Analysis of ethnic relations in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

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Abstract: This analysis consists of a brief overview of ethnic relations in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the different historical aspects that have contributed to past and present ethnic relations in the country. Macedonia's withdrawal from the former Yugoslavia was the beginning of a long, and on-going, divide between the two major ethnic communities in Macedonia, the Slav-Macedonians and the ethnic Albanians. Since the end of the ethnic conflict in 2001, the country has seen some progress resulting from the implementation of the Ohrid Peace Agreement, yet there are still several forces, both internal and external, that are inhibiting Macedonia from European Union accession, NATO membership, and the potential for international recognition as becoming a part of the West.

Keywords: Macedonia, Ohrid Peace Agreement, ethnic relations

History of ethnic relations in Macedonia

Consistent with many of its neighbours' history, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) has a well-documented and steady history of ethnic tension, within the country itself and the in the regional context of the Balkans. Macedonia is a country that is greatly divided between two significant distinct populations, Slav-Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, which comprise noteworthy social, religious, ethnic, and linguistic variances. Ethnic Albanians in Macedonia are the largest minority group in the country, representing about 23 per cent of the population. (Simoska, n.a.)

Since the early 20th century, Macedonia has been partitioned, occupied, and conquered by various outside forces. At the end of the Ottoman rule in Europe, today's Macedonia was incorporated into Serbia, it was then occupied by Bulgaria, and years later, after the First World War, it again became part of Serbia, which would later become Yugoslavia. (BBC News, 2012)

The Republic of Macedonia is now one of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia after gaining independence in 1991, when a majority of voters supported independence in referendum, and joined the United Nations in 1993. (BBC News, 2012) Yet, despite this progress, the new constitution at this time faced much opposition by the ethnic Albanians in the country and, in 1992, an unofficial referendum among ethnic Albanians indicated a demand for their own territorial independence. (BBC News, 2012) While tensions among citizens continued to escalate, so did tensions with their neighbours. International recognition of an independent Macedonia was slow due to the fact that its southern neighbour, Greece, objected to the use of the name "Macedonia", citing that because it is the same as the name of a Greek province, it could not also be used by this newly independent country. (BBC News, 2012)

Despite these disagreements, in 1992, Yugoslavia acknowledged Macedonia's secession and the Yugoslav government resigned after mass demonstrations that had resulted from the failure to gain recognition for the country's autonomy.

Inter-ethnic issues began to escalate exponentially a few years later at the national level. Several incidents in the late 90s prompted protests in the country, such as in 1997, when the Constitutional Court forbade the use of the Albanian flag, in which Parliament later adopted a law to enforce this decision. However, what really caused a significant increase in inter-ethnic conflict in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia started in March 1999. At this time, NATO initiated a bombing campaign in Yugoslavia in response to the treatment of Kosovo Albanians. This, in addition to the mass expulsion and killing of Kosovo Albanians by Serbia, prompted increased migration of Kosovo Albanians into many neighbouring countries, such as Macedonia. "The flood of Albanian refugees from Kosovo has seriously destabilised the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Above all, the refugee influx heightened fears among the Macedonian Slav majority that, because of their higher birth-rate, Macedonia's Albanians are becoming the dominant force in the state." (Strategic Comments, 2007)

In early 2001, the emergence of the National Liberation Army, which demanded equal rights for ethnic Albanians in Macedonia, led to uprisings. After several months of widespread violent conflict between the two groups, peace was restored later that year and was met with a NATO operation, a new constitution, and the Ohrid Peace Agreement.

Ethnic division and tension among residents of the country continue to be some of the most sensitive and complex issues influencing the stability and security of Macedonia today. Since December 2005, Macedonia has been a candidate for European Union accession and has applied for NATO membership. And while the major ethnic conflict ended more than ten years ago, Macedonia is still struggling to prove if they are ready to join the West. This doubt can generally be attributed to the severe lack of trust between the Slav-Macedonians and ethnic Albanians, despite the peace agreement that exists between them. "Trust between the Slav-Macedonians and Albanians has hit rock bottom." (Armakolas and Feta, 2012)

Contributing factors to continued ethnic division in Macedonia

The unresolved issue regarding the name dispute with Greece has continued to delay progress in Macedonia for years. This ongoing disagreement has considerably slowed down Macedonia's progress towards integration with NATO and the EU and has simultaneously increased the tension between Slav-Macedonians and Albanians. Currently, a large majority of Slav-Macedonians would prefer to continue arguments over the name issue rather than compromise for the sake of NATO membership whereas a large majority of ethnic Albanians disagree with this approach, and would instead prefer to resolve this issue quickly so as to attain NATO membership. (Armakolas and Feta, 2012) This long-standing disagreement has only continued to intensify tension between the two ethnic communities and a prolonged process of gaining NATO membership and EU integration will only facilitate further ethnic division in the country.

Additionally, the failed 2011 census also indicates the state's failure to alleviate ethnic tension. The census conflict in Macedonia can be credited to the competition between the ethnic communities for public resources. With the weak state of the economy and the currently high unemployment rate, public administration jobs are being highly sought after. The failure to complete a census is a result of the political elites' concerns that their respective communities had diminished in numbers relative the other ethnic groups and a census had the

potential to essentially decrease their political power or influence, as the principle of "'equitable and just representation of non-majority communities', enshrined in the public policies of the country since 2002, has direct implication on census taking in Macedonia." (Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 2013). In this regard, it is important to note that a policy change in which these kinds of affirmative action policies were reformed to instead focus on economically disadvantaged populations, as opposed to ethnic groups, would be a potential solution to the census conflict in Macedonia.

Skopje 2014

Another recent development that has continued to intensify the divide between ethnic communities is the Skopje 2014 government program. This new project "has undermined inter-ethnic reconciliation… the anti-Albanian animus of rising 'ancient' Macedonian nationalism is a cause of serious concern for the Albanian community." (Armakolas and Feta, 2012) The official purpose of this government project is to renovate the country's capital into a metropolis. This entails the construction of several bridges and churches, as well as new monuments of medieval and ancient figures. While it may be appealing for national tourism, the project appeals to the history of Slav-Macedonians, whereas the Albanian community and their history are not included in the reconstruction and memory of the country's history.

The Future of ethnic relations in Macedonia

In 2014, there have still been protests and outbreaks of ethnic violence in Macedonia. While much of the Ohrid Peace Agreement has been implemented at the national level, the tension that still exists among the Slav-Macedonians and ethnic Albanians can be largely attributed to the actions of political actors in the country. The utilization of media to exacerbate the divide between these two ethnic groups has not subsided and is being used as a tool to increase tension and, subsequently, divert public attention from the country's political and economic problems. "The systematic violation of human rights and freedoms, the suppression of media freedom, poverty and corruption, all remain invisible under a tide of orchestrated chauvinism and ethnic, religious and political divisions." (Deralla, 2014) The media in Southeast Europe has played a prominent role in enabling ethnic conflict in the Balkan region and the media in Macedonia is no exception, as it has deeply reinforced these ethnic divides.

Many of the problems Macedonia faces today exist on the national level, and the ability to resolve these issues and improve and foster ethnic coexistence in the country is unlikely without the presence of political will at the national level. "Inter-ethnic relations, disputes with neighbours, functioning of democratic institutions and rule of law, absent political and economic reforms complete the mosaic why Republic of Macedonia is lagging behind in EU integration processes." (Zendeli, 2012) While these factors are inhibiting Macedonia's progress toward EU integration, it is only with the continued and also increased support of the international community and international organisations, such the NATO and the European Union, that Macedonia will be able to overcome these ethnic divisions. Without EU Conditionality as an incentive for eventual, or potential, EU integration, the ethnic tension between Slav-Macedonians and ethnic Albanians in Macedonia will not diminish. Though Macedonia became a candidate for EU membership in 2005, it still remains a fragile state due to rising nationalism, an increase in school segregation, and a slow decentralisation process. These national issues, particularly in light of the failed 2011 census, need to be dealt with at an international level, so as to allow for improvement. The promise of NATO membership and EU accession have the rare potential to unify the country, however, the current situation in regard to the name dispute has instead created further divide and has stalled progress in the country.

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