Slavic Muslims: The forgotten minority of Macedonia

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A mosaic of minorities
Despite having a relatively small population of just over two million, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia/Republic of Macedonia (Macedonia) is home to a surprisingly wide variety of ethnic and religious minorities. Apart from the Macedonian majority, and the largest Albanian minority, the country also has sizable communities of Turks, Roma, Vlah and Serbs, among others. Perhaps the largest but least known of these ‘other’ groups is the Slavic Muslims who largely go unnoticed in the midst of the ethnic, religious, cultural and political machinations of Macedonia. This group does not fit into any of the familiar ethnic or religious ‘pigeon-holes’. While the generic term ‘Macedonian Muslims’ is often used to denote the group, it has proved to be more ad hoc than adequate to describe their true identity. Despite being one of the largest ethnic/religious groups in the country, State institutions refuse to recognise the Slavic Muslims as a separate entity. If properly empowered this large community has the potential to dramatically alter and even stabilise the political balance.

All political, cultural and economic development in Macedonia has been stifled by the inter-ethnic rivalry between Albanians and Macedonians. This enmity is largely viewed by the International Community (IC), including the OSCE, as a natural and inseparable consequence of regional events in neighbouring Kosovo, Serbia and Albania. All other communities in Macedonia are largely ignored; seen as irrelevant to national and regional security. The IC has allowed the debate on the country’s future to be dominated by the two largest ethnic groups. Solutions to the country’s stagnation are sought exclusively from within these two communities (the belligerents in 2001) belying the fact that Macedonia is a multi, and not a bi-ethnic state. Other ethnic groups, if provided with the opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes, could significantly contribute to the stability and

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1 In February 2009 Ronan Macnamara was seconded by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs to the OSCE’s Mission to Skopje where he worked as a Monitoring Officer in the Tetovo Field Office until June 2012.
3 For the purposes of this article the country will be referred to as ‘Macedonia’ though the constitutional name is ‘Republic of Macedonia’, while, due to an ongoing dispute with neighbouring Greece, the UN-recognized name is ‘the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’, as stipulated in Security Council Resolution 817 (1993).
5 In 2001 an Albanian rebel group, the National Liberation Army (UCK) fought a brief civil conflict against the State.
prosperity of the State. The Slavic Muslims, in particular, seem ideally suited to positively influence the future of their country if given an opportunity. This paper will examine the situation of the Slavic Muslims, providing a short overview of their history, the issues affecting their status in the country and their impact, both potential and actual, on the political stability of the State.

**Who are the Slavic Muslims?**

In different circumstances Slavic Muslims may be identified, or even identify themselves, as: ‘Albanian’; ‘Macedonian’; ‘Macedonian Muslim’; ‘Torbeshi’; ‘Turk’; ‘Gorani’; ‘Bosniak’ or ‘Pomak’. The only unifying factors seem to be religion (Islam) and language (Macedonian). The vast majority of Slavic Muslims live in villages throughout the North and West of the country; however, there are also many integrated within larger towns.

There is major academic dissent on almost all historical facts relating to the Slavic Muslims. Most analysts at least agree that they are the descendants of Slavs who converted to Islam during the Ottoman era. However, even this apparently obvious explanation is highly contentious.

Some claim that the Slavic Muslims are the descendants of Bogomil Gnostic heretics who fled the oppression of the Bulgarian church in the 10th century. The adherents to this theory prefer to be identified as ‘Torbeshi’. The popularity of this theory is perhaps due to their need to construct an identity based on a noteworthy history. The revision of history for the reinforcement of identity is a common theme among Macedonia’s ethnic groups. The current Government has embarked on a massive building project in Skopje to beautify the city. Numerous monuments, including massive statues of Alexander the Great and his father Philip II, have been erected to glorify the country’s past. The controversial ‘Skopje 2014’ construction project is widely viewed by national and international commentators alike as an ethnic Macedonian attempt to reaffirm national identity.

Others within the community believe that the Slavic Muslims are not Slavs at all but descendants of Persian traders or of Ottoman soldiers who settled locally when released from service. Others allege that they are descended from Turkish settlers who adopted the local language and customs but retained their Islamic

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6 In an interview with Canoski, Kamija, Branch Leader of PEI, Struga (17/2/10).
7 In an interview with Ajradinoski, Sherif, President of Rumelija, a Torbeshi Cultural NGO, (June 2009); in an interview with Bektovic, Dr Dzemil; International Balkan University Professor, (June 2009).
8 The origins of the term ‘Torbeshi’ is a controversial subject. Some claim it is derived from a type of headscarf worn to signify leadership. Critics claim that the term refers to a bag of goods which was accepted in exchange for conversion to Islam. Others claim the term refers to the Turkish numbers four and five meaning that their mixed religious and ethnic identities place them somewhere between the two. Still others believe the term refers to the fourth and fifth waves of Islam during which many Slavs were converted.
9 In an interview with Canoski, Kamija (24/3/10).
10 In an interview with Sulejmanoski, Adem & Tasim (cousins), Party of European Future Branch leader in Rostusa, and former SDSM MP respectively.