

THREATS TO MACEDONIA'S STABILITY AND BORDERS

Mladen Klemenčić

INTRODUCTION

Macedonia's first decade of independence has been far from calm and peaceful.

Macedonia appeared on the political map as an independent state less than ten years ago. As one out of six republics within the Yugoslav federation, it gained independence only after the break-up of the federation which had initially enabled the creation of a Macedonian federal republic following World War II.

Owing to the fact that three out of four of present-day Macedonia's borders were international borders long before Macedonia gained independence, the country found itself almost completely within delimited and at least partially demarcated borderlines upon independence.

However, due to its sensitive position as a land-locked country in the heart of the Balkan peninsula, surrounded by four neighbouring states which have all had certain territorial pretensions to parts of Macedonia in the past, Macedonia's first decade of independence has been far from calm and peaceful. In spite of seemingly settled territorial issues, the 'new' country was not welcomed by at least one of its neighbours. Threats to Macedonian borders and stability have been numerous although none of the neighbours has openly questioned or violated its international border.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the sensitivity of the country's geopolitical position and its geo-strategic fragility. Major threats to Macedonia's stability and borders during the first ten years of independence are identified and factors which contributed to Macedonia's stability are also addressed. This article is intended to complement that by J. Talevski and M. Milenkoski which also appears in this issue of the *Boundary and Security Bulletin* and which provides more information on the geographic and technical characteristics of Macedonia's borders.

INSTABILITY FACTORS

Macedonia's independence was opposed primarily by its southern neighbour. Greece, the only European Union (EU) member in the Balkan region, accused Macedonia of expansionistic claims, objected to the use of its official national symbols and even opposed the name adopted by the 'new' country.

Unlike Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, and to a lesser degree Slovenia, which all experienced armed conflict with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia before reaching independence, Macedonia, on its path towards independence, experienced obstacles originating from beyond the boundaries of the former Yugoslavia rather than from within. Macedonia's independence was opposed primarily by its southern neighbour. Greece, the only European Union (EU) member in the Balkan region, accused Macedonia of expansionistic claims, objected to the use of its official national symbols and even opposed the name adopted by the 'new' country. The Greek explanation for this negative policy towards its northern neighbour was that the name "*Republic of Macedonia*", and initially adopted symbols of that state were parts of Greek identity, history and tradition and, as such, could not be used by other territorial entities. The use of the "*historically Greek*" name "*Macedonia*" would, according to this interpretation, imply expansionistic claims to Greek territory. The arguments underpinning these accusations were, however, less than convincing.

Macedonian officials repeatedly declared that the new country had no territorial claims towards any of its neighbours. Indeed, the only evidence Greece could present was a map circulated in Macedonia showing existing international borders, as well as "*geographic-ethnic*" borders (Figure 1). According to this map, almost the entire northern part of Greece as well as the southwestern part of Bulgaria were placed within Macedonia's borders. While the map represents a good example of nationalistic propaganda, it is difficult to regard it as presenting any real threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Greece.

МАКЕДОНИЈА



As an established member of the international community Greece was in a position to influence its partners and managed to block Macedonia's formal acceptance into the international community for some time. Due to Greek pressure the country initially emerged on the international stage under a provisional title – the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and was frequently referred to as FYROM. Under that name the country was admitted into the United Nations (UN) in 1993.

Under the same pretext Macedonia was prevented by Greece from using its newly designed flag and was forced to re-design it. Under pressure from Greece, the Macedonian parliament agreed to modify the flag which was based on the Star of Vergina design found in the tomb of King Philip of Macedon, father to Alexander the Great. That issue was only settled in January 1996. Both versions of the flag were presented in the *Boundary and Security Bulletin* (Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring 1996).

Greece could in fact have had two reasons to oppose and block international recognition of Macedonia (Gow, 1997: 78-79). Greece itself has a Macedonian ethnic minority which has never been recognised at the level appropriate for an EU member state. Greece feared that the existence of the Macedonian state might encourage "Slavophone Greeks", as the Macedonian minority is officially called, to seek collective rights with the prospect of initiating a chain reaction and encouraging Albanian and Turkish minorities within Greece to do the same. Secondly Greece feared that an independent Macedonia would be an instrument of Bulgarian expansionism. However, instead of undermining links between Bulgaria and Macedonia, Greece's hostile attitude only pushed Macedonia closer to Bulgaria.

It seems that Macedonia has successfully managed to overcome some major disputes with its 'strongest' neighbour.

Macedonia's policy was one of patience and step-by-step the new country succeeded in overcoming the obstacles created by Greece. Its confidence has significantly increased since the declaration of independence. Eventually, Greece also redefined its attitude and the two countries concluded an interim agreement to begin normalising their relations in November 1995. At present, it seems that Macedonia has successfully managed to overcome some major disputes with its 'strongest' neighbour. However, although the Greek side has eased its anti-Macedonia policy, it has not completely abandoned political bargaining over the name issue. According to some recent newspaper reports,¹ the latest Greek proposal to the government in Skopje was the adoption of a new name for the country: "Northern Macedonia", in exchange for full formal recognition by Greece.

Another threat to Macedonia's stability lies in its ethnic structure. Like all the republics of the Yugoslav federation, with the exception of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia was considered to be some sort of nation-state. According to the 1991 census, the last one taken within the Yugoslav federation, Macedonians constituted 64.6% of the population. Albanians, the rival and second largest group, accounted for 21.0%. However, Albanian representatives complained that their numbers were under-represented in official reports. They estimated the share of Albanians as being around a third of the population, while some even claimed that the country's population was as much as 50% Albanian.

In June-July 1994 another population count, under the supervision of international experts, registered approximately 430,000 Albanians or 22.9% out of 1,937,000 inhabitants. However, the proportion of Albanians has significantly increased since then, primarily due to the inflow of Kosovo Albanians. Between 1991 and 1996, 108,000 Albanians from Kosovo obtained Macedonian citizenship (Chiclet, 1999). Many more entered Macedonia on an unofficial basis. At present, Albanians must constitute at least 30% of the population. In the long-term, the ethnic balance could well be affected by differential growth rates, with a likely change in favour of Albanians because their growth rate is approximately five times higher than that of the Macedonian majority.

Antagonism between the Albanian minority and Macedonian majority is traditional. Supporters of 'Greater Albania' have always claimed the western parts of Macedonia from Lake Ohrid to Skopje. On the other hand, Macedonian-Albanian relations have never deteriorated to the extent of Serb-Albanian relations in Kosovo. The Albanian community, alongside the Macedonian majority, supported independence in the referendum held in September 1991. The Albanians also broadly accepted basic democratic rules and have participated with their parties in parliament and the government of Macedonia ever since. Nevertheless, inter-communal tensions have been constant and numerous.

One of the greatest sources of tensions has been the Albanian Free University founded in Tetovo at the end of 1994, modelled on the clandestine University of Prishtina which functioned in Kosovo's capital after everyday life was segregated on an ethnic basis in Yugoslavia's troubled province. When the Albanian University opened, two of its leading academics were arrested by Macedonian police, triggering bloody riots. For the Albanians, banning the University meant they were denied the right to higher education. For the Macedonians it was a case of interference by extremists from Kosovo who wanted to destabilise Macedonia.

The Macedonian government found itself caught between international expectations to accommodate the refugees and protests from Macedonians who largely assumed a pro-Serbian and anti-Albanian stance.

Macedonia's stability was particularly questioned during the Kosovo crisis in spring 1999. Following NATO's offensive against Yugoslavia and Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, a humanitarian crisis arose. More than half of Kosovo's almost two million population was on the move. The most terrible scenes of desperation were to be seen at the crossing points between Kosovo and Macedonia. Albanian refugees waited in open fields for days to enter Macedonia and find places in refugee camps organised by international agencies. Macedonia, already burdened with its own "*Albanian question*" was reluctant to accept an estimated 280,000 Albanian refugees from Kosovo (Kusovac, 2000:14), because of a perceived threat to its internal political stability. The Macedonian government found itself caught between international expectations to accommodate the refugees and protests from Macedonians who largely assumed a pro-Serbian and anti-Albanian stance. Refugees were protected only after Western countries organised camps and began airlifting them to other countries. However, the return of Kosovo refugees was made possible in a relatively short time and Macedonia did not suffer a major decrease in its internal stability.

Neighbouring Kosovo remains a constant source of instability for Macedonia. Throughout most of the 1990s the major problem was the uncontrolled flow of Albanians. In 1999 it was the refugee crisis, while at present, since Kosovo has become effectively an international protectorate, a major threat is the general lawlessness there.

Recent clashes between Serbs and Albanians in the Presevo and Bujanovac region, in South Serbia, and in the demilitarised zone beyond the Kosovo border are also a direct threat to Macedonia's stability and security, because a new conflict is taking place again just across the border, with the potential to spill over it and into Macedonia.

Another factor which could trigger the spreading of conflict from Kosovo into Macedonia appears to be the isolated mountain village of Tanusevci next to the Macedonia-Kosovo border. On 26 February 2001 a group of still-unidentified armed people occupied the village. On 4 March three Macedonian soldiers were killed during an intervention against paramilitaries at Tanusevci. The paramilitary grouping is rumoured to be called the National Liberation Army and to be made up of former UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army) soldiers and local Albanians from the village and border area. In the days following the incident at Tanusevci fighting between Macedonian forces and Albanian insurgents spread to other Macedonian villages

bordering on Kosovo and caused the civilian population to flee. By mid-March the conflict had spread over a large Albanian populated area of northern Macedonia including the main centre of Tetovo.

Macedonian officials portrayed the problem as a spillover from Kosovo. It was stated that the attacks and violation of the border were perpetrated by extremists who do not belong to any Macedonia-based terrorist organisation. Some Albanian politicians who are participating in the ruling coalition initially also supported intervention by Macedonian forces. However, as the conflict continued, different interpretations of events started to threaten the government's inter-ethnic unity on the issue. Arben Zhaferi, leader of the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), a member of the ruling coalition, has criticised the government saying "*Macedonian diplomacy has perceived the problem incorrectly, treating Tanusevci as a Kosovo problem, not a Macedonian [one].*"²² Two other Albanian political parties in Macedonia supported a mass meeting held on 14 March in Tetovo. At the meeting Albanians put forward calls for constitutional change and the creation of a Macedonian-Albanian federation.

The UN Security Council in March 2001 rejected Macedonia's request for a security zone on the border with Yugoslavia to be patrolled by Kosovo-based NATO-led KFOR troops. Instead the UN supported Macedonia's efforts to combat terrorism and announced that it would allow Yugoslav forces to enter the demilitarised ground safety zone on the Kosovo-Macedonia border to help combat the movement of guerrillas across the border.

STABILITY FACTORS

The UN peace mission in Macedonia was a classic example of... "preventive diplomacy."

During the first ten years of independence, major factors for stability appeared to be Macedonia's eastern neighbour, Bulgaria, as well as the international community which deployed a preventative peacekeeping mission in Macedonia.

Unlike Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where peacekeepers arrived after armed conflict had already broken out, the UN peace mission in Macedonia was a classic example of what Boutros- Ghalli in his *Agenda for Peace* called "*preventive diplomacy.*" It was the UN's first preventive mission in the history of peacekeeping operations (Geroski, 1995: 64). UN peacekeepers were deployed in Macedonia on the basis of Resolution 795 adopted by the Security Council in December 1992. This was only three months after an official request from Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov for preventive deployment since he feared the war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina would spread to the south of the former Yugoslavia. Macedonians feared that the Serbs, encouraged by early advances in Bosnia-Herzegovina, would overrun Macedonia which, according to traditional Serbian expansionistic perception, was seen as "*Southern Serbia.*" Macedonia successfully agreed with Belgrade a withdrawal of Yugoslav army units by March 1992 but was left defenceless. The newly created Macedonian Army (Macedonian abbreviation ARM) could only patrol the borders and was not capable of defending the country against serious military threats from the outside.

At the beginning of 1993 around 700 Norwegian, Finnish and Swedish troops were deployed to set up the monitoring mission (Geroski, 1995: 64). An additional 520-strong US contingent was deployed in July 1993. Peacekeepers in Macedonia – including for the first time in post-Yugoslav operations, American personnel – justified their presence in the borderlands along the Macedonia-Serbia (Yugoslavia) and Macedonia-Albania borders as Macedonia avoided armed conflicts. Peacekeepers were deployed in the early stages as part of the UNPROFOR (UN Protection Force) mission which acted in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina too. In April 1995, in response to calls from Zagreb and Skopje to separate the three UN missions and draw up individual mandates, the name for the Macedonian peacekeepers was changed to UNPREDEP (UN Preventive Deployment).

The UNPREDEP mission officially ended on 25 February 1999 as the Security Council did not adopt six-month extension due to a veto by China. China's decision followed Macedonian recognition of Taiwan and the establishment of diplomatic links with it. Although the UN mission formally ended, an international presence in Macedonia continued. In 1998 Macedonia hosted NATO's Kosovo Verification Co-ordination Centre (KVCC) to support Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) monitors in Kosovo which were also backed by an Extraction Force in Macedonia. In early 1999 NATO decided to strengthen its presence in the region by deploying 10,000 troops in Macedonia. Their presence was soon justified as they helped to ease threats during the Kosovo crisis from March 1999. NATO continued its presence following the Kosovo crisis because the regional situation maintained to be dangerous and hard to predict.

Bulgaria, once a major threat and source of instability from a Macedonian perspective, in fact turned out to be a factor for stability during the first decade following the break-up of Yugoslavia.

Bulgaria has played a more constructive role to date than Greece in Macedonian stability. Both countries have ethnic Macedonian minorities and from an extreme Macedonian nationalistic perspective therefore occupy parts of historic Macedonia. According to the first censuses following World War II there were approximately 200,000 Macedonians in Bulgaria, mostly in the Pirin region next to the Bulgaria-Macedonia border (Poulton, 1993: 107). Bulgaria subsequently changed its policy towards these ethnic Macedonians and denied them the status of a separate nationality, redefining them as ethnic Bulgarians. That attitude remained unaltered until the break-up of Yugoslavia. In the 1990s Bulgaria, contrary to some expectations, did not make any claims on Macedonia and generally supported the country's independence. This moderate policy was partly due to a general redefinition of the Macedonian question in Bulgaria and partly due to the aggressive confrontation Macedonia faced from Greece, Bulgaria's traditional rival in the region. Bulgaria correctly estimated that cooperation and mutual understanding would bring it closer to Macedonia, especially once Greece openly objected and tried to block Macedonia's independence. Bulgaria, once a major threat and source of instability from a Macedonian perspective, in fact turned out to be a factor for stability during the first decade following the break-up of Yugoslavia.

BORDER THREATS AND AGREEMENTS

It is clear that the Albanian question is both a factor for instability in Macedonia and a major threat to the integrity of Macedonia's borders.

It is clear that the Albanian question is both a factor for instability in Macedonia and a major threat to the integrity of Macedonia's borders. That it is one of the very few threats to Macedonia's borders is primarily due to the fact that Macedonia inherited delimited and demarcated international borders from communist Yugoslavia.

Since the border with Yugoslavia is the only Macedonian border which was originally an internal republican border and was only recognised as an international border following the break-up of the common state, it was, not surprisingly, subject to dispute. The most important dispute concerned the monastery of Prohor Pcinjski which seemed to be, according to recent evidence, a few hundred metres inside Serbia. The monastery is symbolically important for Macedonia because essential decisions which during World War II led to the formation and constitution of the Macedonian Republic were made there. It is logical that present-day Macedonia is keen to have such a place within its territory, especially given that the borderline is not clear in that area.

In order to delimit a common border Yugoslavia and Macedonia established a Joint Boundary Commission in 1996 and tasked it to delimit the borderline and prepare a boundary agreement. The Commission's work was finalised at the 14th meeting held in Skopje on 14-15 February 2001 and a border agreement was signed on 23 February by the President of Macedonia, Boris Trajkovski and the President of Yugoslavia, Vojislav Kostunica. The ceremony was held during the Summit of leaders of Southeast European States. Both presidents emphasised that the agreement was the result of good relations between the two states and their contribution to

...a border agreement was signed on 23 February...

regional stability. The Macedonian parliament ratified the agreement on 1 March 2001. It will enter into force one month after ratification by the Yugoslav parliament, which at the time of writing was still outstanding.

The *Agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia on the Definition and Description of the State Border* includes a detailed description of the 280km-long borderline. The borderline is also depicted on a set of topographic maps at 1:25,000 scale. It has been proposed that the borderline should be demarcated following the agreement. With regard to the two states' most contentious dispute – that concerning the monastery of Prohor Pcinjski – it is understood that although this site remains on the Yugoslav side of the line a special agreement will govern its maintenance and allow Macedonians to visit the monastery as well as Yugoslavs to visit certain sites on the Macedonian side of the boundary.

The border agreement was clearly in the interest of both sides. Macedonia strengthened its international position and hoped to secure further guarantees against a spillover of the crisis in Kosovo into Macedonia. Yugoslavia had the opportunity to continue its reintegration into the international community as well as to re-affirm its sovereignty over Kosovo which it has not effectively exercised since 1999 and the NATO intervention. The deterioration in the security situation on the Macedonia-Yugoslav border also brought some benefit to the Yugoslav side with the UN Security Council decision to allow Yugoslav forces to deploy in the ground safety security zone on the Kosovo border. It is a small but significant move from Belgrade's perspective, not only for the new government's efforts to re-establish control over areas of the country from which its military had been banned, but also for its efforts to re-establish its image and confidence within the international community.

CONCLUSIONS

Macedonia's regional position remains weak and vulnerable, a fact underlined by the recent eruption of violence in the border area.

Macedonia's future stability will continue to depend on developments in the region. In spite of continuous inter-communal tensions Macedonia managed to secure initial internal stability and has been successful so far in strengthening democratic institutions and order. However, as the country "*stuck right in the middle of the Balkan chaos*" (Ripley, 1999), Macedonia's regional position remains weak and vulnerable, a fact underlined by the recent eruption of violence in the border area. The events at the beginning of 2001 have brought the Macedonia-Yugoslavia border into international focus. The border can be considered something of a paradox since it would be logical to expect normalisation and transborder cooperation to follow the border agreement: instead, within a few days of the agreement being signed armed conflicts occurred. Until recently, international support for Macedonia's stability, namely the UN and later NATO military presence there, has proved to be effective and has been widely accepted as successful. Such preventative intervention can serve as a model for continued international assistance in the future.

Mladen Klemenčić is a Croatian political geographer working with the Lexicographic Institute in Zagreb. He is a former IBRU Fellow and is regional editor for former Yugoslavia for the Boundary and Security Bulletin.

However, the latest events are a serious test for the international community and its policies. Macedonian officials roundly blamed KFOR for ineffectiveness and failure to prevent guerrilla activities in the border area aimed against Macedonia. Given that KFOR has done little to normalise life in Kosovo itself, it seems that NATO's presence in the region as well as its overall credibility will indeed be challenged by developments on the Macedonia-Yugoslavia border in the future.

Bibliography

- Chiclet, C. (1999) 'Macedonia risks falling apart', *Le monde diplomatique*, January 1999 (www.monde-diplomatique.fr/en/1999/01/13maced).
- Geroski, B. (1995) 'A Precedent for Prevention', pp.63-69 in: Cohen, B, and Stamkoski G. (eds) *With no Peace to Keep*, London: Grainpress Ltd.
- Gow, J. (1997) *Triumph of the Lack of Will: International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War*, London: Hurst & Company.
- Kusovac, Z. (2000) 'Macedonia: surviving ethnicity?', *Jane's Intelligence Review* Vol.12, No. 8: 12-15.
- Poulton, H. (1993) *The Balkans, Minorities and States in Conflict*, London: Minority Rights Publications.
- Ripley, T. (1999) 'Life in the Balkan 'tinderbox' remains as dangerous as ever', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol.11, No.3: 10-13

Notes

¹ *Vjesnik*, Zagreb, 12 February 2001.

² TOL, 'Week in Review' 12 March 2001.