
MACEDONIA: STILL SLIDING

This ICG briefing paper continues the analysis of the Macedonian crisis begun in the ICG's two most recent reports from Skopje: Balkans Reports No. 109, *The Macedonian Question: Reform or Rebellion* (5 April 2001) and No. 113, *Macedonia: The Last Chance for Peace* (20 June 2001). It analyses what has happened during the past five weeks, anticipates what may happen next, and describes the dilemma the international community faces if it is to improve the prospects of averting an open ethnic war.

I. OVERVIEW

Despite the ceasefire announced on 26 July 2001, and the promised resumption of political talks in Tetovo on 27 July, Macedonia is still locked in crisis and threatened by war. Neither ethnic Macedonian nor ethnic Albanian leaders have been converted to belief in a 'civic' settlement that would strengthen democracy by improving minority conditions, without weakening the integrity of the state. Ethnic Macedonians fear that civic reforms will transform the country exclusively to its, and their, detriment, while ethnic Albanians are sceptical that any reforms can really be made to work in their favour. Nor have separatists from both sides, within the country and in the diaspora, given up their conviction that security for their communities can only be achieved by demarcating – and hence competing for – ethnically "pure" territory.

To the international community, a 'civic' settlement is highly attractive. This would resolve the current conflict by increasing the rights of the ethnic Albanian minority in line with international standards and norms. While every country is *sui generis*, there are clear precedents (not least Switzerland, Canada or Belgium) for granting extensive ethnic and minority rights, including language rights, without splitting the country apart or threatening its territorial integrity. In short, this is a well trodden path; nobody is asking Macedonia to venture into the unknown.

Negotiations stalled on 18 July over the issue of the official status and use of Albanian language in Macedonia. International mediators argue that

almost nothing else separates the two sides, who have agreed on "95 per cent of those things that were to be negotiated".¹

Yet this is not how the matter appears inside the country. Ethnic Macedonians believe the republic-wide use of Albanian – as proposed by the international mediators – would pose a threat to their national identity that cannot be justified, given that only one third to one quarter of the population speaks the language. They are also convinced that all Albanians would refuse to communicate in Macedonian. Given that almost no ethnic Macedonians can speak Albanian, they also fear that bilingualism would become necessary for public sector employment. Hence, many ethnic Macedonians believe this measure of "language federalisation", as they see it, would transform the country exclusively to its, and their, detriment.

Moreover, if the language issue were to be resolved, progress toward a solution could then founder on other crucial elements of a settlement, such as government decentralisation, police reform or the use of national symbols. Each of these issues throws up fundamental questions about the identity of the country and the ownership and distribution of its resources – questions that expose a gulf of contention between the ethnic groups.

The international community is right to pursue a 'civic' settlement, and must resist the superficial appeal of a solution that would entrench and formalise the existing ethnic division, as the

¹ NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson, speaking in Skopje on 26 July 2001.

Dayton Peace Agreement did in Bosnia. Yet, it must also recognise that a 'civic' settlement will almost certainly prove impossible to achieve or implement without a much more substantial security commitment.

It appears that European and U.S. leaders now face a choice in Macedonia that is distressingly similar to the one they confronted in Bosnia in the first half of 1992. They can sit on the sidelines, urging the parties to reach a reasonable settlement by means of compromise, while "ethnic cleansing" gathers pace and the space for moderate options disappears. Alternatively, they can assume the burden of military intervention, possibly even without a political settlement in place.

The latter strategy would entail the risk of being caught up in a war without obvious front lines or even clearly distinguishable opponents. On the other hand, there is great risk that without such a commitment there will be either no agreement – and thus all-out war – or the kind of agreement that has little chance to be implemented. That would probably condemn Macedonia to a long, slow slide into the kind of situation that would ultimately force a Western response in circumstances no more favourable than they were in Bosnia in 1995.

II. EVENTS ON THE GROUND

Events on the ground have swollen the ranks of citizens who doubt that the two largest ethnic groups can live side by side on equal terms. The numbers speak for themselves. Over the past five months, the ethnic Albanian rebels of the self-styled National Liberation Army (NLA) and the Macedonian government forces have contributed to the internal displacement of more than 150,000 people – over 7 per cent of the total population. Anti-Albanian rioting in Bitola on 1 and 2 May 2001 and again on 6 June resulted in the entire Albanian population of some 10,000 leaving the city and the Lake Prespa region. In May and early June, Macedonian forces destroyed hundreds of Albanian homes in the Kumanovo Valley, rendering the return of Albanians to this area almost impossible. The NLA forced the exodus of more than 8,000 people, including 1,200 ethnic Macedonians, from Aracinovo on 24 and 25 June. In the weeks following the 5 July ceasefire, the number of persons displaced in Macedonia increased at a rate of roughly 10,000 per week. On 23 and 24 July, the NLA and Macedonian forces exchanged fire in the streets of Tetovo, Macedonia's second city, only some 25 miles from the capital Skopje, which is predominantly ethnic Albanian. Driven by fear but also by direct threats, an estimated 20,000 ethnic Macedonians and Albanians fled Tetovo and several mixed villages.

Recent fighting has dramatically escalated the conflict. Since 22 July, for the first time ethnic Macedonian civilians were fighting NLA rebels, ethnic Albanian civilians opened fire on ethnic Macedonian police, and there were credible reports that Albanian and Macedonian citizens fought in the streets of Tetovo, Lesok and Nepresento. Macedonian-language television and newspapers have stopped referring to the enemy as "Albanian terrorists" but simply as "Albanians".² The state television news declined to mention when seven ethnic Albanian civilians were killed on 22 and 23 July in Poroj.³ Albanian-language television and

² This is a small but momentous semantic shift, with unhappy precedents in Serbian and Croatian media during the 1990s. In 1992 and 1993, Serbian state television routinely used "the Muslims" and "the Croats" as shorthand for enemy forces, hence implicating entire peoples in the alleged anti-Serb campaign.

³ MTV, MTV2, A-1, Nova Makedonija, Vest, 23-25 July 2001.

newspapers, meanwhile, fail to report details of Macedonian military and civilian casualties.

The Ministry of Interior has armed some 10,000 to 15,000 army reservists in Skopje as “a precautionary measure”. Paramilitary training camps have reportedly been established outside Skopje and Kumanovo, with recruits receiving 800 denars (US\$11) daily as well as uniforms and weapons. Even the best informed embassies in Skopje seem uncertain of the potential number of ethnic Macedonian paramilitaries. Credible local sources estimate that some 2,000 men are ready for mobilisation, and that fundraisers in Germany and Austria are collecting money for weapons, bulletproof jackets and night vision goggles.⁴ A group calling itself the “Paramilitary 2001” has been faxing and posting ominous warnings that all Albanians should flee the capital. The group threatens to retaliate against Macedonian “traitors” who continue to do business with Albanians. It seems to be a front for prominent fundraisers overseas but has not yet been directly tied to any formal government structures.

To date, some 50 ethnic Albanian journalists, intellectuals and business owners have disappeared.⁵ The Ministry of Interior has not issued any satisfactory statements and continues to imply that ethnic Albanian criminals are to blame. Sources in the two ethnic Albanian parties admit that some of the disappearances are related to mafia feuds but maintain that this applies only to about ten of the missing men.⁶ In response, many Albanians have moved from mixed neighbourhoods in Skopje to majority Albanian areas.

Remarkably, there have only been about 50 fatalities (excluding NLA rebels) since the crisis began in February 2001. Yet this statistic also contains a warning. Violence has been carefully deployed and orchestrated, creating sufficient fear and panic to make people flee their homes. Many of them say they will not return home until a final decision or solution is reached. In most cases this

means a clear, decisive military victory by their own side.⁷

Whether or not the ethnic Albanian and Macedonian separatists are coordinating at some level, it is now clear that both sides have been encouraging population shifts to demarcate ethnically “pure” territory. The procedure is less savage (so far) than in Bosnia or Kosovo, but it follows the same logic. If this logic is pursued much further, then, rather as happened in Bosnia in 1992, international security forces would probably be drawn in to mitigate a humanitarian crisis. This role would then likely expand by degrees into a de facto international protectorate.

⁴ ICG interviews in Skopje, June and July 2001. There are rumours in Skopje that a new paramilitary organisation will be unveiled in Bitola on 1 August.

⁵ “Why the Silence Regarding Missing Albanians?”, *Fakti* [Albanian-language daily newspaper], 5 July 2001.

⁶ ICG interviews in Skopje, 20-25 July 2001.

⁷ ICG interviews in Macedonia and Kosovo with Albanian and Macedonian refugees, 21-25 July 2001 and MTV, A-1, CNN, BBC television interviews throughout June and July.

III. BACKGROUND CONTEXT

A. DETERIORATION DURING JUNE

Despite the continued formal existence of the “unity” government composed of representatives of the country’s four main parties that had been achieved under international pressure,⁸ the crisis in Macedonia deteriorated steadily throughout June 2001. A succession of ceasefires brought no real suspension of hostilities. Negotiations among leaders of ethnic Macedonian and Albanian parties produced no breakthrough. The “true dialogue covering all issues of the agenda”, which the European Union presidency urged on 16 June,⁹ did not transpire. The key event on the ground was the NLA occupation on 9 June of Aracinovo, a small town only ten kilometres from the centre of Skopje. This action dramatically raised the stakes. The government was already under strong domestic pressure to pursue a military solution rather than negotiate. The Macedonian army launched an offensive on 22 June to recapture Aracinovo. The operation was officially predicted to last 48 hours. After three days of shelling, little ground had been retaken.

Government-controlled media outlets announced on 25 June that the army was being forced to withdraw under Western orders. In fact, NATO had stepped in to help resolve the Aracinovo issue so that negotiations could restart. According to the terms agreed, the NLA fighters were allowed to evacuate with their weapons under NATO supervision. The evacuation later that day of some 350 rebels under Western military escort was viewed by many ethnic Macedonians as a humiliation imposed by the international community. At this delicate moment, the United States found itself drawn directly into the crisis. U.S. soldiers serving with KFOR, the NATO-led force in Kosovo, but based in Macedonia assisted in the evacuation. The Macedonian press has since published numerous stories, citing foreign sources, claiming that U.S. advisors were present in Aracinovo and actively helping the NLA. These accounts alleged that the real reason for the

evacuation was to rescue retired U.S. military who had been hired as advisors and mercenaries.

The offence felt by many ethnic Macedonians was compounded by a rebuff from European Union foreign ministers meeting in Luxembourg on the same day. Foreign Minister Ilinka Mitreva was told bluntly that Macedonia would not receive further financial assistance as long as state funds were “being spent to buy weapons”.¹⁰

That evening, the country approached the brink of civil war. Crowds gathered in front of the parliament were initially composed of army reservists who wanted to show their support for the military. Ordinary citizens began to join the crowd until it swelled to 6,000 or 7,000. The demonstrators denounced the government and the major political leaders. Shots were fired and some protestors stormed the parliament as the mob shouted, “Death to Albanians, Albanians to the gas chambers” and demanded the resignation of the president.¹¹

Most observers believe that if a well known hardliner such as General Pande Petrevski, chief of staff of the army, or Speaker of Parliament Stojan Andov had declared himself leader of the country on the evening of 25 June 2001, a coup would have succeeded. Instead, Macedonia in effect became leaderless for a day. None of the ethnic Macedonian leaders appeared on television or on radio until President Boris Trajkovski addressed the nation at 15.30 on 26 June.

Courageously, Trajkovski defended the operation to regain control of Aracinovo, but he is highly vulnerable. His traditional VMRO supporters have deserted him. His popularity hinges on that of the international community, which currently is very low. Former Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski, the leader of the SDSM party and another moderate voice, is also weakened. He faces a challenge from the right wing of his own party, led by former SDSM ministers and wealthy members of the hardline diaspora.

By contrast, Prime Minister Ljupco Georgievski benefited from the 25 June crisis and its aftermath.

⁸ See ICG Balkans Report No. 113, *Macedonia: The Last Chance for Peace*, 20 June 2001, p.7.

⁹ From the Declaration on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, European Council meeting in Goteborg, 16 June 2001.

¹⁰ Reported on Macedonian Television (MTV), as well as on A1, Thelma and Kanal 5 television stations on 25 June 2001, and in all newspapers on 26 June.

¹¹ ICG eyewitness accounts, 25 June 2001.

Addressing the nation on 26 June, he referred to EU initiatives as “another punishment the country must endure”, and to the corrupt Europeans as “benefiting from narco-trafficking”.¹² He effectively portrayed the international community in general, and the Europeans in particular, as inept and pro-Albanian. He made it clear that he was not prepared to make further compromises and that he had resolved to call early elections.¹³ Georgievski was the last leader to agree to the 5 July ceasefire, doing so only after very direct and senior arm-twisting by Washington.

B. ARRIVAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL ENVOYS

The 25 June rioting and the ensuing destruction of about 70 ethnic Albanian shops in Skopje acted as a wake-up call to the international community. That day, the EU appointed former French Minister of Defence François Leotard as its special envoy. Two days later, on 27 June, NATO agreed to send a 3,000-strong military mission to supervise the disarming of ethnic Albanian rebels, but only following a settlement and only for 30 days. On 29 June, the Bush Administration swallowed its reluctance to accept new commitments in the Balkans and signalled its long-awaited direct engagement in Macedonia by appointing James Pardew as U.S. envoy.

Leotard's and Pardew's arrival in Skopje, along with Robert Badinter's involvement as a technical expert,¹⁴ brought new energy to the peace negotiations. A ceasefire was negotiated on 5 July 2001. Using Badinter's proposals for resolving legitimate minority concerns, Leotard and Pardew presented a new “framework document” to the four principal parties in the unity government on 7 July.

C. NEGOTIATIONS ON TRACK IN JULY

The “framework document” focused on principles for a peaceful resolution of the crisis and a cessation of hostilities, commitment to Macedonia's territorial integrity, revision of the Constitution and development of local government. It also called for increased or equitable representation of ethnic Albanians in public administration and public enterprises, more minority influence in the selection of judges, more Albanian-language education and public financing and official use of Albanian language in certain municipalities and in parliament.

The proposed political reforms would bring greater minority rights to Albanians through decentralisation, make Albanian an official language, and create a new parliamentary approval mechanism requiring one-half of the votes of minorities for legislation affecting cultural and linguistic interests and for the appointment of judges to the Constitutional Court and Judicial Council.

The two ethnic Macedonian parties in the unity government, VMRO-DMPNE and SDSM, accepted the first U.S.-EU proposal as a basis for negotiation. The two ethnic Albanian party leaders, Arben Xhaferi (DPA) and Imer Imeri (PDP), however, rejected the proposal on 8 July because they considered it did not meet their widely publicised demand for a new “consensual democracy” – in practice, for an ethnic Albanian vice-president with the right to veto any law assessed as inimical to Albanian interests.

Although the EU-U.S. proposal fell some way short of this original demand, and Xhaferi and Imeri objected that the international community had accepted a *de facto* majority veto to the benefit of the ethnic Macedonians, they dropped their insistence on this point on 14 July. They also gave up their demand for constitutional changes that would have elevated Albanians to the status of a “constituent people”, agreeing instead that the constitution should be amended to de-ethnicise its language and refer to all citizens of the country.¹⁵

¹² Macedonian (state) Television, 26 June 2001.

¹³ Parliamentary elections are due by October 2002.

¹⁴ This is French constitutional judge Robert Badinter's second Balkan assignment for the European Union. In September 1991, he presided over the commission of judges from Belgium, Germany, Italy and Spain that assessed the legal consequences of the disintegration of federal Yugoslavia. The Badinter Commission stated in early 1992 that Macedonia had fulfilled the conditions for diplomatic recognition – a finding that is not forgotten by Macedonians.

¹⁵ Contention has for years focused on the Preamble of the 1991 Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, which begins: “Taking as the points of departure the historical, cultural, spiritual and statehood heritage of the Macedonian people and their struggle over centuries for

Xhaferi and Imeri made these concessions on 16 July but warned they would go no further.¹⁶ That left two major sticking points: the ethnic Albanian demand that their language could be used for official purposes in parliament and in any municipality more than 20 per cent of whose residents are ethnic Albanian, and local control of police. The international envoys were prepared essentially to meet the Albanian language demands but the ethnic Macedonian parties flatly refused, and on 18 July, negotiations were suspended.

D. DEADLOCK OVER LANGUAGE

Use of the Albanian language is presently authorised in municipal government, the judiciary, education and culture in communities where ethnic Albanians are a majority of the population, or are present in "considerable number... under conditions and in a manner determined by law" (Art. 7 of the Constitution). However, the 1996 Law on Local Self-Government, in Article 88, defines "considerable" as a 20 per cent threshold based on the most recent census. The minority, however, has no right to use its language in communication with local branches of central government.

Against this background, the proposal in the 16 July version of the "framework document" that state institutions should allow Albanians to use their native tongue – requiring bilingual official documents, such as birth and marriage certificates, and interpretation in parliament – met fierce resistance. Ethnic Macedonians see the republic-wide use of Albanian as a threat to their national identity and believe it is unreasonable for Albanian to be in effect acknowledged as the second official language when its native speakers comprise only one-quarter to one-third of the population.

Ethnic Macedonians are convinced that the moment the constitutional changes became effective, all Albanians would refuse to communicate in Macedonian. Probably some 90 per cent of the country's ethnic Albanians are proficient in Macedonian, while less than 2 per cent of ethnic Macedonians can speak Albanian. Macedonians fear they would no longer be eligible for public sector jobs if they could not speak

Albanian and so would become second-class citizens in their country. In practical terms, the official use of Albanian would be expensive to implement and contested wherever Albanians are not a majority. In short, both sides view the issue as thoroughly political. For Albanians it represents the essential validation of equal status. For Macedonians, it represents a "language federalisation" that, they warn, would divide the country.

E. OTHER ISSUES

The political negotiations are currently stalled by the two sides' refusal to compromise their contrasting visions of a multiethnic country, as symbolised by language. If that issue were to be resolved, however, other aspects of the "framework document" would almost certainly prevent easy progress. The ethnic Macedonians have accepted that the constitution must be amended, but certainly do not see eye to eye with the envoys or the Albanians on the full import of that concession. They also object, with reason, that the envoys' proposals for decentralisation are generally unworkable because they are premised on an overestimation of Macedonia's administrative capacity. On the crucial matter of the police, the ethnic Albanian negotiators insist that the structure reflect the ethnic mix of the local community and the force be under the control of local authorities. The ethnic Macedonian negotiators insist that the central government retain control of the police, to avoid, they argue, increased corruption as well as an ethnically divided force. The compromise proposed by the international team is that local police chiefs be elected by city councils from lists drawn up by the Ministry of Interior. The ethnic Macedonians object to this on the ground that Macedonia needs more rather than less central control over its police.

The envoys have achieved progress on some aspects of constitutional revision. The ethnic Macedonians have indicated a willingness to delete any mention of the Orthodox Church from the Constitution and replace it with a clause denoting the secularity of the state and the equality of all religious communities. The use of symbols and flags remains problematic, however. Ethnic Albanians want the right to fly Albanian flags, which they are presently prohibited from doing by a Constitutional Court ruling. Moderate ethnic Macedonian leaders have proposed a compromise

national and social freedom ... as well as the historical fact that Macedonia is established as a national state of the Macedonian people ...", etcetera.

¹⁶ ICG telephone interviews 12-16 July 2001.

on this issue, provided the Albanian negotiators reconsider the use of Albanian in parliament. SDSM negotiators have proposed that the use of Albanian in the parliament be regulated by a revision of the parliamentary rules and procedures rather than ordained in the constitution. In sum, there is still no meeting of minds on multiple issues.

F. BACK TO VIOLENCE

Military operations and preparations did not stop during the negotiations. Both the NLA rebels and the Macedonian army took advantage of the 5 July 2001 ceasefire, which was punctured by daily exchanges of fire, to resupply and reinforce. But international monitors and NATO negotiators had managed to keep the ceasefire alive until fighting resumed in earnest after 18 July. On 22 and 23 July, the NLA launched attacks on Tetovo which rapidly spread to villages north of the city – Lesok, Neprosteno, Tearce and Vratnica – that are primarily Macedonian but surrounded by ethnic Albanian settlements. The NLA claimed that Macedonian forces “provoked” them to retaliate, but OSCE monitors maintain that 90 per cent of the fresh fighting was instigated by the NLA.¹⁷ International observers in Skopje assessed that the NLA increased the territory under its control substantially after the 5 July ceasefire.¹⁸

An estimated 20,000 ethnic Macedonians and Albanians fled from Tetovo and the neighbouring villages between 22 and 24 July, some of them directly expelled by the NLA. Several hundred were bussed into the capital on 24 July and deposited in front of the parliament. For the second time in a month, the parliament building was invaded by citizens. On this occasion the hand of government hardliners was clearly visible.¹⁹

¹⁷ ICG interviews in Skopje, 23-24 July 2001.

¹⁸ It should be noted that NLA territorial control in this conflict is not a straightforward matter. Except in the enclaves north of Tetovo and Kumanovo, effective territorial control cannot be accurately measured by lines on a map. The NLA has been able to infiltrate or activate groups in previously untouched locations, a tactic that combines maximum psychological impact with minimum exposure to Macedonian military.

¹⁹ Minister of Interior Ljube Boskovski had visited Lesok on 8 July 2001, when he extolled its historical significance for Macedonia’s heritage. Most Macedonians are aware of Lesok, if at all, because it features in a folk song that

The government turned up the volume of its anti-Western rhetoric. In a demagogic press conference that was repeatedly replayed on state television, government spokesman Antonio Milososki accused the EU and U.S. envoys and NATO of deliberating siding with the NLA, saying that “NATO is not our enemy but it is the friend of our enemy.”²⁰

The two envoys, Leotard and Pardew, have been the objects of scathing personal attacks by the Prime Minister and most Macedonian-language media in recent days. They were blamed for having endorsed a peace agreement that would mandate official use of Albanian throughout the country among other concessions.

Also on 24 July, Prime Minister Georgievski asked the government to announce an ultimatum to the NLA to withdraw from all territory gained since 5 July or face removal by military force. While his colleagues agreed that negotiations could not resume until the NLA withdrew around Tetovo, they rebuffed the premier’s demand for an ultimatum. Georgievski sent a public letter to President Boris Trajkovski demanding strong, unrelenting military action against the Albanian insurgents. The displaced Macedonians in front of the parliament echoed the prime minister’s demand for a decisive military response. They were joined by about 300 youths, whose anti-Western chants and calls for Russian assistance led to rioting and vandalism directed against the international community. The embassies and consulates of the European Union, France, Germany, United Kingdom and U.S. were attacked as well as a McDonalds restaurant, British Airways and other international offices.

G. CEASEFIRE AND NEGOTIATIONS BACK ON TRACK?

Throughout the evening of 24 July, NATO officials negotiated with Ali Ahmeti, political leader of the NLA, for a new ceasefire (even though the 5 July document was still formally intact). On 26 July, the new ceasefire was

glorifies the defeat of Albanians who had attacked the village monastery.

²⁰ MTV, MTV2, A-1 and Sitel television stations, 24 July 2001. NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson, immediately rebutted as “entirely and totally false” the accusation that NATO had assisted the NLA. (Press statement by the Secretary General, NATO, 24 July 2001.)

announced. Lord Robertson and Javier Solana flew into Skopje to try and get the negotiations started. NATO negotiators succeeded in getting the NLA to agree to withdraw from recently occupied villages north of Tetovo, while the government promised the army would exercise restraint. The ministry of interior, meanwhile, announced that it had gathered evidence to charge eleven prominent NLA members with crimes against humanity, international law and the state. One of the eleven is Ali Ahmeti, who had just agreed to a ceasefire and partial withdrawal. NATO and the minister of defence escorted a convoy of 80 ethnic Macedonians to inspect their homes in Lesok, shortly after the NLA had withdrawn from the village. By the end of the day, both sides had promised to restart negotiations, this time (at the suggestion of Branko Crvenkovski) in Tetovo itself.

IV BOTTOM LINES

A. ETHNIC MACEDONIANS

The ethnic Macedonians are understandably angry and confused. For ten years the international community told them their country was the region's only multiethnic success story. Ethnic Albanian grievances were cited but no serious external pressure was applied to try and solve them. This situation suited the ethnic majority, which resents now being abruptly told to transform the governance of their country at the behest of a few hundred "terrorists".

Their anger at what they consider the international community's refusal to take effective measures against the NLA is very dangerous. It appears that ethnic Macedonians are increasingly prepared to fight and risk losing part of their country rather than accept a peace settlement that would substantially increase Albanian rights. Approximately half the country's ethnic Albanian population is concentrated in the northwest in compact and homogenous communities. The other half lives in Skopje and the Kumanovo Valley. Numerous ICG interviews indicate that many Macedonians (and perhaps a growing number of Albanians) would like to see the Albanians in Skopje removed to western Macedonia, divided from the "[ethnic] Macedonian side" of the country.

The international community must do a much better job of explaining why reforms that have been discussed fitfully for years must finally be adopted and implemented in full, precisely in order to preserve the integrity of the country. If constitutional amendments, decentralisation, proportional ethnic representation in public and private sectors, electoral reform and official use of the Albanian language are eventually agreed, the changes will be vastly unpopular with the Macedonians, who will blame the international community for destroying their privileged position and (what amounts to the same thing) the essential identity of the state. The international community will have to remain actively engaged to ensure that the changes are actually applied throughout the country.

B. ETHNIC ALBANIANS

The ethnic Albanians are impressively united, certain of their objectives, and confident they can obtain them. The NLA rebels want decentralisation of the state to win political and financial control of municipalities with Albanian majorities. According to current estimates, approximately one-third of the country's population would then live in Albanian-administered municipalities. Distinct from the NLA's focus on decentralisation, Arben Xhaferi, leader of the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), continues to push for reform at the national level, focusing on amendments to de-ethnicize the constitution.

The Albanians have proved to be formidable negotiators. By abandoning some initial demands, presenting their position on the language issue as squarely a human rights concern, and implying that nothing else prevents an agreement, they adroitly seized the moral and political high ground and left the Macedonians looking like extremists.

Until NATO pressured the NLA to agree to withdraw from recently occupied territory around Tetovo, on 26 July, the ethnic Albanian camp was in a win-win situation. Whatever an eventual agreement looked like, it would be better than anything that could have been achieved without the NLA. Now, faced with NATO pressure and also with the Macedonian government's determination to press criminal charges against eleven NLA leaders, the rebels may be tempted to overplay their hand, perhaps by distancing themselves from Xhaferi and his negotiating team. Despite these developments, however, it is unlikely that the NLA will be compelled to disarm, let alone to disband, and hence will live to fight again. The only way of averting this outcome will be for NATO to drastically increase its commitment, for example by promising to pro-actively disarm the rebels after a settlement rather than merely supervise the voluntary surrender of rebel weapons (which senior NATO military personnel privately acknowledge will be a meaningless enterprise).

The ethnic Albanians' initial demands on 7 July 2001 were nearly identical to those made by ethnic Albanian leader Menduh Thaci in 1994 when he split from the PDP to launch a new party, the PDP-A. (This fraction merged in July 1997 with the National Democratic Party to form the DPA under Arben Xhaferi.) In other words, demands that

were radical seven years ago have now moved to the mainstream. This trend is almost surely irreversible. In other words, there is no way for the ethnic Macedonians to put this particular genie back in its bottle.

There is no room for moderates in this context that the NLA played a key role in creating. Elected Albanian leaders do not dispute the central role played by the rebel forces. Indeed, they pay tribute to them. As Imeri told the media on only the second day of negotiations in early July, "If there were no NLA no one would seriously get involved in dialogue with the Albanians. The bottom line is that every Albanian in his soul is with the NLA."²¹

C. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

There is understandable satisfaction in Western capitals, above all in Brussels, with the good cooperation among the key international players since the Macedonia crisis erupted in mid March 2001. The policy consensus among EU member states, the U.S. and NATO contrasts favourably with the often bitter divisions that marked international efforts over Bosnia and, to a lesser extent, over Kosovo. EU officials point with pride to the vigorous shuttle diplomacy of Javier Solana, High Representative for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)

Nevertheless, the international effort to stabilise Macedonia has suffered from fundamental and all too familiar shortcomings. It has been undermined from the outset by a contradiction between ends and means. For the fourth time since 1991, the international community, upon becoming involved in a conflict in the former Yugoslavia, has committed itself to an outcome that it can achieve only if it is prepared to confront at least one, and perhaps both, of the parties.

The international community wants a 'civic' solution, in line with international norms and standards for ethnic and minority rights in a liberal democracy. Yet neither side in Macedonia believes in a 'civic' solution. Democracy is frail, multiethnicity is regarded as dubious Western jargon, and civic politics have no tradition. Ethnic Macedonians fear that civic reforms will transform the country exclusively to its, and their, detriment,

²¹ A-1 Television and Macedonian Television, 8 July 2001.

while ethnic Albanians are sceptical that any reforms can really be made to work in their favour.

This is why the international community must put a brace around the negotiating process; and this requires a more substantial military component as well as political will and economic largesse. However, the NATO members have no intention of risking combat in Macedonia. While this is of course understandable, it greatly reduces the ability of its envoys to obtain the settlement they seek.

Even more debilitating, however, is the refusal to provide or promise a security presence that would allow or oblige the country's leaders to make the compromises necessary to reach a lasting peace. No one believes that the NLA will genuinely disarm during a 30-day deployment of 3,000 troops with a supervisory mandate, as promised by NATO's planned Operation 'Essential Harvest'. A symbolic tally of weapons would probably be surrendered, but not enough to remove the danger of large-scale civil war or at least terrorism that would again hold the country to ransom. NATO involvement on a much grander scale – and for a much more open-ended period – would be required to disarm both the ethnic Albanian rebels and the ethnic Macedonian paramilitaries, and then to provide an environment in which political compromise and implementation of reforms become possible. The absence of a credible security element in the Western approach deters the ethnic Macedonians from accepting reform while it encourages the NLA to hold out for a better deal. Moderate opinion has been discredited, and radical leaders have been encouraged.

The lack of international credibility has other sources as well. The ethnic Macedonian leaders claim that the EU and U.S. envoys presented different proposals to the two sides. They accuse them of arrogance and wilful misunderstanding of Macedonian concerns.²² During the wars in Croatia and Bosnia the international community developed a habit of negotiating separately with each party, leading them to believe that they had agreed to different settlements. Sadly, there is more than enough evidence pointing to the same mistakes in Macedonia.

As in the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, neither side is strong enough to destroy the other, yet the NLA and many Macedonian government officials believe that a military solution is possible. The Macedonians believe an easy victory was snatched from them by the international community. The NLA believes that the international community (meaning the U.S.) will eventually provide the support they need to legitimise what they have won by force. Until one side fears the other or both fear the full weight of the international community, violence is unlikely to stop.

Successful resolution of the crisis will require a robust, long-term NATO and other international presence, intimate involvement in the implementation of the political reforms, and a considerable financial commitment to develop Macedonia's structures of government and administration so they are capable of implementing reforms.

More is at stake than the break-up of a small, impoverished country of two million people. The likely immediate and longer-term consequences of allowing the politics of violence to prevail in Macedonia would be very negative. It is not farfetched to suggest that the achievement of a stable, multiethnic Bosnia would be further delayed; Albania's moderate leaders could be forced to choose between European integration and pan-Albanian nationalism; the prospects for a peacefully negotiated final status settlement for Kosovo would recede; and Serbia's democratic transition would be jeopardised. All these developments would impact on the European Union's Stabilisation and Association process and NATO enlargement plans.

The international community needs, therefore, to ask itself quickly – and answer – whether these all too likely consequences of failure do not justify dispatching a serious NATO force to Macedonia sooner rather than later, and very possibly before any political settlement is concluded. The situation on the ground is so fluid that such a force might be drawn into combat without a clearly defined opponent or exit strategy, a dilemma that could present NATO's jittery members, not least the U.S., with agonising political choices. Without such a commitment, however, the odds against reaching any agreement much less of carrying it through successfully may be daunting.

²² ICG interviews with SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, LDP, MAAK party leaders in Skopje, 20-25 July 2001.

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The International Crisis Group (ICG) is a private, multinational organisation committed to strengthening the capacity of the international community to anticipate, understand and act to prevent and contain conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts, based on the ground in countries at risk of conflict, gather information from a wide range of sources, assess local conditions and produce regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers.

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International Crisis Group

International Headquarters

149 Avenue Louise, 1050 Brussels, Belgium • Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

E-mail: icgbrussels@crisisweb.org

Paris Office

51 Rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 75001 Paris, France • Tel: +33 1 44 88 60 20 • Fax: +33 1 44 88 24 26

E-mail: icgparis@crisisweb.org

Washington Office

1522 K Street, Suite 200, Washington DC 20005 • Tel: +1 202 408 80 12 • Fax: +1 202 408 82 58

E-mail: icg washington@crisisweb.org

New York Office

400 Madison Avenue, Suite 11C, New York 10017 • Tel: +1 212 813 08 20 • Fax: +1 212 813 08 25

E-mail: icgny@crisisweb.org

All ICG reports are available on our website www.crisisweb.org