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## **Ottoman Heritage in Balkans and Nationalism**

**Abstract:** *The ethno-centric study of the Ottoman past after the establishment of the national Christian countries on the Balkan causes many negative stereotypes. Today the cultural and historical heritage from that period is still followed with the negative perception which affects the every-day life of the people living on the Balkan. The aim of this text is to show that for the Macedonian state the Ottoman heritage still represents a serious disability, which can not be fully absorbed and integrated in the contemporary Macedonian society. This will be done through several examples of the Ottoman heritage in Republic of North Macedonia, which is one of the most significant segments of the multiculturalism in this country.*

**Keywords:** *Ottoman heritage; mosque; Torbeshi; nationalism; North Macedonia.*

The Ottoman heritage in today's Republic of North Macedonia is one of the most significant segments of the multiculturalism and multi-confesionalism in the country. This segment of the common cultural heritage of the various Macedonian ethnic and religious communities is very often present in the rhetoric of the highest state officials, and always in an affirmative and positivist context. However, the question remains open as to how much the Macedonian state manages to absorb and articulate that heritage in its politics, to what degree multiculturalism and multiconfessionalism are free from the prejudices and negative perceptions of the past and whether that heritage is free from the (mis)use of various political factors and religious institutions and organizations. The aim of this text is to demonstrate how this heritage can be used in articulating and directing the ethnic nationalisms of the various communities that coexist in the modern Macedonian state<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Republic of North Macedonia is a country in which the largest religious communities are the Orthodox Christian community headed by the Macedonian Orthodox Church - Ohrid Archdiocese (MOC - OA) and the Muslim community headed by the Islamic Religious Community (IRC). The first is mostly made up of ethnic Macedonians and a smaller number of Vlachs and Serbs, and in the second the

through several examples from the spiritual-material and demographic sphere of the Ottoman heritage in Republic of North Macedonia. This also raises the question of how much multiculturalism and multiconfessionalism are really an asset and an advantage, and how free are modern Balkan societies from prejudices and negative stereotypes in the perception of the past. Some of the examples that will be pointed out have already been forgotten or solved in a certain way, although those solutions did not contribute to a different attitude towards the Ottoman historical heritage, nor did they contribute to relaxing the relations between the different religious and ethnic communities.

The first such problem, which raised tensions for a long time, was the Burmalı mosque in Skopje. This Ottoman mosque was built in 1495, and its founder was Mehmed-bey, for whose origin and function there is not much data (Кумбараџи-Ђоројевиќ, p. 76). It was one of the few mosques built on the right side of the Vardar River, which actually represents the new part of the city, which began to be massively populated, mostly by Christians, only in the 19th century<sup>2</sup>. Burmalı Mosque in 1925 was demolished by the then Serbian authorities and an Officer's Residence was built in its place, which was destroyed by the catastrophic earthquake that hit Skopje in 1963. From then until 2014, the place was empty, although it is located in the very center of the city, that is, on the city square itself. In 2009 year, the local authorities of Skopje adopted a new urban plan for the arrangement of the central city area, according to which the construction of a church was foreseen on the city square, and the rationale was that in its immediate vicinity there was the church of St. Constantine and Elena, which was also destroyed during the earthquake. The Islamic Religious Community of the Republic of Macedonia immediately reacted to this decision and sent an ultimatum to the state noting that if a church is built on the square, then they will demand that the Burmalı mosque be rebuilt as well. Such an attitude of the Islamic Religious Community caused a backlash reaction from the Macedonians who fiercely opposed the very idea of a mosque being built on the city's square. The legend was revived that under the foundations of the Burmalı Mosque there was a church named St. Nikola, built in the Middle Ages, which was demolished by the

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most numerous are the Albanians, followed by the Turks, Bosniaks, Torbes (Macedonians - Muslims), Roma, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Even today more than 95% of the population in this part of the city is Christians. On the left bank of the Vardar River is the old core of Skopje, where more than 95% percent of the Muslim city population lives.

Ottomans. However, to this day, there are no scientific facts or material evidence that would confirm this legend<sup>3</sup>. The then president of the Islamic Religious Community, Suleiman Efendi Redzepe, also stated that the day when the foundations of the church are laid, the foundations of the Burmali Mosque will be also laid. At that moment, there appeared a huge public and social pressure both from the Christians and Muslims about the adoption of the decision to build these religious buildings on the Skopje square. But while the Christian community was divided over the construction of a church in the square (a civil movement called "Plošad Sloboda" („Square Freedom“) was formed, which was against the construction of religious buildings in the square), the Muslim community was firmly united and homogeneous for the construction of a mosque on the square, if a church is built there. It was also a big problem that the government of the Republic of Macedonia did not have a clear position on this issue and with some of its actions favoured the building of the church, thus raised inter-ethnic tensions and made the possibility of a dialogue between the two largest religious communities in the country impossible. This problem, it seems, was solved in favor of the Christians, by allowing the construction of a church named St. Konstantin and Elena a few hundred meters away from the Skopje square, while the Officers' Residence on the disputed site was renovated.

Another similar example is the case of the Charshi Mosque in the city of Prilep. This Ottoman mosque in the center of Prilep, built in 1475, was burned and destroyed by Macedonians in Prilep, as revenge for the killed members of the security forces from Prilep, during the internal Macedonian-Albanian conflict that happened in the area of Te-

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<sup>3</sup> In Macedonia, there are many unconfirmed legends which say that under almost all Islamic religious buildings from the Ottoman period, are hidden church foundations. Most of these legends have not been scientifically proven. However, the practice of converting Christian churches into mosques or building mosques on the foundations of former Christian buildings is not unknown among the Ottomans. Such is the case with the conversion of the Ohrid Cathedral Church of St. Sofia in a mosque and the building of the famous Imaret mosque on the foundations of the monastery of St. Panteleimon in Ohrid, towards the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th century. The existence of the church of St. Nikola beneath the Burmali mosque's foundations has not been verified by science, but it is still unknown why the Ottomans constructed a mosque outside of the city at a time when the city had not yet been moved to that side of the river, when there was no Muslim population there, and when multiple mosques had already been constructed in the city's old center to accommodate the needs of the Muslim populace.

tovsko in 2001. In the spring of 2010 the Muslims from Prilep, in co-operation with the Islam Religious Community, requested the restoration of the mosque as an active religious building. However, there was once again a reaction from the Macedonians in Prilep, who did not want to restore the mosque as an active religious building. This problem it is yet to be solved.

The question arises as to what are the reasons for such an extremely negative attitude of Macedonians towards Islamic religious buildings, which are essentially a cultural material heritage from the Ottoman period, located in a Christian environment.<sup>4</sup> Of course this is a complex question whose answer penetrates the political, cultural, social, and educational sphere. Here we can talk about the great division between Christianity and Islam, about a belated attempt at de-Osmanization in the material sphere, about the strong negative stereotypes created among Christians about slavery for more than five centuries, which are still used as tools to inflame national passions, etc. However, in this particular case, I want to refer to two reasons, at least, for such a relationship, which are characteristic of the Macedonian society and which are essential to understanding the problem.

The first of these reasons is the Albanianization, in the eyes of the Macedonians, of the Islamic religious buildings left from the time of the Ottomans.<sup>5</sup> Namely, the largest part of the Turkish population,

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<sup>4</sup> Here I emphasize the Christian environment because Macedonians do not react when similar events occur in a purely Muslim environment. Such is the case with the Arasta Mosque, an Islamic religious building from the Ottoman period, most likely from the first half of the XV century. Towards the end of April 2010 the Islamic Religious Community started the restoration of this building without building permit, of which only a part of a wall was left. The National Conservation Center of R. of Macedonia, reacted to this, indicating that it is not possible to carry on with building activities without a permit because in that way are irretrievably destroyed extraordinary material artifacts from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This had no effect on the protection of the Ottoman heritage and the new mosque was erected. It is interesting that in this case there was no reaction from the Macedonians, because the Arasta Mosque is located in the heart of the Old Skopje Bazaar, which is located in the old core of the city where the Albanians are more numerous and because of which there is no interest from Macedonians in that area.

<sup>5</sup> The Albanianization can be discussed not only of the religious Ottoman buildings, but also of entire areas formed in the Ottoman period, such as the Old Skopje Bazaar. In 2006 within this bazaar, which is one of the largest and best-preserved Ottoman bazaars in the Balkans and, of course, the most significant Ottoman heritage in Skopje, an imposing monument to Skender-bey, an Albanian national hero, was erected, who, to make the absurdity even greater, in the 15th century fought against the Ottomans

which was the most numerous among Muslims and lived on the territory of Macedonia for several centuries, during the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), after the First World War and after in the middle of the last century moved to the Republic of Türkiye. Thus, after their departure, the most numerous community among the Muslim population became the Albanian population, which caused a change in the overall functioning on the community.

The most important in the highest bodies of the Islamic Religious Community and the most influential positions (reisululama and imams) began to be occupied by Albanians. The Ottoman religious buildings, in which until 1963 the Turkish language was the language of the religious sermons, after the mass emigration of the Turkish population, gradually passed into Albanian hands, and the Albanian language became dominant in the religious service of the Islamic Religious Community.

Today, in almost all places where the Albanian population dominates among the Muslims, all sermons and religious services are conducted in the Albanian language. Thus, the Albanianization of those objects caused a change in the perception of Islam and the Ottoman heritage among ordinary Macedonian people. The former equation Muslim = Turk, which applied to the older generations, now is changed and reads Muslim = Albanian, and the old Ottoman buildings are no longer perceived as Ottoman heritage and cultural monuments, but as religious buildings where, along with other believers, certain radical structures also meet. Such connection of any Islamic religious building with Albanian nationalism, does not allow Macedonians to come to terms with the presence of an Islamic building spaces in their community, even if that building is from the Ottomans period, with a history of more than 400 years. In their eyes those objects obtained a nationality, became Albanian and, inevitably, they also became centers of Albanian nationalism. The existence of national Orthodox churches and their connection with the respective nations (Macedonian, Serbian, Greek, Bulgarian, Albanian, etc.) make it easier for the Macedonian Orthodox believer to nationalize the Islamic buildings and their connection with the Albanian community, although there are no national Islamic communities.

For those reasons in the internal Macedonian-Albanian conflict of 2001, the targets were the main religious. The attitudes of the larger

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and was the leader of one of the longest lasting anti-Ottoman uprisings in the Balkan Peninsula.

political parties, both Macedonian and Albanian, also contribute to a great extent to such an attitude. These parties could not abandon their ethnocentric perceptions regarding religion and contribute greatly for the division of the Macedonian society along religious lines to become more visible. So far, no Macedonian government has seriously distanced itself from the connection with both largest religious communities, although according to the Macedonian constitution, the Macedonian state is a secular one, and religion is separated from the state.

The second example where Ottoman heritage is used by ethnic nationalism can be traced in the demographic segment of that heritage.

In the northwestern parts of the Macedonian state lives a separate religious-social group known as Torbeshis, who are also called Macedonian - Muslims. They represent a minority religious group of predominantly Islamic faith, and most of them are Suni. Culturally and religiously they differ from the majority of Orthodox Macedonians, but also linguistically and anthropologically they are different from the larger Muslim ethnic groups: the Albanians and the Turks. They are, in fact, part of the Ottoman heritage in the demographic sphere, which is claimed today by the Macedonians as well as the Albanians and the Turks. However, their identity, stuck between religious - Islamic and linguistic - Macedonian belonging, does not allow those claims to be fully realized by either of the aforementioned contenders. Macedonian society fails to absorb that heritage, which is why, besides unresolved historical issues, there are also contemporary political controversies related to it. Among the unresolved historical issues is the problem of their origin and name<sup>6</sup>, but in this case I will focus only on the political controversies that are the result of abuses by political nationalists.

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<sup>6</sup> Sources to look at regarding the historical dilemmas surrounding the origin of the Torbeshis and their naming: **Ј. Хаџи Василјевић**, *Муслимани наше крви у јужној Србији*, Београд 1924; **П. Чулев**, „Обиколка из албански селища в прищинско, призренско, дебърско и охридско“, *Известия на Народния етнографически музеи в София*, год. 6, кн. 1–4, София 1926, 107 - 121; **М. Павловић**, „Скопски торбешии – најстарије српско племе на Балканском Полуострову“, *Јужна Србија*, 27 XI 1939, бр. 94, Скопље, 1940; **Д. Ангелов**, *Богомилството въ България*, София 1960; **Д. Мандић**, *Богомилска црква босанских христијана*, Чикаго 1962; **А. Стојановски**, „Прашањето за потеклото на името Торбеш и неговото првично споменување во пишуваани извори“, [in:] *Историја, фолклор и етнологија на исламизираниите Македонци*, ред. **Г. Тодоровски**, **Н. Лиманоски и др.**, Скопје 1987, 29-38; **Н. Лиманоски**, *Исламската религија и исламизираниите Македонци*. Скопје, 1989; **Н. Лиманоски**, *Исламизацијата и етничките промени во Македонија*. Скопје, 1993; **Г. Тодоровски**, 2000. *Демографските процеси и промени во Македонија од крајот на XIV век до*

There is no doubt that the Torbeshis used to be traditionally tightly connected with the Turks and in different periods, especially until the departure of the Ottomans from the Balkans, they mostly identified themselves as Turks. However, when in 1944, the Republic of Macedonia within the Yugoslav community was created, the federal government encouraged the Torbeshi to accept the Macedonian identity. But this also caused some tensions with the Macedonian Christian community due to the strong connection of the Macedonian national identity with the Macedonian Orthodox faith and church. It is precisely because of this insurmountable religious difference that a marriage between Torbeshis and Orthodox Macedonians is a rare occurrence. Mutual marriages of Torbeshis with other Muslim communities in the country are much more numerous and more acceptable.

One more attempt at the strengthening of the Macedonian identity among the Torbeshis was the establishment of the organization „Cultural and Scientific Manifestations of Macedonian Muslims“ in 1970. This organization was formed with the support of the official Macedonian authorities, and the aim of it, in addition to strengthening the Macedonian identity, was also the prevention of the Albanian and Turkish influence on the Torbeshis. According to this organization, after the Second World War more than 70.000 of its members were assimilated by other Muslim groups, but mostly by the Albanians.

Although the organization was successful in improving the sense of belonging to the Macedonian community of the Torbeshis, they still remained exposed to strong influence especially from the Albanian Muslim majority. The Albanian influence among the Torbeshis became even stronger after the independence of R. of Macedonia (1991) and many of the Torbeshis begun identifying as Albanians. During the elections in 1990, there was a sharp correspondence between the Organization of Macedonian Muslims and the largest Albanian party, in which later was accused of quiet assimilation and use of religion in an attempt of kosovization and albanization of western Macedonia. Controversies

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Балканските војни. Скопје, 2000; **E. Fraenkel**, "Turning a Donkey into a Horse: Paradox into Identity of Makedonci Muslimani", in: Balkan forum, Vol.3, No. 4(13), (December 1995). Skopje, 153-163; **V. A. Friedman**, „Language in Macedonia as an Identity Construction Site“, [in:] When Languages Collide: Perspectives on Language Conflict, Language Competition, and Language Coexistence, ed. Brian D. Joseph, Columbus (Ohio) 2003, 257-295; **Г. Паликрушева**, Исламизација на Торбешите и формирање на Торбешката суб-група, Скопје, 2016; **С. Стојановски**, „Инкорпорирање на Македонците муслимани како дел од македонската нација“, *Историја, бр. 2* Скопје, 2022, 141-58.

increased in 1995, when the Council of the Islamic Religious Community of R. Macedonia, where Albanians dominate, declared that Albanian is the official language of the Muslims in R. of Macedonia, which caused protests from the leaders of the Organization of Macedonian Muslims.

In the forms from the last census from 2021, there was no special column for identifying as Torbesh or Macedonian Muslim. However, after processing the data, internal data was published in which there are three interesting subgroups according to the declared ethnicity. Namely there were 4,174 Torbeshis, 1,187 Muslims, and 455 as Macedonian Muslims. It can be assumed that behind the last two groups, the members of the Torbeh community are hiding, although a good part of them, of course, must be sought among the three largest communities: Macedonian, Albanian and Turkish. It is interesting that in the municipality of Mavrovo Rostuše, where the Torbehis live, there are also 1,555 people who identified themselves as Turks.<sup>7</sup> However, this only shows the deep divisions in the Torbesh community on which none of the larger ethnic communities does nor manage to impose its identity, but also, that not even the Torbeshis manage to develop their own separate identity despite some attempts.<sup>8</sup> In this case as well, the Ottoman legacy in the demographic sphere turns out to be a handicap for the Macedonian society. The failure to impose a special national identity on this minority religious group by the three aforementioned communities, only confirms the still strong Ottoman influence regarding the formation of the national identity on the Balkan Peninsula. Namely, among both Christians and Muslims, that identity is strongly connected with the religion and the language, which is the result of the influence of the Ottoman Milet system. Also the influence comes from the basic parameters around which the nations were formed in the Balkans in the 19th century - religion and language. The Macedonian nation whose members are Orthodox Christians, never made a serious attempt to integrate the Torbeshis into their environment. This was impossible because the legacy of the Milet system, strengthened by the influence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, does not allow a member of the Macedonian

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<sup>7</sup> Source: <https://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2022/2.1.22.10-mk.pdf> (accessed: April 4, 2024)

<sup>8</sup> In the elections in 2008 also participated the Party for European Integration, also known as the Party of the Torbeshis. Its leader, Fiat Tsanovski, a rich businessman who insists on the ethnic uniqueness of the Torbesh community, managed to enter the Macedonian Assembly.



nation to be non-Christian, much less Muslim. For those reasons today, the conditions have not yet been created for the Torbesh people, who speak the Macedonian language, but religiously belong to Islam, to be integrated into the modern Macedonian nation. The political culture in recent years further intensifies the partisanship in the modern Macedonian society into special religious and ethnic groups with the aim of establishing local political and economic power. Because of that, the Torbeshis, as an Ottoman legacy in the demographic sphere, remain a tool used by Macedonian ethnic nationalisms.

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