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Preface on Minority Nationalities in the Balkans

Nicolas Trifon

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This is the Preface to *Small Peoples and Minority Nationalities in the Balkans* (« *Petits peuples* » et *minorités nationales des Balkans*), Les Cahiers du Courrier des Balkans n°6 (Arcueil, France)

Translated (using digital tools with manual checking) by Andrew McLaverty-Robinson. Nicolas Trifon was a French-based Romanian anarchist of part Aromanian ethnicity, who edited the anarchist journal *Izток* in 1989-91. He is known for his critiques of eastern European socialism, which he considered to be a form of state capitalism transitional between caste and class systems. (Translator's Introduction)

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In Southeast Europe, the landscape of minority nationalities is more varied and unexpected, more pleasant to contemplate and intellectually more stimulating than that of majority nationalities established as nations. The diversity of the constituent traits (reli-

gious, linguistic, social, professional, territorial, political...)¹ of minorities and the strong variation observed from one case to another are as disconcerting, especially at first, as they are fascinating, once one becomes more familiar with them. From this perspective, the range of populations discussed in this issue of *Courrier des Balkans* is revealing. Groups constituted as national majorities are more alike than these minority populations, which often owe their specific existence to the slow decline of the *Ancien Régime* of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empire, a situation more favourable to minorities than to nations. Each of these nations, all of relatively recent formation, has a glorious historical past, at least in the eyes of its members, an ethnogenesis as obscure as it is exhilarating, a language codified down to the smallest details, etc. If the data varies, the structure of the national narrative of the majority nationalities is of the same kind throughout the Balkans. It is precisely these strong similarities that make national ideologies incompatible.

The breakup of Yugoslavia created unusual situations whose complexity was not always fully grasped at the outset. The accession to independence of the former constituent republics of the Yugoslav Federation has significantly altered the situation of the minorities present on these regions (Serbs in Croatia, Hungarians and Croats in Vojvodina and the rest of Serbia, Albanians in Montenegro...), while in Kosovo the recent constitution of a former minority (within Serbia) into a nation has created a new national minority (the Kosovo Serbs) and puts the already existing minorities in Kosovo (Roma, Gorani, Croat, Bosnian...) in an uncomfortable situation. The materials gathered here provide an account, sometimes in detail, of the redistribution of power on the Balkan chessboard.

¹ Regarding the relationship between the political and the ethnic or national, here is the reaction of an anonymous internet user to the article "Greece is still afraid of its Macedonian minority": "I have a Greek communist uncle who fled Macedonia and took refuge in Skopje. The Greeks told him: 'You're no longer Greek!' and the Yugoslavs: 'You're Macedonian and you're changing your name!'"

While deploring the so-called ethnic tensions and ethnic conflicts, outside observers also have a tendency to deplore the preservation of the population diversity in this region, whose complex configuration, inherited from an even more complex history, fuels these tensions and makes these conflicts possible. In doing so, the observer effectively aligns themselves with the various Balkan majority nationalists. In the eyes of these nation-states, the presence on their territory of individuals who define themselves or can be defined as members of another nation, as well as the presence of their compatriots in neighboring nations, constitutes above all an anomaly that must be eliminated at any price. From this perspective, the Aromanians, who identify as such, distinct from the Albanian, Greek, Macedonian, and Slavic worlds in which they live, and from the more distant Romanians whose language belongs to the same linguistic family as theirs, appear to be an anomaly. However, upon closer examination, they are not alone in this situation, if one considers the Pomaks of Bulgaria and Greece, or the Gorani of North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania. We should also not lose sight of the fact that, while it remains common, the perception of minority realities in terms of anomaly or aberration is ultimately doomed by the prospect of European integration.

Two or three other things must also be taken into account regarding the issues addressed in this collection.

Minorities are not homogeneous, far from it, and not all of them aspire to become so. Some may be tempted by nationalism, of their own or other groups, if they think they can gain advantages from it; others indulge in nostalgia for political regimes of the past. The fact of having maintained themselves for centuries, for reasons that are not solely of their own will, does not protect them from rapid changes once confronted, in modernity, with new social and political situations. The precipitous decline in the number of members of some minority communities inside the region is not only due to pressure and power-plays by majority nations anxious to occupy the place taken today by minorities, but also to migratory move-

ments explained by the search for better living conditions. This is, for the case, for example, for the Saxons of Transylvania (Romania) and, on a completely different scale, for the Croats of Kosovo, discussed in this volume in the reports by Markus Tanner in Grossau and Laurent Geslin in Letnica.

Some readers will undoubtedly be surprised by the gap between the former communist countries and Greece regarding minority rights. In many respects, the communists who seized power after World War II introduced legislation respectful of minorities, even if their decisions were also dictated by political calculations. However, the rigidity of this legislation, the refusal to amend it, and above all, the rapid evolution from an initial position of communist internationalism to a focus on the defence of the Soviet Union, and then to a national communism promoted by people like Ceaucescu, Milosevic, and Hoxha, have hardly improved matters. Finally, the defeat of national-communism left a huge void, which has since been filled by romantic nationalism, to

use Marjola Rukaj's expression (in "The Serbs of Albania, Between Integration, Assimilation, and Identity Renewal"), which has wreaked the havoc we know of to this day.

Written in rather measured terms, sometimes demonstrating a subtle and understanding analysis of the often contradictory situations addressed, the texts that follow deal with the thorny problems, obstacles, and rejection faced by minorities in the Balkans. We cannot, however, leave it at that: these minorities, some of which were thought to have disappeared long ago, others considered destined to disappear due to the regional balance of power, still exist, make themselves heard, are defended, and are gaining ground... This process is new, and deserves to be welcomed. For its part, *Le Courrier des Balkans* is striving to participate in this awareness-raising movement by recounting the situation of minorities in southeastern Europe in the French-speaking world.

A specialist on the Aromanian question, Nicolas Trifon lives in Paris. He is best-known as the author of *The Aromanians: A People who are Leaving*, La Bussière, Editions Acratie, 2005.