

## **The Multiculturalism in Republic of Macedonia, Observed Through the Perceptions for the Symbols of the Other Ethnic Groups: Framework of the Symbolic Interactionism**

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### **Abstract**

*Republic of Macedonia is a young country in Southeastern Europe, which gained its independence with a referendum from the former Yugoslav federation, on 08.09.1991. Former Yugoslavia federation was a country with ethnically heterogeneous population composed of six republics and two provinces. Due to the lack of the insufficiently well regulated interethnic conditions in the Constitutions of former Yugoslavia, as well as the resentment of the Second World War, few bloody interethnic military conflicts occurred in the 1990's. In this study we reveal some of the characteristics of coexistence and multiculturalism in Republic of Macedonia, analysing the different perceptions that the members of the various ethnic groups have for the national symbols. In particular, we analyzed the data obtained from a questionnaire. In this survey the participants were asked to express their opinion about the ethnical symbols, in particular, about the flags and coats of arms of the others.*

**Key words:** Republic of Macedonia, multiculturalism, rights of minorities, symbolic interactionism

### **Introduction**

Similarly as most of the countries in the Balkan, which two decades ago became independent from former Yugoslavia, Macedonia is also a country with ethnically and culturally heterogeneous population. According to the last census of the population from 2002, in R. Macedonia live 1 297 981 Macedonians, 509 083 Albanians, 77 959 Turks, 53 869 Roma, 35 939 Serbs, 17 018 Bosnians, 9695 Vlachs and 20 993 citizens – members of smaller ethnic groups. Having into consideration the tragic experiences in the immediate neighborhood, Republic of Macedonia attempted, and it seemed to succeed, to regulate the interethnic relationships in a satisfactory manner for the members of the ethnic groups who live in the country.<sup>1</sup> The attempts for institutional regulation of the relationships had different success in different period. These moved in the range of assessments for Macedonia as the only country from former Yugoslavia, which avoided military conflict, until the interethnic conflict in 2001 and an attempt for reconciliation and rebuilding a satisfactory model of interethnic relationship.

Multiculturalism in R. Macedonia is a natural model derived from the condition of the historical, demographical and cultural facts, but also one which forms the social reality. One brief retrospective of the multiculturalism in R. Macedonia indicates the discrepancy which is perceptible between the institutional framework for regulation of the relationships between the different cultural communities (the Ohrid Framework Agreement 2001) and the interethnic relations, which developed in everyday life. In this research, the conclusions remain at a level of acceptance or non-acceptance of the symbols of the other ethnic groups and the national (state) flag. This way, an attempt is made to research the extent of perceptive compliance towards the symbols, as a basis for construction of the multiculturalism.

The construction of the multicultural frameworks of the institutions rests on the everyday practices of the citizens, that are based on the values of the group that the individuals belong to, the attitudes they have about the important social issues, as well as about the members of their own and the remaining social groups. In R. Macedonia, several times a discrepancy between the attitudes of the political representatives of the ethnic groups in the institutions and the events in everyday life was shown. Hence, on one hand, it occurred that the interethnic relations in everyday life function in a usual way, and on the other hand, the political representatives of the ethnic groups talk about interethnic tensions and vice versa, while the interethnic military conflict in 2001 was beginning, the politicians were speaking of relaxed interethnic relations. Hence, the need for serious analysis of the practical action of the interethnic relations in everyday life is imposed, by relying on the relevant social theories and the available methodology.

## 1. The Interactionist Interpretation of Multiculturalism

At the theoretical level this research attempts to relate the knowledge from many relevant theoretical perspectives developed in the social sciences, in order to understand the complexity and dynamics of the social relationship in R. Macedonia. In this regard, our research attempts to make a symbiosis between the multiculturalism as a theoretical concept and practice on one hand and the symbolic interactionism as a theoretical approach on the other.

### 1.1 Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism as a concept in the social sciences appeared as an attempt to think of the social life in practice, but probably it is much more important as a social practice than as a theoretical concept. The term “multiculturalism” itself reveals that the substrate of the heterogeneity is the variety of cultures with different cultural marks: language, religion, habits and observations of a world which implies them. Kymlicka was right to conclude that the finding of the real answer about the issues of the cultural features is the greatest challenge that the contemporary democracies face with (Kymlicka 2005). So defined, the cultures, inter alia, imply the different ethnicities within a wider social perspective, as well as the collective rights that belong to them.

One more serious analysis of the term multiculturalism shall indicate few implicit meanings of this term: *first*, it is a matter of more cultures that coexist at a certain social space; *second*, these cultures are in a certain mutual relation (most frequently competition) for the rare social goods. According to this, one relation could say that the multiculturalism is an attempt to regulate the relations between the cultures (or their representatives) which on one hand coexist (live together), and on the other hand compete for the rare and valuable social goods. Competition could take many different forms. It can be in the area of politics, economy, education etc. Competition could be latent sometimes and manifested through the relation towards certain symbols. The manner of experiencing the symbols is most commonly caused by the membership of the individuals in certain social groups, but at the same time it reflects the relationship of these social groups towards the other (rival social groups).

The theory and practice know more models of regulation of the relations between the ethnic groups in the multicultural societies:

- liberal multiculturalism (multicultural citizenship)
- assimilation multiculturalism (social and political integration of cultures)
- regional multiculturalism with consocial democracy
- multiculturalism of differences with cultural nationalities (Stojanov 2009: 31-42)

Multiculturalism in R. Macedonia is specific, unique and dynamical, since it is a fruit of the historical, socio-economical and political specifics of the Macedonian society. It is a mixture of the liberal multiculturalism (Kymlicka 1989; 2005) in the area of citizenship and consocial democracy (Lajphart 1994; 1999) which stretches multiculturalism in the area of politics. The elements of the liberal multiculturalism are evident in the inclination towards creation of multicultural (transethnic) public area in which all ethnic communities are actively involved. The consociality of the Macedonian multiculturalism on the other hand, is reflected in the area of inclusion of the representatives of bigger ethnic communities in the formation of institutions, first of all, the dominant political institutions such as the parliament and the government, but also the manner of making the political decisions which banter into the national identity of the communities.

Thus, the liberal multiculturalism comes down to the level of the everyday practical life of the individuals who belong to certain ethnic communities, while the consocial democracy affects the representatives of the communities in the formal political-legal institutions. In other words, while the liberal multiculturalism is informal and dedicated to the invisible rules of everyday life, consocial democracy is formal, institutional multiculturalism. Our analysis *inter alia* is dedicated to the informal liberal multiculturalism.

The institutional approach in the research is usually based on formal (institutional) regulation of the relations and shows serious handicap in the research of informal relations between the representatives of certain cultural/ethnic groups. Exactly for this reason we consider in our analysis the symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework that provides understanding and interpretation of the relation of the individuals with different origin. More precisely, it seems that for understanding the interethnic relations we should rely on following the invisible rules of social life (Garfinkel 1967; 1986), which are a basis of the practical action and through which from moment to moment, the social reality is formed (Berger and Luckmann 1991).

## 1.2. Symbolic interactionism

Multicultural (heterogeneous) societies are societies of cultural relativism. As Semprini (1999) notices in them: the truth is a construction, the interpretations are subjective and they depend on the ethnic origin of the individuals and the values are relative. Hence, multicultural societies have very fine feeling of symbolic communication, and the relation to their own, as well as to the remaining ethnic groups may be learned only through deconstruction of the meanings which are assigned to their own, but to the other ethnic groups as well. Hence arises the meaning of the symbolic interactionism in the analysis of the multicultural societies.

The symbolic interactionism insists on the subjective perceptions that the individuals entering into interaction use (through the meanings they assign to symbols which they use as ethnic groups for self-identification), trying to construct a common system of knowledge of the symbols which are used in the public space. This way, from the sphere of primordial, autonomous, relatively tight and limited mono-cultural public spaces, there is an entering into the area of the multicultural public space which is wider and open for influences from different sides. Especially important here is the process of *symbolization*, i.e. denoting, giving meanings to values, actions, collectives etc. The process of symbolization occurs in the public multicultural space, which does not mean that it does not keep exclusively the primordial perspective of experiencing and relation towards things. In this regard, the symbolic interactionism here we use precisely for understanding and analysis of the meanings which the collectives assign to the collective symbols, such as the national emblems and flags. This means that symbolic interactionism is used as a theoretical perspective for analysis of the multiculturalism. More precisely, through the analysis of the meanings which the symbols carry of the bigger ethnic groups in R. Macedonia we make an attempt to analyze the multiculturalism in R. Macedonia.

Since the ethnic communities as collectives are identified with certain symbols of the collective such as flags, coats of arms etc., the relation towards the symbols of a certain ethnic community can also tell much about the relation towards the given ethnic community. But we do not the symbols of the collectives only a meaning of representatives of part of reality (in this case, the ethnic community which identifies with them), on the contrary, they are much more than that. What is more relevant for this text is how the importance that the symbols of a given collective have, is transposed on the relation of the members of other ethnic groups towards those symbols.

## 2. Method

The best manner to research the importance which the members of the different collectives (ethnic groups assign to the symbols of the remaining ethnic groups) is that they personally answer how they determine them and what importance they give to the given symbols. This is the reason why in the research of symbols, but also of the other relevant issues implicitly or explicitly related to symbols which the ethnic groups in R. Macedonia use within this research, a survey of 100 respondents was performed, of which 40 respondents from Skopje, 30 from Strumica and 30 from Tetovo. These three cities are chosen for several reasons. First, Skopje is the greatest and capital city of the country where lives almost a third of the total population and it has ethnically mixed composition. Second, Strumica and Tetovo are typical examples of cities where one or the other ethnic group dominates or is in great majority (Macedonians are 97 % of the citizens of Strumica and in Tetoto, Albanians make almost 75% of the population). From the respondents, 56 are Macedonians, 40 Albanians and 4 Turks.

The survey was performed in the period from 15<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> January. The sample used is not representative and does not allow generalization of the results and we are only using it as an image of the conditions in R. Macedonia from precisely determined time interval and space observed from the perspective of our respondents.

The respondents inter alia were asked: What kind of emotions are caused by the symbols yellow lion, two-headed eagle and eight-ray sun? The symbols were visually represented and the response options were: *patriotism, pride, resignation, horror* and *fear*. The symbols themselves have historical rootness in symbolization of the ethnica who live in R. Macedonia.

- The yellow lion with a crown on a red shield, under which on a strip is written Macedonia, is one of the oldest symbols in Macedonia. For the first time it occurs in 1340, in the heraldry from Fojnica, so that later on it continues being used in the period between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in order to be taken over by VMRO (Matkovski 1990; Jonovski 2009)<sup>2</sup>.
- The black two-headed eagle on a red basis is the official flag of Republic of Albania and a flag of all Albanians no matter of the place of residence. It is a flag that was used by George Kastriot (Skenderbeg) in the struggle against the Turks (Murgescu, Koulouri and Erdelja 2007: 103-104).
- The national flag of Republic of Macedonia, yellow stylized sun on a red basis, whose author is Miroslav Grcev, was adopted by the Assembly for state flag of Republic of Macedonia on 5. October 1995 (Grcev 2011).

### 3. Results and Discussion

The results of our research say that in R. Macedonia there is relatively great division in the perception of the symbols of the ethnic groups. In this, perception changes depending on the belonging of a given ethnic group. So, if we review the attitude of the respondents regarding the lion as a symbol of the Macedonian ethnic community, we shall see that Macedonians considerably have positive opinion on it, thus, most respondent (24) associate it with patriotism, smaller, but significant number determine it with pride, while very small number of respondents give it negative characteristics such as fear - 1 respondent and horror – two respondents. The perception of the lion as a symbol entirely differs at Albanians. At vast majority from the examined Albanians, this symbol represents a feeling of horror, fear – at 3 respondents, while resignation at 2 respondents and patriotism at only 2 respondents.

**Table 1, Perception of the respondents of the symbol of the Macedonian ethnic community in R. Macedonia: yellow lion on a red base**

	What are your reactions to the symbol yellow lion					Total
	Patriotism	Pride	Resignation	Horror	Fear	
Macedonian	24	13	3	1	2	43
Albanians	2	0	2	3	17	24
Turks	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	26	13	6	4	19	68

Similar are the reactions which the respondents show towards the two-headed eagle as a flag of the Albanians, but also of the Albanian ethnic community in R. Macedonia. Namely, at Albanians, this symbol causes only positive emotions and most commonly it is related to pride (29) and patriotism (11), while at Macedonians, this symbol represents resignation at most of the respondents (21 respondent) or negative emotions, such as fear at 7 respondents and horror at 16 respondents.

**Table 2, Perception of the respondents of the symbol of the Macedonian community in R. Macedonia: black two-headed eagle**

	What are your reactions to the symbol two-headed eagle					Total
	Patriotism	Pride	Resignation	Horror	Fear	
Macedonian	3	0	21	7	16	47
Albanians	11	29	0	0	0	40
Turks	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	14	29	21	7	16	87

When it is a matter of the state flag of R. Macedonia (the eight-ray sun), one can say that unlike the lion, this causes positive emotions at the Macedonians, as well as at the Albanians. This way, one can say that at Macedonian respondents, the state flag represents positive feeling with no exception, while at the Albanian respondents, the state flag represents mixed, but dominantly positive feelings. Namely, 18 Macedonian respondents answered that this symbol causes them a feeling of patriotism, while 31 respondents answered that this symbol causes feeling of pride. One should notice, that important part of the Albanian respondents (6) answered that they feel resignation towards the state flag of R. Macedonia, while 5 Albanian respondents answered that this flag causes them horror.

**Table 3, Perception of the respondents of the state flag of R. Macedonia: sun with rays on a red base**

	What are your reactions to the symbol sun with eight rays					Total
	Patriotism	Pride	Resignation	Horror	Fear	
Macedonian	18	31	3	1	1	54
Albanians	2	14	6	0	5	27
Turks	0	4	0	0	0	4
Total	20	49	9	1	6	85

The results indicate ethnic division in the attitude towards the national symbols of their own and the other ethnic groups. In this case, it seems that the respondents associate the feeling of patriotism to the symbols of the ethnicity, while they associate pride as a feeling to the symbols of the country. At the same time, while they assign a feeling of patriotism at the symbols of their own ethnic group, they assign a feeling of horror or fear to the symbols of the other ethnic groups. If we analyze the negative emotions that are caused by the national symbols of the other ethnic groups, we will see that the Albanians who answered the questions do not feel fear, they are only horrified by the ethnic symbols of the Macedonians, and although a feeling of horror to the ethnic symbol of the Albanians is also dominant at Macedonians, a part of them show a fear of the same as well. However, the answers of the respondents show serious ethnic division of the Macedonian society. Maybe the only symbol which is accepted from both ethnic groups (though there are differences in the extent of acceptance) is the national flag of Republic of Macedonia.

Confirmations of these relationships are the correlations between the acceptance of certain symbols of the ethnic communities in R. Macedonia. So, between the emotions caused by the lion as an ethnic symbol of the Macedonians and the emotions as an ethnic symbol of the Albanians, there is an important negative correlation, which firstly means that there is a relations between the feelings toward one and the other symbol, secondly, it means that this relations is opposite. In other words, those who have positive feelings towards the lion as an ethnic symbol of the Macedonians, at the same time have negative feelings towards the black two-headed eagle as an ethnic symbol of the Albanians, and vice versa, the ones who have positive feelings towards the black two-headed eagle at the same time have negative feelings towards the lion.

Table 4, Pearson’s coefficient of correlation between the perception of the respondents of the symbols of the Macedonian ethnic community and the Albanian ethnic community

		What emotions in you are caused by the symbol COAT OF ARMS WITH A LION	What emotions in you are caused by the symbol BLACK TWO-HEADED EAGLE
What emotions in you are caused by the symbol COAT OF ARMS WITH A LION	Pearson Correlation	1	-,473)**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000
	N	68	63
What emotions in you are caused by the symbol BLACK TWO-HEADED EAGLE	Pearson Correlation	-,473)**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	
	N	63	87

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This same negative correlation, although slightly smaller one, is shown by the feelings to the national flag of R. Macedonia and the ethnic flag of the Albanians. This negative correlation inter alia is under the influence of the answers of the Macedonians as well, who, as we were able to see, have negative emotions about the Albanian ethnical symbol, but positive emotions towards the national flag of R. Macedonia.

Table 5, Pearson’s coefficient of correlation between the perception of the respondents of the symbols of the state flag of R. of Macedonia and the Albanian ethnic community.

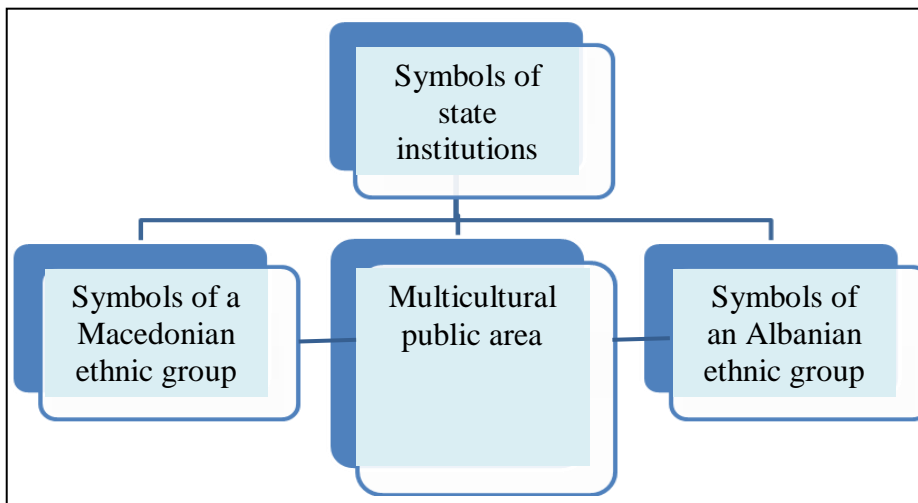
		What emotions in you are caused by the symbol BLACK TWO-HEADED EAGLE	What emotions in you are caused by the symbol SUN WITH EIGHT RAYS
What emotions in you are caused by the symbol BLACK TWO-HEADED EAGLE	Pearson Correlation	1	-,312**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,007
	N	87	73
What emotions in you are caused by the symbol SUN WITH EIGHT RAYS	Pearson Correlation	-,312**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,007	
	N	73	85

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

#### 4. Final Considerations

The results of our research show that at a symbolic level there is serious division of the ethnic communities in R. Macedonia, which is reflected in the differences in the perception of symbols of the personal ethnic group, but also in one binding point, the perception of the national flag for which both major ethnic groups have dominantly positive perception. This only confirms that multiculturalism in R. Macedonia functions on two tracks: the direct relationships between the representatives of the ethnic communities at a level of practical action (everyday life), where serious divergence in the perception of symbols of the other ethnic communities is shown, as well as a mutual antipathy towards the symbols of the other ethnic groups and the formal system of decision making, to which the representatives of both dominant ethnic groups show dominantly positive feelings. It seems that multiculturalism functions at the level of the relationship of ethnic communities with state institutions, and this mixed multicultural model is occasionally destabilized from the mutual relationships, based on the feeling of mutual antipathy of both major ethnic communities in R. Macedonia.

Figure 1, Template of the functioning of multiculturalism in R. Macedonia, observed from the perspective of the relationship towards the symbols of ethnic communities and state institutions



The differentiated relation in the perception of symbols of the ethnic communities (the mutual antipathy), as well as the dominantly positive perception of the symbol of common institutions are produced in a public area of the liberal multiculturalism, against the state institutions that enter in the area of the formal multicultural system. The construction of the multicultural public area which is reflected in the relationship towards the symbols of the national state, indicates the functionality of the liberal multiculturalism, but as well as of its powerlessness to influence the autonomous field of the mono-ethnic public, on the plane of which the antipathies occur. All together this functioning of the liberal multiculturalism does not give good base for the consocial democracy. This means that there is a lack of the relation between everyday life closed within the borders of the ethnic communities and the decisions that the interethnic institutions make. In other words, one can speak of domination of the autonomous internal ethnic public spheres over the central public sphere, which should dominate in the society. This continuously destabilizes the institutions that make the decisions, as well as the total interethnic coexistence. Figuratively speaking, the formal institutional multiculturalism in R. Macedonia is the top of the iceberg, which is constantly destabilized by the events caused from the bad mutual perception of the ethnic groups.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> As a confirmation to this, the best explanation is provided in the positive reports of the appropriate bodies from the international organizations (European commission against racism and intolerance, etc.) who started queuing ever since the first years of the independence, when the judge of the Constitutional Court of France, Mr. Robert Badinter declared the Macedonian, together only with the Slovenian Constitution, for democratic and liberal and that it stipulates and respects the rights of all citizens no matter of the ethnic, religious, linguistic or other origin. It is worth to add, that Republic of Macedonia is a signatory of most international instruments for protection of the human and minority rights, such as the Framework convention for protection of the national minorities, the Convention for Local Government and the Convention for social rights of the Council of Europe

<sup>2</sup> This symbol in 1992, was proposed for coat of arms of R. Macedonia by Miroslav Grcev, but the proposal was not accepted by the assembly.

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