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Group 3: Silent Conflicts vs. Hot Topics in Relation with Minorities

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Silent Conflicts vs. Hot Topics in Relation with Minorities

Quite often, the internationally reported and discussed problems differ significantly from the issues that societies are concerned with. Sometimes, the national political agenda also fails to address or deliberately ignores latent tensions and silent conflicts within societies. Please assess whether there is such discrepancy (between the public agenda and the real hidden issues) in your country and provide examples. Are there silent/hidden conflicts that are ignored by local politicians and society in general? Are there latent tensions that have a serious negative impact on society or that might become a powerful conflict-factor in the future? Please discuss reasons for the prioritization of some issues over others. Discuss the consequences that both types of conflicts (open and silent) had on your society.

I. BLEDAR BASANOVIQ: Case of Albania

Albania belongs to the South East European countries, situated on the Balkans. It has borders with Greece, FYROM, Kosovo, and Montenegro and Adriatic and Ionian Sea to the west. In Albania is still undergoing the transition process from the totalitarian system to the democratic system consisting in the building of a society based on the rule of law and well-functioning of democratic institutions. The main focus lately is devoted to the fight against corruption and organized crime, discrimination of all marginalized groups, which are also the main conditions to be fulfilled in the path toward the European Union.

In my opinion, the mutual understanding, the building of an effective framework for national minorities and its successful implementation resulting in the real improvement of the rights and freedoms of minorities and other marginalized groups represents the main challenge for the Albanian society.

A very immediate problem and with a deep impact on the future of the understanding and mutual tolerance between the majoritarian and minoritarian population is the political will of the elites and structures dominated by the majority to build such a institutional, legislative and social framework of measures towards the positive integration of minorities including all their specific rights.

An obstacle and example of hidden discriminatory or measures resulting in the lowering the general number of minorities was the overall process of the so called Census of the Population and Houses which for the first time included a question on national affiliation of the citizens. While this process has been required for years, it failed to comply with standards. A last minute change/amendment of the respective law (Law Nr.10 442, date 7.7.2011) initiated by the nationalist political representatives of the majority(The Party of Justice and Unity) , consisted of the approval of the article nr 20 which stipulated that a fine for all answers which are not " exact and true" , without any exception. On the other hand, the same article of the law obliges the Instat (State Institute of Statistics) to verify the accuracy of all the responses comparing them with "the available data in the state registers". Considering the high fine (700 EUR), the suspected credibility of the available data in the civil registers dating from the communism era during which to a large extent their minority belonging (ethnicity) was changed to Albanian, and the overall unsecure climate during the process, minority

representatives after failed negotiations to review the contested legislation, called for boycott for the whole process. The result of that was the high rate of 14 % percent of the population which have not been declared about their ethnic affiliation.

After a month, the Constitutional Court decided to annul the article 58 of the Law on civil registers which regulated the ethnicity. By this were cleared all the existing state records on citizen's ethnicity, under the argument of the violation of the human right of privacy. While on my opinion, some minority groups of changed ethnicity during the communist regime, were contesting the implementation of this the dispositions of this article, which stipulated that only the court shall change the ethnicity of citizens, upon their request, other groups were automatically deprived from the right of using such data deriving from earlier time to be recognized by state as members of a national minority (Greeks and Macedonians).

Another existing gap was created especially by the results of the Census of the Population and Houses, from October 2011. While the most of the minority members are mostly of Orthodox religion, the majority of the population belongs to Muslim and Catholic religion. It was the Orthodox church of Albania which contested the most the results of the Census having in mind the low number of believers comparing to expectancies and their own results.

These two legal and statistical factors influenced in rising of the distrust between majority and minorities in Albania.

Another factor which possibly can represent a source of latent conflict is the political use of nationalism from political actors, sometimes from the state representatives aiming the unification of Albanians, or against representatives of minorities in the parliament. These factors often dispute the positive norms proposed from majority conditioning their approval by their numbers in Parliament, which are in case of small majority decisive for the Government establishment. Often they influence in the diplomatic worsening of the interstate relations and a general bad interethnic climate.

Stereotypes in school books and generally absence of historical, cultural, geographical and other elements of national minorities' identity in the school books is also an obstacle to transmit to the youth the spirit of tolerance. The use of languages and the programs on minorities in media, which is often followed by negative commentaries on state relations, needs to be addressed too.

Another potential case of latent conflict represents the state bilateral relations, the influence of the respective treatment of national minorities on these relations and the imposition of the measures which often are not of the same object. (If it is required an interstate agreement on the bilateral recognition of diplomas, it is conditioned by the achievement of an agreement for the protection of national minorities and vice versa. In most of these cases, the adoption of these important instruments is delayed because of" reciprocal absence of political will "to conclude these agreements.

Disrespect of property rights which includes the land usurpation, the unemployment and inequality in employment, the rights to be taught and learn the mother tongue, unequal participation in public life, and lack of education in minority languages are factors which can aggravate the interethnic climate of understanding and tolerance.

Questions regarding rule of law, corruption, and organized crime informality as issues influencing in the life and treatment of minorities in general, have priority comparing to the rights of minorities in government's agenda.

II. GIORGI TABAGARI: Case of Georgia

Georgia is a multi-ethnic state, wherein the ethnic minorities account more than 16 percent of the overall population. Ethnic and religious diversity have always been an integral part of the history of Georgia. Though, in the recent history, country has been through in several tensions, which to a different degree still persists until today.

Since independent, Georgia has faced two territorial conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both regions proclaimed independence soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even though, there are different narratives on the basis of these conflicts, the fact that cannot be neglected is the role of ethnic differences between Georgian, Abkhaz and Ossetian people. These conflicts have been attracting the attention both of international and local stakeholders. Due to the developments in 2008, the issue still remains the topic of active discussion until today and these regions maintained as the hot spots on European map.

Therefore, I would like to draw attention to other important issues related to the minority groups in Georgia, Mainly, on ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis as they comprise the biggest groups of the ethnic minorities.

Worth noting that, from legal standpoint there are no whatsoever impediments for ethnic minorities, however since regaining independence due to vivid xenophobic policy of the first government, minority groups have been widely discriminated. Despite the fact that during the last 10 years government of Georgia had several attempts to implement different projects in the minority populated areas, situation has not changed significantly. Language barrier remains the key problem when it comes to the integration of these groups into the society. As knowing Georgian language is the precondition for education and further employment on labor market, Armenian and Azeri minorities are widely excluded from active participation in Georgia. Linguistic issue is particularly important regarding elections and representation of these groups in political life of the country. As the results, since restoring independence almost under every government, Azeri and to a less extent Armenian minorities have been a source of electoral manipulations. 'A guaranteed' votes for every election. General economic situation has also been an important factor for the past two decades. Taking into consideration several wars since regaining the independence, Georgian economy has been in precarious conditions. Poverty and socio-economic problems have been widespread among the country; hence, minority issues have also been consequently neglected.

In line with the governmental failure to effectively address the challenges related to minority integration, Georgian media and on a broader scale Georgian society often show intolerance towards the different groups. Xenophobic statements are often made by the public figures and widely covered through media as well. According to the Media Monitoring report conducted by the InterNews Georgia in 2011-2012, Hate Speech towards the ethnic Armenians is the most commonly used among all the minority groups. A term 'Armenian' is nearly considered as an insult and conservative media outlets rather frequently insist on the origins of certain political figures with the purpose to undermine their image in the society. To a less extent, the same applies to Azerbaijani minorities and Turkish nationalities, which has been growing during the past years.

These issues outlined above, clearly hinder the full integration of different ethnic groups into Georgian society. While government is not particularly proactive and furthermore, certain figures are themselves noticed to be making rather xenophobic statements, coherently the process of integration is very slow. However, worth noting that due to political and overall geopolitical picture in South Caucasus, it is very improbable that serious tensions occur on the basis of ethnicity. Especially the secessionist movement on the border regions due to the current political relationships between Georgia and kin states of border minorities is nearly impossible.

III. MERITA MECE: Case of Albania

Under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), the Republic of Albania situated in the Western Balkan and populated by 3 million inhabitants has three officially recognized national minorities respectively, Greeks, Macedonians and Montenegrins, and two ethno-linguistic minorities respectively, Roma and Vlachs/Aromanians . According to 2011 population and housing census, ethnic minorities represent 1.5 percent of the total population which is lower compared to data recorded in the previous census. Having 56.7 percent of its population Muslim by religion followed by 10.53 percent as Catholics, 6.75 percent as Orthodox, 2.09 percent as Bektashi Muslims, problems faced by minorities nowadays in Albania are linked to their historical identity. For instance, Bektashi community which follows a version of Islam akin to Sufism wants to be recognized as a separate branch of Islam but the state representatives insist that they are a simple sect denying it a special treatment as a separate religious minority.

On the other hand, Egyptian community which pretends to be different from Roma community is neither recognized as ethno-linguistic minority nor as national minority because, according to the Albanian government, it does not meet certain criteria such as language and tradition. Although Egyptian community is regularly pushing it to be officially recognized as minority group, it considers it a community rather than a distinct minority raising tension among its members. Despite several recommendations provided by the Council of Europe, the Albanian government has neither revised its legislation on minorities nor adopted a comprehensive legal framework to ensure effective access to rights for all minorities. Lack of commitment from the Albanian government has also been shown in 2011 population and housing census where questions about ethnic origin have been optionally included while fines for false declaration of ethnicity have not been very clear raising the option of boycott by some minority organizations.

Moreover, there are no clear quotas for the participation of minority groups in local and central administration. This situation is worst in the case of Roma and Egyptian groups leading to low level of response to various problems faced by them.

Despite several recommendations provided by the Council of Europe on societal discrimination, Roma and Egyptian communities still suffer significant societal abuse. The implementation of “National Action Plan for the Roma and Egyptian Inclusion Decade (2010-2015)” shows slow results due to inadequate resource, sufficient coordination and lack of joint intervention plans among involved institutions at both, central and local level. Especially at local level, local government is insufficiently aware of necessary services for Roma population leaving this task to the civil society organizations which are donor-driven questioning their sustainability in medium and long term.

IV. NASIBA ABBASOVA: Case of Azerbaijan

Statistics

Azerbaijanis form a consistent majority in Azerbaijan Republic. According to the census of 2009 (8,922,400) ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan represent 8.9% of the population. Among them are:

- Lezgins (the largest minority group, making up 2.0% of the population, living in the north of Azerbaijan close to the Russian border)
- Russians 1.3%
- Armenians 1, 35%
- Talysh 1, 26%
- The other small minorities like Ukrainians, Kurds, Tats, and Jews.

Legal Basis

Article 21 ("State Language") of Section II of the Constitution of Azerbaijan state:

- The Azerbaijani language shall be the State language of the Republic of Azerbaijan.
- The Republic of Azerbaijan shall ensure the development of the Azerbaijani language.
- The Republic of Azerbaijan shall guarantee the free use and development of other languages spoken by the population.

Article 45 ("The Right to Use Native Language") of Section III of the Constitution of Azerbaijan state:

- Every Person shall have the right to use Native language. Everyone shall have the right to be raised and get an education, be engaged in creative activities in Native Language.
- No one can be deprived of the right to use Native Language.

Situation of own language learning by minorities in Azerbaijan

The languages of national minorities in Azerbaijan are taught in public schools in regions where these minorities live compactly. Usually to the teaching languages of minorities are devoted two hours a week. In general, they will be learned first four forms. Significant distinction makes the Russian minority, which has its own schools in the Azerbaijan capital Baku. There are also some Georgian and Jewish schools in Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan Republic tries to improve the quality of teaching of several minority languages, such as Lezgin and Talysh. For example, the number of textbooks in these languages has been published in order to replace the old or foreign ones, which were not appropriate.

- The main problem by teaching of minority languages is the lack of competent and good-trained teachers.
- The second problem is that minority languages are mostly spoken, but not written, which means, not everyone who can speak, can also write or read in his/her own language.

Exception:

- Armenian minority is the only exception among all these minorities. Because of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict the number of Armenians on the territory of Azerbaijan has noticeably decreased.

Rights of minorities:

- They are represented at the Azerbaijani Parliament
- They participate in social, political & cultural life of Azerbaijani society

NOTE:

- There have never occurred any problems between Azerbaijanis and minorities till now.
- Republic of Azerbaijan is a tolerant country in respect of minorities, religions, languages, etc.

V. JASMINA TRAJKOSKA: Case of Macedonia

Multicultural society ... living side by side with other and living with each other!?

Republic of Macedonia is a multicultural society which includes different nationality groups. In the Constitution Republic of Macedonia is a country of Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Gypsies, Serbians, Vlachs, Bosnians and others. According to the last register in 2002 Macedonians dominate with 64,18%, Albanians are about 25,17% , Turks are 3,85%, Gypsies 2,66%, Serbians 1, 78%, Bosnians 0,84 % , Vlachs 0, 48% and the others 1, 04% .

Albanians boycotted the referendum for independence on 8th of September 1991 with explanation that Albanians have major disadvantage in comparison with the Macedonians. Minority reflected the state with low emotional connection as not belonging, while the majority thinks that the minority doesn't like the state and doesn't feel the state like theirs. Between 1991-2001 there were many conflicts between Albanians and Macedonians, in 1995 the police stopped the celebration of the construction of the University in Tetovo which was built specially for Albanians' students, the other serious conflict was in 1997 the Albanians' flags were fluttered in front of the municipalities' in Tetovo and Gostivar.

In 2001 there was a military conflict between Albanian extreme group and Macedonian Army which lasted six months. The conflict was a result of many factors, among them were uneven-social, legal and political relations between the two ethnicities. Ohrid Framework agreement was the solution for this conflict and it's was signed after months of negotiation. After the completion of Ohrid Framework Agreement the Constitution has changed and the minority groups, which are at least 20%, got guaranteed rights. The aim of the Framework was to promote the peaceful and harmonious development of civil society while respecting the ethnic identity and the interests of all Macedonian citizens.

Almost every expert has the same opinion after Ohrid Framework Agreement there was a perfect time for beginning to build multiethnic civil society. But it didn't happen. It was just a picture of double nationalism.

The Government of Republic of Macedonia is heterogeneous. Always the Macedonian and Albanian parties are in coalition to make a government. In the Parliament there is Macedonian, Albanian, Turkish, Gypsy, Serbian, Bosnian and Torbesh parties. All parties represent the interest of their electorate, and nationalism is very present in rhetoric of politicians especially during the pre-election period. On one hand with the Ohrid Framework Agreement the conflict was ended, but the other hand the content creates parallel world for minorities in everyday living. The greatest antagonism is between Macedonians and Albanians, the most specific one is the Torbesh community which is engaged for place in Constitution of the state, they ask not to be part of "the others" as the Constitution is, they want to be enrolled as Torbeshi along with others Albanians, Serbians, Vlachs, Bosnians, Gypsies and Turks. Today Albanians children go to Albanian kinder gardens and schools, Macedonians children go to Macedonian kinder gardens and schools. In Universities students also are separated in Macedonian and Albanian languages groups. The new generations of Albanian scholars not even know the Macedonian language. At nights in clubs they are also separated. We have Macedonian and Albanian clubs and restaurants. In the centre of Skopje in old Turkey bazaar there are many Macedonian and Albanian places but there is also separation between the people. Because of the educational system children don't socialize together. And they create parallel world and lived separately. The greatest sin is to fall in love with the man or woman from different nationality, especially with Albanians or Turks; the main reason except nationality is religion. Macedonian side is more flexible about this issue, but the Albanian side when it comes to Albanian girl who'd married a Macedonian Christian is the real problem, and I'm free to say is impossible. In the last twenty years we have examples of mixed marriages of 5%. The main reason why people don't mix each other is politics, media and poor economic situation. "We, the Macedonians, are more tolerant. Albanians have all the rights - to educate, to open businesses, "said a Macedonian from Kumanovo "The Albanians don't have prejudice, but the Macedonians - have. We Albanians are more tolerant "Albanian from Chair said. Prejudges are very present in our society because the media always present the situations black and white. Also nationalistic rhetoric of the both sides Macedonians politicians and Albanian politicians further is enlarging the gap. All this in the long turn will complicate the possibility of coexistence.

According to my opinion we first need to create mixed parties, where Macedonians and other minorities will participate, not only declarative, but will create solutions through public policies for all. We must understand that we have to work on it to integrate minorities into the system and to create criteria where people are going to be seen as individuals not as members of one or another

ethnic group. All citizens of Republic of Macedonia must be worried about poor economic situation, with economic growth and improved life standard it will be easier to work on overcoming the prejudices. In these difficult economic situation people are much more susceptible to manipulation by political elites and media. I think that by raising awareness among citizens, through better educational system and media the impartial and objective informed media that will address the principles of civil concept; we can achieve better inter-ethnic coexistence. Therefore it must be emphasized that the policy of nationalism is always destructive, whether or not we belong to side of a national majority.

VI. MALKHAZ TORIA: Memory projects, silent tensions and armed conflicts in Post-Soviet Georgia

After the fall of the Soviet Union Georgia faced serious political challenges. Among them was bloody ethnic conflict in Abkhazia region of Georgia determined by complex and somehow latent reasons. I would say that one of the crucial determining factors of this conflict was conflicting representation of history in Georgian and Abkhazian memory projects. Indeed, the escalation of tensions was always accompanied or caused by the “war of historians”. Rival parties referred to their past in order to establish territorial and other political rights by claiming historical priority vis-à-vis other groups. This process began in the first decades of the 20th century and extremely sharpened by the end of 80’s of 20th century. I would like to single out some key constitutive elements of the Georgian and Abkhazian memory projects which, I think, reveal silent and latent forms of political struggles over the Abkhazian region of Georgia.

What is the Memory project?

Planned and state-sponsored construction of the past and creation of coherent historical narrative for strengthening a sense of unity of a society

Goals:

- Mobilizing collective memory around the key historical events from the past collectively remembered as major watersheds
- Establishing a coherent historical narrative at all levels
- Articulating priorities: what, when and why should be remembered

Contested Memory Projects and Modeling Ethnic Landscape

Georgian memory project

- Abkhazia - an integral part of Georgian territory and culture
- Abkhazians are culturally close to Georgians or even the people of Georgian origins and their alienation started during Tsarist and Soviet time

Abkhazian Counter-Memory Project

- Abkhazia never was a part of Georgia
- Georgian historians are trying to distort the past and took away historical memory of Abkhazian people

The problem of indigenouness in Abkhazia

Abkhazian position

- Ethnic Abkhazians always populated this region. Georgians came here in later times and assimilated Abkhazians

Georgian historiography - Two main standpoints

- Both Abkhazians and Georgians are indigenous, but Georgians inhabited this territory earlier
- Abkhazians came here in 17th century AD

Same historical period, contested views

Georgian perspective

- 11-12th centuries AD - „Golden ages” in the history of Georgia started by reunion of medieval Georgian kingdoms including Abkhazia
- Abkhazia - a cradle of Georgian culture and statehood

Abkhazian perspective

- The glorious period of Abkhazia’s history. Kings David the Builder and Tamara, canonized as saints by the Georgian Orthodox Church, were ethnic Abkhazians

Drawing Borders and politics of exclusion in Abkhazia after the end of the war (1993)

- River Enguri -limes segregating Abkhazian and Georgian “spaces”
- Theoretical justification of ethnic cleansing and exclusion of Georgians from Abkhazia

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