albanians, pointing out they're a different culture, have a different religion and making small taunts about Albanians such as complaining they're loud and behaves differently (even I after some time started discerning differences between Macedonians and Albanians). On my visit in western Macedonia I was begrudgingly told that Albanians were becoming majority in the town due to emigration of native Macedonians. Even more progressive Macedonians would show strong distaste towards Albanians when talking about them. The Albanian I met, Leke, talked about how altruistic he was and didn't judge people based on ethnicity and had both Albanian and Macedonian friends, but from his way of talking about the topic I could sense some tension. His way of dismissing Macedonia as a fake nation might be telling to how Albanians think about Macedonia.

Their neighbor Bulgaria, to whom which the Macedonians belong to, according to Bulgarians, also caused some general aversion. When some Bulgarians showed up at tour guide B's tour, he made a lot of joke about them and said to the rest of us that there might be some conflicts, though in the end the Bulgarians didn't make any fuss and quietly took part of the tour.

The Macedonians strongly share a common or collective memory and worldview of a country under constant threat, oppression and decay. It is possibly the dystopia that Macedonia is, which is the collective identity holding the country together as a nation with a shared paranoia, a shared pessimism and shared sense of hopelessness. Going to the museum of Macedonian struggle, there is the story of Macedonian struggle for independence, starting with the Karposh rebellion in 1689, going up to after WW2. It's a centuries long struggle, but the museum does not show the end of it and why would it? It is commonly held by the people that things got worse after the break up of Yugoslavia. Who wants to tell the narrative of a struggle, there the end is not the glorious departure into a better future, but rather decline into poverty and corruption? But yet they are, Macedonians. Most of the people I talked to didn't cling to an identity of being descendants of ancient, great kingdoms to maintain their identity. No great myths of the past telling them that are the carriers of some mythical legacy. For the people I talked to this was irrelevant to them, why would it matter? But do we really need to project back national myths hundreds, if not thousands of years to create a commonly held myth distinguishing a people? Distinct identities in former colonial nations, separate from the metropolitan motherland sprung up often even before the colony had achieved independence (Anderson 1991:50). With the stroke of a pen, suddenly a nation state had come into existence. There are certainly people trying to justify primordialist beliefs in an ancient past, like Andrej, or Tour Guide A who isn't even Macedonian by blood but rather by virtue of where he was born, the people hanging around at Macedonia Truth Forum does their best to dig up any kind of source they can to prove this myth but in my fieldwork they have not proven to be in the majority. Meanwhile the taxi driver wants a better standard of living, the architect Stefan does not care for ancient pasts, and even Markus and Elsa who choosed to boycotte the name change referendum on purpose of disagreeing with it, does not believe in Alexander the Great being their ancestor. What unites Andrej, Markus and Elsa, Dusan, Tour guide A and B is not a shared memory of ancient past, but memories of a recent past and present which abuses and bullies them and a future without hope of real improvement. They share these lives in the dystopia which has been created, not by them, but for them. The people who stay behind live it, what happens to the people who leave I do not know.

Giving the assumption of constructivism it doesn't matter, if Alexander's Macedonians indeed are ancestors of the modern population, as the modern nation anyway is just that, a modern phenomena. It is still not my intent to conclude which historical perspective is correct. Nation as an identity, is not built on facts but on perceptions (Özkırmılı 2010:199). It is these perceptions I have been

looking for and I see a nation, but a nation with a confused identity. Macedonian identity is a discourse, in many ways as real as the discourse that creates and maintains Greek or any other identity. Applying the postmodernist outlook of Alan Hanson (1989), it is also not relevant whether Alexander the Great was a Macedonian in the modern sense, but rather concluding that culture anyway is created. Now since Alexander is not universally accepted by Macedonians as Macedonian, I'm gonna turn this argument around and put the accuser as the accused. I would argue that the idea that Alexander the Great was Greek is in fact an invention by modern day Greeks. This is a position which I can not simply back up with one source as it is very much a hotly debated issue with scholars and ideologists making many various claims. This is my own opinion founded through the years I've been taking an interest to the topic. To get an idea how this debate may look, I will drop a link to a debate on quora which rigorously discusses this topic (URL 8). Never mind whether Alexander the Great were Greek or not in the ancient sense, the whole concept of a Greek is a modern concept. It was in the 18th century that knowledge of ancient Greece started reappearing due to the intellectual efforts done in western countries that opened up a small group of Greek intellectuals to *their lost past* creating the groundwork for a movement that would eventually remake the people inhabiting modern day Greece, who knew themselves as romans, as descendants of the ancient Greek civilization (Anderson 1991:72).

Now then Macedonia appeared as an independent country in the early 90's, it was centuries behind in legitimizing it's national myths to the international world and establishing it's foundation as a nation-state and it just so happened that national myths of the new country were also shared by a neighbor which had had a few centuries to cultivate it's nation state identity. The act of appropriating history is by no means unique. There were no political conflicts when Kemal Atatürk declared the Hittities to be his ancestors (only some scholarly criticism) (Frye, 1996:4) and to my knowledge no one in Mali protested when the British Gold Coast on independence choose the name Ghana after the medieval Mande speaking Ghana empire in modern day Mande speaking Mali. Appropriating historical and mythical pasts are part of any countries identity, and often in a somewhat senseless way. Consider the role of the *Brythonic* king Arthur in fighting *Anglo-saxon* invaders in later English/British myth¹⁰.

Now it's true appropriation can be harmful and cause real life issues beyond identity and be used to motivate violent and discriminatory acts. Historical myths have been used to make claims over

10 If the irony is overpassed: Brythons were the original inhabitants of England and linguistic ancestors of modern Welsh. The Anglo-saxons were germanic speaking tribes settling England after the withdrawal of the Roman Empire, subduing and assimilating the Brythonic population to form the root for modern English people

other people. Worst case scenario is likely to be the ideology of Nazi Germany. But other than that, the real opposition to Macedonia comes from an emotional place. Greeks go out to protest Macedonians because they get angry and offended by the country. Several Swedish persons I talked to with interest in history declares that Alexander Nationalism is falsification of history, and are clearly uncomfortable and frustrated by the idea that Macedonian nationalists claims to be descended from Alexander. When I tell them about the creation of Hellenic identity among Romans in modern Greece, they argue that there still exists a linguistic and genetic continuation, even though no continuous identity exists.

If one day Alexander nationalism would lead to real violent conflict with Greece, as is to some extent what the Greeks fear (due to irredentism claims to northern Greece/Macedonia) it is always to be denounced. By and large I have my doubts anything like that would happen. To some extent I disapprove of the antiquization of the Macedonian identity, but contrary to the beliefs I held before doing my field work it is by no means as prominent as one is lead to believe by the discourse most frequently heard about it. In the meantime there exist a people north of the Greeks, west of the Bulgarians and east and south of Albanians who call themselves Macedonians, not north Macedonians. While the name change would be my entry point to this topic, it has had relatively little importance on it's own throughout my thesis and fieldwork. Even people who voted for the name change out of political reasons, do not see themselves as "North Macedonians", to them it's only formalia. The name change however have helped me highlight and get to the broader issues of the conflict of their identity which is larger than the name of the country. As Stanković-Pejnović argues (see previous research) I believe that the external pressure contributes to the increased nationalist tensions in the country. A we seeking a future as a country, an us fighting back against bullies.

Further Research

Looking at Barth's theories and the situation of Macedonians, it's worth asking what is the boundary between Macedonians and it's neighbors? Between Greeks and Albanians the question is easy (language). But to their Slavic neighbor's it's more difficult. Now as I have not delved much into history or concrete cultural traits in this thesis and I do not have the sources to discuss this properly. It is though my speculation that it has happened as a result of political history. If we assume that nations starts appearing in the late 18th century then the nations of modern Balkan-Slavic countries

were all nationless Slavic speakers of often mixed backgrounds. The transition into distinct ethnicities would have happened in the 19th century and Macedonia would appear as a distinct ethnicity due to them not achieving independence or becoming merged with another country, rather remaining part of the Ottoman Empire until the remaining European part with its linguistically mixed population were divided between Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and the newly formed Albania after the Balkan wars (as outlined in Ognen Vangelov's article discussed in previous research). Nevertheless the lack of my own possibilities to further discuss this topic it is something I would focus on if I am to continue researching Macedonia. As of now I can just speculate how the primordialist and Alexander nationalist Andrej really thought about ethnic boundaries then he on one end tells that Yugoslavia was a 'real country' but then claims a distinct Macedonian identity for millenias while admitting mixing has happened to the level that the appearance of Macedonians have changed compared to antiquity. Furthermore I would have appreciated to have the chance to listen to the Slavic speaking minority in Greek Macedonia and how they identify. As of now I only have the words of 'north' Macedonians that those people exist and are in fact ethnically Macedonian.

If it is something I want to really highlight in my data, so is it that I had a prejudicial image of the ideological situation in the country. It is an image in large shared by its neighbors and the rest of the world and have given the small country an unfair reputation. It is this understanding which would constitute the benefit of my thesis, had it come to enjoy a larger audience and create increased understanding. Macedonia is mischaracterized as a country of fanatic nationalists with delusional beliefs. My research can't conclusively disprove this image (especially since I have met people who do confirm it), at its core, it would be useful for the perspectives and knowledge I have gathered to become 'common knowledge' and create less tension between Macedonia and its neighbors. The theoretical perspectives I have used would be useful to mitigate the conflicts in the Balkans and should preferably become more commonplace. But first a more holistic study of Macedonian identity would be needed.

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