

# THE MACEDONIAN PERSPECTIVE ON SERBIA-KOSOVO RELATIONS

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## Introduction

Macedonia is and has been in the past directly affected by the relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Not only because the country is neighbouring both Kosovo and Serbia on the north, but also due to the fact that there is a large Albanian ethnic minority in Macedonia. According to the last census conducted in 2002, around 25% of the population in Macedonia is Albanian. Although constantly subject to increased tensions, the multi-ethnic character of the country has been nurtured ever since the independence of the country. In all the governments so far, there has been an Albanian partner. This was the case even in situations when the political party from the Macedonian ethnic bloc had the majority to form a government. The interethnic relations in the latest period can be assessed as fairly good, but fragile ever since the armed conflict in 2001. However, taking in consideration the fragility of the Macedonian society in general and weak state institutions any significant distortions from outside would have consequences for these relations.

## Interethnic relations in Macedonia and its security policy

In March 1999, when international efforts to achieve peace failed and NATO started its bombarding campaign, a large number of refugees fled to Macedonia. Within 9 weeks, the country received 344,500 refugees, which is around 17% of the population of Macedonia at that time.<sup>1</sup> Of the refugees, 150,000 (over 40 per cent) stayed with host families, many of them were hosted by Albanian families. Whether relatives or not, many Albanian families felt a certain duty to help their fellow Albanians.<sup>2</sup> In 2016 the Ministry of Interior disclosed that around 600 undocumented Serb, Roma and Albanian refugees from Kosovo had remained in the country.<sup>3</sup> Still today, this represents a problem not dealt with in Macedonia. The situation in Kosovo back in 1999 led to an increase in tensions between the ethnic Albanian and Macedonian communities in Macedonia, deteriorating already fragile relations. Having in mind the three given scenarios, Serbia-Kosovo border changes/

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR. 1999. "[Country report - The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.](#)" UNHCR Global Report 1999.

<sup>2</sup> McKinsey, Kitty. 1999. "[Macedonia: Ethnic Albanians Open Homes To Kosovars.](#)" Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty.

<sup>3</sup> Hasani, Miradije. 2016. "[Косовски бегалци очекуваат постојан престој во Македонија.](#)" TV 21.

swapping of territories offers the most grim future to the region, to Macedonia at most. Back in 1998/99 there was a record number of Macedonian citizens joining the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Later, the relationship between the KLA and the National Liberation Army (NLA), which surged in the 2001 conflict in Macedonia, was very difficult to define. However, prominent figures, such as the leader of the largest Albanian party in Macedonia, *DUI*, which has been in power as a coalition partner for 17 years, was also part of the KLA, and a commander in the NLA during the 2001 conflict.

This close relationship between Kosovo and Macedonia Albanians confirms that any turbulence coming from Kosovo would reignite the feeling of solidarity and ethnic belonging, but also internal problems for the security of Macedonia. Talks about any border changes or swapping of territories have already ignited tensions within Kosovo itself, but also filling the social media space in Macedonia with concern. Both Macedonians and Albanians in Macedonia fear any change in this direction.

The tensions that any exchange of territories or border change would create, would definitely include the involvement of Albanians - Macedonian citizens - in any activity, including paramilitary activities, that might surge. According to article 322-a of the criminal law of Macedonia 'a person who, contrary to law, creates, organizes, recruits, transports, organizes transportation, equips, trains or otherwise prepares a person or a group for participation in a foreign army, police, paramilitary or parapolitical formations, organized groups or individually, outside of the territory of the Republic of Macedonia shall be convicted to a term of imprisonment of no less than five years.' Having these cases prosecuted would mean that we will have heightened tensions between the Albanian and Macedonian community in Macedonia again. The Albanian community will expect from the Albanian parties in power to stand in defence of any person prosecuted for the offence. Following the practice of having an Albanian party as a coalition partner, any demands for amnesty would cause troubles in the government coalition. Most importantly, the Macedonian community will again feel that there is impunity, following the experience of the amnesty for the 2001 cases. This situation would also create major distrust between the Macedonian and the Albanian community, most probably causing isolated incidents that the recent period haven't been lacking in. Both the case of "Divo Naselje" and the attack on the MP Zijadin Sela during the 27th of April attack in the parliament, had ethnic background. We must mention also the effect the "Tirana Platform" - a program/list of political demands from three Macedonian parties representing mainly ethnic Albanians, and drafted in Tirana - had on the heightened inter-ethnic tensions in Macedonia. The "Tirana Platform" confirms that any outside influence in the inter-ethnic policies in Macedonia lead to a higher level of distrust between the communities.

Preserving the status quo, even though a more desirable scenario than any talk of border changes, is not a sustainable „solution“. With Kosovo citizens having no perspective

in the country, and waiting for visa liberalisation, with the passing of time will have the effect it had in 2015, when an estimated 50,000 people left Kosovo for EU countries.<sup>4</sup> On the other side, Serbia will not have a chance to advance in its EU accession negotiations without addressing the Kosovo issue. Tensions may not be far away. Considering the close relationship between Kosovo Albanians, and Albanians from Macedonia, we can not rule out that with the stagnation of the normalization of the relations between Serbia and Kosovo, it would mean a larger number of Kosovars applying for Macedonian citizenship through family relations.

Last, the most desirable scenario – the normalization of relations based on a legally binding bilateral agreement to be reached through the ongoing EU-moderated Serbia-Kosovo negotiations. In 2012, after a mediation from Catherine Ashton, the then EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the Commission, both parties came up with a joint declaration “We agreed to continue the dialogue on normalization of relations between the two sides and both are committed to working together”. We choose to believe this is true. In the process of the normalization of relations, Serbia and Kosovo have a good example in their neighbour. The past year Macedonia was able to find a compromise with Bulgaria, and most importantly with Greece. This positive example is to be pointed out to the countries in the region. Even though the process of acceptance of the agreements as good and beneficial for the country is still ongoing, the citizens have found a way to make a compromise on their way towards EU. As with every compromise – a Serbia-Kosovo agreement would require both countries to accept a deal which is not fully satisfactory for either side. However, going back to how the Serbia-Kosovo relations would influence inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia, this scenario offers the best perspective for inter-ethnic relations in the Balkans. Albanians in Macedonia will support a deal that offers a clear progress for Kosovo and its citizens. In this direction, the influence of Serbia-Kosovo relations would be insignificant to the inter-ethnic relations in Macedonia. Most importantly, Macedonia would be able to nurture the Albanian- Macedonian relations without foreign influence.

### Bilateral/Multilateral relations

Macedonia has nurtured good neighbourly relations with both countries for years. The borders with Serbia and Kosovo are demarcated and officially recognised by all parties. All three are involved in many international fora, including the most regional prestigious forums, the Western Balkans Summit (Berlin process). It took Serbia 5 years to recognise Macedonia and was the only country in the region that did not congratulate Macedonia and Greece for reaching the bilateral agreement regarding the ‘name issue’. The Macedonian

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander, Harriet. 2015. [“Exodus from Kosovo: Why thousands have left the Balkans.”](#) The Telegraph.

recognition of Kosovo sparked reactions in Serbia, however, not to the extent that the relations were extensively damaged. The Serbian authorities were timely informed about the Macedonian interest to formally recognise Kosovo as well as the respective timing of announcing and implementing the decision. In addition, the decision came as no surprise to the Serbian authorities. They have expected it having in mind the large Albanian ethnic minority in Macedonia and the domestic pressure exercised by the Albanian party in the government. However, the dispute between the Macedonian and Serbian Orthodox church presents a constant burden to the relation between the countries. Although Serbia is officially a secular country, the bond between the church and Serbian state is strong. Therefore, there is an opinion that the Serbian authorities are not doing enough to push for resolution of this issue. The former Gruevski government maintained close relation with Serbia for which they got praised by Belgrade during the worst political and institutional crisis in Macedonia since the armed conflict in 2001. This was sometimes even at the expense of jeopardising the relations with Kosovo. The coming to power of the new Social-democratic government in Skopje lead by Prime Minister Zaev has changed the situation on the ground. Macedonia has joined the group of countries that supports Kosovo membership in regional, European and international bodies such as UNESCO or Interpol. This increased international efforts in support of Kosovo coincided with the action from the Serbian government to recall its embassy staff from Skopje. The claims over hostile activities against Belgrade have strained the relation between the two countries, at least for a very short period of time. A return to normality happened quickly and exceptionally swiftly leaving the impression that it was just an act of showing discontent on side of Belgrade side at recent Macedonian engagement in enhanced support to Kosovo. On the other side, this diplomatic act was also directly related to the request by Skopje to withdraw their intelligence officer Goran Zivaljevic that was inside the Parliament's premises when the protesters stormed into the building on the night of 27th of April, 2017.

The eventual Serbia-Kosovo resolution in the direction of border correction and exchange of territories would influence bilateral relations with both countries. The Macedonian position<sup>5</sup> is opposed to this proposal and any similar deal that would envisage any kind of redrawing of maps, and will take Macedonia, but also the region, backwards. There are no ethnic-based solutions to the problems in the Balkans. 'One society for all' was the policy expressed by the Macedonian Minister of foreign affairs Dimitrov in an interview with the BBC. The tensions that would appear domestically in the government functioning, and in the society as a whole, would have influence on the bilateral relations with both countries. The country would try to balance its acts internationally. However, internal challenges in dealing with the issues would appear. The divisions on multiple levels would have an effect on the way the country will manage its relations with the immediate neighbours on its northern border.

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<sup>5</sup> BBC iPlayer Radio. 2018. ["Border corrections' talks haunt the Balkans."](#) BBC Radio.

Preserving the status quo is a scenario which occasionally disrupts the bilateral and multilateral relations propelled by actions of Serbia and Kosovo. Whenever there is an issue on the international agenda that concern these two countries such as the integration of Kosovo in Interpol, problems would arise. Macedonia would be placed in a difficult spot to reach a decision and choose a position with which most probably one of the sides would be dissatisfied. The constant one-upmanship between Serbia and Kosovo in the framework of numerous regional foras is also case in point. On one of the Western Balkans Summit (Berlin process) meetings in Banja Luka (Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina) in February 2018, the host country refused to invite Kosovo.<sup>6</sup> As a sign of solidarity towards our northern neighbour, the Macedonian Deputy Prime Minister for EU affairs Osmani cancelled his participation in the meeting mentioning that he has reached this decision not as an Albanian, but as a European. The same action was taken only by the Albanian MFA. There were numerous articles in Macedonia questioning this decision and the way it was reached, that even the Prime Minister Zaev needed to intervene and clarify the situation. More specifically, the decision was given a clear ethnic dimension. This gives a sense of the difficulties that Macedonia is facing when dealing with these two countries.

Normalization of relations based on legally binding bilateral agreement to be reached through the ongoing EU-moderated Serbia-Kosovo negotiations is the scenario Macedonia is pushing for. This will put an end to unnecessary difficulties and positions the country would be faced with and is in line with the policy of the new government in Skopje that we all, the countries from the Western Balkans, need to advance and to move jointly towards an EuroAtlantic future. Furthermore, emerging as a regional success story from a bilateral dispute that had been dragging the country down since independence, the normalisation of relations is the most preferred and desirable scenario for Macedonia.

## Security in the region of South Eastern Europe

Macedonia would be voting in a referendum on 30th of September 2018. The vote, although consultative in nature, will determine the series of events that need to follow in order to complete the implementation of the agreement with Greece. A positive referendum result opens the doors for constitutional amendments to be passed in the Parliament as one of the last steps before throwing the ball into Greece's court. If everything goes well and the Greek parliament votes in favour of the deal, then Macedonia has a clear road ahead to NATO accession. By acceding, the number of Western Balkans countries under the NATO umbrella will increase, one big question will be closed and Macedonia will seal its European future in the existing boundaries. The countries which are

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<sup>6</sup> Gazeta express. 2018. "[Pacolli asks the EU react after Kosovo was excluded from a regional summit.](#)" Gazeta Express.

the subject of this analysis, namely Serbia and Kosovo, are two of the remaining three countries (in addition to Bosnia and Herzegovina) in the Balkans that are not members of NATO, and Serbia is the only one that officially expressed its military neutrality. Therefore, Serbia-Kosovo bilateral issue is one of the two remaining open issues that can pose a threat to the stability and security of the entire region, with a huge potential of spillover into other territories.

From this perspective, the scenario with exchange of territories between the two countries would be detrimental for the region. We have witnessed such or similar ideas in the past and they have never worked. Whether that be the Milosevic-Tudjman deal how to divide Bosnia or the proposal of the former Prime Minister Gjorgjievski for exchange of territories during the armed conflict in 2001. Judging from the capacity of the respective leaders in Serbia and Kosovo that are pushing for this solution and the lack of political will and interest to implement the already signed agreement under EU auspices, any solution that includes land swapping will end in bloodshed and with consequences for the entire region.

Status-quo scenario is difficult to sustain in medium to long-term. It will either lean towards the negative scenario or towards normalization. The situation as it is in the moment will only increase the frustrations on all sides. Kosovo will be without a EU perspective and would be stopped in any attempt to revise its policies and prove itself internationally, whereas Serbia's accession process will be stalled due to lack of results and progress in the negotiation chapter 35. In addition, the EU would lose the momentum created with Macedonia-Greece deal and probable opening of accession negotiation with Macedonia and Albania in 2019. In this case, if the two countries and their political leaders could not deliver results, then the history has shown that they turn towards violence and threats in order to drag attention.

The scenario in which the two countries normalise their relations through the EU-moderated negotiations is expected to produce a long-lasting solution that will bring sustainable peace to the region. This would also open the prospects for both countries to progress in the EU accession process and pave the way for NATO membership of Kosovo. This means, that only in this case, the circumstances will be created and the atmosphere shaped for the 5 EU non-recognisers to proceed and recognise Kosovo as an independent country.

## Conclusion

It is in the Macedonian interest to nurture good-neighbourly relations with its immediate neighbours, both Serbia and Kosovo. Because of the ethnic composition of the country and its internal fragility, it is important for Macedonia that the bilateral dispute between these two countries come to an end. From the Macedonian perspective, and in relations to the consequences each of the three scenarios would have on internal interethnic-relations, bilateral/multilateral relations and security in the region of South Eastern Europe, the most desirable scenario would be the normalization of relations based on legally binding bilateral agreement to be reached through the ongoing EU- moderated Serbia-Kosovo negotiations. This also represents a continuity initiated with the launch of the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue in 2011 that Macedonia endorsed. This solution will also build security and provide stability in the region, but will also open/enhance the EU perspective of both countries, in the interest of their citizens. Stable Serbia and Kosovo means a better future for Macedonia and brighter and more secure future for the whole region.