

TESTING MACEDONIA

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Introduction: The 2001 Crisis

In late February 2001, violence broke out in the village of Tanusevci, located on the northern border with Kosovo (and which served as a KLA base in 1999). This was not a chance incident but rather a deliberate attempt to bring violence to Macedonia by the so-called "National Liberation Army" (NLA). When fighting between the NLA and the Macedonian army spread the following month to Tetovo—the second largest city in the country located in the West with a clear ethnic Albanian majority—the worst fears of the international community concerning a new Balkan war seemed to be confirmed. The foreign media was quick to seize on a story, using extreme terms such as 'Balkan Ulster',³ much to the frustration of the majority population concerned about the image of their country known thus far as an 'Oasis of Peace'. On 21 March, the Macedonian government⁴ gave the NLA a 24-hour deadline to lay down arms or to leave the country. A full-scale military offensive launched on 25 March by the Macedonian army, aided by equipment sent in by foreign countries, succeeded in pushing the NLA fighters into Kosovo. This proved to be a short-lived victory. On 28 April, eight Macedonian soldiers and police officers were killed in an ambush while patrolling the border near Tetovo. A few days later, two more soldiers were killed, this time near Kumanovo in the north. The NLA, which claimed to have acted in self-defence, seemed to have succeeded in unleashing acts of inter-ethnic violence: the killings provoked a wave of vengeance attacks on 30 April and 1 May on stores owned by ethnic Albanians in the southern city

¹ The term "Macedonia" is used for practical reasons to denote this country, which was recognised by the international community as "former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia". The official name in use in the country itself is "Republic of Macedonia".

² The author is a Research Associate at the European Centre for Minority Issues in Flensburg, Germany. The author wishes to thank Prof. Dr. Stefan Troebst, Professor of East Central European Cultural Studies, University of Leipzig, and Florian Bieber, ECMI Regional Representative for Bosnia, for their helpful comments.

³ Tom Walker, "NATO Troops caught in a Balkan Ulster," *The Sunday Times*, 18 March 2001.

⁴ The current government, formed after the 1998 parliamentary elections, is a coalition between the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) of Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski, the small Liberal Party (LP) and the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA).

of Bitola (from which four of the victims originated). Further incidents were reported in other ethnically mixed cities, including the capital Skopje. The government reacted by imposing a curfew in Kumanovo, Bitola and Tetovo, started shelling NLA positions on the border near Kumanovo and Tetovo and was considering declaring a state of war on 8 May to have greater means of fighting back the NLA.

The position of the Macedonian government is that the NLA is a terrorist organization,⁵ that it is exogenous to Macedonia, and that this is therefore an imported crisis. Indeed, this new group which made its first official appearance in January 2001, has been linked to two militant organizations in neighbouring Kosovo—the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and a splinter group, the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Preshevës Medvegjës dhe Bujanocit*) (UÇPMB).⁶ However, the NLA also includes ethnic Albanians from Macedonia (who either previously fought with the KLA or have taken up arms recently to fight with the NLA).⁷

Impact on Inter-Ethnic Relations

In the aftermath of the crisis, inter-ethnic relations in the country have become even more tense, a situation which has been aggravated by incidents of hate speech in the local media (especially in the state-owned print media).⁸ On 29 April, the evening news in

⁵ The NLA is referred to as a terrorist organisation in the US State Department's Annual Report on Patterns of Global Terrorism for 2000 (released in April 2001) (see <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2000/>).

⁶ The Macedonian NLA and the Kosovar KLA have the same abbreviation in Albanian: UÇK (which stands for *Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare* in the case of the NLA and *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës* in the case of the KLA). For more on these various movements and inter-linkages, see Stefan Troebst, "Gross-Kosovo" (Greater Kosovo), paper given at the conference "Neuordnung von Staat und Nation in Jugoslawien" (Reformation of State and Nation in Yugoslavia) of the Task Force Jugoslawien of the Bertelsmann Foundation and the German Foreign Office, Berlin, 2 May 2001.

⁷ The Macedonian government maintains that the NLA is composed mainly of KLA fighters from Kosovo and that it enjoys little support among ethnic Albanians in Macedonia (although it admits that the NLA includes some ethnic Albanians from Macedonia who left for Kosovo to fight with the KLA and have now joined the NLA). The NLA fighters were pushed into Macedonia by the Yugoslav army when it sought to regain control of southern Serbia and the border region, in cooperation with international forces. The Macedonian government rejects reports that local ethnic Albanians from Macedonia have taken up arms to fight with the NLA while foreign observers and some ethnic Albanians in Macedonia maintain that the NLA now enjoys the support of many ethnic Albanians in Macedonia. The NLA itself claims that about 80% of its fighters are from Macedonia.

⁸ See Fabian Schmidt, "Hate Speech Poisons the Atmosphere", *RFE/RL Balkan Report* 5:23, 27 March 2001 (at: <http://www.rferl.org/balkan-report/2001/03/23-270301.html>). For a background on inter-ethnic relations, see Daftary, Farimah, "Inter-Ethnic Relations in the 'former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia' and the Role of the Local NGO Sector in Promoting Inter-Ethnic Communication," Report on a Fact-

Albanian on Macedonian TV and radio was suspended, allegedly because it was acting against state interests and as a factor of disintegration.⁹ According to the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights of the Republic of Macedonia (MHC),¹⁰ the recent events have resulted in the (ethnic) Macedonian population's increased sensitivity to the Albanian issue, resulting in overreactions, increased mistrust, and fear of secessionism.

If one wishes to counter the theory that conflict in Macedonia was inevitable, then why, one might ask, did a violent conflict eventually take place in Macedonia, and why now? One theory is that the ethnic Albanian community in Macedonia has become increasingly frustrated with the weakness of its political leaders who are not effectively representing their interests and concerns.¹¹ The commanders of the NLA, sidelined from politics in Kosovo,¹² might have calculated that this would be an opportune moment to capitalise on this dissatisfaction to try and open a front in Macedonia. This is a sort of delayed version of the "spillover theory", according to which inter-ethnic civil war would spill over into Macedonia from Kosovo (after all, war did not break out in Macedonia as a result of the Kosovo conflict nor of the ensuing wave of refugees in 1999). What has however happened has been a decision by an ethnic Albanian paramilitary organisation with roots

Finding Visit, 12-19 June 2000 (Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues, 12 July 2000) (at: <http://www.ecmi.de/publications/jemie/data/macedonia.html>).

⁹ The Albanian-language journalists insist that the general manager of Macedonian Radio and Television has been deliberately misinformed regarding the content of the Albanian-language news broadcast by those responsible for translating it into Macedonian (see daily briefing on the Macedonian crisis of 3 May 2001 by the Eurobalkan Institute, at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/balkanhr/message/2157>).

¹⁰ Cf. "Joint Statement by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights of the Republic of Macedonia and the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights," UN Commission for Human Rights, 57th Session, Item 14, Specific Groups and Individuals, (b) Minorities, Geneva, 12 April 2001 (at: <http://racocon.riga.lv/minelres/archive/04202001-10:09:35-41.html>).

¹¹ There are two ethnic Albanian parties in Macedonia: the DPA, which has been a member of the governing coalition since 1998, and the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), which was in government until 1998 and has become the more radical of the two since it has been in opposition; both parties are represented in Parliament. The DPA and PDP were joined in March 2001 by a third, rival ethnic Albanian party, the National Democratic Party (NDP), which advocates federalisation of the country

¹² According to Tim Judah, many of the members of the Popular Movement for Kosovo (LPK), a small party which was instrumental in setting up the KLA, were not Kosovar but Macedonian Albanians. While some opted for politics at the end of the war in Kosovo, others did not. These are people whom he calls "the losers of Kosovo politics" who have been agitating to begin a conflict in Macedonia. See Tim Judah, "A Greater Albania?", *The New York Review of Books* 48:8, 17 May 2001, pp. 35-37; see also Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000). Stefan Troebst has published a similar analysis in: Troebst, Stefan, "'Großalbanien', ein Trugbild. Die Teilgesellschaften in den verschiedenen Staaten haben sich ganz unterschiedlich entwickelt," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* no. 248, 25 October 2000, p.15 (see also footnote 17).

in both Kosovo and Macedonia to deliberately provoke clashes with the Macedonian army in the hope that this will in turn spark a conflict between the Macedonian authorities and the local Albanian minority.¹³ Why then did the NLA not act already in 1999, when Macedonia was struggling to deal with the influx of refugees and ethnic tensions were running high ? Explanation for the actual timing of the events of 2001 must be sought in a combination of factors, e.g. the influence of ethnic Albanian decision-makers in Kosovo, the tightening of control over the border region by KFOR and Yugoslav forces, as well as incursions by the Macedonian special forces into the border town of Tanusevci in March 2001. Incidents on the Kosovo-Macedonian border already in 2000 indicate that preparations for the NLA offensives in 2001 might have already begun one year earlier.

Another theory saw the growing inter-ethnic tensions between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians following Macedonian independence as a sign of a coming clash between the two groups. It seems however that, notwithstanding the diversity of interests within the ethnic Albanian community and the shared feeling of discrimination and second class status, a majority of its members wishes to continue living as citizens of the Republic of Macedonia for the political, economic and other advantages of being governed by Skopje have until now outweighed the numerous disadvantages of the risks of trying to change the territorial status quo.¹⁴

Regional Stability and the Role of the International Community

International observers had feared that, following the parliamentary elections of 22 April, Montenegro would secede from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), triggering renewed violence not only in Kosovo but also in Macedonia by the NLA seeking to put on the international agenda the question of the status of those parts of Western

¹³ There were two variants of the spillover scenario: the first one assumed that the Western and Northern portions of Macedonia would become the theatre of military operations by either the Albanian army or by paramilitary formations of Macedonian Albanians (or both) supporting Albanian insurgents in Kosovo, which could result in an armed incursion by Serbian troops. The second variant predicted that a wave of up to one million refugees from Kosovo could flood into Macedonia and destabilise the country. For a critique of the various scenarios of internal and external threat to the integrity of Macedonia, see Troebst, Stefan, "An Ethnic War That Did Not Take Place: Macedonia, Its Minorities and Its Neighbours in the 1990s", In: *War and Ethnicity: Global Connections and Local Violence*, David Turton, ed. (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997), pp. 77-103.

¹⁴ See Troebst, "An Ethnic War that Did Not Take Place," p.91.

Macedonia where ethnic Albanians form a majority.¹⁵ This alarmist "domino theory" seems unlikely at the moment, if only because the pro-independence "Victory for Montenegro" coalition led by President Milo Djukanovic obtained too narrow a victory to move ahead with a referendum as planned (he lacks an overall majority and the electorate seems to be evenly split over the question of independence). In addition, to compare the situation of Montenegro with that of Western Macedonia would mean drawing a parallel between two radically different situations: Montenegro is a well-defined territorial entity, a constituent republic of the FRY, whose right to self-determination was recognised by the Badinter Commission.¹⁶ Montenegro can also refer to a tradition of independent statehood. None of these factors apply to the case of Western Macedonia. Furthermore, it would be extremely difficult to delimit a viable, independent ethnic Albanian part of Western Macedonia without also including significant groups of persons belonging to other ethnic communities. While many ethnic Macedonians believe that the NLA is fighting for a "Greater Albania",¹⁷ support for a "Greater Albania" is probably actually quite low amongst the ethnic Albanian community of Macedonia (and elsewhere); even those who do support this idea are not necessarily ready to take up arms to fight for it. Calls have also been made for federalisation of the country; this is opposed by the DPA.

The international community was (surprisingly) quick and unified in condemning the actions of the NLA in February/March, calling for the resolution of ethnic Albanian claims through political dialogue, not violence. EU Foreign and Security Policy Advisor Javier Solana has made repeated trips to Skopje to encourage such a process. Unfortunately, talks between the main political parties failed to materialise for a long

¹⁵ The question of independence for Western Macedonia has not been directly raised by the NLA thus far. The NLA's official claims resemble those of the ethnic Albanian political parties, i.e. equal job opportunities in state institutions and administration for ethnic Albanians, recognition as an equal constituent people in the Macedonian Constitution, and that Albanian be made an official language. It has called for being included in talks with the Macedonian authorities over these issues.

¹⁶ The "Badinter Commission" was a group of European jurists (headed by the president of the French Constitutional Court Robert Badinter) set up by the European Council to arbitrate disputes and establish criteria for the recognition of new states in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. See the *Declaration on the Guidelines on the Recognition of New States in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union*, 16 December 1991, *Declaration on Yugoslavia*, Extraordinary EPC Ministerial Meeting, Brussels, 16 December 1991, and *Interlocutory Decision (Opinions no. 8, 9 and 10)*, available in *The European Journal of International Law* 4:1 (1993) at: <http://www.ejil.org/journal/Vol4/No1>.

time and the opposition ethnic Albanian Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP) even suspended all relations with the government in protest against the arrest of numerous suspected NLA fighters. DPA leader Arben Xhaferi condemned the outbreak of violence and affirmed that his party would remain in the governing coalition. He did, however, also criticise the arrests which he feared would trigger further violence, advocating a soft approach (amnesty and talks) towards the NLA instead.¹⁸ Renewed violence in April/May was justified by the NLA by the slow pace of political talks on the improvement of the rights of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia. It was only because of an emergency trip to Skopje by Javier Solana on 6 May, who was joined the following day by NATO Secretary-General George Robertson, that the Macedonian government was discouraged from declaring a state of war. The international community feared that this would prompt the departure of the DPA from the governing coalition and further polarise the situation. Large-scale military action also risks producing human casualties and a refugee crisis, almost certainly leading to increased local support for the NLA. The international community at the same time seems to have acknowledged its share of responsibility for the crisis, having failed to effectively seal the border between Macedonia and Kosovo.

A positive side-effect of the violence has been the increase in various forms of international assistance to Macedonia. There has also been international aid targeted at the Albanian community, including \$4.5 million for the new Southeast European University in Tetovo. Following the visit of Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski to Washington, D.C., on 1 May, the US announced an increase in technical-military and economic aid to Macedonia. A symbolic and significant step was taken on 9 April when a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) was signed with Macedonia.¹⁹ However, one should question whether the international community is not sending out an

¹⁷ "Greater Albania" refers to territories inhabited by ethnic Albanians, i.e. Albania itself, Kosovo, parts of southern Serbia (Presevo valley), as well as Western Macedonia (for references, see footnote 12).

¹⁸ "Macedonia: Arrests and Accusations," *RFE/RL Balkan Report* 5:26, 10 April 2001 (at: <http://www.rferl.org/balkan-report/2001/04/26-100401.html>).

¹⁹ The Stabilisation and Association Process was initiated by the EU during the NATO campaign in Kosovo as an upgrading of the EU's previous Regional Approach to Southeastern Europe. The SAAs are at the center of this process, the first of which was signed with Macedonia. Further SAAs are being negotiated with Croatia, Albania and soon Bosnia. The status of the FRY is unclear.

ambiguous message to other crisis regions for one might deduce that the outbreak of violence rather than preventive measures brings quick gains. Furthermore, as the crisis has had very severe consequences on the economy, this aid might not result in significant improvements in a country where the unemployment rate is around 30%.

While on the one hand, the quick and unified response of the international community to the crisis should be acknowledged, it can also be criticised for conducting 'panic diplomacy' and for seeking to preserve the status quo in the region rather than working towards resolving uncertainty and coming up with a concerted policy on Southeast Europe. For example, the EU has strongly cautioned Montenegro against holding a referendum on independence at what it perceives to be a critical moment.²⁰ The process of negotiating a new relationship between Montenegro and Serbia is likely to be very difficult, further contributing to a climate of uncertainty in the region. What should therefore be a greater source of concern to the international community is disagreement within Montenegro, between those in favour of independence and those against. It is the unresolved question of the future status of Kosovo and, arguably, uncertainty regarding the future relationship between Belgrade and Podgorica, which risk having a negative impact on inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia and regional stability in general.²¹ This is why the international community should focus on presenting constructive proposals and on encouraging political dialogue on unresolved issues rather than telling states what they should not be doing. This is an important opportunity for the EU to show that it can deal with foreign policy problems on its own, without assistance from the US.

From Bi-culturalism to Multiculturalism?

Inter-ethnic relations have not been a priority of the Macedonian government, although its efforts to cooperate with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities to resolve the question of higher-language education in Albanian should be recognised. The

²⁰ "EU Warns Montenegro Against Independence," *RFE/RL Newslines*, 25 April 2001; see also *RFE/RL Newslines*, "End Note," 23 April 2001.

²¹ See: *The Macedonian Question: Reform or Rebellion*, ICG Balkans Report no. 109 (Skopje/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 5 April 2001, at: <http://www.crisisweb.org>). See also *After Milosevic: A Practical Agenda for Lasting Balkans Peace*, ICG Balkans Report no. 108 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 26 April 2001, at: <http://www.crisisweb.org>).

MHC has repeatedly drawn attention to the ethnocentric orientation of education, deploring that this area has become an ethnic battleground rather than an integrative matter. There are many other problem areas which must be resolved, preferably at the local level, for example concerning the use of minority languages. Decentralisation and dialogue at the local level are the key to addressing issues affecting inter-ethnic relations. Talks at the level of the political elite are not sufficient, especially given that the general population's trust in its politicians has increasingly eroded, due to corruption scandals and their inability to deal with crisis situations. Divergences of positions should also be allowed for within each ethnic community, rather than expecting a homogenous stance. Two more important issues which need to be resolved if a significant improvement in inter-ethnic relations is to be achieved will be highlighted below.

The unclear formulation in the preamble of the Constitution, which combines the ethnic and civic conceptions of the Macedonian state, does not help create a positive context for dialogue. However, to recognise ethnic Albanians as a second constituent people risks to further accentuate tensions by scoring a point for ethnic politics and causing the dissatisfaction of some of the other ethnic communities (Roma, Turks, Serbs and the Vlachs).²² Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski is clearly not too keen on revising the Constitution; rather, he prefers to talk about individual rights, emphasising that the priority at the moment is economic, social and other reform. As it seems improbable that the issue of the preamble of the Constitution will be laid to rest, what should be discussed is a formulation clearly stating that the Republic of Macedonia is a state for all of its citizens, regardless of ethnic, religious or linguistic origin. The reality, however, is that it will take some time before such a civic society can be developed. In the meantime, the minority approach can not be abandoned.

The upcoming population census (which was supposed to have been held from 15-30 May 2001 but has been postponed to October due to the crisis) will hopefully settle

²² Ethnic Albanians are dissatisfied with the preamble of the Constitution which states that "Macedonia is established as a national state of the Macedonian people, in which full equality as citizens and permanent co-existence with the Macedonian people is provided for Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Romanics and other

another sensitive issue: that of the size of the various ethnic communities. It is therefore crucial that it is carefully prepared and carried out, under the supervision of international observers, and that it is not boycotted by any segment of the population. The census should also be conducted, as far as possible, with the participation of members of the minority communities in the census commissions, and it should count all those who have chosen to make Macedonia their home.²³ The two ethnic Albanian parties have insisted that census questionnaires be printed in the minority languages. This, too, is controversial for the Macedonian Constitutional Court ruled on 25 January 1995 to revoke Article 35 of the previous census law which allowed for questionnaires to be filled out in the minority language, arguing that this amounted to granting minorities official use of their language nationwide and not only in self-government units (the latter right is recognised).²⁴ According to the new law, census forms will be printed in the Macedonian language in Cyrillic, but the State Census Commission is willing to give each census-taker a copy of the questionnaire in the language of the nationalities (minority languages). It is also envisaged to have an interpreter to help fill out the forms. The upcoming census has a particular significance for ethnic Albanians: they hope that official statistics will be adjusted to state that they constitute up to 35% of the total population of about 2 million, rather than 23% according to 1994 figures.²⁵ Other minority communities, especially the Roma, should also be made aware of the importance of an accurate census.

Conclusion

The Macedonian state is being tested from all sides: by the NLA which is waging guerrilla warfare, by the ethnic Albanians who are presenting great demands, and by the international community which is exercising pressure on it to address ethnic Albanian

nationalities living in the Republic of Macedonia..." (Preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, promulgated on 6 January 1992) (at: <http://www.soros.org.mk/mk/en/const.htm>).

²³ The UNHCR and the Council of Europe have called for cutting down the residence requirement for Macedonian citizenship from 15 to 10 years in the citizenship law in order to regularise the situation of refugees (from Kosovo, Bosnia and other parts of the former Yugoslavia principally).

²⁴ For more on the current census debate, see "A Lesson in Political Mathematics," *AIM Skopje*, 20 April 2001 (at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/balkanhr/message/2102>).

²⁵ Discrepancies are due to the difference between the total number of ethnic Albanians living in the country and those with legal residence. There is also a debate on how to count the ethnic Albanian diaspora. The ethnic Albanian parties in Macedonia want all ethnic Albanians who have lived abroad for more than one year to be counted; the UN, however, recommends setting a one year cut-off point to minimise the risk of counting the same person twice.

grievances. But the Macedonian population, too, is being tested on its ability to resist provocation to engage in acts of inter-ethnic hatred; it must therefore demonstrate that the claim to being a model of peaceful inter-ethnic relations is well deserved. At the time of writing, a state of war has been averted. Furthermore, on 14 May, after lengthy negotiations, a new "government of national unity" faced its first day of work. The idea to form a broad coalition was set forth in March 2001 as a means of addressing the crisis with the participation of all political parties with representation in Parliament. However, there were many issues to be resolved between the two main (ethnic) Macedonian parties, the VMRO-DPMNE and the opposition Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (SDSM), especially over the issue of early elections and distribution of ministry seats. Negotiations with the PDP were also tough (the PDP was demanding a ceasefire against the NLA before joining the coalition but it was more probably weighing the losses in NLA-sympathiser votes that it might incur by joining the government). While the support of the ethnic Albanian community of Macedonia for the violent tactics of the NLA seems to be quite low still, all will depend on whether the politicians will manage to put personal interests aside and reach an agreement as to how to address their grievances. It would be dangerous on the part of the Macedonian government to underestimate the readiness of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia to take up arms.

What is also needed, in addition to high-level political dialogue, is a broad civic debate at the intermediate and grassroots level. Already, many initiatives have been launched to establish roundtables on inter-ethnic relations involving political leaders, minority representatives, experts, civil society, etc. In order to create the right conditions for genuine dialogue, what is needed is a common civic framework for resolving the question of inter-ethnic relations. The MHC calls for a citizen's approach as well as adherence to multiculturalism rather than bi-culturalism which would allow for identification with more than one ethnicity. The urgency of such a broad dialogue on legislative reform, decentralisation and other issues is evident for what is at stake is stability as well as long-term prospects for majority-minority accommodation not only in Macedonia but also in the whole of Southeast Europe. It is unfortunate that violence was needed to place the issue of inter-ethnic relations at the top of the Macedonian political agenda.