

Macedonia's High Wire Act

Author: [Dragan Nikolic](#)

In the shadow of war, Macedonia's coalition government is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain social stability.

As ever more Kosovo Albanians pour south across the border, ethnic Macedonians feel that they are getting a raw deal out of a conflict which is not of their making. Many fear that irrespective of the outcome of the war in neighbouring Yugoslavia, their own country will have been changed forever because of it.

Ever conscious of the potential for ethnic rivalries to spill-over and engulf Macedonia, the government in Skopje, while co-operating with NATO, has made it plain from the start that it wish to repatriate refugees as soon as possible.

In the meantime, it has been seeking to move them on, into third countries. However, the influx of refugees from Kosovo has been so overwhelming that it is increasingly threatening the country's fragile ethnic balance.

Gane Todorovski, a poet and former Macedonian ambassador to Moscow, expresses the fears of many ethnic Macedonians when he says that little will remain of his country if the "ethnic Macedonian bulwark" caves in to the flood of Kosovo refugees. To date more than 300,000 Kosovo Albanians have crossed the border. Of these, only about 60,000 have been air-lifted to the West.

Ethnic Macedonians have also voiced frustrations that the domestic producers of foodstuffs and clothing are not benefiting from the international effort to feed and care for the refugees. They complain that aid agencies have bought and transported more supplies from far-away Kenya, than they have bought in Macedonia.

Of far greater concern to ethnic Macedonians, however, is the presence of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) inside the country. According to Police Minister Pavle Trajanov, KLA members have entered the country together with refugees and are hiding in inaccessible border areas. Moreover, he says, they have been recruiting new members from among the refugees, forming secret cells and attempting to import arms.

Trajanov fears that in time the KLA could link up with local Albanian "extremists" and that this might result in armed actions against the Macedonian Army and police.

Tensions have been rising as a result of a series of recent incidents. In the Stenkovec camp, some 4,000 Albanian youths demonstrated against the Macedonian police after a refugee who had escaped was forcibly returned to the camp.

The demonstrators chanted "KLA" and "NATO" and claimed that the police were worse than their Serbian counterparts, demanding they be replaced with ethnic Albanian officers.

In an effort to defuse tensions over restrictions still imposed on the use of the Albanian language at official level, parliamentary speaker Savo Klimovski recently announced that members of each nationality will be able to address parliament in their own

language, once the working procedures have changed. He also proposed a more liberal use of the national flag, based on agreement among the coalition partners, than the constitution currently allows.

These conciliatory gestures have, however, generated a backlash among ethnic Macedonians. The government fears that this in turn may undermine the prospects of its candidate, coalition member Vasil Tupurkovski, succeeding Kiro Gligorov in the presidential elections this autumn. This subsequently led Klimovski to add that he had been expressing his "personal opinion" and not government policy on these sensitive issues.

Despite this apparent volte-face, most political analysts here do expect amendments to the constitution to go through. These could radically redefine the status of the Albanian minority in Macedonia and their relationship with the Macedonian majority. Analysts believe the changes are being effectively forced upon Macedonia by the international community and that Skopje has no choice but to comply if it is to benefit from NATO protection and future financial support.

Petar Gosev, a leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, which is joining the government as the fourth coalition partner, says that to ensure Macedonia's survival, the government has to remain firmly on the pro-NATO course.

However, he believes that any redefinition of Macedonia as some kind of common Albanian-Macedonian state will paradoxically jeopardise the country's survival.

At present, no such plans are on the table. Arben Xhaferi, leader of the Albanian Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) and partner in the coalition government, has charted a conciliatory course. His political party wields great influence in the refugee camps and he has tried to reassure ethnic Macedonians that there is no need to fear the KLA.

The former nevertheless remain nervous and worry what might happen if the Kosovo refugees remain in their country in the medium to longer term. The omens from Bosnia and Herzegovina are not good, they feel. There, more than three-and-a-half years after the end of the war, only 27 per cent of refugees have returned to their homes, despite a continuing substantial international military force.

Dragan Nikolic is a journalist in Skopje formerly with the Belgrade daily Nasa Borba.

Location: Macedonia
Kosovo
Bosnia and
Herzegovina

Focus: Balkans: Regional Reporting & Sustainable
Training

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/macedonias-high-wire-act>