

Geographical Overview | **Western Balkans**

Macedonia: Prospects for a European Future

Dr. Eran FraenkelSenior Research Associate - CIDOB
Providence RI, USA

Macedonia¹ is a small, landlocked country with a population of about two million that has been the object of inter- and intra-communal disputes for over a century. Macedonia formally came into national existence, with its own cultural, political and linguistic identity in 1946, after the establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) under Josip Broz Tito and the League of Yugoslav Communists. Prior to World War II, Macedonia's neighbours on four sides had claimed either its land or people, based on religious, linguistic or other historiographic evidence. Geographic Macedonia's partition in the early 20th century following the two Balkan Wars allotted approximately half its territory to Greece; slightly less to Serbia and significantly less to Bulgaria and Albania. Pre-war Serbian Macedonia became the Socialist Republic of Macedonia and, with the same borders, is now the Republic of Macedonia.

Inclusion in the SFRY was a tectonic shift in Macedonia's history. Imitating the Soviet 'nationalities policy,' Tito's government created a three-tier hierarchy of identity: Slavs (e.g., Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins, Bosnians² and Macedonians) were each considered a *narod*, or the titular nation in its own republic. *Narodnost* (nationality) specified an identity

community present in the SFRY but having a titular country outside Yugoslavia's borders: in Macedonia these were Albanians, Turks and a few Bulgarians. *Etnicka Zaednica* (ethnic community) referred to people with a cultural identity but no titular country. In Macedonia, ethnic communities included Roma (Gypsies), Jews and Vlachs. The Titoist system, which could best be described as 'controlled pluralism,' was meant to promote a new Yugoslav identity that was to supersede, if not erase, pre-war ethno-nationalism. This expectation, however, did not apply evenly. Whereas the central government perceived Serbian, Croatian and Albanian nationalisms as perpetually latent threats to the Yugoslav ideal, Belgrade actively promoted a Macedonian identity (and thereby an attachment to the SFRY) by codifying the Macedonian literary language; establishing Macedonian-language theatre, university and media; and, in 1967, by recognising the first autocephalous Macedonian Orthodox Church, independent of the Serbian Orthodox Church.³

Although the 'Yugoslav experiment' could be considered relatively successful, its credo of *Bratsvto i Edinstvo* was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, *bratsvto* (brotherhood) meant that Macedonia's ethno-linguistic communities were accommodated rather than being forcibly assimilated as happened to their counterparts in Greece or Bulgaria. *Edinstvo* (unity), however, remained fragmented as all communities developed along separate, non-intersecting paths, with minorities occupying strata

¹ Although the United Nations and the European Union insist on FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), here we use the country's constitutional name – the Republic of Macedonia; or simply Macedonia.

² In 1971, the Slav Muslims of Bosnia were recognized as a separate nation called Muslims (eventually Bosnjaci, or Bosniaks) to distinguish them from Orthodox Serb and Catholic Croat Bosnians.

³ Towards the end of the Ottoman period, the Orthodox Church in the Balkans split into 'national churches' that represented the interests and identities of specific ethno-linguistic groups; namely the Bulgarians and Serbs. Prior to that, only the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches had been recognized as legitimate. The Greeks still claim that Orthodox Slavs and Albanians are renegade Greeks; and the Serbs refuse to recognize the Macedonian Orthodox Church at all.

structurally inferior to ethnic Macedonians. That is, the condominium of communities in Macedonia from 1946 to 1991 was purchased at the price of the minorities giving priority to the aspirations of the majority, and accepting the majority's criteria of 'national belonging.'

Following the collapse of SFRY, many authors, including this one, described Macedonia as the only country to emerge from Yugoslavia non-violently. From independence in 1991 to 2001, all ethnic groups participated in government and institutions such as the military, earning Macedonia the title 'oasis of peace.' Nonetheless, the country's communities fundamentally disagreed about Macedonia's 'nationhood'; some advocating for a unitary state, others for a bi-national or possibly a non-national civic state. Whereas for ethnic Macedonians political legitimacy rested on 'nation' and 'state' being coterminous, for Albanians – who comprised approximately 20% of Macedonia's population in 1991 – their status as a non-titular minority was anathema. Macedonians categorically rejected the Albanians' increasingly vehement demands for a constitutional bi-national (Albanian–Macedonian) country as a negation of their long fought-for right to their own nation state. Absent a shared acceptance of civic rather than identity-based values, all social, political, cultural or economic issues (whether language rights, decentralization, conducting a census, proportional vs. majoritarian parliamentary representation, or abolishing cronyism, bribery, and black marketeering) were framed by ethnically based mistrust that has endured to the present day. During its first 10 years of independence, Macedonia weathered numerous crises, but none greater than the influx of nearly 400,000 mostly Albanian refugees in March-June 1999, due to Serbia's campaign of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and NATO's military response. Ethnic Macedonians feared that should these refugees remain long term, they would initiate a radical demographic shift that would alter permanently the new country's socio-economic criteria for inclusion and exclusion. For Macedonia's Albanians, many with kinship ties to Kosovo, accommodating the refugees was a moral imperative, irre-

spective of any long-term considerations. Ethnicity trumped citizenship. Although the war was brief and most of the refugees repatriated to Kosovo, this experience illustrated how much Macedonia was still a country in 'transition,' but without a commonly accepted destination. Albanian and Macedonian politicians gave lip service to institutions of a 'participatory' and 'representative' democracy, but the country remained deadlocked in profound disagreements over the State's legitimacy and identity.⁴ These disputes were skillfully exploited by self-interested political cadres, who referenced and manipulated their own ethnic communities' grievances to divert attention from their incompetence, and from their agenda to stay in power by keeping the Macedonian pot simmering just below boiling point.

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Just as the Kosovo War was the defining moment for Macedonia before 2001, the so-called Baby War of 2001 determined the country's subsequent trajectory. Its consequences still resonate through current social and political realities in Macedonia. The violence between Macedonian security forces and Albanian insurgents (commonly known as the Kosovo Liberation Army, or UÇK) was relatively short-lived with relatively few fatalities on both sides. The war's main casualty was the assumption that Macedonia was an 'oasis of peace' immune to the conflicts experienced by other former Yugoslav republics. In many ways, ethnic Macedonians were taken by surprise by the outbreak of violence since they

⁴ In an article published on 6 April 2001 in The Guardian, this author is cited describing the impasse between Macedonians and Albanians as: "Macedonians don't know who they are but know what they want. Albanians know who they are but don't know what they want." This citation provoked quite a bit of vitriol from Macedonians worldwide.

had proudly regarded Macedonia as a 'tolerant and multicultural' society. Ethnic Macedonians' definition of 'tolerance' and 'multiculturalism,' however, did not conform to those of the country's minorities, and especially not of the Albanians.

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Pressured by the United States and the European Union, the Macedonian government and Albanian leaders ended the insurgency by reaching the *Ohrid Framework Agreement* (OFA) in August 2001. But, if the issue preceding the war was Macedonian 'ethnic politics,' the enduring effect of the OFA was the 'ethnicization' of all politics. Once the final version of the OFA and its constitutional amendments had been passed by Parliament, the republic had gone from being a Macedonian nation-state, to a civic (non-national) state, and ultimately to a *de facto* binational state of Macedonians and Albanians. Instead of diminishing identity-based discourse, the OFA elevated ethnic identity to the forefront. What had been a two-tier stratified society (Macedonians and the rest), became a multi-tier stratified society: Macedonians and 'others' in some parts of the country; Albanians and 'others' in some parts; and Macedonians/Albanians and 'others' elsewhere.

One of the ironies of the OFA and the international community's role in its design and execution is that both Macedonian and Albanian ethno-nationalist policies and agendas have become constitutionally legitimate. Under the guise of the OFA, extreme na-

tionalists have assumed and retained power without regard for their citizens' needs or the reforms required to make Macedonia eligible for EU accession. Specifically, since the parliamentary elections of 2008, a coalition of nationalist Macedonian (VMRO-DPMNE) and Albanian (DUI)⁵ parties has gained absolute power. Advances made by Albanians through the OFA and the constitutional amendments have not diminished the Albanian politicians' pursuits of their own interests, rather than those of the country in which their constituents are citizens. For example, although Albanians historically have run more small businesses than Macedonians, Albanian politicians do not advocate for an economic platform to benefit **all** small businesses. Rather they represent the interests of Albanians *per se*, who also happen to engage in small business.

Likewise, ethnic Macedonian politicians now feel even more unhindered in advancing policies that aggrandize rather than develop their country.⁶ But to assure their hold on power, Macedonian politicians must cooperate with their Albanian counterparts in order to avoid the kinds of hostilities that led to the war of 2001. This political collusion provides the 'stability' the governing coalition needs to divide the country's economic spoils. In a style that is reminiscent of post-war totalitarianism, it has been both the priority and the active practice of the ruling parties to almost exclusively allow their peers to participate in government, and to repress or eliminate possible dissent wherever possible – whether in politics, the media or even the business sector. To consolidate their position, VMRO and DUI called for unexpected early parliamentary elections in April 2014, garnering an absolute combined majority and extending their mandate for another four years. SDSM, (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia), which is the only opposition party of any consequence, boycotted Parliament in protest of these elections, which they considered fraudulent. The absence of SDSM, however, did not deter the victorious parties from

⁵ DUI is the Macedonian acronym for the Albanian party known in Albanian as the BDI (Bashkimi Demokratik për Integritim, or Democratic Union for Integration). After the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, this party was formed by Ali Ahmeti who led the Albanian insurgency in Macedonia. Since then, DUI has been in power continuously in coalition with Macedonians either from the leftist Social Democrats or rightist VMRO DPMNE party.

⁶ The most egregious example is the Skopje 2014 project. See www.balkaninsight.com/en/blog/skopje-2-aa4-a-recipe-for-urban-disintegration. Also see the author's analysis of the current government at [www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionales/n1_95/macedonia_and_the_eu_plunging_headlong_into_the_past_macedonian_version_included/\(language\)/eng-US](http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionales/n1_95/macedonia_and_the_eu_plunging_headlong_into_the_past_macedonian_version_included/(language)/eng-US).

proceeding as though government were fully functional. In several record-breaking sessions, Parliament considered and passed approximately 200 pieces of legislation, with no public comment or participation.

Another form of VMRO/DUI cooperation has been the indefinite delay in conducting a population census, the last of which was abortively started and halted in 2012.⁷ Without data newer than the previously completed census of 2002, each governing party can claim its share of political power by declaring, at least rhetorically, that it represents a certain percentage of the country's population. This is particularly significant to DUI, because of historical disputes regarding the size of the Albanian community, which have ranged from under 20% to over 40%. In these circumstances the government can invent figures that suit its interests and can justify making social and economic decisions based on unsubstantiated numbers. Given the absence of hard data, population figures can only be estimated. Demographers and other observers in Macedonia believe that the country has lost between 400,000 and 600,000 people – or nearly 25-30% of its population. Whereas, historically, out-migration was motivated mostly by economics, especially for Albanians,⁸ there has been a marked rise in the number of Macedonians leaving for reasons such as: political discrimination based on party affiliation; significant increases in the level of intimidation by the government against any form of dissent; and increasing scepticism about the likelihood of Macedonia's accession to the EU. In contrast to the inter-ethnic hostilities that were among the root causes of the war in 2001, the nearly total lock on power by the VMRO-DUI coalition has shifted the dynamics from *inter-ethnic* to *intra-ethnic* competition characterized by very polarized and antagonistic politics. Put otherwise, differences among political parties of any ethnic group only reflect *how* they intend to promote their community and its interests, and not *whether* they intend to do so. It is within this aggravated and volatile context that Macedonia has

been seeking to gain accession to the EU, and that Brussels has been attempting to engineer Macedonia's path towards EU membership.

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As matters stand at present, neither of these efforts has much chance of success. Rather than making either economic or political progress, in 2015 Macedonia regressed dramatically and at times was considered to be 'teetering on the brink of collapse.' At the heart of an unfolding series of crises was the release of thousands of wiretapped telephone conversations by the SDSM, which it claimed were recorded illegally by the governing VMRO party. These recordings allegedly reveal unprecedented efforts by the government to repress any dissenting voices by direct and indirect means including blackmail, imprisonment, and possibly the use of death threats. In the wake of these revelations, Macedonia experienced massive student protests in Skopje, SDSM's boycott of Parliament and increasingly violent confrontations between state security forces and Albanians on the border with Kosovo. Prior to 2015, it had seemed that Macedonians of all political affiliations had resigned themselves to VMRO's permanent 'state capture,' and had abandoned any hope of emerging from the country's dense fog of apathy. For a short time, renewed civil society resistance to the government was seen as a

⁷ See www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2013/07/23/feature-01

⁸ The implications have been particularly stark among Albanians in Western Macedonia. Beyond the demographic consequences, this increased out-migration has also contributed to increased poverty due to fewer remittances being sent and fewer investments being made by Diaspora Albanians in their home districts.

possible crack in the government's armour that had been preventing Macedonia meeting the criteria required to enter into accession negotiations with the EU. However, efforts for Macedonia to overcome its political crisis have not yet achieved their goal. An agreement crafted by the EU between the VMRO and the SDSM called for a number of specific measures to reduce escalating tensions and to clear the path towards early elections in April 2016 (www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-warring-leaders-struck-crisis-deal). Key to this agreement was the resignation of Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and the installation of a temporary government comprised of ministers from the SDSM as well as VMRO. Another component was the creation of a Special Prosecutor's office to investigate allegations of corruption, including information contained in the wiretapped tapes. Although Gruevski did resign, the opposition has refused to participate in government, claiming that its role in government is symbolic and lacks any authority to act. Likewise, the Special Prosecutor's ability to pursue that office's mandate has been thwarted by Parliament.

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Discussions with observers of Macedonia, both domestic and international, indicate that the country is not about to extricate itself from its worsening circumstances. Regional conditions have further exacerbated Macedonia's sense of victimization: Greece continues to refuse to recognize the country by its constitutional name, and maintains its ability to veto any chance of Macedonia entering into accession negotiations with the EU. The wave of refugees from

Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan who have been arriving in Greece has also burdened Macedonia with new humanitarian and fiscal obligations, since Macedonia is the first country through which these people pass on their way to Germany or Sweden.

What emerges from such observations is that Macedonia cannot be expected to address the full gamut of the problems it faces without substantial outside assistance. But, such assistance needs to be contextualized in terms of developments in the Balkans as a whole, rather than directed strictly at Macedonia as though it can overcome issues whose sources lie outside its borders. This approach towards Macedonia applies largely to the EU, which occupies a specifically strategic position vis-à-vis Macedonia and its neighbours. Punishing Macedonia for failing to meet accession standards – rather than providing concrete means for its citizens to demand and implement reforms – only demotivates those Macedonians still dedicated to their country's political and economic development. At present, Macedonia is a black hole that is growing wider and darker, and whose condition is being sugar coated by labeling it a country in transition. Transition has been the mantra for 25 years, ever since Macedonia's first post-independence government under President Gligorov decided to take an evolutionary rather than revolutionary approach towards the country's development. Other than avoiding massive violence such as the Bosnian war, this approach has not achieved its aims, leaving Macedonia's political and economic future more uncertain now than it was then. Most immediately, the elections slated for April 2016 are in jeopardy due to unresolved disputes between the major political parties. Expectations that the Special Prosecutor would assure free and fair elections have disappeared because this office has no mechanisms to determine the accuracy of electoral rosters, neither the ability to assist the Election Commission in preventing voter intimidation and/or fraud. Consequently, even if elections take place in 2016, there is no reason to expect that the current government will not be re-elected. In that case, a new mandate for the VMRO-DUI coalition would give them a bright green light to continue practices that have kept them in power, while more citizens look for ways to flee from Macedonia to 'Europe.'