

# ***KOSOVO: MACEDONIA'S PERSPECTIVES***

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If there had ever been any clear official position of the Republic of Macedonia vis-à-vis the Kosovo issue it remained a secret till this very day. Throughout the entire post-Yugoslav period, the country had been engulfed by numerous and grave problems, but Kosovo was perceived as such only occasionally and in moments of violent escalation.

The state policy towards the region could have been identified only indirectly through the top officials' statements. For instance, the first President Gligorov promoted politics of equidistance towards all four neighbours (Bulgaria, Greece, Albania and FR Yugoslavia), that is equal treatment of and neutrality towards all of them. For some analysts it rather displayed Macedonia's lack of policy, while for others it served also as a cover for Gligorov's stand that Kosovo's cry for independence would destabilize Macedonia.

During his mandate (1998-2002), the then Prime Minister Georgievski proved to be rather pragmatic and flexible: he was the first official to formally welcome the Prime Minister of the provisional Kosovo government right after the 1999 NATO intervention. The softening of the Macedonia's policy towards Kosovo was probably most evident during the mandate of the Prime Minister Buskovski (2004-2006). It looked as a turning point to see a Social Democrat politician advocating close political and economic ties to the Kosovo province, especially in the light of the allegations about the Social Democratic Union's inclination towards the Serbian side in the conflict.

Yet the changing official positions towards the Kosovo issue (as well as towards any other hot regional issue) have not been a result of maturation of the Macedonian foreign policy but rather a consequence of the increased US/EU influence and presence both in the country and in the region.

Especially since 1999, the Government has been continuously repeating the refrains previously spelled out in Brussels and/or in Washington. The most frequently taken position has been: "We are committed to the international law and respect the position of the international community", even if the international community as an abstract entity is obviously deeply divided over Kosovo's final status. Such a stand was a way to show cooperativeness with US/and political correctness, rather than an expression

of Macedonia's own political deliberation on an issue that has a direct impact on its national interests. This rather vague position has become unattainable since Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence – or secession - and the wave of recognitions that followed the act. Even then, just days prior to the world-wide announced act the Macedonia's Government position was that declaration of Kosovo's independence was “a hypothetical situation that it would rather not comment”.

Nevertheless, soon the authorities had to spell out the first independent official position but again it was again made in a rather vague manner. Since late February 2008 the state representatives have been sticking to the same phrase: “Macedonia is going to act in accordance with its national interests.”<sup>1</sup>

However, few know what the national interests of Macedonia truly are when it comes to Kosovo's independence. Macedonia behaves as a weak state fully dependent on its international mentors. Thus only a few doubt that it is just a matter of time when the official recognition is going to be issued. Explicitly, the Macedonia's state leadership claims that it has not yet discussed Kosovo's recognition - the most recent statements being those of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Interior given in mid-July 2008 <sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, at the same time, in an interview for the Voice of America Mr. Ahmeti avoided to call upon national interests but explicitly stated that Kosovo would be recognized very soon “because Macedonia has to follow the US policy”.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, few doubt that Macedonia has *de facto* recognized Kosovo since long ago. Prior to Kosovo's declaration it had been quite usual for the protectorate's representatives to be welcomed with a protocol typical for the highest foreign dignitaries. De facto recognition has become even more evident since the process of demarcation of the border started in early July and with the formal acceptance of Kosovo passports.

According to some Macedonian international law experts, it is problematic that the Government calls upon the so-called Ahtisaari's Plan as a legal basis for the demarcation process.<sup>4</sup> This document has never been adopted by the UN, i.e. in its Security Council, due to Russia's and China's disagreement. Actually, the only legal document which incorporates the Plan is Kosovo's Declaration of Independence. By referring to the Ahtisaari's Plan, the Macedonian government accepts the Declaration as valid, which is *de facto* recognition of the Kosovo state, although implicitly. Officially, the Macedonian government denies any direct correlation between the demarcation and the formal recognition of Kosovo.

The chronic lack of any expert debate or public discourse on highly important issues is being compensated by the media and public opinion surveys. The media sources

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<sup>1</sup> A1 TV, 17 February 2008, <http://www.a1.com.mk/vesti/default.aspx?VestID=89789>

<sup>2</sup> “Kosovskoto pra\_anje se u\_te ne e razgledano” (The Kosovo issue has not been discussed yet), *Vecer OnLine*, 19 July 2008, <http://www.vecer.com.mk/?ItemID=2DC1B93ED08FFD46B20BD27A8295A393>

<sup>3</sup> “Kosovskoto pra\_anje se u\_te ne e razgledano” (The Kosovo issue has not been discussed yet), *ibidem*

<sup>4</sup> Jana Lozanovska, “Za demarkacijata so Kosovo” (On the Demarcation with Kosovo), *Dnevnik*, 29 April 2008, available on: <http://www.dnevnik.com.mk/?itemID=610D900B29575C48BAF39327E3F9EB58&arc=1>

should be taken with great reservations as they are hardly independent. On the other hand, they hold great potentials for influencing the public opinion in Macedonia, in the direction of the owner's party preferences.

The same applies to the civil society organizations. Actually, there is only one NGO that has been conducting public opinion surveys on the name issue, Kosovo and on the public support for the NATO/EU membership – the Skopje-based Center for Research and Policy Making. The surveys display the evident polarization along ethnic lines. In continuity the majority of ethnic Macedonians oppose recognition of Kosovo; and vice versa - gross majority ethnic Albanians wholeheartedly expect the Government to recognize Kosovo as soon as possible.<sup>5</sup>

The public opinion survey conducted in April 2008 indicated that for 74% ethnic Macedonians the absolute state priority was demarcation of the state border towards Kosovo, while unconditional Kosovo's recognition was priority for over 90% of ethnic Albanians. In meantime, especially since the NATO Summit in Bucharest another issue has become even more indicative for the division of the public opinion along ethnic lines. For instance, in June even 95% of ethnic Albanians were ready to accept change of the constitutional name in exchange for NATO membership, while 75 % of ethnic Macedonians were against.

This is a drastic change from the survey results in March 2008 when only 52% of ethnic Albanians agreed with the change of the state's name. With regard to both issues (Kosovo and the name) it is hardly surprising that the ethnic group react in a "tit for tat" manner and mostly on an emotional rather than a rational ground.<sup>6</sup> In other words, in absence of a consolidated governmental and expert position, the citizens are led by their instinctive identity concerns and inter-ethnic distrust.

Ethnic Macedonians are mostly concerned with their identity and state-related problems (such as the name, border demarcation, Church recognition). On the other hand, the ethnic Albanians in Macedonia are more concerned with Kosovo's recognition than with the national interests of their homeland - or at least it is how they are perceived by the ethnic Macedonians.

Objectively, when it comes to Kosovo's recognition, Macedonia finds itself between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, Kosovo's recognition is hardly a win-win solution for the country, especially seen from the regional prism. Least of all, Macedonia would like to make Serbia its enemy, but it would be even worse to sandwich itself between the two traditional friends - Serbia and Greece, an alliance which can prove harmful vis-à-vis the name issue and Macedonia's economic, transportation and energy dependency on both countries.

On the other hand, Macedonia's most numerous minority group consists of 25% ethnic Albanians. Within the coalition government there is a strong pressure from the Albanian partner. More correctly, all Albanian political parties agree on this account although there has always been 'competition' over who has done more for the Albanian cause and who is a better promoter of the Albanian interests region wide.

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<sup>5</sup> The survey results could be found at: <http://www.crpm.org.mk/Home.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Milcin stressed this point in an exchange with the author of this text, for which she is grateful.

DUI and its leader are in obvious advantage before DPA politicians. Ahmeti put it very explicitly: he had personally taken part in the military fight for Kosovo's statehood.<sup>7</sup> Having in mind the fact that Ahmeti was also a leader of the National Liberation Army in 2001 conflict, it is not difficult to understand the concerns of the ethnic Macedonian community. Ethnic Macedonians distrust Ahmeti also with regard to the name issue: according to some media reports, he has paid visits to Athens and talked to the Greek state leadership. In mid June in his interview for the Greek newspaper *Ta Nea*, Ahmeti explained that the name issue should be resolved in accordance with the multiethnic character of the Macedonian state<sup>8</sup>.

Such a statement met strong resentment with the Macedonian public and media and it did not help elevate public distrust with ethnic Macedonians. The coalition agreement between VMRO and DUI allegedly included Kosovo's recognition but both partners publicly hold different positions.<sup>9</sup> While Albanian politicians regularly claim that the issue has been solved, the Macedonian partner in the government is more cautious.

There are two main reasons for this VMRO attitude. First, they would like to gain something (closure of the open border issue) before the recognition is given, so they can boast about their achievement. Having in mind that this allegedly "technical issue" will take many months before it is closed<sup>10</sup>, VMRO has gained plenty of time to play on patriotic card with its electorate, especially on the eve of the 2009 local and presidential elections. Gruevski creates a public image as a non-compromised leader who does not retreat before blackmails be they from abroad or from within his own government. His public profile narrows his policy options, and it may hit him as a boomerang once the US press more strongly in favour of Kosovo's recognition. The VMRO leader is aware of his weak position towards the mighty ally, but in the meantime he tries to benefit as much as possible so the recognition of Kosovo is being pushed aside, at least temporarily.

Given the domestic constellations and the external pressure in favour of Kosovo's recognition, the question is not if Macedonia is going to do that officially, but rather when it will be done. Given the strong support that Government enjoys in the parliament and in the public, it will face no strong internal opposition once the decision is made. Ethnic Albanians will rejoice, ethnic Macedonians will remain divided between "pro" and "cons" but the decision will be accepted as necessary if not desirable.

By recognizing Kosovo, Macedonia has a good chance to eliminate a serious problem that burdens inter-ethnic relations, especially if the act is accompanied by demarcation of the northern state border. Nevertheless, the relations between the two major ethnic groups are likely to remain uneasy and tense due to other internal processes. The power-sharing system is ongoing a mutation, which at the end of the day may turn

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<sup>7</sup> Ahmeti's interview for the Kosovo newspaper *Epoka e Re*, 4 August 2008 (broadcasted by Kanal 5 TV, <http://www.kanal5.com.mk/ShowNews.aspx?ItemID=36407&mid=1500&tabId=1&tabindex=0>)

<sup>8</sup> "Ahmeti bara multietnicko ime za zemjava" (Ahmeti calls for a multiethnic name for this country), *Dnevnik*, 18 June 2008, available at:

<http://www.dnevnik.com.mk/?itemID=F13C0F465D894044BA38F2C4397C1AB2&arc=1>. Also see the original article in the Greek newspaper *Ta Nea*:

<http://www.tanea.gr/default.asp?pid=2&ct=1&artid=71220>

<sup>9</sup> A1 TV News, 9 August, 2008, available on: <http://www.a1.com.mk/vesti/default.aspx?VestID=96153>

<sup>10</sup> According to the Ahtisaari plan, the border issue is supposed to be closed within a year.

into a federalization. Probable separation of Kosovo and/or consequent changes in Bosnia may speed up this internal process in Macedonia. Some analysts (such as prof. Frckoski) believe that in case Macedonia is left out of NATO (due to the Greek veto) there will be separatist tendencies with ethnic Albanians, who would then opt to leave a country with no Euro-Atlantic perspectives.<sup>11</sup>

This is a quite unlikely scenario because NATO and EU would not be willing to encourage such developments. But this could anyhow be used as an excuse for separatist forces.

The issue of Kosovo's recognition is growing into a new Balkan apple of discord. As elsewhere, Macedonia faces a really tough choice between creating friends and foes in the region. The same applies to most of the countries in the Balkans, which still behave as a system of connected vessels.

The most unpredictable issue is Serbia's reaction in case of Macedonia's recognition of Kosovo. In the worst case scenario, Macedonia may find itself under dual blockade from the north (Serbia) and the south (Greece). The economic setback would be disastrous, having in mind country's dependency on transportation routes and energy supplies. In the short run, Macedonia can benefit from the opening of the Kosovo market, but in a long run and in the light of the desired European integration Macedonia needs friendly relations with both Serbia and Greece.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the government official's overoptimistic view that economic ties with Kosovo have enormous potential for the Macedonian economy, the facts tell something else: the size of the Serbian economy is more than 10 times that of the economy of Kosovo. Worsening of the bilateral relations with Serbia will surely affect the dispute between the Serbian and the Macedonian Orthodox Church.<sup>13</sup>

For any state that considers Kosovo's recognition the crucial question is what will be the official borders of the new-born state. Will Kosovo be able to preserve its territorial integrity? The frozen conflict in Kosovo and its de facto division into an Albanian and a Serbian part is not something to be overcome soon, especially now when the escalation in Georgia has created new precedents and new frozen conflicts for which the international community does not have a solution.

According to some analysts, the new geopolitical situation is likely to slow down the process of international recognition of Kosovo as well as to strengthen the internal divisions of Kosovo.<sup>14</sup> In other words, uncertainty is likely to cloud the region for a

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<sup>11</sup> Ljubomir Frckoski's presentation at a Round Table "The Republic of Macedonia's Dilemmas - Before and After Bucharest", organized by the Open Society Institute Macedonia, on 23 April 2008. Audio record can be found at: [www.soros.org.mk](http://www.soros.org.mk)

<sup>12</sup> Experts and businessmen in Macedonia agree over this argument. See more: *Radio Free Europe in Macedonian Language*, <http://www.makdenes.org/programs/aktuelnosti/ma/2007/12/DCFEE11F-4009-4017-9C93-FB5B5BD6EC35.ASP>

<sup>13</sup> On these relations see more in: Haakan Wiberg and Biljana Vankovska, "A Special Part of Europe: Nation, State and Religion Among Orthodox South Slavs", *DIIS Working Papers*, No. 15/2005, <http://www.diis.dk/sw12794.asp>

<sup>14</sup> "Paralela: Kosovo i Gruzija" (Parallel: Kosovo and Georgia), Radio Slobodna Evropa, 16 August 2008, <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/Article/1191588.html>

considerable time period, in which some Macedonian experts foresee serious security concerns.<sup>15</sup> Partition *via facti* may have a direct effect on Macedonia, i.e. it will be one more proof that the multiethnic model is not workable anywhere in the region. It will be questionable if the Macedonian precedent (although imperfect and declarative) is going to endure in such a regional surrounding.

Kosovo's impact on the region will not cease to exist even if all the neighbouring states (except Serbia, understandably) grant their formal recognitions. The Kosovo state is born as a failed state, which means it will continue to produce instability and will add some more heavy stuff in already too big history that is hard to consume. Kosovo's independence came to being not as a climax of a successful international state-building but rather as a result of its failure.<sup>16</sup>

Some economists believe that despite all odds the region is entering a more prosperous phase of economic development but there are too many "Ifs" for such a scenario to work out.<sup>17</sup> The Balkan "geography of animosity" is not limited only to the sanitary cordon named Western Balkans but involves even states that are EU member states. Macedonia's painful path to NATO membership is an appropriate example for this statement.

The Balkan knot gets even more complicated due to the deep-rooted conflicts in the region, the internal crisis in the EU after the Irish referendum and because of the recently changes in the geopolitical reality in the Caucasus.

The EU promise to the Balkan states is not so such a sure option anymore - despite the encouraging rhetoric from Brussels.

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<sup>15</sup> "Stanje na Kosovu nije završena stvar" (Situation on Kosovo is not over yet), Radio Slobodna Evropa, 13 August 2008, <http://www.slobodnaevropa.org/content/Article/1190755.html>

<sup>16</sup> Even eminent European politicians do not hide their concerns: "I have two concerns that we need to address. The first is the obvious one of state-building in Kosovo. Taking a decision on status might be the easiest part of the process ahead of us - creating a truly stable, sovereign and viable state over the years to come a somewhat more demanding one. The second is the need to avoid major setbacks in the crucially important process of regional and European integration as a result of the political turmoil that decisions on the status of Kosovo could be associated with." (Carl Bildt's speech "The Balkans in Europe's Future" at Robert Bosch Stiftung, Berlin, 31 January 2008, available at: <http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/7956/a/97186>)

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Gligorov, "Geography of Animosity", *Pe\_\_anik*, 4 June 2008, <http://pecanik.net/content/view/1073/60>