

# Macedonia: History, Geopolitics and the Macedonian Identity

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*It is quite true that “Macedonian national identity is one of the most complex in the Balkans”. [1] The present-day Macedonians are having a century and a half identity disputes with their neighbors, especially with the Greeks and the Bulgarians but as well as and self-identity problems within the territory of the state of Macedonia which was proclaimed as an independent in November 1991 on the foundation of ex-Yugoslav socialist republic (1945–1991) under the same name.*

Today, only about 64% of Macedonia’s citizens claim to be the *Macedonians* in ethnolinguistic terms while the rest of population reject this name even from the national-political point of view – i.e., to be called *Macedonians* just as the citizens of the state of Macedonia. Bulgaria does not recognize the existence of ethnolinguistic Macedonians under the claim that all the Slavs of Macedonia are of the Bulgarian ethnolinguistic origin while Greece rejects to recognize any ethnolinguistic Macedonians on its own state’s territory using the term *Slavophone Greeks* for those Greece’s inhabitants who are claimed by Skopje to be Macedonian diaspora in neighboring Greece. Even the world is divided in regard to the official name of the state of Macedonia as some countries recognized it as the *Republic of Macedonia* but other states prefer rather the term the *Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia* (FYROM). Therefore, this country is the only state in the world to be officially recognized by other states or international organizations as the *Former...* [2]

This article is dealing with the conflicting claims to Macedonian identity primarily asserted by both Greeks and Slavo-Macedonians. The long-time conflict between Greeks and Slavo-Macedonians over the question which ethnic group has the right to identify itself as being Macedonian is, in fact, a political dispute over the name, flag, history, and territory but, in essence, it is a dispute over the question who has the right to use the terms Macedonia and Macedonians. [3]

## Terminology

Macedonia is a geographical and historical area which name originates from the antique time and which is mentioned as a land at several points in the Bible. Writing on the problem of who the contemporary Macedonians are and/or who they are not is quite a controversial issue from both academic and political sides. From a very practical point of view, there are three standpoints of identifying those people who are today either calling themselves as Macedonians or living within the territory of some Macedonia:



1. Macedonians are those who are living within a multiethnic geographic area of

Macedonia[4] that is bounded to the north by Skopska Crna Gora Mts. and Shara Mts.; to the east by the Rila Mts. and Rhodope Mts.; to the south by the coast of the Aegean Sea around the city of Thessaloniki, Olympus Mts. and Pindus Mts.; and to the west by the lakes of Ohrid and Prespa. This territory is today politically divided between FYROM, Bulgaria, Albania, and Greece (as a consequence of the Balkan Wars in 1912–1913) while geographically it is composed by Lower (south) and Upper (north) Macedonias.

2. Macedonians are those who are today living in FYROM as the citizens of this political entity called as such by a temporary name as a result of Macedonian-Greek diplomatic negotiations from 1991 to 1993.
3. Macedonians are all those who are calling themselves by such ethnonational name no matter they are living in FYROM or in geographic-historical Macedonia.[5]

### **The Antique Macedonians**

To deal with the identity issue of the modern-day Macedonians requires firstly to draw attention to the difference between the ancient Macedonians and the contemporary Macedonian nation. In one word, these two ethnic groups have nothing in common except the same ethnic name due to the very fact that the modern Macedonians accidentally live on the part of the territory once populated by the ancient Macedonians of Philip the Macedon and Alexander the Great. It means that three thousand years ago a people called the Macedonians lived at the Balkan peninsula among whom Alexander the Great (336–323 BC) is, for sure, the best well-known representative of these ancient Macedonians, who created in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC the first global empire by connecting the provinces of three continents[6] - the empire in which the ancient Greek language became the first global *lingua franca* with the Greek culture as the first universal culture of civilized world.[7] The ancient Macedonians originally lived north of the ancient Greeks (north of Olympus Mts.) up to the southern parts of the central Balkans and had their own language and traditions.[8] However, the upper class (aristocracy) was fairly Hellenized and used the ancient Greek language for official purposes followed by worshipping of the ancient Greek gods.[9]



Alexander the Great mosaic

It is of quite a fake assumption that southernmost ex-Yugoslav republic was named as Macedonia because it covered the territory of the ancient Kingdom of Macedon and, therefore, the so-called Macedonians of Yugoslavia had historical rights for cultural and identity legacy of Macedonia and Macedonians from the time of Antique. To be clear, the present-day state of Macedonia is located not on the territory of ancient Kingdom of Macedon but rather on the territory of the Roman Province of Macedonia which was composed by vast territory including present-day Albania, Greek Thessaly, FYROM, and parts of Bulgaria up to Rhodope Mts.[10] The archaeological sites on the territory of FYROM (for instance, Stobi or in Bitola) of the Antique time belong to the Roman but not to the Macedon period. These facts suggest that FYROM Macedonians have nothing to do either with the territory of the ancient Kingdom of Macedon or with its historical and cultural legacy. In other words, the name of a present-day state of Macedonia is, in fact, empty of the real ancient Macedon inheritance. The Greek historiographers are basically right with

their claim that the Yugoslav historiography for the very political purpose simply extended Antique Macedon state "...much further towards the north than the borders of historical Macedon, in such a way as to include actual Slavic regions that have never been parts of Macedonia in antiquity, but were actually districts of ancient Dardania".[11]

A real ethnolinguistic origin of the ancient Macedonians is not clearly fixed. There are many unproven theories on their origin: Greek, Illyrian, Thracian or mixture of all of them. However, in the course of time, the ancient Macedonians became enough different from the Greeks, especially from the matter of their spoken language, that even majority of the Greek intellectuals of the time considered Macedonians as *barbarians* - not the Greeks by blood, i.e., those who did not speak Greek language as a native one. The most prominent figures of those well-known Greeks who perceived Macedonians as not Greeks, and therefore being *barbarians*, are Thucydides (the author of famous "Peloponnesian Wars"), Demosthenes (384–322 BC)[12] and (pro-Philip) Isocrates (436–338 BC). However, as a matter of fact, there were thousand years of continuous presence of Hellenic culture and civilization on the territory of the Kingdom of Macedon that many Greeks considered, like today, ancient Macedonians as one of many Greek tribes.[13] According to Prof. M. Rostovtzeff, Greeks hardly understood Macedon language but, anyway, it was a dialect of Greek with many foreign words.[14]

### **The Slavo-Macedonians**

If the ancient Macedonians were not the ethnolinguistic Greeks, they have not been as well as the ethnolinguistic Slavs like the modern Macedonians are. In other words, self-called Macedonians who today inhabit the Balkan peninsula, are the Slavic people, having nothing in common with the ancient Macedonians of Philip II (Philip of Macedon) and his son Alexander the Great.[15] From the late Antique onward there were several different ethnic groups who became settled at the Balkan peninsula as, for instance, Celts, Huns, Bulgars, Germanic tribes, Slavic tribes, Mongols or Ottoman Turks. Surely, they either drove away or assimilated the autochthonous population, or even became assimilated (like the Asiatic Bulgars who became ethnolinguistic Slavs).[16] The Slavs, divided into many tribes, were settled in the Balkan peninsula from the end of 6<sup>th</sup> century AD (from around 580 up to 624) and the autochthonous people living in the land of Roman Province of Macedonia (at that time under Byzantine administration) became soon assimilated by these Slavic tribes who became settled even on the Peloponnesus peninsula (today in South Greece). However, no single historical source of the time recorded any Slavic tribe under the name of "Macedonians" or "Bosnians" (well-known were the "Serbs" and "Croats"). Therefore, modern Macedonia's people, whom we know under the national name of "Macedonians", differ in ethnic point of view from the ancient Macedonians, with a different language and culture.[17] Subsequently, FYROM's Macedonians should be called as *Slavo-Macedonians* for the matter of difference with the *Antique Macedonians*.



In essence, the present-day Macedonians are the Slavs who to a certain degree assimilated pre-Slavic population of Macedonia but borrowed the ancient name of the settled land (of Roman Province of Macedonia and Byzantine Theme of Macedonia) as their new national one.[18] However, the problem of political-national nature arose when after the WWII Yugoslav Macedonians started to claim a national, historical and cultural legacy of the ancient Macedonians and their state with whom they, in fact, had nothing in common.

However, one can say that something similar goes about the Greeks as well. The ethnic nature of contemporary Greece is in no close match to the ethnic nature of the area at the time of Alexander the Great. New peoples in the Middle Ages entered Greek territories and merged with the existing peoples. Whereas in FYROM there is a majority of people of mixed ethnic stock who speak a Slavic language and have a predominantly Slavic culture (about 2/3 out of total population), in Greece, there is a majority of people of mixed ethnic stock who speak Greek language and sharing Greek culture. Therefore, as both FYROM and Greece have changed dramatically in the ethnic mixture over the past 1500 years, like all other Balkan regions, it cannot be claimed that there is a pure and not interrupted the ethnonational continuity of any Balkan modern nation with the ethnic groups from the past. Moreover, the Balkans "...is one of the most ethnically, linguistically and religiously complex areas of the world. Its geographic position has historically resulted in it being disrupted by invaders moving from Asia Minor to Europe or vice-versa".[19]

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## Notes

[1] Stephen Barbour, Cathie Carmichael (eds.), *Language and Nationalism in Europe*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 229.

[2] James Pettifer (ed.), *The New Macedonian Question*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, 3–59.

[3] Loring M. Danforth, *Ethnic Nationalism in a Transnational World*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, 6.

[4] About Ottoman Macedonia's ethnolinguistic and multiconfessional composition, see [Henry N. Brailsford, *Macedonia: Its Races and Their Future*, London: Methuen & Co., 1906].

[5] Hough Poulton, *Who are the Macedonians?*, Hong Kong: Hurst & Company London, 1995, 1–2.

[6] Hans-Erich Stier et al (eds.), *Westermann Großer Atlas zur Weltgeschichte*, Braunschweig: Westermann Schulbuchverlag GmbH, 1985, 22–23.

[7] On this issue, see in [Philip Freeman, *Alexander the Great*, New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2011; Thomas R. Martin, Christopher W. Blackwell, *Alexander the Great: The Story of an Ancient Life*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012].

[8] In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, biggest portion of the present-day state of Macedonia was not part of the ancient Kingdom of Macedon and it was covered by the territory known as Paeonia that was populated by the ancient Illyrians but not by the Macedonians [Giuseppe Motta (ed.), *Atlante Storico*, Novara: Istituto Geografico de Agostini S.p.A., 1979, 13].

[9] On ancient Macedonians, see in [Eugene N. Borza, *In the Shadow of Olympus: The Emergence of Macedon*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992; Joseph Roisman, Ian Worthington (eds.), *A Companion to Ancient Macedonia*, Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010].

[10] Hans-Erich Stier et al (eds.), *Westermann Großer Atlas zur Weltgeschichte*, Braunschweig: Westermann Schulbuchverlag GmbH, 1985, 38–39.

[11] Nicolas K. Martis, *The Falsification of Macedonian History*, Athens: Graphic Arts, 1984, 13.

[12] “Demosthenes viewed the peoples of Macedonia as barbarous riffraff led by a king (Philip II) who not only did not belong and was unrelated to the Greeks but could not even boast a respectable foreign heritage” [John Crossland, Diana Constance, *Macedonian Greece*, London: Batsford Ltd, 1982, 9,15].

[13] Michael B. Sakellariou (ed.), *Macedonia. 4,000 Years of Greek History and Civilization*, Athens: Aristide d Caratzas Publ., 1988, 63.

[14] Михаил Ростовцев, *Историја старога света: Грчка, Рим*, Нови Сад: Матица српска, 1990, 155.

[15] This was recently recognized by a mayor of Skopje who sincerely gave a statement that today’s Slavo-Macedonians have nothing in common with Macedonians of Philip the Macedon and Alexander the Great.

[16] The modern Bulgarians are of Turkic origin who migrated to the Balkans from their homeland found north of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. They crossed the Danube in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century (679–681) and inhabited the territory of present-day North Bulgaria, which was at that time already settled by seven Slavic tribes. By the early 10<sup>th</sup> century Turkic Bulgars became assimilated by the local Slavs but their ethnic name was given to such amalgam of Bulgar-Slavic people. From the 10<sup>th</sup> century onward the Bulgarians (mixture of Bulgars and Slavs) are considered as a Slavic people who were speaking Slavonic language [John V. A. Fine, JR., *The Early Medieval Balkans: A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994, 305].

[17] Here it has to be noted that the fundamental dogma of the FYROM historiography about the origin of the modern Macedonians clearly confirms that they are the Slavs and even the oldest Slavic nation [James Pettifer (ed.), *The New Macedonian Question*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, 55].

[18] The modern ethnonym *Macedonian* is derived from the ancient toponym *Macedon*. Similar it happens with today ethnonym *Bosniak* that is derived from a toponym *Bosnia* (a name of the land *Bosnia* comes from *Bosnia* [Bosna] river). Therefore, modern ethnonyms *Macedonian* and *Bosniak* are not grounded on the ethnic foundations but rather on the territorial.

[19] Hugh Poulton, *The Balkans: Minorities and States in Conflict*, London: Minority Rights Publications, 1994, 1.

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