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**Macedonia - Names,
Nomenclaturas and NATO**

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Key Points

- * The possible NATO decision on FYROM/Republic of Macedonia membership is complex and depends on unstable political realities.
- * In both Greece and FYROM/Republic of Macedonia, the political elites have a strong interest in the continuation of the status quo over the name issue.
- * These views are not necessarily irresponsible, given the need for stability in the new situation that will follow Kosovo independence and Macedonia's key role as a buffer territory.
- * There are likely to be significant movement and trade problems in the region when Kosovo independence is recognised, and post-Ohrid reforms have largely stalled. An appropriate EU policy is perhaps more important than NATO membership.

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Introduction

'La question albanaise nait véritablement avec le processus de désintégration du système communiste et de la Yougoslavie, caractérisé par la création de partis politique nationaux par les Macedoniens et les Albanais, et par le mécontentement face a la politique du 'vieux régime', ayant comme implication une inégalité des nationalités, dernier pas du gouvernement 'communiste'.¹

This statement, written by a semi-official commentator in Skopje on the eve of the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, can be seen as typifying a main train of thought among the Skopje-Macedonian political elite about the future of their country. FYROM/Republic of Macedonia politics since the end of communism has been dominated by the unresolved position of the 25% plus ethnic Albanian minority living mostly in the west of the country. The imminent Kosovo independence decision is bound once again to focus some attention on the Macedonian Question, as Serbian and Russian interests have argued that Kosovo independence is but one step on the road to a so-called 'Greater Albania', which would allegedly include the western part of the current state within its territory.

At the same time, in the last few months, some effort has been made within the United Nations, backed by the United States, to move the seemingly endless negotiations between Greece and FYROM/Republic of Macedonia over the name problem to some sort of conclusion. They have been in progress, intermittently, for twelve years, since 1995. In that year, the so-called 'small package' agreement was signed that removed some of the most difficult issues between Skopje and Athens, in particular the 'Star of Vergina' flag design.²

Why is a Settlement so Difficult?

The disadvantage of the 1995 'small package' agreement was that it gave most of what either political elite wanted in terms of opening trade and money making opportunities, while leaving untouched the basic name dilemma. This, in turn, is linked to the nature of the Skopje elite, which had many of the characteristics of the old communist period nomenclatura where the ideological construct of 'Macedonianism' was rooted in the Titoist origins of the state itself. On the Greek side, the change in atmosphere over the name issue has been much exaggerated. Although there are not nowadays the large 'Macedonia is Greek' campaigns of the 1990s, with mass street demonstrations, the main reason for this is that after the departure of PASOK from power, the new centre-right dominated parliament and government contained many political figures (particularly from north of the Gulf of Corinth) who have very hard line views on the issue.

Ideological imperatives connected with the growth of Christian nationalism in wider world affairs play a great part in the issue. The Greek argument about the nature and population of the state established by Philip II and Alexander the Great is based on the views of most serious ancient historians, and continues to dominate the open and subconscious discourse in most universities in the West, and through that the often unconscious assumptions of many diplomats and intelligence officers.³ The Greek diaspora, particularly in Australia and the United States, continues to see the issue as central to Greek national identity. This has greater importance than it might appear at first sight because in both countries, but particularly Australia, there is substantial ethnic Greek overrepresentation in the diplomatic, military and national security agencies, akin to the often fabled power of the Jewish lobby in the US, but all the more effective because it is largely unnoticed outside Ankara and Skopje.⁴ Thus the Athens Olympics and their aftermath provided a suitable cover for the issue to become a 'frozen conflict', sanctified by the special role given to UK and US security and associated agencies in Greece at that time. The current New Democracy government is in many ways a neo-conservative creation where legitimate and necessary measures to secure a major sporting event also had an agenda to change the modus operandi of the Greek state over a wide area, and to swing the general agenda towards the right. The language of Christian nationalism and the 'war on terror' also provide a basis for the elision of rational debate about the real nature of the modern Macedonian Question, and reinforces intractable positions on the name issue.

As far as Skopje is concerned the changes in the Greek state mechanisms under the present government, which were supposed to be part of the pre-Olympic Games security preparations and the 'war on terrorism' have included reactivating population movement control legislation dating from the pre-PASOK period which has enabled large numbers of Slav-Macedonian political activists to be excluded from Greece, and prevented from raising issues in EU and other forums. At the same time, Athens mounted a 'spin' campaign to allow family members from the Slav-Macedonian diaspora based in the ex-Warsaw Pact countries to visit Greece for short summer visits, which are widely publicized in the Athens press.

The Greek hard right believes that the Skopje state will have no viable long term future, and that a territorial division will eventually take place where the Albanians may have to receive the northwest corner, while Greece can turn the remainder into a semi-protectorate, and eventually 'redeem' the 'Slav Macedonians'.⁵ These ideas, or various watered down versions of them, are not confined to the lunatic fringe, and with the increasing importance of religion in the modern world, find a receptive audience in parts of the Greek and Serbian Orthodox churches, which have historic claims to land on modern FYROM/Republic of Macedonia territory. The conflicts in the Macedonian Orthodox Church over the pro-Belgrade Bishop Jovan who was arrested and imprisoned in 2006-2007 illustrate the importance of the issue in current inner-Skopeian religious discourse.⁶

The Nato Decision

Diplomatic efforts are primarily linked to the imminent NATO decisions on whether to admit the Western Balkan countries of Albania, FYROM/Republic of Macedonia and Croatia as prospective members. A decision on the issue may be made as early as April 2008, although it could be further delayed. The so-called 'Adriatic Three' have been closely linked by various agreements in the last five years, and the reviving activity of the Russian navy in the eastern Mediterranean is adding more urgency to this decision. NATO's parallel negotiations with the Montenegrins have been going well, and it is claimed in Podgoritsa that the majority of the Montenegrin

armed forces leaders are now happy to join NATO. Given the considerable Russian economic interests in Montenegro, securing this deal is also important for NATO, particularly for naval strategy. The 'Adriatic Three' have already been providing soldiers to US-led coalitions, and it is likely Kosovo will also follow as a resource supplier after independence. The Western policy of the early post-2000 period, that EU and NATO membership for the Western Balkans should be simultaneous, has in effect been abandoned, as it is unlikely that FYROM/Republic of Macedonia and Albania will be anywhere near possible EU membership status for some time, and it remains unclear what will actually happen with the final decisions and detailed timetable on Croatian membership. A significant factor in NATO deliberations is likely to be the dramatic success of Russian 'energypolitik' in the Balkans, with the Gazprom deal over the new pipeline links with Serbia a major strategic gain for Moscow, something that was assisted by Western vacillation over the Kosovo issue.

Regional Considerations - the Key Position of Greece

Greece has seen the Kosovo decision as inevitable for some years, but there has been the usual split between the political elite and the views of the majority of the population, who generally back Kosovo as staying within Serbia. An independent Kosovo places a not unduly friendly new state with a nominal Muslim culture between Greece and its northern neighbours in the European Union and NATO. There is a large gap to be bridged on both sides. Stability of some kind in FYROM/Republic of Macedonia is important for the maintenance of the only easy motorway routes linking Greece with western Europe that do not go through Kosovo. The memories of the new Kosovo rulers are likely to be dominated by recollection of the strong Greek support for most of Belgrade's political positions over the last twenty years, and Greece is very unpopular among the general Kosovan Albanian majority population as a result of the refusal of Athens to admit any Kosovar refugees at all in the 1998-9 humanitarian emergency.

Greek trade, mostly agricultural exports, has grown in Kosovo in the last eight years, and a low-level diplomatic representation has been maintained, but the new state is likely to bring difficult new questions for Athens, and for neighbouring majority-Orthodox states. An obvious immediate issue is the possibility of some sort of post-independence economic boycott of Kosovo from Serbia, which if it takes place will most likely be focused on the flour and cereal supply: over 80% of Kosovo supplies are obtained from Serbia. Belgrade has doubled the flour price in the last eighteen months, which has been presented as a response to rising grain prices on world markets, but it has also been a useful political tool to put economic pressure on the Kosovo population.⁷

Meat is also heavily traded cross-border, although this mostly takes place through two very large, technically illegal markets in remote rural areas that may be hard for Belgrade to influence. Serbia is also likely to appeal to neighbouring states to join a boycott or embargo, and there is likely to be pressure from public opinion within the new EU 'Orthodox block' of Romania, Bulgaria and Greece for governments to act. By far the most likely scenario will be for the governments to avoid explicit support for Serbia, but to privately advise their customs and tax authorities to create local obstacles to Kosovo trade. Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha has already said that he will open all Albanian ports and harbours to Kosovo transport for food if this scenario does in fact develop. The nascent EU advisory and law and order force for Kosovo is not formed or deployed, and previous EU efforts in the Balkans do not give rise to much confidence in its practical reach beyond major towns and areas near asphalt roads. Whatever the progress with the

mission, it is unlikely to be able to significantly influence this economic threat to the new state, and the close link with what happens in FYROM/Republic of Macedonia.

Travel Issues

Passports are also likely to be an important issue. Serbia is introducing a new passport system that will make all the current Yugoslav and Serbia-Montenegrin Federation passports invalid.⁸ Many Kosovo Albanians who need to travel abroad held these documents as with some neighbouring countries they were more useful than the UNMIK travel document, but they will soon no longer be able to use them. Serbia will refuse to recognize the new Kosovo passport and may be able to pressure some other countries to do the same, and thus attempt to isolate the population of the new Kosovo. Romania is likely to prove a particularly difficult problem for Brussels, as relations with the Kosovars have been at a very low ebb since the amnesty for a group of Romanian special police accused of serious crimes in the February 2007 demonstrations in Prishtina. Border issues are likely to be important - some of the transport problems of the 1990s may return for a time, where Kosovo car number plates and documentation may not be recognized in some Balkan countries. FYROM/Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro currently act as vital safety valves for Kosovo in these respects.

Travel will be difficult for the new Kosovo citizens in some directions, and thus FYROM/Republic of Macedonia occupies a critical position for the Kosovars. The Gruevski government in Skopje has recently said that it will consider imposing a visa system for Kosovars' travel, which if actually implemented will mean that many Kosovars will be forced to use Albanian and Montenegrin routes to travel abroad. This will immediately create serious regional difficulties at a practical level. These immediate practical issues are of much greater relevance to the future stability than fears about the formation of a Greater Albanian state. The process of state formation in Kosovo is likely to lead to long-term basic changes in southern Balkan regional relationships, and this will make the implementation of the Ohrid Accords and the general stabilization of FYROM/Macedonia a top priority for the international community.

In a sense, this has already been recognized, as exemplified by the new pressure to solve the name problem in Skopje, which is a necessity for any further progress towards European Union and NATO membership. NATO is therefore in a difficult position over these decisions. If the Skopje state is admitted now it will be on a basis where the military reform programme has not satisfactorily addressed the key stability issue of the ethnic balance in the armed forces, particularly at the top, and where there is a serious issue with a major neighbour, Greece. Trying to force through a botched compromise over the name - although it is unclear what that could be, because in the last analysis the state is either called 'Macedonia' or it is not - will reactivate the Macedonian issue as a divisive force in the region. There is also the ever-present problem of Serbian and Russian intelligence activity in the Skopje military for NATO to consider, something reminiscent of the relationship with pre-Orange Revolution Ukraine in the 2001 conflict in Macedonia.

The Brodec Violence

Many of these problems can be seen in concrete form in the violent events in the village of Brodec, in the mountains above the western Macedonian town of Tetovo, in November 2007. A group of armed fugitives from Kosovo had been hiding in the

area, and were in loose, unclear association with some local militant figures. In an anti-terrorist operation, several of them were killed, and also at least three civilians who appear to have been unconnected to the crisis. Ethnic Albanians in Brodec claim to have seriously damaged an army helicopter in the fighting, but independent verification of this claim is difficult.

Photographs released by the German military officials in FYROM/Republic of Macedonia taken immediately after the assault show scenes of widespread destruction, including the destruction of various houses and agricultural property and the shooting up of the local mosque, which local residents allege took place from helicopter gunships. Although apprehending the fugitives was no doubt justified, the whole episode indicates the incapacity of the Skopje state to operate against problems in the western mountains except through using the new NATO equipment they have received in a vigorous and brutal counter-insurgency framework. The tactics and modus operandi can perhaps at the best be described as crudely heavy-handed for what was basically a police arrest mission, and the army was used in the absence of institutional rule of law and a respected police.

The operation inevitably gave rise to allegations from the ethnic Albanian villagers that it was a revenge operation for the defeats the Skopje army suffered in these mountains in the 2001 war, when National Liberation Army (NLA) leader Ali Ahmeti, currently deputy national leader in Skopje, had his headquarters at nearby Shipkovic. In the aftermath of the events, and subsequent mass funerals in both Tetovo and Brodec, the US Embassy rushed to broker an agreement in December where the Skopje government would finance social benefits for ethnic-Albanian NLA soldier veterans from the 2001 war, long a running sore in Albanian-Skopje government relations. This was a clear attempt to buy off trouble from the numerous, often unemployed veterans who remain in the west. A major, unexpected, casualty of the events was indirectly the Kosovo leader Agim Ceku, who issued a firm statement supporting the counter-insurgency only to find the army violence provoking widespread sympathy for the dead fugitives. Ceku was planning to retire from Kosovo politics shortly in any event, but his remarks will probably have ensured the end of his political career.

The lack of a military or paramilitary response to the Brodec violence from the ethnic Albanian side was mainly due to the imminent Kosovo independence decision, and their sense that the scale and violence of the army attack may have been a provocation intended to derail the Kosovo deal, along the lines of the 1999 Kicevo shootings at the beginning of the Kosovo conflict. In Tetovo, and the wider ethnic Albanian minority, it is generally believed that both the Serbian and Bulgarian military intelligence have substantial influence in the FYROM/Republic of Macedonia military.

The Decision

This all illustrates very clearly the several reasons why progress towards NATO and European Union membership has been slow, and solving the name issue has been so difficult. These include problems of state functioning, slow progress on implementing the Ohrid Agreements, lack of the rule of law in many places, a major problem of corruption in business and public life, and the lack of real substance to the functioning of many public institutions, particularly the Skopje parliament. On the Albanian side of the political divide, the retirement of Arben Xhaferi from active political leadership on health grounds has deprived the international community of a key local interlocutor. Since the 2001 conflict, there has been a slow and

undramatic process of community separation at work, with many Macedonians leaving ethnic-Albanian towns in the west like Tetovo, and ethnic Albanians hardly living at all in Macedonian strongholds in the east like Stip and Strumica. Language use, a key feature of the Ohrid process, is equally exclusive. While there has been reasonable progress in attracting ethnic minorities into the police, this is not the case with the armed forces, where the NATO-inspired reform programme has been effective at ending conscription, bringing in professionalism and sacking unnecessary personnel, but almost useless at improving the ethnic composition above NCO level.

Although this will be a difficult decision for NATO, it will be even more difficult for the European Union to deal with Macedonian aspirations. The unsatisfactory progress of agreed reform programmes in Bulgaria and Romania since full membership has indicated to the EU the dangers in following an enlargement programme based on wishful thinking, neo-Marxist determinist ideology about enlargement mixed with vague liberal hopes. These problems will worsen if the current world credit crisis spreads to the Balkans, as much of the recent progress in the economy in many new EU member states has been essentially based on cheap credit unleashing a property boom. If commercial property values begin to drop within the Eurozone and the new member states as fast as in the US and UK, the effects on locally based banks and economies will be serious.

The reality in FYROM/Macedonia has been that after the period of legislative action over the Ohrid Accords that ended the war in August 2001, which lasted about three years, there has been little if any major change or structural reform. Some of the Ohrid legislative provisions that passed the Skopje assembly have not actually been implemented, for instance in secondary school education. Gruevski is not seen generally as a strong leader, and much of the activity of the government only affects the margins of Skopje life. The benign economic conditions in 2004-7, with some genuine foreign investment coming into FYROM/Republic of Macedonia, such as in the mining sector, and the improving climate in Kosovo may not continue for much longer.

Does any of this matter very much? This is almost entirely an issue for the European Union, again. NATO has lived quite easily in the past with national members with less than good democratic credentials, e.g. Turkey in some phases, or Greece during parts of the junta period. But the European Union has a specific democratic agenda and many rules on the subject. To bend the rules to open the door for FYROM/Republic of Macedonia membership would be to repeat the Bulgarian experience in many ways, only worse, as whatever its very serious problems, Bulgaria is a functional centralized state with a long tradition of public administration. (It is thus also of greater interest to Putin's Russia, where the old nomenclatura's European veneer can be manipulated easily in pro-Russian directions - as the current energy debacle for the West illustrates.) In Skopje, the entire local political elite, on both sides, owes its rule and position to the fact that the state is fairly dysfunctional and the elites are truly postmodern, creating their own political realities of 'Macedonia' for their own local audiences.

As such, whatever their public rhetoric, many political actors have little or no real interest in a 'European' future that would demand they surrendered their own nationalist agendas to embrace the wider Pan-European nationalism coming from Brussels.⁹ The awkward reality is that in order to keep the lid on ethnic conflict after the disaster of the 2001 Macedonian events, the ex-nomenclatura elites on either side of the ethnic fence have been allowed to continue with patterns of political leadership that are based entirely on communalism and the family and kin,

or wartime achievements, in the case of Ali Ahmeti's Albanian majority party, the BDI.

It is a fact of life, in any sphere, that the more members join a club, the less membership actually means. The European Union appears to have reached this point with the Western Balkans, and unless, improbably, there is a dramatic abandonment by Athens of its current policy, progress in this phase of the Macedonian Question will and should be slow and measured in dealing with the name issue. The nomenclaturas on all sides need certain ambiguities connected with the name very much, to retain the vestiges of a functioning state, and it is likely to be dangerous for NATO and the EU to disturb them and the precarious ethnic balance they represent, given the accretion of Russian energy power in the region, and the possible future of Bulgaria as its surrogate within the European Union.

Endnotes

¹ 'The Albanian question was truly born in the process of disintegration of the communist system and of Yugoslavia, characterised by the creation of ethnic political parties by the Macedonians and the Albanians, and by dissatisfaction with the politics of the 'old regime', which implied ethnic inequality, the last step of the communist government.' *Le République de Macédoine dans les relations internationales 1991-1998*, Dragan Stoilovski, Skopje 1999

² See paper by Evangelos Kofos in 'The New Macedonian Question', Ed James Pettifer, London and New York, 1998.

³ See 'Clio in the Balkans - The Politics of History Education', CDRSE, Thessalonika, 2002

⁴ In my personal experience in the region over the last twenty five years, I have never met anyone from FYROM/Republic of Macedonia origins in the Australian or United States diplomatic service, or other associated government agencies.

⁵ It is believed that the Greek armed forces have had plans to enter parts of FYROM/Republic of Macedonia from as early as 1991-2, when it was argued in northern Greek military circles that border security maintenance in the event of state breakdown in Skopje might require an internal military presence in FYROM.

⁶ See paper by James Pettifer in 'Some Developments in the Macedonian Orthodox Church after 1990' in the forthcoming book edited by I. Muzarku to be published by University of Bologna in April 2008.

⁷ The rapid rise in grain prices has also given ammunition to those in Serbia who argue that the country is better off outside the European Union. If Serbia joined the EU, it would be involved in the world of the CAP and production quota issues for farming. Income from the grain and corn harvest has always been a major source of foreign income, and in the Milosevic period virtually all of the surplus was sold to Russia.

⁸ see 'VIP News - Defence and Security', Belgrade, No 198, 10 January 2008

⁹ It is noticeable in the UK that when newspapers like 'The Guardian' and 'The Independent' discuss Balkan issues, the EU is never seen as projecting a nationalism of its own, but as a superior organisation that transcends the petty concerns of the Balkan national state leaders. Euronationalism projected through the enlargement agenda in the region has surprising similarities to the religious concept of supercessionism, where Christianity 'overtook' Judaism and earlier religions. There is also a clear relationship in this discourse to traditional political anti-Semitism. For interesting background in an earlier historical period, see Robin Okey, 'Taming Balkan Nationalism - The Hapsburg "Civilising Mission" in Bosnia, 1878-1914', Oxford, 2007.

Want to Know More ...?

See:

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