

MINORITIES WITHIN MINORITIES: BETWEEN THE “SELF” AND THE “OTHER”

Although, for centuries, we have witnessed different forms of nationalism, we cannot deny the fact that the international community lacked the necessary pace to form the instruments that would provide the protection of national, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities. The minority rights literature talks only about these minorities as being subjected to certain policies that are restrictive or violating basic human rights. Despite the existence of such oppressive policies, minority groups ironically exert similar hegemonic policies to the minority groups that exist within themselves. This paper takes a general approach to the identity formation process and examines the creation of the “Self” and the “Other” and its reflections within the minority group itself.

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Given that international law is made by governments, it comes as no surprise that international minority rights have lagged behind the development of other branches of human rights.”¹ The development of minority rights has taken quite some time when compared with the other branches of human rights. Only after the 1990s with the interethnic violence that was sparked by the Cold War in Eastern Europe could the interest be drawn on the issue of minorities. Throughout history we have witnessed different forms of nationalism which were contained up to some point through the existing regimes², we cannot deny the fact that the international community lacked the necessary pace to form the instruments that would provide the protection of national, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities.

When we talk about the term identity, it will be assumed in this paper that identity is multiple and can be situated on different levels in each individual.³ An individual can describe himself/herself through his/her ethnic, religious, national or even political identity. When you ask a citizen or one of the member states of the European Union for example, he/she may express his/her identity at different levels. Depending on the priority, he/she can say that he/she is European (political) or Christian (religious) or German (national). This paper deals with a further level of identity that persists within a minority group which can be classified as “minorities within minorities”.

In general, different identity groups have an impact on political motivation, nation building, majority and minority relations and social issues and therefore the issue of the protection of minorities is a very sensitive one. However, the minority rights literature talks only about the linguistic, ethnic, religious or national minorities as being subjected to certain policies that are restrictive or violating basic human rights. Despite the existence of such oppressive policies in their daily lives, minority groups continue to exert these same hegemonic policies to other minority groups that exist *within* themselves.

Most of the literature that deals with the concept of “minorities within minorities” takes groups such as women or children as the major examples of the minority within minority groups. However in this paper I will try to paint a general picture of the identity formation process, i.e. the creation of the “Self” and the “Other” as a whole and *within* the minority groups themselves. It will be argued that the identity formation process is not only evident between the majority and minority groups but also *within* the minority groups themselves through the cleavages in geography, language, gender or age.

¹ Marc Weller (ed.), *The Rights of Minorities* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 1.

² Florence Benoit-Rohmer, *The Minority Question in Europe* Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 1996, p.11.

³ Lena Stelling, “Identity-building in Europe – a postnational challenge?”, <http://www.euroculturemaster.org/pdf/Stelling.pdf>.

It will be further argued that “conceptualizing minority groups only at the receiving end of state policies of assimilation and repression, runs the risk of overlooking the multi-layered social differentiation that characterize these groups internally, commonly assumed to consist of a homogenous population.”⁴ Moreover, since there are no designated instruments to control the repressive policies that these “minority within minority” groups are being subjected to, a minority group may itself become a source of discrimination. Following on this argument, the minority group that will be discussed in this paper will be the Greek Orthodox community living in Turkey with regards to their internal cleavages as a result of geographical and linguistic differences.

Be it the collapse of the communist regimes or the end of the Second World War, conflicts resulting from linguistic, ethnic, religious or national differences have come to the fore. These conflicts at times have come to a point where states have started questioning the validity of existing boundaries.

The question of the protection of minorities has been a long-standing one, since the Treaty of Versailles. Of course the meaning of minority rights has changed with time, and today, especially since the 1990s the question of minorities has started being perceived as a question of human rights. And even though major challenges still exist today, it is universally acknowledged that it is necessary to permit preservation of cultural diversity which also serves as a source of enrichment, and the maintenance of peace and security.⁵ No one can deny the difficulties minority groups still face today when it comes to the classification of national, linguistic, religious or ethnic minorities. A persisting problem is the lack of consensus over the definition of the term minority. Trying to come up with a definition that would encompass all minority groups and that would be considered binding by all parties has sparked serious controversies and even led to the abdication of the efforts to strengthen the instruments that would further help the identity formation process.

Today when you ask a person who identifies herself/himself with a certain collective identity to define what the indispensable features that make up his/her identity are, he/she would most probably describe the specifics of that group through comparison. Comparison is one of the tools for many people that have long been used to describe the “Other”. Perhaps it might not always be the case that the concept of the “Other” is associated with negative attributes but when it comes to identity-building, it will be claimed in this paper that the “Other” signifies the different and thus the alienated or the excluded. In multicultural societies or in societies where there are representations of different languages,

⁴ Haris Rigas, “Reinforcing Cleavages and strategic identity endorsement within a Minority Group: the Arab-speaking Rums from Antakya as the new *Karmanlides*” submitted to *Bosphorus University*, May 2008.

⁵ Benoit-Rohmer, 1996, p. 12.

religions, races or color, the conception of the “Other” is commonly done by the members of different groups in order to be able to define the “Self”.

This identity-building process, i.e. the creation of the “Self”, is mostly complex and has a decentralized power among different groups within the society when compared with other aspects of the social and political life.⁶ Following on this, different groups will feel urged to preserve or “securitize” their identity at different levels. According to Ole Wæver, the action of securitizing is defined as the process of securitization that is performed by a securitizing actor with a referent object. Taking a constructivist stance in 1993, the Copenhagen School of Security Studies applied the concept of “social construct of security” to communities other than states, which particularly corresponded to ethnic groups and they introduced the concept “societal security”.⁷ According to this approach, societal security refers to the situation when a society tries to secure its identity as compared to a state which feels the urge to secure its sovereignty. Thus societal security is about those situations when societies perceive a threat in identity terms and it can be inferred that the collective identity is what holds the society together which therefore is vital for their existence.⁸

When it comes to the discussion of national identity, underlining Hobsbawm in his famous text “The Invention of Tradition”, nations are taken to be historical constructs. However, when nationalistic movements are examined, one can easily see that their main argument in mobilizing crowds is the existence of a common history, culture and tradition from where the nations derive.⁹ The question that intrigues the common sense is to what extent one can talk about a common history and/or culture that the national identity is naturally derived from.¹⁰ In this piece, it will be assumed that the identity formation process is a continuous and ever-changing one although certain essential characters may persist.

As mentioned above, in this paper, identity will not be taken as some static concept therefore the collective identities are assumed to be in-the-making rather than stable. As Friis expresses in her paper “From Liminals to Others”, collective identities are subjectively experienced and expressed through social communication and perceptions of the “Self” and “Others”.¹¹ Derived from this statement, while studying the formation of collective identities, no one can deny the crucial role the “Other” plays. The “Other” is signified by the difference that creates the “Self” and one may go up to claiming that without an “Other”,

⁶ Ajay Mehra et al. “Religion and Identity: Building Bridges or Barriers”, <http://74.125.77.132/search?q=cache:jypQc4gKjoIJ:www.citizenshipandsecurity.org/Berlin/RELIGIONANDIDENTITY%2520final.doc+Identity-building+in+minorities&hl=tr&ct=clnk&cd=6&gl=tr>.

⁷ Karsten Friis. “From Liminals to Others: Securitization Through Myths,” <http://www.gmu.edu/academic/pcs/Friis72PCS.htm>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

there would be no self. Friis argues in her paper that what constitutes an identity is more the difference from the “Other” than the sameness of the “Self” and as a result what establishes the self is the collection of those differences.¹² As may be taken from Fredrik Barth in “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries”, “ethnic distinctions do not depend on absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a social system does not lead to its liquidation through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence.”¹³ What Barth claims simply is that identities are not formed and strengthened as a result of geographical and social isolation as has been assumed but the identity formation process is somewhat relational and takes up from the differences in the surrounding that one can only realize through actual interaction with other groups. Following on this definition, we can further state that those who do not fit into the definitions of the “Self” are immediately identified as different and thereof classified as the “Other” and in most cases are excluded, alienated or estranged. This approach does not neglect the existence of certain traits that come through history such as language, culture, religious exercises and so on.¹⁴

Until now, the creation of the “Self” and the “Other” has mostly been attributed to the national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities existing among the majority that makes up the society in which they live. Consistent with this claim, when the minority group takes itself as the majority in a certain situation, the group that is different becomes the “Other” and therefore is subjected to the policies that the minority groups struggles against in most cases.

Following from the concept of societal securitization, minority groups try to preserve their collective identity through those essential characters that they claim to form their collective identity and build a protective shield towards those who has the qualities that are different from most in that group. The most commonly mentioned among these groups are women and children. However, when we look at certain other minority groups we may find traces of the creation of “Self” and the “Other” within those groups as well. Unlike what is commonly thought, minority groups themselves are not entirely homogeneous groups and do in fact harbor cleavages within themselves. As a result we witness the acts that would lead to the alienation or exclusion of the “minorities within minorities”. In addition, since there are no mechanisms to control the oppressive policies exerted on these “minorities within minorities” and there are no checks and balances systems, in most cases these discriminatory acts are taken for granted by the members of the group. As an example to the hegemonic policies exerted

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* Illinois: Waveland Press Inc., 1969, p.10.

¹⁴ Karsten Friis, “From Liminals to Others: Securitization Through Myths,” <http://www.gmu.edu/academic/pcs/Friis72PCS.htm>.

on the minorities within minorities, one example we will consider in this paper is the Greek Orthodox or the Rum community in Turkey where we can easily see the alienation of the Arab-speaking Greek Orthodox community from Hatay, a south-eastern city of Turkey.

Most of the time when talking about religious minorities in Turkey, the arguments dwell on the point that minority groups often find themselves “defenseless against policies of oppression and assimilation, exercised or tolerated by the state, in the name of dominant majorities.”¹⁵ The Rum community of Istanbul has also experienced the same type of policies throughout the years and as a result of such pressures the number of Rums living in Turkey has decreased from a number close to 160,000 to approximately 4,000 people by the year 2004. Throughout the works that has dealt with the situation of Rums in Turkey, the focus had always been on the designation of Greek Orthodox minorities as “victims”, which obscured the practices of hegemony occurring *inside* the minority group itself.¹⁶ However especially with the increasing migration from Hatay to Istanbul, it has become obvious that actually other forms of hegemonic policies have been exercised *within* the Rum community itself, directed at the Arab-speaking Greek Orthodox from Hatay.

Unfortunately the Rum community of Istanbul which suffers severely from demography and low numbers of population still cannot accept the integration of Arab speaking Greek Orthodox community from Hatay in social and political life. Out of the total number of 4,000 Greek Orthodox citizens residing in Turkey, approximately 800 are Arab speaking Greek Orthodox, which is a significant number for the Greek Orthodox population in Turkey. Although geographical and linguistic cleavages exist, in accordance with the Lausanne Treaty which serves as the point of reference for the situation of minorities in Turkey, the problematic stands that the Arab speaking Greek Orthodox and the Rum community in Istanbul are considered as belonging to the same minority group. Since as a whole the Rum community is taken to be a homogeneous one, the Arab speaking population of Greek Orthodox community suffers from practices that reflect the “minorities within minorities” policies very clearly. Years of fear and uncertainty resulting from the repressive state policies exerted on the Rums of Istanbul have resulted in an introvert psychology within the community together with conservatism that forces Rums today to keep every practice that may have constituted as discriminatory, in the group and leave no space to any criticism or whatsoever. In turn, the most costly side-effect of these practices has become a relative lack of transparency in every aspect of their social and political life.

¹⁵ Haris Rigas, “Reinforcing Cleavages and strategic identity endorsement within a Minority Group: the Arab-speaking Rums from Antakya as the new *Karamanlides*” submitted to *Bosphorus University*, May 2008.

¹⁶ Rigas (2008), p.1.

The issues are numerous. To start with, the total number of Arab speaking Greek Orthodox population is not small and looking at the demographics, the younger generation can even be said to be more in number than the younger population of the Rums of Istanbul. With the increasing migration from Hatay to Istanbul, the Arab speaking Greek Orthodox community has started attending the Greek Orthodox schools in Istanbul *en masse*. On the one hand, the number of students coming from Hatay has taken the pressure off the shoulders of the Greek Orthodox schools in Istanbul that face the risk of closing down due to the decreasing number of student. On the other hand, this mass attendance by the students from Hatay has led to a number of controversies among the Rums of Istanbul and the school administrators in particular. It has been claimed at a meeting in Istanbul attended by the Rum community of Istanbul and representatives from Greece that the language barrier between the Arab speaking students from Hatay and the Rum students from Istanbul has created a certain amount of tension at the schools between both; the students and within student-teacher relations. As Arabic is their mother-tongue, the students from Hatay encounter serious difficulties when they have to adapt to the Greek language. The approach within the Rum community of Istanbul has been to disregard these difficulties. This approach as it is very problematic is also a reflection of the “minorities within minorities” situation within the Greek Orthodox community; in this case through a linguistic cleavage. Both through the laws that regulate the minority schools in Turkey as these students are not allowed to have any education in Arabic and through the policies subjected by the Rums of Istanbul which make up in this case the majority, the Arab speaking Orthodox community feel restricted when it comes to exercising certain cultural and social rights.

When it comes to the issue of foundations, the frequency of elections in Rum foundations is rather low, especially when compared with the Armenian foundations. After the new regulation passed in September 2004 that urged the conduct of election in minority foundations, the elections in Rum foundations could be performed only after two years. In this picture, the Arab speaking community could only find a place after 10 years of presence inside the community. Last year, two Greek Orthodox citizens from Hatay were finally elected as committee members in two of the precincts. The participation of Greek Orthodox from Hatay in the foundation elections became a controversial issue. There were suspicions that Greek Orthodox from Hatay were brought to Istanbul just to vote and create leverage for Greek Orthodox from Hatay in the elections. Reportedly policemen visited their homes and asked them to present their IDs in order to prove that they were eligible to vote.¹⁷

¹⁷ “What is Democracy for the Rum Community?” *Agos Newspaper*, 30 May 2008.

Evident from these examples, the Rum community presses for the Hellenification of the Arab speaking Orthodox community and they are not ready just yet to accept them into their own group. Moreover, the oppressive treatment they are being subjected to cannot be criticized by anyone who witnesses these since the community lacks the checks and balances system that would help the Arab speaking Orthodox to find a way out. It is interesting at this point to find that the minority groups which strive for the values such as tolerance, democracy, equality and self-determination already lack these within their own community. In conclusion, although the concern for equality is a constitutive element of multiculturalism, it is surprising to find out that multicultural policy and practices promote inter-group equality but remain largely insensitive to demands for intra-group equality.¹⁸ Moreover, as evidenced above, since any initiative for change has been left to the communities themselves, this has disadvantaged the “minorities within minorities” even further.

¹⁸ Gurpreet Mahajan, “Can intra-group equality co-exist with cultural diversity?” in Avigail Eisenberg and Jeff Spinner-Halev (eds.), *Minorities within Minorities: Equality, Rights and Diversity* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.92.