MACEDONIA:

A CRISIS
NOBODY WANTS TO NOTICE

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Seven years after Macedonia began its successful recovery from the 2001 crisis which threatened to pin its majority Macedonian and minority Albanian ethnic groups in a bitter inter-ethnic conflict, and just three years after it earned the status of an EU candidate state, Macedonia seems to be in trouble again. After the Parliament elections of the summer of 2006 and the formation of the second post-conflict Government, Macedonia has slithered into a political crisis that threatens not only its Euro-Atlantic integrations, but also its brittle ethnic balance.

The real political disaster came at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008 where, as a result of Greek's veto over the "name dispute", Macedonia came short of an invitation to join NATO. For NATO, this was an opportunity to close a large chunk of the Balkans crisis management chapter by putting Macedonia – together with Albania and Croatia – behind the Alliance security umbrella, thereby containing the remaining pockets of instability in the region. There is an even bigger strategic goal that failed to be accomplished in Bucharest: Macedonia, as the first state with a standing multi-ethnic peace agreement to enter NATO, was supposed to serve as a role model for Kosovo and Bosnia, NATO's two other major problems in the region. This failure greatly undermined the ambition of NATO, and particularly the US, to declare political victory and transfer responsibility for the Balkans to the EU.

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For someone in Brussels, there are good reasons not to notice Macedonia's troubles in the two years leading to the Bucharest Summit. Macedonia has earned the status of candidate for membership in the EU in the year of the Dutch and the French referendums. In this "Annus Horribilis" for European integration, Macedonia's candidate status was to showcase EU enlargement as an effective and necessary device to stabilize the brittle multi-ethnic democracies in the Balkans. Recognizing the current crisis in Macedonia will be equivalent to admitting failure of European integration to deliver on that promise.

The Achilles' heel of the Ohrid Agreement

The functionality of the Ohrid Agreement is to a large extent result of its loose structure. The provisions of the Agreement are particularly agile for inter-ethnic problem-solving because they do not confine the actors to detailed and strictly defined procedures how to implement the items elaborated in the Agreement, including the key issues of decentralization of power, promotion of equitable representation of minorities in the public administration, and the use of languages and ethnic symbols. Even for the mechanisms critical for institutional protection of minority interests, such as the so-called *Badinteur* "double majority" voting principle,[1] the Ohrid Agreement and the subsequent legislation do not provide precise instructions as to the mode and scope of their application. Indeed, the Ohrid Agreement – suitably entitled as *Framework* – could be described as an "open ended" document that provided Macedo-

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[1] According to the Badinteur majority principle, the passage of legislation where identity issues and minority interests are concerned requires a "qualified majority of two-thirds, within which there must be a majority of the votes of Representatives claiming to belong to the communities not in the majority in the population of Macedonia." See Article 5, item 1, of the Framework Agreement.

nia's ethnic groups with flexible set of principles (a framework) to negotiate solutions to their inter-ethnic problems. Negotiated solutions were converted to legislation, new institutions and best practices, which in turn, upgraded the original framework.

"This Framework," the very short introduction of the Agreement states, "will promote the peaceful and harmonious development of civil society while respecting the ethnic identity and the interests of all Macedonian citizens." But from there on, most things depend on the creativity, initiative and willpower of the political elites to determine how the Agreement should be developed and implemented in real life. If multiethnic and multicultural democracy is a "living creature" – a constant work in progress through which inter-group relations and positions are continually discussed and renegotiated, then the Ohrid model assumes the ethnic groups have sufficient political capacity to continually bargain away their problems to keep their common "creature" alive.

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This is the Achilles' heel of the Framework model. Given the contradictions and tensions of multiethnic societies in transition, and the frequent opportunism of Balkan politics, a very limited number of problems get settled in due time and manner, let alone "once and forever." In that vein, the experience of the six post-Ohrid years has indicated that although considerably smaller, more flexible and outwardly less complicated than the Dayton Accords, the Ohrid Agreement may paradoxically be more difficult to implement and sustain in its intended form. While most of the formal requirements stipulated in the accord are fulfilled, the reality

of multiethnic Macedonia is incomplete and progressing in a direction that is far from determined.

The current inter-ethnic crisis in Macedonia emerged after the country's elections in mid-2006, when a new set of nationalist political forces undermined the Ohrid Framework Agreement by exploiting the loose character of the settlement in their disputes. The malfunction of the post-Ohrid concord has occurred on several levels. First, the core provisions of the Agreement been manipulated by the ruling majority, led by the center-right ethnic Macedonian party VMRO-DPMNE, and in response, by the Albanian opposition party DUI, therefore invalidating their legitimacy and effectiveness for the long run. As consequence of this friction, three of the four pillars of the Ohrid agreement have been knocked off balance: (1) the Government has persistently sought ways to circumvent the spirit of the Agreement's cornerstone Badinter double majority principle, which has limited its ability to marginalize the Albanian opposition party DUI; (2) the process of decentralization of power to units of local self-government, which are almost wholly controlled by DUI in Albanian-dominated areas,[2] has been deadlocked in critical areas, such as the appointment of local police chiefs, and often rolled back by the Government in some instances to limit the authority of DUI and the opposition. The Albanian opposition party DUI has used its control in the local administration to resist the Government, most notably by disregarding the Badinter principle in Albanian-dominated communities under its control; (3) amidst these scuffles, key legislation governing the sensitive issue of ethnic symbols has been refuted by the Constitutional court, opening the scope for another schism between central and local authorities with an ethnic pretext. At the same time, the shape of the controversial law on the use of ethnic languages, the last remaining legislative commitment of the Ohrid Agreement, has been hotly disputed between the Government and the opposition DUI.

The Return of Ethnic Nationalism

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[1] DUI currently controls the overwhelming majority of 14 out of 16 mayors in Albanian-dominated municipalities.

With that many core provisions hanging in the balance, it is hard to see how Macedonia's political crisis will be overcome without first confronting substantial pressure for substantial review of the Ohrid Agreement

out first confronting substantial pressure for substantial review of the Ohrid Agreement. For if the Agreement in its present loose and flexible form failed to keep the peace under pressure from political and inter-ethnic quarrels, a step towards a more substantial and rigid agreement, similar to the now hardly functional Dayton model, might be called for from some quarters. Even the ominous issue of federalization has been mentioned as a remedy. If previous experience is any measure, such massive reconfigurations of the ethnic balance usually do not transpire without substantial and violent escalations in this part of the world.

Secondly, not only the provisions of the Ohrid Accords, but also the atmosphere of accommodation and compromise – which is, by design necessary to keep Macedonia's inter-ethnic peace operational – seems to have been poisoned on the long run, basically removing the possibility of finding alternative compromise solutions for the crisis without significant intervention of outside factors. This owes to two basic factors: the ideology and the political interests of the key actors on the political scene. In spite of the country's political transformation after the end of the 2001 crisis, the central player in the current Government coalition, the Macedonian right-wing VMRO party, has preserved its nationalist ideology, capturing the prevailing sentiment in the majority Macedonian ethnic group, which maintains a strong but silent resentment of the Ohrid Agreement and the former Albanian guerilla, represented by the Albanian opposition party DUI. Reflecting this stance by op-

posing DUI and occasionally sidetracking the Ohrid Agreement, VMRO was able to create and maintain a very substantial edge in the polls *vis-à-vis* its political competitors. This allows VMRO to keep its opponents off balance and stay way ahead in the polls – a strategy that contributed to the landslide victory of the party during the early elections that took place on June 1st 2008. Despite substantial international pressure to squeeze VMRO in the straitjacket of post-Ohrid Agreement compromise – which included a negotiated agreement in May 2007 between VMRO and DUI behind closed doors designed to address gaps in the Ohrid Agreement – VMRO has been unwilling to comply. After consenting to this agreement in private, VMRO's leader and Macedonian Prime Minister did not recognize its existence in public. He claims that the negotiations have produced a simple record of discussions, rather than an obligatory agreement.

VMRO's Albanian coalition partner DPA, the mortal enemy of the opposition party DUI, has adopted the same strategy in the opposite way – it has sacrificed its ratings in the Albanian electorate to make itself indispensable to VMRO as a tool for maintaining representation of Albanian interests in the Government, without the need for VMRO to sacrifice its ratings to inter-ethnic dialogue with DUI. In this way, DPA secures the position in the Government, which under normal circumstances would be an unattainable having in mind DUI's continuously superior polling and election figures. In turn, the opposition DUI, which won the majority of Albanian votes but was excluded from the Government coalition with this arrangement, uses every opportunity to undermine the Government.

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sensitive aspect of inter-ethnic accommodation. Because of the ideologies, vested interests, and extremely high political stakes that make up this situation, nothing short of a substantial re-orientation of the Macedonian political scene will suffice to overcome this crisis. But as the campaign results of the June early elections have basically confirmed, if not escalated, the same entrenched positions in both ethnic camps. Moreover, given the stakes involved, the ballots have been extremely exceptionally irregular and violent in the Albanian-dominated areas along the border with Kosovo, turning this area in into a "grey zone" of violently contested democratic representation, and a reservoir of future instability and regional spill-over.

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Reluctant Guarantors

The third malfunction of post-Ohrid Agreement Macedonia is that the guarantors of the Ohrid Agreement, most notably EU and the US, have been manifestly unable to prevent these trends time and again in the past couple of years, leaving matters to the locals to settle (or more precisely, to make worse). This stand-off, non-interventionist approach, driven by attempts to contain the situation behind the curtains, has led to repeated failures of international efforts to prevent escalation of the Macedonian crisis. The internationals first found it hard to

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contain violence during the last election in 2006, then failed to manage the rift between VMRO and DUI, then failed to compel the Government to implement the May agreement, then failed to help avert mass fraud and violence during the June 2008 early elections – the list goes on. The key issue here, as was anticipated by the Ohrid Agreement architects, is that the US and the EU are the only forces that have the gravitas to suppress a spiraling political and inter-ethnic crisis in the country, something which the Macedonian political spectrum obviously cannot hope to achieve. But very much as in the case of the Kosovo status issue, the question is to which extent are the US and the EU ready to commit politically (and otherwise, if need be) to impose the right solutions? What is certain is that the old proverb "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" has a special salience for these kinds of situations. After Macedonia's rejection from membership in NATO, and by extension the dimming of its EU integration perspective – the sole unifying political projects that kept the country's multicultural democracy glued together – the Ohrid Agreement guarantors will now inevitably have to be engaged in a far more conspicuous and meddlesome political and security heavy-lifting to contain an emerging crisis with regional repercussions.

And there are ominous signs on the road ahead. So far, the national cause of securing independence and international recognition of the independence for Kosovo has put pressure on all Albanians political factors in the region (and especially potential troublemakers) to "behave." During the past periods of high confrontation with the Government, this argument convinced many of the radicals in DUI and beyond to restrain from violence, no matter what. Such restraints are now questionable, especially after serious complications with the possibility of partition of Kosovo's north.

The psychological barrier towards using more intense violence has already been breeched in Macedonia. Low-level violence between the Macedonian security forces and Albanian armed groups has permeated the peace throughout 2007 and the first half of 2008, occasionally resulting in larger confrontations, such as the massive police action that eliminated one of the more prominent criminal/radical Albanian armed groups in the village of

Brodec in November 2007. But the massive use of violence during the early election in June 2008 has certainly upped the ante. Not only that this returned old resentments, but it will certainly raise the level at which such confrontations will be fought in the future raising the specter for appearance of armed groups with political backing, something that the Macedonian security forces and the international community will find far harder to counter. A potential to add a lot of powder to these sparks also comes from Kosovo. Macedonia is by far the most vulnerable neighbor of Kosovo when it comes to potential spillover as result of the highly problematic status process.

Other External Factors

The weakness of Macedonia and the lack of a concerted US and EU approach to this problem, opens opportunities for other external factors to add fuel to the fire.

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Greece already seized the opportunity to force its will in the long-standing name dispute between the two countries, using its veto power in NATO (a device Greek diplomacy is historically quite fond of) to stop Macedonia's integration. The other factor, interestingly, is Russia, which seems to increasingly demonstrate an interest in Macedonia's troubles, in private for the moment. According to several well-placed sources, Russia's President Putin, in a meeting with his Macedonian counterpart in Zagreb in June 2007, insisted on the option of federalization as a solution for the inter-ethnic troubles in the country, to the alarm of the Macedonian side. Encouraging all sorts of developments to complicate Western policies

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in regard to Kosovo's independence is one of the principal occupations of Russian diplomacy nowadays, and it is hard to interpret Putin's proposal in any other way. Russia does not have direct means to shape events in Macedonia, but its influence in the Balkans has always been tectonic rather than conspicuous, with significant indirect leverage to promote trouble that will push things in the desired direction – either by (ab)using its voice at the diplomatic table regarding Kosovo and Balkan issues, or by encouraging Serbia to put additional pressure on Macedonia.

The main point is this: the more the situation escalates – which seems inevitable without outside intervention – the harder it will be to repair it without major revision of the Ohrid Agreement. This will mean replacing the current loose model of the Ohrid provisions with a quasi-federal construction which already proved dysfunctional in Bosnia. This tendency must be resisted at all costs if the creation of another volatile protectorate next to Bosnia and Kosovo is to be avoided.

In this fragile period ahead, some mechanisms must be put in place to prevent regional spillovers from impinging on Macedonia's delicate dynamics, and to discour-

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age external actors' intent on exploiting these. Without this, the international community will never be able to contain the consequences of the Kosovo status resolution. Basically, all such external threats in this regard, boil down to borders. Macedonia's border with Kosovo is still not demarcated, and this will remain a major weakness to be exploited by troublemakers external and internal. The Ahtisaari proposal offered an optimum solution to this problem – an internationally supervised process with tight deadlines with Kosovar compliance tied to their independence process. With the Ahtisaari plan now largely in the dustbin, this provision needs to be sustained by the international community in whatever scheme eventually becomes the final status of Kosovo.

Conclusion

In a twist of irony, the EU and NATO policy of not noticing the crisis in Macedonia has now resulted in Macedonia – not just the usual suspect Kosovo – to gradually become a hotspot where instability and spill-over risks for the region would foment. Macedonia is now entering a "Serb scenario" – a radicalization on issues of ethnic

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identity, which threatens to paralyze and roll back the processes of stabilization and Euro-Atlantic integration and divide the political spectrum and the country along ethnic lines. If this process is left unchecked, the "gravitational force" of the Ohrid multiethnic model and the unitary character of the state will gradually diminish. In

this context, the search for some sort of inter-ethnic equilibrium can only turn towards the option of federalization and highly contagious issue of re-drawing internal ethnic borders. If these trends achieve their peak during the inevitable, if temporary, American withdrawal from global (and Balkans) affairs throughout the 2008 Presidential campaign, and a period of European introversion and disengagement, Macedonia, as well as all of its neighbors and some key "old Europe" countries might (re)enter the "Bucharest 1913" historic geopolitical framework of solving ethnic problems through border changes. If this kind of a regional system is allowed to materialize, the fault line that would emerge along the Vardar River in Macedonia could provide equal or even grater source of instability and regional divisions than the Ibar River in Kosovo. This would close the historic circle of failed formulas for establish peace and multiethnic coexistence in the region that spans from the Bucharest Conference in 1913 to the Bucharest NATO Summit 2008..This is the nightmare scenario that must be avoided at all cost through urgent action of democratic forces in the region and EU, NATO and US assistance.

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