

THE ALBANIAN QUESTION

Macedonia at the crossroads

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Introduction

Early in 2001, a number of apparently small, armed Albanian groups emerged in the mainly Albanian-populated region of northern Macedonia adjacent to the country's border with Kosovo and engaged in skirmishes with the thin on the ground Macedonian security forces. After over a decade of relative peace and bloodless transition of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to independent statehood, the events in the northern region of this rather small country startled both the Macedonian public and some quarters of the international community but were quickly dismissed as nothing more than localized and short-lived incidents.

A month later, in mid-March, the spread of the violence to Macedonia's second largest city, Tetovo, and its rapid escalation came to prove that the country was facing one of its major challenges in its short history of independence. Tetovo, a town in the heart of Macedonia's Albanian-populated north-western region looked and felt a city under siege. The Albanian insurgency was no longer a remote news story but a tangible and visible event unfolding in front of the eyes of ordinary Macedonians and the world. What is more, such a tremendous coup on the part of the Albanian insurgents constituted a serious blow to the authority and legitimacy of the Macedonian government which seemed not to be in a position to restore control over a significant part of its territory and radicalized ethnic Albanian opinion.

The insurgents claimed to be expressing the legitimate demands of the sizeable community of Macedonian Albanians and to be the champions of Albanian national rights in Macedonia. In a discourse combining elements of nationalist and irredentist rhetoric¹ and the idiom of civil rights and equality, the self-proclaimed National Liberation Army (NLA) claimed that it had more

¹ Fazli Veliju, one of the main spokespersons and leading personalities of the NLA living in Switzerland employed the rhetoric of Albanian nationalism in the summer of 2001, at a time when the NLA was reassuring its interlocutors inside and outside Macedonia of its emphasis on constitutional reform and civil rights: 'We Albanians are in such a danger as a nation that the individual is of little importance. The nation is more important than the individual', in B. Odehnal, 'Macedoine. Le fondateur del'UÇK et de l'ONA, Fazli Veliju, declare: La guerre devrait durer encore une année', *Le Courrier des Balkans*, 3 July 2001, <<http://balkans.eu.org/pipermail/courrier-balkans/>> (my translation).

or less earned a position at the future negotiating table over the future shape of Macedonia and called on the Skopje government to accept this new reality. The ideology of the NLA and the motivations underpinning the insurgence have been marked by the legitimization of Albanian irredentism and nationalism as a counterweight to the civil rights deficit that Macedonian Albanians have been experiencing.

On the other hand, the Macedonian coalition government reacted to this challenge by attempting to delegitimize the NLA. It argued that, contrary to insurgent claims that their forces had been recruited from among the local Albanian population and were rapidly increasing in size, the crisis was an export from Kosovo, sustained by the illegal activities of a few hundred 'terrorists'.² What is more, having got conditional international backing, it embarked on a massive and decisive offensive on 25 March 2001 that managed to contain the Albanian insurgent forces in a small part of Macedonian territory along the border with Kosovo. However, the armed confrontation was not contained for long as Albanian forces eventually emerged in different parts of the country, besieged the town of Kumanovo in the north-east and cut off its water supply while, in the early summer, entered virtually unopposed the village/suburb of Aracinovo, overlooking and within shelling distance of Skopje international airport.

Macedonian responses to the crisis

The Kumanovo crisis had already given rise to a sense of profound uncertainty among ethnic Macedonians who saw a militant armed Albanian movement growing strong and taking control of part of the territory of their country. Official discourse kept responding to the unfolding events by branding the insurgents as 'bands of terrorists' and representing the crisis as an imported one. This process of 'externalization' of the crisis and representation of the NLA as an 'invading' force and of treating the situation on the ground as effective 'occupation' of the territory of the Republic of Macedonia, although not totally unfounded, has clearly hindered open public debate on the nature of the Macedonian state and the relationship between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority. What is more, the Aracinovo incident brought home to the Macedonian public the ability of the insurgents to move undetected and unopposed in Albanian-inhabited areas of Macedonia and of bringing the conflict to the country's capital itself and shocked ethnic Macedonian public opinion thus giving nationalist circles within and outside the government the opportunity to capitalize on the prevalent sense of insecurity and to force their agenda into the universe of public discourse.

This change in Macedonian public mood and political debate was very starkly exemplified by the transformation of Macedonia's Prime Minister and leader of one of Macedonia's largest political parties, VMRO-DPMNE, Ljubco

²[T]his was a long planned aggression of Kosovo towards Macedonia ... You can convince no one in Macedonia that the U.S. and German governments are unfamiliar with the identity of chiefs of rebel gangs invading Macedonia today and that had they implemented a much stricter policy, the aggression of these gangs against our country would have been thwarted' (Macedonian Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski's address to the nation, 20 March 2001).

Georgievski, from a moderate and pragmatic leader who compromised his nationalist principles for the sake of political stability, into an intransigent exponent of a military solution to the crisis. Although Georgievski's VMRO-DPMNE was returned as the largest party in the November 1998 parliamentary election, partly due to the support of its nationalist constituency, its leader showed remarkable pragmatism and moderation by inviting Arben Xhaferi's Democratic Party of Albanians (PDA) to join the government and reassuring Albanians of his commitment to a multiethnic Macedonia.

However, the architect of Macedonia's coalition government after the November 1998 election, often accused of having entered into a 'sinister' alliance with the PDA, has become one of the most outspoken proponents of a military solution to Macedonia's political crisis and has called for an official declaration of a state of war by the Macedonian parliament. As it is widely recognized that the 'country's armed forces are incapable of decisive victory against a force of mountain partisans'³ the rationale behind such a position is definitely much more complex. One way to explain Georgievski's reluctance either to negotiate with the insurgents, or to consider daring political reforms, may be to see it as an attempt to appeal to his core constituency of VMRO-DPMNE supporters in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, scheduled for January and, possibly, to tap into the constituency of ethnic Macedonian citizens that have been alarmed by the extent of the crisis. Another, perhaps, additional interpretation of this sudden radicalization, not only of Georgievski, but of the various Macedonian nationalist forces across the political spectrum, relates to the longer term effect that a declaration of war would have on Macedonian politics. This would almost definitely be the reinforcement of the sense of polarization of Macedonian society and the forces that advocate the abandonment of the project of a multicultural Macedonia.

Events like the highly disturbing, and evoking dark moments in history, destruction of Albanian properties by Macedonian mobs in the southern town of Bitola 'in response' to the Tetovo offensive of the NLA serve as a clear warning of the divisive potential of such political positions. In the event that a state of war is proclaimed by the Macedonian assembly, the implications as far as redefining Macedonia, Macedonianness and the position of Macedonian Albanians within such political and cultural frameworks could be devastating as they would almost certainly solidify the existing divisions of Macedonian society.

Signs of the nationalist mobilization of considerable parts of the ethnic Macedonian majority are hard to miss: the branding of the NLA insurgents invariably as 'terrorists' has virtually become standard practice in the media, while the coverage of the crisis is selective and simplified: emphasis is almost invariably placed on the drama of displaced or entrapped ethnic Macedonians, victims of the NLA while Albanian perspectives are almost entirely missing. In this context, the activities of the Macedonian forces appear to be benign and victimless, while the roots of the current conflict are systematically effaced.

Equally the Macedonian Orthodox Church, at home and in the diaspora,

³V. Jovanovski, 'The Macedonian hawk: perhaps the greatest political casualty of the Albanian insurrection is Macedonia's peacemaking premier has turned into a dangerous hawk', *Balkans Crisis Report*, No. 255, 13 June 2001.

has been quite active organizing collections for the families of, and conducting prayers for 'the Macedonian martyrs' (referring to the soldiers and police fallen in recent confrontations). The use of such deeply religious and emotional vocabulary and the investment of the current crisis with a sense of sacredness effectively produces the material of which national myths are constructed and renders the current conjuncture a privileged moment in the process of definition of the Macedonian nation.

The combination of the powerful idioms of terrorism, victimhood and martyrdom can result in a potent concoction of a widespread virulent nationalism that sacrifices any hopes of coexistence for the sake of 'ethnic purity' and 'security'. In this environment of nationalist paranoia and symbolic annihilation of the Albanian minority and its civil rights claims bizarre scenarios of solving Macedonia's ethnic 'problem' are now unashamedly albeit still cautiously advanced. Such is the solution outlined in an Academy of Sciences and Arts of Macedonia (ASAM) memorandum (apparently oblivious to the disastrous consequences of such misguided initiatives of its Serbian counterpart in the 1980s). This document, produced by Georgi Efremov, chairman of ASAM and rumoured to reflect the solution preferred by some quarters in the governing VMRO-DPMNE, including the Prime Minister himself, proposes a process of territorial and population exchange between Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania whereby Macedonia would cede western regions with Albanian majority populations such as Tetovo and Gostivar, to the latter two and, in exchange, Albania would cede to Macedonia the area around Pogradec, home of a substantial Macedonian minority. For the time being, the reaction to the plan has been mixed with some political forces unambiguously condemning it,⁴ although the fact that such propositions found it hard to find a legitimate place in the universe of public debate prior to the Albanian revolt are now discussed under the pretext that after the recent fighting in Tetovo and elsewhere, 'Albanians and Macedonians [can] no longer live in peace',⁵ is telling of the sea change in Macedonian politics. If ever implemented, such a plan would effectively constitute an act of ethnic cleansing and an unforgivable abdication from the responsibilities that a commitment of a multicultural society entails.

Albanian responses to the crisis

The two main Albanian parties, the DPA, Democratic Party of Albanians and PDP, Party of Democratic Prosperity, which until the emergence of the NLA had been highly antagonistic to each other, seem to have been equally affected by the crisis as, despite some muted, verbal expression of disapproval of the methods of the NLA they have had to accept the NLA's agenda. The virtually total silence of Albanian political personalities and activists at the face of a militant Albanian movement that has taken over large chunks of the territory of the Republic of Macedonia is noticeable in this respect.

⁴As Veton Latifi characteristically points out 'among the few political leaders who refrained from denouncing the plan were Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski, the leader of the Macedonian VMRO-DPMNE party, and parliamentary speaker Stojan Andov, a member of the Liberal Party, a junior member of the coalition'. 'Storm Over Macedonia Partition Plan. A proposal to divide up Macedonia along ethnic lines has provoked outrage', *Balkans Crisis Report*, No. 253, 6 June 2001.

⁵V. Latifi, *ibid.*

Albanian politicians such as Arben Xhaferi and Imer Imeri have kept an ambiguous stance as they have been participating in a 'grand coalition' government committed to ending to the crisis using political and military means while at the same time negotiating with the NLA for the compilation of a list of common demands such as the 'Prizren Platform', agreed on by Macedonian Albanian parties and the leadership of the NLA in a meeting held in Kosovo in May 2001.

As a result, Albanian leaders in Macedonia have been progressively abandoning their publicly declared commitment to the integrity of the Macedonian state by adopting the NLA demand for constitutional changes that give the Albanians the status of a constituent nation of the Republic of Macedonia. Although the 'Prizren Platform' formula is no longer officially pursued by Xhaferi and Imeri after pressure from the international community, the formula of a 'two nation' state, including the establishment of 'national' at the expense of citizens' rights, looms eerily over the negotiations on constitutional reform.

Ironically, whereas progressive Macedonian political forces back a constitutional arrangement that de-ethnicizes the constitution by removing the current preamble that effectively enshrines a special and privileged relationship between the Macedonian nation and the state, by decoupling state and Macedonian Orthodox Church and introducing a strong secular identity to the polity, Albanian leaders seem to want to retain the divisive nationalistic clauses that they have consistently and rightly blamed for the perpetuation of a discriminatory regime, albeit by extending constitutional protection to the 'Albanian nation'.

Such a strategy legitimizes the NLA and its nationalist logic, and undermines the authority of the elected representatives of the Albanian voters. Its federal implications undermine the cause of coexistence and carry within them the potential of ever growing divisions and ethnic sectarianism and of future conflict. While Albanians are right in feeling that they have little stake in the current constitutional and political arrangements, the solution of building another divided society like Bosnia or Cyprus, marked by lack of commitment to multiculturalism, coexistence and interaction does not seem likely to reduce societal insecurity and to ensure freedom and prosperity. What is more, the continuing military campaign of the NLA undermines the quest of a mutually satisfactory solution as it maintains social polarization and uncertainty about the country's integrity.

Is there a solution?

Macedonia had been hailed as the success story of former Yugoslavia. The remarkable achievement of the young republic emerging out of war-torn Yugoslavia more or less intact, having avoided a war of secession or a violent conflict between the different ethnic groups that claimed it as their home was taken, not entirely unjustifiably, as proof of the success of the Macedonian transition. What is more, at a time when the international community has embraced a blind and uncritical veneration of ethnic minority rights without an appropriate underlying theory or rationale underpinning them, the existence of Albanian (as well as Roma, Turkish and Serbian) political parties, and their

often nominal participation in government coalitions was considered to be sufficient evidence of a functioning multicultural democracy.

Without wishing to underestimate real and tangible steps towards ensuring minority rights within independent Macedonia, one could not but notice that the former Yugoslav republic was marked by tensions. On the one hand, the symbiosis of ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians was premised on what could be described as a weak form of consociationalism. The political elite of the republic, divided across ethnic lines, was, at first sight, able to present an image of integration and coexistence that kept out of sight deep fissures in the political sphere and in everyday life.

In this atmosphere of optimism, international, and some ethnic Macedonian and Albanian observers alike chose to ignore the more worrying and negative trends that the facade of Macedonia's multiethnic political system revealed: namely, the division of the political arena between ethnic parties, the failure of the existing political forces to forge long-term alliances and common platforms that overcome ethnic divisions and their inability to define themselves primarily as non-sectarian or non-ethnic parties. In addition, the numerous signs of disenfranchisement of Macedonian Albanians, enshrined in a constitution that oscillated between civic and ethnic definitions of Macedonia and which insensitively linked the state to Macedonian Orthodox Church, contributed to an increasingly rigid geographical and spatial segregation between the different ethnic communities. The warning signs of the impending crisis were not, however, heeded by the Albanian and Macedonian political elites who have largely remained content with practices that naturalized and reified the ethnic divisions of the country.

A way out of the crisis certainly involves a reversal of this trend of segregation and ethnicization of politics. It requires a simultaneous commitment to integration, equality and difference that is absent from the philosophies of the VMRO-DPMNE and their Albanian interlocutors and armed insurgents. At the same time, it relies on the abandonment of military solutions pursued by the Macedonian government and the NLA and, more crucially, a meticulous effort of reintegrating men and women of violence (soldiers and guerrillas alike) into everyday life structures. To the success of both these objectives, the role of the international community is crucial, in the sense of making clear that armed insurgence as a means of getting political outcomes will not be tolerated and of providing the necessary resources for successful reintegration projects.

However, there is a broader regional dimension that needs to be addressed which has been touched upon in the war of statements between the NLA and the Macedonian government. The fact that the former attempted to represent the crisis as entirely imported, while the latter went to great lengths to reassure domestic and international opinion that it was an indigenous force, brings home the problematic nature of the nation-state and its paraphernalia (national borders, economies, etc.) in contemporary South-eastern Europe. When former Yugoslavia broke up, little thought was given to the difficulties of transforming administrative boundaries into national borders disrupting long-established cross-border kinship, cultural, economic and political relations. What is more, the Kosovo conflict and the intensification of cross-border flows that this entailed demonstrated the degree of permeability of national borders in times

of regional instability, malaise and conflict. For any solution in Macedonia to work, regional issues such as the Kosovo status, regional co-operation and reconstruction, demilitarization and economic development are necessary prerequisites. Let us be in no doubt about this.

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