

Ethnic Quilt Looks Frayed in Macedonia

'Country is hanging by a thread' says one observer

by Alissa J. Rubin

SKOPJE, MACEDONIA
After Croatia came Bosnia. Bosnia was followed by Kosovo. Now tiny Macedonia could be another Kosovo, yet one more piece of the old Yugoslavia that is unable to contain its ethnic tensions without a towering figure like Marshal Tito to keep them in check.

Other Balkan powder kegs may ignite first. The republic of Montenegro is considering its own attempt at secession from Serbia-dominated Yugoslavia.

But Montenegro is not riven by competing ethnic groups in the tradition of Croatia (Croats vs. Serbs), Bosnia-Herzegovina (Serbs vs. Croats vs. Muslims) and Kosovo (Serbs vs. ethnic Albanians).

In Macedonia, by contrast, the dominant Macedonian Slavs made up about 65 percent of the population, and ethnic Albanians accounted for 23 percent.

And that was before 250,000

ethnic Albanian refugees inundated the country from Kosovo after NATO started its air war March 24. About 170,000 of them have already rushed back into the province since the war ended earlier this month, easing—but not eliminating — the Macedonian Slavs' fear that the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia will try to join with their brethren in Albania and Kosovo to create a Greater Albania.

"Macedonia is hanging by a thread," says David Holderidge, the regional director for Catholic Relief Services, who has worked in the Balkans for the past decade. "It wouldn't take much for this place to divide down the middle, with the Macedonians on one side and the Albanians on the other, and that pulls in Greece and Turkey and there's open war."

In one sign of the importance that the West attaches to Macedonia, President Clinton stopped here Tuesday [June 22] on his way home from a week of summit-level conferences elsewhere in Europe.

Despite its heritage as the homeland of Alexander the Great, Macedonia has been a nation for only eight years. For that period it has teetered on the edge of becoming the next center of Balkan bloodletting.

"The nightmare scenario is that the country will be destabilized, and the four countries around us will pick us apart and that will be the end of Macedonia," said Zoran Andonovski, external affairs officer for the World Bank office in Skopje, Macedonia's capital.

Macedonia lies at the intersection of the two political axes that run through the Balkans: the Orthodox Christian axis that runs from Serbia to Greece and the Muslim axis that runs from Turkey to Albania. All these countries as well as Bulgaria have claimed Macedonia as their territory over the last 2,000 years, and each would like to have it back.

U.S. diplomats are trying to help in the only way they know how — with money. They have been pushing to deliver millions of dollars to Macedonia in the hope of averting internal strife. So far, the United States has delivered only a relative pittance: \$21 million to a country whose economy has been devastated by the war.

Most of the losses result from the termination of trade with Yugoslavia, which was the country's second-largest trading partner as well as its largest supplier of raw materials. Macedonia's economy is contracting at an annual rate of 4 percent this year, economists

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estimate, and more than one-third of its work force is unemployed.

As the economy has fallen, ethnic tensions have risen. The dominant Macedonians are alarmed by ethnic Albanians' recent demand that their constitutional status be upgraded from that of a protected minority to that enjoyed by Macedonian Slavs. They see it as a signal that they want expanded influence in all spheres controlled by the government — especially jobs and educational policy.

It is hard to overstate the extent to which ethnic divisions govern every aspect of life and politics in Macedonia. The Albanian Macedonian minority and the Macedonian Slav majority live starkly segregated lives — a division that was only heightened by the war across the border in Kosovo.

The two groups speak different languages, practice different religions (Macedonian Slavs are largely Orthodox Christian, while the Albanian Macedonians are mostly Muslim), and they live in different parts of the country.

Even Skopje is divided by the Vardar River, with most ethnic Albanians living on one side, marked by mosques and a rambling bazaar, and most Macedonians on the other, with the Orthodox cathedral and government headquarters.

Few Albanian children go to Macedonian schools, and the Albanian university is illegal, its degrees not recognized by the government. Ethnic intermarriage is almost unheard of.

“There is a heritage of xenophobia between the ethnic communities in the Balkans,” said Arben Xhaferi, the leader of the Albanian political party that is part of the government's ruling coalition. “The Albanians are the victims now. We want to protect our lives, our culture, our identities.”

While neither Xhaferi nor other Albanian leaders in the government preach the separatism that the Macedonians fear, they do want equal rights.

That is unacceptable to the extreme nationalists who are pushing to win a place in the ruling coalition in the next election. They view Albanians as little more than terrorists, plotting to take over the country.

“All of ... the ethnic Albanians, are involved with” the Kosovo Liberation Army, said Straso Angelovski, who heads the Movement for Pan-Macedonian Action.

“By 2010, the Macedonians will be a minority in their own country,” said Angelovski, “and we should not allow that to happen If the refugees [from Kosovo] do not all leave, it will happen even sooner.”

The war only heightened the mistrust between the two groups. Ethnic Albanians in Macedonia were dismayed that few Macedonians opened their homes to the Kosovo refugees.

“There were a few Macedonian families who knew refugees through business dealings, who took them in, but very few,” said Abdurauf Prusi, the president of El Hilal, an ethnic Albanian aid

agency in Macedonia that helped refugees find shelter.

In the small town of Struga, ethnic Albanians held rallies supporting the war on one side of the main street while pro-Serbian Macedonians marched down the other side.

In Skopje, Macedonian taxi drivers organized convoys to drive across the Yugoslav border every Saturday at dawn to give blood for Serbian soldiers injured in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization campaign against Yugoslavia.

“Macedonia did too much to help the Albanian refugees,” said Atalic Dijana, 28, who was riding in one of the taxis. “They should have gone to Albania to get help. It's no wonder other countries don't want them. They know who they are — they are the biggest Mafiosi in the world.”

The prospect of an outright civil war still seems remote to many Macedonians, if only because they have avoided it so far. But as Vladimir Milcin scanned a newspaper with reports of a bomb that exploded a few feet from a mosque in the ethnic Albanian section of Skopje, severely injuring two people, he shook his head.

“Terrorism is coming,” said Milcin, the director of the Open Society Institute, funded by Hungarian American financier and philanthropist George Soros.

“Ordinary people are not just uneasy but scared, and so it's much easier to manipulate them, to sell any story to them We're seeing a soft beginning of hysteria on a mass scale.”