

The World

Today



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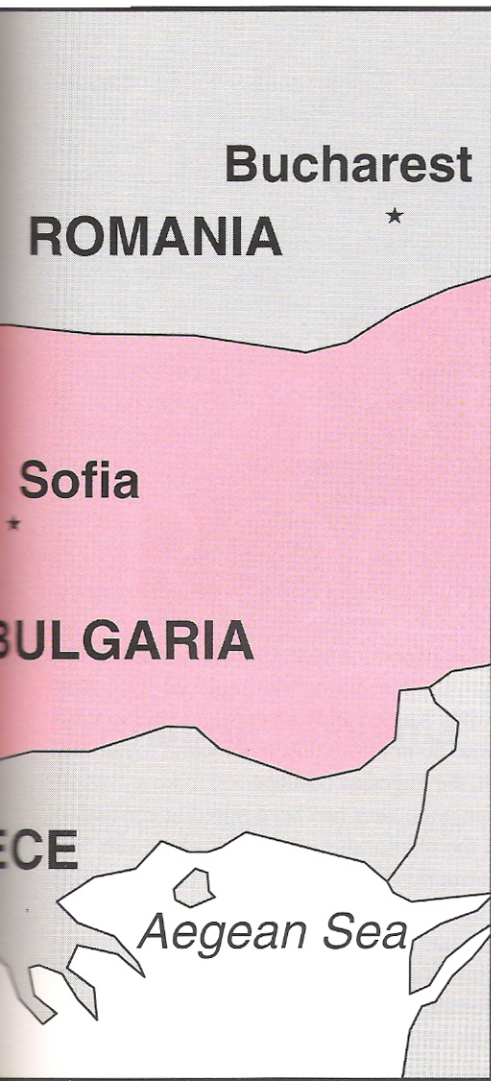
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MACEDONIA REJECTS MILOSEVIC

James Pettifer

The war in Kosovo has given neighbouring Macedonia, with its twenty-five percent Albanian minority, a key role in the southern Balkan crisis. Parliamentary elections last October/November have resulted in the overthrow of the Social Democrat led coalition of Branko Crvenkovski, which contained many pro-Serb and pro-Yugoslav politicians. There was a major victory for the nationalist Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (VMRO DPHME) – which has close links to Bulgaria – and its coalition allies. They won sixty-two of the one hundred and twenty parliamentary seats. The coalition of Albanian parties won twenty-four seats, and has been invited to fill five government ministries.

UNLIKE THE CORRUPT ELECTION IN 1994¹, where a much rewritten Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) report 'approving' the vote was derided by most independent observers, this poll was seen as generally free and fair by all participants.

For seven years western government and ambassadors in Skopje have given strong backing to the Social Democrat leaders, seeing President Kiro Gligorov and his ex-Belgrade politicians as a force for stability. But this 'stability' greatly aided Serbia and President Slobodan Milosevic.

During UN sanctions against the former republic of Yugoslavia, massive and widespread sanctions busting was tolerated, ostensibly to ensure the survival of Macedonia. In practice this gave major support to Serbian interests. In socialist Yugoslavia, Serbia was much the largest trade partner for Macedonia, taking over sixty percent of its exports. Serbs control many of the large economic enterprises in Macedonia. Many Macedonians only adopted their identity in the old Yugoslavia for career reasons, having been born pre-1939, when Vardar Macedonia was part of south Serbia. Organised crime from Serbia operates freely in Macedonia.²

DESTABILISING

But the destabilisation of Macedonia through ethnic conflict has still developed, with the Albanians having a radical and often nationalist

leadership under Kosovo-educated Arben Xhaferi. The west has backed the Skopje government in the imprisonment of the mayors of Tetovo and Gostivar – ethnic Albanian towns in the west – for alleged separatist activity.³

For two years there have been bombings, arms seizures and deaths in the western, Albanian-dominated areas. The Kosovo Liberation Army has begun to establish a presence there, using Macedonia as a supply and logistics base.

The electorate has now decisively rejected this illusory 'stability', enforced by the manipulated 1994 election, and extensive corruption among the old governing elite. With over thirty percent unemployment, the GDP of the second poorest country in Europe, and the collapse of many public services, voters, particularly the young, chose jobs, change, the democratisation of the state, a genuine free press, and the reform of the communist dominated Ministry of the Interior.⁴

VMRO has promised to create thousands of new jobs, and to attract massive foreign investment. The position of the European Union (EU) and the United States will be critical to the success of these plans, as Macedonia has very serious economic and fiscal problems, and the stability of the economy and currency depends largely on external support. ▶

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◀ The new government will pose many problems for the EU, although it appears to have a potentially better relationship with the US. Vasil Tupurkovski, leader of the minor coalition partner – the Democratic Alliance – has spent time in America. France and Britain, in particular, were strong backers of the old Gligorov political system, as a covert pro-Serb, pro-Yugoslav force in the region.

America has tended to be critical of this policy, and has tried to assist the Albanians over their human rights difficulties. Many Skopje politicians of all parties believe it is still the long term aim of both France and the UK, and Russia, to reintegrate Macedonia with the third Yugoslavia (FRY), as far as possible, perhaps even in a new federation. The free trade area with Serbia set up in 1996 was a step towards this objective.⁵ Macedonia has yet to show its long term economic viability as a separate state without external support.

DEEP SUSPICION

Although VMRO claims to have completely distanced itself from its old roots as the first modern terrorist organisation, it is regarded with suspicion by many in the west, as a sinister, pro-Bulgarian front organisation. It is very strongly anti-Russian and anti-Serb in its historical outlook, which is likely to cause problems given that Russia still sees Macedonia as an important element in its Balkan policies.

Other neighbours have traditional prejudices against VMRO. This is particularly so in Greece, where many observers expect the re-emergence of a 'Macedonian Question' among the Slavophones in the north as a result of VMRO's success. The Republic of Macedonia/FYROM constitution still contains elements which Greeks find objectionable, and in Athens VMRO is widely believed

to have private – or not so private – territorial ambitions on northern Greek territory.

The Bulgarian government in Sofia has ministers who represent the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation tradition, and whatever else it signifies, the election result marks the first real opportunity for Bulgaria to take an active role in influencing a key element in the Balkan crisis.

The result is a serious setback for Serbia, and to a lesser extent Greece, which had seen a Yugoslav-oriented government in Skopje as the best guarantee of its local security interests, particularly the key transport routes north to its EU partners.

NATO will be an immediate beneficiary of the election. The Skopje government has already agreed to the deployment in Macedonia of the 1,700-strong NATO force to protect the OSCE monitors in Kosovo. The Gligorov government had last summer refused to cooperate with NATO's plans.

ALBANIAN ADVANCE

As well as marking a victory for Bulgarophile interests in Skopje, the election is a marked advance for the ethnic Albanians. The 'moderate' Albanians – nearly all ex-communists – who occupied token posts in the last government have been replaced by a new coalition dominated by Arben Xhaferi and a new, younger generation of Albanian politicians who do not have any sentimental loyalty to, or any personal links with, the Yugoslav concept.

Nomenclature Albanian politicians had been mired in corruption allegations, centering on the relationship of some leaders with foreign governments, and corruption in the privatisation programme. It will now be possible for the Albanians to struggle much more effectively for their demands as part of the wider attempt to democratise Macedonia. This would involve the introduction of basic European human rights standards for all citizens and the abolition of communist period legislation under which the two mayors were jailed.

Equality for the Albanian language in public life, the release of ethnic Albanian political prisoners, and recognition for the privately-financed Albanian-language University of Tetovo are likely to be their main objectives.

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

But for a very nationalist party – even if the leadership of Lupjo Georgievski has studiously created a moderate image – it will be difficult for VMRO either to concede these demands to the restive Albanians, or to satisfy the high economic expectations that have been created.

The proximity of Macedonia to Kosovo is likely to inhibit foreign investors. The EU, as the main economic influence on the

Skopje government will have to decide how far aid schemes and market access can be conceded without appearing to discredit its relationship with the previous government.

Serbia still has considerable backstairs influence in some ministries in Skopje, and without a reorganisation and restaffing of key areas such as the foreign ministry – a stronghold of pro-Yugoslav elements – and the interior ministry, it is difficult to see how the new government can achieve its objectives.⁶

¹ See 'Macedonia: still the apple of discord' in *The World Today*, Vol.51, no.3, March 1995.

² See Hugh Poulton, *Who are the Macedonians* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 1995).

³ See 'Flames of Unrest Threatens Macedonian Tender Box' in *The Times*, 12 July 1997.

⁴ See *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 24 Nov. 1998.

⁵ See *Serbia in the World*, (Belgrade: Nov. 1996).

⁶ See 'Macedonia - Next Domino' in *The Economist*, 7 March 1998, p.53.



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