

# Macedonia: Small Potatoes or a Big Deal?

*Duncan Perry*

*Duncan Perry is Dean for Graduate Studies at  
Millersville University of Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup>*

Macedonia sits teetering on the brink of disaster. Prime among the reasons: deteriorating relations between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians, augmented by poor communications among all ethnic groups and a failure of the government to invoke needed reforms. Too, there is the Kosovo spill-over. This insurgency, mounted by the National Liberation Army (NLA), a by-product of the Kosovo Liberation Army, is threatening Macedonia with civil war by playing on the strained interethnic relations. There is also the government itself, inexperienced in war, commanding a military that is inexperienced, under-equipped, and under-trained. This scene is set against a background wherein political leaders have lost the popular trust owing to widespread corruption at all levels. Macedonia's media, a primary opinion-maker, also contributes to the problem by offering biased, and sometimes inflammatory, coverage of events and issues. Finally, there is the troubled economy – unemployment is high and prospects for a change in economic indicators in the near future are low.

## **The crisis**

What has brought this on? Macedonia, a multi-ethnic state that gained independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, has spent the past ten years struggling. It survived a pair of damaging Greek economic blockades imposed over the name the new state chose, the flag it designed, and its alleged expansionist aspirations. Most of the causes of this emotionally charged scenario have been removed. Macedonia

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<sup>1</sup> The author visited Macedonia in May as a team member of the Munich-based Südosteuropa Gesellschaft's project on promoting "Interethnic Coexistence and Dialogue in the Western Balkans." Material in this article in part comes from project findings. He wishes to thank John Lampe, University of Maryland (USA) and Leonard Cohen, Simon Fraser University (Canada), for reading a draft of this article.

modified its flag and every one understands that Skopje has no intention of annexing anyone's territory. The issue of what to call this new republic, however, remains unresolved, though world opinion has moved away from the diplomatically imposed artifice, "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", created to palliate Greece, in deference to simply using "Macedonia".

Then there was the UN-imposed embargo on rump Yugoslavia, Macedonia's chief trading partner. Skopje honored the embargo as a measure of its commitment to joining the European Community and being a good international citizen. While the enforcement was haphazard, Macedonia nevertheless inflicted economic hardship upon its people for the sake of showing itself fit to be a candidate for membership in the European Union.

Next came the Kosovo crisis. Macedonia served as the chief base of operations for international forces operating in Kosovo. Once more, it was demonstrating its willingness to be a responsible partner. With the exodus of more than 350,000 Kosovar Albanians to Macedonia, it again stood ready, albeit with reservations and trepidation, to do its part. Quickly, it was overwhelmed. The budget, still recovering from the earlier setbacks, faced a new catastrophe. The government, up to that point had been unable to reform the economy and Macedonia's infrastructure was pushed to the limits as it sought to cope with this humanitarian crisis. To make matters worse, Western assistance in handling the refugees was insufficient, at times muddled and often late. Ethnic Macedonians were torn between aiding the hapless Kosovar Albanians and the realization that these very people could serve to undermine the tenuous balance of power in the state between the ethnic Macedonians, with 62 per cent of the population, and the ethnic Albanians, officially representing 23 per cent of the people, but said by their political leaders to account for much more. Many ethnic Macedonians felt that the international community was compelling them to subvert their own state – it was like inviting foxes into the hen house. But they did it anyway.

Ethnic Albanians, who are chiefly Muslim, and ethnic Macedonian Slavs, who are overwhelmingly Christian Orthodox, have been at odds – some would argue for centuries. Their intertwined histories have been such that their Albanian and Slav ancestors alternately dominated one another, not always in generous and humane ways. Still, the two groups have managed to coexist over the long haul. Since the creation of the Macedonian republic, Albanian politicians have been involved in the political mainstream and some have served in the national government. But, as in other emerging democracies, corruption has become a problem in Macedonia. Politicians of all groups, castes and hues, and at all levels, have failed to deliver on promises and have become involved in corruption, some of it petty, some of it anything but. Trust, especially in national leaders, is low. Ethnic Albanians seem especially disappointed and angry. They had expected their politicians to spearhead reform, to bring equality, equal opportunity, affirmative action and more to their constituents. Instead, they seemed to pursue matters of self-interest, responding to the voters with half-measures and rhetoric meant to

hold them off. It is partly on this disparity that the NLA seeks to trade. Using arguments about continuing injustice, police brutality and inequality, its members seek to capitalise on long simmering grievances to win the support of the Albanian population. Rumours abound that the NLA is making progress recruiting among the young, unemployed males in Tetovo, the intellectual and population center of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia.

By most accounts, the NLA is a group of Kosovo Liberation Army die hard extremists who are looking for a place to go and a Slavic enemy to fight, now that their violent approach has lost its appeal in Kosovo. Some were born in Macedonia, others not. They have no programme but have adopted the platforms of the Albanian political parties. Cloaking their actions in nationalist terms, these self-styled freedom fighters decry the abuses of the Macedonia government and its failure to respond to the needs of ethnic Albanians. While it is quite true that the government has been unresponsive, there is no Milosevic-like dictator in Macedonia and Macedonia is not another Kosovo – not an ethnically Albanian province of a predominantly Slavic country. Rather, Macedonia is a sovereign state, a democracy, where the rule of law, though imperfect, is nevertheless in place. While ethnic Albanians, who constitute the second largest population group, have been treated as second class citizens, they have nevertheless prospered. Their thriving grey economy serves their economic needs, perhaps better than the shaky black economy of the ethnic Macedonians. Today's problems do not stem so much from oppression like that suffered by Kosovar Albanians at the hands of the Belgrade government as from ethnic Albanian impatience concerning long anticipated reforms that their political leaders have failed to deliver.

Ethnic Macedonians, as well as other peoples who round out the Macedonian state's multicultural population, including ethnic Turks, Roma, and Serbs, are also fed up with government corruption and inaction. But few appear to know how to combat it. So, with smoldering resentment, many have accepted it and have found ways to flaunt the laws themselves. Some voices speak out against the epidemic corruption, notably in publications like Sasho Ordanoski's *Forum*, a hard-hitting weekly journal focussing on political affairs. But this is the exception. To make matters worse, the media, perhaps the major opinion-making mechanism in the country, is, at best, of un even quality. Because most media are owned, or at least controlled by one party or another, or the government, biased reporting is usual. To compound the problem, inflammatory rhetoric occurs, sometimes even descending to the level of hate speech. This merely widens the ethnic divide.

The perceptions held by ethnic Macedonians about ethnic Albanians, and vice versa, are stereotypes. They are not founded on a solid understanding of the needs and aspirations, cultures and values of the other group. They are based on assumptions, traditions, myths, and tales. Ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians do not interact as a rule, so how can they understand each other? Their leaders stopped meeting to discuss cultural issues and areas of friction back in 1996. Journalists generally present only one side of an event or story – that of their own ethnic group. School textbooks, national myths, even popular songs,

contribute to keeping Macedonia's peoples apart. So, the citizens of Macedonia identify themselves with their ethnic groups not their corporate state. While ethnic Macedonians possess a pride in their land, they do not value ethnic Albanians, whom they see rather as dangerous, unpredictable, untrustworthy, long-term squatters who must be tolerated. Albanians, on the other hand, argue that they know no other land and have no place else to go. They do not trust ethnic Macedonians, seeing them as anti-Muslim and bent on keeping Albanians in an inferior position. So, instead of being proud of being a Macedonian citizen, Albanians take their pride in being Albanian. Other ethnic groups, none of which constitute a sizeable percentage of the population, are generally ignored in this clash of identities and have stayed out of it.

Nevertheless, even in this unreal world, most ethnic Albanians are very moderate in their approach to finding resolution to these problems. They oppose violence and want to live peacefully with ethnic Macedonians. They do not want to secede. Most ethnic Macedonians are also moderate and want peace and order. However, if the NLA can somehow induce the unseasoned Macedonian Army to overreact, to commit vengeful excesses, such behaviour could push Albanians into the NLA camp and set the stage for civil war. Events at this writing indicate that the NLA may be succeeding.

### **If there is war....**

If they do, what would be the consequences? Apart from the appalling and needless bloodshed and destruction of another humanitarian disaster, there will probably be a call for the separation of western Macedonia, which is predominantly Albanian, from the state. If an independent Kosovo is a bad idea, even if well meant, what does the international community do with a second breakaway Albanian territory lacking infrastructure, resources, and laws? For while Kosovo will for many years to come be a Western burden, it will also be *Serbia irredenta*, a hot spot where hot heads may well fight over his torical and religious ar ti facts and ter ri tory. Al low a slice of Ma ce do nia to be come *Nova Albania*, or worse, merge it with ei ther Ko so vo or Al ba nia, and it would be come Ma ce do nia's Ko so vo. Make no mistake; ethnic Macedonians will not surrender their territory easily. Their state was only cre ated at the end of World War II and the na tional iden tity of eth nic Ma cedonians has only been recognised for two generations or so and is still not uni ver sally ac cepted in ter na tion ally. These peo ple are not of a mind to re lin quish what they have fought hard for and won, still within the living mem ory of some.

If an Albanian insurgency breaks up the state, get ready for a Macedonian reaction to follow. Macedonia could join with neighbours like Yugoslavia to "solve" the vexing Albanian problem, further polarising the region. At the very least, the potential for a long-term, even if low grade, insurgency in the south of Europe is on potential offer here. And associated with a fractured Macedonia comes the assumption of still greater corruption, a flaunting of the international law that failed to

protect the nascent state, the proliferation of smuggling contraband, drugs and other cargoes.

Another casualty will be international community credibility. NATO in particular, with its troops, equipment and vehicles on the scene, seemingly poised to respond to the crisis if it chooses to, will be exposed as ineffective if it fails to defend Macedonia. This is a dangerous message indeed to send to would-be dictators, warlords and thugs elsewhere, who might otherwise think twice if they thought NATO, or a similar international organisation, would descend upon them and use force. Failing to help Macedonia could be taken as a statement that multi-ethnic states are not viable and that the West is granting *de facto* permission to nationalist everywhere to engage in ethnic cleansing.

The Macedonian lands, the object of neighbours' territorial aspirations in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, could once again be a source of irredentist conflict. And not to be overlooked as fallout from the destruction of Macedonia is the possibility of terrorist acts perpetrated outside of the region, either as a means of drawing attention to one cause or another, or as a measure of revenge, one side against the other. As is often the case with such behaviour, in no cent targets are selected for maximum effect.

Macedonia's well-meaning president, Boris Trajkovski, is trying to stave off war. At his urging, a government of national reconciliation was put in place in May 2001, representing all major political parties. It is Trajkovski's position that Macedonia must be a state for all its citizens, words that resonate with the ethnic Albanians. They want equality with the ethnic Macedonians, who, at present, are the only ethnic group singled out in the state's constitution as the constituent people. The Albanians also want their language to become a state language and they want the right to use the Albanian state flag alongside the Macedonian flag. They want equal opportunity in all sectors and they want it now.

The advent of the NLA offers Albanian parties an opportunity to press harder for more concessions and they are doing this, working, in some cases with the NLA – a risky business for themselves and the state. For its part, the NLA demands a seat at the negotiating table. Trajkovski has rejected this idea on the logic that those who treat with terrorists undermine the very basis of a democratically established government. As a result, the recent efforts of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to bring the NLA into discussions, were rejected. Meantime, the NLA stepped up its activities, provoking the Macedonian prime minister, Lubco Georgievski, to demand a declaration of war against the insurgents. The West's response has been to encourage moderation and a measured use of force.

For ethnic Albanians, Macedonia is the best deal out there. For ethnic Macedonians, it is the only deal. With much in common, what divides ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians is fear of each other and a resentment stemming from a tradition of not trusting each other or working together – not wanting others to have what they do not possess. Not surprisingly, Macedonians argue that Albanians want too much and give too little. They already have equality, say

ethnic Macedonian conservatives – the constitution's preamble, which stipulates that only ethnic Macedonians are constituent people, includes reference to protecting the rights of minority peoples. Albanians reply that they are made to feel like second class citizens because of the wording of this preamble, because of prejudicial treatment by the authorities, because they are virtually excluded from universities and public employment, because they are not integral to the state's economy.

What all Macedonian citizens need to come to grips with is that reality is changing. Any society that discriminates against any segment of the population is headed for trouble. And if the Albanian population continues to grow at the current pace (Albanians could be the majority by the year 2025 according to some demographers), what then? Ethnic Macedonians' hard won identity will thus be threatened severely if it is built solely upon pre dominance in the state instead of upon a strong cultural identity, accompanied by equanimity and a genuine respect for other cultures and an appreciation for a culturally diverse state.

### Next steps

There are many things that need to be accomplished to round out Macedonia's development as a member of the European community of states. And much needs to be done and done now to reduce tension. The government can change the preamble of the constitution to make Macedonia, as the president suggests, a state of all its people. Corruption, so central to current woes, has to be ended and confidence restored in the government and the economy. The media can be instrumental in this activity, if it too can be reformed and made independent. Education must be made available to all, at all levels, and both text books and instruction must be shorn of bias and rhetoric. These recommendations are urged by participants in an interethnic dialogue held in Macedonia in May 2001 sponsored by Germany's Südosteuropa Gesellschaft.<sup>2</sup> Participants, a combination of opinion-makers from within various ethnic groups in Macedonia plus Western Balkan specialists and German parliamentarians and diplomats, agreed that interethnic dialogue must immediately commence in earnest.

Other changes are needed: creating an effective, multi-ethnic police force and military, developing a judicial system that works for all people, and settling the question concerning the use of the Albanian language in official activities. At the same time, ethnic Albanians need to rethink the idea of using the flag of another nation to symbolise their ethnoses. A state can have but one official flag and it should be emblematic of the pride and identity of all peoples in that state – a goal for which all citizens of Macedonia should strive.

To move such reform activities along, the government must take the

2 In the frame work of the "Interethnic Coexistence and Dialogue in the Western Balkans" project referred to in foot note 1.

leadership. So far, it appears willing to act only when it has no alternative. To turn this around, some blunt talk and serious prodding from the West appears indicated, even though calling upon the international community to intervene in Macedonian affairs is less than an ideal solution. Macedonian officials and perhaps others sometimes resent it, and it smacks of condescension. No one likes to be told what to do, preached at, or scolded. Yet we live in a world where minimum standards have been established and enforced across borders. And if the Macedonian government is to get unstuck from the rut of inaction in which it currently finds itself, someone needs to give it a push. The West behaves as though there is plenty of time to do this. This is wrong, dead wrong. There is very little time left. Every day is a danger and every day of relative peace is an opportunity for the international community to make a difference.

There are immediate measures that the West can take now to promote the stabilisation and reform process. These include:

- Taking all needed action, including the use of force, to end the NLA insurgency and restore and maintain stability immediately;
- Through strong diplomatic representation in Skopje, working with the government to develop and implement needed political and social reform beginning with the constitution's preamble;
- Pressing for invocation of the law on languages;
- Providing needed economic assistance and advice and working with the government to put in place effective anti-corruption measures, using appropriate leverage if required;
- Resolving the naming issue to give Macedonia a sense of permanency in the European family of states;
- Working with the police and the military, equipping them with appropriate knowledge, technology and weapons, while ensuring that they are trained in the constitutional limits of their authority;
- Working with the judiciary to ensure that equal protection for all is a reality;
- Working with the media to create and enforce ethical standards for journalists, perhaps through the creation of a national ethics board and provide professional training for journalists;
- Assisting with education and textbook reform, providing assistance to train more teachers and to ensure that teachers understand and teach tolerance;
- Assisting in promoting multi-cultural dialogue at all levels of society;
- Encouraging interfaith dialogue at all levels.

Full implementation of such recommendation and others like them, will take time. But, just beginning serious and open efforts to address some fundamental issues would send a strong signal to Macedonia's people that a new approach to governance and state building is under way. Macedonia's ordinary people are looking for signs of change and signs of hope that there is a future.

No one wants war, but every one fears it. And calls by the prime minister for

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de clar ing a state of war only fos ter na tion al ist hys teria. Why not de fuse this tick ing bomb be fore it de to nates? Why not give the peo ple of Ma ce do nia time to come to grips with 21<sup>st</sup> cen tury re al ity with out first un der go ing wrench ing and di vi sive war? They are prag ma tists and will find the way to cre at ing a vi able, multi- eth nic state if given the chance. The col lapse of Ma ce do nia, some thing the in ter na tional com mu nity could pre vent, is a mis er able re ward for be ing a faith ful ally, and al low ing it to hap pen is a short sighted de ci sion that will have last ing neg a tive re per cus sions for dec ades to come.

Macedonia is worth the commitment. A successful multi-ethnic, solvent and durable democracy in the heart of the Balkans would be an authentication that there are ways to bring peo ple to gether across cul tures to live to gether and pros per – if given time to adapt and al lowed the op por tu nity to fo cus on change with out hin drance of war. Ma ce do nia is thus more than small po ta toes; it is truly a big deal, for it can be the beacon showing the way to resolving interethnic problems be tween peo ples around the world.