

Macedonia Simmering

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By Iso Rusi (BCR No 1, 01-Feb-99)

Yet such calm is artificial. For Macedonia, the war in Kosovo is much closer than the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ever was. The connection between Macedonia and Kosovo is obviously tighter in several ways than the link with Bosnia, and more sensitive. With clashes in Kosovo occurring only tens of kilometres away, it is simply impossible to avoid the danger of the situation spilling over. With international debate on some form of possible intervention in Kosovo increasing, Macedonia could hardly avoid being involved.

Indeed, in Western Macedonia, the Democratic Party of the Albanians (DPA), now a member of the new governing coalition, is organising a large humanitarian campaign for Kosovo. The rival Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), also an Albanian party, has announced a proposal on a resolution for Kosovo, and written letters to NATO, the EU and the US about the "prevention of further bloodshed and genocide". Putting aside their differences at the start of the fighting between Yugoslav forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army this past summer, both parties organised joint demonstrations in support of Kosovo Albanians and demanding international intervention. The sensitivity of Macedonian Albanians to what is happening in Kosovo is clear: the Albanians from the two new countries used to live together in the former socialist Yugoslavia, their friendship and family ties are numerous, and there are countless ties from university study, professional relationships, and other links.

The downplaying of the conflict may thus represent little more than repression of the fears of a spreading of the conflict that in reality are broadly shared by the Macedonian public. The fear is especially prevalent among ethnic Macedonians, who really would wish that the crisis were far away. They are particularly afraid that the deterioration of interethnic relations will spread from Kosovo to Macedonia and threaten the very existence of the Macedonian state. The new Macedonian government a coalition of supposedly "extremist" Macedonian nationalists in the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) and "radical" Albanians in the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), along with the civic-oriented Democratic Alternative (DA) has demonstrated a substantial softening on the issues which in recent years caused so many interethnic tensions. New positions or measures have been introduced on the amnesty law, the use of minority languages in parliament, and the constitutionality of higher education in non-Macedonian languages. See *Reporting Macedonia: The New Accommodation*, a new special publication from IWPR. So even domestic issues link Macedonia to the Kosovo crisis.

Previous disagreements among the coalition partners about the role of NATO - and the position of Macedonia in relation to Kosovo also seem to have been put aside. VMRO-DPMNE, the largest party in the new government, used to argue that any support of the Kosovo Albanians was interference in the internal affairs of a foreign country. The Democratic Alternative, the second party in government, kept to the Western formulation; party leader Vasil Tupurkovski has argued that "the issue is an internal affair, but it has larger implications in the region, and the West has to intervene." The DPA, together with its rival the PDP, supported direct international intervention in Kosovo. The differences were most obvious when NATO planes flew over Macedonian skies in June 1998, and debate over Western intervention in Kosovo flared.

But things changed late last year after the elections, exactly during the transition period between the old and the new administrations. NATO asked Macedonia for permission to stationing forces in the country first for potential "fast intervention" and then as an "extraction forces". Then in December, NATO Secretary General Javier Solana and NATO commander Gen. Wesley Clark arrived. One of the first decisions of the new government was to permit the stationing of 2,300 NATO soldiers in Macedonia as a guarantee for the potential extraction of the planned 2,000 verifiers in Kosovo from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In December, French Defence Minister Alain Richard visited, and make remarks suggesting that in case of an intervention, the number of NATO soldiers based in Macedonia may be doubled.

Meantime, after six years the 1,050-strong UNPREDEP force (UN Preventative Deployment Force) also remains. These troops are now scheduled to remain until February. General opinion suggests that one more (possibly final) extension of their mandate will be granted. Some media in Macedonia speculate that UNPREDEP is the favourite of President Kiro Gligorov, while the new government prefers the NATO extractors. Within this split, they see different priorities: the first to assist internal security, and the second to ensure faster entrance into NATO. And the two concepts importing security for internal reasons and joining NATO (for which internal security is a precondition) are in fundamental contradiction.

The most delicate point of debate concerns a serious Western intervention in Yugoslavia. Despite US rejections of the idea, some form of air and/or land intervention is a possibility, however remote. In this

scenario, Macedonia is seen as a kind of Western aeroplane carrier. This would of course be seen by Macedonia's former compatriots in Yugoslavia/Serbia as treason. Yugoslavia's military is vastly superior to Macedonia's, and there is a Serb minority in Macedonia. Such factors could serve to spark direct conflict between Macedonia and Yugoslavia, possibly providing Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic with a way to take revenge against NATO or the Macedonia Albanians by ensuring that events spill over directly into Macedonia.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the real number of refugees from Kosovo now in Macedonia is significantly higher than the figure of 889 estimated by the local Red Cross. The number of people from Kosovo who stay with friends and relatives is unknown. After the Racak massacre and the latest Serbian offensive, their number is expected to grow. Nevertheless, there is no immediate prospect of a refugee wave of thousands, as suggested months ago when Gligorov promoted his unlikely plan for a corridor through Macedonia to Albania for Kosovo refugee flows.

Indeed, Gligorov himself could emerge as a problem in the latest Kosovo crisis. Long cast as a wise politician and creator of the Macedonian "oasis of peace", he also regularly met Milosevic and Kosovo Albanian leader Ibrahim Rugova. After the defeat of the president's Social Democrats in the parliamentary elections, his authority has changed. With his own party in power, he exercised more power than provided for in the Constitution. Under the new cohabitation, that position will change, especially if he serves also as a kind of opposition to the new government. Under the constitution, decision-making in foreign policy is divided between the president and the government, and thus a new source of political tensions seems likely.

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