

## **Futile Dialogue Exposed**

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Macedonia's conflict exposes the myth of fruitful inter-ethnic dialogue over the last ten years.

Only political amateurs can adhere to the view that the armed clashes in the hills around Tetovo are the work of bored Kosovo Liberation Army "veterans" seeking new excitement through a small shoot-out in Macedonia.

Such an interpretation overlooks a key question - if these groups are made up of a few hundred stray "Rambos", how come they've rocked this young republic to its core?

Even if the "Rambo" thesis were accurate, the fact remains the militants have exposed the weaknesses in Macedonia's concept of multi-ethnic democracy - a concept built for at least a decade on the principle of one community's, the Macedonian majority's, dominance over another, the Albanians.

The futility of dialogue between Macedonians and Albanians has finally been exposed. The young men who've taken up guns on the Sar Mountain are forcing the country to look itself in the mirror and to realise that inter-ethnic talks over the last ten years have taken place against a backdrop of police repression of the Albanian community.

That is why the armed groups should be trusted when they say their goal is not the disintegration of Macedonia, but a desire for all in Macedonia to realise that when "democratic dialogue" is conducted through the language of police batons, agreements tend to be reached with bullets.

Macedonia declared its independence in 1991 despite the Albanian community's abstention from the referendum. Albanians objected to the wording of the question on independence which left room for Macedonia to enter "an alliance of sovereign states of Yugoslavia" at some time in the future.

Macedonia then adopted a new constitution, again without the involvement of the only party to represent Albanians at the time, the Party of Democratic Prosperity. Albanians disagreed with the definition of Macedonia as a state of only Macedonian people. They also objected to the recognition of Macedonian as the only state language and the imposition of the Cyrillic alphabet.

Since 1991, Albanians have pointed to the constitution as a generator of crisis in the country. The document is an odd hybrid, combining civic ambitions with a mono-ethnic character. The introduction describes Macedonia as a state of ethnic Macedonians and "other citizens".

In the years after independence, Macedonia launched a clamp-down on cigarette smuggling. Police raided the Bit-Pazar quarter of Skopje. In one incident, four innocent people - Albanians - were killed. Their deaths have yet to be properly investigated.

The clamp-down targetted street vendors rather than the border crossings where the cigarette trucks enter the country illegally. The stallholders were predominantly Albanian. The aim was to pin the blame for smuggling squarely on the shoulders of Albanian criminals.

Not that Albanians are more honest than other people or wouldn't want to be part of such activity. But to

single them out as the source of such criminal activity when virtually every colluding state body is controlled by another ethnic community - the Macedonians - was disingenious to say the least.

In 1992, a group of Albanian intellectuals sought to re-open the Albanian Teachers' College where students would be taught in Albanian. The college had been shut down in 1986 during a campaign in the former Yugoslavia against "Albanian irredentism".

After waiting for a response for two years, Arben Xhaferi and Fadilj Sulejmani took things into their own hands and in 1994 set up Tetovo University. While "democratic dialogue" continued over the future of the institution, police were despatched to forcibly shut down the university.

This dialogue ended in the death of one Albanian, the detention of some of the university's organisers and arrogant comments from the then interior minister Ljubomir Frckovski, who dismissed the project as a "private party". The Macedonian state has yet to recognise the institution.

In 1996, dialogue continued, this time over the use of Albanian insignia. Once again, talk was accompanied with batons and shooting. Police intervened in Gostivar to remove an Albanian flag from a municipal building. Four people died, hundreds were beaten. Gostivar's mayor, Rufij Osmani, was arrested.

Dialogue over the use of the Albanian language and adequate representation of Albanians in state institutions was conducted in much the same way.

Frckovski is believed to have patented the government's approach to the Albanian question - hit first and then maybe offer some concessions, but not today if you can put it off till tomorrow.

This strategy gave rise to the impression within the Macedonian community that theirs was the side always making concessions. Conversely the Albanian community came to believe everything could be obtained by force. That logic led directly to the shooting in Tanusevci and Tetovo.

Of course, like all peoples, Albanians have destructive elements within their ranks. Albanian political parties, both those within the coalition government and those in opposition, are also to blame for the current situation.

Some Albanian leaders lied to their people, promising to secure them all their rights once they came to power. They encouraged them to dream about Ilirida, a proposed autonomous entity within Macedonia - a proposal voted for by a majority of Albanians in a self-organised referendum in 1992. These politicians spoke of "radical" remedies if they did not succeed by "peaceful means".

Once in office, however, these same politicians almost invariably moderated their attitudes and demands in exchange for a piece of the Macedonian economic pie. They were nick-named "Mr 10 per cents" - the percentage allegedly gleaned from the sell-off of state companies.

The voters, meanwhile, did not forget the promises made, nor did they moderate their ambitions.

Arben Xhaferi's Democratic Party of Albanians, a member of the ruling coalition, rightly advocates dialogue and opposes violence.

But the DPA has been accused of falsifying votes during the 1999 presidential elections, easing Boris Trajkovski's way to office. Some claim the DPA was behind the appearance of guns during the 2000 local elections - one Albanian was shot dead in the village of Kondovo near Skopje. Voters boycotted the second round ballot in protest.

For years I have argued democracy in Macedonia has been realised using formulas inherited from the former Yugoslavia. Political elites are building "brotherhood and unity", raking in fortunes in dodgy business deals, while the two largest communities in the country grow further and further apart. Macedonians and Albanians share a republic but live in parallel worlds.

The gun battles around Tetovo are the product of the last decade's "dialogue".

Macedonia now has two options - reach a lasting agreement or split. The country has a chance to emerge stronger from this crisis but only if its citizens take on board just how dangerous a long-term game with ethnic feelings would be.

It's important to realise the fighting in the Sar Mountain could be attractive to young Albanians who have endured ten years of humiliation and heavy-handed treatment from their own government, been cheated by their own leaders and promised a paradise by politicians only interested in their own material benefit.

But such problems cannot be solved by arms. Militarism in Macedonia could set alight the entire Balkans. And Albanians would burn in those flames along with everyone else.

This message needs to be taken to the fighters in the Sar Mountain. Prime Minister Ljupco Georgievski or Xhaferi need to get up that hill and promise the young men there that Albanians will never again be singled out as the source of all the country's ills; that dialogue in the future will be genuine and will not be drowned out by the thud of police batons.

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