

What was the “Macedonia is Greek” rally about?

Selling Out Human Rights for Votes

On 18/11/07, the Pan-Makedoniki association held a “Macedonia is Greek” rally in Melbourne, to pressure Labor and the Coalition into continuing to foster Greece’s persecution of indigenous Macedonians. Greek Australians who value the basic tenets of our multicultural society would not support the systematic repression of Greece’s many ethnic minorities and of Macedonians everywhere. If Labor and the Coalition are truly committed to encouraging freedom and democracy worldwide, they would respect the national name that the sovereign citizens of the Republic of Macedonia have determined for themselves.

Ever since it seized Southern Macedonia in the Balkan Wars of 1912/13, Greece has denied the right of indigenous Macedonians to maintain their language and ethnic identity. Greece implements a policy of forcefully assimilating or ‘cleansing’ ethnic minorities in order to create an ethnically homogeneous nation. The policy is based on 19th century nationalist doctrine that envisaged a Greater Greece, encompassing territories and people that were never previously part of Greece.

In modern Greece, peaceful Macedonians who identify as Macedonian, or speak Macedonian in public, face severe intimidation, discrimination, and violence by the state and by an aggressively nationalist society that is fostered by state institutions.

Macedonians are denied the freedom to study their own language, maintain and promulgate their culture, or to establish their own associations and religious parishes. Macedonians who have spoken out against this persecution have been exiled, harassed, and have had their properties confiscated.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to

National or Religious and Linguistic Minorities requires that:

... States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity. (Article 1 (1))

In a report entitled “Denying Ethnic Identity: The Macedonians of Greece”, Human Rights Watch-Helsinki found:

The Greek Government denies that a Macedonian minority exists in Greece. It refers to ethnic Macedonians as “Slavophones” or “Slav-Speakers”. The official Greek position is that the Greek state is ethnically homogeneous, the only exception being the Muslim minority in western Thrace-which is in reality a Turkish minority...

The Greek Government’s denial of the existence of the Macedonian minority violates international human rights agreements to which the Greek Government is a party. (Under international law), minority identity is a matter to be determined by the individual, and not by the state.

In June 2004 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance noted that persons (in Greece) wishing to express their Macedonian, Turkish or other identity incur the hostility of the population.

According to Greek author, Hercules Millas:

The basic belief which is impressed upon nine to twelve-year-old (Greek) pupils is that they belong to a superior nation. Such notions as equality among nations and peoples, or that civilization can derive from the interaction of different cultures, are not to be found in these (Greek) textbooks. (“His-

tory Textbooks in Greece and Turkey”, History Workshop Journal, 1991, p. 24; Also see Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, “Introduction: The ‘Turks’ in the Imagination of the ‘Greeks”, South European Society and Politics, Vol. 11, No. 1, March 2006, pp. 12-13).

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What is more important to Greek nationalists than respect for human rights is an obsessive desire to persuade everybody that “the real Macedonians” have been of Greek nationality or ethnicity since ancient times. The fact that ancient authors, including Polybius, Arrian, Plutarch, Pausanias, clearly identified the Macedonians as a separate, non-Greek people, does nothing to moderate their fanatical belief in this nationalist myth. Yet as recently as the 19th century the official view of Greek history was that “the population of the Greek Peninsula had been struggling for independence from foreign domination ever since the ancient Greeks had been conquered by the Macedonian armies in 338 BC” (Anna Triandafyllidou, “National Identity and the Other”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 4, July 1998, p. 605).

Greek American scholar Anastasia Karakasidou writes that to refer to nineteenth-century inhabitants of South-Western Macedonia as “Gre-

eks” or “Bulgarians” is to adopt national categories that were subsequently imposed on inhabitants of the area (Karakasidou, “Fields of Wheat, Hills of Blood: Passages to Nationhood in Greek Macedonia”, 1997). Her intellectual honesty was met with such overwhelming nationalist hysteria that Cambridge University Press, fearing for the safety of its staff in Greece, refused to publish her book.

Greece’s efforts to suppress the distinct Macedonian identity extend to Macedonians all over the world, including Australia. Since 1991, Greece has campaigned to block international recognition of its neighbour, the Republic of Macedonia, under the name chosen by its sovereign citizens. To appease the Greek Government and its international lobby, Australia has refused to recognise the independent Republic of Macedonia under its proper name, choosing instead to refer to it by the bizarre name ‘Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’. This is despite the fact that the majority of members of the United Nations (over 120 countries), including the USA, Russia, China and Canada, have now recognised the Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name.

The Australian Government’s failure to respect the right of Macedonians to self-identification affects over 80,000 Australians of Macedonian origin. When Macedonian Australians declare that they originate from Macedonia, Australian government departments register their country of origin as ‘Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’.

We know of no other state or Australian community whose national or ethnic identity has been denied or altered by the Government.

For many decades the Australian Government has failed to support the thousands of Australian citizens who have been denied entry or re-

entry into their ancestral Macedonian homeland - without any valid reason given by the Greek state. Australians who maintain their Macedonian ethnic identity have had their ancestral properties confiscated by the Greek state - without any valid reason. By failing to condemn this behaviour by the Greek state, the Australian Government is a silent accomplice to ethnic cleansing.

Greece’s attempts to suppress the Macedonian ethnic identity contravene European and international human rights standards. A multicultural society like Australia should be discouraging ethnocentric human rights violations, rather than reinforcing them with its own policy of denying Macedonians the right to self-identification.

As Australians, we must not remain indifferent while our politicians undermine fundamental human rights standards that Australia is a signatory to. In this particular case, their concessions cannot be even remotely justified by reference to competing rights or Australian national interests. The only benefits such political concessions provides are for opportunistic politicians seeking favour with a fanatical special interest group, which wants to legitimize racially repressive policies that are more severe than our abandoned ‘White Australia’ policy.

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