

The Numbers Game for Macedonians

By Victor Bivell

It is said that politics is about numbers - and numbers are a key reason why Macedonia is bullied by Greece, Bulgaria, Albania and Serbia. There are more Macedonians outside of Macedonia than inside. So much so that there are only 1.3 million ethnic Macedonians in the Republic of Macedonia. Compare that with 4.5 million Albanians in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia; 5.5 million Bulgarians in Bulgaria; 5.9 million Serbs in Serbia, and 10 million Greeks in Greece (although that official number is widely understood to be over-estimated as Greece does not collect data on its ethnic minorities).

1.3 million are not a lot of Macedonians looking after the homeland.

The percentage of ethnic Macedonians living in Macedonia, at 64 per cent, is also far less than for the majority populations in the neighboring countries. Bulgarians are 77 per cent of Bulgaria's official population, Albanians and Serbs are 83 per cent of Albania and Serbia respectively, and Albanians and Greeks are 93 per cent of Kosovo and Greece respectively.

Macedonia is bullied because it is the smallest kid on the block.



There is a reason why the saying “There is strength in numbers” is an old one. Because it's true. Macedonians have the numbers, but they are spread out around the world. This is why I started the ‘Macedonia Needs Macedonians’ campaign. We need to reverse the centuries old trend of Macedonians leaving Macedonia. Macedonia needs the net trend to be Macedonians moving to Macedonia. If we can achieve this, over time Macedonia will become stronger and better able to look after itself. As the country gets stronger, the bullying will slow down and one day stop. Macedonia will stay Macedonia, and Macedonians will have the free and secure homeland they have always wanted.

The world recently saw an example of how this process works. In August 2017 US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that the US won't win in Afghanistan and neither will the Taliban so it is time to negotiate a settlement. Secretary Tillerson was showing how real politics works. When countries realize they can't win, they talk. There is a lesson here for Macedonia. The Greek and Bulgarian governments still think they can destroy the Macedonians, so they keep trying.

To achieve peace, Macedonia has to become strong. At the existential level that means getting enough Macedonians from around the world to return to Macedonia to get the ethnic Macedonian population above 70 per cent so that the country can become politically stable. At the economic level, it means attracting business people and using every means possible to grow the economy and provide jobs. At the diplomatic level it means better relations with the five members of the UN Security Council, the EU member governments and governments that have so far not recognized Macedonia's name.

It also means more input from the diaspora. Every Macedonian who cares has the power to help to make Macedonia strong. All they need do is think about how they can help. When Macedonia is strong enough, the Greek and Bulgarian governments will stop bullying it and start serious talks.

It is the role of a majority population to provide stability, but Macedonian governments have not done this. In 1961 Macedonians were over 71 per cent of Macedonia's population. By 2002 this number had fallen to under 64 per cent, and along with the fall came dangerous political instability. The Macedonian majority has a responsibility to provide the country with stability, and it is within the power of individual Macedonians to achieve this.

Consider this. There is a reason why each morning more Macedonians wake up outside of Macedonia than wake up inside Macedonia. There is a reason why so many Macedonians are spread out around the world. It is not an accident. Why are there so many people of Macedonian descent living in other European countries, in America, in Canada and in Australia? It is not just choice. Much of it is the result of geopolitics, deliberate government policies by Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, and by the British Empire and its friends when it gave support to Greece in the early 20th Century.

Rulers and governments have been moving peoples around for millennia to suit their political aims, be it moving away native peoples to consolidate and maintain control of a newly won territory or moving in their own people as colonizers. They did it in Mesopotamia in the sixth century BC, the ancient Greeks did it along the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts, King Philip and Alexander the Great did it, the Romans did it, and many others did it.

Here is what happened in Mesopotamia in the 600s BC. In her book *Mesopotamia: The Invention of the City*, author Gwendolyn Leick says “Rebellion was punished by the destruction of cities and countryside, the plundering of treasures and the removal of large sections of the population, especially from among the tribal peoples.”

Another example: in 356 BC King Philip used population movements to consolidate his control over the Crenidas mining settlements on the northern Aegean coast. Crenidas was a Greek colony then ruled by a Thracian king. James R Ashley in his book *The Macedonian Empire* says Philip moved against Crenidas with 5,000 troops, enough for the Thracian ruler Cersobleptes to withdraw. "Philip then consolidated the several small communities there into one settlement that he named Philippi. It was heavily fortified and settled with a large number of Macedonian colonists who quickly displaced the native Thasians."

There are plenty of examples where the ancient Greeks put in Greek colonists and the ancient Macedonians removed them. History is full of populations being moved en masse.

One of the biggest people-movers in history were the British. They did it to take over America, Canada and Australia. The British were also a key player in handing over Aegean Macedonia to the Greeks, and in the catastrophic population exchanges that followed that saw Macedonians and Muslims moved en masse out of Macedonia and over 630,000 Christians moved in from Turkey as Greeks. The British and the world have done nothing since then to stop the Greek government's policies of ethnic cleansing of Macedonians that include discrimination in favour of the colonizers and the economic under-development of Macedonian areas to encourage migration. In fact, more ethnic cleansing followed as part of the Greek Civil War.

Many Macedonians left divided Macedonia due to a lack of work but economic migration can also have a geopolitical cause. If Macedonians had been in charge of their own destiny, they would have created their own economic opportunities by building their own schools, their own industries, their own villages and towns, and perhaps fewer Macedonians would have left as economic migrants.

So there is a reason why most Macedonians do not wake up in Macedonia each morning. How do Macedonians feel about that? Should they just accept it? Or should they make up their own mind about Macedonia, about life and where they live it?

I believe that all peoples should have a homeland. The Republic of Macedonia is the only place in the world where Macedonians as a people can build a homeland. But it needs enough Macedonians to keep it safe and make it strong.

Moving back is not for everyone. But it may suit those who want a new start in life, who left the Republic but now want to return, who have family and other connections to the Republic or other parts of Macedonia, who see a business or professional opportunity in returning, who want a base to travel Europe and the northern hemisphere, or who have another reason. Those who cannot or do not want to return can still assist by supporting the Macedonian economy and culture.

Whatever you do, wherever you live, do it consciously, and not because up to a hundred or more years ago some faraway, greedy and heartless politicians decided that your family should no longer live in Macedonia.

Victor Bivell is a journalist and editor and the publisher of 13 books on human rights in northern Greece.

Copyright 2017

Source: www.pollitecon.com