

The Impact of the Ohrid Agreement on the Macedonian Future⁴³

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Does the progress of the ‘Ohrid Process’ mean in the same time the progress of Macedonia? The short answer from today’s perspective would be yes. It does not mean that in Macedonia the conflict and its consequences are forgotten. The recent conflict in Macedonia has made the road to NATO and the EU more difficult. Years were lost for conflict resolution and rehabilitation. Instead of benefiting from the peaceful transition from the turbulent regional events, Macedonia was unnecessarily interwoven in the regional security puzzle. The Kosovo crisis was one of the key factors that led to the spillover of instability into Macedonia. But the international community could not allow another Bosnia in the area where it is far more dangerous to light a fire. The international community, led by the EU and the U.S. especially, reacted.

So far Macedonia has gained from the implementation of the Framework Agreement and subsequent constitutional amendments. Perhaps it is now on the path to building a functional multi-ethnic society. This is an important precondition for peaceful balance in society. Macedonia made significant progress towards stability and ethnic reconciliation after the conflict. People today do not speak about security and ethnic tensions but instead they seek jobs and ways how to escape from poverty.⁴⁴ Local problems are on the agenda having in mind that the “macro-political questions” are resolved. Southeast European States have the same pathway: NATO and EU. Macedonia is no different. Fifteen years ago

⁴³ Turkey recognizes Macedonia under its constitutional name.

⁴⁴ P. Atanasov (2006) “Macedonia and EU Integration: Common Problems and Common Goals”, Austrian Presidency of the EU: Regional Approaches to the Balkans, (eds.) Denisa Kostovicova and Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, Center for the Study of Global Governance, Vienna.

many things were unclear and the future of that part of the continent was uncertain.

1. “After the rain”

Whatever part of the third wave of the Balkan conflicts you analyze or however you are trying to generalize about the roots of the conflicts, you will always make a pause before the disastrous impact of Serbian nationalism. Nationalism, but mostly Serbian nationalism, consumed the Yugoslav federation. We can also discern two characteristics of the rigid ethno-political mobilization in general: armed violence and ethnic cleansing. Whether the unbelievably high level of violence and ethnic cleansing was consequence of unsettled historical bills, or of the eternal need for establishing nation-States at any price or yet the result of deeper socio-psychological processes is still under the question. Looking from today’s point of view we may only say that regardless of historical development, one has to always count on processes which catastrophic consequences which draw the Balkans backward.

What are the “results” of 10 years of national rebuilding? We are faced with weak democracies burdened with heavy internal social problems, then, strengthening of organized crime and criminalization of societies and their cross-border linkages, followed by high rates of unemployment, corruption and dysfunctional local economies. Certainly, the heritage is overloaded by international presence with high military resources and bureaucracies. There are still attempts for further ethnic fragmentation (Montenegro) and demands for changes of the borders according to other ethnic delineations. Here you can always count on comparative discrepancies of minority rights solutions in the Balkan states.

How does this affect small States’ security in Southeastern Europe? Maybe the important lesson is that the stability of one state does not come only from the power of its armed forces alone. Most importantly, the stability of one state can be built only within the international framework. In this context, the International community represented by Western countries has a powerful influence in the new world order. And

certainly, unresolved internal problems always have latent potential for implosion, and after the release of negative energy, regaining control is difficult. In all of this one aspect is crucial; the support of national strategic security goals by international actors, even for non-NATO countries. Without it, there cannot be a secure environment and legitimate stability. What is needed is patient work, a lot of investments, lobbying in centres of power and long lasting efforts. But security must come first. Of course, membership in NATO brings higher quality of security.

In sum, the international community could not do much about the dissolution of socialist federations (USSR, SFRJ, and Czechoslovakia), which seem inevitable in retrospect. The Cold War had to end with a winner. The winner was the West.

How then was the international community inefficient or unprepared for transitional assistance? It failed because of a “lack of strategy” for rewarding the “weak” and punishing the “strong”; and because it built a wall between the civilized West and the barbarian Balkans. But one can never blame solely the outside world and forget about one’s own mistakes and failures. More often than not most of the solutions depend on the internal management of societies. A conflict resolution is harder when there are many gaps and unresolved issues. And at the beginning of 2006 there are still open issues: Kosovo and Montenegrin independence, and Bosnian and Macedonian reconciliation.

2. “There should be sunshine after rain”

Macedonia was, historically, the regional “apple of discord”, and yet, it did not succumb to the nationalistic implosion that other former Yugoslav Republics fell victim to. If we take its geographical position, it was real wonder how the tiny Republic of Macedonia, with almost one third of non-Macedonian population survived without more important internal turbulences. How it avoided conflict for nearly a decade is a good question. The answer reveals why the Macedonian case of post-conflict rehabilitation went positively.

First of all, there is no “compressed” Macedonian nationalism, which would probably provoke a conflict since the first 2-3 years after the separation from Yugoslavia. The absence of loaded Macedonian nationalism was due to a policy aimed at defending against the effects of the surrounding pan-nationalist politics, and appropriate political pluralism which succeeded in softening ethnic tensions. Second, it was also due to the international support mainly from USA, which allowed creation of space and time for building and stabilizing the political system. In the same time, the Republic of Macedonia “earned” support by making pragmatic steps and recognizing some of the “ethnic human rights” of the minorities. These were not perfect concessions, but very advanced considering the Balkan context and akin to European policies. And thirdly, Macedonia was not a threat for any Balkan state.⁴⁵ On one hand, its Army was in the phase of transformation and it was not offensively equipped. On the other hand, the attempts of Greece and Bulgaria to present the Republic of Macedonia as a politically unsuitable creature were extinguished with great efforts. During this “struggle” sympathies were on the Macedonian side.

The answers above shed light on why Macedonia did well in post-conflict rehabilitation compared to most Balkan countries. Definitely the non-existence of “compressed” Macedonian nationalism was one of the major reasons why the Ohrid process went ahead with minor frustrations at the political level. Why the Macedonians did not produce such “great” nationalism is another question which is not part of this analysis.

Also, the non-existence of the deep-rooted ethnic hatred with minor historical “baggage”, comparing to Serbian-Albanian or Serbian-Croatian real or mythical heritage, is also one of the major factors supporting the Macedonian post-Ohrid integration. And, of course, the lesser consequences of armed conflict helped wounds heal faster.

⁴⁵ Another factor of stability was the nearly decade-long deployment of a preventative UN mission – UNPREDEP – which succeeded so well it barely made the world headlines. The contribution of UN troops should here be credited in alleviating tensions, especially since the Preševo Valley crisis erupted after their departure. Editors’ note.

Certainly, the support by the international community (however defined) was an integral part of Macedonian solution.

Probably the leadership of the state (including all major political parties) was very conscious what could have happened if the conflict continued and grew in a bloody civil war. The Bosnian case was very illustrative. Then, maybe, the international community saw that the Macedonian eruption could not be controlled as in Bosnia and would have regional implications.

The conflict was “resolved” by the Framework Agreement. The Agreement, also known as the Ohrid Agreement, is an attempt to lower the further widening of latent ethnic tension in society and to preserve the multiethnic character of the state. We can say that the International Community played a positive role especially with its firm handling of the process of conflict management.⁴⁶ If something good can be said for the behavior of many international factors in the Macedonian crisis, then it seems that the crucial moment is that they did not allow the conflict to spread to the level of general and long lasting civil war on ethnic and religious basis. Stopping the conflict in a phase when there were still chances and possibilities for continuation of life upon compromise and a new basis, the international community played a positive role in the crisis.⁴⁷

Another level of analysis shows that interethnic relations in Macedonia were never satisfactory or at least enough so to secure peace and stable development. In the interest of peace the conflict was very frequently purposely avoided, repressed, with compromises that satisfied nobody.⁴⁸ But there were always some ways out of the labyrinth. Still, let’s face this sad truth – however unreasonable it sounds – the crisis in Macedonia

⁴⁶ P. Atanasov (2006) ‘The Progress of the “Ohrid process” in Macedonia’, Post-Conflict Rehabilitation, (eds) Dardel, Gustenau and Pantev, Vienna and Sofia, p. 183,

<http://www.bundesheer.at/wissen-forschung/publikationen/publikation.php?id=304>

⁴⁷ Z.Nacev (2003) ‘The nature and the characteristics of the conflict in Republic of Macedonia manifested in 2001’, Contemporary Macedonian Defence, III: 7, p. 27.

⁴⁸ B.Vankovska (2002) ‘Facing with the truth’, Odbrana (Defence), XI: 69, p. 9.

is the consequence of the happenings and unresolved conflicts from Slovenia hitherto. Since the beginning of 2001 something is happening to us that may be the last act of the Yugoslav drama: the first act started in the northernmost autonomous Republic, it may be logical that the progressive spillover of the conflicts finally captures the southernmost one. The assumption that eventually a wider conflict in Macedonia may spillover in the opposite direction, toward repetition of destabilizing of Kosovo, Bosnia, Yugoslavia, Croatia, is very real.⁴⁹ Was Macedonia a collateral damage from the 1999 NATO intervention or just part of the southern conflict triangle and problematic relations between Serbians, Albanians and Macedonians? The international community did not do much to help the country to get out of its existential problems, but it added much with the destabilization of the region after the Kosovo crisis.⁵⁰ This kind of analyses are not rare and not without arguments.

As we can see there are different views on the domestic front as well. But some conclusions are inevitable. The “Internationals” were on the Macedonian side. The Framework Agreement was a good solution for the Macedonians as well. If this political arrangement continues Macedonia can still be a viable and prosperous place to live in. With the Framework Agreement, the Albanians definitely raised their political status in Macedonia and gained cultural concessions and protective legal mechanisms concerning usage of their language, issuing official documents, higher education in Albanian, etc.⁵¹ Some concessions are big achievements for the Albanians. The increased participation in State institutions, including the Army and the police forces, the decentralization process and other “identity” matters of significance guarantee the Albanians more equitable political power balance having

⁴⁹ B. Vankovska (2001) ‘The country can be defended with understanding’, Odbrana (Defence), X: 62, p.6-7.

⁵⁰ B. Vankovska (2001) ‘Macedonians, Albanians and the “third” ones’, Odbrana (Defence), X: 65, p. 7.

⁵¹ P. Atanasov (2006) ‘The Progress of the “Ohrid process” in Macedonia’, Post-Conflict Rehabilitation, (eds) Dardel, Gustenau and Pantev, Vienna and Sofia, p. 190,
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in mind their percentage in the total population. All of these mean progress for Macedonia on its path towards NATO and EU as well.

3. The way ahead

If one would like to picture the Macedonian state-of-affairs in 2005-2006 concerning stability and security, he/she has to start with the remark that Macedonia is a relatively stable country, with regular elections, reforming itself thanks to the European agenda towards democratic and market oriented reforms and, five years after the conflict, is back to normal.

It can be said that Macedonia lives in a secure political environment under a stressful economic situation source of social unease among the unemployed and other groups that are victim of the “transitional” processes. The sparks of hope are the Euro-Atlantic integration processes that will probably help the Balkans to get rid of historical burdens while Europe itself will be “lightened” of Balkan problems. Without EU integration, the Balkan States will be destined to repeat the historical errors and produce more history than they can consume.

After 15 years of navigating the turbulences of the Balkan wars and after the implementation of the Framework Agreement Macedonia has learned some lessons. The political power re-balancing is a far more important demand than social and cultural issues. Albanians in Macedonia now have higher political status as a community by which other questions can be tackled and resolved. State institutions, especially political appointments, are main indicators of having the capacity for post-conflict management and rehabilitation.

Whether post-conflict reconciliation will ever occur is another good question. Also, one of the priorities should be the reconciliation in the public sphere, among the communities and ordinary people not just among political actors. Additionally, the residual winners’ and losers’ attitudes will not be beneficial for the future state projects and the

common political will of the citizens.⁵² That is why the European dimension is valuable; to avoid winner-loser distinction. In the Balkans it is difficult to create win-win solutions. This is evident from Serbian-Kosovo relations. Two more things should be added to this argumentation. First, every peace plan has a so-called “date of expiry”; the situation on the terrain can very fast outpace the peace plan solutions and if corresponding changes do not follow the reality can clash very destructively with what is on paper.

Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council is a good example of this. The same can be said for the Dayton Agreement. In this sense the fast implementation of Ohrid Agreement proved beneficial for Macedonian political forces and their priorities. Second, peace plans, if not properly “internalized” by the political forces or the public can never bear fruit. Then, the parties involved must have firm beliefs in the solutions proposed by the plan. This is why the Bosnian case is still difficult to handle and is not leading towards better results. No peace plan is perfect. If you like them to work out then you should also add some faith and cherish it, because the international community cannot do everything and will not resolve all of our prejudice and hidden scenarios.

I mentioned that post-conflict reconciliation is still missing in the Macedonian case. What it would look like or what should be part of it is a very complex issue. Otherwise, the Ohrid Agreement is functional and has allowed constitutional amendments. Some solutions will slow down the political decision-making in parliamentary procedures, but as some Balkan people say better late than never. The goals of the Ohrid Agreement were realistic and I already mentioned most of the factors that led to its success. The Framework Agreement cannot be replicated in other cases in the neighbourhood because of different historical, political and social elements. Some micro-solutions may be incorporated but the success of it will depend on many other factors as well. The

⁵² P. Atanasov (2006) ‘The Progress of the “Ohrid process” in Macedonia’, Post-Conflict Rehabilitation, (eds) Dardel, Gustenau and Pantev, Vienna and Sofia, p. 192-3,
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Framework Agreement is certainly shared as a project with its positive outcomes between the domestic and foreign political actors. This should be supported. The European Union has a historical chance of accelerating the process of association of the Western Balkans towards full membership. EU indecision and the creation of a virtual border to separate the Balkans from Europe would be shortsighted.

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