

**Conflict Studies Research Centre**



**The 2001 Conflict  
in FYROM - Reflections**

**Institute of War &  
Peace Reporting**

**June 2004**

# **The 2001 Conflict in FYROM - Reflections**

## **Institute of War & Peace Reporting**

### **Key Points**

- \* In FYROM the Ochrid Accords process remains central to the future of the state.
- \* The extent to which extreme Slav opinion in that period is now shared by the Slav majority will determine the long-term success of the process, and this is difficult to gauge.
- \* Though the economy and unemployment continue to cause concern, open paramilitary activity has largely ceased.
- \* The National Liberation Army leaders are still actively involved in FYROM politics.

### **Contents**

#### Introduction

James Pettifer

From Army to Party – The Politics of the NLA 1-16  
By Iso Rusi

Lions & Tigers – The Militarisation of the Macedonian Right 17-28  
By Saso Orsanoski

The Ohrid Framework Agreement Negotiations 29-36  
By Vasko Popetrevski & Veton Latifi

Same World, Parallel Universes – The Role of the Media  
in the Macedonian Conflict 37-43  
By Gordana Icevska & Ilir Ajdini

The papers in this publication are copyright IWPR 2002 and were first published in IWPR's book 'Ohrid & Beyond – A Cross-Ethnic Investigation into the Macedonia Crisis', IWPR, Skopje and London, 2002.

### **Want to Know More ...?**

See: James Pettifer, '*FYROM After the Concordia Mission*', CSRC, G129, January 2004, <http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

For general background and an account of the conflict see, John Phillips, '*Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels in the Balkans*', I B Tauris, London, August 2004, and other relevant CSRC and International Crisis Group, <http://www.crisisweb.org> and US Institute of Peace papers.

*'Ohrid & Beyond – A Cross-Ethnic Investigation into the Macedonian Crisis'*, IWPR, Skopje and London, 2002.

### **Disclaimer**

The views expressed are those of the  
Author and not necessarily those of the  
UK Ministry of Defence

ISBN 1-904423-77-9

**Published By:**

**Defence Academy of the**  
**United Kingdom**

**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

Haig Road  
Camberley  
Surrey  
GU15 4PQ  
England

Telephone: (44) 1276 412995  
Fax: (44) 1276 686880  
Email: [csrc@da.mod.uk](mailto:csrc@da.mod.uk)  
<http://www.da.mod.uk/csrc>

**ISBN 1-904423-77-9**

# **Introduction**

**James Pettifer**

The three years since the 2001 conflict in Former Yugoslav Macedonia have seen a period of relative stabilisation and progress in the implementation of the Ochrid Accord agreement that formalised the end of the war. Although the economy remains a cause for serious concern and unemployment is very high, open military and paramilitary activity has largely ceased, except for isolated incidents and violence linked to crime and smuggling.

The papers reproduced in this document were originally produced by the Institute of War and Peace Reporting, as part of a project to assess the history of the conflict. They are of considerable interest in indicating the nature of what happened in 2001; and in particular civil-military relationships on both sides of the conflict, and the progress of the Ochrid negotiations. These are historical issues, but have an important bearing on the future of the state.

As such, they are likely to have permanent value in the historiography of the period in Macedonia, and in particular the history of the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA) and associated and successor movements. It is an axiom in the study of popular paramilitary and insurgency movements that such movements often have a long learning curve, and it can take many years of often difficult experience before they attain military efficiency. The paradigm in the history of communist-period insurgencies was perhaps the Long March in China, but there are many other examples. The National Liberation Army (NLA) in the 2001 Macedonian conflict was in some senses a successor organisation to the KLA in Kosova between 1993 and 1999, but the relationship between the two is not always clear and has been a matter of much controversy and often ill-founded and dogmatic political assumptions, where both are seen to be the products of a secretive underground conspiracy.

In reality, the development of both organisations followed patterns which are deeply rooted in local political and military contexts, and had different leadership styles and individual leadership capacity. An important issue for future historians will be the assessment of the extent to which the organisation of the NLA was consciously based on an attempt to avoid some of the weaknesses and political and military errors which affected the Kosova force in that war; for instance, the avoidance of overreaching beyond their military capacity that led to the reverses for the KLA in Milosevic's 'First Offensive' period in spring 1998 in south west Kosova. In turn, this was linked to the attempts of the KLA to take and hold sizeable towns, and to break out of its rural strongholds.

A central question in the history of the 2001 war in Macedonia is likely to be whether NATO in fact 'saved' Skopje from the NLA in its most ascendant period, and if this is the case, whether it led to some of the international community's deals with the NLA leadership that followed, that in time led to the Ochrid agreement. On the other hand, some analysts believe that it was never the intention of the NLA to occupy or partition Skopje and that the leadership had learned from the mistakes of the KLA in Kosova in 1998 and did not over reach at key moments in the war.

Recruitment policy is also likely to be an important issue for historians' consideration. Compared to the KLA, the NLA was quite a difficult organisation to join: it was much better armed and trained and had a different internal paramilitary culture and modus operandi.

On the Slav side of the conflict, important issues are likely to be the determination of the extent to which their political leadership had become fragmented and demoralised by the conflict and as a result led to the militarisation of the Slav community. It will be of interest to future historians to try to assess this, and also to see how far the public positions taken by the more militant Slav leaders were fully shared by their political constituency. This will have an important influence on the future if the Ochrid process breaks down at any point, with the possibility of a reignition of the conflict. Optimists generally believe that the allegedly more 'extreme' leaders such as Interior Minister Boskovski in the 2001 conflict were unrepresentative of majority Slav opinion, which is now prepared to see the implementation of the Ochrid deal, whereas pessimists believe that their outlook was, and is, widely shared amongst the Slav-Macedonians. If this is the case, it is likely to make full implementation of the Accords difficult.

The nature of the Ochrid negotiations has been little understood by the majority of commentators, as has the complex interaction between the different military and political components on the two sides, and in particular the Greek role in determining the limits of the Ochrid remit.

The publication of these papers is put forward in the hope of stimulating informed debate about these and other related issues, and CSRC is grateful to the Institute of War and Peace Reporting for permission to publish them.

## **From Army To Party The Politics of The NLA**

**Iso Rusi**

*(Publisher and editor of the weekly magazine LOBI)*

The early origins of the National Liberation Army, NLA, remain something of an enigma - not only for commentators and analysts, but even for many former rank and file members. From the beginning of the war in March 2001, the NLA enjoyed extensive coverage in the foreign media and after September 2001 coverage improved within Macedonia, yet many issues regarding the planning and preparation of NLA activities in Macedonia remain unclear.

This ambiguity results from a reluctance of those believed to be the main actors to make public their version of events. Ali Ahmeti, the principal political representative and former leader of the NLA, apparently believes that the time has not yet come to reveal the NLA's early codes of operation, or those of the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA. Material and communiqués predating the conflict are conspicuously absent from the NLA's official website (<http://www.shqiponjapress.com>).

Others are slightly more forthcoming, hinting they have information which could challenge popular perceptions. For example, Xhezair Shaqiri - also known as Commandant Hoxha, "Xheza" - claims that in 1999 Ahmeti believed that armed actions in Macedonia would be possible only in 2003 or 2004 at the earliest. Shaqiri, who led the group which entered the border village of Tanusevci in mid February 2001 and later directed NLA operations in the Skopje suburb of Aracinovo in June 2001, claims that Ahmeti made this assessment after KFOR entered Kosovo.

Some of the leadership of the National Democratic Party, NDP, an Albanian political party in Macedonia, were in close contact with the core of the NLA leadership even before the conflict in Macedonia. They recall meetings in Kosovo and Macedonia at the beginning of March 2001, in which the activities at Tetovo Kale were discussed and decided upon. If these details became public, the existing view about "who is who" in the former NLA would change, they say.

In November 2001, at a meeting in Sipkovic with the editors of the weekly magazine Lobi, former NLA spokesman Nazmi Beqiri revealed the existence of a "war diary" in which preparations for NLA activities in Macedonia were chronicled in detail. The diary was written under the pseudonym of Dern Korabi, identified during the war as an NLA spokesman, from whose email address the NLA and the Coordinating Council of Albanians in Macedonia sent press releases to the media. The same address is now used by Ali Ahmeti's party, The Democratic Union for Integration.

Lobi editorial staff could not persuade Beqiri, Ali Ahmeti and the NLA chief of staff Gezim Ostreni, to allow publication of the entire diary, although a single entry

describing the first contact between NLA representatives and the international community - in the form of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR - was published in Lobi's 2002 New Year's issue.

An attack on the Tearce police station in the Tetovo region and the subsequent communiqué of 23 January 2001, are widely perceived as the first NLA actions. The communiqué, entitled Communiqué No 4, was addressed to the German broadcaster Deutsche Welle and claimed NLA responsibility for the Tearce attack. It said the NLA had been formed after the failure of the Macedonian state to reform itself by legal means and in response to the use of force by the authorities.

“So far we, the Albanians in Macedonia, have sought our rights through dialogue in a constitutional and peaceful way,” it began. “Our demands have been ignored. The Macedonian government has responded to these peaceful approaches with a reign of terror, as seen in Skopje, Ladorishta, Tetovo, Gostivar and Kicevo.” The communiqué went on to call for foreign diplomatic involvement. “The anti-Albanian policy the Macedonian government has pursued so far has rendered the current Macedonian Albanian dialogue senseless. International mediation is needed before it can continue.” The communiqué then outlined the group's ultimate goal, stating that the NLA “... will fight until Macedonia constitutionally becomes a Macedonian-Albanian - or Albanian Macedonian - state,” before concluding, “We are in favour of preserving Macedonia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We respect NATO's interests in Macedonia and especially those of the USA”.

The main components of Communiqué No.4 were later reiterated in a letter attributed to Ali Ahmeti. Although the letter had no clear addressee, it was posted on the web site of the former NLA, at <http://shgiponiapress.com/html/shkresa/orgnderkangl.htm> and should therefore be considered as an “official” source. Judging by its other content, there is little doubt that it was written after the beginning of the war and, more specifically, after Ali Ahmeti had emerged as a public figure at the end of March-April 2001. The letter, elements of which are reproduced below, was written in English. It defines the principles and goals of the NLA in the following terms:

- a) *The NLA is committed to the preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the FYROM.*
- b) *That talks between parties in the conflict must take place with international intermediation.*
- c) *All Albanians who lived in the FYROM must have the right to be citizens of FYROM.*
- d) *To repatriate all the Albanians forcibly expelled by the Macedonian state.*
- e) *To conduct a census of the population and this must be undertaken by an important international institution.*
- f) *To change the constitution of the FYROM so that the following elements are sanctioned in the basic document.*
  - 1) *FYROM will be a state of two peoples: a Macedonian-Albanian state or an Albanian-Macedonian state;*



## From Army to Party – The Politics of The NLA

- 2) *Together with the Macedonian language, the Albanian language will become the official language;*
- 3) *Each community will be free to use its own national symbols;*
- 4) *To eliminate the discrimination in the economy and in the state administration;*
- 5) *To eliminate the discrimination in the political system, in the decision making process, and gerrymandering so that the elections reflect the will of the people;*
- 6) *To free all political prisoners and acknowledge the right to return to all the people persecuted for their political beliefs and the people who fled FYROM and live in exile.*

Communiqué No 4 was the first time these principles, which the NLA had consistently presented, were drawn together in a single document. It was not, however, the first communiqué issued by the NLA. The organisation had previously claimed responsibility for paramilitary activity in Macedonia in 1998, 1999 and 2000. These earlier statements implicated Fazli Veliu in the case of the “Kicevo bombers”, when small bombs were exploded near several Macedonian police stations in 1998 and 1999. Veliu was the leader of the National Movement of Kosovo, LPK, and one of the founders of both the KLA and the NLA. He is also Ali Ahmeti’s uncle, and both are from the Kicevo area. A further NLA communiqué from 30 January 2000 claimed responsibility for attacks on police stations in Skopje and Oslomej, and was posted on the website <http://www.kosovaelire.com>.

Alongside references to the NLA, this website included information on the petition for the release of Fazli Veliu from prison in Germany, where he was then awaiting extradition to Macedonia. On 13 March 2000 it was reported that the Association of Former Political Prisoners, AFPP, was collecting signatures in Macedonia to submit to the German Embassy protesting at Veliu’s detention, and that 20 MPs from Albanian political parties had signed the petition.

Subsequently the then Justice Minister, Xhevdet Nasufi, either withdrew or chose not to actively pursue the Macedonian request for Veliu’s extradition, and he was released in Germany. Nasufi was a member of the Democratic Party of the Albanians, DPA, and three members of the AFPP would later become founders and principal office-holders in the NDP. These reports certainly give grounds for speculation that connections did exist before 2001 between the NLA and the Albanian political parties in Macedonia.

### **Letter to Annan, Robertson & Prodi**

Previous connections with the Albanian political parties of Macedonia were played down in a later document produced by the NLA. While Communiqué No 4 was addressed to a German media organisation and the website posting by Ali Ahmeti took the form of an open letter, this later text took the form of formal diplomatic correspondence. It was dated on 24 April 2001, and addressed to an impressive list of recipients: Kofi Annan; George Robertson; Romano Prodi and Mircea Geoana, who were, respectively, Secretary General of the United Nations, Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, NATO, Chairman of the European Commission, and Chairman of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE. The letter was signed by Ali Ahmeti and written under the heading of the Cabinet of the Political Representative of the National Liberation Army.

The text is available on line at <http://shgiponjapress.com/html/shkresa/rnemoangl.htm>. Although the author (or authors) obviously sought to observe western norms, the letter is extremely long and repetitive, so only excerpts are reproduced here. The language is at times emotive, referring to the excesses of pan-Slavism, and employing terms like “apartheid” and “genocide” to describe the treatment of Albanians. The writer was probably not a native speaker, and certain parts are not entirely clear. Nonetheless, Ahmeti’s letter reiterates and expands the justification for NLA activism, and its goals. It portrays the NLA as the champion of a people victimised by the state in which they live, and lays out in greater detail than before the range of problems faced by the majority of Macedonia’s Albanian population.

*The letter opens by congratulating its addressees “for the consistent and the substantial contribution that the organisations you lead are giving to the cause of peace, and to the establishment of a just and lasting order in southeastern Europe and, in particular, in the former republics of the Socialist Yugoslav Federation”.*

*The letter then outlines its purpose in the following terms. “In the absence of proper channels of communication, and faced with an intensive malignant and speculative propaganda campaign, emanating from the state apparatus of the Former Republic of Macedonia, we wish to take the opportunity to write to you and inform you why we, the Albanian intellectuals, students, educators, peasants, and workers, have taken up weapons to fight in the ranks of the National Liberation Army for justice, liberty, and equality”.*

*The closing paragraphs list the core demands of the NLA, and a summary of their grievances. “We are asking that all Albanians in FYROM must have the right to be citizens of Macedonia, including economic emigrants and political exiles. All Albanians who were forced to migrate or were forcibly expelled by the Macedonian state must be repatriated. We are asking that a complete census of the population be taken and not a sample; we want this census to be taken by an impartial international institution and we would very much welcome your recommendation.*

*Yet, all these measures are preliminary and intended to create the necessary prerequisites for a true democratic state based on a modern understanding of citizenship. The whole body of laws, and in particular, the constitution of the FYROM must be changed to reflect the new reality and so it has to become a document to guarantee the rights of all citizens.*

*Thus, Macedonia cannot remain the ethnic property of a single ethnic group; it must be a state of two peoples. To us it is irrelevant how they call it, Macedonian-Albanian or Albanian-Macedonian. The point, though, is that Macedonia must not continue to be ethnic property in which the Albanians are segregated because of who they are. We demand that the Constitution be changed so that together with the Macedonian language, the Albanian language would become the other official language. Furthermore, we demand that each community must be free to use its own national symbols.*

*These changes ought to be reflected in the political, social and cultural life of Macedonia. To have trust in each other and make this entity a viable state, discrimination based on ethnic background in economy, employment, and in the state administration must be eliminated. This discrimination must be eliminated in all other sensitive areas such as education, science and culture. This discrimination based on ethnicity must not exist in the political system, in the decision-making*

## From Army to Party – The Politics of The NLA

*process. The pathologies of the political system, currently so widespread in Macedonia, such as gerrymandering, district drawing, vote buying and the like, must be eliminated so that the elections reflect the will of the people.*

*Finally, we demand that all political prisoners be freed. We demand that the state acknowledge the right to return to all the people persecuted for their political beliefs and the people who fled FYROM and live in exile. We consider all of the above as truly balanced demands that in the long run would make Macedonia a model of ethnic coexistence in the Balkans.*

*The simple, bare truth is that we are enemies of no one; we just - and only - want our families to live and prosper in peace without being considered as the modern slaves of an ethnic state. We are fighting because all other peaceful ways to avoid segregation, discrimination, and oppression, have been exhausted. We are fighting because no other avenues have been left open so we could, at least, hope to obtain justice for ourselves, for our families, for our relatives, and for our people.*

*At the time of the proclamation of the independence of Macedonia, all Albanians who live there wanted to believe that the past periods of repression were gone and were history. Democracy would be the solution to the problems that had torn this society apart in the past: ruthless police and state control, systematic segregation, economic marginalisation and exploitation, forcible migration, the criminalisation of an entire ethnic group, educational and cultural monopolisation, and the like. Unfortunately, the Albanians ended up discovering that these hopes were unfounded. The same elites who had mercilessly oppressed us in the past, emerged as the ruling elite of the new entity.”*

The 24 April letter was entirely consistent with previous statements from the NLA in early 2001. What it highlighted more explicitly was the gulf between the expectations of Albanians in Macedonia in the early 1990s, and the reality of their lives in the newly independent state. In the following passage, the letter made an implicit accusation that Albanian political parties had failed to deliver on promises to the citizens who had elected them, even though one or other party was always represented in the republic’s ruling coalitions. Later on, an explicit explanation for this failure was proffered, with the lack of progress through the political process blamed on Macedonian nationalism.

*“... whenever we sought to organise ourselves in political parties - so that we could use the proper democratic procedures to defend minority rights - we stood to discover that they would use the majority in the parliament to crush us. Whenever we decided to support one leader, hoping that a middle ground would be created, we found out that a lot of them were in their payroll. Whenever we demonstrated, they would send the police to beat, arrest, and jail our people. Whenever we would sign the petitions, the signatories would be interrogated and persecuted, and petitions would be simply disregarded. Whenever we would demand no taxation without representation, we would find out that the meaning of taxation, of representation, and of human rights was defined by this state determined to become ethnically cleansed as Macedonian. Whenever they decided to have a census, they conducted a ‘sample’ census and then claimed that this sample census mirrored the ethnic reality of Macedonia.*

*During the past decade we have been confronted with an avalanche of Macedonian nationalism. What made this experience more painful was that they were doing nothing new; as a matter of fact, nothing had changed from the past. The change that surprised us most was that even in the face of this mounting oppression, the*

*international community decided to close their eyes and proclaim this country, which was pursuing these disastrous policies, as a model of democracy. The false census was accepted without any qualifications. The Albanians asked for a university in their language and they got a private university. Our essentially political demands were presented as irrational, conducive to the destabilisation of Macedonia, and what was more ridiculous, as demands for a greater Albania.”*

Despite this catalogue of grievances and frustrations, the letter stressed that the Albanian minority did not seek the destruction of the Macedonian state or a change of borders. Again, this statement repeated and expanded statements in earlier communications from Ahmeti and the NLA.

*“At no point have the Albanians in Macedonia sought any solution of our problems in a redrawing of the borders or the breaking of the Macedonia [sic]. We have been committed to the preservation [of] Macedonia as an entity; we have been committed to the preservation [of] Macedonian territorial integrity and sovereignty. All what we have asked has been that Macedonia had to be our state, too, not just a state of another ethnic group, not just a state that oppresses us in the name of that ethnic group. All what we want is that Macedonia becomes a modern state based on citizenship and not on ethnicity, which in turn is easily manipulated by a small ruling elite.”*

And dialogue was the preferred way of achieving that: *“Even now, we continue to support political dialogue; we very much wish to avoid any confrontation with the ethnic Macedonians. We wish that our people, and their people, live in peace and without perpetuating or creating a myth of ethnic hatreds. That is also the reason why we have refrained from taking any actions that would be disruptive of the political talks. Even now we are seeking to help create an atmosphere that would be conducive to meaningful talks. But we will refuse the legitimisation and perpetration of any system that seemed intent upon continuing the system of apartheid of the past”.*

The letter also rebutted current or future critics who might allege that the NLA was not Macedonian in origin or personnel. *“While there is no conspiracy against Macedonia, and in this context, let me assure you, that contrary to what it is being said, all our soldiers are Albanians from Macedonia, (we have a strict policy not to accept any soldiers from other Albanian lands in the region,) the solution must come from a dialogue between the Macedonians and the Albanians.*

*Furthermore, I wish to assure you, in the strongest terms possible, that it is not our intention to break up Macedonia. The NLA is committed to the preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the FYROM. We strongly believe that, once our painful predicament has been addressed in the proper manner, and the problems that have transformed Macedonia into a powder keg are solved, we will continue to live together in a democratic and modern society”.*

The letter closes with an assurance that far from wishing to pose a threat to order in the region, the NLA wanted to establish peace and aspired to a Macedonia which would be a common state for both Macedonians and Albanians: *“Our people have suffered so much in the past. The NLA is an army of the people and I assure you that every soldier in our units would gladly return to school, to work, to the village where they come from if they could be sure that the segregation system would end and that Macedonia would become the state of both ethnic groups: the Macedonians and Albanians. We love our land and our people and we want to live in peace with our neighbours, respected for who we are, and as citizens of a state that is our state also.*

## From Army to Party – The Politics of The NLA

*It was the desire of all the National Liberation Army that we address you: to inform you of some of the reasons why we have taken up weapons, of who are we, and what are our modest demands. We would follow very attentively any initiative you might decide to take, for we are eager to find a peaceful solution. We wish to assure you that your exceptional contribution to the cause of the peace and the plight of the oppressed is a strong assurance that any future initiative undertaken would be welcomed in good faith, by the National Liberation Army and the Albanian people in Macedonia.”*

## **Relations Between The NLA & Albanian Political Parties in Macedonia**

Ali Ahmeti’s letter to Annan, Robertson, Prodi and Geana touches upon the attitude of the NLA towards Albanian political parties. Like earlier documents, it focuses on the obstructive role played by Macedonian politicians in preventing Albanian parties who chose to participate in the parliamentary system from delivering what they had promised their electorate. However, the letter does include a sentence which criticises the Albanian political elites in Macedonia. “*Whenever we decided to support one leader, hoping that middle ground would be created, we found out that a lot of them were in their payroll.*” The poor syntax creates some confusion, but the claim seems to be that ordinary Albanians were repeatedly betrayed by their elected representatives, who preferred to strike deals with their Macedonian counterparts instead of working to bring about reform.

Those who have interviewed NLA members, during the course of the war and since, report that off the record, their interviewees were consistently critical of Albanian politicians in Macedonia. When Ali Ahmeti talks to foreigners these days, he bluntly describes the Albanian politicians as “looking after their own interests”. Other members of the former NLA are openly critical of the Democratic Party of Albanians, DPA. Commander Hoxha recounts that some time after their withdrawal from Tanusevci, some of his fighters died still infuriated by statements from DPA representatives in Ljubco Georgievski’s coalition government at the beginning of the war. The Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Bedredin Ibraimi, and DPA’s vice-president, Menduh Thaci, caused particular outrage by saying that the NLA were “traitors” to the Albanian cause in Macedonia, and that “any government has the right to exert its authority over the entire territory it governs.”

Later, when the “government of national unity” was established on 8 May 2001, the Vice President of the Parliament Ilijaz Halimi - also from the DPA - was accused by Party for Democratic Prosperity, PDP sources of insisting that the PDP publicly distance itself from the NLA as a condition for joining the new coalition. On 20 March while still in opposition, the PDP had signed a joint statement with the DPA, calling on the NLA to lay down their arms. Since the NLA disbanded, Ahmeti has been more measured in his criticism. Asked in an interview with the daily Fakti to assess the role, activities and engagement of Albanian political parties, he responded in the following diplomatic terms.

“The Albanian political parties in Macedonia have worked ceaselessly and still carry out their jobs with maximum regard to their obligations to their electorate. We have now joined together and no party has obstructed this union. Since the NLA appeared on the scene, I haven’t hesitated to arrange meetings with the party leaders and in this regard I should say that I’m not one to indulge in empty talk. The Albanian political parties

have made huge efforts to realise their goals and for our part, I have tried to clarify what the NLA is and what its goals are. In our meetings with the Albanian political parties and various associations, our aim was to overcome any prejudices we might harbour towards each other. For my own part, I did not harbour any grudges over slanders made against the NLA. I know there has been a large amount of disinformation which we should not fall victim to. Instead, we should look each other in the eye and talk straight, free of preconceptions, or exaggeration.

I have always been mindful of the general environment in which the Albanian political parties were working. So while we have taken their position into consideration, we have at the same time asked them to support the NLA, because without widespread support from politicians, intellectuals, workers and people in general, the NLA could not succeed. In this context, our meeting in Prizren should be seen as one of the most productive events in Albanian politics. Far from endangering the interests of the Macedonian state or the Macedonian people, it sought to reduce our differences and offer them a peaceful solution to the crisis. As politicians, we have also now fulfilled our sacred commitment towards the Albanian people, because with our actions we have tried to send signals of inter-ethnic understanding. This is why the Ohrid agreement is valid and sustainable for us. We will stand together until it is fully realized.”

This response might seem to be a gesture of “forgiveness” made to secure the cooperation of the Albanian political parties in realising Ahmeti’s project of Coordinating Council. However, cooperation between Albanian political parties and the NLA actually began with the signing of the Prizren Declaration in May 2001, which Ahmeti also mentions. Part of a peace plan conceived by Robert Frowick, then special representative of the OSCE in Skopje, its full title was “Declaration of the Albanian Leaders from Macedonia Regarding the Peace and Reformation Process in the Republic of Macedonia.” Its signatories were Ali Ahmeti, as the political representative of the NLA and Imer Imeri and Arben Xhaferi, the leaders of the PDP and DPA.

The declaration stated that the various Albanian leaders, mindful of an historic juncture in Macedonia, agreed to act in the national interest towards a common goal: reform of the state to create a democracy for all citizens and national communities. The consensus among Albanian leaders was to be based upon a number of shared principles: support for the territorial integrity and multi-ethnic character of Macedonia; a rejection of “ethnic territorial” solutions to Macedonia’s problems and a recognition that ethnically-based separatism would damage the citizens of Macedonia and threaten peace in the region; a recognition that there could be no military solution to the problems facing the Republic of Macedonia; a commitment to transforming the Republic of Macedonia by means of closer European and Atlantic integration; and finally, a willingness to engage the USA and the EU as facilitators to resolve internal problems.

The signatories also pledged to work together for a set of specific reforms. These included a review of amendments to the constitution of Macedonia, unrestricted use of the Albanian language as one of the country’s official languages, a proportional ethnic presence in the institutions of the state, enhancement of the authority of local government, complete secularisation of the constitution and the state, and the introduction of mechanisms to ensure a consensual resolution of issues of national interest involving ethnic rights.

## From Army to Party – The Politics of The NLA

The declaration was intended to establish a formal connection between the NLA and the Albanian political parties. Although the NLA was the most powerful force on the Albanian side, it was an illegal military group, and therefore unacceptable to international and Macedonian government negotiators as a partner in dialogue. The emergence of the NLA had left the Albanian political parties politically marginalized, but they were treated by the international community as the only legitimate representatives of the Albanians in Macedonia. The Prizren declaration thus linked the real strength and influence of the NLA with the formal legitimacy of DPA and PDP, gained at parliamentary elections in 1998. In practical terms, the declaration amounted to a mandate from the NLA for the political parties to represent Albanians from Macedonia in any negotiations mediated by representatives of the international community.

Frowick's plan faltered when the Prizren Declaration was made public. The Macedonian reaction was as negative as it was immediate. Key representatives of the international community were also opposed, most notably Mark Dickinson, then the British Ambassador to Macedonia, who at the time was also representing the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policies, Javier Solana.

Dickinson's harsh negative assessment of the unification of the Albanian side was seized upon by the Macedonian political parties and media. The daily paper Nova Makedonija, for example, ran a headline announcing "Xhaferi and Imeri sign a document betraying Macedonia." A statement from President Trajkovski said, "These meetings are unacceptable and run against the government and their own [the PDP and DPA] commitment not to negotiate with terrorists."

Prime Minister Georgievski's fierce response was that "the agreement represents a declaration of war by the Albanians against the Macedonian nation." The DPA and PDP were urged by Macedonian political parties to renounce the signatures of their leaders. Robert Frowick was instructed to leave the country in disgrace. The rejection of the Prizren Declaration as a basis for talks obstructed the discussion process between political parties that President Trajkovski had overseen. Some of those involved in the plan to connect the NLA with PDP and DPA, such as the Kosovo publisher Veton Surroi, remarked at the time that a chance to establish peace in Macedonia had been thrown away.

Over time, it appears that others reached the same conclusion, recognising that nothing could be resolved if the NLA were excluded from the negotiating process. Even Prime Minister Georgievski later acknowledged that some of the conditions set by Prizren would have to be met, when he said in a television interview "it is probable that we will have to drop the preamble to the Constitution, or announce a second constituent nation. It is likely that we will have to announce a second official language."

Despite the outrage at the time, it now seems - as Ahmeti has suggested - that the meetings in Prizren were a critical stage in the integration of the NLA and its platform into the debate over Macedonia's future, which in turn served to make the Ohrid agreement possible.

## **The NLA & Plans for a Division of Macedonia**

One of the basic premises of the Prizren Declaration was that there could be no “ethnic territorial” solution to the problems facing the Republic of Macedonia and that any push for an “ethnic division” of the territory would harm the citizens of Macedonia and threaten peace in the region. While this is wholly consistent with previous NLA statements supporting the territorial integrity of Macedonia, it is diametrically opposed to the standard view of the NLA among the Macedonian public - namely that the NLA’s main goal was to conquer and ethnically cleanse Macedonian territory. Macedonians generally believe that NLA military actions were intended as the first phase in the partition - or at least federalisation - of Macedonia, to be followed by projects for a “Greater Albania” or a “Greater Kosovo”.

NLA activities and statements from May and June 2001 show clearly that the NLA continued to resist such initiatives, which they believed were coming in the form of covert signals from the Macedonian government. When the DPA was invited to join Georgievski’s government, for example, NLA leaders still distrustful of DPA suspected a plan to create a majority in Parliament, which at any given point could vote for the division of Macedonia. The publication of a proposal by the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, MANU, which envisaged an exchange of territory and populations between Albania and Macedonia, was taken as a clear sign of government intent.

The NLA entry into the Skopje suburb of Aracinovo in the summer of 2001 symbolised a rejection of any such offer for the division of Macedonia. According to Ali Ahmeti, a subsequent symbolic entry was planned for Krusevo, a town strongly associated with the struggle for Macedonian statehood. Ahmeti also claims that following the MANU proposal for partition, the NLA leadership forbade any activities near Grupcin, which had been mentioned as a putative border between ethnic Albanian and Macedonian territories.

Two NLA communiqués from 31 May and 7 June offered the same clear response to the MANU proposal for division and exchange of territories and population. *“The General Headquarters of the National Liberation Army considers that the plan published by MANU once more confirms the chauvinist policy within certain political circles that have been and are still active in the Macedonian state,”* read the first.

Seven days later came the second. *“The General Headquarters of the National Liberation Army is concerned at the situation in the field, which is becoming increasingly tense after the publication of the MANU scheme for an adjustment of Macedonia’s borders and Prime Minister Georgievski’s public call for an open conflict with the Albanian population in Macedonia.”*

It is significant that in much of its publicity the NLA leadership referred to the state as “Macedonia” and used the term “Macedonian”. In some cases they used the terms FYROM and “Slav-Macedonians,” which are as offensive to ethnic Macedonians as the term “Shqiptari” when used by Macedonians to describe Albanians. In an interview with the BBC Albanian Service, Ahmeti said that he used the term Slav-Macedonian only to emphasise ethnic identity, as he used Macedonian to refer to citizenship. On learning the offensive connotations of Slav-Macedonian, he adjusted his terminology, using “Macedonian” instead.

After the destruction of the Orthodox Christian monastery and church in Leshok, the NLA issued the following statement in a communiqué on 21 May. *“The General*



## From Army to Party – The Politics of The NLA

*Headquarters of the National Liberation Army expresses its deep regret for the destruction of the church in Leshok. We strongly condemn this act of vandalism. So do the Albanian people of Macedonia, who follow four different faiths: Islam, Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism. We regard every form of worship and faith as sacred, as can be seen in our history in which there have been no religious conflicts among Albanians. In any war, regardless of its nature, our fighters have come from all these religious backgrounds. This tradition is reflected within our own ranks, which include fighters from all these religions. This is why all God's temples are sacred for us".*

Following the August 2001 explosion at the Brioni motel in Celopek, a village near Tetovo, the NLA Headquarters issued a press release which "... strongly condemns this terrorist act carried out by criminal circles" and concluded that "these acts of vandalism can only damage peace and the future of this country and are favoured by those who seek to spread hatred among the citizens".

These statements serve an obvious propaganda purpose. However, along with a series of planned and executed military actions, they also serve to directly contradict the view that the NLA's agenda was ethnic partition.

### **Aracinovo & The Confirmation of Ahmeti's Authority**

As already mentioned, NLA forces occupied the Skopje suburb of Aracinovo in June 2001 and the inhabitants were forced to leave. When the Macedonian security forces mounted an offensive to re-enter Aracinovo at the end of June 2001, they probably had no inkling that this would greatly aid the NLA cause. The Macedonian offensive not only complicated relations between the government and its public, it also significantly diminished the leadership's standing among key international players.

When the military failed to achieve the promised victory, the public were outraged and vented their anger in anti-government and anti-western demonstrations. By moving ahead against the advice and wishes of the international community, the government squandered its reputation as a partner who could be trusted. The final assault on Aracinovo was launched almost immediately after EU foreign policy chief, Xavier Solana, had concluded one of his visits to the country. In the end it was the international community which was forced to salvage the honour of the Macedonian government by convincing the NLA to withdraw from Aracinovo.

The success of the international intervention rested on one important factor which had remained unclear until that point: namely, the extent to which Ahmeti controlled local NLA commanders and could guarantee an NLA withdrawal from Aracinovo. NATO's special envoy Peter Feith had been in touch with Ahmeti, and received an assurance that the fighters would withdraw. But until the operation was complete, Feith and his staff were unsure of the chain of command in NLA.

It was apparent only that Commander Hoxha, although not formally in command of the occupation of Aracinovo, had led it from beginning to end. Commander Hoxha himself has consistently confirmed that Ahmeti and the NLA headquarters controlled Aracinovo, and that their orders and decisions were always implemented. He also recalls that this was made clear to Feith when he entered Aracinovo and that Feith was told that only the details of the withdrawal needed to be discussed.

Feith still appeared dubious and devoted great energy to trying to persuade Hoxha to withdraw.

If the dynamics of NLA withdrawal from Aracinovo were uncertain at the time, the successful conclusion of the operation significantly enhanced Ali Ahmeti's image. His willingness and ability to keep his word impressed international representatives, who came to see him as a cooperative and reliable partner. This impression was bolstered by Ahmeti's role around Tetovo after a ceasefire agreement was reached on 5 July 2001.

Some NLA members in Tetovo had not withdrawn from their positions as agreed, but continued to control parts of Tetovo and the villages on the Tetovo-Jazinec road. Following an order from Ahmeti, these units withdrew to the ceasefire line. Again, Ahmeti had demonstrated his authority, as there is reliable evidence that some NLA commanders in the Tetovo area opposed the withdrawal. In one interview, for example, the Chief of Headquarters of the former NLA, Gezim Ostreni, described the withdrawal as "a waste of a million bullets".

Ahmeti's reputation was made evident at a NATO press conference in Skopje on 10 August 2001. Asked whether the NLA could be trusted to respect the ceasefire agreement, the NATO Ambassador at that time, Hansjorg Eiff responded that, "I would say that we have seen through the evacuation of Aracinovo, that an obligation undertaken by Ali Ahmeti has been fulfilled and that the orders he gave were implemented".

## **NLA - Kosovo Relations**

It is no secret that while KLA was conducting military activities in Kosovo, many young Albanians from Macedonia took part. There were also some connections between the Macedonian government and the KLA through the DPA, which is a member of the ruling coalition. But as the aftermath of the war in Kosovo showed, the KLA was not a wholly unified force. DPA contacts were mainly with the KLA chief Hashim Thaci, links with regional KLA leaders who operated more or less independently, were far weaker.

One of these leaders was Ramush Haradinaj, who controlled the territory around Prizren, in southern Kosovo. NLA members who started operations in Macedonia were recruited from among Haradinaj's former fighters and Prizren was Ali Ahmeti's main base outside Macedonia. Another link can be seen in the case of Gezim Ostreni, Chief of the NLA Headquarters, who held a senior position in the Kosovo Protection Corps that was set up after the war, and included many former KLA personnel.

Like many other NLA personnel, Commander Hoxha was also a member of the KLA. Through the LPK, Fazli Veliu and Ali Ahmeti had been politically active in Kosovo and were also founders and fundraisers for the KLA. But while the Macedonian media claims systematic cooperation, sometimes even suggesting that the NLA was simply an offshoot of the KLA, former NLA members insist that links did not extend beyond those in the public domain. Commander Hoxha says that assistance for the NLA from Kosovo was a private and individual affair. Indeed, former KLA commanders who had entered politics or joined the Kosovo Protection Corps opposed NLA activism, on the grounds that it would be detrimental for Kosovo.

## From Army to Party – The Politics of The NLA

Public statements by Kosovo politicians and intellectuals appear to confirm this view. As the war began in Macedonia, the leaders of Kosovo's three largest political parties, Ibrahim Rugova, Hashim Thaci and Ramush Haradinaj, issued several joint and individual statements calling on the NLA to suspend operations and lay down their arms. In an interview with the Skopje daily "Dnevnik" on 3 March 2001, and in a subsequent interview with BBC World, the Kosovo publisher Veton Surroi commented that "any armed group should be politically isolated".

Thaci and Haradinaj also made a number of statements stressing that they wielded no influence over Veliu and Ahmeti. Ironically, it was probably Ali Ahmeti's involvement in the creation and funding of the KLA that empowered him to ignore its former commanders.

### **The Coordinating Council of Albanians & The Democratic Union For Integration**

During August 2001, when NLA disarmament was underway under "Operation Essential Harvest", Ahmeti was frequently asked what the future held for him personally and for former NLA members generally. His answers followed a standard pattern. "We'll integrate into society," he would say. "If NLA soldiers had jobs, they will go back to them. I have not thought about a political party."

In an interview with Radio Free Europe on 17 September 2001, Ahmeti said "There are no politics involved in the NLA. We did not start a war in order to get involved in politics". However, he also commented "The NLA included people who used to be involved in politics and humanitarian organisations ... we cannot interfere if they want to return to their previous activities. We, the leaders of the NLA have not yet decided whether we will get involved in politics or not. I personally have not been a member of any party and have not decided whether to take part in any of the parties".

When Ahmeti did enter the political arena, it was with the experience of the Prizren Declaration firmly in mind. His initial goal appears to have been to pursue that model, to encourage a coordination of Albanian political parties with the NLA structures, in order to facilitate the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement. In this spirit, declaring that the Prizren Declaration served as a motto, Ahmeti began discussions with the representatives of the Albanian political parties in Macedonia in the late autumn of 2001.

Ahmeti's vision for the Coordinating Council of Albanians in Macedonia was clear. With the signing of the Framework Agreement, existing Albanian political party programmes became obsolete. Henceforth, their focus should be the implementation of those measures which would improve the status of the Albanians in Macedonia. The implementation of the agreement and the enactment of new laws would in turn create a climate conducive to the further promotion of western democratic principles. After that, parties with distinctive platforms could again emerge as important players.

With hindsight it is clear that while Albanian party leaders accepted the need for joint action in principle, they all had reasons to delay the work of the council. Although the party closest to Ahmeti, the NDP did not accept the Ohrid Framework Agreement and still advocates a federal Macedonia, which Ahmeti considers would be more harmful for Albanians in Macedonia than projects for territorial division.

Part of the PDP leadership viewed the Coordinating Council as dominated by the former NLA, and worried that the new grouping could cause parties to lose their distinctive identities. As the first Albanian party formed in post-Yugoslav Macedonia, they saw this as unacceptable.

These objections were important, but it was the DPA that sealed the fate of the Coordinating Council. After the NLA disbanded, Ahmeti was subject to constant criticism that he was under the influence of the DPA leader, Arben Xhaferi, or that he had been “bought” by Menduh Thaci, the DPA vice president, who has a reputation for mixing politics and business.

Xhaferi claimed to support the idea of the council and Ahmeti, perhaps naively, believed him. In the event, the DPA tried to hijack the Council and to bring Ahmeti under their influence, thereby eliminating any electoral rivals and securing the party's position in the elections of 2002. When that failed, the DPA concentrated on destroying the Council, again with the aim of reducing Ahmeti's power.

Only then did Ahmeti create his own political party, the Democratic Union for Integration, DUI. The inaugural assembly was held in Tetovo on 5 June 2002, and Ahmeti was declared party president. The DUI manifesto is almost the same as that of the Coordinating Council, and is reproduced below. It expresses an overriding commitment to the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement, the creation of a civic state, and the repair of an economy and society fractured by conflict, corruption and organised crime.

After the first assembly, Ahmeti demonstrated that he had still supported the ideal of a Council, and called on the DPA to work in coordination with other Albanian parties. This seems unlikely to happen while former NLA leaders and established politicians from the DPA and other Albanian parties disagree over who has a mandate to speak for the Albanians of Macedonia, and who best represents the community's interests. The history of the NLA's foundation and struggle looks certain to be used as political capital by all sides in this ongoing dispute. In that process, more details regarding the complex web that binds the destinies of different ethnic Albanian individuals, movements and regions, seem set to emerge.

## **Appendix: Statement of the Democratic Union for Integration**

### **Inaugural Assembly of The Democratic Union for Integration, DUI Tetovo, 5 June 2002**

#### **Responding to:**

The will of the progressive powers which brought about an essential change in the position of Albanians in Macedonia to continue their involvement in the process of a genuine democratisation of Macedonia.

The tremendous support these forces enjoy among the population and the openly expressed wish of citizens for their continued involvement in political life, to guarantee the achievement of total equality for all citizens in Macedonia as a condition for peace and stability.

The diminished political, economic and social situation in the country, which requires new approaches and ideas, so that recovery may take place over the shortest possible period, there is a need for a new political party.

#### **It is called “The Democratic Union for Integration” and it will work towards:**

The complete implementation of the Ohrid Agreement;  
 A stable Macedonia, in the best interests of all the citizens, as well as regional and European interests;  
 A multi-ethnic Macedonia, where all the citizens may feel free and equal;  
 The elimination of corruption and organised crime and the establishment of mechanisms to prevent both;  
 The integration of Macedonia into European and Atlantic structures, starting with the regional integration as envisaged in progressive European and world models;  
 the building of a modern economic system, to create possibilities and guarantees for foreign investment, with the longer term aim of reducing unemployment;  
 The establishment of a functioning democracy and lawful state, with a particular emphasis on respect for human rights.

#### **The immediate action plan of the party includes:**

The reintegration into society of former fighters;  
 The return of all refugees to their homes;  
 The reconstruction of residences damaged over the last year;  
 Improvement of inter-ethnic confidence;  
 Urgent action to reduce poverty.

#### **The DUI will work towards:**

Decentralising the government and developing local democracy;  
 The achievement of complete equality at all levels of society;  
 Improvement of the representation of women in decision-making institutions;  
 Solving the Albanian higher education issue, with particular regard to quality and professionalism;  
 Involving the Diaspora in Macedonian society, with a particular stress on encouraging their return and investment of capital.

**The Democratic Union for Integration invites:**

All the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia to work for the construction of a multi ethnic society;

All political parties in Macedonia to fulfil the commitment made in Ohrid for the achievement of political stability;

The international community to continue support for the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement as well as support for democratisation of Macedonia, in order to help Macedonia to achieve proper international standards for integration in the family of democratic states.

# **Lions & Tigers**

## **The Militarisation of the Macedonian Right**

**Saso Ordanoski**

*(Publisher and editor of Forum Magazine)*

### **The Security Situation in the Summer of 2001**

By the standards of the fighting in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, the 2001 conflict in Macedonia was not especially bloody. Official data from the Ministry of Interior Affairs and the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Macedonia, indicates that by the end of July 2001, a total of 38 members of the security forces had been killed and 220 wounded.

The dead comprised 14 policemen and 24 officers and soldiers from the Army of the Republic of Macedonia, ARM. Only a few of the casualties were incurred in direct confrontation with the Albanian extremists. Most of them were the result of ambushes, sniper fire or anti-tank and other types of mines. In the same period, eight civilians were killed and 63 injured in National Liberation Army, NLA, attacks on populated areas. About 15 civilians were physically attacked and tortured, and around 20 kidnapped. The fate of at least 12 kidnap victims is still unknown.

One of the highest profile battles between Macedonian security forces and the NLA occurred in the village of Aracinovo, ten kilometres from the centre of Skopje and even closer to the country's main airport at Petrovec. On June 8, about 400-500 Albanian extremists entered the village. According to interior ministry data, they were led by several well-known local offenders with substantial criminal records. These included Xhezair Shaqiri who used the alias "Hoxha"; Nazmi Sulejmani, or "Arusha"; the Jonuzi brothers: Murtezan known as commander "Aracina" and Ibrahim or "Braha"; Ragmi Emini, or "Majanca", also known as commander Brko; Selajdin Emini, Ekrem Qahili, aka "Commandant Zuti" and Ridvan Neziri. Their previous offences were mainly related to illegal drugs trafficking, cigarette smuggling or violent crimes, including charges of murder.

The armed insurgents forced the civilian population - 90 percent ethnic Albanian and 10 percent ethnic Macedonian - from their homes, and made preparations to defend Aracinovo against attack. They dug trenches and supply tunnels, then laid mines and other booby-traps to hinder attacks by the Macedonian security forces. From these combat positions, the leaders of this group of extremists threatened that if the Macedonian security forces did not halt their operations in the Kumanovo-Lipkovo region, they would launch missile and mortar attacks on civilian and military facilities and institutions in Skopje and its environs.

Between 22 and 26 June, the Macedonian security forces launched an offensive to retake Aracinovo. At the beginning of this operation, the interior minister Ljube Boskovski bragged that he would be drinking coffee in the village centre within 24 hours, but the reality was rather different. Four hundred police and military

special forces took part in a five-day battle, in which four members of the security forces were killed and around ten more wounded.

The Macedonian political elite and NATO representatives then reached an agreement to prevent a further escalation of hostilities, which would certainly have caused widespread destruction in Aracinovo and more victims on both sides. On the evening of 26 June, the Albanian extremists were evacuated from the village by NATO, along with their entire arsenal and transported by bus to areas controlled by the NLA.

The confrontation in Aracinovo was a pivotal moment in the Macedonian conflict for a number of reasons. Some analysts saw Aracinovo as a kind of test case for the security forces. In previous months, they had been unable to engage the enemy effectively, and so had failed either to damage NLA military capacity, or regain NLA-controlled territory in the northern regions around Kumanovo and Tetovo. At Aracinovo, the NLA offered battle, and initially it appeared that the international community had permitted the Macedonian authorities an opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to inflict a military defeat on the rebel forces. In this regard, Macedonia's security forces failed. Militarily, Aracinovo revealed that even when supported by helicopter gunships and artillery, Macedonian police and military special forces lacked the planning and command capacity to successfully execute a complex operation, which demanded coordination and effective target identification, as well as firepower.

The failure could be partly attributed to the rules of engagement under which Macedonia's security forces operated. International military and civilian observers monitored the operation closely and insisted that civilian houses and property in the village should not be targeted unnecessarily. The EU and the USA also insisted on a "proportional use of force", a formulation remains unclear to this day, both in terms of definition and method of implementation. The European chief of security and foreign policy, Javier Solana, visited Skopje immediately after the beginning of the crisis in Aracinovo in an attempt to pressure the Macedonian side "to continue with political dialogue and stabilisation of the country".

The significance of Aracinovo went further. Some analysts interpreted the timing of the NLA action as calculated to increase pressure for NLA representation in political negotiations then in progress under the auspices of President Trajkovski, without the mediation of the international community. Certainly, the president himself took the situation seriously. In June 2002, a year after the event, he told the Macedonian weekly Kapital that he believed Aracinovo was the critical moment of the crisis, and that if the NLA had attacked strategic facilities in Skopje, the conflict would certainly have escalated.

Those who believe that the international community was prepared to go to extreme lengths to intervene directly in the peace process have drawn attention to reports from respected Macedonian and western media sources that a number of foreign military experts were present with the NLA in Aracinovo. Initial stories referred to 14 mercenaries, allegedly employees of the US private consultancy firm Military Professional Resources Incorporated, MPRI, engaged by the rebels to improve their military capacity. Although they enjoy widespread currency in Macedonia, these stories have not been verified.

It is, however, widely acknowledged that MPRI did train members of the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, when the western military alliance was preparing to use force



against Slobodan Milosevic's regime. More recently, according to the website [www.mpri.com](http://www.mpri.com) (<http://www.mpri.com>) the company was an official advisor to the Macedonian Army, ARM, over how to implement reforms to meet NATO standards.

## **Post-Aracinovo Trauma & the Strength of the Enemy**

The controversies regarding the failure of the Aracinovo campaign left the Macedonian military-political elite scarred and deeply traumatised. Discord and mistrust among the Macedonian parties, including participants in the broad coalition government led by Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski, reached a peak, with mutual accusations and disputes becoming ever more public.

One immediate effect of the failure to secure a decisive victory in Aracinovo was that international pressure mounted for a political resolution to the crisis. This was exerted on the government and Macedonian parties, which had labelled the NLA a terrorist organisation and refused to countenance any negotiation with its members.

The evident inability of the state to overcome the NLA threat by direct military means served as a graphic indicator that the NLA was far more potent than first thought. Most domestic and foreign security and intelligence analyses had highlighted its problematic ideological-criminal roots, plus the criminal aspirations of many of its leadership.

Aracinovo demonstrated that the NLA also had in its ranks a number of experienced, well-trained fighters armed with highly sophisticated weapons. In some cases, the NLA was better trained and armed than Macedonian security forces, and posed a serious challenge. If it could not be defeated militarily, some reasoned, then avenues of dialogue would have to be opened.

Ironically, though, other operations had ended in victory for Macedonian security forces. Although Aracinovo attracted the most attention, the NLA also made several attempts during the course of the crisis to connect their forces in the Tetovo and the Kumanovo-Lipkovo regions. These took the form of repeated offensive thrusts from Kosovo through the village of Krivenik, near the Macedonian villages of Gracani and Radusa, in order to establish control over the exit from the Kacanik Gorge and the slopes of the Skopska Crna Gora mountain range just above Skopje. In this case, the deployment and tactics of the Macedonian army were well-planned and organised, and the offensives were aborted. NLA aspirations to establish a so-called “liberated territory” in northwestern Macedonia along the entire border with Kosovo, and part of the border with Serbia in the Presevo and Bujanovac area, remained unrealised.

This strategic failure did not appear to diminish support for the NLA among the local Albanian population in Macedonia, or reduce the number of Albanians willing to take up arms and join the NLA. The NLA consisted of five brigades, which operated in the Kumanovo (the 113<sup>th</sup> Brigade), Skopje (the 114<sup>th</sup> Brigade) and Tetovo (the 112<sup>th</sup> Brigade) regions and in the areas of Gostivar (the 116<sup>th</sup> Brigade) and Radusa (the 115<sup>th</sup> Brigade).

According to Ali Ahmeti, the NLA political representative, the NLA numbered 5,000 people during the crisis, including those who provided logistic support. According to the assessments of foreign and domestic military analysts the total number of

NLA fighters was not more than two or three thousand, and the brigades were most numerous just before the end of the conflict in the second half of 2001.

Among them were a few hundred so-called “dogs of war”, who had gained experience at the fronts in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. Most were Kosovars, former or current members of the Kosovo Protection Corps, KPC, who had been trained and armed by foreign advisors before and during NATO’s war against Milosevic’s regime. They also included a group of Mujahedins who had been in the Balkans for a long time. These extremist formations were highly mobile, equipped with sophisticated western arms. They were the most dangerous adversaries for the Macedonian security forces but they also intimidated those Albanians in the occupied parts of Macedonia who did not agree with the NLA goals or methods.

Members of this group were responsible for most of the killings of Macedonian security force members, especially where atrocities were also committed. One example was the incident in May 2001 in the Vejce area, ten kilometres from Tetovo, when eight Macedonian soldiers and policemen were killed and their bodies reportedly mutilated. One group of this kind was led by “Commander Teli”. The group of five including the said Teli, was liquidated by security forces in Skopje, under circumstances that remain unclear.

## **The Military-Political Context**

As Aracinovo became a battleground at the beginning of June 2001, the political nature of the conflict in Macedonia had recently undergone a substantial change. Hostilities had begun as a classic clash between the Macedonian security forces and a “protection unit” linked to a well-known smuggling chain running from Macedonia, through the border villages of Tanusevci and Debalde into Kosovo and on to Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Western Europe.

This path was used to smuggle various commodities, including cigarettes, drugs, arms, and human beings. For an entire decade during the Milosevic regime in Belgrade, the Macedonian-Yugoslav border had not been officially demarcated, and as a result the Macedonian police and army had not been empowered to control it. After the fall of Milosevic in October 2000 and the signing of the border demarcation agreement between Belgrade and Skopje in February 2001, Macedonian security forces started to patrol the frontier and police the flow of goods and people.

A firm and clear border between Macedonia and Kosovo threatened the interests of criminal “bosses” in Kosovo, making some form of conflict almost unavoidable. When fighting began in Tanusevci, the leaders of the Democratic Party of the Albanians in Macedonia, DPA, most notably its vice-president, Menduh Thaci, demanded that the Macedonian security forces deal swiftly and harshly with groups which they, like their Macedonian counterparts in government, regarded as criminals and extremists.

This position reflected the fact that with the outbreak of armed conflict and the emergence of the NLA, the Albanian political leadership in Macedonia found its influence among Macedonia’s Albanian population threatened. DPA leader Arben Xhaferi had been previously acknowledged as the key player in shaping the Macedonian Albanian political agenda. Now he seemed cut off from popular sentiment, and for the first time unable to exert any control over developments. The DPA also seemed ineffective in responding to NLA criticisms that they were

## Lions &amp; Tigers – The Militarisation of the Macedonian Right

corrupt, ambitious and had neglected Albanian ideals of equal status as a group, or people, alongside the Macedonian majority.

At the end of May 2001, leaders of the Albanian political parties in Macedonia, the DPA and the Party for Democratic Prosperity, PDP, met NLA leaders in Prizren in Kosovo. The meeting was facilitated by Robert Frowick, a US special envoy, and was intended to create links between the NLA, the DPA and the PDP in order to identify common interests and enable a political dialogue to resolve the crisis. The result was the so-called Prizren Agreement, a shared platform whose existence was announced by Macedonian media almost immediately. The Macedonian public viewed the Prizren Agreement as treason by Xhaferi and Imeri against Macedonia. US diplomatic involvement also looked like a covert recognition of the NLA as legitimate at a time when the international community was still publicly criticising the organisation for its use of violence and labelling its members as extremists or, as in one speech by Lord Robertson, “thugs and murderers”.

Until then, VMRO-DPMNE and the DPA had enjoyed close relations within the ruling coalition, and their relationship was viewed benevolently by the international community. Having renounced its nationalist platform of the early 1990s, VMRO-DPMNE was seen as a moderate presence on the political scene, which supported a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski still cooperated with foreign representatives in attempts to defuse tensions. He continued to coordinate activities with the DPA, even though their influence on events was clearly limited. On 16 May, he broadened the coalition government considerably, even inviting his party’s chief rival for the support of ethnic Macedonians, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia or SDSM, to join.

Georgievski was still considered the main Macedonian partner of the West. He had taken a number of steps in economic and political reform, including attempts to address the sensitive issue of Macedonian attitudes towards the Albanian minority and its main political representatives. Such good behaviour, in symbolic terms, had persuaded the international community to turn a blind eye to increasingly clear evidence that the alliance between the DPA and VMRO-DPMNE was built on and maintained by corruption. Instead, foreigners would either locate the roots of corruption within other forces in the government, such as Vasil Tupurkovski’s Democratic Alliance - an accusation not wholly undeserved - or they would discount the damage it caused by suggesting that “informal ties” of this sort constituted “a form of political cohesion”.

Judging Macedonia’s main problems to be those of inter-ethnic relations, they saw the alliance and working relationship between VMRO-DPMNE and the DPA as a bond to be nurtured however possible, as it contributed to “the stability of the state”.

The events of late May and June 2001 proved this assessment resoundingly wrong. Given relative latitude to operate by the international community, the Albanian and Macedonian ruling political elites in the Republic of Macedonia had re-established criminal spheres of influence with their Kosovo partners and competitors after the end of the Kosovo crisis. The emergence of the NLA served to remind the DPA of their obligations to their core constituency, and US pressure also functioned to change the relative value of alliances. In this context, the Prizren Agreement offered the DPA, and to a lesser extent the PDP, a pathway back to credibility and influence.

For Prime Minister Georgievski and the people around him, the Prizren Agreement and the failure of the action in Aracinovo were heavy political blows which made a difficult situation worse. Casualties on the Macedonian side were growing. In the field, the military situation was deadlocked. The state budget, formerly sound, was wrecked.

Misunderstandings, or even open animosity, flared up with the SDSM, even after the new coalition was formed, and with former VMRO-DPMNE party member President Trajkovski. The dominant feeling in Georgievski's cabinet was that VMRO-DPMNE had now also been betrayed by its former ally, the DPA. The international community was also viewed with hostility, as it had begun to speak openly of "two [equivalent] sides in the conflict" and to criticise the Macedonian authorities for their inability to resolve the crisis by political means.

In this context, Georgievski shifted tack dramatically, and started to propose a division of the country. He barely concealed his support for a proposal made by members of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, MANU, for a territorial and ethnic division of the country. MANU proposed an exchange of territories between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Albania. Spurred on by the president of the parliament, Stojan Andov, and other academic, political and military intelligence circles in the country and abroad, Georgievski supported the plan. At one point, Georgievski even stopped speaking with foreign mediators and other diplomats on any subject except the need to redraw the borders in the Balkans. Wittingly or unwittingly, he thus found himself in agreement with extremists among Albanian politicians. His enthusiasm for a clear-cut, "definite solution," in which ethnic and political loyalties were inextricably linked, came to dominate VMRO-DPMNE, the largest single party in the parliament, and to shape government policy.

## **The Establishment of Rapid Reaction Units**

After the failure to retake Aracinovo, the military and political leaders of Macedonia conceived a plan to create a new combat formation as part of the security system. The idea was that this new unit should be highly-trained, equipped with state-of-the-art weapons, and used for rapid interventions. The idea was discussed in President Trajkovski's cabinet meetings in the early summer of 2001 by members of his National Security Council. President Trajkovski decided thereafter to create a temporary unit to fight terrorism. The unit's officers and personnel would be mainly military, with some police elements and it would be controlled by the ARM, in cooperation with the police.

This concept won support from the international community, in particular NATO. It was seen as consistent with the overall framework of reform for the ARM in preparation for its eventual integration into the military alliance. At the beginning of September 2001, a British diplomat reported that international training assistance would be provided for a new rapid reaction special unit within ARM's First Brigade, to handle future terrorist incidents in the country. He said that the British government would send two experts, from the army and police force respectively, to assist in unit command and to control training, and issues of organisation.

According to IWPR sources, Trajkovski's decision was followed by several weeks of delay and inactivity. Without taking any specific steps towards organising this new

## Lions &amp; Tigers – The Militarisation of the Macedonian Right

security structure, the General Staff of the ARM informed the president that all ARM human resources were in combat positions in the crisis regions or securing the state borders. As a result, they said, the ARM could not respond to his request. The ARM made it clear that the unit should be composed of professional soldiers, not reservists. The ministry of interior, meanwhile, opposed the creation of such a unit within the ARM command structure, and so refused to allow its members to join.

Prime Minister Georgievski and the interior minister, Ljube Boskovski, exploited ARM reluctance to take their own initiative. On the pretext that the army was incapable of a timely reaction to the complex security situation, they set about creating a new police unit to undertake the rapid reaction role and to fill the security vacuum.

The process began on 12 June 2001 when the government ratified a secret decision to establish the special unit. Based on this decision, the minister of interior promptly passed an act entitled “Decision to establish a rapid reaction police battalion of the Ministry of Interior Affairs,” which was secretly published in a special, not – for – public edition of the Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia.

The decision consisted primarily of three points which determined the institutional position, components and command structure of the unit:

1. *A Rapid Reaction Police Battalion of the ministry of interior affairs is established with 570 members to carry out certain missions, having as a commander the head of the Special Units Sector at the Police Department.*
2. *The Rapid Reaction Police Battalion is created for the purpose of protecting the security of the Republic of Macedonia, in the circumstances of a complex security situation, or when public order and peace is disturbed to a great extent.*
3. *The Rapid Reaction Police Battalion consists of members of the Police Special Unit at the ministry of interior affairs, members of the regular police component of the ministry of interior affairs and members of the reserve component of the ministry of interior affairs.*

From a legal perspective, Boskovski’s act provided a lot of scope. The Macedonian police consists of 6,000 uniformed policemen and another 1,500 detectives belonging to the criminal police. Apart from the special anti-terrorist unit or “Tigers”, which has about 200 specially trained members there is yet another unit called the Special Task Force. This consists of several hundred policemen, selected from uniformed career police from any of Macedonia’s over 300 municipality police stations. The Task Force mainly includes the best trained policemen and those considered as the most courageous in action. This unit is often used in more complex police actions such as clashes with demonstrators, rescue operations or dealing with hostage and siege situations.

## **The Lions**

As minister of interior, Boskovski had a legal right to decide upon the composition and the number of police formations, once authorised. In the summer of 2001, he

exercised this right. Instead of creating a new unit along the lines stipulated in the decision reproduced above, he decided to use his executive power to augment the number of the existing Special Task Force - composed entirely of outstanding career policemen - with reservists and regular policemen. For that purpose, as early as July and August 2001, Boskovski's people all over Macedonia started to compile lists of volunteers from the lists of police reservists, scheduled to be mobilised. A total of 7,000 reservists had their names transferred to membership of the Special Task Force Unit, and part of a unit known as the Lions was drawn, legally, from that cadre.

At the same time, Boskovski's followers visited local ministry of defence offices around the municipalities in Macedonia with names of people they said should be removed from the registers of military reservists. These people, it was explained, would be specifically engaged in the police. Most were members of VMRO-DPMNE and some were well-known offenders with bulging criminal files. Boskovski's actions, in this regard, were illegal, according to Marjan Gurovski, a spokesperson for the ministry of defence. Speaking in the summer of 2001, Gurovski stated that "collecting volunteers for the defence of the country violates the existing criminal code of Macedonia".

Boskovski had nonetheless chosen his moment well. After the first ceasefire was agreed and declared on 5 July, elements of the NLA started a massive 'ethnic cleansing' operation of Macedonians from a slice of territory running up from Tetovo to the village of Jazinec at the border with Kosovo, and including the Tetovo villages of Lesok, Jedoarce, Otunje, Zilce, Setole, and Ratae.

Boskovski withdrew his regular police units from the region, while at the same time distributing arms to civilians of Macedonian ethnic origin. At the beginning of September 2001, domestic and foreign media started publishing stories like one in the British Sunday Times which described "robust men with sunglasses and highly sophisticated infantry arms trying to look like Rambo. These groups, as well as factions of the Albanian rebels, were not very interested in disarmament. They were preparing themselves for a Balkan civil war."

Speaking in the same month to Forum magazine, Boskovski himself spoke of the new Lions as "healthy men from peasant and working class families who have Macedonia first in their hearts. There is no reason why Macedonia should be disturbed because of them ... The Lions will provide back-up and logistical support for the operations of the Tigers. They'll help in cases of natural disasters, searching houses for arms, and so on."

The existence of the Lions contributed to further rifts in the government coalition, when defence minister and SDSM member Vladimir Buckovski criticised Boskovski's actions in public. The SDSM realised that the new unit was not under the control of the broader security system of the state. In effect, it was a one-party formation that VMRO DPMINE was preparing for "peace time" activities - that is, to mount provocations, threats and pressure against political opponents after the crisis. 2002 would be an election year regardless of whether elections were held in January, as agreed at the Ohrid negotiations, or at some later point before the end of the mandate of the current parliament in November 2002.

The official unveiling of the Lions took place on 2 November 2001 when they joined regular police units during a demonstration exercise at the Krivolak training field in the Penus area. On that occasion, Minister Boskovski addressed 2,000 policemen,

## Lions &amp; Tigers – The Militarisation of the Macedonian Right

as well as President Trajkovski and Prime Minister Georgievski. He specifically praised the Tigers and the Lions. Both special units, he said, had shown “superhuman values in defending Macedonia” and had proved “that there are no political options when Macedonia is at stake.”

On 9 January 2002, at a police training field near Skopje, another controversy arose. At a special Orthodox Christian ceremony, the Tigers and the Lions were blessed and consecrated. They were given religious medallions with the following text: “God protect me from evil and give me the strength to defend my home, my people, my Macedonia.” When journalists observed that this injection of church ritual into affairs of state had effectively defined the special units according to a single religion, whereas Ohrid had called for mixed police units, Minister Boskovski responded that “those of different religion ... may accept or reject the medallions.”

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect for critics of the Lions was that from their establishment in summer 2001 until the beginning of summer 2002, they had performed almost no rapid reactions to military threats, as only a very small number of combat actions against armed Albanian extremists took place. In the same period, however, the Lions provoked, or were otherwise directly responsible for, dozens of incidents, including murder, wounding, fights and other serious or petty criminal acts carried out against civilians of both Macedonian and Albanian ethnic origin.

Popular pressure has caused about twenty of the Lions to be dismissed because of their connection with organised crime, a fact which in turn raises questions about how they were employed in the first place. According to unofficial information and reports in the Macedonian media, investigations or court procedures are currently underway against at least a third of Lions’ members suspected of involvement in serious criminal acts.

## What Next for the Lions

Georgievski, and especially Boskovski, have found themselves under strong pressure from both the Macedonian public and representatives of the international community to disband the unit. Boskovski has sought to trivialise public concern, and also to defend the way that the unit was created. In the same interview with Forum in September 2001, he said, “If they were named ‘the Monkeys’ everybody would have been in favour! If they were named ‘the Crocodiles’ everybody would have been in favour! But the problem is that they are called ‘the Lions’ ...” These comments were intended to minimise the significance of the fact that the heraldic sign of a lion is the trademark of Boskovski’s own party and that bottles of wine produced in his wine cellar bear labels sporting the same sign.

Pressure from the international community began in the summer of 2001. At the end of August, NATO Secretary General George Robertson held a meeting with Prime Minister Georgievski behind closed doors and presented him with concrete data, including names, numbers, locations and other details, which showed Macedonian paramilitary groups were operating across the country. The meeting included a sharp exchange between Robertson and Georgievski.

At the beginning of September 2001, NATO Special Envoy Peter Feith wrote to the upper echelons of the Macedonian government, warning them of the appearance of “para-police forces’ in the conflict regions, most notably the Tetovo villages of

Zelino, Zilce, Ratae and Jagunovce. Minister Boskovski responded by suggesting that Feith should be declared *persona non grata* and banished from Macedonia.

Since then, the official position of both Georgievski and Boskovski has been that the Lions represent a legal part of the Macedonian security system, that their operations are subject to professional command and planning and that they are under the full procedural, operational and political control of the minister of interior. Georgievski and Boskovski thus both reject the terms “para-police” or “paramilitary structures” as inaccurate and unacceptable, stressing that such terms will not be tolerated by the Macedonian government or VMRO-DPMNE.

The legality of the Lions and the question of whether they are a regular or paramilitary unit is a delicate one. At the beginning of September 2001, the chief of the OSCE Mission in Macedonia, Ambassador Craig Jenness commented, “There are claims about the existence of Macedonian paramilitary units but we have not until now been able to substantiate those accusations.”

In October that year, in an interview for Jane’s Intelligence Review, Jenness added that “the meaning of the term ‘paramilitary’ often is not clear.” He went on to provide the following comparative statement, “People often use that name for armed individuals who act without legal grounds and with no adequate command and control. I separate that meaning from any special police units which could have true legal grounds for their existence, as well as for the police reservists. Special police forces exist in a number of countries but I think that everybody would agree that those units have to adhere to the highest standards of professional police behaviour and to provide a service for citizens. Multi-ethnicity, the inclusion of women in appropriate numbers and strict respect for professional European police procedure represent the standards that are expected from them.

“We continue to receive reports from a number of places about the existence of armed individuals with no legal grounds or with no determined command and control. There have been recurrent shoot-outs in different places. It is a matter of investigation whether these are cases of politically motivated violence or ‘simple’ criminal activities. However, we are not able to carry out such an investigation.”

Jenness’ tone is measured, Georgievski and Boskovski have since been subject to many months of harsh, synchronised European and American pressure to disband the Lions. As early as October 2001, half of the mobilised 7,000 police reservists were demobilised. This figure corresponds with statements by Prime Minister Georgievski in April 2002 that the Lions had been cut down to about 3,500 from the original 7,000. He also confirmed that their number would be further reduced to 1,200. Those remaining would be transformed into border police units - as requested by the Europeans and the Americans - to control the borders of the Republic of Macedonia.

The most strongly worded and explicit demand that the Lions be wholly disbanded came from NATO on 20 March 2002, when the prospects for Macedonia’s future membership of the alliance were reviewed at an ambassador-level meeting in Brussels. On that occasion the current Macedonian foreign and defence ministers were clearly told that Macedonia would not become a NATO member until the government, among other things, disbanded the Lions. Diplomatic pressure continued over the next few months and finally, in the regular annual report of the European Commission on the Stabilisation and Association Process of the Republic



## Lions &amp; Tigers – The Militarisation of the Macedonian Right

of Macedonia within the European Union, an official statement appeared stating the EU's position that the Lions should be "disbanded immediately".

Emma Ardwin, the European Commission's spokesperson in Brussels, explained the reasons for this demand. "The European Commission and some international organisations have been informed of cases in which the Lions violated human rights. Furthermore this paramilitary group does not consist of ethnically mixed forces, in compliance with the agreement on the 'composition of the police units of the Framework Agreement of August 2001 ... We suppose that once they are disbanded the Government will take care of their disarmament."

The Macedonian Prime Minister Georgievski was informed of the EU's stance by Javier Solana, the European Commissioner for Foreign and Security Affairs, during discussions of the report in Luxemburg at the end of April. At the time Solana expressed displeasure that the Macedonian government only planned to disband the unit by the end of 2002. In tandem with Europe, the US State Department confirmed the position of the international community regarding the Lions through its special envoy for Macedonia, Richard Holmes, during his stay in Skopje in April 2002.

The VMRO-DPMNE leadership has mounted a defence of the Lions, insisting that the security situation in the country does not permit them to disband the unit. At the time of writing, in July 2002, the Lions continue to be an active formation of the Macedonian ministry of interior affairs. They continue to provoke numerous incidents in which Macedonian citizens, regardless of their ethnic origin, invariably get the worst of it. VMRO-DPMNE's determination to stake political capital on the survival of the Lions is now prompting speculation over the Lions' projected role before and during the parliamentary elections in Macedonia scheduled for 15 September 2002, and whether that role will include violence calculated to exert political pressure.

"The incidents of the last few weeks, in which the members of the special police units were involved, represent an overture to a broader misuse of these special police formations," said Radmila Sekerinska, who is an opposition SDSM member of the Macedonian parliament, in an interview for IWPR. Over the last year or two, we have often warned that with no proper criteria or control when these people were enrolled into the police service, they would be difficult to influence later on. Today, they represent a praetorian guard for the ruling VMRO-DPMNE. This party is quite prepared to employ these units for its own political purposes during the elections."

"Both the Lions and the Tigers form part of a wider political strategy of how to control the political and criminal underground in Macedonia", says Aleksandar Comovski, a renowned political analyst and editor at the influential A1 Television. "This underground is often used for political purposes. It is clear that these police units pose a danger to Macedonian democracy, since their real targets are representatives of the independent media and opposition activists."

It is hard to forecast the future fate of the Lions and Tigers or their possible engagement during the elections. If the opposition wins the forthcoming elections, it is almost certain that they will disband these units as a matter of urgency and undertake legal proceeding against many individual members for crimes committed while wearing the uniform of the Macedonian police.

Saso Ordanoski

The Lions are well aware of this and the most important question is whether they - and their political and criminal mentors - will allow such a turn of events.

## The Ohrid Framework Agreement Negotiations

**Vasko Popetrevski**

*(Journalist with A1 TV)*

**Veton Latifi**

*(Journalist with the Albanian MTV Program)*

*“When nobody is entirely satisfied, it means you have achieved the right compromise.”*

This phrase aptly describes the political dialogue that took place in Macedonia during the summer of 2001, which concluded with the signing of the Framework Agreement and the end of the armed conflict. Neither the Macedonian nor the Albanian signatories to the so-called “Ohrid Agreement” were completely satisfied with it. Nonetheless, it was accepted by political parties on both sides of the conflict as a necessary element of the peace process to stop further bloodshed.

The agreement satisfied the main demands of the Albanian leaders by enhancing the political and legal status of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia. At the same time the agreement maintained the unitary character of the state, a provision which the Macedonian leaders had insisted on and which Albanian leaders opposed. Their differences could probably not have been overcome without the mediation of the “dialogue facilitators”, James Pardew from the United States of America and Francois Leotard from the European Union. NATO also played a key role in calming the situation in the field.

The role of international mediation in the dialogue, and an ongoing international commitment to guaranteeing compliance with the agreement, were key factors in persuading the negotiating teams from both sides to accept the proposed compromises that the agreement represented. The importance of the international role can also be gauged by reviewing the conduct of negotiations before active foreign involvement began.

Before the final sessions took place in Ohrid there had been several months of political discussions in Skopje under the auspices of President Boris Trajkovski. Representatives of the four main Macedonian and Albanian political parties took part: the Interior Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation-Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity, VMRO-DPMNE, headed by Ljubco Georgievski; the Democratic Party of the Albanians, DPA, headed by Arben Xhaferi; the Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia, SDSM, headed by Branko Crvenkovski and the Party for Democratic Prosperity, PDP, another party of Albanians in Macedonia, headed by Imer Imeri, then party president.

All four parties belonged to a new crisis government, formed to contain or bring an end to the conflict and to deal with its consequences. Dialogue progressed in an inconsistent manner, pursued intensively only when there was fresh political pressure on the participants. This came mainly in the form of armed attacks by the

National Liberation Army, NLA, which was not directly involved in the negotiations. As all parties appeared to resort to stalling tactics rather than actively trying to reach a settlement, many observers concluded that they were simply going through the motions, while they waited to see how events would develop.

The Albanian parties were primarily interested in developments in the diplomatic sphere, while Macedonian parties were concerned with the military situation. Both the PDP and the formerly dominant DPA had been taken by surprise by events in the field, so in the first few months of the conflict they had virtually no political or security influence on the situation. The operations of Albanian extremists were led mainly by people from the Albanian diaspora in Switzerland and Germany, but also directed from a power base in Kosovo, by circles with criminal or extremist agendas. The strategy of the Albanian political parties was to bide their time and engineer the involvement of international mediators and - later - the NLA. The DPA and PDP knew that their political credibility would be lost if they made any commitments they were unable to fulfil, so they played a waiting game.

The Macedonian parties, meanwhile, hoped that government forces might be able to win a military victory against the NLA, and regain complete control over the country. While they still believed this was possible, they too avoided actively seeking a negotiated settlement. Both sides sought to use this phase of talks to establish better starting positions in the final negotiations which they knew would be unavoidable before the crisis was finally overcome.

There were, of course, other serious disagreements, several of which concerned the status of Macedonia's constitution, drafted in 1991. The Macedonian parties, including the VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, were unwilling to negotiate at all if the constitution was on the table. Their stance was that the constitution already guaranteed not only minority rights, but general human rights and freedoms too. They were angered that ethnic Albanians were using violent means to achieve political ends.

The Albanian camp, meanwhile, believed that the constitution had been a key factor in precipitating the crisis. They demanded changes so that "the Albanians" would be equal in the text with "the Macedonians". They also pointed out that a significant portion of their demands overlapped with political reforms that the Macedonian state was supposed to be implementing as part of the EU Stabilisation and Association Process.

These differences had caused deadlock in the Trajkovski-led dialogue. It was clear that only the active involvement of the international community could drag the two sides away from politically entrenched positions.

In the spring of 2001, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Javier Solana, and NATO Secretary General, Lord George Robertson, used shuttle diplomacy to try and advance the process, but the results were mixed. So, in June 2001 the US administration appointed James Pardew from the State Department as a special envoy to Macedonia, while the European Union entrusted the same role to retired French politician, Francois Leotard. Pardew was a former US senior military intelligence officer and Leotard a former defence minister, so they seemed to combine the necessary diplomatic and security expertise required for effective mediation in the Macedonian conflict.

Although the spring political dialogue had not ultimately succeeded, it did highlight several important issues. The importance of political decentralisation to strengthen

## The Ohrid Framework Agreement Negotiations

local self-government was recognised, also the need for fair and appropriate representation of the members of ethnic communities in the public administration. Agreement seemed likely on these. More problematic were questions regarding the use and status of the Albanian language at a state level and the participation of different ethnic communities, especially Albanians, in the police. These issues blocked the discussions in Skopje. They were finally addressed by the intervention of leading figures from the EU, NATO and OSCE: Javier Solana, George Robertson and Mircea Geoana. After their visit to Skopje and discussions on 26 July, it was announced that political dialogue was back on track.

At this point, the negotiations were moved out of Skopje. The first proposed venue was northwestern Macedonia, where the population was mainly Albanian and where the conflict had been most severe. In July, President Trajkovski announced that the next round of discussions would take place in Tetovo, “because this town needs peace and we should show that it is a safe town and a symbol of coexistence between different ethnic groups”. Unfortunately, security concerns made Tetovo impossible. Instead the town of Ohrid was chosen, a tourist centre situated on a beautiful lake in the southwest of the country, well known for its cultural and historic monuments. The Ohrid discussions, which led to the Ohrid Agreement, began on 28 July and lasted until 9 August, when the agreement was initialled.

The meetings took place in a complex of government villas on the lake, 5 km away from the town and well isolated from the surrounding beaches. Throughout the negotiations the location was subject to heightened security, with guards on land and water. The main discussions took place at the Biljana Villa, which at the beginning of the 1990s had been the location for a series of meetings between the presidents of the former Yugoslav republics. The destiny of the Yugoslav state formed the agenda for those meeting, no agreement was reached and a war had followed. For those painfully aware of this history, the venue for the Macedonian-Albanian inter-ethnic negotiations was not auspicious.

Other aspects of the way the talks structured were also discouraging. Ljubomir Frckovski, a law professor, former minister, and member of President Trajkovski’s expert team during the negotiations, said that for this kind of dialogue, intended to follow the lines of Dayton in 1995, “It is customary for the negotiators to be ‘locked’ in one place, which ensures efficiency in the negotiations and avoids direct public pressure over the content of the discussions.” But although the VMRO-DPMNE team was accommodated onsite, and the SDSM stayed at a hotel resort 25 km away, the Albanian delegates opted to stay further away. They spent the first night in Ohrid, but said that they felt insecure in this largely ethnic Macedonian region. Thereafter, the DPA members lodged at an Albanian village near Struga, the second town on the Ohrid Lake, over 30 km from the villa, while the PDP team travelled in from Tetovo every day.

The NLA, whose members were fighting government security forces, was not directly involved in the dialogue. “The rights that Albanians were supposed to take away from these negotiations were far more important than insisting on an NLA presence at the Ohrid conference,” said Ali Ahmeti, the NLA’s political representative. Albanian political leaders have nevertheless acknowledged that they were in constant touch with Ahmeti during the negotiations. “We informed him of every nuance in the changes that were to be made to the original text,” reported DPA leader, Arben Xhaferi. The Albanian camp had already formed a joint negotiating platform after Ahmeti, Xhaferi and Imeri signed the Prizren Agreement in May, and they stuck to it at Ohrid. For the Macedonian camp, the main priority was to avoid

any solution that would threaten the unitary character of the state; this was the line over which they would not permit any compromise solution to cross.

For these reasons, the negotiating atmosphere in Ohrid was not relaxed. Moreover, armed conflicts continued in the western and northern crisis regions. On the one hand this imposed pressure on all participants: both the NLA and the political groups that commanded the Macedonian security forces were using violence to try and steer the discussions. On the other hand, the continuing violence showed that a political agreement was needed as soon as possible, to serve as the basis for a ceasefire that could be a first step towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

As the discussions in Skopje had revealed, the two most sensitive issues to be resolved concerned the status and use of the Albanian language at a state level, and reform of the police. On the Albanian language issue, the position of the Albanian political parties was that it should be the second official language in the Republic of Macedonia, equal in status to Macedonian. That was unacceptable to the Macedonian camp, whose members argued that such a move was unnecessary, since the Albanian minority is concentrated in the northwest of Macedonia. More importantly, it would also constitute a linguistic federalisation of the country. This, they argued, contradicted a basic principle of the Framework Agreement: namely that the unitary status of the country must be maintained. They pointed to the first article of the agreement, entitled “Basic Principles,” agreed by the negotiators and mediators in Skopje, which states that “the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Macedonia as well as the unitary character of the state cannot be violated and must be sustained”. Also, “there are no territorial solutions for ethnic issues”.

This posed a dilemma for the negotiators, as they searched for a compromise that would promote the Albanian language to the level of an official language, without implying the federalisation of Macedonia. This single question took up four days. A key factor was that in Skopje, the international facilitators Pardew and Leotard had already embraced the notion that Albanian should be a second official language, equal in status to Macedonian. According to participants, Pardew admitted during the Ohrid negotiations that this had been an error.

Nonetheless, as Ljubomir Frckovski explains, the position of the international facilitators shaped a final agreement on this issue that was closer to the Albanian parties’ starting position than it may otherwise have been. “Once you have offered something to somebody, it becomes very difficult to reach a compromise which would mean going back on what has previously been promised.”

Frckovski’s interpretation, that with few changes, the pre-Ohrid proposal largely shaped the final agreement, has been denied by the Macedonian parties and by the president. During the negotiations, for example, premier Ljubco Georgievski attacked the international facilitators, claiming, “They want to break us down cowboy style.” Branko Crvenkovski of SDSM stuck to the position that the official use of Albanian on an equal status with Macedonian was unacceptable because it threatened the unitary character of the state. But despite such bitter opposition, the DPA and PDP continued to insist on equalising the status of Albanian with Macedonian, as an official language.

The deadlock was broken on 1 August, when the cabinet of the president announced that, “after long discussions the four largest parliamentary parties led by Georgievski, Crvenkovski, Xhaferi and Imeri, under the auspices of President Trajkovski and with the assistance of the facilitators Leotard, Pardew and Van der

## The Ohrid Framework Agreement Negotiations

Stoehl, have reached a general agreement on the language issue.” The press release announced that “the agreed solutions in this area will be final, conditional on the resolution of other disputed issues, including the issue of the police.” Under the terms of the agreement, the Macedonian language is the official language in the Republic of Macedonia, used for international relations. Any other language spoken by at least 20 percent of the population is also an official language, and can be used for personal documents, civil and criminal proceedings, by institutions of local self-government and in communication between citizens and central government.

The 20 percent threshold meant that Albanian was the only language other than Macedonian granted this recognition, but the recognition came as a function of demographics, rather than as a symbolic recognition of equal status. The agreed legislative package also permitted MPs of Albanian ethnic origin to speak in their mother tongue in parliament, and in meetings of the parliamentary bodies, or commissions. Government ministers did not receive this privilege, on the grounds that they were not elected but appointed as political officials.

The political leader of the disbanded NLA, Ali Ahmeti, considers the compromise on the recognition of Albanian as a second named official language as the greatest and most necessary concession made by the Albanian side during the Ohrid negotiations. “For me, it was acceptable for Albanian not to be accepted as an official language, because if this proposal had not been accepted it would have meant the continuation of the war with thousands more victims.”

The agreement on language was considered a major step forward in the dialogue, but the negotiators still faced a major task with the issue of reforms to the police. As with the language issue, the two sides began with irreconcilable positions. The DPA and PDP called for the transfer of some police authority to a local level. More precisely, they demanded the creation of local police units under the jurisdiction and management of local authorities. For the president, VMRO-DPMNE and SDSM, a centralised police force was an essential component of a unitary state. The DPA and PDP proposal, they said, would effectively divide the country, by dividing the police. It would also create local police forces that were part of local political party structures.

Again, the facilitators struggled to find a way to reduce the gulf between the two camps. A key role was played by EU high representative Javier Solana, who arrived in Ohrid on 5 August. He landed at Ohrid airport on a Ukrainian aeroplane, accompanied by the chief of the Ukrainian diplomatic corps, Anatoliy Zlenko. At the time Ukraine was the biggest supplier of arms to the Republic of Macedonia, and Kiev was under constant pressure from Brussels and Washington to stop supplying government forces in Skopje, especially as a political agreement between the Ohrid negotiators began to seem possible. By arriving together in Ohrid, Solana and Zlenko sought to send the signal that official Ukraine policy on Macedonia was in line with that of the EU and USA, thus putting additional pressure on hawks on the Macedonian side to reach an agreement.

Solana’s one-day visit on 5 August proved fruitful. At an evening press conference held at the Gorica Hotel, near the Biljana Villa where the negotiations were taking place, Solana announced that a compromise had been reached on the police issue. “We have closed another problematic issue and I think we are very close to a final agreement,” he said, expressing hope that he would come to Skopje very soon for the final signing of the agreement.

According to the negotiators from Ohrid, Solana managed to convince Albanian politicians that the concept of total local control of the police was indeed harmful for Macedonia. A compromise solution was offered, according to which the chief of the local police department would be chosen by the municipal council, from a shortlist provided by the minister of interior. This was not a new solution, but a practice used in the former Yugoslavia during the socialist period.

Solana also accepted the argument of the Macedonian negotiating team, expressed by Frckovski as follows. "We pointed out that ethnic cleansing of Macedonians was going on in the western part of the country. While that trend continued, a local quota system to guarantee the representation of different ethnic groups in the police would be meaningless, since in practical terms, an ethnically homogeneous Albanian territory was being created."

Thus, the Albanian demand that the ethnic composition of the police in any municipality should mirror the ethnic composition of that municipality, was not accepted. The compromise solution, again responding to Macedonian concerns over the preservation of the unitary state, was that the ethnic composition of the police should mirror the ethnic composition of the overall population, rather than the ethnic composition of any one area. The negotiators also agreed on a specific schedule for implementation, with deadlines by which target numbers of Albanians should be enrolled in the national police force.

With the resolution of the police issue, a final agreement was close. The outstanding questions concerned the procedures by which the constitution should be changed. The ensuing debate consumed another two days of discussions, as the Macedonian camp demanded additional guarantees that the NLA would disarm rapidly. That process was supposed to move in parallel with the verification of the Framework Agreement by the Macedonian parliament, but Macedonian negotiators now insisted that the parliamentary procedure to adopt the constitutional changes should begin only after the completion of NLA disarmament. In a number of statements to the media, facilitators Perdew and Leotard made clear that they viewed this demand as a device to stall the dialogue. Finally, it was agreed that disarmament and parliamentary debate should be conducted at the same time.

The negotiations were finally over and the discussion had moved to the signing protocol: when the agreement would be signed, whether it should be signed in Ohrid or Skopje. On 7 August, violence intervened. An operation was conducted in a Skopje suburb by the special anti-terrorist unit of the ministry of interior. Five armed Albanian extremists led by Commander Teli were killed. The police claimed that the men were members of elite NLA terrorist units. The exact details of the operation, especially the question of how the armed extremists were identified, the exact circumstances in which they were killed, and whether Albanian informers played a role, remain unclear. What was immediately obvious was that this incident placed the future of the Ohrid Agreement in jeopardy.

According to Nikola Popovski, SDSM vice-president and a member of the negotiating team, the news reached Ohrid that night. The main evening news on Macedonian National Television - a station controlled by VMRO-DPMNE, in his view - reported in euphoric terms that NLA members in Skopje had been "liquidated". The story was given a full fifteen minutes of air-time said Popovski, adding that the SDSM team were extremely anxious about what would follow, as they knew from the previous fighting that the NLA would mount some form of revenge operation. Within 24 hours, Popovski's fears were realised. The next morning, August 8, a lightly-armed



## The Ohrid Framework Agreement Negotiations

Macedonian army convoy was ambushed near Karpalak on the Skopje-Tetovo highway. Nine reservists were killed and many more injured, sparking further public protests by Macedonians and again threatening the peace process.

According to statements from participants in the Ohrid discussions, nobody knew what would happen next. “The atmosphere was tense and difficult,” said Branko Crvenkovski, leader of SDSM. “Everybody withdrew to their camps. Nobody talked to anybody about anything, let alone thought about signing the agreement.” His colleague Nikola Popovski remembers that President Trajkovski refused to meet the international facilitators that day, even though they were at the Biljana Villa. An Albanian participant in the discussions recalls how “a depressing and tormented atmosphere followed us home that day, reinforced whenever we had to pass a police checkpoint.”

The international facilitators remained determined to bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion. In a joint statement issued after the incident near Karpalak, they stressed the importance of finalising the political discussions under Trajkovski’s auspices. They also declared that “signing the Framework Agreement is the major requirement for political stability in the Republic of Macedonia, and one of the key preconditions for deployment of NATO troops to assist in disarmament.”

US envoy Pardew presented the Albanian representatives with a pen, and urged them to initial the agreement. Xhaferi and Imeri were reluctant, but Pardew then warned them that tragedy could ensue if they refused. After consulting with NLA headquarters in Sipkovica and receiving a green light, the PDP and DPA representatives agreed to initial the document. On the same day VMRO-DPMNE announced that they were suspending their participation in the dialogue. After the incident at Karpalak, the party spokesperson declared “We cannot be expected to participate in a political dialogue while soldiers are being killed, civilians are kidnapped and there are shoot-outs in and around Tetovo.” But later that day they initialled the document, along with the SDSM representatives. The signing was scheduled for 13 August, in Skopje.

Even though the initialling of the agreement eased tensions in the Tetovo and Kumanovo regions where the conflict was most severe, key figures there remained sceptical about it. Tetovo mayor Murtezan Ismaili, for example, recalled that while the conclusion of the Ohrid negotiations raised hopes that the spiral of violence in Tetovo would end, “there were many reservations with regard to the implementation of what had been agreed”. The mayor of the Kumanovo municipality, Slobodan Kovacevski, recalled that there were “citizens of conscience who knew that nothing could be achieved through war, so the worst was prevented”. While he acknowledged the Framework Agreement had an impact, it was not pivotal in his view.

Between the initialling and the planned signing of the agreement there were more incidents. On 10 August, near the Skopje village of Ljuboten, an anti-tank mine killed another seven members of government security forces. This was followed by reprisals against the village of Ljuboten by interior ministry forces. With an obvious risk of further escalation, the Ljuboten incidents caused public outrage, placing additional pressure on all the politicians and making it uncertain whether they would sign. Plans for the signing event continued, but under conditions of secrecy. Everybody knew that Solana, Robertson and Geoana were supposed to be in Skopje for the ceremony on 13 August, but nobody knew when they were arriving. For

security reasons, the exact location of the ceremony was not disclosed until the very last moment.

In the end, the Ohrid Framework Agreement was signed at the residence of President Boris Trajkovski. Located in Vodno, a hilly part of Skopje, it overlooks the entire city. Along with President Trajkovski, the four party leaders, Ljubco Georgievski, Arben Xhaferi, Branko Crvenkovski, and Imer Imeri all signed the Framework Agreement. Their handshakes, although not the most cordial, represented a message to citizens that the war in Macedonia was coming to an end. As a guarantee, the Framework Agreement was also signed by the US and EU special representatives, James Pardew and Francois Leotard. Javier Solana, George Robertson and Mircea Geoana were present, and applauded the signing.

The atmosphere of the ceremony was marred, however, when party leaders addressed the public afterwards, Arben Xhaferi, invoking the terms of the agreement which had been signed but not yet adopted, spoke in Albanian. President Trajkovski described Xhaferi's gesture as a provocation. Ljubco Georgievski responded by leaving the ceremony.

Speaking after the signing, the former NLA leader Ali Ahmeti expressed his conviction that the Ohrid Agreement was a vital step in the peace process. "If the Ohrid Agreement had not been signed, a new Bosnia would have unfolded with one or two hundred thousand victims," he said. Today, the man whose organisation started the seven-month conflict in Macedonia believes that, "with the Framework Agreement a new historical chapter opened, in which Macedonia has become a state for Albanians as well." He considers the agreement satisfactory, although not ideal, describing it as "a compromise in which the Albanians are winners." He believes nonetheless that the agreement leaves "space for its shortcomings to be corrected."

Macedonians undoubtedly hope that any such corrections will be pursued through legal and peaceful means.

## **Same World, Parallel Universes**

### **The Role of the Media in the Macedonian Conflict**

**Gordana Icevska**

*(Editor of weekly magazine Kapital)*

**Ilir Ajdini**

*(Editor with Makfax news agency)*

From the beginning of the 2001 crisis until now, the media in Macedonia has operated in two parallel universes. Journalists working in the Albanian and Macedonian language media have provided radically different accounts of events, mainly addressing their own ethnic group but also with an eye to foreign audiences. Although overt hate mongering has been rare, both Macedonian and Albanian media have tended to assign responsibility for the violence to the “other side”. Seldom cooperating, they have used sources selectively, to construct arguments that have often owed more to emotion than strict objective appraisal. As a result, international and domestic analysts agree that media reporting during the conflict served to inflame the political situation.

The Republic of Macedonia is home to many TV and radio stations and a flourishing print media. Since early 2001, a majority of observers have noticed a split in the country’s media over coverage of the conflict between Macedonian government forces and ethnic Albanian insurgents in the NLA, or National Liberation Army. This split has largely replicated the line between the Macedonian language and Albanian language media. Spokesperson for the European Union in Macedonia, Irena Guzelova, acknowledges that the different language media present two completely different realities. “If you read about the same event, on the same day, first in Fakti [an independent Albanian language daily] and then in Nova Makedonija [the state-run Macedonian-language daily] you wouldn’t connect the two. They are completely different,” she says.

The most obvious distinction came in the language used to describe the combatants. The Macedonian language media generally spoke of “terrorist attacks”, featuring “fires, looting, torture and terror,” against Macedonian civilians by “terrorists”. In these accounts, Macedonian security forces appear as “defenders of the fatherland” confronting “Albanian terrorist gangs infiltrating from Kosovo and Albania”, assisted by “Mujahedins”, who after 11 September 2001, were recast as “al-Qaeda terrorists”. The message here was that the war was provoked and conducted by terrorists, with assistance from Kosovo. Their aim was to conquer part of Macedonia, drive out all non-Albanians, then partition the territory. As such, they were cast as forces of destruction, hostile to the status quo and established international order.

The Albanian language media, by contrast, described a conflict waged by “Albanian fighters” against “Macedonian security forces” and “paramilitary groups”, assisted by “mercenaries from Serbia, Russia and the Ukraine”. From this perspective, the Albanians of Macedonia had been compelled to resort to violence as the only way to win rights to which they were entitled, which had consistently been denied to them

by the nationalist Macedonian state apparatus. In this account, the Albanian armed forces were described as local, from Macedonia, whereas their opponents included professional soldiers from foreign states which might broadly be regarded as anti-western.

The terminological divide runs throughout all media institutions. The state-owned publishing house Nova Makedonija produces the Macedonian language newspapers Nova Makedonija and Vecer, as well as the Albanian language newspaper Flaka, while state TV broadcasts programmes in both Macedonian and Albanian.

In Macedonian, the security forces are referred to as “defenders of Macedonia”, in Albanian, the more neutral “Macedonian military and police force” is used. While Albanian language state media described NLA forces as “rebels” or “fighters”, bulletins from the Macedonian Information Agency, widely used by the Macedonian language media, called them “terrorists”.

This ethnic divide began to erode certain core journalistic principles. In its annual report on the world’s media, The International Press Institute, IPI, included a section on the conflict in Macedonia by quoting a Macedonian journalist as saying, “In this story there is no balanced reporting, nor should there be. There is nothing to be said for the other side. I have no questions for those who kill people.” In general, the Macedonian media relied almost exclusively on Macedonian military and police statements, also drawing on “anonymous intelligence sources”, domestic and international. The Albanian language media also published official press releases by the Macedonian authorities and statements from leading politicians and police and army spokespeople. However, the Albanian media also had access to statements from NLA spokesmen and commanders, as well as political leaders from the crisis regions, including mayors and municipal councillors, so their stories were generally based on these sources.

Again, international and domestic analysts noted this phenomenon. Florin Pasnicu, spokesperson for the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, reported that in many cases, “journalists prefer to stay on their own side without crossing to the other to verify their information”. The 2001 annual report of the Macedonian Helsinki Committee observed that, “Many of the media reported one-sided statements from politicians, functionaries or ‘experts’ and ignored the need for credible evidence,” also noting that none of the media offered neutral information, a balanced approach or alternative views of the conflict. This unwillingness or inability to offer differing accounts, coupled with a tendency to repeat rumour and speculation in the guise of “anonymous” or “unofficial” sources, had functioned to blur the line between factual reportage and editorial commentary, said the report.

Almost all publications had daily features attacking the other side, sometimes in inflammatory terms. High profile incidents, in which members of the security force were killed, usually prompted the Macedonian media to demand that peace negotiations with the Albanian side should be halted, so the war could be fought “to the end”. Journalists consistently underlined - and sometimes exaggerated - tragedies on their own side, while devoting little space to - and generally downplaying - the suffering of civilians on the other side. “The media have either become prisoners of their own ethnic prejudice or chosen to back certain political interests,” commented the Macedonian Helsinki Committee report for 2001. NATO’s spokesperson in Macedonia, Craig Ratcliff, also observed that journalists reported events in strict accordance with their ethnic origin.

## Same World, Parallel Universes - The Role of the Media in the Macedonian Conflict

Some journalists openly abandoned their roles as non-participant observers to the conflict. One of the most notorious cases was that of Magdalena Cizmanova, a reporter for the private Skopje TV station, Kanal 5. In May 2001, while reporting from a Macedonian army position in one of the crisis regions, Cizmanova fired a grenade launcher at a village. This highly irregular episode, which was widely criticised and drew a censure from the Macedonian Broadcasting Board, is the most graphic illustration of the atmosphere which pervaded the media.

Over a year after the end of military conflict, the same general style of reporting persists, although the tone and language has become less extreme. Explanations of the root cause differ. Some observers, such as Florin Pasnicu, believe that the heightened emotions of wartime were allowed to overwhelm professional propriety. "It is only human to have emotions, but to maintain their professionalism the media must maintain a healthy distance from those emotions," he said.

Vesna Sopar, a media analyst at the Institute for Sociological and Political Legal Research in Skopje, was more sympathetic to the media. "Journalists are humans, just like everybody else. They also experienced deep emotions about everything that happened in Macedonia during the crisis," she said. While unbalanced coverage could not be justified, journalists found themselves unable to transcend the climate in which they worked. "While we are constantly mindful of the media's role in shaping public opinion, we should also keep in mind that the public has its own 'reality' based on informal communications and other shapers of public opinion. The public will accept a message from the media only where it coincides with that other reality. Preconceptions are not easily or quickly shifted. Like the media, the public operates its own mechanisms of selective reading, listening and watching," she added.

In Sopar's view, this "virtual" reality of perception became a trap for journalists and the public alike, making them "witnesses of a virtual apocalypse far much more dangerous than a real apocalypse". For the independent media, the room for manoeuvre gradually shrank. Although some journalists and editors attempted to observe the principles of objective reporting, they were hampered by lack of cooperation and the inaccessibility of sources. As popular opinion hardened and direct reportage or investigation became more difficult, even conscientious journalists found their options limited.

OSCE spokesperson Florin Pasnicu has suggested that in some cases this "virtual" relationship even influenced events on the ground. In his view, the media wielded considerable power which was used irresponsibly, often to the detriment of ethnic relations. In some cases "media reports generated new developments, because they shaped the collective mentality and psychology to such a degree that people based their actions on what they read in the media," he said. One example of this was the return of police units to villages in the crisis areas, timetabled for January 2002. The media started warning of a new spring offensive, which generated significant fear among villagers who thought that they were in danger. As a result, they began to oppose the return of the police, he said.

The European Commission has described the Macedonian media as structurally weak, under the financial and political control of the government. The Macedonian Helsinki Committee concluded their 2001 report by noting, "indications of indirect pressures on certain media and certain journalists. Worst of all a majority of the media have placed themselves in the service of ethnic interests. This encourages a form of self-censorship among the journalists who consider it their main duty to

promote the interests of their ethnic group, not to maintain professional standards and defend freedom of information. This situation is worrying, particularly with regard to the peace process.”

Opinions differ on how the situation could be improved. The European Commission has proposed radical reforms including professional training programs for members of minorities, EU spokesperson Irena Ouzelova, believes the problem is a structural one. “The media is dependent on patrons. The state-owned media depends on the government, while the private media is owned by businessmen who either have political ambitions of their own, or owe their licenses to politicians who must be kept happy.” Vesna Sopar argues that for progress to be made, the two distinct media worlds must be broken down. This process could begin with the publication of Albanian language papers in Macedonian, and for commentaries or editorials in Macedonian language papers to be printed in both languages. “The papers will not lose anything, on the contrary they would gain,” she says. “Maybe not immediately, but in the long run, definitely. In this way journalists would stop viewing the citizens of Macedonia as ethnic groups, but as people with a shared humanity. Someone has to take the first step.”

Since the end of the armed conflict in 2001, some analysts have found grounds for optimism. NATO spokesman Craig Ratcliff had no criticisms of coverage of the alliance, for example. “I think that we are treated with a high degree of professional respect” he said. “I treat them [journalists] fairly and I think they are fair towards me.” Similarly, Florin Pasnicu categorised most coverage of the OSCE as at least neutral, if not always timely and accurate. Pasnicu detected some negative coverage of the international community which he attributed to a combination of “longstanding negative perceptions” and reactions to events in Kosovo, which Macedonians do not always understand, with the result that they fear negative consequences for Macedonia.

The particular significance of Kosovo was also apparent in judgments made by Macedonia’s Broadcasting Board, during the conflict. The board directed considerable criticism towards the Albanian language media in particular, regarding the broadcast of programmes from the Kosovo radio-television satellite channel, the use of terminology which portrayed the Macedonian security forces as violent and the NLA as legal combatants. TV Art in Tetovo, an Albanian-language station, received warnings from the board, while the editorial policy of the Albanian language section of state-owned television was criticised. Sections of the Albanian-language media were accused of violating Article 35 of the broadcasting law, which outlaws the broadcast of material calling for a violent overthrow of the constitutional order, or material which inflames ethnic hatred or intolerance. The board’s censure led the director of Macedonian television to suspend the evening Albanian language news broadcast and to suspend an Albanian journalist who had made a statement to the foreign media supporting the NLA. Journalists in the Albanian language section protested the suspension by staging a three-day boycott during which no news was broadcast in the Albanian language.

The terrorist attacks against the USA on 11 September 2001 heralded a new phase in the media war. The Macedonian language media began uncovering “links” between Osama Bin Laden and the NLA, usually based on information from “anonymous foreign intelligence sources” or unnamed sources in the Macedonian Intelligence Agency. In some cases journalists admitted the absence of hard evidence, noting that it was “difficult to prove the links between Osama Bin Laden and NLA terrorists” or assuring their audience that “the ministry of interior is

striving to find a link between al-Qaeda and NLA terrorists.” Nevertheless, an overall impression was created that Macedonia was a chief target of the new international public enemy number one.

Articles and reports appeared, claiming that the NLA had direct connections with al-Qaeda, that the CIA knew that Osama Bin Laden’s fighters had fought with Albanian terrorists in Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania, and that NLA leader Ali Ahmeti had accepted money from Osama Bin Laden via Sali Berisha, the former president of Albania. One of the most emotive claims was that al-Qaeda terrorists had carried out a massacre of eight soldiers and policemen near the village of Vejce on 28 April 2001. The Macedonian language media broadcast ministry of interior statements claiming that “the intelligence service possesses footage showing Mujahedin activities in Macedonia”, while daily newspapers published photos of Mujahedin fighters allegedly taken in Macedonia.

Newspaper commentaries demanded to know why the United States had taken no action to solve a problem long identified by Macedonian intelligence agencies. The CIA and US diplomats in the region were upbraided for their reluctance to act earlier, and the USA chastised for its incorrect assessment of events in the region. One author peevishly concluded that “only when the Americans got hurt did they realise what was going on here”. Even though the NLA had disbanded after the Ohrid Agreement of August 2001, articles appeared alleging it was still manned by Mujahedin. Israel military intelligence sources were quoted claiming that al-Qaeda terrorists from Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania and Macedonia had been ordered to open a second Islamic front against the USA in the Balkans.

In the battle between journalistic standards and sensationalism, sensationalism usually triumphed. In the case of the alleged photographs of Mujahedin in Macedonia, for example, as the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, IWPR, pointed out in its media monitoring bulletin for September 2001, the pictures could have been taken anywhere in the world. At the end of October 2001, the Macedonian language media widely quoted a story from the British Independent newspaper, reporting that Interpol had discovered links between al-Qaeda, the Albanian mafia, and Albanian “terrorists” in Macedonia. In fact, the Independent made no mention of Macedonia, the NLA or even “Albanian terrorists”. Although the original text did indicate that police in Tirana had provided Interpol with information suggesting links between criminal organisations in Albania and Bin Laden, who had probably visited Albania, the alleged “link” to Macedonia was fabricated and then attributed to the original text.

Albanian-language newspapers immediately denounced the story as “typical Macedonian propaganda” intended to distort reality, not least as Macedonian journalists had partly sought to verify their story on the basis that many NLA fighters had beards. “These lies about Mujahedins fighting for the UCK ... are ridiculous and intended to discredit the struggle of Albanians for equality,” ran one commentary, adding, “Moreover, they want to hide their shame that among the Macedonian policemen and soldiers are Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian and Romanian mercenaries.”

None of these claims were borne out by later events, with the possible exception of an incident on 2 March 2002, in which seven foreign citizens were shot dead near Skopje. The differing accounts of this incident indicate once more how tightly journalists were bound by broader circles of political influence, and the levels of animosity and mistrust which existed between fellow media professionals.

The official police version of the incident was that the seven men were “Islamic terrorists, probably from Pakistan”, who were connected with “Albanian terrorists from Macedonia” and intended to attack western diplomatic targets in Skopje, including the US embassy. The US embassy in Skopje has repeatedly denied that it was under any such threat. It has also denied claims by the Macedonian police that the CIA had information about the seven men. At the beginning of May, the Greek media reported that the men were in fact six Pakistanis and one Indian, economic migrants who were trying to illegally cross through Macedonia into Greece, where their relatives were already working.

IWPR monitoring at the time recorded a number of sharp commentaries in the Macedonian language media, relying solely on the Macedonian police version of events. The commentaries urged the international community to recognise that Macedonia was fighting a war against terrorism and demanded that Albanian politicians in Macedonia renounce the use of violence for political ends. In each case the discovery of “Islamic terrorists” was treated as proof of the alleged conspiracy between Albanians in Macedonia and al-Qaeda.

The Albanian language media, by contrast, pointed out inconsistencies in the police version of events and treated the official accounts with open scepticism, detecting the hand of the interior minister Ljube Boskovski. According to one commentary the killing of the seven men was “a spectacle” which demonstrated “Minister Boskovski’s various goals, to locate Macedonia within the war against terrorism ... and to show the alleged connection between the former NLA, al-Qaeda and the Mujahedin in general.” The commentary also suggested that Boskovski was trying to woo foreign diplomats - and flex his muscles - by stationing armoured personnel carriers outside foreign embassies.

Another article described the measures as “another piece of theatre from Boskovski”, while a third declared that “Boskovski should be in the Hague charged with crimes against humanity, not presenting himself to the West as a friend who defends the interest of western countries in the struggle against global terrorism.” The tone of these stories, and their contrast with the coverage in much of the Macedonian-language media, demonstrated the huge gulf which remained, eight months after the Ohrid Agreement.

## **A View From The Ground**

While this summary has outlined the huge grounds for pessimism over the media in Macedonia, it is heartening to note that some important players, especially in the private sector, have attempted to analyse their own behaviour. Goran Mihajlovski, editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper Vest, points out that the conduct of the media was partially conditioned by its audience. “If we published a photograph of an NLA member on the front page, or even made a simple reference to Arben Xhaferi [a leading Albanian politician], we would receive numerous calls from readers threatening to boycott the paper.” Mihajlovski believes that such pressures worked subconsciously on Vest’s writers and was reflected in their output. In this way, the media became part of a spiral of violence.

The editor-in-chief of the private Al television channel, Aco Kabranov, believes that right across the media the conflict was reported in an unprofessional, hysterical fashion. In this process, the truth - and therefore the profession as a whole - was the major casualty. Kabranov also alleges that much of the Macedonian language



## Same World, Parallel Universes - The Role of the Media in the Macedonian Conflict

media was infiltrated by a new breed of journalist, “police or intelligence mouthpieces, who received large sums of money to try and provoke some kind of final clash between Macedonians and Albanians”.

Kabranov's own channel was considered by many observers to have been more objective than most other media during the crisis. A1 strove to use a variety of sources and to present the attitude of the “other side”. That editorial policy was resented by more extreme Macedonian circles, and on several occasions A1 was attacked by official government representatives, with Prime Minister Ljubco Georgovski once commenting, “We do not know who A1 television works for.” Walls around Skopje are still festooned with anti-A1 graffiti, including: “A1-traitors,” “A1-UCK,” “A1 stands for Allah one,” and “A1-Ahmetivision”.

Despite this ordeal, Kabranov remains optimistic. In the long run, he believes there will be little place in the Macedonian media for what he calls “cheap police intelligence stories”. He is confident that citizens will eventually see the difference between the so-called “patriotic” media and the so-called “treacherous” media, which refused to dance to the authorities’ tune. “Then it will become clear to people that the campaign to foster false patriotism among [sic] was to the disadvantage of both the citizens and the state. Until then, we will continue to see cheap stories by police stooges who pass themselves off as journalists,” he says.

Shkelzen Halimi, editor-in-chief of the private Albanian-language newspaper Fakti, agrees with Kabranov that some journalists acted as police stooges during the crisis. Unconfirmed stories were published which “significantly poisoned the Macedonian public”, he says, adding that they served “the needs of a certain political group”. The result of that kind of journalism, according to Halimi, was “an irrational hatred that reached tragic proportions”.

Branko Trickovski, editor-in-chief of the private daily newspaper Utrinski Vesnik, is far less critical of media conduct during the conflict. Trickovski, whose paper was perceived as one of the more objective, acknowledged that there were cases of manipulation, extreme nationalism, tendentiousness and provocation. On both sides there were media which “in a vulgar and primitive way believed - and still do - that things could only be resolved if enough blood was spilled on both sides,” he said. However “as a critical mass, the media sought to control the situation rather than promote further violence,” he said, attributing their failure to play a more precautionary role to conformist tendencies.

Overall, it is clear that with notable individual exceptions, the media in Macedonia failed the country’s citizens during the conflict. A lack of objectivity and professional standards in reporting destroyed the media’s credibility. Attacks by journalists on each other further inflamed a volatile situation. Accusations that the media helped fuel tensions in the country seem fully justified. Fortunately, there is a broad consensus regarding the dangers of this situation. As Bosnian analyst Zlatko Dizdarevic has written in a previous IWPR report, in other Balkan wars the media stimulated a kind of parallel thinking, a path which led to enormous bloodshed and suffering. To take a different route, he concluded, journalists in Macedonia must rediscover their professional responsibilities, which all but a small minority appear to have forgotten. Until they do, they will continue sustaining a drama that could have a bloody ending.