

“Separatist Fires” in Macedonia and the Virtues of Corruption. Kosovo Provides the Toxic Model of Rebellion

Violence in Kumanovo

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Global Research, May 11, 2015

Region: [Europe](#)

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This will be something for the books of violent dispute. A series of gun battles over the weekend lasting over 16 hours have left eight police officers and fourteen gunmen dead in the town of Kumanovo in Macedonia. The slain police were members of the anti-terrorist Tigers unit. The Macedonian police authorities have since released a video of the captured gunmen, with a few sporting UCK insignia.[1]

Where, then, with the various punters in this latest lethal spat? Officially, the European Union is urging calm between participants. Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO Secretary-General, has also expressed “great concern” while urging all sides to “exercise restraint and avoid any further escalation, in the interest of the country and the whole region.”

But only a few members of the EU refuse to acknowledge the legal status of a state that was given birth in similar circumstances, one waged with a narrative of bullets and ethnic politics. Neighbouring, Albanian-majority Kosovo, long deemed part of Serbia, provides the toxic model of rebellion in the broader context of Balkans politics. The recognition of Kosovo, broadly speaking, is Europe’s green light for secession.

For that reason, various organisations and states are keeping watch on the latest affair: will the argument by the Albanian separatists for a province along Kosovo lines be cleaved off the Macedonian state? In 2001, sparks flew between the security forces and Albanian insurgents, ending with the hastily cobbled Ohrid peace accord. “This Framework,” it reads, “will promote the peaceful and harmonious development of civil society while respecting the ethnic identity and interest of all Macedonian citizens.”[2]

The air has been heavy with prospects of such a confrontation. On April 21, a police outpost in the village of Goschince, part of the predominantly Albanian municipality of Lipkovo 25 kilometres northeast of Skopje, was attacked by a group of 40 armed gunmen wearing the uniforms of the National Liberation Army (NLA). Hostages were taken, and threats issued.

According to the spokesman describing the attacks, “The leader of the group, speaking in Albanian... told the captured police officers the following: ‘We are from the NLA and tell everyone that nobody can save you, neither [Prime Minister] Nikola Gruevski, nor [head of the junior Albanian DUI party] Ali Ahmeti. We want our own state.’”[3]

The town of Kumanovo itself demonstrates that dreary repetitiveness of factions seeking advantage and reward, flavoured by a hint of conspiracy and not so grand design. There

are the separatists themselves, operating in various guises. There are the corrupt government officials who align themselves with status quo corruption while extolling the virtues of stability. Then there are the indigent civilians who simply wish to continue living in an ethnically mixed city, desperate as it might be. As a resident told the *Balkan Insight*, "We all know each other, we would have seen if there were any terrorists. Everything seemed normal until yesterday."

The formidable Albanian presence in Macedonia has led to its fair share of scuffles and grief. But the very basis of the framework agreement in 2001 was based on two neat, if unfortunate delusions: the existence of a nourished, extant civil society, and the "harmonious" existence of the ethnic setting. Neither has come to pass, one feeding the other noxious, undermining gruel. In such a vacuum, nature has done its best to fill it with considerable nastiness.

Such acts of instability also take place in a country run by a government well versed in wire-tapping and profligate misrule. They, it can be said, provide the pretext and the incitement for those who prefer action to empty salutations to constitutional rule. The accord itself notes how, "A modern democratic state in its natural course of development and maturation must continually ensure that its Constitution fully meets the needs of all of its citizens and comports with the highest international standards, which themselves continue to evolve." There are even suggestions filling the rumour mill that the attacks over the weekend were staged as efforts on the part of the government to retain power. Crisis breeds reactive crisis.

Since 2006, Prime Minister Gruevski has been in charge, leading the VMRO-DPMNE party in a series of coalition governments. Drunk on megalomania and revisionism, Gruevski has drained the public purse for enormous cultural projects, notably around the city of Skopje, emphasising the poorly made point that Macedonia gave birth to western civilisation. This form of "antiquisation" insinuates Disneyland practices into ritualised worship. Heads have invariably swollen in the process.

Since February, opposition leader Zoran Zaev has been busy releasing recordings he claims were provided by the intelligence services concerned about the tilt towards authoritarianism. "After nine years of leading the country, they need to control everything." Thousands have purportedly figured in the targets, including ambassadors, journalists and members of the opposition. In a twist of some perversion, it has been claimed that Gruevski has himself been a victim of such wiretapping, made more fascinating by the fact that the spy chief is his cousin. Such a climate a healthy civil society do not make.

This did not seem to concern Gruevski, who jumped on the opportunity to remind Macedonians about the role played by the police, who had, he hyperbolically suggested "prevented the murders of 8,000 people." Internationalising the conflict, he suggested that the attacks were part of a broader trend, facilitated by "participants in several countries, some in the Middle East, which points out to their big experience in guerrilla fighting." Gruevski is, however, closer in pointing the finger to a Kosovo connection with the 40-strong group.

As with so much in the affairs of the Balkans, there are suggestions of other hands, powers lurking to alter the balance and move the pieces. "There is foreign intelligence in this scheme," argues Foreign Minister Nikola Poposki. "There is no proof of who the foreign power is – but the people in the [wiretapping] affair have admitted that a foreign power is

involved.”[4]

All, it seems, is woe and shambles. The separatist fires will be well sustained with such figures as Gruevski in power. In turn, the incumbent government draws salvaging political profit, even as the state withers before the strain of spending and poverty. With such rulers in charge, insurrection receives its justifying inspiration.

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Notes:

[1] <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-mourns-for-killed-policemen-while--shootout-continues>

[2] <http://www.ucd.ie/ibis/filestore/Ohrid%20Framework%20Agreement.pdf>

[3] <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/armed-men-storm-macedonia-border-police--outpost>

[4] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32612508>

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