The Last Best Hope: Stabilisation Prospects for Macedonia

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> The Macedonian question has been the cause of every great European war for the last fifty years, and until that is settled there will be no more peace either in the Balkans or out of them. Macedonia is the most frightful mix-up of races ever imagined. Turks, Albanians, Greeks and Bulgarians live there side by side without mingling – and have lived so since the days of St. Paul.
> John Reed,
>
> The War in Eastern Europe, 1916
> In this part of the world it is difficult to find the true path between reason and emotion, myth and reality. This is the burden of the Balkans, which prevents us from becoming truly European.
> Kiro Gligorov

In 1996, the first U.S. ambassador to Macedonia toured a household appliance factory soon after his arrival in country. Five years after the nation's independence from the former Yugoslavia, the factory's director asked the ambassador, "Do you think we will make it?" The factory, located in the poorest of the former Yugoslav republics, was a decrepit monstrosity designed to service the now lost Yugoslav market and was one of at least a dozen in Macedonia that the World Bank had insisted be either closed permanently or sold. As the ambassador stepped into the courtyard, he responded gently, "Well, if you get that electrical motor contract in Turkey... ." The factory director interrupted to correct the misunderstanding: "No," he said, "I mean the country. Do you think Macedonia will make it?"

In some ways, the more perverse response would still have been, however, "Well, if you get that electrical motor contract in Turkey... ." Indeed, Macedonia's precarious existence ever since its declaration of independence in 1991 has largely been based on conditions – political, ethnic, social, economic – that extend from outside borders as much as internal dynamics within the nation. And, while Macedonia is seemingly well understood as a precarious example of potential Balkan instability, the tiniest nation in Southeast Europe is also a poorly understood success. In the broadest terms, Macedonia is characterised in the "Western" as a nation where the nationalist party, VMRO, sometimes ruthlessly suppresses the Albanian minority and aggravates tensions between ethnic Albanians and Slavic Macedonians. Nothing, in reality, could be further than the truth – but the perception of the "West" is, unfortunately, far more important than reality. The task to challenge and to reverse this perception may well come to represent the major security issue for Macedonia in the future. The perception embedded in the John Reed epigraph for this brief presentation is, in truth, a distortion; sadly, many analysts and even some policy makers believe it to be true.

I am constantly reminded, for example, of how largely ignorant Americans and Europeans (from outside the Balkans) are of Macedonia. A perhaps frivolous example from "pop" history illustrates this ignorance. A popular television game show in the U.S. recently posed as its prize – winning question the following: "Boris Trajkovski was recently elected as president of what Southeast European nation?" It seems notable that none of the game contestants answered the question correctly; none of them, in truth, even bothered to hazard a guess.

Yet Macedonia seems, in many ways, the most shining and positive example to rise from the ashes of former Yugoslavia. And, despite the obvious evidence to the contrary, reports of Macedonia's death have been greatly exaggerated. The challenges to accentuate the positive, and deal with the negative, will remain over the next decade.

One may thus realise, with some irony, both how blessed and how cursed the Republic of Macedonia remained throughout the 1990s. On the one hand, this tiny nation-state escaped, narrowly perhaps, the vicious cycles of destruction that consumed Croatia in 1991, Bosnia in 1992, Kosovo in 1999, and to some extent never relented in the continuing self-destruction of Serbs and Serbia throughout the last decade of the twentieth century. On the other hand, Macedonia has had to suffer through benign and intentional neglect from both Balkan neighbours and the so-called international community ever since its 1991 declaration of independence.

Slighted with the label of the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" from the earliest days of its existence, this state has managed to achieve small measures of political, social, economic, and even inter-ethnic integration. In the Balkans – or in the wider and more euphemistic context of "Southeast Europe" by which the Balkans is commonly known – this seems a near impossibility. Unlike Bosnia, Macedonia has received little infrastructure support or massive international assistance. Equally, bloodshed in the form of conflict outbreak and ethnic cleansing on a large scale has not, to date, occurred in the region.

Predictions in the Balkans, even more so than elsewhere, are a foolish enterprise. But given the limited time for this presentation and the more pressing need within this conference to engender a wide discussion, I would offer the following observations masked as recommendations for future direction:

Macedonia Will Always be Defined by "The Other."

Distasteful as the truth may be, Macedonia owes perhaps a debt of gratitude to Slobodan Milosevic. If not for his ruthless machinations and manoeuvrings, Macedonia may well have lacked the drive and the passion to seek independence. If not for the clumsy manoeuvrings and often ruthless machinations of the former Serbian leader, the amount of international support for Macedonia's independence and continued success would have been even smaller than it was. Thus, Macedonia's identity will likely continue to be defined by relations with other states that surround her. Whether we speak of Kosovo or Serbia at large, Greece, Bulgaria, or Albania, Macedonia – a land-locked country – must gracefully manoeuvre a path through difficult waters.

The Need to Establish Milestones for Determining Economic Progress and Promoting Achievements.

The sad truth, of course, is that it took war in Kosovo before renewed assistance would be offered in any significant amount to Macedonia. As with Bosnia, the tragedy of a neighbour’s agony provided another form of salvation both for the Macedonian people and for the viability of her continued existence as a state. Until 1999, again unlike Bosnia, the presence of UN forces in the area paled in comparison to the wide latitude of authority and responsiveness that NATO and SFOR (Stabilisation Force) exercised in post-Dayton Bosnia. The Balkan Stability Pact – known more formally as the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe – signed by Macedonia in June 1999, provided the opportunity for both economic and significant material assistance to this struggling nation. The pact thus provides provide a measure of hope, albeit however small, for the future republic of Macedonia. Yet no effective milestones exist, as part of a formal process, to demonstrate how the Stability Pact itself falls farther and farther behind in implementing the change it was originally intended to stimulate.

The Necessity to Create an Effective Public Relations Program, a long-term Vision, and a Definitive Strategy.

Macedonia must establish effective communication links to promote her identity, interests, and strategy for the future. To date, most especially in relation to recent crises, Macedonia continues to be "defined by the other" player in the political dynamic. Perhaps just as crucial as establishing a sound economic base, the need for promoting Macedonia's political identity is critical for competing interests in the expanding and transforming Europe. If Macedonia has serious intention to eventually become part of the European Union – and it should be clear that this is a long-term goal – then an effective and clear communication of the nation's intent to become included, rather than continually excluded, must be part of the long-term vision.

A Pragmatic Policy that Seeks Wider Support for Contributions Already Made and Yet to Come.

Macedonia received obvious neglect from the "West" during the years of her early independence. Treated largely as a staging area for NATO operations both prior to, during, and after the Kosovo engagement of 1999, it remained unclear how firm the "West's" security, economic, and even political commitments to Macedonia's future success were. Such ambiguity, while providing the "West" with a means to escape culpability, also invoked an inevitable bitterness in the Macedonians themselves. Saso Ordanoski, former editor of the Macedonian Forum magazine and normally an optimistic Balkan observer, remarked grimly in 1999 that Macedonia was forced to end up paying the bill for Serbia's injustice against Kosovo's Albanians. In the end, he added, if NATO countries had used only a small proportion of what they had spent on bombs to modernise Macedonia and other Balkan countries, the region would have had a far chance not only for integration but for survival as well. (The Economist 1999, 52).

Resist Accommodation Based on Ethnic Differences.

Macedonia is the last genuinely multi-ethnic state in the Balkans. For some, this suggests the impossibility of her continued existence. Cynics, often with no Balkan experience or knowledge, can be quite brutal in their ideas and so-called resolutions. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Van Evera, for example, suggest that:

If the Slavs refuse to share more equally with the Albanians, violence is inevitable. To forestall this, NATO should consider calling for a plebiscite to determine whether the Albanians want to remain in Macedonia. If not, Macedonia should also be partitioned. This is feasible because the Albanians of Macedonia are concentrated in western Macedonia, next to Kosovo and Albania. (New York Times, 19 April 1999)

Such a "solution" is flawed by internal contradictions. Why NATO should violate its own standard of avowed post-conflict neutrality and take on the role of mandating plebiscites, normally the role of institutions such as the OSCE, is unclear. Why Albanians of western Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania itself should be aligned with (read, "partitioned") into a community that would represent the poorest ethnic community in Europe, and yet be separated – physically, psychologically, economically – from the very ethnic communities and trading blocs they would depend on (such as the "Slavs" of Macedonia) and be somehow expected to remain viable is doubtful. Why Mearsheimer and Van Evera cannot recognise that the partition they advocate is yet another barbaric form of ethnic cleansing, and more than just an "ugly formula for ending wars," is incredible.

Promote Europeanisation.

If Europe has learned anything in the post-Cold War environment, surely one lesson was that European economic integration actually fuelled disintegration in Southeast Europe.

Outsiders push Balkan integration... but such efforts are doomed to fail in the face of local insecurity and political resistance. The Balkans need the leverage that can be achieved only by satisfying the region's single common aspiration: "Europeanisation"... In practice, Europeanisation means extending the cross-border monetary, trade, and investment arrangements that already operate within the EU across Europe's Southeast periphery... What the region is not achieving politically on an intraregional basis can therefore be achieved within a few years under the aegis of Europeanisation. This "New Deal" should apply to all states in the region – Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey, and Yugoslavia – with no state's existing EU affiliations jeopardised or set back through participation... Early staged entry into liberal European economic regimes will encourage private-sector development, reduce the state's economic role, underpin the rule of law, and increase the benefits of forswearing violent conflict over resources and national boundaries. (Steil and Woodward 1999, 97–98)

One need only look at how the attraction of EU membership has furthered compliance with expected standards of civil society, to include the rights of ethnic minorities, in the Baltics and in Central and Southeast Europe. And one need not look much beyond how the incentive for nearer-term NATO and EU membership for Bulgaria and Romania, and even far-distant-future possibilities for Macedonia and Albania, provided cohesion and unity in the extraordinary intervention against Yugoslavia in 1999, even at great economic, social, and civil distress and expense within these nations.

In Lieu of Closure

Macedonia, over the last decade, has come perilously close to internal collapse on more than one occasion. Aside from a failure to complete secure resolution with Greece over various disputes, her internal commitments to economic reform were never fully committed to during the 1990s. Further, geographical isolation, obvious lack of technological sophistication as well as lack of access to technology, and evident and continuing political instability – severely aggravated by the Kosovo crisis of 1999 – failed to encourage foreign investment over the long run. That said, such investment along with the successful implementation of economic reforms are the only means to secure stability or ensure Macedonia's long-term success.

If one were to take a retrospective look at the Balkans in general over the last decade of the twentieth century, it might indeed seem miraculous that Macedonia had not suffered a fate similar to that of her neighbours. Yet the future for Macedonia seems laced with promise as much as peril. One evident conclusion is that the tensions between Slavic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians would continue at either an aggravated level of contest or at a manageable means to achieve workable consensus. The solution, nonetheless, could only be achieved by the peoples of the region itself. Such evidence should become a viable marker for other troubled nations of the region.

What are the strategic implications for American policy? First, policy makers must realise that the ambiguity that professed neutrality between contending parties and served apparently well enough during the 1990s, cannot be maintained indefinitely. Secondly, and in the effort to move beyond former Yugoslavia's internal haemorrhaging, there s a pressing need to link Macedonian identity with other European identities and organisations. Membership in NATO, for example, seemed a cultural marker of inclusion as much as a security guarantee. Finally,

the United States would have to recognise that difficult choices remain in the future. While many have consistently emphasised – perhaps overemphasised – the power of the Greek lobby in influencing foreign policy, this was not an all encompassing explanation for the lack of increased commitment. Civil societies, both creating and sustaining them, require difficult choice.

In retrospect, it seems odd to realise how little credit or acknowledgement Macedonia has received for her success since independence. No matter how difficult the choices for the people and for the region itself, it is no accident that the Macedonian question of the nineteenth century has been resurrected in a new form in the late twentieth century, one which requires a frank assessment of this nation's necessity and probability for survival. Perhaps the most complete irony is that Macedonia's fate could have been determined, and may well be, by specific and strategic policy choices rather than by a fatalistic coin toss left to the indiscriminate and often brutal gods of chance.

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