



The Power of Perception: The Impact of the Macedonian Question on Inter-ethnic Relations in the Republic of Macedonia

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Introduction

The present article explores the impact of the Macedonian Question on the relations between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority in the Republic of Macedonia. The central argument put forth here is that the attitudes of Bulgaria and Greece, and to a lesser extent Serbia and Albania, towards the Macedonian nation, influence the ongoing conflict between Macedonians and Albanians as to the kind of state the Republic of Macedonia should be. At the heart of the Macedonian Question are conflicting perceptions and dogmas of the ethnic origin of the Macedonian nation, and the specific question of whether a distinct Macedonian nation actually exists.

The Bulgarian perception of the Macedonians has historically been – and remains – that the Macedonian people originate from the Bulgarian nation and that the Macedonian language is simply a dialect of Bulgarian. Therefore, from a Bulgarian point of view, the territory of the Republic of Macedonia is culturally and nationally Bulgarian. Although political leaders in Sofia today officially maintain that Bulgaria makes no territorial claim on Macedonia, the Bulgarians nonetheless retain a strong attachment to Macedonia, which in turn is influenced by the fact that many Bulgarians originally arrived in Bulgaria as immigrants from Vardar and Aegean Macedonia. The Bulgarian attitude is illustrated by the decision to recognise the Macedonian state in the early 1990s while refusing to acknowledge the existence of a distinct Macedonian nation.

Greece, in turn, opposes the application of the name 'Macedonia' to any other place than what to them is Macedonia, namely, northern Greece, and denies the existence of any Macedonian national minority, claiming instead that those who call themselves Macedonians are Slavophone Greeks. Following the Republic of Macedonia's declaration of independence in 1991, Greece exerted great pressure within the European Union to deny the incipient republic diplomatic recognition unless it changed its name, and placed a trade embargo on Macedonia.

In contrast to Bulgaria and Greece, Serbia's position towards the Macedonians is more ambiguous. While Belgrade was instrumental in promoting a sense of Macedonian national consciousness during the communist era, Serbia has in the past often maintained that the territory of the Republic of Macedonia constitutes a southern part of Serbia and that ethnic Macedonians are Serbs by origin.

Albania, in turn, does not reject the existence of a Macedonian nation but given the relatively large Albanian population in the Republic of Macedonia, objects to the present constitutional structure that effectively makes Macedonia a state belonging primarily to the ethnic Macedonian majority where Albanians are relegated to the status of second-class citizens.

At the same time as Bulgaria and Greece continue to exert rhetorical and psychological pressure on the Macedonian nation and state, the conflict between the ethnic Macedonian and Albanian communities in the Republic of Macedonia continues, as the political leaders of the Albanian minority demand that Albanians be conferred the status of a constituent nation, on a par with the Macedonian nation, and that the Albanian language be made an official language of the

Republic of Macedonia, alongside the Macedonian language. From a Macedonian perspective, however, there is a widespread fear that the realisation of such demands from the Albanians, as well as potentially threatening claims from neighbouring states, would spell the end of the Macedonian nation-state.

The Power of Perception: National Identity and the Macedonian Question

A nation, according to Smith, can be defined as 'a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.' (Smith 1991: 14) This implies that each nation's history and experiences are unique and distinguishable from those of other nations. In the case of the Macedonian nation, however, its uniqueness and separateness has been strongly contested by several of Macedonia's neighbours, which in turn impacts on Macedonian domestic attitudes and policies towards its Albanian minority.

National identity is largely shaped by perceptions of self and other. Perceptions, in turn, are crucial in that they influence the information base on which people form beliefs and create 'truths'. They influence 'both what things are seen as facts, and what significance these "facts" carry...'; and '...perceptions vary according to where the observer is located in relation to the thing viewed....' (Buzan 1991: 343) The subjectivity of perceptions, therefore, results in conflicting perceptions in general and, sometimes, conflicting perceptions of national identity and 'truth' in particular. The Macedonian Question is a case in point.

Perceptions play a significant role in the contentious Macedonian Question. As Troebst points out, the modern history of Macedonia from Serbian, Greek, Bulgarian and Macedonian points of view '...suffer[s] from one and the same distortion of perspective: [Macedonians, Serbs, Greek and Albanians] assume one single line of tradition that, however thin it may be, is considered to be decisive and is extended rigorously in both directions along the axis of time. Contemporary ideas are easily projected back into the past, just as historical facts are extrapolated into the present and then on into the future.' (Troebst 2001: 62) Consequently, competing perceptions about the origin, character and 'ownership' of Macedonia become intransigent as neither the Macedonians nor their neighbours consider the notion that '...nations exist in time ... are shaped by temporal processes and thus have temporal components.' (White 2000: 15) A reason for this is the importance of the territorial component of nations. That is, nations exist not only in time but also in space, as a '[s]ense of territory and emotional attachment to place are integral components of national identity.' (White 2000: 13) Nations, White notes, '...express their identities in the cultural landscape of places and territories.' (White 2000: 21) The emotional link between place and national identity is a crucial factor in the Balkan region, as one and the same place is often claimed by several nations, so that, for example, Kosovo is perceived as essential to both Serbian and Albanian expressions of national identity; the historical town of Ohrid in the Republic of Macedonia is claimed by the Bulgarians as an integral part of the Bulgarian national history, just as it is regarded by Macedonians as the cradle of their national culture; Salonika (now Thessaloniki in Greece) is regarded as an integral part of greater Macedonia, and so on. As White suggests, in the Balkans '...many nations feel that their identities have been violated because their territories have been continually transgressed by other nations.' (White 2000: 6) Hence, the problem of competing and conflicting perceptions of national identity and historical places in the Balkans is



compounded by, on the one hand, the notion that national identities are fixed in time and space and, on the other hand, the historical reality that a given piece of land in the Balkans has been ruled, in different time periods, by different states and empires.

The focal point of the Macedonian Question is the issue of the origins of the Slavic people inhabiting geographical Macedonia and, consequently, the issue of who has the right to the Macedonian lands as well as the ownership and significance of the name 'Macedonia'. In Roudometof's words, '...the central contemporary controversy concerns the manner in which Bulgarians, Greeks, and Macedonians view and interpret Macedonian identity. In particular the conflict centres on the premise that the Slavs of Macedonia constitute a distinct nation, the Macedonian nation.' (Roudometof 2000: 7)

Geographically, Macedonia is divided into three parts: Vardar Macedonia which constitutes the present Republic of Macedonia; Pirin Macedonia which is part of today's Bulgaria; and Aegean Macedonia which is the regional name of northern Greece. Historically, Macedonia has belonged to Bulgaria, Serbia, Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire at various times, although the Bulgarian claim to Macedonia is perhaps the most challenging and compelling. In the Byzantine era, 'the name "Macedonia" applied to part of what is now Thrace, and the territory of the present-day Republic of Macedonia was the core of the Byzantine province of Bulgaria.' (Drezov 2001: 55) As the Turks made headway into the Balkans, Macedonia came to be incorporated into the Ottoman Empire but, as Drezov notes, '[u]ntil the late nineteenth century the Turks did not even know that they were in occupation of a place called "Macedonia".' (Drezov 2001: 55)

The Macedonian Question was born in 1870 when Russia, on behalf of the Bulgarian nation, pressed the Ottoman Empire into allowing the creation of a Bulgarian Orthodox Church, or Exarchate, separate from the Greek Orthodox Church. The authority of this newly established Exarchate was to include parts of Macedonia, then an Ottoman province (Barker 1950: 7). Greece and Serbia felt their national interests threatened by this development and began to compete with the Bulgarians in extending their influence over Macedonia. As a result of the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913, geographical Macedonia was divided, with Greece and Serbia taking the majority of the territory and Bulgaria being left with a minor part. Bulgaria had been against the division and, consequently, was compelled to ally itself with Germany in both world wars with the intention of regaining Macedonia.

It was not until the second half of the 1940s, when the Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito established the Socialist Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia - thereby elevating the Macedonian people to the status of nation - that it seemed as if the Macedonian Question had been resolved. Under the leadership of Tito, and with the blessing of Joseph Stalin, the Yugoslav political elite aimed at solving the national problems 'under the slogan of "Brotherhood and Unity", and the Macedonians were recognised for the first time as a separate nation.' (Poulton 2000: 125) Thus, Macedonia became the sixth constituent republic of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. According to Bell, it was with the founding of the Yugoslav Macedonian republic that a sense of a Macedonian national identity gained strength and became systematised. Under Yugoslav rule, and mainly directed from Belgrade, a Macedonian language was codified, an autocephalous Macedonian Orthodox Church was established, and academics 'developed a "usable past" and projected Macedonian national feeling far into history, for

example by converting the medieval Bulgarian Empire of Tsar Samuil into a Macedonian one and even claiming a link to Alexander the Great.' (Bell 1998: 193) As Perry points out, Tito's decision to promote a Macedonian national consciousness served several strategic purposes:

[the establishment of a Macedonian republic based on a Macedonian nation] undermined Bulgarian territorial claims to Macedonia and scotched the notion that Macedonians were Bulgarians. The recognition of a Macedonian nationality also made it difficult for Serbians to maintain that Macedonians were part of the Serbian nation. The founding of a Macedonian republic thus reduced the size of any potential Greater Serbia. Because it included a fair-sized Albanian minority, Yugoslav Macedonia also was a guarantee against a Greater Albania. (Perry 2000: 271)

Similarly strategic was Tito's naming of the Muslims in Bosnia as a separate nation, thereby offsetting competing Serbian and Croatian claims on Bosnia-Herzegovina, and for the duration of Tito's rule it seemed his strategic moves had brought peace and stability to the Balkans. Ironically, Tito's manoeuvres in Macedonia and Bosnia, including the 'establishment' of two new nations, were in part an effort to curb nationalism in the Yugoslav republics.

In Yugoslavia, the Macedonian nation acquired legitimacy in the face of Bulgarian and Greek claims. Therefore, when Yugoslavia began to crumble, the Macedonian leadership was initially in favour of remaining in the federation for security reasons, but as it became clear that a truncated Yugoslavia would be dominated by the Serbs, Macedonian political leaders concluded that in order to protect the Macedonian nation they had to declare an independent Macedonian state. As Macedonia gained independence, however, the security of the Macedonian nation was again at stake as the Macedonian Question re-emerged in 1991, illustrated by the actions and official attitudes of Bulgaria and Greece. While recognising the Macedonian state, Bulgaria refused to acknowledge the separateness of the Macedonian language from Bulgarian. Implicit in Sofia's position on the language issue was the denial of the existence of a Macedonian nation.

The Greek reaction to the Macedonian declaration of independence was characterised by vehement opposition to the application of the name 'Macedonia' to anything that was not Greek. Furthermore, according to Greek interpretations, the newly created constitution of the Republic of Macedonia made references not only to the lands of the Republic but also to territories within the Greek state. Finally, the issue of the flag of the Republic of Macedonia prompted anger in Athens, as the Macedonian flag carried the ancient Macedonian emblem, the Star of Vergina, which the Greeks regard as an integral part of the Greek cultural heritage.

Thus, issues concerning the Macedonian Question, some of which communism had temporarily suspended, regained momentum in the early 1990s. Without the protection of the Yugoslav federation, Macedonia found its security weakened and as a response to Bulgarian and Greek attitudes a more assertive and uncompromising strand of Macedonian nationalism emerged, which would have a significant influence on Macedonian-Albanian relations in the new state. As Poulton suggests, the aggressive assertion of Macedonian nationalism was a



means to hide the potential weakness of the Macedonian nation and state (Poulton 2000: 172).

Macedonia and its Neighbours: Conflicting Perceptions of National Identity

As an independent state, the Republic of Macedonia found itself in various disputes with its neighbours during the 1990s, many of which were rooted in Macedonian, Greek, Bulgarian and to a lesser extent, Serbian sensitivities concerning national identity. For what has been at the core of these conflicts is the question of the origins of the Macedonian nation (Kofos 2001: 255).

Bulgaria

Although the Macedonian identity has been questioned by several nations and states in the Balkans, the Bulgarian perceptions of, and attitude towards, the Macedonian nation and territory is perhaps the most important and the Bulgarian case the most challenging one. Since Macedonia became an independent republic in 1991, Bulgaria has assumed the role of 'big brother', taking an overt interest in the political development in Macedonia, whilst assuring that Bulgaria makes no territorial claims on the Republic of Macedonia. From a Macedonian perspective, however, Bulgaria's self-declared big brother status has more often than not been regarded with suspicion. Despite the fact that Bulgaria's policy towards Macedonia today reflects a wish for neighbourly cooperation rather than aggressive nationalism, Macedonia is still considered by Bulgarians as an essential part of their national history and, therefore, what from a Bulgarian perspective is considered the protection of the Bulgarian national identity, is perceived by the Macedonians as a threat to their own national identity.

Bulgaria was the first country to extend formal diplomatic recognition to the Macedonian republic in 1992, but while recognising the state, it was clear that the Bulgarians did not accept the Macedonians as constituting a nation distinct from the Bulgarian. While the issue of the nation was not explicitly mentioned in the Bulgarian declaration of recognition - as in international law, it is the state, not the nation, that is officially recognised - it was nonetheless raised, indirectly, through the issue of language. The Macedonian language shares most of the characteristics that distinguishes Bulgarian from other Slav languages, hence prompting the Bulgarian view that Macedonian is nothing else than a Bulgarian dialect (Poulton 2000: 116). This became a source of contention between Bulgaria and Macedonia in the 1990s, as the former refused to employ interpreters or translators in official communications with the latter. While the question of the nation was a theoretical one, the issue of language was very much a practical one, including such essential questions as how to draft the necessary documents that would define the relationship between the Bulgarian and Macedonian republics. In 1992 the Bulgarian President Zhelyu Zhelev explicitly stated that Bulgaria recognised the Macedonian state but not the nation (*The Independent* 1992: 11). Zhelev's remark was made in response to the Prime Minister of Greece, Constantine Mitsotakis, who reacted strongly to Bulgaria's decision to recognise the Macedonian state. To placate the Greeks, Zhelev reassured them that from a Bulgarian point of view, 'Macedonia' was only a geographical term and not the name of a nation (*The Independent* 1992: 11). Zhelev's remarks raised the issue of nation to a critical level between Bulgaria and Macedonia. In February 1999, however, the political leaders of both states signed a joint declaration that was aimed at resolving the language dispute between Bulgaria and Macedonia. Accordingly, both parties agreed to solve the practical problem of language by employing the formula, 'Bulgarian language according to the

Bulgarian constitution and Macedonian language according to the Macedonian constitution'. (Williams 2000: 29) In this way, official documents between the two states could be drafted in both Bulgarian and Macedonian without Bulgaria having to recognise the existence of a separate Macedonian language and, implicitly, nation. The issue of language was thus treated in legal terms and not as an ethno-national category.

According to Drezov, 'Bulgarians either deny the contemporary reality of a Macedonian nation and language, or – when they do acknowledge it – ascribe it entirely to Serbian, Comintern and Titoist propaganda.' (Drezov 2001: 51) Hence, the Bulgarians, as well as Macedonia's other neighbours and the Macedonians themselves, fail to consider the changing nature of national identity and language, a process illustrated by the observation that from the 1920s onwards the Bulgarian identity in Vardar and Aegean Macedonia went into decline (Drezov 2001: 51).

The Bulgarian perception of the Macedonian lands and people is further illustrated by the fact that Bulgaria still celebrates the 3rd of March as its national day. It was on this day in 1878, following the Russian liberation of the Bulgarian nation from Ottoman rule, that the San Stefano treaty was signed. Under this treaty most of geographical Macedonia was incorporated into the new Bulgarian state. But only a few months later the San Stefano treaty was annulled by the Great Powers at the Congress of Berlin and replaced by a second treaty, which severely truncated the territory of the Bulgarian state by handing back the Macedonian territory to the Ottoman Empire. The reason for this revision was British and Austro-Hungarian fears that a large Bulgarian state would inflate Russian influence in the Balkans. From a Bulgarian point of view, the replacement of the San Stefano treaty with the treaty of Berlin, and the consequent loss of Macedonia, violated the rights of the Bulgarian nation, as Bulgarians from Macedonia were unjustly left out of the new Bulgarian state. As Roudometof notes, '[e]ver since [the treaties of 1878], both the Bulgarian state and its intelligentsia have repeatedly asserted their claims to Macedonian territory, claims that are viewed as part of Bulgaria's process of national unification.' (Roudometof 2000: 6)

In regards to Bulgarian and Macedonian history, 'the Macedonian historical figures are also claimed by Bulgaria as Bulgarian heroes...' (Poulton 2000: 117), prompting many Bulgarians to insist that Bulgaria and Macedonia have a shared history that cannot be separated from each other. History, of course, plays a crucial role in nation-building, and one of the defining characteristics of a nation is that it perceives itself to have a unique history, separate from that of other nations. Hence, by asserting the shared history of the Bulgarians and Macedonians, the former effectively lays claim on the latter as being part of them. From a Macedonian point of view, in turn, there is an acutely felt need to assert the separateness and uniqueness of the Macedonian national identity by constructing a history and a language that cannot be identified with those of either the Bulgarians, nor the Serbs, nor Greeks.

Territory also plays an important part in Bulgarian assertions vis-à-vis the Macedonians, for not only do the two nations make claims to the same national heroes, but these historical figures, in turn, are directly associated with a particular place. The old town of Ohrid is a case in point. Located in today's Republic of Macedonia, Ohrid is claimed by both Macedonians and Bulgarians as the cradle of their national cultures and as capital of the medieval states of King



Samuel. And when a monastery church in the Macedonian town of Lesok was destroyed in an attack by ethnic Albanian guerrillas in the summer of 2001, Bulgarian media lamented the destruction of this 'Bulgarian' church. Although Bulgaria today makes no official claims on the Macedonian territory, it nonetheless continues to exert at least cultural pressure on the Macedonians. The Macedonian perspective of the Bulgarians remains grounded in the fear and suspicion that the latter's friendly attitude conceals more aggressive, nationalist sentiments that could be potentially threatening to the integrity of the Macedonian nation and territory. Such a fear is further exacerbated by the Bulgarian denial of the existence of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria's Pirin region.

Greece

More direct and explicit in its attitude towards the Republic of Macedonia, Greece has exerted even stronger pressure on Macedonia than Bulgaria has. Official Greek policy since the end of the Greek Civil War has denied the existence of a Macedonian nation. But the Greek position differs from the Bulgarian in so far as it does not necessarily negate the existence of a distinct Slavic people in the Republic of Macedonia, but only the application of the name 'Macedonian' to this people. From a Greek perspective, the name Macedonia is, and has always been, considered 'a constituent element of Greek cultural heritage.' (Kofos 2001: 232) The Bulgarian position however, as noted earlier, was and remains that the Slavic people of the Republic of Macedonia do not constitute a people separate from the Bulgarians. Bulgarians, furthermore, do not object to the use of the name 'Macedonia' as they regard it as pertaining to a historical region, not a people (Kofos 2001: 232).

Hence, nationalists in Greece and Bulgaria both claim that the Macedonian nation is nothing more than an 'ideological construct' of the Cold War and of Tito's 'efforts to expand his reach into the southern Balkans. Indeed, Greeks and Bulgarians have suggested that ethnic heterogeneity and state-sponsored ethnogenesis cast doubt even on the Macedonians' claim to be a distinct nation or ethnic group.' (Roudometof 2000: 7) Athens' and Sofia's questioning of the existence of a uniquely Macedonian identity thus poses, if implicitly, a threat to the legitimacy of the Republic of Macedonia as the latter is founded on the principle of ethnic nationalism, that is, a Macedonian state for the ethnic Macedonian community.

In 1991 the newly independent Republic of Macedonia chose the Star of Vergina - a sun with sixteen rays and a symbol from the era of the ancient Macedonian kingdom - as the emblem on the Macedonian state flag. This prompted vehement protests from the Greeks who regard this symbol as distinctly Greek since, as they maintain, the ancient Macedonians were in fact nothing else but Greeks (Shea 1997: 190). The appropriation of the Star of Vergina, coupled with references in the new Macedonian constitution and preamble to Aegean Macedonia, suggested to the Greeks that the new republic laid claims on Greek Macedonia as well.

In response to perceived Macedonian aggression, Greece declared an embargo on Macedonia in 1994, an action much criticized by most of the EC/EU countries as well as by the United Nations. As a result of diplomatic intervention by the Clinton administration and Cyrus Vance an Interim Accord between Greece and Macedonia was concluded in 1995, according to which the two parties agreed to respect each other's territorial integrity and Greece recognised Macedonia as an

independent state, although the conflict over the name 'Macedonia' had yet to be resolved. One of Greece's conditions for the agreement was that in seeking admittance to international organizations, Macedonia would use the name 'Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia'. Moreover, Macedonia assured that its constitution made no references to peoples or territories within the Greek state and agreed to remove the Star of Vergina from its state flag (Shea 1997: 305).

To this day the Greek-Macedonian dispute over the use of the name 'Macedonia' has yet to be resolved although the Greeks have hinted that, contrary to earlier positions, they are ready to accept a compound name that includes 'Macedonia', such as, for example, 'New Macedonia', 'Upper Macedonia' or possibly even 'Vardar Macedonia'. But the basic conviction amongst Greeks, that Macedonia was and is Greek, remains and as Pettifer notes, '...the existence of Macedonia as a part of Greece has a fundamental place in the Greek political psyche.' (Pettifer 2001: 18)

Serbia

Whilst the Yugoslav army withdrew peacefully and voluntarily from Macedonia in 1992, it was not until 1996 that Yugoslavia recognised Macedonia - under the name of the 'Republic of Macedonia' - and this only after the Interim Accord between Macedonia and Greece had been signed. Serbia's decision to finally recognise Macedonia was largely influenced by the willingness of Greece, Serbia's ally, to establish diplomatic and trade relations with Macedonia (Williams 2000: 27). In the first quarter of 2001 the borders between Yugoslavia (Serbia) and Macedonia were finally demarcated, which put an end to the border dispute between the two countries that had been ongoing since Macedonia left the Yugoslav federation. But because the border demarcation also applied to the Kosovo/Macedonia border, the agreement signed between Belgrade and Skopje was met with protests from the ethnic Albanian political leaders in Kosovo, who claimed that Serbia/Yugoslavia no longer had jurisdiction over Kosovo and therefore had no right to enter into an agreement with Macedonia in regards to the Kosovo/Macedonian border.

The delay in Yugoslavia's recognition of Macedonia was in part due to the fact that some radical members of the Serbian elite opposed Yugoslavia's recognition of Macedonia on the grounds that there was no such thing as a Macedonian nation, and that Vardar Macedonia, therefore, constituted nothing else but 'Southern Serbia.' (Williams 2000: 27) In the interwar years this part of Macedonia was ruled by Serbia and at the time was considered not as a separate entity, but as part of Serbia. Although Serbia today officially acknowledges both the Macedonian state and the nation, the mainstream view amongst Serbian academics is, according to Drezov, 'that throughout the ages the Macedonian Slavs were devoid of any particular ethnic characteristics, and always represented a part of "une masse flottant" that stretched between "true" Serbs and "true" Bulgarians...' (Drezov 2001: 53) Hence, the Serbian view of the Macedonians resembles their view on the Muslim Bosnians, another nation made official by Tito's policy. The Muslims, the Serbs claim, are in reality Serbs who converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule.

Albania

Whilst recognising the Macedonian state, Albania maintains that such a state does not belong particularly to the ethnic Macedonian people (Isakovic 2000: 220). Nonetheless, Albania initially welcomed the creation of the Republic of Macedonia,



which it saw as a counterweight to Serbia (Pettifer 2001: 21). The Albanian state per se has not been regarded as a serious threat to the integrity of the young Macedonian republic, as the former has been mainly preoccupied with its own troubles since the end of communist rule. Nonetheless, statements made by the former Albanian president Sali Berisha in regards to the Albanian minority in Macedonia did lead to more strained relations between the two countries in the 1990s. During his tenure, Berisha 'frequently and publicly raised the question of the rights of ethnic Albanians, which prompted protests from the Macedonian government that Albania was interfering in Macedonia's internal affairs.' (Williams 2000: 28) He also declared his support for the Albanian language university in the Macedonian town of Tetovo. The university was set up by the ethnic Albanian community but declared illegal by the Macedonian government, which maintained that higher education must be conducted in the Macedonian language. Albania-Macedonia relations were further injured as Berisha lent his support to the radical wing of the Macedonia-based ethnic Albanian Party for Democratic Prosperity when the party split in 1994 (Williams 2000: 28).

Berisha's personal interference aside, the status of the Albanian minority in Macedonia was until recently less of a concern to Tirana than the treatment of Albanians in Kosovo. At the same time, Albanian nationalism grew in strength during the 1990s, particularly in the Albanian dominated parts of Macedonia and Kosovo, which may to a considerable degree be a reaction to the former Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milosevic's policies towards Kosovo. NATO's intervention in Kosovo effectively prevented Serbian efforts to ethnically cleanse the province of its Albanian population, while inadvertently furthering Albanian (nationalist) interests. The strongest wave of Albanian nationalism thus comes from Kosovo and was initially abetted by Western dislike of Milosevic. But when Milosevic was removed from power in the autumn of 2000, the West's support for Kosovo Albanian demands for an independent, and effectively Albanian, Kosovo, diminished as a more democracy-oriented government took office in Belgrade. Today, however, the ethnic Albanian threat from Kosovo has again come to the fore as Macedonia finds itself embroiled in what increasingly looks like a civil war between the Macedonian political leadership and ethnic Albanian guerrillas, which are not only armed and supported by Kosovo's National Liberation Army, but also intimately tied to the Kosovo question.

In conclusion, the relationship between the Republic of Macedonia and its neighbours can be summarised as follows: Bulgaria is the main identity threat to the extent that identity is anchored in language; Serbs are the main identity threat to the extent that identity is anchored in religion; Albanians [are] the main identity threat to the extent that identity is anchored in statehood; and Greeks [are the main identity threat] to the extent that identity is anchored in the name of the nation, its language and state (Isakovic 2000: 220).

Although today Macedonia's neighbours have declared that they make no claim on the territory of the Republic of Macedonia, in all four of them there are nationalist political parties who do make such claims or 'who want a revision of the position of their compatriot minorities that would have a profoundly destabilising effect on the new Macedonia.' (Pettifer 2001: 17) Hence, the fear in Macedonia of a potential threat - particularly from Bulgaria and Greece - against its national and territorial integrity is still felt. While Greek policy towards Macedonia in the 1990s had a direct and overt impact on Macedonian nationalism, and therefore also affected the Macedonian position towards its Albanian minority, the Bulgarian perspective on the Macedonians can be said to

have had a more indirect and predominantly emotional impact on the Macedonian national psyche, particularly as it related to the issue of national identity. Thus, as Bell suggests, Macedonian nationalism was mobilised in the early 1990s 'as a response to the Greek contention that the inhabitants of the new Macedonian Republic should not be allowed to call themselves "Macedonians" and to the Bulgarian denial of a separate Macedonian identity.' (Bell 1998: 193) In turn, this more assertive brand of Macedonian nationalism - strongly promoted by the Macedonian diaspora in Australia, Canada and the United States - has a negative impact on the ongoing tension between the Macedonian and Albanian communities as it makes the former less receptive to the latter's grievances.

The Macedonian Question and the Establishment of the Republic of Macedonia

Macedonian national consciousness developed relatively late compared to other national movements in the Balkans, although this is disputed by Macedonian nationalists. The further mobilisation of a Macedonian national identity was to an extent a product of Serbian interference in Macedonia, Bulgarian perceptions about the ethnic origins of the Macedonians and, later on, of Tito's strategy to formalise a Macedonian nation in order to balance the ethnic power symmetry in Yugoslavia and to undermine Bulgarian claims. The strength of Macedonian nationalism has therefore in part been contingent on the extent to which Macedonians have perceived their identity as being challenged by Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbs and sometimes Albanians.

When the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was threatened with collapse in the early 1990s, Macedonia, like Bosnia-Herzegovina, was at first unwilling to go its separate way, acknowledging that from a security perspective it was better off as a republic in the Yugoslav federation where the Macedonian nation would be protected from any potential Bulgarian, Serbian, Greek and Albanian aggression. But as Croatia and Slovenia broke away from the federation, independence emerged as the only feasible option in order to prevent Macedonia from becoming wholly dominated by Serbia, the largest and most powerful remaining Yugoslav republic. Hence, as a newly independent state, Macedonia found itself in a situation where the potential threat from the 'Four Wolves' (Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia and Albania) compelled the Macedonians to mobilise their national consciousness in order to protect their identity and territory from outside claims.

Re-born in 1991, the Macedonian Question had a significant impact on the development of the new Macedonian state in so far as the attitudes of the neighbouring nations - Bulgaria and Greece in particular - promoted a more assertive Macedonian national consciousness, which in turn is reflected in the 1991 Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia. The preamble of the Constitution (1991) explicitly declares the right of the Macedonian people to a state: 'Taking as the points of departure the historical, cultural, spiritual and statehood heritage of the Macedonian people and their struggle over centuries for national and social freedom as well as the creation of their own state...' Macedonia is established as '...a national state of the Macedonian people, in which full equality as citizens and permanent co-existence with the Macedonian people is provided for Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Romanics and other nationalities living in the Republic of Macedonia...' However, equality as citizens is not the same as equality of ethnic communities, and the preamble strongly implies that the ethnic Macedonians are the primary owners of the state. The preamble thus asserts the culturally dominant status of the ethnic Macedonian population and clearly indicates that



the character of the Macedonian state is premised on the principle of ethnic nationalism, on the right to self-determination of the Macedonian nation.

From a Macedonian perspective - in turn influenced by the history of geographical Macedonia as well as by Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian attitudes towards the Macedonian people - the revival of the Macedonian Question posed a problem for the new Macedonian state: in order to justify the legal character of the Republic of Macedonia as a national state of the Macedonian people, the legitimacy of the Macedonian nation had to be consolidated, which effectively meant the assertion of a Macedonian identity vis-à-vis its neighbours. The justification of Vardar Macedonia as a Macedonian nation-state was further compromised by the fact that the ethnic Macedonian population constitutes a relatively small majority, approximating at the most two thirds of the total population. Albanians, the second largest ethnic group in Macedonia, make up a significantly large minority and given its size, the Albanian population objected to their classification as a minority in the new Macedonian state. Their protest was bolstered by the fact that in socialist Yugoslavia the Albanians had not been regarded as a minority but as a nationality, which had its autonomous region, Kosovo.

Macedonian National Identity and the Macedonian-Albanian Conflict since 1991

As Macedonia gained independence, the symbolic link between the Macedonian people and the Macedonian state needed to be protected, not just from outside threats but also from within the Macedonian republic, where the Albanian minority posed the greatest challenge to the consolidation of a Macedonian nation-state. Whereas the Macedonians insisted that the Republic of Macedonia must remain a national state of the Macedonian people, where other ethnic groups enjoy equal citizen rights, the Albanians demanded the creation of a bi-national state, in which the Albanian minority would be recognised as a constituent nation, alongside the Macedonian nation. The Albanian claim was based on the observation that the Albanian minority constitutes at least 25 percent (and according to Albanian estimates perhaps as much as 35-40 percent) of the total population of the Republic of Macedonia, and that in some Macedonian towns the Albanians outnumber the Macedonians. Tetovo, for example, which is the second largest city in Macedonia, has a local government led by Albanians. As Poulton notes, ethnic Macedonians fear that 'with the presence of large ethnic Albanian regions in the north-west bordering Albania and Kosovo, Vardar Macedonia might be truncated with the ensuing rump falling prey to predatory neighbours who view the very concept of a Macedonian nation as historically false.' (Poulton 2000: 176) From a Macedonian perspective, therefore, the territorial integrity of the Republic of Macedonia is directly linked with the preservation and consolidation of a Macedonian national identity.

As previously noted, the Macedonians saw their national identity contested from several directions at the beginning of the 1990s, most notably from Greece and Bulgaria, and from inside the new state the Albanian opposition to Macedonian political and cultural dominance added to Macedonian perceptions of national insecurity. In 1991, the Albanian community in Macedonia boycotted the referendum on independence and instead staged its own referendum in which an overwhelming majority of the Albanians voted in favour of territorial autonomy from the Macedonians. Eventually a more moderate Albanian leadership asserted that the Albanian population nonetheless remained committed to the unity of the Macedonian state, whilst demanding measures to grant them non-territorial autonomy in the political sphere (Ackermann 2000: 61-62). When the current

crisis in Macedonia emerged in the spring of 2001, however, Albanian demands vis-à-vis the Macedonians again hardened, as did the Macedonian position towards the Albanians.

The Albanians in Macedonia do not object to the name 'Republic of Macedonia', which they regard 'as being territorial without any specific Slav connotations...' (Poulton 2000: 187) Neither do they oppose Macedonian nationalist references to antiquity (Poulton 2000: 187), although it is not uncommon to hear Albanians claiming, if only to provoke their Slav neighbours, that Macedonians are nothing else but Bulgarians by origin. Rather, the conflict between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians since 1991 has focused on the issue of the legal and political status of the Albanian population in Macedonia and, ultimately, on the political and cultural character of the Macedonian state. Contentious issues have been those of language and education as the Albanian community calls for the recognition of the Albanian language as a second official language and demands that the illegal Albanian language university in Tetovo be granted the status of a state university. From a Macedonian perspective, however, giving in to Albanian demands regarding language and education would lead to a de facto division of the country and perhaps also to attempts by the Albanians to secede, tearing away the region around Tetovo, Gostivar and Debar from the Macedonian state. What is at stake from a Macedonian point of view, therefore, is the territorial, and by extension national, integrity of the Macedonian state. Territory, White maintains, contains the 'cultural landscapes of group identity' and therefore 'the expression of territoriality is...the expression of a group's need to protect its language, its religion, its essential identity.' (White 2000: 5) This is very much the case in Macedonia where the sovereignty of the Macedonian territory is regarded as key to protecting and asserting a distinctly Macedonian national identity vis-à-vis Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian claims. Any perceived threat to the territorial integrity of the Republic of Macedonia thus constitutes a threat to the legitimacy, and possibly even mere existence, of a Macedonian nation.

In contrast with both Macedonian and Albanian interests, representatives of the West, led by the United States and the European Union, wish to mould Macedonia into a multi-cultural state where no ethnic group dominates the other, and where a civic approach to nation- and statehood predominates amongst all communities. From an ethnic Macedonian perspective, however, such a scenario would undermine the security of the Macedonian nation, and could potentially open the way for Bulgaria, and perhaps even Serbia, to officially claim the Macedonians as Bulgarians/Serbians, thus making demands on the Macedonian lands as well. The West's wish to transform Macedonia into a Balkan version of Switzerland, Belgium or Canada thus seems an improbable project since, firstly, contrary to these three Western countries, Macedonia is named after its majority ethno-national group which implies that ethnic Macedonians will always constitute the culturally, if not politically, dominating group of the population; and secondly, while the Albanians in Macedonia might afford to see the Macedonian state turned into a civic state like Switzerland, the ethnic Macedonians cannot, for the same reason as mentioned earlier: the need to ensure the protection and survival of a contested national identity. Given that the Macedonian claim to national self-determination is based on the perception that the Macedonian nation is historically authentic, and the fact that this perception is contested by several other neighbouring nations and/or states, the need for the Macedonians to defend the basic premise of the current Macedonian state is particularly crucial. From a Macedonian point of view, it is their right, as a nation, to establish a state, just as the Bulgarian,



Serbian, Slovene, Croatian and Albanian nations have their states. Hence, they do not consider themselves under obligation to give in to the demands of the Albanian minority.

As several of its neighbours contest the authenticity of the Macedonian nation, the identity of both the Macedonian nation and state becomes highly problematic. Firstly, as was suggested earlier, Macedonian nationalism necessarily grows stronger in the face of the attitudes of Bulgarians, Greeks and Serbs in regards to the Macedonian nation. This is seen as crucial in order to justify the continued existence of the Macedonian nation-state. For if there is no Macedonian nation, how can there be a Macedonian nation-state? Secondly, if the Macedonian state were to give in to Albanian demands that the Albanian minority be elevated to the status of constituent nation, or other demands that imply increased Albanian power over Macedonian state affairs, the justification for a Macedonian nation-state runs the risk of being undermined. This again would pose a threat to the Macedonian national identity. What is at stake, therefore, is '...the very "distinctiveness" of the Macedonians as a separate people, and this in turn is closely associated with their claim to form the Macedonian nation – for how would it be possible for a people without a "culture" or "ethnicity" of their own to lay claim to a separate political (i.e., national) identity?' (Roudometof 2000: 12)

According to Ackermann, the development of a Macedonian national identity conflicts with the need of the Albanian minority to preserve its cultural identity. 'The more Slavic Macedonians assert their cultural identity, the more ethnic Albanians feel the need to assert theirs, leading to a vicious circle.' (Ackermann 2000: 66) But the reverse is also the case, that is, the needs and wishes of the ethnic Albanians to assert their cultural and national identity clashes with the ethnic Macedonian effort to develop and consolidate their national identity. An example of this is the issue of language rights in Macedonia. According to the Macedonian constitution, the Macedonian language is the sole official language of the Republic although provisions for the use of Albanian are also made in municipal government, the judiciary, education and culture in communities where the Albanians form a majority of the population (International Crisis Group 2001: 6). The ethnic Macedonian position, however, is that the Republic of Macedonia can only have one official language, Macedonian, given that it is a Macedonian nation-state. Albanians in Macedonia are not recognised as a nation, and therefore, the Macedonians argue, do not have the right to demand that Albanian be declared a second official language of the Macedonian state. As a recent report from International Crisis Group states, '[e]thnic Macedonians see the republic-wide use of Albanian as a threat to their national identity and believe it is unreasonable for Albanian to be in effect acknowledged as the second official language when its native speakers comprise only one-quarter to one-third of the population.' (International Crisis Group 2001: 6) From an ethnic Albanian point of view, however, the fact that the Albanian population in Macedonia constitutes such a significant portion of the entire population is grounds for demanding that the constitution be changed so as to make the Albanians a constituent nation, alongside the Macedonian, thereby recognising Albanian as an official language. Were those changes to be made, however, the Republic of Macedonia would no longer be what the ethnic Macedonians envision: a national state of the (ethnic) Macedonian people. And without a state of its own, the Macedonian nation would become an easy target for those Balkan neighbours who regard this small nation as a historical falsification.

While criticising the ethnic Macedonians for refusing to grant further rights to the Albanian minority, the West fails to comprehend that what is at stake in the present conflict between Macedonians and Albanians is not just minority rights for the latter but, equally important, the legitimacy and recognition of a Macedonian national identity. It is the latter issue, which itself is influenced by Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian perspectives on the Macedonians as well as the Macedonians' perceptions of those perspectives, that shapes the current conflict between the two largest ethnic communities in the Macedonian republic. The failure to resolve the disputes between the Macedonians and Albanians can thus be explained partly by the failure to recognise how the Macedonian Question continues to exert influence on the Macedonian national psychology.

As Schöpflin suggests, identity '...offers individuals the security of community and solidarity, of shared patterns of meanings, a bounded world in which to live and in which one can find others like oneself.' (Schöpflin 2000: 10) As a category of identity, therefore, nationality is important as a means of security, and the Macedonian national identity becomes a security mechanism vis-à-vis the Bulgarians, Serbs, Greeks and Albanians, all of whom have laid claim on the Macedonian lands, its people or the name 'Macedonia'.

Conclusion

Suggesting a link between the Macedonian Question – the issue of the origins and authenticity of the Macedonian nation – and the conflict between the ethnic Macedonian majority and Albanian minority in the Republic of Macedonia, this article put forth the argument that the former influences the latter in so far as Bulgarian, Greek, and to a lesser extent, Serbian and Albanian, perceptions of the Macedonian nation exert emotional, cultural and political influence on Macedonian attitudes and actions towards the Albanians. Whilst recent US/EU-led negotiations aimed at forging a peace deal between the Macedonian and Albanian communities have focused on the issues of minority representation and language rights, Western mediators have failed to comprehend that the underlying reason for the Macedonians' unwillingness to grant the Albanians the status of constituent nation and declaring Albanian a second state language, is directly connected with the Macedonians' perceived need to assert their national identity vis-à-vis neighbouring nations. Were Albanian demands to be met, the Macedonians fear, the territorial integrity of the Macedonian state might come under severe threat, which in turn could have disastrous consequences for the Macedonian nation. The West's formula for peace, which envisions the consolidation of a civic-minded, multi-ethnic Macedonian state where no ethnic group dominates the other, thus goes against the most fundamental principle of the ethnic Macedonians who regard it as not only their right to retain a Macedonian nation state - albeit with equal rights for Macedonian citizens of non-Macedonian origin - but also a necessity in order to ensure the survival of the Macedonian nation in the face of continued Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian scepticism towards the Macedonian nation.

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