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A dangerous inter-ethnic balance in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

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The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) has entered its most difficult security situation since 2001; the series of recent inter-ethnic violent incidents have jeopardized peaceful coexistence between Slav-Macedonians and Albanians, the country's two major ethnic communities. The genuine fear for ethnic violence in FYROM added to the strained atmosphere and tensions in the north of the Ibar River, and the second set of ethnic Albanian arrests in Presevo Valley have fueled the situation in the area. The NATO summit in Chicago, where Skopje hoped to shift the Alliance's position on the country's membership, did not manage to bring the calm after the torment. With FYROM's progress towards Euro-Atlantic institutions temporarily blocked, concerns over the country's stability remain center stage. The recent escalation of inter-ethnic tensions raises fears of renewed instability in the country.

Five months of inter-ethnic tension

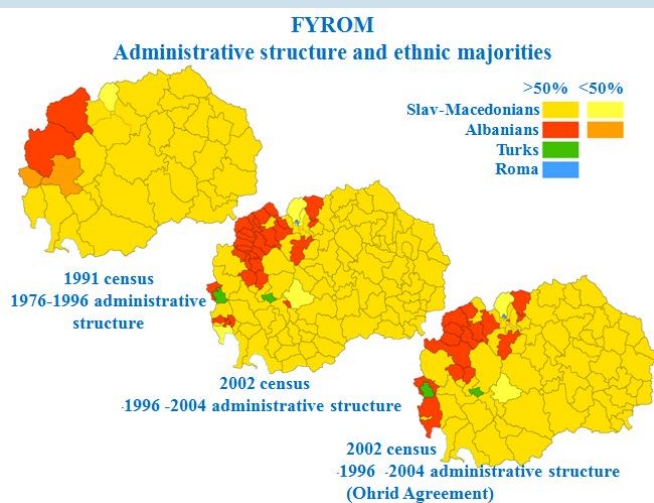
More than a decade after the country teetered on the verge of an ethnic war, the tensions between the Slavic and the Albanian populations resurfaced in January 2012 when an Orthodox church was set on fire in Struga. Many regard this as a response to an incident at the Vevcani carnival where local Christian men, dressed up as women in burkas, mocked the Koran. This was highly offensive to Muslim Albanians who responded by taking down the state flag from the Struga local government building while chanting nationalist slogans and burning Orthodox churches. Both incidents further aggravated already frosty ethnic relations.

Inter-ethnic tensions continued in February when an off-duty Slav-Macedonian policeman shot dead two ethnic Albanians in a dispute over a parking space in the city of Gostivar. This incident was followed by a dramatic escalation of tensions and led to a series of protests and violent attacks. During the first half of March, gangs of Slav-Macedonian and ethnic Albanian youths attacked people in commuter buses and in the streets of Skopje, the nation's capital, and in other towns. The call for peace

on behalf of the Interior Minister Gordana Jankuloska and the foreign ambassadors in the country had little success and tensions continued.

Fears of ethnic conflict were stoked in April further by the discovery of five slain Slav Macedonian fishermen beside a lake at the village of Smiljkovci, north of Skopje. Speculation about Albanian-led gang-style killing was reinforced by threats, made by a mysterious self-proclaimed organization called ‘Army for the Liberation of Albanian Lands,’ to launch attacks after its ultimatum to the government in Skopje to withdraw from “occupied Albanian territories”. On April 16, hundreds of angry young Slav-Macedonians staged a huge demonstration in Skopje to protest the Smiljkovci killings. The protesters chanted nationalist slogans that blamed ethnic Albanians for the killings. The rally spiraled into violence when young Slav-Macedonians tried to enter Albanian districts, but the police managed to cordon them off.

On May 20, suspects were arrested during a massive police operation in Skopje and surrounding Albanian villages. The Interior Minister was quick to describe them as “followers of Radical Islam,” and alleged that some had undergone training in Afghanistan. Five of the arrested were eventually charged with the lakeside killings and with terrorism. These charges were widely disbelieved among Albanians and in response thousands of them took to the

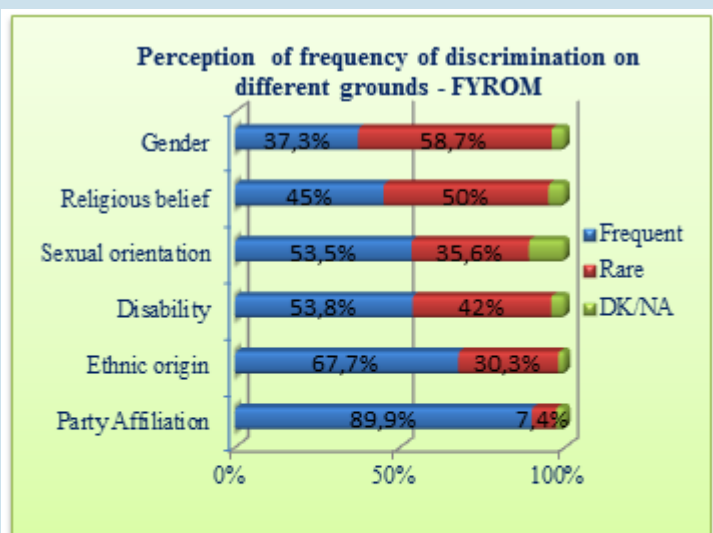


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streets protesting the methods used to capture the suspects. The Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), Mr. Gruevski's coalition partner and the largest Albanian ethnic party, denied collective responsibility for the killings. The mixture of Islamist and Albanian ultra-nationalist slogans heard during the Albanian demonstrations raised fears of bringing such radical elements to the fore. Some analysts talk about an Islamist strategy of radicalizing or intimidating the mainstream Muslim population. At the same time, Muslim infighting continues but is considered largely internal politicking between rival ethnic Albanian parties over financial interests and not as an issue of genuine religious extremism. That said, the established Albanian parties seem to face a dilemma of strategy: should they become more visibly Islamic or to continue their pro-Western strategy, a strategy that is considered crucial for the peaceful coexistence of the two ethnic communities?

The fear of ethnic conflict mobilized officials and representatives of both communities to call for restraint. Meanwhile, the main Slav-Macedonian parties are embroiled in a blame game over the incidents. The opposition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) has accused the governing VMRO-DPMNE of orchestrating the incidents to increase public support for the government. SDSM has insisted that this was meant to relieve the pressure from the

government at a time when the country has faced economic stagnation and has no real prospect of joining Euro-Atlantic institutions. PM Nikola Gruevski denied all allegations. Some sources have accused Greece and Serbia of provoking conflict in order to destabilize the country. But this allegation fails the test of reality as an unstable FYROM is not in the interest of either of these two countries. Some sources accuse the political elite of the country of governing through exploiting (sometimes) extremely ultra-nationalistic discourse while other sources claim that the latest developments are the result of an Albanian strategy to change the constitutional order of FYROM.



The discrimination on the grounds of **ethnic origin** is perceived as second most frequent grounds in FYROM's society. This is believed by the greatest part of the ethnic Albanians (84.7%), but also by the majority of Slav-Macedonians (60.4%).

Source: A research report about the "Discrimination in FYROM on the Grounds of Ethnic Origin" published by the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation, March 2011.

Inter-ethnic relations: eleven years after the Ohrid Framework Agreement

FYROM has a history of ethnic tension. The internal relations between the Slav-Macedonians and the ethnic Albanians remain the most sensitive issue affecting the stability and the security of the country. After the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001, ethnic tensions diminished for

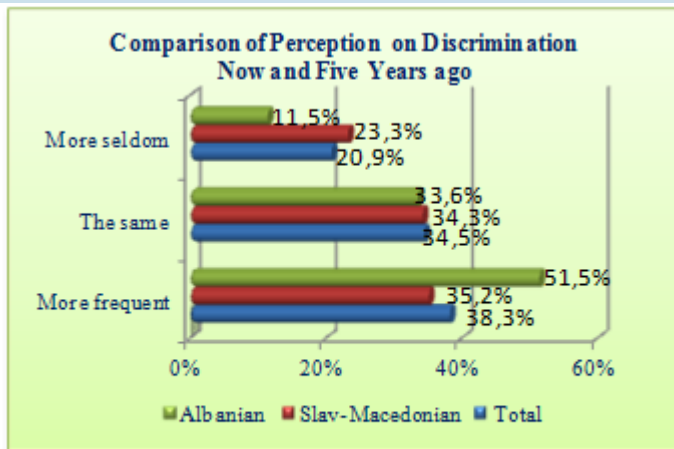
some time. But eleven years after the agreement that put an end to the Albanian insurgency, misunderstandings and lack of trust persist between the two major ethnic communities. The two groups have limited contacts at the societal level and in recent years the contacts are diminishing further. Trust between Slav-Macedonians and Albanians has hit rock bottom.

At the core of ethnic Albanians' grievances lie perceptions of being looked down upon and treated as second-class citizens. Albanians accept that much of the Ohrid Agreement has been implemented, but complain that the process has been too slow and has not translated into a real commitment to create a multi-ethnic state in which they will have equal decision-making power. Their main struggle is for economic, national and cultural rights and equal representation nationally, but the country remains dangerously polarized and the full implementation of the Ohrid agreement is doubtful. The government of Nikola Gruevski has been criticized by Albanians for neither doing enough to ensure equitable representation nor to implement the law on languages and take a stand on preventing cultural exclusion. FYROM's segregated education system meanwhile has only become more entrenched.

Additionally, the grandiose government program 'Skopje 2014' has undermined inter-ethnic reconciliation. The anti-Albanian animus of rising "ancient" Macedonian nationalism is a cause of serious concern for the Albanian

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community. The program’s aim has been to transform the capital into a European metropolis with churches, bridges, and numerous classical-style monuments of ancient and medieval heroes, yet in the process it has appealed to Slav-Macedonian nationalism and given it a visual expression. Generally, Albanians view ‘Skopje 2014’ as a project which symbolically excludes them from their country’s capital. Last year’s clashes between Albanians and the police over the building of a memorial church in the Kale site of Skopje is just one example that exposes the ethnic division brought out by the program. Albanians thought that building a church in the grounds of an Ottoman fortress in an Albanian majority district was a provocation and an attempt at historical falsification. For Albanians and other Muslims, ‘Skopje 2014’ is just another chapter in a century-long process of marginalization and destruction of their architectural heritage. Inter-ethnic tensions are used by Albanian political parties, which have tried to use the issue of anti-Albanian discrimination as a key voter-mobilisation factor. This demonstrates also the lack of vision on the part of Albanian parties and their inability to present a real platform for the future of Albanians inside FYROM. DUI, as part of the ruling coalition, is losing credibility among Albanians; analysts fear that DUI’s weakening is leaving a void in which radical Islam may spread its influence.



Source: “Discrimination in FYROM in the ground of ethnic origin”, Macedonian Center for International Cooperation, March 2011

However, the Slav-Macedonians within the country do not share the Albanians’ views. The Ohrid Agreement is perceived as being unbalanced between the Albanian community and the Slav-Macedonians because it gives Albanians too much leverage with respect to domestic affairs. Slav-Macedonians are fearful that every demand of the Albanian side is just a step towards the formation of a ‘Greater Albania’ that will include parts of their own country. The dissatisfaction of the majority in a multiethnic state could have negative effects on social cohesion and stability. Thus, the governing VMRO-DPMNE’s emphasis on national pride and particularly the Skopje 2014 project has boosted Slav-Macedonian self-confidence after years where members of the ethnic majority felt they were the major losers of the process. PM Nikola Gruevski has built his popularity and political success on

this patriotic discourse which has contributed negatively to inter-ethnic coexistence. Additionally, poverty and unemployment contribute to social frustration and rising tensions.

NATO membership: dividing rather than uniting?

The inability to solve the name dispute with Greece, and the consequent failure to make progress towards NATO and EU integration, exacerbates tensions between Albanians and Slav-Macedonians. Both groups agree on their country’s goal of Euro-Atlantic integration and this could potentially act as a factor contributing to the unity of the country, but there is a danger that NATO accession could shift from a unifying to a divisive feature as the two major ethnicities disagree on its implications for the name issue. The majority of Slav-Macedonians would take the name over NATO membership, while the majority of Albanians feel exactly the opposite. Albanians are especially frustrated at successive governments’ inability to resolve the name issue and see themselves as the victims of Nikola Gruevski’s nationalist rhetoric. Thus, they support a quick compromise to the name issue for faster NATO membership.

After the December 2011 favorable ruling of the International Court of Justice, FYROM’s political leadership embarked on an active campaign in view of the Chicago Summit which was held on 20-21 May 2012. Although the NATO officials had declared that enlargement would not be on the agenda of the summit, FYROM’s foreign minister Nikola Poposki traveled to Washington DC to convince the Americans that his country is contributing more than its fair share to NATO missions and should be rewarded with membership in the Alliance.

Additionally, a group of Albanian intellectuals had sent a letter to the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, asking for NATO membership. They called on the American administration to take this step before the security situation in FYROM deteriorates further. According to them, the name issue is less important and has been dramatized by the Slav-

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Macedonian political leadership for political gain. The Croatian-Slovenian and Kosovar-Serbian compromises have shown that even in much more complicated and politically sensitive situations there is a solution when the political will exists, but the populist policies followed by Nikola Gruevski do not help. Albanian analysts argue that any option other than Euro-Atlantic integration can be dangerous to the stability of FYROM's multi-ethnic society. Thus, they claim that an invitation for FYROM to join the Alliance can prevent the region from experiencing a new Bosnia or Kosovo.

In Chicago, NATO members deferred FYROM's application for membership for 2014, maintaining their position that an invitation depends on a mutually acceptable solution to the name issue. Both Slav-Macedonian and Albanian opposition parties accused PM Nikola Gruevski of isolating the country and expressing dissatisfaction with the way the government is handling relations with the EU and NATO in a period that even Kosovo has moved closer to EU by receiving the visa liberalization roadmap. For Nikola Gruevski, the nation-building process has far greater importance than NATO membership. This position enjoys wide support among Slav-Macedonians, who see in 'antiquisation' a symbolic 'revenge' for the 2001 victory of the Albanian insurgency and the Ohrid Agreement that followed. Having the support of most Slav-Macedonians, VMRO-DPMNE will continue to antagonize Albanians, upping the risk of destabilization.

Coexistence between Slav-Macedonians and Albanians in FYROM remains a challenge. Both groups are suspicious of the actions of each other; there are mutual prejudices and many people actually have internalized their negative opinions of the opposing ethnic group. FYROM hangs between Europeanisation and inter-ethnic violence. In the absence of any meaningful solution to the country's internal issues, some Albanian voices will likely explore more radical options which could further destabilize the country. Political elites still have a long road ahead en route to uniting the country's communities.

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