

Democratic awakening in Macedonia: Expecting the unexpected

Elena CEBAN*

Abstract

On the weekend of 9-10 of May 2015, a firefight with grenades and snipers took place in Kumanovo, the third biggest city in Macedonia. However, it was just the tip of the iceberg – for seven months Macedonia witnessed the most massive popular movement in its history. People of all ethnicities protested the oppressing tax law, the stagnating educational law, the outrageous conduct of the Ministry of Health, the unbelievable recordings revealing government schemes of corruption, election fraud, political murder and nepotism. Claiming that the conflict in Kumanovo was staged by the authorities to distract public attention from the above-mentioned problems, people organized into a movement and established a camp in front of the government, determined to leave only when the government resigns. While voices echo the resemblance with the 2001 conflict, a thorough analysis of internal factors indicates that the commotion is revolving around mass dissatisfaction with the government in power.

Keywords: Macedonia, protest, corruption, conflict, political crisis

Civil unrest: seven months of murky waters

It is not uncommon to hear about civil unrest or armed confrontation in the Balkans, due to its historical heritage. In its twenty three years of independence, Macedonia witnessed several conflicting situations including clashes between its two main ethnicities – Macedonian and Albanian, but it also developed mechanisms for better integration and preservation of diversity.

One often hears Europeans associate the term “Macedonia” with a fruit salad. While it brings a smile on Macedonians’ faces, it suits the country quite well – Macedonia is a small (25,000 sq. km.) territory that hosts Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, Romani, Serbs, Bosniaks and other ethnic denominations.

Although a multiethnic country, its general goal of European integration is shared by all political factions. Macedonia signed an Association Agreement with the EU in 2001 and was granted the status of candidate in 2005 ([European Commission 2005](#)), but fur-

* Elena Ceban is a Master graduate in Transatlantic Studies at Faculty of European Studies of the Babes-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca (Romania), ceban.elena89@gmail.com

ther negotiations were stalled because of the ongoing dispute over the official name of the country with Greece¹, which also vetoed Macedonia's entry into NATO.

For the purpose of better understanding the current power-sharing schemes in the political sphere, the three main political parties will be presented below.

VMRO-DPMNE² is a centre-right ruling party with a Christian Democrat-style orientation; its leader, the current Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, took office in 2006. The party won the majority of seats in parliament four times since 2006.

SDSM³ is the main opposition party and second in Parliament; it is led by Zoran Zaev, who became the main face of the anti-government protests after releasing the infamous wiretapped recordings. His party stands for liberal economic policies, co-operation with the international community, and flexibility in the row with Greece over the country's name in order to enable the country to join NATO.

DUI⁴, the third and "junior" ruling party in the government; it was formed by former guerrilla fighters in the 2001 conflict and advocates the full implementation of the Ohrid Agreement which granted equal political rights to the Albanian population. ([Balkan Insight 2010](#)).

The recent firefight in Kumanovo made the headlines of the main European and international newspapers, yet most of the reports fail to encompass the complex power-relations between governments and their citizens. Our goal is to get an overview of the latest events in Macedonia and analyze the systemic components of the current political crisis. From massive student protests in late 2014 to recorded proof of high level corruption and a threat of an armed conflict, we will follow the chain of events that culminated in early May with a shooting incident that took the lives of eight policemen and injured over 30 people.

Stage I: The students' movement

The unrest among the civil society was best visible when students started organizing protests against the new law of education that introduced an additional external examination. For the first time since its independence, Macedonia saw tens of thousands of students marching the streets of Skopje, in what would become a genuine movement.

Studentski Plenum is the name taken by students to identify their movement: protests that started in November 2014 gradually transformed into a fully-fledged occupation of the University space. While classes were boycotted, students together with their profes-

1 Greece claims that Macedonia is the historical name of a Greek region and represents the Greek heritage.

2 Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.

3 Social Democratic Union of Macedonia

4 Democratic Union for Integration

sors (who created their own Professor's Plenum) could be found on the premises of the University, giving alternative lectures, organizing debates on relevant topics and informing students about possible actions undertaken by the Plenum.

Below are the pleas made by the students of the State University *Ss. Cyril and Methodius*:

- cancelling the newly-adopted law on education that introduces an external examination. Students claim that the law goes against the Bologna system, which specifies that universities and other educational bodies can reserve the right to decide upon the preferred method of grading.
- denouncing the deplorable condition of dormitories, the lack of funding for the state university, the lack of adequate representative student bodies that are not infected by corruption and often sudden changes in the educational law.
- introducing a more democratic process of decision-making that would involve the student body in a transparent process with suggestions based on a needs-assessment.

The government's decision to open talks with representatives of the students' body took everybody by surprise. On February 24, the occupation of the university ended, with the Plenum taking the decision not to disband and continue representing students' interests.

What happened next was even more surprising. High-school students followed the example of their older counterparts and started their own movement – the *Srednoskolski Plenum* (High-school Students' Plenum). This time, protests covered the whole territory of Macedonia, with students protesting several times a week, while boycotting classes and even organizing alternative activities in some high-schools. Under the slogan “Stop the bad reforms”, students requested the cancellation of the external examination, returning to the old pattern for the graduation exam and respecting the EU educational standards. Teachers joined the movement, supporting their pupils in their quest for modifying the educational law. ([Radio MOF 2015](#)).

But what made students turn their protests into a movement was the government's decision to prohibit any type of student association, which came at the beginning of April. Since then, regular camps in front of the Ministry of Education and Science were held in order to express disagreement with the breach of the right to civic association.

Stage II: Protests related to the wiretap scandal

For the past couple of months, the main opposition party in Macedonia, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia, has been publishing recordings of illegally wire-tapped

conversations of prominent political figures, journalists and activists, called “bombs”.⁵ The opposition claims that the conversations had been recorded by the Secret Police headed by Saso Mijalkov and that Gruevski orchestrated the illegal surveillance of some 20,000 people.

The tapes have lifted the lid on a range of suspected wrongdoings by senior officials, including election fraud, intimidation, the politically motivated jailing of opponents, surveillance of journalists and interference with the media, the judiciary and the prosecution. At the time being, around 30 such bombs have been made public, conversations being grouped according to the main legal breach.

In the most shocking revelation, senior government officials are allegedly heard scheming to cover up a dubious car accident that took the life of a noted government critic. Another recording seems to implicate the government in sweeping under the rug a case in which police had beaten a young reveler to death (Joseph 2015). One of the latest bombs exposes PM Gruevski’s hypocrisy over the dispute with Greece regarding Macedonia’s name. The tape includes conversations between Nikola Gruevski, the PM, Antonio Milososki, the former Foreign Minister and Saso Mijalkov, the former Director of the Administration for Security and Counterintelligence:

“Milososki appears to explain to Gruevski and Mijalkov that they should seek a complex compound country name that would include a prefix with a “political connotation” like Independent, Sovereign or Democratic before the name Republic of Macedonia, with a suffix in brackets like (Upper), (Northern) or (Vardar). Milososki also says that the Greeks will be able to sell this to their own public by insisting that the current Macedonian name has been changed significantly.” (Marusic 2015a).

An extended space was given to the topic of election fraud. Several bombs reveal dialogues that refer to different techniques used by the ruling party members to cancel the first round of elections because of apparent loss on their side (threatening employees with dismissal and business owners with closure, staging incidents at the polling stations in order to invalidate the ballots, making ballots “disappear”, etc.). Interlocutors also refer to “crushing the opposition” during the second round of elections (Al Jazeera 2015).

Gruevski insisted that the tapes were created by unnamed “foreign secret services”, in collaboration with the opposition, in order to destabilize the country. Refusing to acknowledge the authenticity of the revealed tapes, the PM mentioned in a press-conference that he would not step down and dissolve the current government, a declaration that triggered further protests backed by the opposition. The dismissal of two ministers

5 Al Jazeera created an interactive map of the transcripts, together with profiles participants, at <http://interactive.aljazeera.com/ajb/2015/makedonija-bombe/eng/index.html>

involved in the scandal – Gordana Jankulovska, Minister of Internal Affairs, and Saso Mijalkov, the Intelligence chief – did not manage to feed the people hungry for a consistent change of the governing elite.

Amid refusal from the government to take any action regarding the claims of corruption, protests became a regular sight in Skopje, the capital. Under the slogan *Protestiram* (I protest), which became extremely popular on Facebook, tens of thousands of people marched the streets of Skopje every week establishing a protest camp in front of the Vlada (the building of government). Estimates go between 20.000 and 100.000 people, the exact number being unavailable. Numerous Facebook users supported an online campaign that urged people not to resort to violence, not to bring sharp or dangerous objects to the protest and not to respond to provocations.

Daily activities included speeches held by professors, businessmen, politicians, journalists; debates; musical events, etc. People insisted that PM Gruevski and his cabinet had to resign.

As a response to this act of popular rebellion, supporters of the VMRO-DPMNE ruling party organized a counter-camp to show support for the government. People maintained that they were there on their own will, that they lived well and that the government was doing all it could to serve their citizens (Jordanovska 2015). Despite the evident disagreement between both camps, distance was kept, and no violent outburst was registered.

Stage III: The armed clash in Kumanovo

On the 8th of May 2015, an armed conflict between a so-called terrorist group and the police took place in the town of Kumanovo near the border of Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo. Several streets on the Albanian side of the city were blocked, and shootings were heard for two days around the city. A general feeling of uneasiness overtook the city, but there was no actual reason to believe that an escalation was expected. During the two days of shootings, eight policemen were killed and another 37 people were wounded (Marusic 2015b). Official media reported that the situation in the city remained calm despite the blockade and that citizens had nothing to fear.

Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov on the 10th of May 2015 chaired a session of the National Security Council, which opposition party leaders also attended. The session noted that prompt police action neutralized a group of several dozen people that had planned terror attacks across the country, intending serious destabilization (Marusic 2015b). Ivanov also used the incident to urge Western powers to unblock Macedonia's

entry into NATO and the EU in order to avoid the rise of such terrorist groups.

While the government insists to hold extremist Albanians responsible for the attack on the police, voices from the opposition suspect the government's involvement in staging the conflict in order to distract people's attention from the ever-growing scandals around the corruption allegations. Considerable effort was put into keeping track of hate speech and avoiding the escalation of the conflict through the spread of misinformation. Facebook and Twitter were used as main tools to spread the message that there was no ethnic clash in the city of Kumanovo, whose population is 35% Albanian.

Remembering the 2001 conflict: what is different now

The armed clash with the police in early May inevitably triggered associations with the 2001 ethnic conflict and raised fears of escalation in the region. However, the sense of déjà-vu these events provide misleads the general opinion. The forces that triggered the armed conflict in 2001 differ considerably from the ones that are driving the popular movement into the streets today. Understanding this difference is crucial for imagining a future action plan, both for the civil society and for political actors involved.

Historically speaking, the geographic territory of Macedonia is scattered across three modern nation-states: Bulgaria, Greece and FYROM. The end of the Ottoman rule over the Balkans (in 1912), the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and the First World War (1914-1918) reshaped the entire Balkan region, Macedonia included: thus, Vardar Macedonia became a part of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, while the Aegean Macedonia with Thessaloniki passed to Greece and the Pirin Macedonia to Bulgaria (Sotirovic 2015).

After the declaration of Macedonian independence in 1991, Bulgaria recognized the new state, but not the nation to which its majority belongs, nor the language that they speak. Albania faced its own crises of transition, but Macedonian citizens self-identified as Albanian were allegedly involved in various armed confrontations with Macedonian police over the rights of the Albanian minority in Western Macedonia. And in the best-known neighborly stand-off, Greece – the northern region of which is also called Macedonia – challenged the republic's status by interpreting its constitution, new flag and very name as expressions of extraterritorial ambitions (Cowan, 2005:2).

The ethnic component fluctuated in time, as a response to the major imbalance in the whole region. Thus, after the Treaty of Lausanne was adopted in 1922, the Muslim population was considerably reduced when a population exchange happened: some 350.000 Muslims from Macedonia were displaced to Turkey, while around 1.200.000 ethnic Greeks from Anatolia came into Greece and its adjacent regions (Sotirovic 2015). Eighty

years after, as a result of the war in Kosovo, over a quarter of a million refugees from Kosovo arrived in Macedonia – one refugee for every eight citizens (Cowan, 2005:5). It is hard to estimate today's ratio of Albanian-speaking citizens, due to the fact that the last population census happened in 2002. Nevertheless, around a fourth of the population is Albanian-speaking, leaving around 65% Macedonians and roughly 10% other ethnicities.

The commotion created by two world wars and ethnic displacement left space for the emergence of nationalist politics. Under Tito's rule, in Yugoslavia, Macedonians were recognized as a constituent 'people'. Tito's new structure recognized separate 'peoples' and 'nationalities' residing throughout the various republics, and gave them certain rights on that basis (Cowan, 2005:12). The Socialist Macedonia gained recognition of its nationhood, language and alphabet.

Naturally, the establishment of a "majority" automatically triggered the shaping of "minorities". The Albanian-speaking minority was not granted autonomy in the same way that Kosovo obtained it, together with the right to have their own president, government, assembly, police, university and academy of sciences. Enforced by the impressive number of Kosovar refugees who settled in different Macedonian regions across the North and North-West and radicalized by a wish to gain political power and privileges, the Albanian community got involved in an armed conflict at the beginning of a new century.

The armed conflict in Macedonia started in February 2001, when the guerrillas of the so called National Liberation Army (NLA) seized control over the village of Tanusevci near the border with Kosovo. Over the next few months, fighting spread to areas near the northern towns of Kumanovo and Tetovo and close to the capital Skopje. The conflict ended with several thousands of internally displaced persons and claimed the lives of over 60 Macedonian soldiers and policemen. The number of casualties among NLA remains unknown (Balkan Insight 2007).

The outcomes of the conflict were materialized by the Ohrid Framework Agreement – a document backed by the United States and the EU that became the main guarantee for Macedonia's accession to NATO and the EU. The Agreement bids for keeping Macedonia's sovereignty by making concessions to the Albanian population. Thus, every ethnicity that represents over 20% of the population of Macedonia got the right to receive education in their native language, which becomes an official language of the state (Framework Agreement 2001). Besides recognition of cultural rights, it created space for Albanian representation in Parliament and gave more autonomy to Albanian-populated municipalities. Thus, leaders of the Albanian guerrilla turned politicians, founded the Democratic Union for Integration, DUI, which entered coalition government after the September 2002 elections.

But the Ohrid Agreement had a limited impact. While focusing on immediate results

which included halting military actions, it deepened the division between the two ethnic communities. The envisioned political solution of double representation in government created deadlocks, with Albanian junior ruling party often blocking legislative initiatives, due to the institutionalized procedure of “double majority”. Political interests aside, the community is culturally divided. Albanian children go to Albanian schools, their parents shop in Albanian shops and markets, on weekends they go to Albanian cafes and attend Albanian events.

But the fact that there is a division in the municipalities where both ethnicities reside doesn't mean that conflict is imminent. Although there is limited interaction between them, interethnic friendships are not uncommon and even joint events happen. Kumanovo is known on a national level for its efforts to blur the physical boundaries between Albanians and Macedonians by organizing events held in both languages and by encouraging the young generation not to foster the division.

As seen in the previous section of this paper, the recent clash between the police and a terrorist faction in the Albanian side of Kumanovo is an attempt of the government to hold on to power by switching public attention from the massive wiretapped scandals and allegations of corruption to a presumable ethnic clash and escalation. Having this as a starting point, we can safely assume that at stake is not Macedonia's integrity, but rather the government's survival.

In 2001, the Albanians were genuinely disenchanted with the governing party. Although Albanians were handed important ministries and their participation in the public administration increased by 25%, Albanians intermittently accused the Macedonians of discrimination in the labor market, in secondary, and higher education, in outlays on infrastructure (Vaknin, 2009: 591). Today, all the population is dissatisfied with the current economic situation. High rates of unemployment, increased taxes, limited freedom of expression, scandals of high corruption and halted negotiations with the EU because of the name dispute with Greece are just some reasons that pushed people into the streets to claim a change of government.

Another argument in favor of this theory descends from an established practice of cooperation in mixed municipalities, fostered by the emergence of an open civic society. Since the proclamation of independence 23 years ago, various international organizations supported the development of civil society by funding and encouraging cultural projects. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Skopje is an active organization that monitors political hate speech, works to prevent violence during protests and offers counseling and support to the LGBT community. After signing the Association Agreement with the EU and becoming a candidate country in 2005, Macedonia got access to European funds for both political and the civil sectors. Other funding opportunities

came from the Council of Europe and from the Soros Foundation.

The results of this continuous process of fostering dialogue between communities could be perceived during the anti-governmental protests. Both Macedonians and Albanians gathered in Skopje to request Prime Minister Gruevski to resign, in an unprecedented mass movement that preceded the conflict in Kumanovo in early May. And it was Alsat, an Albanian-owned TV station that was airing the wiretaps and offering extensive airtime to opposition voices, a remarkable gesture of solidarity. Albanian web-sites have published sharp anti-government commentary by ethnic Macedonians, something that was largely unheard of in the traditionally ethnically segregated media sector (Joseph 2015).

To sum up, comparing this year's events with 2001 and claiming that there is a risk of renewed ethnic conflict draws the attention away from the real problem: the retention in power of a profoundly corrupt government which ignores popular dissatisfaction with its ruling.

Media coverage

Media plays a crucial role in creating the link between what is happening in the streets and what is delivered to the rest of the population. Without any doubt, there is a considerable part of the population that was unaware of the frequent protests happening in Skopje due to the fact that national TV channels and press were not covering them. The government acted extremely careful in order not to let the fever of unrest raise in other parts of Macedonia.

In 2007, Macedonia ranked number 36, ahead of the United States, in Freedom House's Press Freedom Index. Last year, Macedonia sunk to 123, languishing with the likes of Venezuela (Joseph 2015). Research conducted by the Macedonian Centre for European Training in 2014 indicated that the majority of Macedonia's citizens, 53%, fear to openly express their opinions, and another 64% think they are exposed to state surveillance (Georgievski 2015).

Condemning the corruption in the media circles, young people resorted to online social media to mobilize forces and build up a structured movement. Both the Students' Plenum and the High-School Students' Plenum had an official position statement and an agenda for daily events. The Protestiram movement has a daily agenda as well. Facebook and Twitter are the main "meeting points" for people to connect and plan their activity.

For instance, after the PM Gruevski's speech in which he mentioned that nobody would thank him for spending his best years between the walls of the Vlada, a twitter

campaign under the hashtag *thankyouNikola* (*falaNikola*) unleashed a wave of “gratitude”. With messages full of irony and sarcasm, Macedonia’s twitter community pointed out to the poor state of economy, the high level of corruption, the selective application of the rule of law, the government’s tightening control of the media and other issues that have become synonymous with the regime that has been in power for nearly ten years (Georgievski 2015).

Boris Georgievski from BIRN believes that the role of the social media was much bigger than simply disseminating information about the situation in Kumanovo (Georgievski 2015):

“It showed its importance as a tool for calming tensions between the different ethnic communities and acted as a direct opposite to the numerous Macedonian pro-government and regional (especially Serbian) media that published a lot of disinformation, essentially calling for blood.”

Concluding remarks

It is inevitable for the European community to feel uneasiness every time one of the Balkan countries comes up in the news and the tags read “conflict”, “protest”, “casualties”. Its tumultuous history keeps haunting the still-young democratic republics that were established after the collapse of the Yugoslav Republic and went through an unfortunate belligerent episode at the end of the twentieth century.

When it comes to Macedonia, concerns over the possibility of a disintegration of the country due to its Albanian population are still echoing both in the country and abroad. Yet, rather than immediately jumping to the conclusion that it’s another ethnic conflict, a more careful consideration needs to be made. Being constantly constrained by the ruling party, the opposition decided to act boldly, and apparently they enjoyed the support of the masses.

This time, the wind that blows from Macedonia promises a change. At least the people who organized a camp in front of the Government with the intention to watch its constituents walking out with their resignation in hand seemed to be confident about it.

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