

Dialogue in Skopje

Author: [IWPR](#)

Branko Geroski, editor-in-chief of the leading independent Macedonian daily Dnevnik, and **Kim Mehmeti**, novelist and a founder of the leading independent Albanian weekly Lobi, spoke in the offices of Dnevnik on September 10 with IWPR executive editor Anthony Borden and IWPR Macedonia project director Agim Fetahaj. For more information visit [A Bridge Across the Vardar](#).

IWPR: What is your view of the current situation in Macedonia - have we passed the worst, or is it yet to come?

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Branko Geroski: Obviously, the end of the crisis has not come yet. The situation is very complicated, very tense. There are hidden agendas which we cannot influence, and which - although I don't like conspiracy theories - do overcome our capacity, as an ethnic community. So it is very hard, and I simply do not know what will happen next.

Kim Mehmeti: I think everything depends on the international community. Macedonia has already made a step towards one kind of "Lebanonization": not only do ethnic Albanians have their own military structures which the state institutions regard as illegal but the police themselves have created paramilitary structures. So unless everyone in Macedonia is disarmed, the country will retain its potential for conflict, low-level but with great risk for the whole Balkans.

It will be especially risky if a security vacuum appears after NATO's mandate is completed and space for revenge emerges. In this case, the international efforts will collapse like a house of cards, and I believe this would be the final end of Macedonia.

Geroski: I appreciate Kim's desire for a total demilitarisation, but the trend is towards even more arms in Macedonia. At the moment, we have a new NATO mission, which means new weapons, new soldiers and, in some instances, new problems. Unfortunately, instead of a process of demilitarisation, the society is being militarised. Even the Ohrid agreement includes ways of restructuring the police, and Albanians have proposed ways for restructuring the army. But until now there has been no proposal on how to reduce arms and the means of killing.

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Mehmeti: I am not naive. I know the consequences of having a foreign army in one's own fatherland. But I am not talking about destroying local arms only in order to have German or someone else's tanks here. I see the arrival of foreign arms as a means to destroy the domestic ones. After that, we would be in a situation where we wouldn't have to think of arms as the only way of solving our problems.

IWPR: What are the key factors that will determine the success of the peace plan?

Geroski: The key factor is the willingness of both ethnic communities to make it happen. In the new agreement, we have designed a system that looks like consensual democracy. It is a system that will satisfy the appetites of the Albanians and of the international community. The problem is that we could have reached these changes in three or four years of political, not real, fighting. With Macedonia beginning the process of association with the EU, certainly Brussels could have put great pressures on the Macedonian authorities.

Now we may have a great system, but there is no content in the relations between Macedonians and Albanians. Trust has been lost. Albanians constantly pointed out that we had never been at war with each other. Now that is lost. We have had war, and this will make it difficult to take crucial decisions about the future of the country.

Let me remind you that Yugoslavia was a perfectly designed system of consensual democracy. What we have here is not even as advanced as the decision-making structure of the Yugoslav state system, but even that country disintegrated.

So we fear that the peace process will merely cement current relations. The peace process itself does not mean anything if it doesn't bring development, a chance for progress for both ethnic communities. That chance may not be lost forever, but I fear that it is lost for the moment.

Mehmeti: The design to rearrange Macedonia is wonderful, an optimal solution for the Albanian side. But it all depends on the human material to put together, and that is us, the citizens of Macedonia.

Wisdom that grows out of this tragic situation is hardened, and leaves no room for doubt. If Macedonian citizens have truly concluded that the country can only survive based on the will of all of its citizens, and not just some of its communities, then that is a sufficient basis for us to turn towards each other.

We have already demonstrated that in every area, if the two most numerous communities want to destroy the country, they can do it. But we can take a positive lesson from this and realise that we, the Macedonians and the Albanians, exist not just to spite each other but in fact to share a common goal.

The framework agreement offers a definitive break from the Leninist concept of state-building, the 19th century concept, whereby the most numerous community chooses the design and we, the others, take part in that only to the extent that we are allowed. If Macedonia abandons this concept with a sound conscience, it will regain the advantage it had, compared to its neighbours.

On the other hand, if the percentage of Macedonians who think they are not able to live with Albanians increases, or if the Albanians start to close themselves off, then we will see the creation of ethnic borders. In Bitola, now, there are no more Albanians, while it is difficult to be a Macedonian in Tetovo. The challenge is to halt this draining of these unsafe enclaves.

Geroski: All of Kim's nice wishes will be drowned out when the first gun starts firing after the end of this harvest, when the first serious incident happens. Let's not be naive. We are still at war with each other. Only elementary political preconditions have been created for peace, but I doubt that this war has ended. I think politically extreme Albanians received a very clear message from the Western powers: if you want to achieve political goals, reach for arms, fight and you will succeed! I admit that armed Albanian militants managed to achieve their goals, at least in part. This tells me that the story is not over. So I am rather pessimistic, and feel peace is far away.

Mehmeti: I know that my hopes could be killed off right away. On my way home, I have to pass three checkpoints where reservists of Ljube Boskovski [the interior minister, alleged by some to be responsible for the killings at Ljuboten] will ask for my identity card, and everything depends on whether they are drunk or sober! So I have no illusions. I know that it is easy to start a war, and peace requires time and effort.

But I am fascinated with my friends, the Macedonians. They always seem to know what we Albanians think. Let me tell you how we understand the message from the West: "You Albanians be careful because this is

the last time you will manage to survive. Any more games in the future could be very risky."

I absolutely agree that the process of "de-Yugoslavisation" of the Balkans is not finished. For me it will be completed when the status of Kosovo and Montenegro are defined. Then, and if there is international support, including an extended military presence, the Macedonian story will be closed.

IWPR: What is your view of the international involvement in the conflict, especially the role of NATO?

Geroski: They have been clumsy. Kim's answer just proves my point about encouraging the use of force to reach political goals. As Kim and all Albanian intellectuals confirm, the issue of Kosovo has still not been resolved, and it will touch the interests of all the Balkan countries, especially Serbia and Yugoslavia, as well as the international community. Montenegro, too, is yet to come, which means also the status of Albanians in Montenegro.

So I would like to be convinced that the message to the Albanians is, "This is your last game". I would like to hear one Albanian say, "OK, we got what we got, we are satisfied. That's it. The goal has been reached. Now we can live in peace." Unfortunately, we don't get that message. The story of the Albanians in the Balkans continues. The crisis continues. There will be more wars, more problems and more troubles involving the international community.

Mehmeti: I don't think Albanians and Macedonians should stop searching for beauty. They should continue, but not with arms. Until Tanusevci [the village north of Skopje where fighting first erupted this spring], Macedonia was the pampered child of Europe. Probably Europe knew this child was disabled in its inter-ethnic relations, and so was always indulged.

Lately, among Albanians there is a very good joke: Who should Ali Ahmeti [the National Liberation Army leader] thank the most? The Macedonian-language media and the government of Macedonia who recruited his army.

Don't forget that until March, the international community had a very clear position towards the crisis in Macedonia, fully backing the government. But this position changed when they saw that the state institutions are not real public institutions but ones only interested in protecting one community. It changed when they saw that the Macedonian-language media did not hesitate to collectivise the guilt: from a child to a hen - an Albanian hen - they are all guilty, all legitimate targets.

From that moment, the international community was left with no other choice but to take a position, telling the government: respond, but proportionally. They saw that the brothers rushed to buy helicopters with tax money they had taken in part from Albanians, but that only Albanian houses were destroyed. They saw people who claimed that destroying a church is barbarism but destroying a mosque is a legitimate target. People who even declared that we are the Taleban, but made no such remarks when the mosques in Prilep and Bitola were set on fire.

The president and the government of this country expressed their condolences to the families of every soldier who was murdered. But we never once heard them express their condolences to the families where an Albanian child was killed. So the country's institutions were not prepared to protect their citizens. That's why we the Albanians had the right to ask the West for protection.

Geroski: Things are not as Mehmeti presents them. First, we cannot forget a very important fact: who started the war. It was Albanian "thugs", as George Robertson [the NATO secretary-general] called them at the outset. The victims in this war are the Macedonians. This war was to conquer a piece of Macedonian territory, and it is still going on. I'm completely aware that it will be achieved with NATO's new mission. A piece of territory will definitely be beyond the control of the state of Macedonia.

Inappropriate behaviour did take place, as the foreigners say, on both sides. But the international community was biased. If ever there was a pampered child in the Balkans it was the Albanians - supported by the US, the EU and, in the Kosovo war, NATO.

Now, what's done is done. The winners on the battlefield should be congratulated. But what will come out of it all? What will life be like in Western Macedonia, in the "Tetovo ghetto"? What will the state look like? Will it be luckier than the previous one? These are the big questions.

Were the other states that went through the hell of war - Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Yugoslavia - happier and richer afterwards? Everything that the Albanians in Macedonia achieved with arms and killings could have been achieved by political means. In the civilised world, political goals are achieved with political means. In Kosovo that was impossible, but in Macedonia it was possible. This is why what was done in Macedonia was a great sin.

Mehmeti: I don't argue that the Albanians started the war. At least we agree on something. But I could prove that Albanians never reached for guns to attack the Macedonians; they attacked institutions. They never attacked a single settlement, not one!

Macedonians also claim that Albanians occupied territory. Would my house have been occupied by the Albanians? It is Albanian! Speaking in ethnic, not state, terms, I always thought that my field is Albanian, not Macedonian. But during this war I realised that Macedonians treat me as a subtenant in this country. If I'm not satisfied with my house and I raise my voice, they will tell me how to behave since it is Macedonian.

I agree that there were some who anticipated war and then urged it on - look at the proposal of the academics [the Macedonian Academy of Arts and Sciences, which floated a map dividing the country into ethnic areas]. But this war would have ended three months ago but for the rejection of the proposal of Robert Frowick [former OSCE official in Macedonia, who proposed a mechanism for including the rebels in peace talks]. In fact, Albanians exceeded themselves and were expecting someone to be clever enough to say, Stop.

Now Branko claims that it all could have been achieved through political dialogue. Why wasn't it after Tanusevci? Why didn't someone say, "Look, the way this has started it will burn everything out." But no, first they wanted to stick Macedonian flags in Albanian villages and only then negotiate. That's why I say that Albanians were provoked, and that the NLA was formed by intellectuals, media and political dilettantes from here.

IWPR: Both of you have long been identified as political moderates. But recently some have seen a change. Branko has written texts suggesting that the only solution is a military one. Kim has insisted - except for in this conversation - on using interpreters with his long-time Macedonian friends. So have your attitudes and political orientation changed?

Geroski: I'm convinced that neither of our positions changed. Reality changed, significantly.

The Lesok monastery is changed because half of it is gone. The mosques in Prilep and Bitola are changed because the one in Prilep is gone. Seventy Macedonian families are left without the heads of their families, killed, most of them not in a soldierly way but in a cowardly way.

The country is definitely changed. People lost their trust. I'm not optimistic like Kim that very soon we'll dance the Kozara dance [a Yugoslav dance that symbolized brotherhood and unity] and we'll hug and kiss

each other and we will be happy until the end of our lives. It won't happen soon.

To opt for peace means to have principles. I was the first one who publicly proposed changing the text in the preamble to the constitution [a key Albanian demand]. I was the one who supported peace up to the last hour of the negotiations. But I do not accept the occupation of Tetovo by some bandits.

In the comment published in Dnevnik for which all of you point at me, moving me completely unfairly to the camp of the militant Macedonians, I said the following: there won't be any peace in Macedonia unless we comply with what was agreed. It was not agreed to occupy Tetovo and other territories.

We all know who started the offensive the day the Ohrid agreement was initialled. That's not politics. That's pressure on an entire nation.

Kim and I could discuss how we should design this flat of ours. I have my own room, he has his own room. Or in this country of ours, where he has a house and 5 kilometres away I have my own. But if you come and tell me that this is no longer my room, that I have to move out, as 70,000 ethnic Macedonians were told, I would have no choice but to defend my room in our mutual flat - ie, my house in our common country.

The issue is not your house, Kim, and your field, which you quite rightfully consider Albanian. Only 5 kilometres from your house is my house - my house is the issue. Macedonians are driven away from the Tetovo area, not Albanians. I would like to see one Albanian intellectual say: "Stop, people. We should not drive these people away from their historic hearths, because that is not right." At this moment 70,000 Macedonians are driven away from their homes, and 50,000-60,000 Albanians fled as a result of the war. That's the only thing where we are equal: in the consequences and the sufferings of the war. But we are not equal in sharing responsibility for the injustice.

Mehmeti: Macedonian reality has changed, and I tried very hard not to change along with it. To stay as I was. During this period I had more than 20 interviews with media both here and abroad in which I sent a message to the Albanians: if you start feeling joy when houses are burned or children are killed, I don't need such a victory.

But even in the mathematics we differ. Branko mentions 70 casualties and I will mention about 400. The reason is that I count all the new graves in Macedonia, Macedonian and Albanian. I include Albanian casualties as well - children, women, ten people from Ljuboten . . . He counts only the Macedonians, as if they were the only victims. The entire time, the media, parliament, everyone claims that in Macedonia there are only 70 victims. The government counts only the policemen and the soldiers. It does not count the child killed in Poroj. It's pitiful.

Albanians and Macedonians in Macedonia will win the battle only if they are courageous enough to look themselves in the mirror. To see not what others have done to them but what they have done to others. That will be the sign that we will be able to live together.

Albanians are closer to the truth, not because we are more human but because we read both in Macedonian and in Albanian languages. That's the situation: we are always closer to the truth. I'm glad that the Albanians did not collectivise guilt but made a clear distinction: the conflict was the NLA against the authorities, never the Albanians against the Macedonians. That happened with the Macedonians . . .

Still, I never wanted to dance the Kozara dance with the Macedonians - many Albanians don't like me, so I wouldn't expect an entire other nation to. But understanding, yes, that I could expect.

As for language, I have proved my attitude towards my citizens by telling stories in both languages. But I felt humiliated, provoked. I know Macedonian language well, but when I say that I want to speak Albanian, it is so I can organise my thoughts better. But then a colleague of mine called to say he was invited to participate in a TV programme. He asked me to ask them if he could use at least some phrases in Albanian. They reacted as if the NLA had come to bomb the studio! That's why I stand by what I said: until we start respecting each other in this state, I'm not going to use the language anymore.

IWPR: What are the preconditions for peace and coexistence in Macedonia?

Geroski: I am convinced that when the constitutional changes are presented in parliament, Albanians will vote for them and they will vote for the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia as a whole. Thus for the first time after ten years they will approve the constitutional act of this state and they will say: Yes, this is our country where we can live in peace and tranquillity. Until this moment I have not heard such a confirmation, but I hope I will. That's one of the basic preconditions.

Another is to show a little bit of sincerity in the period that follows, a general human sincerity. Kim knows well that no matter what he says, this was never Kosovo, that the Macedonians have never been Milosevic's Serbs. There was a great difference between Macedonia and Milosevic's Yugoslavia. Even after this war there will be a great difference between Macedonia and the new democrats in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The Macedonian as an ethnic stereotype differs significantly from the other more powerful Balkan nations. And that's the fortunate thing in this region. There won't be a tragedy if the minority fears as if it is threatened, because all over the world minorities who feel threatened fight for their rights. But it is a real tragedy if the majority feels that it is seriously threatened. If we manage to avoid a real war, it will mean we managed to avoid that feeling.

Nevertheless I still believe we are better than all those foreigners who were trying to convince us that they are more civilised, that we are Balkan people, killers and so on. Thank God in Macedonia we still haven't used bombs to kill children, to destroy pubs and markets, as happens in Great Britain.

This is where we search for the foundations for coexistence. How many generations it will take to forget all that has happened, I don't know. The future depends on that. It is possible that everything will end nicely - but only if there is willingness on both sides, especially among those who drew weapons first. That is the order. The one who first starts the killing needs to forgive, but for that he first needs to ask for forgiveness.

Mehmeti: One of Branko's conditions is being fulfilled. The one who started firing first has begun to disarm first. On that the international community was correct.

Now, if I knew that with the Ohrid agreement Macedonians were even in the smallest way damaged, I would publicly, as Kim Mehmeti, distance myself from it. I don't want to accept anything that means taking something from somebody else in order to give it to the other.

I know absolutely that peace in Macedonia depends on the mood of the ethnic Macedonians. I don't think of them as less courageous people than mine. But if the Macedonian state continues to incite a feeling among ethnic Macedonians that they are humiliated and degraded, I don't see a way out. If the media continues to nurse the sense that the Macedonians are losers and that this is a capitulation, then in two or three years some ethnic Macedonian "NLA" will emerge and the same problem will reappear, only bigger. In this case, Albanians will be interested not in the maintenance of this state but in its disappearance, as soon as possible.

This is the only danger for Macedonia. As long as the world exists, there will be extreme Albanians. I have

no illusions about this. But I also know that in England there are at least 2,000 Englishmen who wake up every morning with a prayer for war. But do you know what else is there in England? There are state institutions that absorb all that as some kind of trash thrown into the river and washed up on the banks.

In this ten-year long dispute we appeared as dilettantes because we have not succeeded in dealing with some most elementary things. Branko is right: compared to the Albanians who lived under Milosevic we lived in heaven! But when he disappeared, the Albanians in Macedonia faced the fact that they were almost the biggest losers. I'm trying to think as an ordinary Albanian. What would his calculation be? He would take a pencil and start: why haven't we got anything? Maybe because we did not fight, we weren't aggressive enough.

Now for Albanians from Macedonia, Kosovo is the centre of our education and culture, half of our families are there. Branko knows who educated us in Yugoslavia. Why did Albanians from Macedonia flee to Kosovo and not to Albania? Because at least 30 per cent of Albanian men from Macedonia have wives from Kosovo. It is not just the ethnic feeling.

So there is nothing more irritating for us than when the president comes out and says, We are against an independent Kosovo. Why are you against what you are trying to provide to your own people, an independent state? I have never understood this. Why would Macedonia be at risk?

The result is that Albanians in Macedonia feel like they are in some kind of "waiting room" regarding Kosovo. Maybe I am stupid and naive - I'm a writer, and I don't know how to think politically - but I think the very day Kosovo is declared an independent state, the Albanians in Macedonia will know that the end of the story has come. Yet as long as the dilemma remains open, about how to divide Kosovo with the Serbs, Albanians in Macedonia will wonder, What about us?

So in this context, I don't feel like a winner. A winner would have had another goal - the destruction of Macedonia - and be able to say: we have overcome the Macedonians. Never, it was not even at the back of my mind, did I say that we are fighting against the Macedonians, but against the institutions of this state, which is mine.

Geroski: I'm convinced that when the president reads your statement, he will be more careful in what he says about an independent Kosovo. In the past maybe Kim was not so dangerous, but now he is because, even if he is not the winner, Boris Trajkovski is militarily defeated.

Kim: If he feels as if he is only the president of the ethnic Macedonians, he should be.

Geroski: Even though many things have been destroyed, not so many have been built. The reality is this: you and I cannot go together to Tetovo. This is the situation that has been worrying us for some time. So I won't be happy in my Skopje and you won't be happy in your Saraj [Kim's home district], but both of us have a rather good standing in front of the people from Tetovo and Kumanovo.

Anyway, I think that the Albanians already have an independent Kosovo, I believe . . .

Mehmeti: So why are you against it since you know that they already have it? That's even more irritating.

Geroski: I believe that you will have effective autonomy in a part of Western Macedonia, because part of that territory will not be under the control of the security forces. But I'm also certain that life for Albanians in Macedonia in the coming period will be even worse than before. But you won't be able to explain that to yourself, and even less to me.

My fault as a Macedonian is great because I haven't done enough though I did a lot - you have to admit - to be constructive and courageous in increasing the rights of minorities. But I believe that your fault is a little bit bigger than mine because you didn't do enough to say: "Wait, there is always another chance and we must not start killing people for this thing."

Mehmeti: My advantage is that I read Branko and I know everything he has said, but he does not read me. I don't blame you; such are the circumstances. But you don't know what I said at the beginning of this war and I cannot elaborate it here for you because I don't have the texts with me.

All wars are hard to explain. Did we really need a war? No. But what can we take from it? When the war in Croatia began, it was impossible to find a Croat and a Serb who would sit like this and talk. And in Macedonia you could still find at least 100 people who, even though they don't look at each other in the best way, would still talk.

If that substance is well kneaded, you can still have good bread. That's why I keep saying: everything depends on the institutions, will they be able to do the kneading? With the idiots [politicians] that we have right now not only do I expect war but even worse things. Even now they will try to force us, to tell us what kind of house to build, on the left or on the right. I'm counting on a new generation that will be able to learn the lesson from this tragedy.

IWPR: The last question is the most difficult - after all this, could you say what you two do agree on?

Geroski: I am fascinated with Kim's optimism even though he claims that he is a pessimist. He seems to me to be a fantastic optimist, so I will agree to meet again for seminars where we can study more about brotherhood and unity. I would like to agree with his optimism, but frankly at this point I am not sure.

Mehmeti: I accept the role of optimist. Do you know where it comes from? I know that all my Macedonian neighbours have been given Kalashnikovs. I know that in Macedonia tens of thousands of Kalashnikovs have been handed out. I know that, in some areas, Macedonians could have risen and made a mess. Even to the Albanians I say that that is the proof that they do not want war with us.

The proof that Albanians do not want war with the Macedonians is the following: I live in an ethnically pure Albanian environment and not even from the most illiterate Albanian - I claim this with all my honour - have I heard that the time has come for this to be settled once and for all. Everyone wonders how is it possible that the government hasn't come to its senses, that some wise man has not emerged to sort it all out.

But still, the Albanians, not even the hardest rebels, have risen against the Macedonians. As a journalist I had contacts with them, and they all claimed that they couldn't bear the humiliations from the country's institutions. If it was up to me I would go for civil disobedience -- everyday protests, boycotts, closed roads - but not the war. Certainly you could have explained to the Albanians that all this could have been achieved in three years.

But bear in mind that there are people whose level of patience is different from Branko's and Kim's. Now I will tell you a secret: for the first time after a long time I have crossed over to this side of Vardar. I am afraid of the reservists, but not of Branko.

Location: Balkans
Macedonia
Albania
Serbia

