

II. Ethnic Serbs in Macedonia, 1991-1999: From Unstable Peace to Uneasy Settlements

Background Conditions

From ancient times until the end of the Greek civil war in 1949, the area known as Macedonia was the field of recurring conquests, insurgencies, or terrorism sponsored by waxing and waning empires and neighboring states emerging out of the Ottoman Empire. Current Macedonia's first historical identity was as part of the much larger Kingdom of Macedonia believed to have been established in the 6th Century B.C. and expanded by Alexander the Great in the 4th Century B.C. For centuries thereafter, the territory known as Macedonia comprised a southern area now in Greece, slavic Vardar Macedonia to the north, and eastern Pirin Macedonia within present-day Bulgaria. This area was taken over by the Roman Empire in 168 B.C., invaded by the Slavs in the 4th Century, captured by the Bulgars in the 9th, mostly absorbed into the Byzantine Empire in 1018, controlled by the Serb tsarist empire in the early 14th Century, and conquered by the Ottoman Empire in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. The Ottoman Turks retained control until the early twentieth century.

A distinctly indigenous Macedonian national consciousness did not arise until intellectuals from the area began to articulate the notion of a distinct local culture in the late nineteenth century. In 1893, a local political movement called the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), fought for Macedonia's independence from the Ottoman Empire. This movement established a short-lived Republic of Krusevo in Macedonia, but within weeks, their nationalist Ilinden Uprising in 1903 was quashed brutally by the Turks.

As the Ottoman Empire declined, the ascendant Balkan states Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece supported guerrilla activity against the Turks on behalf of their respective nationalist causes, with several alliances shifting among them. In the First Balkan war of 1912, they expelled the Turks, agreed to divide the area, and granted independence to

Albania. Serbia was ceded the area comprising present-day Macedonia, but this was challenged in the Second Balkan War of 1913, when Bulgaria tried to annex the Serbian portion. Its defeat led to repartition of the larger area among Greece and Serbia, with a smaller eastern portion going to Bulgaria. As a result of World War I, the area of present-day Macedonia was placed under the Kingdom of Croats, Serbs and Slovenes, in which it was called South Serbia.

Only when the Comintern created the Macedonian communist party within the Communist Balkan Federation in 1924 did the current boundaries begin to be regarded as a particular political jurisdiction. Yet during World War II, the Nazis captured Macedonia from Yugoslavia and gave its control to Bulgaria.

Course of the Conflict

Pre-Existing Order

It was not until 1944 when Tito declared the existence of a "People's Republic of Macedonia," did the area first achieve some political and legal foundation. This action was taken in response to the demands of the increasingly self-conscious group of communists within the partisan movement who came from the Vardar area. It reduced Serbia's size, but retained control of Macedonia for Federal Yugoslavia against Bulgarian and Greek interests. In 1946, the area became an autonomous republic with its own constitution within the new Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). To link Yugoslavia while curtailing the Serbs' hegemony, who were sixty percent of the population, Tito granted more cultural autonomy and political authority to all the republics, including Macedonia. Though that republic encompassed Albanians, Turks, and other groups, it was more tightly tied to the ethnic Macedonian majority, who were Orthodox, when Tito in 1967 revived an ancient bishopric that had existed at the southern city of Ohrid. This made the Macedonian Orthodox Church autocephalous. The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution bestowed yet more financial, judicial, and educational autonomy to the republics, and granted them authority over their own defense forces.

Unstable Peace

The collapse of communism was accompanied by economic decline throughout Yugoslavia, resulting in discontent directed toward the Federal government where Serbs were gaining greater influence. But Macedonia did not experience the same level of resentment toward the Serbs as was felt in the other republics. Most ethnic Macedonians at that time were pro-federation and shared with Serbia a wariness toward the intentions of the ethnic Albanians who lived on both sides of their common border. Indeed, their first free parliamentary elections in November 1990 heard both Macedonian communists and nationalists approve of Albanian harassment, so the Albanians boycotted the election. Additionally, like Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia was a poor republic that was heavily dependent on the federal redistributive policies coming from Belgrade, so President Kiro Gligorov was not inclined to secede.

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In June, 1991, Gligorov proposed a loose confederal Yugoslavia, but by that time, Yugoslavia's *de facto* dissolution was proceeding through armed hostilities between Slovenia and Croatia, on the one hand, and the federal government in Belgrade, on the other. As a result, Macedonian leaders concluded they, too, must secede lest the Macedonians be left as a minority in a Serb-dominated rump Yugoslavia. In September, the government held a referendum in which 95% of the 72% eligible voters, including ethnic Macedonians living abroad, approved independence. Although the republic's Albanians as well as Serbs boycotted the referendum, the government declared sovereignty in November, held its first multi-party elections, and requested EC recognition and United Nations (UN) membership.

When Macedonia severed its ties to Yugoslavia, the potential for violent conflict increased not only with its former federal government, but several other fronts as well. This stemmed from its political identity being largely undefined in a new and uncertain environment of revived and contending nationalisms. Independence Day September 8,

1991 was a political apotheosis for Macedonian nationalists, culminating their own particular search for a sovereign state. But the fact that Macedonia had never before had its own exclusive government created considerable uneasiness. The Serbian, Albanian, as well as Bulgarian nationalisms that were also active in the region could upset the new country's uneasy internal ethnic relations and/or invite intrusions from a neighboring state. As a pretense for aggressive actions against Macedonia, some of these nationalist movements could cite a past era when their ancestors had founded a political entity in the larger Macedonia region, and they could point to historical moments when opposed groups or states suppressed their cultural distinctiveness. Thus, the basic threat to Macedonian stability was not internal ideological, economic, or even cultural cleavages, but a more immediate matter of its future political control. How would a free-standing Macedonian state, in which about 64% of the population was ethnic Macedonian, relate to and integrate the several other ethnic groups living within and across its borders? Three other Yugoslav republics were finding they could not reconcile the same kind of pressures, short of going to war.

Although Macedonia thus faced threats on several sides, the most pressing question was how a contracted Yugoslavia, dominated by the Serbs, would react to Macedonia's independence. The Serbian political elite led by President Slobodan Milosevic had already been forced by Slovenia's break-away to give up trying to restructure the emerging post-communist Yugoslavia under Serbian hegemony. But another "Greater Serbia" vision, promoted by radical Serbian nationalists, favored uniting those areas inhabited by self-declared ethnic Serbs, such as the Krajina in Croatia, together with areas like Kosovo and Macedonia that had few Serbs but were regarded as part of Serbia historically. The leader of the Serb Radical Party, Vojislav Seselj, said in 1991, "Three states will come out of Yugoslavia, -- -Greater Serbia, Small Croatia, and even smaller Slovenia...And Macedonia has always been the Serb territory..Macedonians, Moslems, and Montenegrins are fictitious nations." Many Serbians referred to Macedonia by its

interwar name, South Serbia, and still viewed Macedonians as having no distinct identity and their language as Bulgarian. The Serbian Church had never recognized the Macedonian Church.

Yet in late 1991 and early 1992, despite increasing ethnic consciousness on both sides and the potential for tensions right after independence, no hostilities between Macedonia and Serbia broke out. Pursuing a policy it called "active neutrality," the Macedonian government pledged friendly relations with all neighbors. After parliament voted that the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav army (JNA) should leave, Gligorov negotiated an agreement that removed it by April.

But this peaceful departure was mainly possible only because Milosevic could not afford to keep troops both in Macedonia and fight the Bosnian war. He also reasoned that, left economically dependent and exposed to the depredations of what were known as the "three wolves" (Albania, Bulgaria, and Greece), Macedonia would crawl back to Serbian protection. This view was later reinforced by the collateral effects of the economic sanctions against the FRY of November 1991 and May 1992. Hence, although there appeared to be no immediate threat, because the JNA took every weapon and piece of equipment it could carry and destroyed the rest, the new Macedonian state was defenseless. The negotiated pullout left Macedonia vulnerable in the face of possible Serb aggression, such as upon conclusion of the war in Bosnia. Also, Macedonia's efforts to be recognized by the U.S. and the EU and others as a sovereign state and thus deserving the protection called for under the UN Charter had been thwarted by the Greek government.

Consequently, as soon as mid-1992, Macedonia and members of the international community began to fear that the war between Serbians and the Bosnian government might "spill over" into Macedonia. This might take the form of a direct Serbian attack on Macedonia, or intensified repression by the Belgrade government of the Albanian majority in Kosovo, a previously autonomous area in Serbia that borders Macedonia.

The latter could incite nearby Albania to come to their brothers in arms and/or a Kosovar uprising that could spur a large influx of refugees into Macedonia. Either event might unsettle the internal ethnic balance and destabilize the part-Albanian and fragile coalition government of the newly-independent, multiethnic and fledgling democracy.

Its disintegration could also occur through subversion from the North. Ethnic Serbs in Macedonia were only two percent of the population and Milosevic had not claimed they were threatened as he had regarding the Serbs in Kosovo and Bosnia. Yet, the radical Serbian nationalist Vojislav Seselj looked to exploit the discontent of Macedonia's Serbs, and Serbian elements are believed to have assisted cells of Serbian nationalists in Macedonia.

In short, although independence had provoked no immediate adverse reaction from Serbia, the longer the Bosnian war continued, Macedonia increasingly worried that changes in the Serbs' fortune might prompt them to recapture Macedonia or cause it to fall apart from within.

The war in Bosnia thus focused the attention of U.S. and other governments to some extent on the wider region as well. In the fall 1992 they initiated several explicitly preventive initiatives. In late summer 1992, President Gligorov requested international observers to monitor the border with Serbia. In early fall, President Bush urged the Committee for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) to place observer missions in Macedonia, Kosovo, and other still peaceful areas of rump Yugoslavia. The idea was to discourage the aggravation of ethnic tensions and to alert the international community to the earliest signs of conflict. The CSCE Council of Ministers (CoM) authorized the CSCE Spillover Monitoring Mission for Macedonia in September and gave it the job of monitoring the northern border. Its officials periodically visited Macedonia's leaders and neighboring capitals, including Belgrade, and paid visits where border incidents occurred, ensuring that their presence was known to local and international media.

Visiting UN headquarters in early November, Gligorov also requested the deployment of a United Nations peacekeeping force to monitor the border. The co-chairs of the Steering Committee of the ICFY, Lord David Owen and Thorward Stoltenberg, suggested a fact-finding team be sent. In accordance with the team's recommendations, UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali proposed the deployment of a battalion of approximately 700 men as an extension of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Croatia. Resolution 795 passed the Security Council with no opposition in December. The world's first multilateral preventive deployment was put in place in January, 1993, composed of 500 Canadians, who were replaced in February by 700 Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish troops. The force was organized into a separate command from UNPROFOR, with the name, United Nations Preventive Deployment Force (UNPREDEP) in March, 1995. By far the largest international mission in the country, the military contingent was 1,050-persons strong at its height in 1996, having been supplemented by U.S. troops in 1993.

The deployment's mandate was to patrol the Macedonian side of the 240 kilometer-long Serbian and 180 km Albanian border, monitor and report developments that could threaten Macedonia, and "by its presence, deter such threats from any source, as well as help prevent clashes which could otherwise occur between external elements and Macedonian forces, thus helping to strengthen security and confidence in Macedonia." Troops were positioned at a string of temporary observation posts, from which small patrols are sent out. The instructions to post commanders were to report the occurrence of specified threatening events, but retreat from any significant attack, returning fire only in self-defense. Border patrols approached intruders in non-threatening ways to inform them of the administrative line and request their return, which

in most instances has occurred. The mission's civilian police supervised Macedonian police and civil authorities in border areas with large proportions of Serbs and Albanian minorities.

Although the deployment of the OSCE mission UNPREDEP prevented the unstable relations between Serbia and Macedonia from developing into a crisis that could escalating into violence, it did not succeed in stabilizing them entirely. As the war continued, there were further grounds for believing that changes in the Serbs' fortune might prompt them to recapture Macedonia or help it fall apart from within. FRY had not recognized the new state or agreed to an international border in place of the internal boundary. As late as 1994, Macedonia was still viewed in Belgrade as a seceding republic whose departure led it to economic disaster and to the risk of disintegration, due to the pressures from Albania and Bulgaria and the internal plotting of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia. Public comments by Serb leadership, combined with the fact that the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) had not recognized Macedonia or agreed to an official international border in place of the internal boundary, exacerbated Macedonia's fears. In November 1993, for example, in a press conference with Greek Foreign Minister Michael Papaconstantinou, Milosevic referred to Macedonia in tenuous terms and spoke of a confederation with Greece. As late as 1994, Macedonia was apparently still viewed in Belgrade as a secessionist republic whose departure led it to economic disaster and to the risk of disintegration, due to both internal and external pressures. The pro-regime Belgrade press and Serbian ultra-nationalists continued to see "South Serbia" as going through a trying transition on the way to eventual reunion. After the 1994 census, the Serbian press rejected the results by claiming Macedonia actually had ten

times the number of Serbs recorded. Many Serbians still viewed Macedonians as having no distinct identity and their language as Bulgarian. Furthermore, the Serbian Church never recognized the Macedonian Orthodox archbishopric granted by Tito in 1967.

Despite the presence of a deterrent force, the behavior of Serbian border troops seemed to corroborate the notion of persisting Serbian designs on Macedonia. Small contingents of Serb forces would periodically penetrate the border, occupy a place for hours or days, and eventually retreat, but only after tensions sometimes arose and negotiations were required. In one instance, in June 1994, Serbian soldiers took over for several weeks a mountaintop in the northeast known as Hill 1703, which has an especially strategic vantage on Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria. Macedonia troops gathered in the area, but for awhile, the Serbs refused to leave or negotiate. Although the evidence is ambiguous as to whether or not the Serbs intended or were able to engage in more aggressive actions, clearly, Serb forces were at least testing the Macedonian government and the international peacekeeping force.

Conflict Abatement and Settlement

Although the Macedonia-FRY relationship remained uncertain and unstable from 1992 through 1995, it never reached the level of high tensions, low level violence, or open war. Aside from occasional border infractions, there were few instances of overt hostilities or even confrontation. Independence and the withdrawal of the JNA were negotiated bilaterally, yet deeper relations were not established because of the pressures of nationalists in Belgrade and pre-occupation with the Bosnia war. But neither did it enter anything like peaceful conflict through institutionalized bargaining and formal bilateral diplomacy.

Then, following the Bosnian war Macedonian-FRY relations began to reflect more normal inter-state relations, at least minimally. Following the signing of the Dayton Accords in 1995, the FRY recognized Macedonia and economic traffic was fully restored. The border issue was taken up by the Macedonian-FRY border commission, although it has proceeded very slowly because of Serb delays **so an agreed boundary remains undecided. Macedonia was admitted to the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the Partnership for Peace, and began receiving IMF and World Bank loans.**

The seemingly explosive situation in the Kosovo area added another pressure on Macedonia's territorial integrity and internal stability. The growing confrontation between Serbians and Albanians, particularly since the late 1980's (see the following narrative) potentially affected Macedonia because under Yugoslavia, Kosovo Albanians were tied through family, economics, and frequent travel to those in Macedonia. Many highly educated Albanians studied at Kosovo's Prishtina University. Were tensions to rise further there, masses of Albanian refugees might push into Macedonia and upset the ethnic Macedonian-Albanian balance. Thus, Kosovo's brethren Albanians in Macedonia and Albania might move through Macedonia against Serbia, possibly causing Serbia to attack.

Unstable Peace II

The escalation to civil war in Kosovo in 1998 increased the potential for destabilizing Macedonia that have been presented by Serbis directly and indirectly. For

one thing, Macedonia has been put increasingly in the position of being an antagonist toward the rump Yugoslavia that is associated with the NATO policies. After the Macedonian government chose to recognise Taiwan as a sovereign state, having been offered economic aid, China vetoed the UN Security Council decision to renew the mandate of UNPREDEP when it came up for renewal in late 1998. The mission was thus terminated, but in its stead, troops from the NATO alliance replaced those from UNPREDEP who had been patrolling its borders. After the bombing of Serbia commenced in March, 1999, Serb troops captured three US soldiers along the border and are holding them as prisoners of war. Since then, more NATO have arrived. Demonstrations against the NATO presence have apparently been attended by ethnic Macedonians as well as Serbs.

Second, Macedonia's necessary reception of large numbers of Albanian refugees escaping the Kosovo conflict has not only placed on it a significant financial and logistical burden, but threatened to provoke its fragile internal ethnic Macedonian-Albanian modus vivendi. Macedonian farmers protested violently against the use of their land for refugee camps, for example, and the forced nighttime expulsion of thousands of refugees from the temporary Blace camp and their deportation to other countries not only took the international humanitarian organizations by surprise, it threatened to provoke reactions from the Albanian citizens in Macedonia and their leaders in the government coalition. As a result, although NATO has pledged protection of Macedonia from external attack, that war may yet undo the value of the preventive measures that have been taken quite deliberately and been moderately successful so far, due to its weight on the domestic political fabric on which Macedonia's survival as a state has relied.

Selected Sources

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