

Language and the Denial of Macedonian Ethnic Identity

By Victor Bivell

This Paper was presented at the International Association of Genocide Scholars 2021 Conference co-organized with Universitat de Barcelona, Spain: Genocide and Its Prevention in the Digital Age: 21st Century Challenges, 19 - 23 July, 2021.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak about Language and the Denial of Macedonian Ethnic Identity. There is a long history of governments and particularly the Greek government using language to try to change the identity of Macedonians into something less Macedonian or non-Macedonian. The excellent 1994 Human Rights Watch report, *Denying Ethnic Identity: The Macedonians of Greece*, includes a vocabulary of denial words that the Greek Government has developed over more than a century to deny Macedonians in Greece their ethnic identity. In this presentation I want to go a step further and look at how the Greek government has introduced and attempted to introduce this vocabulary into other countries and international arenas.

This behavior has its roots in the question of what Macedonia would look like after the fall of the Ottomans. Unlike other Balkan regions, Macedonia was denied self-government. Instead, in 1912-13 the neighbouring countries, Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, invaded. The victors and their allies call this invasion the Balkan Wars. The Macedonians call it the Macedonian Genocide. The brutality of the Wars/ Genocide shocked Europe. The 1914 Carnegie Report said of the Bulgarian and Serbian armies and in particular of the Greek army that “the object of these armed conflicts... always and everywhere the same, was the complete extermination of an alien population.” Although the word genocide had not yet been coined, the phrase “the complete extermination of an alien population” is probably still the most accurate description of genocide at its worst.

Along with land, the Greek government also gained a huge non-Greek population. Macedonia was a multicultural land. It had an indigenous Macedonian population and many other ethnic groups. Rather than leave the newly renamed ‘Greek Macedonia’ multicultural, the Greek government set about making it monocultural through assimilation, ethnic cleansing and

colonization. These policies were assisted by the development of an extensive vocabulary of ethnic denial against the Macedonians. There is a long list of these words and phrases in my paper *The Greek Language of Cultural Genocide*.

After many decades of such repression, the 1994 Human Rights Watch report said “the Greek government has denied the ethnic identity of the ethnic Macedonian minority in violation of international human rights laws and agreements.” The Report summarized many of the Greek government’s techniques to deny Macedonian identity and culture. These include:

On identity: the Report noted “a marked climate of fear in which many ethnic Macedonians are reluctant to assert their Macedonian identity or to express their views openly.” The Government does not refer to ethnic Macedonians as Macedonians but as “bilinguals”, “Slavophone Greeks”, “Slavophones”, “Slav-speakers”, Slav-Macedonians, “Slavs”, and “dopii” which is Greek for “locals”. In addition, the government changed place names and personal names from Macedonian to Greek. People and new-borns must have Greek names; they cannot have Macedonian names.

On language: “the teaching of the Macedonian language is not permitted.” Although Macedonians refer to their language as Macedonian, the Greek Government refers to it as: “the idiom” or “Slavo-Macedonian Language”. Historically repressive measures included forbidding the language, compulsory Greek language classes, and fines and beatings for many who spoke Macedonian. Since 1951, there has been no Census question on languages spoken in Greece.

The report also details many repressive measures, double standards and harassment against Macedonians in regard to politics, religion, employment, cultural expression, freedom of expression, and human rights activists. Almost all of these repressive measures are still in place today.

As mentioned, I now want to look at how the Greek Government has extended this denial of ethnic identity to other Macedonians such as those from the Republic of Macedonia, and into other countries and international arenas, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. At all levels of government, organizations and individual relations, there are many thousands of examples of the Greek government, its supporters and diaspora nationalists blocking or attempting to block the expression of Macedonian ethnic identity. From these, I’ll discuss four.

The most high profile example began in 1993 when the Republic of Macedonia’s entry into the United Nations was contingent on it accepting the

supposedly “provisional reference” of the “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. That Macedonia was denied entry under its Constitutional name exposed the United Nations at its worst – it violated the very first article of the UN’s own International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: the right to self-determination. How did that happen? The picture is not entirely clear, but we know that the United Nations is not a democratic organization. It is run by the five-member Security Council. Macedonia’s membership was not put to a vote of UN members. And in this regard it is worth noting that about 140 countries recognized the Republic of Macedonia under its Constitutional name, a clear majority of the countries in the world.

The announcement that Macedonia would join using the “provisional reference” came from the Security Council. So who was or were Greece’s political supporters in the Council? Media reports of the time indicate it was France. Over time four of the five Security Council members recognized Macedonia bilaterally under its constitutional name. These were Russia, China, United States and Britain. The standout which did not is France. The academic Loring Danforth said it was France that proposed the temporary reference and also that Macedonia and Greece enter mediation. If so, then France opened the door for Greece to turn a unilateral issue into a bilateral and international issue, and for Macedonia to have to compromise its self-determination. Interestingly, after the signing of the 2018 Prespa Agreement it was France in 2019 that vetoed Macedonia’s EU membership talks, thus opening the door for Bulgaria to blackmail Macedonia by demanding compromises on the Macedonian language and identity.

The problems with Macedonia negotiating its name are that Greece had a long record of denying Macedonian identity, and that any variation to Macedonia’s name would affect the Macedonian identity. Macedonians understood this very well, which is why they so strongly opposed the UN process. This was also clear in the way the supposedly temporary reference was used. Greece and its supporters turned the reference “Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” into the acronym “FYROM” and used “FYROM” as a way to take Macedonia out of the temporary reference and Macedonia’s identity. They also used it everywhere, even though it was supposedly meant for internal UN useage only. And they gave it credibility by saying that it was a name officially approved by the UN, while not mentioning that possibly only one country, a Security Council member, was behind it. The UN did not call out these practices. The UN mediated talks were euphemistically called a “name dispute” but in reality they were a process of ethnic denial. Thus, by

instigating the name negotiations and not calling out the misuse of the provisional reference, the United Nations gave its imprimatur to an attempt at ethnic denial.

In contrast, friends of Macedonia and those who understood the injustice of what was happening used the names Macedonia, Republic of Macedonia, FYR Macedonia or Macedonia (FYR), thus keeping Macedonia in the name.

The UN process led to the Prespa Agreement that the Western powers said would end Greece's dispute. But from the point of view of the great majority of Macedonians around the world, the Prespa Agreement was undemocratic and is a comprehensive failure. It began with a US and EU funded Color Revolution that removed a popular and democratically elected Macedonian government. That same party won the subsequent election but was denied power when the US and EU told its traditional Albanian coalition partners to support the losing opposition party. Thus the party that lost the election was installed into government, and is seen by Macedonians as a US-EU puppet government. Despite having said that there would be no change to Macedonia's name, that party then commenced negotiations that led to the Prespa Agreement. The new name, North Macedonia, was put to a referendum and was defeated. A massive boycott campaign saw the turnout well and truly fail to reach the 50 per cent threshold needed to make the referendum result valid. Turnout was only 36.8 per cent, and only 33.7 per cent of eligible voters voted for the new name. And a great percentage of these were ethnic Albanians, not Macedonians. Yet the US, EU and the Macedonian government immediately called the referendum a success. The Government did not have the 80 parliamentary votes out of 120 to change the Constitution, and the media reported that it gained them by bribery and blackmail including Opposition parliamentarians whom it had previously imprisoned and were in prison at that time.

So the Greek double standard for Macedonians prevailed. While other peoples have self-determination, while Greeks have a country called Greece and the French have a country called France, Macedonians cannot have a country called Macedonia. And as feared by most Macedonians, the words Macedonian and Macedonians to describe their ethnic identity are now often replaced by "North Macedonian" and "North Macedonians". Thus Greece's use of its friends and allies saw France and the United Nations become active players in the denial of Macedonian ethnic identity.

The next two examples are from Australia. Australia has a large Macedonian diaspora, but an even larger and more politically active Greek

diaspora.

In February 1994 after 58 countries had recognized the Republic of Macedonia, so too did the Australian Government, but under the UN's "temporary reference". This recognition was heavily criticized by spokespeople from the Greek-Australian community and there followed several weeks of high profile acts of fire bombings and arson, with the most severe against Macedonian properties including churches and businesses.

The Australian Government then met with representatives of the Greek community and agreed to their request that Macedonians from the Republic of Macedonia be referred to as "Slav-Macedonians". This decision was announced on television without any prior consultation with the Macedonian-Australian community.

Accordingly, a Directive was issued to Australian government departments and agencies to "use the description 'Slav-Macedonians' when referring to people who live in, or originate from, the FYROM." The directive also said that Macedonians who do not originate from the Republic, such as those from Greece, be referred to as "Associates of Slav-Macedonians". I kid you not.

The Macedonian community was shocked at the Government's Directive and its denial of the fundamental right to self-identification. In response, the Australian-Macedonian community immediately announced it would undertake a national campaign of civil disobedience against the Directive and the Government.

The national politics were like this. On the Greek side was the Australian Labor Government and the Federal Liberal Opposition, the State Liberal Governments in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia and the Labor Opposition in South Australia which later became the government. These three states have very large Greek communities which outnumber the Macedonian communities, and there was a shameless play to draw or keep votes. In addition, members of these parliaments plus the Federal Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs and the NSW Minister for Ethnic Affairs were of Greek origin.

On the Macedonian side were the Australian public, the majority of Australia's many ethnic communities, the Australian media including the multicultural Special Broadcasting Service, and the Australian Law.

The implementation of the Directive was slow, so perhaps the public service also understood that it was wrong. So slow was the implementation that the Directive was re-issued a few months later. Over a number of years distressing stories emerged of Macedonians having used the word Macedonian

for their ethnicity only to have this changed to “Slav-Macedonian”, but over time such instances declined and in 2008 the Government cancelled the Directive.

But that was not the whole story. Victoria has the largest Macedonian population in Australia but an even bigger Greek population that traditionally voted for the Labor Party. The Liberal Victorian Premier and Government saw an opportunity to attract Greek voters from Labor and openly took the Greek side with many inflammatory comments such as saying that the Federal Labor Government had “betrayed” the Greek community by recognizing Macedonia.

In July 1994 the Victorian Government introduced its own Directive – that the Macedonian language, which was widely taught in Victorian schools, would now be called Macedonian (Slavonic).

The Macedonian community was again shocked and immediately opposed the move. The Directive caused great distress. The Australian Macedonian Human Rights Committee and the Macedonian Teachers Association of Victoria launched a legal complaint against the Victorian Government and the Directive. A Commissioner with The Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission initially dismissed the complaint, but the decision was appealed and a Judge in the Federal Court of Australia upheld the appeal. The Victorian Government then appealed that Judgement to the Full Federal Court and lost, and then had an application to appeal to the High Court of Australia dismissed. The case was then reheard by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission which, like the Federal Court, found that the Directive was discriminatory and racist and contravened the Racial Discrimination Act.

The Commissioner wrote that the Directive “involved a distinction based on ethnic origin in re-naming the language Macedonian and had the effect of impairing the recognition on an equal footing of a human right in the cultural life of users of the Macedonian language and I declare that the respondent should not continue such unlawful conduct.”

The Federal Government’s Macedonian identity Directive took 14 years to defeat. The Victorian Government’s Macedonian language Directive took six years to defeat. These are two examples where Greece tried very hard but was ultimately unsuccessful in spreading its language of ethnic denial. But the examples clearly show its modus operandi and how it seeks to leverage and exploit political sympathizers, political systems and opportunistic politicians.

My last example is about how academics and universities have been used to spread this language of ethnic denial.

Unfortunately, thousands of academic papers and books use some of these Greek ethnic-denial terms. In this material, instead of reading about Macedonians we read about ethnically non-existent people called “Slav-Macedonians”, dishonest euphemisms like “Slavic-speakers”, and so on. It’s extremely disrespectful, and it’s racist.

Almost all Greek academics and academic works use this terminology. Much of it also comes from non-Greek academics doing literature reviews and desk research, or who are self-declared philhellenes. It is most common among British academics. Whether they are aware of it or not, these academics use double standards when writing about Macedonians. For example, they don’t describe Serbians, Bulgarians and others as only Slavs or Slavic-speakers; they don’t describe the French as Latins or Latin-speakers; and they certainly don’t describe the English, Dutch, Swedes, Americans, Canadians, Australians and others as Germanics or Germanic-speakers.

Nowhere is the Greek, Bulgarian, French or other identity subject to the same scrutiny, criticism, standards and double standards as the Macedonian identity.

It’s time to end what I call the Balkan Doughnut Myth — the nineteenth and twentieth century idea that the people in Greece knew they were Greek, the people in Bulgaria knew they were Bulgarian, the people in Serbia knew they were Serbian, the people in Albania knew they were Albanian, but somehow the people in the middle, the people in Macedonia, didn’t know they were Macedonian – that these people needed total strangers, politicians and academics in faraway places, to tell them who they were.

Where did this bizarre idea come from? The academic Ipek Yosmaoglu says “The questions of what and who constitute Macedonia and the Macedonians has generated speculation since the early nineteenth century.” The early nineteenth century, of course, is when the modern Greek state was established with the help of imperial France, Britain and Russia. And like its parents, the new Greece had imperial ambitions, the “Megali Idea” of a greater Greece. It is this that led to the Macedonian Genocide and the Greek vocabulary of cultural genocide which too many academics wittingly or unwittingly adopt and propagate. If you are concerned about self-identification and ethnic denial and you encounter this vocabulary, please, call it out.

Thank you for listening.

20 July 2021

Copyright

Source: www.pollitecon.com